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Gang Betrayal, Woman Style

By

Michael DiStephano
Aka Michael Anthony

This is dedicated to my son, whose shenanigans brought the child's character to life.

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Chapter 1

The Encounter

Robin had just opened her shop, *Some Assembly Required*, when the door jingled, “May I help you?”

Mesmerized by her outfit, Robin watched as a woman approached. Vivid blue eyes instantly locked onto the fur coat. Each row of soft pelts had a distinct shade of brown. Considering the chilly day, she questioned why any woman would wear it unbuttoned. However, wearing fur was seldom just about warmth.

The woman also wore a complementary, mocha-colored, wide-brim hat, a matching handbag, and killer boots. Finally, her eyes caught a glittering locket dangling from a gold-linked necklace.

"Do you know who I am?" the woman asked.

"Why, don't you?" Robin responded tongue-in-cheek, while unpinning her chestnut hair. Waves cascaded onto her shoulders, framing an oval face.

"Try school." She lit a cigarette.

Back then, she knew a handful of girls who could ooze sex while munching on a greasy hamburger. She studied the woman's high cheekbones, a petite nose, brunette hair, and inviting Mediterranean eyes. "That was years ago."

"We were in the same Crossroads Gang." They were appropriately called Crossroads because the corner they hung around had three intersecting roads.

Robin had befriended a wild bunch in her teens. When she became pregnant, she bolted. Out of necessity, there were significant gaps in her memory. "I have no idea."

"Sofia." She blew smoke in Robin's direction.

Her mouth dropped open. She hoped they would never meet again, but here they were. Finally, she found her voice. "It's been years…"

"I knew you'd remember me."

It's not like Robin ever considered her a friend. A slimmer Sofia made her face angular while giving her body a fabulous figure. But then, she had always been a knockout in a cold-hearted way. "You're hard to forget."

"I noticed you're on the opposite end of the block from the bank."

That made her blood freeze. Believing a new town would allow her to reshape her world, Robin fled in her mid-teens. "So, much for chitchat."

"You missed my point, or did you?"

"You're the same Sofia I remembered." Funny how we remember someone exactly how they once were, but many have changed. In contrast, Sofia was always predictable. Robin began to play with her plain silver ring.

Sofia's eyes grew sharper. "Lila thought we shouldn't approach you…"

"Lila is still with you?" She was puzzled and saddened as to why Lila would be. More importantly, Sofia's presence meant Robin had a problem.

"Cathy thought, like me, with a brat to feed and a business in the dumps, you would be open to listening." She flicked the ash into a trash can next to a display case.

When they all hung in the same gutter, Robin hated how Cathy and Sofia acted like they were the hierarchy and treated Lila and her like the low-archy. "F.Y.I., my daughter is why I went straight."

"Well, we deserved a better childhood."

Following her mother's death from an overdose, Robin expected closure. Instead, like a raging fire, her grief sucked up the oxygen. One week later, her sister was admitted to intensive care, not from an overdose but from Zoe taking a drug she was warned could be bad shit. That left Robin questioning whether drug addiction was simply a choice. Suddenly, her thoughts were interrupted.

Staring under finely arched brows, Sofia said, "Cathy recognized you while we were casing our next caper."

Initially, Robin wondered why Lila and Cathy hadn't accompanied Sofia. Then it clicked. Given that Lila and she were once best friends, it would impede Sofia's style. After all, Cathy didn't want a reunion. She wanted her enforcer to deliver the message. "Ain't I lucky?"

"We want to go over our plan with you," Sofia smiled, but it looked like she was smiling at the precarious position she put Robin in.

The words were an uncomfortable echo of her past. Before her pregnancy, she would have been all in. That transformation amazed her. "Sorry, I can't get involved."

"You can't, or you choose not to?"

"Both."

"Perhaps I can convince you to opt back in." Sofia sounded sinister.

"You always refused to accept something when it wasn't in your interest." There is more than one way to neutralize a bully. But off the top of her head, Robin couldn't think of one.

"I know you've been hiding since you and Aaron bumped off that bank. The dumb police were looking for his partner in crime. Not his pregnant girlfriend." Her voice developed an edge.

"That sounds like you researched me." If you don't think about the awful things you did, it kinda goes away, but not really. Sofia's presence caused Robin to revisit snippets of her past. She dug deep but failed to grasp Sofia's attraction to all things nefarious. But she couldn't grasp Aaron's fascination either. But her parents and siblings also had the same obsessive mindset.

Back then, she turned to the Crossroads Gang for support. But when Robin needed them the most, she realized that gang life wasn't a lifeline but her crypt. If not for the buts, her childhood would have been copacetic.

“If the stupid authorities listened to neighborhood gossip as I did, you would be in prison instead of here.” They momentarily stared at each other.

Like any gang, for Sofia, displaying vulnerability was a cardinal sin. Hence, Robin felt that whatever she said, the other shoe was about to drop. Although she wasn’t sure what she was about to say was true, it served her purpose. “The statute of limitations ran out.”

Sofia’s eyes crinkled at the corners. “As you know, robbing a bank is also a federal crime.”

Robin always hated the expression, as you know. Specifically, when Sofia sensed that she didn’t know. “It never crossed my mind.”

“Well, their clock is still ticking,” she said while donning a devious smile.

“Jeez, Sofia, I wonder what you were like before charm school.” After all these years, the government’s case against her would be so paper-thin that they likely wouldn’t pursue it. Still, as a single parent, Robin didn't feel she could afford the risk. Jessie needed a full-time mother, not one consumed with legal matters.

“Why bring the hammer when I can bring a heat-seeking missile?” Sofia said proudly.

Sofia always acted like she wanted to be someone. Too bad she wasn’t more precise. “I just discovered that leaving the gang can be challenging.”

“Why don’t you join us for drinks at six tonight?” Sofia tossed the lit cigarette in the trash.

“Sorry, I have a daughter to take care of.” Robin wasn’t sure if she should be more concerned or more pissed.

"Let's meet before the weekend. Remember, the early bird gets the worm." Once again, the corners of Sofia's eyes creased.

My God. No matter how far she ran, she couldn't outrun her past. "But the second mouse gets the cheese."

Sofia paused for a second, then sourly smiled, "True."

"There's nothing to talk about." Robin wasn't sure which was worse, being listened to by Cathy and Sofia or not being listened to.

"I'm flexible, you pick the time and place." Her eyes looked cold.

Not wanting this to dominate her thoughts, Robin said, "Tomorrow, there's a teacher's workshop, so school starts at 11:00. I'll open the store after we're done. *Cravingz* is in vogue, but we should be okay there for brunch."

"If you don't show up, I'll simply send an anonymous letter to the FBI regarding your relationship with Aaron." Sofia leaned into Robin's personal space.

Though she didn't have a reply, she would the next time they met. However, because Sofia was so close, it felt to Robin as if she were inhaling Sofia's carbon dioxide. So, she lashed out. "I don't appreciate you getting in my face."

Sofia's eyes narrowed slightly. "This is strictly business. Don't take it personally."

It was an odd choice of words, but then Sofia was odd. "Why shouldn't I?"

"Look, the plan I put together is terrific." Again, her eyes scrunched.

Sofia had always been a dictator seeking a platform. In jest, Robin said, "Aaron tried that. When it fails, it fails miserably."

"Women aren't as crude as men."

Sofia's bluntness rocketed Robin into an exchange. Robin did not want her father to move in, but her curiosity got the best of her. "Why doesn't Dad live here?"

Sitting on the frayed sofa, her mother's head tilted up. She strained to smile through black-and-blue cheeks. "You asked! He walked out the day I told him I was pregnant with you. When he needs a place to crash, he drops in. This way, you aren't a drain on his wallet."

"And you're okay with him hitting me?" Yesterday, he had punched her so hard in her stomach that she was still hurting.

Before responding, her mother's head dipped, and she inhaled the white powder. Her eyes gleamed. Then she wiped her nose. "After beating both of us up last night, he grabbed his automatic and went into my bedroom, intending to blow his useless brains out."

A part of Robin felt she should voice sympathy, even though she had none. "Did you call 911?"

Her mother gleefully said, "It wasn't a police matter. It was a gunsmith issue. The cheap automatic misfired."

While her mother had a love-hate relationship with her father, Robin didn't. Once she reached that point, Robin tried to shake off the journey. Struggling to return to the present, she responded to Sofia's statement that women aren't as crude as men: "Regrettably, some are as foolish."

"Did the jerk know he was about to become the brat's father?" Her demeanor reinforced her words.

Sofia's social skills get the grade that requires a parent's signature in school. "Oh! I almost forgot how thorough Cathy was."

"I told you, I'm Sofia," she glared at Robin.

"I know." Robin viewed Cathy and Sofia as inseparable, as the elements of air.

Sofia exhibited a cold smile. "Did being with that loser get you what you wanted?"

She spoke with practiced neutrality. "More or less. Mostly less."

"If I were with Aaron, I would have killed the SOB." She then removed a flask from her coat pocket and took a swig.

At times, Sofia's emotions were so clear that Robin wondered if that batty lady was built inside out. Paraphrasing what an ex-boyfriend told her, Winston Churchill said to a woman reporter, "If Aaron were with you, he would have encouraged you to do just that."

Chapter 2

Jessie

After school, Robin and Jessie sat on the grass under a cloudless sky. A breeze scattered yellow leaves. Sunlight filtered through the branches of a towering oak tree. Flanking the park's dirt path was a baseball field and a playground. The park was empty, except for them and a few birds that were hiding in plain sight.

Robin read the first two pages of The Cat in the Hat, and her daughter, with her help, read the rest. Jessie had thick, wavy blond hair, a petite nose, and a dimpled face as smooth as whipped butter.

"I think I saw Mrs. Summers today." When Robin drove onto the school grounds, it seemed her teacher was directing the children who took the bus.

"Did she have on a red coat?" Jessie's backpack lay next to her.

It was an odd question, but that was Jessie. "Maybe."

"And purple jeans?" Jessie asked as she returned the book to her backpack.

Oh gee, does she have a keen eye? "I don't know."

Jessie grinned. "It probably was her."

"How was school today?" Never having experienced regular mother-daughter chats as a kid, Robin looked forward to these moments.

"Okay," she said.

Robin caught the hesitation in Jessie's voice. "Anything wrong?"

"Nothing."

Knowing what nothing meant, she said, "Tell me what's going on."

She looked at her nails, which had been painted a week before. The cuticles were now bare. "Mrs. Summers likes Olivia more."

"Is that a problem for you?" Robin was amazed, for she had never been close to any of her teachers. With a less chaotic home life, she wondered whether Jessie was more attentive or perhaps times had changed.

Jessie hesitated before saying, "She's very smart."

Regardless of its validity, Robin decided to take advantage of the opportunity Jessie laid at her feet. "When we return home, we'll review any subject you feel is difficult."

"Can we stop at *Taste Buds?*"

"We have ice cream at home. It's costly to eat out constantly." It disturbed Robin that she had to cut their expenses.

"I'll pay."

"You don't have money." If this were last year, the school bus would have dropped Jessie off at the store after school. Given the little walk-in traffic she had, Robin found herself closing the shop early.

Jessie rummaged through Robin's purse until she found what she was seeking. "No problem. Mrs. Summers showed me how to write my name. I'll use your pen to sign like you do, Mommy."

"It's not that simple." Usually, Robin would be amused, but not when just getting through the day had become challenging. Then, there's Sofia's sudden appearance. As memories unfolded, she shifted to the subject occupying her thoughts. "What do you think about moving?"

"Can we move near the ocean?" When she smiled, her face lit up.

For a person who no longer wished to be in the thick of things, she was amazed at her knack for getting into intolerable situations. Robin shrugged, "I don't feel it. Perhaps we could live near a lake. The school may not be as good. If not, I will homeschool you more. Would you like that?"

"I like dolls."

She couldn't believe that answer. But that was a 6-year-old being a 6-year-old. "I meant, what do you think about us spending more time on schoolwork?"

Jessie wiped her nose with the back of her hand. "How will you know what to teach me?"

Reconnecting with Sofia left her feeling like a mouse in the forest. To protect her daughter, Robin was busy searching for an escape hatch. “If there’s a problem, I’ll go online.”

“When I get stuck, you help me.”

Upon viewing the lesson online, Robin shows Jessie how to analyze the question from various angles. This allows Jessie to solve the problem, even though she hadn’t realized she could. Suddenly, like a parachute catching in midair, an idea clicked. Robin will take the advice she gives Jessie and examine her options. Fear could be a starting point, but it’s never a good idea for it to be the finish line. “Well, now you’ve got me thinking.”

“Also, you said the trick is to come out of it stronger.”

“It appears you’re the smart one.” Though Robin was no grandmaster, she enjoyed chess—possibly because she was good at it. When a chess piece was threatened, she excelled at countermoves.

But then, she didn’t play chess as much as she played her opponent, which she hopes to do now. If the girls insist on involving her, she’ll do whatever it takes to win. She’ll look for a great exit strategy instead of searching for an escape hatch.

Robin was about to discover what happens when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object. Though risky, payback was always sweeter when dealing with girls like Cathy and Sofia.

Chapter 3

Having Brunch

After all these years, there was no blueprint for what would occur. Slices of time pulled at Robin like a nasty scar. Other than Sofia, Robin seldom forgets a face. However, in Cathy's case, she would gladly make an exception. "What do you want!"

Cravingz was an expanse of angled glass overlooking Main Street. The sun shining through the windows made the inside lighting unnecessary. It had glossy wooden tables, cushioned chairs, and a marble floor.

With it too early for the lunch crowd, the restaurant was nearly empty. There were twenty-four tables inside. A couple sat next to a neon sign flashing OPEN. On the opposite end, several elderly men were having coffee and pie.

“Is that how you greet long-lost friends?” As if a character from Greek mythology, Cathy had olive skin and brown eyes. Her copper-toned hair, with red highlights, was swept to one side.

“I don’t like being threatened.” She went into attack mode, but at this point, there was nothing to attack.

What surprised Robin was how Cathy, in one short sentence, still managed to make a regal impression. Robin wished she had that talent. It’s too bad that drugged-up parents don’t teach social skills. Combing her hair to one side seemed to make Cathy’s face look oblong. So, Robin probably wouldn’t have recognized her either.

“Well, you know how Sofia can come across at times.” Her manner suggested she wasn’t responsible for Sofia’s conduct.

“In other words, unlike you, Sofia rarely conceals her position.” That is, if you don’t count those times Sofia tried to con Robin and failed.

“You do remember a familiar face?” The third girl had wattage behind her smile.

Robin saw Lila’s face brighten before she said anything. The time that passed between them seemed to melt away. Robin beamed back. They had bonded in ways that went beyond blood. Before Lila, she never had a best friend, and she suspected neither had Lila.

Lila was slender with beautiful bone structure. Her straight hair framed an expressive face of cognac eyes, long lashes, and arching brows. Back in their teens, Lila and Robin laughed at everything and nothing. “How are you?”

“Can’t complain.”

“Sure, you can,” Robin kidded.

“Well, while waiting to order, let’s catch up. How have you been?” Cathy asked.

“Up until now, I've been fine.” Since Sofia had entered the picture, Robin thought she'd consult her crystal ball the next time she skipped town. If she had, she would have chosen another continent.

“I suppose that’s true. And your daughter, Jessie. I believe,” Cathy said.

Robin was waiting for a but, to her surprise, Cathy never went there. “She’s doing great.”

“You probably are a fantastic mother.” Cathy’s eyes lowered.

Robin detected the faint trace of admiration. “And how is everyone here doing?”

Cathy paused, and when she did speak, it was with an upper-class tone. “There’s nothing to tell.”

That vague response left Robin wondering, “Or nothing you choose to tell.”

“Here’s some milk.” The server, who wore a classic white uniform and work shoes, brought hot tea for Cathy and coffee for the others. She took their orders and left.

“We can use a favor from a childhood friend,” Cathy said.

With her thoughts on a spin cycle, coffee was the furthest thing from Robin’s mind. “Why do you need me?”

Before continuing, Cathy swiveled her head as if scoping out where other customers sat. “It’s a simple matter of logistics. Your shop is on the same block, or we wouldn’t normally get you involved.”

Acting frustrated never helps. At least it never helped when dealing with her drugged-up family. What gnawed at Robin was that she wasn’t sure how badly Cathy wanted what she wanted. Speaking thoughtfully. “Nothing about this is normal.”

Sofia, with her fur coat draped over the back of her chair, wore a rust-colored blouse so tight she might need an inhaler to breathe. She wrestled to free a cigarette and popped it in her mouth.

Despite knowing that the norm was never the norm for Sofia, Robin said, “I don’t think you’re allowed to smoke in here.”

A white floppy hat was pulled down, obscuring part of Sofia’s face but none of her attitude. Upon taking a drag, she flicked the nonexistent ash into her water glass. “So.”

Robin ignored her uncalled-for brashness and turned her attention to why she was here. Not wishing to get involved, she offered the girls another score. “There’s a jewelry store several shops down from me. Why not steal a vehicle, drive it into their plate glass window, grab their pricey pieces, and skedaddle?”

“Why should I be happy majoring in the minors?” Sofia removed her flask and poured some of its contents into her coffee.

Everything stopped when the server passed out the food. After she left, Cathy said softly, “Given it’s a low-end store, there’s little to gain.”

So they are after real money, Robin thought. “According to a bank teller I’m friendly with, they don’t keep oodles of cash on hand.”

Sofia stabbed a forkful of food before she spoke. “I’m not after the money.”

A flabbergasted Robin wasn’t expecting that response. “What are you after, withdrawal slips?”

Grinning, Sofia swallowed. “You’re right. Banks are notorious for not keeping more cash on hand than they need. At least not enough to justify three women going through the hassle we planned.”

“I don’t want to hear about your crazy plan.” Robin was familiar with crazy plans. Like the time her mother promised to take her to the beach. She still recalls the excitement she felt. It turned out her mother’s drug supplier had informed her that he had experienced the most incredible high of his life there. So, to avoid being nabbed by the cops, they went to an empty beach one winter night. With the temperature hovering in the mid-20s, Robin’s job was to keep an eye open.

“The president of *B & E National* is socially connected,” Cathy explained in a business manner.

“And?” Even though Robin spoke only one short word, her tone revealed her mindset.

“I’m getting to that. West of town has a huge exclusive section.”

“That’s a larger town, Johnsonville.” However, it borders Swan Lake, and many preferred to shop here. Especially the upper class.

"The social climbers and wealthy snobs keep their valuables in *B&E's* safety deposit boxes. Sofia has a novel plan," Cathy said.

"And I hope you have a backup plan when things don't pan out." They talk like the police had lobotomies. She began to fidget with her unused teaspoon.

"How are they going to know you're involved?" Sofia blew a string of smoke in Robin's direction.

Fighting with little success to keep her tone neutral. "If there are any clues, they'll find them."

"I want to strike over the Thanksgiving Holiday…" Sofia paused when the server checked if everything was okay. She refilled everyone's drink except for Robin, who hadn't touched her coffee.

Redirecting the conversation, Cathy spoke as if leading up to an insightful point. "Word is, they'll be closed for four consecutive days."

"Yeah! Banks aren't normally closed for more than three consecutive days. It has something to do with the town's two-hundredth birthday celebration," Sofia fork paused inches from her mouth.

"None of the stores on Main Street should be open," Cathy said.

As if they were a tag team, Sofia once again jumped in. "So, it's a great time to rob those suckas blind."

"The problem with that is they keep building better mousetraps." Like Robin's father, she thought change wasn't in Sofia's DNA.

"Show some faith. We will clean everything up and replace the locks." Sofia tilted her head as she took another bite of her Western omelet.

"You think that's a good idea?" Robin wondered why methodical Cathy accepted Sofia's plan.

"If it works, I do," Sofia said.

Robin blinked. "Yeah, and what happens when customers can't get into their boxes?"

Cathy allowed the silence to stretch out, then said, "Don't worry, we have locks that look similar. They're designed to snap into position and configured so that any key will open the box."

Whenever Robin heard, 'Don't worry,' she typically began to panic. "Ain't technology marvelous?"

Sofia raised her fork. "The beauty in my ingenious plan is that weeks will have passed by the time those pencil pushers figure out what occurred."

"You talk like you're the only one who knows how to rob a bank." As she began to appreciate its uniqueness, she realized it had merit. What blew her away was that it originated from Sofia.

"Not at all. I'm the only one here who knows how to rob this bank." Sofia took one more drag before tossing the cigarette into her water glass.

"Any way you slice it, they'll realize the robbers operated out of my shop. Hence, I'm involved." When they were all together, Cathy pulled off petty jobs. That's why Robin assumed

they were swindling the bank president out of a few grand. Upon further thought, if that were the case, why would they need her help?

"C'mon, that's not necessarily so," Cathy said.

"But it feels so."

"I know you are juggling bills. Allow your alarm service to lapse. We'll make it look like someone broke in through the back door. The cops will assume it was used as a jumping-off place, nothing more," Cathy said.

Not feeling chummy toward Cathy and Sofia, Robin refused to tell them she had canceled her security policy months earlier because of financial problems. However, she kept the security company's stickers on the windows and doors to discourage a break-in. "If none of the shops are open, why do you need my cooperation?"

"With business being off, what do you do?"

On Robin's radar was the fact that Cathy rarely engaged in superficial chatter, especially when she was discussing business. Not wanting to help Cathy make her point, she responded to avoid being set up. "Sometimes, it takes all day to do nothing."

Eyes sharpen, "I'm not making small talk."

Like Cathy ever did with her, "Neither am I."

"We are just three women, and the preparation needed is time-consuming. Utilizing your shop for specific tasks gives us breathing room. After the job, we'll throw five grand your way as a token of appreciation. That should help you out."

Speaking in a smooth, cordial tone doesn't diminish the importance of what she's saying. "Gee, with a proposal like that, it's hard to figure out why you are shorthanded."

"Isn't it?" Lila kidded back.

Robin finished a baby back rib and returned the bone to her plate. "Attached to that generous offer is the possibility of ten to twenty years in prison. Therefore, the risk assessment is kinda high for the low return."

"Then I'll ask Sofia to work things out with you." There was gravity in Cathy's declaration.

Robin could hear the confidence in Cathy's tone, and that meant power. Of course, power without principle is control. But, unlike her father, Cathy always spoke pleasantly. That made her more palatable while simultaneously making her more treacherous. "Does Sofia still carry a Saturday night…"

Jumping in, Sofia's voice was glacial. "It simplifies complex issues."

With Sofia's position of brute power, Robin needed time to think, and she had plenty to contemplate. Addressing Cathy, she said, "By the way, I've been curious if you achieved your American dream. If my memory is correct, you wanted marriage and two kids."

"That must have been seven, eight years ago?" Cathy asked.

Instead of answering, she treated it as a rhetorical question. "Do you have any children?"

"Marriage, yes…divorce, yes…kids, no," Cathy said.

Robin suspected Cathy never knew love. So, why would a psychopath want a relationship? Even more curious, what kind of guy would marry a nutcase? “Sorry, it didn’t work.”

“Thanks.” Cathy blotted her lips, retrieved lipstick from her purse, and placed it on the table.

“Oh, I forgot my lipstick. Can I borrow yours?” Robin was busy convincing herself she didn’t yet have a plan. And perhaps she didn’t. However, if the girls insisted on involving her, what she had was a budding scheme.

“Have you forgotten that I don’t share? After we finish, we’ll return to the house we rented. Keep the lipstick. We’ll call it a signing bonus.” Cathy rolled it across the table.

“Thanks. In that case, I can put it on after I brush my teeth.” She used to wonder if not sharing was a result of Cathy’s upper-class breeding or simply who she was. With her mother disappearing and her father’s conviction of white-collar crimes, Cathy must have experienced a crash landing.

Poverty was hard enough to take when growing up poor. Coming from a privileged class, schmoozing with her was the closest anyone in the neighborhood could ever get to being knighted. She picked up the lipstick and dropped it into her shoulder bag using her napkin.

“You won’t even touch it?” Sofia said.

While wiping the barbecue sauce off, she said, “*Cravingz* is known for ribs. And my fingers are greasy. How about you? Have you ever been married?”

“Hell no. I’m going to be rich soon. Why should I share anything with a loser?”

Sofia spoke as if that said it all, and perhaps it had. “Suppose he’s a winner.”

“So, do we have a deal?” Cathy asked with a friendly yet firm tone.

When you are losing, the trick is to blindside the opponent. Realizing the score was too big for Cathy to walk away from, she reviewed her options. Considering how much Cathy wanted it, she questioned whether showing her disdain mattered. After all is said and done, agreeing was the least resistance to what she suspected would be inevitable. As Robin did with her mother, she often accepted the absurdity.

That’s why she felt compelled to switch plans. Not fully thinking it through, she improvised. Her new plan B drifted up like toxic smoke. It went against her principles, but self-interest frequently dictates one’s position.

Worse than a crime is a blunder. That’s why she looked as though her life had just changed. Speaking as much to Cathy as to herself. “Well, in for a penny, in for a pound. If you are using my shop, I insist on being part of your team.”

“I have you by the balls. If the FBI knew what I know, they would be over you like ugly on an ape.” Sofia’s face was bright red.

“I thought you hated the FBI?” Sofia could never think beyond the fog of tequila.

“Not today.”

Robin needed the emotional security of having the girls on record to justify what she was loosely contemplating. Suspecting them of many unproven crimes, Robin said, “So, libertarian Sofia threatens to turn to the government for help. You can only push me just so far. Sending an anonymous letter to the FBI will accomplish nothing because I know who sent it.

“The first thing I’ll do is shine a light on you. At a minimum, unique jobs like this would be out. Not to mention, I’m sure that they would look closely at Cathy and you. God knows what they’ll uncover?”

“Let them look,” Sofia’s anger flashed.

“If I’m going to break the law, why not reap the reward?” The plan is never as crucial as the planner, and with Cathy involved, the bank job must have been carefully thought out. The take should ensure Robin has the money for Jessie's education. Although her decision didn’t scare her, she felt uncomfortable with the deal she struck.

Sofia clenched her jaw, and her eyes became steely. “Just because you want in, doesn’t mean we will share anything with you.”

True to character, Sofia made a mistake in thinking Robin was powerless. “Cathy implied you could use help. Also, if I’m part of the team, I would never cooperate with the police.”

“I kill rats,” she lit another cigarette. Again, blowing the smoke in Robin’s direction.

She talks like she’s an exception to all laws. “As I was saying, if I’m someone who lets you use my store and the police end up charging me, it would be idiotic not to horse-trade. I can’t believe you believe I’m an idiot.”

“Sherry arrived early and quickly got nabbed on a drug charge. So, we could use another hand,” Lila said.

Dumbfounded, the words popped out of her mouth. “Sherry, Sherry Barkley. Have you girls ever considered switching to decaf?”

“You talk like she's weird.” Sofia's eye twitched.

Robin almost said what she was thinking. Instead, she hesitated, “You’re saying I’m wrong?”

“She thinks like me.”

Robin knew that. “Is that why you let her join you?”

“Sherry sometimes wants in, and I don’t screw friends.”

Coming from Sofia, she found the statement interesting. However, good lies often are. “Talking about not screwing a friend, is that a, yes?”

“Dating back to our years in the Crossroads Gang, we have always had an exceptional working relationship,” Cathy interjected.

With Cathy voicing her opinion, Robin needed to clear the air. “In the past, my relationship with Sofia was frosty. So, I must ask…”

“Trust me, our canvas is blank.” Sofia's face widened, but her smile wasn’t warm.

Robin never trusted anyone who said, ‘Trust me.’ Ever since her teens, she considered it a gambler's tell. “Well, you always had an excellent memory.”

“Though we had our differences in the past, you never cared what I thought. Now, I see a cautious Robin. What happened to you?”

“I was younger then.” She now feels uneasy watching horror movies or riding roller coasters.

“Well, what transpired between us occurred years ago,” Sofia nodded.

Though Sofia nodded, it was such an awful nod that Robin felt that an early indicator regarding the girl's true intention would be useful. “As you know, I’m having financial problems.

I can muddle through for now. But they'll give me the boot immediately after Thanksgiving if I don't scrape up seven hundred."

Sofia said with attitude, "Why should I…"

"Sorry, after we pull the job, push comes to shove, we'll lend a friend the dough," Cathy interjected.

"What?" Sofia said.

Cathy played the long game. That's why she wouldn't hand over any money until the job was done. "From the way you are talking, the take isn't a matter of a million, but rather millions. All you're willing to do is advance me seven hundred."

Cathy's eyes flash astonishment. Her face turned as red as her highlights. "It's nothing personal. It's business."

Robin just discovered where Sofia got— 'This is strictly business. Don't take it personally.' "Do we have a deal?"

"I'm giving you my word," Sofia smiled, but her eyes betrayed her. Then she tossed another cigarette into her water glass.

"Glad to be on the team." The only time Robin believed Sofia was when they were talking about today's weather, and Robin was outside. Despite that, Robin nodded in agreement.

"With that settled, let me switch the subject. What store do you recommend for me to buy a top-of-the-line paint set as a gift for a guy?"

"You have a boyfriend?" Robin was mildly amazed since she had never been sure if Sofia was straight.

"You know how men can be. Well, maybe you don't."

"Tell me all about him," Robin said while paying no mind to her snarky remark.

"A while back, Zackary discovered it was my birthday and gave me a present. Naturally, I feel obligated to return the twit's gesture."

So, he's a twit. "Is he a good artist?"

"God, I hope not."

Robin gave a wry laugh. "I don't get it. Then why buy an art set?"

"Well, if I bought the ninny something inexpensive, the S.O.B. would think I'm cheap. I won't allow that. The goal is to buy something that appears substantial. Yet the jerk won't have any use for."

Robin's jaw didn't just drop. It almost hit the floor. "Try *Art Pallet* on Main Street."

"Well, we are running late, and I know you must open your shop." Cathy flagged the server as Robin tossed a twenty on the table."

"The meal is on me," Cathy said.

"I'd rather not be in a position of owing you one," Robin said pleasantly.

Nodding, Cathy picked up the money and said, "You want to drink with us later? It will be like old times."

"Having a daughter, I must decline." Robin knew that was something Cathy couldn't fully grasp yet would appreciate. She was never sure how Cathy made those fine distinctions, but her body language made it clear she had.

"We are off Water Street, number 135. If you change your mind, bring a bottle," Sofia said.

That hurled her back to when they last clashed. One day, Robin drank so much that she felt dehydrated and needed a glass of water. Sofia couldn't understand why she wanted to drink water, and a fight almost erupted. It didn't because Sofia started carrying a gun.

Not trusting the girls, she felt compelled to clarify what it meant to become part of the team. Being an uncomfortable accomplice, Robin wondered how Cathy would react to one more demand.

Chapter 4

The Split

Feeling Machiavellian, she said, “While surrounded with all this love, I want a full share.”

“I have you by the balls. I don’t have to offer you a Russian ruble.” Sofia said.

Never having a firm grasp of what Cathy was about, Robin marveled over the gang’s opinions. Some thought Cathy’s cunning ways would make her wealthy. Whereas others believed she would spend a life in and out of prison.

Robin took the middle road and believed Cathy wasn’t that clever or that stupid. Unlike Sofia, Cathy was logical to a fault. Keeping in mind that it was difficult to follow the logic of a

psychopath. Looking at Cathy, Robin voiced to herself as much as to Cathy. “What’s your input?”

“While others in the gang played checkers, you played chess,” Cathy said.

Her mother was a good chess player with people. Robin will never forget the time she was in a clothing store. Her mother said, “I know your father gave you money to get clothes for school. Look, my hand is shaking as we talk. I need my medicine…”

“I thought you had some.” Like most addicts, her mother believed it didn’t matter how she won, as long as she did.

Robin’s skinny mother looked distressed and, without her makeup, a decade or two older than she was. She gave a mystifying smile. “Oh, I have a great idea. There’s a way we both can be happy. Let’s do a girl’s thing. We’ll play, pretend. Go into the dressing room and try on these outfits. Slip on the one you want under what you are wearing.”

Robin’s sapphire eyes locked on, “Why?”

“Do you want to be part of this family?”

“Yes.” Though secretly, she often fantasized that she had been kidnapped years ago, and this wasn’t her real mother.

“Then you need to fit in. Stop asking stupid questions. Accept and adjust.”

“But why try on a bunch of outfits?” Given Robin's world, she sensed that if she disagreed, the little authority she had over her own life would be stripped away.

“Before stealing, you need to know which outfit you like. It will be our secret.”

“But Dad gave me the money to buy school clothes.” When you grow up in a family of

addicts, you gradually discover you live in an underground environment.

"I never said you should tell him you would use the money to buy clothes. I asked you to tell him you needed the cash to get clothes. No shop wants to arrest a little kid. If you get caught, use your God-given wits. Cry a lot and sound apologetic. Tell them you had assumed your mother already paid for it. I have the cash to make good on it. So, I'll simply explain that it was a misunderstanding. Nothing should come of it. Thinking on your feet will make your mother proud.

"Believe me, it took plenty of schmoozing to get that penny-pincher in a generous mood. But the decision is yours. We can both win, or you can be a selfish brat, and I'll be in agonizing pain for a few days. Don't worry about your mom. I can always fall back on plan B. Oh! Since we've saved all that money, let's stop at an ice cream parlor when we're done here. We'll pretend it's a girls' night out. My treat."

"What's plan B?" When her mother had money, 11-year-old Robin would get calls from Ray at 3:00 in the morning, telling her to come over. Ray would dump her mother outside the *Bottoms Up* Bar and lock the door. Robin somehow had to bring her home before Child Protective Services got involved.

Of course, as with addicts, once Robin's mother started, not only did she spend the money her father gave her on liquor and drugs, but she'd often go through their grocery money as well.

When Robin was 10 years old, she got a call from her mother, who had woken up in Boston and needed bus fare. Desperately trying to pull herself back from her time travel, she told

Cathy, “You are using my shop as an operating base. I will become a person of interest. What am I saying? I will be a suspect, possibly their prime suspect…”

Unhappily, Sofia asked, “What’s your bottom number?”

“With my freedom on the line, I require an equal share…twenty-five percent.” She would be such an obvious suspect that, given the slick nature of the job, a seasoned detective might conclude the thieves had tried to set her up.

“If I contact the FBI, you risk losing your brat?” Sofia said.

“I’ll make sure a relative watches her.” Fortunately, she knew one, and one is all it took.

“Are you talking about your crazy aunt?” Cathy asked, placing her hand over her mouth as if smothering a chuckle.

Crazy ran wild in her family—for instance, her mother’s sister, Aunt Sarah. The lady hasn’t traveled more than a mile from her home since her twentieth birthday. Luckily, she knew one person. That’s if he was willing to make such a sacrifice. “Of course not. Aaron had a brother.”

“As I recall, he was a tough hombre. You would allow a Neanderthal to raise Jessie?” Cathy asked.

Robin marveled at how well Cathy knew her. “A Neanderthal with a Ph. D. in literature and a bachelor’s degree in applied mathematics. Not to mention several other degrees.”

“That’s a smart bruiser.” Lila then gulped her water.

“Well, which is it? Smart or bruiser, because he can’t be both,” Sofia said.

Ordinarily, she’s right. “He took years of kickboxing lessons.”

Cathy's face displayed an itty-bitty smile. “So, while we learned to fight in the street, he had to be taught how to be biker bar tough.”

“What’s the difference in how someone beats the crap out of you?” Thinking back, she remembers her father hammering her mother and her—the how or why never mattered. However, she suspected it was because another bimbo had just left him.

A smile tugged at the corners of Sofia’s mouth. “And he cares for Jessie?”

“He’s Jessie’s godfather. All I have to do is ask.” He never visited them, so she wasn’t sure how much he cared. Often, it’s not who we are. It’s who we appear to be.

“So, you must ask,” Cathy said.

Damn, that was an astute observation, and Robin had no clever comeback. Finally, she manufactured a response. “What matters is he’s not someone you want to anger. He'll get even if anything happens to Jessie or me, like his brother.”

“Based on your history, I would have thought you stopped believing what guys say in your mid-teens.”

That snarky statement felt like a sting from a scorpion. Unlike Aaron, Logan believed in the importance of family. In contrast, her brother Liam wanted twelve-year-old Robin to support his drug habit. She recalled the day he approached her in total clarity, “I know a way you can get all the fancy clothes you want and more.”

As her eyes widened, she asked, “How?”

His hand shook, his eyes drooped, and his face was drawn. “I’ll get you all dolled up, and you can simply stand on Utopia Boulevard.”

She felt almost immune to his manipulative ways—almost. “You have the money?”

“I’m tapped out. For now, you can wear the clothes you have.”

Noticing his shifty eyes, she asked, “Isn’t that where Mom sometimes goes for drugs?”

“So, you’re familiar with the area.”

Uncertain what he wanted from her, she thought, you don’t need to have a few screws loose to follow an addict’s thinking, but it helps. “You want me to sell drugs.”

“Not exactly. Over there, you will meet lots of guys. You get my point.”

“I’m unsure what the point is,” but her skin was crawling. For once, why couldn’t he act like a big brother?

“All you do is ask guys if they want a date. Doesn’t that sound like fun?” His eyes glowed.

“That’s gross.” Growing up in a family of addicts, she knew gross. The first time her mother took her to Utopia Boulevard, a curious Robin asked what everyone was doing, and her mother told her. Right down to when a girl asks a guy if he wants a date, the term ‘date’ means oral sex. And in her mother’s classic style, she wasn’t that delicate in her explanation.

That’s when she stopped trying to get along with Liam. He died two months later after suffering cardiac arrest. It was caused by him running, as in running away from the men in blue. Addicts aren’t known for their stamina.

And cops being cops, it took forty-five minutes for the EMT to arrive. By avoiding her siblings' path, she became street-smart rather than street-dead. “Remember, the same cookie-cutter molded both Logan and Arron.”

“In other words, he’s an educated gorilla,” Cathy lightheartedly said.

“How about ten percent?” Sofia sounded defeated.

A statement like that, coming from a bully like Sofia, ruffled her feathers. “Only if you could guarantee that if I get caught, I’ll get ten percent of the time everyone else does.”

“Sofia, why take on more than we must? Let’s give Robin an equal share. I assure you, she’s worth it,” Lila said.

“Going back to our gang days, you have always been an asset,” Cathy said.

Pretending there was no shift in attitude, Sofia grudgingly said, “Okay.”

Knowing Sofia, her reluctance implied internal editing. So, saying "okay" didn’t necessarily mean "okay." Despite having doubts, Robin responded appropriately. She turned her face into a picture of innocence. “In that case, I’m glad to be a team member.”

“Well, we are running late,” Cathy said.

“Oh! It’s 1 o’clock, time for my meds,” Sofia cheerfully announced. She removed seven prescription bottles from her purse. Opening each bottle, with help from her flask, she swallowed the pills.

Robin held back a chuckle. Looking around, she was surprised the trendy restaurant never filled up. *Cravingz* must also be having financial problems. With the town undergoing dramatic changes, the timing may be right to move on.

Cathy looked around and asked. “Didn’t you tell Sofia this is a popular restaurant?”

“An ex-boyfriend told me an old-time baseball player, Yogi Berra, once said, nobody goes there anymore. It’s too crowded.” Robin felt that guys who followed sports heard many good lines.

Since their arrival, images have stirred deep inside her subconscious. It's funny how she couldn’t forget something she didn’t want to remember. Perhaps that’s why her Wayback Machine was clicking on all cylinders.

Chapter 5

Aaron

Knowing it promised to be the bash of the year, Robin wore autumn colors—a yellow blouse, terracotta pants, brown pumps, and plum-colored lipstick. Lila did her hair, which was layered and had a long side fringe. Her scarlet fingernails navigated around the rim of her wineglass. For all she knew, it could have contained Ripple.

As Tiger's hand touched her arm, Robin felt a pang of discomfort. “Aren’t you dating Flora?”

“The bitch broke up with me, and I don’t know why.” Tiger had a broad face, greasy hair, huge hands, and eyes that seemed to belong to a carnivore. He also had a muscular frame, like

that of a day laborer. Gold-plated chains hung from his thick wrestler's neck, which was covered in tattoos.

"Why do I get the feeling you are getting into an area I don't wish to get into? If you're curious, simply ask her?" They were partying in a house whose parents had gone away for the weekend. Though she tried to pull away, just slightly, he wouldn't let go. It appears that rejection turned him on.

"I would, but the squeeze got a restraining order. If I make contact, she could have me arrested." Tiger looked as if Flora had found his passwords.

Robin believed that men who prefer to be called by their childhood nickname should be taken out and shot. "I'm willing to risk it."

His voice sounded irate. "What?"

Because his tone was edgy, she smiled. "I meant that kinda sums it up."

"My eyes were tearing up, but I attributed that to allergies. I'm no crybaby. I can't help but wonder if she thought I was breaking up with her and wanted to beat me to the punch. What's your take?" His eyes gazed at her breasts for a moment too long.

It appears he needed her validation. With a facial expression that showed disdain, she said, "I would attribute your eyes tearing up to pepper spray."

His face twisted into something ugly. Then, as if concluding that was her sense of humor, he said, "You're a laugh a minute. Here's the thing—though I'm finished with her, I still want to learn why."

Although he didn't know what he was doing, that never stopped Tiger from doing it. "If you think back, the clues had to be there."

He yanked her towards him. To Robin, his intentions looked as dark as his hair. "Don't fret, I won't discriminate because you and Flora never got along."

So, the only way for him to get over a girl is to get over another girl. "That's all right, you can discriminate."

He cocked a brow, signaling his position. "If you want to become my squeeze, you must control that tongue of yours."

"Before my father died, he warned me never to get involved with someone who is crazier than I." It was the only sound advice that her deadbeat father ever gave her.

Just like her father, Tiger looked violent with power. He raised his bulky arm and said, "I oughta bitch slap you for that."

"Hey, if you don't leave the girl alone, I'll break your arm." As if waiting to see how Tiger would react, Aaron stood motionless. Robin noticed sweat beading up on Tiger's forehead.

Bright red face, jittery eyes, he guardedly said, "Butt out."

Her eyes took in Aaron. Something was compelling about him. He looked so dangerous that she was scared. Now that Tiger was concentrating on Aaron, she kicked him in the groin. "Creep."

"Ouch! You bitch." A flicker of pain flashed across his cheeks. His callused hand instantly let go of her.

Aaron had a gymnast-like body. Wavy hair reminded Robin of the ’60s. He was built in a way that drew girls' attention. A rugged face, muscular frame, and musky, he-man cologne added to that image.

Robin's eyes softened. “I can handle this radioactive turd myself.”

“Consider me a backup plan.” With Aaron’s veins pumped with blood, Robin sensed Tiger wouldn’t mess with him.

She wasn’t sure she would have kicked Tiger if Aaron hadn't spoken up. But with Aaron turning cowboy, she went from vulnerable to the aggressor. “You don’t own me.”

Tiger spoke with an air of self-importance. “You prefer that lazy bum.”

“What? I would have you blow me, but it wouldn’t be fair to my dick. Hey, there’s an art in trash talk, and I’m fluent.”

She swore she would never date a bully like her father. “What’s important is that I don’t belong to you.”

“You want that geezer. You got him.” Never one to display grace, she watched as Tiger limped away.

“If you see him and I’m around, kick him again.” Aaron's tone was reassuring.

“I’ll kick him whether you’re around or not.” She tightened her grip on her plastic wineglass.

As if realizing where her head was at, Aaron approached and said, “I got it. You don’t belong to anybody.”

He got it, she thought. Something was compelling about him. Hosting an expression in sync with her words, Robin said, “I thought you were going to clobber him.”

“And risk soiling these fine duds?” Aaron was wearing a tight khaki outfit, a faded red shirt, and jeans that needed ironing.

“Thanks for stepping in before things got out of hand. That creep always thinks he’s the most irresistible guy in the room.” Robin always found Tiger easy to resist.

“We both know that’s not true.” His delivery was telling.

“Most guys I know would have ripped into him.” Aaron’s outfit should be cited for polluting the environment. That reminded her of what her father occasionally wore when he was still alive. At times, he dressed like a drifter. She suspected he had done this so the mark would think her father was a patsy. That made it easier for her father to fleece the guy.

“I gather, you’re referring to that, lazy bum crack?”

She knew Tiger wouldn’t have launched that accusation at Aaron unless it was credible. “And I take it you aren’t working.”

“I’m no bum. I quit. Now I view myself as a peripatetic.”’

While lifting her drink to her lips, she asked, “A what?”

“That’s a scholarly individual. Aristotle roamed the Lyceum in Athens, imparting his wisdom to others. People who attended looked forward to getting insight into the great philosopher’s power of reason.”

Sensing he wasn’t the type to know that word, she asked, “Where did you come up with peripatetic?”

"My egghead brother put a positive spin on it."

At least he wasn't putting on false air. "How do you earn money?"

"While most people go to the track and bet on all the races, I selectively pick one or two. Party time begins once I've built a small nest egg. The last time I partied so hard, my accountant asked me if I put a down payment on a condo."

Though she never met him, gang gossip said he lived on the wild side. That made him desirable in an edgy way. "You won that much?"

"Luckily, I hit the pick 3, big time."

Betting on the winners in three consecutive races isn't selective. "Luck doesn't last."

"It was breathtaking."

"What do you mean?" The girls are right. There is a presence about the guy.

"The last race, Breathtaking won by a nose."

She wondered if playing the horses was like smoking. She had a neighbor who started off smoking three or four cigarettes a week. Over the years, he got hooked. "Are you a big gambler?"

"You like betting on horses?"

Often, when someone doesn't answer a question, that avoidance answers it. "I have enough problems figuring out people."

"I don't even try. Aside from horses, the only things I dabble in are fact and hearsay."

Something wordless passed between them. Of course, her interest could have stemmed from Aaron coming to her defense. Robin found that sexy. “You piqued my curiosity. If you’re going to compare yourself to Aristotle, what kinda guru are you?”

“I opt for having fun over the absurdities of being just another working stiff, afraid of being cheated out of my small share.”

Coming from a gang environment, she understood the importance of acting tough. What she didn’t comprehend was his wardrobe. “Does that include being a fashion trendsetter?”

“Hey, I didn’t want to wrinkle my leisurewear. Besides, no one ever accused Aristotle of being a snazzy dresser.”

She enjoyed his playful manner, and given what her home life had been like, having fun was something she longed for. “But wrinkles were in back then. Their houses lacked an electrical outlet to plug the iron in.”

“Then they should have cut the cord and placed it on the potbelly stove to heat up.”

Though he was a legend among certain gang members, his taste for fashion was never mentioned. “I agree with you.”

Surprise splashed on his face. “Because I made sense?”

“No, because you’re nuts,” she finished her wine. It had a fruity flavor.

His cheeks broadened. “Well, as I see it, air in a glass serves no purpose…”

“So, let’s both refresh our drink, mister peripatetic.”

“You like their Chardonnay?”

Learning it was Chardonnay, she nodded. “If you mess with him again, be careful. I’ve seen that moron throw a sucker punch.”

“I wouldn’t like that.”

“How would you know until it happens?” However, she saw her mother’s face after her father had just done the same. He not only fractured her jaw, but on the way down, she smacked her cheek against a wooden chair. But life was not kind to her. Even her death was a struggle.

“Why did you hook up with the creep?” Arron asked.

“You’re kidding me. I wouldn’t trust him to go to a 7-Eleven to get me a Slurpee.” With her whole family gone, Robin felt like an orphan. She longed for male companionship, and they clicked instantly.

“I heard him ask about you.”

“He overheard Sofia talking to Cathy. She joked that I had a crush on the snake. Which proved he has good ears. Too bad there’s nothing between them because Sofia was kidding.” Then again, with Sofia, one could never be sure what was going on in her head.

“That girl has no personality,” Arron said.

“And you do?” Sofia’s knack for causing mischief was legendary. Perhaps that’s why Sofia’s reputation always seemed to precede her.

“That’s a great question,” Arron smiled.

“Sofia is more of an acquaintance.” It took all she had for Robin to acknowledge even that.

“Well, you should be more selective with who you pick as an acquaintance.”

"Do I detect venom in your tone?" It was easy to see why the gang gossiped about him.

"Now that we are talking, I wonder how old you are."

Dear Lord, she shouldn't have said radioactive turd. To her ears, it sounded childish. Like other teenage girls, Robin could look older when dressed up. On her thirteenth birthday, she believed her best ten years were between the ages of nineteen and twenty-one. "Nineteen."

His eyes stared intensely. "Really? When did you turn nineteen?"

A couple of months shy of sixteen, she was old enough for men to consider her fair game. "Minutes ago, I skipped several years."

Chapter 6

Love

"Don't you love me?" They were in Aaron's 19-year-old souped-up Dodge Charger with a hood scoop and chrome hubcaps. The muscle car was fully accessorized and in mint condition.

"You want to have sex in the back seat of this jalopy?" That was something her sister might have done. Since Aaron shared an apartment with many guys, a few of whom were notorious, she wasn't going there.

"In a few years, it will be an antique." It wasn't antique-ish, but with the fire-engine-red finish and tan leather seats, the car was flashy enough to be a chick magnet. But then he's into cars.

She ran her hand along the spotless interior. “Then ask me in a few years.”

They parked under a canopy of drooping shade trees that closed in around them. Arron said, “No one complained before.”

According to the buzz, when Aaron doesn’t get his way, he moves on to another girl. She tapped her foot. “I want to go slow.”

“At the speed you’re going, I’ll be collecting Social Security.”

“Then why me?” Although Robin tended to fool around, she refused to have unplanned pregnancies like her mother.

“You have a great set of tits, and I have the hormones,” Aaron laughed.

Proclaiming a desire for her body and not for her as a person compelled Robin to turn away. She knew that unless she gave in, he’d find another set of great tits. “Do you have a condom?”

“Not on me.” He buried his face in her neck.

She always tried to keep the world her mother occasionally thrust upon her compartmentalized from her private life. Drawing fine distinctions allowed her to justify much. “How do you like paying child support for the next eighteen years?”

“You know the odds of having a baby?”

“No! Do you?” Her mother always preached to Robin that strong men get their way.

“It’s minuscule.”

“Wanta bet the likelihood dramatically increases with sex?” Robin’s mother had three kids and hadn’t planned any of them. Not to mention the countless miscarriages. Robin wondered if she had inherited her mother’s rabbit gene.

“Drugstores aren’t open.”

“Several supermarkets are open all night.” Though Robin felt uneasy about her concession, she didn’t want to lose him.

“They don’t stack condoms on shelves, and their pharmacy department is closed.”

She wondered if that was true. Regardless, Aaron knew he would make the move on her tonight. From what little she knew about men, they thought about sex all the time. She even heard that until the age of fifty, the average male thinks about sex once every five minutes. That caused her to wonder what men think about after fifty, perhaps death. “Lucky you, motels are open.”

“You can trust me.”

“I want to.” She pondered whether 'hotel' was a clean word while 'motel' was a sleazy word.

“What’s wrong with wanting to have fun?” He caressed her breast.

“That mindset works right up until the moment it doesn’t.” Her sibling did that. They seemed to float through life, oblivious to the world, before crashing. However, in love with him, she felt the hold he had on her right down to her toes.

“Can’t you take the pill?”

"Not as easily as you could slide on a condom." While she talked, his touch was turning her on. Unlike her mother, she has always accepted the consequences of her actions. So, she had to give it thought… a lot of thought.

"Look, there are several birth control alternatives for men today. Therefore, let me think about it."

To her, that meant he was open-minded. On the other hand, bearing in mind Aaron's resourcefulness, he must know how to get a condom this late. Therefore, she didn't entirely trust him, yet she needed to. "What does that mean?"

"Don't sweat it. For a filly like you, I'll step up."

She hated it when a guy said stuff to get his way. "How? By robbing another bank?"

"For that nag to lose, the fix had to be in."

And that makes it okay? "What would you do if I got pregnant?"

"I have an uncle who's a plumber. Recently, he asked me to join him."

"Why didn't you?" And why had she not heard about this before? She quickly concluded it was because he didn't want the job.

"I needed to see how my playing the horses would turn out."

"Would you get a regular job for me?" With her voice trailing off, as her imagination spiraled.

"I would do that for all of us."

The warmth of his breath touched her ear. Despite the voice in her head having doubts, her heart pounded with excitement. "Wow! Why?"

"You can trust me to do right by you. After all, it would be my kid, too." Tenderly, he held her hand.

Wanting to trust him, she was bathed in a romantic glow. She turned and kissed him. Her thoughts spun so fast that her mind went blank.

Chapter 7

Spending time with her daughter

Robin and Jessie went to Lowe's to buy a flashlight. While there, they visited the Halloween section, featuring oversized witches and skeletons. It also displayed a variety of tombstones and other scary decorations.

As they began exiting the store, Jessie greeted a woman in her fifties who was entering. Arm extended, palm up, eyes wide, voice serious, "The store is nice, but don't go in the Halloween section. It's very spooky."

A crescent smile broke across the woman's face. "Thanks for the tip."

Robin grinned, thankful for the comic relief. "Now we'll return home for your favorite meal, lasagna, followed by ice cream."

"Can I help?"

Robin purchased oven-ready noodles, cooked the meat, and made the sauce the previous night. All they had to do was put the ingredients in a deep pan. "I would like that. After we're done, we can do some schoolwork."

"The principal announced they now have a suggestion box."

Unsure where this was heading, she asked, "What would you like to put in it?"

"Not to make math so hard."

Robin chuckled. Although Jessie is doing okay in math, she finds it challenging. That's why they spend more time on math than on other subjects. "Math is abstract problem solving, and that's tough. We'll review math tonight."

"I don't know if you can help."

While Common Core wasn't Robin's thing, Jessie was only in the first grade. "Why?"

"The math I do is really hard."

"Jessie, do you think I would have a problem passing first-grade math?"

"Yes!"

This time, Robin chuckled with familiarity. "I've been out of school for years, yet we got a 'B' last grading period, so I didn't do bad."

As little kids tend to do, Jessie hopped from subject to subject like Kermit the Frog. "When we move, can I see Uncle Logan?"

Her brows lifted. Aaron's brother was someone Jessie had wanted to meet ever since Robin could remember. It would be nice to see him. "I will have to check where he's living."

"You don't know?"

"I have his cell number. Logan is a private person. He could have moved without telling me." Though curious, she was not one to pry.

"I want him to have kids I can play with."

"You have friends." If Robin had made friends like Jessie, there wouldn't have been a need to join a gang. Despite having a pleasant personality, Robin wasn't outgoing. Hence, what she had was a slew of acquaintances.

Lila had been the closest thing to a friend since the first grade. Being a loner, not by choice, its isolation forced her to be at home more with her addicted family. To Robin, it felt worse than death. That's why her decision to join the gang was a no-brainer.

"So do you."

Robin tells Jessie that almost everyone is nice. However, at Jessie's age, mothers tend to do that. As for herself, most of the kids in the Crossroads Gang couldn't be trusted. She wondered what they were like now. Having problems herself, she didn't wonder for long. "As you grow older, friendships don't come as easily as they do for children."

"They should."

Robin was glad Jessie was uninhibited, yet she worried her daughter was too innocent. "Maybe so, but it's not that way."

"Can we visit?"

"That's a great idea. He's one of the good guys," she said, noting that she hadn't met many. Given his family history, Logan had to claw his way for everything he achieved.

Discussing Logan, coupled with the resurfacing of her old gang, brought back repressive memories. Somehow, Sofia's abrupt appearance gave her a portal into her past. Yuck!

Chapter 8

The Test

Back then, Robin shared an apartment with three other girls. Despite all being in their mid-teens, they were on their own. When she woke, she ran straight to the bathroom. This was the second consecutive day she had woken up feeling nauseous.

As she opened the door, Lila was on the other side. She was wearing a thick pink terrycloth robe and matching fluffy slippers. “Does Aaron know?”

Before saying anything, she gave an exaggerated sigh. With her thoughts spinning, she indulged in ring-twisting. “I barely know myself.”

“Don’t panic. Step back and tell me what you love about him.”

She became annoyed when she thought about it because she couldn't think of one thing. Perhaps that speaks for itself. "He's my pandemic."

"I hope you picked right."

"Why would you say that?" However, Lila's comment made Robin question Aaron's commitment.

"What guy doesn't want a much younger girl?"

"You think he's like that?" Although that question wasn't the end of their relationship, it was the beginning of the end of her infatuation. Now, she pondered if Aaron loved her or her great set of tits.

"Tell him and find out." Lila's hazel eyes turned down.

Something told her it was going to get messy. But her life has always been messy. "Too bad, Aaron's thoughts traveled upward..."

"From his penis, like all men," Lila sporadically completed Robin's thought.

"First, I need to get one of those pregnancy tests to confirm it. Then I need to find out its sex." Telling Aaron that he's having a daughter or a son adds depth. Though she knew what to tell Aaron, she had no idea what she should tell herself.

"Do you think you're that far along for an ultrasound?" Lila's foot pushed aside a pile of dirty clothes. On weekends, the small apartment smelled like a hamper of laundry.

"There is only one way to find out." Suspecting she was pregnant yesterday, Robin Googled and discovered that the gender could be determined as early as 7 weeks.

"I'm sure he'll do right by you. If not, I'll help raise your kid."

Showing support meant a lot to an insecure Robin. “Crap. I knew better. He kept on saying he’d come up with something next time. Then, when the next time came, he didn’t. Instead, I should have used a diaphragm or gone on the pill.”

“That leads me to ask, how well do you know him?”

“Well, enough to hope for the best and brace for the worst.” A little voice in the back of her head told her Aaron might be a deadbeat dad like her father.

“If you need anything, including money, let me know.”

Lila’s empathy was comforting. She was about to discover what Aaron was made of, and she prayed it wasn’t anything like her father. “Thanks.”

“How do you feel about having a child?” Lila’s tone sounded optimistic.

“I’m fine with that. I hope Aaron feels the same.” Last week, she was an immature teenager, going on thirteen. Today, she is a mature teenager, going on nineteen.

“I see no reason to conclude anything but the obvious. So, when you confirm, then what?”

Given her past, she owed it to herself to prove she would be a better parent than her mother had been. “God, I wish I knew.”

Chapter 9

At Gunpoint

"I could use your help." Aaron wore a custom-fitted silk shirt and designer jeans.

Dreading what was to come, she found it amusing how people viewed things differently when the situation was no longer hypothetical. "I thought you stopped gambling."

"I had stopped."

The past tense *I had* echoed in her mind. "How does fearing the police make you feel?"

"Sounds like you had been talking to my egghead brother."

"It beats becoming your partner in crime and sometimes girlfriend." Because of her father, she recognized a slight stretching of his vowels.

"C'mon, I know you belong to the Crossroads Gang."

"A small-town gang. We're no Hells Angels." The gang mainly consisted of 'not nice' girls rather than real badasses. Sofia was the exception.

"I heard you kicked ass in a gang fight."

"That depended on which girl you asked."

"I'm asking you."

That brawl took place last year. Now, she wondered if her reputation was what attracted him. "A girl threatened a girl in our gang because she was caught in the movie theater in the other girl's neighborhood."

"That's dumb." Unexpectedly, he removed a flask-sized bottle from his jacket pocket and took a swig.

"I only went along because, typically, nothing happens. This time was different. We fought at *The Combat Zone*. During the fight, Wendy tried to stab Lila in the back. Luckily, I got there just in time to shove her down. When she hit the ground, she fractured her arm. Hence, the legend about me was born." Robin learned that day that a gang fight is an hour of boredom, followed by minutes of sheer terror. She saw an out-of-control Robin, a side of herself she wasn't proud of.

"So, you experienced a choice and chose excitement."

"Not true, I was too afraid not to go. But I'm not that girl anymore."

"So, we'll never become a team like Bonnie and Clyde."

"Weren't they killed by the police?" Secretly, robbing a bank intrigued her. That fantasy ended once she found herself taking a small part.

"My egghead brother gave me a quote (from Milton). Better to rule in Hell than serve in Heaven."

Though she was catholic, she wasn't sure if there was an afterlife. She believed energy survived. After all, you can't destroy energy, and you can't create it. "And I ask myself, is there life after death?"

"Yeah, what's your answer?"

"Holding up a bank is a surefire way to find out. But is finding out worth dying for?" She refused to allow Aaron to define her. Although Robin didn't know who she was, she knew who she wasn't. Robin was no Bonnie.

"Look at it this way, there's no upside without the downside." His amber eyes came alive.

She wanted to voice her position, but her family taught her that arguing about someone's obsession is a nonstarter. Determined never to allow Aaron to treat her like a punching bag, her father had, when drunk, Robin was ready for a fight. "Do you have a drinking problem?"

"Oh, I have a problem. It's just not drinking. It began when Blade told me what his henchmen would do if I didn't pay up." Surprisingly, his innocence seemed cloaked in stress.

"I thought peripatetic Aaron didn't care about material possessions." She questioned if he would spend a life in and out of prison. With her thumb, she began to flick off paint from her nail.

"I was peripatetic. Now I'm just another bum." Emotions strangled his words.

So, he cared about possessions, but not enough to work for them. "What happened?"

"Trying to get Blade off my back, I bet on too many races." He drained the bottle and then tossed it into the back seat.

"And if you had won, you would have been on a hot streak. What gambler quits when they are hot?" She refused to hide her attitude. Arron often acted on a hunch. An impulsive gambler, over a long time, can't win. Robin was determined that her child wouldn't grow up in a dysfunctional home.

"Robbing the bank is the only way out."

Amazingly, the anticipated excitement she saw in his eyes reminded Robin of her family when they were about to take drugs. "And are you substituting your gambling habit for a liquor habit?"

"A man oughta be allowed one vice. All I'm asking is that you sit in the car." His voice sounded desperate.

"Then why do you need me?" The last time she helped him, he had promised to stop betting on the horses once he paid Blade off. But here we are.

"In this neighborhood, leaving the engine on while not being in the car is a no-no." He donned a ski mask.

"A lack of control on your part is supposed to dictate breaking the law on my part." All she wanted was a normal relationship. Was that too much to ask?

"Very funny."

Her intense eyes locked onto him. Unlike with her father, she was older and could push back. "Am I laughing?"

"What's with the third degree?"

"Things changed. I changed." Fleetingly, she wondered if Aaron was capable of change. Or, like her father, giving time, he'll become a mean drunk?

"Everyone has problems from time to time."

"Some bigger than others." She'll help him with this and avoid further involvement. That was all she felt required to do.

"We'll talk later."

If Aaron hadn't been consumed by his problems, he would have suspected what was happening. Signs existed. "Why not tell Blade you took that plumber job your uncle offered? That you'll pay him off slowly?"

"I gave him too many bullshit excuses already."

That statement hit home. Too late, she realized if pressed, he'd tell her what she wanted to hear. Now she wondered whether his uncle had ever offered him a job. After what Robin had just heard, she wouldn't. "All you want is for me to stay in the car?"

"I want a quick escape. It's not like I'm asking you to be the getaway driver. When I'm done, we'll go straight to Blade, pay him off, and I'm through gambling."

"Until the next race." Robin wondered how she could have been so gullible. She wondered if all she had done was trade a drug-addicted father for a gambling-addicted boyfriend.

"I had a run of bad luck."

"What kinda lame excuse is that?" However, despite everything, she would do it. Crazy things happen when love gets involved. Her mother would do weird stuff for her father because she loved the bastard.

"I hear you. There's no reason to be so irritated."

"If you were listening, you would know I alluded to it politely the first thirty times." Though she exaggerated, the point was made.

"I'm not sure how to deal with this new Robin."

"I know." Over the time they dated, she had learned that they had opposing definitions. Her definition of being wild was rejecting specific laws, like underage drinking. In contrast, Aaron's definition was paying off a gambling debt by robbing a bank. That wasn't wild. That's insanity.

"Tell you what, after I drop in on Blade, I'll treat you to lunch at the *Seaside Café*, and we'll talk."

"We never went out to eat, so how do you know what I like?"

"Then you decide."

"Okay." Not sure how Aaron would react to her news, she scraped enough dough together to take a cab home if needed. But she wanted to gauge his reaction first, and that made her uneasy.

"The whole thing shouldn't take more than 20 minutes."

With her adrenaline spiking, her nauseous stomach pain lessened. "Or twenty years."

"I'm not sure if I should be offended."

"Oh, I'm sure." If Aaron were an average guy, he would look within.

Chapter 10

The Escape

"Maybe you didn't give it a fair shot," Aaron said, fishing a cigarette from his pack.

She didn't know which was more annoying: him robbing a bank or her lack of spine. While they talked, she searched for a way to poke around the edges of what dominated her thoughts. But there wasn't a seamless way to slide in.

Believing this was not the time to be a coward, she garnered the courage to speak up. "I went with you. I saw what it was about. And now I want out. Not only is it too reckless for me, but it's not fair to our child."

"What?" He raised a brow, and their eyes caught.

There was something in those eyes that she had never seen before. She saw contempt in his eyes. On second thought, it could have been resentment. As Robin saw it, Aaron had two choices. To rob a bank or have his bones broken. Given those options, Robin knew what Arron would do, so she grudgingly helped him. “I’m as surprised as you.”

Suddenly, the high-pitched sounds of sirens appeared to be all around them. “I thought I was enough.”

The words were like a punch to her stomach. She stared at him with disbelief. “Well, our baby growing inside of me doesn’t agree.”

“Do you want the kid?” He made a left.

Ever since she got pregnant, she had feared that when she got to his core, she would discover there was nothing there. “Don’t you?”

“Well, guys say all kinds of stuff.” He said it with a straight face.

In the blink of an eye, her world changed. Now she believed that when someone says, ‘Trust me,’ it is a preamble to a lie. Her stomach churned. Adrenaline pumped through her veins. Though she needed him, she didn’t have him. She watched her mother cling to the relationship long after it had run its course. “This is our child.”

“You’re sure I’m the father?”

“What kinda girl do you think I am?” Her heart felt like it had just separated from her chest. She would never forget that preposterous question. When a guy doubts a girl, it’s often because of the guy’s shortcomings. That led her to wonder if he slept around.

He nodded apologetically. “Do you expect me to marry you? Because right now, I have bigger concerns than children and a white picket fence.”

She experienced growing up in a family of addicts, gang fights, and clashes with the cops. She experienced the anxiety of petty crime. She experienced a lifestyle not meant for her. She saw Aaron as a new beginning. She was wrong. “At times, you can be a prick. I wish you were one of those pricks who used condoms.”

“What did I say that ticked you off?” His eyes shifted, but they didn’t make contact.

She wanted to hit him, but that wasn’t her. Still, some things can’t be unsaid. Staring blankly out of her window, she said, “Everything.”

“People should stop demanding that I behave like they want me to. I’m a big boy.”

It may have been just her, but she suspects his irresponsibility ran deeper. “Spare me the bullshit. How about being a man?”

“All I did was tell you how it is.”

“Yeah! Now that I’m pregnant.” She thought Aaron needed her, and she needed him. She was wrong twice.

Fleetingly, his eyes shifted her way. “It’s confirmed. You’re not lying to…”

“Hey, the truth is bad enough.” Though his reaction annoyed her, it shouldn’t have come as a surprise—nothing he did should have come as a surprise.

“Will you be able to raise our kid?” his voice cracked.

Before her pregnancy, she had never believed he could walk away. And yet, he proved to be no different than her deadbeat father. “I’m prepared to do what’s right.”

"Do you know if it's a boy or a girl?" He flashed a sympathetic smile.

"I will call her Jessie." Her eyes always returned to him. Something about giving her baby a name allowed her imagination to flourish. While having a kid concerned her, a part of her was excited.

His gaze shifted sideways. "Naming her after my sister shows class."

"Thanks." Aaron's younger sister had been playing when she ran into the street without looking, and a car hit her. Her death ripped his parents' marriage apart. After their divorce, Aaron's life changed forever.

"I would wish you lots of luck, but wishing someone good luck is considered bad luck."

"Wishing anyone luck is pointless." Somehow, pregnancy made her wiser than her years.

His head was tilted down. There was an uneasy silence before he said, "Look, I shouldn't have gotten you involved. Take the money. At the next turn, I'll slow down. Hop out and hide."

Not wanting her daughter to be born in prison, she wanted out. There's no denying she wanted out for herself as well. "If you escape, you'll need some dough. I'll..."

"It wasn't as much as I needed anyhow. Take it all. When we hook up, I'll get it."

For a guy like Aaron, displaying his feelings was a sign of weakness. That's why she felt compelled to ask, "Are you drunk?"

"What you told me cleared the alcohol from my system."

Through wet cheeks, she looked at him as if for the first time and noticed he had a face that life had chewed on. Stuffing the cash into her purse, she asked, "You think you can lose the police?"

"I can hope, it's all I got." He took a drag of his Newport, inhaling deeply.

"I envy you," though she tried, she failed to hide her disdain for the position he put her in.

As if Aaron understood what she meant, he sadly nodded.

"Your brother returned home. The first chance I get, I'll call Logan." She wiped her eyes. The investigation might discover that a girl was his accomplice. Therefore, it would be best for Robin to leave town. She'll probably follow Aaron's capture online.

"Say hello to Jessie for me." His eyes were dull.

It sounded to her like a kiss-off. But then, there was something transient about him. As he made a turn, her attitude evolved into detachment. When the car slowed, she quickly kissed his cheek. "Don't do anything foolish."

"I make no promises," he defiantly smiled.

To Robin, his face suggested Aaron needed her support. However, she was no longer prepared to give it. She jumped out. Paying no mind to the scrapes and bruises she incurred, she scrambled into the safety of the rocky terrain.

Protected from view by shrubs, she reached a high point and hid behind a cluster of boulders. With a clear view of the looping road, she watched Aaron brake. He seemed to study his predicament.

Then, he floored his pedal. He swerved onto the soft shoulder to avoid the barricade. Sideswiping the police car, he muscled past it. The police rapidly fired. Aaron's car leaped in front of an RV and slowed to a crawl.

Robin reasoned that one of the bullets must have caused Aaron to lose control. The RV, which the police had waved by, had begun to accelerate when it smashed into Aaron's auto. Its momentum propelled Aaron's vehicle to the opposite side of the road. Dangling over the cliff's edge, his tires spun in the air. Robin's hand went to her mouth. Her eyes puddled.

An 18-wheeler rounding the turn began to slow when the driver slammed on the brakes. The truck jackknifed, clipping Aaron's Charger just enough to push it off the road. As it tumbled down the cliff, it careened off a large rock. Continuing its steep trajectory, it crashed into a wide tree. Horn blasted. Gas spilled. Then she saw a flash.

The explosion was so fierce that the ground beneath her feet trembled. When the smoke cleared, the car resembled junkyard debris. In witnessing his death, something broke inside of her. Her lower lip trembled. Dread settled in her bone marrow. At that instant, Robin realized she had never known him and would not get a chance to correct that. It appears the only thing they had in common was their love for Aaron.

Pulling herself together, she wiped her eyes. She wasn't under any illusion about what her life was going to be if she stayed on this path. Her best years will be in her past. And her daughter's world would be as chaotic as hers.

That would be a horrible way to begin Jessie's life. Her mountain of tears grieved not only for herself but for her fatherless child. Though there was no going back, how could she move forward?

She had visited the state park below only twice. Luckily, Robin had hiked this rocky terrain and remembered a cave a bit further east, where she could think through her problems and cry. Somehow, she had to get control of her life.

Chapter 11

Checking things out

The following day, as Robin opened her shop, Cathy and Sofia popped in. Sofia removed her gold necklace and floppy black hat, placing them on the glass counter. Cathy asked, “Mind if we go into your attic and look around?”

“With a cellar door in the back, shops use the basement.” Then, as if a switch turned on, it clicked. “The access is in my office closet.”

Wearing latex gloves and holding flashlights, Cathy and Sofia entered the closet. Once in the attic, Sofia tapped on the wall. She said softly, “Just as suspected, it’s Sheetrock.”

Cathy scribbled down items they would need. “How about the floor?”

"They cheated towards the back. I'll buy some deck planks to fill the larger gaps." This was the first time the team had turned to Sofia for guidance. Consequently, she took her new status seriously.

"We should get a few more lanterns," Cathy said, adding it to her list.

"And four hand-held vacuums. That would make cleanup go faster." Sofia hoped that the uniqueness of this crime would prompt the FBI to open its checkbook for information. Without a prior history of robbing banks, the fools would come up empty-handed.

"Cleaning up might add an hour to the job," Cathy said.

"Given our timeframe, that shouldn't be a problem. Disinfectants would destroy any evidence we may have inadvertently left." Also, ensure the police miss their all-important first 48-hour window.

"That's logical," she smiled.

"It is." Her tone suggested surprise. The last thing Sofia would accept was to fail. Unlike her parents, who yelled at her for every damn thing, Cathy was understanding. She also treated her like a partner, something Sofia's loser father had never done.

The happiest moment of her life was when she finally stood up to the tyrant. That was promptly followed by the saddest moment. The two-bit gangster with the brain of a centipede made it clear he wouldn't tolerate her pointing her gun at him and asked her to move out. However, because she pointed her .22 at his heart, hammer cocked, his tone was strikingly polite.

They continued to scan the attic. "We'll have to put cardboard over the vents facing the street."

"Good point. Any light at night could invite the Gestapo," Sofia said.

"Will all of the shops be closed?"

Sofia's position was simple. If anyone gets in their way, kill the sucka. Whereas Cathy would grasp the necessity of that, wimpy Lila would not. Cathy is strong, while Lila is a pushover. "They shouldn't be open."

"How about the jewelry store?"

"It's posted on the door that they'll be closed on the days we're concerned about. Rumor has it that the bank will be closed, but they haven't made it official. Also, the ad agency receptionist said they'll be closed." When Cathy's father was arrested, the authorities confiscated all her expensive jewelry. As a result, Cathy became methodical and stowed away money, which the authorities would never find.

Four years ago, they were detained for fleecing a little old lady out of five hundred bucks. Cathy retained two shysters to defend them. The lawyers conferred to ensure neither said anything inconsistent. Reluctantly, the prosecutor had to drop the charges. Appreciating Cathy's thoroughness, Sofia wanted to mimic her style.

"You asked?" Cathy's tone implied surprise.

"Stole a page out of your playbook. I told the receptionist I wanted to make a sales pitch and asked whether they would be available on the days we were concerned about. The girl told me their clients wouldn't be open, so they wouldn't be open either.

"After the call, I tossed the burner in a dumpster. Oh, I've been meaning to ask you. Do you think the police will question Robin?" Learning from her conniving, drugged-up mother, you might say Robin was well-schooled in talking her way out of clashes with the law.

Sofia would never forget talking to Robin's mother when a cruiser pulled up. As if it were happening right now, she remembered every word. The squad car stopped on the wrong side of the street, its windows down and its lights flashing. The huge cop stuck his worthless head out the window, "Where were you when the *Cheap Guys Liquor* store was robbed?"

"When was that, Ethan?" Chloe asked.

"Around noon today, a boy saw you exiting the store."

"He saw me?"

"Well, a woman who fits your description. Unless you have a solid alibi, you're taking the damn fall." The cop dangled his handcuffs.

"You know the *Sunnyside Motel*?" The question suggested she was sharing intimacy.

"Your alibi better be ironclad."

"Check with Evans for our monthly rendezvous." Chloe smiled sinfully. She was jailed for prosecution five times, used a variety of methods in talking cops out of arresting her for intoxication, and was questioned repeatedly for petty crimes.

"You better believe I'll check. You know what happens to junkies that lie to me."

"What, the drugs aren't killing me fast enough for your taste? Oh! I don't want him to get mad at me, so you should be tactful. You know how riled up the cap easily gets."

"I'll get back to you," he hesitantly said.

After the patrol car drove off, Sofia let out her breath. “You’re lucky you were with the Gestapo.”

“I was?”

“You bluffed the moron.” Chloe was sharp in a way Sofia’s mother never could be.

“I always have a plan B. The weasel won’t check. Everyone at the precinct knows that if you don’t wish to walk a beat, you don’t question the cap. Particularly about touchy matters.”

“So, did you rob the liquor store?” Chloe’s style made Sofia feel as if she were part of the caper.

“Silly girl. I was just entering when Ken stepped out and closed the back door. Coming from the alley, I heard what sounded like a dog and a cat fight. I guess he wanted to watch it. Knowing how the cash register worked, I helped myself. On the way out, I grabbed a shopping basket and loaded it with liquor bottles.”

“What would you have done if he returned at that moment?”

“Once I took the money from the cash register, I could afford to pay for the bottles. I was cautious enough to leave some money so it wouldn’t be obvious at first glance,” Chloe smiled.

“Gee, their cameras must have recorded you.”

“The stupid chatterbox complained Monday that the system went down, and the repairman was so busy that he won’t come for two weeks. Want a bottle of Don Julio Tequila?”

“Hell yeah.” She had to steal any liquor she got from her parents. Too bad that bitch, Robin, got a cool mom, and she’s stuck with a crappy one.

“Look under the dumpster around the corner.”

"How many bottles did you take?" Maybe she'll grab a couple.

"A professor I once knew said liquor stimulates the mind and body. Before nightfall, I will have the most stimulated mind and body ever."

Cathy interrupted Sofia's thoughts, answering her question. "How could the police not suspect Robin?"

"Fleeing this town will automatically make her look guilty. When they catch her, she'll have to devise a doozy of an excuse. I wonder if the wuss is still up to the challenge?" Despite what Robin had said at *Cravingz*, Sofia knew she wouldn't have the balls to rat her out.

"Time will tell."

"Any idea what the wuss will say?" Sofia would love to be the fly on the wall, watching Robin's reaction as they slap handcuffs on her. She probably would get the same thrill she had numerous times when the police handcuffed her father.

"Do you care?" Cathy asked.

"When it comes to Robin, she's lucky I don't stick her with the cost of our equipment." Though Robin made a fool of her before, she who laughs last laughs best.

Chapter 12

The girls returned

Robin was in her office doing paperwork when the girls climbed down from the attic. Glancing through the office windows, they could see that there weren't any customers in the store. While brushing dust off her pants, Sofia said, "A small rotary saw is all I'll need to cut through the drywall dividing the stores."

Surprise splashed across Robin's face. "I would think the shops would have concrete walls separating them. How did the developer get that past the building code?"

"You think only bank robbers are crooks?" Sofia sneered.

"From everything we could gather, the builder had financial problems. Rumor had it that he paid people off. We just confirmed that they cut corners in the attic," Cathy said.

Robin thought that was probably why the girls picked B & E. "How about when you get to the bank? I can't believe their wall would be that flimsy."

"From the information I could piece together, it's probably a thick sheet of steel. I planned to use a blowtorch. Also, the jewelry store security system shouldn't pose a problem for us," Sofia said.

Although she didn't understand why it wouldn't pose a problem, Robin decided to address her huge concern, "And if it's brick or cinderblock?"

"I doubt it. But I plan to bring a skill saw and a concrete blade in case. We'll leave all the equipment in your office closet. This way, we'll have easy access," Sofia said.

When Sofia knocked a cigarette out of the pack, Robin pointed to the large ceramic ashtray on her desk. "I got it because you're a big smoker."

Nodding her thanks, she removed her flask and took a gulp. "Want a swig?"

"It's still morning." Drinking this early brought back memories of her mother. As soon as she awoke, she would take a shot and throw it up, repeating that routine until she could hold the booze so she could function. Sometimes, she tried the red beer solution. She topped her beer with a splash of tomato juice and a pinch of salt. It was a manageable hair-of-the-dog option. If Sofia lives long enough, that will become her world.

"I didn't ask you for the time."

Skipping over the snarky response, Robin asked, "How will we get into the vault?"

“Instead of dropping into the bank and then breaking into the vault, I’m toying with the notion of entering the vault directly from above.”

She always wanted to understand someone's logic. “Why?”

“If we break into the bank and drill a hole in the vault door, they will instantly know what happened.”

Robin's parents thought they could outfox everyone. So, she was familiar with Sofia’s type. “What? No one is allowed to glance up at the hole in the ceiling?”

“For appearance, a drop-down cork panel ceiling was installed. I would have to figure out a way not to create a mess and not to trigger the alarm.”

Fat chance. In the nanosecond that followed, the idea of triggering the alarm made her nervous. “And there’s enough air in the vault?”

“Because customers enter, the temperature must be consistent. Hence, a ventilation system…” Sofia interrupted herself and said, “Wait, you’re a genius, Sofia. We could enter through the ductwork. It’s sheet metal. The vent should be large enough to crawl through.”

That caused her to feel better. Robin’s questions used to drive her mother crazy, but toward the end, they helped her. As for her father, she never questioned anything the know-it-all did, and the results were predictable. “Are you sure about that?”

“If needed, I’ll have the equipment on hand to go through the top.”

“And when the bank opens, cops will be all over this area.” Robin felt it necessary to express her reservations, even though Cathy would not listen as she had never done before.

"They won't even know they have been tampered with. If we're lucky, not for a week or two," Sofia said.

According to Sofia, everything works as planned. In truth, life seldom does. As drugged up as her mother was, she always had a contingency plan. "You're pipe dreaming."

"Don't sweat it. I'm thorough."

"All that would do is make it difficult for the authorities to narrow the window of when the break-in occurred." Not needing an alibi would help Robin. Still, they would have an idea of when. Though it didn't bother Sofia, that and other things occupied Robin's mind 24/7.

"No matter what, my plan would give us several days before the police are alerted."

Because her family, like all addicts, is so fixed on their narrow viewpoint, out of necessity, Robin learned to see all sides. "Let's keep in mind cops aren't stupid."

"Neither are robbers," Sofia said.

"Not all criminals are smart." When she was a kid, constantly in conflict with the law and getting into scuffles, she hated cops. Since going straight, her respect for the men in blue has grown. Likewise, her respect for criminals has shrunk. Still, Sofia's plan had legs.

"Oh! Before I forget, you have a tall hamper. Can we use it to put the jewelry in?" Cathy asked.

Robin recently purchased it. "I'll get a box of trash bags. That way, we'll each have a bag. I'll also purchase a sturdy duffel bag. When we are done, we'll dump all the garbage bags into it."

As they were leaving, Sofia retrieved her hat and gazed around. “Where’s my gold necklace?”

“Where did you leave it?” As a kid, Sofia was notorious for losing her jewelry.

“Don’t you remember? Because I constantly lost my jewelry, I got into the habit of taking it off when I could. I set the necklace on the display counter beside my hat, so I won’t forget it. I left my earrings in the house rather than take them off in your shop,” Sofia said.

That didn't surprise her, considering that the gold earrings aren’t as spectacular as the rest of her pricey outfit. And considering the day was unusually warm, she wore a cashmere sweater instead of her fur coat. “A lady with two small girls wandered in. One of the kids may have taken it. Why didn’t you put it in my office?”

“You have so little business, it never crossed my mind,” Sofia said while putting on her hat.

“Thanks. Unlike department stores, eighty percent of people who stroll into my shop purchase something,” some a lot. That’s why people browsing along the strip is so important.

“Did they buy anything?”

“A cash customer. I never saw the lady before. Was it anything special?” Like service people often do in restaurants when a customer complains. Robin didn’t have to care. All she had to do was pretend to care.

“It has sentimental value. My tightwad grandma gave it to me as a high school graduation present.”

That statement caught Robin off guard. “You stopped going at fifteen.”

"Ah, the old buzzard didn't know that, and I wanted something from Mrs. Scrooge. She sprang for an 18K gold necklace. The locket had, 'To Sofia—Love Grandma.'"

Deception in exchange for monetary gain. Robin thought her siblings would have done that if they were still around. While grabbing her office vacuum, she said, "Oh, can you give me a hand? Get the duct tape. I want to start it about five feet high and run it straight to the floor."

"For what reason?" Sofia asked while retrieving it.

"I promised Jessie I would start to mark off her height." Robin returned the vacuum to the closet.

"Why not mark the wall like everyone else?"

"This way, if they kick me out, I could bring the tape with me. Smart, ha? Hold the top while I run it down." She walked toward Sofia.

Sofia ran it down without Robin's help. "It wasn't a two-person job."

"Thanks," Robin said. Somehow, their presence yet again drove her into her past.

Chapter 13

Lying low

So, when the girls left, she plunged back into those dark places. Arriving at Minneapolis by Trailways bus, her liquid eyes cast down. “It was horrible!”

“You saw him die?” Logan’s chocolate eyes were moist yet alert.

“I saw everything.” She didn’t know why Aaron had to make Arnold Schwarzenegger in character look like a sissy.

“Are you okay?” Both brothers were an inch away from six feet. Logan was a thinner version of his brother. He had bony limbs and didn’t have Aaron’s barrel chest. However, his average features and wavy hair blended well, making him a good-looking fellow.

Not really. And she won’t be all right for a long, long time. “It’s still a shock.”

"The reports on the internet said the cops were in hot pursuit when his car crashed."

Aaron, giving her the kiss-off, played with her head. "Having a souped-up car, he tried to muscle past the blockade. No one could have escaped."

He blinked against watery eyes, "Damn it! Aaron lived every day like it was his last."

When you do that, you die young. "And one day it was."

Once in his car, Logan asked, "Well, you feel like a drink, or would you rather go straight to my place?"

Right now, a drink should be therapeutic. If she weren't pregnant, she would get drunk. "I'm not of age."

He tossed a sad smile her way. "Being twenty, neither am I. The bartender is a good friend."

Things always seemed better with a drink. Not to mention, it should settle her stomach. "In that case, I'll have a glass of wine."

Not being the weekend, they sat at a cocktail table towards the back of the empty bar. *The Back Stage* was long and narrow. "It's cold in here."

"I have a sweater in the car." He started to get up.

"I'm not a sweater person." She ran her finger around the edge of the wineglass.

Laughing, he sat back down. "Well, then, freeze."

"Is it okay if I crash at your place for a few days?" She had no idea where she would go after, but right now, she needed a bed. Not a seat on the moving bus to fall asleep.

"Stay as long as you want. I'll fix up the guest room."

Aaron had told her that Logan lived in a small apartment and had converted a tiny dining room into an office. “You don’t have a guest room.”

“No problem. I'll move my desk into the living room. The sofa in that room is convertible. It also has a sliding door, so you’ll have privacy. Damn, I just noticed the bus ride left you looking as if you're hungover.”

The long trip and lack of sleep screwed up her internal clock. Her voice thickened. “Because of my irregular sleep pattern, I’m having morning sickness in the afternoon.”

His eyes lit up. “Are you having the kid?”

“On my way here, I was leaning toward not wanting the responsibility. As the bus pulled into the station, I began to lean toward having Jessie.” After Aaron died, her thoughts became muddled. She wanted to become a mother. Yet she had no idea why.

“Great, if you do, have her here.”

She took a long gulp of her Chardonnay. The cops must be looking for Aaron’s accomplice. Her philosophy was out of sight, out of mind. If not for Logan, she had nowhere to hide. Though she wanted to tell Logan how much she respected him, Robin lacked the confidence to do so. “I couldn’t do that to you.”

“Don’t do it for yourself. Do it for your child.”

“I’m indebted to you.” Because Aaron’s death played in her head repeatedly, she worried that if she gave birth, her baby would act as a constant reminder of what had occurred.

“Then make it up to me.”

Considering Logan didn't strike her as the type to say you owe me one, she was at a loss to understand what he was getting at. "How?"

"Has anyone else offered to be her godfather?"

Though she barely knew Logan, he seemed to have a knack for cheering her up. The last time they chatted, they couldn't find Aaron. Despite the awful things she did, he made her feel better about herself. "Thank you. I insist on contributing financially."

"I'm old school. Besides, unless it was legitimately earned, I don't want to get involved."

Displaying empathy for her situation made her feel better. "As his girlfriend, I could make Aaron do anything he wanted to."

He nodded understandingly. "You and your daughter could stay with me as long as you want."

"Thanks to you, I'll stick around until I give birth, then we'll see." Some lucky girl will snatch him up.

"Under the circumstances, do you think liquor is a good idea?"

"It's the first drink I've had since I found out. And the wine relaxes me." Physically, she was as healthy as a pack mule. Emotionally, her heart felt as if it were held together by reinforced concrete.

"If you want, we can shop for baby stuff tomorrow."

Who thought this guy up? Though sweet guys weren't her type, she meant what she said. "You are the nicest man I've ever met."

Chapter 14

With the passing of time

"Do you have any plans for Jessie?" They were in Logan's small living room. Robin was on the couch, which was as comfortable as a park bench. She had propped her legs on the glass coffee table to relieve the pressure. Logan sat opposite her at his desk.

Her belly protruded like a melon. "To graduate from college."

"That's not much of a goal."

Spoken by someone who received a scholarship and will soon graduate with a mathematics degree. She wanted her child to have the same chance at a good life as any other child. "It is to me. The best anyone in my family ever did was graduate from middle school."

“For many kids, the key to school is getting an early jump on it. To ensure she's ready for kindergarten, teach her sight words and read a fairytale to her nightly. Touching on math is also a great idea. If you have a problem teaching Jessie the subject, call the local school and ask them what computer learning program they recommend.”

“What?” That caught her off guard. However, he was not wrong about such matters.

“When we moved, the new school district was much better. Because my mother was too busy to help me, I fell behind in all my subjects except math. As a result, I had to study twice as long as my classmates.”

“I didn’t know that.” She wanted to soak up everything she could to help her daughter achieve what she had failed to do.

“Once I caught up, I never even got a B in any subject again, just A’s.”

“I also never got a B, and it wasn’t because of all those damn A’s.” There was more truth in that than she cared to admit. But with her, it was a matter of her survival. Schools and teachers were sporadic. She often went to school for the free meal or when their heat was turned off.

He laughed, “By the way, do you think anybody in the Crossroads Gang would be interested in how you’re doing?”

“They all would be interested. Aside from Lila, they would want to see me fail, but they all would be interested.” That awkward truth surprised even her.

“Your insight amazes me.”

“Me, too.” With Robin’s mother manipulating her, there wasn’t much breathing space. Since being on her own, Robin has been busy discovering who she has become.

"Education is all about training the mind to reason things out."

Though she wasn't sure what family life was about, she knew what abandonment felt like. She was determined that Jessie would have options she didn't have. "You did okay."

"Not really. Numerous times, I considered quitting. Instead, I got stubborn. While that pigheadedness might result in a screwed-up life, it makes me very employable."

That work ethic must reveal itself in his interviews. Instead of getting into his finer points, she said, "All that says is you know how to go after your priorities."

"Well, if you stay here, we'll both have the time to tutor Jessie."

"I must admit, it would be tough for a single parent." But by hook or crook, she'll do it. Proving she's a much better mother than her mother could ever hope to be. That left her questioning if she was having Jessie for the right reason.

Logan glanced at his smartphone before adding, "I feel you're a survivor."

Though the strong can always survive, they can't survive always. That's why she had to make the right decisions. This concerned her, but "Once I got pregnant, the idea of living on the wrong side of society lost its appeal."

While he talked, his eyes were studying his phone. "Now that you are becoming a mother, you seem more stable."

Life forced upon her what she had subconsciously been leaning towards. Her change began when Logan visited Aaron. She had a conversation with Logan on the beach that echoed in her mind to this day.

Logan's patience gave her a glimpse into who she could become. Despite the awful things she did, the idea that she was a good person was revolutionary. He showed her what the future would look like if she didn't change. "You remember our conversation…"

"I remember all our conversations."

"Well, that opened my eyes." Though she loved Aaron, Robin wasn't sure addicts knew what love was about. Aaron may not have been addicted to drugs, but he nevertheless had an obsession.

What frustrated her most was when her manipulative mother got somewhat clean, she said, 'Sorry.' But 'sorry,' couldn't compensate for all the hurt she caused and would cause again. On the other hand, if Aaron survived, he would likely follow that pattern. And she would wind up in prison because of him. Just like her mother, he would say, 'Sorry.' But that w…Suddenly Robin clutched at her stomach, "Holy crap."

"What?"

"The baby moved inside me," her face glowed.

"Are you okay?"

She nodded. Since her stomach wasn't queasy, she asked, "Will you be here for dinner?"

"Unfortunately, I'm meeting a couple of buddies shortly. We're going to a Japanese joint. They're known for their chicken teriyaki. You know how it got its name, don't you?" Logan glanced at his phone as if he had just arranged to meet.

"No idea."

"He was the first Japanese kamikaze pilot who survived?" he smiled.

"Have a good time." Since it referred to World War 11, she suspected it was an old joke.

Lately, she has not understood him. Though she loved talking to him, he would suddenly change his demeanor. Keeping his distance has become a habit. Not having eaten dinner together in over a week, she knew it was time to move on. She just wished she felt as confident in leaving as she pretended.

Chapter 15

The Plan

"The bank just made what we already knew official. The other shops will also be closed all four days to celebrate the town's birthday." The girls arrived after lunch. They parked in the back. Since the store was empty of customers, they brought in a lot of equipment.

"Here's your ashtray," Robin simply removed the butts, leaving the ashtray empty but dirty.

Nodding, Sofia then lit up, "I dated this guy for several months."

“I’m impressed. I’ve never known you to have a serious relationship.” But Robin was a kid when she fled the area. In that time, Sofia could have changed. Then again, if the past were any indication, she would’ve had the poor soul for lunch.

“It's more like I endured the creep. I did that so know-it-all Richard could brag about his illegal escapades. I’m bringing this up because Cathy thought it would be smart for me to assure you that this job has been well planned.”

Knowing Sofia as she did, Robin said, “So, you dated a guy you didn’t like to learn about banks.”

“If Richard looked at me and not my tits, that muscle-bound lunkhead would have figured out what was going on. Why else would I travel down here so often?”

“I don’t follow you.” Sofia is a copycat thief. And that’s supposed to lend her assurance? Thank God, Cathy was overseeing the operation. Otherwise, her decision to join them would never have come to pass.

“He’s from this neck of the woods.”

“So, you turned a bruiser into a patsy.” Sofia could suck water out of a rock. That’s why she felt sorry, not for Sofia but for the lunkhead.

“Why try figuring out stuff when I could use the sap?”

“You always did.” Sofia acted more like a tough bruiser than the men she knew. Yet men were attracted to her. Perhaps not her, but her body.

“Before the asshole met me, he was two women shy of a threesome. Yet I was amazed he got that close.”

Minus Cathy, Sofia didn't care about anybody. "I hang around people I like. Don't you?"

"Aren't you listening? The jerk knew about banks."

"Of course he did," Robin asked herself what was more frightening, being certifiable or proving it.

"When I fluttered my lashes in awe, he eagerly revealed everything he knew. So, if there's any problem with my plan, blame the asshole."

"You expect me to blame a guy you used if things go haywire." Talking crazy and not because of drugs says a lot.

"I light up my life," Sofia said.

"Someone has to." Sofia's philosophy had always been, 'If you got it, flaunt it.' And as far as men were concerned, she got it.

"My body was closed for pleasure, open for business. He's not the first guy these Egyptian eyes worked their charm on." They were unblinking.

"With you, sex is a currency." There must have been some hanky-panky going on in her family tree, for she's not even Egyptian. Nonetheless, those eyes were as green as summer grass.

"Would you believe the asshole thought he was good in bed because I asked five-minute Richard if he could make it last longer? Proving he couldn't, I stopped using my Xanax."

"Have you dated anyone since?" So, she's weirdly horny. Typically, sex works out the kinks in the relationship. But Sofia always used it like a magic wand.

"The occasional date, but nothing serious."

Robin knew Sofia didn't care much about anyone. "Gee, that's a real shocker."

"It's more due to me than the guys." Her tone lacked sympathy.

"Oh! I know." Once she said it, Robin realized she hadn't dated anyone recently. So perhaps that's more about her than the guy. But then, the men in her life never seemed good for her. Just like Robin's father, they were superficial bastards.

"Boy, are you judgmental?" Though worded as a question, it was a statement.

Despite feeling her words wouldn't make a difference, Robin said them anyway: "I believe God is telling you something. All you need to do is look inward to find it."

"Being busy with bank business, I missed the phone call."

Robin couldn't understand why any guy would be attracted to that cold-blooded witch. Could men be that shallow? As memory kicked in, she recalled that Sofia attracted narcissists. "Sofia, you must have had a heart once."

"That loser would screw a lamppost if it had the right curves. At least with me, Richard had the best months of his life."

She talked about the guy with indifference. "Accepting that as a truism, after the breakup, it must have been followed by the worst months of his life."

"Why should I care? He wasn't much fun unless we both were wasted."

Out of idle curiosity, Robin had to ask, "So, was the guy street-smart?"

"Using him wouldn't have been so easy if he weren't a birdbrain."

Having grown up on the street, that's the first thing Robin would look at. "The way you feel toward him, you should pray he's not one of those men that kiss and tell. That would prove embarrassing."

"That's ironic because where he went, he'd be smart to keep his yap shut."

"Where did he go?" The difference between them lay in Sofia's eyes. Robin saw the rush Sofia felt at the thought of taking advantage of someone.

"He's here in their prison. So, I got the info, just under the wire."

There was not a scintilla of regret for her action.

"Since we are discussing the job, why aren't you practicing with us?" Sofia asked.

"When I'm not working, I'm watching Jessie. I can't leave her alone."

"I'll watch her."

"No, you won't," Robin snapped.

"Then find another way.

"Well, we must wrap up this inspiring conversation. I need to pick up Jessie. She's getting out early today."

"More like an early release," Sofia said.

"That depends on how you view it."

"Then you tell me, how does it feel, having a brat?"

With anyone else, that 'brat' crack would be a figure of speech, "I love it."

"Why?"

"Motherhood gave me purpose. It helped me to turn my life around." However, since joining the girls, her view of things has shifted a bit.

"That's where we differ. The only thing I hate is getting caught."

Her parents shared Sofia's mindset, and their lives lacked meaning. “Then tell me, what do you consider the coolest part of living outside the law?”

“No rules.”

But is the up worth the coming down? “A surefire way to stop the police from harassing you is not to commit the crime. You might even feel better about yourself.”

“I was pregnant once. I sold the terror…”

“Why would you sell your child?” To illustrate how much people loved their kids, Robin knew of only one example where the weaker dominated the stronger. It’s their children.

“I gave birth to mayhem. That brat was demanding and selfish…”

And you’re not? “Babies are.”

“If you are good at motherhood, you won’t be needed when your brat grows up. Given that’s the objective, why bother? This way, it will never need me, and with the money I received, I had a great vacation. They were suckas. To get that whiny brat off my hands, I would’ve given it to them.”

The idea sounded horrifying. The best parts of her day are those simple moments she shares with her daughter. Perhaps because she never experienced that bonding relationship growing up, she still marvels at it. Then again, Sofia is the type of mother who murders her child. So, the kid is better off without her. “I wouldn’t sell Jessie for anything.”

“Why the hell not?”

Maybe this is who she had always been. Maybe resisting a druggie lifestyle is why she had so many problems dealing with her family. However, if she hadn't resisted, like her siblings, her life would have been over before it began. "Because it's not right."

"Did you also add integrity?"

Motherhood had a sobering effect. "Jessie centers me, so yeah."

"I don't like it."

"What don't you like?" But was it the right question? A better question may have been, 'What do you like?'

"I don't like all of it."

Chapter 16

Getting to know Sofia

"So, how is this going to work?" Robin had closed her shop for a couple of hours so they could talk without customers interrupting. And Sofia insisted they meet in the park. Possibly to show off her fur coat.

They sat at a picnic table in an empty park, drinking Coke from a can. However, Sofia, who worships at Jose Cuervo's house, drank from her flask. Like a tough guy, Sofia stood with one leg on the bench, a cigarette dangling from her lips, a flask in her hand.

"We will stash the take in a safe place and wait for things to cool down," Cathy said.

"Why not get rid of everything before the break-in is discovered?" Upon reflection, Robin realized it would be highly suspicious if she were to make tracks promptly. If possible, it was best to let the police question her and the leasing office kick her out before splitting town.

"I agree with Robin," Lila said.

"The fence I know won't be in town," Cathy said. The wind, combined with an overcast, made it a bleak day. Occasionally, the sun slipped out of the clouds.

Based on Cathy's past, Robin thought she took no pleasure in wronging a friend. However, when greed conflicts with her morals, Cathy conveniently allows Sofia to betray her friends. "And you're waiting for the fence because you gave your word."

"He's been fair before, and here, a few points are a lot of dough," Cathy said.

It took the girls a while to broach the subject of money, and Robin seized the moment. "Mentioning dough, I'm in dire straits..."

"We agreed that when the job's done, we'll lend you enough to cover your immediate expenses," Sofia said.

Sofia occasionally cultivated a poker face. Particularly when her intentions were less than honorable. Hence, Robin had to rely on her instincts, just as she had in years past. "I just hope the take is as big as you think."

Wide-eyed, Sofia said, "Hey, when I go, I want to have so much money that I'll take some with me."

"Where we're going, you can't spend it," Lila said.

"So, what? I didn't spend it here." As if she had just realized what she had said was clever, Sofia smiled.

"Well, after this job, we'll be semi-retired," Cathy said.

"Translated, you'll be retired until the money runs out." Robin had no idea if that meant a few months or several years.

"Of course, it's until then. But I'll zero in on another bank to rob," Sofia said.

There it was—reason number one to get out of Dodge. They'll never stop robbing until they're apprehended. To plead to a reduced charge, Sofia would have no qualms about giving Robin up. "So, you'll live high on the hog for a while."

"Who knows, I might even visit the Hague. Having an uncle convicted there, I'm curious what the place is about," Sofia said.

Robin wondered if Sofia wanted to visit the Hague because all things criminal infatuated her. "The way you're going, I'm sure you'll make it."

Oblivious to Robin's barb, Sofia said, "Best of all, we'll have the blueprint on how to pull the next big caper."

Or a pattern in which the cops can link the crimes together. Being dragged back into that seedy world brought up all kinds of emotions. Particularly, when this wasn't a petty crime. "So, do you have any male friends you're not trying to use?"

"Men are disposable idiots," Sofia said.

Excluding Cathy, everyone was disposable. Half joking, "Then try women."

"You know, Robin, I'm never sure when you're kidding." Sofia's face twisted into something ugly.

"Sorry. It must be because of that famous humor the Germans are known for." Though her father was Italian, her mother was German. Over the years, it became apparent that Sofia had many of her mother's traits. Even so, it was a disproportionate reaction to the 'try women' comment.

"What do you plan to do with your portion?" Lila asked.

"Make sure Jessie is the first person in my family to attend college." Robin wanted Jessie to be busy dating, planning her prom, and deciding which college to attend, rather than worrying about protecting her mother from the cops.

"Why is that so important?" Sofia asked.

"Because it beats a life spent sporadically in prison." Robin is determined to give Jessie options that she never had.

"My 5-year sentence resulted in less than two years in prison," Sofia said.

"What were you in for?"

Sofia shrugged, "According to the arresting officer, not using my head. I hooked up with the wrong slimeball. That bastard gave me up so fast it surprised the detective."

Though the answer was evasive, she decided to go with the flow. "So, you are on parole."

She shook her head and said, "Due to overcrowding and other issues, I was released outright."

Robin wondered what the other issues were. "Gee, some girls have all the luck."

Chapter 17

Doing the prep work

In the evening, Cathy, Sofia, and Lila went into the attic. Sofia used a stud finder and a small rotary saw to cut through the drywall near the back of the attic. She removed the insulation and cut through the wall on the opposite side of the 2x4s.

They went from unit to unit, taping the vents facing the street with cardboard. As expected, the jewelry shop had affixed stickers to the walls indicating that the attic floor was equipped with a high-tech security system to deter burglars.

When they reached the wall protecting the bank, it was not flimsy at all. Furthermore, gaining access to the vault through the duct would require a unique tool that they had seen in the

movies, but didn't know whether it existed. Of course, Cathy could contact a toolmaker the gang occasionally dealt with.

As they returned, Lila removed the covers over the vents. Sofia patched up the holes as best she could. Using a battery-operated nail gun, she affixed furring strips slightly inside the 2x4 studs. Then she attached the Velcro to the furring strip. Next, she affixed the Velcro's mate to the detached Sheetrock, so that it fit flush with the wall.

Finally, Sofia grabbed a battery-operated vacuum with suction cups. This allowed her to jockey the far-side Sheetrock into position. As Sofia had done to the far side, she attached the furring strips and Velcro to the near side. Then she put the insulation and Sheetrock back in place. It would be evident if someone moseyed down to that end and looked at the wall. However, since shops used the basement, not the attic, for storage, it was a risk worth taking.

"Okay, we have things to go over," Cathy said once back in Robin's office.

"Like what?" Robin was at her desk doing paperwork. Upon Jessie going to sleep, she paid the neighbor's daughter to watch her.

"We need a couple of items."

"Is there a problem?" As the big day inched closer, Robin grew more apprehensive. Conversely, she eagerly counted the days because it was a massive haul. Without a doubt, she was conflicted.

"None that can't be overcome." Sofia was busy putting on her hat and the gold bracelet she had placed on Robin's desk.

"Are you sure? Because the way I'm looking at it, we have only one shot to get it right." Knowing how fixated Cathy seemed, Robin found it hard to believe Sofia wasn't spot on.

"You're looking at it wrong. Don't view it as a risk. View it as an opportunity," Sofia said.

While Robin continued to talk to Sofia, Cathy joined Lila in carrying equipment, including bottled water and deck planks, into the attic. After completing the job, they would dispose of items such as empty water bottles and cheap machinery.

Items like the portable battery-operated magnetic holder the girls intend to use on the bank's steel wall would be left in the attic. Once the components snap into position, taking them apart would be troublesome. If for another job they need one, they would order another built.

"Really, and how will you spend all that time in the vault without smoking?" Hoping to find a flaw in their plan, or something they hadn't yet considered, Robin was throwing darts.

"Nicotine gum," Sofia said.

"Looks like you figured everything out," except that the police aren't stupid.

"That's why I invested my time with that dumbass, Richard…"

"I would rather you had invested your time in a guy who's not a dumbass and didn't get caught." Just like when they were teenagers, Sofia's overconfidence gnawed at Robin.

"The bonehead robbed a jewelry store. Then, he tried to pawn the pricey pieces at another shop in the same small town. As luck would have it, the manager he approached just left the other store."

"What?" It was hard to imagine how a skilled thief could do something so idiotic.

"Richard was brilliant. However, he got so wasted towards the end that he wasn't working on all his thrusters."

So, Richard became cocky. "Did he rob banks?"

"The beauty is we're using his template, so only a few cops will put it together. Because the jerk is in prison, he has the perfect alibi."

"Big deal, they'll look for a copycat," and Sofia dated the guy. Her whole plan depended on nothing going wrong. Luckily, methodical Cathy was really in charge.

"It's not like I sat down with the simpleton and talked shop. I acted so mesmerized that noodle brain couldn't help himself."

"Who would'a thunk." With Sofia, what counts is what she does, not what she says. It was beneath Sofia to play up to anyone when they hung out together. That made Robin wonder whether she had changed. Upon reflection, Sofia could have changed, but more likely it wasn't for the better.

Chapter 18

Practicing

They donned coveralls and rubber gloves. Lila braced the drill against her body to bore a hole. Because they were drilling through metal, she wore goggles. Suddenly, her wrist snapped, and she lost control of the high-speed drill, which landed with a loud thump. “Ouch.”

“Drill got away from you again?” Cathy had rented a house, and they were in the basement. She paid for a locksmith to supply them with knockoffs of the bank’s safety deposit boxes. Each had a set of four boxes secured to a table, anchored against the wall. Upon finishing, they slid the box’s face out and inserted a new set. Then, they began drilling the locks out all over again.

"It just nicked me. These dumb drills aren't easy to operate." Lila had long, athletic limbs. But she was so mechanically uncoordinated that contractors would pay her not to work for them.

"You should wear wrist supports," Sofia said.

"I've been thinking, how will I climb a rope?" Getting down will be easy. It's the escape that counts.

Sofia jumped all over that. "For God's sake, it's a rope ladder."

Impulsive Sofia has the patience of a moose in heat, Lila thought. "I feel like I'm in basic training."

"We all feel that way," Cathy said.

"It will take forever to open all the locks. Assuring us of the more expensive pieces, we should open the larger boxes first." In case we don't finish.

"That's a great idea," Sofia said.

Because of how Lila managed this drill, she asked, "You honestly think we'll be able to open all the boxes?"

"Duh, you think that could be why we're practicing?" Sofia said.

Sofia wouldn't dare talk to Cathy like that. "Come to think of it, if that happened when we're in the vault, it might create a problem."

As if understanding exactly what Lila was getting at, Cathy said, "Don't fret. I have putty and touch-up paint to minimize any accidents. While imperfect, it should delay any action until the bank realizes what happened."

Nodding, Lila asked, “Why isn’t Robin here?”

“Her babysitter is caring for her sick aunt,” Cathy said.

“I’ll watch Jessie.” It will be fun, Lila thought.

“Why, Lila, I didn’t know you had maternal instincts,” Sofia said.

There’s a lot you don’t know about me. “Robin needs the training, and if this is what I need to do, I’ll do it.”

“Lila’s daycare is open 24/7,” Cathy kidded.

“That’s me. Thief by night, nanny by day.”

“Have you ever watched a brat before?” Sofia asked.

“How hard could it be? I’ll take her to *McDonald's,*” Lila said. She used to enjoy talking to kids. Since Robin came back into her life, bits and pieces of her past surfaced, along with the fun it once was.

“And what do you plan on doing the rest of the time?” Sofia asked.

“I’ll be with her the entire day?” She wasn’t sure how to entertain Jessie for that long. However, it couldn’t be worse than being here.

“Robin told me not many people relished browsing along the strip in cold weather, so she closes on Sundays,” Cathy said.

“Then I’ll watch Jessie this Sunday.” Lila used to watch her brother, Marek, when her grandparents went away. That was when she could enjoy the house without her grandfather sneaking peeks at Marek and herself.

“Good, then she’ll be able to get in shape,” Sofia said.

"She looks in better shape than we are." Old friends possess the fondest memories.

"I volunteered. She turned me down," Sofia said.

Surprise, surprise. All that self-absorbed psycho would do is toot her own horn. While bragging, she might even show her the gun she lugs around. "If it were up to you to spite children, you would outlaw *Mr. Softee* ice cream. Possibly turn them on to tequila."

"Hey. Using it as a flavoring would encourage those brats to drink more milk," Sofia said.

That reminded Lila of what her grandfather once did. He got her drunk because he believed an intoxicated ten-year-old Lila would be easy to control. That was, until Lila gave back her lunch all over him. "Why would you offer your services?"

"Because I knew she would say no. This way, I get credit for offering without doing."

"I would have offered my services. However, unlike Sofia, there was an outside shot Robin would say yes," Cathy joked.

"Have you ever babysat?" Lila asked. Unlike Sofia, Cathy is a psycho who can be trusted within reason.

"I'm not sure any of us know anything regular people do," Cathy lightheartedly said.

"Speak for yourself. That brat could learn a lot from me," Sofia said.

"That's what Robin was afraid of," Lila said playfully, yet meant it. She wouldn't trust Sofia to watch a kid any more than she would trust her grandfather.

As Sofia lit up, Cathy said, "Must you always smoke in my presence?"

"I promise not to exhale."

"Why don't you enjoy your cancer stick outside?" Though Cathy structured it as a question, it wasn't.

Sofia walked up the stairs and out the front door. Just as a man strolled by, she cupped her hands to protect the flame from the breeze. Striking the match, she took a drag and gazed around the empty street. Immediately, she called Cathy, "As you suggested, I went out for a smoke, and a man was walking by, then he disappeared. I'm concerned he could have snuck into the house. Could you check and see if it's safe for me to return?"

"You're the one carrying a pistol."

"So!"

"So, isn't an answer."

"I used it for protection. It's a frightening world out there." Sofia said, eyes darting around the empty street like a frightened animal.

"You act like a vampire that's afraid of sunlight."

Chapter 19

Lila watches Jessie

They were in a *McDonald's*. It looked like every other *McDonald's*, but that was the franchise's intention. Jessie had a Happy Meal—four-piece chicken McNuggets with fries, chocolate milk, ice cream, and a free toy. Lila ordered a small vanilla milkshake.

"Should I call you Jessie?" Like many people, Lila wasn't fond of her name.

"My name is Jessie Brooklyn Turner. But you can call me Jessie."

Smiling, she said, "I always believe in asking what someone wishes to be called."

"So, you're an old friend of mommy's," Jessie said while playing with the toy she had put together.

"Not that old." Lila thought Robin and she would be friends forever.

“Do grown-ups keep the same friends?”

“What do you mean?”

“I had a best friend in kindergarten, Suzie Marie. When I entered the first grade, she was in another class, and Rebecca became my best friend. I thought you switched friends every year.”

“Some friendships last a lifetime.” However, Robin needed a change in scenery.

“Then why haven’t I heard about you?”

That was a damn good question. They were inseparable until they weren’t. Robin gave Lila her new number, but Lila misplaced it. She suspected Robin's pregnancy made her eager to sever ties with the gang. And that's why Robin never called her.

Despite knowing that what she said would go over Jessie’s head, she said, “Your mother moved away to find herself, which left me lost. That happened when Arron died.”

“He was my daddy.”

Getting what Jessie meant, Lila said, “You mean he is your daddy.”

“He died. So, he was my daddy.”

“He’ll be your father forever and ever.” Because Lila had no idea who her father was, she felt empathy for her.

“I’m not sure. A boy in school keeps telling me I don’t have a daddy.”

Lila undoubtedly heard Jessie’s real concern. “That would make you feel like hell.”

“How do you know?”

“I grew up in hell.” Lila lived with her grandparents because her mom received a life sentence for killing a John. Her grandparents didn’t give a hoot about her or her brother. They

took them in because they wouldn't allow other family members to think her mom turned into a prostitute due to bad parenting. In fact, her grandmother once proclaimed it couldn't be because of her, since she never mentioned sex in their home.

"What happened?"

"Never seeing my mom, three kids in school constantly accused me of being motherless. That is, until I stood up for myself."

"Yeah, what did you do?"

"I beat them up." When the word got out that three boys needed medical attention, the other kids who occasionally teased her were fleeing by platoon, brigade, and division.

"At the same time?"

They falsely believe that being a boy makes them automatically tougher. But she was born with gas in her limbs. "Did you ever hear the expression, 'Don't count your chickens…'

"Before you count your cows."

"That's not exactly where I was going." Upon Lila telling the principal, a boy punched her. One of their mothers shot back, 'You did a lot of punching, yourself.' Lila snappily responded, 'I did it to defend myself. Kenny did it for power.'

And that's when the principal flexed his muscle and suspended everyone involved. At that moment, Lila learned not to say anything voluntarily. Instead, she began keeping her mouth shut.

"Where did you learn to fight?"

"Public school." In the school she attended, knowing how to protect yourself was a necessity.

"For real?"

"Everyone has a mommy and a daddy." At least Jessie knows who her father is and has a mom who cares for her.

"But he died before I was born. That's why Cody said he couldn't be my daddy." She took a bite of a fry.

"It takes time to have a child." Lila suddenly realized how much she had missed the everyday connection with ordinary people. She wanted that back.

"Did he love me?"

"Aaron loved you before the lump ever appeared in your mother's belly." Whereas her grandfather acted as if he were too young to be a grandfather. But his dirty thoughts shifted to Lila once the state incarcerated her mother.

At the age of eleven, she began to carry a kitchen knife. Though Lila missed, just the sight of a carving blade being lunged in anger ended her grandfather's nightly visits. And an end to him playing doctor with her little brother.

"Why?"

"Because you're his." Lila wondered if her father knew of her. Since her mom was a streetwalker, it most likely wouldn't have mattered to him. Chances were that her father's best friend was the neighborhood pimp. Therefore, she knew only her mother's side of the family.

Then again, based on her mother's side, she was probably better off not knowing her father or his family.

"How could I be his when he never met me?"

"Without him, you wouldn't be here." Lila was getting to know Jessie and her insecurities. From what she saw, Robin was a good mother.

"Are you sure?"

"Of course." Not knowing how Robin would deal with it made her skittish. Nevertheless, she enjoyed talking to Jessie so much that envy scratched her.

"Then why does Cody make fun of me?" Jessie asked while demolishing the ice cream.

Not believing in talking down to kids, she cautiously said, "You don't have to take that garbage from anyone. Of course, the school expelled me because of what I did."

"Maybe I won't take it either. We are moving, so what could the school do to me?"

"When?" Lila was hoping to stay in touch with Robin. Now, she felt she was saying aloha—simultaneously hello and goodbye.

"Mommy didn't tell me. We are visiting Uncle Logan first."

"Isn't that your father's brother?" From everything Lila heard about him, he was an upstanding guy.

Nodding, "Mommy told me he has a black belt in kickboxing."

Lila thought she also had a black belt, but in shopping. "That would make him tough."

"To beat up those kids, you must be tough." Then, she finished the French fries.

"Tough enough." Watching Jessie eat made Lila hungry. She'd get a hamburger if she could remember where she put her credit card. Frustrated, she searched her pockets.

"So, no one messes with you?"

"That's not true lately. However, after our chat, I intend to make it so." Taking Sofia's guff isn't friendship, it's submission. Sofia will soon discover what 'tough enough' means if she doesn't get off her back. Not liking her role, Lila was amazed at how a little girl managed to reach her.

"When Mommy introduced you, you didn't smile. So, I thought you must be mean. But you aren't mean. You are very nice. You really are."

Taken aback, she was momentarily speechless. Then, an idea crossed her mind. To give Robin an occasional break, she said, "Maybe we can do this again."

"That's Mommy's job. Won't she get mad?"

Again, Lila was momentarily speechless. But then, when she needed to speak up, she tended to hesitate. "Oh, I get it. Your mommy loves to do the work of 20 people without a break."

"Mommy said you would take me to the movies. Can we see a PG movie?"

"Why didn't you ask your mother?" Lila hadn't even told her what her choices were.

"Because she would say no."

"Then let's pick a movie, she would say, yes."

"Well, I'm going to play now," she said, leaving two Chicken McNuggets and half of her chocolate milk. She removed her shoes and ran into the caged play area.

Lila sat there, feeling like a jealous bitch, at how Robin had turned her life around. If she had Robin's cell number, she would tell her what a great girl Jessie was. She could call Cathy and have her put Robin on. That's if she remembered where she put her phone. Perhaps she left it in the car.

Chapter 20

Robin Practices

"Every team member must be able to do everything, or they shouldn't be getting a full share," Sofia said. They were in the basement.

"You always were a female Mussolini," Robin said.

"I expect excellence. What's wrong with that?"

Her terminology was off, as it wasn't what Sofia expected. It's her attitude that rubs people the wrong way. "Operating a high-speed drill has to be difficult for Lila."

"What are you, her protector?"

"Is the drill too difficult for you to manage?" Cathy asked.

She had to admire Cathy's synthetic compassion. But then Cathy could read the phonebook and sound sympathetic. She viewed Cathy as a lovely lady, standing with the aid of a cane while pointing a gun at her. Robin adjusted her goggles. Then she picked up the drill. "Don't worry about me. I can handle anything Sofia can dish out."

Robin braced her body against the high-speed drill. Despite its control problems, the industrial bit managed to drill a hole. Placing the bit on the second lock of that box, she made another hole more quickly.

Sofia had clipped the sides to the face, thus allowing Robin to slide the box out and open the lid. Next, Robin removed the locks. Momentarily, she stared at the costume jewelry, then tossed it into one of the plastic bags she had supplied to the team. Since there was nothing else in it, she quickly turned the box upside down so the shavings would fall out.

Closing the lid, she slid the box back in and popped the new locks into place. With her thumb, she pressed the lock. This automatically released the spring, securing the lock in place.

"We need to do it again. And by 'we,' I mean you," Sofia said.

"I think not." She refused to give that czar the satisfaction.

"What?"

"This exercise aims to ensure every team member can do their job. On the first attempt, I succeeded. If there is something else, let's move on." If not, she'd join Jessie and Lila.

"I noticed you looked at the jewelry you found in the box," Sofia said.

What's with her, Robin thought. "I'm not allowed to look?"

"It robs us of valuable time. All I want is for you to put it in the bag. After the job, you can spend all the time browsing through the stuff."

Surprisingly, she's right. Women often spend a great deal of time admiring a gorgeous piece of jewelry or an attractive garment. "I was amazed at how chintzy the jewelry looks. I won't waste time again."

"It doesn't matter to me if they are dollar-store diamonds. Just toss them into the bag and move on."

"Got it," bitch. Taking orders from someone who wouldn't give her the time of day felt weird.

"I rub you wrong, don't I?" It sounded more like a statement than a question.

Chapter 21

Robin voices her disdain.

Well, she makes it hard to like her. She usually would not say this. However, except for Cathy, Sofia didn't care what anyone thought. In Robin's book, this made her un-insultable. "You do have that effect on me."

"We have never been close."

They had never gotten to this point before. Then again, considering Sofia would never change, what would it accomplish? "Maybe because while growing up, I received more empathy from Publishers Clearing House than I ever got from you. Yet, you demand people treat you like royalty."

"Not to mention you hate taking orders from me."

"Who likes taking orders?" Growing up, she had enough of that from her father, who, like Sofia, acted like 'Ming the Merciless.'

"Just keep in mind when someone screws me, they have to look over their shoulder so often they'll need a neck brace," Sofia said.

Her tone reminded Robin of a TV version of a Nazi torturer. "As I mentioned to you years back, people only screwed you because they wanted to beat you to the punch."

"I don't understand." A smug look followed.

"I think you do." Instead of acknowledging that fact, she majored in historical fiction.

Sofia's left eye twitched. "Don't test me. These are your two warnings. Your first and your last."

Robin wondered who she stole that line from. "Right, that's because trust has always been the hallmark of our relationship."

"Despite what people say about you, I consider you a friend…"

That absurd comment caused Robin to say, "It's so nice of you to lie to me, but no one here believes that."

"Just like Cathy, I don't let friendships get in the way of business." She said without even an eye blink.

"Speaking of friends outside of Cathy, do you have any girls over for a fun time? Because I once knew a man who bragged to me that he never had anyone over to his house except for business. After a few drinks, the guy complained that he didn't have much of a social life. Gee, I wonder why?"

"What's your point?"

That answered her unasked question. "There's a wizard from the land of Oz that gave the Tin Man a heart…"

"I have a heart. After this score, I plan to address that facet of my life," Sofia said.

Those who plan to change, rather than trying to change, exist in a world of contradictions. "The idea of you converting is worth a family field trip. Let me know when that occurs. Jessie and I will visit."

"Can't wait."

"Get serious. What makes you think you could wake up one morning and become someone else?" Robin tried to have her mother look within. The more she tried, the angrier her mother became. But that's how a deeply flawed person reacts. Her mother died in denial of who she had become, and so will Sofia.

"So, you were put on this planet to enlighten me."

"Though friends may not make the world go around, they make the trip worth it." Then again, perhaps friendships are too complex for Sofia to accept.

"I've consistently been able to achieve the goals I set."

Unfortunately, she means criminal goals, rather than moral goals. Everyone knows prison can be a terrific school for felons. For Sofia, lockup must have been crime-central. "Minus run-ins here and there with the law."

"Unavoidable detours."

“Making plans for living is what you do when you’re imprisoned. Since you aren’t, why wait?” Because of her family background, Robin was familiar with druggies. Addicts aren’t psychopaths, but they often act remarkably similar for different self-serving reasons.

“My decision is not based on your timing.”

“But compassion costs nothing.” Robin wondered why she was spending time explaining when Sofia was indifferent. But then Robin cared. As a child, the one thing she wanted was communication. However, she was excluded from family conversations, perhaps because her viewpoint collided with the mindset of addicts.

“So, you think you know me.”

Here she had a question that needed no answer. “Do you remember Candy?”

Sofia’s eyes revealed that the question offended her. “Why can’t you bury the dead?”

When Sofia disagrees, she lies, misdirects, and is disingenuous. For her, it’s not about exchanging ideas. It's all about winning. But here, the question was more telling than the answer. “All she wanted was to be your friend.”

There was no misinterpreting Sofia’s annoyance. “I have friends. Why should I care what a girl from Mayberry, USA, wants?”

“Aside from Cathy, who else?” With her family dying when Robin was a kid, she never had much of an opportunity to bring up the past. Although her family wouldn’t have listened, it may have given her some closure. Here, she had that opportunity.

“Sherry.” Her eyes looked as hard as marbles.

She spoke with certainty. “Palling around with your drug dealer doesn’t make her your friend. It makes her your co-conspirator.”

While holding onto her hard eyes, Sofia said, “In your opinion.”

“Did you go to Candy’s funeral service? Because I did.” Like her mother’s funeral service, no one from the Crossroad Gang paid their respects, except for Lila and her. True to her colors, Sofia distanced herself from Candy’s suicide despite her being a contributing factor.

“Gee, I was busy selling Girl Scout cookies,” Sofia sarcastically said.

“Why did you and Sherry use her?” Sofia dehumanized her victims. Just like Robin’s father often had.

“I never said we did.” There was an undercurrent of resentment in her voice.

Among gang members, it was common knowledge. “You didn’t have to.”

“If you must know, I didn’t intend to use her. But she was ready to be plucked. Letting someone else do it would have robbed me of the fun.” Sofia’s face glowed.

“Like hell she was.” Seeing Sofia acting proud grated Robin.

There was an uncomfortable silence before Sofia said, “Why are you still angry over the past? Let the dead rest.”

Why people lie is often more telling than the lie itself. “Thankfully, it's anger that made me change.”

“Look, we all bear some responsibility. So, it’s best to move on,” Cathy said.

“But I can’t move on. To heal, you must remember.” So, instead of blocking it out, Robin locked it in.

“If you’re looking for redemption, I have better things to do with my time,” Sofia said.

“All you care about is tequila,” Robin said.

“I didn’t say that.” Her tone left no doubt as to her position.

“That’s exactly what you said. It's just not what you wanted me to hear. Has anybody tried to drop a glacier on you yet?” Her voice, while not threatening, was forceful.

“If you liked her, why didn’t you become her friend?” Sofia’s voice was elevated.

That hit a nerve. But then Robin shouldn’t have left herself exposed. Though Robin wanted to help her, she didn’t want her as a friend. Because the two were inseparable, she kept her distance, a decision she regrets.

She now views it as if you saw a hippo stepping on a mouse and stayed neutral. It doesn’t feel neutral to the mouse. Talking more to herself, she said, “I wasn’t a big fan of hers. Still, I would never throw a pizza party over someone taking their own life.”

“It was just a coincidence.”

“Coincidences are always interesting. Especially when the theme was the wicked witch is dead.” She acts like that is common. Perhaps for Sofia it is.

“That was taken out of context.”

“How about putting it in context?” Even Cathy, Sofia’s mirror image, without the rough spots, refused to treat Candy like a mark.

“You must have been aware she was loopy,” Sofia said.

“Then don’t bother with her.” Sofia’s actions were so flawed that she couldn’t even fabricate an answer.

"Let me tell you why I…"

Regardless of what Sofia thought, Robin made her point. "Never mind."

"Never mind?" Sofia frowned.

Robin felt Sofia would jockey for position rather than be truthful. "My ears are hurting enough."

Sofia's face twisted into a malevolent smear. "I'm going to tell you anyway. She was my sister."

"What?" Robin couldn't believe her ears. Knowing Sofia, it may or may not be true.

"Well, half-sister. My father couldn't keep it in his pants if he had a chastity belt strapped on."

Sofia's words momentarily hung there. If true, it was a rare display of honesty. "I met Candy's Mother at the funeral. The poor lady was devastated. She cried the entire time I was there."

Sofia made a derisive sound before saying, "It served that bitch for what she did. I would never sleep with a married man."

Since Sofia slept with a guy to learn about bank robbery, she was uncertain about the validity of the statement. Despite her doubts, she grudgingly contemplated displaying compassion where none existed.

Cathy interjected, "Instead of bickering, why don't you bury the hatchet?"

"How?" Robin had no idea how they could ever do that, but it ended the spat. And she appreciated that.

"Have a drink with her at a local watering hole," Cathy said.

Trying to lighten the situation, Robin said, "Make that a double."

Chapter 22

Finalizing things

"Given we'll be busy from the time the bank closes till it reopens, you might want to take uppers," Cathy said.

"No sleep." Being that Robin is likely the first person the police will interview, overdosing on drugs was out of the question. At least, no illegal drugs.

"A nap here and there, that's it," Cathy said.

"I'll figure something out." Aside from instructing Robin on what to do, Sofia had been noticeably silent throughout the session. That compelled Robin to conclude she was wrong. Sofia isn't un-insultable.

"Who's going to look after your daughter?" Cathy asked.

"The school is busing students to the nation's capital. To educate kids about the pilgrims' arrival in the 17th century and why Thanksgiving is part of our culture. Jessie will visit the historical sites, including meeting a congressman." They offered the trip to students with good grades. Logan was right. It pays to tutor children before they enter kindergarten.

"At the age of six?"

"Would you believe it? They're explaining the moral fiber this nation was built on." Although doing it over Thanksgiving was unusual, it fit their theme, and the timing was ideal for Robin.

"From politicians?" Cathy asked.

Well, they stated reasons, not their actual motives. "It's a different world. Not at all the street life we grew up in."

"Aren't you worried your daughter will grow up being gullible?"

"Hopefully, the friends she attracts will be trustworthy." Not the battles Robin had to contend with among gang members.

"And we aren't?" Sofia asked.

Like a petulant child, Sofia speaks. Robin's head swiveled in her direction. "What are you suffering from, spasms of lucidity? The other day, you admitted sleeping with a guy to find out how to rob a bank."

"The peabrain was sent up the river because he was wasted," Sofia said.

Robin would bet Sofia never told him he was losing it. Then again, towards the end, she told her mother that the drugs were dumbing down her ability to think. As Robin feared, her mother grew angry with her. “Yet he was coherent enough to pass along his knowledge.”

As if she didn’t wish to go there, Sofia abruptly pivoted. “I don’t think the problem is getting into the safety deposit boxes. It should be easier than getting into the vault where they keep the cash.”

Given her drugged-up family, not to mention her 6-year-old daughter, Robin was used to jumping from one subject to another. “How do you know which boxes to open?”

“Duh, we’ll start with the larger ones first. We'll stop to clean up several hours before the bank is scheduled to open, even if we aren’t done.”

Dear Lord, Robin thought. Given the disinfectant supplies in her office closet, Sofia wants the vault to be cleaner than her apartment. “I’m not a maid service.”

“For this to work, there must be no sign of a break-in.”

“When the box holders complain, the bank will get a hint.” Still, it would pose an interesting dilemma.

“Thinking they’re perfect, in the beginning, their bean counters will ignore the customer complaints. By the time those arrogant pricks finally realize what happened, valuable days will be lost.”

“You’re giving a lot of weight to the first 48 hours.” She wasn’t sure if the first 48 hours began when the crime was committed or when the police discovered it. Nevertheless, the advantage of delaying an investigation can’t be overstated.

"You don't get it. Without a timeline, how can they build a case?"

"Don't fool yourself. Although the method is new, the crime is as old as time." Why do crooks always believe they can outsmart the world?

"So what? According to the law, hunches don't count."

"Ever commit a crime, that everything goes as planned?" Robin's father was once convicted on circumstantial evidence, even though criminal cases were supposed to hinge on the high bar of what a reasonable person would conclude. But he looked guilty, and despite not being part of the law, that fact should never be discounted.

"Stop it! I'm not in the mood to feel down," Sofia said.

Chapter 23

Showtime!

"It's showtime," Sofia announced, then removed her floppy hat. Wandering over to Robin's desk, she removed her gold bracelet and placed it next to her hat.

Just like forensic police do at a crime scene, they donned white coveralls, gloves, and goggles. Fortunately, the temperature was comfortable for their work. Once in the attic, Sofia removed the Sheetrock panel and the insulation. Then she placed the battery-operated vacuum with three suction cups on the far side and jiggled the Sheetrock free.

They saved time by storing the planks in Robin's attic. Cathy closed the larger gaps on the floor with a nail gun. Again, to block the lantern light from shining outside, they taped up the vents facing Main Street as they made their way to the bank.

The girls had a custom-made, battery-powered magnetic holder. It was built in components to make it easier to carry. Even in pieces, getting into the attic was a nightmare. Heavy straps were fastened to support beams. The assembled device was then placed on the steel partition.

“Before I begin, all of you should grab those fire extinguishers. Sparks will fly every which way. The attic is like a tinderbox. If anything catches fire, promptly put it out,” Sofia said.

The women scampered about, making sure any spark was instantly smothered. Gradually, the blowtorch made an oval hole in the steel wall large enough to pass through. With the aid of the magnetic holder, the team cautiously eased the thick steel plate aside. Cathy entered the unit with a fire extinguisher in hand, prepared to douse any potential fire on the other side. Once the steel plate was secured, they turned off the magnetic holder.

Upon entering, the massive ductwork wasn’t difficult to spot. Immediately, Sofia applied the blowtorch to the thickened galvanized sheet metal. Then, she taped the edges so the women wouldn’t cut themselves and leave DNA evidence.

Crawling in, Sofia spray-painted a line leading to the vault. So, coming and going was easy. The unique tool Cathy had made was a telescopic device with a magnetic screwdriver that curved around. The sleek design ran on a single AA battery. It permitted Sofia to reach through the vent. With a flip of a switch, she could electronically pop up a magnifying mirror and turn on the light or collapse it.

Once they confirmed the type of screw, Cathy inserted the correct bit. Like in Mission Impossible, she slid a button backward to unscrew it. She put each screw removed against the

duct's wall. When only a couple of screws remained, Cathy held the vent in place with pliers. After the last screw was removed, Cathy slanted the grill into the duct, placing it beside the screws.

Then, Sofia secured a long rope ladder to 2x4s on each side of the vent and ran it through the ductwork. She also installed a pulley with a slidable extended arm. Connecting a wheel made it easier to lower or lift the equipment. Wearing headlamps, they stepped down and turned on battery-powered lanterns. The dim light casts uneven shadows.

Before starting, Sofia seized her new status, becoming the instructor rather than a student. She lectured the girls on potential pitfalls, delivering a monotonous pep talk. The team inserted earplugs to muffle the sound of the drill.

After boring the holes, to Robin's delight, the replacement spring action locks performed as practiced. Per Sofia's instructions, they didn't spend time on anything that looked like it contained just papers.

Although they might glance at a piece, they wasted no time admiring the jewelry. Even the boxes with thick envelopes, which they suspected of containing cash, were tossed into their trash bag without a second glance. Although each box took time, they made steady progress.

When one of the girls was about to crash, she returned to Robin's shop, set the timer, and lay on the cot Cathy secured. After a power nap, she returned. Cathy also bought breakfast stuff, bread, cold cuts, and salad kits. She kept it in the fridge in Robin's back office. When she finished, the girl rejoined the team and continued drilling.

Because there was no sunlight, Cathy put a portable clock on the floor, which also showed the day. Sporadically, Sofia would bark an order. That aside, they were just as they rehearsed, tackling the task.

When the stainless-steel bit became dull, they tossed it and replaced it with a new one. Batteries were constantly being charged in Robin's office. It was grueling work. The only thing that kept them from walking out was the payday that would soon follow.

Chapter 24

Problem

When Lila placed the drill on the next box, it spun out of her hand. On the way down, it slammed her foot before rolling onto the floor. Although their research leaned towards the bank not having a sound-activating device, there was a slim chance they were wrong.

The girls suspected that if they had installed such a device, the high-speed drills would have triggered an alarm. Even so, they looked relieved when they didn't hear anything, at least not from inside the vault. Nevertheless, that didn't comfort Lila as she hobbled around.

"Do you have any ice packs?" Cathy asked

"No. Wait. I have bags of frozen vegetables I microwave when Jessie visits so she can eat something healthy."

"Why don't you take her back and apply the bag before it swells?" Cathy said in a caring tone.

"I had a wrist problem last year, so I also have an Ace Bandage," Robin said.

Climbing up the rope ladder proved an ordeal. They were only several hours from having all the boxes open. So, while Robin helped Lila limp back, her eyes scanned the attic for items that didn't belong there. Once in the office, they took off their overalls, then she helped Lila sit on a sheet covering the cot and raised her leg onto the step stool.

"Do you think I fractured my toe?" They removed their earplugs.

"There's no point in seeing Urgent Care. All they would do is prescribe pain pills." Robin removed her goggles.

"When we return to the house, I'll get some from Sofia." Upon Lila removing her goggles, you could see the mark the protective gear made around her eyes.

"She has them?" Robin unlaced Lila's shoe and wrapped a frozen bag of peas around the injured area. The Ace Bandage held it in place.

"You'll be surprised what she has."

So, despite being able to drink like a fish, she gobbles up drugs and doesn't show it. "You know, of all the gang members I thought would still be with, those whackos, you were the last."

"I was with Cathy, and she's easy to take. As for Sofia, she was recently released from prison."

“Sofia is an acquired taste that I never acquired.” Unlike Cathy, who wouldn’t go to the authorities unless there was some advantage, Sofia would go out of spite.

“She told me the only law she hasn’t broken is the law of gravity.” Dark eyebrows pulled together.

Robin suspects she steals lines to make herself appear bright. Sometimes, Robin wonders if she believes every line she stole. “On a job like this, what makes her dangerous is she doesn’t know what she doesn’t know.”

“Let’s assume she does learn what she doesn’t know. Do you think she then knows it?” Lila kidded.

Chapter 25

Against monster odds

Robin knew only what she needed to know about Sofia. “There’s a girl who either lives a wrong life or has no life.”

“What does that mean?”

Robin felt Sofia’s small-mindedness made her a scary character. “When she’s not incarcerated, she lives a wrong life. When she’s in prison, she has no life.”

“Talking about prison, Sofia's recent conviction was that of being a getaway driver.”

“She would be good at it.”

"A few months after you left, Sofia told me she borrowed the car from a guy. Though I didn't trust her, stupid me hopped in. She was dozing off at the wheel when a police car turned on its siren.

"That's when I discovered she was partying all night, and with her ride gone, she had stolen the car to get back to our neighborhood. To lose them, she drove so wild I feared her more than the cops.

"No sane person cuts through the Hidden Woodlands with a car. She did it while half-asleep. Once when she dozed off, I remember wondering if she would die in peace while foolish me was screaming in terror?"

Robin giggled. She loved it when Lila told a story. Knowing the area was filled with trees, thick bushes, and boulders, she visualized the scene in its entirety.

"About a half mile in, the cops stopped. When we could no longer see them, she said she'd drive me back. I told her, 'I'll get back on my own.' She was so insistent that I finally made her an offer she couldn't refuse. 'If you stop the car, you can have my jacket.' It's the one I robbed from the mom-and-pop shop off Hook Creek Circle. I gave up my clothes and hitchhiked. It was safer," Lila said.

"I don't blame you. I never understood that monster," and she tried.

"What's to understand? Sometimes a monster is just a monster," Lila said.

"How did the car look after she went through Hidden Woodlands?" The few times Robin was in the car when Sofia was driving, she wished she had purchased flight insurance.

"Not too good. And loopy Sofia never even used her seatbelt."

"She never did." It ran counter to the tough girl image she wants to project.

"Like others, the Sofia that went to prison is not the same psycho that came out."

The plot thickens. "What happened?"

"Not sure, but since she was released, she's like an evil clone of herself."

"It's not possible to have two women alike who are that dumb."

Lila giggled, "As part of a plea deal, one of the men provided the police with Sofia's name. When she got released, gun-slinging Sofia got hold of another firearm and went in search of the guy. She intended to kill the snitch. Luckily, he had split town."

It's not that prison made her wrong. That lady has never been right. "Why would Cathy let her freelance?"

"It would be hypocritical for Cathy to stop her, given that this last year she has been doing a few jobs independently."

"So, she found her niche." Despite Cathy's attempts to appear ordinary and sociable, she was neither. Robin thought the contradictions Cathy carried must lead to constant, everyday struggles.ds

"She has always been secretive. Before we came here, we spent three weeks in Michigan and met with a contractor who builds the customized equipment we need. Cathy disappeared one night.

The next day, the newspaper reported that a cat burglar had struck a hotel. I suspected it was her. Frankly, I was surprised she allowed Sofia to hook up with us again. However, this job was so huge we needed help."

"How can you hang around an unemotional Cathy and a Sofia who puts more thought into selecting her hats than caring about anyone's feelings?" To Robin, she's a big hat, no cattle person. If the girls were half the women Robin thinks they are, they would be half a woman.

As if needing to explain, Lila said, "Years ago, I joined the world and got a job. I thought it would work out. It hadn't."

"Yeah. What kind of job did you get?" Seeing Lila in pain, Robin handed her a box of tissues, which she kept on her desk.

"I had a nothing job in a department store. I was on a slow track to middle management. If I had a boyfriend making as much as I did, we would have been poor together. It was a dumb dream." Her eyes displayed disappointment.

"I know dumb, and that's not dumb. You tried," and trying is better than not trying.

"I failed."

"You know anybody who has never failed?" It's part of being human.

"I'm not sure I want to work for a living. Work is hard." Her delivery sounded as if she were staring at an empty shot glass.

"Everyone works hard, some at working hard, others work hard at not working. It's called surviving." She believed they faced similar headwinds. However, her mindset gradually changed when she began earning a decent amount.

"Why pinch pennies when crime pays well?"

"I must admit, starting over is the hardest thing someone can do. Unfortunately, you left knowing you could return if your life didn't improve quickly. Whereas, because of Jessie, I had

no fallback position." She bit her lip, thinking that if not for Logan, the transition would have been much more challenging. His support softened the landing. Still, Robin changed when life changed her.

"Tell me, where do I go when I walk out on my life?"

She tried to wrap her head around it. Dealing with life's uncertainty is what shapes us. "Any consolation, things seldom go as planned."

"Maybe for me, happiness isn't in the cards." It sounded like a rhetorical statement.

"Maybe you're too demanding of yourself." When good people cross the line, they overanalyze what they could have done differently. Instead, she needs a course correction.

"Are you studying psychology?"

Robin laughed. "Don't you wish your life went in another direction?"

Lila reached for Robin's arm and squeezed it affectionately. "All the time."

"While doing right may not make you feel fantastic, it leaves you feeling better than doing wrong." Assembling the pieces, Robin assumed that being on the wrong side of the law was why Lila felt defeated. She knew how a life of crime had demoralized her siblings. Toward the end, they were pathetic junkies.

As if mulling it over, she said, "Maybe. But work is hard."

"To do it right, most things are. Robbing is the lazy method, which often turns out to be more costly." Robin may have fallen into the same downward spiral if she hadn't had Jessie. Phew!

"Rolling a church mouse in sugar doesn't make it a cookie."

Robin laughed and then said, in good humor, “You gave me a couple of reasons why you went back. Now give me one reason you shouldn’t have.”

“You’re right,” Lila said, removing a bunch of tissues, wiping her eyes dry, and cavalierly laying them on the cot.

Looking into Lila’s bloodshot eyes, Robin felt sorry. Compassion seeped into her voice, “When you rejoined Cathy, I bet a lot had happened, yet nothing had changed.”

With eyes turned down, “It never does.”

“Was it as awful as you imagined?” Robin needed to help her friend find another path. All Lila needed was a decent job, and she would never return to a life of crime.

“Who says I imagined it?”

Ethics aside, the flaw in Lila’s position is that unless it’s only a one-shot attempt, they’ll eventually get caught and spend years behind bars—watching life pass by makes robbing not worth it. “You are on a rollercoaster ride. Though you don’t know the twists and turns, you know where it must end up. Life doesn’t always have a fairytale ending. What you need is an off-ramp.”

“Don’t we all?” Her head was tilted down.

“Have you noticed that the days go by slowly and the years whiz along?” Making her feel like she’s aging in her dog years.

“Cathy is like family, and you support your family.”

Knowing the gang had become Lila’s family, she let that comment stand. The uncomfortable truth that lay between them was that Lila thought Cathy cared. Lila didn’t

understand Cathy, but Robin wasn't sure Cathy understood Cathy. Having the wrong friend can be worse than having no friend at all.

Still, it was hard to argue when those falsehoods served Lila's needs. "The only thing I envy about Cathy is her gorgeous hair. I don't recall her hair being that stunning. It makes me wish I had natural red highlights."

"So does Cathy," Lila laughed.

Surprise spread across Robin's face. "Even before Jessie was born, I realized the dreams I wanted for her could only be achieved if I took charge of my life. Having Jessie impacted me in ways I hadn't considered at the time."

"Something so transformative turned on something so tiny."

What kept her going, what made her strive, was the desire for her child to have a better life than she had. That meant she had to find herself. "You talk like I made it. I don't view myself that way."

"The choices I made over the years came with a cost. That bill is now coming due."

Many crooks love it. For Lila, it's a matter of loyalty. "Then turn it around. Though life may not be fair, with any luck, it's balanced."

"That's something to consider."

Suddenly, it felt like a switch turned on. "Didn't I read that your brother owns a hotel somewhere in the Midwest?"

"In Oshkosh."

"Yeah, that's it." Last year, she read online that a hotel owner, Marek Gorski, had made a generous contribution to a woman's cause. Robin knew it had to be Lila's fantastic brother. Though barely twenty, he found backers to invest in him. But then, he was always a financial whiz.

"I know what you are getting at. I don't believe in accepting handouts from my little brother." Like a gravity wave tugging on her, the corners of her mouth pulled down.

"Yet you have no problem robbing strangers and living off their money." How bad must things get before she acknowledges the truth?

"Crazy, isn't it?" she smiled grimly.

Against monster odds, all kinds of people turn their lives around. It starts with the desire to. "When life goes right, it can be magical."

"So, did leaving your old gang make your life magical?"

Of course, having a guy would be ideal. Despite her funk over her failed business, the answer popped into her head so quickly that it surprised her. "I don't allow not being perfect to become my enemy. For me, close is close enough."

"It's not that I'm in denial. I discovered that making a new life means sacrificing my current one." Lila unwrapped the Ace Bandage and handed Robin the bag of peas. Robin returned the bag to the freezer.

"You call moving on from them a sacrifice?" Even back when they all hung together, Robin was too embarrassed to call those sickos friends. Streetwise, Robin believed that if those two whackos were foolish enough to reveal who they were, she would take them at their word.

Her eyes flickered. “But asking Marek for a favor.”

“Sometimes, when we try to be kind, we make matters worse. I’m sure he prefers to help you now rather than visit you in prison.” Robin’s conversation with Aaron’s brother, Logan, changed her life.

“And what would I do at a hotel?” Her eyes looked defeated.

There are various jobs that Lila could do or learn to do. “A sharp cookie like you could manage the staff. Learn marketing…”

“You always give me too much credit,” she said with a polite smile.

Robin sensed Lila’s lack of education made her insecure. “Or you don’t give yourself enough credit. The Lila I knew could do anything she set her mind to. Having someone that he could trust is invaluable to Marek.”

She nodded. “He touched on trust.”

Crime, like drugs, destroys people’s lives. “Why didn’t you take him up on his offer?”

“That’s not the direction I dreamed my life would take.”

“And this is?” The problem in choosing any path is that one tends to follow it regardless of where it leads.

“How do I walk away from the only thing I’ve ever known?”

People often resist change, even when it is positive. “There’s nothing wrong with making a life-altering decision, especially when you know it’s the right choice.”

“The showstopper is, is it the right choice for me?”

How could it not be? Robin believed her ability to look at herself honestly set her apart from her family. It was that insightful discovery that led her to decide whether to raise Jessie. "You know why I never came back?"

"You opted for a prison break," Lila kidded.

"My body is made of memory foam. I never forgot what gang life was like." The main reason she wasn't an alcoholic is that she remembered the hangovers. She couldn't understand why people who suffered the following day continued to drink week after week, year after year.

There was a time when she envied those who drank and never seemed to get a hangover. That is, until she discovered that eighty percent of heavy drinkers felt no effect the following day. So, the hangover prevented her from becoming an alcoholic.

"Well, rumors about why you split were all over the place."

"Getting pregnant was when I finally got Aaron to look at me. At that moment, my feelings toward Aaron changed. And at the same moment, I saw the gang in a different light." Robin saw the look on his face when she told him she was pregnant. It was a brief yet meaningful exchange that haunts her to this day. She realized that, though they dated, Arron didn't know who she was, and likewise, she never knew him.

"But Aaron must have loved you very much."

"When a much older man sticks his hand down a girl's pants, he ain't searching for movie tickets," she half-joked. Looking back, he dated much younger women.

"C'mon, a catch like Aaron could have chosen any of us. He picked you. What does that say?"

That statement flabbergasted her. After all, it was Lila's comment about him being much older than Robin that made her begin to question his intentions. Recently, she wondered whether he hung out with a younger crowd because older women wanted the relationship defined. He lacked stability as husband material. In contrast, the Crossroads Gang made him feel like a star. "Lack of judgment on my part."

"Talking about me being hard on myself. You were what, fifteen or sixteen?"

"After his death, I reviewed my relationship with Arron…" She was shocked to discover that, despite not liking her father, she had grown up attracted to tough, troubled men. Eww, the joke was on her.

"So, if he escaped, would you have broken up with him?"

She spent a great deal of time thinking about that. Only when love doesn't pan out do we look back. What she couldn't figure out was why Aaron was her pandemic. Being a messed-up teen, Robin wasn't sure if she loved him. Or, with the family gone, she desperately needed a mate. Too bad the feelings were the same. "That's a great question. You know when he left me?"

"Tell me."

He left for the same reason as her rotten father left her mother. "When I told him I was pregnant."

"Newsflash, whatever you ran from, you haven't stopped running."

Knowing Lila, it was probably true. Nonetheless, the truth is a necessity if you strive for improvement. "The difference is, now I'm running toward a better life. And Jessie is the reason why."

"What amazes me about kids is that they have the best moments of their lives, yet they're too young to remember them."

As memories unfolded, she couldn't help but wonder how a tiny baby could open such a huge space in her heart. "Kids don't have to remember for it to shape them."

"Lord knows, what happened to me was long ago, yet the trauma of that experience is something I'm still grappling with."

Like most kids, she knew little about her friend's home life. Generally, it was the parts Lila decided to disclose. She knew that, due to her childhood, Lila yearned for a family. Though curious about what went on behind her friend's closed doors, it was up to Lila if she chose to share. Although Cathy's gentle approach lent Lila comfort, just knowing the words to the tune isn't enough. "Do you think Cathy cares about you?"

"I know what you are getting at. You can't question my loyalty to friends."

"I'm not questioning your loyalty. I'm questioning your judgment. How about Sofia when the chips are down? Do you believe you can count on her?" Because they had limited time, Robin retrieved another bag of frozen vegetables and wrapped her foot.

She closed her eyes. "At best, Sofia is an idiot. You know, she thinks you're crazy."

"She must be looking in a mirror. I know her, but I bet Sofia doesn't know me." In fact, Robin was counting on that.

"Then who are you?" Lila asked.

"The same girl you knew when we were in our teens, but with years of experience." Whereas Sofia never learns from her past.

"I must admit life can be tricky when she gets involved."

"Since we are on the topic, I'll tell you the girls are hiding something..." Abruptly, she stopped. Though she caught herself, her statement had an undertone.

"Like what?"

She wanted to tell her, but Robin knew that at the right moment, everything would be clear. Besides, she knew about the intention of one, but not both. Not yet anyhow. "Time will tell if I'm right."

"The one thing you should know is Sofia may say the slate is clean, but she remembers everything you did."

"She said that?"

"Not in those words."

"Then in what words?"

"Sofia indicated she has you to thank for giving her a second chance."

When all is said and done, Cathy would only do something hurtful after careful calculation. In contrast, impulsive Sofia couldn't help but instantly react. "You know why she hates me?"

"Because she has never been able to put one over on you."

"That's her problem." While both occasionally made her life a living hell, at least Cathy thought she was being fair.

Lila smiled, "Have you noticed that when Sofia gets angry, she acts like a trailer park queen?"

A queen who wasted hours of Robin's time in their basement. To show off, she reviewed things Robin didn't need to know, like how the battery-operated telescopic screwdriver worked in case Cathy was unavailable. If Cathy were sick or arrested, the job would be canceled. It's not her job to do Cathy's job. "Her elevated position is an illusion…"

"Her life is an illusion. She's a ruling queen in a world of one."

"Exactly, once this job is over, self-anointed Sofia returns to a queen in waiting." When Robin doesn't like someone, her imagination makes the person more ridiculous than they are. However, that's impossible with Sofia because she's like a villain in a Batman movie.

"According to Sofia, she wouldn't be waiting. She would be preparing for the time she's in charge."

"But who will follow her?" Robin asked.

"Before they died, I got to know her parents. Let me tell you, her father had demons that an exorcist wouldn't go near. One-sided, selfish, and vengeful. The sin he could not forgive his wife for committing over the last twenty years was aging, twenty years."

"What the hell. Didn't he also age?" As for her parents, all Robin knew was that Sofia hated her father.

"I said that to him, and he replied, 'But she looks old.' That was from a guy who looked as old as the bible and acted more powerful than a king. Her mother wasn't any better. Fresh out of rehab, the witch made a pass at me."

To some men, an aging woman is a crime. "How old was he?"

"Old enough that if Sofia could have stayed home a little longer, he would have grown to appreciate her. When I met him, he needed her to do simple tasks like make a sandwich and tell him what day it was."

If, in your childhood, your parents were monsters, then you have serious problems. Though Robin had issues, she didn't view her mother as a monster. "In that case, the laugh would be on her. What Sofia inherited could make her too damaged to be fixed."

Lila's eyes glisten, "God, I missed you. I wish I had a friend like you."

Surprise splashed on her face. "You do. I am."

Nodding her acknowledgment, Lila returned to their topic, "This wasn't the life I dreamed of, but do any of us get to choose?"

"Maybe we don't have total control, but you can navigate the ship in a certain direction." Looking back, Robin had trouble getting along with self-absorbed gang members. Not all the girls in the gang were like that. A few were, and that reminded her of home life.

Uncertainty flashed in her eyes. "I will give that thought."

"Tell me, can you forget the ugly things you've done?" Like any gang, the awful things they did weren't shared with outsiders. Robin was only sixteen when she split. Desperately, she tried to bury her past. Since the girls arrived, those unforgettable moments have resurfaced.

"No sane person forgets. There are many rotten things you don't know about me…

"Do I want to?"

"No. What happened to the dreams I had?"

"Same as mind, life. No one can erase their past, but it doesn't have to weigh on you." The only girls that wouldn't give a damn were Cathy's and Sofia's of this world.

"Lately, I find myself just trying to survive."

"Just surviving is not living." What criminals have in common with their so-called friends is their love of crime.

"Isn't that the sad truth?" The faint hope of a better life lingered in her eyes.

"When I discovered I was pregnant, failure wasn't an option." Somehow, once the decision was made to have Jessie, her life took a different path.

Smiling, she said, "So maybe I need to get knocked up?"

"Sometimes things need to incubate. I would give Cathy and Sofia my cell number, but they might call. If you ever go straight or wanta talk, give me a jingle." She grabbed a sheet of paper from her desk, jotted her number, and handed it to Lila.

Nodding thanks, Lila tore it in half and jotted down hers, handing it to Robin. "Hopefully, this is my last throw of the dice."

The thought that crowded everything else out was, "I hate it when…"

"The boss quietly stands by and lets Sofia do the most despicable things imaginable," Lila completed Robin's thought.

They both disliked how the boss let Sofia do despicable things that benefited Cathy. Allowing Cathy to foolishly believe that it left her accountability-free world intact. "When you say, 'The Boss,' I assume you don't mean Bruce Springsteen."

Lila laughed, "You were amazing at figuring out what Sofia would do."

“She’s as difficult to figure out as the maze on the back of a box of Cap N’ Crunch.” It’s the little things that betray who we are. For instance, when Lila left, the first thing those psychos thought about was who they could get to replace her. When Robin moved, the first thing she thought about was how she’d missed Lila.

That reminded her that before splitting town, there was a friend she must say goodbye to. She wished she could have been a better friend to Ava. Having a kid and a job, she had limited time.

“Am I that important to you?”

In various ways, Lila was the woman Robin could have become. “You will always be my best friend. Helping you makes me feel good.”

“Well, you turned things around.”

The longer she robs, the greater the odds of her getting caught. For better or worse, this is Robin’s only shot. “So can you.”

Lila stood up and tossed the tissues in the wastepaper basket. With her throat slightly constricted, she said, “I promise to sleep on it. Now we must get back.”

“Are you happy? Because I don’t see you smiling as much.” She believed in Lila. She just wished Lila did.

“Gee, you need a better reason than that.”

“Is there a better reason?” Her tone was steady and confident. For Robin, happiness must start with reality. Otherwise, what good is it? That was another reason she couldn’t get along with her family. They refused to see what they were doing to themselves.

Her eyes became sad. “You were always easy to talk to and the smartest of the bunch.”

That surprised Robin, since she had no formal education. Then again, neither did the other gang members. Life has this way of flying by faster than any of us thinks. “I don’t want you to run out of life before your time runs out.”

“I wish I had your confidence.”

Damn, did Robin snow Lila? Almost as good as being confident was acting as if you were confident. “Me too!”

“You turned your life into a beautiful one.”

Since Robin is taking part, giving Lila advice seems hypocritical. “With the help of Excedrin.”

“Is that what you’re on?”

She was determined to do it on her terms. “It prevents headaches, while the caffeine helps keep me awake.”

“I forgot you don’t want to do ups.” Lila glanced down at her phone, which was vibrating. “Surprise, surprise, Sofia texted, ‘Recess is over.’”

“Wait, can’t the cell phone be traced?”

“I gave you my cell number. The ones we are using here are burners.”

“Before we go back, let me tape up your foot.” Robin removed the bag and wrapped her foot with the Ace Bandage. The high sneakers, tightly laced up, gave her added support. Then, they donned their gear.

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On the way back, with Lila limping, she stumbled and put her foot through one of the gaps in the floor. Luckily, she grabbed hold of an overhead 2x4 before punching a hole in the cork ceiling panel. “Sofia will crucify me.”

While helping Lila regain her footing, Robin said, “Let’s not tell her.”

“How could I not?”

“There’s no law that says everything must flow through that bitch.” She slid the panel through the gap. Upon pushing the corkboard back in place, she returned it. You can see the damage if you’re in the shop and look at the ceiling. Eventually, the bank will discover what happened, anyhow.

“Thanks. You know you never fit in. I admire that.”

“Why?” That surprised Robin. However, upon reflection, she realized Lila was spot on.

“It was the way you never fit in.”

That was one of the best compliments she ever received. Her parents would occasionally give her a backhanded compliment. Like when her father told her, ‘That was pretty smart for a dopey kid.’ “Hint! Neither did you.”

Chapter 26

Cleaning up

“Since we have only a little left, and I have to hit the ladies’ room, it’s a good time to take what I can back. This way, we’ll have less to carry when we wrap up.” As Sofia barked at Lila, Robin gathered the girls' jewelry bags and handed each a new trash bag.

Then she dumped all the plastic bags into a nylon duffel bag. Because of its weight, she connected the shoulder strap to the pulley’s rope. Once she climbed up, she hoisted the bag using the wheel.

While crawling through the duct, she dragged it behind her. To her amazement, getting it through the 16-inch space separating the 2x4 supports wasn’t easy. Improvising, Robin first maneuvered the bag through. Lantern in hand, she slipped through herself.

She repeated this procedure until she reached her office. As she descended from the closet stairs, she heard the faint sound of someone's sneakers pounding on the wood floor. Instinctively, she deduced that Sofia had panicked when she discovered what Robin had done.

Once in her office, she headed straight to the bathroom. When she finished, she grabbed for the knob. Instead, Sofia opened the door. "Don't you believe in knocking?"

"I just want to be sure you weren't skipping out on us."

Wearing a practiced smile, "Yeah, and as part of my master plan, I stopped to hit the john."

"Why did you take the bag with you?" Sofia asked.

Her face looked befuddled. "I didn't have time to secure it. Rather than drop it willy-nilly, I took it with me. Come to think of it, aren't you the one who lost your necklace in my store because you were careless?"

"I meant, why did you take the jewelry?"

"Until we are done, what else is there to take…the drills, the lanterns, the cleaning material?" If it were just Cathy and Sofia, she would have entertained cutting the rope ladder and leaving them stranded in the vault. But then Lila would be arrested as well, and that was unacceptable.

Sofia stepped forward, opened the sack, and glanced inside. A shimmering diamond bracelet lay on top. Going against her preaching, she paused to admire the exquisite piece. "I don't trust you."

"You don't trust anyone. What a way to live." The sad truth is that Sofia didn't trust people because Sofia couldn't be trusted.

"Where were you going to put it?"

Robin watched, amazed at the comfort a glittering piece of jewelry could give the wrong woman. "Beside the metal cabinet in the corner."

Once back in the vault, they opened the few boxes that remained. Wasting no time, the girls sprayed disinfectant everywhere. Then they vacuumed the floor. The deep cleanup added thirty-five minutes. Due to their training, they finished ahead of schedule. As Lila grabbed a drill, Robin said, "I'll do it. You look like you're hurting."

"It will heal eventually," Lila said.

"That doesn't help you now."

"You have the skill of cutting right through the bull," Lila said.

They climbed up to the attic for the final time. Inside the vault, the tumblers clicked, and the girls were taken aback. Sofia promptly pulled up the rope ladder while Cathy turned the wheel to bring up the last piece of equipment attached to the pulley. Then, she retracted the extended arm.

"Spread out. The duct is not designed to hold all this weight in one place," Sofia muttered.

Just as they had practiced, Cathy held the vent grill in place with a pair of pliers and, with her other hand, inserted a screw. After Cathy aligned the hole to the grill using its mirror, Sofia slid the button forward, and the telescopic magnetic device took care of the rest.

"I thought the vault was on an automatic timer," Robin whispered.

"According to know-it-all Richard, in case of an emergency, they all have a code which overrides the system. That must mean they are doing this for one important customer," Sofia whispered.

"Or something went wrong, and the police are on the other side," an anxious Robin whispered.

Once again, Cathy put another screw in position. Sofia extended the device through the vent. After Cathy lined it up, Sofia pushed the button again. To their dismay, the screw toppled to the ground. Quickly, Sofia retracted the device, and Cathy did her job.

Just as the vault door began to open, Sofia screwed in the opposite side, thereby securing the grill in place. Bringing the device into the vent, she peered through. Two men entered. Both men inserted their keys. After one of the men grabbed a thin folder, he slid the box close, and they exited. So far, it has worked as planned.

When they closed the vault door, the girls sprang into action. Sofia removed the tape around the ductwork. Then she spot-welded the sheet metal into place. While doing that, Lila removed the cardboard covering the vent and grabbed a fire extinguisher. Cathy also grabbed an extinguisher. Robin, lantern in hand, took it upon herself to search the area for anything the girls may have left behind. Oddly, she found a water bottle and a shoe heel and put them in a bag.

As they moved to the next unit, Robin systematically scanned it while Sofia dealt with the steel partition. She discovered other items that shouldn't have been there. Down the strip of stores, Robin meticulously searched each bay, finding more items.

Chapter 27

The Promise

Once in Robin's shop, they spoke more freely. Cathy said, "Wow! That was close."

The girls promptly unloaded the equipment and removed their forensic outfits. As Lila put on her coat, she said to Robin, "Without your help, we would have been done for."

Sofia turned to Lila. Her attitude matched her words. "I would have capped those flunkies."

"That's what Custer said," Lila joked.

Then they made two trips, loading the equipment into the trunk of their car. Despite limping, Lila continued loading the vehicle with the remaining equipment. Sofia combined the remaining take into a fifth bag and placed it in the duffel bag.

Though Robin knew where this was heading, she felt compelled to approach the thorny subject. “Being late…”

As Sofia donned her hat, she turned to face Robin. “Haven’t you heard? I’m a night owl.”

Yeah, like a lion at night, she prowls for weak game. “Being late in paying the rent, they’ll give me the boot if I can’t come up with the money…”

“Don’t sweat it. We’ll find you regardless,” Sofia said while putting on her gold bracelet.

Oddly, she worried more about the puppet than the puppeteer. “How?”

“Trust me,” as if understanding, eyes widened.

There we go again with that ‘trust me’ crap. It was a small yet telling phase. Funny, that since Arron said, ‘You can trust me to do right by you,’ she hadn’t trusted anyone who said, ‘Trust me.’ Having much doubt, she refused to let it end there. “If I don’t get the money promised, I’ll be evicted. Unsure where I will go, you can’t possibly know where I’ll be.”

“Gee, that’s a great point.” She sounded disingenuous.

Since leaving the gang, she wasn’t accustomed to being blown off. But then, she wasn’t accustomed to dealing with the Sofia type.

“The least you could do is give me the bread we agreed upon.”

“You were spot on about the police suspecting you. That’s why all that would accomplish is less dough for us.” The air instantly soured.

Asking for such a small amount compared to the heist incensed her. Especially given that she knew how Sofia’s twisted mind worked. She came alive when turning the screws. “Nothing has changed since we made our agreement.”

"Unfortunately, the way our account is set up, fronting you any dough will be difficult," Sofia smugly said.

Because she didn't think before speaking, Robin concluded that Sofia had to be as surprised as everyone else regarding what came out of her mouth. From Cathy's expression, Robin surmised she had not objected. An obvious question hovered over the entire exchange. "Let's cut to the chase. In your own words, by not advancing the money promised, am I correct in assuming you also refuse to give me my cut?"

"In any words, I refuse." Her tone was emphatic.

Sofia stabs people in the back, the way ordinary people breathe. Being more incensed than surprised, she said, "First, you forced me into helping, then you screwed me."

Cold eyes shifted to Cathy and then smugly back to Robin. "As I recall, your arm didn't need much twisting."

Initially, she refused to respond because Sofia was right. It wasn't entirely involuntary. What she did was hold her nose and jump in. Finally, she manufactured a reply. "But you lit the match."

"On this job, I'm the decider. And I want it all." Her voice sounded overjoyed.

"Let's call it what it is, a double cross." One thing Robin knew was that if Sofia planned to screw her out of her share, she couldn't resist seeing her response to not giving her the money agreed-upon. The need for that early indicator is why Robin asked for the advance.

"I consider this a triumph of image over reality." With Sofia, wearing a wide-brim black hat, she looked like a Hollywood-typecast badass girl.

Once again, Robin wondered where she had stolen that line. “Need I remind you, if the police suspect me…”

“Surely, you know what I would do to someone who ratted me out.” Sofia looked pleased. Just then, Lila joined the girls.

Suddenly, she realized Lila was right. In this tense moment, Robin found herself fidgeting. “You have a bad habit of betraying your…”

Interrupting, Sofia looked at Robin and said, “It’s more like an enjoyable pastime.”

Currently, the conflict is between Sofia and herself. Like a stage actress taking her spot, Robin found herself flanked to her left by Cathy. This made her feel like a voodoo doll, with pins stuck in her everywhere. “Now I know how big a bloodsucker you are.”

Her face transformed into a look of conceit. “I'm a sucka? You were a fool for trusting me. In truth, I would have done it for kicks. This way worked out amazingly well.”

Irate, her cheeks were flushed. The angrier she felt, the more reasonable her response became. A trait she acquired from her mother. “Back then, I only did stuff to you when I figured out you were trying to con me.”

“And I finally did.” She glanced admiringly at the bag holding the jewelry.

As she had reacted toward her mother years ago, her thoughts and words weren’t necessarily consistent. Struggling to keep her tone reasonable, she said, “Any normal person would have learned…”

“Just so we understand each other, I would never share anything with you.”

Even before their meeting at Cravingz, Robin felt that the lunatic was predictable. “I can see our opinions differ. Yours is wrong.”

“Yeah, well, you know how it goes. This, more or less, makes up for all the times you made me your patsy. While sunbathing on the French Riviera, I’ll think of you locked up in a six-by-eight cell.”

Robin knew it wasn’t that Sofia was killing time. Sofia relished the foreplay. However, she didn’t want to bring Sofia to that irresistible urge. That’s why she knew it would be wise to end it here. But Sofia’s cockiness hardened Robin’s position. Speaking with more edge than she intended, she said, “So, you promised me money, and instead, I’m supposed to settle for a prison sentence?”

“You may think it can’t get worse. It can always get worse.” Sofia licked her lips.

For a moment, Sofia was silent, which made Robin more concerned. Then, she recognized the expression on her face as her eyes came alive. Oh shit. First, she said that to herself, and then she almost did it. Pain is nothing compared to fear.

Standing frozen, Robin watched as Sofia reached into her coat pocket and swiftly produced her revolver. There was a gun in her hand and an unhealthy glee on her cheeks. Sofia spoke in the same controlled manner as a mafia kingpin would. “Don’t forget, I pack heat.”

Despite Robin’s fatigue, her body became rigid. The pounding of her heart felt like it had thrusted itself against her ribs. Robin went into survival mode. She was too terrified to talk and too terrified not to.

She wished she could say she refused to take her guff, but she found herself busy dodging a bullet. Although she was prepared for the double-cross, the words, 'I pack heat,' echoed in her mind like an incantation.

Robin had never thought about how she would die. But she knew she didn't want to be killed by Sofia or anyone else, for that matter. When she spoke, her voice was weaker yet still there. "Your mother must be very proud."

Sofia's shameless smile said it all. "Once she saw my gun, the witch never bothered me."

"Why is that?" Robin saw the weapon rising. Staring down at the barrel of a loaded firearm is when all plans change. As she had done before, she steeled herself.

"Guns don't kill. Bitches kill."

"Didn't you tell me you wanted to change? So, now's the time to correct that." Because of how quickly she drew her gun, Robin suspects Sofia is chomping at the bit to kill her.

"Isn't changing my mind a woman's prerogative?" Sofia slipped her finger through the trigger guard as if she were greeting a long-lost friend.

Growing up in a gang, she thought about death. Not often, but sometimes. However, this was the first time she had had the luxury, if you choose to call it that, of knowing exactly how her life would end. And she was now thinking in terms of minutes, not years. Not allowing herself a more forceful statement, she said, "Since we reconnected, it's comforting to know the one thing I won't die of is low blood pressure."

Sofia's eyes gleamed. "You wouldn't be the first person I whacked. It's a great way not to have any enemies."

Robin had the right on my side. Sofia had a gun on her side. That's why she had to lower the room temperature. To achieve that, Robin had to talk calmly, which she was not. "There's still time to undo it, so are you sure you want to screw me?"

"The store where I got this glamorous fur coat has a security guard—foolish me. I should have said they had a security guard. Being curious to know how it felt, I iced the jerk. It wasn't hard to take a sucka's life. If you don't believe me, ask him yourself. Do you own a Weegie Board?" Her eyes crinkled.

In watching nature programs with Jessie, she learned that charging gorillas wave their arms and pound their chests. For reassurance, they have another gorilla by their side. Robin was sure Cathy was that gorilla. "This is a dangerous game you are playing."

"What are you going to do about it?" Her smile could rival the stars in the heavens.

Barely able to hold it together, swallowing a lump in her throat, her voice sounded hollow. "I'm thinking."

"This must hurt you like hell. Good." Sofia gave a long, cold stare.

In the old Crossroads Gang, Sofia got her ass kicked so often that the girls began to call her a perennial loser. Gang membership has few rules. However, an absolute requirement is a pulse.

One girl beat her so severely that she was hospitalized. When she got out, in fear, Sofia began to carry a firearm. Instantly, she saw herself as an all-powerful queen. Except for Cathy, everyone else in the gang was Sofia's court jester.

The gun, however, while giving her power, never improved her fighting skills. In hand-to-hand combat, Sofia is so afraid that her actions are indecisive. Hence, the bruiser persona she projects made her a fake not to mess with. “Your position is not only wrong but foolish...”

Her eyes narrowed. “I have you outmaneuvered. You cannot incriminate us without it affecting you.”

“That’s sound advice, but at the moment, not very helpful.” Though Cathy was tougher than Sofia, that wasn’t saying much. Still, Cathy spoke so calmly that most of the girls were unsure what the psycho would do if she won. Hence, many, including herself, tried to avoid conflict.

“You only live once. And it’s a good day to die.”

“Right now, I’m trying not to find out if that is true.” Murder is about emotions, and Sofia's hatred of Robin left her uneasy. Besides taking both on, one pointing a loaded weapon at her was insane.

Her smile was more of a victory lap. “Your only chance to keep your precious brat when arrested is a plea not guilty. You can never involve us without involving yourself.”

Inches from being unglued, Robin’s wide eyes grew wider. “I’ll give that all the consideration it richly deserves.”

“If you even think about striking a deal by giving them our names, remember, I whack rats. So, you'd better pray I don’t come back, or you’ll wish you never knew me.” Sofia removed her flask, unscrewed the cap with the same hand, and took a swig.

Only a psycho would give Robin notice before killing her. “I already do.”

"If I see you again, I'll blow your ugly heart out of your chest." She smoothly thumbed the gun's hammer back. The silence that followed was deafening.

Not sure how to reply, Robin stood there powerlessly. Her heart felt as if it were being held together by an Erector Set. Though she was far from defeated, she wasn't as far as she would like.

Chapter 28

The Smash and Grab

There's a difference between letting the gun do the talking, which Sofia has done before, and killing. Though Cathy was concerned about what Sofia had revealed, her lawyer would argue that getting the fur coat hadn't benefited Cathy. She was an innocent bystander when the security guard was killed.

In this job, once Cathy entered the vault, she became an automatic co-conspirator. That's why she's extremely concerned about what Sofia might do. That distinction compelled Cathy to return to when Sofia drew her weapon on the security guard.

They were coming back from visiting Lila. Hoping for a shortcut, Sofia turned off the main road. Feeling her way, she cut through the side streets. Stopping at a light, the tires skidded

on an icy snow patch before they caught. Sofia asked, “When do you think Lila will be released?”

“She thought in a day or two.” Because they had given themselves plenty of time before their next job, her hospitalization hadn’t set them back.

“I never would’ve suspected Lila of having an ulcer.”

“Just because she's quiet, don’t underestimate her.” Cathy saw Lila in a fight during their teen years. She was volcanic.

“That was years ago. Now she's a wuss.” Catching the sun, Sofia’s gold locket shimmered.

“Lila has a habit of making herself heard when needed.” Her voice was calm yet demanded attention.

“Why should I care? She’ll act just like my wimpy father. The minute I pulled my gun on the bully, he turned into a fucking coward.” Sofia’s breath appeared in puffs.

Much like her father, she always tried to project a persona of a Mafia Don. However, unlike Sofia, the bastard was as tough as nails. “I heard he’s a God-fearing man.”

“Well, now the dumb ass fears me more.”

“What did he do to tick you off?”

“Surprisingly, nothing that awful.” As the road forked, Sofia swung to her left.

Despite believing the truth should never be used to inflict pain, Cathy said, “Then the problem lies within you.”

Responding like she never heard Cathy, “The only thing that jerk ever gave up on is me. And while pointing my piece at his heart, I told the airhead as much.”

“So, you became the kingpin.” She could imagine how that went over.

“The heater can’t get this stupid car warm enough.” Sofia timed her arrival just as the rental company was overwhelmed with customers. She wore a disguise and gave the busy agent phony paperwork. Then, she distracted the agent with question after question. Hence, they dared not risk returning the car because of a faulty heater.

Cathy was relieved that disabling the GPS tracking device was relatively simple. Before splitting town, they’ll clean the Honda thoroughly, removing any evidence of their presence. “Lila offered you her coat until she's discharged.”

“I didn’t like it.” Whereas Cathy wore a heavy coat over a wool cardigan, Sofia had mislaid her trendy tan coat. It had brass buttons, slanted pockets, and wide lapels.

“Rather than wear a coat that doesn’t make a statement, you prefer to freeze.” A biting chill had descended from Canada. So, a pleasant morning gave way to a frigid afternoon.

“To be seen wearing an off-the-rack coat would be embarrassing.” Traveling light, she wore a chic cashmere sweater.

“We don’t know anyone here. So, how could you be embarrassed?” When discussing Sofia, one must consider the optics.

Though the sweater promised to keep anyone toasty warm in the coldest temperatures, it didn’t. Suddenly, her eyes widened. “Ooooh, look! I like that coat in the window. And it’s in the middle of no man’s land.”

The strip store was on an empty street. All five businesses had signs reading "Closed." It was sandwiched between a shoe repair shop and a pest control firm. Grasping Sofia's unspoken intent, Cathy looked to see if there were cameras. At least visibly, there weren't. "*My Furry Friend* is closed."

"It's cold enough to freeze the balls off a chipmunk."

"Then buy it when the store reopens." Instinctively scanning the surroundings, Cathy noticed that aside from this strip, there wasn't anything in earshot.

"Why wait? I can take that one?" While glancing at Cathy sideways, she slowed. Its wheels crushed a clump of frozen slush. Parking on the empty block a few stores down from the outlet, she took a sip from her flask.

"Let's not do this." However, Cathy knew the whole shebang would take less than a minute.

Sofia lowered her head. "C'mon, it'll be a hoot like when we were teenagers. I'll throw something through the window, grab the coat, and scram."

Hosting an uneasy expression, Cathy asked, "And if there's a security guard inside?"

"Did you see the prices pasted on their window? They're selling bargain basement garbage. It must be synthetic fur." The mannequins were arranged so that your eye was drawn to the spectacular coat in the center. Even from the car, it was clear that the designer had paid meticulous attention to details.

What she said was true. Mom-and-pop shops didn't hire security guards to protect cheap coats. "Then why take the risk?"

“What woman passes up a freebie?” Sofia's hopeful eyes met Cathy's.

Knowing Sofia, Cathy sensed that she wouldn't want it once she ran her hand over the coat’s fake fur. Mulling it over, Cathy concluded that if she didn’t participate, it was Sofia’s problem. Thus, it’s Sofia’s call. Hesitating, she nodded.

Instantly, Sofia reached under the seat, grabbed her pistol, and put it in her tote. She wrestled the flask into the back pocket of her stretch jeans, then retrieved her mask. Cathy also donned a ski mask. Leaving the engine on, they exited.

Quickly, Cathy gazed at the advertisement pasted on the window. “Look! It’s a sweepstake. It states that the Sable costs $25,000. It includes a certificate of authenticity.”

“Even better.” Sofia’s eyes brightened.

“Hey, Ray Charles, read the promotional literature. That guarantees they hired a security guard.” The small store had to be a chain to give away such a pricey coat, and the promotional material reinforced her belief. It stated that the Russian Sable was on display here only this week, leading Cathy to conclude that they move the coat from shop to shop.

Cathy tried to scan past the displays. However, the coated mannequins and discount pricing affixed to the window obstructed her vision. With such a high-end coat, she no longer felt the risk was solely Sofia's.

“I don’t see anyone.” Sofia grabbed a shopping cart left outside the store and hurled it. Glass shattered; the alarm blasted. Before stepping in, she kicked the jagged glass with the toe of her gladiator boot.

“Let’s get out of here.” As Cathy spoke, she heard heavy footsteps coming from inside.

A burly man cautiously stepped into the display. His hand moved toward his holstered weapon. With a booming voice, his words commanded attention. “Drop it, miss, or I’ll drop you.”

Suddenly, Sofia’s face turned red. As she released the coat, she reached into her shoulder bag. Her eyes gleamed like a bird of prey eyeing a rat. In a fluid motion, she retrieved her revolver. As if imitating James Cagney in an old bad-guy flick, she screamed, “Take that, sucka.”

Just as the guard removed his sidearm, the first shell ripped through the shoulder of his gun hand. Followed by a second shot that entered his leg. When he crashed to his knees, his .45 automatic skittering across the floor.

“Stop!” As much as Cathy tried to stop the bloodshed, she couldn’t look away.

The third bullet tore a hole in the man’s other leg. Sweat ran down his receded forehead. Looking at Sofia with watery eyes, he extended his good arm, his hand empty and his palm out. “No, please! I have a…”

Now, in a rhythm, Sofia fired a fourth time. As the slug entered his stomach, the guard’s body bent over. The fifth shot was a headshot. Then, a sixth and seventh shot rang out. The security guard’s body twitched. He stared blankly past her.

“Sofia, Sofia!” Cathy screamed. Even with the alarm booming, Cathy could hear the wail of a siren in the distance.

Sofia picked up the coat and turned triumphantly. “Did you see the pussy pleading?”

And you wouldn't have, if the situation were reversed? Gazing at the guard, Cathy concluded that no one could lose that much blood and survive. Besides, it was a mathematical certainty that the headshot would become the widow-maker.

Sofia's action dredged up memories of Cathy's unhinged father. Unable to shake free of her childhood, she was haunted by those memories. For her father, killing someone was better than sex. "We have to get out of here."

"Give me a minute. Let me enjoy the dessert." There was a sharp whiff of gunpowder. Small pools of blood lay about. An animated Sofia then took a long gulp of tequila.

"We don't have time. The cops are on their way." She couldn't comprehend Sofia's infatuation with murder.

Sofia blinked her way back to focus. "Is that driver looking at us?"

"We are wearing ski masks, so it doesn't matter." The guard's complexion was milky, his hand trembled uncontrollably, and his eyes remained open. Death she could handle, even his murder. The guard's suffering was a problem for her. Upon the paramedics' arrival, Cathy hoped they would close his troubled eyes.

"C'mon, it would be my pleasure." As they returned to the car, their boots crunched on a chunk of frozen snow.

"We must return to Lila." Her deep brown eyes conveyed authority. In treating the guard like he was target practice, Cathy didn't trust Sofia behind the wheel. Hence, Cathy was driving.

"I don't get it. Why are we returning to the hospital? Their security cameras must have caught us leaving earlier." Sofia removed her mask and popped a cigarette in her mouth.

"We got turned around and left through the doctor's entrance. Don't you recall telling me how surprised you were not to have spotted any cameras? I would feel better with Lila as their alibi." As she left the hospital, she would face a camera in the lobby to establish a defense.

This should buy her time, but not eternity. It was, however, the best they could do. Cathy hoped the best was good enough. All she could think about was how different her life would have turned out if her arrogant father had been a cautious crook.

"Do you think anyone would believe her?" Sofia asked, eyes crinkling, as she wrapped the coat around her shoulders.

"She's our Teflon Don." As they blended into the traffic, the noise of a few trucks drowned out the sirens.

"Our what?" It came out sounding like she was half paying attention.

"Unlike us, Lila has never been convicted of a felony." Her cousin Jazon is one hell of a lawyer. A great trial attorney in the family is a plus when you operate on the wrong side of the law.

"So." Sofia opened the window a crack and exhaled the smoke.

At the next light, Cathy removed her mask. "Having something is always better than having nothing."

"Don't tell wimpy Lila what happened." Sofia ran her hand over the luxurious fur as if stroking a collie.

"You're kidding me." How does she ask Lila for an alibi yet refuse to tell her why she needs it?

"Asked me if I care?" They turned right onto a cross street, heading toward Kennedy Boulevard.

"You know when people say there's no such thing as a stupid question." There were moments when Cathy felt uneasy around Sofia, not because she feared her. But instead, she found she didn't care for others just like Sofia didn't. Knowing it was wrong, yet unable to control her indifference, was a world she struggled to understand.

"Yeah." Sofia took a large gulp, finishing off Jose Cuervo.

"They're wrong. If you ever said anything dumber, I don't recall. I could see killing him if it helped you." Here, Cathy was busy trying to figure out what the advantage could be. Only once had Cathy allowed her emotions to prevail.

The Wilsons were one of the foster couples the state assigned her to. To survive, she turned herself into a chameleon, and perhaps that's who she'll always be. During her stay with them, Cathy methodically plotted their demise. She was amazed that she could act emotionally despite being a logical person. But then, unexpectedly, she possessed extreme hatred.

"It was his fault." Her eyes lit up.

"Hah?" Cathy didn't appreciate Sofia's mood swings. They took her to places that Cathy couldn't go. But then, Sofia never quits when she's behind or ahead.

"He needed to be whacked." Her feeling regarding the killing of the guard oozed with delight.

Crackled erupted. To Cathy, that sounded like an insanity defense. However, her father tried that and lost big-time. "There's no, he needed to be whacked, defense."

"Don't you see, it wouldn't have happened if ol' blue eyes hadn't gone for his piece?"

Impulsive people get carried away with the moment, losing sight of the larger picture. "When I yelled stop, why did you keep shooting?"

"He wasn't dead yet." Unfocused eyes stared out the window.

Though Sofia had threatened to cap a few people before, Cathy was always there to restrain her. Here, the sequence of events rapidly spiraled out of control. "Once we leave the hospital…"

"Let's get a bite. Suddenly, I'm in the mood for some Fettuccine Alfredo."

"Haven't you heard murder trumps hunger?" Sofia's murder of that guard surprised her, but it didn't shock her.

"Then you sit and watch."

"We first have to get rid of your revolver." No matter how slim the risk was, the smart play was to ditch the weapon.

"All of a sudden, it has become my lucky pistol." Her face broke into a satisfied grin.

Because of Cathy's father's experience, she knew how meticulous the authorities could be. "Just as quickly, it will become your unlucky pistol if the police match your gun's striations to the bullet fragments they recover."

"Good guns aren't cheap." She spoke as if she were thinking aloud about how costly killing someone could become.

Sofia's denial has always been more potent than her rationale. That's why talking to her often made Cathy feel as if she were clawing at a rock. "You prefer a lethal injection."

“The sucka looked gawky.”

“A bullet to the head will do that.” Since Sofia's release from prison, micromanaging her has become Cathy's full-time job.

“Well, I’m 100 percent right in wasting the sourpuss.”

“I would agree with you, but then we would both be wrong.” She always wore designer clothes, but nothing this gorgeous. Then again, everything looks fantastic on Sofia. If Cathy had a choice, she would be beautiful rather than brainy. After all, you could fake intelligence.

“Along with this stylish coat, I need fashionable hats.”

“Aren’t you concerned about what you just did?” As they talked, Cathy recalled that it took a year to investigate her father for fraud before the government charged him. By design, the justice system is reactive, not proactive. That’s why she feared the situation might worsen before it got a lot worse.

“The sap’s death can’t bother me…”

She tried to shake away her annoyance. However, impatience surfaced. “But a homicide detective can. Because it’s murder, you should consider not wearing that coat…”

“Being slow to react, maybe he had health issues. Who knows, I may have done the sucka a favor.” Sofia’s eyes once again crinkled.

The dead never worried Sofia. It was the living she had problems with. “Ol’ blue eyes didn’t die from an illness. He died from 7 bullet holes, one to the head.”

“Well, I taught him.” A grin spread across her face.

“Studies show dead people don’t learn.” Little worried, Cathy, but this had. She wondered if the state would consider her an accomplice. If so, the evidence against one is evidence against all. Unsure what could be done, but once asked, she would find out.

“If I knew whacking someone would feel like this, I would’ve done it years ago.” Sofia then inhaled her cigarette like a hallucinogen.

Cathy’s brows knitted together. Crazy has always required more energy than being normal. And of course, like all impulsive people, compulsion is Sofia’s driving force. Cathy contemplated whether she should reply.

But lately, disagreeing with Sofia is where thoughts go to die. Hence, what would further dialogue accomplish? Cathy now had an unobstructed view of her problem. Wishing she had turned the thermostat down before Sofia started shooting the guard, she would seize the moment this time. “Hold your powder.”

Chapter 29

Back to the present

Robin was so consumed with the revolver pointed at her heart that she hadn't heard what Cathy said. In her mind, seconds to her death ticked off. One, two, three. "It's not worth dying over. Take the damn ..."

"You must feel stupidly vulnerable," Sofia said.

Stupid, not so much. Vulnerable absolutely. Suddenly, it clicked regarding what Cathy had said. Though she experienced a degree of relief in the tightness in her chest, the gun was still pointed at her. At least now she saw the light at the end of the tunnel. "You look at things one way. Sometimes it's the opposite."

"I'm having a special today. It's my godfather, offer. Your life for the loot." Sofia slid the hammer back in place.

Wanting to hurt her, Robin's mouth began to move. Realizing that she lacked the ammo, she throttled back. After all, she was busy changing zip codes as they spoke. Robin had two words for Sofia, one of which was a blatant lie. "Kindly leave."

"Kindly?" Sofia smiled wickedly.

"Make of it what you will. But go!" In attacking a problem with your fist, you generally won't be as effective as if you used your head.

"Just for you, I kept my powder dry." Sofia sounded like a general leaving his battle plans open.

With her thoughts unfocused, she kept her mouth shut. Seeing daylight between her and disaster, Robin tried to smile, then tried once more, but her strained face could only reveal her predicament. Letting Sofia have the final word was the least Robin could do. So, she did it.

In triumph, Sofia's eyes performed an exaggerated eye roll. "It's time to boogie on out of this dump."

Shouldering the bag of jewelry, she turned and, right before exiting, gave a choreographed backward glance. Her eyes again crinkled. "When you last hung with us, you enjoyed beating the girls at chess…"

"As I recall, you sometimes played checkers." Now we will see what kind of chess player you are.

"God knows why anyone would enjoy that silly game. However, I finally get a chance to say, checkmate." This time her smile was robust.

Robin's eyes never left Sofia's back. When Robin opened her mouth to speak, she changed her mind. As the door slammed shut, Robin's stress loosened. She managed to unclench her teeth. "Holy crap."

Despite her hands shaking, she promptly locked the back door. Robin exhaled the bad air, making room for healing. Here, Sofia's performance ruled. However, soon the girls will see what happens when the curtain opens.

Desperately, she shifted her focus to how she had turned the tables on the girls. Though she needed her ZZZs, she had to set the stage first. Then, Sofia will understand the consequences of the game she chose to play. Now, there's no turning back.

Chapter 30

Lila's reality

"You went back on your word with Robin." When the girls returned to the house, they hit the sack. Frustrated about being as silent as a snowflake, Lila flooded her thoughts with regret for not speaking up. Instead of conking out, she tossed and turned. As she did, her annoyance cooked, leaving her with a low-grade headache.

"Nah, I didn't consider the deal finalized." They were never up before ten unless they were on a job. Hence, the café had only one other table occupied.

"You would have if it were cuckoo, Sherry." With Robin joining them, Lila could finally enjoy the first job since Sofia had been released from prison.

“Being a team member, you should be on my side.” Like always, Sofia had a couple of swigs of tequila before her morning coffee.

“Taking a side isn’t as important as being right.” You could hear the edginess in her voice. On the bright side, Lila’s headache was beginning to ease.

“This is a case of addition by subtraction,” Sofia said.

“In other words, it wasn’t in your financial interest.” Instead of smoothing things over, Sofia’s cockiness made it worse. Provided she could remember where she'd put Robin’s cell number, Lila thought she'd split her share with Robin when she received her cut.

“She who laughs last laughs best.”

“Or realizes it was never funny.”

“The old Robin would have figured out what I was up to. Not this feeble version.”

It reminded Lila of her grandfather, who used to take advantage of little kids. Just because someone could, doesn’t mean you should. “You know how messed up you must be to cheat her, particularly when she has money problems?”

“Who wants a fair fight? The best time to kick someone is when they are down.” Sofia gave a pleasing laugh.

Knowing Robin as Lila did, she wondered how Sofia had outfoxed her. The friend she once knew was a savvy lady. So, what the hell happened to her? “When it comes to the Robin I know, you had better pray she doesn’t get up.”

“We didn’t do this to make you angry.” Cathy’s tone was compassionate.

"And yet you never asked me if it was okay." Lila realized it was a dance the girls had done before. However, doing it to her friend revealed their true nature.

"I came here to enjoy my cup of coffee, not to be lectured," Sofia said.

"You lied to her." Although Lila hated her grandfather, he displayed loyalty. That is, he wouldn't tolerate anyone screwing his family except himself. Lila always considered the Crossroad Gang family. Unlike her grandfather, Sofia does screw her family. Lila didn't think anyone could sink lower than her grandfather. That's why what Sofia did was eye-opening.

"Everybody has an angle."

From Lila's perspective, that comment revealed more about Sofia than she meant to. "That doesn't give you the right to cheat her?"

"Motherhood made her mushy."

"We would have split it with Sherry if she hadn't been arrested." By not being strung out on drugs, Robin was more valuable than zany Sherry ever would be.

"Getting back for the things Robin had done left me feeling great."

It's a pity the battle over an earlier dispute is always fought in the present. "Dredging up the past is dangerous."

"I didn't dredge up anything. We needed her cooperation. So, I told the bitch I would bury the hatchet…"

She should argue with someone else. Lila no longer wished to hear it. "You don't bury anything. You slammed it in."

"Because of what I said, she helped," Sofia proudly said.

"Robin isn't your enemy. Integrity is."

"It's not worth bickering over," Cathy said.

"I need more." After partnering with them, she only owned her self-esteem. Even that is peeling away. Enough was enough.

"And if there isn't more?"

She tried to rationalize Cathy's position. All she came up with was the obvious. "We screwed a friend."

"Does it matter? This should be the last job we pull for a long time."

"And that makes it alright?" The girls were heading down a path Lila didn't wish to travel. This left her with a decision to make.

"Odds are we'll never see her again." Cathy then sipped her tea.

Despite Robin moving, if Lila could remember where she put her cell number, she planned to keep in touch. This added tension to an otherwise stress-free friendship. "And she'll never see you again. Would it be okay with you if she did that to us?"

"Considering there are three of us, she couldn't."

She was thinking the unthinkable. If Robin had decided to fight, it would have been a two-on-two match. "You justify everything, don't you?"

"Who cares about her?" Sofia said.

Sofia would not do that without first clearing it with her pied piper. "I care. She's my friend. Well, she was a friend."

"This need not affect how you relate to her," Cathy said.

Suddenly, she realized she had allowed Cathy to be in charge. When she was eleven, she refused to take any guff from her grandfather. So, why did she permit Cathy to control her? “And if it were up to you, would you cut her in for an equal share?”

“What’s your point?” Cathy asked.

“That will mean two votes against screwing Robin and only one vote for.” If they couldn’t be honorable among each other, why was she hanging around with them? She was better than that, or at least she aspired to be.

“In this instance, voting is a form of protest.”

Cathy lives in her fantasy world. Not only didn’t Cathy prevent the screwing of her friend, but by going along with it, she encouraged it. “Given that you hold the deciding vote, don’t pretend it’s not your decision.”

Uncharacteristically, a surprise flashed on Cathy’s face. “Okay.”

“According to both of you, it’s addition by subtraction. That’s *Math for Dummies,* dummies.” When she stood up to her grandfather, he changed his ways—at least, she thought so. However, as she grew older, his sinister plot began to take shape.

What he wanted was for her to be out of the house. To be alone with her little brother, Marek. Luckily, she sensed that scenario coming. She wondered why she had never suspected this scenario. Perhaps it was because Lila considered Cathy a friend. “Friends are supposed to stick together.”

“You’re getting riled up over nothing.”

"It isn't nothing. You can continue to fool yourself, but don't try to fool me." Robin has always been a friend. And at times of need, Lila did nothing. She would never abandon her friend, especially when Robin saved her life by coming to her rescue right before Wendy stabbed her in the back, despite having a mangled face, a badly bruised shoulder, and a bloody leg. People who say words hurt more have never been in a gang fight.

"All you have in common with her is the past," Cathy said.

"All I have in common with you is the jobs we pulled." Thinking back, she remembered Robin saying, 'I'll tell you right now they are hiding something.' When asked, 'What?' Robin tentatively replied, 'Time will tell if I'm right.' So, that foxy lady knew how it would play out. Why hadn't she stopped her? That was what Lila was busy trying to figure out. It gets curiouser and curiouser.

"What's wrong with that?" Cathy asked.

"I guess our friendship doesn't run that deep." The more assertive she got, the more fractured their relationship grew.

"That's not true," Cathy said.

Nothing was more taxing than doing nothing. The first time she remembered not acting was when she was nine and a 'John' had his way with her. Her mother only attacked the guy because he tried to stiff her by refusing to pay extra for both.

She recalls her mother yelling, 'No one messes with my baby girl without coughing up the bread.' Then she lunged at him. According to police records, her mother stabbed him with a switchblade twenty-three times.

The jury didn't buy her lawyer's argument that no hooker turns on a 'John' without cause. It's a shame she never had a caring mother. Like then, she wished she had another bite at the apple. "It feels true. Why can't I rely on either one of you not to screw a friend of mine?"

"I'll give it thought," Cathy said.

"What's there to think about?" Cathy's style is to kill with politeness. Here, action speaks louder than words. For Lila, their trust was broken. Without trust, they have nothing.

"I have no regrets about what I did," Sofia said, eyes crinkling.

"If you weren't packing that stupid pistol, you wouldn't be so damn cocky." She spoke softly yet with intensity.

"Best of all, the gun came with an instructional manual explaining how to use it." She then removed prescription bottles from her purse.

Sofia's belittling manner angered her. But Lila knew there would be no apology. Still, she refused to take any more guff from Sofia. "Would you like to reword that more delicately?"

She held up her three middle fingers. "Read between the lines."

Lurking around the corners of her mind is how her friendship with both has worsened. "Gun, or no gun, if I wanted to beat the living crap out of you, I would."

Sweat dotted Sofia's forehead. "What makes you so sure, you…"

Cutting her off, Lila said, "When I told you what I would do, it is the end of the conversation, not the beginning of a debate."

Sofia was so loud that the conversation at the other table ceased. "You're bluffing."

"If you ever bother me again, you'll find out." Lila's tone was low yet serious. It felt as if she had kicked the sides of a collapsible kingdom.

Chapter 31

The Bank

A box holder and a bank employee entered the vault. They both inserted their keys. Miss McBride slid the box out and placed it on the table. As the gray-haired woman began to leave, the man opened the lid. He had a voice like a foghorn. “Did my wife come in?”

The lines between her brows deepened. Her eyes narrowed. “I can check.”

“That’s all right. I need to call her anyway.” He stepped out of the vault. O’Connor was of average height and weight. His wide face had short hair, as if he were in boot camp.

Upon speaking to his wife, he approached McBride. Her hair and outfit were decades out of date. “My wife has not come in, and my Piguet is missing.”

“Let me call over the manager,” McBride said.

Casually dressed, Mr. Gates packed fifteen, perhaps twenty pounds more than he should have, but the excess weight rounded him off pleasantly. He had a trimmed mustache, a square face, and close-set eyes. “Mr. O’Connor, are you sure your watch was in the box?”

“Absolutely. I wouldn't be here if my nephew weren’t getting married.”

“I’m not sure what to say. Because of the bank’s safeguards, boxes can’t be opened without the holder’s key. Let me call the police.”

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Bald except for a few curly strands of hair around his ears, Detective Parker arrived. He had a wrinkled forehead and a time-worn face. He also had a streamlined body that looked like it hadn’t yet filled out.

“Normally, I wouldn’t have contacted you. However, this is the fifth time a customer told us something was missing from their box this week,” Gates said.

“Could it have been tampered with?” Parker knew most of his cases were solved within the first 48 hours; after that, he was often forced to move on.

“I don’t know how. They would have had to drill out the lock and somehow put it back,” Gates said as he led Parker into the vault.

At this point, Parker was better with questions than answers. “Why put it back?”

“How else could the box holder’s key work?” Gates said.

Rubbing his chin gave the impression he was deep in thought. “May I have a list of those who complained?”

“Of course.”

Believing the branch manager should have his finger on the pulse of his customers, Parker asked, “What’s your take?”

“Frankly, I’m baffled. It doesn’t make sense.”

Parker found the problem intriguing. “Please contact me if anything else pops up.”

“Are you going to talk to the people?”

Parker’s experience is, “In listening to someone, I can usually tell if they are credible.”

“Also, we have been contacted by two lawyers.”

That got Parker’s instant attention. Like most cops, he disliked lawyers, especially defense attorneys. “And that didn’t send a chill up your spine?”

“We routinely referred everyone to our legal department.”

“How many complaints do you have?”

“In addition to this week, last week, we had three customers claiming their boxes had something missing, and another customer informed us her papers were out of order. We only know this because she’s in the middle of a messy divorce and wanted assurance that her husband didn’t rifle through her belongings.”

That piqued Parker's curiosity. “And before then?”

“Occasionally, we get a box holder inquiring. Often, they have more than one signer on the account, so a sibling or a mate dropped by. It is unusual to experience multiple customers complaining in a month. Here we are going into the second week, having the same problem.”

“And boxes appear to be untouched?” He was known to ask the obvious. The response either reinforced his belief or pointed out any missteps.

"Most definitely. So, where does that leave us?"

Having suspicions without proof of a crime can be a critical time. A fan of Agatha Christie's narratives, Parker found this plot captivating. He was determined to get to the bottom of it. "You're talking like we are dealing with a crime. With no sign of forcible entrée, there is no crime, and without a crime, we can't have a suspect."

Chapter 32

Detective Parker returns

Parker believed nothing was worse than doing nothing. After talking to a partial list of people the bank had supplied, he returned, accompanied by another detective. “Thomas is our forensic expert. He is also familiar with banks.”

Gates led them into the vault. Thomas was a short, stocky man. Under a forest of bushy brows, his dark eyes appeared small. Wearing an inexpensive suit, Thomas was the type who was more comfortable spending Friday evening solving a crime than attending a party. “Can you open a box?”

“It requires two keys. I have one. The customer keeps the other.”

Just then, a woman wandered in. Parker asked, “Miss, we are police detectives. Can you open the box in our presence? We really could use your help.”

“All the box has is my house papers. If it helps, sure.”

Thomas played with the lock. Then he asked Gates, “Can we open an unused box?”

Shortly thereafter, Gates returned, pointing to an unused box. “Here are the keys.”

They slid their keys in, pulled the box out, and examined it. “When did your bank begin using these locks?”

“Honestly, I have no idea. Excuse me, I have a customer,” Gates said, looking outside the vault.

Ten minutes later, another customer approached, flashing his badge. Thomas asked, “Sir, we have a problem with the safety deposit boxes. Would you mind if we looked at your box after you were done?”

“I’m here to get my wife’s diamond necklace.” Taylor’s jaw was working on a wad of gum.

“We aren’t interested in what you have in it,” Thomas said.

Upon opening the lid, he peered in. Walking out of the vault, his voice rose an octave, “It’s not here.”

“Stuck in the corner, I see what looks like a metal shaving. Does that mean someone drilled into the box?” Parker asked.

Thomas’s brow shot up. While eyeing Gates, who had just returned from Taylor yelling at him, Thomas pointed at another box. “Let’s see if we can open this box. Use your key.”

"You need the box holder's key," Gates said.

"I'll use my house key."

Gates had a befuddled look. "That won't work."

Hosting a confident grin, Thomas said, "Humor me."

Chapter 33

Forensics gets involved

"We need a court order to open all the boxes. Do you have any idea how the robbers got in?" Thomas asked.

"If they came in through the ceiling, there'll be a hole above the cork panels," Parker said, gazing up.

"Giving it thought, they likely came in through the ductwork."

That might bypass the vault's alarm, Parker thought. "Before we go up, I'll check to see if any security systems should be disarmed."

"You're going to have some busy days ahead."

"As well as long nights." Parker's gut told him it would not be easy to solve.

After securing a ladder, Thomas climbed up from the vault and examined the large vent covering the duct. "It looks like several screws holding the vent in place are missing."

"It has screws?" Parker was pissed because he was left to reheat what he considered a cold case.

"It's an old bank."

Parker's first reaction is that it played like an inside job. Shouting up to Thomas, "C'mon down, the bank just cleared it for us to go into their attic."

When they entered the attic, Thomas pointed his flashlight at the wall. "Look at the metal plate. They must have used a blowtorch.

This was a professional job. "Yeah, I see. And before leaving, they spot-welded it back in place."

Thomas studied the ductwork and said, "They even patched this up."

"Why go through the bother?" It was seemingly a minute detail. But uncovering the crime often hides in the details. That's why Parker refused to leave any stone unturned.

"If they hadn't, the temperature in the vault would not be consistent. The bank may have called a repairman and discovered the break-in earlier."

"When will your team get on this?" Parker was never one to sit around and wait.

"Three members of my department are wrapping up another case. When they're done, I'll have answers for you." He glanced at his phone and said, "My team just texted me. They should be here within two hours."

"What's your input?" Upon further consideration, Parker concluded that locals didn't do it. None of the crooks in town was this sophisticated. He hated clever criminals.

"They need stamina to spend days drilling out the locks in the vault. My guess is they're in their twenties or early thirties."

"That could be anyone." When his career stalled and his wife left him, Parker's ambition also abandoned him. Despite Chicago being the city he loved, he left its madness in search of a quaint town to reboot his life.

"Anyone but you," Thomas joked.

"You know, I had thick brown hair as a kid. As I got older, it turned gray, then magically disappeared." Reflecting on his youth, he realized that men don't love in their sixties with the same intensity they loved in their twenties. Adjusting to his new reality hasn't come easily.

"There's nothing wrong with being bald…"

"So, age caught up with your eyesight," Parker kidded.

"I'll trade you no hair versus being pudgy any day."

His eyes accepted the compliment with dignity. "What's your input?"

"I wouldn't rule out they were out-of-towners."

That was Parker's conclusion. "You keep saying they…"

"If all the boxes were opened as I suspect, it would have taken several men."

"Why?" Though Parker had worked on bank robberies before, it was a simple stickup. He wouldn't expect a crime of this nature in a small town.

"Off the record, I don't think it's the original locks."

Knowing his craft, Parker assumed Thomas was right. However, he needed to understand Thomas's reasoning. "What makes you think the locks were switched?"

"It appears to me that the lock's backplate is larger than normal. This would allow the new plate to better conceal the hole. It also features a simple spring-action lock that slides into place. I've never seen that on a safety deposit box."

"These are clever unsubs." At least one thief was bound to be impulsive. He planned to ask his informant if any stranger in town was a big spender. If possible, he'll follow the money. In detective work, that's a truism. With a little luck, he could wrap up this case quickly.

"Let's follow the trail." Wishing to preserve all the evidence, they left everything and entered the next shop through the front door. Parker chatted with the shopkeeper for a while, then asked for permission to enter their attic.

"Going from unit to unit, who should we trust?" Thomas asked.

"No one." Though Parker risked tipping off any crook involved that the police were now investigating, it was necessary.

"Whoever planned this is extremely neat."

"Yeah, it looks like Dick Cantor's handiwork. I've heard he now calls himself Richard. He's in prison, but the style is similar." Parker said. His method gave him enough time to go home and polish the furniture before the robbery was discovered.

"Like what?"

"One of his trademarks was that it could be days or even weeks after the break-in before it was reported. When Dick robbed a jewelry store, he took only select pieces, often replacing them with high-quality knockoffs. Delaying the investigation was Dick's MO (modus operandi).

"This job also took time before the bank caught on." The problem with his method was that it was so unique that detectives automatically suspected Cantor. But that egomaniac couldn't help himself.

"Scuttlebutt is, he's crazy. So, who could get close enough to that perp to be a copycat?"

That character always worked alone. "Certainly not a normal guy."

"How about an abnormal woman?" Thomas said in jest.

Parker's eyebrows climbed. He became intrigued by the possibility. Keeping that in mind might help him connect enough dots to uncover the mosaic. "Thinking about it, robbers come in both sexes. I wonder what type of woman would be foolish enough to woo that madman."

"A crazy one," Thomas said.

"That doesn't narrow the field." Given that Dick enjoys showing off, it shouldn't be difficult for an attractive woman to get him to talk about stuff.

An amused Thomas asked, "Why would you automatically assume it's his style?"

"It's tardier that way." Parker had an affinity for simplification, and like most cops, when in doubt, he followed his gut.

Chuckling, Thomas said, "Can't argue with your logic."

"Rumor has it that after he pulled a job, he celebrated by indulging in high-priced call girls." Thinking back, Parker apprehended a Chicago madame known in the right circles. He was

hoping she would turn on a drug dealer Parker had been investigating. Being well-connected, the woman accused him of pressuring her to have sex.

Lacking corroborating evidence, IA couldn't get him kicked off the force. Despite that, they made it clear he would never get another promotion. True to their words, Parker was routinely bypassed for the captain's opening.

When it leaked out what Internal Affairs had investigated him for, with his marriage already shaky, his wife refused to accept his version. Parker was amazed that Penny never accused him of things he had done, only of things he hadn't done. But perhaps she accused him of things she had done.

"You're saying this job was committed by ladies of the evening," Thomas said while scratching his head.

Parker never meant that Dick acquainted himself exclusively with hookers. "Or a girl decided to play him, to acquire the information. I arrested Dick once. Running down a lead with that kook is like running in circles."

They followed the path to the next shop. Upon chatting with the owner for a while, they entered the attic.

Thomas seemed to pick up the conversation where they left it. "You're a cop. You should be able to wrangle the truth out of the perp. Otherwise, what's the badge for?"

"Getting the hot chicks."

As if following Parker's thought, Thomas said, "It should be easy for a guy like you to find a girl."

"Why would a girl want a guy my age?" Being elderly diminishes one's sexual allure, despite having a tail that occasionally wags.

With a dumbfounded expression, he said, "How about a woman around your age?"

"Why would I want her?" Parker half-kidded. Though women considered him over the hill, he always had an eye for younger girls. Like his ex-wife, Penny, who was 10 years younger than him.

As he grew older, the cuties no longer found him attractive. Still, pretty governs his emotions. In contrast, older women did nothing for him. If that didn't make sense to Thomas, he wasn't alone.

"Well, the older we get, the better we were," Thomas joked.

As they went from shop to shop, Parker and Thomas entered a few more. Again, they introduced themselves. After chatting for about five minutes, Parker said they needed to go up to the attic. Instinctively, he gazed up. Noticing the damaged ceiling tile, he asked, "When did that occur?"

"Don't know. A customer's kid pointed it out yesterday," the gentleman said.

Considering the shop's security system, Parker deduced that the thieves must have worked out of the end store. Upon getting a feel for the merchant, they went into the attic. Thomas removed the damaged ceiling panel, examined it, and slid the corkboards back in place.

"Let's see what's behind the drywall." Parker needed to get lucky. It's great to be good, but there's nothing like luck.

"Why?"

"Why not?" Though it was outside his chalk line, he was curious.

Chapter 34

The Clues

Thomas began to remove the drywall. Since it was an attic, placing it over the concrete didn't make sense. Still, Parker wondered what they had done with all the cinderblocks. While studying the cut edges, Parker discovered it was only drywall.

Considering how chintzy the store separation was, he also wanted to investigate that. However, he currently has a more pressing matter. Though it wasn't easy, Parker stepped onto the staircase, and it rapidly swung open. Grabbing onto the sides for dear life, it rolled down as an extension ladder might.

Parker's brain screamed, without uttering a sound. He felt like he had just gone on a scary ride in an amusement park. Once in Robin's office, Thomas asked, "Why not go through one of the closer shops?"

Parker mulled that over, "Maybe the security system here isn't that good."

"Should we notify the shopkeeper?"

"Since we are already here, let's first poke around," Parker said, knowing it went against his training.

"Given it's an illegal entrée, anything we find might be considered 'fruit from the rotten tree.'" Aside from a picture of a child playing with a puppy on the desk, everything else is business-related.

"We have probable cause. If necessary, I'll return with a search warrant." Though he learned the rules, he didn't always follow them. All things considered, they were written by politicians and lawyers, not detectives.

Thomas walked over to the desk. He removed a pen from his shirt pocket and gently nudged items. Gazing at the shelf against the back wall, he said, "She's a big smoker."

"The office has an old computer. But then she could be using her laptop." His ex-wife used a laptop. It's funny how trivial things reminded him of Penny. Along with the good times came the old hurt. However, given that they had been together for over two decades, it wasn't surprising. Too bad, instead of aging together, they grew apart.

"There's a fold-up cot."

"Yeah, I wondered if that's connected to the break-in." On the floor beside the cot were folded sheets and a pillow.

"And you think they came back here for some shuteye?" Thomas asked.

"Either that or they dozed off in the vault while the others bored holes in the locks with noisy drills." It certainly was an extensive plan.

"Nice catch," Thomas said.

With all the butts in the ashtray and the cot, this must have been their first and last stop. Based on how slick this crime appears, "I'll bet you won't find any fingerprints in the vault, except that which belongs."

Thomas looked perplexed. "Considering anyone can request to see the vault before deciding to rent a box, you'll need more than prints."

"Stay put. When I talk to the owner, I could use a second opinion." According to other shopkeepers Parker spoke to on the strip, Robin kept to herself.

"If her office is any indication, she's someone who is trying to keep her head above water."

"Having a big score would help." Then why linger around? If she were involved, all Parker could think about was that crooks do the darndest things.

"You're always a cop," Thomas said.

"Suspicion is my stock and trade." Being a detective, he had to consider everyone a suspect. When possible, he had shied away from that mindset, especially in his personal life.

As footsteps grew louder, Parker rested his hand on his holstered weapon.

Chapter 35

Meeting Robin

Robin looked at Thomas and Parker, then glanced at the open closet door. Instantly, she grabbed a broom leaning against the wall and used the handle like a stick. “If you leave now, I won’t call the cops.”

“Do you know who we are?” Thomas asked.

“By sneaking into my office, I have a good idea.” Although Robin had her suspicions, it was best to act clueless.

Suppressing a giggle, Thomas said, “We are the police.”

Though she suspected they were cops, she reasoned that a frightened woman played better theater. “Then you are crooked cops.”

"We are here on official business." Parker eased his hand away from his firearm.

Though she expected them to pop in, it wasn't through the attic. "Prove it. Show me your badge."

Parker reached into his shirt pocket and flashed his ID. Making light, he said, "That's me with hair. It was taken when I was younger."

"What photo do you have that isn't of a younger you?" she asked, putting down the broom. Sofia was right; it took the bank a while to notify the police.

"We are investigating a bank robbery."

Since they robbed the bank, she has worn silver jewelry. Today, she had on a bracelet and a matching clunky necklace that complemented her red blouse and gray pants. "And that's why you couldn't use the front door?"

"Following the robbers' path led us here."

"The bank robbery was on the radio. But I don't understand why it led you to my shop." She was savvy enough not to volunteer until the detective revealed that snippet.

"They entered the *B & E's* vault from this office."

"I'm not next to the bank." Robin felt uncomfortable sticking around. However, she relied on Cathy, telling the truth about waiting before unloading the merchandise. After all, why would Cathy lie?

Otherwise, she would have already fled with Jessie. Still, it was a calculated gamble. And waiting until the leasing office kicked her out had its benefits. Otherwise, she would likely become a person of interest.

"They cut through the attic walls."

"When?" She looked surprised.

"Sometime over Thanksgiving."

Though staying put had risks, it was ideal to disappear once the police interviewed her. Furthermore, Jessie came down with Strep Throat. So, she kept her in bed, with a kind neighbor watching over her. "That's about when my shop was broken into. They smashed the small window on the back door. I called the leasing office."

"Did you call the police?"

"Spoke to Sergeant Nelson. The strangest thing was that they broke in, yet they took nothing. But what is there to take?" Though the girls were supposed to stage a break-in, they hadn't. Probably to further set her up. So, she smashed the back door window, reached in, and unlocked it. She was amazed at how simple it was, just like in the TV mystery shows.

"Do you have your copy of the report?" Parker asked.

She noticed the detectives studying her like a bird of prey eyeing a meal. "Sergeant Nelson thought it might be kids. He told me there was no point unless I found something missing."

"Regardless, you should have filed a report."

"What do I know? I'm not a cop. I don't even play one on TV." She suspected Sergeant Nelson told her that because the police were trying to show that crime was down. For those of us who are weak in math, if you don't prosecute criminals, statistically, there's less crime. At times,

Robin suspected they didn't arrest her mother for the same reason. Apart from that, it would have been for petty stuff.

Smiling, he confirmed, "And nothing was taken?"

"On top of that, the kids also left a cot and cold cuts in the fridge, which I had for lunch twice." Robin decided that leaving the cot would lead the detective to conclude they used her office. Hence, anything Sofia planted that Robin may not have found could be easily explained away.

"This is probably where they operated from," Thomas said.

"You mind if we take those sheets when we leave?"

This is a slew of questions for someone who snuck into her office. "Be my guest. Oh, I already washed them."

"Why?"

Though it was just a question, Parker's why was a hard why. As such, it sounded more like an interrogation question. "The store sells a line of natural remedies. Occasionally, a customer comes in, and their child tells me their mother or father isn't feeling well. Yet they insisted on coming. I figure they can lie down. This way, they would feel obligated to make a purchase. Smart, hah."

"Do you have a criminal record?" Parker asked.

"I resent the implication. You're the first police detective I've met," in years. She had a juvenile record. When she became an adult, she had the record expunged.

"I wouldn't make a habit of it," Thomas joked.

"By the way, do you mind if I light up?" Parker asked.

Knowing the subject would come up, she wondered whether he smoked. "Please don't. I hate the smell of cigarettes."

"With the ashtray filled with butts…"

"Where?" Where you planted it, silly, she told herself.

"On the bookshelf," he pointed.

"Sheesh. Is that why I kept smelling cigarettes? Let me toss that?" Each time Sofia used the ashtray, knowing her lipstick, fingerprints, and DNA were on the cigarettes, she saved the ashes and the butts separately. After Sofia left, she cleaned the sides and bottom of the ashtray. Then she dumped the ashes back in, followed by the cigarettes.

Though Sofia said she couldn't implicate them without implicating herself, Robin disagreed. All it took was cunning. Given that she and Jessie would soon be leaving the country, it was worth the risk.

"If you don't mind, I'll take it," Thomas said.

"How's business?" Parker asked.

"It has seen better days. They may be giving me the boot." Though she knew saying it was unwise, the detective brought it up. She hoped this way, when she split, it wouldn't set off alarm bells.

"And when is that?"

"Ask them." With each passing day, she became more nervous. Now that the police were aware of the bank job, she was nearing the final lap of her plan.

"What about the merchandise in this shop?" Parker asked.

"If I'm forced to close my door, the vendors and leasing company can fight over it." Until recently, she had credit.

"You mind if my forensic team looks around, including the attic?"

"I thought you just did. Be my guest. FYI, I never used the attic." Given Sofia's past, she knew the girls would try to screw her. Or, more precisely, Sofia would want to. Because it was to Cathy's advantage, she would likely be okay with it.

"Can you drop by the precinct? Say in an hour."

She was not about to let herself become their patsy. So, she devised a plan on the fly. When Cathy pulled out her lipstick at *Cravingz*, Robin suspected it might come in handy. Now it's where the cops should find it.

Using gloves, she crumbled the tape Sofia had handled when Robin asked her for help. It was under the pretense of wanting to mark off Jessie's height. With Sofia's fingerprints on it, Robin tossed it beside the cabinet file in her office.

Robin was careful to plant clues that led the detective to her desired conclusion. That's why she placed Sofia's supposedly lost necklace in her bathroom. The one from her grandma, she left on the front counter. Without giving it much thought, she discarded the tissues Lila had used to wipe away her tears after the drill landed on her foot.

While the girls exited the attic, Robin meticulously searched each unit, looking for items Sofia had planted, such as a pen and material from a torn pair of pants. Robin had it in her office because she planned to turn it into rags.

She also recovered other items, like empty water bottles and a shoe heel. Unsurprisingly, the heel came from a pair of comfortable red pumps she kept under her desk. She put everything in the bag she was carrying.

Unwilling to take any chances, except for the cot, she tossed what she gathered, including items Sofia purposely left in her office. Now, she needed to skip town before the girls discovered the entirety of what she had done.

Chapter 36

Uncovering Evidence

“My team found a gold locket,” Thomas said.

“Where?” Parker often conducted business in the break room, where other officers came and went. This was vital to the detective's ability to solve any crime. The casual setting let him think beyond the structured confines of his training.

“In Robin’s bathroom.”

He grimaced at his cup, which hadn’t warranted it. “Big deal.”

As if understanding where Parker was coming from, he said, “It’s not Robin’s.”

“Are you sure?” It could prove to be a promising piece of evidence, Parker thought.

"Had the name Sofia inscribed. We also found lipstick in her office that rolled under the desk. We are checking everything out," Thomas said.

"The first chance I get, I'll ask Robin to explain why the necklace was there." In an investigation, one thing can lead to another.

"Whether true, she'll probably claim she lets customers use her bathroom," Thomas said.

"You're right. She told us as much when she said sick customers can crash on the cot left behind." Now, given it thought, Parker wondered how often that occurs.

"Oh yeah. I almost forgot about that." Just then, a group of noisy police officers entered.

Somewhere along the way, this stopped feeling like a cold case and became an active investigation. "How about the lipstick…"

"I know what you are getting at. It's a different shade than the lipstick left on the cigarettes," Thomas said.

Parker just figured something out, maybe, possibly. "Wait! Could it be that coldhearted bitch, Sofia Ferrari?"

"Who's she?"

"According to Lieutenant Stryker from the 3-12, she's a gangbanger, that they are looking for." Since Stryker wants to talk to her, she automatically became a person of interest.

"Is there a warrant out on Ms. Ferrari?"

"Nah, he simply wants to question her, and there was a sighting of her last week in town." Though assumptions are dangerous in his work, they are often necessary.

"Is she still around?"

"All of a sudden, I want to question her." By the time his investigation was complete, she might need a tailor for a prison jumpsuit.

"Has she robbed banks?"

"Sofia is a two-bit crook. A grifter like her could have stepped up in class. Especially, given the job reminds me of Dick Cantor's handiwork." That screwball was into everything.

"If you establish a connection, what do you have?"

"Leverage." In all the jobs the perp pulled, two consistent threads ran through them: neatness and sophistication. The bank job had both.

"What's your input?"

"It's been rumored he hit a few small banks." To Parker's way of thinking, that meant Sofia used him.

"And what does this heist have in common with his style?"

"The guy is like Felix in The Odd Couple, a stickler for neatness." Aside from being a neat freak, his method destroys evidence. On the downside, it led the police to conclude that Dick Cantor was involved.

"Just like this job," Thomas said.

"From what I'm told, Sofia Ferrari is sexy. So, it would have been easy for her to hook up with Dick," and decide to go for the big score, or she could have decided to go for the big score and hook up with him.

"Particularly if she didn't know he's in prison. She could have been setting the poor sap up for the fall."

A conviction would be straightforward if Parker could prove they had a connection. Suddenly, he wanted to nail her. “For any girl to hook up with that crackpot, she had to have a few screws missing.”

“What’s your input?”

“She has a few screws missing.” His wife had a few screws missing. At times, Parker found it adorable. Other times, he found it infuriating.

“Sounds like you figured it out.”

“All I have is a gut feeling,” and that means he should drop in on Dick Cantor.

“Forty-plus years of experience make it more than a feeling.”

“I need a reason for Dick to talk.” Parker has the urge to see the look on Dick’s face when he realizes he was used sexually.

“Offer him TV rights or, better yet, a carton of cigarettes.”

“Relying on him is like putting Goldilocks in charge of the investigation.” Parker didn’t remember if he smoked, nor did it matter. A hot commodity like cigarettes could always be swapped for something he wanted.

“You know what brand he likes?” Thomas asked.

Same as any prisoner, “Someone else’s.”

“That seems to be a popular brand among inmates,” Thomas said.

“I’m not sure that headcase would play ball?” With that statement, his memory sharpened. Dick drove Parker crazy the last time he questioned him.

“Tell him Sofia says hi and watch his reaction.”

Although Parker liked a good challenge, he hated running down leads, which left him frustrated. “You would lie to him?”

“Of course not. You’ll be the one lying,” Thomas kidded.

The downside is that even if he got the Lego pieces to build the machine, “Interpreting someone’s reaction can’t be used in court.”

“At least you’ll walk away with a gut feeling,” Thomas said.

“It’s a short drive to the prison,” he said, mulling it over.

“Given how sophisticated the crime was, I doubted it would be solved.”

“I’m still not close.” A detective's nightmare is figuring out what happened without anyone being held accountable. That serves no one except the crook.

“What do you need?”

Prosecutors don’t waltz into court with a gut feeling. “Evidence would be nice.”

“Then get some.”

Chapter 37

Robin is Interviewed

"Thanks for coming in," Parker said.

Did she have a choice? "Anything to help."

"Let's use my office."

"Okay." To achieve an informal appearance, this must be the unofficial interrogation room. To her surprise, his office was windowless and so small she felt claustrophobic.

"Before we get on the subject, *Some Assembly Required* sounds intriguing." As Parker talked, he pulled a chair from the side wall for her to sit in.

Instead of getting right to the point, he adds lubrication. She convinced her employer at the time, Allen Rogers, that he shouldn't fight the public. Instead, he should carry what his customers want. Over time, they gradually developed a more friendly product line. "That's why I kept it. Initially, you had to assemble the jewelry. The shop evolved into what it is now. I made sure the shop still retails several kits you put together."

"Thanks for clarifying that. Are you still living on Maple Court?"

"Ever since I moved here, Detective Parker." She expected to be read her Miranda Rights. When Robin hadn't, she interpreted that as a good sign.

"Do you know anything about the bank break-in?" He placed his cell phone and pad on his desk. Yet he seldom took notes.

"Only what you told me." Unlike her desk, which at least had a picture of Jessie, everything on his was business-related.

"Was your shop ever broken into before?"

Starting with lobbing softball questions was better than the cops questioning her years back. Be that as it may, gangbangers don't get much respect. Neither do teenagers. "Never."

"If they didn't know you, why use your place as a jumping-off point?"

"No idea." No novice to police tactics, Robin was not going to do Parker's job for him. Given that people like to figure things out for themselves, she intends to let him deduce the reason from her. That's why she would dole out her rationale, teaspoon by teaspoon.

When possible, she'd agree with the detective. Because she did that regarding her rotten father, the police thought she was brilliant. Over time, she became aware that it wasn't solely

cops. She discovered that even if you know nothing about the subject, agreeing makes the other person think you're smart.

"How is your security system?" He glanced at his desk monitor, then his eyes returned to her.

From her gang affiliation, she sensed it was best to look him in the eyes and speak. "What security system? Having financial problems, I let the policy lapse."

"Then this would be a windfall."

"If I were that type of person and knew anything about banks, which I don't. Are you accusing me?" She assumed he wanted to measure her reaction by bringing her to the edge. Robin knew that lying depends on how good you are and if the investigator is sharp. And his creased face made him look like he's skating on retirement.

"Just an observation."

"If I were going to rob, I would have broken into the jewelry shop. On second thought, Howie is on this strip. He has no security system." Gossip had it that he talked too much, particularly around young women.

"I was in there earlier. Acme security protects it." Parker and Thomas were in every shop on the bank's side of the block.

Though she wasn't sure if what Howie said was the truth, it served her purpose. "Howie puts those stickers on his windows because it's a common name. So, he's able to purchase them online, cheaply."

"How come you know that?"

"He told me in confidence." Being questioned for a crime concerned her, but it was expected.

"What does he have?"

"Top of the line computers. He's a surveyor, and his business doesn't have the traffic of a retail store. He told me how much those computers are worth. It's enough to pay off my debt. And bank robbery would not be my first choice. To say nothing of prison scaring the heebie-jeebies out of me." The last sentence violated the gang's unofficial code, which was all about projecting a tough-girl image.

She participated in what she considered fun things, like sneaking out of a store without paying or flashing a hundred-dollar bill and, at the last second, giving the cashier a twenty in the hope she would receive change from the hundred. Amazingly, it occasionally worked.

"Why do you know about his computers?"

As she leaned forward, the chair tilted, making it difficult for her to find a comfortable position. But that's what Parker wants. She lowered her voice to a whisper. "Just between us, Howie gets tongue-tied around me, often telling me stuff he shouldn't."

"So, what's your opinion on why the robbers used your place?"

"I was hoping you would tell me." When questioned, there's a tendency to blab. But blabbermouths tend to trip themselves up. And of course, speaking to Sergeant Nelson about the break-in supported her position.

"Why weren't you open over Thanksgiving?"

"C'mon, Detective Parker, you know the stores were at the town celebration. Regretfully, my shop isn't doing well, so I couldn't afford a booth. Since there was little traffic along the strip, I took the time off and moped around my apartment." It amazed her how a failed business could simultaneously depress her while saving her butt. Still, she would prefer it were thriving.

"And why would the crooks know that?"

She spent a long time figuring out what the cops would ask. "Like the other stores, posted on the door was when I'd close and when I'd reopen."

"Have you tried to work things out with the landlord?"

"Recently, I gave them a partial payment. The leasing office didn't seem pleased. I'm hoping they will be flexible. I should know shortly." Because she wanted to leave town, her rent-reduction demand was outrageously low. She suspects that once the check clears and they get around to padlocking the shop, they'll notify her.

"Are you personally on the hook?"

Not wanting to appear secretive, she'll answer all his questions regardless of their relevance. "When I took over the business, it was incorporated. So, I have no liability."

"Can you explain where you were when the bank was robbed?"

Ironically, she felt calmer now than she did about being interviewed, perhaps because there was nothing more to do. "I'm not sure. Can you…"

"How about your daughter? Can Jessie establish your whereabouts?"

There wasn't much to the detective. Her first impression was of an elderly cop planning his retirement. The kinda guy she would barely notice at a small get-together. That's why she

was surprised at how well Parker did his homework in such a short time. Based on her experience with the police, she was more concerned with who the cop was than with the law. “You would take the word of a 6-year-old?”

“It’s the cop who asked the questions.” Parker followed up with a warm smile.

“Over the holiday, Jessie was on a school outing in Washington, D.C. Other than that, except when Jessie was in school, she could confirm I was near. When she was in school, the customer’s credit card charges would prove that I was working.

“Because my business is failing, I isolated myself and tried to figure out what Jessie and I would do if the leasing company kicked me out.” She wondered whether she had given him too much information. But she felt the details helped her position.

“We found a gold necklace in your bathroom. Care to explain?”

“Being more of a silver person, I don’t own gold jewelry.” She knew people generally prefer either gold or silver, not both. Since the bank job, Robin wore silver jewelry. Before coming here, she put on a cheap, assembly-required bracelet and a plain ring. To show, she wiggled her middle finger.

“So, it’s not yours?”

“Occasionally, a customer asked if they could use the restroom. And not wanting to feel hustled, some women prefer to try the jewelry on privately.” Robin now felt he was sharp. Hence, she would not take his easy manner as a sign of incompetence.

As if Parker expected that kind of answer, he redirected the conversation. “You have been living here for how long?”

She refused to let the wobbly chair affect her. “I moved to Swan Lake when Jessie was a baby, and she’s now in the first grade.”

“And that was when Allen Rogers hired you?”

“Yes. Allen had no relatives, so when he got cancer, he showed me what I needed to know. When he died, he willed the business to me. That was three years ago. It is demanding work and involves significant responsibility. But it pays the rent and puts food on the table.” Despite not having a high school diploma, she ran a business, and her face radiated pride.

Being single with an infant, she was desperate. Allen was the only person who would hire her. He had a sign in his window that said, ‘Now Hiring People That Show Up!’ It was a full-time job. He even encouraged her to bring Jessie to the shop.

Having no relatives on her side to speak of, he became Jessie’s honorary uncle. Robin always had him over for the holidays and occasionally invited him for a late Sunday dinner. Both Jessie and she miss him. Now that she was talking about him, she wondered if Jessie would remember Allen.

“It doesn’t anymore?”

“Zoning allowed an indoor shopping center to be developed south of here. I’m not the only business suffering.” It significantly reduced traffic on Main Street, especially during the cold months. Hence, retail stores that relied on walk-in traffic were hurting. To compensate, she had to let go of the high school girl she had hired part-time. Instead, Robin did all the work herself.

“Why didn’t you move?”

"The landlord wouldn't let me out of the lease. The restaurant on the next block is closing. Shops on both sides of Main Street are struggling." Allen negotiated a long-term deal that seemed terrific at the time. What luck. Those businesses that survive will undoubtedly renegotiate their contracts or move.

"How do you know that?"

Her eyes tightened marginally. "That's the rumor. Instead of beating around the bush, why don't you ask me what you want to know?"

"If there's something you want to get off your chest, now is the time."

Not to you. Pushing herself to the edge of the chair, "Frankly, I like the people at the bank. If I knew anything, I would have told you."

"Would you?" His face revealed nothing beyond his question.

Chapter 38

Off the record

That comment threw her for a loop. Fearing a demotion from being helpful to being a suspect, she searched his eyes. “Detective, you’re not going to get the answer you want by questioning the wrong person.”

“In analyzing the Sheetrock, I observed that, by the way it was cut, the thieves started from your office. Can you explain why they would choose your place?” Forensics also confirmed that.

“Don’t know.” It was an obvious question, so she should have had a reason. She thought they would assume her office was where they operated from. But it never dawned on her that forensics could deduce that fact. That left Robin wondering what else she hadn’t thought about.

“Let’s go off the record.” Parker put down his pen and closed the notepad.

That was a good sign unless he was crafty enough to set her up. “Detective Parker, there’s nothing more I know.”

“In a well-planned operation like this, it simply doesn’t fly that things would happen haphazardly. Consider me a detective with an abacus. I need math to add up. Frankly, it doesn’t. My problem is with the trivia things. Selecting your shop as their headquarters tells me they knew something.”

What surprised her was that he was impressively correct. He might probe her background more deeply if she couldn't give him an acceptable explanation. She had secrets she didn’t want Parker to discover. Especially her relationship with Aaron. Desperately, she needed to find a reason as to why the thieves had chosen her shop. “Or the other stores had active security systems.”

“Frankly, there are a few possibilities.”

She loved that statement. In other words, he didn’t have a clue. “Well, one of them shouldn’t include me.”

“How did the crooks know you had no alarm?”

She was surprised that Sofia hadn’t noticed the missing alarm box when she initially dropped in on her. However, Sofia was preoccupied with pushing her button. “The outside may display stickers, but when I stopped making the payments, the security people removed the alarm. On your way out, surely you noticed the dangling wires where the box once hung.”

"It still doesn't hold water. They could have just as easily used the lawyer's or the accountant's shops, which are closer, yet they chose yours."

Luckily, Parker gave the wrong example. She took the detective far off his reservation and said, "I had an uncle who lived in Manhattan. It was somewhere uptown. He told me he didn't lock his door because no one would rob him."

"He told you that?" Parker's face looked puzzled.

"It was true. A mob boss lived in the same building. Everyone in the neighborhood knew if they robbed any apartment on that block, their car would be found at LaGuardia Airport." Just like her father, her uncle was a windbag. That blowhard proved to her that New Yorkers have two cold seasons: winter and attitude.

The only other thing she learned from him was that hospitals in Manhattan don't take cash. Apparently, the show-off arrived with the cash to prepay for a procedure. The woman at Mount Sinai told him she needed a certified check or a credit card. When he argued, the lady pointed to a safe in her office and said, 'See that safe. It has been broken into three times this week. We don't accept cash.'

With a baffled expression regarding LaGuardia Airport, Parker asked, "Why there?"

"According to him, it's the mafia's way of informing the police that the individual has been executed and won't be found." Although it raised an issue, she preferred that Parker extract the information from her.

"And using the shops next to the bank says that."

"Did you ever see who the law and accounting firms have for clients? Both businesses share the mucky mucks involved in drug trafficking." Simply knowing those thugs were in town gave her the willies.

"How would you know that?" Though Parker refused to show his emotions, it wasn't hard to sense where his head was at.

"Last winter, while shoveling the snow from my walk, I spotted the guy the local TV station claims is a kingpin in the drug cartel strolling into the lawyer's and accountant's offices." Being good at manipulating the detective wasn't something she was proud of, but with her family being addicts, that ability was her inheritance.

"Like whom?"

"That Carlos fellow and his henchmen." Knowing he had to be intrigued, she paused.

The name instantly leaped to Parker's tongue. "Carlos Vélez."

"Yeah, that's the fellow. I recognized him because he wore a bandana, making him look like the terrifying drug lord local TV stations portrayed the sleazeball as." Though she had redirected the questioning, she knew a good investigator would find his way back.

"And you never thought to tell the police?"

He must be kidding. In fear of reprisal, most people would say nada. "I assumed the DEA already knew. Certainly, a crook, like a bank robber, would know not to mess with those businesses."

"You're saying the law firm deals with that clientele."

She wondered if it was all an act. Lightheartedly, she said, “Who else would criminal lawyers deal with?”

“Then it’s your opinion that those lawyers are shady.”

She wasn’t sure if he found that hard to accept or was playing the devil’s advocate. “Why would I say that? Everyone knows how much integrity attorneys have.”

Parker grinned. “They aren’t the only stores on the strip.”

“The jewelry store, like the bank, probably has a top-of-the-line security system. Wait, a bank teller once told me they don’t keep oodles of cash on hand. Still, there’s nothing like cash.” Although the safety deposit boxes were knocked off, the police hadn’t disclosed that tidbit. Like many detectives, hoping the crooks would slip up, Parker didn’t believe in sharing specific morsels.

“How about the print shop?”

“Yikes. Have you been there? Especially their restroom? It’s grimy.” She wondered if men ever drove somewhere else because the restroom was too icky. She had.

“So, you think they might not be neat freaks.”

“I’ve been in grimy gas stations that had cleaner restrooms. Who likes filth? Not to mention someone else’s filth.” It had been years since she had had a run-in with the law. She will never forget the moment she was caught stealing food.

During the integration, the officer learned that 12-year-old Robin was hungry. Her mother said, “If you want food, get it yourself.” Having no money and the soup kitchen being closed, she took a package of cheese and bread.

Because of constant tension between her mother and the police, it was apparent to the officer that Robin had little choice. The kind policewoman agreed to let her go, provided she worked off what she had taken, and, on a full belly, she did.

From that day on, the German deli owner sporadically gave her food in exchange for work. Though he underpaid her, earning a meal felt better than accepting a handout from the soup kitchen.

“You seem to be saying your place was chosen by default.”

“Oh! And since my security system was off, the camera in the rear was also not working.” With that, she noticed Parker almost smile. She needed Parker to conclude it was easy to break into her place. At the same time, the corner shop lent them much privacy.

“We like a sample of your DNA.”

That caught her off guard. Feeling as awkward as a lady of the evening at a church social, she asked, “Why?”

“So, we can eliminate it from other DNA we may find.”

Eliminate her ass. However, in the eyes of the law, refusing to cooperate always sounds guilty, and being guilty, she will not refuse. “Sure.”

“After you leave my office, simply hook a left. You can’t miss it. Room 4.”

Chapter 39

The Necklace

Parker wandered into the breakroom after questioning Robin to digest what he had learned over a mug of coffee. As always, he asked himself if he believed her and why. Although her story was simple enough, Parker had to decide if the interview was more of a performance. Before concluding, Thomas entered and said, “I put a rush on everything.”

“Let’s find out where Sofia Ferrari is.” Parker was drinking black coffee. Thomas poured himself a cup, made mud with milk, and joined him.

“Are you going to bring her in for questioning?” He handed Parker her rap sheet.

"If I need to." However, before speaking to Sofia, he needed to have a chat with Dick Cantor.

"Does she hang with anybody?"

"A snitch informed me there are two other women. One of the women must be Cathy Kazan." She's known as the ringleader. As far as Parker was concerned, if nothing else, she was guilty by association.

"What about the third woman?" Thomas asked.

"He didn't know. Sherry Barkley hung with them intermittently. But she was incarcerated on a drug charge." If Sherry Barkley were the third girl, that would be the perfect crime team—a cool-headed ringleader, a psycho, and a drugged-up loopy girl.

"Where should we look?"

"Perhaps they rented a house. Also, check out the motels." Once Parker discovered their location, he planned to keep them under surveillance. Parker knew he had jumped to an assumption, but his gut told him Sofia was involved.

Being a modest police force, Thomas often multitasked. "I'll have a few aids get on it."

"Don't forget the dinky places. Oh, and please work with Sergeant Bryant on this." He glanced at her rap sheet, despite having already read her file. It was a considerate thing to do. Too bad Penny disagreed. Opening a car door for her in the middle of a heated argument only inflamed her further.

Nodding, Thomas said, "Also, we'll speak to real estate brokers."

"That's provided they used their real names." They had no reason to lie. Giving a false name would make them appear guilty. Then again, lying is what crooks do.

"Don't fret, I'll cover all bases," Thomas said.

If they're still in town, we'll find them. "Hopefully, the jewelry will be retrievable."

"Providing you know what fence they used," Thomas said.

"The bank manager supplied us with a partial list, including photos of the pricier pieces." If the crooks had used local talent, recovering the merchandise shouldn't be that difficult.

"I'll have Barbara visit local jewelry and pawn shops. She has a good eye." Her street smarts and photographic memory made her a rising star.

"I want to close this damn case." Though he knew he would miss being a detective, Parker hated crawling into a perp's head.

"I've never seen you so emotional."

"It could be my last case." When he retires, Parker expects the department he has shaped to continue without him. If he acquired a business that has a more sociable lifestyle, he might get over Penny. Even better, he might hook up with another woman. Hopefully, it won't end in a failed marriage. He experienced that three times.

"Then solve it."

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While Parker and Thomas talked, Robin waited for what seemed like forever before someone swabbed the side of her mouth. On her way out, her face turned white. A uniformed

officer was escorting Sofia in. As they passed, Robin purposely didn't lock eyes with her. The chance encounter left Robin wondering if Parker planned it. If so, she had big problems.

Minutes later, a patrolman poked his giant head in the breakroom. Interrupting Parker's conversation with Thomas, he said, "Detective Parker, I've been looking for you. I heard through the grapevine that you wanted to question Sofia Ferrari. She's in the interrogation room."

Chapter 40

Interviewing Sofia

Having no idea where this would lead, Parker was undecided about whether to turn it into an informal interview. Sometimes, it's best to shake the tree. Therefore, he led her into his office and took a seat at his desk. "Sofia Ferrari, are you Italian?"

"You're kidding. Half the letters in my name are vowels." As always, her fur coat was eye-catching. It proved to be the ultimate expression of fashion power. Adding to that image, she wore a wide-brimmed hat.

"Maybe you can help me out," Parker started, friendly. He never understood anyone, beginning by attacking the person. There was plenty of time to play bad cop if needed. First, he wanted to extract as much information as he could voluntarily.

“Where did you get my name?” Removing her coat, she sat and swung it over her lap. Unfortunately, the gun’s brown handle peeked out of her bunched-up pocket. Casually, she placed her pocketbook in front of it.

“Why are you asking?” Parker’s voice displayed the unquestionable tone of a seasoned investigator.

“Being curious is my character failing.” Concealed from view by her handbag, she pushed the gun back into the pocket.

Then, have increased curiosity. “Let’s leave it at a referral.”

She had an awkward smile. “Just for you, I’ll take the rest of the day off.”

“I’m the lead investigator.” He was the only investigator on this case, but he was the department's top dog.

“Then it must be important,” Sofia said.

“Lieutenant Stryker from the 3-12 is looking for you.” There’s a hole in any case. Assuming she’s guilty, he must fill in the missing pieces.

“Do you know why?” She rocked in the chair.

He wondered why Stryker didn’t include that detail. But then, with Stryker, secrecy is part of his job. “I didn’t ask.”

“I’ll contact that precinct later.” Her tone sounded sincere.

He thought he had heard it all before and seen it all before. However, he had never worked on a robbery like this. “In reviewing your file, you have an extensive record.”

"True, I had problems. However, I've been squeaky clean in the last two years." She squirmed in her chair.

Speaking in a cold, measured language, he asked, "Are you referring to the time you were incarcerated?"

Her face was washed with a dubious expression. "I may not be a model citizen, but I've paid for my mistake."

"We found your locket in a shop on Main Street." If the police officer had alerted Parker, he would have instructed the patrolman to follow her, leading to the discovery of Cathy Kazan's whereabouts, the identification of the third woman, and the location where they were living.

"And you called me in to return it. How nice." She swiveled in the chair as if trying to get comfortable.

He didn't appreciate her cutesy style, but when questioning perps, he generally found a reason not to like them. "Not exactly."

"Aren't the cops the good guys?" She twisted her foot around the chair's leg.

He didn't want to come across as a hard-nose detective, but that's who he was or had become. "Are you familiar with Robin Turner?"

"The name doesn't ring a bell."

"How about the shop on Main Street, *Some Assembly Required*?" He placed his cell phone alongside his notepad.

"Yeah, I remember. It was an unusual name. Too bad it wasn't an unusual store."

"It's a catchy name." Based on her attitude, Parker thought she would be a tough interview.

"I was interested in what the shop was peddling."

"And you couldn't tell from the display windows?" Simple questions like that infuriated his ex-wife. But being logical wasn't Penny's strength. Initially, he thought her impulsive nature was cute. However, as his job demanded analytics, Penny grew more irrational, and they drifted apart.

"That never tells the whole story."

"Well, that's where your necklace was found." Parker would give her as little information as possible.

"How do you know it's mind?"

Despite having no proof, he decided it would be an effective way to gauge her as a person. "Being in prison, your prints are on file."

"How many points?" Unconsciously, she shifted in her chair.

So, she's the type who can't help but demonstrate how smart she is. Like Penny, she might not care if what she says is true, so long as she comes across as intelligent. He still remembers the time Penny's flirty cousin had twins. Penny said, knowing her, it could have been from two men. Though it sounded ludicrous, Parker knew better than to question her statement.

Instead, the first chance he had, he googled it and discovered that there were cases. Even so, the odds are one in five million. To Parker, it makes as much sense as looking at a mansion because he bought a dollar lottery ticket. "Seven points."

Eyes narrowed, “Don’t you need nine? Well, no matter, I’ve been looking for it. Thanks.”

Considering how slick the job was, the necklace popping up seemed awfully convenient. It was so convenient that he wasn’t sure what to make of it. “The necklace is what the police call a clue.”

Hesitantly, she said, “I must have taken it off to try on another necklace.”

Damn it, she had an answer. “You indicated you didn’t like their stuff.”

“The store was empty, and I felt sorry for the lady. But not enough to buy anything. What’s the big deal?” She pressed her hands against her temples as if it would lessen her pain.

“Here I ask the questions.” He concluded she had a tough exterior. Then, so did his ex. At those times, he figuratively punched his way through; all hell broke loose.

“You are a very anti-positive,” she said, looking concerned.

“It’s just that I have a problem when someone dabbles in my field.” He was going on a fishing expedition, but that’s how you catch fish.

“What do you mean?” Her voice quivered.

“In my line of work, coincidences never feel good.” Unfortunately, a detective can’t be selective about who they deal with.

“Misplacing my necklace shouldn’t make me a suspect.” Sofia leaned the chair to the left.

Assembling the bits and pieces in his mind, she looked as guilty as sin. “A suspect in what?”

She blinked hard. “You didn’t bring me in to shoot the breeze. Ain’t I presumed innocent in the eyes of the law?”

That's a myth we all live with. "The system isn't designed to find the innocent, innocent. Just the guilty, guilty."

"The choice is yours. You can believe I'm telling the truth or not."

"Great, I choose not." His gut told him she would lie about certain things. Perhaps she'll lie about everything.

Her voice sounded uneasy, "Typical cop reaction."

"It's hard to give a hardened criminal a pass," which her rap sheet supports.

"Do you have any evidence?" With that statement, the wind changed.

"I'm working on it." Because he didn't like arresting anyone unless he was confident of the outcome, his arrest rate was low while his conviction rate was the highest in the precinct.

"Are you charging me with something, or letting me walk?" There was a faint tremor in her voice.

"It's one of those." Penny used to hate it when they argued, and he slowly built his case. She said it made her feel like a suspect. However, he had his suspensions.

He worked at wooing her away from Jeff. However, when she left him, to his astonishment, she moved in with Jeff, which only confirmed his doubts regarding his wife's fidelity. Toward the end, they had little in common, anyway. To Parker, working things out meant Penny had to correct her ways.

"Spare me the foreplay. It's obvious you have no intention of exploring anyone except me."

"This Christmas, I want to give my girlfriend a coat. Where did you get yours? It's quite stunning." The most frustrating aspect of being a detective is seeing criminals wearing expensive clothes. Conversely, having the money for such a coat confirmed his belief that she elevated her crooked ways.

"Sorry, I came across the coat up north. Anyone who says money can't buy you happiness doesn't know where to shop."

Not willing to feed her ego, he shifted his focus. "This crime is different from your earlier escapades. Bank robbery elevates you to the big leagues."

"So, you're questioning me about *B & E National*."

"My problem is, why else would you be in this neck of the woods?" The interview served one function. That is, he saw only one possibility. Both Cathy and Sofia were involved.

"Don't knock it. This is a charming town."

"I'm sure." If he had his way, she'd be behind bars for life. However, at this point, all he had was a gut feeling.

She gulped hard. "If this is what your charming town is about, I won't be returning."

He wondered what made her tick. But as with perps, he didn't care that much. "All I'm doing is following that pesky law."

"Not from where I'm sitting."

Most suspects feel compelled to ramble when accused of a crime, proclaiming their innocence. Sofia hadn't. However, based on her rap sheet, she was familiar with the legal system. "No one accused you of being smart."

"Now, detective, I've never knocked off a bank. Any good detective would point out that people don't change their MO."

"Like everyone else, crooks evolve." His wife evolved in ways that pulled them apart. As a result, Penny blamed him for their lack of common ground. But it was she who changed. This left him with a feisty woman who refused to accept the traditional role of a housewife.

"I didn't do it."

"That's what we're here to discover." Once he finds the right person, it's incredible how quickly everything falls into place.

"If memory serves me, there is a jewelry store on that strip. I saw several eye-catching pieces in their display window. So why wouldn't I stop there? Banks are notorious for not carrying more cash than they need to operate."

"Money wasn't taken." He released specific details when it served his interests. Hopefully, it will advance the conversation.

Stealing Robin's line, she said, "Excuse me. What were they after, withdrawal slips?"

Little comments often build a larger picture. "They broke into the safety deposit boxes."

"That doesn't make sense. Why not break into the jewelry store if they are after rocks?"

While glancing at the text as if he had just received the information, Parker said, "Our research shows you travel with two other women. One is Cathy Kazan. Why don't you ask her to call me? We can set up an appointment."

"Of course," her tone was unpleasant.

"What's the name of the third girl with you?" It hadn't gone unnoticed that she was giving complete answers without elaborating.

"Why?"

"Does this sound like a negotiation?" Parker didn't believe he should compromise in police work or, for that matter, in his private life. Unfortunately, neither did Penny.

"It's Lila?"

Surprised at how quickly Sofia gave up her name, he wondered if she was a regular. "How about her last name?"

Sofia gazed up as if taking a nostalgic stroll down memory lane. "No idea."

"You don't know or refuse to say."

"I have nothing to hide."

"By the way, where are you staying?"

"It's south of here. When the patrolman picked me up, I lost my ride. I think I can find the place. But I don't know the address."

Bull. Acting like he had seen Dick serve his purpose. Besides, mentioning him would put more pressure on her. "Oh! I visited Dick yesterday."

The muscles in her jaw twitched. "Dick, who?"

He hated lying like criminals do. "Sorry, you probably know him as Richard, Richard Cantor."

"I don't know everyone in prison." Her eyes blinked, and her voice wavered.

Parker always thought it was ironic that the police knew more crooks than the crooks did. “Did I say he was in prison?”

You could see the oops on her face. “How silly of me. I naturally assumed you were talking about a criminal...”

Based on her run-ins with the law, he didn’t expect to get much, and she didn’t disappoint him. “Do you have an alibi for when the bank was robbed?”

Her cheeks dropped. “Exactly when did that occur?”

The case was coming together bit by bit. “Sometime over the Thanksgiving Holiday.”

“Can you be more specific?”

“Due to how it was conducted, it’s one of those crimes that, on paper, seems intriguing. Yet it isn’t hard to figure out.” That’s another thing that irked his wife. His easy manner during an argument. But that was his training, or perhaps Penny was right. That’s who he is. The thing that annoys him about their divorce is that it has been years, and like a narcotic, she hasn’t entirely left him.

And by her recent phone call, he doubted whether he had left her. Penny told him she wouldn’t marry Jeff, despite their living together, because he’d never be the husband Parker was. Parker even asked her if she was being truthful with him, and she replied, ‘About that, I am.’

“Then why don’t I come back when you figured it out instead of playing this game?”

A felon, acting dumb, doesn’t cut it. “Grand thief is no game.”

Chapter 41

Sofia feels emboldened

He's acting like a Keystone Kop. "Don't you get tired of playing bad cop?"

Zeroing in on a sticky point, Parker said, "You see my problem. Asking *exactly* when the robbery occurred implies that you knew that was a crucial point."

As suspected, the dumb ass doesn't have the evidence needed. "Would you expect less?"

"Certainly not from a person who pulled the job." His manner was no-nonsense.

Super, it worked as designed. But then Sofia knew the men in blue were incompetent. "Gee, being unable to nail down the timeline must make your job tough."

"I hope you aren't planning on leaving town."

As if her emotions were on a bungee cord, hesitation again seeped back in. "Why?"

"I have a little more digging to do."

In prior towns, when the Gestapo brought her into a precinct, they were close to charging her. However, with the statement that he had 'more digging to do,' she concluded the knucklehead wouldn't detain her. That's the result of combining a great plan with a rinky-dink police department. "I don't know what you have against me. I've always liked the police."

"Well, they don't always like you."

"Hell, what do I know? Perhaps we are both wrong." Surprised at what she had just said, Sofia's cheeks broadened.

"Cute. Once I know where to look, I can ferret out all the secrets."

Detective School 101 advises against interrogating a suspect until you are prepared to make an arrest. "Tell me what that means. I've always been curious."

Holding up his thumb and index fingers, he said, "It means you are that far away from being charged. Thank you for your cooperation. Our chat made things clearer."

Cooperation sounds like she's volunteering. "If I didn't have to be here, why did your eager-beaver cop insist?"

"How did the patrolman do that?" A slight hunch revealed his feelings.

"I was looking at women's hats when he ordered me to accompany him." Parker must be a life member of the good ol' boys club.

Refocusing, he said, "Well, I did need to speak to you."

"I fail to see the point of your questions?" The clown is on a witch hunt. Fleetingly, she thought it would be fun to shoot the flunky. But then, unless the dirtbag was detaining her, why even bother?

"You haven't been charged yet. So, I don't need a point."

"How about returning my necklace?" Strangely, Parker reminded Sofia of her father, who intimidated her until she got even.

"Supply me with your contact info. After we conclude our investigation, I'll make sure it's returned."

The jerk is kidding. She only wore it to remind her of how she finagled her senile grandma. The old hag would endlessly tease Sofia. She told Sofia that she'd become a woman when she stopped crying.

The problem was that she couldn't stop crying. Years later, when Sofia cocked the hammer and rotated the pistol's barrel between her eyes, her grandma finally stopped. The shit stood there gawking at her. That's when Sofia informed her that she expected a high school graduation gift. "Not knowing where I'll be, I'll call you."

"If I need to speak to you…"

"And if I refuse, will your hired goons threaten me again?" Her tone left no room for interpretation.

That comment fueled Parker's mindset. "Would the juror please ignore my last statement? Next time, I'll bring an arrest warrant."

“Any more questions? I’ll retain a lawyer.” The detective is trying to ruin her day. Then, she realized her day was ruined when she considered hiring a lawyer.

“I find you unbelievable. You need to come clean.” Her story didn’t hold water.

“The only thing I need is a ride back.” While making sure her gun wasn’t spotted, she put on her coat. Then, she reached into her purse for her cigarettes and matches.

“Give me a few minutes to arrange it.” Parker began to text.

Because Parker's texting appeared longer than necessary, she wondered if he would assign one of his underlings to follow her. Then again, it would be fun to lose the lackey.

“A patrolman will meet you at the entrance.”

Chapter 42

The Girls

Once again, Parker wandered into the breakroom to drink black coffee and reflect on the interview. While Parker analyzed Sofia's window dressing, the girls hooked up and rushed over to Daniel’s house.

“We have to get out of here,” Cathy said as she opened the rusty wrought-iron gate. The squeaky hinge sounded like the soundtrack to a 1940s black-and-white horror movie. A tall elm dropped autumn leaves, which dotted the stone path. The wooden shutters rattled, and the lamppost light flickered. A two-story 1950s red brick structure was set back from the road, shrouded in darkness.

"Trust me. I'm cautious around the cops. A prison jumpsuit never looked good on me," Sofia said.

"I've been meaning to ask you, why didn't they arrest you for carrying the handgun?" Lila walked with a stiff-legged gate, primarily because she didn't soak her foot in warm water.

"The dumbass cop was too busy staring at my tits to frisk me. If things got out of hand, I would have whacked the numskull," Sofia said.

Lila couldn't resist raising her brow. "Fortunately, you set up a place to meet if any of us got picked up."

The sky was electric. Thunder rolled down from a high elevation. Their coats flapped in the chilly wind. With Christmas around the corner, several houses on both sides of the street had displays.

"When I spotted Sofia being escorted out by that patrolman, I knew it was time to flee. Immediately, I called Daniel. Luckily, he caught an earlier flight, or we couldn't unload the stuff so swiftly." Turning to Sofia, "In fear of the cops dropping in on us, Lila and I put everything in the car."

They had already discarded what they no longer needed and shipped any items they wished to keep to an out-of-state storage facility. Cautious Cathy wanted nothing incriminating lying around.

"Is Daniel how you found out about the bank job?" When Lila last spoke to Daniel, his health was far from ideal. But she heard he was a cancer survivor.

"Of course." Strapped over Cathy's right shoulder was the bag packed with jewelry.

“As I voiced earlier, the idea of sticking around was risky. Not to mention, the waiting was sheer torture. We should have skipped town once the job was over.” Across the street, colorful lights flashed, Santa on his sleigh.

“Don’t forget, I was working around the town’s four-day celebration. Since Daniel gave us this opportunity, I would normally use him. The timing was off because he and his wife were visiting their kid. I didn’t like the idea of traveling with all that loot. So, I secured it while we waited for Daniel.”

As they approached the archaic door, a note read, "Use the knocker." This made them feel as if they were at the Addams Family's home. Hesitatingly, Cathy did just that.

“Hey, when we are done here, I’m splitting town. Both of you can take in the sights,” Sofia said.

With Christmas reminders everywhere, Cathy said, “Oh, please, Santa’s elves get busted for trafficking in stolen toys, yet you’re telling me no one suspects Santa of any wrongdoing. Like Santa and his elves, we’re joined at the hip. If they suspect you, I automatically become a person of interest.”

“Come to think of it, the detective did say he wanted to talk to you.” Sofia wore a high-fashion hat, pierced earrings, and her fur coat.

“Did he say why?”

“I didn’t ask, but I have a pretty good idea.”

As they were greeted, an off-key clock in another room chimed. Daniel had a wide face and a friendly smile.

"It has been eight years since we met, and you still have a full head of hair." Lila found his smile heartwarming. Playfully, Lila ran her hand through his hair. Her cheeks blushed as the hairpiece fell to the floor. "Oops."

"My wife told me I should glue it on." Bending over, he retrieved the wig.

"With such a smooth surface, use an epoxy," Cathy joked.

"You always had a full head of hair. It hasn't been that many years since I've seen you…" Sofia said.

"The last time you saw me, you had dropped out of high school," Daniel said.

"Still, I'm forced to wonder if you have a debilitating disease," Sofia asked.

"Just hair lost," Daniel said.

"Gee, that is debilitating," Lila blurted out despite wondering if the cancer was a factor.

"With a body like this, who needs hair?" he kidded. Daniel's eyes bulged, and his potbelly hung over his belt.

As they entered, their eyes adjusted to the lack of light. He led them through a narrow hallway, passed a dark kitchen, and into his office. To minimize her gimp, Lila strolled in with the speed of a woman killing time, by shopping.

The musty room had a vaulted ceiling and wide cherrywood beams. The furniture, paneled walls, and heavy drapes could have been purchased when the house was initially built. The room was large and rectangular, with two paddle fans. Abstract paintings added needed color. On top of an oversized, ornate desk with lion feet sat a pack of Marlboro cigarettes, a glass ashtray, an acrylic card holder, and a tall coffee mug holding pencils and pens.

Upon placing his disheveled hairpiece on his desk, Cathy asked, “While we’re on the subject, who styled it?”

Wiggling his thick eyebrow, he said, “My pillow, you just woke me up from my nap.”

Lila spotted a red outfit lying over a chair. “You’re Jewish. I never imagined you playing Santa.”

“Who else would work around the Christmas Holiday?” He visits the children’s ward of the town’s hospital.

“Luckily, like Santa, you’re out of shape.” The room was so chilly that the girls kept their coats on.

“I was born heavy.” In not shaving for a few days, his cheeks had a porcupine-like texture.

“How heavy were you?” Sofia asked.

“You couldn’t roll me, if that’s what you’re wondering.” Daniel began to laugh at his own joke, but it quickly turned into a smoker’s cough. His nose was crushed as if someone had hit him. And his droopy Basset Hound eyes were whiskey colored. A gold Gucci watch peeked out from his uncomplimentary Mr. Rogers sweater.

Refocusing, Sofia smiled like a kid who had just discovered a prize in their box of Crack-O-Jacks. “Well, Daniel, do you have oodles of cash on you?”

“I could give you some and wire the rest to a bank account Cathy set up?” Much like other self-made men, he projected an air of confidence.

Blown away by the discovery, Sofia’s face shows shock. “You set up a bank account?”

"It's a lot of money before taxes, and we aren't paying taxes. So, I figured Daniel could wire the funds while we're vacationing in the Bahamas. This should be a safe way to get money out of the country and party before deciding if we should go our separate ways."

"You don't want to hang around with me?" Sofia's tone sounded dejected.

"Recently, we've been rocky. Unless we are a team, we are less than the sum of our parts. I'm just giving both of you a choice," Cathy said.

Turning to Daniel, Sofia asked, "How much do you think the take is worth?"

Looking at a duffel bag, his eyes twinkled. "The internet reported that the robbers must have stayed in the vault for days. You girls have chutzpah."

"No doubt, it was grueling work," Sofia said.

Chapter 43

Paste

Clearing a section, Cathy lifted the bag, flipped it sideways, and tossed it onto his desk. It landed with a thump. She emptied each plastic bag, laying the contents beside it.

Daniel spun around, putting on disposable gloves, and lit a floor lamp that curled overhead. Then he turned back, glancing at a diamond-studded bracelet in the second bag. “This one has lots of rocks.”

“It’s a beautiful piece.” Cathy smiled. The room was electric with anticipation.

After removing a stone from its setting, he measured it. There was a shelf behind him, and he placed it on the scale. With a pad and pen by his side, he jotted down some numbers.

Studying it through an eyeglass, he turned back to them and cocked an eyebrow. Leaning against the back of the chair, he said, “Why would anyone put paste in a safety deposit box?”

Cathy laughed, “A cheap slob buying his mistress a CZ (cubic zirconia) bracelet, telling her it cost thousands. You know how men are.”

She handed him another piece. After examining it, he again raised a brow. “Oy vey. Does everyone in this town have a mistress?”

“Why?” Cathy’s hands began to pull at each other. Doubt bobbed to the surface.

“This is more paste.” The moments that followed were nerve-racking.

There was an uncharacteristic flicker in Cathy’s eyes. Her face furrowed with concern. Rummaging around, she grabbed a piece from the third bag. The team waited, frozen in position like they were watching a cliffhanger. “Look at this watch.”

Turning it over, he instantly said, “I don’t have to. It’s a knockoff Rolex.”

“You sure?”

“Too light to be real gold.”

“You know your jewelry,” Cathy said.

“It’s what I do.”

Cathy poked around before removing a diamond necklace with a heavy gold casing. It was from the most recent batch that the girls opened. “How about this piece?”

He spun in his chair and went through the same procedure. After studying the rocks, he said, “Now that’s more like it.”

Again, Cathy combed through the jewelry, picking a pendant from the same bag, “And this piece?”

Upon analyzing the white gold pendant, he said, “These Arabian-cut stones are good.”

“How good?”

“Not as pricey as the other piece, but the gems are real.”

Foraging through the fourth bag, she grabbed a brooch. “And this piece?”

Daniel held it in his palm, “A level above dollar store quality.”

Cathy handed Daniel a necklace in the fifth bag. Shaking his head, he barely looked at it.

“Dammit,” Sofia’s tone was as sharp as cut glass. Her face had completely transformed. It was like watching time-lapse photography.

“Relax, have a seat,” Daniel said.

“Don’t tell me what to do,” Sofia said.

“What are the odds that most of those boxes are worthless?” Despite sounding like a rhetorical question, Lila’s face revealed she had no answer.

Hands moved wildly with excitement. Sofia said, “Zero to none. I was sitting on top of the mountain, and that bitch gave me hemorrhoids.”

In a rare show of emotions, Cathy’s face drooped. The irony is that when things are looking up, that’s when the head fake comes. Just like in her childhood, when the government entered her life, they not only arrested her father but also confiscated all her expensive jewelry. And because Cathy’s abrasive father had alienated their relatives, Child Protective Services also got involved. Hooking her up with couple after couple.

Sinking into an overstuffed chair, she drew her legs up and hugged them. Her head rested on her knees, face hidden. Closing her eyes allowed Cathy to retreat from reality. Still, her thoughts never strayed far.

She recalled her mean-spirited father being charged with tax evasion and bank fraud. The government proved he had three sets of books—one for the bank, one for the IRS, and a correct set for internal use.

Two months before his arrest, in a knockdown brawl, her father fractured her mother's jaw, among other things. A week later, instead of waiting for the handyman to lay concrete for a shed, her father decided to do it himself. That's when her mother saw a chance to bolt. The only thing worse than losing a parent is losing the wrong one.

Cathy had always wondered why her mother hadn't dropped by the school to pick her up. Upon her father's imprisonment, she was sure her mother would return. But she didn't. Not in the following days, weeks, months, or years.

One of the couples the state hooked Cathy up with punished her for the slightest offense, especially when she mimicked her father's behavior. The beatings they administered compelled her brain to shut down when she needed it to function the most. Three years later, a pragmatic Cathy returned and, in a businesslike manner, meticulously ensured they were in no condition to watch another child. But then, the dead never are.

Shuffled from home to home, saved every penny she stole. Finally, she had enough money to hire an investigator, but even he couldn't find her mother. That's when her thoughts

shifted to whether she'd ever return to living in a big house with its gigantic rooms and spacious yard. It offered refuge from her overbearing father.

Because memories faded, the glory of an earlier time gradually reconfigured itself. So, despite her father, she revered the privileges of the upper class, particularly her social status. That's why wealth and the good ol' days were inseparably linked.

Chapter 44

Visiting Cantor in Prison

Thinking it was now a dot-connecting exercise after finishing his coffee, he drove to the prison, stopping only to buy cigarettes. Parker met Cantor in a small room with a table, metal chairs, and a concrete floor. He explained that the robbery had Dick's hoofprints all over it. "I could get you some privileges if you cooperate."

His face glowed. "I've never had a fan club before. For my cooperation, I would like weekend passes to visit my mother and..."

A guard informed Parker that, most of the time, they had no idea where a conversation with Dick was heading. Years ago, Parker had the same experience. "I heard she passed away."

"Still, I like to pay my respects." He had a bulky frame, 6′ 2″, perhaps 230 pounds—a barrow chest and brawny shoulders.

Rumor had it that Cantor was the one who killed his mother. Instead of getting into the weeds of that, Parker paid him no mind. "Look, detectives don't believe in coincidences."

"Gee, my accomplishments are becoming legendary. I love it! Finally, I'm getting the recognition I deserve. I might even write a book…"

Fleetingly, Parker sat there wondering if the kooky guy believed the garbage that was pouring from his mouth. "Get over it. I'm here because you're the only crook who cleaned up after himself."

"That was my shtick. All that work for what? In hindsight, I became like Zorro, leaving my mark. That made it easy for the state to pin the crime on me."

"You are an obsessive individual." He placed his phone and notepad on the table. Both served as a reminder of his authority.

"The prosecutor nailed me to the wall by insisting that it was my trademark. The jackass claimed that the lack of evidence proved I did the job. The jury bought it, hook, line, and sinker. I never heard such nonsense.

"During the trial, the crotchety prosecutor declared on one job that the place was so rundown, it had to be me who left an envelope with enough cash for the owner to install a new floor. And the stupid jury ate it up."

According to the media, while the prosecutor questioned a witness, he positioned himself near the defendant. Casually, he crumbled up a sheet of paper and innocently tossed it next to Dick on the defense table.

Before his attorney could figure out what was going on, the defendant had unraveled the paper and attempted to smooth it out, hence proving that it was Dick's obsession. The judge was angry over the prosecutor's stunt, so both lawyers ended up in his chambers. Afterward, he instructed the jury to ignore the antics. Of course, they could not.

The judge applied pressure the following morning, which led to an agreement: "In your plea deal, you acknowledge doing just that."

"Oh, yeah, I forgot. Still, an incompetent employee failed to lock the safe. I was after the jewelry. Why be greedy? There was enough cash for both of us. Since when is doing a good deed a crime?"

Instead of Dick analyzing, he justifies. "Robbing has always been a crime."

"You sound like that sanctimonious prosecutor."

In fairness to Dick, the prisons are full of inmates who haven't learned. "Not everyone tries to pawn jewelry in the same small town they had stolen it from. Can you explain why you would do that?"

"It's difficult."

"Give it a shot." Parker was curious why anyone would do such an asinine thing.

"It was snowing. Sue me, I don't like driving in poor conditions."

Parker shakes his head. More likely, he was lazy. “In that case, why not take it to a fence?”

“I wanted to cut out the middleman,” he spoke deliberately.

Parker noticed something new. Dick tended to talk with a calming tone. As screwy as it sounds, it added to his character. “Makes sense to me.”

“It was a good plan.”

“If things worked according to plan, I would still have hair,” Parker said. Despite thinking he’d still be married. Before things went off the rails, he planned to retire and devote his attention to his third marriage. Of all his wives, Penny was the one he still cared about. Despite her flaws, she possessed a dynamic personality.

“Sure, rather than acknowledging how good I am, harp on that minor point.”

“Stop bragging. You aren’t that good. Over the years, a dozen perps told me you’re a real bastard.” Three men told Parker. In police work, everyone knows when it’s beneficial; three is construed as a dozen.

“It amazes me that so many people knew my mother.”

Parker gave a dry laugh. “A good detective can easily spot a pattern.”

“If I had to do it again, I wouldn’t be so neat.”

According to the guard he spoke to, Cantor is still a neat freak. “Who says you are capable of being anything else?”

“This place cured me.”

Dick's obsession made it easy to zero in on him. "Oh, I bumped into Sofia yesterday. I could see why you went for that piece of ass."

His facial muscles softened with the mention of her name. "Sofia, who?"

This intensified Parker's suspicion. "Sofia Ferrari. Who else could I be talking about?"

A twinkle appeared in his eyes. "So, you are here to see if I know the bitch."

"Do you?" Parker took the twinkle as a positive sign.

"No," he said snappily.

Being so swift, it sounded like a yes to Parker. "Well, I have a reason to believe you do."

"It's time to play; let's make a deal," he said in a thundering announcer's voice.

Parker was mildly surprised he hadn't acted incensed over Sofia using him. Reaching down, he grabbed a bag and said, "Here's a carton of cigarettes."

"You know a cigarette is soothing with coffee. But what's coffee without dessert? Apple pie would be a smart choice. Of course, that followed a main course. A thick steak cooked medium-rare, served with a baked potato and asparagus. That comes after an appetizer. I prefer king crab, but I'll settle for almond, cheddar cheese balls if prepared properly. And let's not forget an aged whiskey on the rocks."

"You want me to bring liquor into a prison?" Parker glanced at a text from Sergeant Bryant. His team found the house the girls rented. It looked abandoned. Additionally, they found an old train ticket in the trash can. Aware that the train didn't run until morning, Parker texted back to check on the car-rental places.

"Join me. The last girl I dated told me I sound better when we both drank."

"I don't know why she would say that." Towards the end, Parker's wife sounded better when they drank. At least Penny was fun to talk to.

"Would you believe they don't allow liquor here?"

During their talk, Parker received intermittent texts, but none called for a reply. "Lucky for you, I don't play hardball. Otherwise, imagine how miserable I could make your life if you refuse to cooperate."

"Why should I give it any thought when you don't play hardball?"

"Tell me only what makes you feel comfortable. I'm here to listen." Fearing Penny's response, Parker wouldn't make such an open-ended request. He knew being unable to talk openly to his pretty ex-wife didn't say much about their marriage. However, she refused to discuss the problems that troubled their marriage. Perhaps because she knew her criticisms were unfounded.

"I never flipped on anyone. Check around. I'm no stoolie."

Parker clicked his phone and turned it around. He had texted an officer to take a picture of Sofia without her knowledge as she left the precinct. The overexposed image was barely better than what the police had on file. It was an upper body shot. "Do you recognize her?"

He leaned in. His gaze fell on the photo. "She doesn't look familiar."

Frustrated, Parker placed his hand over Sofia's head. All that remained were her open fur coat and her bosom. "For crying out loud. How about now?"

"Funny, man."

"If I went out with a girl having size 40 knockers, I would remember." Parker once did, and he had remembered.

"And I bet she'd have the surgeon's bills to prove it."

"So, you don't care if she played you." Parker was shocked. Most crooks would be livid.

"Based on her looks, it wouldn't be hard."

Shaking his head in disgust, he returned the phone to the main screen. "Keeping your yap shut is not in your best interest."

"In that case, what are you offering?"

"Your facial expression gave your answer away." This meeting drew Parker closer to the realization that Sofia knew Dick. Nevertheless, connecting the dots to a jury would be impossible without his collaboration.

"Reading my body language is a minor detail."

"Right now, minor details matter." Another thing that upset his wife was how he pieced together minute details in building his case against her. Penny always refused to admit to any affair, but what choice did she have unless she was ready to acknowledge her infidelity?

"How, by interpreting my expression to fit your conclusion? Cops always do that."

However, those seemingly innocuous details, when added up, become something else. "You must have heard about the bank robbery."

"Ever since I moved here, I haven't gotten around much."

He received three texts, but none called for a reply. "Look, if she's involved…"

"Don't you know? You're the crackerjack detective."

"I'm just getting started. Given time, I'll get there. A sharp cookie like you should want something out of it." Parker eyed the carton peeking out of the paper bag.

"How about having my sentence reduced?"

Thus far, the flake wanted to visit his dead mother, have a full-course meal with liquor no less, and now a get-out-of-jail card. Out of amused curiosity, Parker asked, "Regarding an early release, what are you talking about?"

"Would you believe I don't have any of my belongings here? I'm ready to walk out right now."

Not getting anywhere, he tried another tack. "Look, all prisoners dream of life outside—someone to meet them at the gate. Enjoy drinks at a neighborhood bar. Perhaps a chance to kick start their life…"

"Ever since I moved here, I have dreamed about owning one of those old Datsun pickup trucks."

"Not that it matters, but I'm wondering if a Datsun pickup truck is your dream vehicle, what your dream girl looks like." Parker dreamed of having kids with Penny, but they couldn't. So, when they divorced, he had nothing to show for all those years but mixed memories.

His face curled into amusement. "By you being here, I'm figuring if I acknowledge knowing her, it will make your case a slam dunk."

Despite Parker's preference not to admit anything, he said, "Eventually, I'll get there without…"

"However, without me, you'll never confirm if I know the bitch. That's why there's no incentive you can offer me except a reduced sentence. Of course, a great meal puts me in a good mood to listen."

Many people have reputations that are hard to live up to. But this crackpot surpassed his. "Even though she's ripping off your MO, you refuse to talk."

"I'm becoming legendary. When I die, I don't know how the world will go on."

Given the guy's wackiness, Parker said, "The universe managed without you for the first 14 billion years."

"What?"

"Wondering if this would get Dick to start talking, he said, "I want to thank you for wasting my time."

"You know, sixty percent of what they say about me is made up?"

As he feared, the exercise seemed pointless. "The problem, Dick, is it still leaves a lot, that's true."

"Haven't you heard I now call myself Richard?"

"You'll always be a dick to me." Parker removed the carton of cigarettes. Crumpled the paper bag and tossed it back onto the table. In a nanosecond, Dick began to smooth it out. When Parker knocked on the door, waiting for the guard to open it, he couldn't help but laugh.

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Parker dealt with all kinds of criminals, but Sofia was a different breed. As he stepped into his SUV, he spoke to Sergeant Bryant and discovered that forensics confirmed that the ashtray in Robin's office was filled with cigarettes containing Sofia's DNA. And there were too many butts to be a customer. In addition, they also found her fingerprints on balled-up duct tape in Robin's office. This was far from conclusive, but it helped his case.

To Parker, it didn't make sense to implement such an ingenious plan and then make so many dumb mistakes. That's why Parker felt it had the hallmark of a frame. However, because he believed Sofia was guilty, not questioning the evidence made her arrest easier. "I want her picked up."

"On what charge?" Sergeant Bryant asked.

"She smokes too much. Her fashionable hats are offensive. The coat she wears results in many fine animals being slaughtered. Take your pick." Given how easily the evidence melted together, Parker planned to tell her what they found. Hopefully, an angry Sofia will talk.

Chapter 45

Being, Conned

Lila tried to restrain herself from displaying annoyance at Sofia's snarky comment directed toward Robin of zero to none. "Then explain it to me."

"Why should I?" Sofia sneered at her.

"Because I'm not that bright." Lila reached a boiling point.

Her words matched her tone. "You know, Lila, sometimes your lack of smarts amazes me."

She had nursed Sofia's insults until they festered inside her. Unexpectedly, firing up her brain cells, she didn't censor her speech but allowed it to gush out, biting off each syllable cleanly. "You think trusting friends means I'm not smart?"

Sofia laughed coldly. "Well, your friend hoodwinked us."

"Didn't you listen to what I said?" Lila reciprocated with a drop-dead smirk.

"Did you hear me?"

Color crept north from her neck. "Fair enough. Let's talk about that. When did Robin have the chance?"

Sofia's eyes narrowed. "How about when she took the jewelry back to her office?"

"You followed her." As she spoke, the pieces gradually fell into place. That foxy lady knew all along she was splitting town.

Sofia scowled. "What's with you? It takes only seconds to switch the bags."

"Then this is one of those times when less isn't more. Addition by subtraction is no match for your ignorance." Lila's hands were fixed to her hips.

"I wondered why she had such a large hamper in her office bathroom. Buried under her dirty clothes, she must have hidden bags of fake jewelry. Not trusting her, I peeked into the top plastic bag. In glancing at it, everything looked fine. I'm guessing she purchased some good knockoffs, like that CZ bracelet."

"Getting as good as you dish out doesn't feel good, does it?" For whatever reason, Robin was a curse in Sofia's life.

"I was outmaneuvered by plankton."

Sofia should've known better. "When we were all in Robin's office, she gave you a chance to do the right thing."

"Then she's going to wait a long time."

"Outsmarting those who try to pull something over on her is a classic by-the-book Robin strategy," Lila recalled Robin's confrontation with Sofia. Sensing something else was happening, warning bells went off in her head. She looked squarely at Robin and failed to see the sleight of hand.

"Now that the foreplay was over, the main event begins," Sofia said, then paused as if waiting for that observation to sink in.

At the time, Lila heard Robin's words but didn't understand. "You don't know her as I do. That lady has never been a country yokel."

Paying no attention to what Lila said, Sofia continued, "Another thing, except for the first two bags, why don't I see any cash? Not to mention, my necklace was miraculously found by the police in Robin's store. What are the odds that someone returned it? Robin must have planted it. That bitch not only screwed me, but she also set me up. No one fucks with me."

Lila stopped trying to appease and stared into Sofia's eyes. She should have known Robin wouldn't roll over and play dead. "What kind of world are you living in?"

Dismissing the statement, Sofia flipped her hand. "I'm not dumb."

Psycho or not, the words should mean the same. But Sofia gives new meaning to words. "No, your authority comes from intimidation."

Her face matched her red nails. "No way did I give her a reason to doubt me."

Unladylike, Lila rolled her eyes. “Being Sofia means never having to say you’re sorry for acting stupid!”

“You must have suspected she was up to something,” Sofia said.

“I knew what that crafty lady was capable of if pushed. Who would’a thunk, you two nincompoops would do the pushing?” Words flowed like water through a crack.

She gave a dismissive grunt. “I had everything figured out.”

Robin always wore velvet gloves with steel tips. “Not everything. Even as a kid, trying to outsmart Robin was your original sin.”

“Why should I care? Her having a brat and feeling desperate is her problem.”

Anger was burning a hole inside Lila, “And now it’s your problem.”

“You’re changing the subject.” Sofia lengthened her words.

“I’m not changing anything. I want to know what the subject is.” But knowing Sofia as she did, Lila sensed she was more interested in revenge than in recovering anything.

Sofia’s face was distorted with anger. Eyes menacing. “She should have been an easy mark. Now, she’s a dead mark.”

That’s what Lila feared. The images she conjured up made her blood boil. “You should learn how to deal with people.”

“It was a simple plan.”

“Yeah, your stupidity versus her smarts. There’s no contest.” No longer would she control her tongue. At least as far as Sofia goes, she wouldn’t.

“The bitch snookered me, and I won’t have it,” Sofia said, ignoring Lila’s comment.

“But it hadn’t happened the way you pretend. She played rope-a-dope with a dope.” The last time Lila was this angry, she tried to stab her grandfather. Fearing she wouldn’t miss next time, he stopped his evil ways with her brother and her. However, she sensed he redirected his wickedness to other kids in the neighborhood.

“I won’t allow you to talk to me like that.”

With Sofia’s world about power, Lila snapped, “Blow me.”

As if she didn’t hear her, Sofia asked, “How did she figure out what I was up to?”

“Do you know the difference between how a bully talks and how you talk to me?” It was more of a setup line than a question.

“If you’re that curious, Google it!”

Regardless of it falling on deaf ears, Lila said, “I have. It doesn’t know the difference either.”

“You are an ordinary person.” To Sofia, being ordinary was the quicksand of mediocrity, and that was the biggest insult one could sling at another.

While Lila wasn’t insulted, the intent was noted. But then no one screws another like a so-called friend. “I never doubted Robin’s loyalty, unlike you.”

Face tense. “Are any of these pieces something you removed from the vault?”

Goading her wasn’t smart, but Lila no longer cared. “You kept drumming into my head not to dilly-dally around admiring the jewelry.”

Sofia’s head tilted unnaturally. Her eyes shot up. “Now, you listen to me.”

Lila turned her nose up. She spoke fast and clipped. “To my surprise, what you said made sense. Often, your words cause traffic jams in my head.”

Exhibiting a sourpuss, “You want to get into it now.”

“It’s a toss-up. You’re either stupid or high on yourself. On second thought, you’re just an ordinary nincompoop.” Lila’s delivery was so cold that she thought her words would freeze midair, and not until a spring thaw would people hear what she said.

“I don’t have time for this.”

“Make time.” Not taking Sofia’s guff felt liberating. That’s why Lila was determined to end her problem with Sofia here and now.

Chapter 46

Confrontation

"Who else but Robin could have done it?" Sofia stared with haunted eyes.

"Tell me why you agreed to cut Robin in, only to screw her?" By the time Lila was done, she was shouting.

"That's not the point," Sofia said.

Nasal flared. "That is the point."

"Truthfully, I thought having a brat would give us leverage. It should've made her the perfect pigeon," Sofia said.

Occasionally, Sofia lapsed into the truth. "That lady has never been the creampuff you took her for." Robin could figure out what Sofia would do before Sofia knew.

"I wasn't thinking."

"You never do. Hanging around with you, the only thing I can guarantee is I won't die of low blood pressure." Lila was shocked by her newfound aggression.

"Dammit, there was no reason for her to distrust me."

Vaguely aware of the spat, Sofia's voice transported Cathy back from her time capsule. In a semi-conscious state, she said, "You're the reason."

Her head dipped…eyes turned down. "I should have detected signs of the double-cross coming from that weasel."

"You're assuming she gave you a sign," Cathy stared at Sofia or perhaps the wall behind her.

"Heck, she has a kid to care for, so maybe it's for the best." Lila saw it as Robin tricking the girls who had tried to trick her.

"She's supposed to get away with the second robbery because she did the first." Sofia's eyes were glued to Lila.

Lila stared back at Sofia with irritation, which she refused to conceal a minute longer. "You transform the simple into the complicated."

"Somehow, she realized we were going to shortchange her," Cathy said.

She couldn't believe her ears. Lila was struggling with her anger. Not to let go. Instead, she was determined to hold onto it. "Speak for yourself. Unlike you two, I would never screw a friend."

"Doesn't it get tiring, always being right?" Cathy said with a forced smile.

“That was an act of betrayal.” The fury Lila felt had crawled its way to the surface.

“You’re like the dopes I duped.” Sofia’s hands moved fast, her tone exacting.

Though she didn’t understand either girl, she accepted it. “Or possibly she figured out how the empress of ice would behave, for the love of the almighty buck.”

“Sue me, I was thinking out of the box,” Sofia said.

“More like you were thinking out of the planet.” Screwing Robin didn't make sense, but then, crazy people rarely do.

“Stop it! I don’t know how to deal with your outburst,” her expression confirmed that.

She had taken Sofia’s abuse on her chin so long that it felt like her head was going to explode. “Acting dumb is the only minority you can become a member of at any time.”

“It wasn’t personal,” her voice revealed frustration.

That’s the problem. “It never is with you. Talking to you makes me want to take Preparation H.”

“Hah?” Sofia looked dumbfounded.

“You’re a pain in my ass.” If it were anybody else but Sofia, the woman could step back, apologize to Robin for trying to scam her, and see if she would split the heist as agreed. However, with Sofia, everyone knew that the first chance the vindictive bitch got, she would double-cross her again.

“Screw you. In traveling with that little terror of hers, she’s vulnerable,” her words spilled out.

"I know how that twisted mind of yours works. Leave her daughter alone." Just thinking about it gave her the willies. Lila's face went hard, and the smoothness in her voice was completely gone.

Sofia's tone grew more intense. "You have a better idea?"

That irritated her as a woman and, down the road, perhaps as a mother. "You always go for the jugular. I can't believe you would kill a 6-year-old. It's not something I would brag about."

"I've done worse," Sofia spoke with the mindset of a mafia kingpin.

She has the coldest blood, this side of being a reptile. Sofia always felt comfortable in her hypocrisy. "Let me understand this. You are livid at Robin for having the audacity to do to you what she knew you planned to do to her?"

Eyes narrowed. "According to you, because I tried to screw her, she justified taking it all..."

"Justified, I would think Robin was more like thrilled."

Spoke with a slightly amused look. "Maybe you shouldn't hang with us."

Lila's long, slender fingers curled. She hadn't been this forceful since setting her grandfather straight, "Maybe I should kick your ass."

Sofia's face turned red. "Believe me, I just got out of prison. I dealt with girls tougher than you."

"That has me wondering if you are lying to me, or if you are lying to yourself." Like all bullies, Sofia refused to hear the truth. But then, Sofia cared more about image.

Typically, when deciding which path to take, Sofia hesitated. “You wouldn’t be the first person I whacked.”

Her grandfather had the same attitude. There is no limit to what an evil person can do. “It’s not that you don’t know better. It’s just that your enjoyment is more important than other people’s feelings.”

“Don’t forget, I pack heat.” Something dark, even subterranean, was in her eyes. She gave a predatory gaze. Redistributing her weight, Sofia looked like an old Western gunslinger.

This surprised Lila. Perhaps Sofia had more courage than she thought. More likely, Sofia was crazier than she thought. Not even at gunpoint would she allow Sofia to intimidate her. “You’re lucky.”

“How so?” Sofia took a menacing, small step towards Lila.

“No one had shoved that damn pistol up your ass, yet!” Lila needed her life back.

Sofia stood her ground, driven by either courage or fear. It was hard to tell. “You think you are tough enough to try?”

“You’re going to shoot me in front of Daniel?” Lila quickly shifted from a dumbstruck expression to indignation. It had been years since someone intentionally provoked her. She might take some guff from a friend, but she would rather eat an M-16 bullet than take any more garbage from Sofia.

The glitter in Sofia’s eyes and the widening of her cheeks were all too familiar. “You’re howling at the moon.”

Chapter 47

Quicker than a hiccup

Lila refused to let her foot injury become an excuse. A glaze settled over her forehead. Sparks jumped from nerve ending to nerve ending. When Sofia dug into her coat pocket, Lila lost it. Relying on muscle memory, her heels clicked rapidly, pounding the wood floor.

As though it were choreographed, her shoulders swiveled gracefully, like a cheetah in full stride. She was on her quicker than a hiccup, powering a backhand across her cheek. While it stung her hand, the pain felt soothing.

Sofia's head bobbed, forcing her to take a backstep. Lila advanced, ramming a shoulder between her breasts. Then, she grabbed Sofia's hair with her long fingers and gave it a yank. Sofia's head jerked like she was a rag doll.

Removing the snub-nosed .38 from her coat pocket, Lila promptly shoved Sofia's arm away with her left hand while delivering a flicking right to her cheek. Momentarily dazed, the shot exploded wildly off target. The bullet harmlessly nicked Newton's Cradle, which was on a shelf. It made a clinking sound. As the weapon toppled to the floor, the scent of gunpowder hung in the air.

Blood leaked, stripping Sofia's upper lip. Lila followed up with an uppercut to the creamy center of her stomach. Moving economically, she gyrated so that a looping left connected with Sofia's nose, snapping her head like a piñata. Then her fist smashed into Sofia's jawbone.

When Sofia threw a looping left, Lila lowered her head. As Sofia's arm sailed through the air, Lila came up like Mike Tyson and let fly her own powerful left into Sofia's cheekbone. While a disoriented Sofia wobbled, Lila hammered an eye.

Stumbling, she quickly stepped backward to regain her balance and tripped over a low table, scattering neatly stacked magazines. Her momentum sent her into a recliner, which flipped, slamming the back of her head against the mahogany floor.

Her legs had the strength of tissue. Trying to stand up, her hands clawed at the tall halogen lamp. Like a knife slicing through the air, Lila advanced. Out of breath, a wobbly Sofia leaned forward. Just then, Lila plowed a forearm into her chest, launching her toward the wall.

She bounced off the wood paneling with the force of a bowling ball hitting a pin. Sofia's legs buckled, and she collapsed onto the floor. Somehow, Sofia managed to corkscrew herself upright. Lila felt like she had just toppled a Goliath wannabe.

Standing on weak legs, Sofia's pupils swam. Not giving her any time, Lila delivered a couple of shots to her stomach. She followed up with a stinging right to her cheekbone and a looping left to her jaw. Repeatedly, her fist pounded Sofia's face. Blood dribbled from her cheeks, her nose, and her mouth.

Disoriented, she took four wobbly steps. Lila watched with amazement as she stumbled past her before falling backward. Lila kicked her in the kidney area twice before leaping on top of her. A right elbow smashed into Sofia's jaw. "I told you, 'Gun or no gun,' what I would do. This is what I call keeping my word."

"Help." Her cheeks were blood red and puffy. The squeaky voice had a primal cry.

Though the scuffle lasted only minutes, Lila was panting like a marathon runner. She could see that all the bluster Sofia lived by had been vacuumed from her. The problem lay with Sofia's short-term memory.

She pinned Sofia's arms under her legs. When Lila fights, she loses control of everything but kicking ass. For the first time, she became aware of that during the fight. There was something scary about the suspension of normalcy. Looking down at her, she said, "You have two choices. Promise me you won't harm Jessie. Or you can promise me you won't harm Jessie after I beat the living hell out of you."

Flat on her back, eyes dilated, she stared blankly. Her tone sounded tiny, but many were after a confrontation with Lila. "Help."

Lila grabbed a pierced earring and yanked it off. A loud shriek followed, making Lila want to cover her own ears. Sofia's hand struggled to comfort her bloody ear, but she couldn't

move her arms. Then Lila smashed her fist into Sofia's cheek, followed by a snapping right connecting with her good eye.

Changing plans, she placed her thumbs over Sofia's partly closed eyes. She could feel the tremor in Sofia's body. As she felt the curve of her eyelids, Lila could barely resist the urge to press. "I'll poke those ugly Egyptian eyes of yours out unless you swear not to harm Jessie."

Blowing out short breaths. Face heart attack red, "Okay."

"I don't believe you." Her tone was filled with conviction.

"I promise." Words spat out between breaths.

Refusing to listen to the puppet, Lila went to the puppeteer, "Cathy, tell me now that you'll see to it Sofia keeps her word, or she'll need a seeing-eye dog."

While lighting a cigarette, Daniel turns to Cathy and says, "You need a smoke."

As awareness sharpened, Cathy leaned in. She gripped the arms of the chair so tightly she could have squeezed the life out of it. The statement brought her back to the present. "I gave it up."

He coughed and sat up a little straighter. "When smokers need to think things over, they light up."

She seemed to give it thought. Slowly, she leaned toward Daniel's desk and grabbed a cigarette, screwing it into her mouth. A trembling hand struck a match, and she inhaled the cigarette.

With Lila's back to her, Cathy pushed herself up and retrieved Sofia's gun. Heading to the girls, her boots clicked on the hardwood floor. Just as Lila wearily glanced over her shoulder,

Cathy slapped the side of the firearm across Lila's head. The room spun. She rotated around before tipping to the side.

Though Lila never lost consciousness, like a beached whale, she struggled to breathe. As she sucked air into her lungs, they abruptly remembered their purpose. When her equilibrium began to return, Lila tried to clear her head. Groggily, she spiraled to her feet. Initially, she staggered like a fawn taking its first steps.

Unsteadily, Lila gyrated towards Cathy. With the weapon pointed at her, an involuntary shiver ran down her spine. Cathy was now standing far enough away so that she couldn't be rushed. Lila said, "Sofia is not defined by being crazy. Rather, she defines crazy-ism."

"You're getting worked up over nothing," Cathy said.

"It's not, nothing." Though her anger had receded, it was still within her grasp.

Sofia had one shoe on, the other lying by her leg. Lila watched as Sofia moved experimentally, evaluating the limits of her discomfort. Gasping for air, she rolled over and tried to get up. She failed and tried again.

As Lila's thoughts clicked, she kicked her in the stomach. "Didn't you tell me the best time to kick someone is when they are down?"

This time, Sofia grabbed her shoe and crab-crawled away. When it was safe, she rose. With one shoe in her hand, she headed for her pocketbook. Her ear was torn, her eyes swollen, a long bruise ran across her jawline, her face was bright red, and her hair was tacky. She removed a handful of tissues and promptly spat out a mouthful of blood.

"Then you'll make her crazier." Acting like an old companion, Cathy puffed her Marlboro.

"Doctors can set a broken leg, but they can't fix what's broken in her head?" Lila's breath came in long, steady puffs. Abruptly, her attention was drawn to Sofia rummaging through her pocketbook.

Sofia produced a letter. "You think I'm pure evil. Your facial expression gives your feelings away."

"I'm not responsible for what my face does when you talk." Exhaustion drooped her eyelids.

"Then, who is?" Tears rolled over her black and blue cheeks. While she talked, she worked on the kinks in her neck.

"If you don't like it, stop talking crazy."

"I'm not even borderline crazy. I received this letter from the mental institution that evaluated me. The letter declares I'm legally sane. That's why I went to prison instead of a mental institution. Read it and weep." Then, in tears, she flung the letter at her.

One would hope that when accused of being crazy, the person wouldn't be eager to prove it. But every village needs its idiot. "What a wasted evaluation."

"Stop it. This isn't helping," Cathy said in a measured manner. Her cigarette glowed between her fingers.

Blood oozed from Sofia's nose, darkening her blouse and her coat. Then, Sofia pulled out her flask and guzzled the tequila like Kool-Aid. "You better pray that the cleaners get the blood out of my coat, or this isn't over."

Lila paid no attention to the stupid threat. "Why do you drink so much?"

"Not for your pleasure."

"Alcohol won't solve your problem."

"Neither will milk." Liquor trickled from the corners of her mouth. She wiped her chin with the back of her hand.

"I was hoping you took your meds today. For when you don't, you talk to imaginary friends." She's beyond help. Even therapy hasn't worked.

"They're not imaginary, it's my subconscious."

"Breaking news, that's where imaginary friends come from." Talking to no one, people laughed at her. Feeling emboldened, a fight breaks out. Only to her chagrin, she discovered none of her imaginary friends joined her. So, the odds weren't four against one but one against one. Often, losing is why she began to take her meds.

"Well, I took them!" She gently touched her half-closed eyes. Dry blood caked on her cheeks.

"Take more. They aren't working." She closed her eyes and prayed to the patron saint of mental health, if there was one.

"I used to consider you family." Grabbing another handful of tissues, she caressed her bloody ear.

"According to you, nothing says family like a bullet through the heart." Despite being ready to make her sightless, Lila was glad Cathy stopped her. However, she wasn't thrilled about how Cathy accomplished that feat.

"Why don't you tone down the hyperbole?" Cathy said, then sat down heavily and inhaled deeply on her cigarette.

Tell that to her pumping heart. Although she sensed it had something to do with Cathy's father being a loudmouth bully, she had been curious for years. She would love to know the inside scoop as to what makes Cathy tick. "Why do you always talk so calmly, so reflectively?"

"When the state threw me into the Child Protective Services system, at times, I mimicked my father's behavior. That is, until I met the Wilsons. If I did something wrong, trying to rid the evil from me, they beat me mercilessly. In times of stress, I needed answers, not beatings. So, you might say, my style developed out of necessity."

"Or you might say, like a politician, this is just a performance." That was the first genuine feeling Cathy revealed to Lila.

Her face took on a gracious smile, and then Cathy turned toward Sofia, "You brought out that old tiger in Lila."

"Yeah, the way your mangled face looks, I need a drink." Despite Lila's shoulders sagging and her batteries running low, she refused to show signs of fatigue.

"Look, Lila, I'm making no promise, but I'll see what I can do." Cathy's tone was warm and friendly.

She had it with Cathy, who spoke sympathetically, yet did nothing. Speaking freely, she said, “That’s screw you, in Cathy’s language.”

Before catching herself, Cathy blinked. “I understand why you would feel that way.”

The truth flowed through Lila’s thoughts so quickly she couldn’t think straight. She massaged her aching head. “I’ll take my stuff out of the car and leave.”

“You can hardly walk.” She spoke in a caring tone.

Exhilarated by the whipping she administered, Lila’s gaze ping-ponged, “Daniel, would you give me a lift to the train station?”

Craning his head, Daniel finally seemed to notice she had a problem. “I don’t know their schedule…”

“That’s all right. I’ll sleep there until it comes.” Because of Robin, Lila realized she had once enjoyed being sociable, but that gradually faded. She gave up way too much for Cathy's friendship.

“We aren’t even dating, and you are finishing my sentences. I was about to add that I can call and find out their schedule.”

With mismatched, heavy, dark furniture, his place had all the warmth of an old man’s bachelor pad. “From what I see, you have a beautiful house, but suddenly I feel claustrophobic.”

“With the bank job not panning out, you’ll need some walking-around money.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a rubber-banded roll of cash.

“Thanks, but I can’t take all your money.” However, she wasn’t looking forward to hobbling about searching for an ATM.

Smiling as he tossed the roll to her, “Don’t worry, I have more pockets.”

Dealing with a world of shady people, Lila had to acknowledge that there was kindness in Daniel's pudgy face. She peeled off what she might need and handed the rest back. Remembering that Daniel operated out of his pawn shop, she grabbed a business card from his desk. “I’ll send you a check when I…”

Cathy grinned crookedly, “C’mon, don’t walk away from your cut.”

“I keep asking myself, what have I gotten myself mixed up in?” Although she once viewed Cathy as family, she no longer believed she had been. That was an uncomfortable realization.

“Listen to me. I don’t know if you can be too rich, but I know you can be too poor,” Cathy said.

“Let her leave. She should go back to that rat-infested town.” Sofia’s fingers jabbed at her.

Chasing the money suddenly became a luxury she couldn’t afford. “I’d rather have a few rats than be one.”

“It would be best if you viewed this incident objectively.” Cathy inhaled the cigarette. Then she gazed at the glowing end before leaning toward the ashtray at the corner of Daniel’s desk, putting it out.

Lila swiveled around to face her. Mouth turned down. “I don’t feel objective.”

“Can’t we discuss it?”

“We, we just did.” The second ‘we’ was higher in pitch.

"As before, the door will always be open if you change your mind." She spoke softly and with sympathy.

"That's all right. I'll close it on my way out." Unlike other times, she would never team up with them again.

"Put aside your anger for a minute and think."

Holding onto her venom, she stubbornly shook her head. "Hanging around with both of you, those roads to hell keep getting paved."

"Maybe you think taking a stand now gets you off the hook for everything you did," Sofia said while touching her burning cheek.

"The problem is I'm not falling. I'm stooping to your level." The hurt will never leave her. Robin shocked her back to reality.

"Then you are a loser." Rifling through her bag, she liberated a filtered Camel from her pack.

"Yeah, a loser with a terrific backhand." Her rage felt cleansing.

"Lila, this is the big score we've dreamed of," Cathy said.

"Correction. It's your dream." From Lila's perspective, it's the 'break glass' emergency plan.

"Normally, Sofia is as gentle as a pussy cat." As if to reinforce her words, Cathy's tone was soothing.

Unlike a rattlesnake, Sofia takes pleasure in the attack. If Cathy doesn't get that by now, she never will. While adjusting her pants, Lila said, "Yeah, a pussy cat that double-crosses a

woman we were all friendly with. She packs heat and tries to bump off those whom she considers family. Poor Sofia is so misunderstood."

"She wasn't going to shoot you. Italians are prone to acting excited in times of stress."

Disagreeing with the tenacity of Winston Churchill's quote that, 'Nothing in life is so exhilarating as being fired at and missed,' she said, "I find nothing exhilarating about Sofia trying to shoot me. It sucks."

"It happened because you riled her up. It wasn't personal." The haze of smoke covered the room.

It sure felt personal. And let's not skip over how much she loved it. "You always create an excuse for her when stuff happens, like in that clothing store."

"Let's not air our dirty laundry in front of Daniel," Cathy said.

That experience moved her from dog whistles to fog horns. "Why the hell not? It gave Sofia a taste of blood. And that adrenaline rush is her drug of choice."

"Do you believe Sofia is out of control?"

So, always in control, Cathy found Sofia's impulsive type incomprehensible. "Petty crime is one thing. Ripping off a bank is another. Eventually, that two-faced junky will get caught. She'll cut a deal to reduce her sentence, taking down everyone around her."

"I'm no rat. I'm no rat." With ice water eyes, she inhaled and blew a cloud of smoke towards Lila.

"In that case, try the Robert Blake defense when you get caught. Explain that you couldn't have shot the security guard because you went back to the restaurant to get your gun."

Paying no mind to Lila's sarcasm, Cathy said, "Until recently, we have been a team."

Though it's never a good idea to call a crazy person crazy, Lila did just that. "The problem is you're both psychopaths."

"Psychopath, I could barely spell. Diamonds, I understand," Cathy said.

Wow, she didn't even bat an eye. "I don't even know why we're friends."

"According to you, it's simple. We were friends with you because we're crazy. The question is, why were you, our friend?"

Oh, my lord, Cathy is right. Those monsters took human form. She put up with these fools long enough. "I want no part of killing."

Refusing to wave a white flag, Sofia stabbed the air with the cigarette. "You're just lucky you caught me by surprise."

Lila's eyes became steely. She showed teeth a werewolf would envy. "Yeah. The real trick is getting your flapping mouth to shut up."

She wiped her upper lip of dried blood. "You weren't that quick…"

"Quick enough." Lila shot back.

"What I was getting at is that I'll be ready next time." Sofia's voice was so low it was barely above a whisper.

Still simmering, Lila jumped all over Sofia's statement. "If you mean it, I can finish what I started now. Word of advice. If you mess with me again, you'll wind up being spoon-fed at a nursing home for the rest of your rotten life."

"I don't like threats." Sofia's cheeks turned an even brighter red.

Lila took a forceful step and saw that her tough-girl front had been destroyed. “Don’t you know the difference between a threat and a promise?”

Instantly, her face folded into itself. Refusing to make eye contact, she sat gingerly and started to dig through her purse.

“Pretending you’re tough isn’t the same as being tough. Is it?” Then, she flicked her neck, tossing her head back triumphantly.

Cathy sighed, “Let’s try to be civil.”

Chapter 48

The Ace in the Hole

"Tell me again, how much courage it took to empty your pistol into an injured man with two small kids and a wife. That security guard begged you not to kill him." Her words came out in a rush. Lila was saddened when the media reported that the guard had a wife, a baby, and a 2-year-old.

"He would have been a problem." Sofia's voice was so flawed that it sounded murderous.

With the gun out of his hand. Unable to stand due to multiple bullet wounds. "Another possibility is your adrenaline rush was far more important than his life."

"Being a make-believe cop, he may have noticed details, which could be useful in tracking us down."

Her grandfather used to fabricate reasons for his actions, and she didn't like him either. He failed to understand that, although she stopped arguing, it didn't mean he had won. But like all bullies, he interpreted things to his benefit. "Not everyone kills because they must. Fess up. You loved it."

"He may have recognized my voice," Cathy said.

Sofia turned killing the guard into a joyous sacrifice. In contrast, Cathy would consider it a regrettable necessity. At least, that would be her stated position. Who knows what she really thinks? "Fat chance with the alarm blasting, police siren in the background, and riddled with bullet holes."

"Why should I take the chance?" Sofia said.

That's not good enough. "If you hurt Jessie, I'll talk. Do you hear me?"

Suddenly, Cathy stood and raised the firearm. "Everyone here heard you. I don't think you appreciate the seriousness of what you revealed."

"Then why did I make out my will?" Lila miscalculated Cathy. Apparently, they were never friends.

"So, what makes you think I'll let you strut around after threatening us?"

Despite the room temperature shifting, Lila stood her ground. But then she backs down from no one. "Because, along with my will, I signed a letter spelling out what Sofia did when you were both at *My Furry Friend*. If anything happens to me, that letter will reach the authorities."

Cathy looked her in the eyes, "Isn't it convenient that we found out about it now?"

"There was no need until now. How do you think you two will look in all-orange attire?" The way things were going, Lila had no idea what would happen if Cathy didn't believe her.

"Peachy. How do I know you aren't bluffing?"

"You played poker with me. How often do I bluff? The question I have is, do you know when to fold?" Lila played a good hand of Texas Hold 'Em, despite seldom bluffing, or perhaps because of that. But then, uncharacteristically, she kept a poker face.

"Why did you wait until now to turn the thumbscrew?"

Confiding in the girls never felt comfortable. If it had, she wouldn't have needed to threaten them. "You expected me to tell you before? If you think I'm bluffing, call my hand."

"So now Daniel knows."

Sitting woodenly, he grabbed the pen on his desk and repeatedly clicked it. "I'm no yenta. My wife accuses me of having two faults. One is that I don't listen to her, and the other is something else."

"You know what I do to stoolies," Sofia said.

"Do I look like a yutz? If I talk, I'm sure you'll be responsible for my second circumcision. It took me a year to walk after my first. And despite it working like a seventy-three-year-old water gun purchased at a dollar store, I'm fond of it." Daniel's humor was a welcome relief.

"The problem is that old people tend to forget the agreements they make," Sofia said.

"I see no advantage to acting my age," Daniel joked.

“When did you have time? I mean, we left as soon as you got discharged from the hospital,” Cathy said.

“After you informed me what went down, my cousin called to see how I was doing. When I told Jazon what happened, he insisted I must protect myself from potential problems down the line.

“Jazon’s position was simple. I shouldn’t trust anyone who kills without having killer’s remorse. His partner has a friend practicing in a nearby town. He swung over, and within three hours, we were done. Both attorneys have an original set.” The dead can affect the living in countless ways.

“I asked myself, what can you prove? The police opt for facts,” Cathy said, redirecting the focus.

Her eyes hardened. “Sofia murdered someone, and now you want to debate the evidence?”

“That’s exactly what I want.”

“The proof lies in what the media left out. The bullets were from a Colt 9-millimeter. Oh, and let’s not forget his blue eyes. These facts didn’t appear in the papers. I texted them pictures of Sofia with the coat on when we traveled down here. That’s more than a smoking gun. It’s the bullets.” Not losing sight of the fact that she had to prove it, Lila realized she never knew Cathy.

“He could have identified me,” Sofia said.

“How? You both wore ski masks.” Lila refused to be dragged into Sofia's world.

With half-closed lids, Sofia made eye contact. “The smart play is to stop provoking me.”

"You lost. Can't you stop bullying?" Lila's voice climbed to a yell.

"What good is a letter without a witness?" Cathy asked.

When has legality ever been a problem for either one of them? "You might be right or possibly not. Both attorneys assured me that sworn testimony from a dead person carries much weight, especially when it includes photos of Sofia wearing the fur. Oh, I also included Gail. Remember her? She's the girl you sent to the hospital."

"Dammit, I hit the wimpy slut only once," Sofia's eyes blinked like it was Morse code.

"Dammit. You hit the wimpy slut only once, in the back of her head, with an aluminum baseball bat." For public safety, animals like Sofia should be kept in cages.

"I have an alibi. I was with my friend Cathy when it happened."

"Bull."

"Ask her," Sofia said.

"No, what I can't believe is that you have a friend. So, what's Cathy's alibi?"

"What counts is that the task was done."

"You hit her because you hated the competition." Lila's woman's intuition shouted, 'Head for the hills.' That's provided Cathy doesn't shoot her.

"The rat fink doesn't remember what happened, so where's the proof?" Sofia asked.

"Sometimes, the proof is irrelevant." Sofia never even dated the guy. Then, she cared more about losing to Gail than the guy.

"As Cathy said, cops insist on proof."

"That's rich. You clobbered Gail because she dared to go out with a guy you were sweet on. She wound up in intensive care. The physician reported she was struck so hard that she lost part of her memory, which is the only reason they couldn't charge you. And now you're demanding due process. FYI, the letter reveals why you did what you did," Lila said.

"You weren't there, so anything you wrote is from a second party, and that's hearsay."

"Not when what I wrote came from you. That's not hearsay, it's just, say." She had similar proof when she approached her grandmother about her grandfather, but all the witch cared about was the men she fooled around with. If not for her concern that the state wouldn't keep Marek and her together, she would have gone to the police.

"If that letter gets sent, you'll be sorry."

"Not today." Not ever.

"Are you going to shoot Lila?" Sofia asked.

Never taking her eyes off Lila, Cathy said, "According to Lila, that won't make the problem disappear."

"Give me the gun. I have the disappearing part figured out," Sofia said.

With a dumbfounded expression, Cathy shifted her attention to Sofia, yet she kept her eyes on Lila. "No."

"Can we trust you?" Sofia asked Lila.

"Minus one of you killing me, you are gonna have to," Lila said.

"I know."

"The problem with being an idiot is you don't know how to keep it to yourself." Because the guy Gail dated was tall, had black licorice hair, and was good-looking, he was nicknamed Elvis. Lila would bet the farm that Sofia didn't know his real name was Kevin.

"If you think about talking, keep in mind, no one messes with me," Sofia said.

"Well, I messed, and I won." That felt liberating, yet she was also sad to end this chapter of her life. Cathy may have been as distant as Robin believed, but her manner and words were comforting.

"This isn't over."

"You're an odd duck." More than anything, Lila now needed to join the real world.

"Haven't you heard odd is in?"

"You believe in hell, Sofia?" Lila asked.

"Why?"

"I didn't until I teamed up with both of you." Sofia never wasted time on the truth. Instead, fabricated truth was good enough.

"So, Sofia has social issues…" Cathy said.

Though Lila was exhausted, she was still angry. "She's like a toothache. I keep probing with my tongue. I need the pain to stop."

"Screw you." Sofia's face turned chalk white.

With unhurried calm, Cathy asked, "Would you tell me if you're bluffing?"

"What's the difference? If the police arrest us, they'll want a head. After what you did to Robin, you shouldn't trust me. As we are parting ways, let me give you a heads-up. Unlike you

both, I don't turn on friends. However, I do get even with snitches. So, before you enter a plea deal in which you give names, keep the guard's murder in mind.

"While I'm at it, also keep in mind that I could be used by your attorney when Sofia rolls on you." Every cord in Lila's neck strained. She has never been in prison and wasn't prepared to be sentenced because of those two yo-yos.

Cathy seemed to think about that before saying, "It didn't have to come to this."

"The moment she killed, her world became a blood sport." Ever since, her vocabulary has included capping, whacking, and wasting someone.

"You were a fool to tell her about the shooting." Sofia then took a poke from her cigarette.

Knowledge is power. Like any crime, some details were not released. "While Cathy spilled the beans, you bragged about the details. The minor particulars in my letter came from you. His deep voice, receding forehead, and there were more holes in him than a slice of Swiss Cheese."

"By now, the killing is old news," Sofia said.

Sofia never appreciates the depth of the crimes she commits. "There are things that could fly under the radar. Killing isn't one of them."

"Why should I care?"

"The store where the officer picked you up must have cameras. Also, if the detective who interrogated you was any good, he surely noticed the pricey Sable you wore. Cathy even warned

you not to wear it. Given those facts, I don't think the police will view your spin on the matter as you want them to." Sofia never frets about things that could happen, Lila thought.

"Anyone who is crazy enough to extend their arm and raise their hand in the hope of stopping a bullet is a fool."

It would have snapped Lila back to reality, but she's not Sofia. "The law doesn't allow exceptions for killing the foolish."

"If they come after me, I'll take out your cousin, the lawyer," Sofia said.

She didn't think that would stop the letter from being sent. Instead of arguing that fine point, Lila said, "With two lawyers involved, it won't stop anything. Upon receipt of the letter, you will be catapulted to be the prime suspect of both murders."

"If I had my gun, I would show you."

"You tried and couldn't." Lila's voice was unflappable.

Chapter 49

It's all about the kill

"Jessie won't be harmed, I guarantee it. So, will you come with us?" Cathy asked.

"While you're at it, maybe you should teach her how to levitate." She's like a creature that tasted blood. Once that happens, it must be put down. Out of the blue, Lila realized impulsive Sofia couldn't control her actions. So how could Cathy control Sofia when Sofia couldn't control Sofia?

Understanding her intent, Cathy said, "Nonsense."

It's right under her nose, yet she fails to see it. Lila said, "It may sound ridiculous, but it's Sofia's world."

"Let me worry about that. Now…"

Even before Cathy finished, Lila shook her head in exaggeration. Controlling a mad Sofia was something she never signed up for. Even if she could, “Stopping her from killing Jessie will not stop her from killing.”

She winced. “Why would anyone go on a killing spree?”

“The why depends on the who.”

“There’s no proof of that.”

“But we both know she lives for the hunt.” The way Sofia described the shooting, it’s clear she loved popping the guy. No one has that much passion and loses it over something as trivial as misplacing a dollar-store ring. From this day forward, she’ll kill men like they were stray dogs. Lila turned to Sofia, “You got a rush from killing that guard, didn’t you?”

“He was a loser,” Sofia snappily said.

With a gleam in Sofia’s eyes, Cathy’s expression instantly changed. “If you were me, how would you manage the situation?”

If Cathy hadn’t spoken up, Sofia would have terminated Robin. And Lila would have eliminated Sofia. “Like a nest of tarantulas.”

“Why do you think that?” Uncharacteristically, Cathy’s expression revealed much.

“You don’t know?” Minutes ago, Cathy was busy deciding whether to shoot Lila. Now she’s seeking her advice. Not because what Sofia did was wrong, not because it was stupid, not because she was incompetent, but because it could link Cathy to a murder.

“That’s why I’m asking.”

Though Cathy may not believe her, she's now questioning Sofia. Killing for Sofia is like meat to a pack of wolves. "Despite having passed away, killing that guard was the next best thing to bumping off her father."

"Cathy stared at Sofia's marred face, which was so red that it looked like she had just come off a rotisserie. "Nasty." Then she whirled back to Lila, "Attacking Sofia like that, I must give you credit. That's the gutsy Lila I once knew."

Lila could see the wheels turning in her head. Of course, she needed to track down Robin, and it was obvious Lila wouldn't help, whereas Sofia would. Afterward, she wondered what that black box would do. On the other hand, knowing Robin, they'll never find her. "You should excommunicate your loyal subject, but you won't."

"If she doesn't join us, that means a bigger cut for us," Sofia yelled.

"FYI, my brother has been asking me to join him." Her voice cracked a bit. If it were a park ranger job, she could envision it, but she wasn't sure if she was suited for a white-collar job.

"You think the exciting world of hotel management is up your alley?" Cathy asked.

As she tried to calm down, her logic returned. "I do when it allows me to lie low for a while. Feel free not to drop by if you are ever in town because—well, because."

Cathy gave a sympathetic gaze. "You don't mean that?"

"Until you pulled that damn weapon on me, I foolishly believed we were friends. I now know how a spontaneous Cathy reacts." Lila was 99% sure they were friends and 100% wrong. Robin was right. She has never fit in with those crazies. How could she have been so naive?

"Sorry."

"Sorry is inadequate." But she had no idea what would be.

"Then how can I make this right?" Her voice was surprisingly remorseful.

Cathy failed miserably as a friend. "For a start, you can grovel."

Her expression softened into a grin. "A start of what? If we get the jewelry, you'll see me in a week. If I get caught, you'll see me in 15 to 20 years."

Typical Cathy downplayed the part about pointing the gun at her. The prospect of hooking up with Cathy again gave her a headache. "Keep it all. I don't want any of the blood money."

"Hey, let's not waste time yammering." Sofia's cheek muscle twitched.

"Should I sort through the bags on top and appraise the pieces? It won't take long," Daniel said.

"Great idea," Sofia said.

"No," Cathy said.

"If you need money, I'll give you forty gees for the necklace I looked at."

"And that's from one of the small boxes," Sofia said.

"So?" Daniel asked with a face that looked puzzled.

"Don't you get it? The small boxes should hold less valuable jewelry. The take must be in the millions."

"When we catch up with Robin, we'll contact you," Cathy said.

"I'm scheduled to return home next week, and I'm not about to sit around here eating…"

"I noticed that weight thing," Cathy said lightheartedly.

"Next time you see me, I plan to be a slimmer image of myself."

"You're going on a diet?" again, Cathy asked.

"I believe you can't stop eating something because the taste lingers in your mouth, thus your thoughts. If you could change that, stopping would be easier. I invented several sprays to alter the taste in your mouth.

"When I feel I've consumed enough, I simply spray the taste of apple in my mouth. I also have cherries, strawberries, and a fruit basket spray. It gives me the control I want. This week, I lost five pounds," Daniel said.

Viewing him as substantial instead of fat, Lila said, "I look forward to seeing a slimmer Santa."

Smiling, Cathy said, "Have a good trip home." Turning to Lila, Cathy asked, "Robin wouldn't sit around waiting for us to look her up. So, do you know where she would go?"

At that moment, Lila recalled Jessie telling her they were first visiting Aaron's brother. Despite that, her penetrating eyes made an answer unnecessary. "No."

"How about her cell number?" Before Lila could answer, Cathy shook her head. As if reading Lila's thoughts, Cathy said, "Not to track her down, but to see if I can undo the mess Sofia created."

She spent a nanosecond wondering where she put Robin's cell number. Despite what Cathy said, Lila refused to help, even if she found it. Cathy had nowhere to start looking, and Lila felt good about that. "You mean the mess you both created? She didn't give me her number."

Jumping in, Sofia said, “I don’t believe you.”

“Imagine that. Do you think if she split with the loot, she would be dumb enough to keep the same phone?” Lila punctuated it with a smiley face.

“All I can think about is a quote by Sir Walter Scott, ‘Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive,’” Cathy said.

“Yeah. Did that Scott dude mention how to fix it?” Lila sarcastically asked.

“Hey, our best shot is to catch her at home,” Sofia’s puffy eyes marginally opened.

“So much time has elapsed. Why would you want to check if she’s home now?”

“I wanted to check, like before now.”

“Why?”

“Oh, I forgot to tell you. She was leaving the precinct when I was being escorted in.” As if checking that she had it, she fished out the car’s keyless device from her coat pocket.

“Let me think. To avoid casting suspicion on herself, it would be just like Robin to stick around until the cops interview her. Though risky, it’s a clever move on her part,” Cathy said.

“We need to get out of here pronto,” Sofia’s tone filled with excitement.

“Lila, I’m sorry, it’s just too much dough to walk away from,” Cathy said.

“And that’s your bottom line.” As she talked, she became aware that, aside from her, money was the crook’s measure of success. She hoped that was not what her world was about. However, she would soon find out if that were true. Unlike her last job, working for her brother, she would have no excuses for turning to crime again. Unless that’s who she is.

"With all that money, when I close my eyes, all I can think about is vacationing in Europe with my childhood friends."

That sounds elitist, but she was raised privileged. Lila was surprised to discover that Cathy was still obsessed with her past. But then, in a way, so is she. "When this is over, I would hope that's not all you think about."

Cathy nodded as if giving that thought. "Once, we made a great team."

The way Cathy and Sofia were acting made her wonder if she ever truly belonged. "Providing I didn't voice an opinion."

When Sofia took another deep swallow, Cathy said, "Take it easy with the liquor. I need you to be sober. We can't afford the cops stopping you for drunken driving."

Sofia directed her remark to Lila. Speaking with great sarcasm, "Happy trails."

Cathy's eyes furrowed. "In giving it thought, I'm not sure another duffel bag filled with the jewelry could fit in her hamper. Therefore, I assume the plastic bags containing fake jewelry were buried under her clothes. With you rushing to catch up to her, she didn't have much time to swap them out. Let's play it safe. Please return the stuff to their plastic bags while I help Lila get her luggage."

Handing her the keyless device, Sofia said, "I'll also find Robin's home address."

Glancing around the room, it could best be described as controlled chaos. Lila faced Cathy and said, "I made a mess of Daniel's office. Give me enough time to put things back in place."

"I'll do it," he said.

"You sure? Two people could easily handle the table. It's heavy for one person." Though exhausted, Lila felt obligated.

"Look at this muscle," he joked, pointing to his left arm.

While laughing, she said, "I never doubted your ability." Then Lila wriggled her fingers at Sofia. "Too-da-loo."

"I'll send you the coat's cleaning bill," Sofia said.

"Eat my dick," Lila said.

"Oh! Be sure to say hello to Marek for me," Cathy said.

"And thanks for not shooting me."

"Please, I did nothing."

"Fortunately, that was the right move," Lila said.

Chapter 50

The Exit

"We have to leave," Robin said to Jessie. They had just finished dinner when the leasing office called to tell her they had rejected her offer and had secured the shop. Given that Detective Parker questioned her, coupled with Jessie's recovery from Strep Throat, the timing couldn't be better. Though tired, Robin was antsy since seeing Sofia at the precinct.

Panic was an early warning sign in her past life with the Crossroads Gang. Everything she wanted was either packed or ready to pack, which made it easier. Still, with all the trivial things to do, time seemed to conspire against her.

Though she couldn't leave there fast enough, she stopped at the door and peered affectionately back. Through the years, her aging apartment had slowly grown on her.

Overwhelmed, she gazed at the windows that flooded their kitchen with morning light. The archway that she had marked Jessie's height every month or so. The 1,000-piece puzzle of Frosty the Snowman, which they had almost finished. It was on a foldable bridge table in the cozy living room, along with an ancient TV.

She had an affinity for antiques, but her place was just old. Yet it meant so much to her. Her apartment was warm and friendly. The galley kitchen features a funky yellow countertop and Vinyl flooring.

She arrived as a teenager in crisis. Now, she was departing as a responsible adult. With a flip of the switch, the light in the room retreated. Returning the one-flight walkup apartment to how she first viewed it…outdated furniture and chilly.

The day was too gray. The combination of temperature and wind made it feel too cold. The clouds sucked the light out of the sky. As winter approached, the nights appeared earlier and lasted longer. The empty streets were eerily haunting.

"I can't wait to meet Uncle Logan." Jessie's smile was contagious.

Robin remembered his average features combined well, making him a drink of water. "Let's get on the road."

"After talking to him on Zoom so many times…"

She was surprised he never visited. "He's looking forward to meeting us, especially you."

"It's supposed to rain and then snow all night." The forecast was for a 30-degree dip in temperature tonight.

“Let me know if you see animals lining up two by two.” Since Jessie insisted on looking out the front window, Robin secured the safety seat on the passenger side. Because this side street was one-way, Robin stood in the road, talking to her daughter.

“Why are you rushing me?” A crescent moon occasionally glowed.

“We should have already left.” She was cold and exhausted. Perhaps they’d be on the road for only an hour. That would put enough distance from here to lend her comfort.

“This is how fast I move.”

“Sorry.” In the urgency, Robin forgot that asking Jessie to move faster slows her down. Besides, you shouldn't have a child if you can’t spare five minutes for them.

“How long is the trip?”

“It’s a good distance from us. If you can entertain yourself, we can get there in two days. If we stop often, it will take longer.” Robin knew nothing about cars beyond how to start one. The Chevy was beginning to show its age. Trying to squeeze a long trip out of it, she instructed her mechanic to do whatever he thought was necessary.

“Would I get credit for doing schoolwork?”

“Along the way, we’ll stop and get you a DVD of one of the movies you asked me for. You can watch it in the car on my laptop as we go.” Robin hated sunless days. Today was one of the ugliest of the season.

“Which one?” Jessie asked while buckling herself up.

“It depends on what they have. Will you miss your friends?” Robin raked Jessie’s hair in place with her fingers, and it promptly undid itself.

"All but Cody." Her eyes dropped.

Never feeling secure about the business, she squirreled away enough not to be penniless. "What happened?"

Jessie paused before saying, "Nothing."

"With you, nothing always means something. What happened?" Though she feared asking, the only thing worse than knowing is not knowing.

"Last week, he was bothering me. I told him to stop it."

"Did he?" Despite the urgency, as a mother, she showed interest.

"He said boys are tougher than girls. I said, 'I take kickboxing. Don't force me to hurt you.'"

"Did that do the trick?" Having grown up in a rough neighborhood, Robin wanted to ensure her daughter could protect herself. When Jessie turned 6, Robin signed her up for kickboxing and jiu-jitsu lessons. Though she knew little about fighting, given Jessie's age, she could probably hold her own.

"After Rebecca told him, I broke a board in two with my hand. All it took was one karate chop." The board was slightly stronger than Balsawood. This martial arts school required all children to break a board upon joining.

Warning a boy not to bug her reminded Robin of something Lila would do. Although Robin feared knowing, she feared staying ignorant more. "What did Cody do that annoyed you?"

"He said I didn't have a daddy."

The words landed like a sucker punch. "Everyone has a daddy."

"I don't." Then Jessie said, "Wait, where's Gabby?"

"She's in the trunk. If you want your doll, I'll get her when we stop." Impatiently, she stood there and chatted despite the urgent need to leave.

"Remember, you told me you needed gas?" Jessie said.

"Gee, I forgot. Thanks." Upon closing Jessie's door, she turned to walk around to the driver's side. Under the streetlamp's glow, her watchful eyes saw a familiar outline of a car making a sharp turn into her block. As is often the case with dreams, she woke up to reality.

She felt her muscles harden. Each breath felt like someone was drilling a hole in her lungs. Danger trickled down her spine. Panic washed over her face. Fleetingly, Robin remembered telling Lila she wished she were tough. Lila told her she was tough. Then how come I lose my share of fights?

Lila's response surprised her. In street fights, there are only the mean and not the mean. Robin didn't fight mean. Given that courage is the enemy of fear, she would rather die fighting like a rabid dog than experience a cowardly death. So, calm down, she told herself.

Sofia stopped parallel to Robin's car. Gun in hand, she began to open the door and to climb out. Adrenalin spiked. Robin jettisoned forward as if she had burned through the rocket's first stage.

Instinctively, she rammed her foot against the door, slamming Sofia's leg. Holding her keys like it was brass knuckles, she promptly smashed Sofia in the face. Then, she grabbed her gun hand and slapped it against the metal strip above the door. While Sofia screamed in pain, a wild shot rang out. To Robin's relief, the revolver tumbled onto the ground.

With the car's overhead light on, Robin noticed Sofia's flesh was swollen and discolored. Also, she had alcoholic eyes. She fleetingly questioned what had happened. Instantly, she realized, you don't have to hit her hard for those bruises to hurt. She promptly propelled her fist like a grenade launcher and hammered Sofia in her nose. Opening a wound she received from Lila. Blood dripped from her upper lip.

As Sofia's hands moved toward her broken nose, Robin grabbed her by the hair, snapping her head back. Copying a move Robin had seen the martial arts instructor show to a much older class, she drove her fist into Sofia's throat. Her head dipped down, gasping for air.

Just then, Cathy came flying around the front of the car like it was the Charge of the Light Brigade. Though Robin wasn't sure who was tougher, she would fight like she was. Swinging the door open, it struck Cathy, who was in full stride. The impact made her double over. Next, Robin swung the door as if to close it, but instead, it crashed into Sofia's bent-over body. The collision drove her back, forcing her head to smack into the aluminum strip above the door.

Spinning toward Cathy, she let fly a right cross, striking her in the chin. Then, her fist exploded into her jaw, and Cathy collapsed. Scrambling to her car, she swung open the driver's door and hurried in. Her hands trembled as she fumbled with the keys before starting the vehicle. With Jessie crying, the engine rumbled. Shifting into gear, she peeled out. A gust of wind blew her door shut.

All she needed was enough time to cut down a block. Once she lost them, she would be safe. Peering into the rearview mirror, she saw their car lurch forward. Filled with terror, she thought Jessie and her would die.

Who wants to be defined by the worst decision of their life? Murphy's Law says that whatever can go wrong will. Robin's life proved that Murphy was an optimist. Hearing her daughter crying, she blurted out, "Shit."

"You used a naughty word," Jessie's voice crackled.

Chapter 51

The Police

"Where's the car?" Parker joined his team, already in the field.

"Give me a couple of minutes to set the tracking up," the IT guy said. He was sitting at a computer in the precinct. Since the rental places weren't open, it took considerable time to discover which company the girls had rented the car from. Obtaining the necessary GPS information to track the vehicle was also a tedious process.

"I want you to stay online and follow them in real-time." Parker was convinced the girls had fled town.

"Here we go, the car is west of the highway, on Walnut," IT said.

Parker was pleasantly surprised that they were still around. Instead of wasting time packing, they should have split. He naturally assumed they must be heading to the interstate. “Great, we can cut them off.”

“Then you better step on it because the vehicle is hauling ass.”

While three squad cars hurried out from various locations, Parker asked, “Where should the roadblock be set up?”

“There is a slew of blocks they could cut down…” IT said.

“Let’s establish a roadblock at the interstate’s entrance,” Parker said.

“I’ll head to Princeton.” Sergeant Bryant’s windshield started to speckle with raindrops.

Parker made a quick left and sped up the block. All he knew was that Sofia and the rest of the gang wouldn’t leave the area if he had any say. “Let me know when the cars are in position. Being close, Claire and Freddy should block the highway’s entrance.”

“Because we don’t have vast resources, I’m pulling Amy Sutton and Jim Conway off their assignment. They'll join us upon wrapping up a domestic dispute,” Sergeant Bryant said.

“Didn’t Jim just join the force?” Parker hated using rookie cops, especially when Amy was herself a rookie not long ago. Mistakes could lead to a criminal going free, but this was a small town.

“Don’t worry about him. He’s quick on the uptake.”

“We’ll hold up our end,” Claire said.

“Be careful. Sofia’s last conviction was for being a getaway driver,” Parker said.

“Where did you hear that?” Claire asked.

"Lieutenant Stryker." Also, it was on her rap sheet.

"Are you going to shoot her?"

"Gee, I hope not," Parker said.

"Stryker told me Sofia carries," Claire said.

Feeling justified, Parker removed his Glock and popped the magazine out to confirm it was loaded. Then he slammed it back in. All the time, he was zipping through the streets. "Does he think she can kill?"

"In a heartbeat."

That reminded him of his days in vice. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure he told me that."

"Why would he even bring it up?" Parker found himself in a life-threatening situation. In small towns, that wasn't their primary function. It made him feel like a real cop.

"Hearing that you interviewed Sofia, Stryker swung by the precinct. It must have been when you visited Cantor. We had a chat. That's when he dropped that tidbit on me."

"I don't know if any of you ever used your weapon. Let alone fired at a woman." Parker wondered if the patrolman patted her down before he brought her in. That's another thing he will talk to him about.

"Any tips?" Claire asked.

"Bullets don't make distinctions." His vehicle went uphill and downhill.

"That makes it a no-brainer," Claire said.

"It must bring back memories of when you worked vice in the windy city," Sergeant Bryant said.

Parker had several dangerous jobs. This small town was more focused on petty crimes and domestic disputes. "I'm proud of how the team is responding."

"Ever shoot anybody?" Claire asked.

"When going after drug traffickers, it's unhealthy to miss." Parker played a drug dealer/addict in need of a hit. When the deal went sideways, Parker killed two members of the gang. For a time, his personality hardened into a tough guy. That drove his wife crazy. It took him a month to regain his composure. Parker isn't sure his confrontational wife ever got over it.

That was the beginning of Penny not being his best friend. What brought him back down to earth was his belief that power-hungry cops and the crooks they arrested were just the flip side of the same coin.

"According to Stryker, she's known to pal around with Cathy Kazan," Claire said.

Parker knew that. "Does she also carry?"

"Stryker wasn't sure."

"Anything else come out of your chat?" After Sofia's arrest, speaking to Stryker could prove helpful.

"Strangely, he asked me what Sofia was wearing."

All Parker remembers is the stunning fur coat, but it is hard not to notice. Aware that Stryker's job is shrouded in secrecy, he asked, "You know why?"

"Haven't got the foggiest."

"We are approaching Princeton. How far away is Sofia?" Sergeant Bryant asked.

"Give me a moment. I'm not sure she's heading that way," IT said.

"Why?" Sergeant Bryant asked.

"The vehicle seems to be zigzagging around town," IT said.

Chapter 52

The Chase

Slapping the dashboard, Robin screamed above the engine's roar. She couldn't focus on anything except Jessie and her survival. In her effort to escape, she fleetingly wondered whether to blame herself for causing the very havoc she was running from. After all, she had written herself into a corner. "God damn. Bad timing never abandons me."

"What's the matter, Mommy?" Jessie's voice was so whiny that only a mother could have understood what she said.

"Nothing. Hold on, baby." Again, Robin glanced in her rearview mirror. Despite the night swallowing the light, a lamppost's glow let her see only two girls in the car.

Desperately, she cut the wheel as she stepped on the gas. The car gyrated on the slick road and hopped onto the curb. Returning to the street, its undercarriage dragged along the pavement. The rear tires fishtailed one way, then the other, down the block.

Rain exploded onto the streets, obscuring her view. In addition, a crackling lamppost cast ghostly shadows. Fighting the slippery road, its rear tires swayed. She frantically made a wide right turn as she approached a red light.

Since her 4-cylinder clunker goes from 0 to 60 in 4.5 minutes, Robin was outmatched in speed. She was also never a NASCAR racer, so her only hope was to outsmart that cuckoo woman.

She flew past a row of old brick houses with small lawns, a *KFC*, and a *Walgreens*. All the time, Sofia was closing the distance. She jammed on the brakes and negotiated the sharp right turn. Sofia did not respond quickly enough and zoomed past the intersection.

Hoping to lose her, she saw the Ford turning onto the street when she approached the end of the block. With a death grip on the steering wheel, she was squarely in the now. Fearful that it would soon end, and when it did, it wouldn't end well, she cursed herself out.

Trying to suppress her emotions, she struggled to take in her surroundings. At the next intersection, she hooked a hard left. Tires squealed. Speeding like a cop in hot pursuit, she barely avoided hitting a tree.

As the road pinched down, she hit a pothole. The steering wheel spun out of her hands. When the car bounced, its undercarriage once again dragged along the ground. Through her side mirror, Robin saw the Ford in the wrong lane. It was a car's length behind her.

While handing Cathy the gun, Sofia said, “Damn, she is driving desperately.”

“You don’t think she has a reason to?”

“I wanted Robin to have a horrible death.”

As if understanding Sofia’s point, Cathy said, “A collision in a speeding car isn’t horrible enough for you?”

“Nah, she’ll be instantly killed. So, there’s no lingering pain.” The road curved around.

With a confounded expression, Cathy said, “So, you want her to feel getting to dead.”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

“We treated Nazis, prisoners, better. All I want to do is disable her car. Keep in mind the Lila threat. If the car crashes, in all probability, Jessie will be hurt.”

Robin could hear the other car’s engine grow louder. Suddenly, she saw a muzzle flash and heard pop, pop, pop. Her brows instantly knitted. It felt like adrenaline had squirted out of her eyes. Panicking, she made a hard turn and headed down a back street.

When Sofia’s rear tires spun on the slippery asphalt, the Ford hopped a curb and knocked a fire hydrant off its mount, obliterating the headlight on her driver’s side. Water shot up like a geyser, then plunged back to earth. The impact caused her car to veer toward a thick tree head-on. Cathy yelled, “Sofia!”

Right before the disaster, Sofia cut the wheel. Unfortunately, its rear tires skidded into a tree. The taillight shattered, and the bumper came loose. It dragged along for about 30 yards. Then crashed to the ground. While wiping blood off her upper lip, Sofia blurted out, “Big deal. Everybody winds up hitting a tree sooner or later.”

Cathy gawked at her.

Robin nervously twisted her neck as she swerved around a garbage can that had blown into the street. In so doing, she sideswiped a trash bag, and its contents flew every which way. Fortunately, the street was empty. But then, only a fool would be driving on a night like this.

Looking like a passenger who had just realized something had gone wrong with the flight, she cut the wheel. Her rear tires swerved before the car gained traction. Anxiously, she floored the pedal. The acceleration sent her car skidding wildly into the oncoming lane.

The wipers angrily swept across the windshield. Robin made a sharp right turn, and her wheels overreacted again. The car started to tip, then bounced back on all four tires. Once more, the car's carriage scrapped the road.

With one headlight working, Sofia pounded the horn. The noise was so nerve-racking that it felt as if adrenaline were shooting out of her ears. When Sofia almost caught up, Robin swung in front of her and smartly braked.

To avoid rear-ending Robin’s car, Sofia swung into the oncoming lane. Otherwise, unbuckled, Sofia would have slammed headfirst into her windshield. Though Jessie was in the back seat, Robin instinctively felt that self-absorbed bitch was predictable. Robin then cut the wheel, sending the car into a high-speed, rollercoaster-like turn. Sofia couldn’t act quickly enough. Again, she whizzed across the intersection.

A crying Jessie kicked the heel of her shoe against the back of the front seat. Robin’s thoughts darted around faster than her car was going. If she didn’t devise a solution promptly, she was sure her last words would be, ‘Goddam, that wasn’t a great idea.’

"Is this the day we will die, mommy?" a quivering voice cried.

Damn, was that a great question? Anger turned the corners of her lips down. Speaking with more confidence than she felt, "No."

Suddenly, an idea dawned on her. If she dumps everything in the street, the wind should scatter the jewelry and cash. Then there would be a choice between chasing her or securing the take.

Though Sofia enjoys the hunt, Cathy ruled. And their survival trumps everything. With one eye on the road, one eye looking in her rearview mirror at the girls, and ping-ponging back to Jessie, she needed three eyes, all working independently.

"The car behind us is pretty close," Jessie whined.

"That's because we are being followed," Robin tried to swallow the dryness in her mouth. It was a stupid gamble. When you set out to outfox a crazy woman, you had better outfox a crazy woman.

She was hoping Sofia would once again speed past them. That might give her enough time to toss the bags onto the street before they doubled back. As Robin approached the corner, she glanced into her rearview mirror. To her amazement, they weren't there. Instead, Sofia had pulled up alongside her. This was Robin's chance. She braked while cutting the wheel. As her car skated around, Sofia zoomed by.

When the street widened, Robin pulled over and slammed on her brakes. The car jolted forward, hydroplaning. The water sprayed everywhere before the wheels gripped the road. She wanted to scream until the windows cracked, but her vocal cords refused to cooperate.

In stark contrast, a row of homes on both sides of the street had red and green blinking lights. Despite the chilly night, sweat oozed from her pores, soaking her body. Watery eyes blurred her vision. Shakily, she popped open the trunk. Struggling against hysteria, with every breath she inhaled, danger grew inside her. “Be right back, baby.”

Rushing to get rid of the jewelry before Sofia had time to backtrack, her icy fingers reached into the trunk. She moved around her clothes. Just as she reached for the duffel bag, Robin heard the whine of a distant siren.

Despite the urgency, she instinctively glanced over her shoulder. The flash of a blinding light momentarily froze her, just like it would freeze a deer. As a headlight raced across her face, Cathy and Sofia whizzed by, followed by an unmarked police car with its ear-shattering siren.

Waves of relief fell over her. Needing more oxygen than she was getting, she let in the rush of welcome air. Her chest expanded, then she blew it out. Gradually, the pounding in her chest lessened. Rain-soaked tears ran down her face.

She was about to comfort Jessie when another vehicle, a black SUV, slowed. It also had flashing lights. To her chagrin, it felt like an aftershock hit. Drawing in an unsteady breath, she inhaled shakily.

Quickly, she piled things on top of the jewelry bag. Before closing the trunk, she rummaged around for Jessie’s doll. Then she stood there trying to get her blood pressure under control.

Chapter 53

The Police

"Why don't you talk to the driver?" Rain pinged off their car.

"Me?" Jim asked.

"You've watched me do it. Now it's your turn. This way, I'll stay back and concentrate on what's happening. If there's a problem, I can react," Amy said.

When his partner opened her door, Robin exhaled irregularly. In the background, Jessie was crying. As he approached, he said, "I'm Patrolman Jim Conway. Do you mind telling me why you stopped, Miss?"

His deep voice had the authority of a drill sergeant. The rain drummed the street. She opened her coat to wrap it around the doll. Protecting it from getting soaked. As she did, cold air rushed in.

With her heart pounding, she struggled to steady herself. A trickle of sweat traveled down her back. An urge to comfort Jessie grew. “Brrrr. My daughter is having a hissy fit. Hoping it would calm her down, I wanted to give her the doll. I stopped to get it out of the trunk.”

“How about the car that was behind you, miss?” The storm burst above, howling and smacking anything in its path.

“I didn’t want to get the guy in trouble. Driving like that under these conditions is crazy. It should be illegal for a drunk to be on the road.” A blast of wind splashed water on her face. Rain flattened her hair. Yet Robin stood there, like an extra in *The Living Dead*.

“It is,” the officer said calmly.

“Is he getting a DUI?” She was surprised her exhausted brain could function.

“Wasn’t the other car following you?” Raindrops blurred her eyes.

“May I give the doll to my daughter?” Jessie, crying in the background, added validity to her story. Particularly given that he must’ve known a woman was behind the wheel. However, most people would assume a drunken driver was a male.

“As soon as we are done. Please answer the question.” Threads of moonlight occasionally cut through the billowing clouds.

The young man must not have children. Trying to concentrate, Robin walled off everything around her. “I guess I wasn’t driving fast enough. The goofy guy kept honking his horn at me. The faster I went, the faster the car followed me.”

“There are only two ways to stop a car from tailgating. They are to slow down or pull over.” The night air whipped down the block, blowing trash here and there.

She felt as though she was in the middle of a mystery. “I finally did that. And as you must have seen, the crackpot zoomed past me. I’m sorry, officer. I must console my baby before she has a nervous breakdown.”

Speaking matter-of-factly, he said, “Then, take her home. Being out in this blizzard is no place for a little kid.”

Not sure how to respond, Robin’s head dipped down, “You’re right.”

At that moment, chatter crackled from the squad car. His partner yelled, “C’mon, Jim! We gotta go.”

“Have a good day, miss,” the police officer swiftly returned.

“You too, officer.” She said calmly, more calmly than she thought she was capable. Then she collapsed, leaning on the trunk. Robin was in a disturbing state of satisfaction. She sucked in a breath, letting oxygen work its magic. When she slowly exhaled, her tension began to unknot.

Wiping her eyes, she turned to watch the police car’s taillights narrow. Momentarily, she stood still on this rainy, windy night. Giving her depleted brain recovery time. As Robin opened the rear door, she removed the doll from under her coat and twisted her face into a happy beam.

When she looked at her daughter, guilt snaked through her. Robin tried to conceal her emotions, but her eyes welled up anyway. “Sorry, I guess I was driving pretty wild.”

“You scared me.” Jessie gave a scowl, which she inherited from her mother.

“Here’s Gabby.” Giddy with relief yet sad about Jessie. This left her wanting to do the jig while crying.

As Jessie snatched the doll, her face folded into a pout. “You scared Gabby, too.”

“Apologize to Gabby for me.” She spoke softly, but what else did she have to offer?

Between sobs, Jessie was barely legible. “It’s hard to stay angry at you when you give me ice cream.”

“I’ll try to make it up to both of you.” She stroked her daughter’s moist cheek.

“How?” she said while wiping her nose with the back of her hand.

“Let’s see. Since you mentioned ice cream, when we stop for lunch tomorrow, you can have any ice cream you want.” To coax Jessie out of her mood, Robin leaned in and hugged her.

As Robin walked around to the driver’s side, she studied the hood for bullet holes. Cathy must have been shooting at the engine. With both cars' herky-jerky movements, only two of Cathy’s slugs appeared to hit anything. Both nicked the hood.

Confident that the police were far away, setting up a roadblock, she changed her plan. Instead of the highway, they would use the city streets. Returning to the car, she raised the heat. Thick clouds glided over the mountain range. At first, the snow flurries replacing the rain were so powdery that they drifted in the air.

Upon wiping her face clean, she tapped the gas, easing up the block. She turned left onto Ryan. When she reached the edge of town, it seemed the bottom fell out of the heavens. Waves of snow pounded her windshield. She saw a dazzling array of lightning against the fiery sky. Her rearview mirror revealed what the night hid. A portrait of the quaint town, with its hard angles.

“What flavor?” Her voice was now coherent.

“You can decide.” The offer of ice cream shifted Jessie's mood. With all the tension, her body needed to shut down. Upon feeling secure, Robin will stop for gas. Once safely away, she would hook onto I-81 and head north out of Virginia.

There are a few things she hates more than driving in adverse weather. Conversely, she loves being inside on bad weather days. So, once she puts a fair distance between this town and them, they’ll check into a motel.

Chapter 54

In Hot Pursuit

“Are you sure there’s only one car?” IT asked.

“Why?” Per Parker's training, he had the unit follow rather than overtake them. It was easier and safer.

“Before they were aware of our presence, they were zipping through the streets helter-skelter,” IT said.

“Now that you mentioned it, we spotted the vehicle on Locust making a U-ey. Given the severe weather, I assumed they missed their turn. It’s also possible they were chasing someone,” Bryant said.

"IT is right. It doesn't make sense. Sofia was a getaway driver. If she were lost, she wouldn't panic and zip around town?" Parker said aloud, but it sounded like he was talking to himself.

"I briefly spoke to the driver in the other vehicle," Jim said.

"You get a name?"

"Sorry, I only spent a short while. My thoughts were focused on the chase."

"How about her license number?" Parker asked.

"It appeared to be a simple case of road rage. She had a little child in the back seat crying. Since her answers passed the smell test, I let her comfort her daughter," Jim said.

"Because of your comment, 'she had a little child,' we now have two front-runners. Could you recognize her?"

"With the weather being horrendous and water dripping off her face, I'm afraid not."

"It's not your fault. Rookies are trained not to make those mistakes in the big city. Next time you stop someone, before leaving, you must get the basics."

"Agreed," Jim said. Snow was now thick and steady.

"They turned north, heading toward the highway's entrance," IT said.

"Are Claire and Freddy in position?" Parker asked.

"This is Claire. I see one headlight coming up fast. Thinking it's them, our weapons are drawn. You hear me, Parker?" Helmets and body armor were on.

"I heard."

As Sofia approached, she asked, "What the hell do I do?"

Before they left Michigan, Cathy discovered that the vehicle had been reported stolen. Hence, it became a rolling billboard. While discussing hypotheticals, the attorney Cathy retained informed her that anyone who killed a security guard would be foolish to repeat a prior pattern of giving the car-rental company a false name or disabling the auto's GPS. Therefore, Cathy made sure they were squeaky clean this time. "It's my fault. Like last time, I should have deactivated the GPS device."

"We had planned to be here for a while. Who wants the police nosing around this small town, when we were busy robbing the bank?"

Because Sofia gave bogus information when renting the car, even after identifying the Honda as the vehicle used in the security guard's murder, the police couldn't trace it back to them. "Knowing the police, they'll check every piece of jewelry."

"Maybe I should waste the lackeys." She wiped dried blood from her cheek.

"Get serious. This is a small town. If even one cop is injured, we'll never make it back to the precinct alive." That's something her egomaniac father would try. Though Cathy had been arrested before, she had never been chased by the police. Now, she knew how her father felt.

At the time, she didn't understand why her father had fled without her. However, when two bounty hunters tracked down the tyrant in Saskatchewan, Cathy discovered he had skipped out with two suitcases of cash and a hot twenty-year-old.

If the bully hadn't caused such an uproar, the bounty hunters probably would have split the million dollars with him, and he would have gone his merry way. But by the time they apprehended him, half the neighborhood was watching. With all those witnesses and the police

minutes away, they must have felt compelled to hand over the money, minus a few grand, which somehow mysteriously disappeared.

Sofia leaned right as the streets curved. “Yeah, we need a good story.”

“That won’t fly.” Perhaps the news about her arrest will prompt her mother to appear. More likely, a robbery of this size would lead her childhood friends to discover who she had become. Now, they’ll never accept her. Given that recapturing the past was no longer possible, her big dream was shot. Lila was right. It’s time to focus on something else.

“Let’s skip this exit,” Sofia said and flew past it.

“They bypassed us,” Claire said.

“Then get on the highway and block the next entrance,” Parker said.

“Foster is covering an accident a quarter mile away from that entrance. I’ll have him leave his partner to wrap things up and block the service road. And I’ll swing over to Prospect to block the side street,” Bryant said.

“I’ll make sure they can’t double back. So, they’ll be boxed in,” Parker said.

Seeing flashing lights as they approached the highway entrance, Cathy said, “They could do this all night.”

With her foot pressed hard on the pedal, the engine growled. Her car swerved as it sliced through the air. “I’ll run through the service road, blockade.”

“What’s the point?” On the other hand, who cares? Because Sofia tried to double-cross Robin, her life had permanently changed, Cathy thought.

"This way, I can ditch the .38, and you can toss the bag with the pricey jewelry. They can't arrest us for having bags of paste jewelry." Cathy handed the gun to Sofia. Despite poor visibility, made worse by her half-closed, puffy eyes, Sofia accelerated past 100 MPH. As the car skidded on a slick patch, Sofia found herself heading into a roadblock. When she braked, the vehicle fishtailed before regaining traction.

"Lawyer up. Like last time, I'll retain two shysters who will communicate with each other." As always, Cathy had done her homework. She knew two lawyers she would hire.

"Got it. I know nuthin' about nuthin'." The snow bounced off the windows as they headed into the wooded area.

The police opened fire, and a barrage of bullets hit the vehicle. Because only one car blocked the road, Sofia veered around. Feeling good, she glanced in her rearview mirror and saw Parker quickly approaching her.

Instinctively, she gunned the gas while cutting the wheel. The vehicle spun out again. Sofia's body braced for the collision. Unable to control his vehicle, Parker's SUV rear-ended them. Ford's trunk collapsed like an accordion. Luckily, Sofia's head stopped inches short of smashing into the windshield.

The impact forced the girl's car to lurch forward. They skidded onto the shoulder. Right before hitting a wide tree, Sofia managed to angle the vehicle. However, their car hydroplaned across the street. And raced towards a stream paralleling the service road.

Instantly, Cathy retrieved the duffel bag from the back seat. Opening her window, she grabbed the top bag. While tossing the jewelry, a gust of wind snatched the bag from her hand. A decibel or two below yelling, she urged Sofia, “Throw the pistol.”

Sofia flung her pistol just as the car sideswiped a tree, forcing the vehicle to spin around. The airbags deployed. During the descent, Sofia did everything Mario Andretti would do—except it was in the dark, with trees scattered about and the car plunging backward.

Being super cautious, Cathy also tossed the jewelry out of every bag. While in a nonstop downward trajectory, its left tires climbed over a rocky patch, and the vehicle flipped. Like a turtle on its shell, the vehicle's momentum kept it moving along its downward path.

Because Sofia didn’t wear a seatbelt, her head smashed into the car’s ceiling. Knocking her momentarily unconscious. With Cathy’s seatbelt secured, her head snapped like a rubber band. Dazed, she hung suspended.

The car rolled upright, settling in the shallow creek with fast-moving water. The Ford looked like a smart bomb had hit it. Cathy quickly unsnapped her seatbelt. Despite their injuries, both women opened their doors and hurried off in opposite directions.

Chapter 55

The Trip

An exhausted Jessie slept through the night. By the time they were back on the road, it was midmorning. For Jessie's sake, Robin would ensure the rest of the trip was uneventful. Though she was less vulnerable, she didn't feel safe. But then she suspected it was far from over. What nagged at Robin was that if the girls escaped capture, as sure as thunder follows lightning, Sofia would track her down.

Fearing her magically reappearing, Robin constantly glanced in her rearview mirror to convince herself that Sofia wasn't lurking about. Though she felt paranoid, it's not paranoia if she is being pursued.

Despite leaving the problem behind her, the threat remained. If the girls managed to escape the high-speed chase, Sofia would be livid. That would make her more dangerous, providing it was possible.

After a short while, they stopped for brunch in the town of Kosciuszko. “Where are we, Mommy?”

Because of Lila’s nationality, Robin knew he was a Polish hero. But she couldn’t recall how to pronounce the general’s name. So, she asked the server, “Miss, would you talk slowly and tell me where we are?”

“The *IHOP*.”

Aside from pancakes, as promised, Jessie also wanted ice cream. Though she felt fine, Robin knew that cold items could relieve the symptoms of Strep Throat, so, despite it being a bit early, she acquiesced. Their ice cream soda special said, ‘Your spoon never had it so good.’ Jessie chose root beer with strawberry ice cream, chocolate sauce, whipped cream, nuts, sprinkles, and a cherry on top.

“You won’t finish that,” Robin said.

“It’s the best.” Wide-eyed Jessie finished about a third.

“Let’s get on the road.” The doctor informed Robin that Jessie shouldn't be contagious within a day or two of getting Strep Throat. Because it was a long trip and Robin was the only one driving, she decided not to risk finishing it.

At the next rest area, Jessie was playing with a poppy while Robin was talking to the dog’s owner. Jessie turned to Robin, “Mommy, don’t leave without me.”

Robin couldn't believe her ears. "Jessie, when have I ever forgotten you?"

After the owner and the dog left, Jessie said, "I'm nervous about meeting Uncle Logan."

"Well, he's looking forward to meeting you." He had helped her when she was pregnant and felt abandoned.

"You see that boy?"

She twisted her head at a kid on the walkway, "The one holding a skateboard."

"They rock."

"Skateboards are dangerous, and the boy is older than you." She also noticed the sign prohibiting skateboarding.

"If you don't care about me, I'll ask Santa. If I get hurt, you'll be sorry." Her lips pressed to form a straight line.

Like any mother, Robin often worried about her daughter's safety, especially when she acted bratty. "Maybe Santa already got you something."

"So, he'll get me two presents."

"That's expensive." Although Robin hadn't bought her anything yet, she knew what she was getting Jessie.

"What does he care? Santa's a zillionaire."

Holding back her chuckle, Robin said, "Suppose he gives you a bike with training wheels."

"That's smokin'. Wait! A boy in school said the big fellow isn't real."

She was approaching the age where Robin had to consider telling her. Yet, not wanting Jessie to cry, she asked, “What do you believe?”

“Not sure. There is an Easter Bunny, isn’t there?”

Thinking quickly, she asked, “What does one thing have to do with the other?”

“Phew. He brings me candy.”

“The quicker we leave, the quicker we’ll get there.” It surprised Robin to discover that a catch like Logan wasn’t dating. She also found it interesting that he hadn’t discussed his divorce.

“How long will it take?”

“My answer won’t change because you ask me thirty times a day.” She wondered if Jessie's desire to meet Logan was the only reason they were visiting him. It would be nice to think Logan was looking forward to seeing them, too.

“Not true. I asked you seven times. Wait. No, eight.”

And there are still many hours of driving to go. “Well, it should take another day or two. Why don’t you do schoolwork on the laptop?”

“Will that get us there sooner?”

“It will make the trip seem quicker,” for both of us.

“I love you, Mommy,” dimples swelled.

That blew Robin’s mind. Though it should be easy to say, it’s not. She had never heard that from her parents or siblings. “And I love you, sweetie.”

Chapter 56

The Police Officer

Mesmerized by the scenic view, Jessie opened her window the following day, letting the cold air hit her face. When Robin heard a persistent noise, she asked Jessie to close her window. As the sound grew louder, she cranked up the radio. While exiting I-90 to find a place for a late lunch, a patrol car pulled alongside her and directed Robin to pull over. She eased over to the shoulder.

Given that the cop took his time emerging from the patrol car, anxiety set in. Since Sofia peddled her body to learn how to rob a bank, if captured, she would sell Robin out in a New York minute. Accompanying that fear, she saw the patrolman's expression, which matched the arctic temperature as he approached.

"Miss, your muffler is noisy." He had a lazy eye that never looked at her straight on.

"Is that what it is?" She felt both relieved and embarrassed.

"A noisy muffler is a violation. I will give you a ticket because it wouldn't be fair to the last person I gave a ticket to if I didn't give you one."

"Just so you know, officer, it would be fair to me if the next person you stop, you didn't give a ticket." Her generous smile softened the bite of her words.

"Lady, you gave me my first laugh all day, and after arguing with my wife, I needed that. They call me the ticket cop, but you just became my exception. Forget the ticket." He directed her to a service station with an honest mechanic.

The young man replaced a broken bracket and filled four small holes. The guy couldn't understand why she had all those tiny holes. Although Robin assumed it was from the high-speed chase, she acted surprised.

With Jessie asleep in the car, Robin decided to keep driving. By the time they checked into a motel, a silver glow covered the landscape. The next day, Robin chose to wear a yellow outfit—a color that few women could pull off. Though she wasn't sure why it mattered, she applied makeup.

Upon exiting I-39, they searched for a place to have breakfast. Afterward, they hooked onto a secondary road. They weren't on a thoroughfare, but what looked like a dirt path. Time passed as it does on long trips.

"Are we close, Mommy?" Jessie asked as she browsed Robin's smartphone, her doll, Gabby, on her lap.

“We have a few hours to go.” Logan had moved since Robin last saw him. She hoped his new place would be larger than his apartment when she stayed with him. He assured her it was. Still, she wondered if Logan was too kind to turn them down.

With Jessie’s attention drawn to playing a video game on Robin’s smartphone, she asked, “How about now?”

“Same answer as before.” Since Jessie was checking the trip on Robin’s smartphone, her constant asking seemed odd. Once outside the major cities, she thought of the Midwest as farmland, deserted dirt roads, and friendly country folks.

Just minutes passed, and Jessie said, “I think it’s around this bend.”

Logan told Robin that when you think you're off the beaten path, you're on the right road. However, he seemed to live a few miles past the end of the earth. “And I think we need quiet time. Let’s say 15 minutes.”

They drove in silence for a while before Jessie said, “Mommy.”

“W-h-a-t?” she spoke in a carefully modulated tone.

“Would you tell me when 15 minutes is up?”

Robin couldn’t help but laugh.

The flatland transformed into hilly roads. She thumped over train tracks that extended in both directions as far as her eyes could see. If not for Jessie checking Waze, Robin would have thought she had taken the wrong road.

Right before Logan's driveway, she noticed a sign that read… 'No trespassing. Survivors will be prosecuted.' By now, the sun was in the western sky. Tires crunched on the gravel as the old Chevy rattled up to his house. Her face looked drawn, like she had partied a night or two.

Upon stopping, apprehension crept to the surface. She squinted into her visor mirror and questioned the woman, looking back to see if she had made the right decision. Refusing to get caught up in her emotions, she swiftly thought about how all that money would change their lives. Lately, that seemed to justify everything.

Chapter 57

Jessie's Uncle

Because he wasn't wearing a coat but a rust-colored sweater, she noticed Logan had lost his wiry build. He now had a well-defined physique. Though he was more muscular than she remembered, he wasn't musclebound.

Robin didn't understand guys who built huge muscles just to view themselves in the mirror. If they were into sports, she could see a need. Otherwise, there had to be more to life than spending hours sculpting one's body.

His tan wasn't Hollywood, but gave him a healthy, outdoorsy appearance. He had wavy hair, high cheekbones, and a clean-shaven face. Specks of silver at the temples surprised her.

Luckily, they added character. Perhaps because they were occasionally in contact on Zoom, Robin felt she would have recognized him even if he were dressed in a Halloween costume.

Farms flanked his place, leaving her feeling that things hadn't changed here in a hundred years. From the outside, the two-story structure looked big but not grand. The house was on sloping wooded terrain. Trees were spackled with frost. It looked as if Norman Rockwell had painted the landscape in autumn colors.

"Before you ask, a cop friend put up that sign," Logan said.

Robin laughed. She was cold despite wearing a bulky coat and a ski sweater. "Seeing you're not wearing a coat, what do you wear in the summer?"

"I'm wearing an undershirt, a shirt, and a heavy sweater." Dry leaves skidded across the terrain.

"Next time you're into layering, finish it with a coat." Her eyes appeared droopy.

"That's a clever comeback," Logan stabbed his thumbs in the loops of his jeans.

"You're Uncle Logan." The sun found hints of gold streaks in Jessie's hair, and the chilly air brought out her rosy dimples. She wore a winter coat over a bright red dress purchased at Consignment Mommies. This morning, she had painted her short nails blue with white stars and applied an enormous amount of perfume.

"It's nice to finally meet you," he said, even though he had met her when she was born.

Hosting curious eyes, she asked, "You like my mommy?"

"Absolutely. When we first met, I thought she was pretty, smart, and fun." Logan squatted to almost eye level, his arms resting on his Wranglers.

"I still am," Robin said, thinking the air smelled clean as if it hadn't been affected by the Industrial Revolution.

Smiling, he said, "Let me show you the house first, and then I'll bring your stuff in."

"Gee, I didn't know you lived in the sticks. If you ever have a fire, the truck will never arrive in time." Robin surveyed the surroundings. The farmhouses which flanked him, the cul-de-sac across the street, and the snowy mountain range, looming in the distance. From her perspective, this is just what the doctor ordered.

"You came from the east. Continuing west a mile or so, things get more congested."

So, the dirt road connected his place to civilization. If nothing else, that was comforting. She surveyed the landscape. Among the tall trees and bushes, Robin's eyes caught a wellhouse. "You drink well water?"

"I've been drinking the water since I moved in and haven't had a problem. I've been drinking the water since I moved in and haven't had a problem."

Catching her off guard, she momentarily stared. Then she sensed it must have been his humor that had him purposely repeating the sentence, and she grinned. "I'm sure."

"I had the water tested. It's better than the county water," Logan said.

"Is that a comment about your water or the county?" Robin asked.

A stone path dissected the land. Jessie kicked up red and yellow leaves as they approached the house. Dragging her feet, Robin approached his place. She could see a Christmas tree through a large bay window with its lights blinking. Remembering Logan wasn't into decorating, she speculated he'd have done it for Jessie.

"What do you do, Uncle Logan?" Jessie asked as they climbed the low stone steps two at a time onto the porch. Wooden rockers flanked a small round table, and collapsible chairs were scattered about.

The double-wide door opened with a faint click. While entering, Logan said, "I help recruit students for the university."

Robin always marveled at how educated people oozed confidence. It was too late for her, but she wanted that for Jessie. "Logan is a marketer. He's responsible for getting high school kids to attend the college he works for. And to do that, it means he's smart."

"While I don't know if I'm that smart, I'll do nothing to suppress the rumor," he joked.

Just like Aaron, his boyish smile could melt ice, Robin thought.

"Let me show you the house. I just finished decorating Jessie's bedroom." The house smelled Christmasy.

"I get my own room?" Jessie asked.

"Why not? You're worth it."

Jessie's thin shoulders lifted. Her face crunched up in the right place. "Yippee."

"What do you mean, decorated it?" Robin noticed his house was immaculate, with barely a pencil out of place and floors spotless. But then, he was a family of one. She recalled that he had always been organized. That left her wondering whether, over the years, his neatness had become an obsession. If so, could he adjust to a 6-year-old's messes? As for Robin, the clutter was tolerable until the company arrived.

"I painted her room and decorated it for a girl Jessie's age. I also got toys she might play with."

"That's very nice of you." Robin didn't realize he would go to the bother. She would have told him they'd only be there briefly if he had mentioned it.

"I enjoyed it."

As they strolled around, she took it all in—the furniture, curtains, and the airy feeling of the house. Her tiny apartment often made her feel as if she were indoors too long. "It's a beautiful house. When did you buy it?"

"I purchased the land and built it."

That must have given him a tremendous sense of accomplishment. "Really."

"Have I ever lied to you and gotten caught?"

"Not yet." Having thought that someday he'd make a great daddy, she was curious to see how he related to Jessie.

"I lived in the basement for two years before the first floor was complete. At the rate I'm now going, completing the second floor will take a decade."

When they entered the living room, her eyes caught a painting of Aaron. What got her attention was how the artist captured his troubled eyes. Shifting her attention to Jessie, she said, "That's your father, Aaron."

"I know."

Additionally, paintings were scattered about. They would look like cavemen's drawings if not for the vivid colors. At best, it was art for the pleasure of art. "The paintings caught my eye. I don't even see the numbers."

As if understanding her paint-by-numbers joke, Logan smiled knowingly. "He's an undiscovered artist, and judging from the quality of his primitive work, he'll likely remain undiscovered."

"In other words, the artist is too normal to be greatly successful." The room also had a rustic sofa and a sizable stone fireplace. Because this side of the house's first floor extended past the second floor, a skylight was at the edge of the living room.

To the right was a country-sized kitchen. Off to the side were the dining room and family room. A truncated corridor led to the bedrooms. First, he showed Jessie her bedroom. It was adjacent to Robin's.

He had painted Jessie's room in pastel colors. It had a single-size loft bed with five drawers, a bookcase under the foot of the bed, and a matching toy chest against the wall. Robin's room had a queen-size bed and light pine furniture. The spare bedroom was opposite Jessie's room, and the master bedroom was opposite Robin's.

"They are good-sized rooms." With its heavy wood furniture, women would assume it was a bachelor pad. However, Robin always believed the furniture must talk to one another. Even when it didn't seem like a perfect blend, it was a comfortable mismatch.

As they approached a curved staircase, Jessie asked, "What's up there?"

"Just a floor and walls." It also had electrical and plumbing.

"Can I see?"

"Let's go up."

Robin's pumps were heavy on the wooden stairs. The light from the undraped windows made it brighter than on the first floor. Interlocking hardwood flooring, a bathroom, another stone fireplace, and a sink for what looked like a perfect spot for a second kitchen gave Robin the impression that all it needed were walls. Her apartment could fit into it, with room left over. She wondered how he felt living alone in a big house. "I like the skylight."

"A few friends helped me install it. I was thinking about having French doors that lead to a large terrace."

"It needs a female touch." One's home is a self-portrait. The house cried out for knick-knacks. To his credit, most guys' places look like they are the work of experts in unrelated furniture. Although it was manly, it felt comfortable. Just as important, it came together.

"I know. Don't you think it would make a great entertainment area?"

Her mother would have known what to do with a space this large. She, along with Robin's siblings, would have wild drug parties. By not getting involved in the drug scene, as Cinderella did, she would have been the one to clean up their messes. "Do you entertain much?"

"Even on my best days, I'm not a party person. That's why it has taken me so long to finish it."

He built his dream house, which was disproportionate to the needs of one person. "You could use part of it as a barroom."

"Not being much of a drinker, what do I do with the rest?"

"It would make a great TV room," Jessie said.

"Do you watch much TV?" Logan asked.

"Don't you?" Jessie asked, as if she couldn't imagine, not.

"Once in a while."

"Then what do you do?"

"I'm into computers. Sometimes, I read a book online or spend time with a friend. Occasionally, I go for a walk."

"Mommy says you went to college," Jessie said.

Nodding, he said, "I have five degrees. That's because, as a university employee, I can take their courses for free. So, I'm not as dumb as I look."

"How could you be?" Robin kidded.

Logan laughed. It was deep and from the belly. Robin liked that in a guy.

Chapter 58

Getting to know Logan all over again

As soon as her head hit the pillow, her active mind began taking her to places she didn't wish to go. So, a pleasant day transformed itself into a scary night. Many horror movies she watched featured a woman alone and in the dark.

Because of recent events, she slept like a baby. That is, every hour or so, she woke up disoriented, wanting to scream. Tossing and turning, she dozed off again, her thoughts drifted into dark crevices.

When you are worried, every noise claws at you. She opened her eyes to the wind whistling. Devoid of color, she caught a glimpse of movement out of the corner of her eye. Deep in shadow, an image shifted as it approached the bed and came into focus.

Realizing who it was. The dark unleashed the predator in Sofia. Robin's nerve endings throbbed with fear. Sofia jumped onto the bed. Gun by her side, she glowered at Robin. A vindictive Sofia raised the weapon. Getting into her personal space was unnerving. Though Robin feared a confrontation, she never expected it this soon.

Between the time lightning hits and thunderclaps, Robin sprang up and latched onto Sofia's hand, changing the bullet's trajectory. Wrestling for possession, the firearm toppled onto the mattress. Robin promptly kicked it away.

"No," Sofia said. Then she put up her arms to protect herself. Quickly, Robin landed a right cross to Sofia's chin. To her dismay, Robin watched Sofia tumble backward toward the revolver.

Before Robin could react, Sofia twisted her body, pouncing on the weapon. Gun in hand, she turned to face Robin. Now confident, slowly she rose. Killer eyes stared. "It was easy to figure out where a loser like you would go. That's because I have true grit and balls of steel."

She stared into the eyes of a cold-blooded murderer. Confident that if anything happened to her, Logan would take care of Jessie, Robin spoke her mind. "Hey, true grit and balls of steel, go fuck yourself."

"Language, language," eyes crinkled. Then she fired. Robin's teeth jackhammered together. She fell back and rolled off the bed, landing on the floor with a thump. Disoriented and in a bit of pain from the fall, she lay there. With fear becoming her Achilles' heel, she felt as if life was being squeezed out of her.

Confused, she searched for a bullet hole. Expecting to see evil eyes piercing down, she looked up. It took a moment to figure out what had occurred, and with it, an infusion of life pumped through her body.

When Robin realized the monster wasn't lurking about but resided within her, she abandoned any hope of sleep. Remembering that Logan was on rooster time, she selected a comfortable outfit. Weighed down by the whole ordeal, she wandered into the kitchen.

Given that Logan could cook, Robin wasn't surprised to find a kitchen filled with small appliances. A Vitamix, a waffle maker, a hot-air cooker, an electric grill, and others lined the counter against the wall. The open shelving held dishes and water glasses.

An artsy potbelly stove in the corner looked more decorative than functional. Surprisingly, next to the sink was a cabinet, not the typical dishwasher. The recessed lighting brightened the room. "Again, I apologize. Jessie wanted to meet you."

Meeting her eyes across the room, he said, "Nonsense, I wanted to see both of you."

She thought Logan would have a couple of kids by now. Wanting to express her regret, she said, "To be honest, I was shocked when you told me you two were separating."

"Divorce is legal." Joining her, he sat at the counter.

"For a guy like you, it must have been tough?" She admired Logan's commitment to family. Robin's family would probably be alive if they had the same attitude. One thing is for sure—her life would have been vastly different.

"I'm living proof there's life after death."

He poured himself coffee and said, “How rude of me! I should have poured you first.” He then poured the cup back into the pot and poured her a cup.

She smiled, “That’s alright.”

“It is.” He took her cup, poured it back into the pot, and then poured himself a cup.

While giggling, she said, “How in the world did you ever think that up?”

“It’s called stealing. I saw the skit at a friend’s place. We watched an episode of ‘The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show.’ That’s an old TV sitcom. Gracie was a funny lady. And you looked like you needed a laugh.”

She came out feeling down. Against her feelings, he pulled a smile out of her. But then he always had a way of opening small pockets of joy in her. Returning to where they left off, she said, “Sorry, the marriage didn’t work.”

“It’s better this way. Thinking back, once married, we rarely had a meaningful exchange.”

“Why?” She wore a loose blouse and baggy jeans. They were designed that way.

“I didn’t want to interrupt her.” His dungarees and khaki shirt seemed like the kind of outfit you would wear around the house when no one else was there.

“She’s a fool for wanting out.” She believed that once Logan made up his mind, he went the distance.

“Oh! I left her.” There was isolation in his eyes.

“I can’t believe that.” Though she knew it wasn’t her business, her mouth appeared to be working independently from her brain.

“I thought she wanted to be a wine mom.” His long legs stretch down to the footrest.

“A what?” She took an experimental sip of coffee.

“Essentially, a soccer mom who drinks socially. To my surprise, it didn’t include being a mom.”

So, she didn’t have kids. Robin couldn’t even imagine herself wanting to be a kept woman, which made her wonder what kind of woman Karen was. “The drinking part sounds like fun.”

“What she wanted was to be a lady of leisure. Providing I paid the bills while she was charmingly unfaithful.” His eyes glanced down.

“She cheated on you?” Once again, the words tumbled out. Even greater than the act of betrayal is the emotion that you can’t trust the one person you need to.

“More times than Russia invaded Ukraine. If you need proof, ask her dog. He was present for all of them. Do you know what that dog eats?”

“Hopefully, dog food.” But dogs, like men, eat what they shouldn’t.

“I wish.” He paused, but his pause sounded like he wasn’t done. “It’s always good to work close to home. You can see who’s messing with your wife.”

“What?” She was astonished. He wasn’t into revealing personal things over a long distance. Yet face-to-face, he wasn’t as private as she had grown to believe. Oddly, she understood that.

"I forgot to bring a report to work. Being minutes away, I came back to get it. He was a mean-looking dude. I remember thinking if he killed me, it would solve all my problems," Logan bitterly joked.

That had to be hurtful. "Under the circumstances, you had no choice but to divorce her."

"From the stories she told about her childhood, you would think she was born in a log cabin she built."

While laughing, she wondered if the guy was just a playmate, as Logan had implied. "Did she eventually hook up with the guy?"

"Even though I wanted out, I told friends, maybe not me, but lord, please, not him. Since that time, she has had a slew of boy toys."

Knowing Logan, she suspected his divorce affected him more than he let on. "There must have been a hint."

"Ironically, I never saw a change because there wasn't one. That day, I learned she saw nothing wrong with sleeping around while we were together. I guess for her, I was just another boy toy." He gulped coffee.

Charmingly unfaithful implies sneaking around. "Then why hide it from you?"

"Initially, she didn't want to talk about it."

"So, she felt better when she didn't have to justify herself." It was the same mindset that her drugged-up family had.

"According to Karen, she displayed panache by not flaunting it in my face."

What a fool. Logan was a keeper—a guy who puts the family first. In her eyes, that made him a rock star. “How considerate of her.”

“She gave me a choice. My options were for us to stay married while she pursued other relationships or get divorced.

“You’re kidding me.” That’s kinda nervy.

“Though I was on her side, it didn’t mean I was against my side. Trying to be reasonable, I even consulted a shrink. Explained to him her point of view, her background, and why she needed an outlet. In the middle of unraveling her inner child, the counselor interrupted. ‘Hey, you aren’t her therapist.’”

“Sounds like you needed a friend, not a therapist.” She didn’t know anybody who could accept those terms.

“Falling in love, I had no control over. Staying in love was something else.”

Because of her experience with Aaron, she wasn’t sure what she would do. But with Logan, logic eventually prevails. “Decisions regarding relationships are always tough.”

“This is a small town, so I couldn’t help but bump into her. Despite it being awkward, we occasionally have a surface-y chat. I’m secretly delighted when she shares with me her crappy life,” his face turned devious.

Imagining how messy it could have been, she said, “You’re lucky you didn’t have a kid with her.”

“Why? I like kids. Aren’t you glad you had Jessie despite what happened to Aaron?”

In her world, happy moments came after conflicts. “Well, I appreciate you making Jessie feel at home.”

“When I became her godfather, we instantly bonded.”

“You’re serious.” What’s in an intelligent man’s heart counts more than in his head.

“Hey, Jessie has my mother’s chin. Her boy-killing dimples remind me of my sister. My family traits are etched into her.”

Nothing makes a mother warm up to someone quicker than acknowledging that they like your child. “And I made sure, unlike Aaron, she doesn’t have his rough edges.”

“Are the rough edges what excited you about him?”

“I’ve asked myself that dozens of times. If I met your brother today, his wild side would frighten me away.” In the months they dated, she found herself running to him and, in the end, away from him.

“I thought by now you would have hooked up with another,” Logan said.

With possibly one exception, she wasn’t serious about any of them. “Most guys are leery of getting involved with a woman and her child.”

“Some of my single friends feel that way.”

“In never knowing Aaron, Jessie looks at any man I date as her potential daddy. I can’t stand seeing Jessie’s heartbreak when things don’t pan out.” By verbalizing it, she wondered if she unconsciously kept the guys at arm's length. One guy even accused her of being standoffish.

“I know Karen would never date a divorced man if he had a child living with him.”

Chapter 59

Enjoying Breakfast

As the sun broke through the horizon, a sleepy-eyed Jessie appeared. She wore unicorn pajamas that said, 'Let the magic begin.' Although it was late fall, a few birds chirped their daybreak song.

"Who is Karen?" Jessie asked.

"Karen was my wife. We divorced." He went behind the kitchen counter.

"Why?"

Logan grinned. "What do you want for breakfast?"

"Like what?" Jessie asked, rubbing her eyes.

"Eggs, French toast, waffles, pancakes…" He stopped when her eyes lit up.

“Pancake with pecans sounds yummy.”

Logan put bacon in the microwave. Noticing he was making enough bacon for everyone, Robin was amazed that, after all these years, he still remembered she loved it. She could have an orgy with cashews and bacon.

He removed the ingredients, beat the eggs separately, and added vanilla extract. After boxing everything together, he put the batter on the grill and retrieved the pecans. He pointed his spatula at her, “Good choice. Luckily, I have pecans. Did you know I can flip a pancake faster than anyone else?”

“Really,” Jessie said.

“Want me to do it again?” he said while doing nothing.

“No, I saw it the first time,” Jessie gave him a sly glance.

Robin beamed. Being street-smart is a trait Robin treasures. Jessie grabbed Logan’s smartphone on the counter, as she often did with Robin's phone. It appeared she was looking for a game to play. “Jessie, you know better than that. When you take something without permission, it’s called stealing.”

Jessie blushed. “Sorry. From now on, I’ll ask permission before stealing.”

“That’s alright,” Logan said, grinning.

“Mealtime is when we talk. There is no phone, TV, or computer.” It was difficult enforcing that rule, but she insisted.

Jessie returned the phone to its place.

“That was a long trip you took.”

"I wanted to meet you." Jessie sat on the stool.

"You want milk or orange juice?"

"Both."

He puts both on the granite counter. "So, how was the trip?"

"At the beginning, it was scary." Jessie's face was drop-dead serious.

"Why?" He gave everyone a pancake and a small individual nut bowl, set the syrup on the counter, and placed the remaining pancakes and bacon on separate platters. The pecans were put in a bowl so that everyone could help themselves.

"Mommy had a fight with another driver." Her face looked concerned.

Robin was glad that a fight could also mean a disagreement, rather than what it was. Not wanting to discuss the car chase, she said, "Logan was once a short-order cook."

"A good one," Logan said.

Despite never trusting a skinny cook. Suddenly, Robin realized the term needed an explanation. "A short-order cook makes meals that can be served fast."

"I use a cake mix instead of pancake batter. It makes it tastier. So, what do you think?"

Taking a bite, Jessie said, "It's yummy."

"I didn't understand why I couldn't make a good pancake. Cookbooks have never worked for me. Luckily, another cook revealed the key is to beat the eggs before adding the flour. Learning that trick is why the summer job wasn't wasted," he said.

"Logan had many different summer jobs when he was a kid." To Robin, that made him a hybrid.

"Yeah, like what else?" Jessie asked.

"I worked in the circus one summer."

"What did you do?"

"Helped set up the tent and take it down." Also, he was a gofer.

"Did you like it?"

"It's not nearly as exciting as I expected." While talking, he placed his hand on Robin's forearm.

Her face scrunched. "Sorry, I don't like being touched when eating."

"What, were you a dog in a previous life?" his hand slipped away.

Robin laughed, thinking her father would hit her for saying that. Maybe that's why it's essential to feel comfortable enough to express her thoughts without the other person taking offense.

"Why all the different jobs?" Jessie asked.

"I wanted to learn something new."

"Is that why?" All her family ever cared about was where their next high was coming from.

"I have always been big on learning about things."

"What other jobs did you have?" Robin thought his last statement proved how unusual Logan was.

"My first job was as a paperboy. The following year, I was a food server. Another was a street vendor. However, the most rewarding job was volunteering on Sundays, serving meals to the homeless."

"How did you get all those jobs?" Jessie asked.

"My uncle's business was called MRC. Since no one knew what the letters stood for, he would make up whatever he needed to support any story I told. As a kid, I would go online and research what was involved. Then, I would tell them I had experience doing that type of work or something similar."

"What did MRC stand for?" Robin had long wanted to ask him whether he was a plumber and whether he offered Aaron a job. Feeling vulnerable, she was concerned about where the conversation would lead when she stayed with him. Now that Jessie was present, it didn't seem appropriate.

Laughing, he said, "Initials of his name. Matthew Ricky Cooper. And what do you want to do, Jessie?"

"Something that requires thinking. Mommy likes those kinda jobs."

"It's the most rewarding," Logan said.

"Do you have any games?"

"Would you like to go to the zoo instead?"

Robin wished her mother had taken her to the zoo or the circus. "Any particular time you want to leave?"

"Yes," Logan said and stopped.

Chapter 60

The Zoo

While skipping over the curved path partly covered by fallen leaves, Jessie asked, “So, what do I do?”

“You’ll see. Here’s food to give them.” The petting zoo section consisted of small sheep, goats, ponies, and llamas. The animals quickly converged on Jessie, who started giggling. As Logan helped her, the bag fell out of her hands. While leaving the caged-in area, Jessie said, “They really wanted the food.”

“When I was a kid, I also enjoyed that exhibit.” The chilly air revealed itself in small puffs when talking.

"You want more feed?" Robin loves zoos, carnivals, and happy clowns. She believes they tap into something magical in children. A part of her envies the joys she never experienced as a kid. Now and then, she lives vicariously through Jessie.

"No-o-o-o," she gave a toothy grin.

"Well, let's follow this path." Robin was back to her routine of applying some makeup.

An excited Jessie scampered over to the monkey cage. With a slight narrowing of her eyes, Robin glanced over her shoulder, looking for the girls who could be looking for her. It took only a moment, but it was enough.

Logan followed her gaze. He was focused on her, who was focused on something else. "Yogi Berra once said, 'You can observe a lot by looking.' So, what are you observing?"

"Before I came here, I ticked off Sofia. I don't know if you remember her." Her voice tightened noticeably. When they all hung out together, Sofia kept losing the cops who were in hot pursuit of her.

"Gun-slinging Sofia from your old gang? I'm surprised that someone hasn't killed that crazy lady." He stood still, his gaze turning distant as he probed the surroundings before settling back on her.

She wasn't impressed. When men scan, they miss everything. "Haven't you heard it's illegal to shoot her, and reasoning with her has never worked?"

"Do you know what it takes to kill her?"

“Balls.” She always believed monsters are less terrifying when you know them. Yet, Robin never fared well whenever she envisioned another encounter. Even Robin's dreams, which were often in color, were in dreary black-and-white when it came to Sofia.

He squinted up at the translucent clouds drifting across the sky. “Using Star Wars jargon, I feel a disturbance in the force.”

“She’s an unserious woman who must be taken seriously.” That girl is too dumb to play dumb. Sofia would get sympathy if she played it right. After all, her older brother was killed in a drive-by shooting, her mother spent much of her life in drug rehab centers, and her father was the neighborhood tough guy who spent a lifetime being harassed by police.

“When I visited Aaron, she was the butt of many jokes,” Logan said.

“I bet it was behind her back.” Sadly, a woman who enjoys bragging about murdering a security guard wants her dead.

“One man I talked to thought she was an evil, hurtful, self-centered bitch.”

“Anyone I knew?”

“Father O’Flaherty.”

“You’re kidding me,” Robin said while laughing. She wasn’t sure if Logan meant it, and that said plenty.

“I’ll be glad to meet with Mrs. Count Dracula on your behalf, providing I have proper security,” he kidded.

“Be sure to keep your neck covered.” While smiling, she thought she needed to connect with a fence fast. Tomorrow, she’d go online to look up a guy her gang occasionally dealt with.

Hopefully, *Pawn Treasures* will still be in business. Daniel might even fly out here for a take like this.

"I'm no expert, but the possibility of a paranoid psychopath lurking about is not helping with my erectile dysfunction."

"She acts so macho; I've wondered if one day she would come out of the closet and declare herself a lesbian. Look at who I'm talking to. Being a typical male, the idea probably turns you on."

"That's because they are both right," he joked. "Now that we are on the subject, have you ever made love to a girl?"

"No, have you? Oh, Cathy would be with her." Given that Robin had gotten safely away, she thought there would be a level of comfort.

"Don't feel bad about ticking them off. I believe one way to judge a person is by their enemies."

"Then I'm in good company." She couldn't have a more flawed set if she had handpicked them. That forced Robin to wonder who she was back then. However, gang life was an escape from her family.

"Yet, aside from glancing around, you don't look concerned."

"It's called makeup," though she was kidding, it was no joke.

"In that case, until I find a can of spinach, I'll be just another Sailor Man watching from my car with the heat on and doors locked."

"Wow! You seem so concerned, perhaps I'll let you do the worrying for me." Logan responded in a way a typical guy would. Not playing the alpha male was refreshing.

"Gee, thanks."

"Aaron would have played the tough guy." But then Aaron carried his toughness like a Red Badge of Courage.

"You don't get a medal for acting macho. However, having that teenage mentality might attract a certain type of woman," Logan said.

Robin wasn't sure whether he meant Aaron hanging out with much younger girls. Though she hated admitting it, in retrospect, Aaron's toughness had to be a component of her attraction to him.

As noon approached, Logan said, "We can grab a bite here or go to the Alley Cat Café. It's five minutes away."

"According to my uncle, who lived in New York, that would qualify as a Chinese restaurant."

"I heard the rumors," he said, smiling.

"Jessie is having a wonderful time. Let's have lunch here." Robin again scanned the terrain. Like Robin has done every day since fleeing, she made a mental note to check online for an update about the girls. They ate as they strolled around.

After they finished eating, knowing Jessie, like most kids, loved donuts, they entered the bakery section. As Jessie studied the donut selection, a man with kind eyes looked at her. While

pointing, he said, “This one is chocolate glaze. On the bottom shelf is my favorite French Cruller. Bavarian Cream is on the top row next to the jelly donuts…”

With amazement, Logan said, “Wow, you know your donuts.”

“I’m a cop,” followed by a modest grin.

“Thanks,” Jessie said. Without waiting for a reply, “I have my own bedroom.”

The man just stared.

After Jessie had selected her donut, they walked around a bit. “This is the best time ever.”

Logan nods.

“Look at that poor lady,” Robin said. The woman looked homeless.

“She must be a New Yorker,” Logan said.

“How do you know?

“She is walking fast like she is late for a meeting. Over there, even bag ladies are in a rush.” While laughing at his joke, Logan squeezed her arm.

It was a quick touch, but that was enough. Though she knew how irrational it was, that didn’t stop her from feeling an emotional pull. Under these circumstances, she wasn’t prepared to think in those terms. Additionally, Logan was too intellectual to woo a high school dropout.

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They headed back late in the afternoon, arriving around dinner time. Logan prepared the meal while Robin insisted on making the salad. After they had cleaned the dishes, Logan grabbed a frying pan and turned to Jessie. “Let me make you popcorn.”

“Where’s the lid?” Jessie asked.

"It broke."

"If you don't use a lid, the popcorn will go everywhere."

"Then catch it."

"You're going to make popcorn in a frying pan without a lid?" Robin asked.

"The floor is clean." Logan again cleaned the floor around the stove as he heated the oil. Then he poured the kernels in. It began to pop all over the kitchen. Wiping tears of laughter from her eyes, Jessie moved like a jackrabbit, caught what she could, and ate it.

He scooped up the rest of the popcorn, put it in a bowl, and then cleaned the mess. "I had a relative do that to me when I was around your age, and I never forgot it."

"Did your relative take any medication?" Knowing life wasn't perfect, Robin sensed these joyful moments would pass shortly.

He laughed. "Now that you mentioned it."

Robin stood there, thinking how different her life would have turned out if only Aaron had been more like Logan. "I don't think Jessie will forget it either."

"Can you make a fire?" Jessie asked.

"It's set up. All it needs is a match. Would you like to start it?" he asked.

"You rock." Her dimples glowed.

Jessie's smile lit up Logan's chocolate eyes. "You also rock."

Chapter 61

The Relationship

The evening settled over the town with a lazy eye. Robin changed into a cozy outfit. Something she wore around the apartment when only Jessie and she were there. It had more sag than stretch. An oversized blouse hung limp on her while her braless breasts wiggled. She also wore her favorite frayed jeans.

With Jessie in bed, Logan turned the kitchen recess lighting on low. For reasons Robin never understood, house lighting was either too bright or mood-setting. As the sun made its westerly arc, the temperature outside rapidly dropped. “Oh, do you have a large jar and sticky tape?”

"Sure." Logan reached into a cabinet for a Mason jar. He grabbed a tape dispenser from the kitchen's junk drawer.

"I'm tired of relocating the elf daily." She unscrewed the lid.

"What?"

Robin opened her pocketbook and removed a piece of paper and an elf. "Jessie learned from her classmates that elves have magical flying powers. Every morning, when she wakes up, she looks to see where the elf flew during the night.

"While coming here, I didn't have to worry about that, but Jessie informed me that the elf should know where we are staying by now. Do you realize what a nuisance it is to remember that the elf must be found in another part of the house each morning?"

"So, what will you do?"

"I have a plan…"

"Does it involve deporting all the elves?"

"Well, I have another plan. I put a mask on this elf and have this note. It reads, 'Hi, Jessie, my name is Benny. Because the flu is going around and Santa does not want any child to catch it, all of Santa's elves are in a 7-day quarantine.'" Pushing off the stool, she put the elf in the jar, screwed the top on, and taped the note to the lid.

"What?" he laughed.

"At least this way, I get a small breather." She placed it on the counter where Jessie sat at breakfast.

Logan added another log before they sat on the throw rug in front of the sofa, facing the fireplace. With the flick of the switch, he turned the Christmas tree lights off. He gave her a blanket and opened a bottle of Chardonnay.

"I'm not going to get up, but if I had a time machine, I would have gone back and put more ice cubes in my drink."

She swirled her fluted glass by its stem. "Oh, really. That's what you would use a time machine for? That leads me to ask. What are you drinking?"

"Water, ice, and something to give it zest," Logan said.

She felt a punchline coming. "Yeah, like what?"

"Johnnie Walker." The night was alive with an occasional howl of the wind.

While smiling, she thought that if Jessie never saw Logan again, Robin was confident her daughter would not forget him. "Thanks for showing Jessie such a great time."

"Hey, it was fun." The soft hiss of the fire lent a comforting sound.

"We should be gone in three or four days." Despite knowing that cell phones could be tracked, Robin decided to hold onto it for a little while. This way, she'll contact Daniel on her cell phone, keeping Logan out of it.

"I was hoping you would stay longer."

"You mean that?" She hadn't had this kinda fun in years. And moments matter. Still, she couldn't help but wonder about how he would react to what she did.

"Until you arrived, I had almost forgotten how much I enjoy company, especially yours." His milk chocolate eyes sparkled.

Because he never visited her, the statement sounded odd. “My company?”

“There was a time when I wondered what would have happened if I had met you before Aaron.” Slowly, he swirled the cubes.

Not being a prize raffled off, nothing. However, in hindsight, she was a teenager in crisis, and Aaron was an infatuation. Macho guys like him never change. He existed in his selfish world. That’s why her emotions regarding Aaron had developed calluses. She patted him on his shoulder. “I respected you too much to think in those terms.”

He clinked her glass. “Why?”

“You were more educated than anyone I've ever met. I was in awe of you,” and might still be.

He waited until after taking a sip of scotch before continuing. “Big deal. I know people who attended better universities.”

But she didn’t. “That’s because we travel in different circles.”

His head turned when the fire’s leaping flame caught his attention. “Do you like your world?”

Given it thought, the answer surprised her. “Not particularly.”

“Then join my world.”

She momentarily stared at the blaze. “How?”

“If it’s so important to you, complete your schooling.”

“That’s not my point.” She felt warmed by the blanket and comforted by the wine.

“It’s my point.” The fire flickered and danced.

"I'm afraid that ship sailed." Often, she felt like a dummy around educated people.

"You're still young. So, you have the time. Therefore, the ship has sailed only if you want it to."

"To graduate from college, I first must finish high school." True, Robin never gave schooling a shot. She often showed up for a free lunch, or because they had no heat, but not for the education.

"Have you ever considered becoming a lawyer?"

"What?" She couldn't believe her ears.

"If you are going to argue, you should get paid for it," he quipped.

"I'm not arguing. I'm simply explaining why I'm right." However, Robin had to acknowledge the merits of going back to school. And it's not like she doesn't have the time or money.

"Touché."

"I was amazed at how hard you studied."

"Being Aaron's little brother, his competitive nature wore off on me. Eight years older and several decades tougher, Aaron moved through life like a battering ram. To compete, I took kickboxing. Now, when I fight, I still lose, but more slowly," he kidded.

"I'm sure a savvy guy like you had been ahead on points." She always liked his understated style.

Grinning, he said, "Not willing to venture into his wildness, I applied myself in areas where I could excel, such as sports and math. Unintentionally, it led me down a different path."

Their mother didn't raise any dummies, but the path Logan took, "It gave you integrity."

"Aaron had that."

"You think?" She wondered where the relationship had gone wrong. What she could have done differently is hard to tell. More importantly, would it have mattered if she had figured it out?

"At the time, I didn't want to say anything. I felt Aaron's death was suicide by cop." A strong wind shook the windows.

"Your brother lived for the thrill." That possibility was filed away in the far corners of her mind, where it rattled around until now. Sometimes the truth hurts, sometimes it's soothing. Robin wasn't sure which this was.

"I'm willing to bet he knew you were pregnant."

She recalled a middle school teacher telling the class a fable about a pig and a dairy cow. They were walking down a road when the pig said, 'I don't know why people like you more than me. I give people ham, sausage, and bacon; you only give people milk.' The cow replied, 'That's because I give it while I'm alive.' Just like the pig, Aaron wasn't generous. Instead of taking her places, they were always in his damn car or a motel. "I told him on the day he died."

"Well, having a child would make him crazy."

"More likely being crazy is why he got me pregnant." Talking it over with Logan, who knew him well, added clarity even in areas where she disagreed.

"Angry over our sister's death, coupled with our parents' separation, followed by our father dying early because of multiple illnesses, conspired to change Aaron."

“Aaron’s charming facade made him an expert at masking much.” She could still picture the look in his eyes. Perhaps it was because she was sixteen, but his true character was mysterious.

“We all wear masks. Aaron wasn’t born to fail. The circumstances, or how he internalized them, made him go rogue. Towards the end, he was facing years in prison. He was desperate to go out like a man.”

It wasn’t death he feared, but life. “How I die isn’t as important as when I die.”

“For Aaron, it was. As you know, he quit his job to try his hand at the track. Trying to help, I learned of a guy who needed a part-time assistant but couldn’t afford to pay anyone. Having experience in the renewable energy field would ensure Aaron lands a high-paying job.

“After a lengthy conversation, he agreed it would be a good backup plan if the horse gig didn’t pan out. Aaron agreed to work for the experience. Within two weeks, he got fired from a non-paying job.”

That’s Aaron. He preferred to go out in the blaze. She didn’t want to think she loved him blindly. However, being a troubled teenager at a crossroads in her life had to be a factor. “Gee, you have given me much to mull over.”

“When did you start listening to me?” His eyes were steady on her.

The question struck her as odd because what he said always made an impression. “You’ll be surprised.”

“Then you care what I think?”

Not wanting to use many words to make a simple point, she said, “Depends more on what you say.”

“Everything depends on something. Allow me to toss one more thing out there.”

Getting into the weeds of Aaron wasn’t her cup of tea. “Perhaps you can change the subject.”

“I already have. Years ago, I thought you were electrifying.” His voice became soft.

Though deeply touched, she instinctively downplayed the comment. “I’m not that exciting.”

“You are, to me.” If Logan was surprised at what he said, it didn’t show.

“Come again?” Suddenly, the room was quiet. The crackling of logs filled the silence.

“It could be just my imagination.” As the log settled, the flame made his eyes sparkle.

Though life’s experiences hardened her, she also had a vulnerable side. His eyes never left her, making her heart skip a beat. “What is?”

“You look prettier in person than on Zoom.” As he refilled her drink, his hand shook.

Catching his tone, his disclosure heightened her senses. The emotional shift was a quintessential moment. The sensation ran down to her toes. “It’s nice of you to notice.”

“I notice more than that. Your alluring eyes are bluer than a Vincent van Gogh sky.”

“There’s one on each side.” Damn, and she thought this was a social call. When he scooted even closer, she got a whiff of his cologne. The idea was too reckless. Yet she couldn’t stop thinking about it. Like a movie starlet, she peered up from lowered lashes.

"I also noticed your silky hair." Using his fingers, he tenderly combed her hair away from her eyes. It was a gentle touch. An intimate touch.

Uh-oh. Given his strong face, compassionate eyes, and the addition of flattery, proved to be weapons of their own. Just like in her teens, she wasn't sure how to handle the situation. She was looking for friendship. But now she was drawn to his intensity.

Swallowing the lump in her throat, she was careful not to display an expression that would discourage him. With his face glowing from the flickering fire, her heart raced. She gave him a nonsensical response about her silky hair. "I grew it myself."

"You did a great job," he smiled.

Her eyes were alert. She fidgeted with her ring and stopped when she realized he was studying her. "What are you doing?"

"Trying to lower your respect for me a notch. How am I doing?" Shadows partially darkened his face.

"Pretty good." She wondered if she would have regrets.

"Then I plan to make love to a beautiful woman tonight."

"By sweet-talking me." She held her drink with both hands to steady it.

"It's my aphrodisiac special."

"And I thought you gave me the wine to be sociable." Not to get me in the mood.

As if to prove he was tuned in to her, he said, "Your beauty is still photogenic."

Robin thought she might appear pretty with a good makeup artist and photographer. Allowing herself a small piece of modesty, she said, "I'm no centerfold."

“It could be the liquor talking. But you’re beautiful from where I’m sitting.” He gave her a GQ (Gentleman Quarterly) smile.

Blushing like a teenager, her wineglass rose to her lips. “In that case, drink more.”

The moment had redefined itself. Somehow, the fierce fire settled into a hiss. “You’re so hot, I’ve seen men turn their heads.”

“Next time, clue me in.” She put down her wineglass. To keep from trembling, she hugged her knees to her chest.

Speaking with eyes fixed on her, “You have a way about you.”

She couldn’t stop visualizing them making love. “I didn’t know I had a way.”

“When was the last time you had sex?” In the silence that followed, anticipation filled that space.

If he heard any sound, it was her heart trembling like a captive bird. As his hand caressed her face, the phrase 'use it or lose it' came to mind. A ripple of heat traveled through her so fast it felt like a flashfire.

Eyes floated to his, which were superglued to her. She was in over her head. It was about time, she told herself. To escape the silence, she climbed out of her thoughts, “Let’s see, when was the last time I had sex? Does my vibrator count? We’ve been reclaiming the nights for years.”

His eyes washed over her face. “We are about to find out.”

Bubbling with excitement, her face glistened with moisture. She grabbed her glass and guzzled the remaining wine. Because the conversation should soon end, she toed off her shoes under the blanket.

Despite the awkwardness, the feeling was too delicious to ignore. Glowing with expectation, her body grew hot. “Don’t worry, I remember how.”

“A good memory can come in handy.”

As suspense fell over her face, he gently stroked her cheeks. To her, the right touch means more than words. When he tenderly kissed her neck, it felt like she was dreaming. One thing she knew for sure. Kissing her neck worked every time.

Then he kissed her on the lips. Extending her arms, she pushed him away even as she held him and stared into his caring brown eyes. She felt his gaze reaching into her soul, making her face glow like a smitten teenager.

Her thirst for him brought back memories of what a kiss once meant. She brushed the tips of her fingers over his lips. With urgency, she opened her mouth. Tasting him, she pressed her burning body against him.

Chapter 62

Sex

His shadow crossed her face and became still. Although she occasionally had sex, being with a child quickly got complicated. With Logan, despite him being Aaron's brother, it felt like the right elixir. Given that her body had no conscience, it would be an issue only if Logan chose to make it one. Strangely, he did not.

Initially, her breathing was heavy. She stretched lovingly and felt the warmth of his skin, the tightening of his muscles. A smile gradually pulled out from the corners of her mouth. Leaning back, his fingers began to run gently through her hair. Briefly, they lay there, face to face.

Her mouth lifted towards him, easing into a hot, lingering kiss. While stroking a smooth thigh with a feathery touch, he nibbled his way. Showing great care, he passionately unbuttoned her blouse.

The fireplace cast a soft glow onto her cleavage. As he caressed her breasts, she felt her nipples grow firm in his hands. Robin ran her fingertip over his eye, across his face, down to his chin.

Feeling a hot flash, her body throbbed. Rolling into him, her hair tumbled as their mouths joined. Her hands rested gently against his chest. She couldn't take her clothes off fast enough. As did he. Warming to his gentle touch, she studied the intensity in his eyes. Goose bumps ran through her. She never wanted him to let go.

Playfully, she bit his jaw before brushing her pillow-soft lips against his ear. Excitedly, she let her hand roam, exploring his body with her mouth. Her eyes closed as they kissed. His taste filled her. Skin to skin, they were interlaced

Suddenly, she remembered how earthy and sweaty great sex felt. With the sensation spiraling through her, she made a tiny, muffled sound. Her hands crept down, enjoying the exploration. She took him into her mouth. Slowly, her hungry mouth worked its way up. Finding his lips, she surrendered to the moisture of his tongue.

Rolling her over, she could feel the strength of his body, his muscles. Lost in the sea of emotions, she let him explore every inch. Again, their lips feverishly joined. Her legs trembled as a warm wave washed over her. She moaned.

While burying herself in the heat of the moment, he entered her. As their bodies joined, she arched hers. Rising and falling, they moved in sync. As the tempo quickened, waves of pleasure transported her into an alternative sphere. One that had nothing but heat.

The joy, the ecstasy that was pumping through her veins, reached down to her core. All she knew was that she couldn't get enough. Her muscles tightened and then released as his muscles had.

Despite it being improper to compare him to Aaron, she couldn't help herself. Though the line between memory and reality often gets blurry, with Aaron, sex has always been more of a conquest. Not surprisingly, she prefers Logan's gentler, less macho style.

Her head was nestled in the soft spot under his collarbone. She was lost in her thoughts when he began to stroke her hair. Abruptly, the intimacy was spoiled by the possibility that this was a one-night stand.

There's an understanding that guys aren't responsible for acts performed while under the influence of alcohol. That would lower her respect for him more than a notch. Refusing to think Logan was like that, she shoved that thought aside. Still, since she was a little kid, the problem with good times was that the tough times were just around the corner.

Chapter 63

Changing Plans

Logan's watery eyes were filled with purpose. "Regarding last night...."

While he needed his morning coffee, she didn't. It served as a reminder that she doesn't drink coffee when in a stressful situation. Regardless, she took the mug. It warmed her hands, and she joined him at the counter. "What are you trying to say?"

"I wanted to tell you last night. But with my tongue down your throat, having a conversation seemed inappropriate." The moisture from his chest made his cream-colored shirt cling to his body.

"Tell me what?" That's how she expected a guy to begin, before putting a spin on it. No stranger to disappointment, she wondered whether he would prove himself a typical man and give her the boot. However, in studying his eyes, it felt like something else was going on.

"I don't want it to be a one-night stand." His face was bright red, and his eyes caring.

"Then, what do you think happened?" Though it was crazy to make love, she had. That fantasy lasted until her morning shower. With doubt overwhelming her, she asked herself, 'Who was she kidding?' Being a typical male, he must have planned to maneuver her into bed but not into his life. The idea snowballed so rapidly that she would have felt better if she had been abducted by aliens.

She deduced that he had little opportunity because he lived in a sparsely populated region. Sometimes, sex is just sex. Otherwise, she would not have come out with bleary eyes, wet, stringy hair, wearing a worn robe, and feeling a bit slutty.

"Do you know what I instantly thought about when you told me you were visiting?" His brown eyes are cast down.

"First chance you had. You would jump my bones." And to her amazement, she wanted them jumped. Even Andy, the man she had almost married, hadn't brought out the passion in her that Logan had. But she wasn't madly in love and hadn't pretended to be. What Andy represented was security, not heat. After Aaron, anything less than everything is unacceptable.

"Okay, do you know the second thing that came to mind?" he joked. Then continued, "I love your body. I love making love to you."

"How about my mind?" Upon Aaron telling her, 'You have a great set of tits, and I have the hormones,' the answer to that question was important to Robin.

"It terrifies me," he teased. "I want you more than I ever wanted any girl."

"Wow." Before she came out, she talked herself into concluding that the joyous night came with a short expiration date. After all, he was educated, and her thoughts were embedded in the hard facts of reality. Realizing she was wrong, deliciously wrong —her emotions flowered.

"You must admit we clicked last night."

As the statement hung in the air, her heart pounded with excitement. Conflicted, she resisted the notion that someone like Logan would consider her anything more than a roll in the hay. Telling her, 'We clicked,' made her feel alive. "There's a 'we'?"

Logan tasted the coffee before saying, "You didn't wear a bra last night."

It was an evening of pleasure, satisfying her need for lust. "Since you unbuttoned my blouse, it shouldn't matter."

"That's a classic justification for the male gaze. It's a great way to have a first date." Then he removed a folded handkerchief and patted his brows.

Because his words made her heart race, she wanted to push aside logic and hug him. "We had a 'first date?"

"My only regret is that I never had the courage to tell you how I felt until now," he said.

"You must have dated since your divorce." Up until now, having a great life has been for others. That's not living but existing.

"A few but none excited me like you."

Still in the pinching stage, she was struck by the truth she refused to admit. Something was missing in her life. She missed the warmth of a guy, the security of his arms. “I wasn’t prepared for this.”

Leaning closer, he whispered in her ear, “I’m just a guy, hoping the girl of my dreams will love me back.”

“Straightforward, Logan, strikes again.” Though surprised, if Logan hadn’t felt the urgency of her shortly leaving, he wouldn’t have made his move. And Robin is thankful he did.

“That’s what honesty sounds like.” His eyes grew moist.

She studied his face. The way he looked at her, she knew he loved her. But, being Robin, she asked, “What happens when you change your mind?”

“Why would I do that?”

“You’re very educated. I’m sure you're accustomed to intelligent, sophisticated women. So eventually, you’ll come to your senses and dump me.” The point that gnawed at her was: how could someone with a doctorate find a high school dropout stimulating?

A puzzled expression washed over him. “Why do women turn on themselves?”

“I can’t understand how a guy like you would fall for a girl like me.” Nevertheless, he made her feel beautiful.

“What’s to understand? You’re attractive, intelligent, and a lot of fun. I love you.”

Unlike Arron, Logan’s world is a world of words and feelings. “I like that in a guy.”

Grinning, he said, “I don’t want you and Jessie to leave again.”

And she was wondering if he was going to give her the boot. The boot, her ass. Logan made his intention clear by letting it all hang out. With all her flaws, he still loved her. That made her feel ridiculously excited.

Having a propensity to favor unorthodox solutions, this one catapults to the top of her list. She never liked being so concerned about a broken heart; she refused to dance. “For me, love is all or nothing, so give it thought.”

By this time, the light was beginning to filter through the kitchen window. “I have.”

“Have what?” She felt his pull, for unlike Aaron, she always enjoyed their talks. And how she loved their lovemaking. That left her wondering if he was the right guy at the wrong time.

“I’ve been thinking about you for years.”

Being with a child makes affairs complicated. “Do you know what you are getting yourself into?”

He looked at her, baffled. “It took guts for me to finally make a move on a girl I love to pieces from afar.”

“Wow, I never saw it coming.” With love filling her, Robin wasn’t sure where that left her plan.

“And now you have.” His eyes seemed to yearn for her.

“If we hook up, your friends will discover Jessie is your brother’s child. Won’t that prove embarrassing?” As she had years ago, she found herself asking Logan questions and listening to

his perspective.

"Guys, don't sit around sharing feelings."

"C'mon, gossip is the new literature. It fills the empty space." Suddenly, it hit her. When it comes to doing nothing, Logan is everything. And life is all about having fun during those in-between times.

"If I hadn't allowed my feelings to be known, we could have been short-changed. Besides, guys talk about sports."

The thought of them becoming an item wormed its way into her psyche. "That shows the differences between the sexes. Girls' night out is spent chit-chatting about guys."

As he smiled, lines creased his cheeks. "Oh! We're thinking about girls. We're just not talking about them."

"Typical macho wannabe philosophy."

"I'm not the type to force you to decide. Well, that's not true. I am the type. But I don't want to come across like that."

"You certainly make things tough." There's nothing like love to screw up her brain. She closed her eyes, and a joyful tear squeezed out.

"Don't let it go to your head. But you're the type of girl, guys notice." He brought his mug to his lips.

"Poor helpless guys." Her face displayed mild amusement. In never contemplating the possibility of them becoming an item, it's apparent that even her imagination has limits. Now, her mind was roaming in free-range territory.

He paused to drink coffee, then asked, “Do you remember when we couldn’t find Aaron and chatted on the beach…”

“Oh, I remember. I didn’t know you well, but you changed my life forever.” An image of that exchange had been etched into her brain. It wasn’t until they talked that she realized she had choices.

“I, too, never forgot it.” His eyes glittered like diamonds.

Knowing how it affected her, she said, “C’mon, you must have had that talk with other girls.”

“But you were the first. Not to mention the most receptive. I hope our talk gave you clarity.” In a male version of crying, his eyes became watery, and he blinked the tears away.

She wondered why most men aren’t equipped with tear ducts and concluded that for many guys, crying is on par with being a sissy. “Ironically, it didn’t answer my questions. Rather, it forced me to question my answers.”

“In full disclosure, that talk even turned certain girls off,” he sheepishly admitted.

They spoke of her chaotic life and what she wanted to become. Unable to discuss such matters deeply with her family, their chat altered how she viewed herself. “All these years, I wondered if you ever dated any girl who was a mess like me.”

“Honestly, you’re no more screwed up than the rest of us. The only difference is you know it.”

Coming from a dysfunctional family, that possibility never dawned on her. He gave her insight that she would never have had without him. “You keep teaching me new things about myself.”

The warmth of his smile lit up his face. “I loved Aaron, but ever since that day, I felt the wrong guy got the right girl.”

“Talking to you on the beach was enjoyable.” She always suspected Logan thought her relationship with Aaron was wrong. After Aaron’s death, she even asked him about it, and he said, ‘He couldn’t explain it.’ She assumed that meant he refused to explain it. Now she knows why.

“Before our chat, I was more interested in my school grades, and girls didn’t have a problem with that. From that moment on, I was envious of Aaron. I knew it wasn’t right, yet I couldn’t help myself.”

“Well, you certainly surprised me.” Suddenly, she displayed an obsessive need to fidget with her bracelet.

“Is that a, no?” His chin dipped slightly. His upper lip beaded up. Again, he used his handkerchief.

“Is what a no?” Then she twisted her ring with her finger.

“You’re fidgeting like a ferret on UPS.”

Watching his face turn down, her heart melted, “Wow, you don’t miss a trick...”

“Forget my indiscretion. There’s no point in us both remembering it,” he bitterly joked, while staring into his coffee mug.

She could almost feel his disappointment. “What you noticed is me contemplating how us being an item would impact Jessie.”

Suddenly, his eyes glisten. “Being smitten over you for years…”

“Smitten is a good thing,” she tried not to get her hopes up. Not when past affairs had failed, making her super cautious. On the other hand, because Robin felt isolated from her siblings, she longed for a loving family.

“I’m trying to say I’m looking for clarity.” He then lifted his mug to his lips.

And like that, her world became complicated. “You never made a move.”

“How could I? You were with my brother. I was ashamed of my feelings. But that was then, and we are in the now.” His tone sounded optimistic.

Being pregnant, her body was out of sync to such an extent that she could have misread the signs. Still, while time moves forward, memories move backward. Curiosity burned inside her. “Toward the end of visiting you, I felt you didn’t want to be around me.”

His lashes lowered briefly. “You read the tea leaves wrong. Because of how I felt, I tried to distance myself from the situation. Avoiding you was cowardly on my part.”

“If the circumstances had been reversed, I would have reacted similarly.” His action —or in this instance, inaction —speaks louder than words.

“I felt like an understudy who would never get my shot.”

“I see that.” Back then, she had a propensity for picking fast men who bet on slow horses. Attracted to edgy men left her with distant memories and a fatherless daughter.

“I feel compelled to tell you where my head is. I’m not as young as I used to be.”

"Who is?" When she met Aaron, she was so young that she let her parents' relationship dictate what love meant. The problem was that their relationship wasn't about love, not as far as her father was concerned. As it turned out, neither were Aaron's feelings toward her about love. It must have been her loneliness that brought them together.

His eyes were again moist, and again, he blinked tears away. "When you stayed with me, it was the happiest time in my life."

Getting pregnant forced her to mature quickly. Given that she viewed Logan as the classic enabler, she had to be on her own. Still, "I didn't want to leave."

"Then don't disappoint me a second time." Again, he sipped his coffee.

The last time she cried was when those psychopaths were after Jessie and her. This time, it was because of joy. She wiped the moisture from her eyelashes. The thought of them becoming a couple pulled at her. "Dammit, I hate crying."

Allowing her to process the moment, he didn't intervene. Eventually, he said, "Well, you picked a good reason to start."

"I never saw you cry." She wished he had tried to rock her world. However, in her ocean of grief, he would have barely caused a ripple.

"When you were leaving, I cried."

"That was a tough time for both of us." She saw him look to refill her mug, but she hadn't touched it.

"Due to how Aaron lived, his death was anticlimactic. I cried because the girl I wanted in my apartment, in my bed, moved on. So, a relationship that never started ended. Until now, you were the girl that got away."

Those luminous eyes twisted her into a pretzel. "The only good advice my mother ever gave me is there's no point in playing hard to get unless you get caught."

Suddenly, his facial muscles appeared less tense. "I missed you more than any lover has a right to be missed."

"You have always supported me, no matter what I've done." Though he melted her bones, marriage is different from dating. Marriage is a contract. Many contracts don't work. That's not what she wants for Jessie or herself.

"I'm due for vacation time."

Her mouth curved in the gravity of the situation. "This is a life-altering decision. Please take it."

"Would you like to go somewhere?"

While logic dictated that she should go slow, her emotions were in the now. "I like to stick around here and get to know you on a deeper level. I could take the hurt of it not working out. What I can't take is the hurt Jessie would experience."

"For a mother, being protective must be an obsession."

She smiled. "While you're on the subject, do you have any obsessions I should know about?"

"Only the love I have for you. And I know you're falling for me."

"What?" With life's uncertainties, she knew, yet she didn't know where it would end up.

"Tell me you aren't," he smiled.

"After years of being critical of guys afraid of using the 'L' word, I'm shocked to discover I, too, am hesitant. I love you." Part of her was concerned that she gave away more of herself than she wished. Considering their past, she felt he deserved the truth.

There was a spark of excitement in his eyes. "By the way, if we hook up, with all of us living here, I want to get a dishwasher."

Playfully converting him to the woman of the house, she replied, "Whatever you want, dear."

Grinning, he said, "While we are getting reacquainted, won't Jessie be bored?"

"I pulled her out of school, so a big chunk of her day will be spent doing schoolwork." Perhaps after Logan takes his vacation, she'll enroll Jessie in the local school here while she decides what to do. This way, Jessie could also get to know him in a family setting.

"Being with you is a dream come true."

Once again, liquid gathered in her eyes. She wanted him to sweep her off her feet and carry her to bed. Instead, with a slice of sun bouncing off the wall like an old friend, she said, "Before Jessie wakes up, hold me as if you'll never let go."

They stood, and he threaded his hands around her waist, pulling her in. His body felt warm and firm. He was about 4″ taller than Robin, so she stood on her toes and kissed him. It was long and tender.

She would hold off contacting Daniel until she told Logan what she had done. There were plenty left unsaid. Saying it could be a game-changer. However, she didn't need his endorsement. All she needed was his acceptance. That, of course, only comes into play if she decides to stay.

Breaking her train of thought, he asked, "I just got a whiff of something that smells heavenly. What are you wearing?"

"Crest toothpaste."

Chapter 64

Logan's Point of View

After all those years, his feelings were revealed, and she hadn't shot him down. He didn't know why she would be that callous. Yet he was so afraid of destroying his dream that he almost prevented it from becoming a reality.

He was tempted to get down on one knee, as he had last time. Not that he's superstitious, but that marriage ended in a divorce. "I understand your need to be sure."

"For Jessie's sake, I better…"

"So that you know, Jessie won't be the only one devastated if we don't work out." Despite there being no other acceptable choice, in divorcing Karen, he became depressed.

Navigating through the problem almost undid him. If not for his friends' intervention, he might have lost it altogether.

Eyes filled with mischief, “Maybe I should get a few tips from your ex.”

“I know you’re kidding, but something tells me you two would hit it off, but don’t.” The scars he endured made him question if he deserved a second chance. To get a second chance with his first true love felt great.

“Why would you assume I would like someone who wronged you?” He crossed his legs. She followed up with the same, yet sexier.

“Because I didn’t miss on Karen’s personality, I missed on her as a person. She’s a cute lady, and most of the time she has a pleasant disposition.” Divorcing her would have been easier if she had turned out to be a bitch.

“You are very forgiving. I would have gone out of my way to hate her.”

“Don’t get me wrong. For a long time, I was angry. However, I couldn’t deny she was fun to be around,” except when she acted pushy. Though deciding to leave Karen seemed elementary, it was anything but. If Robin stays, he’ll confide how gut-wrenching that decision was.

“Then you don’t go off half-cocked?”

He felt it was more than merely an observation. “Is that important to you?”

“It’s important when you have a child. She could throw a temper tantrum over Santa bringing her the wrong gift.”

Occasionally, Karen could be adamant. She refused to acknowledge that being bossy never worked on him. He listened politely. Yet he hadn't altered his position. That drove her crazy. He wondered how Jessie would react to that approach. "I must admit I'm a novice at raising a child. With your help, I'm sure I'll be at least acceptable."

"If it comes to that, you'll make a great dad."

Though he wasn't convinced, he would try hard to be a good husband and father. He was sure Aaron was so wrapped up in his own world that he would have been neither. "I want you to understand this is a big step for me, too."

"Men! If it doesn't work out, you'll go to a bar and drink your sorrows away. While I'm left picking up the pieces of a devastated child."

Logan sensed Robin believed he was the Rock of Gibraltar. However, his divorce proved otherwise. "Drinking never solved anything. I tried."

Her gaze rose, "So, you have another divorce, that's..."

"You never experienced the joy of a disreputable mouthpiece and a vindictive spouse out to get you." He was amazed at how a pleasant, fun-loving girl could turn on a dime.

"Then tell me."

Although he loved Karen, Logan, in hindsight, felt he had married mainly because he had never enjoyed an empty house. "Before I filed for divorce, I wanted to know her realistic bottom line. Her demands were simple. She wanted my house, bank account, and all future income."

"The bitch."

"As faith would have it, during our talks, a well-off aunt of hers unexpectedly died, leaving her a tidy sum. Given that I hadn't yet voiced my decision, her lawyer couldn't argue with any credibility that we had already agreed on a divorce settlement. Therefore, if anyone got anything, it would be me.

"That's when she suddenly turned good-natured again. Just wanting out of the marriage, she eagerly settled. My world was wrecked, and from what I could tell, all she felt was relief. She bought a gorgeous house and a Porsche from her inheritance, which she uses to drive around with an adopted 90-pound Great Dane." The dog enjoys sticking his head out the window.

"That's a big dog for a girl to handle. Why did she adopt a Great Dane?"

"Because her doctor informed Karen she couldn't have one," Logan snappily said.

It caught Robin off guard for a split second. Then she quickly chuckled, "And I would have a shattered 6-year-old."

This isn't a competition to see who feels worse. Pushing that aside, he felt his lonely life was about to change. "It appears you can devastate or please both Jessie and me. The choice is yours."

"Gee, I never had so much power. I love it."

Chapter 65

Together

"When we are done here, we can all go fishing."

"Where?" Robin asked.

"My property extends to the lake. It's solidly packed. With a little luck, we'll have fish for dinner." Then he wondered if Jesie liked fishing. On the other hand, he never met a kid who hadn't.

"You know how to cook it?" Robin asked as she studied her freshly painted nails.

Logan nodded.

"First, Jessie needs to study. Unfortunately, math is not my strong suit." Robin's pumps emphasized her shapely legs. A matching tan skirt accentuated her slender hips. A spicy blouse gave a glimpse of her cleavage.

"Math's my forte." Logan's gaze rapidly ran from Robin's legs up to her breasts and finally rested on her smile.

As their eyes caught, she wanted to pull her skirt up another inch. "Are you volunteering?"

"Why not?" Painstaking, casually dressed in a thick turtleneck. He also wore creased Levi's.

"Yaay!" Jessie said.

"How long?" Logan asked. A whistling wind shook the windows. It was so chilly that the cold penetrated the house.

"Fifteen minutes. She has problems with math."

"Well, five out of four people do."

Robin pondered that for a nanosecond. "I'm sure."

"With both of us, we'll be able to figure out how to solve the problems," Logan said.

"She sparkles in English. Did you know Jessie can recite the alphabet backward?"

"Yeah, let's see."

Jessie turned her back to Logan, "A, B, C…"

Logan laughed. "Upon finishing the math lesson, Jessie asked, "What's that?"

"A walkie-talkie set." Since not everyone has a cellphone, he uses it when his company wants to walk around so they can contact him if there's a problem.

"I always wanted one."

Surprised, he asked, "You know what it is?"

"No."

Chapter 66

Becoming a Couple

Before Jessie went to change into appropriate clothes, she briefly spoke to her mother.

"I've been trying to clue you in. Jessie doesn't like fishing."

"Sorry, I assumed all kids like it."

"The idea of hooking a fish in the mouth irks her." Some parts of Logan's life were foreign to Robin.

His eyebrow twitched. "Why didn't she tell me?"

"She didn't want to hurt your feelings. I liked that." She was proud to have raised a daughter who cared.

"That's unusual for a kid her age, right?"

“First time.” Her daughter was growing up at an alarming rate.

“Does she like fish without fishing?” A blast of wind rattled the skylight.

“Jessie told me she doesn’t feel it.” Amused that Jessie used one of Robin’s expressions, the conversation went no further.

“How does oodles of hot dogs and ice cream for dessert sound?” In addition to the fridge, he had a freezer in the pantry, which was packed. Although he was the only person living in the house, he often overcooked—that way, he could enjoy the meal several more times without having to make it from scratch.

“Not that it matters, but what flavor?” Considering the cost of food today, he must have taken out a student loan to fill the freezer.

“She’ll have a choice of three yummy flavors, four if you count orange sherbet.”

“For Jessie, that’s a trip to flavor town.” While she was pregnant and staying with Logan, aside from bacon, he bought organic food. But people change. Upon reflection, knowing Logan as she does, being pregnant, he didn’t want to keep stuff around that she shouldn’t eat.

“I get lucky sometimes.”

“To think of Jessie, you are a sweetie.” She said this despite knowing that men don’t like being called 'sweetie'. For Robin, love has always been a leap. Years back, when she dated, the guy was tough, like her father. And like her father, the bastards screwed up her life. Could she accept a caring guy?

“I hate being called that?”

"You might have to get used to it." She's been dating the wrong men all her life. Perhaps with Logan being different, it's an omen.

"Just so you know, I brought a whole bunch of food Jessie might like, including chicken nuggets and frozen hamburgers."

"When I stayed with you, I thought you didn't like hamburgers." Learning about Logan lent her comfort.

"I do when it's veggie-free."

At that moment, Jessie entered the room, wearing a heavy coat and a sad face. As if orchestrated, the roar of the wind slapped the house. Its timing was perfect. Logan glanced out and said, "The wind sounds too vicious for me. We'll do it another day. Perhaps you can learn to swim in the lake when it gets warmer."

"Will you teach me?"

Logan nodded, then turned to Robin and whispered, "Have you decided on staying until then?"

The idea pulled at her. She whispered back, "I'm working on it."

"If you stay until my birthday, I'll be able to teach her."

"Your birthday is in September.

She loves his understated humor. She loves doing nothing with him. There is no way around it. She loves him. What astonished her was that she always thought a lucky girl would snatch this guy up. Never did she suspect the lucky girl could be her.

Chapter 67

Considering Jessie

With the mid-winter sky, a deep shade of blue, Robin and Logan were alone on the wide porch, cuddled in heavy coats, gazing at the cul-de-sac and a neighbor's farm. They sat in wooden rockers around a wrought iron table. Cheese and crackers were on a wooden board. Also, there was a bottle of Chardonnay. It was a lazy country afternoon. Her face was bathed in a mixture of shadows and light.

Jessie was inside watching the latest 'Toy Story' for the umpteenth time, so this was Robin's chance. Believing that strength lies in vulnerability, she was ready to voice the issues that concerned her. Because the situation was overwhelming, she struggled to find the right words to express her feelings. While picking at her nail polish, she said, "Let's talk."

The silence that fell over him didn't go unnoticed. After a moment, he prodded, "Go on."

This time, she would yield to nothing less than everything. At a crossroads, she felt an urgency to rebuild the strands of her life. "Do you know what you are getting yourself into?"

"Tell me."

'The best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry.' "Honestly, I didn't plan on staying long enough to get involved."

"I did."

All of what he didn't know was burning a hole in her head. "Right now, she is on her best behavior."

"Oh! That I understand. How would she react to my becoming her father, legally?"

If Robin stayed, she wanted assurance that they would become a family. He just answered an unasked question. "Elated."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm her mother. Of course, I'm sure. However, all kids are born with the innate ability to irritate their parents. What if you told her to do something, and she said no? You don't care about her. Adding, you'll be sorry when she ruins her life?"

"I'll ask her, if I don't care, why would her ruining her life make me feel sorry?"

She liked that logic and might even use it herself. Still, she wondered how her daughter would react. "I come from a dysfunctional home. The hurt I feel never leaves me. I couldn't stand it if I put Jessie through that same experience."

“To survive your screwed-up families means there’s more to you than an ordinary person.”

“You aren’t getting me. You are getting a set.” Somehow, this town got hold of her. Having neighboring farms that eat what they grow and sleep when it gets dark makes life peaceful.

“I love both pieces.” He grabbed the bottle and refilled their wineglasses.

Although she never uses liquor for courage, she finished her drink quickly. But she needed it. “She desperately wants a daddy. Becoming her father would be like Jessie willing herself into the magic kingdom. If we hook up and a month down the road, you grow tired of me, it will break her little heart.”

“You keep assuming my education means I can’t fall for you. I have. If you want a guarantee, get homeowners' insurance. Only a fool would tell you where this would lead twenty years from now. But I can guarantee you will never bore me. If that were the case, you would have already done so.” His eyes were caring and serious.

“I want you to be sure because marriage is an as-is agreement for me.” Robin also waited for a time for Logan to bore her, but he never did. She craved strolls through a park, with birds chirping, while Jessie skipped along the trail.

His tone revealed his position. “I don’t take marriage lightly. If my ex promised to be faithful, we would still be married despite everything.”

All she ever wanted was to preserve her small corner. Loving a guy who also loves Jessie made him her shining knight. “That leads me to ask, what do I have that Karen doesn’t?”

"My heart."

Loving his reply, Robin's face glowed. "When Jessie was born, I looked at her and knew I was all she got. If we marry, she will become both of our responsibilities."

"When I married, I asked my uncle if I should have kids. He said he couldn't advise me. Then he added that having children had enriched his life. Without them, he would never have experienced those moments. You both are the best thing that has ever happened to me."

Because Jessie made friends quickly, she wasn't overly concerned. Nevertheless, it had to be addressed. "I can't expect Jessie to live in isolation. She needs kids her age to play with."

"Farmhouses with kids surround us. I let them fish on my property. A nice girl her age is on the farm adjacent to this property. On second thought, they might not hit it off."

"Why not?"

"If Jessie hates fishing because hooking a fish in the mouth troubles her, she may feel uneasy around Lucy. Her family eats the food they grow. They also raise and eat chickens."

With that statement, Robin felt she had entered an alternative universe. "I don't think I could eat an animal I raised."

"Ah, you never met a chicken."

Robin laughed. It was friendly and innocent. "Next time you see any of the kids, introduce Jessie to them."

"I'm sure she'll make friends here and in school. Or would you prefer to move?"

His willingness to sell this gorgeous house he built speaks volumes. "Speaking of school, how is it?"

"The public school here is supposed to be good. Or we can explore enrolling her in a private school."

"No, I prefer public schools. With any luck, it will reflect the world she'll live in." Though Robin grew up in a crime-riddled neighborhood, normally, kids are kids. Maybe next week she'll visit the school.

"Watching kids around here, I'm thinking of a new line of clothes. Shorts for winter, pajamas for school." He smiled almost imperceptibly.

"That's everywhere now." Because Logan is quick on the uptake, she didn't plan to fill in the details. More than anything, she refused to start their relationship with a lie, only to add another lie to cover up the first. She would lay it out, allowing him to judge her.

Chapter 68

Coming Clean

She was trembling like a leaf as she approached the next topic. Though happiness may be an illusion, that mirage was within her grasp. If she acted now, things might not break apart. The only way to get his honest input is to share pieces of her stowed-away past. While Robin searched for the right words, he gave her time. “Some things are better left unsaid. Before you comment, I’m going to say them, anyhow.”

“Give a little dirt. It can be healthy,” he kidded, but his eyes were alert.

She could see him bracing for what she had to reveal. Regardless of whether it changes his opinion of her, Robin refused to be selective. Beginning to feel like a cork, she put down her fluted glass. “I’m not who you think I am.”

Nodding, he said, “No one ever is.”

According to what she found online, the police apprehended Cathy and Sofia. Not knowing what was going on, she felt vulnerable. Sofia’s extensive criminal record would typically prevent the authorities from offering a substantial plea deal.

On the other hand, because Robin had the jewelry, she couldn’t be sure how generous the state’s offer might be. Given Sofia's vindictive nature, she would disclose Robin’s involvement out of spite.

Cathy had brushes with the law as well. Though Cathy was flawed, she wasn’t the type to spill her guts. Because of her father’s conviction, or perhaps her aristocratic upbringing, Cathy despised snitches.

That left Lila, and after checking online, Robin found that either the police didn’t know about her or chose not to release her name. Although Robin doubted the police could shake Lila down, she couldn’t guarantee how anyone would react to pressure. She bit her lip before saying, “While I don’t think I’m a suspect, there’s a catch. I did something illegal, and in sticking around, I could wind up spending years in prison.”

The corners of his mouth turned down. “In that case, someone would have to take care of Jessie, and if you are asking, I already accepted the responsibility when I became her godfather.”

Confident he would do that was one thing. Volunteering was another. That made her eyes glow like a lit candle inside a frosted glass. She would have melted if he had put his arms around her right then. “What can I say about you?”

“Very little.”

"What?" Robin could have completed her thought, but there was no point. Given her family, she wasn't used to leaning on someone. By offering to look after Jessie, Logan made his position clear. She wasn't alone unless she chose to be.

"I take commitments seriously."

"When we chatted on the beach, I instantly concluded you were a family man." First impressions are often manipulated, but she sensed that wasn't the case with Logan.

"Come to think of it, what do you mean by sticking around?"

"For everyone involved, I decided not to leave the country." Perhaps because her business failed, she believed that fleeing the country would put it all behind her. Regardless of the reason, when crunch time came, she realized she would rather be in prison than leave Jessie without a country.

"Good people can do bad, all the…"

Though she heard his words, she failed to recognize herself. "Bad people also do bad things."

He warmly smiled. "There's good and bad in everyone. Take the good and move forward. Can you undo what was done?"

Typical male, he shoots for a solution. "No. Well, yes, maybe…"

"Could you be any vaguer?"

"Oh, jeez. I suppose some things can be undone." The bottom line is that she wasn't about to let the girls railroad her. That said, stepping back to make things right might render her predicament moot.

Even before he spoke, his body language made his position clear. “Moments have a way of finding all of us. Life is as simple as that.”

Who says she wants to be found? Many people paint a picture of themselves that they don’t live up to, but Logan wasn’t one of them. It was a case of optimism over realism. “I’m not wrong.”

“How about wrong-ish? Undoing something that doesn’t benefit you demonstrates one’s principle.”

When something helps someone, regardless of its merits, they justify it. For her, it fell under the banner of survival. She felt hijacked by events. “You must understand the old gang tried to con me. My first option was unacceptable. My second option was something I would normally not consider. But given the alternative, it suddenly became acceptable.”

“Did they know you figured out what they were up to?”

“They know now.” While conning them may not have been about the money, it had to be part of the equation. That insight compelled her to wonder if she had joined them because she sensed she would wind up with all the loot.

“They broke their word to you, so you broke your word to them.”

“My mother’s attitude was to join them if you can’t beat them.” Robin did both. Growing up on the street, getting even was an absolute requirement.

“I understand that if everyone around you is cheating at cards, you have a choice: either cheat or leave the game.”

“I could not pick up my chips. So, I played the hand I was dealt.” It became apparent to Robin that she would have to fight for every point she gained.

“Greed causes people to change.”

She paused, as if she had to organize her thoughts. “I didn’t act. I reacted.”

He flashed a sympathetic smile. “All I did was comment about your...”

“Then why do I hear a ‘but’ coming?” She was mildly surprised that understanding didn’t translate into acceptance.

“Now that the crisis is over, I would ask, if right doesn’t matter, what does?”

“I shouldn’t be penalized for being resourceful.” After all, she outsmarted the girls.

His eyes looked glassy. “Then tell me what you consider fair.”

That was a question that hounded her. When things go wrong, people tend to blame themselves. The problem is that they are often correct. “Aside from outconning a con, perhaps nothing.”

Eyes looked thoughtful. “Did outmaneuvering them feel good?”

The other alternative was terrifying. Yet strangely, she felt better traveling to where she is than being here. “It didn’t make me feel worse.”

“Everybody stumbles. What we do afterward is the measurement of our character.”

Her denial was instinctive. But then, denial was her inheritance from her mother. That said, her mother was often wrong. “They force me to play by their rules, and I still won. That has a Hollywood quality to it.”

“I know you. You wouldn’t do anything wrong unless you felt compelled.”

She didn't respond…she couldn't respond. The hypocrisy of that statement lay in the fact that she was both good and bad. "Have you ever been conned?"

He looked at her as if words were unnecessary. "I've been married."

She knew men's limitations. They don't care, 'What makes Sammy run?' All they want to know is how far and how fast. "According to my mother, the only thing that mattered was if you could get away with it."

"Why is that so important to you?"

She accepted it as a truism. Nevertheless, Logan's questioning of the statement tormented her. That was the first crack in her fortified wall. "Because it's something I'm good at."

"Knowing Cathy and Sofia as I do, I suspect you got even by taking something that wasn't theirs. If that's not the case, then no action is needed. However, if I'm right, should it be yours when it didn't belong to them?"

She hadn't thought about that. But greed drowned out everything else. There had to be a line drawn somewhere. If taking expensive jewelry from innocent people isn't on the list of wrong things, you should tear the list up. Losing control of the conversation, she had to regroup. "It's important that Jessie gets an education. And not grow up stupid."

A befuddled expression covered his face. "An education doesn't make you bright…"

She was surprised at his reaction. "You're the closest I'll get to a GED."

"Damn it, your intelligence is one of the things that attracted me." His tone demanded her attention.

She wondered if that was true. Around the educated, she felt socially inadequate. “Jessie needs opportunities I never had. So, you understand, when I was fourteen…”

He jumped in. “Give me a hint. How old were you when your story ended?”

Like most kids growing up in a dysfunctional family, she kept things secret from her peers. Now, she would reveal her upbringing despite its ugly past. While playing with her bracelet, a whiny tone crept into her voice. “My mother said, ‘Selfish brat. May God strike me down if I’m lying. R-o-b-i-n don’t act stupid. A figure like yours is wasted on geometry. You’re old enough to make me proud. Use your God-given body to get from boys whatever you want. Especially with those that like to party the night away…”’

“Yikes. You know why addicts go to meetings?”

Sensing he would answer his question, she kept quiet. Nevertheless, his telling her about addicts is like her telling Einstein about physics.

“Because they feel guilty about…”

“My parents never went.” Although her parents occasionally got clean, she suspected it was because they were short of funds.

“When my father died, my mother sent me to therapy. The counselor asked me an interesting question. It forced me to view my mother in a different light. Now, I’m going to ask you the same question. What would your mother’s version of that sound like if she were here?”

Addiction didn’t just exist in her family; it galloped. She closed her eyes and saw her mother. Once again, she struggled to keep the resentment from her tone. As previously, she spoke in a whiny voice. “Rotten brat, you never listen. R-o-b-i-n, don’t you want to be part of

this family? Girls with a body like yours don't give it away. They sell it. Do your mother proud by bringing home any drugs the boys partied with. Let's do a girl's thing. Share any cash you stole with your mother. That will be our secret."

Almost choking, he said, "This isn't exactly how I thought it would play out…"

Such is the nature of addicts. Someone else's welfare becomes irrelevant. "Lacking a better term, my mother almost 'bastardized me."

"Being your mother, she must have wanted the best for you."

"Who says wanted is good enough? Cutting through the bull of being socially correct, I didn't lose my mother due to substance abuse. I lost her because she was an addict. The scars she left will never go away." Her grief will always be close to the surface. When you are a little kid, the word 'mother' is a substitute for 'God.'

"None of us gets to choose our parents."

"Growing up with an addictive mother is like having an injury that refuses to heal." What a combination, her mother robbed her of her youth, and Aaron stole her innocence. As far as her father, he was a foul-mouthed bastard. Because he acted like a tough guy from the planet Krypton, she found herself drawn to the wrong guys. He must have had an impact on her life in other ways. Too bad it is hard to figure out how a father affects you.

"All I can say is, your mother was different than my mother. How did you turn out so normal?"

"Not according to my mother. She played on my emotions."

"Wait, you're Catholic, and they are known to have guilt."

Something dark existed within her mother. She had forced Robin to do things no mother should. Luckily, Robin refused to become a magnet for guilt. “I’m not talking about having guilt. I’m talking about giving it.”

Logan’s laugh had a painful edge. “Except for the crooks, no one should lose. Let’s remember that winning isn’t everything.”

“According to my mother, winning is the only thing.” Seeing the concern on his face, her head dipped. Unlike before, getting away with stuff no longer gave her that cuddly feeling. Though she felt terrible about it now, what she used to get away with was petty stuff, fun stuff — a blouse here, sunglasses there.

“In a perilous situation, people change. When the threat is over, good people try to return to normal. Don’t let greed rob you of decency.” His compassionate eyes never wavered.

She paused as if trying to figure out what had happened. Apparently, once she decided to join the girls, everything that followed was like a black hole, pulling her in molecule by molecule. “That’s someone else's life. It has never been my life. Regardless, I now have the money for Jessie’s college.”

“I’m Jessie’s godfather. She’s family. No matter what happens with us, I guarantee she’ll have the money to attend a good university even if I must work three jobs.” His tone left no room for confusion.

Until you know someone, you don’t know. His last statement irritated her because it made all her excuses moot. “I hate when you say things like that.”

As if understanding where she was coming from, he said, “You’re supposed to.”

What started as a need to outwit Sofia grew like a monster lurking within. In fairness, acting normal in an abnormal situation isn't normal. "It's hard to figure you out."

"Don't feel bad. Some women never do."

"In retrospect, it's exciting to know I have the money, but not how I acquired it." Suddenly, she realized she wasn't coerced but instead seduced by the money. His logic tied her up in knots. She wondered if all the time she spent scheming compelled her to think about the money, not the ugly details.

She wanted to feel good about her new wealth, but she hadn't. With his insight, the spell was broken. Upon reflection, the girls forced her to view it as a chess match of moves and countermoves. Too bad it was never a game.

In refusing to become a patsy, she ignored everything but the con. However, scrubbing the past never worked for her, nor did compartmentalizing everything. Both blinded her from the big picture.

He held an intense gaze and said, "You should ask yourself if it shouldn't belong to the girls, should it belong to you?"

She resisted asking herself that because she wouldn't like the answer. And of course, her mother believed that one must fight viciously to win. But addicts don't live by the same rules that the rest of us do. "Isn't possession nine-tenths of the law?"

"Undoing whatever you did can be viewed as a new beginning."

It appears her most dangerous enemy was herself. In retrospect, Robin didn't like her transformation. Just like with Aaron, she fell into the abyss. "Along the way, I forgot, when you partner with a crook, it's hard not to become one."

"Does that mean your position has shifted?" Though his eyes were watery, the caring still shone through.

"Because my business failed, I was in the dumps. Beating the girls at their game proved to be a great elixir." His perspective brought her actions back into focus. Apparently, in hoodwinking Sofia, she altered her own mindset. As a result, she victimized the innocent. After drifting into the shadows, somehow, she must find her way back into the light.

"So is doing right. You killed two birds with one stone. You outsmarted the girls and returned everything."

As if thinking aloud, Robin said, "In this instance, it's the same bird being killed twice?"

"Hah?"

"If I return everything, it will undo any harm that the girls' cause. And if I play it right, it will simultaneously cripple the state's case against Lila and me." But was giving up her one shot at becoming wealthy worth the cost of becoming a goody two-shoes? Clearly, what Robin needs is a third option.

"That's an excellent point."

Depending on how you view it, her words lent comfort or discomfort. The problem is that, over time, she began considering the jewelry hers. His Eagle Scout position left her with a

choice. Her chosen path would reveal herself to herself. This can be a beautiful experience or a nightmare. “In retrospect, I did something I shouldn’t have.”

“I’m sorry I missed the part where you said I’m right?” His face lit up.

What the girls forced upon her yesterday, she voluntarily did today. Why did it feel right at the time, yet it feels wrong now? If she knowingly makes the wrong decision, she’s as bad as her selfish mother. “Because of what you said, I have a free-for-all going on in my head.”

Grinning, he asked, “Who’s winning the war?”

“Hopefully, we are.” This episode felt like a freight train rolling down a mountain, out of control. On the bright side, she did win the battle she chose to fight.

“I’m going to need more than three words.”

When she gave him the power to put her life on the right track, she inadvertently gave him more power than she intended. Though his insight was a hard pill to swallow, that was why she loved him. “How about four? I made a mistake.”

“Congratulations, you’re the first person in the history of our country ever to make a mistake.”

“But are you okay with it?” She studied his eyes.

“I’m okay with it if you’re okay with it.” His voice was flat.

Goddamn! By displaying a healthy dose of empathy. He cleverly put the onus on her. Then again, goodness must spring from one’s heart and not be forced upon. “I wanted not to be like those girls in the worst possible way, and I succeeded.”

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

"I love you." She loved how he listened to her while still voicing his opinion. It's the kind of stuff that makes her coffee percolate.

Logan lightheartedly said, "That's me, a sexual turn-on with morals attached."

"Nothing is more embarrassing during a disagreement than the moment I discover I'm wrong." When she tells her daughter she gets ice cream after the meal, Jessie may not like it, but that's the deal they struck. Likewise, being ethical is part of the deal she struck when she hooked up with an honest guy.

"Doing something is always better than doing nothing."

Though he was disappointed in her, he couldn't be more disappointed in her than she was. She had a solid strategy. It's too bad she lost track of the plot. On the other hand, the strong survive criticism while the weak turn to drugs. Trying to extract the positive from what she had done, Robin asked, "Is it possible for a con to have a principle?"

His eyes softened. "That's better than taking Prozac."

He's not asking her to take the blame. He's asking her to fix the problem. Her experience has been that whenever she splits hair, it's because she's knowingly wrong. "You know what my problem is?"

"Problem, singular?" he asked tongue-in-cheek.

She wanted to twist his nose slapstick style. Before Cathy and Sofia thrust themselves into her life, when she got things wrong, at least her heart was coming from the right place. That made her wonder whether her morals had become situational. "Like all children, I'm what my parents created. Sadly, they were who they were."

Penetrating eyes made words unnecessary. “Then it’s about time you install an upgrade.”

She always felt that if you have one foot on the dock and one foot on the boat, you will wind up in the water. “Well, they say insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result.”

“No. Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, knowing the result won’t be different.”

Wow! That’s precisely what her whole messed-up family did. It appears she tried to turn her back on her actions. Thank God it didn’t turn its back on her. “Dear lord, you gave me much to ponder.”

“What else can I say?” his voice trailed off.

“Believe me, you said a lot.” Exposure to gang mentality desensitized her. But then the change we don’t expect hits us the hardest. Someday, she wanted to take her child in her arms and honestly tell her that she had done her best. To do that, she needed a course correction.

“Can I help?”

“It’s something I need to work through on my own.” He saved her twice. Being intent on not losing sight of the big picture, it was now her turn to save herself.

“Look, when we talk to our mate, we are supposed to support them. I did not do that…”

Along the way, she even fell in love with his integrity. After all, it made her a better person. “I like to think my ego could stand up to criticism, especially when it’s coming from the heart.”

“So, what will you do?”

To set her mind straight, she needed to do some soul-searching. “Right now, I’m not prepared to make you a promise I can’t keep…”

“When will you be prepared to make me a promise you can’t keep?” Though he tried to add some levity, his eyes were serious.

No one wants the truth when they aren’t prepared to hear it. Although he was too kind to be blunt, it felt like a veiled warning, complete with the veil. Her manner was warm and fluid. “Don’t worry. I survived my past, and I’ll survive this.”

Chapter 69

The Aaron Situation

If they were to become a family, Logan had to know how she dealt with the Aaron situation. “All I've told Jessie is that her father died in a car accident. I haven’t mentioned what her father had done.”

“Why not?”

A flabbergasted Robin looked at him with narrow eyes. “She’s a kid, and I prefer that she have a life.”

Chuckling, he said, “You made a great start.”

“She needs a male role model.” When she fell for Aaron, she didn’t have a child. Of course, she was so young that what kind of father he would make was barely an afterthought.

Talking with a hangdog expression, “I appreciate that, I do, but I’m looking for love. Not qualifying as a male role model.”

She read the deep strain in his eyes. Though the brothers shared similarities, where it counted most, they were opposites. “Once I got pregnant, I needed the whole enchilada—love, respect, and what kind of father he would be. Looking back, Aaron was a two-dimensional affair that I was better off without. Luckily for us, you check off all the boxes.”

His moist eyes brightened. “Past affairs can be difficult, especially when they involve Aaron…”

“I don’t know if this will help, but Aaron greatly respected you. He credited you for many things, even for calling him peripatetic.” It was a good substitute for the word bum—better than she would have chosen.

“As his little brother, he never paid attention to anything I said. Yet when I met his friends, I heard them repeat things I'd told Aaron. Honestly, I don’t know what to make of that.”

“I guess in separate ways, we must learn how to cope with him.” She prayed that what had pulled them together wouldn’t drive them apart.

Steering away from that thorny subject, “From the talk I had with you on the beach, I sensed you didn’t enjoy living on the edge. Rather, you’re a woman who doesn’t always follow the rules.”

“Well, I don’t mind telling you, by the time we were done talking, I needed the kind of relationship we talked about.” Aaron's popularity among other gang members made her wonder how loyal he was. According to comedian Chris Rock, ‘A man is only as faithful as his options.’

"Do you still love him?"

Back then, she was so young and lost that she wasn't sure what love was about. Regardless, does anyone ever forget a loved one? "On some level, perhaps, but I never loved him like us. With you, I feel good about the relationship. With Aaron, I felt insecure."

His eyes studied her. "Why?"

"You two are as different as daylight and darkness. If I hadn't slept with Aaron, he would have burned rubber on his way out the door." Like he kinda had when he discovered she was pregnant.

"Then you need to pick a man carefully." A softness entered his eyes.

She considered his statement, but what did she have to consider? Robin never understood love. All she could do was feel it. "That's what I'm doing, or rather just did, sweetie."

"I feared you would never say yes." His voice was upbeat.

"And I'm only slightly drunk." Robin kidded. Possibly, Lila was right about her still running. With Logan filling her heart with song, she finally stopped running.

"I consider you my best friend, and I have never had a best friend."

"A guy like you must have." Unlike Aaron, she feels comfortable with Logan, and in marriage, comfort counts.

"You're not hearing me. I never *had* a best friend before."

Giggling, she said, "There's nothing greater I could aspire to than to be part of a loving family."

Chapter 70

The Best Man for the Job is Jessie

"When do you want to get married?"

"What about sending out invitations and renting a hall?" She let her thoughts swirl. For a guy, marriage is simple. Girls dream about it in their childhood. When the big dream comes, it's everything.

"We aren't love-starved, teenagers. Let's make it simple. Invite a few friends and marry here."

Despite her head being in the clouds, Robin realized Logan was right and nodded. Aside from Jessie and Lila, who was there for her to invite?

"This brings me to a touchy subject. When one of my friends got married, he invited his ex-wife to the wedding. Do you think I should invite Karen?"

"As your wife-to-be, I refused to sign a permission slip." Though at times uncompromising, that quality made her who she is.

"You're a tough nut to crack."

She stared. Her face left no doubt regarding her position. "You argue, and you're not getting laid tonight."

While laughing, he said, "I wasn't thinking about that."

Fat chance. "Now that I'm with a guy, I need a bunch of outfits. Jessie will want to come. Join us. This way, you can keep an eye on her. Perhaps I'll even find some spicy lingerie for nighttime."

"I hate shopping."

"This isn't an audience participation part, you're coming," Robin joked.

While grinning, Logan said, "From my experience, when in department stores, women should be required to strap on a GPS tracking device because every time I turn around, they are gone."

"That's why God gave women cell phones."

"But Jessie changes the ringer on your cell so often, how would you know it's your phone?" Though Robin didn't like Jessie messing with her ringer, Jessie got a big kick out of doing that, so she tolerated it.

"By the way, where are you taking me shopping?"

"The next town has a mall."

"Why, not this town?"

"The store here has all the panache of a dollar store without the fanfare."

While laughing, she thought, it's like coming out of a frigid winter; flowers suddenly bloom in spring. Her happiness could arrive around the same corner. "Who's your best man?"

"Instead of having to choose among my friends, unless she's your maid of honor, I'll ask Jessie."

"You see, you are a sweetie." His kindness comes from within, and she hopes he never changes.

"You have to stop calling me that."

Surprised she was this hyper, she acted as if she had not heard him. "It will be fun to watch her organize your bachelor party."

"I think I'll skip that."

"Smart move, go straight for the ice cream." Though it came six years after Jessie was born, Robin would have what she always dreamed of—a loving, close-knit family.

"Nothing improves the flavor of scotch like root beer with strawberry ice cream, covered with chocolate sauce and whipped cream."

Robin had told Logan about the ice cream Jessie had at *IHOP.* Just thinking about that drink, her face crunched up. "Don't forget the nuts, sprinkles, and a cherry on top."

"Not to mention all the kid movies my friends and I will watch."

"And with Jessie taken, I'll ask Lila." That's provided she didn't break bad and cooperated with the authorities. If that's the case, the wedding may never take place.

"Wasn't she a close friend from your days in that Crossroads Gang?"

"She's a nice lady." Having a guy to share things with makes her feel complete.

"From what I heard, she's a battle-tested warrior queen."

"Until Cathy's and Sofia's arrest, they hung in the same gutter." Though Robin should have tossed her phone, she didn't. Robin assumed Cathy had decided Sofia would not give the cops her name. This left her wondering if this was the proverbial calm before the storm.

"I look forward to meeting her," Logan said.

"Around Cathy and Sofia, she tends to be quiet." That struck her as odd because when she and Lila were alone, she tended to talk.

As if knowing what Robin was thinking, he said, "Quiet people are talkative around the right people."

"Stick around. I want to show you my mother's wedding dress." Robin had Lila ship her clothes, including her mother's wedding dress, when she fled to Logan's after Aaron died. Though her mother never got married, they were engaged. Her father had no objection to her getting a wedding dress, provided she paid for it. She never got to wear the dress because the good-for-nothing walked out on her when her mother told him she was pregnant.

Robin opened the front door. "Jessie, would you bring me the white box from my closet?" Being overwhelmed, she hadn't given proper thought to wearing her mother's dress. Because of their strained relationship, Robin now wondered if that was a good idea.

Jessie comes back, holding the elf. “So, the elf doesn’t have any magical powers.”

An excited Robin forgot about the elf. Planning to use it next Christmas, Robin had placed it on a shelf in her closet. “I’m sorry you found out this way.”

“You’ve been moving the elf around every night after I went to bed.”

“I’m afraid so.” Despite contemplating telling Jessie, Robin’s eyes began to well up.

Jessie’s cheeks tightened. “So, you lied.”

She loves the innocence of children. “Kids like to believe in Santa and his elves.”

“So, there’s no Santa either. You brought me the bicycle?” Her voice cracked slightly.

“Like the Easter Bunny. It’s a nice story,” Logan said.

Her eyes widened in comprehension. “There’s no Easter Bunny?”

What adults often do when they try to recover from putting their foot in it is to make the situation worse. “It’s more like a little white lie. Stories like Santa, Easter Bunny, and Tooth Fairy allow children’s imagination to flower.”

Reacting to the sheer weight of what Jessie discovered, she sat heavily in a chair opposite them. Looking like a kid on Christmas morning, having unwrapped a large box only to find socks, “There’s no Tooth Fairy. I lost my gift giver, candy supplier, and money maker.”

Though it was laughable, Robin hadn’t laughed. Logan did. Robin said, “You aren’t helping.”

“Sorry.” His tone became serious.

“Some kids in school said they don’t exist. So, I sorta knew.” Jessie wouldn’t meet her mother’s eyes.

"May I give you a hug?" She got up, braced her leg on Jessie's thigh, and leaned in. Hugging her until Jessie squealed.

"Your leg feels like 1,000 pounds, Mommy."

Robin removed her leg and said, "I didn't tell you, sweetheart, because I wanted you to discover that from your friends."

"Jessie's classmates did tell her. She believed her mother over them," Logan said.

Chapter 71

Having a Powwow with Jessie

Two days later, with the landscape dusted with thin snowflakes, Robin wanted to discuss a few minor things with Logan. Her calm was interrupted when she saw a woman telegraphing outrage. Logan was unusually constrained.

Robin wanted to hear what was taking place, but the distance and the wind direction worked against her. She watched as the lady stormed back to her red sports car and yelled, “You wouldn’t leave her if I told you to.”

Because they were roughly five yards away, Logan elevated his voice, yet spoke calmly, “It’s not important that I leave her; what’s important is that you leave.”

As Logan approached, she said, “Wow! What was that about?”

“My ex just discovered I’m engaged.” Strangely, his tone was the same when saying good morning.

“An ex-girlfriend?” She could envision an ex thinking they would eventually get back together, being angry at Logan.

He gave a wry laugh. “I wish. That was my ex-wife. Reminding me why she’s my ex.”

“You said she was cute with a pleasant personality.” That woman was a self-righteous, meddlesome bitch. Robin would hate to hear what unpleasant sounded like.

“I said I didn’t miss on Karen’s personality. I missed on her as a person. You witness her version of; I am the ruling emperor.” Logan headed to the house, and Robin followed.

“No one told me that when we got engaged, your ears were sold separately.” What kind of hair is he splitting?

“When Karen was like that, all arguing did was fuel her anger. I was tempted to tell her I’m also adopting Jessie and watch the Supreme Leader have a conniption.” His face turned into a devious grin.

The two women he loved were continents apart. Her heart told her one thing. Her logic told her that, given he no longer cared what Karen thought, getting in the middle of them was unwise. Therefore, she chose to steer clear of the conflict. “At least she didn’t bring her dog.”

“Sweetie?” he said. You could see vapor rising from his mouth.

Surprise covered her face. “You like the dog?”

“That’s his name. Why do you think I hate being called sweetie as much as I do?”

Caught off guard, she said, “Oh! Do you want to talk about what just happened?”

“When she was bitchy during our marriage, I didn’t pay attention. I’m not about to start now that we’re divorced.”

Bringing up what she wanted to go over now seemed petty. As Logan entered the house, Robin yelled to Jessie, “I want you to join me for a powwow.”

As agreed, the conversation would be between mother and daughter so Jessie could talk freely. Several minutes later, Jessie comes out wearing her heavy coat to ward off the winter chill. Icicles dangled from the porch. She sits in a rocking chair. “Uncle Logan is home a lot lately. You always worked. Does Uncle Logan get paid for today?”

“Logan took vacation time.”

“Oh. Does Uncle Logan get paid for today?”

Robin elaborated, “When you work at a regular job, you get a vacation.”

“I didn’t know that. Does Uncle Logan get paid for today?”

A smile splashed on her face. “Yes.”

“Wow! Then can we go out later and have ice cream?”

Realizing that when she had financial problems, they didn’t eat out much, she suppressed a laugh. “We have ice cream here?”

“But I like going out.” Jessie took a sip of her hot cocoa, which was topped with tiny marshmallows. Logan had made it right before she joined Robin.

“I’ll think about it. Before we discussed what I wanted to chat about, I saw a bar of soap on the floor after you took a bath. You must start…”

"Don't blame me. I never touched it." Jessie swung her legs like a pendulum.

Again, Robin suppressed a giggle, "You took a bath yet never touched the soap?"

"Nope, not me." Her face turned into a pout.

What did she do? Spit in the air and jump through it. However, having a more pressing matter to discuss, Robin chose to move on. "Uncle Logan is very nice, isn't he?"

"The best." Her lips were chocolatey in the corners.

"Would you like to stay here longer?" The icy wind caressed her cheeks. Cold nipped at her nose. Even Frosty the Snowman wouldn't go out on a day like this. After their conversation, Robin would go in.

"Yes-s-s-s-s-s." Jessie smiled.

"Would you like to live here?" Like a lawyer, she only asked questions she was confident about.

"If I don't have to go fishing."

People say children can't focus. They have an uncanny ability to zero in on their concerns quicker than any adult Robin has ever met. "How about if we both stayed here permanently?"

Honey-colored eyes beamed, "That rocks."

"You know I love Logan." She wasn't sure if she said too much or too little.

"Me too." Her rosy cheeks widened.

"I love him differently." Though she didn't know what Jessie could grasp, Robin felt compelled to voice that distinction.

"You mean like a husband."

"Do you like that idea?" She never ceases to be amazed at how sharp today's kids are.

Her eyes narrowed slightly. "Will he be my daddy?"

"What do you think about that?" Though Robin knew the answer, you can never be entirely sure what's going on in her head. Besides, it's always best for Jessie to reach her conclusions rather than being told.

A grin covered her face. "Who doesn't want a daddy?"

Robin tried not to cry, but tears rolled down a path carved out by earlier ones. Even if she just liked Logan, for Jessie's sake, she would contemplate marriage. "He loves you and wants to adopt you. In other words, he will become your real daddy. So, you can call him daddy now if you like."

"I like."

"Well, we'll have roots." Robin's eyes were clouded. Then, she wasn't used to being this happy.

"If that means we stay here, I like roots." Jessie's face brightened.

"And how about Logan?"

"I like the way you dress him."

Instinctively, she wondered if Jessie thought she was a mother to everyone. Then, Robin remembered how observant Jessie could be.

"Another thing, have you noticed how messy his bed is in the morning?"

"No-o-o." Once more, Robin was surprised.

"Your bed is so neat. It's like you haven't slept in it. Why is his bed so messy, Mommy?"

Though she loved making love to him, it became more about love than heat. That was when she knew she belonged here. “I don’t k-n-o-w. First chance I get, I will speak to him.”

“Don’t tell him where it came from. I want him to like me.”

“Like you, he loves you.” She couldn’t wait to tell Logan. In a way, wanting to share had already made them a family, and she loves that feeling.

“Can we celebrate by eating out?”

Regardless of his ex-wife’s infidelity, she admired Logan's trust in her. Trust should be the cornerstone of any relationship. “Of course. Oh, I would like to add…”

“C’mon, we gotta celebrate.”

Chapter 72

The Phone Call

A morning chill hung in the air as winter inched closer to spring. The sun was breaking through the fog, and she watched as clouds swept over the mountain top. A gust of wind cut through the trees. While Logan, who understood computers as if born into a family of geeks, worked on a problem, Robin went out on the porch for a cold wave of fresh air.

Waking up many times last night, she felt like a nocturnal animal. She stared at a panoramic view of the towering mountain range peeking through the darkness. Still, there's nothing so breathtaking that it's worth getting up this early to watch. She was tired of being afraid. What grabbed her attention was her decision to stay. That only intensified her fear that Sofia would eventually rat her out.

As she gazed across the crisp terrain, Robin heard an air raid siren. Then she realized Jessie must have been fooling around with her phone again. While fishing it out of her heavy robe, she thought no call at this godly hour was ever good. She began to ignore the call but thought better of it. Putting it on speaker, she felt as if she were talking into space. “Hello.”

“Oh, good, you still have your phone. I couldn’t find your number. Suddenly, I woke up, remembering where I put it. You know me. I tend to lose everything. I even lost my virginity,” the caller said.

Initially, the voice sounded distant, as if talking to someone overseas. Then she recognized her childhood friend’s voice. “At our age, that’s common.”

“Not to lose it, I put your cell number somewhere safe. I called as soon as I remembered where.”

Since there was a possibility that the police knew Lila was involved, Robin resisted calling her. Besides, it was less complicated for Lila to call her. Wary, she gulped her coffee before speaking in a restrained tone. “I’m fine. What’s going on with you?”

“Hey! I’m not sure you're aware of what happened. The police nabbed Cathy and Sofia, and this time, it’s more than just a flesh wound. They will spend a long time behind bars.”

“Before we get into that, I want to know how you’re doing.” Robin searched the internet for updates on Lila. There weren’t any.

“Don’t worry about me. I’m working for my brother. I even joined a bowling team.”

Though Robin trusted Lila, she was careful not to admit she had done anything illegal, especially robbing the bank. From her gang days, she knew that pressure often works where

evidence fails. “I never understood that game. What do you get out of hanging around a bowling alley?”

“Men.”

“That’s the best reason I ever heard. But you dated plenty of men.” Since only two girls were chasing her in the car, Robin hoped Lila had left them in time to avoid capture.

“Hopping from town to town, all I had were short affairs. Or I broke up with the louse.”

“Why?” Expecting to split what she got from fencing the jewelry, Robin plotted to exchange phone numbers with Lila.

“In a short while, a girl knows who she is dealing with. I wasn’t willing to put up with their crap.”

Not staying in one place long enough to grow roots, that’s what you get. “You’re an amazing survivor.”

“If you can move on, do so.”

“History does seem to have an obnoxious habit of repeating itself.” Her regression didn’t make sense. Unfortunately, many things in Robin’s life never made sense.

“Like indigestion, given time, it will pass,” Lila said.

“Yeah, one more thing to bury.” It was fast and destructive, like a tornado. Fortunately, the calm that followed, along with Logan’s help, allowed her to regain control.

“We were once good friends.”

“I like to think we are still best friends.” Their friendship, rooted in need, quickly turned into fun.

"How did you deduce what Sofia was planning?"

Knowing Sofia's playbook, Robin would be more likely to accept time travel than to accept Sofia changing. "When Sofia agrees, it's a lie that hasn't occurred yet. Besides, if Sofia wants to win, she must learn the rules of the game."

"Why didn't you tell me what you thought the girls were up to?"

Cathy lives by her rules. But she has a history of bending them when it's not in her interest. "The way you felt, I didn't think you would believe that of Cathy."

"Truthfully, I was surprised when Cathy didn't stop Sofia. Aside from you, there's not another girl in that gang I would trust." Her response was subdued.

"Some were trustworthy." Not one to fear, she had a good relationship with gang members who didn't act as if might makes right.

"Well, you're the one I choose to tell me the ones I can trust."

Screwing people has always been Sofia's holy grail. It should be carved on her tombstone. "When I helped you limp back to my office, I spotted enough stuff Sofia planted in the attic to conclude she was setting me up. The only thing I didn't know was whether Cathy would stop her?"

"Again, you outconned her."

"It's my frequent 'fool her' miles plan."

Lila laughed. "Knowing you, what was your plan B?"

“If I were proven wrong before they discovered what I did, I wanted to secretly meet with you for lunch and return the stuff to you.” Fearing Sofia, this was the safest way to undo what she did.

“You would make a great profiler.”

Gang life, she understood. Especially Sofia, who was genetically engineered that way. “Sadly, Sofia only feels alive when she’s turning the screws.”

“Well, you’re public enemy number one on her list. She would throw you to the lions if she had her way.”

“Providing after she's done, there’s anything left to throw.” Unfortunately, Sofia has a long memory.

“Even if you die, she’ll still be angry. Her anger will stop only upon her death.”

“You just gave me another reason to pray she doesn’t stay angry.” If not for her hate, that nutjob would have no personality.

“So, you let your feelings dictate.”

“When relationships are involved, what else is there?” While beauty may gracefully age, our basic character tends to intensify.

“You put them in a foul mood yet again. However, having your enemies in prison is preferred.” Lila half-laughed.

“Because of the positive feedback, things made sense that weren’t.” Logan brought her back down to earth.

“Well, I no longer have to be concerned with Cathy scheming to have me rejoin her.”

"It's been years since I had to manage a problem that Sofia created." Robin would breathe more easily if Sofia couldn't breathe at all. Childish, yes, but equally satisfying.

"For me, going straight is a work in progress."

To bring that up out of nowhere, Robin knew it had to weigh on Lila's thoughts. Finding a job with responsibilities was when Robin began to feel good about herself. "How does that make you feel?"

"Starting over is rough."

"Like a cold, in time, it passes." Thanks to Jessie wanting to visit Logan, it turned out to be the best decision Robin didn't make.

"Let's hope you're right."

What hovered in Robin's thoughts was that while she was done with Sofia, Sofia wasn't done with her. She thought there wasn't a possibility, but asked, nevertheless. "Is there a chance in hell they'll forget about what I did?"

"Don't sweat it. I remember you once telling me you wanted to find that one big score and walk away from that life…"

"Please view that as a typo." In her teens, Robin wanted a house so huge that it was in two zip codes. Having a child ended that.

"I noticed you changed, and for the better."

Focusing on one of several items which lately dominated her thoughts, "You have no idea how often I began to call you..."

"You weren't sure if I was apprehended. Even if I were, I would never cooperate."

"Thanks. I can't get past the girls giving me Sophie's Choice." Sofia is like the climate. You can't change it.

As if understanding how Robin's mind worked, Lila said, "Cathy and I looked at the evidence. All they had was hearsay. That's why we didn't think the FBI would have pursued it."

"Though I agree, I couldn't rely on that outcome because of how it would affect Jessie." Given current technology, Cathy could eventually track them down. So, once she took the jewelry, leaving the country became the perfect solution. While staying at Logan's, that's when reality settled in.

"If you had asked, I would've helped."

It could be pride. Or perhaps, having been alone all these years, she wasn't used to asking for help. Regardless, "I'll have to remember that."

"So, how's Jessie?"

"She's doing fine." What kept going through her mind was that Logan came to her rescue twice. Without him, they could have become two women without a country.

"You did an excellent job with her. Just like you, she's down to earth."

The oxymoron is, "Though all parents want to spoil their kids, they don't want their kids to be spoiled."

"I enjoyed the time I spent with her. It made me think about having children."

A wave of pride swept through Robin. That made her feel that Jessie was exceptional. "I gather you walked away unscathed."

"I was never afraid to stand up to them," Lila said.

"We are not the same. Truthfully, Sofia carrying a handgun terrifies me. I guess I'm a scaredy cat." That made her feel small. Conversely, those who aren't scared often die young.

"Not so fast. I recognize courage when I see it. You acted despite being terrified. That makes you brave."

Considering she never viewed it that way, it made Robin feel good. After all, who doesn't want to be brave? "Ever been convicted?"

"My lawyer always beat it on appeal," Lila's tone sounded amused.

Robin would have laughed. However, she sensed it was true. Lila must have retained her older cousin. Everyone in the neighborhood knew Jazon was a great trial attorney. "Try to keep that record intact."

"Knowing my brother would welcome me made it an easy decision," Lila said.

"And you're willing to move on?" Not feeling she had a choice, Robin found the decision easy, but making the change was difficult.

"Hooking up with them was a stupid mistake."

The truth is that those psychos wouldn't allow anyone into their twisted world. That is, except for each other. "Do you know how difficult it is to make smart mistakes?"

Laughing, Lila said, "I don't blame you for what you did."

As far as Sofia was concerned, Robin considered herself an expert in sleight of hand. Too bad Logan was right. It wasn't hers to keep. "I don't like being pressured. My only choice was to wait for my chance."

"If I had a daughter like Jessie, I would do anything to keep her safe. I'm convinced that wanting money for Jessie's college was the deciding factor in joining us."

"About the money. I might surprise you." Once she talked with Logan, Robin knew how it must end.

As if understanding how her mind worked, Lila said, "So, you think you can fix it."

"I prefer not to lose track of what I'm playing for." She saw the small picture and the big picture. Family life has always been her mothership.

"So, you now have a purpose."

She had her share of challenges, but none like this. To her amazement, she found it hard to let go of the darkness of greed. Knowing what had to be done yet not doing it kept her in limbo.

She wasn't sure what she hated the most, the guilt she felt for what she had done or her decision to return it. Robin was caught at the intersection of greed and morals. It was the most annoying thing she had ever experienced. Like most people, she didn't just want to know she did the right thing. She wanted to feel it. At that moment, she decided to place all her chips on black. "Just keep an eye on the internet."

"By the look of things, the investigation petered out."

She had the police trying to recover the jewelry, the media in her rearview mirror, and Logan by her side. "It's coming back in vogue with a holy plot twist."

"The robbery does have a Gothic overtone."

"Funny, I wasn't scared until after I got away with it." But then she became so fixated on the money that it crowded out everything else. It wasn't until afterward that she had time to think.

"But is he worth it?"

That question made it obvious how well Lila knew her. She wondered how being with someone could be that important, but "He is to me."

"You have always been a romanticist. Hopefully, this time, it's the right guy."

"Do you think the girls will give up my name?" The unknown frightened her since she was no longer leaving the country.

"Don't worry about Sofia talking."

"It may not happen immediately, but hopefully, her world will soon explode." When that happens, she wants to be around, but at a safe distance.

"I have some good news," Lila said.

"Define good."

"If Sofia talks, she will swiftly meet her soon."

"Why?" The more they chatted, the more comfortable she was saying things.

"Shortly after parting company with them, I let it be known to Cathy that if they give up either of us, I will reveal a particular job to the authorities. There's no statute of limitations on premeditated murder. Cathy will do what she must to ensure Sofia keeps her yap shut."

A vindictive Sofia could throw everyone under the bus, including herself. "It's never good to be a witness. How about your criminal past? Aren't you putting yourself at risk?"

"Not including this heist in the last two years, I conned conmen. I doubt any of them would go to the authorities. And with you returning everything, even if Sofia talks, knowing you, I don't have much to fear."

"By opening up that can of worms, what makes you think they won't charge you along with Cathy as accomplices?" Robin assumes impulsive Sofia is the one who killed. She even bragged about that when she pulled a gun on Robin in her office.

"Don't fret. Luckily, I was hospitalized recovering from a bleeding ulcer when Sofia killed a security guard."

"That's the perfect alibi." A bleeding ulcer sounded serious. That's another reason not to return to a life of crime.

Robin thought about how foolish Sofia was for mentioning that she had killed a security guard. But Sofia is a narrow-minded bully who could never have imagined anyone having the balls to testify against her.

However, if Robin were apprehended, this information would lend her the power to strike a plea deal. Had crinkled-eyed Sofia understood the significance of what she revealed, she would have joyfully emptied the weapon into Robin.

"Not surprisingly, the killing took place shortly after Sofia was released from prison."

As far back as elementary school, Sofia would torture small animals, so the progression was natural. "She has always been loopy, so how could anyone detect a difference?"

"Good point," Lila said.

It felt as if she were visiting Sofia after dark. Having proof that Sofia had wasted a guy lent Robin emotional security. “Why did you also protect me?”

“The news reported they found Cathy’s and Sofia’s stuff scattered about your office. In contrast, they found nothing of mine. Not even the tissues I remembered tossing in your wastepaper basket.” It was the tissues Lila used in Robin’s office after she injured her foot.

“I like you.” The affection for one another healed the separation of time.

“It appears we both ran up a bill regarding our friendship. If you ever return to the States, let me know. I would love to see you and Jessie again.”

“Why do you think I left the country?”

“When it comes to protecting Jessie, you’re like a momma bear.”

“You’ll see us shortly.” Robin was finally on the right path.

“Why?”

“Because that guy you asked about, we’re getting married.” Maybe if Lila hooks up with someone, all four could meet socially.

“Congrats.”

“Considering how my relationship with Aaron went, I feel uneasy.” But Logan has a way of opening little pockets in her. She hadn’t felt this way towards a guy before.

“Then why get married?”

Because she and Jessie love him, and the rest are details. “He fills my heart. On top of that, he’s hot…”

“How hot?” Her tone sounded amusingly curious.

“He excites me more than sizzling bacon.” She’s not marrying him because she desires to be with him. She's marrying him because she can’t imagine life without him.

“Ah, yes, bacon, your temple of health. You could do worse.”

“Newsflash, I often had.” Neither of them ever had anything close to a family.

“It’s a small affair—just a few friends. When the date is set, I would love for you to stay over with us,” she said, her eyes welling up.

“I’ll be honored. What continents are you on?”

A mural of emotions spread across her face. “I live roughly an hour from Oshkosh.”

“Why did you settle around here?”

“I needed good cheese,” she joked.

“Then, we’ll be seeing each other a lot.”

“Not knowing anybody here, I’m searching for a maid of honor. Any idea where I could find one?” She was delighted that things were beginning to settle into a routine. Believing that a town's flavor is shaped by its residents, Robin wanted to know all about its people. That’s why she plans to introduce herself to her neighbors when it gets warmer.

“I’ll be thrilled to give you away,” Lila’s tone bordered on sarcasm.

Chapter 73

The Heist

Despite the weather bureau's forecast of a late winter storm rolling down from Canada, Robin felt optimistic. A distant wind was supposed to gradually push a thick bank of snow clouds across the Midwest.

“You can take my car,” Logan said.

“Why would I want a keyless device that is five times the size of my key?” Robin was in the kitchen enjoying her morning coffee.

“Your sedan is a time capsule.”

“It should survive one more trip.” She also inherited the car from her employer, Allen Rogers, upon his death. Though it was old, it never broke down on her.

Believing there was always a third option, she searched for one that left her as happy as the box holders. But that proved to be a fool's folly. While talking to Lila, her ethics finally pushed past her greed.

“Well, have a good trip.”

“Oh, since we’re all living here, I grabbed this statue when I put the stuff in my car. It came from my shop. Upon my return, I’ll find a place in the living room. Don’t you love it?” She decided to add a touch of her character to the place. The clay figure was about two feet high. Though she didn’t think it was smart to take it with her, she loved it too much to leave it behind.

“I didn’t know you were religious.” The serene setting is a mother sitting on the ground, cradling her loving child.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s Mary and the baby Jesus.”

“It’s a Navajo Indian holding her child,” she said with attitude.

Laughing, he said, “If you’re wondering why I said that. I also am wondering.”

Staring into the morning mist, she approached her car. The blanket of fog reminded her of a graveyard. She heard a vehicle before she saw it turn into the property. As its headlights filtered through the fog, she realized it was a police car. Wishing she could magically vanish, she stood there frozen in position. Her muscles tightened, and her breathing became labored.

As he approached, his frame looked bear-like. He removed his sunglasses, though it was mysterious to her why he had them on in the first place. Her downcast eyes grew watery, and his

face blurry. Adrenaline shot through her like a bazooka. Pushing her feelings aside, she greeted him with a perky smile. “May I help you, officer?”

Close up, his massive build, along with a mop of sandy blond hair, made him look like a corn-fed bruiser. “Are you Robin…”

“Yes,” muscles tense. She told herself there was no rush to act—wrong again. This episode would have been in her rearview mirror in another hour or two.

While he continued to study her, seconds ticked off. Then, as if flicking a switch, he smiled broadly, “I’m Logan’s friend Larry. Congratulations, you’re marrying a great guy.”

“Thanks,” she said as she lifted her head. Her features softened, and his amber eyes now appeared gentler. She found that there is something about a guy’s name that ends in 'y' or 'ie' that sounds friendly.

“Is he in the house?” In the distance, a train blew its whistle.

“He’s in the Kitchen.” With that scary encounter, she was determined more than ever not to delay the inevitable.

“Nice meeting you at last.” Larry then headed toward the house.

Leaving Logan to look after Jessie, she swung her legs into the car and shut the door. She traveled about an hour southwest and bought boxes and packing material. She cleaned everything earlier in the week, ensuring no incriminating evidence remained.

Cathy was right. There was lots of fine jewelry and, to her surprise, oodles of cash—more cash than she suspected would be claimed. She even discovered what appeared to be a pricey

coin collection featuring our presidents. Not to mention stacks of important papers. She placed the bagged items into two decent-sized boxes using heavy latex gloves and Styrofoam.

Despite Lila's assurance, she didn't trust Sofia. That's why she included a letter in one of the boxes. Labeled that box, 'Open me first.' With Logan's help, the letter contained a couple of sentences that, if presented convincingly, would make Lila's and Robin's culpability questionable.

With her thoughts on the spin cycle, she drove along dirt roads dotted by family farms with rolls of hay, rusty tractors in the fields, and decayed wooden barns. Though she was a small-town girl, she never lived in a one-horse town.

She purposely parked in a shopping strip a short walk from a UPS store. Before leaving the car, she slipped into a simple, baggy black dress. Then, she added a long wig and donned mirrored sunglasses.

Also, she wore a heavy, frayed parka that she had bought at a thrift shop. Its puffy texture further concealed her shape. The entire disguise made her unrecognizable and look as fat as an Italian sausage. Dollar-store bracelets clanked like wind chimes. Fake diamond earrings dangled.

She placed the boxes on a foldable platform. After filling out the information, including a fake return address, she approached the clerk, fidgeting with her bracelet before paying in cash. Then, she returned the cart to the trunk.

Next, she drove to a Goodwill drop-off and disposed of her outfit. She leaned against the car's driver's side window and closed her eyes. This simple task left her feeling that the universe had realigned itself, restoring her faith that everything would be okay.

As she drove back, the sun dipped behind a cluster of dense snow clouds. They were gliding across the sky, in tight alignment. Trees swayed in the wind, and snow floated through the air.

Suddenly, the barometric pressure dropped. In no time, the sky exploded. Swirls of snow appeared in front of her headlights. Thick flakes transformed the black asphalt into a picturesque white landscape.

Though she hated driving in the snow, she loved the contrast it brought ahead of her. Suddenly, light streamed through the heavens, and the sun's rays bounced off the snow-covered thoroughfare. The road sparkled like hundreds of tiny prisms guiding her way.

It was as if the storm had reconfigured her world. Robin not only wanted to do the right thing, but she also wanted to feel that she had. Unsurprisingly, she now felt it. Sometimes, and maybe many times, things have a way of working out for the best.

Although the statute of limitations wouldn’t run out for years, she effectively circumvented the authorities' hold over her. It was comforting to know she had gone through what she had and somehow emerged better off.

Coming full circle, her facial muscles relaxed, her eyes danced, and her anxiety eased. Giving her peace she hadn’t felt since this episode began. A wide, Zen-like grin creased her face. She was returning, free to enjoy a great life.

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The bank received the boxes the following week. Upon reading the letter inside, the gray-haired woman cautiously brushed away the Styrofoam and peeked into a bag. Her deep lines instantly softened.

Catching Miss McBride's expression, Gates stopped what he was doing and rushed over. "What?"

Her recessed eyes brightened, revealing the friendly smile of a grandmother everyone wanted. "I think it's all here."

"What's all here?"

Reading the printed letter, "Kindly accept our apology. Though we didn't have a good day, the law did. We have returned everything we have. Since we don't know the individual box holders, it's a one-size-fits-all apology.

"So that you know, they forced us to help. We always intended to outsmart the crooks and undo the harm they inflicted. Sorry. It took longer than we expected. Signed, Embarrassed." Then, the woman poured a handful of pieces onto her desk.

Gates's head bobbed. "Is that what I think it is?"

"That's what the sender says."

"How would we know who gets what?"

"Boss, let the police ferret it out. You need to call them."

He paced as if walking off the rush, then turned and said, "This is a storybook ending."

Chapter 74

Prison

Wearing an orange jumpsuit, they stood in the prison yard. It was equipped with high gray concrete walls, spiraling barbed wire, and lookout towers. Cathy turned to Sofia. “The news reported that someone anonymously returned everything to B & E National.”

“Do you think that two-bit swindler suddenly developed a conscience?” Sofia asked with an attitude.

“Don’t you hate people with morals?” Without a hairstylist, Cathy’s hair lost its stunning red highlights.

The cloudless sky was the color of water with drops of blue ink added. “I’m not opposed to taking advantage of those suckas who act like a Girl Scout. In giving it more thought...”

“I know what you are thinking.” Sofia’s life is laced with paranoia. Cathy wondered why she would waste time seeking the truth when she was good at creating self-serving lies.

“Wouldn’t you?”

She was surprised there was all that cash. Then, it was rumored that the bank had shady clients. Facts are stubborn things. “$360,000 in cash disagrees with you.”

In an unladylike fashion, she snorted. “That doesn’t make sense.”

“It must, to her.” Too bad a law-abiding society is Sofia’s enemy. Not that Cathy doesn’t cross the line. However, when she did, it was out of necessity.

“Okay. What does that sound like to you?”

“A guy.” Despite joining them in the bank’s job, Cathy never questioned Robin’s integrity. She admires people who get into trouble for the right reason, and Robin has always been at the top of that list.

“More like a sugar daddy.” A light breeze ruffled her hair.

“Robin’s mind doesn’t work like ours. Don’t you recall that her only concern was money for Jessie's college? Under all that armor, Robin is a romanticist.” She gave a low whistle of admiration.

“After what happened to her at sixteen, one would hope she wised up.”

Though Cathy hates to admit it, in her heart, “Robin is still a teenager. And the world is a better place for it.”

“I don’t see it,” Sofia said.

“Why, I’m not surprised?” Although Sofia likes winning, she hates losing even more.

"It has crazy written all over it."

To return everything revealed her character. "There are those that would agree with you…"

"But you disagree. Because you weren't happy, you gave marriage a shot. The relationship became rocky when Paul complained that you didn't share. That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard."

That's perceptive, especially for Sofia. According to Paul, the flaw is that marriage may initially bring happiness, but the ecstatic high eventually wears off. After giving it thought, he was right. That euphoric moment was just that, a ripple in time. Cathy achieves the same rush by occasionally hopping into bed with a guy for the first time. "How do you know that?"

"Not often, but sometimes, when you get wasted on my drugs, you talk."

"You remembered?" The more Cathy thought about it, the more she realized Sofia hadn't forgotten because it infuriated her. Blinded by rage is a powerful force. This time, her venom was directed at a man she barely knew.

"I remember everything."

"It's ironic that you boast about thinking outside the box. Whereas marriage taught me that happiness lies inside the box." Like her father, Cathy didn't understand love or that mushy stuff. What she understood was wealth and all its trappings. She thought it was unfair of Paul to judge her for not giving what she didn't have. Too bad he needed that.

"Paul was no saint. All you ever had was an occasional one-night stand. Where's the harm?"

“And that’s the straw that broke the camel’s back.” Because of her father, she enjoyed sex with different partners rather than settling for the humdrum lifestyle of a perennial mate.

“What if he didn’t ask for a divorce?”

“I married him till death do us part.” The more she became aware of what marriage was about, the more she realized that permanence was a mistake for her. Whereas Paul favored closeness, Cathy had none to give.

Minus Paul, she had never been with a guy who truly loved her. She saw the glow in his eyes when they talked, the joy he exuded during their weekly walk. It was as if she were the only girl in his life. The oxymoron is that, though she wanted a man to share her life, she couldn't share her feelings with him. Incapable of understanding love, she found Paul's refusal to keep in touch after the divorce mystifying.

“Couldn’t you control him?”

“If I could, he wouldn’t have left me.” Even after a failed marriage, most people remarry. As she heard through the grapevine, Paul had. Cathy believes that people who remarry for love are a triumph of hope over experience.

“I was surprised you didn’t borrow my gun.”

“It wasn’t that kind of marriage.” The paradox is that because of her sweet, innocent mother, Cathy enjoyed being loved. She cherished having a man on her side. Though she tried to hold the marriage together, she only postponed the inevitable.

“I’m not talking about blowing the asshole away. Just the sight of the revolver would turn him into a wuss.” Her eyes crinkled.

"Paul is no wuss. I made my bed. Now, I must lie in it alone." Paul had no chance against the allure of an occasional partner, and he knew it.

With Cathy's statement, Sofia returned to what irritated her, "That second-class brain gets to play the hero while we pay for the crime."

"Given she hadn't revealed who she was, the only place she could play hero was in her head." People expect one to do the right thing. She didn't understand why anyone would, unless it benefited them. Even so, Cathy revered those who displayed true conviction, like Robin.

"Then no one won." As Sofia turned, you could see the split earlobe, where Lila had yanked her pierced earring off. Thankfully, when the skin healed, it appeared smooth and unblemished.

"Yet everyone is satisfied but us." What an ironic twist of fate.

"Regardless of what she did after the fact, breaking the law is breaking the law."

Aware that deep inside Sofia, revenge burned, she gave her a skeptical glance. "Where did you hear that garbage?"

"Over the years, that fast-talking bitch, got away with a lot of shit."

"Too bad Robin talks better than you listen." Sofia has a history of remembering only what supports her position.

"If nothing else, we should nail her ass."

Lately, whenever Sofia spoke, Cathy felt like giving her a Miranda warning. "Don't believe your press clippings. The state wouldn't shorten our sentence by a day for giving them a person who voluntarily returned everything.

"Apart from that, Lila may have been bluffing when she first mentioned that her attorney would inform the authorities. However, the message that Sherry relayed has serious consequences." She spoke without criticism.

"Mentioning her attorney, I thought we could appeal our conviction."

"Don't forget, we pleaded guilty." True to her persona, when Sofia didn't like something, she never stopped trying to finagle. She should yield to its reality.

"That doesn't matter…"

"Do you ever let go of anything?" Surprisingly, Cathy's tone revealed that her tolerance wasn't infinite.

"The cop said he saw me toss the gun and you the jewelry. With the weather being as miserable as it was, he's a liar."

"I spoke to the attorney about that. Parker claimed a crack of lightning exploded across the sky at just the right moment." Cathy refused to argue that the system was unfair, as her father had.

"Lightning hit before we started tossing the stuff. All we must do is raise questions."

"My attorney called it the distorted and destroyed method." All Parker needed to do was clarify his statement when he testified. Claiming in the frenzy, what he thought was lightning must have been a car's headlight washing over him.

"Exactly. It plants doubt among the jurors. A good lawyer can build on that doubt and make Parker out to be a liar."

"Everybody lies. Cops lie, defendants lie, jurors who say they can be neutral lie, lawyers are paid liars, and judges lie, claiming no one lies in their courtroom." Cathy wished she could say she was amazed at how easily Sofia's small-mindedness gets energized. But she had witnessed it too many times.

As if not hearing a word, Sofia said, "The more I think about it, this is just another cop conspiracy. The prosecutor in this dumb town must have been pressured to get a conviction."

"You could smell a conspiracy at a preschool." In attempting to disperse the take, Cathy tried to scatter the jewelry, so it must have left a trail parallel to their car's path. That alone makes them look guilty. Also, when a gust of wind ripped the first plastic bag from her hand, she couldn't swear it was empty.

"I've always been a deep state believer."

"FYI, the police claimed they found our DNA and prints on a diamond earring and a jade necklace."

"We handled the merchandise with gloves." Fear of being viewed as a loser is Sofia's Achilles heel.

"In Daniel's office, I rifled through the pieces, and you put the take back into their bags. Neither one of us wore gloves."

"The real stones were in the top bag. You tossed it first…"

"Regardless of DNA or prints, they recovered some of the stolen jewelry. That fact isn't tainted." Cathy had thoroughly reviewed every fine detail. What's the point of going to trial if there's no defense?

"Or they had a weak case. That's why they offered us a favorable deal."

Who would the jury believe, the police or two accused bank robbers with rap sheets? "The prosecutor would make us look like badasses in the eyes of the jury. Therefore, they don't need overwhelming evidence."

Sofia shrugged, "All that work for nothing. I dated a loser. We didn't get the money and got a prison sentence to boot. It's not fair."

Robin must be pleased with her performance. "We set the rules, forced her to become a player, and we became the cheese on Robin's mousetrap."

"That sounds like you like her."

"More like I underestimated her." Cathy wasn't sure whether they were predators or prey.

"It was your idea and my plan. And what did we get out of it?"

"Years of prison with early parole if we're lucky. Otherwise, my parole officer hasn't been born yet." Ironically, by the time she's eligible for parole, her father should be getting out of prison.

In following her abrasive father's parole hearings, she learned that the U.S. prosecutor, Emily Mitchell, was hell-bent on his not being released, probably due to her father calling her the C-word, among other vulgar names, to her face.

Even after her retirement, she showed up every time the prisoner review board met to discuss her father's release. If Parker shows up at her parole hearing, she could be in her forties before being released. Luckily, her lawyer assured her that Parker was not vindictive.

Failing to understand why her mother abandoned her when they both got released, she'll have to confront her father. With Cathy being older, the tyrant could no longer intimidate her. Regardless of what comes out of it, she plans to make the reunion a memorable experience.

"Even so, they can connect us to only a small amount of jewelry. That's why I don't think they should have been allowed to charge us with taking everything."

"So, conservative 'gun-slinging Sofia' after conviction turned ultraliberal," once again. Cathy's usual calming tone was slipping away.

"Next time we…"

"Oh, please, I'll be in my thirties by the time I'm eligible for parole," Cathy spoke in a tone that displayed limited patience. What surprised her was the prosecutor's favorable deal without revealing who else was involved. However, this is a small town, and her lawyer was once married to an influential judge. And the lawyer Cathy retained for Sofia was once a prosecutor. Hence, they had pull and friends in the right places.

A weak case means it's a gamble for both sides. And considering Lila's threat, risking a trial didn't make sense. After all, they were caught red-handed. Especially when her lawyer showed her all the circumstantial evidence Parker had amassed, combining that with a subtle request for another twenty grand so she could work her magic.

That proved you don't commit violence against prosecutors and judges—you influence their decision. Although it was difficult to move funds without the state's knowledge, Cathy always made contingency plans.

"I want skin in the game."

"What's the point of playing unless you win?" Lila is right. Being an adrenaline junky, Sofia gets turned on by the action. In hindsight, Cathy felt she should never have allowed Sofia the freedom to screw Robin. That's another mistake she will never make. In Cathy's eyes, the mistakes were piling up.

"I can't argue with the logic, but this is personal." In the background, you could hear the high-pitched voice of a guard instructing a prisoner.

"I wonder what the results would be if I tried my hand at a legitimate business." Not wanting to spend a life in and out of prison, Cathy was busy examining her options.

"You can't think like that. You must believe that the next caper will be a success."

"How has that worked for you?" In acting independently as a cat burglar, Cathy found her groove. A couple of the ladies had expensive jewelry. Not enough to live as extravagantly as her father had, but it was sufficient to buy a small, thriving enterprise. Best of all, they'll never figure out who committed those burglaries if she stops now.

"Would you leave robbing?" Unlike Cathy, who committed crimes for money, Sofia was seduced by the action and the power it gave her.

"I would bring it with me and retrofit it to an ongoing firm as the Fortune 500 companies do. For them, it isn't even illegal." The government had problems with two key witnesses and offered her father a settlement.

If he had accepted the deal, the prosecutor would have allowed him to retain a substantial portion of the money under a plea agreement. It was unfortunate that her bullying father thought he had the upper hand and turned them down.

"And do you think you'll be successful?"

"There are millions of Americans who know little about running a small operation and are making a good income. One more won't matter." Sofia has always been defiant to the point of madness.

Sofia spoke with the compassion of a rabid dog. "If we had the loot. We would be in a fancy hotel…"

"But we're not." And that cannot be swept under the carpet.

"Lila is lucky I made an error when I went for my gun. Otherwise, I would have mopped the floor with the bitch. Then, the dumbass would be too scared to threaten us."

Annoyance slipped into Cathy's voice. "There are only two reasons you didn't mop the floor with her. First, Lila is quicker and stronger than you. The second reason is you couldn't."

Chapter 75

Parker surfaces

Though spring was approaching, it was still a bit cold. Thankfully, the afternoons have been sunny lately. Robin was on the porch chatting with Logan, enjoying cheese and crackers with their white wine, when a car turned into their property. When the fellow opened his door, she instantly recognized the man. While approaching, he said, “You must be Logan. May I have a private conversation with Robin? I’m Detective Parker. It should take only a few minutes.”

Though Logan looked concerned, he nodded and went into the house.

“I have a theory. Would you like to hear it?” He said matter-of-factly.

“Do I have a choice?” Despite how she felt, Robin was surprised that she could also speak in a composed manner.

“Here’s how it goes. Gun-slinging Sofia threatened you or perhaps your daughter. Having limited options and the possibility of a score of a lifetime, you reluctantly joined your old gang.”

“Why would you conclude that?” Given that he had no jurisdiction in this state, she concluded he wouldn't arrest her. Then, why was he here?

“You’re lucky an accused killer makes a poor witness.”

“What?” So, they know about Sofia shooting that guard. Murder changes everything. Robin constantly checked updates. There were no new charges. She wondered if Sofia had been charged. Or perhaps, since she’s in prison, they were slow, walking their indictment?

“And the problem with rookie cops in small towns is that they aren’t properly trained. When Patrolman Jim Conway introduced himself, he failed to get your name.” Though Parker’s tone wasn’t cordial, he didn’t express anger either.

“I don’t follow you.” With the pressure building, a shaky hand took a sip of her Chardonnay.

“If he took any of the vitals down, name, car license number, etc., you would be in jail waiting for the trial.”

“So, you are here to tell me what you don’t have.” The words popped out of her mouth. To compensate, she smiled, which softened her response.

“I checked with your leasing company. They had given the other stores dramatic discounts. Despite not wanting you to leave, your rent-reduction demand was so out of line that they had no choice but to reject it. To them, the low offer felt like you wanted them to hick, you out.”

That meant a lot to Robin, because she didn't have to go belly up. If she wanted to keep the business, Robin could have reached an agreement. "I guess I'm not good at those kinda things. My low offer was intended as a negotiation tactic. Instead, it inadvertently turned them off. If they had made a counteroffer, things could have been worked out. What they failed to realize was how flexible I was prepared to be. And for that, I accept the blame."

"Once Sofia was arrested, you considered her threat muted. Oh, and though the FBI can prosecute you for robbing that bank years back, they closed their books when Aaron was killed. Yes, the FBI knew that you were Aaron's girlfriend at the time. However, all they had was circumstantial evidence.

The sum was so little, and it happened so long ago, that without solid proof, they have no intention of reopening the case. And the agent I spoke to is a reliable source. As far as B & E National, the safety deposit boxes weren't insured federally, so the robbery is a local matter."

Never doubt a cop's investigation ability. "Without confirming anything, you certainly appear to be thorough."

"Regardless of the strength of this case, if the jewelry weren't returned, I would feel compelled to charge you and Lila. So, you bit the bullet twice and survived. Because of my conversation with your friend Ava, I don't believe you're the type of person who would commit a crime unless pressured. I'm here to let you know how lucky you are that the bank received that UPS shipment.

“I handed in my resignation, and I’m leaving next week, so the case will be officially closed. I assume you decided not to leave the country when you got engaged. Hope you and Logan have a better marriage than any of mine were.”

“What?” She took him for a family man, not a playboy.

“I strolled down the aisle several times. With any luck, I’ll do it once more.”

“So, you're retiring.” Parker doesn’t miss a beat. Not even the fact that she and Jessie recently got passports.

“I’m going home. An old buddy needed a partner. I purchased half interest in a cop bar back in Chicago.”

“Lots of luck in your new venture.” In not arresting her, her first thought was, but she dared not say, Yippee Ki Yay.

Chapter 76

Cathy Loses Her Cool

An inmate led Sofia into the prison laundry room and then left. It was filled with enormous commercial laundry machines, steel-reinforced pillars, and a concrete floor. This section of the network had cameras temporarily out of service, and the inmates knew it.

Sofia's eyes suspiciously narrowed. "What?"

"Tell me why you are going behind my back." Something Sofia never understood is that once the inmates don't like you, everything you do is unpopular. Thus, they snitched.

"About what?"

About what? How many things could there be? "Scuttlebutt, you are reaching out to the district attorney's office."

Sofia's face turned red. "We insisted it was just the two of us because we planned to track down the slime when we finally got out of this rathole. After we got every dollar the bitch stole from us, I intended to shoot her a few times before killing her…"

Cathy couldn't believe her ears. Saying stuff like that when it was discovered what Robin did was one thing. Saying it after sufficient time had elapsed to think it over was another. "Shooting her a few times isn't enough?"

"That will do for a start…"

"The start of what?" Cathy finally grasped that Sofia enjoyed inflicting pain solely for the pleasure of it.

"With the heist being returned, there's no advantage in not giving her name. That's why I'm trying to work out a deal so that sleazeball is arrested for her part."

A vindictive Sofia could extend Cathy's sentence by an additional twenty-five years plus life. Though unlikely, they could come after Cathy for murder. When someone dies during a crime, an accomplice can be indicted for murder. Hopefully, she could convince the prosecutor that she tried to stop Sofia from killing the guard. "I'm in prison because of you. I can be in prison without you."

"C'mon…" Sofia dialed her tone down.

The state might let her cop to a lesser charge—provided she agrees to testify against Sofia. If she refuses to cooperate, they will have no choice but to play hardball. Her tone projected limited patience. "How about Lila's letter?"

“Don’t fret. I have that covered. Robin isn’t smarter than me.” Her tone was unsurprisingly submissive.

Getting even by a self-absorbed Sofia produces a monster. Still, always cool, Cathy chose to talk it through before reacting. “She’s not hah. Robin is on the other side of these walls, we aren’t?”

“Not for long. We pleaded guilty, so the state isn’t interested in other crimes.”

Robin is living rent-free in Sofia’s head. “Things are crashing around you. And yet your reaction is so asinine that you make matters worse.”

Sofia’s veins began to bulge on her temple. “What’s wrong with getting even with that ass?”

“Robin has a hard ass.” Her emotions had clawed their way to the surface.

“I was going to surprise you.” Sofia tried to smile, but her eyes nervously darted about.

In other words, the second she returned the merchandise, there were no riches at the end of Sofia’s rainbow. She needs a strategy. Vengeance is not a strategy. “Just so you know, trying to have more patience isn’t working for me.”

“Trust me, I know what I’m doing.”

Sherry had passed along a message from Lila. It was a warning not to reveal Robin's involvement. “When Lila’s letter is sent, what will you say?”

“My lawyer indicated they aren’t interested in past crimes.”

Unable to afford the attorneys Cathy hired for their case, Sofia must have turned to an overworked, underpaid public defender. Given Sofia's tendency to selectively share information

that supports her position, it is likely that she had deceived her lawyer. Telling him that, aside from her 2-year stint, she had been involved only in petty crimes. And being in prison with a long sentence, this state wouldn't care about pursuing minor offenses.

She can guarantee Sofia that the Michigan prosecutor would be highly interested in the smash-and-grab. "The best thing your lawyer could do is find another client."

"Why would you think that?"

Cathy had eaten salad kits that were more intelligent. "Lila's letter would result in you being charged with murder. As an accomplice, I could be accused of the same crime."

"I told you, according to my lawyer, that isn't even in play."

"A million sperm and you had to make it there first." Though it was an old line, it seemed befitting.

"Hah! Once, he assured me past crimes weren't an issue, why should I give Lila's threat any thought?" She tried to smile again. When it wasn't returned, it quickly faded away.

"According to Albert Einstein, 'The difference between stupidity and genius is that genius has its limits.'" Lila is right. She's a crash course in crazy.

Her manner was submissive. "There's no reason to be bitchy."

"You haven't seen bitchy, yet. The police reported that the driver passing by saw two women." Cathy felt her impatience growing. In its place, she spoke in an icy, controlled tone.

"I wanted to ice him. You insisted he wasn't important."

"Your gun was empty." Cathy was tired of keeping Sofia in bubble wrap.

"All I needed was to reload."

“He would have been more than 100 yards away. What were you going to do? Cap the man in a moving vehicle from that distance with a short-barreled 9-millimeter handgun.” Sofia's impulsive attitude was becoming uncontrollable.

“I’m a good shot.”

“Then why did you constantly miss the security guard?”

“None of the shots were off their mark.”

“In the first several rounds, you only winged the man.” He was only 10, perhaps 15 feet away.

“I’m entitled to my fun.”

That crazy answer momentarily stunned Cathy. Lila was right. From now on, anywhere she goes, someone will wind up murdered. “You’re no Annie Oakley.”

“I could down a bear with a .38.”

With her patience running thin, Cathy’s sentences were getting short. “Bull.”

“You doubt me. When I was thirteen, I dropped a deer with a .22. A carefully angled neck shot would do the trick.”

Street-smart Cathy said, “Try asking a charging bear to twist his head for you.”

“My point is, I had time.”

“Time for what, capture?” She should have kept Lila. But Lila would never have gone after Robin. That meant she would have given up any hope of getting the money back. Hence, her dream of reuniting with her childhood friends would have ended. She was torn between knowing what the smart move was and making it.

Sofia's eyes blinked rapidly. "The only thing my wimpy father ever taught me is that giving up is a bad habit."

She isn't listening. "This state could agree till the cows come home. Michigan isn't going to agree to let a murderer walk because you handed over two jewelry thieves who voluntarily returned the merchandise. All that would happen is Robin would fabricate a tear-jerking tale about how you threatened her daughter, forcing her to help. She'll turn victimhood into an art."

"She's not a victim. She was one of us."

"Not anymore. Lila, having no choice, would claim she agreed to become Robin's partner." Revengeful Sofia always needs an enemy.

"What makes you think she'll say Lila was her partner?"

"I don't think I know." It boils down to what happened versus what appeared to have happened.

"You couldn't possibly know what Lila would say."

"I know you read in the newspaper what Robin wrote. It used the term, *we?* So, while you try to get even with Robin, you get a death sentence. That is, unless you rat out who the other girl you were with was." Though Cathy spoke in a carefully modulated tone, her frustration was peeping through.

"They can't go back on their agreement."

Holy crap. She would offer Sofia a penny for her thoughts. However, that seems pricey. "You're living in fantasyland. What did you relay to the attorney?"

"Being a lawyer, I don't trust him. So, I divulged nothing."

“This prison has our clothes. Upon receiving Lila’s letter, any decent detective would check on what the prison is holding. When asked how you came to own that pricey Sable, did you think about what you'll say?” Cathy’s tone was demanding.

“So what? I would tell them my grandma gave it to me.”

“Don’t be absurd. The promotional literature on the store's window said that the Sable was one of a kind. Besides, you two don’t even like each other. And you’re telling me she’s going to lie to the cops, knowing she’ll be charged with murder.”

“All I had was an initial conversation with my attorney.”

“In other words, your attorney contacted the authorities to set up a preliminary exchange. And the state hasn’t gotten back yet.” There’s a problem with letting her off the hook. Just like a weed, it locks itself in and grows back.

“To be played by that double-crossing Robin is insulting. She’s a ‘backstabbing bitch.’”

“Dear lord, all you would accomplish is turning them into celebrities.” Cathy’s inner rage was enough to fracture her brain.

“If it makes you happy, I’ll halt all talks.”

Because of this ignoramus, Cathy could spend the rest of her life in this hellhole. Lila is right. If she doesn't stop, Sofia, someone will soon write Cathy’s obituary. “What would make me happy is for you to adopt the vow of silence.”

“Don’t work yourself up to a lather. I’ll terminate all communications.” As Sofia spoke, she took a backstep.

“Spiteful Sofia didn’t give a rat’s ass about anyone else.” Though Cathy may be many things, she was never vindictive. She never held a grudge for the sole purpose of getting even. There was always a big picture behind it.

“I was going to tell you.”

“When, two minutes before they charged me with murder?” Sofia was always obsessive. But lately, when something gets under her skin, she loses track of everything else. Especially when it involves her nemesis, Robin.

“I prefer to view myself as persistent. It means the same thing…yet sounds kinder.”

Cathy knew it was Sofia’s desperate attempt to lighten the situation. But anger was spiraling through her body like a raging fire. “It’s better to remain silent and have everyone wonder if you’re an idiot than speak up and remove all doubt.”

She snorted. “You’re going to stand there and tell me you don’t want to get even with that rat.”

“Only if it helps me. Being also charged with first-degree murder and armed robbery doesn’t help one iota.” Although she dislikes informants, she would gladly explain to the state what happened. Hopefully, Lila will keep her promise and testify on her behalf. Then it dawned on her that all she needed to do was collaborate Robin's letter as true. Gun-slinging Sofia forced Lila and Robin to help. That would ensure Lila feels compelled to return the favor and give favorable testimony.

If she didn't hate snitches so much when charged, she would have ratted Sofia out in exchange for a further reduced sentence. It was unfortunate that she was so preoccupied with rejoining the upper-class socially that she lost sight of the details.

Upon reconnecting with childhood friends, she planned to woo a wealthy man into marriage, securing her place among the privileged class. Cathy's dream was within her grasp, and now, because of Sofia, it is several galaxies away from reality.

Her voice took on a pleading tone. "Well, nothing happened."

"Nothing happened yet." She's going to make sure Sofia doesn't get any bright ideas again…not today, not tomorrow, not ever.

"If your mind is already made up, why are you bothering to talk?" she pressed her lips together.

"Just wanted you to know how easy it is for me to get you alone."

Her eyes widened. "I'll drop it. I promise."

"You're a loose end. My loose end. And I won't permit it." For the first time in memory, Cathy's control visibly peeled away.

Cathy's terrifying demeanor made Sofia tiny. Her voice was rough and tearful. "What are you going to do?"

"What Lila and Robin did to you. Between us, this time will be more memorable." The irritation revealed itself in her delivery.

"Why?"

“Because I could.” Cathy stepped forward, and Sofia stepped back. Taking a quick step forward, Sofia’s head pitched down, head-butting Cathy. In driving Cathy back, Sofia unexpectedly showed good instincts.

Cathy’s hand instinctively went up to her forehead. Quickly, Cathy regained her balance and advanced. Unsure what to do, Sofia hesitated, but Cathy didn’t. What could only be described as a stomach-bending punch, Cathy viciously slammed her fist into Sofia. With her knees beginning to buckle, she pounded Sofia’s bent-over body, sending her down on one knee.

Lifting her by the hair, she spun Sofia around, ramming her forehead into a concrete pillar. Sofia's knees were weak again. As she turned to face her, Cathy started to throw a right cross. When Sofia went to block it, Cathy connected, a looping left to her cheekbone.

Then, she drove a right cross into her jaw. Groggily, Sofia began to throw a punch. In the middle, she stopped and ran. Unfortunately, her legs were wobbly. Leaning in, Cathy shoved her hard. Sofia’s head bounced off the dryer. The impact forced Sofia to her knees.

Struggling to a standing position, Sofia wisely tried to get out of the way of Cathy’s assault. But Cathy would have none of it and plowed a haymaker into her temple. Disoriented, once more, Sofia fell to her knees.

Tipping forward, Sofia began to crawl. Cathy raised a leg, and her foot shoved her down. Tears mixed with blood dribbled off her chin. Sofia raised her hand like a traffic cop. A cry screamed out like a wounded animal. Her eyes begged for mercy. “Don’t, please don’t.”

As anger transported Cathy back to repressed memories, slivers returned from the last confrontation her father had shortly before her mother disappeared. What her father never knew

was that Cathy had secretly packed and pressed her ear against the closed door, hoping her mother would leave, taking her. But she didn't leave that day.

Not allowing her emotions to surface, logic dictated her thoughts, that was, until now. All these years, she had been methodically pushing around the abstract pieces of the puzzle. She never considered how a stupid, vengeful man would react.

That would explain why the brute laid concrete himself for a shed, even though he always said manual work was for others. Underneath the concrete, her mother's body must lie. There are noninvasive ground-penetrating radar devices to make a dead body visible.

The next time she sees her father, it should be a moment that neither will ever forget. "Unlike what my father must have done to my mother when she threatened to testify for the feds. I won't kill you today."

Leaning over, Cathy grabbed Sofia's hair and raised her to a standing position. Then she propelled her back against the pillar, hitting her with a right jab and a left hook. Terrified, Sofia threw up her arms to protect her face. A fist glided under Sofia's elbows, delivering an uppercut to her jaw, snapping her head.

The sound of Sofia's head slamming into the pillar, followed by an involuntary shriek, was something Cathy would never forget. Upon delivering another uppercut, Sofia dropped like a rock.

Half unconscious, sitting upright, leaning against the wall, blood ran down her nose, her cheeks, and her mouth. Bending over, she slammed her fist into Sofia's bloody nose. Anymore was simply self-indulgence.

While Sofia sat there dazed, Cathy pounded her head with dispassionate ease. Time and again, the back of her head slammed against the concrete support. Lifeless, Sofia's tipped to her side.

"You, obsessive bitch," Cathy yelled. She then kicked her half a dozen times in the stomach. In defense, all Sofia could do was curl up on the cold concrete floor. A high wail cut through the silence.

Breathless yet energized, and her mask back on, she composed herself. She spoke slowly, clearly, and purposefully. "Now we are going to have a chat. If the authorities question me for any reason, we'll do this again. Next time there won't be any of this nice girl shit."

While panting, with arms straight and shoulders back, Cathy turned, raised her head, and gracefully exited. As a child, she had several places to escape to when she was stressed. In prison, there was no large bedroom or backyard she could retreat to or expensive jewelry she could admire to distract her thoughts. Here, she had just a six-by-eight cell.

Chapter 77

Sofia

When guards discovered Sofia was injured, sobbing, and incoherent, they rushed her to the prison infirmary. Since her whole body hurt, the examination was an aerobic exercise. After getting her under control, the nurse practitioner looked at her mangled face. No longer rambling, Sofia volunteered, “I accidentally walked into a wall.”

“On no less than ten separate occasions, not to mention numerous times, you ran into the concrete wall backward. Don’t sweat it. You’ll be fine.”

“I may be okay, but I’m not fine.” Her head looks like it had a war with a concrete wall.

“I’ve had plenty of practice in patching up inmates.”

"I would feel better if your practice didn't include me." Swollen eyes stared like an army in defeat.

"You aren't the first jailbird to tell me that." The nurse applied pressure to Sofia's nose.

She flinched. Once again, it broke. "Ouch! That hurt. Can't you be gentle?"

"I'll do as my training taught me. If you object, let me know. I will stop, and you can return to your cell."

"And what? Request someone else to look at me." Swollen cheeks, a woozy head, and discolored skin left her looking worse than Humpty Dumpty after his great fall.

"Regardless, it's your choice."

With Cathy no longer by her side, Sofia had to figure things out. Cathy gave the impression of being tough. Hence, they didn't bother Sofia. Now, Cathy wouldn't be there for her. "Who's going to protect me?"

"That's the guards' job."

Not packing heat limited her options. "Yeah. They didn't last time I was in the hoosegow."

"Sorry," she said, her tone sympathetic.

Hot-blooded, she often gets into trouble because of her impulsive nature. Somehow, she'd have to learn to keep her yap shut. If not, she runs the risk of abuse she endured in her last prison stint. One of the reasons she was released early is that the inmates almost killed her. If she had her gun, she would teach them to mess with her. "I need to sort things out. I refuse to go through that again."

"How about letting the prison hierarchy know of your concern? I could relay a message to…"

Not this time. Without Cathy and without a gun, she had problems. Big problems. "Do you know what these women will do if they suspect I ratted them out?"

"No."

"Well, I do. Can you keep me here through the weekend?" Trying to block out the memories, she closed her eyes. But the images flashed in front of her.

"With all the injuries you have, it's only prudent. This should relieve the pain."

As the nurse practitioner reached, Sofia's eyes followed her hand. "You're not going to give me a needle?"

"You just got your nose broken, head mangled, and you are black and blue all over. You should be wearing a body case, and you're worried about a needle."

"So?" Her body trembled.

"Either I give you this, or you go back to your cell."

Sofia nodded while closing her eyes.

"Oh, your attorney called and wanted to know when you would be well enough to chat with the prosecutor."

Chapter 78

The Big Day

She considered not wearing the wedding dress. Then Logan pointed out that if she didn't hate the dress, it might be a way to bring some closure. Despite what he said, Robin knew her past wasn't that easy to overcome.

Although she told Logan the truth, it wasn't the whole truth. For her dignity, she withheld vital chunks of herself. Kids deserve to have a happy home life. However, to children of addicted parents, their world is different. Her mother often exhibited a Mona Lisa smile. That is an elusive quality of mystery and complexity.

There are many things she wasn't ready to share. Like the time her mother was handcuffed for possessing drugs. The officer decided not to arrest her after she said her daughter would do him some favors. Luckily, the cop's partner nixed that.

Her mother often did something horrible, then followed it up with a kind gesture. Later, for example, 10-year-old Robin overheard her mother tell the cop's partner that she would never have allowed her daughter to do such a thing. But Robin knew better.

That day, she took Robin to the park, where she played for hours. In other words, her manipulative mother played with Robin's emotions. To flip the script, Robin hoped the bitterness of her past would allow her to appreciate the happy days ahead.

Following the marriage, she once again paused to look into the full-length mirror and stared at the image staring back. Whether it was the wedding gown or the emotional glee from getting married, she had never felt this beautiful.

After alterations, the strapless dress fit comfortably at the bodice and flared at the bottom. The vintage detail was embroidered on the edges, producing an inspiring illusion. Her mother believed anyone who acted happy had an ulterior motive. Therefore, Robin's euphoric disposition would make her suspicious.

The gown added another dimension to her mother that the drugs had stripped away. In her youth, she must have had a shapely figure. Robin wished she had known her back then. That might have helped her to understand.

Incapable of having any power over the past, she altered her world in the only area she could—her dreams. Once, she dreamt about her siblings or mother, and on occasion, her father.

The astonishing thing about her deadbeat father is that she never liked him in life and doesn't like him in death.

As the author of her dreams, Robin used to control them, knowing in advance what each family member would say. However, since becoming engaged, their responses have grown unpredictable. She had no idea if this was her way of keeping her family alive or if they were indeed communicating with her. Excluding her father, they found the peace in death they couldn't find in life.

The bond she carries in the name of family astonished her. Though life goes on, just as it must, there are times when she stops whatever she is doing, and a single tear slowly trickles down her cheek. Joyfully, she said, "See you in my dreams."

As Robin entered the living room, she saw Jessie frantically running. "I have a tummy ache. It doesn't feel good, Daddy."

Robin wondered, 'What tummy ache feels good?' The ease and comfort with which Jessie called Logan daddy made Robin's heart swell. Her blue eyes were dry, but that was about to end. Robin's face crunched up. Tears ran down her cheeks.

It occurred to her that she rarely cried over sad stuff. But unaccustomed to happy events, her eyes often glistened. "It's probably from all the junk she devoured. I warned her several times that it would lead to a stomachache."

"In that case, could it be the power of suggestion?" In the background, she could hear another champagne cork pop.

"Very likely." Logan's parenting skills were developing. However, as this was a good test, she wondered what his inventive mind would come up with.

"Here, I can cure that by squeezing the disagreeable food up your back and out of your mouth. Don't worry. It's only the yucky food that's causing you to feel nauseous. You won't even see it."

As he slowly ran his hand up her back, Jessie's eyes widened with urgency. "Wait! Suppose instead it slips down, and I have to pee?"

Logan tried unsuccessfully to suppress a burst of laughter. Robin diverted her attention by touching her stomach to keep from laughing. Since waking up, Robin felt as if she had demolished a large bag of chips.

"I have something Jessie can take to make her feel better." She took Jessie into the kitchen and gave her daughter strawberry ice cream to soothe her tummy. As she suspected, Jessie demolished a bowl and, feeling better, got on her bicycle.

Thanks to Logan's patience, one week after Christmas, Jessie learned to ride her bike without training wheels. She cycled to the farm next door to play with her new best friend, Lucy. They met at the school bus stop and instantly clicked.

Chapter 79

A Grain of Rice

While Logan was inside with his friends, Robin and Lila sat on the porch. A brutal winter yielded to the change of seasons. It was unseasonably warm for early spring. Just the kind of day Robin loved. After a morning shower, the sun broke through, and the air smelled fresh.

The mountain range came alive with colorful flowers. Honeybees flock to nectar-rich blooms. The sound of migrating birds filtered through the trees. In the distance, a lawnmower whined. As if the scene were choreographed, a deer scampered across their vision and dashed away.

Lila wore a red pleated blouse, straight-legged black pants, and pumps. “Sounds like the birds discovered it’s spring.”

"Oh, please, they haven't discovered anything. Birds still fly into windows. It must be peer pressure," Robin kidded.

While chit-chatting, Lila's eyes shifted. "Is that a fire?"

Robin reached into her tote and retrieved her phone. After dialing 911, she pressed the speaker. "Emergency. Can we help you?"

"I'm looking at a neighbor's porch on fire. Their place is on Winter Way." A handful of houses with small front lawns curled around the cul-de-sac.

"Do you know if anyone is in the house?"

It lies on the other side of the dirt road. "Their car isn't in front."

"What is the address?"

"I don't know, but if you turn into Winter Way, it's the one with the burning porch." Click. Robin looked at Lila. "The lady hung up on me."

Giggling, she leafed through her pocketbook. "I know the letter we talked about is here." Upon finding it, she handed Robin an envelope containing the details of the smash-and-grab.

The letter explained that Sofia wouldn't go to the ladies' room unless the palace guard gave her a hall pass. So, while Cathy may not have participated, she didn't stop Sofia. It included pictures of Sofia wearing the stolen fur coat, along with a flash drive containing the same photos. Her letter also touched on Gail and the incident involving the aluminum baseball bat.

Because the statute of limitations never runs out on premeditated murder, it added emotional security to Robin's decision to stay in the country. After all, if the possibility of a

death sentence didn't stop her, Cathy beating the hell out of her should. "The funny thing is, out of prison, Sofia was a bully and a pain in my ass. In prison, she's still a pain in my ass."

"Oh, I didn't want to meet with Cathy because it might give the authorities ideas…"

While nodding, "But like her last stint, could Sofia be released early?"

"Perhaps, but only after spending years behind bars." As a few clouds drifted along, Lila's face slipped into the shade.

"Phew! If it's wrong to hope Sofia spends a long time in prison, I don't want to be right." Robin kidded, thinking lately that the Gods had created a good life for her. However, life is like a clever mystery. One is never sure of the ending until it ends.

Giggling, Lila said, "As luck would have it, Sherry Barkley is in the same prison. Preferring to talk to someone who's spaced out, I flew back."

"I haven't spoken to Sherry since I got pregnant." After years of drugs, the few times Robin's father was sorta clean, he had the IQ of a malfunctioning amoeba. That made her wonder what a drug-free Sherry would sound like. Provided she was drug-free.

"She looked like a character in the Star Wars bar."

"Talking to Sherry is like being at a Frat Party. Towards the end, everything gets kinda fuzzy." Robin loved it when Lila told a story. Her narrative made it come alive.

Nodding, Lila reflected as if it were happening in real-time. "This must be hard. Have you ever been convicted of a major crime before?"

"You mean in this state?" Sherry asked.

Chuckling, Lila said, "Thanks for the clarification."

"I was set up. Both Wyatt and I were convicted…"

"Who's Wyatt?"

She shrugged her broad shoulders. "They claimed he is my boyfriend. I had to laugh. You know me, I don't even like guys."

With a giggling tone, Lila said, "We have a mutual friend, and I would appreciate it if you could relay a message."

"Which one?" You might think that prisons don't allow makeup, but they do. She wore more makeup than King Lear.

"The one whose reality is based in the real world."

"According to you." She was a Pit Bull of a woman. At 5′8″, her muscular frame resembled that of an NFL linebacker, lending her a tough-girl image.

"And everyone not named Sherry."

"The other girl is wired differently, and it has taken time for her to figure out who she is." She had large, watercolor eyes highlighted by bronze eyeshadow, yellow under-eye liner, and purple lipstick. This left her looking like her makeup had gone wild.

"And might never." Her new multicolored spiked hair drew attention to her round face.

"We are in different prison wings, so getting a message to her is hard. What's in it for me?" Somehow, Sherry's expressive eyes dominated.

"Let's circle back to that. I want her to know that what I said to her in that bald guy's house, the one who plays Santa, is also true for my friend. Like with me, if things surface, a letter will automatically be sent." They were speaking on the phone, and thick glass separated them.

The few times Robin had listened to Sherry, Robin wondered if she, and not Sherry, had taken a mind-blowing drug. “And she was okay with that?”

“That’s when things got weird.” Lila's face lit up as if transported back in time.

“If I do that, will you bust me out of this hellhole?”

“Sherry, you must be high on something because bringing that up feels like a sitcom.”

“Not true. I don’t have money for drugs…”

“And yet you have money for makeup.”

“Don’t I look great?”

Hearing a fire truck, their heads turned. Red lights flashed. Two fire trucks hooked a right onto Winter Way. Springing into action, they extinguished the fire. Logan was right. They were minutes away. While both women looked, Lila continued.

“The prison must be recording our conversation,” Lila said in an amused tone.

“It’s known that the office help is too lazy to listen. And the stupid guards in those lookout towers are always hungover.”

“You’re a mythomaniac.” Lila’s brandy-colored eyes glisten.

“I’m a what?”

“Sorry, I must refer to the thesaurus when describing you.”

“C’mon, everyone knows they’re extinct.”

Lila’s face gleamed. “Look, if you relay my message, I’m prepared to deposit in your prison account…”

“I want a thousand dollars, a year's supply of makeup, and TV rights.”

"TV rights? Who do you think I am, the warden?"

"No, she's old and mean."

"What did you do?" Lila said it as if she knew craziness would follow.

"Beat up my cellmate."

"You are always looking for more wood to burn." A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth.

"The vindictive warden sent me to a prison counselor for anger management. The shrink concluded that I didn't know how to handle adversity. That's not true. I just didn't like what Emma said."

"Why can't you simply behave?" The story lost nothing in its retelling.

"Since you already think I'm spaced out, I might as well tell you that I believe in alternate universes. In none of them am I strait-laced," Sherry said.

Lila laughed at its absurdity. "It's nice to know I can get answers about the universe. But right now, I have a different problem, and what you want won't fly."

"Ooooh! Could you smuggle a ladder in so I can climb the prison wall?"

Lila smiled. "What? You don't like Earth One, so you switch to Earth Two. The walls must be 20 feet high."

"Listen, I'm not talking about a traditional ladder. Smuggle in one of those extension ladders so it doesn't look that long."

As if taking in the nonsense of it, Lila grinned. "And where do you suppose I stash it? In my pocketbook?"

"You must have a big pocketbook."

An awkward expression covered her face. "This comedic relief makes me think of four words: pass the popcorn, please."

"The day I stepped into this hokey pokey, the fascist warden demanded I turn my life around. 'I yam what I yam.'"

Robin was amazed that she was still quoting Popeye. "I don't know what she needs more, a psychiatrist or a brain transplant."

"Her mother should have used a better form of birth control." Then, drifting back into the scene. "Look, this is my offer. I will deposit $150 in your prison account. If you insist on anything else, I'll find another way."

"What's to stop me from talking?"

"Knowing how Sherry's mind works, I weighed the possibility of that cheapskate trying to extort more money before I approached. So, I told her, 'You have no idea what I'm referring to. However, if any of it becomes known, a letter will automatically be sent, resulting in you attracting the wrath of both women.'"

"Is that the best you can do?"

"It's the only thing I'm willing to do."

"Did she agree?"

Nodding, Lila extended her arm and removed a grain of rice from Robin's hair. "That's 30 minutes out of my life that I'll never get back."

"The only thing Sherry ever accomplished was to make time go by slowly." Her uncertainty is gone. Her uneasiness is gone. Everything about this is gone. It's finally over, she thought. Just as significant, Lila was smiling more. Robin wondered if that meant her friend was back.

"There's no guarantee how Sofia will react. Like all bullies, hate is living inside that rageaholic."

"When it comes to Cathy, Sofia doesn't bend her knees. She lives on her knees. So, it wouldn't make sense for her to talk." Still, she wouldn't bet her rent money.

"Keep in mind, dysfunctional people do dysfunctional things," Lila said.

In other words, what's the point of being an idiot if Sofia can't prove it? "I wonder what, always in control, Cathy is thinking."

"Damage control."

That was often in her mother's head. What a way to live. "Good, because Sofia kisses Cathy's ring."

"More like another part of her anatomy," Lila giggled.

"The thing about kissing ass is, it doesn't kiss back." Regarding her family, flattery never worked for Robin.

"If Sofia ever discloses…"

"We'll get gold medals. They say life is 90 percent perception and 10 percent reality. In other words, it's one grand illusion." Though not a professional actress, Robin knew how to tug at a jury's heartstrings.

Lila's face looked amused. "So, do you feel safe?"

"Once the jewelry was returned, I felt safer," Robin admitted.

Nodding in agreement, Lila said, "Oh, I've been meaning to tell you. Before I started over, I read that the bank acknowledged the return of all the jewelry and cash. It even leaked that the bank received $120,000 more cash than the box holders reported missing."

Having been busy these last few days, Robin had missed the story. "Just as I figured. It's either fat cats hiding the dough from their wives or drug dealers not reporting their income to Uncle Sam."

"Regardless of which, those raunchy guys must have been reluctant to file a claim."

"The safe play would have been to return all of it." But Robin tends to be more of a risk-taker.

"How did you play it?"

From her viewpoint, Robin did what Logan implied, at least a favorable interpretation. "I asked myself, did the snakes concealing all that cash deserve to be fleeced? Then, I realized the question was academic. If they hadn't already acknowledged they had money in the vault, they wouldn't receive any after it was returned. Therefore, the only question I had to decide was, who would get it? A government that didn't need the dough or us. Thus, I harmed no one who wasn't going to be harmed…"

"So, you didn't return all the cash."

"What, you never met a hypocrite before? Too bad I didn't trust my gut, or I would have kept more."

Lila's cheeks swelled. "That's the Robin I know."

Reaching into her tote, she pulled out a large envelope. "I love my wedding ring, but cash would have been better."

"How much better?"

It's incredible how well Lila knew her. "Leaving the gang didn't make me street stupid. Knowing our government would keep any unclaimed cash grated me. There was so much scattered throughout the bags that I knew no one would miss some.

"I don't know about you, but I need another car. Here's half of the money I kept. It's roughly forty grand. Even if Sofia rats us out, the authorities can't prove this was in the vault. Better yet, I don't trust that loony. And if she talks, it will get out of anyone's hands to control the situation.

"Let's both hide the cash. This way, even if she talks, neither of us would be accused of profiting from the bank job. Oh, on the off-chance Sofia talks, before you leave, we should concoct a story to tell the authorities." Besides, if Sofia gives them up, they might need the money for negotiations or legal fees.

Nodding, Lila put the envelope in her bag. "So, the bank job was profitable."

"I would've told you when we had lunch, but you never asked." They met two weeks ago at a quaint Thai restaurant.

"Well, I got sidetracked when you told me Parker paid you a visit. This proves you still are street savvy."

“Fortunately, I don't have the stomach for crime.” The difference lay between her thoughts and her actions. Like most criminals, they are in the business of robbing. That occupation is not meant for me. But just the mention of her stomach reminded her of how queasy it felt.

“Now, let’s get back to having a good time.”

Robin felt grateful that, among all the girls she hung out with in the gutter, she was fortunate to have one worth calling a best friend. “Lila, I love what you did to your hair.”

It was a chic hairstyle that covered her ears like a 1920s flapper. Simple yet trendy, short top with side curls, giving Lila a glamorous look. “Because of your wedding, I went to an exclusive stylist. It cost $450.”

“Were you being charged by the hair?” Robin had to admit that she looked spectacular.

“Really,” Lila said.

“Lila, you are extremely bright. So, there’s no reason you can’t also complete your schooling.” As luck would have it, one perk of Logan working for the university was that his family could take courses for free. In her wildest dreams, Robin never envisioned she would be the first in her family to attend college. But first, she needs to get her GED.

What she would do with the degree was problematic. Regardless, she wants that degree. Beyond that, it should serve as an excellent example for Jessie.

“I’ll consider it.”

Because Logan would soon adopt Jessie, she could also attend college here for free. “Sounds to me like something else is going on.”

"Lately, I switched my focus from robbing to men. To my surprise, it opened a whole new world."

"From robbing, to men, what?" Robin asked in a naive way.

"Dating them, silly," Lila giggled.

Robin seldom judges how others should prioritize their lives. Therefore, she pivoted. "Doesn't it feel good to live a carefree life?"

"Being in charge of a department at work, I have more enemies than when I was a thief," Lila said.

Robin realized that being in charge always comes with pitfalls. "That's the downside of the upside."

"It's funny, yesterday I couldn't spell 'efficiency engineer.' Today I are one," Lila chuckled at her joke.

Robin relished Lila's infectious laugh. "Efficiency engineer sounds impressive."

"It's someone who does precision guesswork. Oh! After weeks of delays, you called, adamant that the wedding had to be this Sunday. I didn't want to ask what the rush was, but what was the rush?" That gave Lila only a three-day notice. She arrived in the morning and planned to spend a week with them.

"For Jessie's sake, we wanted to ease into marriage. But things rarely go as planned. I prefer not being in a position where I must lie, telling her that her sibling was born prematurely. Unlike Aaron, I knew Logan would make an honest woman out of me." Her first pregnancy was

predictable. Now, she was convinced she had inherited her mother's rabbit genes. Knowing Logan was on her side and how he would react lent her comfort.

Lila smiled. "Well, accidents happen. That's why I'm alive today."

"Come again." Her facial expression conveyed that Robin had forgotten Lila's mother was a streetwalker. Upon reflection, Robin's mother didn't plan her either.

"30 Love."

"What?" Robin's stomach growled.

"I took up tennis…2 points."

Fortunately, before Logan, sex was sporadic. "Even my diaphragm didn't prevent pregnancy. From now on, I'm going on the pill, or Logan is using a condom."

"And what makes you think marriage would make you honest?"

"By the way, Logan suggested we make you an honorary aunt." That should make Lila feel good.

"If you do that, you know I'll spoil the kid," she said in a bright and cheery tone.

With any luck, an honorary aunt spoiling the kid wouldn't make the child spoil. "I would expect no less."

"What kind of aunt do you think I'd make?"

"How you turned your life around can be inspiring." Knowing Logan as she did, she would eat healthier in the coming months.

"On my way over to you, I realized the problem wasn't my background or my choice of friends. Though robbing has never been my dream, it is my thing. I own that," Lila said without altering her gaze.

Occasionally, you must kick yourself out of all the chaos, Robin thought. "This is not the Lila I know."

"Then you don't know me. My past haunts me in ways I don't understand. Adjusting is difficult."

"We talked about…" Robin mentally recoiled.

"You mainly talked. I politely listened."

Given that it's hard to straighten something crooked, thinking life was that simple was foolish. "You haven't been convicted of a crime yet, so if you turn your life around now, no one will give a hoot about your past."

"You want the truth or the true truth?"

The conversation began to overwhelm Robin. "The truth would be nice."

"I haven't robbed since the girls, and I parted."

Now, she was about to discover that the truth wasn't the whole truth. "And what's the true truth?"

"I haven't robbed yet."

"How do you feel?" Because they were teenagers when they palled around, one might say the Earth was still cooling. Robin hoped Lila would meet a guy she could lean on. That would make the transition easier.

She shrugged. “I just told you.”

“You just told me you were wrestling with going straight, not how you feel about it.” Robin didn’t know why Lila felt that way. She speculated that her friend might not have had any idea either.

“Wrestling with logic versus emotions, I wonder which will win.” Her face was troubled.

Feeling the impact of her statement, Robin wondered if Lila’s criminal past was somehow baked in. “You don’t always get what you wish for. Often, you get the one you feed.”

“Then tell me, why do I have problems sleeping?

“Because your conscience is telling you that’s not who you are anymore.” The years creep up on all of us faster than we imagined. She didn’t want Lila to be left standing in prison when the music stopped.

“Before Sofia rejoined us, I planned a few jobs. Pretending to be a wealthy widow, I targeted hustlers who would be too embarrassed to report that a woman outsmarted them. As it turned out, I’m a natural at conning con artists.”

Her father made a living at conning charlatans. His life was empty. And toward the end, he was no longer tough enough to walk away unscathed. The only thing more treacherous than an angry mark is an angry mark that's tougher than the conman. He was beaten to death by a mark. “The Stone Age didn’t fade away because of a shortage of stones. It vanished because something better came along. Don’t you feel that going straight is something better?”

“What happened to my dreams?”

"The sad truth is dreams don't work unless you work at them." Life is measured by its moments. And the moment Robin got pregnant, turning her life around, was no longer a choice but a necessity.

"Life had changed me." She talked as if shame had settled in.

Only Lila could sentence herself to a life of crime. "The person you are now may not know how to deal with the situation. However, the girl I knew found a way when she wanted something bad enough."

As if conjuring up an image, Lila closed her eyes. "Before I moved out of my grandfather's house, I told the bastard in front of Marek that if he did anything to my brother, I would come back and kill him.

"I also told him I would believe Marek's version. And at my trial, I would reveal what he did to the children in the neighborhood. He knew I meant it. So did Marek. Even when the neighbors began to suspect him. The bully never touched Marek.

"Saving him from our grandfather's wicked ways, my little brother idealizes me. The thought of disappointing Marek makes me uneasy. I wonder if Thomas Wolfe went far enough."

With a counterwind blowing, she asked, "What do you mean?"

"If you could go home again, should you?"

The boundaries that separate criminals from ethical people are arbitrary. We all crossed over to the other side at times. Regardless of which fork Lila takes, she will struggle with her decision for years. "Why don't you try to forget the awful things you did at times?"

Her eyes turned curious, "Why?"

"When I try to forget, I can't. It's my new method of remembering."

Smiling Lila said, "Eventually I'll figure things out."

Gangs and crime are inseparably linked. Robin wasn't sure if gang life was the beginning of her crookedness. "You can't change your life by not changing anything. Don't forget, Vivian argued that exact point when she was fourteen, in a school debate. Last year, I read online that she was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole. What makes you different from her?"

"I have you."

Robin was taken aback. "Wow, what a compliment. Whenever you want to talk, I'm here for you."

Hesitantly, Lila asked, "This is my second shot at the brass ring. How many chances does one get?"

To Robin, that sounds like she should have minded her own business. We are like a twig in a storm. As much as we want to be strong, our flexibility determines our survival. "If you're lucky, until you get it right."