A POLICEMAN’S ANGEL

A Novel by  
 James P Lynch

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There's a proverb attributed to the Buddha:  
  
‘Whatever precious jewel there is in the heavenly worlds,  
  
there is nothing comparable to one who is awakened.’

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CHAPTER 1

An Undercover Operation

The Restaurant

The hot summer breeze wafted around Officer Mac Merrick as he stepped out of his Tesla at the corner of Randolph and Green Street. His Apple Watch showed it was 12:05 a.m., Tuesday, June 19, 2060. This area of Chicago, known as Restaurant Row, buzzed with activity even at this late hour. Mac strolled briskly toward his destination, Bar Etna, a popular Italian restaurant.

Passing the center of Randolph Street, Mac glanced behind him for his undercover partner, DiOtis Williams. *Where is he parked?* *Oh, there he is—two or three spots from the intersection.*

In a nondescript 2055 Ford Phazer electric car, DiOtis sat with his windows down and lights off. A well-liked African American cop from the 9th Precinct, DiOtis wore his hair in dreadlocks—a style that helped him blend seamlessly with the local hoi polloi.

Undercover operations had grown hellishly dangerous since the Russians introduced a small black-market device that detected FBI and police wire transmitters. The days of a police van with officers listening to every word and squad cars ready to pounce at the first sign of trouble were long gone.

A graduate magna cum laude with a BS in Criminal Justice from St. Joseph’s University in Philadelphia, Mac was tall, handsome, and ambitious. He’d quickly risen from rookie status to the prestigious FBI-Chicago Joint Task Force on Organized Crime. The task force focused on the Albanian mob, recently resurrected after a 20-year absence.

The Albanian Shqiptare (loosely pronounced "sh-kip-tare") are the most violent mob on the planet; everyone fears crossing them, making snitches rare. Mac’s informant, known as Johnny Sniffles for his habit of snorting crushed Adderall tablets, reported that an Albanian named Besim was a regular at Bar Etna on Tuesdays and could supply any recreational drug you’d need. Mac’s mission was to set up a drug buy to gather intelligence on the secretive crime syndicate.

Mac had never been to Bar Etna. His sister Ronnie had recommended the bomboloni, an Italian hole-less donut with a squeeze bottle for the filling. Entering the restaurant, he found only one empty table. Scooting into a chair, Mac waited for a server to notice him. An auburn-haired waitress in jeans and a black Bar Etna T-shirt approached.

“Do you know what you want?”

“How about a Bud Light and a couple of bomboloni?”

“What fillings do you fancy?”

“What’s your favorite?”

“Well, I like vanilla crème custard and strawberry myself.”

“Sounds good; I’ll have those.”

The waitress twirled and headed to the kitchen to place the order. Slumping back in his chair, Mac could hear occasional cheering from the second floor.

She sashayed back with his order, smiling as she set down the Bud Light, the bomboloni, and two squeeze bottles.

“I’ve never tried these before.”

“Just jam the tip of the squeeze bottle into the donut’s side and squirt in the filling.”

She placed the bill on his table. “That’ll be $41.75. Pay me when you’re ready.”

“Let me pay you now; keep the change.”

Mac pulled four twenties from his pocket and handed them to her. Her eyes sparkled as she took the bills.

“Wow, thanks! I’ll be keeping an eye out for you next time you’re here.”

“Is there a fellow named Besim here? I hear he frequents this place on Tuesday evenings.”

“Do you mean Besim, the soccer fanatic who always wears an Arsenal T-shirt? He’s upstairs watching the game.”

“Yeah, that’s the guy. I’ve never met him, but I want to talk to him.”

“Don’t know him personally, but I know who he is. I’ve got one more table to serve, then I’ll go upstairs and tell him there’s a gentleman on the first floor who’d like to chat. That’ll give you time to enjoy the bomboloni and beer. You okay with that?”

“Anytime,” Mac said, flashing a boyish grin.

He checked his polo shirt. Two of the three buttons were FBI recording devices, each equipped with a high-resolution camera and a sensitive microphone. At Precinct 9, Mac had confirmed both devices were operational."

Halfway through his second bomboloni, Mac noticed the red-haired waitress ascending the stairs to the second floor. *Okay, it’s showtime*, he thought, mentally reviewing the practiced spiel the task force had agreed upon. After descending, she headed toward him.

“I told him you wished to speak, and he said he’ll come down shortly.”

Minutes later, Mac watched two men descend the stairs.

Meet the Mobsters

The first man was about six feet tall, clean-shaven, with black hair. The second was shorter, with black hair and a five o’clock shadow goatee, wearing a red Arsenal T-shirt. Mac assumed this was Besim. They scanned the front tables as they reached the bottom of the staircase, then strode quickly to his table.

“I am Besim. You wanted to speak to me?”

“Yes, have a seat.”

The men slid into the two empty chairs and stared at him, unsmiling.

“Who are you?” Besim said.

“I’m Randall Conover. I work for a public relations firm, Oxten Communications.”

Mac handed Besim a business card and glanced at the taller man, who watched suspiciously.

“And you are?”

“Is not important.”

*So, he’s the silent partner*, Mac thought.

“Look, this is new for me, asking about such a thing. My company is a subcontractor for a Fortune 200 firm—which will remain secret, you understand. The CEO of this company is a billionaire many times over. He likes to throw rowdy parties and is looking for a source of recreational materials, but he doesn’t want to run afoul of the police.”

Besim leaned forward, elbows on the table, hands clasped. He tilted his head slightly and stared at Mac for several uncomfortable seconds.

“What made you think we have anything to do with this? We’re legitimate businessmen.”

“I asked around.”

“You did? Asked who?”

Mac improvised. “I chatted up quite a few people at local bars. I got your name from a guy who called himself Skeeter. He said you might help and that you’re always here Tuesdays for the Arsenal matches on cable sports.”

Besim laughed, his eyes brightening for a moment.

“Let’s say, Mr. Conover, that we could help you. What kind of recreational supplies are you looking for?”

“Some good-quality cocaine. None of the harder stuff like rocks, blues, or China White. The billionaire doesn’t want overdoses in his mansion.”

“The blend known as China White—cocaine mixed with fentanyl—provides an incredible high. Our distribution system is very careful in combining ingredients; an accidental overdose would mean losing a customer, something we wish to avoid at all costs.”

“I know, I know, but I’m under specific orders—just good-quality cocaine, that’s it.”

“Okay, we do that. Anything else?”

“Yes, there is. Our client wants a supply of roofies.”

Besim chuckled and glanced at his companion. “These must be some wild parties.”

Mac pressed on with his practiced, fictional pitch.

“The billionaire has a fetish, I hear. He likes to rape the wives of his executives. After drugging them, he puts the male executive in one bedroom to sleep it off while he does his thing with the inebriated spouse. Films it, I’m told.”

“How many entertainment supplies are we talking about?”

“Well, he has bi-monthly parties, thirty to sixty people.”

“We sell nearly pure cocaine, cut only fifteen percent. An eight-ball will do four people, so maybe you need fifteen eight-balls.”

“How much does that cost?”

“Eight-balls are $275, so fifteen would cost you over four thousand.”

“How about the Roofies?”

“Roofies are five dollars a tablet. Our supply is white, easy to crush, and dissolves clear in the bitch’s drink—they never know. I can supply a bottle of fifty for $250.”

“Sounds good,” Mac said, thinking *this was going better than planned.*

“What’s next?”

“We go upstairs, call the boss, and see if he’s okay with this. Then we’ll come down and let you know.”

Minutes passed. Mac watched a tall man in a black windbreaker descend the stairs. Middle-aged, with oily black hair streaked with gray and a five o’clock shadow mustache and goatee, he exited and walked west on Randolph Street, away from DiOtis.

As more time elapsed, Mac debated whether this was going too smoothly. He’d expected resistance, requiring multiple meetings to seal a deal. His goal tonight was simply to put out a feeler.

Eventually, the two men descended and approached him. The silent mobster, now in a black leather jacket, carried a gym bag.

“Okay,” Besim said. “What you’re asking for is a substantial arrangement, so the boss wants to talk to you. We’ll meet about a block from here. All is good. Come with us, Mr. Conover.”

They exited the restaurant and walked north on Green Street.

“Where are we going?”

“A construction site just up the street. The boss can pull in there.”

Mac grew suspicious as they moved out of DiOtis’ line of sight. About five hundred feet from Bar Etna, they reached a double-wide driveway leading to an empty construction site. No streetlights illuminated the area; only dim moonlight allowed Mac to scan the surroundings. A ten-foot-high chain-link fence enclosed the site. Construction workers had scraped the ground clean, and a backhoe sat forlornly in the far corner. They stopped by an industrial dumpster—a shadowy form in the moonlight—next to several stacks of wooden pallets.

“We wait here,” Besim said. “The boss will text me as he approaches. Relax; everything’s good.”

Murder

As DiOtis watched Mac and the two Albanians exit the restaurant and head north on Green Street, his side of Randolph Street was dark. He didn’t see Yilka Kartallozi approach.

Yilka, one of the most vicious Kryetars—or underbosses—of the Albanian mob, preferred the garrote to kill his victims, but this situation demanded stealth and speed. When his Tesla RoboTaxi arrived, Yilka drew a Sig Sauer handgun with an optic sight and custom silencer from his jacket. Coldly efficient, he moved quietly toward Officer Williams’ car. Placing the red dot on DiOtis’ temple, he fired. The silencer and passing traffic muffled the shot; no one across the street noticed. The hollow-point bullet ended Williams’ life instantaneously. Blood splashed the side door as his body slumped into the passenger seat. Yilka dashed to his RoboTaxi, hopped in, and sent a text to Besim as the car sped away, a smile on his face.

Two minutes passed, and Mac began to worry. The plan was for DiOtis to follow slowly, but there was no sign of him. Besim’s phone beeped with a text message. Simultaneously, a Tesla RoboTaxi pulled up to the driveway but didn’t enter.

“Why is that Tesla empty? You said your boss was coming.”

“Not today, Officer Mackenzie Merrick,” Besim said.

Simultaneously, the other mobster, wearing brass knuckles, landed a sucker punch on Mac’s jaw. Mac fell face-first into the dirt, unconscious. As he lay there, the two men kicked his head and ribs, then clipped metal handcuffs on his wrists behind his back. When Mac awoke, pain radiated from his jaw and ribs, leaving him at their mercy. The mobsters lifted him to his knees. The taller man reached into his gym bag and pulled out a Glock 50 pistol with a silencer.

“My name is Luan. The text Besim received says your partner, Officer DiOtis Williams, is dead. Now it’s your turn. You fucked with the wrong people, so you’re going on a trip to see Jesus.”

“Are you crazy? Killing two police officers in one night will start a war. The FBI and the entire Chicago PD will descend on you.”

“Are you begging for your life, Officer Merrick?”

“Hell no. Yeah, maybe my life ends here, but at least I lived it dedicated to saving people. You bastards kill our children and poison this city with your goddamn drugs.”

“Brave words, Officer Merrick, but your Chicago Police Department is about to learn an important lesson: never interfere with Albanian business.”

Luan raised the weapon to Mac’s forehead. Mac steadied himself and met Luan’s gaze, eye to eye.

The Angel

Hiding behind the dumpster, a young woman sprinted toward Luan. Wielding a handheld Avenger stun gun, she pressed its electric arc against the back of his neck. Mac saw Luan’s eyes widen as his face contorted in a piercing scream. She turned sideways, smashing her elbow into his nose and breaking it. With a sweep kick, she knocked him onto his back. As he fell, she snatched his gun and tossed it into the dumpster. To Mac, her movements were like a ballet on fast-forward—every action delivered with elegant swiftness.

Besim reached into his pocket and pulled out an Italian folding knife. Flipping it open, he charged at her. She aimed a small DemonFyre pepper spray canister at his eyes, dousing them with blinding, painful green gel.

“Jesus, you fucking bitch!”

His eyes snapped shut, and she took swift advantage. Stepping forward, she delivered a soccer kick to his groin. He howled and staggered toward her. Grabbing his shoulders, she smashed her knee into his chin. As Besim slumped to his knees, she pirouetted like a dancer and kicked him in the jaw. Mac watched Besim fall face-first, unconscious. She picked up his knife and flung it into the dumpster.

Seeing Luan rise to one knee, she deftly sprayed him with the same blinding treatment. As his eyes closed, she landed a spinning roundhouse kick to his head. Mac heard the sharp thwack in the moonlit night as Luan fell forward, landing awkwardly on his side.

Reaching into her hoodie pockets, she pulled out twenty-seven-inch industrial zip ties. She slipped one around Luan’s ankles, pulled it tight, and used another to bind his wrists. Dashing to Besim, she secured his wrists and ankles with more zip ties; she wasn’t gentle about it.

Mac watched her rummage through Luan’s gym bag. Finding the handcuff keys, she walked behind him and unsnapped the shackles. They dropped to the ground with a clinking sound. Standing in front of him, she extended her hand to help him up. Surprised by her strength, Mac rose unsteadily. Facing her, he saw her flash a smile as she released his hand. He could hear her heavy breathing, like a track star crossing the finish line.

For the first time, Mac studied her closely. In the dim moonlight, she was strikingly beautiful, with a fashion model’s face, full lips, and long blond hair pulled back in a ponytail. Trained to notice details, Mac pegged her at five feet eleven. She wore a black hoodie, jeans, and expensive running shoes. Her belt held a leather holster securing her stun gun and pepper spray.

“I owe you my life. What’s your name?”

In the quiet of the empty construction yard, with her labored breathing the only sound, she gazed into his eyes. Over the years, Mac had honed an exceptional ability to read faces. He felt she knew him, cared for him.

*Who is she?* Mac wondered, staring into her mesmerizing face. He sensed her weighing her options, but suddenly she turned and bolted toward the dumpster.

“No, come back! I need you! You’re a witness!”

Despite his plea, it was to no avail. Mac watched as she scrambled up the pallet stacks and leaped to the dumpster’s edge. Squatting, she sprang for the top pipe of the chain-link fence, grasped it with both hands, and vaulted up and over like an Olympic gymnast.

She was gone, vanishing into the hot Chicago night.

CHAPTER 2

Crime Scene Investigation

Officer Down

Mac fished out his burner smartphone and called the police dispatcher. Several agonizing seconds elapsed before the dispatcher answered.  
“This is the dispatcher,” she said.  
"Ten one, ten one! Officer down, I say again, officer down, at the intersection of Randolph and Green Street, across from the Bar Etna restaurant."  
"Who is calling?"  
"This is Officer Mac Merrick. The officer down is DiOtis Williams. Send EMT units as quickly as you can!"  
There was a cascade of beeps and buzzing. Mac heard her call out.  
"All units in Precinct 12. Officer down at the intersection of Randolph and Green Street. The officer is DiOtis Williams. All units respond. Any nearby EMT unit, please respond."  
Mac could hear multiple police sirens starting up from every direction.  
"Officer Merrick, are you OK?"  
"I'm a little shaken, but I have two suspects in custody. I need backup!"  
"Where are you located?"  
Mac shook his head to try to clear the dizziness. He checked Besim and Luan; they were starting to regain consciousness.  
"I'm in an empty construction site five hundred feet north on Green Street, on the east side. We were working an undercover op. I'm not armed."  
The dispatcher came on again.  
"All units in Precinct 12. Assist Officer Merrick in securing two suspects. Empty construction site five hundred feet north on Green Street from Randolph, east side."  
Mac could hear more sirens approaching, echoing off the buildings. The two assassins were now conscious and struggling against their restraints. A patrol car pulled up behind the motionless Tesla. The passenger-side officer got out and yelled, "Officer Merrick, where are you?"  
"Over here."  
Both officers ran up with flashlights.  
"Can you prove who you are?"  
"No, we were working undercover. Since I arranged a meeting with these two perps, I had to go without ID in case they searched me. Call dispatch and have them send you a photograph."  
Two more police cars stopped on Green Street. Now, six cops surrounded Mac with guns drawn. One officer was on the phone with dispatch; his facial ID verified Mac’s identity.  
"OK, this is Officer Merrick. Are you hurt?"  
"Got walloped in the jaw so hard I saw stars. Now I'm dizzy. Have I got a shiner?"  
"Sure do; we'll call EMT to have a look at you."  
"By the way, call me Mac. Shackle these bastards; they tried to kill me. Oh, I haven’t given them their Miranda rights."  
Stumbling over to the two Albanians, Mac identified them.  
"I only have their first names. This one is Besim. That guy is Luan; he’s the one who tried to kill me."  
The officers made quick work of properly restraining them, using stainless steel handcuffs and leg restraints. They lifted them to their feet. Both men had pink gel on their faces, contusions, bloody noses, and a couple of shiners to boot. As the officers read their Miranda rights, another police vehicle stopped in the street, lights flashing but no siren.  
The officer who stepped out was Mac’s boss, Commander Ryan DiMarco, head of the Gang Investigation Unit for the Chicago PD. DiMarco is 52 years old, with a receding hairline, and in good shape for his age. He headed straight for Mac.  
"Mac, are you all right?"  
"Just dizzy, Commander. Any news about DiOtis?"  
"Not yet. There are a lot of vehicles up there. I saw an EMT unit near the light. What happened?"  
Mac took a deep breath before answering.  
"We were set up, Commander. They lured me to this construction site and sucker-punched me with brass knuckles. After I woke up, they had me on my knees, handcuffed. Luan, the one on the left, pointed a Glock pistol at my forehead and said he was going to kill me. Ryan, they knew my name; they knew DiOtis’ name. They knew everything about us!"  
"How did you survive? How did you take them down?"  
"I didn’t; I was helpless. She took them out."  
"She? What the hell are you talking about?"  
"A young woman came out of nowhere, Commander. She hit Luan with a stun gun, right on his neck. She zapped him long enough to make him drop the Glock-15, which she threw into the dumpster. The other guy, Besim, unfolded a switchblade and charged her."  
Mac stopped to catch his breath.  
"How did she stop him?"  
"He didn’t get close to her. She pulled out a pepper spray weapon and doused both of his eyes. In seconds, his eyes closed, and she had him. She knocked him out cold.  
“I’ve never seen anyone fight like her. It was like watching a kung fu movie; her every move was quick, balanced, and lethal.”  
Three officers stood behind DiMarco, fascinated by Mac’s story. One of them asked, "What happened next?"  
"She went through Luan’s gym bag, found the handcuff keys, unlocked my cuffs, and helped me to my feet. I told her I owed her my life. I asked her name. She just stared at me, saying nothing, then ran away."  
“What did she look like?" DiMarco asked.  
"She was tall, five-eleven, slim, and very athletic, with long blond hair. Her face was beautiful, even in the moonlight. She looked like…" Mac paused to collect his thoughts. "She looked like an angel.”  
"I’d like to meet this angel," DiMarco said. "Me too," added one of the officers.  
DiMarco’s phone pinged, and he put it to his ear.  
"Yeah, I’m here with Merrick. He’s OK, just banged up a bit."  
Commander DiMarco stopped talking, his face turning utterly pale as he exhaled deeply.  
"I understand. I’ll tell Mac. What, he’s coming in his car? No, no, don’t let his brother see that; keep him away from the scene. You heard me; don’t let him see what happened. OK, I’ll get Merrick transported to the Rush University emergency room. Bye."  
DiMarco turned to look at Mac.  
"Mac, I’m sorry. Your partner is dead. They hit him with a hollow-point bullet. There was nothing the EMTs could do. He was dead on arrival."  
Mac’s eyes watered, tears washing down his cheek. He struggled to speak.  
"DiOtis is dead? Oh, God, no. It should have been me."  
His legs buckled, and Commander DiMarco quickly enveloped him in his arms, raising him back to his feet.  
An EMT van pulled up on Green Street, and two emergency medical technicians rushed over with their equipment bags.  
"Is this Officer Merrick?"  
"Yes," DiMarco said. "I just told him about Officer Williams."  
"Let’s get him seated on the ground," one of them said as they went about their work. They quickly took his vitals.  
"Commander, he’s in no immediate danger, but he has evidence of a concussion and several bruised ribs. I recommend transport to an ER right away."  
"Take him to the Rush University Emergency Department."  
As the EMTs ran to fetch their gurney, DiMarco knelt to talk to Mac.  
"Mac, we’re sending you to Rush. They’ll take good care of you. Is there anyone you want me to call?"  
"Don’t let my dad hear about this on the morning news."  
"I’ll call him, Mac. I’ve always liked your dad. You know that."  
An FBI vehicle pulled up, adding to the traffic jam on Green Street. Special Agents Gabriel Marecki and Elisha Simmons ran up to them.  
"Mac is OK,” Commander DiMarco said, “but he’s had a concussion. The bastards used brass knuckles on him. We’re sending him to Rush University right away."  
"We just heard about Officer Williams," Agent Marecki said. "Speaking for all of the FBI in Chicago, we’re gutted by this, Ryan."  
Agent Simmons knelt beside Mac and clasped his hand as the EMTs rolled the gurney toward them. Simmons is African American with an exceptionally clear complexion and chin-length straightened black hair. She’d received her master’s degree in criminal justice from the University of Mississippi (Ole Miss). Her lovely Southern accent garners instant attention from the cosmopolitan residents of Chicago.  
"Let us take care of y’all tonight, Mac. Y’think the cameras got damaged?"  
"I don’t think so, Elisha. It all happened in the moonlight; maybe there’s not much to see."  
"Let me get that polo shirt off ya. You’d be amazed at what the Lab Division in Quantico can do with these button cameras."  
After removing his polo shirt, Elisha left Mac’s undershirt in place. The EMTs began strapping Mac to their gurney.  
"Commander, one more thing," Mac said. "She threw the gun and the knife into the dumpster."  
"Who’s he talking about, Ryan?" Agent Marecki asked.  
"Apparently, some young woman intervened and saved Mac’s life. She ran away, saying nothing."  
As the EMT technicians started to roll Mac to their vehicle, all the police rushed to form a single-file line to clasp Mac’s hand and encourage him.

Mac's Parents

John Merrick had been asleep for three hours when his iPhone beeped. The display indicated that Ryan DiMarco was calling. Having dealt with Commander DiMarco on many occasions, John’s heart rate and breathing quantum-jumped; he knew what a call like this meant in the middle of the night.  
"Hello, this is John Merrick."  
"John, this is Commander DiMarco of the Chicago Police. I want to say first that Mac is OK, but we’ve transported him to the ER for concussion treatment. His partner was killed tonight, but I can’t say anything else because it’s an ongoing investigation."  
Anne Merrick sat up in bed, placing her hand on John’s shoulder.  
"Oh my God, is it Mac?"  
John snapped his head around. "He’s OK; they’ve sent him to the ER for a concussion. What hospital did you send him to, Ryan?"  
"The Rush University Emergency Department."  
"OK, Anne and I will chopper to our downtown law offices and take a company vehicle to the hospital. Thanks for the heads-up, Ryan, and let me say how disheartened we are about losing one of our officers. Bye for now."  
"Fly and drive safely tonight, John. Goodbye."  
"Should we call Ben and Ronnie?" Anne asked as she hurriedly put on jeans and a light blue blouse.  
"This time of night? I say no. They both get up at 6:00 a.m.; we’ll call them from the hospital."  
John and Anne live in a $16 million mansion in Highland Park, north of the Chicago Loop. Thirty years ago, they acquired the three-story home as part of a court settlement against a client who defaulted on his debt to their law firm. Located on a bluff overlooking Lake Michigan, the Merricks improved the property as their law firm prospered.  
They dashed toward the helicopter pad and climbed into the firm’s Sikorsky S-98 executive chopper. Anne set about connecting her harness and finding her headphones. She felt completely safe flying with her husband, a former Marine helicopter pilot from the Central African Republic War. As the rotor blades started spinning up, Anne took a deep breath, unsure of what they would encounter at the hospital.

Lewis Morton

The phone also rang at Lewis Morton’s home in North Riverside.  
"This is Morton."  
"Doctor Morton, this is Valmir from the night crew. Tonight’s operation has hit a snag."  
Lewis used his thumb and middle finger to sweep the sleep from his eyes, glancing at the other side of his bed and feeling instantly thankful that he had sent the escort home at 11 p.m.  
"OK, what have you got?"  
"The undercover officer, DiOtis Williams, was killed, and Kartallozi got away on a succession of Autotaxi rides; he’s home safe now. However, the Chicago Police captured Besim and Luan, and their target, undercover Officer Mackenzie Merrick, is alive and at Rush University ER."  
"Jesus!" Morton said. "Any idea how this happened? Our information was that Merrick would be unarmed."  
"Not sure, but chatter on the police channels suggests a citizen intervened on behalf of Officer Merrick. They don’t know who this person is."  
"Alright, increase surveillance of all police text messages and phone calls. See if you can spot anything happening on police cameras in the area. One more thing—find out where they’re taking Besim and Luan. I’ll inform the Boss."  
"On it, Doctor Morton."

Moral qualms in his head lasted only a few seconds as he descended the stairs. He knew he was involved with the wrong people, but it was too late. He might be a genius criminal, but he was still a criminal. And tonight, he was an accessory to murder—and it wasn’t the first time. It had all started so innocently, so long ago.

Lewis Morton was a computer science sophomore at the University of Chicago when he met Imer Bisha in a social studies class. Imer, pronounced "eee-mare," was studying business administration. Assigned together as a two-person team to write a term paper on the effectiveness of modern social media platforms in influencing public opinion, they were a perfect match. Imer’s two years of classes and street education in business harmonized well with Lewis’s genius-level understanding of computerized systems.  
Lewis visited Imer’s apartment for the first time on a Friday afternoon. He was surprised at how clean it was—not the usual Animal House pigsty like most off-campus housing units. They worked until 7 p.m. that first Friday night, making real progress. Imer made a phone call, and Grubhub showed up with food. While eating dinner, Lewis asked about Imer’s background.  
"Tell me about your family."  
Imer stiffened, his face a cold stare. He was quiet for several uncomfortable seconds.  
"I have one brother. My mother died from ovarian cancer eighteen years ago. The Feds incarcerated my father for life at Big Sandy Prison in Kentucky on a federal RICO charge. An aunt raised us."  
"How do you pay for this apartment, your tuition? Do you have a scholarship?"  
"My father was head of a crime family, Lewis. In this case, the Albanian crime syndicate. When the government jailed my father, they took care of us. It’s as simple as that; it’s all about loyalty."  
Lewis shifted uneasily in his chair, thinking *Jesus, am I in the company of Michael Corleone here?*  
"What are your plans after college? Are you planning to enter the family business?"  
"They want me to, but I think drugs, prostitution, and protection rackets are so last century. The world is different now; corporations have all the money. It’d be better to pick their pockets than those of a bunch of desperate junkies."  
"I’ll admit," Lewis said, "I’ve thought about that too. Suppose a company had vast supercomputer resources and enough staff willing to break the law. In that case, it might be possible to infiltrate the computer systems of the largest and most technically adept corporations."  
"To do what?"  
"To penetrate and modify a subway turnstile system, for example. When the customer waves his cash card, siphon off every thirtieth transaction. To do this, you’d have to reprogram their turnstile machines. All the maintenance manuals are available if you penetrate their computer systems. One could apply these tactics to electric car chargers, gas pumps—lots of things."  
Imer brightened up a bit.  
"Do you think you could do this stuff?"  
"Not now. I’d need to pursue a Ph.D. in computer science—get into a program deep into computer security, like McMaster University in Canada."  
"Lewis, it’s Friday night. There are no classes tomorrow. Why not stay the night? I’ve got a lovely guest bedroom."  
"Sure, why not? Let me call my folks."  
As Lewis talked to his parents, Imer was on the phone with someone else. An hour later, there was a knock at the door. Imer ushered two women into the living room. Lewis jumped up, shocked at how stunningly beautiful they were. One was Asian, tall and slim, with black hair flowing past her shoulders. The other looked European, shorter and more voluptuous, with chin-length blond hair.  
Imer put his arm around the Asian woman.  
"Lewis, meet Yuki. She’s mine this evening."  
He pointed to the blond.  
"This is Lenka. She’s yours for the night. Lenka, this is Lewis, a friend of mine from college. I want you to show him a good time. You can take him to the guest bedroom."  
The blond smiled and took Lewis’s hand.  
"Deeze way, Lewis," she said in a slightly Slavic accent.  
Astounded, he followed her to the guest bedroom in the back. Lenka turned on the table lamp since the sun had gone down. After closing the drapes, she approached him.  
"You done deeze before? Are you virgin?"  
"Hell no, I’m not a virgin. I’ve had sex two or three times. I don’t get this. Are you one of Imer’s friends?"  
"Uh, no. I do deeze for a living."  
"You’re a hooker?"  
"No, Lewis. I escort. I usually charge $5,000 per night. Imer pay full price, so maybe we make the most of it?"  
"Well, who are you, actually?"  
"My name is Lenka Petrakova. I moved here from Croatia. No worries—I use a personal STD monitor every day. I have a subcutaneous birth control device. My sex is good; you will like. I do anything you want, as many times as you like. Would you like me to undress?"  
"Absolutely."  
At that moment, Lewis realized, biblically speaking, that he had just taken a bite of the apple.

Dr. Morton, dressed only in his boxer shorts and a robe, made his way to his first-floor home office. He picked up his iPhone and dialed Imer Bisha. Lendina Bisha answered the phone.

Lendina Bisha

"Working late tonight, Lewis?"  
"Ah, Lendina. What are you doing up at this hour?"  
"I’ve been working on an accounting project. Do you want me to wake up Imer?"  
"Unfortunately, yes."  
Lendina switched the phone to speaker mode and rose to rouse her husband. She walked to his bed, sat on the edge, and tugged at Imer’s shoulder.  
"Imer, it’s Lewis. He needs to speak to you."  
Imer Bisha rubbed his eyes and slowly sat up. Lendina held the phone in her lap and pointed it toward her husband.  
"OK, Lewis. What’s up?"  
"Houston, we have a problem."  
"What have you got?"  
"Last night’s operation was a clusterfuck. The Chicago Police arrested Besim and your brother Luan. Their primary target, Officer Mackenzie Merrick, is alive and in the hospital with a concussion. The secondary target, Officer Williams, is dead, and Yilka got away successfully."  
"Jesus Christ on toast, Lewis! Do we know what happened? Our information was that Merrick was going into the restaurant unarmed."  
"There was a report of a citizen intervening. Merrick arrived without his shirt, so it’s fair to assume the FBI has his button cameras."  
"Where did they take Luan?"  
"He and Besim were both taken to the University of Illinois ER. The Chicago Police will transfer them to District 12 headquarters when discharged. Although, with the FBI involved, you never know."  
"We’ve lost control of this. Cancel the two ops to plant drugs and money in their private cars."  
"Are you sure, Imer? The whole idea was to make it look like these were two dirty cops who got involved with organized crime."  
"They didn’t get their just due, did they? I’ll take care of Officer Merrick later. Now we’re in cleanup mode; we need our lawyers. Not your gray-suit corporate attorneys, but our criminal law guys."  
"Says here that Sipelli and Meyers are both at a legal conference at the Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island. They leave tomorrow afternoon."  
"OK, contact them at 7 a.m. and tell them to leave immediately."  
"Imer, you shouldn’t go to the hospital. The cops will never let you get close to Luan anyway. You don’t want to raise suspicion; it would jeopardize our operation."  
"Agreed. Bye for now."

The Hospital

It was 3:15 a.m. when the Merricks’ Tesla Zephyr pulled up to the Rush University Hospital Complex, one of Chicago’s most stunning architectural buildings. The emergency room department was on the first floor. Entering the ER quickly, they encountered a staff nurse.  
"Where is Officer Merrick? We’re his parents."  
"Oh, he’s in room 42 over there," she said, pointing toward the room. "We just returned him from an MRI scan. The Chief Resident, Dr. Modi, is reading it and will be down soon."  
"Is he OK?" Anne asked.  
"He’s had a devastating experience tonight with blunt force trauma to his head and ribs and losing his partner. He’s awake, but I must warn you—he’s a bit discouraged. He’s under police guard, so you’ll have to identify yourselves. Follow me. I’ll take you to him."  
As they approached Mac’s room, the two policemen rose from their chairs and faced them.  
"Sorry, folks, but we’re restricting this room to only hospital staff and family."  
"Officer, we’re John and Anne Merrick, Officer Merrick’s parents," John said.  
"You’ll have to identify yourselves."  
John and Anne retrieved their driver’s licenses and handed them to the guards.  
"OK, this looks good to me. Mrs. Merrick, would you open your handbag for me?"  
She complied, and the officers stepped aside to allow them into the room. Mac was sitting upright in a hospital gown, propping himself up by resting his right elbow on the bed’s guardrail. His fingers were on his temple, his eyes were wet, and a single tear slithered down his cheek. His left eye was swollen and had a big shiner around it. Anne was the first to rush up and envelop him in her arms.  
"Mac, are you all right?"  
"I should be dead, Mom. It should have been me. Why did I live, and DiOtis die?"  
John Merrick pulled a chair to the other side of the bed and spoke softly.  
"Son, my helicopter was brought down by an RPG in the Central African Republic War. We hit the ground hard, and the blade fragments ignited the fuel tank. I was able to unbuckle and stumble away from the wreck, but my co-pilot didn’t make it. To this day, I ask myself the same question. Why me?"  
"What happened?" Anne asked.  
"We were on a simple undercover mission, making a feeler to the Albanian mob to set up a potential drug buy."  
"I thought the Chicago Police eliminated the Albanian mob twenty years ago."  
"I guess they’re like Jason Voorhees, Dad. They keep coming back."  
"Go on, Son."  
"I had gotten info from a snitch that a guy who might be one of them frequents Bar Etna on Randolph. DiOtis was backup in a car across the street. The two guys lured me to a nearby construction site. They sucker-punched me, and I woke up on my knees, handcuffed behind my back. He told me that DiOtis was dead, and now it was my turn. He pointed a handgun at my forehead, and I knew I was going to die."  
"How did you survive?"  
"She saved me, Mom. She saved me."  
"She?" John said. "I don’t understand."  
"A woman came up from behind and went after the shooter like a raging tiger. I’ve never seen anyone fight so efficiently, so effectively as her. She took them both down and freed me. I told her that I owed her my life and asked her name. She said nothing and ran away. Mom and Dad, she was like an angel."  
"I’d like to meet this angel," John said.  
"Me too, Mac. Me too," Anne said as Doctor Modi entered the room with a nurse and an orderly.  
"These are my parents, Dr. Modi."  
"Oh, hello, Mr. and Mrs. Merrick. Glad you’re here. My examination indicates that Mac has several blunt-force trauma injuries. It looks like a brass knuckle punch to his jaw and multiple kicks to his head and ribs. While the MRI scan shows the effects of a minor concussion, there’s no swelling of the brain and no evidence of a cracked skull. In any case, I’m admitting Mac to the hospital, and these orderlies are here to transfer him to a new bed before going up. We’ll want to keep Mac here until Thursday morning. I’ve transferred his file to the attending on the top floor."  
"Doctor Modi, Anne and I are benefactors of this hospital. I want him in the best room you have."  
"I’m very aware of that, Mr. Merrick. Mac will be in a single room facing Lake Michigan. We try to treat all our patients equally here, but we are sensitive to the needs of our policemen, who protect us too."  
"Doctor, I must get to get to Officer Williams’ family. I can’t wait until Thursday."  
"Mac, do what the doctor says," Anne said. "I’ll get you to Officer Williams’ family Thursday morning."  
A nurse and orderly rolled a mobile hospital bed beside Mac and started the patient transfer.

CHAPTER 3

Who Was the Good Samaritan

FBI Meeting

The Rush University Medical Center released Mac early at 8 a.m. on Thursday, and Anne Merrick drove him to the Williams family home. It was a tearful affair with a steady stream of visitors. The Superintendent of Police, Javion Green, and his First Deputy Superintendent, Linda Shannon, visited in the morning to offer their condolences. Mac chatted with DiOtis's brother, Andres, who was now doubly determined to find out who killed DiOtis. Andres, also a Chicago policeman, was a former Army Ranger with combat experience in several African dustups, and was the best rifle shot in his division.

During his visit to the Williams residence, Mac received a phone call from D'Marcus Mason, the Special Agent in Charge of the Chicago Field Office. Mason asked if Mac felt well enough to attend a briefing at FBI Headquarters at noon. A Chicago police cruiser transported Mac to the FBI building on West Roosevelt Road. As Mac was checking through security at the guard gate, David Hanko, the Assistant Special Agent in Charge, approached him.

"Mac, are you up for this? You look pretty beat up."

"I'm OK, Dave. Who's at the meeting?"

"Just about everybody," Dave said as they entered the building and headed for the secure conference room. Mac counted twenty people seated around the table.

"Everyone, this is Officer Mackenzie Merrick of the Chicago Police," Hanko said.

Mac took a seat next to Commander DiMarco. The meeting opened with Chicago’s Superintendent of Police, Javion Green, speaking first. Green, an African American, is 58 years old with a slightly receding hairline, completely gray, and clipped short. The entire police force respects him due to his honesty and ability to follow through on promises he made.

"Let me say first that we are both a police force and a family. I visited Officer Williams's family home this morning. I assured his brother, Andres, that no stone would be unturned, no lead not followed, and no expense avoided to find and bringing to justice these killers. Officer DiOtis Williams comes from a three-generation Chicago Police family, and we will never forget his sacrifice."

Superintendent Green pounded the table with his hand to emphasize his point.

"I have placed Officer Andres Williams on administrative leave for two weeks to allow him to grieve and help his family through the upcoming funeral. I'm also transferring him to the Joint FBI-Chicago Task Force on Organized Crime per his request. Officer Merrick, I can also offer you administrative leave. Still, I hope you will help us immediately solve this crime."

"Sir, I'd like to get back to work right now."

"Done, Mac. Now, to start this meeting, will you detail the Tuesday, June 19th events for the assemblage?"

Mac explained the operation was just a feeler in hopes of getting a meeting with one of the Albanians. He was critical of himself, not being more suspicious that the man coming down the stairs first might be one of them. He also faulted himself for not being wary that the meeting was going just a little bit too well, that they suckered him into walking alone with them.

Everyone in the conference room stopped fidgeting when Mac described the construction site ambush. Helpless, watching a person point a powerful gun with a sound suppressor at his head, Mac knew that his life would end in a matter of seconds. He described how his reaction to imminent death was not by thinking, one last time, about family, friends, and such. Instead, Mac decided to stare into his killer's face, not to give him the satisfaction of showing fear. He wanted his last moment to show the courage and determination with which he had lived his life.

Mac then described his rescuer. How quickly she neutralized Luan and Besim and bound their hands and feet. He recounted how she freed him and then ran off.

"Mac, do you know her? Any chance y'all've met before?" Special Agent Elisha Simmons said.

"No, Elisha. I would have remembered a face as beautiful as hers. I've never seen her before. I'm sure of that."

Superintendent Green resumed control of the meeting.

"Special Agent Mason, Mac was wearing two FBI button cameras, and you sent their data to the FBI Crime Labs in Quantico. What have you got for us?"

D’Marcus Mason is the Special Agent in Charge of the Chicago region. Imposingly tall at 6 ft, 4 inches, Mason is a 52-year-old African American with a shaved head and a closely cropped salt and pepper goatee. He always looks suspicious and is sparse with his words.

"The crime lab retrieved data from both button cameras. We got a surprisingly good image of the woman's face. Our electronics specialist, Pietrina Cerrone, has an image on her FBI satellite phone. She will pass it to each of you, have a look, and then return it to her. The Bureau will not release this picture to the Chicago PD because we don't want a leak or an anonymous mole tip off the Albanian mob about her."

Pietrina handed her satellite phone to the person beside her, and everybody passed it around the table. Mac's heart lurched when he looked again at her image, the face of his angel. After the last person had a look and returned it to Pietrina, she connected her FBI laptop computer to the 72-inch high-resolution monitor on the wall.

"I'm going to run the incident on Tuesday night until the ambulance crew transports Officer Merrick to the hospital,” Pietrina said. “The Quantico Lab has purposively blurred the woman's face so as not to give her away. Still, we feel this is enough for the three prosecutors here to indict the perps for numerous felonies. Pietrina started the first video, and the image, cleaned up and brightened, was alarming and fascinating. As the video showed her taking down the two mobsters, Mac could hear one attendee whisper, "God Almighty."

"Special Agent Mason, tell us what you learned," Green said.

"OK, about that woman who saved Mac's life. We ran her face and fingerprints through all federal, state, commercial, and Interpol databases. It came up jack squat, nothing, no file on her at all. Maybe she is an angel.

“One other tidbit about this angel girl: DNA analysis of the pepper spray she used indicated that it was DemonFyre. This is a special formulation manufactured solely for the Department of Homeland Security. How she procured it is a mystery.

“The two perps who tried to assassinate Mac are, and I know you are aware of this, Luan Bisha and Besim Morina. Luan Bisha is the son of Kreshnik Bisha, the former Chicago mob boss currently serving a life sentence with no parole at Big Sandy in Kentucky. His two sons were eleven and fourteen when their father was incarcerated. An aunt raised both boys after their mother died of cancer in 2038. We know that the older one, Imer, attended the University of Chicago and went on to get an MBA. He is a co-owner of Chicago Cyber Engineering out near Hines. They do lucrative software development for the BSNF railroad and other big clients."

"So, are you guys saying that we've arrested the mob boss here?" Superintendent Green said.

Special Agent Mason leaned forward, and laid his hands flat on the table.

"I wouldn't make that assumption, and I don't think you should either."

Green looked at the prosecutors at the end of the table.

"Ms. Amanda Varian, what do you think of our evidence so far?"

Amanda Varian is 45 years old and one of the most experienced prosecutors in Illinois. Elegantly dressed in a business suit and starched blouse, she wears her long mahogany hair French braided in the back and secured with a silver clip.

"A bail hearing is scheduled for 4 p.m. today. With this video provided by the FBI, it should be a slam dunk getting bail denied. I will ask for a closed hearing to protect the woman who intervened. Where are Bisha and Morina currently incarcerated?"

"At Precinct 12 headquarters," Green said.

"OK, we should transfer them to something more secure, like the Cook County Correctional Facility."

"Amanda," Green said, "I'd like to hear your take on all you've seen and heard here. You've got better intuition than most of us."

"All right. We have not caught the killer. He got away, and Commander DiMarco told me that the two perps were saying nothing, resisting all forms of police interrogation. The men who attempted to kill Officer Merrick are in serious legal trouble. That statement from the video, ‘Officer DiOtis Williams is dead. Now it's your turn,’ is proof positive of being part of a conspiracy to murder a policeman. If robbers kill a shopkeeper, we make the getaway driver face life in prison.

"That woman, Mac's angel, isn't a good Samaritan who saved someone from murder. She knew in advance what they were going to do. That woman came prepared: stun gun, pepper spray, advanced fighting techniques, and a supply of industrial zip ties. The question is: is she one of them, possibly disgruntled? Or is she, more likely, someone they hurt.

“My last observation is this: that woman knows more about them than any of us."

"Javion, I would have every right to take over this investigation since it involved a joint FBI-Chicago PD operation,” Special Agent Mason said. “However, I have high confidence in Commander DiMarco and the Chicago Police force. Let's let him continue, and the FBI will provide priority assistance when needed. I will transfer Agents Marecki, Simmons, Whelan, and technical support staff member Cerrone to District 9 headquarters. Let's get these bastards."

As the meeting broke up, Amanda Varian approached Mac.

"Mac, would you like me to brief your dad? We go back a long way. It would be strictly confidential."

"I'd appreciate that, Amanda."

“Consider it done, Mac. We must hurry over to the bond hearing at 4 p.m. We have more than enough evidence to ask for a denial of bail. We’ll get these murderers, Mac.”

A uniformed officer tapped Mac on his shoulder and said, "I'm your ride home, Mac. Come with me."

She Leaves a Note

"That's quite a crash pad," said the officer who drove Mac up to the entrance of The Grant Park Tower, the luxury condo at 1204 South Prairie Avenue.

"Yes, that's the benefit or curse of being born rich. Guess you know one of my secrets. Thanks for the ride."

Mac looked up at the massive 54-story luxury condominium as the patrol car drove away. Built 30 years ago, the apartments in this building are among Chicago's most spectacular digs. He has a two-bedroom, two-bath apartment on the 14th floor, with a dazzling view of the lake and nearby Grant Park.

Mac's family is wealthy. His dad is not a billionaire but is currently close with $800 million in assets. John Merrick and his wife Anne founded the most successful law firm in Chicago: Merrick, Dawson, and Brant. With a complement of over 300 lawyers and support staff, the firm's corporate and criminal law expertise makes it the most formidable and sought-after law firm in Illinois.

John Merrick, 58, attended Holy Cross and completed his law degree at Harvard Law School. Anne graduated summa cum laude from Cornell Law School and is now the law firm's chief operating officer (COO). At 55 years old, she is beautiful, well-read, and articulate.

Mac is 28 years old, six feet tree inches tall, and weighs 190 pounds. Years of rigorous physical training and running two miles a day through Grant Park or on the Tower’s treadmills have sculpted his body into that of a Greek Adonis. He keeps his light brown hair clipped short and spiky in the front—a popular style these days. His ocean-blue eyes capture the attention of anyone he meets. As his mother often says, he’s a babe magnet.

Mac has two siblings, Benjamin and Veronica, who work for the law firm as non-equity partners.

Ben, the eldest at 33 and a specialist in corporate law, is married to Wilhelmina Brant. Wilhelmina, a Chicago public defender, is the oldest daughter of Ashley Brant, a founding partner of the firm. Ben is the quiet family member, the last to speak in a discussion, and always listens attentively, looking for an opening to make his point. He's handsome, just like his father and brother, six feet tall with black hair and a well-trimmed goatee. He received his legal education at the University of Chicago.

Veronica is 31 years old and spectacular in looks and intellect. Educated at Wellesley College and Harvard Law, she graduated from Harvard summa cum laude, making her the most sought-after graduate that year. She joined the family law firm and quickly became their best criminal law staffer. Feared by all the prosecutors in Cooke County, Ronnie dresses very stylishly for court, with her long blond hair tied into a bun with a silver clip. For parties and socials, she brings the full vavoom to bear with haute couture dresses, movie star makeup, and a disarming smile. Ronnie is married to Peter Fieldstone, a junior partner in a Chicago hedge fund.

When they reached eighteen, John and Anne Merrick gave each of their children a $15 million trust fund. Ben and Ronnie elected to have Ronnie's husband, Pete Fieldstone, manage their money. He has nearly doubled the fund's value in ten years.

Mac, 28 years old, opted to use some of his trust funds to finance his education in criminal justice at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia. This decision initially infuriated his father. Still, Anne's continual diplomacy eventually convinced John that it's OK for any of the children to go their own way in life. Mac graduated magna cum laude from St. Joseph's and applied to the Chicago Police Force.

Mac, encouraged by his father, used some of his trust funds to buy the $915,000 14th-floor apartment at the Grant Park Tower on Chicago's Loop. Pete manages the remainder of his trust fund, so there's adequate income to pay the expensive yearly Condo fees for all the amenities Mac enjoys.

Mac is very secretive about his personal relationships. He often socializes with police force members in the ramshackle bars and restaurants where they congregate after work. While there's a lot of dating and sex between the cops he knows, he spurns all advances from the female staffers he meets, said merely, "I'm involved with someone else."

The someone else is a bit of a dodge; Anneliese Darban is a casual sex partner. She works as an international troubleshooter for a Fortune 400 accounting firm, causing her to be on the road often during the year. When she gets back into town, they hook up at either her place or his apartment. Annaliese, pronounced Anna-Lisa, is spectacular with long black hair and a slim athletic figure. She and Mac have convivial dinners and discussions, but both know this is a relationship of convenience only.

Walking through Grant Park's revolving door, he looked towards the concierge position. On duty now, Devon broke into a big smile.

"Officer Merrick, we've missed you for several days. Oh my God, what happened to you?"

Mac moved closer to Devon.

"Sometimes police work has its bumps and bruises."

"Well, I hope you feel better soon. The occupants of this elegant domicile appreciate that a genuine Chicago policeman is living here."

"Thanks, Devon."

Mac turned to head for the elevators.

"Oh, Office Merrick. A young lady came in here a couple of hours ago and left you an envelope."

Mac wheeled around.

"What did she look like?"

"Well, she's the prettiest gal I've ever seen coming through these doors, and I mean no disrespect to your glamorous sister or Miss Darvan. She was tall, had blond hair, blue jeans, a light blue T-shirt, and the prettiest face I'd ever seen. She said not a word. Just handed me the envelope and strolled out."

Devon reached into his desk and produced the small envelope. Mac took it and headed for one of the chairs. Trembling just a little bit, he looked at the envelope. It was the size of a thank-you card with a computer-printed address.

*Mackenzie Merrick**Apartment 1404  
The Grant Park Tower  
Chicago, IL*

He contemplated for a moment the safety of opening this. It could be Ricin or worse. *She wouldn't do that*; he thought as he carefully opened the little envelope. Inside was a small card, again computer printed.

*Heartbroken that I could not save Officer Williams.  
My information was that you were the only target.  
So sorry.*

Mac got out his phone and called Commander DiMarco.

"Hi, Mac. What's up?"

"I'm in the lobby of my condo at 1204 South Prairie Avenue. She left me a note."

"You mean the angel? The woman who saved your life?"

"Sure looks like it. The way Devon, the Concierge in the lobby, describes her, she's the woman that rescued me."

"I have Agent Simmons and Pietrina Cerrone with me. Stay put, and we'll come right over with some equipment. Don't let the doorman leave until we've spoken to him."

An hour later, police and FBI personnel crowded the lobby of Grant Park Tower. Pietrina showed Devon the enhanced photograph of Angel's face on her FBI satellite phone. Devon verified that the image was the same woman who had left the note. Mac, Ryan, and Pietrina, an FBI electronics specialist, were in an office on the first floor, reviewing camera footage with the building's security officer.

"There's no doubt about it," Pietrina said, "every security camera in this building freezes five minutes before she arrives and unfreezes ten minutes after leaving. Color me impressed."

"I just got off the phone with the city security camera manager,” Commander DiMarco said. “He reports that the three city cameras covering this area also froze. It looks like our angel is some kind of wizard, too.

“Can’t you just follow this lady with city surveillance cameras and artificial intelligence? See where she lives?” said Devon, the daytime concierge.

“We wish we could,” Commander DiMarco said. “The federal government prohibited the use of AI to monitor citizens' movements twelve years ago. This came after the riots in China over their government’s program of tracking and identifying private citizens and using the data to give everybody a citizenship score. Entering a known drug area, for example, would result in a tax increase as punishment.

“Our national government prohibits tracking and cataloging people’s movements in public for any reason. I don’t like it, as a police officer, but I kinda understand their reasons.

“Mac, may we inspect your apartment for forcible entry."

"Anytime," he said as they headed for the elevator. After dusting his doorknob for fingerprints and photographing them, they entered his unit and looked around. Housekeeping had made the bed and picked up. His place was spotless.

"Pretty spiffy place, Mac," Pietrina said.

"Don't act dumb, Pietrina, the FBI knows that I'm from a wealthy family. I can't go back in time and change my family; I love all of them dearly."

Pietrina put her arm around him and lightly pulled them together.

"Relax, big guy. Your secret is safe with me. Too bad I'm married; otherwise, I'd be putting a full-court press on you."

"So, Mac. Does it look like anybody has been here?" DiMarco said.

"I'd just say the cleaning ladies, that's all."

"Well, we're back to where we started. A cop killer on the loose and a mystery woman to boot. Get some rest, Mac."

Mac escorted them down to the lobby and returned to his apartment a little past six o'clock.

At seven thirty, there was a knock on his door. Mac looked at the image on his door monitor, his sister Veronica.

"Hi, brother. Like some company?"

"Sure, Ronnie. Want something to drink?"

"How about a cola?”

As the sun, setting in the west, caused the building shadows to extend to the lakeshore, Ronnie plopped down onto Mac’s leather sectional.

"Pete is pitching to potential investors in Seattle for a couple of days. Thought I'd hang out with my little brother."

"Little? I'm six-three, Ronnie."

"Yeah, and getting into all kinds of mischief, I hear. Still banging that accounting chick?"

"You didn't tell mom and dad, did you? They'd be all over me about marrying her and pumping out grandchildren."

"No, your secrets are safe with me. Anyhow, Pete and I decided to have children. I had my subcutaneous birth control implant removed last month. Maybe we'll see some action on that front."

She sat cross-legged and sipped her Coke Cola.

"Mom said that a woman saved your life. Is that true?"

"That information is secret right now. We're trying to protect this person, whoever she is."

"Mac, conversations between you and I are the same as attorney-client privilege. I would never pass our conversations on to anyone outside the family. You know that I never told mom and dad about Anneliese."

"She was here today before I arrived, the angel. Left a note."

"What did the note say?"

"It said, ‘Heartbroken that I could not save Officer Williams. My information was that you were the only target. So sorry.’"

Ronnie put her drink down.

"Like to hear the opinion of an overly aggressive defense attorney?"

"Let her rip, Barrister."

"OK, your life-saving rescue and that note indicate two possibilities. She's one of them but is having a change of heart, or they harmed her in some way.

“Considering that the Albanians are especially vicious in their dealings, her whistle-blower behavior would inevitably result in her death. My intuition is that they hurt her or someone from her family. Her note delivery suggests that she's made a judgment about you, that you are one of the good guys.

“Surely, she will reach out to you again. I'm going to give you some free legal advice. Don't try to get her to dump everything she knows; she'll recoil from that. Tell her that you're here to love and protect her. Be patient with her, Mac. Dad says she's beautiful. Is that true?"

"Well, taking my beloved sister out of the analysis, I'd say she was the most beautiful female I've ever encountered, and that was in the moonlight."

Ronnie swung her feet to the floor.

"Mac, if you see her again, tell her I will protect her. I'm the best damn criminal lawyer in the city, and I'll represent her pro bono. Tell her she's not alone in this."

"You're assuming that I'll see her again, Ronnie."

"And you will. Woman's intuition. Do you still have that bathing suit of mine in your closet?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Let's go veg out in the building's hot tub for an hour, just you and me."

"Anytime," Mac said as they got up and headed for his closet.

The Gang’s All Here

Strolling into the 7-story, $35 million Chicago Cyber Engineering office building, Imer and Lendina Bisha met Alan, the security guard. Alan sweeps all employees for electronic devices like phones or memory dongles.

"You can go on up, Mr. and Mrs. Bisha."

Imer nodded to Alan and headed for the executive elevator. Moving to the top floor, they entered the secure conference room. The conference room, surrounded by steel and beryllium seals on all six sides, is a Faraday cage. No amount of microwave penetration will reveal what is happening in the meeting room. Everybody was in attendance, so Imer took his seat at the head of the table.

"All right, what have we got?"

Tony Sipelli of the family's law firm Sipelli and Meyers spoke first.

"We got in from Mackinac Island just one hour before today's four p.m. bond hearing. The boys said a woman came at them like a freaking banshee and took them down with a stun gun and gel pepper spray. She knocked them out and bound their hands and legs with zip ties. They said nothing to the police despite all the standard Joe Friday interrogation techniques.

The prosecutors crushed us in the bond hearing, Imer. It was a closed hearing; no public or press allowed in. They had an FBI video of the whole thing, with Luan admitting that Officer Williams was dead, and Officer Merrick was next. It showed him pointing his pistol at his head. That's the point where she attacked them. She unlocked Merrick's cuffs and ran away. The FBI blurred the girl's face on the video, so there's no chance of getting a make on her. Prosecutors said they had ironclad evidence of a conspiracy to murder two police officers, the murder itself of Officer Williams, several handgun violations, and so forth. The prosecutors asked for denial of bail, and they got it."

"OK, what's the bottom line?" Imer said.

"Your brother Luan and Besim are going to prison for life. The court was crawling with FBI people; God help our boys if they get involved."

"Any chance of breaking them out?"

"Fat chance," Daniel Meyers said. “The Chicago Police transferred them to Cook County Jail, the high-security section."

"Anyone else wants to offer an opinion?" Imer said, glaring at the group.

"Yeah, I have an opinion," said Dr. Lewis Morton. "I told you that taking action against the police was a high-risk gamble, and something could go wrong. Now you've lit a fire under them, and they won't relent until they bring us all down."

"Do you think, Lewis, that I'm gonna sit right here and let the cops steal $25 million in cash from us and get away with it?"

“Look, Imer, we've got a mole in this organization. That's the best answer so far. Over and over, I've told you that shipping cash around the country is so last century. It's all blockchains and millisecond crypto-cash transfers on the Internet now. We know how to do it in ways that don't trigger federal financial thresholds.

“I know the New York City family likes their cold, hard cash; holding it in their hands. But in today's world, this is just epically stupid."

Imer was quiet for thirty seconds, biting his lower lip and staring at the floor. The rest of the group expected some kind of outburst.

"The opinion of the leadership in our New York, Boston, Los Angeles, and Seattle operations is that the Chicago Police are behind these robberies of our money. We are people who always respond with extreme action when others threaten our business. These dirty cops must pay. I want this undercover cop, Merrick, dead. Do you hear me? Dead."

Yilka Kartallozi jerked his chair closer to the table edge.

"I have something I want to say."

"OK, Yilka. You have the floor."

"I agree with the big bosses. The Chicago Police are robbing us of money collected by every territory's operation. We must find the mole behind this and teach the Chicago PD a lesson. We should do something spectacular to make them think twice about bothering us or jailing our brothers.

“One of the guys in the research department gave me a rundown on Officer Mackenzie Merrick. Do you know what I found? He's rich. His father is John Merrick, founder of Merrick, Dawson, and Brant, one of Illinois's most prestigious law firms. In addition to Mackenzie Merrick, the policeman, John has a son and a daughter who work in the firm.

“Forget about killing Officer Merrick for now. Instead, let's ruin his life. Let's kill his father and plant a couple of 8-balls in his car. Officer Merrick will know that he got his father murdered. He'll obsess over it and wallow in guilt for a couple years. Then we'll kill him our usual way, with his dick stuffed into his mouth, just like the old days.

“We’ll send a shock wave all the way to City Hall. They'll beg the police to stop pressuring Albanian businesses and maybe force a reduction in charges for Besim and Luan. Hit back. It's our best response."

Imer nodded his head.

"I like that idea. Get some people to do surveillance on John Merrick. Find some habitual thing that he does that would make a hit possible. Yilka, this is your project. Make it happen but keep me informed."

As the meeting broke up and everyone filed out the door, Imer turned to his friend, Lewis.

"I assume you are not on board with this."

"No shit. You're taking a huge risk here."

"Noted, my friend. You keep rolling in the big bucks from the large, wealthy, and ponderous corporations. I will get rid of the nuisances that we face occasionally.”

CHAPTER 4

The Reporter

Lois Lane Reborn

Natalie Rumsfort stopped at the entrance of the Blarney Stone, an Irish watering hole frequented by Chicago cops, located at the intersection of West 18th Street and South Bishop. The day had been excruciatingly hot for a Tuesday, with afternoon temperatures in Chicago peaking at 118 degrees.

After graduating four years ago with a perfect 4.00 GPA from Northwestern’s Medill School of Journalism, the Chicago Sentinel hired her for city reporting. The Sentinel is one of the new newspapers that evolved from the national government’s requirement that all social media companies contribute to a Journalism Fund to reinvigorate the news businesses that lost advertising revenue to the Internet. The Sentinel, operating on subscriptions and the Journalism Fund, runs in the black and even publishes a print edition. Modern newspaper journalism works symbiotically with the local and national television media, and Rumsfort’s camera-friendly good looks make her a natural for on-air reporting.

Natalie has a boyfriend, Rene Fournier, who is still working on his Ph.D. in English Literature at Northwestern. Rene wants to be a writer, so if Natalie succeeds in her dream of making it to a national network as a journalist or anchor, he can set up shop in any city she resides in.

Her city editor, Charles Randolf, had sent her out to gather stories about the effects of the heatwave, a yearly phenomenon thanks to unchecked global warming. She had spent the day interviewing hapless elderly residents in the impoverished parts of the town whose window air conditioners had failed due to the continual running at full blast. Still, in the back of her mind, she wanted to find out about the last week's cop-killing. The police department had effectively set up a news blackout, only admitting that the fallen officer was DiOtis Williams, and two perps were in custody.

*What's going on?* Natalie thought.

Today, she dressed casually, which put interviewees more at ease. Her long ruby red hair, parted in the middle, back over her shoulders, tight blue jeans, and white tank top emphasized her voluptuous figure, something she regularly uses to entice information from susceptible men. Like many Chicago women, she eschewed wearing a bra during the hot summer months. Closing the entrance door behind her, Natalie breathed in the cool air, a welcome relief from sweating all day and pounding the streets. The frigid air also pebbled her nipples, making their presence known in a bar filled with men. Natalie shrugged, thinking *It’s* *time for some low-grade seduction*.

Passing the pool table, one of the cops, chalking his pool cue, shouted. "All hands on deck! The Fire Engine has arrived! Hey, Natalie, wanna play a game with us?"

"I'll take a rain check, Larry. Anyhow, do you really want to lose again?"

Natalie laughed as she moved to the back of the pub, stoping at a table seating somebody she knew, in this case, Officer Denny Luton, from Precinct 12. He was sitting with a policewoman and a civilian.

"Well, Natalie Rumsfort, the Sentinel's best cub reporter, what brings you here?"

"The air conditioning, what else?"

"I can see that," Denny said, looking at her T-shirt.

Natalie looked down at her breasts and cooed.

"Red Alert, girls. Male chauvinist pig dead ahead."

The policewoman laughed for a couple of seconds, then Denny motioned for her to sit down.

"Natalie, next to me is Officer Shaunetta Owens of the 12th, and next to her is Alex Cottingwood; he's a heating and air conditioning man."

The waitress appeared, and Natalie ordered a bottle of Irish Whistle beer, a local brew, and a pretzel basket. She looked at Alex.

"You must be doing a land-office business this week?"

"Oh yeah, our business is as hot as the weather. I do mostly commercial units, the ones with compressors on the roof. Those small window units are just cheaper to replace."

"They last less than five years, on average. Why is that?"

"Since the planet morphed into only giant corporations, those bastards designed the window units to last only a couple years. The commercial units are a bit sturdier, lasting maybe ten years under this heat load."

The waitress appeared with Natalie's beer and pretzels, and she held up her smart card and paid the bill with a 25% tip. Natalie looked at the two police officers.

"What kind of chaos are you dealing with this week?"

"Suicides, lots of suicides,” Shaunetta said. “The heat wave makes it worse. The giga-corporations have driven most people into low-wage service sector jobs that aren't sufficient to meet even the most basic living expenses. While Chicago may have very tight gun laws, firearms are still pervasive. Suicides by overdose, wrist slitting, and hanging are successful only 10% of the time. Despondent people who pick up a gun are 90% successful. Yeah, we keep the coroner busy."

"What about you, Denny? What's been your mayhem?"

"Drugs, of course: cocaine, crack, and fentanyl. New suppliers are popping up like whack-a-mole. We can't keep up with them."

"Was that what the murdered cop, Officer Williams, was investigating?"

"I'm not allowed to talk about that, Natalie. It's undercover work, you know."

"Well, the press release said that you arrested two perps. Who made the pinch, Denny?"

She leaned forward so that her tank top showed a lot of cleavage.

"Tell us one of your many off-color jokes, and maybe I'll give you something.”

Natalie smiled and used her photographic memory to recall one. "Why should you always shake the bottle of mustard vigorously in the restaurant?"

"Beats me," Denny said.

"To prevent mustard pre-cum. You know, that milky yellow fluid that comes out first and makes the bun soggy before the real goo squirts out."

Shaunetta started laughed first, before the two men. Finally, Denny and Alex got it and started chuckling.

"OK, Natalie, that was pretty good. I'll give you something. The two perps, whom I won't name, lured another undercover officer to a construction site near Bar Etna. They sucker-punched him and had him on his knees, handcuffed. One of them pointed a Glock with a silencer at his forehead and told him that they had just killed Officer Williams and that he was next."

"Did they kill him? Is that a secret?"

"Nope, that's the mystery part of this. Just as the thugs were about to shoot, a citizen attacked them and took them out. She fought like a fucking banshee."

"She?" Natalie said. "You mean a woman saved the officer's life? Who is she?"

"We don't know. The woman bound the perps with cable ties, found the handcuff keys, removed the cuffs, and helped our guy to his feet. She said nothing, just smiled, and ran away. We're calling her the angel."

"Was the officer wearing a body cam?"

"Oh, hell no. The gangbangers would have spotted that. No, he had two FBI button cams, very high-tech. We got a video of the whole thing."

"So, this was an FBI - Chicago Police drug-op?"

"Yes, it was. I can't say anymore, Natalie. It's an ongoing investigation."

"Just one more question, Denny. What drug gang were they investigating? I'll pay your current tab if you tell me.”

Natalie summoned the waitress and held up her smart card.

"Pay the current tab for this table."

The waitress raised her small tablet computer and completed the transaction.

"Again, Denny, who are they?"

Officer Luton placed his hands on the table, leaning closer to her. He raised one eyebrow as he spoke the word "Albanians."

"You're kidding, Denny. The Chicago Police and the FBI wiped out the Albanian mob twenty years ago."

"Whack-a-mole, Miss Pulitzer Prize, whack-a-mole."

Natalie stood up.

"Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. That was certainly more interesting than a Korean air conditioner that petered out in just two years. You have my number; call me if there's anything new."

She quickly exited the Blarney Stone and called for a RoboTaxi to take her back to the Sentinel. There was work to do.

The Grand Jury

It had been a draining week for Mac. He participated in the funeral for DiOtis Williams, with a couple of hundred uniformed officers, marching to the urban church where the Williams family attended. Many dignitaries, such as the Mayor, the Attorney General, and several notable politicians, were in the procession. It had extensive media coverage, and streamed live on social media, with reports on all news broadcasts.

Thursday morning, June 28th, Mac was in Precinct Nine Commander Walt Gerszewski's office. As usual, Commander Gerszewski cracked his knuckles and listened attentively as Commander DiMarco went over the history of the Bisha family.

"Admittedly, we don't have anything on the older brother, Imer Bisha; by all accounts, he is a legitimate, successful businessman. He lived with an aunt, got perfect grades in school, attended the University of Chicago, got an MBA, and formed a hugely successful software firm and several other companies."

"OK," replied Walt, "why would we want to chat with him?"

"A couple of things don't add up.”

"Such as?"

"Well, who paid the tuition at the University of Chicago? Also, who provided the seed money to start that lucrative business? All we could dig up was some foreign venture capital money with some of the earmarks of big-time money laundering."

"Admittedly, that's not much to go on," Walt said, “However, let's have a chat with this fellow."

Commander Gerszewski turned to his laptop and quickly found the number for Chicago Cyber Engineering. He dialed the number and used the speaker so all could hear.

"Good morning. This is Chicago Cyber Engineering. How may I direct your call?"

"Hello, this is Commander Walt Gerszewski of the Chicago Police. I want to speak to Mr. Imer Bisha."

"He's in the building this morning. I'll connect you to him."

The group listened to banal elevator music for a minute.

"Hello, this is Imer. To whom am I speaking?"

"This is Commander Walter Gerszewski, Chicago Police, Precinct Nine."

"What can I do for you, Commander?"

"You no doubt know that we arrested your brother Luan for the murder of a policeman. We'd like you to come to Precinct Nine headquarters at 3120 South Halsted today. Let's call it a friendly visit. I don't want to draw up a warrant, Mr. Bisha."

"No need, Commander. I'll be coming with one of my corporate lawyers. Is 2:00 p.m. OK?"

"That will be satisfactory; thank you, Mr. Bisha. Bye."

"OK," Walt said, "he didn't sound perturbed at all. You guys head over to the Daley Building for the Grand Jury now. Be back before 2 p.m.

Mac, after the Grand Jury session, I want you to go home for the rest of the day. I don't want you near this place when Bisha walks in."

Mac sat next to Commander DiMarco in the Grand Jury Room on the 21st floor of the Daley Center in downtown Chicago. Mac looked at the grand jury; there were sixteen of them today. There were no media, reporters, or spectators here; this was a secret deliberation.

Prosecutor Amanda Varian, wearing a business suit and a modest embroidered blouse, strode in, took her seat, and looked around quickly.

"Good morning, jurors. I’m Amanda Varian, representing the Cook County State's Attorney's Office.

This case is number 2060-4017 against Luan T. Bisha and Besim R. Morina. The State accuses them of conspiracy to murder Officer DiOtis Williams in the early hours of Tuesday, June 19th, 2060. We are also accusing these men of the attempted murder of Officer Mackenzie Merrick, along with several weapons violations. We have incontrovertible video evidence of their crime and Officer Merrick's testimony."

Amanda presented all the evidence and video of the crime and cross-examined Officer Merrick.

"Bailiff,” the Grand Jury Foreperson said, “please escort the prosecutor and witnesses out of the room while we deliberate.”

Outside, Mac leaned over to Commander DiMarco and asked, "How do you think we did?"

"Slam dunk, Mac, slam dunk."

The jury asked the prosecutor and witnesses to reenter the courtroom after only twenty minutes, which was a good sign, Mac thought.

"Foreperson, have you reached a decision?"

"We have, Ms. Varian. We voted unanimously to indict Luan T. Bisha and Besim R. Morina on all counts."

"Thank you, jurors. We will enter this case into the Court docket this afternoon. The grand jury is now in recess and will resume after lunch at 1:00 p.m."

"Bailiff, we ask that all court documents identify Officer Merrick only as 'Individual 1."

"So directed, counselor," he replied as he left the courtroom.

DiMarco looked at Mac and said, "Two bastards down and one to go."

"Amen to that," Mac said as they left the Courtroom.

CHAPTER 5

Mob Vengeance

Mob Boss Questioned

A uniformed officer escorted Imer Bisha and Tom Appleton into Commander Walt Gerszewski's office.

Imer Bisha has a foreboding visage when first encountered. Dressed in a black business suit with a white shirt and tie, he looked suspiciously at the assemblage. His jet black hair clipped short, emphasized his widow's peak. Long black eyebrows, low near the bridge of his nose and sweeping up at the sides, give his face an ominous expression.

His lawyer, Thomas Appleton, resembled a barrister from Central Casting. Appleton wore a gray suit with a light blue shirt and a gray tie and sported a cheerful smile.

"Have a seat, gentlemen," Commander Gerszewski said.

Walt introduced everyone seated at the table, each receiving an intense stare from Imer.

"Before we begin, Mr. Bisha, let me remind you that we are recording this discussion," pointing to the camera and microphone on the wall. “Also, since Agent Marecki is present, it is a federal felony to lie to an FBI agent.”

"As you know, your brother, Luan Bisha, and an associate named Besim Morina are in custody. They were indicted earlier today by a Grand Jury of conspiracy to murder Officer DiOtis Williams and the attempted murder of an additional undercover policeman."

"I have minimal contact with my brother, Commander, and typically only see him at Christmas. He is the owner of a sheetrock company. That's all I know."

"Fine," Walt said, "Where were you at 1:00 a.m. on Tuesday, June 21st?"

"Asleep in my home at 1310 North Lakeshore Drive with my wife."

"Can you prove that Mr. Bisha?" Agent Marecki said.

"That was nine days ago, but I'm sure my wife will verify that I'm home every night except when I'm away on business."

"Do you know Besim Morina? Is he an associate of yours?"

"No, I've never met him."

"Mr. Bisha," Special Agent Marecki said, "You went to the University of Chicago and received a bachelor’s and a master’s degree in business. Is that right?”

"Yes, but what does this have to do with my brother?"

"Who paid your tuition for this University? Our investigation showed that you paid in cash every semester. Where did that money come from?"

"That's not illegal, Agent," Tom Appleton said.

"Please answer the question, Mr. Bisha."

Imer Bisha wiggled a bit in his seat, his facial expression irritated.

"The Albanian community paid my college expenses. The community is like a family; donating money to good students, new businesses, and so forth is traditional. It's no different than the Jewish community. When a Jew wants to open a business, everybody pitches in and raises the money. Have you ever been to a Bar Mitzvah? Those envelopes contain thousands."

"And who collected these funds?"

"My Aunt.”

"Who died twelve years ago," Agent Marecki said.

"Mr. Bisha, you are the CFO and part-owner of Chicago Cyber Engineering. Is that true?" Commander DiMarco said.

"Yes."

"Where did you get the money to finance this start-up?"

"From various venture capital resources. Thanks to our success, we have paid off our start-up loans and are now debt-free."

"I'm sure you did. We could get a search warrant drawn up for your Chicago Cyber Engineering building. Come have a look, so to speak."

Bisha laughed, then fastened his penetrating stare at Commander DiMarco.

"There is no need for a warrant. You are welcome to visit our facility at any time. I will authorize my staff to cooperate fully, let you sit at any computer terminal, and review any file. We'll show you any room, file case, or storage box we have. We are a legitimate business, Commander, and we have nothing to hide. Show up anytime. You'll see."

"I'm sure we will," Commander Gerszewski said. "Officer Parker, please escort these gentlemen to the Precinct entrance. Thank you, Mr. Bisha and Mr. Appleton. That will be all for now."

As Bisha rose to leave, he gave a baleful stare to Commander DiMarco. After they had left, Commander Gerszewski addressed the group. "Well now. I'd say that they were as suspicious of us as we were of them."

"He could be the real mob boss, Walt, not the perp we have in custody,” said Special Agent Marecki.

“You may be right. OK, guys, let's get to work."

Meet the Press

Late in the afternoon, Superintendent of Police Javion Green was shuffling through papers at his office in the Public Safety Headquarters on South Michigan Avenue when the operator rang him.

"Superintendent Green, I have Ms. Natalie Rumsfort from the Sentinel on the phone. She wants to speak to you."

"Thanks, Beth. Put her through."

"Superintendent Green, this is Natalie Rumsfort of the Sentinel. As a courtesy to you, I'd like to advise you that we are running a story tonight about the murder of Officer Williams nine days ago. It will be online tonight and in print tomorrow."

"Fair enough, Natalie. What are you planning to report?"

"That there was another undercover officer involved. A woman, whom the police force is calling 'the angel,' not only saved the undercover officer's life but subdued both perps, bound them with cable ties, and then ran away.”

"I admire your investigative work, Ms. Rumsfort. It’s an ongoing murder investigation, so I can't say much. However, your information is accurate. We don't know who this woman is."

"Can you identify the officer she saved?"

"Absolutely not. We never reveal the identities of our undercover officers."

"How about telling me who the two perps are?"

"Watch the court docket the next couple of days. The Grand Jury has just indicted them."

"One more question, Superintendent Green, is the Albanian mob back in Chicago?"

"We're trying to find out."

"Thank you, Superintendent Green. Although I probably irritate you, understand that I am only searching for the truth."

"Natalie, how could I be irritated at the girl with the fire engine hair?"

"Ten-four, Javion," Natalie said with a laugh.

Superintendent Green dialed Beth, the operator.

"Beth, connect me with Commander DiMarco.”

*Complications, there are always complications,* he thought.

Mac Watches the News

Mac stepped out of his shower at about 7 p.m., having done a late afternoon run in nearby Grant Park. After drying himself off, he donned sweats and headed for the living room, carrying a water bottle. He voice-commanded the television to play the 24-hour local news channel. The attractive lady on camera smiled.

"We return to that remarkable story today about the angel, who rescued a police officer nine days ago from certain death. I’m pleased to speak with Natalie Rumsfort at the Chicago Sentinel."

The screen switched to double windows, with the Sentinel reporter on the right. Rumsfort wore a printed cotton summer dress, her long ruby red hair framing her riveting face and very blue eyes.

"Natalie, who is this angel that you are reporting about?"

"We don't know, Cynthia. Nor does the Chicago Police, for that matter. Our reporting is that she saved another undercover officer from a certain assassination by attacking and subduing two criminals. She reportedly fought like a Ninja, taking them both down in seconds and then binding their hands and feet with cable ties. She released the officer from handcuffs, smiled, and just ran away. Our sources tell us that the undercover officer was wearing a secret FBI button camera, so there's a video of the whole incident. The Grand Jury handed down an indictment for the two perps yesterday."

“Natalie, are there any photographs or videos of this woman?”

“Very few, Cynthia. There is an iPhone video of this Chicago angel beating up two drug dealers who were selling fentanyl-laced drugs to students outside of Taft High School. A student, kept after school for detention, saw the fight start from his second-floor window at a distance and recorded it. I’ll run it for you now.

As you can see, the Chicago angel is tall with long blond hair. Watching her take down these two criminals is akin to a Kung Fu movie. After immobilizing them, you can see her texting the 38th Precinct Police and making her escape between two homes.

"Natalie, has this woman come forward?"

"No, she’s a mystery, Cynthia. I want to encourage this woman to call the Sentinel tip line so we can set up a secret meeting. I'll personally guarantee her safety and anonymity."

"Thank you for joining us today, Natalie."

Mac muted the sound and pondered the angel as the news presenter moved on to other topics. *Will I ever see her again?* he thought. *Or is her appearance in my life just a simple one-off?*

Plans for a Murder

Imer, Lewis, and Yilka huddled around the table as Tariq Shyle went over the ongoing surveillance of John Merrick.

"We have found a lunch choice that he makes every Wednesday. That location is Barneys, a popular restaurant in the Loop with five-star food. Our one real-time observation showed him arriving in a company Tesla."

"How do we know he's a regular, based on just one visit?" Dr. Morton said.

"The team broke into the smart card transactions for that restaurant since New Year’s, and it showed him lunching there almost every Wednesday."

"OK, so Wednesday's the day we off him,” Imer said. "Who do we have to do the job?"

"Obviously, nobody from Chicago Cyber. We'll have to draw from the more traditional staff pool. How about Nick Rexha?"

"No, I want two guys. How about Lukas Jasari? Lewis, can you access the restaurant's security cameras?"

"No, Imer. But we can access the city’s security cams outside. We’ll give you a head-up when he's about to leave."

"Imer, this has to be timed perfectly," Yilka said. "There must be a RoboTaxi in hold mode outside the restaurant and a series of others to hide their escape. What do you want to do if he has a guest with him?"

"Don't harm the guest; he'll be scared shitless anyway. Just wax Merrick's father, two shots to the head; Lendina will be in Seattle that day," Imer said. "Let's get to work."

As the meeting broke up and everybody left the secure room, Imer looked at Lewis and scowled, "Don't even think about saying it."

Dial Wednesday for Murder

At 11:45 a.m. on Wednesday, Imer and Yilka were in the secure meeting room with Dr. Morton, overseeing the noontime operation. They viewed city security cameras trained on the exit of Merrick’s office building, the restaurant's front, and a broad view of the area from across the intersection.

"OK, we've got Nick and Lukas in a RoboTaxi a block away, parked and waiting on our instructions. They're both packing," Lewis said.

Several minutes later, they spotted a Tesla leaving the underground parking garage of the Merrick, Dawson, and Brant Law Firm office building.

"The mark is on the move, Imer," Yilka said.

"Just make sure it's him."

In just a few minutes, a Tesla electric SUV stopped at the entrance of Barney’s Restaurant. The gull-wing doors lifted, and John Merrick stepped out. He extended his hand to assist a woman with blond hair and a business suit from the car.

"OK, that would be his daughter, Veronica. You still want to proceed, Boss?" Yilka said.

"Yes, kill them both."

"God almighty, Imer! You can't be serious," Lewis said.

"We wanted to make a statement, so proceed with it. If you can't handle this, work on something else."

"No, I'll stay. We can't have this fail."

They watched John Merrick, and his daughter walk into the restaurant. Lewis, Imer, and Yilka waited patiently for forty-five minutes for the Merricks to finish their lunch and approach the restaurant’s glass entry doors. Yilka addressed Nick and Lukas on the RoboTaxi’s phone.

"They're coming out. Wax both John Merrick and his daughter. Get into position, boys."

Lewis watched the RoboTaxi come around the corner and stop parallel to the restaurant. Nick and Lukas stepped out and took a position halfway between the entrance to Barney's and the intersection. A few pedestrians were walking past, and a veiled Muslim woman sat on a bench at the corner bus stop.

John and Ronnie Merrick stepped out of the restaurant, laughing about something. Veronica used her cell phone to summon the company’s Tesla.

At that moment, all the security cameras that Imer, Lewis, and Yilka were watching froze.

"What is going on, Yilka?"

"We've lost everything, Boss. All the cameras are frozen. We're blind."

The two mobsters leaning against the office building wall next to Barney's jumped out and quickly approached John and Ronnie. Drawing Glock 50 guns from their jackets, the laser beams danced on the Merricks’ clothing.

"John Merrick," Lukas said, "Your son intruded in our business. Now, you and your daughter are going to pay the price. Never interfere with Albanian business."

"Look, she has nothing to do with this. Let her go!"

"No way, motherfucker. You're gonna watch Nick blow her brains out; then I'll do you."

"Daddy!" shrieked Ronnie.

As Nick moved his laser spot from Ronnie's waist towards her head, he was unaware of Angel dashing towards him like a cruise missile. Angel reached Nick so swiftly that she had her arm around his head before he could react. Angel vaulted up and rotated her body counterclockwise to kick Lukas in the temple. Lukas dropped his gun as he tumbled to the pavement.

Angel stepped in front of Nick and violently head-butted him. He appeared stunned, so she soccer-kicked him in the groin hard. As he sank to his knees, she snatched his gun and threw it across the street. A swift kick to the side of Nick's head rendered him unconscious, toppling to the ground like a falling obelisk.

Lukas had risen to one knee and retrieved his pistol. As he pointed the spotting beam towards John Merrick, Angel grabbed Merrick's suit collar, put her leg out to trip him, and yanked him down just as the pistol discharged. The bullet shattered an empty parked car window. The blast echoed through the buildings, followed immediately by Ronnie’s high-pitched shriek.

John Merrick crashed into his daughter, and both fell against a concrete garbage container. The collision lacerated John Merrick’s scalp, causing it to bleed profusely.

Angel leaped towards Lukas, squirting her DemonFyre pepper spray gel into his eyes. He howled like a wounded animal as Angel wrenched his gun from his hand and side armed it on the sidewalk towards John Merrick. Grabbing Lukas’ shoulder, Angel put her forearm between his legs and lifted him off the ground. She smashed him forcefully onto the sidewalk; his head bounced onto the concrete, and the impact knocked him senseless. John Merrick staggered to his feet; he seemed to be recovering.

Reaching into her fanny pack, she brought out several industrial zip-ties and gave two of them to John. Without a word, they both knew what to do. Working together, they cuffed both assassins face down on the sidewalk.

Angel went over to the sobbing Ronnie and offered her hand to lift her to her feet. Ronnie opened her arms and hugged Angel tightly. The sound of approaching police sirens reverberated from all directions.

"Angel, you have to go. The police will be here soon."

Looking one last time at Angel, Ronnie pleaded.

"Run!"

Angel turned and raced to the intersection, crossing it just as a patrol car approached. The officer assumed that it was somebody fleeing an active shooter situation. He turned towards the restaurant.

"Dad, please don’t say anything that jeopardizes Mac’s Angel."

"Sweetheart, we're in a war. That woman is the best ally our family will ever have."

John Merrick quickly retrieved his iPhone and called Mac.

"Hi, Dad, what's up?"

"Son, two men just tried to kill Ronnie and me outside Barney's Restaurant in the Loop."

"Oh my God, Dad. Are you guys OK?"

"Yes, we're both alive, and the police are pulling up. Your Angel saved our lives. Mac, I need you right now. We're pretty shaken up."

"On my way, Dad. Take care of Ronnie."

Looking down the street, John Merrick spotted Angel as she entered the massive office building on the other side of the intersection. As the patrol car pulled up, John placed the gun on the sidewalk and stepped away. The officer who exited the patrol car followed a standard procedure for active shooter situations.

"OK, folks, put your hands on your head and lock your fingers together."

Both John and Ronnie complied as the officer got behind them. "Now, folks, lower yourselves to the ground face down and put your arms together behind your backs."

He quickly snapped metal handcuffs on both. Four patrol cars arrived at the scene; the sidewalk was now crawling with police.

Another Police cruiser pulled up; Deputy Superintendent of Police Linda Shannon stepped out. Fifty years old with shiny shoulder-length gray hair, her three stars made everybody take notice.

"All right, what is going on here?"

"We've got four perps, a weapon, and what seems like a hell of a street fight."

"Turn these two over," Linda said, pointing to the Merricks.

Two officers rolled them over, surprising Shannon.

"Oh my God, this is John Merrick. John, is this Veronica?"

"Yes, Linda. Those two guys tried to kill us as we exited the restaurant."

Shannon ordered the officers to remove John and Veronica Merrick’s handcuffs. Looking at John's bleeding scalp and Ronnie's flushed face and cut lip, she barked an order.

"Get an EMT unit here, stat! John, did you disarm these two men?"

"No, a bystander helped us."

"Really? Let me guess. Blond hair, a pretty face, and fights like a God-damned Ninja. Right?"

"Guess so, Linda."

"Where did she go, John?"

"I don't know; I was looking after Ronnie. She just ran off. She threw one of the guns way over there," pointing to the Glock pistol across the street. Linda bellowed to one of the officers.

"Get that gun into an evidence bag."

Another officer pointed to a woman recording everything near the intersection.

"Oh great, bring her over here. Explain to her that while it's legal to film police activities, she must cooperate with us or face obstruction of justice charges. Go get her but be nice."

Walking towards the hog-tied perps, she asked one of the officers.

"What have you got on these two?"

"Pockets are empty, no identification, no nothing. We think that empty RoboTaxi over there is probably their getaway vehicle."

"Get an officer to disable that thing."

An EMT van pulled up, and Linda and some officers helped the Merricks walk over to it. John had a deep scalp laceration, and it was bleeding profusely. Both medics went to work, pushing the wound closed and applying emergency skin glue to close the wound temporarily. They made quick checks of his vitals and assessed him for concussive effects. The completely rattled Veronica had a nasty bruise on her right cheek and a minor laceration at the corner of her lip. They applied a pain relief spray and an ice pack.

Deputy Superintendent Shannon addressed the officers.

"I want patrolmen to check the reception desk of every building in the vicinity,” Shannon said. “Ask if a woman with blond hair entered the building in the last half hour. Get to it!"

A police vehicle pulled up, and Mac Merrick ran to the EMT van. He hugged his father first, patting him on the shoulder.

"Dad, are you hurt?"

“I've got a scalp wound; the medic superglued it together for now. Ronnie's a mess; she's never experienced anything like this."

Mac hugged his sister, who was still trembling.

"Mac, I was completely paralyzed with fear. I couldn't help Dad. I feel so ashamed."

"Don't worry, Ronnie. You're alive. That's all that matters.”

"Son, come here."

"What is it, Dad?"

"We'd be dead but for that angel girl of yours. Those two bastards had the drop on us and said they would kill us because of your police work. She saved us, Mac. Just as they were about to shoot, she came at them like a Kung Fu warrior, took them both down, and laid them out flat.”

"Dad, I’m sorry that I've endangered my family; I'm so sorry."

"Not another word like that, son. We're proud of your police work."

Deputy Superintendent Shannon walked up.

"Officer Merrick, I'm glad you are here. We need to protect your family. Where should we start, John?"

"Linda, we need to immediately secure my wife, Anne, and my son, Ben, at our law offices. Can you call the Highland Park PD and get them to send a couple of patrol cars to our home on 91 Lake Vista Road? I'll have one of my law partners contract a security firm to go there later today to safeguard our home. My daughter-in-law is Willie Brant. She's a Public Defender and is in the Daley Center today."

"Consider it done."

More police showed up, and Deputy Superintendent Shannon closed the intersection and the street adjacent to the restaurant. A crowd of television and print vans showed up, with reporters clamoring for information. Climbing out of the Sentinel van was Natalie Rumsfort. Approaching the police tape line they had set up around the crime scene, she smiled at one of the officers.

"What happened here?"

"Apparently, there was an attempted assassination. No fatalities, I hear."

"Do you know who the targets were?"

"A couple of lawyers named Merrick. Sorry, I don't know much more than that."

Natalie moved through the crowd that was growing by the minute. Reaching the sidewalk, she turned and collided with a woman.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Natalie said.

The young woman said nothing and stared at Natalie with just a hint of a smile. Trained to notice things, Natalie observed that the woman wore cream-colored yoga pants and a light blue T-shirt. She had beautiful, straight black hair that framed her oversized sunglasses. Her face was pretty, with freckles all over her nose and face. There was just one problem: she was wearing a wig. Natalie could see a hint of blond hair peeking out near her temple, something most people would miss.

Natalie reached out and gripped the woman's left wrist.

"Did you see what happened?"

The woman stared intently at her for a couple of seconds, her faint smile morphing into a more quizzical expression.

"Tell me what you saw?"

In a smooth and practiced motion, the freckle-faced woman deftly moved her fingers to the top of Natalie's forearm, pushing and breaking the grip. Natalie could feel the strength she possessed. The woman flashed a quick smile, turned, and walked swiftly away. She disappeared from view in a matter of seconds.

CHAPTER 6

The Merrick Family

Imer Bisha Reacts

"Tell me what the hell is going on?" Imer said.

"We don't know. We don't know. All the cameras in the area have frozen," Yilka said.

Twenty-five minutes passed, and suddenly, the cameras started jiggling and returned to full motion. Lewis peered at the several images.

"Imer, the cameras are back. Looking at the one across the restaurant, I can see Nick and Lukas sitting against the adjacent building wall, trussed up with zip ties. Looking at the camera across the intersection, I see an EMT vehicle among the police cars. I'll try to zoom in; this is a very high-resolution camera. OK, I can see medics treating John Merrick and his daughter. He's bleeding from the scalp; she looks like she's uninjured. Uh Oh, I see Deputy Superintendent Shannon directing things. It looks like another monumental screw-up, Imer. The cops have arrested our boys."

There was a long period of silence from Imer. Finally, he spoke up.

"Yilka, leave the room."

"Am I in trouble, Boss?"

"No, my friend. But I want to speak with Dr. Morton alone."

Yilka got up and left the secure room, closing the door.

"Lewis, what do you think is going on?"

“Somebody is tipping off the police about our plans, Imer. We’ve got a mole in our organization. The cops are shutting down selected city security cameras to mask what they are doing.”

“Lendina gets back from Seattle in a couple of days. She vetted every employee here. We need her input before embarking on mole hunting. In any case, let’s lay off operations against Officer Merrick’s family for a few days.”

“Agreed, Imer. I’ll be interested in what our lawyers say about Nick and Lukas when they call us for legal help.”

Police Analysis

Deputy Superintendent Linda Shannon called an emergency council meeting in Walt Gerszewski's Precinct 9 headquarters. Walt selected a little-used meeting room with no security cameras or recording equipment. Shannon started the session.

"OK, Let's go. First, the Merricks are in Rush Hospital and are in satisfactory condition. The hospital plans to discharge them tomorrow.

“We identified the two perps, Nick Rexha and Lukas Jasari, who are Americans of Albanian ancestry. Prosecutors are going for denial of bail at tomorrow’s bond hearing.

“We have what looks to be a reappearance of the so-called Angel. A woman at the intersection was recording the scene and capturing the attack and rescue. Pietrina, could you show what the tourist recorded on the monitor?”

Pietrina started the video, showing the assassin's RoboTaxi turning right at the light.

"Watch the woman at the bus stop," Pietrina explained, "wearing the orange Muslim Shayla. Note as the RoboTaxi approaches, she gets out her cell phone. As the two Albanian guys move to the sidewalk, she punches something into her phone. We think this is the moment when all the area's cameras freeze. Now, you can see the Merricks exit Barney's Restaurant and wait for their ride. As Rexha and Jasari start to draw their guns, the woman pulls off the head covering and goes at them like a hypersonic missile.

“The Merricks said the two men stated that their son, Mac, had interfered with Albanian business, and they would pay for it with their lives. This Angel woman’s moves are impressive.

“I shared this video with some of the self-defense instructors at Langley, and they all think this woman is Red Belt or better."

"Thank you, Pietrina," Linda said. "The local cameras were frozen for about 30 minutes. Fortunately, the Blake Office building receptionist reported that a young woman with blond hair entered the building quickly and went straight for the elevator. Searching a maintenance restroom in the basement revealed this fascinating tidbit in the waste bin. This soft plastic sheet appears to be a computer-printed decal for applying freckles to one's face. There's no product like this on Amazon, so it's either handmade or copped from the movie industry.

“There's more. The search team found a basement tunnel to the building next door. It turns out that at one time, thirty years ago, the same firm owned both buildings, and they built the tunnel."

"Linda," Walt Gerszewski said, "what's your assessment of all this?"

"I think we're dealing with an extraordinary person here, one with courage, athletic skills, and the sharpest mind we've seen in a long time."

"Ms. Varian, what does the prosecutor's office think about this woman?" Walt said.

"Well, she didn't interfere with police operations here; she was gone before you arrived. If it is true that she somehow managed to disable city surveillance cameras selectively, that's a small-potatoes felony. From what I've seen, we don't have much to go on, and most juries would give this girl a get-out-of-jail-free card in seconds.

However, the two perps are in deep trouble because we have a video of this attempted killing. At least we've got four from the new Albanian mob in the slammer."

"Commander DiMarco," Walt said, "What's our next move?"

"First, I'm removing Mac Merrick from undercover work; he's not exactly a secret anymore. I'll use him as an investigator for our task force. We need to find this Angel. Ms. Varian is right; this girl knows more about this mob than any of us. We’ll sweep all the city's self-defense instructors to see if any of them have trained her.

We caught a break when the tourist who videoed the attempted assassination agreed to let us have the video exclusively in exchange for box seats at a Cubs game. The FBI blurred out Angel's face, returning the modified video to us.

Once again, the excellent image of her face today, her prints, and the small DNA sample yielded absolutely nothing. She's still a ghost."

OK, everybody," said Deputy Superintendent Linda Shannon, "the fourth of July is in two days. Get some rest, and we'll hit this hard later in the week."

Healing Effects of a Hot Tub

Since July 4th was a Sunday, Anne Merrick called the family to assemble at their Highland Park home on the lakeshore. One of the firm’s founding partners, Ezekial Dawson, contracted War Horse Security to protect the family. Three guards patrolled the grounds and minded the gate.

Once he heard the news, Veronica's husband Pete flew home from Albuquerque. He has been by Ronnie's side ever since, slowly bringing her back to her usual self.

Showing a flash of her natural ebullience, Ronnie suggested that the Merrick children and spouses assemble in the hot tub adjacent to the swimming pool. Ben was already in the whirlpool with Willie.

Mac eased himself into the bubbling waters and sunk to shoulder level, maneuvering to place himself near one of the jets. Ronnie and Pete were the last to arrive. Splashing into the tub, Ronnie took her seat across from Mac.

"Pete, how hot was it in Albuquerque?" Willie said.

"123 degrees at 1:00 p.m., 100 degrees at night. At least it was a dry heat. Say, Mac, any girlfriends to report?"

"Same old, same old, Pete. I have some casual friends."

"Come on, Mac. Those policewomen must be throwing themselves at you."

Mac responded by sinking into the tub until his head was underwater. He stayed submerged for 20 seconds. Coming up for air, Pete quipped, "Find any horny policewomen down there?"

"Yes, I did. I gave the horny policewoman a thermonuclear orgasm. She left to sleep it off."

Everybody laughed.

"Seriously, Pete, there's a lot of dating and mating in the Chicago PD; that's why we have so many multi-generational police families. I just feel that it's best not to mix sex and duty. I want to advance in the force, make Commander someday. Relationships that go sour have throttled many a career."

"In all businesses, little brother," Ronnie said, "the adage don't shit where you eat still applies. Especially now that the Me-Too movement thirty-five years ago has borne fruit."

"But Mac, a young man your age needs some kind of sexual outlet," Willy said.

"Can everybody get off my sex life? I don't ask you about your sexual proclivities, do I?"

"Well, Veronica puts on her Cheerleader costume at least once a month for me," Pete said.

"And Ben has a special treatment for my dry mouth condition," Willie said, giggling for a few seconds.

"Alright, that does it. I'm going where it's safe," Mac said before he dropped down again to the bottom of the tub.

Serious Talk

Night had fallen, and the clear sky and waxing crescent moon caused Lake Michigan to shimmer as Mac, Ronnie, and Ben entered the Merrick mansion’s great room. His mother and father lounged on the leather sofa, enjoying the view.

“May we join you?” Ben said.

“Delighted,” Anne said.

“So, Mac. Any success in identifying our Angel?”

“She’s a ghost, Dad. The FBI ran a complete facial recognition analysis on her. It came up fruitless. She’s not on any facial database we can access—the same for the partial fingerprints we found.

Since I guessed her age to be no older than twenty-five, the FBI used an Artificial Intelligence analysis of Chicago birth records for the five years she might have been born. Understandably, it’s not a sure bet that she was born in Chicago. Still, we average about 40,000 new babies in Chicago every year. All hospitals enter their births into a City Hall database.

They got a hit. The baby that should have been number 37413 has no birth record. The physical hospital record is missing, and somebody deleted all digital records. If that’s the Angel, she was born on December 22, 2037. She’d be 23 years old today.”

“Did she expunge the records, Mac? Or someone else?”

“Well, Mom, considering that she caused city surveillance cameras to freeze and thus mask her actions, I think we’re dealing with a Ninja computer genius. So, yeah, the Angel probably removed all her records.”

Mac stared at the floor for several uncomfortable seconds, his expression disconsolate.

“What’s wrong, Mac?” Ben said.

“I’m just disappointed, Ben. Disappointed in myself.”

“What on earth for, Mac?”

“I’ve endangered you, Ronnie, mom, and dad by my police work. If I hadn’t stood up to dad years ago regarding my college and career choice, none of this would be happening. Instead, I’ve caused a psychotic criminal gang to seek revenge on the people I love, and I don’t know if I can stop it.”

“Mac, you can’t blame yourself for any of this,” Anne said. “This house is a veritable fortress, with zoning easements allowing unscalable fencing, infra-red intrusion beams, and a mechanical gate. Why? Because we are always in peril of retaliation by clients and opponents dissatisfied with their legal outcomes. Danger and the Merrick family are old friends, Mac.”

“Still, Mom, if it weren’t for that fearless and clever woman we call the Angel, the Merrick family tonight would be just you and Ben. None of this would have happened if I hadn’t been so obstinate in my senior year in high school.”

“Mac,” Ronnie said, “our law firm seeks fair treatment for the guilty and exoneration for the innocent. You protect the people of Chicago from criminals preying upon them. We are both seeking justice? I am proud of your police work. Everyone in the family is.”

“Including me, Mac,” John Merrick said as he turned to face his youngest son.

“I’d like to address the college placement issues that caused discord between you and me ten years ago. I have some things to say, and I want you, your mother, Ronnie, and Ben to listen attentively without interruption.

“Parents know that the only legacy they leave in this world that really lasts is the children they conceive and nurture. Your parents add their very essence to humanity’s gene pool via their children, grandchildren, and future generations that follow. It’s the only thing that lasts. After hundreds of years, the wind wears away the engraving on a tombstone. Any physical record of your presence on this earth eventually fades. But not the children. They are the record that survives, and it’s been that way since the dawn of humanity.

“Ten years ago, I forgot that simple wisdom. Somehow, I got into my head the self-centered notion that our law firm was my legacy. I assumed my children would cement that legacy by attending law school, passing the Bar, and working in the firm. Eventually, they would take leadership positions, and our law firm would always have the Merrick stamp.

“I blew my stack when you told us you didn’t want to be a lawyer. I forced you to apply to Cornell, making you take a trip to tour the campus. I laid down an ultimatum: go to Cornell Law School, or I wouldn’t pay for any other college you selected. You stopped arguing with me. I thought I had won and that all three of my children would follow in my footsteps.

“But you had other aspirations. You knew that when you turned eighteen, Anne and I would give you a $15 million trust fund shortly after high school graduation, just like we did for Ben and Ronnie. As soon as we transferred the trust fund to an investment account set up by Ronnie’s new husband, Pete Fieldstone, you withdrew what you needed for St. Joseph’s University in Philadelphia and canceled your Cornell application.

“The night you informed me of this, I was furious. I knew I couldn’t stop you, but I told you you’d never get another dime from this family. I effectively disowned you. It was the most egregious mistake of my life.

“Worse yet, I failed to see you off when you left for college with your car and the U-Haul trailer. I acted like I never wanted to see you again. It took your mother four years to convince me of the error of my ways. She explained that I had no right to dictate the course of my children’s lives; it was OK for any of our children to break the Merrick family mold.

“When I realized how wrong-headed I’d been, I chartered a jet to take the family and our law partners to your graduation. We had a celebration dinner at the Barkley Prime Steakhouse. I apologized. We hugged. I had my son back.

“I found that lovely apartment at the Grant Park Tower and offered to pay for it. You refused and insisted that it come out of your trust fund. I acquiesced because you wanted to be in charge of your affairs. I secretly admired you for that.

“We were so proud of you for finishing at the top of the class at the Chicago Police Academy and promoted so quickly to the Joint FBI/Chicago Joint Task Force on Organized Crime. Everything you’ve done is a credit to our family. I want you to know that.”

“Dad, you must know by now that I don’t carry grudges. I never once wavered in my love for you and Mom. Of course, I’m headstrong. Who gave me this trait? It had to be you.”

“Yep,” John Merrick said, “like father, like son!”

Natalie Grills the Cops

*Another Friday, another police bar*, thought Natalie Rumsfort as she barged into Rumble's, a popular bar and grill just outside Precinct One. She wore a tight chartreuse yellow tank top suitably low cut for today's intelligence-gathering mission.

"Natalie, over here!" shouted a policeman at one of the tables.

Natalie flashed a smile and headed their way, reminding herself of what a professor at journalism school said.

"Cultivating sources is the seed of a future story."

"Grab a chair, Lois Lane," Officer O'Dell N'Tua said.

O'Dell is one of the most handsome African American officers she knows, which means she must diplomatically decline his offer for an overnight liaison. Exchanging sex for information works only once while playing hard-to-get succeeds every time.

O'Dell took a glance at her tank top as she sat down.

"Am I allowed to look?"

"Am I allowed to ask questions?"

"Fair enough, Natalie. I'll take that deal."

The policewoman next to O'Dell asked sweetly.

"Am I allowed to look?"

Natalie gave her a sly smile.

"I'm strictly men these days, Annabell. Like every girl on campus, I tried a couple of girls in college, but I like the challenge that a male presents me."

Natalie turned to the third policeman at the table.

"I'm sorry, I don't know you. I'm Natalie Rumsfort of the Sentinel."

He reached out and shook her hand.

"Vince DiGrazio, ma'am. I'm just out of the Academy."

"Nice to meet you, Vince. Now, O'Dell, what did you hear about that assassination attempt last Tuesday?"

"I'm sure you know it was John Merrick, some highfalutin lawyer, and his circling-shark daughter, Veronica Merrick Fieldstone."

"That's a metaphor for a superior attorney who beats you in court, right? Merrick has a son on the force, doesn't he?"

"Yep, but I've never met him."

"Was he the undercover officer that the Angel saved?"

"You know I can't say that, Natalie. We never discuss undercover work."

"After the Angel saved the Merricks, what did she say to them before running off?"

"Nothing," Annabell offered.

"Do you have any videos of the event, like a security camera?"

"They have a video from a bystander. The woman exchanged the video for Cubs tickets. It shows everything. The FBI is altering the video to blur the girl's face; maybe you'll see it in a few days," O'Dell said.

"What about the security cameras in the area?"

"That's the odd thing," Annabelle said. "All the security cameras in the vicinity froze just as the hit commenced and stayed frozen for 30 minutes."

"Really? You have no idea where she went?"

"I heard she ran into an office building, headed for the basement, changed clothes, and used a little-known passageway between the buildings to escape. They found something interesting in the basement restroom."

"Yeah? What?"

"Waitress!" O'Dell said. The waitress came over and asked what they wanted. Natalie held up her smart card.

"Give them whatever they want."

Low-grade bribery completed, Natalie asked again.

"What was in the basement restroom?"

Annabell continued, "They found a flexible plastic sheet with, get this, freckles printed on it. They think she changed clothes, put on a wig, and applied freckles to her face."

"Oh, my God!" Natalie said. "I bumped into that woman in the crowd near the crime scene. She was tall, beautiful, with long straight black hair, and had freckles on her face."

"Lots of people have freckles, Natalie."

"Yes, but this girl was wearing a wig. I noticed a wisp of blond hair near her temple, where the wig didn't completely cover her natural hair. Jesus, I saw the Angel!"

"What happened to her?" O'Dell said.

"I grabbed her wrist and asked her if she had seen anything. She said nothing but deftly broke my grip by twisting and pushing her hand. Then she smiled at me and bugged out. Jesus, I've got to find this woman."

"Get in line with everybody else in the city.”

CHAPTER 7

Searching for an Angel

Chinatown

Imer ordered Daniel Hoti and Gezim Zenelli to get more protection clients. As they entered Zhang's Oriental Emporium, many customers were milling about, admiring all the Chinese-made products. This store was first on their list of several that day. Leaning over one of the counters, they asked the Asian saleslady if they could speak to the manager.

She called out to Vincent Zhang, a ninth-generation descendant of the Chinese immigrants who built Abraham Lincoln's transcontinental railroad. Vincent walked toward them.

"What can I do for you, gentlemen?"

"Is there somewhere we can talk privately?" Hoti said.

"No, there isn't, What's this about?"

"All right, we represent a company offering specialized security services for businesses in this area. Crime is at an all-time high, and junkies desperate for fixes are burglarizing other shops on this street. We have ways to prevent that."

"And just how much does this service cost?"

"Just five percent of your gross receipts. We visit every two weeks to look at your books, and then payment is due."

"This is just a standard protection racket. I'm not interested. Please leave my store immediately."

Gritting his teeth, Hoti grabbed the elderly Zhang by his shirt collar, pushing him back into the counter. A few display items fell to the floor, and all the customers froze, unsure what would happen next.

One female customer, lurking behind a display of Chinese garments, started moving toward the two men. She silently positioned herself close to the mob thugs, who were unaware of her presence.

"We are not people to be trifled with," Daniel said.

The other mobster, Gezim, stepped forward and grasped Zhang's wrist. Once again, Angel's intervention was swift. She yanked forcefully on Gezim’s back collar, extending her leg to trip him backward to the floor. A short kick to his chin put him on queer street. Daniel lunged toward her, but she deftly deflected his left arm and struck him on the neck with the heel of her hand. The blow momentarily stunned him, so a groin kick and a knee to the chin sent him straight to the floor. She quickly restrained them with large cable zip-ties as Zhang knelt to assist her.

Zhang noticed that one customer was recording all this with her smartphone.

"May I see what you got?"

She smiled and gave the phone to him.

He watched a bit of the recording and then erased it.

"Here," Vincent said, returned the phone. "Recording is not permitted in our store."

He looked at Angel.

“Go to the back of the store, turn right, and run just a few feet; you'll find a path between the stores across the alley to get you away from here. Run, Angel. We'll take care of these criminals our way."

Angel flashed a smile and turned toward the back of the store. All the customers started clapping and cheering. Like a wisp of wind, she disappeared. Zhang called for his loading dock crew and two other employees.

"Let's take these two thugs to Fei's Tattoo Shop down the alley. They need some artwork.”

They dragged the two trussed-up and gagged mobsters to the loading area, placed them on a dolly, and carted them down the back alley to the tattoo shop near the block's end.

"What do we have here?” said Johnny Fei.

"These two criminals tried to force me to buy protection services. I'd like you to tattoo the word 'Asshole' on their foreheads. Then my boys will drive them to an industrial area and dump them. How much will that cost, Johnny?"

“No charge,” was the answer.

The Dojo

It had been a couple of weeks since the attempted assassination of John Merrick and his daughter Veronica. Leads had dried up; it looked like the Albanian Mob had gone underground. Mac and Elisha Simmons spent the workdays interviewing the owners of Chicago's many Dojos, inquiring about training a tall, pretty, blond woman in martial arts and street fighting. So far, all denied that they trained the Angel.

"So, what's next on the list?" Elisha said.

Searching through the research pages he prepared at Precinct 9 headquarters, Mac found the next school nearby.

"The Gold Dragon Wushu School is just down the block."

As Mac and Elisha approached the school, it was unremarkable in appearance. A simple sign in both English and Mandarin identified the establishment. Large glass windows gave pedestrians a view of the interior, which looked like an ordinary gymnasium. The doorway was on the side; they entered and walked down a hallway to reach the school's door.

Inside, a couple of students were using a treadmill and bicycle. A tall Asian gentleman arose from his desk as they approached. Elisha spoke first, slowly in her southern accent.

"Are you Mr. Yong Wu, the owner of this here martial arts school?"

He made direct eye contact with Elisha as he spoke.

"Yes, I am Master Wu, owner of this Dojo specializing in the Wushu Discipline. How can I be of service?"

He bowed slightly to Elisha.

"Mister Wu, I’m Special Agent Elisha Simmons of the FBI."

She flashed her FBI badge at him.

"With me is Officer Mackenzie Merrick from the Chicago Police Department."

Mac showed his badge to Master Wu. Mac let Elisha do the talking because the FBI tends to intimidate people.

“Mister Wu, let me start by sayin’ that we’re just here gatherin’ information. You and your school ain’t the subjects of any investigation we’re conductin’. However, let me remind you, it’s a felony to lie to an FBI agent.”

"Agent Simmons, subterfuge is not permitted in this school by anybody, including its Master."

“Very well, Mister Wu. We’re goin’ round all the self-defense schools in Chicago, lookin’ for info on a woman who’s mighty good at street fightin’ and real smart. All we know is she’s tall and beautiful, with natural blond hair. Y’all got anyone here who fits that description?”

"I have many students that match that description, Agent Simmons. One-third of our students are female, of many races and hair colors. Do you have a photograph of the woman in question?"

"Yes, we do. But the FBI’s keepin’ the photos of her secret for now."

"We are at an impasse, Special Agent Simmons, an impasse of your making. Just who is this woman you seek?"

"We call her the Angel," Mac said. "She saved the lives of my father and sister. She has information about the Albanian mob we need and may be in danger herself."

Master Wu folded his arms and cracked a smile.

"Ah, yes, the Angel. I saw the television report on her from the Sentinel reporter. Has she committed a crime, Officer Merrick?"

"No, she hasn't."

"We believe that she might’ve tampered with city surveillance cameras in one of her appearances," Agent Simmons said.

"Seems like a minor infraction, considering the good she did, wouldn't you say, Agent Simmons?"

"In the grand scheme of things, you may be right, Mister Wu. Let me ask ya one more question. Have y’all given any private instructions, not part of your scheduled classes?"

"They wouldn't be private if I were to discuss them with others.”

"Answer the question, Mr. Wu."

"I have, on rare occasions, given private instructions.”

"In your private lessons, have y’all ever taught her, the Angel?"

"Without seeing her photograph, I can't answer your question. We are at another impasse, Agent Simmons."

"Master Wu," Mac said, "this woman, this Angel, seems to be on a one-woman vendetta against the most violent criminal gang on Earth, the Albanian mob. If we could contact her and secure her cooperation, we could get her to safety and use what she knows to bring those who harmed her to justice."

Wu fixed his steel gaze on Mac.

"There's a proverb attributed to the Buddha, Officer Merrick. ‘Whatever precious jewel there is in the heavenly worlds, there is nothing comparable to one who is awakened.’"

"Mr. Wu, thanks for your time. Here’s my card. Please give me a call if you come across any information bout’ this Angel person." Elisha said.

Walking down the street, Mac turned to Elisha.

"Think he's the one who trained Angel?"

"Of course, he is."

"Do you want to lean on him?"

"Nah, he's one of the good guys. Anyhow, if this angel gal is on a crusade against the Albanian mob, she’d never show her face in the Gold Dragon Wushu Dojo and endanger her Sensei.”

Angels in the Park

A creature of disciplined habit, Mac knocked off work at 5 p.m. and returned to his condo. Leaving Grant Park Tower at 5:30 p.m. dressed in running shorts and a blue T-shirt and carrying only his iPhone, badge, and condo key card, Mac planned a two-mile run today, sensible in this heat but certainly more fun than the Tower’s treadmills. He eventually reached the Lakefront Trail, a scenic pedestrian sidewalk with beautiful Lake Michigan views and the cooler air flowing in from the water.

As Mac neared the end of the Lakefront trail, he was building up quite a sweat. Approaching a massive tree, a woman stepped out from behind the tree right into his path. He came to a quick stop.

It was her, his angel, in a light-yellow T-shirt and snug-fitting Daisy Dukes shorts. The late afternoon sun revealed how beautiful she was: tall, athletically slim, prominent breasts, and long natural blond hair. Her sparkling green eyes with a pronounced limbal ring mesmerized him. She looked at him, a pursed smile reflecting amusement at his surprise. Angel’s complexion entranced him, nary a freckle or birthmark visible on her pale pink countenance. She had a canvas bag draped over her shoulder. Mac guessed her age as twenty-four.

They stared at each other for several seconds until Angel gave him a broader smile, showing her white teeth; her eyes brightened even more. She lifted her right hand, wagging her fingers to say “Follow me,” and led him silently through the line of trees near the end of the Lakefront trail halfway up Grant Park’s grassy knoll. She motioned for them to sit down at a spot where nobody was close enough to hear what she might say.

Mac glanced at the Boston Dynamics MowBots working north of their location. *Those machines would take over an hour before they reached our location,* *likewise for the MetaBots edging the sidewalk*, Mac thought.

Angel placed herself gracefully on the plush lawn facing him. Reaching into her canvas bag, she pulled out an Apple tablet computer. Mac remembered his sister’s advice: “Don’t push her. Let her reveal herself at her own pace.”

She powered up the tablet computer, opened a text-to-voice app, and started typing. The female voice from the speakers had an American accent. Years of artificial intelligence (AI) improvements to these systems gave the voice a realistic cadence and emotion.

“I'm taking somewhat of a risk today, Officer Merrick. My heart tells me that you are an honest and just man from a good family and would not attempt to apprehend me.”

"Please call me Mac. No, I will not apprehend you. I owe you my life. My father and sister owe you their lives. Why are you talking to me through a text-to-voice app?”

“I am unable to speak, Mac.”

“How long have you been mute?”

“All of my life.”

Tell me your name?"

"It’s best that I remain anonymous.”

“Then I will call you Angel until you trust me enough to tell me your real name.”

“I am no angel. You have witnessed my usage of force.”

“You’re wearing a wedding ring. Are you married?”

“No. It’s a white topaz ring. Men and occasionally women approach me while running. I just hold up my fake ring and shake my head ‘No.’ That usually works.”

“How did you know the Albanian mob would kill me?”

“I possess a genius-level understanding of computer-based systems. I have broken into their computers and monitored their chat applications.”

“The Albanian Mafia Shqiptare has gone high-tech?”

“These criminals have penetrated many Fortune 500 companies. It’s larceny on a grand scale. When I found out they intended to kill you, I decided to intervene. I didn’t realize that my action would trigger a cascade of insane vengeance against your family. You are fortunate that I have always managed to stay one step ahead of them.”

“Have they penetrated us, the Chicago Police and the FBI?”

"Yes, the Chicago Police and the FBI have been totally infiltrated. The Albanians know everything; they see city security cameras, listen to your cell phones, and read your texts and emails. They can look at any computer file you have. The intrusion is malware and hidden subroutines that you will not find. It is the most sophisticated computer invasion ever, surpassing even Chinese and Russian digital spying. The only thing they can't crack is the new FBI satellite phone.”

“Have you ever worked for them? Are you a disgruntled former employee?”

*“*No*.”*

"OK, let's get to the heart of the matter. What did the Albanian mob do to you? Did they hurt you?"

Angel went silent for several seconds, looking down at her tablet computer. When she looked up, her eyes watered ever so slightly. Mac realized he had touched a nerve. She started typing again.

"I am not here to discuss the reasons for my activities. I have something more important to tell you."

"I'm listening."

Angel had prepared a text message for Mac. She just touched a screen icon to start it.

"The Albanians will receive twenty-five hundred pounds of Chinese fentanyl tomorrow night. The shipment is aboard a Beckman Trucking Company Tesla Truck, Oregon License plate MJ-2487K. It arrived by boat from China on June 30th. The Portland, Oregon shipping terminal is corrupt, and customs officials did not correctly search this shipping container; bribery, I assume.

The mob loaded the container on the Beckman truck and programmed it to drive here on autopilot. It will arrive tomorrow at 10:30 p.m. at the Brownman Trucking Yard at 5205 West Lake Street in Melrose Park. The rail yard to the west and buildings and trees to the east will shield the transfer.

The Albanians will arrive in a black step van. The Beckman truck will stop, and a mob driver will enter the cab and manually steer it to the lot's back. I should also mention that they are planning ten people for this operation, all armed. Eight will be carrying assault rifles. It will be dark there, not much moon. I'm guessing twenty-five hundred pounds of fentanyl might be worth $200 million or more. This much fentanyl will kill a lot of people."

Angel rummaged through her canvas bag and produced a laminated sheet, computer printed on both sides, with all the details she had given him. She handed it to him.

"Mac, I have more to tell you.”

Mac was patient as she typed on the tablet. While Angel is a fast typist, she takes minutes to communicate.

“On all vehicles you use tomorrow, go into the setup, and turn off anything that transmits out of the car: no cellular, WiFi, or satellite link. That way, they cannot track you. Use only word-of-mouth and FBI satellite phones to communicate. These people are vicious, Mac. Be careful."

"Thank you for that. Now I have something important I want you to hear."

"I'm listening."

"You are not alone in this world. My family will do anything to help you. But for me, Angel, I can't stop thinking about you. I know you saved my life, but it's deeper than that."

"You have a girlfriend. Her name is Anneliese, yes?"

"You accessed the Grant Park Tower's guest logs?"

"Child's play."

"You deserve the truth, even if it is a bit embarrassing for me. Anneliese is someone I get together with to have occasional sex. I avoid sexual liaisons at work; she is constantly on the road for her accounting firm. Both of us know that this is a relationship of convenience only. While I respect her immensely, I don't love her, Angel. Never have, never will."

"There's nothing to be ashamed of. We do what we have to in this world we have been born into."

“Angel, tell me what I can do to help you?”

She locked her gaze at him for several uncomfortable seconds.

“I would die for you.”

She flashed a warm smile before starting to type on her iPad.

“Mac, I have risked my life for you and your family. May I ask a favor of you?”

“What do you need?”

“If you reveal to the Chicago Police, the FBI, or the press that I am mute, the mob will easily track me down and kill me. Seriously, how many tall, blond, mute girls are there in Chicago?”

“Then I won’t say a word about it. If I’m pressed on it someday, I’ll simply explain that I was protecting an extremely valuable informant.”

“Thank you. The less you and your family know about me, the safer it is for them. I will contact you when I have information that you can use.”

“How will you contact me?”

She stared at him again, finally yielding an impish smile.

“In your condo’s living room at the Grant Park Tower, on your cherry console table under the east windows, are two items: a portrait of your family having dinner at Cancun, Mexico, and a Grecian vase with an image of the Goddess Aphrodite. If I need you, Mac, I can find you.”

“Well, you little devil!” Mac said, laughed heartily as Angel smiled.

“I’m teasing you, Mac. There’s a Grant Park Tower promotional video of your apartment on their website. I would never invade your home. You have work to do. It’s time for me to leave.”

With that, Angel stood up, and Mac followed suit. Stepping closer to him, she placed her hands on his rib cage. He knew what she wanted and embraced her immediately. Angel hugged him tightly, digging her face into his shoulder. Mac could smell the body wash she used, the faint smell of jasmine in her hair. It was enthralling.

Releasing the hug, she looked at his face; they were inches apart. He wanted to kiss her, but he remembered Ronnie’s advice. As her eyes widened just a smidge, like we all sometimes do after asking a question, Angel slowly stepped back, flashing a luminous smile.

She reached into her bag and pulled out a Cubs baseball cap and sunglasses. Putting them on, Angel smiled one last time, turned around, and started sprinting north.

*I think I’m in love,* Mac thought as he watched her till she ran out of sight.

Making a Plan

Mac returned to Grant Park Tower and jumped into the shower. After throwing on some casual clothes, he dialed the Chicago FBI. They told him Assistant Special Agent in Charge David Hanko had already headed home. Mac used his iPhone to command his Tesla to leave its parking space and be ready at the building's entrance. Saying goodbye to Devon, the concierge, he used Tesla’s setup screen to shut off the StarLink and cellular system. The screen immediately squawked, complaining that this would disable Tesla's automatic maintenance systems. Microcomputer technology has advanced so far that the onboard computer contains all the United States' mapping data. As Angel suggested, the GPS and autopilot systems would still work, but nobody could track where he was going. He entered FBI Special Agent Hanko’s home address in Hinsdale, southwest of the city, and started the journey.

Ringing the doorbell at the Hanko home, a woman wearing a light pink jumpsuit opened the door.

"Are you Gwen Hanko?"

"Yes, I am."

"Mrs. Hanko, I'm Officer Mac Merrick of the Chicago Police. I need to speak to your husband."

She turned her head and yelled, "David, there's Officer Merrick here for you."

David Hanko came quickly.

"Mac Merrick, what brings you out in this heatwave?"

"Sir, I have something important to discuss with you that can't wait. Is there somewhere we can talk privately?"

"Sure, let's go into my office."

Pulling up a chair at David’s desk, Mac fetched a notepad and a Sharpie and wrote:

*Power off your laptop and personal cell phone. The FBI satellite phone is OK. Are there any Internet-connected cameras in this room?*

Agent Hanko raised his eyebrows as he read the instructions. Nonetheless, he complied with the request.

"There are no other cameras in this room, Mac. What's with all the cloak-and-dagger stuff?"

"David, I was running through Grant Park a couple of hours ago, and the Angel stepped in front of me. She led me to a secluded spot and told me some things."

"OK, what did she say?"

“Angel told me that the Albanians have completely infiltrated the Chicago PD and the local FBI. They have access to every cell phone conversation, text messages, email, computer files, and security cameras around the city. They know our every move."

David sat back in his chair, drumming his fingers on the table's edge.

"That's quite a claim she's making. I imagine that our computer people will say it's BS. What else did she say?"

"She gave me this," Mac said, handing him her printed notes.

Hanko started reading Angel's double-sided notes. The more he read, the more shocked he looked.

"The detail in this is mind-boggling, Mac. She must be one of them, possibly disgruntled?”

“I asked her that. She told me that she has never worked for them.”

“It could be an elaborate trap to kill police and FBI in retaliation. Do you believe her?"

"Yes, I do. My intuition is that this girl is telling the truth."

"OK, it looks like we have an avenging angel here. Sum up for me, Mac."

"We could simply intercept that truck on the highway and seize the fentanyl. You'd have one of the biggest fentanyl busts in Illinois history. However, by letting the shipment arrive at the Browning Truck Yard, we could bag the drugs and ten mob people in one fell swoop.

“Angel suggested that all planning must be by word-of-mouth or via the FBI satellite phone. All vehicles must have their Internet connection disabled. Secrecy is paramount here; they are watching us."

"Sit tight, Mac."

David used his FBI satellite phone to photograph both sides of Angel's notes. He then called the Special Agent in Charge D'Marcus Mason and set the phone on a holder so Mason could see both of them.

"David, are you at home?" Mason said.

"Yes, D'Marcus, and I have Mac Merrick of the Chicago PD with me."

"Ah yes, good evening, Officer Merrick. What's going on, David?"

"Mac was contacted by that Angel girl a few hours ago. She tipped him that a huge delivery of Chinese fentanyl would arrive tomorrow at 10:30 p.m. in Melrose Park. She provided Mac with two sheets of notes. I'll transmit the photos to you right now. Read her notes carefully."

Mac and David watched as Mason carefully read the notes, taking his time, occasionally raising his eyebrow. When he finished, Mason looked up.

"Color me impressed. She must be on the inside to have this detail. Still, if this info is accurate, we have to act."

"Sir," Mac said, "She told me she never worked for them. I think she's a genius who has turned the tables on them."

"Could be, Merrick; we just don't know. In any case, let's use what she gave us. Agent Hanko, do you remember that large warehouse in Melrose Park we seized five years ago? I think it's about three blocks from the West Lake Street address she gave."

"Yes, I remember that place. The government still owns it. That could be our base of operations."

"Exactly. I'll call Superintendent Green. He has an FBI satellite phone; I'll get the ball rolling. It'll be a joint FBI - Chicago PD operation. We'll supply the heavy firepower. Officer Merrick, you go home and get some sleep. An FBI vehicle will pick you up at 8 a.m. sharp at your residence. Oh, David, requisition an FBI satellite phone for Officer Merrick. It will be his until further notice.”

CHAPTER 8

FBI – Chicago Drug Bust

Night Action

Mac was grateful for the FBI night vision glasses while walking carefully on the Union Pacific rail yard tracks. It was pitch black, and he was following a parked train of rail cars. With a group of twenty police and FBI agents, Mac stopped behind a flat car just 200 feet from the Brownman Trucking company, which abutted the rail yard. He couldn't see the spot where the fentanyl transfer was to occur. There was a four-foot retaining wall, crumbling in several locations, and a line of derelict trailer bodies rusting away. The area was all abandoned trucking companies and warehouses except for the Brownman business. It was just a tiny 3-bay garage for tractor-trailers and a contractor's mobile office. All the lights were off, and no one else was on site when they arrived.

The FBI used 24-foot ladders in the dark to get eight snipers onto the warehouse roof, situating themselves to deliver a deadly crossfire if needed. The team removed the ladders and placed them in a field along the tracks. The 40 people ahead of Mac crossed the rail yard into the neighboring business, a dumpster operation. It had a wrought iron fence with thick bushes between it and the abandoned warehouses, so they lay in wait, silent and out of sight. Another 40 police and FBI personnel were hiding in a thick line of bushes north of the warehouses, waiting for the command to close the ring.

Mac's group was to cut off escape across the rail yard. Next to him, Special Agent Gabe Marecki had a rifle and a megaphone. Mac held a brand-new FBI-issue M6 Carbine Rifle, a lighter-weight version of the Vietnam-era M-16 with a 30-bullet magazine and a high-tech night vision scope. Orders were to shoot to kill if necessary.

He listened to his earpiece, connected to his FBI phone. Special Agent Mason ran the operation with the assistance of Superintendent Green. The Air Force's new Boeing SkyEagle drone circling overhead was also in the loop. The optics on the drone are state-of-the-art and dazzling. The Air Force brags that they can see the sweat on a mouse's nuts. The pilot identified himself as Dragonafter the mythical fire-breathing monster.

*"OK, boys and girls, Dragon here. I see a black step van approaching; it's a large one. There’s also a black SUV following."*

Mac could see some of the team in the dumpster lot scrunch down.

*"Dragon here, they just let off a guy near the street. He's lighting a cig. Now the van and the SUV are driving to the back."*

Another five minutes elapsed; Mac could sense his excitement rise. He watched the headlights move towards the Brownman yard and stop right in front of him. He could only see the glare; the line of abandoned trailers occluded his view.

*"Dragon again. A tractor-trailer rig with two shipping containers is just a block away. Everybody is out of the step van; I see nine of them. The rig driver makes ten.*

*All right, I see eight of them with long guns.*

*I can't see handguns on the others, but the infrared blurs things slightly.*

*The truck stopped just inside the entrance. The guy is getting into the cab. OK, he's got manual control; he's driving it slowly to the back."*

Special Agent Mason got on the air.

"Mason here. Alpha team, move to close the circle while the truck noise masks your movement."

*"Dragon here. I can see all the teams in place. There's no path to escape without running the gauntlet of police fire."*

"All teams, wait till Dragonconfirms that they have unloaded the fentanyl," Mason said.

*"Dragon on the case. They've rigged up a ramp to the truck bed. They're opening the door to the rear shipping container."*

Mac fought his impatience. Gabe reached over and patted him twice on the shoulder."

*"Dragon again. They are bringing out what looks like plastic-wrapped bundles. They've set up a daisy chain to get them into the step van. Busy little fellows, aren't they."*

Dragoncame on again in a few minutes.

*"Dragon, that's the last of it; they're closing the container door."*

"All right, this is Mason, GO, GO, GO."

Mac heard an FBI agent on the roof use a powerful megaphone.

*"This is the police. Fifty officers, all heavily armed, have you surrounded. Drop your weapons and lie face down on the ground, with your hands on your head."*

Simultaneously, several officers on the roof lobbed a new police device called a SuperNova, just a baseball-sized transparent plastic sphere with unusually powerful LEDs as bright as a floodlight until the battery runs out. A dozen SuperNovas lit up the parking area like it was daytime.

One of the mobsters pointed his AR-15-style assault rifle toward the warehouse roof and fired a burst, but he was shooting blind and hit nothing.

"This is Mason. Fire at will; take them down!"

The gunfire started, and loud bangs thundered around the buildings like the grand finale of a fireworks show. Dragon began to report on the hits.

*"Dragon. Two down in the yard, not moving. One tossed his handgun and is lying down. Seven are heading for the retaining wall. They're going for the rail yard!"*

Three came over first. Marecki used his megaphone.

"Drop your weapons, or we will shoot you!"

The rest jumped over the retaining wall, and one of them shouted.

"Spread out. Let 'em have it!"

They scattered like ants, guns blazing. All seven had AR-15 assault rifles that sounded like cannons. Mac could see two of them approaching his flatcar.

Marecki said, "I've got the one on the right."

Mac trained his Colt M6 at the man on the left.

"Die, you fucking cops!" the thug yelled as he sprayed three shots in Mac's direction. The bullets whizzed overhead, but close enough that he could hear the swishing sound as they went by. The mobster made it past two sets of tracks when Mac fired. He aimed to the right of his sternum, placing the bullet right through the heart. The gunman froze for a moment, then sank to his knees. He raised his weapon again and aimed it toward Mac. There was no choice; Mac fired at his forehead, and the impact made him drop sideways like a demolished smokestack. He was dead.

*"Dragon here. They're all down. I repeat, they are all down. I'll sweep the area to make sure there are no stragglers."*

Special Agent Mason came on.

"Cease Fire, Cease Fire. Locate the perps and pass on their condition. The Melrose Park Police are converging to assist. EMT crews are on the way."

"Mac, are you all right?" Agent Marecki said.

"Yeah, I'm good. How about you?"

"I got a bit of shrapnel in my arm; one of the gang banger's shots ricocheted off the rail car. Pretty sure my tetanus shot is up to date."

"Let me have a look," Mac said.

He fished out his tactical flashlight, and Marecki showed him where the stuck shrapnel was.

"It's not bleeding very much. Want me to pull it out?"

"Nah, let's give the EMTs something to do."

They both climbed up onto the empty flat car and let themselves down on the other side. Mac went over to the mob guy he killed and turned him over; blood was everywhere. He was lifeless. Marecki did the same with his assailant; a single headshot had killed him.

"Jerry, throw me a couple of SuperNovas," Agent Marecki said.

His fellow FBI Agent tossed two of them, already lit, in their direction. They placed one near each corpse. The area was awash with sirens as police and emergency vehicles converged on their location.

Marecki walked over to Mac.

"Your first one, Mac?"

"No, a Meth-addled lunatic attacked me on a drug raid; he got one shot into my body armor. It took three shots to kill him. Can't say I liked it then, and I don't like it now."

"It's always that way, Mac. The amount of fentanyl in this bust could have killed a couple thousand people. Your Angel did a good thing tonight, and so did you."

Press Conference

All Chicago newspapers, TV stations, and news blogs received text messages that the Chicago Police and the FBI would hold a news conference at 3:00 p.m. on Friday. There were earlier news reports of a major police operation in Melrose Park. This news conference was like a magnet at the Public Safety Headquarters on South Michigan Avenue. Forty reporters were waiting, with an array of cameras and microphones in place.

Various flags, both state and federal, adorned the conference room. An oak podium with several microphones was next to a folding table with a cloth cover. On the floor was something substantial, also covered with a tarp. Numerous police officers stood guard at the doors and near the podium. Reporters were chattering loudly; rumors were rampant that a big drug bust had happened the night before.

At 3:00 p.m., Superintendent of Police Javion Green, First Deputy Superintendent of Police Linda Shannon, Special Agent D'Marcus Mason, Mayor Kotecki, and Illinois State Attorney General Della Baxter filed in and took their place behind the podium. Superintendent Green stepped up to the microphone and tapped it several times.

"Can everyone hear me?"

A couple of reporters in the back shouted “Yes.”

"OK, let's get started. Last night, a task force of Chicago police and FBI personnel conducted a drug interdiction operation in Melrose Park. We intercepted a delivery of twenty-five hundred pounds of powdered fentanyl from China. The ten-person drug gang unloading this cargo did not surrender, and a short gunfight ensued. Six of this gang were killed, three critically injured, and one surrendered." Motioning to the officers to remove the cover, Green continued.

"Here, you can see what 2500 pounds of fentanyl look like."

Uncovering the booty caused an audible murmur from the crowd of reporters. The table had the recovered handguns and assault rifles. The seized drugs were in 60-pound bags, about 42 of them. Powdered fentanyl is pure white; the Chinese plastic bags had a slight yellow tint.

"We estimate that this amount of fentanyl would be worth $200 million on the street. Fentanyl is now the most dangerous illegal drug in the United States. The drug gang taking delivery of this material was well-armed. All had handguns, and seven had illegal military-type assault weapons. The three prisoners in the hospital are refusing to cooperate with us. Our investigation of this drug gang is just starting, but I assure you that we will currycomb the state to find this gang's leadership and bring them to justice. I want to introduce Special Agent D'Marcus Mason of the FBI to speak about their role in this."

Mason wore his usual FBI blue jacket, but his height and foreboding facial expression got everyone's attention.

"Good afternoon, everyone. The FBI is pleased to have been part of this joint FBI - Chicago Joint Task Force on Gangs field operation. As this successful interdiction demonstrates, we work, train, and plan together. Fentanyl is a synthetic drug derived from an organic pharmaceutical compound called piperidine. While China is trying to limit the production of fentanyl, too much of this is still getting through. Drug gangs in Chicago and elsewhere are mixing fentanyl into their cocaine supplies. Because of this, opioid overdose deaths are skyrocketing. The loss of life due to overdose deaths is now double the number killed yearly due to firearms."

After hearing from the assembled politicians, Superintendent Green offered to take questions.

"Superintendent Green, Sally Vustig of NBC Chicago, were any police or FBI killed or injured during this raid?"

"No, there were no fatalities or serious injuries. We had one twisted ankle, some scrapes, and some shrapnel lacerations. All officers are back on the job today.”

"Superintendent Green, Alan O'Keefe of the Tribune, how did you find out about this drug shipment?"

"We had a tip from an informant, Mr. O'Keefe."

"Sir, was that tip from the Angel?"

"We protect our sources; we will not discuss how we got this information. Next question."

"Superintendent Green, Natalie Rumsfort of the Sentinel, were the members of the drug gang Albanians?"

"Ms. Rumsfort, it is not a crime to be an Albanian. We have many officers on the force of Albanian ancestry, and our city has a vibrant Albanian community. That said, we have verified that six of the gang arrested are of Albanian ancestry."

"Sir. Isn't it true that this so-called Angel has thwarted multiple attempted assassinations by Albanian mob members? Isn't it true that she seems to have a vendetta against this group? Are you in communication with this Angel? Isn't Alan right that you got this tip from the Angel?"

"Again, Natalie, we do not reveal our sources, so it's fruitless for you to continue to ask. Next question.

The news conference droned on, many of the questions repetitious, a product of the reporter's penchant for asking the same thing repeatedly, hoping that someone would trip up and reveal the truth. Natalie thought to herself, *This Angel is the whole story. I have to find her*.

Chapter 9

Mob Meeting

On Friday evening, Imer, Lendina, Lewis, and Yilka sat around the conference table at the Chicago Cyber Engineering secure meeting room. Imer looked unusually nervous, knowing this video conference would not be pleasant.

Lewis started a video conference. Separate windows opened, revealing the faces of New York, Boston, Los Angeles, and Seattle bosses. Arsen Murka, the head of the New York mob and titular head of the Albanian syndicate in the United States, spoke first.

"This is the worst fuck-up we've had in decades, Imer. It's all over the news here. It makes us look like hillbillies running moonshine. Sixty-five million dollars! Down the drain. Six family members gunned down, and four others hospitalized or jailed. How could this have happened?"

"We don't know. Only fourteen people knew about the delivery: me, Yilka, two of our security group, and the ten guys we assembled to unload the truck. We don’t involve Dr. Morton in most of our drug, prostitution, and protection ops."

"Maybe I should have been involved," Lewis said.

Ari Dervishi, the head of the Boston group, spoke next.

"Look, Imer. You've got a traitor in your organization, a mole, a rat of some kind. Do you have any suspects?"

"No, we don't."

"Los Angeles here. What's this 'Angel' that gets some mention in the news about this? Is she surveilling us?"

"Dr. Morton, you take that one."

"Impossible. No one can break through our security here at Chicago Cyber Engineering. I use cyber techniques far more advanced than anything the Chinese and the Russians have."

"So, where are we?" Arsen Murka said. "It sure looks like the Chicago Police have you by the short hairs and will not let go."

"I'd like to say something," Lewis said.

"OK, Dr. Morton, we're listening."

"My cyber skimming operations are beyond state of the art. We netted $650 million last year and are looking at $800 million coming in this year. We use artificial intelligence to design our skimming to be below their radar. The more targets we penetrate, the more money we will make.

“This traditional blackmail, drug, and prostitution business you are running is so last century in thinking. It's too risky. What did you make from it last year? $120 million nationwide, as I recall."

"We appreciate your views and especially your monetary input to the organization, Lewis," Murka said. "However, our traditional lines of work are profitable and provide a potpourri of targets for bribery and blackmail. These operations keep the police and feds off our backs. We also keep our traditional business operations completely divorced from Chicago Cyber Engineering.

“Keep doing what you are doing. The leadership is happy with your work but remember that we financed your operation."

"Arsen," Imer said, "I still think we should rub out one of those fucking Chicago cops. However, this time, it should be one of the leaders."

"Do you have a candidate?"

"Yes, I suggest Ryan DiMarco, the Commander of the Gang Investigation Unit."

"OK, I think we all agree. However, and take no offense to this, I'd prefer to arrange the hit. I'm thinking of a guy named Vitomir Vukovic, a Serbian that we sometimes use, to kill this cop bastard. He's one of the most skilled assassins we know. He owns a rare sniper rifle, a Walther W2000. There are only twenty of these in existence, and he has one. We'll have to hire a corporate jet to fly to Mexico, use one of our border tunnels to get him across, and then drive him to Chicago. The operation will be hush-hush until the night before. We'll need a nondescript getaway vehicle with two drivers that I’ll supply. Not another word about this until we call you. You good with this, Imer?"

"Yes. Lewis will send you what we have on Commander DiMarco immediately."

“That will be all for now. The organization is unhappy with what happened," Arsen Murka said.

CHAPTER 9

The Serbian Hitman

The Hit Man

Using her kitchen tongs, Shelly DiMarco flipped the bacon strips in the cast iron pan. The bacon made a satisfying crackling sound, and the bacon grease aroma permeated the kitchen. She could hear Ryan's shaver buzzing in the bathroom down the hall. They were up this Monday at 6:00 a.m., a little earlier than usual. Ryan typically leaves at 7:30, and she follows at 8:30 to make her 10 a.m. psychology class at the University of Chicago. She's only a couple of years younger than her husband. Still, Shelly strives to have the same appearance as the day they met, shoulder-length, chestnut-colored straight hair with bangs cut at the top of the eyebrows.

She and Ryan had lived in a modest but comfortable home in Elmhurst, raising their two children: Beth and Alex. The children grew up, married, and moved away. When the Chicago Police promoted Ryan to Commander, they decided to sell their suburban domicile and live in the big city. They reside in a beautiful three-bedroom condominium at 1720 South Michigan Avenue in the Prairie District.

Shelly put the bagels into the toaster. Ryan likes a simple bagel with bacon and Dijon mustard with his coffee.

"Breakfast in two minutes, Ryan.”

The doorbell rang, and Shelly straightened up, surprised at the untimely intrusion. No one had ever rang their doorbell before 7 a.m. Shelly dropped her tongs on the counter, headed down the hallway to the front door, and peered at the door camera display. The visitor was female. Shelly unhooked the chain lock and opened the door.

Standing before her was a tall young woman with long blond hair, blue jeans, and a light blue cotton T-shirt. She had green eyes and a sculptured face, like a supermodel from Shelly's fashion magazines. The woman said nothing but held a smartphone, typing quickly with her thumbs. A feminine computerized voice rang out.

I mean no harm to you or your family. I must speak to Commander DiMarco. It is life or death.

Shelly is a policeman's wife, familiar with her husband's daily dangers. With that in mind, Shelly stared back at the face of the woman, who remained expressionless, her gaze locked on Shelly's eyes. Shelly turned her head towards the interior of the apartment and shouted.

"Ryan, come to the front door. Now Ryan. Now."

She looked at the woman but could hear her husband running towards them, sensing him detouring to grab his police revolver. Ryan DiMarco pulled up alongside his wife as she stepped sideways to make room for him in the doorway. He didn't point his pistol, but the woman noticed it, and her expression changed to surprise. She raised the smartphone several inches to emphasize that she meant no harm.

"Are you the Angel, the woman who saved Officer Merrick and some members of his family?" Ryan said.

She nodded her head.

"Why are you here?"

Angel lifted her smartphone and punched some screen icons, triggering a set of pre-programmed messages.

“The Albanian Mob has contracted a hit on you. They have positioned a sniper on the roof of the vacant Pincelli Construction building across the street. He is a Serbian assassin named Vitomar Vukovic. He has a Walther W2000 sniper rifle. He plans to kill you when you exit the lobby and enter your Tesla at 7:30 a.m.”

"Oh my God, Ryan."

"It's OK, Shelly. Angel, what else do you know?"

Angel tapped a screen icon, and another message rang out.

“Arsen Murka, the New York City head of the Albanian mob, arranged the hit. Three days ago, Vukovic flew in on a private jet to Mexico. The mob used a secret border tunnel to get him into the United States. A Mercedes Benz self-driving electric car brought him to Chicago yesterday. The get-away vehicle is a white van labeled Danworth Plumbing, probably stolen.

Two armed mob employees are in the van, parked on Michigan Ave, 300 feet south of 18th Street.”

*"*All right, Angel. What do you suggest we do?"

Again, she had a message already prepared*.*

“Call the FBI. They'll have to assemble a team with whoever they have. Disable all Internet and cellular systems in the vehicles they use.

I have set all city surveillance cameras around the FBI facility and in this area to loop the previous fifteen minutes, starting at 6:30 and ending at 8:30. I opened the east alley door on the empty Pincelli building. Use the stairwell to get to the roof.”

"Angel, why won’t you speak to me?”

She started typing on her smartphone as Ryan and Shelly waited patiently.

“I am unable to speak, Commander DiMarco. If you were to disclose this publicly, the mob would eventually track me down and kill me. You may be a ‘By the Book’ policeman, but I’m betting your heart is big enough not to sell me out to the mob.”

“You guessed right, Angel. Does Officer Merrick know this?”

“Yes.”

“Then he’s the only one I will discuss this with.”

“The mob can’t snoop on the FBI Satellite phones. I must leave now. I will give Officer Merrick anything new that I think will help you.”

Ryan placed his revolver on the table next to the door and stepped towards Angel.

"Angel, stay with Shelly and me,” Ryan said gently without the usual police authority voice.

“You'll be safe with us. You can't continue to take chances like this. It's my job to protect you. Let me help you."

Angel handed Ryan a printed sheet with all the details. She resumed the text-to-voice app.

"I have broken the law to get back at these people. My goal is to bankrupt these criminals and make them easy targets for the police. I accept that I will probably not live through this. I'm OK with that."

"That is not OK, Angel. Officer Merrick told me that he believes these people hurt you grievously. There's no justice in a suicide mission by you. I can get you protective custody, put you in a safe house, and guarantee that we will not prosecute you. You need to trust me, Angel. Let me help you!"

Angel smiled and started typing again.

"I'm already in a safe house, Commander DiMarco. By now, you must know that I have expunged all digital records of myself and a few physical records to boot. I know you mean well, but that may not be the case for others up the chain.”

"Ryan, let me say something." Shelly stepped closer to Angel.

"Before you leave, Angel, put my telephone number on your smartphone. Shelly DiMarco 312-555-4619."

Angel punched Shelly's info into her phone. She looked up at Shelly and flashed a warm smile.

"Angel, call me anytime you feel alone, upset, or discouraged. I will come to you by myself, anywhere you want, no police. You are not alone in this world, my friend. It's time for you to leave. Can you get away safely?"

"I have programmed surveillance cameras to mask my escape. Your husband has work to do; I must leave now."

Shelly opened her arms, and Angel stepped forward and embraced her. Shelly patted her gently on the shoulder. Angel turned to Commander DiMarco and stepped toward him. That was all he needed; he swooped his arms around her and gave her a bear hug like he'd embrace his daughter.

"Go, Angel, I'll take it from here."

With that, Angel turned and ran for the stairwell. In seconds, she was gone.

Counterattack

Ryan locked the door, engaging the deadbolt and the chain lock. He looked at his wife.

"If you've got things cooking, turn them off, and stay away from the windows."

He fetched his FBI satellite phone and dialed D'Marcus Mason, the Special Agent-in-charge of the Chicago FBI. The time was 6:25 a.m.

"Good morning, Ryan. Getting an early start today?"

"D'Marcus, Shelly and I just got a visit from the Angel. She says the mob has a professional hitman on the roof of the empty Pincelli Construction building across the street, waiting to pick me off when I enter my Tesla at 7:30 a.m."

"Jesus on roller skates, Ryan. What else did she tell you?"

"D'Marcus, write this down. The assassin is Vitomar Vukovic from Serbia and he has a rare Walther W2000 sniper rifle. Shelly, look up the address of Pincelli Construction. Oh, Angel said that Vukovic flew into Mexico, crossed over in a border tunnel, and drove to Chicago. Did you get all that?"

"Yes, Ryan. I jotted it all down," D'Marcus said.

"Honey," Shelly said, "the Pincelli Construction address is 1737 South Michigan Avenue. They went bust six months ago."

"Got it, Ryan. Stay on the phone. I'm going to multi-task a few things. By the way, I'm at home, going through a few reports."

Special Agent Mason dialed the number for the FBI Earth Resources unit in Langley, Virginia; a familiar voice answered.

"Hello, Agent Mason. Walter Danvers speaking. How can I help?"

"Walt, I need a quick look at the roof of a building in Chicago. There may be a sniper in place to kill a Chicago Police Commander. The location is 1737 South Michigan Avenue. We need this quickly, Walt."

"We have a Space Force surveillance bird coming into range right now. I'm sending the GPS coordinates to it. I'll shoot the picture to your phone as soon as we get a lock on the building."

In about a minute, an image of a building appeared on both Mason's and DiMarco's FBI phones. The Langley office commanded the satellite's camera to zoom in. It revealed a lone man sitting below the roof ledge, dressed in black. He was fiddling with a rifle, and a gun case and duffel bag lay next to him.

"OK, Agent Mason. I see the perp, his sniper rifle, and its case. The large duffel bag has what looks like an AK-47 class semi-automatic rifle. The AK-47 is probably for spraying the car if the initial hit isn't a kill shot. I see only one door on the building's roof, and the air conditioning equipment impedes his view of it. A shoot-out with this guy will be dangerous, Agent Mason."

"Understood, Walt. Can you send me regular reports as other satellites come into range?"

"Affirmative, Agent Mason. Over and out."

"Commander DiMarco, anything else from the Angel that might help us?"

"Yeah, she says the getaway vehicle is a white van labeled Danworth Plumbing, parked on Michigan Ave, 300 feet south of 18th Street. There are two armed perps aboard. She says that she unlocked the east alley door behind the building. Angel says that the surveillance cameras around the FBI building and my location will show a continuous loop starting at 6:30 a.m. and holding for two hours. I should also tell you I let her go; she should be clear of the area now."

"Don't worry about that, Ryan," Special Agent Mason said as he dialed the FBI building night-shift receptionist.

"Hi, Norah. Who's in the building now?"

"Sir, six agents, mostly the night shift crew, are here now. Agent Marecki and several Chicago police officers are in the lobby. They’re about to go to the Chicago Police/Fire Training facility for an early practice slot at the gunnery range, a scheduled exercise for the Joint Task Force on Gangs."

"Let me speak to Agent Marecki, Stat!"

Over the next few minutes, a plan came together. The four Chicago Police officers, including Officers Mac Merrick and Andres Williams, and seven FBI agents moved unobserved to the FBI garage where they donned body armor, helmets, and Colt M6 rifles. They clambered into two FBI trucks disguised as commercial vehicles and headed out. Agent Marecki was in charge, and the team reached the area by 7:00 a.m. One truck moved past the getaway vehicle and verified that two mob perps were inside. They circled the block out of sight and awaited orders to take out the getaway truck. One FBI Agent, DeWayne Bailey, hopped out to work his way between the buildings to function as a spotter on the getaway vehicle.

Marecki stopped his van one city block east on 18th Street. Looking at his three FBI agents and Officers Merrick and Williams, he explained the hasty plan.

"We'll approach the alleyway behind the Pincelli Building on 18th Street, out of sight of the hitman on the roof and the getaway boys. We gotta be quick and silent. I'll give the Serbian a chance to surrender, but if he refuses and raises his gun, we’ll have to start shooting. However, we're in a residential zone; all the surrounding buildings have people. Make your shots precise. You've trained for this. Let's do it!"

It took only a minute to reach the alleyway behind the Pincelli Building. Angel had unlocked the alley door, and the team entered the first floor of the four-story building. The building was vacant, and the lights were off. Agent Marecki called his boss, Special Agent Mason.

"D'Marcus, we're in the building. Do you still have the perp on the roof?"

"Affirmative, we have a satellite zeroed-in as we speak. Gabe, at least six countries have warrants on this guy, Vukovic. He has an Interpol rap sheet as long as my arm. Our records indicate that he has waxed as many as 45 victims. I have Superintendent Javion Green on the line, and he'd like to say something."

"Agent Marecki," Superintendent Green said, "I'll have every available police unit converge on your area once you’ve dealt with the perp. Be very careful. There may be others assisting the assassin that the Angel is unaware of. Good luck!"

Marecki and the group moved through the first floor. There were a few empty desks in the cubicles, but it looked like the used office furniture dealers had picked the place clean. Mac Merrick entered the elevator cab and pulled the Fire Department emergency stop button, rendering the lift inoperative.

Opening the stairwell door, Marecki said, "Safeties off. Let's head to the roof."

The six men made their way to the roof door. Reaching the door, Marecki pointed to Mac and two FBI Agents to go right, and he, Andres, and the other FBI Agent would go left. Marecki gently opened the door, and his group slipped out to the left. Mac's group made it to the right without tipping off the hitman. Marecki peered around the massive air conditioning fan and heat exchanger and spotted the assassin. He was on one knee, placing a magazine in his AK-47 semi-automatic assault rifle. At the same time, Mac noted that if he could jump to a second heat exchanger unit across the roof, he would create a deadly crossfire if needed.

Agent Gabe Marecki decided it was time to act and bellowed.

*"This is the FBI. You are surrounded. There is no way to escape. Drop your weapon. Now! You won't get a second chance."*

Agent Marecki wondered if Vukovic even spoke English. Vitomar Vukovic's face showed shock at Marecki's warning. His peripheral vision caught Mac dashing across the roof to reach the other air conditioner unit. He switched his AK-47 rifle to semi-automatic mode, stood up, and squeezed off three shots at Mac. Fortunately, Mac was too fast, and none of the bullets touched him. An assault weapon's sound is deafening, like urban warfare, the reports echoing through the surrounding buildings.

"That's it; take him out."

Vukovic sprayed several shots toward Marecki and his team; they took cover. He also fired a burst toward Mac’s team. Vukovic moved his position to give himself a straight line to the roof door, firing shots at both teams. Mac was behind an exhaust fan mounted on stilts, so he got down on his belly and looked at Vukovic standing across the roof. He had a clear shot at his lower legs, so Mac zeroed in on the assassin's ankle. The shell's impact created a pink halo on Vukovic's lower right leg, and bits of flesh and bone shot outward. Vukovic collapsed to his knees, still brandishing the AK-47 weapon. Mac stood up, but Vukovic pointed his gun at him, firing one last shot just as Mac dropped out of sight. That was all Agent Marecki needed; he fired a shot at the center of Vukovic's chest, blowing a golf ball-sized hole and obliterating his aortic artery. Vukovic swung his rifle toward Agent Marecki, but Mac stood up and fired a round at Vukovic's temple. It was a safe shot, angling down enough to avoid spraying adjoining buildings. For the Serbian hitman, it was lights out. He was dead before he slumped face forward into the metal roof surface. Blood poured from his chest and head; it was not a pretty sight.

Agent DeWayne Bailey peered through his telescopic sight at the getaway vehicle on Michigan Avenue. So far, they were casually smoking and chatting. It was 7:15 a.m. when the first gunfire from the Pincelli Building echoed through the buildings.

*It's showtime*, Bailey thought to himself.

The driver jerked, threw his cigarette out the window, and started to move the vehicle. Bailey knew this was an electric van, and the battery pack was under the cargo floor. Figuring that nobody was in the rear of the truck, he started pumping shots from his Colt M6 assault rifle into the back of the vehicle. Automotive battery packs have improved in the past thirty years and, when fully charged, contain an incredible amount of electric energy. The bullets passed through the vehicle's thin metal skin into the battery pack, causing immediate catastrophic failure. The truck stopped, and smoke started pouring out from the bottom. The two mobsters tried vainly to get the vehicle moving, their faces showing abject panic.

At that moment, the FBI vehicle pulled behind the smoking delivery van, and the four officers took a two-by-two position on either side of the burning truck.

The FBI Agent shouted, "Put down your weapons, get out of the vehicle, and lay face down on the pavement! Do it now, or we'll start shooting."

The two mob getaway drivers looked at each other, realizing there was no choice. Police sirens were coming from every direction. They nodded to each other, dropped their revolvers to the car seats, and got out with their hands up.

The officers apprehended them, forcing them to the pavement and cuffing their hands and feet. The Chicago Police called for the Fire Department, advising them of an electric vehicle fire.

On the roof, Agent Marecki shouted.

"Cease fire! Everybody call out!"

"Mac here. I'm good."

"Williams here. I'm OK."

The other team members called out, allowing Agent Marecki to ascertain no injuries in the team. The group crowded around Vukovic's corpse. Agent Fowler knelt and placed a credit card-sized ECG monitor on Vukovic's upper chest, which showed no pulse.

"He's dead, Gabe."

Agent Marecki called Special Agent Mason as police sirens were blaring from all directions.

"D'Marcus, the assassin is dead. He refused to surrender and started shooting. The team sustained no injuries."

"Good work, Gabe. The Chicago Police are converging on your location. Superintendent Green is driving to the area to direct cleanup. He wants to secure Commander DiMarco's building and get him and his wife to a safe house while we deal with this. Your team also apprehended the getaway boys. No injuries, but there's a hell of a vehicle fire now. The FBI will take over the case since this fellow flew in from overseas. I've ordered a crime scene investigation unit to assemble and converge at your location. Too bad we couldn't have taken Vukovic alive; we might have squeezed some information out of him."

Across the street, Shelly DiMarco buried her head in her husband's shoulder when the gunfire started. Ryan had his police revolver drawn, and they were by the front door. Ryan could discern that the second burst of weapons fire was down the street, away from their building. He felt relieved when police sirens started up everywhere and converged on his location. His FBI satellite phone was on the hall table in speaker mode. Eventually, Special Agent Mason reported that the Serbian hitman was dead, and his accomplices were in custody. He reached around Shelly and gently patted her on her waist.

Soon, a half dozen Chicago uniformed officers assembled outside their front door. Superintendent Javion Green pushed through the crowd and spoke to Ryan's door camera.

"Ryan, it's all over. Open up. We need to get you and Shelly to a secure location."

The DiMarcos opened the door, and Green asked them to get their go-bags. They would live in one of the Chicago Police's several safe houses for at least two days. Shelly protested that she had a 10:30 class at the university, but Superintendent Green insisted she cancel the session. She relented and used her cell phone to send a class-canceled text to each student. Ryan fetched his police jacket before leaving. Green left a policewoman to stay in DiMarco's apartment while they were gone.

Police Quibbling

The Chicago Police Headquarters meeting room looked like a college classroom, with amphitheater seating for sixty people, a long desk at the bottom, and an array of high-resolution display screens for multimedia presentations. At the main table were Javion Green, D'Marcus Mason, Ryan DiMarco, and Mathilda Ling, a prosecutor in the Cook County State's Attorney's Office. Seated was an array of Precinct Commanders and FBI staff. Superintendent Green opened the meeting.

"OK, lower the lights. Everybody, power off your smartphones now. FBI satellite phones are OK. We have disconnected all video cameras in this room and swept the area for hidden microphones. I think we can review this case without being surveilled.

"Let's get started. We had a successful intervention this morning of an attempted assassination of Commander Ryan DiMarco. His smiling presence next to me attests to the skill and bravery of the FBI and Chicago Police professionals seated in the third row. I'd like all of us to show our appreciation for their efforts."

Green started clapping, and quickly the entire room joined in. Commander DiMarco pointed at Mac and the others and lifted his hands upwards to suggest they stand. The Joint Task Force response team rose with satisfied smiles.

The attendees discussed the various elements of the morning's intervention. Special Agent Mason described the rare sniper rifle Vukovic had with him. He pointed out that Vukovic could have placed a bullet into Commander DiMarco's eyeball at that distance.

Pietrina Cerrone, the FBI electronics specialist, reviewed Angel's ability to tamper with surveillance cameras. Not just to look at their image but to set them in a loop mode to fool the viewer.

Special Agent David Hanko discussed the two getaway drivers. They claimed somebody hired them to pick up an individual at 7:30 a.m. in front of the Pincelli Construction building. They had no idea that it was a murder attempt. Their problem is that they flew into Chicago two days ago and have warrants out on them from the Los Angeles police.

Green asked State Prosecutor Mathilda Ling to comment on the matter. Ling is short in stature, wispy-thin, of third-generation French Chinese extraction, and has shoulder-length black hair. Her beautiful face belied her pragmatic intellect. Mac had heard that the Illinois State Attorney General Della Baxter relied on her to evaluate whether a prosecution would succeed before a jury.

"I share everyone's satisfaction at taking down one of Interpol's most wanted killers. However, today's action does nothing to advance our effort to identify and remove this resurrected Albanian crime family beleaguering Chicago. Your Angel obtained the information about who sponsored this morning's assassination attempt illegally, making it useless in a court of law.

Everyone in this room worships this Angel lady as a friend and savior of the police, but I believe she is guilty of violating numerous state and federal laws. I'm referring specifically to breaking into the Pincelli Construction building, tampering with the city and FBI surveillance cameras, and cyber intrusions of Chicago police and FBI computer systems. Whatever grievance she has against the Albanian mob doesn't give her a free pass to break the law now, does it, Officer Merrick?"

Ling looked straight at Mac as she said this, her icy stare an intellectual challenge. All eyes locked on Mac and Mathilda Ling. The tension level in the room intensified as Mac rose to his feet.

"Respectfully, Ms. Ling, we use informants with questionable backgrounds all the time. It's part and parcel of our everyday work. Without the information of some decidedly shady individuals, we would be hamstrung finding and rooting out crime in Chicago."

"You don't fight crime by encouraging it, Officer Merrick."

"And how exactly am I encouraging crime, Counselor?"

"You met her face-to-face in Grant Park. You knew she tampered with city surveillance systems, yet you chose not to detain her. If I were her, I would assume that you are personally condoning her activities."

Mac felt his anger rising but knowing that the elite of Chicago's FBI and Police Force was watching, he had to remain calm and dispassionate.

"Ms. Ling, when I met her in Grant Park, I was dressed in a T-shirt, gym shorts, and running shoes. My iPhone, badge, and condo key card were all I had on me. What are you suggesting that I do? Punch her in the face? I had just completed a two-mile run. I doubt I could have caught up with her if she decided to take off running."

"Did you tell her she was under arrest and then call for backup, Officer Merrick?"

"No, counselor. I told her that I would not apprehend her. She saved my life and the lives of my father and sister."

Mathilda Ling shuffled her shoulder back into her seat; her expression changed to a satisfied grin.

"I rest my case, Officer Merrick."

Ling turned to her right and looked directly at Commander DiMarco.

"You also had the opportunity to arrest this Angel this morning, Commander DiMarco. Yet you, like Officer Merrick, opted to give this woman a pass. You had your police revolver with you; is that not true?"

DiMarco glared at Mathilda Ling, giving her an intense stare. He was aware of this prosecutor's penchant for following the law. He had several prosecutions that he had advocated, but she vetoed them based on illegally obtained evidence.

"I decided, Ms. Ling, that apprehending the assassin was more important than arresting a young woman trying to save my life. I asked her to stay with Shelly and me so we could protect her. She declined my offer, so I let her go. I'm not apologizing for a single thing that happened this morning, Mathilda."

"You're picking and choosing your criminals, aren't you, Commander DiMarco? Don't you realize that this woman's demonstrated ability to tamper with city computers and mass transit systems could pose a potential threat? What if this Angel created a monumental traffic jam while she robbed a Brinks truck filled with money?"

DiMarco's face remained taut, his demeanor calm and collected.

"So far, I've seen no indication that this Angel woman has any evil intentions. Her actions have been to save lives and assist the Chicago PD in eradicating this Albanian crime family. Our recent fentanyl bust attests to that."

Superintendent Green interrupted the discussion.

"Ms. Ling, I am satisfied with the performance of my police officers regarding this matter. So far, this Angel person has saved the lives of two officers and several civilians. She may be illegally obtaining some of her evidence. But as an informant giving us clues about mob activities, I'd classify her input as extremely helpful. I'm hoping that we can slowly convince this woman to come in. In exchange for a light, probation-only sentence, we might discover what she knows and what techniques she has used."

James Lyle, Commander of Precinct 7, stood up. Lyle, 50 years old, is African American and respected by all the other Precinct Commanders since Chicago's Englewood area is the most challenging.

"Javion, I agree with District Attorney Ling. This Angel is a lawless vigilante. She may have presented herself to the public and the Chicago Police Department as some sort of folk hero. But this gives short shrift to her use of violence and unlawful intrusion into public and private computer systems. We have reports of her beating up Albanian mob grunts trying to sell protection services to Chinatown's unwilling businesses. She's acting as a one-woman police force. Would this group be less sympathetic if this Angel were not white and beautiful? What if she was black or Latino? Would we be so quick to lionize her?"

Lyle's remarks brought an instant negative response to the room. Green heard comments like "That's out of line" and "Are you kidding me?" The room suddenly became electrified. Since this was a Chicago Police Commander making the charge, Superintendent Green motioned everybody to be quiet.

"Are you accusing me of being racist, James?"

"Well, you are giving this white woman a pass, are you not?"

"Nobody gets a pass, Commander, be they ugly or beautiful, black or white, gay or straight. Your suggestion that I favor this woman because she is white is personally offensive to me. I have worked to remove racism from the Chicago Police Department all my career. We protect all people, James. The number of complaints about police racism has hit an all-time low during my tenure as Police Superintendent."

Commander Lyle stood his ground, face grim, voice belying suppressed anger.

"Not racist, Javion? Prove it. Issue a warrant for this Angel's arrest as a material witness. Require DiMarco and Merrick to bring this woman in the next time she rears her pretty little head!"

"Police work is often a judgment call, James. This woman's information may be crucial in breaking up this mob activity. So far, all her force applications have been to protect private citizens and law enforcement personnel. There's no indication of any criminal intent on her part, so I judge that we should concentrate on these Albanian criminals. I encourage Commander DiMarco and Officer Merrick to gain her confidence so we may eventually work together. But for now, James, there will be no warrant for Angel's arrest. That is my judgment, and as Police Superintendent, my judgment prevails. Have I made myself clear, James?"

"Loud and clear, sir," Commander Lyle grumbled as he sat down.

Mac looked at Commander DiMarco, who gave a knowing shrug. Things had undoubtedly become more intense, but rifts between precincts were common. Mac just worried that this made things more dangerous for the mysterious Angel.

Mob Regrets

Imer, Lendina, Yilka, and Lewis took their seats in the Chicago Cyber Engineering secure room. On the video conference display, Arsen Murka, the titular leader of the Albanian crime family in the USA, spoke first.

"Imer, what happened? News reports tell us that this morning's op was a failure, with our Serbian sniper dead and two of our family arrested?"

Knowing where the web camera was, Imer looked straight at it, his face frozen in a [mortiferous](https://www.thesaurus.com/browse/mortiferous) stare.

"Maybe I should ask you. You kept me out of the loop on this operation. You brought in your own hitman and drivers. You only asked for my help at 1 a.m. when you requested that Lewis' night staff begin surveillance of the cop's home and the FBI facility. Answer your own question, Arsen. You're the one who fucked up."

The other mob bosses wiggled a bit in their seats, looking at subordinates with surprise on their faces. Challenging the big boss, especially in front of others, is unheard of.

"Weigh your next words wisely, Imer. I'm beginning to think that maybe I should have had the Serbian waste you instead."

Lendina, combing her long hair from the side of her face with her fingers, focused her brown eyes directly on the camera.

“Father, I must side with my husband here. You kept the Chicago group out of your planning. Had we known more, we might have spotted a flaw in your operation. I wouldn’t have used my husband’s words, ‘You fucked up.’ But the responsibility for this failure resides not in Chicago.”

"All right, stop that right now!" Luvas Vercuni, head of the Seattle operation, said. "You two are doing what the Chicago Police and FBI want us to do: fight among ourselves. How much did you spend on this operation, Arsen?"

Arsen Murka exhaled deeply and paused for a few seconds before answered.

"Three million, six hundred thousand dollars.”

"Jesus, we spent over three million and have nothing to show for it. How did this happen?" said Ari Dervishi, head of the Boston syndicate.

"Don't worry about the money, Ari," Lewis Morton said. "We just opened up a new skimming operation on several national trucking companies, taking minuscule amounts from their waybills and shuttling them to our accounts. We've cleared $20 million in just six months. I'll set my people on recovering the initial payment to the Serbian gunman.

“Arsen Murka called at 1 a.m. and requested support from my staff. I communicated the info to my night staff, and that's where I think the information leaked."

“I put out feelers to our snitches in the Chicago Police Department after it became clear that the hit job had failed,” Imer Bisha said.

“Commander DiMarco’s residence is in Precinct 1. Our source in the neighboring Precinct 9 told us that Officer Mackenzie Merrick was one of the FBI team members who killed our sniper. He is the same undercover cop we tried to wax last June 19th.”

Everybody looked at their display panels at Arsen Murka. He was staring downward, absorbed in his thoughts. Eventually, he looked up at the web camera after some tense seconds.

"For the time being, contact me first before any action against the Chicago Police or the Merrick family. Everybody good?"

The display screen showed the syndicate bosses raising their fists and giving the thumbs-up sign.

"OK," Arsen said, "I'll stay in touch."

As the conference display went dark, Lewis exhaled and turned to Imer.

"Come on, Imer, let's go get a drink at Fat Willie's Bar."

CHAPTER 10

Mob Retaliation

Lewis Plans a Murder

Imer Bisha entered Lewis’s office determined to discuss the recent failures to eliminate the undercover cop, Mackenzie Merrick, and his father, John Merrick. Bisha’s attitude was anything but calm. His lips pursed, his eyebrows slanting down towards the bridge of his nose, all gave the image of an angry and annoyed man on a mission.

Lewis Morton lifted his hand from his laptop touchpad. He turned to look at his wall decorated with Caribbean photos. Lewis stared for a few seconds at the stunning color photograph of Anse de Grande Saline beach on the Island of St. Barthelemy. He allowed himself a moment to recall his trip to that beach with two young and beautiful Ukrainian girls who had joined the syndicate’s escort business. Lewis harkened back to the heavy surf that day, the sea's turquoise color, and the topless escorts imploring him to join them in the water. He shook his head ever so slightly and turned to make eye contact with Imer.

“Lewis, are you listening to me?”

“Yes. I just needed a moment to clear my head. Go on.”

“We set up a hit to eliminate that undercover cop Mackenzie Merrick and his partner, Officer Williams. Yilka took care of the black cop, but Merrick somehow survived.

“In reprisal, we attempted to kill Merrick’s father and sister a few weeks later. Once again, this op failed. Thanks to this Merrick family, a dozen people, including my brother, are in prison. What the hell is it about these people? Are they cats with nine lives?”

“Ease up. We are both college-educated. Let’s think this through. A woman who knows how to fight interrupted our operations. Somehow, she has managed to learn of our plans.”

“Is she somebody from a rival gang?”

“Doubt it. No rival syndicates have the computer hacking expertise that I’ve developed. The tampering with the surveillance cameras gives us a clue we need.”

Bisha leaned back in his chair, his expression softening a bit. He clenched his fist and placed it under his chin, rubbing his five o’clock shadow goatee.

“OK. What does the freezing of the city surveillance cameras tell us?”

“That she’s a policewoman. Trained in hand-to-hand combat, possibly military, or a bright star at the Academy. She uses her cell phone to tell the city surveillance crew to turn off specific cameras to mask her activities.”

“Fine. But how does she know about our plans?”

“That’s the million-dollar question, isn’t it? She can’t penetrate our computer systems here at Chicago Cyber Engineering. I’ve seen to that. She must have somebody on our staff tipping her off. She might be blackmailing one of our employees or threatening them with jail.”

“I find that hard to believe,” Imer said. “Lendina picked the staff for our upper-floor operation. These Eastern European men and women are not only superior software engineers, but their connections to the family are beyond question. We thoroughly vet all our employees. If our company has a mole, we must set up a series of traps to expose this individual. That’s going to require some time and very secret planning.”

“Still, my friend, we have the problem of the Merrick family.”

Lewis turned his business laptop towards Imer and brought up a photograph of Anne Merrick. Part of a promotional brochure advertising the Merrick, Dawson, and Brant Law Firm, Anne’s image was impressive, with shoulder-length white hair and a tasteful business suit.

“This is Anne Merrick,” Lewis said. “She’s 55 and three years younger than her husband, John. It turns out that John is a better litigator than her, but she has the business acumen to run a 300-person law firm, so she’s the COO. She could be a formidable opponent.”

“How so?”

“Well, she knows how to organize and run an investigation. They do this all the time to prepare for a case. If she decides to look into our activities, she could be a huge problem.”

“Come on. What makes you think they even know we’re involved?”

“Her youngest son is a cop. Suppose he tells her that the Albanian Shqiptare is involved. In that case, it’d be a matter of time before your name pops up and the lovely Mrs. Merrick starts delving into our affairs.”

“Can we wax her?”

“Going to be difficult. The Merricks hired a private security firm to protect each family member. She travels everywhere with two armed guards.”

“Do we snipe her?”

Lewis flashed a Cheshire cat smile, a little proud of himself.

“No. We Bonny and Clyde her.”

“You have a plan? OK, spill it!”

“Goes like this. We assign a crew to penetrate the computer systems at the Merrick, Dawson, and Brant Law Firm. The firm has a fancy helicopter, mostly for long-distance trips. We are looking for a scheduling conflict. Say she must take the company Tesla SUV for a long journey because the firm needs the chopper. We reprogram her Tesla SUV en route to take an unscheduled exit down an off-ramp of our choosing. There, the vehicle will stop. We arrange for a couple of our men with machine guns to perforate the lot of them.”

“Explain to me again how you can reprogram a Tesla or other self-driving vehicle. I’ve read in Forbes that the satellite link connecting the vehicles to the Tesla factories and dealerships is impossible to break.”

“Oh, indeed it is. It’d take a quantum computer to break that encryption. Quantum computing is still in its infancy; the machines are hellishly expensive and unavailable to us.”

“So, how do you do it?”

“I broke into the local dealership’s computer system. It’s an array of local Internet-connected computers, one of which is the maintenance manager’s machine. His computer, powered on continuously, has a maintenance app that allows him to access any Tesla vehicle. He can update the software, tweak the routing, enable the inside camera, do an emergency stop, etc. The exploit I planted allows me to control any Tesla self-driving vehicle in Chicago. Best yet, they are none the wiser. So much data moves from their cars to the factory that my little tampering is insignificant.

The remaining question is, who do we have to ambush the rich bitch and her bodyguards?”

“I have just the guys,” Imer said. “The Rahmanov twins, Bulat and Timur.”

“Who are they?”

“They’re Chechens, brought into our Boston operation. These guys are gun nuts. I hear they have two Chinese Hua Qing mini guns. Those are 6-barrel Gatling guns they’ve modified to be portable and hand-held. They can turn that Tesla SUV into Swiss cheese.”

“Do you trust these fellows?”

“I’ve met them. Bulat’s name means steel, while Timur’s name means iron. That’s why the family in Boston calls them the Iron Chechens. They speak OK English. Leave this part to me. When the Rahmanovs finish shooting, it’ll be a closed-casket funeral for that Merrick woman.”

“OK. I’ll assemble a team to break into the Merrick, Dawson, and Brant Law Firm. You arrange to bring the twins to Chicago.”

Angel in the Elevator

The Merrick, Dawson, and Brant Law Offices building at 910 North LaSalle Street is a shining example of John and Anne’s shrewdness in exploiting opportunities. They bought the unfinished building in 2044 when the developer went bust. Taking out substantial loans to finish the project, they turned the ten-story tower into a modern office building with two underground parking levels and a helicopter pad on the roof. The Merricks rented the top four floors to a public relations company and a small brokerage firm.

Ann Merrick turned to her laptop in her sixth-floor office to receive the conference call from her husband.

“So, John, you made it to Columbus?”

“We did, Anne. Ezekiel Dawson and I just did an early check-in at the hotel. Right now, we’re heading for lunch before negotiating with PowerDyne Energy. Are you all set for your trip to Milwaukee today?”

“Almost finished, John. Millie Grainger is putting together our multi-media presentation, and the two Warhorse guys are waiting outside for us. I’m participating in a panel discussion about the uneven application of bail in the United States. You know, whites walk while people of color languish in prison due to the inability to pay. It should be a fascinating conference at The Pfister Hotel.”

“Have a safe trip. Always keep the Warhorse people with you. I’ll see you at home tomorrow. Love ya to the moon!”

“Ditto, John. Over and out.”

Anne looked to the far end of her spacious office at Millicent Grainger, her favorite paralegal. Millie is thorough and a master at organization. Her unique beauty, a combination of long, wavy auburn hair complemented by matching freckles, masks her ruthless efficiency. The Merricks always choose her first to help with challenging cases. They’ve had to fend off recruitment efforts of other law firms who have witnessed her skill. John Merrick had often commented that Millie, while professionally a paralegal, operates with the expertise and cunning of a private investigator.

“Millie, is my presentation ready?”

“Yes, Anne. I have the firm’s presentation laptop in the satchel, with the audio-visual controller and fifty handouts. Warhorse Security is sending Mike Zilog and Mario Sierra with us on this trip. They are waiting for you by the elevator.”

Anne used her iPhone to speak to Julia at reception.

“Julia. I’m heading to the elevators for my trip. Check Millie and me out of the building.”

“I’m on it, Anne. Have a safe trip!”

At the elevator, Anne watched as Mario punched the down button. They waited, a bit impatiently, for the elevator to descend from the top floor. Eventually, the down elevator reached their level, and the doors opened. Anne, Millie, and the security men barged in, worming their way to the back. The elevator made two other stops before it reached the first floor. The other passengers filed out save one. A casually dressed woman faced away from them with a canvas bag over her shoulder. She was holding a tablet computer in her left hand.

“Could you please press the Door Close button?” Anne Merrick said.

The woman complied, the elevator doors closed, and the cab slowly descended. When the elevator moved between the first floor and parking garage level B1, the woman suddenly pushed the emergency stop button. The alarm did not go off, but the cab stopped abruptly; everyone felt the jolt. The two Warhorse security guards immediately drew their weapons and pointed them at the woman.

“Young lady, turn towards us and put your hands over your head. If you do not comply, we will shoot. Do it slowly.”

The woman turned to face them. She was tall, blond, and wore a T-shirt labeled ‘*I Fix Things*.’ Her green eyes showed no fear. Staring only at Anne Merrick, she slowly lifted her tablet computer and touched a screen icon. A computerized female voice rang out.

“Anne Merrick, I mean no harm to you, your paralegal, or your bodyguards. You know who I am. I need you to trust me.”

Anne took one step closer to the woman.

“Mike. Mario. Lower your weapons.”

“Are you kidding?” Mario said. “She could be a mob employee.”

“Mario, this is Mac’s Angel.”

“No! Mrs. Merrick, she could be one of them!”

“Mario, I’ll repeat it. Holster your weapons. That’s an order!”

The two bodyguards complied but remained suspicious.

“Angel, why are you addressing me with a computer?”

Angel quickly typed a response.

“I am unable to speak, Mrs. Merrick.”

“How long have you been mute? What is your name?”

“I have been mute all my life. The less you know about me, the safer it is for you and your family.”

“Respectfully disagree, Angel. Your courage has saved the lives of my husband, son, and daughter. Please let me help you.”

“Mrs. Merrick, may I remind you that I am a criminal? I broke into your building’s computers. I’m in control of your security cameras. Right now, the mob thinks you are still in your office. I can’t let the Mafia Shqiptare think you know anything about me.”

“Damn you, Angel. You are as obstinate as my daughter! Why are you here?”

Angel had a series of pre-programmed text-to-speech messages.

“Your road trip is a trap. The Albanian mafia has targeted all of you for assassination. They will reprogram your company Tesla during your journey. When you approach Exit 47B on the Kennedy Expressway, your vehicle will take a surprise exit down this off-ramp. The SUV will stop 150 feet before Damen Avenue, where two Chechens will approach with Chinese Gatling guns. They will slay everyone in the car, then escape.”

“What do you suggest we do?”

“You have two choices. One would be to simply cancel your trip. The Albanians will just try again. Or you could sacrifice your company SUV and allow me to arrange for their murder plot to blow up in their faces.”

“Explain option number two for us, Angel.”

“I brought four mannequins in my rental SUV, two females and two males. Dressing the department store dummies in your clothes, we send the vehicle on its way. You will return to your office via the stairs using your swipe cards and wait in your office until this is all over.

The security cameras near your office will show it empty until 3 p.m. Power off your cell phones. I will send an email message with the details to Officer Merrick, who’s at FBI Headquarters today.”

“I’ll take Door Number Two, Angel. Does this mean Millie and I must return to my office in our bras and panties?”

Angel’s face broke out into a luminous smile.

“I brought sweatpants and T-shirts for everybody.”

“OK, Angel. What can we do to help?”

“Follow me.”

She released the elevator hold, and the cab started moving.

The next several minutes were periods of frenetic activity. Angel used the basement security cameras to record the group exiting the elevator, entering the firm’s SUV, and sitting in their seats. They disabled the vehicle’s interior camera with a piece of tape. Once Angel had all the video she needed, the group changed clothes and dressed the mannequins. After placing the mannequins in the vehicle, Anne entered the SUV and set up an auto-pilot route to the Pfister Hotel in Milwaukee.

Angel directed the group to move to the stairwell. Anne, Millie, and the two War Horse Security guards clutched plastic bags containing keys, swipe cards, documents, etc.

“Mrs. Merrick. Please call the parking garage guard using your iPhone’s Super Bluetooth walkie-talkie app. The mob will be unable to listen. Explain the situation. Ask him to inspect your vehicle and verify that only mannequins are onboard.”

The guard, Reynaldo Sienna, was surprised to get a walkie-talkie call.

“Mrs. Merrick, why are you calling on the walkie-talkie?”

“Reynaldo, listen carefully and do exactly as I say. The firm’s Tesla SUV will be approaching to leave for Milwaukee. Please walk up to the vehicle and verify it is occupied with just mannequins. Give it a thumbs-up and open the gate.”

“May I ask what is going on?”

“We became aware of an assassination attempt on this vehicle during our trip, and we’re arranging a little surprise.”

“Ma’am, are these the mannequins Ms. Rubb brought in this morning?”

“Say again?”

“You know, your scheduled guest this morning. She was on our system. A visit from Ms. Cher Rubb?”

Anne looked up, staring incredulously at the Angel.

“You entered our building under the name Cher Rubb?”

Angel returned a demure smile as Millie giggled.

“Reynaldo, what we’re doing is top secret. Not a word to anybody until this blows over. When the lovely Ms. Rubb pulls up, let her leave without inspection.”

“Got it, Mrs. Merrick. You can count on me. Who is she, Mrs. Merrick?”

“She’s an angel, Reynaldo. It’ll be a few minutes. Be ready.”

Angel motioned for everyone to look at her tablet display.

“Now, I will demonstrate the fruits of my video editing. What you are observing is what the Albanian mob is now viewing. Here you are, heading for the elevator. Fortunately, there are no security cameras inside the elevator. OK, there you are, entering the vehicle. Now, I will command auto-pilot start. And away we go.”

At the gate, Reynaldo looked in the windows, gave a thumbs-up, and opened the gate. Angel commanded the Tesla to resume, and it dutifully left the building.

“Mrs. Merrick, thank you for trusting me. It is time for me to leave.”

Anne moved closer to Angel, face to face.

“Angel, before you leave, I have something to say. Please listen to me. I offer you pro bono, our law firm’s representation on any and all future litigation you may find yourself involved in. I’ve done everything you asked, Angel. Please say yes!”

Angel looked down at the floor, absorbed in thought for several uncomfortable seconds. She raised her tablet and began typing.

“Mrs. Merrick, I accept your firm’s offer of legal representation in any future entanglement I may have with the law.”

Anne turned to Millie and the two bodyguards.

“Millie, Mike, and Mario. Do you both affirm that you witnessed this verbal contract?”

The group affirmed that they, too, had witnessed the contract. Angel started typing again.

“I’ve done many things to cover my tracks. Some of them are patently illegal. I am a criminal by choice, Mrs. Merrick.”

“That is for a jury to decide, Angel. That’s where I come in. For our arrangement to work, we must establish trust between us. To show your confidence in me, I ask that you tell me your name.”

“Please don’t ask me for my name or any other information. The less you know, the safer it is for your family.”

Accepting this, Anne Merrick laid down the law.

“The attorney-client privilege, which gives us a legal basis for secrecy, now covers everything Angel has told us today. Millie, Mike, and Mario, you are contractually bound to observe this privilege. You protected us, Angel, and we, in turn, will protect you.”

Anne dug out one of her business cards and wrote her cellphone number on the back.

“Angel, here’s my personal cellphone number. Text me anytime, even if you only wish to talk to somebody.”

Angel opened her arms to Anne Merrick, who enveloped Angel in her arms, hugging her tightly. Millie also embraced Angel and provided her business card and cellphone number.

“It’s time for me to leave, Mrs. Merrick. Please return to your office.”

With that, Angel got into her rented SUV and commanded a destination. Her vehicle drove away quickly, turning a corner and disappearing out of sight.

Road Wars

Special Agent Gabe Marecki picked up his satellite phone at the Chicago FBI headquarters.

“Agent Marecki, this is Shaniqua down at the reception desk. We just received an internal email message addressed to Officer Mackenzie Merrick. I’ve red-flagged it and cc’d it to the Special Agent in Charge Mason. Is Merrick with you?”

“Yes, he is, Shaniqua. Copy the message to my phone, please.”

Agent Marecki positioned his phone so Mac could see it, and they read it with escalating alarm.

*Officer Merrick.*

*The Albanian Shqiptare has targeted your mother for assassination. Visit this website for details: 2D00:FFFF:0000:3EAE:01B0:00FF:0072:000A*

*p.s. Your mother is safe.*

*Angel.*

“Holy shit, Gabe.”

Gabe received a call from Special Agent Mason on the satellite phone at that very instant.

“Agent Marecki, we received a tip that a mob hit is in play against Anne Merrick, Officer Merrick’s mother. Bring Officer Merrick to my office immediately!”

Mac and Gabe raced to the elevator and were in Agent Mason’s office in less than a minute. Mason looked alarmed.

“Gabe, open that website on your SatPhone while I get somebody over to Anne Merrick’s law offices to find out what is happening.”

D’Marcus Mason called the reception desk and asked Shaniqua if any agents were near the Merrick Building, adjacent to the River North neighborhood. She determined that Agent Meghan O'Sullivan was just one block away, conducting an interview. Mason ordered O'Sullivan to terminate the interview and go straight to the Merrick Building to determine Anne Merrick’s whereabouts.

Angel’s suggested website was elegant. A Google Maps application showed the real-time location of the Merrick SUV, presently contending with city traffic. A text display box had all the details of the plot. Special Agent Mason looked astounded as he read Angel’s details.

*“Officer Mackenzie Merrick, Chicago Police*

*The Albanian mob has targeted your mother, Anne Merrick, her paralegal, and two bodyguards for execution today….”*

The group read with alarm all the details Angel had provided. Mason relied upon his FBI Satellite Phone to function as his computer and Internet connection.

Mason’s two large display monitors showed the Merrick vehicle's current location. His FBI satellite phone allowed him to have Chicago Police Superintendent Javion Green and Commander Nivani Subramanian, the decorated head of Chicago SWAT, participate in the discussion.

“OK, why is the Merrick vehicle stopped?” Mason said.

“It’s been steered into a construction zone,” Mac said.

“D’Marcus, why don’t I just flood that off-ramp with Chicago Police officers and arrest these two bozos on weapons charges?”

“No, Javion. You can’t pit your guys against two Gatling guns firing Chinese PLA ammo. For the love of God, will somebody find me a sniper I can get to that off-ramp!”

“You gotta be right with the Lord, D’Marcus,” Agent Elisha Simmons said. “Guess who's just seven miles north of Exit 47A on the Kennedy Expressway, headin' south? I've got three FBI agents from Washington, DC, travelin' 'round demonstratin' the Einstein Gun!”

“Perfect, Elisha. Are you talking to them?”

“Yes, sir. We’re vectorin' 'em to a carpet store on North Damon Ave. They’ll have t'cut through the fence, clamber over the rail tracks, an' descend into the stand o' trees on the wooded knoll facin' the other side o' the Damen Ave off-ramp.”

“Dennis, get me the names of those three agents and push their CVs to my phone.”

“Agent Mason, what is an Einstein Gun?”

“Oh, it’s a hush-hush DARPA project, Mac. Do you know how Hollywood has those Steadicams, shoulder-mounted gyro-stabilized platforms to hold cameras steady as a rock? Well, imagine a powerful rifle mounted on such a platform. But this prototype has an advanced sensor package and a supercomputer that measures the wind and temperature conditions along the flight path. It precisely orients the gun's barrel to hit your selected target. There’s a long-winded acronym, but most people have nicknamed it the Einstein Gun. I had scheduled you and the Chicago FBI Task Force to attend the demonstration.”

A few more minutes passed, and Shaniqua from the reception desk called Special Agent Mason.

“Sir, I have Agent Meghan O'Sullivan for you. I’ll patch her through.”

“OK, Meghan, what have you got?”

“The receptionist at the Merrick Building insisted that Mrs. Merrick was away from the office on business, so I barged my way to the sixth floor and found Mrs. Merrick, her paralegal, and her two bodyguards in her office safe and sound. Here, I’ll shoot you a picture.”

Everyone in Mason’s office stared at Meghan’s image of Anne Merrick, Millie Grainger, Mike Zilog, and Mario Sierra. They all had self-satisfying smiles as if they knew something and you didn’t.

“Sir, Mrs. Merrick hasn’t been very forthcoming in answering my questions, something about attorney-client privilege.”

“Let me speak to her, Meghan.”

Meghan O’Sullivan handed the FBI Satellite Phone to Anne.

“Special Agent in Charge Mason would like to speak to you. Just hold it like a Facetime call.”

“Good afternoon, D’Marcus. It’s been a while.”

“Guten tag to you, Anne. Let’s dispense with the small talk. Did you send your company SUV out on a trip with mannequins in the vehicle?”

“Yes, we did,”

“And who told you to do this?”

“An informant.”

“Was this informant the woman colloquially known as the Angel, the same person who saved your husband and daughter a few weeks ago?”

“I cannot disclose any information about our informant. This individual is now a client of our law firm and is subject to attorney-client privilege.”

D’Marcus turned to look at Mac Merrick.

“Mac, I assume you wouldn’t have any better luck questioning Mrs. Merrick about her informant?”

“That’s right, sir. Once my mother gets a bug up her ass about something, she’s relentless. There’s no stopping her.”

“Like mother, like son, D’Marcus,” Anne said with a pronounced mischievous smile.

“Mrs. Merrick, this is Chicago Police Superintendent Green. I’m going to send some policemen over to secure your building.”

“Well, Good afternoon, Javion. If the mob monitors police frequencies, won’t that tip them off?”

“As your, ahem, informant has schooled us, we will contact neighboring precincts by FBI satellite phone, directing the officers by word of mouth. Please instruct your staff to cooperate with their security directives.”

“Will do, Javion, good luck today.”

Active Shooter

FBI Special Agent Ben Kang, an Asian American veteran of the Navy Seals program, flipped the “On” slide switch on his shoulder's Einstein Gun. He felt the satisfying “wumm-wumm” vibration as the gun’s gyros took control. Ben is one of the Bureau’s top marksmen and a perfect candidate to evaluate and demonstrate the DARPA prototype.

Ben and his traveling companions, Agents Nokie Molenda and Justin George, pulled into the carpet store parking lot as directed by Elisha Simmons. As Nokie used bolt cutters to make a hole in the fence, someone from the store inquired about what was happening. Justin gave the standard FBI warning and recommended that he move employees to an interior room until the police issued an all-clear.

Bringing only helmets and rifles, they climbed stealthily up to the rail line. After Justin placed the bullhorn at the western end of the railway bridge, they moved downhill into the stand of trees and bushes opposite the Damon Avenue off-ramp. Fortunately, the Chechen twins did not see their movements. Kang’s location was a sniper’s dream.

He peered into the telescopic sight and pointed at the two men up the grass incline above the Exit 47B offramp. All three agents’ telescopic sights relayed their images to Special Agent Mason’s office. Agent Kang spoke in a voice barely above a whisper.

“Agent Mason, are you receiving this?”

“Yes, loud and clear, Ben.”

“OK, your informant’s information is correct. The two Chechen fellows just donned Kevlar and metal body armor front and back. OK, now they’re putting on a sizable backpack; that’ll be the ammo belt. Note the feed chute is coming out of the top, going to the mini gun. Their Achilles heels are the battery module, riding piggyback to the ammo sack, and the feed chute. Shooting out either one will render the gun inoperative.

As you can see, the mini-Gatling gun, slung from the shoulder and held at hip level, relies on volume, not accuracy. As I remember, the American version of this weapon can shoot fifty rounds per second. I see two grenades and a sidearm on each shooter. Agent Mason, these Chechens are not people to be trifled with.”

“It’s your op, Agent Kang. Trust your training.”

“Mason, we could stop these guys right now if you want?”

“No, Ben. If you let them destroy the Merrick SUV, we can charge them with attempted murder.”

“OK, Roger that. Any news on the progress of their target SUV?”

“Merrick SUV just cleared the last traffic light on West North, just a few minutes to make the I-94 North on-ramp.”

“OK, we’ll sit tight. Agents Nokie Molenda and Justin George are to my left in this dense brush on the knoll. Justin left the bullhorn on the railway overpass. He’ll communicate with it via Super Bluetooth. I hope they’ll shoot at the railroad bridge rather than us.”

“Ben, the Merrick Law Firm SUV has entered the I-94 on-ramp. Two minutes away. When the SUV reaches your off-ramp, Chicago Police units will stop traffic on North Damen Avenue, north and south of you.”

“Agent Molenda here. An empty Ford Electric pulled to a stop just past the railway overpass. Wanna bet that’s the getaway vehicle?”

“Agreed, Nokie. When I start shooting, take out the passenger side tires. Ford electrics will not move with two flat tires,” Agent Kang said.

Kang took a few moments to view the kill zone. The off-ramp is an artificial ravine. At least the bowl of the gully would contain the ricochets. Agent George spotted the Merrick SUV at the top of the off-ramp.

“OK, the mob’s target has arrived. The SUV is moving towards us slowly. We’ve caught a break; no civilian vehicles are ahead or behind it.”

“Let them have their fun, Justin. Then give our warning.”

Mac and the FBI Agents observing the unfolding scene at FBI Headquarters felt a little helpless. For Mac, it was especially disconcerting, for he would be watching someone attempt to kill what they thought was his mother. Agent George’s scope feed was wide-angle; most in Mason’s office concentrated on Justin’s view.

When the Merrick SUV rolled to a stop, Bulat and Timur galloped down the grassy knoll, about one hundred fifty feet from North Damen Avenue. Positioning themselves on either side of the SUV’s headlights, they sprayed the vehicle with a ten-second burst, probably a thousand bullets in toto. The sound was deafening, even with the highway noise above. The barrel flashes had a stroboscopic effect; the SUV interior filled with black smoke, resulting from burning plastic panels in the vehicle.

As Bulat ran up the grassy hill towards the highway, Timur pulled the pin on a high-energy grenade and tossed it inside one of the blown-out windows. He raced to join his brother, and they both faced away.

The explosion, confined in a closed space, was a combination of white and yellow, bright enough to blind the viewers for a second. The Tesla SUV’s gull-wing door launched, spinning into the air, followed by what appeared to be a body. The body crashed onto the pavement, draped over the curb. Agent Kang quickly zoomed in on the dead body; it was obviously a mannequin. The explosion blew the face apart, leaving a jagged hole in the plastic. The smoldering wig lay a couple of feet from the dummy.

Bulat and Timur Rahmanov approached the prostate department store dummy. Their mutual consternation turned ugly as they started to shout at each other. Realizing that somebody had fooled them, both men stumbled towards the getaway vehicle on North Damen Avenue.

Agent Justin George, safely hidden in the trees and bushes with the others, operated the FBI bullhorn mounted on the railroad bridge as they neared the street. His voice was loud and piercing.

*“This is the FBI. We have you surrounded. There is no escape.*

*Drop your weapons, step away, raise your hands over your heads!”*

Timur Rahmanov spotted the bullhorn on the railway bridge and fired a volley at it. The shells bounced off the steel bridge plates, spinning onto the train tracks and the street below. Some bullets hit the concrete bridge abutment, and a large cement fragment crashed into the pavement.

FBI Special Agent Ben Kang was coldly efficient in using the Einstein gun. The ammo is a 50 caliber, 700-grain tungsten bullet with a Mach three exit velocity.

Placing his scope crosshairs on Timur’s tibia, his first shot severed the Chechen’s left leg just below the kneecap. Collapsing awkwardly to the pavement face first, Timur howled from the pain. Kang quickly repositioned his crosshairs on the military-grade connector at the top of Timur’s battery pack. The next shot sheared off the connector, rendering the Gatling gun inoperative. Timur’s minigun delinker and six barrels rotated to a stop; the gun was dead.

Agent George shot out the two passenger-side tires on the escape vehicle. At the same instant, police sirens started from both directions on North Damen Avenue.

Agent Nokie Molenda fired a round from his M-6 carbine at Bulat’s shoulder. While Bulat’s Kevlar and metal body armor could deflect his bullet, the impact felt like a sledgehammer. Bulat stumbled backward and slipped, falling on his rump. Agent Kang saw his chance and targeted, with the Einstein gun, the feed chute at Bulat’s mini gun. The impact sheared the ammo belt and forced Bulat to release his grip on the weapon. Bulat quickly detached the minigun's straps and rose to his feet. As four police cars entered the intersection, Bulat foolishly retrieved his handgun and brandished it. Agent Kang’s last shot with the Einstein gun blew a hole in Bulat’s right hand; the pistol landed several feet away. Commander Knight of the 20th Precinct used his bullhorn to issue an ultimatum.

*“This is the Chicago Police. Take off your armored vest and lay face down on the pavement. If you refuse, we are authorized to shoot to kill. This is your only warning!”*

Bulat and his brother spoke briefly to each other in Chechen. Turning to Commander Knight, Bulat shouted in broken English.

“We give up. My brother hurt. He no move.”

Bulat slowly removed his armored vest, gun belt, and grenades. He lay face down on the hot pavement, and two Chicago Police officers rushed to him, guns drawn. Four others descended on Timur, unhooking his gear, and handcuffing him. They used a zip-tie as a tourniquet to staunch the bleeding until an EMT team could arrive.

With the bullhorn blown to bits, Agent Kang had to shout.

“Chicago Police, this is the FBI Team. We’ll come around and help you secure those Gatling guns.”

Commander Knight pointed his bullhorn at them.

“Great job, fellows. The suspects are in custody. EMT units are on the way. Any injuries on your end?”

“We’re good, sir. See you in a few minutes!”

CHAPTER 11

Uncooperative Witness

The Merrick Law Firm

Late in the afternoon, Anne Merrick sat at the head of the twenty-person conference table with her husband, John, Ashley Brant, Millie, and the two Warhorse Security guards. While Anne Merrick has a closet in the building with several clothing changes, blouses, and undergarments, she stayed in the sweatpants and black T-shirt the Angel had provided, emblazoned with the phrase “*Bitches Rule*.”

John immediately flew back to Chicago when Mac called him about the abortive assassination plot. The Chicago Police and FBI Agents who rushed to the building waited patiently in the hallway.

“So, we’re all agreed,” Anne said. “Not one mention that the Angel is mute. That might make it easier for the cops and the mob to identify and locate her. We’ll hide under Attorney-Client Privilege. Mike and Mario can leave the conference room. We’ll call if they want to interview you.”

The intercom beeped. It was the reception desk.

“Anne, this is Julia. They’re here. Marika is escorting them to the conference room.”

What entered was a who’s who of the Chicago FBI: Special Agent in Charge D’Marcus Mason and Agents Hanko, Marecki, and Simmons. Officer Mac Merrick and his immediate boss, Commander Ryan DiMarco represented the Chicago Police/FBI Joint Gang Investigation unit.

When Mac entered the room, Anne smiled.

“Hello, Son.”

Mac waved both of his hands in exasperation to said, “This wasn’t my idea.”

Once everybody sat, Anne Merrick, Chief Operating Officer (COO) and founding law firm member, took control of the meeting.

Confrontation

“Agent Mason, you know my husband, John Merrick. Next to him is Ashley Brant, one of our founding partners. Ezekiel Dawson, our other founding partner, remains in Columbus, Ohio, on litigation. You called for this meeting, D’Marcus. State your business.”

“Mrs. Merrick, how did you learn today that you were the target of a mob assassination plot?”

“An informant advised us of this situation.”

“Who is this informant? May I remind you that it is a federal felony to lie to an FBI agent?”

“Don’t insult my intelligence, D’Marcus.”

“Answer the question, Mrs. Merrick.”

“Our informant is now a client of this law firm. Due to attorney-client privilege, we cannot share any details about her.”

Elisha Simmons handed Agent Mason her FBI satellite phone; two pictures of the Angel were on it.

“Mrs. Merrick, these are two photographs of the individual who saved the life of your son, daughter, and husband. Is this your informant?”

“Again, I cannot share any information about this person.”

“You are admitting that your informant is female. How and when did this woman approach you?”

“She approached us at about 12:05 p.m. We were in the elevator heading for the parking garage.”

“How did she get into this building?”

“Apparently, she entered herself into our computer system as my guest. I saw it pop up on my calendar and thought it was a mistake, so I disregarded it.”

“May we ask what name this informant used?”

“She identified herself as Ms. Rubb.”

“Miss Rubb?”

“Yes, Ms. Cher Rubb.”

Anne looked to the end of the conference table at her son, who was fighting hard to restrain a laugh. She, herself, cracked a mischievous smile.

“Cute,” Agent Mason said. “Mrs. Merrick, I’d like to have FBI cyberwarfare specialists examine your computer systems. We could possibly identify this woman and determine how she hacked into your computer.”

“Absolutely not, Special Agent Mason. We are not giving the FBI, the Justice Department, or the Chicago Police access to our business records. You know damn well that no judge would ever grant you a search warrant for such a thing. You’d need an Appellate Court to designate a special master to look at our computers.”

His irritation rising, Mason clenched his fists, eyes squinting.

“Do not skirmish with me, Mrs. Merrick. Three of my agents and several Chicago Police officers just had a gun battle with two mob killers armed with Chinese Gatling guns. Perhaps you don’t appreciate just how much danger you avoided. Agent Simmons, run the video of the incident at Exit 47B of the Kennedy Expressway.”

“Millie, help Agent Simmons pair our display with their laptop.”

Millie Grainger sprang into action, helping Simmons with the Super Bluetooth connection. All eyes turned to the screen as the mob hit unfolded. Anne felt a shudder course through her as the assassins sprayed the Merrick SUV with what looked like a thousand bullets. When the vehicle exploded, her eyes widened in shock. When the shooting video ended, Special Agent Mason, loaded for bear, turned to Anne Merrick.

“Now, Mrs. Merrick, there are two possibilities. One likelihood is that your informant, Miss Rubb, is a mob employee. She may be on a mission, currently unclear, that may eventually result in death or injury to you and your family. The second possibility is that Miss Rubb is a victim of the Albanian mob. If so, she acts foolishly as a self-styled vigilante, hoping to get revenge on her tormentors. In either case, it is best for public safety to capture and detain this woman. So, I ask you again, tell us everything you know about her.”

“OK, D’Marcus,” John Merrick said, “Let’s dispense with the rather whimsical moniker Cher Rubb since that is obviously not her name. May I suggest we refer to her henceforth as the Angel, the name given to her by the Chicago Police?”

“Our Police Department has mixed opinions on her, John,” Commander DiMarco said. “Some believe she’s pro-police, and others think she’s an unrestrained vigilante we must bring to justice. I sympathize with her but worry that she’s reckless and will get herself killed.”

“Mrs. Merrick, an organized crime syndicate, specifically the Albanian Mafia Shqiptare, has a vendetta placed on your family. They will not stop until they have their vengeance. You may not comprehend the grave danger you and your family are in.”

“Comprehend? I respectfully disagree with your assertion.”

“Look, Anne, we’re just trying to keep you safe!”

“Keep me safe? May I remind you, D’Marcus, that the mafia attempted to execute my son, and this woman saved his life? Two weeks later, the same mob tried to kill my husband and daughter outside a restaurant, and again this woman saved their lives. This morning, this gang of criminals attempted to kill my staff and me, and this woman saved our lives. This woman has done what the FBI and the Chicago Police failed to do – protect my family. If I knew her name, I wouldn’t tell you. If I knew she had a tattoo or a birthmark, I wouldn’t tell you. So, you’re getting nothing more from me, D’Marcus.”

“Officer Merrick, please explain to your mother the folly of her refusal to help us?”

“That would be futile, sir. Permission to speak freely?”

“Go ahead.”

All eyes in the room focused on Mac, speaking for the first time as a police officer in front of his parents. His bearing was as sturdy as the table’s ash slab, his voice clear and steady.

“Sir, it would be inadvisable to mount a full-court press to capture and incarcerate the Angel. All her actions to date have been to protect people. If we were to throw her ignominiously in the slammer, there’s a good chance that she might clam up and never cooperate with us. She has shown some willingness to speak with me. By letting me continue to try to gain her trust and friendship, we might turn her into a real asset.”

“Mac,” Agent Hanko said, “we can’t let a vigilante operate in Chicago, administering street justice. The rule of law must prevail.”

“Sir, most of her interventions were to rescue people accosted or brutalized by mob thugs. There was a recent human trafficking incident where she beat up two mob grunts holding five women prisoners. But there’s no evidence that she’s doling out street justice.”

“Mac,” Agent Mason said, “your mother testified that this Angel person broke into her computer system. This woman is a cyber-criminal.”

“Wouldn’t the FBI like to know how she does this?”

“Well, of course. If you do encounter this woman, encourage her to turn herself in. The Courts will consider the lives she saved.”

“Fat chance, D’Marcus,” Anne Merrick said, laughing. “No jury in this town will convict her, especially after our firm makes her look like the second coming of Joan of Arc.”

“Speaking for the firm, Agent Mason,” John Merrick said, “we have no further information to disclose about our client, the woman known as the Chicago Angel. Attorney-client privilege is something that we will aggressively defend in court. For this reason, I am ending this meeting. Ms. Grainger will escort you to the building lobby.”

Standing up, Special Agent Mason looked irritated, as he always does. Commander DiMarco turned to Anne Merrick one last time.

“Anne, call my number whenever you venture out in an automobile. We’ll dispatch a police cruiser to escort you.”

“Thank you, Ryan. I will comply. It’s been nice seeing you.”

Getting Millie Involved

John and Anne Merrick called Millie Grainger to Anne’s office an hour later.

“Ah, Millie, sit down. What is your current assignment?” Anne said.

“Before today’s excitement, I worked on the Russou BioTech carcinogen class-action suit. We are very close to blowing this case wide open for you.”

“OK, I want you to turn that effort over to Susanna Marks. John and I have a new assignment for you.”

“What would you like me to do?”

“We’d like you to research everything you can find about this reconstituted Albanian mob. Find out who the mob’s local leaders are, what businesses might be fronts covering their illicit activities, how much money they are making, and so forth.”

“Can I get some help, Anne?”

“Sure, use the two Cornell summer interns for assistance with Internet research.”

“Anne, your son Mac probably knows a lot about these people.”

“John and I are uncomfortable quizzing him about all this. He’s worked as an undercover policeman for the past couple of years, and everything they do is hush-hush. It's too bad you turned him down when he asked for a date four years ago. You might be the walking Wikipedia we need today.”

“Anne, for the love of God!” John Merrick said.

Millie sat up straight in her chair. The conversation had just turned the corner and headed down Awkward Avenue.

“How did you find out about that? I make every effort to keep my private life separate from my work here at the firm.”

“My daughter Veronica advised me when it happened. Somehow, she’s the black hole of gossip; nothing escapes her attention.”

“While your speculation has made me feel discomfited, Anne, I will respond honestly as I always do with you. Yes, Mac asked me for dinner once, shortly after joining the Chicago Police Force. I explained that I had a hard and fast rule to never date anyone within the law firm, including any close relatives of the founding partners. His response was gracious and understanding, and Mac and I have been on amicable terms ever since.

That said, you should not construe my spurning of his offer as a negative evaluation of your son’s worth as a potential romantic partner. He is every woman’s dream: intelligent, handsome, honest to a fault, and intrinsically kind. Mac is one of the good guys, Anne. Surely you know this?”

“Anne, you should apologize to Millie. You had no right to pry into her personal life like that,” John said.

Chastened by the sudden realization that she spoke out of turn, Anne Merrick looked down at her desk, her fingers rubbing the desk pad for several seconds. She looked up, staring directly at Millie.

“My husband is right, Millie. I spoke thoughtlessly. I apologize for what I said. The mob’s attempt to kill us today, my penchant for matchmaking, and my desire for grandchildren all caused me to lose self-control. Can you forgive me, Millie?”

“There’s nothing to forgive, Anne. We’ve both had a stress-filled day. It’s time for all of us to go home. I will start my research first thing in the morning.”

“Agreed, Millie,” John said. “Mike Zilog is still here. I’ll have him escort you home. Call my son, Mac, tonight if you sense anything out-of-order, like somebody surveilling you. We’ll see you back at work tomorrow.”

Later, on the drive back to FBI Headquarters, Special Agent in Charge D’Marcus Mason turned to his immediate assistant, David Hanko. Mason had calmed down a little, his attitude a little more introspective.

“Dave, I’m going to contact Carolina Hendon about this case.”

“Sorry, D’Marcus, who is this woman?”

“Dr. Carolina Hendon is the FBI’s top person on cybercrime. She’s got multiple degrees from Cal Tech, a veritable genius. Rumors are that she will take command of the FBI Cybercrimes division when the current head retires at the end of the year.”

The Reporter

Not wanting to order something for dinner, Mac microwaved two burritos and consumed them with a bottle of water. Just after finishing his impromptu dinner, the desk Concierge called him.

"Officer Merrick, a reporter from the Sentinel, Ms. Natalie Rumsfort, is here to see you."

"Martin, did you check her ID?"

"She showed me her Illinois driver's license and her Sentinel press credentials and badge."

"OK, have the guard scan her for weapons, give her a building pass, and send her up."

In about five minutes, the door chime sounded. Recognizing her on his door monitor display, Mac opened the door.

"Miss Rumsfort, please come in."

They both instantly scanned each other. Natalie, her red hair flowing into a ponytail, was a portrait of exquisite beauty. Of average height for a woman, Natalie had a sensual, pretty face and wore form-fitting brown pants and a beige tank top. As Natalie walked by, he sensed the very slight scent of perfume, obviously bringing her A-game tonight.

Mac motioned her to sit, and she plunked down on the leather loveseat next to his sofa. She pulled a small recording device from her bag.

"Do you mind if I record this?"

"I very much mind, Miss Rumsfort."

"Very well, I'll put this away."

She stowed the recorder, pulled out a small tablet computer, and flashed her bright smile at him.

"Please call me Natalie."

"I'm Mac, by the way. One other thing, this conversation is off-the-record."

Looking around at his apartment and glancing at the lakefront view, Natalie said, "Pretty nice digs for a policeman, wouldn't you say?"

"Don't act surprised, Natalie. You're an ace investigative reporter. I’m sure you know all about my family and how successful they are, that I'm a trust fund kid."

"Does that cause you problems, being a rich man on the police force?"

"No, it does not. Most officers know that I'm from a wealthy family. I collaborate with them, drink with them, and grieve with them. Unless it's official business, I don't bring any of them here."

Natalie shifted position in her loveseat and looked at him thoughtfully.

"Your father and mother founded what is now Chicago's most successful law firm, in all of Illinois, for that matter. Your siblings both went to law school and now work for the firm as junior non-equity partners. Yet, you opted to get a bachelor’s degree in criminal justice from St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia and join the Chicago Police Department. Did that cause any disagreement with your parents and siblings?"

"My dad was initially disappointed, but my mother talked him out of it. Now he's an enthusiastic supporter."

"What is your hoped-for career path in the Chicago PD?"

"I want to succeed on my own and advance in the department based on my work, not to whom I'm related. I hope to make it to Commander someday, although most Commanders are a dozen years older than me."

"Really? Your father certainly has connections in the Police Department. Doesn't that give you a leg up?"

"Technically, maybe. But I've asked my dad never to intervene on my behalf."

Natalie chuckled, "Good luck with that."

She had been typing into her tablet, swiping pages, and updating notes.

"You have a girlfriend, Anneliese Darban, of Beckman Accounting Group. I checked with one of her fellow employees at that firm, and he told me she's out of the office for 90% of the year. She's your fuck buddy, isn't she?"

Mac stared at her intently for several seconds, thinking *Is she trying to provoke me, get me off-balance before the real questions begin?*

"That's a cheap shot. I wouldn't ask you questions about who you were intimate with."

"Don't get your shorts starched; I'm not much different than you. I have a boyfriend who is still working on his Ph.D. at Northwestern. I’m monogamous and would never cheat on him, especially with a cop. That said, I do find playing hard to get an effective strategy to get cops to talk. Anyhow, I have some serious questions for you. Are you game?"

"Give it your best shot."

"OK, were you saved by the so-called Chicago Angel last June 19th?"

"That was an undercover operation, and I cannot discuss any part of it."

"My sources tell me that it was the Albanian mob, and they were planning to kill two undercover policemen. This Angel lady saved the other officer's life by beating the shit out of the two Albanians who were about to kill the, ahem, unknown undercover officer. They tell me that Officer Williams' killer got away."

"You know I can't address that; it's undercover work."

"Mac, two Albanians attempted to kill your father and sister outside Barney's Restaurant thirteen days later. Once again, this Angel thwarted the killing. She ran off and evaded capture."

"Could be simply coincidence."

"Bullshit, Mac. I say the Albanians saw two of their gang bangers jailed. You were the other officer targeted, so they decided to kill two members of your family in retaliation."

"This is a current police investigation; I cannot discuss it," Mac said, showing some irritation at her.

“Today, the Chicago Police got involved in a gunfight with two gangbangers on a Kennedy Highway offramp. The police have placed an embargo on the op, spurning all requests for details. Like to know what I found out?”

“Well, don’t keep me waiting.”

Some hedge fund friends in your family’s office building say that the building was crawling with cops that day. Did the mob try to kill your family again? Did the Angel intervene?”

“Once again, Natalie, I cannot comment on this,” Mac said, trying to keep his irritation in check.

"I bumped into this Angel in the crowd near Barney’s restaurant after she saved your father and sister."

"Really? The newspapers say she got away."

"She sure as shit did! When I saw her, she had yoga pants, a blue T-shirt, long black hair, freckles, and sunglasses. She had the face of a supermodel."

"So, Natalie, what makes you think that was her?"

"I spotted the wisp of blond hair near her temple where she hadn't properly donned the wig. Also, she released my grip on her wrist as if I were some bothersome flea. Yeah, it was her. Some cops told me they found a flexible plastic sheet with printed freckles that she used to disguise herself. You want to know what else they told me?"

"I'm on pins and needles."

"They told me that all the security cameras froze while she was saving your dad and sister and stayed frozen for a half-hour."

"Maybe that was the Albanians?"

"Ha! I've got some great Nigerian crypto investment deals for ya."

"OK, Officer Merrick. Last question. Have you met this Angel since she saved your life?"

"I choose not to answer that."

Natalie's face lit up; she gave him a sly smile.

"Oh, so you have met her. What's she like? What's her story?"

Mac studied Natalie's face for several seconds, contemplating his words.

"Natalie, you're going to get her killed."

Natalie put her feet on the floor and put her tablet into her bag.

“I get it; you love her. I’m like any other woman, we instinctively read men's faces; we know when they love someone else. You've got it bad for this girl, don't you?"

"Natalie, don't."

She stood up and put her bag on her shoulder.

"Mac, my word is good. I promise you that this conversation is off the record, and none of what we discussed will ever appear in TV broadcasts or print. Please tell this woman that I'd like to speak to her. I can arrange a secret meeting place and guarantee her security and confidentiality."

"No way, Natalie, you'll get her killed."

"Thank you for your time, Mac. I'll show myself out.

CHAPTER 12

Private Investigation

Millie’s Report

John Merrick closed the hallway and window blinds in the firm’s main conference room. It had been ten days since he and Anne had assigned Millie and two summer interns to research the Albanian mob and its new Chicago operation. Veronica joined the meeting because Anne felt she deserved to hear Millie's report as a victim of a mob assassination attempt.

Anne always admired Millie’s wardrobe choices, and she did not disappoint today. Millie sported a dark navy-blue Brooks Brothers jacket and matching tapered pants. A simple, starched, pure white blouse completed the ensemble, giving Millie a professional look, probably one-quarter of Anne's usual outlays.

“OK, I’m ready,” Millie said as she started her PowerPoint presentation.

“First, let me review the history of the Albanian mob known as the Mafia Shqiptare. That’s pronounced sh-kip-tare. They rose to prominence after the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s. As you may recall, the breakup of Yugoslavia, spurred on by NATO intervention, resulted in utter chaos in the region. The war crimes, mass murders, and widespread rapes left many victims and millions of aggrieved Balkans.

So, while we tend to refer to this organized crime family as Albanian, in truth, they are also composed of members from Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Bosnia, and others. War always creates a leadership vacuum, and the worst of humanity rushes to fill that empty space.”

“Are these groups Islamic,” Ronnie said.

“On paper, yes. But the Albanian mob seems to ignore most of the teachings of the Prophet. Loansharking, for instance, violates the Islamic principle of not charging interest.

Going on, the Albanian syndicate jumped right into the illicit drug business. In an area experiencing such upheaval, the discouraged and depressed population were easy marks for drug use. The Mafia Shqiptare, emboldened by its success, branched out quickly worldwide, preying on the Albanian and other ethnic communities to supply people to join the family.”

“So, Millie, these mob people are not family, not blood-related, yes?” Anne said.

“Exactly, the word family here is not genealogical but signifies membership in a group. An individual’s membership requires loyalty and a willingness to risk death for the family if needed.

The current international leader of the Mafia Shqiptare is Skender Hasa, who lives near Tirana, Albania's capital city.

The purported North American boss in the United States is Arsen Murka, working out of Queens, New York City. Rumors say he’s in his early seventies. There are no photos of Murka, and he has so many safe houses that the New York Police and the FBI have been unable to locate him. My next slide shows the cities where the FBI thinks the Albanian mob is active. One of those cities is, of course, Chicago.

In 2042, the FBI arrested most of the Chicago Albanian mob and sent them to jail for a long time. The boss was Kreshnik Bisha, currently a lifer at the Big Sandy federal prison near Inez, Kentucky. Now, pay attention because this is where it gets fascinating.

Kreshnik Bisha had two sons and no daughters. Luan and Imer Bisha were in middle school when the FBI incarcerated their father. An aunt raised the boys after their mother died of cancer. Luan Bisha finished high school but went right to work for the mob. The Chicago Police arrested him, along with a second-tier mob grunt named Besim Morina, for the attempted murder of an undercover police officer and for the murder of Officer DiOtis Williams last June. A grand jury indicted both men, and the court denied bail. They are currently awaiting trial.

“So, what happened to the other brother?” Ronnie said.

Imer Bisha, pronounced eee-mare, is brilliant and got high enough grades to enter the University of Chicago. I checked with a friend at the University of Chicago Financial Aid Office, and she looked up his records. He paid cash every semester. Imer Bisha got a master’s degree in finance and accounting and graduated cum laude.

“Are you suggesting that Imer Bisha is legitimate, not a mobster?”

“Quite to the contrary, Anne. While Bisha looks legit on paper, I’ll show that it might just be an elaborate cover.

Bisha has founded five companies in the Chicago area. There’s a massive warehouse operation north of the loop and a phenomenally successful software development firm in Hines. He also owns a company that makes electric car charging stations, a metal fabrication company east of Napierville, and a South Side recycling company. Well, OK, that’s a junkyard.”

“Anything suspicious about those, Millie?” John said.

“Yes, the financing of these companies came from overseas sources. Sources masked by multiple shell companies hiding who the real investors are.”

“You’re saying that mob money financed these companies?” Anne said.

“It would take the FBI or the CIA to untangle the byzantine network of foreign money, but my guess is that mob money is behind all Bisha’s activities. The real interesting part of this story is Imer Bisha’s wife, Lendina.”

“OK, tell us about Lendina,” Anne said.

“Lendina Murka Bisha, here’s a recent photo of her. She is the oldest daughter of Arsen Murka, the Queens, New York mob boss. Lendina and Imer Bisha were married in Albania at Skender Hasa's home. They bought a $3.5 million condominium at 1300 North Lakeshore Drive. As far as I can tell, they have no children. Lendina has been very public here in Chicago and active in several charities. She created and partially financed the Ship of Hope Halfway House for Runaway Teenagers and Battered Women. The city of Chicago pays part of their operating expenses.”

“So far, she sounds pretty legit, Millie?”

“She’s not, Ronnie. But to explain why I’d have to speak about things I would rather not put on a company PowerPoint presentation. Information so disturbing that I’m reluctant to verbalize it.”

“Millie,” John said, “these people tried to kill everybody in this room. If you know something about them, we want to hear it, no matter how down and dirty it is. What you say stays in this room.”

“OK, do you remember the Bowsten case from several years ago? I lined up a deposition for you with Madeline LeGalt, a professional escort. I reached out to Maddie this week. She now operates via the Internet, using OnlyFans to reach a group of subscribers. She puts on strip shows and performs sex with her current paramour, that sort of thing. Occasionally, she arranges a private encounter at an extremely high price, like twenty thousand dollars. All the IRS sees is a consulting fee. While strictly illegal, the police don’t bother with the sex workers in the escort trade – they’re just not on their radars.

She told me the Albanian mob runs a well-organized and financed escort operation. They employ beautiful and willing women from Hungary, Ukraine, and the Czech Republic, paying them high wages for a limited time, say ten years. Who are their customers? Well, mostly the exploding millionaire class. Many of the liaisons are single encounters, but they also supply women for sex parties, think Eyes Wide Shut scenarios. Imagine any sexual perversion, and this Albanian escort business has women who will deliver.”

“Millie, if some rich creep wants a girl to be his dominatrix or urinate on him, so what? It’s consensual, isn’t it?” Ronnie said.

“Agreed, who cares? Right? But Maddie said some of these rich perverts want underage girls and are willing to pay a king’s ransom for the experience. She says that virgins go for half a million. But white Caucasian underage virgins go for a million bucks if they’re pretty.”

“Where do they get these underage girls?” Anne said.

“Maddie told me that Lendina smuggles some underage girls from China on container ships. The Caucasian ones are from the Ship of Hope halfway house. You know, the girls that ran away from the facility; at least, that’s their excuse. Maddie told me that she hears that Lendina Bisha, while presenting a cheerful and beguiling public persona, is as ruthless as a Nazi stormtrooper in her business dealings.”

“Have you found out anything else about Lendina Bisha?” John said.

“Yes. Lendina went into business with a woman named Magda Galanis. They converted a building in West Halsted near Randolf into an art gallery called *La Touche De l'artiste, or The Artist’s Touch* in English.Magda’s the gallery owner, and Lendina’s the Chairman of the Board. I looked at city building records. The top floor contains several luxury condos with a private elevator to the street. Galanis lives on the third floor; the two art gallery floors are on the bottom.

On paper, Magda Galanis looks pretty legit. She graduated from Fordham in New York City and taught Art History at Northwestern for a couple of years before opening the art gallery. Friends in the art world tell me the gallery does a land-office business. All the nouveau rich want to plaster their mansions with expensive art, and Magda is happy to oblige. Expensive paintings have always been an essential part of modern money laundering.

Last week, I chatted with a Panera Bread delivery boy near the gallery, asking him if he ever delivered to Magda Galanis. He told me that the gallery receptionist directed him to the third floor. He knocked on Magda’s apartment. She answered in a loosely tied robe, giving him quite a show. As he handed her the order, a completely naked woman crossed the living room, fit and voluptuous, with long brown hair.”

“That was Lendina?” Anne said.

“Yep, it had to be her.”

“So, she’s bisexual.”

“Sounds like an open marriage, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Ronnie said. “I’m guessing that Imer Bisha gets the pick of the litter of those Ukrainian escorts whenever he pleases. Millie, you didn’t go into that art gallery, did you?”

“No, I was worried they might identify me using facial recognition. To go in there, I’d need a disguise. That concludes my report. I cc’d copies of my PowerPoint to your inboxes. I do have one more issue to discuss.”

Anne Merrick, satisfied with Millie’s presentation, scooted her chair closer to the table.

“What else is on your mind, Millie.”

“OK, I found out that there’s this exclusive opening at the *La Touche De l'artiste* next Saturday starting at 7 p.m. The Russian artist Valerian Bukovski is currently visiting the United States. Magda Galanis convinced him to exhibit at her gallery. His portrait paintings have become an international sensation, so they expect several Russian oligarchs to fly in to see the new collection.

Anne, if you could check with some of your friends, they might have received an invitation to this opening. Talk one of them into giving you their invitation. I’ll go there in disguise with those oversized fake glasses with the nano-camera system we have from the Bonadanno case. I could look at who’s there, help identify some mob people.”

“Wouldn’t they recognize you? Anne said.

“Me? A worker bee in a prestigious law firm? I think not. I have a pretty spiffy bandage dress that will draw attention away from my face. With a black wig that completely covers my left eye and part of my nose, I’ll be very Bohemian-looking. It'll fit right in with the artsy crowd.”

“Still sounds dangerous to me,” John said.

“It’s a public gathering, John. What are they going to do? Stab me in front of an audience?”

“I’ll make some calls tomorrow, Millie. I’ll get us a ticket.”

Ronnie stood up and pushed her chair away from the table.

“Excellent research, Millie. You’re the best. Mom and Dad, I’m heading home. Pete is back from that symposium in San Diego; he’s waiting for me.”

“Millie, great work,” John Merrick said. “Anne and I will drive you home. The two War Horse guards are waiting in the lobby for us.”

The Art Gallery

Millie arrived fashionably late on Saturday, at 7:30 p.m., wearing a black Lycra bandage dress, topped by a faux rhinestone-encrusted collar that exposed both shoulders. Her attire drew attention to her svelte figure. Millie, only five feet, two inches tall, weighing 95 pounds, secretly wished she were more voluptuous, but most women would kill for her shape. She arranged her black wig to fall over her left eye, and the addition of the oversized Memory glasses helped disguise her identity.

Third in line to enter the *La Touche De l'artiste* gallery, Millie waited patiently. Passing through the metal detectors, she dumped her burner phone and one-use cash card from her simple black clutch onto the tray. By plan, Millie had nothing on her person that could identify her. Eventually, she reached the reception table, which was currently staffed by Magda Galanis. It was showtime, so she handed the invitation to her. Galanis looked twice at the invitation and Millie, like a double take from the movies.

“Well, you’re obviously not Cecile Milton?

“I am Daphne Devon Anderson. I work in Mrs. Milton’s marketing department. Mr. and Mrs. Milton left two days ago for Australia, joining a forty-day cruise before wintering in Hawaii. They asked me to look at the exhibition and recommend if any of the pieces would be suitable for their collection.”

Magda peered at her suspiciously.

“What qualifies you to make such an evaluation, Miss Anderson?”

“I majored in Art History at Penn State.”

“Excellent, we have several samples of work from the 17th Century Dutch Golden Age, you know, master’s such as Mijtens and Titian. They’re at that end of the gallery.”

“Excuse me, ma’am, Titian was Italian and painted one hundred years before the Dutch Masters,” Millie said, thankful that she had done her research.

“Yes, of course, Ms. Anderson. My mistake. Here’s a brochure on Valerian Bukovski and his exhibit. Enjoy your visit. We also have a wonderful photography exhibit upstairs that may interest you.”

“Thank you, Miss ….”

“I’m Magda Galanis, the gallery owner. Ms. Anderson, put away your cell phone. We don’t allow photography anywhere in the gallery because the intense flashes can degrade the oil paintings.”

“Yes, of course,” Millie said as she walked toward the Russian exhibit.

Millie found the Russian section crowded with admirers gathered around Valerian Bukovski. A translator was standing next to him, interpreting questions and answers. Millie maneuvered towards one of his portraits that didn’t have as many people admiring it.

The portrait, titled “Girl with Golden Hair,” was a profile study of a beautiful young woman, illuminated from two sources: facing her and behind her head. While her nearly photo-realistic face had the right shades of pink for her cheeks and lips, Bukovsky rendered her blond hair in streaks of gold, complementing her single gold earring.

“Stunning, isn’t it?” a female voice behind her said.

Turning around to acknowledge the comment, Millie realized that the woman speaking was Lendina Bisha. Standing beside her was Imer Bisha, her husband, obviously forcing a smile. Millie fought the urge to run, knowing that these may be the people who ordered Anne Merrick’s murder just two weeks earlier. But she had a role to play, now thankful for participating in the drama club at Northwestern.

“Why yes, it is. The warmth of the brush strokes in gold draws you in, doesn’t it? Are these works commissioned portraits paid for by wealthy clients, or are they the private collection of Bukovski?”

“These are from his private collection,” Lendina said. “He charges a million dollars for a commissioned portrait. The one you’re looking at is a steal at $750,000.”

“That’s relatively high for such a young artist, is it not?”

“Oh no, the international buzz on Bukovski is so strong that we feel these pieces will triple in value in five years, Miss ….”

“Oh, forgive me. I’m Daphne Devon Anderson. I’m here on behalf of Cecile Milton. They’re on an extended vacation but asked me to review the gallery’s offerings.”

“I’m Lendina Bisha, Ms. Anderson. I’m the chairman of the board of this art emporium. May I introduce my husband, Imer?”

“Delighted to meet both of you,” Millie said, suppressing her nervousness.

“Milton Gears, the people with the unique alloy that wears better than stainless steel,” Imer Bisha said.

“Why yes, we do most of our business with military contractors.”

“Miss Daphne, I founded a company called Chicago Cyber Engineering. One of our specialties is computer security. With all the intrusive industrial espionage rampant these days, CCE has some very sophisticated solutions to deal with that.”

“I’ll be sure to pass that along to our IT Department, Mr. Bisha.”

Lendina whirled around, looking towards the reception desk.

“Oh, look, Imer. Sergey Tripaleyev just walked in. He owns all the aluminum mining and manufacturing in Russia. Let’s give him a personal tour.”

“Thank you for coming tonight, Ms. Anderson. Enjoy our art gallery,” Imer Bisha said as they departed.

A wave of relief twinkled through Millie’s body as her bluffing succeeded. She moved to another of Bukovski’s portraits, titled *Blue Lady*. It was the same artist’s model, with a blue shawl framing her face. Her expression was slightly suspicious, but Bukovsky still rendered the wisp of hair in gold brush strokes.

Millie felt the presence of someone behind her, then the feeling of a hand clenching her left buttock, squeezing, and releasing. She wheeled around to see who the perpetrator was, only to find a smiling Valerian Bukovski looking at her, with some of his entourage chuckling at his boldness.

“Tell me, Mister Bukovski, do Russian girls allow you to do that?” Millie said, smil at him. The translator voiced his reply.

“After Vodka, pretty girl.”

“I am not one of your artist’s models, sir.”

“But you enchanted me, pretty girl.”

“Do Russian girls fall for that line, Mister Bukovski?”

“Every time. I immortalize Russian women in my paintings.”

“On that, we agree.”

Millie spotted Lendina Bisha approaching, with the Russian billionaire Sergey Tripaleyev and a stunning woman at his side.

*Hmmm*, Millie thought, *is she his wife or his mistress du jour?*

She moved throughout the gallery’s first floor, viewing every piece of Bukovski’s collection, secretly photographing every person attending the opening. Millie noticed some men assembling a tripod with a small black box connected to a laptop near the reception desk. Magda Galanis looked at the screen and then stared at her. Instantly, Millie knew something was wrong, so she walked quickly to the stairs, ascending to the second floor.

The photography exhibit did not disappoint. While Magda and Lendina may be mob-affiliated, they exhibit good artistic sense in their featured photographers and painters. Only a scattering of people admired the photographs today, which was not surprising since everybody invited was here for Bukovski.

Again, Millie sensed the presence of somebody behind her. As she turned to look, a person in a blue shirt and slacks yanked off her glasses. He had a tag that said SECURITY in bold lettering. Millie sensed another guard behind her.

“You are photographing the exhibits and patrons. Is expressly forbidden.”

“That’s preposterous!”

“We have sensor system that detects cameras. In your case, it’s these eyeglasses. Come with us quietly. We need to interview you.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you.”

The guard behind her grabbed her left forearm, and she felt a painful jab above the small of her back. Millie yelped, and tears instantly flowed from her eyes.

“Jesus! Did you just stab me?”

The voice behind her growled, sounding like a schoolyard bully.

“That was only a pinprick with my knife. Either go with us, or I push it all the way, cutting your spinal cord. You’ll spend the rest of your life in a wheelchair. Be smart, little girl. Don’t fight us.”

The guard behind her gripped her neck and forearm, pushing her toward the elevator. Tiny Millie was no match for these brutes. She begged them to release her, but they forced her into the elevator, to the third level, down two hallways, and into a large storage closet. Closing the door behind them, one of the two guards forced her against a wall while the other inspected her clutch.

“You came here with only a burner cellphone and a one-use debit card? Who are you? Who sent you here?”

“As I told Ms. Galanis, I’m Daphne Devon Anderson. I’m representing Cecile Milton, who asked me to review the collection.”

“You’re lying.”

Mirko, one of the guards, received a telephone call. He listened for a few seconds and replied.

“I’ll come right down.”

As he opened the closet door, he turned to the other guard.

“Goran, make her talk.”

“How hard do you want me to go at her?”

“You heard me. Make her talk!”

Goran waited until the door closed before approaching the trembling Millie. She was crying from the sharp pain in the small of her back.

“Last chance, little girl. Tell me who you are and who sent you?”

Millie shook her head, indicating no. Goran placed his hand on Millie’s throat and pushed her against the wall. She coughed and sputtered, fighting to breathe. Goran used his other hand to squeeze Millie’s breast so hard that the pain was excruciating.

“Stop it. You’re hurting me.”

Goran released his grip, and Millie slapped Goran’s face. The smack made him wince.

He responded by punching her in the face as hard as he could. The blow landed on her right cheekbone and eye. Her head rebounded against the wall, and she collapsed onto the floor. He reached under her armpits and lifted her. Millie’s right eyelid swelled shut, and a fearsome bruise formed on her cheek. She looked like she had done twelve rounds with Rocky Balboa.

“Don’t want to talk, do you? Well, you’re in for a long night, honey.”

Goran, his face maniacal, pushed her against the wall again, his hand on her neck. He moved his other hand under her dress, digging his fingers beneath her panties. Millie could only sob at this violation of her womanhood.

Suddenly, Millie felt the tingle of electricity emanating from Goran’s hand on her neck. At the same instant, a crackling, buzzing sound filled the closet. Goran’s eyes bugged wide open; his mouth open in literal shock. The buzzing ended in a few seconds, and Millie felt someone pull Goran away. She fell to the floor, sobbing uncontrollably.

Angel delivered an epic beatdown on Goran. She was just too swift for him. An elbow smash and a roundhouse kick to his liver set Goran up for the coup de grâce. Angel smashed his face against the edge of the shelf, breaking his nose. The bleeding and unconscious Goran tumbled to the floor.

Reaching into a small canvas bag she carried, Angel retrieved several industrial cable ties, zip-tying Goran to the shelves.

Retrieving Millie’s clutch, Angel placed her phone, eyeglasses, and debit card back in. She also dropped a thumb drive into the small purse. Reaching into Goran’s pockets, Angel found his swipe card. She used her smartphone to cycle through the building’s security cameras, determining when it was safe to go into the hallway. She lifted Millie to her feet and snaked Millie’s arm around her neck. The two of them traversed the labyrinth of hallways until they reached the door to the stairwell. The swipe card gave them access to the stairs.

Angel led Millie up the stairs to the fourth floor. The deserted hallways enabled Angel to find the elevator, exclusive to the tenants, leading to the street behind the gallery. As the elevator doors closed, Angel summoned her rented Tesla. She got to the road just as the vehicle arrived. Pushing the sobbing Millie into the car, Angel commanded a destination and got out a notepad.

Mac to the Rescue

Lounging on his plush leather couch, Mac mindlessly watched the local news channel at 8:30 p.m. when his cell phone rang. He turned off the television and answered.

"Officer Merrick, this is Martin at the front desk. Someone just dropped off a very distraught young woman here, along with a note saying:

*Tell Officer Merrick that this is Millicent Grainger.*

*The Albanian mob beat her. She needs help.*“Mac, I can’t get her to talk to me. It looks like somebody savagely beat her.”

“Millie! Oh my God. I’m coming down. Martin, don’t let her leave.”

Mac was sprinting from the elevators to the Concierge station in two minutes. He had his police revolver strapped to his waist and his badge in his pocket. Martin and the night shift guard were hovering over Millie.

Mac knelt in front of Millie, who was sobbing uncontrollably.

“Millie, it’s Mac. Who did this to you?”

Millie could not respond. She was breathing fast, her lower lip quivering, and constantly sobbing. Mac, summoning his Tesla using his smartphone, looked up at Martin, the Concierge.

“Who brought her in, Martin?

“Some very flashy lady, Mac. She had orange-tinted glasses, bright blond hair in one of those chin-level razor cuts. Said not a word, just handed me this note and left.”

*The Angel*, Mac thought.

“Martin, has Doctor Rundle left for her shift at Insight Hospital and Medical Center?”

“Yes, Officer Merrick. She left an hour ago.”

Mac fetched his cell phone to call Doctor Robyn Rundle, a Chief Resident at Insight. Robyn lives on Mac’s floor at the Grant Park Tower.

“This is Dr. Rundle. Oh, Officer Merrick. Is this an emergency?”

“Yes, Robyn. I have an injured woman dropped off at Grant’s Reception. I believe the Albanian mob has beaten her.”

“Do you know who she is?”

“She’s Millicent Grainger, a paralegal at my parent’s law firm.”

“Shoot me a picture of her, Mac.”

“OK, Mac. You need to bring her in here right now!”

“Robyn, if you admit her through normal hospital procedures, the mob might locate her and send somebody to finish the job.”

“Really? OK, I’ll authorize clandestine treatment for her. Route 41 is light tonight, so take her to the employee entrance B1 on the north side. I’ll have an orderly waiting with a gurney.”

Mac arrived at Insight Hospital in eight minutes. He helped the orderly get Millie out of Mac’s Tesla. Just inside the employee entrance, Dr. Rundle was waiting.

“Millie, can you hear me? Do you know where you are?”

There was no response, just sobbing from Millie. Dr. Rundle placed a credit card-sized ECG monitor on Millie’s chest.

“Mac, her heart rate, and respiration are elevated. I think we’ve got a beatdown followed by a panic attack here. I’ve got an ER room waiting for us.”

After weaving through the maze of hospital hallways, Dr. Rundle steered Millie’s gurney to an empty ER room. Mac stayed in the corner of the room, observing his neighbor’s work. The ER doctor and nurses quickly took Millie’s vitals, indicating an ongoing panic attack.

“Mac, we’re giving Millie a shot of Klonopin, an anti-anxiety drug. It should take 30 to 45 minutes to ease her condition,” Robyn said.

Two nurses removed Millie’s wig and bandage dress, which had a side zipper. Millie was sobbing, trembling, her mind somewhere else.

“Mac, you’d better look at this,” Dr. Rundle said. The assailant hit her face on the floor or up against a wall. She took the full force of the blow, so a concussion is a real possibility.

Look at this large contusion on her left breast; you must squeeze flesh hard to do that. Hate crime is the first thing that comes to my mind.”

“Hate crime, Robyn?”

“Hatred against women, Mac. That’s not all. See this red scratch mark between her upper thigh and her labia? We see that in rape cases where men try to dig their fingers under a woman’s panties. Mac, these criminals sexually assaulted her.”

“Jesus,” Mac said, shaking his head.

“Doctor Li, let’s turn her over.”

There was a bloodstain on the small of Millie’s back.

“Mac, this is a stab wound. It’s pretty close to her vertebra. Derrick, I want a surgery consult stat. Get them down here!”

“Mac, I can’t get a psych consult until tomorrow's first shift.”

“My boss’s wife, Dr. Shelly DiMarco, teaches psychology at the University of Chicago.”

“I know Shelly DiMarco. She’s on our consultancy list here. Can you get her to come in?”

“I’m on it, Doctor Rundle.”

Commander Ryan DiMarco, Mac’s boss, and his wife, Shelly, arrived in fifteen minutes, and Ryan took charge of the investigation. He used his FBI satellite phone to contact the nearby Precinct Commander, who dispatched a Special Victims Unit officer, Sheila Overton, to the hospital with a rape kit. After 40 minutes, Millie’s vital signs returned to normal; she seemed to be coming out of it. One of the ER nurses elevated her bed to a sitting position. Millie was blinking her eyes, trying to focus.

“Doctor DiMarco, just five minutes. Surgery is ready for her,” Rundle said.

“Millie, can you hear me?” Shelly said.

“Yes, where am I? Who are you?”

“I’m Doctor Shelly DiMarco. I’m a clinical psychologist. You’re at Insight Hospital. Doctor Robyn Rundle and Doctor Bing Li will help you get better. You know Officer Mac Merrick; he brought you in. Millie, who did this to you?”

“It’s all my fault. I’ve let everybody down.”

“Millie Grainger, a beating is never your fault. So, who did this to you?”

Millie took several breaths before answered, trying to collect her thoughts.

“We learned that the Albanian mob had an art gallery on West Halsted near Randolf called the Artist’s Touch. They had an exclusive invitation-only opening for this famous Russian portrait painter tonight. I asked Anne Merrick to canvas her friends to see if she could borrow an invitation. She got one from a woman who was going on vacation.

I disguised myself and bluffed my way into the opening. I wore imaging glasses that our firm had used a couple of years ago. I planned to surreptitiously photograph the crowd to see who mingled with these people. Instead, they started looking at me suspiciously; I don’t know why. So, I retreated to the second-floor photography area.

Two men surrounded me and grabbed my glasses. One of them knifed me in the back. It stung. They forced me onto an elevator and then pushed me into a third-floor closet. One left, telling the other to find out who sent me, to beat it out of me, if necessary. He pushed me against the wall, choking me. When he groped my breast, I slapped him. It made him go berserk.”

“What happened next?” Shelly said.

“He punched me in the face. His fist struck me like a wrecking ball. I fell to the floor, seeing stars. He lifted me to my feet, trying to hurt me in any way he could. He choked me; I couldn’t breathe.”

“Doctor DiMarco, just two more minutes,” Dr. Rundle said.

“What happened next, Millie?”

Millie started sobbing again, her eyes dripping. She looked at Mac Merrick, almost pleading.

“Mac.”

Mac approached her bed, taking her hand in his.

“Millie, do you want to stop?”

“Mac, he put his fingers in me. I was so frightened. I thought he would rape, kill, and bury me in the woods. That’s when I felt the electricity, the buzzing sound. He froze and stopped choking me.

I felt someone pull him away. As I fell to the floor, everything started spinning. I don’t remember anything else.”

“OK, Shelly. That’s enough for now. Millie, this is Officer Sheila Overton. She’s a specialist in sexual assault cases. Will you give consent for a forensic examination?”

“Should I, Mac?”

“Yes, Millie. It’ll be evidence that will hold up in court if we ever catch that bastard. We’ll clear the room. Only Officer Overton and Doctor Li will perform the exam. Just five to ten minutes, Millie.”

“Will you stay outside, Mac?”

“I’m not leaving you tonight, Millie. We’ll get you through this.”

“OK, Mac. I’ll do it.”

CHAPTER 13

Family Squabble

Reading the Riot Act

At 10:30 p.m., Anne, John, Ben, and Ronnie looked worried while sitting in Anne Merrick's office.

“We should have heard from Millie by now, Dad,” Ben said.

“Yeah, I have a bad feeling about this.”

Suddenly, Anne’s MacBook Super lit up with a conference request from Commander Ryan DiMarco of the Chicago Police. Anne quickly accepted the meeting, and Anne’s conference cameras put them into separate windows.

“Good evening, Ryan. Why are you calling?”

“Police business, Mrs. Merrick. I have one question, and don’t lie to me. You don’t want me any angrier at you than I am right now.”

“What’s this about, Ryan?”

“Anne, did you send your paralegal, Millicent Grainger, into a mob-owned art gallery tonight?”

“Yes, we did. Millie was collecting information on who attended the opening, so we might better know the gang trying to kill us.”

“Shame on all four of you! You sent a 27-year-old, 95-pound, innocent woman into a nest of vipers. This is the result of your stupidity!”

Commander DiMarco replaced his image with a photograph of Millie’s face. Her left eye was swollen and shut, and her face bruised.

“Oh my God,” Ronnie said. “Is she OK?”

“No, Mrs. Fieldstone. Someone in that gallery stabbed Millie Grainger in the back, beat her savagely, and subjected her to aggravated criminal sexual assault. They raped her.”

“Is she in a hospital?” Anne said.

“Yes. Someone dropped Millie off at The Grant Park Tower with a note asking the Concierge to call Officer Merrick. He brought Millie to the hospital where she is now receiving clandestine treatment.”

“What hospital is it?” John Merrick said.

“I’m not disclosing it, John. Please do not attempt to guess her location and visit since that might lead the mob right to her to finish what they started.”

“We have a first-rate medical plan for our employees, Ryan,” Anne said.

“Doesn’t matter. Millie’s treatment is strictly cash-only.”

“At least let me pay for her treatment,” John said.

“Your son is covering Millie’s medical expenses, John. He’s probably using the trust fund you gave him. So yeah, in a matter of speaking, you’re paying for her hospitalization.”

“Commander DiMarco, tell us what we can do to help?” Anne said.

“Get everybody home safely tonight. Then, stick to your usual routine over the next few days. I’m not convinced that the Albanian mob got a make on Millie. So don’t tip them off.

My wife, Shelly, is here helping Millie get through this. Tomorrow, I’ll work out where Millie can safely convalesce and return to her everyday life and work.”

“May I speak to Mac?” Anne said.

“Inadvisable. Mac is furious about this. He was going to call and read the Riot Act to you, but I put the kibosh on that. Give him a few days to cool down.”

“Ryan, who brought Millie to Grant Park?” Ben said.

“The Concierge described a tall, flashy-looking woman with blond hair. She placed Millie on the couch, handed him a note, and bugged out. Sound like somebody we know?”

“Ryan,” John said, “before we end this meeting, I’d like to speak on behalf of the family. Tell my son we are embarrassed and humiliated by our role in Millie’s injuries. We are so sorry about this. We will dedicate ourselves to helping get Millie physically well and safely back to work here at Merrick, Dawson, and Brant.”

“Very well,” Ryan said. “Last piece of advice, Anne Merrick. Don’t poke the bear anymore, capeesh?”

“Agreed, Commander. Will you call me tomorrow about Millie’s condition?”

“Will do. Good night, counselors.”

Police Response

Pietrina Cerrone, dressed in street clothes with her brown hair pulled into a ponytail, and a night shift FBI Agent joined the investigation at Chicago’s Insight Hospital.

“OK, Mac. I looked at the contents of Millie’s purse. She had just four things in there. Neither the spy glasses, the burner cell phone, nor the one-use $200 debit card could identify her. The last item is a petabyte thumb drive. Now, that’s an odd duck, isn’t it?

“I’m having trouble believing Millie went to that mob art gallery to plug this into one of their computers. It’s more likely that her rescuer dropped this into her handbag.”

“I’m with you, Pietrina.”

Commander DiMarco and Doctor Rundle approached Mac and Pietrina.

“How’s Millie?” Mac said.

“She’ll physically recuperate at least,” Dr. Rundle said. “Millie is in recovery, still too groggy to talk. The surgeons reported that the knife had just nicked her fourth lumbar vertebra. Any deeper would have endangered her spinal cord.

“We’ve arranged a single room upstairs and listed the room as out-of-service, with the cameras disconnected. I expect we’ll be able to release Ms. Grainger sometime on Monday.

“Mac, maybe it’s not my place to suggest, but Millie will need a couple of weeks to recuperate. If she were to stay in your guest bedroom, I’m just down the hall to help medically supervise her recovery.”

“I was thinking the same thing. Ryan, you OK with this?”

“How’s the security in your building, Mac?”

“Top-notch. There’s an armed security guard in the building 24/7. You can’t use the elevators unless approved by the front desk.”

“OK, that sounds like a plan. Pietrina, what do you have on the contents of Millie’s handbag?”

“Sir, I suspect the eyeglasses, phone, and debit card are Millie’s, but this Angel girl may have planted the petabyte thumb drive there. I want to take the evidence back to FBI Headquarters tonight and have a look.”

FBI Analysis

Monday morning, FBI Special Agent in Charge D’Marcus Mason called a meeting about the Millie Grainger case.

“Let’s get started. Gabe, tell me about the victim,” Mason said.

Gabriel Marecki cast a photograph of Millie onto Mason’s display. It was an image from Merrick, Dawson, and Brant’s publicity files.

“This is the victim, Millicent Grainger, a Merrick law firm paralegal. She’s an only child and graduated high school at the top of her class. Her father died when she was in grade school; her mother died of cancer halfway through her senior year. She sold her parents’ house and possessions and used the proceeds to finance her four-year degree in paralegal studies at Northwestern.

She landed a job as a junior paralegal at Merrick, Dawson, and Brant. She’s now considered their most skilled paralegal. Other law firms have made her lucrative offers; she spurned them all. A background check reveals no arrests, bankruptcies, or police records. She’s as squeaky clean as her photograph.”

“OK, so the mob beat up Pollyanna. Pietrina, you reviewed the items in the victim’s handbag. What did you find?”

“Millie probably purchased the burner phone and the $200 debit card Saturday afternoon. There’s nothing on them. The imaging glasses are the property of the law firm where she works.

“The thumb drive has Saturday’s security camera data files from the art gallery La Touche De l'artiste. This Angel person addressed a read-me file to the police. It was short.”

*Chicago Police, FBI*

*These are the Saturday surveillance files for the mob-owned art gallery La Touche De l'artiste. I erased all their camera storage and backup files locally and on the cloud. While not usable in court, you may find this data illuminating.*

*Sincerely, Angel*

“That Angel gal is right; these files are a treasure trove. I will run the clip that shows the initial attack on Ms. Grainger. Here, two guards come up behind Ms. Grainger, yank off her glasses, and stab her in the back. And there they are, pushing her into the elevator. There is no video of what went on in the storage closet.”

“Did you get a facial match on Ms. Grainger’s assailants?”

“Sure did,” Pietrina said, “the one who yanked off her glasses is Mirko Tomic, wanted on an assault charge in Los Angeles. The one who stabbed her and allegedly beat and raped her is Goran Pesic. He was on trial in New Orleans for the murder of a policeman when he skipped bail."

“Any chance of apprehending them?”

“Doubt it, D’Marcus,” Dave Hanko said. “The mob undoubtedly sent them out of town right after Millie escaped from the building. Washington will get a full list of everybody on these security camera files. Of course, not of this is usable in court.”

“True, Dave, but Ms. Grainger's DNA forensics exam will hold up in court if we ever manage to collar Pesic. Superintendent Green tells me Ms. Grainger will convalesce in Officer Mac Merrick’s guest bedroom. He’s hired a home care nurse to be with her while working. Dave, who owns that art gallery?”

“Two women, boss. Magda Galanis and Lendina Bisha.”

Agent Mason straightened up, tilted his head sideways, and looked quizzically at Agent Hanko.

“Get me what you have on these two. Call Ms. Galanis and Mrs. Bisha and invite them here for an interview. Use the usual threat that we’ll issue a warrant if they don’t cooperate. Also, send someone to Merrick’s apartment to speak with Millicent Grainger.”

Mac’s Request

Monday noon, at the Merrick Law Firm, the receptionist called Veronica.

“Ronnie, this is Julia. A drone just delivered an envelope for you. It’s from your brother Mac.”

“Have Marika bring it to me ASAP. They postponed my court appearance today, so I'm in for the rest of the day. Ask my mom to come to my office.”

Anne Merrick pulled a chair beside Ronnie, and they read Mac’s message together.

*Ronnie:*

*While I’m mad as hell at you, you are my sister, and I love you.*

*Please purchase the following items and bring them to Grant Park Tower at 6:30 p.m. tonight.*

*Seven pairs of ladies’ underpants – size 2*

*Four pairs of ladies’ sweatpants – size 2*

*Six T-shirts, cotton - size 2*

*Seven pairs of ladies’ socks – size 2*

*Three sets of ladies’ pajamas – size 2*

*Please arrive incognito with a hoodie, sunglasses, and no flowers. Martin will be expecting you. I don’t think the mob knows who they beat up and raped. Let’s keep it that way. Elisha Simmons of the FBI will interview Millie at 7 p.m.*

*I‘d like you to provide Millie with legal representation during the interview.*

*Love, Mac*

“Well, at least Mac has reached out to us; that’s a hopeful sign. I’ll call my personal shopper and get her to drone these items to us this afternoon. What was that candy bar that Millie adored?” Anne said.

“Those little bite-sized Rolo candies, Mom.”

“OK, I’ll have her get a supply of those.”

“Mom, do you want me to take a message to Millie?”

“I do. But before I compose my letter to Millie, I have some news.”

“What news, Mom?”

“We just heard from Ezekiel Dawson. PowerDyne Energy has decided to settle instead of risking a jury trial. We’ve agreed to a $2.3 billion settlement for our forty clients. Our 33% will net us about $759 million before taxes. Our settlement income will put the firm in the billion-dollar club!”

“Wow, Mom. That’s fantastic news! Is it still under wraps?”

“Yes, mum’s the word until Ezekiel comes home with the signed and court-approved documents. Millie’s discovery of that engineer who admitted that the company leaked transformer chemicals into the local water table was the breaking point in this litigation. They had to cave after she obtained that testimony. I plan to recommend to the board that we award Millie $1 million for her work.”

“Can I tell her tonight?”

“I’m going to give you a note.”

Millie Cooperates

“She’s in the guest bedroom,” Mac said as his sister, Ronnie, entered his front door. Handing Mac the shopping bags with the clothes, she doffed her hood and scarf and sprinted to Mac’s guest room. She pulled up short when she encountered Dr. Robyn Rundle fastening a blood pressure cuff to Millie’s arm.

“Hi, you’re Mac’s sister, right?”

“Why, yes. I’m Ronnie.”

“I’ll just be a minute. I’m Doctor Rundle, by the way.”

Robyn finished checking Millie’s vital signs. She explained to Ronnie that any hugging needed to be gentle with the contusion on Millie’s left breast and the stab wound on her back.

Mac entered Millie’s room and started putting away Millie’s clothes as Doctor Rundle headed back to her apartment to get ready for her shift at Insight Hospital.

“Ronnie, are your parents upset with me?”

“Heavens, no, Millie. Quite the opposite. We are all mad at ourselves for putting you in a dangerous situation. My Mom wrote you a note. Here, I want you to read it.”

Millie’s heart soared as she read Anne’s letter. All four founding partners signed it, although Ezekiel Dawson’s signature was digital since he was in Ohio.

“This is so kind, Ronnie. We won the PowerDyne Energy class action suit, and they’re giving me a million-dollar bonus?”

“You deserve it, Millie. Your research and investigation broke that case wide open.”

Mac’s doorbell chime sounded, and he welcomed Special Agent Simmons to his apartment. She, too, was wearing a hoodie. Mac brought a bar stool from his kitchen to the bedroom as a platform for the FBI camera. Ronnie set her iPhone on the same seat to record the interview.

Elisha Simmons introduced herself and the other participants attending the interview in her distinctive Southern accent.

“Alright, let's get started. Ms. Grainger, I gotta remind you now, lyin' to an FBI Agent is a federal felony, sure as the day is long.”

“Agent Simmons, before we start, there’s something I want to say. Please don’t ask me to give up the Angel who saved my life twice. We couldn’t conduct this interview were it not for her intervention.”

“Very well, I’ll just ask y’all one question 'bout your Angel. Are y'all certain that the lady who pulled y’all outta the La Touche De l'artiste buildin' last Saturday was the one folks call the Chicago Angel?”

“Agent Simmons, I don’t recall anything after that mob brute knocked me to the floor.”

“Worth mentioning,” Mac said, “that the FBI interviewed Martin, our evening Concierge, at his home, and he identified the Angel as the woman who brought Millie in.”

“Alright now, that’s enough ‘bout the Angel, Millie. I need ya to walk me through what y’all have dug up on the Mafia Shqiptare. Tell me what you know, even if it’s just guesswork. And I’m keen to understand why you was over at that art gallery last Saturday night.”

Millie’s interview lasted just over ninety minutes. Mac asked Elisha to stop several times when Millie started to get emotional. Mac would return from the kitchen with a glass of ice water, giving Millie a moment to collect herself.

Agent Simmons switched off her camera, stashing it in her hoodie pocket.

“"Thank you, Ms. Grainger, y'all been mighty cooperative. Some of your allegations are just plain explosive. Are them two Chicago doyenne ladies actually fronts for organized crime? Mason's fixin' to dig into this. The real question tonight is this. Do they even know who they beat up?”

“I don’t think they do,” Ronnie said. “Our best bet is to get Millie back to work as soon as she physically recovers. Having Warhorse Security escort her home wouldn’t raise suspicions, considering what happened to the Firm’s SUV.”

“I reckon Mason'll wanna see Mac and Commander DiMarco tomorrow afternoon, after he's had a spell to chew over my report.” She put on her hood and headed out Mac’s door to the elevator.

CHAPTER 14

Mob Women

Lendina Versus The FBI

Special Agent David Hanko ushered Lendina Bisha, Magda Galanis, and their lawyer into the interview room.

Lendina wore a stylish black and white knitted business suit. Her long brown hair included two braids tied to a clip behind her head. She was smiling, showing no fear or nervousness.

Magda Galanis wore a simple pink floral wrap dress. Her oval face, full lips, and piercing blue eyes revealed no fear. Both women were wearing an exotic perfume, noticed instantly by the men in the room.

Her lawyer, Tony Sipelli, was a hulking Italian who smelled of day-old beer and slobber-soaked cigars. The three took seats together at the interview table.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Bisha and Ms. Galanis. I’m Special Agent in Charge D’Marcus Mason. On my right is Special Agent David Hanko, and on my left is Commander Ryan DiMarco of the Chicago Police. As you can see from the cameras in the room, we are recording this interview. Let me remind you that lying to an FBI Agent is a felony.”

Lendina Bisha focused her icy stare at Agent Mason, morphing her expression to a blasé smile.

“I’m a Certified Public Accountant, Agent Mason. Honesty is the cornerstone of our business.”

“Very well,” Mason said.

He placed photographs of Mirko Tomic and Goran Pesic in front of Lendina.

“Does this person work for you and Ms. Galanis? His name is Mirko Tomic.”

“I do not know this person. He does not work for me.”

“OK, does this person work for you? His name is Goran Pesic.”

“Again, I do not know this individual. He does not work for me.”

“What’s this all about, D’Marcus,” Tony Sipelli said.

“Glad you asked, Tony. The Los Angeles police have a warrant out on Mirko Tomic, a career criminal with an extensive rap sheet. Goran Pesic, having served two jail terms for assault, skipped bail in New Orleans while on trial for the murder of a policeman.

So, once again, Mrs. Bisha. Did either of these two men work for you? Specifically, did they work for you at your art gallery, La Touche De l'artiste, last Saturday*?*”

“Absolutely not!” Lendina said.

“Ms. Galanis?”

“To suggest that we hire career criminals to work at our gallery is preposterous. Agent Mason, we moved $35 million in fine art and photographs through our gallery last year. We take a 40% commission. After taxes, we plow that $14 million profit right back into the Chicago economy, into local businesses founded by Lendina’s husband, and various charities we support. Hiring criminals with that kind of money at stake would be totally daft.”

“Mason, what’s your interest in these two men?” Tony Sipelli said.

Agent Mason, the master of the piercing stare, looked straight at Lendina’s brown eyes as he spoke.

“These men accosted a female visitor to your gallery Saturday evening. They stabbed her in the back, forcing her to a third-floor storage room, where Goran Pesic beat and sexually assaulted her.”

“Ridiculous, Agent Mason. My staff reported no such incident at our opening on Saturday night. This didn’t happen. Do you have proof?”

“We handle rape cases with special procedures, Mrs. Bisha. We identify victims only as Individual-One. This person is in protective custody while she recuperates. That said, we have her testimony and substantial DNA evidence. If we apprehend these men, they are both looking at rape and assault charges.”

“Again, Agent Mason. This did not happen. How did this woman leave the building without us seeing her?”

“It’s an ongoing investigation, Mrs. Bisha. I cannot provide any more information about this case.”

David Hanko laid a document in front of the two women.

“Mrs. Bisha, this is a summary from the Transportation Safety Administration of your and Ms. Galanis’s national and international travel over the last two years. You’ve traveled worldwide to Europe, the Balkans, China, Korea, Saudi Arabia, and so on. Isn’t this excessive for a Chicago-based accountant?”

“Not in the slightest, Agent Hanko. This travel is on behalf of our art gallery. We acquire sculptures and paintings worldwide from museums struggling financially and wishing to balance their books. We also deal with private collectors who tire of a particular tableaux and are willing to part with it for an advantageous price. These negotiations require face-to-face contact.”

Commander DiMarco chimed in, looking directly at Lendina Bisha.

“Mrs. Bisha, getting back to the assault at your gallery last Saturday….”

“No such assault occurred, Commander. None of my staff reported any such incident!”

“Very well, Mrs. Bisha. You could settle our impasse conclusively by allowing me and a police forensics team to review the gallery’s security camera footage during your event last Saturday.”

“Unfortunately, Commander DiMarco, my IT consultant informed me Sunday afternoon that the security camera system malfunctioned on Saturday, and no camera footage is available.”

“How convenient,” Commander DiMarco said, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

Lendina maintained her icy stare at DiMarco for several uncomfortable seconds.

“Are you accusing me of something, Commander?”

“We’re done here, Mrs. Bisha,” Special Agent Mason said. “Thank you for coming in today. Agent Hanko will check you out of the building.” Standing up and heading for the door, Lendina wheeled around and faced Mason.

“Do you have children, Agent Mason?”

“Yes, two teenage daughters.”

“How nice,” she said with a condescending smile.

Lendina, Magda, and their odoriferous lawyer left the interview room.

FBI Analysis

David Hanko returned to Agent Mason’s office with Pietrina Cerrone and Elisha Simmons. Mason replayed the interview to refresh everybody’s memory and asked for comments.

“Well, Boss,” Elisha said, “that last comment Lendina Bisha made to y’all sure sounded like a threat to you and your kin.”

“I felt the same way, but her carefully chosen words wouldn’t be legally actionable.”

“Kinda curious why y'all didn't bring up that suspected escort service operation or her husband. What's the story behind leavin' that out?”

“I don’t want to lay any of my cards on the table right now. Admitting that the art gallery’s surveillance tapes are gone strengthens my feeling that they don’t know who they beat up and raped. If I felt otherwise, we’d have to consider the Witness Protection Program for Millie Grainger. That’s something I’d like to avoid.”

“Pietrina, how did they detect Millie using a secret camera?”

“Most bug detection systems today flash an infrared light in the camera's direction and detect the lens's glint. Even a nano-camera has a tiny lens. In the Angel’s stolen surveillance tapes, you can see them setting up this system and pointing at Millie.”

“D'Marcus, what 'bout this Angel woman? Y'all think we oughta mount a full-on FBI effort to bring her in?” Agent Elisha Simmons said.

“For now, we will leave the Angel problem to the Chicago Police. I must admit to a somewhat begrudging admiration for this Angel girl. You know, the enemy of my enemy is my friend, that sort of thing. Commander DiMarco, what’s the Chicago Police’s take on her?”

“Well, a good portion of the rank and file see her as a hero, a friend to the police. Then again, a contingent among us thinks she’s a lawless vigilante. She saved my life, so I guess I’m pro-Angel. I hope we can eventually offer a deal in exchange for her help. First, we must find out who she is.

“Elisha,” Agent Mason said, “you and Mac Merrick find this girl. Tell her we’d like to make a deal if you locate her.”

“We’re on it, sir.”

Millie and Mac

“Oh, Mac. That smells so good!” said Millie as Mac brought the loaded pizza into the guest bedroom. “You will join me? Right?”

“Absolutely,” Mac said as he placed a towel and plate on Millie’s lap.

Mac used a pizza cutter to separate two slices for Millie with a supply of paper napkins. He placed his plate on her bed and drew a chair up to the bed.

“I bought two pizzas, left one with Martin, our Concierge, and Jalen, the night guard.”

“That was nice of you, Mac. Whoever makes your pizzas, this is delicious. I’ve been dreaming of this all day after Dr. Rundle said I could eat regular food.”

“How are you feeling tonight?”

“Much better, Mac. Doctor Rundle has me off the woozy-inducing painkillers, and my back injury is settling down quite a bit. Is my face looking any better?”

“Almost back to normal, Millie. Your eyelids are no longer swollen, but you still have a shiner.”

“Mac, I’m embarrassed to ask, but did you see me naked at the hospital?”

“Yes, Millie, I did.”

“Oh …” Millie said, looking pensively down at her plate.

“Millie, look at me.”

“Yes, Mac?”

“Millie, until I could get backup from the Chicago Police, I was your sole protection that night. Robyn showed me the extent of your injuries. I see naked women all the time on duty as a policeman. They run the gamut from drunk or methed-out women who don’t realize they are naked to, sadly, murdered women tossed into a dumpster. Police officers are not supposed to react sexually to these situations. I know I don’t.”

“I sometimes wonder if this wouldn’t have happened had I not turned you down four years ago, Mac. You would have told me not to go into that art gallery.”

“Millie, I was a young Police Academy graduate, just 22 years old. I understood and accepted your reasoning. Truth be told, I’m no different than you. I don’t date anyone from the force. Broken relationships have destroyed many a career in the Chicago Police.”

“Do you have a girlfriend?”

“Not in the normal definition.”

“What do you mean, Mac?”

Mac took another bite of pizza, keeping his eyes on his plate. It was an uncomfortable moment, but he relented and looked at Millie.

“If I answer that honestly, Millie, you’ll think less of me.”

“Try me, Mac. What do you mean?”

“Her name is Anneliese Darban. She works for Beckman Accounting Group. She’s their best troubleshooter. They send her on missions nationwide and internationally; she’s out of the office 90% of the time.

“When she returns to town for a few days, we get together for sex. The arrangement is pretty simple. Either of us can break it off with no acrimony or hard feelings. Anneliese doesn’t want a family, a needy boyfriend, or a long-term commitment.

“My arrangement with Anneliese is secret, Millie. My parents don’t know about it. Ronnie found out but has kept it confidential.”

“Have you ever tried to hook up with a regular girlfriend?”

“Yes, but I haven’t been too successful. The usual impediments intervene, they only want my money, can’t handle the hours, or can’t deal with the worry that I might be killed.”

“Mac, I don’t think less of you for any of this. But you come home to an empty house. Don’t you want someone here waiting for you? Someone who wants to tell you about their day, hear about yours? A girl to start a family with?”

“Of course, Millie. However, the Chicago Police have put a lot of faith in me, putting me on the Chicago-FBI Joint Task Force on Organized Crime. I’m working like crazy to impress Commander DiMarco and Special Agent Mason with my work. So, I take the easy way out, occasional burst-mode sex with Anneliese.”

Millie Grainger chuckled at Mac’s description.

“Well, that’s an odd way to put it. What about the Angel, Mac? She’s stunning, smart as hell, athletic?”

“She has touched me in a way no other woman has. She saved my life, and I can’t stop thinking about her.”

“Nothing to be ashamed about there, Mac.”

“Millie, I did get to have dinner with you tonight. It’ll be our secret.”

“Mac, you were there for me when I needed you. I’ll never forget that.”

Mac started to gather up the plates, bottled water, and napkins. He told Millie that the leftover pizza would be in zip-lock bags in the fridge for tomorrow.

CHAPTER 15

Chamber of Commerce

Planning

Julia rang Anne Merrick in her sixth-floor office Friday afternoon at the Merrick Building.

“Hello, Anne. Marika picked up your dress from the dry cleaner’s. She’s bringing it to your office.”

Anne shrugged, gazing out the window at North Lasalle Street. Everywhere she looked was green, as Chicago was in glorious summer’s bloom. At least tomorrow’s event at Chicago’s Peninsula Hotel will be pleasant weather. A cold front brought a short respite from the heatwave.

Anne is one of the Executive Directors of Chicago’s Chamber of Commerce. One of the largest Chambers in the United States, the Chicago chapter has over 1300 businesses as members. The Burnham Award Dinner at the Peninsula Hotel will draw over three hundred business leaders to Saturday evening's social event. While most small law firms find the Chamber’s dues and event fees onerous, Anne and John feel that their firm's size and extensive corporate law experience justify the cost. Brand building, as John likes to say.

While the Chamber’s Chairman confers the Burnham Award, Anne Merrick would bestow the Outstanding Service Awards. A popular member of the Board, the Chamber often chooses Anne to host these events thanks to her public speaking skills and good looks.

She decided to wear a ten-year-old Jovani strapless embellished tulle ballgown for tomorrow's bash. The floor-length off-white dress had a straight neckline with a decorative laced-up back. While Anne and her daughter, Ronnie, are of Scottish lineage and have ample bosoms, Anne liked this dress because it showed no cleavage but emphasized that she, at age 63, is still as thin as a college student.

The Chamber would typically allow Anne two guests as an Executive Director. Typically, those would be John, and Ben or Veronica in less turbulent times. Tomorrow night, her guests would be John and a Warhorse Security guard formally dressed.

Anne appreciated that her founding partner, Ezekiel Dawson, had negotiated a $2.3 billion settlement with PowerDyne Energy. Fortuitously, the electric company had sizeable cash reserves, so PowerDyne Energy dispensed the settlement money quickly, a cool $759 million to the firm. At least there would be adequate funds to pay for the Warhorse security people.

Burnham Award

The Chamber spared no expense in staging this yearly event. They booked the Peninsula Hotel’s Grand Ballroom, which allowed over 300 guests. The Peninsula erected a small stage, including a podium, teleprompter, two high-resolution displays, and a table for the trophies and plaques.

John and Anne arrived fashionably late Saturday evening, but John still had some schmoozing time out on the Shanghai Terrace. He put it to good use, meeting people and offering the firm’s business card to potential clients. When the hotel announced that the Burnham Award Dinner would start, everybody filed into the Grand Ballroom, ready to enjoy the Hotel’s Five-Star service.

The dinner's salad and first course were reasonably quiet, with a lively conversation between the people crammed at the tables. Anne’s bodyguard whispered how much he liked the Boeuf En Croûte (beef tenderloin) entree. Once the dessert portion started, so did the Chamber’s many speakers with audio-visual presentations. Finally, Anne climbed onto the stage to present the Distinguished Service Awards. Though a director, she did not participate in these awards' nomination and selection process. Fortunately, the Chamber staff prepared a script for her on the teleprompter. The team also supplied her with a wireless microphone disguised as a tiny piece of jewelry. Anne dutifully read the script, scrolling through the teleprompter.

“The next Distinguished Service Award goes to James Drake of Drake Manufacturing for their Jesse Ma Houston Park restoration efforts on South Drexel Boulevard. Mr. Drake and his fellow employees replaced worn-out equipment and made landscaping improvements to this playground for the children's benefit in this area of Chicago. Mr. Drake, would you be so kind as to come to the podium.”

Anne flashed her most radiant smile for James Drake as she handed him the commemorative plaque.

“Would you please give Mr. Drake and his employees a round of applause?”

John Merrick joined the rest of the guests with a hearty expression of admiration. Anne returned to the podium and looked at the running script on the teleprompter. For just an instant, the screen text jolted her. The next recipients were Lendina Bisha and Magda Galanis. Like John getting a shocker in court, the best strategy is to show no emotion and act unsurprised. Without missing a beat, Anne pressed on.

“The next Distinguished Service Award goes to Magda Galanis and Lendina Bisha of the *La Touche De l'artiste* Art Gallery for their fundraising efforts for the Ship of Hope Home for Battered Women and Teenaged Runaways. This year, Ms. Galanis and Mrs. Bisha raised over $4.5 million for the Ship of Hope facility’s operation. Ms. Galanis and Mrs. Bisha, would you be so kind as to come to the podium.”

The two women slowly made their way to the stage. Lendina Bisha wore a metallic gold Ralph Lauren dress with a lot of cleavage. Magda Galanis was a bit more modest with a white metallic jersey gown, one-shoulder bared, culturally appropriate for an émigré from Greece. Anne Merrick stepped to the edge of the stage and handed Lendina the commemorative plaque.

“Congratulations, Mrs. Bisha. You too, Ms. Galanis. Would everybody give a round of applause to these two ladies?”

As the audience applauded, Lendina and Magda turned to face the crowd. They raised the plaque over their heads, basking in the moment's glory. As Lendina returned to her table, Anne pressed on with the awards, finishing with a practiced flourish that elicited the attendees' admiration. Returning to her seat, Anne and John endured the remaining presentations and speeches, occasionally glancing at Lendina’s table, where she held lively conversations with her tablemates.

When the Burnam Awards dinner concluded, Anne and John said goodbyes to the Executive Committee and headed out the door as the hotel’s employees cleaned up. John suggested a nightcap out on the Shanghai Terrace, and Anne happily agreed.

In good weather, the Peninsula’s Shanghai Terrace is one of the loveliest spots in downtown Chicago. The terrace overlooking the Miracle Mile is, by design, Asian in appearance. The tables and chairs are decidedly Chinese; the plants are reminiscent of a Chinese garden, with a granite sculpture that looks like an ancient Buddha worn down by the tides of time.

John and Anne Merrick took a table near the statue, with their Warhorse guard standing nearby. A female voice from behind them rang out.

“May we join you?”

Turning to acknowledge the question, Anne Merrick was surprised to see Lendina Bisha and Magda Galanis.

“Have a seat, Mrs. Bisha, and Ms. Galanis. May I introduce my husband, John Merrick?”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance,” Magda Galanis said as she glided into her chair.

Anne called for the waiter, who took Lendina’s and Magda’s order: white wine for Magda and an Orange Mimosa for Lendina. Anne whispered to the waiter to put the drinks on her tab.

“Lovely night is it not?” Magda said.

“Yes,” John said, “one would wish every summer-in-the-city night was as pleasant as this.”

Lendina was looking at Anne Merrick, emulating a child’s staring contest. She sipped a bit of her Mimosa and fired the opening salvo.

“Tell me, Mrs. Merrick. Who is that stern-faced man hovering over us?”

“Please call me Anne. That man is my bodyguard. He’s with Warhorse Security and the city of Chicago licensed him to carry a firearm.”

“Really? For a Chamber of Commerce event?”

“In our line of work, Lendina, we make our fair share of enemies. People dissatisfied with their legal results sometimes turn to violence. Our home in Highland Park is a veritable fortress for this reason.”

“Does this happen to you often, Anne, these acts of retribution?”

“Several weeks ago, two criminals attempted to murder my husband, John, and my daughter, Veronica, in front of Barney’s Restaurant. So yes, Lendina, we take these threats seriously.”

“I remember that story,” Magda said. “John, that Angel woman saved you. At least, that’s what the press is calling her. She’s a modern-day Scarlett Pimpernel. Do you know who she is?”

Though Magda Galanis asked the question, Anne Merrick, as stone-faced as her opponent, shifted her gaze to Lendina.

“This individual, referred to as the Chicago Angel by the local and national press, is now a Merrick, Dawson, and Brant client. Due to attorney-client privilege, we cannot disclose any information about her.”

Lendina relaxed a bit in her seat, giving Anne a half-smile.

“So, you do know this woman, this Angel lady?”

“I didn’t say that Lendina. We may know everything about her or next to nothing about her. I can’t discuss it due to attorney-client privilege. I realize you’re curious about this person, but we must follow the legal profession’s rules and procedures.”

“Would you be interested in what they’re saying about her on the street, Anne?”

“Hearsay evidence is the first thing to get tossed in a court trial but do regale us with your gossip.”

“I hear this Angel person is actually a policewoman utilizing illegal tactics, and the Chicago Police are covering for her.”

“You’re suggesting that the Chicago Police are breaking the law?” John Merrick said. “Anne and I have a son in the police force. I doubt that he’d agree with that assertion.”

“There are lots of examples of bad and lawless cops. I didn’t mean to offend your son or his reputation. He may well be a modern Prince Valiant.”

“Our law firm faces bad cops in court now and then, Lendina. But your suggestion that the Chicago Police are breaking the law as a matter of policy is something with which I must respectfully disagree.”

“Adding to what John has said, the city of Chicago has 13,000 Police Officers and about 1800 ancillary employees. It’s one of the oldest police departments in the world. The number of bad apples exposed yearly is minuscule when considering the force's size.”

“Still,” Lendina said, “how do you defend yourselves in a world that has become so violent, and you are on the front lines?”

“We rely on the police and personal security services,” John Merrick said, gently pointing to their security guard.

Anne Merrick fixed her gaze on Lendina Bisha. Anne’s expression showed unwavering concentration; her voice sharp as a surgeon’s scalpel.

“John's comment, Lendina, doesn't mean we are like sheep waiting to be slaughtered, accepting these threats to our lives. Our law firm investigates those threatening us to identify possible legal remedies.”

“How so?”

“Once we have identified the person or corporation that is menacing us, we thoroughly examine that individual’s or corporation’s assets. We list these assets, their value, and their legal ownership documentation. Even attempts to obscure ownership via overseas shell companies would prove fruitless under the assault of our corporate law division. Suppose the individuals we target own a metal fabrication plant, a software company, an expensive condominium, or an art gallery. In that case, we can prepare a series of lawsuits to recover those assets.

We usually move legally after the State of Illinois has arrested, charged, and convicted that individual in a court of law. For instance, if the Federal Government convicted those individuals under a RICO statute, it would seize all their assets. We would register our personal injury lawsuits as assets to be subtracted from the government seizures. In other words, we will get our pound of flesh.

On the other hand, if someone kills John and me, we have arrangements for that grim eventuality. Merrick, Dawson, and Brant have friendly relations with several top law firms in Chicago and Illinois. These firms have copies of our evidence with instructions on how to sue on behalf of the Merrick estate. Those who carry out their threats will face a series of endless and debilitating lawsuits. We are not sheep, Lendina.”

“No one is suggesting that you are. But I am intrigued by your example of assets, which included businesses that my husband, Imer, and I own. Are you accusing me of something, Anne?”

“I was speaking hypothetically, and you should presume no such judgment.”

“My husband and I are legitimate entrepreneurs, founders of several successful companies. Our facilities and business records are public. You could visit any of our companies and see for yourself.”

Anne Merrick twirled her stirrer in her Lillet Rose Martini, taking a pregnant pause before responding.

“If you are, as you claim, legitimate entrepreneurs, then you have absolutely nothing to fear.”

“But you don’t believe me, do you, Anne Merrick?”

“Lendina, I’m a veteran Marine pilot,” John said. “I’ve seen humanity at its worst. I’ve had people lie to me and seen lives lost as a result.

“Study the Grand Jury’s indictment, which is now a public record. You will see the names Luan Bisha and his associate Besim Morina, identified as members of the Albanian Mafia Shqiptare, an organized crime family. Luan is your brother-in-law. So, Anne and I have grounds for suspicion.”

“While I am an accountant by trade, John, and not a lawyer, are you not subjecting me to guilt by association?”

Lendina Bisha’s expression morphed into an intense glare. A couple of tiny veins near her temple became visible, indicating tension.

“Did you run a background check on me, Anne?”

“Yes, I did.”

“And what did it reveal?”

“For you, your husband, and Ms. Galanis, no arrests, indictments, warrants, or financial judgments were reported. In other words, your record is as clean as a Norwegian waterfall.”

“Well now, I rest my case, Anne and John Merrick,” Lendina said with a mischievous smile. She stood up to leave, and Magda followed suit. John and Anne rose from their seats as well.

“Lendina, once again, congratulations on your Distinguished Service Award. You too, Ms. Galanis.”

“Good night, Anne,” Lendina said as she headed for the exits.

CHAPTER 16

Anneliese

Carolina Hendon

Carolina Hendon peered at her FBI laptop display screens, paging through lines of microprocessor software. She compared the surveillance camera’s operating system and application code with the manufacturer’s reference copy.

“This is either annoying or downright impressive, Mac. Whatever this Angel person did to these Internet-connected cameras, there’s no trace of it now. After hacking this camera, she restored the code to its original factory copy. She’s good, Mac.”

Carolina is an FBI cybercrime troubleshooter. Based out of Washington, she does a lot of fieldwork throughout the United States. Thirty-two years old with a blond pixie haircut, Carolina’s good looks belie her impressive academic background: bachelor’s, master’s, and doctorate degrees in computer science from Caltech. Rumors have her in line to take over the FBI Cybercrimes Division when the current director retires at the end of the year. Carolina has a habit of constantly licking her lips, making them moist and fetching.

Mac knew not to make a play for her. His FBI teammates informed him that Dr. Hendon always has a boyfriend, and the current one is in the State Department.

“So, Carolina, what’s the difference between mob surveillance and Angel’s use of these cameras?”

“Well, you stated that Angel told you the mob could see all the city’s cameras. If she is right and the Albanians have penetrated the city’s computer systems, it would be simple to tap into the city surveillance office feeds. However, we see no evidence of such penetration of the cities and the FBI’s computer systems today.”

Carolina licked her lips again and locked her blue eyes on Mac’s face.

“About fifteen years ago, all the surveillance camera manufacturers switched to the CloudView standard where every camera connects to the Internet using the same mesh network WiFi protocol. These cameras, Mac, all employ an imager and a microprocessor with WiFi circuits. Your Angel seems to be able to penetrate the operating systems of these cameras and reprogram their operation. She can freeze or set the image into a loop that tricks anyone observing it.

It’s an impressive feat, Mac. I suspect she fashioned a web crawler to locate every camera in Chicago and gain access. She’s made me a believer, Mac. Our tech specialist, Pietrina Cerrone, showed us how she froze and looped these cameras.”

Mac’s iPhone beeped; it was a text message from Anneliese Darban.

*“I’m back for the weekend. You free?”*

Mac sent a short response.

*“I’m home at about 7 p.m. tonight. Like to come up?”*

Anneliese replied.

*“I’ll bring some dinner!”*

Carolina smiled at the flying thumbs.

“Girlfriend, Mac?”

Mac straightened up in his seat. Questions about Anneliese are always awkward.

“Her name is Anneliese, and she’s an international troubleshooter for Beckman Accounting Group. She’s out of town most of the time. We get together when we can.”

“No need to get defensive, Mac. I never date anyone within the FBI. That’s a surefire career killer. My current boyfriend is in the State Department. You’d be surprised how common a casual sex partner is in Washington, DC.”

“So, my secret is safe with you, Carolina?”

“Yes, it is, Mac. By the way, I’d like to speak with this Angel if you ever find her.”

Anneliese Visits

They were a perfect match, at least sexually. Anneliese Darban regularly travels for her international accounting firm, Beckman Accounting Group. She doesn't want the pressure of a needy boyfriend complaining that she's always out of town. Her parents run a successful suburban real estate firm, and constantly pester her to find a guy, settle down, yadda, yadda. Likewise, Mac's mother is still cross-examining him about hoped-for female relationships.

Consequently, Anneliese and Mac kept this relationship secret; only their condos' concierges knew about their arrangement. Somehow, Veronica found out, but she has remained discreet about it. After their weekday trysts, Anneliese would typically go home. On Friday or Saturday, she would usually sleep overnight.

Mac’s Tesla dropped him off at the Grant Park Tower’s entrance and headed down the street toward its assigned parking space. He said hello to the night concierge, Martin, as he came through the revolving doors.

“Good evening, Officer Merrick. Ms. Darban came in a half-hour ago; I gave her one of your spare keys. You're looking at a feast tonight by the smell of that food she brought! If ya have any leftovers, send ‘em down.”

“I’ll try, Martin,” Mac said as he walked into the elevator.

As Mac passed through his front door, the first thing he saw was Anneliese sprinting toward him. She jumped into his arms at the last second, Dirty Dancing style. Locked in a passionate kiss, Mac twirled her around and around. As she broke loose to smile at him, Anneliese placed his police cap on her head.

“I brought Italian tonight.”

“Great,” Mac said, “Let’s have a look.”

Anneliese had one of Mac’s stockpots warming up the fusilli and Bolognese sauce. She had also brought garlic bread and several apple-crumble tarts.

“Wow, Anneliese, that’s a lot of food.”

“Leftovers, Mac. Leftovers!”

“Have I got time for a shower?”

“I’ll wait.”

Mac thought of Martin, the night concierge.

“Anneliese, can you take a sample of everything down to Martin in the lobby? I’ve got some plastic snap trays on that shelf.”

“Sure, Mac. I’ll take some down to him right now. Dinner will be ready when you’ve finished your shower.

Later that night, at 2 a.m., after a marathon sex romp at several locations throughout Mac’s apartment, Anneliese sat cross-legged on Mac’s bed. With her feet tucked underneath her, she admired the twinkling city lights and the moonlight shimmering off the Lake Michigan waters.

“You know, Mac. I always avoid asking about your police work. I try to be a respite from it, and I’m sure, in some cases, it’s none of my business.”

“What’s on your mind, Anneliese?”

“I’ve been away for seven weeks, but I keep up on current events in my hometown. Some thugs tried to kill your father and sister a few weeks ago. A woman the press is calling the “Angel” saved their lives. She also rescued an undercover policeman before that. Was that you, Mac?”

“Yes, but that’s a secret, Anneliese.”

“And it will stay so. The press says that she is some Ninja genius. Is that correct?”

“Yes, that’s true. The Angel’s fighting skills are reckless but forceful. She can penetrate our city's computer and surveillance systems. To most of us in the Chicago Police Department, she’s a hero, a guardian angel. But some police and some prosecutors regard her as an out-and-out criminal.”

“Have you met her after she saved your life?”

“Yes, she approached me in Grant Park and provided details about an impending drug delivery. We got a big bust on that one.”

Anneliese shifted out of her legs-folded position and languidly stretched her left leg over Mac’s hips. She nuzzled her head close to his on the pillow.

“What was she like?”

“In a word, she’s beautiful. Angel is tall, with natural blond hair, an athletic figure, and mesmerizing green eyes. She’s mute, Anneliese. She used an iPad text-to-voice app to communicate with me. She refused to give me her name.”

“Did you ask her why she is doing all this reckless stuff?”

“Yeah, I did, and she clammed right up. Her eyes watered slightly. I knew I had struck a chord with her.”

“You know what that means. The mob either killed somebody she loves or raped her.”

“Yeah, that’s kind of what I’m thinking too.”

“Do you love her?”

Mac realized that a moment of truth was upon him. After an evening of passionate intimacy, something about being in bed with a naked woman loosens one’s inhibitions. Anneliese had given all she had of herself to him this evening; she deserved candor.

“Well, I guess that I do love her. Wouldn’t you? I mean, she saved my life. Anneliese, I had an Albanian thug point a Glock-50 with a silencer right at my forehead. The time I spent with you tonight is courtesy of her courage, no matter how reckless it was.”

“More to the point. Do you want to be with her? Have her always at your side. Raise children with her, all that stuff?”

Mac shrugged, wiggling just a bit, moving his hand from her ribcage to her left breast, spreading his fingers. Anneliese responded by placing her hand over his, locking him to her bosom as she always does. In the shimmering, quiet night, he could feel her heartbeat.

“This isn’t a competition, Anneliese.”

Anneliese turned her head to face him and moved to touch their cheeks together. He sensed the warmth of her breath as it quietly flowed over his face.

“It’s not, Mac. You and I have always been honest about what this is between us. We are both career driven. Sexual relationships at work contravene our life goals. Yet, we both have sexual needs. We fill that gap in our lives together.

That said, either one of us can walk away with no hard feelings. I’m OK with that. Still, Mac, what do you want to do about her?”

“Save her. That’s what I want to do. Save her from the ambitious prosecutor who sees her scalp as a career springboard. Save her from a vicious mob who wants to torture and kill her. If there was just some way I could get her away from all this?”

“You’ve got money, Mac. Have you ever thought about getting her out of the country?”

Anneliese repositioned herself to a seated position on the bed, legs folded underneath her.

“I know you did a background check on me, Mac. Did you know I did the same to you? I probably know more about your money than you do. It’s my job to know these things.”

“What are you getting at?”

“Well, using your money, we could spirit her away to a foreign country to live out her life incognito. I’d suggest New Zealand. They have an extradition treaty with the United States but rarely enforce it. We could get her a new identity, buy some property there, set up an annuity to allow her to live comfortably for the rest of her life.”

“You would know how to do this?”

“Mac, I am an honest accountant. Do you want to know why my company pays me $190,000 annually with a generous expense account? I know all the illegal tricks, money laundering, cooked books, bribes, and ne'er-do-wells out there that try to rob, cheat, and steal their way to riches.

For example, I know a guy who runs a fake passport business. He has plants in the State Department and the technology to spoof the biometric chip in the passport. She’d have a new identity, with phony background details, the works.

I also know of a realtor on the North Island of New Zealand, near Gisborne, who sets up shady individuals on the lam with beautiful houses on beachfront properties. All it takes is money, something you have.”

“How much money, Anneliese?”

“Off the top of my head, about four million. Three and a half for a suitable annuity, the rest for the bribes and transportation.”

“I’m willing, but is she?”

“Yeah, that’s the question. Hey, pull that cover over us. Let’s get some sleep.”

CHAPTER 17

Natalie Visits Dr. Morton

Visit from a Fire Engine

Natalie Rumsfort was starting to get irritated. She had made an appointment to interview Dr. Lewis Morton at 10:00 a.m. It was now 11:15, and there was no sign of the Chicago Cyber Engineering CEO. Three trips to the reception desk yielded the same result, "Dr. Morton is running behind. He will receive you soon." The security staff added to her irritation by confiscating her bag with the iPhone, iPad, and other personal stuff. Even her iWatch went into the checked bin. She could only carry a large notepad, a Sharpie pen, and a set of printed questions and notes.

Natalie dressed differently for this interview, eschewing the jeans and T-shirt attire she used to gain police officers' attention. Today, Natalie wore an indigo business suit and a white blouse. Her outfit was from Hong Kong, tailored for her hourglass figure. The lace-trimmed blouse showed no cleavage, and the skirt ended just below her knees. *Prim and proper*, she thought, *perfect for entering the kingdom of the nerds.*

*This place must be a gold mine*, she thought, scanning the modern art on the walls, the dazzling water fountain in the center of the reception area, and the polished granite everywhere. At the far end of the reception area was a Meta Zephyr humanoid robot polishing the floor. A woman came into her field of view, flashily dressed in a gray tailored business suit, with a man's white shirt, grey scarf in place of a tie, and high heels. Her long blond hair, worn up, caused some waiting visitors to notice.

"Ms. Rumsfort, I'm Alice Brinlyn, Dr. Morton's executive assistant. He will see you now."

Natalie rose and dutifully followed. Walking briskly to the edge of the reception area, Alice swiped a security console to open the door to the executive section. She led Natalie through a labyrinth of hallways and two more security doors before reaching the mahogany doors of Morton's office. Pointing at the door, Alice smiled sweetly.

"Go on in. He's expecting you."

Natalie pushed through the door, and her first reaction was how tidy his office was. The computer nerds she interviewed had offices littered with manuals and candy wrappers. This office was spare, with two executive desks. One was for business, and the other had two large computer monitors and a keyboard. Morton sat behind the business desk and rose as she entered the room.

"Natalie Rumsfort of the Chicago Sentinel. What brings you to Chicago Cyber Engineering?"

He did not offer to shake her hand. Natalie looked straight into his eyes, giving him a wry smile.

"As always, Dr. Morton, a search for the truth."

Morton was incredibly handsome, not much taller than Natalie herself. Morton looked almost preppy, wearing a tailored black raisin suit, a white shirt, and a silk tie.

Looking at the photographs decorating the walls of his office, Natalie quipped.

"Nice Caribbean pictures. Saint Martin?"

"Saint Bart’s," he said, looking at her suspiciously. "Have a seat, Ms. Rumsfort."

He settled into his executive chair as Natalie pulled one of the office chairs up to his desk and put her notes and paper on his business desk. She uncorked her Sharpie and looked at him.

"Shall we begin?"

Morton did not respond, just stared at her warily.

"Doctor Morton, I've been to many facilities in my work, including some very secure military bases. This building is, by comparison, a veritable fortress. Why such security for a software house?"

"There's an adage in the software engineering business, Ms. Rumsfort. It's ‘never write software that you can buy or steal.’ We have a lot of trade secrets in the code we write and thus must secure our intellectual property to prevent competitors from accessing and stealing it.

“Our programmers use Microsoft Surface laptops we supply to do their work. CCE does not allow them to take it or any storage devices home after work.”

"Isn't your software available for theft at your customers' sites?"

"Obviously, computer software is not your field. Customers never get a copy of our source code; instead, they get an executable. It's the machine instruction code necessary to run the applications we design, but to the customer, it's just a jumble of numbers."

Natalie, her face serious and emotionless, stared at him.

"The intensive security could also hide what you're really doing, couldn't it?"

Morton shuffled in his seat, visibly irritated, but he responded calmly.

"We write code, Ms. Rumsfort. That's all we do. I can take you on a tour of the facility and show you every room and file cabinet. You can ask any of my employees any questions you desire. We have nothing to hide."

*Cool customer*, Natalie thought.

She made some notes on her papers and looked up at him again.

"You created this company with Imer Bisha, did you not?"

"That's a matter of public record. What is your point?"

"Imer Bisha is the son of jailed Albanian mobster Kreshnik Bisha. His brother, Luan Bisha, is currently in Cook County jail, awaiting charges of conspiring to kill a policeman."

"Imer Bisha, was fourteen years old when the state incarcerated his father. An aunt raised him after that. I met him at the University of Chicago, where he gained acceptance by being his high school's valedictorian. He has pulled himself up by his bootstraps and has founded several companies, including this one. Your suggestion that he may be mob-influenced is unfair and inaccurate."

Morton’s voice became more intense, his facial expression giving way to irritation.

"I didn't suggest that Dr. Morton. You did."

"What else?"

Natalie shuffled her papers. After reading one paragraph of her notes, she looked up.

"No local banks would invest in your company's start-up eleven years ago. Why is that?"

"Imer and I found better sources of start-up funding at a more advantageous rate than the local banks offered."

"Ah yes, the principal angel investors were Pantelleria Holdings and Kustos Investments. Pantelleria Holdings is a shell company set up on the Caribbean Island of Nevis. The SEC believes Pantelleria Holdings is an agent of the DiGrazio crime family in Sicily. Likewise, Kustos Investments is a shell company set up in Albania that turns out to be an agent for the Votaz crime family. You set up this company with mob money, didn't you?"

Irritated by this line of questioning, Lewis Morton wiggled a bit in his seat and glared at Natalie.

"You don't understand how start-ups are funded. We employed Global Financial Services to secure funding for our venture. They comb the world looking for investors willing to back our project and decide which deal is best. I had no say in this. They simply informed me that the money was available. Global could have gotten the money from the devil, and it would have made no difference.

“Our software business was so successful that we paid off Global Financial Services and whoever supplied them with the money in just three years. We are beholden to nobody. That is a public record with the SEC, and you can verify it yourself."

Natalie spent a minute jotting down notes and looked at Morton again.

"Very well, it's also public knowledge that after receiving your bachelor’s degree in computer science at the University of Chicago, you attended McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. You received a master’s and Ph.D. in computer science, majoring in cyber security. Your Ph.D. thesis was “Regeneration of Cache Exploits in Multi-Thread Processors.” Now, admitting that I haven’t a clue what that means, I checked with friends from my alma mater, Northwestern. They told me you are one of the world’s foremost cybersecurity experts.”

“I think I should be flattered, but what exactly is your point?”

“I looked at the client list provided by your marketing department, which includes firms such as BSNF Railroad, EZ-Pass, San Francisco BART, Lyft Electric Vehicles, and Magnus Shipping. These contracts put you close to the mainframes of some huge corporations. It’s not idle speculation to wonder if you might use your cybersecurity talents to penetrate these firms’ computer systems for nefarious purposes if you were so inclined.”

Natalie looked directly into his eyes for telltale signs of nervousness or anger. Morton’s expression wasn’t threatening but was intense – he stopped blinking.

“I am not so inclined. Any suggestion otherwise borders on libel. We haven’t had any complaints from our customers.”

Natalie had one more nugget to try.

“Tell me about Boyd Creekmore?”

“Boyd Creekmore? Who the hell is that?”

“Turns out he was the Chicago Building Inspector for this building’s construction. Creekmore died at age 38, two weeks before completing this project.”

“So? Many people die young. Every year, we have a college basketball player keel over and die on the court somewhere in America. Autopsies usually show a congenital heart defect that nobody knew about.”

“The Chicago Police were investigating Creekmore for money laundering. He made two large real estate purchases with cash he couldn’t have earned from his civil servant’s job. Next thing you know, Creekmore is dead and cremated with no autopsy.”

Morton straightened up, put his elbows on the desk, and clasped his hands tightly, fighting to restrain his anger.

“You’re weaving a conspiracy theory. What’s your point?”

“Well, if he knew some secrets about this building, those secrets went with him into the ashes urn.”

At that moment, Alice Brinlyn opened the door.

“Dr. Morton, the group is waiting for you in Conference Room C.”

“On my way, Alice,” Morton said as he stood up and headed for the door. “Please escort Ms. Rumsfort to the lobby and check her out of the building.”

Morton didn’t even say goodbye to Natalie. He just disappeared down the hallway.

“Follow me, Ms. Rumsfort,” Alice said as they headed for the lobby.

Outside, as Natalie recalled the Sentinel pool car from the parking lot, she looked at the seven-story building one last time.

“I wonder what really goes on there?”

Mob Planning Again

“OK, Lewis,” Imer said, “you asked for this meeting, saying we have a serious problem. What is it?”

It was 9 p.m. Imer Bisha, dressed in blue jeans and a black polo shirt, scraped his fingernails on his right eyebrow several times. He leaned forward, gave Yilka a quizzical look, and fixed his suspicious gaze at Dr. Morton.

“That red-haired Sentinel reporter, Natalie Rumsfort, visited me this afternoon.”

“So, what happened?”

“Rumsfort cast suspicion on my cyber-security expertise and our client list. She suggested that we may be doing more than just writing software. Your father’s name came up, as well as your brother's. She hinted that we might be cyber-skimming these corporations.”

“Speculation that she surely can’t prove,” Yilka said.

“I agree. She doesn’t have much knowledge of computer-based systems. What surprised me was that she brought up Boyd Creekmore, the building inspector for this facility. We eliminated him because his spending habits jeopardized our carefully designed cover. Worse yet, she identified the investors for this installation.”

“You mean she found out who financed this building?” Yilka said, arching one eyebrow.

“Exactly. Somehow, she unearthed who they are.”

Imer leaned back in his chair and momentarily looked at the ceiling lights. Training his piercing gaze on Lewis, his voice turned serious, business-like.

“Yes, I remember that project very well. We set up an overseas shell company whose true source of investors and capital was impossible to deduce. Fortunately, we found a city building inspector, Mr. Creekmore, who was amenable to bribery and blackmail. I recall that he had a sexual kink, which we exploited.”

“What was that?” Yilka said.

“He liked sex with two or more women, something we could provide from our escort pool. Of course, we filmed it, and you can guess the rest.”

Imer cracked a rare smile but went on.

“My worry is that she might discover our Michigami Storage warehouse where we have our separate cloud supercomputer for skimming operations.

“The warehouse freight elevator looks like it ends on the first floor. Just enter the special code into the elevator’s keypad, and it will go down one more floor. A very James Bond class of secret lair, I must say.”

“Another flair I liked,” Lewis said, “was sneaking in the European tunneling machine. We cut a two-foot-wide underground shaft between the Chicago Cyber Engineering and Michigami Storage buildings. Once we pulled a water-tight conduit pipe between the buildings, the gigabit fiber-optics lines connected our staff to the remote computer system. If the Feds execute a search warrant, we can disconnect from the Michigami Storage computer in microseconds, and the Feds would be none the wiser.”

Yilka Kartallozi drummed his fingers on the table, absorbed in thought. “OK, what exactly is our exposure here?”

“I’d say she’s likely to dig into city records and deduce how someone, that being us, managed to get Creekmore’s body cremated before the city could perform an autopsy. I looked up her curriculum vitae; she was top of her class in the journalism school at Northwestern. Based on her interrogation of me this afternoon, I don’t think she’ll stop until she gets to the bottom of poor Mr. Creekmore’s demise. Yeah, Yilka. I think we’re exposed quite a bit,” Lewis said.

Yilka leaned back in his chair, smoothing the hair behind his head. “We could see if her parents are still alive, rough them up and threaten their lives, or do the same thing to her boyfriend if she has one?”

“Nah, we have to eliminate her permanently,” Imer said, “just like Creekmore. We have a new guy from our New York City operation named Flavio Zogaj. He has no criminal record, and Lewis’s staff erased what digital records there were of him in Albania. Is there any way to lure Rumsfort somewhere for the liquidation?”

“The Sentinel has a tip line for its reporters. We could send her an offer to meet to disclose information on corruption at a Chicago software house,” Lewis said.

“She’ll never agree to meet anyone alone; she’ll demand a public place, like a restaurant or whatnot,” Yilka said.

“OK then,” Imer said, “I’ll arrange to have Zogaj wax her. Lewis, we’ll need your team to arrange our get-away vehicle.”

“Sounds like a viable plan; let’s get to work,” Lewis said.

CHAPTER 18

Perils of Natalie

The Restaurant Attack

Impatience was beginning to set in as Natalie Rumsfort twirled the stem of her glass of Pinot Noir. She furtively looked around the Clubhouse Restaurant for her potential snitch. Whoever it was, he was an hour late and it was nearly dark outside. Natalie had already ordered a Classic Italian Beef sandwich and consumed most of it.

Having arranged this meeting through a series of text messages, the caller wanted a one-on-one with no other participants. In turn, Natalie demanded a public meeting place, the Clubhouse Restaurant, a golf-themed eatery adjacent to the famous Crowne Plaza Hotel in Rosemont.

She was seated at a small booth against one of the exterior windows of the jam-packed restaurant. Natalie looked toward the sprawling bar. A woman in a black jumpsuit and a stylish brunette pixie-cut hairstyle was nursing a drink at one of the corners. She, like Natalie, was looking around the restaurant, searching for someone.

Now thoroughly irritated, Natalie dipped the last bit of her Italian Beef sandwich into the au jus cup and took a bite. She spotted a person approaching as she swallowed, looking at every table as he moved. He wore black slacks, a shirt printed with a Gypsy-like pattern, and an open black leather jacket. He stopped at her table and turned to face her.

“Natalie Rumsfort of Sentinel?”

“Yes, I’m Natalie.”

His expression turned morose as he reached inside his jacket pocket for a pistol. Pointing the laser sight at Natalie’s forehead, he growled in broken English.

“Never fuck weeth Albanian beezness. You pay weeth your life.”

Eons of evolution have altered the human body to respond to danger instantly. Most people experience this while driving when an obstacle unexpectedly appears, like a car pulling out of a driveway. The heart rate immediately accelerates as adrenalin courses through the body, respiration spikes, and the mind’s responsiveness amplifies. For most people, this increases the chance of proper corrective action, like pressing the brake. In Natalie’s case, the opposite happened as she froze, overcome with instant fright. Her bladder emptied into her jeans.

The woman sitting at the corner of the bar was lightning fast as she maneuvered around the tables and dove for the gunman. Angel reached him just as he pulled the trigger, using her right hand to deflect the gun upwards as it fired. This pistol had no silencer, so the blast was intolerably loud. The errant shell hit the glass window and shattered it. There were shrieks from the startled customers as most of them began diving for cover.

Angel used her momentum to drive the gunman to the edge of Natalie’s table. She got a hand on his gun and struggled as he tried to turn the gun towards her. It fired again into the ceiling, the blast reverberating throughout the restaurant. Natalie remained frozen, shivering like a child after a day in the snow. People were screaming as panic coursed throughout the restaurant.

Head-butting the gunman, Angel stunned him just long enough to get her mouth on the wrist holding the gun. She bit him hard, causing him to squeal as he released the pistol, which fell on Natalie’s table. Angel quickly reached for it. Stepping away for an instant, she ejected the pistol’s magazine and threw it across the floor. Turning the gun upside down, Angel pulled the slide backward, and the chambered bullet popped into her hand. She threw the bullet towards the bar.

The gunman, Zogaj, lurched towards her, but Angel used her height to her advantage. Squatting and then jumping vertically, she struck him in the chin with her right knee, like a boxer’s uppercut. Zogaj staggered, trying to reach for anything to steady himself. Now she had him. Angel whacked the thug in the temple with his pistol, grabbed him by the neck and flung him toward the ground. Zogaj fell to the tile floor in a heap, groggy with his legs in an X-configuration, right calf draped over the left calf. Angel jumped into the air, landing with her feet simultaneously on his right ankle and knee, breaking his right tibia bone in the middle. The snapping of the bone made a gruesome sound. The entire fight lasted only a few seconds.

Angel reached for Natalie’s hand, trying to pull her away from the table but Natalie was frozen, unable to move. Reaching under Natalie’s armpits, Angel dragged her away from the booth. Grabbing her hips and lifting her over her shoulder, she carried Natalie like a fireman, dashing through the restaurant, into the kitchen, and heading for the back entrance.

The two mobsters, waiting in the getaway vehicle near the restaurant’s main entrance on Balmoral Avenue, heard the two gunshots and observed panicked people streaming out of the establishment. Zogaj did not come out as planned, so they decided to go in and investigate.

Barreling through the kitchen’s rear entrance doors, Angel rushed into the expansive parking lot and set Natalie down. Police sirens were wailing from every direction as people poured into the parking lot. Pretty soon, the place was going to be crawling with cops. Fetching her cell phone, she summoned her Tesla RoboTaxi, which appeared in seconds and opened its gull-wing door. Angel scooped Natalie up and dumped her unceremoniously into the vehicle. Using her cell phone, Angel commanded the RoboTaxi to head north toward Interstate 90. She pushed Natalie down on the seats, out of sight. As they passed several police cars rushing to the restaurant, their Tesla looked like an empty vehicle on its way to a pick-up. Angel’s getaway was successful.

Natalie was in a fog during the journey. Angel said not a word but furiously typed things into her smartphone. Eventually, Natalie recovered enough to realize that they were in Chinatown. They passed a Catholic church before stopping. The car’s doors opened, and Angel motioned for Natalie to exit the vehicle. They were on a deserted residential street with no pedestrians in sight. The rental Tesla returned to its home base. Angel’s control of the maintenance app ensured there would be no record of the journey.

Putting Natalie’s arm over her shoulder and supporting her with an arm around the waist, they went to the front door of a dingy, nondescript three-story apartment building. Angel helped Natalie up the stairs to a second-floor apartment. Going inside, she placed Natalie on a dining chair. Opening the refrigerator, Angel uncapped a bottle of water. Giving the bottle to Natalie, she started typing into her smartphone. The robotized female text-to-voice app spoke for her.

“You’re in shock. Drink as much water as you can. I will draw a bath for you.”

“Why are you speaking through a computer? Are you mute?”

“Yes, Ms. Rumsfort, I am unable to speak.”

Natalie watched Angel enter the bathroom carrying a plastic laundry hamper. She filled the tub with hot water, pouring in some bath salts. Turning off the faucets, Angel returned, extended her hand, and led Natalie to the bathroom. Once again, she typed on her smartphone, and the female computer voice rang out.

“Ms. Rumsfort, you are safe with me. I will never hurt or abuse you nor make any unwanted sexual advances. I can help you survive what you experienced tonight. Do you trust me? Nod your head?”

Natalie nodded her head.

“Are you the Chicago Angel?”

Again, Natalie patiently waited as Angel typed her response. Finally, the slightly robotic female voice from the smartphone replied.

“I am no angel, Ms. Rumsfort. I intentionally broke that killer’s right leg tonight, so he could not escape arrest. You must understand that I will never harm you. Let’s get you into the bath, and I will launder your clothes.”

Natalie lifted her arms as Angel gripped both sides of her white T-shirt and lifted it over her head, tossing it into the hamper. Angel showed no reaction to Natalie’s breasts. Nor did she react as she pulled Natalie’s urine-soaked jeans and panties off. Finally, Natalie’s deductive instincts started to return.

*OK,* Natalie thought*. She’s probably not lesbian, or is it I smell like a community urinal at a professional football game? Hmm ….*

Angel pointed to the tub, and Natalie stepped in and lowered herself into the warm, soothing water, murmuring a soft moan of pleasure. Angel typed again into her smartphone.

“I have both white and red wine. What’s your pleasure?”

“White would be wonderful.”

Angel returned with a Libby goblet full of chilled white wine a minute later. Angel’s bathtub had a utilitarian metal rack draped over the end for soap and sponges, and Angel set the cup down on it. Then, she removed three bobby pins from her wig and took it off. Angel’s long blond hair tumbled over her shoulders, and as Natalie’s first chance to see the woman known as the Chicago Angel, she did not disappoint. Scanning her body, Natalie noticed that she was tall and athletically shaped.

*If I were a lesbian, I’d be all over this girl*, Natalie thought.

“Thank you, Angel. Please call me Natalie.”

Knowing the drill, Natalie waited patiently for Angel’s response.

“My name isn’t Angel, but revealing my name may get me killed. We’ll talk about that later. I’ll launder your clothes now. Just relax for a while. You’re going to be OK.”

“Thank you, Angel,” Natalie replied as she watched her load the clothes into the washer/drier combo in the kitchen through the open bathroom door.

Active Shooter

Ryan DiMarco was in full battle dress as he, Mac Merrick, and the rest of the Chicago/FBI Organized Crime unit arrived at the Clubhouse Restaurant. The age of gun violence in the United States has made these scenes commonplace. Chicago SWAT surrounded the building, with the employees and patrons evacuated a safe distance away, floodlights illuminating the locale like the afternoon sun, and news crews kept at bay.

“Well, Nivani, what have you got?” Ryan asked the SWAT Commander.

“Hi, Ryan. The short answer is three perps holding six hostages in the Clubhouse restaurant on the first floor. We’ve got them boxed in, all entrances and exits covered, and if they break out, it’ll be like Custer meeting six thousand Sioux warriors.”

“Any idea what happened?”

Standing next to DiMarco, Nivani Subramanian, the head of Chicago SWAT, chuckled before answering.

“We spoke to one of the bartenders who got out. He said that some guy tried to shoot one of the patrons, but another customer intervened. He said the guy fired two shots but didn’t hit anybody. That turned the restaurant into an all-out panic.”

“Did the barkeep describe the customer who intervened?”

“He said it was a tall woman in a black jumpsuit with short brown hair. The guy said it was like watching a Kung Foo movie. She carried the customer out of the restaurant.”

Ryan DiMarco looked at Mac.

“Somebody we know?”

“She gets around, doesn’t she.”

“Nivani, have you talked to them?”

“Negative, Ryan, that’s the strange part. We’ve shouted at the gang bangers, but they’re not responding to anything. No demands for a getaway vehicle, no nothing.”

“What does Superintendent Green want to do?”

“He’s in St. Louis for a symposium. He wants us to wrap this up quickly. I’ve got one sniper zeroed in on one of the perps. Another is crawling to a position where he can tag the other guy. One of the three thugs is wounded and moaning like a whore with a teenager. Over here, Ryan, we’ve got video of each sniper’s headcam.”

The SWAT team had a command post set up with several tablet displays. Each display showed the sniper’s helmet cam and an inset display showing the view from his sniper rifle’s telescopic sight. One officer had his crosshairs centered on one of the perp’s pistols. The other officer was wiggling into position.

The first sharpshooter reported that the six hostages were out of the line of fire. The second sniper finally got into position, and his displays showed that he was shooting away from the hostages.

“Boss, I’ve got a bead on his gun. I’m good to go,” the second SWAT sniper said.

Mac and Ryan remained quiet as Nivani Subramanian, one of the most respected police force members, did his work. The Superintendent or the city politicians have never questioned his tactics. Protection of the innocent is his driving force, and his operations have rarely resulted in a bloodbath.

“OK, Teams one and two, after I give the order to shoot, you folks barge in there like a cloud of locusts and get the hostages outta there,” Nivani said.

Nivani took a deep breath, then said, “Execute!”

Two loud and thundering rifle shots rang out, knocking the pistols from the perp's hands. The pistols skittered along the floor, accompanied by yelps from the wounded men. A flash grenade went off, loud as a fireworks detonation, adding to the men’s stunned state. The screen showed heavily armed police officers swarming the scene, taking each man to the floor and directing the hostages away from the chaos.

“Boss,” one of the SWAT officers reported, we’ve got three perps down and subdued. We’ve got a broken leg, one with two fingers shot off and one with a sizeable hole in his palm. We’ll need Medics right away.”

“OK, good work, guys.”

Mac and Ryan were at the scuffle scene five minutes later, assisting with the crime scene investigation. Finally, SWAT returned the bartender, who had seen the whole thing but got away.

“What did you see?” Ryan said.

“OK, this is the booth with the red-haired woman sitting alone. I only looked up when the first shot rang out. I saw this tall girl struggling with the gunman. She must have deflected the first shot; a second shot went into the ceiling. She took the gunman down like a goddamned Ninja. I’ve never seen anything like it. She jumped on his legs when he was on the floor. He started howling.

The Ninja girl grabbed the red-haired lady, put her over her shoulder, and carried her out of the restaurant. At that point, everybody started running, me included.”

“Did you serve the Ninja girl?”

“Yeah, she was gorgeous, with brunette hair in a short pixie cut, black jumpsuit, tall and slim. I didn’t speak to her, though. She ordered her drinks using the position’s menu tablet and swiped a burner credit card to pay. Gave a nice tip.”

Ryan turned to Mac.

“What have you got?”

Mac held up a woman’s handbag.

“I think this is the target’s purse.”

Mac opened it and found some IDs.

“Well, lookee here. The Illinois driver’s license is for Natalie Rumsfort, and this is her Chicago Sentinel press credential.”

“Interesting,” Ryan said, “we need to contact the Sentinel right away and see if they’ve heard from her or know where she is.”

Ryan’s FBI phone rang again; this time, it was Superintendent Green.

“Hi, Ryan. What have you got?”

“Sir, it looks like a mob hit on a Sentinel reporter, Natalie Rumsfort. A woman thwarted the assassination and carried Natalie out of the restaurant. This woman broke the killer’s right leg. We think the two getaway drivers returned to investigate. We arrested all three and sent them to the hospital.”

“I know Rumsfort,” Green said, “we need a full-court press to find Natalie and ensure she is safe. Keep me apprised of any new developments.”

Mac looked at Ryan, his face reflecting curiosity.

“What was Natalie Rumsfort investigating that the Albanian mob would want to risk such a public assassination attempt? She must have mucho pissed them off.”

“No shit,” Ryan said.

Getting to Know You

Natalie Rumsfort paused at the full-length mirror in Angel’s living room. Her red hair looked clean and dry after her bath. Dressed in Angel’s borrowed sweatpants and a baggy T-shirt, Rumsfort looked no worse for the wear after facing an assassin's gun in the Clubhouse Restaurant just a couple of hours ago.

Rumsfort furtively glanced at the closed bathroom door and listened to the rushing white noise of Angel’s shower. Looking back at herself in the mirror again, Natalie felt ashamed that she had taken up a meeting with an anonymous tipster without security, even in a public place. Worst of all, she humiliated herself by responding to the hitman with a full-on panic attack, pissing her pants, and freezing in shock, unable to run away. There, but for the grace of God and this magnificent woman taking a shower in the bathroom, she would be dead.

*I’m in Angel’s lair*, Natalie thought. *Organized crime would torture and kill her if they knew she lived here. The Chicago Angel is the woman every local and national news outlet hopes to find and interview. A lady that most of the Chicago Police Department want to hug, but a sizeable portion want to arrest. Even the FBI is interested in her. Who is she? How does she know what the mob will do next? Where did she learn how to fight? God, there are so many questions. So far, all I know is that she’s mute. I’m sitting on the story of the year here!*

Natalie walked through the apartment, making mental notes. Angel’s furnishings are top shelf for an apartment in the poverty-stricken Chinatown. Her bedroom id furnished with a matching oak bed frame, nightstand, and dresser, while the second bedroom included an office with a Dell supercomputer and two large display screens.

Angel’s office is a nerd’s paradise with 3D printers, a workbench, tools, voltmeters, and oscilloscopes. The office closet has equipment shelves, while the bedroom closet has an adequate supply of stylish garments, sports clothing, and wigs.

The living room is furnished with a simple leather couch, end tables, and a driftwood coffee table. A small display screen on the wall near the door showed multiple windows giving exterior views of the stairs and front door and coverage around the building's exterior. One living room wall has solid oak shelves with books ranging from philosophy, science fiction, and computers. are

*She lives alone*, Natalie thought.

Angel came out of the bathroom and grabbed a dining chair, dragging it into the office. Natalie followed suit. Rumsfort, watching with fascination, didn’t comprehend anything Angel was silently doing with her computer displays, but she worked fast. Angel handed the burner phone to Natalie and explained what she wanted her to do.

“This is a burner phone, so the mob cannot trace it. I have modified it to disconnect the GPS circuits. Also, I’ve broken into the University of New Mexico’s mainframe and inserted software to make your call appear as if it is coming from their computer’s WiFi. When the call is complete, my software will auto-erase from their system. Your phone call will not give away this location. You need to call your editor at the Sentinel and tell him you are OK.”

“What do you want me to say, Angel? I mean, am I your prisoner?”

Angel smiled.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Natalie. You can walk out of my building right now if you wish. However, that would be foolhardy as the Albanian mob will certainly try again.”

“You’re right, but what can I do?”

“I own a safe house in Park Ridge,15 miles north of here. I rented it as Sarah Scott. It’s a two-family home; I have one side of the building. There’s an old 2038 Chevy Malibu in the garage. It’s an internal combustion engine car with no modern electronics. For now, that’s where you should live.”

Natalie rocked back in her chair and looked at Angel quizzically.

“How can you afford all this, Angel?”

“I have a job, Natalie. I write code for a local software development company; it pays $140,000 a year.”

“That’s not enough to afford two domiciles in Chicago.”

Angel started typing into her smartphone; this would be a long epistle.

“OK, I have stolen quite a bit of cash from the Albanian mob, $5 million two years ago and $20 million this year. In each case, I sent the money to the IRS via RoboTaxi. However, I delayed returning the first $5 million to the IRS for twelve months and developed a tech stock investment app. As a result, my stock portfolio is now $1.3 million and growing.”

“You can’t invest $1.5 million in cash in the market and not trigger banking and SEC thresholds designed to prevent organized crime money laundering. So how did you do it?” Natalie said. Angel gave a Cheshire cat smile as she typed her response.

“Cryptocurrency, Natalie. There are Crypto ATMs all over Chicago. The daily limit for a wallet is $3000. For one year, I kept the mob cash in several long-term storage units, extracting enough cash to make a week's worth of Crypto buys. I had nearly $300k in cryptocurrency in three months, totaling a million in one year. This money I used to invest in the tech stock market lawfully.”

“Still not buying it, Angel. Crypto ATMs have an ironclad digital trail of all transactions.”

“Natalie, I can break into any computer-based system. That’s my thing, my skill. I installed special software patches in the ATM to cover my tracks and attribute the transaction to a non-existent person. I only did this for a year, then removed all traces of my activities. As I said, I returned all the mob cash to the IRS. You can verify that if you like.”

Angel handed the burner phone to Natalie, who dutifully dialed the number of the Sentinel operator.

“This is the Sentinel answering service. How may I direct your call?”

“I’d like to speak to Charles Randolf, the City Editor.”

“He’s out of the office at the moment.”

“Connect me to his cell phone. You have his number.”

“Very well. Hold, please.”

At least 30 seconds elapsed, but eventually, Natalie’s editor came on. Natalie switched the burner phone to speaker mode, so she and Angel could hear the conversation.

“This is Randolf. To whom am I speaking?”

“Chuck, it’s Natalie Rumsfort. I’m OK.”

“Natalie, for God’s sake, I’m at the police station. We’ve been worried sick about you. Where are you?”

“Chuck, I’m in a secure place for tonight. Tomorrow, I will be moving to a safe house and will return to work Monday morning around 8 a.m. Have the company lawyer available to accompany me to the police station.”

“Natalie, are you with the Angel?”

“I am on an investigation at the moment and, as such, will not reveal my sources to anyone. I need you to back me up on this, Chuck.”

“Consider it done, Natalie. I look forward to having you back at work on Monday. Bye for now.”

“Thanks, Chuck. Bye.”

Angel gave Natalie a thumbs-up gesture, followed by a half-smile. Then, returning to her smartphone, she typed:

“I haven’t eaten since breakfast. I have French Vanilla ice cream and some store-bought apple pie. You interested?”

“Anytime. Let’s dig in!”

Clean and refreshed after a bath and shower, the two women relaxed a bit with the late-night dessert. Determined to discover more about this mysterious Chicago Angel, Natalie morphed into full reporter mode.

“Angel,” Natalie said after languidly dissolving another spoonful of ice cream on her tongue, “you saved my life tonight. That’s a kindness that I will never forget. I will never give you up to the police or even my editors. I will never release whatever you tell me until you give permission or, God forbid, someone kills you. Please tell me your story.”

Angel rose and placed the dessert plates and spoons in the dishwasher. She brought a large Apple tablet computer from her office. Starting the text-to-voice app, she typed.

“I’ve been writing a diary in a first-person format. I’m taking a chance telling you about me and what I’ve done, but I’ve already risked my life for you, and my heart tells me that you may be one of the most honest people I have encountered. So here, I’ll let you read it.”

Natalie sat cross-legged at one end of the couch, so Angel placed a soft cushion in her lap and positioned the tablet computer on top.

“I wrote my diary in Open Office, but here is a PDF file you can scroll through.”

Natalie knew that reading this might take a long time. However, she also realized this could be the most important document she would ever read. After reading Angel’s diary, Natalie looked up at the Angel.

“This is amazing, Angel.”

“That’s all I’ve written so far. If you ever decide to use my story, you must protect the anonymity of anyone who helped me.”

CHAPTER 19

Natalie Hits Back

The Safe House

Natalie yawned and ran her fingers through her long red hair. Looking at her wristwatch, it was 3 a.m.

“Angel. Let’s get some rest and talk some more in the morning. I’ll sleep on this couch. Do you have a pillow and blanket?”

Angel didn’t answer but brought out a down pillow and a comforter. As Angel turned off the apartment's lights and disappeared into her bedroom, Natalie dozed off, reflecting on how lucky she was to see another day alive and in good health.

Natalie woke at 9 a.m. to the smell of coffee brewing and the delicious aroma of baking, thinking to herself*, is there anything this girl can’t do?*

As she rose from the couch, Angel approached her with a toothbrush, still in its unopened box, and a travel-sized tube of toothpaste. Heading for the bathroom, Natalie said, “What are you baking?”

“Lemon crumble coffee cake. It’s my recipe.”

Angel had placed Natalie’s laundered clothing on the vanity, so she washed her face and got back into her street clothes.

Sitting down with Angel and enjoying the lemon crumble cake and coffee, Natalie pressed on with her interview.

“Angel, my intuition is that Dr. Lewis Morton is doing much more than writing software for clients. I uncovered a building inspector, Boyd Creekmore, who died suddenly just before the CCE building received its certificate of occupancy. The city cremated his body by mistake and did not perform an autopsy.”

Angel wiggled a bit in her seat and flashed a sly smile.

“I’ve noticed that the fifth through seventh floors of Chicago Cyber Engineering go silent most of the day. I don’t see any employees on those floors running applications on the building’s cloud computer. It’s as if they are working on another computer, either somewhere in the building or offsite. Maybe that is related to the building inspector’s demise.”

Rising from the table, Angelplaced the plates and glasses in the dishwasher, and disappeared into the office. She came out later with a duffle bag. Handing a burner phone to Natalie, she explained:

“For the time being, leave your iPhone powered off. Use this phone to make all your calls. I’ve set it up to appear that it is WiFi calling from the NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratories in California. The Albanians cannot track you using this phone. I have a Tesla RoboTaxi pulling up outside. Let’s get you situated in my safe house in Park Ridge.”

Natalie dutifully followed her, getting into the Tesla taxi and heading out of Chinatown. As the vehicle autonomously drove towards its destination, Natalie continued to ask questions.

“Are you in control of this Tesla?”

“Yes, I broke into the local dealership’s computer, specifically the account of the chief maintenance manager. I can send commands to any Tesla using his account, bypassing all the security protocols they have in place. When we release this vehicle in Park Ridge, the Tesla will return to its charging station with no record of having made the trip, no images of the occupants, and so on. It looks like Dr. Morton can also control Robo Taxis and the like.”

“Won’t Dr. Morton deduce where we’re going by looking at the city’s surveillance cameras?”

Angel flashed a laughing smile.

“That’s my best bit. My Tesla exploit transmits the vehicle’s position to my computer in Chinatown. I set the proper surveillance cameras into a 10-minute loop mode, showing the traffic image from before we enter the field of view. Your burner phone will do the same as you drive throughout the town. That makes you a criminal too, but at least you’ll live.”

The Tesla pulled up to a commonplace two-family duplex in Park Ridge. Natalie noted that the location was near the Chicago L subway system but nowhere near any shopping centers. Each side of the duplex had a garage. The layout looked like a clone of Angel’s Chinatown apartment. Two bedrooms, one being an office with a Dell supercomputer and two display screens. The furniture was modern and expensive. Nowhere in either location did Natalie see anything like a weapon.

Angel explained, in detail, everything Natalie needed to know to live here. The grocery delivery service would leave the order on the porch. Dragging a dining table chair into the office, Angel brought up some applications on her Dell supercomputer.

“Natalie, I am a criminal. I accept that, but I want you to know I have never stolen anything from innocent civilians. I only take from the Albanian mob. I have penetrated a myriad of computer systems here in Chicago and elsewhere, mostly to glean information. I’ve told you that CCE is, on paper, a legitimate enterprise. They do great business and pay taxes on the profits. Right now, they deposit their legitimate income in downtown Chicago’s Northern Trust Bank in about 37 different accounts. If you look at this screen, these are the accounts as of Friday afternoon.”

Natalie leaned forward, looking at these accounts, marveling at their size. Some of the funds had millions of dollars.

“Some money eventually moves to stock and bond purchases, some is used to expand the business, and some goes to Dr. Morton and Imer Bisha, the company's owners.”

Natalie leaned back, whisking her red hair off her cheek and out of the way. “You’re thinking of something, aren’t you?”

“I’ve done everything I can to keep you out of danger, but I doubt you want to live your life as a hermit. I imagine you’d like to return to your job – investigative reporting.”

“Yes, I want to go back to work. Is it possible?”

Angel stared at Natalie for some uncomfortable seconds. Natalie sensed that she was going to say something important, something controversial. *My God*, she thought*, I love this girl*. Angel started typing again.

“The days of pissing your pants when confronted by danger are over, Natalie. You need to fight back.”

“Aha, you’re thinking of transferring their money currently in Northern Trust Bank elsewhere, right?”

“Exactly, Natalie. If the Albanians murder you, I’ll transfer the whole kit and kaboodle to overseas charities. It’ll take them years to recover it, if at all.”

Natalie started laughing, then got serious. “OK, I’m in all the way. What’s the plan?”

“You go right back to Chicago Cyber Engineering tomorrow. You go in there in full bitch mode. We’ll stage a little demonstration of what will happen if they kill you. Show no fear. Treat them like shit because that’s what they are. You’ll need a police escort. I suggest you ask Officer Mac Merrick to go in with you with other cops in the lobby for moral support.”

“You know that Merrick loves you, right?”

The smile disappeared from Angel’s face. Natalie knew that she had struck a raw nerve.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Natalie. Merrick has a girlfriend named Anneliese Darban.”

Natalie raised one eyebrow, Spock-style.

“Oh please, Darban is out of town ninety percent of the time. She’s just a casual sex partner. There’s no commitment in that relationship, except to orgasm.”

“OK, I’ll be honest. I’m attracted to Merrick.”

“Me too,” was Natalie’s enthusiastic response. “He’s a hottie, for sure. But I have a boyfriend; I’m off the market.”

“Natalie, I’m a criminal. He’s a cop. Common sense dictates that my record would get in the way.”

Natalie laughed heartily, “Yeah, and Maid Marion didn’t shag the living shit out of Robin Hood!”

Angel lowered her forehead and peered up at Natalie. Cognizant that Natalie had bested her in this conversation, she decided not to press any further about Officer Mac Merrick. Instead, she spent the rest of the day showing Natalie everything about the safe house, ordering groceries, and taking a spin in the 2038 Chevy Malibu.

As dinnertime approached, Angel prepared a large beef stroganoff casserole for Natalie and herself, with leftovers for tomorrow’s dinner, if necessary. Angel left for her home in Chinatown, leaving Natalie to fend for herself.

Police Headquarters

Driving into downtown Chicago to the Sentinel building in Angel’s Chevy Malibu and presenting herself to her editor, Charles Randolf, Natalie was adamant about not revealing her whereabouts over the last day and a half, other than saying she was with a source. Randolf decided to play along, knowing Natalie had just survived an assassination attempt.

At Natalie’s request, the company lawyer, Michael DiNicola, called the Superintendent of Police, Javion Green, and suggested that Natalie Rumsfort would be willing to come in at 10:30 a.m. for an interview at the Headquarters building on Michigan Avenue. He also requested Officer Mackenzie Merrick be present, along with his boss, Commander Ryan DiMarco, and that all smartphones powered off and all surveillance cameras disconnected for the meeting.

Natalie, Randolf, and the Sentinel lawyer walked to a large meeting room at the headquarters building. Natalie had drawn a crowd for this one. The Chicago Police Superintendent and the FBI Special Agent-in-charge, D’Marcus Mason, were prominent in the group. Natalie spotted Mac Merrick, dressed in a full police uniform, and smiled at him as she took her seat.

Most of the questions came from the Organized Crime Unit Chief Peter Arnette. He was interested in why Natalie was in the restaurant on Saturday night and who she was meeting. With her counsel’s permission, she revealed they got an anonymous tip regarding criminality at a local Chicago software firm, and Natalie wanted a public meeting place. She stated that there was no inkling that the meeting would turn violent.

While admitting to a previous encounter with Dr. Lewis Morton of Chicago Cyber Engineering, Natalie revealed nothing about her conversation.

Chief Arnette showed Natalie a photograph of the alleged assailant, and she confirmed that this was the man who tried to shoot her. When shown the other two perps' photos, she drew a blank, remarking that she didn’t recognize them.

Arnette asked Natalie about the urine on the floor. His attempt to rattle her went nowhere.

“So what? It’s not like I’m used to having someone shoot at me.”

Natalie was resolute about the Angel and what happened after the attempted assassination, giving them nothing. They wasted a good half an hour asking the same things over and over. All she would reveal was that a Good Samaritan saved her life; this person is now a journalistic source.

Frustrated at Natalie’s intransigence, Superintendent Green took over the interrogation.

“Now, Natalie, we can’t protect you if you won’t cooperate with us.”

“Protecting sources is the cornerstone of journalism, is it not, Superintendent Green?”

“I understand, but you’ve got a target on your back. Shouldn’t that trump your journalistic prerogative?”

Natalie shuffled forward in her chair, staring directly at the Superintendent.

“Do you really want to protect me, Javion?”

“Of course, that’s our job.”

“OK, great! I want to drive to Chicago Cyber Engineering this afternoon and speak directly to Dr. Lewis Morton.”

Superintendent Green placed his fingers on his cheek and thumb under his chin, showing the tiniest smile.

“And exactly what are you planning to say to Dr. Morton, may I ask?”

“I’m gonna rip him a new one!

“That’s not all, Javion. I want Officer Merrick to go with me into Morton’s office for protection. Commander DiMarco must be in the lobby with other policemen as a backup.”

Green stared silently at Natalie for several seconds, pondering his answer.

“You’re not seriously thinking of going along with this cockamamie idea, Javion?” said Peter Arnette.

“Yes, I am. Commander DiMarco, get yourself, Merrick, and about a half dozen officers tricked out with the new 6G cellular bodycams so we can monitor from here.

Mac, let Ms. Rumsfort do the talking. Say nothing. You’re there to protect her. I know you have a history with some of these people, but I need you to be professional today.”

“Understood, sir.”

“Anything you want to add, Special Agent Mason?”

“I thought of having Dave Hanko go along, but it might be best to stay here and just see what transpires.”

“One more thing, Superintendent Green,” Natalie said, “you could undoubtedly have a police cruiser follow me back to my safe house, but that would jeopardize my life. I ask that you honor my secrecy here.”

“Let’s do this, Natalie. I will refrain from following you if you tell Officer Merrick about your new location. Mac, please do not write it down or enter it into your phones. Just memorize it. We’ll have it for extreme emergencies only.”

“Will do, sir.”

“All right, get this underway, Commander DiMarco.”

Confrontation

Following Natalie’s instructions on dealing with the Albanian mob, the police van and two cruisers approached the Chicago Cyber Engineering complex from different directions, arriving simultaneously. Natalie and the seven officers barged through the building’s revolving doors. A uniformed guard quickly approached and spoke curtly.

“You must go through the metal detectors and remove all electronics and weapons before entering this facility.”

Ryan DiMarco stood face-to-face with the guard.

“You are unaware of city ordinance 1016.23, which states that officers may not remove any of their equipment during the normal course of their duties. Or, in other words, our answer is no, we don’t have to submit to your security procedures.”

“Well, she does.”

“Nope, she’s with us. She’s not going through your TSA line either.”

Mac noticed that the desk receptionist was making a panicky call on her phone. Seconds later, a flashily dressed female emerged from the first-floor security door. Natalie recognized her as Alice Brinlyn, Dr. Morton's executive assistant. Looking a bit worried, she scurried up to the group of officers.

“Is there something I can help you with, Officers?”

Mac stepped forward with Natalie.

“Yes, Ms. Rumsfort here would like to speak with Dr. Lewis Morton at once. I’m her protection; wherever she goes, I go.”

“Do you have an appointment, Ms. Rumsfort?”

“No, I’m just dropping in.”

Natalie carried only a manilla folder and her burner phone in her pocket.

“Well then, that won’t be possible. Dr. Morton is quite busy today.”

Commander DiMarco stepped forward and spoke to her using a gruff command voice.

“Young lady, you are just seconds from me arresting you for obstruction of police duties. Would you like to try out the handcuffs I always carry? Take Ms. Rumsfort and Officer Merrick to Morton’s office now. The rest of the officers and I will stay in the lobby.”

Suddenly flustered by the police command voice, Alice wilted like spinach in boiling water.

“Very well, this way, please.”

She led them through three security doors. As she approached Dr. Morton’s office door, Mac noticed that Natalie had taken out her phone, punched a screen icon, and then put the phone away. Alice opened the door.

“Dr. Morton, Natalie Rumsfort of the Sentinel to see you.”

Brinlyn remained in the hallway as Natalie and Mac entered the expansive office. Mac noted the office layout: expensive furniture, one desk for business, another for software development, and Caribbean photographs on the walls.

Two men stood up as they entered. One was Lewis Morton, in a three-piece business suit. The other was Imer Bisha, dressed in a black suit with a black dress shirt.

“Natalie Rumsfort of the Sentinel, do you have an appointment?” Morton said.

“I do now, Dr. Morton.”

Lewis pointed at Bisha.

“This is Imer Bisha, co-owner of Chicago Cyber Engineering.”

Imer stared menacingly at Natalie but just nodded.

“This is Officer Mackenzie Merrick. He’s here only to protect me.”

“To protect you from what?” Bisha said.

“From you two bastards.”

“What are you talking about,” Dr. Morton said.

“Five days ago, I interviewed you in this office, inquiring about what really goes on here at CCE and a dead building inspector, Boyd Creekmore. A gunman tried to kill me Saturday night in the Clubhouse Restaurant. A gunman you hired, Mr. Imer Bisha.”

Bisha, angered and eyes widening, took a step towards them. Mac stepped closer to Natalie, surreptitiously brushing his hand over his holster, ready to extract and fire his Glock-50 with practiced speed and precision. Mac chambered the first round before entering the building. He sensed that this might be going out of control quickly.

“What you’re suggesting is outright slander, Ms. Rumsfort. If you go public with a ridiculous charge like this, an army of lawyers will wipe you out in court, mark my words,” Bisha said.

“Oh, I know it was you, Mr. Bisha. Although my evidence wouldn’t hold up in court, I know that you two were involved.

“And the point of espousing this ridiculous conspiracy theory, Ms. Rumsfort?” Morton said.

“Chicago Cyber Engineering is a legitimate business enterprise that makes good profits by supplying software and services to many Fortune 500 corporations. Is that not correct?”

“Well, yes, that’s public knowledge, so what?”

“You deposit your after-tax profits in 37 separate accounts in the Northern Trust Bank on South Lasalle Street, am I right?”

“So?” Imer Bisha said, looking quizzically at Morton.

I’m an investigative reporter, Mr. Bisha. It’s my business to get information from trusted journalistic sources.”

Natalie pulled from her folder a computer-printed sheet containing 37 accounts with the account numbers and amounts. She handed it to Dr. Morton.

“The list showed those accounts as of the close of business last Friday. Note that my source highlighted two of them in yellow.

“The top highlighted line is the account that Mr. Bisha makes regular withdrawals from, and the bottom highlighted line is yours, Dr. Morton. Would you please log onto Northern Trust Online and verify the amounts on those two accounts?”

They looked at each other quizzically, and Morton sat down at his business desk laptop and feverishly entered information as Bisha stood behind him, peering over his shoulder. Finally, after a minute, Dr. Morton looked up at Natalie and said: “All right, those amounts appear to be accurate.”

“Wait for it, Dr. Morton.”

In a scant few seconds, Morton’s laptop beeped twice.

“Well, I believe those beeps indicate an online withdrawal in progress. Care to look at those accounts again, Dr. Morton?”

Natalie gave them a Cheshire cat grin as Morton jumped into action.

“What happened, Lewis?” Imer Bisha said.

“It looks like you made a $15,000 withdrawal, Imer. It says that the withdrawn funds went to the Illinois Police Benevolent and Protective Association.”

Lewis continued to type into his online banking program.

“OK, I also made a $15,000 withdrawal and transferred it to the Benevolent Association.”

The two men stood up. Dr. Morton’s preppy facial expression turned to fury.

“You’re playing with fire here, lady.”

“Oh, there’s more, Dr. Morton. Listen carefully. Suppose my trusted source, which I will never reveal, not even to the police, determines that I am dead. In that case, a sophisticated software application will find and transfer every one of CCE’s accounts in the Northern Trust system to overseas charities. Sure, you might be able to recover some of them, but that will take years to resolve. For example, you have $140 million in those Northern Trust accounts today.

“There’s more. My source also provided me with this list of names.”

Pulling out another printed sheet, Natalie read the names.

*Natalie Rumsfort  
Rene Fournier, her boyfriend  
Officer Mackenzie Merrick  
John Merrick  
Anne Merrick  
Benjamin Merrick  
Wilhelmina Brant Merrick   
Veronica Merrick Fieldstone  
Peter Fieldstone*

“If you murder any of these people, my source will drain every one of your bank accounts to overseas charities.”

Natalie handed the list of names to Morton. He looked dumbfounded. Bisha, on the other hand, appeared like he was ready to kill somebody. Rumsfort smirked at Bisha.

“Mac. Let’s go.”

As she turned for the door, Mac stopped and faced Imer Bisha. Mac’s facial expression displayed a scornful sneer.

“Mr. Bisha, thank you for your generous donation to the Illinois Police Benevolent and Protective Association. That was very thoughtful of you.”

Leaving with the slightest sarcastic smile, Mac wheeled and escorted Natalie to the door, closing it behind them. He asked Alice Brinlyn to guide them back to the lobby, which she did as speedily as possible. Mac and Natalie walked swiftly over to Commander DiMarco and the other officers in the reception area.

“How did it go?” Ryan DiMarco said.

“You will not believe the shit she pulled in there. Let’s get out of here.”

The officers left the building and returned to Chicago. Natalie remained silent during the ride. Ryan drove Mac and Natalie back to Chicago Police Headquarters as the other officers returned to their precinct.

Police Response

Inside Headquarters, they walked to a different meeting room where Superintendent Green, Special Agent Mason, and several others watched the operation through Mac’s body cam. Natalie, Ryan, and Mac took their seats.

Superintendent Green had a serious face as he addressed Natalie.

“Ms. Rumsfort, I don’t know whether to hug you or throw you into the slammer. You involved my officers in an extortion plot. That’s not how we do business here in the Chicago Police Department.”

Natalie laughed.

“Well, if I’ve managed to piss off everybody, doesn’t that mean I’m doing my journalism good and proper?”

FBI Special Agent Mason was his usual morose self.

“Natalie, you’re involved with someone illegally penetrating a Chicago Bank. That’s a felony; you could get years on that charge.”

Natalie was still in full bitch mode. She stared pointedly at Special Agent Mason.

“Agent Mason, look at me. Whose threat should I take more seriously? Your threat to jail me, on evidence you don’t have, or Mister Bisha’s threat, or attempt thereof, to kill me. No offense, but I’m worried more about that Albanian crook than you. So, what the hell have you done to protect me, Mister FBI man? I’d say jack squat, to be honest.”

“All right, all right,” said Superintendent Green. “Get off your high horse, Ms. Rumsfort. Unfortunately, your so-called journalistic source, this woman we call the Angel, has a penchant for disregarding the rules and rights of both the honest and the evil among us.

“Nonetheless, while I am Superintendent, we will continue to operate as a legitimate and honest police department, which means we will never resort to extortion.

“I called Alan Prestwick over at the Illinois Police Benevolent and Protective Association, and he confirmed the two $15,000 donations from Bisha and Morton. He has drawn two checks for said amounts at my request, which are being couriered to Chicago Cyber Engineering as we speak.”

“Bully for you, Superintendent. You’ve wiped your nose of a micro-scandal. So what? Those two bastards are still out there, murdering at will, doing God knows what in that, ahem, software house in Hines. Can you blame me for taking my security into my own hands? What have you done for me?”

“Well, I sent a bunch of policemen with you on your little stunt, didn’t I.”

“Superintendent Green, I wonder if I may weigh in?” Mac said.

“Go ahead, Officer Merrick. All views are welcome on my watch.”

“From what we’ve learned about Dr. Lewis Morton, his credentials are impeccable; he has two books on computer security and a boatload of peer-reviewed papers. When he and his company bid on software jobs, they are selling him and his reputation. The guy’s a genius.

“This reputation has also made him arrogant. He thinks he’s smarter than everybody around him. He certainly thinks he’s smarter than us, the Chicago Police Department.

“Natalie’s little stunt might have pissed everybody off in this room, but for the first time in his adult life, Lewis Morton may have realized that he may be up against somebody out there that’s smarter than him. I watched him, sir, as Natalie’s performance played out. She rattled him. His behavior will have to change. He’ll be more prone to making mistakes.

“I suggest that we let Natalie go back to being Lois Lane. We don’t follow her, stake out her safe house, or bother her. The undercurrent of all this is the possibility that the Albanian mob has branched out into corporate crime on a grand scale. So far, Angel’s information has been unactionable because she employs illegal surveillance methods. But I think she’s getting close to blowing these people up, and I want to be there when she does.”

Superintendent Green was silent for a few seconds, making eye contact with Mac.

“I’m inclined to agree with you, Mac.”

“Fine, Javion,” Special Agent Mason said, “but I have a question before she leaves. Natalie, who is Boyd Creekmore?”

“The building inspector for the Chicago Cyber Engineering construction project.”

“OK, that’s enough. Mac, drive Ms. Rumsfort back to the Sentinel building. Natalie, my word is trustworthy. We will not follow you around or harass you.

However, contact us if you ever feel threatened again, and we will come as quickly as possible.”

“Thank you, Javion. I seek the truth; you seek justice. In the end, they are one and the same. Good day, gentlemen.”

Natalie followed Mac out of the meeting room. Special Agent Mason turned to Superintendent Green..

“She played you like a fiddle today, Javion.”

“Yeah, maybe so, but we learned a lot from her stunt. She certainly threw us a bone with that fellow Boyd Creekmore.”

“It’s a pleasure doing business with the FBI,” Javion said.”

Family Meeting

Mac’s Tesla whirred to a stop at his family’s home in Highland Park. The estate’s gates opened automatically for his vehicle, duly registered in the home’s security system. As he stepped out of the car, a guard approached him.

“Ah, Officer Merrick. I’m Terrence of War Horse Security. Good evening.”

“Hi, Terrence. Nice night, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir. The whole family’s here tonight. I think they’re waiting for you.”

Mac punched in the security code and entered the Merrick mansion at the front door. He was still in his Chicago Police uniform, with the cap decorated with the familiar checkerboard pattern.

“Well, hello, son,” intoned an elated John Merrick, standing up as Mac maneuvered into his seat. Everybody was in attendance: his mom, dad, sister, brother, and spouses.

“Hope I’m not too late.”

“Not at all, son,” Anne Merrick said. “Willie, will you and Ben help me bring the food?”

Anne had prepared a feast: a stuffed chicken breast with her unique sauce, garlic mashed potatoes, lima beans, and a Caesar salad. Mac hadn’t eaten since breakfast and wolfed down his mother’s family-style dinner. Ben and Willie brought in the butter-cream layer cake as Mac lavished praise on his mother.

“Mom, this dinner is just fabulous. I’ve had quite a day, and this really hits the spot!”

“Thank you, Mac. It’s so good to have you here,” Anne said appreciatively.

The family happily devoured Anne’s layer cake as Mac stared at the tablecloth for a long time, absorbed in thought and deciding what to say next. Finally, his sister Ronnie, sensitive to his moods, noticed this and spoke up.

“Mac, there seems to be something on your mind. Airing your feelings is OK; you’re among family here.”

Mac took two deep breaths and looked at his father.

“What I want to say involves the health and safety of everyone at this table. It means revealing secret police information. For that, I need the standard lawyer-client privilege from all of you. Unfortunately, Pete, you are the only one here who is not a lawyer.”

“Mac, have I ever lied to you?”

“No, Pete. You have always been honest with me.”

“Then, I’m not lying to you now. Like my wife, Ronnie, I will die before I ever reveal what you will say to anyone outside the family.”

“That’s good enough for me, Pete.”

Mac noticed his sister placing her fingers on her husband’s hand, gently patting him.

“Son, what’s going on?”

The entire group leaned forward, nervously concerned at what Mac might reveal.

“Dad, the active shooter situation at the Clubhouse Restaurant Saturday night was an attempted mob hit against a Sentinel reporter named Natalie Rumsfort. Superintendent Green kept that information secret because we didn’t know Natalie’s whereabouts until today.

We now know that the Angel saved Natalie’s life, subdued the gunman, and got Natalie out of the restaurant and off to a safe house. Natalie came into Headquarters this morning with her editor and a Sentinel lawyer. Ferociously devoted to her reporter’s creed, Rumsfort revealed nothing about the Angel and what happened after the shooting. She instead demanded a confrontation with these Albanian mobsters with a police escort. That’s why I got involved as her bodyguard.”

“Mac, who did Rumsfort meet with and where?” Ben said.

“This part is going to surprise you, Ben. She met with Dr. Lewis Morton and Imer Bisha, who jointly own a software company called Chicago Cyber Engineering in Hines.”

“Bisha is the guy who Mom and Dad suspect arranged the Exit 47B off-ramp assassination attempt.”

“Yes, Ben.”

“Mac, do you have hard evidence that the Albanian mob runs this software company?” Anne Merrick said.

“No, Mom. Most of what we know is information provided by Angel, which wouldn’t hold up in court.”

“But there’s a bigger picture at play here, Mac. Right?”

“Yes, Dad. It’s more like organized crime is branching out into corporate America, with alarming national implications. Anyway, I accompanied Natalie with instructions to let her do the talking. I was body-cammed as Superintendent Green, and the FBI was curious about how this would play out. If this confrontation went south, I had a round chambered in my police revolver.”

“So, what happened at this meeting?” Ben said.

“Well, it turned out that the Angel threatened the Albanian mob today using Natalie Rumsfort as a go-between. Natalie told Bisha and Morton that if she or any of us at this table turns up dead, the Angel will drain their legitimate business accounts at Northern Trust Bank and send the money to overseas charities.

Rumsfort and the Angel, ensconced in her secret lair somewhere, staged a little demonstration by sending two $15,000 withdrawals from Chicago Cyber Engineering bank accounts to the Illinois Police Benevolent and Protective Association while Morton and Bisha watched. Of course, Superintendent Green later sent the money right back, but Rumsfort made her point.”

“What the Angel did is highly illegal,” said Willie Brant, a Chicago Public Defender.

“You’re right, Willie. Still, it’s impressive for Angel to penetrate Northern Trust’s security and manipulate those accounts.”

“Technically speaking, she’s still a criminal.”

“Criminal acts without criminal intent.”

“Mac, have you had any contact with the Angel since she saved your life?” John Merrick said.

“Yes, I did meet her again, Dad, a few days after the mob attacked you and Ronnie. She approached me in Grant Park and supplied information about a mob drug delivery, which we successfully interdicted.”

“So, Mac,” Anne said, “you are then aware that she is mute?”

“Yes, Mom. My boss, Commander DiMarco, also knows, but we’ve both agreed not to make that public to protect her. She also told me that she had been mute all her life and had never worked for the mob. She refused to answer when I asked if the Albanians hurt her.”

“Based on my short contact with her,” Anne said, “I believe she’s an orphan, Mac, with no family to turn to.”

“Well now,” John Merrick said, scanning everyone at the table, “this presents the family with a unique conundrum. A woman who is employing illegal tactics is also protecting this family. Mac, Anne, Ronnie, Millie Grainger, and I owe our lives to this Angel. So, the question is: what do we, as a family, do about her?”

“Dad, I will never arrest her. Even if it means giving up my career as a Chicago policeman, I will not turn her in.”

“I don’t think any of us would want to see her incarcerated, Mac,” John Merrick said. “Still, what can we do to help her?”

Mac shuffled in his seat. He knew he was about to open a can of worms.

“I have a friend, Anneliese Darban, who is an expert in international finance. She suggests that a four-million-dollar annuity set up in New Zealand might give the Angel a life there, safe from the mob's clutches. So, I am willing to use four million from my trust fund if I can get Angel’s agreement.”

“You’ll do no such thing, son. Anne and I will fund such an enterprise if it comes to that.”

“Wait a minute,” Anne Merrick said, “exactly who is this Anneliese, and why don’t I know about her?”

“Is it a rule that I must post my relationships on the family bulletin board, Mom?”

“Mom, stop. Just stop,” Ronnie said. “I ran a background check on this woman. Anneliese Darban is a troubleshooter for the Beckman Accounting Group. Her fellow employees describe her as smart, cheerful, beautiful, and totally career driven. She is out of town 90% of the time, saving the company from disasters in the United States and internationally. She gets together with Mac when she’s in town. I would describe her as a casual sex partner.”

“Why didn’t you introduce me to her, Mac?”

“I didn’t want to disappoint you, Mom. If you dumped all over her about marriage and children, she’d disappear like Harry Houdini.”

“Well, do you love her, Mac?”

“No, Mom.”

“Do you love this Angel girl?”

Mac was frozen, staring directly at his mother, unable to answer, or more correctly, afraid to answer. You could hear a pin drop in the dining room at that moment.

“I withdraw the question,” Anne Merrick said. “I already know the answer.”

There was a long pause until John Merrick broke the silence.

“OK, as the patriarch here and the oldest at the table, I decree that my son’s sex life is to receive no more interrogatories.

Mac, sum up for us. Does Angel’s intervention today makes us any safer from mob retribution?”

“I doubt it, Dad. While Dr. Morton struck me as pragmatic, Imer Bisha looked like he’d kill anybody who irritated him. This Albanian mob has a penchant for violent, sometimes crazy acts of vengeance. I’d still recommend keeping War Horse security on the job until the Chicago Police and the FBI roll these guys up.”

Mac stood up, smoothing out his police shirt.

“Look, I would spend the evening in the family room, shooting the breeze with everybody. But not today. It’s not often that you meet the man who tried to kill you and probably intends to try again.

I need to go home, shower, have a glass of wine, and get to bed early. It was great seeing all of you. I hope that I wasn’t too much of a downer tonight.”

After hugs all around, Mac headed out to his car. As the doors automatically opened, he heard his mother running up to him.

“Mac, Wait!”

He enveloped her in his arms, giving her a bear hug.

“Mac, I love all my children equally. But you, you’re special. You’re the one with a heart of gold. You can’t blame a mother for being frustrated that there isn’t some gal out there who can appreciate you as I do.”

Mac released the hug and slipped into his car seat. “Don’t change, Mom. I love you the way you are.”

As the Tesla whirred to life and the headlights snapped on, he took one last look at his mother, tears streaming down her cheeks but smiling as he motored away.

CHAPTER 20

Anneliese Leaves Town

Anneliese

Mac toweled his left calf dry, stepping on the bottom of the cloth to finish his foot. One last rubdown of his head completed the job. The shower was the second one he had taken today. He hung his wet towel on the heated rack and laid two new ones on the end of the driftwood-colored bathroom vanity.

Opening his bathroom door and stepping out, he found Anneliese standing in his way, admiring what she was seeing. Mac is in good condition as police training and his daily run through the park left him with a GQ model's body: strong shoulders with a flat stomach. Mac groomed his chest and body hair with trimmers and an electric shaver.

Turnabout being fair play, he admired Anneliese's naked body as well. She was tall and thin, with small, perfectly shaped breasts.

Mac grinned and stepped aside, motioning her towards the bathroom. "Your shower awaits, Madame."

She quickly grabbed his buttock and gave it a playful squeeze as she went by. Giggling as she went into the bathroom, she called out to Mac.

"Mac, I spoke to Devon at the Concierge desk. He says he got us a 7 p.m. dinner reservation at Maeve's Bar and Boeuf."

"Sounds good," Mac replied as he headed for his bedroom.

Breakup

The Maitre D' led Mac and Anneliese to a two-person table in the popular steakhouse. Once settled in their seats, each ordered a cocktail and studied the menus.

After ordering half-salads, Mac selected the regular 10-ounce filet mignon, while Anneliese chose the short rib stroganoff. Once the first cocktails were down the hatch, their conversation flowed freely.

"So, Mac. Have you had any more contact with that Angel girl?" Anneliese said as she stirred her Lillet Rose Martini with her plastic stirrer.

"Come again?"

"You know, it was obvious that you were thinking of her when you made love to me this afternoon."

"What would prompt you to say that?"

"A girl always knows when the man she's intimate with is thinking of someone else. "

Mac shuffled in his seat, grappling with how to answer her question. He knew that Anneliese's observation was accurate. The Angel had been on his mind; his mind had drifted during their lovemaking.

"I don't even know her name, Anneliese. There's no relationship to report. I'm sorry if I weren’t up to par this afternoon. Police work does occasionally interfere with our daily life."

"Don't be offended, Mac. Even on your worst day, you're a far better lover than any other man with whom I've taken a turn."

Anneliese thanked the waiter, who placed her salad on the table. Readjusting the napkin in her lap, she started to work through her half-salad.

"We've both been realistic about this relationship, Mac, two career-driven people who need a safe sexual outlet. You want to be a Police Commander. Sex with coworkers poses risks that you don't want to take. A full-time girlfriend is also a burden; she may be uncomfortable with the demands of police work.

“I want to open my own accounting firm eventually. Several of my customers are already interested; one more big client and I can make the jump. Family and children don't interest me. So, our relationship is perfect for me. If I'm in town and have the itch, I can call you, and vice versa. For a short time, we have all the advantages of a married couple: passionate sex, walks in Grant Park, nice dinners like this, and stimulating conversation. The difference is that there are no strings attached. Both of us can walk away with no consequences.

“This brings me to some news. My company is sending me to Dubai next week for a six-month assignment. An accounting project is a major fiasco; they need me to dig in and save it. To be honest, I have an ulterior motive. If I succeed in rescuing the project, I can turn the client to my side. He's highly placed in the UAE royal family and has mountains of money. With someone like that backing me, I could realize my dream of starting my own accounting firm."

"So, this is goodbye?"

"Certainly for six months, Mac. If something develops in the meantime with this mystery woman of yours, then I guess it would be goodbye permanently."

Mac's expression froze as the weight of Anneliese's words soaked into his consciousness. No matter how robust a male personality you have, rejection cuts deep. You immediately question your value as a person; you wonder if she is the last fish in the sea. He knew this moment could come someday, though he always thought it would be himself to cut the cord.

"If that be the case, Anneliese, I'll miss you. I want you to know that I'd happily invest in your company when you go into startup mode. Sure, I don't have the money a Middle Eastern potentate might have, but every little bit helps when starting a company."

"I appreciate that, Mac. To be honest, I'd rather stay in Chicago. I'll have to put my rather active libido on ice while working in an Islamic country, although the UAE is a bit more relaxed than Saudi Arabia."

Two servers appeared with their main courses, so Mac and Anneliese enjoyed their dinner and amiably chatted about less weighty topics. Later, as they were finishing up small servings of strawberry ice cream, a restaurant customer brushed slowly by Mac and stopped at their table. Simultaneously, both Anneliese and Mac looked up.

She was tall in a flower-print summer dress. Short, pixie-cut red hair with a chartreuse beret framed her dazzling face. She glanced at Anneliese but fixed her gaze on Mac. He recognized her instantly; it was the Angel.

Angel had a folded note in her hand. She deftly placed it on the table in front of Mac. Flashing a megavolt smile at Mac, she turned for the restaurant's exit.

As she briskly strode away, Mac struggled to his feet. It was too late, for she had already reached the door. In a second, she was out of sight. Mac realized it would be hopeless to catch up with her, so he slunk back into his seat.

Anneliese, who watched the mystery woman exit the steakhouse and disappear, stared at Mac, her eyes wide with surprise.

"Is that the Chicago Angel who's been on the news?"

"Not so loud," Mac said as he fanned the table with his hand to indicate that they should lower their volume.

"Yes, that's her. You can't tell anyone about this. There are a hundred people who want to kill her. I need you to be discreet about this, Anneliese."

"Of course. What does the note say?"

Mac unfolded the note.

*Meet me tomorrow at Buckingham Fountain (west side) at 9 p.m.*

*Wear black clothing and rubber-soled shoes.*

*I want to show you something.*

Mac turned the note so Anneliese could see it.

"Wow, that's pretty cloak-and-dagger."

"Anneliese, anything you reveal about this to anybody endangers her life. That Sentinel reporter, Natalie Rumsfort, knows about you and me. If she presses you for information, you'll get Angel killed. Anneliese, there will always be a spot for you in my heart. Even if this night is our last meeting, I need your loyalty on this."

Anneliese reached across the table and clasped Mac's hand.

"I won't say a word about this to anybody. I'll always be here for you, even if we are no longer lovers."

"I appreciate that, Anneliese. I really do."

He motioned to the waiter to bring the bill. They were on the street a few minutes later, waiting for their RoboTaxi vehicles to arrive. Annaliese's taxi showed up first, and they embraced and kissed one last time.

"When do you leave?"

"Sunday night," she responded. "That girl, Mac, is beautiful and courageous. Even if I’m halfway across the world, I can help you save her.”

Anneliese opened the Waymo car's door and took her seat. As Mac closed the door, she smiled at him and said.

"Win one for the good guys, Mac!"

With that, the electric vehicle moved silently into the Chicago night. Mac watched until it moved out of sight. He had lost one friend and now had to win the trust of another. Like everything in his life, he was determined.

CHAPTER 21

The Drug Lab

Trip with an Angel

Standing on the massive plaza surrounding Buckingham Fountain, Mac smiled as the hourly show started. After dark, the computer-controlled pumps shoot water up to 150 feet high, and lights and music enhance the performance. This famous landmark, one of the world's largest water fountains, has required continual repair and improvement due to Chicago's debilitating winters. There was a pretty good crowd this warm evening, oohing and awing at the water gymnastics.

Mac had shared Angel's note with Gabe Marecki and Ryan DiMarco, heads of the Joint Task Force on Organized Crime. They all agreed not to attempt to arrest the Angel this time. Like Mac, they were interested in what she wanted to reveal. Mac wore running shoes, black denim jeans, and a black hoodie. It was oversized to cover Mac's standard-issue Glock-50 gun with a 10-round clip. They didn't include any button cameras; Mac would be on his own in this operation.

He did not sense her approach. Instead, it was as if she had beamed right next to him, like a character from Star Trek. They looked at each other silently until Angel flashed a demure smile. He noticed she wore a black leotard with a black fanny pack attached to her waist. Her blond hair had been French braided in the back.

She clasped his palm gently, walking west towards South Columbus Drive. She fetched her smartphone as they approached the street and entered some commands. After a minute, a Tesla RoboTaxi appeared and stopped alongside them. Angel opened the door, and both climbed in. After punching some commands into her smartphone, the vehicle started moving.

"May I ask where we are going?"

Mac waited patiently for her response; he'd been through this drill before.

"To an industrial area just south of Midway Airport."

"And what exactly will I be seeing?"

"Where they manufacture and ship their drugs. I'm sure you will find it illuminating."

"I'm sure I will.”

"I apologize if I embarrassed you in front of Anneliese, Mac. Many people are looking for me; I must be unpredictable when approaching you. That said, I don't want to interfere in any of your intimate relationships."

"I'd say my relationship with Anneliese is dunzo, Angel."

"What happened, Mac?"

Mac shrugged and wrung his hands together.

"Two things, Angel. First, Anneliese is relocating to Dubai for six months to sort out an accounting project. Second, on a couple of occasions, she told me that my lovemaking was different and that she felt I was thinking of another woman. She asked who it was. I told her I was worried about a woman I had encountered in my police work. When you appeared, she made the connection. She knows you're the Angel, but I trust her to be discreet."

Angel pondered her answer for an uncomfortable number of seconds. Mac wondered if he had revealed too much. She glanced at Mac and then started thumb-typing.

"A personal relationship between us is inadvisable, Mac. The main reason is that you are an honest policeman, and I am a criminal. My actions have already endangered members of your family.

“Tonight's expedition has risks, but I can control what happens tonight. I know that men find me attractive, Mac, but that doesn't change my reality.

“I am a voiceless outcast, wounded, possibly beyond repair. You can't allow yourself to fall in love with me, Mac. It will only bring you and your family heartbreak."

Mac became insistent. While he didn't use his command voice, he ensured his tone was sharp enough to get her attention.

"Angel, listen to me. You are not a voiceless outcast. Nor are you wounded beyond repair. On the contrary, you're a beautiful woman with a good heart, for whom life probably gave you a raw deal, not just from the Albanian mob but, I suspect, from all of us. We failed you. Well, it stops right here.

I love many people, including my mother, father, sister and brother, their families, and the people I work with. I will do anything to protect them. And, of course, I love you. I will do anything to protect you. If they ask me to arrest you, I will refuse that request, even if it means ending my career. I'm going to prove to you that you can trust me. Your safety is the most crucial thing in my life now, Angel."

"Right now, I'd say I’m protecting you, Mac. Ah, we're almost there. Give me a second while I reprogram this Tesla."

Angel typed rapidly into her smartphone as the vehicle stopped on West 65th Street. She commanded her door open, and they both got out onto the south sidewalk. There were very few cars and no visible pedestrians. Streetlights up ahead appeared to be out, so the district was unusually dark. On the other side of the road were mostly shuttered businesses.

Angel led Mac south down an alley, and they made their way through a couple of companies until they reached a large, empty manufacturing company parking lot. At the rear perimeter of the parking lot there was a stack of oak pallets about chest high. Mac and Angel got behind the pallets, out of sight. She extracted two pairs of night vision eyeglasses from her fanny pack. She turned on one unit and gave it to Mac. These devices were new on the market, sporting infrared capability and image intensifiers. They let you see in the dark with the same capability that the Seal Teams had in their bulky night vision systems, albeit in standard eyeglasses.

Mac looked at the two old brick buildings across the street with a sizable driveway between them. The building closest to 65th Street had a shipping dock. The building next to it had three large doors that could pass small trucks and step vans. Angel started typing into her smartphone. She turned off the sound and showed the screen to Mac.

“The drug lab is the four-story brick building to your left (next to 65th Street). The two-story brick building on your right is the shipping and receiving operation. A tunnel exists between the buildings to move the product to the shipping department, acting as a horizontal dumbwaiter, essentially a conveyor belt. Oh, look, a shipping door is lifting!”

A large door on the shipping and receiving building opened. A BMW electric step van backed out of the building, turned towards 65th Street, and disappeared. It had no driver.

“The drug lab has two attached buildings along 65th Street. The middle one is vacant, and the one on the east end has a legitimate trucking company. The three buildings attached east of the shipping building are also vacant.

Near Midway Airport, this area used to be full of trucking companies. The rise of giga-corporations and self-driving vehicles wiped out most small shipping firms.

Today, if you want to ship 500 television sets to Billings, Montana, you just query Tesla, Volkswagen, Mercedes Benz, and others for a truck. It auto-pilots to your shipping dock, and you load it up. You program it to self-drive to Billings and hit go. I've never seen a big truck here. Most of the shipments are step vans or smaller.”

"Angel, how do you know it's drugs in that step van that just left? It could be something legit, like cardboard boxes or construction materials."

"I have penetrated the building's computer system. They have a Dell Galaxy Plus computer system. The buildings have surveillance cameras everywhere, both optical imaging and motion sensors. I tapped into the interior cameras, it’s all cocaine, heroin, and fentanyl-based products. Here's a thumb drive with a video from yesterday's production. It's pretty high-tech. Mac."

Mac slipped the thumb drive into his pants pocket.

"Angel, how is it possible for a bunch of Albanian mobsters to get so high-tech? Is this all the work of Dr. Lewis Morton?"

"Yes, Mac. He is the heart and soul of Chicago Cyber Engineering, a brilliant computer scientist who has brought the mob into the modern world. He designed and built the production lines I will show you."

"Well, shouldn't we just raid Chicago Cyber Engineering and arrest the lot of them?"

"That will be fruitless; I'll explain why after we get away from here."

Angel started typing commands into her smartphone.

"I have just set their surveillance systems into 30-minute loop mode. Notice between the buildings is a fire escape ladder on the abandoned trucking business on 65th Street. We can use that to get up on the roof and have a look. Follow me, Mac."

Mac and Angel sprinted to the shipping dock, moving between the buildings until they reached the fire escape ladder on the vacant shipping business. With the mob’s surveillance cameras spoofed by Angel setting them into 30-minute loop mode, no one saw them pass between the buildings. Angel climbed first, followed by Mac.

Eventually, he made it to the top, and she pulled him onto the flat roof of the vacant trucking company building. They silently made their way to the brick drug lab building.

Windows from the upper two floors were visible, but Mac and Angel could only peer into the third-floor windows. There were three windows on either side of the building's chimney. Angel escorted Mac to the window closest to 65th Street.

Mac had seen other drug gang production facilities before. They were seedy operations in dingy basements. The dregs of society weighed out powders using cheap digital scales, painfully trying to insert the opioid product into small zip-lock bags for street sale.

This operation was shocking to him. Peeking into the third-floor window, he observed a modern, automated production line. Some industrial robots, conveyor belts, and specially designed machines were mixing and packaging the results. Angel recalled a description she had prepared earlier on her smartphone; she showed it to Mac.

"This is their cocaine plus fentanyl line. An employee feeds two auger-driven tanks with cocaine and fentanyl. A computer measures the correct amount, by weight, into a mixing drum. The drum rotates to break up any clumps and get the two drugs' right mixture. Then, they transfer the drum into another auger-driven container to measure the desired amount.

A dime bag contains about a tenth of a gram of the stuff. An eight-ball contains 3.5 grams.

Over to your left is a machine to compress fentanyl into a ball and dip it in blue dye (known as blues).

They use the same plastic sleeve for packaging all varieties. Once heat-sealed at the top, they move the dime bag to the sorting machine, dumping the correct number of packets into a cardboard shipping box.

The machine tapes the box shut and attaches a shipping label. They carry the box to the horizontal dumb waiter and transfer it to the shipping department next door.

Mac, this is state-of-the-art industrial engineering."

Angel and Mac crept to the far side of the building. Angel explained that this was their OxyContin line. They had successfully penetrated the Medicare computer systems, set themselves up as a bogus hospital group, got in on the monthly group purchase of the popular drug, and then arranged for pharma companies to deliver drums of the stuff. They pay the wholesale price the government negotiated and then sell it to desperate clients at ten times that price. The operation included metering the correct number of pills into plastic medicine bottles, applying the label, and packaging for shipment.

"Mac, we shouldn't push our luck. Let's get out of here. I'll explain what else I know on the way back to the Loop."

They made their way to the ladder, descended to the ground, and headed east until they reached the trucking company. Angel recalled the Tesla, and they jumped in as soon as it rolled to a stop. Mac felt a sense of relief as the vehicle silently moved away from the drug lab.

"Angel, is this their only drug lab in the United States?"

"They had an old-style lab in Queens, New York.

It has been retired since this one can efficiently produce the same product. I learned that Morton is planning a second automated drug operation in Redmond, Washington, to service the West Coast. It's to be in the old DeForrest Engineering building on Kitchahomee Road. Not in operation yet, Mac."

Mac entered the address she gave him into his smartphone. The team had decided not to risk the loss of an FBI satellite phone if something went awry.

"How much cocaine are they moving through there, Angel?"

"They've been getting powdered cocaine base every two weeks. I looked at their receiving records, and 1600 pounds will arrive on Thursday morning. That's about forty large bags spread out on two pallets."

"OK, Angel. Explain why getting a search warrant on Dr. Lewis Morton and his Chicago Cyber Engineering operation would be fruitless?"

"They have a supercomputer, Mac. It's a Samsung Pulsar All-Flash Storage System, essentially a private cloud system. Powerful and expensive. I have hacked into it and watched everything they do. They purge all the petty criminal stuff every day. With multiple erasures, not even the CIA can resurrect it.

But I suspect there's a secret second supercomputer.

The three top floors go silent for a good part of the day. I don't see them working on anything. Those software engineers, I suspect, are using a different cloud supercomputer, possibly off-site or hidden somewhere in the building. Morton has prepared for a raid, and you'll find nothing."

The Tesla made its way to the Grant Park Tower’s entrance portico and stopped. The intense ambient lighting made her a stunning image of feminine beauty, with green eyes and a warm smile completely melting him. Sensing one last chance to speak to the Angel, Mac asked her the most crucial question.

"Angel, why didn't you take Commander DiMarco's offer of asylum, a safe house, no prosecution, in exchange for your cooperation?"

"DiMarco is a good man and meant well, but he can't guarantee that offer. I have broken a barrel full of state and federal laws. They will jail me for what I've done."

"How do you support yourself, Angel?"

"I have a job, Mac. I work for a small software firm from my apartment. They have been incredibly good to me and consider me their best employee.

I did steal cash from the mob twice. I intercepted a mob vehicle two years ago carrying $5 million in cash. I used the cash for one year to invest in the tech stock market. I tripled my investment in six months. The IRS got their five million back plus the tax on my capital gains. I waylaid another mob vehicle with $20 million in cash four months ago. I sent the entire amount to the IRS. You can check on that."

"Did you rough up anybody to steal that mob cash?" Mac inquired.

"No. In the five million interdiction, I unloaded the mob’s van of the cash while the driver was inside a dive bar getting sloshed. In the $20 million theft, I spiked their Tesla's bottled water with Rohypnol.

I will not kill anybody, Mac. However, if I see one of them attempting to kill a policeman or assaulting a civilian, I don't have a problem kicking the shit out of them."

"I'll be honest with you. One State DA and one Precinct Commander want to arrest you. The rest of us, though, are all on Team Angel."

“I’m a criminal, Mac. I have chosen this life for myself.”

“You’re not a criminal to me. I have money, Angel. My family can save you from all this. We can buy you a new identity, purchase an oceanfront house in New Zealand, and set up an annuity to give you a guaranteed income. It will allow you to live comfortably and safely from mob retribution. Anneliese knows how to set all this up.”

*“*And that would make you, your family, and Anneliese criminals like me.”

“I’d do it for you. I told you; I love you.”

“Mac, don’t.”

“Angel. Put down your smartphone and take my hands.”

She placed her phone on the seat and offered her hand. Mac gripped her, feeling an ever so slight tingling sensation as her fingers curled into his.”

“Angel, I’m going to ask you one question. For this one time in your life, answer me truthfully, not from your spectacular brain, but from your heart.

Do you love me, Angel? Nod your head, yes or no.”

They stared at each other for several seconds. Mac watched her green eyes water, and a single tear dribbled over her lower eyelid.

She nodded yes. Mac whispered to her.

“I knew it.”

Mac moved closer to her; their eyes locked on each other. He tilted his head slightly to kiss her, and she responded by pressing her soft and moist lips to his. It was a gentle kiss, not as passionate as he had been with other women, but Mac had never felt this emotionally drawn to a woman before.

Angel placed her hands on his shoulder blades and pulled herself to him, compressing her breasts against his taut chest. Mac opened his lips slightly and tentatively touched her upper lip with his tongue; she responded in kind. He felt her shiver as she released her hands and moved away from him.

Angel picked up her smartphone and let it do the talking.

"It’s time for me to leave, Mac.”

He opened his arms to her, and she responded with a final embrace in the back seat of the Tesla RoboTaxi.

Mac stepped out onto the Grant Park portico. As the gull-wing door retracted to its closed position, she flashed a bright smile as the electric vehicle started moving. He watched her until the car was out of sight.

*Jesus, she's priceless*, Mac thought as he barged through the condo's revolving door.

CHAPTER 22

Police and FBI Raid

The Bust

It was just after noon on Friday. Mac stared at the multiple surveillance screens in the FBI command post in a warehouse several blocks away from the Albanian drug lab. The city of Chicago still owned the warehouse, and was happy to provide a location to stage a drug raid. Mac's information from the Angel lit a fire under the FBI, which quickly organized a drug interdiction team consisting of the Joint Task Force, Chicago SWAT, and about forty other FBI personnel brought in for the operation.

All the big wigs were present and accounted for in this bust: Superintendent Green, Special Agent Mason, Assistant Superintendent Shannon, Chicago SWAT Commander Subramanian, and Wilson Portman, the Deputy Director of the FBI, who flew in from Washington.

"OK, we don't move until the furred oracle has spoken," Portman said.

All eyes were on the camera facing the 65th Street side of the drug lab. One of the glass brick windows had a metal 8-inch exhaust pipe protruding with an elbow facing the sidewalk. The FBI figured this was probably exhausting cooling air from one of the machines.

In the surveillance camera's view was Special Agent Hanko, walking a beautiful Golden Retriever named Snorts the Wonder Dog, the FBI's pride, the scourge of drug smugglers. Nobody escapes this pooch's nose.

"Come on, Snorts. Give us your judgment," Agent Mason said.

Snorts stopped at the edge of the brick building, raised his leg, and gave the building a quick wash, eliciting laughter in the crowd watching. Hanko started moving down the sidewalk to where the exhaust port was. Snorts stopped, turned towards the building, and walked right up. You could see him sniffing. Then he started digging the sidewalk like he was attempting to bury a bone. Special Agent Mason laughed uproariously.

"Snorts, the Wonder Dog has rendered his judgment. There be opioids in da house! Ms. Ling, are you satisfied that we should proceed?"

Mathilda Ling, dressed elegantly in a gray business suit, starched white blouse, and black hair worn up with a gold clip, stepped forward.

"Your anonymous tip, albeit from the Angel, and the identifying of the presence of opioids by the FBI drug-sniffer canine, makes Judge Benton's search warrant this morning unlikely to be challenged in court. I recommend that we proceed. However, let me emphasize that none of the information given to Officer Merrick by this Angel person is usable in court. You'll have to nail these guys based on what you find in there."

Ling smiled discreetly and stepped back into the gathered group.

"Thank you, counselor," Mason said. "Angel's videos of the surveillance cameras inside both buildings indicate that every employee is packing. A few carry assault rifles. We will give them a verbal warning to drop their weapons, but you are authorized to use deadly force against anyone holding a gun or any other weapon, for that matter. Let's take them down and not lose anyone of our own. Do what we planned and practiced this week, and we will rid Illinois of this death factory. OK, Let's go!"

Twenty minutes later, Mac stood with forty others just around the corner of the factory parking lot where he and Angel had surveyed the buildings last Sunday. Special Agent Marecki led his group, which included the Chicago Police SWAT team and a dozen other local police officers. They donned battle gear, including helmets, body armor, and M6 assault rifles. Mac and Marecki listened on their FBI satellite phones as Special Agent Mason controlled the operation.

"Mason here. Hanko reports that he evacuated all the trucking company employees to safety. We have twenty officers on the roof of the vacant trucking company and ten inside. There's no way they can escape heading east.

“I just got word that the city engineers have disabled all surveillance cameras in this area. OK, I see the sound truck approaching.

“Teams A and B, Go! Go! Go!"

Mac and his group sprinted towards the production building. Half went for the steel door in the back while Mac and the rest approached the double-glass doors on 65th Street. The police public address van stopped under the traffic light. The officer driving shouted the warning through the loudspeakers; it was ear-splitting.

*"This is the Police. You are surrounded.*

*Drop your weapons to the floor and raise your arms above your head.*

*We will shoot anyone holding a weapon.*

*There is no escape. Give yourselves up!"*

Mac and his group gathered at the double glass entrance doors on 65th Street. Using a Halligan bar, an FBI agent smashed the glass panes, slipped inside, and unlocked the door. Marecki went through first, followed by Mac. As they bounded up the short stairs to the first floor, he could hear the police using a shotgun to obliterate the lock on the rear door.

Mac quickly scanned the first floor. It contained cardboard boxes and barrels, obviously the receiving area with a freight elevator in the center and a loft at the rear, accessible via a steel staircase. The employees scattered like panicked ants.

"Put your weapons on the floor and raise your hands," Marecki said. "You won't get a second chance!"

A shadowy figure raised above a shipping drum across the room and fired two shots. They whizzed overhead, ricocheting off the back wall. Marecki motioned for Mac and his group to fan to the left and directed his group to take up the middle. A dozen officers poured in from the breached back entrance.

Mac looked to the loft, where a man appeared with an AK-47 slung to his back. He had a grenade and was pulling the pin out with his hands.

"Gabe, he has a grenade!"

The man gripped the grenade, pulled the pin, and wound up to throw, just like a Cubs relief pitcher. At that instant, Andres Williams fired a round, targeting his forehead. The shot made only a tiny hole in the forehead with a puff of swirling smoke but exited the thug's skull, followed by a stream of blood, bone, and brain matter bits. The man's expression froze like someone had hit the stop button on a computer. A second shot, fired by Special Agent Marecki, targeted the thug's heart. The man dropped to the loft's floor like a sack of rocks. As his corpse hit bottom, the grenade sprung loose from his hand and rolled in front of him.

"Everybody down!" Marecki said.

The grenade exploded, sending shards of metal in every direction. It was worse for the remaining thugs; they were right under it. Mac could hear one of them yelling, "Oh Shit," as the shrapnel hit him.

Four gangsters rushed towards the motorized garage door by the shipping dock. One hit the green "raise" button, and the gate rolled upwards. They bolted through the door as soon as it had lifted high enough. Reminiscent of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid's final scene, there were met outside by over twenty armed policemen, each with their guns trained. They looked at each other sheepishly, then threw their weapons to the ground and raised their hands. In a few minutes, they were all trussed up with zip ties.

Pointing to the building's breaker panel, Marecki yelled at one of his agents.

"Alec, kill the power!"

The agent darted to the electrical distribution box and switched off the building's main circuit breaker. The lights went off, rendering parts of the first floor a bit darker. Modern urban warfare followed, which they had practiced every week since Mac joined the Joint Task Force. While the Marines and Army Rangers use grenades in clearing buildings, this is impermissible in an American city environment. SWAT methodology boils down to locating the shooters and outflanking them. In all the confusion, Agent Marecki observed two individuals shooting. He tossed a percussion grenade in their direction. When the charge exploded, Mac bounded to a location that gave him a clear shot at the mobster. Choosing not to employ a kill shot, he aimed at the shooter's knees and fired. The shell shattered the shooter's right knee, and he yelped loudly and fell onto his buttocks. Using his command voice, Mac gave a warning.

"Toss your gun away and lay face down, or the next shot kills you. Do it now, or you're dead!"

The shooter threw his Glock in Mac's direction and laid face down, groaning in agony. Similarly, an FBI agent took out the other shooter, shooting the perp in the thigh.

"Surrender now, or you're dead. Put your guns on the floor and raise your arms. Last warning!" Marecki said.

Three people slowly stood up. They looked nervous, eyes flitting back and forth. Agents and police officers marched them to an open area and shackled them with zip ties. Mac and the team quickly checked several offices before going up the stairwell to the second floor. Entering one of the automated production lines, they encountered seven people with their hands up. After zipping them up and searching for weapons, the prisoners were marched downstairs to the outside shipping dock.

Gabe Marecki called Agent Mason on the satellite phone while heading up the stairs.

"D'Marcus, we've cleared the first and second floors. One dead, two wounded. No team casualties so far."

"Good work, Gabe. Commanders DiMarco and Subramanian subdued the shipping building. The mob crew put up a fight: two dead, four seriously wounded. Chicago SWAT officer Benz took a Glock-50 bullet in the right thigh; he'll be OK. We had five idiots on your third floor jump out the windows onto the adjoining roof. Our officers arrested all of them. We're marching them down the ladder right now."

Agent Marecki motioned for the team to rush to the third floor. After bounding up the stairwell, they burst into the production area where Mac and Angel had reconnoitered the drug production equipment last Sunday. About a dozen people gathered in the open space with their hands up. As the officers restrained each employee with zip ties, Mac interrogated one of them.

"What's on the fourth floor?"

The employee responded that it was all spare parts, primarily shelves, and nobody should be there. Marecki sent some of the team to check the floor; they shouted that it was empty.

Marecki noticed that a large office in the corner, with computer equipment on a desk, had a man frantically typing something into a keyboard. Entering the room in force, they looked with amazement at a man in his thirties dealing with a standard Windows 50 login screen and cursing.

"Can you fucking believe it! I can't goddamn log in. I've typed the password twenty times! Fuck!" he said.

"Push the chair away from the computer, stand up, and put your arms over your head," Agent Marecki said.

The employee complied, stood up, and turned to face the phalanx of officers facing him.

"What were you planning to do when you logged in?"

"There's an app I'm supposed to run if building security is compromised,"

"And what is your password," said FBI Computer Investigative Specialist Carolina Hendon as she slipped gracefully into his seat.

"Not that it makes any difference; the password is 'LarryMoeCurleyJoe.'"

Carolina laughed, "Jesus, fellow. Any modern desktop supercomputer could guess that in five seconds."

She typed the password into the login dialog box and received an "invalid password" response. Carolina turned and looked at Mac.

"Care to take a guess," she said, smiling as always.

"Try 'Angel' with a capital 'A,'" Mac said.

She typed 'Angel' as the password, and the Windows 50 home screen instantly blossomed to life. The crowd of assembled officers cheered. The Windows home screen's open area displayed a unique icon labeled "Hello FBI."

Carolina retrieved a petabyte thumb drive from her bag and plugged it into the computer's optical USB 6.0 port, copying the machine's entire storage system in five seconds. Carolina asked Assistant Director Portman.

"Do you want me to click that FBI app, Will? It might erase the entire machine."

"You've got a backup copy; Let's give it a try."

Carolina clicked on the FBI App. A window appeared with a list of all the usernames and passwords for every app on the computer. There were hundreds of them. Carolina looked back at her supervisor.

"Boss, this Angel woman is good. I mean, can we hire her?"

"A discussion for another time, Carolina. Dig out what you can that is immediately actionable, then pack this stuff for shipment to Langley."

As they headed for the freight elevator, Assistant Director Portman smiled when he observed Snorts pawing the floor near a large cardboard drum.

"Give Snorts a big treat tonight, Alan. He was great today!"

"Oh, he's getting an entire Chicago deep-dish pizza tonight, boss," Alan said.

A phalanx of police surrounded the 41 mob employees, all seated on the pavement outside. The city coroner loaded one of the deceased into his van. FBI Special Agent Mason approached Ryan DiMarco to compliment him on his team's success.

"Well done, Ryan. Just one injury, better than we all hoped for."

"I was shocked that they decided to resist, D'Marcus. Two of the ones we captured will give you a laugh."

They walked the line of detainees and stopped as DiMarco pointed to the two men. They each had the word 'Asshole' tattooed on their foreheads. Mason tried to act professionally, but Mac's laughter made the always morose Special Agent break out into a wide smile.

"Is this some kind of personal statement you two goombahs are making?" Mason said.

"It was the fucking Angel," one of the men wailed.

"Really? The Angel is a tattoo artist?"

"No, Mister FBI bastard. The fucking Angel beat the shit out of us, then turned us over to the Chinks. The goddamn Chinks took us to a tattoo parlor, then dumped us in a field. Nobody can take us seriously on the streets anymore, so that's why we ended up here."

"So, Mister Asshole, why did the Angel beat you up?"

"We were just negotiating a business deal in some Chink souvenir shop. It was none of her business."

"Let me guess; you offered security services for five percent of the gross, right?"

"Nobody would have stolen from him if the old Chink proprietor had taken our deal."

"No, just you. You would have been the one stealing; Look at the bright side, you two idiots will be popular in prison. Everybody will know where you want it!"

Mason turned to Ryan DiMarco. "Good one, Ryan. That was funnier than Snorts pissing on the building!"

Mason walked over to Police Superintendent Javion Green.

"A big day for the Chicago Police, Javion."

"Yes, it was D'Marcus. And a big day for the FBI. We've got the streets closed off around the building. I'm organizing a team transporting raw materials and finished products to the FBI building. I don't want any of that stuff in the building when we show the facility to the press."

Superintendent Green shouted to Commander DiMarco, "Ryan, let's get the assault team back to the staging warehouse.”

The Angel Reacts

Shelly DiMarco opened the door of their condo, remembering to engage the deadbolt behind her. Home security was now second nature after the assassination attempt. She quickly glanced at her smartphone on the way to the bedroom; still, no word from Ryan. He had been missing for two days; he couldn't tell her what was happening. She understood that he had to keep it secret but guessed he was on another drug interdiction op and might face gunfire. Shelly hated this part of their lives. He was the Organized Crime Task Force leader; he led point, as the Army veterans would say. The smartphone screen glared with the "No Messages" status.

Kicking off her high-heeled shoes, Shelly reached the back of her red and white embroidered Celia dress and found the zipper clasp. She peeled the dress over her shoulders and off. The crisp, air-conditioned air was a welcome relief from the hike from the campus building. Today, the afternoon temperature hit 106 degrees again.

*Damn global warming*, she thought to herself.

Unclasping and discarding her bra and panties, she luxuriated in the cold air, continually blowing from the air ducts near the ceiling.

Shelly gathered her shoulder-length hair in the back, twisted it into a bun, and covered it with her plastic shower cap. Stepping into the shower, she quickly washed everything below the neck, not wanting to spend a half-hour drying her hair. Choosing just sweatpants and a T-shirt, she flopped down onto their sofa, satisfied that, for her, at least, it was now the weekend. The phone rang; it was Ryan.

"Hi, babe. It's me. It'll be all over the news tonight. We busted the Albanian's drug production facility. Caught them napping. I should be home around ten."

"Was anybody hurt, Ryan?"

"Some of the mob decided to fight; there was a short gun battle. We waxed three of them; no police or FBI killed, just one officer shot in the thigh."

"What about Gabe Marecki and Mac Merrick? Are they all right?"

"A grenade exploded near them, but it did not injure any members of their assault team."

Can you get a deep-dish pizza delivered at 10 p.m.?"

"Consider it done. It'll be in the fridge for you if you're late."

"Love ya, baby. You're the greatest! Bye for now."

Shelly sunk back into the couch, giving herself a long exhale. *At least he's safe*, she thought. It wasn't the moment she dreaded: the knock on the door, the several uniformed officers bearing the bad news. She had often been with Ryan to the homes of police widows who had endured that scene. She had participated in such visits so many times that she had memorized certain things to say. All the while feeling guilty for being thankful that it wasn't her getting the bad news.

Her phone beeped; it was a text message from Angel.

"Ms. DiMarco. Angel here.

Is Commander DiMarco OK? Is Officer Merrick OK?”

*"I just got a call from Ryan. He and Mac Merrick are OK. Only one Chicago policeman hurt - a flesh wound, not life-threatening. Three perps killed, five wounded. Are you OK, Angel?"*

Angel took more than a minute to respond. Shelly assumed that she was giving some thought to her response.

*"*I am OK, Ms. DiMarco. The mob will be apoplectic over the seizure of their drug lab. They invested millions in this production facility. I expect a violent response."

With a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology, Shelly tried a different tact with Angel.

*"Angel, please join Ryan and me for dinner in our condo tomorrow night. I'm a good cook. I will move my electric car to one of the guest spots; park in my spot: Level 2, Space 23. Nobody will know you're here. We can talk about anything you want. Ryan won't arrest you; I'm sure of that."*

Her response was swift and sure.

"That's very sweet of you, Ms. DiMarco. The mob will be making a full-court press to find and kill me. I cannot; I will not endanger you or your family. You face jeopardy enough in your life as a policeman's wife. Please don't ask me to add to it.

I wish I had a normal life and that we could be friends. Life never seems to turn out as you expected.

All the best to you and Ryan. Angel out."

With that, the telephone call disconnected and returned to the home screen. Angel had returned to her world.

The Mob Reacts

Arsen Murka, the head of the Albanian crime family in the United States, was furious as the video conference screen clearly showed his gritting teeth and furrowed brow.

“How the fuck did this happen, Imer? We invested ten million dollars in this facility, placed it in a run-down part of town, installed state-of-the-art security, and vetted every employee. How did the fucking cops find out about it?”

Imer swallowed hard. Ordinarily cold and distant and sure of his position as leader of the Chicago family, he felt his pulse racing. One wrong word with the big boss, and he’s a dead man.

“We don’t know how the Chicago Police found out about the facility. We can’t penetrate the new FBI satellite phones, so some of the advantages Dr. Morton has provided us seem to be slipping away.”

“So, you’re saying we’re fucked. Our source of supply for our drug business is gone. Our distribution network will run dry in a few days, and all the other competitors will move in. You’ve served us a hyena steamer, Imer, and none of us like eating it.”

“May I butt in?” Lewis Morton said.

“I hope you have something good to say, Lewis. I’m on the verge of calling my cardiologist since my blood pressure is through the roof.”

“I’ve got everything handled. When I purchased the automation equipment, I bought four copies of everything. The remaining three sets of equipment are in our Michigami Storage building. Three months ago, our secret overseas investor group acquired Hiawatha Storage, a two-story warehouse business south of Hickory Hills in Chicago. It’s a running operation, with trucks moving in and out all day. The security arrangements are first class.

“We replaced the management with our staff, and in a couple of days we’ll lay off the floor workers. There is an opportunity to set up a new drug production facility on Hiawatha's upper floor, as only one-fifth of it is currently in use. I have engineering teams preparing the equipment as we speak. You’ll have to staff the operation, but we can get it going in two weeks.

“I’ll send a truck with a duplicate set of automation equipment to Vinski Kastrati in Los Angeles in one week. He’ll have to find us a location, but we can get that operation up and running in six weeks tops. So, calm down, Arsen. I’ve got this.”

“That’s good. But what about this fucking Angel? What do you know about her? Did she squeal to the cops about our facility?”

“Originally, I thought this Angel person was a policewoman. Now I’m not so sure. She may be an independent operator. We may be up against a woman who has the intellect of Alan Turing and the fighting skill of Wonder Woman. Apparently, she has penetrated the cloud computer system here at CCE, monitored our security ops, and thwarted some of our activities. It doesn’t look like she has accessed the remote computer we use for our international cyber skimming work.”

“How do you know that?” Luvas Vercuni of the Seattle group said.

“After the attempt to wax that nosy Sentinel reporter Natalie Rumsfort backfired, she showed up with Officer Mac Merrick in my office. They staged a little demonstration, obviously in cahoots with this Angel. They moved money from two of our CCE accounts at Northern Trust Bank to the Police Benevolent Fund. The Northern Trust accounts are all from our legitimate business activities. The Police Superintendent returned our money, but they made their point. Rumsfort threatened that this Angel person would move all $140 million of our funds overseas if we killed her or anybody in the Merrick family.

“Our remote supercomputer would have been part of her demonstration if she knew about our cyber skimming operation.”

“If we were to kill this Angel, wouldn’t she have a logic bomb set up to drain our funds if, for example, she doesn’t check in every twenty-four hours?” Luvas said.

“If we decide to wax her, I could institute a freeze on all our legit Northern Trust accounts. Then no transactions would be possible unless approved by bank management. However, I don’t recommend killing this woman. There are just too many unknowns involving this Angel and her activities.”

“If I may add to Dr. Morton’s report,” Imer said, “we have a dirty cop in Precinct 7 ready to trap and jail this Angel person. His Precinct Commander, James Lyle, is an honest cop; we need him out of town for our trap. Lyle’s mother, who lives in Baton Rouge, died last month, and we discovered he would be traveling to Louisiana to settle her estate.

“Exactly what is your supposed move?” Luvas said.

“Once Commander Lyle is out of town, we’ll stage an incident to motivate this Angel person to intervene. This trap's beauty is that the dirty cop, who is white, is a captain and would be in charge of the Precinct when Commander Lyle is away. If he arrests this Angel, we’ll get a chance to shiv her at the precinct headquarters.”

“And how do you plan to do that, Imer?”

“I’ve got a guy, Rinor Prishtina, who will kill her right under the noses of those fucking cops. We’ve got a Japanese ceramic knife, sharp as a razor and long enough to reach the bitch’s heart, ready to go. We’ve tested it, and it doesn’t register on X-ray screening machines. I’ll have a get-away car right outside for Rinor to escape. She’ll be dead girl walking, for sure.”

“I’ll repeat,” Lewis said, “I don’t think it’s a good idea to kill this Angel person. We don’t know what kinds of retaliation she has planned for us. For the time being, I think it’s a good idea to lay off her, the reporter, and the Merrick family. How this Angel is surveilling us is still a mystery to me. I see no evidence of any intrusion on our house cloud computer. Since I haven’t discovered how the Angel is doing all this, it’s best not to provoke her.”

“We understand,” Arsen Murka said. “However, I want this Angel cunt dead. Do you hear me? I want her dead.”

“We’re on it, boss,” Imer said.

CHAPTER 23

Angel’s Capture

Community Organizer

Mac flopped onto his leather couch at 8 o’clock and mused about the day’s police work. They had come up empty, trying to chase down the purchaser of the industrial automation equipment seized in the drug lab bust. The machinery had every identifying mark or number filed away.

Mac switched the TV to the local 24-hour news service. One segment piqued his interest. The TV presenter introduced the Sentinel reporter Natalie Rumsfort, who interviewed Pastor Jeremiah Montgomery, a beloved and sometimes fiery community organizer.

Pastor Montgomery wore black, with a Roman collar signifying his senior status at the Gethsemane Church on South Loomis Boulevard. Pastor Jeremiah has a full head of hair and a beard, but the years have turned it primarily white. He wears large brown-rimmed eyeglasses, a trademark of his reputation as the black community's voice. As a youngster, Pastor Montgomery had worked with Chicago’s most famous community organizer, Barack Obama.

“Pastor Jeremiah,” Natalie said, “you have been quite vociferous lately about the increased drug usage within the African American community. To what do you attribute this rise in drug dependency and overdose cases?”

“It’s been bad enough, Natalie, that we’ve had to resist the traditional illicit drug business within our community; by that, I mean the Gangster Disciples and the Black P Stones. Now, we face a new onslaught from a resurgent criminal gang, the Albanians. This gang, removed from Chicago twenty years ago, has suddenly reappeared and is selling heroin and cocaine to our children and destitute adults. By mixing the dime bags of cocaine with fentanyl, the drug gives a more powerful high and results in a more permanent addiction to the substance. Fentanyl is one hundred times more potent than morphine. To our African American community, it’s a double whammy of misery. You’re either a hopelessly addicted junkie, unable to function in society, and prone to crime to support your habit, or you’re an overdose victim, lost to your family forever.”

“How long has this been going on, Pastor?”

“For at least seven years, Natalie.”

“How do you know that these new drug dealers are Albanians?”

“The bottom of the distribution chain, the street-level dealers, are our own children. The Albanians heaped money on black teenagers to sell the product, hooking the underage dealers in most cases. The lure of quick cash is too appealing for children of a community where unemployment is over forty percent. I’ve interviewed some of these teenage dealers, who tell me that the mid-level distributors are white and speak English with a Balkan accent. On one occasion, I photographed one of these distributors and had a computer-savvy friend run a Google reverse image search on the guy; he is an Albanian immigrant.”

“But what can be done, Pastor, with a heartless criminal syndicate killing the vulnerable and the Chicago Police seem unable to stop them?”

“Well, Natalie, I’m organizing a convocation of all the African American ministries on the south side to institute a new community action plan called the Drug Busters Initiative.”

“Pastor, please explain the Drug Busters Initiative?”

“Everybody in our town has smartphones, even if they’re cheap. All these phones have 40-megapixel cameras with excellent low-light gathering capabilities. One of our computer experts is preparing an app for everybody’s phone to compare anybody acting suspiciously with a database of photographs of known Albanian drug distributors. Suppose one of our citizens spots one of these people in our community engaging in the illicit drug business. In that case, we can alert the Chicago Police regarding these evildoers' identities and locations. We will make these murdering Albanian mobsters regret setting foot in our neighborhoods.”

“Thank you, Pastor Montgomery, for your time today, and may I express my best wishes on the success of your Drug Busters initiative. Natalie Rumsfort of the Sentinel signing off.”

Mac hit the mute button on his remote and headed for the kitchen, thinking “The more pressure on the Albanian mobs, the better. What’s worrisome is what Bisha and his gang might do to retaliate.”

Beatdown

Pastor Montgomery strolled into the Brothers Barbershop, 1054 West 63rd Street at 8:30 am on Friday. Marques Odom gave the barber’s chair cloth a vigorous shake, which was unnecessary since Pastor Montgomery was his first customer of the day.

“Yo, have a seat, Reverend,” intoned Marques as Jeremiah Montgomery wiggled into the chair.

“What’s new with ya dis morning?”

“Got a big meeting at 11 a.m. on the new Drug Busters program. The app for everybody’s phones should be ready early next week.”

“When ya got it, Pastor, bring it here and show me how to install it. I’ll print up some flyers to distribute in all these apartment buildings, telling them to show up here for installation and training.”

“That would be most helpful, Marques. The Precinct Commander, James Lyle, has promised full cooperation. The Drug Busters app will automatically transmit to their tip line, and Lyle says he’ll investigate any lead immediately.”

“Jeremiah got any new Yo Mama jokes?” the barber in the next chair, T’Darius Lumimba, said.

“Always,” replied Pastor Montgomery, trying not to squirm in his chair.

“Well, down with it, Pastor.”

“Yo Mama so ugly the Terminator said, "I won't be back."

The barbershop erupted into laughter.

“Good one,” laughed Marques as he swooped the chair cloth off Pastor Jeremiah with a flourish, and the gray clippings fluttered to the floor. After paying the bill and adding a ten-dollar tip, Pastor Montgomery bid adieu to the barbers and headed onto the street. He turned west and crossed Aberdeen Street.

Urban renewal over the last twenty years had turned this part of Chicago’s south side into a densely populated area, with every vacant lot seized by the city and dotted with three-story apartment buildings. Apartment occupants could only afford to run their window air conditioning units in the afternoons, so most windows were open, revealing the hustle-bustle of urban life. A few people shouted greetings to Pastor Jeremiah as he crossed the intersection. He smiled at the group of pedestrians milling about on both sides of the street, hoping to run errands before the oppressive summertime heat descended.

Jeremiah didn’t notice the brown Chevy van approaching, with the side door opening as the vehicle was still moving. Three white men jumped out and rushed toward Pastor Montgomery. Shoving a woman walking alongside out of the way, one of them got behind him and applied a headlock.

“What the hell are you guys doing!” Jeremiah said.

“You mess weeth Albanian business, and you’ll wish you were never born,” was the grumbled reply.

The woman they shoved out of the way got between Jeremiah and one of the other attackers and objected.

“Git ya hands off of this man, muthafuckah!”

The thug threw a simple jab to her jaw, and she dropped like a bag of rocks, landing on her side, her head bouncing on the concrete.

He turned again to Pastor Montgomery, hitting him first with a blow to the abdomen, causing Jeremiah to slump forward, all the air exhaling from his lungs, making a slow, drawn-out moan. The next punch was to Jeremiah’s face, knocking his trademark brown spectacles on the sidewalk. He was now semi-conscious, moaning incoherently.

The getaway driver didn’t see the blond-haired woman behind the van sprinting across the street. Angel went for the mobster standing guard as the other two continued their assault. He brandished a billy club.

Seeing her approach, he swung his weapon in her direction. She skillfully ducked under it and struck his Adam’s apple with the heel of her hand. His eyes opened wide in surprise. Angel gripped his face with both hands and dug her thumbs into his eye sockets.

“You fucking bitch!” was his response as he pushed away from her, shaking his head violently. Angel, pirouetting like a ballet dancer, tornado-kicked the mobster in his rib cage. He yelped and fell to the ground, his billy club rolling away from him.

Now, she turned her attention to the two men pummeling Pastor Montgomery. Sensing his compatriot's takedown with his peripheral vision, the one punching the Pastor rotated to face her.

“So, you’re the woman everybody’s calling the Angel? Well, bring it on, bitch!”

Angel sized him up instantly, his stance, the way he was leaning, and the brass knuckles on his right hand. She stepped to her left, away from his right arm, sensing he was right-handed. He rotated towards her, hoping to close the distance so he could strike her. Angel raised her left hand, and he foolishly followed it with his eyes. Her retaliation was swift and painful; she kicked him in the groin, squarely in his scrotum. He howled in agony.

Three male bystanders, emboldened by Angel’s intervention, attacked the other standing mobster, wresting him away from Pastor Montgomery. The whole scene had devolved into a raucous street brawl. Jeremiah, dazed and bleeding, slumped to his knees.

Angel pushed the mobster who had been thrashing Pastor Montgomery towards the side of the apartment building. He hit the wall with a thud, and she grabbed his shirt collar with her right hand.

She sensed someone gripping the fingers of her left hand, followed by the metallic clink of a handcuff closing. Angel wheeled around and found herself handcuffed to a Chicago police officer. His name tag identified him as Captain Tilson Baggs.

Her first reaction was dumbfounded, as her peripheral vision showed the thug she had subdued escaping, helping the other mobsters to their feet, and running to the getaway van. Angel pointed to the fleeing criminals with her free hand, and her facial expression indicated surprise at the officer’s inaction.

Captain Baggs stepped closer to Angel, and without warning, he delivered a sharp punch to her jaw. Angel had experience with receiving strikes during training sessions with Master Wong’s Wushu students. Still, it momentarily dazed her. The assembled crowd shouted at the officer.

“What are you doing? She was defending Pastor Montgomery. You’re letting them run away.”

Police sirens were blaring from two directions as the four mob thugs roared away in their getaway van.

As the bystanders moved closer to Captain Baggs, he unholstered his Glock-50 handgun and pointed it at them.

“Step back, or I start shooting. You’ll only get one warning.”

At that moment, a crowd of about twenty people surrounded Baggs and the Angel. The two bystanders closest to Baggs stepped back; they didn’t want to be police shooting victims.

A Chicago police cruiser roared to a stop, and two officers hopped out, working their way through the assembled crowd. The crowd started chanting.

“Let her go. Let her go.”

One officer knelt beside Pastor Montgomery, bleeding profusely from facial wounds, still dazed and incoherent. He called for an ambulance. At this point, Angel’s nose was bleeding. A couple of drops of blood trickled from the corner of her mouth.

The other officer, Tevaughn Lincoln, went straight to Baggs and the Angel.

“Captain, what’s going on?”

“I’ve arrested this woman for fighting, disturbing the peace, and disorderly conduct,” Baggs replied. “Officer Lincoln, handcuff her.”

Officer Lincoln snapped his handcuffs on her left wrist; leaning close to her ear, he whispered.

“Stay calm, Ma’am.”

Two more police cruisers pulled up as the crowd continued to chant.

“Let her go, let her go.”

Officer Lincoln cuffed Angel’s right wrist and uncoupled Captain Baggs’ handcuffs from her.

“Check her for weapons,” Baggs said.

Tevaughn stepped close to the Angel and did a quick frisk. She was wearing only a T-shirt and sweatpants.

“She’s clean, Captain Baggs.”

“Well, get her ID.”

Tevaughn looked into Angel’s face; she was breathing heavily.

“I must check your pockets, Ma’am. It’s standard procedure.”

She was wearing sweatpants. One pocket was empty. Officer Lincoln retrieved a smartphone, a debit card, and a house key from the other pocket.

“Captain, she has no ID, just a phone, burner debit card, and a single key.”

Tevaughn handed the items to Captain Baggs, who stepped closer to Angel. The crowd was still chanting. People were streaming out of the nearby buildings to join the protest.

“OK, lady. What’s your name?”

Still breathing heavily, Angel glared at him, making no response.

“Answer me.”

In frustration, Captain Baggs slapped Angel on her face suddenly and sharply. Angel did not cry out; she couldn’t, but her eyes watered from the searing sting of the blow.

“Jesus, Captain! She’s handcuffed,” Officer Lincoln said.

That brutality enraged the crowd, and somebody threw a tomato at Captain Baggs. It hit him in the chest, but the watery pulp sprayed his face.

The crowd started throwing things at the two police officers. Baggs raised his Glock-50 gun and fired two shots into the air. The gunshots were loud, eliciting some shrieks from the crowd. Two more Chicago police officers rushed up to the beleaguered officers. One of them was a female officer, Rosie Juarez. She looked at one of the onlookers and asked.

“What’s going on?”

One lady in the crowd stepped forward and responded angrily.

“Three mob bastards were beating up on Pastor Montgomery when this lady here, this Angel girl, jumped in and protected Pastor Jeremiah and fought off the mob motherfuckers. Then this fucking cop here arrested the Angel and let the three wise guys escape. You call this justice? Well, fuck you. Let her go!”

An ambulance pulled up, its siren blaring. Two emergency medical technicians jumped out and rushed to Pastor Jeremiah, who was still semi-conscious.

The crowd, still chanting, continued throwing things at the officers. Officer Juarez spoke nervously to Captain Baggs.

“Jesus, Captain. We have to get her out of here.”

“Where’s your car, Rosie?”

“Right over there,” she said, pointing to her police cruiser.

Baggs called Rosie’s partner, Officer Winston, to help get Angel into the squad car. Winston and Juarez took one of Angel’s arms and helped her stumble into the patrol car.

“Drive her to the Precinct 7 station. I’ll be right behind you,” Baggs said as he sprinted to his vehicle across the street.

As the two police cruisers sped away, more police officers arrived, trying to calm the crowd, which was having none of it. Marques Odom, the barber, became the titular head of the group.

“Let’s all march down to Precinct 7 headquarters. It’s only seven blocks away.”

The gathering started moving west, ignoring the pleas of the police officers to disperse.

Mac Calls His Sister

En route, Captain Baggs called the Central Dispatcher to inform her that he had arrested the Angel and was moving her to Precinct 7 headquarters on West 162nd Street. She sent out a bulletin to all units.

*“Angel captured, transporting to Precinct 7 Police Station.”*

Every police officer, the FBI, and soon the media would have the news in seconds.

Mac Merrick and Commander DiMarco were in a police vehicle stuck in traffic on Route 94 near Mayfair. Ahead of them was a spectacular truck collision wherein two 18-wheelers crashed into one another, jack-knifed, and turned over, blocking the three-lane superhighway from side to side. It was impossible to get around them, and the traffic behind was bumper-to-bumper for at least a mile. Tow trucks were on the way, but it would be a couple of hours before work crews could clear the wreckage.

“Mac, a message on my phone just popped up saying that the Chicago Police captured the Angel and are taking her to Precinct 7 headquarters. They’re calling for backup. It seems that a riot is underway.”

“Jesus, Ryan. We’re stuck here. Let me call my sister.”

Mac used his FBI satellite phone and called the number for the Merrick, Dawson, and Brant law firm.

“Hello, this is Merrick, Dawson, and Brant. How may I direct your call?”

“Julia, this is Officer Mac Merrick. Is my sister Ronnie in the building? It’s an emergency.”

“Oh. Hi, Mac. Yes, she’s in Conference Room 2 with your dad. I’ll connect you.”

There were a few seconds of static.

“Mac, I have Veronica for you.”

“Mac, it’s Ronnie. You’re on speaker. What’s the emergency?”

“Ronnie, they’ve just arrested Angel. The Chicago Police are transporting her to Precinct 7 headquarters on West 162nd Street. Unfortunately, I’m stuck in a massive traffic jam near Mayfair. There’s no way I can get there anytime soon. Can you get over there and defend her? I’ll stake my entire trust fund to cover her bail.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Mac,” said John Merrick. “Anne offered our firm as her lawyers, pro bono, when she saved her life, and she accepted. The firm will cover her bail. Julia, are you still on the line?”

“Yes, Mr. Merrick.”

“OK, contact Millie Grainger; get her to the lobby immediately with a standard arrest kit. Have War Horse security move the new Tesla SUV to the entrance and program it directly to the Precinct 7 headquarters. I want to leave in two minutes.”

Booking an Angel

As the two police cruisers pulled up to the front entrance of the Precinct 7 headquarters, there were just a handful of pedestrians. The approaching demonstration was still six city blocks away.

Officers Winston and Juarez exited their vehicles and opened the rear door, helping Angel out of the back seat. Captain Baggs joined them, and he and Officer Winston escorted her, arm-in-arm, through the building's glass doors.

Police officers and others filled the lobby; the word must have spread rapidly through the building. Precinct 7 is primarily African American, so the tall, blond, Caucasian woman stood out like a single daisy in a grass field. Angel didn’t look fearful but scanned her surroundings, identifying surveillance cameras, windows, and exits. Baggs pushed her past the lobby reception desk to the bookings desk.

“I’ve arrested this woman for fighting, disturbing the peace, and disorderly conduct.”

Officer Gabriella Castillo, a bilingual Latina policewoman, turned the booking tablet computer around and pointed to the text box for Captain Baggs to enter the charges and sign his name. When he finished, she stood up and asked.

“Did you explain the Miranda rights to her?”

Captain Baggs looked at Officer Juarez.

“I didn’t Miranda her, did you?”

Juarez nodded no. Castillo shrugged and walked around her desk to where Angel was standing.

“Ma’am, look at me and listen carefully. You have the right to remain silent. However, anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to speak with an attorney. If you cannot afford one, one will be appointed for you. Do you understand what I have told you?”

Angel gave no response.

“Please answer yes or no.”

Again, no response.

“Are you unable to speak?”

Still, crickets.

“Please, Ma’am. Just nod your head if you understand me.”

Angel nodded, barely perceptible.

“OK, that’s a start. What is your name?”

Again, abject silence. Castillo turned to Captain Baggs.

“Did she have any ID on her?”

“No, she only had a burner smartphone, a one-use debit card, and an unlabeled house key. We removed a hair clip when she went through the metal detector.”

“Her ID might be on her phone.”

Captain Baggs broke into a condescending grin as he picked up Angel’s smartphone and walked around her.

“This one requires a fingerprint.”

Baggs gripped Angel’s right index finger and placed it on the screen's bottom fingerprint sensor. The phone emitted a haptic feedback signal, indicating the phone was operating.

“You’re not so smart after all, are you, blondie?”

His smile evaporated when he saw the smartphone’s display. It showed ‘Full Erase in Progress,’ with a progress bar rapidly moving towards completion.

“You made it erase, you fucking bitch.”

He slammed the phone on the counter, grabbed Angel’s throat with his hands, and squeezed hard. Angel’s face showed panic, a normal response to strangulation. Baggs pushed her into Officer Castillo’s counter.

Watching all this was Officer Robert Lyle, Commander Lyle’s oldest son. Robert is tall; huge would be a better description. But, like his father, he’s fair-minded and operates by the book. He jumped to Angel’s rescue, pulling Captain Baggs’ hands from her throat. Slumping to her knees, Angel gulped for air, her face red, eyes watering.

“Baggs, what the hell are you’re doing? We shackled this woman; she’s our prisoner. We don’t beat prisoners!”

“She erased the phone. That’s the destruction of evidence, Robert.”

“No, you erased the phone. How did you know the index finger unlocks the phone? Maybe she selected another finger instead. All these phones can be configured to erase data if an incorrect fingerprint is used. It’s a common anti-theft technique.”

“She knew and didn’t say anything.”

“We just told her that she has the right to remain silent. Tilson, get a cup of coffee, count to ten, whatever. Officer Castillo and I will book her.”

Captain Tilson Baggs glared at the Angel briefly, shook his head in disgust, and headed for the vending machine room.

Officer Lyle helped Angel to her feet and spoke gently to her.

“Look, my father is Commander of this Precinct. He thinks you are a lawless vigilante. Me? I don’t know what to think, but I have a job to do. I’m going to remove your handcuffs. Don’t try to make a break for it or go all Ninja on us. All we want to do is take your fingerprints, weight, height, and so on. Go easy on us, and we’ll go easy on you. Nod your head if this is OK.”

Angel nodded in the affirmative, and Officer Gabriella Castillo started fingerprinting. When they got to the mugshot part, a female police officer, Makayla Miller, tried to make her more presentable by dabbing the blood from her nose and the corner of her mouth. She even smoothed out her hair.

While Officer Castillo was booking Angel, nobody in the crowded lobby noticed Rinor Prishtina pass through the front door metal detector and weapons check. Wearing a leather jacket, odd for a summer day, he removed it and placed it on the conveyor belt. There were no alarms. Donning the jacket, Rinor positioned himself in the far corner of the boisterous lobby, observing the officers booking the prisoner. He gingerly reached inside the coat, fondling the Japanese ceramic knife.

Captain Baggs, his facial expression arrogant and sneering, returned as Officer Castillo was reattaching Angel’s handcuffs.

“All right, what have we got about her?”

“Well, the fingerprints came up zilch on the FBI database, so I entered her name as Individual-1. That’s what it says on her mugshot.”

At this point, a policeman ran up to Captain Baggs, in charge of Precinct 7 today.

“Tilson, there’s an angry crowd approaching east on 162nd street. They’ll be here in a couple of minutes.”

“Well, how many?”

“At least two hundred.”

Captain Baggs momentarily forgot about the Angel. Instead, he started barking orders, commanding his officers to clear the precinct building of non-police personnel. There were strenuous objections from people with appointments, but Baggs had emptied the precinct headquarters of civilians in a couple of minutes. There was one straggler. Officer Robert Lyle approached Rinor Prishtina, who seemed unwilling to leave.

“Sir, all civilians have to exit the building immediately.”

“But I have an appointment; I have business ….”

“No exceptions. Please go out the door now. Don’t make me draw my gun.”

Pointing to the front entrance, Lyle gave Rinor’s shoulder a little shove. Prishtina grumbled as he left the building.

Looking out at the front entrance, Captain Baggs could see the first protesters arriving on the street. He got on the headquarters public address system and called for all officers to assemble in the lobby, directing several to guard the entrance. After sending officers to the building’s other doors, he called all Precinct 7 police units to return to headquarters to assist with crowd control. The crowd outside the station started chanting.

“Let Her Go! Let Her Go!”

Rattled by the escalating mayhem, Captain Baggs returned to the booking desk, where Officer Castillo had reattached Angel’s handcuffs behind her back. Motioning two uniformed officers to join him, Baggs barked a command.

“Grimes, Joyner, take this suspect to Interview Room 2, chain her to the table and wait for me.”

The two officers escorted Angel down the hallway and around the corner, out of sight.

“Gabriella, call Officer Carla Gutiérrez and tell her to meet me in Interview Room 2 with a strip search kit.”

“Baggs, you can’t strip search her. It’s against the law. Illinois permits strip searches only in drug smuggling and terrorism cases. Your charging statement says nothing like that.”

“Look, Castillo, while Commander Lyle is in Louisiana, I’m in charge of the precinct, and I decide what is legal and what isn’t. Now call Gutiérrez, or I will put you on report!”

“All right, I’ll call her. But you’re making a big mistake, Captain.”

Gabriella Castillo raised her phone to make the call.

Savannah Mendez, an information technology officer for the Precinct 7 building, came through the front door. She approached Robert Lyle as the demonstration became more raucous outside.

“Robert,” Mendez said, “I just spoke to some demonstrators outside. They told me that this Angel girl defended Pastor Montgomery from three mob thugs, and Captain Baggs arrested her and let the gangbangers escape. What the hell is going on?”

“I don’t know, but Baggs plans to strip search her. That’s a flat-out violation of police regulations. There’s something rotten going on here, Savannah. Can you still monitor all the surveillance cameras in this building from your office?”

“Sure can; what do you want me to do?”

“Copy all surveillance files for today, so if Baggs tries to erase any evidence, we’ll have an alternate backup.”

“I’m on it, Robert. I’ll make three copies on thumb drives, two for me and one for you. They’ll never know. I never liked that rat bastard, Baggs. I wouldn’t put anything past him.”

In Interview Room 2, Angel sat at the far end of a table; her handcuff chain threaded through a U-bolt. Officers Grimes and Joyner stood watch. So far, she had been cooperative, watching the two officers warily. The door opened, and two additional police officers entered, followed by Captain Baggs.

“OK, blondie. I’ll ask you one more time. What’s your name?”

She just stared at him, expressionless. At that moment, Officer Carla Gutiérrez entered the room carrying a small cardboard box.

“Captain Baggs, this is the strip search kit. I just called Gabriella Castillo at the booking desk, and she says that you charged this woman with only disorderly conduct and fighting. Under Illinois state law, you can’t legally strip search her. Therefore, I will not participate in any strip search of her, and I suggest you do likewise.”

“Carla, I’m in charge of the Precinct today, and I decide what we do. So, you can get the hell out of here.”

“Fine. I’m going straight to my office and calling Internal Affairs about this. You’re making a big mistake, Captain Baggs.”

“Get out, Carla,” Baggs said as she disappeared down the hallway.

Baggs turned his attention to the Angel, ordering the officers to remove her handcuffs and chain.

“Stand up,” he said, “Take your clothes off.”

Angel’s facial expression changed, her eyes glinting resistance and determination. Finally, she stood up, shaking her head from side to side, indicating “No.”

Baggs stepped closer to her; she backed up from him until she was up against the wall and the two-way mirror.

“Last chance, blondie, remove your clothes!”

She shook her head once again, indicating “No.”

Captain Baggs closed the distance to her and threw a punch with his right hand. Angel’s training allowed her to sense his move, and she rotated her head away from the blow, dissipating much of its energy. However, the bare-knuckle strike restarted the blood dripping from her nose and the edge of her mouth.

“Grab her and put her face down on the table,” Baggs said.

Angel struggled to get away from them, but the four uniformed police officers soon overwhelmed her, and they lifted and slammed her face down onto the table. Her breathing became labored as she squirmed in desperation, but she had an officer holding each arm and leg fast. She couldn’t move.

“Don’t want to get undressed? No problem, darling,” Baggs said.

He turned on the battery-powered scissors and cut her T-shirt from the hem to the collar. Then, ripping sideways from the neck to both the sleeve's cuffs, Baggs yanked the T-shirt remnants to the floor. Angel was not wearing a bra. Her pants got the same treatment, and he yanked them off violently. The only sound was desperate breathing from Angel, trapped by these five men. With a few quick cuts on her pink panties, Captain Baggs robbed Angel of her clothes, dignity, and rights as a prisoner.

“Jesus, Captain, hurry up. She’s stronger than a horse,” Officer Grimes said.

Captain Baggs uncapped a tube of lubricant and smeared it on his index finger.

“What are you doing, Baggs? You’re supposed to use a rubber glove,” Joyner said.

“Nah, we’ll do this the old-fashioned way.”

He used his left hand's fingers to separate Angel’s buttocks and moved the index finger towards his target. Angel’s panicked struggle occupied the attention of all five cops. They didn’t notice the door to the interview room open, but the voice that rang out was feminine, loud as a church bell, and sharp as a banshee scream.

**“Don’t you fucking touch her!”**

Intervention

A surprised Baggs straightened up, looking at the woman who interrupted him. Wearing a brown business suit, a white blouse, and a blue tie with a brass medallion, strawberry-blond hair fashionably piled on the top of her head with a silver clip, she was a picture of fashion and fury.

“Who the hell are you?”

“I’m Veronica Merrick Fieldstone of Merrick, Dawson, and Brant. We’re her lawyers. You tell your men to get off her.”

“And who is this guy?”

“I’m John Merrick, founding partner of the said law firm. Millie Grainger, our paralegal, has a photograph of your attempted illegal strip search. Now, she will photograph each of you for our firm’s records.”

Millie quickly snapped images of each police officer, the smartphone’s camera making the telltale “Ka-Kish” sound emulating the old mechanical cameras.

“Captain Baggs, what have you got us into?” Officer Joyner said after Millie photographed his face and badge number. Ronnie was still angry.

“You men will be the subjects of a massive lawsuit against the Chicago Police Department for the sexual abuse of our client. While the city will eventually pay the civil award, they’ll hold it against each of you for participating. So, say goodbye to any professional career advancement, fellows.”

All four officers released their grip on the Angel and stepped away from the table. Gasping for breath, Angel lifted herself on one elbow and folded one knee underneath, curling into almost a fetal position. Blood dripped from Angel’s nose and the corner of her mouth. Baggs looked at her scornfully.

“Are these people your lawyers?”

Looking beaten and discouraged, Angel glanced at John Merrick, then Captain Baggs and nodded in the affirmative.

“Let the record show that the prisoner has confirmed that we are indeed her lawyers. Captain Baggs, where are her clothes?” John Merrick said.

“Um, she didn’t cooperate, so we cut them off.”

“That’s it. Baggs, you and your men get out of here and send us a policewoman with some clothes for her.”

There was a rustling behind the two-way mirror as the people watching the interrogation rushed to get out. Unfortunately, they weren’t fast enough for Millie Grainger, who darted into the hallway and photographed each of the peeping Toms as they came through the hallway door.

With a look of disgust on his face, Captain Baggs ordered Officers Grimes and Joyner to stand guard outside the door. Then, he disappeared down the hallway.

“Dad, let’s get her onto that chair.”

John Merrick got one arm under Angel’s knees, the other under her shoulder blades and lifted her off the table. He tenderly carried her over to the metal chair near the wall. As John gently placed her on the chair, he and Ronnie glanced at her chest. Angel’s left breast had a large X-shaped scar with several Frankenstein monster-like crosscuts. An unprofessional surgeon must have quickly repaired the wound, leaving the ridges of the scarring raised, thick, and with some red showing.

Angel sensed what they were looking at; her expression turned pained and humiliated. She faced away from them, tears flowing, looking down at the floor.

“Dad, your jacket.”

John Merrick removed his suit jacket, and he and Millie arranged it to cover Angel’s body.

“Millie, go outside and find her some clothes to wear,” John Merrick said.

Savannah Mendez had brought up all the building’s surveillance cameras on her display in her third-floor office, including the ceiling camera mounted in the Precinct 7 surveillance office. As the Tech Officer for the precinct, she had access to all the building’s computer systems, including the surveillance office, which monitors the precinct headquarters interior and all Precinct 7 street cams.

Captain Baggs entered the office and ordered the two officers to take a coffee break, as she suspected. When they had left, Baggs took over the surveillance office computers and commanded a total erase of the day’s surveillance data. Savannah gave herself a self-satisfied smile as she had just copied the surveillance database to thumb drives seconds before Baggs’s erasure. Popping the three thumb drives into her pocket, Savannah headed downstairs. On the first floor, she encountered Millie Grainger, whom she knew from her studies at Northwestern.

“Millie, are you here on legal business?”

“Oh. Hi, Savannah. Yes, I’m part of Angel’s legal team.”

Curling her finger to indicate “follow me,” Savannah led Millie into the female restroom. Handing her one of the thumb drives, she whispered.

“Captain Baggs just erased all the day’s surveillance camera data. Here’s a copy of everything right before he erased it. You need to get this out of the building.”

Millie dropped the thumb drive into her pocket and whispered.

“Thanks, I’ll take it from here.”

As she reentered the hallway, Millie encountered Officer Carla Gutiérrez, with whom she had previous dealings.

“Carla, we need some clothes for our client.”

Officer Gutiérrez entered a storage room, selected some female prison clothes, and escorted Millie back to the Interview Room.

Officers Grimes and Joyner were standing guard outside the door of Interview Room 2 as Officer Gutiérrez and Millie reentered the room.

“Dad, you should stand outside while we get her presentable,” Ronnie said.

Officer Gutiérrez supervised the process of getting Angel into her one-piece orange jumpsuit. She also brought undistinguished white panties for undergarments, orange socks, and a simple cloth slipper for footwear.

Ronnie opened the door and called her father back in. Captain Baggs and two officers reentered the Interview Room. As Officer Gutiérrez left the room, she gave Baggs a stink eye that measured a ten on the Richter Scale.

Baggs looked warily at John Merrick. Then, pointedly refusing to address Veronica, he barked more orders.

“We’re moving the prisoner to a holding cell. Wait in the lobby until we tell you when you can see her.”

“No, you’re not!” John said. “We haven’t had a chance to talk to her.”

“Look, counselor, if you haven’t noticed, there’s a riot outside. I’m moving the prisoner to a more secure cell for her protection. I’ll let you know when you can confer with her.”

As Captain Baggs fitted Angel with handcuffs, Ronnie admonished the discouraged Angel.

“Angel, listen to me. You’re under extreme duress. That’s why we are here: to protect, defend, and speak on your behalf. Give them absolutely nothing. Do you hear me? Make no statements to anybody until they let us see you.”

John, Ronnie, and Millie watched helplessly as Baggs, and two other officers, escorted Angel to a holding cell at the far end of the building. They retired to the lobby, a scene of absolute chaos as the demonstration outside grew more raucous. Millie asked John if she could speak to them privately, so they guided her to a hallway spot away from the surveillance camera.

“OK, Millie. What’s up?”

“Captain Baggs just erased all the building’s security camera files. I think he’s hiding something.”

“How do you know that, Millie?”

“A Police Tech Specialist I know from college, Savannah Mendez, claimed that she snagged a copy of today’s data seconds before Baggs deleted it. She gave me a thumb drive. We need to get it out of the building.”

“Agreed, Millie. Use your visitor badge to exit the building, then head to our company's Tesla vehicle. Call Anne and arrange an immediate drone pickup. Send the thumb drive to the office and have Anne assemble a team to review it.”

The News Spreads

At Merrick, Dawson, and Brant's offices, Anne Merrick huddled in the conference room with Ezekiel Dawson, one of the firm’s founding partners, plus a couple of legal assistants. On her Apple tablet computer, she paused one of the network images of the Angel. At the top of the screen, the network sensationalized the picture with the caption “Chicago Angel Captured – Vigilante or Hero?”

Anne magnified the image, blood visible on Angel’s nostril and the corner of her lip. Zooming further, Anne studied Angel’s face and her expression.

*What must this woman be feeling?* Anne thought. *Is she feeling rage, disappointment, fear, regret? No, not this girl. She has, so far, tried to help the police. She’s not going to become a criminal today by fighting with them.*

*My son loves her. And why not? I mean, look at her. She’s tall, with a supermodel's face, a statuesque figure, and Eastern European blond hair. She’s every man’s dream girl, but she can’t speak. Still, my son loves her. I owe her so much. We have to get her out of this.*

Anne’s stream of consciousness stopped when her phone rang. It was Julia telling her that Millie Grainger was on the line.

“Hi Millie, It’s Anne. What’s happening?”

“Anne, we have not spoken with Angel. They moved her to a holding cell. There’s a riot forming outside. We did interrupt an illegal strip search by Captain Baggs, who is in charge of the precinct today. I am sending you photographs I took of the perpetrators, including Baggs. Anne, these photos are sensitive as our client had her clothes cut away.”

“Just got them, Millie. I’ll review and institute special procedures for them. Anything else?”

“Yes, and this is explosive, Anne. A Police Tech Specialist passed me today’s Precinct 7 surveillance tapes right before Baggs erased them. John suggests a drone transfer immediately. I’m inside the company Tesla. It’s just a thumb drive, Anne.”

“Give me a few seconds, Millie. I’ll book a drone pickup.”

Anne opened the Drone App on her smartphone, giving the firm’s address as the destination and Millie’s phone as the pickup location. The drone service ordered a “buzzer” to Millie’s GPS coordinates.

“There’s a drone nearby, Millie; it’ll arrive in one minute.”

Outside the Precinct 7 headquarters, the crowd had swelled to over four hundred people, chanting: “Let her go. Let her go!” News trucks for the local media and national networks pulled up, interviewing people who had observed Angel’s intervention, replete with pictures from their smartphones. However secretive Angel’s activities had been before, she was now famous, and her exploits a national cause célèbre.

Natalie Rumsfort was standing alongside the Sentinel remote van when a woman approached who recognized her. She showed Natalie a video she had made of the entire incident from her 2nd-floor apartment across the street. Fortunately, she had a high-resolution smartphone camera with a high-tech image stabilization system. Soon, Natalie and her crew edited and prepared the material for broadcast. With this video, she got several media outlets to broadcast her live.

At Merrick, Dawson, and Brant's offices, a wall display showed the local 24-hour news station when the news announced a special report from Natalie Rumsfort of the Sentinel.

“Hello, this is Natalie Rumsfort of the Chicago Sentinel in front of Precinct 7 Headquarters. I'm standing here with Makayla Washington, who observed the Angel incident just an hour ago and recorded Angel’s arrest. Makayla, describe what you saw as we play your video.”

“Well, I’ve known Pastor Jeremiah for decades, so I yelled at him when he came out of the barbershop. See how he waves at me?

“I follow him as he crosses the street. Many people were out and about this morning before the afternoon heatwave. See that? That’s the van with three guys jumping out. Now they grab Pastor Jeremiah and start givin’ him a beatdown. That flash sprinting across the street is that Angel girl. Just look at her demolishing that white gangbanger. Now she’s giving the other man the business when out of nowhere comes this cop who cuffs her. Can ya believe it? The gangbangers run away, and the police officer does nuthin. Look at him, punching her in the face. A big crowd starts forming, and the police push her into a squad car, and they take off.

“Natalie, I know we don’t stick up for white folks in this part of town, but this Angel girl is getting a raw deal. That’s all I gotta say.”

“Thank you, Makayla, for your video and commentary. It sure looks like Chicago’s Angel was being a good Samaritan, but this morning, she finds herself a prisoner in the Precinct 7 headquarters; her fate is an open question.

“A few minutes ago, precinct officers advised us that the prestigious law firm Merrick, Dawson, and Brant are in the building, acting as Angel’s lawyers. You might remember that this woman, known as the Chicago Angel, saved the lives of the firm’s founding partner, John Merrick, and his daughter, Veronica Merrick Fieldstone, by thwarting an underworld assassination attempt outside Barney’s Restaurant. Natalie Rumsfort of the Sentinel signing off.”

“Jeevika, did you snag a copy of that?” said Anne Merrick.

“Yes, I did, and it’s 16K resolution.”

“Good. Clip any bits not germane and email copies to John, Veronica, and Millicent. There’s a thumb drive coming in a few minutes with Precinct 7 surveillance footage; I’ll need you to review and prepare a summary video,” Anne said.

Time to Worry

Imer Bisha paced back and forth in the Chicago Cyber Engineering secure conference room, waiting impatiently for Rinor Pashtina’s call. He was getting on Lendina’s nerves, irritated by his constant sitting and exiting his chair.

“What’s taking so long?” Bisha said. “We got word from the get-away vehicle that Rinor was in the Precinct Lobby just after Captain Baggs brought the Angel bitch in.”

Dr. Morton stared at Yilka, exchanging a knowing glance that maybe things were not going according to plan. Finally, Imer’s phone rang.

“Boss, ess Rinor here. No luck on stab Angel beetch. Captain Lyle’s boy kicks me out before I get to Angel. Beeg mob outside. Everything crazy. Building in lockout. Can no get back in.”

“Rinor, what about the back entrance?”

“All lockout, Boss. Cops at all doors. Can’t get back in.”

“OK, Rinor. Get in the car and leave the area immediately.”

“So sorry, Boss.”

“Shit! That was our best chance to wax that bitch,“ Imer said. “Now, what do we do?”

Lendina powered up her tablet computer and opened the local TV news channel. She cast the image and sound to the conference room’s large display panel. The local channel displayed a candid photograph of the Chicago Angel, taken by a bystander. Lendina did a quick screengrab of the image as the announcer intoned the news.

“We take you now to the local CBS mobile unit outside Precinct 7 headquarters, where reporter Amanda Nance has this incredible scoop. Amanda, explain to our viewers what you have found?”

“Thank you, Mary Beth. Interviews with two Precinct 7 officers and one maintenance worker revealed that the woman, colloquially known as the Chicago Angel, is mute and unable to speak. We don’t know if her condition is recent or lifelong. Officers tell us that she refuses to answer questions, exercising her right to remain silent. As a result, the Police don’t know her name or any other details about her. I also can report that Police Superintendent Javion Green has just arrived with a phalanx of officers and prosecutors to take over the Angel situation.”

“Thank you, Amanda, for your fascinating report from the scene. In other news….”

Lendina screen-grabbed and sharpened Angel's image with her PhotoImageAI program and displayed it on the large display panel. Lendina stood up, walked to her husband, pointed to the screen displaying a photo of the Chicago Angel.

“Imer, do you know this woman? Don’t lie to me. Who is she?”

Imer Bisha froze, afraid to answer. His long, pregnant silence prompted Lendina to face Yilka Kartallozi.

“Yilka, I’ve known you since childhood. You’d better tell me the truth, or I’ll call my father to sort this out. Who is this girl?”

“Uhh, Oh Jesus. We gangbanged this woman four years ago.”

His face dripped with guilt, for he knew that Lendina was the big boss’s daughter and was untouchable.

“You gangbanged her? Is she a prostitute?”

“No,” Yilka said, “we snatched her from Bob's 24-hour Diner on South Canal Street. She was the night shift dishwasher. We hooded her and took her to our Michigami Storage warehouse.”

“You snatched an innocent civilian? How many people raped her, Yilka?”

“Me, Imer, and nine others. One other guy filmed it with a Steadicam and professional movie lights.”

“You made a porno of the gangbang? Please tell me you are joking, Yilka?”

“No, Lendina. It’s no joke. We called the video ‘Blond Beauty Gangbang,’ and stored it on our secret supercomputer beneath Michigami Storage. When we get requests, we temporarily move it to the Chicago Cyber Engineering mainframe for distribution.”

“How many people have requested this video?”

“Dozens,” Yilka said.

“Did you know about this, Lewis?”

Lewis Morton shook his head. Lendina turned to face her husband.

“What else do I need to know about this?”

“At the end of the gangbang, I cut her.”

“Specify what you mean by ‘cut her?’ Answer me, Imer?”

“I used my knife to cut an X over her left breast. I cut deep enough to leave a permanent scar.”

“Then you let her go?”

Imer, looking a bit embarrassed, exhaled before answering.

“After all the shit we put her through, I thought that her never crying out or complaining was grounds for some admiration, that I should spare her life.”

“Of course, she couldn’t cry out, you stupid fool. She was mute.”

Lendina turned her attention to Yilka.

“Yilka, I set up and run our North American escort operation. We occasionally provide these women free of charge as a benefit to family members, paying them out of our profits. If you want to gangbang a girl, we have women who specialize in staging those rape scenarios. If you accidentally hurt them, we pay them triple. Why would you prefer snatching an innocent civilian or a crack whore over my escorts?”

“Your escorts are actresses, playing a part. The crack whore, who thinks we will snuff and bury her in the woods, will try desperately to please us.”

Lendina shook her head in disgust. Being a certified public accountant, she is pragmatic. Decisions have consequences, and her mind is now in overdrive, considering the possible adverse outcomes.

“You damn fools. You have endangered the entire family. If the cops acquire this rape video, Yilka, Imer, and nine other family members will be going to the slammer.

Imer, do you have a list of who you gave this video to?”

Imer Bisha shook his head.

“OK, I’ll have to contact my father and have him put out the word to destroy all copies of this video.”

“Lewis, you don’t look so good today either.”

“How so?”

“This pretty blond vigilante, who has been beleaguering us for months now, is actually the second coming of Alan Turing. She has broken into our computer systems without you detecting it, Lewis. That little money transfer that the red-haired Sentinel reporter staged demonstrated her computer hacking skills.”

“I think you’re right, Lendina,” Lewis said, “but your husband is Admiral Yamamoto.”

“Why, Lewis?” Imer said.

“Admiral Yamamoto sank all the American battleships at Pearl Harbor but didn’t destroy the fuel tanks and dry-dock facilities. He realized that he only awakened a sleeping giant.”

“And your point being, Lewis?”

“You put this Angel woman near the FBI. If they’re smart, they’ll convince her to join them in exchange for immunity. That woman’s skill and resolve, coupled with the financial and technical resources of the FBI, will unleash a veritable juggernaut against us.”

Imer exhaled deeply; at the end, he said simply, “Fuck.”

Leadership Involved

At the rear entrance of Precinct 7 Headquarters, several Police vehicles arrived and discharged their passengers. Leading the entourage was the Police Superintendent, Javion Green, and his second-in-command, Linda Shannon. Deputy Chief Batundey Moore and Cooke County Prosecutor Mathilda Ling followed the leadership. Four more policemen joined the entourage as they entered the back entrance and headed straight for the lobby. Superintendent Green observed the chaos outside as the crowd chanted and sporadically tossed water bottles and rocks at the entrance’s front windows. Fortunately, the installation of bullet-resistant polycarbonate windows made the missiles bounce off harmlessly.

“OK, where is Captain Baggs? Isn’t he in charge now that Commander Lyle is in Louisiana today?” Green said. Officer Makayla Miller stepped toward him and explained.

“Captain Baggs is in his office, preparing paperwork for the prisoner’s Bail Hearing.”

“Where is the prisoner?”

“She’s in the secure jail cell in the back.”

“All right, I want to see her.”

Watching this and visibly enraged, Veronica Fieldstone stepped forward, eyes slightly squinting.

“Like hell you are, Superintendent Green. Captain Baggs did not allow us to consult with our client. My Father and I insist that you allow us to confer privately with Angel before you interrogate her.”

“Well, Good morning to you too, Ronnie,” Green said. “OK, look. Let’s go to the cell and ascertain the prisoner’s condition. You! Over there. You’re an EMT, right? Bring your bag. I want you to check a prisoner for me.”

The entourage followed Officer Miller on a trip through several corridors and cell block security doors until Officer Miller pointed to the Angel. Ronnie looked at the cell's layout: cream-colored tiles on all three walls, a glass-block window with steel bars, a long bench under the window with a thin blue pad, and a cubby-hole toilet giving some privacy. Angel was sitting in her orange jumpsuit, the palms of her hands resting in her lap. Green signaled with his hands, and the door to the cell automatically unlatched and motored open. Superintendent Green strode in alone; Angel looked at him guardedly.

“Young lady, I am Superintendent of Police Javion Green. I want an Emergency Medical Technician to have a look at you. John Merrick has told me that you cannot speak. If you’re OK with the EMT checking your condition, nod your head.”

Angel nodded in the affirmative, and Green motioned for the EMT to enter the cell. Clad in matching charcoal dockers and a polo shirt with the Chicago Fire Department EMT applique, she quickly sat beside Angel, who turned toward her.

“Hi, I’m Shondra. All I want to do is quickly check your vitals and look for any evidence of concussion. Angel nodded in compliance, and the EMT went about her work promptly. The Superintendent of Police towered over them, and the entourage waited in the hallway. The EMT completed her exam and stood up.

“Superintendent Green, her vital signs are good; there’s no evidence of severe concussion. She has a cut on her lip and dried blood on her right nostril. I noticed two bruises on her throat and a contusion on the side of her face.”

“Can you tell if these wounds result from the street fight Captain Baggs said she was in?”

“Could be, but I wouldn’t bet the farm on it,” Shondra said as she left the cell.

Green removed his small notepad and a pen from his pocket. He offered them to the Angel, “Please write down your name, Miss.”

She nodded from side to side, giving a firm “no.”

Green exhaled deeply and shook his head in frustration, not knowing how to deal with this. He turned to John Merrick.

“Counselor, would the three of you come in here?”

John Merrick, Veronica Merrick Fieldstone, and Millicent Grainger entered the cell. John became immediately combative.

“Javion, we have to move our client to a secure room where we can speak with her privately.”

“Not today, John. This cell is the most secure place in the building. I’m well aware that people want to kill her, but God damn it, not on my watch. Officer Miller, is that the only surveillance camera in this cell?”

“Yes, sir. Disconnect that camera and microphone, and the cell is completely private unless someone is standing in the hallway.”

Looking at the camera and realizing that he couldn’t reach it, even though he was six foot two inches, Green looked directly at Millie Grainger.

“You, freckles, how much do you weigh?”

“Ninety-five pounds, sir.”

“OK, get on my shoulders and disconnect that thing,” Green said.

As Green knelt, there was some laughter as Millie jumped onto Angel’s bench and climbed onto the Police Superintendent’s shoulders. Grabbing Millie’s shoes, Green stood erect, and Millie reached for the camera’s Internet connector and unlatched it. The red light on the camera went off, and Millie reported that it was dead, for the moment at least.

After returning Millie to her feet, Superintendent Green, his face reverting to its normal serious state, turned to John Merrick.

“John, she’s all yours for the moment. However, I plan to move her soon to the George Leighton Criminal Court Building. I have two reasons to do this. I want to get her case on Judge Katzenberg’s bail hearing docket at 1 p.m. I can’t eliminate the possibility that today's events might be an organized crime op designed to isolate and kill the prisoner, maybe in this precinct building. I’ll give you 45 minutes. Armed guards will be down the hallway to deny anyone access unless I authorize it.”

Once Millie ascertained that the coast was clear, John and Ronnie sat on either side of the Angel, with Millie cross-legged on the floor. Millie handed Angel an Apple tablet computer with the text-to-voice App already running.

“Angel, it’s time for you to tell us your real name,” John said.

“If I do that, the mob will use that information to track me down and kill me.”

“Accepted, Angel. The three of us operate under the auspices of attorney-client privilege, meaning we may not divulge our clients’ secrets to anyone. If you want your name to remain secret, that’s how it will be for now.

Angel, I owe you my life. My wife, son, daughter, and Millie owe you their lives. Ronnie and I will utilize our law firm's resources to get these charges dismissed and you released. But we need to establish some mutual trust between us.”

“Angel,” Ronnie said, “Let’s get to the elephant in the room. Those large scars on your left breast, over your heart. Are they self-inflicted?”

Angel shuddered, barely perceptible, then glanced at Millie on the floor. Her eyes teared up. She started typing again.

“When I was eighteen, the Albanian mob kidnapped me from the restaurant where I was working, took me to a warehouse somewhere, and gang-raped me.

When they finished, they mutilated me as a warning about what would happen if I went to the police.

I don’t want your pity on this. I get enough of that every time I use a tablet computer to communicate.”

John Merrick glanced at his daughter, who had a somewhat poignant expression on her face.

“Angel, take my hands.”

She lightly gripped his hands with hers. John stared directly at her entrancing eyes.

“Angel, there’s no pity from Ronnie, me, or anyone else in my family. Why? Because you’re not just a client, you’re family to us. Do you hear me, Angel?

“You’ve risked your life to save my wife, son, daughter, Millie, and myself. We love you and will do anything to help you.”

Angel released her grip and started typing again.

“It’s a two-edged sword, Mr. Merrick. My activities have put your family in grave danger.”

“Please call me John, Angel. Danger and my family are old friends. We have people we’ve defended and whose unsuccessful cases resulted in threats of retaliation. As far as today is concerned, what do you think happened?”

“I made a tactical mistake.”

“Please be more specific,” Ronnie said.

“It came to my attention a few years ago that a seemingly legitimate software development company in Hines called Chicago Cyber Engineering is, in fact, a front for massive mob penetration into the Fortune 500 business community.

I had been monitoring a chat application on their mainframe cloud supercomputer. CCE automatically erases chats after reading, but they don’t know that my exploit snags the messages and transmits them to me.

Most of the messages are benign, but occasionally, I see their security department setting up and running mob activities, such as their plans to kill your son.

I monitored their plans to rough up Pastor Montgomery but assumed I could deal with any mob grunts sent to do this.

I didn’t anticipate that a Chicago Police officer would be lying in wait to apprehend me.

I was a fool today. I admit it.”

“Was it Captain Baggs who arrested you?” Ronnie said. Angel nodded yes. On the floor, Millie recorded the conversation on her smartphone.

“Have you had any previous contact with Captain Baggs, however slight?” John said. Angel shook her head, “No.”

John Merrick’s iPhone rang; it was Superintendent Green.

“John, Commander Ryan DiMarco, and Officer Merrick have just arrived. May they speak with your client?”

“Yes, Javion. Send them right in.” John Merrick immediately heard the mechanical rumbling of steel doors opening.

Mac Merrick stood in the doorway of the holding cell; his eyes locked on Angel’s face. She showed surprise at seeing Mac in his regular Chicago Police Uniform, light blue shirt, dark blue pants, and checkerboard-striped cap. Angel’s eyes teared up as she stood, her expression disconsolate, ashamed. Mac bolted to her, arms wide open, and Angel buried her face into his shoulder, draping her arms around him. He removed his cap and dropped it to the floor; Millie deftly reached for it. Ronnie looked at her father, their eyes showing recognition of what was transpiring. Mac gently released her, whispering in her ear, “Love you.”

Angel looked next to Commander DiMarco, giving him a look suggesting: “I’m sorry.”

That didn’t stop Ryan, who opened his arms to her.

“Bring it in, Angel.”

She hugged him as he lifted her off the floor briefly.

“Ryan,” John said, “Can we speak off the record?”

“Sure, John. What’s on your mind?”

“What do you know about Captain Baggs?”

“I don’t know him personally. The 7th is a minority precinct, mostly African Americans and Latinos. The staff here reflects that. Still, the Department’s diversity initiatives resulted in some white officers posting here, which includes Captain Baggs. Why do you ask? Has Baggs acted in an unprofessional way?”

“We interrupted Captain Baggs and four other officers attempting an illegal strip search of our client,” Ronnie said.

“You interrupted before or after the strip search, Ronnie?”

“Baggs had cut away her clothes with scissors, had spread her buttocks with one hand, and was about to insert an ungloved finger into her rectum when we walked in. There will be hell to pay for this, Ryan.”

“There should be,” Ryan said.

Mac turned to Angel.

“Did Captain Baggs mistreat you in any other way?”

She retrieved the Apple Tablet and started typing.

“After he handcuffed me on the street, he punched me in the face. I did not resist arrest in any way, Mac.

In the station, he choked me when my smartphone automatically erased itself and punched me again in the interview room.”

“Commander DiMarco and I should speak to the Superintendent about this. The building’s surveillance cameras can verify Angel’s veracity. We’ll be back.”

Mac and Ryan DiMarco exited the cell and motioned for the officers to let them pass.

CHAPTER 24

Merrick, Dawson, and Brant

The Cottrels

“This surveillance footage Millie sent us is explosive, Anne,” Ezekiel Dawson said. Dawson is the firm's oldest founding partner, a Yale-educated African American with a photographic memory and an uncanny ability to spot good evidence in a haystack of bullshit. Anne Merrick leaned over to have a look at the laptop display.

“As John lifts Angel off the table, there’s a wicked scar over her heart, like something out of a Frankenstein movie. Somebody marked her, Anne. We’ve seen gangs do this. Cut so deep that the scar lasts a lifetime.”

Anne looked up at Ezekiel.

“Let’s not jump to conclusions. However, my intuition is that this woman is a rape victim. That mark is a warning.”

Anne Merrick’s iPhone rang; it was Julia in the lobby.

“Anne, I have Brenton Farkas of Farkas and Lloyd. He wants to Facetime with you and says it’s about the Angel.”

“OK, Julia. Put him through.”

“Brenton, I’m swamped today, as you might imagine. What’s this about?”

“We have two clients, Colby and Tillie Cottrel, owners of a company for which we provide corporate legal services, who contacted us a few minutes ago. They asked me to reach out to you to say that they will fund any bail money required for your client, the woman known as the Chicago Angel. Currently, their corporate cash reserves are about one million dollars.”

“Who are these people, Brenton?”

“I will disclose that they are your client’s employers.”

“Speaking for all the staff here at Merrick, Dawson, and Brant, please convey our appreciation to the Cottrels for their kind offer. That said, our firm will cover any bail set today.

I should tell you, Brenton, that this Angel saved the lives of my husband, daughter, and my youngest son, an undercover policeman. It’s not public knowledge that the Angel saved my son, so I’ll need you to keep it confidential.”

“Of course, Anne.”

“Brenton, Ezekiel Dawson here. Would you consider arranging an off-the-record interview with your clients to provide background?”

“Certainly, Ezekiel, I’ll sign off; good luck with your case today.”

Baggs Interviewed

“Sit down, Captain Baggs,” Superintendent Green said.

Baggs shuffled into an empty seat in the Precinct 7 conference room. All of Green’s retinue, Mac, Ryan, and Commander Lyle’s son, Robert, were in attendance. Baggs looked at the gathering and put his cap on the table.

“What’s on your mind, Superintendent?”

“For starters, how did you get involved in a street fight down the road?”

“I was across the street, having a smoke before going to work.”

“Tell us what you saw and how you got involved?”

“Well, I saw three white men jump out of a van and start giving Pastor Montgomery the business. Then I observed a white woman joining the fight, so I rushed across the street and handcuffed the first participant I encountered, the white woman.”

“The people outside the Precinct building say you let the three attackers escape. Is that true?”

“Get serious, Superintendent Green. I was a single cop handcuffed to the woman’s left wrist. How could I possibly give chase in the circumstances like that?”

“Did you punch a handcuffed prisoner in the face, Captain?”

“Yes. The woman appeared like she planned to hit me, so I struck first.”

“They say you discharged your revolver.”

“There was a mob forming. I was alone. I shot in the air to back the crowd up.”

“At the headquarters here, Officer Lyle tells me you choked the prisoner. Is that true?”

“I take issue with Lyle on this. The prisoner erased her smartphone, destroying evidence. I got a little rough. What do you want me to do? Let her walk all over me?”

“All right, last question. Why did you start a strip search on the prisoner when two officers advised you it would be illegal to do so?”

“The three criminals beating up Pastor Montgomery looked like Albanian mobsters, who have been flooding the 7th precinct with drugs. I assumed the prisoner was in cahoots and could carry contraband within her bodily cavities. That’s why I overruled them.”

“You can dispense with your phony act of superiority, Captain Baggs,” Green said, banging his fist on the table.

“You have exposed the Department to a costly lawsuit. Illinois totally banned strip searches ten years ago. The only exception is terrorism and drug mules, usually seen at our southern border and some airports.

“Captain Tilson Baggs, report to Room 105 of the George Leighton Criminal Court Building at 1:00 p.m. for the bail hearing. I’m placing First Deputy Superintendent Linda Shannon in charge of the Precinct until Commander Lyle returns.

“Captain Baggs, there’ll be hell to pay if you’re lying to me.”

Superintendent Green led the procession out of the conference room; Officer Robert Lyle was last. He couldn’t resist. He wheeled around and faced Captain Baggs.

“Baggs, you’re an asshole!”

Moving an Angel

Superintendent Green walked deliberately with a pronounced scowl on his face, returning to the Precinct cell block.

“Commander DiMarco, what’s your read on all this?”

“Well, sir, I think Baggs is lying to you. Worse yet, I have a sinking feeling that Baggs may be a compromised cop, working on behalf of organized crime.”

“I hope to hell that you’re wrong, Ryan. In any case, I’m assigning you and Officer Merrick to protect this prisoner. Your security directives will be the law, at least till we get this case resolved. I don’t want that woman harmed. Do you hear me? Not a hair on her head mussed.

“I’ve got Nivani Subramanian and some units of Chicago SWAT pulling up as we speak. Do what he says as far as transportation is concerned. I’ll have extra police at the courthouse for you to deploy to protect the prisoner.”

They entered the hallway just as Subramanian and his people arrived. John Merrick, Ronnie, and Millie stood up as the crowd assembled outside the cell. Green was still very much in charge of the prisoner transfer.

“Young lady, we are transferring you to the Leighton Criminal Court Building on South California Street for security reasons. While awaiting a formal bail hearing in that building, Commander DiMarco will oversee your security.

“I understand that individual members of the police force may have acted unprofessionally towards you. If that is the case, I apologize. Commander DiMarco and Officer Merrick will ensure that your treatment will be by the book and uphold the justice and fair play standards that I insist on from all my officers.

“Commander Subramanian of Chicago SWAT will be in charge of the transfer. I’ll let him explain his procedures to you.”

Subramanian and two of his men, dressed in full battle gear, approached Angel. She stood up, looking somewhat resigned. Nivani looked at her sympathetically.

“May I call you Angel?”

She nodded yes.

“Don’t be intimidated by all this military gear. We know that organized crime wants you dead. These bullet-proof vests and assault rifles are to protect you. We’ll get you there safely. The law requires me to handcuff you behind your back. Usually, we’d attach leg restraints, but I’ll forgo those if you promise not to run away. Nod your head ‘yes’ if you’ll comply.”

Angel signaled her compliance. Subramanian was gentle and efficient. The SWAT team formed a four-person line on either side of her, with Nivani in the lead and Mac and Ryan taking up the rear. The procession traversed several hallways until they reached one of the rear entrances. Three black SWAT vans were in a row, all vehicles open at the rear while Precinct 7 police kept the crowd of news crews and spectators at bay.

“OK, Miss Angel. See that middle van? That’s our destination. We’re going to trot over there fast, and I want you to jump in as quickly as possible,” Nivani said.

It was all over in seconds. The crowd started cheering as Angel appeared, and several news reporters futilely shouted questions to a woman who could not speak. The SWAT vans began moving. Angel sat on a bench, surrounded by six heavily armed officers, plus Mac and Ryan. A few news drones hovered overhead, broadcasting the convoy to the 24-hour news services. Most media trucks headed out, surmising the likely destination is the bail bond court.

One of the SWAT officers asked Angel: “Would you like some water?” She nodded yes.

He uncapped a water bottle and brought it to her lips. Angel leaned forward and closed her lips around the bottle, and he tipped it just enough to dispense the drink. He tilted it two more times before she backed away. Then, capping the bottle, he said [yearningly](https://www.wordhippo.com/what-is/another-word-for/yearningly.html).

“If they find you not guilty, will you have my babies?”

“Sit down, Crowler.” Commander DiMarco said as everyone in the van laughed. Angel flashed a radiant smile, appreciating some humor on a very trying morning. Subramanian was, as always, meticulous in his planning. The convoy headed east to the Dan Ryan Expressway, then north to the Stevenson Expressway to the courthouse. Arriving at the courthouse, the SWAT team parked at a back entrance and escorted Angel and her captors into the building. Once SWAT nestled Angel in an interview room, Commander Subramanian removed her handcuffs.

“Young lady, I want to thank you for your cooperation and for not going all Ninja on us. While there may be a debate in the police department on your tactics, I know a good heart when I see it. You have a good heart. Commander DiMarco and Officer Merrick will oversee your security now.”

Subramanian and his SWAT team headed out, and DiMarco positioned several officers to prevent unauthorized access to the interview room. Angel sat silently in a chair, bemused by all the activity in the hallway.

The Dirty Cop

Anne Merrick started up a conference call with her husband John, Ronnie, and Millie, making their way to the courthouse in the company Tesla.

“John, we’re sending the Natalie Rumsfort video of the assault on Reverend Montgomery to each of your iPhones. It makes it pretty clear that Angel acted as a Good Samaritan. It also shows Captain Baggs punching and then slapping a restrained prisoner. His actions look damned suspicious.

“The scar over Angel’s heart looks like a gang warning. The video of Captain Baggs’ treatment of our client violates police anti-violence regulations. It’s all actionable, John, but probably of no use in the bail hearing.”

“Thanks, Anne. We’re pulling in at the courthouse. I will call you when we get situated.”

Anne directed two paralegals to edit the surveillance file*s* to summarize the police interactions with Angel. Anne received a call from Julia at the reception desk.

“Anne. A very distraught woman has just contacted me via Facetime. She says the cop who arrested Angel sexually assaulted her daughter three years ago. She wants to speak with you.”

“Add us to her Facetime call, Julia, and get Ashley Brant in this conference ASAP. Stay on the line to record any details we need.”

The Facetime call popped up on Anne’s laptop computer. The screen image showed a fashionably dressed woman in her late forties, tears dotting her cheeks in obvious distress. Next to her was a teenage girl, maybe sixteen. She was also crying.

“Mrs. Merrick, my name is Alex Rome. I live just north of your office in the LakeVista condominiums. Twenty minutes ago, I found out that the bastard policeman who arrested the Angel assaulted my daughter. She has proof. Mrs. Merrick, my family is well-off. I want to sue that son of a bitch….”

Her voice trailed off as she started crying again, looking for a Kleenex to dab her face.

“Alex,” Anne said, “what is your daughter’s name?”

“My name is Ryleigh,” the daughter said.

“Alexand Ryleigh, listen to me carefully. State law is precise and clear on cases of sexual abuse involving minors. Under no circumstances can your daughter’s name be revealed in public court documents or the media.

“Ah, the lady who just popped up is Ashley Brant, one of the founders of this law firmand our specialist in family law and sexual abuse cases*.* Ashley, this is Alex Rome and her daughter Ryleigh. Alex says they have proof that the policeman who arrested Angel sexually assaulted her daughter three years ago.”

“May I ask, Ms. Rome, what is the proof?” Ashley said.

Again, Ryleigh answered the question. The teenager, face flushed from stress, held up a nondescript pair of glasses.

“I was wearing these Meta Memory glasses. They include a camera and microphone that can run all day. You read them out with a Meta Super Bluetooth app.

“Three years ago, I walked home from school; it was a warm day. I took a shortcut through an industrial area. This police car pulled up, and the officer started asking me a lot of questions. Pretty soon, he starts accusing me of trying to make a drug score. He rummaged through my school bag, accusing me of being a junkie.

“Then he unzips his pants and tells me to give him a hand job. I knew what that was but had never done anything like that before. It was the most degrading thing I’ve ever experienced. When he finished, he threatened to kill my parents and little brother if I said anything.

“I was so embarrassed that I hid the glasses where Mom and Dad would never find them. Today, I recognized him in that video of Angel’s capture. I don’t care if it ruins my life; I want that monster cop stopped!”

“Alex, does your husband know about this?” Ashley Brant said.

“My husband is a world-renownedarchitect. He is currently in Indonesia, starting a building for Tesla Energy. So, no, he doesn’t know. I am a freelance web designer working from home. I used the Bluetooth app to download the video file from Ryleigh*’s* glasses; I can send you a copy right now, clipped to show the cop's interaction. It’s about ten minutes.”

“Use the drop box at the bottom of the screen; we’ll get it immediately,” Anne said. “OK, we have it. You sit tight while we review it.”

What followed was a vile video of a male police officer manipulating and threatening a child. The Memory glasses clearly showed the cop’s face at one point. Anne stopped the video, shot a screenshot over to one of her paralegals, and asked her to do a facial recognition analysis of that image with Captain Baggs’s file on the Chicago Police database. Another screengrab showed his ID badge. As Anne expected, the facial recognition analysis resulted in a 100% match.

“Mrs. Rome,” Anne said, “may I address your daughter?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Ryleigh, you have done nothing wrong. The video clarifies that Baggs is guilty of sexual assault and several other offenses. I ask you; do you want me to go after this guy?”

Ryleigh looked at her mother.

“Mom, I want to fight back, even if it means I’m branded as a slut for life.”

“Mrs. Merrick, on behalf of my daughter and me, we would like to hire your law firm to bring this bastard cop to justice.”

“Alex, we normally require a $25,000 retainer from well-off clients, as we are the best law firm in Illinois. If you allow me to use this evidence to pull the rug out from under Captain Baggs today, I will authorize a reduction of the initial retainer to $5,000.”

“Barry and I have at least fifty thousand in our bank checking account today. I could arrange a bank-to-bank transfer in a few minutes. What’s next?”

“Alex, I’ll let our founding partner, Ashley Brant, explain that.”

“To get you justice in this case,” Ashley said, “will require two parallel paths. First, we will force the District Attorney and the Chicago Police to arrest Captain Baggs and take his case to a grand jury. Based on the evidence you submitted, it looks like a slam dunk.

“Second, we will sue the Chicago Police for damages. Multi-million judgments are possible in a case like this. I suggest the two of you come to our law offices immediately to get things started.”

“Alex and Ryleigh,” Anne said, “you must keep this secret. There may be a mob connection going on here. Ryleigh, your courage and determination match our client, the Angel. You have our admiration and appreciation for your help. God bless both of you.”

As the screen went blank, Anne stared at Ezekiel, giving him a sly smile.

“Ready to toss some shit into the fan, Ezekiel?”

“Oh Yeah,” was his answer.

CHAPTER 25

The Perry Mason Moment

Slam Dunk

“John, are you in a secure location?”

“Yes, Anne. Superintendent Green used his influence to get us a small conference room to prepare for today’s bail hearing. Why do you ask?”

“Put me on speaker; I want all of you to hear this.”

“All set, Anne. Go ahead.”

“OK, that Police Captain, Tilson Baggs, sexually assaulted a thirteen-year-old girl three years ago. We have a video of the crime. This young girl, now sixteen, and her mother are in our law offices as we speak. Ashley is taking a legal deposition.”

John Merrick glanced at Veronica, who mouthed, under her breath, “Oh shit!”

“Millie, power up your laptop computer. I’m going to send you an image and a video file. The photograph, taken in Ashley’s office, is of Alex Rome and her daughter Ryleigh. Captain Baggs forced Ryleigh Rome to perform a hand job in an industrial area near her home. He threatened to kill her family if she ever mentioned it to anyone.

Unfortunately for Captain Baggs, Ryleigh wore Meta Memory glasses with an imager and microphone. She hid this from her mother and father for three years.

When the networks broadcast Baggs’ picture as Angel’s arresting officer, Ryleigh decided to tell her mother what happened and fight back. I’ve accepted the Rome family as new clients and offered a reduction in our standard retainer fee.

Millie, have you received these two files?”

“Yes, Anne. I have them both.”

“Very well. John, the video is about ten minutes and is alarming to watch. You’ll know what to do with it. Veronica, I need you to be professional today, but it’s time to drop the Sword of Damocles on Captain Baggs.”

“We’re on it, Anne,” John answered. “We’ve got a meeting with the prosecutors in 20 minutes. Keep me posted about anything new you uncover. Bye!”

Negotiations

John, Ronnie, and Millie filed into the expansive conference room in the George Leighton Criminal Court Building. The room, paneled with decorative walnut wainscoting, is in the older wing, with the walls dotted with various Illinois politicians' portraits.

Illinois Attorney General Della Baxter, an African American success story, was facing them across the table. In her early fifties, she remains eagle-beautiful with long, straightened dark brown hair and a stylish business suit with her trademark ornate choker necklace. Taking their seats, John Merrick spoke first.

“Attorney General Baxter, you traveled all the way from Springfield for this?”

“Yes, I did, John. Here in Illinois, we take vigilantism and cybercrime very seriously. I’m here to ensure the fair application of justice. Your client is a hero to some, but she has a penchant for running roughshod over the law when it suits her.

I believe you know Cooke County State’s Attorney Mathilda Ling. Also with me today is US Attorney Joseph Tyler Wolvingham, representing the federal government in this matter. We want to settle this case right here, right now. Ms. Ling, give them our offer.”

Mathilda Ling looked directly at Ronnie and asked.

“Does your client have a name?”

“Yes, she has a name, but you advised her that she has the right to remain silent. She is exercising that right. For now, I suggest you refer to her as Angel.”

“Cute. To cut you a generous deal here, we expect some cooperation from this woman. Her refusal to identify herself is an obstruction of justice, which will add to the charges against her.”

“Publication of her real name would allow the mob to locate and eliminate her, Ms. Ling,” John Merrick said.

“Maybe she should have stayed out of the mob’s business and let the police handle the criminals instead.”

“What’s your offer, Mathilda?” Ronnie said.

“All right. Two years in a minimum-security prison followed by ten years’ probation. We would ban your client from using a computer during probation.”

“That’s a laughable non-starter, Ms. Ling,” John said. “Our client is here today on charges of, and I quote, ‘fighting, disturbing the peace, and disorderly conduct.’ These charges are ludicrous if you’ve seen the video of the attack on Pastor Montgomery and our client’s intervention to rescue him. No Grand Jury in Chicago would enter a charge for this. We reject your offer out of hand. Anything else before we leave?”

“Wait a damn minute, counselor,” Baxter said. “Your client admitted to Commander DiMarco that she tampered with city surveillance cameras and broke into a building during last month’s sniper incident.”

“So what, Della,” John said. “Our client saved Commander DiMarco’s life. Good luck finding a jury that wouldn’t give her a get-out-of-jail-free pass on that one. In any case, that’s not what you charged her with today, is it?”

Frustrated, Attorney General Baxter turned to the US Attorney.

“Joe, do you have anything to add?”

Looking directly at Veronica Merrick Fieldstone, he said.

“I have a warrant from the Chicago FBI to bring your client in today as a person of interest. We’d like to talk to her.”

“The more you parade her around, the more likely you’ll get her killed.”

“Noted, Ms. Fieldstone. The FBI will get her safely to headquarters, no matter what happens in the next thirty minutes.”

Angel was alone in the holding room. Mac and Ryan were in the hallway, ensuring no one could approach without their approval. Ryan DiMarco spotted his wife, Shelly, walking toward them. She had a purse and a paper bag. Mac and Ryan strode up to greet her.

“Hi, Shelly. What brings you here?”

“I brought a sandwich for Angel. Is that OK with you, honey?”

“Sure, let the policewoman verify that you’re not carrying any weapons and leave all your electronics on the table.”

Angel stood up, looking surprised as Shelly DiMarco entered the holding room. Shelly rushed to her, giving her a tight embrace.

“I know you don’t have your phone, you know, to run your text-to-speech app. I brought you a sandwich. It’s Ryan’s favorite, bacon on a bagel with Dijon mustard. You’re not a vegetarian, are you?”

Angel shook her head, indicating ‘no.’ Shelly handed her the bag, and Angel sat down and started to consume the sandwich, looking up once to smile. Shelly opened the door and motioned for her husband.

“Ryan, can you fetch my small hairbrush, elastic band, and a couple of packages of makeup remover pads from my purse? I’d like to make her presentable.”

Shelly began smoothing Angel’s hair, brushing it back on top, and securing it with the elastic band behind her head. She combed the sides down to her shoulder blades. Hair-wise, Angel looked like a movie star. Cleaning her face, Shelly dabbed away dried blood at the corner of her mouth and nostril, but she couldn’t hide the bruise on her cheek.

At that moment, Superintendent Green and the SWAT team appeared at the door. Both Green and Nivani Subramanian entered the room.

“Young lady, we’re moving you to a room outside the Bail Bond Courtroom. We need your cooperation again,” Green said.

Nivani brought out his handcuffs and said to her, “You know the drill.”

Shelly watched them leave, four SWAT police on each side of Angel, Nivani leading the group, with her husband and Mac following.

Bail Bond Court

Natalie Rumsfort squirmed into her mahogany bench seat in the Bail Bond Court Room. She used her influence to gain admission. As she looked at the newly remodeled courtroom, she noticed space for about thirty-five spectators in the viewing area. Today, there were probably fifty crammed in. A mahogany half-wall with a swinging door separated the lawyers from the spectators. The judge's bench towered over the room, with a witness stand on the right side. She watched a court employee draw and close the Venetian blinds on the windows, assuming it was for security reasons. The walls on either side of the judge contained large display panels since PowerPoint and videos are now essential to courtroom procedures.

As one might do at a rock concert, Natalie scanned the audience, wondering *Who’s here*. Most of the spectators were local representatives of national media companies. There wasn’t enough time to fly in the network personalities from New York and Washington. Yet, they all shared a common purpose: to see this Robin Hoodesque woman waging war on Chicago’s organized crime. The scene was noisy and raucous as the crowd shared rumors and unfounded speculations.

A procession of courtroom employees took their places, such as the stenographer on the Judge’s right. Natalie’s pulse rate accelerated when the prosecution arrived; she spotted Attorney General Baxter and Assistant State Attorney Mathilda Ling, plus one additional person she didn’t recognize. Next came John Merrick, Veronica Fieldstone, and a legal aid who took their places. There was constant murmuring from the crowd. Natalie recognized Chicago police officers in the group, including Mac Merrick and Superintendent Green.

Natalie also noticed a very attractive young woman with a blond pixie cut, dark blue business suit, and an FBI badge in the far corner. *Who is she*, Natalie thought.

The bailiff entered the room and intoned, “All Rise.”

Judge Joshua Hoffenberg made his way to the bench. One of Chicago’s oldest working judges, at 75 years old, Hoffenberg’s hair was white as milk.

“OK, let’s get started.”

“Your honor, Attorney General Della Baxter, and State’s Attorney Mathilda Ling for the prosecution. Today, we are here to decide bail for the person colloquially known only as the Chicago Angel.”

Baxter pointed to somebody at the back of the room, and shortly after that, two policemen escorted the handcuffed Angel into the courtroom. As she passed the spectator area, people started murmuring about how tall she was.

“Jesus, she’s beautiful,” whispered one of the reporters as the Angel passed by.

Once Angel sat next to the Merricks, the Judge spoke up. “Remove her handcuffs.”

“We don’t think that’s a good idea, your Honor,” Ling said.

“I said remove her handcuffs.”

One of the police officers who brought her in unsnapped her cuffs. Judge Hoffenberg peered at the Merricks.

“Defense?”

“Your Honor, John Merrick and Veronica Merrick Fieldstone for the defense.”

“Counselor, does your client have a name?”

“She does, Your Honor, but our client is exercising her right to remain silent.”

“All right, how do you suggest we address her?”

“We suggest using the name Angel for the moment, Judge.”

“Jesus,” said Mathilda Ling, shrugging and shaking her head in disgust. Della Baxter spoke for the prosecution.

“Your Honor, the State is requesting denial of bail for this suspect. There are extenuating circumstances.”

“For fighting, disturbing the peace, and disorderly conduct?”

“Your Honor, the State asserts that the suspect is a lawless vigilante whose activities threaten law and order in the State of Illinois.”

“All right, get on with it.”

“The State calls to the stand Captain Tilson Baggs of the Chicago Police Department.”

Murmuring continued as Baggs made his way to the witness cubicle. Mathilda Ling spoke for the State after the bailiff swore in Captain Baggs.

“Captain Baggs, how long have you been a member of the Chicago Police Department?”

“For 23 years, Ma’am.”

“You arrested the suspect this morning. Please describe what transpired at approximately 8:45 am just west of the intersection of West 63rd Street and Aberdeen?”

“I parked just past Aberdeen on the south side of the street, having a smoke. Three men jumped out of a van and started beating a pedestrian. I watched a white woman, the suspect, sprint across the street and join the street fight so I decided to intervene.

“I clipped the jaw of one strand of my handcuffs to myself and ran towards the fighting. Encountering the suspect first, I handcuffed myself to her left wrist. She resisted arrest, so I had to pop her in the face to establish dominance.

“The other three assailants got away, and I faced a mob of angry people accusing me of things. I discharged my revolver into the air to back the crowd away. Other Police units arrived, and we quickly transported the suspect to Precinct 7 Headquarters.”

“Counselor, would you like to question the officer?” Judge Hoffenberg said.

“Indeed, we do, your Honor.”

Merrick moved out of his chair and approached Captain Baggs.

“Good afternoon, Captain Baggs. With Commander James Lyle in Louisiana dealing with his late mother’s estate, that makes you, as second-in-command, in charge of the Precinct, does it not?”

“Yes, sir.”

“OK, the Precinct Commander usually starts work at 8 a.m. You were forty-five minutes late for work this morning, weren’t you?”

“So what?”

“Late for work, located precisely where an attack occurs, rushing to arrest the woman who news reports say has been a thorn in the side of organized crime. These details contain all the elements of a set-up, does it not?”

“Objection, Your Honor. Completely speculative and without foundation,” Mathilda Ling said.

“Your Honor, Sentinel reporter Natalie Rumsfort released this video of the entire incident, taken by a woman in a third-floor apartment. I’ll show it to the court now.”

The video, taken by Makayla Washington, clearly showed Angel acting as a Good Samaritan, first taking down the assailant with the billy club and then getting the person beating Pastor Montgomery away from him. Captain Baggs handcuffs the Angel while letting the thugs escape. At no point, John observed, did the Angel appear to be resisting arrest.

“Your Honor, this is a bail hearing,” Ling said. “This suspect has tampered with city surveillance cameras, invaded our computer systems, and penetrated the accounts of the Northern Trust Bank on Lasalle Street. The State wants bail revoked for this suspect.”

“You don’t have a scintilla of evidence for any of that, Ms. Ling.” John said.

“All right let’s cease the sniping, folks,” Judge Hoffenberg said. “Mr. Merrick, do you have any more questions for the witness?”

“Yes, your Honor. Mrs. Fieldstone has some questions for Officer Baggs.”

Veronica got out of her seat, carrying Millie’s Apple tablet computer. She approached Baggs, her eyes squinting like a gunslinger from a spaghetti western.

“I checked your police record, Captain Baggs. It’s basically clean. Congratulations on twenty-three years of success hiding that you are a corrupt and evil policeman?”

“How dare you say that Counselor.”

“Oh, I’m going to prove it right here, right now, sir. Three years ago, on June 2nd, 2057, in an isolated industrial area north of the Loop, you committed forcible and non-consensual sexual assault of a thirteen-year-old girl.”

“Objection, your Honor,” Ling said. “Ms. Fieldstone is staging an inflammatory and prejudicial publicity stunt solely to soil the honorable witness's reputation. She should be ruled out of order.”

Ronnie wheeled around to face the Judge.

“Your Honor, I have proof of this charge, a video of said incident. Since the victim was thirteen at the time of the crime, state law requires special handling. A confer in your chambers about this is appropriate.”

Judge Hoffenberg stood up, his face reflecting frustration at the turn of events.

“Prosecutors, defense attorneys, head to my chambers. You too, Superintendent Green. Place police officers on either side of the suspect for her protection. Captain Baggs, remain in your seat until we return.”

The courtroom was abuzz with conversation as the lawyers left for the Judge’s chambers. Captain Baggs, however, looked worried, and his eyes started blinking incessantly.

The Judge’s Chamber

“All right, Ronnie. If you’ve got something, now is the time to show it,” Judge Hoffenberg said.

Opening Millie’s tablet computer, Ronnie displayed Alex Rome's image and her sixteen-year-old daughter Ryleigh, taken in their offices just an hour ago.

“These people, Judge, are now in our offices, taking depositions and providing evidence. Ryleigh informed her mother of the assault only this morning after recognizing Captain Baggs in the Sentinel video. At the time of the crime, she was wearing Meta Memory glasses.”

“Forgive me, Ronnie; I’m an old man. What are memory glasses?”

“They’re popular with the kids, Your Honor. They’re spectacles with a high-resolution imager and a microphone, able to run all day. You pop them on a charger pad at night. The kids read them out with high-speed Bluetooth. The minor victim, Ryleigh, wore these as Captain Baggs abused her. The mother, a web designer, provided a video showing the crime's entirety. It’s about ten minutes long. I’ll warn you; this is very disturbing to watch.”

Ronnie started the video. It was vile and disgusting, as she promised, especially how Captain Baggs manipulated the child. You could hear Superintendent Green mutter at one point, “Oh my God.”

When the video ended, the prosecutors were stone silent. Judge Hoffenberg broke the ice.

“Prosecutors, any reaction to this?”

“I’m speechless,” Attorney General Baxter said.

“You should be,” Ronnie said.

US Attorney Joseph Tyler Wolvingham spoke up.

“Ms. Fieldstone, what exactly do you want?”

“We want the charges against our client dropped right now, today. She walks.”

“Wait a minute,” Attorney General Baxter said, “your client is a threat to this community. She can’t just walk out of here.”

“No, Della. The threat to our community is sitting in that witness chair,” John Merrick said. “Madame Attorney General, I know you, and I respect you. But it is time to play hardball. Everybody knows that you plan to run for Governor next year. If you refuse to release our client, my daughter and I will schedule viewings of this sexual assault tape in our offices with selected press members, with the Rome family in attendance, to answer questions. The media will hound you about this every day of your campaign. Your campaign will sink like the Titanic.”

Della Baxter stared at Mathilda Ling for several uncomfortable seconds. Finally, Baxter muttered, almost imperceptibly.

“Checkmate.”

The Illinois Attorney General faced John Merrick.

“All right, we’ll drop the charges against your client forthwith.”

Ronnie turned to Superintendent Green, who looked discouraged.

“Javion, our law firm will sue the city over this: the abuse of our client in police custody and the rape of our other client by a member of the Police force.”

“As you should, Ronnie. I don’t know what to say. I’m flabbergasted. Will you let us use your evidence to prosecute Captain Baggs?”

“Of course,” Ronnie said.

“Not so fast, everybody,” US Attorney Wolvingham said. “On behalf of the United States Government, specifically the FBI, I have a warrant for the individual you refer to as the Chicago Angel as a material witness. In other words, they’d like to talk to her.

Before the group gets bent out of shape, the FBI would like the prosecution, the defense, and Superintendent Green to attend the Chicago FBI Headquarters interview. They also requested Officers DiMarco and Merrick's attendance. Here’s the warrant they have prepared.”

Wolvingham handed John Merrick the warrant document; he and his daughter quickly scanned it and nodded their approval.

“OK, everybody. Let’s get back to court. We have some business to conclude,” Judge Hoffenberg said.

Reversal of Fortune

The conversation in the courtroom spectator section was loud and raucous during the intermission. Still, as the participants filed back in, the room quieted down, and everybody was anxious to see what would happen. Superintendent Green stood behind the swinging door as Judge Hoffenberg gaveled the court into session.

“Superintendent Green?” Hoffenberg said.

“Your honor, I ask the court’s indulgence for a minute.”

“Proceed, Superintendent,”

Green and two officers approached the witness seat. Captain Baggs looked unnerved and worried, his eyes wide open.

“Captain Baggs, I am arresting you for the sexual assault of a child by force, abuse of a child - aggravated by the age difference, and indecent assault and battery on a person under 14 years old. Listen to me carefully.”

Green recited the Miranda rights to Captain Baggs.

“Do you understand these rights as I have delineated them to you?”

Astounded by this turn of events, Baggs could only whisper, “Yes.”

“Please surrender your weapon and badge, Captain Baggs.”

Baggs unholstered his gun, unhooked his badge, and gave them to Green.

“Step to the floor, Captain.”

The two officers with Superintendent Green snapped on handcuffs and leg restraints. Baggs started crying.

Two more officers entered the courtroom. Green instructed them to transport Baggs to the Cooke County Jail immediately. The spectator section was silent as they frog-walked the weeping Baggs out of the room. Angel was stone-faced and contemptuous of Baggs as he went by her. Green took his seat in the spectator section. Judge Hoffenberg banged his gavel.

“Attorney General Baxter, does the State wish to say something?”

“Yes, your Honor. The State is dismissing all charges against the suspect known as the Chicago Angel.”

The courtroom erupted into cheers. All media present furiously typed messages into their smartphones, announcing the result.

“Your Honor,” Baxter said, “the FBI is executing an arrest warrant for the defendant as a material witness; they wish to interview her immediately. The State’s business here is concluded.”

“Very well, the Court is in recess for ten minutes.”

As most media filed out, anxious to file their reports, about a half dozen FBI agents entered the courtroom. The Agents wore bulletproof vests and helmets and carried M6 semi-automatic rifles. One agent, dressed in a traditional FBI blue jacket, seemed to be the leader. He pulled up an empty chair next to Angel.

“Good afternoon, Ma’am. I’m Assistant Special Agent in Charge, David Hanko. We want to talk to you at FBI Headquarters. We’re not planning to charge you with any crime; we just want to talk to you. Don’t be alarmed by all these men with big guns. They are here to protect you.

Your lawyers, the prosecutors, Superintendent Green, Officers DiMarco, and Merrick will also attend. At the meeting, you will be talking with officials of the FBI Cybercrimes Division and the Central Intelligence Agency in Washington.

Let me remind you that it is a federal felony to lie to an FBI agent. Since this is the execution of a warrant to bring in a material witness, you will have to travel handcuffed. Commander DiMarco will attach the handcuffs, and we’ll be on our way.”

“Stand up, Angel. Hands behind your back,” DiMarco said. The handcuffs' click prompted Ronnie to step in front of Angel and give her one last bit of advice.

“Don’t react to the spectators and media out there. Look straight ahead. My brother will be with you all the way. You’ll be safe.” Ronnie hugged her quickly, and the entourage was on its way.

CHAPTER 26

The FBI

Conference

Special Agent Hanko and Commander Ryan DiMarco led Angel into the expansive conference room at Chicago’s FBI Headquarters. In the amphitheater seating were about thirty onlookers, mostly FBI employees. Special Agent in Charge D’Marcus Mason swept the meeting room for any hidden microphones or security cameras. At the bottom was a large meeting table filled with notables from the Illinois prosecutorial ranks and attendees from the Federal prosecutor's office. Superintendent Javion Green represented the Chicago Police, with Ryan and Mac by his side.

Special Agent Carolina Hendon, the FBI Computer Investigative Specialist, sat at the end of the table. Impeccably dressed in a form-fitting dark blue business suit with a white blouse, only the clip-on name tag indicated her FBI affiliation. Her subtle makeup and perfectly coiffed pixie-cut blond hair testified to her understanding that leadership at multiple agencies would be observing her work this day.

One giant wall-mounted display screen showed people from the FBI Cyber Crime Division in the new Meuller FBI Building in downtown Washington, DC. A group of CIA employees at the Langley, Virginia headquarters appeared on the other screen.

Hanko ushered Angel into a seat next to John Merrick. In charge of the meeting, Carolina smiled as she faced the woman known as the Chicago Angel.

“Commander DiMarco, please remove her handcuffs.”

Ryan quickly removed Angel’s cuffs and placed them in his pocket.

“My name is Doctor Carolina Hendon. I’m an FBI Special Agent and Computer Investigative Specialist. May I address you as Angel?”

David Hanko placed a tablet computer running a text-to-voice app in front of Angel. She quickly responded.

“Yes.”

“All right, Angel. The document David is placing before you, prepared in cooperation with your legal team, is an immunity agreement. It stipulates that you will reveal how you have managed to penetrate our computer systems. You will instruct us on protecting ourselves and tell us what you know about the Albanian mob’s activities. If satisfied with your assistance, we will grant you State and Federal immunity for all your actions. This immunity does not apply to murder, of course. Have you murdered anyone, Angel?”

“No, Ms. Hendon. I have never murdered anyone, nor will I in the future.

One other thing, Agent Hendon, I will not identify anyone in Chinatown who helped me obtain illegal goods and services, such as the person who acquired Department of Homeland Security DemonFyre pepper spray. I am not a snitch.”

“Angel, we are solely interested in your expertise regarding computer security and the involvement of the Albanian mob. Mister Merrick, we’ll give you a moment to advise your client.”

“Angel,” John said, “this is the best possible outcome. If you help them, you can walk out of here free and clear. Ronnie feels the same way; we recommend that you accept this deal. Give them what they want.”

“Angel,” Carolina said, “Consider the national security aspect of all this. You’ve alerted us to the prospect that organized crime may be penetrating our government, industrial, and financial computer infrastructures. Teach us how to secure our systems. We can run with that and help you bring down these criminals.”

Angel glanced at Mac. He gave her a “Hell yes, do it” nod of his head.

“All right, I will agree to this.”

John Merrick signed the document, followed by Special Agent in Charge Mason for the federal government and Attorney General Baxter for Illinois. Staffers quickly prepared copies and passed them around.

Angel walked towards Carolina Hendon, taking the empty chair beside her.

“Are you familiar with this version of Linux?”

Angel quickly started a text-to-speech app on the workstation.

“Yes, very familiar. I will start a virtual machine application you can mirror to your associates in Washington and Langley.”

Carolina, whose resting face is always a slight smile, watched in fascination at how fast Angel worked.

“Very well,” Carolina said, “We now have mirror copies of this virtual machine at our FBI Headquarters and CIA Headquarters. Now, I’ll lock them together so we can all interact with the virtual system.”

“May I ask who is running the application at those locations?”

In his late twenties, an African American male wearing round spectacles appeared on one wall display.

“Angel, this is Bodell at FBI Washington. I have about twenty specialists with me today for this.”

A young woman in her late twenties spoke up on the other wall display.

“Angel, this is Natasha at CIA Langley. I have about a dozen staff with me watching this.”

A voice from Natasha’s group shouted. “Tell her!”

“Oh, they want you to know that there are already three marriage offers on the table,” Natasha said, followed by a quick giggle. Angel smiled widely, her perfect white teeth disarming everyone in the room.

“Nerds,” Carolina observed. “Let’s keep this professional, boys. Anyway, I believe Angel likes a Chicago policeman.”

Someone in the CIA group rejoindered.

“Can we have him eliminated?”

Everybody broke out into laughter, even in the Chicago FBI conference room. A bit of levity served a purpose: to put everybody at ease. Continuing to work, Angel’s fingers drummed at lightning speed.

“I’ve just brought in and decrypted an extensive file system from the Amazon cloud.

This set of folders comprises all my work on cyber penetration of organized crime computer systems and government systems. It has code and documentation on everything I’ve done.

The event of my death, triggered by my absence of a weekly confirmation message, would have transmitted this data to the FBI in Washington.”

“Teams in Washington and Langley. Confirm that you have this database,” Carolina said. Both teams affirmed that they had a copy.

At that moment, a male face popped up on all the screens. It was Reynard Landsberg, the United States Attorney General.

“Sorry to interrupt, but I’m monitoring this meeting as I work today. Agent Hendon, I want this information classified. See to it.”

Just like that, his pop-up window minimized.

“Participants, label Angel’s database as classified immediately.

Angel, please continue.”

“About three years ago, while visiting a large Chicago software development house, Chicago Cyber Engineering in Hines, I realized that this company had organized crime elements within its staff, specifically members of the reconstituted Albanian mob. That’s when I started my campaign to investigate them and interfere with some of their activities.

This individual, Doctor Lewis Morton, whose photograph I am displaying, is the CEO of this company and a nationally recognized cybersecurity expert.

The image now on your screens is Imer Bisha, co-owner, and son of a jailed mobster.

They run on paper, a legitimate business, doing software development for many Fortune 500 corporations.

CCE utilizes a Samsung Pulsar All-Flash Storage System supercomputer connected to the Internet using an AT&T Communications fiber-optic service.

I have penetrated this supercomputer using an exploit that I will describe shortly.

I was surprised to discover that CCE’s security department was using city surveillance cameras to assist in running criminal operations, such as organizing drug distribution, targeting protection rackets, sex trafficking, and murdering policemen.”

*“*Angel, let me interrupt,” Carolina said. “We rigorously check the FBI and CIA computer systems daily for viruses and malware infections. As of this morning, our systems are safe.”

“I’m about to prove you wrong.

This folder is a copy of Doctor Morton’s exploit with the code he developed. Note that it’s a modern variant of the Spectre and Meltdown attacks first seen thirty-five years ago.

Basically, he’s triggering a rare anomaly in the core’s branch predictor circuits. My measurements are that it takes no longer than seventeen seconds to trigger this anomaly in a busy computer core. Using this path, Morton can insert a branch to his code in executive mode, and it’s game over. You’ve been had.”

“OK, you’re saying, Angel, that he’s in our systems, and we don’t realize it. Correct?” Carolina inquired.

“Yes. I’ve created a C++ class with all of Morton’s tools, plus a helpful graphic application I built to exercise his exploit. Here, Doctor Hendon, you can run the demonstration yourself.”

“Please call me Carolina today, Angel.”

Angel pointed to a list of target computer systems.

“Please pick the CIA mainframe in Langley.

Natasha, please have one of your staff email you a five-digit code.”

“Allison, send me an email from your phone with a five-digit number,” Natasha said.

Angel directed Carolina to her graphic application's “Monitor Emails” part. She pointed Carolina to the specific email Allison had just sent. Opening the email, a dumbfounded Carolina announced the result.

“Allison, your five-digit code is 52916. Is that correct?”

“Jesus,” Allison said, “That’s what I typed. Oh, my God.”

“Natasha, please select a top-secret file in your most secure directory. Pick a file that, while top-secret, is innocuous enough that its contents, revealed in this meeting, will not endanger national security. Message Carolina just the file name.”

The screen at CIA headquarters showed much discussion, with several people crowded around their workstations. Eventually, they messaged Carolina a single file name without identifying the folder where it resides.

Angel pointed to the file search part of her app, and she and Carolina found and retrieved the file within seconds.

“OK, this is a file detailing the public phone numbers of the three hundred US embassies worldwide. I’ll scroll through a few pages,” Carolina said.

“I’m curious, Angel. Were you ever evaluated for IQ?”

“Not before I turned eighteen. I did take the standard, timed Mensa IQ test online once.”

“What score did you get?”

“195. I don’t expect you to believe me.”

“I do believe you. That IQ is on a par with Alan Turing, Stephen Hawking, and Albert Einstein.”

Reynard Landsberg, the United States Attorney General popped up on both displays again.

“Miss Angel, experts have told us for years that artificial intelligence (AI) makes penetrating our computers impossible. How could we be so wrong?”

Attorney General Landsberg, please be patient with me and the time it takes to answer your question. It’s just the way I am.

These so-called AI systems operate by scraping the Internet worldwide for every scrap of knowledge. This vast amount of information trains supercomputer clusters, which then categorize the data and determine what information is useful versus what is fallacious. However, humans develop both the information and the software at every step, and humans are prone to errors. Beating these supposedly impenetrable computers simply involves finding and exploiting these human mistakes.

In my case, I discovered a hidden instruction set in both the ARM-designed computers and the RISC-5 chips. This dormant hidden instruction set allows me to do things with the memory management circuitry that you cannot detect.

As far as the term Artificial Intelligence goes, we still don’t know how our brain’s neurons work. There are 100 billion neurons with 2 quadrillion synapses interconnecting them. Our AI chips try to duplicate this architecture by creating massively parallel cores with fast interconnection speeds to perform matrix multiplications and so forth. But today, we’re nowhere near duplicating the human brain, if ever.

In conclusion, Mister Landsberg, in this world of Artificial Intelligence, made by humans, using information supplied by humans, I can defeat these systems by finding their mistakes and omissions and exploiting them. In other words, sir, I can beat any of ‘your’ systems.

“Thank you, Miss Angel. I will have some of my staff explain your answer to me later, but I get the general gist of it. Do go on.”

“Thank you for that fascinating discourse, Angel,” Carolina said. “May I ask why Doctor Lewis Morton is unable to detect and delete your exploit?”

Arrogance, I assume, Carolina. He assumed that no one was ahead of him in matters of computer security. I do believe my little stunt with the Sentinel reporter moving cash from his bank account to the Police Benevolent Fund unnerved him quite a bit.

Another pop-up window appeared on the FBI display, Bartholomew Radzinger, the Director of the FBI.

“Miss Angel, I am Bart Radzinger, the FBI Director. Are you contending that Dr. Morton and Imer Bisha have also compromised our FBI computer systems?”

“Yes, sir. Carolina and I can demonstrate that right now if you wish.”

“No, that won’t be necessary. My question is, will you help us remove it today?” Radzinger said.

“I’ll do that right now, Director Radzinger.”

Angel spent the next twenty minutes teaching the FBI and CIA Headquarters staff how to detect and remove the Morton exploit. She provided a running thread to discover Morton’s attempts to re-engage and thus reject the attempt.

“Angel, the exploits you designed, are you still using them?”

“Yes, but currently, I am concentrating on Doctor Morton’s supercomputer.”

“But you have entered our systems, right?”

“Yes, Carolina. Only to find out things. Once I got what I needed, I erased all evidence of my intrusion.”

“Please describe the techniques you have deployed, Angel.”

“All right. I used this exploit to steal about twenty-five million dollars of drug money from them.”

Carolina’s face showed surprise.

“Twenty-five million? Tell us about that.”

“The mob bosses like cold, hard cash. Occasionally, Morton converts their illicit profits into paper currency and sends it via RoboTaxi to New York City.

I found out about two of these transfers and intercepted them. Two years ago, I stole five million from their RoboTaxi while the mob delivery boy got sloshed in some dive bar.

The twenty million I intercepted by reprogramming their Tesla to come to me first so I could spike their water bottles and booze with Rohypnol.”

“Wait a minute, Angel. You are claiming that you can reprogram a Tesla self-driving vehicle. They have the most sophisticated computer security on the planet,” Carolina said.

“True, but the Chicago Tesla dealership uses interconnected supercomputers. One of those desktop units is their maintenance manager’s computer, which is always powered on. By breaking into it, I discovered he had a maintenance app allowing him to send commands to any Tesla vehicle on the road. I can surreptitiously command any Tesla vehicle, reroute the vehicle’s destination, view the exterior cameras, etc.”

self-driving

Carolina, with her index finger rubbing her lower lip, wanted to know more.

“May I ask what became of the money?”

“I held the five million for one year, investing in the stock market. Once I had built up a nest egg (currently $1.3 million), I sent the five million plus interest to the IRS via a RoboTaxi.

I sent the twenty million directly to the IRS. I’m sure my theft of their drug loot caused the Albanian mob some discomfort.”

Carolina motioned for an FBI employee to come to the table. She jotted down the amounts and asked him to check with the IRS immediately.

“Tell us more about your current exploit?” Carolina said.

“This one, you may find shocking.”

“Try me.”

“I’ve modified the Open Software Foundation’s C++ and Rust compilers.”

*“*You’re kidding, right?*”*

“No, I’m not. As you well know, Dennis Ritchie of Bell Labs invented the C language in 1972. Ritchie published a little-known paper suggesting that an exploit built into the compiler would be challenging to detect and virtually foolproof.

The follow-on to the C language was the C++ object-oriented language, developed by Bjarne Stroustrup in 1985. Improved versions of it are still in use today.

Almost all ARM and RISC-V computer applications use the compiler and linker tools supplied by the Open Software Foundation. Software engineers prefer these open-source toolchains because they are free and nearly as efficient as ones from vendors like Intel, IBM, and others.

I broke into the Open Software Foundation’s tool repository and reprogrammed the C++ and Rust compilers to insert my exploit into every application built with these languages. In short, I can penetrate just about every ARM and RISC-V computer in the Western World.”

“This is amazing. How do you trigger your exploit, Angel?” Carolina said.

“I trigger an Open Software Foundation patch to the targeted computer, ostensibly to fix a known bug. The patch system will recompile a software module and stealthily install my modifications during the rebuild.”

Angel presented her folder containing the C++ patch exploit. Carolina verified that all teams had the same set of tools on their systems. All sides confirmed that virus scans were negative, and their Linux operating systems were at factory defaults.

“Using my handy app, Carolina is now contacting the Open Software Foundation computer and triggering an auto-patch of the FBI computer system in Washington.”

“OK,” Bodell said, “we’ve got an Open Software Foundation patch starting. Looks pretty innocuous; we get these all the time. Now it’s compiling and linking. Whoops, it finished. I’ll run a quick virus scan now. OK, Carolina, we show no virus here.”

“Carolina,” Angel said, “let’s steal one of their files.”

In minutes, Angel and Carolina pirated a secret document from the FBI computer and monitored classified email correspondence.

“Angel, how many computers have you broken into using this technique?”

“In truth, very few. I’m currently on Doctor Morton’s and your FBI and CIA computers in Washington. I have used this technique to examine the Chicago Police systems, index some city surveillance cameras, and find out information about Officer Merrick, whom the mob was planning to assassinate. I’m also in the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) computer, principally to hide my heavy Internet use and have my packet usage billed to them. My review of all the available literature on computer security indicates that my solution is unique, and no one else has attempted anything like this.”

“Special Agent Hendon, if I may interrupt,” Superintendent Javion Green said. “Since you just demonstrated that a possibly mob-related company in Chicago has infiltrated government computers, perhaps with criminal or traitorous intent, shouldn’t we immediately get a search warrant and tear that Chicago Cyber Engineering place apart?”

“Angel, I’d like to hear your answer to Superintendent Green’s question,” Carolina said.

“Superintendent Green, I ask your patience as I prepare my reply. I will try to keep my response as non-technical as possible.

Chicago Cyber Engineering is a seven-story office building. My observations of their activities tell me that the upper three floors use a different supercomputer. The mainframe I have penetrated shows no execution threads from those employees during most of the day. The best way to describe it is that somebody throws a switch, and ‘poof,’ they’re gone.

I believe this other supercomputer is either buried at their location or off-site.

Doctor Lewis Morton has designed his operation to be impervious to raids or legal searches. Morton has devised all the chat lines to self-multi-erase. He can instantly switch all those employees working on God-knows-what to legitimate software projects.

You will find nothing if you go in there with a search warrant. Your discovering jack-squat will enable Morton’s legal staff to make getting another search warrant approved impossible. Checkmate, so to say.”

Superintendent Green looked at US Attorney Wolvingham.

“Joe, is she right about this?”

“Yes, Javion, Angel’s correct about Morton and his mob buddies. She just proved that this fellow is two steps ahead of us. We’ll need more before we can move on this guy.”

Once again, Attorney General Reynard Landsberg’s face appeared on the conference screen.

“Special Agent Hendon, understanding that the other directors and I listening to this have no idea what this lady is talking about, can you please explain the national security aspects of what we just heard?”

“Sir, the Angel here has conclusively proven that an organized crime enterprise has penetrated the government and industries’ most secure AI-protected computer systems and may have stolen national security secrets for barter or trade with our enemies. These mobsters are also looting some of the country’s Fortune 500 corporations on a grand scale.

“Second, she has demonstrated a sophisticated cyber penetration technique, allowing her to get surreptitious control of seventy percent of the world’s computers. The difference, I believe, is that while her methods are patently illegal, her intentions are honorable. She can be a national asset if we play this right.”

“But we don’t really know anything about her, do we?”

“Agreed, sir.”

Special Agent Hendon turned her chair to face Angel.

“Angel, look at me, straight at me. Answer me honestly. Who are you, and why are you doing all this?”

CHAPTER 27

The Reveal

Angel’s Story

Angel gulped and stared at the floor for several uncomfortable seconds. Turning to the workstation keyboard, Angel typed quickly and deliberately. This time, she hit the ‘voice’ button at the end of each sentence. The perceptive viewers in the audience noticed that Angel’s eyes had watered a bit.

“My name is Jane Doe 413. I was born on December 22, 2037, in a squalid drug den to meth addicted parents, who abandoned me on Grant Park’s waterfront the next day.

Taken to a hospital, I needed a tracheotomy, but the pediatric resident was drunk. The delay getting a pediatric surgeon to come in caused brain damage resulting in my inability to speak, to make any sound at all.

Child Protective Services (CPS) placed me in eight different foster homes until I was six years old. I have no memory of those years. CPS sent me to the Alden School for the Deaf in Rockford, in hopes that they could teach me sign language. There, I excelled in reading, writing, and math. State funding cuts two years later forced me out of that school.

In an enormous mistake by CPS, they transferred me to the State Institution for Intellectually Disabled Children outside of St. Charles, Illinois. This facility, formally a Christian college, housed children unable to dress themselves, do the simplest puzzles, use the bathroom. Their parents had given up on them.

Fortunately, a kind teacher, Ms. Adams, realized that I was brilliant. I spent my days reading in the abandoned library. Ms. Adams bought me a refurbished laptop computer from eBay, and I began my education in computers and artificial intelligence.

When I was twelve years old, an institution employee raped me. I didn’t understand what he was doing to me, but Ms. Adams identified the rapist, and the Institution fired him. When I didn’t get pregnant or developed any STDs, they told me to forget about it.

When I turned 18, the Institution dumped me, sending me to Chicago by bus with $200 and a duffle bag of clothing. They directed me to go to the Ship of Hope Halfway House for Runaway Teenagers and Battered Women, who would house me and look for a suitable job.

Not wanting to go to another Institution, I applied for a night shift dishwashing job at Bob's 24-hour Diner on South Canal Street. Bob was extremely kind to me, finding me accommodation with his aunt, helping me get an Illinois ID card and a bank account. Eventually, I saved enough money to rent a two-bedroom apartment in Chinatown and purchase a Dell Galaxy Plus supercomputer system.

When I turned nineteen, I noticed two men with greasy black hair staring at me lasciviously at 5:30 a.m. in the diner. One was making a phone call.

It was still dark and cold outside when I left the restaurant at 6 a.m. I sensed someone behind me as I waited for my RoboTaxi to arrive. It was one of the men who watched me in the diner. A van pulled up, and this man and others overpowered me, handcuffed, and hooded me, and drove for an hour to what I believe was a warehouse somewhere. They kept me chained all day to a drainage pipe. I knew what was coming.

At six p.m., they took me into a room where eleven men were disrobing. There was a twelfth man who was videorecording everything.

While monitoring Doctor Morton’s computer, I intercepted a request for this rape video by some mob type in Los Angeles. I was able to snag a copy*.*

The Video

Angel stopped for a moment, her hands trembling. Tears were streaming down her cheeks as she glanced at Officer Merrick*.* She started the video*.*

The audience stared dumbfounded at the video, shot with intense movie lighting and a high-resolution motion-stabilized camera. Imer Bisha approached Jane with a folding knife and threatened to gut her from groin to sternum if she resisted. Jane shook her head, saying, ‘No,’ and stepped backward, so Bisha struck Jane on the side of her face. After Jane collapsed to the floor, Bisha and Kartallozi lifted her back to her feet and started removing her clothing.

Carolina quickly reached for Jane’s playback controls and hit the pause button. The room went silent. Someone whispered, “Oh, my God.”

“No, No, No,” said Ronnie, slapping the table.

“Jane, fast-forward that video to the part when they mutilated you. Show them what those mob bastards did to you!”

“Mutilated her?” Carolina said.

Jane fast-forwarded through the rest of the video, four hours long, to the end. She stopped at the point where the gang slammed her onto a small ottoman table.

The audience watched in horror as Imer Bisha unfolded a knife and cut an X over her heart, covering most of her left breast. It gushed blood. Bisha made several crosscuts on the wounds to give the scars a Frankenstein monster appearance. He threatened her life if she ever talked. Bisha left the room after giving instructions to dump her near the restaurant.

Jane stopped the video. Without warning or explanation, she quickly unsnapped her prisoner jumpsuit's four buttons and pulled it aside enough to expose most of her left breast. What followed was several uncomfortable seconds, the room so silent that you could hear people breathing. Jane stared at the floor, tears streaming down her cheeks, her breathing was short gasps, the camera showing everyone what they did to her.

Carolina Hendon reacted first. She rolled her chair over to Jane, adjusted the prison jumpsuit and quickly re-fastened the buttons. All her professional coolness, by-the-book training, and career ambition evaporated. A feminine bond now took priority over everything. She leaned in and embraced Jane, holding her tightly as the room remained silent.

United States Attorney General Landsberg appeared on everybody’s screens. His face looked somber, slightly ashen.

“Special Agent Hendon, let me take over for a few minutes while you care for Jane the Angel.

“FBI Director Radzinger and CIA Director Mccullough, regarding the rape video evidence we have just witnessed, I am instituting National Security Directive 1820, Section 5. You will assign rapid response teams immediately to locate and move all automatic backups of this evidence to the top-secret repository. I will be directing the FBI to assemble a special team to review the evidence in its entirety and identify the attackers via facial recognition and other techniques.”

“General Landsberg, this is Illinois State Attorney General Della Baxter speaking. You must understand that all Jane's evidence given to us today is unactionable. She gathered this evidence by illegal means. This situation is disconcerting to everybody, including me, but it is, unfortunately, the raw truth.”

“Understood, AG Baxter. But, someday, we may get lucky and legally bust one of these criminals who might have a copy of this rape video. Having a perp list available will enable a quick roundup of these criminals.”

While the US Attorney General spoke, Carolina was busy helping Jane recover from the trauma of reliving past violent memories. She brought fresh bottled water and a box of Kleenex, dabbed Jane’s eyes, and waited until Jane composed herself. Attorney General Landsberg turned his attention to Carolina and Jane.

“Special Agent Hendon. The FBI Director recommended you run this meeting. I’d like to hear your take on all this.”

Carolina, whose usual countenance is a smile, stared grimly at the camera. Her practiced self-control evaporated. She was a volcano about to erupt.

“You’re asking me, sir, for my take on all this? I will speak to you bluntly, General Landsberg, even if it means the end of my hopes for advancement in the FBI.”

“I am ashamed, sir.

“Ashamed to be part of a society that warehoused this child with special needs and did not suitably educate her.

“I am mortified that the State Institution for Intellectually Disabled Children covered up her sexual abuse without a scintilla of compassion for the emotional damage she suffered.

“I am outraged that a criminal organization could kidnap and rape this innocent woman with impunity, knowing full well that she would have nowhere to turn for help.

“And today, sir, I am revolted that these heartless mob bastards used our Chicago Police Department as an unwilling pawn in a plot to capture this woman and probably eliminate her.”

The room filled with undiscernible murmuring as the participants realized that Special Agent Hendon was casting blame on everybody for what had happened to Jane. All looked nervously at the giant display screen, wondering what the Attorney General's reaction might be.

“That kind of precise candor, Special Agent Hendon, is what I need, no, what we all need to hear today. The overriding issue, I guess, is where we go from here.

“Carolina, has she satisfied the parameters of the immunity deal we offered to her?”

“General Landsberg, we have cut forty million-dollar checks to cybersecurity consultants who haven’t yielded one-tenth the insight, information, and elegantly crafted computer code this woman has just provided. I’m guessing that the CIA cybersecurity operation feels the same as the FBI does concerning her cooperation.”

“We second that assessment, Carolina,” Natasha from the CIA interjected. “My nerds are jumping up and down, begging me to hire her immediately.”

Carolina turned to face John Merrick and Veronica Merrick Fieldstone.

“Mr. Merrick, Mrs. Fieldstone, we will draw up an addendum to our immunity agreement stating that Ms. Jane Doe 413 has satisfied her part of the arrangement and is free to go. You are free to drive her out of this building, and we will not prosecute her for anything she has disclosed today.

“However, I believe this would severely harm your client and the United States of America. May I elaborate?”

A Fresh Start

John Merrick sat more erect, stiffened his posture, and made poker-faced eye contact with Carolina. “We’re listening, Special Agent Hendon.”

“Today’s events have radically altered Jane’s status quo permanently. Her face is all over the local and national media, plus being mute is now part of her persona. By now, the Albanian mob has made the connection: the woman causing them profound financial damage is, in fact, a woman they gang-raped. These criminals will redouble their efforts to find and kill her.

I will initiate a crisis team in Washington to distribute Jane’s exploit removal software nationwide. Our nation’s foreign and domestic enemies will inevitably learn about the genius woman who exposed a secret mob invasion of government computers. Jane would be vulnerable to foreign spies who might want to kidnap her, spirit her out of the country, and torture her into cooperating.”

“Where are you going with this, Carolina?” John Merrick said.

“We have three members of the Merrick family in this room, all targeted for elimination by the mob, each saved by Jane Doe 413. John Merrick, do you have a guest room in that mansion you own in Highland Park?”

John Merrick relaxed a bit and slumped back into his chair. He took a glance at his daughter and smiled as he did it.

“Yes, we do, Carolina. May I ask for your indulgence for a couple of minutes?”

John Merrick rearranged chairs to let Mac, Ronnie, and Angel sit together. They set up a Super iPad and placed a FaceTime call to Anne and Ben back at the law office. The negotiations were quick.

“Anne, I’m sitting here with Ronnie, Mac, and Angel, whose real name is Jane Doe 413. We have executed an immunity agreement, and Jane is free to leave the FBI building. On behalf of the entire family, I would like to offer her permanent residence as a beloved family member at our home. Do you and Ben concur?”

“Yes, we do, John, with all our heart and soul. What a lovely name, Jane, but you will always be my Angel. Please come home with John and join our family. You can stay as long as you like. Please say yes, Jane!”

Jane, overcome with emotion, faced Mac, and started typing.

“Mac, am I not endangering your family by my presence?”

“Jane,” Mac said, “we’re already in danger. You’ll be joining forces with us. Together, we will beat these people, however long it takes. I’ll protect you. Please say yes. Please, Jane.”

Jane started crying, and some tears dripped onto her tablet. She typed her response and hit the voice button.

“I accept your offer, Mrs. Merrick. I will do all I can to bring honor to your home, love and protect every family member, and pull my weight as a contributing partner in the household.”

“Fabulous, Jane,” exclaimed Anne Merrick. “Welcome to the Merrick family. John, I’ll have our helicopter pilot fly Ben and me to Highland Park to prepare Jane’s bedroom. He’ll return to FBI Headquarters to bring everybody home. See you soon.”

Jane turned to face the Superintendent of Police.

“Superintendent Green, may I speak with you?”

“Of course, Angel. What do you want to say.”

“On the rape video you witnessed, the part where they were cutting my chest, the older man holding me down, on the right, with the five-o’clock shadow goatee, was Yilka Kartallozi. He is the one who killed Officer Williams. I found this out after returning home and seeing their subsequent messages to kill both officers. Also, he was the one I saw in the lobby of Chicago Cyber Engineering.

That you can’t use my information to arrest him is regrettable, but I thought you’d want to know.”

Green stood up, the muscles and veins of his face pulsing in anger.

“Jane, the Angel, know this. Someday, those criminals will make a mistake. When they do, I will rain Hell from above on that bastard Kartallozi for his crimes against you and my officers. As God as my witness, I promise you that!”

“All right, everybody,” Carolina Hendon said, “back to our seats. We have some negotiating to do.”

At this point, Reynard Landsberg, the United States Attorney General, appeared on the wall displays.

“Special Agent Hendon, you have some sort of plan already worked out?”

“I do have a plan, sir. How about you listen in and put the kibosh on any part of it you don’t like?”

“Proceed, Doctor Hendon.”

Carolina, her eyes sparkling with intensity, faced Jane. She was about to lay down the law.

“Jane the Angel, your Ninja vigilante days are over. I will offer you a job as a special consultant to the FBI. The salary will be $130,000 a year.

There will be concessions you will have to make. Do you currently have a job?”

“Yes, I work from home for Chicago Advanced Software Engineering at 454 West Division Street.”

“We will contact them to arrange the closeout of your work. Jane, how many apartments do you currently rent or own?”

“I have an apartment in Chinatown and a safe house. Natalie Rumsfort of the Sentinel occupies the safe house.”

“I’m assuming your safe house has a Dell Galaxy Plus supercomputer rig with your software installed?”

“Yes.”

“All right, we will have teams remove those computers this evening. We’ll work with the Merricks about where to store your technical equipment in their house.

Jane, you must turn over the $1.3 million you earned in the stock market to the government on Monday. In a roundabout way, it’s ill-gotten gains. My plan here is to make you legitimate, just like myself and everybody else in this room.”

“I will comply with that.”

“Then it’s all set. Attorney General Landesberg, are you satisfied with these arrangements?”

“Yes, Special Agent Hendon. Please provide Jane Doe 413 with appropriate FBI contractor credentials and an FBI satellite phone. On my end, we will get a secret wiretap order from the DC Federal Court, allowing us to surveil any of the computers at that mob programming shop.

Counselor Merrick, I will direct the US Marshalls to protect your property in Highland Park. I will also provide funding to pay your expenses with that private security firm you’ve been using.

Superintendent Green, we’ve known each other for decades. As a favor, I’d like you to assign Officer Merrick to protect Jane Doe 413 as his top priority, in addition to his other duties.”

“Consider it already done, my friend.”

“All right, everybody, let’s get to work!” With that, the meeting concluded.

Carolina, still very much in control, started barking orders. She sent a female Agent to the physical training stockroom to get standard-issue FBI sweatpants and a blue T-shirt for Jane. Jane provided a list of her two addresses and the location of the emergency keys. Natalie Rumsfort, contacted at work, agreed to set up a meeting time to enter the safe house with her lawyer.

After an hour of discussions, document signing, and so forth, it was time to get Jane out of the FBI Building. A protective phalanx of eight agents, four on each side of Jane, marched her through the building, followed by the Merricks. Several of the FBI Agents carried M6 Carbine Rifles. Many of the building’s employees, in FBI Blue, lined the hallway walls and applauded as Jane walked by.

After traversing the tunnel to the adjacent parking building, the group walked straight for the Merrick, Dawson, and Brant’s Sikorski S-98 Executive Helicopter at the back end of the roof. The blades were not spinning, but the company pilot stood at the aircraft's door. The group let Jane board first. The pilot held out his hand to assist her onto the flight deck.

“Hi, Miss Angel. I’m Barney, the law firm’s pilot. Welcome aboard. Pick any seat you like.”

The Sikorsky seats ten in this configuration, so in addition to the Merricks and Jane, Special Agents Hendon and Hanko, Chicago Police Commander DiMarco, and four FBI Agents carrying M-6 Carbines all took their seats. John Merrick ensured everybody fastened their belts and fitted their noise-canceling headphones.

Jane smiled even more as the chopper’s blades started spinning. The helicopter lifted off smoothly, flying east over the Northerly Island marinas. Once over Lake Michigan, they headed north toward Highland Park. Mac pointed to the family home as Barney maneuvered the craft toward the concrete landing pad. The blades stopped spinning. As Jane unbuckled herself, John Merrick put his hand on her shoulder.

“Jane, you’re home!”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

![A person smiling for the camera

Description generated with very high confidence]()

James P Lynch lives in Florida after a 45-year career in engineering; designing minicomputer and microcomputer systems for spacecraft, wind tunnels, heart monitors, and industrial motor controllers. He has two children and six grandchildren.

Mr. Lynch maintains a blog where you can ask him questions, review the novel, and learn about his family and things he’s interested in. The blog is at this web address: [**www.jamesplynchbooks.com**](http://www.jamesplynchbooks.com)