

PROS AND CONS  
MYSTERIES

# DECEPTION

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CHRISTY BARRITT

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PROS AND CONS MYSTERIES

BOOK 3

**CHRISTY BARRITT**



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# CHAPTER 1

SEVENTEEN YEARS AGO

“I want you to go into the store and tell the clerk that you need help.” Olive Sterling’s dad leaned closer as the two of them stood on the sidewalk. “Tell her you’re sick and raising money to help pay your medical bills.”

Olive frowned as she contemplated her father’s words. “But I’m not sick.”

Her dad tilted his head. “You had a fever last week. Remember?”

“But I’m better now.” Her dad wasn’t making sense. The fever had passed, and she was back to feeling like herself, other than a few sniffles.

Dad’s gaze locked on hers, and some of the softness in his tone disappeared. “I just need you to do what I’m telling you.”

Dread pooled in her stomach, and Olive knew her dad wouldn’t take no for an answer.

He’d taught her to be obedient, to follow his orders without questioning. He said being compliant was important, especially in his line of work. But he didn’t explain any more than that, and she wasn’t sure why working at a car dealership made obedience so important. Yet he talked about it all the time and even did drills with her.

As Olive stared at the small-town pharmacy, her heart pounded in her ears and her lungs grew tight, like she couldn’t breathe. All she wanted was to run.

She pictured herself turning and darting down the sidewalk of the unfamiliar town. She imagined pushing herself as fast as her eight-year-old legs would allow. She was strong and a good runner.

Would her dad catch her?

She frowned because she knew the answer. Yes. He was taller and stronger.

What would he do after he caught her? Would he punish her? Make her go inside the pharmacy anyway?

Tears glimmered in Olive’s eyes as she realized the impossible situation she faced.

She couldn’t get out of this. Her dad would make sure of it.

“Hey, sweet girl.” Her dad’s voice softened as he stooped down to her eye-level. “There’s no need for you to be upset. There’s nothing wrong with asking for money when you need it.”

She stared into his blue eyes. She thought her dad, with his thick dark hair and easy smile, was the most handsome man ever.

But she didn’t like him right now.

She had to make him see her perspective. “But, Dad—”

“I know you’re young, and you may not feel like you need money,” Dad continued. “But your mom and I need some help. I had to take off work to stay home with you the day you were out sick from school. I lost my paycheck for that day.”

“You did?” Her voice trembled.

He nodded. “I did. By doing this for me, you can help pull your weight in our family. That’s what family does. They help each other out. Everyone contributes.”

Guilt filled her with such force she thought she might hurl. Olive hadn’t realized her sickness made her dad lose money. Without money, they couldn’t pay the bills. Buy groceries and gas.

She’d overheard her mom and dad talking about bills just the other night. She’d slipped back into her bedroom before they’d seen her. But Mom had sounded really worried.

Being grown-up must be so hard. All Olive had to worry about was doing her homework and hanging out with her friends.

At once, Olive had visions of her little sisters growing hungry with no food on the table. She imagined them crying because their stomachs were empty. She thought about shivering in the winter without heat.

What if her family became homeless and it was her fault?

A cry lodged in her throat at the thought.

“You can do this, Ollie.” Dad gave her an affirming bob of his head. “I believe in you.”

Olive pulled in a shaky breath and nodded resolutely.

She wasn't going to get out of this. Maybe she was selfish for wanting to.

She gripped the jar in her hand. Earlier, Dad had told her to write "Please Donate" on a piece of paper with a crayon, and then he taped the note to the jar.

Her father had told her to wear her oldest jeans and a dirty sweatshirt—she'd picked a pale pink Barbie one with spaghetti stains on the front. She remembered the day she'd gotten those stains on her favorite shirt. She'd cried, but she couldn't bring herself to throw it away.

Normally, her mom fixed her long, curly hair so it looked pretty—like a doll baby, Mom said. But not today. Today, Olive's hair was still matted in the back from where she'd slept on it last night. On the sides, the strands were frizzy.

Olive thought she still had some sticky syrup on the corners of her mouth. Her dad had made her favorite blueberry pancakes today for breakfast. Normally, he told her to wash up afterward.

Not today. Today, he hadn't even told her to brush her teeth.

Then Olive's mom and sisters had taken off to go to a baby shower for one of the neighbors. Her dad had asked to "borrow" Olive for a surprise errand.

She'd been so excited to spend some time alone with her dad. He was always so fun—unless he was trying to teach her a lesson.

The two of them had driven out of Tuscaloosa to this small town, a place Olive had never been before. She didn't even know its name.

As they rode together in the car, Dad sang along with songs on the radio—one about being under an umbrella-ella-ella and another about chasing waterfalls.

Olive had been expecting their errand to be something fun like getting a treat or a surprise trip to an amusement park. Maybe even shopping.

She hadn't expected this.

"Go on." Dad nodded toward the pharmacy door. "You can do this."

She swallowed hard, gave Dad one last look, and then stepped inside the store. The place smelled like cleaning supplies and food. At the back of the store, she thought she saw a counter where people could buy sandwiches.

She frowned. Eating a sandwich sounded much more fun than asking for money.

Slowly, Olive walked to the counter, where a clerk—an older lady with pale blonde hair piled atop her head and a dark blue smock—smiled down at her.

"Well, hello there. What can I help you with?" The woman had a Southern drawl and gave off grandmotherly vibes.

Olive wondered a moment what it would be like to have grandparents. She'd never known hers. Sometimes, she felt jealous of her friends who talked about the time they spent with their grandparents—on holidays and vacations and weekends. How they were spoiled with candy and cookies and slumber parties.

Olive held up the jar. Her hand trembled along with her voice as she said, "I'm collecting money."

"Money?" The clerk tilted her head. "For what? A fundraiser?"

"I've been sick, and my family needs help paying our bills now." Olive forced her words out. "My dad's missed too much work, and I don't want my sisters to go without food." Her voice cracked.

The woman's eyes widened with alarm. "Oh, sweetie. That's terrible. I'm so sorry to hear that."

Olive's eyes welled with tears. Not because she was poor and sick—but because she hated every moment of this. She hated feeling helpless to do anything but obey. She might be young, but this felt wrong.

The clerk glanced through the large windows at the front of the store to the sidewalk outside. "Are you here alone, sweetie?"

"My dad's outside. He . . . he said this is hard for him."

"I bet it is." The woman reached into her pocket, pulled out a twenty-dollar bill, and dropped it into Olive's jar. "Here you go. Maybe this will help just a little."

"Thank you." Some of the pressure left Olive's chest.

It had worked. All Olive had to do was ask for money, and someone had given it to her.

The clerk had thought Olive was upset about being sick. Really, Olive was upset about having to ask for donations. The clerk didn't know that, however.

Her emotions had fed right into her dad's scheme.

Her dad would be happy.

But doing this felt gross. Olive never wanted to do it again.

*Never.*

Bracing herself, she stepped outside ready to tell her dad she was finished.

## CHAPTER 2

TODAY

Olive Sterling paused on the sunny sidewalk of Oasis, Texas, and felt the warm, late April breeze sweep over her, pushing strands of her curly hair away from her face.

She stared at the small, familiar town around her. This place, located about an hour west of Austin in Texas Hill Country, had once been home.

That seemed like another lifetime ago, however.

Her gaze drifted from the Rusty Lantern Café, where she'd soon meet the subject of her investigation, to Irwin's Pharmacy on the corner.

As Olive stared at the small business, memories of that long-ago day with her dad filled her mind. This wasn't the same pharmacy Dad had ordered her to go into and plead for money. But it might as well be.

Olive had put the recollection out of her head for many years, trying to forget the shame she'd felt as she obeyed her father. Right now, the details of that day jolted back into her memory with striking accuracy.

Her father's ask hadn't made sense back then.

But now it did.

Now Olive knew more about her father. Knew about his schemes. About the lies that had been hiding beneath his friendly exterior.

Other parents taught their children not to lie. Her dad, on the other hand, had taught her *how* to lie. Which was probably why Olive hated not telling the truth now.

She could justify it when it came to investigating, she supposed. But not in real life.

Even worse, she'd never truly have closure on those issues. Her father was dead, and he'd taken the answers to the grave with him.

Olive pulled herself together and drew in another breath.

She glanced around her again. She never thought she'd revisit this place.

Then she'd gotten a phone call from her old friend Jason Stewart. His request for help had been hard to turn down. Partly because it was Jason, the only man she had ever loved.

He was also the man she could never be with.

Not that she *wanted* to be with anyone. Her life was too complicated—not to mention the fact she had major trust issues. The one man she was supposed to feel safe with—her dad—had been full of lies. How did someone move past that?

She stuffed her hands into her pants pockets and watched the people around her.

Did she even know anyone who still lived here in Oasis? Or had everyone moved on? Gone on to bigger and better places?

Olive had lived here when she was sixteen. Back then, the population was only 3,241. Now the town had blossomed to nearly fifteen thousand, and a few strip malls and hotels had even been erected on the outskirts of town.

In some ways, living in Oasis had been among the happiest days of her life. This town was where she'd met Jason. He no longer lived here—he was in Chicago. But some of his family remained.

Olive and her family had stayed in Oasis less than a year, as they were prone to do. Then her father had uprooted them and moved them to Indiana so he could become a pastor. Her father becoming a pastor had caused a whole slew of other issues. But she preferred not to think about those now.

Right now, she'd focus on this case.

Jason had hired Aegis, the company she worked for, to do some investigating. One of his sisters thought she—and the whole town, for that matter—was being scammed.

It had taken some convincing, but Olive finally talked her boss, Rex, into letting her take this job. Normally, the cases they took on were much more high-stakes and high-profile. They left insurance cheats and infidelity to the smaller firms.



She was here under the guise of being a documentary filmmaker.

The case: A woman in Oasis could be defrauding the community of their money to satisfy her own greed. Olive needed to prove if that theory was true or not.

And she needed to do it by Saturday, when a community-wide event called Kick Cancer would take place and all the proceeds would go to this woman. Apparently, there would be an auction, a bake sale, and a concert by a local band.

And all the money raised would be matched by a local real estate developer.

If this woman was lying, she stood to steal thousands of dollars this weekend alone. Olive had seen flyers for the event posted around town, and someone had walked past wearing a “Kick Cancer for Rebecca” T-shirt.

As Olive stood on the sidewalk, goosebumps suddenly spread across her arms and neck.

She recognized the feeling—the feeling of someone watching her.

However, she’d just gotten into town, and no one should know she was here. So who would be watching, and why?

She scanned the street around her. The cozy storefronts with colorful flowers in hanging baskets. The wooden benches beckoning people to sit and stay awhile. A barbershop complete with a barber pole. A café with a chalkboard advertising the day’s specials. People walking their dogs or strolling with shopping bags.

Then she saw him.

Just around the corner across the street.

A man holding a camera.

A camera whose lens was aimed at Olive.

Her breath caught.

“Hey!” she shouted.

Then she took off after him.

---

The last thing Olive wanted was to make a scene. But she had to find out why this guy was taking pictures of her. She’d only been in Oasis for a few hours, and no one in town knew the real reason she was here. Only her coworkers at Aegis and Jason.

Something like this could blow her cover—something Olive couldn’t afford to let happen.

She darted across the street, and a Honda Civic nearly rammed into her. Instead, the driver threw on brakes and lay on his horn.

“Sorry!” she yelled as she continued to dodge vehicles.

But the pause had given the photographer long enough to put more distance between them.

Whoever the guy was, he was fast.

Olive watched as he turned, heading down an alley.

She pushed her legs as quickly as she could, trying to reach him.

She had some serious questions for this guy.

There was a small chance his presence wasn’t about her current case.

For the past few months, someone had been sending her texts that implied they knew who had murdered her family eight years ago.

Yes, murdered them. If Olive had been home at the time, she’d be dead too. But she’d sneaked out that night to go to a party, which was the only reason she was alive now. Her disobedience had ultimately saved her.

The thought made her heart twist.

Her family’s killer had never been caught, but Olive was determined to change that.

And it started with figuring out who’d sent her those texts.

Olive pushed herself harder as she ran down the sidewalk, dodging several people and murmuring her apologies.

Then she turned down the alley.

She paused to catch her breath as she scanned the area.

The space was narrower and darker than she’d expected. Aside from some trash cans, the alley appeared empty.

But that didn’t mean this guy wasn’t hiding.

She squinted as she took a step forward. She couldn’t be certain if the alley stopped at a dead end or if it turned. The shadows made it difficult to determine.

She wished she could draw her gun, but she didn’t want to alarm anyone innocent who might see her.

However, the Glock was tucked beneath her jacket in case she needed it.

She peered around the first set of trash cans.

There was no one.

Then she peered around the second set.

Still no one.

Where had the guy gone? It appeared he knew his way around this area. She stashed that fact away in the back of her mind. Then she continued forward. Suddenly, an engine revved in the distance. She froze. The next instant, a man on a motorcycle charged around the corner. Headed straight for her.

## CHAPTER 3

The motorcycle sped toward Olive, and she had nowhere to go.

The driver sideswiped her, nearly knocking her to the ground. Instead, she stumbled backward into the brick wall beside her.

She glanced at the motorcycle again, trying to get a glimpse of the man. But the helmet and eye shield covering the man's face obscured his identity.

He tore onto the street, skidding as he turned. Horns sounded as if drivers had thrown on brakes to avoid hitting him.

Then he was gone.

Olive knew there was no way she could catch up with him on foot.

Straightening, she tried to catch her breath. Her arm ached from where she'd hit the wall, and a pulsating pain captured her hip where the motorcycle had clipped her.

She was grateful to walk away from this with only bruises.

Just as she composed herself and started back toward the sidewalk, she glanced at the ground and squinted. A device lay there, a device she hadn't seen earlier.

A silver USB drive.

Had this fallen from the man's pocket when he'd blasted past her? It was a definite possibility.

Olive picked up the device and studied it. The metal exterior wasn't weathered or damaged, which seemed to indicate it hadn't been out in the elements long.

This could be just the clue she was looking for.

She shoved it in her pocket. She'd check the flash drive later.

Right now, she had a meeting to get to.

---

Olive hurried toward the Rusty Lantern Café.

Just as she rounded the corner, she spotted Nova Levington walking down the sidewalk toward her.

Nova, whose family hailed from the Philippines, was petite and curvy with a small waist and dark hair cut into a wedge. Purple streaks touched the edges, and bright blue glasses perched on her nose. Her clothing was normally colorful—or if not colorful then all black. She had no in-between.

She worked as one of their tech geniuses at Aegis Security. Although Olive usually partnered on assignments with Tevin McIntyre, Nova was a better fit this time. Nova was more artistic than Tevin, a skill that would be essential because of the film editing they'd need to do.

She was always crankier than Tevin, though it was usually in a funny way.

On occasion, Nova had moments the team labeled “Supernovas,” where she had a brilliant idea that helped solve the case.

Olive had been surprised Rex sent anyone with her, considering the nature of the assignment. But she was glad he did. Nova would pretend to be Olive's camera woman. Mitzi McGraw was also in town, working a temp job as a receptionist at a local hospital.

They'd all arrived on the same flight, but they'd each picked up their own rental car for the assignment. It was easier to split up and cover more ground that way.

Nova paused in front of Olive, a khaki-colored canvas bag on her shoulder. “You good? You look winded or something.”

Olive scowled and rubbed the bruises forming on her arm. “I'll tell you more later. Right now, we need to get inside.”

“Is Rebecca here already?”

“She wasn't a few minutes ago. I took a little detour, and she could have arrived since then.”

Nova threw her another questioning glance. “Detour? Now I’m really curious.”

Olive glanced at her watch. “I’ll explain later. I don’t want to get into it now.”

But that USB drive was burning a hole in her pocket. She couldn’t wait to see what was on it.

As she and Nova headed across the street, Nova’s eyes swept over Olive. “Nice look. A little crunchy, a little nerdy, and a whole lot of serious.”

That was the vibe Olive had been going for. She’d picked out neutral colors and clothing with natural fibers. Her dark, curly hair was pulled into a low ponytail, and she wore dark-framed glasses and Birkenstocks with white socks.

“This assignment isn’t like most I’ve done before.” Nova opened the front door to the restaurant, and they slipped inside.

“It is unusual, but I think it’ll be interesting since—” Olive abruptly stopped talking as she spotted the subject of their investigation sitting at a table near the front.

Olive generally preferred to sit on the periphery of the room so she could keep an eye on everyone coming and going. It was a safety protocol.

But someone like Rebecca Hansen liked to be center of attention—if their theory was correct, at least.

The woman was striking in a wholesome way. She had chestnut-brown hair that came below her shoulders in soft waves, a bright toothy smile, and smooth skin with a few freckles across her nose. She wore a flowered maxi dress and a jean jacket along with white sneakers and a brown leather crossbody bag strapped over her chest.

Her earnestness had made her a TikTok sensation. More than two million people had begun to follow her story online. It was quite impressive, to be sure.

Rebecca was twenty-seven years old, only two years older than Olive. Back when Olive had lived in Oasis, Rebecca had lived in California, so they’d never met.

Five years ago, the woman had moved here with her husband, Matt.

Four years ago, their little girl had been born.

Three years ago, she’d been diagnosed with stage four blood cancer and had been given a year to live.

Two years ago, she was still in treatment.

Nine months ago, she’d been declared in remission.

Three months ago, a scan and blood tests showed the cancer had returned.

“You must be Olive Robinson.” Rebecca rose, her voice as warm as syrup—but it didn’t sound fake.

Normally when Olive went undercover, she chose a different last name. But since she’d lived in this town at one time, she stuck with the name she’d used while living here. That would make this assignment more interesting, to say the least.

For most people, it was strange to change names when they moved. Not for Olive’s family. She’d thought changing her last name with every move was normal. However, her father had said she and her sisters weren’t allowed to mention the fact to anyone. Later, when Olive was older, he’d said it was because he worked for the government. He’d said he would explain it all to her one day.

One day had never come.

“Rebecca . . . it’s nice to meet you.” Olive extended her hand. “I’m Olive, and this is my assistant, Nova.”

“I look forward to talking to y’all.” Rebecca’s smile radiated friendliness and Texas charm. “I was intrigued when I got your email, and I’m so honored you thought of me. I’m just an ordinary girl who’s been thrown into extraordinary circumstances.”

That could be a good sound bite—if Olive was really doing this documentary.

As the scent of toasty bread and coffee rose around them, they sat at the table Rebecca had claimed. She’d already ordered a charcuterie board, which sat at the center of the table.

Rebecca followed Olive’s gaze to the meat and cheese spread.

“I hope y’all don’t mind that I already ordered something. But good food *always* makes everything better, doesn’t it? Although, I haven’t had much of an appetite lately, to be honest.” Her smile waned as if betraying her inner struggle.

“I can imagine.” Olive offered a compassionate frown.

The empathy wasn’t all fake. Part of her did feel badly for the woman. And Olive needed to keep an open mind and consider the fact Rebecca could be telling the truth.

The waitress appeared, so they quickly glanced at the menu.

After she took their orders, Olive turned back to Rebecca. It was time to get started.

Olive dove into her opening spiel.

## CHAPTER 4

“As I told you on the phone, we want to do a preliminary interview with you—nothing that’s recorded or official,” Olive started, grabbing a cracker and piece of cheese from the board in front of her. “When it comes to our documentaries with Union Bay Productions, we like to first get a good feel for our subjects. Then both parties decide whether or not they want to proceed.”

“Of course.” Rebecca munched on a grape.

“The good news is that we already have financing lined up and guaranteed distribution to streaming networks.”

“That’s amazing.” Rebecca nodded enthusiastically.

If this documentary were real, then it would open up incredible opportunities for Rebecca. Only she didn’t know none of this was real. It wouldn’t make her TikTok career flourish. If anything, this investigation could ruin her.

Olive was working undercover as a documentary producer. The team behind her at Aegis had expertly put together some clips of other documentaries she’d supposedly produced in the past. One on conditions at an animal hospital. Another on the effects of processed foods on health.

It had been quite the feat to get it all done and to get fake reviews and interviews online. But Olive’s team was amazing, and her backstory looked both authentic and impressive.

“I’m thrilled y’all could come.” Rebecca practically glowed as she said the words with bright eyes and a big grin. “There’s nothing I love more than sharing my story so that maybe someone else can be inspired by the events that changed my life. I want them to know that even though bad things can happen to us, good can still shine through.”

Another great sound bite.

“That’s a great way to look at life when things like this happen.” Olive meant the words—she knew from experience. “Sometimes having a positive attitude can truly make such a difference when we face trying times.”

“You can say that again.” Rebecca’s smile stretched from ear to ear. “I’ve learned so much about myself, and I’ve become a better person because of everything that’s happened to me. People often ask me if I had this journey to do all over again if I’d change anything. The answer is no. Yes, it’s been a terribly difficult time. But I’ve grown so much and have become a better person through these trials.”

Olive swallowed hard and nodded. Rebecca was both charming and believable—much like Olive’s father had been.

If the woman truly was sick, then Olive could see why people wanted to support her.

But if she was lying . . . then she was preying on people’s kindness and goodwill. She was using emotional exploitation to benefit herself.

Olive had to find out if this woman really had cancer. If she didn’t, then she was scamming this community out of hundreds of thousands of dollars.

And the only possible motivation this woman might have was greed.

Nothing made Olive angrier.

---

The waitress brought their food. Rebecca got a turkey sandwich, Olive some potato soup, and Nova a salad.

They’d talked as they’d eaten. A few times, Olive glanced around, halfway expecting to see someone she recognized from her stay here.

She saw no one familiar.

When Olive wrapped up her initial interview with Rebecca, she paused. She needed to sell her cover if she wanted to proceed with this investigation. This was the moment when push came to shove.

“I really feel like people can find inspiration with your story,” she started. “I’d love to move forward with this

documentary if you're on board."

Rebecca paused a moment, and Olive wondered what she would say.

Time seemed to stand still.

If she said no, then investigating this case would be a lot more complicated.

Finally, a grin spread across Rebecca's face. "I'm totally on board. I really feel like we'd be a great fit. We need to share the tough times in our lives so others will know they're not alone in their struggles."

Olive smiled, trying not to show her relief as she reached her hand out. "Then it's a deal. A handshake will suffice until you sign the actual contract—which you should have received a few days ago."

Rebecca took her hand and gave it a hearty shake. "I did. I already had my lawyer look it over, and I've decided to sign."

"Wonderful." Relief filled Olive.

Their first obstacle had officially been conquered.

"I really think this will be great." Rebecca lowered her voice. "I mean, we'll have to work around my treatment schedule. I'm assuming you knew that, right? Then again, assuming things can be dangerous . . ."

"Of course," Olive told her. "That shouldn't be a problem. What do you have coming up?"

"I have a few appointments, but I should be mostly clear for the next two weeks—unless something else pops up." Rebecca touched her chest.

Olive could barely make out the outline of what appeared to be a medical port beneath her dress. Could Rebecca fake having a port?

Olive wasn't sure. That was one of the many questions she needed to explore.

"I'd like to get started right away." Olive pushed her plate away. "The initial filming would be ideal at your house. It would let people have a glimpse into your life. Would that work?"

"That sounds fantastic. I'm not sure how clean it's going to be." She let out a self-deprecating laugh. "My housekeeper went AWOL and stopped returning my calls earlier this week, then she never showed up yesterday."

"Good help is hard to find," Olive said.

"And I know it sounds weird that I have a housekeeper, but cleaning my house takes so much energy. It's a splurge Matt and I allowed ourselves."

"It makes sense." Olive patted her hand. "You have enough on your mind without worrying about how clean your house is."

"I appreciate your understanding." Rebecca paused. "I watched some of your other documentaries, and I have to say I was really impressed. I was a little skeptical when you first called me. The last thing I'd want to do is to agree to do a documentary with someone sketchy. But I'm so glad we met because you seem like the perfect person to partner with. I think our paths crossed for a reason."

Olive forced a smile. Rebecca was good. *Really* good. She had what came across as a genuine sweetness and sincerity about her.

The best con artists did.

"I think this is going to be a great opportunity." *A great opportunity to get to the truth.* Olive kept that thought silent.

In Olive's years going undercover, fooling people still bugged her to an extent. However, she usually tricked the bad guys. Those people deserved consequences for their actions.

Other times, Olive had to fool people who were decent humans. Those instances were the ones that haunted her.

If it turned out Rebecca Hansen truly did have cancer, Olive would feel terrible for investigating her. That was why she had to proceed very carefully.

Olive was primarily doing this assignment for Jason . . . though she had to admit she *did* have an ulterior motive.

She'd lived in this town at one time, and she was determined to figure out what her father had really been up to.

Was he a con artist who preyed on the innocent in order to take their money? If that was the case, then why were his financial accounts at zero after he was murdered? Where had all that money gone?

Or was what her father had told her true? He'd told her he secretly worked for the government, taking on new roles and identities in order to investigate classified crimes in different areas of the country.

Olive wanted to believe her dad was one of the good guys.

But what if he wasn't?

That was the question she struggled with.

Maybe being here in Oasis would help her find some of the answers she desperately sought.

## CHAPTER 5

Olive took some cash from her wallet and dropped it on the table. “Lunch is on me, of course.”

“You going to eat that?” Nova pointed at some leftover bread that had come with Olive’s soup.

“Don’t plan on it.” Olive nudged it closer to her colleague. “Make me some lumpia and pancit later, and we’ll call it even.”

“It’s a deal.”

Nova was notorious for eating people’s leftovers. And Olive was notorious for asking for lumpia and pancit in return. The crispy spring rolls and Filipino noodle dish were her favorites. When she’d gone to visit Nova’s mom once while on a work trip, the woman hadn’t stopped offering her food.

Nova said it was the Filipino way—guests always had to be well-fed.

“Thank y’all so much for lunch.” Rebecca paused. “So, what time should I expect you to come over tomorrow?”

Before Olive could answer, an older woman with gray hair walked by and stopped to talk to Rebecca, mentioning how much she loved her and was praying for her.

“Her granddaughter was one of my students,” Rebecca explained after the woman walked away.

Olive smiled. “It’s nice that you have so much support.”

Rebecca tilted her head, a wistful look in her gaze. “I don’t know what I would do without this community. They’ve been so wonderful and have really gone above and beyond.”

Olive realized she didn’t have that kind of support network. She moved from place to place. She had no family—only the FBI agent and his wife who’d taken her in for a year after her family’s murder.

Sure, she had her colleagues at Aegis. But they were all like her—lone rangers who didn’t get too close. Except maybe Tevin, who in many ways was like a brother to her.

She ignored the pang of loss that pulsed in her chest.

Instead, she cleared her throat. “So, going back to tomorrow—would nine a.m. work?”

“That should be fine,” Rebecca said. “I look forward to telling my story. I believe that good can come from the bad if we let it. And, honestly, sharing my story is one way I cope with what’s happened to me, given my terminal cancer diagnosis.”

The woman was so convincing that Olive *wanted* to believe her. Olive needed to act like she *did* believe Rebecca.

But this assignment would definitely be challenging, especially in light of Motorcycle Man.

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Olive and Nova stepped outside the Rusty Lantern. Rebecca had run into someone else before leaving, and they were chatting inside still. The woman was clearly a mini celebrity around here.

As Olive stood on the sidewalk, the feeling hit her again. The feeling of being watched.

She paused and glanced around. But she didn’t see Motorcycle Man anywhere—not even peeking around any corners.

“Olive?” Nova asked beside her, a touch of weary resignation in her voice.

She turned back to her colleague. “Sorry. I caught a man taking pictures of me earlier.”

“What?” Surprise laced her voice.

“I’ll tell you more later. Right now, I want to keep my eyes open.”

“Of course.” Nova shoved her hands into the pockets of her purple varsity-style jacket, the fabric rustling with a hint of annoyance. “Must be weird coming back to this place. Has the town changed a lot, or is it still quaintly provincial?”

“It’s gotten bigger.” Olive swept her gaze down the sidewalk again. “It seems a bit cleaner and more cheerful. I don’t know. Maybe everything looks different once you’re older.”

“Maybe. The town where I grew up is cookie-cutter suburbia. Every direction you look could be any other bedroom

community in America. I always thought it'd be cool to grow up in a small town like this where everyone knows everyone or at least, that's what the movies tell you."

"The truth is I didn't exactly grow up here. I lived in Oasis for less than a year. That was about the longest my family stayed in any one place."

Nova frowned and pushed her glasses higher, a flicker of genuine concern mixed with a hint of "don't make me care." "That sounds complicated. Or, you know, a constant exercise in packing and unpacking. Either way, not my idea of a good time."

Olive and Nova weren't particularly close, so Nova didn't know all the details of Olive's past. Very few people did. Olive figured it was best to keep some things private—including her history.

"What now?" Nova blew out a breath, a clear sign of impatience, as she glanced around at the passing cars and people out shopping. "Do we need to talk about tomorrow? Because, honestly, I'm already picturing my bed."

"We should," Olive said. "But first I'd like to familiarize myself again with the town and walk around a bit. Maybe we can meet tonight at the hotel to talk about our game plan more."

"Fine," Nova said. "Six. At the hotel. Dinner. As long as it's not some 'local delicacy' that involves questionable seafood, I'm in. I just pulled into town in time for our lunch, and I'd really like to unpack, take a shower, and maybe have a solid nap before we dive into tomorrow's . . . adventure."

"Then you should. I'll see you at six. I'll order dinner."

"That works. If that's it, then I'm going to run. Plus, I need to call Micah. He's probably wondering if I've been kidnapped by . . . well, by anything."

Her colleague seemed to easily find guys to date, even though the relationships never lasted long.

Olive didn't quite understand how all that worked. With their jobs, she and Nova were on the road a lot—two hundred eighty-nine days last year, to be precise.

She wondered if Nova was using a dating app, but given the woman's technical expertise, Olive didn't think she was the type to do so. Nova had seen too much of the ugliness that could happen as a result of those things.

One case in particular stood out in Olive's mind—a case they'd investigated involving a fourteen-year-old girl who'd gone to meet a guy she thought was a fifteen-year-old boy. She'd actually met a fifty-year-old predator.

They'd rescued the teen, but that case had stuck in Olive's mind. It could have ended so differently.

Nova's dating life wasn't any of Olive's business, and she didn't ask.

After Nova said goodbye, Olive walked back down the sidewalk, trying to appear as if she were merely taking a casual stroll.

She was actually looking for that photographer.

But she didn't see him, nor did she spot any motorcycles stashed anywhere.

Olive nibbled on her bottom lip.

She *would* figure out who that man was, she vowed.

After walking several blocks and seeing nothing, she finally started back toward her car.

But as Olive headed toward the small lot where she'd parked, she paused.

Rebecca stood next to a dark-green Mercedes, talking to someone inside.

Whatever their conversation was about, it looked heated as Rebecca's arms flew in the air and all her sweetness disappeared.



## CHAPTER 6

Olive took a step back and listened.

“I don’t know why you felt the urge to track me down here.” Rebecca snapped at the person inside the car. “I’ve talked to you about this before.”

“Then you should return my phone calls.”

“I don’t return your phone calls because I don’t want to talk to you.” Rebecca’s back was ramrod straight and her jaw set with anger.

Sweetheart Rebecca was gone, and in her place was Assertive Angry Rebecca.

The man lowered his voice and said something Olive couldn’t make out.

Rebecca threw her hands in the air again and stepped back, clearly frustrated.

The car suddenly pulled away, and Rebecca jerked back as if fearing her toes might be run over. She muttered something under her breath and shook her head.

Then Rebecca glanced over her shoulder. Before Olive could hide, Rebecca spotted her.

The woman’s cheeks reddened, and she pushed a hair behind her ear.

There was no need for Olive to pretend she hadn’t seen the conversation.

Instead, she stepped toward Rebecca just as Rebecca stepped toward her.

“I’m sorry you had to see that,” Rebecca started, an apologetic look on her downturned lips and misty gaze.

“I wasn’t following you. I promise. I parked over there.” Olive nodded toward the black Jeep Wrangler she’d rented. “Is . . . is everything okay?”

“It’s fine.” She waved her hand as if making light of the situation. “That’s my cousin, and I swear he’s been difficult since the day he was born.”

“We all have relatives like that.”

Rebecca glanced in the distance before saying, “He just likes things his way, you know? He wants to live big without working for anything. In fact, he came here to ask me for money. I’m afraid he’s going to use anything I give him for drugs.”

Olive raised her eyebrows. “That takes some nerve to ask you for money considering what you’re going through.”

Rebecca let out a sharp laugh. “Tell me about it. But I’m not that surprised. I had to ask him a few months ago to leave me alone. The stress he added to my life, on top of the stress of going through this cancer journey, was just too much.”

“That’s understandable.” Olive patted Rebecca’s arm, careful to act compassionate. She needed to earn this woman’s trust.

“Stress only makes things worse. I’m sorry he’s not respecting your boundaries.”

“Me too.” Rebecca drew in a shaky breath. “Thanks for listening and, again, I’m sorry you had to see that.” She pointed to a white Lexus SUV two vehicles down. “I really need to run.”

A teacher who could afford that Lexus on top of her cancer treatments and medical bills? It was possible Rebecca had bought this before her diagnosis. But the vehicle looked new.

Olive wouldn’t ask Rebecca about it now. But she stored that information away, adding it to an already long list of doubts, questions, and things to investigate.

---

Olive had one more stop before she headed to the hotel—but it was a stop she dreaded.

Still, the meeting couldn’t be avoided. She’d set it up in advance.

She climbed in her Jeep and plugged the address into her GPS.

Then she pulled away from Main Street and headed toward a house located on a country road about fifteen minutes away. As she drove, she kept an eye on her rearview mirror.

She didn't think Motorcycle Man would show up again—but she couldn't be sure. Until she knew what this guy was up to, she needed to be on guard.

Thankfully, she reached her destination without incident. She pulled up to a small white house with a beige carport beside it and numerous children's toys scattered around—trikes, a plastic slide, a bright red sandbox.

An old Datsun sat beneath the carport, indicating someone was home.

Before Olive even climbed from her Jeep, the side door of the house opened, and Chelsea Stewart Johnson stepped out with a toddler on her hip.

Olive sucked in a breath. She hadn't seen the woman in nearly ten years, and Olive wasn't sure how the woman would react to being around her.

Chelsea was Jason's older sister—three years older to be precise. The two looked nothing alike since Jason and all his siblings had been adopted. But Olive remembered that Chelsea had always been the quiet, level-headed one of the group.

Olive hadn't known her well. Chelsea had been away at college when Olive and Jason had dated. But Chelsea was the one who'd told Jason her concerns about Rebecca—she was the whole reason Olive had known about this potential scam and had come here.

Olive knew from Jason that Chelsea had four children, which sounded like enough to leave anyone exhausted. Her husband was a local cop, and she stayed home with the kids.

"Hi, Olive." Chelsea sounded neither warm nor cold.

Olive paused at the bottom of the chipped brick steps and nodded. "Chelsea. It's been a while."

"It sure has." Her tone remained neutral, not giving away her feelings.

"And who is this?" Olive tilted her head toward the toddler in Chelsea's arms. The tow-headed boy was probably two with big eyes and an adorable toothy grin.

"This is Henry." Her voice warmed. "He's my youngest. The rest of the kids are in school."

"Nice to meet you, Henry." Olive cast a wide smile at the boy.

The boy smiled back and waved his hand before burying his face in his mom's chest.

Chelsea nodded behind her. "Would you like to come in?"

"That would be great. Thanks for agreeing to meet."

Olive couldn't remember the last time she'd felt so nervous about talking to someone. But this was a necessary conversation.

She may not have known about what her father did.

But in this case the daughter would pay for the sins of the father.

She wasn't looking forward to it, however.

## CHAPTER 7

Chelsea brought Olive a pouch of grape juice—she said that was all she had on hand other than water. Olive insisted she didn't mind before taking a sip from the tiny straw she'd poked into the top.

Henry sat on the floor playing with some toy cars, running them along a road printed on the rug beneath him. Olive smiled, enamored with the boy's chubby cheeks and big eyes. She imagined Jason on the floor playing with his nephew, and her heart panged with some kind of strange emotion.

Was that longing?

Olive pulled her gaze away, dreading where this conversation might go. Certainly Chelsea had things she wanted to say to Olive—things not pertaining to this investigation. Considering how things had gone between Jason and Olive, it would be weird if she didn't.

Chelsea got right to the point. "You broke my brother's heart."

Olive drew in a deep breath before calmly saying, "I didn't want to move."

"You could have stayed in touch." An edge of protectiveness remained in Chelsea's voice.

"I wanted to. It was complicated. I was only sixteen, and my hands were tied."

Her lips flickered down in a frown. "I do realize you were young. But what about when you turned eighteen? Did you have a choice then?"

Olive swallowed hard, trying to carefully phrase her next statement. "My family was murdered when I was seventeen years old. Life was a lot different after that."

Chelsea pressed her eyes closed and lowered her head with regret. "I'm sorry. I had no idea. Jason didn't tell me that."

"It's okay. You couldn't have known. And believe me, I never wanted to hurt Jason. I loved him."

Chelsea opened her eyes again and studied Olive's face for several minutes. "Jason told me the two of you reconnected recently."

"We did. I was in Chicago for another job—"

"You're a PI now?"

Olive nodded again. "That's right. It was nice to see Jason again."

She shifted, her expression softening. "I'm sorry if I sounded harsh. I just needed to get that off my chest before we started. I'm protective of those in my circle."

"It's understandable."

Chelsea offered a half shrug. "For what it's worth, I really thought you and Jason were perfect together."

"Your brother is a wonderful man. He deserves someone . . . well, someone much better than me, who has more to offer."

Those were some of the most honest words Olive had ever spoken. Her life was full of potholes, and the path behind her was dark and twisted. Jason deserved someone who would make his life better, not more complicated.

Chelsea opened her mouth as if to argue with Olive's statement about Jason deserving someone better. Then she pressed her lips together instead.

She couldn't deny those words, could she? Because they were true.

---

Olive took another sip of her grape juice and set the pouch on the end table beside her. "Thank you for letting me come. I know you must be nervous."

"Jason assured me you'd do a good job with this, that I could trust you."

"You can. I won't tell anyone whatever you say."

Chelsea stared at Olive another moment before nodding. "Okay then. Let's talk."

“Thank you.” Olive licked her lips before diving in. “Let’s start at the beginning. How do you know Rebecca?”

Chelsea’s frown deepened, and she rubbed at an imaginary spot on her jeans. “It brings me no pleasure to say any of this.”

“I understand.”

“But I can’t sit back and stay silent if Rebecca is swindling good people with big hearts out of their hard-earned money.

We’d be supporting her as she works hard to make her fake life believable. How absurd is that?”

For once, Olive wished she really was making a documentary . . . because that line would sell the entire feature to viewers wide and far.

“I met Rebecca and Matt at church.” Chelsea ran her hands over her jeans again as if nervous. “We’re in the same Sunday school class. It’s for young married couples with kids.”

“Is it a large church?”

“About five hundred people.”

Olive’s gaze drifted to Henry as he continued to play with his car. Another pang she couldn’t identify hit her.

She turned back to Chelsea. “What’s Rebecca like?”

“Enigmatic is the best word to describe her,” Chelsea said. “Everyone loves Rebecca. Even when she was diagnosed with cancer, she still brought food to people after they had a baby or when they were sick or lost a loved one. She led the children’s choir at Christmas. She was—*is*—quite the force to be reckoned with.”

“I can see that.” Olive crossed her legs as they continued. “Do you remember when she was diagnosed with cancer?”

“I do. We were all devastated.” Chelsea shook her head, the conversation clearly weighing on her. “Rebecca was so transparent about everything that it was touching. She walked us through all her struggles, and she had this amazing faith. I mean, she really was an inspiration. I would have fallen to pieces if I’d gotten that news, but she was so strong.”

“When did you start getting suspicious she may not be telling the truth?”

Chelsea blew out a breath. “I guess my doubts started as admiration. I mean, Rebecca was always so positive despite what happened. She also always looked good. My sister-in-law—my husband’s brother’s wife—had cancer, and during chemo she lost some teeth, she got scabs on her face, her hair fell out, and she had no energy.”

“Did you wonder if Rebecca’s body was simply responding differently to treatment?” Olive waited to see how the question would be taken.

“Maybe. That’s what I told myself at least. But then Rebecca supposedly had a bone marrow transplant. Two days later, her family went to Disney World.” A wrinkle formed on her brow, and she shook her head in disgust.

“Okay . . .” Olive waited for her to continue.

“She rode the rides! You can’t do that so soon after having a procedure like she had.” Chelsea’s voice rose with emotion.

Her observation had been astute. “I can see why that would make you suspicious.”

“Once the idea was in my head, everything started falling into place, including the fact that she never lost her eyebrows. That’s when I knew for sure that something was up. Her story just didn’t make sense.”

## CHAPTER 8

“Come again?” Olive said.

Fire lit in Chelsea’s gaze. “Rebecca lost her hair—even though it grew right back very quickly. However, she never lost her eyebrows. That’s not how chemo works.”

“Good observation.” Olive had to admit she was impressed. Those small details were generally the most important.

“But how could I even confront this issue? If I was wrong, then I’d be the biggest jerk in the whole world.”

“It’s definitely a hard position to be in. Your husband is a cop. What did he say?”

“He said lying isn’t a crime. He said his hands were tied.” She paused. “I’m not 100 percent sure he believes me even.”

“That’s a tough place to be in.” Olive licked her lips before asking, “How much money have you given Rebecca?”

“Ten thousand dollars.” Chelsea’s cheek twitched as if it pained her to say the words.

Olive’s eyebrows shot up. “That’s a lot.”

Plus, Olive knew Chelsea and her husband didn’t have a lot of money. That amount was a huge sacrifice for the young family.

“We pulled money out of Monty’s—he’s my husband—retirement. We prayed about it and felt strongly that we wanted to help. The surgery Rebecca needed was experimental and not covered by insurance. But without it, Rebecca wasn’t going to live. Her daughter wasn’t going to have a mother anymore. How could we hold onto that money, thinking it was more important than her life?” Chelsea rubbed her throat as tears filled her eyes. “But it was a big expense for us. We don’t have much extra money.”

Olive tried to put herself in Chelsea’s shoes. She could only imagine how she might feel. Outrage was a good word to describe it. Rebecca was going on vacations and getting new cars while Chelsea and her family lived in a small house and drove an old car, and a vacation for them was going camping so they could save money.

Which led Olive to her next question. “Tell me about Rebecca’s Lexus.”

She let out a bitter laugh. “I was shocked when I saw her drive up in it. Someone gave it to her, supposedly.”

“Has she ever mentioned having a cousin?”

Chelsea narrowed her eyes. “A cousin? I have no idea. Is that relevant?”

“I’m just double-checking something.”

Chelsea picked up Henry as he waddled over and lifted his arms toward her. He cuddled against her chest, his big eyes still observing Olive.

“I’ve heard a lot of other people have given a significant amount of money to her.” Olive wanted to hear Chelsea’s reaction to that fact. “And I’ve heard a lot of people might give even more money to her at the fundraiser this weekend.”

Her expression darkened. “It’s going to be huge. From what I can gather, she’s already raised almost a quarter million dollars. People have paid for her to go on a cruise. Someone even paid off her house. And that’s great . . .” Chelsea swallowed hard, her neck straining. “If Rebecca is really sick.”

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Chelsea’s phone rang, and she excused herself to answer.

Olive watched carefully as her expression darkened.

Then Chelsea gasped, and her hand flew over her mouth.

Something was wrong, she realized.

A moment later, she ended the call and turned back to Olive. “That was Monty. He called to let me know there’s been an accident . . .”

Olive’s breath caught. “An accident?”

“A hit-and-run—right off the highway you probably drove down to get here.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Olive paused. “Was it someone you know?”

“It’s Maria . . . she’s Rebecca’s housekeeper. The police are investigating it now. But she’s in critical condition, and whoever hit her is long gone.”

“I’m so sorry,” Olive murmured, even as her mind raced.

“Me too. Everyone knows Maria around here. She’s a good woman. How could someone do this to her?”

“I wish I could answer that for you.”

She pressed her mouth closed. “I hope she’s okay, and I hope they find whoever did this.”

This was a coincidence, right? It wasn’t connected with Rebecca? Or with Olive’s investigation, was it?

## CHAPTER 9

A few minutes later, it became obvious from Henry's whines that he was ready for a nap, Olive stood and thanked Chelsea for meeting with her.

Now it was time to go.

But Olive's conversation with Chelsea had been insightful. And Olive couldn't stop thinking about Maria's hit-and-run. She definitely wanted to look into that more.

"I'm glad I got to see you again." Chelsea sounded a little friendlier toward Olive as she walked her to the door.

"Me too."

Chelsea smiled and touched her shoulder, almost as if offering an olive branch.

It was such a gentle gesture, but it gave Olive hope that maybe everyone around her didn't hate her for reasons beyond her control.

"I'll keep you updated when I can," Olive told her.

Then she slipped back into her Jeep.

She should have just enough time to get to the hotel, order some dinner, and prepare for her meeting with Nova. Plus, she really wanted to check out the USB drive the mysterious photographer had dropped.

As she headed down the road, she saw police cars ahead and pressed on the brakes.

This must be the area where Maria had been found.

One lane was closed, and a police officer now directed drivers.

She observed the scene, seeing if she could pick up on anything out of the ordinary about the supposed accident.

Three cop cars were there. The ambulance must have already taken Maria to the hospital.

The traffic stopped a moment, and Olive sent Nova a text to let her know what happened.

Nova responded with a thumbs-up.

Then Olive continued to wait. As she eased closer to the scene, she lowered her window to get some air—or to overhear any conversations.

"Look at the road," one of the officers said. "This guy didn't even try to slow down."

A knot lodged in Olive's throat.

It was what she feared—this wasn't an accident.

Just what kind of shady things were happening here in her old town?

---

Ten minutes later, Olive pulled up to a run-of-the-mill hotel on the outskirts of town. The place was three stories with interior room entrances, free breakfast, and clean accommodations.

It would be "home sweet home" for the next week at least.

Her thoughts continued to linger on the accident.

When she'd started this case, she'd thought she was investigating a scam. But what if there was more to it than that?

What if Maria had been hit on purpose?

But what sense would that make? Unless Maria had threatened to expose Rebecca and Matt. Would one of them go to those lengths to keep their secrets?

She wasn't sure, but she didn't like the thought of it.

As Olive strode down the hallway, she remembered the USB drive. She couldn't wait to see what information was stored there.

Motorcycle Man's image filled her mind again, and her throat tightened. Who was that guy? What was he up to?

She had too many questions, too many pieces that didn't fit.  
Olive reached her room and opened the door.  
As soon as she did, she froze.  
Someone else had been in here—and it wasn't housekeeping.  
The place had been turned upside down.  
Olive's back tightened, and she grabbed her gun.  
Had the intruder left already? Or was he hiding just out of sight?



## CHAPTER 10

Olive cautiously stepped into the room and scanned everything around her.

She swung her gun toward the bathroom on her left. Flipping the lights on, she surveyed the small space.

No one was there.

She stepped back into the small entry and carefully paced forward.

Olive paused at the corner, and her gaze swept over the king-sized bed. The couch. The small desk and dresser combo.

No one still.

Just to be sure, she peered on the other side of the bed, her gun still raised and ready.

No one crouched there, ready to pounce.

With a relieved sigh, she shoved her gun into her purse.

Then she examined her room more closely.

Her suitcase's contents had been strewn, and her clothes now lay scattered on the floor, bed, and couch. The extra blanket from the dresser was half inside the open drawer and half on the floor. The pictures on the wall were crooked. One of the pillows had even been split open and now looked as if it had been disemboweled.

It all seemed like overkill.

Someone had either come here looking for something or to send a message. Olive would guess it was to send a message. Or Motorcycle Man could have realized she had the USB drive and had come looking for it.

The gutted pillow? Maybe someone had just done that out of spite.

Did someone know her true identity? Did Rebecca suspect Olive wasn't here with pure intentions, and had Rebecca sent someone to scare Olive off to protect her image?

Olive had no idea.

But she didn't like this.

She glanced at the door to her room. Should she tell the front desk clerk? Ask for security footage? Call Monty?

No, she decided. Doing so would only draw more attention to her and complicate matters. She'd stay quiet about this for a while longer.

Right now, she needed to straighten up so she could get to work.

But this wasn't the start to this assignment Olive had wanted.

---

Olive had straightened her room and ordered Chinese food when a knock sounded at her door.

Nova.

Olive checked through the peephole to be sure.

She quickly ushered the woman inside and then locked the door behind them.

Nova froze near the entry and cast Olive a confused look. "Jumpy much?"

"Someone broke into my room." Olive strode back toward the couch.

"What?" Her voice lilted with surprise.

"And someone nearly ran me over with his motorcycle earlier."

Nova eased farther into the room and paused. "And you're just now mentioning this to me?"

Olive grabbed her computer and sat back down with it. "I had other things to worry about first."

"If your cover is already blown, then I'd say that's a pretty big worry." Nova gave Olive a sideways glance as she sat beside her on the couch.

"That's what I'm trying to figure out now." She grabbed the jump drive. "The photographer dropped this USB drive when

he nearly ran me over with his motorcycle.”

“Whoa. That’s next-level.”

“At least, I think it belonged to him.” Olive handed the device to Nova. “I know you probably want to check this before I put it in my computer.”

“People say you’re smart for a good reason.” She grabbed her bag, pulled out a laptop, and inserted the USB drive. “This computer isn’t connected to any network and has no information on it—just in case.”

“Smart thinking.”

Sometimes there were bugs planted on these devices, so while people thought they were getting information, someone was actually either hacking into their system or destroying it. It was always best to use devices with certain parameters in place for these moments.

Olive watched the screen. “Now let’s see what’s on this memory stick.”

A moment later, pictures appeared.

Olive expected to see photos of herself in town. Or maybe photos of her in Indiana, where Aegis was based.

But that wasn’t what she saw.

Photos of Rebecca had filled the screen.

Olive blinked as she stared at the images.

Only one thought came to mind: Was someone else investigating Rebecca also?

---

“What . . . ?” Nova murmured. “There’s gotta be more to this story.”

“You’re right. There has to be.” Olive stared at the photos.

There were pictures of Rebecca walking around town. Pictures of her at church. Going into her house. Walking into the local hospital.

“Someone has been stalking Rebecca.” Nova shook her head in disbelief. “This guy probably heard you were coming to town to do this documentary, so he took pictures of you also.”

“So maybe my cover isn’t blown.” Olive leaned back and let that thought settle.

“Who else might suspect Rebecca has been lying, and what do they plan on doing about it? Exposing her? Or worse?”

Olive continued to stare at the photos. “That’s an excellent question. Maybe it’s someone she’s scammed. If she’s taken a lot of money from them, it would give them reason to be angry. Maybe really angry.”

“It’s definitely something to consider.” Nova shrugged slowly.

Olive told her about the argument she saw Rebecca having with the man in the parking lot. Then she shared the details of her conversation with Chelsea. She ended with the update on Maria.

“I gotta admit—I wasn’t excited about being assigned to this case. But it’s getting more interesting. Maybe it won’t be that bad after all.” Nova pulled her legs beneath her on the couch as the two of them settled in for their conversation.

Olive’s phone buzzed, and she glanced at the screen. “Our food is here. Let me grab it. Then we can talk through the rest of our plan.”

Just as Olive rose, an alarm sounded, and lights flashed above her.

“The fire alarm?” she muttered.

Olive and Nova glanced at each other.

“Maybe it’s a false alarm,” Nova suggested.

“Maybe—but we can’t stay here, just in case it’s real.”

She sighed. “Figured you say that.”

They quickly packed up their gear, not leaving anything with confidential information on it. Then they headed out.

This wasn’t a complication she wanted tonight—especially not considering there were so many other things she needed to work on.

But safety first . . . unless someone had pulled the alarm to lure them outside.

## CHAPTER 11

When Olive stepped into the hallway, she didn't smell any smoke. So what had happened to set off the fire alarm? She and Nova took the stairs to the first floor. In the lobby, a clerk directed everyone outside. They filed out the front door—some people in pajamas, others with hair in curlers. Some still had their luggage with them as if they'd been about to check in or out.

Olive wanted to believe the fire alarm was a coincidence. But what if there was more to it? What if someone did want to draw them outside?

Uneasily, she gripped the backpack on her shoulders more tightly.

Going into this assignment, Olive had thought it would be easy. She'd figured minimal danger would be involved, which would be a nice change from some of her recent cases.

Now she was starting to rethink that. What if there was more to this investigation than she'd anticipated? Between Motorcycle Man and Maria's hit-and-run, she was feeling more uneasy.

As she and Nova stood with the rest of the guests in the parking lot, Olive quickly scanned the crowd, looking for any familiar faces or anyone acting suspicious.

Everyone else seemed just as irritated at this change of plans as she was.

But she had a feeling this fire alarm was connected to her case.

In her line of work, she couldn't afford to assume anything.

A man standing in his pajamas with his wife and two young—and very sleepy—daughters let out a loud sigh. "This is nothing. I'm telling you, I saw a guy walk in, pull the alarm, and then keep walking."

Olive's lungs tightened, and she exchanged a look with Nova.

"What kind of guy?" someone else asked. "A guest?"

"I don't know." The man sounded annoyed. "He wore a black leather jacket and sunglasses—inside. One of *those* people."

Olive's thoughts raced. That sounded like Motorcycle Man.

He really had come to the hotel and lured everyone outside.

Maybe he wanted to clear Olive or Nova from their rooms so he could find something—something like the USB drive Olive had in her pocket.

"I've got to get back in there," Olive whispered to Nova.

"You're not leaving me out here. I'm going with you."

"I don't know if that's a good idea."

"It's not a good idea," Nova said. "It's a great idea. Now let's go."

She started toward the hotel.

---

A hotel employee stood guard at the front door, only letting firefighters in and out.

Olive and Nova would have to think of another way to get inside.

They cut through the parking lot to a side entrance instead.

At the door, Olive pulled her keycard from her pocket and ran it against the scanner.

The lock clicked open.

If Motorcycle Man had done all this to get Olive and Nova out of the hotel, there was a chance he was still in their room. That they could catch him. Catching him would mean demanding answers—something they could use right now.

She and Nova slipped inside and quietly closed the door behind them.

They headed toward the stairway on their left.

But before they could ascend the steps, footsteps came down.

Instead, they darted beneath the stairwell, quickly ducking out of sight.

A moment later, two firefighters in full gear walked by.

“Looks like a false alarm,” one of them muttered.

“I guess some people don’t have anything better to do than to set off the alarm.”

“I hope we can find whoever wasted our time and slap a nice fine on them.”

“We’ll definitely be checking the security footage.”

False alarm? Maybe Olive’s theory was true.

As soon as they passed, Olive and Nova left their hiding spot and rushed up the stairs.

Olive paused at the doorway to her floor and scanned the hallway for any firefighters who might still be checking out the rooms.

It was clear.

Olive nodded to Nova, indicating she should follow. Then they hurried down the hallway to Olive’s room.

After drawing her gun, she swiped her key card and slipped inside.

She crept forward, looking for any signs that someone might be inside.

It was empty.

But when Olive glanced at the bathroom mirror, she saw a message had been left for her there.

Someone had used her lipstick to scrawl the words, ***Where is it?***

## CHAPTER 12

“We were right,” Olive murmured as she stared at the message. “That guy wanted to lure us away. He wants this USB drive.”

“Olive . . .” Nova crossed her arms over her chest as they stared at the mirror. “If that guy left this message, then he was just here.”

Olive sucked in a breath. “And he could still be close.”

This was their chance to catch him.

Wasting no more time, Olive and Nova flew from the room, down the stairs, and outside.

Hotel guests remained gathered in the parking lot, waiting to go back inside. Four fire trucks still surrounded the building, lights flashing. The irritating wail of the fire alarm still sounded in the distance.

Where was Motorcycle Man?

Olive paused on the sidewalk, Nova beside her, and scanned her surroundings.

What if Motorcycle Man had joined the crowd and was simply watching them right now? Maybe he even felt a measure of delight at all the trouble they’d gone through.

Or what if he wanted to corner them and force them to hand over this USB drive?

Those were all possibilities.

Nova leaned closer. “Anything?”

Olive shook her head. “Not yet.”

“He couldn’t have gotten very far away,” Nova said.

“I agree. But since we don’t even know what his face looks like, it’s going to be hard to pick him out.”

Just as she said those words, an engine revved in the distance.

Olive recognized the sound from earlier—from when she’d almost been run over.

She craned her neck to the sound, bracing herself for trouble.

A motorcycle pulled from the hotel parking lot. The driver stopped just long enough to send them a look.

A look meant to intimidate.

Olive’s breath caught.

“It’s him,” she hissed to Nova. “Motorcycle Man.”

“What’s he doing?” Nova asked. “I can’t see his license plate!”

Olive strained to get a glimpse, but she couldn’t see it either.

“He’s sending a message,” Olive told Nova. “He’s letting us know he’s not done with us yet.”

Olive stared back, needing to let him know she wasn’t done with him yet either.

---

An hour later, the fire trucks left, and all the hotel guests were allowed back inside.

As Olive walked past the front desk, she grabbed the bag of Chinese food waiting there. Her name was on it, and the top was still stapled shut.

Olive and Nova went back to Olive’s room. The first thing they did was to check it out more thoroughly—just in case any more surprises or bugs had been left.

They found nothing.

Knowing that, the two of them settled on the couch, cardboard boxes of food in front of them.

Olive’s moo goo gai pan was lukewarm but edible. The scents of chicken, soy, and steamed vegetables filled the air, making her stomach rumble.

“I’m so hungry,” Nova murmured. “It’s such a travesty that our food isn’t fresh anymore.”

“Just a travesty.” Olive resisted an eye roll.

They dug into their food. Olive wanted to dive back into the investigation, but she gave Nova a few minutes to eat first.

“You know, I’ve been thinking lately,” Nova started, her mouth full of rice. “I think you and Mitzi would be perfect at doing cosplay with me.”

Cosplay was another of Nova’s loves.

“Oh, yeah?” Olive was curious where she was going with this.

“Yes, I think you’d be perfect as Lara Croft, Tomb Raider.”

Olive practically wanted to snort. “Yes, because I look so much like Angelina Jolie.”

“Exactly.” Nova didn’t seem to get her joke. “And Mitzi would be perfect as Black Widow, especially with that chokehold move she does and her brilliant use of feminine wiles.”

“I could see that.” Olive bit into a piece of chicken. “Who are you dressing up like lately?”

“Harley Quinn, of course.” Nova did actually roll her eyes. “She’s the best.”

“Of course,” Olive echoed with amusement.

It was time to change the subject. Nova had eaten enough to at least settle her hunger.

“Okay, let’s talk about this case again. Can you check the security footage to see if we can figure out who that guy was?” Olive asked. “It would be nice to have a face.”

“Let me see what I can do.” Nova set her container of fried rice down and grabbed her computer. She typed several things before grunting. “This is weird.”

“What’s weird?” Olive paused with her container in hand. “It’s all blank.”

Olive winced. “How is that possible?”

“It’s possible because someone knew what they were doing. This guy—or whoever was helping him—turned off the cameras when he came in and pulled the alarm.”

Olive leaned back into the couch. “So he’s smarter than I’ve given him credit for.”

“Apparently.”

Her thoughts raced. This wasn’t the way she’d seen this assignment going.

This man could be a serious problem.

## CHAPTER 13

Nova let out a breath before grabbing her fried rice. “Well, that’s that. I’m not sure how else we can figure out who this guy is. He’ll mess up sometime, right?”

Olive nodded slowly and leaned back on the couch. “Most likely.”

Nova shoved her chopsticks full of fried rice into her mouth, chewed, and swallowed. “All the equipment is ready to go for tomorrow. We’ll find the best place to set up inside Rebecca’s house, and you can interview her. This should go off without a hitch.”

If only things were as simple as they sounded . . .

Olive blew out a breath. “As long as Rebecca believes we’re on her side . . .”

“The key here will be finding the evidence we need to prove this.” Nova cast Olive a knowing look.

“True.” Olive plunged her chopsticks into her moo goo gai pan. “That’s the tricky part. How do you prove someone doesn’t have cancer? Especially with all the HIPAA laws in place.”

“We look for any inconsistencies in Rebecca’s story, research to see if she hops from one medical facility to another, pay attention to any resistance she has to sharing details or contacts, and watch for suspicious changes in behavior when certain subjects are brought up.”

That about covered it.

A recorded confession would be ideal, but Olive knew Rebecca was too smart for that. She’d potentially carried on this scam for the past three years without raising many eyebrows. Eventually, however, she would get sloppy and mess up.

If only there was a way to look at her financials. A way to see her medical records.

But even if they managed to do that, they couldn’t use that information to prove Rebecca was a fraud. The info would have been illegally obtained.

Olive was also curious about Rebecca’s husband and daughter. Was Matthew in on this with her? Certainly, she couldn’t fool him also, not when he was there at her appointments with her.

She still had so many questions.

Hopefully, Mitzi could find some information for them while working at the hospital. The woman was good at what she did.

Take tonight for example. Mitzi was the type who could make friends quickly wherever she went. So even though it was her first day on the job at the hospital, she and a couple of the nurses were going to dinner together.

All Mitzi needed to do was to find a nurse with loose lips who might share something about Rebecca.

It wouldn’t happen instantaneously. Building that kind of trust would take time. But if anyone could do it, Mitzi could.

Their colleague would also monitor everything at the hospital and let them know when Rebecca came and went.

Olive continued to think through things as she and Nova ate dinner.

When Olive finished her food, she set her container on the table beside her.

“You done with that?” Nova raised her eyebrows and nodded toward the container.

“Help yourself.”

For a tiny woman, Nova was like a garbage disposal. She *loved* eating.

“But you still owe me some of that lumpia and pancit when we’re back home,” Olive reminded her.

“It’s a deal.”

The woman really did make the best lumpia ever. Olive actually found herself craving it.

As Nova grabbed her leftover food, Olive stared at her computer, at those pictures Motorcycle Man had taken.

Again, she wondered if he’d been the one to pull the fire alarm and, if so, why.

They would need to check Nova’s room also, just to make sure there were no surprises there.

“One more thing to add to our list is him.” Olive nodded to the pictures. “We need to figure out who this guy is and what exactly he’s up to. The last thing I want is for him to blow our whole operation.”

Her muscles hardened at the thought.

He would *not* blow their operation. Olive would make sure of that.

Her phone rang, and she glanced at the screen. It was Chelsea.

She quickly answered. “Hey, there.”

“Hey, sorry to interrupt you,” she started. “I wanted to let you know what I just heard. Maria is dead.”

Olive’s heart beat harder. “Oh, I’m so sorry.”

“Me too. She was a wonderful woman. She didn’t deserve to die like that.”

“Did you hear anything else?”

“Some paint from the car was found on Maria’s purse. That’s how hard she was hit. Apparently, it was a dark-green vehicle that hit her.”

A dark-green vehicle? Just like the car Rebecca’s cousin had driven.

Wasn’t that interesting?

---

After Olive gave Nova the update, they checked Nova’s room—which adjoined Olive’s.

It was clear.

Motorcycle Man must have gone through all that trouble with the fire alarm simply to clear them from the room and try to get the USB drive back.

There was a good chance he’d try again, so they’d need to be careful.

Back in her room, Olive sat on the couch, mentally shuffling through everything that had happened since she’d arrived in town.

Being in Oasis again was weird—really weird.

Would she recognize anyone else from her brief stay here? Were all of Jason’s family members as forgiving as Chelsea? Or would they be hostile toward her?

She wasn’t sure.

Coming back to her former home turf was tougher than she’d imagined, nothing like the heartwarming movies on TV.

Olive’s cell rang, and she glanced at the screen.

Her breath caught when Jason’s name appeared.

Normally, she might consider whether or not she’d answer. When she was on other assignments, she usually didn’t. But he *had* hired her to come here and investigate Rebecca, so sending him to voicemail felt unprofessional.

She swallowed hard before answering and putting the phone on speaker. “Hey, there.”

“Ollie . . . now *there’s* a voice I enjoy hearing.”

A flash of delight swept through her at his words.

She quickly swallowed the emotion and asked, “Rough day at work?”

Jason worked for tech giant Conglomerate as their head of security. Things had been stressful there as of late due to a scandal a few months ago at the company.

“Not really. It was pretty normal.” He paused. “My problem is I’ve been preoccupied with thoughts of you.”

Olive’s eyebrows shot up. He wasn’t usually so direct—but she kind of liked it. “With me?”

“With your case.”

Her expression softened, but her heart—if she were honest—dipped with disappointment. “Of course.”

“How’s it going so far?”

Olive leaned back on the couch and gave him a basic overview—leaving out the motorcycle incident, the photographer, and the fire alarm. It was best just to stick with the facts directly connected to this case.

She thought about mentioning Maria but changed her mind. She’d wait until she was sure of a connection.

“Things went okay with Chelsea?” Hesitation marred his voice.

“She was great. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen her. Henry was adorable.”

“He’s a fun kid. Being an uncle is the best.”

His words caused a strange emotion to lodge in Olive’s throat.

She imagined Jason as a dad one day. He would be great—stern but fun, protective but loving, gruff but authentic.

At one time, Olive had dreamed about the two of them having kids together. Now that dream was dead. She needed to be careful not to resurrect it.

“I appreciate you going to bat to take this case,” Jason said a moment later.

“Of course.” She paused. “I actually met with Rebecca earlier. She seems . . . charming, and her story is remarkable.”

“And false.”

“Maybe.” Olive was trying to be open-minded.



“Chelsea and her husband work hard for their money. It wasn’t easy to sacrifice their savings for Rebecca. To think they may have lost part of their retirement all so this woman could buy a new car and go to Disney? It makes me sick to my stomach.”

Olive understood the sentiment. “One way or another, I’ll get to the bottom of this. I promise you that.”

“I know you will.” He paused. “So, what’s it like being back in Oasis?”

*It’s felt like someone wants to kill me . . .*

She didn’t dare say that out loud.

Her lips twisted into a frown as she contemplated her response. “It’s been strange. This place has grown a lot since I was here last, and I doubt I even know many people anymore.”

“You might be surprised.”

She nestled back into the couch cushions. “How often do you make it back?”

“I try to come home at least once or twice a year—usually for holidays or birthdays.”

“That’s nice.” Olive tried to imagine what it would be like to have family to come home to.

Then she quickly put that idea out of her mind. Feeling sorry for herself would get her nowhere.

It would never happen. Her family was gone. They had been for 2,986 days.

She was solo on her journey called life.

She thought she’d accepted that idea. But lately, it felt harder than usual—probably ever since she’d run into Jason, if she were honest with herself.

Olive needed to keep up her walls—they were the only thing protecting her from crumbling.

Letting them down would only mean defeat.

As she and Jason continued to catch up, Olive stood and paced to the window, curious if all the fire trucks were gone.

She didn’t see them.

Her breath caught.

Because she *did* see a dark-green Mercedes pull out of the parking lot. It was too dark to see any details, but it looked an awful lot like the vehicle Rebecca’s cousin had driven.

## CHAPTER 14

### SEVENTEEN YEARS AGO

Olive stepped from the pharmacy and showed her dad the twenty-dollar bill in the mason jar.

His eyes lit with approval, and a surge of satisfaction rushed through Olive—satisfaction that she'd pleased her father.

Then she remembered what he'd asked her to do, and any good feelings disappeared. She hated what she'd done. Hated it more than homework and washing dishes and even going to the doctor for shots.

Her dad squeezed her shoulder. "Good job, honey. I knew you'd be a natural."

"A natural at what?" Olive's chest tightened as she waited for his answer. She wasn't sure she wanted to hear his response.

"You have a trustworthy face." Dad nudged her chin affectionately. "You're the kind of person people want to believe."

Olive didn't know how she felt about that. But she thought her dad was trying, in his own way, to give her a compliment.

He straightened and kept a hand on her shoulder. "Now I want you to go into the ice cream shop and do the same thing."

Panic rushed through her, and her chest tightened again until she could hardly breathe.

He wanted her to do this *again*? Olive thought it was only a one-time thing. That she'd done it, and now it was over with. She couldn't do it again!

"But—"

"You don't think twenty dollars will help us pay our bills, do you?" Dad tilted his head at her. "It's a great start. But we're going to need more if we want to keep the lights on."

"But, Dad—" Olive *had* to convince him to change his mind.

His gaze tightened. "You can do this, Ollie. I believe in you. You're going to be helping your family out so much. Isn't that what you want? To help your family? You love us, don't you?"

"Yes." Her voice trembled. "But I don't like this."

"Sometimes we have to do things we don't like." Her dad's voice turned hard, a tone she didn't dare argue with. "It's just a fact of life."

Tears escaped the corner of her eyes and formed rivers flowing down her cheeks, dipping to her neck. "Can't we please just go home? Please? I'll set up a lemonade stand. I'll offer to pick up dog poop in Ms. Eason's backyard. I'll—"

Her dad softened his gaze with what looked like compassion. But Olive no longer knew whether or not that emotion was real.

"I just want you to go into four more stores." Dad's voice turned soothing, convincing. "Then we'll go home. I promise."

Olive licked her lips. She wanted to argue. To dig in her heels.

She wanted to go home and play with her dolls or sit on the porch swing or pick wildflowers. She wanted to do something—*anything*—normal.

Why this?

She wished she was bigger, older. Wished she could say no and stand her ground.

Instead, she felt helpless, like she had no choice but to obey.

She *hated* feeling helpless.

When she was old enough, she'd make sure she was never in this position again. She wouldn't let anyone boss her around, not even someone she loved.

Olive started to wipe away her tears, but her dad grabbed her hand. "Leave them. They'll help to sell your story."

Nausea churned inside her, but she nodded.

Then Olive stepped into the ice cream shop and prepared herself to ask for more money.

But this whole setup felt wrong . . . and embarrassing.

She hoped she didn't run into any kids from her school.

# CHAPTER 15

TODAY

Olive awoke early to get ready for the day. She wanted to review her interview questions as well as all the terminology she needed to be familiar with as a part of her job as a documentarian.

Thankfully, she was a quick study.

At 8:30, Olive and Nova met downstairs in the lobby and grabbed something to eat from the breakfast area.

As she sipped on some fruity tea, Olive geared herself up for the day.

The last thing she wanted to do was to ruin an innocent person's life, to add more heartache onto someone who was suffering.

That was another reason why she needed to keep her investigation under the radar until she had more evidence. If Rebecca truly did have a terminal illness, then she deserved to be treated with respect.

"Are you ready for this?" Nova's voice broke her from her thoughts.

"I think so. Let me help you." Olive grabbed one of the cases Nova was carrying, and they walked outside.

Today was gloomy with a blanket of gray clouds overhead that spewed bursts of cold rain. It seemed fitting for their assignment.

They walked to Olive's Jeep Wrangler and loaded the equipment in the back. Then they took off toward Rebecca's house.

"You feel as nervous as I do?" Olive stole a glance at Nova.

Nova shrugged. "Nervous? Nah. Not really. I mean, I like catching the bad guys. But I like knowing they're definitely the bad guys first."

"Me too." At least Olive wasn't alone in her feelings.

---

They drove into a neighborhood—a newer one if Olive had to guess. These houses were maybe ten years old, based on their style and upkeep.

Several minutes later, they pulled to a stop in front of Rebecca's house—a two-story, farmhouse-style home with dark-blue wood siding and white trim.

"Here goes nothing," Olive murmured.

"We are Union Bay Productions," Nova repeated.

Heaving in another breath, Olive climbed out and took the equipment from the back. They'd even had some "Union Bay Productions" stickers created and placed them on the camera case. Not only that, but the stickers looked well-worn.

Details were what their team did best. They'd created business cards for them as well.

Olive and Nova trudged to the front door.

Before they even knocked, the door opened, and Rebecca stood there with a smile on her face. Today, she wore a blue maxi dress with small, pink flowers patterned in narrow lines.

"Good morning," she greeted them.

She sure was perky. Had she heard about Maria? Certainly, she had.

"Good morning." Olive gave Rebecca a nod.

Olive had dressed for her new identity again today. She'd worn loose jeans and a black linen shirt. Her hair again was pulled into a low ponytail, and she wore minimal makeup.

She'd done just what her dad had taught her—she'd dressed the part.

She frowned at the thought.

"Thanks for letting us come," Olive said.

“Of course.” Rebecca extended her arm behind her. “Come on in.”

Olive observed the interior of the home. A large living room stretched to her left, a kitchen beyond that. The place wasn’t as open concept as she assumed it would be.

But the inside of the house was nicely decorated with slipcover couches and chunky wooden tables. A walker stood in the corner as well as a tank of oxygen.

Olive would really like to find some of Rebecca’s medications or even some paperwork from the hospital. But that would take more snooping.

Her gaze went back to the living room. Family photos were everywhere—on the wall, on shelves, and on tables.

Rebecca must have seen Olive looking at the pictures. “A local photographer heard what I was going through and offered to take these pictures for us.” She ran her hand along the side of one photo featuring her daughter. “This is Willow. Isn’t she gorgeous?”

“She really is.” The girl had chestnut-brown hair that came to her waist and a bright smile—just like her mom.

“She only goes to preschool three days a week, so my neighbor is watching her today,” Rebecca continued. “Georgina helps me out a lot. I don’t know what I’d do without her.”

Olive made a mental note to talk with that neighbor sometime.

The people closest to Rebecca would have the most insights on the details of Rebecca’s life. They’d be the ones most likely to see the cracks.

Had any of them ever confronted her? Rebecca would probably never admit it.

“You’ll have to excuse me today.” Rebecca ran a finger beneath her eyes, which had become teary.

“Is everything okay?”

She shook her head. “It’s just that our housekeeper . . . I just found out last night that she was killed in a hit-and-run accident. I’m trying to stay strong, but I’m still processing everything.”

## CHAPTER 16

Olive squeezed Rebecca's arm. "I'm so sorry to hear that. Are you still okay to do the interview?"

Rebecca tearfully nodded. "Absolutely. I just need to get myself together."

"Take all the time you need."

She sniffled. "The best thing I can do is to keep my thoughts occupied. This interview will be perfect."

"If you're sure . . ." Olive paused, trying to carefully proceed.

Rebecca seemed truly upset. But what about the green sedan that had hit Maria?

Had it belonged to Rebecca's supposed cousin? Was Rebecca secretly in on this?

If only Olive could outright ask those questions. But she couldn't.

Even if she did and Rebecca was guilty, the woman would never admit it. She had too much on the line.

Olive cleared her throat. "Will your husband be joining us?"

"No, he had to go into work," Rebecca told them. "He works for a marketing company, but his boss keeps threatening to fire him."

"Why?" Olive tilted her head curiously. "That seems heartless."

"Exactly. I mean, I'm grateful Matt has a job. But he's had to miss so much work because of my appointments. I guess his boss can't afford to keep paying him when he's gone so much. But I don't know what we'll do if he's fired. Since my cancer came back, I've had to give up my job as a teacher."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

Rebecca shrugged. "It is what it is, as the saying goes. God will provide. He always does."

Was that true? Olive wondered.

It would be nice to believe the sentiment was real.

But looking back on her life, she didn't see any evidence of it.

Olive hated to be negative, but maybe faith truly was just a crutch for the weak . . . or a target for con artists.

---

Olive needed to gracefully change the subject from faith to cancer.

"We should probably get started." She turned to Rebecca. "Where would you like to set up?"

"Wherever y'all think is best."

Olive glanced at Nova. "What do you think? You're the creative director."

Nova glanced around the room before stopping on a wooden armchair with thick beige cushions in the corner. "I think that could be a great place to set up the interview. There's just enough natural light coming in from the window to add a little bit of drama. Plus, there are some lovely pictures on the wall that will add a personal touch to your story."

"Whatever y'all want will work for me." Rebecca clasped her hands together in front of her. "Can I get you something to eat or drink?"

"We ate at the hotel, so we're fine," Olive said. "But thank you."

Olive could see why people liked this woman. Rebecca was pleasant and cheerful and a ray of sunshine in the storm. Something about her drew people in and made them want to be her friend.

As Nova began to set up the camera, Rebecca gave the signed contract to Olive.

Then Rebecca shifted almost nervously.

"Is this your first time doing an interview on film like this?" Olive asked, curious about the reaction.

"I did an interview with a local news station before one of my fundraisers. It was a twenty-second clip that aired. That was nerve-wracking enough." Rebecca touched her cheek. "I'm not sure if I have a face for TV or not."

“I think you’ll do just fine.” Olive had a feeling Rebecca knew *exactly* how photogenic she was. The woman was pretty and well-dressed—the kind of girl who was popular in high school and had a lot of friends.

“Well, thank you for the confidence.” Rebecca did a little curtsy before laughing as if self-conscious.

“If you’ll just give us a few minutes, we’re going to test the lighting and the sound,” Olive said. “Then we’ll get started.”

Part of her couldn’t wait to dive in and see what they might uncover today. The other part dreaded breaking people’s hearts. It almost felt like there was no winning in this situation.

As Olive glanced around the room, something caught her eye—something small and out of place. She needed a better look, but Olive didn’t want to examine it too closely with Rebecca nearby. She’d need to wait for the right opportunity.

She turned to the woman. “On second thought, I think I really could use a glass of ice water before we start. Do you mind?”

“Not at all,” Rebecca said. “Just give me a moment.”

She left the living room and headed toward the kitchen.

As soon as Rebecca was gone, Olive walked toward the TV.

If she’d seen what she thought, she didn’t want to be too obvious.

Instead, she pretended to look at the pictures surrounding the TV.

In reality, Olive’s gaze was drawn to a small device perched on the corner of a black picture frame. She’d spotted it and suspected she knew what it was. But she wanted to be sure.

It was a camera.

The question was, had someone left the device there to spy on Rebecca? Or had Rebecca left it there to spy on them?

## CHAPTER 17

The interview with Rebecca was inspiring and touching—all the things someone doing a documentary could want.

But what if everything Rebecca told them was a lie?

Olive tried to push that thought to the back of her mind, which had been harder to do after she'd spotted three more cameras set up in the woman's house.

Something was *definitely* going on. Was Rebecca paranoid about break-ins? Was she into voyeurism? Or were these nanny cams?

Or was someone else trying to capture her deceit?

By two o'clock, Rebecca seemed notably tired. Her motions were slower, her eyes droopy, and her enthusiasm lacking.

Olive knew they needed to wrap up this interview.

She closed her notepad. "I can tell you're exhausted. We can finish this at another time."

Rebecca offered a weak smile. "If you don't mind, that would be great. I'm sorry I don't have as much energy as I used to."

"It's understandable." Faking cancer was probably exhausting.

Then Olive reminded herself to keep an open mind. She couldn't operate on assumptions, or she'd never find the truth.

Just then, Rebecca's phone rang. She glanced at the screen and a flicker of emotion passed through her gaze. Was that fear? Dread? Anxiety?

Olive wasn't sure.

"If you could excuse me for a moment." Rebecca rose and paced into the kitchen.

When she was gone, Olive quickly whispered to Nova, telling her about the cameras.

Nova's eyes widened.

Before she could respond, Rebecca's voice drifted from the kitchen.

"I know!" Rebecca's words were muffled but angry. "Get off my case." Pause. "Don't call me again." Another pause.

Then silence.

A few seconds later, Rebecca reappeared from the kitchen, a forced smile on her face. "Sorry about that. I still have a few bills I'm trying to pay off, and those debt collectors are relentless!"

Was that really what that phone call had been about? Her excuse seemed viable.

Olive had no way of knowing. But her gut told her Rebecca was lying to them.

Rebecca paused in front of them, still smiling softly. "You're still coming to the fundraising event on Saturday, aren't you? And we can play a clip of our interview?"

"That's the plan," Olive said.

"I'm so glad to hear that." Rebecca grinned broadly then paused. "Is there anything else you need from me today?"

"Today? No. But I'd love to interview Matthew in the next day or two if you think he'd be up for that."

"He probably would be." Rebecca paused as if in thought. "Let me talk to him. I know he's trying to squeeze in some work now while he can. He can't afford to get behind on things."

"That makes sense. Just let me know." Olive glanced at the pad of paper in her hands where she'd scribbled various notes during the interview. "And I'd love a list of other people I can talk to as well—people who've really stood beside you and supported you throughout this journey. I'd like to get a slice of different areas of your life, from church to school to neighbors."

"I'll make some phone calls before I give out any contact information. But I can definitely get that to y'all."

"Perfect. If you could send the list to Nova, she'll organize everything from there." They'd given Rebecca their contact information earlier. Olive rose. "Now, we'll get our things and let you rest."

"I appreciate that. I sure do miss having my old energy." Rebecca watched as Nova packed up the camera. "Can I help with anything?"

"We can handle this." Nova stood. "You just take it easy."

Part of Olive couldn't wait to get out of here.

She needed to talk to Nova . . . she wanted to know if her colleague had noticed the same detail she had about Rebecca's story.

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"Look what I got." Nova held up something between her fingers as soon as they got in the Jeep.

Olive's eyes widened. "Is that . . . ?"

Nova grinned and nodded. "One of the cameras we saw in Rebecca's place? Yes. I want to see what I can find out about it."

A new thought hit Olive with startling force. "Is it recording our conversation now and sending it to a server?"

"No, I already disabled it, which was just as simple as taking the battery out."

"You're sure Rebecca didn't see you take it?"

Nova gave her a look. "Who do you think I am? A rookie?"

A smile cracked Olive's face. "Of course not. It's just at the first sign we're fakes, Rebecca will clam up and not talk to us anymore."

"I know. That's why I swiped it when I went to the bathroom on one of our breaks. I'm sure Rebecca didn't see. She was too busy telling you about how great all her doctors are."

Olive nodded in admiration of her colleague. "Perfect. I can't wait to see what you find out. Good job."

Nova narrowed her eyes. "It's so weird. If Rebecca set up the cameras, why would she want to record everything going on at her house? But if someone else left the cameras there, then why? There's clearly more that's going on here. Even if this whole cancer story is legitimate, something doesn't smell right."

"I agree." Olive put the Jeep in Reverse and started back toward the hotel, not wanting to look suspicious by staying in the driveway too long. "And did you pick up on what Rebecca said?"

"I think I heard everything she said, but I'm clearly not picking up on what you picked up on." Nova narrowed her eyes and frowned. "Can I pretend I did and say yes, but you share your version anyway?"

If there was one thing nice about Nova it was the fact she had a decent although cranky sense of humor about these things. That could go a long way during tense investigations.

"During the interview, Rebecca mentioned she needed another bone marrow transplant," Olive said.

Nova squinted. "And that's a problem? Don't people need more than one sometimes?"

"I was looking at the timeline," Olive said. "And Rebecca had her first bone marrow transplant less than a year ago."

"Okay . . . I'm going to need you to spell this out for me a little more."

"People can only have bone marrow transplants every one to two years. Yet she's saying she needs this one next month. It's only been nine months since her first one."

Nova's eyes widened. "Brilliant. How do you even know that?"

"Unfortunately, facts—especially facts involving numbers—get stuck in my head. Then I can't get them out. I remember things a little too easily."

Olive didn't want to love numbers, but she did. Her brain latched onto them like they were life rafts on a sinking Titanic.

"Well, that works in our favor now," Nova said. "Having a good memory probably always works in your favor—unless you're holding onto any resentment or unforgiveness for people who've wronged you."

Olive wanted to deny her words, but she couldn't. Nova had hit the nail on the head.

Having a long memory could be a blessing or a curse.

Right now, Olive would focus on the blessing portion of that statement.

If Rebecca carried through with this and told everyone she was getting the bone marrow transplant next month, then Olive would have more definitive proof that the woman wasn't telling the truth.

And that would be a blessing.



## CHAPTER 18

Olive dropped Nova off at the hotel.

Her colleague wanted to examine the camera, plus they'd told Rebecca they'd put together some snippets from today's interview to share with her. She'd seemed excited, and the goodwill gesture would help them build trust.

But Olive wasn't quite ready to return to her room yet. She had other things she wanted to do first.

After she dropped Nova off, she headed back toward town.

As she drove, she kept an eye on her rearview mirror, halfway expecting to see Motorcycle Man appear again. He didn't.

Every time Olive thought about those cameras in Rebecca's house, she thought about Motorcycle Man. If someone other than Rebecca had planted those cameras inside her home, he made the most sense. After all, he'd been taking candid pictures of Rebecca.

Why stop at photos when he could get videos also? Maybe this person planned on posting them online as a way of exposing Rebecca.

Olive simply wasn't sure if the man was a friend or a foe. After all, he could have run her over on that motorcycle, but he hadn't. Yet he was clearly up to something.

She planned on figuring out what.

She pulled into the parking lot of the local elementary school, the place Rebecca had taught first grade until six months ago. Olive imagined Rebecca was a good teacher, the kind kids really liked.

Even though Rebecca had promised to send Olive a list of people to interview, Olive wasn't only interested in talking to those enamored with Rebecca. She wanted to talk to a wide scope of people to get their feelings on the cancer situation.

She also needed to meet with Mitzi later. Olive had texted her, and the two of them had agreed to meet in the next town over. While they were here in Oasis, they didn't want to risk being seen together. It could seem suspicious.

Olive also had one or two other places she wanted to visit if she had time. Places from her childhood.

But that was only if she had extra time.

Right now, she strode toward the school. The kids were already out for the day, which worked in her favor since she wanted to chat with teachers and administration.

She stepped inside, knowing full well that security would probably stop her.

Who she didn't expect to see was Sabrina Novak—Olive's best friend when she'd lived in Oasis, and a woman she hadn't talked to in nearly a decade.

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"Olive Robinson?" Sabrina's mouth gaped open as she stepped closer. "Is that really you?"

"Sabrina Novak?" The surprise in Olive's voice was sincere.

So maybe coming here to the school *hadn't* been a good idea. But Olive hadn't known Sabrina worked here—at least that was what she assumed since her old friend wore a name badge with the school's name on it.

Sabrina had always been pretty, but she looked even more beautiful with age. Her blonde hair was long and straight, her cheekbones high, and her figure youthful. Back in high school, she'd always been insecure about how she dressed—her family hadn't had a lot of money—and because her skin was acne prone.

Now her skin was as smooth as porcelain and her clothes new and stylish.

"What in the world are you doing here?" Sabrina let out a squeal before running toward Olive and throwing her arms around her.

Olive reciprocated with equal but more subdued enthusiasm.

Though she and Sabrina had been close while Olive lived in Oasis, Olive had to wonder what people had thought about her

family after they'd left town. Had her father scammed people out of money? More people than just Jason's family? Did everyone here know he was a con artist? What reputation had he left in his wake?

Olive still had so many questions, and she didn't like the uncertainties.

"I'm here to do a documentary on Rebecca Hansen." Olive paused just inside the front doors.

"What?" Sabrina's eyes widened. "*You're* the filmmaker? Rebecca mentioned something to me about a documentary. I didn't know you were connected!"

"Who would have thought?"

"Well, I always thought you'd do well in Hollywood, so I'm not surprised."

Olive paused. What did that mean? She didn't want to read too much into Sabrina's words. But . . . did her friend suspect she was a good actress? Olive assumed Sabrina hadn't meant the words as a compliment.

She put that thought aside and asked, "How about you? What are you doing here? Did you ever leave Oasis?"

"I went away to college, and I was determined I wouldn't come back here. Now look at me." She raised her hands and twirled around. "I'm a second-grade teacher at the very school I attended. Can you believe it?"

"Not at all. I thought you'd be the CEO of some big company in New York or LA. Or—"

"Nashville," they said at the same time, and then they laughed.

Sabrina had had a major crush on country artist Sam Hunt and had often said she would move to Music City one day so she could track him down and force him to fall in love with her. They'd had a lot of good laughs at her antics.

"That's what I always thought too." Sabrina waved her hand in the air. "Then I fell in love with a hometown boy." Her voice drifted as if she had a mischievous secret to tell.

Olive tilted her head. "Anyone I know?"

"As a matter of fact . . . Ellis Briggs."

Olive's eyebrows flew up. "Ellis Briggs? The captain of the baseball team? Two years older than us? Total hottie—although, as far as I know, he doesn't sing country music."

"No, he doesn't. He can't carry a tune in a bucket, as the saying goes." Sabrina laughed. "I never thought he'd be interested in someone like me. But after you left—" Her voice seemed to catch on those words, but then she continued. "After you and your family left, everything was different, you know? The two of us really hit it off."

"How was it different?" Olive wasn't sure where Sabrina was going with that comment.

It wasn't as if Olive's family had made an impact in the area. Not that she knew of. Not a positive one, at least.

"Jason just wasn't himself, and the group we hung out with fell apart. Plus, my family had to declare bankruptcy."

Olive's eyes widened with sincere surprise. "Bankruptcy? I had no idea."

"Apparently, my dad made some bad business investments, and he lost all his savings." Sabrina shook her head. "It was really hard on him."

Olive listened to her tone, but she didn't hear any accusation there.

Was Olive's dad connected with the bad business investment? If so, did Sabrina know about it?

This wasn't the time to ask.

She swallowed hard instead. "I'm really sorry to hear that."

"It's old news, I guess. Plot twist—we survived." Sabrina smiled then glanced at her watch. "Listen, I really want to catch up with you, but I have to get to a staff meeting in a minute. How long are you in town?"

"Only about a week."

"Can we grab dinner sometime?"

Catching up with Sabrina sounded fun—and it would give Olive a chance to get her friend's take on Rebecca. "How about tonight? Or do you already have plans with Ellis?"

"Ellis is actually working late. I just need to double-check that I can get a sitter for my daughter. But I think my mom will watch her. Could we do seven?"

Olive grinned. "That works for me. Just name the place."

"Absolutely. There's a new Italian restaurant in town that I'm absolutely in love with. I've been drooling to eat their chicken carbonara again."

"Sounds delicious."

"Perfect. Then meet me at Reginaldo's at seven. It's easy to find—it's on Main Street. Can't miss it."

Olive had seen the place earlier. "I can't wait to see you there then."

This meeting was either fortuitous or a huge mistake. Olive wasn't sure which one yet.

But she was looking forward to talking to Sabrina more—for both professional and personal reasons.

## CHAPTER 19

Olive's conversation with Sabrina had taken more time than she'd anticipated. Even though Olive would love to go into the school office and talk to more people, she'd told Mitzi she'd meet her in a half hour—and that didn't leave her much time. Maybe Sabrina would share something of importance later.

The next closest town to Oasis was thirty minutes away, so Olive needed to leave now in order to be on time. She could always come back to the school later.

She stepped from the building and headed to her Jeep. As she did, she quickly scanned the parking lot.

She didn't see anyone watching her. But she needed to remain on guard.

Olive had so many memories of Sabrina. The two of them had been like sisters. They'd shared secrets—not all of them, of course. Olive didn't dare tell anyone her suspicions about her dad.

But the two of them had planned trips they'd take when they had money—Bora Bora preferably, but they'd settle for Aruba. They'd talked about having barbecues with their families—because their husbands would definitely be best friends. They'd even talked about raising their children together, even though Olive should have known better.

Olive pulled up to a local coffee shop. As soon as she went inside, she spotted Mitzi in the corner, still wearing pink scrubs. Olive slid into the booth across from her.

Mitzi was beautiful—blonde and bodacious were the best words to describe her. Plus, her extroverted personality made her instantly likable.

Her personality and looks made men flock to her like moths to a flame.

Mitzi was in her early thirties, and she'd worked at Aegis for seven years, making her a senior agent. Before that, she'd worked for the CIA—something she never talked about. She'd only mentioned it in passing once and had never brought it up again.

“Nice look.” Mitzi scanned Olive up and down. “Very bohemian.”

Olive looked like a hippy, and Mitzi looked sexy. That sounded about right.

“I thought it fit the persona I need to capture.”

“I'd say.” Mitzi grinned. “I went ahead and ordered for you. Hope that's okay.”

“Depends on what you ordered.”

Mitzi nodded to the paper cup on the table. “Mint tea with honey.”

“Perfect.” Olive wrapped her fingers around the warm cup.

With that settled, they got down to business. Olive insisted that Mitzi go first.

Mitzi strung her thin arm across the back of the booth as she leaned back casually. “I've been trying to get to know some of the staff at the hospital. Have I mentioned how much I love small towns, especially ones where they use the word *y'all* all the time? It's just adorable.”

Olive found it heartwarming as well, but she stayed focused. “Did you discover anything?”

“I was getting to that.” She tapped her pink-tipped fingernails on the table. “Rebecca is all the talk around town in case you didn't know.”

“I gathered as much.”

“Well, one of the nurses I went out with last night is totally enamored with the woman. She thinks Rebecca should be an inspirational speaker, write books, and maybe even get her own talk show on national TV.”

Olive's eyebrows shot up. “She's definitely under Rebecca's influence.”

“I'd say. So she probably won't be much help.”

“It doesn't sound like it. Anyone else?”

“Another nurse, Sherri, worked directly with Rebecca. At least, that was my impression. You know they can't really say patient names without getting in trouble. But since Sherri works in the cancer unit, her path should have crossed with Rebecca.”

“And?”

“Whenever Rebecca came up in our conversation, Sherri stayed quiet.” She took a sip of her coffee.

“Is it because she’s a rule follower and doesn’t want to say anything she shouldn’t?”

Mitzi raised her shoulder toward her tilted head. “That’s a possibility. But more than that, I think it’s because Sherri didn’t see eye-to-eye with the nurse who raved about Rebecca. I think Sherri knows something.”

“Can you get some information out of her?”

Mitzi grinned. “That’s what I’m hoping.”

Olive gave her an encouraging nod.

If anyone could do it, Mitzi could.

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Olive and Mitzi continued talking, not missing a beat. It was easy with Mitzi, who was a natural gabber.

“There was one other nurse, Anne, who recently quit,” Mitzi continued. “I’m trying to track her down. Everyone was shocked when she quit because there were no signs she was unhappy. But on the day she left, everyone could tell she’d been crying. She left a meeting with the medical director, a man who’s known to mostly care more about the hospital’s bottom line than anything else.”

“Sounds promising,” Olive said. “Keep me updated.”

Mitzi shifted in her seat. “Okay, enough about me. How about you?”

Olive filled her in on everything that had happened, not leaving out any of the details. Motorcycle Man, the pictures on his flash drive, the message on the hotel mirror. She included how Maria had died in a hit-and-run and the cameras in Rebecca’s house.

“It sounds like we’re getting somewhere.” Mitzi took a sip of her drink. “Someone is already suspicious of us, possibly suspicious of Rebecca. But it sounds like Rebecca is beginning to trust you. Now we just need to get more details.”

“More proof,” Olive added.

Mitzi gave her a look. “That’s the hard part.”

“I agree.”

Mitzi’s gaze locked on Olive’s. “It sounds like you need to be careful also. That whole photographer on the motorcycle thing doesn’t leave me feeling good.”

“You’re not the only one,” Olive agreed. “I’ll definitely be keeping my eyes wide open.”

“You and me both.”

Olive took another sip of her tea.

As she did, a shadow paused by their table.

She looked up and saw a man in his early forties wearing green scrubs standing there. His gaze was on Mitzi.

“Sorry to interrupt, but you work at the hospital in Oasis, right?” he said. “You’re new.”

A grin spread across Mitzi’s face, and her persona changed from casual to flirtatious.

She batted her eyelashes, clearly using her feminine wiles.

“I am.” She leaned forward, her lips pursed now. “I saw you there earlier.”

He extended his hand. “Dr. Darren Peters.”

“I’m Mitzi.” She gingerly placed her hand in his.

“Are you also new in town?”

This man could have some answers. Olive just needed to let Mitzi have a go at him.

Knowing that, Olive slid from the booth and rose. “I hate to run, but I do need to get going. It was good catching up.”

Mitzi gave her a nod.

As she walked away, she heard Mitzi and Darren talking.

A doctor at the hospital would be a great contact.

Now she just needed to let Mitzi work her magic.

But as soon as Olive stepped outside, she paused.

Her skin on her neck crawled.

There it was again. That feeling of being watched.

She glanced around the dark parking lot.

Then her phone buzzed.

Cautiously, she pulled her gaze away from her surroundings and glanced at the screen.

A picture appeared.

A picture of Olive and Mitzi having drinks together a few moments earlier.

Someone *had* been following her. Watching her.

And this person wanted her to know it.

How had someone even gotten this number? Only a few people here had it—including Rebecca and now Sabrina.

In the distance, she thought she heard an engine rev.

A motorcycle engine.

## CHAPTER 20

Olive had just enough time to run by her old house before she met up with Sabrina. But as she drove, she kept her eyes peeled.

She hadn't been imagining things when she thought she was being watched. But she hadn't found the culprit either. Motorcycle Man could very easily be following her now—maybe even in a different vehicle, and she didn't like that thought.

Her phone rang, and she saw it was Tevin. She answered, grateful for the opportunity to talk to him.

"Hey!" she started. "I wasn't expecting to hear from you."

"Bad time?"

"I'm just driving right now. What's going on?"

"You asked me to look into those phone numbers," he started. "Thankfully, I have a system for that."

Tevin had systems and spreadsheets for everything. Olive found the quality endearing.

Her lungs tightened. Someone had sent her two different texts from two different numbers recently. The first she'd received in Chicago, and it had read: *I know who killed your family.*

The second, she'd received just this month while she was on assignment in Wyoming. It had read: *I know who murdered your family, and you don't. This has got to be killing you.*

Clearly, the messages had been pertaining to her family's deaths.

"That's right." Her throat ached as she said the words. "Did you find something?"

"As a matter of fact, I did. It's nothing huge, but I think you'll find the information interesting."

"Please, don't keep me in suspense." She gripped the wheel more tightly.

"The numbers are both from burners, of course. I tried to trace the store or stores where the phones were purchased, but I didn't have any luck. *However* . . . I can tell you the general region those texts were sent from."

Her lungs froze. "Where?"

"Strangely enough, they came from Texas . . . the very area where you're working this case, actually."

Olive's heart pounded in her ears. "Is that right?"

"I wanted to let you know." He paused. "Are you in some kind of danger? Danger besides our normal danger?"

She considered how to answer before deciding on simply telling the truth. "I don't know, Tevin. I really don't know."

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Tevin's words continued to play in Olive's mind as she headed down the road.

Those texts had been sent from this area? What sense did that make?

She wasn't sure.

But maybe going to her old house was a good idea. Maybe there were answers there or memories waiting to be unlocked.

If nothing else, maybe seeing her old place might bring some closure.

As she pulled through a traffic light—she was the last one through—she saw no other cars behind her. Her shoulders relaxed slightly.

If someone had been following her, maybe she'd lost him.

Still, she wouldn't let her guard down.

Olive slowed as she pulled into her old neighborhood, and memories hit her.

For the longest time, Olive had actually hoped her family might stay here in Oasis.

Then there had been the night she'd heard her dad arguing with two men downstairs. The next morning, he'd had a cut on his forehead.

He had denied the argument and that it had gotten physical, of course. He'd said he was watching TV and that was what

Olive had overheard, not an argument. The cut on his forehead had been because he tripped.

Olive hadn't believed a word he said.

Not long after that, they'd moved.

When Olive had run into Jason several months ago, she'd found out her dad had blackmailed Jason's mom out of twenty thousand dollars. Her dad told Jason's mom Olive was pregnant and that if Mrs. Stewart didn't pay up that Jason would have to forfeit college in order to support his family.

But Olive had never been pregnant. She'd had no idea her father used such a terrible ruse. It had been a shock to her four months ago when Jason told her.

The manipulation made her sick to her stomach.

At first, Olive hadn't known why her dad would lie about something like that. Had it only been about the money? She still didn't know the answer.

However, it had since come to light that her dad wasn't really a secret government agent doing covert operations. He was more likely a con man.

How did a person even recover from news like that?

Olive wasn't sure . . . but she was leaning toward the idea that she couldn't recover.

## CHAPTER 21

Olive stared at the two-story beige house with the small front porch, a porch she and Jason had enjoyed many evenings as they swung back and forth on the swing, talking about their future together.

She'd always known her family would probably move again, but she'd only been two years from graduating. So either way, Olive had figured she and Jason could stay together. Maybe they'd go to the same college even.

The two of them had been determined to figure out a way.

Her future for once had felt exciting.

Then her family had left, fleeing in the middle of the night and not taking anything but their clothes and toiletries with them.

Her dad had told Olive that under no circumstance was she to be in contact with anyone from Oasis, Texas, again.

Through her formative years, her dad had programmed her to listen to him. It was a weird type of mind control, Olive supposed now that she looked back on it. But she hadn't wanted to disappoint him.

He'd made his order sound dire. Every time Olive remembered those men she'd heard him arguing with, she wondered if by being in contact with people in Oasis she would put her family in danger.

As it turned out, her family had been in danger anyway.

Now, as Olive stared at her old house, she didn't feel any warm memories.

She only felt regret.

Regret that she hadn't stood up for herself more.

Regret that she hadn't asked for more answers before it was too late.

Regret that she hadn't stayed in contact with Jason anyway.

But it was too late to change any of those things.

Now Olive just had to live with the consequences.

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Olive glanced up and down the street one more time. It was still empty, other than a few cars parked along the curb.

After a moment of hesitation, she pulled into her old driveway and parked.

Being here was risky, but she hoped the risk was worth the reward. Though the sun was sinking in the sky, it wasn't dark yet. She hoped the brightness would work in her favor.

She climbed out, strode toward the porch, and knocked on the door. She wasn't sure exactly what she'd say when—and if—someone answered. But she felt confident she could wing it.

"Ain't nobody living there," a gravelly voice in the distance called.

Olive glanced at the neighboring house and saw an older gentleman sitting on his porch. She didn't recognize him from when she'd lived here.

The man sat in a battered lawn chair, his back hunched, and his hands resting on a cane in front of him. On a rusty table beside him stood a bottle of lemonade and a bag of peanuts.

Olive walked across the lawn toward him. "No one's living there? It looks like someone is keeping up the place."

The man shrugged. "Place has been empty ever since I've lived here. Not sure what's going on with it. Don't affect me, so I don't ask questions."

Olive paused as she realized the man was waiting for her to explain her presence here. "I actually lived in that house when I was in high school. I happened to be in town and just wanted to reminisce, I suppose."

He grunted as if satisfied with her answer. "I see. I only moved here a few years ago myself. Wanted to be closer to my son. Health's not as great as it used to be."

"I understand." She glanced back at the house. "Do you think it would be okay if I walked around the outside? I just want to



see what's changed and relive a few good memories.”

*Lies. All lies.*

“If you want to dig into your past, I won't stop you.” A coughing fit prevented the man from saying anything else.

Did he know something? What an odd thing to say.

Maybe he hadn't meant anything by it.

“Thank you,” she finally murmured.

Olive headed back toward her old place and slowly strolled the perimeter.

Memories filled her.

Memories of playing hide-and-seek with her sisters. Of having a barbecue with some of her dad's friends on the back deck.

Of hurrying out the front door so she wouldn't miss her bus.

Had that really been her life at one time, or was it all just a dream?

Sometimes Olive wasn't sure.

She reached the backyard and walked onto the small deck—which was now dry and cracked with age.

She paused and squinted. A paper had been placed between the screen and the back door. Based on how clean it looked, it hadn't been there long.

She picked it up and studied the outside.

There was no name or address on the folds, nor was there an envelope.

Strange.

Nibbling on her lip, she unfolded it. The words there made her lungs freeze.

*Like father, like daughter.*

## CHAPTER 22

Olive's breath caught.

Had this been left for her? Had someone known she'd come back to Oasis? That she'd be nosy and stop by her old house and go around to the back?

But . . . who would think that? She had no idea.

However, those texts had been sent from this area.

Suddenly, being out here didn't feel safe.

Olive glanced around, searching for anyone who might be watching.

But the sun was setting, leaving everything bathed in gray and casting too many shadows in the trees behind the house.

Then her skin prickled. She knew that feeling.

Someone was out there, she realized. She wasn't being paranoid.

"Who's there?" she called.

There was no answer.

She grabbed her gun and stepped forward.

She knew the move was risky. She was exposed here.

But if someone was in those woods watching her, she wanted to know who—and why.

She took another step forward, the grass dry beneath her.

Gone were the memories of sunbathing back here and setting up a picnic with her little sisters.

This was no longer a safe place—it was a place full of danger.

Her gaze remained trained on the trees, looking for any sign of movement. Or the glint of a gun barrel. Or the whites of eyes as they watched her.

Still nothing.

Whoever was out there was hiding.

Hoping not to be found? Or hoping for a surprise attack?

Olive wouldn't give anyone that satisfaction.

Just as she reached the edge of the woods, a stick cracked from deep within its depths.

She froze, swiveling her gun toward the noise.

Then a figure in black darted away from her through the trees.

---

Olive couldn't let this guy get away.

"Stop right there!" she yelled, even though she knew it would do no good.

The man ran even faster.

In the woods, it was too shadowy to get a good look at him. She could only tell he was tall with darkish-colored hair.

She'd find out more details about him . . . when she caught him.

She continued darting between the trees, desperate to catch up with him. If she remembered correctly, this small patch of woods stretched approximately an acre or two before reaching a park at the other side.

Olive had snuck through these very trees many times to meet Jason back when she'd lived here. However, things in this area could have changed since she'd moved. She would need to be on guard, just in case.

The man sprinted behind a tree.

Olive surged ahead, desperate to catch him and unhappy that he was now out of her sight.

But as she reached the same tree, she paused.

Was he already gone? Why couldn't she see him anymore?

Unless he was hiding.

She slowed her steps, not wanting to be caught unaware.

Then she listened. Listened for any rustle of clothing. Sticks cracking. Gun cocking.

She heard nothing.

She took a tentative step closer, knowing that her every movement would alert this man as to where she was.

But she didn't have all the time in the world. She couldn't simply hide and wait for him to make the first move.

She continued to creep forward. Step by step. Gun still raised.

Just as she crossed in front of another live oak tree, something swung toward her.

A stick.

Before she could duck, it smacked her in the head, and she toppled to the ground.

## CHAPTER 23

Thirty minutes later, Olive stepped into Reginaldo's.

After she'd been hit with the stick, her world had spun for several minutes.

By the time it stopped, the man was long gone. She'd looked for him, but he must have gone to the park on the other side of the woods and escaped.

She was still grumpy with herself that she'd let him get away. But there was nothing she could do about it now. To make matters worse, her head still ached and her side was still sore from being thrown into the wall when Motorcycle Man went after her.

She'd been tempted to cancel her meeting with Sabrina. But she didn't.

Reginaldo's appeared to be housed in an old fast-food joint. The scent of garlic, simmering marinara sauce, and bubbly cheese hit her.

Even though Olive had tea with Mitzi earlier, she suddenly couldn't wait for this meal. Her stomach even rumbled.

The place was busy, with hardly any open tables. Soft instrumental music played overhead, adding to the old-world vibe, and the lights were dim.

Sabrina grinned at her from a table near the window, seeming truly happy to see Olive.

For some reason, Olive had thought everyone in town might hate her. From a logical perspective, her reasoning didn't make much sense. Most of the people now in Oasis didn't know anything about her dad. Didn't know her dad could've been a con man. Didn't know her family had been murdered.

But Olive knew.

She needed to be careful how she acted. People tended to treat others the way others treated them. If Olive treated people with suspicion, they'd treat her the same way.

"You've got to tell me all about your life," Sabrina said as a waitress brought a basket of bread, a saucer with olive oil and herbs, and two glasses of water.

"It's really not that exciting." Olive shrugged as if it wasn't a big deal.

"Olive, you're a filmmaker." Sabrina said the words slowly. "*A filmmaker!* That is *totally* more exciting than teaching second grade."

Olive truly did want to catch up with Sabrina. But . . . she also hoped at some point this conversation would turn to Rebecca. She needed to give it time.

"People think being a filmmaker is so glamorous, and I suppose if you make it big, then it is," Olive started. "But I do my job because I love it. I choose causes that are close to my heart to pursue, even if there's not a big paycheck that comes with them."

Sabrina stared at Olive and shook her head. "I love hearing that. This job seems to fit you so well."

"Earlier you said you halfway expected me to go to Hollywood." Yes, Olive was feeling Sabrina out. Olive wanted to know what her old friend had meant when she said those words. They'd remained on her mind since then.

She didn't usually care about other people's opinions. This time, she did, for some reason.

"Oh, I don't know why I said that." Sabrina waved her hand as if brushing off her statement. "It's really nothing. Your dad just seemed like someone who could be a Hollywood star, you know? He had that personality that was bigger than life. I can see parts of your dad in you."

All the moisture left Olive's throat. Most people were probably honored to be told they were like their parents.

Not Olive. If anything, she wanted to take what her dad had taught her and turn it on its head. She wanted to use those skills to help people, not to hurt them.

She tore off a piece of bread and dabbed it in the olive oil. She knew the questions that would come next and wanted to avoid them if at all possible. Questions about how her family was doing now.

Answering those inquiries was always a downer.

She needed to change the subject before Sabrina went there.

“Earlier, you said something about Jason changing after I left,” Olive started. “What did you mean by that?”

Sabrina blew out a breath. “I don’t know. He was more withdrawn. He didn’t date anyone else. He actually told me once that he was going to find you.”

Surprise washed through her. “He said that?”

Sabrina nodded. “He did. I guess nothing ever came of it.”

“I guess not.”

“Young love . . . it’s filled with so much drama, right?”

Olive forced a smile. “Absolutely. So, I’m curious.” Olive held her bread, about to take a bite. “Do you know Rebecca Hansen?”

Sabrina’s eyes widened. “Of course. *Everyone* in the area knows Rebecca. She’s like a mini celebrity, which sounds weird considering the reason she’s famous is because she’s sick. It was just so heartbreaking when we heard the cancer came back.”

“I can imagine. It’s great how the whole town has pitched in to help her.”

A bittersweet smile tugged at her lips. “I know. Isn’t it? I try to help when I can. I’m even on the committee for the fundraiser this weekend.”

“Are you? Maybe I should interview you for the documentary.”

Sabrina laughed and waved her hand in the air. “I don’t really have a face for the camera. I’m just glad to do what I can. Sometimes, I even babysit Willow. Really, they’re such small things, all things considered.”

Olive tried not to show any excitement. “That’s kind of you.”

Sabrina shrugged. “It’s the least I can do. Plus, my daughter, Paisley, likes to play with Willow, so it all works out.”

“Does Rebecca’s daughter ever talk about what’s happening with her mom? I imagine it’s hard on her. Or maybe she’s not old enough to understand.”

“She doesn’t say much.” Sabrina shrugged. “She just said her mom goes shopping a lot. Maybe that’s what Rebecca tells Willow, so she doesn’t get freaked out about the hospital visits.”

It was a possibility.

Or what if Rebecca really was going shopping while she told people she was at medical appointments?

That was another possibility.

They continued talking. Olive learned that Ellis was now a traveling salesman. They had one daughter, who was four years old. Sabrina still hated being the center of attention, but she did head up the local Reading Council.

Olive listened to her friend’s updates. She was happy Sabrina was doing well. She deserved only good things.

But she kept thinking about what Sabrina had said.

Was Rebecca really going shopping when she was supposedly at her medical appointments? At this point, it wouldn’t surprise her. Olive only wished she could prove it.

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After eating some lasagna and catching up with Sabrina, Olive went back to the hotel, anxious to talk to Nova and see if she’d found out anything.

A new excitement filled Nova’s gaze when she ushered Olive into her room, almost as if she’d discovered something important.

Olive settled on the couch and waited for her colleague to start. More empty containers of Chinese food sat on the table, adding the scent of steamed broccoli to the air. Several pairs of dirty socks were scattered on the floor, and Nova’s equipment was set up on every available surface. The woman was brilliant but a slob.

“Okay, I’ve been chomping at the bit for you to get back so I can tell you a few things.” Nova lowered herself on the couch also, wearing plaid pajama bottoms and a black top as she sat cross-legged.

“Sorry it took me so long,” Olive said. “I ran into an old friend, and we had dinner together. I was trying to feel her out about what she might know about Rebecca. But I can share that with you later. I’m much more interested right now in hearing what you have to say.”

“Okay, then. I’m going to start with this camera we found. I believe someone else put these cameras in Rebecca’s house.”

Olive sucked in a breath. “Why do you think that?”

“I managed to connect the camera to my computer. I did a few more technical things—I can spell them out if you really want.”

“Not really.” Technical details generally bored her. “I trust you.”

“That’s what I thought. Anyway, long story short, I was able to trace the IP address where the footage is being sent.”

“And?” Olive held her breath.

Nova held up her phone. “I found an address about twenty miles from here.”

“You’re brilliant.” Olive meant the words. Her colleague was grumpy but amazing.

“I know.” Nova closed her computer and smiled. “But there’s more.”

Olive’s eyebrows shot up with surprise. “Please tell.”

“I kept thinking about what you said about Rebecca meeting with her cousin yesterday, so I decided to dive a little deeper.

It turns out Rebecca doesn’t have any cousins.”

“What? Doesn’t everyone other than me have cousins?” Olive’s parents had been only children, and her grandparents were dead. Her family situation had always seemed unusual.

On more than one occasion, Olive had tried to look up statistics on how common that was, but she hadn’t been successful in finding any information.

“Actually, no, not everyone has cousins,” Nova said. “I know several people that don’t have cousins. I don’t have any cousins either.”

“Maybe it’s not as unusual as I thought.”

Nova shrugged. “So anyway, neither of Rebecca’s parents had siblings. Well, her mom had a sister at one point, but she died when she was younger. And her dad *did* get remarried, so he has a stepson, but this stepson doesn’t have any children.”

Olive tucked that information away. “What about Matt? Could the man have been one of his cousins?”

“I thought of that also and looked into it. He does have two cousins, but they both live in California. One, according to social media, is currently on a cruise, and the other is expecting a baby at any moment. So it wasn’t either of them.”

She loved it when Nova was so thorough. “Okay . . . so the man Rebecca met with isn’t a cousin. Then who is he?”

Nova shrugged. “Without seeing his picture or a license plate, it’s nearly impossible for me to know.”

Olive’s shoulders slumped with disappointment. “I guess that makes sense.”

“But there’s more.” Nova grinned and raised a finger. “I actually did more of a deep dive into Rebecca’s family. She said they lived in California, right?”

“Right.”

Nova’s eyes lit with excitement. “Well, apparently, Rebecca is estranged from her family. She and her mom haven’t talked in years.”

Olive knew there was more to that statement. “Do you think that’s relevant to this case?”

“Interestingly enough, I called Rebecca’s mom and told her I was a reporter doing a story on Rebecca.”

“Brilliant. And?”

“She told me she and Rebecca haven’t spoken in six years,” Nova said. “I asked why. She said her daughter has a lot of problems, and she was tired of being pulled into them. She also said when Rebecca moved away, it was an answer to prayer.”

“Ouch.” Olive’s eyebrows shot up again. “That’s harsh.”

“Yes, it is. But it could definitely hint that Rebecca has some issues.”

“I’d love for you to look into Rebecca’s past more. See what she was like in high school or college. Find out if there were ever any issues with her lying in the past. There’s a good chance she’s set up a pattern of deception.”

Nova nodded. “I’m on it.”

Olive nodded slowly. Maybe this information would give them a launching point for their investigation.

## CHAPTER 24

Olive wrapped up her conversation with Nova and stood. “It sounds like I still have more work to do.”

Nova cast her a look. “Like what?”

“First of all, I want to check out the location you traced back to this IP address.”

Nova straightened, suddenly looking interested. “You want company?”

Normally, Olive might say no. She didn’t mind working alone. But having Nova there could be helpful, especially with Motorcycle Man on the loose.

“If you’re up for it, then come on.”

She smirked. “I’ll bring my laptop with me in case we have any downtime. I’ll either work or watch cat videos.”

Nova loved her cat videos—and cat memes. Rex had to ask her to stop sending them on their professional communications.

“Very well then,” Olive finally said. “Let’s get going. I’ll drive.”

They stepped outside and went to Olive’s Jeep. She glanced around as she walked, making sure she didn’t see anyone watching her.

It appeared everything was clear, but she still had to be careful.

Just out of curiosity, she checked her wheel wells and bumper for tracking devices.

Was it paranoia? Quite possibly. But Olive preferred to think of it as being safe.

Once she felt confident no one was tracking her, she took off down the road as Nova called out directions.

The address where they were headed was toward Austin and San Antonio.

It was dark outside, which would work both in their favor and as a disadvantage. In their favor because the darkness would help conceal them, but as a disadvantage because it would be harder to see everything and keep an eye on their surroundings.

Olive had no idea what she was expecting to find. But she was curious and wanted to see the location with her own eyes.

As they left Oasis, the roads became more isolated, dotted with only the occasional farmhouse.

Twenty minutes later, Nova pointed ahead. “Turn here.”

Olive glanced at the dirt road to her right, and her eyebrows shot up. “This could be interesting . . .”

They pulled down the bumpy dirt road, and the darkness seemed to become darker. Short, shrubby trees lined either side of them—but nothing else. No houses or businesses or other vehicles even.

“Slow down.” Nova glanced at her phone. “We’re getting closer, and I’m not sure what we’re going to come upon.”

Olive’s foot eased off the accelerator.

As she neared the address, she spotted an open area up ahead. She pulled to the side of the road before approaching the house, stopping where the Jeep would be concealed by trees—just in case anyone suspicious was around.

She put the Jeep into Park. “I should go the rest of the way on foot.”

“You’re not leaving me here like a chicken leg in a crab pot.” Nova shoved her phone in her pocket as she prepared to get out.

“A what?”

“Never mind. But I’m coming with you.”

Olive hesitated. She didn’t want Nova to be injured if things went south. Olive had been trained to defend herself, but Nova’s main role with Aegis was as support staff.

But she knew Nova wouldn’t change her mind. She was stubborn. Besides, Olive had her gun with her.

“Then let’s go.” Olive opened her door. “Just stay behind me.”

---

From behind a tree, Olive observed the house.

There was nothing to hide behind closer to the house. Just a wide-open space leading to the building in front of them.

The house looked more like a shack, a place where no one had lived for quite a while, based on the splintered wooden boards and rusty tin roof. There were no lights on and no cars parked out front.

This *definitely* didn't look like a place that had internet or where someone would be receiving feed from a hidden camera.

"Strange, isn't it?" Nova muttered, echoing Olive's thoughts exactly.

"It is. Are you sure this is the right place?"

Nova nodded. "Positive."

She stared at the building and frowned. "I suppose this place could be a good cover if someone wanted to have a hideout no one suspects is in use."

"How are we going to find that out?" Nova asked.

"There's only one way. We've got to get closer." Olive reached for her gun.

"I'll follow you."

Olive gripped her gun in one hand and a flashlight in the other as she stepped closer to the shack. She had no idea what she might find inside, and she needed to be ready for anything. Thankfully, Rex had trained her for situations like this.

She remained skeptical they'd find anything here, but she didn't want to leave without checking things out first.

"Stay close," she murmured to Nova.

Remaining low, the two of them hurried toward the house.

If another operative was with Olive, they might split up now. But that didn't seem wise with Nova, no matter how innocuous this place seemed.

They circled the building, looking for any signs someone had recently been here.

The darkness made it difficult to ascertain, and the windows were too high for her to see inside. They were surprisingly intact, however.

Olive needed to be certain the place was deserted.

"This way," she whispered to Nova.

Olive climbed the rickety steps—held up only by cinder blocks—leading to the porch.

She slowly paced toward the door and twisted the handle.

To her surprise, it opened.

But as she took a step forward, the floor beneath her disappeared.



## CHAPTER 25

Olive let out a gasp as her body plunged downward.

“Olive!” Nova yelled as she reached toward her.

But it was too late.

Olive’s feet slammed into the ground, and sharp boards pressed into her sides.

The jarring impact shot pain through her legs and into her torso.

She moaned. The floor had collapsed, Olive realized. Most likely because of age, based on the splintering of the wood.

“Are you okay?” Nova dropped to her knees beside the hole in the porch.

“I guess I should have been more careful.” Olive grimaced with pain. “Help me up?”

“Of course.” Nova took her hand and pulled.

It took a couple of tries, but Olive finally climbed out of the splintered hole and stood on the floor. She carefully tested the boards beneath her this time.

She glanced at Nova and gave her a knowing look. “Watch your step.”

Nova snorted. “You think?”

Olive glared—playfully. Kind of.

Then she stepped into the house and shined her flashlight around the place.

The interior looked as if someone had left this place frozen in time when it had been abandoned—possibly as long as forty years ago. Since then, critters had made their way inside. Spiderwebs hung in corners, and a hole—probably put there by a rodent—gaped from one of the throw pillows.

A pale-pink sofa and loveseat trimmed in glossy—but dusty—wood sat against two walls with a matching glossy table. Flowery drapes that matched the pink couch hung atop the windows, dry-rotted with age.

Olive slipped into the kitchen, which was more of the same. Except this time instead of pink, everything from the stovetop to the refrigerator and wallpaper was avocado green and mustard yellow.

The flecked Formica countertops were empty—other than a piece of trim that had fallen from the cabinets—almost as if the previous owner had left the place in good condition, just in case.

Just in case what? Someone wanted to buy it? In case the owners returned to it one day? Exactly what was the story behind this house?

Maybe Olive would look into it later.

For now, she searched the rest of the place, Nova on her heels.

When she reached the bedrooms, she expected to find one of them had been outfitted with high-tech equipment. She expected monitors with a feed showing Rebecca’s house.

Instead, Olive found an old queen-sized bed with an ornate wooden headboard and a marble-topped dresser.

She put her gun back into its holster and turned to Nova. “It doesn’t look like anyone has been here for years.”

Nova frowned. “You’re right. It doesn’t.”

“Any chance that IP address could be wrong? Could someone who knows what they’re doing daisy-chain it, so it looks like the address is pinging from here when it’s actually pinging from somewhere else?”

“You’re so close yet so far from sounding like you really know what you’re talking about.” Nova smirked.

Olive cast her another good-natured glare. “I try. Anyway, keep looking into it. Hopefully, we’ll find some answers soon.”

---

As Olive led Nova away from the shack, she couldn’t stop thinking about their visit.

She didn’t think she’d missed any clues inside. She’d even examined the floors to see if there had been any disturbances in

the dust, but she didn't see anything indicating someone had been there recently.

The visit felt like a waste of time.

Their feet crunched the dry grass beneath them as they walked. Even though it was late April, bugs were already out. The darkness around them felt like it could swallow them whole.

"I forgot to tell you that Rebecca sent me a list of other people who might want to be interviewed." Nova's voice pulled Olive from her thoughts. "I already set up one for tomorrow with Rebecca's husband."

"Perfect." Olive really wanted to talk to him. "I look forward to hearing what he has to say."

"Me too." He had to be privy to the scam if that's what this was. But maybe he wasn't as good of an actor as Rebecca and would give something away.

Olive scanned the area around them again. "I'm also very interested in this fundraiser Rebecca has coming up. We have to stop more people from giving money to her if she's faking this."

Nova cast Olive a sideways glance. "You know you're going to break this entire town's heart if this is true."

Olive frowned and slowed her steps. "Would they rather their hearts be broken or their wallets?"

If they were really doing a documentary, that would be another great line to use in promos.

"I'm not sure. That's the thing about scams like this. One person preys on people's kindness, and it ruins it for the people who really are sick and need money."

Olive nodded and sighed. "I guess we need to get back and work on things for tomorrow. Hopefully, we'll turn up some new leads then."

They climbed into the Jeep, and Olive did a U-turn. Then she started back down the lonely lane leading away from the shack they'd checked out.

About halfway down the road, Olive glanced in the rearview mirror.

A headlight appeared behind her.

Not a normal headlight either.

A single headlight.

A headlight from a motorcycle.

Her muscles tightened. "It looks like our friend is back."

Before she could attempt to lose the driver, a distinctive popping sound flew through the air.

Her back glass shattered.

Nova screamed and covered her head with her hands as she slid down in her seat. "Someone's shooting at us?"

More popping sounds came from behind, answering her question.

"Stay down!" Olive yelled.

As wind rushed around them, Olive gripped the steering wheel, trying to prepare herself for whatever would happen next.

## CHAPTER 26

Olive didn't dare take her eyes off the road to glance at Nova.

Instead, she called, "Are you okay?"

"I think so." Tension stretched through Nova's voice.

"Stay down." She gritted her teeth as she stared at the road in front of her.

Wind roared into the Jeep, and the hum of the motorcycle grew louder.

Olive stole a glance in the rearview mirror.

The motorcycle was still there—and getting closer.

"How can the guy drive the motorcycle and shoot at the same time?" Nova asked. "Doesn't he need both hands to steer?"

"That's a good question. One I'm not worried about answering right now."

That headlight kept getting closer and closer.

"Oh, no, you don't." She floored the accelerator.

But the motorcycle was surprisingly fast. Its engine rumbled louder the faster it went.

Olive told herself not to panic, remembering all her defensive driving courses. She didn't usually have to use the skills she'd learned. She preferred to stay under the radar while on assignment.

Apparently, that wouldn't be happening with this case. From the moment Olive had set foot in town, she'd been a target.

"Olive . . . what are you going to do?" Nova's voice trembled as she crouched forward, her body bouncing at the ruts in the road.

Olive glanced in the rearview mirror again.

The motorcycle was so close she could barely see the headlight any more.

What was this guy trying to do? Come up beside them and shoot?

Her lungs tightened. She couldn't risk that.

"Stay down!" Olive shouted.

Then she threw on the brakes.

With any luck, the motorcycle would smash into them, and they could lose this guy.

But he must have been anticipating the move because he swerved beside them.

She pressed the accelerator again, knowing she needed to move.

Moving targets were always more challenging than stagnant ones.

The Jeep lurched ahead, while more flashes of gunfire pierced the darkness. Olive leaned forward, trying to make herself smaller.

The windshield shattered.

As pebbles of glass rained on her, she swerved.

The Jeep rumbled off the road.

She pressed on the brakes as they bounced over uneven terrain.

Finally, the Jeep jerked to a stop, inches from hitting a tree.

Olive's muscles clenched as she wondered what the guy behind them would do next.

---

While the dust settled around her, Olive drew in a deep breath. Her heart continued to pound in her ears.

"You good?" She glanced at Nova.

Her colleague was hunched down, but she nodded.

Nearby, a motor revved.

Olive reached for her gun and turned, preparing for the worst.

Instead, the motorcycle zoomed by, spitting out loud exhaust.

He was leaving.

The driver had only wanted to scare them—not kill them. This would have been the perfect opportunity.

Olive sighed and raked a hand through her hair. More pebbles of glass tumbled out.

“You can sit up now,” Olive told Nova. “He’s gone.”

Nova slowly rose and glanced around as if to confirm the coast was clear. Then she looked at Olive. “Has that guy lost his mind?”

“Unfortunately, no. I think he knows exactly what he’s doing. He wants to send a message.”

“I’d say he succeeded.” Nova touched a small scratch that stretched across her cheek from the flying glass.

All things considered, that could have been so much worse.

As the noise of the motorcycle disappeared, a new sound filled the air.

Silence.

The hum of some crickets in the nearby shrubs.

The hum of the Jeep engine had disappeared.

Not a good sign.

Nova seemed to realize the truth at the same time as Olive, and she asked, “Is the Jeep toast?”

“Let’s see.” Olive turned the keys and tried to start the Jeep.

Nothing happened.

She tried again. Still nothing.

Resisting a sigh, Olive opened the door and climbed out.

They hadn’t crashed into anything, so the engine *should* be fine. Hopefully, it would be a simple fix.

Nova scrambled out after her. “What are you doing?”

“One of the cases I worked required me to act as a mechanic.” Olive popped the hood. “I learned quite a bit.”

“Enough to get us going?”

“Let’s find out.” Olive let out a breath. “But I’m pretty sure the rental agency isn’t going to be happy about this.”

## CHAPTER 27

Olive was thankful to be back at the hotel.

She'd managed to start the engine after discovering the fuel hose had been dislodged—probably from all the ruts in the road and their sudden stop. Olive had fixed it and then gotten the Jeep back on the road.

It had been a windy ride back, and pebbles of glass occasionally flew down from the broken windshield and hit them in the face. At least the weather was warm.

Olive had looked for Motorcycle Man as they drove but hadn't spotted him. She didn't think he'd be back tonight. He'd already made a statement.

All things considered, she and Nova were doing remarkably well.

But anger surged through Olive every time she thought about the confrontation.

That man must have followed them to the house and waited with his bike in the woods until they left. Then he'd decided to strike.

Olive should have been sharper. She should have seen him earlier. Should have been a more defensive driver.

Was she too distracted by her past to be on this assignment? Too preoccupied with thoughts of her family? She had to be stronger than that.

Thankfully, she and Nova were okay. This was just one more headache to deal with as she tried to find answers about Rebecca—this and that note she'd found that read, "Like father, like daughter."

Her gut tightened at the memory. Who was playing these games with her?

Olive wasn't sure, but she didn't like it.

Then there was the man in the woods. The photo someone had sent of Olive and Mitzi. The message left on her hotel room mirror.

With her hair still wet from her shower, she leaned back in bed and crossed her legs at the ankles. Maybe a good night's sleep would help.

Then her phone rang.

She glanced at the screen and saw it was Jason.

A surge of excitement rushed through her, followed by a frown.

Keep your distance, she reminded herself.

Since Jason had hired her to do this job, she couldn't very well ignore his calls. Was this going to be an every-night thing?

Part of her liked that idea.

Olive swallowed hard before answering.

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"Hey, Ollie." Jason's voice rumbled over the phone line.

Instead of feeling stressed, a wave of relief washed over Olive. He'd always had that effect on her. He made her feel safe—and that wasn't a feeling she took for granted.

"Hey, you." She settled back into her pillows. "How's it going?"

"With me? Fine. I'm much more curious about how it's going with you."

How much did she tell him? For a moment, Olive wished she could pour everything out. But that wouldn't be prudent.

After all, he'd hired her agency for this case, and she needed to remain professional.

Instead, she shared the most basic details of the case with him—nothing personal.

She told him about her interview with Rebecca, about finding the cameras, about following the IP address to that abandoned house. She told him about Mitzi's work at the hospital, and what the gang would do next. She even told him about

Motorcycle Man shooting at them.

At the end, she added, “And I ran into Sabrina.”

“Sabrina Novak? I haven’t seen her in years. But I did hear she was still in town.” Jason paused. “Did you have a nice time catching up?”

Olive remembered Sabrina saying how things changed so much after Olive left. About how Jason had changed. How he didn’t date anyone else and said he was going to go find Olive.

She swallowed hard, guilt swirling through her. “We had dinner together, and it was nice. I’m glad to hear she’s doing well.”

“I’m sure it’s weird being back in Oasis.”

Olive gripped the phone more tightly. “It is.”

A moment of silence passed between them.

“Listen,” Jason finally said. “I talked to Chelsea earlier. She was going to call you, but I told her I would pass along the message instead.”

She sat up straighter. “I’m curious now.”

“Chelsea was talking to a mutual friend—someone who used to live in Oasis but who moved to Galveston a year or so ago.” He drew in a breath. “Apparently, this friend, Diana, ran into Rebecca at the beach last year.”

“Okay . . .” He had her full attention now.

“I hate to gossip, but Rebecca was supposed to have this specialized cancer surgery. She raised a lot of money to go because this treatment wasn’t covered by insurance.”

“Keep going.”

“Here’s the weird thing. Diana’s friend had a similar surgery and wasn’t able to walk without assistance for a couple of weeks afterward. She was in too much pain, and sitting down was agony. Yet there Rebecca was, the day after her supposed surgery, going into the ocean. She even showed this friend a small bandage on her back and told her the surgery had gone amazingly well. There was *no way* Rebecca would feel up to going into the water right after a surgery like that. It would also be an infection risk to get in the water so soon.”

Olive clamped her jaw shut.

The evidence was definitely stacking up against Rebecca.

But Olive needed to be able to prove it. The fact that Rebecca was convincing only made this harder.

How far did the woman plan on taking this?

## CHAPTER 28

### SEVENTEEN YEARS AGO

“Can we leave now?” Olive asked, looking up at her dad and pleading with him.

He squeezed her shoulder. “Yes, we can. You did good.”

She’d ended up going into six stores—her dad had broken his promise.

She’d collected ninety-six dollars and some change in the mason jar—but she didn’t want any of it.

That wouldn’t be a problem because her dad had taken the cash and pocketed it. She assumed he would use it to pay bills.

At least her sisters could now eat.

Her dad led her behind several storefronts to their car. But just as she was about to climb inside, Olive’s dad froze.

“What’s wrong, Dad?” She looked up and followed his gaze.

A man smoking a cigarette leaned against a building in the distance.

Olive squinted. She’d never seen the guy before, but he was looking right at them.

“Sweetheart, get in the car and wait for me,” Dad said. “I’ll be right back.”

She had so many questions. But she didn’t have a chance to ask any.

Her dad opened the car door and directed her inside. Then he slammed it.

She watched as he tucked in his shirt and strode across the lot toward the man.

The man straightened as her dad approached.

Olive continued to watch.

Who was that guy? Did her dad know him?

If so, how had the man known they would be here today?

Nothing made sense.

She couldn’t take her eyes off them.

Dad stopped in front of the man. The two didn’t shake hands. Instead, they stood close talking. She couldn’t hear their words, but she sensed they were talking quietly, as if sharing a secret.

What kind of secret would her dad have with this man?

Whatever it was, Olive didn’t like it. A bad feeling swirled in her gut.

Then the man handed her dad an envelope. Her dad glanced around before sliding it into his pocket.

A moment later, the two split, and her dad strode back to their car.

When he climbed inside, he offered a wide grin as if nothing had just happened. “Thanks for waiting.”

“Who was that?”

“Just an old friend.”

Olive didn’t believe that. “How did he know you’d be here today?”

“He didn’t. He just happened to see me.”

She narrowed her gaze. “If he wasn’t expecting to run into you, then why did he give you an envelope?”

Dad’s eyes widened for a fraction of a second before he chuckled. “You don’t miss anything, do you? It was a flyer he just happened to have on hand for an upcoming event. No big deal.”

“It was in an envelope.”

“You’re mistaken. It was just a folded piece of paper.” He began to whistle as he put the car into Drive and pulled away, headed home.

Her dad wasn’t telling her the truth.

That upset her. Olive knew what she saw.

She was quiet for the ride home, vowing she’d never forget this day for as long as she lived. Dad had lied to her again, making her worst day ever even worse.

If he didn't have to tell the truth, then why should she?



## CHAPTER 29

TODAY

Olive and Nova had an interview lined up today with Rebecca's husband, Matt.

In the meantime, they had a lot of small details to look into.

Nova was working on finding information on Rebecca's financials. It was complicated, given the fact Rebecca wouldn't just hand over her bank statements. Though Nova was an expert at hacking into systems and websites, financial systems were always more difficult.

First of all, she had to figure out what banks they had their money in, which was tricky. They needed to get a good look at the family's mail. If they could even find out the names of their financial institutions, they would at least have an idea of where to look for this information.

While she did that, Olive started to work on getting her Jeep windows repaired. But she discovered when she called the rental agency that Rex had already taken care of everything, and keys for her new vehicle were waiting for her at the front desk.

She'd sent her boss a text last night to let him know what happened. She hadn't expected him to step in like that, however.

Technically, they should have filed a police report. But Olive hadn't wanted the extra attention or the hassle. Rex must have made up an excuse and agreed to pay for the damage. Either way, she was glad not to have to worry about it.

Instead, she worked on putting all the details of the case into a dossier—Rex preferred to stay in the loop, and this was one way to do that.

She added more details to the timeline, including Rebecca's trip to Galveston.

Then she made a list of all the extra expenses and the gifts Rebecca had received—things Olive and Nova would cross-reference. The list included her new car, her mortgage being paid off, her trip to Disney World, and now this trip to the beach.

Olive stared at what she'd written and leaned back.

These donations could be financing a real nice life for Rebecca, full of things she might not be able to afford otherwise.

If this was all fake, then Rebecca was an expert at manipulating people.

---

At eleven, Olive and Nova packed up and headed to the workplace of Matt Hansen.

They'd both been doing their own research and updated each other as they headed toward Matt's office.

Nova had found some old classmates of Rebecca's and sent emails. She'd also emailed Jason's friend from Galveston to get more information.

Olive had looked into the owner of the property where the IP address had pinged. She hadn't had any luck finding out that information, though.

Matt only had an hour to give them, but his boss had agreed to let Olive and Nova set up in his office during Matt's lunch break.

Olive was anxious to meet the man.

They pulled to a stop in front of Goodmen Marketing and grabbed their gear.

Matt met them at the door.

The man was handsome in a very ordinary way—tall and fit with thick, light-brown hair and nicely balanced features. He looked like the kind of guy you'd want to throw around a football with or have over for a barbecue.

"Thanks for letting us come," Olive started as he led them down the hallway.

"Of course. Whatever I can do to help get Rebecca's story out there." His voice sounded grim as he said the words.

Now that Olive got a closer look at him, she noticed the circles beneath his eyes. Things had taken a toll on him—things being either Rebecca's sickness or her fraud.

Olive really wanted to know if he was aware of her fraud or if she'd tricked him also, though Olive didn't see how he could be that naive if that was the case. He'd gone to her doctor appointments. He should have heard her diagnosis, seen her being treated.

There was no way he wasn't in on this.

"Rebecca wanted to be here, but she had a rough night," Matt started.

"I'm sorry to hear that." Olive put her bag on the floor.

"She started having some pain in her stomach while we were sleeping. She called her doctor, and he thinks everything is okay. He told her to take it easy but to call if anything gets worse."

Matt sounded sincerely worried. What if Rebecca really did have some type of medical issue, but it wasn't as dire as she made it out to be? Like an ulcer or something?

"That has to be difficult," Olive said. "I'm sorry."

Matt nodded, his eyes dull.

One thing was for sure: his exhaustion was real.

"Anyway . . ." He let out a breath. "We watched the clip you sent us from the interview. It looked really good."

That had been Nova's doing. She'd stayed up late trying to get the video ready to reassure Rebecca they were legit.

It appeared their plan had worked.

"We're glad you liked it," Olive told him.

"It was well done." Matt paused. "I know we don't have a lot of time, so we should probably get started."

Olive nodded, but a touch of guilt crept in.

She didn't want to do more damage if this man was already suffering. They needed to determine whether their investigation was legit before things got too far.

She wouldn't ruin an innocent person's life, and if Rebecca's cancer was real, then she needed to back off.

But if it was real . . . who was Motorcycle Man? Why was someone taking pictures of Olive and Mitzi at the coffee shop? And what about the cameras in Rebecca's house?

This case was turning out to be entirely more complicated than Olive had ever guessed.

## CHAPTER 30

“How did you and Rebecca meet?” Olive crossed her legs as she sat in a folding chair across from Matt in his office. He sat in a blue corner chair, looking decidedly uncomfortable. Nova had added some powder to his face so it wouldn’t look shiny on film. But sweat kept popping through.

“Rebecca and I met in college,” he started. “She was in my world literature class. As soon as I saw her, I knew she was something special. She absolutely lit up a room when she walked inside.”

Olive smiled. “I can see that.”

“It took a long time for me to work up the nerve to ask her out. I thought for sure she’d say no. In fact, I almost didn’t ask. Then we were in a study group and ended up working together. We hit it off and started hanging out. One thing led to another and . . .” Matt shrugged. “What can I say? I got my wish. She kissed me first.”

“Took some of the pressure off of you, huh?”

A sad smile tugged at his lips. “Yes, I guess you could say that. We were inseparable after that. As soon as she graduated, we got married. A couple of years later, I got offered a job here in Oasis, and we moved. We had the same visions every newly married couple has. We wanted the house, the two-point-five kids, the family vacations. But life took an unexpected turn.”

He sounded sincere—sincere enough that Olive felt for him. If he was in on this, he was a good actor also. What were the odds?

“Can you tell me about the day Rebecca was diagnosed?” Olive asked.

Matt blew out a breath. “Rebecca hadn’t been feeling well. We thought it was just allergies or the stress of moving, starting a new job, etc. One night she felt especially bad, and I insisted she go to the doctor. That set off a series of tests and . . . here we are.”

“I can’t imagine how difficult that was.” Olive paused. “What have you learned throughout the whole experience?”

“I’ve learned that there’s only so much a person can take before they break—because there is a breaking point. It’s savage trying to handle the amount of stress this situation has caused. I wouldn’t wish it on my greatest enemy.”

As Matt continued to talk about their struggles, Olive’s gaze drifted out the window.

Her breath caught.

A man stood in the parking lot.

Not Motorcycle Man.

No . . . it was a man who looked an awful lot like the one Olive had seen meeting with her father in the parking lot that day when she was eight.

---

Olive had tried to put the man out of her mind during the rest of her interview.

He’d been there one minute, and he was gone the next.

Had he just been a figment of her imagination?

She wasn’t sure. And it wasn’t fair to think about that now, while she was supposed to be investigating something else. But she would definitely be thinking about the man and why he might be in Oasis more later.

Olive knew her time with Matt was almost up. He had to get back to work. In fact, he’d already missed several phone calls, and two coworkers had stopped by to ask him questions.

After their conversation as she and Nova began to pack, Olive considered having a change of heart. This whole case was truly complex. She almost preferred something cut and dried over a case that tugged at her heartstrings.

Matt’s phone rang, and he glanced at it. “It’s Rebecca. Excuse me a minute.”

“Of course,” Olive said.

She and Nova continued to quietly pack up their equipment—the cameras, lights, and microphones.

“What?” Matt’s voice rose behind them.

Olive paused, sensing something was wrong.

“Okay, I’ll be right there.” He pulled the phone from his ear and reached into his desk drawer, pulling out his car keys.

“I’ve got to go.”

“Is everything okay?” Concern rushed through Olive.

“No. Rebecca isn’t doing well, and I need to get her to the hospital.” He rushed toward the door. “She’s throwing up blood.”

## CHAPTER 31

“You’re in no state to drive.” Olive stepped in front of Matt. “We’ll take you.”

“You don’t have to do that.” He barely seemed to register her words. But his hands trembled so badly that his car keys tumbled to the floor.

When he tried to pick them up, he dropped them again.

“I insist.” Olive nodded at Nova.

They grabbed their things and hurried alongside Matt as he rushed down the hall.

“I need to tell my boss I’m leaving,” he muttered.

“You call him en route,” Olive told him. “You don’t need to be behind the wheel.”

Matt didn’t argue.

They hurried outside to Olive’s newly rented Jeep and helped him into the back seat. Nova quickly climbed in beside her, and Olive took off down the road. She reminded Matt to call his boss.

He thanked her and grabbed his phone.

As soon as he finished that call, Olive asked, “What about Willow? Where is she?”

“At preschool. I have until three to pick her up.”

“Good. She’ll be taken care of.”

Olive’s mind continued to race as the miles flew past.

“Do you want us to call 911?” Nova asked.

“No, I’d rather take Rebecca in myself. She hates ambulances. We called one once, and the paramedics were in an accident while taking her to the hospital. She wasn’t injured, but she’s hated them since then.”

“Understood,” Olive said. “Has this ever happened before? The vomiting blood?”

“Not this exactly. But you name it, and Rebecca has probably gone through it. She’s the strongest woman I know, and I hate to see her suffer.” His voice cracked.

Thankfully, it only took ten minutes to reach the house.

Before Olive had even put the Jeep into Park, Matt jumped out and rushed toward the front door. He truly appeared worried.

Olive and Nova hung back a few steps, wanting to give him some space.

“You think this is legit?” Nova whispered as they stood outside.

“I have no idea.” Olive hated the doubt in her own words. But she wanted to be honest.

They exchanged another look before stepping inside.

Olive paused near the entry. In the living room, Matt knelt beside Rebecca, who was balled up on the floor. A lump formed in Olive’s throat at the sight.

If this woman wasn’t really sick . . . then she should get an Oscar.

---

Matt carried Rebecca to the Jeep. She looked pale, and her hand didn’t leave her stomach.

Then they all climbed inside.

Olive rushed toward the hospital, driving as fast as she safely could. She didn’t say much—she figured they should give Rebecca some space.

But Rebecca finally lifted her head and spoke. “This . . . isn’t the same . . . Jeep you drove earlier.”

The woman was observant. Olive had to give her credit for that. This new Jeep Wrangler was steel gray instead of black.

“I was in a minor accident last night,” Olive told her. “I had to trade one rental for another.”

Rebecca's arms remained crossed over her stomach, and she leaned forward, moisture beneath her eyes. "Is that why you're wincing when you move?"

*No, that was because I was sideswiped, hit over the head, fell through a floor.*

"Unfortunately, yes," Olive said.

"I'm sorry."

"Me too." Olive swallowed back more guilt.

Rebecca honestly seemed to be in pain.

What if this investigation wasn't based on facts? What if Chelsea was jealous of the attention Rebecca was getting? Chelsea didn't seem like the type, but Olive had to consider the possibility.

She pulled up to the emergency entrance of the hospital. Just like at the house, Matt opened his door before Olive had even put the Jeep in Park.

He rushed toward the entrance, grabbed a wheelchair, and hurried back toward them.

They all helped Rebecca into the chair, and then Matt wheeled her inside. Meanwhile, Olive went to find a place to park.

She wasn't sure if they should go inside with Rebecca and Matt. But they would. Part of her hated herself for going inside to snoop instead of out of true concern.

She didn't have a crisis of conscience very often. But she did right now.

"What do you think?" Nova asked after Olive pulled into a parking space.

How did she even answer given her inner struggle? "I'm not sure right now. Rebecca looked like she was in pain."

"She did. And Matt looked so worried."

"Exactly." Olive frowned. "Maybe we're trying to crucify an innocent person who's truly down on her luck."

"Let's just keep an open mind," Nova said. "If Rebecca is innocent, we'll back off. She won't have to know we're actually investigating her."

"Except when this documentary never comes out . . ."

"We'll tell her the funding got pulled. It won't be a total lie."

Olive thought about her words before nodding. Nova was right.

But Olive still didn't like herself at this very moment.

## CHAPTER 32

As soon as Olive reached the waiting room, her gaze connected with someone behind the front desk. Mitzi.

She gave Olive a look to indicate they would talk later. Maybe Mitzi had some more details for them.

Then Olive's gaze went to Rebecca and Matt. They were seated in two chairs close to the emergency room doors. A nurse stood in front of them and took Rebecca's vitals. Matt's arm was stretched on the chair behind Rebecca.

She and Nova stopped a respectable distance away, trying to give them space.

"Y'all don't have to stay." Matt's voice sounded dull with emotion as he glanced up at them.

"It's true," Rebecca said before pressing her eyes closed. "I know y'all have other things to do."

"We hate to leave you." Nova sounded surprisingly compassionate as she said the words, a change from her normal grumpiness.

"I'm used to this." She let out a feeble laugh.

Silence stretched a moment.

Then Rebecca's eyes opened, a new thought lighting her gaze. "I know the timing of this sounds weird . . . and I can't believe I'm suggesting it. But this could be some good B roll footage for the documentary. You know what I always say—if life hands you lemons . . . I think this could be one of those times."

Olive's eyes grew wide also. "You want us to record this? Are you sure? I mean, the moment seems so . . . so private."

Rebecca nodded resolutely before pressing her eyes closed in misery. "I want viewers to see exactly what I'm going through. I don't mind if you record me. But you can't get anybody else in the background."

Another thought filled Olive's mind. Rebecca had known she and Nova were meeting Matt today. What if she'd staged all this because she wanted this raw footage to make her story seem more legitimate? To pull on people's heartstrings?

Nova glanced at Olive and shrugged. "I could use my phone camera to get some footage. It will seem less intrusive to anyone else who's here in the waiting room."

"Whatever works for you." Rebecca nodded as she kept her eyes squeezed shut.

Nova pulled out her phone and began to record from a distance.

Olive remained standing, out of the frame, and observed the waiting room. Several people sent looks their way.

In a town this small, there was a good chance most people here knew of Rebecca's story. There was a good chance the nurses like the one taking Rebecca's vitals right now also knew what was going on.

Her sickness had become something the whole community carried together.

It was a really beautiful thing . . . if it was real.

---

Ten minutes later, Rebecca was taken back.

Matt went with her while Olive and Nova remained in the waiting room. They moved to a corner for more privacy. Olive had grabbed her computer and backpack from the Jeep so she could catch up on some things while they waited.

More people had come into the waiting room, which didn't afford Olive and Nova the opportunity to talk much—even though Olive was chomping at the bit to do so.

But as soon as the other patients were called back, Olive turned to Nova. "What are you working on?"

"I'm corresponding with some of Rebecca's old classmates from high school and college, trying to get one of them to talk."

Nova slouched in her seat, barely moving her lips as she quietly said, "But what I really want is to see Rebecca and Matt's financials."

"Did you figure out a way to do that?"

Her lips tugged downward in a frown. "I need to see more of their mail so I can pinpoint their financial institutions."

“How do you plan on doing that?”

“I can go pick up their mail for them—at least, that’s what it will look like. If anyone asks, I’ll say Rebecca’s at the hospital, but she doesn’t want anyone to know she’s at the ER so please keep this quiet.”

It sounded as if she’d thought this through. “That sounds like a good plan. But it’s still risky.”

“Yes, it is, but this might be the best—or only—time to go for it.”

Olive couldn’t argue with Nova’s assessment. “I don’t think we should both leave the hospital.”

“I can do it.” Nova held out her hand. “Give me your keys, and I’ll go. If, by chance, it turns out Rebecca or Matt leave early or you hear about someone going to their house for any reason, let me know.”

“Of course.” Olive handed Nova the car keys.

Olive would wait to hear if there were any updates, to see if she could find out anything new. If Rebecca wasn’t really sick, she couldn’t hide that from doctors, right? There was no way she could fake lab results. But because of medical laws, the staff at the hospital could never admit anything. Their only hope was that Mitzi would overhear something.

Olive sighed. That made this assignment more complicated. They needed evidence before the FBI could get involved and subpoena any records.

But the task felt impossible . . . as well as heartless.



## CHAPTER 33

Olive watched as a man rushed into the ER and headed to the information desk.

“I’m here to see Rebecca Hansen,” he started.

He instantly had Olive’s attention. She hadn’t seen him before. He was on the shorter side with a sharply receding hairline and thin build.

She tried to shut out the sounds of a kid playing on an iPad two rows over. A conversation between a husband and wife about how they needed to change their vacation plans. A man who’d nicked his thumb with an axe, and now he sat moaning with a bloody cloth on his hand.

She didn’t want to miss a word the man at the desk said.

Olive had never seen him before, but he was obviously someone close to the Hansens.

“I’m sorry, only one family member is allowed in with her right now,” Mitzi told the man.

“I’m Brandon Phelps,” the man said. “Did they leave a message for me?”

Olive stored his name away.

“As a matter of fact, they did.” Mitzi handed him a note. “Hope that helps.”

“Perfect.” He took the piece of paper and stepped back.

Olive continued to watch the man as he paced with his cell phone to his ear.

What she wouldn’t give to hear what was being said on the other side of that conversation.

“Sure,” he finally said. “I can pick those things up for you. Is there anything else you need?”

Olive’s breath caught.

Then he said, “Yes, I know where you keep the spare key. I’ll go grab everything from your house and bring it back to the hospital.”

Panic raced through her.

This man was heading to Rebecca and Matt’s house.

She had to warn Nova before she was caught and their cover was blown.

As soon as the man left the waiting room, Olive dialed Nova’s number.

But the call rang and rang.

Nova didn’t pick up.

Was her colleague all right?

Even if she was okay now, there was a good chance Nova wouldn’t be okay if this man caught her.

Olive’s muscles bristled.

She had to figure out exactly what to do.

---

Olive tried to call Nova again.

Again, there was no answer.

She texted her.

There was no response.

But what could she do? Nova had taken the Jeep, so it wasn’t as if Olive could jump in the vehicle to go warn her.

No, aside from asking to borrow Mitzi’s car—which could blow both their covers—Olive was stuck here without a ride.

Although . . . the person who’d sent Olive that picture of her and Mitzi together might already know who they are and why they were here.

They’d have to cross that bridge when they reached it.

She drew in a deep breath.

Her hands were tied right now, and she'd have to trust that Nova could handle herself.

Nova was a highly trained, highly skilled operative with a well above average intelligence. She would know how to handle this situation.

But Olive didn't understand why her colleague wasn't answering the phone. They'd talked about this before she left.

What if something was wrong and that's why she wasn't answering?

The thought left her uneasy, and anxiety bubbled inside her.

Olive stared at her computer screen, trying to look busy. But in truth, her mind played out various scenarios. Scenarios where Nova was caught. Where she was questioned. Where this investigation was cut short because of one bad decision and one unanswered phone call.

Olive drew in a slow breath. She had to shift her thoughts.

She wasn't usually one to feel so panicky. Maybe being back in this town had her at odds with herself.

Olive's phone jangled, and she nearly jumped out of her seat. A middle-aged woman sitting a few chairs away glanced at her with a curious look in her eyes.

"I guess I was lost in my own world," Olive said with a laugh. "Please, excuse me."

That seemed to appease the woman.

Olive glanced at the screen. It was Nova!

Her heart pounded faster, and she quickly put the device to her ear, careful to keep her words in check in case anyone close was listening.

"How is everything?" Olive kept her voice cheery, though she tried to send a hidden message. "I heard Mr. Merryman was coming over. Did you see him?"

"Everything is fine. I got what we needed and left."

Relief filled her. But she still had more questions.

"I tried to call, but you didn't answer. I was getting worried." Again, Olive tried to sound neutral, even though inside she was irritated.

"There was a camera outside, so I used a signal jammer to stop the camera feed. It didn't let any calls go through either."

Olive's eyebrows flew up at the thought. "A signal jammer?"

The woman sitting closest to her shot her a look.

"It was the only thing I could think of to do since I was in a hurry," Nova explained.

Olive felt the woman's eyes still on her and said, "I've never heard of that band. But cool name."

"Band?" Confusion stretched through her voice. "Oh, I get it. Someone is listening. The good news is that I think I may have found something. I printed out the bank records. Rebecca might have other hidden accounts I wasn't able to find. But it's a good starting place."

Olive released the pent-up breath she'd been holding. "I'm glad something good came out of this. The party is going to be awesome."

She glanced at the woman in the waiting room, noting she didn't appear to be listening anymore. But Olive still needed to be careful.

"I'll come back to the hospital now, and we can look at them."

"Sounds great." She ended the call, grateful Nova was okay.

She really did hope these financial records proved something. Not that they could use records obtained by illegal means to show the FBI and strike up a case against Rebecca.

But at least it would be a start.

Olive looked up in time to see Mitzi motioning to her from behind the desk.

She wanted to talk.

Olive gave her a nod before closing her computer, slipping it into her backpack, and then stepping outside.

## CHAPTER 34

Olive stepped out into the warm, sunny day.

She glanced left, then right.

Finally, she spotted Mitzi standing to the side, her cell phone in hand as if she were making a call.

Olive quickly stepped into the shadows, behind a thick brick column, where she wouldn't be seen with Mitzi.

"What's going on?" Olive started, not daring to look at her in case anyone was watching.

Mitzi continued to act as if she spoke into the phone instead of to Olive. "I'm not supposed to tell you this, but Rebecca's being admitted."

Olive's eyebrows shot up. "She is? So she really is sick?"

"Maybe not with cancer. But something is wrong if she's coughing up blood."

"True." Olive leaned back against the post, her thoughts racing.

Mitzi shifted her weight, phone still to her ear. "It could be unrelated."

"Also true."

"One other thing—Anne, that nurse I've been trying to track down . . . she's MIA."

Olive's eyebrows flew up. "What do you mean?"

"I can't find her. She's not answering her phone. I asked a few people, and they haven't heard from her either."

"How strange," Olive muttered.

"Very. But I'll keep looking."

She glanced at Mitzi. "How did your talk go with the doctor yesterday after I left the coffeehouse?"

"He's very charming. We're going to dinner tonight. I'll let you know what he says." Mitzi nodded toward the door.

"Listen, I don't have much time. I've got to go back inside."

"Wait . . ." Olive started.

Mitzi paused.

"Could you ask Rebecca and Matt if I could see them?" Olive asked.

Mitzi thought about it before shrugging. "I'll send back the request and see what they say."

"Thank you."

Mitzi strode back inside first. Olive waited a few minutes before slipping from the shadows and going back to her seat.

She glanced at Mitzi and saw she already had the desk phone to her ear.

Going back to see Rebecca and Matt now seemed insincere—and made her feel like a horrible person, truthfully. But this needed to be done.

Olive wanted to see Rebecca for herself.

Mitzi lowered the phone and called out, "Is there an Olive Robinson here?"

"That's me." Olive picked up her backpack and made her way to the desk. "Yes?"

"Rebecca said she'll see you. She's in Room 122. Go through the doors, head to the left, and you'll see the room just ahead. You probably won't want to stay long, however. She's very tired."

"Of course." Olive gave Mitzi a polite nod. "Thank you."

The door buzzed, and Olive stepped through. She wished she could wait until Nova got back, but she had to strike while the iron was hot, as the saying went.

She found Room 122 and paused.

At once, she told herself to think like her dad. What would he do in this situation?

He'd be charming. Make people feel special. Show no signs of doubt.

That was how Olive needed to act now also.

But she hated herself for trying to reflect any part of her dad's character.

---

Olive stepped into Rebecca's room and paused.

Rebecca lay in a hospital bed. An IV was hooked to her arm, and machines beeped behind her. Matt sat in a chair on the other side of the bed, that same worried expression on his face.

The sight of Rebecca looking like this took Olive back.

She could totally see where someone who 100 percent believed Rebecca would have their heartstrings tugged on.

Bright, exuberant Rebecca now looked pale-faced and tired. She wore a hospital gown, and her hair wasn't as shiny and stylish as usual. Even her eyes seemed to have lost their sparkle.

However . . . the woman had lowered her phone as soon as Olive walked into the room. Based on the angle she'd been holding it, Olive had to wonder if Rebecca had been making a TikTok video for her followers.

Olive swallowed hard. "Hey."

"Hey." Rebecca offered a weak smile. "You didn't have to wait around."

Olive stepped closer. "I wanted to know how you were doing."

"As well as can be expected," Rebecca said. "They're going to do some tests and see if they can figure out exactly what's going on. Hopefully, there aren't any new tumors. It could be something as simple as an ulcer. With all the stress we've been under, it's a possibility. That's what we're hoping, at least."

"So you don't know how long you'll be here?"

"No." She paused, her eyes crinkling at the sides. "I hope this doesn't throw off your documentary. I know you can only stay in town for a limited amount of time."

"The documentary is the least of my concerns right now," Olive told her. "I'm just sorry you're not feeling well."

"Me too." Rebecca glanced at Matt and squeezed his hand.

The look they exchanged nearly broke Olive's heart.

She hated feeling so conflicted. But she did. Part of her wanted to believe this was all true and Rebecca was a victim instead of someone who preyed on people's good intentions.

Olive drew in a breath, trying to set her emotions aside. "What can I do for you?"

"Nothing really. We sent a friend to the house to pick up my medications . . . I try to have them all written down, but a couple of them changed recently. I wanted to make sure I didn't forget anything."

Olive wished she could see those medications—if she could see if they were real and if Rebecca's name was really on the bottles.

"What about Willow?" Olive asked. "Should I pick her up for you?"

"I called a friend, and she's going to bring her home from preschool. But thank you. That's very sweet of you."

Olive had to wonder if that friend was Sabrina. Maybe Olive could somehow find out.

When Rebecca's eyes drooped, Olive scooted away from the bed. "I should go and let you rest. But if you need anything . . ."

"We'll let you know." Matt gave a firm nod.

Olive stepped from the room and began to slowly walk down the hallway. But as she passed the nurse's station, a conversation there caught Olive's ear.

"The situation is dire," a man—a doctor, Olive assumed, said. "We should do more tests."

"Yes, sir," the nurse answered.

"Call Dr. Peters. He's the one overseeing our patient. He needs to be included in this."

Wait . . . Dr. Peters? He was the man who'd talked to Mitzi last night at the coffeeshop.

Was *he* the doctor treating Rebecca?

Suddenly, things felt a lot more interesting again.

## CHAPTER 35

Olive stepped from the hallway and back into the ER waiting room.

She'd already texted Mitzi about Dr. Peters' possible connection to Rebecca, just to give her a heads-up.

As Nova joined her in the waiting room, a man standing at the nurses' station caught Olive's eye. She'd seen him somewhere before but couldn't place the location.

The man, who was shorter than Olive's own five-foot-six-inch frame, was probably in his early thirties with thinning, light brown hair, a thin build, and wire-framed glasses.

As soon as the man saw Olive and Nova, his expression changed. He recognized them also.

He stepped closer. "Weren't you in the office earlier today? Goodmen Marketing?"

"We were." Olive suddenly remembered the man from the office. "We were interviewing Matthew Hansen."

"I'm Brad," he told them. "I work with Matt. I heard what happened and wanted to come check on them. How's Rebecca doing?"

"It's hard to say," Olive started, not wanting to say too much. "She seems to be hanging in."

He tilted his head compassionately. "I understand. I just wanted to swing by so Matt and Rebecca could know we at the office are thinking about them."

"That's very kind of you." Olive imagined Matt's coworkers probably had to come out quite often to check on them.

Then she realized that this guy might be a good person to talk to.

"You said you work with Matt?"

"I do. I have for the past three years. He's a good guy. I just feel terrible about all he and Rebecca are going through." Brad's voice didn't contain any doubt. He truly believed Rebecca and Matt were experiencing a hard time.

"That's nice that the company is there to support him," Olive said.

"Yeah, it's been really hard on them. Whatever we can do to help." Brad crossed his arms.

"I heard it's been difficult on Matt having to take all these days off work."

Brad squinted. "Really? Our boss has given Matt liberal leave. His own mom had cancer, so he's been pretty understanding. Even volunteered to let y'all come out to film the interview there."

That didn't match what Rebecca had told them.

Olive bit down before saying, "I'm so glad to hear that."

Brad let out a breath. "Yeah, back in the day, Matt and I liked to blow off steam together whenever we could."

This man suddenly had all of Olive's attention. "Oh, yeah? You two golf together or something?"

Brad laughed. "No, no golfing. As a matter of fact, we used to ride together."

"Ride together?" Olive had a feeling he wasn't talking about horses.

"Motorcycles. We used to take long rides when we could. There's nothing like being on the open road and feeling the wind whipping around you."

Olive tried not to show any surprise. But she'd had no idea Matt was a motorcycle guy.

She glanced back at Brad. "I bet riding is fun. I've thought about trying it myself. I suppose Matt doesn't ride much anymore, not with everything else going on."

"No, unfortunately, he doesn't." Brad frowned.

Although if Matt's wife needed money for treatments, it seemed like selling an extra vehicle might be a good solution.

"Does he still have a motorcycle?"

"I don't really know, to be honest." Brad shrugged. "If he's sold it, I haven't heard. It was a beauty, so I sure hope he didn't."

What was the possibility Matt was the one who'd been following her? Maybe he was checking up on Olive to make sure she was legit? Or maybe he wanted to scare them off.

If either of those possibilities were true, was Matt the one who'd shot at them? Why would he do that? It seemed extreme.

Olive wasn't sure. But she'd definitely be thinking about this new theory more.

---

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Olive asked Nova as they walked outside to the Jeep.

"That Matt might have something to do with this?"

"Exactly," Olive said. "Maybe he doesn't want us to do this documentary, and he's trying to scare us off. Maybe he thinks we're going to discover the truth, and he doesn't want to blow everything."

"It's worth exploring."

But . . . something was bugging Olive. "Matt really did seem grieved over everything that's happened, didn't he?"

"He did," Nova agreed. "But what if Matt is grieved because he and his wife have dug themselves into a hole they can't get out of?"

"I guess that's a possibility," Olive murmured. "But then there's the whole USB drive. Why would Matt be taking pictures of his wife around town and putting them on a USB?"

"Maybe he doesn't trust her either. Maybe there's some infidelity going on—maybe between her and the doctor. Doesn't that sound like a soap opera?" Nova raised her eyebrows.

"It *definitely* sounds like a soap opera—and probably a leap. Although . . . I have to say I've seen stranger things happen."

"You and me both." Nova nodded.

They paused by the Jeep, and Nova turned toward her. "What now?"

Olive's thoughts raced through the possibilities. "Could you go back to the hotel and look more into Matt's background? I'm not saying he's behind this. But I *am* saying there could be more to him than meets the eye."

"I'm inclined to agree. I'll get right on that. And I'll keep trying to get in touch with some of Rebecca's old friends too."

"Good." Olive nodded slowly. "Between that and Mitzi going out to dinner with the doctor tonight, maybe we can finally make some headway."

"Let's hope."

They climbed into the Jeep and took off down the road.

Nova hadn't asked Olive what she was going to do. Maybe that was a blessing.

Because Olive should be pouring all her time and energy into this case.

But she couldn't stop thinking about the man she thought she'd seen outside Matt's office. The same man who'd met with her dad seventeen years ago.

Could he be the one who'd left that note on the back door of her house? The one that said, "Like father, like daughter"? The one who'd been in the woods and hit her over the head before escaping?

Maybe there were more answers in this town than Olive had assumed. Answers about her dad and what he'd really been up to.

She wanted to find out what they might be.

For that reason, she wanted to head back to her old house. Maybe talk to some neighbors. Maybe even talk to members of Jason's family.

Someone somewhere had to know something.

Even though she had come here to investigate Rebecca, Olive was bound and determined to find some answers about her own past also.

## CHAPTER 36

Olive dropped Nova off and then headed back to her old place. She wasn't sure exactly what going there might prove.

But she needed to go. She wouldn't rest until she could see it again.

Just as before, she pulled to a stop in front of her old house.

And just as before, there were no cars in the driveway or anything to indicate anyone lived here or had visited recently. It was dinnertime and still light enough outside to see everything clearly.

She climbed out of her Jeep and paused on the sidewalk, staring at the familiar house with a touch of dread.

The more she dug into her father's background, the more chance she could discover something she might not want to know. Was she really prepared for that?

She thought she was.

"You back again?" someone nearby called.

Olive craned her neck and saw the neighbor she'd talked to yesterday. Just as before, he sat hunched in a lawn chair, both of his hands perched on a cane in front of him, as he watched the world around him.

There was a saying when Olive was growing up that the best prevention against crime was a nosy neighbor. This man needed a prize for that.

She paced closer so the man could hear her and handed him something she'd picked up on the way here. "I noticed you like these."

He raised his shaggy brows before opening the bag. Then a grin spread across his face when he saw the bottle of lemonade inside. "This is my favorite."

"I thought you liked that brand." Gifts usually earned a lot of bonus points with people.

"Thank you." He twisted the top and took a long sip. "Best lemonade around."

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

Olive smiled at his enthusiasm. "Anything new since I was here last?"

He shrugged. "Not really. It's been pretty quiet. For someone who likes to people watch, there hasn't been much to see."

"That's too bad." Olive glanced back at her old house. She wasn't sure why she was disappointed. Why she had wanted more—or expected there to actually *be* more.

"I'm not sure what you're looking for. I'm guessing you might want to purchase the old family home and that's why you're here?"

She licked her lips, realizing the explanation was plausible. "The thought has crossed my mind."

"In that case, there *was* someone over at your old place this morning," the man continued. "Didn't really seem important earlier. But maybe it is now."

Olive swung her head back toward him. "Was there?"

She needed more information.

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"I figured it was a real estate agent or something," the neighbor said. "Certainly, the house has to go on the market again sometime. It can't sit there empty forever."

Olive turned back to the neighbor. "Tell me about this real estate agent."

The man grunted. "Not much to tell. Some man wearing a suit went to the front door, then walked around the house. Figured he was checking it out for a potential sale. Or maybe he was even from the bank. I didn't ask."

It was strange because this man seemed like exactly the type who'd ask anyone who stopped by what they were doing. He certainly hadn't let Olive get away with snooping without interrogation.

“Was he older or younger?” she asked.

“Well, my definition of younger might be different than your definition of younger.” He let out a cackle before breaking into a coughing fit. “If I had to guess, I’d say he was probably in his late forties. Dark hair. Trim build. Looked like he may have had some acne when he was younger, if you know what I mean.”

“Pock marks,” Olive said.

Unfortunately, that didn’t fit the description of the man Olive thought she’d seen at Goodmen Marketing—the same man she thought she’d seen with her dad when she was growing up. Nor did it fit the description of anyone else she’d met since she’d been in town. Who was he?

She turned back toward the man. “Tell me, are there any other residents on the street who’ve lived here a while?”

Olive didn’t remember most of her neighbors from back then. After moving so much, getting to know too many people seemed useless. Developing relationships took so much time and effort, only for her family to leave again.

“Honestly, there aren’t very many who’ve lived here long. A lot of the old-timers moved out—some to nursing homes, others to bigger homes. Some have passed. Now there are lots of families with young children in this area. I think they call these starter homes or something. Anyway, I wish I could help you more.”

“No, this is great, thank you.” She nodded toward the house. “I’m just going to walk around one more time to see if that man left anything.”

She remembered the note she’d found last time. Had someone left another message just in case she returned? It seemed like a possibility.

Or would that man be in the woods again? The one she’d chased?

“You go right ahead.” The man took another sip of his lemonade. “I won’t tell anybody.”

“Perfect. You have a good night.”

With that said, Olive started back toward the house, her muscles poised to act if necessary.

She paced around the front first. Then walked along the sidewalk, up the driveway, and toward the back.

Nothing looked different.

When she reached the backyard, she scanned the woods for any signs of trouble.

She saw nothing.

Then she glanced at the back door, halfway expecting to see another note there.

There was no note.

She paused and squinted.

However, the door was open just about an inch.

And it hadn’t been like that when she was here yesterday.



## CHAPTER 37

Olive stepped inside the house and glanced around, waiting for trouble.

But there was no one in the kitchen.

She paused. This place looked just like it had nine years ago when she'd lived here.

Dark wood cabinets that were too ornate to be in style. A subway tile backsplash and dark-green granite countertops. Beige tiles stretched across the floor. A bay window bumped out from one wall. A wooden table that had been outdated when Olive lived here, but was now even more outdated, still nestled against those windows. Even the curtains were the same—dark blue with a yellow striped pattern.

Memories hit Olive of her dad making blueberry pancakes for her and her sisters. More memories of sneaking in this back door late at night. Living here had been the beginning of Olive's rebellious phase.

More than once, she'd been caught and grounded—but that hadn't stopped her from doing what she wanted.

Her disobedience had caused her mom some stress. A pang of remorse ached in her chest. Olive now wished she could take that back. But hindsight, as the saying went, was 20/20. She couldn't go back and make life easier for her mom, but she'd always regret that.

The floor squeaked beneath her, and Olive snapped back to the present.

She'd gotten too caught up in her memories. She needed to keep moving, to remain on guard. After all, this door had been left open.

What if it had been left open on purpose?

Steeling herself to search the rest of the house, Olive crept through the kitchen and eased into the dining room.

She swung around the doorway, gun raised, searching for signs of life.

There were none.

She stepped back into the kitchen and headed into the living room.

Again, more memories filled her. Memories of family movie nights with popcorn. Memories of having her sixteenth birthday party—her first guy/girl affair. Memories of her dad arguing with those men in the middle of the night and then denying it.

Olive paused near the front door and glanced up the wooden stairway. The bedrooms were located up there.

She wouldn't leave here without checking them out.

Just as that thought crossed her mind, a creak sounded above her.

Her breath caught.

Someone could be in the house.

If so, Olive needed to figure out who.

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Olive briefly considered calling backup.

If someone was inside this house, she didn't want to battle them alone.

But that would require calling Nova, and Nova was in no position to protect her.

Olive had no one else to turn to right now.

This wasn't supposed to be a dangerous assignment, so she hadn't thought she'd need backup.

And just because Olive had heard a creak upstairs didn't mean she was in danger. Maybe it was the wind. They'd had a few strong gusts today, after all. The breeze could have knocked something loose, and that could have been the sound she heard.

She'd never know unless she checked it out.

One way or another, Olive knew she'd head upstairs. There was no need to delay the inevitable.

Gripping her gun, she started up the first step.

She walked slowly, quietly. The stairs didn't make any noise beneath her. Plus, she still remembered where all the creaks were. She'd become an expert when she'd lived here.

She reached the top landing and paused. If she went right, she'd reach the primary bedroom. To her left was the hall bathroom and two smaller bedrooms, the one closest to her being her old room, and the other being where the twins had slept.

Olive considered her options before heading right. She'd check out her parents' old room first.

Carefully, she pushed the door open.

She scanned the inside of the room. A king-sized bed stretched in the center of the space with an off-white coverlet over it. A large dresser and a chest of drawers lined two walls. A standing mirror was positioned in the corner.

Olive glanced at the reflection to see if it showed anything she couldn't see from where she stood.

It didn't.

Still, she carefully walked around the edge of the room. She paused at the primary bathroom.

Instead of flinging the door open, she opened it quietly.

She wanted the element of surprise to be on her side.

But the bathroom was empty.

She blew out a breath.

This room was clear. But the flashes of memories she kept experiencing might be the most dangerous thing of all. This place represented all she'd lost—her mom, her dad, her sisters.

Her childhood.

Her family hadn't been perfect—not even close. But she felt like a different person now, a much lonelier person.

Shoving those thoughts aside, Olive moved on to the hall bathroom.

The small space had no place to hide. It was clear.

Then she checked the twins' bedroom.

To her surprise, the pine bunk beds were still there.

An uneasy feeling filled her. Other people had lived here since her family, right? Although, the neighbor did say no one had lived here since he moved in three years ago.

This place hadn't been abandoned for nine years. What sense would that make? The house was perfectly sellable, perfectly livable. There was no reason for it not to be lived in . . . unless there was more going on than met the eye.

Her uneasiness grew.

Carefully, she walked across the floor and slid open the accordion-style closet doors.

The space was empty.

She let out another breath.

Her muscles remained tense as she waited, expecting someone to pop out.

But so far, those fears were unfounded.

Only one room was left.

Hers.

Perhaps this was the room Olive dreaded seeing the most.

Because this room would remind her of the last normal year of her life.

By the time she'd reached sixteen, she'd known her family was anything but normal. But living here and being with Jason represented a sweet time in her life, nonetheless.

After leaving Oasis, her family had been murdered.

Life as she knew it had been over, never to return again.

The house back in Indiana . . . it had been torn down after four people were murdered there. No one wanted to live there after what had happened. So Olive had never revisited the memories there—not that she'd want to.

This was the first time she'd ever gone back to one of her childhood homes.

She wasn't sure this was such a good idea. But she wasn't turning back now.

Olive swallowed hard and opened the door to her room.

Her lungs tightened again.

It was almost like this place had been left as a shrine.

She clearly pictured herself sitting on her bed doing her nails. Listening to Taylor Swift. Talking with Jason on the phone.

Her mind kept getting swept back in time, filling her chest with a distinct bittersweet feeling.

Then another creak sounded.

The next second, a shadow lunged at her from the darkness.

## CHAPTER 38

The figure threw Olive against the wall.

Pain reverberated through her shoulder. But she didn't have time to think about it. She only had time to act.

She gripped her gun, starting to turn it.

Before she could take aim, the man—she was certain the figure attacking her was male—slammed her hand into the wall.

The gun slipped from her grasp and clattered to the floor.

*No!*

But it was too late.

Now her only choice was hand-to-hand combat.

Before the man could slam her into the wall again, she twisted. Tried to get a good look at him. But the man wore a ski mask that obstructed his features.

“Who are you?” she asked.

He only grunted and lunged at her again.

This time, she moved out of the way, and he smashed into the wall.

A picture crashed to the floor, the glass shattering into large shards.

He screamed a name at her before grabbing a fake potted plant from a small table and pelting it on the floor.

He quickly righted himself, his anger unchecked. Then he came at her again.

She ducked low, caught him on her shoulder, and flipped him over her.

He landed on the nightstand. As the furniture collapsed, the glass lamp on top of it hit the floor and shattered.

Like a cat, her attacker sprang up.

Based on the low growl coming from deep inside his chest cavity, Olive had made the man even more angry.

She quickly glanced at the floor. If she could only reach her gun.

But the man seemed to spot the weapon at the same time as she did.

They both lunged for it.

She wrapped her fingers around the barrel. As she did, the man drew his fist back and rammed it into her cheek.

Her head snapped back, and the room began to spin.

Whoever this guy was, he was strong and a skilled fighter.

Olive shouldn't have come inside alone. She needed backup.

Because one wrong move, and this guy would kill her on the spot.

Her strength alone wasn't going to get her out of this situation. This man was clearly stronger than she was.

She needed to use her brain.

The guy started to raise the gun toward her.

Her breath caught, and time seemed to turn to gelatin.

She had to act. Now.

Olive swung her leg. Her foot hit his arm, and the gun flew from his hand.

She watched as it skidded across the floor and disappeared under the bed.

She bit back a grumble.

That wasn't going to be much help.

Every action Olive took against this man only seemed to make him more determined.

She stood, crouched and ready to defend herself.

He rose to his feet also.

Then he charged at her like a linebacker.

They both flew through the doorway and into the hallway.

Olive hit the wall again, and pain pulsed through her. The breath left her lungs.

This was *really* going to hurt in the morning.

The man loomed over her, leering at her.

“Mind your own business.” His gravelly voice stretched through the silence.

“What are you talking about?” Was this related to Rebecca’s case? Or did this tie into her dad somehow?

She honestly wasn’t sure.

The man held something to her throat, and Olive felt the prick of a blade.

She tensed, knowing that one wrong move could mean the difference between life and death.

He must have grabbed a shard of glass from that broken lamp.

Now he used it like a knife.

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“I should kill you right now,” the man growled.

Olive had to think of a way out of this situation before he did that. But the sharp glass at her throat made it impossible to move. Even talking could be risky.

Suddenly, her life flashed before her eyes.

She’d made the best of things since her family had been killed. But she’d become a virtual island, keeping everyone at arm’s length.

If she died today, what would she have to show for her life?

Who would even miss her? Only her colleagues, and maybe Tom and Jill would mourn.

The thought left her feeling hollow inside. For years she’d told herself it was best to remain distant. But at the moment, it all seemed so meaningless.

Then another sound came from downstairs.

A door closing. Footsteps.

Someone else was here?

Her mind raced. It wasn’t Nova. Nova wouldn’t have come here after Olive.

There was no one else Olive could imagine it would be. No one knew where she was.

Her heart throbbed in her ears.

Had this guy brought backup? Or were two of her cases colliding and would she be faced with double trouble right now?

She had no idea what to expect.

The man continued to glare at her. Then he pulled the glass away from her neck and let out another guttural growl.

He grabbed her by the hair and slammed her head into the wall.

Pain flashed through her head, and the house began to spin around her.

“Don’t go anywhere,” he growled. “I’ll be back to finish this.”

Footsteps faded toward the stairs.

Olive slid to the floor. Her head spun, and nothing made sense.

The man . . . he had to be downstairs by now, right?

She had to get a grip before this became her final day.

She needed to get up. Needed to move. To escape.

Instead, nausea swirled inside her. She squeezed her eyes shut, the spinning messing with her equilibrium.

Maybe she couldn’t move yet, but she could listen.

That was when she heard a shout. More yells sounded, though she couldn’t understand any words.

What was happening?

More sounds—stomping, cracking, grunting.

Suddenly, it grew silent.

Moments passed.

Then footsteps pounded up the stairs.

The man . . . was he coming back to finish what he’d started?

A tremble raked through her.

She had to move!

Olive tried to sit up but moaned instead. Her whole body hurt.

She touched her throat and felt something wet.

She was bleeding, she realized.

The man had cut her more deeply than she’d thought.

How much blood had she lost?

She didn’t know, but the footsteps drew closer.

She opened her eyes. Tried to sit up again, determined to defend herself.  
But as the room continued to spin, she squeezed her eyes shut again and sank back to the floor.  
*God, if You're out there and if You're listening, please help.*  
Olive didn't usually call out for help.  
But she was now.  
Especially as the footsteps approached.  
"Ollie?" a deep voice asked.  
She froze.  
That voice . . . it was familiar.  
Was she hallucinating? That had to be it.  
Because it almost sounded like . . . Jason.

## CHAPTER 39

“Ollie . . .” Someone knelt on the floor beside her.  
Olive pulled her eyes open and blinked.  
She must be seeing things.  
Because the man beside her looked like . . .  
She blinked again.  
“Jason?”  
No, it couldn’t be. Why would he be in Texas? It made no sense.  
But even with her blurry gaze, she was nearly certain she wasn’t seeing things.  
“We’ve got to get you help,” he murmured.  
Olive opened her mouth, wanting to argue. But no words left her lips.  
The next instant, Jason gathered her in his arms. Her head fell against his chest, and her body felt nearly limp.  
Then she remembered her attacker.  
Panic raced through her.  
Where was he?  
“There’s . . . there’s a man . . .” Her words were nearly indiscernible to her own ears. But she had to warn Jason.  
“I fought him, and he ran away,” Jason said. “I started to go after him, but I thought you might be inside and knew in my gut I needed to check on you first. I’m glad I did.”  
Olive touched her throat again, wondering exactly what she looked like. A bloody mess, probably.  
She didn’t think the man had cut an artery. She wouldn’t be conscious now if he had. But she was battered, for sure. Achy and weak.  
Jason carried her down the steps. Then he threw open the front door and strode outside to a Range Rover.  
A Range Rover? That was the vehicle he drove back home. Had he driven here from Chicago?  
No, of course not. That would have been too long a drive.  
Those details didn’t matter right now. Only getting away from here mattered.  
Jason opened the door, gently placed her in the front seat, and clicked her seatbelt in place. Then he climbed in also.  
But before he could start the vehicle, Olive squeezed his arm. “I don’t want to go to the hospital.”  
His eyes widened. “But you’re bleeding.”  
“I don’t think . . . I don’t think the cut is deep.”  
He frowned. “We should find out for sure.”  
She pressed her eyes closed, and visions of going to the ER filled her mind. Rebecca was at the hospital. Mitzi was still working.  
She thought about having to explain what had happened, why she was there.  
It was a complication she didn’t want in this investigation. Not if she could help it, at least.  
“I need you . . . to check me out first.” Olive’s voice sounded dry and raspy as she said the words.  
She pulled her eyes open again, and her vision cleared.  
Jason stared at her, concern in his brown eyes.  
“Ollie . . .” Hesitation marred his voice.  
She sent him a pleading glance. “I’m pretty sure the cut looks worse than it actually is.”  
Jason stared at her another moment before releasing a slow puff of air. Then he leaned closer, resignation in his gaze.  
He gently tugged the collar of her shirt and squinted as he examined her injury.  
He frowned again before saying, “You’re right. Maybe the cut isn’t as bad as it initially looked.”  
That was a relief.  
He opened the glove compartment, pulled out a first aid kit, and grabbed some gauze. After squeezing some antibiotic

ointment on it, he began to treat her wound.

As he did, Olive's breathing slowly evened out and her thoughts became clearer.

Her most pressing question at the moment was, "What are you doing here, Jason?"

"I . . . I just wanted to be here with you," Jason admitted. "I asked you to take this case, and the thought of you being down here in Texas . . . the place we fell in love . . . I just wanted to be here too."

His words warmed her heart, though she didn't want them to. Still, he'd been her first love. Even if they didn't have a future together, she could still cherish those memories.

As he pressed some gauze to her wound, the pain snapped her from her thoughts.

"I guess it's a good thing you did come here, or I'd be—"

She sliced a finger over her throat. Then she tried to laugh it off, but the movement made her body hurt too much. Instead, she squirmed with pain.

Jason's expression tightened, and he didn't respond. He clearly didn't find it funny.

Instead, he stared at her neck. "Maybe you don't need to go to the hospital. But you're pretty beaten up."

"Take me back to my hotel. I'll get cleaned up there. A warm shower and some pain pills will help. I should be okay. Sore but okay."

He gave her another look as if he still wanted to argue. Instead, he nodded and started the Range Rover.

They had a lot to talk about. She had so much to say, so many questions to ask. But she wasn't sure she was in the right frame of mind to start any of those discussions now.

First, she needed to clean herself up and get her racing thoughts under control.

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On the drive, Olive noticed Jason stealing glances at her, worry in his gaze.

She wanted to reassure him. But talking hurt too much right now.

Her body ached. Her lip was swollen. She'd probably have a bruise under her eye and on her cheek where that man had punched her.

Then there was the cut on her throat. A burst of pain shot through the area every time she moved. If he'd gone just a little deeper . . .

Emotions clogged her throat. She couldn't think about that. She needed to focus on the facts.

Who had that man been? What had he been doing in her old house? Had he followed her there? What did he want?

More determination hardened inside her.

She needed answers now more than ever.

She and Jason reached the hotel fifteen minutes later.

After putting the Range Rover in Park, Jason reached into the back seat to grab something. He handed it to her. "Put this on. Otherwise, you're going to raise too many questions when people see the blood on your shirt."

She glanced at the gray University of Chicago sweatshirt before carefully slipping it over her shoulders. The shirt nearly drowned her, but the scent of Jason's familiar woody cologne brought her comfort. What she wouldn't do just to get lost in this scent for a moment. But that wasn't a luxury she had.

Instead, she opened her door. Before her feet hit the pavement, Jason met her and took her arm. She stared at him a moment, still in disbelief he was here.

He looked just as handsome as ever with his short, dark hair and broad build. His jeans fit him nicely, and his black T-shirt showed a sneak peak of a tattoo beneath the sleeve. The former Army soldier still carried himself like a military man.

He walked Olive inside.

With every step, Olive glanced around, looking for signs of anyone watching her.

She saw no one.

That was a relief, at least.

But she still needed to get to her room without raising any eyebrows.

She just needed to stay calm and act normal. Otherwise, someone might think Jason had beaten her and cause a scene.

They made it to her room without anyone stopping them.

Before she could step too far into the space, he was already checking out everything for any signs of trouble.

He returned to her a moment later. "It's clear."

Olive nodded, relieved to have a second set of eyes. "I want to take a shower. Then we can talk."

"You need to take something for the pain," Jason said. "You have anything?"

"In the bag. On the dresser."

He found the bottle and poured two pills into his hand.

He handed them to her, and she popped the pills in her mouth, threw her head back, and swallowed.

Then she grabbed some clean clothes from her suitcase and slipped inside the bathroom.  
Maybe being away from Jason would stop her heart from racing out of control.  
Maybe the warm water of the shower could wash away her worries.  
If only.



## CHAPTER 40

Olive let the warm water wash over her. Her body hurt, but hopefully the pain meds would kick in soon.

As the water pounded her, her mind continued to race. However, she still couldn't make sense of anything—not Rebecca, not the attack in her old house, not Jason.

Maybe she just needed to give her thoughts a rest. Maybe get some sleep.

But now Jason was here, and his presence only added to the emotion buzzing around inside her.

She couldn't believe he was in Oasis. That he'd found her at her old house just as she'd cried out to God.

Had God actually answered her?

Part of her wanted to believe He had. The other part remained skeptical. She'd already been let down by the most important man in her life. She didn't want to believe in God only to be disappointed in Him also.

Just as she turned the water off, nearby voices drifted to her ears.

She froze.

Jason was talking to someone in the room.

Urgency rushed through her.

She quickly threw a towel around herself and rushed to the door.

She threw it open . . . only to see Nova standing inside the room with Jason.

Her colleague's eyes widened when she saw her. "Olive?"

"I . . ." Olive glanced down at her towel, suddenly self-conscious. "I heard talking and was worried something was wrong."

"You didn't answer your phone, so I came to check on you." Nova glanced at Jason. "Then I saw a strange man in your room, and I became even more concerned."

Jason shrugged. "I knew you were working with a woman named Nova, and I figured this was her. So I introduced myself."

Nova shrugged also. "I recognized his name, so . . ."

"How did you recognize his name? I've never talked about him." Olive squinted when she realized how harsh her words sounded. She threw him an apologetic glance. "Sorry."

He shrugged. "No offense taken."

"His name did come up when Rex spelled out this assignment for us," Nova said.

Olive's face flushed. She wasn't thinking clearly. "Of course."

"You look . . ." Nova looked Olive up and down and frowned as if holding back her true thoughts. "What happened?"

With one hand still holding her towel in place, Olive reached for her neck, then her face. "It's a long story."

"I'd say. Catch me up later?" Nova waited for her response.

"Of course. I just need to dry off and get dressed. Then Jason and I need to talk."

"Fine. Call me when you're done." She took a step back, a glimmer of humor in her gaze. "And behave yourself, in the meantime."

Olive shot her a look and watched as her colleague shut the door. Then she glanced at Jason, and her cheeks heated. "I'm sorry about that."

His hands were stuffed casually in the front pockets of his jeans. "It's okay."

She pointed her thumb behind her, hating how self-conscious she felt right now. "Just give me a few more minutes."

"Of course."

Olive closed the door, her heart racing out of control.

So much for calming herself down.

---

Olive finally left the bathroom wearing unflattering gray sweatpants and a black sweatshirt. Her hair hung in wet ringlets around her face, and her ribs ached—as well as the rest of her body.

Those things, however, weren't her biggest concerns.

All she could think about was Jason. The fact he was here. The fact he'd ridden into town like Prince Charming and saved her. The fact he was in her hotel room right now.

She almost felt shy as she sent him a tentative smile. She hadn't ever been called shy. Sometimes quiet. Sometimes introverted. But never shy.

He sat on the couch. He didn't have his phone in his hand or a computer on his lap.

His expression seemed to show he'd simply been waiting for her to emerge, like nothing else mattered.

Olive lowered herself a respectable distance away. "Hey."

"Hey." He reached for her, gently pushing away some strands of hair as he examined the cut on her neck. "We should probably put something on that."

"It looks like you just so happen to have a first aid kit."

His cheek twitched as if he wanted to smile but couldn't. "Never leave home without one."

"Funny, in the years I've known you, I never saw you as a Boy Scout."

"I wasn't. But, of course, my father *was* a doctor." He offered a half shrug.

"He's not anymore?" Olive hadn't thought to ask the question earlier. Mostly because she figured his father would want nothing to do with Olive after her own father had scammed the family out of twenty thousand dollars.

"I thought I told you. After my mom passed, since all the kids were out of the house, Dad decided to take a job doing home health down in Florida. Said he needed a change."

"I see."

"He seems to like it. He's even been seeing someone—a woman named Trish—and he acts really happy."

"I'm glad."

Jason began to dab some ointment on her wound. Olive ignored the sting.

"I know Chelsea still lives here. How about your other siblings?" Jason had two sisters and two brothers, all adopted.

"Dominic still lives here also. He owns a storage facility on the outskirts of town. When he's not managing that, he runs a lawncare business as well."

"Good for him." Olive turned her gaze away from him when she realized how close he was. Close enough that she could see golden flecks in his eyes. That she could smell his woodsy cologne. That she could easily reach forward and touch the day's growth on his cheeks.

All. Bad. Ideas. Bad, bad ideas.

"My other siblings moved away," Jason continued. "I guess you could say there are limited job opportunities around here."

"I guess." Her voice sounded strained as she said the words.

Though it was good to hear updates on his family, Olive also knew she was just wasting time . . . delaying the inevitable conversation.

Jason dabbed the last bit of ointment on her throat. "Let's let it air out before we put a bandage on it."

"Sounds good."

He picked up a clear bag filled with ice. "In the meantime, I grabbed this from the machine down the hall. You might want to put it on your cheek. I also grabbed a towel from the housekeeping cart to wrap around it."

"Thank you." Olive lifted the ice and put it to her cheek.

She'd envisioned the possibility that she and Jason would see each other again sometime. But never in a million years had she imagined their meeting would be like this.

As she glanced at him, she knew they had a more serious conversation that needed to take place.

And there was no need to delay it any longer.

## CHAPTER 41

“What are you doing here, Jason?” Olive nestled back on the couch and pulled a knee to her chest. “It’s like I told you earlier.” Jason stretched his muscular arm across the back of the couch, his fingers close enough to brush her shoulder. “This case concerns me. But the thought of you being here in Oasis, and me not seizing the opportunity to see you . . . seemed like a no-brainer. But I *am* sorry to show up unannounced. I’m not trying to cramp your style or distract you.”

He was *definitely* going to be a distraction. But a good kind, Olive supposed as she tore her gaze away from his defined bicep and the tattoo stretched across it.

One day, she’d ask him if she could see that tattoo. She’d ask why he’d gotten it. What it meant.

But that day wasn’t today. Today was the day she maintained her distance from the man.

“Did you drive or fly?” The question sounded unimportant, but she needed the filler as she continued to sort her thoughts.

“Drive? I’m not that crazy. I flew in and picked up a rental car.”

“A Range Rover? With a first aid kit?”

He shrugged as if it wasn’t a big deal. “You can pay extra to get one.”

“And you just happened to find me at my old house?” She still couldn’t quite figure that one out.

“I wasn’t sure where you’d be. I drove into town about twenty minutes before I found you, and your old home was the first place I thought to come. When I pulled up, a neighbor mentioned a woman who’d just walked around to the back of the house. I stepped inside, heard the fight, and sprang into action.”

Her throat clenched at the thought of that confrontation. She was so grateful the fight hadn’t been any worse. Things could have ended so much differently.

She swallowed hard, determined to keep her thoughts focused. “I wonder if the neighbor saw my attacker leave.”

“Right after I talked to him, he had to go inside to check on some greens he was cooking. I don’t think he came back out, so it’s doubtful.”

“When you got there, did you by chance see a motorcycle anywhere nearby?” The questions kept coming.

Jason’s eyes narrowed. “A motorcycle? No, I can’t say I did.”

Olive nodded, knowing he was waiting for an explanation.

Then again, she had a lot to update him on.

She blew out a breath. “Listen, how about we order some sandwiches? I’m suddenly very hungry. As we eat, I’ll fill you in on everything.”

And she did mean everything.

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Olive took the last bite of her Italian grinder and carefully chewed, her aching jaw slowing her movements. The sub had been surprisingly delicious with its mix of oil and vinegar dressing, along with some herbs slathered on the cured meats, provolone cheese, and vegetables.

She’d timed out her meal perfectly because she’d also just finished telling Jason her update.

Jason leaned back on the couch, his eyebrows raised. He’d finished his Philly cheesesteak at least ten minutes ago. “Wow. That’s a lot.”

“It *is* a lot. Nova and I have been busy, although progress has been slow. This is one crime that’s hard to prove.”

“I know.” Jason blew out a breath. “That’s why I wanted to hire you. If anyone could find the truth, it would be you.”

Warmth spread through her chest. “I appreciate the confidence.”

“You earned it.” He paused and shook his head. “What makes this case even more complicated is the fact that it’s not a

crime to lie. You can't get the local police involved because they won't be able to do anything."

"But we can get Rebecca and Matt on the wire fraud if this is true." Olive paused. "What concerns me is if Rebecca and Matt have already spent all this money that's been donated. If they've spent it, then it's going to be really hard for them to pay it back to the good-hearted people who donated."

"They can liquidate their belongings, but it would still be difficult." Jason frowned and shifted. "So what's next?"

"I need to follow up with Nova and Tevin on a couple of things. I'm also very curious about Matt and the fact he used to ride a motorcycle."

"You really think he could be the one taking pictures? Does that really make any sense?"

Olive frowned. She had issues with the theory also, especially since Motorcycle Man had shot at them. "It's hard to say. But if Matt is in on this scheme, then maybe he's paranoid we'll find something and ruin everything he and his wife have set up."

"And if he's not?"

"And if he's not in on this, then maybe he's looking for evidence that Rebecca has been lying to him—or having an affair."

Olive shrugged. "It's an angle worth pursuing at least."

"I agree it's worth pursuing. Do you think he's the one who attacked you tonight?"

She didn't have to think about it. "No. This man's build was different. It wasn't Matt."

Jason frowned and ran a hand over his face. "I just never thought this case would take a dangerous turn."

"I didn't either. It seemed pretty cut and dried when you asked me to look into this. But there's clearly more going on here than we ever assumed."

"Clearly," Jason said.

As much as Olive would love just to have some time alone with Jason, that wasn't a possibility right now. There were too many other things going on. If this fundraiser took place on Saturday, there was a good chance a huge chunk of money would be going to Rebecca and Matt.

Instead, she grabbed her phone. "I'm going to call Nova and see if she can join us now. Maybe she has some updates. And I need to call Tevin too. I want him to look into my old house and see if anyone has lived there since my family moved out."

Jason gave her a questioning look.

Olive shrugged. "I know the request might sound crazy, but the inside of the place looks just like my family left it. Is that normal?"

He shrugged this time. "It's hard to say, but . . . maybe. Some people don't care about decorating or style, so new owners may not have touched anything."

Olive considered his words.

"You could be right," she finally said. "But my gut tells me there's something else going on here, and I'm dying to know what."

## CHAPTER 42

Nova joined Olive and Jason a few minutes later in Olive's hotel room. Her gaze volleyed back and forth between Olive and Jason with curiosity.

Thankfully, she didn't ask any of the questions lingering in her eyes.

"I'm glad you asked me to come over because I have an update for you." Nova pulled up an armchair in front of them and sat cross-legged with her laptop on her legs.

"An update sounds good." Olive curled her legs beneath her. "What did you find out?"

"In the time since we've talked last, one of Rebecca's old friends from high school called me back. She was pretty insightful. She said Rebecca always liked to make up stories."

"What kind of stories?" Jason squinted.

"The kind that got attention. Apparently, Rebecca *loved* it when all eyes were on her."

Olive knew the type—she usually stayed away from them, however.

"Do you think she's doing this cancer scheme just for attention?" Jason asked. "Not for money?"

The theory shouldn't surprise Olive, but for some reason it did. Money was usually a much bigger motivator than getting noticed. But it was a possibility.

"It's a definite maybe. Rebecca told people in high school that she met Tom Holland when her family took a trip to New York, and he asked for her number." Nova rolled her eyes.

"Unlikely . . ." Olive murmured.

"She also told them her great-grandfather was actually royalty somewhere in Europe, but he'd fled the country in order to get married. Those were the biggest stories. They went on from there."

"Maybe she has histrionic personality disorder," Olive suggested.

"Maybe. It could even be Munchausen's. You've heard of that, right?"

"Yes. Gypsy Rose's mother had Munchausen's by Proxy. People with the disorder fake being sick."

"That's definitely a possibility. But I saved the most interesting thing I learned for last." Nova's eyes still sparkled.

Olive twisted her head in curiosity. "Please, don't keep us in suspense."

"I also got in touch with someone that Rebecca and Matt went to college with. These two aren't as innocent as they portray themselves." The sparkle in Nova's eyes grew even brighter.

"What do you mean?" Jason shifted forward on the couch.

"I mean that when Rebecca met Matt, Matt wasn't *just* a student at the school. He was a graduate assistant. So the two of them dating was a no-no."

Olive sucked in a breath. She hadn't expected that.

"But there's more." Nova paused before announcing, "The other thing is . . . when Matt and Rebecca met, he was also married to someone else."

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Olive certainly hadn't expected to hear the news that Matt had been previously married.

Had Rebecca seduced him, the handsome graduate assistant? Or had they both pursued each other?

She remembered Matt telling them his story earlier. About how he'd been afraid to talk to Rebecca and had thought she was out of his league. How they'd been put together in a study group where she'd ultimately made the first move.

There were definitely questionable parts to his story. Maybe he'd stuck with the basics, but the rest he'd glossed over the truth.

If he'd lied about that, then Olive felt as if he would lie about other things also.

After Nova finished sharing her updates, she stood. “I have some things I need to work on now, so I’ll let you two finish catching up. But tomorrow we have an interview lined up with Rebecca’s neighbor Georgina. We’ll need to check on Rebecca also, of course.”

That was right. Nova had lined up that interview in advance. Olive hoped she’d be feeling better by then. She wanted to keep that appointment so she could hear what the woman had to say.

“Hopefully, Mitzi will have an update for us also.” Olive turned to Jason. “She’s going on a date with a doctor tonight, and we think it’s the same doctor who’s treating Rebecca.”

Jason raised his brow. “That would be providential.”

“I think so too.” Olive copied his expression. “With any luck, maybe she’ll even call tonight.”

“That would be helpful,” Jason said.

Nova excused herself and left through the adjoining door, closing it tight. But Olive wasn’t ready to jump back into talking about anything personal.

In fact, maybe she really just wanted to delay any heart-to-heart talks.

Instead, she grabbed her phone. “I need to call Tevin real quick, if you don’t mind.”

“Not at all,” Jason said.

After Olive said the “if you don’t mind” part, she realized how silly the words were. She was working on a case he’d hired her to do. He should want Olive to do everything in her power to get these answers. She had to get a grip.

She dialed Tevin’s number, and his voice came across the line a moment later. “Hey, hey, hey.”

Olive turned on the phone speaker. “Hey, Tevin. It’s Olive. I’m here with Jason.”

Tevin paused. “Jason? I didn’t know he was in Texas.”

Olive hadn’t expected to hear the strange edge to his voice. “I didn’t either.”

“I decided to come out and see if there was anything I could do to help,” Jason explained.

“I see,” Tevin muttered. “Well, it’s always good to have backup around.”

But Tevin knew better than anyone that Jason was more than just backup.

Tevin had been there when Olive had first run into Jason while on assignment in Chicago. He knew more of the details of their past than anyone else. He’d seen the two of them interact.

“What’s going on?” Tevin sounded much more professional now than he probably would if Jason wasn’t present.

“I’m going to send you an address, and I’d love if you could look into who’s owned the place for the past eight or nine years.”

“That sounds easy enough.”

“I’m hoping it will be,” Olive said. “To be up front, this is personal and not connected with Rebecca’s case.”

“I kind of figured. I’ll see what I can find out.” Tevin paused. “I also have an update for you.”

Olive leaned back. “I could use an update.”

“It’s about those cameras that were planted in Rebecca’s house.”

She sat up straighter, any relaxed muscles tightening. “Did you find out something about them? Because we went to the location where the IP address was apparently pinging, but it looked absolutely abandoned, like it hadn’t been touched in years.”

“I’m not sure why that happened. Without being there, it’s way more complicated to try to figure out. However, the interesting thing is that I figured out a way to hack into these cameras at Rebecca’s house.”

Her eyebrows flew up. “You did? That doesn’t feel quite ethical.”

“No, it doesn’t, does it? I realize that, which is why I haven’t turned the cameras on to watch anything. I wasn’t sure what you wanted me to do.”

That was a good question. What did she want?

Olive thought about that question, not wanting to rush her answer.

## CHAPTER 43

Olive turned the possibilities over in her mind a moment, weighing each option.

Finally, she said, “Rebecca and Matt are at the hospital right now anyway, and I suspect Matt won’t be coming home tonight. So let’s wait on the decision. I don’t suppose you can see anything historical on the camera feed, can you?”

“No, I don’t have access to the server. Just to the feed in real time.”

“Good to know. Thank you for your work on that. And I’ll let you know about the camera feed.”

“Sure thing.” He paused. “If you need anything else, call me. In the meantime, I’ll look into that house. Go ahead and send me the address.”

“Will do.”

Olive ended the call, sent over the address, and then turned to Jason, studying his expression. His gaze showed he was deep in thought, analyzing the conversation.

She’d always appreciated people who didn’t have knee-jerk reactions to situations.

“I think your response was a good call,” Jason said. “It’s one thing to have cameras on people when they’re in public or even in an office setting. But I’m not sure how I feel about spying on someone in their own home.”

“I agree. There are some ethical dilemmas that come with this job, unfortunately.”

“I can only imagine.” Jason turned toward her, tilting his head. “You look tired.”

“I guess you could say it’s been a long day.”

“Talk about an understatement.” He threw her a knowing look before pausing. “Thank you for all your work on this, Ollie.”

The low tone of his voice caused her cheeks to flush again. “Of course. I only hope we can find some answers for you.”

“You will.”

She cleared her throat, trying to forget just how attracted she was to this man, even after all these years. Time had only filled him out more and made him more handsome—something she shouldn’t be thinking about.

She cleared her throat again. “How long are you sticking around for?”

Jason shrugged. “I’ll probably play it by ear. I took the rest of the week off, and I don’t have to be back at work until Monday.”

“Are things going well at Conglomerate?”

He let out a breath. “As well as can be expected.”

Something about the way he said the words made Olive pause. Last she heard, he loved his job. Had something changed?

She wanted to ask. But she didn’t. She could stay up all night catching up with him. She couldn’t afford to do that, however. Plus, she needed to keep her distance, no matter how hard that was.

Jason seemed to sense her exhaustion and rose. “Listen, it’s getting late, and I’m going to let you get some sleep.”

Olive stood also. “Where are you staying?”

“Actually, I’m staying here too.” He flashed a smile. “It’s the best of all the hotel options in the area. I could stay with Chelsea or Dominic, but I thought this would be easier.”

A sense of relief washed through her. It would be good to have him close, although she wouldn’t admit it.

“If you want my help in the morning, call me, and I’ll be there. But I didn’t come here to get in your way or to cramp your style.”

More relief filled her. “I appreciate that.”

She didn’t want Jason to feel obligated to help her. But since he’d offered, she wouldn’t turn down having another set of eyes—especially given the danger that had arisen.

His gaze lingered on her a moment longer, almost as if he wanted to say—or do—something more.

Olive licked her lips, trying not to think about what it would be like to kiss him right now.

Honestly, kissing him right now would simply be painful—and she wasn’t just talking about emotionally. Her lip was busted, and her cheek hurt.

She would need to think of how to explain her injuries to people later.

For now, romance was the last thing she needed to think about.

Her phone buzzed, pulling her from the moment.

She stepped back and glanced at the screen.

Reid Harrison's name appeared.

"Who's Reid Harrison?" Jason squinted as he glanced at the screen.

Olive shrugged and quickly clicked off the call. "Just someone I worked with on my last case. He calls me on occasion to catch up. I can call him back later."

Jason suddenly felt a little cooler. "I see."

He opened the door and gave her a nod before leaving.

Being alone right now and clearing her head just might be one of the best things she could do for herself.

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After Jason left, Olive sank into the couch and let her mind wander through everything that had happened, starting with Jason.

She could hardly believe he was here, and she wasn't sure if she was excited or anxious about it. Honestly, both emotions could exist at the same time—and they did. She'd wondered when—or if—she'd see him again. Now they were back in Texas together.

That would take some time to process.

Then there was the man who'd attacked her at her old house. She had no idea who he was. The mystery surrounding him bothered her. Was he connected with her past? With her dad's past? It just didn't make sense.

Then there was the man on the motorcycle who'd shot at them. He added another layer of danger to everything. And there was the man who'd been watching from the woods who'd swung that stick at her head.

Olive had so much to think about right now. Unfortunately, Rebecca was sinking to the bottom of that list.

Olive couldn't let that happen. Rebecca was the reason she was here. Rebecca was why she'd been hired.

Maybe the best thing she could do right now was to get some rest—although she halfway expected Mitzi to call with an update about her date.

She glanced at the time. Nine p.m. It was still relatively early, she realized. Mitzi probably wouldn't be home for another couple of hours. Was it worth it to sleep for only a few minutes, only to be woken again?

Possibly. Her body was achy and tired, and her mind needed to rest.

She leaned back into the couch. Olive still couldn't get over the fact Matt had been married when he'd met Rebecca. Or the fact that Rebecca had always told stories to make herself seem important or special.

But none of that concretely proved she was lying now. That was what Olive needed.

Solid proof.

Olive would keep working on finding it.

For now, she stood and stretched and got ready for bed. Then she checked the locks on her door one more time and turned off the overhead lights. She climbed under her covers.

But just as she plugged in her phone to charge it, the device rang.

Surprise washed through her when she saw the name on the screen.

Tom Greer, the FBI agent who'd taken her in after her family was murdered. He rarely called her unless he had something important to say.

Olive stared at the phone a second before answering. Caution pulled tight between her shoulders—a sense of foreboding overcoming her. Was everyone okay?

"Tom . . ." Her voice sounded raspier than she'd anticipated.

"Hey, Ollie. How are you?"

She didn't even know how to answer that, all things considered. She settled on, "Staying busy."

"I bet you are."

"Everything okay with you? Is Jill doing okay?"

"We're both fine." He paused. "Look, I don't want to beat around the bush, so I'll just tell you why I called."

"Please, do."

"I just got a cryptic text message."

The tension at her back pulled tighter. "Okay . . ."

If he was telling Olive this, it was somehow connected to her.

"The text read, 'Tell Olive to stop looking into her father or else.'"

Her heart pounded in her ears. "Someone sent you that?"

"They did. Is there anything that you want to tell me, Olive?"



She let out a sigh as she thought through her response. She didn't usually discuss cases with Tom, but there was no harm in doing so now. Olive trusted him—as much as she trusted anyone, she supposed.

"I'm back in Oasis for an assignment," she admitted. "Since I was already here, I went back to visit my old house a couple of times. Tonight, there was a man hiding inside. He attacked me."

"Oh, Ollie." His voice turned fatherly. "Are you okay?"

She shrugged, even though he couldn't see her. "I'll make a full recovery. Do you think that's why someone sent you that text? Did you just get it?"

"About twenty minutes ago. I was trying to figure out how to proceed after I read it. The number was from a burner phone, of course."

"How did someone get your number?" she asked.

"If someone is determined enough, they'll find a way."

Her thoughts raced. "I've gotten two strange text messages over the past few months also. They both claimed that the sender knew who murdered my family. He was basically taunting me."

Tom remained silent a moment—the type of silence that spoke volumes about his unease. "Did you respond?"

"No, I figured it wouldn't do any good."

"And you have no idea who sent them?"

"No idea at all. But when I went back to my old house the first time, someone had left a note for me there."

"What did the note say?"

"‘Like father, like daughter.’"

Tom paused. "I don't like this, Ollie."

"I don't either. But I also want answers."

"I can't tell you what to do," Tom said. "And you're going to do whatever you want anyway. But, Ollie . . . please, be careful."

"I will be."

However, the more she dug into this, the more danger she would uncover. She knew that without a doubt.

## CHAPTER 44

SEVENTEEN YEARS AGO

As soon as Olive and her father had gotten home from their excursion, Dad had told her to hurry and get cleaned up. Resentment welled in Olive as she hopped in the shower. She knew the truth—Dad didn’t want Mom to see her looking like a mess. That meant he didn’t want Mom to know what he’d asked Olive to do. Nausea swirled inside her at the thought of what she’d tell her mother when she asked questions—and she would ask questions.

Olive finished her shower and dressed in some clean clothes. She brushed her hair and teeth. As she looked in the mirror, she looked more like herself—not like the dirty, sick girl she’d portrayed earlier. Right as her mom and sisters got home, Olive went downstairs. Jessie and Jules toddled toward her, their arms raised. “Sissy!” The twins threw their arms around her, each one taking a leg. Her sisters loved her, and Olive loved them also. Her mom had struggled with a tough pregnancy. Olive still remembered being uncertain if the twins would make it. They’d been born early. But two and a half years later, they were strong and lively. “I missed you both too.” Olive wrapped her arms around them, then she looked up at her mother. Part of her wanted to tell her mom everything. What would Mom say? Certainly, she wouldn’t be happy with Dad. Her mom was a rule follower. She’d washed Olive’s mouth out with soap one time when she’d lied about doing her homework. She’d said that in this family, they told the truth. Olive didn’t see how that was possible. But, the other night, Olive had heard her mom and dad arguing. If she put her ear to the wall between their bedrooms, she could hear them talking sometimes. She didn’t usually do that. That night, she had. She wanted to know what their raised voices were about. Their talk hadn’t been about money. It was something about a meeting that was coming up. Her mom hadn’t wanted her dad to go. Her dad had said everything would be fine. Then her mom had said she was tired of moving, couldn’t they stay here a while? Her dad’s voice had softened, and Olive hadn’t been able to make out what he said afterward. Then her mom had cried. She frowned at the memory. Olive didn’t want to be the reason her parents fought. Her friend’s parents had just gotten a divorce, and now her friend was sad all the time. Olive didn’t want to be sad like that. She didn’t want to cause her parents to split up. She hoped her dad never asked her to beg for money again. Next time, she’d refuse—even if she got in trouble. “Olive . . .” Her mom studied her, tilting her head in adoration. “Don’t you look pretty?” “Thank you.” Olive smiled despite herself. “Did you and your dad have fun today?” Olive opened her mouth, unsure what to say. Maybe she should tell the truth. Her mom didn’t like lies. But then Olive would only be starting trouble. Before she could respond, Dad appeared from the kitchen, wearing an apron and holding a spatula. He was fixing some lasagna for later.

“Hey, sweetheart.” He gave Mom a kiss on the cheek. “How was the baby shower?”

“Heather is going to be a wonderful mother. We had fun, didn’t we girls?” She looked back at Olive’s sisters.

Jessie and Jules continued to cling to Olive’s legs.

“So what did you two do together?” Mom looked at Olive, then Dad, an innocent expression on her face.

Dad put his hand on Olive’s shoulder, but it felt heavier than usual.

“We got ice cream,” he said. “Did some window shopping. Took a nice little walk. It was fun, wasn’t it, Olive?”

Dad stared at her, waiting for her to agree.

How would he react if she didn’t?

Olive licked her lips, considering spilling the truth.

Then she thought better of it and nodded. She wouldn’t start trouble—not this time. But if he ever asked her to do that again, she wouldn’t stay quiet.

As soon as she nodded, her dad winked at her, letting Olive know she had his seal of approval.

It was bad enough she’d lied to those strangers today. But now she was lying to her mom.

Guilt flooded her. But what was she supposed to do?

Another snippet from today filled her memories.

As she and her dad had driven home, her dad had started reciting a list of what sounded like rules.

*Always stay close to the truth. It’s easier to remember the facts that way.*

*Believe the story you tell others. It will make them believe it also.*

*Whenever possible, let people talk about themselves. Ask them questions. Take the attention off yourself.*

Why had he told her all those things?

Olive wasn’t sure.

It was almost like he wanted her to trick people more.

She *hated* that idea.

A frown tugged at her lips.

All she wanted right now was for this day to be over.

## CHAPTER 45

TODAY

Olive was even more sore this morning than she'd been yesterday. Not only was her body tender from the fight and her other injuries, but she hadn't got much rest, despite her best efforts.

Right after she'd drifted to sleep, Mitzi had called.

Her date with the doctor had gone well, but she hadn't discovered anything new. She said the doctor talked a lot about himself—his upbringing, his schooling, his social connections. He'd even talked about his family some—about how his dad had been a rancher. How his granddad had been an end-times prepper, complete with a fallout shelter. How his mom was Miss America 1994.

When Rebecca was mentioned, he'd clammed up.

But Mitzi felt confident he knew something more, something he either couldn't—or wouldn't—share.

She'd promised to keep working on him.

Hopefully, today would provide more answers.

With one last glance in the mirror, Olive grabbed her bag, ready to leave for the day. She'd worn a lightweight turtleneck that covered the cut across her neck. She'd also carefully applied makeup to cover the bruises on her face. Her busted lip was harder to conceal, but she could tell people it was a fever blister if they asked.

However, her body ached, and she'd had nightmares last night about her attack.

She'd need to push through those things and stay focused.

Olive had already texted Jason, and he'd agreed to tag along today. Just like last night, Olive had mixed feelings about him being here. But she knew he wouldn't be any trouble. In fact, he'd probably be a big help.

A few minutes later, she, Nova, and Jason met downstairs. They grabbed breakfast from the lobby area before heading outside.

Olive paused when she saw her Jeep in the lot. "What . . . ? How . . . ?"

"Nova and I went back to the house last night while you were resting," Jason explained. "We grabbed your Jeep and your gun. Plus, we checked out the house for any evidence. We didn't find anything."

Olive felt speechless a moment. "Wow. I wasn't expecting that. Thank you."

"Of course." Jason said the words as if what they'd done hadn't been a big deal. Then he handed her a bag. "Gun is in there."

"I appreciate it."

"I don't mind driving today," Jason offered before studying their faces. "If you're okay with it. I have no problem with women driving, just for the record."

"I hate driving, so that's fine with me," Nova said. "We need to head to the hospital first, right?"

"It only makes sense to check on Rebecca," Olive said. "But we also have that interview lined up with Georgina."

They reached the hospital and stepped inside. Jason agreed to stay in the waiting room. It would be too strange to explain his presence to Rebecca and Matt. Besides, he said he had a few phone calls to make.

With that settled, Olive and Nova headed toward the front desk. Unfortunately, Mitzi worked the ER, so she wasn't at this desk. They could find her later if needed.

"You didn't tell me he was so cute," Nova whispered as they walked.

"Who?"

Nova shot her a look. "You know good and well who I'm talking about. Jason. If he ever decides to do cosplay, he should totally be Batman."

"Totally." Why did Nova always think of people in terms of cosplay? Olive supposed the trait only made her colleague more interesting.

“Did he really surprise you by coming?” Nova asked.

“He did.”

“That’s sweet.”

Olive supposed that was one way to look at it. His presence was both sweet and a complication.

“When I make you that lumpia and pancit, you should give him some,” Nova said. “My mom claims it’s the way into any man’s heart.”

“Who said I want his heart?” Olive cast her an outraged look.

“You clearly do. I can feel the chemistry between you two.”

Olive opened her mouth to argue. Instead, she said, “You just hand over the lumpia and pancit. I’ll decide what to do with it.”

The nurse at the front desk confirmed Rebecca’s room number hadn’t changed, and they started that way. But as Olive and Nova passed two women in the hallway, their conversation caught Olive’s ear.

“I don’t know how long I can keep acting like this,” the shorter of the two said as they headed toward the hospital exit.

“I talked to the police about it, but they said they couldn’t do anything.”

“It should be a crime!”

Were they talking about Rebecca? Olive’s gut told her they were.

After all, these women were about Rebecca’s age. They were dressed casually in jeans and T-shirts. One was tall with short curly hair, and the other was shorter with blonde hair, cut into a bob.

Olive had to make a quick decision.

Before she missed the opportunity, she turned and called, “Excuse me!”

The two women stopped and turned.

Olive hoped this wasn’t a mistake.

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“I wasn’t trying to eavesdrop,” Olive started, trying to sound casual as she scooted closer to the women. “But we’re here visiting Rebecca. It sounds like maybe you are too.”

The women glanced at each other, a silent conversation passing between the two, before nodding.

“That’s right,” the taller of the two said. “And who are you?”

“I’m Olive, and this is Nova. We’re doing the documentary on Rebecca and Matt.”

An unreadable emotion flickered in their eyes.

“Rebecca did mention that,” the tall friend said.

“It looks like you were coming from her room,” Olive said. “Is she not doing well this morning?”

“When is she ever doing well?” the shorter friend muttered under her breath.

That was an interesting statement to make, Olive mused.

“I’m sure it’s hard seeing her like this,” Olive finally said.

The women remained quiet a moment before the tall one said, “Yes, it is challenging.”

Olive had other questions she wanted to ask, things she wanted to know.

But she wasn’t sure this was the time or the place.

Instead, she pulled out a business card. “I’m looking for people who know Rebecca to interview for this documentary. It sounds like you two are close to her, so if you’re interested in being interviewed, I’d love to set something up. However, I’m only going to be in town for a few more days.”

The tall woman took the card, looked at it skeptically, and then slid it in her purse. “Good to know.”

Olive had a feeling the woman wouldn’t be calling. But she really wanted to talk to them.

She wouldn’t let this go. These women had opinions. She wanted to know what those opinions were.

She was determined to find out one way or another.

But not here, and not now.

## CHAPTER 46

“The doctor wants me to stay a little longer,” Rebecca said from the hospital bed. “But I should still be able to make it to the fundraiser tomorrow.”

Olive plastered on a wide smile. “That’s great news.”

Rebecca didn’t look great this morning. She was paler than usual with all kinds of machines and wires still hooked up to her.

Olive had glanced around the room when she first entered, looking for any clues about Rebecca’s condition. Any labels on the medication hanging on the IV bag or notes scribbled on the board.

She’d known it was unlikely she’d see anything to give her a glimpse into Rebecca’s medical history, and she hadn’t.

She did, however, see a ring camera light and some sound equipment.

That was when it hit her. The man who’d gone to their house yesterday? He hadn’t gone there to get Rebecca’s medications. He’d gone to retrieve her equipment so Rebecca could record more TikTok videos.

Olive made a mental note to check the social platform later to watch Rebecca’s updates.

Matt sat beside Rebecca’s bed still, dark circles beneath his eyes.

Olive swallowed hard at the sight of him. He looked rough.

Then she remembered his motorcycle.

She was desperate to make some of these pieces fit.

She plastered on a compassionate—and authentic—smile. “It looks like you stayed here all night.”

He ran a hand over his face. “I did. I didn’t want to leave Rebecca—just in case she needed me.”

“I guess Willow is still at her friend’s house?” Nova asked.

“That’s right.” Rebecca readjusted the canula at her nose. “I’m so grateful for all the good friends we have. I don’t know what we’d do without them.”

“I can imagine.” Olive offered a nod.

Rebecca paused and squinted at Olive.

A rush of nerves shot through Olive. What was she thinking?

She waited.

“No offense, but you look worse off than I do today,” Rebecca finally said. “Are you okay?”

Olive resisted the urge to touch her neck or face. “Do I? Just tired.”

Rebecca was far more observant than Olive had given her credit for. She would need to be careful.

“You shouldn’t work too hard,” Rebecca said.

There she went, sounding like she cared about other people in the midst of her own suffering. Olive had to give her kudos for that.

Nova cleared her throat. “Not to change the subject, but I was wondering if I could get some footage of you here in the hospital. I think it would really help drive home the seriousness of this situation.”

“Yes, of course.” Rebecca nodded. “That’s fine.”

Olive sucked in a breath before approaching the next subject. “Listen, while she does that, I was wondering if I could have a word with you, Matt? Maybe out in the hallway.”

“Is everything okay?” Rebecca’s eyes widened with alarm.

“It’s fine. I just wanted to clarify a couple of details from our interview, and I thought it would be easier somewhere quieter.”

“Of course.” Rebecca nodded, seeming reassured.

With Rebecca’s blessing, Olive and Matt stepped into the hallway.

It was time to ask him some hard questions.

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Matt definitely looked nervous as the two of them stepped outside Rebecca's room.

He wasn't sure what to expect right now, and Olive hoped to use that to her advantage.

"What's going on?" Matt crossed his arms, putting up a physical barrier. Body language 101.

"Listen, I don't want to beat around the bush," Olive started. "But we've been doing some fact-checking. It's only smart when you're doing a documentary, right?"

His skin looked a little paler. "Of course. What's wrong?"

"We've talked to a couple of Rebecca's old friends from college. One of them told us you were actually married when you and Rebecca met. She also said you were a grad assistant, which would have made dating Rebecca out of bounds."

His eyes widened and then softened again.

This hadn't been what he expected her to bring up, was it? He seemed almost relieved that it was just a question about his infidelity.

"Oh, that." His voice turned more serious. "I just didn't think that was relevant to your documentary. Is that something you're going to add to the video?"

"Not necessarily. It's just that when there are inconsistencies in what a person tells us about one aspect of his or her life, then we have to question possible inconsistencies in other things they're telling us. Make sense?"

Matt nodded quickly. "Yes, of course. I didn't mean to keep that truth from you. I just didn't want it to be broadcast, of course."

"I can understand why you wouldn't want that information out there."

He pressed his eyes closed before running his hand over his face again. "I'm not proud of what happened. But my marriage was less than a year old, and it had been really rocky. I shouldn't have ever married Miranda, but she pushed me to tie the knot, and I did. We were so unhappy together. Then I met Rebecca, and she was such a bright spot."

He was pretty good at selling this, Olive mused.

She still had more questions. "Did Rebecca know you were married when she pursued you?"

Matt's eyes crinkled at the edges. "When she pursued me?"

Olive tilted her head. "You said she was the first one to make a move. You said you were in a study group together."

His cheeks turned red. "I was actually doing some tutoring outside my normal job hours. Even though she did kiss me first, believe me, the feelings were mutual. She refused to truly date me until my divorce was finalized."

"That's good," Olive muttered.

Matt turned his sharp gaze on her. "Does that make you feel better? And is this really even that important? There are so many other things we need to be focusing on concerning Rebecca's treatment."

Olive didn't like the way he'd dismissed her questioning, acting as if Olive was the one out of line for bringing up the subject.

She thought about his motorcycle. Should she ask him? Watch his reaction?

Why not? She was running out of time.

"One more question." She locked her gaze on him. "Is it true you like riding motorcycles?"

His brow furrowed. "I do. How is that important?"

"I'm just trying to find interesting snippets about you and Rebecca that people can relate to. Motorcycles are one of those things."

He stared at her another moment and shook his head. "I still don't see how that's relevant."

"B roll," Olive answered. "It helps give life to documentaries and make the people I interview seem more human."

Matt finally nodded. "I guess that makes sense. But I sold my bike, so I don't think your idea is going to work."

Sold his bike? Was he telling the truth?

Olive needed to find out.

## CHAPTER 47

Thirty minutes later, Olive and Nova left Rebecca's room.

Matt was still acting funny, like he hadn't appreciated Olive digging into his background. He definitely hadn't been warm during the rest of their visit. Olive had considered asking him about his time off from work, but she'd decided to wait. She didn't want to spook him.

Nova got the footage she'd been looking for. Then Rebecca's eyes had drooped as if she needed to take a nap, and they'd realized it was time to leave. That was fine because Olive didn't think they'd find out anything new.

Instead, they headed back downstairs. As soon as Jason saw them, he rose, questions in his gaze.

But it wasn't safe to talk about anything now. Olive would wait until they were back in the Range Rover.

They only had forty-five minutes until the interview with Rebecca's neighbor.

As soon as the doors were closed on the Range Rover, Olive gave them the update.

"It definitely sounds like Matt's hiding something," Jason's jaw tightened as he said the words.

"I agree."

"What about those two women we saw?" Nova popped her head between the two front seats. "Do you think they'll call us back?"

"I'm doubtful," Olive said. "But we need to track them down anyway. I want to ask them some hard questions. First, we need to figure out their names."

"I'll work on that," Nova said. "I'll also check out Rebecca's TikTok and see if she's added any new videos. I'll watch her acting skills in action again."

"Perfect," Olive said.

"While you were upstairs, Sabrina came in with Rebecca's daughter," Jason added. "They were in the bathroom when you came down, which is probably why your paths didn't cross."

"How is Willow holding up?" Olive remembered the pictures she'd seen of the angel-faced girl. Certainly, she wasn't unaffected by all this.

"She seemed okay," Jason said. "But Sabrina looked tired."

"I imagine she is." She must have taken today off work to be with Willow and bring her here. That wasn't always an easy task as a teacher.

"She also invited the two of us over for dinner with her and her husband tonight," Jason continued. "I didn't give her an answer. However, she may or may not think I'm in town to see you because we're . . . together."

Olive glanced at Nova in time to see a smile tugging at her lips.

She ignored her colleague.

"Tonight?" Olive repeated. "I'm not sure that's going to work out—it depends if we figure out anything new."

"If it makes any difference, they don't have much time either—only an hour and a half. But she really wants to see us."

Then again, maybe meeting with Sabrina would be good. Olive could get the inside scoop on whatever Willow may have told her.

"On second thought, tell her we can meet. I think it could be a good move . . . for the investigation and personally." Olive glanced at Nova. "We don't have anything scheduled tonight, right?"

Nova shrugged. "I'll just be working on this 'film'—not that we plan on doing anything with it. But I need something for the fundraiser."

"I appreciate that."

As the conversation ended, they pulled up in front of the neighbor's house.

It was time to do another interview.

Olive hoped they'd learn something new and that they weren't simply wasting their time.



---

Georgina Creedence lived next door to Rebecca and Matt.

The widow appeared to be in her mid-sixties, with light-blond hair cut in a sharp wedge. She had no children of her own, and she often stepped in to help out Rebecca and Matt. She even made them dinner twice a week.

Jason waited in the Range Rover while Olive and Nova went inside.

The interview started with Georgina singing Rebecca's and Matt's praises. Tears even welled in her eyes as she spoke about them. She obviously truly felt bad for the couple.

But nothing she told them so far during the interview was necessarily helpful.

However, her commentary *was* informative.

Especially when she told them about how she'd cancelled some plans to see some of her old girlfriends for a once-in-a-lifetime vacation opportunity in Naples, all because Rebecca and Matt had an emergency and needed her to babysit.

Apparently, she'd only recently stopped being able to babysit, and that was because she'd had knee replacement surgery.

Although . . . based on what Olive knew about Rebecca and Matt, that wouldn't stop the couple from asking for Georgina's help if they were in a "bind."

But it was what Georgina said right before they left that really caught Olive's attention.

"I went to visit my sister last week," she started. "She lives in Midlothian, right outside Dallas. There's another young mother in town there who's going through the same battle as Rebecca. When she told me, I couldn't help but think how eerie the similarities were."

Olive shifted in her seat. "Like what?"

Georgina frowned and shook her head. "You know . . . all the surgeries and treatments, many not covered by insurance. The time off work. The bills that pile up. It's just so sad. But the community has really come together to support this young lady also. Do you think there's something happening that's making these young women sick?"

Olive's lungs froze at the woman's words. Unfortunately, people were diagnosed with cancer every day, so that wasn't unusual within itself. Even young mothers were diagnosed. And having the community come together wasn't that strange either.

There was some other thought that Olive wanted to latch onto—she just wasn't sure what.

She'd think about it more later.

For now, Olive and Nova thanked Georgina and packed up their things to leave.

Just when they stepped outside, Motorcycle Man sped by the house.

## CHAPTER 48

Olive and Nova rushed back to the Range Rover and slammed their doors, shoving the equipment in the back seat.

Then Olive pointed at the street ahead. "Follow that motorcycle."

"Yes, ma'am." Jason threw the vehicle into Drive and took off.

"Stay on its tail."

Olive grabbed her phone. She needed to know if Matt was still at the hospital or not. If he was, she could rule him out as being Motorcycle Man. If not, it wouldn't necessarily prove he was Motorcycle Man, but it would get her one step closer to finding the truth.

It was risky, but she called Mitzi.

"How can I help you?" Her friend asked in a professional voice.

"I need you to find out if Matt is still at the hospital. It's urgent."

"Yes, ma'am," Mitzi said with drawl. "I'll see what I can do."

Olive ended the call, knowing Mitzi would call back as soon as she knew something.

Right now, her gaze was focused on the road.

Motorcycle Man had gotten a decent head start, and Olive wasn't sure if they could safely catch up with him.

Besides, what would they do if they *did* catch up? Demand the guy stop and take off his helmet so they could see his face? The most likely scenario would be that they followed him, found out where he was going, and watched as he took off his helmet, revealing his identity.

Jason took a sharp left turn onto another street, pivoting so quickly Olive felt her stomach drop as if they were on a thrill ride at Six Flags.

Two blocks ahead, she spotted the motorcycle. The driver turned again.

Jason jerked the wheel, turning a block earlier than Motorcycle Man. He headed toward the retail area of town.

At the next light, he glanced to the left, then the right.

Motorcycle Man was nowhere to be seen.

Where had he gone?

They couldn't have lost him this fast.

"Maybe he stopped at one of the stores," Olive said. "Go left!"

Jason did as she said.

But at the next intersection, they still didn't see this guy or his motorcycle.

He couldn't have just disappeared.

They had to keep looking.

As they did, they needed to be careful.

This guy had drawn a gun on them before, and there was no guarantee he wouldn't draw a gun on them again.

---

Olive, Jason, and Nova canvassed all the nearby streets and neighborhoods.

But they still hadn't seen Motorcycle Man.

Then Mitzi called.

Olive put the phone on speaker as she answered, anxious to hear what she had to say.

"He's gone," Mitzi announced in a whisper. "I took a bathroom break and went upstairs to check. Matt wasn't in the room with Rebecca when I got there. I asked one of the nurses, and she told me that Matt left about fifteen minutes ago. Told her he was running home to get something."

Olive raised her eyebrows. If Matt had gone home to get something, was that something the motorcycle? Did he keep it in the garage?

But if he'd gone to the house, Olive would have seen him. *Jason* would have seen him, at least. If Matt had pulled into the driveway, Jason would have definitely noticed.

What if Matt kept the motorcycle somewhere else? It seemed like a theory worth exploring.

She thanked Mitzi and ended the call.

Motorcycle Man was gone. Whatever hopes Olive had of finding him and discovering his identity had disappeared along with him.

But she was nowhere close to being done with this investigation.

## CHAPTER 49

The three of them stopped for lunch at the Rusty Lantern. It would be a good opportunity to talk through things.

The place looked just like it had last time Olive was here—warm and cozy with the tantalizing scent of freshly baked breads and homemade soup. Half the tables were already taken, full of people chatting and enjoying good food.

This time Olive ordered some lemon orzo soup and limeade.

Before their food arrived, Tevin called, and Olive excused herself to answer.

She paced toward the front of the restaurant. “Tevin . . . what’s going on?”

“I’ve been looking into that thing you asked me about,” Tevin started. “The old address where you used to live.”

Olive shifted as she stared outside. “And?”

“It’s a little weird, but it looks like no one has actually lived in that house since your family left.”

She squinted. “Really? Why? It wasn’t listed in my parents’ financial records after they died.”

“Actually, someone else owns it. They just don’t live there.”

Her breath caught. “Why would someone buy a house and let it just sit there? Who owns it?”

“It’s pretty interesting,” Tevin said. “It turns out a shell company owns it.”

“Is that right? Why would a shell company buy it?” Olive hadn’t been expecting to hear that news.

“Beats me. I tried to find more information on this company, but there’s not much out there. I’ll keep searching, of course.”

“Thanks for looking into this for me. It’s very helpful.” Olive ended the call and joined Jason and Nova back at the table.

But Olive planned on looking into that shell company the first chance she had.

“Everything okay?” Nova stared at Olive, questions in her gaze.

Nova didn’t know everything that had happened. Truthfully, Olive wasn’t sure she wanted her colleague to know all the details. Not until she could figure her out a little more.

In the time since Olive started talking to Tevin, their food had been delivered to the table. Olive got settled and lifted a spoonful of soup.

Finally, Olive said, “I asked Tevin to look into a personal matter.”

Nova stared at her as if waiting for more. Olive didn’t offer. Instead, she took a sip of her soup.

Then she said, “So let’s talk about what we know.”

---

With their stomachs full, Olive, Jason, and Nova headed out from the café. They’d talked through everything and made a list of what they needed to do next.

They were creeping closer to answers, but they weren’t quite where they wanted to be yet either.

Nova wanted to return to the hotel to work on some things, so they’d head there now to drop her off.

Olive reminded herself that the fundraiser was tomorrow. If they didn’t find answers before that event, Rebecca could take all that money and spend it—or maybe even hide it somewhere—before people ever had a chance to get their funds back if she wasn’t legit.

The time element pressed heavy on Olive’s conscience. She didn’t want to see all those people cheated out of their hard-earned money.

That meant they couldn’t afford to waste a single minute today.

She snapped her seatbelt in place, her ribs still aching.

Before she could think about the pain too long, her phone rang. It was Mitzi.

Olive answered, putting it on speaker. “I’m here with Nova and Jason.”

“Jason?” She paused, then realization stretched through her voice. “Oh, *Jason* . . .”

How did everyone at Aegis know about Jason? Was the office gossip chain stronger than Olive had guessed?

“Anyway,” Mitzi continued. “I just wanted to let you know that Rebecca is being discharged this afternoon. Sometime around three.”

Olive glanced at her watch. That was in two hours.

“Good to know. Thanks.” Olive wanted to take a look inside their house before they got back, and this would be the perfect opportunity. But she would need to be very careful.

“I thought the info might be helpful. No other updates. Not yet.” She paused. “I *am* going on another date with Dr. Peters tonight, however.”

“Good. Maybe he’ll share something. What about Anne, the nurse who left?”

“I’ve been asking around about her, but there’s still nothing. I’ll keep asking.”

“You do that,” Olive said. “Time is running out.”

Just as she ended the call, something up ahead caught her eye.

Her lungs froze in place.

A dark-green Mercedes.

Through the window, it looked like the same man inside. This was potentially the same vehicle that had been involved in that hit-and-run that had killed Maria.

“See that green Mercedes?” she told Jason. “We need to follow it.”

He shrugged as if unaffected by the request. “Yes, ma’am.”

Part of Olive loved it when he said that.

He took off after the Mercedes.

Maybe they could finally find out who this guy was.

## CHAPTER 50

Jason stayed a safe distance behind the Mercedes.

Olive kept her eyes glued to the vehicle. She didn't want to lose this guy. He could have the answers they needed.

"Anyone want to tell me what we're doing?" Nova asked from the back seat.

"That's the car Rebecca's so-called cousin was driving when I saw them arguing in the parking lot. I still haven't been able to figure out who he really is, and this might be our opportunity."

"Interesting," Nova said. "I'll see if I can run his plates while we follow him."

"Great idea," Olive said.

Jason did a good job remaining unseen. But as the man headed out of town, that would be more difficult. Traffic on the road would become sparser.

Olive kept her gaze on the vehicle, determined not to lose this guy. "You think he knows we're following him?"

"Not yet," Jason said. "But if we're not careful he will soon enough."

Olive nodded in agreement.

"Bad news, guys," Nova murmured as she tapped on her computer. "I don't have a strong enough signal out here to run the search on that car's plates. But I'll run them as soon as I can."

They'd left Oasis and headed west on a lonely road through Texas Hill Country. But this wasn't an unfamiliar road to Olive. She'd been down this very road this very week.

She didn't dare speak her theory out loud. She needed to wait to be certain.

But sure enough, the man turned right onto another lane.

A lane that only led one place.

"I know where he's going," she murmured.

"To the shack," Nova said.

"The shack?" Jason questioned.

"The one we traced back to the IP address from the cameras in Rebecca and Matt's house," Olive explained. "But the place looked abandoned."

"Maybe we missed something," Nova suggested dryly. "But probably not."

Olive's thoughts exactly. "Let's find out."

---

Jason continued to keep a safe distance behind the Mercedes, especially as the road became more and more isolated. If that guy saw them now, it would be too obvious he was being followed.

The trees cleared up ahead, and Olive directed Jason to pull over before they got too close. He parked behind a cluster of live oak trees.

Then he turned to her. "What now?"

Olive drew her gun. "We go the rest of the way on foot. We can't afford to be spotted, and I'm not ready to confront this guy until I know a little more about what we're facing."

"Understood." Jason drew his gun also before turning to Nova. "Maybe you should wait here, just in case."

"I'm not really ready for a gun battle, so I'd be more than happy to hang out here and keep watch."

With one last glance at Nova, Olive and Jason climbed out. They stayed in the shadows of the trees as they walked closer to the property.

They paused at the edge of the woods.

Olive squinted. The Mercedes was nowhere to be seen.

“This guy had to come this way,” she muttered. “This is a dead-end road.”

“Agreed. There’s no garage here so he didn’t pull into that.”

So where did he go? It didn’t make any sense. The car hadn’t just disappeared. There weren’t that many options around here either.

Olive supposed the driver could have pulled to the other side of the property, behind the house.

But they wouldn’t know unless they walked back there—and walking back there was risky. As soon as they left the safety of these trees, which were only on one side of the property, there would be nothing to protect them—just wide-open space.

“What do you want to do?” Jason asked.

Olive knew without a doubt what she wanted to do. “I want to get closer.”

Jason nodded and gripped his gun. “I figured you’d say that. Let’s go.”

## CHAPTER 51

Olive and Jason hunched low and hurried toward the house.

Last time she was here, it had been getting dark.

Right now, the sun bore down on them. Even though it was only April, it was at least eighty degrees out—if not hotter. Olive was wearing a turtleneck, mostly to conceal her neck.

Now, as sweat dripped down her spine, the clothing choice seemed like a terrible idea.

She and Jason reached the side of the house and stayed beside each other. There, Olive raised a finger over her lips, motioning for Jason to remain still. Yet he already seemed to read her mind, to be operating in sync with her as he nodded.

Then they listened. Olive hoped to hear an engine or voices or the hum of electronics.

She heard nothing.

How strange.

She nodded, indicating to Jason to follow her.

They headed to the other side of the house. At the corner, she paused and peered around the edge.

“Anything?” Jason whispered.

Her jaw tightened as she said, “There’s no car here.”

“That’s weird.”

Her thoughts exactly. “I’m going to walk the rest of the perimeter, just to be certain.”

“I’ll be right behind you.”

The two of them continued around the house, each step taken with caution—just to be safe.

But there was nothing to indicate someone had been here.

Something was going on at this shack. Olive just wasn’t sure what. But she needed to figure it out.

They paused in front of the house, and Jason asked, “Should we go inside?”

Olive remembered when she’d gone inside earlier. She’d been thorough and didn’t feel the need to look further.

“I’ve already been inside, and I didn’t see anything.” She paused. “Plus, the floor isn’t stable. I may or may not have fallen through.”

“Ouch.”

She rubbed her rib where the boards had scraped her. “Tell me about it.”

Jason blew out a breath. “If the inside is clear, then I have no idea what could be going on here.”

Olive frowned and glanced around one more time. “Me neither.”

---

Back in the car, Olive settled into the front seat as they gave Nova the update.

She looked just as perplexed as they did. “This case just keeps getting stranger and stranger.”

“You can say that again.” Olive frowned as the words left her lips.

Nova’s phone rang, and she glanced at the screen. Her voice rose with excitement as she said, “It’s Miranda, Matt’s first wife. I left her a message, and she’s actually calling me back.”

Olive’s breath caught. “Answer and put it on speaker.”

Nova hit a button and held the phone out between the three of them. “This is Nova. Is this Miranda?”

There was a pause before a soft voice said, “Yes, you left me a message. Honestly, I wasn’t sure whether or not I should call you back. But I finally decided I would. I’m still hoping I don’t regret this.”

“I appreciate the callback. I’ve been hired as a private investigator to look into your ex-husband, and I’m trying to put together some information about him and his background.”



“Who hired you?” Miranda asked.

“I’m not at liberty to say.”

“What exactly are you investigating?”

Nova’s gaze flicked up to Olive’s. “The person who hired me believes Matt might be guilty of fraud.”

“Fraud?” Miranda’s voice lilted with interest. “I wasn’t expecting that.”

“I was hoping to ask you a few questions . . .” Nova said.

Another pause lingered. Then Miranda said, “I can’t promise to answer all of them. But you can try me.”

Olive gave Nova an encouraging nod.

Nova leaned closer to the phone. “We heard you were married to Matt Hansen when he met Rebecca. Is that true?”

More silence. Then, “Everything I say is off-record. Do you understand?”

“Of course.”

“Yes, Matt and I were married. We’d only been married about eight months at the time he met Rebecca. And our marriage had been rocky.”

“He claims he didn’t cheat on you, that he didn’t start actually dating Rebecca until you were divorced,” Nova said. “Is that the case?”

“No, that’s not the way it went down.” Miranda released a bitter laugh. “He started working all these extra hours at the college. Claimed it was because he had so much work to do. But it was really because he was seeing Rebecca. Now, if you want proof, that will be hard to find. But it’s the truth.”

“Did you ever meet Rebecca? Were you a student there also, by chance?”

“I wasn’t a student there,” she said. “I was working as a waitress at a local steakhouse to help pay Matt’s way through school. However, a couple of the girls I worked with were students.”

“Did they know Rebecca?” Nova asked.

“They didn’t seem to actually know her. But they knew of her. She made quite the name for herself on campus.”

Olive’s heart pounded harder. This was exactly the kind of information they were looking for.

Despite the riveting conversation, she scanned the trees around her again, careful not to let down her guard. Last time she had done that here, that motorcycle man had appeared out of nowhere and shot at them.

“How did she make a name for herself?” Nova asked.

“It turns out she was telling everybody a sob story about how her dad was dying of heart failure. No one could see through her lies. I couldn’t believe it.”

“How did you know it wasn’t true?” Nova asked.

“Once I found out that Matt was seeing Rebecca, I decided to do some research into this ‘dream girl’ of his.”

“What did this research show you?” Nova asked.

“That research showed that Rebecca’s father was alive and well. Not a hint of sickness in the present or in the past.”

“So she definitely lied?” Nova asked.

“Yes, she did. And I heard she has cancer now. But I don’t believe it for a second.”

## CHAPTER 52

They ended the phone call with Miranda, then glanced at each other.

“I have a feeling if more people from her past would talk, we’d hear more stories like this,” Olive said.

“I’m inclined to agree.” Nova nodded.

“However, it’s like Jason said last night, lying itself isn’t a crime.”

“But defrauding people of money is,” Jason added.

Olive let out a deep breath. “As much as I would love to sit here and talk about this more, we only have an hour until Rebecca comes home from the hospital. I want to check out her house before she gets back.”

Jason’s eyes widened with alarm. “What do you hope to accomplish by doing that?”

“I want to see her medicine bottles. See what she’s supposedly taking. She has all this medical equipment in her home, but the truth is anybody can order a lot of that stuff online. Those pictures she posted and the videos where she has an IV hooked up to her and oxygen . . . those are all things that can be staged. And I heard she has a hospital bed in her home. That would make her ruse even easier.”

“I can block the cameras when you go inside, just in case someone is watching,” Nova said. “I’d like to do that from the hotel, however. I have other work I need to do—like continuing to look into Rebecca’s finances and running that license plate.”

“Makes sense.” Olive glanced at the time again. “I think we’ll have just enough time to drop you off and then to get me back to the house. I should be able to slip in and out pretty quickly.”

“And me?” Jason asked.

“I’ll need you to be my lookout just in case anyone comes home early.”

“I can do that.”

“Great. Then we need to get on the road.”

---

Olive halfway expected the motorcycle man to appear again, following them as they left this property. But he didn’t.

Still, this property had her intrigued. She wanted to know what was going on here. But now wasn’t the time to find out.

They had just enough time to drop Nova off and then get to Rebecca’s place.

Jason pulled to a stop across the street and down a few houses.

It looked like no one was home.

“Call me if you see anything suspicious,” Olive murmured.

“I will.” Jason’s voice sounded sincere and filled with concern. “Be careful.”

Her throat went dry when she realized his voice had dropped to that deeper level, the way it always did when he talked about being concerned for her.

She didn’t want to feel touched by the subtle change, but she did.

“I will be.” Her voice sounded entirely too hoarse for her comfort. She needed to keep a tighter rein on her emotions—something that always felt harder when Jason was around.

“You know how to pick the lock?”

“I do. I’m pretty good at it.” Probably because while other parents were teaching their kids to do laundry or properly wash dishes, her dad was teaching her how to pick locks. Said it might be a good skill to have one day.

And now here she was.

*Like father, like daughter.*

Just like the note that she’d found on her old house said.

With one more glance at Jason, she hurried across the street. In thirty seconds, she’d let herself into the house and closed

the door.

She was nearly certain no one had seen her.

Olive paused just inside the door and glanced around the home. She needed to find that medicine, take a picture of the bottles, and get out of here.

She hurried through the living room, searching as she walked for any medicine bottles. She hadn't seen any medicine bottles in this room when they did the interview.

She paused in the kitchen and quickly searched the cabinets.

She still didn't see any medicine.

Next, she headed to Rebecca's bedroom.

When she stepped into the room, she paused. A hospital bed was shoved into the corner, and a regular king-sized bed filled the middle of the space.

Olive supposed that wasn't suspicious within itself. But if this disease was fake, then Rebecca truly had gone to the extreme.

Snapping from her thoughts, she headed to the dresser.

Sure enough, uncountable orange and white medicine bottles stood like a miniature city there.

Working as quickly as possible, Olive began to take pictures with her phone.

Just as she snapped the last one, her phone buzzed.

She glanced at the screen and saw a text from Jason:

Someone just pulled into the driveway and is heading inside. Get out now.

## CHAPTER 53

Olive heard the front door open.

Her heart raced as she realized what was happening.

She didn't have time to get out of the house. Heading toward the back door would put her right in line with the front door.

She had to make a quick decision.

She ducked into the closet, leaving the door cracked just enough to peer out.

As she stood there in the darkness waiting, she texted Jason:

Man or woman?

He replied back:

Man. Never seen him before.

Olive had to wonder if this was the same guy who'd come while Nova was looking through the mailbox.

But why would that man come back now? If Rebecca and Matt were heading home from the hospital, it would be strange for him to come here to pick up something. The timing was off.

Maybe this guy wanted to grab something before Rebecca and Matt got home so he wouldn't be seen.

The soft pad of footsteps on the carpet sounded in the hallway.

Olive waited, halfway expecting the man to enter the bedroom.

A creak cut through the air.

Her lungs froze.

But the sound hadn't come from the door to Matt and Rebecca's bedroom, she realized.

There were two other bedrooms in the house. From what Rebecca had told Olive, one belonged to Willow and the other was a home office. She wasn't sure which was which.

If Olive had to guess, the man had gone into the office. More suspicious information could be found there.

She took a step back and her foot hit something.

Out of curiosity, she reached to pick it up.

She squinted.

A burner phone had been stuffed into a shoe.

Why would Rebecca or Matt have a hidden burner phone?

More things didn't make sense.

She wanted to take the device with her, but she couldn't. If this phone went missing, it would be too obvious someone had taken it. Instead, she placed it back inside the shoe.

As she did, a new thought hit her. What if someone else was investigating this family? The police? The FBI? Even a reporter possibly?

Maybe that was who'd come inside.

Olive would never know if she remained hidden.

Drawing in a deep breath, Olive pushed the door open and slunk out. She wanted a better look.

But she couldn't be caught. She needed to be very careful.

For that reason, she decided to stay in the bedroom and peer into the hallway.

She quietly walked toward the doorway.

Just before she reached it, the floor squealed beneath her.

She froze, her heart racing out of control.

Had that man heard her footstep? Had she just blown it?

She was about to find out.

---

Olive's heart pounded in her ears.

She couldn't just stand here. Yet she couldn't afford to make any more sounds either.

She imagined the man coming into this room and seeing her. Reacting to her. Attacking her.

Her body still ached from the fight last night. She wasn't as strong today as she'd like. Her body needed more time to recover.

Her phone vibrated in her pocket.

It was probably Jason, checking to make sure she was okay.

Olive needed to move!

She hurried toward the bedroom door and ducked behind it.

She had her gun with her, though she didn't want to use it.

No sounds came from the hallway.

She tried to peer in the gap between the door and the wall.

As her vision narrowed, she spotted a man wearing a black ball cap and hoodie. She couldn't make out his features.

But he stared at the bedroom doors as if contemplating whether to go inside.

Olive's heart continued to pound in her ears as she waited.

Finally, the man went inside the other bedroom.

Olive released the breath she'd been holding, though she knew she wasn't out of the woods yet.

Remaining in place, she continued to watch and listen.

She heard his footsteps moving around. A moment later, he emerged, shoving something into his pocket.

His steps were faster this time as he headed away from the hallway.

Then the front door closed.

The man was gone.

But it was too soon to relax.

Instead, Olive took the phone from her pocket and looked at her messages.

Jason confirmed the man was walking back to his vehicle.

She let out a breath. Good.

But she still needed to get out of here.

She glanced at her watch. Rebecca should have been released from the hospital about ten minutes ago. If she'd left any earlier . . .

Olive didn't even want to think about that.

She left the bedroom but paused as something beckoned her back.

Her eye was drawn to the room she'd seen the man go into.

On a whim, she hurried down the hallway and pushed the door open, fully expecting to see an office.

Her breath caught when she realized it was Willow's room.

What in the world had the man been doing inside the girl's room?

Her thoughts twisted in so many different directions, they formed a knot.

None of the possibilities were good.

Her phone buzzed again—probably Jason reminding her to get out of there.

She glanced at the screen. But before she could read the words, she heard car doors slamming. Voices drifted from outside.

Olive scanned her texts and confirmed her fear.

Matt and Rebecca were home early.

## CHAPTER 54

Olive typed back:

**Which door are they headed toward?**

Jason answered:

**The front.**

Olive sprinted toward the back of the house. If Matt and Rebecca came inside right now, they'd see her at the back door.

But she was going to have to take the chance.

Though she was cutting it close, she quietly slipped outside.

First obstacle: conquered.

She wasn't out of the woods yet, however.

Olive remained low as she ducked to the side of the house—the side opposite the driveway.

She'd have to time this just right in order to get back to Jason's vehicle before Matt and Rebecca saw her.

With any luck, Matt would help Rebecca inside and get her settled.

That would give Olive the perfect opportunity to get away.

For now, she waited near the corner of the house, thankful the family didn't have a fence. Still, she prayed no one saw her standing here because she knew she looked suspicious. It would be hard to explain away her presence.

She was counting on Jason to be her eyes.

He sent another text:

Going to the front porch now.

From her position near the corner, Olive heard Rebecca and Matt talking. Nothing about what they said sounded suspect.

Matt told Rebecca to be careful. To watch her step.

Just like any doting husband might say when bringing his wife home from the hospital.

Except there was no one here to hear their conversation. So were they faking it because faking had become natural to them?

Or because something really was wrong with Rebecca?

Olive couldn't be sure.

She still heard them on the porch. They were taking their time getting inside.

Her muscles wound tighter.

Then Olive heard another door slam—but not Matt and Rebecca's.

She glanced over and saw Georgina step out onto her porch.

Her stomach sank.

*No . . . !*

Olive quickly ducked behind a bush before the woman saw her.

---

None of this was supposed to be so complicated. The whole investigation was supposed to be a simple in-and-out assignment.

Yet at every turn she faced a new obstacle.

Olive crouched lower behind the bush, the leaves tickling her face. She didn't care. She couldn't let Georgina see her.

The woman paused and called hello to Matt and Rebecca.

Olive's heart thumped harder as she waited.

If Georgina decided to walk across the lawn to talk to them, she would *definitely* see Olive. Or if Matt and Rebecca decided to meet Georgina halfway, they would *definitely* spot Olive.

Neither scenario was good.

Making an impulsive decision, Olive grabbed her phone and dialed Georgina's number.

Then she watched.

The woman stepped toward the sidewalk as if heading to meet her neighbors.

Then she paused.

Olive's heart pounded in her ears.

The next moment, Georgina turned and headed back inside to answer the call.

Relief swept through her.

Still, she would have to be careful.

She ended the call. If Georgina called back, Olive would apologize and tell her the call was accidental.

She peered around the corner again.

Rebecca and Matt had gone inside.

Wasting no more time, Olive darted toward Jason's Range Rover.

This excursion had been too close for comfort.

## CHAPTER 55

Jason pulled away from the curb as soon as Olive was in the vehicle.

“That was a close one,” Jason muttered, quickly looking her over.

“Tell me about it.” Olive leaned back in her seat, trying to catch her breath. Her adrenaline had really been pumping. “You didn’t recognize the guy who went into the house?”

“Never seen him. You?”

“I didn’t get a good look at his face. How about his vehicle?”

“He parked behind me, farther down the street. I almost got out to check his plates, but I didn’t want to take my eyes off the house in case you needed help.”

“I appreciate that.” She held back a frown. “It’s weird, Jason. That guy went into Willow’s room.”

He quirked an eyebrow. “Willow’s room? What would he be doing in there?”

“I have no idea. I think he took something, but whatever it was, it was small enough to fit in his pocket.”

His jaw thumped. “That is strange.”

“I did, however, get photos of Rebecca’s medicines. I’m going to send them to Rex.

He has connections in the medical field who can answer some questions for us—faster than we can research this.”

As she talked, Olive sent the pictures to Rex. He immediately replied and said he’d try to have some answers by tomorrow.

Olive took a minute to examine the labels herself.

She hadn’t had a chance to read the fine print when she was taking the photos. She was in too big of a hurry.

But most of the names of the medications meant nothing to her.

And many of the dates on these bottles were expired. A couple were for Matt.

“Well?” Jason asked.

“My gut tells me some of these bottles are just smoke and mirrors, props used in the background of Rebecca’s TikTok videos to make herself look legitimately sick.”

Jason let out a grunt. “If that’s what she’s doing, it’s disgusting.”

“I agree.” She let out a sigh. “We should probably go.”

They were supposed to meet Sabrina and Ellis for dinner at six. That only left them an hour and a half. They still needed to change and get ready.

Maybe this dinner was a bad idea, especially with so many other things going on. But Olive’s gut told her not to cancel. She couldn’t help but think that Sabrina might know something useful. After all, their old friend had been watching Willow *and* she was helping with the fundraiser. She could be a wealth of information.

But they wouldn’t be able to stay long. They had too many other things to do. Plus, Sabrina and Ellis had something else on their schedule as well.

Maybe she and Jason would discover something new, something that would move this investigation forward.

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“Why do I feel nervous?” Olive didn’t mean to ask the question out loud, but she did.

Jason stole a glance at her as he drove down the road a couple of hours later. “Revisiting the past isn’t always all fun and games.”

“What are we going to tell Sabrina? What reason did you give her that we’d both be in town?”

“I just told her we’d reconnected, and I thought it would be fun to visit you while you were doing the documentary since it was our old stomping ground. She didn’t seem to think anything of it.”

Olive let out a breath. “Okay. That sounds good.”



She did feel better, but nerves still thrummed through her.

“Hey . . .” Jason looked at her again. “I wasn’t trying to make you feel weird about doing this. I’m sorry if I did.”

Olive shook her head. “I don’t feel weird about having dinner with them. It just feels weird to be back, like I’m visiting a different time in my life.”

“I get that.” Jason opened his mouth as if he wanted to ask more questions, but then he closed it again.

There was still so much Jason didn’t know—especially about her father. In general, it was better that way. She wanted to keep things simple.

They finally pulled up to Sabrina’s house.

The place was nicer than Olive expected. Two stories with white brick, black window frames, and a black tin roof—a high-end blend of modern and rustic. Two BMWs were parked in the driveway.

“I’d say Sabrina has done well for herself,” Olive murmured.

This house reminded Olive of Jason’s place.

His biological grandfather had found him before he died, and the two of them had really connected. When the man died, he left everything to Jason. Little did Jason know at the time that the man was a multi-millionaire with a huge house and money that would leave him set for life.

Olive, on the other hand, was happy with her little apartment back in Indianapolis. She was never there very often anyway. Money only seemed to make life more complicated. With more money came more bills, more things to take care of, more people who only liked you for your social status.

Olive sucked in a breath before saying, “Here goes nothing.”

“You’ve got this,” Jason reassured her.

As they climbed the steps to the front door, it opened, and Sabrina and Ellis stood there, looking like the picture-perfect couple.

Ellis had always been handsome, and he still was. His dark hair was now receding slightly. His face had filled out more, but he was still lean with a wide grin. Still refined.

Sabrina clasped her hands in front of her as she gazed at her friends. “Olive and Jason! I can’t even tell you how excited I am. I have dreamed about the day when all of us could get together again for so long. And I can’t believe you’re both here. In my wildest dreams I thought *maybe* I’d see one of you again. But *never* both, and *never* together.”

As Olive stepped closer, Sabrina let out a squeal and then pulled her into a hug. She did the same with Jason.

Ellis was more reserved as he gave them loose embraces and handshakes. Olive and Jason hadn’t been nearly as close to him.

“I brought some flowers.” Olive held up the wildflower bouquet they’d picked up at the store on the way.

“They’re so beautiful.” Sabrina sniffed them. “Thank you. Now, y’all come in. Paisley actually went to a friend’s house. We had Willow with us last night and most of the day today, but we took her home about an hour ago. Having her here is always fun, but Paisley is a social butterfly and likes a variety of friends.”

A social butterfly? Olive had to wonder which parent she got that trait from. Both Sabrina and Ellis were friendly, but she wouldn’t call either of them social butterflies.

“So this is my house.” Sabrina held her arms out as if to display her living room.

Her decorating style inside appeared similar to the outside with minimal embellishments, all in neutral tones.

“It’s lovely,” Olive said. “Very lovely.”

Sabrina gave them a quick tour, including an impressive game room and a beautiful sparkling pool out back.

What did Sabrina say Ellis did for a living again? Olive couldn’t remember. He clearly made good money.

A tantalizing scent hovered in the air and made Olive’s stomach grumble.

Sabrina seemed to read her thoughts. “You sound hungry. We already put the steaks on the grill. Ellis was starving. We’re not trying to rush anything, of course. But the baked potatoes are in the oven, I’ve got a salad made, and I even have sweet tea and lemonade—I didn’t forget about your caffeine allergy.”

“It sounds perfect.” Just as Olive said the words, her stomach grumbled again.

She was hungrier than she thought. Working cases always built up an appetite, it seemed.

Sabrina turned to them. “Why don’t we go ahead and eat then? I know you don’t have much time because you’re here to work on your documentary. Besides, we have to pick up Paisley in an hour and a half anyway.”

“I’m starving also, so it sounds good to me,” Olive admitted.

Several minutes later, they were all gathered around the table.

Olive wanted to chat. But she also wanted to hear about Willow.

She’d have to use all her skills to bring up the subject without being too obvious.

## CHAPTER 56

The steak was delicious. Then again, Olive was in cattle country, so it should be.

The conversation as they ate had been pleasant but basic.

At a break in the conversation, Olive leaned back in her chair. “I just want to say that I think it’s really nice you guys let Willow stay here while Rebecca was in the hospital.”

Sabrina waved her hand in the air. “It’s not a big deal. It’s the least we can do after everything that family has been through.”

Olive softened her voice and asked, “Off the record, how does Willow seem to be holding up? I imagine this has been hard on her.”

“Actually, she seems surprisingly resilient.” Sabrina shrugged.

“Most kids are,” Ellis added. “They’re tougher than we give them credit for.”

“That’s true,” Olive agreed. “I’d hate to think about her being too upset.”

Jason lifted his glass of sweet tea, about to take a sip. “It sounds like Willow might be used to stuff like this by now. It’s pretty much been her whole life, right?”

“That could very well be true,” Ellis said.

“But you know what?” Sabrina sat up as if she had another thought. “Willow said the funniest thing. While we were having breakfast this morning, she told me her family has a beach house down in Galveston.”

Olive tried not to look too interested as she tilted her head. “Did she?”

“I just kind of laughed it off. Considering their situation, I know they can’t afford a beach house.”

“Maybe one of their relatives owns it, and they consider it a family beach house,” Jason suggested lightly.

“No, Willow *definitely* said it was theirs. Said they go there every summer and build sandcastles. Granted, she’s four so . . . who knows?”

Olive’s mind raced. What if all those times Rebecca told people she had to go out of town for treatment, she and her family were really going to their beach house?

A beach house that could have possibly been paid for using funds donated to them for cancer treatment?

If Olive could prove that then they could prove Rebecca was a fraud.

As soon as Olive had the chance, she’d ask Nova to dig deeper into those financials. There had to be some type of digital footprint that showed where all their money was going. To the beach house? What else were they hiding?

As the saying went, “Follow the money.”

Olive had a feeling that was where they’d find the answers they needed.

---

After dinner and dessert, Olive and Jason still had about twenty more minutes before the agreed-upon time they would wrap this up.

Ellis began to tell them about his collection of luxury cars. Jason’s interest perked, and Ellis volunteered to show them his vehicles.

They all filed toward the garage to see his Jaguar, Aston Martin, and Porsche 911.

But as soon as Olive walked into the garage, she forgot all about the cars.

Instead, her gaze zeroed in on a motorcycle parked there.

She let the men talk, discussing the stats on each car.

But her gaze remained on the bike.

“You like motorcycles?” Sabrina seemed to notice Olive staring.

“I kind of do, to be honest.” Olive’s words weren’t untrue. She’d learned to ride in college, and occasionally on assignment when her persona called for it, she still rode one.

“Well, I won’t let Ellis ride one,” Sabrina said. “I just don’t think it’s safe.”

“So whose bike is that? Yours?”

“Oh no. Not mine.” Sabrina let out a brittle laugh. “We’re actually keeping it here for Matt.”

Olive’s eyebrows shot up. “For Matt? Does he not have room in his garage?”

Sabrina lowered her voice. “The truth is, he told Rebecca he’d sell it. I guess they needed the money, you know? But he just couldn’t bring himself to do it. Apparently, he put a lot of money and sweat equity into fixing this beauty up. It was a piece of junk when he bought it.”

“That’s nice you let him keep it here. It’s just too bad he can’t ride it.”

Sabrina swiped her hand through the air. “Oh, he still rides it. Sometimes he’ll come over on his lunch break just so he can take a quick ride. We gave him the code to get into the garage so he can come and go as he wants.”

Olive’s heart pounded harder at her words.

She remembered what Matt’s coworker said—about how Matt had liberal leave for his wife’s sickness. About how Matt had told Rebecca his boss was giving him a hard time.

What if Matt was using that as an excuse? Meanwhile, he was secretly sneaking out and taking joy rides to blow off steam—or something else more nefarious?

It was looking more and more like Matt was their guy. That he might be Motorcycle Man.

But, if that was true, Olive still had a lot of questions that needed answers.

## CHAPTER 57

“That was revealing,” Olive said when she and Jason climbed back into his Range Rover after dinner.

“The beach house and the motorcycle, huh? That could be some decent evidence, for sure.” Jason started the engine but didn’t put the vehicle in Drive. “It was good to see Sabrina and Ellis. They seem to be doing well for themselves.”

“Yes, they do.” Olive blew out a breath. “We should go check in with Nova. Then I want to go back to that shack and see what we can find out.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

If Olive were being honest with herself, she’d admit she was glad Jason was here. She didn’t want to bring Nova with her and put her in potential danger. But having backup was always nice.

They reached the hotel and went to Nova’s room, where they filled her in on their dinner meeting.

“I’m going to call you guys Mr. and Mrs. Smith,” Nova murmured as she sat on the couch with her legs crossed beneath her and her computer on her lap. “I found something also. That car we were following—the one Rebecca’s cousin drove? It’s strange, but the vehicle is actually owned by a company.”

Olive sucked in a breath. “What company?”

“That’s the thing—it’s like a shell corporation. I can’t find any information on it. Weird, huh?”

Another shell corporation? Olive mused. That had to be a coincidence. Her dad couldn’t be connected with this case. However, the commonality bothered her.

“That’s too bad,” Olive murmured.

“Also, I managed to get some financial records,” Nova continued. “The problem is there could be other accounts that I’m unaware of. I’m still working on that.”

“Did you see anything in the bank statements you found?”

“A few things were interesting. There have definitely been some large payments going out. But it’s weird because the funds have been transferred to an overseas account labeled ‘Medical Bills.’ However, just because that’s the way it’s labeled doesn’t mean that’s actually what it is.”

“So Rebecca and Matt set up a Swiss bank account or something?” Olive clarified.

“That’s the harder part to uncover. I’m trying to find a name linked with the account. But whoever owns it knows how to bury their information. I’m still working on it, however.”

Olive pictured Rebecca and Matt setting up a secret overseas account and putting the money people gave them into it. They could say they were paying medical bills from it, but they were secretly pocketing that cash.

“I’m going to keep looking into it.” Nova raised her chin. “I’m sure I’ll discover something.”

“I hope you do. Look into that beach house down in Galveston also. I want to know if they really own a vacation property.”

More questions filled her mind.

Were Rebecca and Matt conniving enough to set up a shell account for themselves? Did they secretly own that green Mercedes? Were they planning a getaway once people caught on to what they were doing? Did they have another scheme up their sleeve for when this was done?

Olive needed those answers.

She glanced at Jason. “We need to get ready for tonight’s excursion.”

“Be safe, y’all.” Nova threw them a look. “I’m trying to sound like I’m from Texas.”

Olive hid her smile.

“No, but really—be careful.” Nova’s voice turned more serious. “If you need anything, call me—I probably can’t help you. But I’ll call Rex, and he can.”

Rex was a very resourceful man.

Olive and Jason went to their respective rooms to change into more casual, dark-colored clothing. They’d head back to the shack and see what was happening there. Under the cover of darkness, maybe they could find some answers.

Before leaving her room, Olive checked her gun to make sure it was loaded and ready. She hoped she wouldn't need to use it. But she needed to have it just in case.

She still wasn't sure what they were up against right now or why the IP address from those cameras would lead back to that shack. It made no sense. Even if the IP address truly was headquartered at that property, why would someone choose that location?

Then again, this whole case had been perplexing.

A woman with cancer with hidden cameras in her house. A man this woman claimed was her cousin, who seemed threatening. A man on a motorcycle, who was taking pictures and shooting at Olive.

Somehow, she needed to figure out how the pieces fit.

There came a point in every case where Olive questioned if things would come together.

They usually did—eventually.

But this assignment felt more important than many she'd done. More personal. She'd worked other cases where the scope was much more far-reaching—or there was a higher chance of a negative outcome, of impacting more people. Bombs. Weapons. Murder plots.

Her urgency now was because of her childhood. Olive often thought about when her dad had made her go into town and ask innocent people for money, even though she wasn't really sick. She'd come to despise people who preyed on the innocent.

People like Rebecca.

Olive took one more glance at herself in the mirror and nodded with resigned approval. She'd pulled her hair into a bun to get it out of her face. Had donned black clothing. Had taken off all her jewelry.

This would have to do. It was time to go meet Jason.

She really hoped things went well tonight.

---

Just as before, Jason and Olive stashed the Range Rover away out of sight behind some trees, just in case anyone else came down this lane.

On one hand, the possibility seemed unlikely. The shack had definitely been deserted.

On the other hand, Motorcycle Man had found them here. Rebecca's supposed cousin had also come out here.

There was clearly more going on at this shack than met the eye.

Jason turned to her as they sat in his vehicle. "You ready for this?"

"More than ready."

They climbed from his Range Rover and headed toward the edge of the trees again.

Pausing there, they observed the house. In the darkness, it was hard to see much. There were definitely no lights on or any other evidence indicating someone was there.

In fact, everything looked so normal. Eerily normal.

"I think we should walk the perimeter of the woods before we venture closer," Jason suggested. "Just to be on the safe side."

"That seems like a good idea."

Woods only surrounded about half of the property. After that, it was a stretch of open field eventually leading to the rolling mountains in the background.

The less they were exposed, the better.

They watched their steps as they walked in the darkness, not turning on a flashlight in order not to be spotted. Slowly, they made their way through the woods, the only sounds that of their footsteps hitting the ground or the swish of their clothes.

Jason suddenly stopped in front of her. "Look at that."

"Look at what?" Olive peered over his shoulder.

Her eyes widened when she saw a dark-green sedan parked within the trees.

There was a small pull-out, big enough for maybe two vehicles to be stashed out of sight.

Even when Olive had walked the property before, she hadn't seen this area. The position of the trees blocked any vehicles from sight.

She and Jason exchanged a look.

Then a voice rang out.

Jason pulled Olive behind a tree.

As he did, she glanced toward the voice.

Her eyes widened when she saw a horizontal door lift from the ground and then close again as a man stepped out with a cell phone to his ear.

Her heart pounded harder. A storm shelter.

She should have known.

Rebecca's cousin—or whoever the man actually was—had been underground.

"I'm doing everything you told me," the man growled into the phone. "I need you to stay off my case. I don't know why the cameras keep going down. I'm still trying to figure that out. The good news is that they're up now."

Olive's breath caught. Was he talking about when Nova had taken the cameras offline at Rebecca and Matt's house?

It seemed like a good bet.

Was this the smoking gun Olive had been looking for?

"I've got to do a few more things, then I'll be back," the man continued. "I'll be careful. Yes, I've seen the woman snooping around. I won't let her find out anything. If she gets too close to the truth, I know what to do."

Olive's heart pounded harder. He was talking about her, wasn't he?

The man climbed into his car and slammed the door. Olive couldn't hear any more of that conversation, but maybe she'd heard enough.

Part of her wanted to follow this guy. But the other part wanted even more to see what was inside that bunker.

She watched as the man drove away. No other cars were here. Based on the conversation they'd overheard, no one was inside either.

If she and Jason were going to strike, now seemed to be the time.

Jason turned toward her. "Shall we?"

Olive didn't have to think about her answer. "Let's go."

## CHAPTER 58

Guns in hand, Olive and Jason hurried to the storm shelter. A lock held the doors together. It only took Olive a few seconds to pick it and throw the doors open.

She stared inside the opening.

A set of winding metal steps led down a dark stairway.

She had a feeling nothing good happened down here.

“Let me go first,” Jason said.

Though Olive was officially the investigator in this case, she appreciated his gallant offer. She didn’t argue with him. Jason knew what he was doing also.

As he took the first step, dim lights flickered on overhead. Clearly, they were activated by motion.

Olive followed behind him, closing the doors as she did.

When she reached the bottom, she expected to see a rustic old storm cellar.

She should have known better.

More dim lights buzzed overhead, illuminating the transformed space.

The floor was polished concrete. The walls had been painted a light gray. Numerous computers were set up on tables around the perimeter.

“What is this place?” Jason murmured as he shoved his gun back into the holster.

Olive’s gaze focused on the computer screens in front of them.

A live feed from Rebecca and Matt’s house played.

The couple stood in their living room, appearing to argue about something.

Olive felt intrusive watching them.

Yet at the same time she couldn’t pull her gaze away.

---

“I almost wish I could hear what they’re arguing about,” Olive muttered as she stared at the screen.

Jason stepped closer to the computers and nudged the mouse.

A second later, voices came through the speakers.

Guilt flooded Olive a moment, but she tried to ignore it.

“We can’t keep doing this,” Matt said.

“We have no choice at this point. We’re in too deep.”

Matt dropped onto the couch. “I’m exhausted. And paranoid all the time. I can’t continue to live this lie!”

So they actually had a guilty conscience about this.

Rebecca, however, didn’t seem ready to give up.

“It is what it is,” Rebecca murmured before stomping from the room.

As she watched, a different idea began to form in Olive’s mind.

What if she’d been looking at this wrong all along? At least, what if she’d been looking at *most* of this wrong? She wasn’t ready to voice any of her theories out loud. They needed more time to simmer.

The problem was she still needed to prove what was going on.

At least, proving Rebecca was faking it was what Olive thought she needed to do from the start.

The truth was, she didn’t have to prove it . . . if Rebecca and Matt simply owned up to what they were doing.

But how would she get them to do that?

Jason muted the volume again and then stepped closer to her. “We should probably get going.”

Olive glanced at the time. It was only smart to get out of here, especially since that guy said he would be coming back.

But as she glanced around again, she noticed a door in the corner. It appeared to be metal, and the marks on the floor indicated it had recently been opened.

She nodded toward it. "I want to check that out before we leave."

She crept toward it, still holding her gun, just in case.

Carefully, she jerked it open.

As she did, a terrible scent hit her.

The scent of death.

Jason shone his light into the space.

A dead woman wearing scrubs stared back at them, and Olive instinctively knew it was Anne, the missing nurse Mitzi had tried to get in contact with.



## CHAPTER 59

“What do you want to do?” Jason asked.

Olive stared at Anne, regret filling her. “If we call the police right now, we’re going to have a lot of explaining to do about why we’re here.”

“We just can’t let this woman’s body rot here.”

“I agree.” Olive’s thoughts continued to race until she knew what she needed to do. “We’re going to leave this place as we found it. When we get halfway back to Oasis, I’m going to anonymously call the police. I’ll tell them what we found and have them come out. That will also keep us off their radar for now.”

Jason stared at her. “You sure that’s what you want?”

“I’m positive.”

He drew in a deep breath and nodded. “Okay then. Let’s get out of here before that guy comes back and catches us.”

They hurried up the steps and locked the doors behind them. Olive carefully wiped away any fingerprints from the door handles using the edge of her sweatshirt. Then they hurried to Jason’s SUV.

They were both quiet as they headed down the road, no doubt each lost in their own thoughts.

Olive hadn’t expected to find a dead body.

Did Anne know too much? Was that why she’d been killed?

Had Maria, the housekeeper, also been killed for that very reason?

If that was the case, then the only culprits who could be responsible were Matt and Rebecca.

But Olive still had trouble reconciling their image to them being killers.

Letting out a heavy sigh, she glanced at the road behind her. It was clear—no one appeared to be following them.

She could be thankful about that, she supposed.

But things still weren’t making as much sense as she’d like.

Just as Olive had promised, when they were halfway back, she used a burner phone she carried in her purse to call the police. She disguised her voice—she was fairly good at accents—to report what had been found.

After she’d given all the information, she ended the call before the operator could ask any more questions.

Then she tried to call Mitzi. There was no answer.

Olive frowned. Was she with the doctor again?

Olive left a message, asking her colleague to give her a call back.

But the bad feeling continued to simmer inside her.

---

At the hotel, Olive, Jason, and Nova gathered in her room to share their new information.

Nova’s eyes widened with surprise at all the new details that had emerged. “I can’t believe this.”

“We can’t either,” Olive said. “I never thought murder would be involved—even though the housekeeper’s death seemed pretty suspicious.”

Nova leaned back in her chair and nodded. “Well, I’ve been busy also. I’ve been trying to put together the video for tomorrow’s fundraiser—just in case it still happens.”

Olive’s phone rang, and she glanced at the screen. It was Chelsea.

She answered, putting it on speaker. “Hey, Chelsea. I’m here with Jason and one of my coworkers.”

“Oh, good,” Chelsea said. “I’m glad I could catch you together.”

“What’s going on?” Olive asked.

“Monty told me the cops were called to a shack on the outskirts of town. They got there and found a dead body.” She

paused. “I know I probably shouldn’t be telling you this, but I have to. The dead body belonged to a nurse . . . and I’m pretty sure it was one of the nurses who was taking care of Rebecca.”

“We know,” Olive said. “Unfortunately, we were the ones to discover it and call it in anonymously. Do you know if the police have any suspects in mind? Or if they know who that place belongs to?”

“I know they’re working on it now. If I learn more, I’ll let you know.”

“Thanks,” Olive said. “I appreciate that.”

They ended the call with Chelsea.

Nova glanced at Olive and Jason, shaking her head. “There’s no way Rebecca and Matt are going to walk away from this unscathed. But I don’t understand the cameras monitoring their house.”

“I’m not sure I understand that either,” Olive said. “But we’re close to figuring it out. I can feel it in my bones.”

Nova rose. “I’m going to keep working. Let me know if you hear any updates.”

“Will do.”

As she left, it was only Olive and Jason.

Normally, Olive would be okay with that. But right now, for some reason, the tension between them made it hard to breathe.

Jason picked up the remote. “Mind if I turn on the news? I want to see if they’re reporting anything of interest.”

“Go right ahead.”

The TV came on, but a commercial played.

A commercial using the song “Hello” by Adele filled the room.

The air left her lungs.

This had been their song. Hers and Jason’s. Throughout the years, whenever she’d heard it, she’d thought of them. Thought about how even more appropriate the lyrics seemed now in their years apart.

Jason’s gaze caught hers.

He was thinking the same thing, wasn’t he?

Olive imagined for a moment what it would be like to step into his arms. To forget her worries, her past—everything—for just a second and enjoy herself.

“Jason—” she started.

He stepped closer, his smoky gaze locked on hers. “Yes?”

Her throat suddenly felt dry. What was she trying to say?

She really had no idea—which was unlike her. Plans were always her thing.

“I . . . I, uh . . . I’m really glad you’re here,” she finally said.

Somehow, in the time it had taken her to say those words, he’d moved until he was standing right in front of her. Moved close enough for her to see the flecks of gold in his eyes. To feel his presence, though he didn’t actually touch her.

She was in serious trouble. Because all she wanted to do was kiss him.

And she was fairly certain that Jason wanted the same.

## CHAPTER 60

### SEVENTEEN YEARS AGO

The next week, Olive and her mom had gone to the local farmer's market to go shopping. Her sisters had stayed home with Dad.

Olive was excited to spend some alone time with her mom, and she was so glad it wasn't with her dad instead. She never wanted a replay of last week. She was still thinking about it and felt embarrassed with every memory.

"Why don't you go pick out some tomatoes for me while I grab some cucumbers?" her mom said.

Olive nodded. She loved it when her mom trusted her enough to let her pick out vegetables at the market. She'd taught Olive what to look for and what to avoid.

She held her basket in the crook of her arm and started browsing the tomatoes, humming to herself as she did.

"Excuse me?" a voice said beside her.

Olive looked up. The blood drained from her face when she saw the woman from the pharmacy standing beside her—the clerk who'd given her money.

"Yes?" Olive's voice trembled.

"You came into the store last week asking for money," the woman said. "How are you doing?"

Her throat burned. "I'm . . . I'm fine."

"You look a lot better. I'm glad to see that. Are you here alone?"

She was pretty sure she wasn't allowed to tell other people when she was alone.

She opened her mouth, unsure how to answer.

Just then, her mom came up and put her arm around Olive. "Hi, there. Is everything okay?"

The clerk cracked a smile. "It's fine. I was just telling your daughter—I'm assuming she's your daughter—that I'm so glad she's looking better."

"Looking better?"

Olive's cheeks heated.

"Since . . . you know . . . since she's sick."

Mom stared at the woman. "She has been under the weather."

"Well, she's such a precious girl. I've been praying for her. I just wanted to let you know." Then the woman walked away, leaving Olive and her mom standing there.

Her mom looked down at her. "What was that about?"

Olive licked her lips. What did she say? Did she tell Mom what Dad had made her do?

He'd made Olive promise she wouldn't. But . . .

"Dad and I saw her last week when we were out," Olive finally said.

"Oh? How did she know you were sick? And you weren't sick when you went out with Dad, were you?"

"I was sniffling," Olive said.

Her mom squinted as if confused by the whole situation.

Then she snapped out of it and shook her head. "Okay then. How about those tomatoes?"

But something about her mom's response made Olive wonder if she knew what had happened.

What if she was okay with what Dad had done?

Olive hated the idea that could be true.

## CHAPTER 61

Olive was up bright and early.  
Her thoughts were still on Jason.  
About their almost kiss last night.  
Yes, almost kiss.  
It hadn't happened—which she should be grateful for. After all, her life didn't need any more complications.  
Nova had called with a question, interrupting their moment.  
Soon after, Jason had feigned an excuse to go back to his room. At least, that was what it felt like.  
He was also resistant to sparking a romance between them again. But she didn't know why.  
Maybe because she'd already broken his heart once?  
Either way, she needed to put the almost kiss out of her mind and pretend it had never happened.  
She glanced at the clock. It was 7:00 a.m., and the fundraiser started at eleven.  
If she truly wanted to stop all this before more people lost their money, then they would need to act quickly.  
She desperately wanted to know if there were any updates on the scene yesterday.  
Chelsea had promised to call them back when she could. Olive didn't want to risk calling her and catching her with her husband there. No need to add any marital strife.  
Instead, Olive quickly showered and got ready. Her body ached more today than it had yesterday even. Not only that, but her bruising was deeper and uglier.  
She might have to go back to the store to get another turtleneck if she couldn't cover up the big scratch at her neck.  
Instead, she dug through what she had brought and settled on a black T-shirt with a beige linen shirt over it and a long, thin brown knit scarf that she could wrap around her neck.  
“Very artistic,” she decided when she looked in the mirror.  
When her phone rang, she didn't recognize the number. She answered anyway.  
“Is this the film producer?” a female asked.  
“It is. Can I help you?”  
“I met you in the hospital yesterday,” the woman said with a whisper. “You were asking questions about Rebecca.”  
“That's right. I'm trying to get some clips from various people in her life.”  
“I don't want to be on camera. I don't want to be on record, for that matter. But there are a few things I know that I should mention. I couldn't really sleep last night because I kept thinking about it. I kept thinking about all the people that she's hurt.”  
Olive's heart beat harder. This was exactly the information she needed.  
“Can you meet? I am available this morning.”  
“No,” the woman said. “That's not a good idea.”  
Why did she almost sound scared?  
“Then can you tell me whatever it is here on the phone?”  
“Yes, but I need to make it quick. I don't believe that Rebecca has cancer. I've had my doubts for a while now, but my friend—the one you met yesterday—stopped me from saying anything.”  
“Why did she do that? And why do you sound so nervous now? Are you afraid of hurting your friendship if you're wrong?”  
“No, that's not it.” The woman paused.  
Olive's breath caught. “Do you think somebody hit Maria on purpose?”  
“I actually do,” she murmured. “As their housekeeper, she had seen things and heard things. She talked to them about it, and they didn't handle it well.”  
“Wait . . . so are you telling me that you think that Rebecca or Matt killed Maria?”  
“Either they did, or they hired someone to do it. It's not that far off especially when you consider all the money that they've brought in through these fundraisers.”

“I see.” Olive didn’t want to say too much.

“And that’s the reason why I’m telling you this over the phone right now. I am afraid if Matt and Rebecca realize that I’m skeptical they might want to silence me also . . . permanently.”

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Olive thanked the woman on the other line and then the call ended.

But she couldn’t get the woman’s words out of her head.

Because she very well could be right.

However, right now, they had to get to Matt and Rebecca’s. They were supposed to film them getting ready for the fundraiser. Then they were supposed to head over to the fundraiser itself to get some footage.

She grabbed her things and headed downstairs. She met the rest of the crew there. Jason was going to talk to Chelsea and see if she could get more information out of Monty.

Then he added, “Listen, Chelsea called early this morning. She didn’t want to wake you, so she called me instead.”

“Is there an update on that nurse?”

“Apparently, the police are still trying to figure out who owns that property,” Jason said. “But when they got on the scene, the cameras were off. The cops don’t know that someone was watching Rebecca and Matt.”

“How did these people know to kill the feed?” Olive asked.

“That’s an excellent question.”

Olive only had one theory—what if there were cameras in the cellar? What if someone had seen them down there?

It was the only thing that made sense.

But she didn’t like the thought of that.

Because that would mean the killer knew Olive and Jason were onto him.

And these people didn’t respect human life. They acted like people were disposable.

She swallowed hard.

Finally, she said, “We should get going. We don’t want to be late.”

## CHAPTER 62

When Olive saw Rebecca, she knew something was wrong. The woman didn't look nearly as cheery as usual. Nor did Matt, who stood behind her with his arms crossed and a vein bulging at his temple.

"Can we still come in?" Olive asked, uncertain about the change.

Rebecca opened the door but didn't say anything.

Olive exchanged glances with Nova as they stepped inside.

Before they could even ask any more questions or say anything, Rebecca started. "I had an interesting conversation yesterday with Georgina."

Olive's heart beat harder. Had the neighbor seen her hiding in the bushes? "Is that right?"

"She said that while I was in the hospital she saw someone collecting my mail for me. The girl with dark hair with purple tips who operated the camera during her interview." Rebecca glared at them. "The problem is I didn't ask you guys to come over and get my mail for me. So why were you looking through my mailbox?"

This was the moment where Olive needed to decide how to proceed. It could make or break the investigation. But she knew it was time to confront Rebecca and Matt.

Olive leveled her gaze with Rebecca as she said, "We know you've been scamming people. Nova and I have noticed that things don't add up. For that reason, we've been concerned we're going to be complicit in your fraud."

Rebecca narrowed her eyes, all signs of friendliness gone. "You've been investigating me this whole time?"

Olive wasn't ready to admit she was a PI. For now, she'd stick with her cover story. "We've been searching for the truth. What we hoped would be a nice feel-good story about people doing nice things for those in the community has been turned on its head."

"You don't know what you're talking about." Rebecca narrowed her gaze. "I don't want anything to do with this documentary anymore. I want you to get out of here." She sliced her hand through the air and then pointed at the door. "Now."

Unfortunately for Rebecca, Olive wasn't quite ready to go.

Instead, she turned her gaze on Matt. "We also learned, by accident, that you've been keeping a motorcycle at Ellis and Sabrina's house."

Rebecca's eyes widened as she turned to her husband. "What is she talking about? You sold that motorcycle. That's what you told me."

Matt's face flushed. "I couldn't bring myself to sell it. I love it so much. It's one of the few things that still brings me joy. That and you and Willow, of course."

"So you lied to me?" Outrage laced Rebecca's voice.

Apparently, the scammer didn't like to be scammed. Seemed a little poetic to Olive.

Matt stood silently, not saying anything.

"There's more to it than that, isn't there, Matt?" Olive finally said. "Are you the one who's been trying to run me over?"

"Run you over?" He narrowed his gaze. "Why would I do that?"

"Someone's been coming after me ever since I got to town. Then I found out you had a motorcycle and . . . maybe there's a reason you didn't want us doing this documentary? Maybe you were afraid we would find out too much about you?"

"You don't know what you're talking about," he snapped. "I haven't ridden in months. And I definitely wouldn't try to run someone over. It would damage my bike too much—plus, I'd never want to hurt someone."

"Physically, you mean?" Olive shot back. "Because you two have hurt a lot of people with this scheme of yours."

Neither said anything.

Olive looked back at Rebecca. "We also know that man you met with in the green Mercedes isn't actually your cousin."

Rebecca's eyes grew even more narrow. "Why in the world would you say that?"

Rebecca still wasn't giving up the truth yet. Olive wasn't sure if she admired that or thought the woman was an idiot for it.

"Because it's true," Olive started.

Rebecca's nostrils flared as she scowled at Olive. "I want you to get out of my house. Now."

Olive knew she wasn't going to get any more information right now. She grabbed her bag. As she did, she glanced at the side table near the front door.

A pile of mail lay there, and stuck between the envelopes were some photos.

Of Willow.

Had someone else volunteered to take family pictures for the Hansens?

Olive didn't think so. They didn't look staged.

There were photos of Willow on the playground. Walking down the sidewalk

"I said get out!" Rebecca yelled.

"On our way," Olive murmured.

Just as she stepped out the door, Rebecca looked at them, a new emotion in her gaze. "You need to drop this. Now."

Was that fear in her voice?

Olive thought it just might be.

---

"That was unexpected," Nova whispered as she and Olive hurried back to the Jeep and climbed in.

"You're right. It was. Did you see those pictures?"

"What pictures?"

She told Nova about the photos.

"What does that mean?" Nova asked as she snapped her seatbelt in place.

"I'm not sure." She frowned as she tried to come up with some theories. "But it's going to bug me until I know."

As Olive turned on the Jeep, she glanced at her phone again.

She must have frowned again because Nova asked, "Is everything okay?"

"I've been trying to call Mitzi all morning, but she hasn't answered, and she hasn't tried to call me back."

"That is weird. I get that she might be caught up in work, but you'd think at the very least she would have sent a text by now."

"Exactly."

A bad feeling gurgled in Olive's gut. What if something had happened to their colleague? Did they need to find Dr. Peters and ask him about his date with Mitzi?

Maybe.

"Try to call her again," Nova suggested. "Maybe she'll answer this time."

While they remained in the Jeep near the curb, Olive dialed Mitzi's number.

It rang three times, and Olive was nearly ready to give up, figuring Mitzi still wouldn't answer.

Then someone answered. However, there was no hello or hey. Just some static in the background.

"Mitzi?" Olive asked.

More silence.

"Are you there?" she asked.

Still no answer.

The bad feeling in Olive's gut only grew.

Then a deep, gravelly voice said, "I have your friend. If you want to see her alive again, then you're going to need to do exactly what I tell you."

Olive's eyes widened, and she glanced at Nova, who mirrored her expression.

"What did you do with my friend?" Olive rushed. "You leave her out of this."

"I'll text you instructions."

Then the line went dead.

Olive's heart pounded in her chest.

Someone must have figured out that Olive was working with Mitzi, and that they were getting closer to uncovering this scheme.

And now those people had Mitzi.

## CHAPTER 63

Olive waited for her phone to buzz. She wanted that message from whoever had abducted Mitzi.

It still hadn't come.

In the meantime, she headed to meet Jason. He was still at Chelsea's house and said they could stop by.

Jason and Chelsea were outside talking when they pulled up.

As soon as they stepped out of their vehicle, Jason squinted as if he knew something was wrong.

"Somebody has Mitzi," Olive stated. "He's supposed to text us directions, and we're supposed to follow those directions if we want to see her alive again."

"What?" Jason ran a hand through his hair. "I don't like this, Ollie."

"Neither do I. And we confronted Rebecca and Matt. They're still denying everything. But I could have been certain when Rebecca told me I needed to stay out of this that there was fear in her eyes."

Just then, her phone buzzed.

A message came in from Mitzi's phone number.

Meet me at eleven.

Then an address appeared, followed by the instructions:

Come alone or she'll die.

---

"What about the fundraiser?" Nova asked. "It starts at eleven. So should we just let it go on? Someone else is probably holding the money for Rebecca, so it's not like she'll get it at the start of the fundraiser or anything."

"That's a great point." Anxiety thrummed through Olive. "Right now, Mitzi is more important than that fundraiser. I've got to tell Rex what's going on."

She stepped away from them and called her boss. He wasn't happy with the news.

"You've got to go get her, Olive," he said. "And you've got to be careful. I'd send someone down there to help, but there's not enough time."

"Jason's here." Olive wasn't sure why she hadn't wanted to tell her boss that earlier. But she hadn't.

Rex was silent a moment before saying, "Is he?"

"He hasn't distracted me from the investigation in case that's what you're thinking. In fact, he's been a big help."

"Utilize him if he's willing," Rex said. "Believe me, I've already looked into his background. He's clean."

Olive wasn't sure how she felt about that. Then again, she wasn't surprised. Rex was very thorough.

"Let me know how everything goes," Rex said. "I'll do whatever it takes to get Mitzi back."

"Me too," Olive added.

She ended the call and glanced at her watch. She only had forty-five minutes until she needed to meet them, and the address that had been sent was a good thirty minutes away. She didn't have much time.

She joined the group again, and their talking stopped as they turned to look at her.

"I have to get going," she told them.

"I'm going with you." Jason stepped closer.

"Me too," Nova said.

"He told me to come alone. We can't all three show up." Plus, no matter how good Nova might be at cosplay, there were some situations that even playacting and lumpia couldn't solve.

Nova frowned. "So what do you want to do?"



“I need you to stay here and keep researching, looking into those financials and those accounts where the money is being sent. I can’t help but feel like we’re going to find some answers there.”

“I can do that,” Nova said.

Olive turned to Jason. “And I’d like for you to come with me. I need you to stay close, but out of sight, just in case I need backup.”

He looked as if he wanted to argue, but then he nodded. “Okay.”

She took a step away from Chelsea. “We need to run. We don’t have much time.”

“Let me know what I can do,” Chelsea said. “I’ll be at the fundraiser. I can talk to the woman who’s organizing it if you want.”

“That’s a great idea,” Olive said. “You do that. Thank you.”

“Be careful,” Chelsea said.

“You too.”

## CHAPTER 64

Olive and Jason talked through all the different scenarios that might be taking place as they drove. She'd already looked up the address, and it appeared to be an old warehouse. Of *course*, it was an old warehouse. It could never be somewhere high-class and safe. She pulled up right on time. She'd dropped Jason off a block ago, and he'd walk the rest of the way in case anyone was watching—and they most likely were. Olive checked her gun. But whoever was waiting for her would probably take it away from her. She had another one strapped to her ankle. They'd probably find that one too. She also had a knife up her sleeve, just in case. She needed to be prepared for whatever might happen. But that was nearly impossible. There were too many unknowns. She stared at the building, which appeared empty. This person who'd sent the text was probably waiting inside for her. She drew in a deep breath, again wishing she had a God she could pray to for safety and protection. She found herself hoping for that more and more lately. She needed to forget the idea. It would only end with disappointment. Then she remembered being at her old house. She'd prayed there, and Jason had shown up. Maybe she shouldn't dismiss the idea after all. She stepped toward the door and jerked it open. Darkness stared back at her. Olive took her first step inside. As soon as she did, a black bag came down over her head and arms clamped her limbs in place.

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Olive had no choice but to see what would play out next. She'd been patted down. Her weapons taken—they'd found all three. Then she'd been carried, kicking and screaming through the warehouse. She had heard doors open and close. Heard footsteps around her. She was placed in a chair. Ties had been put around her wrists and ankles. Then someone snatched the bag from over her head. A bright light blinded her, and she blinked as her eyes tried to adjust. The first person she saw was Mitzi. Her colleague sat in a chair in the other corner of the room, her wrists and ankles also bound. A gag stretched across her mouth. But her eyes were feisty and angry. Then Olive glanced up at the man in front of her. She had expected to see Dr. Peters. After all, he and Mitzi had gone on their date. It made sense that he might abduct her. Olive blinked in surprise when she realized it was . . . Ellis. Sabrina's husband. "You're behind this?" The words came out rough and full of accusation. "That's right. And you're trying to ruin my plans." The facts that had been trying to click in place in her mind suddenly all fit. Well, maybe they didn't all fit, but they were getting closer.

“You found out what Rebecca was doing and you blackmailed her, didn’t you?”

He said nothing.

“How did you find out?”

He smirked. “Dr. Peters and I went to college together. He’d had too much to drink one night and started talking a little too much. Meanwhile, I was about to lose my job in sales, and I didn’t know how I’d support my family. Paisley was still a baby. Then an idea hit me. A brilliant idea.”

“You saw how much money you’d made from Rebecca and decided to spread your enterprise far and wide, I guess? Since Sabrina has helped with some fundraisers, you knew how much money they were raking in. You even hired people to help you. I suppose you and Dr. Peters split some of those profits.”

“Keep going.” He paused. “I find this all amusing.”

“He wanted out, but you knew just how much money was at stake and what a great salesperson Rebecca really was,” Olive continued. “People were practically signing over their paychecks to her after they heard her story.”

Ellis let out a chuckle. “I could tell from the moment I met you that you were a smart one.”

“You were holding not only the fact that Rebecca had been lying over her head, but then you began to threaten Willow, didn’t you? That’s why you had one of your guys go into her bedroom. You had him take one of Willow’s toys as a way of proving that nothing was out of your reach.”

Ellis began to pace. “You think you have this all figured out, don’t you?”

“You’re doing the same thing to other people who’ve been sick, aren’t you? Scamming them out of money?” She remembered the woman from Midlothian.

He smirked. “After this one started going so well, we realized that we needed to keep it going. We found people with the biggest platforms. And when it seemed like their journey of sickness was over, we informed them that it wasn’t.”

“That’s despicable.” Bile rose in her throat. “Exactly how many people are you doing this to?”

“We have a roster.” He shrugged. “Turns out this pays much better than my old job. I just have to make sure nobody gets in my way. You were making that very difficult. I know you’re not a documentary filmmaker.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“And she’s not a temp worker at the hospital either.” He nodded at Mitzi.

“Dr. Peters is helping you, isn’t he?” Olive asked. “It’s amazing what people will do for a paycheck. Who’s the guy in the green Mercedes?”

“Just another one of my workers.” He paused. “But you do know that the fact you’re asking so many questions, and I’m answering them isn’t a good sign for you, don’t you?” He smiled.

“It means you’re going to kill me like you killed Maria and the nurse.”

## CHAPTER 65

Ellis twisted his head, and his eyebrows rose as if he hadn't expected to hear that. "You're smarter than I thought." Olive continued to stare at him, determined not to show any weakness. "You think you're just going to kill me and Mitzi and get away with it?"

"You're both out-of-towners anyway with very few connections. When you disappear, people will just think you left."

She let out a soft grunt. "People do know I'm here, you know. I mean, I don't have many connections, but I do have some very powerful ones."

"We'll think of a good cover story."

"Just like you thought of a good cover story for Maria?" She let out a quick chuckle. "Sorry to break it to you, but everyone knows her death was linked to this scheme of yours."

Ellis's gaze darkened. "I need you to stop talking."

Good. She was getting to him.

"I'm just telling you the truth," she muttered. "Your plan has some holes in it."

"It doesn't matter anymore! I have enough money that I can live happily for a very long time. I can leave town and go start a new life. I can practically buy my own island!"

"And you can let everybody else clean up your mess? How noble of you." Olive shook her head, not hiding the disgust in her gaze. "And what about Sabrina and Paisley? Are you going to leave them high and dry?"

"Sabrina will never approve of this when she finds out. The best thing I can do for her is to leave and not tell her anything. It isn't ideal, but I'm going to have to make that work."

"Not ideal?" Olive scoffed. "Sleeping arrangements on vacation aren't ideal. You're talking about abandoning your family."

Ellis's nostrils flared as his irritation grew. "Stop talking to me like I'm an idiot! I know exactly what I'm doing."

"And you were the one on the motorcycle," she continued. "I should have known. You were borrowing Matt's motorcycle, knowing that was another way of making him look guilty. You were taking pictures of Rebecca to use as blackmail. Then you spotted me and knew I was coming to town to do this documentary. It made you nervous."

"Fine. You're correct. Are you happy now? Yes, you're a smart lady. And you put the pieces together. But your intelligence is not going to do you any favors right now." He raised his gun toward her chest.

Olive swallowed hard and braced herself for what would happen next.

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"You don't want to do that," Olive told Ellis as she stared at him again.

"You've left me no choice." He spit out each word.

"You always have a choice. You don't have to make this any worse for yourself. Killing me will only end with you spending more time in jail."

"You don't know what you're talking about! I'm not going away for this. I already have everything planned."

Behind him, Olive saw Mitzi working her bindings. Could she get them loose?

"I think it's really cute that you're this optimistic." Olive knew she could be pushing Ellis's buttons. But she had to buy more time.

His nostrils flared as he stared at her. "You are really annoying, you know that? Your persistence is going to get you hurt one day." He paused. "Let me correct that. Today. Your persistence is going to get you hurt *today*."

He straightened his arm as he pointed the gun at her, his limbs trembling.

He usually had people do his dirty work for him, didn't he? He wasn't used to being the one taking the shots.

“You just need to give it up,” Olive said.

“I’ve worked too hard to get to where I am to give this up!”

The gun trembled even more.

He was trying to work up the nerve to pull the trigger, Olive realized.

With enough time, he just might be successful.

“Now enough talking!” he yelled.

Olive braced herself. She couldn’t reach him in time. Couldn’t get the ropes from her wrists.

Just then, Mitzi lunged out of her seat, the ropes falling behind her. She tackled Ellis.

His gun clattered to the floor.

Olive tugged harder at her bonds, trying to get away. But the rope was too tight.

Instead, she watched as she continued to work.

Ellis was surprisingly strong and fast.

He flipped Mitzi over, trapping her on her back and pinning her arms down.

As he glared at her, he called out some choice names.

Mitzi wasn’t as strong as she normally was right now. Not after being tied up down here all night.

Olive had to think of a way to help!

She tugged harder, determined to get these ropes off from around her wrists, even if it meant breaking her own thumb.

Ellis grabbed his gun and held the barrel to the center of Mitzi’s forehead. “That was a mistake.”

As Olive realized what he was about to do, she yelled, “No!”

## CHAPTER 66

Olive stood, wooden chair still attached to her and making her hunch over.

There was only one way she could get out of this.

She slammed the chair on the floor, breaking its legs and loosening the spindles on the back. Pain traveled up her back and the side of her leg, but she ignored it.

One of her ankles slid out.

But she needed more time to free the rest of her limbs.

She glanced at her colleague.

Mitzi thrashed, trying to fight Ellis. She had no luck. The man was stronger than Olive had thought.

Just then, the door burst open.

Jason stood there, gun in hand and poised to shoot. "I wouldn't do that if I were you."

Jason . . . thank goodness he was here.

Olive tried to steady her breathing, but she couldn't seem to get a good breath as she watched the situation play out.

What happened in the next few seconds would determine one of their fates. One wrong move could have devastating consequences.

"Put the gun down," Jason said, his voice deep and gravelly.

"You put the gun down," Ellis said, sweat pouring from his face. "Or I'm going to shoot her. Don't test me."

"You don't want to shoot Mitzi," Jason said. "It's not going to end well for you. I assure you of that. Because as soon as you pull that trigger on Mitzi, I'm going to pull the trigger on you."

Ellis froze as if considering his words.

The man had to know he was trapped. He couldn't win in this situation. He was smart enough to hear the truth in Jason's words.

Finally, Ellis muttered another curse.

Olive watched as he rose. Slowly, he put the gun on the floor.

Then he stood to full height and raised his hands in the air.

As he did, the cops flooded into the room, taking over the scene.

Olive finally let out the breath she'd been holding.

Maybe this was now finally over.

---

Olive sat in an office at the police station. She and Jason had already been questioned separately.

Olive had been honest about what was going on when she spoke with the detective assigned to the case. She'd told him she was a PI who'd been hired to look into things. Told him about the evidence she'd found.

He'd grunted and taken notes.

Meanwhile, Mitzi was taken to the hospital. One of her ribs may have been fractured, and she was dehydrated. But she would be okay. Before the ambulance took her away, she told them that, while on her date with Dr. Peters, she'd felt a prick in her neck.

He'd drugged her.

When she'd awakened, she'd been tied up in that warehouse. Ellis was there, and he'd had his guys rough her up as they tried to get more answers from her.

She hadn't given them anything.

Nova had gone to the hospital with her.

As Olive had waited in the office, she called Rex and gave him the update also.

Where was Jason? She wondered. What was taking so long to question him?

Finally, the door opened, and Jason stepped inside.

Without thinking, Olive ran toward him and pulled him into a hug.

His arms enveloped her as he pulled her close.

For a moment, Olive felt safe—a feeling she liked a little too much.

“I’m so glad you came when you did,” she murmured as she leaned into his chest.

“I’m glad I didn’t wait any longer. I don’t even want to think about what might have happened.” His voice sounded hoarse with emotion.

A moment of quiet passed until Olive pulled away from the hug—but just slightly. Their arms still held each other, causing Olive’s heart to pound rapidly.

“Did you hear any updates while you were out there?” she finally asked.

“Not yet. I think the cops are still gathering information. And I’m pretty sure the FBI has been called in.”

“Rebecca and Matt?”

“I overheard they’ve been brought in.”

Olive rubbed the side of her face as a frown tugged at her lips. “I hate to think about Sabrina. She didn’t know any of this, and the fallout won’t be easy for her, will it?”

“It won’t. But she’s strong, and she’ll be okay.”

She knew his words were true. But she still hated it for Sabrina.

“I want to talk to Rebecca,” Olive finally said. “I still have more questions.”

“I know,” Jason murmured. “But I’m not sure if that will happen or not.”

“I’m just glad this is closed, but I’m sorry it ever happened in the first place.”

“Me too.” Jason released her, and Olive stepped back, instantly missing the warmth of his arms.

She stared up at him, questions trying to form on her lips. Questions about them. About their future.

But before any of them could be released, the door opened, and Monty stepped inside. “Good work, you two. I’m glad that we can all finally put this behind us.”

Olive stepped farther away from Jason. “I can only imagine.”

Monty stared at the two of them a moment. “I just realized that you two were probably the ones who called about the dead body of the nurse found in that bunker out of town.”

Olive nodded, not bothering to hide that fact. “If I told you we’d been there, our whole investigation would have been compromised. I’m sorry about that.”

“That’s okay. I’m just glad she was found and that her family can have some closure. My impression is that she knew what was happening with Rebecca and threatened to take action. These guys were determined to silence her so their plan wouldn’t be ruined.”

“What about the rest of the guys?” Olive asked. “The ones Ellis hired?”

“We’ve been tracking them down. Ellis is singing like a canary, trying to get a deal out of it.”

“Does Ellis own the land where the nurse was found?” Olive asked.

Monty’s eyebrows rose. “Actually, Dr. Darren Peters does.”

“I remember Mitzi saying something about how his grandfather had been a preppey and had some type of shelter in place for it.” Olive hadn’t connected the dots at the time, but now it made sense.

“That’s exactly what it was,” Monty continued. “He kept upgrading it with new technology. After he passed, it appears Darren thought it could be a fun hideout where no one would find him. Then when he and Ellis connected, they began using that for this new scheme they’d concocted.”

“I’m assuming the doctor has been arrested?” Jason asked.

Monty gave an affirming nod. “He’s in custody now.”

Olive glanced over Monty’s shoulder and saw the door opened to an interrogation room across the way.

As the detective stepped out, she spotted Rebecca sitting inside.

“Is there any chance I could talk to Rebecca?” Olive knew it was a long shot, but she asked anyway.

Monty grimaced. “I’m not sure the chief is going to go for that.”

“Could you ask him? I’d be happy to share all the evidence we’ve gathered. But I just have a few more questions for her.”

Monty stared at her another moment before nodding. “Let me see what he says.”

## CHAPTER 67

Ten minutes later, Olive was escorted into the interrogation room where Rebecca sat.

“You only have five minutes,” Monty said.

She thanked him and then turned back to Rebecca as the door closed. The woman sat on the other side of the table in the room, her eyes red as if she had been crying.

Olive lowered herself into a seat across from her. “So you were being extorted . . .”

That explained the burner phone and those photos of Willow she’d seen.

Rebecca didn’t make eye contact with her. “I actually *was* diagnosed with a spot of melanoma on my chest. That was real.”

“But it turned into all this?”

She shrugged, the action full of melancholy. “I don’t know what to say. Everybody was just so kind and generous, and it made me feel so good to see how they cared. I guess part of me didn’t want it to end, even after my spot of melanoma was removed and I was deemed okay.”

“So you faked everything?” It still seemed outrageous to Olive.

Still avoiding eye contact, Rebecca wiped underneath her eyes. “I’m not proud of what I did. And Matt really hated it. Then we tried to get out of it, and we got that anonymous letter from someone saying he knew what we were doing and would expose us unless we paid up.”

“That had to be a shock.”

“Matt and I felt like we didn’t have any choice but to keep going. Even when we tried again to back out of it, the stakes just rose. This guy started sending pictures of Willow, and letting us know that if we didn’t comply, she would be either hurt or taken from us.”

More tears welled in Rebecca’s eyes as she stared at the wall. Then all at once they began flooding down her cheeks.

“And I don’t know what will even happen to Willow now.” Her voice cracked as she said the words.

Against Olive’s wishes, her heart panged with compassion. “Where is Willow right now?”

“I was going to ask the police if Sabrina could watch her. But now that I know about Ellis . . .” She shook her head. “So she’s staying with Chelsea. I know she’ll be safe there, even if Chelsea is furious at me.”

“I’m sure she is.” There was no need to hold back the truth.

“This is all my fault, not Matt’s. He deserves to be free.”

“I guess that will be up to the court to decide.”

Rebecca’s gaze met hers again. “Were you ever really filming a documentary?”

Olive shook her head. “I was here to investigate you. Someone was very concerned that innocent people were being scammed.”

She didn’t bother to mention Chelsea. She’d told the woman she wouldn’t.

Rebecca didn’t say anything.

“I can only guess you’ll have to liquidate all your possessions and get rid of the beach house you bought. If only you could get the money back from all the trips that you took . . . but that’s gone now.”

Rebecca’s chin trembled, but she didn’t say anything.

Monty opened the door and indicated Olive’s time was up.

That was fine because she had nothing left to say to Rebecca. Part of her didn’t even feel sorry for the woman. She’d dug her own grave.

Sure, everything had blown up. But that didn’t change the fact that Rebecca had swindled innocent people out of their hard-earned funds.

Now, as Olive had told Rebecca, it was up to the court to decide what kind of justice she’d face.

---



That evening, Olive and Jason met at their favorite park—the one where they’d come when they were teenagers. The place where they first declared their love for each other.

So many memories flooded her, especially as she watched the sun set across the lake there.

They sat on a bench and watched the sky turn colors.

“I heard that all the money raised for the fundraiser is being given back to the people who donated,” Jason said quietly. “If they don’t want the funds back, it will go to a local cancer society.”

“That’s good to know at least. But there’s still been so much damage done . . .”

“You’re right. But at least we put an end to it. *You* put an end to it.”

She reached over and squeezed his hand. “You definitely helped. Besides, we looked into all this because of you.”

“I’m glad I could help.”

Olive let out a breath, heavy thoughts still lingering in her mind. “I still don’t know who that man was at my old house. But I don’t think he had anything to do with this case.”

“You think he had something to do with you? Your family?”

She considered what to say. Jason still didn’t know all the details.

“My dad was up to some pretty dirty things—I’m still not sure what exactly. Even though more than eight years have passed since he died, that doesn’t mean his actions didn’t have long-lasting effects.”

Jason glanced at her and squinted. “So you think someone from your dad’s past has been watching you? That they followed you here, just waiting for you to go inside that house so they could attack?”

Olive hesitated another moment. “Honestly, I’m not sure. I still haven’t put all the pieces together.”

Then she told him about the text messages she’d received and the note reading “Like father, like daughter” that had been left for her at the house.

Jason grimaced. “I don’t like the sound of that.”

“I don’t either. But something from my dad’s past is still following me today. I need to figure out what.”

“I get that. I just don’t want to see you hurt in the process.” Concern filled his voice.

“Believe me, getting hurt isn’t my goal. But I have no idea exactly what’s in store.”

Another moment of silence passed as the sun sank deeper on the horizon.

Olive didn’t let go of Jason’s hand. It was a simple gesture, yet the action wasn’t full of promises she couldn’t keep.

“What’s next for you, Olive?” Jason asked.

She let out a deep breath. “Another assignment, I suppose. I’m heading back to Indianapolis after this, and I’ll see what Rex has waiting for me.”

“You ever get any time off?”

“I guess I would if I asked for it. But I usually don’t have much to do so I prefer working.”

“I see.” Disappointment tinged Jason’s tone.

Olive wished she did have an excuse. That maybe she and Jason could get together.

What would that be like?

“Ollie . . .” Jason started. “I still care about you. I’ve been trying to fight it. To make excuses as to why we can’t be together. And many of those reasons are valid. But that hasn’t changed my feelings.”

Her heart thumped in her ears.

She knew she should deny her own feelings and put an end to this before it started.

But for the first time in a long time, she didn’t want to.

“I care about you too, Jason,” she started. “But I don’t know what that looks like.”

“Maybe we don’t need to know what it looks like.” He shrugged. “Maybe some things are worth the risk.”

As Jason leaned down and brushed his lips against hers, she didn’t fight him.

In fact, she leaned into him and relished the moment.

Being with him felt just as good—if not better—than when they’d been teenagers.

As they pulled away, the two of them exchanged a soft smile.

“It’s a good start, at least.” Olive grinned again.

“I’d say.”

“Maybe I can see about taking some time off on occasion.” She shrugged. “After all, Chicago and Indy aren’t that far away.”

“I think that sounds like a great idea.” Jason leaned in for another kiss.

When the sun disappeared below the horizon, they both knew they needed to leave.

As they walked back to Jason’s Range Rover, her phone buzzed.

“One minute,” she murmured, pausing when she saw Nova’s name on the screen.

She quickly read the message. Then she read it again.

The blood drained from her face.

She had to be reading this wrong.  
But she knew she wasn't.

I've been working at the hospital. Found something strange and thought you'd want to know right away.  
That house where your family lived? I told you a shell corp owned it. It turns out that shell corp is  
connected with Lloyd Stewart.

Olive's throat burned.

Lloyd was Jason's father.

Why in the world would he own that property?

She glanced up at Jason as he leaned against the SUV waiting for her, a grin on his face.

Her heart twisted as an ache captured it.

Did Jason know about the property? Was that why the first place he'd gone when he arrived in town was to Olive's old house?

She wasn't sure.

But until Olive found out, she couldn't trust him—even though she wanted to more than anything.

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PROS AND CONS  
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# ARTIFICE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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[#6 To Love, Honor and Perish](#)

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[#9 Broom & Gloom](#)

[#10 Dust and Obey](#)

[#11 Thrill Squeaker](#)

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[#12 Cunning Attractions](#)

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[#14 Cold Case: Clean Sweep](#)

[#15 Cold Case: Clean Break](#)

[#16 Cleans to an End](#)

[While You Were Sweeping, A Riley Thomas Spinoff](#)

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



*USA Today* has called Christy Barritt's books “scary, funny, passionate, and quirky.”

Christy writes both mystery and romantic suspense novels that are clean with underlying messages of faith. Her books have sold more than five million copies and have won the Daphne du Maurier Award for Excellence in Suspense and Mystery, have been twice nominated for the Romantic Times Reviewers' Choice Award, and have finaled for both a Carol Award and Foreword Magazine's Book of the Year.

She is married to her Prince Charming, a man who thinks she's hilarious—but only when she's not trying to be. Christy is a self-proclaimed klutz, an avid music lover who's known for spontaneously bursting into song, and a road trip aficionado.

When she's not working or spending time with her family, she enjoys singing, playing the guitar, and exploring small, unsuspecting towns where people have no idea how accident-prone she is.

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