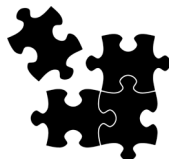


CHAPTER 2



2200 Hours

Nick gulped a mouthful of black coffee and grimaced. Cold. Yuck.

He lowered the cup and raked his fingers through his hair for what felt like the millionth time today, unable to tear his gaze away from the image on his computer screen.

What kind of kook sent a diplomat a jar of sheep's eyeballs?

It was undoubtedly the strangest thing he had ever come across, or at least close to it.

Deciphering whether something was a genuine threat or simply odd fell under his jurisdiction, and often, it turned out to be the latter.

Like the eyeballs.

Some nut's idea of a practical joke.

He chuckled and powered off the computer. Stretching his back with his arms over his head, he let out a sigh, then rolled down his shirt sleeves and rebuttoned the cuffs.

The other cubicles had emptied hours ago.

He stood, grabbed his suit jacket from his office chair and slipped it on, then straightened the collar. With a quick motion,

he transferred his belongings—keys, phone, and wallet—from the desk drawer to his pockets.

Aiming the disposable cup at the trashcan, Nick mimicked an NBA All-Star. To his dismay, the lid popped off upon impact, splashing trace amounts of liquid onto the commercial carpet. What a mess. He'd thought it was empty.

He strolled down the dark hallway to the break room and snatched a wad of paper towels from the counter. On his way back, movement at the end of the hall caught his eye. "Who's there? This office is closed."

He quickened his pace and jogged into the open space, finding nothing but an empty bullpen. Had he only imagined it? Maybe he was losing his mind.

"I've got news, and you're not going to like it." His superior's gruff voice carried from his right.

Nick whirled, facing his boss, approaching from the corner office. A rising moon observed them through bulletproof windows. Silver light slanted across empty desks and cubicle dividers. "I didn't realize you were still here."

Special Agent in Charge Luke Santiago dripped with perspiration, his necktie unknotted, and his shirtsleeves rolled to his elbows. He extracted a handkerchief from his pocket, dabbed his brow, mustache, and sideburns, then stashed it away.

"What's with the sweat? It's got to be twenty degrees outside, and the heat's been off for hours."

"Ambassador Van Sloan received another threat."

"That makes three, right?"

Santiago nodded. "He's requested you for a special assignment. Security detail."

Nick swallowed. "Protect the ambassador? I'm a risk analyst, not a field agent."

"He's aware. He wants you because of your ability to quickly analyze a situation and make sound judgments. Besides, you won't be providing security for Van Sloan."

"Not the ambassador?" Nick's brow furrowed. "Then who?"

"His daughter, Bridgette."

Nick coughed and ran his finger between his collar and neck. "I'm not sure I'm comfortable handling her on my own."

"You won't be. FBI is transferring someone."

"Who?"

"Special Agent Powers."

Nick raised an eyebrow. "Agent Powers? As in *Arizona* Powers, the one who flipped out after that Mitchell kid was murdered?"

"You've got the gist. She'll be here first thing Monday morning."

Nick had never met Powers in person, but he'd read enough news articles and heard enough scuttlebutt to know that working with her would not be without its challenges. According to the media, the woman had a personal vendetta against kidnappers, and her nervous breakdown and subsequent stint in therapy had been widely publicized.

"Is she stable enough to return to work?"

"Director Carlton assured me Powers is fit enough for this task. Take it easy on her, Trueheart. If it weren't for this assignment, she'd be collecting unemployment. I'll see you Monday." Santiago turned to leave.

"Have you seen anyone else on this floor tonight?" Nick hollered after the retreating SAC.

Santiago paused midstride and looked back over his shoulder. "No. Seems we're the only ones who don't know when to call it a day. Not like we have anyone waiting for us." He jabbed his hands into his pockets and dragged his feet toward the elevator as if the weight of the world hung on his shoulders.

The down arrow blinked. The doors opened, and Santiago disappeared behind the metal panels.

Nick would have had someone waiting for him—if life were fair. His gaze lowered to his empty ring finger. Had it really been two years? He crushed the crumpled paper towels in his fist. No amount of self-pity could bring back his wife.

The coffee spill had seeped into the carpet fibers, blending with the multi-colored pattern. Discarding the useless towels, he turned to leave. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of the fire escape.

With a soft creak, the door crept shut on its own.

Nick steadied his nerves, refusing to let his imagination get carried away. He pressed the downward arrow to call the elevator, took it to the ground floor, then waved at the security guard on his way out. His black Honda Accord waited in the parking garage to take him home to his lonely, empty apartment. A drizzle whispered against the pavement, mingling with his own melancholy thoughts.

Wet blacktop shimmered beneath the streetlights as Nick parked under the carport at the south-side apartment complex.

His downstairs neighbors were engaged in a heated argument on their tiny ground-floor patio. Between vile insults and angry retorts, cigarette smoke swirled around them. Ashes fell like snow to the concrete slab surface.

Nick turned off the ignition, then exited the vehicle, waving politely as he passed. He wrinkled his nose at the acrid smell. A thick haze burned his eyes, and his throat tickled. Masking a cough, he jogged up the exterior stairs to his one-bedroom apartment on the upper floor.

He'd forgotten the porch light again. Stumbling over the welcome mat, he fumbled for the lock. Once the door was opened, he flipped on the light and straightened the rumpled mat. A small package leaned against the vinyl siding. Had he ordered something? Not that he remembered.

He shrugged, picked up the package and carried it inside, then placed his belongings on the dining room table, hung his coat on the back of a chair, and ambled into the kitchen to fix his dinner.

Adjusting the *paella* recipe to accommodate for his green pea allergy, he omitted the vegetable and opted for extra broth instead of white wine. As he cooked, a robust aroma filled the small apartment.

Once the *soccarat*, a caramelized crust, formed on the bottom of the pan, he removed the skillet from the range and covered it with the lid and a towel while he changed into sweatpants and a T-shirt from his college days at MIT.

Returning to the kitchen, he garnished the finished dish with chopped parsley and lemon slices, then balanced a full plate, along with a fork, napkin, and a glass of unsweetened tea, and carried them to his desk. As he lowered into the ergonomic chair, his gaze landed on the framed photo of his wife.

A knot formed in his throat. *I still miss you.*

Rachel's brunette waves cascaded to her shoulders. Her brown eyes twinkled with *joie de vivre*. She wore a navy pinstripe suit and the owl brooch that he'd given her on their first wedding anniversary—a brooch that had never been recovered after the fire.

Emotions choked him as he wrestled with memories, both good and bad. He would figure out who took her from him, and they would face the consequences of their actions.

His gaze shifted from the photo to a wooden easel nearby and the corkboard overflowing with photos, news articles, maps, crime scene diagrams, forensic reports, witness statements, and a meticulously crafted timeline connected with red string like the ones in a TV police drama.

Nick stood, plate in hand, and approached the board, pondering the giant figurative question mark at its center. Who killed Rachel Reynolds Trueheart?

The perpetrator had eluded law enforcements' every attempt to uncover their identity.

I just need a name, Lord. I know You know who did this. Tell me, please.

He ate while staring at the murder board, then carried the

empty plate to the kitchen, adding it to the collection of dishes encrusted with crumbs and dried sauces.

Returning to the desk, he checked his email and found two more responses to his social media plea for video footage or snapshots from that fateful day. After downloading the files, he watched the videos, straining until his eyes blurred and making note of the smallest details that might point him in the right direction.

As fatigue weighted his eyelids, he yawned and glimpsed the clock in the corner of the screen. Zero three hundred hours.

Closing the laptop lid, he stood. A weekend at his sister's house with his precious nieces was just what he needed to clear his mind before the long week ahead. He paused at the bedroom door and glanced once more at the corkboard. The questions that had haunted him for two long years would not elude his grasp forever.

Whoever you are. Wherever you are. I promise. I will find you.