

RUSSIAN BRIDES

ONE MUST DIE SO ANOTHER MAY LIVE



HUGH MACNAB



A SAMMY GREYFOX THRILLER

BOOK ONE

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Review request

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Please consider taking just a few minutes to leave a brief review.

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Sammy Greyfox series

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Crime thriller with a supernatural twist

Seminole Killer

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Russian Brides

Hugh Macnab

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1

I'm running smoothly today, not working on anything specific, just exercising. I've left my clapped-out Chevy at the rear of the Sheriff's Department, put my Shield and Glock in my backpack, and set off for an early morning run. It takes fifteen minutes to hit Gulf Shore and head south, five more to get to 5th and head back east. Depending on my goal, I've created half a dozen routes I can run. Today, I'm running an easy loop, and within ten minutes, I'm back across Goodlette-Frank and pulling up outside EJ's Bayfront cafe.

Although I've been running easily, it's forecast to be a hundred-five later today, and the heat hasn't yet started to burn, so I'm bent over, leaning on my knees, when I notice the car. It's nothing special. It's just an SUV with dark tinted glass like half the cars in the carpark. But it's not parked. At least it's not parked correctly. It's sitting across two other vehicles and idling, waiting. I assume someone is inside collecting food to go.

At that moment, a woman exits EJ's with a handbag slewed across her shoulder, a coffee in one hand and a croissant in the other. She's dressed casually in Nike trainers, blue denim shorts, and a plain white T-shirt. There's a gap revealing a flat stomach. She works out. I think this is who the car's waiting for, but it isn't. She turns the wrong way. She doesn't even see the car. I do. I'm standing up now and paying attention. Something's wrong.

She walks towards me and starts crossing the car park. The SUV moves. Slow at first, as if eyeing its prey, then suddenly, it speeds up just as the woman is in the middle of the pedestrian crossway.

I move fast and hit the woman above the waist with all of my one-hundred-five pounds, knocking her off her feet and to the side of the SUV, which screeches past, clipping her ankle and spinning her out of my reach.

Seconds later, I'm looking for the registration, but the SUV is already around the corner and out of sight. I can still hear the engine disappearing up Goodlette-Frank and grin at the irony that it will be passing the Sheriff's office right about then.

Turning my attention to the woman, I see she's already sitting up but holding her ankle and obviously in pain. I unclip my cell and dial 911.

As we wait for the ambulance, I gather up the spilled contents of her handbag and return everything to her before asking her if she knew why anyone would deliberately try to run her down. She looks shocked when I suggest it was deliberate but says there's no one she can think of. She's in too much pain to talk further, so I sit beside her and keep her company rather than ask more questions.

By now, several people are gathering around, and I take my shield and notebook out of my backpack and note all of their details. Someone will interview them in more detail later. After all, why would a homicide detective be interested in a hit-and-run? It shows how wrong I can be.

I ask her if there's someone I can call for her, and the answer surprises me. I've met the man she named once before. He helped me solve a tricky case where one police officer shot another and almost got away with it. His name is Tommy Hawk, and yes, I thought it ridiculous when I first heard it, but that's his name. A Native American, as is this young woman. Her name is Ayita Long, and she works for Tommy Hawk.

Around this time, the paramedics arrive and take over. I stand back and leave them to it, placing the call to Tommy Hawk.

A receptionist answers, and I give my name and ask to speak with Tommy Hawk.

When he comes on the line, I quickly update him on what has happened and that Ayita Long is already heading to the Emergency unit at NCH Baker downtown hospital, only a few minutes away. He thanks me for the call and says he'll head there in person as soon as he hangs up. But before doing that, he asks me to visit him when I have time to spare. 'Unofficial' is the word he uses. He's been almost at the point of calling me, anyway. Intrigued, I tell him I'll think about it and end the call.

Two minutes later, a patrol SUV pulls up beside me. I update them with what's happened, give them the details I've listed in my notebook, and then leave them to handle the follow-up interviews.

I jog at a relaxed pace a couple of blocks north to the Sheriff's Office. I shower and change into faded blue jeans and a lightweight cotton short-sleeved blouse. I hand-dry my hair and comb it out, leaving it to dry naturally - one advantage of long straight hair. I clip my shield and Glock 19 onto my belt and head upstairs.

Rather than go straight to my desk, I check in at the front desk and fill out an

incident report, again passing on all the details of the people who also saw what had happened. Then, thinking that's me finished, I head upstairs, realizing that in all the excitement at EJ's, I've forgotten my coffee.

Someone in the rec area already has a Folger's brew going, so I don't have long to wait. This Folger's coffee thing may seem like a minor deal to some people, but to those who suffered the previous blend, it's a significant victory and hard-fought against long-standing traditionalists. I like to think I led the charge, but when I'm more honest with myself, I'm only one of many who hated the previous crap and were almost ready to walk out over it. My boss, the Sergeant, swung the vote, and that's where I head now, coffee in hand.

'Morning, Dan,' I smile. 'What fun have you lined up for us today?'

'Sounds like you've already had your fair share, Sammy?'

'Wow! News travels fast around here.'

'Are you okay?'

'I'm fine, Dan. It was a definite attempt to run the girl down, though.'

'Any idea why?'

'Not a clue, and she didn't have either. At least that's what she said.'

'You think it was deliberate?'

'I watched the whole thing, Dan.'

'How about you keep the case? See it through?'

'Me?'

'Sure. We're light just now. Most cases are in control, and this looks like it was an attempted homicide. Premeditated at that. Right up your street. Keep me in touch.'

With that, it all starts. If only I'd taken a different route or run a little faster....talk about sliding doors!

2

Sitting in my new cubicle, new - thanks to the pandemic some time ago - we've all moved around so we no longer sit opposite our partners, which reduces interaction and communication even before perspex shields sprung up between everyone. Dan's convinced that all the new safety precautions are affecting good police work and is arguing hard to have the restrictions lifted, but the jobs-worthy higher command is spouting off about protecting the workforce. It's more like they're worried about the cost of their health insurance if they don't deploy the protections. They're never this bothered when new body armor or weaponry becomes available.

I'm checking the daily deluge of emails and incident reports when the phone rings, and I answer it to find the Medical Examiner - Arnie Collins - on the other end of the line.

'Good morning, detective. Hope I'm not disturbing anything too important?'

'Morning, Arnie. No, unless you consider a ton of junk mail important. How can I help you?'

'I wonder if you might have a few moments to come down and look at something with me?'

'Not something gruesome, I hope. I haven't had breakfast yet.'

'No, detective. Well, yes, there is a dead body involved....'

'Don't worry, Arnie. I'll come right down.'

As I'm on the way, I can't help thinking about the man I'm going to see. God knows how old he is. He should've retired a good few years back, but he's quite a character in the department, and everyone likes him. He's surprisingly good at his work. I say surprisingly because he's a Southerner and appears so laid back, with a southern drawl to his voice. This can fool folks with prejudices. But he's one smart and painstakingly detailed guy. When he eventually retires, we'll sorely miss him.

I don't know it, but for the second time this morning, something incidental will change everything for me.

On this visit, I find Arnie in an incredibly joyful mood. This is the first day

he can use his recently purchased autopsy table, and I know I'm going to learn all about it, and I am not wrong.

‘Just look at it, Sammy. Isn’t it beautiful?’

‘It’s wonderful, Arnie. Honest, it is.’

‘You’re just being polite.’

‘No, Arnie. It’s a magnificent autopsy table. It’s so....shiny!’

At that, Arnie Collins gives me a severe glance, and I know I’ve just avoided a lengthy discussion and will now find out why he has dragged me down to his neck of the woods. I’m right. Without another word about the autopsy table, he suddenly turns professional and focuses on the current occupant of the beautiful, shiny stainless steel table.

‘Jon Watson, fifty-five, healthy with no serious medical history and not on any regular medication. I would say he was slightly overweight, but I believe he lived a sedentary life, which would be no surprise. According to his wife, he died around two a.m. this morning after falling down the stairs at his home in Bonita Springs.’

‘Yeah, I saw the preliminary report from one of our team earlier this morning. He was a stockbroker, and according to the detective, a successful one judging from the property he lived in.’

‘You’re not kiddin,’ detective. ‘His Gulf Coast place wouldn’t sell for less than fifty mill for sure.’

I’m downgraded from Sammy to detective. I pretend not to notice. Damn, his new autopsy table.

‘So, you’re suspicious because he’s wealthy?’

‘No, although I must admit that thought had run through my mind when I was at the house. The wife seemed genuine enough, though. She was in a terrible state, and while I was there, the paramedics gave her something to calm her down. No one else in the house. They lived there alone. No family.’

‘So, what’s got your hackles up, Arnie? You allowed the removal of the body, so it can’t be anything obvious?’

‘You really should be a detective, Sammy. One step ahead every time.’

‘I try,’ I replied, happy to be back on first-name terms so soon. ‘Come on. Spill it.’

Pretending to be miffed, Arnie walks around to the far side of the autopsy table and asks if I know much about recovering fingerprints from the skin.

‘Yes, a little. But in most cases, I believe it’s not successful.’

‘True, but sometimes it is.’

‘And this is one such case?’

‘Not exactly. But it is interesting.’

‘Come on, Arnie. I’ve got all my junk mail waiting for me in the office. You never know. There might be something important in it after all.’

‘Okay, okay. Don’t be so irritable. I determined the preliminary cause of death at the site was a broken neck due to falling down the stairs. But now, when I have had a better opportunity to examine the body, as you have already said, I have my suspicions.’

‘He doesn’t have a broken neck?’

‘Oh no, his neck is definitely broken. But it’s how it’s broken that’s got me thinking.’

‘Isn’t a break a break?’

‘No, Detective. Not when it’s a C3/C4 fracture.’

Downgraded again. I need to be more careful.

‘The neck, right?’

‘Yes, the middle of the cervical vertebrae, of which there are seven.’

‘But he fell down the stairs, Arnie. Wouldn’t that account for it?’

‘Possibly, but I wasn’t completely convinced, so I took a closer look using the other new toy we have here. The newest state-of-the-art forensic light camera.’

Crossing the room, he unlocks a tall cabinet, removes a briefcase-sized black hard plastic case, and places it on the lab bench between us. It looks heavy.

‘As you know, this technique uses different wavelengths of light to highlight and help identify bodily fluids, fingerprints, and other traces which you are as familiar with as I am. This model is the most sophisticated yet and combines a high-powered camera with the variable wavelength light-generator to provide high-resolution images with one click.’

‘That’s great, Arnie. Again, I’m pleased you have such a thing, but why are we looking at it when our victim fell down his stairs?’

‘C3 and C4, detective. That’s why.’

‘You’re being obtuse now, Arnie. Can you get to the point?’

‘They teach US marines how to kill an enemy combatant by breaking their necks as part of their training.’

‘Let me guess. They target the C3 and C4 vertebrae?’

‘Excellent, Detective. What most people don’t know is that it’s very difficult to break a neck. It’s both flexible and extremely well-protected by muscle. So, for it to happen during an accidental fall is possible but relatively unusual. Take falling downstairs, for instance. When the Human brain detects that the body is at risk, it floods every muscle with adrenalin. This strengthens the muscle either to help it maneuver away from danger in the leg’s case or to protect sensitive body parts if it cannot avoid the danger.’

‘In the neck’s case?’

‘Correct. I won’t bother you with the names, but over twenty strong muscles support and protect these vertebrae.’

‘Are you saying that this was no accident?’

‘Slow down, detective. Let me show you what I’ve found first.’

Five minutes later, Arnie has rigged the tripod stand for stability, mounted the combined light source and camera, and lowered it over one side of the deceased’s head. Switching everything on, he adjusts the light wavelength, selects the best filters, and stands back to let me look through the camera lens.

At first, it isn’t clear what I’m looking at - a skin close-up, for sure. But, as Arnie describes what I should look for, I notice three small circular patterns impregnated on the skin, roughly in a row, with a faint fourth below.

‘Are these fingerprints, Arnie?’

‘You bet they are, detective. And they do not belong to our deceased.’

‘You’ve run them through AFIS already?’

‘No. He could never have gripped his head in that manner. And as for the prints, we would never get enough matching points to recognize anyone. But I can tell you two things you might find useful. Whoever left these prints gripped the victim’s head from the rear with both hands and violently snapped the neck to one side, severing the spinal cord and cracking C3 and C4. This was a military-style execution.’

‘You said two things, Arnie?’

‘Yes. The killer was not his wife.’

‘And you know this because?’

‘From what we can make of the prints, they’re too large to be hers. The person you are looking for is male, strong, and most likely ex-marine or from some other military organization.’

‘Can you tell if the victim was dead before falling down the stairs?’

‘You mean, was he killed then thrown down?’

‘Yes.’

‘Sorry, Sammy. The time between these two incidents is too short to have any noticeable difference in the pathology. You must take that question up with his wife.’

Heading back upstairs, I’m pleased with being upgraded back to first-name terms by the time I leave Arnie to finish his post-mortem, but I’m still wondering what to do with the information he’s given me when I bump into Dan heading out.

In thirty seconds, I explain that Arnie may have identified a homicide we should look into, and Dan throws instructions over his disappearing shoulder. ‘Check it out. Good luck.’

Two hours ago, I had a maintenance day planned. Some courtroom preparation and a little filing. Now I have the attempted homicide in the car park and now an actual homicide. And that’s just for starters.

3

Having called ahead, I'm back in my beat-up Chevy driving to meet with Marlene Watson, the occupant's wife, on Arnie Collin's shiny new autopsy table. Having already checked out her address, I know their home is in one of the most expensive parts of Collier County or even the United States.

Recently, Dan told me that a buyer had flown in on a Lear jet and offered forty-seven million for a beach-front property near where I'm heading to tear down. Rumor is that the asking price was only thirty-five. Of course, all of this wealth in the County has its benefits. Still, it also increases the cost of living for most of the regular people trying to make ends meet, and even a Detective second-class can notice how high the cost of living is for basic supplies. Fortunately, as would be true everywhere, locals know where to shop, or the rich folks would have to serve themselves.

Heading north on Rte41 before taking Fifth down towards the Gulf, I'm thinking about what I already know about Jon Watson. He was a stockbroker and had spent most of his career moving around within Morgan Stanley, one of the country's largest and most prestigious firms, before settling in the branch in Pelican Bay. After ten years there, he set up as an independent broker, and as far as I can tell from records, he worked from his home address.

Arnie's preliminary autopsy report that morning confirmed that Jon Watson was a very healthy man besides a broken neck and a few extra pounds.

Passing one unaffordable eatery after another, I reach Gulf Shore Boulevard and turn north towards the Naples Beach Hotel and Golf Club. Somehow, even when all the pandemic restrictions were in place, this hotel was never anything other than busy. I have to guess that cash was changing hands more regularly than usual.

I hang a left at First and drive to the end before stopping outside a secluded property with neatly trimmed Wax Myrtle hedges ten-foot tall to either side of a pair of equally tall wrought-iron gates painted black with gold highlights. Already, my mind is calculating how long I would have to be a detective before being able to afford a place like this. The answer is never.

Winding down the side window, the mid-morning heat is already almost unbearable. I'm ready to press the keypad entry box's buzzer when the gates open.

I notice a camera mounted on a tall pole behind the gates has swung in my direction, and I'm glad I've called ahead.

Already overawed by the gates, I'm unsure what to expect from the house.

I drive slowly around the curving driveway of polished patterned brick between stunning displays of Hydrangea and Oleander. While I'm not precisely a green-thumbs kind of person, I can recognize that someone around here is.

The main house appears in the distance, and my first impression is that the design is Spanish or maybe Moroccan, with mustard stucco walls and shallow terra-cotta roofs. The overall structure has half a dozen connected buildings with varying heights and features, including a round tower with what looks like small slit windows for archers to fire down on the attacking hordes.

As I pull around to the front of the house, I can see a five-car garage with three open doors showing a White Range Rover, a lime-green Maserati, and a bright yellow open-top Mini Moke with roll-bars. Continuing, I pull in beside three nondescript, more regular cars, making my little workhorse feel more at home.

Crossing the driveway, I continue to admire the work that must happen to keep the gardens in such immaculate condition. The best part of a hundred palm trees of distinct shapes and sizes surround the property, providing some privacy. However, the sheer size of the plot should be more than enough to prevent onlookers from seeing anything they shouldn't. A mass of bougainvillea grows meticulously over the six arches of the front porch. Someone has positioned enormous clay pots regularly with groups of red Geraniums accented by giant silver-leaved ferns that I don't recognize.

As I arrive at the solid-oak, massive front door, it opens, and a petite Asian woman in a maid's outfit confirms my name before asking me to follow her.

Walking behind the maid, I appreciate this insight into how the rich can live. I've never been in a place like this before, and I'm not envious, but it takes my breath away. Intricate small tiles arranged in precise patterns cover every floor, while tapestries adorn many walls in the rooms we pass through. Somewhere, there's incense burning, which adds a spiciness to the air, which I rather like - something, at last, I feel I can afford. Ceiling fans rotate in every room, creating a fresh breeze throughout.

We pass through room after room until the maid eventually shows me onto a rear terrace overlooking a pool. It would likely be Olympic-sized but bent at right angles in the middle. Maybe the owners enjoy swimming around corners. Who knows? Sitting in the shade, I can see the woman I'm about to meet for the first time. Although sitting, I can tell she's tall and slim. Probably five eight or nine, a few inches taller than myself, with lustrous long dark-brown hair tied back in a ponytail hanging over her far shoulder. It's too long for her, but what would I know? As she turns to greet me, I can't help but notice how beautiful this woman is. Even though her gray-blue eyes are tired and a hint of sadness hangs heavily over her, I'm sure when she smiles in more normal circumstances, she will light up any room she is in. Her carefully applied makeup covers any tear tracks. She's wearing nude lipstick on her full lips and has skilfully added definition to her brows - something I neither have the time nor patience for personally.

'Detective Greyfox?' she asks, holding out a delicate hand. 'I'm Marlene Watson.'

As I take her hand, I give my standard condolence speech and accept her offer to have a cool fresh lemonade and sit across a small table from her. Her accent, although subdued, is Eastern European, although beyond being from that vast area, I haven't a clue. But it seems a good place to start, so I ask her where she was from originally.

'I was born and raised in Russia, detective. I only moved here three years ago when I met my husband, Jon.'

At the mention of his name, I can see fresh tears in her eyes and decide it might be a good time to comment on the pool and the surrounding gardens. After a few of these exchanges, I slowly bring her back to talk about how she came to meet her husband.

'Russia is not a suitable place for a woman like me,' she says. 'If you do what you are told and serve your husband and country as your masters, all is fine. But it is challenging if you want to make more of yourself.'

'You wanted to make more of yourself?'

'Yes. I did well at school and then went to Plekhanov University in Moscow to take my degree in Economics.'

'They taught in English?'

'No. All the courses were in Russian, but I knew I needed to learn to speak English properly if I was ever to escape, so I attended private English language lessons at night.'

'It sure paid off,' I tell her. 'Your English is impeccable.'

‘Thank you, detective. I worked hard at both Economics and English.’

‘Tell me how you met your husband?’

‘I met him online. We chatted for a while. Then he came to visit. We liked each other immediately, and when he returned to visit a second time, I agreed to arrange a fiancée visa for the United States and came back here with him.’

‘So, you didn’t marry in Moscow?’

‘No. We married at St Demetrius, here in Naples.’

‘And that was what... three years ago?’

‘Almost. Our third anniversary... will be next month,’ she replies, again tearing up.

‘I’m sorry to put you through these questions, Mrs. Watson.’

Carefully wiping away her tears, she asks me to call her Marlene.

‘Marlene. Can you tell me a little about your husband’s business?’

‘I’m not sure what you want to know, detective. My husband fell down our stairs in the middle of the night. What does that have to do with his business?’

‘Again, I apologize, Marlene. These questions are all a matter of routine. I’ve got a report to file, and I like to be thorough.’

Satisfied, she describes how he started working on his own a couple of years before they met and that she began helping him once married. ‘His office was on the left as you came in the front door, and we have three employees work there with us.’

‘I see. Would it be possible for me to talk with them also?’

Although giving me a suspicious look, she agrees and suggests I meet with them when we finish, as they’re all in the office.

‘So, Marlene. Can you please explain to me what happened the night of your husband’s death?’

‘We went to bed at the normal time, around eleven. I normally sleep soundly, so I didn’t notice Jon getting up. The first I heard was loud bumping noises, one after another, and I turned to wake Jon and found him missing. I got up, pulled on my nightgown, and went looking for him. He was laying at an awkward angle around the bend at the foot of the stairs.’

Again, the tears well up in her eyes, and seeing that, I tell her to take her time, but she wipes them away and continues, clearly wanting to get this part of the interview over.

‘I ran down the stairs and tried to wake him, but I couldn’t.

I ran to the kitchen where my cell was charging and called 911.’

‘Did you realize he was already dead at that point?’

Marlene hesitates momentarily and then says that she might have thought that but still hoped the paramedics would make everything all right.

‘How long did it take for them to arrive?’

‘I don’t know, but it seemed like forever. I just sat on the bottom stair holding his hand until the gate buzzer rang, and I let them in.’

‘And they pronounced him dead?’

‘Not immediately. They ran all kinds of checks on him, put him in a neck brace, and tried to revive him. But they couldn’t.’

‘So, there was no one else in the house with you when the accident happened?’

‘No. Just the two of us.’

‘You said you’re a sound sleeper, Marlene. Could it be that your husband heard an intruder and came downstairs to check?’

‘No. I mean.... I don’t know. I don’t know why he wasn’t in bed beside me where he should have been. I don’t know why he got up?’

‘And you don’t know if there was an intruder in the house?’

Watching her response, it’s clear that she’s already told me everything she can, or at least, everything she’s prepared to.

‘Can I ask, Marlene? Do you have an alarm system?’

‘Yes, but we rarely use it. If we go on vacation, we put it on.’

‘But not at night, if you’re asleep?’

‘No. We always felt safe here.’

‘And who knows both the gate and the house security codes?’

‘There are quite a few people. Our maid, the chef, gardeners, cleaners, and three company staff members.’

‘I’ll need a list of all their names.’

‘Of course. I’ll put that together for you as soon as you leave.’

Satisfied for the moment, I hand her my card and repeat my condolences before asking if she could introduce me to the staff.

After interviewing everyone at the Watson’s home, I decide I deserve a treat for saving the young woman down at EJ’s. So, I’m now enjoying an expensive coffee at a family-run restaurant that looks out onto the beach. The heat is now close to a hundred, so I sit inside. The family previously declined an offer of a minor fortune for the property, for which I’m eternally grateful. The restaurant is sandwiched between a paddle-board rental company and a realtor. If they had sold out, all three businesses would have disappeared overnight.

Although expensive, I’m enjoying an Indonesian Kopi Luwak coffee, the same blend that Jack Nicholson drank in ‘The Bucket List,’ sometimes referred to as ‘Cat Shit’ coffee as it was produced from coffee beans eaten by Civet cats, before being shat and collected.

As I sit enjoying the view of the gulf through open windows, I think back over my visit to the late Jon Watson's home. The meetings with the company employees turned up nothing useful. Jon and Marlene got along well and were well-liked and respected, opinions mirrored by the house staff. He ran the company, and she the finances. The chef spoke almost reverentially of them both, saying they would never ask her to do too much and were always complementary and grateful for her work.

Marlene herself was distraught at losing her husband. I've seen enough genuine grief in this work to recognize it when I see it. Whoever killed her husband, I had to agree with Arnie Collins. It wasn't her. But what puzzles me is that she hadn't asked why I was talking about an intruder and the implications. Either it had all gone over her head, or she was holding something back, and I have no idea which. I decided not to tell her I intend to treat her husband's death as a homicide until I figure out the best approach. She has enough to deal with right now, but I did explain that a forensic team would be by later in the day to check for signs of a break-in and to give her some advice on improving her security arrangements. She seemed to accept that okay.

So, what does that leave me with? There must have been an intruder. They rarely used the alarm system, which the maid and the chef agreed was what they thought. They had left the rear terrace door open. It wouldn't be the first time that had happened, for sure. The killer was probably ex-military. Maybe a thief is targeting high-value properties. Jon Watson either heard a sound or woke up and wandered downstairs at precisely the wrong moment. Got into a confrontation and had his neck snapped?

I'm okay with everything until that last thought. A former professional marine would be disciplined and unlikely to panic. More likely, as soon as he heard Watson on the stairs, he would be out of there. Unless Watson appeared between him and his exit point and confronted him directly? Only now do I realize that when in the house, I was so mesmerized by the whole place that I'm unable to answer questions about the layout of the place.

I make a mental note to speak with the forensic techs before they pay their visit later in the day.

Convinced I've squeezed everything out of the visit, I leave twelve dollars on the table and head out to the car park only to find I have a flat. I'm not one for self-flagellation, but my spare has been flat in the trunk for months, and I've meant to get it repaired. Shit.

4

After arranging for a pickup to take my car away, I scrounge a lift halfway back to the office and hoof the rest of the way in the midday sun. Not one of my brighter ideas, as I'm drenched in sweat when I arrived with my cotton shirt sticking to me and my nipples pointing the way.

Avoiding the front, I sneak around the back and once again head for the locker room for yet another quick shower.

After drying off, I pull my jeans back on and, after sniffing yesterday's T-shirt from my locker, decide it's a better option, pull it over my head, and brush out my hair once again. I check the mirror to ensure I've missed nothing, but I look fine. Well, as fine as possible. I'm still beetroot red from the sun. I knew it would be scorching, and I swore first thing in the morning I wouldn't get caught out in it, yet sure enough, here I am. Add a blue lamp, and they could use me as a patrol car. Idiot.

Before I head upstairs, I call into the Forensic Lab and explain what I want from them at the Watson's place. Then, my thoughts turn to lunch. Well, I'm not going out without a car, so I first have to arrange a pool car. After that, I know a great sandwich shop not too far away. Pastrami on Rye sounds good about now.

An hour later, the remains of my lunch littering my desk; I'm gathering further background information on Jon Watson. I can confirm pretty much everything both Arnie Collins and Marlene Watson told me. The astonishing additional information is that the Watsons bought their home after they were married almost three years ago for a staggering forty-five million dollars. I've had to review my estimate of how long it would take for a detective to afford to live there. Never is far too soon.

Dan Weissman sticks his head over the partition at that moment and asks if I'm busy. I say no, and just like that, my day takes another sucky turn for the worse.

Dan likes to use his personal car more often than not and claims mileage. So, ten minutes later, I'm enjoying a trip in his Volvo XC40, which he's already told me is a four-wheel drive with an intercooler two-liter turbocharged engine. Don't ask me what that is. I've no idea. But it has comfortable seats. The air conditioning works great, and that's good enough for me.

He's received a call from patrol who say they've found a body in Collier State Park, just a little to the south of the city, and that's where we were heading. The park is spread over seven thousand acres and lies partly within the most extensive mangrove swamps in the world. It's a massive attraction for outdoor activities like canoeing, hiking, or biking. There are also loads of campsites. I've been known to run down there, but there's not enough shade for my liking.

As Dan chats away, I'm not listening most of the time. Over the past few days, I've noticed that I'm not quite feeling my usual self, and I'm worried that I've caught the tail end of the COVID-19 virus. I feel a little sick most of the time; it's less than an hour since I finished my sandwich, yet I'm hungry. And when I was running this morning, I told myself I was having an easy day, but in reality, I could only have an easy day. I didn't have the energy for anything more.

Dan pulling off the highway and into Collier State Park brings me out of my thoughts. A patrol car's waiting for us, and the driver waves that we should follow.

Ten minutes later, we pull up at the rear of at least a dozen vehicles, most of which are emergency services of one type or another. I see both the Medical Examiner and Forensics have beaten us there.

Getting out of the car, Dan gives our names to an officer I nod recognition to. He adds them to the list of site attendees before giving us further directions.

The track from here is clear, but at this time of year, the undergrowth is thick and makes for heavy going. Fortunately, whoever came out here to dispose of the body only made it twenty minutes in before dumping it.

I suspect we have the mosquitos to thank for that.

Out here, there's no point in burying a body. The heat, humidity, insects, and wild animals will remove pretty much all evidence within weeks if not days. So, before even arriving on the scene, Dan has already said that he thinks any form of identification will be difficult, if not impossible.

The deputies have secured the scene, and Forensics are already examining the body, so Dan and I hold back until one of the Forensic team notices our arrival and updates us.

'Hi, Dan. Sammy' says the familiar figure, sweating profusely in a one-piece protective suit.

'Josh,' Dan replies.

'No need for you two to suit up. What's left of this will go back to the mortuary. You'll find nothing of interest out here. Just swamp and damned mosquitoes,' he tells us, swiping one from his face.

'What can you tell us about the victim?'

'Looks like a very young baby, possibly only weeks or even days old. Can't even tell you the sex, although if I were to guess, I would say a baby girl.'

'Any recognizable features?'

'Not that I can see. Arnie Collins will give you a better answer when he looks her over.'

'You think someone didn't want her?'

'That would be my guess. This is an excellent place to dispose of an unwanted baby, Dan. If it hadn't been for the guy walking his dog out here - God knows why - we would have found nothing recognizable in another few weeks. I think he's shit-scared we arrest him for letting his dog run off the leash,' the technician smiles.

Dan looks in the direction indicated and asks me to make sure I chat with the lone figure sitting on a tree stump with his dog and a paramedic for company.

'So, we're looking for a mother who didn't want her child?' he asks, turning back to the forensic technician.

'Or a Dad?' I add.

Dan nods his agreement.

'Not much in the way of a lead, is it?'

'Life's a bitch, Dan. There again, you get the big bucks!' says Josh.

At that, Dan gives his colleague a look of disdain and says nothing. I think of his Volvo 4x4 and silently agree with the technician.

In the background, the remains look small as the coroner's assistant carefully places them on a child-sized stretcher for transport back to the wagon.

As Dan moves to the side of the path to offer the unwanted remains passage, I head over to the unfortunate dog-walker. When I question him, he has little to add. His dog ran off, and he followed to find him sniffing at the remains. He immediately called 911, and Voila. I update Dan with this.

'So, we have nothing?'

'Nada!'

'Well, let's hope Arnie can tell us something about what happened to this poor little soul.'

As we drive back to the office, Dan asks what I think of the guy who fell down the stairs. I tell him I've asked Forensics to check for signs of forced entry but haven't heard yet. That I found the wife believable, at least mostly so; she wouldn't be the first wife to want it all.

'Could she have arranged for a burglary, intending to share the profits, but her husband got caught in the middle?'

'Possible,' I said, not believing it.

'What about the husband himself? Could he have arranged it and accidentally fallen down the stairs? You know, an insurance scam?'

'But that wouldn't explain why the intruder killed him?' I'm good at questions like that. Questions that have no answers.

After a few miles of silence, Dan asks another question. 'You said the Watsons had some employees. What did they say about the couple?'

'That's where our various theories fall apart. They all say the couple were great together and very much in love. And I have to say, my impression of the wife is that she's genuinely upset.'

'Upset because her husband is dead, or upset because she was a part of it somehow?'

'Could be either, I guess.'

'Is there any reason she may want him dead?'

'No, other than she will probably inherit a small fortune. But would that be enough if she loved him and they were happy? Surely she was already enjoying it?'

'What about an accident?'

'No. Arnie was clear about that. He's convinced it wasn't an accident.'

'No, I don't mean that his death was an accident. Whatever they were up to, they didn't plan on the intruder killing him.'

I think about that for a few moments. 'But that would mean he was working a different agenda to whichever of the two was helping him?'

'Which would shock the wife if it were her.'

'A bigger shock to him,' I reply.

Dan nods in agreement. 'So if this man was working with the husband, he just pulled off a spectacular double-cross, and if he was working with the wife and this wasn't her plan, how would she react?'

'Confused? Maybe scared? But how would he gain out of killing her husband?'

'I don't know,' said Dan. 'Was he her lover?'

'Possible, but everyone says how much in love the couple were with each

other. Maybe a blackmailer who persuaded her to leave the back of the house open that night so he could take whatever he wanted?’

‘Was anything valuable missing from the house?’

‘She didn’t mention anything, but I didn’t ask either.’

‘Sounds like you need to have another talk with Mrs. Watson.’

Back at the office, we split up with Dan heading to speak to Arnie Collins about the Collier State Park discovery, and I need to call my doctor. I’m not feeling right. It’s time for a check-up. By the wonders of private medicine and the health benefits of a detective second-class, I’m given an appointment in one hour.

I only remember going to a doctor once before, and that was to have my tonsils removed when I was ten.

I’m not looking forward to it.

5

So, the pool car they give me is a black and white SUV. You can't beat a black and white for discretion as a detective. I'm staring out the windscreen in the doctor's car park. Actually, I'm not staring out at all. I'm staring at it but not seeing it. At that moment, I don't know if I'm more annoyed at what the doctor told me or whether I should have already known myself. I'm pregnant. Shit.

He also ran two other tests and promised to get back to me within twenty-four hours with the results. I didn't ask what other tests he had in mind. I wasn't capable.

Well, one thing I'm sure about. I know who the father is. The only guy I've slept with for five years, and even then, only a few times - just my luck.

I'm stuck in self-recrimination mode all the way home.

I shouldn't be driving, and I don't remember the trip, but somehow, I pull into my allocated parking space, climb out and lock the B&W.

Everything feels surreal. I know where I am, but it's as if I'm drifting through the motions. I climb the stairs, open my front door, remove my badge and Glock, then put them in the kitchen drawer I use to keep them out of sight. I switch on the TV, cross to the fridge in the kitchen, grab a Corona, flip the top, and stop before it can hit my lips. That's probably the first time I've thought of anyone else before having a drink, and it's a shock.

I pour the Corona down the kitchen sink, feel sorry for myself, top up my glass with water from the tap, throw in an ice cube, and flop onto the sofa.

By now, I would be mentally back at work. I would run through everyone I'd spoken to about a particular case, weighing up not only what they had said but how they had said it, and often find the most helpful information in what they *hadn't* said.

Not tonight.

Tonight I have a whole shitload of questions, and not one has to do with work.

I only met Cliff a few months ago while investigating the death of a fellow officer, and as the District Attorney, he helped with my inquiries. Although I didn't realize it until after the case was closed, he had started the case review.

He was more or less my first proper boyfriend, so experience wasn't exactly on my side, but he seemed okay. He was intelligent, funny, and attractive. What was not to like about him? But, I'd never really felt that I needed anyone and only really knew how to be on my own, and if I'm honest with myself, that's when I'm happiest. It was nice to have someone to go out with and have fun with, and the sex had been great, but I didn't feel the need to be moving in together or to spend every waking moment thinking about him or texting twice an hour. I don't know if that makes me a terrible partner, but it's how I am.

On the bright side, as best as I can judge, he seemed to feel the same. His work keeps him extremely busy, but so does mine. His family lives up in Washington, so we were pretty much on our own, besides a few friends he introduced me to. This meant quality time together, and I think I'm smart enough to realize that it wouldn't last if we became more serious, so I was keeping everything low-key.

But being pregnant changes everything. Counting back more carefully, we only had sex four times. Twice the first night and two other times. He wore protection each time. Or did he? Fuck. That second time the first night. I can't remember. Idiot.

Never one for lingering, I decide there are bigger fish to fry and move on. Trying to figure out when this happened is pointless, and it isn't about Cliff. It's about me and my need to figure out what *I* want to do.

This is much more personal. This concerns my body and whether I want to go through a pregnancy. Whether I want a child in my life? What it would mean for my career? Never mind my career. What would it mean for my entire fucking lifestyle? How do detectives manage to be single mothers? Would I be a decent mother? Could I even be a mother at all? I'm not like my mother. Not even close. Fuck, now I'm on a roll. There are thousands of questions, and I can't answer any of them.

Despite all these questions, Cliff keeps fighting for his corner in my crazy mind.

'What about my rights? What if I want to be a father? Should we move in together or get married? What if I don't want the baby and say you should have a termination?'

Would I agree or resent being told this and refuse regardless of what I want?

Then my selfish thoughts overtake me and ask if I should even tell him. And if I have a termination, do I have to tell him? It's my body and my decision. Or is it?

Termination.

Thinking about the word for the first time, it sounds so final. As if that simple act could reset everything back to normal, and life would carry on. No pregnancy, childbirth, child, or need for Cliff to know, simple. Just terminate the pregnancy. Fuck. Life has just become so much more complicated. I guess that's what happens when you have kids.

6

Six a.m. and Alexa rouses me from a restless night's sleep with the Beatles. Don't misunderstand. I didn't sleep with the Beatles - half of them being dead and all. I feel like a zombie. I swing my legs out of bed and spy my running gear out of the corner of my eye. I nearly throw up but don't.

After a shower, I feel a little better, but not better enough to put on the running gear. I don't even want a coffee, so I *am* pregnant. Nothing comes between me and my coffee. But already, life has changed.

The voice on Fox News is giving me clothing advice. The weather is going to be fucking hot, and I should go to work naked. I'm okay with hot, but I'm not going nude.

I choose the lightest summer cotton one-piece dress I own. Very conservative in a plain light blue with a white collar. In the mirror, I look sixteen. Sixteen and pregnant. Pressing the material tight to my belly, I swear I can already see a bump.

I add a white leather belt and my shiny shield to the outfit and admit that the Glock doesn't look like the right accessory. Still, needs must. As my mother always told me, a concession to my need to make the best of myself is to push it around behind my left hip, concealing it from most people but still in reach if needed.

There's a beautiful wooden box on the breakfast bar, with intricate carving on top showing the Sun, Moon, and a Fox. My full given name is '*Sun and Moon, Greyfox.*' I go by Sammy.

This was given to me by my Papa. I open it and empty the contents into the palm of my hand. Four small bones. I roll them and read how they lay. Our people believe these represent the four elements of Earth, Wind, Rain, and Fire, but Papa told me they were Man, Woman, Good, and Evil.

The bones reveal nothing dramatic today, which, as a Homicide Detective, I always take as a good omen.

Two minutes later, and already the bones are wrong. My black and white is still in my reserved space, but someone has slashed all four tires, and it's sitting on the rims. I need to rethink the bones. So much for an early start. I call this in and wait a half-hour for a tow truck to arrive. The guy is still loading the car when a B&W pulls in, and my least favorite deputy grins at me from behind the wheel. This man doesn't even need to speak to wind me up, and I try to control the surge of adrenaline in my bloodstream, but I'm ready for a fight, no doubt about it.

He throws a few stupid one-liners my way, but I stay calm.

I become that helpless sixteen-year-old and ask him if he would climb onto the tow truck and recover my Glock from the front seat.

His expression says it all. I'm pathetic, and he's God's gift to pathetic women. Of course, he will. All this without saying a word.

He climbs out of the B&W and up onto the rear of the tow truck.

As he does that, I jump into the B&W, throw it into reverse and shoot backward out of the parking area in front of my high-rise, spin the car around, and before he can even react, I smoke rubber and leave him sucking exhaust.

I can see him in the rear-view, jumping up and down on the tow truck, his face red, shouting and waving his fists after me.

Suddenly, the day doesn't seem so bad anymore. In fact, it feels downright fantastic.

Half an hour later, I'm in my cubicle staring at an OJ, wondering what happened to my volition. It's like a six-week-old embryo is now issuing commands. I feel useless. The problem is, when I drink the stuff, I enjoy it, and that makes me feel even worse.

I'm saved from more internal attack by my unborn when my extension rings and Arnie Collins asks if I have a little time to spare. I almost run all the way, feeling that the Medical Examiner has just thrown me a lifeline.

'Morning, Detective. I'm probably out of line, but you're looking attractive today. You're positively glowing.'

If anyone else made that remark, I would eat them for breakfast. But Arnie is different. He's two generations older than me, and I don't care what all the current woke supporters say. He's a gentleman. He treats me with respect, both as a woman and a detective. So many guys either see me as a skirt and make lewd gestures when they think I'm not listening or a girl who has slept her way into the Detective Bureau. Arnie isn't like that, so I pretty my hair and thank him.

‘What can I do for you today, Arnie?’

‘Your broken-neck case.’

‘Jon Watson?’

‘Yes, as you know, I have doubts about his cause of death, so I’ve been doing some research.’

‘Don’t you have enough to do around here?’

‘Yes, I do, but I still have to decide the cause of death, and I need more than partial fingerprints and a suspicion about ex-marines before I can give that.’

‘Fair enough.’

‘So, I’ve searched through records here in Collier County over the past few years for similar deaths.’

‘C3/4 breaks?’

‘Exactly, and this is what I have,’ he says, laying a folder before me.

Opening it, there are four pages of closely typed script, but with a summary page in the front. Four deaths, all male, all died from broken necks, all C3/4. All in three years. I wonder if this is uncommon when Arnie answers before I even ask.

‘Statistically, this would be highly unlikely and impossible in such a small population.’

‘So, not a coincidence then?’

Arnie nods his head from side to side. ‘Fraid not, detective.’

‘I guess you’ve decided the cause of death, and we’ve got ourselves a serial killer?’

‘Yes, on both counts, detective. And by only using data from this County. Who knows if he is operating elsewhere?’

We chat a little more before I thank him for doing the research and head back upstairs, where I find the Lieutenant looking for me. It’s fair to say he isn’t too happy with the stunt I pulled with the B&W earlier that morning, and as severe as his admonishment is, I can see Dan laughing in the background and struggle to keep my face straight. Finally, the message delivered, the Lu bends forward, whispers in my ear that it couldn’t have happened to a nicer ass-hole, and walks off.

As soon as he’s out of earshot, the room bursts into spontaneous applause, and I bow before sitting beside Dan. He’s the first to speak.

‘That’s done more for morale in the department than anything I’ve been able to do in the past year.’

‘Yeah, well, don’t get used to it,’ I tell him. ‘I over-reacted and won’t be pulling a stunt like that again.’

I can read Dan well and see he doesn't believe me for a second.

Moving on, it's time to update him about my conversation with Arnie Collins, and he sits quietly and listens as I lay it all out and show him the file Arnie has given me.

After skim-reading the summary and glancing at the following pages, he asks if I can continue with the case, but I know it's a formality.

'Well,' I said. 'I guess I could give it my best.'

Dan laughs, asks me to keep him updated, and chases me out of his cubicle. If I were smart, I might have refused the case. But who said anything about me being smart?

At my desk, two messages are waiting for me. One from the forensics technician who has been to Marlene Watson's house. They found no signs of forced entry. So, the rear terrace door must have been left open. But I still don't know if this was deliberate.

The second message is from Tommy Hawk, reminding me he would like to see me and that the young woman I saved wants to thank me personally. My day's taking shape, but first, I have four potential homicide victims to research.

I'm deeply into the online research stuff when Dan asks if I have plans for lunch, and I guess my blank expression gives me away. Twenty minutes later, my unborn steers me past the kebab stall towards the salad bar, where I reluctantly help myself to a plate of healthy mixed greens. Maybe this little six-week-old is already more intelligent than me? Who knows?

Dan has a burger, and we chat about nothing in particular for a while, both glad to be away from bodies and death, at least for a little bit.

Back at the screen in my cubby hole, I settle down for a long slog. My first instinct is to check for similar deaths in a few nearby Counties first, but whether there are four or more deaths, there's a potential serial killer out there, and perhaps looking at the four cases I already know about will be sufficient.

I can always expand the search later when I have confirmation of what, at the moment, is only a hypothesis.

I've done this work many times and wish someone would develop custom software to run all the necessary checks and produce a summary print-out. But, unfortunately, that day has not yet come, so I start with the most obvious area - Criminal arrest records here and abroad, then personal background checks - birth registration, parents, other family, home address - current and past, education, driver's license details, military service, and public assistance history.

I examine pictures printed off from school yearbooks, driver's licenses, ID

cards, or elsewhere. Looking across them, there's not one common factor immediately obvious. Different ages, races, sizes, and most definitely weights - from rakishly thin to politically incorrectly fat.

As interesting as all the data is so far, nothing is jumping out other than a coincidence that there are no children, either with their current wives or any previous ones, so I move on to employment details, finance, checking credit ratings and history, both personal and business accounts including assets. Now, I'm beginning to see some overlap. All of them were not just wealthy. They were extremely wealthy.

I know Marlene Watson's house, and that fits nicely. However, when I look into where the spouses of the other four live, three of the four are in much more modest accommodation, and given how wealthy their husbands had been, that seems odd.

I'm just finishing up researching the fourth possible victim when my cell rings. It's my doctor who beat around the bush a little before telling me he has the results back from the extra tests he ran the day before. In hushed tones, he tells me I have Chlamydia.

Then, while I'm still absorbing this, he witters on about contacting all previous partners and letting them know they should be checked out. Meanwhile, I think I've had sex four times in five years, and I get a fucking STD. Four times! And it's not like I've been wildly sharing my body with four different people in five years. It was one guy.

I try to remain calm and thank the doctor for telling me because that's one of the stupid reactions you have at a time like that. Your life has just been turned upside down, and you thank the person who told you.

I disconnect and curse the bones for not warning me.

That evening, I don't know what to do. Usually, I would hit my favorite local bar within stumbling distance of my place and drink myself under the table. But I can't do that. My alternative plan to pig out on popcorn in front of the TV isn't allowed either. I find this out when I smell the popcorn and throw up. What's left? Hot Cocoa and an early night?

Fighting the appeal of alternative three, I drag out all the information I've gathered on my new four potential victims and spread everything out on the floor in front of me.

Sitting cross-legged, sipping my Cocoa - yes, my little unborn monster has won another round - I look for commonality.

All four were male. Aware of my unborn, mocking me for my brilliant first observation but not being put off, I continue. All were retired or close to it. All seem wealthy, but they've accumulated their riches in unique ways. Two have had a leg-up from wealthy parents, while the others have built their legacies. All four were married, and it's only when I have this thought I realize the wives are the ones left behind - the ones I will need to talk with. So, I shuffle all the paperwork back into the one giant folder, power up my ancient Dell laptop, and wait patiently for the home screen.

As I wait, I receive an internal message from my new boss. Apparently, I'm now hungry and want chicken soup. Who the hell has chicken soup in their kitchen at the height of summer in Florida?

The unreasonableness of the request doesn't seem to matter, and before realizing what I'm doing, I'm off downstairs, heading for the 24/7 on the corner.

I'm just about to step out from the front of the building when I see two late teens watching the car park. I recognize one of them as living somewhere in the building above me, but the other isn't familiar. The one I know wears these stupid shredded so-called fashion jeans and a T-shirt that even I wouldn't be seen wearing. Nothing wrong a good wash wouldn't fix, but I wouldn't be putting it through *my* washer. Not if I ever want to use it again.

The other wears jeans hanging almost down to his knees, revealing his ass-

crack, and a T-shirt with Led Zeppelin on the front. Now that's offensive. Great band. Great music. He has no right to wear their name.

Zeppelin ass-crack has a shaved head, and my neighbor has long, wavy hair down to his shoulders. He also wears several fake diamond studs in each ear.

As I watch, Zeppelin takes a six-inch blade from his trouser band. Now, this is where I get angry at my little unborn. Maybe smarter than me, but I've come out without my shield and Glock. So perhaps not that much smarter.

At least the two in front of me don't look too bright either, so perhaps we're even. Well, other than two against one, I guess.

It cost me half my soul to convince the desk sergeant on duty to let me have another pool vehicle, and what did he give me? You've got it. Another black and white. I'm damned if I'm going through the whole tow truck experience a second time and have no time to go back upstairs, so I do the only other thing I can think of. I step out of the building and said hi.

The two freeze, like Elsa has just cast a spell their way. I almost laugh.

Then Zeppelin politely asks if I can be on my way. I'm only joking. He actually tells me to fuck off. I don't know how you react to someone saying that to you, but I bet it's not like me. The Stud won't be a problem. I can already see him beginning to edge away, sensing trouble. Zeppelin is the key man here, so I step towards him, stop two paces away, and equally politely give him the same instruction.

He's not fazed. Instead, he grins. Not a cheerful grin. It's more of a maniacal grin like Hannibal Lecter describing how he likes his main course prepared. I don't respond at all. Just stare him down.

The more I stare, the less sure I can see him become. His following remark shows his almost limitless intelligence as he hefts the knife and points it toward me.

'This is a knife.'

If it hadn't been for my training, I swear, this time, I really would laugh. But they taught me not to laugh when someone points a weapon in your direction. So, with iron willpower, I hold it in and kick the wrist of the hand held out toward me. When I say kick, I mean KICK.

He throws down the knife as if it's red hot and screams as he holds his hand, hanging limp from the wrist down. I can tell he's trying to dream up some smart response, but instead, tears run down his cheek, and he turns red. I almost feel sorry for him.

Turning my attention to the Stud, still suffering from Elsa's spell, I ask him if I should go back upstairs for my handcuffs or if he would take his friend to the nearest hospital. I know I should really do the first, but by now, my new boss is

getting impatient for the chicken soup, so I let Stud lead his friend away.

Another thing they taught me in training is to strike first when a weapon appears. Not something I needed to learn. I already learned that a long time ago, as a young Native American growing up in a white man's world, I was never liked, but I was respected. No, probably not respected. I was feared, but at least they left me alone.

Twenty minutes later, I'm back from the 24/7. The soup is warm and in a bowl, but my perverse new boss decides I don't want soup after all. Apparently, the smell of popcorn is all right now, so it's all right with me, too. As I settle down with a large bowl of hot popcorn straight from the microwave, I realize that as well as researching the four potential victim's wives, I should also take a closer look at Marlene Watson. It will be a late night unless my little internal companion decides otherwise. Who knows?

Unable to sleep, I spend time wondering what to say to my boyfriend and rehearsing various alternatives. Hi, Cliff. You're going to be a father, isn't that great? Or, Hi Cliff. Do you know you have Chlamydia? Oh, and by the way, I'm pregnant. The best one I come up with is calling him a bastard before clawing his eyes out.

At one point, I get up, power my Dell again, and reheat the remains of the chicken soup. Then, as I come online, I alternate spoonfuls with keystrokes, studying the effects of Chlamydia on an unborn child.

The good news is that thanks to my doctor's early diagnosis, little Bossy-boots is as yet unaffected. The only risk would be in the later stages and during delivery. My doctor has already explained that all I need is a week's treatment with antibiotics, which should clear it up, and I will pick up those meds the following day. So, no problem there.

Whether there would be a delivery is a question I don't yet have an answer to. But, as if in response, I swear my tummy flops over.

I go back to bed.

Six a.m. and Alexa wakes me, not quite as usual. The night before, I decided on a music change and opted for Genesis's Greatest Hits. As I head to the shower, I can't believe what I hear behind me. A harsh drum machine with some out-of-this-world synthesizer effects, followed by Phil Collins' heavily reverb-laden voice singing, Mama!

You know how people say you see and hear what you are looking or listening for? I get that because my new boss is surely making themself heard. I'm already wondering if I still actually have the option to terminate.

After drying off, I stand naked in front of the mirror, examining myself in great detail. Knowing there's something in there, but still undecided if it's showing or not.

Five fruitless minutes later, I start dressing. Today, I intend to be out and about visiting, so I opt for a lightweight beige cotton suit. I love the suit, but the material crinkles so easily. I balance the plainness with an emerald green cotton

shirt and matching green flats.

After the usual hair brushing, I open my small wooden box and rattle the bones, unsure what to do with them. Then, throw them regardless. Shit. Another stormy day.

For once, I make it to the office without drama and find a message waiting for me. My trusty steed is ready to pick up. That suits me as I'll be driving around quite a bit over the next few days, and although the B&W SUVs are more comfortable, they just aren't the same as my old girl. We've been through a lot together, and she's seen me through thick and thin, so I'm looking forward to getting her back.

The next couple of hours I spend researching the wives, and when I finish with the first couple, I call and make appointments to visit in the afternoon. With that done, I continue with the others until I have files on ten people piled in front of me - five men and five wives. Now is the proper start of the grunt work every detective has to learn to do, and I'm good at it. In fact, I love it.

You need to be a detailed person. That's me. It's best if you also are a structured thinker. That's me again. Well, sometimes, anyway. Patient. Yep, you're getting the hang of it. It's all me.

I use the large conference room table to lay everything out and a department laptop to log everything into a spreadsheet.

Details. Lots and lots of details. I'm in ecstasy - data heaven for the next couple of hours. No people.

Deciding it would be worthwhile to explore the spouses in more detail than during the first go-through, I start again and don't get far before realizing that the wives are missing in most searches. There are no arrests, birth certificates, or family details, and the only reason I can think of why this might happen is if they are not US citizens. Bingo.

All five women are Eastern Europeans who have moved to Florida on fiancée visas and subsequently married, and all have arrived within the past three years. After marriage, Immigration Services has granted all five work permits and full residency rights, but not yet citizenship.

This has to be more than a coincidence, but I don't know what to make of it all.

Checking the addresses of all five, although four have moved their address, three are still in Collier County, and the fourth is only up in Sarasota, an hour or so to the north.

I've already figured out most of the common factors with the men, and some aspects of the wives are interesting. Apart from them being non-nationals, a few other things jump out. They're all between the ages of twenty-two and twenty-seven. From photo IDs on driver's licenses, I would say they are all beautiful. Almost stunning, and that starts me wondering. Attractive foreign wives, no family, and rich men becoming dead husbands. I have five new suspects before me, not that I jump to conclusions.

I look back through the dead husband's death certificates for the cause of death. Sure enough, all died from C3/4 fractures. Three fell downstairs, one from a step-ladder while fixing a roof problem, and the last hit his head and neck, falling into a pool. Spread over three years and across the County, I appreciate Arnie Collins's value right now and then. Who else would have spotted this?

Feeling I've achieved as much as possible for the moment, I repack all my material into files and strip the whiteboard, returning everything to my cubbyhole and locking it away. I've got an unborn to feed, an old friend to collect from the garage, and a couple of bereaved wives to meet. Then, if I have the energy, I'll swing by and meet with Tommy Hawk and the young lady I saved in the car park. Busy, busy, busy.

My first visit is out east past I75 just off Vanderbilt in Golf Club Wonderland, where the houses are all individual in style and isolated by dense woodland. Although decent enough, the place I pull up outside has seen better days. Several tiles are missing from the green roof, and the exterior fiber-cement cladding is at least in need of a good hose-down. In the driveway, weeds battle each other for supremacy, giving the whole place a feeling of desolation. Tumbleweed rolling by wouldn't surprise me. Whatever else this woman is, she's not a gardener.

The front door opens before I get there to reveal an attractive young woman I know is in her mid-twenties waiting to welcome me.

Inside, the house is in a much better state, with most of the contents undoubtedly coming from the woman's previous home nearer to the Gulf coast, but looking as if she has dumped them there. There's no feeling of homeliness to the place. Although she's been here two years, this is obviously just a place to live.

While the woman makes coffee for us both, I do my detective thing and nose around. I notice a collage of photos on one wall showing the happy couple before her husband's death. Several others are around the room, and this woman clearly misses her husband. There is no sign of her husband's family anywhere, but there are a couple of old black and whites of people I assume would be her folks back home in whichever Eastern European country she comes from.

Over the next hour, as we talk, I like this woman and can see why she would be attractive in more than looks. Aside from seeming slightly evasive around financial questions, she appears open in all her answers. Her husband had slipped at the edge of their pool and hit his head and neck heavily on the side of the pool when he fell in. She explained that this was what the police had told her as she was inside and didn't see the accident happen. She found him floating in the pool sometime later and assumed he had drowned.

When I ask about family members, she confirms that her husband had no children and no close surviving family. Then, when I ask why she had moved house, she tells me that she couldn't live where her husband had died and wanted to move out into the country and live a quiet life. This is the first point at which my detective's voice starts niggling. I dig deeper.

‘Your husband was a wealthy man when the two of you met, was he not?’

She nods but remains silent.

‘He must surely have left you a substantial sum in his will?’

‘Yes, but I bought this place with cash and have given much of the rest to various charities. I did not come to America to be rich. I came to be happy, and having all of his money did not feel right to me.’

‘So you gave it away?’

‘Mostly. I still have a little. Enough that I need not work.’

Stuck somewhere between incredulity and outright disbelief, I change the topic. ‘You’re from Eastern Europe somewhere, aren’t you?’

‘Yes, I was born and raised in Moscow, Russia.’

‘And how did you meet your husband?’

‘We found each other online.’

‘E-dating? So it works then, does it?’

‘It did for us. When my husband first came to visit, we knew immediately that we would be good for each other, and when he came the second time, I applied for a fiancée visa and returned here with him. We were very much in love.’

Lifting one of the framed photos, I confirm it is her husband before commenting on his age. ‘He looks quite a lot older than you?’

‘Yes, but that didn’t matter to us. He explained that he did not have time to marry or even date when he was building his career. He retired just before we met and wanted someone to share the benefits of his work.’

‘And that’s where you came along?’

‘Yes.’

‘Have you ever thought there was anything unusual about your husband’s death?’

As soon as I ask, I know a lie is coming, and sure enough, the answer doesn’t ring true.

‘No, of course not. He slipped. Why do you ask?’

‘You know, we detectives always like to ask questions.’

‘But my husband died two years ago. So why ask questions now?’

‘I’m following up on some details on another case I’m working on. So it’s nothing to trouble yourself about,’ I explain before continuing.

‘When your husband slipped, you’re sure no one else was around then?’

‘No. It was the gardener’s day off. He was the only person we used. My husband said he had missed real life because of his career and liked to do most things for himself. He became an excellent cook and did most of the handy work around the house, but the garden was a full-time job. So we hired a gardener.’

Not giving up, I press on.

‘And there was no stranger on the property at the time of his accident?’

‘No. At least, not that I knew of. Unless my husband let someone in without telling me, I don’t see any reason he would do that.’

‘So you’re sure your husband’s death was an accident?’

I can see she’s getting upset, and I’m unsure if it’s because I’m talking about her husband’s death or because I’m asking awkward questions they hadn’t asked her the first time around. The case was closed almost as quickly as they opened it when the coroner reported an accidental death.

‘I don’t understand what you’re implying?’

I decide it’s time to back off. I can have a second go some other time. So, I apologize for any distress my questions may be causing and repeat my offer of condolences before standing, thanking her for the coffee, and allowing her to show me the door.

Outside in the Chevy, I’m aware of the woman peering through shutters, watching as if needing to confirm that I’m really leaving. In my mind, I imagine her making an immediate call to someone, repeating the details of my inquiries. Worried for the first time. It had all gone so smoothly, and now some detective was asking questions. *What should I do?*

Starting the engine and pulling out onto the drive, I mull over what I’ve just seen and heard.

The woman loved and still misses her husband. I won’t dispute that, even though it confuses me. Women who love their husbands don’t usually go around killing them.

They met online, and after a whirlwind romance, she moved to Florida and married a wealthy man many years older than her. But, again, this happens worldwide, so there is nothing unusual about it.

The way she described their life together sounded blissful. She was enjoying the essential things in life instead of spending her husband’s millions. Maybe that was why she gave his money away. To live a simpler life like he had wanted? She claimed to have only kept enough to buy her modest house. So I get that. But why such an isolated lifestyle? And what did their friends make of her choice? Would they understand why she’s now living where she is? Is she still in touch with them? I suspect I already know the answer to that. It’s an area I can look into, perhaps.

She also claimed that she was not present when her husband died. Convenient, but it could also be true whether her husband slipped by accident or with a little help. She may not have been there.

On the surface, everything seems reasonable, but although the answers given are primarily accurate, they might not be complete, and that's where my detective work will begin. For now, I've another bereaved widow to visit. Like the first, she now lives in smaller, more affordable accommodation thirty minutes East of I75, even further from the city.

When I arrive, my first impression is better than the last place, but on closer inspection, I notice they've subdivided the home into two smaller units, and the door I'm looking for turns out to be round the back. The property is bright, cheery yellow with white wooden shutters on the windows, some open, but most closed against the day's heat. There are wooden half-barrel tubs at either side of the front door with various plants gasping for water. I almost feel sorry for them. More than the occupant apparently does.

I ring the doorbell and wait. I'm about to ring again when the door suddenly opens, and for the second time that day, I'm looking at a beautiful young woman who, in this case, I already know is only twenty-three.

'Deputy?'

'Sammy Greyfox,' I reply, offering my hand. 'Thank you for seeing me. This is just an informal chat, Nadia. I'm sorry, can I call you Nadia?'

'Of course. Come on in.'

As I pass the woman, there's a pungent stench of alcohol.

'Take a seat, Deputy. Can I offer you a drink?'

'No, Nadia. Thank you. I want to ask you a few questions about your husband if you don't mind?'

'My husband?' she answers, surprised. 'It's over two years since he died. What can you possibly want to know?'

'We're always doing follow-ups, Nadia. I promise not to take much of your time.'

I can see her considering this, or how long it might be before she can go back to doing whatever she was doing before answering the door, and I can guess what that was.

'Fine,' she says, dropping into a chair opposite.

Like the first widow, she's what I call dressed-down. Casual shorts and a halter-neck top from Walmart, with a pair of cheap flip-flops on the floor under her chair. I'm sure she would be stunningly attractive when dressed up, but she looks tired and run down right there. Her hair looks like a grown-out version of a designer cut from months before. Short at one side, much longer at the other. On her, it doesn't matter. I doubt anyone would see beyond her stunning green eyes.

To one side, on a small table, lays an open copy of a Baldacci hard-cover and a pair of reading glasses. There's also an empty tumbler. At least the woman has good taste in authors.

I run through much the same conversation I had with the previous widow and receive more or less the same answers. Her husband was older than her and recently retired. They met online and married in Naples. He died when he fell downstairs in the middle of the night in an identical fashion to Marlene Watson's husband. So everything matches. Then I ask about why she moved house and is living where she now is.

'I need a drink. You want one?' Without waiting for an answer, Nadia leaves the room and returns a few moments later with a bottle of Jack Daniels and a second glass. Holding the glass up, she acknowledges my refusal with a shrug, lays the extra glass aside, and pours a stiff measure into her own.

I try again with my brilliant tactic of repeating a question. 'So, you were about to tell me why you moved and are living out here after your husband left you all his money?'

'Was I?' she replies, taking another good swig. 'I'm living here because I choose to. I gave all his money away. Didn't want it. And here I am,' she said, indicating the room with her arms.

'You gave away your husband's money, right?'

'Pretty well, all of it. More trouble than it was worth. Everybody wanted some. Attorneys, Accountants, Bankers, Realtors, Pool Cleaners, Window Washers, the list goes on and on.'

'Who did you give it to, Nadia?'

'Charities. Fuckin' hundreds of them. They were like vultures around a dead carcass.'

As I watch this sad figure, it's clear Nadia's drink isn't a one-off. In ten minutes, the half bottle in front of her is almost empty, which is serious drinking. Never one to miss an opportunity, I ask again about her husband's death.

'Tell me again how your husband died?'

'Twasn't my fault. Nothing I could've done. I didn't have a choice,' came the slightly slurred reply. 'Couldn't prevent it, could I?'

'No, Nadia. Accidents are just that. If we knew about them in advance, they wouldn't happen.'

'Yeah, right? Sometimes they happen anyways.'

'Do you mean you didn't have a choice, Nadia?'

'I said enough. I think you should go now,' she replies, struggling to her feet. 'It's time you're leaving.'

Annoyed, as I feel I'm just getting somewhere, but having no choice, I rise and make my way to the front door. Stopping, I pull a card out and hand it to her. 'If you think of anything else that might be helpful, call me.'

'Sure, Detective.'

There's more to the death of this woman's husband than a simple fall down the stairs. But the case is two years old and again closed as an accidental death. Her dead husband is still in her thoughts, and her glass by the look of it. He's not a friendly ghost. He's haunting her.

Still, two widows down, and definite similarities are beginning to appear. Wealthy, retired, younger Eastern European wives suffered fatal accidents and left buckets of cash - all given away by their spouses. In situations like this, where there are no dependents other than the spouse, the widows would be on top of the suspect tree if the deaths are suspicious. But these women have given their wealth away, not the act of money-grabbers, and if they didn't want the money, why would they kill their husbands?

10

Thirty minutes later, I pull up outside the Seminole Casino on the Reservation for my meeting with the proprietor, Tommy Hawk.

This is only the second time I've visited the Seminole Casino. The last time I had been investigating the shooting of a fellow officer. Indirectly, Tommy put me on the right track to solving that case. I'm grateful for that and feel I owe him.

Until the pandemic, the Casino was the largest revenue generator for the local Native American communities. The government provided investment incentives to help construct the building and tax concessions to help the indigenous native tribes, amongst the poorest in the county, run the facility. As a result, people travel not only from all over the State to play there but from all over the Country and further still. Unfortunately, because of pandemic regulations, the Casino only operates at fifty percent of its capacity. Hence, earnings are down, and the local tribes are suffering.

In a replay of my previous visit, I enter the building and look around, quickly identifying the man who had helped before - Hola, the owner's bodyguard. As I approach him, I raise my hand and smile. He remembers me and returns the greeting.

'Detective,' he said. 'We have been expecting you.'

'Hi, Hola. Good to see you again.'

'Likewise, Detective. Can I show you into the boss's office?'

'Sure, thanks, Hola. And thanks for your help when I last visited.'

'You're welcome, Detective. I believe you successfully closed your case.'

'Yes, I did, thanks to you and your boss pushing me in the right direction.'

With that, Hola knocks on the door we've arrived at and opens it to show me into Tommy Hawk's office.

The giant seven-foot man gets up from his desk and strides to take my hand, engulfing it as surely as night swallows day. In the background, I'm aware of Hola withdrawing and closing the door quietly behind him, leaving us alone.

'Please, take a seat, Detective. Thank you for coming.'

'Never could resist a bit of mystery, Tommy,' I reply. 'I know Ayita Long wants to thank me, although it's unnecessary. But you said you were about to call me anyway, so what can I do for you?'

‘So suspicious, Detective. Why would you assume I want something from you?’

I give him my best cynical smile.

‘So perhaps you are right. There again, perhaps I have asked you here for some greater purpose?’ he suggests, leaving the question unanswered. ‘When you were last here, you were pursuing a particular case, so we did not discuss what is happening here on the Reservation.’

‘You mean with the Casino?’

‘No, Detective. I mean with our more recent operation.’

‘Which is?’

‘Before I say, can I confirm how long you have been in the Naples Sheriff’s Office?’

‘Almost two years now.’

‘Then you will not have followed the many debates and reports in the press. Much discussion over many years.’

‘Discussions about what?’

‘My newest investment. A State-certified brothel.’

‘A what!’

Tommy smiles at my surprise. ‘It took the best part of five years to push through both County and State houses. I had to suck up to Republicans and Democrats alike. But eventually gained approval two years ago on a ten-year trial basis. As a result, we now have the only legalized brothel in Florida, here behind the Casino.’

‘Wow. I honestly don’t know what to say.’ And I’m not just saying that. I *really* don’t know what to say. First, there’s my surprise that a legal brothel could ever exist in Florida and in upmarket, expensive Naples of all places. Then there’s the embarrassment that I’ve missed the whole thing and have no idea this is happening in my jurisdiction, some detective.

Tommy carries on, filling the awkward gap. Awkward for me, that is.

‘Then say nothing yet. Let me tell you a little more about it first,’ he proposes, opening a large schematic and spreading it on his desk.

‘This is the Casino,’ he starts, pointing to a long rectangular building drawn on his map. ‘And this is the accommodation for the girls.’

‘Your girls live here?’

‘Yes, on-site. This other building is a small hotel where we offer overnight stays for out-of-state guests or those looking for a unique experience and bring their wives or girlfriends with them.’

‘Can we back up a moment, Tommy? How on earth did you get the State to agree to this? As far as I know, the only State which allows this is Nevada. It’s

illegal everywhere else,’

‘Correct, Detective. But we have worked it under the umbrella of support for the indigenous Native American Indian Population. As you know, all the profits from the Casino already go to supporting the local tribes, and this new investment will be no different.’

‘But prostitution is still illegal here in Florida?’

‘Yes, but not on our reservation. Not now, anyway.’

‘What about the local tribal elders? Surely they don’t want such a thing here?’

‘The members are mostly old but are still very aware of how underprivileged our people are. We have the lowest life expectancy in the Country, the highest rates of drug and alcohol dependency, poor education, and virtually no job prospects for the vast majority. And all that before the pandemic hit us. Now, everything is so much worse.’

‘So, this is an economic stimulation package?’

‘Yes, Detective. You could put it like that. But do you realize the size of the current Reservation Casino business across the country?’

I plead ignorance.

‘Last year’s total revenue was almost one hundred billion dollars.’

‘Wow, that’s a tidy sum.’

‘Yes, and even after all the tax benefits, the Federal Government still received almost twenty Billion, and the State and County less, but still very significant sums.’

‘So, you’re telling me everyone wins?’

‘Exactly. And since we had already finished construction before the pandemic, we spent the lockdown interviewing employees and have now started up.’

‘By employees, you mean prostitutes?’

‘I mean ladies offering safe, discrete, and unforgettable entertainment. Why would anyone pay for a prostitute on a street corner or in a lap-dancing bar when here, they can have the ultimate legal sexual experience?’

‘Say it any way you like, Tommy, but you’re still peddling sex. What about their pimps? How do you manage them?’

‘I don’t. There *are* no pimps. Our recruitment is selective, with thorough background checks and several interviews, including one by a professional psychologist and a personal meeting with myself. There is not one girl here with a background involving prostitution or drugs. They are also told that drug use is a cause for instant dismissal, even if the guest provides them. If that happens, they will call for help immediately, and we will remove the guest.’

‘What about Aids and STDs? Aren’t you concerned about these?’ I ask, with a real depth of personal feeling on the subject. Something I have no intention of sharing.

‘We are, Detective. We check all our ladies every week and provide insurance cover for sexual diseases and more general full health cover, which also includes close family members.’

‘Their families?’

‘Yes. Quite a few are married or have children or both. So, we take care of their families.’

‘Some have children?’

‘I told you, Detective. We are very selective. We take understanding why someone would work here seriously. Sometimes, they are single parents, and if that’s the case, we provide daycare or, as is more often the need, babysitting services at night. We have one young lady working through medical school with enormous fees, and she is not alone. We have quite a few in full-time or part-time education at different levels, and they earn their fees for a few years and then plan to leave when they gain full-time employment. We encourage that.’

‘Doesn’t that mean you will have a high turnover of ladies?’

‘Well, it probably will, but remember, we are just starting. Besides, a good grocer supplies fresh veg daily, does he not?’

‘You’re comparing these women to vegetables?’

‘An unfortunate choice of metaphor. Please excuse me for that. But, as a correction to your last remark, Detective. All of our ladies are not necessarily young. We try to accommodate all needs within reason. Everyone is over eighteen. That is one boundary we will never cross. But others are through their sixties.’

‘Sixties? You’re catering for retirement homes?’

‘It might surprise you, detective. But, yes, we already have regulars from some local care homes, and plenty of men also desire an older woman.’

‘Mother issues?’

‘We don’t analyze our guest’s purposes, Detective. Instead, merely fulfill them where it is legal to do so.’

‘And you say the third building here is a private hotel?’ I ask, pointing to the map on the desk before me. ‘How is that used?’

‘We offer guests the opportunity to make their personal sex tape with one or more of our ladies. Each suite has four cameras capable of viewing different angles, all linked to a central computer activated by voice commands. Hands-free operation, as you will appreciate, is important in our business. Custom software automatically splices and edits the four tapes to produce a final article

they can take home. Or they can experience a real voyeur sex party. Something which, even in this early stage of business development, is very popular.'

'Impressive, Tommy. You've really thought this through.'

'Yes. I like to think of this investment as offering the safest, healthiest, and best choice a person can make when they want to pay for sex in Florida.'

'That's quite a tagline you have there, and interesting as all this is, Tommy. I'm still unsure why you want to share all this with me?'

'Ah. Now we get to the nub. Do you know how many people we will employ in this operation?'

'Twenty, thirty?'

'Try a hundred and twenty? And that's just this year alone.'

'What?'

'And that's what I refer to as phase one. In five years, I believe we can earn more with this business than from the Casino, and that's already generating between three and four million a week.'

At that, I can't help but whistle.

'So, to your question, detective. I want to offer you a position as head of security for both the Casino and the Brothel.'

'Me!' I laugh. 'You can't be serious, Tommy. Why me?'

Tommy Hawk pushes back in his chair and reminds me he does detailed background checks on every employee.

'So, you've been checking up on me?'

'Yes, Detective. And everything I have found out tells me you would be an ideal fit. You have degrees in Psychology and Criminology, which you attained at great personal cost, a burden you still carry with long-term Education loans still to be repaid. You served your basic time on patrol in Miami, earning a medal of honor after rescuing a fellow officer while under heavy fire. Then, three years as a State trooper, where they awarded you a top-gun medal, before joining the Sheriff's office here in Florida, where you earned your second-class promotion quicker than any previous detective, bypassing many with much more experience than yourself. And yet, while still being admired and respected by your peers.'

'You missed my first-aid certificate,' I reply, secretly impressed.

'I will also confess that you being a Native American helps.'

'Balancing your equal-opportunities commitment, Tommy? Is that it?'

'Cynical, Detective. But as you know, we are legally obliged to do such things.'

'Well, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I'm happy where I am in the Sheriff's office.'

‘I thought that would be your response and prepared for it. So I would ask you to do two things for me.’

‘Which are?’

‘I would like you to meet a few of my staff and talk with them.’

‘Not much point if I’m not coming?’

‘But you will do it?’

‘When I have some time. I guess it would be interesting to talk with them. What’s the second thing?’

‘Open this envelope when you get home tonight,’ he says, handing me a plain brown envelope. ‘If you call me in the next few days, I’ll schedule the meetings. Then, if you’re still uninterested, I can look elsewhere.’

‘Okay, Tommy. But I can tell you right now.’

‘I understand. Please, humor me for now?’

Standing, I offer my hand and agree to be in touch.

‘Hola will take you to meet Ayita on your way out - the girl you helped yesterday. Something that has already increased your value as a potential employee,’ Tommy smiles. ‘I’ll be seeing you again soon, Detective.’

The visit with Ayita Long is a quick one. Although her injury isn’t life-threatening, a broken ankle isn’t fun, and she’s still in pain. I accept her thanks and get out of Dodge as soon as possible. Taking thanks isn’t a comfort zone for me.

Back safely in the Chevy, I throw the brown envelope on the passenger seat and start the car. Next stop - the doctors to pick up my prescription, then you’re never far from a CVS.

Thinking about where I’m going brings my mind out of the safe place it has been all day - death, widows, homicide, all now replaced by babies, boyfriend, parents, and fucking Chlamydia. Thanks to focusing on work all day, I’ve made virtually no progress with the endless list of questions in my mind, although I might have narrowed them down to one without realizing it. I need to forget about anyone else, including Cliff and little Bossy-boots, and decide whether I want to be a mother.

If I don’t, then termination is the way to go. It’s unpleasant and not something I ever expected to confront, but I will if I have to do it. I’m sure of that. I wouldn’t be the first, and not the last, to go through the procedure. And with it being so early, it will be a relatively straightforward experience if I decide soon. Not that I know much about the whole thing.

If I decide to be a mother, I would tell Cliff and let our relationship evolve.

No pressure. Just chill and see where it goes.

He might have no interest in being involved, but even if that *is* his response, I know him well enough that he would provide financial support. It's the minimum I could hope for, but I wouldn't knock it. After all, detectives don't earn big bucks, and little Bossy-boots would be expensive. Beyond that, if he said he would be happy to be a father, we could discuss all the options, from getting married to sharing the care.

Shit! I'm not ready to talk about marriage, for sure. We could talk about anything else. Given these new circumstances, sweeping the offer from Tommy Hawk off the table without considering it further could be rash. At least I should probably do what he asked and talk to some of his staff, then make my mind up. On-site daycare for a working mum would be a dream.

However, how the District Attorney would deal with his child being raised on a campus with a casino and a brothel makes me smile.

11

There's no line at CVS, so after collecting my prescription, I check back at the Sheriff's office before knocking off. Bossy-boots decides I need something sweet, so I stop at the vending machine area on the way to the coffee area and pick up a packet of M&Ms. Armed with these and a freshly made hot black coffee, I sit at my desk, log on and check my mail. Nothing of interest, so I start to update my notes from the two visits with the widows, but first, I call widows three and four and set myself up to see them the following day. One is local, and the other is up in Sarasota, so I can have a leisurely drive up there in the morning. Perhaps a burger at the beach. I let that thought go through my mind to see if Bossy-boots might complain. Nothing. Nada. Happy with the M&Ms for the time being. I guess tomorrow will be a whole new day.

I'm typing away happily, munching and sipping, when the lieutenant stops by.

'You got a minute, detective?'

'Sure, Lu. What can I do for you?'

'In my office, if you don't mind,' he replies, turning and leading the way.

Being invited into the office always feels like you're about to have a death sentence pronounced on you, and I half-expect him to be wearing a black cap.

I stand there, not even sure if I should sit or not.

'Close the door, Detective.'

That's it. I'm in trouble. What the hell have I done? I rack my brain, but honestly - I'm clean.

He hands me a single sheet of paper I recognize immediately. It's an official complaint form. Scanning some detail, I see it's ridiculous. I'm being reprimanded for using excessive force on a member of the public, resulting in severe injury requiring hospital treatment and several weeks' absence from work. It's submitted by the Led Zeppelin fan who was about to poke holes in my tires that morning.

'This is bullshit, Lu.'

'Just tell me what happened?'

I'm angry, but I describe the events as calmly as possible. An achievement I

feel proud about. The lieutenant listens patiently before advising me I should speak to my union rep before the process goes any further and that I may also want to take legal advice on how best to protect myself.

I hear the words, but they don't compute. The little bastard had a knife and pointed it at me. I thought I was being generous by letting him off with a broken wrist. If I'd had my badge, I would have cuffed him, broken wrist or not, and dragged him into the station to charge him. So much for being reasonable. The litigious society we live in really sucks. I'm also angry that the lieutenant seems to be on the side of the little bastard. As for several weeks' absence from work, I bet he wouldn't recognize a day's work if it hit him in the face. Fuck.

When I get back to my desk, Dan's waiting for me.

'Rough day?'

'You've been told?'

'Yep. Want to tell me the details?'

We sit in Dan's cubicle while I walk him through the details. His advice is to talk to the union rep and take legal counsel.

'Don't be angry with the lieutenant, Sammy. He has to follow a strict policy with complaints like this, and as there is physical injury involved, he will take it seriously, as will the investigating officer.'

All I can do is groan. And I've been having such a good day up until then - no more notes updating for me. I pack up and leave the office quicker than Roadrunner.

Outside, I sit in my trusty Chevy and wonder what to do next. Here's how I see my choices. Call the union rep or an attorney and kick-start my defense. Speak with my parents and tell them I'm pregnant. Find my boyfriend and tell him to get checked for Chlamydia, or that I'm pregnant, or both. Or, if I think little Bossy-boots will allow me, sink a few beers at the bar I frequent close to my apartment. I choose the latter.

Thirty minutes later, my trusty Chevy is in the reserved parking spot outside my apartment, and I'm on my own, on a corner stool at the Rusty Nail. In my hand is a cold Corona with a lime twist. In front of me is the brown envelope given to me by Tommy Hawk.

Reg, the barman, knows my moods by now, so he had delivered the Corona and disappeared to the other end of the bar.

This place is nothing special, but it's *my* nothing special, making it special to me. I need someone on my side, and if I can't find anyone, I'll settle for

someplace instead. This is it.

Glancing around, possibly for the first time since I started coming here a couple of years ago, I see the place is a dive. The wooden tables and chairs are worn down and stained. So much for regular antibacterial wipes. These are lucky if they see a wet floor rag at the end of the night. The bar itself is okay. Old solid wood, with a brass leaning rail running right around and a spittoon doing the same just above floor level. It's at a convenient height for me to rest my feet on, but I dare not look inside. Dull, tuneless music is playing on an old wall-mounted jukebox in the background, mixed with the never-ending electronic noises from the slot machine in the far corner. A dart board hangs on the far wall, but no one uses it. Overall - I'm happy here. It keeps me grounded.

A first sip of beer, and I'm feeling guilty. At least my new boss down below is telling me I'm feeling guilty. I don't know the difference anymore. I wave to Reg, ask for some iced water on the side, and then turn my attention to the envelope. Tearing it open, I skip much of the detail on the first page and glance straight to the money on offer. Fuck! It's more than twice what I'm earning at the department. Twice! I instinctively reach for the bottle, but my hand returns with the iced water glass. I take a sip to settle my jangling nerves. No way I'm worth that amount of cash. Am I? I mean, free market and all. If someone is prepared to pay it, I must be worth it.

I can't help myself. I start wondering what I would do with spare cash. It's not a problem I've ever had since I started paying back my student loans.

A better apartment? I like my apartment, although it is on the small side. No, strike that. It's way too small and in a lousy apartment block in an even more lousy area. Some new running shoes would be next on the list, but that wouldn't knock a hole in the salary on offer. Then I have a sad thought. My little Chevy with a hundred-twenty-five thousand on the clock might have to go. But on a more positive note, I could help my parents out, something I can't do on my detective's salary.

As these thoughts wander through my mind, I read some other terms and conditions. Full comprehensive non-contributory medical cover for my immediate family, which would include my parents, any children I may have, and me. I don't feel the need to ask Bossy-boots' opinion on that. But for my parents, who are getting on, this would be amazing and something they could never hope to achieve. It would also get around them having to accept something from me, as the company would give it, not me. Financially, this is huge.

I would also be entitled to a two-bedroom apartment on the complex, either

furnished or unfurnished, whichever I prefer. That would solve my apartment dilemma, but it also removes one of the things I could use the extra cash for. I do some quick sums and reckon this is like another thirty percent boost to my salary. The pension scheme is open to all employees, and for every dollar I put in, the company adds two, which is better than the County provides.

They also have free day and night care for babies and young children. If I take this up with other parents, I would have a say in the facility's running, like a cooperative.

There are a lot of other details in the offer, but by the time I've reached this far, my mind is blown.

Suddenly, I'm less concerned about the lack of support from my lieutenant. This isn't something I can sweep aside. This is a once-in-a-lifetime chance to change my and my parent's lives. Not to mention providing a more secure future for little Bossy-boots, if there is to be a Bossy-boots.

Another evening gone by, and I still haven't told Cliff. I'm stalling because the decisions are already too complicated for me. If I involve him, I know they'll only become more so. I need to do it tomorrow at the latest, I tell myself. So, I text him, suggesting we meet at the restaurant we first met in.

Eight pm sharp. Don't be late.

You can see where little Bossy-boots gets the name from.

12

Six a.m. and Phil Collins tries to wake me up to Mama, but I skip track and listen to ‘Follow You Follow Me’ before climbing lethargically from my pit and heading for the washroom. Only after splashing my face with cold water do I realize I feel better than the previous day, so before I get any complaints from my little free-loader, I throw on my running gear and head out.

I’m not heading into the office this morning as I have appointments with the two other widows and would make for the first of these directly from the apartment, then head up to Sarasota to meet the second and hopefully have a little late lunch up there. I push the thought of a burger at the beach out of my mind in case Bossy-boots gets early wind of my plan and screws with me.

Down the stairs, out of the building, and there she is in all her splendor. My trusty steed parked where she should be, looking, well... old. I should probably start calling her my *rusty* steed.

I look away guiltily and start my run. I have several local routes I like to follow, so I pick my favorite and head off.

Many people listen to music when they run, but I switch off and enjoy slipping into a simple rhythm. Today, I’m two minutes in, and I know it’s not going to happen. I’ve only covered one block when I see my ear-studded neighbor eyeing me from a doorway. He nods, indicating that I should talk with him, so I stop and consider. I’m not one for deliberately putting myself in risky situations. And this guy has backed into the shadows. Who knows how many others there may be in there? But, on the other hand, I *do* want to talk to him. I’m just not sure if I should or not. No, hold that thought. I *know* I shouldn’t, but life’s full of risks, and I think this one is worth it, so I slowly saunter in his direction, keeping alert just in case this is a revenge thing.

I enter the building and see he’s only taken a few steps back. He wants to talk and doesn’t want to be seen. He starts the conversation brilliantly.

‘You’re a detective?’

I give him full marks for observational abilities as I confirm this for him.

‘I want to help. But I can’t.’

I think playing dumb will be best. Let him be more specific, so I nod.

‘He’d cut off ma balls if’n he knew I’s talking to you.’

‘Who?’

‘You know who.’

Never one for riddles, I break the pattern.

‘Let me guess. Your broken-wristed friend?’

‘He’s no friend of mine.’

‘You were together.’

‘Sure. But only cause I have to be.’

‘Whose making you?’

He’s looking around nervously by then. If I want to keep him talking, I must offer him something.

‘Look. If there’s some way I can help you, I will. But you need to tell me what you need?’

‘He heads up the double Ds.’

‘The what?’

‘Double Ds. They run this area, and he wants you out.’

‘Bad for business?’

‘You got it.’

‘Tire slashing?’

‘Sure.’

‘What’s his name?’

‘We call him Luke, but his Mama calls him Lucius.’

‘What are the double Ds into?’

‘You name it, man. Snow, Candy, China White, Whiz, the lot. You want it. They’ve got it.’

‘How did you get involved?’

‘I jus’ live here, man. That’s all. I don’t want nothin’ to do with this.’

‘So, you’re offering to rat him out? Is that it?’

‘Me! No way. But, if I can help you lock him up without gettin’ involved, I will, man.’

Thinking fast on my feet, I realize I need time to gather more background on this, but I don’t want to lose this lead. I also can’t keep calling him my ear-studded neighbor.

‘What’s your name?’

At first, he hesitates, and I think he’s going to pass. Then he doesn’t.

‘Chico.’

‘How do I get a hold of you, Chico?’

‘I’m here or around here most of the time. I’ll watch out for you.’

‘Okay. Let me see what I can find out about Luke and get back to you.’

‘Sure, man.’ Saying that, he steps further back into the shadows and disappears.

After he leaves, I realize he’s wearing the same grotty white T-shirt from before. It doesn’t look any better.

Suddenly, I don’t feel much like running anymore, so I about turn and run the block back to my place, thinking about Luke and the double Ds, wondering if this might solve my problem with the lieutenant.

Back in the apartment, I take my first antibiotic tablet, empty a jug of water into the coffee machine, throw the old filter into the bin, add a new one, position a mug, and turn the device on. Next, I throw two bagels into the toaster, strip off my running gear, and step into a cold shower - nothing better to start the day in Florida’s summer heat except maybe two cold showers.

After drying off, I wrap a towel around myself, plaster peanut butter and jelly on the bagels, and pour my first coffee, mulling over how best to approach the double Ds. Given the range of goodies they offer, this isn’t a tiny rinky-dink operation. That makes me wonder what kind of trouble I’m maybe getting myself into.

I’ll need to have my shield and Glock to hand when I run in the future.

I know one guy in Narcotics pretty well, and I decide to make him my starting point. He’ll know the double Ds and probably know Broken Wrist Luke. Maybe I can get ahead of this ridiculous charge the Lieutenant is being forced to follow through on.

When I finish breakfast, I look at the linen suit I wore the previous day. I’d hung it up to see if the creases would disappear overnight. No such luck. It’s a sight. So, it’s back to jeans and a clean shirt for me. Comfort dressing is a natural way of life for me, anyway. When I button up the top of my jeans, I swear it’s more difficult than usual. It’s probably just my imagination. There again, maybe it isn’t. Who knows?

Badge, Glock, bones, and I’m out the door and on my way with today’s portent looking not too bad. Let’s face it. It can’t get much worse.

My first stop will be with the widow who still lives in the County, like the previous two.

When I arrive, I’m thankful I’m not allergic to cats. She seems to have replaced her late husband with them. I don’t know how many, but they’re everywhere.

Like the other wives, she's young and attractive. An Eastern European who met her more elderly husband online and moved to Naples on a fiancée visa to get married. Also similar is the downsizing into a small three-bed, this time to the north of Naples in a small rural community called Lehigh Acres, well away from the affluent Gulf Coast. Her husband had fallen from a ladder while replacing some loose roof tiles. Unfortunately, she'd not been at the house when this happened, and the cleaner discovered her husband's body when she arrived.

She has converted one entire wall into what I consider more or less a shrine, with an array of thirty or more photos of herself with her late husband. Someone loved and still being missed without a doubt.

When I ask why she has moved into such a modest new home, she virtually answers from the same script as the previous widow, Nadia. She couldn't live in the house in which her husband died. She had married him not for his money. She had given most of the money to charitable causes but kept sufficient to buy her new home and afford her simple lifestyle. The same script, yes. But who had written it?

When I leave, I'm glad I settled for jeans that morning. A suit would have been covered in cat hair - a nightmare. As for the case, I'm no wiser.

Beginning to drive north to visit the fourth widow up in Sarasota, I realize something strange is going on, and in my mind, the husband's deaths are becoming more and more like homicides. There are just far too many similarities to be coincidental. What bothers me most about this last visit is this multi-millionaire climbing around on his roof, replacing a faulty tile. I doubt that anyone with as much money as he had would even notice he had a roof, never mind tiles. Maybe he was like the first widow's husband and liked to do the chores himself.

The trip north will take around an hour and thirty, but instead of thinking about the case, my mind again turns to my personal life. After visiting the fourth widow, I intend to swing by my parents and talk with them. I think I know what my Mama will say, but Papa's a different kettle of fish. I hope they might have some valuable insights. I could sure use a few right now. Just three or four days ago, life was fine. Routine maybe. Even a little boring, perhaps. But okay.

Now, look at me. I'm stalking what I'm becoming convinced is a serial killer,

which would be a big deal for me in my career. At the same time, I'm in trouble at work and may be liable for personal damages, something I can't afford. I'm hosting a miniature life-form, not to mention some nasty little bacterial friends I could fine do without. My super-duper new boyfriend is carrying these little characters around with him, and who knows, spreading them elsewhere for all I know. So my love life, which usually sucks, sucks even worse.

On the bright side, I may have an inside man on the double Ds and a ridiculously generous offer to head up Security at the Seminole Casino. Thinking about the job, I notice that I have edited out the brothel part from the job offer, which is probably how I'll tell my parents about it. If I had planned my day better, I would have brought an overnight bag and stopped off with my parents for the night - something I don't do nearly often enough. But I have to confront Cliff. I don't really think he'll be spreading Chlamydia around, but there again, I didn't think he would have it in the first place. So what do I know? Anyway, I have to tell him.

Entering Sarasota, I follow the Tamiami trail, pass the Longhorn Steakhouse, and continue for a mile before turning left and heading into seriously wealthy territory. It's a while since I've last been here, and even then, it had been to visit Siesta Key Island on the opposite side of the inter-coastal. From there, you can only look over at Millionaire's Paradise, with the enormous houses and yachts tied up at their private moorings.

Today, I travel as far as I can before hitting a dead-end, where I face a large gated driveway with an Estate Agent's for-sale sign posted to one side.

Before I can get out of the car, an attractive brunette taps on my car window.
‘Detective Greyfox?’

‘Sure. Are you Alicia?’ I ask as the woman bends down and lifts a dog that must surely be running for the smallest in the world.

‘This is Wolf,’ the woman proclaims, lifting the dog to eye height. Then, saying nothing further, she turns and presses a fob in her hand, opening the gates. ‘Just park up front, and I’ll be right with you.’

Ten minutes later, we’re sitting on a terrace looking over at Siesta Key Island from the other side. Impressive as the view is, I know people looking back at us would be jealous. A maid brings two Virgin Coladas at Alicia’s insistence, and after a sip, I acknowledge the excellent advice.

Of the four women I’ve met, Alicia is probably the most attractive. Facialy, I could see her on the front of the more popular fashion mags, and body-wise, well, she would be the center of attention wherever she goes. She has it all, and I

feel like a lawn weed in her presence, compared to a bougainvillea in full bloom. But of course, this is all in my head and has nothing to do with her. Instead, she's friendly, outgoing, and positive and seems to be coping well with the loss of her husband.

'So, Detective. You mentioned you were looking into the death of my husband again. I don't understand why, but how do you think I can help you?'

I have to admit to liking this young woman. She presents a stark contrast to the others. Somehow more resolute, whereas the others felt browbeaten.

I dive in with another brilliant detective starter question.

'So, you're selling your home?'

'You detectives don't miss much, do you?' she laughs.

She's caught me out already.

'Yes, I've my eye on a smaller property only four or five plots from here. I don't wish to live in the house my husband died in, but I don't want to lose this spectacular view either.'

'Or you're mooring, by the look of the yacht you have there?'

'Again, excellent detective work. My husband taught me how to sail it, and I go out whenever possible.'

'So, you're not intending to downsize or move away?'

'No. Why do you ask?'

I work my way around this without saying too much, instead asking another question.

'Do you mind if I ask? Did your husband leave everything to you in his will?'

'You can ask whatever you like, Detective. Yes, he did. Including the yacht. It's great and all, but it doesn't replace him.'

'No, I get that, Alicia. I don't want to upset you, but can I ask a few questions about your husband's death?'

'No, of course. Go ahead.'

'Was there anything suspicious about it in your mind?'

The woman thinks about that briefly as if weighing up what she might say.

'Not at the time. As I told your colleagues from the local Sheriff's office here.'

'But since?'

'Well, I'm not sure.'

'How do you mean?'

'After my husband fell down the stairs, I was pretty shocked by the whole thing. When interviewed, I didn't mention something that had happened a week

before. I didn't think of it.'

'What was that?'

'I received a hand-delivered envelope addressed specifically to me. It had a picture of my parents back in Moscow and a message that if my husband died, I should say nothing.'

'What did you do with it?'

'I showed it to my husband, but we thought it a stupid prank of some description and threw it out.'

'And your husband died shortly afterward?'

'Yes, but it was an accident.'

'Do you remember if your house alarm was set the night of his death?'

'No, it wasn't, and that was strange. Normally, we set it, but that night, one of our live-in staff apologized and said that she had been up for a drink and had forgotten to reset it.'

'And you weren't aware of anyone else in the house that night. An intruder?'

'No. I slept through the whole thing and only woke up when one of the staff screamed the next morning.'

'And what has made you think of that message you received now?'

'I had a second one delivered more recently after my husband's funeral.'

'Was it another picture of your parents?'

'Yes. But they had taken it earlier that day. It was date-stamped.'

'What was the message with this one?'

'That's the strange thing. It only had a business card for a Financial Advisors company.'

'Do you still have the card?'

'No, I'm sorry. I threw it out.'

'And have they been in contact with you?'

'Not with me, they haven't. But my attorney, who has been settling my husband's estate, has told me that a company has been encouraging him to transfer the business.'

'So, he would know the name of the firm?'

'Yes, probably. I can give you his card if you like.'

After a little more general conversation, I thank Alicia and start the drive south to my parent's place, leaving the world of luxury behind. As I drive, I start the familiar process of thinking through what I've just learned.

This case is similar in that the husband died falling down the stairs at night. He was older than his beautiful wife and very wealthy. But in this case, his widow is moving four plots away into a smaller house in an equally expensive

area and has no intention of selling her yacht.

The alarm was off the night the husband died, which casts suspicion on a particular staff individual whose name I have written down. Unfortunately, the local Sheriff's office had assumed it was an accidental death and had not ordered forensics to check for forced entry.

Then there are the two letters, possibly threatening Alicia's parents back in Ukraine, and the mysterious pressure on her attorney to pass over the settling of the estate to a Financial Advisor's company. This is something I will look into.

It takes around thirty minutes to get to my parent's home, and when I arrive, Papa's not yet home from work. He works as a porter at one of three Medical Examiners in Fort Myers, and with one ME to twenty-five thousand people, they're always busy, and Papa benefits from the overtime.

Entering my childhood home, the familiar smell of burning herbs transcends the years and brings back memories of a good childhood. The world was different back then, and I spent most of my younger life playing outdoors with friends. Our Mamas would pack a simple lunch, and we would disappear for the whole day to explore, returning at night only when we became hungry. Education was challenging, as the system didn't cater well to indigenous Native Americans, forcing me to look elsewhere to expand my knowledge. However, that was where my uncle had been helpful. He had been a Marine for ten years before settling down and becoming a teacher, working on a Reservation, just unfortunately not mine. But that didn't stop me from constantly pestering him for books and knowledge.

Mama is in the kitchen, making familiar food on the stove. She's making Fry-bread. This is another childhood favorite, comprising a simple mix of flour, baking powder, and salt mixed with warm water. Fry bread had been a staple food for Native American tribes for generations since the US Government forced many of them from their lands and made them march miles with meager supplies to resettle. These days, the younger generation refuses to eat it as they consider it associated with oppression, but not my parents, and not me, who love how mama adds herbs and spices into the mix to add flavor.

After hugs and kisses, I sit opposite her as we enjoy simple glasses of water. Something else I always love about coming home is how Mama and Papa enjoy simple pleasures without needing material things. They don't even have a television, which, in my eyes, is astonishing.

It doesn't take Mama more than a few minutes to reckon that something is

troubling me and ask what it is.

I pour out my sad story, skipping the part about Chlamydia. Mama sits quietly, listening to every word. Waiting patiently until I finish before proving me right. Then, finally, she says exactly what I'm expecting. That I should follow my heart, and I will never be disappointed. Although I already know it, having her say it is still comforting. But when Papa comes home, and after we've enjoyed the evening meal together, and I tell him, he surprises me.

'My daughter, you have always shone brightly in our lives and still do so now. The thought you may bring a new light into this darkening world fills me with joy. But you have changed since the young explorer who lived for adventure. You have grown much and adapted to the modern world much better than we could have hoped for you. This is the world within which you need to answer your questions, not the world of the past. We are wise enough to know that we are no longer the best to give you the answers you seek. But we are also wise enough to know you will make the best choices. Your choices will have heavy consequences, so when you choose, you must be prepared to deal with those. If you extinguish a light, you must learn to live in the dark. But when you live in the dark, new stars will appear and perhaps burn brighter.'

After that, when Papa is finished and I'm deep in thought, Mama makes me coffee, which she knows I love, and we talk a little longer until I check the time and announce that I have to dash. I have just enough time to get to the restaurant where I'm meeting Cliff.

I'd forgotten all about that and, at first, regretted eating with my parents. Then, on reflection, regretted arranging to meet with Cliff for dinner. The conversation I have planned for him may make the meal a little uncomfortable.

I really push my luck down the interstate, hoping no troopers are around when a message comes in on my cell. It's Cliff, apologizing for being unable to make it and asking if I'm free at the same time and place the following night. I hope some poor girl isn't picking up what he gave me. I slow down and drive the rest of the way home under a black cloud.

13

It's strange, but I can wake up to the Beatles eight days a week, but two mornings of Genesis, and I'm ready for a change. This morning, the Beach Boys are extolling the virtues of California girls while subtly putting down girls from the rest of the world. I should be pissed, but I like the song.

Annoyed that my laundry basket is piled high, I opt for some men's underarm deodorant and pull on yesterday's shirt and jeans. Needs must. After adding the usual to my belt, I try something different with the bones. So, I open the box, take them in one hand, and roll. Take a reading, then lift them and roll again.

When I was a child, and Papa showed me how to read these, just because I wanted to know, I sat and worked out how many permutations there were when you roll four dice. And I reckoned the answer was twelve-hundred-ninety-six. So now, when I roll the same twice in a row, I struggle to make sense of it. The chances of that happening must be millions to one. So part of me says the bones are trying to give me a warning, while the devil inside wants to roll them a third time.

I opt for the first, returning them to their small wooden box almost reverentially. I think the God of evil has already found me, and the God of good isn't playing on my team right now. The message from the bones is that someone will screw with me. I fast-forward to my planned meeting with Cliff that evening, thinking through what he might say.

These thoughts are still troubling me when I pull into my parking space at the office twenty minutes later and climb out of my trusty steed.

A patrol officer arrives beside me before I've even locked the door. Yes, I lock the door. It may be clapped out, but the thought of it being stolen from the police car park makes me extra sensitive. I would never live it down.

'Morning, Detective.'

'Hi, Del. Are you okay today?'

I can be sociable when I try. But I don't try often.

'Sure, I'm fine. I just wanted to give you a quick heads up.'

'Okay. You have my attention. What's up?'

‘Most of us pissed our pants with what you did to Kowlinski with the tow truck. But he didn’t like it.’

‘I guessed that.’

‘Well, your Sergeant asked a few of us to see if we could root out some video evidence from security cams round your neighborhood, to see if they showed the ass-hole who tried to stab you. None of us want to see you sent up for what you did.’

Not sure I’m following him; I egg him on with positive noises.

‘Well, my partner and I found a store directly opposite your place, and we reckoned the camera there would have a clear line of sight, so we asked the manager for the disc from the security camera.’

‘Great work, Del. Do you have it?’

‘No. That’s what I’m trying to tell you. We think it worried Kowlinski that it caught you making an ass of him, and he beat us to it. He already has it.’

‘Fuck.’

‘Yeah, that’s pretty well what we said. Good luck getting it back, detective.’

So, I’m making my way up the stairs, desperate for coffee, trying to figure out if the bones were warning me about Cliff or Kowlinski. Two rolls. Maybe both. Now I’m just grateful I didn’t roll again.

Fifteen later, I’m safely tucked away in my cubicle, coffee to one side and a chocolate donut’s remains to the other. I’m listing activities and follow-ups for the day. I need to contact the attorney looking after Alicia’s affairs and find out the name of the other Financial Advisory company interested in her business. I also want to revisit the most recent widow of the man in Arnie’s freezer, Marlene Watson, who started this whole thing. I want to know if she had any mysterious letters or photographs delivered in the weeks before her husband’s death. I also wonder if the weak link may be one of the other widows - Nadia, the JD drinker. I don’t feel bad about taking advantage of that. Being a good detective isn’t anything to do with being fair. It’s about uncovering the truth.

I’m just about to talk with Dan and thank him for trying to clear my name when the phone rings, and I answer it to find it’s Del again.

‘Kowlinski’s in the common room. He’s got the security camera disc with him.’

‘Thanks, Del.’

I make straight for the Patrol Officer’s common room, not sure what I intend to do, but that’s not uncommon with me. I’m not the forward-planning type. More of a jump-in-and-sort-it-out-after type. He’s holding court, telling some

story or other. Some people are laughing half-heartedly, and others are ignoring him. He's not a popular guy.

I head straight over. He stops speaking mid-sentence and turns to face me. 'Can I help you, detective?'

'You know you can, Kowlinski. You have a disc I need.'

He tries to play dumb with me, but Del has already told me it was there, and I think I can see a corner peaking out from underneath the duty roster he has in front of him.

I pull the oldest trick in the book. I glance over his shoulder, suddenly snap to attention, and say, 'Captain!'

He flusters and turns to look. I grab the disc and am halfway out the door before he notices. I float back to my cubicle, disc in hand, pleased with myself. Sometimes I'm just so damn smart.

Before I can do anything with it, Dan asks for an update, so I lock the disc in my top drawer. I'll look at it later. But, at least I have it.

It takes fifteen minutes to update Dan on what I've discovered. Then he updates me on the *Dead Baby* case. The way he has named the case surprises me, and although I get it, I'm not sure I'm ready for what he's about to tell me.

'Arnie has finished the autopsy. It was a girl. He couldn't tell how old she was, but only a few days.'

'Still-born?'

'Arnie says no. Some complicated reasoning about blood circulation and internal organ activity. Whatever, she was badly beaten. Someone broke all four limbs in several places, and Arnie reckons this was all before she died from a final blow to the head. He pointed out that the bones in a baby are especially fragile, so the damage inflicted would have been easy to do.'

'But not accidental?'

'Not accidental,' Dan confirms, hesitating momentarily before continuing his harrowing description. 'There would also have been massive internal injuries, although decomposition makes it impossible to be very specific. But he did notice an unusual puncture wound in the center-front of the skull.'

'Puncture wound?'

'Needle of some sort. Fairly large. Arnie reckons they injected her with something before or during her torture.'

'Anesthetic?'

'Possible. There was no trace, so we don't know what it was.'

I don't know what to say, so I opt for silence. But I know that little Bossy-

boots is pretty upset. I can understand that. Why would you want to come into a world where this happens to a newborn? And why would I want to let you, is my unconscious reply?

Dan's still talking, but I haven't been listening.

I only catch the end. Something about the sniffer dogs going out to Collier State Park, just in case this isn't a one-off.

Even without Bossy-boots to worry about, I would be pretty freaked out about Dan's case. But I have a job to get on with, so I make three quick calls and arrange my day. First, I will revisit with JD Nadia. When I speak with her, she almost seems sober and isn't keen on me stopping by to ask a couple more questions. But, reluctant as she is, she eventually agrees. So, she'll be my first port of call. Then, I have a strange conversation with Alicia's attorney. He's now recommending a new company take over her entire portfolio of financial management needs, even though he has been her husband's attorney for nearly thirty years. When I ask him why, he says it's because this other company can deal with all aspects of managing the estate, rather than his firm, which can only deal with some. I ask if this other firm is like a one-stop-shopping type of business, and he agrees, describing that as a good way of looking at it.

I listen to him but don't believe him. Show me an attorney who willingly gives up good business that he has had for thirty years to another attorney. It doesn't happen.

He gives me the other firm's name, which I write down - deciding that maybe I need to come at it from that angle. But he doesn't intend to tell me anything else.

My last call set me up with Marlene Watson, the most recent bereaved widow. I get the distinct impression she's expecting my call.

One thing I need to do before heading out. Find out what I can about the Double D's.

14

When I make it upstairs to the Narcs team, I don't need to mention my internal complaint procedure. Jerry already knows. He doesn't tell me this until he's enjoyed a good laugh about how I nicked Kowlinski's B&W and left him stranded.

'Ass-hole. Did you know he's failed the detective board three times?'

'And here am I thinking it's all personal? You've burst my bubble, Jerry.'

'Nah, Sammy. He's pissed off at all detectives. You're nothing special to him.'

'Don't know if that makes it better or worse?'

'Anyway, what brings you all the way upstairs? You fancy a job here in Narcs. There's always room for you here, you know.'

'Thanks, Jerry. I appreciate that. But I'm happy where I am. It's about the Double D's.'

'Drug pushers in the North part of the city. Run by a guy who goes by the handle of Lucky Luke. His proper name is Lucius Gomez. Puerto Rican. Lives with his old man, who doesn't give a shit about him. Why are you interested?'

'I guess I broke his wrist.'

'That's who you kicked? Well, you picked one nasty little mother-fucker to mess with, Sammy. I hope he's out of action for a good while. He peddles everything and anything, but we've never been able to prove it. We also suspect him in several stabbings in the past few months, but people fear him, and no one will say squat.'

'Well, I might have an in for you.'

That gets his attention.

'Who is it?'

'I'd rather not say? He's real skittish about being caught.'

'What's he look like?'

'Six-two, real skinny. Shoulder-length wavy hair, Latin coloring. Early twenties. Lives in my block somewhere.'

'Don't recognize him. What's he offering?'

'Not sure. He doesn't want to be stuck in the middle, that's for sure. He says he's only involved because he lives there.'

‘Can he tell us where Luke keeps his stash?’

‘I don’t know. Is that what we would want from him?’

‘Sure. Although we would want to catch Luke himself there.’

‘Do you want me to see if he’s prepared to do that?’

‘Unless you want us to do it?’

‘No. I don’t think he would go for it. He’s too scared. It’ll need to be me.’

‘All right, Sammy. Stay in touch, and let me know if you need anything from us. This would be a big deal for us. We’ve been after this scumbag for quite a while.’

Downstairs, I grab my detective’s badge and Glock from my desk and head down to the car park, wondering what I’ve just committed myself to. This kid will most likely be putting his life on the line, and I’ll be responsible for keeping him alive.

I unlock my trusty steed, climb in, close the door, and turn the key in the ignition. Nothing. Try again - still nothing. I mean nothing: no sound, no ignition light, nada.

I move Cliff and Kowlinski across a little in my head before adding my trusty steed to the list of possible offenders that day. The stones said I was only supposed to be screwed twice. Now I’m *really* pissed.

An hour and several calls later, I’ve arranged a tow truck and rescheduled my appointments for the afternoon with JD Nadia and Marlene Watson. Bossy-boots tells me I want a chocolate chip treat, so as I’m heading north anyway, I make for Cesibon, just off the far side of Tamiami Trail North - the best ice cream in the world.

I sit outside, polishing off my chocolate chip as if Bossy-boots were sucking it in. It barely touches the inside of my mouth before I’m staring at an empty tub, wondering if I should have a second. At this point, I still think I have free will. That I can choose whether to have another. Stupid, really, but I’ve never claimed to be a fast learner.

Before heading back to the pool car, the desk sergeant signed me out; I linger at the store window of *New Balance*, admiring the various new running shoes that I can’t afford. Reading the adverts, these shoes would make my running so much easier. I would float on air. Run faster. Feel so much better afterward. I need these. My life is incomplete without them.

Having inhaled my chocolate chip without even tasting it, I’m on a downer because I’ve had the same crappy old running shoes for almost a year. Adverts suck.

I arrive at Nadia's place mid-afternoon, ring the doorbell at the rear of the property, and wait. After a decent length, I ring a second time and maybe leave my finger on the button too long. Still no answer.

I'm getting a little irritated.

I try again, letting it ring for the best part of a minute.

I wonder if she's all right when she still doesn't come to the door.

I squeeze in between the wall and a hedge and wander around to the side of the building, peering in each window as I go.

At the last window on that wall, I hold my hands close to the glass to shade the sun and stare as hard as possible.

That's when I hear a scream from inside.

I jump back as a split appears in the horizontal blinds, and a pair of thick-lens glasses stare back at me.

I wave. Okay, so that maybe isn't the right thing to do, but it's all I can think of right then. After all, the woman scared me with her scream, not the other way around. My second thought is to have her come to the door. So I wave again. Thinking I may just have confused her. I stand still until a door opens to my left, and a middle-aged, grossly overweight woman sticks her head out and asks me what I'm doing. Her language is much more graphic than that, but I'm trying to give such words up.

I move towards her, showing my badge, and apologize for disturbing her. I can see her pay attention to my badge number, and I know she'll be a pain in my ass.

I ask her if she knows if Nadia is in. She doesn't. So I go back to the previous windows and start again.

That's when I see her. She's on the floor in her front room, where she'd finished half a bottle of Jack Daniels in less than twenty minutes; I can't see any bottles around. She could be drunk. She could be sick. So, I do what anyone would do in these circumstances. I kick her front door down. That's when my day gets worse.

Would you believe that as soon as I'm inside, she sits up and asks me what the hell I'm doing? I try to explain but end up apologizing and assuring her that the department would pick up the repair cost.

I realize the questions I have for her are going to have to wait. But, as she calms down, I at least try one.

'You said you met your late husband over the internet?'

'So?' I get why she doesn't want to cooperate. I really do. Mind you. I can

feel a refreshing cool breeze blow through the open door behind me. Cheaper than the air con. I think she's unlikely to appreciate that observation, so I keep it to myself.

'Can you tell me how you did it? Was it through a website, chat room, or what?'

'Website.'

If there's a prize for single-word communication, she's a good contender.

'Can you tell me which website?'

'Findperfectlove dot com.'

Now, I could laugh, but I don't. It seems to have worked for her. Besides, look at my most recent attempt. How can I be critical?

I tell her I'll contact a firm the department used to replace doors, and they should be with her within an hour, then decide on a quick tactical withdrawal. I've caused enough trouble for one day. Time for my next visit. Hopefully, it will go better.

Arriving at Marlene Watson's home, I find the front gates open, drive straight through, round the curved driveway, and park my relatively respectable pool car beside a seven-series shiny black BMW. Wondering who this belonged to, I lock up and head towards the front door just as it opens, and Marlene shows an elderly gentleman out. I make him in his sixties. Medium height for a man and with a slim build. A nicely tailored dark suit with a fine pin-stripe. Crisp white shirt and a light blue tie. Hispanic, without a doubt. Probably South America somewhere. I wouldn't know. They all look the same to me. That's what people say about my race, too, so I like to think I share the pain.

His face is weathered, like a ship's captain from when the decks were exposed to all weathers. His hair is somewhere between gray and silver, pulled tightly back into a small ponytail. He looks like a fit man but on crutches.

A woman walks behind him, wearing a smart two-piece, carrying a briefcase. I guess you need someone to do that if you're on crutches. She walks ahead to open the car, and he nods to me as he passes.

When I arrive at the front door, Marlene is waiting for me and shows me through into a different area of the house from my last visit - the kitchen.

'I hope you don't mind, detective. I'm just about to make myself a strong coffee. Would you like some?'

Not a tough decision for me.

So, as she busies herself, I pull out a stool and sit at a breakfast bar that could feed the entire Native American Nation and look around. There are appliances for everything imaginable, and I bet she doesn't know how to use any of them,

although she's handling the coffee maker confidently, so I give her credit for that. I lose count of ovens after six, and the fridge-freezer could keep astronauts alive all the way to Mars.

Soon enough, Marlene places a mug of black coffee on the worktop before me and pulls out a second stool. The aroma is terrific. She did say she was about to make a *strong* coffee, and I'm happy to ride along. If I had a spoon, I would try standing it upright. This woman is class. This is already better than the lemonade I had on my previous visit. If things keep improving like this, I might have to keep coming back.

'So, Detective. You said you have a few further questions?'

Today, her hair is loose over her shoulders and hangs in long flowing waves down to her breasts. She's wearing a light white cotton dress, rather old-fashioned for my taste but undoubtedly cool in the day's heat. The sadness I noticed before is still around, but it's no longer hanging over her. Instead, it's in her eyes.

'Yes, thanks for seeing me again on such short notice. I'm sure you have many things to attend to.'

In response, she nods and sips her coffee.

'I just have a few more questions. But first, I need to inform you that we are treating your husband's death as suspicious.'

'What? How do you mean suspicious?'

Her reaction is almost genuine, but not quite. I already feel she's been expecting me to return for this very reason.

'We now believe your husband was not alone when he died. We think someone killed him.'

I watch the color drain from her face and her hand shake as she carefully lays her coffee down. This time, her surprise is more convincing. But I'm unsure if I've surprised her by telling her someone may have killed her husband or that I've found out about it.

'I'm sorry to have had to tell you, Marlene. But obviously, now we need to ask more questions.'

The tears are welling up, and she excuses herself to fetch a tissue from nearby. When she returns after a few moments, she's more composed.

'Can I ask why on earth you think what you do, Detective?'

'We base this conclusion on autopsy results and forensics. You know your husband broke his neck?'

'Yes.'

'Well, how he broke it convinced our Medical Examiner that the fall would not have caused it.'

‘But he fell down the stairs. I saw him laying at the bottom, his head twisted.’

My detective radar is up, and something isn’t right. I just don’t know what. So, I start doing what I always do in this situation. Ask questions.

‘Tell me again where you were when your husband fell.’

‘I was in bed.’

‘And you were unaware of Jon getting up or going downstairs?’

‘That’s right. I was asleep.’

‘Nor were you aware of an intruder before or after your husband’s fall?’

‘No. There was nobody.’

I believe in the ring of truth and have enough experience to recognize the sound. I’m sure this is a lie, and my mind starts puzzling furiously. Why would she be lying about her husband’s death? Why would she deny there was an intruder? Unless she had to. But what would make her? Then I remembered what Alicia had told me, up in Sarasota the previous day. So, I switch tack.

‘Had you received any unusual mail in the weeks preceding your husband’s death, Marlene?’

I can already feel another lie coming before it leaves her lips. I measure it in millionths of a second delay, but it’s also visible in her eyes.

‘No. Nothing that comes to mind.’

‘So, no photographs of family members back home or threatening messages?’

Same thing, only more delay, and I could now detect fear in her eyes. This woman is frightened.

‘No, I told you, detective. But, if I can ask you to hurry, I have a busy day.’
I give her my serious detective look.

‘Marlene. I don’t think you understand. It no longer matters how busy your day is. This is a suspected homicide I’m investigating. And you are a key part of it.’

She has moved up the frightened scale to terrified and is clenching her hands to hide the shakes. I’m waiting for more tears, but she’s beyond that.

I can either sympathize and ease up or pressure her and break her down. Pressure is more my style.

‘Marlene, I must tell you I don’t believe your story. I don’t think you were asleep, and I don’t believe you didn’t know you had an intruder. What I don’t know is whether you arranged for the intruder to break in or not. No alarm. Open back entrance. You might as well have had a flashing neon entry sign above the house.’

Now the tears do start. A flood. Her hands cover most of her face, but I can

still see the mascara tracks. Her shoulders are shaking as she sobs. I admit I feel sorry for her. But sometimes, you do what you have to.

‘It’s time you tell me what really happened, Marlene. Then, it’ll be better for you, and I can bring your husband’s killer to justice.’

I couldn’t have predicted what would happen next. I think she’s about to reveal all, but I’m wrong.

‘I must ask you to leave, Detective.’

I sit back, shocked.

‘Now!’ she adds.

I’m so close to a breakthrough. I can feel it. But I don’t have any choice. It’s her house, and she’s asked me to leave. I could take her in, but given her emotional state, even I would think that cruel.

On the way out the front door, she speaks again over my shoulder.

‘And if you want to speak to me again, Detective. Contact my attorney.’

She hands me a card, and that’s it. I’m out on my ear.

On the bright side. I know I’ve made progress. Jon Watson’s death was not an accident, and his wife is terrified of someone. But I have no idea who.

This makes me rethink the other four widows. Nadia is showing definite signs of drowning her fear in Jack Daniels. Alicia’s attorney is under pressure to hand over her portfolio to another company, and I don’t buy his explanation for why. Then, the two others generously donated their fortunes to charity and moved into the boondocks.

This is becoming interesting.

15

Crossing towards my desk back in the office, my mind is going around in circles. I have about ninety minutes until I meet with Cliff, and I'm still unsure what I'll say to him. I'm angry with him about the Chlamydia, but I don't want to be mad at him about being pregnant. So, which should I start our conversation with? If I let my anger loose first, how can we possibly have a decent discussion about Bossy-boots? But if I don't, it would feel like the Chlamydia isn't important, and it fucking is. How can we calmly talk about parenthood over a glass of wine and a meal while I wait to suddenly drop a question about an STD?

There are several sheets of paper on my desk and two phone messages. The sheets are two further complaints. One is accusing me of inappropriate behavior. Apparently, I'm now a peeping Tom. The other is a complaint about my heavy-handedness in knocking down Nadia's front door and a claim for damages because of the stress accompanying it. By my reckoning, Nadia must have had her attorney on speed dial. How the hell did she act so quickly?

The first message is from my garage, informing me that my engine has seized and is beyond repair. There was no oil or something. I've had the car since I moved to Naples two years ago, and it never needed any.

I thought a light would come on if there were a problem.

He can get me a reconditioned engine for fifteen hundred, but I need to let him know.

The second is from my union rep, asking me to call him urgently.

I'm just looking for something to throw when Bossy-boots suddenly demands coffee, and for once, we agree.

I ball up both messages and throw them in the bin.

Passing Dan's cubicle, I haven't realized till then, but he's still there. He isn't doing anything. Just sitting.

'Dan? Coffee?'

He looks at me, and I swear he's aged since I last saw him just a few hours ago. He looks drained.

'Dan. You okay?'

'Sit,' he said, pointing to the spare chair.

‘What’s up?’

I’m unsure he’s going to answer, and I’m about to ask a second time when he speaks, his voice shaky. I’ve never seen him like this, and it’s frightening me.

‘There’s more.’

I know I’m not super bright at figuring things out, but I don’t know what he’s talking about. So, I cover it up. ‘More?’ I ask, implying I know more than I do.

‘Yeah. And at least two of them are most likely twins. The dogs found them this afternoon. Forensics are out at Collier County Park. Still exhuming the bodies.’

‘Babies?’ I say, now following at last. ‘They’ve found more babies’ bodies?’

Dan nods. ‘They called Arnie out when they found the twins, but he left when they discovered a third. His two assistant Examiners are there now. I don’t think Arnie took it very well. He’s not answering his cell.’

‘I think I get that.’

‘Yeah, me too.’

‘Do they think they’re newborns, like the first one?’

‘Yes, they are. And they say they’ve been out there longer.

They’re having to piece the tiny bones together from fragments. All broken like the first.’

‘Holy shit, Dan. This is awful. Who would do such a thing?’

‘And why? That’s what I don’t understand. Terminations are available in the early months for anyone who doesn’t want a child. And adoption is available for anyone who goes full term. Christ, Sammy. Even the illegal market would pay fifty grand or more for an unregistered baby. So why would someone kill them? It makes little sense.’

We kick a few ideas around for a while after that, but I’ve nothing to add that he hasn’t already considered, so I ask him if he wants a coffee, but he declines, saying he’s only back in the office to get a break that he’s heading back out to the dig.

I top up my mug and head back to my desk, trying to think of why someone would kill babies in such a brutal fashion, but I can’t come up with even the faintest idea.

I spend the calmest hour of the day typing my notes and answering the two most recent complaints. I’m sure the lieutenant will make these disappear when he understands what happened. At least, I hope he does.

When it’s time to go, I tidy my desk. Not something I usually do. I’m nervous about my meeting with Cliff. That’s a lie. I’m worried I’ll lose it and end up a gibbering wreck, with him not understanding what I’m trying to say.

I climb into my pool car and head for the Tavern on the Bay.
Time to face up.

I could have walked the ten minutes, but I want transport to make a quick getaway if I have to. I park up outside EJ's, where I recently jumped in front of the SUV trying to knock Tommy Hawk's girl down and enter the Tavern. It's a Wednesday night, which means two things. Rib night and Trivia quiz night. The place is hopping.

I scan the room and see that Cliff is already there and has snagged a table beside the open windows. On a warm, balmy night like this, there will be a nice cooling breeze. The seats are the equivalent of flying First Class. He gives me a wave, and I wave back as I wind through the crowds.

Seeing him, I feel a brief flutter, and it isn't Bossy-boots this time. I like this guy. I can't pretend anything else. Well, that's shitty.

As I arrive, he stands and lightly kisses me on the cheek, and I let him before sitting opposite. He already has a glass of white wine in front of him and a Corona waiting for me. It's a small thing, but he's telling me he knows I like Corona and that he's thinking of me. Unfortunately, this isn't getting any easier.

I push the Corona aside and pull a glass of iced water into its place. If he notices, which I'm sure he does, he says nothing. Instead, he apologizes for having to cancel the previous evening. Something about a big case he was prosecuting: I don't know. I'm not listening.

He rambles on for a while, filling the time, but I'm sure he knows something is wrong. And I'm right.

'So, what's up, Sammy? You're too quiet.'

So there it is. The moment I've been turning over and over in my mind for the past few days has finally arrived. And I'm tongue-tied. Which way do I go? Chlamydia or pregnant? Pregnant or Chlamydia? Instead, I do neither. I just sit staring at him like an idiot until he prompts me for a second time.

'Sammy?'

I wish I didn't fucking well like him. This would be so much easier. If he has Chlamydia, he's been sleeping with someone else and didn't get it from me. If he's sleeping with someone else, maybe he doesn't feel we're in an exclusive arrangement, or perhaps he doesn't feel the same for me as I do for him. If he doesn't feel like this for me, I don't want to know, and I realize that's what's really worrying me. I'm scared he doesn't care.

'Sammy. Speak to me.'

At that moment, I conclude there's no correct order to do this, so I dive in.
'You have Chlamydia?'

The shock on his face would have been funny if I weren't so upset.

'I have what?'

'You heard. Chlamydia. You know, a sexually transmitted disease.'

'I know what Chlamydia is, Sammy. Why suggest that? Have you? Is that why you're dancing around?'

'Yes, Cliff. I do. And the only person I've slept with for heaven knows how long is you.'

'So, you're sure I have it?'

'It's the only possible conclusion. You should get yourself checked out.'

Talk about putting a dampener on a conversation. When the server arrives to take our food order, it isn't a balmy breeze flowing in the open window. It's more like an Arctic blast. I swear, my Corona is frostier than when I sat down. It takes all my strength not to grab hold and down it in one.

We sit in uncomfortable silence for a moment, Cliff sipping his wine and me my glass of iced water. I can almost hear his mind tick over. He's smart, and I have a funny feeling I know what he's figuring out. It turns out I'm right.

'Your pregnant?'

I don't know why, and I'm certainly not doing it for effect, but my eyes fill up, and tears run down my cheeks as I frantically use a paper napkin to mop them up. Where has the strong me gone? Since when did I become a weepy, helpless little woman?

'How far along?'

'Around six weeks,' I answer, regaining a little control.

He takes a few moments, and I can almost see his mind flipping through the pages of some invisible calendar.

'And you found out about the Chlamydia from your doctor during a check-up?'

I nod. I told you he was smart.

'It was the water. You love you're Corona, and I could only think of one reason you would choose water instead.'

'Very clever.'

'So, you have questions for me, no doubt?'

'Cliff, I have so many questions for myself, never mind for you right now.'

16

It was a restless night. I came home from the Tavern feeling more confused than when I went. Cliff and I talked for the rest of the evening about what Bossy-boots would mean to our relationship and lives. We also discussed termination and debated the pros and cons. Eventually, we talked ourselves to a stand-still, and it was only on the drive home I realized I hadn't asked him where or when he might have contracted the Chlamydia. During my research a few days back, I learned that it can last for between one and four years without treatment. So, it's possible he contracted it before we met, but I don't know because I forgot to ask.

Two a.m., and my mind is in a whirl.

I run through everything he said, then rerun it all through my new assistant interpreter and come up with different answers.

I don't know if he wants me to have the baby and whether he's for or against a termination. Whether he's ready to be a father or thinks I would be a good mother. I've just multiplied all my unanswered questions by two or more.

Unable to settle, I get up and switch on my ancient laptop, allowing it to warm up while I visit the washroom and splash my face. I make myself hot cocoa from a tin I must have had since I moved in two years ago. I think Bossy-boots is also having a rough night.

I take Kowlinski's DVD from my hold-all and insert it into the laptop.

I have to wait an annoying couple of minutes while the damn machine whirls and clicks before a list of filenames appears in front of me. They're in gibberish, so I click on the first and sit back to watch the content of the store-front security footage.

Although I'm a huge fan of Abba, even though they haven't recorded for years, I'm not expecting the introductory bars of Mamma Mia.

'I've been cheated by you since I don't know when.'

'So I made up my mind. It must come to an end.'

It's like receiving a message from a higher power from forty-five years ago. I sit transfixed, listening to the sage advice.

'Yes, I've been brokenhearted since the day we parted.'
'Why did I ever let you go?'

Talk about conflicting messages. I've enough problems without help from Abba, so I try another file. It turns out to be another Abba track.

'Knowing you, knowing me.'
'There's nothing we can do.'
'We just have to face it.'
'This time, we're through.'

As good as the music is, this is not helping me. As for Kowlinski. Fuck him. He's set me up. Bastard. Beware a woman scorned. Just for a moment, I wonder if he knows about my conversation with Cliff, but only for a moment. He doesn't know, and neither does Abba.

I've set Alexa to play Abba's greatest hits at six a.m., so I wake up to the cheeriest music ever with '*Dancing Queen*.' I skip into the washroom and shower through, '*Take a chance on me*.' The music is working. I feel better.

Breakfast comprises muesli with low-fat milk and natural yogurt. Don't ask, but Bossy-boots coerced me into stopping at the 24/7 on the way home last night. At least the music is great, and when they sing '*Money, money, money*', I remember that I've promised Tommy Hawk I would meet some of his people and give him my response to his offer.

I'm pleased with myself for eating such a healthy breakfast until I throw most of it up fifteen minutes later. I have to wonder at that point whether Bossy-boots knows what the hell he or she is doing.

I give up on running and pull the same jeans on with a plain white T-shirt, which is like a Snow-white advert compared to my studded neighbors'. I need to spend some time with my laundry soon. Or my jeans will make their way to the office without me.

With a fresh brew in front of me, I prioritize my day. The list is growing. My car. How can I find fifteen hundred? Is it worth it, or should I try for a loan and buy something a little newer? I don't know. Why worry now when tomorrow will do? I park it.

Then there's Chico. I need to find him but don't know where. If I have time to wander around the neighborhood, he'll spot me, but I don't. I add him to my tomorrow list. The union rep, forget him. Kowlinski. He's definitely high on my

list but not necessarily urgent, so I slip him onto tomorrow's list. Cliff. Well, I have no idea what to do there other than allow some time to pass to think things through. Tommy Hawk. I should see him and his people today, even though I haven't decided what I want to do with his offer yet.

Then, feeling pleased I've sorted my personal life out, I start considering my case. Nadia mentioned meeting her husband through a website, so I should follow up on that. Then there's the firm that Alicia's attorney has given me to look into.

Thirty minutes later, the office is quiet when I arrive. Nobody has even brewed the first batch of coffee, so I wash out the jug, fill it with fresh water, and top up the machine before replacing the jug underneath the spigot. I then pop a new filter in, add a couple of spoons of coffee, then switch the device on. With no one around, I often sneak extra coffee in. We share the cost. Nobody complains.

While I wait, I walk back to my desk and look up the website. Findperfectlove dot com, and sure enough, it comes up with pictures of really hot European women. Their catchline is 'meet gorgeous women'; all you have to do is provide a name and email address, so I do. Maybe this will solve all my personal problems.

I can have a gorgeous wife who will raise Bossy-boots while I get on with my career.

Apparently, I can choose a bride from Russia, Ukraine, Romania, the Baltic, or Belarus - wherever that is. So, there are plenty of choices there. But that's only a teaser. Brides also long to meet me from Poland, Latvia, Czechoslovakia, Estonia, and more. I recognize most countries but couldn't tell you where they are on a map.

I look up the contact number and call them, setting up an appointment with the owner for eleven that morning. Nipping back to the coffee area, I'm the first to fill my mug and wonder what's happening. Why is the place so quiet? On the way back, I notice the lieutenant in his office and knock on his door.

'Hi, Lu. Where is everybody?'

'You haven't heard?'

'Heard what?'

'They're out at Collier State Park helping with the search for the babies.'

'The babies?'

'Yeah. Including the one from a few days ago, we're now up to five at the last count, but they think there will be more. The conditions are atrocious, and everyone is suffering from the heat and the mosquitos. The little bastards are

thick out there, and our guys are like a picnic for them. I've got guys coming in this morning to spray the entire area. That should help.'

'Is Dan there?'

'Sure is. Up front.'

'Is he okay?'

'As okay as anyone could be in that situation, Sammy. He'll cope like he always does. Do you need anything from me?'

'No, Lu. Thanks. You got my details about what went down with my peeping Tom and breaking-and-entering?'

'Yes. I'll take care of it. Just watch whose windows you're peeping through in the future.'

Back once more at my desk, I lay down my coffee and place another call. This time, it's to the company of Financial Advisors interested in Alicia's financial affairs - DC Associates. I make myself an appointment for two that afternoon.

I'm to meet with the founder and owner himself, Diego Cruz.

I know nothing about him, so my next task involves Google.

It turns out Cruz was raised and educated in Bogota, Columbia. He became a US citizen over thirty years ago and has lived here in Naples for the past twenty years. There's a picture of him and his wife, and I immediately recognize him as the older man I met leaving Marlene Watson's the previous day. That's interesting.

His wife is stunning. A former Miss Black America with her own dance, music, and theater career. According to her Facebook page, she met her husband when he had a brand new Ferrari delivered to her front door after jokingly saying she would put her five grand first prize towards one in an interview after they crowned her. She was born in Kampala, Uganda, in 79' and they now have two daughters, Laila and Jayla.

Looking a little deeper into her husband, I find out he's a major fund-raiser for the Motor Neuron Disease Society and figure that explains why he was using crutches. He's also well-connected. There are pictures of him with dignitaries and notables from across both aisles and in both State and National houses. It isn't apparent from his contacts if he has a political leaning. He's also exceptionally well qualified, both legally and in Real Estate. So, I guess that's why he considers himself the best solution to Alicia's needs. That could be true.

I can hardly believe where his office is when I see the address. It's on a small island under Rte41 in Naples, just across from where Cliff and I sat at the Tavern on the bay the previous night. There are a few yacht clubs and marinas on the

island, a huge Hyatt, and some condominiums. And there's at least one office. How would I know?

I have an hour to spare before my first meeting with the website company, so I'll stop by the bank and discuss a possible loan.

Thirty minutes later, I regret that decision. You need collateral and a good credit rating to get a loan, and I have neither. So not only was I embarrassed, but also angry at the way the jerk who dealt with me looked down his nose at me. Smug little bastard.

I'm just fuming in my pool car, wondering what to do, when Bossy-boots comes to my rescue by suggesting more chocolate chip would be good. I'm not so confident in her instructions after losing this morning's hand-crafted special breakfast. Nevertheless, I decide to go with the idea.

Good call. It sounds like just what I need to cheer me up.

When I park up, I can't help but notice the Aston Martin in the Managing Director's parking space. Thinking back to my not-so-trusty steed and the visit to the bank, I'm jealous.

Eleven o'clock on the dot, and I enter the office of Findperfectlove. Again, given my dilemma with Cliff, I can't ignore the grim irony of my task. Thinking about him momentarily, I realize I haven't heard from him since our meal. Not even a text. Then I remember not listening very well the previous evening when he was rambling on about some case or other he was prosecuting. He's probably busy. I'll hear later.

I wait in reception for a few minutes, admiring the pictures of glamorous women adorning the walls while feeling pretty cringy about my plain white T-shirt and jeans, well past their wash-by date. I can only imagine what the owner might say when I meet him.

However, my worries are unfounded.

The owner is dressed pretty casually in jeans and a gray light-weight hoodie. I guess he's around the same age as me, in his mid-thirties. His brown hair is tied in a bun at the back of his head, and he's sporting a scraggly beard and mustache, which could do with a trim. Nevertheless, his smile is warm and genuine, and I like him immediately. He's just one of those people.

He walks me through to his modestly furnished corner office. Nothing fancy, just the bare essentials. Whatever money he's making from this business, he isn't spending it on office furniture. He asks if I would like something to drink, and Bossy-boots speaks up for me, asking for iced water if he has any. As it happens, there's a water dispenser in the corner, and he pours me one.

Instead of sitting behind his desk, he invites me to sit around a low table to one side of the room. The chairs are rigid plastic and uncomfortable, but he doesn't seem to notice, so I can hardly complain.

He starts by saying he's intrigued by my call and has never spoken to a real live detective before.

I joke that there aren't too many dead ones around, either.

He laughs, and I smile.

I explain that I'm working on a case and he might be able to help, but I'm

unable to provide more details. He seems to understand and accept that.

He introduces himself as Tony Chisholm, the founder and co-owner of Findperfectlove with his wife. I respond in kind and explain that I'm hoping he might help me with some details of people I believe to be his clients.

He looks keen. Like a puppy when you mention '*walkies*', only he isn't bouncing up and down. Given I'm worried about him hiding behind client confidentiality, I ease into the conversation.

'Can you please tell me a little about your business first? How does it work?'

'Sure. I have contracts with companies like this across most major Eastern European countries, including Russia. Their task is to find ladies looking for love and prepared to move to Florida.'

'Florida? What about elsewhere in the States?'

'No. We only service our home State.'

'Might you expand?'

'No, there's sufficient demand here, and I like to keep the business small. It's a lifestyle business. It provides enough for my wife, myself, and our staff to live comfortably without pressure. So that suits me fine.'

'Swap you,' I joke.

'No, thank you, Detective. I suspect yours would be one of the last jobs that would interest me.'

'Me too.'

He laughs before continuing. 'My job here is to find male clients who would like to find love with a woman from a different culture.'

'A beautiful woman?'

'Ah, you've been looking at our website?'

'Well, let's be honest. There aren't many plain Jane's.'

'Okay, So being equally honest, our clients are usually fifty-plus and either divorced or close to retirement, having never found love.'

'And they want some arm candy?'

'No, detective. They genuinely want someone to share the rest of their lives with. And yes, the women available on our site are fairly attractive. And why not?'

'Sorry, Tony, I get it. Why not?' I apologize, knowing I've got to keep him sweet.

'So, how do you go about hooking them up?'

'Well, finding genuine love is a tricky business.'

You're not kidding, I think, but don't say.

'We try our best to make it happen. So there's an extensive client screening process before the male clients can join our program.'

‘You mean, you check how much money he has?’

Tony laughed. ‘Are all detectives so cynical?’

‘Pretty well.’

‘Fine. Yes, we check out his finances, but we do a lot more than that. We start with his school yearbooks and work through college, universities, and employment. Next, we look at military service, employer references, and personal references from three family members or close friends. We’re always checking for consistency. Only if he passes all that do we bring in a psychologist to conduct an evaluation.’

I have to say, I’m both surprised and impressed. I expected more of a wham-bam-and-thank-you ma’am approach. But he still isn’t finished.

‘If our client passes all this, we start the selection process by asking him what he wants. Again, we use the psychologist to help with this. He uses two standard tests to identify key characteristics of his future partner. We then discuss this with him and point out some pros and cons of women from the various countries.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘Women from different countries grow up in different cultures and learn to behave accordingly. Some outgrow these behaviors. Most do not.’

‘So, if he wants a passive wife, he looks at one country. A fiery one, another?’

‘Yeah, that’s the idea. But, once we have narrowed it down to a country, we show him matches that appear to suit the profile he’s looking for.’

‘Not that photographs would have any bearing on his decision?’

‘Cynical again, detective. We do not show him photographs until we have half a dozen profiles agreed upon. Then he sees them for the first time.’

‘Makes sense, I guess. I must be honest. You’re a lot more professional than I was expecting.’

‘Thank you, Detective. We have to be. We charge big bucks for this service. We’re the most expensive in Florida and one of the most expensive in the country.’

‘So what happens next? Do you hook them up?’

‘Yes, but it’s a slow process. There’s no use satisfying our client at this end if the potential partner at the other end is not happy. Remember, we are trying to help our clients find perfect love. That involves two equally committed people who agree about all kinds of things.’

‘Such as?’

‘Approach to marriage, either here in America, or over in their homeland. Do they want children? Career opportunities. Many women we bring over here are

professionally qualified and want to enhance their careers in America. Then there are the greater families and their influences and opinions on both sides. Politics, religion, and so much more.'

'Listening to all this, it seems hard to believe you ever find anyone.'

'But thousands of women want to leave the Eastern Bloc countries. Life there is hard for many of them, and America burns like the beacon it has always been for immigrants. Besides, most of them like our US soaps.'

We both laugh at that before he continues.

'We start with chats. Then, video-chats, and if all goes well, we arrange a first trip where our client travels to meet his prospective partner and her family and friends. Then, if they survive that, she comes here to do the same.'

'After that?'

'If they intend to marry here, our client goes over a second time, and they arrange a temporary fiancée visa and return together. They then have up to ninety days to get married. After that, they apply to have her residential status altered.'

'Can she work here at that point?'

'Yes. She applies for a provisional green card, giving her a social security number so that she would be fine.'

'So that's it. She's in?'

'Not quite. Two years in, they have to go through an interview with USCIS to make sure the marriage isn't a sham. But other than that, yes. She's in.'

'What about citizenship?'

'Not until after the two-year check. At that point, they will give her a permanent green card, and after three further years, she can apply for citizenship.'

'Again, Tony. I'm impressed. You are genuinely trying to make successful matches.'

'It's what we do. And believe me, if you do a good job with one, there's three more knocking on your door.'

Sipping my iced water, I ask if he could answer a few questions for me, then give him JD Nadia's name.

'I've spoken with her, and she said she met her husband through your site. Is that correct?'

'I recognize the name, but I think she was one of our earliest successes. I remember little about her, but I could look her up.'

'That's unnecessary, Tony. But, I'm interested in these other women,' I tell him, passing him a list I've already prepared beforehand.

He takes the list but hesitates. 'I'm not sure I should answer that, Detective.

It's not our policy to talk about our clients.'

I have anticipated this, so I pull out my big gun. Not literally.

'I understand, Tony,' I say, handing him my card. 'Read what it says just before the word detective.'

'Homicide!'

'Exactly. So if you still think your client's privacy is important, we will have a problem.'

'You didn't say you were investigating a homicide. Is it one of these women on this list?'

'No. It's their husbands.'

'Husbands! All of them?'

'Exactly, and there may be more, so the quicker I find out who is responsible, the fewer of your clients are going to suffer.'

Heavy-handed on such a nice guy, but it works, and he quickly confirms that all four names are women who have come through his website. So, I ask him when they were active.

'Three of them, including JD Nadia, were around three or four years ago, with Alicia and Marlene Watson being just over two.'

'So, they all have permanent green cards?'

'Yes, I helped Marlene recently, and I think Alicia was just a couple of months before that.'

This is getting me thinking, but I have to watch my time. I've been here much longer than planned and don't want to be late for my next appointment at DC Associates. So it's time to wrap up.

'One last question, Tony. Does anyone outside of your organization have access to your client information?'

'No, detective. We're very careful about our data security, and I check for hacking regularly. It's my thing. I'm an IT guy.'

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It's only ten minutes by car to the office of DC Associates, but that's long enough for me to consider what I've just learned. At last, I can finally connect the five cases. The rigorous screening and evaluation each husband has undergone sounds like a target list being created to me. Somehow, I'm sure someone is getting into Tony Chisholm's database, regardless of what he thinks. It's also interesting that all five husbands died after the USCIS interviews, so the authorities have accepted the marriages as bona fide. This removes any possibility of a challenge to the legality of a husband's will. I doubt that's a coincidence. I think I'll need to have a second conversation with Tony Chisholm.

The DC associates' office is a relatively modest single-story building, looking more like a small family home than an office. It has a pointy gray roof, a pale blue clapperboard exterior, an ornate entrance in the middle, and two large bay windows to either side. They've cleverly designed the roof to overhang the front door to provide welcome shade for visitors. A small discrete brass plaque with the company name below a bell is to one side of the entrance. It is all very underrated and elegant in its simplicity. This guy has taste. I have to give him that. I notice his shiny black Seven series parked out front and a few lesser BMW models. I suspect he operates a lease car scheme for employees.

I ring the bell, and a mystical voice from a hidden speaker suggests I come right in. So, being obedient, I do just that.

I suspected it would be stylish inside, but not like this. Instead, it's ultra-modern and minimalist. The receptionist sits behind a curved light-oak desk with a small modesty screen beneath. The work surface is clear, except for an Apple laptop open to one side and a pad and pencil. So, either she has nothing to do, or the paperless office has finally arrived. If it's the latter, the Sheriff's office hasn't been told about it yet.

The receptionist is on the low side of thirty, with a welcoming smile and friendly manner. What client wouldn't enjoy meeting her? Even I feel it. She's a natural people person, and I have to fight down my jealousy. I've never been like that. People have to work hard to get through my defenses. Even then, I have more behind that. Only Cliff has ever got close to my inner self, and that thought

almost throws me. When she speaks, I explain that I have an appointment with Mister Cruz.

‘Oh, yes. You must be the detective?’

‘That’s me.’

She produces a registration book from below her desk and asks me to sign in, then disappears for a moment before returning and telling me that her big boss is ready for me if I would like to go straight through.

Cruz’s office is similar. Same beautifully curved desk and Apple laptop, but in this case, there’s also a small coffee table and two chairs to one side. Cruz is behind the desk but waves me toward the seating area. The chairs are horrible modern designs that look uncomfortable and impossible to sit on. I’m wrong. He laughs at my expression as I try one and explains that they come from a Swedish firm specializing in ergonomic design, as does all the office furniture.

When he says *all*, I guess he means the desks because there’s nothing else. No filing cabinets, sideboard for drinks, or bookcases. Nada. Just his desk and laptop. When he stands from his desk, he takes two steps, lowers himself into an electric wheelchair, and expertly guides himself into position opposite me.

I think asking him if he suffers from Motor Neuron Disease would be crass as an opening gambit, so I focus on the office furniture or lack of it.

‘Thank you for seeing me at such short notice.’

‘Always happy to help law enforcement,’ he replies smoothly.

‘Your office it’s... stunning.’ He notices when I struggle to find the right word as he smiles. Nice guy, I’m thinking. He makes you relax, just like his secretary.

‘You’re probably wondering where everything is?’

‘Yes, that’s exactly what I’m thinking.’

‘You should see the back room!’

We both laugh.

‘It’s in the cloud, detective. All up in the Ether, floating around in bits and bytes.’

‘Aren’t you worried about security?’

‘Oh no, Detective. It’s safer there than in any computer or filing cabinet.

‘Unless the Russians or Chinese shoot down our satellites,’ I suggest.

‘In which case, we would have a much bigger problem, Detective. Now, how can I help you?’

‘I’m interested in your involvement with a firm of Attorneys in Sarasota, looking after a woman whose husband recently died in an accident.’

‘Ah, I see. I was expecting you to ask why I was visiting Marlene Watson the

other day when you arrived.'

'Well, that too. I'm investigating the deaths of both of their husbands, and I find you also involved.'

'And you're wondering at the coincidence of that?'

'Frankly, yes. I'm not a believer in coincidences.'

'I see. So I'm a suspect. Do I need my attorney present?'

'No, Mister Cruz. You're not a suspect, at least not yet,' I respond, giving him my best smile. Keeping my options open, Detective. Brilliant.

'Well, you want to know my involvement with these two women?'

'Please.'

'Perhaps I should explain what we do here at DC Associates.'

I nod, guessing I'm about to have a history lesson.

'My mother struggled to deal with our affairs when my father died suddenly from a stroke, and I was too young to help. After that, my purpose was to help others avoid that same difficulty and simplify everything for the bereaved during such personal grief.'

I studied hard and widely, achieving good qualifications in various aspects of Law and Property management, both commercial and private. With these behind me, I started this business twenty years ago and have been able to help hundreds of people since.'

'This is your one-stop-shopping approach?'

'Yes, detective. I see you've done your homework.'

I smile demurely, encouraging him to continue.

'When someone loses their spouse, it's easy to become overwhelmed by the technicalities of settling an estate, dealing with taxation, managing property, and sometimes ongoing business concerns. We specialize in all these areas and across them so that our client will only ever have to deal with one person.'

'And you are responsible for all of their financial matters?'

'Yes. That's our one-stop approach.'

'And are all your clients as wealthy as the two ladies we are discussing?'

'Yes, I'm afraid they are. Our skills satisfy the needs of people whose spouses leave significant financial issues behind them.'

'And do you provide investment advice also?'

'Yes, certainly.'

'You have already confirmed two of the women I am interested in. Can you confirm the other three on this list?' I ask, handing over the same list I'd given Tony Chisholm.

'Well, I'm not sure I can do that, Detective.'

Then, noticing my displeasure, he continues with an offer I'm not expecting.

‘But before you pressure me, I am prepared to look through my records, and if they are there, I would be happy to call them and ask if they are comfortable that I provide the information to you. Would that suffice?’

At this point, I can no longer proceed with my questions about why the three women he hasn’t yet acknowledged live in the middle of nowhere with very modest lifestyles and realize I’ll have to return a second time.

So, I thank him for his offer and explain that I’ll hold off any further questions until I hear back from him.’

He promises to get back to me at the earliest opportunity, and we leave it like that.

Thanks to running late at the website office and having gone directly to DC Associates, I’ve missed lunch, and Bossy-boots is pissed.

I offer a burger or a kebab, but when I place the order at EJ’s, it’s for a Caesar salad and fresh mango juice.

As I take it to eat outside in the shade, I wonder how I knew I wanted fresh mango when I’ve never tasted it before. It tastes good, though - another mystery to add to my list.

Back in the office, I stop by Dan’s cubicle and sit down.

‘How are you doing, Dan?’

He looks better today. Either less stressed or more accepting. I’m not sure which.

‘It’s seven in total.’

‘Babies?’

‘Yeah. Babies. All broken into tiny pieces. I’ve just been down to see Arnie; he has the remains laid out for each of the most recent ones. It’s not just that they are so small. It’s that each bone is in pieces, and there are lots of them still missing. Just piecing them together has been a nightmare. Arnie and both assistants have been at it almost solid for the past twenty-four hours.’

‘Some case you have there, Dan. What are you going to do?’

‘Sammy. I have no idea.’

With that, he asks for an update on what I’m up to, so I fill him in on what I’ve found out and that I can now tie all five cases together for the first time, but I’m still unsure what’s going on. He has nothing to add, so instead, we switch to a more general conversation with him asking me how it’s going with Cliff. This makes me realize I haven’t even checked to see if there’s a message, so I tell him everything is fine while wondering who I’m trying to fool. I ask him if he has seen his sister recently, and he tells me he is going out with her that night. His

niece, Danielle, is in a Drama at school, and they're going together to watch her. I tell him I hope he enjoys his evening and leave him to it.

Back in my little cubicle. I've just switched on my terminal when Abba's 'Waterloo' starts playing through our emergency tannoy system. Fucking Kowlinski. I could strangle the man. I can hear chuckles around me coming from other cubicles. So it seems he's already spread the word about his revenge. If I weren't so pissed off, I probably would be chuckling too. I grudgingly have to admit he's pulled a good one on me.

19

The previous evening was a much-needed break. I caught up with my laundry, although I had two washes and two dries, so it cost me eight bucks, but Mama would have been proud of me for separating whites and coloreds.

Then, Bossy-boots allowed me to chill in front of the TV with a couple of non-alcoholic lagers and a giant tub of popcorn.

I found a channel with nothing but reruns of my favorite series, MASH. It's a story about the goings on in a mobile army surgical hospital, and every time I hear the plaintiff sound of '*Suicide is painless*,' it brings tears to my eyes. When the series first ran, I know the Vietnam War was still ongoing, so the comedy had to walk a fine line between commenting and not criticizing it. I didn't care about that. It all happened before my time.

The show is full of quirky characters, with my favorites being Hawkeye and Klinger. Hawkeye has quick, witty remarks for everything, but Klinger is outrageous. He's always trying to get sent home. But, of course, his Major sees through every attempt and stops him. But whenever the going gets tough, Klinger's with the rest of the team, saving lives and caring. I guess it's his way of coping.

So, when Alexa wakes me at six, I feel properly rested for the first time in days. With no complaints from down below, I freshen up and set out for a morning run, hoping to find my secretive neighbor or at least for him to find me. I get as far as opening my front door before my day sours.

'Go home, Pigs' is sprayed right across it. That this particular pig is already in her home seems to have escaped the moronic graffiti artist. Accepting that my run is finished before it even starts, I turn back and select cleaning agents from a vast collection under my kitchen sink. Until that moment, I didn't realize I had such a thing for cleaning agents. There are dozens of them. All squeezed into a tiny space. The good news is that one of them is bound to work.

I take an hour to restore my front door to its normal state.
Then, I choose from my now vast array of freshly laundered clothing.
I pick out a floral navy blue and white one-piece jump-suit and a pair of

matching pumps and head to work.

I make it to the ground floor, where Chico is waiting for me. This time, both my badge and Glock are visible. Proving I do learn lessons.

‘Front door. Your handiwork?’ I ask.

‘Fraid so. Hope you don’t mind,’ he answers, almost pleading for forgiveness. ‘Had to do it. I’m in the same block.’

As if being a neighbor is reason enough for spraying my door.

‘Fine,’ I tell him, deciding there are larger fish to fry. ‘Have you any more information for me?’

‘I still don’t know where Luke keeps his stash if that’s what you mean.’

‘Anything else you can tell me?’

‘I think he’s got something big coming in tonight or tomorrow night. I heard him talkin’ bout hiring a truck.’

‘Drugs?’

‘I don’t know, but I guess so. He’s real tight-lipped.’

‘Do you know where this something is coming from?’

‘Nah, that’s it, man. S’all I know.’

‘See if you can get more details on the delivery, but do it carefully, Chico. Luke’s a dangerous guy.’

‘You don’t need to tell me, man.’

With that, Chico does his disappearing trick, and I head into the office.

First thing, I make straight to speak with Jerry in Narcos. I’m so focused I don’t even pick up a coffee on the way. Talk about dedication. I give it all.

I needn’t have worried. The Narcos have their own machine, and Jerry insists I join him before we start. It’s a good call. I’m always more rational after some coffee.

I update him about my meeting with Chico. A shipment is coming in within the next forty-eight hours, and he’s hiring a truck, so it must be a significant haul.

‘We’ll keep this op tight, Sammy. Do you want in at the end if we have a location?’

‘You bet I do, Jerry. Thanks.’

‘I’ll bell you. Keep your cell handy.’

Feeling I’m at least making progress with something, I’m pretty pleased with myself when I reach my cubicle. I’ve barely sat down when my cell rings. It’s Alicia, the widow up in Sarasota I’ve been up to visit.

‘Detective?’

‘Yes, Alicia. How can I help?’

‘I don’t know what to do.’

She sounds not exactly hysterical but not entirely in control, either.

‘Where are you?’

‘I’m at home.’

‘Okay. Calm down, Alicia. Just walk me through what’s happened.’

‘I’m not sure they’re connected.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Two things have happened, but they’re separate. I was going to talk to you about the first one, and then someone broke into my house last night.’

‘Are you all right?’

‘Yes, but he hurt me, and I’m worried about my father. I can’t get hold of him.’

‘Alicia, you need to slow down. I’m not following you. Can you start at the beginning? What were you preparing to talk with me about?’

‘My attorney has quit, and he’s recommending this firm he says will do a better job for me.’

‘DC Associates?’

‘Yes, how did you know?’

‘Long story. Don’t worry about it for now. What happened next?’

‘This guy, their Managing Director, called and made an appointment to see me yesterday morning.’

‘Diego Cruz?’

‘That’s him. Why do I feel you know more about what’s happening than I do, Detective?’

‘Alicia, just please keep going for now. I can fill you in later.’

She regroups, takes a deep breath, and starts again.

‘He talked me through why he thought he could provide me the best solution, and I have to say I could see why he impressed my attorney.’

‘One-stop-shopping for all your needs?’

‘Stop this, Detective. You’re frightening me. It’s like you’re reading my mind.’

‘Sorry, Alicia. Please continue.’

‘He almost convinced me until he asked me to sign an agreement to give him control over my husband’s entire estate, savings, properties, even our yacht.’

‘You didn’t sign?’

‘No. I told him I wanted a copy and time to read it over. But he said no, that he had a lot of other clients to take care of and that this was a one-time, take it or leave it offer.’

‘You left it?’

‘You bet I did. I mean, I’m no super brain, but it would have taken a real idiot to have signed off something like that without having the chance to read it and think about it.’

‘What did he say?’

‘That’s what was strange. He didn’t say anything. He returned the papers to his briefcase, handed it to his secretary, and left. It was like it didn’t matter to him. I have to give it to him. His sales technique is unique.’

‘He sounds like these damned adverts that interrupt anything you do on the internet, offering a one-time special something, a last opportunity the following day, and a final chance the following. Annoying.’

‘Well, I wasn’t so much annoyed as confused. So, anyway, I called my attorney and told him what had happened, and he didn’t want to say anything. He almost hung up on me.’

‘I spoke with him and felt he didn’t want to talk with me either.’

‘But he’s been my late husband’s attorney for over thirty years, Detective. I don’t understand why he’s like this?’

‘Okay, Alicia. Tell me what happened last night?’

‘I’d been for a swim in the pool. I’ve been trying to exercise regularly rather than lie around moping. I had come inside and was taking a shower in a downstairs washroom we use when we’ve been swimming when I heard someone moving around outside in the lounge. I switched off the shower and stood shivering, listening, but I couldn’t hear anything. So I put on a robe and went to check it out. When I stepped out of the washroom, someone punched me hard in the stomach, and I doubled up. God, it was painful. I couldn’t breathe. He pulled my head back by grabbing my hair and forced me to look at a photograph. It was my father, but a large red cross was drawn across it in felt-tip marker.’

‘Was your assailant a man?’

‘Yes, but I couldn’t tell you anything about him. It was a male voice, but he wore a dark outfit and a balaclava mask.

‘What did he say?’

‘He said, we warned you, bitch. But you didn’t listen. So now maybe you will, and he threw a picture of my mother onto the floor before me and let go of my hair.’

‘Did he hurt you again?’

‘No, I was focused on my mother. Then, when I looked up, he was gone.’

‘Did you contact the local police?’

‘No. I didn’t know what to do. I’ve been frantic. I must have sent a hundred

messages to my father back in Moscow, but he doesn't answer. Neither does my mother. I didn't know what to do. Then I found your card. Can you help me, Detective? Please.'

'Of course, Alicia. I need you to stay calm. You're the only one who can help your parents now, so please stay calm.'

'I'll try.'

'First, Can you give me your parent's contact details? Do they live at the same address?'

'No, they're divorced.'

'Okay. I need their cells and both addresses. Then please call the local Sheriff's Office in Sarasota and repeat everything you have told me to them.

Tell them you've spoken with me and ask them to contact me when they're ready.

I'll get started looking into your parents.'

'I can do that. How do you want the information sent?'

'You have my card. If you use my email, it will help with the spelling.'

'I'll get onto it right now.'

'Touch nothing the intruder may have touched. The Sheriff will want forensics to go over your place.'

'I understand.'

'Do you have a friend you can call?'

'Yes. I've already called her, and she should be here any minute.'

'Good. You've done the right thing calling me Alicia. You need our help, and so do your parents. I'll get back to you as soon as I have any news.'

Hanging up, I wonder about my first impression of Diego Cruz and DC Associates. Maybe his business isn't as straightforward as he makes it sound. As Alicia also said, I realize the two incidents may not be connected. But there we go with that old 'coincidence' thing again. I'm sure something connects them. But I don't yet understand what.

First, I need to find out what is happening to Alicia's parents. For that, I'll need the Under-Sheriff's help. Part of his role is international cooperation. So he'll know who I need to speak with.

It turns out that the Under-Sheriff, Bill Putinski, offers to help personally, and I'm more than happy to accept. He intends to start with Interpol as it sounds like international blackmail. Possibly organized crime related, and this is right up their street. He reckons he'll probably work with Moscow's Directorate of Internal Affairs. The Moscow City Police to me. I leave him to it.

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With Bill having promised to treat it as urgent and to keep me up to date, I head back down to the office to call the Sheriff's Office in Sarasota. On the way, I check my cell. Still no message from Cliff. I assume he might be busy with his case, and I know it shouldn't, but the thought hurts. He's known for two days now, and I haven't even had a text. At least I know who's going to be making all the decisions. I guess that's all right with me. Well, with some of me, anyway.

Downstairs, Dan asks me if I would have the time to join him on a trip after lunch. He's following up a lead on the *Dead Baby* case, and I agree. It will be good to take a break from everything that's going on in my own case. Sometimes you can get too wrapped up in details and lose perspective.

Another message slip is waiting for me on my desk. It's from my garage.

Shit, I haven't even thought about retiring my trusty steed since the bank manager kicked me out on my butt. He'll want my decision, and I don't have one to give him, but I call anyway.

It turns out he's found the same model for sale and can buy the whole thing for less than a refurbished engine would cost. It isn't fit for the road, but the engine is in working order with only eighty-thousand on the clock. He explains that he'll have to charge extra to swap the engines over, but the total would still be a couple of hundred bucks less overall. I tell him to go ahead without knowing where the money is coming from. Sometimes, you have to do what you have to do.

I call the Sarasota Sheriff's Office and speak to the detective appointed to Alicia's case. He's just heading there with a forensics team in tow. I tell him what Bill Putinski is doing with Interpol and the Moscow Police and promise to keep him up to date.

Next, I check my emails and forward the email from Alicia with her parents' contact details to Bill Putinski.

After that, I'm hungry. And still angry at Cliff, so I tell little Bossy-boots to get used to me deciding on my own and make for a great burger stand I frequent.

I feel much better after a double burger with lettuce, tomato, and crispy fried onion rings. Energized and more in control than I have for days. Salads, yogurt, and mango may suit Bossy-boots, but I have other needs and am the real boss.

I only just make it to the washroom on the ground floor before chucking the whole damn lot up so much for control. There's more to this baby stuff than I realize. Maybe it's time to get a book.

I've thirty minutes till I'm due to head out with Dan, and there's a 'Bargain Books' one block down, so I head straight there.

Given my limited time, I ask the saleslady at the front desk where I can find a book about babies.

She looks at me in that strange way you might imagine when you see an alien for the first time. There are books for the first trimester, second and third. Then books for feeding, potty training, and even diaper management. I go to the area she suggests, and there they are. Books about babies on shelves that stretched up to the ceiling and mostly down one long wall of the store. There are thousands of them. I'm right. There's more to this baby thing than I think. Much more. Babies are big business.

Sometimes, no decision is the only decision you can make, so I do the only sensible thing I can think of and head back to meet Dan.

As we're traveling in comfort in Dan's SUV, he updates me on his psycho baby-killer case and what he's been doing. Apparently, the Medical Examiner started things by taking DNA profiles from each of the baby's remains and searching for maternal and paternal matches through a couple of public databases used by people researching their family trees. When he told Dan about this, Dan had also thought to contact an FBI agent in Washington we worked on one of our last cases with. He's the kind of FBI agent who will never break a rule but is a professional *bender*, like most of us who work in the real world inhabited by criminals. I like him a lot. My kind of guy. He told Dan he would load the same information into the FBI CODIS system and look for matches. This criminal database contains DNA profiles for anyone past or present with a criminal record, incarcerated, or on parole. Florida has signed up for this, as has virtually every other State.

Between the two exercises, they discovered a DNA profile match to a former career criminal, Stan Hardman. When Dan tells me this, I laugh. You couldn't make a name like that up, could you?

Stan has been clean for ten years and runs a bar up in the northeast part of

the city. Not the wealthiest part of Naples. And that's where we're headed. His DNA matched the twins and one other. So he fathered three of the seven babies, making him suspect number one. Or, in the absence of anyone else, the only suspect.

As we silently travel the rest of the distance, I realize I still haven't gotten back to Tommy Hawk and feel terrible about that. I make a mental note to call him when I return to the office.

Checking my cell, there's a message from Jerry telling me they've found three local vans being hired for two days and are installing trackers on them all. But, still no message from Cliff.

When we arrive at the imaginatively named pub - *Stan's place*, we pull into a concrete car park with enormous cracks and holes you can lose a car down. Only three cars are in the lot, and my trusty steed would shine in their presence. The bar itself is a flat-roofed square building with what has once been white tiles all around the exterior. There are probably as many chipped, cracked, or missing as not. They're all filthy. The place makes the car park seem like a flower garden. There's a large fluorescent light above the door advertising the Florida Beer Company. It's flickering as if uncertain whether to advertise this place at all. I can understand the indecision.

Inside, it doesn't get any better. Coming in from the bright midday sun, it's dark and dingy inside. So it takes a few moments for us to see anything at all, then I have to wonder whether it's worth the effort. The bar running down one wall probably looked good in its heyday, but the varnish has long since peeled off, and the top surface looks like he uses the same mop to wipe it as he does the floor, which looks like it's never seen a mop at all. The place stinks of sweat, piss, and, to give it some credit, beer.

The only clean things in the place are two floor-to-ceiling chrome poles mounted on a small stage in one corner. I dread to think why they're shiny and am damn sure they aren't clean.

There's one old guy huddled over the far end of the bar, staring into a half-empty glass. A woman with purple hair and a dirty rag thrown over one shoulder, I take to be a waitress, is sitting beside him smoking a cigar. It's just as well we're homicide and not the smoking police.

The guy we take to be the man we're looking for, Stan, is behind the bar cleaning up, and I say that tongue in cheek. He seems to be around fifty. I find it difficult to tell with bad guys. He has hooded and tired eyes, a nose that could

compete favorably with a blue-nose whale, and two or three days' stubble. His stained-white T-shirt has Guns N' Roses on the front, so at least the guy has taste in music. I'm a big fan of Axl Rose and Slash in particular. These guys are crazy good.

As we near the bar, Dan flashes his badge and asks if there is somewhere private, we can talk. Apparently, Stan is happy to share the conversation with what may be his only two friends at the end of the bar. Before Dan dives in, I ask about the shiny poles.

‘Want to try them out?’

‘You have someone use them every night?’

‘Most nights. Sometimes the cunts don’t show up.’

Swallowing hard, I press on.

‘What about lap dancing?’

‘Show me your butt, and I’ll see if I can fit you in, love.’

‘So, I’ll take that as a yes?’

‘If it’s a yes from you, it’ll be a yes from me.’

‘I don’t suppose any of the girls provide special favors, do they?’

‘Who am I to stop a girl from earning a living?’

‘I’ll bet I know how they pay you?’

At this, he sticks his tongue out and wiggles the tip back and forward.

Having stayed quiet throughout this highly intellectual exchange, Dan chips in.

‘You any family, Stan?’

‘Me? You must be fuckin’ joking. What would I want with a nagging wife and brats to feed?’

‘So no kids either?’

‘That’s what I said.’

‘So, would you be surprised if I said we know otherwise?’

‘Not really. There are probably hundreds of little fuckers running around out there that are mine. I don’t know and don’t give a shit.’

‘Well, knowing you’ve fathered at least three won’t shock you.’

‘As I say. That’s probably the tip of the iceberg. I sow them where I can. I’m populating the fuckin’ planet.’

‘Have you been following the news?’ I interrupt.

Stan looks surprised at the sudden change of direction but regroups quickly.

‘Nah. The screens are on over the bar when we’re open, but the sound’s never up. No one in here’s interested.’

‘So you haven’t been following the Collier State Park story?’

He’s looking suspicious now but obviously still doesn’t know what I’m

talking about. So I explain.

‘Dead, mutilated babies?’

He tries desperately hard to keep his composure, but the effort is showing, and I know he has something to tell us, but I’m not sure what. Dan takes over.

‘You familiar with DNA, Stan?’

‘Sure. You fuckers take it from me every time you bang me up. You would think it fuckin’ changes from time to time. Stupid ass-holes.’

‘Exactly, Stan. We take it and keep it so we can use it to match DNA from crime scenes.’

‘Look, I haven’t done nothin’. This may be a shitty place, and yes, I might have a few slags working here, but I’ve been clean for ten years now. I ain’t got nothing to do with dead babies.’

‘Well, that’s where you’re wrong, Stan. It seems three of them are yours.’

He looks back and forth between us, trying to tell if we’re serious or not, and apparently concludes we are.

‘Well, fuck me.’

‘It seems you are our number one suspect, Stan. So, if you’ve got anything to tell us, now would be the time?’

‘I don’t know nothin’ about having three kids. I haven’t exactly been keeping score around here, but I’m never short of tail. There’s always a girl getting pregnant. It’s a fucking hazard of the job, ain’t it?’

‘So, you know some of the girls who may be the mothers?’ I ask.

‘Sure, but they come and fucking go, don’t they. Sometimes they’re here for a few months, then I never see them again. So think nothing about it.’

‘You must have had some try to shake you down, Stan? They would be desperate.’

‘Yeah, but they never suggested I jammed them up.’

‘But you can give us some names?’

‘I can try, but some I just know first names or what they tell me their first names are.

I never really know and don’t care.’

‘So, pay slips, social security numbers, and addresses are unlikely then?’ I ask.

Getting jittery and hearing the implications of further action, in my words, he opts for being helpful and disappears to come back with a pad and pencil.

I ask him to put whatever information he has in order from the most recent first and leave him to it.

As we wait, Dan whispers that he doesn’t think we’ll get anything more out of him. That he doesn’t believe this guy is involved in the killings. Maybe he

could match the list Stan is producing to one or more of the mothers in the massive amount of data he has from the ancestry search he's still running back in the office.

When Stan finishes, he hands us the pad and Dan tears off the top page. There are a dozen names. Some with surnames, others most likely stage names like Candy and Juicy Lucy. And, as I suggested, no addresses or any other information. What he has done, which we didn't think to ask him, is to put an asterisk beside names he knew had been pregnant at some point, although he stressed that they never accused him of being responsible.

Satisfied that we have all we'll get, we leave Stan enjoying the knowledge of his newfound fatherhood and head back to the office.

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Once Dan parks up, I tell him I'm heading home. That I've got a lot of thinking to do about my case and need some peace. I have a mental image of a stack of message slips waiting for me on my desk, and I already have enough to think about.

Before pulling out of the car park, I call Tommy Hawk and arrange to meet him at the Reservation the following afternoon. I tell him I'll be there around two. I still haven't decided what to say to him.

Bossy-boots is in the control center on my homeward journey and directs me to the 24/7 across from my apartment. I'm making a veggie lasagne tonight, so I'm stocking up with broccoli, cauliflower, bell peppers, and squash. All my favorites in one dish. Well, that's what I'm being told.

I place the bag on the front seat and make the brief journey across to my apartment. Park up and climb out.

As I bend in for the shopping, I sense someone behind me and turn to find two men who must have been waiting for me.

One is a huge Hispanic guy with more fat than muscle, much more. He's wearing a red bandana and sporting large rings through his ears. He doesn't look too bright, but have I mentioned how big he is?

The other guy, I immediately decide, is in charge. He's more of the lean and mean fighting machine type and also Hispanic. He has dark hair, heavily greased and combed straight back, and a small goatee. He also has cold eyes. They're both dangerous, but this one is more so. He would be unpredictable. I have my gun, but it's in the car on the front seat beside the veggies. I need to stall their approach.

'That's far enough, guys!' I tell them as if I'm in control of the situation, not them.

Funnily enough. It works, and they both stop about ten feet away.

'What do you want?'

Goatee answers. 'To deliver a message.'

'So you're a mailman?'

'I guess you could say that. But the packages we deliver, people rarely want.'

‘Can I refuse now, then? And you can take whatever it is away with you?’

‘Not goin’ to happen, sister. This is non-returnable. And it’s got your name on it.’

‘Doubt it. Have you checked? I’m sure I’m not waiting for anything.’

‘It says, pig. That’s you, right, bitch?’

As we’re talking, I’m trying desperately hard to remember exactly where my Glock is. Have I put it on the driver’s side of the bag after I got in, or did I put it on the seat first and the bag on top? Both guys pull knives. If it hadn’t been a serious moment, I would laugh. Goatee has a huge twelve-inch machete, whereas Ringo’s knife is no more than four inches, and I can’t help but wonder if that tells me something about big fat guys. I need to store that information for later consideration and focus on survival.

Ringo moves in first, which is my preference.

I’m not a big woman, and four inches is better than twelve.

He squeezes between my car and the car in the next space, holding his knife out in front. When he gets close enough, I kick him in the cojones, and he tries to double over but becomes wedged in the space. Just what I’m hoping for. With Goatee unable to get at me, I’m reaching for my Glock when a B&W rolls up behind him, switches on the light bar, and gives a double woo-woo.

Goatee makes a dash for it with a patrol officer chasing him down. Ringo extricates himself but throws down his knife when he sees what’s happening. I guess running isn’t an option for him.

At that point, I have my biggest shock of the day. The officer who comes from behind and cuffs Ringo is none other than Kowlinski.

I stand and watch as he squeezes Ringo’s massive bulk into the rear of the B&W before coming back to check on me. His partner returns to report that goatee has escaped, but they know who he is so they would put out a BOLO for him.

‘You ok, Detective?’

‘Sure, thanks, Kowlinski.’

‘No problem. We’re all watching for you after that fuck-head tried to knife you the other day. We thought they might try again.’

‘I guess you were right?’

With that, we shake hands, and I thank him once again.

As I carry the shopping upstairs, I’m trying to remember why I didn’t like Kowlinski in the first place, but I can’t remember. I guess we all make mistakes.

Back in the apartment, I strip, shower, and slip on a loose top and joggers,

then spend thirty minutes preparing the veg and putting the lasagne in the oven. When I close the oven door, Alexa has just started '*Sweet child of mine*,' and I think how Stan's choice of a Guns N'Roses T-shirt is so ironic.

With one of Bossy-boot's non-alcoholic beers, I hunch down on my favorite beanbag. Wiggle around until I'm comfortable and check my cell for messages. Still nothing from Cliff.

Rather than be angry, I try to put myself in his position to see if I can understand him better.

He has only been seeing me for a couple of months. He has slept with me a few times at his place, but other than the first time, I never wanted to stay over. I'm too independent and don't like being caged in. I told him I had never had a steady partner before, so I was inexperienced with relationships and a busy career girl, not the homemaker type. That I'm not a twenty-a-day texter. In fact, he'd be lucky to hear from me.

Then completely out of the blue, I announce that I think he has Chlamydia and that I'm pregnant. So, if he hasn't been sleeping with anyone else in the past year, then that must mean I have. And if I have, how does he know he's the father? If he *has* been sleeping with at least one other person, then maybe I'm right, and he should get checked out. But of course, he should do that anyway, as I might have given it to him.

And if he isn't the father, who is? If I *have* been sleeping around, there may be more than one possibility.

Mulling this over, I realize how little I know about Cliff. Other than he's the District Attorney and has a family in Washington. What does he think about Black Lives Matter? What are his views on religion or abortion? What are his politics - Republican or Democrat?

I really don't know this man, yet here I am, waiting to hear from him about my life-changing choices. Why am I giving him such control? Why do I care so much?

When the answer comes to me, it makes little sense.

Logically, I should get on and make decisions I think are best for me. But I'm scared. Scared of making the wrong choices, and being scared makes me even more scared.

I'm deep in thought when a text arrives, and I grab my cell expecting him to have been reading my thoughts and to ride in on a white charger and help me make all the right choices.

It's a message from Tommy Hawk confirming the meeting the next day and

letting me know that he has lined up three people to meet with me. The first two are working girls. The third is a guy called José Pinho, some kind of caretaker for the girls. After meeting with them, I'm to come to his office, and he'll answer any further questions I might have.

At that moment, the timer goes off, and I rescue the lasagne from the oven just as the topping is burning. I don't mind. The burnt cheesy bits are my favorite, and I don't care what Bossy-boots thinks.

The only further thought I have over the rest of the evening is how wrong I've been about Kowlinski. I'm due him big time.

This morning, I abandon my pool car and leave it at home while I jog one of my longer routes to EJ's for a toasted bagel and coffee. Somehow, I'm not sure how it happened, but my mind feels clearer today.

My day is clear in my mind. I intend to focus on DC Associates and my possible new future up on the Reservation. I'll be happy if I can progress on these two things.

Arriving in the office, I see the stack of messages on my desk and immediately regret my decision to go home early the previous evening. Groaning, I head for the coffee area and find that someone already has a fresh brew ready, so I help myself and drudge back to my cubicle. As I pass Dan's, I see he isn't in yet, which is unusual. But then, he's managing a unique case, so I cut him some slack.

One sip of my coffee, and I start going through the messages. One from Kowlinski told me he'd booked Ringo from the previous evening but that I need to fill out a report ASAP. Next is a message from Bill Putinski asking me to stop by. Maybe he has some news on Alicia's parents in Moscow. I should do this sooner rather than later. The next is from my garage, saying my trusty steed is ready and I can collect it for the mere sum of nine-hundred bucks. Better than fifteen-hundred, but still more than I have. I'll have to stall, so put the message to the bottom. Next is from Alicia, asking me to call as soon as possible. Then a surprising message from Tony Chisholm at Findperfectlove also asking me to call. Followed by an even more surprising message from JD Nadia, saying she would like me to stop by but not telling me why. So much for my simple day, and I haven't even checked my emails yet. Fuck.

While I drain the last of my coffee, I try prioritizing the messages, and Bill Putinski is at the top. Then I can call Alicia with whatever news I have. After that, I'm so surprised to hear from JD Nadia that I think I should stop by on the way up to the reservation in the early afternoon. If I have time, I'll contact Tony Chisholm in between there somewhere. But I'll have to slip a second visit to DC Associates into the next day. I don't want to ease up on the pressure to get him to talk to me about his other clients, but I don't have much choice.

To get to Bill's office, I have to pass the Sheriff's, and he flags me in as I pass.

'Morning, detective. You've been a busy little beaver, haven't you?'

I'm not sure which things he's referring to, but I agree. That's my *go-to* response at times like this. I reckon you can always disagree afterward.

'I've just been told the BOLO put out on your second attacker has been called off. One of our patrols is bringing him in as we speak. This is one serious troublemaker. You were lucky Kowlinski, and his partner arrived when they did.'

'Yes, Sir. I'm very grateful.'

'That's two attacks in a week, Detective. So what the hell are you doing that's stirring this gang up?'

'Nothing, Sir. Just being a detective and living on their turf.'

'How about living somewhere else before something bad happens to you?'

'Excellent advice, Sir. I'll think about it.'

Continuing onto the Under-Sheriff's office, I can't help but think the Sheriff has unknowingly just advised me to take the opportunity with Tommy Hawk and move up onto the reservation.

Bill Putinski is one large man. He's larger than Ringo by at least fifty pounds, but in this case, most of the extra would be muscle, not fat. He's had both arms removed from the seat behind his desk so that he can sit in expanded comfort.

He waves me to sit.

'I've spoken to Interpol, who helped put me in touch with the Directorate of Internal Affairs in Moscow. They've sent people to look for your woman's father at home and work. They have also questioned family and neighbors. And I have to say. It doesn't look good. Her father didn't turn up at work yesterday, and there has been a disturbance at their home, including signs of forceable entry at the rear. So it looks like they left, or were taken, in a hurry. Their clothes were all there, as were the woman's handbag and other belongings, including a cell they believed to be hers. No one saw them leave, although a neighbor called in to see them on her way to work, and they didn't answer the door, which she said was unusual. So the chances are they were taken sometime during the night. They will continue to look for them but don't hold out much hope.'

My heart sank. I'm going to have to tell Alicia.

'I'm sorry, Sammy. I know that's not the news you were hoping for.'

'No, Bill. It isn't. Have you contacted the Sheriff's Office in Sarasota yet?'

‘No. Thought I should leave that to you.’

‘Sure. I’ll take care of it. Thanks for your help, Bill.’

On the way back to my desk, I’m already replanning my day. I need to give this news to Alicia personally. So I text asking if she’ll be at home for the rest of the morning and received a reply almost immediately. She must hover over her cell, waiting for news. I send a further message saying I’m driving up and should be with her mid-morning. I’m just mentally juggling my priorities, wishing there were more hours in the day when a further text arrives. It’s from Cliff asking to meet up. It bums me that I decided to leave my pool car at home. That will be another twenty bucks for a cab to pick it up.

Forty minutes later, I’d like to say the ninety-minute drive North on I75 was peaceful, but it’s far from it. I call the Sarasota Sheriff’s Office en route and ask to speak with the detective on Alicia’s case and wait while they try unsuccessfully to track him down until finally giving me his personal cell. I try that, and he answers immediately.

‘Maxwell.’

‘Hi, this is Sammy Greyfox.’

‘Hi, detective. I was about to call you.’

‘Yeah, how did you get on yesterday?’

He spends the next ten minutes updating me with what I already know and confirming that there were no signs of forced entry or unfamiliar fingerprints. That Forensics had turned up squat. I update him about the possible fate of Alicia’s parents and tell him I’m heading up there to see her. He asks if he should be there, and I say only if he feels the need. That I’ll break the news and give him an update afterward, and he’s happy to accept. I suspect he’s as busy as I am.

My next call is to JD Nadia. It rings and rings, but she doesn’t answer. Probably on the floor again. I hope her new door is keeping her safe, and text her, saying it will probably be the next day before I can see her. I’m not expecting a reply.

I spend the next thirty minutes of the trip trying to figure out what to do about Cliff’s request for a meeting. I thought I’d reached a breakthrough the previous night. That I was going to stop letting him have such an influence on my decisions. That I would make my own mind up. But apparently, that was all bullshit. I can’t decide if agreeing to meet is the act of a scared and lonely child

or a mature and reasonable adult. Fuck it. I'm all over the place.

I'm still pondering when another text comes through. It's my garage again. A simple message repeating that my car is ready to collect. Shit. Now I regret having used such a small garage. It was my way of saving cash, but the problem is he wants payment, and I'm now feeling guilty. He probably needs the cash as much as I do. Technically, he *does* need the cash, but I don't have it.

I text back, saying I'll stop by after work. I have no idea what I'm going to do.

My head is spinning when a second text arrives from Cliff, saying that I wouldn't know what to do if I were like him. That he had spent three days not knowing, but he had finally decided to contact me. He also said the doctor had checked him out, and he was already on antibiotics. Fuck. I've forgotten to take mine for the past two days. What the hell am I thinking? I text my doctor asking if I need to start again. How can I have forgotten?

Without warning, I'm forced to the shoulder, where I dive out of the car and throw up. I guess bagels aren't on my prescribed eating plan. Well, not today's eating plan, anyway. I wipe my chin with a tissue, and as I sit gathering myself for a few minutes, a State patrol car switches on its light bar and pulls in behind me.

I sit still and wait while he checks out my plate and then comes forward to knock on my side window.

'ID?'

I show him my badge, and he nods.

'You okay, Detective? This is not a good place to pull over.'

I don't feel like telling him I'm pregnant, so hold up my cell and give him some line about needing to talk through a serious case I'm working on. He tips his hat and returns to his car. I'm expecting him to pull away, but he doesn't. It soon becomes apparent he's expecting me to go first, so I do, with him following me for the next ten miles, carefully matching my speed. What the fuck is he up to?

Anyway, he disappears up an off-ramp when I hit lower Sarasota County and leaves me in peace. I remember back to a couple of years I put in as a State Trooper and how, if not entirely convinced by someone's explanation, I would do the same thing. Then I recall how it was when I met Dan Weissman. I pulled him over for speeding. We talked for a while with him explaining that he was a Detective as I had just done and that his mind was very much on a serious case he was working on, like I had just done, and I have to laugh. I suppose my experience had a better ending than Dan's. I got off with being followed. Dan got a ticket and was told to concentrate on driving when he was in his car, not his

case.

But even though I had ticketed him, he spent the following few months convincing me to join him in the Detective Bureau in Naples. And now, here I am.

Alicia's gate is open, and this time I realize that the Estate Agent sign doesn't say DC Associates, so Alicia hasn't yet succumbed to Diego Cruz's charms. I park in the same spot as the last time, and as I open the door, Wolf jumps up and down excitedly at my feet. I bend down and scoop him up. He weighs nothing at all. But is full of energy, most of which he spends trying to lick my face.

I love dogs, but they do *not* lick my face.

I draw the line at that.

Alicia appears beside me and takes the little thing from me, apologizing for his behavior. I guess the little guy is probably helping her keep everything together, so I tell her it's no problem and follow her into the enormous house.

I'm pleased when she suggests we sit on the terrace with the view again, and am happy to spend a few minutes watching the powerboats and yachts go by while she fetches some more of her delicious fresh lemonade.

She doesn't hang around when she returns, immediately asking if I have news of her parents.

I tell her what I know, trying not to sound either too fatalistic or, perhaps worse, optimistic.

She doesn't react as I expect. I know from her phone call the previous day; she's really worried, so I expect her to break down in tears. She doesn't. Instead, she explains she had given the photograph of her father to the Sarasota detective, but she had photocopied it first and laid that in front of me. The man in the picture is from a different generation and culture. He's most likely wearing his best suit, although it still looks a little worse for wear. His white shirt looks frayed around the collar line, but his tie looks new. Perhaps bought for the photograph? Difficult to guess his age, but I know Alicia is nearly thirty, so I think around fifty, maybe fifty-five, but he looks much older as most people from previous generations do. He's wearing a flat cap and sporting a sizeable bristly mustache that covers both lips. His expression is stern as if he had been told to sit up straight.

There is a large cross drawn across the entire picture. I know from Alicia's call it's red in the original, but the copy in front of me is black and white. I imagine red would be more dramatic. Red is final. Red is when you fail. Red is most likely dead, and I see from Alicia's expression she's already thinking the same thing. She confirms this with her first words.

‘He’s dead, isn’t he?’

I try denying the obvious, saying we can’t be sure, but my heart isn’t in it. She’s right. He’s dead.

Now, she finally breaks down and leaves me alone for ten minutes while she regroups elsewhere. I try to enjoy the view or count the number of boats going by, but my heart isn’t in that either.

When she returns, she apologizes, but I refuse to accept, saying that I entirely understand, which I do. Thinking of my Papa, I know it would devastate me. I ask her if she’s all right, and she nods. I move the conversation on.

‘What about the intruder? Had you left the pool doors open when you came in to shower?’

‘Yes. Stupid of me, but I honestly didn’t think about it.’

‘And has a doctor examined you since the attack?’

‘Yes, I was really worried. So, I arranged an emergency appointment with my Gynecologist.’

‘Gynecologist?’

‘Yes, Detective. I discovered my husband had left me a farewell gift. Something to remember him by,’

‘You’re pregnant?’

‘Yes. And luckily, the punch didn’t do any harm.’

‘So you’re what? Three months?’

‘More or less to the day. My Gynecologist insisted on a scan after the assault and told me I am having a son. He explained that I wouldn’t normally have the scan for another eight weeks, so the gender is only his best guess.’

‘Congratulations, Alicia. That’s wonderful news.’

At that moment, I realize I haven’t talked with a pregnant woman before. Never. I know I shouldn’t, but I want to learn more. Was she sick all the time? Does she have a Bossy-boots telling her what to eat?

We spent the next twenty minutes with me, selfishly satisfying my thirst for knowledge rather than helping Alicia deal with her problems. Eventually, she clocks what’s going on and asks outright.

‘You’re pregnant too, aren’t you?’

I’m sure my hesitation gives the game away as she smiles and says she’s really pleased for me, which is strange. I’ve told no one other than my parents and Cliff, so having someone else congratulate me suddenly makes it seem real. And she used the words she is ‘*pleased for me*.’ To this point, I’ve never considered being pleased. Everything has been about doubt or worry, and confusion. The thought of being pleased is alien to me, and I don’t know what to

say, so instead, I do what I usually do. Avoid the whole topic, and get back on track.

‘Look, Alicia. If we deal with facts about your parents as we know them. At this moment, we don’t know what has happened to either of them. If someone has taken them, it’s most likely they took them together. This might be to scare you. It doesn’t mean either, or both of them are dead.’

‘No, detective, you’re right if we stick to facts.’

‘Do you think this connects to your attorney passing your business onto another firm?’

‘Yes, I can’t think of any other reason someone would target my parents.’

‘Okay. Tell me about your conversation with Diego Cruz.’

‘It was more or less what I already said. He presented his case very well, and the service he was offering genuinely impressed me. I could see how it would make my life a lot easier. But then he produced this legal draft document and passed it to me along with his gold Cross pen, asking me to sign, and we could get started with everything.’

‘What did you say?’

‘I said I liked what he offered but would need time to read the details and discuss it with my attorney and a few close friends.’

‘He didn’t like that?’

‘I don’t know, to be honest. He just gave me the *onetime-deal* line, and when I refused, he just took the draft back and left with his secretary.’

‘He didn’t threaten you?’

‘No, certainly not. He was polite throughout. I was just disappointed that he didn’t understand my need to take some time and consult with others. But it’s his business, so I guess he works his own way.’

‘Apparently, successfully, from what I’ve already found out.’

‘So, there’s no direct reason his visit connects to what has happened to your parents?’

‘No. None at all.’

‘But it’s at least suspicious?’

‘You bet your ass, detective. Excuse my French. I wasn’t born yesterday, and being raised in Russia, I understand how things work. We had the Secret Police to live with.’

Understanding that we have talked our way into lunchtime, Alicia disappears briefly and returns, having prepared a simple lunch of bread, cheese, and olives while we talk a little more.

I finally admit that I’m around eight weeks pregnant, and she asks me

questions I haven't considered. How am I with morning sickness? How am I coping with my hormones being all over the place? We laugh at my name for my new inner companion - Bossy-boots. Alicia has decided to call hers Master-Right because she already knows he'll always be right.

She tells me how she's finding making decisions almost impossible, yet because of her husband's death. So she has had to make many more than usual. And that's why Diego Cruz's offer sounded so attractive to her.

With both of us feeling better after our conversation, I thank her for lunch and the advice and set off on the return journey, promising to keep her up-to-date with any additional information on her parents.

I'm already on I75 heading south when I remember that I meant to speak to one of Alicia's employees about accidentally leaving the alarm off the night of her husband's death. Annoyed with myself, I call my counterpart in the Sarasota Office, update him on my visit, and ask him if he can follow up on the employee. Look into her background. Check her bank account for an unusual sum around the time of the accident. Just regular detective work. He says he'd be happy to do that.

So now, as I drive, I'm thinking ahead. I'm heading to the reservation first to talk about a job offer I haven't decided about, then to the garage to pick up my car and pay nine-hundred dollars I don't have. After that, I have to respond to Cliff's texts that I haven't had two seconds to consider. I'm sure life was much easier before Bossy-boots came on the scene.

I'm just getting my head into Tommy Hawk's offer when my cell rings. It's Jerry in Narcos. They've figured out which rented truck will be involved in the drug activity and that it's happening that evening, sometime around seven. Do I want to be there?

When I arrive at the Reservation, I bypass the Casino and drive around the back, where Tommy Hawk had shown me the other two buildings were. One is a two-story in the form of a long motel. The lower level comprises individual rooms used for business, and the upper rooms are for employee accommodation. There are two security offices, one at either end of the building. You would have to pass through one or another to reach the accommodation. Employee safety has obviously been a significant concern.

But I'm unsure about the lack of separation between business and home. I can't see myself living above the brothel, suffering the inevitable banging and sounds of sexual delight, both being given and received.

I park in a space reserved for guests immediately outside one of the security blocks and climb out of the car. I can see the other building over to my right. This looks more like a Holiday Inn, or at least that level. Very classy.

This is where clients pay small fortunes to make their personal videos. Not something that has much appeal to me. I'm not a prude or anything, and enjoy some porn now and again when I'm horny, but I wouldn't want to watch myself perform. No, thank you. Still, everyone to their own, I guess.

Inside, I find a security guard asleep. I couldn't have scripted this better. Can you imagine? Here's me considering working as Head of Security, and my first potential employee is asleep on the job.

Instead of waking him, I go around behind him and find a board with names and spare keys hanging underneath. Each key has a room number punched into it. I check the room number for the first person I'm there to meet, Ayita - the girl with the broken ankle. Then, quietly, I unhook every key and pile them on top of one another on the reception desk, right in front of the sleeping guard, and take a snap with my cell showing both the Guard and the keys. Then I make my way upstairs to Ayita's room. I knock, and a voice from within shouts that I should wait a minute. So I do.

When Ayita opens the door, I see the hospital has encased her foot in a ski boot, and she's walking with the help of a crutch.

‘Detective?’

‘Hi, Ayita. Good to see you again.’

She ushers me in, and I must admit being surprised by what I see. I expect a standard motel room, but this is nothing like that. Instead, it’s twice the size and fitted out with a small kitchen and dining table, discretely placed behind a half-height wall creating a separate eating area. In the principal part of the room, carefully fitted shelves and cupboards line one complete wall, with a television and Comcast box in the middle. Opposite this are two gray leather sofas and a coffee table. In the background, a couple of small high tables with stylish lamps provide the light in the room, and the whole place is tastefully decorated in pale shades of oyster and gray. Overall, the place puts my own to shame.

Seeing the look on my face, Ayita laughs.

‘Not what you were expecting, Detective?’

‘Most definitely not.’

‘There’s a second room over there if you would like to look,’ she says, indicating a door to my left.

I follow her direction and open the door to find a spacious bedroom, not as large as the main room, but plenty large for the fitted wardrobes which run along one wall, a dresser, and a full-size king bed. Two bedside tables hold two more stylish lamps and a namesake to my own - Alexa, telling me it’s already almost three in the afternoon.

Closing the door again, I recognize the aroma of Columbian brew and am right. Delicious. One of my favorites.

With mugs in front of us on the coffee table, we sit on opposite sofas and talk about her injury, what it means for her work, and how Tommy Hawk treats her.

She confirms everything Tommy has told me. They fully cover all of her medical expenses, including extended physiotherapy sessions, in six weeks when she’s ready. In addition, she’s being paid sick leave, with a weekly payment equaling her average earnings from the three months before her injury.

We then talk about her background and why she’s working there. She’s Miccosukee, which, until the early 60s, was part of the Seminole tribe but gained independent Federal recognition because of many cultural differences. Although since then, many of both tribes have intermingled and married, and the distinction is now somewhat historic. She has no issue with working on the Seminole reservation, for instance. Being Native American myself, I can see her beauty through my tribal eyes. The best way I can describe her would be rounded. A rounded face and rounded body. Not fat, just... well, rounded.

Slightly shorter than myself, I would guess at around five-five, with long dark brown hair parted diagonally across her head starting from the right-hand

side at the front and finishing at the left-hand side at the back. All pulled tight and tied in two neat bundles which hang over either shoulder. She has my brown eyes but fuller lips than me. Her people would consider her exquisite, as would any of my kin.

When I ask her why she works in the brothel, it's a sad story.

'Mama died from tuberculosis when I was ten and left Papa and myself to look after my little sister, Miali, who was only seven, and with medical debts, we had no way to pay. Papa had no work then and spent his days smoking weed and doing nothing to help. So after school, I would do jobs for anyone in our neighborhood to earn enough for food, to keep us alive.'

'What about the medical charges?'

'They took our house, which wasn't really ours, anyway. It was the banks, mostly. But still, they took it and threw us out. So we moved in with my Aunt and her family. Miali and I shared a room with her four children. Papa slept on the floor in my Aunt's room. We had nothing, but we got by. My Aunt was great. She taught me how to make dresses, iron clothes, cut hair, and many other things so that when I left school at fourteen, I could finally earn some money.'

'And how did you end up here?'

'After the pandemic lockdown began to lift, I saw an advertisement for the brothel on a roadside billboard. I wasn't sure about it, so I talked with my Aunt. She said I should forget it. That it was a sinful profession and would only end in tears. She told my Papa, but he was too far gone on weed to care. So, as teenagers do, I ignored my Aunt's advice and came for an interview anyway.'

'Can I ask, Ayita? Had you slept with a man by then?'

'No. And I was worried about that, as you point out. But Tommy explained that they would choose well-established clients whose preferences and demands were most suitable to break me in gently.'

'And it was okay?'

'Yes. Now I enjoy my job. Tommy makes sure that we have control over the clients we see and what they expect us to do. There're no drugs on site, which is great, and each room downstairs has several panic buttons we can press if we need help. I feel safe working here. At least I did until now.'

Until her last sentence, I'm almost falling under Tommy Hawk's spell. With everything she has been saying, I'm ticking off the concerns I've brought with me and have to agree. It seems like Tommy has thought the whole thing through thoroughly.

'What do you mean, Ayita? Until now?'

Suddenly, she's tense. Until that moment, we could have been old friends chatting away, carefree. But now, that's no longer the case. I prompt her.

‘Ayita? Talk to me.’

‘I’m not sure, Detective.’

‘Sammy, please, Ayita,’ I say to her, trying to get her to relax.

‘I don’t know if I should say anything. I may be wrong.’

‘If you’re wrong, nothing will happen. So, tell me.’

‘I think someone is trying to close us down?’

‘How do you mean, Ayita? Close what down?’

‘The brothel.’

‘What makes you think that?’

She bends down and taps her ankle boot. That makes me realize I’ve handed over her case to another detective and now have no idea how the investigation is proceeding. A fact that won’t exactly show her I care. I push the thought aside and get her to tell me more.

‘You’re worried someone targeted you?’

‘Yes, and no, detective.’

I notice she’s fallen back into a more formal interview mode again, so I stick with it.

‘The yes, I understand. I was there, remember? And it looked deliberate to me. But why would that make you think someone was trying to close the entire business?’

‘I’m not the only one having accidents.’

‘How many more are there?’

‘It depends on what you count as an accident. I can get to four more without trying. And two of them are dead like I would have been if you hadn’t saved me.’

‘Two are dead? What happened?’

Sometimes strange coincidences happen in life, and there’s no accounting for them. I don’t believe in them most of the time, but this one comes at me from way off left field.

‘One died in a hit and run, similar to my accident. The other fell down the stairs here at the brothel. She broke her neck.’

I don’t know what to say. I realize I’m jumping ahead, but falling down the stairs and breaking her neck just feels crazy. My surprise must be evident because when I next notice, Ayita is up on her feet, shaking my arm.

‘Are you all right, Detective?’

‘Yes, yes. Ayita, thank you. Can I ask what happened to the other two girls?’

‘I’m not sure, detective. They just disappeared. The police never found them. In case they return, Tommy still has their apartments locked up with all their

belongings inside. If you want to know anymore, you must talk with him.'

'When did all of this happen?'

'All since we opened almost twelve months ago. Until my accident, I wasn't feeling safe and even thought of quitting, like many other girls. But now, I feel I've taken my punishment, so I'll be okay for a while. And I'm getting paid.'

'Who else feels like you do, Ayita?'

'Almost everyone.'

'And Tommy. What does he think?'

'I don't know. We're too frightened to talk to him.'

'Frightened of what? Surely not Tommy?'

'No. It's this new guy he's brought in. José Pinho. Should be José Asshole if you ask me. Would you believe he's responsible for staff welfare? How's that for funny? We avoid him like the plague. Nobody trusts him.'

'So why did Tommy hire him?'

'No one knows. He just did.'

After that, we talk a little longer, and I ask Ayita to write the names of all four girls who have either disappeared or died, then head out.

When I reach the security guard's office again, I'm surprised. This time, there's no one there. I look behind his desk area, but wherever he has gone, he isn't guarding the girls. The keys are back on their pegs. I take out my cell and snap the vacant desk. I still have no opinion about whether I will be his future boss, but I'm pretty sure I won't after I send these snaps to Tommy Hawk. This guy is dead meat.

Outside in the cool of the early evening, my mind is fully engaged in thinking about missing girls, a second hit-and-run, and mostly, a broken neck falling downstairs. I climb in the pool car and head out, off the reservation and back onto I75 south.

My further meetings will have to wait a day or two.

I need to talk with Arnie Collins, then Dan.

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By the time I get back to the office, it's almost six, and I know I need to find out more about the take-down of the rented truck by Jerry and his Narc team at eight. But I'm also desperate to talk with Arnie Collins, so I head to the ME's cold and sterile world.

I've missed Arnie, but I talk with one of his assistants. Give him the name of the girl who had died falling down the stairs at the brothel and ask him to recheck the County records.

Dan isn't in his office back upstairs either, so I text him and check for messages on my desk.

The Under Sheriff wants to see me urgently. My garage still wants payment. Jerry has left a message about a Narcs briefing at seven, which is in about fifteen minutes. I head to see Bill Putinski. At least he's still around. I knock on his door and enter.

'You want to see me, Bill?'

'Hi, Sammy. Some mixed news on your Russian folks. It seems your woman's father is dead. He's been shot. But her mother is fine.'

'Shot!'

'Yes, I spoke to a detective in Moscow an hour ago. We were right. They took both parents from their home in the middle of the night and held them somewhere for a few hours. Then they shot her father in the head while her mother watched and dumped her on the streets of Moscow, where she eventually got to the police.'

'Is there any information about why this happened?'

'Just a message. One of the kidnappers told the woman to speak to her daughter. That's all he said.'

'So, there is a connection?'

'I would say so, Sammy. I've asked the Moscow police to place the woman in protective custody until you make some progress at this end.'

'Thanks, Bill. I'll talk with her daughter as soon as I can.'

Still mulling this over, I head straight to the conference room for the Narcs briefing.

When I arrive, the room is already crowded. Jerry has gathered five of his own team and four patrolmen who will undoubtedly be glad of the overtime. I notice one of them is Kowlinski, and I give him a friendly nod as I enter and sit down.

The plan is simple. Thanks to the tracker, we know precisely where the truck is and are preparing to form two teams. Wherever the truck stops, we will position the two teams to either side, out of sight, and wait while a drone with a camera allows us to monitor activity in and around the truck. Then, as soon as we see anything suspicious, we come in from both sides and scoop up everyone involved. The only thing we aren't sure about is whether Luke will be there. But if it's a big delivery, the chances are good.

The room is upbeat and stinks of macho hormones, but I'm used to it. Even get a bit of a kick out of it.

I don't get that smell too often. And given my discussions with Cliff, I might not be smelling it again anytime soon.

Thirty minutes later, I'm beside Jerry in the back of an undercover 4x4, watching the transmission from the drone. We expected the truck to have headed into a commercial district with warehouses, but it's currently parked outside an apartment block downtown.

We wait and watch until, eventually, two guys appear from the building, maneuvering a large sofa out of the doorway and onto the walkway. One of them opens the truck's rear, and they load the sofa and go back inside.

I look at Jerry, but he's as puzzled as I am.

'Do you think the drugs are in the sofa?' I ask. But he doesn't answer. Just keeps watching.

Over the next hour, we watch another sofa, two beds, and an enormous wardrobe being loaded before Jerry finally calls the operation off. 'They're onto us.'

'But how?' I ask. 'You kept the word tight, didn't you?'

'Only the people you saw in the room tonight know about this op. I didn't even tell my boss, who will crap on me from a great height tomorrow when he sees the overtime cost.'

I'm deadbeat when he drops me back at the office, and I know I should go in and call Alicia up in Sarasota with the news about her father, but I reckon her mother will have already called so that I can leave it till the morning.

Instead, I climb into my pool car and drive home.

As I think about Alicia, I have this horrible sinking feeling.

I need a shower, a Corona, and some junk food to perk me up. I feel I can eat a whole horse. I'm having meat tonight, for sure. The Corona will be replaced by this non-alcoholic stuff I've found. It's not Corona, but it'll have to do.

I park up, take the kebabs from the front seat, and enter my apartment building to find Chico waiting in the shadows. He goes straight onto the attack.

'You fucked up, man!'

I hate it when someone attacks from a position of strength. It's just so unfair. But he's right, and I tell him so.

'Something went wrong. They must have been expecting us?'

'You know why, fucker?'

I could take objection to that, but Bossy-boots and I are way past hungry now. We've both agreed on kebabs, and they're already getting cold, so I stay calm.

'No, I don't know why, Chico. Can you help me out there?'

'They got blue cover, man. That's why.'

'Blue-cover? What you talking about, man? Give it to me in English.'

As soon as these words come out of my mouth, I realize how tired I am. I'm sounding like him now.

'They got inside info, man. Blue-cover.'

A light goes on at last, burning pretty dimly, but it's on.

'You mean we've got a mole in the Sheriff's office?'

'Blue-cover. Like I told you, man.'

'You have a name for me?'

'No. I don't know no name. But you're the detective. So sure, you can find out.'

With that, he about turns and does his usual disappearing trick.

What he implied is surprising, but it makes sense. The good news is, Jerry had kept those involved down to himself, five of his guys, four patrolmen, and me. I can discount Jerry and myself, so there are only nine suspects.

By the time I figure that out, I decide against a shower and put my kebabs into the microwave to reheat, grab a cool non-alcoholic lager from the fridge and some paper towels, then sit down with my cell to look through my unread mail. There are too many to count, but there are several from Cliff starting with - *I'm here. Where are you?*

Fuck, fuck, fuck. I've forgotten to text him to cancel dinner. What am I doing? I'm still trying to think of what to say in a message when I glance at the list again and read a terse message from Tommy Hawk asking why I hadn't stopped by after meeting with Ayita. Then there's my garage with a simple

message. '*I've had an offer of seven hundred for the Chevy. Should I take it?*'

Feeling like the captain of the Titanic on the way down, I take a great swig just before my fire alarm goes off with a piercing shriek. I look around to find smoke billowing from the microwave. I dash across the room, pull out the plug, and then across to the other side to throw open both windows. The room still fills with smoke, and I'm coughing and retching as I hang my head out the window and gasp in the fresh air.

The air helps clear my mind. I pull my T-shirt over my nose and head back in to grab the fan I use instead of air conditioning, plug it in beside the microwave, and turn it on full.

It isn't a perfect solution; it takes a good half-hour to clear the room, but it works.

I now have two additional problems.

The room reeks of smoke, and the kebabs are ash. Bossy-boots isn't impressed, and neither am I.

I leave the windows open, not exactly risking burglary on the sixth floor, and head back to the kebab shop, deciding if there's space I'll eat in.

There is, and I do.

Food helps, but I'm not looking forward to returning to a smoky room. Still, needs must. There's no way I can spring for a hotel.

Back in my apartment, the smell isn't as bad as I expected, so I close the windows, take a fresh non-alcoholic lager from the fridge, pop the cap, and sit down with my cell once again. There's a new text from Cliff. '*Couldn't wait any longer. Gone home. Call me.*'

The previous day, when I'd been talking about pregnancy and babies with Alicia, she'd mentioned suffering from raging hormones, and I'd smugly sat thinking they weren't a problem for me. Now I'm not so sure. That's three times I've forgotten to contact Cliff in a single day!

25

Morning call and Alexa plays '*The boy is mine*' by Brandy and Monica based on the Jackson/McCartney track, '*The girl is mine*.' I like it but don't know if it contains any hidden message for me that day, given how I treated Cliff the previous night.

Anyway, a new dawn, a new day. I should have showered the previous night, and now I desperately need one. I don't think the apartment stinks too badly from last night's smoke, but my hair does.

Twenty minutes later, squeaky clean, I repeat the previous exercise of standing naked in front of my full-length mirror and checking for a bump before dressing. There's still nothing to see, yet my jeans feel tighter than before.

In the background, the weather channel is telling me it's going to be another hot day, so I pick the lightest top I have and prepare myself for comments in the office, as it's more revealing than I would typically choose. But hey, in a hundred-five, a girl wears what she must. Let's face it. I'm not exactly going to get complaints.

As I climb the stairs at the office, my priorities are clear.

I'm going to call and actually speak with Cliff to clear up what has happened and hopefully agree on another time to meet up. Then, I'll call my garage and promise to square up at eight sharp.

With my trusty steed back safely in my parking space, I'll start my official day by calling Alicia and talking to her about the death of her father and her mother being held in protective custody.

That's my plan. And that's what I genuinely intend to do. But, unfortunately, it just doesn't work out.

I collect my coffee and don't even reach my desk before Arnie Collins intercepts me.

'You've found another one,' he told me with no introduction. I must look as puzzled as I feel because, without asking, he clarifies this for me.

'A C3/4 break. Just like the others.'

'Like the Russian Brides?' I reply before realizing that Arnie won't know

anything about his victims being married to women from Eastern Europe.

I spend the next few minutes explaining, then ask him what he's found out.

'I missed this one because the death was a woman, not a man, and they did the autopsy up in Lee County. But, remember, I said there could be more if we look outside Collier County.'

'Guess you were right, Arnie. Is there anything particular you can tell me about this woman's death?'

'Nope. Just the same as the others. Very professional.'

'Thanks, Arnie. I'll stay in touch if I come across any more.'

'You're going to catch this guy, detective? Aren't you?'

'Sure am, Arnie,' I tell him, trying to sound as positive as possible.

Knowing my hunch is right, I cover the remaining distance to my cubicle without further interruptions. This woman, who had fallen down the stairs and broken her neck at the brothel, is connected to the case I've mentally called *Russian Brides*. But it doesn't fit. Arnie's right about that. All the other deaths are men. And this woman has nothing to do with Tony Chisholm's website. At least, I don't think she has. Something I can find out real quick. I place a call on my cell but only get through to an answering service. Looking at my watch, it's still only seven-forty-five. Chisholm probably doesn't start till eight at the earliest: lifestyle business and all.

Shit, my trusty steed! I'm due at the garage in fifteen.

Leaving my coffee, I run down the stairs and all six blocks to the garage. Even though the day hasn't warmed up yet, I'm soaked in sweat when I arrive.

The owner is just throwing up his metal shutters when I arrive, panting. I see my steed parked outside in the lot, just waiting for me. My plan is simple. I'm going to pay using a card and get the hell out of there before it bounces.

I can sort out the problems later when I get paid.

I enter the office full of apologies, but the owner's thoughtfulness makes me feel terrible about my shitty plan.

He shows me the list of work he's done, and I'm not a mechanic, but it's a lot.

I hand him my card, and he runs it. Then he reruns it before returning it to me with a pained expression.

I pretend to be surprised and ask him to run it a third time.

He does, but with the same result, and again hands it back.

Even though I'm already feeling terrible, he manages to make it worse.

'Look, Sammy. I like you. I got paid for another big job yesterday, so I'm

good until the end of the month. Would that help you?’

I look at him, speechless. Here he is, struggling to keep his business going and offering to fund me for seven interest-free days. What can I say?

Seeing that I’m jammed up, he reaches below the counter to retrieve my keys and hands them to me. ‘See you in a week?’

‘Sure,’ I reply, already knowing I won’t have the cash then either.

The well-used seat fits my butt like a glove. Smiling to myself at my stupid mixed metaphor, I put the key in the ignition and turn. The refurbished engine kicks into life immediately. It sounds different somehow, but I don’t care. It’s good to go.

Back at the office, I turn before entering the building and have one last look at her in my parking spot and smile. She’s back!

Climbing the stairs, I meet Dan heading out. He tells me he’s still trying to track down some potential mothers on the list Stan Hardman gave us. I tell him I’ve found another broken neck case but don’t tell him where. I still haven’t talked with him about Tommy Hawk’s offer yet, and feel a little guilty. So I don’t want to explain why I was out at the brothel. Not yet, anyway.

As I get to my desk, there’s a CD lying there. It’s Abba’s greatest hits. There’s a sticky on it with a simple message. ‘Sorry. *Hope you like Abba!*’

I’ve clearly misjudged Kowlinski pretty badly.

I’m generally not that far off with people.

I smile and slip the disc into my hold-all, realizing he doesn’t know about the range of music available through Alexa. I won’t tell him. Sometimes I can be graceful.

My cell rings, and I answer. It’s Alicia up in Sarasota. She wants to tell me the news from Moscow, and I let her talk. It seems like she needs to. She’s hyper. Upset about her father and feeling guilty that she has contributed to his death in some way, but also relieved to find that her mother is safe. I guess we both thought she had lost both parents.

When she runs out of steam, I ask her if the Sarasota detective has been to talk to one of her staff yet. She says he hasn’t, and I make a note to myself to find out why not?

She asks if I have any more news, and I tell her I still have a few things to follow up with and reassure her I’ll be in touch as soon as I have anything I can share.

With that, I end the call and try to reset my day’s priorities again. This time I intend to write them down. It seems a pregnant memory doesn’t function as well

as it should. I know I only have a few things to follow up on, but if I write them down, I can score them off and feel good about achieving something.

1. Check the progress in Ayita's hit-and-run case. I feel embarrassed I haven't done this.
2. Check in again with the Russian bride website, with the name of the woman who had fallen downstairs at the brothel
3. Look into the name Ayita gave me yesterday at the brothel. José Pinho. I'll find a criminal record in his background if everyone fears him.
4. Apologize to Tommy Hawk for messing him around and arrange another meeting
5. Tell Jerry in Narcs about the blue cover Chico told me about.
6. Follow up with DC Associates
7. Look up files on the four women Ayita named: a second hit-and-run, two missing persons, and my new broken-neck case.
8. Talk with the Sarasota detective about interviewing Alicia's staff member
9. Return JD Nadia's call

There's more than I thought. I'm glad I've written them down. It will help me prioritize. I go for a couple of quick wins first. I call detective Maxwell in the Sarasota Sheriff's office. The familiar voice answers.

'Maxwell.'

'Hi, detective. It's Sammy Greyfox here?'

'Oh, sure. Hi detective. You're asking if I've spoken to that housekeeper yet, right?'

'Right in one.'

'Sorry, but it's on my to-do list.'

I know he means that as a positive statement, but I'm looking at my list in front of me, and it doesn't feel like it. I press on.

'Give me a probability of getting to it today?'

He says. 'Not high, but I'll see what I can do,' and hangs up.

Inter-office co-operation in its finest form. Still, his day is likely much the same as mine, so I move on to item two and call Tommy Hawk.

I start by apologizing for not getting to him the previous day. But he's already spoken to Ayita, and she has shared some of her concerns about someone having it in for the entire business. He asks me what I think of the idea.

'I don't know, Tommy. But I suspect some of what she says might be true.'

‘Which bit? She said a lot.’

‘The girl who broke her neck falling down the security block for one, and probably the hit-and-run victim.’

‘What about the missing girls?’

‘I don’t know. If there’s a master scheme in the background, it would fit, but if there isn’t, they may have just walked away.’

‘Leaving everything they own behind?’

‘I guess not.’

‘Are you going to be looking into this, Sammy?’

‘I am.’

‘Are you doing it as the police or my head of security?’

‘I’m a detective, Tommy. And that’s what you need me to be. If you need to fill that job, you should. I can’t give you an answer right now.’

‘Let me put it on hold until we figure out what’s happening. Then we can talk again. How’s that sound?’

‘It sounds good to me. Thanks, Tommy.’

Two down, seven to go.

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I stand up and scan the office, trying to see who's in but can't tell. That's one downside of these stupid cubicles. I have to look for the detective following up on Ayita's hit-and-run.

When I find him, he's in his cubicle on the phone. I drag a chair over and sit beside him. I never use rank, but sometimes being a second-grade detective helps. He gets a little flustered with me sitting there and hurries the end of his call.

'Hi, Sammy. What's up?'

'The hit-and-run I passed you a few days ago.'

'Oh, yeah. Sure, let me get the file. It's here somewhere,' he replies, searching through a stack of folders at least two feet thick until he finds the right one. Opening it, he quickly gets himself back up to speed.

'Right. We picked up the plates from the traffic cam at the lights outside the mall where the incident happened. Traced the car. It was stolen from outside a house in Bonita Springs sometime the night before and reported that morning when the owner first missed it. We discover it a couple of hours later, abandoned in the rear car park of the Golden Gate Church of Christ down on Seventh Street and Tenth Avenue. We hauled it in and dusted it but came up with nothing. We checked cameras on the route for pictures of the driver, but the tinted screen prevented us from seeing anyone.'

'So, we're nowhere, right?'

'Sorry, Sammy. I know you were personally involved in this, but we've gone as far as we can. I'm going to have to close the file.'

'Well, before you do,' I say, handing him the other name Ayita has given me. 'Can you look into another death that happened sometime in the past year? Another hit-and-run. Let me know what you find, will you?'

'Sure, Sammy. You think they're connected?'

'I don't know. See if you can find out for me?'

Back in the office, I check my list. This paper thing seems to work really well. I make a mental note to try it more often. Three down and six to go.

It's coffee time, so I head up to Narcs to scrounge one from them. Jerry is at the machine, and he makes two rather than the one he planned to make for himself.

A few minutes later, we're in a small conference room. Given the conversation I intend to have with him, I think it a wise precaution. As soon as I suggest it, I can see him wondering why. A good detective is Jerry.

'What's up, Sammy?'

'Have you heard the expression Blue-cover?'

'Sure. Someone inside who leaks information.'

'Well, my man in the double D's says we have someone doing just that?'

'What?'

'Yeah. He says that's what went wrong with the rental truck. They got a tip-off and changed plans. They couldn't cancel the truck without it looking suspicious, so they moved one of their Gran's into a retirement home.'

'Cocky little dick-heads.'

'But, Jerry. Think about what this has done for us. We know exactly how many people knew about the operation and who they are. I reckon you told five of your guys, and we used four from patrol.'

'So, it's one of nine?'

'How well do you know your guys?'

He pauses momentarily, thinking his answer through before telling me that three of them have been with him for years and that he would trust them with his life. So our suspect pool is down to six.

'What do you think we should do now?' I ask.

'You don't need to do anything, Sammy. This whole thing is drug-related. If there's been more than one leak, there'll be a trail, and I'll find it.'

Leave it with me.'

Back downstairs once more, I check the time and feel good that I'm making progress on so many fronts, and it's only just gone eleven. I'm at four down and five to go. If I keep this up, I can take the afternoon off.

The missing link between what I call the *Russian Bride* case and the dead girl in the brothel is worrying me. So, I log on and start looking into whatever I can find out about the name Ayita gave me. The guy that Tommy has hired to take care of staff welfare. The one that frightens everyone. José Pinho.

I start by searching for his criminal history and come up with trumps immediately, but not in this country. He came to the USA five years ago and has had a clean sheet since then, but before that, he was in São Paulo, Brazil, where his sheet was anything but clean.

Raised in a Ghetto district, his early run-ins with the law include petty theft, minor break-ins, and small-time crack-peddling. Enough to have him known by the local State authorities, but he was still flying under the Federal radar till he was around sixteen, and he joined the Primeiro Comando da Capital, or PCC for short.

I've never heard of the PCC, so I have to look it up separately. It's the most significant criminal organization in Brazil, controlling illegal contraband and drugs moving in and out of the prisons in São Paulo, and with influence far beyond the prison system.

I didn't know it, but Brazil is the number two consumer of cocaine globally, behind the United States, and the top consumer of Crack cocaine. I didn't even know the US was so high on the world list of Cocaine users.

Seemingly as José expanded his skills, he became an influential figure controlling the export of pure Cocaine to the United States. Big business. But it wasn't only the PCC interested in the US market. Another paramilitary organization, the Command Revolucionário Brasiliense da Criminalidade, the CRBC, also wanted the US market. Neither of these groups being good at sharing, rival factions were always involved in bloody battles, and they could measure the life span as a member of either party in months, not years.

The Federal police turned José against the PCC, and he sold them out. In return, he gained his life and freedom if he left the country. He sought asylum in the United States in exchange for telling all he knew of the PCC to the CIA.

And here he now is, working for Tommy Hawk on the Reservation. I'm finding it hard to connect the two pieces of information. In Brazil, he was a prominent important figure. Here, in Florida, he's responsible for employee welfare in a brothel? It doesn't make a whole lot of sense.

Having listened to Tommy telling me how detailed his employee selection program is, how did he get the job? Something I make a note to ask about.

Given his background, I can see why Ayita might find him intimidating, and I regret not staying around yesterday to talk with him. Still, I'm better prepared to do so now I know his background.

Satisfied with my progress, I turn my mind to the rest of the information Ayita has given me. The names of the four girls.

I already have the hit-and-run case being looked into, so I leave that aside and focus on the other three. I start with the broken neck case that doesn't fit.

Her name is Eva Granger, and she was twenty-two when she died almost a year ago. Her file says she was five-three and just over ninety pounds, so she was petite. Eva was a local girl born and raised in Sarasota. Her father is American, from the same area, and her mother is a Malaysian immigrant from

thirty years ago. Her file tells me she has no other family, at least in this country, but she has a child. A baby boy, Jason.

She would probably have had Jason at work with her in daycare or the night-time equivalent. I don't have a name for this other than a babysitting service, but I think it's a lot more than that.

Eva was clever. She was working at the brothel to fund her study program, and I wonder whether I couldn't have used the same opportunity when I was foolishly taking my two degrees and saddling myself with a lifetime of debt.

She studied at Keisner University for a DNAP in Anesthesia. I'm not sure what that is, but Keisner's got an excellent reputation, so it's probably important and valuable.

They interviewed a few of her fellow workers after her death, and they all described her as clever but emotionally immature. She liked to complain and didn't mix well, often keeping herself to herself. One of them said she had a history of making poor choices. This intrigues me, but there's nothing further about it in the notes.

In Tommy Hawk's interview, he said that as well as using her work to fund her University studies, she also contributed heavily to a scholarship fund for her son.

To me, she sounds like a very determined woman. I admire her priorities and wonder what I might learn from her.

The Coroner's report tells me nothing I haven't seen before. C3/4 fracture causing instantaneous death. Ruled as accidental, and the case was closed.

There's nothing I can link to the *Russian Bride* case, so I'm no further forward. But I do wonder what has happened to her son.

I pull the files on the two missing girls, but they're paper thin. Other than being reported missing, they were both over eighteen, and there was no evidence of anything untoward happening to them. They seemed to have just moved on. Both files are marked as no further action required and closed.

To be fair on, the detectives who looked into the two cases. Other than the girls left their worldly possessions behind. What did they have to go on?

Nobody saw them leave. They hadn't indicated that they were thinking about it. So, again, I'm left with questions but none I can answer.

And are these disappearances in any way connected to the *Russian Bride* case? I have no idea.

I've learned that all the incidents Ayita mentioned have occurred since Pinho started working for Tommy Hawk. But does that mean anything? Again, I don't know that either.

Noticing the time, I've once again managed to work through lunch. I'm convinced little Bossy-boots has just made me look at my watch. I quickly called JD Nadia, and this time she answers almost immediately. She sounds sober, and I wonder if I should stop calling her JD.

'Detective. Thanks for returning my call.'

'You're welcome, Nadia. I'm sorry it's taken longer than it should.'

She shrugs off my apology and asks if I can come and see her. It's urgent, but she needs to speak with me person-to-person. I agree and ask if she'll be available in an hour or so. She says yes, so I hang up and head out to search for a salad. Today it needs to be a Greek salad with lots of olives.

I thought olives are usually stuffed, but seemingly the other way around works too, as after my salad, I'm stuffed. I asked for extra olives, and the guy behind the counter gives me a whole side. I eat them all. I don't even like the damn things.

It's almost three when I arrive at Nadia's home.

Nadia opens the door for me before I pull up outside. I admire the new wooden door frame on the way in and wonder if the department will pay to paint it. I suspect I know the answer, so decide not to raise the subject.

I sit where I had the last time.

Nadia crosses to a table in the background, returns, holding two photographs, and hands them to me.

The first is a picture of a young woman. I would guess seventeen or eighteen, smiling and happy. Dark hair, beautiful. It looks like she's having a good time somewhere. The second is the same girl asleep in bed.

I hand them back and wait for an explanation.

'It's my younger sister, Ola.'

'She's lovely.'

'Yes, she is. She hated it when I told her I was moving here to America.'

'She's still in Russia?'

'No, but I didn't know that before. This first picture of her arrived a fortnight before my husband's accident.'

It's the happy, smiling picture.

'There was no message, and I assumed she had sent it to me. I tried calling her to thank her, but she didn't answer. I spoke to our parents, but Ola had gone to a party the night before and had not come home. This worried all of us.'

I nod, having a funny feeling I know what's coming.

'I called them every day over the next week, but she still hadn't returned. The police were looking for her, but she had just disappeared.'

'Then you received the second picture with some kind of message?' I guess, surprising Nadia.

'You knew about this?'

'No, Nadia. But this is a familiar story.'

Nadia nods her acceptance and regroups her thoughts.

‘The note,’ I prompt.

‘Yes. It said something simple like your husband may die, but your sister will live.’

‘What did you do?’

‘I showed it to my husband. He thought it was some kind of sick hoax. But I worried about my sister.

I told my parents, but they didn’t know what it meant either.’

‘Then your husband died?’

‘Yes. At first, I was so upset I didn’t even remember getting the pictures and the note. I was in a terrible state. We were so happy. He was a wonderful man, and we loved each other so much.’

At this, Nadia slows down, and tears form. She suddenly offers me a coffee, which I accept, realizing she wants a few minutes to pull herself together.

When she returns with two steaming mugs, she’s recovered, and I’m impressed she’s having a coffee rather than a large JD. After all, this must be a tough conversation for her. The coffee is instant. A disappointment.

‘What happened next, Nadia?’

‘I was arranging the service when a man appeared at my door, offering condolences and asking if he might have a little of my time to see if he could help.’

I’m pretty sure I know who this was, and I wager he walks with crutches. But I keep that to myself and let Nadia continue with her story.

‘He was fantastic. Very polite and well-spoken. He also offered to help me with everything from settling my husband’s estate to sorting out all my tax worries. I hadn’t honestly had time to think of that, and as he talked everything through, the complexity of what I was facing petrified me.’

‘So he offered a one-stop-shop for all your needs. Is that it?’

‘Yes. And at the time, it was a Godsend.’

‘You signed a contract with him there and then?’

‘Yes. He had it all ready for me. I didn’t even bother to read it through. He said it only contained what he had already told me.’

‘Do you have a copy I can see?’

‘No. He promised to send me one, but it has never arrived.’

‘Has he lived up to his commitments, Nadia?’

‘I don’t know, detective. I mean, yes, but everything hasn’t worked out as I thought it would.’

‘Like this place, for instance?’ I ask, indicating the house we’re in.

‘Yes. But all he said was that although my husband lived well, he had debts and loans as well as property and investments. The important thing was that I should come out of the situation with a home that was one-hundred percent mine and a lifestyle income for the rest of my life so I would never have to work again. I thought that sounded good, and that’s what he has arranged for me. I even have my meals delivered. Whatever I order, they deliver. All paid for by some trust fund or other, I don’t understand.’

‘So he has delivered.’

‘Yes. I have no debts. I have the house and a regular income guaranteed for life.’

‘So, how does this relate to your sister’s pictures?’

‘She called me two days ago.’

‘That’s great, Nadia.’

‘She’s been here in Florida ever since she disappeared.’

‘How did she manage that?’ I ask, surprised at this twist in Nadia’s story.

‘She hadn’t told her parents, but when she went to that party, she was leaving to come to America with a man she met through the same website I used.’

‘She was following you?’

‘Yes, and our parents would never have let her.’

‘Was she eighteen?’

‘No, that’s the puzzling thing. She wouldn’t have been eighteen for another six months. So, the website wouldn’t have accepted her. I told her I didn’t understand, but she said the man she was with had arranged everything. He was brilliant.’

‘Are you seeing her soon?’

‘No, that’s another strange thing that worries me. She told me we can’t be together but that she needs me to know she’s safe.’

‘Did you tell her what happened to your husband?’

‘Yes, she said she was sorry. She knew nothing about it.’

‘Have you told your parents she’s okay?’

‘Yes, but they don’t understand what has happened to her or why she is in America. Or why she hasn’t been in touch. Yes, they’re happy but also worried. Something’s wrong here, detective, but I don’t know what, and I don’t know what to do about it?’

‘Do you have the cell number she used?’

‘Yes. I’ve tried calling her back, but it’s discontinued.’

‘Did she say she would call again?’

‘No, and that’s the thing. When she said goodbye, it sounded so final.’

At that, Nadia can’t stop the tears this time, and I sit and watch her cry,

feeling as confused and helpless as she is.

I have plenty to think about when I am driving back down I75 in my new-sounding trusty steed.

I need to complete the rest of my to-do list, specifically a further discussion with Tony Chisholm at the website company and Mr. Smooth at DC Associates.

I answer my cell. It's Jerry from Narc's, with an update on his attempts to figure out who the blue cover is.

'It's neither of my two other guys.'

'So, we're down to the four patrol guys?'

After agreeing, he suggests we meet the following morning, and I end the call. At least we're getting somewhere with something, which is more than I can say for my major case. But unfortunately, it appears the more I find out, the more complicated it's becoming.

Given the hour, I avoid the office and drive straight home. A quiet night at home will give me time to think.

I'm unsurprised to find Chico waiting when I enter the building. So either he's following me, can read my mind, or has hung around all day. I hope for the latter, as the previous two would worry me.

'Yo, detective.'

'Hi, Chico. Thank's for the blue-cover tip. We're close to finding out who it is.'

'Not my problem, man. Sides, I got a bigger one.'

'Why? What's happening, man?' There I go again, talking like him. What can I say? It's troubling. Like I've found my natural inner voice or something.

'The drugs. They're coming in tomorrow afternoon, in broad daylight.'

'Where from?'

'Up from Miami, coming up the trail around three.'

'What's the end destination?'

'You know the Mall with Costco?'

'Yeah.'

'Well, round the back, there's an auto repair shop, a hot-rod make-over place, and a furniture warehouse. In between, there's a scrap metal joint with high gates. That's where it's going down. Luke'll be there for sure.'

'What else can you tell me?'

'I'm not sure, man. But I think it's high-grade Coke, and they're bringing it in a Wells Fargo Security truck?'

'They've hired a Wells Fargo Truck to move Cocaine?'

‘Nah, man. They stole it from the yard a couple days back.’

‘Anything else for me?’

‘Why? Ain’t that enough?’

‘So, what’s your problem?’

‘I gotta be there. You catch him. But if you catch me. I’m fucked.’

I think about that for a moment and feel sure I can get Jerry to overlook this guy’s involvement, but I also need to keep him safe afterward.

‘You got something bright you could wear?’

At first, he looks at me as if I’ve flipped. Then he catches on.

‘I got a red hoodie.’

‘Wear it and stay out of sight when we move in.’

‘Cool.’

With nothing else to say, he turns and walks into the shadows. I can’t sit on this, so I call Jerry back and ask if he’s still in the office. He is. So much for my quiet evening.

Upstairs, as soon as I tell Jerry the information, he calls round his team and brings them in. While we wait, he orders pizzas and soft drinks.

An hour later, we’re all stuffing our faces in the larger conference room on his floor of the building. I bring everybody up to speed with what I know, and we form our plans.

We have three objectives. Secure the drugs and catch the bad guys, especially Luke. Make sure that my guy, Chico, escapes. And find whoever is leaking information to the double D’s.

We work out all the details, staying late into the night. The next step is for Jerry to call a meeting in the morning and ensure our four suspect patrol officers are there. After that, we’ll go through the details of the take-down but with the wrong time, location, and a dummy plan.

I drag my weary body back to my apartment; even Bossy-boots is too tired to strip. We crash onto the bed, clothes and all. We’re asleep within minutes.

Sometimes I hate Alexa, and this is one of these times. She is so fucking cheerful. I shout at her to shut the fuck up and stagger to the shower.

Afterward, I throw two bagels into the toaster and grimace at the blackened and warped microwave staring at me, trying to make me feel guilty. It doesn’t work. I’m too shattered to feel anything.

I check my cell. Fuck, fuck, fuck. There's another message from Cliff asking if I'm still alive. I haven't answered his last text because I thought an actual discussion was the way to go. It's just that I've forgotten, and that was over a day ago. He must think I'm a right asshole. He's right.

How can I forget to talk with Bossy-boot's father?

Couldn't Bossy-boots have reminded me, I think, in an attempt to share the blame?

I can't call now, it's still only six-thirty, but I will call when I hit the office.

In the office, Dan's already there before me. He explains that he's tracked down one of the potential mothers on Stan-the-barman's list. The only thing he hasn't done is find her whereabouts, which he's busy doing.

He asks me for an update on my *Russian Brides* case, and it's only as I'm trying to explain it to him I realize how much I don't yet understand. There are more holes in my understanding than in a whale-sized fishing net. So, when I finish, I move to my cubicle and start another list. But first, I put the actions I haven't completed on my previous list and start from there.

1. Check progress on the second hit-and-run case that Ayita mentioned
2. Visit Tony Chisholm at [findperfectlove dot com](http://findperfectlove.com). Check the name of the woman at the brothel with the broken neck and ask how Nadia's seventeen-year-old sister came into the country through his website.
3. Decide what to do about José Pinho at the brothel
4. Revisit DC Associates. Cruz had said he would check if the women on my list were his clients, but I haven't heard squat from him.
5. Check with the Sarasota detective regarding the interview of Alicia's housekeeper
6. Involvement in Jerry's morning sting operation and the afternoon takedown.
7. Find Nadia's sister

When I add the last one to the list, I'm unsure what to write until I start. My visit with Nadia has raised further questions about the website company and DC Associates, but I already have that covered. I feel the one thing that could break the case wide open would be to find Ola. Nadia's sister. She's someone I'm sure links everything together.

I'm thinking about how best to get started when Jerry calls to remind me I should be upstairs.

The briefing is in the larger conference room I was in the previous evening. Jerry has spoken to the duty sergeant first thing to make sure they allocate him the same four patrol officers who watched a Granny being moved into her care home a few days before.

Jerry takes the lead, talking through all the plan details, knowing that as long as everyone is in the room, no one can leak anything.

When the meeting is almost finished, Jerry excuses his guys to prepare while keeping the four officers to explain in more detail exactly where he wants them to be positioned.

Jerry's guys head outside and take up predetermined hidden positions around all the building's exits.

As soon as Jerry finishes the meeting, I switch on a cell phone jammer I've concealed under the conference room table. This will undoubtedly cause grief within the building, but it's essential to our plan.

With no connection to a cell tower, whoever wants to call the Double D's, will have to go outside to do it, and sure enough, one of them does.

Jerry's guys move in, seize him, secure his cell, and bring him back upstairs to the conference room.

Boy, am I surprised?
It's Kowlinski.

I sit beside Jerry when he's questioning him, but Kowlinski stubbornly refuses to admit to anything. First, he claims he was calling his sick mother. But when the call trace comes through and proves to be a burner, his vehemence dies down a little. Then Jerry calls the number, with the cell on loudspeaker.

Lucky Luke answers it. I recognize the voice from when he tried to stab me. I can't help it. I speak up.

'How's your wrist fuck-head?'

I'm not expecting an answer, but he just can't let me have the last word.

'Fuck you, bitch. You'll get yours.'

After that, the line goes dead, and Kowlinski's shoulders collapse.

I leave Jerry to it and go back downstairs, wondering whether I should feel stupid because the asshole has fooled me so easily, or smart because I always knew there was something wrong about the guy.

I realize now, thinking back, that Kowlinski hadn't gone to the 24/7 to get the security disc of the knife attack for me to use in my defense. He'd gone to remove it to protect Luke. Fuck. Why hadn't I seen that?

I look at the list I created earlier and decide that finding Nadia's sister should be the top priority, so I head for our tech-support group, one floor down. These guys are amazing. Every time I find out more about what they can do, I can't help but wonder if there's such a thing as a private life anymore. The guy I single out for my attention, I know to be single and around my age. I might as well use what I have. I give him my best smile, and he visibly perks up.

We exchange a few minutes of flirty banter, during which I don't mention Bossy-boots, then get down to business.

I give him what I know of the phone call from Nadia's sister: the date, time, and cell number.

He explains that to track a previous call; he would need to access the service provider's database. Usually, that would require their permission, but as he is a regular bona fide user, he already has the software and approval. This is all thanks to a decision taken in the 5th US Circuit Court of appeals in Texas which found that law enforcement no longer requires a search warrant to access call logs and history.

But our office has a general dispensation order for such a search. So, he already has direct access to the service provider's database.

He opens up some complicated-looking software on his workstation and enters the details. We watch as a world map slowly tunes into the United States, then moves south, enlarging Florida, until finally settling here in Naples, with a red flashing center on downtown and a circle of a five-mile radius. This narrows the search area down to around seventy-five square miles. Still a lot of territory, but it's here in Collier County. He types furiously, muttering something about the damned service providers not taking proper care with their back-ups before apologizing for not being able to be more precise.

He explains that he can generally triangulate to a specific building by measuring signal strength from the three nearest cell towers. But with this call, it isn't possible. So I should blame the service provider as the bottom line.

Nevertheless, I thank flirty guy and head back to my desk to get the picture

Nadia has given me of her sister, then go looking for the duty sergeant. After hearing my explanation, he agrees to issue a BOLO to all units to remain in place until he says otherwise.

It may take a little time, but eventually, one of our patrols will spot her. I can't think of anything else to do, so I return to my cubicle. It's time to consult my list. On the way, I check with the hit-and-run detective. But he has gotten nowhere. The MO is identical to what happened to Ayita. The car was stolen the previous day and had tinted glass. Here, the girl is killed outright. The vehicle was abandoned only two miles from where the incident occurred: no prints or any other forensic trace. The case is still open, but there are no leads, so there is nothing to pursue.

Back in my cubicle, there is a new message slip on my desk. The detective up in Sarasota wants me to call, so I do.

'Maxwell.'

The guy needs to work on his interpersonal telephone skills, but I won't be the one to tell him. He updates me on his interview with Alicia's housekeeper. She had stubbornly refused to admit anything other than she'd forgotten to put the alarm on last thing at night. Then, Maxwell bluffed her by asking where the cash deposited in her bank account the following day had come from, and she fell for it.

Her story was that someone had approached her with the offer. He said he was after an expensive piece of artwork. He wouldn't touch anything else. It was easy money, and no one would get hurt. Maxwell believed her, and so do I. The guy had set her up. It was never a robbery, but there was no way she could have known. We agreed we should charge her with a lesser crime, not assisted manslaughter. Besides, at this moment, Alicia's husband's death is still officially an accident.

I congratulate Maxwell on fine detective work and thank him.

Now it's a toss-up between the remaining items for my attention. Given it's only a couple of hours till Jerry's takedown, and I don't want to miss that, I decide that rather than rush into anything else; I'll do some further background research. I need to look into DC Associates more closely.

Bossy-boots liked the pizza the night before, so I order another and set to work.

As Diego Cruz told me, he started the company some thirty years ago, and it's been growing every year since. I pull up the most recently published accounts, and his annual revenue takes my breath away. His income is over a hundred-fifty million.

I try to figure out how much he's making out of that, but finance and accounts are not my thing. Even if they were, I still wouldn't understand all the tax avoidance stuff that I know this type of guy gets up to. It would be a lot, for sure. That's sufficient detail for me.

This being a Friday, I decide I'll use surprise tactics and visit him at home the next day rather than at his office. I want to get a better feel for the man and where better than at his home.

I note his home address, which is easy enough as they list him as the CEO in his accounts, with his address public record, then I turn my attention to Findperfectlove.

Only then do I remember my promise to myself that I would contact Cliff as soon as I got into the office earlier. Shit.

I call his cell, but it goes straight to voicemail. So I call his office. His secretary tells me he's bang in the middle of a critical case. The culmination of six months' work by almost the entire department. She says she'll let him know I called.

I feel like crap. Despite being so busy, he has made arrangements to see me several times, and I've let him down. Once, he had changed a date, and I mentally accused him of not caring and being an asshole. He has sent multiple texts, and I haven't even taken the time to return them.

Whether he's a Saint or a Fuck-up, I don't deserve him either way. At that moment, I don't feel like I deserve anybody.

I'm still in a gloomy mood when I go down to the ground floor at the rear of the building to meet with Jerry and his team. When I arrive, most of them have already geared up and are checking their weapons. Jerry hands me my body armor, and I nearly drop it. It's a while since I last wore one of these things, and it weighs a ton. I'm more of a knife-vest kind of girl, but today, we know these guys will be seriously tooled-up. A lot is riding on the delivery. So, I am making an exception. It doesn't seem so heavy with the weight distributed across my shoulders, but I guess when it's all at the end of an arm, the laws of mechanics will make it heavier. Jerry helps me balance it up and tighten the straps.

Most of the team arm themselves with Glock seventeen sidearms, with full-size mag capacity of thirty-three shells. Most who chose the seventeen prefer the longer barrel for improved sighting and greater accuracy. I get that, but I still like my Glock nineteen with its much shorter barrel. We're talking six inches versus four, and that's a big difference to carry around with you.

Besides their side arms, some select semi-automatics, while a couple prefers

shotguns. They also load up with flash bangs and extra nylon ties. I stick with my Glock. I'm not planning on being in the front line.

When we're ready, Jerry runs over the plan's details again, reminding everyone that they are to avoid finding the guy with the red hoodie - Chico. Then we head out back and climb aboard two SWAT bearcats.

We've agreed on the bearcats for two reasons. First, we know the Double D's will have a Wells Fargo armored car, so if they use that to make a run for it, it won't get past a steel armor-constructed Bearcat. Second, we might have to go in through high gates to gain entry, and how better to do that?

Although the Cats can carry a dozen fully equipped officers, our total force comprises ten, split between the two vehicles. In addition, we've picked up a few SWAT guys along with the Cats.

I sit next to Jerry and listen in as he communicates with State troopers who have picked up the Wells Fargo truck leaving Miami on I75, heading west, and are tracking it in an unmarked. It has just passed the Walmart exit at Collier Boulevard and will soon turn north, twenty minutes away.

With ten minutes to go, we're parked to the rear of Texaco at the north end of the target location. The others are hidden behind a small advanced technology development company to the south. The Wells Fargo truck will most likely pass us and enter from the north.

Sure enough, bang on time, the truck appears coming along J&C and turns south on Lee Ann, passing us by.

We wait, watching the picture transmitted to us by two techs on top of Costco's roof over in the Mall. They have a clear line of sight and are specifically looking for Lucky Luke. Jerry wants him badly.

The truck pulls in towards the closed gates and waits. Moments later, guys Jerry recognizes as part of Luke's gang appear and unlock the gates. That's when we see Luke for the first time. I smile when I see he's still wearing a cast on his arm. The truck pulls through the gates, and one of Luke's men locks them again.

We continue to watch the video feed. The truck has pulled back mostly out of direct line-of-site, but we can still see the back end. Luke appears as the rear doors swing open, and all hell breaks loose.

We not only see what's happening but hear it in real time. Heavy artillery is firing from the back of the truck as at least six guys jump out, spraying lead at everyone in sight. Luke is the first to go down and stay down. I guess he won't be worrying about his wrist anymore. Some of his guys make it to cover and start returning fire, taking down some of their attackers.

Much as we might think watching two sets of bad guys take each other down is a good thing, and we can sit and watch - Jerry orders us in, with our Cat arriving first and taking down the gates.

Two minutes later, the gates hang from their hinges, and we're out of the Cat and running to take up positions behind cover. This surprises both sets of bad guys, and they momentarily stop shooting. I imagine they're trying to decide who's the biggest threat. They figure us, and suddenly we're under fire from all directions.

That's when the second Cat follows us in but keeps going to the rear of the yard before stopping. From there, our second team has a clear line of fire at both sets of bad guys, which, to give them credit, they figure out pretty quickly. One by one, the firing stops, and they stand, raising their hands in the air.

Within minutes, we round them up and lay them flat on their stomachs with their hands tie-wrapped behind them.

Jerry and I wander over to check on Luke, but he's well gone. He must have taken most of the opening salvo. His torso is shredded. He was an asshole, but nobody deserves to die like this.

By this time, paramedics are flooding the scene, tending to the injured, and a couple of wagons have rolled up to remove the prisoners. Job well done.

Chico is nowhere in sight. So either, he's brilliant at hiding and avoiding the detailed search. Or else he was never there in the first place. I'm not sure which.

Back in the office, I'm still on an adrenalin high when Dan comes in. He's already heard about the takedown but doesn't know it involved me. Once I reassure him I'm fine, he wants to understand how I became involved, so I start at the beginning with Luke confronting me outside my apartment.

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Almost everyone from the afternoon's operation is down at the Tavern on the Bay that night. So it isn't just that we're celebrating success, which we are. But we've also survived, and that's even more important.

The only downer on the results of the operation is that there were no drugs in the Wells Fargo truck. Other than the heavily armed guys, there was nothing. That took the edge off for Jerry, and I get that. But, for me, it's a win. I can live in my apartment without being troubled further by the Double D's. Simple needs. That's me.

I ignore Bossy-boots and have a single Corona, but when I try to order a burger and fries, I feel suddenly sick. I ask for a glass of iced water and head for a quiet corner to consult the menu with my unborn antagonist.

I'm sitting there running through one proposal after another, hoping to find something we can mutually agree on, when Cliff sits opposite me.

I guess I probably look dumb as my mouth falls open, and I lose the ability to form words. I don't *feel* dumb. But I *do* feel horribly guilty. Gut-wrenchingly so.

He laughs at my predicament, waves a server over, and orders a Coors Light with burger, fries, and onion rings, then looks at me before adding another glass of iced water and a Greek salad.

How the hell does he know Bossy-boots likes olives?

'Heard about the bust and thought I'd find you down here.'

'Yeah.' Which is still about all I can offer.

'You were involved?'

'Yeah.' I like this single-word conversation. I'm coping well and hope we can keep doing this while knowing we can't.

'How are you?'

'Fine.'

Again, he laughs that laugh of his. He's laughing with me, not at me, although I can argue there's a good reason for the latter.

'I bet you've nearly called me a good few times?' he says as if reading my mind.

This time it's all I can do to nod my agreement. The guilt is swelling up

inside me. I'm drowning in it.

'I think I understand. But what does it matter? We're here now.'

At that, his beer and my fresh iced water arrive. He raises the bottle and clinks my glass. 'To us, and whatever the future holds.'

I sip my iced water, wishing for something stronger. Much stronger.

'So, the Jury's out,' he continues.

I assume he's talking about what he wants to do about us, but as usual, I'm wrong.

'My case,' he prompts. 'I gave my last address today, as did the defense. Now we wait and see.'

'Will you win?' I ask, not knowing what this major case is he has been working on for so long, which doesn't help my guilt levels either.

'Who knows? Jurys are fickle. I guess I'm hopeful, but you never know.'

I sit quietly. I've so much I want to say but no idea where to start. But then Bossy boots solves the problem for me.

I suddenly excuse myself and run full pelt for the washrooms, just in time. I wretch and wretch, but nothing much comes up. But I'm sure I'm releasing tension and guilt by the bucket load.

After splashing my face and giving myself a good talking-to, I head back to the bar where Cliff is already picking at his side of onion rings. He asks if I'm okay. I tell him I'm fine and sit staring at his burger.

He says nothing, cuts it in half, and pushes the plate toward me. 'You look hungry.'

I don't need a second invitation. It's wonderful. So much so that I wave the waitress back and order the same again.

After that, we talk.

I haven't realized how much I've bottled everything up. What does he want to do? What do I want to do? Do I want a child at all? What about my work? Do I want to be a mother? Does he want to be a father? Would we be together? Would he even care? How would I manage for money? I even tell him I'm broke and am running around in a car I can't afford, which is when I cry. Not just a few tears. This is a full-on embarrassing tsunami.

Fuck, the place is full of cops. I don't know what to do, so I splutter something about being sorry and run for the door.

Knowing I was heading to the Tavern, I'd left my trusty new-sounding steed in my parking space back at the Sheriff's and set out on foot.

I'm just entering the car park at the office when Cliff's Mercedes pulls up beside me, and he winds down the window.

'I don't suppose I can offer a bankrupt girl a good time?'

The second time I've stayed over is even better than the first. Cliff let me prattle on and on without interrupting. He knew I needed the release. But he also knew that I didn't need any answers from him. Not there. Not then.

He took me to bed and made love to me so tenderly, then held me as I fell asleep in his arms. The best sleep I've had in quite a while. It could be the smoke-free environment.

There's no rush in the morning. It's Saturday, so we have a repeat performance, then he asks me what I would like for breakfast. I make a song and dance of asking Bossy-boots and tell him we will settle for muesli and yogurt if he has them, which he does.

After we've eaten, I'm still wearing the clothes I'd worn the previous day, so I tell him I need to go home and change. I also say I've one work-related thing I want to do that day that might take a couple of hours. He offers to run me home, but I refuse, saying I'll take a cab to the office and pick up my car. That I'll need it for what I intend to do later.

We agree to meet at four and enjoy a stroll together before eating out again. That sounds good to me. It will give us both time to clear our minds. Well, me, anyway.

Back in my apartment, I can still smell smoke when I open the door, but what can I do?

I open the window, but all that does is let the heat in.

I close it again and make a note to add air fresheners to my shopping list.

I shower, wash my hair thoroughly and this time, blow dry it. I think I'm subconsciously prettying myself up for Cliff, but I'll never admit it, even to myself.

I dress in a dark blue cotton suit with a white shirt and look every bit like a detective. I want to create the impression that I know what I'm doing and that I need to be taken seriously, even if I don't have a clue what's actually going on.

When ready, I clip on my Glock and badge and head out. Diego Cruz, here I come, ready or not.

It's about two in the afternoon when I roll up at Cruz's home. It's an expensive place in the North Atlantic Ocean area, where the Gordon Pass connects the Gulf with Dollar Bay.

The house is a beachfront property with a principal home and a separate guest home off to one side. I could never hope even to afford anything as

upmarket as the guest home. As for the main house. If you like large stone columns with massive double wrought-iron gates hanging from them, circular fountains, and tall pillars supporting an overhang at the front door under which I could comfortably fit my whole apartment, this place is for you. The surprising thing is the gates are wide open, and I'm free to wind around the circular driveway and hide my Chevy behind the familiar black seven-series BMW.

There are four other cars parked around the circle. A small red Mazda, a black Jeep complete with bull bars and an array of attached headlamps, a white Mercedes convertible, and a seven-seater Infinity QX80 - a beast of a wagon with a powerful V8 engine I know because I've seen it advertised. Have I mentioned I'm a sucker for adverts? Most folks fast forward through them these days, but not me. Especially if I have popcorn in my hands.

I climb the broad marble steps and press the front bell. The resulting noise inside sounds like a church tower forewarning of an invasion. I swear the ground shakes under my feet.

The door opens in a matter of minutes, and I meet Taylor Cruz in person for the first time. Because I've done my research, I recognize her even though she's a little older than the pictures I've seen on her Facebook page. She's a stunner, and I can immediately see why she won her beauty competition. She smiles and asks if she can help me.

I flash my badge and apologize for disturbing her at home before telling her I need to talk with her husband.

She stands aside and allows me to enter before closing the door behind us and leading the way.

As I follow Cruz's wife through the house, she explains that they have a few friends round for the day, and everyone is out the back. On the way through the elaborate home, I'm keen to see how the Cruz family is spending all this money he's making. She's busy apologizing for some work being undertaken here and there, but she explains they are preparing their home for the later stages of her husband's condition. I guess the super-elite expect us mere mortals to know about their life's trials. She's taking it for granted that I know her husband suffers from Motor Neuron Disease. She's right, of course.

Finally reaching the rear of the house, she asks me to wait beside open folding windows the full height and width of the far wall while she fetches her husband.

I'm looking out over a pool you could happily have a hundred people in,

with fifteen or twenty tables and chairs around the perimeter with canopies. Loungers are at the far side of the pool, and several guests are at a fully fitted bar, half in the pool and half out. One guest is sitting waist-high on a stool at the bar while everyone else stands. I can hear splashing and children's laughter.

Cruz's wife has not gone directly to the pool. Instead, she turned to the right and followed the line of the building. I guess that MND and pools don't get along too well together and that her husband is probably sitting in the shade, watching events from a distance.

A few minutes later, she returns and asks me to follow her back into the house and through a few adjoining rooms until we arrive at Cruz's home office. He's already there. I can tell he's angry and trying hard not to show it. The veins in the side of his neck give him away.

As his wife leaves, I thank her and apologize again before she closes the door and leaves us alone.

Cruz indicates I should enter and sit opposite his desk. I judge he's already back in control and must admire him for that.

'I'm surprised to see you today, Detective. Although I expected you to return, I thought you might have had the courtesy to make an appointment at my office. But here you are.'

'I guess homicide trumps courtesy.'

'Yes, quite so, Detective. Of course, it would. And also trumps weekends. How may I help?'

'I wonder if you have checked the names I left with you yet to confirm them as clients.'

'As a matter of fact, I have. I was about to call you on Monday morning.'

'Then, these women are your clients?'

'Yes. All the names on your list are current or past clients.'

'Would it be possible to see their contracts, Mr. Cruz?'

'Now, now, detective. You know that would be a step too far. But perhaps if you have specific questions, I can provide some details for you without giving too much away?'

I've forgotten how smooth and calm this man is and wish I'd better prepared myself.

'One detail about the help your business provides puzzles me. You seem to take on clients living in lifestyles, not unlike your own here, and yet they mostly end up living in small houses far away from the Gulf.'

'And your question, Detective?'

'What happened to all of their money?'

‘Ah, I see. Can I ask? Have you any expertise in accountancy?’

Without waiting for my answer, he continues, which annoys me.

‘As well as taking care of the widow’s estate duties and taxes, I also ensure the repayment of any debts or outstanding loans. For instance, some people live in expensive properties but support large mortgages with their income. Just as some people drive expensive cars but are repaying significant loans. So, everything is not always as it seems. It is, in my experience, not unusual for a seemingly wealthy man to keep the reality from his wife or family.’

‘So, you’re saying, by the time you have squared the deceased’s accounts, there’s not as much left as the widow may expect?’

‘Precisely, Detective. Have any of the widows on your list explained my contractual commitment to them?’

‘To establish them in a new loan-free home with a lifestyle income for the rest of their days?’

‘Exactly. You have been paying attention. Are you familiar with equity-release schemes, detective?’

I tell him I’m not.

‘Basically, I take over a share of their property value in return for short-term cash, which supports their immediate needs. Many use this to enjoy their older years, medical costs, or costly care-home charges. Others don’t want to leave all their hard-earned cash to let their family quarrel over it.’

‘Enjoy it while you still can,’ I suggest.

‘Again, completely correct. And that is what I do for my clients.’

‘And you charge for this service?’

‘Of course. My fees are not trivial, but again, you wouldn’t expect them to be. After all, the sales value of their property becomes my risk. It can go up but can also fall. My charges take the potential shortfall into account.’

I can see I’ll get nowhere without a court order and help from a forensic financial expert to examine his contracts and accounts, so I switch tack.

‘What do you know about your most recent client in Sarasota? The one you visited personally a few days ago?’

‘Nothing much. We talked, and I made my offer. She has initially refused. I suspect she may still come back to me. Besides, I have plenty of other clients.’

‘So you know nothing about her housekeeper being paid to switch off the alarm the night of her husband’s death?’

‘Not a thing.’

‘Are you aware of the kidnapping and death of her father in Moscow just a few days ago?’

‘My goodness, no. How terrible, and so soon after losing her husband.’

‘And you’re not putting pressure on her existing attorney to pass her business on to yourself?’

‘I have spoken with him as a courtesy. I explained what my firm could offer and asked him to talk with his client. I believe he has done so.’

‘So, no strong-arm tactics?’

‘Don’t be ridiculous, detective. I’m a financial advisor, not a thug.’

‘And what about Nadia Gates? Are you aware that someone has kidnapped her sister?’

‘I’m sorry, detective. But your questions are becoming quite ridiculous. I didn’t even know Ms. Gates had a sister; if I did, I would have nothing to do with her being kidnapped. So now, if you have no further sensible questions, I think we are finished here.’

‘No more questions for the moment, Mr. Cruz. But I can assure you, I’ll be in touch,’ I tell him, rising. ‘I can find my way out.’

‘Perhaps you can talk to my attorney the next time, detective?’ he shouts over my shoulder.

On the way out, Taylor Cruz catches me and asks if her husband has been able to help. I try to reassure her he has, but there’s a hesitation in her acceptance that makes me wonder. I quickly dig out one of my cards and hand it to her, saying that it always helped to have a detective on speed dial and laugh. She smiles but is taking my card more seriously than I think she might. By way of covering up her embarrassment, I ask about a few of the framed pictures on the hallway wall. She explains that they depict the growth of her two girls - Laila, four, and Jayla, two. I tell her how lucky she is to have such beautiful children. They look like their mother, which I consider a good thing.

Outside, I climb into my steed, start her up and head back into the world of reality as I know it. I don’t like Cruz’s world. I don’t like it at all.

Driving to meet Cliff, I think through what I’ve just achieved. It seems I’ve maybe started putting everything together for the first time. Yes, I should have done that first, but hey, ho. I’m sure I riled him. And I also learned one helpful thing that I hadn’t expected. Tony Chisholm was in his pool playing with the children. I hadn’t seen the Aston Martin in the drive. I guess he has more than one car and conclude that his wife probably owns the QZ80 as a family car. His presence here should make my next visit to Findperfectlove more interesting.

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I don't sleep with Cliff again that weekend, but we spend most of the time together, walking, talking, and enjoying each other's company. We don't come to any startling decisions but talk about virtually all aspects of Bossy-boots' appearance. He likes the name and laughs when I tell him I feel I'm being taken over by a mind-influencing monster from outer space.

Bottom line. I still don't know if Bossy-boots is going to survive much longer.

I've learned that Cliff will be there to help with whatever decision I make. I guess that should make me feel good, but for once, I wish he would say what he wants instead of being so damned considerate.

I feel like the ball is firmly back in my court, and I'm disappointed he doesn't want to pick it up.

Monday morning starts routinely. Alexa is back to playing Beatles while I shower and scrape together some clean clothes, feeling surprisingly low after such an enjoyable weekend. I leave my apartment block without interruption, and my steed is undamaged. That should have lightened my mood, but it doesn't.

First thing when I get to work, I check with the duty Sergeant if anyone has seen Nadia's sister yet, but no luck there. So, I head upstairs feeling lethargic. Almost as if I'm coming down with something.

Dan's on the phone in his cubicle. So I pass by and sit down in my own. There are a couple of messages. One from Jerry in Narcs, the other from Tommy Hawk; both are asking me to call.

Rather than call Jerry, I go to find him, hoping he'll make the coffee.

He does.

I sip. He talks, which suits me fine.

They've identified the bad guys in the Wells Fargo truck as members of the *Savage City Gangsters* operating out of Miami. The thing is, Miami eliminated them in the mid-two-thousand and tens. In their heyday, they had way more than a hundred members. They were responsible for not only supplying Marijuana, Crack, and Cocaine, but for a string of homicides, sex offenses, drive-by shootings, home invasions, and other violent crimes.

That these guys have reappeared and are interested in taking out a rival gang in Naples is worrying Jerry. I understand that.

We chat a little about Kowlinski. He's been talking. It seems he has two kids going through college and is struggling to keep up with payments. Then his father becomes ill and has no medical insurance. So basically, he's already fucked before we get our hands on him.

I feel for the guy. But a dirty cop is a dirty cop.

Back downstairs, Dan finishes his call, and we swap notes for a while on our respective cases. He's sure he's found a woman who is a potential mother to one of the dead babies in Collier County Park. He asks if I would like to go check her out with him, and I agree but say I have a couple of calls to make first.

In my cubicle, first, I return the call from Tommy Hawk and agree to go up there in the afternoon and meet with José Pinho, then himself. I say around three.

Then I call Tony Chisholm at Findperfectlove, apologize for taking so long to get back to him, and schedule a meeting for one. Set up for the day, I tell Dan, and we head out.

We're going to see a woman called Rita Lea. Her sheet shows she has been in prostitution for around ten years. She's only twenty-six, which is worrying. One way or another, she's avoided serving time but has spent one year in a halfway house to help with a Crack addiction. She's living with her mother up Rte41 north of the airport.

When we park up, I worry about Rita's likely diet. They have an apartment above a pizzeria takeaway, a smoothie cafe, and a pastrami bar.

We enter at the rear and climb a stair that stinks of urine. The front door has 'Lea' scrawled into whatever paint is still clinging to it. Probably someone's handy knife-work.

The bell doesn't work. Dan knocks instead, then wipes his hand on his pants.

The girl who comes to the door may be twenty-six but looks more like fifty-six. Her hair is lank and lifeless, her skin the color of puke after a curry. Her eyes are bloodshot with heavy bags underneath, and she has a front tooth missing. When the teeth fall out, it's never a good sign with a junkie.

She's thrown a thin oriental gown over her bony frame, and I'm right to worry about her diet, but for the wrong reasons. I doubt this girl has seen food for weeks. Her breath is rancid.

When she sees Dan's shield, she says nothing, just turns and stumbles back into the apartment. Dan and I follow, avoiding touching anything as much as

possible.

Rita has collapsed in a thread-bare chair. We remain standing. The room looks pretty much as we expect, having seen the state she's in herself.

Everything is dated, dirty, or broken. She hasn't even bothered to remove evidence of her addiction problems. Rolled up paper-tubes, a lighter, a razor blade, and white lines on the tabletop tell us that this girl is in serious trouble. It looks like her drug of choice is Cocaine.

We aren't there about her drug habits or prostitution. Instead, we're hunting down a baby killer. So Dan keeps the conversation focused.

Yes, she's been banged up. Twice actually, she tells us. The first time she aborted naturally. Given her addiction history, I very much doubt it was natural. Well, not my definition of natural, anyway. The second time, she got help. That's when we find out about a woman Rita calls, 'Mother Hen.'

This woman somehow found out that Rita was banged up and made her an offer she couldn't refuse. Rita said the offer included free board and lodging for the rest of her pregnancy, which was about five months. They also helped her through a drug rehab program at the same time. Then when the baby was born, they gave her five grand for it, and she returned to the streets.

When she's telling us this, she shows no emotion. I doubt she has any left in her to show.

She describes the woman she called Mother Hen as kind and helpful, but after the baby was born, she changed, and Rita didn't understand why. We did. It was all about the baby, and a newborn is worth more than five grand on the black market. The newborn of a serious junkie, much less so. Hence the free rehab program.

Realizing the girl has nothing more to tell us, we debate whether to follow up on the drug abuse but decide she's way too far gone. Cruel, but you can't save everyone, and sometimes you just know.

We sit in Dan's car for a moment, considering what she's just told us. It seems like this is progress. The thing still bothering Dan is if they sold the baby, how did it end up so severely beaten and discarded in the swampy ground of Collier State Park?

I don't have an answer for him.

By this time, it's too late for me to go further with him, so he drops me back at the office. I grab a taco and seven-up, then head upstairs. I'm still eating when the detective looking into the hit-and-run cases for me stops by. He shows me a photo taken from a security camera near where the car was abandoned after hitting Ayita, then a second one from a camera at a different location. They took this one where the other car was abandoned after the girl from the brothel was

killed. Although the photos' details are too indistinct, I can see it's the same man in both.

We reckon he's above average height by comparing him to items in the background. Maybe six, two, or three. White skin. Dark hair. Solid muscular build and maybe works out a lot. There isn't much more we can tell, but at least it's something. It tells me it's the same person responsible for both, and that plays into Ayita's theory that someone is trying to close the brothel. I have to believe Tommy Hawk has already figured this out, and I can't understand why he hadn't mentioned it to me before.

Still puzzled, I head out. It's time to catch up with Tony Chisholm at Findperfectlove.

Once again, I park beside the Aston Martin, allowing my trusty steed to get reacquainted and make my way into the reception. Tony's already there, talking with the receptionist, and he smiles when he sees me and offers his hand, which I shake.

He thanks me for coming, leads me through to his corner office where we talked before, and, without asking, pours iced water from the cooler and places it in front of me. I realize he thinks he has arranged this visit, so I let him lead.

'When you were here previously, you asked me to confirm certain women had come through Findperfectlove and whether anyone could have bypassed site firewalls to find their details?'

I nod.

'And I said that would be impossible.'

I nod again, deciding to wait and see where he's going.

'Well, after you left, I looked closer and found that I was incorrect. But not in the way you suggested.'

Confused, I asked for clarification.

'I should have told you that no unauthorized person had access to the information.'

'Which means what exactly?'

'There is one person who does some background research for me. Especially financial and familial checks.'

'You use an external consultant?' I said, suddenly interested.

'Yes. By telling you, I don't mean to imply that he has done anything wrong. On the contrary, he has always done excellent work for us. But identifying him is a more accurate answer to your question, detective. I have his details here.'

With that, he hands me a business card for someone called Zac Scott. All that's on the card is the name and cell number. No company. No address. I tuck it

in my pocket, thank Tony, and ask him if I saw him at the home of Diego Cruz at the weekend.

He looks surprised but confirms it, telling me he was there with his wife and children.

I ask how he met Cruz, and find out that Tony had studied IT at Boston Mass, then joined IBM initially as a programmer, then systems analyst. After five years, he and his wife wanted to start a new life and moved to Florida to pursue their dream. They started Findperfectlove together but needed financial backing. Enter Diego Cruz. He funded the start-up for a share in the company.

Tony admitted that it worried him this guy was a classic private equity Business Angel, who would take as much out of the company as possible and then withdraw, but that hadn't happened.

Cruz had proven to be a long-term investor and is still supportive, although his money's no longer needed.

Suddenly remembering, I hand him the list of names Ayita has given me. The women who are either dead or missing from the brothel and ask if any of them are clients.

By now, I've already developed a level of trust, so without question, he logs into his system and, after a few moments, tells me they're not on his client list. Unfortunately, this list includes my newest broken-neck case, meaning I no longer have something that links all the cases. I've just run aground.

Laying the thought aside, I ask if he knows anything about Nadia Gate's sister, Ola.

Once again, he checks his database, confirming that she *has* been a recent client, although he doesn't remember her.

'Did you check her age when she applied?'

He checks his system before confirming she was eighteen.

'Would it surprise you to know she was only seventeen?'

'Highly unlikely, detective. We're very thorough in our checks and would never accept a seventeen-year-old on our books. Neither would any of our partners in Eastern Europe.'

'Perhaps you mean you would never knowingly accept a seventeen-year-old?'

'Oh, I see what you mean. It might have been a mistake?'

'Maybe your Mister Scott slipped up?'

'Or someone in the Eastern Europe end of the business?'

I almost think I've found out all I can when Tony slips in one last-minute gem by telling me that Zac Scott has the trust of Diego Cruz. But of course, it's Cruz who recommended him.

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First thing in the morning, determined not to mess Tommy Hawk around anymore, I head straight up to the Reservation rather than swing by the office. So for once, I'll be early for something. I'm pleased with that decision.

Tommy told me that although José Pinho is only responsible for the staff in the brothel, he has an office in the back of the casino, a couple of doors along from his own.

When I park out front and enter the casino, Tommy's protector is nowhere in sight, but I know where I'm going, so I head straight there. A tall, dark-haired guy is leaving Pinho's office and walks right past me with no acknowledgment. He leaves the door slightly ajar behind him.

When I get there, I push it open just as Pinho gathers some photographs from his desk. When he sees me, he quickly throws them into a desktop drawer. I don't see the details, but I suspect I know what they might have been, and that gets Pinho and me off on the wrong foot.

I introduce myself, and he invites me to sit.

Neither of us says a word while we circle each other looking for an opening. I always like someone to attack. I'm a natural defender. When I was at University, I played racket ball. Even regular ordinary people change when they go on a racket-ball court. They suddenly become aggressive monsters, thrashing the ball as hard as possible. I let them. They may win a game or two initially, but when I was on the court, they would rarely win the match.

As I predict, he breaks first.

'So, Detective. You're thinking of joining us, I believe?'

How can some people convey so much meaning in such few words? He makes the word '*Detective*' sound like I've just dragged myself out of the gutter, while '*we*' implies a bond between himself and Tommy Hawk, with me on the outside. Clever, but I'm not fooled.

'Joining Tommy? Possibly.'

'And why would you want to give up such a comfortable career with the Sheriff's office?'

'I like Tommy. He's a good man.'

‘But to work in a whore-house? That’s a bit of a comedown, surely?’

At no point in my earlier visits did I hear anyone refer to the brothel as a whore-house. My dislike rapidly morphs into hatred, a powerful emotion I usually only inflict on myself. I guess that makes Pinho special somehow. But not in a good way. I start pushing the conversation in the direction I want it to go.

‘What exactly is it you do here, Pinho?’

I match the intonation of his name to how he pronounced Detective and smile inwardly.

‘Bit of this, a bit of that. Looking after employees, mostly whores.’

‘That’s quite a detailed list of responsibilities you’ve got there. Sure you can handle all of that?’

He prickles. I can see him straining to smile.

‘I manage.’

‘So, given how responsible for employees you are, can you explain why two women have gone missing? One other was killed in a hit-and-run, yet another was injured similarly. All on your watch? It sounds like you’re doing a hell of a job to me.’

‘It’s not my fault if two whores piss off telling no one. And the hit-and-runs didn’t happen here. They happened downtown in your territory, Detective. So why didn’t you fucking save them?’

Time to attack.

‘How are your friends in Brazil? I believe you’re much sought after down there.’

More prickliness. I’m now definitely under his skin, and there’s not much he can do about it.

‘That’s all behind me, Detective. I paid my dues.’

‘So, if I search your office, I couldn’t find any Cocaine?’

‘I tell you, Detective, I’m a changed man.’

‘Sure. I can see we would enjoy working together. I’m a great fan of people having second chances. Not so good with three, though.’

‘I doubt very much we will work together, Detective. But you never know.’

At last, something we can both agree on. Although I’m not sure, it’s for the same reasons.

Without another word, I stand and leave, sure this guy is already causing problems for Tommy. I would also like to have seen the pictures he shuffled into his desk drawer. I’m a massive believer in first impressions, and this guy is trouble with a capital T.

Tommy has heard I'm in the building and is waiting in his office for me. He offers me a drink, but I refuse.

Every time I see this massive man, I wonder about creation. Although huge, everything is in perfect proportion, at least everything on display. He also moves with a grace not usual for someone his size and bulk. But there again, Native Americans have always been great hunters.

I dive straight into what's bothering me and ask why on Earth he has hired Pinho.

The answer is that he's part of a package deal. When Tommy raised the funding for the new business, he and the Tribal Elders raised a third, the bank a third, and the remaining sum came from a private investor.

As is customary, there are always terms and conditions when a private investor puts so much cash into a business start-up. In this case, the investor wanted the freedom to appoint someone to the board, so Tommy had to invent a position for him. The investor gave him Pinho.

When I ask what he thinks of Pinho? Tommy is very circumspect. Given that Pinho reports directly to a significant shareholder, I understand where he's coming from.

I also ask Tommy why he hasn't mentioned the two missing girls, the accident on the stairs, or the death of the earlier hit-and-run case.

He says that before Ayita talked to him the day before, he didn't buy into the conspiracy theory. He thought they were separate events. Now he isn't so sure.

When I ask if he thinks the theory involves Pinho, the slight hesitation in his response gives me the answer I suspect, even though his words deny it.

He doesn't trust Pinho, either.

He asks me if I'm any closer to finding who is responsible for the hit-and-run with Ayita, and I tell him other than a very vague description of a tall, dark-haired man, we're pretty much at a dead end.

He looks disappointed but accepts the news gracefully.

We talk a little more, touching briefly on how he's keeping the job offer free for now, then I leave and head back down I75.

This time I come away sure of two things. Pinho is trouble. He may or may not have been behind the goings-on over the past year, but he sure as hell is future-trouble brewing. The other thing is that Tommy wants me because of Pinho. He's stuck with him. Unless someone can give him a way out, that's why he wants me, I'm sure.

It's already after six when I hit the city boundary, so I go straight home. I'm a little worried as I haven't heard from Bossy-boots all day, but I needn't be. As soon as I think about food, I'm no longer alone.

It seems I'll have my way tonight, as I buy two kebabs without complaint. This is also worrying me. If I'm already having this kind of influence, what sort of mother might I be?

As I park up, I have the strangest feeling someone is watching me, but looking around. I can't see anyone. Maybe it's Chico; come back to see if I'm pleased with how the Wells Fargo take-down finished. I know I'll never see him unless he wants me to.

When I enter the apartment, do I remember the microwave is still on the fritz.

I'll need to have the kebabs lukewarm.

Even so, they're still good, and I get no complaints from down below.

I text Cliff, asking about his day, then get ahead of the laundry basket for once. I sort the coloreds, pile them into my basket, grab a handful of quarters, and head back downstairs to the laundry room. It's one thing I don't like about the dump I'm living in. The basement has six washers and dryers, and there are six more combos on the top floor. Of course, that's for a hundred-twenty apartment, but most folks work during the day.

I'm in the lower half of the building, so I always use the basement. This night, when I arrive, there are three free washers, so I load up, close the door, rack the quarters, then push them home. The machine starts, and I head back upstairs.

With two floors to go, I notice the lamp is out. Looking up the stairwell, the next two floors are the same, which is strange. They weren't like that on the way down. At least, I don't think they were. I'll need to call the Super and let him know.

As I arrive at my floor, before I can open the heavy fire door, I hear a sound behind me and turn to see a man climbing the stairs. I hadn't heard him before, so I suspect he has entered from one floor down. I can't make out who it is, but he's the wrong build for Chico. At that exact moment, another figure appears coming down the stairs, and I realize this is no coincidence. I grab at the door handle, but the door won't open. It's being held on the other side. I turn and back into a corner. I can see both men now. They're Hispanic. One has a droopy mustache with long stringy dark hair tied back with a bandana. It doesn't look like he has washed his hair for a month. The other is wearing two loopy earrings

and has a shaved head and a scar across his chin. Neither looks friendly.

Sometimes you fight, and sometimes you run, and sometimes you do a little of both. When earrings takes the last step onto the landing, I step towards him, grab an earring, and pull hard. The lobe of his ear splits open, splashing blood everywhere. He puts one hand up to feel the damage. At that moment, he loses concentration, and against an enemy, that's a grave mistake. I don't hesitate. I kick him in the middle of his chest, sending him barreling back down half a flight of stairs. Just before he comes to a halt, his head hits the wall with a sickening noise. He's no longer a threat, for sure.

The bandana guy will not make the same mistake. He hasn't flinched as his partner in crime hit his head on the wall.

He pulls out a knife. This isn't a penknife. This is an honest-to-goodness fucking big knife.

We're only six feet apart, and I'm defenseless, but he hesitates, and in that instant, he loses, and I win. The landing door flies open, smacking into his hand, sending the knife pirouetting off down the open stairwell.

The good news is the knife is gone. The not-so-good news is there are now two of them again.

I don't wait to get a look at the third guy.

I turn and run, taking the stairs three or four at a time, leaping over the first guy and building a lead over the remaining attackers.

They're still two flights behind me when I reach the ground floor, but they are coming fast. I leave the front of the building and run to the right-hand front corner. I judge my pace carefully, so I'm just disappearing when they appear. I hear them shout and follow.

I do the same at the next corner. The dumbheads follow me. I can hear their labored breathing. I might be small, but I can move.

Halfway along the back of the building, there's the rear entrance from the car park, which surrounds the building. So, again, I slow until they appear, then dash inside and climb the stairs, moving even more slowly as they struggle to keep up.

I step over the first attacker.

Stop to check for a pulse. He's fine.

Then climb the final few steps to my level and make for my apartment. I go inside but leave the door ajar.

When my two pursuers arrive, I hear them outside discussing what to do. One says they've been paid to finish the bitch, which doesn't sound good. I'm nobody's bitch.

The other argues that they weren't told it would be difficult, but eventually,

the first wins the day, and in they come.

It never ceases to amaze me how stupid thugs like this are. Not for a moment do they wonder why I haven't locked and bolted my door or why I've left it wide open for them.

They grind to a halt, staring at my badge in one hand and my Glock in the other.

'We was never told you was a cop?' one of them manages as if that makes the attack okay.

It doesn't take me long to get them face down and trussed up, then ten minutes later, the cavalry arrives in the form of at least ten patrol cars and Dan Weissman himself. Knowing when an officer needs assistance, half the force responds is a great consolation.

My officer needs assistance message was maybe a little over the top.

Officers bundle the two offenders off, and paramedics take the one on the stairs, leaving Dan and me alone.

'Coffee?'

Dan laughs. 'You take out three attackers, one armed with a knife, and calmly offer coffee. So what, are you Superwoman or something?'

I laugh back and realize I'll now have to tell Dan about Tommy Hawk's job offer. There's no way around it now. Pinho sent these gang-bangers. I know it and hope we can squeeze that out of them in interrogation.

Dan sits quietly as I talk. Then, when I'm finished, I hand him the job offer letter Tommy gave me. He looks it over and gives a long, low whistle when he sees the salary on offer.

'What are you going to do, Sammy? This is one hell of an opportunity.'

'I know it is, Dan. And to be honest, I don't know. There's something else I need to tell you. And it might make all the difference.'

'What's that?'

'I'm pregnant.'

Paperwork for the attack at my place the previous evening takes the first few hours of the following morning, along with watching the interview of the two Hispanics. The third suffered a concussion but is recovering in hospital, cuffed to his bed with an officer for company.

I'm down in the holding area, and the 'hit-and-run' detective is leading the interrogation of my two conscious assailants. He's doing a good job. Dan and I are watching from behind a one-way screen.

He's laying out how seriously the District Attorney takes the attempted homicide of a law enforcement officer. I'm positive the two guys would crap themselves if they knew it was the DA's girlfriend they tried to knock off.

At that thought, I realize that I've never thought of Cliff like that. My boyfriend. We seem too old for boyfriend and girlfriend, but I don't know what else to call him.

By the time he has laid the seriousness of their actions out for them, the detective can't keep up with the rate they're squealing. Two minutes later, they mention him. Pinho. I have him. I look at Dan, who nods. It's time for both of us to visit the Reservation.

As a courtesy, I call Tommy and tell him what's happened. After checking that I'm all right, he confirms that Pinho is in his office, although he has no idea what he's doing. Nevertheless, he commits to keeping him there until we arrive if he can.

Thirty minutes later, Dan and the officers with us wait outside while I knock on Pinho's door and enter without waiting. The photos I'd seen him hurriedly hide the day before are arranged in a collage on his desktop while he's busy jerking off.

Talk about flustered. His face turns red, and I can't tell if it's with anger or embarrassment. Seeing the pictures on his desk, I hope for the latter, but I doubt it. All the images are of children in various stages of undress. Some performing fellatio. Mostly girls, but a few boys as well.

As he packs his hardware back into his pants, I grab his wrist, spin him around and throw him against the wall.

‘José Pinho, you are being arrested on charges of attempted homicide to start with. And other charges will follow.’

At that point, Dan and the officers enter the room. I hand him over to the officers, who read him his full rights, then take him away while Dan and I stare at the photographs.

As we’re looking, Tommy Hawk comes in and joins us.

Tommy’s upset because he feels responsible for Pinho. I’m upset because he’s a kiddie fiddler, and I hate these guys with a vengeance. But Dan’s upset for a different reason.

He has selected two photos in particular and is staring at them.

‘I know these girls,’ he says. ‘They’re in my niece’s drama class at school.’

Back in the office, I’m trying to help Dan come to grips with what we’ve just found out. The two girls, Gemma Merril and Sarah Mathis are both fifth graders at Golden Gate Elementary. Dan doesn’t know much about them, but he’s already called the school and asked the Principal to tell him what he could about each girl.

Both are ten years old, although Gemma is days away from turning eleven, whereas Sarah is a good seven or eight months younger.

The Principle describes Gemma as having average intelligence and being a dreamer. Not good at completing homework assignments and also a loner. She’s being raised almost single-handedly by her mother, working at least two jobs. After school, they drop her off the school bus at her Grans.

Sarah is less intelligent, mainly in the lower third of her class. Another loner, harmless enough but with far too vivid an imagination. She talks endlessly about becoming a movie star or singer. Her mum died of a drug overdose when she was only in kindergarten, and her father is raising her. He’s a long-distance truck driver and often spends nights on the road, leaving Sarah with her Grandpa.

‘Classic broken family stories, Dan. We’ve all heard it so many times before.’

‘Yes. I get that, Sammy. But who took these pictures? And how did they do it?’

‘We should contact the trafficking team, Dan. Let them figure it out.’

‘I know, Sammy. But these are Danielle’s friends. How can I ever explain this to her? I need to find out who is responsible for this and close it down. These girls were all on stage with Danielle just last week when the school put on the drama production. Thank goodness we didn’t find Danielle’s pictures among these. We might have done. My sister’s on her own and works long hours.’

‘Your sister would never allow this to happen to Danielle. And Danielle is

much too smart, anyway.'

'I guess. Nevertheless, I still need to find out who has taken these.'

I leave Dan at that point, having plenty of work to do on my case. I'm trying to figure out how to get a copy of the contract that DC Associates are offering their clients. I'm confident our legal and finance people would take it apart if I can. But I've nothing like sufficient grounds to get a court order. Then I remember the card that Tony Chisholm has given me, look it out, and call the cell number.

A male voice answers and confirms he is Zac Scott and does some work for Findperfectlove. I tell him I would like to meet with him and detect some reluctance which he tries to explain by his being busy.

I pull the old *homicide investigation* trick, and he backs down, agreeing to meet me at his place at ten the following morning.

That night I voluntarily choose salad and olives, although I back them up with some Ben&Jerry's chocolate chip. Bossy-boots doesn't object, so I settle down to watch some mindless program on TV. I can't concentrate. My mind keeps going back to the photographs we confiscated that afternoon. I should be wondering how someone could do such things with young, innocent children, but thanks to a recent secondment I worked on with a trafficking task force, I'm only too aware of what people can do. That starts me wondering. Is this the kind of world I would be bringing Bossy-boots into?

To shrug off my melancholy, I switch the tv off and power up my ancient Dell.

By the time the home screen loads, I've made a fresh brew and am sitting ready to go.

I want to find out more about DC Associates.

There's plenty of marketing nonsense, and their company pops up on many websites, but I'm getting nowhere. But then I come up with a fresh approach. I log onto the Secretary of State Corporation and Business Entity website. Here I can check the State of registration and search multiple online databases. This site proves to be a mine of helpful information. For instance. Would you believe DC Associates is a DC Enterprises subsidiary registered in the Cayman Islands? Once I discover that, I look more carefully at DC Enterprises and its subsidiaries. As well as DC Associates, there is Findperfectlove - I guess no surprise there. Then there is a private investigation company that goes by the name of ZS Enterprises, and I think that's the guy I'm going to meet the following morning - Zac Scott. However, I don't understand why his business

card doesn't say private investigator on it. The next is a company named SB, with no further information available. Not exactly helpful. Finally, and most intriguingly, there's a private medical firm called *Best Care Medical - BCM*.

I try searching for *Best Care Medical* online but keep returning to *Best Buy*, which is a whole different thing. Although I almost divert and look at the prices for a new microwave, but don't. Eventually, I decide that BCM doesn't have a web presence, which intrigues me even further. What company doesn't have a web presence these days?

Try as I may, I can't find a thing, so I go back into the Secretary of State's site and trawl back through the various websites I've already looked at until I find the registered address and name of BCM's CEO.

Now beginning to lose focus, I note the details and send them to my office email account, then power off. Finally, it's time for bed. I'm tired. We're both tired.

Once again, Alexa hits the spot with her selection of Beatles tracks. First up is ‘I’m so tired’ just as I struggle to open my eyes. By the time I swing my legs out of bed, she’s moved on to their version of a song that became the first Gordy’s Motown hit back in the 60s, ‘Money, that’s all I want.’ Which makes me think of the debt I owe the garage. I still have no way to pay it, and the month end is getting close.

The late-night work I finished the night before is still swimming around in my head, trying to fit into my understanding of what’s happening in my *Russian Bride* case.

The brides are being targeted, but by whom? My inside track is Diego Cruz, but how can I prove it? Is Tony Chisholm as innocent as he seems, or is he selecting the most appropriate women? But if this is a sophisticated financial scam, are they killing innocent people? It seems callous, but I’m no longer surprised by the lengths people will go to for money. Diego, yes. I can see him do it. But Tony doesn’t seem the type.

If Diego is a major player, I need a better understanding of this Zac Scott character. Maybe he’s the missing key? After all, Diego recommended him to Tony Scott.

Then there is the *Best Care Medical* facility. What on earth is Cruz’s involvement with that? Is it purely an investment, or is he using it in some related way? Does it have something to do with his Motor Neuron Disease? Still lots of questions, but I’m feeling closer to understanding.

As for SB, who knows? If it had been BS, I would recognize it straight away, bullshit.

I remember that I’m due to see Zac Scott in a few hours. Perhaps that will help get me some answers.

In the office, I stop by Dan’s office and sit with him for a while. He’s talked with his sister the previous night about the photographs we found in Pinho’s office. That horrified her. Her daughter had been to sleepovers with each of the girls in previous months, and she was worried they had involved her. But Dan reassured her there were no photos of Danielle and that they searched Pinho’s

office thoroughly.

Dan asked her how she thought they could have taken these photos. She told him she knew both Gemma's Gran and Sarah's Grandpa personally, and they're both very protective of their grandchildren, but there's no way the girl's parents are involved. So she couldn't offer any helpful advice.

Dan wonders whether to hand the case over or talk with the girls directly. But he isn't thinking straight and is too involved personally. I tell him so, and he reluctantly agrees.

When I leave him, he's already calling Child Protective Services.

For once, no messages are waiting for me, so I log on and catch up with emails, some of which are over a week old. As I grind through these, I still wonder how I can learn more about *Best Care Medical*. I wonder if Arnie Collins might know anything about them. He's worked in the area for the best of sixty years.

I call him. Sure enough, he knows them and explains they're a pre-natal clinic with obstetric and gynecological expertise. Not one of the better-known clinics, but with what he calls a solid enough reputation.

I hang up, still even more confused why they would not have a website. I check the registered address location on google maps and find it's not too far from where I will meet with Zac Scott. I decide to drop in uninvited later in the morning.

I spend longer than intended, messing around before suddenly noticing I've just about enough time to get to Zac Scott's. His office is about fifteen minutes away. I need to move.

Jumping into my car, I turn the key, and nothing happens. I try again, but still, nothing happens. The ignition light remains out, and the dash lights too. The car is flat. Probably the battery.

I dash back in to arrange a pool car, but with the paperwork to complete and trouble finding the right keys, I'm already half an hour late before I even start. I call on my cell as I leave the car park but only get a recorded message. Fuck. I don't know whether to go or cancel. I'm already en route, so I might as well go all the way and hope that Scott is still there.

The address he has given me turns out to be a private address. An apartment block, and I have no idea which apartment he's in. I park up and wait by the front door for a few moments until someone comes out. I flash my badge and enter as they leave.

There are a couple of hundred mailboxes along the left-hand wall. I scan the

names from the top left. Sure enough, it's like at the airport check-in, when you always pick the slowest moving line to wait in. I should have started at the bottom right. He's in apartment 186B.

I check the lifts. They're both out of order. Not my day. There are ten floors, so I reckon twenty per floor. He must be on the tenth and groan inwardly.

An eternity later, I arrive at the top floor, and sure enough, 186B is off to my right. I walk along the outside balcony noticing that I can see the Gulf from up here, but who would care? It's one of those things. People who live in a place like this see this view daily and think nothing of it. They probably don't even notice it anymore.

Arriving at 186B, I knock and wait. When the door opens, a young woman answers, holding a tiny baby, surely no more than a week old. She looks good soon after delivery, making me wonder how I might look when my time comes. Probably fat and frumpy.

She asks if I'm the detective.

I nod.

She apologizes for not answering my call fifteen minutes before. She was changing a diaper. She tells me that Zac had to go to another appointment but would happily see me some other time if I call. I note that it will not be up on the tenth floor and thank her.

As I trudge back down the stairs, something about the girl is nagging at the back of my mind, but I can't quite grasp it. Probably one of these things that will wake me up in the middle of the night.

Back at the car, I call the garage and tell them what's happened to my trusty steed. The owner promises to swing around at lunchtime with a new battery. If that's what I need, he'll add ninety bucks to my bill for the end of the week. I thank him, tell him I've left the keys at the front desk, and end the call thinking, what the hell is an extra ninety bucks?

It's time to swing by *Best Care Medical*.

Ten minutes later, I draw into a mini-mall and park opposite Dunkin Donuts. I'm not on a tight schedule, so after consulting with Bossy-boots, I head inside and order two chocolate glazed and a black coffee.

I sit in the window looking out the Mall, enjoying a little quiet time. There hasn't been much of that recently. While there, I read a text from Cliff saying the jury is coming in with the result. I send him good luck wishes and sign with a kiss. I do that before thinking about it, but it feels okay.

I spend the rest of the time considering whether I can see a long-term

relationship with Cliff.

I like him. But is that enough? Do I love him? I don't think so, but I don't know. He's never said he loves me. I guess it's too early for either of us, but Bossy-boots isn't waiting for us to decide. Time's moving on, and that gives me an idea.

Best Care Medical is sandwiched between Beds-R-Us and Walmart. A classic flat-roofed, glass-fronted nondescript office with a receptionist tucked behind an inexpensive desk. I'm already beginning to understand why they don't have a website. She asks if I have an appointment, and I act in my chosen role. Shy and nervous.

She suggests I take a seat and tells me she'll call someone to talk me through their services.

Five minutes later, a woman approaches and asks if I am Samantha. I nod. She asks me to follow, so I do.

She shows me to a small conference room with a table, four chairs, and a water cooler. I accept a plastic cup and sit.

'So, Samantha. How can we help you?'

'I don't know. I'm not sure I'm in the right place.'

'Let's just slow down and take things a step at a time, shall we?'

She's good, this woman. Intelligent, caring, the person you would like to share your deepest secrets with.

'Can I ask?' She said. 'How far along you are?'

I tell her around eight weeks.

'And what are your intentions?'

I act dumb. 'Intentions?'

'Yes, are you intending to deliver, or might you be looking for a termination?'

I tell her I don't know. I want to give her as much rope as possible, so keep playing dumb.

'Whatever it is you are looking for, we have you covered,' she assures me.

'What if I don't know what I want?'

'Then you have plenty of time to decide, and we can be with you until you do. Then help in any way we can. Here, in Florida, you can terminate until twenty-four weeks, so you have plenty of time to decide.'

'Can I take a pill?'

'Yes, but if you want to terminate now or in the next month, we recommend a combination of two medications, Mifepristone to prevent further development of the fetus and Methotrexate which will bring on contractions and liberate the

fetus.'

'What about if I'm not ready to decide until after that?'

'If you are in the second trimester, we will give you medication to help dilate the cervix, and the doctor would fit small dilator sticks into your cervix, usually the day before the procedure. These absorb fluid and expand, enlarging the opening to the cervix. The procedure only takes fifteen to twenty minutes, and you would be free to leave after a recovery period. You may have heard this referred to as a D&E procedure?'

'How much does all this cost?' I ask, pretending to be worried about the cost while *actually* worrying about the cost.

'If you go for the medication route in the next month, it will cost around seven-hundred dollars. If you leave it until the second trimester, the procedure would be around twelve-hundred dollars.'

'What if I can't decide by twenty-four weeks? What if I go all the way but change my mind and don't want to have a baby?'

'I'm afraid it's illegal to perform a termination beyond twenty-four weeks, so you would be looking at delivering your child. Afterward, we could help you with adoption procedures. There are always people looking for a healthy baby. I don't think you need to worry about that?'

'So, someone else can take my baby?'

'Don't you worry about that right now. You have a long way to go, and we can help you with that situation should you need it.'

We talk a little more about the details of the D&E procedure and whether it's painful or what the after-effects may be, then I thank her for her time and come back out into the bright sunshine, more knowledgeable that when I went in. But on balance, I probably still have more questions than answers, both on my *Russian Bride* case and personally.

I can imagine the whole interview as being a very unpleasant experience for Bossy-boots.

Needing time to think, I treat myself to a second coffee at Dunkin' Donuts, fight the urge to have another donut and sit in the same seat at the window.

I still don't understand why Diego Cruz would be involved with this company, especially as it isn't strictly operating in the same class as his firm or Findperfectlove. This place is being managed on a shoestring, yet he has millions and probably more squirreled away in the Cayman Islands.

The only thing I found vaguely suspicious was when the lady said there are always people looking for a healthy baby. It isn't in the words she used but more in how she said them. I don't know. Maybe I'm just imagining it all.

From a more personal viewpoint, I have another four weeks to access the termination using medication. It sounds simpler, less painful, and with fewer after-effects. Not to mention five hundred dollars cheaper. Mind you, it's another five hundred I don't have. This leaves me wondering if I don't have the money, would it save me money or not?

That reminds me to call the garage.

Having discovered that I'm the proud new owner of a ninety-dollar new car battery, I throw my coffee cup in the bin and squeeze past someone coming in on my way out.

Crossing the pedestrian walkway, my fight-or-flight kicks in with no warning, which is just as well. A Black SUV has pulled out of the next row and is speeding fast toward me. I've no chance of avoiding it entirely, but thanks to my fast reactions, I'm already throwing my body backward as it strikes me, spinning me back toward the sidewalk.

Although in shock, my mind is thinking fast. I realize in that instant I'm being targeted just like Ayita and know the driver is unlikely to give up, so I let momentum continue to roll me until I come up against a concrete pillar holding up the Mall overhang. I know I'm injured and should stay down, but somehow, I drag myself onto the sidewalk and rest my back against the pillar. I feel safer there.

I'm wrong.

The SUV has skidded to a halt and is now reversing fast, intending to jump the curb and flatten me against the pillar where I sit. There's nothing I can do. Just watch death rushing towards me.

Just for that instant, I feel extraordinarily at peace within myself.

But, apparently, it isn't my time.

Before the SUV can reach me, a brown UPS truck smashes into its rear, bringing both vehicles to a shuddering halt. Steam is rising from the truck's front end, but it's completely blocking the attacker's further attempt on my life.

The SUV driver must have realized that at the same time as me and pulls away with the sound of tearing metal. Once free from the truck, it begins to limp away round to the far exit of the Mall. I say limp because one of the rear tires has deflated, and the car is virtually running on the rim. He won't get far for sure, but I'm in no state to chase him.

Now that I'm safe, my adrenaline levels crash to be replaced by horrific pain in my left knee. I'm not going anywhere soon and lay still, trying to control my breathing and remain calm.

The UPS driver climbs out of his van and runs towards me with his cell in

his hand, asking if I'm okay. I nod and grimace simultaneously, then listen as he calls emergency services and requests paramedics and the police. The guy is great with me, sitting and talking all the time calmly and not trying to move me. He knows what he's doing. He notices my badge as I thank him, and I promise him the department will pay for the repair of his truck. He tells me not to worry. To focus on laying still and not making anything worse.

Within a few minutes, a patrol car is first to arrive. I flash my badge and quickly describe what happened and the badly damaged SUV. After assuring the officer I'm okay, he heads off to give chase. He will radio in the details, but I suspect he'll find it abandoned not too far away. How far can you drive a car on three wheels without drawing attention to yourself?

Two minutes after he leaves, the paramedics arrive and are brilliant. Within a couple of minutes more, they give my whole body a once over, strap my knee in a brace to stop any further damage, and give me a shot in the arm to dull the pain.

Whatever they give me. I start to feel pretty good. Morphine, I guess. I feel like I'm floating through life for the next few hours. I remember everything, but only through a drug-induced haze. Being loaded into the ambulance. More patrol cars arriving. The short trip to the Emergency area at NHC Baker hospital.

The doctor who checks me out is great. I insist she checks Bossy-boots first, but everything is okay down below. It did cross my mind how incongruous it is that I'm worried about this little monster within, yet I've just been discussing termination at the clinic.

The doctor then used a mobile X-ray machine to look at the damage to my knee, showed me the result, and talked me through what needs to be done.

I'm still floating at the time, so the details are a bit blurry.

In essence, I've torn both the Medial and Lateral Ligaments on my left knee, and she's recommending a leg brace and crutches, followed by three months of physiotherapy.

Even in my hazy state, I'm no longer a happy bunny.

They take various measurements for the leg brace and place me in a small private room off the A&E Department to recover. That's where Dan finds me. My wonder drug has almost worn off by then, and I'm beginning to feel the pain. I'm surprised when he sees me and laughs. It isn't what I'm expecting. He explains that he isn't laughing at my injury. It's the expression on my face. Regardless of how brave I'm trying to be, the mix of pain and determination to smile when I see him makes me look like a maniacal killer from some old horror

movie.

Anyway, I give Dan the whole story as he sits at the bedside, and he confirms that the SUV has been found abandoned just around the corner from the exit to the mini Mall. Patrol officers are canvassing both where the car was left and where the incident occurred to see if anyone could help identify the driver, but he doesn't sound hopeful. As with the previous hit-and-runs. The SUV was stolen the night before.

An hour later, I sign my release forms and hobble out of the Emergency Department on crutches, my left knee firmly strapped up. I was expecting to look like a robot, but the brace is no more than an adjustable neoprene knee support with a hole in the kneecap. It isn't as restrictive as I expected it to be.

I've already started taking acetaminophen for the pain, so I don't feel too bad.

Dan opens the door of his car and chuckles as I maneuver my way in with my left knee sticking straight out in front of me. I guess it looks funny, but I'm sure I wouldn't have laughed if the roles had been reversed. I tell him this, and that makes him worse. I give him the silent treatment as he drives me home.

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I cannot tell a lie. It was a rough night. The only positive I can think of is that Bossy-boots acknowledged that I needed my full attention elsewhere. But of course, it didn't help that I'd forgotten to tell Alexa not to wake me, and '*Here Comes the Sun*' didn't do it for me at six am.

I tell her to shut up and try to get some more patchy sleep, but it just won't happen.

I have several minor scrapes and feel grubby, so I pull the elasticized clear plastic booty the hospital has given me over my neoprene support and stumble towards the shower. My knee feels twice its normal size, and whether it's stiff because of the injury, or the support, it is neither here nor there. It's stiff and awkward. Nevertheless, I shower and feel better afterward.

Only after I have my underwear on do I realize I will have a restricted choice of clothes. None of my jeans or trouser suits will go over the knee support, so I'm limited to skirts and dresses.

I select a light blue cotton skirt and a clean blue shirt.

I'm ready for action, and it's only seven. I brew some fresh coffee and use some quiet time to catch up with my thoughts about the case, but that's not exactly where my mind goes.

I'm stuck on something Tony Chisholm said when I visited Findperfectlove. I struggle to remember it precisely. But he talked about how Zac Scott provided financial background information on potential clients. But he also said familial checks.

I'm wondering why that phrase is going round and round in my head. There's something I'm missing. I can feel it.

Before I can come up with any conclusion, my cell rings, and I answer it to find it's Cliff. He's in a buoyant mood, so I guess the Jury has swung his way. I'm right. It doesn't seem the time to tell him someone just tried to kill me, so I let him burble on for a while about how significant this case is for him. I guess I'm pleased but also miffed. He never once asks how I am. After he hangs up, I feel that he doesn't care. It's all about him.

After finishing my second cup of coffee, I clip on the two daily essentials -

badge and Glock- and spy the crutches leaning against the wall near the door. I can't see myself using these. So, I limp in circles around the apartment for a few moments, proving that I don't need them. I Ignore the increase in pain. Stubborn, that's me.

Convinced, I head for the door crutch-free, only to remember I don't have transport. The pool car is still at the mini Mall, and my car is in its parking space, complete with a new battery. And that reminds me. I now have only three days to find nine-hundred ninety dollars.

I call a cab and hobble downstairs. It's already waiting for me when I exit the front of the building. Even walking the short distance to the cab, I can feel my heightened senses checking the surrounding area. Who knows when another SUV might want to run me down? But all is well. I load myself awkwardly into the back of the cab and give him the address for the office.

On the journey, I figure out the significance of Tony Chisholm's statement. He said the consultant checked familial backgrounds, but it was for his potential male clients only, not the brides-in-waiting. In other words, the husbands. The dead husbands who left all of their estates to their wives because they had no close direct family. Either Tony Chisholm or the elusive Zac Scott is lining up potential victims. I'm now sure of it.

At the office, I'm glad Dan isn't in his cubicle. I can limp past and make it into my own without being spotted. As usual, there are messages piled up for me. One from Alicia up in Sarasota. Another is from the duty sergeant asking me to complete a report about the incident from the previous day. One from the garage confirming my car is back in its space, and they have added the ninety dollars to my account. There's another from a familiar name, but I can't quite place it. The last one gets my attention. It's from a patrol officer who claims to have seen Nadia's missing sister.

I start with the patrol officer and call him. He's off-duty but happy to talk. I can hear young children playing in the background. He's seen the woman we're looking for shopping in the 5th Avenue Mall area downtown, but by the time he parked up to look for her, she'd disappeared.

He tells me he spent thirty minutes looking before being called to another incident. I end the call disappointed, but reassured that she's still in Naples and know that we'll eventually find her.

Next, I call the duty sergeant and tell him I'll fill in the paperwork immediately. He asks me if I'm all right, and I tell him I'm fine while feeling it's

already time to treat my pain again. Why do we tell people we're fine when we're not? I hang up and dry pop a couple of Advil. They take half an hour to kick in, and I should've taken them an hour ago. Still, better late than never.

I call Alicia up in Sarasota.

She doesn't know what to do. She's had another call from her attorney, trying to persuade her to sign the deal with DC Associates. She pleaded with him to explain his determination, but he refused. She wants to know what I think.

I suggest she finds a new attorney and explains to him what's going on. Seek their advice before doing anything. Then, I ask if she's heard from DC Associates again, but she hasn't.

I hang up, wondering what the hell is going on with her attorney. I think about making a fresh brew but can't face the walk, so I settle down to produce my incident report. It will take the best part of the morning, with both paperwork and online forms, to complete. At least I don't have to move around. The knee is throbbing.

It's almost lunchtime when Dan appears. He sees me and walks straight to my cubicle.

'What the blazes are you doing here?'

'Working,' I said, as matter-of-factly as I can.

'You should be at home, Sammy. Someone just tried to kill you.'

'Sure, but didn't. And here I am. Alive to fight another day.'

'But you're injured?'

'My knee, Dan. That's all. The rest of me is fine.'

He's getting the picture. I can be stubborn. He already knows that.

'Right, no driving, and no going anywhere alone until we figure out who tried to run you down.'

'Yes, boss.'

I do this sometimes. Agree with someone to get rid of them without ever intending to do what they say. But I do agree with no driving. That would be impossible.

Dan says he's going to order pizza for lunch. Do I want some? I consult below decks and order cheese with two toppings, salami and chilies. I may be broke, but I can still afford toppings.

Dan sits down and, in a whisper, asks if Bossy-boots is okay after yesterday. I tell him we're both fine. He apologizes for forgetting to ask at the hospital, but I tell him not to worry.

He then tells me he's heard back from the Tampa Police in Hillsborough. The

woman Rita Lea said had taken her in when she was pregnant is running an operation that serves two purposes. First, it acts as a halfway house for women incarcerated in the Tallahassee Corrections facility in the north of the State. When they have a year left in their sentence, they can be released to this halfway house where they receive help to find work and re-enter society. The second role has grown out of the fact that because drug use is rife in Tallahassee, there's a need for a drug rehab program.

Various law enforcement agencies use this facility and consider the woman responsible for running it hardworking and committed. Her name is Elle Cussons

The detective that called Dan told him it isn't unusual for Cussons to come across someone like Rita and offer help. However, he got a very different story when he called her to discuss what Rita had said.

Cussons said Rita had done well with the drug rehab program, but when she was almost at her due date, she packed up her few belongings and moved out, telling no one.

Cussons has no idea where she went and hasn't heard from her again.

'So,' I said. 'Rita is lying?'

'Seems that way,' agrees Dan. 'Did you think she was lying?'

I thought back to the sad state of the woman and the place she lives in. She may once have kicked her drug use, but the evidence we saw in her apartment said that was in her past. That makes her untrustworthy in my eyes, and I say so. Dan agrees and says he'll have to revisit her and check her story.

As Dan leaves for his cubicle, my phone rings.

It's Alicia's attorney. He introduces himself as Denis Allerton. The name on one of my message slips I couldn't quite recall. He says he would like to meet with me personally, but not in his office. Thinking of my knee, I say he would be welcome to come down to Naples, expecting him to refuse, but he immediately agrees.

We arrange to meet the following morning at EJ's for breakfast.

I hang up, wondering what that's all about.

The Pizzas arrive, and Dan and I spend the next thirty minutes in the rec area, chatting about anything and everything, as long as it has nothing to do with work. But, back in my cubicle, I hate to admit it, but my knee is killing me. I'm up-to-date with the pain meds, but they aren't helping, so I decide to head home, take the weight off, and enjoy some quiet time with a chic flick or two on Netflix.

First, I have one more call to make. I want another appointment with Zac

Scott, the mysterious private investigator. His girlfriend answers the call. I recognize her voice from the previous day. I give her a shortened version of having a knee problem and ask if her boyfriend can come into the office the following day, perhaps at one o'clock. She says she'll ask him and let me know. I give her my cell number and say to call anytime.

I thought I would see if I could drive my trusty steed home, but my knee's far too painful.

I call a cab and start hobbling downstairs to the front desk.

I don't think I've ever been at home during the daytime on a working day before.

I loosen my knee support and settle in front of Netflix with a whole tub of popcorn and a glass of iced water.

The pressure I've been under, combined with the painkillers, suddenly overcomes me, and before I know it, I'm waking up in a dark room. My knee is stiff and painful, so the first step is to relieve myself, splash my face, then take two painkillers. I've achieved the first two when there's a knock on my front door.

This place is all I can afford and is in a slightly dodgy area. Nobody knocks on my door. Everyone knows I'm a cop. Shady people stay away in case I catch them out for something or other. Everyone else stays away because they're uncomfortable with me being a cop. Like they have something to hide, even if they don't know what, and I might use my super-detective powers to find it out.

I grab my Glock and hobble to the door as the knocks are repeated. When I'm ready, I brace myself against the wall to one side of the door and throw it open, hoping to catch whoever it is by surprise.

Well, that works.

Cliff is staring down the barrel of my Glock with a terrified expression.

I quickly lower the gun and apologize. Cliff gives one of his laughs, but it doesn't quite ring true. He was genuinely shocked.

I wave him in, close the door behind him, and invite him to sit.

He studies the couch I've just woken up on, which still has a wrap, the remains of my popcorn, and an empty glass on it. The only alternative is my beanbag, and he's actually considering it, at which I have to laugh.

I limp to the couch and clear the debris, making his choice easier. I can see him looking at my knee brace, then realize I'm only wearing a T-shirt and knickers. He isn't looking at my knee brace. He's trying not to look elsewhere.

I blush. Even admitting it makes me blush further. I cover my embarrassment by offering him a drink, and he asks if I have coffee. Funny how even though he's seen it all before, that was then, and this is now. It's different.

I head to the kitchen, grabbing my jeans and bra.

By the time I return with two coffee mugs, Cliff has recovered his composure. I've restored my modesty. He's removed his jacket and tie and is relaxing while flicking through the 'my favorite' section of Netflix.

'I didn't realize you had such a dark side,' he laughs.

Most of the films are silly romcoms.

I don't feel I can sit beside him, so I push the beanbag into shape and drop into it with some lame excuse about it being more comfortable for my knee.

He tells me he heard about the attempt on my life and asks how I am.

I lie again. I say I'm fine. I've forgotten the painkillers I was about to take when he knocked on the door, but the lie comes easily to my lips.

I ask him about his win in court and find out it really was a big case. He's made sure a serious drug baron will be incarcerated for a long time.

I'm impressed when he talks about his work. He's so damned clever. It makes me feel stupid.

After a few more casual catch-ups, he says he wants to discuss my situation.

My radar switches on immediately. He didn't say 'our' situation. It's apparently '*mine*.'

He talks about how new our relationship is. How much he enjoys spending time with me. How he admires that I'm a detective. I can tell there's a *but* coming.

Sure enough, when he eventually gets around to it, he admits that he doesn't think my pregnancy is a good basis for developing a future relationship. That may cause us to make choices we might not otherwise make and regret.

For everything he says, my mind is saying the opposite. Maybe it's a perfect basis? Perhaps we would make a lot of wonderful choices and never regret them. Maybe we would live in pure bliss? Maybe I become a role model for good motherhood.

But I stay quiet.

He's spent the past few days thinking this through, so I should at least listen.

He says he will accept his financial responsibility if I want to have the baby. I can count on that.

I believe him.

But he doesn't see himself co-parenting in the short term.

Then, throwing a glimmer of hope, he adds that you never know. Things change.

He asks me what I would prefer to do, catching me on the hop. I bumble a few incoherent sentences but genuinely don't have a clue.

After that, we talk a little longer, each of us knowing it's time for him to go.

Before he does, he says that he doesn't want affordability to be something I'm worried about when making such an important decision and that I'd already told him recently about not being able to pay the garage for the repair of my car. So, he takes out his cell and asks for my account details.

This is happening too quickly for me to process, and part of me wants to tell him to stuff his cash, but the more pragmatic part realizes he's right. My finances would be a factor in my decision, and that wouldn't be right. So I give him my details, and he transfers two thousand dollars there and then.

He pecks my cheek at the door, and when I close the door behind him, it feels like I'm closing off any future we may have together. I've sold out for two grand, and that makes me feel cheap and angry, not at him, but at myself.

Feeling desperately alone, I head for the kitchen and the painkillers. All kinds of thoughts are swimming around in my head, but none explain the tears streaming down my face.

I can't remember ever being so upset. It takes the best part of an hour for me to calm down and regain control. When I have, I start figuring out what is upsetting me. Then, like a good detective, I begin listing the possible culprits.

1. I like him more than I have admitted. I hate it when I don't understand myself, although I should be used to it.
2. He doesn't like me as much as I like him. That just plain hurts.
3. I feel foolish for allowing myself to become so vulnerable.
4. He doesn't want Bossy-boots full stop. That makes me feel protective. I guess this is what people call my mothering instinct kicking in.
5. I hoped he would help me decide what to do. Fuck. I hoped he would decide for me, so I could blame him if it went wrong.
6. I expected him to be more positive
7. I feel not just lonely but alone and unwanted. And this makes me wonder if Bossy-boots felt the same when I went to the *Best Care Clinic*.
8. Accepting the cash makes me feel like a pauper. Is the extra money intended to pay for a termination, but he doesn't want to say it? Is that what he wants?
9. I am a pauper. I've accepted his paying for my car, which is what I know I need to do with his money. If I need more for a termination, I'll come up with it another way. I'm pathetic. He's super wealthy. Why would he be interested in me, anyway?

10. His backing out has exposed a lack of me having an opinion of my own.
11. I'm both embarrassed and ashamed of myself for being in such a pathetic state.

I suspect if I keep at it, I can add more. But there's no point.

One thing is evident now, though. I need to decide what to do about Bossy-boots sooner rather than later.

The painkillers are kicking in, so it's time for bed.

Curled up, with the light off, my mind won't stop. If I terminate Bossy-boots, am I a killer? How many more opportunities to be a mother might I have at thirty-five? Ticking clock and all that stuff. Should I think more seriously about accepting the job offer that Tommy Hawk has made me? That would solve virtually all of my problems.

Thinking about Tommy's offer turns my mind onto a question lurking unnoticed in the background for some time.

Although we've taken José Pinho out of the picture at the brothel, I don't know if he's behind the missing girls, the broken-neck accident, or the two hit-and-runs. Neither do I yet know if there's a bigger scheme to ruin the brothel, as Ayita fears. So there's still plenty of work to do there.

Then, my mind connects my hit-and-run and the other two. Stolen car. SUV with tinted glass. Definite attempts to kill in all three cases. Once successfully. But if my case is mixed in, is it because I'm considering working there or for another reason?

If it's the former, I can understand it. Whoever is responsible would not want Tommy bringing in a detective as Chief of Security.

But if not that. It's connected to something else, and the only other thing I'm working on is the *Russian Bride* case.

What have I done to make someone want to kill me in that case?

Sleep doesn't come. I toss and turn all night, my mind alternately working on the case, then what to do about Bossy-boots. I don't reach any helpful conclusions on either. My knee is trying to burst out of the support, and my skin is puffy both above and below it. I loosen it a little and swallow some more painkillers.

I'm tired and weary when I arrive for an early breakfast at EJ's that morning. Eddy, who takes orders, pours me a coffee without asking. Then tells me a guy is already sitting in a back booth waiting for me. I tell him we're going to order food, lots of it. He says he'll be right over.

I limp to the far booth and squeeze in opposite the man I assume is Denis Allerton, Alicia's attorney.

I see him watch my neoprene support as I move towards him, but he doesn't comment.

He dresses as you would expect a fancy high-flying attorney to dress. Smart three-piece, flashy tie, highly polished shoes. He has what you would call gravitas. A serious look. I suppose if you're paying mega-bucks for an attorney. This is what he should look like.

I guess him to be around sixty, and if not exactly obese, he certainly carries a few pounds more than he needs. Maybe he stores up to hibernate in the winter? Who knows? He has a ruddy complexion which makes his silver tightly-trimmed beard stand out. Slightly beady eyes, with those annoying glasses that rest right on the end of the nose. I never know where to look. Through them, or over them.

'Detective. Thanks for agreeing to meet with me.'

'Only cause you offered to pick up breakfast,' I joke. They don't allow us to do that, so I know the tab will be on me. I'll add it to my general tab at EJ's and hope I'm good for it.

Before he can say anything, I lift one of the laminated menus and salivate. I've had nothing substantial since the pizza Dan bought for lunch the day before. Even I don't count a giant tub of popcorn as substantial.

When Eddy has taken our orders, I ask Allerton why a secret meeting is needed. He's acting real nervous and examining everyone who comes in

carefully. The guy is tense as hell.

He removes an envelope from his jacket pocket and places it on the table in front of me.

I open it and out fall photographs. The only difference this time is there are half a dozen, not one or two. All are showing different people. Allerton explains, pointing to one at a time. They are his parents, wife, sister, and daughters.

‘They started arriving just a few weeks ago, accompanied by this one repeatedly,’ he explains. He shows me half a dozen photographs of Alicia, his client, up in Sarasota. In each case, there’s a red felt-tip cross across her face, as I’ve seen before, with the single word ‘choose.’ But again, the implied threat is obvious.

‘I didn’t want to say anything to Alicia. She would have told me to ignore them, but I didn’t feel I could.’

‘So you withdrew your services?’

‘Yes, and that’s when Diego Cruz came calling.’

‘A coincidence?’ I ask.

He doesn’t bite. He’s genuinely scared, and I’m not sure why. Is he scared of the implied threat to his family? Is it the threat to Alicia, the wife of a long-term client and friend? Or is it talking to me because he is also being threatened?

‘DC Associates have a long-standing, excellent reputation with this one-stop-shopping solution they offer. I thought it best to recommend them to Alicia. She can always refuse.’

‘And you would be off the hook?’

He at least has the decency to look abashed.

‘I didn’t know what to do, and I’m not sure I should be talking with you either, detective.’

‘Don’t worry, Mr. Allerton. I won’t tell anyone about our meeting. And I think you’ve done the right thing coming to me.’

At that point, the food arrives, and I tear into my sausage, bacon, and two eggs over easy. Allerton pushes his scrambled egg around the plate several times and settles for jelly spread on his rye toast. Too worried to eat, I take it as. Doesn’t stop me, though.

After finishing, I insist on picking up the tab, and he leaves. I ask for a free coffee top-up and think about how this additional information will fit into the *Russian Bride* case.

There’s only one reason I can think for Allerton being threatened. To have him pass the business to DC Associates. But, as he said, DC Associates has an outstanding long-term reputation. I wonder if that reputation is built on dubious dealings like that happening to Alicia. It seems a stretch.

What is interesting is that the blackmail threats take the same form as that with several of the Russian brides. That makes me wonder about the widows I haven't yet thoroughly checked out, like the most recent - Marlene Watson. The woman whose home Diego Cruz was leaving when I arrived.

Broken neck, stairs, DC Associates. All that's missing is a few threatening photographs, and we would have a match. I make a note to call on the Watson home for a third time.

I walk to the office a few blocks from EJ's, which isn't such a bright idea. By the time I arrive, my leg looks like an elephant's. I hobble upstairs, stopping now and again to swallow the pain. Then make my way to my cubicle, passing Dan on the phone.

I virtually collapse in my chair just as Dan walks up behind me. He hasn't seen my struggles, so I put on a brave face and smile.

'What's up, Dan?'

To my horror, he draws up a chair and sits. I'm going to have to keep up my pretense. He'll send me home if he sees the pain I'm suffering. I'm not having that. So, I suck it up.

'You wouldn't believe it, Sammy. Child Services, in conjunction with a lieutenant from the Trafficking group, interviewed each of Danielle's two school friends with their parents present. First, it was Gemma. They showed her the photographs we took from José Pinho at the brothel. She was happy to talk about them. Her Gran had told her she would lose her house and needed money. And that Gemma could help by allowing her to take photographs and sell them.'

'And she fell for that?'

'She's only ten, Sammy. And we're talking about her Gran, who sees her virtually daily. So why would she not?'

I have to concede that.

'Then Gemma discovered that her friend Sarah was learning dance routines with her Grandpa. She was copying some of her favorite singer's routines, and he was filming them.'

'Innocent enough.'

'Yes, but you haven't seen the routines or the outfits he encouraged her to wear.'

'Skimpy?'

Dan nods, then carries on.

'What happened after that is because Gemma and Sarah talk at school, both the Gran and Grandpa started getting together and encouraging the two girls to do things ten-year-old girls shouldn't know about.'

‘They were selling the pictures?’

‘Yes, but it’s worse than that, Sammy. There were videos taken, and we didn’t find these in José Pinho’s office.’

‘So, where do you think they are, Dan?’

‘We don’t know. Pinho is holding onto that information, hoping to negotiate some reduction in charge or sentence.’

‘So, it was the Gran and Grandpa who were abusing their grandchildren. That’s awful, Dan.’

‘Sure is.’

‘How about Danielle? How’s she taking it?’

‘We haven’t told her yet. I’m going to my sister’s tonight to help break the news.’

‘Don’t envy you, Dan. Good luck,’

With that, Dan leaves, and I dive into my top drawer for painkillers and swallow them dry. Then, when I stop shaking, I look up Marlene Watson’s phone number and call her. I tell her I’ll be with her at three that afternoon and that she might like to have her attorney present.

First things first. I’m expecting the private investigator used by Findperfectlove in ten minutes, and I know it will take me that long to get back downstairs. Just as I’m leaving, my phone rings. It’s the duty sergeant to say Zac Scott has arrived and has already been shown into interview room three.

I groan. Interview room three has no windows. It’s like talking to someone in a broom cupboard.

As I enter conference room three, Zac Scott stands and offers me a chair. I found going downstairs much harder than going up, so by the time I arrive. I’m glad to accept his offer. He’s an imposing figure when he stands up. I guess around six, three, or four, with close-cropped brown hair and a square jawline. I would put money on him being ex-military. Piercing blue eyes under bushy eyebrows hint at intelligence. He sits down in another chair but doesn’t relax. I feel he doesn’t know how. He lives on the edge. Another thing that screams military.

We introduce each other, and I apologize for turning up late at our previously arranged meeting. He waves it off, saying he was sorry he couldn’t stick around for me.

I dive in.

‘You’re a PI?’

‘I am.’

‘Licensed?’

‘Of course.’

‘Licensed to carry a concealed weapon?’

‘I am.’

‘Ever use it?’

‘Nope. Nice to have it there, though.’

‘Ex-military?’

‘Marines. Third Battalion, Fifth Marine.’

‘Overseas service?’

‘Helmand province, Afghanistan. Five years.’

‘Not an enjoyable experience?’

‘It had its moments.’

‘Moved to Florida when you left the service?’

‘Yes. Five years ago.’

‘Been a PI since then?’

‘No. I worked for Wells Fargo for two years first.’

‘You do some work for a website company. Findperfectlove?’

‘I do.’

‘Can you tell me what you do for them?’

‘I screen potential clients to ensure they are suitable as long-term future husbands for their Eastern European potential brides.’

‘So you look into their financial investments, for instance?’

‘Yes. But it’s a lot more than that. I help build up a complete background on each client. Academics, family, military service, criminal charges, and so on.’

‘Pretty thorough?’

‘Had no complaints from Tony Chisholm.’

‘Do you ever strong-arm any of his clients? Or deliver threatening messages to any of his client’s new brides?’

He doesn’t react. He looks at me as if I’ve gone off-piste and don’t know what I’m doing.

‘I’m not sure what you’re getting at Detective, but if those are serious questions, then my equally serious answers are no, and of course not.’

I go for a change in subject.

‘You’re a new father?’

This time he looks puzzled. Not the response I’m expecting. I prompt him.

‘When I met your girlfriend, she had your baby in her arms.’

Now I see dawning, but it’s like a false dawn. I can feel a lie coming.

‘Yes, of course. You met Denzel. He’s not ours. We’re just looking after him for a little while. His mother had a difficult birth.’

‘Oh, I see. Sorry.’

‘No need to apologize, detective. It’s a simple mistake to have made.’

I jump again. Jumping around, I find it catches people unaware.

‘One thing is puzzling me about your work for Findperfectlove. You don’t vet everyone, do you?’

‘You would need to ask Tony about that. I do what he asks me.’

‘I see. Another thing that puzzles me, and maybe you can help? Each person you vet never seems to have any immediate family or dependents.’

‘That’s common with people who have dedicated themselves to their careers. They lose touch with any family they have because of their singular focus on business and make no genuine connections in their personal lives. That’s why they use Tony’s site, I guess.’

‘So, not unusual then?’

‘No.’

‘You work with various international companies in the matching process?’

‘Yes, I do.’

‘Have you ever approved a woman under the age of eighteen?’

‘No. Tony is clear about that. I depend on the sister companies in whichever country she lives in for such details, though.’

‘So, it’s possible that one of them could screw up occasionally?’

‘I guess so.’

I continue talking with Scott for a bit longer, but I already know I have everything I will get from him. He’s very much in control of himself.

When he leaves, I remain in the windowless space trying desperately to recall where I’ve seen him before.

Back upstairs, I’m just trying to decide my next task when Jerry from Narcotics stops by and sits down.

‘Hi, Sammy. You look like shit.’

‘Thanks, Jerry. Nice of you to say.’

‘I heard about the hit-and-run. You doing okay?’

I turn round and reveal my neoprene knee sticking straight out under my desk.

‘Sore?’

‘Bitching.’

‘Sorry, Sammy,’ he says, sitting back. ‘Thought you might like an update on the Wells Fargo affair.’

I nod.

‘The Savage City Gangsters have moved up from Miami to fill the void left

by the dirtbag that tried to knife you.'

'They don't hang around, do they?'

'Time's money. Anyway, I should show you their new guy up here. You can keep an eye out for him.'

With that, he hands me a sheet on the new leader. A guy called Vegas. I can't decide whether to laugh or cry when I see the picture. Jerry sees the confusion and asks what's up?

'That's Chico. The guy that started the whole thing off.'

'You mean your inside, man. The one who got away from the Wells Fargo take-down?'

'The same one.'

Jerry has no difficulty deciding his reaction and laughs out loud. 'He suckered you, Sammy. He used you to get rid of the guy in his way.'

I've already figured that out, and my emotional state is catching up fast. I sure as hell don't feel like laughing. Fuck. That little prick.

I'm just trying to decide what to do next when Dan asks me what I have on for the rest of the afternoon. I tell him it's mostly some detailed research and a visit to the most recent widow in the *Russian Bride* case - Marlene Watson.

He tells me he intends to go back and meet with Rita Lea again to ask her about the discrepancy between her version of what happened when she delivered her baby and that of the woman who ran the halfway house she had been staying in.

As both visits are up I75, Dan suggests we go together, so I won't have to take a cab. I also know it means he can keep an eye on me, but I say nothing.

On the way north, Dan talks a little more about the Grandparents responsible for the pictures of his niece's friends. I can tell he isn't looking forward to the conversation with his niece later that evening.

I update him on my case that I'm becoming convinced that it somehow involves DC Associates, but I can't quite nail it down. I also tell him about Zac Scott being responsible for the background checks on the dead husbands in my case and that he had said that it was just a coincidence that none of them had anyone to leave their wealth to. Only their wives.

And it's when I mention Scott that I suddenly recall where I've seen him before. He was sitting at the bar in the pool at Diego Cruz's home. But as I consider this, there's nothing untoward about it. He works for Tony Chisholm, who was also there with his family. But I'm now more convinced that Scott's more involved than Chisolm. I'm sure he's that fourth company in DC Enterprises registered in the Cayman Islands. ZS Enterprises would be Zac Scott PI. That makes sense. Now all I have to do is figure out SB.

When we pull in at Rita Lea's building, the desolation of the place must be infectious. Since we were here just a few days ago, the pizza takeaway shop has been boarded up, and both the smoothie cafe and the pastrami bar are empty. I feel sure they'll follow their neighbor soon.

We climb the stairs and make our way to Rita's apartment to find her front door slightly ajar.

Dan knocks and shouts, but there's no answer.

We look at each other and draw our pistols. Dan shouts that we're armed and coming in.

Nothing much has changed since we were last here. If anything, the place is even more of a mess, but that isn't what gets our attention.

Rita is sitting in the same chair, her mother opposite her. Dan checks Rita, and I check her mother, but both are dead. Having seen the state Rita was in before, we aren't surprised she's gone, but having her mother die at precisely the same time is suspicious and makes this a potential crime scene.

Dan calls it in while I don gloves and snoop around. We wait until a couple of the guys from our Bureau arrive and take over, then head off to visit Marlene Watson.

Whatever happened to Rita's baby, we'll never know now. Another dead end for Dan.

I have already called ahead and apologized to Marlene Watson, saying we will be an hour late, and when we arrive at her place, the gate's already open, and we're free to drive right up and park outside the front of the house. This time, I don't feel so bad in Dan's car. It's verging on respectable in the company of those belonging to her employees. There's a new car there I haven't seen before. A bright red Mercedes sports, and I guess her attorney will be present.

A maid shows us into a small room that I assume would have been her late husband's study. Marlene is there, dressed casually in jeans and a lightweight pale blue sweater. She looks tense. She looks older than when I saw her last.

She introduces her attorney as Des Stone. Like the attorney I bought breakfast for, this guy is in a sharp three-piece, with shiny shoes and, in this case, a flowery satin tie. The tie probably cost more than my new battery. Hell, who knows? Maybe more than my car!

She indicates that we should all sit in the three chairs arranged in front of the desk while she takes her position behind it.

Clearing her throat, she asks how she can help.

I take my time. I want her to talk, so I need to be careful.

I explain that she's not the only woman to have lost her husband in recent years. I'm investigating five such deaths, all of which are husbands who have met and married their wives through Findperfectlove.

I find her difficult to read, but it feels like she isn't surprised by anything I've just said. Maybe by the detail, but not the overall picture.

I then explain how one wife has had her younger sister kidnapped. Another suffered her father's death back in Russia, and I'm equally sure I will find

similar things happening to the two other widows.

‘And you want to know if I’ve received such threats?’

‘Yes, Marlene. We think the man who killed your husband has killed at least four others and that there will be more deaths if we don’t stop him.’

At that point, Marlene looks to her attorney, who gives her the briefest of nods, then tells us her story.

Driving back south, Dan and I review what Marlene has told us and what extra information that gives us. In her case, her parents were being threatened, similar to Alicia. She had seen the intruder drag her husband out of bed and the bedroom. By the time she followed, both men were at the bottom of the stairs, with her husband already dead. The intruder saw her but said nothing, just left the way he had come in.

She described him as a white male, tall and strong, but in the shadows, she couldn’t tell us anymore. She only briefly caught a glimpse of him in the bedroom and again at the foot of the stairs.

When we started asking about her plans to settle her husband’s estate, she looked more often at her attorney, who nodded less and less. She denied being coerced into using a particular attorney to handle the estate, although neither Dan nor I believe that to be true.

I tried asking outright if she intended to use the services of the man I saw leaving at my last visit, but her attorney said she had nothing more to add to what she had already told us.

We both believe that she’s scared stiff, that whoever killed her husband would come back and the same would happen to her.

Dan drops me at home, asks if I need him to fetch anything from the 7/11, then leaves. I climb the stairs, exhausted. Not that it has been a hard day. I’ve done relatively little.

It’s the pain in my knee. It’s draining the life out of me, and again, I’m taking my next painkillers too late.

I change into a cool loose-fitting nightdress, swallow the tablets, and sit at the morning bar staring at the bones.

I open the small box, hesitate momentarily, then roll them. Apparently, I’m in for a surprise. What the bones don’t tell me is whether it’s a good or bad one. I guess the answer arrives with the knock on my door.

Although I’m ready for bed, it’s more to do with pain and the need to rest my leg than to do with sleep. It’s only eight-thirty. I lift my Glock, limp to the door,

and make sure the chain is on before opening it.

Peering through the gap, I can't believe who's there. I close the door, detach the chain and throw it open, pointing my Glock at eye level.

'You little Fucker! You used me!'

Chico Vegas backs until he can go no further. And I'm standing in the hall with the barrel of my gun pressed against his forehead.

When I do something like that, I expect someone to be scared. Chico isn't. When I calm down, I see he's amused more than anything else. I assume he's laughing at me because he has pulled one over on me. I'm so wrong. I take a few more moments to catch on. Then blush.

I'm only wearing the flimsiest nightdress, and with my hands held high to point my Glock, I'm exposing much more than intended. It's impossible to stay angry when you're flashing bare pussy.

It's one of these situations you get into where there's no right answer. Standing there revealed to the world isn't a solution, but neither is letting Vegas win.

Damn. I have to choose the latter.

I lower the weapon, recover my decency, and decide that he may have won round one, but I will win round two.

I go back on the attack.

'You used me to float to the top of the shit heap you call a business.'

'Business is business, Detective. Besides, you took down some seriously bad people.'

'So now you're in with the Miami crowd?'

'Word travels quickly,' he says, surprised.

I've scored a minor point, at least.

'What do you want, Chico? You've used up all of my good grace. I'll tell you that.'

'Looks like you got plenty of good grace down below if you want to share,' he smirked.

'If you're not careful. My good grace will chew you up and spit you out in pieces.'

He stops smirking. I'm pissed, and I have a gun. He gets that.

'I want to give you something back.'

'You're kidding, right? You think I would trust you again?'

'It doesn't matter to me, Detective. I tell you something, do you trust me or not? S'up to you.'

I give him my best cold detective stare.

I'm interested, but he knows that already.

‘So, what you got?’
‘It’s the Ho’s roun’ here.’
‘What about them?’
‘Their pimps been goin’ missin’ man.’
This confuses me.
‘Which Ho’s, and which pimps are we talking about?’
‘Bout fifty or more, round here. Probably eight, nine pimps gone awol.’
‘What do you mean, awol?’
‘Disappeared. No trace, nada, man. The girls all got the same fresh man, but he different.’
‘Chico, pimps come and go. There’s always another ready to take over. You know that.’
‘Not like this one. He don’ take money from his Ho’s.’
‘What?’
‘I tellin’ you, man. He lets them keep every cent.’
‘What’s in it for him?’
‘I don’t know. All he’s told them is to keep their cash, and if they get up the spout, to call him, and he would help them.’
‘Sounds more like a good samaritan.’
‘It feels bad to me, man. Cause it don’t make no sense.’
‘Yeah, I can see how someone being nice wouldn’t make sense in your world. So why are you telling me, anyway?’
‘You gotta do something, man.’
‘About what? Some guy helping girls make a better living, and who worries about their welfare? What do you want me to lock him away for? Being kind?’
‘What’d he do with the pimps? They wouldn’t just give up their Ho’s and move away?’

I have to give him that. I’m still not sure I want anything to do with it. So I ask who this new benefactor is.

‘Don’t know much. The Ho’s - they got a new tat. Say’s ‘F’ for free. They got the others from their pimps removed. It all paid for, man. And that’s not cheap. None of them tellin’ me nothin’ no more. They don’t wanna lose the arrangement, so they ain’t saying squat.’

‘How do you expect me to find him, then?’

‘You, the Detective. Fuckin’ detect.’

With that, he does his usual and saunters into the shadows, hands in his pockets. However, he does glance back and shout. ‘Thanks for the show, man.’

Five minutes later, I’ve added knickers to my ensemble just in case someone

else comes to the door, and I have to raise my arms again.

I'm drinking a hot chocolate with marshmallows on top. I'm a little concerned in the back of my mind that Bossy-boots doesn't seem to worry so much about what I eat or drink these days. I guess both of us are busy wondering what decision I'm going to make, and for one of us, it's life or death.

I turn my mind back to Chico Vegas.

Like the last time, I'm sure he isn't just passing me information out of the kindness of his heart. So there is something in it for him. But what?

Another restless night, so I'm up before Alexa starts playing. I've selected Chicago and listen to '*If you need me now*' as I finish breakfast. Still, Bossy-boots is quiet, and I'm becoming concerned. There's now a tiny but distinct bump when I check myself in the mirror. I need to decide what I intend to do, so give myself forty-eight hours. I'll choose by tomorrow night. A simple goal. I can work with this.

I pop a couple of painkillers and tighten up my knee support, which hurts like hell. Clip on my badge and Glock and head down for my cab.

At the office, I go straight up to Jerry in Narc's and tell him about the strange conversation I had in the hallway the previous night.

I don't mention exposing my pussy. I can only imagine how quickly that story would go around the place.

Initially, he's as skeptical as I am until he has a little time to think it over.

'Ho's would be one of his major outlets, Sammy. And their clients would be a second. If he has lost fifty or more of these, he will surely be hurting. This new samaritan must supply them. They won't stop using because their pimps have disappeared. They're just taking their business elsewhere.'

'So, a problem for Chico.'

'Especially if it's not a short-term thing. It sounds like this good samaritan is thinking long-term?'

I nod. That makes sense, and it annoys me that Jerry has to point it out.

'Listen, Sammy. I've some people close to the streets. I'll talk to them, see what they know, and give you a shout.'

After thanking him, I wonder what for. He's Narc's, not me. I've enough on my plate without being taken for another ride by Chico Vegas. Anyway, it seems like the thing to do.

As I pass Dan's office, he's just hanging up and waves me to the spare seat. He asks about my knee, and I tell him I'm fine. That's always my response. It's sore as hell. Think heat of the sun with occasional solar flares shooting out.

Then he tells me how the conversation with his sister and niece had gone the

previous night. Apparently, easier than he thought it might, and hearing that, I can't help but wonder if his niece hadn't quite grasped the seriousness of what happened to her friends.

It turns out I'm right.

That morning, Dan's sister called and told him that Danielle had finally become very upset when she learned that both her friends' grandparents were being locked up. She was heartbroken.

The good news is that although she had been at both grandparents' houses, nothing sinister had happened to her. Instead, she'd had fantastic times, which made it even harder for her to understand.

When Dan finishes, I reassure him that his niece is resilient and will bounce back soon enough. Then, I give him thirty seconds on my conversation with Jerry and head off to my cubicle.

More messages are waiting for me.

The first is a good one. A thank-you from the owner at the garage. I know you can't tell emotions from a written message, but I can imagine his surprise or shock when he received the payment. I'm convinced he would have been expecting me to hand him the car as payment, and it was definitely down to the wire.

The following message is from Diego Cruz's wife, Taylor. Saying she would be in town this morning and would like to meet up for lunch if I'm available. I ring the number and agree to a meeting with no further conversation. I'm left wondering what that will be about.

Next, there's a message from Arnie Collins. I call him.

'I know it's not strictly your case, Sammy. But two women were brought in yesterday, and I believe you discovered them?'

'Rita Lea and her mother. I don't know the mother's name.'

'Yes. Well, you have another broken neck to add to your list.'

'Rita Lea!'

'No, Sammy. Rita died from the cumulative overuse of narcotics. I'm still waiting for the test results, but I would guess Cocaine was her particular poison. No, it was her mother. C3/4 clean break. Died instantly.'

Arnie has nothing to add, so I hang up, but this leaves me thinking.

Rita is the only lead Dan had on his baby-killer case, and we found that through a DNA check with some help from the sleaze bag up at Stan's bar.

As far as I know, although Stan gave us a list of possible girls he had banged up, he had no idea where they were, nor did he care. So he was unlikely to have told anyone we had found Rita.

The only other people who knew would have been the Hillsborough police up in Tampa and the halfway house they contacted. But, thinking that through further, until we contacted the Hillsborough office, they knew nothing about the baby-killer case, so it seems unlikely that anyone there had leaked Rita's name.

Which only leaves the halfway house. The halfway house that disagreed with Rita's story about how she left and whether she sold her baby. I'm wondering now whether I don't believe Rita after all.

The last message on my desk is from the officer who previously reported seeing Nadia's lost sister. He's left the same cell number. I call, and a female answers. She asks me to wait a moment while she fetches her husband.

'Detective?'

'Yes, have you seen the missing girl again?'

'Sure did at almost the same place. This time I took a picture before parking, then lost her again.'

I meant to send it before I clocked out, but it's my kid's birthday today, and I left my cell in my locker by mistake, but I'll get it to you first thing in the morning if that's all right?'

'Sure, that's fine. After all, I already know what she looks like. So you enjoy your birthday party. Thanks again.'

Just as I'm trying to decide what to do next, I have a further realization about Zac Scott. I haven't just seen him in Diego Cruz's swimming pool. I've also seen him at the brothel. He was coming out of José Pinho's office at the Casino. He walked straight past me in the corridor outside Tommy Hawk's office. Now that's interesting. Pinho has nothing to do with my *Russian Bride* case or DC Enterprises. So why was Zac Scott there? He's playing an even more complicated role than I've been thinking.

I've already found out what I can from Google about Scott, so I contact the same FBI agent that helped Dan get DNA matches for his dead-baby case. An agent that I've worked a complex trafficking case with before. I call Pat Cataldo in Washington.

When he answers, he's traveling, so he asks that we keep the conversation short and says I can fill him in on details later. That suits me, so I give him Zac Scott's name and ask for anything they have on file. Then, remembering the ME's description of my neck-breaking killer, I ask if he can also get military service records. Pat promises he'll do what he can and ends the call.

Next, I need to catch Dan up on my thoughts about the halfway house, then head out for my lunch with Diego Cruz's wife, Taylor. I'm looking forward to that. She's one of those people that can do that to you.

The Maria D'Anna Cafe is only half a dozen blocks north on Rte 41, and I usually would walk it in less than ten minutes. Today, I take my fully paid-up, new-sounding trusty steed and take longer. My leg's awkward, but thankfully I've injured my left knee, not my right. Not clever, but I about manage the drive.

Taylor Cruz is already there. Usually, most people like to take the small table in the window to watch passers-by or show themselves off, so I'm interested that Taylor has chosen a table at the furthest back corner.

She's wearing a simple one-piece light summer dress in pastel yellow, cinched at the waist, with a thin white leather belt. No jewelry. Virtually no make-up. She doesn't need any. Same as me, only with different results.

She gives a small wave as I enter, just in case I haven't seen the only customer there.

I pull out the chair opposite and sit.

We chat about anything and everything for a little while. I'm prepared to be patient. Whatever she wants from me, it's a big deal for her. Besides, even just passing the time with this woman is enjoyable.

She tells me about how she ran an early morning fitness program for WZVN-TV during the pandemic and how, although she had done that for free; it helped her book sales go through the roof. She had also volunteered at a local food bank three mornings a week. In more recent times, she's working hard to raise attention to the needs of the people most badly affected by the pandemic. Those who could no longer find work or are struggling with medical insurance with their ongoing longer-term conditions, which relate to having caught the virus. She says there are tens of thousands of long-term sufferers in Florida alone. This isn't something I know anything about. She's lobbying at local and State levels, organizing fund-raisers, and still has time to spend with her two young children.

I should have felt insignificant after hearing all this, but she doesn't make me feel like that at all. I feel like I want to sign up and get involved. This is one powerful woman, and I guess I feel privileged to get some one-on-one time with her.

We both agree to have a light lunch and order the soup of the day and salads. Mine is the Chef's daily special. Hers includes a little paté, Kala Channa, and Chia seeds. Me, I stay away from things I don't recognize. I'm a food coward.

The salads arrive before Taylor works up to tell me why we're there. She starts by talking to me about her husband's illness.

'He was first diagnosed almost five years back. They told us then that there was no known cure for Motor Neuron Disease and that we should prepare for a

bumpy ride. At first, it was occasional tremors or a slight loss of grip. Then his speech became a little more difficult, so we started regular speech therapy, which has helped. But it's a progressive illness; whatever we do, it worsens. You saw some of the preparation in our home. We're making a self-contained ground-floor area available for him. He will need a self-flushing toilet and a walk-in shower with handrails and a seat. We've bought a special bed which does everything for him besides sleep.'

I've never really thought about how people have to adapt to living with MND, and I can see how much of a burden this is on Taylor, although she isn't complaining. Then she tells me about the setback.

'Three years ago, he found a Doctor Lin in Beijing, who has founded a new clinic and specializes in treating not only MND but also Parkinson's and ALS. The techniques they are developing are highly experimental and different from patient to patient.'

'That would have been encouraging for your husband?'

'Yes, very. We flew to visit the clinic and met with Doctor Lin himself.'

'Did he offer to help?'

'Initially, he wanted to run lots of tests. But he explained that they were using neural regeneration techniques, which combine stem-cell therapy using both neural and mesenchymal cells, with medication and rehabilitation. It all sounded so positive. Diego became excited.'

'I can imagine. Is the stem-cell implantation process complicated?'

'No. The stem cells are infused directly into the spinal canal, and although sensitive, it's not painful and over quickly.'

'This must have sounded like a miracle to your husband?'

'Yes, it did. But when they got his test results, they said his condition had progressed beyond the point at which their techniques would work.'

'That would have been hard for him to hear?'

'It was hard for both of us, detective. We tried everything to have them change their minds, but they wouldn't take him on as a patient.'

'So, a long journey home?'

'Yes. We came to accept it, or at least I thought we had. Diego resumed his business interests, and we started intense physical therapy. His condition seemed to plateau for a while, but then more recently, it's getting worse. He's not dealing with it so well anymore.'

By this point, I'm already regretting my attitude in my conversations with Diego Cruz. I had no idea what was going on for him in the background. So damned focused on my case.

'So, what do you want from me, Taylor?' I ask.

Whatever she's about to tell me is not easy for her.
I can see her pluck up courage.
'He's become so difficult around the house. He's snappy and argumentative.
He's not like the man I know.'

'Probably understandable with what he's suffering?'

'Yes, but I think he's doing something bad.'

'Bad? What do you mean?'

'I was looking for something in his study yesterday and found a small glass vial in his bureau drawer and a hypodermic kit.'

I think he's injecting himself.'

'If he's taking drugs, Taylor. You can hardly blame him.'

'That's just it. I don't think he is taking drugs. At least not the kind you mean. I think he's trying some kind of miracle cure.'

At this, she reaches down, lifts her handbag from under the table, opens it, and hands me a small glass vial. It's empty.

'I couldn't take the full one. He would miss it, so I searched the garbage until I found this. It's all I can give you.'

I hold it in my open hand, wondering if I should take it.

'If you can find out what this is, I would be grateful. I just need to know what he's doing. That it's safe?'

Decision made. I tell her I'll see what I can find out.

After meeting with Taylor, I sit in my steed thinking about how busy she is. All the volunteering and lobbying. Looking after her husband, making all the changes to their home. All while still raising two young children. My life is hectic, but it's nothing compared to that. So, if she can raise two kids, surely I could find time for one?

But it's one of those cathartic thoughts. It breaks a log jam I didn't even know was there. Suddenly I realize how much I love being a detective. I love having my hectic life and don't want to share it with a child.

Sometimes you can't make tough decisions logically. Life's just too complicated for that to work. This is one of those times. I can't simply weigh the pros and cons and make a balanced decision. I need to leap.

Decision made, I head away from the office towards *Best Care Medical*. Strike while the iron's hot. One termination coming up.

Ten minutes later, I'm impressed with myself. I haven't changed my mind and am now in the car park of *Best Care Medical*. I am ready. Feeling positive, I switch off the ignition and am just about to get out of the car when the clinic's

front door opens, and Zac Scott comes out carrying a small cooler box like the organ transplant people carry. He heads to the right, climbs into his car, and drives off. He hasn't seen me.

What the hell is Zac Scott doing at *Best Care*? And do I want Bossy-boot's life to be extinguished where he's involved? One step forward. Two steps back. I curse under my breath and head to the nearest CVS. I needed more painkillers and time to think.

By eight, I've decided that my knee can transport me as far as my local bar, and Bossy-boots will allow a single Corona. So, I'm sitting at the corner of the bar, mindlessly staring at a TV screen hung high on the wall. I may appear relaxed, but my mind is whirring.

Before returning home, I visited our Forensics lab and left the small glass vial Taylor had given me. When I told the technician the story, he saw an opportunity to be a detective like me. He promised to run some overnight tests and get the results to me the following day.

Regardless of what Taylor said, it would come back as some narcotic or other. It would likely give him some short-term relief, but as was always the case, he would need to take more the next time to get the same comfort, and so on. Addiction is a crappy master.

It would also explain his mood swings, and although I didn't want to say anything to her, they'll probably worsen. I don't envy her position. Or his. I guess I'm feeling more sympathetic to him than I have been. I've been so focused on him being behind some Machiavellian plot that I haven't stopped thinking of what may be happening in his personal life. Still, if I can prove he's doing something illegal, he's going down, and he can take his MND with him.

Thinking about Diego Cruz moves me on to Zac Scott. I have him in the frame for the deaths of the *Findperfectlove* husbands. He's also more than likely the source of the threats the wives have been receiving. He probably has connections in Moscow and is responsible for the death of Alicia's father. That seems like a stretch, but it's a logical stretch. I still can't figure out what he's doing at *Best Care Medical* and what he was carrying when he left.

I spend a few more minutes just letting my mind turn thoughts over and over, but I get nowhere. I then start to wonder why he had been in José Pinho's office. What could the two of them have in common, other than being scumbags? Does he have something to do with child pornography? Seems like another stretch. Is he part of a grand plan to collapse the Brothel? Possible, but I keep asking why? What would be in it for him? But I can't think of anything. I've no idea how to make progress with Zac Scott. I only hope my FBI contact will come through and give me something I can use.

Just then, Bossy boots disturbs me with a sudden demand for food, so I order a small bucket of chicken wings and some iced water, then move over to a table in the corner.

As I wait, it seems like Bossy-boots is talking to me. I feel like I have a little angel on one shoulder and a little devil on the other, and they're arguing about termination. Here, Bossy-boots is the angel, and I'm the devil. It's interesting how my subconscious has automatically appointed Bossy-boots the role of an angel. This isn't a fair fight.

This is the drawn-out logical weighing-up process I've been trying to avoid. I know where it will lead. Stalemate. But it won't just lead to stalemate. It will also lead to indecision. And for anyone who has been down this road, indecision is a decision by another name. I know that sounds insane, but if I can't decide, and sufficient time goes by with me jammed up before you know it, I will have a real Bossy-boots to contend with.

By the time the chicken wings arrive, I'm so confused; both of us have lost our appetites.

I have them bagged and set off for home.

Outside, still distracted, I slip off the sidewalk and stumble awkwardly, twisting my knee. The pain is sudden and severe. I curse loudly, and a couple passing by gives me the eye. I'm not just limping now; I'm limping *and* in excruciating pain. Until then, I'd been convincing myself that the knee was improving, but it isn't. I'm still waiting for the swelling to reduce so I can start physio. I haven't even started the healing process yet. Now I'm worried I've done some further damage.

Usually, the stairs to my apartment would be more uncomfortable than walking on the flat. Not now. My knee is killing me during both. I've always believed that women have a higher pain tolerance than men, so I can't imagine how a man would react now. Probably be on morphine in an ambulance which sounds good to me at that moment.

As I'm slowly limping up the stairs, my body dripping in sweat with the effort, who should be waiting for me but the guy I helped promote to local drug baron - Chico.

'You hurtin' man.'

He's a master of observation.

'Saw you trip. You in serious pain, man.'

'Yeah, Chico. Well spotted.'

He rummages in his pocket, then holds out two small tablets in the palm of his hand.

‘Take your pain away, man.’

‘I don’t do drugs, Chico. And if I weren’t feeling like shit right now, I would lock you up.’

‘Look, man. These are just painkillers. Strong, sure. But just for the pain. You don’t got to take them more’n once. They get you through the night.’

My detective’s voice is telling me to cuff him, but I’m seriously hurting.

I put out my hand, and he drops them in.

‘Swallow dry, man.’

Six am and Alexa chooses ‘Twist and Shout’ to wake me up. Given someone is already playing a drum kit inside my head and my knee has puffed up badly all around the support, she couldn’t have come up with a worse choice.

I tell her to shut up, and the room falls silent. I always think a quiet room is one thing, but a silent one after it’s been noisy is different. I’m sure it’s something to do with your ears or brain or something.

Casting my mind back to the previous evening, I vaguely remember taking the two tablets Chico gave me, but not a lot after that. I must have made it up the remaining stairs and put myself to bed, but I don’t recall that.

I swing my good leg out of bed first, then Mr. Puffy. I have to loosen the straps on my support, and the pain is intense when I do.

After sitting for a while, gathering strength, I hop to the bathroom and do everything I need to do, other than shower. My plan is extra deodorant. My hair deserves better but gets a loose finger comb and shake.

I check the time. My cab isn’t due for thirty minutes, so I raid the fridge, only to find it more or less empty.

I sit on the edge of the bed, sulking. I don’t know how people who suffer constant long-term pain can cope. I’ve only been like this for a few days, but already my nerves are fraying, and I can feel a darkness closing around me.

Giving myself a metaphoric shake, I clip on my badge and Glock. I Wince as I stand but head for the door. It will take me longer to get down the stairs today. So I start early rather than late. I’ll head to EJ’s and cheer myself up with a cooked breakfast.

I’m in the office by eight, drugged to the max with painkillers. I limp quietly past Dan’s cubicle, hoping to get to my desk before he can see my pain. I don’t make it.

‘You need to get that looked at again, Sammy,’ he tells me, catching me up before I can even sit.

‘Soon, Dan. I’ll get on it today.’

The problem with wearing a dress or a skirt is that my knee has nowhere to hide. Even I can see how much worse it is than the day before. So maybe Dan has a point.

I collapse on my chair, expecting Dan to be right behind me, but when I look up, he’s nowhere to be seen. So apparently, I can get on with my day.

I haven’t even powered up my desktop when Dan arrives pushing a wheelchair. He has that look that says he isn’t having any arguments. I don’t give up easily, but my knee is killing me. Between our efforts, we get me settled into the wheelchair, and Dan starts heading for the lift in the extreme corner of the block. I’m stuffed.

NHS Baker is busy when we arrive, but Dan has a word at reception, and in a matter of minutes, a nurse comes and wheels me in for examination. By pure chance, it’s the same doctor who checked me out the first time, so all I have to do is explain I tripped the previous evening and seemed to have made my injury worse.

She examines my knee and orders a repeat of the same quick X-ray.

As we wait, Dan updates me on a phone call he’s had from the Hillsborough detectives looking into the halfway house. They interviewed quite a few staff members while off-duty, without their boss to counsel them. There were sufficient inconsistencies for them to go in and interview everyone, both staff and the women staying there, and they uncovered several scams.

Elle Cussons, the woman who runs the show, turns out to be a groomer. She has files for lots of women in Tallahassee detention and due out over the next twelve months. Most of these are in for drug-related offenses. She’s getting all of this information from someone working in administration in prison. Armed with this information, she’s writing to selected women, depositing cash directly into their accounts, and developing relationships with them, so that when she approaches the authorities on their behalf, they’re keen to accept the halfway house. It’s better than completing their sentence, and she’s already a ‘friend.’

Once these women are in her care, she quickly reconnects them with their drug of choice and puts them to work in bars, strip clubs, massage parlors, or street corners up in Tampa.

As for her helping the unfortunates who become pregnant, she takes them in for free.

She would only put them through a drug withdrawal program while they are

pregnant because she doesn't want the drugs to affect the babies and reduce their sales value.

The babies are sold as soon as they are born, and the mothers are again hooked back on drugs and thrown back out to earn a keep.

This has all been going on for years under the eyes of the Federal authorities, and a major investigation is being started into how this has happened. Dan's sure there were a few backhanders involved. Time will tell.

The operation is closed completely, and the women are being rehoused elsewhere.

Elle Cussons will serve time. A lot of time.

Maybe someone will write her?

The doctor pulls back the curtains around my area and clips two X-rays onto a lightbox on the wall. The first is my original from a few days before. The other is the new one.

She talks, but I'm not listening. I'm groaning, hopefully only inside. I can see the damage the fall has done. Now I have damage to both the medial ligament on the inside and the lateral on the outside, and there's *also* a tear in the anterior cruciate ligament right at the center of the knee joint. By the time I've accepted the news, she's moved on to talk about the next steps, which I think is an odd expression to use.

'Your knee is now unstable for both forward motion and lateral. Your options will be surgery to repair some of the damage, particularly this most recent injury to the anterior cruciate ligament, or the brace you didn't want the last time you were here. The one you have been wearing will be inadequate now. If you want to avoid surgery, you will need a metal caliper.'

How bad can the day get?

She then tells me she'll have me measured up again while I wait and that, in the meantime, she will write up a prescription for some non-steroidal anti-inflammatory meds and a more potent painkiller.

I tell Dan to go; instead, he takes the prescription when it's ready and heads off to the pharmacy. I can only sit and wait. Not a strength of mine.

As I sit there, I wonder about this Elle Cussons woman. On the one hand, she's hooking women on drugs. On the other, she's helping women give them up. What a strange setup.

As I'm thinking it through, a couple of thoughts that Dan hadn't mentioned come to mind. First, to whom did she sell the babies? And were they all sold, or have some ended up in the swampland in Collier State Park?

When Dan returns, he's already carrying a paper cup of water. I open the

paper bag the meds are in and empty two of each into my hand. Two pink, two blue. Gender-neutral meds, what next. The colors make me wonder if they will affect Bossy-boots, but I'm in too much pain to worry about that right then. I swallow all four and drain the cup.

While we wait, I share my thoughts about Elle Cussons with Dan. He's already been thinking he may have found the source of some of his dead babies, but he hadn't thought to ask if the Hillsborough detectives knew who she was selling the babies to. So, he makes a call, and the detective at the other end promises to get back to him.

Two hours later, with me looking like something out of *Transformers*, we exit the hospital, and Dan helps me into his car. Usually, I would have been ready for a fight, but not this time. He takes me home and helps me hobble up the stairs.

In the apartment, he makes us both a coffee while he tells me he has spoken more with his niece, and although she's sad for her two friends, she says they're already back at school but in the care of Child Social Services until their parents can make better arrangements for them after school.

I'm glad when Dan tells me the parents are not in trouble. After all, they'd left their children with their own parents for safekeeping. What could be wrong with that?

When Dan eventually leaves, it's only just after mid-day, but I'm dog-tired. So sleep is just what I need.

That's when my cell buzzes. It's Pat Cataldo from the FBI Washington office. He's been looking into Zac Scott's military history for me.

'Hi, Sammy. You're due me big time the next time we get together. I've had to pull a favor over in the DoD even to be told this information. Then I had to plead with the Secretary of State herself to gain access. She isn't happy, but I got it. I'll send the full file to you, but let me give you the highlights.'

Isn't it funny how your pain disappears when you concentrate on something else, and at that moment, Cataldo has one hundred percent of my attention.

'Interesting guy you've flagged. He spent five years in Helmand Province with the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines. It was a bloody time in Afghanistan. They lost twenty-five marines with over a hundred-eighty wounded in one battle in Sangin. When he left afterward, he was due to receive a bad conduct discharge, but he avoided that due to serious pressure from on-high. He was going to be given the OTHC - other than honorable conditions, discharge. Still, he refused to accept that, and would you believe the powers-to-be allowed him out of the service with a general discharge with full benefits.'

‘So, friends in high places?’

‘Not exactly friends, Sammy. More like protected species.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘Your guy was a *fixer*. You wanted something. He could fix it for you. Like in the second world war where GI’s wanted nylons to pull the women in France and Britain.’

‘Zac Scott was providing nylons?’

‘No. He was providing something much more precious and expensive. He was providing young children.’

‘Children?’

‘Local village kids were disappearing. He was selling them to the Afghan warlords.’

‘That explains why he would be given a dishonorable discharge, but why an honorable one?’

‘The Warlords weren’t the only ones he was supplying.’

‘Not...?’

‘Senior American and British commanders.’

‘Fuck. Are you kidding? How did they get away with that?’

‘War, Sammy. Chaos, death, and destruction all around. The fine line between life and death. It happens.’

‘So, they bailed him out to protect the higher-ups.’

‘That’s it. So now you know.’

‘That’s great, Pat. At last, I think I’m getting a handle on the mysterious Zac Scott.’

‘Stay safe, Sammy. You’ve got your eyes on a nasty character there.’

At that, he ends the call, and I sit back to reassess my opinion of Zac Scott. If he can do what Cataldo told me, he could snap a few innocent necks. I’m also interested that he has a history of dealing with children, and that helps provide a clue to another piece of the puzzle. His connection with José Pinho at the brothel.

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The following morning I'm awake and out of bed before Alexa can choose the first track of the day. The swelling around my knee has gone down. Either the anti-inflammatories are kicking in, or having replaced my caliper with the neoprene support overnight, has helped. Either way, I'm feeling a little better and more positive. Also, thanks for the insights I now have on Zac Scott.

Apart from attaching my new mechanical knee, my morning routine is as usual. But before leaving, I try the bones one more time. My parents go through this routine every day. It means a lot to them, and I feel obliged to continue the tradition. There are so many others falling by the wayside. It seems a small thing to do. But still, I can't see it lasting.

I roll them out and read them as Papa taught me. They tell me an end is in sight. End of what, I wonder? And that's where I lose faith. The readings are so vague they're virtually meaningless, like horoscopes or tea-leaf readings. Anyway, I've done my duty. I pack them back in their box and head for the office. My cab will be waiting downstairs.

Checking my cell on the way in, there's a message from the Forensics technician about the vial given to me by Taylor Cruz. He wants to see me. There being fewer flights of stairs involved, I head there first thing.

'Wow,' is his opening gambit on seeing the new metalized me.

'It's designer, so you can't afford it. It's only for detectives,' I grimace. 'You got a seat around here?'

The technician, Ray something-or-other, shows me into their break room and offers me some fresh coffee, which I gratefully accept.

'So, you have some news for me?'

'Sure have, detective. I've run all the tests I could on the remaining contents of your vial and have come up with a surprising result. It contained Adrenochrome.'

'Adreno... what?'

'Adrenochrome. It's a natural hormone produced by the Pineal gland in the human body. It's often called *Pink Adrenaline* because of its color.'

'What does it do?'

‘It’s a precursor for adrenaline, secreted by the body in large quantities during intense fear, anger or perceived life-threatening danger.’

‘Isn’t that what adrenaline is?’

‘Yes, but the body produces this even quicker. It optimizes the adrenaline response of muscles and nerves while protecting the body’s tissues and organs from the rigors of the adrenaline rush.’

‘So, is it speeding up or slowing down the effects of adrenalin?’

‘Both. It’s an optimizer to get a maximum response and a buffer to protect against damage.’

‘And that’s what was in the glass vial?’

‘Yes. But there’s more. The medical and scientific communities have known about it for decades but have not reported it widely because of how it can be used, combined with how it must be produced?’

‘How is it used?’

‘People believe it has restorative qualities and can help regenerate human tissue, nerve responsivity, and cognitive function. People have known this as far back as the Pharos.’

‘So if it’s a natural product, why is making it being kept on the down-low?’

‘Both the regenerative strength and the destructive side-effects relate to the producer’s age. The older the person, the less effective and more destructive it is.’

‘So, the younger the person?’

‘Got it in one, detective. The younger the person, the more effective the regenerative power is, with fewer damaging side effects. Babies, therefore, are the best suppliers.’

‘Babies?’

‘Yes, but to produce it, they must be terrified or afraid for their lives.’

I don’t wait to hear if Ray has anything else to add.

I head up to the Detective’s Bureau as fast as my caliper will allow.

Dan isn’t there. I sit and call him on my cell. He’s on the way in and will be there in ten minutes. I decide I can wait and settle into looking through some emails.

As I scan down the content of my inbox, I see most are routine, but there’s one that’s from an unrecognized address, and I usually wouldn’t even hover over it, but the subject is *painkillers*.

My heart skips a beat as I click, and a jpeg opens up to fill the screen. It’s a picture of me taking the tablets from Chico in my stairwell the previous evening. Fuck. I close it down and read the accompanying message. ‘*You’re mine now,*

Detective.'

The little shit-head has set me up. No way he is getting one over on me, but right then, I don't have a plan. But I will have.

At that moment, Dan arrives and comes straight into my office. I run through my meeting with Taylor Cruz, her giving me the vial and the technician's discovery.

Much as I did, he sits back to let everything sink in. I'm not sure where his mind is going, but I know about mine.

Sure enough, he doesn't go to the same place as me.

'That fits with the Elle Cussons halfway house. She's a factory for unwanted babies. We need an answer from Hillsborough about who she was selling them to.'

I'm about to go into my theory when the phone rings, and I answer it. It's Jerry in Narc's.

'Sammy, we talked with as many girls as we could on the street, but none of them would tell us who had taken them over. However, they did confirm that they now get to keep all their income and that someone will look after them if they get pregnant. Your source is right. There's a new kind of pimp in town.'

'Thanks, Jerry.'

'One thing they told us that might be useful. They've all been given a cell with one number pre-programmed to contact their new savior. Maybe I can get it for you.'

'If you get it, will you send it over?'

Dan has overheard our conversation, so I needn't update him. He points out that this could be another baby factory. Street girls having accidents, getting paid to complete their pregnancy and then for the baby.

Listening to this explanation, I think I'm beginning to understand what José Pinho may have been doing at Tommy Hawk's brothel. He was trying to break it up. It was affecting street trade and cutting the production of the baby factory. And that thought takes me back to Zac Scott.

I run through the FBI's call from the previous night with Dan.

Zac Scott is suddenly becoming more than just a man of interest. But we need to get our ducks lined up. So we head for the conference room. Dan's speed has picked up, mine just the opposite.

We have most of the pieces, but we're unsure what actual proof we have. We also agree that we're working on different aspects of the same case, and both trails lead back to Diego Cruz and DC Associates. Our minds are working fast

and furious now. Dan calls Hillsborough and asks if they are any closer to identifying who the babies were being delivered to and is told that Elle Cussons is holding out for a deal with the District Attorney.

Dan decides that it's important enough to go for a deal, so he leaves to call the DA up in Hillsborough personally.

That makes me realize that I haven't spoken to Cliff since he paid for my car. It's funny how my mind works. I could have said since he decided he didn't want to be a father or didn't want our relationship to get off on what might be too tricky a starting point. But, no. I thought about him paying for my garage charges.

Not only have I not thought about Cliff, but I haven't been paying much attention to Bossy-boots either, especially since the close escape at *Best Care Medical*.

That switches me back onto the case. *Best Care* is part of DC Enterprises in the Cayman Isles. I've also seen Zac Scott coming out of there with a cool box. Could that have been the Adrenochrome vials? I think I just figured out who is buying Elle Cussons unwanted babies. And I bet I know whose number will be programmed into the burners given to local street girls. But I've still no proof of anything.

Stumped for the moment, I go back to my cubicle to check for messages, but there are none.

So I spend time wondering what I should do with the picture of me taking drugs.

As I think about it, I scroll further down and find a message I've been waiting for but have forgotten about. It's from the patrol officer who had seen Nadia's younger sister downtown. There's a jpeg attached, and I click to open it.

No doubt in my mind. This is the girl we had put out the BOLO on, but she's dyed her hair red, and I realize I've seen her before. She'd been holding a baby and opened the door at Zac Scott's apartment. Fuck. I'd missed recognizing her. This is Nadia's sister, Ola. She's living with Zac Scott.

Desperate to tell Dan, I'm frustrated. He's still deep in conversation trying to explain to the DA up in Tampa why Elle Cusson's evidence could be so important. I can't disturb him. So I call for a cab and swallow a couple of painkillers. Scott's place is only fifteen minutes away. I can be there in thirty.

I'm halfway there when my cell buzzes, and I answer it to find Nadia shouting hysterically at me on the other end.

'She's here, detective. She's here!'

'You're sister?'

‘Yes, Ola. You need to come. She’s terrified of someone, but I can’t understand what she’s saying.’

‘Okay, Nadia. Stay with her. Try to calm her down. Lock your doors. I can be with you in thirty minutes.’

It’s times like this when you need to be functioning at your best. But, unfortunately, Bossy-boots must have missed that memo.

I ask the cabby to pull over while I climb straight-legged out of the rear of the cab and chuck up at the verge. I have God-awful stomach cramps, but I can’t do anything about that. I can only tough it out.

Twenty minutes later, my cab arrives at Nadia's home, and I immediately know something's wrong. The front door is half-open. I ask the cabby to wait and do what I should have done fifteen minutes before. Call for backup.

I should wait. I know that. But I can't. I take out my Glock and am vaguely aware of how ridiculous I must look limping with one metal leg, vomit down the front of my skirt with a Glock held unsteadily ahead of me.

I reach the door and shout that I'm armed and coming in. Gently, I ease the front door open with my metal leg and peer inside. I can see Nadia on the floor at the far side of the lounge. Slowly, not that I can do it any other way, I clear room by room before I check on her. It would do nobody any good if I'm killed for not taking care. I fear the worst for Nadia. A C3/4 break is my guess.

When I eventually get to her, I feel her pulse. It's strong and regular, and I breathe a sigh of relief. I've grown attached to my little group of widows, particularly Nadia.

I call for an ambulance, make her comfortable, and sit down to wait.

My backup is the first to arrive, and I have them check around the outside of the house, then go canvas the neighbors to see if they've seen anything.

I'm still waiting with Nadia when she slowly comes around. I insist she stays down on the floor but help her sit up and lean against the side of the sofa. She asks about her sister, and I tell her she was gone before I arrived.

Then she tells me what happened.

Ola arrived at her door unannounced with a small child in her arms. She explained that when she suddenly went missing in Russia six months before, she lied about her age and joined the Findperfectlove site, hoping to follow and surprise her sister. She hadn't expected that she would meet someone almost immediately who would sweep her off her feet. He visited Moscow twice, the second time returning with Ola on a fiancée visa. At first, all was fine, other than he said he didn't want her to talk with her sister until they were married.

She was confused about this, but waiting for a little didn't seem important. Time went by until her ninety-day visa ran out. The man she was with said he could fix it, but now she mustn't tell anyone where she was. Definitely not her sister. Until her longer-term visa was approved.

Then she found out he wasn't the businessman he claimed to be, but a pimp with dozens of girls working for him, and she ended up becoming one of them, although a special one. She lived with him at his apartment, with her own bedroom. They ate together and went out together until she eventually became his girlfriend and stopped working the streets. From there on, she became his lead-bitch who managed his herd. She had never seen herself doing it, but she found she was good at it. Her months on the street helped her understand the games the girls would play, the money they would conceal, and their dependency on drugs.

She broke the rules once and called Nadia, which I already knew about. But besides missing her sister, she settled down to her new life in the Florida sunshine. Until the police discovered the babies' bodies in Collier State Park, as she watched on television, she said she was shocked, but her boyfriend wasn't. He almost didn't seem to care, making her wary of him.

Then one day, she fell and badly damaged her wrist. It was painful, and she called to tell him. He came to her rescue and took her to the hospital, but not before she discovered a baby crying in the trunk of his car.

'How did he explain that?'

'He said he was looking after it for a few days for one of the herd. She had a difficult birth and needed a rest.'

'And she was okay with that?'

'Yeah. She's been looking after the baby since and had it with her today. She avoided him taking it away and discretely checked with the herd where the baby came from.'

'Let me guess. Nobody knew?'

'That's right. She became suspicious and was becoming protective. Finally, he said the child had to go, but she pleaded to keep it a little longer.'

'And he let her?'

'Until today.'

'What happened that made her come here?'

'Yesterday, he left his filing cabinet unlocked when he was out. Something he had never done before.'

'What did she find?'

'Lots of files with women's names on them. Mine was one. She read it and realized that my husband was being set up. She just wasn't sure what for. It looked like some kind of financial scam.'

'What did she do next?'

'She put everything back and googled my husband's name.'

'And found out he was dead?'

‘Yes. Then she went back to the cabinet, made a list of half a dozen other women, and looked them up.’

‘Same thing?’

‘Four dead, two as yet are still alive.’

‘So what did she think?’

‘That she was living with some kind of killer. She hadn’t figured out why he had the baby she was looking after.’

‘So, today. She bundled the little one up and came here?’

‘But as soon as I called you, I didn’t even reach the door to lock it. Her boyfriend arrived and kicked it down. Ola was terrified, but he was gentle with her and the child. I’m not a psychologist, but I can tell you she’s become involved in one strange relationship.’

‘What happened to you?’

‘I tried to use a vase to knock him out while he was trying to calm her down, but he saw me coming and hit me on the side of the head. I think it was just a reaction. I don’t think he meant to hurt me. I went down and don’t remember a thing until I wakened up just now with you here.’

‘So, you don’t know where they’ve gone?’

At that point, two female paramedics arrive and ease me to one side. I don’t object. I already have everything I’m going to get from Nadia. I stagger outside and hobble to the patrol car and use their radio. I call in Zac Scott’s name and as best a description as possible and ask for a BOLO to go out on him. I ask for his car registration to be checked and the details added. He won’t get far. I also arrange for the joiner to come and repair the front door. Thanks to me, the guy’s business is booming these days.

I pay off the cab that’s still patiently waiting and hitch a ride back downtown in the patrol car, trying to assimilate all the extra information collected since last night. The back of the ride stinks of sweat and piss. I’m just getting a handle on putting everything together when my cell rings, and I answer to find Taylor Cruz almost apoplectic on the other end.

‘He’s lost it, detective!’ she’s screaming. ‘He’s locked himself in the study and taken my youngest daughter in with him. I don’t know what he’s doing, but I hear her cry. I don’t know what to do?’

‘Try to calm down, Taylor. Is your other daughter safe?’

‘Yes, she’s here with me but scared.’

‘Take her somewhere safe. Somewhere where she can’t hear what’s going on in the study. Stay with her. I’ll be there as soon as I can. Fifteen minutes tops.’

The siren and the light bar go on. We'll be there in less than fifteen for sure. I call Dan and tell him what's going on. He says that the DA up in Hillsborough has agreed to a deal for Elle Cussons, and she has named Zac Scott as the guy she was selling the babies to. Dan says he's already heading to Scott's place but will turn around and head for the Cruz home. It sounds like Taylor Cruz needs help, and he might be able to get there before me. I tell him about the BOLO I've just issued, and we agree that there's time enough to pick up Zac Scott.

Siren and light bar leading the way, we race up the driveway at the front of Cruz's home. There's no sign of Dan as we screech to a halt. But, the black BMW and Taylor's small red Mazda are there, as is the black jeep with bull-bars I've seen before. I check the number with the BOLO alert. It's Zac Scott's. Nadia's sister and the baby are nowhere to be seen.

In my rush, I trip, getting out of the back of the patrol SUV, and while my brace prevents further damage, it doesn't stop excruciating pain from shooting up my leg.

I lay still for a moment, allowing the pain to subside, before accepting the hands offered by the two officers to get back onto my feet.

Gritting my teeth, I send one round towards the rear of the property and ask the other to follow me in. Only when I get to the foot of the wide marble stairs do I realize the ridiculousness of asking him to follow me, so I tell him to go ahead and assess the situation while I maneuver my way up the stairs. There are only a dozen stairs, but I'm soaked in sweat when I reach the top.

I can hear Taylor screaming as she had been when she called me, and the officer is trying to calm her down and figure out what's happening. I hobble through the open doorway and see Nadia's sister standing behind Taylor. Her face is ashen. She's clearly in shock.

When Taylor sees me, she pushes the officer aside and rushes toward me.

'He's still inside. I don't know what he's doing?'

'Where are the girls?'

'Laila is with her nanny in the kitchen, but Jayla is still in the study with Diego.'

'And Zac Scott's in there?'

'Yes. He arrived after I called you, and Diego let him in, then locked the door again. What are they doing, Detective? And why has he taken Jayla in with him?'

'Did Scott have a baby with him?'

At the mention of the baby, Nadia's sister looks at me as if seeing me for the first time. I would kick myself if I weren't already in enough pain. I really

should have recognized Nadia when I visited Scott's apartment. The change of hair color is no excuse.

Taylor nods in answer to my question and waits for an explanation I don't have time to give her. Besides, what would I say? Between Scott and your husband, they have murdered twenty people or more, including innocent babies? I don't think so. So instead, I ask her if there's another way into the study, but I already know the answer from when she met me there on my last visit. It surprises her she hadn't thought of it herself, and she points to the left. I tell her to take Nadia's sister, wait in the kitchen, and then tell the officer to stay where he is in case someone comes out. I tell him to assume either man will be dangerous.

I hear another car pull up in the drive, but I can't wait, so I follow Taylor's directions and circumvent the study coming to a second entrance from the rear of the house.

Glock drawn, I try listening for a moment, but the wooden doors are solid, and I can't make out anything other than raised voices. I try the handle. It turns silently. Suddenly, I can hear what's being said.

Cruz is standing at his desk, shouting at Scott, telling him he's too late and that he's squandered too much Adrenochrome on their clients. That he had been told to bring him more.

Scott is holding a baby out in front of him, arguing that he needs one more day to process the child. That everything will be okay.

I can't see Jayla.

But I could see what Taylor had been telling me. Diego is losing it big time. Suddenly, he opens the top drawer of his bureau, pulls out a Glock not dissimilar to the one I'm holding, and points it at Scott.

I kick open the door, which isn't clever, given the state of my knee.

Although my Glock's out in front of me, the sudden pain in my knee distracts me for a fraction of a second.

Cruz turns the gun in my direction, and I fire, only half-focussed because of the pain.

I haven't seen Jayla because he's been holding her to his chest with his back to me. When he turns and I fire, the bullet travels straight through Jayla and hits Cruz in center-body mass. On the range, we're taught to aim center mass. This would count as an excellent shot. But there shouldn't be a child in the way.

Everything seems to slow down and happen in slow motion. Cruz falls backward, knocking over his swivel chair. Jayla falls silently to the ground and lies unmoving. I stand stock-still, only vaguely aware of Scott rushing forward

with the baby in one arm and bending to check on Jayla.

I lose time. I'm in some other place, and then suddenly, I'm not. Zac Scott has closed the distance between us, knocked the Glock from my hand, and spun me around. I can feel his powerful arm around my throat, but I don't care. I'm going to die. That's all I deserve. It seems right.

A distant crash echoes in my ears. I don't know what it is and don't care. Then a shot rings out, and the pressure around my throat slowly subsides before falling away as Zac Scott slides to the floor. I look to see Dan holster his sidearm and walk toward me. When he reaches out his arms, I collapse into them, sobbing uncontrollably.

I'm still there when Taylor Cruz rushes into the room and sees her daughter on the floor. Screaming, she runs towards her and cradles her child as she lies on the floor. She doesn't know I'm responsible right then, but her grief tears my insides out. Dan guides me out of the room, but I fight him, determined to say how sorry I am.

The words won't come.

I watch her cry and sink lower into a place I never knew existed.

A week has passed, or so I'm told. I don't know. There have been critical-incidence and officer-shooting reports by in-house investigators and non-department independent members of the DA's office. I'm told I must meet with a psychologist, but as yet have stalled successfully. I'm on what they call garden leave. I've no idea why. I don't have a garden, but that's what they call it. Dan's been great, or at least he's tried to be. I just can't let anyone in for now. Cliff has called a dozen times. He even turned up at my apartment, but I pretended to be out.

I haven't spoken to Taylor Cruz. I should, but it's hard enough to get out of bed right now. I wouldn't know what to say, but I know I must try at some point. Not yet.

Dan has spent a lot of time with me, talking through the cases we just closed and piecing everything together. Then, finally, we figure most of it out.

Cruz was running a financial scam. Scott was his heavy. They used the legitimate Findperfectlove website to check out wealthy men with no heirs. Allowed them to get settled and marry, then waited until the wife received her green card and would become the undisputed beneficiary of his estate. Scott then used a combination of blackmail and scare tactics to shut the wives up while he killed their husbands.

Cruz took over their estate management and fleeced them good and proper while leaving them with a home and a trust fund to keep them quiet.

The District Attorney has appointed someone to oversee a repatriation plan for all those affected by Diego Cruz's fraudulent activities.

Tony Chisholm at Findperfectlove was unaware of how his site was being used. I'm pleased about that.

Zac Scott was behind the removal of pimps in the area and was paying for the street girls to deliver full-term babies and hand them over to him. He was also doing the same with Elle Cussons halfway house, and clients who used *Best Care Medical* went to full-term, then changed their minds. These people were told the babies would go to suitable homes. Cash payments ensured their silence.

Scott was responsible for all the dead babies in Collier County Park. Dan discovered a more recent arrangement between *Best Care Medical* and a local crematorium where they would dispose of damaged babies' bodies for two hundred bucks. I ask you. Two hundred dollars to cover up the atrocities Scott had been putting these innocents through.

Diego Cruz had been using his high-level contacts at County and State levels and in Washington to sell the Adrenochrome to the filthy-rich across all walks of society. Pricks who could spend a hundred grand on wrinkle cream. The records in his office revealed over a hundred attorneys, politicians, wealthy private individuals, and even a supreme court judge who were paying for his *Pink Adrenaline*. The FBI is having a field day mopping them up. There will be years of trials and massive attorney fees for the lucky.

When the Beijing clinic turned down Cruz for MND treatment, he started using his own product. At first, he convinced himself it was helping, but as with any addictive narcotic, he needed more each time or to use it more often. This eventually brought him into conflict with Scott, who was earning six-figure sums from wealthy clients for one vial.

Although we couldn't prove it, we reckoned that Zac Scott was behind the hit-and-runs, including my own. He was trying to break the legal brothel's stranglehold on his street business. So, my *Russian Bride* case and Dan's *Dead Baby* case end up the same. We also presumed they would never find the two missing women from the brothel.

Dan tells me that Jayla's memorial service is in two days. I know this, but my brain has nowhere to store the information. It's like trying to fit in a piece from the wrong jigsaw. No one is talking about a service for Diego Cruz or Zac Scott.

For me, I sit at home looking at my shield. My knee still throbs. It's too early to start physiotherapy. I don't think I'm ready for the psych help either. I may never be. I don't have time for shrinks. The department still has my Glock. That adds to my pain. I feel naked without it.

I still have decisions to make, and Bossy-boots has finally worked to the top of the list. Nothing else matters now.

Addendum

Adrenochrome - true or false?

True: The Pineal gland creates such a substance in the Human body. It is a chemical compound known to modern science since the 1930s, with the formula C9H9NO3. It prepares the mind and body for the surge of adrenalin.

Unknown: To harvest the Adrenochrome, blood must be collected quickly from the pineal gland. Adrenochrome is mainly produced when the human body is abused or tortured. It is strongest in younger people, children, and babies. It has been considered the fountain of youth by many civilizations over thousands of years and, more recently, allegedly used by the Uber wealthy.

Trafficking and child pornography in Florida

They rank the United States as one of the worst countries in the world for human trafficking, where about 200,000 incidents happen yearly.

Florida has the third highest reporting of human trafficking in the National Human Trafficking Hotline in the United States.

Many people assume most trafficking victims in the U.S. are undocumented immigrants. But, in reality, most domestic trafficking victims are U.S. citizens, and most trafficked children are also US citizens.

Children living with their married biological parents place them at the lowest risk for child abuse and neglect. However, living with a single parent increases the risk of abuse and neglect to over eight times that of other children because of dependence on others for child care.

In 2018 there were 36,795 reported cases of child abuse in Florida alone.

There is at least one known case in Florida where a grandmother encouraged

abuse of her granddaughter.

The typical age for child trafficking in Florida is 12/13. Children are often transported as short a distance as fifty miles before being resettled and repeatedly abused for cash.

The average ‘buyer’ for an underage girl is a white male earning over \$100k.

On average, there are thirty-five thousand underage children runaways annually in Florida. Unfortunately, many of these end up being trafficked or abused.

Grooming - facts

The grooming of women in prison is a fact. They are written to, made friends with, and even sent money to make life inside more comfortable and to create a debt-bondage. Then, when they are released, these new friends lead them into drugs and prostitution and then force them into trafficking to satisfy their debt bondage.

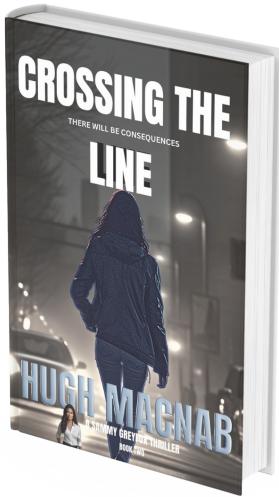
HUGH MACNAB



I hope you enjoyed reading Russian Brides.

Sammy Greyfox's journey takes a dramatic turn at the end of Russian Brides, leaving her with a pivotal decision - what to do about Bossy Boots?

Read the series' second book, *Crossing the Line*, to discover what Sammy decides.



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In her first case, after nine months of recovering from her involvement in the fatal shooting, Sammy is tasked with finding the killer of a Narcotics detective.

During the investigation, she must decide whether an addict who has abandoned her children and is now a Dominatrix is the killer or also a victim.

This case will have her rush headlong into danger in a race against time to prevent the death of someone she loves.

To encourage you to keep following Sammy's adventures, I'd like to offer you a **special discount of...FIFTY PERCENT** of *Crossing the Line*. To get this, use discount code **CTL50** at my store.

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If you would like to watch the trailer, click here.

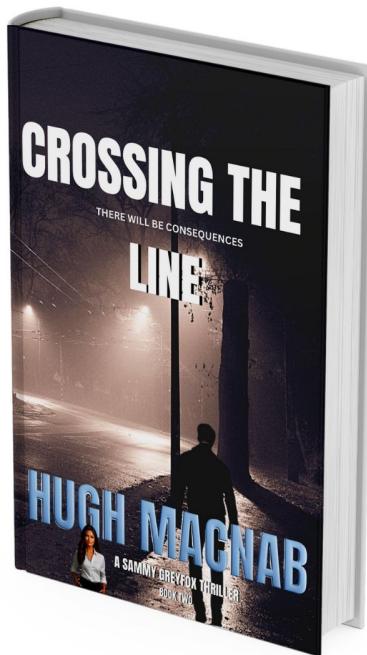
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Enjoy

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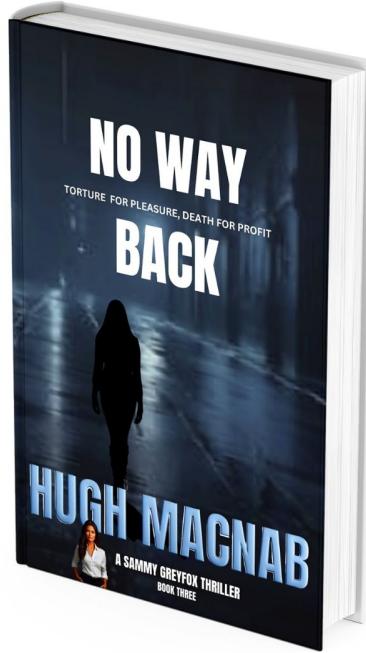
More Sammy Greyfox Thrillers

Atlee Pine, Renée Ballard, Lindsay Boxer, and now Sammy Greyfox



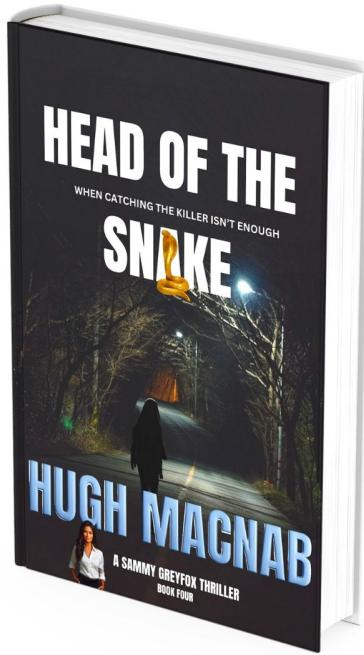
Crossing the Line

*How old must you be to become a serial killer?
A spine-chilling race to a shocking climax.*



No way back

When a private detective is killed, Sammy must not only solve the case, but race against time to save someone she loves from a painful death.



Head of the snake

A strange case that even the combined skills of Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot would struggle to solve.



Lost Souls

*Sammy travels the length and breadth of the country
seeking twelve lost souls.
Some she will save. Some she will not.*

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