**Operation**

**Brain Drain**

Going Back to School

Author:

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*Operation Brain Drain: Going Back to School*

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I dedicate this book

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**Chapter One**

## The Disappearance of Cat

The dorm rooms were a never-ending source of frustration for Catalina. She lived in Alvarado, one of the smaller dorms with only 170 residents. It was the place to be for anyone in the Pre-Health Programs. It was conveniently near the La Posada Dining Hall, her third home at UNM, the other being the biochemistry lab. When she wasn't consumed with thoughts of organic chemistry and studying for her upcoming MCATs, her mind drifted to more mundane matters - like food. The tantalizing aroma of freshly cooked meals wafted through the window, tickling her senses and making her stomach growl in protest. But with each visit to the dining hall came the disappointment of late-night stale cafeteria food and the never-ending lines of hungry students clamoring for sustenance. Oh, how she longed for a home-cooked meal or even a simple sandwich made with love. But for now, she resigned herself to the monotony of dorm life and its endless cycle of mediocre meals.

Cat quickly learned that living here meant being surrounded by overachievers who were just as competitive off-campus as in the lecture halls. She compared her study habits to those of her peers, constantly feeling like she was falling short. Despite the pressure, Catalina managed to keep up with her coursework. She even joined a few study groups to help her grasp some of the trickier concepts.

With her exceptional intelligence and unwavering determination, Catalina earned a scholarship to pursue a degree in biochemistry at the University of New Mexico. She was a gifted student, excelling in her studies and undergrad research projects. But behind her academic success lay a deep-seated loneliness. Her only sibling, Diego, had been estranged from her for years. Their relationship fractured irreparably after their parents' death. Despite Catalina's attempts to reach him, Diego remained distant and aloof.

As she curled up in bed with her textbook, Catalina couldn't shake the yearning for connection with her family. Her grandmother, Maria, had always been there for her, but the absence of her brother, Diego, left a void that weighed heavily on her heart. He had been the cool older sibling, teaching her to ride a bike and sneaking her out for ice cream when their parents weren't looking. But now, memories of their shared childhood were distant echoes in Catalina's mind. Despite these thoughts weighing on her, she threw herself into studying organic chemistry, finding comfort in its complexities. Her days were busy with lab work, lectures, and late-night study sessions. The world of molecules and compounds gave her a sense of purpose and served as a distraction from the ache in her heart. As sleep finally washed over her, she let the book fall to the floor and turned off the light.

The moon hung high in the sky, a pale, ghostly orb casting its eerie light into Cat's room. The closed blinds did little to block the moon's glow, leaving the space in a strange twilight that made every shadow seem alive. Startled from her sleep, Cat sat up in bed, her heart pounding with fear. She strained to see through the darkness but could make out only vague shapes and the occasional flicker of movement. Her instincts screamed at her that something was wrong. Trembling, she pulled the covers up to her chest, holding them close as if they could protect her from whatever unknown danger lurked in the room. The moon cast a faint silver glow over everything. And there, in the corner by her dresser, stood a figure. Cat squinted, trying to make out any details through the shadows. It was a man; she could tell that much, but his features were shrouded in darkness. All she could do was pray that this was just a nightmare, a figment of her imagination brought on by the haunting light of the moon.

The sound of footsteps walking toward her bed, caused Cat's heart to race and her breath to catch in her throat. She squeezed her eyes shut, willing the intruder to just leave her alone. But suddenly, she felt the bed shift beneath her, and the covers were yanked away, leaving her exposed and vulnerable. Every nerve in her body screamed for her to kick him, but fear paralyzed her. She could feel their presence looming over her, a menacing shadow waiting to strike. Her mind raced with terror as she fought back a primal scream rising in her throat. All she could do was wait, frozen in terror, for whatever horrors lay ahead.

The overpowering smell of chemicals invaded her nostrils. A sickly-sweet aroma mixed with bitterness and a sharp, pungent tang. She had studied the properties of this drug back in her undergraduate days, memorizing every detail of its deadly effects. But never did she imagine it would be used against her. As she lay there, paralyzed by its numbing powers, the scent grew stronger in her throat, suffocating her. She fought to keep her eyes open, but they betrayed her and shut tight like a trap. And just like that, everything went black. The darkness engulfed her, stealing away all senses except for the lingering taste of chloroform on her tongue.

Cat awoke to an intense pain radiating from her wrist and a searing sensation in her nostrils. As she tried to move, she realized with horror that she was bound tightly to something. Her wrists were painfully tied to her feet, rendering her completely immobile. Every inch of her skin felt taut and restricted, as if trapped in an intricate web of ropes. Sharp tingles shot through her body, causing her muscles to ache and tremble. She felt a throbbing headache pulsing behind her eyes, making it difficult to focus. Desperately, she tried to shift her position to get a better view of her surroundings. It wasn't until she caught a whiff of plastic, leather, and gasoline that the realization hit her - she was inside the trunk of a car. Panic flooded through her as she thrashed about, kicking at the sides of the trunk and attempting to scream for help. But even the simplest movements were hindered by the tight duct tape covering her mouth, its rubbery and musty smell overwhelming her senses. With her tongue, she desperately tried to push at the tape, tasting bitter metal on its surface and feeling the sting of blood where it had ripped at her lip

The sound of the car's engine echoed through the deserted road, as the two men inside exchanged worried looks. The woman in the trunk was making too much noise, and they couldn't risk being caught. Panic rose in their chests as they tried to come up with a solution.

"What do you want to do? We can't keep driving like this. She's making too much noise. Someone will hear her," one man whispered urgently.

"We need to knock her out again. Do you have any more chloroform?" the other replied, searching frantically through their supplies.

"No, that was the last. It's why she's awake. I didn't have enough," he explained, frustration evident in his voice.

"Why don't you hit her or something? That should work," the first man suggested.

"We can't hit her, numb nuts," the other retorted, annoyance creeping into his words. "She has to show up in good condition, or else we may not get our money." Their voices lowered to a murmur as they continued to debate their next move, fear and desperation fueling their actions.

As Cat listened to their chilling and unsettling plans, a wave of relief washed over her like cool water on a hot summer day. She tried to remain calm and quiet, but fear slowly crept in, consuming her thoughts. What if they changed their minds and decided to hurt her anyway? Her heart pounded with conflicting emotions - relief mixed with terror - causing her body to tense up. Curling into a protective ball, she closed her eyes tightly as if it could shield her from the danger lurking nearby. With each breath, she prayed for this nightmare to end soon, for safety and escape from this terrifying situation.

The low, rhythmic hum of the car's engine and wheels came to a stop. Cat's heart raced as she felt the car pull over and heard two men arguing in hushed voices outside. "You didn't use enough chloroform," grumbled one man, his voice rough and slurred. "She should have been out for at least another thirty minutes." The sound of their tense conversation made her body stiffen with fear and adrenaline. She strained to hear any other sounds or movements outside, but all she could focus on were the muffled words of her captors.

The truck latch was pulled, and moonlight flooded in. Cat kept her eyes mostly closed, just open enough to see the men. Both held weapons, one a small gun and the other a knife.

She could see that one man was Hispanic, short, and young looking, maybe her age, his skin smooth and hairless, and the other was bigger, older, also Hispanic, with a beard and a scar above his eye. Both were dressed in jeans, flannel, and trucker hats. Maybe father and son?

The two men exchanged a glance, then their eyes turned towards her, lingering on her bruised and bound body. She remained silent, trembling, with her eyes squinting, appearing closed, but open enough for her to see them fully. The tall one reached into the trunk and retrieved the duct tape from her mouth, cutting it with a knife. "Ay, mira. Looks like she finally settled down, no?"

They closed the trunk with a thud and climbed back into their car. Cat heard the sound of gravel shifting under the tires as they drove away, but then it stopped abruptly. She felt the sharp turn of the wheel and was thrown against a can of gasoline, causing it to tip over and spill its contents all over her, making her feel even more helpless and afraid.

The impact was sudden and jarring, causing Cat's head to slam against the sharp corner of the trunk. A searing pain erupted in her forehead and cheek, almost blinding her as she struggled to catch her breath. The smell of gasoline filled her nostrils, thick and suffocating, making it difficult to focus. She could feel a throbbing sensation in her left shoulder, but couldn't tell if it was from the rough driving, or if it happened in her dorm room.

With trembling hands, she felt around for something to use as a weapon. Her heart racing with fear and desperation to escape the trunk before something even worse happened. The sound of the car turning onto pavement and the murmur of Mexican-laced English were constant reminders of the danger she was in. Despite the chaos and confusion, one thought remained clear in her mind - she needed to get out and get help before it was too late.

Cat's tried to think logically through her situation. She was a scientist, after all, but logic seemed to be failing her at the moment. Her captors were most likely human traffickers, and the thought made bile rise in her throat. The idea of being sold as a sex slave was enough to make her blood run cold, but she refused to believe she was the type of girl they would target. She had always been confident in her body positivity, embracing her curves without shame or fear of judgment. Yet now, that same body felt like a target on her back. She couldn't wrap her head around being taken for trafficking - she didn't have any enemies or stalkers, no reason for kidnapping - but the more she thought about it, the more it seemed like the only possibility. And what did that mean? Endless abuse, forced into sex work, possibly drugged and completely at their mercy? The mere thought of it sent shivers down Cat's spine. But she refused to let them break her spirit. With a deep breath, she focused on formulating a plan. If she could pretend to enjoy the sexual acts and avoid getting drugged, maybe she could find a way to escape after a few weeks. But then another thought hit her like a ton of bricks - what if she failed and got pregnant from one of these men? Panic threatened to consume her as she realized she had been hiding her virginity for years, so surely faking enjoyment wouldn't be too difficult...right? Wrong. As much as she tried to calm herself with this plan of action, deep down Cat knew it would never work. She couldn't fake something so personal and intimate without breaking inside.

And then it hit her - she had no one to call for help once she escaped. No family who cared for her, no friends who truly knew her. Even Dr. A, her mentor and colleague, would probably assume she left for a new job. The crushing weight of loneliness and despair threatened to overwhelm her, but Cat refused to give up. She had to believe that someone would miss her, someone would come looking for her. The negative thoughts could not consume her - she had to focus on escaping and finding help before it was too late.

Could this unfortunate event actually work in her favor for getting into Baylor University's prestigious medical school? Would they see her survival as an act of bravery, perhaps even offering a scholarship? Her fingers itched to grab her phone and start planning. Maybe she could use her near-death experience to launch a successful GoFundMe campaign and receive the necessary funds to pay for medical school without taking out any loans. That would be ideal, and she couldn't help but let herself daydream about the endless possibilities that could arise from such a turn of events.

After what felt like an eternity in the truck, Cat's tears flowed uncontrollably, her sobs echoing off the enclosed walls of the car. The constant banging and shaking caused her entire body to ache. She closed her eyes tightly, trying to calm herself by counting aloud.

"One." Her voice shook.

"Two." She listened to her own rapid heartbeat.

"Three." She took a yoga class once, she knew it could help her breathing.

"Four." Gasping for breath, she tried to make herself very small.

"Five." By the time she reached ten, she was exhausted and struggling to catch her breath. The need to use the bathroom and her hunger became impossible to ignore. Panic set in as she realized she had no idea where she was or how to escape. The fumes of gasoline mixed with the smell of urine made her stomach churn. Would it be dangerous to just let go? Cat knew enough about biology to remember that urine is mostly water with only 5% waste products. But in this situation, every little detail felt overwhelming and life-threatening.

The car careened off the interstate, jolting Cat out of her daydreams. She shook her head to clear it and focused on the road ahead. They drove for what felt like an eternity, winding through endless stretches of desert and empty highways. Cat had lost track of time and distance, her mind consumed by thoughts and worries. Suddenly, the car made a series of sharp turns, throwing her body against the trunk walls. How long had they been driving? An hour? Two? It was hard to tell. And where were they even going? Albuquerque seemed like a distant memory now, a blur in the rearview mirror. Finally, the car came to a stop with a screech and Cat's heart raced as she waited for the inevitable. The door opened with a loud creaking sound, signaling the end of their journey...or perhaps the beginning of something even more terrifying.

As the men yanked her out of the trunk, her bare legs hit the ground with a thud. The odor of gasoline filled her nostrils as they roughly grabbed her arms and dragged her into the light. She struggled to cover herself, but it was too late - she was only dressed in a skimpy sports bra and panties. "What the hell did you do, Chica?" one of them growled, his breath reeking of alcohol.

"Ora, she totally meó on herself, I'm gonna reek a gas y meados, man. What the hell am I gonna tell la wife, José?"

As the pungent scent of gasoline and urine filled the air, Jose quickly reached for a large brown towel on the passenger seat. His hand brushed against five Styrofoam cups filled with coffee, knocking one over and spilling its contents onto the floor. He cursed under his breath as he tried to mop up the mess in the trunk before it seeped into his clothes. With a sigh, he reluctantly called his wife on his cell phone and explained that he would be late due to an unexpected mishap at work.

The man's voice was harsh and commanding. "Tell her nada; eres el hombre de la casa," he sneered at his companion.

Cat understood his words, “Man of the house, hah… he was no man, he was a bestia, a beast!” She was lucid enough to not say this aloud.

His grip on Cat's arm was firm as he lifted her effortlessly, carrying her towards a small clearing in the desert. As they emerged from the shrubs, she caught sight of a small single engine plane waiting on a makeshift runway. The silver body of the aircraft glinted in the sunlight, a stark contrast to the earthy tones of the surrounding landscape. Fear gripped at her heart as she realized the implications of their destination - they were going by air.

As they shuffled towards the plane, her face was pressed against the damp fabric of the man carrying her. Cat strained to understand the rapid Spanish being spoken around her. She could make out only a few words – "chica", "consciente", "drogarla" - and felt a surge of fear at the mention of drugs.

The stench of stale sweat, and engine oil hung heavy within the small aircraft. It was a visceral reminder that escape, if even possible, was far beyond Catalina's reach. Fear pulsed through her veins, a relentless drumbeat that pounded with each vibration of the plane.

With a jolt, Cat was handed over to another man. His coveralls were tattered and stained, smelling of drink and bearing the marks of years of hard work. As he stood before her in his worn attire, she couldn't help but be reminded of the man who ran the bookshop in town - both men seemingly weathered by time and experience. She could feel the strong beat of her heart as the man climbed the stairs to the plane, each step echoing through the metal frame. Suddenly, a sharp prick on her arm sent her into a dizzying darkness. In that moment, all she could think about was how the distinct smell of leather, old cigarette smoke, oil, grease, and gasoline brought back memories of her father's garage - a place filled with love and warmth despite the harsh scents.

As the plane lifted off the ground, a smile spread across his face. He couldn't help but smirk as adrenaline coursed through his veins. He knew this trip would result in a substantial payout of five thousand dollars, which only fueled his confidence and excitement to reach their destination.

The plane vibrated more intensely as it climbed, the roar of the engines masking any other sound. Cat's eyelids fluttered, her mind fighting the encroaching fog. Shapes blurred—the gruff men, the plane's bare interior. Her last fading memory was the prick of the needle and the scent of her father's garage, now a cruel mockery of safety.

As the plane leveled out, the abrupt shift in her body mimicking the nauseating lurch of her stomach. Fear sliced through her. Disorientation and panic mingled, making her head spin.

The weathered man crouched beside her, his presence a looming shadow. "Well, well, look who's back with us," he rasped, a hint of amusement in his voice. He leaned closer, his alcoholic fueled breath hot on her face. "We've got a long way to go, sweetheart. Might as well get comfortable.”

Cat instinctively recoiled, her body buzzing with trapped energy. The plane's sterile lights cast harsh shadows, distorting the man's features and transforming the small space into a claustrophobic cage. She scanned the windows, but they revealed only a sea of endless clouds, a cruel reminder of her isolation high above the world.

She tried to speak, but her voice croaked, barely audible. "Where...where are we going?”

The man merely chuckled, a low, grating sound. "That's for us to know, and you...well, you'll find out soon enough." He reached out and ran a calloused finger down her cheek. She flinched, unable to mask her revulsion.

His smile hardened. "Don't worry, little bird. They're going to take good care of you. Very good care.”

With that, he turned away, leaving Cat shivering in the plane's half-light. The destination was an ugly unknown, but one thing was clear: her nightmare was just beginning.

Rational thought seemed to evaporate under the weight of fear. Fragments of her life flashed before her eyes: the comforting smell of old books in the university library, the thrill of a successful laboratory experiment, studying with friends. All of it was fading, replaced by the oppressive confines of this airborne prison.

Curled uncomfortably on the plane's cold floor, Catalina drifted in and out of a hazy state. The relentless drone of the engines lulled her, but a prickling unease kept her from true sleep. Rubbing the tender spot on her arm where the injection had pierced her skin, she knew unconsciousness was inevitable. Determined to remember everything before the inevitable police rescue, she tried etching the details into her memory. Her eyelids, heavy as if weighed down by stones, began to droop. The cabin lights blurred, morphing into swirling halos. A flicker of defiance sparked within her, a desperate fight to stay awake. But her body, a traitor to her will, succumbed. Darkness, thick and heavy, engulfed her whole.

# Chapter Two

## The Professor

Growing up in Tres Piedras, the son of two ex-Weathermen turned small-town teachers, Ben had sought solace in the desert's vast emptiness. It felt worlds removed from the claustrophobic intensity of "the commune," where a shifting cast of idealistic radicals cycled through his parents' home. He craved normal order, the structure of a syllabus instead of the manifestos endlessly debated over stale coffee and paranoia.

Books, not bombs, became his weapons of choice. Dickinson's precision, Whitman's expansive spirit – they offered worlds he could control, rebellions confined to the page. His parents, weathered veterans of street protests and clandestine meetings, seemed both proud and baffled by his bookish bent. Their wary smiles hid disappointment, he knew, that he might not inherit their revolutionary fire. Yet, their fierce protectiveness of Tres Piedras, this haven they'd built amidst the buttes, slowly seeped into his own sense of place.

Dinner table conversations weren't about spelling tests, but heated debates on civil disobedience, the failures of the electoral system, the names of the powerful hidden behind corporate masks. Ben absorbed it all – not the doctrine, but the simmering rage against injustice, the deep-rooted cynicism about those in power. Those debates shaped him, fueling a rebellious streak that manifested not in Molotov cocktails, but in the poems he scribbled late into the night, angry words were his weapon against the world his parents railed against.

Academia, Ben mused, had been both sanctuary and battlefield. The intellectual rigor suited him; the satisfaction of illuminating great works for his students fueled his passion. But it was also a place of petty rivalries, fragile egos, and a subtle disdain for anything unorthodox. He'd earned his parent’s begrudging respect because he'd found a weapon they could never fully comprehend: the power of the written word.

As the sun rose high in the sky, casting warm rays of light through the windows of his office, Ben's TA, Bethany, appeared with an unusual sense of urgency. Her usually composed demeanor was replaced by agitation and fear. Her sharp eyes darted around the room, searching for something that seemed out of reach.

Ben knew not to dismiss Bethany's concerns lightly. She was a bright young woman with a keen attention to detail – qualities that had made her an invaluable asset to his team.

"What's wrong, Bethany? Is there an issue with the course materials?" Ben asked calmly, trying to ease her obvious distress.

"It's not that exactly," Bethany replied, nervously biting her lip. "It's... something I overheard. A rumor, perhaps. I know better than to give into those, but this one feels different."

She hesitated before continuing, her gaze flitting across the room as if seeking reassurance from the dusty books stacked on the shelves. "Dr. M., there are rumors spreading about missing students at UNM. Seven so far, with the the latest one just yesterday."

Ben was taken aback. He hadn't heard anything about missing students. While it wasn't uncommon for undergraduates to drop out when things got tough, they typically told someone, so she may be onto something, but not likely.

"I'm sure it's just idle gossip, Bethany," Ben reassured her, trying to keep his tone steady. "The administration hasn't mentioned anything about missing students. You know how undergraduate students can be – here today, gone tomorrow."

Bethany shook her head, her expression grave. "I would normally agree with you, Dr. M., but the last student who went missing was Catalina Ramirez, a graduate biochemistry major and TA, with plans to attend medical school, and before Cat, George Rabbitfoot – accepted into Stanford's dental program, Lacy Jones and Shannon Norton from the Computer Sciences and Owen Charles from the Engineering department, Poppi McGill and Rajiv Ramdat from the Business School, Sandra Adiarte from Dance, all advanced undergraduate and graduates. This isn't the typical behavior of a struggling student, and there could be more."

"Do you know all of them personally?" Ben questioned.

"I don't know them personally, but from what I've heard, they are all good students who are involved in clubs and have friends. They just didn't show up to class one day."

"Bethany, I can see how upset you are about this. Let's go talk to Dr. TaSsay and see if he knows anything. The university President should be informed about this."

Bethany nodded and they headed towards the President's office.

"Susan, could we have a moment to speak with Dr. TaSsay? Bethany, my graduate TA, has some concerns that need to be addressed," Ben said, knowing that using the word "issues" would grab Susan's attention.

"Of course, Dr. Musser. Let me check his schedule. He is available for the next fifteen minutes. Will that be enough time?"

"Yes, thank you, Susan."

The tension simmered as Ben entered President TeSsay’s office, Bethany, by his side. Her normally bright eyes held a worried flicker. "Professor Musser, Ms. Jones," TeSsay greeted them, his smile a touch too practiced. "What can I do for you both?"

Ben met TeSsay’s gaze head-on. "We're here about the disappearances, Dr. TeSsay. Specifically, the lack of university action on this matter."

A flicker of shock, then irritation crossed TeSsay’s face. "Professor, the university is taking this very seriously. We've contacted the authorities—"

"—Contacted?" Ben interrupted, his voice rising. "Seven students have vanished, TeSsay, and all you've done is make some phone calls? The community is terrified."

Bethany, usually reserved, spoke up, "Dr. TeSsay, everyone's talking about it – students are disappearing, and the rumors...they're getting worse every day."

TeSsay steepled his fingers, his composure returning. "Rumors are exactly why we need to proceed cautiously, Ms. Jones. Spreading panic won't solve anything. The police are investigating, and the university is fully cooperating."

Ben slammed a fist on the polished desk. “President TeSsay, why is this the first time I have heard about it? You should have all the faculty on high alert, taking attendance, talking to their classes.”

"Professor Musser," TeSsay said, his voice now icy, "I understand your concern, but I will not have you question my commitment to student safety. This university has a protocol for such incidents, and we are following it. Perhaps you should focus on educating your students instead of grandstanding."

Ben's anger surged, fueled by a lifetime of subtle dismissals. "Grandstanding? I know how idealism can curdle into something twisted in the wrong hands. Maybe you should focus on the shadows under your nose instead of condescending to me about protocol!"

The room went silent, the air crackling with unspoken accusations. Bethany shuffled her feet, clearly uncomfortable.

TeSsay leaned back in his chair, his voice smooth once again. "Professor Musser, your...passion is noted. But you are not an expert in security matters. You've stated your concerns. We will take them under advisement. But rest assured, the well-being of our students is paramount."

Ben knew the conversation was over. TeSsay’s words were a dismissal wrapped in bureaucratic pleasantries.

"Don't worry, Dr. TeSsay," he said, his voice tight, "I'm not leaving this alone. If you won't protect our students, I'll find someone who will."

He turned and walked out, Bethany trailing behind him. In the hallway, she grabbed his arm. "Professor Musser, wait! Should I...should I quit working on my thesis?"

Ben looked at his student, so young, so vulnerable. "No, Bethany," he said, his resolve hardening, "don't let them scare you. Stay alert, and keep your ears open. Maybe we can figure this out before they make another move."

The sun beat down as Ben and Bethany exited the administration building, the weight of the conversation with Dr. TeSsay settling heavily on them. Frustration simmered in Ben, replaced by a cold resolve. "He's more invested in protecting the university's reputation than finding Catalina, George and the others," he muttered.

Bethany, her usual optimistic spirit dimmed, chewed on her lip. "We can't just wait around. What if there's something we can do?"

Ben stopped, considering. "The police are investigating, but…" he trailed off. A risky idea sparked in his mind. "There's a chance Cat might have left a clue behind in her dorm room. Unofficial, of course, but…"

Bethany's eyes widened. "You're thinking of breaking in?"

"Technically, it would be unauthorized access," Ben hedged. "But if Catalina was taken, wouldn't that justify looking for evidence?"

Bethany hesitated. The idea of breaking into a dorm room felt wrong, but the image of Catalina, missing and potentially in danger, trumped her reservations. "We wouldn't damage anything, just look for signs of a struggle," she finally agreed.

A plan, shaky at best, began to form. Catalina’s dorm was on the other side of campus. As they walked, Ben discreetly slipped a small, multipurpose tool from his backpack into his pocket – a carryover from his desert camping days, a habit he hadn't quite shed.

Reaching the dorm building, they found it bustling with students. Bethany, ever resourceful, spotted a group of girls leaving one of the rooms. "Hey, excuse me," she called out, a friendly smile plastered on her face. "Do you mind if we ask you a quick question?"

The girls stopped, curious. Bethany explained that they were Catalina Ramerez’s professors and were checking in as they hadn't seen her in class. The girls confirmed they were Cat's friends and that she'd said she was planning to study with them that day. They hadn't seen her all day.

"Did she seem…different?" Ben asked, probing for any odd behavior.

The girls shook their heads, confused. "No, not at all. Her usual self."

Ben and Bethany thanked them, the unease growing with each passing moment. Cat, meticulously organized, wouldn't just disappear. They needed to see her room.

Reaching Catalina’s floor, they found it deserted. Taking a deep breath, Ben knelt before the door. With practiced dexterity, he used the tool to manipulate the lock. The click that freed the latch sent a jolt of adrenaline through them.

Inside, the dorm room was a picture of normalcy. Textbooks lay open on the desk, notes scrawled in her neat handwriting. Her clothes hung neatly in the closet. But something felt wrong. It was too pristine, lacking the small personal touches that usually spoke of its inhabitant. Most unsettlingly, her toothbrush and other daily necessities were still there.

Ben scanned the room. Nothing seemed to indicate a struggle, a hasty departure. This wasn't a runaway situation, but a calculated abduction. Catalina was gone, vanished without a trace.

A sick feeling settled in Ben's stomach. Ben couldn't shake the feeling that he was that the university was hiding something. This wasn't a simple missing student case the local police could handle. He needed someone who wouldn't shy away from the harsh truth, someone who understood the darkness that could lurk beneath the facade of academia.

Reaching into his pocket, Ben pulled out his phone, his expression grim. "We need to call someone who can handle this," he said, his voice tight. "Someone outside the university. Someone like FBI Special Agent Eve Black." Eve, with her past ties and her own unconventional methods, was their only hope of finding Catalina and the others.

# Chapter Three

## The Surveillance Game

Special Agent Eve grimaced at the lukewarm Starbucks in her travel mug. It tasted suspiciously like disappointment, the prevailing flavor of her stakeout. Three hours. Three excruciating hours watching her suspect, Brad Weston, water his prize-winning petunias with a meticulousness that would make a CIA analyst weep.

"Eyes on target, Black," Agent Hill's voice crackled over the earpiece. "He just fertilized his pansies. Riveting stuff, huh? Think they'll grow faster now that he's juicing them?"

Eve rolled her eyes, her own training in behavioral analysis kicking in. Brad's relaxed posture while gardening was a stark contrast to the tense energy she usually saw in high-level financial crooks. "You could've warned me he was a horticultural enthusiast, Hill. I might have packed a copy of "Fifty Shades of Fertilizer."

"Patience, Agent. Insider trading isn't exactly a thrill-a-minute operation...unless you consider the thrill of watching paint dry."

"Noted," Eve muttered. If Brad tried to sell his petunia secrets on the black market, she'd personally lead the raid, caffeine-fueled and ready to rumble. Another suspicious twitch of his watering can and she might just snap.

Suddenly, Brad straightened, the gardening guru replaced by a man with a purpose. Eve's body went on high alert – shoulders tensed, gaze narrowed. He marched purposefully inside, then returned thirty minutes later in a suit, his briefcase clutched tight. Bingo.

Eve, ever the professional (with maybe a splash of "whiskey-swilling detective" trope because, why not?), tossed the tragic coffee remains and grabbed her gear. Ten minutes later, she was tailing Brad's minivan in her painfully bland rental. The trail led them to a part of town even Google Maps seemed to avoid. This wasn't your average stockbroker's lunch territory.

Eve parked a safe distance away, her keen eyes scanning the scene. Brad entered a building adorned with a faded sign that proclaimed "Lefty's Gym – No Wimps Allowed." She snorted. Interesting clientele for a supposed pillar of the financial community. Maybe Brad was into extreme wellness programs?

"Hill," Eve murmured into her mic, her body language expertise picking up the tension in her own shoulders, "Looks like Brad's got a passion for… unconventional forms of stress relief."

"Stay sharp, Black. This could be where the real action starts."

‘Stay sharp, did he think she was a rookie? Hill has no idea who he’s talking too, or the way I take car of men like him.’ Eve mumbled to herself. She adjusted her earpiece, settled into a position with a clear view, and prepared to analyze the heck out of this shady situation.

Lefty's was a testosterone-fueled nightmare of questionable workout routines. The air crackled with a mix of sweat, stale protein powder, and a hint of desperation perfect for a B-grade action movie. Brad stood near the boxing ring, the crisp suit a stark contrast to his surroundings. He was flanked by two goons who gave "former bouncer" and "debt collector" vibes, their body language radiating barely-contained aggression. This was getting juicy.

Eve's instincts screamed "danger". Brad's usually confident gait was stiff, his jaw clenched, eyes darting around nervously. The goons, on the other hand, were swagger personified. Something was about to go down, the only question was, what?

The gym's layout was a surveillance nightmare. No discreet corners, just open space and bulky weights. Eve sighed. Time to improvise. Grabbing her gym bag (cleverly packed with covert recording equipment that would make Q Branch jealous), she sauntered past the front desk, flashing the receptionist a dazzling smile. Internally cringing at the perkiness, she chirped, "First day back! Excited to sweat out those vacation margaritas!"

The meathead behind the counter grunted, eyes glued to the fight replay. Score one for clueless gym bros. Onward, Special Agent!

Eve headed straight for the "vintage" treadmill closest to the ring, adopting a brisk jog that was half for show, half to steady her nerves. Discreetly adjusting an innocent-looking water bottle holder, she now had a close-up recording angle. Showtime.

The negotiation was all hushed tones and tense body language. Then, Brad did something unexpected. He reached into his briefcase and pulled out... photos? Blueprints? Eve strained to see, her pulse echoing the frantic beat of the gym's awful soundtrack. Bingo. Whatever those plans were, they were worth a brown envelope of something shady.

Before she could even process the trade, the goons were gone, their smug confidence a stark contrast to Brad's lingering unease. As he exited, Eve nonchalantly switched off the treadmill, her mission now a mix of satisfaction and a knot of worry in her gut. This was bigger than insider trading – industrial espionage, maybe something even more sinister. Sending those blueprints to Hill would yield some interesting results.

The tail back to Brad's house was about as exciting as filing expense reports. His GPS blip led her through cul-de-sacs lined with eerily perfect homes, an unsettling calm after the adrenaline rush of the gym. The frown on Brad's face was a nice touch - she was betting his quiet life was about to get messy. Eve parked discreetly, her mind whirling. Those goons weren't hired muscle, they were ex-military or worse. Which meant...

"Hill," Eve spoke into the mic, her voice low, "Those aren't your average thugs. I'm reading ex-military vibes. Run that plate deeper."

A pause, then Hill's voice, crackling with urgency. "Give me an hour, Black. You stay put, eyes on the target."

Staying put wasn't in Eve's nature, especially when her instincts were tingling. Brad's open garage was a siren song – reckless, possibly illegal... and completely irresistible. Armed with latex gloves (because even secret agents need germ protection) and a healthy dose of self-preservation-be-damned, she slipped out of the car.

The garage had "suburban bombshell" written all over it. Boxes, tools, and… jackpot. A stack of discarded blueprints, matching the ones she'd seen earlier, with frantic scribbles. Kneeling, she carefully sorted through the papers, her pulse quickening with every revealed detail.

"Bloody hell," she whispered. These weren't industrial plans – they were for a high-tech, military-grade drone. Oh damn.

Hill's voice crackled in her ear, breathless. "Black, we have a hit on the plates. Those guys are tied to a radical militia group, known for weapons theft and extremist plots."

Eve swore, the puzzle pieces slamming into place. Militias, industrial espionage, high-tech drones...this wasn't about profit. This was about something far more dangerous. Eve was in over her head, and this time, it wasn't just her life on the line.

Just then, headlights sliced through the dusk. Brad was back, and he was walking straight toward the garage. Eve swore again, scrambling to hide. Footsteps got closer, and in a heart-stopping moment, she spotted Brad's feet through the gap beneath the door. If he saw her… well, it would get interesting, and not in the good way.

Then, a voice drifted from inside the house. "Honey, is that you?" Footsteps retreated.

Eve let out a breath she didn't realize she'd been holding. Time was a luxury she didn't have, but the blueprint… She crept toward the door, her movements a tense ballet in the dim light.

Just as she reached the threshold, a child's cry pierced the air. Eve froze. A small figure dashed into the garage, heading straight for Brad. A boy, maybe five years old, his face a mix of excitement and tears. "Daddy! You're home!" He launched himself at Brad's legs.

In that single, unguarded moment, Eve saw it. The tenderness in Brad's eyes as he scooped up his son, the genuine affection in his smile. This wasn't some heartless corporate monster. This was someone playing a dangerous game, and his family was caught in the crosshairs.

Knowing she couldn't leave that blueprint behind, she also knew she couldn't jeopardize an innocent family. A decision solidified, backed by a protective wave of mama-bear instinct as she watched the father and son. Stealing a final glance at the two, she slipped silently out of the garage.

The drive home was tense, a mix of adrenaline and the haunting image of a father's love. Hill's warning about the militia was a constant, unsettling buzz. She also knew retrieving that blueprint had consequences; she might have just made herself a target. But maybe, just maybe, she'd also saved an innocent family in the process.

Just when her thoughts were starting to overwhelm her, her phone rang. SAC Ford's voice, sharp and crisp, broke through the haze. Missing students, a secretive university society... ah, this smelled like an undercover mission. The kind that got your blood pumping, not your forehead twitching in suppressed rage.

"We're resurrecting Dr. Nicole Mathers.

# Chapter Four

## The Artist

Robert's soul bore the scars of East St. Louis. The city was an industrial beast of steel and concrete, a labyrinth of overpasses, tunnels, and the iconic Gateway Arch looming against the smoke-tinged sky. Beneath the veneer of commerce, a different city festered – one of broken sidewalks and darkened windows, the relentless hum of traffic punctuated by gunshots and sirens. This was his battleground, where anonymity was both salvation and suffocating weight.

His father's wrath had forged Robert's hatred of the place. East St. Louis was a city of lost dreams, where factories belched out despair instead of opportunity. Its streets were littered with the wreckage of lives – abandoned cars, vacant stares, the sickly-sweet scent of desperation clinging to the air. This was where 'Roberto' was born, a biracial kid yearning for a different skin, a different fate.

Home offered no solace. His cracked two-story box, with its steel-barred door and perpetually shattered window, was a prison masquerading as shelter. The breeze that whistled through the hole carried the cries of the neighborhood, a brutal soundtrack to his solitary existence. Evenings were spent huddled under threadbare blankets, the winter chill seeping into his bones, a chilling echo of the emptiness within.

His bedroom was a stark testament to his isolation. The cramped space, barely large enough for a bed and dresser, felt oppressive. Above him, the hole in the window was a grim reminder of the night he witnessed a man's life snuffed out in a flurry of violence. The memory lingered, a phantom chill settling over him.

Robert felt trapped, ashamed of the crumbling walls and his father's drunken rages that echoed through the house. His dreams of escape warred with a desperate sense of belonging. East St. Louis was his battlefield, but it was also the only world he knew.

The one refuge lay across the street. The Chinese restaurant was an oasis of order in the chaos. Gold lettering gleamed, and inside, the warmth of polished wood and steaming dishes offered a stark contrast to the harshness outside. Here, among the Aunties with their kind smiles and scolding tongues, he was more than just a lonely kid from a broken home. He learned Mandarin, the sing-song tones a balm to his spirit. He felt safe, useful, a flicker of ambition defying the weight of his city.

Robert's world reeked of stale cigarettes and cheap whiskey – the constant, nauseating reminder of his father. It was a scent that clung to the man's skin, to their crumbling house, to Robert's own dreams of escape. Wine later became a thing of sophistication thanks to those gallery openings with Raul, but even that couldn't erase the bitter tang of his past.

Coming out had been a battleground. His mother, with her quiet wisdom, had always known. A gentle hug and a whispered, "I love you, no matter what," had been the only absolution he needed. But his father...the mechanic's rough hands were meant for engines, not the gentle touch of acceptance. His dream of a son working beside him had crumbled, replaced by disgust aimed at Robert's 'arty' ways. He hated Robert's brushes and canvases with the same intensity he hated Robert's mother.

So, Robert hid. He hid his sketches, his aching heart, and his desperate love for the Impressionists – those rebels who defied rigid rules. They were freedom painted onto canvas, the splash of defiant color he craved amidst the grayness of his life. His own escape plan was a masterpiece in the making, a future painted in sun-drenched hues far from this broken place.

His mother's death was the final blow. Aged fourteen, his heart was already cracked, and his father's abandonment shattered it further. He retreated deeper into himself, pushing others away, a warped kind of self-preservation against more hurt. He'd been the harmless boy, the one who'd melted into the background... but now, a quiet bitterness took root within him.

Yet, he found a sliver of belonging amidst the Aunties. Their restaurant, with its gleaming sign and comforting aromas, was the one place the neighborhood's harshness couldn't penetrate. They fussed over him, clucking disapproval at his meager frame, feeding him until his hollow ache lessened. Their scolding for not studying more was almost a caress compared to his father's indifference. He learned Mandarin amidst the clatter of dishes, the lilting tones a salve for a lonely soul.

He was still an outsider, but they forged a kind of family. Theirs was a scarred sort of love, tinged with pity for his situation and born from a maternal instinct that transcended even his awkward attempts at protection. And within that, perhaps more than his art, lay the first seeds of Robert's healing.

Here's the revised version focusing on tighter flow, evocative descriptions, and deepening Robert's emotional complexity:

Mrs. Twain was more than a teacher; she was an angel in sensible shoes. The mysterious sack lunches, always on his desk, were a lifeline when his own home felt barren. It was she who saw the flicker of talent behind his quiet eyes, who fought alongside the counselor for the scholarship to UNM. And then, came her mother's ring – worn gold gleaming with a love she feared might fade too soon. It was the weight of a dream and a crushing sorrow, tucked into his pocket as the bus left.

Mrs. Twain stood at the station, a sentinel against the ache in his chest. The lemonade, tart and sweet against the lump in his throat, the picnic basket a token of a care he'd never truly known... He turned away from the bus window, hiding the tears that threatened to betray his brave facade.

New Mexico was a fresh canvas, but old habits clung tight. He was the boy who blended into the shadows, who hid his talent alongside his pain. Yet, here in Albuquerque, a sliver of himself dared to emerge. No longer bound by his father's scorn, he could just...be.

His hands were his solace, shaping paint and clay with an intensity that mirrored the storms within. Studios became his refuge, the scent of linseed oil and turpentine a balm. Supplies were meager, his cafeteria wages stretched thin, but creation was its own reward. Even so, solitude remained his shield. Friendships seemed a luxury when his art was both his escape and his closest confidant.

He was fiercely protective of his work. Each piece was a fragment of his soul laid bare, vulnerable to the careless touch or the uncomprehending eye. Fear warred with a desperate longing – to be seen, truly seen, yet terrified that they might not understand.

Then came Raul, brazenly confident in his own skin, a bright splash of color in Robert's muted world. Where Robert hid, Raul embraced. Bio 112 became a battleground – against the baffling intricacies of science and against his own reluctant admiration for Raul's easy grin and outstretched hand. Desperation, more than camaraderie, led him to accept Raul's offer. It was the start of something he couldn't yet name.

It was on a late Thursday night when they were sitting in Robert's dorm room, index card covering phylogenetic trees scattered around the rug where they sat.

It was the lingering touch of Raul's hands that made Robert's body tingle. It was unlike anything he had imaged those late nights in St. Louis. Raul brushed his fingers over Robert's shoulder and down his chest, sending the blood rushing to Robert's cheeks. He let his fingers move to Robert's sleeve and linger there, waiting for him to return the gesture. They had to study for the test, so Robert resisted. If he was truthful to himself, it was less the test and more the lack of his experience that made him hesitate that first night.

Robert had been working on his final project for nearly three years, and the time had come. He had never been so nervous in his life. Raul, his partner, and best friend, helped him transport the pieces to the University of New Mexico Art Gallery. Robert appeared to be flying by the seat of his pants, but he knew that he would have time to figure out any mistakes before the show opened. The gallery was upscale, with high ceilings and sleek black-and-white walls. Robert was so wrapped up in his work that he had not even realized what time it was. Robert was temperamental and getting upset about how things were going, but Raul knew it was part of his art. Being an artist meant being tough to deal with sometimes.

Robert, the first to broach the subject of Raul's missing teaching assistant, Catalina, felt a prickle of unwelcome heat creep up his neck. He'd never met the woman, yet weeks into the semester, Raul seemed to know her entire life story. A possessive anger simmered beneath Robert's carefully constructed mask of indifference. He yearned to get on with the show's setup, anything to distract Raul from his incessant praise of this ethereal being. Didn't Raul understand Robert's sacrifice, the countless hours poured into this exhibition? He forced a nonchalant shrug, the words bitter on his tongue. "Look, if tracking down your amazing, beautiful, and wonderful TA is more important than helping me set up, then maybe you should just..." Robert trailed off, the venomous edge to his voice betraying his simmering jealousy.

Raul, bleary-eyed from a sleepless night of frantic searching, barely registered the barb. Exhaustion gnawed at him, leaving him with no patience for Robert's theatrics, so he left the gallery. Raul walked past the parking lot and crossed the road, oblivious to the man flipping his cellphone open and the others in the car springing into action.

As soon as Raul was out of sight the van pulled up to the gallery entrance and screeched to a halt, blocking the doors. The men did not know what they were up against, Robert could be a fighter, but they doubted it, they never knew any artist types, but both Marco and Jose agreed, they were never very manly.

 "Marco, it's your turn to give em the good ole' chloroform nap." As the older of the two, Jose took the boss role too seriously.

"Fuck that, Jose, I did the guy from school in Utah." Jose knew holding the gun was the safer of the jobs, and he wasn't about to get kicked in the nuts like the chick did, hell, his balls still hurt when he thinks about it, and it has been near two months.

"Ah hell, gimme the shit then." and snatched it out of his hands. Marco knew it was all about stealth, but that worked better when the lights were off. He jiggled the doorknob. "Fuck, the door's locked, do we really have to get him tonight, how about tomorrow?"

"The boss said tonight, quit being a fucking puto, Marco." He looked around for a rock and threw it at the glass door." It cracked but didn't break.

"Now who's the puto, Marco." Jose found a bigger rock and threw it at the door. The crack grew, but not enough to break it. “Your wife can throw better than you.” Jose never missed an opportunity to let Marco know how pussy-whipped he was, and that it made him less a man to let some chica tell him what to do.

“Fuck you, man. Don’t talk about my wife!” Jose never stopped harassing him, probably because his old lady was too ugly to do anything but stay at home and do his bidding.

“Why, afraid she’ll hear and make you stay at home?”

They both tried again and again, and finally a custodial worker showed up, open the door and asked the men what the hell they were doing.

Marco picked up the gun and shot the custodial worker and down he went. "Who's the fucking pussy now, Jose?"

"You get the janitor; I'll get the faggot."

"Jose, come on man, don't talk like that, my Maria's brother is one of those, and he's a good guy."

"Sorry, I forgot." Marco walked down the hall, muttering under his breath about the woke generation who didn't have a clue about life. He stopped when he saw a room with the door open. "Hey, you," he called out. "We need some help, there's a janitor passed out by the door, we need a phone."

"I'm down here." Robert reached in his pocket to get his phone, "I'll call 911.

As soon as Marco got close enough, he covered Robert's mouth and kept it there until the chloroform took him down. "Hey boss, the faaaaa artist is out."

Jose walked down the hall to the studio and looked in. Nothing in here but pieces of art lying around, shit he thought, where are the spoils? and started to walk out, as soon as he was within range he said,” Nothing inside but some of them fucking paintings."

"You idiot, they're art, Jose, you fucking moron."

"What the fuck's the difference, they aint got a price tag on em."

"Leave em, we gotta get out of here.

"Bueno, entonces vete a la mierda, Marco." he walked over to the passed-out Robert and kicked him in the side. Then reached under his arms and dragged his unconscious body out to the van and threw him inside. He then went over and helped Marco with the janitor. "Let's throw him in Duck's pond and head to Graham Bell Airport.

“Sounds good, should we stop for food on the way, it’s a good hour drive?” His stomach growled at the mere idea of food.

“Sure thing, bud.” They were best friends and made a fucking great team.

# Chapter Five

## The Ricin Lab

Cat jerked awake, slung over a shoulder like a forgotten duffel bag. Each blurry step pounded a fresh wave of panic through her skull. They descended into darkness, her body a ragdoll against brick and unforgiving metal. A sharp turn, a bone-jarring tumble, and finally, the scrape of his shoes on a flat surface. What the hell was happening? Her drug-addled mind conjured monstrous images, each worse than the last, fueled by the dank, fetid air rasping in her throat.

The hallway stretched before them, a grotesque parody of a living space. The cracked concrete floor was slick with unseen moisture. Plywood walls, warped and stained with indeterminate grime, seemed to close in. The ceiling was low, dotted with sputtering fluorescent bulbs casting sickly shadows.

His grip on her loosened, and she was unceremoniously dumped to the floor. Desperation clawed at her as she attempted to scuttle backwards, but rough fingers yanked at her hair, a painful reminder of her captor's presence

He shoved her toward a door. A dull roar of feminine voices buzzed in her ears. The door creaked open, spilling dim yellow light. Not a dungeon as her fevered brain had initially painted, but something even more unnerving.

The room was sterile. Pale paint peeled from the walls, revealing glimpses of institutional cinderblock. Five sets of metal-frame bunkbeds were crammed along either side, rumpled sheets hinting at a hasty departure. At the foot of each bed sat a plain wooden trunk. And facing the far wall, a row of girls. Nine or ten, their thin shoulders rigid with a silent dread.

Skinny, yes, some with skin stretched taut over protruding bones. But their clothes were clean, mismatched t-shirts and shorts that screamed enforced uniformity. Hair hung in limp braids or utilitarian bobs. Not the filthy, broken victims she was expecting. It was strangely...orderly. An unspoken fear vibrated in the silence, a chilling undercurrent beneath the room's forced sterility. Who were they? Where had they come from? And what twisted game was being played here?

She sniffed the air, expecting the stench of filth and excrement, but instead it smelled of industrial soap. The girls were thin, with shadows like bruises beneath their eyes, but their clothes were clean, and their hair – whether in braids or bluntly cropped – was free of grime. A flicker of misplaced hope sparked in her chest. Disheveled bunkbeds lined the room, five sets on each side, with trunks at their feet. It seemed hastily prepared, a makeshift dormitory.

A question bubbled up in her throat, but the man backhanded her across the face before she could speak. He snarled at her in a language she didn’t recognize, spit flying from his lips. His violence left her stunned and disoriented. He grabbed her arm with bruising force, dragging her towards a bunk and pointing towards a box filled with clothes and toiletries. Then, he turned and left. The heavy click of the lock echoed in the sudden silence.

Her cheek stinging, she spotted a girl who looked about her age. "What's happening?" she began, but the girl lunged forward, covering Cat's mouth with a desperate hand. Her eyes were wide with terror as she shook her head, backing away as if Cat carried a plague.

A low murmur rippled through the room. The girls weren't speaking, but their hands moved with a strange fluidity, weaving silent conversations. Frustration bubbled up in Cat. Another attempt at speech was met with the same fierce silencing, the girl mouthing "No talk" with a pleading urgency.

Still wearing her sports bra and shorts, the cold began to seep into Cat's skin. She reached for the thin blanket on the bed she assumed was hers. The other girls scattered, retreating to their bunks like startled birds. With a final, jarring click, the lights plunged out, and the room was swallowed by an inky, oppressive darkness.

The next morning, a rough shake yanked her from a fitful sleep. One of the girls, gaunt-faced but with a surprising strength, motioned urgently for Cat to rise and find her place in the line snaking across the room. Moments later, the girl at the front began a series of exercises, the others mirroring her movements with a strange, synchronized obedience. It dawned on Cat then, with a chilling jolt: this wasn't a place of chaos, but of twisted order.

Her shoulder throbbed, and a tentative touch confirmed her fear. There was a lump, firm and angry, beneath the skin. They'd injected her with something – a tracking device, like the chips they implanted in beloved pets. Panic warred with a bitter sort of amusement. She wasn't some stunning exotic bird, plucked from obscurity. Her curves, her slightly crooked nose - they didn't fit the profile of the girls she'd seen snatched and sold on the news. She felt oddly invisible amidst the regimented jumping jacks, and no one seemed to care about her non-participation.

Cat trailed behind the girls into the bathroom, her mind reeling. Their silent hand ballet was fascinating, yet unnerving. Fifth-grade sign language wouldn't cut it, but maybe later... Her reflection in the cracked mirror was a shock – tangled hair, wild, bloodshot eyes. A quick shower couldn't wash away the lingering sense of violation. Clothes were laid out for her, and she locked her meager belongings in the trunk. Bedtime, only it was morning. She sat, a knot in her stomach, and risked mimicking the alphabet with her hands – H I. Confusion, then a shy grin and a wave. Progress.

The girls in fresh, identical outfits sat primly on their beds, hands weaving their silent conversations. Nothing to read, nothing to write with. Cat traced C A T in the dust on the wall, pointing to herself. The repetition clicked, her new companion beaming as she mirrored the action: L I S A. Then, the same knock, the scramble, Lisa pulling her along. Upstairs, a startling change of scenery awaited.

A large, open room filled with tables, and... men. Young men, unkempt and wide-eyed, radiating a different kind of fear from the girls'. Instead of bonding, these men radiated distrust. A sorry cast of stereotypical nerds: Thick glasses, some clean-shaven, others sporting scraggly beards, a mix of bodies from lanky to pudgy. Ill-fitting pajamas completed the pathetic picture. They'd seen rough times. Cat's stomach churned with a new realization. They were not interested in sex; this was something far stranger. And if none of these guys looked like criminal masterminds... well, that left the guards, and they exuded pure, brutish stupidity.

The guards were a stark contrast to their captives. Army fatigues hung loosely on their muscled frames, the rifles slung across their bodies grimy and neglected. These weren't soldiers, but thugs masquerading as such. Their faces were hard masks, jaws perpetually clenched. Sweat glistened on their skin, pores gaping, sending a harsh wave of over-soaped musk through the air.

Two women, stout and weathered, heads wrapped in the kerchiefs of another era, wheeled in carts overflowing with food – eggs, toast, cheese, orange juice. A shrill whistle pierced the air, and the girls fell into seats with trained obedience. Each plastic place setting gleamed under the harsh fluorescent lights. They ate in silence, a strange contrast to the boisterous guards. Only one girl seemed amiss – skin flushed; breaths ragged. She refused food despite the silent pleas from those around her.

The ascent into the lab was like entering a different world. Thermocyclers, centrifuges, gleaming glassware—it was a molecular biology lab, and a well-stocked one at that. Lab coats were distributed, and a lanky man with a clipboard handed each of them a notebook. Cat's stomach twisted when she opened hers. Page after page filled with meticulous directions, the word 'Ricin' a chilling refrain. Holy hell. A glance at the sick girl confirmed her worst suspicions – these people weren't just making poison; they were testing it.

Divisions formed – genetic engineering, cultivation, extraction. Her group was extraction, a chillingly methodical process: crushing seeds, heating broth, cycling it through ice. It yielded a deceptively innocent-looking orange liquid. Handle with care, they were warned. Cat did the mental math, factoring in the scale of the operation. This wasn't petty theft; this was a fortune in the making.

First run: squeezing seeds, crushing the life from them. She caught Lisa's eye across the room. The sick girl was working with her group, looking even worse. Cat's shift blurred by, and tiredness was a distant ache. Even the itching from her injection site had faded, a worrying lack of sensation. Lunch, then dinner: cabbage mush, bread, and enough calories to keep their bodies functioning. Then more extractions. No clocks, no windows – a world stripped of time.

Finally, the whistle. Shuffled back into their cells, the lock clicking behind them. The sick girl was surrounded by the others, her condition deteriorating. Somber whispers filled the room. Lisa tugged Cat over, pointing to herself – L. Then, to Cat... M. Had Lisa forgotten her name? Cat signed back, emphasizing the C. Lisa pointed to another girl – C. The penny dropped. But why M? She shrugged, miming the letter. Lisa leaned in, her voice barely above a breath: "Meow." Of course. Cat.

Here's your rewritten scene, focusing on sensory details and building an atmosphere of menace and unease:

The lab manager was a skeletal figure. Thin, graying hair clung to a skull-like head, his eyes like black beads sunk deep in their sockets. A permanent sneer twisted his lips, drawing attention to a nose and chin as sharp as daggers. His pale, papery skin stretched tight over bone, and he twitched constantly, a flurry of nervous energy. His long white lab coat seemed an absurd luxury in this place, its starched crispness a stark contrast against the grime and despair. Every rustle of fabric as he moved was an accusation. He carried tissues like weapons, dabbing at his nose with a disdainful air, as if the very act of breathing their air was an offense. If one of them accidentally brushed against him, a new lab coat would materialize, an ominous reminder of his untouchable status. His voice lacked warmth, words slicing through the air like scalpels.

The guards exuded a different kind of danger. They swaggered, shoulders thrusting, feral eyes raking over the girls. Their stares were heavy, unblinking. Tension crackled beneath their skin, visible in the pulse at their throats, the shallow rise and fall of their chests. Cat met their gazes and saw a dark reflection of her own fear: the older one balding, his scalp gleaming under the harsh fluorescent lights; the younger with a wild mop of black hair obscuring his eyes. Both were towers of muscle, their presence looming over the captive scientists.

Here's a reworked version of the scene, focused on building a chilling sense of routine, Cat's growing desperation, and the unsettling isolation of the new girl:

The sick girl's absence at exercise was a chilling weight that settled over the room. When Cat dared a glance, she saw only the outline of a body beneath the blanket, a grotesque reminder of their fragility. The other girls moved with grim efficiency, as though death in their midst was merely another task to be managed. A sickening thought bloomed in Cat's mind: maybe, in this twisted reality, it was. Escape wasn't a far-off fantasy anymore; it was a frantic pulse beneath her skin, a necessity before she too became a faceless body under a sheet.

Days blurred into a grueling cycle. Wake, exercise, eat, work. The evening meal was an indistinguishable mush, soup one night, then something… thicker, with a gelatinous texture and a lingering, familiar flavor. Liver, her mind screamed, a horrifying realization she desperately choked back.

It was a week after the first girl's death when another took her place. A newcomer, slightly older, her eyes wide with confusion and fear. She signed frantically to those who understood, a desperate plea: Where am I? Why? Her questions sliced through the air, a stark contrast to the chilling silence that answered her. They avoided her eyes, and within hours, it seemed even her desperate questioning had faded.

Lisa and her 'C' companion pulled Cat towards the Spanish girl's bed. Each ragged breath was a nail in her coffin, and Cat knew the poison coursing through her veins. There was nothing to be done. The girl's blood-flecked coughs, the rising fever, the vacant stare... a chilling echo of the first victim. Fear mixed with a terrible curiosity as Lisa gestured towards her, mouthing a silent question: What now?

Cat had learned the gruesome fate of the dead. The lab's hidden room... tables laden with tools not of science, but of desecration. Preservatives and disinfectants, a macabre mockery of care. The room fell silent as the girls were led around the bodies. For a fleeting, horrific moment, life seemed to linger. An echo of personality in the glaze of their eyes, their skin still faintly warm. Then, the ritual of embraces, of whispered goodbyes. Tears fell as the guards came, their touch brutal, not gentle. They dragged the body away and began their grim work.

The next corpse waited. Each girl now faced a grim reflection. When her turn came, the Spanish girl's skin was ice beneath her fingers. Cat's mind recoiled; this is wrong, this shouldn't be. The next shift was a blur of suppressed horror. And the newcomer? Gone, vanished without a trace.

Sleep was impossible. The image of the sick girl haunted her. Overheard whispers from the guards – a dismissed allergy, a hasty cover-up. Impossible. An allergic reaction wouldn't be this swift, this...final. But the truth was too monstrous to contemplate. Her fellow captives slept, oblivious. Cat was alone with the ghosts and the knowledge that her escape wasn't a matter of if, but how.

# Chapter Six

## The Road Trip

The drive back to Mobile tested the limits of caffeine dependence. Luckily, Starbucks had outposts strategically placed along the interstate – Jefferson Street in Montgomery for the initial jolt, Poarch Road in Atmore to power the final leg. Eve wasn't just about survival; she craved that legendary Valhouli brownie. Sometimes a counterterrorism special agent’s gotta have goals.

Home was… complicated. The kids were a much-needed dose of pure chaos, a welcome contrast to the simmering tension that was her marriage. Since uncovering Franklin's, shall we say, extracurricular activities, 'miserable' was an understatement. Still, field duty beckoned, and with it, the SAC and the dreaded possibility of a Franklin-shaped roadblock.

The SAC's office screamed 'government-issue chic'. Bland lighting, scuffed furniture, the lingering scent of old coffee – it was like walking into a tax audit in beige. At least the file on her desk wasn't titled "SA Black's Dubious Tactics." That would be awkward.

"So, Montgomery," SAC Ford began, radiating the bland charisma of a mid-level accountant. "How'd that little off-the-books escapade go?"

Eve mentally calculated the cost of faking her own death and starting fresh with a camel farm in Australia. "Well, SAC Ford," she chose her words strategically, "we achieved our objectives in… a timely manner."

Ford either missed the implications or was the master of passive-aggressive understatement. "Excellent. Now, about one Dr. Ben Musser…"

Eve's stomach did a perfect swan dive. Ben. Brilliant, socially awkward, probably-still-a-little-smitten Ben. "Ben's great. Heard he'd moved into academia. Guess he missed those thrilling faculty meetings."

SAC Ford squinted, a man more accustomed to budget spreadsheets than clandestine rendezvous. "New Mexico's field office called. Apparently your Dr. Musser contacted them," he grunted, shuffling papers. "Seems some students went AWOL, under suspicious circumstances. The President of the university's in a flap, local police couldn't be bothered. Given your…existing ties to Musser, and our fondness for cost-effective solutions, we're sending you back undercover. As Dr. Mathers, we spent so many FBI dollars creating that persona, it only makes sense to bring it back."

"This is…unexpected, but good," Eve replied, scrambling to adjust her mental itinerary. "Gives me a chance to see my father in Tres Piedras, too." She omitted the tiny detail that involved Jackson, her pseudo-ex from an terrorism sting operation turned prison break. Life was messy that way.

"Splendid. Here's your refresher packet on 'Dr. Mathers'. Albuquerque expects you by Friday."

"Anything else, sir?"

"Just one thing, Eve," Ford leaned back, chair creaking ominously. "Get outta here before Human Resources catches wind of this trip. They're still a bit sore about... well, the Montgomery incident."

On the drive down Highway 65, the Sandhills rolled past like a never-ending screensaver. The kids were a welcome whirlwind – Harper's tales of sentient crayons, the baby's newfound ability to drool on command. Franklin loomed, his tidy existence the antithesis of the wild ride her life had become.

Packing was an exercise in compartmentalization. Eve the Mom shoved aside Eve the Agent, who in turn ignored the echoes of Eve the Slightly Unhinged Academic Flirt who'd once captivated Jackson. Nina Simone's mournful trumpet filled the room, then… coffee! Eve, the Caffeine-Addled Wonder, shoved the others aside.

The phone's ringing shattered the musical truce. Franklin? Panic flared, then subsided. It was Ben. Smooth, awkward, and probably still wearing mismatched socks.

"Eve, so glad you're coming!" he practically chirped. "UNM's a madhouse, but dinner? Some local place, catch up?"

Eve switched gears faster than a getaway driver. "Sounds great, Ben. Let's do it. I need a break from…budget reports." She glanced at the nanny hovering in the doorway, an unspoken question in her eyes.

Bag half-packed, Eve let logistics take over. Ignore the missing students mystery, ignore the Jackson-shaped complication lurking in New Mexico, and definitely ignore the simmering marital disaster awaiting her return.

Eve's return to the house wasn't marked by fanfare. The nanny nodded silently, her eyes flicking between Eve and the half-packed suitcase. Harper, bless her chaotic heart, came barreling down the hallway, a whirlwind of glitter and half-finished drawings.

"Mommy!" The shriek wasn't so much a greeting as a sonic assault. Harper attached herself to Eve's leg, a sticky-fingered koala bear with an impressive vocabulary and even more impressive lung capacity for a four-year-old.

Eve scooped Harper up, feigning enthusiasm. "Hey, sweetie, did you miss me?" Internally, she measured escape routes. A well-timed migraine wouldn't be suspicious, right?

"I watched Frozen! Like a million times!" Harper declared, bouncing in Eve's arms. "Daddy says you have to watch it with me tonight."

That explained the headache building behind Eve's eyeballs. "Wow, sounds amazing," she managed, wincing internally. A Disney sing-along marathon was not her idea of optimal mission prep.

The baby, thankfully, chose that moment to wail, effectively ending the glitter-fueled interrogation. The nanny, hovering with unspoken judgment, swooped in to take charge. Eve, grateful for the reprieve, tried to remember which closet she'd shoved her other suitcase into.

Franklin materialized, as if conjured by her desperation. "Eve," he said, his tone the epitome of placid neutrality, "I didn't expect you so soon."

Right. Because a wife returning home was completely out of the ordinary. Eve pasted on a smile that probably resembled a grimace. "Change of plans."

His gaze skimmed over the suitcase. "Heading out again soon?"

"Something like that." The prospect of an imminent departure now seemed like a tempting escape route. "Work trip, unfortunately. Can't be helped."

Franklin nodded, the perfect image of the supportive-yet-not-too-nosy husband he likely wasn't anymore. "Well, let's make the most of the time we do have. Ice cream after dinner?" He shot Harper a playful wink.

Betrayal, oddly enough, tasted a lot like vanilla with sprinkles. Eve mustered a smile. "Sure, sounds good. I should, uh, finish packing."

As Eve retreated to her room, Harper's relentless rendition of "Let It Go" echoed through the house. At least the soundtrack fit her current situation. The suitcase might as well be a ticking time bomb, her careful compartments of identity about to explode in spectacular fashion. And the worst part? She hadn't even reached New Mexico yet.

The ice cream parlor was a study in artificial cheer. Bubblegum pink walls, sticky booths, the cacophony of shrieking children and rattling spoons... If Dante had designed a level of hell for spies, it would resemble this.

Eve sat stiffly across from Franklin, a wall of forced smiles and strained conversation between them. Harper, oblivious to the undercurrents, was in sugar-fueled heaven. The baby, bless his soul, mostly drooled on his bib and occasionally punctuated the awkwardness with a well-timed shriek.

"So," Franklin began, the word hanging in the saccharine-sweet air, "tell me about this trip."

"It's… a case," Eve replied, carefully avoiding specifics. "Nothing particularly exciting, I'm afraid."

Franklin's smile held a hint of something Eve couldn't quite decipher. Pity? Calculation? "I'm sure you'll excel, as always."

The words were polite, but the undertone chilled her. Did he know? Suspect? Was this some twisted form of payback for her own deceptions?

"Mommy, watch!" Harper thrust a spoon overflowing with sprinkles and half-melted chocolate at Eve. "You have to try it!"

Eve forced herself to take a bite, the overly sweet concoction making her stomach churn. It was a perfect metaphor for the situation – saccharine facade, an undercurrent of tension, and a lingering sense of nausea.

Franklin cleared his throat, "SAC Walker, Albuquerque called earlier. Interesting little case they've roped you into, out in New Mexico."

Eve's spoon clattered against the table. Her carefully constructed composure cracked. "How do –"

"Ford worked it out, they need me in NM too." Franklin's smile was thin, devoid of warmth. "Seems my data analysis skills are of interest. You won't be alone."

Eve's mind raced. This wasn't a mere complication; it was a wrecking ball aimed straight at her precariously constructed undercover world. She could practically see the Albuquerque mission implode, dragging her marriage and possibly her sanity down with it.

Harper, sensing the shift in mood, thankfully lost interest in her ice cream. "Can we go to the park?" she pleaded, tugging on Franklin's sleeve.

The change in topic was a godsend. "Of course, princess," Franklin replied, his voice softening immediately.

As they left, Eve caught her reflection in the shop window. A woman with tired eyes, a smudge of chocolate on her cheek, and a secret life about to unravel in spectacular fashion. That image, not the sticky-faced children or her husband's sudden involvement, was the true terror.

Back at the house, the illusion of domestic normalcy crumbled. Franklin, ever precise, corralled the children into bath time and bedtime rituals with practiced ease. Eve watched from the sidelines, feeling more like a ghost than a participant in her own family's life.

The nanny, a silent witness to the strained dynamics, lingered awkwardly just outside the nursery door. "Mrs. Black," she ventured, a touch of concern in her voice, "is everything alright?"

Eve managed a weak smile. "Just tired," she replied, the lie a shield against the chaos brewing within her. "Long drive and all."

Once the house finally quieted, the silence was deafening. Franklin took his usual spot on the sofa, a book open on his lap, a glass of scotch at his elbow. The embodiment of the well-ordered life she'd both built and betrayed.

The silence after Franklin's revelation stretched, heavy and suffocating. Eve stared at him, the familiar image of her husband fracturing before her eyes. Years of lies, a carefully constructed life, all crumbling at the edges.

"Montgomery," Franklin repeated, his voice tight. "The disappearances… it all makes sense now. You're in deep, Eve. Deeper than I ever imagined."

Part of her wanted to lash out, to scream accusations of his own darkness. But logic, cold and clear, held her back. She couldn't afford distractions, not now.

"Yes, Franklin," she admitted, her voice hoarse. "This case… it's bigger than missing students. There's a darkness there, a danger I can't quite place."

He scoffed. "Danger? You thrive on danger, Eve. That's why you need me there. My skills, my analysis – they can be your edge."

The very suggestion sent a shiver down her spine. Franklin as her partner? A walking conflict of interest, a potential landmine waiting to explode. But revealing the truth, the monstrous truth of his past, was not an option. Not yet.

"Listen to me," she said, forcing her voice into a semblance of calm. "This isn't about your skills, Franklin. It's about… discretion."

He raised an eyebrow, skepticism etched on his face. "Discretion? Since when do you care about keeping things quiet?"

"Since this case took a turn," she countered, her voice hardening. "There are things involved… things I can't explain. Sensitive tactics, blurred lines. Having you there would complicate matters, raise unnecessary questions."

A flicker of something – was it hurt, or perhaps a flicker of understanding? – crossed his features. "You don't trust me, Eve?"

The question hung in the air, a painful accusation. Trust. It was a fragile commodity between them, especially now.

"It's not about trust, Franklin," she said, her voice softening. "It's about protecting you, protecting the children. This… this mission might get messy. I need to know you and they are safe, away from the chaos."

A long silence followed. Franklin studied her, his gaze searching, as if trying to see through the carefully constructed facade. Finally, he spoke.

"You're right," he conceded, his voice devoid of its earlier anger. "The kids… they need normalcy. And maybe… maybe you do too, away from all this."

Relief washed over Eve, a tidal wave after moments of holding her breath. "Thank you, Franklin," she said, the words sincere despite the tangled web of emotions she felt.

He reached out, his touch lingering on her hand for a fleeting moment. "Just be careful, Eve. More careful than you ever have been."

His words held a hidden meaning, a veiled warning that sent a tremor through her. He might suspect something, but the truth of his own darkness remained buried. For now.

As dawn painted the horizon, Eve finished packing her bags, a hollow victory settling in her stomach. Franklin would stay behind, a shield against suspicion but a constant source of unease. Albuquerque awaited, a tangled mess of missing students, hidden dangers, and a truth she had to keep buried at all costs.

This mission wasn't just about finding the students; it was a desperate race against time, a race to keep her fragile world, her double life, from imploding.

# Chapter Seven

## The Bureau Mobilizes

Eve pulled into the Albuquerque field office parking lot, a knot of dread tightening in her stomach. Home away from home, but not really. Inside, the familiar drone of keyboards and hushed conversations greeted her, but the air buzzed with an undercurrent of tension that even stale coffee couldn't mask.

Special Agent in Charge (SAC) Walker emerged from his office like a thundercloud, his grim expression setting the tone. "Black," he barked, his voice tight. "You're late."

Eve kept her expression neutral. "Travel delays, sir. Ready to get started."

"Ready might be an overstatement," Walker grumbled. He gestured towards his office. "Come on, let's get this circus rolling."

The briefing was pure nightmare fuel. Missing students weren't just missing; they'd vanished without a trace. No ransom demands, no social media chatter, nothing. It wasn't local cops dragging their feet; it was something far more sinister lurking in those shadows.

"This reaks of something big, Black," Walker said, slamming a file shut. "And HQ sends you, the undercover expert. Guess that means they finally decided to stop covering their asses and deal with the problem." His stare was as heavy as the desert heat.

Annoyance flickered within Eve. It wasn't just the condescension; this was her area of expertise. She knew how things worked, sometimes better than those behind their desks.

"Let's be clear, SAC Walker," Eve replied, keeping the ice out of her voice with effort, "I'm here to find those students, same as you. Protocol, publicity, that's your headache. Mine's getting results."

Walker's steely gaze held hers for a long moment. "Bold words, Agent Black. Let's see if you have the actions to back them up. You've burned bridges before, if I recall."

Her past hung in the silence, unspoken but undeniable. "Those bridges, sir," she countered, "Saved lives. I'll do whatever it takes to save these kids, too."

His frown barely lessened. "See that you do. Because if this blows up, it's your head on the chopping block. Understood?"

Eve nodded, frustration burning beneath her professional facade. Walker was either oblivious to the danger she courted daily or just didn't care. And there, in that sterile office, a familiar thought surfaced: who was the real enemy here? The invisible ones who'd snatched the students, or the ones who'd sent her, with all her messy baggage, to clean up the mess?

The briefing room became a pressure cooker, Walker's relentless cynicism a constant grating counterpoint to Eve's instincts. He questioned everything – her assessment of the situation, her proposed undercover approach, even the necessity of the Dr. Mathers persona.

"Going in dark, alone, with that… flamboyant alter ego?" Walker scoffed. "Sounds more like a suicide mission than an investigation."

Eve gritted her teeth. It was one thing to endure Franklin's doubt, born of worry and the unraveling of their marriage. Walker was different – dismissive, distrustful, seeing her as a loose cannon rather than a honed weapon.

"SAC Walker, with all due respect," she retorted, her voice deceptively calm, "I've spent more time undercover than you have behind a desk. My methods work."

His eyebrows shot up. "Perhaps. But your reputation precedes you, Agent Black. Maverick, insubordinate… those files don't make for comfortable reading."

The insinuation, the implied threat, hung heavy in the air. Eve was tempted to reveal just a sliver of the truth, the countless times she'd danced at the precipice to save lives. But protocol, that ironclad shield, held her tongue.

"My record speaks for itself," she said, her voice clipped. "Success where conventional methods failed. But if you find that inconvenient..."

Walker slammed a fist on the table, rattling the half-empty coffee cups. "Inconvenient is a mild word, Black. What I find is recklessness, a trail of potential disasters barely contained, and a disregard for procedure that could cost lives."

Eve stood her ground, fire sparking in her eyes. "Lives are exactly what's at stake here, sir! Missing students, a danger hiding in plain sight, and you're more concerned with my paperwork?"

A muscle ticked in Walker's jaw. "My concern is preventing a tragedy, not facilitating one. You go in there half-cocked, stir up God knows what… those kids could end up collateral damage."

The accusation hit a raw nerve. She wasn't reckless; she was calculated to the extreme. Yet, Walker's distrust was a mirror reflecting her own fears. In his eyes, she saw the risk she embodied. The fine line between hero and ticking time bomb.

"I'm not some wild card, SAC Walker," Eve pushed back, the tension stretching between them. "I'm a scalpel. Precise, when used correctly. Let me do my job, or find someone else willing to take this on. But don't stand here and hamstring me before this even begins."

Her ultimatum hung in the air. The silence was deafening. Finally, Walker leaned back, exasperation warring with something like grudging respect in his eyes.

"Fine," he relented, his voice gruff. "But you screw this up, Black, you'll answer for it. Not just to HQ, to me. Personally."

It was far from a vote of confidence, but it was a start. Eve's relief was tinged with a defiant spark. She’d navigate the minefield that was UNM, and she'd do it her way. And if SAC Walker got in her path… well, she'd always been good at dodging bureaucratic bullets.

The initial friction between Eve and Walker crackled with open hostility. He scrutinized her every move, breathing down her neck during her undercover prep. It wasn't just professional doubt; she sensed a simmering personal animosity she couldn't quite place.

A new urgency filled her. She had to tread carefully. Her usual tactics, that calculated recklessness, wouldn't cut it. Not with Walker scrutinizing her, likely waiting for her to make a fatal misstep. Eve needed to keep Walker off her scent, protect her past actions, all while unraveling whatever sinister forces were preying on UNM.

# Chapter Eight

## The Ticking Timebomb

Robert woke on the cold concrete, his head throbbing, his vision swimming with confusion. The smell of turpentine assaulted his senses, and the harsh overhead lights cast an eerie pallor. Why was he here, surrounded by art supplies?

Trying to remember, he closed his eyes. The art gallery... setting up for the show... and then a crash, shattering glass. After that, the memory faded into a nauseating blur.

His eyes snapped open. Scattered across the floor were brushes, paints, everything an artist craved. But amidst the alluring colors, one detail brought a chill to his spine. In front of him was a familiar landscape, one he'd studied in art history class. It was stunningly beautiful, yet infamous – painted with pigments laced with cadmium and lead.

The instructions were chillingly clear: duplicate the masterpiece or face the consequences. The importance of the painting was not due to the talent of the artist, but it was known to be one of the deadliest paintings on the planet.

Robert knew the pigments well. If inhaled or absorbed by his skin, it would be a slow, agonizing death. Visions of respiratory failure, madness, and organ shutdown flooded his mind.

He tried to look away, but the vibrant brushstrokes held him captive. The red of a sunset, the lush green of the valley – were they as soft as they appeared or would the toxic dust dance off the canvas itself? The temptation to touch was horrifying... yet irresistible. He refused to believe that that was going to be his fate, someone would find him before the pigments killed him.

He wanted to scream, to thrash in despair, but something held him back. If he died, they won. To survive, he needed to focus. Robert had to paint his way out.

The first brushstroke felt alien in his hand. A blob of cadmium red, too viscous, too... alive. It dripped onto the pristine canvas, forming grotesque shapes. He fought the urge to wipe it, forcing his hand into controlled shapes. The struggle wasn't just with the paints, but with the shadows of hallucinations creeping into the edges of his sight. With each stroke, the toxins clawed at his mind, making him doubt what was real.

Already, his eyes were swelling with the venom of the pigment, and it was hard for him to breathe through his burning throat, which was clogged with a dried-up mix of saliva and pigment. Robert prayed for blindness so he would not have to see his end approaching. He tried to imagine not going blind, tried to imagine a world with only black and white hues, tried to imagine it would be enough. But he could think of nothing but his end. Spiraling out of control was not going to help, the best thing he could do for himself, was to shake this off, and hope he will be rescued before the fate he was fearing actually happened.

Robert was in a small room with a hotplate, an electric kettle, and small refrigerator, and a cot in the corner. His stomach started to growl so he looked for some food in the mini fridge, which was stocked with pieces of finely chopped chicken, some popcorn, some chocolate, a few small pieces of fruit, and a bottle of wine. Robert was in a small room with a hotplate, an electric kettle, and small refrigerator, and a cot in the corner. His stomach started to growl so he looked for some food in the mini fridge, which was stocked with pieces of finely chopped chicken, some popcorn, some chocolate, a few small pieces of fruit, and a bottle of wine.

He wondered a little about the previous guest. Was he still in New Mexico? He looked around the room, walked over and sat down on the cot, and picked up the pillow and looked for a tag. Made in China. Well, that was not going to help him one bit. He threw the pillow down, grabbed the bottle of wine and sat in front of the easel.

The stool squeaked as he sat, and nearly slid out from under him, the rubber sole of his tennis shoe halted the movement and saved him from falling on his ass.

Next to the easel was an old wooden table, the dark, heavy wood worn smooth. Spots and drops dried paint stained nearly covered the top, and Robert slid his hand across the hills and valleys. The pigments were in small little glass jars and were placed in rows on a table. Each row held a color, red, orange, yellow, then green, blue and purple. The colors were placed in order like a rainbow or the colors of a setting sun. They calmed him. The first row contained reds-blood reds, pinky-reds, and even a purple so dark it was almost brown. The second row held yellows, bright and buttery-yellow, lemon yellow-yellows and a mix of pale yellows that he could almost mistake for white. The last row contained the purples of an eggplant and the blues of the sky at twilight; yet there were also blues so light they were as white as the clouds. John looked at them in fascination. He wondered how he could have ever thought these colors were ugly.

The brushes were old school, from what he could tell they were made from the hair of hogs. The bamboo handles were darker than dark, worn smooth by use. More brushes than he could imagine ever using. Some were nearly full of oil paint. Oil paint is demanding and corrosive, so he would go through them quickly. He held one, he loved the feel of them in his hands. When they became too dry to pick up any more color, the edges would fray. These brushes had seen a lot. Their bristles held back a million drops of red and yellow and brown. Their bony handles could hold back a million more.

Robert dipped his brush into the red paint and drew a circle. The paint was thick and viscous. He watched the red dye drip and splatter onto the canvas. The droplets ran down to the bottom of the circle and pooled into a red spot. The rest of the paint on his brush piled up on top of the bristles as a blob and puddled on the canvas. The blob wasn't a blob anymore, it was a blot.

Robert stared at the spot – it wasn't big enough. Way too small. He dipped his brush again, overloading the bristles with paint, but something held him back. The damn thing was yanking his arm around like a puppet on a string. He wanted to stop, to pull back, but some crazy instinct inside him kept on swirling. The circles started forming a line, marching right across the canvas against his will.

The brush moved with more purpose; its movements were a little more controlled than before. Robert struggled with the brush, but it was no use. He bit his lip and his eyes darted left and right. He watched his hand and the brush, they moved with certainty and purpose. Robert turned the canvas around to see what was happening, but he didn't recognize the picture.

There was a face in the center of the canvas, it was a circle in the middle of a series of circles. The face was surrounded by a black halo, its eyes were white, and it had a black dot for a nose and an oval for a mouth. It was a white face, with black eyes, a red spot in the center of its forehead, and a black circle around its head.

Robert was shocked by the face; he didn't draw it. He wanted to stop the brush, but he couldn't. The brush continued, adding to the face. He couldn't in his hands, like it was his own skin. He liked the way it moved. It felt like it moved on its own. He liked the feeling of it moving on its own. As he relaxed more paint dripped from the brush and splattered onto the canvas. Robert felt himself smile; it was a good feeling.

Sunlight pierced the shed window, glinting off something on the canvas. One of those black dots – now an oval – shimmered in shades of yellow and green instead of its inky origins. Robert had never touched those colors. Leaning in, he realized the gleam wasn't paint at all. It was like a jewel had somehow sprouted from the canvas, but that was impossible. He'd been thinking about jewels while painting... but a jewel sprouting from the work itself?

His memory jolted, the events of last night flooding back. Suddenly, his confusion gave way to a grim acceptance. He shouldn't fight it, hadn't it been easier when he'd surrendered control? Letting the brush do as it pleased took away the struggle.

The brush moved faster, and the face morphed into a smile, its eyes went from white to black and back to white, its cheeks grew full, and its chin was sharp. Then the brush moved down to the black halo. The halo was growing into a circle, as the halo grew, the face shrank. A perfectly round black circle with a white dot in the middle appeared. The white dot turned into a white oval with a black dot for a nose and an oval for a mouth.

The brush stopped and the paint on the bristles dripped onto the canvas. The bristles were too wet to hold more paint. Robert relaxed, his breathing slowed, and his muscles relaxed. The brush felt good in his hands. He liked the way it felt when it was first picked up. He liked the way it felt when it was put down and he was done painting with it. It was smooth, warm, and comforting, like a good friend.

The sun was high in the sky, and it was starting to get warm. Robert looked at the picture again, he loved it. It looked like a target. In the center was a white face with a red spot in the middle of its forehead, surrounded by a black circle. Surrounding the face were red concentric circles and a black border. The red was blood red, and the black was charcoal black.

This was not the painting they, whoever they are, not the painting they wanted from him, but he had to build up his skills with the new paints, brushes, and unfamiliar space.

Robert could see the face in the center, but he could also see the target. He decided to call it "Curse of a Thousand Cuts" because that's what he felt like he had become. He thought about it for a while and decided he also liked the "Curse" part, because he felt like his new life was a curse.

Robert's throat felt like sandpaper. Every word he rasped out was a struggle, a testament to the hours he'd spent yelling into the pipe. He yearned for relief, for something cool and refreshing to soothe the raw ache in his throat. His eyes darted towards the bottle of wine, a desperate flicker of hope. But logic battled with desperation. Wine wouldn't quench his thirst, it would only dehydrate him further.

He knew he needed a break. His body ached from the strange contortions he'd put himself in while trying to communicate with Mandy. With a heavy sigh, he shuffled towards the mini fridge, a small beacon of normalcy in this bizarre prison. A bottled water, condensation clinging to its cool surface, seemed to mock him. He grabbed it gratefully, along with an apple – a small token of freshness in this sterile environment.

The first gulp of water was pure bliss. It trickled down his parched throat, carrying away the dust and despair that had settled there. The apple, misshapen and imperfect, held a surprising sweetness that belied its grocery store origins. Each bite was a tiny rebellion, a defiant act against the sterile monotony of his surroundings.

Exhaustion gnawed at him, urging him to rest. But a different kind of thirst gnawed at his soul – the thirst for cleanliness. The bathroom beckoned, a single room housing a toilet, a sink, and a shower. It was the only such facility in his entire captivity. But a wave of apprehension washed over him as he focused on the shower. The pipes, a corroded mess, seemed to whisper of insidious diseases lurking within their rusty embrace. The air itself felt thick with the potential for poisoning, a slow, agonizing death delivered through the very water meant to cleanse.

Fear wrestled with his desperate need for hygiene. If the pigments didn't kill him, this place would, he thought grimly. With a deep breath, he reached for the bathroom door, the rusty hinges groaning in protest as he opened it. What awaited him on the other side would send a jolt of surprise through his already frayed nerves.

Robert's stomach lurched as he unzipped the leather bag carelessly left behind by one of his captors. Relief warred with apprehension. Maybe, just maybe, this bag held the key to escape, a clue to their location, or even a hint of his captors' identities. But as he peered inside, a cold dread settled in his gut.

There were four unlabeled bottles, filled with a clear liquid that could be anything from water to a potent poison. Each glint under the harsh light held a sinister promise. Were they meant to keep him docile, or worse? He pushed them aside, a shiver crawling up his spine.

Beneath the bottles lay a crumpled mess of printer paper, the kind churned out by a cheap home computer. Unlike the sterile white paper, he used in his studio, these sheets were a roadmap of desperation. Coffee stains like angry brown splotches marred the surface, each one a testament to frantic late-night scribbling or a captor's careless disregard. He gingerly picked up the top sheet, his breath catching in his throat.

The scrawled handwriting wasn't his. It was messy, urgent, the frantic scribblings of a stranger trapped in this same nightmare. Confusion clouded his mind. Was this a message from another captive, someone they'd snatched before him? Or was it a chilling note from his captors, taunting him with a fabricated rescue effort? His heart hammered in his chest as he flipped to the second page, each word a potential landmine. More of the same panicked handwriting filled the page, punctuated by unfamiliar names. Each name sent a fresh jolt of fear through him – were these other victims, or simply a list of potential targets?

His eyes scanned the pages with a desperate urgency. Then, on the final sheet, a single line jumped out at him, stark against the coffee-stained chaos: "Find Robert." The world seemed to tilt on its axis. Robert. His name. Was this a desperate plea from another prisoner searching for him, or a twisted game his captors were playing? The room spun, the implications of that single line twisting like a barbed wire fence around his already frayed nerves. Panic threatened to engulf him, but a flicker of defiance sparked to life within him. He wouldn't give in to their games. He had to understand what this meant. He had to find out who left this message, and why. He had to find a way out.

The weight of the paper stack seemed to press into Robert's hands, each page a potential revelation, a clue to the nightmare he was trapped in. His fingers trembled as he contemplated opening one of the mysterious bottles. A cool drink, a numbing oblivion… it was so tempting. But what if they weren't harmless? What if this, too, was part of his captors' cruel game?

Logic won out over desperation… for now. He had to understand what those cryptic notes contained before yielding to any substance that might cloud his already unsteady mind. Besides, if there was one thing his captors seemed to provide, it was wine.

The bed, though small, looked inviting. Its crisp linens and neatly arranged pillows whispered of rest, a stark contrast to the harsh concrete floor where he'd spent the sleepless night before. He could spread out the papers, decipher them in some semblance of comfort. Yet, even that small luxury seemed tainted. He craved the familiar sting of wine, the temporary escape it offered from the terror clawing at his insides.

The first page was a grotesque menu detailing a different kind of human trafficking. Names he didn't recognize – artists, musicians, scientists – a collection of stolen potential. He desperately hoped for a spark of recognition, but found only despair.

He flipped to the next page – another sickening list. And the next. Name after name, each followed by a chilling implication - an address, a skill, a target marked for exploitation. This wasn't random kidnapping – it was the deliberate harvesting of talent.

The final page made his blood run cold. A map of his city, familiar streets twisted into a predator's hunting ground. Marked bus stops, circled buildings… a sinister network laid out before him. Ten thousand dollars lay beneath the papers, not a ransom but a down payment on the value his captors placed on his skill.

The wine bottle was nearly empty, but it offered little solace. The room seemed to close in around him – the shadows, once merely annoying, now seemed to seethe with unseen eyes. Was he being watched? Were there cameras hidden within the cracked paint and rusted pipes? Panic surged alongside a desperate need to act. His survival depended on it.

He moved with a frantic energy he hadn't felt since he'd yelled himself hoarse into the pipe. He tore into the bag again. The bottles, their contents a chilling mystery, were shoved aside. He craved clarity, and those enigmatic liquids offered none.

The map became his focal point. Familiar landmarks, now poisoned with a new meaning, demanded his attention. Perhaps within those scribbled circles and marked bus stops lay a pattern, a clue to their base of operations. He squinted at street names, his artist's memory trying to piece together a larger picture.

Distantly, he registered the crinkling of paper, the lingering scent of coffee. He ran a trembling hand through his hair – the notes were important too. Were the names victims, or perhaps a chilling catalog of potential targets? His captors clearly possessed an intricate knowledge of their victims' whereabouts. If he could reverse engineer this twisted logic, maybe he could find a way out.

A new surge of adrenaline pushed the fear to the background. He wasn't just fighting for himself anymore. The names on that list were real people, their lives hanging in the balance. He spread out the map on the floor. With a combination of determination and dread, Robert began to sift through the clues. He would find the pattern, decipher their network, and somehow turn the tables on these monsters.

he acrid wine coated Robert's throat, a harsh echo of the terror coursing through his veins. With each ragged breath, the implications of the list, the map, the cash, weighed heavier. He wasn't just trapped; he was a commodity, his talent a twisted bargaining chip in a nightmare he couldn't comprehend. Panic gnawed at him, a primal urge to scream, to thrash against the metal table – anything to drown out the silence that felt like another layer of confinement.

He pounded his fists on the table, the sharp retort offering a fleeting sense of agency. Yet, it was a pathetic gesture against the enormity of his situation. He needed a way out. His gaze fell on the pipe, a rusty lifeline in this stark prison cell. But what could he use as a signal, a desperate Morse code against the encroaching despair?

The empty wine bottle mocked him, a useless relic of a fleeting rebellion. He snatched it up, the cheap, fermented grape juice a bitter mockery of freedom swirling within. With a surge of desperation, he brought the bottle down hard on the pipe. The clang reverberated harshly, more an expression of anguish than a cry for help.

Silence descended, a thick blanket smothering what little hope remained. Had anyone heard? Was there another captive trapped nearby, struggling with the same sickening helplessness? Robert banged again, the sound a frantic, rhythmic plea. Then again. His arm ached, each impact sending vibrations through his body – a physical manifestation of the tremors wracking his soul. He had to believe he wasn't alone. He had to...

A muffled sound, a mere echo of existence, pierced the chilling silence. Robert's heart leapt, slamming against his ribs like a trapped bird. Another faint thud followed, and hope ignited within him, a tiny pinprick of light in the smothering darkness. He sent another desperate clang against the pipe.

"I'm here!" His voice was hoarse, barely above a whisper, yet it held the weight of a lifeline.

His ears strained, seeking any response. Then, a voice, weak and hesitant, filtered through the wall: "I'm in the next room... help... can't move the pipe..."

He banged the bottle again, his entire body humming with urgency. "Hold on!" His other hand grasped the pipe, shaking it with desperation. Nothing. It held firm, a mocking reminder of their shared imprisonment.

"Mandy…” the name emerged unbidden, a desperate question in the silence.

"Mandy..." Her voice sounded younger than he'd expected, laced with exhaustion and a haunting edge of confusion. "Weeks maybe... time... it blurs. Who…?" She trailed off, strength ebbing with each syllable.

"Robert," he blurted out, his focus laser-sharp. "I got here yesterday. Mandy, where are we?"

His breath caught in his throat. Then – "Boston. I'm from Boston."

His stomach plummeted. The papers – that chilling list – flashed before his eyes. "Mandy... what do you... what do you study?"

"...Art history," her voice barely carried through the wall, a fragile whisper laden with both confusion and a spark of impossible hope.

"An art history student…" Dread and realization warred within him. His eyes darted to the discarded papers scattered across the floor. Mandy Taryn. The name was there, a damning confirmation of his worst fear.

"Mandy..." his voice shook slightly. "There are others. They've taken more of us."

A chilling silence, a void of unimaginable terror. He pictured her on the other side, a stranger whose fear now mirrored his own. Then, her voice trembled back, barely audible, "Robert?"

"I'm here, Mandy. I'm not leaving you."

The promise hung heavy in the air; a weight he wasn't sure he could carry. But in this suffocating darkness, it was the only lifeline he could offer. Neither of them was alone. And in that fragile connection, their shared defiance, hope flickered – a tiny flame against the monstrous forces holding them captive.

"Yes… Robert…" Her voice trailed off, then with a surprising spark of determination, "I'm so glad you're here. I've been so scared."

"I know, Mandy. Me too. Let's talk tomorrow, figure out a way to escape."

"Me too, Robert." Her voice was stronger now, the first flicker of determination piercing through the fear. "I've heard them… noises, whispering. But never this close."

His own fear was mirrored in her words. "How many, Mandy? How many rooms do you think? We need to get out." The bottle slipped from his clammy grip, the metallic clang echoing in the oppressive silence.

"I don't know," she confessed, her voice tinged with a childlike helplessness that made his stomach churn. "Sometimes the voices are clear, sometimes… whispers. Different people, different accents. I think they move us."

The terrifying implication hit him like a physical blow. If they were being moved, it meant the network was even larger than he feared. "Have you seen them? The ones holding us?"

"No..." Her voice cracked. "They bring food when I'm asleep. But I think... I think there are cameras."

Invisible eyes, always watching. He shuddered, a wave of claustrophobic nausea washing over him. "Sleep, Mandy. We'll make a plan tomorrow. Together." It felt like a hollow promise, but he needed her to cling to some semblance of hope.

A long silence stretched out. Then, with surprising strength, she replied, "Okay, Robert. But… promise you won't leave me alone." Her words hung in the air, a desperate plea that cut through him.

"Never," he vowed, his voice ragged. Sleep beckoned, a dangerous but necessary escape. Yet as he finally drifted off, it held the tang of the pigments and a strange undercurrent of excitement. He was no longer alone in this nightmare, but that brought a chilling realization. Someone out there was methodically collecting talent, twisting skill into a grotesque form of imprisonment.

Sleep offered a temporary respite, but the shared nightmare lurked just beneath the surface. Robert awoke with a jolt, the acrid tang of the cheap wine still clinging to his tongue. A sliver of light peeked beneath the heavy door, a grim reminder of another day in their captivity.

He glanced towards the wall, a flicker of hope battling the gnawing fear in his gut. "Mandy, you awake?"

A muffled reply came through the pipe. "Barely. What time is it?"

"No way of knowing," he admitted, frustration creeping into his voice. "But it's time we started figuring out a way out of here."

Silence hung between them, heavy with the weight of their situation. Finally, Mandy spoke, her voice laced with a terrifying realization. "Robert," she started hesitantly, "do you remember those names on the list… and the addresses?"

A cold dread washed over him. "Yeah. What about them?"

"Think about it, Robert. Every name… every address… a person with a specific skill. And you, an artist. Me, an art history student." Her voice trembled on the last word.

He scrambled towards the crumpled papers scattered on the floor, a sickening dread creeping into his gut as he reread the contents. The horrible truth slammed into him – they weren't just kidnapped, they were commodities. Their skills, their talents, were being exploited in some monstrous way.

"They're not just holding us captive, Robert," Mandy's voice echoed through the pipe, barely a whisper this time. "They're using us…"

"Using us how?" The words scraped against his raw throat.

"The pigments. In the newspapers, there were stories… about forgeries. Deadly forgeries. Artists dying from exposure to unknown pigments." A strangled sob escaped her voice. "We're the key, Robert. We're the ones who are going to create those forgeries."

The revelation hung between them, a monstrous truth that turned his stomach. They weren't just prisoners; they were instruments of destruction. Each brushstroke, each meticulous detail, would be a death sentence, not just for the victims but potentially for themselves too.

As the enormity of their situation settled in, a new resolve hardened within him. He wouldn't become a tool in a madman's game. He wouldn't let Mandy become one either. They had to escape, not just for their own freedom, but to prevent a horrific crime from unfolding.

A jarring slam ripped Robert from the drug-induced haze. Eyes fluttering open, the world spun sickeningly. Disorientation pulsed through him – not the familiar ache of a hangover, but the insidious aftereffect of whatever they'd slipped into his food. He needed to focus. Think.

Something was wrong. The room, with its harsh light and threadbare furnishings, felt off-kilter. He scrambled around, a frantic urgency twisting in his stomach. Then, it hit him – the bag. Gone. The list, the money, those mysterious bottles… all vanished.

"Damn it!" he choked out. What were they planning? Were the bottles a twisted test? An antidote he'd now lost? His hands trembled as he lunged for the pipe, pounding it with renewed desperation.

"Mandy!" His voice cracked with fear. "Mandy, answer me!" The silence echoed back, each unanswered plea scratching at his sanity. Had they moved her? Was he truly alone now?

No. He wouldn't let his mind succumb to that darkness, not while she was somewhere in this labyrinth of captivity. Clenching his jaw, he turned away from the pipe. There was no time to drown in despair. Those cursed pigments awaited.

Each labored step towards the easel felt like a march to the gallows. The familiar scent of oils and turpentine now seemed laced with poison. To use those paints, the very means he'd spent a lifetime mastering, was to seal his own fate. Yet, refusal wasn't an option, not while there was a chance, however slim, to save Mandy, to disrupt their captors' monstrous plan.

He would paint. Perhaps, within his brushstrokes, he could find a way to signal for help, to leave a hidden message. Or maybe, just maybe, he could turn his talent into a weapon of defiance. He didn't have a plan, merely a flicker of hope to cling to as he prepared to create both a masterpiece and his own death warrant.

# Chapter Nine

## The Meet and Greet

As the tires of Eve's jeep crunched against the gravel driveway of the University of New Mexico Campus, she couldn't shake off the unease that had settled in her stomach. The stark contrast between the picturesque exterior of the institution and the grim reality of her latest case was jarring. She parked in a reserved spot, marked 'Visitor,' and stepped out, adjusting her blazer and securing her weapon and badge in the lock box in trunk of her car.

Approaching the entrance, Eve scanned the area, her eyes sharp and observant. Two agents from the Albuquerque Field office were waiting for her, their expressions a mix of curiosity and professionalism. Agent Collins extended his hand first, his grip firm as they exchanged greetings. Agent Rios nodded in acknowledgement before leading the way towards the administrative building.

Dr. TeSsay, the university president, greeted them with a warm smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. He exuded an air of authority, but there was an undercurrent of tension in his demeanor. After exchanging pleasantries, Dr. TeSsay gestured for Eve to follow him to his office. As they walked through the corridors lined with academic accolades and student artwork, Eve couldn't shake the feeling of being watched. She discreetly surveyed her surroundings, noting the security cameras strategically placed at various points.

Once inside his office, Dr. TeSsay motioned for Eve to take a seat while he settled behind his desk. His fingers steepled together as he studied her with a calculating gaze. "Agent Eve, I must say, your presence here is quite unexpected. To what do I owe this visit?"

Eve leaned forward slightly, her tone neutral but piercing. "Dr. TeSsay, we are here to investigate several missing students."

The university president's facade faltered for a split second before regaining composure. "I assure you, Agent Eve, the University of New Mexico takes the safety and well-being of its students very seriously. There must be some mistake, we have no reason to assume the students are missing. It is not uncommon for students to take off for a few days."

Eve's eyes narrowed, a slight smirk playing on her lips. "Funny you should say that, considering our investigation has unearthed some troubling discrepancies in the student enrollment records. Specifically, we have reason to believe that certain individuals listed as students have not been seen in several days, and in one case, weeks."

Dr. TeSsay's mask slipped further, a flicker of panic crossing his features before he schooled his expression into one of false concern. "I can assure you, Agent Eve, we will fully cooperate with your investigation. But I must emphasize that the university prides itself on upholding the highest standards of integrity and transparency."

Eve leaned back in her chair, her gaze sharp and unwavering. "Transparency is exactly what we're looking for, Dr. TeSsay. Starting with access to your records and any security footage from the past month as it relates to this case."

A bead of sweat glistened Dr. TeSsay nodded slowly, choosing his words carefully. "Of course. The safety of our students is paramount. We will provide any documentation or footage that may aid the investigation."

He stood, moving to open the office door. "Please, let me escort you to our records office. My assistant can pull the files you requested."

Eve rose as well, her expression neutral. "That would be appreciated. And I'd like to speak with campus security regarding the footage."

Agent Collins interjected, his voice laced with a hint of concern and a touch of amusement. "Special Agent Black," he said, addressing the undercover agent, "perhaps it would be best if you let Agents Rios and I take a look at the footage while you attend to the new faculty welcome." A brief snicker followed his words, a testament to Eve's infamous reputation within the agency.

Eve had no choice but to agree, though her jaw clenched in frustration. This was her investigation, and she chafed at the idea of being sidelined, even temporarily. But Collins was right - her cover had to take priority.

"Of course," she replied evenly. "I wouldn't want to be late for my first faculty meeting."

She turned to Dr. TeSsay with a polite smile. "If you could direct me to the meeting, I would appreciate it. I'm eager to meet my new colleagues."

TeSsay's relief was palpable as he ushered Eve out of his office. "Of course, Dr. Mathers. Right this way."

As she walked briskly beside the university president, Eve made note of the path they took. She catalogued each hallway intersection, stairwell, and security checkpoint. The layout could prove useful later in her investigation.

They arrived at a conference room already buzzing with activity. Eve adjusted her lanyard name tag - Dr. Nicole Mathers, Psychology- and stepped inside. She was greeted immediately by an effusive woman clutching a clipboard.

"Dr. Mathers! So wonderful to meet you. I'm Martha, the assistant dean of faculty affairs." Martha pumped Eve's hand enthusiastically. "Please, have a seat and we'll get started shortly."

Eve nodded and found a chair near the back of the room. As she glanced around covertly assessing the other attendees, her phone buzzed with an incoming text. It was from Collins.

Footage secured. Anomalies noted. Records next. Keep cover but keep eyes open. Something fishy here.

Eve's pulse quickened. They were on the right track. She had to tread carefully, but it was time to start digging deeper.

The welcome presentation began, a dull overview of bureaucratic monotony. But Eve was only half listening, her mind spinning with the possibilities this investigation presented. What were they hiding here? And where were those missing students? She was determined to find out.

The fluorescent lights flickered on, illuminating the conference room. A tall, balding man stood in front of her, looking down at her with a stern expression. “Dr. Mathers, I presume,” he said. He glanced over at the university president before turning his attention back to Eve. “It's not often that a president handpicks their own faculty, especially without consulting the bargaining unit. But until that's settled, welcome to the department.” He paused and added, “Dean Andrews couldn't make it, but she sends her regards

Eve maintained a pleasant smile, though internally she bristled at the dean's thinly-veiled skepticism.

"Thank you, I'm honored to be here," she replied evenly. "President TeSsay has spoken very highly of the psychology department, I'm eager to get to work."

The man nodded, his expression still guarded. "I'm sure he has. Well, I'm

Professor Barrington, chair of the department." He extended his hand.

Eve shook it. "Wonderful to meet you, Professor."

As he moved to take a seat, Eve discreetly surveyed the room. The other faculty members were engaged in quiet conversations, casting furtive glances her way. Word of an undercover FBI agent joining them had clearly spread.

Eve pondered how much they knew. Had TeSsay informed them of the missing students? Of the investigation? She would need to tread carefully, earn their trust while gleaning whatever information she could.

Her thoughts were interrupted as Martha tapped on the microphone. "Let's get started, shall we?" The presentations droned on, department overviews and introductions blurring together. Eve took notes and smiled pleasantly, all the while tracking names, relationships, power dynamics.

Finally, they reached the Psychology department section of the presentation. Professor Barrington took the mic, welcoming Eve briefly before launching into the role of the department within the university. Eve continued observing, watching for reactions at the mention of new faculty. A few polite smiles, mostly indifference. No signs of tension or concern.

As the meeting drew to a close, Eve hung back, hoping for a chance to speak with the professors one-on-one. A tall woman with sharp features approached her.

"Dr. Mathers? I'm Karen, we spoke over email. I'll be your department mentor." She extended her hand.

Eve smiled. "Of course, Karen, great to meet you." Here was her chance. She could gain Karen's trust, get access to more information.

As they left the conference room, Eve felt a swell of anticipation. She was on the inside now. It was time to put the pieces together.

Dr. Mathers followed Karen down a narrow hallway, the smell of spicy curry wafting through the air. "Just a temporary office while we make some changes," Karen explained. "Sorry about the lingering aroma – Dr. Gandhi had to abruptly leave for India." They reached a small room with a window overlooking the quad. It was cluttered but functional, with a desk and computer set up in one corner. Before Eve could go in and leave Karen behind she grabbed Eve’s arm and said, let’s get coffee.

Karen shifted her weight nervously as they walked down the hallway towards Dr. Barrington's office. "He can be a bit territorial," she whispered, glancing over her shoulder. "Just don't take it personally." She gave a half-hearted smile before knocking on the door and stepping inside. The stern look on Dr. Barrington's face confirmed Karen's warning as he gruffly greeted them.

As Eve and Karen made their way down the busy corridor, a tall, lanky figure caught their attention. The man's bald head gleamed under the fluorescent lights as he pushed past students without a second thought. Eve's FBI training kicked in and she instinctively moved Karen behind her, ready to draw her glock from her jacket. But then she remembered that she was now Dr. Nicole Mathers, not SA Eve Black, and forced herself to relax a little. However, her senses remained on high alert as the strange man continued his determined stride towards them.

“Hello,” he said, pausing and trailing off uncertainly as he struggled to recall the mentor's name. His eyes scanned her face, searching for a clue. Finally, he settled on a fake smile and continued, “I'm sorry, I seem to have forgotten your name.” He waited patiently for her to fill in the dots.

“My name is Karen,” she replied with a warm smile, stepping forward to greet him. “Provost Gregory, let me introduce you to UNM's newest faculty member, Dr. Nicole Mathers.” She gestured toward the woman standing beside her.

Dr. Mathers stood tall and proud, exuding confidence and intelligence. Her dark hair was pulled back in a sleek bun, and her sharp features were softened by a kind smile. As she extended her hand to shake his, Provost Gregory couldn't help but feel impressed by her presence.

“Dr. Mathers, this is Provost Sam Gregory,” Karen introduced them formally.

Eve strode confidently towards the tall figure of Provost Gregory, her heels clicking against the concrete sidewalk. As their hands met in a firm shake, she couldn't help but notice the strong grip and clamminess of his palm. The beauty of the UNM campus surrounded them, with red brick buildings stretching towards the sky and vibrant green trees lining the walkway. The scent of freshly cut grass added to the serene atmosphere as she greeted him warmly, taking in the surreal surroundings.

As they made their way down the hallway towards Provost Gregory's office, Dr. Mathers couldn't help but wonder about the role of a Provost. What exactly does he do? She discreetly wiped her clammy hands on her pants, trying not to notice the beads of sweat glistening on Provost Gregory's forehead despite the cool interior temperatures.

Engaging in small talk, they passed by various staff members and students bustling about their day. Each interaction left Dr. Mathers more curious about this new campus and its community. And as for Provost Gregory, he couldn't help but feel intrigued by this accomplished addition to the faculty and eagerly looked forward to getting to know Dr. Mathers better

Eve's eyes lit up when she spotted the familiar green mermaid logo on a sign. She eagerly ordered her usual tall black coffee from the barista. Karin kindly offered to pay for it. As Eve turned around with her drink in hand, she saw Professor Ben Musser, an old friend from her small hometown of Tres Piedras. Despite their complicated past - he was the one who had alerted the FBI about her father - she walked over and gave him a warm hug. She knew she could trust him; after all, he had risked his own safety by pretending to be her father’s alias, John Black, when an FBI agent came snooping around. With the help of her friend, Nadia, they had managed to incapacitate the agent and dispose of him and his car in a nearby ravine. It wasn't something they were proud of, but it was necessary to protect her father’s identity.

# Chapter Ten

## The Dancer in the Shadows

Sandra moved like liquid grace, her form a symphony of silk and steel. Born with rhythm in her blood, she was a dancer before she could walk. Sculpted by endless hours of practice, her body was a testament to both artistry and discipline – lean muscles rippling beneath skin as warm and yielding as honey. A fierce smile touched her lips, contradicted only by the lethal intensity in her eyes.

Dance was her birthright. She'd slipped into her first leotard at three, her dark hair twisted into a child's imitation of a ballerina's bun. Tiny victories followed - a half-scoop of ice cream with her mother, the sting of the words "dancers cannot be fat, Sandra" lingering in her ears.

Sandra's relationship with her mother was a waltz of love and resentment. Cruel critiques ("dancers are dancers no matter what") were woven amongst glowing praise ("you dance well, my little ballerina"). She was the eternal star, destined for greatness, an only child whose stage was shared with her demanding, ever-present mother.

There was that kindergarten triumph – the singing prize, her bittersweet second-place in dance. Her mother wept then, not in sorrow, but in a pride that burned brighter than any spotlight. Sandra was a ballerina. A beautiful ballerina, in her mother's eyes. Yet, her long, silky hair was a point of contention. Never neat enough, not styled enough. Sandra's endless practice left little time for friends, her chatter filled with dance, and her mother's voice echoing in her head: let your hair down, pay attention to your looks.

But...wasn't a ballerina supposed to be beautiful? All her life, it was "twig" this, "stick" that, from the envious girls at school. Her mother, the architect of her physique, dismissed them, "they don't know the difference between skinny and athletic." But now, her mother's focus shifted, implying there was something lacking, something to fix. It was a puzzle Sandra couldn't solve.

She was a twig, a stick, a dancer. She was, her mother insisted, made to be the best. Second place was failure. She had to win, no matter the cost. Yet, amidst the triumph and the pressure, a question began to stir: what was the price of being "pretty enough"?

Sandra couldn't remember a time they weren't teetering on the brink. Not some grand struggle, not the kind folks made movies about, but that gnawing uncertainty, the way a loose tooth wiggles before it finally falls out. Her father, Father Matthew, his eyes held a quiet, steady warmth. "We're getting a check from Jesus," he'd say, a smile playing on his lips. That confused her - how could Jesus send money? If he loved them so much, wouldn't he have sent more? Still, his faith was woven into their days like a golden thread, and she loved him fiercely.

He was the kind of father a girl dreams of - playful, gentle, a safe harbor against the world. Sandra clung to that warmth. Adult stuff felt far away, and with good reason. At six, she was a star. Not just with church plays; ballet took root in her soul. Every leap, every spin had that touch of something wild, some echo of her father's easy laughter.

"Just like your daddy," her mother would sigh, a hint of disapproval in her voice. "Too much fire, Sandra. A ballerina needs grace, a softness like mist." Sandra didn't see why. Daddy was amazing, so was being like him. But she also saw the worry lines on her mother's face, the tired way her shoulders slumped at the end of the day.

Her father was a beacon in the storm. He couldn't conjure bread for empty cupboards or mend their threadbare shoes, but his smile, a testament of faith etched into his weary features, was their anchor. He was her strength, the one person she knew saw her— truly saw her – with a child's unwavering certainty.

Deep down, a chill had settled in her young heart: her mother's indifference, a sharp, persistent sting. It was in the relentless attempts to mold her into something... different. The 'why' of it was a mystery, a child unable to comprehend the desire to extinguish what made her unique. Her mother's constant refrain, "for your own good", rang hollow against the question burning in her soul: Why not good enough as I am?

The venom dripped most freely in whispers, words like acid against her skin. "You're not as special as you think." "Deep down, you're a terrible person." And the most insidious of all: "Your father doesn't love you. He doesn't care." Each barb was a lie, she knew, because her father's love was a tangible thing, a warmth that wrapped around her like sunlight. Yet, the whispers were relentless, a cruel counterpoint to his quiet, "I love you, Sandra."

And so, a silent war raged inside her. She wanted to believe in her mother's goodness, craved that bond, but the evidence was damning. "My mother doesn't love me," the realization settled like a stone in her stomach. She believed the worst, because deep down, that's what her mother had taught her: a terrible person couldn't possibly be worthy of love.

Sandra grew up in a quiet neighborhood, her school just a heartbeat away from home. She liked the predictable rhythm – the familiar faces of her teachers, the steady tick of passing grades, the comfortable space she carved amidst the chatter of her classmates. Not the center of attention, never the loudest voice, but content in her own world. Sandra was a loner, yes, but never lonely.

Her father was her anchor. Homework sessions at the kitchen table were a quiet battleground where he taught her how to conquer fractions and stubborn verb tenses. Parent-teacher conferences, those dreaded public assessments, became moments of quiet pride as his weathered hands gripped hers a little tighter when the teacher spoke her name. Sandra knew, with a certainty deeper than bones, that her father was in her corner, always.

That same certainty gave her courage. There was no playground bully Sandra wouldn't face down, no injustice she'd quietly endure. Her voice, though rarely raised, was clear and firm, her gaze unwavering. Until it came to her mother.

Her mother's friends were a swirling tempest of silk scarves and bright laughter. To Sandra, their kindness felt thin, a sheen masking the sharp glances and whispers that followed when she left the room. They were the sharks circling the queen bee that was her mother, all razor smiles and patronizing advice.

Sandra's friends saw a different woman at those gatherings, a softer version of her mother. But Sandra? She saw the truth, the coldness simmering beneath the practiced facade. Her mother, with her perfect nails and flawless makeup, was a viper. Selfish, vain... and it was a war of wills neither of them dared speak of openly. A war waged in narrowed eyes, forced smiles, and thinly veiled insults.

Sandra hated her, and the hatred, a writhing thing beneath a mask of brittle politeness, was returned in kind. One day, curiosity burning, Sandra asked why their mailbox overflowed with checks from Jesus. Her father withdrew into his office, returning with a sheaf of papers so thick it made her own collection of sheet music look paltry.

"They're from Jesus," he said, a smile stretching across his face, false as a stage curtain. Even then, she sensed something wrong.

Then came the knock on a frigid Sunday morning. Two men, suits sharp, badges glinting coldly. Her father disappeared, swallowed by the stark authority of the law. She never saw him again.

The truth came later, a twisted revelation: the checks from "Jesus" were the congregation's tithes, stolen. The church, the community – their warmth evaporated, leaving Sandra and her mother to face the chill of betrayal alone.

Her mother sought solace in amber bottles. Wine with friends became wine at dinner, then wine always, a constant companion. As her mother retreated into the haze of alcohol, her support vanished. Ballet, the one beacon for Sandra, was cast into shadow. No more chauffeured rides to class.

Yet, like a determined sapling, Sandra found a way. Bus schedules became her gospel, a lifeline to the barre before school. Evenings, weekends – all were consumed by the work that would pay for this precious defiance. Her sanctuary became a locked bedroom, a barrier against her mother's increasingly erratic behavior, the parade of strangers that blurred into a faceless tide of disappointment. She retreated so fully from her home, there were days when she and her mother were nothing more than ships passing in the night.

The world outside might have turned against her, but the ballet studio was different. A fund, discreetly established by teachers who saw her unwavering drive. A scholarship, her talent undeniable. Sandra, a bookworm at heart, found herself walking onto the university campus, not with the books of a scholar, but the pointe shoes of a dancer.

When not in class or the studio, Sandra spent her time in Organic bookstore, working at night unpacking boxes, pricing books, and when lucky at the front of the store placing books on shelves, and helping customers.

The bookstore's warmth clung to Sandra's clothes as she stepped into the night, Saturday slipping into Sunday. Her heart, however, fluttered with anticipation – a rhythm set by the handsome young man who'd sought her out for three Saturdays now. Dreams swirled in her head as she slid into her weathered Honda Accord, the engine grumbling to life.

But the rearview mirror shattered those dreams. There he was, the man of her fantasies, no longer soft smiles and earnest questions about historical fiction. He was sharp angles and cold steel, the knife a jagged slash against the night.

Frozen, Sandra heard his command. Drive. Obey. His voice, once a gentle question, was now a low thrum of menace. She was his hostage, he a predator guiding her through the darkness.

His orders hung in the air – a harsh directive to drive, to flee through backroads, to abandon any semblance of a normal life. He was a criminal, she his unwilling hostage. Petrol pumped, the silence between them as dense as the gathering twilight. Her words, tentative attempts to break the tension, clattered against his steely resolve like pebbles thrown at a stone wall. She read in his taut frame a chilling expertise, the mark of a man who'd trod this path far too many times. Each rebuff was a knife against her skin, a stark reminder of her vulnerability.

Fear prickled like a swarm of insects beneath her skin as they drove. Hours bled into an eternity, finally culminating in a remote cabin nestled deep in the woods. Blindfolded, she was shoved roughly inside, the lock clicking behind her like the snap of a death sentence. Yet, a flicker of strangeness sparked within the terror – the faint murmur of voices, a man's comforting tone, and the giggle of a young girl. Was she facing a lone captor, or something far more sinister? Panic flared, then gave way to a grim determination. Deals whispered within her mind, a desperate attempt to armor herself against the unknown.

Time stretched into a torturous eternity. The door creaked open, a rough hand seizing her shoulder, guiding her up. A chair scraped against the floor, followed by the icy bite of a blade against her throat. Still blindfolded, senses straining, her only comfort was the strange plea for trust. How many others shared this shadowy haven? What twisted game awaited her? Terror battled with steely self-preservation as a rope bound her wrists, tethered to the chair's armrest.

A foreign tongue sliced through the air – voices swirling, quick and sharp, a man and woman, she guessed. Each syllable tightened the knot of fear in her belly. She bit back a cry, listening with an intensity fueled by desperation. Then, a sudden flurry of movement – the woman's voice rising in fury, the scrape of a chair, and a calloused hand dragging her forward.

The blindfold was a choking veil, darkness laced with the heavy scent of damp earth and the chilling echo of laughter. Her fight for survival erupted in a blind, desperate surge. Knees scraped, feet fumbled, and a scream ripped from her throat as freedom momentarily flickered before her grasp. But his grip was iron. She tumbled, slamming against the unforgiving ground, breath knocked from her lungs. Pain flared from her battered back.

His laughter grated above her, a victorious taunt. She was a frantic animal, thrashing blindly against his strength, fueled only by the sheer animal terror of the cornered. Another attempt to buck him off, another burst of contemptuous laughter. Her flailing foot caught empty air as he evaded her desperate kick.

Then, the blindfold slipped, and his hand closed around it, a brutal jerk yanking her upright, breath rasping in her strangled throat. In a terrifying flash, she saw him – a monstrously amused face looming above. She tasted her own blood on her lips, the world spinning. Fight or flight instincts warred within her, but all she could do was stare, transfixed by horror, as the darkness descended once more.

"Now now Sandra, all that flirting you were doing in the store with me, and now you want to hurt me?" Where's the fun in that?” His lip curled up in a sinister smirk. She remembered how she had been drawn to him, how she had thought him to be the typical cute guy, but now she saw his face was deceptively charming. Pure evil radiated from his eyes, and a lecherous grin spanned his face.

She heard the woman's voice again, it was not English, but she understood the tone, leave her alone. Maybe the woman was on her side? Sandra started to relax. What she didn't know was that the woman had said, "Leave the skinny bitch alone, she doesn't belong to YOU."

Sandra gasped as powerful hands dragged her across the room, her body a limp weight against his strength. He flung her into the closet, the impact jarring. The door slammed shut, the lock an ominous click. Footsteps pounded away, fading into silence. Darkness enveloped her, broken only by a sliver of light through the keyhole. She pressed her eye to the gap, catching glimpses of hulking figures striding down the corridor.

Heart hammering, she snatched the nail from the shadows of the cramped closet. Back at the door, each measured scrape against the lock echoed like a gunshot in the tense silence. The satisfying click that freed the latch was a fleeting victory. The immensity of the cabin mirrored the hulking figures she'd glimpsed. Escape was a fantasy; capture, a brutal certainty.

The ajar door offered a silent escape. The empty room held the faint echo of hushed voices, replaced now by a cold dread slithering down Sandra's spine. Straining her ears, she caught snippets of conversation from the next room, a harsh cadence that scraped against her Slavic background. It was Russian. No question. Heart hammering a frantic tattoo against her ribs, Sandra darted towards the door. A glint of metal on the table – a long, cruel blade. Snatching it, she sprinted for the exit. But a flicker of movement caught her eye. The woman, the one she'd thought an ally, stood bathed in the doorway, a traitorous glint in her eyes. A guttural shriek tore from the woman's throat, a string of Cyrillic consonants that sent a fresh wave of ice through Sandra. Before she could react, the woman had become a weapon pointed at Sandra, a weapon aimed at the men down the hall.

The hallway roared with pounding boots, echoing the frenzied thud of her own heart. There was no time for hesitation. Sandra bolted towards the woman, not at her, but past her. Every year at the barre, every painful extension, every forced turnout became her weapon. With a dancer's impossible twist, Sandra pivoted, dodging the woman's desperate lunge. One hand found a railing, and in a single, explosive movement, Sandra vaulted clean over the woman, her legs whipping through the air as she catapulted out into the open doorway.

Sunlight stabbed at her eyes and the crisp air felt like heaven on her burning lungs. Behind her came a frustrated bellow, but the woman was no match for Sandra's speed. She sprinted for the nearest car, yanking open the door and fumbling with the ignition - all with the desperate agility of a woman who knows she's dancing for her life. Tires squealed, spitting gravel as she tore away.

In her rearview mirror, the house shrank rapidly, the woman a mere speck consumed by the distance. Sandra drove, the stolen knife clattering against the dashboard with every bump. Escape was a ballet of its own, a dance of instinct and survival. Only when she was certain she was alone would she let herself fully exhale.

Relief crackled through her veins, a desperate pirouette before the inevitable fall. For one breathless moment, she was a phantom, a blur of metal and dust against the winding road. But her rearview mirror, that traitorous prop, shattered the illusion.

The black sedan materialized from a curve, morphing from shadow to predator in a heartbeat. It devoured the distance, a monstrous shark closing in. Panic wasn't a fist, it was an icy tide flooding her lungs.

Brake lights flared, tires screamed. Too late. The impact wasn't just metal on metal – it was bone against unyielding steel. Glass exploded, a deadly confetti that showered her as the world twisted, then warped into darkness.

Jolted awake, her skull was a snare drum pounded by an invisible hand. She tried to rise, but a white-hot lance shot through her ankle, a brutal curtain call. Darkness flickered at the edges of her vision.

"Impressive escape attempt, ballerina." The voice was cruel amusement set to a twangy drawl. She blinked, the world resolving into a blurry tilt – an airplane cabin. Old overalls. The reek of stale whiskey. Nausea churned, a violent encore, and blackness rushed up to meet her.

# Chapter Eleven

## The Lab Rats

Cat settled into a routine, the exercise, the meals, and the deafening silences gave her plenty of time to think of a plan. She noticed the younger guard eyeing her whenever she was in the lab, and this was going to be his weakness.

The lab, once a place of scientific rigor, was now her twisted stage. Every shared experiment became a calculated performance. She was the doe-eyed victim to his predator, and it was a role she played with chilling efficiency.

Andrei's touch was never gentle. A hand brushing against hers was heavy, a lingering grip on her arm left faint bruises in its wake. But with each flinch she suppressed, each forced smile, his arrogance grew. Her feigned fear became his fuel, her discomfort mistaken for thrilling submission.

He reveled in his dominance, his laughter booming against the sterile walls when she'd stumble beneath his leer. His jokes were crude, his boasts masked thinly-veiled threats. Yet, she'd listen attentively, tilting her head with a wide-eyed curiosity that hid her inner disgust.

He was a caveman, a relic of a brutal past. And she was his willing prey, or so he believed. Her thoughts were her own fortress. With each forced laugh and lowered gaze, her escape plan crystallized. His rough touch was not a weapon to break her, but a catalyst to ignite her fury.

The coffee cup became a symbol of their grotesque ritual. Each sip she endured brought her closer to freedom, closer to making him pay. He savored her submission, blind to the storm brewing behind her porcelain doll façade.

Night fell like a shroud, smothering the remnants of another grueling day. Muffled sobs echoed against the bare walls, a testament to the horrors her body could not forget. Andrei's touch lingered like a brand, a phantom heat against her skin. The familiar wave of nausea hit, not from the poison but from the gnawing tension that coiled within her.

The morning shift was a blur of feigned smiles and calculated glances. Her focus narrowed to the task at hand – a complex extraction that required precise measurements and delicate handling. A flicker of genuine frustration creased her brow as her eyes scanned the shelves. The crucial reagent taunted her from above, mocking her carefully cultivated charade of helplessness.

Andrei sauntered in, his thick accent slicing through the sterile silence. "Problem, princessa?" His leer made her skin crawl. Italy…his voice had the cadence of those romantic movies, not the harsh reality of her captor.

A plan took shape. "Just this," she sighed, pointing to the vial, "It's out of reach. Could you possibly…" The plea died on her lips, replaced by a blush. Success. His ego flared like a beacon.

As he retrieved the reagent, their fingers brushed. She suppressed a shudder, forcing a meek look of gratitude. His rough chuckle sent a shiver down her spine. Romania, not Italy. The realization hit hard. Escape would be even more difficult now, the language barrier another hurdle to overcome.

Back under the microscope, her mind churned. His accent, a strange mix of harshness and a lingering softness, was both a complication and an opportunity. He was different, perhaps less entrenched in this system than the others. Could she exploit this somehow? Could his outsider status make him a potential, desperate ally? The idea was as dangerous as the ricin she handled, but her current plan was already a deadly gamble.

The next morning brought a grim sort of relief. In the lab's sterile order, she found a semblance of control. Today's work - a complex extraction - demanded meticulous focus. Her hands moved with practiced precision, but her eyes betrayed her. They flickered towards the high shelves, landing on the crucial reagent, mockingly out of reach. A muscle twitched in her jaw as she fought a wave of genuine frustration. It could shatter her facade of incompetence.

Andrei's thick accent cut through the silence. "Problem, princessa?" His leer held no trace of the suave Italian she'd initially imagined. A harshness tinged his words, a guttural echo of...Romania?

Her stomach clenched. Escape had just become infinitely more complicated. But a new possibility sparked. "Just this," she sighed, pointing to the vial, "I can't quite reach. Would you mind…?" A forced blush heated her cheeks, a practiced display of meek charm. His ego swelled, a visible pulse throbbing at his temple.

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Even as he retrieved the reagent, her mind raced. Each brush of their fingers made her skin crawl, but it was a calculated risk. His accent, a jarring mix of harshness and lingering softness, hinted at an outsider status, a potential vulnerability. Could she turn that to her advantage? The plan was a gamble with deadly stakes, but so was every breath she took in this gilded cage.

The day dragged on, each experiment a test of Cat's nerves. With each forced smile and feigned struggle, she tightened the invisible leash she had crafted around Andrei. She'd cultivated a dependence on his "help," leaving vials just out of reach, asking him to explain complex procedures in a way that mimicked difficulty.

His gruff explanations fueled her act. She tilted her head, wide-eyed and grateful, a silent promise of admiration shimmering in her fabricated gaze. The game was a twisted dance – predator and prey, but in her mind, the roles were already reversed.

As the last rays of sunlight bled through the lab's windows, the other scientists filed out, leaving them alone for the first time. A manufactured sigh escaped Cat's lips. "I still don't understand this procedure," she mumbled, staring at a data set with feigned confusion.

"Again?" Andrei scoffed, but a smug satisfaction lurked in his eyes. This was her moment. "Would you mind terribly? Maybe if you explained it one more time…" Her voice trailed off, laced with a hint of helplessness.

He lumbered towards her, his movements predatory. But before she could react, he wasn't reaching for the data pad. His hand shot out, clamping over her mouth, stifling her scream. A sharp pain erupted on her arm – a flash of teeth, a sickening crunch. Panic clawed at her throat, but she forced it down, replacing it with a whimper.

He hauled her close, his weight overwhelming. "You think you're so smart, little mouse," he snarled, his thick Romanian accent scraping against her ear. The sterile lab transformed into a grotesque parody of a love nest as he shoved her towards the guard's room.

Tears welled in her eyes, but they were tears of fury, not fear. Every fiber of her being screamed to lash out, to fight back. But the ricin, hidden behind a reagent bottle, remained untouched. She needed him alive, needed him to trust her for a little while longer.

Biting back a sob, she played the part. A whimper escaped her lips, her body going limp against his. His touch was a violation, but it was also a confirmation. He believed her charade. And as he threw her onto a cot in the dimly lit guard room, a chilling calm descended upon her. She would survive this. She would escape. And when she did, she would make him pay, a hundredfold, for every bite, every broken promise.

The night stretched before her, filled with a different kind of horror. She'd known fear, despair, the crushing weight of confinement. But tonight, a new emotion burned within her - a cold, steely resolve. Tonight, she was not a scientist, not a captive. Tonight, she was a predator waiting for the perfect moment to strik He dragged her back to the cell block long after darkness had engulfed the compound. Each step echoed with the weight of the fresh violations she carried within her. With a brutal shove and the final clank of the lock, he left her in the darkness.

The other prisoners stirred, their movements slow and hesitant in the dim light. She avoided their eyes, the bite marks on her arm a searing brand. The silence was accusatory. She had flirted with danger, a desperate bid for freedom. But in their eyes, she saw only betrayal. Whispers slithered through the room, a viper's nest of resentment, fear, and despair.

Only Lisa moved closer. Her eyes held no judgment, only a deep well of shared sorrow. She wrapped a frayed blanket around Cat's shoulders, the gesture a silent pledge of tenuous solidarity.

That night, as Cat pressed her face into the thin, scratchy pillow, she didn't cry. Her tears had long since dried up, replaced by a glacial determination. She was not just a victim. She was a weapon honed in the crucible of forced submission. The escape plan burned within her, each step meticulously plotted. She would not only escape; she would ignite a reckoning.

The tension in the cellblock was as thick as the stale air. Each wary glance, every muttered curse, felt like a knife against Cat's skin. Her feigned flirtations had been a gamble, and she was now facing the consequences. The other girls, once her allies against a shared enemy, had become a hostile jury

Exercise, their only respite from the confines of the lab, became a minefield. Jostling shoulders turned into intentional shoves, whispers devolved into mocking hisses. Each stumble, each breathless gasp, was met with cold satisfaction in their eyes. They had branded her, not just with their distrust but with a chilling indifference to her suffering.

The telltale marks of her ordeal were impossible to hide completely. The bruises that bloomed across her skin were a grim atlas of Andrei's brutality. Lisa, ever observant, was the first to notice. Her eyes widened with a horrifying mix of pity and dawning understanding. While the others saw a willing accomplice, Lisa saw a prisoner enduring a different sort of torture.

The silent language of the cellblock was one Cat had painfully deciphered. Their furtive signing, once a lifeline against their captors, now held accusations. Traitor. Whore. Each word pierced deeper than Andrei's teeth ever could.

Yet, within this isolating storm, a single thread of connection remained. Lisa's touch was hesitant, but it carried unspoken support. In the shared darkness, they would pass notes written in the shaky scrawl of a forced alliance.

Andrei, emboldened by her apparent submission, grew bolder. He lingered longer by her workstation, his whispered promises curdling into lecherous threats. And it was in his arrogance that Cat saw an opportunity. A false vulnerability, a tantalizing hint at misplaced trust, would be the bait to lure him into her meticulously laid trap.

In the wake of his most recent brutal assault, Cat felt shattered. Isolation hung heavy within her, a suffocating echo of the girls' silent condemnation. The fleeting moments of fear, the gut-wrenching nausea of her forced intimacy...those were now overshadowed by an all-consuming rage. The scientist in her analyzed it clinically at first, a protective disassociation. But as the bruises bloomed into stark reminders, that detachment gave way to a burning, focused fury. She was not prey, but predator. A weapon forged in this vile crucible.

Night brought no solace. But in a surprising twist, it was Lisa who breached the chasm her actions had created. The touch of a cool, wet washcloth against her fevered skin was hesitant, almost apologetic. Yet as Lisa nestled close, whispering words of understanding, a strange wave of relief washed over Cat. Her secret, her desperate gambit, was no longer a burden carried alone.

The shared warmth of their bodies, a defiant act against the sterile chill of their cell, ignited something within Cat. Gratitude, yes, but something more potent: a shared purpose. When she wrapped her arms around Lisa, it wasn't seeking comfort, but forging a bond of calculated resistance. They slept, not as sisters, but as accomplices, their whispered plans a defiant counterpoint to the darkness.

The other girls remained a looming threat. Their animosity simmered, threatening to erupt. One evening, during a tense meal, a deliberately spilled bowl of gruel sent Cat sprawling. The sneers on their faces that followed was a declaration of war. The time for delicate pretense was over.

The ricin, carefully secreted, whispered promises of retribution. Andrei, lulled into complacency, would not see the storm gathering. It was time to accelerate her plan, to weaponize their hatred against the true architects of their suffering.

The plan had crystalized during those shared nights with Lisa – a risky gambit, a twisted performance that would hopefully seal their fates. As the guards' evening shift approached, Cat's stomach churned, but her eyes held a steely resolve. She approached Lisa, her whisper a blend of plea and manipulation.

"You have to stay," she urged, "He'll trust me more if we…" A flicker of revulsion crossed Lisa's face, quickly masked by grim acceptance. This was their play, and they had no choice but to perform.

Andrei found them lingering after the others were herded back to their cells. His smirk was a grotesque parody of arousal. "Looks like I've got both of my favorites tonight, eh?" He leered, oblivious to the undercurrent of tension.

Cat forced a smile, nausea twisting in her gut. "Lisa, I...well, I want her to see." A blush, carefully practiced, crept onto her cheeks. "I want to make this special." Every word felt like swallowing acid.

Andrei's eyes widened in surprise, then a predatory glint ignited his gaze. The prospect of a twisted display, of dominating not one prisoner but two, inflamed his arrogance.

The guardroom was a dimly lit chamber of horrors. Lisa huddled in a corner, her eyes wide with a fear that mirrored Cat's own. Yet, as his rough hands tore at her clothes, Cat forced herself to watch. It was crucial to his undoing; to analyze his weaknesses, to anticipate his desires.

His touch was like a burning brand, but her revulsion hardened into cold determination. This was not submission but warfare. Each gasp, each stifled sob, was ammunition meticulously gathered. The ricin, hidden on her lab bench behind the reagents, was the key to their vengeance. And with each violation, with each hissed threat from Andrei, she grew closer to making him taste the consequences of his own depravity.

When he was done Lisa was crying on the floor, her body used and bruised. Cat was not any better, she was just getting used to it. When he was done it was time to make him coffee, and with Lisa there to distract Andrei, Cat was able to go alone to get the coffee, and it was then she used the pipette to extract the ricin from the e-tube and place it in the cup.

Lisa's sobs echoed through the oppressive silence of the guardroom, a gut-wrenching counterpoint to Andrei's satisfied grunts. Cat forced herself to look away. Every tear, every flinch from Lisa's bruised body, ignited a white-hot rage within her. His violation of Lisa was one she endured herself with each degrading touch.

Disgust and determination warred within her. Her own battered body was a testament to her endurance, an ugly adaptation to this brutal reality. She was weaponizing that endurance, honing it into a tool of vengeance.

"Coffee," Andrei rasped, pulling himself into a grotesque imitation of composure. His vulnerability, however fleeting, was an opportunity.

Cat rose on shaky legs, forcing a compliant smile. "Of course, anything for you." Lisa's whimpers followed her as she turned towards the door. Her eyes swept over their makeshift kitchen, landing on the break area with its gleaming coffee maker. It was decision time.

Each step echoed her resolve. With Lisa distracting Andrei, a flicker of hope bloomed. This was her chance. Her lab coat pocket held a treasure more deadly than any weapon: the Eppendorf tube with its lethal orange liquid. With practiced deftness, she filled a pipette, her movements a chilling imitation of her scientific routine.

The coffee maker buzzed and hissed, its domestic sound strangely jarring against their grim purpose. As the bitter brew dripped into the pot, she added her own deadly ingredient. The pipette clattered against the ceramic, the only betrayal of her inner turmoil.

With a shaking hand, she poured the poison-laced coffee. Each drop was a promise of retribution. This was not escape, not yet. This was the first strike in her brutal war for freedom – both for herself and the woman cowering in the corner, each tear silently fueling Cat's icy determination.

Lisa's broken sobs knifed through the silence. Their echo was a grim reminder of the price paid for every second that ticked by. Cat's revulsion twisted into something colder, a dangerous focus honed by repeated violations. This wasn't just survival instinct; this was calculated vengeance. Years of scientific protocol kicked in, replacing emotion with chilling precision.

With practiced detachment, she scanned the makeshift kitchen. Her gaze settled on the coffee maker, the gleam of its chrome a beacon of potential. In her lab coat pocket, the innocuous Eppendorf tube pulsed with lethal promise. The pipette felt familiar in her hand, its scientific purpose now a grotesque perversion.

Each hiss of the coffee maker felt like a countdown. With Lisa distracting Andrei, a desperate hope tinged her actions. The bitter brew dripped into the pot, a grim counterpoint to the deadly drops she measured out, each one an indictment fueled by Lisa's whispered cries.

Pouring the coffee became a macabre ritual. Her hand trembled, but not from fear. It was the weight of consequences, the terrifying satisfaction of turning her captors' own tools against them. Andrei, lulled by his arrogance, saw obedience, not a scientist wielding her knowledge as a weapon.

A sliver of doubt crossed her mind as she carried the tray back to the guardroom. Could she trust Lisa, or would a last-minute pang of terror ruin everything? Lisa's haunted eyes met hers, mirroring her own desperate resolve.

"Andrei expects his reward," she murmured, the words sour on her tongue. In a final act of twisted manipulation, she handed the cup to Lisa with a pleading look. "Please, make this…special."

Lisa's breath hitched. In a chilling unspoken pact, their fingers brushed as she took the cup. Not submission, but a silent declaration of war.

Excellent choices! Let's craft the scene, building the tension as the ricin takes effect, then showcasing the brutal fight as freedom hangs in the balance:

The minutes stretched into a torturous eternity. Cat forced herself into the charade, offering Andrei practiced smiles as Lisa feigned interest in his crude boasts. Each word that passed his lips was a countdown to either their escape or their doom. Behind her impassive facade, she calculated: Four hours. That was the insidious nature of the ricin, burrowing into his cells, destroying him from the inside out.

The first signs were subtle. A bead of sweat, a sudden flush, a tremor in his hand as he lifted the poisoned coffee. He paused, a flicker of suspicion marring his usual arrogance. "Something tastes…off," he growled.

Cat's pulse quickened, but her voice remained deceptively calm. "It's the finest Columbian blend," she lied, holding his stare. "Perhaps your refined palate is accustomed to something…sweeter."

His laughter boomed, false and tinged with unease. The ricin was taking hold. A wave of nausea swept over him, and he doubled over, a choked gasp tearing from his throat.

Panic fueled his rage. "You poisoned me!" he snarled, lunging for Cat. His strength was a fading echo of his previous brutality. But desperation made him deadly.

Cat fought back, but she was no match for his sheer force. His blows rained down, bruising flesh and cracking bone. But as he weakened, a surge of adrenaline shot through her. She would not die cowering. She would escape, even if it meant clawing her way through him.

Suddenly, a blur of motion. Lisa, her eyes blazing, gripped a scavenged wrench with trembling hands. A sickening thud echoed through the room as it connected with Andrei's skull. He crumpled to the ground, unmoving. A heavy silence fell, broken only by their ragged breaths

For a frozen moment, they stared at their tormentor's lifeless body. A wave of nausea threatened to overtake Cat, not from the ricin, but from the violence. But beneath that horror, a cold pragmatism took over.

"We need to move," she gasped, her voice barely above a whisper. "Before the others realize he's gone."

Freedom, a monstrously beautiful prize, finally seemed within her grasp. It was tainted with blood and desperation, but it was hers for the taking.

The guardroom door thudded shut, an echoing tombstone for their dead captor. Their breaths came in ragged gasps.

"We have to go," Cat hissed, her voice laced with urgency. "They'll find him soon enough."

Lisa's eyes were wide, filled with a mix of terror and grim determination. They moved in tandem, slinking through the shadowy corridors, every creak and rustle a potential alarm. Each step towards a dimly lit exit was a gamble. Their freedom felt agonizingly close.

And then, disaster. From the end of the hall, the bald guard loomed like a specter. He had sharp eyes, those eyes. Always scanning, always watching.

"Hey!" His shout shattered the fragile silence. "What are you two…"

Panic exploded within Cat. He grabbed Lisa. A sickening wave of despair washed over her. She could try to fight, but that would doom them both.

"Run!" Lisa screamed, wrenching free. "Go!" Her voice was a desperate plea, and a final act of defiance.

Cat didn't hesitate. Tears blurred her vision as she sprinted, Lisa's sacrifice a fiery knot in her chest. A gunshot ripped through the air, a chilling confirmation of her friend's fate.

Stairs blurred beneath her feet, each flight bringing her closer to the faint glimmer of the kitchen. The old cleaning ladies, their faces etched with concern, stood frozen in shock as she hurtled past.

The night air hit her like a shockwave. The street was deserted, the stark silence broken only by her own ragged sobs. She was free, but the cost was a crushing weight. Lisa, brave and defiant, had bought her this chance with her life.

Cat ran. Each step was agony – a broken rib stabbed with every breath, her fractured wrist throbbed in time with her pounding heart. She had to honor her fallen comrade. To escape, yes, but also to ensure their sacrifice wasn't in vain. The first step of that journey began there, on that desolate street, fueled by a mix of rage and a terrifying new resolve.

The city held its breath in the pre-dawn quiet. The only sound was the frantic rhythm of Cat's feet against the damp pavement. The metallic tang of blood filled her mouth, a constant reminder of Lisa's sacrifice.

The scent hit her first – a damp, earthy aroma that spoke of freedom. The Danube. Relief flooded her, short-lived but potent. She had to reach the water, submerge the chip, sever the connection. With each desperate breath, a single thought pulsed through her mind: don't stop.

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The river shimmered in the faint moonlight, a ribbon of escape. But just as she stumbled onto the deserted wharf, a deafening roar shattered the stillness. Headlights sliced through the darkness, blinding and terrifying. A desperate scream died in her throat as the car careened towards her.

The impact was a brutal symphony of pain. The world spun, a kaleidoscope of fractured images – the accusing glint of chrome, the indifferent rise of the sun, a dark stain blooming on the cobblestones. her world spun, a sickening blur of pain and Andrei's twisted image. His cruel sneer, the flash of headlights, the sickening crunch of metal... it replayed in her mind like a warped horror film.

Her broken body protested as she struggled to lift her head. Through a haze of pain, she saw him limping back towards his battered car. Every step was a testament to his rage, but also to his vulnerability. He was wounded, perhaps gravely. A strange hope flickered within her.

Then, a miracle. Or perhaps, retribution.

Andrei reached the car, fumbled with the keys, then slipped inside. The engine roared to life, a mechanical snarl in the desolate silence. But instead of pulling away, the car lurched forward, then careened towards the edge of the wharf. Cat's eyes widened.

He was overcorrecting, the ricin's deadly effect taking firm hold. A scream tore from his throat as the vehicle plunged into the murky depths of the Danube. Bubbles churned the surface, a grotesque dance of death. Then, chilling silence.

Cat woke to a symphony of beeps and the sterile white glare of a hospital room. Her body throbbed with a dull ache, every movement a testament to her broken ribs and battered limbs. A wave of nausea washed over her, and she squeezed her eyes shut.

Lisa. The memory of her friend's selfless act ripped through her like a fresh wound. Guilt was a suffocating weight, threatening to drag her under. But amidst the despair, a flicker of defiance sparked. No. She wouldn't succumb. Lisa wouldn't have died in vain.

A glint of silver caught her eye. On the bedside table, a worn leather satchel – her escape bag. Miraculously, it hadn't been taken. Her fingers brushed the cool metal of the vial containing the ricin – a grim reminder of her desperate plan.

The door creaked open, and a stern-faced doctor entered, his eyes narrowed in suspicion. He spoke in rapid Romanian, but the word "implant" resonated clearly. They knew.

This wasn't freedom. It was a different kind of captivity, a hospital room with watchful eyes and a ticking clock. But as despair threatened to consume her, a new resolve took root. She wouldn't be a prisoner, not yet. She would heal, she would plan, and she would find a way to sever the connection, to truly escape the clutches of those who sought to control her.

The hospital room buzzed with the muted sounds of a busy ward. Cat, pale and unmoving, was barely a presence against the stark white sheets. Her injuries, both visible and hidden, told a story of brutality and desperate resistance. A lone nurse hovered nearby, her eyes filled with a mix of pity and professional detachment. The escape bag, a silent testament to Cat's broken dreams, lay forgotten on the bedside table.

The phone's shrill ring pierced the sterile monotony. The nurse hesitated, then answered. Her voice was hushed, a reluctant intrusion into the grim tableau.

"Poliția?" Her words were rapid Romanian, punctuated with pauses as she listened to the response. Concern, then a flicker of surprise, etched lines across her weathered face.

"Da, da…” She glanced at Cat's still form. "Unidentified female, maybe twenties. Foreign, I think. No papers. Injuries…extensive." A pause, then a hesitant question: "Da. There was a vehicle incident, but…" Her voice trailed off, replaced by a worried frown.

When she hung up, a new energy filled the room. Footsteps echoed down the hallway. A police officer strode in, notebook in hand. His eyes swept the scene, landing on Cat's bruised and battered form. There was no recognition, only the professional gaze of someone accustomed to the grim side of human existence.

He approached the nurse, questions firing in quick succession. Age? Circumstances of the accident? Any possible leads to her identity? The nurse's answers were a jumble of broken English and uncertain gestures.

With a grim nod, the officer pulled out his phone. A flash pierced the dim room as he snapped a photo of Cat's face. She remained oblivious, a tragic mystery in a stark hospital bed.

The photo sped across Bucharest, through official channels, landing somewhere within Interpol's vast network. Algorithms analyzed her features, searched digitized records, and somewhere, a match would be made. A missing person would get a name, a family would get a devastating answer.

But for now, Cat remained suspended in anonymity. Her past, her desperate flight, the ordeal that brought her to this stark room – those secrets were hers alone. The officer closed his notebook with a sigh. The case was open, the investigation begun. But the answers, like Cat's true fate, remained suspended in the uncertain air.

The sterile hum of machinery underscored the oppressive silence. Wrapped in bandages, Cat was a stark reminder of the brutality she fought to escape. The escape bag, a discarded testament to failed dreams, sat abandoned on the table.

Routine shattered as the nurse's phone jangled. Her hushed Romanian conversation pierced the quiet, ending with a worried, "Poliția?" The officer who arrived was seasoned, his gaze scanning the scene dispassionately. Yet, even he seemed unsettled by the sight of Cat's battered form.

Questions, photographs, the stark language of bureaucracy echoing off the white walls. Cat remained an enigma. But as the officer's camera flashed, something impossible happened.

A tear slipped down Cat's cheek, a solitary defiance against the darkness. Then her lips moved, a barely audible whisper slipping into the sterile air: "Lisa…" . Strength flickered within the broken shell, a fierce love defying even unconsciousness.

That image – the tear, the murmured name – would cross oceans, landing on a cluttered desk in Albuquerque. Eve Black, hardened FBI agent, would study it, haunted eyes reflecting a relentless determination born from her own dark past. This wasn't just a missing student. This was war.

Meanwhile, shadows stirred. Panicked whispers traveled across Bucharest's underbelly. The network responsible for the abductions wouldn't remain idle. But their desperation would leave cracks in their polished facade. Cat's anonymous plea for help had unwittingly sparked a firestorm.

At UNM, damage control kicked in. Smiling administrators would downplay concerns, deflect questions. The FBI would arrive, met with bland platitudes about cooperation. But Agent Black wasn't fooled. She had seen that haunted tear, heard that desperate whisper. She would unravel this conspiracy, no matter the cost.

# Chapter Twelve

## The Phone Call

Dr. Nicole Mathers – Eve, to herself – stared at the landline in her sparsely decorated university office. Its beige bulk mocked her desperation; Leonid Minin wouldn't respond to emails on the University server. This call couldn't be traced back to the FBI, but it was a desperate measure nonetheless. Years had passed since their previous contact, and even then, their interaction had been brief, professional.

Yet, his interest in her that day hadn't escaped her notice. It was a card she was hesitant to play, but her search for Robert had reached a desperate point. Swallowing a knot of unease, she dialed the number she'd meticulously memorized.

The phone rang three times, then a click and his voice – smooth but with a lingering edge – "Minin."

"Mr. Minin, it's Dr. Mathers. I fear I may have stumbled upon something alarming - far beyond our original discussions about art forgeries." Her voice was composed, tinged with the authority her 'Dr. Mathers' persona afforded. Yet, beneath that professional veneer, there was a subtle undercurrent... a hint of vulnerability she hoped would pique his interest.

She laid out the facts: the missing art student, his unique abilities, the chilling possibility of a larger pattern. "Have you heard anything… whispers, even… about students being targeted, kidnapped?"

There was a pause, then his reply, laced with a hint of intrigue, "Human trafficking is an opportunistic business. Skill is indeed a sought-after commodity." He paused again, testing, perhaps, how much she would reveal

"I... I heard whispers of something from Bucharest, Romania. A ring… elusive…" His voice held a predatory quality. He was interested, but this was a negotiation, and he expected a return on his investment.

Eve knew she was crossing a dangerous line, but finding Robert was worth the risk. "Mr. Minin, I would be… eternally grateful for any help you could provide," she said, allowing a flicker of desperation to color her tone. "My... my research would benefit immensely from the insights of someone with deeper knowledge of this underworld."

She held her breath. The price for his help remained unspoken, dangling heavily between them. But desperation had a way of bending morals, and her search for Robert had pushed her to the precipice of a chilling bargain.

A flicker of triumph ignited in Nicole's eyes as Minin confirmed her worst suspicions. Romania. A fresh surge of adrenaline masked the unease twisting in her gut. Robert could be there, held captive in some grimy warehouse, his talents twisted into a grotesque parody of art.

"Mr. Minin," she began, maintaining her academic facade though her voice held a new urgency, "I'm deeply indebted for your insight. Would you be willing to meet with a… specialist… for further details? Of course," she added, the hint of a promise lingering in the air, "there would be compensation for your time."

Mimin's predatory instincts would pick up on the shift in her tone. He would know she wasn't just some academic anymore, that she had resources, connections – possibly even danger – swirling around her. The prospect of greater reward would entice him.

Once the meeting was arranged, a single call was all it took. "Mic," she purred into the secure line, a strange sense of anticipation coursing through her veins. "I have a situation – Bucharest. Need someone with your… particular skillset."

Mic, a shadow of a man, would ask no questions. Names, numbers, and cryptic details would be enough to set him in motion. Find and retrieval missions were his forte, an uncanny talent whispered about in the darkest corners of the intelligence world. He would move like a wraith, unseen and untraceable, his methods a blend of ruthlessness and surgical precision.

The plan was in motion, yet the waiting would be the hardest part. Eve knew Minin was expecting a meeting, but he wouldn't be expecting Mic. And while she wouldn't be in the field, Eve's own skills – manipulation, extraction, and, when necessary, lethal force – were waiting to be deployed. Bucharest would be their battleground. Robert was the prize. And she wouldn't rest until he was back by her side.

Mic's world was a whirlwind of dust and desperate whispers. The Afghan family – terror etched into their eyes, hope clinging to his every step – pressed closer under the ragged cover of nightfall. Then, his satellite phone crackled to life.

Eve's voice, crisp and surprisingly calm amidst the chaos, jolted him back to another mission, another shadow war. "Mic," she breathed, an undercurrent of urgency cutting through her usually composed facade. "Bucharest. Find and retrieval. Need your talents – now."

Mic's mind raced, the gears of his uncanny ability already shifting. He knew this was personal for Eve, carrying the weight of urgency and unspoken obligations. "Details en route," he rasped, expertly guiding the terrified family towards a pre-arranged rendezvous. Germany, then the US, a sliver of hope against the darkness. Only then would his full attention shift to Bucharest.

The data trickled in – Minin, suspected human trafficking, Romania. Mic's instincts flared. This wasn't a regular op, yet payment wouldn't be an issue. A recent mission with Eve had been… lucrative. Minin would expect a fee, and that debt would be settled with funds from their last clandestine endeavor.

"Remember, Mic," Eve's voice echoed in his earpiece as he meticulously planned his Bucharest infiltration, "to him, I'm a 'mutual friend'." The way she phrased it held a hint of resignation. He knew Minin demanded respect, but more importantly, compensation.

Within hours, Afghanistan faded, replaced by cryptic travel arrangements, and meticulously crafted cover identities. Bucharest loomed, not just a city, but a nest of vipers. The promise of profit hung heavy in the air – not for himself, but to facilitate this desperate mission born from Eve's own shadowy world. Mic thrived in the shadows, a ghost with a deadly purpose. This operation might be intertwined with Eve's personal stakes, but as always, it was business. And business, with his particular skillset, was always about to get bloody.

The tension within Eve was palpable. On the surface, she was Dr. Nicole Mathers, a respected academic enroute to a mundane faculty meeting. Yet, beneath that carefully constructed facade, her mind raced with images of shadowy figures and whispered conversations. The call from Mic was her lifeline, a flicker of hope in the midst of mounting dread.

Each step towards the conference room felt like a charade. Cordial smiles directed at colleagues, banal discussions about curricula... it all seemed absurdly trivial against the high-stakes game she was playing. The weight of Robert's absence pressed down on her, a constant reminder of the monstrous forces she was up against.

Her fingers drummed an impatient rhythm on the stack of papers she carried. Each tick of the unseen clock was both a torment and a promise. Soon, Mic would have infiltrated Minin's circle. Soon, she would have a lead, a way to claw Robert and the other students back from the clutches of those who sought to exploit his talent.

# Chapter Thirteen

## The Faculty Meeting

The stale scent of burnt coffee and academic snobbery clung to the air like a cheap suit on a corrupt politician. Eve, inwardly wincing at the comparison, settled into her seat, half-hidden behind a stack of student evaluations. It was time to put her FBI-honed observation skills to work, and caffeine would be her weapon of choice.

Across the table, Hempstead blustered on about a textbook with all the intellectual vitality of a neglected houseplant. Textbook choice as a proxy for ego-stroking – classic. If there's one thing Eve had learned, it's that pompous blowhards were remarkably similar, whether they wore suits or tweed jackets.

A snide whisper about a student's "disappointing" research drifted her way. Eve sipped her black coffee, the warmth a stark contrast to the chill in the room. Backstabbing pettiness wasn't exclusive to the world of cutthroat business; it seemed academia just dressed it up in fancier vocabulary.

Then there was Davies, a walking advertisement for designer labels and intellectual apathy. That handbag probably cost more than a student's semester tuition. Eve's internal sarcasm meter pegged into the red zone.

She met Barrington's gaze as he addressed her, a flicker of curiosity in his eyes – probably wondering how long it would take the newcomer to crack under the sheer weight of the collective mediocrity in the room. Thankfully, her poker face was as honed as her combat skills.

"Dr. Barrington," Eve began, her voice pitched low enough to carry the hint of the exasperation bubbling just below the surface. "It seems focusing on dusty textbooks and stroking donor egos takes priority over, you know, actually sparking a desire to learn in our students." Translation: This place was a joke, and she was about to expose it.

The silence that followed was deafening. Jaws dropped, outraged gasps echoed against the bland walls. Hempstead's face achieved a shade of purple that should be patented. Davies actually blinked, as if shocked that someone dared to question the natural order of things.

Barrington, however, leaned forward, a flicker of amusement in his eyes. Finally, someone who saw through the charade. "Dr. Mathers, care to elaborate? Your perspective is… refreshingly blunt."

Eve hid a grin. It was on. Time to unleash her inner chaos agent, disguised behind disarming politeness and a healthy dose of sarcasm. With each subtly pointed remark, each "innocent" question that chipped away at their self-importance, she was not just playing the role of a disgruntled academic. She was waging a covert war against the kind of arrogant elitism that fueled far darker evils than boring lectures.

Sure, this wasn't a hostage situation or a takedown of a corrupt CEO, but for Eve, fueled by caffeine and contempt for the privileged few, this was as close to the action as she was going to get - for now. These academics might think they were untouchable, but Dr. Nicole Mathers had just arrived to deliver a reality check, venti-sized, with an extra shot of sass.

The department meeting devolved into a battleground, the air crackling with barely restrained outrage and something akin to...excitement. Eve suppressed a smirk. These sheltered academics had no idea what kind of fire they'd just lit.

Hempstead, his pompous veneer cracking, sputtered about "maintaining academic rigor." Eve barely stifled a yawn. "Rigor, Professor? Or clinging to the past out of fear of the world outside your ivory tower?" His face flushed an even deeper shade of purple, a satisfying confirmation that she had struck a nerve.

Davies, momentarily off her designer pedestal, finally spoke, "Dr. Mathers, your… candor is, shall we say, unusual." There was a hint of a challenge beneath the condescending tone. Clearly, this woman wasn't used to being questioned.

"Unusual, perhaps," Eve countered, meeting her gaze, "Or is it simply honesty? We're here to educate, not perpetuate outdated hierarchies." She took a calculated sip of her coffee, letting the silence linger. This wasn't about winning an argument—it was about sowing seeds of doubt, disrupting their comfortable little world.

Even Barrington, the voice of reason, couldn't entirely hide his amusement. "Dr. Mathers raises valid points. Perhaps we've become…complacent in our methods." It was a hesitant admission, but an admission, nonetheless. Emboldened, others around the table began to murmur in agreement.

Sensing blood in the water, Eve leaned forward, a predatory glint in her eye. "Complacency allows for mediocrity. And our students? They deserve excellence." Her voice held the conviction of someone who'd seen the cost of indifference firsthand.

"Now," she continued, her words sharp as a stiletto, "Imagine if we ditched the ego-stroking and actually met students where they are. Social media isn't the enemy, it's a tool. A chance to connect theories to the chaotic world they live in." She challenged them openly, daring them to refute her point. Let them dismiss her as an idealistic outsider, that just made her task easier.

To Eve's surprise, it wasn't Hempstead who countered her. It was Davies, with a flicker of something resembling curiosity in her eyes. "You suggest turning our classrooms into…Twitter feeds?" Her disdain was palpable, yet the question hung in the air. A breakthrough, however small.

Eve smiled, a wolfish grin playing on her lips. "Not Twitter feeds, Professor Davies. But hubs for critical thinking. A viral rumor is as valid a case study as any peer-reviewed paper, especially when it comes to how ideas spread, for good or ill." She paused, letting her words sink in. "Or are you afraid of the intellectual messiness of the real world?"

The faculty exchanged uneasy glances. They were trapped, forced to consider the uncomfortable truths this audacious newcomer had flung at them. Hempstead blustered, but his protests lacked earlier conviction. Davies shifted in her seat, the bored disdain replaced by a flicker of begrudging interest.

Barrington cleared his throat. "Colleagues, let's not dismiss Dr. Mathers' ideas out of hand. Perhaps a healthy dose of…disruption… is exactly what we need." He met Eve's gaze, and she saw in his eyes a hint of respect, even a shared spark of rebellion against the inertia that had settled over their department.

The meeting finally ground to a halt, leaving a strange mix of simmering resentment and a lingering spark of defiance in its wake. Eve, buzzing with the heady rush of controlled chaos, gathered her papers with a deliberate calm that belied her inner satisfaction.

Just as she rose, ready to escape the clutches of academia for the day, her phone vibrated. A text. Mic. "Landed. Target zone: 48hrs. Secure comms up. Await instructions." A surge of adrenaline masked the twist of guilt in her gut. Robert was out there, in the clutches of those who exploited his gifts, and she was playing faculty politics instead of finding him. But this… this was crucial too. It ensured Minin's cooperation, and with him, a path to Bucharest.

As she typed out a coded reply, her eyes swept the room one last time. Hempstead was glaring daggers, as if his inflated ego had been personally punctured. Davies watched her with calculating curiosity, probably weighing the value of this disruptive new element in the departmental equation.

It was Barrington, surprisingly, who approached, a wry smile playing on his lips. "Dr. Mathers, a word?" He gestured towards his office, the offer more an invitation into a conspiracy than a reprimand.

Eve met his gaze, all innocence and academic decorum. "Of course, Dr. Barrington." Let him think she craved mentorship, that this was merely ambition. They had no idea who they were dealing with. Yet, as she stepped into his office, she couldn't help but think, maybe, just maybe, this place wasn't a complete lost cause after all.

Dr. Barrington's office was a study in understated authority – tasteful bookshelves, a framed diploma, a subtle landscape painting that was far too serene for the chaos Eve had unleashed mere hours earlier. As she settled into the stiffly upholstered guest chair, she couldn't shake the sense that she'd disrupted the carefully curated calm of this space just as she had the meeting.

Barrington leaned back in his leather chair, steepling his fingers in a gesture that could have been either thoughtful or intimidating. "Dr. Mathers," he began, his voice surprisingly gentle, "you've certainly made an impression on your first faculty meeting. A most… stimulating impression."

Eve forced a smile, the picture of a contrite newcomer. "My apologies if my candor was… unexpected, Dr. Barrington." It was an outright lie, but one delivered with the practiced sincerity of an expert undercover agent.

Barrington gave a slight chuckle. "Unexpected indeed. And refreshing, I must admit. We've grown somewhat… complacent here. Your challenge… well, it was a much-needed wake-up call." There was a weariness in his voice, the honest admission of a man who had perhaps compromised his ideals for the sake of academic peace.

Eve tilted her head slightly, gauging his sincerity. Was this a ploy, an attempt to lull her into a false sense of security? Or was there a flicker of genuine rebellion beneath the tired academic facade?

"Dr. Barrington," she began carefully, "I truly believe in the power of education to make a difference. But complacency, as you say, is the enemy of progress. If we don't evolve, don't engage with the world our students live in… what's the point?" Her words carried the weight of long-held frustration, a yearning for the collaborative, intellectually rigorous environment of Cornell that she'd found so dismally absent here.

Barrington nodded slowly. "You're absolutely right, Dr. Mathers. We've become so focused on maintaining the status quo, we've forgotten our purpose. It seems you've rekindled a spark here… unintentionally perhaps, but a spark nonetheless."

"Well, perhaps not entirely unintentional," she admitted, a hint of a smile playing on her lips. "Change can be messy, unsettling. It was time someone shook things up around here."

Barrington's laugh was genuine this time. "My sentiments exactly. And tell me, Dr. Mathers, do you intend to continue your… crusade for disruption?"

Eve met his gaze directly. "Disruption with a purpose, Dr. Barrington. Isn't that what true education is all about? Shaking off the old, making way for the new?"

A genuine smile broke across his face. "Welcome to the revolution, Dr. Mathers."

As she left his office, the beginnings of a strange alliance hummed in the air. This mission had just taken a more complicated, and interesting, turn. And between stirring up academic unrest and coordinating a covert extraction mission in Bucharest, well… Eve was just getting warmed up.

# Chapter Fourteen

# The Good News

Eve hadn't even left the faculty parking lot when another call jolted her already frayed nerves. This was not Mic – the caller ID displayed an Albuquerque number. A flicker of dread snaked through her. Had something happened? Compromised her cover?

She pulled over, took a steadying breath, and answered.

"Special Agent Black?" A gravelly voice, one that carried the undeniable weight of authority, echoed through the speaker. "Special Agent in Charge, SAC Walker, FBI Albuquerque."

Eve's grip on the steering wheel tightened. "This is she," she confirmed, her tone clipped and professional. The polite facade of Dr. Mathers was already slipping away, replaced by the instinctive wariness of Eve – the operator, the woman who walked the razor's edge.

"Dr. Mathers, we've had a development. Catalina Ramirez," he paused, the name hanging heavy in the air, "the missing student from UNM – we have possible intel placing her in Bucharest, Romania. A patient matching her description was treated at a local hospital several weeks ago."

Eve felt as if the car had slammed to a halt despite her being stationary. Catalina – the young biochemisty prodigy whose disappearance had sparked her entire undercover mission – possibly in Bucharest? The revelation was like a bucket of ice water dumped over her head. Mic. Minin. Romania. The pieces were starting to fall into place, a terrifyingly clear picture taking shape.

"Possible, Agent Walker?" she pressed, her voice sharp with a mixture of urgency and controlled fury. Why had this intel taken so long to reach her?

"We're still verifying," Walker conceded. "Romanian authorities are… let's just say cooperation isn't their forte. But the description matches, and the timeline fits with her disappearance."

Eve's mind was racing, calculating possibilities, and the sickening implications. "SAC Walker, I need everything you have on this – patient records, dates, the treating physician. Anything."

Walker whistled, a low, sharp sound. "Hold on, Black. This changes things. We had our Legat prepping for a debrief, but this… this puts a whole new spin on things."

Eve bristled. "Don't tell me protocol, Walker. Those kids…" her voice hitched for a fraction of a second, the raw emotion a stark contrast to her usual steely control. "Those kids are in danger. Every minute counts."

"I know, Black," Walker's voice softened slightly. "Look, you're unofficially off the books right now. But unofficially, I can tell you the Legat's name is SA Roman. She's already been looped in on the Ramirez intel. Hold tight, let me connect you directly."

Eve forced a breath through her clenched teeth. Working with the Bureau, even unofficially, felt like navigating a minefield. Yet, right now, their resources were a necessary evil.

Moments ticked by, an eternity in Eve's fraught state. Then, a new voice filled the line, a woman's, clipped and professional. "This is Special Agent Roman, Bucharest Legat. Special Agent Black?"

"Special Agent Roman," I need the intel on the Ramirez case, Catalina Ramirez, the missing student – she was treated at a Bucharest hospital?”

Davies' voice grew sharper. "Special Agent Black, this is a sensitive operation. I understand your concern, but official channels…"

"Forget channels, Davies!" Eve snapped. "Those kids are in danger. Every. Single. Second. Tell me what you know about that hospital, about Ramirez's treatment."

A tense silence stretched over the line. Finally, Davies sighed. "Look, Black," she amended, a flicker of recognition in her voice, "we're on the same side here. Our intel confirms a young woman matching Ramirez's description was admitted, apparently hit by a moving vehicle, but no other details. We're working on getting in to see her, but Romanian authorities are notoriously…"

"Uncooperative," Eve finished the sentence for her. "I understand. Look, Roman, I have my own resources in Bucharest. Let me help you expedite this. Unofficially, of course."

"Okay, Black," Roman began, her voice tight with tension. "Here's where things get messy. This wasn't a simple accident. Ramirez… she's been targeted, injuries are way too severe. And there's severe memory loss – genuine or… let's just say, there are troubling inconsistencies."

Eve swore under her breath, a familiar icy dread settling into her gut. This went beyond a missing student. This was deliberate, brutal, and someone was covering their tracks.

"The doctor," Roman continued, "He's dead. Car accident. Looks like a suicide, but staged clumsily. Someone's desperate to shut down witnesses."

Eve's mind was already working. A dead doctor, memory manipulation... this wreaked of a sophisticated operation. But who would benefit from silencing a potential witness to the attack on Ramirez?

"Working theory, Roman?" Eve prompted, her voice edged with steel. "Who does this benefit?"

"And here's the kicker, Black," Roman's voice dropped. "Sources say Ramirez was working in a high-security lab. Something cutting-edge, possibly bioweapons-related. Ricin's been mentioned."

Eve sucked in a sharp breath. Ricin. It all clicked – the missing student, the targeted violence, the potential for a dangerous weapon. This wasn't just some opportunistic trafficking ring; this was a threat of a far larger scale.

"So, some very bad people want Ramirez silenced," she summarized, her mind racing to fill in the blanks. "And they don't care about collateral damage."

"That's our assessment," Roman confirmed grimly. "Now about getting eyes on Ramirez. That hospital's on lockdown. It'll be difficult, dangerous…"

"But necessary," Eve cut in, her voice sharp and decisive. "Unofficial, off the record, I'm the closest thing you've got to someone who can play at their level. Keep me updated, Roman. Bucharest's about to get a whole lot more uncomfortable for whoever's behind this."

The call ended, leaving Eve alone with the chilling realization of the case she'd stumbled into. This was bigger than just a few missing students. She was dealing with an organization ruthless enough to silence witnesses, skilled enough to manipulate memories. And somewhere in Bucharest, a brilliant but vulnerable young woman was caught in the crosshairs.

Eve felt a surge of determination as she turned the car back towards campus. Dr. Nicole Mathers was already fading away, replaced by the cold-eyed pragmatism of Agent Black. She'd play the undercover academic as long as needed, but every dull faculty meeting, every pretentious lecture brought her closer to infiltrating the dark heart of Bucharest.

Whoever was behind this would pay. She wasn't about to let another brilliant mind be exploited, another life ruined for profit or power. This was no longer just a case; it was personal. The hunter was on the prowl, and her target was crystal clear: the faceless organization that dared to turn science into a weapon and innocent students into pawns.

# Chapter Fifteen

## The Interview

The Third Eye Gallery" was less an art exhibit and more an assault on good taste. Acid-bright paintings clashed on exposed brick, sculptures hung precariously from the ceiling, and the scent of turpentine mingled with the electronic thrum that throbbed through the floorboards. A fitting stage for a man like Raul.

Eve, undercover as Professor Nicole Mathers of the Psychology department, was a chameleon in sensible tweed. Sensible tweed that was two sizes too big, sensible heels that were beginning to pinch, and a look on her face that said she wasn't happy to be there, nor would she be anytime soon.

A figure emerged from the artistic chaos: lean, clad in a lab coat that looked like it had lost a valiant battle with a rainbow, and sporting hair the color of an overripe mango. Raul's eyes, a shocking shade of electric blue, widened in comical surprise.

"Professor Mathers! To what do I owe this unexpected… explosion of academia?" He gestured around the gallery, paint-spattered hands fluttering like startled birds.

"Raul. I was in the neighborhood," Eve lied smoothly, "and thought I would check on you. I heard about your friends Robert and Catalina missing. Such a tragedy."

There was a theatricality to Raul's grief. He sank dramatically onto a stool with exposed springs, dabbing at non-existent tears. "Tragedy doesn't even begin to cover it! My beloved Roberto, snatched away! And Catalina, that fiery ball of passion and peroxided hair – poof!" He gestured vaguely into the air. "Gone like yesterday's spilled solvent."

Eve tilted her head, her gaze pinning him like a carefully dissected specimen. "You seem to have been… close with them. Were you involved in anything outside of your academic work?" She watched the flicker of unease in his eyes. Bingo.

Raul's laugh was a nervous, high-pitched thing. "Professor, with all due respect, my lab schedule and the demands of interpretive sculpture leave little time for... extracurriculars."

"And by that, you mean..." Eve let the question hang, heavy and accusatory, in the turpentine-laced air.

His hands moved restlessly, dislodging a shower of glitter from the sleeve of his lab coat. "You think I'm involved? Roberto was my world! Catalina was... well, less my world and more a natural disaster I tolerated for the betterment of science."

"I see." Eve didn't, not by a long shot. "It’s interesting though. I didn't know you were friends with them off campus."

Raul's shoulders slumped. "Look, Professor, Roberto...he wasn't the easiest person to be around. Intense, always stressed about his art. But I loved him, you know?" He raised his eyes, pleading. "And Catalina...well, she could be a handful. But she was brilliant, just needed a little...guidance."

"Guidance?" Eve echoed, raising an eyebrow. "In biochem... or other matters?"

Raul shifted uncomfortably, his fingers pleating his rainbow-splattered lab coat. “She had a… volatile streak. I tried to help her channel it. Roberto too, in his own way.”

Eve filed that away. 'In his own way.' Sounded more ominous and vague than any good explanation should be. "Speaking of which," Eve continued, "odd coincidence that the disappearances happened so closely together, wouldn't you agree?"

Raul flinched, the electric blue of his eyes seeming to dim. "Perhaps it's not a coincidence. Perhaps it's..." He hesitated, a sheen of sweat breaking out on his brow. "Perhaps there's a pattern we're missing."

"A pattern?" Eve pressed. "And what pattern would that be? Ambitious art students? Volatile laboratory TAs? Or boyfriends who dabble in the dramatic arts a little too zealously?"

Raul recoiled, his hands now fists on the paint-splattered table. "Professor, are you accusing me of something?" he cried, the acoustics of the gallery amplifying the tremble in his voice.

"I haven't accused you of anything," Eve said, voice deceptively calm. "All I'm doing, Raul, is asking questions. Which you seem oddly reluctant to answer."

Raul swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing in his slender throat. "It's just... a shock, okay? Having people you care about disappear."

"Indeed," murmured Eve. "But surely you must have some idea of what might have happened to them. Anything you remember, however small, could be a clue."

Slowly, Raul deflated, the flamboyance draining out of him. "There was..." he lowered his voice, as if the sculptures themselves might listen, "...an incident. Just before Roberto vanished. We got into an argument about Catalina." A shadow flitted over his face. "He was jealous of her."

Eve leaned in, a jolt of adrenaline masking the discomfort of her pinching heels. She was getting somewhere. "Jealous – I thought he was gay, your boyfriend?" That came out a little less couth than Eve had intended.

Raul managed a wry smile, a spark of his earlier flamboyance returning. "Jealous because she was my muse, not all relationships involve sex, Professor Mathers."

A blush threatened to stain Eve's cheeks. It was, after all, not her strong suit, this gentle probing into the complex mess of human relationships. "Touché. So, Roberto was threatened by your… creative partnership with Catalina?"

Raul sighed, running a hand through his mango-colored hair, disturbing the careful streaks of glitter. It added a touch of the absurd to the otherwise tense situation. "Threatened is an understatement. Roberto had a temper. Brilliant, yes, but…" he searched for the right word, "… volatile. He saw Catalina's drive, her raw talent…" He gestured wildly, nearly smacking a precarious-looking mobile. "... and it drove him crazy."

Eve pressed on. "And the argument? What was it about?"

Raul's gaze flickered towards a particularly garish sculpture, resembling an explosion in a macaroni factory. "Stupid, really. I was talking about Cat's disappearance a lot, and Roberto wanted the evening to be all about him. We were setting up for his gallery show, his final project, and he was tired, took it out on me." He threw up his hands, a hint of theatrical frustration returning. "I was doing him a favor being there, helping him, and he was upset with me? I left!"

Eve tilted her head, studying him. "Yet, Roberto's disappearance conveniently followed your fight. And she's vanished too." She let the silence hang between them, heavy with unspoken questions.

The gallery's neon lights flickered, casting long, disturbing shadows across the chaotic art. Raul's earlier flamboyance had faded, replaced by a weariness that made him seem unexpectedly fragile.

"Professor," he began, his voice barely a whisper. "It doesn't make sense. Roberto, I get. Volatile, yes. But disappearing? Without a word? He'd at least leave a note… something dramatic."

He fixed her with imploring eyes. "You have to believe me – I had nothing to do with this. And Cat? She wouldn't leave the lab, not with her experiments running. Something... something is wrong."

Eve regarded him carefully. Despite the outlandish hair and the splattered lab coat, she sensed a desperation beneath the theatrics. "Look, Raul," she said, her voice softening slightly. "I understand your concern. The circumstances are troubling."

She hesitated, then decided to throw him a lifeline. "The truth is, there might be more to this than just disappearances. Something the police have been keeping quiet." Her eyes narrowed. "If you know anything, Raul, anything that could help with the investigation, now is the time to tell me."

Would he take the bait, trust her enough to open up? Or would the flamboyance reassert itself, a shield against the harsh reality they both suspected? Eve waited, her heart drumming a frantic rhythm against her ribs. And for the first time since donning the disguise of Professor Mathers, she wondered if this rabbit hole went far deeper than she'd initially bargai Raul stared at her, his eyes wide with a mix of shock and something akin to hope. "More to this?" he echoed, his voice rising in pitch. "What do the police know that they're not saying?"

He paced, the glitter from his hair leaving a shimmering trail on the concrete floor. "Listen, Professor," he said, his voice low and urgent. "I don't know everything. Roberto... he could be secretive.

He stopped, suddenly still, as if a thought had struck him like an errant brushstroke. "The night he disappeared," Raul continued, a tremor in his voice, "I saw a car. Dark, sleek, out of place in this neighborhood.

Eve leaned forward, the sensible tweed forgotten in the chase for the truth. "Could you describe the driver? Anything at all?"

Raul shook his head, frustration etched on his face. "No, it was too dark. But there was something... off. He shuddered. "I should have done something, walked back in, taken a photo, something!"

"Perhaps it's not too late," Eve said, her mind racing. "Raul, if there's anyone else who might have seen that car, anyone around the gallery, we need to find them."

A flicker of determination sparked in Raul's eyes. "The janitor! Mr. Kowalski has eyes like a hawk. And he’s always muttering about the 'comings and goings' around here." He paused. "Come to think of it, I haven't seen him in a few days."

Eve exchanged a quick, meaningful glance with herself in the reflection of a nearby sculpture. "A missing janitor as well? Raul, I think you and I need to have a longer chat, she glanced at her watch, it was about time for her next appointment. “Next time.”

A hint of color returned to Raul's face, though whether it was from excitement or fear, Eve couldn't tell. "Discreet is good," he managed a wry smile. "Less chance of my reputation being completely ruined."

As she made their way out of the gallery, passing beneath a sculpture that threatened to topple with a menacing creak, Eve couldn't shake the feeling that she'd stumbled upon something far darker than a mere case of missing persons.

The sensible tweed of Professor Mathers felt heavier, the heels impossibly high. Eve was buzzing with anticipation. Her instincts whispered that Raul, despite his theatrics, held the key to unraveling a mystery that twisted and throbbed like the electronic music echoing in the gallery. And somewhere beneath the absurdity of glitter and garish art, she sensed a vulnerability that made him all the more dangerous to underestimate.

# Chapter Sixteen

## Professor Alverez

The New Mexico sun beat down mercilessly as Eve, disguised as Dr. Nicole Mathers, navigated the bustling heart of the UNM campus. Students, a kaleidoscope of colors and personalities, spilled out of buildings, their chatter a cacophony that grated on her already frayed nerves. This vibrant display of youthful energy was a stark contrast to the grim realities swirling within her.

Following a campus map clutched tightly in her sweaty hand, she made her way towards the Biochemistry building. It was a squat, utilitarian structure, more fortress than academic haven. The sterile, concrete exterior did little to inspire creativity or innovation – a fitting metaphor for Dr. Alverez’s career, Eve thought cynically.

Pushing open the heavy oak door, she was greeted by the stale, familiar scent of lab chemicals. The hallway was a labyrinth of beige walls adorned with faded science posters – outdated diagrams of molecular structures, long-forgotten discoveries celebrated in pixelated glory. Here and there, students with pocket protectors and thick glasses scurried past, lost in their own scientific pursuits. "Nerds," Eve muttered under her breath, a wry smile playing on her lips. It was a term once used with derision, now a badge of honor in this temple of knowledge. Yet, even amongst these dedicated minds, she knew this professor was an anomaly, a relic clinging to outdated views, a dead weight on the ever-evolving field of science.

Following the musty scent of old coffee and stale pastries, she descended a flight of dimly lit concrete stairs. The flickering fluorescent lights cast long, eerie shadows, deepening the sense of neglect that permeated the lower levels. Here, at the fringes of academic prestige, resided the forgotten – fading research projects, and perhaps, a man holding a key to unraveling a sinister plot.

Eve took a deep breath, steeling herself for the encounter. his lab, she knew, would be a reflection of the man himself – stagnant, resistant to change. But beneath the surface, there might be a hidden trove of information, a forgotten detail, something that could offer a lead in this desperate game of shadows.

Dr. Jorge's lab was a cluttered den of scientific relics. Beakers lined dusty shelves, their contents long since discolored and inert. Ancient slide viewers sat untouched beside cracked petri dishes. The overall impression was more graveyard of innovation than active research center.

His desk, a fortress of paper stacks and yellowed textbooks, groaned under the weight of his apparent disinterest. And in the center of it all, sat Dr. Jorge himself – a disheveled man with untamed hair and an air of distracted resentment. His faded lab coat was stained with what Eve hoped was merely forgotten coffee spills.

Upon her entry, he barely glanced up, his watery eyes squinting at a paper held inches from his face. "Yes, yes?" he grumbled; his voice rough with disuse. "Dr. Mathers, wasn't it? What can I do for you?"

Eve swallowed a flare of disgust. This was the man responsible for shaping the minds of aspiring scientists, including Catalina. "Dr. Jorge," she began, her voice cool and measured, "I was hoping we could discuss Catalina Ramirez. Her recent disappearance..."

Jorge snorted, dismissing her mid-sentence. "Ah, Ramirez. Well, between you and me, her absence is hardly a loss to science." He shrugged, pushing his glasses up on his nose with a greasy finger. "Young women these days have their heads filled with all sorts of foolish notions. Better off at home, having babies, wouldn't you say?"

A surge of barely contained fury washed over Eve. Her knuckles whitened as she clenched her fists. This archaic relic, this academic dinosaur, dared to belittle Catalina's ambitions, her talent, her very being? It took every ounce of her self-control to maintain her professional facade.

"Dr. Jorge," she replied, her voice a thin veneer of politeness over roiling anger, "despite your antiquated views on gender roles, Catalina was an exceptional student. I'm here to gather any information that might shed light on her disappearance."

Jorge scoffed, his voice laced with condescending amusement. "Exceptional? Perhaps in her own mind. Stubborn, more like. Had she focused less on chasing some misguided notion of a career, she might not have gotten herself into trouble."

Eve's voice was now deceptively quiet, but held the weight of barely suppressed rage. "Dr. Jorge, what do you know about the circumstances leading up to Catalina's disappearance? Please, anything that could be helpful." Her words hung in the stale air, a silent ultimatum.

Jorge shifted uneasily, his smug facade momentarily cracking. Perhaps he sensed the danger lurking beneath her composed exterior. "Look," he mumbled, "students come and go. I barely remember her face, let alone her last days on campus. Perhaps you should be speaking to campus security or the police, eh?"

It was clear this was a dead end. Jorge, with his misogynistic disdain for female ambition, was more likely part of the problem than the solution. But Eve wasn't ready to give up. She would turn this rancid encounter into fuel, a reminder of the darkness she was combating, not only for Robert's sake, but for all the Catalinas who deserved a future unhindered by prejudice and stagnation.

The urge to rearrange Jorge's face with her fist was almost overwhelming. Eve clenched her jaw, the effort visible in the twitching muscle. Catalina, Robert, all those bright futures snuffed out... the rage threatened to consume her. But amidst the fury, a familiar, sardonic voice whispered in her mind.

"Dr. Jorge," she began, her voice deceptively sweet, "I'm so sorry, did I interrupt your groundbreaking research? Perhaps you were just about to cure cancer with that dusty petri dish?" A flicker of annoyance crossed Jorge's face – he clearly wasn't used to being challenged, especially not by a woman.

"Young lady," he sputtered, adjusting his glasses with a greasy finger, "I'll have you know..."

Eve cut him off with a dismissive wave. "Spare me the credentials, Professor. If your career was any more stagnant, it would've been fossilized alongside the dinosaurs."

Before he could bluster out a response, Eve slammed the phone down onto the desk, shattering the screen. Jorge flinched, the smug façade finally cracking.

"There," Eve said, an exaggerated smile plastered on her face, "consider that a donation to your retirement fund. Perhaps now you can afford a course on basic human decency."

Leaning in, she lowered her voice, the playful tone replaced by icy venom. "Listen carefully, Professor. Those students – the ones whose brilliance you couldn't even recognize – had more potential in their pinky fingers than you've had in your entire, wasted existence. And if I discover even the slightest hint that you had a hand in their disappearance..." She let the threat hang heavy in the stale air.

"I suggest," she continued, straightening up, "you make yourself very scarce. Because trust me, Professor, the fallout from their disappearance will make your current problems seem like a summer breeze."

As Eve swept out of the lab, a wave of satisfaction washed over her. Delivering that verbal lashing, fueled by equal parts fury and sarcastic wit, felt cathartic. Yet, the humor was a fleeting weapon against the chilling reality of their situation.

Behind her, she heard a muffled thud. Glancing back, Eve saw Jorge slumped in his desk chair like a punctured balloon. His shoulders sagged, the fight momentarily knocked out of him.

"Might as well retire at the end of the semester," he muttered under his breath, more to himself than anyone else. The words barely carried through the heavy lab door, but Eve caught them nonetheless.

A grim smile touched her lips. Perhaps her verbal assault had struck a deeper nerve than she'd imagined. The idea of Jorge, his misogyny and arrogance silenced, was a small yet satisfying victory. It wasn't the grand finale she truly wanted for him, but it was a start. She'd ensure his remaining time in academia would be anything but comfortable.

With a final, disdainful glance at the lab, Eve turned and continued down the hallway. Jorge was a minor obstacle; one she'd deal with swiftly and ruthlessly. Now, focus was paramount. Robert and the others were out there, their lives hanging in the balance. Their plight fueled her every step.

# Chapter Seventeen

## Wolfsbane

The Starbucks, with its cheerfully colored signs and the smell of overpriced coffee, became a bizarre backdrop to Eve's phone call. It was like ordering a hit alongside a vanilla latte – disturbingly mundane with a lethal undercurrent

Eve pulled out her phone, resisting the urge to scan the Starbucks for possible witnesses. She scrolled with the practiced ease of someone with far too many dubious contacts, then hit dial. The ring echoed with a strange hollowness in the cheery atmosphere.

"Dr. Marconi," a female voice, clipped and professional, answered on the second ring.

"Doc, it's Eve. Need a favor." Her voice was as smooth as the crema on a fresh espresso. "Something with a little kick, but nothing too messy. A heart attack would be lovely."

Dr. Marconi chuckled darkly. "Aconite fits the bill. Also known as Wolfsbane, if you're feeling literary."

"Wolfsbane? Isn't that something out of a bad fantasy novel?" Eve couldn't help the sarcasm, the tension bleeding out in a teasing tone.

"Don't dismiss the classics," the doctor replied, amusement lacing her voice. She launched into a scientific explanation about sodium channels and cells, but Eve cut her off with practiced impatience.

"Yeah, yeah, the science-y bit. Can we skip to the part where you express-mail me a murder weapon and instructions?" There was a hint of a wheedle now, the facade of nonchalance cracking a bit.

"Of course, dear. Expect delivery tomorrow." Dr. Marconi's voice was all business again. "And Eve? Try not to leave a trace." The line went dead with a click.

Eve hung up, a crooked smile twisting her lips. "Just another day at the office," she murmured, and took a long sip of her now-cold macchiato. For a moment, the assassin and the coffee-lover seemed to merge, creating a darkly humorous dissonance.

# Chapter Eighteen

## The Island of Horrors

Sandra's eyelids fluttered open, the world a swirl of nauseating colors and muffled voices. The dull throb in her head was a bitter echo of the chase, the crash... then the cold finality in her kidnapper's eyes. Where was she?

"...Bucharest was a triumph," a voice declared, accented and sharp. "The biochemist produced enough for a small army. Clients were... pleased."

Biochemist. Ricin. The words crashed through her skull like cymbals. Catalina... Her heart pounded a frantic rhythm. Was her friend a victim, too? Or worse?

"...this next target, an architect? Difficult. But the reward..." The second voice was a rumble, laced with greed. "Entire complexes, built on forced labor. Untraceable."

Sandra fought to remain still. Focus. Listen. Every word might be the key, not just to her survival, but to stopping this monstrous operation.

The old man clicked his tongue. "Architects are skittish. Better off with those muscle-bound athletes. Simple minds, easily controlled."

He wouldn't understand. They all underestimated the steely determination she'd hidden behind a facade of quiet compliance. They saw her as another pawn, another asset to be sold.

The plane dipped. They were landing. Soon. The flicker of defiance ignited into a blazing resolve. It wasn't just about survival anymore. She would dismantle this network. One victim at a time, one exposed secret at a time.

The man with the accent chuckled, a sound devoid of humor. "Muscle is easy to replace, Ivan. This architect, though... the right one could build a masterpiece for a very important client."

"Ah, yes," Ivan, the old man, rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "The American with the island. He wouldn't settle for anything less than perfection, would he?"

"Perfection with a price tag, of course," the accented voice continued. "Millions for a private ballet troupe, hand-picked from all corners of the world. Dancers, choreographers, the whole shebang. All... 'donated' shall we say?"

Sandra's breath hitched. Ballet. The bookstore. It all clicked into place. Her skills, her talent, had made her a target.

"A small island," Ivan mused. "No chance of escape. The perfect playground for his little... project."

Just then, a groan escaped Sandra's lips. A sharp intake of breath from the accented man followed.

"Well, well," Ivan said, a hint of amusement creeping into his voice. "Looks like our Sleeping Beauty has decided to wake up."

A hand, surprisingly gentle, reached down and brushed a stray strand of hair from Sandra's face. It was the man from the bookstore, his eyes holding a flicker of something that might have been sympathy, or perhaps just a professional interest in keeping his 'merchandise' calm.

"There, there, little ballerina," he murmured, his voice a soothing balm. "Don't worry, you'll be perfectly safe. We're just taking you to a beautiful island, a place where you can truly express your talent."

Sandra stared up at him, her voice raspy as she whispered, "What island? What do you want with me?"

The man from the bookstore smiled thinly, his eyes as cold and calculating as a shark's. "Let's just say, Mr. Thorne has a very particular vision. And you, Sandra, are just the missing piece for his masterpiece."

"Sandra, I am going to be honest with you, my friends and I were hired to kidnap you and take you to a plane in the morning. We're not going to hurt you, no touching you, just take you to the plane. You understand?

She nodded again.

If you try to escape you will get hurt and maybe killed, we don't want that, you don't want that. So, be a good girl and all will be okay, yes?

She nodded again. "A plane to where." she asked, knowing he would not tell her. So she followed it up with, "I'm thirsty, can I have some water?"

The man left, but returned shortly, with a paper cup and held it to her mouth. She opened and he tilted the cup, pouring the water down her throat, some ended up on her onto her shirt, and the coolness made her shiver.

"Are you cold? I can get you a blanket." he offered, then left again. He returned quickly with a small blanket and wrapped it around her. She moved from side to side and pulled it tighter around her. When she was finished, he said, "Okay, Sandra, I'm going to untie you, be good, okay, Sandra?

"Okay, Sandra, time to untie you..." His touch was clinical, efficient. Her legs, numbed by hours of captivity, buckled as she stood. Every sway, every stumble was cataloged by his sharp predator's eyes.

"How long…?" The question died on her lips. Hope was a luxury she couldn't afford. But as the island loomed ever closer, a defiant spark flickered in Sandra's eyes. This wasn't just about survival anymore; it was about turning the tables.

The plane taxied to a stop, the island heat was a suffocating wave even through the tinted windows. Sandra watched the bookstore man and the men from the hangar engage in brief conversation. There was a casualness to their interaction, a chilling certainty that this was routine, that their 'cargo' had nowhere to go.

This was her chance. It wouldn't be long, and it would be a fight against time as much as against the terrain. But as they guided her into the waiting SUV, her mind was already racing, every detail of the island's layout imprinting upon her memory.

Inside, the air crackled with a false sense of security. They expected her to cower, to wait for her assigned cage on this lavish prison. Instead, Sandra tensed, every muscle a coiled spring, her focus on the ocean – a treacherous path, perhaps, but her only path.

The beach blurred by, a flash of sand and scrubby trees. Then, the unlocked door. It wasn't an oversight. It was a dare, an implicit promise that escape was impossible. They'd underestimated how far desperation could drive her.

Her plunge into the jungle was instinct fueled by terror, the terrain a brutal enemy. But behind the breathless scramble was calculation – forcing them to search, buying every precious minute. The shoreline appeared, harsh and unyielding, but the ocean, roiled by choppy waves… that was her twisted lifeline.

The shock of the cold water was a brutal counterpoint to the adrenaline coursing through her veins. Every labored stroke was a defiance of their plan, a refusal to be caged. The boat, emerging from the hazy horizon, was a beacon. The shouts in a foreign tongue were music compared to the chilling English of her captors.

The island wasn't the lush haven her captors had painted, but a sprawling testament to their monstrous scheme. Lush greenery gave way to manicured exercise yards, dormitories lined up in sterile rows, and a central, open-air stage that dominated the eastern shoreline. A grim realization washed over her – they weren't building a troupe, they were forging a synchronized army of dancers.

Women, some barely older than girls, moved with chilling precision. Their bodies weren't those of artists, but sculpted weapons hardened by regimented workouts overseen by trainers whose barked orders cut through the humid air. These women weren't performers, they were prisoners. Sandra's blood ran cold. This was the fate they had planned for her, and the defiance sparked into a burning need to not just survive but dismantle this nightmarish operation.

The boat cut through the water, delivering her back into the clutches of the men. But this time, there was no false kindness, just the fury of a disrupted transaction. She was hauled from the water roughly, their words in an unfamiliar language punctuated by the harshness of their hands. She, the precious 'new talent', was now a liability. They hissed a familiar word - "punishment" - spitting it out as a promise of pain to come.

The SUV became a suffocating cell as it transported her further inland. Each bump in the road sent jolts through her injured body, twin agonies to the terror clawing at her mind. But Sandra forced herself to focus. There were cracks in their efficiency – the distraction at the airfield, the casual cruelty now replacing their initial facade. They were arrogant, but they weren't invincible.

Every detail was fuel for the desperate plan swirling in her head. The dormitory layout, the routines of the guards, the shift changes etched into their bored expressions. And beneath it all, a flicker of rebellion she spotted in the eyes of a few of the captive dancers – women who, like her, refused to be entirely broken.

The pain when it came was brutal. A dank, windowless room, the harsh shouts of her interrogators, and a punishment designed not cripple her ability to dance, but to break her resolve to fight. Her screams echoed through the concrete walls, yet with each blow, with each sob wrenched from her throat, Sandra's resolve hardened like tempered steel.

They'd underestimated the strength forged in countless hours at the barre. They'd assumed a dancer was fragile, all graceful lines and delicate movements. Sandra knew different. Dance was discipline, an unyielding spirit forged into muscle and sinew.

Her recovery was slow, calculated. She feigned weakness, lulling them into a false sense of victory. Each stolen moment was spent stretching, flexing the injured muscles, regaining control over her battered body. Meals, once choked down out of necessity, were analyzed – what foods might aid healing, what scraps could be secreted away as a meager weapon, or barter for information.

The dancers, initially wary of this newcomer, became a furtive network. Whispered conversations in stolen minutes relayed the island's grim structure – those in charge, supply deliveries, escape routes that had tragically failed. Sandra was no longer just a victim; she was a strategist, building an arsenal of knowledge and tentative allies.

Her chance wouldn't be an escape. This island fortress was too well-designed for one woman to flee. Instead, like the most daring and complex choreographies, her plan hinged on perfect timing and absolute ruthlessness. Pain had been her teacher. Now, her body, her deception, and the seething anger of the imprisoned troupe would become her weapons.

They'd intended to turn her into a perfectly obedient performer for their grotesque amusement. Instead, Sandra, the injured ballerina, was about to give them a show they'd never forget – one with rebellion as its rhythm, and freedom as its explosive finale.

# Chapter Nineteen

## The Office Hours

But as she walked, the echo of Jorge's muttered words lingered. Retirement... a quiet fading into obscurity. It was a fate too good for him, he deserved true justice, the kind that would truly honor the stolen potential of those students, would demand more than that. Eve was looking forward to receiving the package.

Dr. Mathers scanned the clock – 8:50 AM. Ten minutes before her "office hours" even began, and already a student was hovering by the door like a vulture eyeing a carcass. She sighed, shoving aside the well-worn copy of "Advanced Cryptography" she'd been attempting to decipher over a lukewarm cup of coffee.

The door creaked open, and a young man strolled in, a cocky grin plastered on his face. He wore a designer tracksuit that probably cost more than her rent, and his hair was styled with enough product to slick back a small mammal.

"Dr. Mathers?" he drawled, his voice dripping with a nonchalance that grated on Eve's nerves.

"That's Professor Mathers," she corrected, her voice clipped. "Though judging by your attire, I suspect you wouldn't recognize a professor if one tripped you with a textbook."

The grin faltered slightly. "Right, uh, Professor. Look, I know these office hours just started, but…" He pulled out a pair of what looked like platinum-plated tickets, waving them with a flourish. "These are floor seats for the Cytological Cyto… uh, the big Cytology conference! Super important stuff, you know?"

Eve raised an eyebrow. Cytology, the study of cells, wasn't exactly known for its glamorous rockstar conferences, let alone floor seats. "And what, pray tell, is so earth-shatteringly important about this… Cytology… conference that you can't manage to miss my very first office hours?"

"Well, it's, uh, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity! Plus, there's, you know, free food." He shifted awkwardly under her withering stare.

Eve leaned back in her chair, a steely glint in her eyes. "Look, Mr...?"

"Chad," he supplied hurriedly.

"Mr. Chad," she continued, her voice low and dangerous. "Let me educate you on a little concept. It's called 'responsibility.' You signed up for this class, which means attending lectures. Lectures that, incidentally, start in 60 minutes." She gestured pointedly at the clock.

Chad's face drained of color. "But… the conference… free food…"

Eve cut him off. "Here's a deal, Mr. Chad. You can either attend my office hours and discuss your, ahem, 'cytological concerns,' or you can skedaddle to your fancy conference and face a guaranteed zero on your first assignment. The choice, as they say, is yours."

Chad gulped; his bravado thoroughly deflated. "Office hours it is, then," he mumbled, shuffling towards a chair, suddenly looking very small in the oversized tracksuit.

Eve allowed herself a small, satisfied smile. Maybe this whole "professor" gig wouldn't be so bad after all.

Just as Chad shuffled out, looking defeated and possibly questioning the trajectory of his entire collegiate career, Dr. Mathers spotted a new pair of visitors. This time, two girls – freshmen, if Eve could hazard a guess. They were giggling conspiratorially, their backpacks stuffed full of colorful notebooks, and their manicured nails painted shades she suspected didn't exist in nature.

"Hello!" chirped the taller of the two, her voice high and strained with forced cheerfulness. "We're here for your office hours!"

A fresh surge of irritation washed over Eve. "And you two are…?"

"Oh gosh, how rude of us!" The shorter one fluttered her eyelashes. "I'm Tiffany, and this is Brittany."

Brittany giggled and waved, somehow managing to look both demure and vaguely rebellious.

"Intro to Psychology, right? Today's lecture is on...oh geez, I totally forget..." Tiffany's brow furrowed in what was surely meant to convey earnest confusion.

"Nonverbal communication," Eve supplied dryly.

"That's it! Silly me." Tiffany's laugh was like nails on a chalkboard. "Anyway, so, like, we wanted to ask if we could skip class? We just got these amazing offers to get, like, makeovers and stuff. Totally free!"

Eve stifled a groan. "And you believe missing a lecture on nonverbal communication is the best way to prepare for a… makeover?"

"Well, duh!" Brittany giggled again. "We gotta look our best! You know, body language, first impressions, all that good stuff."

Eve narrowed her eyes. "Let me see if I understand this correctly. You want to skip a lecture on nonverbal behavior in order to get a full-body makeover? Ladies, perhaps you need a bit less 'makeover' and a bit more of the 'over' part in 'think this over.'"

Tiffany and Brittany blinked in unison, their faces a mixture of confusion and barely repressed annoyance.

"You don't get it" Tiffany whined. "This could be our big break!"

"Like, we could be Instagram influencers!" Brittany gushed.

Eve resisted the urge to slam her head into the desk. "Look," she said, injecting a forced patience into her voice, "I appreciate your… ambition. But being successful – as an influencer, a psychologist, anything at all – takes more than a good makeover. It takes discipline, focus, and commitment. Something tells me those free makeovers aren't offering much in the way of those qualities."

The girls exchanged a look, and Eve could see the defiance hardening in their heavily mascaraed eyes.

"Fine, whatever," muttered Brittany, flipping her expertly highlighted hair. "We'll just go to Professor Johnson's class. It's, like, the exact same lecture anyway."

With a final dismissive toss of their heads, they turned and marched out, their laughter echoing mockingly in the hallway.

Eve closed her eyes for a moment and breathed deeply. Maybe it was time for another cup of that terrible coffee. This first foray into academia was proving more exhausting than any undercover operation ever had been.

Dr. Mathers glanced at the clock again – only twenty minutes until this charade of "office hours" ended. Just then, a shadow darkened the doorway. A young man stood hunched on the threshold, his figure gaunt and his clothes ill-fitting in a way that spoke of isolation, not fashion. His eyes, barely visible beneath a mop of greasy hair, darted around the room like a trapped animal's.

Eve immediately tensed, her instincts screaming warning signs. It wasn't just his disheveled appearance, but the volatile energy that seemed to radiate off him. Her hand strayed subtly under the desk, to the discreetly holstered Glock she'd taken to carrying on campus after all too many news reports.

"Can I… help you?" she asked, keeping her voice even.

The boy stepped into the office, his gaze skittering nervously. "I, uh…" He fumbled with a worn backpack, his fingers trembling. "I saw the sign… for office hours…"

"Intro to Psychology?" Eve offered. She kept her tone neutral, but her mind raced, cataloging his features, his movements, searching for threat indicators.

He nodded jerkily. "Yeah. I, um, I need to talk to someone." His voice cracked, a high, desperate edge to it.

Eve gestured to the empty chair. "Please, sit down." Every fiber of her being was on alert – this wasn't a student seeking help with a term paper. This was something far more dangerous.

As he moved forward, something glinted in the half-light – metal, tucked into the waistband of his baggy jeans. Eve's heart hammered. Was it a weapon? She had to get him to reveal it, but without startling him into a violent reaction.

"I hear listening is a big part of psychology," he mumbled, his eyes still fixed on the floor. "Maybe… maybe I just needed to be heard."

Eve seized the opportunity. "Absolutely. And to understand, sometimes we need to see more than just words. Could you… perhaps stand up? Sometimes it's easier to speak freely when we can move."

Hesitantly, he stood, his form stiff and awkward. The metal object was now partially visible, the dull sheen unmistakable.

"I…" he began, then his eyes widened, staring not at her, but over her shoulder. His voice came out in a strangled whisper. "No… no, please…"

Eve risked a glance back. There was no one there. Before she could react further, the boy gave a choked cry of terror and bolted from the room.

Eve, adrenaline surging, followed in hot pursuit. He wasn't heading for a classroom, but sprinting blindly towards an exit.

"Stop!" she commanded, her voice echoing down the empty hallway.

The boy froze, then spun to face her, his face twisted in a mask of pain. "You don't understand! They're coming! They're always…" His voice broke.

Eve moved calmly towards him, hands raised slightly, a soothing presence amidst the storm in his mind.

"It's okay," she murmured. "Take a deep breath. No one is coming. You're safe here."

The boy shook his head, eyes wide with a terror she couldn't reach. Then, as if her words triggered a hidden switch, he collapsed, sobbing. Not the defiant sobs of a thwarted assailant, but the broken whimpers of a lost child.

Eve knew then, this wasn't about violence. It was about a fractured mind seeking a desperate, self-destructive escape. And somehow, against all odds, her office, her little corner of academia, had inadvertently become a sanctuary. At least for today.

# Chapter Twenty

# The Professor

A flash of inspiration struck Eve. Why not turn a volatile situation into a teachable moment? It was risky, unorthodox, a far cry from the structured lesson plans she'd prepared. But something told her that the best way to break through to this student wasn't in a secluded office, but in the midst of everyday life.

"Actually," she interjected before the boy could sink further into despair, "I have an idea. Come with me…"

He blinked up at her, confused, a flicker of wariness creeping back into his eyes.

"I'm about to teach my class. Why don't you tag along? It'll be a safe place, we can talk more afterward, alright?" Her voice was firm, leaving little room for argument.

The boy hesitated, then, in a small act of defiance or perhaps desperation, shrugged.

Eve led him down the hallway at a brisk pace. The closer they got to the lecture hall, the more his shoulders hunched, and his steps slowed.

"Don't worry," she murmured, "It'll be okay. Just… try and blend in."

The lecture hall buzzed with pre-class chatter, students flicking through notes or engaging in hushed conversations. As they entered, a few curious glances landed on the disheveled boy trailing her, but Eve quickly directed him to a seat at the back.

With a final squeeze of his shoulder for reassurance, Eve took her position at the front of the class. A glance across the room confirmed the boy hadn't fled, but sat rigid, hands clenched in his lap.

"Welcome to Intro to Psychology…" Eve began, her voice stronger than she felt.

"Today," she began, her voice crisp and clear, "we're delving into the fascinating world of nonverbal communication. The way we move, the expressions we wear... these unspoken cues reveal far more than we might think."

A hush settled over the class. Some students leaned forward, notebooks ready, their eyes glinting with curiosity. Others shifted in their seats, a hint of boredom in their posture. One young woman in the front row, hair pulled back in a severe bun, mirrored Dr. Mathers' upright stance, her focus unwavering.

"Let's start with eye contact," Eve continued, her gaze sweeping across the room. "Direct eye contact can convey confidence, sincerity..."

And then she spotted her. Nadia, Her best friend, confidante, and a woman more dangerous in a sundress than most were in Kevlar. Former weapons trainer for the Israeli IDF and Mossad, Nadia was a force of nature disguised in a warm smile. And right now, that smile was fixed on Eve, a silent message passed between them.

A ripple of movement caught Eve's attention – a male student nearby hunched lower in his seat, his gaze flicking around the room, never quite landing on her. Avoidance, a classic sign of discomfort or concealment. Was he simply disengaged, or was there something he was hiding?

"...But," Eve emphasized, "prolonged staring can be perceived as aggressive, even threatening."

A few students across the room exchanged glances, a hint of unease mirrored in their slightly tense shoulders. Perhaps they were remembering an unpleasant encounter marked by that exact behavior.

Eve moved on, analyzing gestures. "Open palms? A sign of honesty, receptivity. Crossed arms? Defensiveness, a subconscious barrier." She noticed a cluster of students near the center mimicking each other's posture – mirroring, a way of building rapport, perhaps even signaling a clique.

"Even in stillness, our bodies speak volumes," Eve stated, pausing dramatically. A restless leg bouncing beneath a desk, the constant tapping of a pen – these were telltale signs of anxiety, or perhaps impatience.

As the lecture progressed, Eve watched her audience as much as she taught them. She saw the subtle flirts, and micro-expressions of attraction – a raised eyebrow here, a tilted head there. Friendships forged in the shared posture of friends, and the gulf of distance reflected in the stiff, unyielding stance of an outsider.

When class ended, the usual rush of students filing out was a subdued trickle. Eve approached the boy calmly. He tensed, ready to retreat, but her gentle touch on his shoulder seemed to steady him.

"Thank you for staying with me today," she said quietly. "Now, let's go somewhere private, so we can get you some help, okay?"

He nodded silently. It wasn't compliance, not yet, but there was a crack in the wall he'd built around himself.

"Office hours," Eve mused as they walked, "might mean something entirely different from now on."

Eve escorted the boy down the hallway, her pace gentle yet purposeful. Reaching the school's mental health center felt like a small victory, a step towards breaking the cycle of isolation gripping him. Inside, a warm-faced counselor took over, promising to provide guidance and resources. Hesitantly, the boy followed her in, casting a final, almost grateful look at Eve.

Stepping out of the center, relief washed over Eve, mingled with a lingering unease. That encounter had been a sobering reminder of the battles many fought unseen behind a facade of normalcy. Just as she was about to return to her office, a familiar figure emerged from the shadows of the hallway.

Nadia. Her usual easy smile was gone, replaced by a determined set to her jaw. In her hand was the manila envelope, the same one Eve had seen earlier in class. The doctor's package, the gift for Dr. Jorge Alverez.

"Well," Nadia said, her voice low, "that was… unexpected." Her gaze flicked towards the mental health center's closed door.

"Part of the professor package, apparently," Eve quipped, a wry smile playing on her lips. It was a mask over the adrenaline starting to course through her veins.

"You never cease to surprise me," Nadia mused, handing over the envelope. There was an unspoken question in her eyes - why am I at the university, and how can I help?

Eve felt a familiar thrill. The classroom, the troubled student, now this package… It was like her undercover instincts were awakening from a long hibernation.

"Looks like my assignment just got a lot more complicated," she replied, tucking the envelope under her arm.

Nadia's smile returned, but it held a predatory gleam. "Glad to hear it. Maybe it's time we had a little extra-curricular activity."

With that, Eve filled Nadia in on the plan as the headed to her office.

# Chapter Twenty-One

# The Package Delivered

Eve slammed the office door, the manila envelope a venomous weight in her hand. Nadia, observing her from across the desk, arched an eyebrow. "Not quite the welcome-to-the-faculty fruit basket, is it?" she remarked.

"Wolfsbane," Eve ground out through clenched teeth, "courtesy of Dr. Alvarez."

Nadia's eyes widened. "The poisoner's choice? Seems a bit... enthusiastic."

Eve felt her knuckles whiten on the envelope. "It was meant to be. Before he oh-so-generously offered his condolences about Catalina, he basically said the world of science wouldn't miss a woman's perspective." The memory of his dismissive tone, the utter disregard for Catalina's life and work, sent a fresh wave of white-hot rage through her.

Nadia leaned forward, her expression a lethal mix of understanding and fury. "That son of a..." she started, then exhaled slowly. "Eve, I know that sting. I've felt it too many times. But poison, that's not fixing the problem. It's just perpetuating it."

Eve chewed her lip, the temptation of swift, brutal retribution still whispering in her mind. But Nadia was right. As satisfying as it might be, sinking to Alvarez's level wouldn't change anything. It would make her as toxic as he was.

"We have to expose him," she murmured, the words crystalizing a new plan. "Show the world his true colors. Make it impossible for him to ignore, demean, or silence any woman ever again."

With a decisive movement, she ripped open the envelope, the deadly contents spilling into the trash.

Nadia gave a sharp nod of approval. "See? Professor smarts coming in handy. Now, let's figure out how to take this archaic bastard down."

Eve felt a surge of grim determination. This wouldn't be some petty revenge scheme – this was about dismantling a system of arrogance and abuse. The task ahead wouldn't be easy, but with Nadia's unwavering support, she felt a cold resolve settling in her bones.

Dr. Alvarez had picked a fight with the wrong woman. He assumed a quiet professor would cower or crumble in the face of his belittlement. Instead, he had just ignited a war, and Eve, armed with intellect and an unwavering ally, was ready to claim victory. The battle would be strategic, the dismantling slow and deliberate. And when it was over, he would be the one left in ruins.

A predatory gleam sparked in Nadia's eyes. "Alright, Professor," she began, a wry smile playing on her lips. "Time to turn those lectures on strategy into action. How do we wreck this guy without ending up in jail ourselves?"

Nadia's eyes narrowed. "Okay, no time for a slow burn takedown. We need something with impact, and we need it fast. Think disruption, not destruction."

Eve paced the small office, her mind racing. "He's supposed to give the keynote speech at that big symposium tomorrow. High profile, lots of donors, the whole nine yards." She paused, a spark of inspiration flaring. "What if it wasn't such a smooth performance?"

"Sabotage?" Nadia grinned. "I like where your head's at. But how messy are we willing to get?"

Eve chewed on her lip, visualizing the event. It would be crowded, formal… opportunities would be limited. "Messy is risky. Discreet is key. Maybe something to rattle him right before he goes on? Throw him off his game, make him stumble."

Nadia's gaze settled on the discarded envelope, the wolfsbane a useless prop now. "Psychological, then. We need to plant a seed of doubt, something to prey on his arrogance…"

Suddenly, an idea struck Eve. “What if Alvarez has a pattern of undermining his students, especially women, right when they need confidence the most? What if Catalina wasn't an isolated case?"

Nadia's eyes widened. "You mean, stage an intervention. Hit him where it hurts - his precious ego and his reputation as a mentor…"

"Exactly," Eve continued, the plan gaining momentum. "But we make it bigger. Find some students or stage our own… maybe get some of the Tres Piedras female residents in on it. They show up at the symposium, pretending to be students, and…"

"…politely, but publicly, confront him. Share their experiences. Nothing he can outright dismiss, but enough to plant doubt," Nadia finished, a hungry glint in her eyes.

Eve nodded. "We sow the seeds of discontent, then let them fester. Whispers to the right ears - concerns from colleagues, rumblings about his treatment of students…"

"By the time he's on that stage, everyone's watching, waiting for the cracks to show," Nadia added, a predatory smile on her lips. "Donors, faculty... he'll be squirming under their scrutiny. Even if he smooth-talks his way out of it, the damage is done."

A surge of excitement coursed through Eve. This wasn't just vengeance; it was a rebellion. Alvarez thrived on power, on silencing women. This public intervention was a way to amplify those silenced voices and unravel his control.

"No poison," she mused, "but the sting will be just as sweet."

The rest of the day was a whirlwind. Discreet inquiries into Alvarez's reputation, reaching out to female residents sympathetic to their cause, even a strategic phone call or two to plant the right rumors...

By nightfall, the stage was set. Tomorrow, Dr. Alvarez wouldn't just be giving a speech – he'd be facing a tribunal, and the jury would be those he thought he could manipulate with impunity. He had fatally underestimated not just one woman, but a whole network ready to turn his arrogance into his downfall.

The air in Eve Nadia's office crackled with a mix of anticipation and ruthless determination. Their makeshift war room was littered with notes, scattered with clues to the quiet campaign they planned to unleash before the symposium.

"Timing is key," Eve mused, tapping a pen against her lip. "We want the whispers to spread, but not give Alvarez enough time to fully discredit them."

Nadia smirked, tracing a finger over a hastily drawn timeline. "Late afternoon today… a well-placed comment to a friendly but gossipy secretary…" She grinned. "Something juicy but vague - concerns about female grad students feeling pressured, undervalued…"

Eve nodded. "Perfect. Then, a ‘casual’ coffee run to bump into a few key faculty members. Mention student anxieties, maybe even a dropped hint that Alvarez's 'mentoring style' might be a bit… intense."

"Subtle, but enough to raise a few eyebrows," Nadia agreed, her gaze darting to the printed guest list for the symposium. "Now, the donors… those we want to hit hard. Let’s slip something to that nosy Mrs. Atherton—heard a troubling rumor about a student dropping out, feeling completely demoralized after working with Dr. Alvarez…"

Eve grinned coldly. Mrs. Atherton loved to be on the inside track and had a soft spot for sob stories, the perfect vector to spread sympathy laced with doubt.

"And while she's busy gossiping," Nadia added, "a well-timed 'anonymous' email to the university ethics board. A vague complaint about a pattern of questionable behavior towards students. Just enough to pique their interest, especially with the symposium buzzing with potential donors."

Eve leaned back, a flicker of satisfaction glinting in her eyes. "It won’t be proof, but it'll paint a picture. A whisper here, a raised eyebrow there... By tomorrow morning, everyone attending that symposium won't just see a brilliant professor; they'll see a potential liability."

Nadia's smile was sharp. "Let's see how well he performs when the spotlight burns a little too harshly. When the applause might be tinged with just a hint of suspicion."

Their strategy wasn't about immediate destruction, but a carefully orchestrated dissonance. Doubt wasn't as flashy as a public accusation, but it was insidious, seeping into cracks in reputations, eroding trust.

Dr. Alvarez wouldn't even see the storm brewing until it was too late. And when the time came for his carefully cultivated image to crumble in front of his peers, he would have two underestimated women to thank for his fall from grace.

# Chapter Twenty-Two

## The Victim Retrieval Specialist

Mic scanned the room as he approached the booth, noting the exits, the sightlines, the rough-looking pair nursing beers in the corner who might not be as engrossed in their conversation as they seemed. Mic slid into the booth across from Leo Minin, his practiced smile at odds with the assessing glint in his eyes. The Bucharest cafe buzzed with the muted clatter of worn China and hushed conversations – the perfect backdrop for secret deals against a canvas of faded tourist photos.

Suddenly, a commotion erupted at a nearby table. Two men, faces flushed with wine and Slavic anger, were embroiled in a heated argument. Voices rose, chairs scraped against the floor, momentarily drawing the attention of everyone in the cafe, including Mic.

Minin seized the opportunity. He leaned forward, his voice barely a murmur. "So, the American with the deep pockets, she thinks I know where they're holding her precious artist?"

"So, the American with the deep pockets, she thinks I know where they're holding her precious artist?" His accent was a jagged mix of Russian and something harsher, hinting at a past forged far from the gilded galleries he now frequented.

Mic sipped his coffee, the bitterness mirroring his distaste for men like Minin. "Robert? He's a student, Mr. Minin. A kid." He let the unspoken accusation hang – Minin knew exactly what he was insinuating.

"Ah," Minin's lips curled in a predatory grin, "And his disappearance… inconvenient, yes?"

"That's Dr. Mathers' concern. I'm here for the boy." Mic's tone was ice, belying the frantic calculations in his head. Eve Mathers was a wildcard, prone to shifting alliances that could leave Mic stranded in unfriendly territory.

The arms dealer leaned forward, eyes glittering with avarice. "And if I show you, what then? A generous donation to a struggling orphanage, perhaps?"

Mic met his gaze. "Listen, Leo. Dr. Mathers set the terms. I’m here for the intel. The hows and whys aren't my concern."

Minin barked a laugh. "Ahh, the loyal middleman. So predictable." He leaned closer, his next words barely a whisper. "Bucharest is a small world, Mr…?" He let the question trail off, a silent threat.

"Call me Mic." He paused, choosing his next move carefully. "Word of a double-cross travels fast – missing inventory, dissatisfied clients…"

A flicker of unease crossed Minin's face, quickly masked. "Let's assume… hypothetically… that I can help. But even generosity has limits." His gaze hardened. "What guarantees do I have the good doctor won't abandon you the moment she has her precious student?"

Mic's smile was thin, devoid of warmth. "That's her gamble, not yours. Now, the location?"

"A warehouse district near the river. Abandoned textile factory, that sort of thing." He slid a folded paper across the table. "Surveillance schedule, approximate guard rotations. Consider it proof of… sincerity."

"Perhaps," he started, a speculative glint in his eyes, "this is the start of a… mutually beneficial arrangement. There are always those in need of a discreet retrieval."

Mic rose, his exit already planned. "I'll keep that in mind, Mr. Minin. If the price is right," He left the last part hanging. It was a lie – he'd walk through fire before doing another job for a snake like Minin.

A hint of amusement flickered in Minin's eyes. "Of course, of course. And if ever the good doctor and her enterprises... require assistance?"

Mic cut him off, his smile razor-thin. "She has your number." With that, he turned and disappeared into the bustle of the cafe, the aroma of dark coffee clinging to him like a shroud. It was just another day in a world of shifting allegiances and whispered deals, and for now, his only goal was getting that kid out alive.

# Chapter Twenty-Three

## The Symposium

The lecture hall buzzed with a dull drone. Dr. Jorge Alvarez, with heavily pomaded hair and a smug smirk, launched into his presentation. Slides flickered onto the screen – complex molecular structures, graphs littered with jargon, and the sort of mind-numbing minutia only a deeply invested biochemist could truly appreciate.

Scattered among the seasoned academics were the young women from Tres Piedras, their eyes bright with feigned interest. Eve and Nadia had briefed them well – the objective wasn't true knowledge absorption, but the sowing of seeds of dissent, precisely timed to disrupt and derail.

Alvarez, oblivious to the undercurrent, reached the crux of his thesis: A convoluted theory on enzyme pathways and their potential application – something about groundbreaking metabolic treatments, Eve dimly recalled. Then, as if a switch had flipped, his voice shifted.

"...but of course," Alvarez deviated, a condescending smile spreading across his face, "the delicate biochemical balance required for such advancements demands a special touch. Something, shall we say, inherently attuned to the nurturing processes of nature…"

He paused, basking in his own perceived profundity. This was it – the opening that Eve and Nadia had anticipated, the subtle shift from pseudo-science into the familiar territory of Alvarez's outdated worldview.

The first disruptor, strategically seated midway through the hall, raised a tentative hand. "Dr. Alvarez, if I may," she began, a flicker of nervousness playing across her features. "Could you clarify the connection between 'nurturing processes' and the enzymatic catalysis pathway you outlined earlier?"

Alvarez, initially pleased by the question, couldn't resist the urge to embellish. "My dear, you see, while the raw intellectual power needed for this field is undeniable, the true breakthroughs come from a deeper understanding, an almost intuitive alignment with the…"

Before he could fully articulate his sexist drivel, another hand shot up, this time from the back of the hall. "Excuse me, Dr. Alvarez," a stronger voice interjected, "but your earlier work on gene expression seemed heavily reliant on data collected by your female research assistants. Isn't their contribution the 'nurturing' you're implying?"

The room erupted in a rumble of disquiet. Alvarez stuttered, backpedaling furiously. He attempted to reorient the discussion towards the 'theoretical', but the damage was done. His initial foray into chauvinism had cracked the veneer of academic discourse.

The questions now came in rapid succession, each infused with carefully crafted barbs. "Dr. Alvarez, your paper last year seemed to discredit Dr. Kimura's findings. Was that also due to her 'nurturing nature'?"

"Could you explain why your lab has the highest turnover rate for female research assistants in the entire department?"

Alvarez, once a proud peacock preening on stage, was now a flustered mess of contradictions and half-baked justifications. The esteemed biochemists in the audience watched with a mix of discomfort and perverse fascination. This wasn't a scientific debate; it was a public dissection of archaic mindsets masquerading as intellectual superiority.

Eve leaned back, a triumphant smirk playing on her lips. There was nothing quite like watching a well-crafted plan unfold. These young women weren't simply disrupting a talk; they were chipping away at the foundation of systemic inequality in science. One cringe-worthy derailment at a time.

As Alvarez stumbled towards an unsatisfying conclusion, the lecture hall was no longer a haven for his biochemical musings. It was a battleground, and the weapon of choice was not a pipette or a microscope, but the sharp, unrelenting voices of those long dismissed and underestimated. The conference hall, once echoing with Dr. Alvarez's outdated pronouncements, was now a cacophony of empowered female voices. Dr. Alvarez, flustered and sweating, tried to regain control, but his words were drowned out by the tide of defiance.

Eve watched with a satisfied smirk. This wasn't just about puncturing Dr. Alvarez's inflated ego; it was about empowering these young women to challenge the limitations placed upon them. A subtle shift had occurred. The audience wasn't there to be lectured to; they were there to be heard.

As the final accusation of "Me Too!" rang out, a stunned silence descended upon the room. Dr. Alvarez, red-faced and sputtering, looked like a deflated balloon. Then, Nadia, ever the opportunist, grabbed the microphone.

"Thank you, ladies," she boomed, her voice cutting through the tension. "Today, we've heard a lot about what women can't do. But let me tell you something – we can do anything we set our minds to. We are doctors, lawyers, engineers, and yes, even FBI agents!"

A wave of cheers erupted, the sound washing over Dr. Alvarez like a tidal wave. He mumbled something incoherent and scurried off the stage, his polyester suit a monument to his misplaced dominance.

Eve and Nadia exchanged a triumphant grin. This wasn't just a victory against a pompous blowhard; it was a spark that would ignite a fire. The young women of Tres Piedras had found their voices, and that, Eve knew, was a force to be reckoned with.

# Chapter Twenty-Four

## The Warehouse

Mic pocketed the intel, a bitter taste in his mouth mirroring his distaste for the job. Minin was a lowlife; yet here he was, preparing to risk his neck to save a kid Minin probably helped kidnap. This favor for Eve was getting more complicated by the minute – and dangerous. He still wasn't sure why an art historian needed his specific skillset but favors in this world were a currency all their own. Eve would owe him one, big time.

He scanned the surveillance schedule. Two guards at the main entrance, one patrolling the perimeter with irregular intervals. Minin, ever the pragmatist, hadn't bothered wasting manpower on a vast, abandoned building with no valuables left to guard.

Exiting the cafe, Mic slipped into the fading Bucharest twilight. Streetlamps cast long, distorted shadows, and the air thrummed with the hushed activity of a city comfortable with its secrets. The warehouse district was a short walk. He'd scope things out, then find someplace secure to make further plans. This was going to need more than just a rushed rescue.

The riverfront loomed, a dark expanse punctuated by the skeletal frame of the textile factory. Its broken windows were like empty eyes staring across the water. Minin's information was accurate, at least. Mic melted into the shadows, his senses on high alert. A flash of movement on the roof... but no, just a feral cat hunting pigeons. Nerves always played tricks in these situations.

The silence in the abandoned district began to press in, fueling a creeping unease. Mic needed to get inside, confirm the intel, and formulate a plan. He found a shattered window low to the ground, slipping inside the cavernous warehouse with practiced ease.

The dim interior smelled of dust and decay. His boots crunched softly on the debris-strewn floor. That's when he heard it – a muffled sob, quickly cut off. Holding his breath, Mic strained his ears. Another muffled sound, this time coming from a deeper section of the building.

The hair on the back of his neck stood on end. Minin had only mentioned one hostage. Cautiously, he moved further in, following the sounds. A sliver of moonlight illuminated a makeshift barrier – stacked crates concealing a hidden doorway.

Mic worked in the shadows. The camera was easy enough – a quick, brutal motion from the shadows to snap its neck, sending it clattering uselessly to the floor. He knew time was his enemy now – someone would notice, and every second of delay was dangerous.

The warehouse was a labyrinth of old machinery and crumbling walls, footsteps echoing in the oppressive silence. Each door was a gamble.

Room after room, the same scene unfolded. Terrified faces, disbelief vying with desperate hope. Some bolted at the first sight of him, fleeing into the dark corridors without question. Others, paralyzed by fear, refused to budge, whispers catching in their throats. "It's a trick... he's one of them..."

Each refusal was a gut punch, but there was no time for persuasion. Mic's voice was rough but urgent as he moved from room to room. "I'm here to help. Run when you can, find a way out! Police are coming!"

Despair clung to him. How many kids were still trapped in this nightmare? His mind raced. Maybe creating a central distraction, herding the others towards whatever exit he could find... it was a terrible plan, but all he had.

He started calling out for Robert, “Robert, UNM student, Robert, UNM student.

...Then, a glimmer of something more than just terror in a pair of too-wide eyes. "Who… who are you?" The voice was weak, barely a whisper.

Mic kept his distance, sensing the boy's fear. "Raul sent me." He hated lying, but it was necessary.

Recognition flickered in the boy's eyes, but it was quickly masked with wariness. "Raul? How... how do I know you're-"

Mic cut him off, a knot forming in his stomach. Could he do this? Cause chaos, lead the students to safety, knowing full well that the guards would be armed, out for blood? Eve's instructions echoed in his mind... hold back the police, get them out yourself. She had reasons, but those reasons started to feel hollow faced with the pleading eyes of these terrified kids.

His hand drifted to his pocket, feeling the reassuring shape of the burner phone. One call, and the cavalry would be on the way. But would it be betrayal? His deal with Eve, the favor he was owed... it all crumbled against the urgent need in Robert's eyes.

Mic closed his eyes for a moment, the decision a bitter weight. "Robert," his voice was no more than a rasp, "it's going to get noisy. But it means help is coming. Do you understand?"

A flicker of hope sparked in the boy's eyes, quickly tempered with caution. "Who's coming?"

"Someone who can help. Now, I need to make a distraction. When it starts, you tell them what I said. Help is on the way." Mic paused, his own doubts echoing in his mind. Was he making the right call? "And Robert... tell them to run. Fast."

The boy – Robert, his mind supplied – swallowed hard but nodded. The sight of him, still a defiant spark amidst the fear, fueled Mic's determination. His promise to Eve shattered, he now had a different promise to make. To get these kids out alive.

Mic leaned closer, speaking in a rapid undertone. "Robert, there are dozens of kids in this place. I can't get them all out alone, but you can help."

Robert met his gaze, a flicker of determination pushing back the lingering fear. "What do I do?"

"You know this place better than I do. Is there a central area, somewhere we can herd the others?”

Robert thought for a moment. "Yeah...the old loading bay. Only accessible through one corridor."

Mic nodded grimly. "Perfect. I need to make a distraction – something loud, something that'll draw their attention away from here. Maybe fire..." His eyes scanned the room, spotting a pile of moldy rags and a broken canister half-filled with a flammable liquid.

"When you hear it, that's your cue. You tell them help's on its way, tell them to run for the loading bay. Got it?"

Robert hesitated. "What about you?"

Mic gave him a crooked smile. "Don't worry about me, kid. I've got other ways out of this rat trap." He left it ambiguous – best not to involve Robert too directly in the violence he knew was coming.

"Now, remember," Mic said, emphasizing each word, "speed is everything. Once that chaos starts, we don't have long before they figure it out. Can you do this?"

Robert stood straighter, a glimpse of the defiant he hoped he would find. "Let's get these people home."

Mic reached for the burner phone. As he dialed Eve's number, a cold certainty settled over him. There would be consequences – deals broken, debts left unpaid. But in that hidden room, with the weight of dozens of desperate lives hanging heavy in the air, none of that mattered.

The phone rang once, twice... then Eve's clipped voice cut through the tense silence. "Mic, where the hell are you? The timing needs to be-"

He cut her off, urgency lacing his voice. "Change of plans, Eve. It's bad. There's not one student, there's dozens. This is a whole damn trafficking operation." He kept his voice steady, the shock he felt threatening to turn his words to a shout.

Silence hung on the line, then Eve swore, a bitter exhalation. "Dammit, Mic, why didn't you say-…"

"Look, arguing gets us nowhere," he snapped. "The cops, you need to call them now. They need to be ready to intercept." His mind raced, picturing the warehouse, the potential choke points, the desperate hope on the students' faces.

Eve paused, then, surprisingly, her voice softened. "You're sure about this? The op was meant to be clean, no authorities...."

"Clean?" His voice cracked a little with bitter laughter. "There's nothing clean about this, Eve. Get me the police, fast."

A long breath. Then she spoke, a no-nonsense edge in her tone. "Alright, alright. I can reach the Legat, the Embassy connection. He'll get the Romanian police mobilized."

Relief mixed with a fresh wave of tension. The police would secure the situation, but he was still in it, deep. "Can they be at the loading bay? If we can funnel them out…"

"Give me location details. Don't do anything stupid, Mic." There was a hint of worry in her voice now, unexpected after their earlier conversation.

He relayed the address, rough directions, then hesitated. The urge to downplay things, to maintain his usual air of cool competence almost won. Instead, he let the desperation seep through. "Eve...you better bring a bus. There's a hell of a lot of kids."

The wail of sirens cut through the night, a beacon of hope against the warehouse's bleak silhouette. Mic held his position in the shadows, watching as the Romanian poliţişti stormed the loading bay. Raucous shouts, the flash of lights, then the first wave of students poured out – hesitant, a dazed mix of relief and terror on their young faces.

Mic let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. Eve had come through, thank god. Now, his part was done. He faded back into the darkness, the same way he'd come. It was sloppy, risky, but blending in with the chaos was the only sure way to avoid awkward questions from the Legat or whoever might be in charge.

As he melted into the streets, relief warred with a lingering unease. It was over, at least for him. The kids were safe, more or less... And judging from the gaunt faces of some of the rescued students, the horrors they'd endured went deeper than kidnapping. As he slipped away, he knew this was not the way he wanted to go, and instead, hopped on his motorbike and followed the police to the hospital. He told himself he was doing it for his friend, but he knew, he was doing it for himself too.

The hospital was a whirlwind of activity when he arrived. The familiarity of its sterile hallways offered little comfort this time. Poliţişti questioned students, weary doctors triaged injuries. The hushed buzz of whispers hinted at far darker things than broken bones.

Then, he caught sight of Robert, face pale, but his eyes blazing with an anxious determination. As their eyes met, the student broke away from a cluster of officers, hurrying towards Mic.

"You came back," Robert breathed, relief evident. Then the questions came, rapid-fire. "Did they find Mandy? A girl, American?

Mic's heart sank. He had no answers, only the grim certainty that this nightmare wasn't over. "No," he said, keeping his voice low, "the police didn't find her. But they'll keep looking, don't worry." It felt like a hollow promise, even as he said it.

Then, a doctor, harried but compassionate, approached. "Excuse me, young man, but we need to finish your examination. There are others..."

Robert nodded, a flicker of doubt clouding his face.

Once all the students were taken care of Mic left the hospital. He wanted to go back and look for any signs on who did this. When he got to the building the police were there, but he had a few tricks and made his way inside. Robert mentioned the bag left behind by one of the guards. He tracked it down and took it with him to the hotel. He found the Coquette House, just a few blocks from Bucharest Emergency Hospital.

When Mic returned to the hospital the next morning it felt no less oppressive the second time around. The smell of disinfectant, the muted buzz of machines, and the low murmurs of nurses and police officers - it all swirled around Mic like a shroud of uneasy anticipation. He found Robert's room after a short search, the worry lines etched on the young man's face momentarily forgotten at Mic's appearance.

"You came," Robert said, a flicker of hope sparking in his eyes. "Did you hear anything… his voice trailed off, the unspoken plea for news about Mandy hanging heavy in the air.

Mic held his gaze, an idea both reckless and impossibly hopeful taking root in his mind. "Come with me."

Without waiting for a response, he turned and headed out into the bustling hospital corridor. Robert followed, confusion and a desperate flicker of hope warring on his face. Mic led him through a maze of hallways, finally stopping at a partially open door.

Peering inside, Robert gasped, his eyes widening in disbelief. A frail figure occupied the hospital bed, hooked up to monitors and an IV drip. Pale, hollow cheeks, but unmistakably the American girl Robert longed for. Mandy.

Mic pushed the door wider, a wheelchair parked beside the empty bed. "Turns out, rescue operations sometimes leave a few loose ends." He flashed Robert a wry smile. "Looks like you both owe someone a thank you."

A wave of relief washed over Robert, followed by a rush of questions. But before he could voice them, Mic gestured towards the wheelchair. "Now, go on. Looks like your friend needs some good news about as much as you do."

Robert hesitated, a flicker of concern in his eyes as he took in Mandy's sickly pallor. Mic nodded reassuringly. "She's weak, but she'll be alright. Doctors got to her just in time."

With a surge of determination, Robert crossed the room and knelt beside Mandy's bed. As he spoke her name, her eyes fluttered open, disorientation slowly giving way to a dawning recognition. Their hushed conversation was a private bubble of joy in the sterile hospital room.

Mic stepped back, giving them space. His work here was done, at least for now. But as he watched the two reunited friends, a nagging unease lingered. Mandy's condition was a grim reminder - this wasn't a clean-cut victory. The aftermath of such horrors would be far longer and more difficult than any rescue.

# Chapter Twenty-Five

## The Brainstorming Session

Eve leaned back in the ergonomic nightmare they called an office chair. "This campus coffee is an abomination." She swirled the lukewarm liquid in her UNM-branded mug, grimacing. At least the caffeine jolt was keeping her somewhat functional after the red-eye flight and a fruitless morning digging into Raul's background. The boyfriend was either a heartbroken mess or the greatest actor since Olivier. And given his theatrics, Eve was leaning towards the former.

Nadia, bless her efficient heart, slid a fresh Starbucks cup across the desk. "Figured you could use the good stuff."

Eve took a grateful sip, the hit of caramel momentarily eclipsing the bleak case notes spread before her. "You, my dear Nadia, are a lifesaver."

"Speaking of saving lives," Nadia said, tapping a file, "where are we with these missing kids? Still circling the Raul-shaped drain?"

Eve huffed, a strand of dark hair stubbornly escaping her messy bun. There was a reason she was a pantsuit and field work kind of agent, not the hair-gelled interrogation type. "Raul's out. We dug deep – family history, finances, social media rabbit holes so dark I might need therapy – the kid's cleaner than a church choir."

Nadia's frown mirrored Eve's own. "So, either he's the world's best liar, or he's clueless. Hard to see him as the mastermind behind an international kidnapping ring." She steepled her fingers, her analytical mind churning, "These students... all brilliant, and now, gone. What's the connection?"

Eve scanned the files again. George Rabbitfoot, pre-med wunderkind. Lacy Jones, coding goddess. "It's not just the talent. None of them have much by way of family. Estranged parents, orphans..." She glanced at Catalina's file. Even she claimed minimal contact with her younger brother. "These kids are ghosts, Nadia. Easy to snatch without raising an alarm."

The revelation settled into a chilling silence. The coffee was forgotten, the ache in Eve's neck from the cramped workspace a distant annoyance. Something about the sterile efficiency of the disappearances set off her well-honed instincts.

"They're not being ransomed," she muttered, "not with this profile. They're being...utilized."

The word hung ominously between them. An image flickered through her mind: makeshift labs, forced experiments, stolen genius twisted into dark purposes. She'd seen it before, in grim glimpses during ops that still tinged her dreams with chemical burns.

Nadia chewed on her lip, mirroring Eve's unease. "Whoever is behind this," she began carefully, "they have resources, organization. We're not dealing with a lone stalker, but with something...bigger."

The office door creaked open, disrupting the grim train of thought. Ben Musser, his rumpled tweed a stark contrast to their FBI-issued formality, offered them a hesitant smile. "Not interrupting anything too critical, I hope?"

"Of course not, Ben," Eve said, forcing a lightness she didn't feel. "Just confirming what we already know – that this case is a giant mind-bender."

"Indeed," Nadia chimed in. "We're going round in circles with this Raul lead. Any chance you've got something more promising from the academic angle?"

Ben grimaced. "Afraid not. His faculty records are squeaky clean, students love him, even the department head – and you know she's got a broomstick lodged somewhere inconvenient – doesn't have a bad word to say."

Eve hid her skepticism. A universally beloved professor was always a red flag in her book. But Raul's overwrought performance still screamed heartbroken lover, not mastermind. Her fingers drummed an impatient rhythm on the desk. "What about connections between the missing students? Classes together, research groups...anything?"

Ben shook his head. "That's the million-dollar question, isn't it? High achievers from different disciplines, no obvious link. It's maddening."

Eve mirrored his frustration. Body language was her forte – microexpressions, posture, the subtle tells that betrayed lies – but in this case, the bodies themselves were missing. "We need something concrete," she growled, "a pattern, a clue, anything that gets us off this damn hamster wheel."

Then it hit her, a jolt as potent as the double-shot espresso. "Applications."

The word hung in the air as Nadia and Ben exchanged puzzled glances.

"Student applications," she clarified, a surge of adrenaline quickening her pulse. "Financial aid, scholarships... most of these kids wouldn't be here without it. Something triggered their selection, made them targets."

Nadia's eyes widened. "You think there's a specific application, a benefactor...someone picking them off one by one?"

Ben ran a hand through his unruly hair, a nervous habit born of long nights hunched over student files. "Could be. We get some…unusual donors. Eccentric alumni with very specific stipulations for scholarships, research grants…"

Eve was already on her feet, her mind racing faster than her worn-out sneakers could carry her. "That's it! We need to cross-check applications for the past few years. Look for similar backgrounds, any common thread these kids might share." There was a spark now, a flicker of hope in the vast, dark void of this case.

Ben scrambled for his notebook, already formulating a plan. "I can get a list of high-value scholarships, discretionary funds..."

"And I'll lean on the Financial Aid office," Nadia added, a steely determination glinting in her eyes. "Someone in there has to know something. Students don't just get massive grants out of thin air."

Eve grabbed her coffee mug, the warmth a stark contrast to the chilling possibilities swirling in her head. "Let's move. We need to find the nexus of this whole nightmare, the reason these brilliant kids are being...collected." Her gaze was laser-focused, the taste of the abomination that was campus coffee a distant memory. The hunt was on.

The cramped Financial Aid office was a fluorescent-lit labyrinth of filing cabinets and hushed whispers. Eve barely masked her impatience as a harried-looking administrator, one Mrs. Beasley, fumbled through paper files older than some of the missing students.

"I assure you, Agent....Emerson?" she sputtered, peering over half-moon reading glasses, "we take student privacy very seriously."

Nadia flashed a disarming smile, softening her presence. "Of course, Mrs. Beasley. We understand, but these are extenuating circumstances. Every detail could help us find those kids."

Mrs. Beasley, clearly susceptible to Nadia's charm (and perhaps the implied threat of an official FBI audit), finally unearthed a stack of folders. Eve pounced.

Skimming through the documents, her eyes narrowed, searching for inconsistencies. Need-based scholarships, merit awards… The minutiae was enough to make her nauseous. Then, something caught her attention in Lacy Jones' file.

"Hold on," she said, tapping a line item. "What's the Provost Scholarship Program.

Mrs. Beasley blinked. "Hm, let's see…ah yes. Quite competitive…specific criteria..." Her voice trailed off as Eve snatched the file, her heart thrumming in her chest.

"We need to talk to IT," she snapped at Nadia, "and get a list of Provost Scholarship winners. Pronto."

When Nadia returned with the list of winners she was crestfallen. She briefed the others on what she found out. The Provost Scholarship, the winners. However, only one name on the list was a winner, Rajiv Ramdat, from the business school. Dead End.

Eve reached for her phone, a name flashing through her mind. "I need to make a call."

Winnie had been an invaluable asset during Eve's stint with the dark web unit. The woman was a hacker extraordinaire, capable of finding a needle in a digital haystack.

"Winnie, it's Eve. Listen, I need a favor, big one. It has to be discreet…University Provost Scholarship program, past five years. I need everything – who sets it up, where the money comes from, who reviews the applications…everything."

There was a pause, then Winnie's trademark chuckle, a digital rasp through the line. "Consider it done, Agent Black. You owe me."

Eve hung up, a mix of anticipation and anxiety twisting in her stomach.

# Chapter Twenty-Six

## Hackers Gambit (Winnie Reveals)­­

Eve slammed the last file shut, the sound echoing sharply in the cramped office. Hours, wasted, spent chasing ghosts and red herrings. The missing students' faces flickered in her mind's eye – bright, eager, now swallowed by an impenetrable darkness.

Her phone buzzed, a lifeline in the bleak landscape of the case. "Winnie," she barked, a mix of apprehension and hope fueling her voice.

"Hey, Agent Black," Winnie's crackling voice filled the room as Eve switched to speakerphone. Nadia and Ben crowded closer, silent but brimming with tense anticipation. "So, about that little scholarship of yours... interesting setup, I must say."

"Get to the good stuff, Win," Eve urged, the muscles in her neck taut with a familiar blend of caffeine and adrenaline.

"Alright, alright, here's the weirdness. Every single one of your missing kiddos applied for the Provost Scholarship Program, like you suspected. Dug through those applications with a fine-toothed digital comb, cross-checked their answers. Turns out, these kids weren't just brainy."

Winnie paused; the silence somehow more ominous than words.

"Spit it out," Nadia snapped, her usual composure cracking around the edges.

"Two demographics popped out, consistent across the board. First, every single one of them fell within the top 5% in their field. Makes sense, scholarship's aiming for the cream of the crop. But here's the kicker," Winnie continued, "these kids were also in the bottom 5% in terms of listed family ties. Orphans, estranged parents, that sort of thing. Lonely geniuses, ripe for the picking."

Eve felt the blood drain from her face. The pattern was chillingly clear. "Solitary...vulnerable...easy to disappear without protest." She glanced at Catalina's file, a knot forming in her gut. "All except one."

"Bingo," Winnie confirmed. "Our girl Cat, she mentioned a brother on her application. Now, I can't find any records on the guy, so either he's living under a rock or…"

Nadia finished the thought, her voice grim. "Or he doesn't exist."

Ben slumped forward, hands covering his face. "My God, it's a...a catalog. They're selecting them, preying upon their isolation."

Eve interjected, “More like a menu, a restaurant menu, where buyers are choosing which students to get. They order, and the kidnapper or kidnappers come get the merchandise, and hand deliver.”

Ben commented, “Eve, don’t call them merchandise, they’re kids.

Eve apologized, she forgot how sensitive Ben could be. “Sorry, professor.”

The room fell into a tense silence, broken only by the insistent whirring of the overhead fan doing a dismal job of circulating the stale air. Eve's body pulsed with a sickening mix of anger and urgency. These weren't just case files; they were stolen lives, brilliant minds extinguished before they could fully ignite.

"So the brother's a fabrication," Eve mused, her gaze sharpening around a new investigative avenue. "Cat was desperate enough to invent a support system. She knew the rules of the game, even if unconsciously."

"Which means..." Ben trailed off, mirroring Eve's train of thought.

"Which means we need to find out every single lie, every omission on these applications. That's where whoever's behind this will slip up, reveal the true priorities of their twisted operation," Eve finished, her voice cold and determined.

Get back to those applications, Winnie," Eve ordered, her voice now a steely command. "We're going to expose every hidden ingredient in this recipe for disaster, and then we're going to track down the bastards who cooked it up."

# Chapter Twenty-Seven

## The Gig is Up

Eve stirred the tepid hotel room coffee, the metallic tang a poor substitute for a decent Starbucks brew. Across the table, Nadia meticulously reviewed the university website's scholarship program details. The sterile blue light cast an unnatural glow on her sharp cheekbones.

A knock on the door shattered the tense silence. Eve barked a gruff "Come in," the remnants of sleep still clinging to her voice. The door creaked open, revealing a figure more suited for a cosplay convention than an FBI investigation.

Winnie, all of twenty-something with hair the color of a midnight sky and eyes that sparkled with digital mischief, squeezed into the cramped room. Her Hello Kitty backpack seemed at odds with the grim reality of their situation. "Yo, Agent Black," she chirped, her voice laced with a singsong lilt. "Figured you could use a hacker with a side of adorable."

Eve snorted, a flicker of amusement chasing away the oppressive weight of the case. "Adorable? Let's hope you're more lethal than your backpack suggests, Winnie."

Winnie grinned, unfazed. "Honey, lethality comes in all shapes and sizes. Especially when those shapes can bypass firewalls like they're made of tissue paper."

Nadia finally looked up, a hint of a smile tugging at the corner of her lips. "Nice to meet you, Winnie. We need a plan, audacious but with minimal bloodshed. Preferably none on our end."

Eve leaned back in her chair, her mind whirling. "We need you in the system, Winnie. Enrolled as a student, applying for this damned scholarship. Become bait."

Winnie's eyes widened, a flicker of something akin to excitement replacing the playful glint. "Whoa, Agent Black, going undercover? Me? Isn't that a little...outside my usual skillset?"

"Think of it as a digital social experiment," Nadia interjected, her voice laced with dry humor. "Besides, you're the only one here who can create a fake identity that wouldn't set off every red flag in the university's security system."

Eve tapped her finger on the table, a predatory glint in her eyes. "And while you're in the system, Winnie, we need eyes and ears. Access to their network, their communications…anything that gives us a lead."

Winnie's grin widened. "Consider it done. Just be warned, my social skills are about as functional as a government website."

"We'll manage," Nadia said, already pulling up the scholarship application form on her laptop. "Now, let's cook up the most brilliant, fake student this university has ever seen."

The brainstorming session crackled with nervous energy and a touch of absurd humor. Winnie, it turned out, had a wicked sense of humor, peppering Nadia's meticulous planning with outlandish suggestions for Winnie's fake persona. Eve, ever the pragmatist, kept them grounded.

"Alright, let's hold the invisible pet dragon for another mission," Eve interjected, stifling a laugh at Winnie's suggestion for a "unique extracurricular activity."

Hours melted into the afternoon, fueled by lukewarm coffee – for Nadia and Winnie – and a steady stream of takeout boxes that did little to improve the ambiance. Finally, a satisfied hum escaped Winnie's lips.

"There you go, folks. Meet Amelia Sato, genius programmer with a tragic past and a penchant for obscure historical reenactments. Guaranteed to pique their interest and trigger zero suspicion."

A knock on the door startled them. Eve, ever vigilant, reached for her weapon, her body language radiating a subtle shift – shoulders tense, eyes narrowed. Nadia, however, simply sighed.

"Room service," she muttered, rolling her eyes. Eve relaxed, holstering her weapon.

A young hotel worker, harried and slightly sweaty, stood at the door. "Uh, delivery for a Miss Sato?" he stammered, holding out a small package.

Eve exchanged a surprised glance with Nadia. "Winnie, you work fast," she commented.

Winnie, a smug smile plastered on her face, tapped a button on her phone. "Who needs an M when you have a V, Agent Black? Vik Stallion himself came through in record time."

Eve carefully examined the package. "A tracker. Small enough to be…ingested?"

Winnie shrugged, her nonchalance both impressive and slightly concerning. "Vik guarantees it won't interfere with your daily…activities. Just try not to set off any metal detectors, alright?"

The room fell silent, the weight of the situation settling back in. A fake student, a risky operation, and a race against time. Eve took a deep breath, the stale hotel room air a stark contrast to the adrenaline now coursing through her veins. "Let's get this show on the road," she said, her voice grim with determination. "Winnie, you're enrolled. Now, we wait."

The waiting was the hardest part. With no immediate leads, the cramped hotel room became a stifling prison. Every tick of the clock felt like a hammer blow, an echo of precious time slipping away. Eve found herself obsessively studying the faces of the missing students, searching for some unseen connection, a subtle pattern that could lead them to the predators behind it all.

Nadia, a whirlwind of efficiency, kept the logistics moving. She transformed the hotel room into a makeshift operations center, pinning maps and timelines across the faded wallpaper. Her attempts to bring order to the chaos were a calming contrast to Eve's restless pacing.

The ticking of the hotel room clock hammered away at Eve's last nerve. Each second echoed the failure gnawing at her, a relentless reminder of the brilliant minds still lost in the shadows. She glared at the congealed remains of takeout noodles, their greasy scent a cruel parody of the Starbucks she craved.

Then, on the third day, Eve could not take it anymore. “The Provost did not take the bait, we have to come up with a better idea.

Nadia suggested, “We can assume the Provost is the one behind it, the Mastermind. Why don’t we casually mention our suspicions and see if we can scare him into acting. Winnie, have you noticed anything suspicious around your dorms?

“Nope, all quiet at the Avarado.” Winnie commented.

Nadia said, “The Provost doesn’t know me, how about I feign FBI and just ask him a email, see what happens?

The team agreed this was the best idea.

Subject: Recent Activity - University of New Mexico Provost Scholarship Program

Dear Provost Gregory,

I am writing to express concerns regarding recent online activity associated with the Provost Scholarship Program. Certain patterns raise questions about the security of the selection process and the safety of student information.

I would be grateful for the opportunity to discuss these concerns with you in person at your earliest convenience. Your cooperation in this matter is of the utmost importance.

Sincerely,

Agent Nadia Reynolds, FBI

# Chapter Twenty-Eight

## The Mail on Sunday

Provost Gregory stared at the email, the sterile blue light doing little to dispel the cold sweat prickling his skin. FBI. It was a word that could curdle a man's blood, and Sam was no exception. He reread the email, Nadia Reynold's words dripping with veiled threats. They were onto him, somehow. Panic clawed at his throat, a predator tasting blood.

He slammed the laptop shut, the metallic clang echoing in the opulent silence of his office. His mind raced, frantically searching for an escape route. Then, a name surfaced – Amelia Sato. The brilliant programmer, the latest addition to his twisted scholarship program. Her name had been buried within a stack of applications, but now, it stood out like a beacon.

An idea, desperate and reckless, ignited in his mind. If the FBI was after him, he couldn't risk a digital trail. He needed a fail-safe, a way to erase everything before they could get their claws in. Amelia Sato, the 'invisible pet dragon' enthusiast, might be the key.

Gregory forced a smile, the gesture feeling alien on his tense face. He logged into the university database, his fingers flying across the keyboard. Amelia Sato. Alvarado Hall, Room 217. Tuesday, Introduction to Cryptography, 10 AM. Perfect.

His heart hammered a frantic rhythm against his ribs as he crafted an email.

Subject: Provost Scholarship Meeting - Amelia Sato.

Dear Ms. Sato

I'd like to discuss your outstanding application for the Provost Scholarship program in more detail. Would you be available to meet in my office tomorrow at 2 PM?

Sincerely, Provost Gregory."

He clicked send, the innocuous message a monstrous lie. A meeting? No. This was a summons, a prelude to a desperate gamble. He would lure Amelia to his office, a pawn in a twisted game of survival. He'd force her to eliminate the digital evidence, to scrub his computers clean. The thought of it, of holding a young woman's life hostage, sent a tremor through him, but fear was a powerful motivator.

He envisioned the look on Amelia's face when she entered his office, the naivety in her eyes replaced by terror. A grim satisfaction flickered within him, a flicker quickly extinguished by the cold, hard truth. He wasn't just gambling his own freedom, he was gambling with a life. And in the high-stakes poker game of secrets and lies, the chips were all pushed in.

# Chapter Twenty-Nine

## The Undercover Analyst

Amelia Sato – or rather, Winnie – suppressed a smug grin as she stepped into the Provost's opulent lair. This wasn't a scholarship meeting; it was a performance. And damned if she wasn't going to win an Oscar for her portrayal of vulnerable programming prodigy.

The Provost rose, extending a clammy hand. His smile was the stuff of nightmares – all teeth and no warmth. "Ms. Sato, a pleasure. Please, take a seat," he gestured towards the imposing leather chair facing his desk.

Winnie played her part to perfection. Wide-eyed, slightly flustered – a brilliant mind caught a little off-guard. "Thank you, sir," she stammered, her voice laced with the calculated hint of nerves. "I apologize for the last-minute change of plans."

"Not at all, my dear," Sam Gregory oozed false concern, "Your academic record speaks for itself. I must confess, your application for the Provost Scholarship intrigued me greatly."

Winnie felt a wave of nausea. She knew what kind of 'intrigue' fueled the monster before her. Yet, she kept her facade intact, letting a touch of excited curiosity flicker across her features. "I...I was honored to be considered, sir."

The Provost leaned forward, the predatory glint in his eyes intensifying. It was time to dangle the bait. "Ms. Sato, I believe your skillset could be a tremendous asset...beyond just the scholarship." He paused, the silence heavy with unspoken promises.

Winnie let a carefully-crafted expression of confusion settle across her face. She was playing the fish, and he was reeling her in. "I'm not sure I understand, Provost Gregory."

The trap was set. He took a deep breath, his carefully constructed facade of academic paternalism beginning to crack. "Your coding abilities, your understanding of...security systems… they're exceptional. Let's just say there are certain projects, certain...opportunities, that could greatly benefit from your expertise."

Winnie's mind raced. This was it. He was admitting his scheme, albeit in veiled terms. Just enough to damn himself and provide the trigger for Eve and Nadia to storm the castle. Maintaining her innocent naivete, she tilted her head slightly, "Projects outside the university?"

A flicker of triumph crossed Sam’s face. "Highly confidential, of course. Extremely well-compensated." He paused, letting his unspoken offer dangle enticingly. "Think of it as a...a highly exclusive internship."

Winnie willed her stomach to stop churning. Everything about this man, the way he looked at her as if she were a prize to be claimed, sent shivers of revulsion down her spine. Still, the show must go on.

"I...I'd need more details, sir," she stammered, a perfect blend of hesitation and ambition. Every word she uttered was a tiny signal flare to Eve, who would be monitoring every second of this grotesque exchange.

Provost Gregory leaned back, a chilling sense of satisfaction radiating from him. "Of course, of course. But know this, Ms. Sato, your brilliance has the potential to take you places you never imagined."

Winnie feigned interest, “I have the skills, Provost Gregory, I will do just about anything for money.” She knew this would win him over.

Why not show me your skills now, have a seat, and (he opened the lid on his laptop, “I want you to go into the system and delete everything on the computer related to the Scholarship Program. Don’t worry about my losing the information, I have back-up, I want to see if you can do it.”

He thought he was so smooth, she will show him. Her fingers flew across the keyboard, a controlled fury fueling her movements. The Provost's computer systems were wide open, a buffet of incriminating data laid bare before her. Emails hinting at dark dealings, student files marked with cryptic notes – evidence, clear and undeniable, of the twisted operation running beneath the veneer of academia.

A smile, genuine this time, tugged at Winnie's lips. This was gold. But before she could bask in the victory, her smile evaporated, replaced by a pit of ice in her stomach. A hidden folder, labeled 'Project Omega', reeked of danger. The sickening details within confirmed her worst fears.

"What are you doing?" he snarled, his voice a low growl.

Winnie scrambled to minimize the incriminating data on her screen, her mind racing for an escape route. "Just...working on the project, sir."

He ignored her, his eyes flitting across the laptop screen. The realization of what she'd seen dawned on him, slow and horrifying. "You..." he choked, his hand disappearing into his suit pocket.

A glint of metal caught Winnie's eye. Panic surged through her veins, momentarily paralyzing her. Provost Gregory brandished a gun, his face contorted with a manic desperation.

"Start cleaning it all up," he rasped, his voice trembling. "Every file, every trace. Do it now, or I swear..."

Winnie swallowed hard, forcing down the rising tide of fear. "Alright, alright," she stammered, her hands hovering over the keyboard. This was it. Time to turn the tables.

Her fingers danced across the keys, seemingly complying, while in the background, a hidden program whirred to life. With a single covert keystroke, she triggered the data transfer – a flood of incriminating files silently streaming towards Eve's secure server.

A tense silence stretched between them, broken only by the rhythmic tapping of Winnie's fingers. When the transfer was complete, she slammed the laptop shut, a defiant glint in her eyes. "Done," she said, her voice surprisingly steady.

Gregory, however, seemed to shrink, the bluster draining away from him. The revelation that she had transmitted the evidence sent a horrifying tremor through him. He hadn't thought beyond this moment, beyond silencing this digital loose end.

"You..." he sputtered, his hand shaking as he clutched the gun. "You think you've won?"

A slow, predatory smile spread across Winnie's face. "Checkmate, Provost." Before he could react, she lunged forward, knocking the gun aside. The ensuing struggle was brief but brutal. In the end, using a combination of street smarts and sheer adrenaline, Winnie subdued him, twisting the gun from his grasp.

But victory turned bittersweet. Gregory, eyes wild with desperation, lunged for a hidden panic button under his desk. With a sickening click, the closet door swung open, a dark, suffocating maw. He shoved Winnie into the cramped space, slamming the door shut and locking it.

Trapped in the stifling darkness, Winnie couldn't help but let out a frustrated groan. She had exposed him, yes, but escaping the clutches of a desperate madman was a whole new challenge. Still, a spark of determination flickered in her eyes. The game wasn't over. Not by a long shot.

# Chapter Thirty

## The Mastermind

Eve stared at her laptop screen, the sheer volume of data both exhilarating and chilling. Winnie – brilliant, brave Winnie – had just delivered the smoking gun. Names, locations, encrypted messages… it was a roadmap to dismantling the entire horrific scheme.

Nadia, her face etched with tension, hovered over Eve's shoulder. "This is it," she breathed, "Every victim, every accomplice, the whole damn network."

But Eve's elation was cut short by a gnawing fear. Winnie. Smart, resourceful Winnie, the bait they'd so heartlessly dangled, was still in the lion's den. Eve slammed the laptop shut. "Time to bring the cavalry," she gritted out, her voice a lethal promise.

The FBI descended upon the university like a storm cloud, precision and urgency blurring the lines between controlled chaos and outright war. Eve, fueled by an adrenaline-laced cocktail of anger and dread, led the charge. Floor plans from Winnie's earlier recon were clutched in her hands. Each corridor thrummed with tension, each second that ticked by amplifying the gut-wrenching possibility of being too late.

Bursting into the Provost's office, they found a scene of twisted desperation. Gregory, disheveled and eyes wild, cowered in the corner – a cornered monster. No trace of Winnie, but the gleaming brass lock on the closet door was chilling confirmation.

In two strides, Eve crossed the room. Kicking in the door revealed a cramped space, Winnie huddled on the floor, hands bound, eyes wide with a mix of relief and lingering fear.

Cutting the restraints, Eve pulled Winnie into a fierce hug. For a brief moment, the noise seemed to fade, replaced by the simple, overwhelming relief of finding her safe.

"Win, you absolute genius," Eve finally choked out, her voice laced with the strain of the past few days. "You cracked it wide open."

Winnie, still slightly shaky but regaining her trademark smirk, quipped, "Well, Agent Black, you did say I needed a little…social experiment."

Then, over Winnie's shoulder, Eve noticed it: a flash drive half-hidden under a pile of discarded newspapers. Her gut twisted. "What's that, Win?"

Winnie's mischievous grin turned somber. "Insurance policy," she explained, handing it to Eve. "Sam Gregory's 'doomsday' file. If things went south, this was his trigger to bring the whole operation crashing down in a blaze of blackmail and destruction."

Eve felt a chill run down her spine. The depths of the man's depravity, his willingness to destroy lives to save his own skin, defied comprehension. They had dodged a bullet, but the explosion had merely been delayed.

"Then we end it," Eve declared, a steely determination replacing the fear. Turning towards Nadia, who had been coordinating with swat teams, Eve raised her voice above the din. "Nads, get this drive to my dad. We need to know what’s on it before we can fully neutralize this threat."

Eve regarded Provost Samuel Gregory like one might a particularly repulsive insect—with detached analysis masking a surge of disgust. His designer suit hung loosely on his once-imposing frame, mirroring the way his authority had drained away, leaving only a shell of fabricated importance. Not in some harsh interrogation room, but in his own office, surrounded by trophies of a now meaningless career.

"You like clever students, don't you, Provost?" Eve's voice was the soft hiss of a snake before it strikes. "Tell me, do you always harvest them yourself?"

Gregory flinched, jowls wobbling in a grotesque parody of thought. "I don't... harvest...that's ridiculous."

A stack of files sat on the polished mahogany desk. Project Renaissance, each neatly labeled. Eve had meticulously dissected their contents – promising students, impressive skill sets, then... nothing. A clean break in their digital footprint, a life evaporated.

"Let's start small," she continued, tapping a single file with a perfectly manicured nail. "Roberto Castellanos. Artist, vanished into thin air." A flicker of defiance sparked in Gregory's piggy little eyes. A mistake. He thought he could bargain, leverage what he knew against her ignorance.

Eve leaned forward, the academic façade fading. "How much do you think a mind like his fetches, Provost? From the right buyer, willing to overlook the... unconventional sourcing?"

The defiance died, replaced by the stark pallor of fear. Gregory wasn't a mastermind, never was. Just a greedy middleman, a parasite engorged and emboldened. She'd known his type before, in grimy back alleys and shadowy war rooms.

"Tell me, did you watch them walk into that trap?" Eve pressed. "Knowing all along..."

She let the accusatory silence stretch until Gregory's mouth worked soundlessly, gasping for explanations he lacked. The hunter had become the cornered prey.

The scholarship application had been the first breadcrumb. Too impersonal, too preoccupied with skills raw and unrefined, as if the student's aspirations were irrelevant, only their potential for exploitation. Then came the patterns – quiet whispers of brilliant peers who'd 'gotten a break' and disappeared, murmurs of shadowy endowments bestowed on the truly elite. The kind of whispers ambitious students like her would chase.

Then Winnie. Her messages had been like frantic alarm bells: Discrepancies in disappearances, not just in New Mexico, but nationwide. A spiderweb of missing minds with one chilling common thread – academic brilliance within fields that a corrupt mind could twist into a weapon.

Gregory sagged, a pitiful sight amidst his polished trophies. "I didn't know...the extent of it. Just...passing them along."

"And for that, you got a cut. Made yourself indispensable." Eve spat the words. "Who are your buyers, Gregory? Who's at the top of this?"

"I can't...they'll..." His voice cracked, a pathetic squeak amidst the damning evidence. Eve was close, but the trail was still maddeningly cold. A flash of something like calculation briefly replaced the terror in the provost's eyes. He still thought he had something to barter.

Then it hit her. He wasn't just afraid for himself. There was a deeper thread of terror beneath the bluster, a fear that whispered of consequences far greater than hers, perhaps not even the FBI's.

A prickle of unease rippled over Eve. It was one thing to dismantle a single rotten apple like Gregory. But what if the entire orchard was diseased?

Suddenly, a flurry of activity broke out beyond the office's frosted glass doors. Shouts, the pounding of hurried footsteps. Gregory's composure shattered entirely. He stumbled back, hands fluttering uselessly.

"They know?" he whimpered. "They know I've been compromised."

Before Eve could process it, Winnie's voice crackled over her concealed comms, tense and urgent. "Eve, get out of there! I'm seeing unusual activity on campus security feeds...looks tactical. They're coming for you, possibly for Gregory too."

The moment hung suspended. Gregory was irrelevant now. He was just another clue, a breadcrumb that had lured her straight into the heart of a conspiracy deeper than any she'd anticipated.

"Looks like your usefulness is at an end, Provost," Eve remarked, savoring the way he cowered at the change in her tone. "Unfortunately, can't say the same for mine."

She didn't wait for him to process it. Every second mattered. Slipping on the disguise of Professor Mathers once more, she adjusted her sensible tweed jacket (a constant reminder of the charade), and strode towards the door.

The hallway outside wasn't a scene of academic bustle, but bristled with a different kind of tension. Unknown men in unremarkable suits had converged, eyes like chips of ice scanning the crowd. Their movements weren't panicked, but purposeful, the kind of honed efficiency that sent a shiver down her spine. Not cops, not FBI. Something...else.

"Who..." Gregory sputtered behind her.

"The people your little operation caught the eye of," Eve tossed over her shoulder, already weaving her way through startled students. "And trust me, they play a far nastier game than you ever did."

She calculated. Gregory wasn't worth the risk. Let these shadow players take their prize. It might buy her time, a sliver of chaos to slip away unnoticed. Still, she couldn't resist one parting shot. "You should have stuck to skimming funds from overpriced textbooks, Provost. At least that's the kind of theft your mind can comprehend."

The look of utter betrayal on his face as she blended into the crowd was almost satisfying. But Eve, the seasoned agent, the woman who'd walked minefields under far more hostile skies, knew satisfaction would be a luxury she couldn't afford right now.

Winnie's voice buzzed again, mapping out the safest exit route with chilling precision. Each update was a confirmation of her worst fear – this wasn't a panicked response to a leak. It was a well-oiled machine reacting to a disruption.

"They're blocking the main exits, Eve. Two cars heading towards the south courtyard ... looks like an extraction, not an arrest." Winnie's analysis held the cool detachment of someone watching a chessboard, not a desperate escape.

"Damn it," Eve hissed, the sensible tweed feeling suddenly stifling. "They're organized. This goes way higher than ever imagined."

"And that," came Nadia's voice, crackling with a grim sort of amusement, "is why you've got backup, Professor."

The south courtyard, normally a quiet patch of manicured lawn, was a scene of controlled chaos. A sleek black car idled, engine rumbling with predatory impatience. Two men – the same cold-eyed efficiency she'd seen in the hall – flanked a cowering Gregory. Not a gentle arrest, but something almost... reverent.

The sight ignited a hot knot of fury within Eve. They couldn't just waltz in, rip their prize from under the noses of law enforcement, vanish with another stolen mind.

The archway flickered with movement. A lean figure in faded denim emerged, radiating a coiled tension that cut through the manufactured tranquility of the campus courtyard. Jackson. He'd driven through the night, fueled by a mix of loyalty and a recklessness that mirrored Eve's own. His presence was a jolt of adrenaline, a battle cry amidst the civilized chaos.

Meeting his gaze, Eve felt a flicker of something she thought she'd abandoned long ago – a reckless, intoxicating thrill. Jackson, former terrorist turned uneasy ally, was a walking contradiction: a honed weapon, yet fiercely loyal to those he'd sworn to protect. And now, his gaze held a flicker of concern, a silent question about the danger reflected in her eyes.

Nadia, reading the unspoken exchange, sent Eve a curt nod. In the tense game unfolding, Jackson wasn't just backup; he was a catalyst, a human grenade ready to be unleashed.

"New plan, Professor," crackled Winnie's voice, a hint of glee lacing her usual composure. "Time for a double dose of mayhem ... get ready to improvise."

Eve grinned, a feral glint in her eyes that Jackson would recognize instantly. Improv wasn't just a tactic; it was their language, a dance born amidst the gunfire and chaos of Tres Piedras.

Analyzing the scene, Eve's gaze settled on the manicured hedges. A spark of mad genius ignited within her. "Winnie, darling," she purred, a hint of danger in her voice, "Are those hedges as over-engineered as I suspect?"

A pause, then Winnie's laughter erupted over the comms. "You'll never guess, Professor! Apparently, landscaping budgets trump common sense – those bushes are on the damn smart sprinkler network!"

The plan took shape, as audacious as it was undeniably twisted. "Time for some… creative gardening," Eve hissed, savoring the wicked delight that echoed in Winnie's response.

As Gregory fixated on the getaway car, Eve, with Jackson shadowing her, slipped behind the hedges. The scent of damp earth mingled with the adrenaline coursing through her veins.

"In position," Jackson grunted, his voice low and rough. She didn't need to see his expression to know he was mirroring her own predatory anticipation.

"Let's play," she replied, the words a dark promise. Nadia and Winnie, their cues impeccably timed, were the maestros of this symphony of chaos about to erupt.

The sprinklers roared to life, unleashing a torrent that drenched Gregory and his captors. The manicured paradise of the courtyard devolved into a scene of glorious absurdity. Shouts of outrage mingled with the comical sight of the thugs flailing against the relentless downpour.

Jackson let out a bark of laughter, the harsh sound at odds with the meticulously pressed attire of the nearby donors gaping in disbelief. This was their opening, their cue to transform the chaos into an advantage.

Nadia surged from the archway, a whirlwind in denim, tackling a drenched thug with the brutal efficiency Eve had witnessed in countless close-quarter brawls. The other gunman, weapon fumbling in his soaked grip, barely had time to register Eve's presence.

Her veneer of academic propriety vanished in a heartbeat. Years of training honed in unforgiving combat zones took over. A swift kick disarmed the thug, followed by a judo throw that sent him careening into a marble fountain with a satisfying splash.

Gregory, cowering and waterlogged, became a pathetic afterthought. The courtyard, just moments ago a symbol of sterile control, was their personal battleground now. Nadia grappled in the mud, laughter bubbling up through the intensity. Eve, dripping wet but exhilarated, surveyed the scene. Even campus security, their arrival comically delayed, seemed more bemused than alarmed.

This – the adrenaline, the shared thrill of combat, the audacity – this was Jackson's world, the language he understood. In that moment, the tweed felt like a disguise, the professor a distant persona. He met her gaze, a flicker of something akin to pride sparking in the depths of his dark eyes. It was exhilarating, dangerous…and more intoxicating than any victory she'd ever tasted in the pristine confines of academia

.In the aftermath, with the mysterious suits subdued and Nadia spitting out muddy water with a feral grin, Gregory was shaking like a wet dog... Eve didn't wait for his pathetic whimper of a reply. The interrogation room, the carefully crafted threats – it all seemed a world away. Out here, her legs wobbled slightly, the adrenaline crash hitting her hard. She leaned against a wall, taking a steadying breath. The glorious brawl had been exhilarating, but it was a brutal reminder that she wasn't invincible, and this fight was far from over.

"You picked the wrong students to sell," she breathed, an icy promise in her voice. "Because some of us, Provost, know exactly how to fight back."

She didn't wait for his pathetic whimper of a reply. The interrogation room, the carefully crafted threats – it all seemed a world away. Out here, after a glorious brawl, the true scale of their enemy became chillingly clear.

Her phone chirped. A text from an unknown number, dripping with ominous simplicity: *Message Received. Consider this a warning.*

It was their 'out', the clean ending law enforcement would buy to explain the chaos. But Eve and her team, they knew better. The chessboard had been upended; pieces thrown into disarray. They'd taken a pawn, yes. But the queen, even the king, remained very much in play. And this, Eve realized with grim determination, was just the beginning of a far more dangerous game.

The sleek black car in the courtyard thrummed with menace, a cockroach ready to scurry back into whatever dark crevice had spawned it. Eve almost laughed at the absurdity of the situation. One minute she was a tweed-clad academic dismantling a crooked Provost, the next she was sizing up a paramilitary extraction in the heart of a peaceful campus. The scent of burning rubber stung her nostrils as the car lurched forward, a final act of defiance before it vanished down the street. Her fingers still gripped the monkey wrench, the cold metal a jarring reminder of just how close she'd come to being dragged into that darkness herself.

"Well, Gregory," she remarked to the quivering lump of a man being unceremoniously bundled into the car, "seems like your little scholarship racket just got a major upgrade." She kept her voice light, laced with the kind of sarcasm only a life spent navigating the darkest corners of human behavior could cultivate.

Nadia, as expected, provided the opening. A conveniently timed 'clumsy accident', - a cup of scalding coffee, a shriek loud enough to rival a dying parrot – drew the attention of the goons. Just enough chaos, just enough of a distraction for Eve to slip behind a column, and into the real game.

Winnie crackled back, her voice a strange mix of bemusement and tension. "Your timing is impeccable as always, Eve. I'm routing you to a utility closet near the car. Maintenance staff leave tool kits... well, let's just say your improv might get a little more hands-on."

The utility closet smelled of dust and industrial cleaner. Tools hung with almost comical precision. Eve couldn't resist a grin. "Winnie, darling, if I don't at least brandish a monkey wrench with appropriate fury in this situation, I'll consider the day a bust."

Her body language, trained to read tells as subtle as a twitch, went on high alert. The men by the car were professionals. Muscle memory spoke of military, maybe even something more clandestine. Yet there was a rigidness in their stance, not the coiled danger of true predators. Overly reliant on routine, on control. It was a weakness Eve intended to exploit.

She emerged from the closet, not in a whirlwind of action, but as a frazzled academic, an indignant squawk rising in her throat. "Honestly! You spill coffee on confidential files, then just stand there? I need help, now!"

The thugs, as predictable as a textbook equation, reacted. One moved towards her, annoyance warring with duty in his tight frown. Perfect.

Eve launched into a tirade about ruined research, the incomprehensible incompetence of campus security. She even threw in a veiled threat of complaint to some nebulous "higher authority" – a move guaranteed to trigger knee-jerk defensiveness amongst low-level operatives.

While she ranted, her eyes dissected their stances, their hands. Muscle tension, an unconscious shift in weight... the telltale signs that they were contemplating their options. Shove a hysterical professor aside, or risk further attention.

Just when the lead goon's patience was visibly fraying, she went for the coup de grâce. "What is that thing anyway? A UFO? Are you waiting for orders from your alien overlords, or..."

Winnie, bless her black ops heart, chimed in with perfect timing. "Maintenance alert, multiple comms outages reported – south courtyard vicinity. Radio traffic is dead." Annoyance flickered on the thugs' faces – their routine disrupted, the chain of command momentarily severed.

It was enough. Eve seized the moment, lunging forward with the shriek of a rusty hinge, brandishing the monkey wrench with more theatrical flourish than actual intent. "Get away from me, you space lizard!"

The ensuing scramble was almost comical. Thugs jolted back, confusion overriding training. It lasted just a few seconds – the exact few seconds Eve needed. Before they recovered, she was sprinting towards the car, towards the terrified, wide-eyed figure of Provost Gregory. Sometimes, a wild, desperate flailing of limbs was the most effective weapon in her arsenal.

The courtyard was a blur as she flung open the car door, a feral grin splitting her face. But then, the adrenaline began to ebb, replaced by the stark reality of the situation. Gregory was still in danger; the enemy far from vanquished.

Amidst the lingering chaos, she felt a strong hand on her shoulder. It was Jackson, his scent of earth and gunpowder grounding, the calm in her personal storm.

"You good?" he asked, his voice rough, a familiar concern laced within.

Eve nodded, her ragged breath slowly returning to normal. Looking up at him, really looking, she saw it – a silent admiration etched in the lines of his face, a flicker of understanding in his eyes. This, this dance of violence and unexpected victory, was a language he understood, a brutal symphony they'd played before.

The world narrowed then, the fleeing thugs, the cacophony of shouts, a distant backdrop against the intensity in Jackson's gaze. A surge of something new, something dangerous flared between them. It wasn't fear, nor the simple echo of adrenaline. It was the unspoken acknowledgment of a shared darkness, a thrilling awareness that they danced best on the edge of a blade.

His hand lingered on her shoulder, the warmth seeping through her damp shirt. Suddenly, the tweed jacket felt foreign, the veneer of 'professor' cracking. Beneath it, she was the woman who'd fought and bled beside him in the deserts of Tres Piedras, who found a strange exhilaration in the chaos.

A corner of his mouth quirked upwards, a ghost of a smile that sent a traitorous shiver down her spine. "Damn, Professor," he muttered, the endearment holding an echo of something far less academic, "never thought I'd see you go all Rambo on a bunch of suits."

Eve laughed then, the sound rusty and genuine and laced with something far more potent than relief. "Well," she managed, the world around them coming back into focus, "sometimes, a girl's just gotta improvise."

Jackson's grip tightened, a silent promise beneath the teasing words. He got it, maybe understood in a way Eve was still struggling to comprehend. This chaotic, adrenaline-laced bond they shared wasn't about normalcy or fitting in. It was the thrill of the fight, the shared dance with danger. It was dark, exhilarating…and utterly addictive.

The adrenaline receded, leaving a pleasant ache in her muscles and a dull thrum of exhilaration in her chest. Eve glanced at Jackson, catching the amused glint in his eyes.

"You know," he drawled, his voice a low rumble, "Tres Piedras could use a psychology professor with a knack for improvised weaponry."

Eve's breath hitched. Tres Piedras. The mere mention of village home in the desert sent a tremor through her – a mix of longing and a strange, undeniable pull. Living with Jackson, fighting alongside him… It was a life she'd wanted, but Eve knew she could not walk away from Franklin, not with the children. He was far to dangerous.

"Tempting," she admitted, forcing a lightness into her voice. "Both we both know it cannot happen, yet.

Jackson's smile faded, replaced by a flicker of something she couldn't quite decipher. "You sure about that?" he asked, his voice low and serious. "Don't you ever miss…" He trailed off, leaving the unspoken question hanging in the air.

Eve's gaze darted towards the archway, a ghost of a movement catching her eye. A shiver danced down her spine – was it paranoia, or a flicker of Franklin? She couldn't afford to take the chance. Franklin wouldn't hesitate to eliminate Jackson if he suspected anything. The thought sent a cold dread through her.

"Can't miss what you've left behind," she said finally, her voice flat, her body language closed off.

The lie felt heavy on her tongue, a stark reminder of the life she'd chosen, the life she was trapped in.

Jackson studied her for a long moment, his dark eyes unreadable. Then, with a sigh, he stepped back.

"Alright," he conceded, his voice rough with something akin to disappointment. "But if things ever get… hairy, Professor, you know where to find me."

Eve offered a tight smile, a silent admission that a part of her always would. Despite the isolation, the rejection of everything that made her who she was professionally, Tres Piedras was home, a reminder of the girl she once was.

"I know," she whispered, her voice barely audible.

They stood in silence for a moment longer, the unspoken words hanging thick in the air. Then, with a curt nod, Jackson turned and melted back into the shadows, leaving Eve alone with the fading echo of the fight and the crushing weight of her married life. A life where danger walked hand-in-hand with exhilaration, where the line between love and duty was blurred beyond recognition.

# Chapter Thirty-One

## The Vipers Next

Provost Gregory was a symphony of body language gone haywire. Sweat trickled beneath his silk tie, hands wringing an overpriced handkerchief into a damp knot. Fear emanated from him in waves, saturating the FBI interrogation room with the stench of a failing bluff. Not the room Eve would've chosen – too clinical. But beggars couldn't be choosers, and a panicked middleman was better than nothing at all.

"You're making a mistake," Gregory whined, the last vestiges of his academic veneer disintegrating. "I was... facilitating. Passing along talent. This is about national security, resources..."

Eve let a flicker of amusement dance in her eyes, but her voice remained flat. "Let's test that, shall we? Tell me, Provost, when you meet someone powerful, what's the first thing you notice? Their watch? Shoes?"

Confusion rippled across Gregory's face, replacing the arrogance with the look of a deer caught in headlights. A useful change.

"Neither," Nadia cut in, her presence always a force multiplier. "You notice their space. Powerful people own it. How close they let you stand, whether their smile touches their eyes." She leaned in, inches from Gregory's shrinking form. "You, Provost, have never been powerful. You crave it, sell the illusion to yourself with fancy clothes. But you reek of someone who flinches when the wrong person raises their voice."

The room shifted, tension tightening. Gregory wilted further, a deflating balloon. His gaze darted between Eve and Nadia, then landed on his own trembling hands. That was the tell – insecurity gnawing at the thin facade of control.

"Details, Provost," Eve pressed, a predator scenting blood. "Tell us how this started. Who approached you first? What did they promise?"

His voice was barely a whisper. "It was... a conference. Higher education summit, something about innovation. A name tag just said 'Department of Education', but the suit..." He fumbled for words, fear finally swallowing the pride. "It screamed money of a kind I never see around here."

"He offered you a taste," Nadia interjected, "a way out from under the thumb of budgets and whiny students. Am I right?"

Gregory nodded, eyes filling with a pathetic sort of shame mixed with awe. "The scholarships, it was all pre-packaged. The questions, the selection process… so targeted, so…"

"Efficient," Eve finished for him. "Designed to identify a very specific kind of mind. And as always, middlemen like you are drawn to the promise of easy power."

Bitterness coated her words. It was an old story. Corrupt officials, men made small by greed, all too happy to sell out their own for a taste of a world denied to them.

"Tell us about the man from the DOE," Nadia demanded. "Hair color, build, anything you remember."

Gregory's brow furrowed in concentration. "Nondescript, really. Average height, brown hair going gray... But the eyes..." He shivered involuntarily. "Cold. Calculating. Like he was looking at lab specimens, not students I'd known for years."

The pieces clicked into place, painting a chilling picture. Not a rogue operation, but corruption embedded within the highest levels of the education system. Winnie's hushed voice on the comms confirmed it, a whispered curse of "Undersecretary Thompson" followed by a cascade of details Eve barely registered.

"Provost," Eve said, her tone as sharp as a scalpel, "did it ever occur to you that your precious students might not end up in cushy think tanks? That your 'facilitation' was feeding minds into a machine far darker than you can grasp?"

Gregory crumpled entirely. "I didn't know... they said it was classified...threats to the nation..."

"Of course they did," Nadia scoffed. "Always easier to sell evil when wrapped in a flag. You're pathetic, Gregory. But you're also our best chance to unravel this entire rotten mess."

And just like that, Provost Samuel Gregory vanished into the sprawling machine of the federal government - a pawn turned state's witness, his designer suits and hollow arrogance swallowed by the grim necessity of unraveling a conspiracy born in the heart of the system meant to protect the nation's greatest minds.

# Chapter Thirty-Two

## Debriefed

The scent of stale coffee and government-issue despair hung heavy in the makeshift war room commandeered from a back office somewhere in the bowels of the FBI field office. Eve, wired on adrenaline and far too many energy drinks, was starting to suspect the flickering fluorescent lights were engaged in a conspiracy of their own.

"This is more than a kidnapping ring, it's a damn supply chain," Nadia growled, surveying the wall plastered with faces, timelines, and a spiderweb of names and organizations that made Eve's head spin. "Schools, shell corporations, think tanks... it's the perfect system to launder brilliance."

"And at the epicenter of it all?" Eve gestured at the hastily tacked-up photo of Undersecretary Thompson, his bland smile radiating predatory ambition. "Our poster boy for bureaucratic villainy."

"Not for long," Winnie said softly. There was a glint in her eyes that had less to do with the harsh lighting and more to do with the thrill of the hunt. "Gentlemen," she addressed the room, where a cluster of analysts huddled, looking like they hadn't seen a proper meal or a shower in days, "I present to you Exhibit A."

She slid a battered thumb drive across the table. "Our little trip down the digital rabbit hole has produced a doozy. Encrypted files, buried under layers of plausible deniability, detailing the entire bloody operation."

A ripple of excitement crackled through the room. Someone whooped prematurely, the sound cut off by a discreet throat-clearing from Nadia. Eve leaned forward, her focus narrowing. "Let's have the highlights, Win."

"Student selection, neatly coinciding with scholarship deadlines," Winnie started ticking off points. "Shadowy transfers of funds disguised as 'educational grants'. Purchase orders for... oh this is juicy... hardware requisitioned by research labs with no conceivable link to their alleged fields of study."

It was all starting to coalesce, a tapestry of corruption laid bare. But Eve needed the final thread, the piece that would make the smug bastard squirm. "What about our victims, Winnie? Where are the students being taken?"

A hush fell over the room. For all their brilliance, sometimes even the best analysts hit a wall. After all, a ghost doesn't leave much of a trace.

Winnie tapped the drive with a manicured finger. "This is where it gets... interesting. There are coded references to 'facilities', plural, locations redacted. But the pattern…"

"It's not random." Eve finished for her. The pieces clicked into place with a sickening sense of certainty. "They're targeting schools with private airfields and bumbling school leaders.”

A murmur swept the room. Nadia shot Eve a look that was part grudging respect, part 'I told you so'. It had been Eve's theory all along, the one that propelled her down this reckless path. Students with skills that could either get them killed, or used for the pleasure of the morally corrupt.

The weight of it settled over them, a far more chilling prospect than simple kidnapping. This wasn't just about profit, but an obscene kind of power.

"Time to pay our esteemed Undersecretary a visit." Nadia's voice held the sharp edge of a honed blade. "Think he's prepared for a revolt of angry women and overworked nerds?"

A slow grin spread across Eve's face. She doubted smug, self-important men like Thompson were ever prepared for that particular brand of disruption.

# Chapter Thirty-Three

## The Department of Education

The AD from FBI HQ sent a car to Ronald Reagan Airport to pick up Eve, Nadia, and Winnie. That was part of the deal, they get first crack at the undersecretary in exchange for solving the case. The Department of Education building gleamed, an offensively pristine monument to bureaucracy in the heart of DC. Eve, carefully back in her role of Professor Mathers, carried the air of a woman not to be trifled with. Nadia and Winnie flanked her, mirroring the hard lines of the building in their tailored suits. They were an odd trio, but then again, underestimating women had always been a fatal mistake for men like Thompson.

The Undersecretary's office was all polished mahogany and offensively expensive modern art. He rose to greet them, practiced smile faltering slightly at the sight of Nadia's no-nonsense power suit and Winnie's barely contained hacker glee.

"Ladies? This is quite unexpected." He gestured vaguely. "Is there a... problem?" He zeroed in on Eve, likely assuming her the least threatening. Another mistake.

"Let's cut the pleasantries, Undersecretary," Eve said, taking a seat without invitation, pointedly placing the battered thumb drive on his immaculate desk. "We're here about your extracurricular activities."

Thompson blinked. Then he chuckled, the sound lacking any genuine mirth. "I'm afraid I don't follow. My work with the Department..."

Eve watched Thompson's facade crumble like overcooked soufflé. He sputtered, the practiced politician replaced by a cornered animal. Nadia, ever the interrogator, pressed on, leaning forward until her face was inches from his.

"Those facilities, Undersecretary," she growled, "weren't just for weaponizing technology. We found references to... entertainment. High-end, secretive entertainment."

A flicker of something other than fear flitted across Thompson's face - a flicker of smugness. Eve caught it, a cold knot of dread forming in her stomach.

"Elaborate," she ordered, her voice low and dangerous.

Thompson straightened, a measure of his composure returning. "There's nothing to elaborate on. Research grants are allocated based on merit. Students choose their own paths."

Winnie, however, wasn't buying it. Her fingers danced across the keyboard, a predator closing in on its prey. "Interesting," she murmured. "Because this student, Sandra Adiarte, doesn't seem to have chosen a career as a… private ballerina."

An image materialized on the screen – a young woman, all grace and power in a leaping pirouette. Eve frowned. Sandra's file mentioned exceptional talent in mathematics and physics, not pirouettes.

"Explain this, Undersecretary," Nadia snapped.

Thompson's smugness faltered. "Anomaly," he blustered. "Mistake in the system, perhaps."

"A rather convenient mistake for a prodigy in robotics and cryptography," Eve countered.

The image flickered, replaced by another – a man, Roberto Castellanos, surrounded by canvases bursting with vibrant colors. A rising star in the world of abstract art, Roberto's file too, spoke of exceptional coding skills, not a brush.

"And what about Robert Cummings, here?" Winnie's voice was laced with ice. "Seems an odd choice for… art restoration, wouldn't you say?"

Eve pointed at the canvas in the picture, a swirling vortex of crimson and gold. "Those colors… aren't those a little too… vibrant?"

Thompson blanched. "I… I have no knowledge…"

Suddenly, the gravity of the situation shifted. This wasn't just about weaponizing minds. This was a monstrous scheme with an even darker undercurrent. Nadia slammed a file on the desk, its contents stark against the polished mahogany.

"These pigments, Undersecretary. A masterpiece of bioengineering, wouldn't you say? Lethal doses of poison disguised in breathtaking beauty."

Eve felt bile rise in her throat. These weren't just students. They were unwitting tools, forced to create death disguised as art, their brilliance twisted for monstrous purposes.

"And the audience?" she asked, her voice a chilling whisper. "Who are the 'elite' you cater to with this macabre performance art?"

Thompson slumped back in his chair, defeated. "Powerful people," he mumbled. "Those who can afford the…unconventional."

The sting of betrayal sharpened Eve's resolve. How many had they poisoned in the name of twisted entertainment? How many brilliant minds had been enslaved, their futures stolen?

Nadia, ever the pragmatist, was already barking orders into her comm. Raids, rescues, damage control. Eve, however, needed answers, not just results.

"Where are they, Thompson? The students, the dancers, the artists?"

He flinched at the cold fury in her voice. "Facilities… remote… classified…"

"Classified or not," Eve snarled, "we're coming for them. And when we do, pray the only thing on trial is your ambition."

The air crackled with barely contained menace. Thompson had underestimated them all. They weren't just academics, analysts, or a reporter clinging to a hunch. They were the storm, fueled by righteous fury and the desperate need to save lives.

As they stormed out of the office, leaving a shattered Thompson in their wake, Eve knew the real battle was just beginning. They had exposed the rot, but dismantling the entire network, rescuing the victims, and bringing the perpetrators to justice would be a war. A war they were prepared to wage, one bloody pirouette, one poisoned canvas, at a time.

The Undersecretary's office no longer gleamed with smug respectability. It felt like a cage, the polished wood and modern art mocking the shattered illusion of authority. Thompson, visibly broken, was a mere caricature of the powerful man they'd confronted moments earlier.

"You can't touch me," he whimpered, his hands reaching instinctively for a phone now as useless as his title. "Immunity. Diplomatic channels. My lawyers…"

"Your lawyers will be busy negotiating a plea deal," Nadia retorted, crossing her arms with the satisfaction of a seasoned hunter. "You'll cooperate and sing like a canary, or spend the rest of your life painting those lethal masterpieces behind bars."

Thompson flinched. The arrogance finally ebbed away, replaced by a gut-churning fear. He was cornered, the intricate trap he'd built snapping shut around him. Yet, a desperate defiance flared in his eyes.

"You think you've won?" he choked out, "I'm expendable. They'll just replace me."

A chilling realization struck Eve. They'd taken down the architect, but the machine itself still churned on, powered by a thirst for brilliance untouched by conscience. This was the heart of the conspiracy, and they'd only scratched the surface.

Suddenly, the air thickened with tension. Nadia's comm unit crackled, agents on the other end speaking in coded, clipped phrases. Eve's instincts, honed from years outside the system, flared to life. The game was changing, and not in their favor.

"Undersecretary," she said, keeping her voice deceptively calm, "I suggest you stay right there. It wouldn't do for you to have an unfortunate… accident on the way out."

Thompson paled further, his eyes darting from Eve to the door. He knew. Whatever escape route he'd planned, it was now compromised. They weren't just playing chess anymore. This was a high-stakes poker game, with bluffs and threats that went far beyond courtroom maneuvering.

Just as Thompson seemed about to crumble further, he drew himself up with a flicker of defiant pride. "Fine," he spat, "arrest me if you must. But remember, I'm just one piece of this puzzle. There are forces at play you can't even begin to comprehend."

He made a move towards the door, a final, desperate gamble. Eve reacted on instinct, not as a tweed-clad professor, but as the woman hardened in the shadowy back alleys of the world. Before Thompson could take two steps, she was in his path, a wall of determination he couldn't circumvent.

"I think you misunderstand, Undersecretary," Eve said, her voice dangerously low. "You're not walking out of here without us."

Her threat hung heavily in the air. And, just as Nadia's comm crackled to life again, this time with an affirmative 'we have visual' that sent relief coursing through Eve, the office door burst open.

It wasn't the sleek suits of upper-echelon bureaucrats that stormed the room, but the tactical gear of an FBI strike team. Their weapons were trained not out of fear, but with the controlled violence of those responding to an already escalating situation.

Thompson froze, a statue facing an unstoppable wave. Any trace of defiance was gone, replaced by a soul-deep terror. He had gambled, and lost spectacularly.

"FBI!" The shout echoed through the office. "Hands where we can see them, Undersecretary."

As Thompson was restrained, an unsettling thought struck Eve. Had they won, or merely made their unseen opponents aware of the threat? Was this raid the end of the pursuit, or merely the beginning of an even more desperate hunt?

# Chapter Thirty-Four

## The Island Rescue

The saccharine piped music of Ronald Reagan National Airport did little to soothe Eve's restless spirit. Winnie, ever the picture of professional composure (and a hint of relief), offered a final hug, her grip lingering a beat too long – a silent acknowledgment of the danger that still simmered beneath the surface.

"Take care of yourself, kiddo," Eve murmured, her eyes scanning the crowd with a practiced flick of her gaze. Old habits, she supposed, like the way her fingers itched for the familiar weight of her Glock.

Winnie, ever the pragmatist, offered a wry smile. "Likewise, you crazy desert coyote. Don't get yourselves blown to kingdom come down there."

As Winnie melted into the throng of departing passengers, Eve turned to Nadia, the corner of her mouth quirking up. "So, Nadia, fancy a trip to paradise with a side of rescuing damsels in distress?"

Nadia, her dark eyes sparkling with a dangerous glint and a ghost of a smile playing on her lips. "Only if the margaritas are on you, darling." Her voice, a husky contralto, held a hint of her native Hebrew, a subtle reminder of the lethal efficiency that lay beneath her casual demeanor.

Eve barked out a laugh, the sound raw and honest. "You and your margaritas. But seriously, Sandra and those girls… they've been through enough." A shadow flickered across her normally bright blue eyes, a flicker Nadia recognized – a potent cocktail of empathy and simmering fury.

Suddenly, Eve's body tensed, her gaze snapping towards a doorway on the opposite side of the terminal. A group of men had emerged, their postures rigid, eyes scanning the crowd with practiced efficiency. Ex-military, Nadia noted with a flicker of professional recognition. And Vik's boys by the looks of it.

Eve mirrored their stance for a fleeting moment, her body language shifting from easygoing to assessing in a heartbeat. Then, a slow smile spread across her face, predatory and utterly devoid of warmth. "Well, well, well. Look who decided to grace us with his charming presence."

Nadia followed Eve's line of sight, a low whistle escaping her lips. Vik Stallion, all sharp angles and steely resolve, stood amidst his men, looking every inch the formidable leader, he was. Years of Florida sun had etched lines around his eyes, testaments to his well-earned retirement. Yet, a flicker of something akin to amusement flickered in his gaze as he met Eve's.

"Eve, Nadia," Vik rumbled, his voice a gravelly caress. "Fancy meeting you two here. Care to explain why you're radiating more mayhem usual?

Eve sauntered towards him, her hips swaying with a practiced nonchalance that Nadia knew belied the coiled tension in her muscles. "Let's just say paradise is calling, Vik. Needs a little… pest control." She paused, her eyes twinkling with mischief. "And margaritas. Lots of margaritas."

Vik's amusement deepened, a low chuckle rumbling in his chest. "So, another kidnapping, then? You ladies and your penchant for trouble." He swept his gaze over Nadia, lingering for a beat too long on the familiar glint of her Mossad-issued switchblade. "Though, considering the company, I wouldn't mind a little target practice myself."

Nadia snorted, a single, humorless sound. "Don't get too excited, Vik. This little vacation is all about finesse. Not a bullet ballet." Her eyes, though, held a glint that spoke volumes of her capacity for both.

As they boarded Vik's private jet, a sleek Gulfstream IV, Eve couldn't help but notice the way the ex-military guys straightened in their seats, a mixture of wary respect and grudging admiration flickering in their eyes. They remembered Nadia, of course. The woman who could take down a room with her bare hands and a sardonic smile.

Eve, catching a glimpse of her own reflection in the plane's window, straightened her posture, a familiar spark of defiance igniting in her eyes. This wasn't just a rescue mission; it was a reunion of warriors, a chance to reminisce about past battles and forge a path towards a new one. A dangerous, exhilarating one, fueled by margaritas, mayhem, and an unyielding sense of justice. Just the way Eve liked it.

The descent into paradise was a surreal blur. The Gulfstream cut through the humid air like a vengeful angel, leaving the humdrum reality of airports and security protocols far behind. Eve, Nadia, and Vik hunkered down in the plush cabin, the hum of the engines a backdrop to their meticulous strategy session.

Vik, surprisingly adept at reading maps for a man who favored firepower over finesse, pointed out the isolated island compound – a fortress of hedonism built on the exploitation of innocence. Eve's jaw clenched tight. The dancers, their faces plastered on intel reports, were more than just grainy images. They were ghosts from their past, echoes of the Hutaree raid, a stark reminder that some evils festered regardless of geography.

The plane landed on a clandestine airstrip, the silence broken only by the chirp of tropical birds and the muffled thud of Vik's men deploying into the surrounding jungle. They moved like shadows, their grim efficiency a testament to countless unsung battles. This rescue wouldn't be surgical like a SWAT raid; it would be raw, fueled by a need for retribution.

As Eve and Nadia stepped onto the tarmac, the air shimmered with heat and a strange sense of foreboding. Eve ran a hand over the worn leather holster at her hip, the cold steel reassuring against clammy skin.

"Remember," she said to Nadia, her voice low and dangerous. "Sandra and those dancers, they've been broken down. This isn't about brute force."

Nadia nodded, eyes narrowed in grim determination. "In and out. Like a whisper," she confirmed, "And those bastards won't know what hit them." Even in the stifling heat, a shiver ran down Eve's spine. Nadia in stealth mode was a force of nature, ruthlessly efficient and utterly lethal.

They approached the compound under the cloak of twilight, the gaudy facades of the nightclubs and beachfront villas belying the darkness within. Eve's body language expertise picked up on the subtle signs – the twitchy guard at the perimeter fence, the way the gauzy curtains in a second-story window billowed as if someone hastily retreated. They were expected, but the element of surprise was still on their side.

The compound exploded into a symphony of chaos under the veil of twilight. Vik's men stormed the perimeter, their gunfire not so much a declaration of war, but a distraction – a calculated move to create the cover Eve and Nadia needed to slip in unseen. The captor, a bloated caricature of a crime lord, barked orders, his surprise tinged with a volatile mix of arrogance and outrage. This was his kingdom, and nobody dared invade it.

Eve, a phantom in the swirling shadows, crept past the disoriented guards. Her movements were economical, efficient, each step fueled by years of meticulously honed instincts. There was no time for flashy takedowns or drawn-out firefights. This was about extraction, about getting those girls out of this gilded hellhole.

The party hall thrummed with a desperate, nauseating energy. The dancers, their glitter-streaked faces masks of forced gaiety, swayed to the pounding music. Their eyes, however, mirrored Eve's own grim determination. They'd been pushed to their limits, turned into puppets for a sadistic audience. And like those Hutaree women years ago, in their eyes, Eve saw that same flicker of defiance, a will to survive buried beneath the trauma.

Chaos reached its peak. Vik's men, drawing fire and attention, provided the perfect smokescreen. Eve sprinted across the dance floor, a whirlwind of determination and the honed grace of a predator. The captor, realizing too late that the true battle wasn't outside but within, bellowed in rage, but it was cut short – a glimmer of steel, Nadia materializing beside him. A silenced pistol thwapped lightly against his temple. Game over.

"Sandra?" Eve knelt before the dancers, her voice barely a whisper above the din. Recognition sparked in their eyes, followed by a torrent of emotions – disbelief, terror, a flicker of desperation. "It's okay," she urged, keeping her movements gentle, non-threatening. These women were broken, skittish, their trust a fragile thing that could shatter as easily as glass.

Nadia appeared beside her, her movements blurring as she cut through the dancers' flimsy bindings with practiced efficiency. Their whispers were barely audible over the commotion – "It's safe now," "We're here," "You're free." A tide of movement surged towards the back exit as one by one, the dancers broke free from their gilded cage, a flicker of hope rekindling in their eyes.

The escape route – a dingy service corridor behind the gaudy facade – was a testament to the cruelty of their captor. This wasn't about pleasure, but control. Even the dancers' liberation was designed to be a degrading dash through the refuse of their imprisonment.

Suddenly, armed guards poured into the corridor, alerted to the breach. The air crackled with gunfire, the dancers cowering in terror. This was where the carefully crafted plan threatened to fall apart. Extraction wasn't just about moving bodies; it was about protecting them in that critical moment of vulnerability.

Eve and Nadia became a whirlwind of controlled violence. Disabling the guards was simple – a lifetime of training distilled into efficient takedowns. Yet, even in the fury, Eve maintained a sliver of awareness, a protective focus on the women huddled behind her. Every bullet dodged, every attacker disabled was a shield for those who couldn't shield themselves.

They burst into the humid night air, the dancers blinking in the sudden darkness, disoriented but fiercely alive. Vik's steady presence was a beacon, his men a wall of steely resolve. A symphony of sobs, ragged and raw, cut through the night. The battle was won, but the war, Eve knew, was far from over.

As the Gulfstream lifted them away from that poisoned paradise, Eve glanced at the dancers huddled near Vik, their eyes wide and glistening. There was fear, yes, but amidst the terror, a stubborn spark of defiance flickered. They'd been taken, broken, but not extinguished.

A ghost of a smile touched Eve's lips. These women weren't out of the woods yet; their scars would run deep and recovery would be a long, grueling journey. But today wasn't about healing; it was about survival, about ripping them from the claws of evil and offering the simple, precious gift of a tomorrow.

Nadia nudged her, a mischievous glint in those dark eyes. "Not so bad for a rescue mission fueled by margaritas, huh?"

Eve grinned, exhaustion and exhilaration warring within her. "Damn right," she agreed, then shot Vik a pointed look. "Speaking of margaritas, big man, we're gonna need those drinks strong and plentiful. These ladies have earned them, and then some."

Because rescuing the broken was only the first step. Now, Eve knew, came the hard, beautiful work of helping them piece themselves back together, one fierce, tear-stained step at a time. She glanced back at the vanishing island, a smudge against the starry sky. And somewhere, deep within, a warrior's satisfaction bloomed. Today wasn't just a victory; it was a promise - a promise that evil might thrive in the shadows, but it would never, ever extinguish the light.

# Chapter Thirty-Five

## Home

Eve pulled up to the sprawling, antebellum-style mansion that was… home. Well, supposedly. She allowed herself a wry smile. Just this morning, she was knee-deep in an absurdly chaotic rescue mission. Now, manicured lawns stretched before her, and the scent of magnolias mingled with an odd sense of calm. It wasn't the harsh, thrilling calm after the adrenaline rush; it was something deeper, slower, the uneasy silence of a storm passed.

As she approached the house, a high-pitched squeal shattered the stillness. "Mommy!" A blur of pink and sunshine erupted from the doorway, launching itself at her knees. Harper, her beautiful, four-year-old daughter, wrapped her arms tightly around Eve's leg, burying her face in the fabric of her jeans.

Eve's heart melted. This, this fierce, joyful love, was a different kind of battlefield, one she fought with all her might. She scooped Harper up, the weight a welcome anchor, a reminder of why she did what she did.

"Mommy's home, sweetheart," she whispered, burying her face in Harper's soft curls. The scent of sunshine and bubblegum shampoo was a stark contrast to the harsh realities she'd recently faced. But it was a good contrast, a sweet reminder of the life she was fighting for.

A small voice, barely a gurgle, joined the chorus. Tucked in Franklin's arms, her eight-month-old son, Franklin, gurgled and reached out a chubby hand, his eyes wide with curiosity. Relief and a warmth she hadn't felt in far too long bloomed in Eve's chest.

Inside, the foyer was a symphony of gleaming marble and tasteful furnishings, the kind of opulence that should have felt suffocating. Instead, a strange sense of belonging washed over her. Not the fierce belonging of Tres Piedras, born of shared struggle and adrenaline, nor the passionate, complicated belonging she once found in the chaos of New York. It was something tender, a nascent sense of connection with these two precious souls who relied on her completely.

Dinner, an extravagant affair orchestrated by Franklin, was surprisingly enjoyable. His tales of Baby Shark and Ms. Rachel on YouTube were a stark departure from the grim realities she'd recently faced. Yet, the banality, the normalcy of it all, was comforting. For Harper, it was a routine, a normalcy she craved for her children. Evenings with Daddy, giggles over spilled milk, bedtime stories whispered in quiet voices. For Eve, it was a necessary counterpoint to the darkness lurking at the edges of her life. She even found herself laughing, genuinely, at Franklin's exaggerated account of a disastrous “the floor is lava” incident – not because it was funny, but because of the sheer joy it brought to Harper's face.

Later, as she slipped into the luxurious silken sheets of their four-poster bed, a wave of exhaustion hit her. She cuddled against Franklin's warm form, her son nestled peacefully in the crook of her arm, his tiny breaths a soft lullaby. On the other side, Harper, already fast asleep, clutched a well-worn stuffed bunny. The rhythmic rise and fall of their chests lulled her towards sleep.

New York. Tres Piedras. Those were places where she'd fought, bled, and almost died. Places where her identity was forged in the fires of espionage and constant danger. Places that were undeniably home in a raw, turbulent, intoxicating way.

But here, in this quiet opulence, with the scent of expensive cologne lingering, Franklin's steady breathing filling the room, and the soft sounds of her children's sleep, home had acquired a new definition. It was safety. A respite. A meticulously crafted lie, yes, but one woven with threads of fierce love and a mother's unwavering devotion.

As dreams began to flicker at the edge of her consciousness, a single word drifted to the surface, a stark realization amidst the contentment. Home. Had she just thought of this gilded cage, this life with a man she didn't truly love... had she finally, truly, called it home?

The question lingered, a disquieting echo that even the luxurious linens couldn't cushion her from. Perhaps, Eve realized as sleep finally claimed her, acceptance, even of an imperfect situation, was a type of survival too. For now, that was enough. The rest, the constant tension between her warring selves, the ever-present danger…those were battles for another day. Tomorrow, she'd face them head-on, as she always did.

But tonight, in the heart of this unlikely sanctuary, Eve Black, agent, warrior, the woman of countless faces, slept the uneasy sleep of someone who was finally, tentatively, beginning to find her place in a world that shouldn't have been hers at all.

# Chapter Thirty-Six

## The Phone Call

Days melted into weeks, the rhythm of Mobile, Alabama, a slow and steady drumbeat against the frantic pulse Eve was used to. Breakfast with Harper turned into chaotic symphonies of spilled cereal and laughter. Afternoon walks morphed into fantastical quests fueled by a three-year-old's imagination. Dinners, while still elaborate, were filled with baby Franklin's enthusiastic food experiments and Franklin's indulgently proud pronouncements about his son's future career as a Michelin-starred chef.

Eve threw herself into this new normal with a mix of ferocity and bewilderment. Gone were the late nights analyzing satellite footage or orchestrating undercover ops. Instead, she honed her skills at deciphering toddler babble, constructing princess towers fit for royalty, and mastering the art of hiding pureed spinach under mashed potatoes.

The FBI debriefings, initially a constant intrusion, faded into formality. Their focus was on the unusual angle of human trafficking for skills rather than sex, a development they shared with all field offices. Each field office had an academic outreach specialist, and Eve was speaking to every one of them. Make sure you keep an eye out…

The true enemy remained elusive, a shadow that loomed just out of sight. Yet, with each passing day without alarms, without coded alerts flashing across her phone, the weight of that shadowy threat eased.

Evenings, when the children were tucked in and Franklin poured her a glass of ridiculously expensive wine, the veneer cracked slightly. These were the danger hours – when the quiet was too loud and her thoughts a treacherous echo. She'd stare into the flickering fireplace, images superimposed over the flames: dark alleyways, the cold sweat of fear, the steely glint of Nadia's blade.

Yet, there was a shift, a softening around the edges. When Franklin reached for her hand, his touch clumsy yet undeniably affectionate, she didn't flinch away. While his kisses lacked the fire she'd craved, there was a comfort in the repetition, a gentleness that was a balm to her battle-scarred soul. Sometimes, late at night, she'd hear Harper whispering to her stuffed animals or baby Franklin’s soft gurgles of contentment. And in those moments, a fierce, almost desperate wave of love would engulf her – a stark reminder of what she was fighting for, of the normal life she owed her children.

One afternoon, while pushing Franklin’s stroller through the manicured park, she caught a glimpse of herself in a shop window. Her reflection was a jarring juxtaposition: the yoga pants and messy bun of a suburban mom, a haunted look in her eyes that no amount of expensive concealer could disguise. This, she realized with a jolt, was the new face of Eve Black.

A rustle drew her attention. An elderly woman with eyes full of wisdom and wrinkles earned through a lifetime of experiences leaned on her cane, observing Eve. She offered a gentle, slightly mischievous smile.

"New mother, are you?" she inquired, her voice a soft rasp.

Eve hesitated, a lifetime of lies poised on her tongue. Then, she sighed, a sliver of the truth seeping out. "Not so new," she admitted. "Just…" She gestured helplessly, the unspoken words echoing in the air – different, lost, afraid.

The woman's eyes softened. "It gets easier," she said, her voice barely a whisper. "Not the challenges...those just change. But finding your way through them, it becomes a part of you, just like breathing."

Eve stared at her, the profundity of those simple words hitting her with the force of a revelation. This, this relentless love, this fierce fight for normalcy... it wasn't weakness, nor was it surrender. It was adaptation, the evolution of a survivor.

Suddenly, the weight in her chest lightened fractionally. Perhaps, just perhaps, this gilded cage, this fragile domesticity, could become her own kind of battlefield. A battle where swapped secrets and silent takedowns were replaced by lullabies and fiercely defending her children from overzealous park squirrels. It wouldn't be easy. It might never feel entirely natural. But it was hers to fight for, to forge into something that resembled the impossible notion of home.

The afternoon sun cast long shadows across the park as Eve pushed the stroller, the rhythmic click of the wheels a soothing counterpoint to the distant shouts of children playing. The old woman's words echoed in her mind, a seed of hope taking root amidst the ever-present chaos. Maybe, just maybe, this new life, however fragile, could be her own kind of battlefield.

Her musings were shattered by the insistent trill of her burner phone. A number she didn't recognize flashed on the screen. With a frown, she excused herself from a group of chatting mothers and answered the call.

"Hello?" she said cautiously.

The voice on the other end was a torrent of barely controlled panic. "Eve? Eve, is that you? Thank God…" The words hung in the air, the voice a stranger's, yet laced with a desperation that plucked at a buried chord of protectiveness within her.

A cold dread settled in Eve's stomach. "Who is this?" she managed, her voice guarded.

"It's Alice, honey," the voice choked out. "Your mother. Please, Eve, I need your help." A tremor ran through that simple word – mother – a word Eve hadn't spoken in decades, a concept alien to her world of calculated risks and solitary battles.

Alice – the woman who had existed as a fleeting, painful memory, a ghost at the edge of Eve's carefully constructed life. The woman who had vanished when Eve was just a child, leaving a void of unanswered questions and lingering bitterness. And now, here she was, desperate and pleading.

"My daughter, Lily" Alice continued, her voice a ragged whisper, "She’s gone. I need you, Eve. Please…" A choked sob echoed through the phone, raw and desperate.

Eve's world tilted on its axis. Daughter? She hadn't even known she had siblings, erased from their lives with the efficiency her mother had shown in erasing herself from Eve's. Yet, a fierce wave of protectiveness washed over her – an echo of the warrior spirit, redirected towards an unknown family.

The Park faded away, the concerned faces of the mothers a distant blur. In the blink of an eye, Eve was back in battle-ready mode. The carefully cultivated life she was creating for herself cracked, replaced by the familiar hum of adrenaline.

"Start from the beginning," she ordered, her voice sharp and steady. "Her name, everything you know about where she was last seen. Don't leave out a single detail."

Because now, this wasn't just about a ghost from her past. It was about an unknown sister, a fractured family, a desperate plea she refused to ignore. Perhaps, amidst the ashes of her own abandonment, she could find a way to protect those who shared her blood. FBI Special Agent Eve Black, the woman hardened by espionage and loss, was stepping into a new battleground. This wasn't about vengeance or duty; it was about the unexpected, fierce surge of loyalty towards a family she never knew she had.