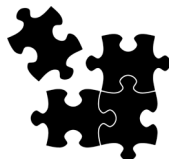


## CHAPTER 3



Monday, 05 February

0800 Hours

Ari strode through the revolving door of the massive brick office building on East Preston Street and entered the lobby, head high, carrying two steaming cups from Beans of Insanity on 5th Street.

A thoughtful offering of caffeine couldn't hurt to set things off on the right foot with Agent Trueheart.

That was the theory, anyway.

A security guard met Ari with a curt greeting. "State your business."

"Special Agent Arizona Powers to see Nicholas Trueheart."

The guard's hawklike glare landed on her full hands, and without uttering a word, he gestured toward a nearby metal table.

Understanding the nonverbal cue, Ari set down the coffee cups then emptied her pockets, placing her keys and cell phone into a plastic container. She unholstered her Glock and laid it beside the other items. Lastly, she retrieved her badge case from her back pocket and handed her identification and credentials to the guard.

He scrutinized her documents before motioning for her to pass through a metal detector.

"The firearm stays here. You can secure it in one of those lockers."

Ari froze. "Excuse me." She buried her trembling hands in her jacket pockets. Her pulse spiked.

"Until you have the proper security clearance, you can't carry that in here. FBI or not. It's protocol."

Ari passed through the metal detector, then reclaimed her belongings, minus the Glock. She straightened her shoulders and tightened security against her paranoia. As a professional, she could follow protocol, even when it clashed with her instincts.

The guard returned her papers, then pressed his lips to the radio on his shoulder. "Special Agent Arizona Powers to see Nick Trueheart."

After a brief pause, a female voice responded through the receiver. "Cleared for access."

"You can go up now. Suite three eleven."

"Thank you."

Ari's apprehension grew as she bypassed the elevator and climbed the stairs to the third floor. Her shoes squeaked on the polished tile. Two intersecting corridors stretched out before her. Polished brass plates displayed the suite numbers. She took the hallway to the right, passing canvas paintings of the Platte City skyline and local mountain range.

At the designated office, she balanced the two cups in one hand and turned the doorknob with the other. A handful of plastic, stackable chairs lined the walls of the reception area. A large picture window offered a view of Sanford's Peak, the region's tallest mountain.

A second security guard sat behind the curved reception desk. He raised his head, made eye contact, and promptly stood. "Special Agent Powers?"

"That's me."

"May I see your identification, please?"

Smiling at the guard's pleasant demeanor, Ari set the coffee cups on the counter, then took her badge case from her pocket again.

The guard reviewed her papers. "If you could sign in here, I'll let Mr. Trueheart know you're waiting."

He held out a clipboard.

Ari scribbled down her name, phone number, the current time, and the name of the person she was meeting. When she finished, she returned the clipboard to the counter, stuck her badge case in her back pocket, and picked up the coffee.

The guard dialed the phone, holding the receiver to his ear. "Nick, Agent Powers is here to see you."

After a brief conversation, he hung up. "He'll be right out."

"Thank you."

Her weekend internet search had yielded results for "Nicholas Trueheart," an escape artist who performed in Las Vegas as "Nick of Time." Two years ago, he disappeared from showbiz after a tragic accident took the life of his wife. Speculation about his disappearance ranged from theories that his wife's death wasn't accidental and he'd fled the country, to bizarre claims that he'd pulled off a magical vanishing act and could reappear at any moment.

The oddest theory she'd encountered was that "Nick of Time" had opened a portal to another dimension and been sucked into the swirling vortex.

Just imagine—an escape artist working for the DSS. Inconceivable. Obviously, the internet had misled her.

After a few more minutes, the interior office door swung open, and "Nick of Time" entered the room.

Her mouth dropped a little, and she clamped her jaw shut before she embarrassed herself. The only difference between the entertainer and the man before her was his attire—business casual instead of a twinkly skin-tight costume.

"Special Agent Trueheart?"

Trueheart sported a quiff in his short, dirty blond hair. Bushy

eyebrows hovered over hooded eyes that carried a touch of grief within their inky depths. The sharp angle of his chin and high cheekbones conveyed strength and bravery. A mustache capped his full lips, and his slightly protruding ears finished off his distinctive features. Only inches taller than Ari, his short stature and chiseled physique had likely aided him in navigating tight spaces during his performances.

*He's good-looking. There's no doubt about that.*

He smiled and offered his hand. "I'm not an agent. I'm a security specialist. Welcome to the DSS, Special Agent Powers."

Not an agent? Ari was taken aback by his revelation. After awkwardly shifting the cups to her left hand, she clasped his extended hand with her right. His callouses scratched her palm.

He looked her over from her Plain Jane nut brown hair drawn into a ponytail to her practical black ankle boots. She wore a leather bomber jacket, a green turtleneck, and black slacks. No makeup or jewelry.

Her cheeks warmed under the intensity of his gaze. Did she pass his inspection?

Ari exhaled, glued on a smile, and held out the aromatic peace offering. "I brought this for you."

"Um, thank you." Trueheart accepted the beverage and sniffed. "I appreciate the gesture. Follow me."

*"Lead the way."*

They entered an open floor plan divided by cubicles. The corner office's door hung ajar, while others were closed and marked with signs—Meeting Room, Interview Room, Evidence Locker, and Restricted Access. Security cameras captured the entirety of the bullpen from their positions on the ceiling.

"My desk is here." Nick stopped beside an enclosed workspace.

Stacks of papers nearly buried the computer monitor and keyboard, while a half-eaten pastry lay on a napkin alongside a generic disposable coffee cup.

The chaos brought out Ari's inner urge to organize the mess, but she refrained.

He set the coffee she'd brought onto the desktop without drinking it. "Down that hall, you'll find the break room, kitchenette, restrooms, and storage. We'll get you a security pass and a parking pass so you can come and go on your own as needed. We have a briefing with Luke Santiago, the SAC, before we begin."

Trueheart led the way into the private corner office, and Ari followed.

A Black man, in his late thirties, stood from behind the desk when they entered. Dressed in a navy sports coat, white dress shirt, and navy slacks, he introduced himself and extended his hand. His teeth glimmered when he smiled.

"Glad to have you on board, Agent Powers. Won't you have a seat?"

They settled into the vinyl chairs facing the SAC.

Ari sipped her coffee and crossed her legs. "Ambassador Van Sloan employs a private security firm. Why does he need us?"

Santiago walked to the window and leaned against the pane, hands in his pockets. "The ambassador believes someone may have infiltrated the security company. That's why the two of you have specifically been chosen for this assignment. You're the only ones he trusts with his daughter's life."

Doubt crept in. Her previous assignment had ended in failure—what if she messed up again? She chewed her lip until Trueheart glanced her way. Did he know of her breakdown?

Of course he did. Everyone did.

Santiago lifted an evidence bag from the desk and passed it to her. "Another threat arrived this morning. That brings the total to four."

Ari read the red ink on the torn sheet of printer paper.

*For crimes done in times gone by. For every hurt and every lie.  
Unless you admit the pain you caused, everyone will see your flaws.*

*-Enigma*

"But it doesn't mention Bridgette by name?" Ari passed the note to Trueheart, who examined the threatening message, then handed it back to the agent in charge.

"No, it doesn't, but combined with the others, we still believe Miss Van Sloan is the target."

"Where did they find this one?" Trueheart asked.

"Pinned to a ceramic bust of Mozart in the music room."

Someone had entered the house undetected and bypassed the security guards and alarms. No wonder the ambassador questioned the reliability of the security company.

"Has the staff been interviewed? Is there anyone else who might have had access to the house?" she asked.

"None of the staff observed anything out of the ordinary," Santiago replied. "The security footage has been analyzed, both outdoor and indoor recordings. All persons of interest have been identified and questioned. Still no leads."

Trueheart's right leg tremored. "Are you sure I'm the best choice for this assignment? I'm a risk analyst, not a field agent. I've never even fired a gun."

Ari raised her eyebrows. How effective would he be in a high-pressure situation?

"Powers will be your muscle. She knows her way around a firearm."

She frowned and narrowed her eyes. Was that an insensitive jab at her mental stability? She took a deep breath and relaxed her shoulders. It was likely just an observation. No need to take it personally.

And he wasn't wrong. A bullet had left her barrel a time or two ... or three. As FBI, it wasn't uncommon for firepower to be necessary to resolve a conflict. Or prevent one.

She relaxed her face and cleared her throat.

Both men looked her direction.

"Is this undercover? Strictly need to know?" she asked.

The SAC perched on the front of the desk. "Miss Van Sloan has been made aware of the situation—not that she was happy about it. The ambassador has requested that you keep as close to a normal schedule as possible. He doesn't want this to upset her any more than necessary, but you two are to stick as close as possible to her side. Don't let her out of your sight. Tail her into the bathroom if necessary, Powers. Otherwise, keep your identities under wraps and try not to draw attention to yourselves."

Ari shifted. "Is it possible Bridgette wrote the notes herself? She has the reputation for seeking publicity."

While spoiled in other ways, the girl had been raised in boarding schools and had had minimal parental involvement in her life. Did she fabricate the danger to garner attention from her father?

Santiago shook his head. "A graphologist has analyzed the handwriting. It doesn't match Miss Van Sloan's. No fingerprints were found on the note."

Trueheart interjected. "Maybe she bribed an employee to write the note for her, and they wore gloves."

He'd read her thoughts.

"It's possible," Santiago agreed. "You're expected at the Van Sloan residence at zero nine hundred hours. I'll be your point of contact, and I'll expect a full report each evening."

Ari and Trueheart stood.

"And Powers?" A hint of warning tinted Santiago's words.

"Yes." She met his gaze.

"I've been informed that you and Miss Van Sloan have a storied history. I don't care what your personal issues are with the ambassador's daughter, but on this assignment, you will refer to her as Miss Van Sloan. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir."

Heat climbed Ari's cheeks, and she bit her tongue to refrain from making a sarcastic retort. The unnecessary rebuke stung. Did he think so little of her professionalism?

She might not be well-versed in the art of schmoozing dignitaries, but Bridgette Van Sloan would receive the respect she deserved, whether or not Santiago believed it. Or maybe that was his point—treat *Miss Van Sloan* with respect she didn't deserve.

Ari cast a sideways glance at Trueheart. "Got the address?"

He nodded. "I'll drive."

As they headed for the door, Santiago's voice halted them. "One more thing."

They faced him.

"There's more to this case than meets the eye," the SAC warned. "Trust no one. If something happens to that girl, there will be severe repercussions for all of us."