

# ~ Malicious Pursuit ~

by KG MacGregor

**Disclaimers:** By now, you should know this part by heart. If you like to envision these characters as familiar faces, I won't mess with that.

This is an action/adventure story. I wanted to call it a thriller, but I thought that was a little presumptuous. However, it is my hope that you have to read the whole thing in one sitting. Oh, and there's romance between women. Thought you'd appreciate that.

Thanks very much to TNovan & Ann who helped me out with the technical details. Any errors you find are questions I forgot to ask, things I didn't clarify, or stuff I made up. If you find mistakes, please let me know.

A HUGE thanks also to Tami, my beta reader en fuego, and to the "fresh eyes" who gave it a read. And thanks also to my Sweetcakes, not just for her editing, but for talking through all of the critical parts until we got things to work.

**Malicious Pursuit**  
**By KG MacGregor**

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[kgmacgregor@yahoo.com](mailto:kgmacgregor@yahoo.com)

## **Part 1**

### **Chapter 1**

"Five...ten...fifteen...twenty..." Ruth Ferguson mumbled to herself as she counted the nickels in her drawer. With a quick tap to the calculator, she scooped the change into its tube and continued with the pennies. If there were twenty-six, her drawer balanced for the forty-third day in a row. "Twenty-four...twenty-five...bang!"

"Again?" Arlene Jones was envious of her co-worker's streak, though she was seldom off in her own drawer, and usually then by only a few dollars or cents.

"Again!" Thank goodness for small favors, because Ruth wasn't interested in hanging around to reconcile her balance sheet today. It was Friday, and her weekend to be with Jessie.

"Congratulations! And the grand prize is you get to keep your job another week," Sharon Petrie joked. She supervised the tellers at the Bank of Madison, and loved the fact that Ruth kept the pressure on all of them.

"Lucky me," the blonde woman answered with playful cynicism, shouldering her purse as she readied to leave.

"You got Jessie this weekend?" Arlene asked.

"Yeah, I'm headed to pick her up right now."

"Any big plans?"

"No, we'll probably just hang out at the house and play. This rain's supposed to be around all weekend."

"Well, have fun."

"Thanks, good night." Ruth stopped at the door and took one last look back. She liked working here. The work was fun because her customers were so nice, and some of the people she worked with had shown themselves to be true friends through her ordeal of the past year.

The November wind had already torn the last of the leaves from the trees; now it was serving final notice that the cold Maine winter was ahead. Ruth hurried across the parking lot in the drizzle, pulling up the collar on her raincoat to ward off the chill. The days were getting shorter now, and it was dark already at five-thirty. From inside her pocket, a tap on the keychain unlocked the door and caused the lights to flash on her black Saturn coupe. Shivering, she started the engine and glanced at the clock on the dashboard. She would be early.

And as always, Skip would be late.

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"A kid's meal, please, with an orange drink; and a...chicken sandwich with a cup of coffee." Ruth placed her order at the busy fast food restaurant, her regular dining establishment every other Friday when she met Skip Drummond to pick up her four-year-old daughter. Her ex-husband was better behaved in public places, so the restaurant was mandated in the court order to host the exchange.

Ruth hated it when her ex-husband came to her house, and she managed to get this one small concession by pressing the social worker who monitored her visits. *Monitored her visits*. That thought caused the young mother to shake her head in disbelief. It was beyond comprehension that things had fallen the way they had, but she vowed that this charade would end soon.

The pickup truck pulled onto the lot at 6:20. She knew it was Skip by the obnoxious fog lights positioned on top of the cab. Knowing him, he'd driven by the place at five till six on the off-chance of getting there before she did so he could raise hell about her being late. But Skip and his bullying demeanor wouldn't matter to her in about two minutes, once he delivered their

precious little girl. Then he could go fuck himself.

"Mommy!"

"Jessie!" Ruth kneeled down to catch the running child in a fierce welcome that stung her eyes with tears. She steeled herself against the image of the tall booted man who walked behind her carrying a colorful backpack. At six-foot-six, Skip Drummond cut a handsome figure in his faded jeans and white buttoned-down collar shirt. His sandy hair was thinning already at twenty-nine years old, but it was nothing a Red Sox cap couldn't cure.

"Well, she's your headache for the next forty-eight hours," he muttered low so no one around them would hear.

Ruth ignored him. "How are you, sweetie?"

"Fine." Jessie was the spitting image of her mother, blonde, slightly built, and with expressive green eyes. Eyeing the kid's meal already spread out for her, she climbed eagerly into the booth and began to munch on a fry.

"Jessie, what happened to your arm?" Ruth felt her blood run cold when she saw the bruise on her daughter's upper arm as she pulled off her coat. Angrily, she glared at her ex-husband in accusation.

"Tell her."

"I fell."

Ruth didn't believe it for a minute and Skip knew it. Neither did he care. "She's got one on her butt, too. She's pretty clumsy." He dropped the backpack with a thump as he turned to walk out. "See you on Sunday. Don't be late," he taunted.

The son of a bitch! How could he hit his own daughter like that?

Ruth took three or four breaths before sitting down with her child. It was important never to cloud their time together with the specter of Skip Drummond, and in ten seconds, he would no longer exist in their minds.

"So what did you bring in your backpack, honey?"

"Just a shirt...and pants...and socks...."

"Who packed it for you?"

"Grandma."

That was good to hear. When Skip packed, he usually "forgot" things that he knew Ruth would

have to go purchase on her meager salary. As it was, Jessie already had nightclothes, a toothbrush, underwear, and several changes of clothing at the small house. And she was wearing her heaviest coat, Ruth noted with relief.

"Where's Lisa?" Lisa was Jessie's favorite doll, a lifelike infant in a diaper and terry sleeper.

"Grandma said I had to leave her there, 'cause she'd get dirty at your house," the child answered innocently.

Ruth took another calming breath as she processed this tidbit. Her former mother-in-law sure explained why Skip was such a son of a bitch, as that's exactly what Barbara Drummond was.

"Do you want ketchup?" Jessie had stopped eating her fries.

"Uh-huh," she nodded vigorously. "Can we go out to the slide when I get finished?"

"Not tonight. It's raining a little, and we really need to get home soon."

"Why?"

"Somebody's coming to see me. He'll only be there for a minute, but I need to be sure we're home when he comes."

"Who is it?"

"His name's Dennis, and I don't think you know him."

"Why is he coming?"

Jessie was world class in the question-asking department. Ruth tried very hard to be patient with it, because she knew that Skip probably never answered anything.

"He's coming to pick up something."

"What?"

"You'll see. Have another bite of your cheeseburger." Ruth forced herself to take another bite of the chicken sandwich. She'd lost her appetite after the encounter with Skip, but she knew she needed to eat. It was going to be a long night.

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Ruth pulled into the driveway of the small rented house, suddenly anxious about the impending visitor. Guiding her child up the back steps, she fumbled with the key and pushed open the back door.

"It looks different," Jessie announced, looking from one side of the room to the other. "I know, you took my pictures down." She pointed to the refrigerator, where Ruth had proudly posted her art work, not only as a reward to her daughter, but as a bright reminder of all that was good in Ruth's life.

"I put them in a box, sweetie. I've put all of our important things in a box."

That sent Jessie running to the closet in the hallway, where she always kept her toys and games. They were gone. "Where's the box?"

"I'll show it to you later, honey. I need to change my clothes before Dennis gets here. You want to come into the bedroom?" On their weekends together, they barely spent a moment apart.

Jessie came in to bounce on the bed and chatter as she watched her mom change. Ruth had laid out jeans, a pullover, socks and tennis shoes, so she dressed very quickly. When she was finished, she hung her dress on a hanger and draped it across the bed, laying the shoes next to it.

A sharp knock on the front door interrupted Jessie's story of what Lisa had done that day.

"That's probably Dennis. Listen, I need to go outside with him for a few minutes. Can you stay in here? Please?"

Jessie didn't want to do that, and she shook her head no.

"Jessie, please? When I'm finished, we're going to put our coats back on and go somewhere, okay?"

"Where?"

"You'll see." Ruth had used that answer already, and didn't want to put her daughter off any more than she had to, but for right now she had to. "Just please stay in here."

Flipping on the front porch light, she swung the door open wide to find a young man in pressed slacks and a fleece pullover. "Are you Ruth Ferguson?"

"Yes. Are you Dennis?"

"That's me! I thought for a minute I had the wrong house." He turned to wave to the driver who had dropped him off.

"I'm sorry. I just got home a few minutes ago. I should have turned the light on for you."

Dennis held out an envelope. "Mr. Huggins said for me to give you this." Dick Huggins owned a used car dealership in Farmington about twenty miles away. Ruth had stopped in on Wednesday night to see what they'd give her in a cash deal for the 2000 coupe.

"Thank you." Ruth quickly opened it and counted out sixty-five one hundred dollar bills. "Yes, that's right. It's right out here." Digging in her pocket, she clicked the keychain to light the interior lights. "I have a screwdriver in the glove compartment. The title's there too, if you want to fill out the mileage. I just need to sign it."

"Why don't you fill all that out while I take the tags off?" he offered, holding up his dealer tag. In just a few moments, Dennis was trading the plates for two sets of keys. "Thank you very much ma'am. You buying a new car?"

"Yeah, I'll go looking with a friend tomorrow." Lie. Big fat lie.

"Good luck finding what you need."

"Thank you, and thanks for coming to pick it up." Her plan was now irrevocably in motion.

"No problem."

Ruth stood and watched the car back out, glancing across the street and to either side to see if the activity had been noticed. This continuing drizzle was a nice cover for her clandestine moves tonight. No lights had come on outside, and no one appeared to be coming or going at any of the houses, so she had every reason to believe that this part of her plan had gone off without a hitch.

"Jessie?" Ruth returned to the bedroom to find her daughter looking in the empty closet.

"Where's your clothes, Mommy?"

"Jessie, listen. You know how I always try hard to answer your questions so you'll understand things?"

The little girl nodded.

"Tonight, I need for you just to trust me. I won't be able to answer a lot of your questions right now, but I will soon. I promise. Can you trust me tonight and try not to ask so many questions right now?"

Jessie agreed hurriedly. She didn't want to see her mother get mad the way her father did.

"Okay, I need you to go put your coat back on. We're going to take a short walk to where I parked our new car." Ruth slid the license plates and screwdriver into her daughter's backpack.

"We have a new car?" she asked with excitement.

"Yes, we do."

"What color is it?"

"Sweetie, remember what I asked you to do. No more questions right now, okay?"

"Okay." But Jessie couldn't help herself. "Are my toys in the car?"

"Yes, honey. It has all of our stuff in it already, as much as I could fit. I got all of your toys and games, and all of your clothes." As she was talking, she was helping zip the pink coat that she'd bought just a little large a few weeks ago. "Now when we go out, I need you to be very quiet, okay?"

The four-year-old made a motion of buttoning her lip.

"That's right. Until we get in our new car, I don't want you to say anything, starting...right...now!" Ruth picked up the dress and shoes from the bed, the child's backpack, and her own purse and raincoat. Leaving the light on in the kitchen, they walked out onto the back porch and she turned to lock the door.

Juggling her load, she dropped one hand to grasp the hand of her daughter, and they walked soundlessly across their own back yard and through that of the neighbor behind them. Stopping by the thick shrubbery next to the house, Ruth scouted the street for traffic or for people out walking in the persistent drizzle. Seeing neither, she led them into the front yard onto the sidewalk, where they turned and walked half a block toward a column of parked cars. Reaching the third, a dark red Taurus station wagon, she unlocked the door and helped the small child into the front seat, leaning across to fasten the safety belt as she shoved the things she was carrying behind the passenger seat. Quietly, she closed the door and hurried to the street side, where she slipped in and slid a single key into the ignition.

"You okay, honey?"

"Is this our new car?"

"Yes, it is."

"I like red."

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In minutes, Ruth was headed toward the outskirts of town, where she pulled into a strip mall and parked next to the large blue box for outgoing mail.

"What are we going here for?"

"We're not, honey. I just needed to stop for a minute. I have to do a couple of things, but I'll leave the heater on," she explained.

The blonde woman got out with her screwdriver and plates and fastened them to the front and back mounts. Next, she grabbed a small stack of envelopes from her purse, including one that wasn't yet sealed. She dropped her house key into that one, inside a thank you note she'd written last night. In her apology for the late notice, she gave her landlord permission to keep the two hundred dollar security deposit for the furnished house, and wished him luck finding a new renter.

The other letters were mostly bills, each containing just a little extra to cover any additional charges since her last statement, and a note instructing them to close her account. Only one note was personal, the one to the bank where she'd worked for most of the last seven years.

The mail from the drop box wouldn't be picked up until Saturday afternoon, meaning it wouldn't be delivered until sometime on Monday. By then, everyone would know she was gone. This would confirm that she'd planned it that way, and that she hadn't met with any sort of foul play. She hoped her friends wouldn't worry, and she couldn't care less how Skip took the news.

## **Chapter 2**

"I think you ought to call her."

"And I think you're insane."

"Aw, come on! How are you going to get a date if you don't ever ask anyone out?"

Henry scoffed at his coworker, though he appreciated her support more than he could ever say. Spencer Rollins was quite simply the best friend he'd ever had.

"You like her, don't you?"

"Yes," he answered meekly.

"And she waved you over to her table at lunch. I'm telling you, Henry, she likes you too."

On the surface, Henry agreed with his friend's assessment. Kim had been very nice, and it seemed that she was going out of her way to be friendly. But the young man's confidence fell way short when it came to personal relationships. At twenty-six years old, he could count on one hand the total number of dates he'd ever had.



"Maybe just a movie or something, you know, something casual," Spencer encouraged. Guys as nice as Henry Estes were rare, she thought, but few women were willing to see past the snow-white hair, red eyes, and chalky skin. In the spirit of political correctness, he called himself "pigment challenged." But Henry was her kind of guy - smart, funny, and decent - except that guys weren't her thing.

She and Henry had worked together as programming partners for six years, the last four here at Margadon Industries, where they'd applied as a team when their former company went under. Headquartered in Bethesda, Maryland, Margadon was a leading manufacturer of pharmaceuticals.

"Here comes another one. Only three to go." Henry logged the report and put it in the queue for processing.

Each Friday between five and six o'clock Eastern time, product managers from all of their plants submitted final inventory figures for the week. The complex system that Spencer and Henry had designed tracked not only production, but materials, thereby automating the inventory control and accountability. Tracking inventory was a continuous process, as each new unit of materials was earmarked to a specific product, and to a unique lot number. Should quality control issues arise, line producers could easily isolate the affected shipment. Another benefit of their system was that supplies and materials were automatically reordered as they were consumed, assuring continuous production and cost flow.

The Friday report was an executive summary of sorts. The product managers at each of the Margadon plants, which were scattered throughout the country and abroad, were required to constantly monitor the inventory for their line of pharmaceuticals, but senior managers in Bethesda wanted production summarized on a weekly basis.

"What are we missing?"

"Let's see...the Dolicaïne...the Kryfex...and the...wait, here comes the Dolicaïne now. And there's Topectol. So it's just the Kryfex."

Kryfex was Margadon's new wonder drug for the Dawa virus, an auto-immune disease that was prevalent throughout eastern Africa. Last spring, the company had won a massive government contract to distribute the drug through diplomatic and humanitarian channels in Ethiopia. In return, the US military was given permission to locate a permanent air base in the northeastern part of that African country, an area essential to operations in the Middle East.

"Come on, guys! Find your butts and get them in gear." Spencer had a party on tap tonight, and she'd promised Elena she'd try to get there early to help set up.

"Why don't you go on? I'll wait."

"Nah, then I'd owe you, and you'd ask to borrow my bike."

Henry chuckled. "Perish the thought." He had no interest at all in borrowing the big Kawasaki. It was all he could do to get on behind Spencer just to go to lunch.

Twisting in their chairs, they chatted another ten minutes as they waited for the last report from the plant outside of Little Rock. "I think I'll give 'em a call," Henry finally said.

On cue, the phone rang and Spencer lunged to grab it first. "Margadon, Spencer Rollins...oh, no wonder." Holding the phone aside, she explained the holdup to Henry. "It's Tim Wall in Little Rock. Somebody dropped the bar coder and they didn't have another one that worked. They had to do it all by hand."

"Do they have the numbers?"

"Yeah, he's going to read them off. I'll pull up the screen." With a few short keystrokes, Spencer accessed the Kryfex form. "Okay, Tim, go ahead."

One by one, Spencer entered the numbers into the corresponding fields, watching the "Cost" columns fill automatically. That was the beauty of a well-written program, she thought, mentally congratulating herself and her partner. The final report would show the week's production of Kryfex, its expenditure of resources, and its corresponding cost and net for the company. Only a handful of people at Margadon got to see these figures. In fact, when the data were uploaded from the barcodes, the reports were generated automatically, going directly to their boss, James Thayer, the company's controller; and he would then route them for distribution to "eyes only."

Spencer and Henry figured out when they were testing the code that they could just about deduce the chemical formulas for nearly every product on Margadon's shelf, using only the gross quantities of ingredients and the size of shipments. As the dock manager read off the figures, Spencer found herself playing the game in her head, trying to guess the number in advance, knowing approximately how much of each component would be used for the week's total. She was close on each part until they got to the cytokines, which was the active protein used in Kryfex. By the quantities already listed in the report, she expected a larger number than the one Tim supplied.

"Wait a minute...let me have the cytokines again." She backspaced to clear the field and waited for Tim to find his place again on his sheet.

He repeated the number, and she verified it. "Does that sound right to you, Tim?"

He had no idea. Clearly, Tim didn't play these formula games in his head. His job was to get the shipments in one door and out the other.

"Okay, go ahead." Spencer tabbed to the next field and the most amazing thing happened.

"What the fuck? Sorry, Tim...hold on." Spencer backed up again to the cytokine field and hit the delete key. "Give it to me one more time."

Spencer grabbed a pencil to jot the number down this time, but Tim was growing impatient and let it show. "Look, the only reason I'm still here tonight is because you dropped the goddamned bar coder and broke it! So just give me the number one more time."

The unusual outburst got Henry's attention and he quickly came to stand behind his partner. He watched as she entered the number and tabbed to the next field. The number changed!

"Did you guys switch suppliers on the cytokines, or did they change the packaging or something?"

The dock manager wasn't about to have his head handed to him again, so he calmly answered her question. No, nothing had changed as far as he knew. He finished his list and Spencer finally let him go.

"Something's fucked here, Henry."

"Cool! I was looking for something to do this weekend," he joked.

"I mean really fucked. If this is doing what I think it's doing, it's so fucked we may be looking for work next week."

Spencer re-entered the numbers and watched as both the quantity and cost column inflated when she moved to the next field. "That's how many there should be, but that's not what he said they used. And somebody had to write something in our code to change that number." Now she was pissed. It wasn't cool to patch someone else's program when the original programmer was still available to do it.

"Pull up the code."

She did and they pored over what would be gibberish to most, but what to them was a source of immense pride. Line by line, they studied the program. Nothing in their code explained the adjustment on the data sheet.

"Look at Alvaladin. It's set up the same way," she said.

Henry sat back down and called up the weekly report for Margadon's protease inhibitor at his terminal, studying the field calculations. "This one's okay. See, the cytokines..." he deleted the field and re-entered. "They stay the same."

"So what the fuck's going on with Kryfex?" Spencer scrolled down to the bottom of the program to see if any comments were written to connote changes, though she didn't expect to find any.

"I don't know what's doing that. We didn't write it. Unless...."

"Unless it's calling a different mod." Mods were modules - lines and lines of syntax that caused a program to do what it was supposed to do. Coders worth their salt never used a whole word

when half a word would do.

"Exactly."

Henry opened the global file, the one they applied to all of the uploaded data in order to generate the weekly reports. Without this master program of macros and loops, they'd have to repeat procedures for each product manufactured by Margadon. "It's calling the right mod."

"Then where the hell is the new number coming from?" Spencer used the calculator on her partner's desk to compute the number change for the cytokines in Kryfex. The altered figure was one-fourth higher than the one she'd entered. "Okay, watch this."

She entered 80 and hit the tab. The number changed to 100, and its cost increased by the same percentage. Then she entered 100; it changed to 125. "Somebody's fucked with it."

"Tell you what," Henry offered, "why don't you let me look at this? You're going to be late for your party."

"I can't just leave you with this mess."

"I don't mind. It'll be fun. Besides, if you're late, Elena will think it's my fault and kick my ass."

"I don't know why you're so afraid of her. She's only this high." Spencer held out her hand shoulder high, gradually moving it upward until it passed her own five-foot, ten-inch frame.

"Yeah, and not only is she taller than you, she carries a gun."

"That's just to pick up chicks."

Henry laughed. "Go on, really. I'll work on this and park what I find on the server so you can look at it over the weekend."

The two had set up their own server years ago in Vienna when they took on a small contract for after-hours. Last year when Margadon implemented a new policy restricting file access to the local area network, they had gotten into the habit of parking bits of code on their server so they could work on things from home. The company would have a fit if they ever found out, but no one at Margadon knew of the server except Henry and Spencer; and besides, programmers were notorious rule breakers.

"This really pisses me off, Henry!"

"Fuggedabouddit! Go have fun. If it's really fucked, it'll still be here on Monday."

Spencer picked up the black helmet beside her desk and grabbed her denim jacket. "Okay, but call me if you need me."

"I will. Tell Elena hi."

"Thanks, pal. I'll tell her."

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The tall programmer bounced down the steps of the fire escape and exited through the back door to the employee lot. Her red Kawasaki 650 was squeezed into a corner alongside two other bikes, both Harleys. On occasion, she would arrive or leave at the same time as the others and would have to endure their ridicule over her ride. But Spencer liked the feel of the Kawasaki, and the brand would always be her sentimental favorite because it was the kind of bike her father had ridden, and the first one he'd bought for her.

With rain and a cold snap in the forecast for tomorrow, tonight would probably be her last ride before parking the beast on the patio of her garden apartment and covering it for the winter. Next week, she'd be sitting in a long line of commuters in the car she'd picked up eight years ago as her "basic transportation." The jibes she got for the Kawasaki were nothing compared to those for her Chevy Cavalier.

Spencer's best bet for getting around the rush hour traffic tonight to Alexandria was to hop on the George Washington Memorial Parkway, as most of the commuters would be pushing their way out of the city in the opposite direction. In just under thirty minutes, she was squeezing the bike between two cars parked in front of her friend's townhouse.

"Agent Diaz?" she called playfully, letting herself into the foyer.

"Thank god you're here," a woman's voice called from the kitchen. "I've got six bags of ice melting in the trunk of my car. Will you bring them in and take them out to the back porch? The keys are by the door."

Without taking another step forward, Spencer grabbed the keys and headed back out and down the steps. Making yourself at home had a whole new connotation at Elena's house. Clutching a ten-pound bag of ice in each hand, she made the first of three trips up the stairs and through the kitchen, stopping to greet her former lover with a quick kiss on the lips.

Women and men alike fell prey to the beauty and charms of Elena Diaz, an IRS criminal investigator whose wide brown eyes could slay from across the room. Spencer knew from experience what it felt like to have those eyes on her, and for a very brief time, she thought that she might be just the one to tame this creature. But it wasn't to be.

"You only invited me for the heavy lifting, didn't you?"

"Don't be ridiculous. You're here in case I get dumped by my date."

"*Serpiente*." Even before they became lovers, Spencer learned of Elena's love 'em and leave 'em reputation, and dubbed her The Snake. The IRS agent had insisted that the Spanish word was much more flattering, so it became her moniker.

Spencer tossed the two bags into the large cooler and returned to the kitchen, this time wrapping her arms around the taller woman from behind. Elena was one of her favorite people in the universe, someone Spencer trusted with her life and limb, but not with her heart. The word "monogamous" just wasn't in the Latin woman's vocabulary.

"Kelly asked a few of her friends over." Kelly Kuykendall was Elena's Woman of the Month.

"You mean there'll be people here you haven't slept with already?" the programmer joked.

"Aren't you funny?"

With a snort, Spencer bounded out the front door again for a second load, then a third, finally stopping in the kitchen to await her next orders.

Elena stopped her preparations to address her friend. "I was just thinking that if one of Kelly's friends turned out to be cute, you might be able to turn on that charm of yours and get lucky tonight."

"God, it's been so long since I've been lucky, I wouldn't know which end to fuck."

"Oh, now that's charming!" Despite herself, Elena laughed at the crude remark. "Just keep talking like that and you won't have anything to worry about."

In the deep recesses of her heart, Elena Diaz knew that one day she would regret not accepting the simple gift of love that Spencer had offered seven years ago. Like all of the other relationships in her life, she and the beautiful brunette had started out as passionate lovers, getting to know each other as more of an afterthought to their sexual adventures. But the more they talked about their lives, their interests, their values, the closer they drew; until one day when Spencer had uttered the words that gave a name to what they had together.

*"I love you."*

*"You shouldn't say that, you know."*

*"I can't help it." Twisting in the bed, Spencer rolled on top of her naked lover and pinned her in place. "And I don't want to share you anymore."*

*Elena reached up and pulled her down, tucking her dark head to the side so she wouldn't have to look into the insistent blue eyes. "You know I'm no good at that kind of stuff, Spence."*

*Elena Diaz could give her heart easily to the likes of Spencer Rollins, but she knew herself well enough to know that sooner or later another pretty lady would turn her head. She wouldn't risk hurting someone she loved by making promises she couldn't keep.*

With the realization that they couldn't go forward, Spencer had taken the painful step to end what they had. She wanted more out of love than what Elena could offer, and she couldn't ask her to be someone else. In the end, they'd forged an unbreakable bond of friendship and trust, and they'd finally gotten past the lustful pull.

It was hard, though, for each woman not to wonder what would happen if the door between them were to open again.

### **Chapter 3**

#### *REDUCED SPEED AHEAD.*

It seemed like every time she'd start to gather speed on the outskirts of a small town, another sign would appear to announce the next wide spot in the road. Ruth was firm in her resolve to stick to the back roads, though. Practically all of the major highways running through New England were toll roads, and that meant stopping, being seen, and worse, being caught on a surveillance camera in a car no one would otherwise recognize as hers.

The blonde-haired child beside her was asleep on a soft pillow with a light blanket pulled up to her chin. They had talked and laughed and sang until almost ten o'clock when Ruth could hear the tired lilt in Jessie's voice. Even with the back seat folded down to make room for all of their things, the passenger seat reclined a good bit, and leaning it back had been the impetus for the little girl to finally call it a night.

*Welcome to Sturbridge, Massachusetts!*

At last, Ruth could pull onto an interstate without worrying about tolls. From what she could tell on the map, I-84 would take her across the corner of New York and into Pennsylvania, where she could pick up something going south. She hadn't quite worked out where they were headed, assuming that if she didn't know, no one else would be able to figure it out either.

All she knew for sure was that she wanted to start a new life far away from Madison, Maine. She wanted her daughter to have a happy childhood, and to be safe from the angry man her father had become. Ruth tossed her head in disgust at that thought. Skip Drummond had always been angry; no one could please him, and everything he'd ever done was in order to manipulate someone else.

But Ruth couldn't lay all the blame for this mess at her ex-husband's feet. No, she had to own up

to her own mistakes, of which she'd made plenty.

The Fergusons were not well off by anyone's standards, but they had always gotten by. Ruth's father Roy had worked his whole life at the paper mill, bringing home a check just big enough to cover their bills, but not to provide many extras. Still, her mother Mildred had been resourceful, making many of their clothes at home, and finding ways to save here and there for coats and shoes or something new for the house.

They were a close-knit family; Roy insisted on it. Ruth, named for the faithful Biblical figure, was expected to spend most of her free time at home, even when her high school friends begged her to come along to football games or parties. Roy and Mildred favored a strict setting for their daughter, and guarded her virtue by refusing her permission to go out with boys until she reached the age of seventeen years old. Even then, the young men in question were scrutinized and given a rigid set of rules.

Her parents were angry and dismayed when Ruth graduated high school and soon after moved out into her own small apartment, taking a clerical job at the Bank of Madison. The division deepened when it became obvious that she'd abandoned the lessons of her upbringing and started going out to dance clubs and bars in Augusta with her new friends and coworkers.

Skip Drummond was her only real boyfriend of any duration, and he turned out to be the one she'd saved herself for. Skip's family owned the area's biggest home appliance and electronics store, and his future was carved out in retail before he was even born. Four years ahead of her in school, the 24-year-old was considered quite a catch in this small town. He was good-looking and popular; he played in all the sports leagues at the recreation center; and he liked to go out and have a good time.

They'd been dating for about six months when Ruth made her first real mistake. She got pregnant. Though she'd been pretty faithful with her diaphragm, the doctor had told her it would be more effective if her partner used condoms as well, and Skip wasn't about to do that. After all, he'd argued, he wasn't the one at risk of getting knocked up.

So there she was, ten weeks along with a boyfriend who was furious, parents who were inconsolable, and a will to have her baby and raise it, no matter what anybody said or thought. The only other person who seemed to like the idea was Skip's father, Roland Drummond, Sr., for whom Skip was named. It was time, Roland thought, for Skip to settle down if he was to be entrusted with more responsibility at the store. A wife and a child on the way just might do that, he thought, and he encouraged the couple to take the step. To sweeten the pot, he offered his son a raise and a manager's post at the store, all conditional on his becoming a family man.

Accepting a proposal that had been coerced in the first place was Ruth's second mistake. Even as they sat in the car after they agreed to go through with it, there was no joy, no anticipation, no resolve. Instead, there was just a shared sense of resignation that they had both lost control of their lives.

The little girl shifted in the seat beside her, bringing Ruth back to the present. Almost an hour



had passed since she'd pulled onto the highway, and she was making pretty good time. She'd spent a lot of hours mired in her past, but that was all going to change soon. Skip Drummond and his cold, overbearing parents wouldn't be part of their lives anymore. For that matter, neither would her own parents, but Ruth couldn't bring herself to care about that. All she needed was this precious child beside her.

Living with Skip had been difficult right from the beginning. There wasn't a day that went by that she didn't feel his resentment about the trap his father had laid for his life. But everything that bothered Ruth about her new role of wife vanished when Jessie Riane Drummond was born. Being a mother was simply the greatest thing she'd ever done. For the first time in her life, Ruth really liked herself. She was proud of the way she took care of her daughter, and excited about spending time with other young mothers and learning the best ways to do things. Best of all, she was starting to feel like the events of the last year and a half - getting pregnant and getting married - weren't at all the trap she thought they'd be. Skip liked showing Jessie off to his family and friends, and he carried her proudly everywhere they went. He didn't seem to want much to do with home tasks, but Ruth wrote that off to Skip being the typical husband her friends had described.

It wasn't until Jessie started teething that Ruth really started to understand how Skip felt about their daughter.

*"Will you shut her the fuck up!"*

*Ruth practically leapt out of bed to go see about Jessie in the night. Picking the child up from her crib, she shushed her to calm her down. It always comforted the baby to be held, even if her mouth still hurt.*

*Skip was growing increasingly agitated by Jessie's everyday behavior, none of which was out of the ordinary for a ten-month-old. He complained about her crying, he hated having baby things in every room, and he even ridiculed her in her high chair for having baby food on her chin and hands. Not that Jessie could understand his cruel words, but it hurt Ruth badly to hear her husband speak to their daughter that way, and she asked him to stop. Mature guy that he was, he stopped interacting with her altogether, except when others were around.*

*"Why can't you get it through your head that she's a baby? She can't help the things she does any more than you could when you were a year old." she screamed one night when he'd gotten angry about Jessie pulling some magazines off the coffee table.*

*"Because I never wanted a baby, and I've got news for you, Ruth. I never wanted you either."*

*"Then why did you get married, Skip? Why didn't you just let me have Jessie all by myself? You think I needed you? I've got a little news for you too. I didn't, and I still don't." Ruth was past hurt. She was hopping mad. "And neither does Jessie!"*

That was the first time she had seriously threatened to leave her husband, and looking back, Ruth wished she'd just done it that night. Jessie was only a year old, way too much trouble for a single father to deal with, especially one with little or no interest in the welfare of his child. It would have been an easy parting, and not walking then was what Ruth thought of as her third big mistake.

Instead, she'd hung around for another year, taking the insults and watching her husband go out alone at night. She didn't care if he wanted to go screw somebody else. She was long past wanting to have sex with him.

And then one night, everything changed forever when Ruth ran into the kitchen to find Skip towering over a screaming Jessie, his hand raised high and coming down hard on her backside. Ruth screamed too, and wedged herself between them to take the angry blows.

That night, she locked herself and Jessie in the child's room. The next day, she packed up everything that wasn't Skip's and returned to her parents' home with her daughter. They were none too thrilled to see her, and blamed her headstrong ways for bringing this on herself. The way Roy and Mildred saw it, Skip wouldn't feel the need to lash out like that if she were stricter with Jessie; and if she didn't provoke her husband with her sassy mouth.

Ruth stayed two weeks with her parents, quickly growing tired of the constant berating. When she found a small furnished house for rent, she called the landlord and made arrangements to move in right away. She and Jessie lived there for almost a year. It was the happiest time Ruth had ever known.

Her fourth big mistake was underestimating the impact her leaving would have on the community gossipmongers, and the subsequent reflection on Drummond Appliances. Roland Drummond was not going to have his son's standing in the community harmed by the vicious lies Ruth was telling about how Skip had beaten them both in a fit of rage. Skip had told his father a completely different story, and Roland was insistent that his son do something to squelch these rumors.

Ruth filed for divorce, seeking permanent custody of Jessie, and asking the court that Skip be allowed visitation only under close supervision. She doubted he'd ever want to see Jessie at all, but she'd insisted on the minimum recommended amount of child support so that her daughter would have some of the things growing up that she'd been denied.

And her fifth and biggest mistake of all was thinking that her storefront lawyer could handle the divorce transaction. She'd expected her ex-husband's objections to be about the financial settlement and she was prepared to make concessions to end this miserable stage of her life. She was totally blindsided when he stood to ask for full custody of their daughter, attacking her fitness as a parent.

*"She's got problems of her own, your honor. Serious problems." "What kind of problems?"*

*"Well, sometimes I'd come home from work at night and poor little Jessie hadn't*

*had a bite to eat all day. She'd be wearing dirty diapers and still be in her pajamas. I'd bathe her and put her in fresh clothes. I was worried she'd get sick being dirty and soiled all the time. It got better after Ruth went back to work, because she had to clean her up to take her to day care. She wanted people to think she was such a great mother, but it wasn't like that at all at home."*

*"That's not true!" Ruth was incredulous at the pack of lies pouring out of Skip's mouth.*

*"You will control yourself, young lady, or I will hold you in contempt of this court. You've already had your chance to speak," Judge Howard admonished from the bench.*

*The biggest blow, though, came when Roy Ferguson stood and told the judge that he believed Jessie would be better off in her father's care. Ruth had always been uncontrollable, he said, and he feared that his granddaughter would be neglected or allowed to run wild and do whatever she pleased.*

Her father's testimony had sealed her fate, and without even asking her to answer Skip's charges, Judge Howard granted the divorce and awarded full custody of Jessie to a father that couldn't stand her. Ruth was allowed two hours of visitation every other weekend, but only in the presence of a social worker.

When three-year-old Jessie was ripped screaming from her that day, Ruth felt as though her very heart had been cut out. And the triumphant look on Skip's face boiled her blood. In that moment, she understood completely why some women simply killed their husbands in their sleep.

In no time at all, the social worker assigned to oversee their visits saw the truth about Jessie Drummond and her mom, and she argued to have visitation extended to two full weekends a month, with the restrictions loosened to "monitored" rather than "supervised." Those weekends had become Ruth's only lifeline.

From one of Skip's cousins, Ruth learned a little about her daughter's life with the Drummonds. Jessie spent most days with her paternal grandmother, a stern woman who resented having to care for a small child all day. From what Ruth could gather, the little girl was confined to a single room for most of the day, and rarely allowed to play outside. In the evenings, she usually played alone in her room while her father watched television. Skip hated having to stay home so much, but his dad convinced him that it would look bad for him to be out when people around town knew that his daughter depended on him so much.

What a crock!

Ruth pushed the thoughts of Skip out of her head again. He wasn't going to be part of their lives anymore. Tonight, she'd taken the biggest risk of her life, kidnapping her own daughter and running away with no intention of setting foot in Madison, Maine ever again. And so far,

everything was coming together just as she'd planned it.

Last Monday, she'd driven to Augusta after work to have a look at the Taurus, a 1989 model that she'd seen in the Auto Trader as for sale by owner. She'd taken out the \$3,400 from her savings account, and managed to buy the car for only \$2,000 on the stipulation that she could pick it up on Thursday. So last night, she'd taken a bus back to Augusta and gotten a cab to the man's house, getting home late and packing it with practically everything she owned before parking it around the corner.

After settling her bills and selling the Saturn, Ruth now had about \$7,500 in cash. That would have to last her and Jessie until she got a job and got back on her feet.

The weary driver turned her attentions back to the road signs. It was almost midnight and she was sixty miles from Waterford, Connecticut. She needed to start looking for a gas station, and cup of coffee would really hit the spot.

## **Chapter 4**

"So who's your new girlfriend?" Elena teased as her ex-lover came into the kitchen to pour another soda. Spencer wasn't much of a drinker.

"Her name is Kaitlyn."

"Kaitlyn! That sounds so pre-teen."

"She says she's twenty. What do you think?" Spencer had locked eyes with the young woman as soon as she walked in the door. Hanging out mostly in the kitchen, she was on hand when Kaitlyn came in for her first drink, and they'd had the chance to meet. Throughout the evening, Spencer circulated, helping to keep things picked up so Elena wouldn't have a mess the next morning. But after each pass through the house, she would return to the pretty brown-eyed blonde for more flirting.

"Yeah, I'd say it's possible. But I'd check her ID if I were you," she joked. "Hell, even if she is that old, thirteen years is a pretty big age difference."

"Well, if I was looking to get married or something, I'd be inclined to agree."

"Oh, I see. So you have something a little more frivolous in mind?"

Spencer grinned mischievously. "Maybe."

"Think you'll need any technical advice?" That jibe was in reference to Spencer's earlier remark.

"No, I think it'll come back to me," she smirked, sauntering out of the room with exaggerated

cockiness.

Fifteen minutes later, Spencer retrieved her helmet from the floor of the hall closet. Bidding her host goodnight with a knowing grin, she walked out to find the young woman waiting at the foot of the steps.

"Should I just follow you?" Kaitlyn had her keys out already. "I really don't want to leave my car here overnight."

"Sure. My bike's right here. I'll pull out and wait." Spencer leaned forward for their second kiss. The first one had come on the back porch, and it clearly signaled where the rest of their evening was headed.

As she watched the cute blonde disappear down the sidewalk, her cell phone jingled in the left breast pocket of her denim jacket, bringing an immediate smile. It was probably Elena calling to tell her not to do anything she wouldn't do, which meant she could do anything she wanted.

But it was Henry.

"Hey, what's up?" She hadn't given Margadon a second thought since she'd left.

"Spence, you're not going to believe this!" he said excitedly. "You've gotta come look."

"No way! I'm about to get laid." She had no secrets from her longtime friend. "What'd you find?"

"Somebody's fucked with it, alright, just like you said. It's backing out the cytokines."

"What do you mean backing out? How?" She'd never heard Henry this agitated.

"It's in the global. It bumps the number for the report, but then it takes it back out in a hidden field. And the cost, too."

"You're not making any sense, pal. We looked at the global. There wasn't anything wrong with it."

"It's not calling ours, though! It's a whole different one, Spence."

"Whoa, that can't be right. How would it do that?"

"Look, you have to come see it. I already called James. He's on the way in."

"You called James?" It had to be serious for Henry to actually call their boss.

"This is a big fucking deal! Somebody's fucking with the formula for Kryfex, and it looks like they're skimming the books."

Just then, a set of headlights pulled up behind the motorcycle and stopped. Spencer looked at her watch. It was almost midnight. So much for servicing her libido, she thought miserably. She might be able to make another date with Kaitlyn, but that would require an actual date, and that wasn't exactly what she'd had in mind with the young blonde.

"Okay, I'll be there in about half an hour. Prop the back door open, will ya?"

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Spencer doubted seriously that Margadon would appreciate her sacrifice tonight, but as Henry had said, it sounded like a pretty big fucking deal, and she and her partner were right in the middle of it. A half hour after the call, she swiped her card at the automatic security gate at the company's headquarters, entered the parking lot and jumped the curb to park the big bike on the sidewalk by the fire escape. As promised, Henry had slid a piece of paper between the door latch and the cutout so she wouldn't have to walk all the way around to the main entrance. Employees had gotten no fewer than half a dozen notices warning them against this practice, but everyone thought it was silly. Even with the fire escape open, the building was still secure, since a key was needed to access each floor.

When she exited the stairwell onto the third floor, the programmer stopped in confusion. Except for the emergency lighting and red exit signs, the entire floor was dark, including the glass office on the other side that she shared with Henry. Spencer walked around the hallway that surrounded the cubicles in the center of the large room. Over the top of the cubicle walls, she could see two people in her office, but couldn't imagine why they were standing there talking to each other in such hushed tones, and in the dark, no less.

She was seconds from calling out to them when she realized that neither was Henry. Stopping in her tracks, she listened to what sounded like a frantic conversation.

"Can't you just delete it?"

"This is our code," James explained. "We need this for things to work. I don't know how he found it, but I have to move it off his doc list."

"Well, do it!" the stranger ordered impatiently.

Spencer stepped closer to the office and peered through the window to see what they were doing. To her horror, she saw Henry lying on his side at their feet; his red eyes open in a blank stare, a power cord knotted around his neck. A wave of nausea gripped her as the reality of the awful scene sunk in. Henry was dead.

Shaking violently, Spencer stepped back from the window, tiptoeing backwards down the hall

toward the fire escape.

"We need to get this cleaned up," the stranger's voice said.

When she rounded the corner and ducked below the level of the cubicles, Spencer just missed being seen by the mysterious man as he stepped out into the center area.

"I'll have this fixed in a minute," James said. "What are we going to do with him?" As he asked the question, the controller turned to face his accomplice, just in time to see the door to the fire escape open and close behind him. "Somebody's here!"

When she reached the stairwell, Spencer picked up her pace, still careful not to make any noise. Halfway down, she heard the door above her open.

"Hold it right there!"

No fucking way! No longer concerned about the noise, she raced down the final flight, flinging open the door and pulling her helmet into place. In mere seconds, she had the bike in gear, tearing toward the guard gate to escape her pursuer.

As she reached the lot, a black sedan came out of nowhere to block her exit.

Thank god, she thought, her headlight shining on the US Government license plate on the front of the car. Someone had already called the feds. Relaxing at once at what she assumed would be a friendly face, Spencer started to remove her helmet when she saw the figure from the fire escape emerge and continue toward where she sat on her bike.

Something wasn't right. The man from upstairs was undeterred by the presence of this federal vehicle. And he and James had just killed Henry.

Spencer looked nervously from the car to the man walking toward her, and back to the car. No, this wasn't right at all. Suddenly terrified, she gunned her engine and squealed around the car and across the parking lot, jumping another curb to tear across an open field to the gated entry. But the gate was closed, and the only way to open it was to swipe her card and wait. There wouldn't be time for that, as the black sedan had turned and was closing in from behind.

The Margadon property was secured by a fence, six feet high with three rows of barbed wire at the top. Spencer whipped back through the lot over the curb, tearing up the grass as she searched for a way out. The driver tried to corral her in the back, while the man on foot was running diagonally toward the back of the property to cut her off. Swerving left, she raced behind the building, remembering too late that there wasn't an outlet to the other side. Instead, she found herself cornered where the building met the fence, and the two men were now angling toward her on foot from only fifty yards away.

Out of choices, she turned the bike in their direction and watched them slowly approach. Behind them, in the far right corner of the property, the ground sloped to a ravine, and the fence dipped

out of sight. That meant that the ground level before the property started to slope was higher than the top of the fence, but she couldn't envision the distance between the hilltop and the fence. If the hill was steep, the fence might be close enough that she could clear it on the fly. And if it wasn't...well, crashing into a chain-link fence at eighty miles an hour was probably preferable to Henry's fate, she thought.

The clock in her head ticked loudly as they approached. She couldn't let them get too close, but if she bolted too soon, they'd close the gap....

Now!

Gunning the engine again, Spencer charged between the two men, one of whom chased her while the other ran back to the car. As she neared the corner of the lot, she leaned forward on the racing Kawasaki, searching for the top of the fence. *Please be close...please be close.* As soon as she saw the top line of barbed wire, she jerked the front wheel off the ground and went airborne, clearing the fence by scant inches.

It was perfect...almost.

Unfortunately, the bike landed at an angle, and Spencer was thrown end over end, barely missing a tree trunk that might have killed her. On impact with the ground, her left elbow jammed against her ribs, and her hip hit something hard. At the same time, a protruding stick pierced her upper arm, all the way through her denim jacket.

Dazed and wounded, she realized with growing fear that her ordeal wasn't over. From beneath the bushes where she lay, she could see one of the men now climbing the fence.

"I'll drive around and come through the woods." the other shouted.

In the dark, she rose and stumbled to her fallen bike, pulling it upright and climbing back aboard. The key wouldn't fire the ignition, so she dropped the kick starter.

Three pumps...four pumps...the man had reached the top of the fence. For a split second, she weighed her chances on starting the bike versus dropping it and running like hell.

Five pumps...he cleared it, vaulting to the ground on a dead run toward her.

Frantically, she jumped high in the air and came down hard on the lever. With a sudden roar, the bike came to life again.

Lurching forward, Spencer rode recklessly through the dark woods, emerging onto the highway just as the black car was pulling to a stop on the shoulder. Instead, it drew up behind her as she raced down the nearly deserted two-lane pavement. On the open road, she lost any advantage of maneuverability and rapid acceleration. The sedan was soon on her tail and threatening to bump her from behind.



At speeds of more than ninety miles an hour, she pushed toward the Beltway, where she climbed the onramp and scooted rapidly to the far left lane. Jockeying for position, the sedan fell back a bit, encumbered by slow moving traffic and cars changing lanes. But the pursuit was relentless, and at every opening the driver of the black car would swerve and surge forward.

Spencer pulled up behind two cars driving side by side, shooting between them on the dotted line to increase her lead. Up ahead, she saw the exit for the Georgetown Pike and held her position in the far left lane, mentally mapping where each car on the highway would be when they reached that point. At the last possible second, she veered off, too late for the sedan to react without risking a pileup.

As she coasted down the ramp, Spencer blew out a breath, realizing now that her left arm and side felt as though they'd been crushed and mangled. All she wanted was to stop and rest.

Instead, she saw the commotion ahead, where the government car had pulled off onto the shoulder and was now creeping down the embankment to the exit ramp. The fucker wasn't giving up!

And neither was Spencer.

This time, she pulled off the ramp onto the shoulder, climbing up the bank to head east on the Pike - in the west bound lanes! Hugging the yellow line to avoid oncoming traffic, she pushed the Kawasaki again to top speeds, this time, putting real distance between herself and her pursuer. When she reached a long gap in the traffic, she turned off her headlamp and slowed, executing a U-turn that sealed her escape. Riding west with her lights off, Spencer watched as the black sedan flew past her in the opposite direction.

Out of danger for the moment, she drove past the Beltway and turned right onto a two lane road that took her out of traffic, entering the only haven she could find: a public park. A paved bike path wound into the woods, and she followed it until she came upon a small service shed. At last, she killed the engine and coasted to a stop, sitting perfectly still as she listened for any sound of traffic coming into the park. Satisfied that she was alone, the tall rider dismounted, her legs shaking so badly that she could hardly walk. With her last measure of strength, Spencer pulled the heavy bike behind the structure out of sight.

Exhausted, sore, and bleeding, she collapsed in a heap to assess her injuries. Merely touching her upper left arm sent fire all the way to her fingertips; the four-inch protruding stick explained that. Grasping the end, she tugged, seeing stars as it twisted deep inside. Finally it snapped, leaving a part still inside, the part that hurt so goddamned much.

"Elena...", she murmured, slapping her breast pocket in search of her phone. It was gone, probably lost when she crashed over the fence. Fuck!

Spencer stretched out on the ground, completely spent.

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"This is Akers."

"I lost her, Cal. She was headed east on the Georgetown Pike." FBI Agent Mike Pollard hated the fact that he hadn't held up his end on the chase. They couldn't afford a breach like this.

Akers sighed in disgust. This was a problem, a big problem. They had planned just to clean up the computer mess and dump the programmer's body where it would never be found. But there was no way to cover up what had happened with the biker on the loose. And someone would ask tomorrow why the ground was torn up around the building. No, they needed another plan.

"Okay, get on back here and pick me up. I found her cell phone in the woods. We'll start there."

"So did you and Thayer finish things?"

"Yeah. He says he erased all the evidence. You and I need to go out to Silver Springs tonight, though."

"Understood. I'll see you in ten minutes," Pollard said. A trip to Silver Springs meant one thing: James Thayer's night was about to end very badly.

## **Chapter 5**

Jessie stirred in the front seat and began to fidget, her eyes still closed as she fought against waking. From the dashboard glow, Ruth could see the marks on her child's forehead from where she'd leaned against the door.

"Hey, sweetie." She reached over and softly stroked her daughter's thigh.

Jessie made a face - her grouchy face, Ruth noted - and struggled against the seat belt to sit up.

"You okay?" The dashboard clock read 3:14. They'd been on the road for almost eight hours, and had just crossed the Pennsylvania state line. Ruth had been watching for a rest area, as she was long overdue for a break.

"Where are we going?" the four-year-old whined.

Ruth was too tired to talk about things right at that moment, but she felt badly about putting the girl off again. "I know this is hard for you, honey. I'm going to pull over soon, and we'll go to the bathroom and rest for a little while. Think you'll be okay for a few more minutes?"

Jessie didn't answer; at least, she didn't answer verbally. But her body language gave away her mood as she slumped against the seat in frustration.

As promised, Ruth pulled into a rest area and parked alongside several other cars. Quietly, they went to the restroom together and got back into the car. This time, Ruth lowered her own seat back, fixing the small pillow so that it covered the console. That let Jessie stretch out with her head in her mother's lap, and soon they were both asleep.

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Only four hours later, the sound of slamming car doors roused the pair from their slumber. This time, they got out and walked around a bit to stretch their legs. The persistent cold drizzle made the car's interior more comfortable and inviting, and soon they were underway again.

"Where are we going?" Jessie asked again, this time with more curiosity than impatience.

"We're looking for a new place to live, sweetie, just you and me."

"Why?"

Why indeed? "Honey, you remember when you asked me if you could stay with me and not go back to your daddy?"

Jessie nodded. It made her nervous to talk about her daddy because he was always telling her she'd better not say anything to her mother or else.

"Do you still want to stay with me, and not have to go back to the other house?"

"Yes," the child answered, not hesitating at all.

"It means you won't see your daddy anymore at all, not even on the weekends." Ruth glanced at her daughter's face to see the response. "Does that make you sad?"

Jessie thought only a second before shaking her head no.

"And you won't get to go back to your room and play with your toys anymore." With that bit of news, she saw the anxious look on her daughter's face. "Not the toys at your daddy's house, anyway. I brought all of the toys from my house. We'll probably have to get a few new toys and some new things to wear, but we can do that."

"Can I get another Lisa doll?"

"Yes, we'll find another Lisa doll," she assured. "Jessie, if you stay with me, it means that no one will ever hurt you again. I promise. But you have to help me. Can you do that?"

The little girl nodded eagerly. If she had her mommy and Lisa, she didn't need anything else.

"You remember that game we play sometimes, hide and seek?"

"Yeah!"

"Well, honey, that's what we're doing. We're hiding from your daddy. That's why we had to drive a long way, so he won't find us."

"Is he going to look for us?"

"I think he will. But if we both keep a secret, I don't think he'll ever find us. Do you think you can keep a secret?"

She nodded again. Even at four years old, Jessie was an old pro at this secret stuff.

"We can't tell anybody about Daddy or that we're hiding. We can't tell your new friends or my new friends. Not anyone. Can you promise me that?"

Jessie was confused about the secret part. "But if we don't tell them it's a secret, they might tell Daddy where we are."

Clever child, Ruth thought. "No, this is the kind of secret that's so secret, we can't tell anyone. In fact, it's so secret that we can't even tell anyone that we have a secret."

Still, the child looked bewildered.

"You know, your daddy is going to look for a little girl named Jessie and a mommy named...?"

"Ruth!"

"Right! So right now, we're going to change our names. Okay?"

"Can I be Brittany?"

Ruth groaned inwardly. Brittany Schaefer was Jessie's best friend from pre-school. "No, Brittany is a very nice name, honey, but I've picked out something a little different. I want your new name to be Megan. I think it's very pretty," she coaxed. "Do you like that?"

Jessie thought it over. She didn't know anyone named Megan, but that was okay, she finally decided. "Yeah."

"Okay, honey, and I'm going to change my name to Karen. You can still call me Mommy, but I'm going to tell people that my name is Karen Oliver and you are my little girl, Megan Oliver."

*The sadness in Edward Melnick's eyes brought tears to her own. Ruth knew at once why the old gentleman had come to the bank today. Quietly and respectfully, she walked him through the closure of the two savings accounts he'd started a few years ago, cutting a cashier's check for the total made out to the Children's Home Society. Ed Melnick had tragically lost both of his beautiful granddaughters, Karen and Megan Oliver, when they'd drowned in a boating accident at Great Pond.*

Ruth vacillated between shame and honor at commandeering the names and social security numbers of the two lost children. In her heart, she hoped that Edward Melnick would understand her need to save her own daughter from danger.

"You and me will have the same last name." Jessie realized.

"That's right. Megan..." she pointed first to her daughter, then to herself, "and Karen Oliver. Starting right...now! Okay, little girl, what's your name?"

"Megan."

"Megan who?"

"Megan Allber," she answered.

"Megan Oliver. Say it with me. O-li-ver."

"Oliver!"

"Good, let's try again. What's your name?"

"Megan Oliver!"

"You're so smart. Karen and Megan Oliver have a secret that no one will ever know. Right?"

"Right."

"So tell, me little girl, do you have a secret?"

"Uh-huh. Me and my mommy..."

"Un-unh! Do you have a secret?"

"No!"

Ruth laughed out loud at her daughter's enthusiasm. It would take a few days to instill the

importance of hiding who they really were, but over time, she knew that her daughter would forget much of what had been her early life. And that could only be a good thing.

At the next exit, they pulled off to get gas. Inside the food mart, Ruth gathered sweet rolls, orange juice and coffee for breakfast and they set out again, the skies overcast and dreary.

"Where's our new house going to be?"

"I haven't decided yet, sweetie. If we see a nice town, maybe we'll stop there and find a place to live."

## **Chapter 6**

The battered woman rolled over on the hard ground, adding injury to insult when her knee collided with the cinderblock wall. With a yelp, Spencer awoke, momentarily confused about her surroundings until the fire-like pains in her arm and side brought rushing back the events of the night before. And just in case lying on the ground in agony wasn't enough, it had started to rain.

Using her good arm, Spencer pushed herself up and scooted under the meager overhang, her back to the wall. There was a rain suit in one of her saddlebags, but she just didn't have the energy to get up.

Clearing her head as she stared into the empty woods, tears suddenly rushed to her eyes as she allowed herself to fathom all that had happened. Her dear friend Henry was dead, murdered by their boss and a man who she thought was a government agent. Whatever he found in the code last night had gotten him killed.

And now, the killers were after her, presumably because of what she knew about the code and about Henry's death. On the phone, her partner had said something about a different global, one that "backed out the cytokines," whatever that meant. It was indeed a big fucking deal, and calling James about it had sealed Henry's fate.

As she had last night, Spencer reached into her breast pocket for her phone, now remembering that she had lost it during the chase. She needed to talk to Elena and tell her what had happened. The IRS agent had lots of friends in law enforcement, and Elena could tell her what to do.

Still weary and now a lot sorer than she'd been last night, Spencer gingerly pushed herself onto her feet. Her injuries seemed to be only on her left side. Her ribs ached with every breath, but it was her arm that hurt the most, oozing blood through the denim jacket. Staggering a bit, she walked to the bike and yanked the strap on the saddlebag, pulling out the black and white nylon rain suit. Leaning against the building, she stepped into it, wincing in agony as she pushed her injured arm through the sleeve.

Shivering against the damp chilly air, she pulled on her helmet and climbed back onto the

Kawasaki. To her dismay, it cranked with a simple turn of the key. Sitting for a moment as the big bike idled, it occurred to Spencer that she didn't have a clue about where to go. Obviously, she couldn't go home right now. These fuckers knew who she was, and they'd be waiting.

First things first, though, she needed gas. It was a miracle she hadn't run out last night.

Now creeping down the bike path toward the park entrance, the blue eyes alertly scanned the parking lot for a dark colored sedan, hoping against hope that she'd seen the last of the sinister tail. Only a couple of cars were there, both of them economy compacts. When the tall rider reached the road, she headed back toward the Georgetown Pike, turning east toward the District, this time in the proper lane. On a corner up ahead was a gas station with a food mart.

Thank goodness Spencer still had her wallet, though it held only sixty bucks, which wouldn't go far if she had to hide out for a few days while Elena got this sorted out. Ten-fifty filled the six-gallon tank; that would get her all the way to Jordan Lake near Raleigh if she had to get away. Of course, if these guys were any good, they'd think to look there eventually.

With her tank now full, Spencer pulled to the side of the building and went in to get the change from the twenty she'd left at the counter so she could call her friend from the payphone outside. Elena just wasn't going to believe any of this.

As she stood in the rain waiting for the agent to answer, Spencer set the heavy black helmet at her feet and gently plucked the blood-soaked sleeve away from her throbbing shoulder. Getting this goddamned projectile out of her arm was going to be a top priority.

"Hello?" A groggy Elena Diaz would need many more hours of sleep to recover from the night before.

"Elena, it's me Spence."

"Wha-? This is way too early, bitch. Didn't you get laid?"

"Elena, listen. I'm in trouble. Henry was murdered last night. I got called in to work when I left your house and I saw the guys who did it. They chased me, but I got away. I need your help. I don't know where to go."

Spencer waited for the inevitable barrage of questions, but it didn't happen.

"Elena?" Fuck! "Elena?"

*"If you'd like to make a call, please hang up and try again...."*

Angrily, she slammed the phone down and dug deep in her pocket for more quarters. This time, she called her friend's cell phone.

*"All circuits are busy."* It cost her fifty cents to find that out.

"Fuck! Goddamn it!" Spencer screamed in frustration as she threw in her last two quarters and dialed the home number again. This time, it didn't even ring. Nor did it return her coins.

Who else could she call? Henry and Elena were her only real friends. She had neighbors, but what good would it do to call them? For all she knew, those fuckers had tossed her house already and her neighbors would want to know why.

She needed more quarters, but the clerk inside wasn't in the mood to make change. Grudgingly, she tossed a sweet roll onto the counter. "How much?"

"A dollar nine."

"Perfect." After pocketing the change, she grabbed another roll and threw two ones on the counter.

"You got a dime?" he asked. Dense.

"No."

"But I just-"

"I lost it. May I have my change, please?"

The light bulb finally went on and the young man sighed and shook his head.

Armed with six quarters, Spencer decided to try the cell phone one more time. Again, she set her helmet on the ground by her feet, cradling the phone in her ear as she dialed with her working hand. This time, the call went right to voicemail. Elena had call-waiting, so she must have turned it off, probably to avoid being disturbed again. Fuck!

Out of options for the moment, the injured woman pulled one of the sweet rolls from her pocket and ripped open the cellophane. She needed to find a dry place to wait out the day, a place near a phone.

Turning toward her bike, Spencer caught sight of a police cruiser slowing as it headed toward the store. A coffee run, probably...she hoped. Relax...be cautious, but relax, she told herself. She'd done nothing to warrant the attention of the police. Gripping her bruised side as she swung a leg over the saddle, she shoved the remains of the roll back into her pocket and prepared to ride out.

It was at that moment that she saw the second black and white, creeping around the corner from behind the building. Spencer tried to calm her rising paranoia, cranking the bike and gripping her helmet.

"Stay where you are and put your hands on your head!" the car's loudspeaker barked as it pulled onto the lot.



What the fuck! Surely this wasn't about telling the clerk that she'd lost her dime. And it could only be about one other thing.

There wasn't time to weigh options. Spencer's instincts were screaming at her to get the hell out of there, and that's exactly what she did, dropping her helmet to the ground as she shot past the incoming car. Crossing three lanes of traffic on the nimble bike, she hurdled the median and sped off, this time heading west toward the Beltway. Over her shoulder, she saw one police car already in pursuit, lights flashing and sirens blaring; the other cruiser was hung up on the median. She never saw the third car that joined the chase.

Accelerating wildly, Spencer felt the sting of the cold rain on her unprotected face. She'd gotten a good jump this time - better than last night - but with the commotion behind her, it was only a matter of time before her pursuers caught up. She had to lose them.

On the Beltway, she picked up even more speed, crouching low behind the small windshield as her speedometer topped 110 miles per hour. A cyclist couldn't afford a lapse in concentration at this speed; nor could she spare a glance over her shoulder. The sirens had faded, but she doubted they would give up the chase this soon.

At I-66, Spencer peeled off at the last second toward Fairfax, unknowingly missing the patrolman that was lying in wait on the Beltway up ahead. When the lookout radioed that she never passed, two of the three cars giving chase abandoned the Beltway, one turning east on I-66 toward Arlington; the other following the interstate west.

In the left lane ahead, Spencer spotted yet another law enforcement vehicle, this one a Fairfax County sheriff's deputy. She hung back near the exit lane, knowing she'd call attention to herself riding in this rain without a helmet. Too late, she heard the siren behind her as the deputy drifted to the right to seal off her advance.

Cold, wet, bleeding, and now completely demoralized, Spencer slowed and pulled over to the shoulder, coasting to a stop as the deputy pulled over in front and got out of his car to walk back toward where she waited. She would just tell him exactly what she saw last night, and surely they would find a conspiracy if it were there.

Her knees still shaking from the adrenalin rush, she sat idling on the bike as the car behind her came to a stop. With her thumb, the cyclist wiped the rain from the tiny rear view mirror.

The sight nearly stopped her heart.

In disbelief, Spencer turned to see the black sedan that had chased her from Margadon, prominently sporting its US Government plate. A suited agent in an open trench coat walked tersely toward her, his steely eyes daring her to move. This was the man who had been in Henry's office last night; the man who had probably killed her friend; and a man who now wanted her dead as well.

Not waiting for an introduction, she spun the throttle and popped the clutch, rocketing forward again as the deputy scrambled back to his car. Without her helmet, she heard the unmistakable sound of gunfire from the man in the trench coat.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Come back to bed," Kelly groaned, incredulous that her lover would be up and about so early after the party that had raged until almost three a.m.

Instead, the IRS agent pulled on her jeans and slipped a sweatshirt over her head. "Something's wrong with Spence."

"What is it?"

"I'm not sure. She said she was in trouble and then the line went dead. I can't call out, not even on my cell phone." Elena grabbed her socks next, then her ankle boots. "Look, I'm going to head over to her place and see if she's okay. Go back to sleep."

The naked woman complied.

Still interested? [Part 2](#)

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## ~ Malicious Pursuit ~

by KG MacGregor

**Disclaimers:** By now, you should know this part by heart. If you like to envision these characters as familiar faces, I won't mess with that.

This is an action/adventure story. I wanted to call it a thriller, but I thought that was a little presumptuous. However, it is my hope that you have to read the whole thing in one sitting. Oh, and there's romance between women. Thought you'd appreciate that.

Thanks very much to TNovan & Ann who helped me out with the technical details. Any errors you find are questions I forgot to ask, things I didn't clarify, or stuff I made up. If you find

mistakes, please let me know.

A HUGE thanks also to Tami, my beta reader en fuego, and to the "fresh eyes" who gave it a read. And thanks also to my Sweetcakes, not just for her editing, but for talking through all of the critical parts until we got things to work.

**Malicious Pursuit**  
**By KG MacGregor**  
© 2003  
[kgmacgregor@yahoo.com](mailto:kgmacgregor@yahoo.com)

## **Part 2**

### **Chapter 7**

Watching out for a new home piqued Jessie's interest for an hour or so as they moved south on I-81 through eastern Pennsylvania; but eventually, the child returned to dreamland, worn out by her night on the road.

In Harrisburg, Ruth drifted over to I-83 toward Baltimore, but as she approached the outskirts of the Maryland capital, she knew that she wasn't cut out to live in a place like that, no matter how much she wanted to leave the small town behind.

She'd never lived in a big city, but from what she'd heard from her friend Arlene, it meant that people lived close to you, but you never got to know them. Workers came home and went inside their houses, closed their doors, and retreated to their fenced-in back yards. There was more traffic, longer lines, and people were more anonymous. Being anonymous had its advantages, for sure, but some people figured that it gave them permission to be flaming assholes, since the chances were pretty low you'd ever see the same people again.

Ruth laughed to herself as she recalled Arlene's most embarrassing moment. Driving in Boston one day, she'd flipped off somebody once who cut her off, and by the time she got home, she was horrified to find out it was her neighbor in a new car.

No, Ruth wanted something a little more out of the way, but a place large enough to afford at least a modicum of anonymity. Places like Madison guaranteed that everyone knew your business; it wouldn't do for people in a new place to start asking questions of the newcomer, and to start comparing notes.

Skirting the maze of interstates and parkways, the young mother continued south into Virginia, noting with interest their proximity to Washington, DC. It might be nice to live close enough to visit a place like this, she thought, with its monuments and museums.

A series of turns landed the old Taurus wagon on the outskirts of Manassas, Virginia. It was sort of a bustling town, lots of shoppers out on Saturday, even in this rain. The stops and starts at the busy intersections woke Jessie and she sat up to look around.

"Are you getting hungry?" her mother asked.

Jessie nodded grumpily. Her usually pleasant personality always got displaced for those first few minutes after waking up.

What Ruth wanted was a place where she could sit in a booth and drink a bottomless cup of coffee. Instead, to her daughter's delight, she pulled into a fast food restaurant that boasted a playground protected from the rain by a large overhang. Ten minutes later, she was shivering outside at a picnic table, watching the four-year-old blow off steam climbing through one tunnel to slide down another.

"Watch this!" the little girl shouted, suddenly appearing head first and landing on the carpet with a thud. Predictably, her face contorted as she began to cry.

"Sweetheart, you came out of there like a rocket. People aren't supposed to be rockets," she teased gently. "Maybe you should come and eat for a few minutes until you feel better."

Jessie did as she was asked, tearfully climbing up onto the bench and taking a big bite of her cheeseburger.

As a mom, Ruth felt pretty guilty about how she'd handled the care and feeding of this child over the last eighteen hours - a cheeseburger for dinner, sleeping in the car, a sweet roll for breakfast, and another cheeseburger for lunch. But it wasn't the food that was important here; it was the playground, and the chance for Jessie to be a kid for just a few minutes. Ruth was asking a lot of her daughter right now, and she wasn't going to lose sight of the fact that this was all about what was good for Jessie.

"I'm going to go get some more coffee, honey. I'll be right back." The playground's only access was from inside the store, and Ruth could keep an eye on Jessie easily as she drew another cup of coffee from the large dispenser. On her way back out, she picked up a complimentary copy of the *Journal-Messenger*, the local paper in Manassas. Once back at their table, she was pleased to see that her daughter had recovered from her spill and was back on the slide.

A couple of the stories on the front page on local businesses and an arts and crafts fair confirmed for Ruth that this was a thriving community, and yet a small town. Flipping to the back, she found the classifieds, which included several job ads, mostly entry level or service jobs. But it was a "for rent" ad that got her attention:

*For Rent: 2BR/1B  
trailer furn \$150  
utl incl. Owner needs  
help w/errands  
& lt chores.*

Ruth had figured on paying at least five hundred a month for something already furnished, and then to have to pay utilities on top of that. It was probably a dump, she reasoned. But maybe not.

Lowering the paper, she took a closer look at the community of Manassas. Traffic was moderate, the buildings new and modern. Signs to Old Town and to the Manassas Battlefield suggested that it was a tourist destination, and that the city's history was a source of great local pride.

"Megan?" The little girl's new name didn't register. "Megan, sweetheart?"

The sweetheart part got the little girl's attention, and it reminded her once again that she would be called Megan from now on.

"Look, honey, I need to make a phone call. Can you put your shoes back on?"

"One more time?" the girl asked hopefully as she started toward the ladder. Ruth smiled and nodded. One more time was the unwritten rule.

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Turning off the main highway, Ruth counted the rows of mailboxes on the left side of the road. At the third one, she turned as instructed. The pavement ended almost immediately; and she hugged the right side of the rutted road until she reached the second driveway on the right. She'd feared from the woman's directions that the place would be way out in the boondocks, but it didn't seem that far out of the city at all.

"Is that it?" Jessie was sitting up straight, straining to see over the dashboard as they turned into the drive.

Ruth saw the white frame house as soon as she turned, but the trailer in the back didn't come into view until she pulled even with the porch. It was pretty close to the house, she realized with disappointment. She'd hoped it would have been set back more for privacy.

Coming to a stop, she spotted a thin, gray-haired woman of about sixty dressed in jeans and an oversized denim shirt stepping from the porch into the driveway. As she got out of the car, Ruth was momentarily intimidated by the woman's obvious appraisal, but relaxed at once when she cracked a smile at seeing Jessie.

"Hi, I'm Karen Oliver. And this is my daughter, Megan."

The woman smiled and stuck out her hand in greeting. "I'm Viv Walters. "Did you have any trouble finding the place?"

"No, your directions were perfect."

"Good," she said, nodding her head toward the back. "Well, it isn't much, but if you want to see it, it's out back."

"I'm sure it's really nice," Ruth offered politely.

Viv chuckled. "I don't know about nice, but it's clean. I had to get in there and scrape up all the dirt and dog sh-," she stopped herself. "Sorry. The woman that lived here before asked me if she could keep a dog. I told her yes, but then she got another one, and another one, and before I knew it, she had eight dogs living in that little trailer. I had to pull up the carpet and put down vinyl, so the floor's new."

Viv didn't seem to know much about salesmanship, Ruth thought. Was she trying to find a renter or trying to warn people away?

"You don't have any pets, do you?" the gray-haired woman asked pointedly.

"No, no pets. Just my daughter and me."

"That's good. 'Course, if you wanted to have a pet, I guess that would be alright. No cats, though."

"I don't think we'll be getting-"

"Thor and Maggie don't like cats much."

Ruth looked around to see if she could spot Thor and Maggie.

"They're my Labradors. I had to lock 'em up on the back porch so they wouldn't jump all over you when you got here. Labradors are like that. Never met a soul that wasn't their best friend. Now if you'd been a man calling about the trailer, I might have had 'em out here with me, you know, just for show."

"You've had some trouble?"

"Oh, no! And I'm not liable to have any as long as they're here. They're sweet, but I don't think they'd ever let anybody hurt me. You want to meet 'em?"

"Maybe later," Ruth said tentatively. "Could we see the trailer?"

"Of course. Right this way."

As they rounded the house, two big dogs let loose with a cacophony of rich, throaty barks. Through the screen at the back door, they could see a black and a yellow Lab, eager to get out and meet these new friends.

Viv led them across the muddy back driveway to the trailer's wooden porch.

"You'd have this spot to park in. I keep my Jeep in that shed over there."

As she opened the door, Ruth got a nasal clearing blast of disinfectant, welcome, she considered, in light of the previous renter. Viv stepped in and flipped on the overhead light switch to reveal a small living room and kitchen area finished in the standard dark wooden paneling. A couch, a recliner, and a straight back armchair practically filled up the entry, and the dining table was a built in bar with two stools and room for a third. A quick perusal of the cabinets found an array of mismatched plates, bowls, glasses and mugs. A few aluminum pots and pans were stored beneath the stove. A tray of assorted silverware and utensils lay inside one of the drawers, and the other held dishcloths and hand towels.

"It's fully furnished, except for sheets and towels. You'll have to get them yourself."

"Just sheets and towels?"

"Yep. Everything else is here already. I mean, it's not the best stuff, but it beats nothing at all, I guess. My daughter used to live here with her husband, but then she ran off with another man, and her husband didn't want to stay, so I inherited everything. That was almost fifteen years ago."

Ruth would have guessed that, given the wear on the counters and appliances.

"Now like it said in the ad, it's got two bedrooms and one bath." Leading the way down a darkened hall, Viv once again flipped a wall switch, this time getting no response. "Damn light bulb! Oops! I did it again. Sorry."

Ruth took it in stride, sure that her daughter had picked up these words and worse from Skip. But even at four years old, Jessie had the discretion not to use them in conversation with her mother.

The first bedroom held a twin bed and had a built in dresser, a stack of drawers, and a closet. Next was the bathroom, a simple tub and shower combination, with a toilet and sink, all in harvest gold. The back bedroom had windows on both sides, a double bed against the end wall, two nightstands, and a dresser with six drawers. Given the motif, Ruth found herself immensely glad that the carpet was gone. It had probably been shag...brown and orange shag.

"So it's a hundred and fifty a month including utilities?" Even for a place like this, that seemed like a pretty good deal.

"That's right. You got water, electricity, and Jerry from the church ran the cable over here and spliced it in, so you have that too."

"And your ad also mentioned some errands and light chores. Could I get an idea of what that involves?"

"Well, it isn't a whole lot, really," Viv began casually. Now her salesmanship was creeping in.

"See, I can't drive at night because I don't see so good. I get most things done during the day, so it usually don't make no difference. But on Wednesday nights I like to go to bingo down at the church and I need a ride. Now you can drop me off and come back for me, or if you want to try your luck, you can stick around." A crooked grin popped out as she scuffed her foot on the vinyl floor.

"That's all you need? Just a ride to bingo?"

"Well," she hesitated, "once in awhile I need a little help around the house. You know, those things that are easier with two people, like holding a ladder...or picking up something heavy...or giving the dogs a bath."

Ruth gulped noticeably.

"They're usually pretty good, but they get excited and sometimes I need help holding 'em still," she explained.

Ruth stood there quietly and looked around. At one-fifty a month, she wouldn't have to worry about making the rent for a while. If she could get Jessie into a pre-school or daycare, she could start looking for work. Even a low-wage job would be enough for the time being if she lived here.

"Would you mind if I talked it over with my daughter?"

"No, not at all," Viv answered. "I'll just wait outside."

Ruth had made up her mind, but she wanted Jessie to like it and to feel at home. Kneeling down, she pulled her daughter close.

"So what do you think, punkin? How would you like to have that little room with pretty flowered sheets?"

"It's dark in here."

"I know, but it won't be when we open the windows." She walked over and tugged gently on the bottom of the shade. Abruptly, it flew to the top with a snap. "Oops, glad I didn't have my nose over there," she teased, covering her nose.

That made Jessie laugh, and she covered her own nose as well.

"What do you say, honey? We can make it pretty, and there's a closet for all your toys in the little bedroom. I think we'll like it here."

"Do you think Daddy will find us here?" the girl asked seriously.

"No, sweetie, I don't. Not if we keep our secret...Megan. Okay?"



Finally, Jessie nodded her agreement. This wasn't as big and bright as the house she'd shared with her father, but it already felt a lot happier than that one.

Together, the pair walked out onto the porch, just as the rain began falling more steadily.

"Viv?"

The gray-haired woman opened her back porch door. "Did you decide?"

"Yeah, we're going to take it. I think Megan and I are going to like living here," she shouted across the back yard.

Viv smiled and waved them in. "Well come on in here and say hello to these hounds so they'll know you're the good guys."

## **Chapter 8**

Spencer throttled back when she exited onto Lee Highway heading west. Her sudden move had caught both the deputy and federal agent unaware, and she was long gone before they got back into the flow of traffic. This time, though, she wasn't going to take any chances running up on another law enforcement officer from behind. She was a sitting duck on these interstates and highways, exposed and at the mercy of the exit ramps and crossroads. She'd have a better chance of staying out of sight on a two-lane road, especially if she could get off road quickly and into a place where she couldn't be pursued.

At the first chance, Spencer turned off the highway, heading south onto a two-lane road with moderate traffic. She needed to find a place to regroup. Her shoulder-length brown hair was wet and stringy, and the blood on her arm had soaked through the nylon, discoloring the white sleeve. She wasn't going to be able to walk into any old public building and hang out unnoticed.

When the road ended, she turned west on 620, away from the city. That road became New Braddock Road, and traffic picked up a bit. Not good, she realized, looking again for something more out of the way. Most of the surface streets looked like they looped back into residential areas, which meant there was likely no thru-way. It wouldn't do at all to get trapped in a place like that.

From highway to back road to dead end and back, she rode in the rain, searching in vain for a place she could stop. Her eyes were peeled for a closed business, a parking garage, or even a dugout on a little league ball field. She needed a place where she could sort out this mess. What was this all about? Had Henry really stumbled across something sinister? And how were the feds involved?

Finally, she ended up in the one place she hadn't wanted to be: on a road leading back to the

interstate. No doubt, the highway patrol and every other badge on earth had her description by now. Cynically, she imagined also that their orders now were "shoot to kill." Spencer couldn't risk being out here anymore. She needed to get off the road now. After dark, she'd venture out and try to call Elena again.

On her left was a large wooded area; on her right, an open field. Straight ahead was I-66 and behind her was a town, filled with stoplights, traffic, and inevitably, police. The lesser of evils was the woods on the left and she turned down a side road to find the best place to sneak in without being seen.

Most of the leaves on the taller trees were gone, but the scrub pines and rhododendrons offered a little cover down low. Still, she'd have to go pretty deep into the woods to be completely hidden to anyone driving by. Spencer had given up on finding shelter, but the rain had lessened somewhat. There was a poncho in her other saddlebag, and she could drape it over the bike to make a tent.

Picking her way up the bank and over a fallen log, the tall rider chuckled at the image of her coworkers trying to get their fancy Harley's in here. Hell, could their big touring bikes have jumped the fence at Margadon? Hell, no! Could they have climbed the curbs and medians? Doubtful! Could they clear underbrush like the Kawasaki? Not fucking likely! Her last twenty hours on the dual purpose KL650 could have been a sales video. Take that, Harley Davidson!

Spencer was winding slowly back into the woods when she heard the dreaded sound, a siren closing in fast. Eager to get deeper into the cover, she accelerated a bit, turning back to see if she could catch a glimpse of the cruiser through the trees.

That was pretty unwise for someone without a helmet.

The instant she turned back around, she was smacked in the face by a stiff branch of a barren white oak. Lying flat on her back as her bike crashed ahead into the shrubbery, Spencer lay there for all of about eight seconds, marveling at the fact that she knew what hit her. Then she took an unplanned nap.

\*\*\*\*\*

For the second time that same day, the injured cyclist awoke to rain in her face. Immediately, her right hand - now the only one she could lift - went to her forehead, where it found a sticky mass she knew was congealed blood. That had been a nasty spill, and she'd obviously been out for hours, as the last traces of daylight were nearly gone.

Spencer struggled to sit up, reeling at the dull ache from her newest injury. Moving only slightly brought shooting pains that seemed to wrap around her head, and she was almost overcome by a

wave of dizziness and nausea.

It was just twenty-four hours ago that she had bid Henry Estes goodnight and walked out of Margadon, her mind already on the fun-filled night ahead. Since then, she'd seen her friend murdered; she'd been chased all over Maryland and Virginia; she'd spent the night outside in the cold rain; and she'd been shot at, for god's sake. Bruises and a punctured arm were bad enough; but now, she worried that she might have a concussion, or even a fractured skull.

More now than ever, she needed help.

Spencer struggled to her feet and reached out for a branch to steady herself. That branch! Fuck, no wonder it hurt so bad, she thought. It was as big as a baseball bat.

Her bike lay in a heap a few feet away, but that didn't matter now. She was in no condition to ride.

As the woods darkened around her, Spencer saw that straight ahead - where she had first thought was deeper into the woods - there was a glow of lights. Apparently, if she'd continued on, she would have emerged on the other side, back at the edge of the town she'd passed.

Steadying herself now on a tree, she stooped to the side pocket on her bike, pulling out the black poncho and dropping it over her head. It didn't matter that she was soaking wet already; the poncho would cover the blood on her arm, and the hood would hide her wet hair and battered face. It was hard not to look like an idiot when you were out wandering around in the pouring rain, bleeding like a stuck pig. At least with the poncho, she could hide the worst of it and maybe not call undue attention to herself.

Slowly, Spencer stumbled through the woods in the direction of the light, not knowing what she'd find when she finally got to the end. With luck, there would be a phone, and a place where she could be warm and dry while she waited for Elena to come pick her up.

Nearing the edge of the woods, the source of light came into view. It was a Wal-Mart, the giant discount department store. Even in the pouring rain on a Saturday night, the store was doing a good business, evidenced by the crowded parking lot. By now, her instincts demanded that she watch out for a dark sedan with government plates, and for law enforcement vehicles of any type. Seeing neither in the darkened lot, Spencer scooted down the embankment, finally reaching the edge of the paved lot on the side of the store.

Tentatively rounding the building, she spotted a pair of payphones mounted on the outside wall next to the vending machines. The slim overhang high above offered little shelter from the rain, which now was coming down much heavier than before. At the entrance, she could see the shoppers gather, all waiting for the deluge to let up so they could run to their cars with their packages.

Spencer knew she must look like a fool out in the rain, but she had no choice. Dropping two quarters into the phone farthest from the door, she placed her call to Elena's home number.

Anxiously, she counted the rings, almost hanging up before she finally heard the response.

"Hello?"

"Elena?"

"Spence, is that you?" The agent had spent the whole day trying to find her friend.

"Yeah," she sighed with relief. "God, Elena, I'm in so much trouble."

"Where are you? I'll come get you." Elena knew that no matter what had happened, it was all some kind of mistake. The FBI had questioned her that afternoon about her ex-lover's whereabouts the night before. They were convinced that Spencer Rollins had killed her coworker, but Elena knew better and said so.

"I'm in Virginia, at a Wal-Mart near I-66. I'm not sure exactly." Spencer looked around for a clue as to what this area or city was called. "Elena, Henry's dead. I saw the guys that did it. I think...I think it was the feds. And now they're after me."

Like she had this morning, Spencer related the truth as she knew it and waited for her friend's response. And like this morning, it never came.

"Elena?" Not again! "Elena?"

At that instant, the programmer realized what she'd just done. The fuckers had found her cell phone and they were probably the goddamned FBI. That meant they knew about Elena, about all the calls they made to one another. And if they were looking for her, all they had to do was wait for her to call her friend. They had listened in to every word, and both times they had cut her off just as she started to explain what had happened. By tapping Elena's phone, they'd found her this morning at the gas station, and goddamn it, that's how they were going to find her right here.

Suddenly panicked, Spencer hung up the phone and stepped back, looking at once toward the parking lot entrance for the telltale police car. Hurrying as fast as she could with her injuries to the nearest row of parked vehicles, she ducked low as she looked for a hiding place.

Her first choice was a pickup truck with a small camper top, but it was locked. Likewise with the SUV two spaces over and the van parked next to it. Finally she reached a red station wagon and gave the door a yank. To her surprise and relief, it opened; and she quickly crawled into the back, covering herself with a black tarpaulin that was already spread out.

Waiting anxiously to see if she'd been spotted, Spencer listened to the sounds around her. Only occasionally would a door slam or an engine start. The rain was obviously keeping shoppers inside.

Five minutes passed, then five more. Warm and dry for the first time today, she gave in to her exhaustion.

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As soon as the door opened, Elena Diaz charged through. "I need to use your phone." Not even saying hello, she went straight for the kitchen and grabbed the cordless off the wall.

"What did you find out?" Kelly had waited all day for Elena to call her about Spencer.

"They're after Spencer, the FBI. Somebody killed the guy she works with last night, and they say it was her. Did you talk to Kaitlyn?"

"Yeah, she said Spencer blew her off right after they walked out. She got a phone call and said she needed to go."

Elena paced nervously. Spencer had said she was in trouble. And that she was in Virginia, and then the line went dead, just as it had this morning.

"Do you think she killed him, Elena?"

"No, there's no way. But I don't know how to find out what happened. The FBI agents who talked to me today asked a lot of questions, but they didn't answer any of mine." The tall woman practically snarled as she remembered Calvin Akers' cocky attitude. "Listen, I need to call my cousin."

"Sure."

Elena dialed the number and spoke at once in Spanish to a woman, then a man. Hanging up, she turned to her lover. "Spencer didn't do this, Kelly. I don't want you wondering about it, no matter what you hear. She didn't do it."

"Okay." Kelly liked Elena's programmer friend, and she figured they had probably been lovers once. Elena had been lovers with nearly everyone, she was learning.

"Thanks for the phone. I gotta go back to my house."

"You came all the way over here just to use the phone?"

"Yeah, I think mine's bugged."

## **Chapter 9**

"Okay, are you ready to make a run for it, Megan?" As much as she could, Ruth practiced saying her daughter's new name.

The little girl nodded and pulled her shopping bag close. It held her brand new Lisa doll, which her mother had rejoiced to find on sale for only thirty-five bucks.

Ruth took the child's free hand in her own, her other carrying a heavy bag of sheets, towels, and a few dry goods from the food aisle, including a jar of spaghetti sauce and a box of noodles.

"Let's hurry," she cried, jogging across the parking lot during a letup in the deluge. Quickly, she opened the passenger door and guided the child into her seat. Next, she opened the door behind Jessie and heaved the shopping bag onto the crumpled tarp. Before the heavy rains could start again, she was in the driver's seat checking the seat belt on her daughter's side.

Ruth felt her stomach knot as two police cars pulled into the parking lot just as she reached the exit. Right this minute, she hadn't broken any laws, but all that was going to change tomorrow at six o'clock when she was due back at the restaurant with Jessie. They weren't coming for her, she knew; it was probably just someone in the store who had tried to pick up something without paying.

"Can I watch TV tonight?"

Ruth chuckled and shook her head in resignation. She hadn't even had a television at her other house. Instead, they played games and told stories, always finishing the night with the book of Jessie's choice. But life was different when the little girl had gone back to live with her father. Barbara Drummond used the television to keep her granddaughter occupied all day, and Skip spent virtually every evening at home in front of the tube; so despite Ruth's aversion, television was undeniably a part of her daughter's life.

"It's 'may I' and maybe for just a little while," she conceded. "Tell you what. We'll have some spaghetti; then you can watch TV while I'll put the new sheets on your bed. Maybe after that we'll find a book and have a story. Okay?"

That sounded pretty good and Jessie readily agreed.

Ruth was exhausted, even though they'd had a two-hour nap together that afternoon on the scratchy couch. It would take her a few days to get back on the right sleeping and eating schedule, but it was more important to get Jessie into a routine.

Finding the right turnoff in the dark proved a bit of an adventure, but soon, they were turning onto the gravel driveway, pulling around to park between the trailer and the house. Ruth turned off the lights and reached behind her to grab the heavy bag.

"Can you take Lisa?"

"Uh-huh," the little girl agreed, turning around as the interior light came on. "Mommy!"

"What?"

"Who's that?"

"Who's who?" Ruth turned in alarm to see what her daughter was talking about, nearly jumping out of her skin at the sight of a woman's bloody face.

"She has a hurt," the child observed.

"Jessie, I need you to run into the house, okay? Take Lisa and go now." Ruth was trembling with fright, and her maternal instincts were on high alert. She couldn't comprehend why this woman was in their car, but whoever she was, she was big trouble.

The four-year-old reluctantly got out of the car. "Who is it?" she turned and asked.

"I don't know. Go on inside," she repeated. Ruth had no idea what she was going to do. Clearly, she couldn't just ask Viv to call the police. The last thing she wanted was to call attention to herself on this, their first day in town.

Quietly, she climbed out of the car and opened the back door. She shook the woman gently, hoping like hell she was only asleep. What if she was dead!

To her relief, the woman shifted as though pulling away.

"Hey, wake up. Come on, wake up," she coaxed.

The eyes fluttered open and squinted against the dome light.

"Come on. You got in the wrong car or something." That was the only explanation that made any sense at all. "I can take you back, but you need to wake up."

"No," the woman moaned. "Can't go back."

"Look, you're hurt. You need to find your family, and see a doctor," she urged.

"I can't," she murmured.

"Come on, you can't stay here." Perhaps a threat would work. "I'm going to go call the police."

"No!" she pleaded, suddenly fully awake and obviously panicked. "No police, please."

Ruth knew it was an empty threat. With the stowaway unwilling to leave, she had few options open to her that wouldn't put her at the center of the very thing she needed to avoid. She couldn't very well drive back to the Wal-Mart and dump her in the parking lot. Thoughts of the store

brought back the image of police cars pulling onto the lot. God, was this who they were looking for?

"Are the police after you?"

"Yes...", she was barely whispering, "trying to kill me. Please help me."

Kill her? Surely she didn't mean the police were trying to kill her. But by the battered face, it looked like somebody was. Ruth's sensibilities told her that she shouldn't get involved, but it was too late for that. Of all the cars in the lot, this woman had picked hers. Something else - her instincts, perhaps - said that she couldn't just turn the injured woman out; that a dreadful fate awaited her.

"Let's get you inside."

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"Jessie, go outside and get the green blanket from the car. Bring it to my bedroom, okay?" Ruth was guiding the injured woman down the dark hallway to the bedroom in the back.

The child quickly ran back out to the car, returning with a plastic package almost too large for her to carry.

"That's it, honey. Good girl. Can you pull the plastic off?"

Ruth eased the woman down to sit on the edge of the bed, holding her upright with one hand while her other released the blanket from its packaging and flung it haphazardly across the center of the bed. Lifting the sides of the nylon poncho, she pulled it over the woman's head and dropped it on the floor. Without the cover, she could see the trail of blood running from the deep gash above the brow, and another splotch that covered her upper arm.

Wrapping an arm around the sagging shoulders, Ruth edged her backward onto the bed, propping a foam pillow beneath her head. Then she lifted the feet and swung them to the end of the bed.

"Sweetie, I'm going to let you watch television by yourself for awhile, okay? I need to help this lady."

Jessie nodded, clearly afraid of this stranger. "Will she hurt us?"

"No, honey, she isn't going to hurt us. We're going to help her feel better. Then she'll be able to go back to her house by herself." Ruth hoped it was that simple. It was bad enough to have a bleeding stranger in her home; it was worse having someone like that so close to Jessie.



She walked her daughter back to the living room, settled her into the recliner with a carton of juice, and tuned in a children's channel on the TV. Next, she unpacked her first aid supplies from the box of toiletries and cosmetics in the bathroom. There wasn't much: some plastic bandages with pictures of cartoon characters, a few cotton balls, tape, anti-biotic cream, and rubbing alcohol. This was the standard kit for Jessie's skinned knees and elbows, and she hoped it would be enough to treat this mysterious woman's injuries.

The first priority was to stop the bleeding above the woman's eye and on her arm. Filling a mixing bowl with water, Ruth wet a cloth and began to wipe away the dried blood. The cut was only about an inch wide, just above the brow, but it went all the way to the bone. From the bruising on the forehead, it looked as though she'd been hit with something blunt that split the skin. Pressing the woman's shoulder to the bed to hold her still, Ruth used a cotton ball to dab the alcohol directly into the wound.

The injured woman moaned without opening her eyes.

"Yeah, I know it hurts. I'm sorry," she soothed. Next, she gently applied the anti-biotic cream and closed the wound with two narrow strips of tape. The woman shivered and Ruth folded the blanket over her. She would deal with the arm after she fed her child.

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"Are you going to sleep with that hurt lady?" Jessie asked innocently as she crawled into bed.

"No, honey. Tonight I'm going to sleep on the couch like we did this afternoon."

"You can sleep in my bed," the child offered.

That was a tempting offer, but it wasn't fair to disrupt Jessie's sleep for a second night in a row. "You're sweet, little Megan," she smiled, nuzzling her daughter's hair. "And I love you. But I'll be okay on the couch."

"I love you too, Mommy."

Ruth pulled the door almost closed and headed back to the bigger bedroom to check on their patient. During dinner, she had become suddenly anxious that the woman might actually die in their trailer, and she'd jumped up to find her resting peacefully, but feverish. That, no doubt, was from being out in the rain.

With a fresh bowl of warm water, Ruth prepared to tend to the arm injury. Pulling the blanket back, she noticed for the first time that the woman was wearing some sort of rainproof jumpsuit.

Why was she dressed to be out in the rain? Had she been riding a motorcycle? That was the most logical explanation, and maybe the pouring rain would then explain why she sought refuge in the car.

As she unsnapped the top, she saw a denim jacket underneath, and a white t-shirt under that. Starting with the boots, she carefully undressed her patient, stopping when she reached the jeans and t-shirt.

Carefully, she pushed up the reddened sleeve of the shirt, gasping in horror as the source of the blood was revealed: a swollen and discolored puncture wound, festering with infection. Was this a bullet wound? This, she realized, was the real source of the fever.

The overhead light in the room wasn't bright enough to allow a close inspection, so she retrieved a small lamp from the living room. Holding it close, she could barely make out something brown and solid in the center of the wound, a stick or something. Gently brushing her fingertip across the opening, she could feel a jagged point. Whatever it was, it needed to come out, and the hole needed to be cleaned.

Soaking a cotton ball with alcohol, she dripped a little of the fluid onto the wound, causing the woman to wake up and jerk away.

"Shhh, I'm trying to help you here. You need to relax."

"It's...a stick...broken."

"Yeah, I can see that. I'm going to have to try to pull it out, and it's going to hurt like hell."

"It already does," she gasped.

With the tweezers from her cosmetic bag, Ruth pinched the end of the stick and gently started to work it out. Unable to stand the pain, the injured woman flinched and tried to sit up.

"You have to be still. I'll be as careful as I can." With her left hand, she gently pressed the woman's collarbone and urged her back against the blanket. As the anguished face contorted in pain, Ruth tugged the stick, this time pulling it clean amidst a new flow of blood. That would help cleanse the wound, but the alcohol would be better. As she trickled it again directly into the wound, the woman flailed, her flesh on fire.

"Shhh, that's it. You can go back to sleep," Ruth soothed.

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"These fuckers are the Keystone Cops," Akers groused into his cell phone. "'Urgent' means after they've had their goddamned donuts and taken a dump. Rollins was long gone before they ever got there." The agent was driving back to the city for the night. They would put out an APB tomorrow. The more time that lapsed, the more dangerous this got for everybody.

"Diaz went out right after the call, but she wasn't gone more than twenty minutes," Pollard reported. "And she came back alone."

"I don't trust that dyke. We're going to need some rookie backup to keep her under surveillance 24/7, home and office. Rollins will call her again. Hell, she might be stupid enough to walk into her office. We just need to make sure we're there when she does."

"Okay, I'll line up a couple of guys in the morning," the junior agent said. He didn't agree at all with the senior agent about Rollins being stupid. Hell, she'd slipped away from them three times already; not many people could say that.

## **Chapter 10**

As tired as she was, Ruth had expected a better night's sleep, even on the cramped couch. But the anxiety about being on the run, coupled with the presence of an injured stranger in their home, robbed her of the peace of mind she needed to completely rest. Now the sun was up, and it already looked as though today, it might actually shine.

It was Sunday. She'd give her right arm to know what was going on back in Madison today. Chances were no one had even missed her yet. Skip never contacted her over the weekend, and she'd told her friends at work that they planned to stay indoors and play. Friends rarely called when she had Jessie, not wanting to interrupt her time.

Coffee would be good, she thought, tossing back the thin blanket as she set her bare feet on the cold vinyl floor. All she had was a packet of instant that she'd nicked from work. They'd have to hit the grocery today.

As she shuffled over to the kitchen area, she was startled by a pounding on the door, accompanied by animated shouts from her landlady.

"Anybody up?"

Jesus! Flinging open the door, Ruth squinted in the light of day as she greeted a beaming Viv on the porch. How could people be so jolly at this hour of the morning?

"Still in bed, huh?"

"What time is it?" A brisk autumn breeze blew into the room, and she hugged herself as she shivered.

"It's almost nine o'clock."

"You're kidding!" Maybe she had slept better than she thought.

"You're just in time to witness the miracle of birth."

A still sleepy Jessie joined her mother at the door, wearing her favorite blue pajamas. "Puppies?" she asked excitedly.

"Yes, ma'am! They're coming now." Viv had told them both yesterday that Maggie was overdue.

"Can we go see?" the little girl begged.

"Sure. Let me get my...", the child stepped off the porch into Viv's waiting arms and was gone before she could blink, "shoes."

Before leaving, Ruth tiptoed down the hall to check on her patient. The cut over her eye had seeped a little, but all in all, it was a hell of a lot better than it had been last night. The arm looked better already, swathed in ointment and covered in a Fred Flintstone bandage. The woman had hardly moved in the night, and seemed to be resting without distress.

Ruth looked for the first time at the mysterious woman in her bed. Her face was pretty, despite the swollen eye that would probably be black by tomorrow. The hair was disheveled and stringy from being wet, but it was a nice shade of brown with auburn highlights. The woman was calm today, compared to the night before when she'd been agitated and anxious about no one knowing she was there. That was certainly an ironic coincidence, Ruth thought. Neither of them wanted anyone to know she was there. Now if they could just get her well and get her out before anyone...Shit! Please don't say anything, Jessie.

Ruth donned her shoes and robe, grabbing the same for her daughter before she bolted across the yard to the back door. In the utility room off the kitchen, Maggie was doing her thing as Viv, Jessie and proud papa Thor looked on in fascination.

"Look, Mommy, four puppies!"

"Here, put these on, sweetie." She handed the child her slippers and robe.

"And more on the way," Viv added, pressing a welcome mug of hot coffee into her tenant's hand. "You want cream or sugar?"

"No thanks. This is perfect. Thank you."

The black lab had produced two chocolates, one black, and one yellow offspring thus far.

"How many do you think she'll have?"

"A usual litter is anywhere between six and ten. I'm hoping for more because they'll fetch about four hundred dollars apiece."

"You're kidding! People really pay that much for a dog?" Ruth asked.

"Full-blooded Labradors aren't just any dog, I'll have you know. Thor's a champion, and Maggie's won Best of Opposite Sex three times."

"What does that mean?"

Viv went on to tell about their successes in the area dog shows. She'd given that up last year when Thor won his champion status. It was a lot of work to show dogs, she explained.

Jessie watched Maggie with excitement as Viv led Ruth to her den, where ribbons, trophies, and photos documented her dogs' illustrious careers in the ring.

"You don't show anymore?"

"Naw, I mean, it was alright." Viv turned out the light in the den and led them back to the action off the kitchen. "It's just that after a while, the dogs didn't seem to like it all that much, and it didn't seem right to put 'em through all that training and grooming and traveling when they weren't having any fun."

That seemed like a fair response to Ruth. She'd always heard you could tell a lot about people from the way they treated animals, and Viv, she thought, was probably a pretty good soul.

A half hour later, the mother's work was done, a grand total of eight puppies, all seemingly healthy and squirming contentedly. Maggie poked each one with her nose as if counting off, then licked them clean and guided them to her teats.

"I like that one," Jessie proclaimed, pointing to a fat chocolate pup on the top of the pile.

"Then I'll save that one for you," Viv promised.

"Oh, we better wait and see," Ruth interjected. She was, after all, the mommy. "I don't think I can afford four hundred dollars for a dog, Viv."

"This one's a gift for Megan...and for you, of course." Viv already liked these two and she wanted them to be happy here and stay for a long time.

Pleading looks from both her landlady and daughter erased Ruth's hesitation. Jessie needed something fun in her life, and it looked like they would be sticking around for a while.

"Okay, but you're going to have to help take care of it," she told her daughter.

"Oh, I will," the happy child promised. She'd never had a puppy before.

To Ruth, this had all the feeling of a bad sitcom. She could already see herself walking the dog alone in the snow and cleaning up its mess. And it would probably end up sleeping at the foot of her bed. "Megan, why don't we go get some breakfast while Maggie takes a nap?"

"I've got plenty to eat here. I bet you're not even set up in your kitchen yet. Why don't ya'll come on in and I'll whip up some pancakes and bacon?" Viv was getting a kick out of having her tenants around, especially Megan. Neither her daughter nor her son had given her grandchildren to spoil, and she hadn't been around little ones in thirty years.

"We don't want to be any trouble," Ruth answered, all the while thinking that pancakes and bacon sounded a lot better than cold cereal with powdered milk.

"I'm gonna fix breakfast anyway. It's no trouble to just add a little more. Come on and stay."

"Alright, then thank you. We accept." But she had to talk privately to Jessie before she said anything about the woman back at the trailer. "Could we wash up? And then I'll come back and help."

"Sure, right down that hall on the left."

Ruth guided her daughter into the room and closed the door. Turning on the water, she began to speak. "You like Viv, don't you?"

Jessie nodded happily.

Despite the self-imposed distance, Ruth had to admit that she liked Viv too.

"Sweetie, don't forget that we have a secret. Even if we like Viv, we can't tell her our secret, okay?"

"Okay."

"And you know what? We have another secret, too. Do you remember last night when we found that lady in the car and she was hurt?"

Jessie's eyes grew big with fright. She had forgotten about that.

"Honey, that has to be a secret too. We're going to help her until she's all better, and then she'll leave. But we can't tell anybody she's here, not even Viv. Okay?"

"Why not?"

Good question, Jessie. Damn good question. "It's really complicated, sweetheart. I guess the best answer is that if we tell somebody she's here, they might find out about our other secret."

It was complicated alright. She could tell by the confused look on her daughter's face that she had more questions. It was just that Jessie hadn't figured out what to ask next.

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Spencer stirred and opened her eyes, struggling to get her bearings. She was in an unfamiliar room with brown paneled walls and windows on each side that rolled out. The room was narrow, and there weren't any pictures or personal items in here.

It was coming back to her. The woods...the call to Elena...the car. She hadn't expected to be driven away. She just needed to hide for awhile, but she must have fallen asleep. It was a miracle that she was here today and not in jail.

Vaguely, she remembered the woman who had tended to her last night...the long blonde hair, the pretty green eyes...the soft, comforting voice .... Where the hell was this place? And why hadn't that woman called the police?

Her arm hurt like a son of a bitch, but it no longer felt swollen or hot to the touch. There was a bandage of some sort covering the wound. When she twisted her head to look at it, she was reminded of another injury, the one above her eye...from where that branch had come out of nowhere and smacked her.

With a colossal effort, Spencer leaned forward and swung her legs over the side of the bed. She was very thirsty and her head was pounding like a jackhammer. Pushing herself off the bed, she started for the door, growing dizzier by the step. Flailing wildly, she lunged for the doorknob, hoping to get her balance.

Then it all went black.

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"And you haven't heard from her since, huh?"

"No. That was last night, right after dark. She said she was in trouble, Rico. I'm really afraid for her." The worry in Elena's voice was genuine, even if the conversation wasn't. As was their habit with family, they spoke in their native Spanish.

"Do you really think she could have done something like this?"

"I don't know what to think."

Elena and her cousin kept the mindless banter going while his buddy Luis combed the townhouse for surveillance devices. In a handwritten note, the spy-wear hobbyist had already confirmed that her phone was tapped, and Elena assumed that these bastards were also listening in on her cell phone, and most likely, monitoring her ISP.

"What do you think, Luis?" The IRS agent had noticed earlier the van down the street and assumed that whoever was watching had seen the two men come in. If they were listening, she didn't want them to suspect the real purpose of Luis' visit.

"I don't know. You know, I only met her a couple of times. She didn't really strike me as the type, though." Excitedly, he motioned Elena and Rico to the end table, pointing toward a listening device that was affixed to the back of the leg.

"Yeah, I'm with you," she agreed. "I just wish the FBI would tell me what's going on. I tell you, those agents can be such pricks."

The word "pricks" didn't translate into Spanish, so that would save a little time for the boys taping the exchange.

## **Chapter 11**

All through breakfast, Ruth fought the urge to excuse herself to run back to the house to check on the injured woman. She'd been fine when they left her, still sleeping off whatever war she'd fought over the last couple of days. But she and Jessie shouldn't stay too long at Viv's, she knew. It wouldn't do at all for the woman to get up and come looking for her.

Viv prepared a veritable feast for their Sunday breakfast: blueberry pancakes with warm maple syrup, bacon, cantaloupe, coffee and milk. She'd even wanted to set everything up in the dining room, but Ruth insisted that the kitchen table was perfect.

From the outside, no one would have guessed that the simple frame structure was like two separate houses inside, one side resembling an antique museum; the other, a comfortable old shoe. The formal living room, the dining room, and the guest bedroom were packed with polished antiques of dark rich woods and brass. The overstuffed chairs and davenport weren't particularly inviting, but they were lovely to look at. Given what she already knew about Viv's down-to-earth nature, Ruth had trouble envisioning the woman living in a setting so elegant.

In contrast, the kitchen, den, and Viv's bedroom held a modern but worn décor that seemed to encourage staying a while and making yourself at home. That was truer to the image the landlady presented, and it was, in fact, the kind of home Ruth wanted for her daughter and herself.



"No, we can't bring him home yet," she answered Jessie's happy pleas about the little brown dog. "He has to stay with his mother until he's bigger so he'll be healthy."

"Can I visit him?"

"It's 'may I' and if it's okay with Viv, I don't see why not," she assured.

"You can come whenever you want, Megan," their hostess politely replied.

Ruth laughed to herself and bit her tongue not to automatically correct her landlady with "may." It was nice having Jessie exposed to an older woman who was patient and attentive. The little girl had been destined to miss out on that kind of relationship in Madison. Barbara Drummond was distant and stern; Ruth's own mother Mildred had never quite gotten past the fact that Jessie had been conceived outside of marriage.

"What are you going to name him? Have you decided?" Viv asked.

Jessie cocked her head sideways while she thought about it. "Brownie?"

"That's okay. He's brown." Ruth nodded her head thoughtfully.

"Or Hershey?" Viv suggested. "Since he's chocolate."

"Hershey! We'll call him Hershey." Jessie squealed with delight. She had heard of the famous candy maker.

"I wonder how many chocolate labs are named Hershey," Ruth mused.

"Probably thousands. But Ghirardelli doesn't really suit him," Viv laughed.

"Hey, sweetie, there's another chocolate maker you like. Do you remember his name?"

"Willy Wonka!"

"What if we called him Willy?"

"Or Wonka," Jessie argued.

"I like Willy better than Wonka," her mom answered seriously, shooting Viv a pleading look.

"I think I like Willy too," she agreed.

"Willy!" The little girl got down from the table and ran into the little utility room. "Yeah, he looks like a Willy."

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Stuffed to the gills, mother and daughter climbed the wooden steps to their new home, the youngster heading immediately for her room where she picked up her Lisa doll and returned to take a seat on the couch.

"Can I watch TV?"

"It's 'may I watch TV'," Ruth corrected gently. "And, yes you may." That would give her a chance to look in on their uninvited guest. She didn't want Jessie around the woman anymore than was absolutely necessary. There was no telling what kind of person got herself in this condition.

Ruth helped her daughter find the children's channel, and then headed back down the darkened hallway. She met resistance as she pushed the door, seeing with alarm that the woman was crumpled in the entry. Ruth shoved harder and rushed in immediately to check that the collapsed figure was breathing okay and not losing any more blood.

"Hey, wake up," she coaxed softly. *Please don't die on me!* Lifting the dark head off the hard floor, she prodded, "Are you okay?"

"I think I got dizzy," the woman murmured, slowly opening her eyes to once again find herself face to face with this soothing presence.

"You need to stay in bed until you're better. Let me help you back there." Ruth was frightened now at what could have happened - and what still might happen - and desperate to get this woman well so she could leave.

Spencer tried to stand, leaning heavily on the smaller woman. "I'm so thirsty."

"I'll bring you something to drink. Come on, get back in bed."

Spencer collapsed again on the bed, mystified at where her energy had gone. Besides the pain in her arm, side, and head, her legs felt like cement, and the dizziness was disorienting.

Lying on her back, she tried again to get a grip on where she was and what had happened to her. Last night, there had been a little girl, too.

"Here you go." The blonde woman returned presenting a glass of cold water and three tablets. "And you should take these too. I think you have a fever."

Spencer tried to sit up, and the woman reached behind her to steady her back. She swallowed the

tablets and started to sip from the glass, but her overpowering thirst got the better of her and soon she was gulping it down in huge swallows. Too much water too fast caused her to choke and cough, which in turn, made her clutch her battered ribs in agony. The blue eyes watered as she slumped forward, the kind woman patting her softly on the back.

"You want to try again?" the blonde offered, this time holding the glass herself to control the amount.

Spencer took another couple of drinks, and then lay back against the pillow, tugging up her t-shirt to display a dark purple bruise the size of two hands just beneath her left breast, and another that covered her hipbone.

"Oh my god, that's awful! What happened to you?"

"A motorcycle wreck," Spencer answered breathlessly, "on Friday night."

"Friday night!" That was almost two days ago. "Why didn't you go to the doctor?"

The dark haired woman shook her head. "I can't," was all she said.

"But you have to. Your arm's infected and it looks like your ribs might be broken."

She shook her head again. "No, I can't." Spencer tried again to pull herself upright, worried that this woman would call someone now that she'd seen the extent of her injuries.

"Wait...no! It's okay." Ruth guided her back against the pillows, where she closed her eyes.

"You can stay here until you're better. I won't call anyone," she promised.

Spencer reached out and clasped her savior's hand, squeezing it hard. "Thank you." It was barely a whisper.

After a few minutes, the dark-haired woman relaxed and her breathing slowed, a sure sign that she'd drifted off again. No doubt, her body was fighting the arm infection as best it could, but it wouldn't hurt to reapply the ointment and change the small bandage.

"Just don't die on me. That would be pretty hard to explain," Ruth said softly, pretty sure that her words had fallen on undiscerning ears.

Ruth had no idea what to do if the ribs were broken, but she remembered one of the guys that Skip had played ball with wearing an elastic bandage around his torso. She made a mental note to pick one up that day when they went out for groceries. Whatever she could do to get this stranger fixed up and on her way was worth it.

Against the backdrop of cartoons, Ruth and Jessie fell asleep together on the couch, the former still trying to recover from the overnight drive from Maine. When they awoke, she began her grocery list with her new budget in mind. Ruth had plenty to get set up, but she needed to be

mindful that the cash she'd garnered might have to go a long way, especially if she had trouble finding work that would accommodate Jessie's hours in day care.

Ruth checked on the injured woman again, relieved to see her resting comfortably. Satisfied that this time she'd stay put, the mother grabbed her jacket and pulled it on.

"Sweetie, we have to go to the grocery. Can you put your coat on?"

"You mean 'may I,'" the child corrected haughtily.

Ruth really had to stop and think before responding. "No, not in this case, honey. You use 'may' when you're asking permission and 'can' when you're asking if you're able."

"That's too hard to remember."

"I know. But you'll get the hang of it one of these days," she said with encouragement. "You're a really smart girl."

Jessie loved hearing that from her mother. Her daddy had never said anything that nice to her.

"Do you think Daddy's looking for us now?"

Talk about out of the mouths of babes. Ruth had awakened from their nap, uneasy and anxious about the impending hour of six, the moment that she officially became a fugitive. The feeling would probably intensify over the next few weeks, and then maybe she could really start to put it all behind them.

"I don't know, sweetie. But he isn't going to find Karen and Megan Oliver, is he?"

Jessie grinned and shook her head. They were hiding.

"Let's go."

Before going into the grocery, Ruth checked out the pharmacy next door. The elastic bandages big enough for someone's torso were expensive, but the woman back at the trailer needed something in case those ribs were really broken.

Returning from their errands just before dark, Jessie asked to visit Willy, and when Viv said it was okay, they took a quick peek and headed for the trailer. When the groceries were put away, the two shared a cheese pizza before settling in the living room for their first real night together at home.

"Will you play Candy Land with me?" Jessie asked.

"Sure. Do you remember where we put the games?" Ruth had brought as many games, toys, and books as she could squeeze into the little car.

"It's under my bed." To Jessie, this was one of the best things about living with her mom. Her daddy never wanted to play games or read stories or play with toys like her mom did. "I want to be blue!" she called.

"Then I'll be...what color should I be?"

"Red!"

"Okay, I'll be red."

For forty minutes, they took turns drawing the cards and marching their gingerbread men to the castle. Ruth got there first in the first game, and they played again. By skipping the shortcuts, she made sure that Jessie won the second time, and that was always a good stopping point.

Next up was a bath and a book, and soon, the four-year-old was down for the count.

As she had done practically every hour, Ruth returned to the back bedroom to check on the injured woman once again. She'd slept for most of the last twenty-four hours, still fighting the infection and probably the effects of being out in the rain so long. The wounds on her arm and eyebrow were definitely better, though, and maybe tomorrow she'd be well enough to be taken somewhere and dropped off.

Ruth grabbed one of the pillows and headed back out to the couch. Last night, she'd used a thin blanket, but tonight she decided to spread out a sheet on the scratchy upholstery. With any luck, this would be her last night on the couch.

Settling in, she used the remote to turn on the television, lowering the volume so as not to disturb Jessie in the next room. Flipping through the channels, she stopped for a local newscast at ten o'clock. Barely able to hold her eyes open, she listened to the report, her worst fear being that the authorities would be on her trail already, broadcasting her picture and a description of the station wagon with Maine tags.

*"Authorities in the metro DC area are seeking your help tonight in finding these two employees of Margadon Industries in Bethesda. Spencer Rollins and James Crowell are wanted in connection with the murder of Henry Estes, a programmer at Margadon. Estes was found strangled in his office late Friday evening; Rollins and Crowell were seen leaving the scene about the time of the murder. If you have information...."*

Ruth suddenly sat up, now wide awake and staring at the picture on the screen, her whole body trembling. The mysterious woman down the hall...the woman sleeping in her bed...the woman whose wounds she'd so carefully treated...was wanted for murder. She turned, her heart nearly stopping as she saw the tall figure standing over her shoulder in the hallway.

## Chapter 12

"It's not true," the woman said, falling to a knee as she grabbed the end table for support. "I didn't do it."

"I need you to leave," Ruth pleaded, her voice shaking with fear. How could she have let a murderer into her home, so close to where her daughter slept? "My daughter...."

"It isn't true," the woman repeated. "I didn't kill that man. He was my best friend," she said sadly, her eyes filling with tears.

"Then why don't you go to the police?" Ruth herself had stood and taken a step backward toward the kitchen.

"Because I saw who did it, and now they want to kill me."

Ruth shook again with panic. What if whoever was looking for her came to this place?

"You have to leave."

"I will. I promise. And I won't hurt you," the injured woman pleaded, pulling herself to her feet. "I didn't kill him."

"Was it that other man they showed? Crowell? He's missing too, they said."

"No, if James is really missing, he's probably dead too by now. He was with the killers on Friday night." Spencer slowly stood and slid over the arm of the old leather recliner. "Can I have water? And maybe something to eat? Please?"

Ruth walked nervously into the kitchen area where she ran a glass of water from the tap. "Ice?"

Spencer shook her head as the blonde woman returned, stretching out to hand her the glass.

"I can make you a cheese sandwich...or some soup...or I have some leftover spaghetti I could heat up." It struck Ruth that the moment was actually surreal. Here she was offering dinner options to an accused murderer who was hiding in her house.

"Anything. I'm sorry I'm so much trouble." Her head was still swimming, but she needed a plan for saving her ass, and that wasn't going to happen with her lying in the bed all day. "You've been...I really appreciate everything you've done."

Ruth took the bowl of spaghetti from the refrigerator and spooned some of the sticky pasta into a saucepan, adding a small bit of water so it would stir. From this distance, the stranger wasn't so intimidating, especially since she looked as weak as a kitten.

"So what really happened?"

Off and on all day, Spencer had been trying to make sense of the events of the last two days.

"Henry and I found a problem in one of our routines on Friday afternoon. We're programmers at Margadon," she explained. "He stayed to work on it; I left to go to a friend's party."

Telling the story out loud brought unexpected pangs of guilt. If she'd stayed with Henry, maybe this wouldn't have happened.

"He called me around midnight to say that he'd found something big. He asked me to come back to the office and look at it. I was doing something else and I didn't really want to go, but then he said he'd already called James, so I knew that whatever it was must have been a pretty big deal. Henry didn't get excited about much, and he was wild."

"James. Is that the Crowell guy?" Ruth scooped the now steaming spaghetti onto a plate and grabbed a fork.

"Yeah, James is our boss. He's the controller, the one in charge of the inventory flow. So when I got to work, it was dark...everything was dark. And it shouldn't have been, so that was the first sign that something was weird. I went up to our floor and I could see James and some other guy standing over Henry's terminal. I started to walk in, but they were...I don't know, acting funny. I don't know how to describe it, but it's like they were whispering and nervous. So when I got to the office, I could see in, and Henry was lying on the floor..." Spencer shuddered at the horrible image in her mind, "and he had a power cord tied in a knot around his neck."

Ruth had been waiting to hand the woman the plate, but she set it on the counter when it was clear that she'd lost her composure.

"I tried to get out without anyone seeing me - I would have gone straight to the cops - but they must have seen me go out and the next thing I knew, they were chasing me all over the parking lot. I had to jump the fence on my bike. That's how all this happened," she indicated her injuries.

"So why didn't you go to the police when you got away?"

"Because...because the guys who were chasing me were the feds."

"The feds? You mean the federal government?"

"Yeah, like the FBI or something."

"How do you know?"

"Because the car that stopped me in the parking lot had government plates."

"Maybe they just wanted to talk to you," she reasoned.

"No, see that's what was so weird. The guy that was upstairs with James had to be an agent too, because when he came out chasing me, he went straight to the car. And then they both started chasing me. That's why I got scared and ran."

Ruth wanted to believe every word, but it sounded preposterous. "I still don't understand why you don't just go to the police. I mean, if you told them this story, they'd be able to find these guys and figure out who's really guilty."

Spencer shook her head in frustration. "It's gotten so much more complicated than that. I got away from those guys on Friday night, and I spent the night out in the rain in a park. But the next morning I tried to call my friend and the line went dead right when I was telling her what happened. Next thing I know, I'm getting chased again, this time by the cops *and* the feds. And one of them was even shooting at me. So if I go to the police, I'm going to end up dead just like Henry. And probably just like James. They'll say I was shot trying to escape or something. I saw what they did and they have to shut me up."

"You called your friend and the line just happened to go dead when you started to tell her about it?" Ruth knew now that the woman was making this up as she went.

"Yeah. Look, I know how that sounds. I don't think I'd believe me either, so I know exactly why you're looking at me like that." The look was one of complete incredulity. "But I swear to god, it's the truth. Or at least it's the truth as I know it. The woman I called is an agent with the IRS, an investigative agent. She's law enforcement, just like these guys. I lost my cell phone when I crashed the bike, so if they found it, they'd know I call her all the time. Outside of Henry and Elena, I really don't have any other friends. Probably the last twenty calls on my log were to one or the other. And these guys had to be listening in when I called. Otherwise, they wouldn't have gotten to me so fast."

"Let me tell you how I see it," the blonde woman started. "You say that you saw your friend dead. Your boss was there and so was this other guy. Maybe they found him like that and they saw you run away. The reason they're trying to catch you is because they think you're the killer."

Spencer drew a deep breath and blew it out.

"Henry was my best friend," she said simply. "We've worked three feet away from each other for the last six years. We pushed each other; we challenged each other. That's why he stayed late on Friday. We found a problem and he wanted to find the answer because it was all this great big puzzle to him. He loved that, and so did I. I'd have been there too if I hadn't made plans for Friday night. It was our code and it had this big ass glitch in it and we both wanted it fixed. That's why I dropped what I was doing and came back to the office when he called me."

Again, her eyes clouded with tears as she shook her head sadly. "You have no idea how unreal it is that somebody would kill a person like Henry. He never hurt a soul, even when people gave him a reason to."

"What do you mean?"



"Henry was Albino. People made fun of him a lot, but it just rolled off his back. He was one of the nicest people I ever knew."

As Ruth listened to the woman talk about her friend, and as she heard and saw the sadness in her story, she became wholly convinced that the woman in her house was not Henry's murderer. But she just couldn't buy that federal agents had done such a deplorable deed.

"You need to tell them that, just like you've told me. If they could hear how you talk about him, they'd have to believe you."

"It isn't a matter of believing me. Those assholes already know I didn't do it, because they're the ones that did." she said angrily.

"Can't you hear how bizarre that sounds? It's like something right out of a spy novel or something. Why would federal agents kill your friend?" Ruth could see the growing frustration, but maybe the programmer was too close to everything to look at it all objectively.

"Because he found something in the code!" Spencer said with exasperation. She never really grasped that others didn't understand programming the way she did.

"I don't know what that means," Ruth groaned. She too was growing frustrated.

The dark haired woman blew out another deep breath.

"It's like this. We have these programs to keep track of production. Margadon makes pharmaceuticals...drugs. You need certain amounts of A, B, and C to make D. We track everything by lot number so we not only know how much A goes in, but what box it came out of, and where it ends up. You ever hear those stories about products being taken off the shelves because there's something wrong?"

Ruth nodded.

"Well, that's how we know which lot numbers are affected when something like that happens. We might find out that there was something wrong with a shipment of B, so we have to recall all of D that was put together with that shipment. You with me?"

"I think so. You wrote some sort of accounting program to track what went into pharmaceutical products and then you found a glitch in it."

"Exactly! But what we found - what Henry found - was that we weren't putting enough of one of the active ingredients into the batches of Kryfex that we're making for a government contract. But then, somebody fucked with our program so they could cover it up. That way, they're billing the government the full amount, but they're shorting the key ingredient, which also just happened to be the most expensive ingredient. And somebody is pocketing the difference."

Spencer was seeing it better herself now that she was saying it all out loud. Could the government contract have anything to do with why the feds were involved in this?

"I'm confused. You mean you were shorting the shipments but charging the same thing?"

"More or less, that's right."

"So maybe that's why the feds were there, because they found out about it and were investigating."

Spencer shook her head. "No, the feds were there because James must have called them when Henry told him what he'd found. Something was going down in the office when I got up there. They were fucking around with Henry's computer and neither one of them acted like they gave a shit that there was a guy lying there with a goddamned power cord tied around his neck." Again, her eyes filled with tears as she thought of the terror Henry had known in his last minutes.

After a few long quiet minutes, Ruth stood up to get the plate from the kitchen. "Here, you need to eat."

"Thank you." She'd had a single bite of a sweet roll in the last two days. "I guess I should also say thanks for taking care of me these last couple of days and for not just calling the cops."

Ruth chuckled at the irony. "Fat chance of that," she mumbled.

Spencer heard it, but let it go.

"Look, I don't mean to be unsympathetic, but you can't stay here. I can take you somewhere, to a friend's house or something, but I really don't want to be in the middle of this. I've got my own problems."

Spencer nodded solemnly. She didn't want to cause any trouble for this woman or her little girl.

"Can you take me back to where I hid my bike in the morning? It's near that Wal-Mart."

"Sure."

"I'll, uh...stay out here on the couch tonight. You can have your bed back."

"That's okay. You could probably use another good night's sleep. How's the arm?"

"It's better."

"And your side?"

Spencer glanced at the door as a little girl appeared.

"Mommy?" Keeping her distance as much as possible, Jessie crossed the room toward where her mother sat.

"Yes, sweetie. Come here." For some reason, Ruth's stomach knotted at the thought of her daughter being in the room with this suspicious woman, though she had concluded to her own satisfaction that Spencer Rollins hadn't killed anyone. However, she couldn't help but be skeptical about the rest of the story. It seemed pretty outrageous to think that the feds were really trying to kill her.

"Hi, I'm Spencer. You don't have to be afraid of me." Spencer set her empty plate on the floor beside the recliner.

"My name's Karen, and this is my daughter, Megan."

"Hello, Megan. Your mom and I were just talking. I'm going to leave tomorrow so you don't have to worry about anything."

Jessie wouldn't answer.

"Did we wake you up?" Ruth asked tenderly, brushing the blonde curls back. "Why don't I come in and read another story? We're all ready to go to sleep now."

Spencer took that as her cue to head back down the hall. She felt a lot better now that she'd eaten, but another night's sleep would be a good thing. She was still exhausted.

And tomorrow she'd be a target again.

No, you may not go to sleep yet. Keep reading! [Part 3](#).

[The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive](#)

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## ~ Malicious Pursuit ~

by KG MacGregor

**Disclaimers:** By now, you should know this part by heart. If you like to envision these characters as familiar faces, I won't mess with that.

This is an action/adventure story. I wanted to call it a thriller, but I thought that was a little presumptuous. However, it is my hope that you have to read the whole thing in one sitting. Oh, and there's romance between women. Thought you'd appreciate that.

Thanks very much to TNovan & Ann who helped me out with the technical details. Any errors you find are questions I forgot to ask, things I didn't clarify, or stuff I made up. If you find mistakes, please let me know.

A HUGE thanks also to Tami, my beta reader en fuego, and to the "fresh eyes" who gave it a read. And thanks also to my Sweetcakes, not just for her editing, but for talking through all of the critical parts until we got things to work.

**Malicious Pursuit 3**

**By KG MacGregor**

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[kgmacgregor@yahoo.com](mailto:kgmacgregor@yahoo.com)

**Part 3**

**Chapter 13**

Ruth was pretty sure that there had to be a shortcut or a bypass that everyone in town knew about and used to get from one end to the other, but today was not a good day for experimenting with alternate routes. Until she learned her way around, she thought it best to stay on the main road. That meant one stoplight after another, and many long minutes alone in the car with her enigmatic passenger.

"Where exactly are we?"

Ruth shot the dark-haired woman a sidelong glance. "What do you mean? This is Manassas."

"Yeah, I got that from the sign on that building back there. But I mean what highway is this and where does it go? How do I get back to DC from here?"

*Beats the hell out me*, Ruth admitted to herself. "I'm not sure."

"You don't ever go to the city for anything?"

"We haven't lived here very long."

Spencer considered this new bit of information. Come to think of it, Karen had shared very little about herself. Then again, it wasn't like they were friends or anything.

The three of them had eaten a quiet breakfast, then the mother and daughter had gone to the landlady's house to visit the puppies. The little girl stayed with the landlady when Karen said she had a quick errand to run.

"So where are you from?"

"Maine," Ruth answered nervously, knowing that her license tags had already given that away.

Changing those to Virginia plates was a top priority. She'd try to do that this afternoon.

"What brings you down here?"

"The usual...a bad marriage...a new start." None of that was a lie.

"What kind of work do you do?"

"Enough with all the questions!" she groaned in exasperation. Okay, that wasn't the right response, she admonished herself, pushing her hand through her hair. She was going to have to deal with people's natural curiosity, and this was not a good start.

"Sorry." If there was one thing Spencer understood, it was a private nature. And on top of that, it made perfect sense that this woman wouldn't exactly feel comfortable with opening up to a suspected murderer anyway.

"No, it's okay. I'm just not used to talking about myself."

"It's alright. I have to learn not to be so nosy."

The pair rode along through town silently, finally spotting the turnoff up ahead for Super Wal-Mart.

"Here we are."

"This is where you found me?"

"You're kidding, right?"

"No, I really don't...it's just that...things aren't real clear to me about the other night. Getting smacked in the head can do that, I guess," she joked, touching the tape on her brow. "I really don't remember us meeting."

"Well, that's because we didn't exactly meet. You got in my car while I was in the store, and I didn't find you until I got home."

"Oh." That explained why she hadn't been pushed out and left in the parking lot. But it still didn't answer why the woman hadn't called the police once she'd reached home and found her there.

"Yeah, you were kind of out of it," Ruth added.

The blue-eyed woman looked around in confusion. It had been dark and raining the other night, and none of this looked familiar. The store was surrounded by woods in the back and on one side, and she wasn't sure where she'd left her bike.

But that wasn't Ruth's problem, Spencer knew. She'd obviously worn out her welcome.

"Listen, I appreciate this - everything - more than I can say. When this all gets cleared up, I'll stop by and settle up for the food and stuff."

"It isn't necessary."

"I know. I just want to find a way to say thanks."

"You don't have to." Again, Ruth heard the edge in her own voice, and told herself to calm down. "Really, it's okay. Sometimes we all need a little help."

Spencer nodded. "Well, if there's anything I can ever do for you...", she had no idea what that might be, "I'm in the book. DS Rollins. Call me."

"Okay." Ruth pulled in and drove through the lot. "Where do you want me to drop you?"

"I guess at the front door. It's going to look pretty funny for me to just walk into the woods and disappear." She might have to wait several hours until dark, she realized grimly. But then if she did that, she'd have trouble finding her bike.

Ruth looked at the woman beside her and knew that wandering into the woods wouldn't get her half the attention her appearance would. Her eye and forehead were black and blue, and her denim jacket was stained with blood. Her pants were filthy, and her hair looked as though it hadn't been washed in a week.

"Why don't I just drop you over at the edge? Then you can just go straight to your bike."

"That would look kind of suspicious, don't you think?"

"Maybe," Ruth said diplomatically, "but I doubt people would notice that as much as they'd notice you walking around the store. You don't exactly blend in with this...", she touched the denim sleeve, "colorful attire, not to mention your equally colorful face."

Spencer conceded that the woman had a point. "Yeah, I guess you're right," she sighed. Frustration seemed to be her constant companion, and it was made worse when the large raindrops began to pelt the windshield. "Oh, boy."

Great! Now Ruth felt guilty about putting the woman out in the rain. But Spencer Rollins wasn't her problem, she kept telling herself. Jessie was her problem, and so was everyone back in Madison who was probably looking for them by now. She couldn't be in the middle of this, and she couldn't do a thing about the weather.

"I'm really sorry," she offered.

"That's okay. I really appreciate everything you did."

The Taurus stopped at the wood's edge. Spencer grabbed her rain suit from the back and opened the door.

Ruth watched her climb out. "Take care of yourself. I hope everything works out." God, that was lame. *I hope you're not killed or anything.*

"Thanks. Thanks for everything."

Spencer closed the door glumly and climbed the muddy bank to the edge of the woods. Any moment now, the sky was going to open up and douse her good, but she needed to get out of sight before stopping to put on her rain gear.

Ruth couldn't shake the feelings of guilt, no matter how much she rationalized her decision. But it had to be this way. Too much was at stake here with her and Jessie, things Spencer Rollins knew nothing about. She wished she'd been able to explain it all, so she wouldn't seem so callous.

Absorbed in her thoughts of the injured woman's problems, Ruth fell in behind a line of traffic, mindlessly turning left before she realized her error. The road she was on led out to the interstate. That was in the opposite direction from the trailer, so she immediately started looking for a place to turn around or circle back. A cutoff up ahead looked promising, and she followed a couple of cars as they turned.

The rain was heavier now, and she turned her wipers up a notch. On her left was a wooded area; in fact, she realized, it appeared to be the same woods where she'd dropped her passenger, except on the other side. Peering through the trees, she tried to catch a glimpse of....

Fuck! Ruth slammed on her brakes, narrowly avoiding the stopped car in front of her. Did the idiot just stop in the road or what?

The flashing blue lights up ahead sent a shockwave to her bones. From here, it looked like a checkpoint of some sort. Her only driver's license was for Ruth Ferguson, a fugitive. It was too late to turn around without being seen, and already, three more cars had lined up behind her.

Her knee bounced uncontrollably as she inched forward and saw with relief that the commotion wasn't a checkpoint after all. Apparently, it was just a minor accident of some sort, because there were yellow lights from a wrecker on the other side of the road. As she drew closer, she followed the patrolman's direction to keep right, finally seeing what all the activity was about: Two uniformed patrolmen were guiding a red motorcycle down the embankment. And parked behind the wrecker was a black sedan with government plates.

So they'd found Spencer's bike.

With a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach, Ruth realized that the woman she'd dropped off was at this very moment walking right into the hands of her pursuers. That man, the one in the raincoat standing in front of the government car, might even be one of the men who Spencer said

wanted her dead. But surely the Manassas police would keep her safe, and she could explain what happened.

But what if everything that Spencer had said was true? She might never have a chance to tell her story. She might be killed in their custody, and they'd just report that she tried to escape or something. Not like it hadn't ever happened before. Suddenly Ruth felt as though she held the woman's fate in her hands.

This is not your problem, the voice said. Your priority is Jessie. Spencer Rollins will be okay.

Even as her conscious mind repeated that mantra, Ruth slowed and pulled onto a gravel road. When traffic cleared, she turned back toward the wrecker, looking away as she passed the patrolman again. Two quick turns later, and she was back at the spot where she had dropped her passenger.

Leaving the car at the edge of the pavement, Ruth got out and scampered hurriedly up the bank and into the woods. Pushing through the wet underbrush, she fought the urge to call out, not wanting to give their presence away. Through the rain, she could make out the figure of the tall woman moving slowly in the woods up ahead. If she could just catch her before she went too far. Running faster, Ruth hurdled a fallen log and charged through the slippery forest floor in pursuit.

Spencer looked about anxiously as she scoured the woods for her bike. She hadn't remembered walking this far when she came upon the Wal-Mart. Thinking she'd just been following the wrong angle, she turned to her right, freezing in place as she caught movement behind her from the corner of her eye. Crouching behind a rhododendron, she waited and watched, shocked to see that the blonde woman had followed her into the woods. Stepping out, she started to call out.

Frantic, Ruth ran faster, waving her hands and gesturing wildly for Spencer to stay quiet and get back down.

"They've got your bike," she whispered, joining the taller woman behind the bush. "They're just over the rise at the edge of the road. It's the black car, just like you said."

The blue eyes grew wide at the sudden danger.

"We need to get back to my car. Let's go!"

Spencer didn't need to be asked twice. Stealthily, the two women moved back through the woods, finally sliding down the muddy bank to where the car was parked.

"Get in!"

Still shaking, Ruth started the engine and turned around. In seconds, they were back on the highway toward town, both gasping for breath in the wake of their near miss.

"How did you know?"



Ruth shook her head, still in disbelief at what had almost happened to both of them. "I took a wrong turn and ended up on the road on the other side. They were bringing a red motorcycle out of the woods."

"And you're sure the black car was there?"

The blonde woman nodded, "with the government tags."

Spencer sighed hopelessly. "I don't know what to say, Karen. I can't believe you came back for me."

"I couldn't let you just walk into that. I still don't believe that the feds want you dead, but on the off chance that they do, I just...."

"Thanks, for whatever reason. You may have just saved my life."

\*\*\*\*\*

"It was her bike, no mistake about it," Pollard reported. The store's surveillance photos from Saturday night showed a blurry image of someone wearing black and white running into the parking lot from the area where the phones were mounted. The pouring rain that night kept them from making a positive ID, but if it had actually been Rollins, it was doubtful she was running to her bike. The lot itself was out of the camera's range.

"Goddamn it! That means she left in somebody's car. Are you sure you cut her off before she told Diaz?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. I even got Diaz telling somebody about it on the phone; that she didn't know where she was."

Akers sighed with annoyance. "Look, we need to tighten the screws on that woman."

"Cal, I can't just tap her phone at the IRS."

"Talk to her boss. Tell him what you're doing and why. If you run into any trouble, say you think she's holding out. Rollins doesn't have anywhere else to go."

\*\*\*\*\*

"I think you should get in the back and cover up. It's best if Viv doesn't see you when we get back to the house."

With Spencer's only real option gone now, and with Ruth starting to get a sense of the danger the woman was in, they'd turned and headed back to the trailer. At the very least, Spencer needed some time to come up with a new plan, a plan for coming forward that wouldn't mean risking her life.

The tall woman squeezed between the seats and curled up in the back, pulling the plastic tarp over her.

"I'll go in and make sure they're busy, and you sneak back into the trailer."

Ruth couldn't believe she had given in to her conscience and let this woman come back. She had so much at stake with hiding Jessie, but she couldn't bring herself to turn her back on someone who had absolutely nowhere to go.

And if Spencer had meant to hurt them, she would never have gotten out of the car in the first place.

## **Chapter 14**

"I really appreciate this," Spencer said as she exited the small bathroom, her hair still dripping from the shower. "I know I keep saying that, but I really mean it."

Ruth and Jessie had returned to Wal-Mart in the afternoon to pick up a few more things for their new house, and with Spencer's last forty-five bucks, had bought a few changes of clothes, including jeans, t-shirts, a sweatshirt, and underwear. From her own reserves, Ruth picked up some socks and a size ten pair of sneakers.

"Yeah, it was self-defense. You were starting to smell," Ruth answered with a chuckle.

The tall woman's jaw dropped. Had that stiff woman just made a joke?

"Viv said I could use her washer, so if you'll give me your other stuff, I'll throw it in with that blanket you bled all over."

"Thanks."

Spencer disappeared down the hall and returned with her laundry, confirming with a sniff that it really was rather pungent.

"Is there anything I can do to help out?"

"Sure. Why don't you stir this while I go put all this in the washer? We're almost ready to eat."

Spencer took over at the stove stirring a skillet filled with sliced beef, peppers and onions. The rice was ready, and a small bottle of soy sauce sat on the counter. The little girl had barely spoken a word since returning from the store with her mother, seemingly afraid of this dark-haired stranger.

"So what's your doll's name?" Spencer asked, trying to set the child at ease.

"Lisa," Jessie answered shyly without looking up.

"That's a very pretty name. One of my best friends when I was a little girl was named Lisa." That was a lie. She'd gone to school with Lisa McCall, but she had hated her guts.

"My best friend is Brittany."

"Does Brittany have a pretty doll too?"

The little girl shrugged her shoulders, still not making eye contact. She didn't like being left alone with this other woman, even if she was nice.

As soon as Ruth walked in the door, Jessie jumped up and ran to her mother's side.

"Megan was just telling me about her friend Brittany."

"Was she now? She and Brittany went to the same Little School back in Maine. We're going to find a new Little School here. Won't that be fun, Megan?"

The blonde child shook her head. She didn't want to be away from her mom, unless it was with Viv and the puppies.

"Sure it would. School's fun. You learn things, and play games, and make friends. You've always liked school," she encouraged. "I bet you'll like it when you make new friends."

"Do I have to go?"

"Not yet. I think we can wait a little while."

Her daughter visibly relaxed at the reprieve.

"But we should find a new school soon, because I think you'll have fun."

"I want to be with you."

"I know, but I'm going to need to find a job when we find you a school."

"Why?"

"Because people are supposed to go somewhere every day. Big people go to work, and little people go to school."

"Viv doesn't go to work."

"That's because Viv's retired. She worked a long time and now she doesn't have to anymore," she explained patiently.

"Spencer doesn't go."

"Well, you see, honey, Spencer's...lazy." She needed an explanation on the spot and hoped the other woman could take some good-natured teasing.

"Lazy?" She really is in a mood.

"That's right. Lazy people just stay in bed all day and that's what Spencer has been doing."

The tall woman shook her head in disbelief. She couldn't believe she'd suddenly become the butt of Ruth's jokes. On the other hand, it was sort of funny to find herself being picked on. In fact, it was a lot like being around Elena.

"Hey, I think dinner's ready. Grab a seat, and I'll bring it over...if I can stop being so lazy." she teased back.

"See?" Ruth laughed in answer, dragging the armchair from the living room to the bar so they could all sit together. The threesome ate quietly until Jessie asked the question that had been bothering her all day.

"Why do you have a boy's name?"

"Excuse me?"

"There's a boy named Spencer at my Little School, and he's a boy."

"Well...Spencer can be a girl's name too," the blue-eyed woman argued gently.

"I don't know any girls named Spencer, just boys."

"Well, now you know a girl named Spencer. It's what my mother and father named me."

"It is kind of an unusual name for a girl," Ruth agreed, as a friendly jibe and a way of letting her daughter know that she understood her confusion.

"It's a family name," Spencer explained defensively. "I was named for my grandmother."

"So your grandmother's name was Spencer, too?"

"Yes," she answered in mock indignation.

"Spencer what?"

The tall woman shifted uncomfortably. "Her last name was Spencer."

"Oh! So your first name is somebody else's last name." Ruth was starting to enjoy the teasing.

"No, actually it's my middle name."

"Mommy, what's my middle name?" Megan asked.

"Alise. Megan Alise Oliver."

"What's your middle name?"

"Michelle. My whole name is Karen Michelle Oliver."

"So what's your whole name?" Jessie asked Spencer pointedly.

"Spencer Rollins."

"Oh, no!" Ruth interjected. "You said Spencer was your middle name. So what's your first name?"

"Now if I told you that, I'd have to kill you."

Suddenly Jessie's eyes went wide and she jumped down to stand behind her mother.

"She's only teasing, honey." She reached around to take her daughter's hand and pull her into her lap. "You can't say those kinds of things around a four-year-old," she admonished.

"Sorry. I was just kidding, Megan. I would never hurt anybody, but especially not you or your mom."

"So what's your first name?" the child demanded.

Defeated, Spencer dropped her fork and leaned back, looking away from the twin pairs of pretty green eyes that waited expectantly. "Dolly."

"Dolly?" Ruth asked in disbelief.

"Yes, Dolly. Dolly Spencer Rollins. I'll have you know that my grandmother was named Dolly Mavis Spencer, and I'm very honored to be named for her."

"Yeah, I can tell by the way you announced it so proudly," Ruth teased. "Dolly Rollins."

Jessie squealed with laughter.

"You think that's pretty funny, huh?" Spencer couldn't believe how these two were ganging up on her.

"Yeah! I think it's funny...Dolly." Unable to hide her smirk, Ruth turned the question to her daughter. "Do you think it's funny?"

The little girl nodded happily.

"See there? The jury's verdict is in."

Spencer rolled her eyes. She'd try a new tack. "You're not setting a very good example for your child, teaching her to laugh at people's names."

That was true, Ruth admitted. "You're right. It isn't nice to make fun of people's names...even funny names."

"Okay, that's it!" Tossing her napkin on the table, she stood abruptly. "You two want to laugh? I'll give you something to laugh about." Reaching over, she dug her hands into Jessie's ribs and started to tickle. As soon as the child dropped to the floor squealing with laughter, she started on Ruth, who also dissolved onto the floor. Only the pain in her own ribs stopped the assault, as Spencer sat back down in the chair.

"Now I better warn you - there's more where that came from," she said menacingly.

Ruth caught her breath and climbed back onto her stool, pulling the child up with her.

"Okay, we give...", and with a very tiny voice, she added, "Dolly."

Spencer smiled and got two smiles back. It felt good to let go of the tension for the first time in three days.

"Okay, since I have to prove that I'm not lazy, I'll clean up the dishes."

"Can I...I mean may I watch TV?"

"Just for a little while," Ruth acquiesced. Under any other circumstances, she would have said no, but this was the very first time ever that her daughter had used "may" instead of "can" and it called for a reward.

Spencer made quick work of the dinner dishes, waiting for one last glass. "Are you finished with your drink, Megan?"

"Uh-huh." The little girl jumped up and stretched to grab the glass so she could take it to the sink, accidentally tipping it over so that it rolled off the counter and shattered on the floor. "Uh-oh!" The bare-footed child started to pick up one of the pieces.

"No, Jessie! Don't move." Ruth picked her daughter up and ushered her to the couch.

"I'm sorry," the child whimpered. Being sorry got her nowhere when she did things like this around her father; but her mother hardly ever got mad about anything.

"It's okay. I'll clean it up. I just didn't want you to get hurt."

Spencer had already started sweeping the glass into a dustpan.

"I'll do it," she offered, stooping to hold the dustpan.

"That's okay. It's just one less dish I have to wash, and that's good because I'm lazy," she joked.

Together, they mopped up the mess and gave the floor an extra going-over. Soon after, the blonde woman and her daughter disappeared into the bathroom to get ready for bed.

An hour later, Ruth emerged from her daughter's bedroom to find Spencer spreading out the sheets on the couch. "You don't have to sleep out here. I don't mind the couch."

"No, you should have your own bed. I'm better now. I don't hurt all over like I did, thanks to you."

Ruth looked the tall woman from head to toe then measured the couch with her eye. "So do your legs unscrew, or does your head come off?"

"You really are quite the comedienne tonight, aren't you?"

Ruth smiled and dropped into the recliner.

"It's been nice to laugh for a change," Spencer said quietly. In fact, their fun earlier seemed to have changed the whole atmosphere here in the trailer. All three of them were more relaxed; it was almost like their living together was just ordinary.

"Yeah, Megan and I haven't laughed much lately either."

"So who's Jessie?" she asked without a hint of reproach. "Or should I ask who's Megan? And who's Karen?"

Ruth sighed heavily. She realized when they were in the bathroom that she had called her daughter by the wrong name in that brief moment of danger. Her first instinct was to deflect the question with simple lie, but it wasn't forthcoming. Her next thought was to just put the subject off-limits. She owed Spencer Rollins no explanations at all. But instead, she found herself wanting to open up, wanting to explain things so that Spencer could understand why she'd been so insistent about not wanting her here.

"Megan and Karen Oliver were two little girls that died a couple of years ago in a boating accident. Their grandfather had opened savings accounts for them at my bank, and Jessie and I needed new identities when we left. I was able to get their social security numbers from the accounts."

"Your husband must be some kind of beast if you have to run away and change your names."

Ruth nodded without looking up. "He never could deal with Jessie not being Little Miss Perfect all the time. He didn't have much patience for kids."

"So you left to get away from him."

"We're divorced. But he got primary custody."

"Wha-? You're kidding!"

"I wish. He told a bunch of lies at our hearing. He said that I left Jessie home by herself; that I would sometimes go days without changing her or feeding her. He put on this big act and the judge bought it hook, line, and sinker. He didn't want her. He never wanted her. He just wanted to make sure I didn't get her."

"So you kidnapped her?"

Again, Ruth nodded, tears filling her eyes.

"She hated living there. She would scream her head off every time she had to go back. And then a couple of months ago I started finding bruises on her arms and legs. She always said she fell. I just wasn't going to let that happen to her anymore."

Now it all made sense why Ruth had taken her in without calling the police. Spencer reached out and laid a comforting hand on her shoulder. "I'd have done the same thing. I think anybody would."

"Well, I guess now you can see why I was sort of...."

"Yeah, I can see that my being here complicates things for you," Spencer said seriously. "I'll get out as soon as I can, Karen. Or should I call you something else?"

"My name's Ruth. But I need to move on from that. Jessie and I both do, so it'd be best if you



could just call us Karen and Megan."

"Sure, whatever you want." Spencer was suddenly struck by the irony of their respective circumstances. "You know, it's amazing when you think about it, that both of us are hiding out, and that we ended up together."

Ruth shook her head and chuckled. "Yeah, like either of us didn't already have enough excitement in our lives."

"I know I really do complicate things for you, Ruth, but if I'd ended up in anyone else's car that night, I'd probably be dead by now. I really do owe you, and if there's anything I can do when this is over to help you and your daughter, I will."

"I don't think there's anything anybody can do," Ruth said, obviously discouraged. "I guess I need to get on to bed. I have a lot to do tomorrow, and Jessie will probably have me up at the crack of dawn to go see the puppies."

"Go on and take the bed. I'll be okay out here." She gestured toward the couch. "Besides, I'll be sleeping in tomorrow, on account of I'm so lazy."

## Chapter 15

Spencer woke before dawn, her mind racing with the bits and pieces of information she had about what had gone down on Friday night. Getting out of this mess called for a careful plan, and she approached that like she did her programming tasks. First, she needed to step back and get the big picture. No matter what the circumstances now, where did she want to end up?

That was easy. She wanted to see Henry's killers brought to justice. She wanted to stop whatever it was that was going on at Margadon that made Henry's life expendable. And she wanted her own life back.

Rummaging through the kitchen drawers, she found a drawing tablet and a few crayons, selecting the blue one because its point was the sharpest. At the top of the page, she wrote Henry's name; beneath that, she scribbled fragments of the things he'd said:

- *somebody fucked with it*
- *it's calling a different global*
- *it's backing out the cytokines*
- *skimming the books*
- *hidden field*

The programmer stared at the words for a long time, trying to imagine each of the steps her partner had taken to find the problem. His call hadn't come until almost midnight, so it must have been an arduous process. But following the trail had gotten him killed.

With that thought, Spencer added one more note:

*- already called James*

That was why Henry was dead, because he had called James. So that meant that James knew about the changes in the program, and therefore, he knew what the program was doing. But he couldn't have done this on his own; he would have needed another programmer, since his own skills were rudimentary at best. Come to think of it, James had never struck her as being the brightest bulb in the pack anyway, so it was likely that he was just along for the ride by virtue of his position as controller. If they were skimming the books, like Henry had said, they needed someone like James to cover the gaps in inventory. But there had to be others involved; someone in production and probably even their supplier.

What didn't make sense at all was why the FBI-

"Will you get me some juice, please?"

Preoccupied with her analysis, Spencer was astonished to see the pajama-clad child standing before her clutching her doll. She had no idea how long the little girl had been standing there.

"Well, good morning!" Dropping her papers, she got up and went to the kitchen. "You want some cereal too?"

Jessie shook her head. "Toast and jelly."

"Toast and jelly," she repeated. "That sounds good. Maybe I'll have some too."

Minutes later, they were sharing breakfast when Ruth stumbled down the hall.

"Is there coffee?"

"Yes, there is. It was made by the Lazy Lady."

That got a giggle out of Jessie, and a smile from her mom.

"What kinds of things do you have to do today?" Spencer asked casually.

"I have to get my car registered, and get a new driver's license. Do you want me to pick up anything while I'm out?"

Anyone listening might have thought they'd been married fifteen years.

"Yeah, can you bring me a notebook of some sort? I borrowed a few pages from Megan's tablet. I hope that was okay."

"Of course."

"And maybe you could find me something a little more...adult to write with?" She held up the crayon she'd been using.

"You mean like markers or maybe a paintbrush?" Ruth teased. "I have a pen in my purse you're welcome to use. Anything else?"

"Gee, I was thinking more like a computer." Even that wouldn't help, though. What she needed to figure all of this out was access to her own terminal at Margadon, and that lay within an impenetrable firewall.

"Are we getting a computer, Mommy?" Jessie asked with excitement. First a puppy, now this!

"No! She's being silly. We can't afford a computer."

Spencer leapt off the couch and began pacing. "All I need is access to a computer. Henry sent it to the server. I'm sure of it."

"What are you talking about?"

Now excited, she explained. "Henry and I used to do a few jobs on the side, you know, contracting with small companies to write code. But we couldn't park that kind of stuff at Margadon, so we bought a server and set it up in Vienna. When we wanted to work on Margadon stuff at night or over the weekend, we'd send it to the server so we could both have access. I bet Henry sent what he found to the server."

"So how can you find out?"

"I need a computer with a modem."

"Well, we don't have either one. Even if we had a computer, I don't have a phone."

"We need some kind of Internet café."

"What about a library? Don't they have terminals?"

Spencer nodded. "Yeah, but they're public buildings. They might have some kind of surveillance. I could get caught. But worse than that is that they'll find the server and go after it. Then all of the evidence would be gone."

"Okay, listen. I need to get going on this car stuff. I have no idea how long we're going to be gone, but if you figure out how we can get to a computer, we'll go when I get back."

"Can I stay here with Spencer?"

"No, honey. You have to come with me."

"Why?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Duh! Both of you. Viv doesn't know Spencer is here, and she knows I wouldn't go off and leave you by yourself."

"Oh," the others said together.

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"...so I told him like, I'm not gonna do that, and he goes, well why not, and I go, I'm just not, so then he goes...oh, shit! Not again! Melanie, I gotta go. There's a cop behind me and he's pulling me over. Bye!"

Sixteen-year-old Carly Porr had been driving less than two months, and this was the third occasion on which she'd been stopped. The first time, she'd gotten a stern warning about rolling through a stop sign. The second was for a series of vehicle safety violations: one headlight and both brake lights in the old Plymouth were out, the tires were nearly bald, and one of the windshield wipers flopped aimlessly in the rain. For all that, she'd gotten ticketed, but it convinced her father to buy her something a little more road-worthy.

That's how she came to be driving the brand new Saturn; at least it was new to Carly. They'd picked it up from her dad's friend Dick Huggins in Farmington on Sunday.

"License and registration, please," the uniformed officer demanded.

"What'd I do this time?" She dug out her license and the bill of sale. The registration hadn't arrived in the mail yet.

"Step out of the car, please."

"What'd I do?" she practically shouted. Some of her friends had warned her about cops who stopped women for no reason, just to bribe them into having sex so they wouldn't get a ticket.

Ignoring her question, the officer studied the bill of sale, matching the vehicle identification number from the brass strip affixed to the dash beneath the windshield. It was definitely the car they were looking for, the one that had belonged to Ruth Ferguson.

"Miss Porr, I'm going to have to ask you to come with me."

Oh my god! Shaking with fear, she pulled out her cell phone. "I'm not going anywhere till I call my daddy."

"Is your father Harold Porr, the owner of this car?"

"He is."

"Then he's going to have to come to the station, too, I'm afraid."

Oh, shit! She must have really done something awful this time. While the officer double-checked her license and bill of sale, Carly peeked at the grill to see if she had a bicycle or something stuck there.

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The cranky four-year-old stormed into the trailer and went straight to her bedroom and slammed her door.

"There is no need to slam this door, young lady," Ruth said sternly as she followed her daughter into the room. "I know you're tired and that you didn't have a good time. I didn't have a good time either, but you heard me promise Spencer that I'd take her somewhere when we got finished."

Spencer felt guilty to learn that she was the cause of the child's consternation.

"Can I go see the puppies?"

"It's 'may I' and I don't think so, because I'm not very happy with the way you're acting right now."

The pouting child responded with a mumbled apology.

"I think you need to sit in here a while and think about how you've acted. Maybe if you took a little nap, you would feel like being nicer."

Jessie kicked off her shoes and curled up on her bed. Ruth watched her settle down, the teary green eyes a sure sign of remorse. She walked over and gave her a soft kiss on the forehead. "I love you, sweetheart."

Spencer sat on the couch, looking sheepish at having witnessed such a personal moment between mother and child. Ruth plopped tiredly in the recliner.

"You're wicked," the tall woman teased softly, bringing an easy smile to her new friend's flustered face.

"That was my toughest Mommy act," she laughed.

"Well, it had me peeing in my pants."

"Stop."

"I'm not kidding. Remind me never to cross you."

"You're so funny." Ruth shook her head, still chuckling. "So Karen Michelle Oliver is now licensed to drive in the state of Virginia, and her car has brand new plates on the front and the back."

"Congratulations. How'd you pull that off?"

"I bought the car two weeks ago for cash from a private seller. I asked him to write me a receipt and I filled in my name. And I told them at the DMV that I'd never had a license before; that I was always afraid to drive. They tested me and that was that."

"Pretty slick."

"Yeah, it helps when you get in a long line of people who are abusing the poor clerk behind the counter and you're the first person who treats him like a human being."

"Catching flies with honey?"

"That's right. Listen, she's going to be a lot more pleasant after a nap. Then I guess we should go look in on the puppies for a few minutes. Did you decide where you needed to go?"

"No. Without a phone book or anything, I couldn't even guess. How would you feel about just riding around a little and seeing what we find?"

"That's okay. But I need to take her somewhere to play for a while. Waiting in that line for three hours was torture."

"Sure. Maybe we'll see a park or something."

Ruth looked at Spencer with gratitude. "Thanks for understanding."

"Not a problem. It's taken thirty-three years, but I've learned that life isn't all about what I want," she grinned.

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Viv was pleased to see the pair standing inside the porch at the back door. It was nice to have these two as tenants, and she loved seeing the pure joy on Megan's face each time she peeked in on the puppies.

"Come on in. They've missed you today."

The excited child made a beeline for the room off the kitchen where Maggie and her pups had settled.

"This is the highlight of her day," Ruth said.

"Then you should bring her over more often. Or she could stay here if you had to run out for something."

"That's very kind. We don't want to be any trouble."

"I wouldn't have offered if it was any trouble. Say, I've got your laundry back here."

"Oh my goodness! I forgot all about it. I'm so sorry."

"That's okay." Viv handed over a small basket of folded clothes and the blanket. "Those were some awfully long jeans in there," she remarked casually.

"Uh, yeah...I sometimes wear them long because I like to roll 'em up. You know, cuffs."

"Uh-huh," she said skeptically. "Look, Karen. I know you got somebody else staying over there. I heard the toilet flush after you and Megan left."

Ruth could feel her face redden.

"Now I don't really understand why you haven't said anything about her, but I guess you had your reasons. It's your business. But you don't have to be sneaky about it. Makes me think you've got something to hide."

Ruth stared at the floor, ashamed to meet her landlady's accusing look. If she only knew.

"She's just going to stay a few nights. I'm sorry I didn't say anything."

"You don't have to be sorry. It's your home and you can have company stay whenever you want. You don't need my permission. But this sneaking in and out isn't necessary. You should go get her and bring her over. "

"Okay." Ruth started out the back door, but stopped. "Viv, how did you know it was a she?"

The gray-haired woman chuckled. "No boxers. No briefs."

Ruth hauled the laundry basket up the steps, balancing it on her hip to open the door. "My landlady knows you're here, and she wants to meet you."

"How?"

"I forgot the laundry and she found a pair of jeans that were about two feet too long for me. And she heard the toilet flush when Megan and I weren't here."

"Great. Are you in trouble?"

"No, but she wants to meet you, so come on."

"Fuck!"

"What?"

"What if she's seen me on TV?"

"Pull your hair back or something."

"Oh yeah, that'll do it," she said sarcastically. "I'll look like a whole different person. Who did you tell her I was?"

"I didn't tell her anything. I just said you were staying here a few days. She's a little put out that I didn't mention anything."

"So, what? Am I a friend of yours from Maine? A relative? Help me out here."

"You can be a friend from Maine, but you're living here now and you lost your job. I didn't tell her much, so you get to make up whatever you want. Just remember that Megan may get curious and start asking questions, so you better keep it simple."

With Ruth in the lead, Spencer nervously walked in through the back door of the house. To her infinite embarrassment, the blonde woman introduced her as Dolly Rollins, which brought a snicker from the little girl, and a renewed threat of tickling from Spencer.

Viv asked worriedly about the black eye and Spencer explained that she'd been in an accident, but that it wasn't serious. She wished later that she'd been more forthcoming about her bruises and injured arm, as that might have staved off the landlady's next request.

"To tell you the truth, I'm glad there are two of you over there. I could use some extra hands with the storm windows now that it's turning cold."



Their plans for looking for Internet access were scuttled when Viv directed them to the shed where the windows were kept, showing them where to find the glass cleaner and the ladder. For the back porch, she had gotten a roll of heavy plastic, which had to be measured, cut, and stapled all around.

"Don't worry about Megan," Viv said. "I'll keep an eye on her. We'll watch the puppies, and maybe play around a little on the computer."

Computer?

## **Chapter 16**

"Would ice help?"

Spencer shook her head. Her ribcage was screaming at her from all the activity with the storm windows yesterday afternoon; and Viv had presented them with a new list of chores for today.

"Too late for that."

"You shouldn't have done all that work without wrapping it up. That's why I got the bandage."

"I know," she groaned. Ruth had advised her twice to stop, offering to wrap the elastic around her ribs. "I'll do it today. But I might need some help."

"I don't know about you, but I'm not all that eager to get started," Ruth said, peeking past the curtain to the house. "I'm afraid if we get finished with stuff, she'll find more for us to do."

Spencer chuckled. "I think we're being punished for me hiding over here. The chores are going to keep coming until she's gotten her pound of flesh."

"You're probably right." Wordlessly, Ruth picked up the elastic bandage and gestured for the tall woman to lift her shirt. "You need to be careful with this. If they're broken, they'll never heal if you keep pulling on it."

"I think they're just bruised. They don't hurt like they did a couple of days ago." Spencer grimaced as the bandage was pulled tight across the dark contusion. Still, she got a nice jolly from the warm hands.

"How's your arm today?"

"It's much better, Dr. Ruth." As soon as she said it, the image of the diminutive sex therapist popped into her head and Spencer snorted.

The blonde woman said nothing, her only response a hard yank on the elastic.

"Ow! Not so tight!"

"Sorry." She wasn't really.

"Do you think Viv will let me use her computer?"

"I don't see why not. Tonight's bingo night, you know. I think you should have to come along for that before you're granted computer privileges."

"Well, I would volunteer, you know, but since my picture's on the news as a wanted murderer, it might be best if I pass," she answered sweetly, batting her eyelashes with exaggerated innocence.

"Excuses, excuses." Ruth moved around behind the dark-haired woman to attach the metal fasteners. "You know, you were asking me the other day about how to thank me for letting you stay here. I think I've just come up with a way, every Wednesday night."

"What, you don't like bingo?"

"Puh-leaze!"

"It'll be fun. You just need a positive attitude."

"Yeah, right. That reminds me, would you watch Jessie tonight so I don't have to keep her out so late?"

"Sure. But I think she's afraid of me."

"Well you did threaten to kill us both, as I recall," Ruth joked. "But she likes you alright. She doesn't ask just anybody to play Candy Land." In fact, Jessie had insisted the night before that Spencer play too, because somebody had to be green. And when the mother-daughter pair trounced the newcomer in consecutive games, Spencer had been a very good sport. It was the first time in ages that Ruth could remember having fun with her daughter and another adult.

On the surface, Spencer was proving to be a really interesting person, easy to be around. Ruth could sense those times when the programmer's thoughts would turn to her dilemma, and she wished there was more that she could do to help. It really touched her that Spencer seemed to have also taken on her problems with Skip, though it was pretty doubtful she'd be able to help with that.

"Look, I really appreciate all your help with Viv's chores, but you really do need to take care of this. Let me do the heavy lifting today, okay?"

"Thanks, Ruth."

"And stop calling me Ruth."

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"You're all wet!" Jessie declared, as if either her mom or Spencer might have been unaware. Viv had grossly misrepresented the enormity of the dog bath task.

A happy Maggie joined her hungry puppies while Thor preened nearby. The dogs really did smell a lot better, but the same could not be said for Ruth and Spencer.

"Dibs on the shower," the blonde woman called as the threesome walked across the drive to the trailer.

Spencer muttered a few choice words under her breath, ever cognizant of the presence of a four-year-old.

"What was that?"

"You don't want to know." She was exhausted, but at least Viv had agreed to let her use the computer tonight while they were at the church. She wanted to look for a job, she said.

Viv had them back over for dinner, and soon after, the landlady and Ruth left to seek their fortunes at the Goodwill Christian Church.

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"You're getting three?" Viv had no idea that her new tenant was so enthusiastic about the game. She'd expected to be dropped off - that's what Norma had always done when she'd lived in the trailer - but no, Ruth was not only going to stick around, she was going to play three cards at fifteen dollars apiece.

"Well, Megan wanted me to play one for her, so I said I would. Then, she wanted me to play one for Spencer. But I drew the line at playing one for Willy and her doll," she explained earnestly.

"Yeah, I usually say I'm playing this other one for Thor and Maggie, but if it wins, it's mine," she joked.

Ruth took a seat at the long table, surprised to find herself excited and eager to start. From the

looks of those around her, this was serious business.

"So which one's yours?" Viv asked, indicating the three cards in front of her tenant.

"Don't know yet...depends on how they do," she smirked.

"You catch on quick, Karen."

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Spencer finished the last of the dishes and helped Jessie find the children's channel on TV. She felt guilty knowing that Ruth didn't like the idea of using the television as a babysitter, but she needed to take advantage of this chance to get online. At least they were together in Viv's den.

Ever since Ruth had followed her into the woods on Monday, the blonde woman seemed to accept Spencer's situation, and was even lending her support. They were no longer talking about when Spencer would leave; in fact, it was as though they both understood that she couldn't, at least not until she found a way to turn herself in without getting caught in a trap.

Considering all that Ruth had done for her - taking care of her, providing for her, hiding her - keeping an eye on Jessie was the least she could do.

"Let me know if you need anything, okay?"

Jessie didn't answer, already absorbed in the cartoon.

With a small smile, Spencer spun around in the office chair to start to work. Accessing the net through Viv's ISP, she went first to the website for the *Washington Post* to read about Henry's murder. Late yesterday, authorities discovered James' body, and they'd intensified the search for Spencer Rollins. Skimming through the story, she sought clues for who else might be involved. Predictably, executives at Margadon were expressing all the appropriate shock and sadness; but one comment stood out:

*"I don't think anyone really could have predicted this, but I can't say that I'm completely surprised by what has happened. In my own interactions with Rollins, I could see that she had a volatile temper, and even Mr. Estes had told others that she thought people at Margadon were out to get her."*

The reporter had spoken with Stacy Eagleton, a senior product manager at Margadon who had primary responsibility for the Kryfex contract. In her six years at Margadon, Spencer had spoken with Eagleton no more than five times. Even if she did have a volatile temper - which she didn't - Eagleton would never have seen it. Added to the absolute bullshit about her purported paranoia, that preposterous assessment put Stacy Eagleton at the top of her list of those involved in this

conspiracy.

Before she left the article, Spencer turned on the printer and waited for it to warm up.

"Is your show good, Jessie?"

The girl nodded absently, and then her eyes grew wide. "You called me Jessie!"

"Oops! I made a mistake. Your name is Megan." Spencer doubted she would ever think of the pair as Karen and Megan again, but she needed to help them keep their cover.

"How did you know my name was Jessie?" the child demanded.

"It slipped out when you broke the glass," the tall woman answered calmly. "Remember when your mom shouted at you because she was afraid you would hurt yourself?"

Jessie nodded.

"She called you Jessie, so that's how I knew it was your name."

"But you can't tell anyone, 'cuz it's a secret."

"I won't tell anyone, I promise."

Thoroughly scolded, Spencer turned back to her work. When she printed the news story, she took a deep breath before taking the next step. Accessing the server was an enormous risk. If the feds knew about it they'd be watching, and they might trace the number right to Viv's front door.

No one except Spencer and Henry knew of the server's existence. When they routed things from work out to Vienna for remote access, they routinely cleaned up the log file at Margadon so no one would know. The company's security team would have a fit if they knew that internal documents and programs had left the local network, but both programmers knew their server was secure, and that the information was not at risk. Besides, they never stored company data, just bits of their code. The way they saw it, Margadon's security measures were overkill.

So the big question was: If Henry did send the files, did he have time to erase the entry in the log file before he was killed? Of course he did. He did that automatically after every upload or download, just as she did. It was part of their procedure, just like logging off. Routine.

With another deep breath, Spencer typed in the URL for a public proxy, a site that allowed her to surf the web anonymously. It wasn't foolproof, but unless those guys had an expert watching the server, they weren't going to find her anytime soon.

From the public proxy, she opened the browser and keyed in the FTP for the server. Her index finger hovered over the "enter" key as she gathered her nerve. Henry was a slave to detail, the most meticulous person she'd ever met, she told herself. No way would he have left the record in

the log file. She tapped it and waited for the directory of files to appear.

There it was, a folder of documents sent Friday night at 11:33, about ten minutes before Henry had called her at Elena's. He had probably called James by that time, but that gave him plenty of time to clear the log file. Had he not, the feds would have taken this folder down, she realized with relief.

With a few clicks of the mouse, Spencer downloaded the files he had posted. They were programs, page after page of the documentation and Visual Basic commands that managed the inventory at Margadon. Henry had uploaded more than eighty pages that he thought were relevant to the problem, eighty pages that he would have wanted her to see.

Spencer logged off when the download was complete, hurriedly reloading the paper tray. Anxiously, she sent each of the documents to the bubble jet printer and waited for the output. At four pages per minute, this was going to take a while.

The first twenty six pages were the global program they'd written to execute all of the appropriate modules. As she glanced at the intricate routines, she couldn't help but remember the fun they'd had together when they wrote this. It was when she was seeing Elena, and Henry had....

"What are you doing?"

Spencer was surprised to find that she had a small visitor over her shoulder.

"I'm just printing some things to read later. Is your show finished?"

Jessie nodded and yawned. "What's it about?"

"It's about...it's a mystery story, like a puzzle with words. I have to figure out all the pieces."

The little girl had come to stand closer and was now leaning against the programmer. Spencer reached out and swept her into her lap.

"Are you getting sleepy?"

Again she nodded. "When's Mommy coming home?"

Spencer looked at her watch. It had been more than a half hour since she'd accessed the server. The fact that their door hadn't been broken down by the feds was a good sign.

"Not for a little while, but I'm finished here." Still holding the four-year-old, Spencer stood and scooped up the last of her papers. A few more clicks, and she shut down the computer. "Why don't we go back to the trailer and I'll read you a story that's more interesting than this one? You wanna do that?"

The sleepy child nodded one more time, seemingly very much at home in these long arms of the woman who had frightened her only a few days ago. They walked quietly into the kitchen, where they said soft goodnights to the dogs, and then exited to the trailer.

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"I can't believe this! I come every Wednesday night, and I'm lucky if I win once a month. You win on two cards your first night."

"Beginner's luck," Ruth explained, feeling a little guilty...but not a lot. It was about time she got a break. "Tell you what. I'll spend my winnings on dinner, if we can cook and eat at your house."

"You've got yourself a deal. And I'll go you one better. You spend your winnings on a fat turkey, and I'll do all the rest. Thanksgiving's the week after next, you know."

For the first time, it hit Ruth that Manassas was her new life, that she wouldn't be sharing holidays anymore with her parents, or with Skip's family. With a few simple words on a whim, Viv Walters had just made her part of a new "family," and it felt better than any family Ruth had ever had.

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Once she'd gotten Jessie settled for bed, Spencer began the task of retracing her partner's steps. For some reason, he'd uploaded two copies of their global program, or so it seemed. Something was obviously different, but damned if she could see what it was. The longer she looked at it, the more confusing it became.

Among the other documents were several pages of macros, the shortcuts they'd written so that the program would run more efficiently and error-free. The last few pages were unfamiliar, but just as she was starting to review them, she heard the Taurus pull up in the muddy drive.

"Did you have a good time?" she asked the smiling blonde.

"I cleaned up," she bragged. "I won the Coverall and the Eight States."

"I take it that's a good thing?"

"It's a very good thing," she proclaimed, digging out her winnings as she swaggered across the

room. "It means I paid forty-five dollars for three cards and I won \$132, so that's eighty-seven in the clear."

"And you obviously had a good time. Can't beat that."

"Where's Jessie?"

"Bathed, storied, and sound asleep," Spencer answered smugly.

"You're kidding." She was mystified that Jessie had gone to bed without a fuss, but she was pleased. What was more confusing to Ruth was how quickly she'd come to trust a virtual stranger to care for her daughter. But it was obvious that she did. There just wasn't anything about Spencer Rollins that was threatening.

"Nope. She got tired, so I put her to bed. Hope that was okay."

"Sure. So were you able to get online?" It was a stupid question, she knew, since Spencer had stacks of papers all over the counter.

"Yeah, but it's going to take me awhile to find what Henry was talking about." Spencer turned back to her work as Ruth settled in the recliner.

"You mind if I watch the news?"

"No, go ahead."

Ten minutes into the broadcast, the Margadon story was updated to include video of police recovering the body of James Thayer from the Chesapeake Bay. Thayer had been sought as a suspect in the murder of Henry Estes, but it now appeared that Spencer Rollins had committed both murders. She was last seen in the Manassas-Centreville area of Virginia, and was presumed armed and dangerous.

Spencer grew nauseous as she watched the clip, just as she did every time she was reminded of her friend's horrid death. It was beyond belief that anyone would think her capable of such a vicious act. But more than proving her innocence, she wanted the animals who had done this brought to justice.

"Oh, my god!" Ruth shouted suddenly, leaping from the chair and out the door.

"What?"

"Viv! She was going in to watch the news."

Ruth raced across the yard and pounded on the back door, shouting for her landlady to hurry.

Inside, Viv Walters had just gotten the fright of her life when she saw the picture of the woman



wanted for murder. At once, she'd grabbed the phone, intent on calling 9-1-1. Only the pounding on the door stopped her, as she realized the danger for Karen and her little girl. Hurriedly, she threw the bolt to let the frantic woman in.

"I just....," she pointed absently at the television, the shock apparent on her lined face.

"It isn't true, Viv. Spencer didn't do it," Ruth said, gasping for breath.

"But they said...."

"No, it isn't true."

Behind her tenant, the tall stranger was approaching slowly from the trailer. Fear gripped the older woman as she imagined the worst.

"She's right, Viv. I didn't kill those people," Spencer said softly.

The calm in her voice was contagious, and the older woman began to relax. "Why are you hiding then? Why don't you just go to the police and tell them you're innocent?"

"Because the guys who killed her friend *are* the police, and they're trying to kill her," Ruth explained. "It's true. I know it's hard to believe, but they're after her, Viv. She's staying here because nowhere else is safe."

Spencer could see that the older woman wasn't convinced. "I'll leave if you need me to. Karen can take me tomorrow and put me out on a street corner if that's the way you want it. You both have already done more for me than I have a right to ask. But just please don't call the police tonight." Her request was as much for Ruth as it was for herself.

"What are you going to do?"

The programmer waved the papers that she'd printed earlier. "I have to prove that somebody else did it. That's why I needed your computer tonight. I have the evidence in these printouts, Viv, but I haven't figured it out yet," she pleaded. "I'm so sorry that I lied to you, but I'm not lying now."

Spencer led Viv to the kitchen table, where she explained in the simplest way possible how she came to be hiding out with Ruth, and what she needed to do to exonerate herself. She showed her bruised ribs and the scar on her arm as proof of the chase.

"These people are dangerous, but they aren't as smart as they think they are. I need some time, Viv, but I'm going to bring them to justice. Please trust me. I promise that I'm not the person they say I am."

Over the years, Viv had gotten pretty good at sizing people up. You had to do that when you rented to strangers. There was nothing about Spencer Rollins that remotely suggested that she was capable of something like this. "I believe you," she said simply.

Ruth watched the exchange, feeling guilty now about her own lies to the obviously compassionate woman. She wanted to come clean about her own secrets, but her situation wasn't like Spencer's. Regardless of how she justified it, there was no misunderstanding or conspiracy about what she had done: She had kidnapped her child.

## **Chapter 17**

Clutching her doll, Jessie shuffled sleepily down the hallway toward her mother's room. Yesterday, Spencer had gotten her breakfast while her mommy slept, but today, Spencer was still asleep on the couch.

"Mommy?" she called softly.

"Hey, sweetie. Come on in." Ruth lifted the blanket and Jessie crawled onto the bed, snuggling against her mother's warmth. "How did you sleep?"

"Fine."

"I'm sorry I got home so late last night, honey. But I won."

"You did?"

"I certainly did. And I'm going to buy us a big fat turkey for Thanksgiving, and we're going to eat a big dinner at Viv's house. Won't that be fun?"

Jessie smiled in agreement. "Will Spencer be there too?"

"Maybe, if she wants to. You like Spencer, don't you?"

The little girl nodded. "She's funny?"

"Oh yeah? What does she do that's funny?"

"She tickles me, and she makes you laugh."

"Yes, she does. I think she's funny too. You think we should go wake her up?"

"Uh-huh. And she has big feet."

"Big feet?"

"Yeah, come see."

Holding her daughter's hand, Ruth walked into the hall, at once covering her mouth to suppress the laugh. Indeed, Spencer Rollins had big feet, so big in fact that they hung over the end of the couch, blocking the path to the living room. Tiptoeing back into her room, the conspirators laid their plans.

Each armed with a cotton swab, they crept back down the hall, stooping low to take turns trailing the swabs softly across the instep of the bare feet. Mother and daughter worked hard to contain their giggles as the toes curled, the feet twitched, and the legs jumped.

"Someone is going to be very sorry," a deep voice threatened from around the corner.

Jessie squealed and ran into her room. Ruth followed and huddled with her daughter on the bed, bracing for the inevitable onslaught. And Spencer made good on her word, suddenly appearing in their doorway, her face etched in mock fury. After five full minutes of frenzied tickling, the woman with the big feet returned to the living room, avenged and now wide awake.

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"My granddaughter's been kidnapped, and I want to know what you're going to do about it!" Roland Drummond, Sr. bellowed. He was furious at the ineptitude of the local police, but that paled next to his opinion of the social worker who had persuaded the judge to allow unsupervised visitation. Ruth Ferguson didn't care about that child; she was obviously bitter about the divorce, and only wanted to hurt and embarrass his son.

"I assure you, we're doing everything we can, Roland," the sheriff pledged. "I've contacted the FBI, and they're sending an agent over this afternoon to go over all the details. Once they put their pictures out there, there won't be anyplace to hide. I promise you, we'll bring 'em back here."

"And when you do, I want that woman in jail! She ought never see the light of day again for this."

Skip hung back, perfectly content to watch his father take the lead in berating the investigators. Over the last few days, it occurred to him that the best possible outcome from all this would be that they never found either one of them. Sure, it would mean that his ex-wife would get undue satisfaction from thinking that she'd beaten him. But the real truth was, if they never found her, he wouldn't be saddled with a child to raise, but he would have the support and sympathy of the community instead. Having Ruth run off with Jessie was exactly the freedom Skip was looking for.

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Off and on all day, Spencer studied the printouts, still not sure of the paper trail her partner had created. Why would he post two copies of the same document? The answer was that he wouldn't. Something was different in these two sets of twenty-six pages; she just had to find it.

In the meantime, she examined the program Henry had appended. It was amateurish at best, but still, James was incapable of writing it. Either he had subbed it out, or another person was involved in this conspiracy.

"You making any progress?" Ruth asked, returning with Jessie from a tour around town with Viv.

"A little, but not much," Spencer conceded. "I know the key is in here somewhere. I'm going to have to go through all this line by line."

"Can I help?"

"Karen? Spencer?" Viv was calling them from the back porch.

The blonde woman went to the door as Spencer rolled her eyes.

"Can you two help me with something?"

With Jessie in tow, both women walked over to the house, where their landlady promptly directed them to the burned out overhead light in the kitchen.

"It just popped when I turned it on," she explained.

Ruth and Spencer retrieved the ladder from the shed, the taller of the two climbing up to disassemble the dirty fixture. That started Viv on a crusade to clean all the fixtures, and before they knew it, their afternoon was gone.

"She's a slave driver," Ruth moaned as she dropped onto the couch.

"Yeah, but I've got no complaints. I'll do whatever I can to help her, considering what she's doing for me." Spencer took the recliner and leaned forward. "And that goes double for you, Ruth."

The blonde woman managed a small smile. Spencer Rollins had literally forced her way into their lives, and something told Ruth already that she would stay there. Though she knew nearly nothing about this woman, she felt close to her; closer in fact than she had to anyone for a long time. A shared sense of urgency bonded them, sort of "us against the world."

"Stop calling me Ruth," she laughed.

"I'm sorry. You just don't look like a Karen." Spencer looked at the blonde woman intently. It was presumptuous, but she got the feeling that she knew Ruth Ferguson as well as anyone.

"You don't owe me anything, Spence. I've liked having you here. I know it wasn't like that at first, but now that I see what you're up against, I want to help."

"Thank you. And I meant what I said about trying to help you too."

"If you do, that'll be great. But even if you don't, you're going to get out of this mess, and when you do, I hope we'll still be friends."

"Me too," she said sincerely. "So you think you'll stay in Manassas?"

"It's as good a place as any, I guess. Where's your home?"

"I have an apartment in Fairfax, not far from here, actually. But I'm originally from North Carolina."

"How'd you end up here?"

"A job. Right after college, I took a job in McLean. That's where I first met Henry. That company went under, and we applied as a team to Margadon. Been there ever since."

"Is your family still in North Carolina?"

Spencer's eyes went far away with the simple question. "No," she answered quietly. "My parents died in a fire about four years ago."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I shouldn't be asking so many questions." Ruth stood up and patted her new friend's shoulder. She felt awful for stirring up the memories. "I should check on Jessie."

As she looked in on her napping daughter, Ruth's stomach clenched with anxiety at the thought of something so horrific happening to those she loved. Now, she understood why Spencer had no place to go, no one to turn to but the friend she'd tried to call. And she knew too what a loss Spencer must feel for the friend who'd been murdered.

"You want some coffee or something?" she offered, returning to the kitchen, where the programmer was once again poring over her code.

"Yeah, that'd be nice." Spencer was amazed at how comfortable she felt with Ruth, so much so that she'd been ready to talk about losing her mom and dad, something she'd done with only Henry and Elena. Her two closest friends were the only reason she'd gotten through the tragedy.

"So what about your family? Where are they?"

"Oh, you don't want to hear about my family, I promise. My own father stood up at Jessie's custody hearing and told the judge he thought she'd be better off with Skip because I had always been difficult to control."

"Were you? Difficult, I mean. I know the part about Jessie is a crock."

"I wasn't difficult compared to most teenagers. But my parents had rules out of the Dark Ages, and the consequence of even bending those rules was more and more distance between us. It was like they didn't even want me to be their daughter anymore if I couldn't be perfect."

"So they were strict."

"They were way past strict. If they'd had their way, I'd still be in a chastity belt at twenty-five years old."

"Wow, how'd they feel when you got married? Were they okay with that?"

"Hardly," she scoffed. "See, I did the getting married-getting pregnant thing out of order."

"And that just added to what they already believed about you." Though her loss was tremendous, Spencer doubted that it was even half the void this woman had felt.

"I guess. All I know is I won't miss them. You can't miss what you never had."

Spencer put her papers down and went into the kitchen, where Ruth was gathering a stack of vegetables from the refrigerator. "Can I help with dinner tonight?"

"I'm just going to make some soup. You can...," she pulled a pound of hamburger from the meat tender, "brown this in that pan while I chop these. Or if you want, you can just stand there and keep me company."

The tall woman smiled, ripping open the package. "I think I can handle this without doing too much damage."

"So tell me about your friend, the one you tried to call the other day."

"You mean Elena? Gosh, what can I tell you about Elena that wouldn't send you running and screaming?" she joked. "I told you she was an IRS agent, right? Mostly she investigates ill-gotten gains. She looks for people who seem to have more money than they should."

"Like drug dealers?"

"Exactly. They're the easiest to find, because most of them don't have jobs. The tougher ones are money-launderers, white-collar criminals, government officials on the take. They all go to work every day, so they have to do something really stupid to get tripped up."

"It sounds like an interesting job."

"She likes it. She gets to carry a gun. She says it helps her pick up...chicks." The last word she said tenuously, realizing too late where the conversation would go from there.

"She's a lesbian?" Her question was surprisingly matter-of-fact.

"Yeah. And...so am I."

Ruth felt the words as much as she heard them, a shudder traveling through her body like a strong wind. It was as though in that instant Spencer Rollins had been fully revealed, and the result was utter fascination. Miraculously, she managed not to cut her thumb off.

"So...you and Elena...?"

"No. We were, but that was a long time ago. We're just friends now. Well, not 'just' friends. We're good friends. Even without talking to Elena, I know that she knows this is all bullshit. And even without me telling her what to do, she's already trying like hell to find out why these guys are after me."

"She knows you that well?"

"Yeah, that well."

Ruth had calmed the butterflies, though she had no idea where they'd come from. It didn't make sense that Spencer's disclosure would have unnerved her like that.

"So what happened with you two? How come you're not still...?"

"Lovers?"

Ruth nodded. A soft tremor rippled through her again.

"Basically, she dumped me."

"Dumped you? Why would she dump you?"

"That's what I said!" Spencer said haughtily, and they both laughed. More seriously, she explained, "Elena's just a really unique person, and she's a great friend to have. But she's one of those people who has to be in control of everything all the time. And she knows she can't control other people, so she keeps them at arm's length. I think I may have scared her, though, you know, threatened her independence. I know she loved me, but she couldn't go forward, and I couldn't stay put."

"I don't really understand why people want to be alone. Of course, I might understand it better now, though, since I've got all this baggage. I know I don't ever want to take a chance on losing

my child again."

"I don't think Elena really wants to be alone. I think she's just afraid that she'll hurt somebody who loves her, and she doesn't want to risk it."

"What about you, Spencer? What do you want?"

The dark-haired woman sighed. "I want to find love someday. I want to find somebody who makes me want to stay and stay."

Ruth smiled in understanding. Whoever won Spencer Rollins' heart would know love, she was sure. This woman was definitely a "giver" and, Ruth believed, a person who was capable of fierce loyalty. Those were things that she wanted from a partner, and things she was willing to give. And just where the hell did that thought come from?

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Ruth and Jessie were long asleep, while Spencer waded through the pages, line by line. She found what she was looking for on page fourteen of the second copy. It was a single line, and it simply redirected the process to a different global file. So every Friday, Spencer or Henry would run their global, unaware of the switch. It was pretty fucking clever.

Henry followed the redirect to a new global, which called an unfamiliar macro as it processed the Kryfex data. The new macro stood out like a sore thumb because it was written in a totally different style. Coding style was unique, like handwriting. Programmers like Spencer and Henry relied heavily on loops and macros to minimize not only the processing time for the computer, but also the keystrokes used in the commands. It was a favorite game for both of them to see who could write a particular program using the fewest lines of code. Invariably, the final product would be a combination of their best efforts.

Other programmers were more rigid, repetitive in their detailed logic so that each routine was clearly delineated on the page. Such programs typically took longer to run, and were, to Spencer, a royal pain in the ass to patch, because each routine had to be addressed individually. It was an example of the latter style that leapt out from the stack of papers she held. Neither she nor Henry would have written a command in such longhand.

So there it was, the evidence that had gotten Henry killed. Someone at Margadon - most likely someone contracted by James - had toyed with the original global module, redirecting the process to a new global, one they didn't even know existed. This second global file was a carbon copy of their own, but an additional routine was included to inflate the number of cytokine units by twenty-five percent. Another macro contained a few lines of code that reduced the order for the Kryfex cytokines, but the cost was unaffected. And in the final program, one she didn't



recognize at all, the additional payment was then redirected off the books, presumably into a third-party account. The accountants and auditors would never know because the net profits were unaffected. And from what Spencer knew about cost per unit for the cytokines, someone was pocketing about sixty thousand a week.

In the notebook Ruth had brought her, she began to put the pieces together.

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Ruth awoke in the night, surprised to see the light still streaming under the door. It was almost 3 a.m. Getting up to check it out, she found Spencer slumped forward at the kitchen counter, her papers scattered and the notebook marked in red.

Gently, she shook the broad shoulders. "Hey, you need to go to bed."

Spencer lifted her head and looked around. She couldn't have been asleep more than a minute or two. "I have to clean this up."

"I'll do it. Go on back to the bedroom."

"No, I'll get the-"

"Go on. It's okay," she quietly insisted, gathering the papers and moving the coffee cup to the sink.

Spencer complied, and within minutes, she was sound asleep. She never even noticed when Ruth got back in bed beside her.

Roses are red, violets are blue. Think Ruth & Spencer will buy a clue? [Part 4](#)

[The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive](#)

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~ Malicious Pursuit ~

by KG MacGregor

**Disclaimers:** By now, you should know this part by heart. If you like to envision these characters as familiar faces, I won't mess with that.

This is an action/adventure story. I wanted to call it a thriller, but I thought that was a little presumptuous. However, it is my hope that you have to read the whole thing in one sitting. Oh, and there's romance between women. Thought you'd appreciate that.

Thanks very much to TNovan & Ann who helped me out with the technical details. Any errors you find are questions I forgot to ask, things I didn't clarify, or stuff I made up. If you find mistakes, please let me know.

A HUGE thanks also to Tami, my beta reader en fuego, and to the "fresh eyes" who gave it a read. And thanks also to my Sweetcakes, not just for her editing, but for talking through all of the critical parts until we got things to work.

**Malicious Pursuit 4**

**By KG MacGregor**

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[kgmacgregor@yahoo.com](mailto:kgmacgregor@yahoo.com)

**Part 4**

**Chapter 18**

The sound of cartoons - and the equally unmistakable smell of coffee - wafted down the hall and into the back bedroom, where Spencer Rollins had just enjoyed her best night's sleep in a week. That the covers were thrown back on the opposite side of the bed was evidence that she hadn't spent the night alone, but she might as well have, given her near-comatose state.

But it was definitely interesting that she'd been invited to share the bed, especially in light of yesterday's revelation. Immediately, she chastised herself for any leap of logic she was tempted to make, but the warm and fuzzy feeling lingered nonetheless.

Spencer stared at the ceiling as she went over in her mind the proof that Henry had found. A second global program included a routine that inflated the number of cytokines for both the executive reports and the accountants. The full bill was paid to the supplier, who carved out the extra dollars for all of the players. Best she could tell, the players were James, Stacy Eagleton, the cytokines supplier, and the line producer in Little Rock. James was obviously expendable once the program was in place, and when he participated in Henry's murder, he became a liability. The missing link was to the feds, the guys who wanted her dead. The only connection she could think of was that this was a federal contract.

"So you're awake." Ruth appeared in the doorway, coffee mug in hand.

"Yeah." Spencer pushed herself up in the bed. She was still in last night's t-shirt, but her jeans lay in the floor.

"Did you figure things out last night?" Ruth sat on the edge of the bed and handed her the mug.

"Thanks. I think so. I still don't know why the feds are involved, though. I mean, it's a federal contract, but that doesn't explain those guys being on the take too."

"Isn't that what your friend does? Didn't you say she tried to find people with...what was it...ill-gotten gains?"

Spencer nodded pensively. Elena would have access to all kinds of information. She could probably figure out exactly who was involved in this.

"I need to find a way to get this stuff to her."

"Can't you just mail it?"

Spencer shook her head. "No, these guys are probably watching her and checking her mail. I know they were tapping her phone. They're waiting for me to contact her again, and they can't afford to have me tell her what I know."

"Maybe...", Ruth couldn't believe she was really going to say this, "I could take it to her."

"No way. I don't want you involved in this." Spencer was adamant. It was too big a risk.

"Hello! I'm already involved. If these guys find you, they're going to find you here. You think they're just going to let me tell everybody what you told me?"

For the first time, the programmer realized with alarm the position she'd put them all in. No one was safe here, thanks to her.

"Then I need to get out of here." Quickly, she threw back the covers and grabbed her jeans.

"No! Listen to me."

Slowly, Spencer sat back down, surprised at the forcefulness of the smaller woman's voice.

"They don't know me. Elena doesn't know me. Why can't I just make an appointment with her to talk about my taxes or something and give her your stuff?"

Spencer shook her head. "She doesn't do that kind of thing. The only people who talk to her about taxes are looking for a plea bargain."

"Well think of something else, then. But you're not leaving, not until I know you're going to walk out of here to someplace safe."

And that was that.

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Special Agent Calvin Akers winced when he saw the lighted number on his cell phone. He dreaded the tirade that would start the instant he answered the call.

"This is Akers."

"It's about goddamned time you took my call!"

"I've been in meetings," he lied.

Stacy Eagleton recognized a lie when she heard it, but she had more important nuts to squeeze. "What's the status of Spencer Rollins?"

"We've got her picture out there. I just got the okay to throw in a reward, so unless she's hiding under a rock, we're a big step closer." He hoped that would placate the bitch.

"You better hope so! You and Pollard have a hell of a lot more at stake here than the rest of us."

Akers clicked off the phone when Eagleton ended the call. He didn't need her reminder of what was at stake. Two people were dead at his hand, and every day that Spencer Rollins ran free, he and Pollard were more at risk.

But he was pretty sure they could stand up to scrutiny if she started making accusations. They'd put together a pretty good case: Eagleton's commentary on her paranoia and temper; video of her fleeing the scene; they'd even managed to tamper with the gate log, showing her arriving that night before James. And speaking of James, Pollard had even thought to use one of the kitchen knives from Rollins' apartment.

Yep, she was guilty, and they could prove it if they had to.

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"This is all clear to me, Spencer. Really, I understand every word...well, except for the part about calling globals and macros. You might want to spell that out a little bit." Ruth read all six pages of Spencer's typed account, stopping when she got to the attached sheets of code.

Spencer had worked all afternoon at Viv's computer writing down her account of events and her theories about the players. The only link she could imagine that involved federal agents was that they had possibly done background checks for the key personnel executing the contract.

The programmer made some notes in the margin and reread the difficult section.

"That's much better," Ruth agreed. "So all you have to do is put this in Elena's hands, right?"

"Right. I guess I need to go back over to Viv's and do these edits first."

"What if you sent it to the newspaper?"

"I thought about that. Hell, I thought about calling them last weekend. I thought it might protect me if I made it all public, because they wouldn't dare do anything with all of that attention on me. But the problem with that is that they'd get to the evidence and destroy it. If I can't prove they did it, they'll find a way to make it look like I did. And Henry's killers will go free."

"So is there anyone else you can give it to that can pass it on to Elena? Any of her friends?"

"Nobody I can think of, but I'm still working on it." Spencer scooped up her papers and set them aside. "And I think there's something else we should do."

"What?"

"I think we should tell Elena all about you and Jessie."

"Oh, no. I don't think so." No way was she going to confess to being a fugitive to a federal agent.

"If anyone can help you - if anyone *will* help you - it's Elena Diaz."

"Why would she help me? She doesn't know me from Hedda's house cat."

"But she knows me. And she'd help you because I asked her to."

"I think you're forgetting one very important fact here, Spencer. I'm guilty of a felony. I kidnapped my child and fled across state lines. The feds are looking for me now too. And if she finds out, she may have to turn me in, whether she wants to or not."

"No, she won't. Elena cuts deals with criminals all the time to get a bigger fish. She has the authority to do things like that. She wouldn't turn you in if I asked her not to." Spencer needed to make her see that Elena could fix this. She might be able to look into some things, lean on a few people, throw a little weight around. Ruth shouldn't have to be on the run. She'd done nothing to deserve the way the system had treated her, and that needed to be fixed.

"Fine, I'll do it under one condition."

"What?" Anything.

"You let me take it to her." The brunette started to speak, but Ruth put up her hand. "That's the only way I'll agree to do it."

Spencer was over a barrel and she knew it. If she didn't give in, her hands were tied as far as helping Ruth set things right. She couldn't just go to Elena about the mother and daughter unless Ruth gave her all the information. She needed names, and circumstances, and theories about who might be able to help Ruth back in Maine. If it could be done, Elena Diaz would make it happen.

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"Something stinks here, Chad." Agent Diaz slumped uninvited into the leather chair across from her boss's desk, her hands clutching a manila folder. All of their conversations about the Spencer Rollins case took place in his office because hers was bugged by the FBI.

"I sympathize, but what can I do? She's called you twice already." Chad Merke had been none too happy with the FBI's request to monitor his agent's communications, and he was downright pissed about the van outside that shadowed her every move. But his hands were tied thanks to a favor he owed the Bureau when he'd convinced them last year to trade a collar for testimony in a drug case.

"No, I mean really stinks. It's bad enough that they probably listen to me pee, but I think there's more to this than just a fugitive on the run."

In the eleven years they'd worked together, the supervisor had learned to trust this woman's instincts. She was dogged when it came to investigation, and she had a nose for sniffing out trouble. "You got something in that folder?"

"Yeah," she admitted. "I've been doing some digging on my own, and I came across something pretty interesting for one Special Agent Michael Pollard." That was the agent who had approached her boss.

"What are you doing poking around in Pollard's business? Just because he's working this case? We don't do things like that, Agent Diaz. You know better," he scolded.

Yes, she did know better, but something about this case wasn't right, and it wasn't just because Spencer was their prey. "Chad, this is not a case of me abusing my authority. It's about me having my own suspicions. Isn't that what you pay me for, to play my hunches and catch the bad guys?"

"You're stretching it, Elena." He folded his arms defiantly across his chest. "So what have you

got?"

"Agent Pollard is pulling down about \$115 thousand a year, but he and his wife are pretty extended. They've got four kids in private school, and a mortgage on a five-bedroom house in McLean."

"So?"

"So they just bought a vacation home in Eastern Shore, about \$150 thousand...for cash."

"Cash?"

Elena nodded.

"So this Pollard, he's still working this case?"

"Yes, he is. In fact, I think he's sitting out in the van. You want me to go get him so we can ask him how he got his hands on that much money?"

Merke leaned forward and rested his chin on his hands, intrigued by the information she offered, but stopping short of considering it as evidence. "So I gather that you think his new house and his interest in Spencer Rollins are related?"

Elena sighed, closing the folder and tapping it rhythmically on her knee. "I know it's a stretch, Chad, but hear me out. First of all, Spencer didn't kill Henry. They were best friends, but even if she had hated his guts, Spencer wouldn't have done something like that. I know her, and you know what I just said is the absolute truth. Second, she tried to call me twice to tell me what was going on. Both times, the calls were cut off, like whoever was pulling the strings didn't want me to hear her side of the story. That's pretty desperate if you ask me, and it happened before those assholes ever got a warrant to tap my phone. Third, if she didn't kill him, who did and why? You know as well as I do that the answer in a case like this usually comes back to one thing: greed. And I don't like it that one of the agents who wants her caught, who wants to keep her from talking, just paid cash for a vacation home."

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Ruth and Spencer managed to get through the evening without talking about the code, about Elena, or about Ruth's running away with Jessie. The words were just beneath the surface, but without a resolution, there was no need to keep beating a dead horse. Spencer stridently refused to allow the young mother to make the delivery unless she came up with a foolproof plan for getting her in and out without risk of being caught.

When the dinner dishes were done, Jessie brought out her new dinosaur puzzle and spread the pieces on the floor. Since Ruth was doing the laundry tonight, Spencer sat down in the floor to help. "Helping" a four-year-old with a puzzle meant grouping pieces by color and giving lots of hints. Ultimately, Jessie would be the one to place each piece.

It was a wonderful feeling for Ruth to see her child nurtured by someone else. Neither Skip, nor his parents, nor her own had ever spent much meaningful time playing with Jessie, reading to her, or teaching her things. It suddenly washed over Ruth just how much she liked Spencer, and how much she enjoyed having her around.

When the puzzle was finished, Jessie was ushered to bed. Ruth returned to the living room to find the programmer scribbling into her tablet.

"So what's next?"

Spencer shook her head and sighed. "Would you take me to the Franconia-Springfield station tomorrow morning?"

"You're going to see Elena." It was a statement, but she hoped her friend would deny it.

Instead, she nodded. "Yeah, if she isn't expecting me, maybe they won't be either."

"You're just going to walk into her office?"

"Yeah...you know, I was thinking that maybe I should do what you said and write a letter to the *Washington Post* and leave it with you. And if you don't hear from me again, you should drop it in the mail or something."

"I don't believe this! Do you hear how ridiculous that is? A letter to the paper isn't going to mean a goddamn thing if something happens to you. It's too dangerous for you to go. I'll take it."

"No! I'm not going to let you do that."

"But they aren't looking for me. Not these guys, anyway. I bet they couldn't care less about Karen Oliver."

Spencer shook her head in frustration. "She wouldn't even bother to see you unless you-" Spencer stopped herself, her mind racing with a new idea, "unless you told her you had information on Roscone. That would get her attention."

"Who's Roscone?"

## Chapter 19



Elena Diaz resisted the urge to make an obscene gesture, waving instead toward the gray panel truck, parked illegally on Constitution Avenue for the last five days. The boys inside had been watching her building and monitoring her phone and internet account all week. Despite her outrage at the intrusion, she was stuck with the surveillance, as the FBI was almost certain that Spencer would contact her again.

Flashing her ID to the guard at the desk, the towering woman bypassed the elevator in favor of the steps, just as she did every day. Three flights of stairs were nothing given her usual exercise routine. Each day, the 37-year-old agent pushed herself to her physical limit, and then pushed a little more, always reaching to be stronger, faster, better. She was as tough as any field agent at the IRS, and to her infinite delight, she was often taken too lightly, adding to her advantage.

"Morning, Elena."

"Hi, Thomas." No one was more underestimated than Special Agent Thomas Fennimore, her bespectacled assistant of the last three years. It took Elena almost a year to realize that Thomas's bumbling demeanor was but part of his incredible savvy, and she eagerly took him on when other senior agents balked at what they perceived as ineptitude.

"I found something I think you're going to like," he offered, following her into the windowed office. He waited in the doorway expectantly until she bought a clue and followed him back out.

"I could use some good news." Automatically, the two exited the office area and went back into the stairwell where they could talk without fear of being overheard.

"It's about Pollard and that other guy, Agent Akers. I ran a little query on work logs, and they were the agents assigned to do the background checks for the Kryfex contract."

"The what?"

"Kryfex. Margadon developed it for the Dawa virus, and the US is shipping it to Ethiopia in return for an air base. And since it's a big contract, they did background checks."

"Do you know who they talked to? Did they ever talk to Spencer?"

"I don't have that list yet. I can start pulling it today, though. I doubt Spencer would have been interviewed. They usually only do the higher-ups."

"That's good work, Thomas. Go ahead and follow up. Did you find a money trail for Akers?"

"Not yet, but I'm working on that too."

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"So what was the judge's name?" Spencer was typing the story of how Ruth and Jessie had come to be on the run.

"The judge's name? You really think that's relevant?"

"I don't know what's relevant. I just want to give Elena as much information as possible. Maybe she can talk to him about the facts."

"What facts?" Ruth grumbled. "His name was Howard...Malcolm Howard."

Spencer typed that into the account and reread the whole document aloud from the screen.

"Is that everything?"

"As far as I know."

"Okay, here it comes." She hit the print key. "Are you ready to go call?"

They had agreed that it would be best for Ruth to go alone and place the call from a payphone somewhere in Reston. Calling from Manassas might raise a few eyebrows, especially since they'd found Spencer's bike in the woods.

"Ready as I'll ever be."

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Without a word, Thomas dropped a fresh folder on his supervisor's desk. His cocky grin told her that he'd gotten some dirt, and the tab read "Special Agent Calvin Akers."

The report documented plane tickets to Las Vegas, hotels in Atlantic City, even a trip to the Atlantis Resort in the Bahamas. Calvin Akers had a gambling habit. That's why there was no money to be found. Cool!

The phone interrupted Elena's joy, and her eyes went at once to the digital display: a payphone in Reston. A lot of her information came from payphones because tipsters liked their anonymity, but every call she got these days made her think of her friend on the run.

With no small measure of sarcasm, she announced, "There's the phone, boys. Got your tapes in? Ready...set...go! Hello, this is Special Agent Elena Diaz with the Internal Revenue Service. How may I help you?"

"Uh...Agent Diaz...I...uh...."

"Yes?" It wasn't Spencer, she realized with a mixture of relief and regret.

"I was wondering if you were still interested in information about George Roscone."

Roscone? Yes, she was interested. Hell, yes!

"Who am I speaking to?" George Roscone was the District's DA, and he'd scuttled a very big case against two drug dealing brothers a couple of years ago by leaking her investigation to the press. She was certain he'd been bought off, and set out to prove it by trying to locate the money. After eight months of finding nothing out of the ordinary, she'd reluctantly let it go when Chad not-so-subtly suggested that she redirect her budget to something that would bear fruit.

"I'd rather not say. I want to be anonymous, for now, anyway. Can I do that?"

"My office will work with you to maintain confidentiality. But before I can guarantee that, I'm going to need to know what kind of information you have, and how you acquired it."

"Okay...", Ruth needed to make all of this believable, so she'd practiced in the car on the way to Reston. She wanted to come off as nervous and uptight, and that was easy enough if she just borrowed from her recent experiences. "I used to work in a bank in the city and you subpoenaed all of Mr. Roscone's statements. Right after that, my boss asked me to keep an eye on his account and see if anything happened?"

"So did something happen?" God, she really wanted Roscone.

"Well, not exactly. See, I got laid off not long after that. But I moved out to Virginia and a couple of weeks ago, I started work at another bank."

Sometimes, it was like pulling teeth to get people to talk. "And what does this have to do with George Roscone?"

"He came into my new bank the other day. He has an account there. I know it was him because...well, I always thought he was really handsome." Spencer had told her to put that in because Elena used to go on and on about what a "pretty boy" Roscone was.

This was definitely the kind of tip Diaz was interested in, but if he had another account, she really didn't need this witness. All she had to do was launch a new query and watch it come up. It took a lot of resources to track accounts and transactions, but it was easier when she knew in advance what to look for.

"But the thing is, he doesn't go by George Roscone. He goes by another name on this account."

Holy shit! Diaz nearly fell out of her chair. This was the best news she'd had in a year.

"Can you give me the name that he uses, and the name of the bank and the branch where you work?"

"I...well...."

"What is it?"

"It's just that I've been laid off for awhile, and I was wondering if maybe there was a reward or something."

Elena was used to requests like this, especially from tipsters on the bottom rungs of the economic ladder. A few thousand dollars meant a lot to somebody who lived from hand to mouth, and it was nothing compared to the costs of 24/7 surveillance of suspects and round-the-clock audits. Thank god her boss saw the advantage of a few dollars wisely spent.

"I might be able to swing a small reward of some sort, maybe as a whistleblower, since this has to do with your work. It's all going to depend on what kind of information you have and what we're able to prove in court."

"I have copies of his statements for the past two years. And he's just started making big deposits and withdrawals again."

Elena was practically salivating. She spun around to look at the clock. It was a quarter after five on Friday evening.

"I'd be very interested in having a look at those. If you'll give me your name and address, I'll come pick them up tonight."

"No, I think I'd prefer to meet you somewhere and show you what I have. Really, I want to do the right thing, but if there isn't a reward, I don't want to be involved." She hesitated for effect. "I could get in a lot of trouble for this at work, probably even lose my job."

"I know, and I really appreciate you coming forward with this. Can you meet me somewhere tonight?"

"Tomorrow would be better. I'm on my way home and I have things I have to do tonight."

Great! Wouldn't want to interfere with a Friday night date when justice was at stake.

"Okay." A situation like this called for kissing ass, and Elena could do that when she had to. "Can you come into the city, or would you like to meet somewhere else?"

"What about somewhere on the mall, say near the Metro stop at the Smithsonian?"

That would work very well, Elena thought. The Smithsonian was across the mall from her

building.

"How's nine a.m. tomorrow morning?"

"I can be there then, I think." She didn't want to appear too eager. "If I can't make it, is there a number I can call?"

Elena quickly rattled off her cell phone. "How will I find you?"

"I'll put all my copies in a blue folder."

"Okay, then. I'll see you tomorrow morning. This is a good thing you're doing. I wish more people would take their civic duty as seriously as you." That was the standard speech Elena gave when people provided her with information. She hoped the woman would take it to heart.

"Just see if you can get me some reward money. I really need it."

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"So what do you think?" Agent Pollard, who had spent the last nine hours inside the surveillance van, turned off the recorder to talk to his boss on the other phone.

"I'm not sure, Mike. Who's this Roscone guy?"

Pollard flipped through the dossier on Agent Diaz.

"He's a DA. She's been working his case to see if he's on the take."

"That sounds just like the IRS, doesn't it?" he laughed.

"So, you want me to follow up on this one?"

The agent in charge knew it would be a waste of time and resources. "Nah, I wouldn't bother. It doesn't have anything to do with Rollins. But this Roscone...?"

"Yeah?"

"Tip him off." Akers hated Elena Diaz.

## **Chapter 20**

"You don't have to do this, Ruth. It isn't too late to change your mind." The two women stood next to the Taurus, both anxious about what the day might bring.

"It's no big deal. I'm going to drop this off and be back here inside of three hours."

"Elena's gonna shit a brick when she finds out the Roscone stuff is bogus. I think she'd rather have him than me," Spencer joked nervously.

"I doubt that. Look, don't let Jessie watch cartoons all morning, okay? Take her over to see the puppies or something."

"You bet." Spencer locked her serious gaze onto Ruth's anxious face. "Thanks for this, Ruth."

"You're welcome."

Spencer wrapped the smaller woman in a nervous hug, which was heartily returned.

The blonde woman got in and started the car, but didn't close the door, her eyes still lingering on the angular face of her friend. "This is the beginning of the end, Spence. It'll all be over soon."

"I hope so, for both of us." Spencer closed the door and stepped back, waving goodbye as she watched the Taurus pull away. Not that they'd needed any reminders, but both of their lives were riding on the meeting with Elena.

Ruth realized it too. She'd been thinking all morning about what was at stake for both of them. Coming forward about her identity was a big step, but after their talk last night, she'd agreed to put all her faith in Elena, trusting that the agent would never let Spencer down.

Last night had been...interesting. When it came time for bed, the programmer had gotten the sheet and blanket from the closet to make up the couch and it struck Ruth as silly that she would do that. They had slept together in the double bed the night before; why not again? Spencer had joked that while she had no problems sharing a bed with the likes of someone as pretty as Ruth, she should keep in mind that sleeping with a lesbian was theoretically the same as sleeping with a man. Maybe so, Ruth had said, but it was a hell of a lot more comfortable. And that's precisely what she found to be so...interesting.

When she reached the Metro station at Franconia-Springfield, the end of the Blue Line, Ruth parked the station wagon in the garage. A twenty-minute ride would take her to the Smithsonian, but Spencer had suggested she get off earlier at Farragut West and walk across the mall from the opposite direction. It would make her feel more in control of this meeting if she weren't so predictable.

When she boarded the train, she flipped open the blue folder to examine its contents one more time. The first few pages were bogus bank statements, formatted on Viv's computer, and photocopied last night at a grocery store in Manassas. Underneath those statements were

Spencer's report and the annotated pages of code. The last page was the typed note that Spencer had encouraged her to include, the story of Ruth Ferguson and Jessie Drummond. In her recounting of events of Madison, Ruth didn't reveal her new identity. If this didn't work out, she and Jessie would need to move on, since it meant the feds would then know that they were in the area. Her anxiety compelled her to pull it out of the folder. But as she considered one more time Spencer's infinite trust in Elena Diaz, she slipped it back inside.

When the Federal Triangle station was announced, the blonde woman stepped off and followed the signs to Constitution Avenue. She was at once awed by the stateliness of the buildings around her. As she walked toward the mall, she began to make out the tops of both the Capitol and the Washington Monument, and when she finally stood between those two landmarks, she could see the Lincoln Memorial, the National Gallery, the Smithsonian, and even the top of the White House. Standing in this majestic place was almost breathtaking. She hoped that one day soon, she could bring her daughter to explore this wonderful city.

Ruth was fifteen minutes early for her meeting; already, the mall was bustling with tourists, and thinking that she wouldn't stand out so much helped her relax a bit. In the distance, she located the Metro stop for the Smithsonian and the bench where Spencer said she should wait.

After only five minutes, she spotted a woman walking from the direction of the IRS building that she just knew was Elena Diaz. She was as Spencer had described: very tall, curly dark hair with large brown eyes. She was dressed in tailored slacks and a turtleneck, the black blazer no doubt concealing the gun tucked beneath her shoulder. Ruth held the blue folder conspicuously in front of her and waited to see if she would catch the woman's eye.

Diaz was aware of the woman on the bench, but she was almost past her when she glanced sideways and caught the blue image. Stopping short, she turned and strode purposefully toward the bench.

"Are you waiting for Elena Diaz?" she asked.

The blonde woman nodded once and dropped the folder to her lap as the agent took a seat beside her on the bench.

"Would you mind showing me some identification?" Ruth asked tensely.

Elena smiled and pulled her badge from her waistband, flipping it up to reveal her official photo ID.

"Is that for me?" She gestured toward the folder.

Again, Ruth nodded without speaking; she was much more nervous about this than she'd ever imagined she'd be. It was sure easy to see why Spencer had been attracted to Elena Diaz. The Latin woman was gorgeous, obviously strong and confident; independent, Spencer had said.

Elena took the folder and opened to the first page, scanning the information with excitement.

"Where's the name? And where's the bank's name?" she asked pointedly, working hard to conceal her agitation.

"I just wanted to show you what I had so we could talk about the reward." Ruth leaned over and slid her finger beneath the bogus spreadsheets, opening to the first page of Spencer's report. "There's more here," she said.

Elena's eyes grew wide as she realized what she was seeing, the salutation *Serpiente* confirming its authenticity. Spencer had sent this woman to talk to her.

Automatically, she looked up, locating in her peripheral vision the surveillance van that had dogged her all week. Those guys never seemed to take a day off, she grouched to herself. The asshole was probably watching her through binoculars; but she doubted seriously that their conversation was bugged, especially since this woman had waited for her on the bench instead of at the Metro stop where they'd planned to meet. But they shouldn't take a chance.

"Look, you did the right thing bringing this to my attention, but I'm going to need to look at it and talk to some people before I'll know about the reward. Are you okay with having to wait a few days?"

"I can wait. I'm okay for now."

That was the best news Elena could have gotten. Spencer was safe and out of sight, and she'd made a friend who was willing to go out on a limb for her. "Is there any way I can get in touch with you if I have any more questions?" How could she contact Spencer?

Ruth squirmed on the bench as she contemplated her predicament. If Elena really could help Spencer, she needed a way to reach her.

"What if I call you back on Monday? Is that enough time?"

Elena pulled out a business card.

"I think so. I should be able to ask around by then. Here's my direct number and extension." Elena scribbled the information on the card and pressed it into Ruth's hand. Standing, she offered her hand and one last message of thanks. "I really appreciate your help on this. I'll do everything I can to get you some kind of reward."

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Agent Pollard chuckled as he lowered his binoculars. By the time Diaz got her warrant, Roscone



would have wired the money out of the country into an offshore account.

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Ruth headed toward the Smithsonian station, constantly checking the crowd to see if she was being followed. Spencer had advised her to take a circuitous route back to the Blue Line, so she hopped off at Metro Center, changing to first the Red Line, then the Yellow, finally jumping back to the Blue at Pentagon City. She'd been one of only a handful getting off at Chinatown, so that gave her confidence that her mission was a success. Nonetheless, she had to calm her shaking hands before she could start the car and pull out of the garage into traffic.

Mission accomplished.

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"I can't believe you did all that by yourself," Ruth remarked to a very tired and sore Spencer, who had spent the morning spreading a load of gravel over the muddy driveway.

"It gave me something to do besides climb the walls while you were gone."

"Well, it wasn't too smart, considering that your ribs are still black and blue and your arm has a hole in it," she scolded, taking up a position behind the taller woman so she could massage the aching shoulders. Jessie sat at the kitchen table coloring in a new book.

"I know, but what could I say? They dumped it and left. Viv couldn't get her car out, and you couldn't have gotten yours in."

"You could have at least waited for me to help."

"I was going crazy," she reiterated. "So tell me everything. What did Elena say when she found out the Roscone shit was bogus?" A hard squeeze from Ruth reminded her that the four-year-old was present. "Sorry."

"We didn't talk. Well, we did, we just talked about Roscone. She acted like she was nervous about us being overheard, so I played along."

"But you showed her the papers?"

"Yeah, I gave her everything."

"Boy, she must be under pretty tight surveillance if she wouldn't even talk to you." Spencer winced when the small hands found a hard knot at the back of her neck.

Ruth felt the flinch and honed in on the spot, pressing it gently with her thumb until she could feel the muscle start to release.

"So did you guys figure out a plan to talk again?"

"Yeah, you were right about the reward. That gave us a good excuse, because she said she'd have to check on it and I should call her back." Ruth then remembered the card she had shoved in her pocket. "Come to of think of it, she gave me her card."

Ruth dug the card out of her jacket, admiring the gold-embossed shield. Turning it over, she found a note.

"Oh, I didn't see this. Look what she wrote." She handed the card to Spencer.

Elena had scribbled a few words of encouragement and a warning: *Hang in there, Spence - we're working on it. No contact is best for now.*

"I knew it! She's already on it. What'd I tell you?"

"I can see why you trust her. There's something about her that gives off confidence and authority. And she sure did seem glad to hear from you." Ruth resumed her shoulder massage.

"How could you tell?"

"I don't know exactly. It was like her shoulders relaxed and her voice got softer."

Spencer chuckled. "I can't believe you picked up on that. I've seen it before too, just like you're describing. That's when I first realized that her tough girl stuff was an act."

"I don't think it has anything to do with not being tough. I think she just cares for you, and she's probably been pretty frantic herself about all of this." In her voice was a trace of admonition. It was clear that the agent's feelings for Spencer were genuine, and if Ruth had to bet, she'd say they went beyond the friendship Spencer described.

"I'm sure she has. I'm really lucky to have her on my side. And you can see now why I wanted you to put all this other stuff in her hands. If there's a way to fix things, she'll find it."

After meeting Elena for herself, Ruth found herself nursing a glimmer of hope after all. "Even if she can't, I do trust her now not to turn me in."

Unexpectedly, Spencer reached up and covered a hand that worked her shoulder. "Listen Ruth,

no matter what happens, I really appreciate what you did today."

She liked the familiarity of Spencer's hand on hers. "You know, you've got to stop calling me that. You're going to confuse my daughter, and Viv's going to start asking questions."

"Sorry, but you're just not a Karen," Spencer said sheepishly. "And Jessie's not a Megan, either."

"I know, but if Elena can't help us on this, we have to be Karen and Megan Oliver from now on...Dolly."

"That was low."

Ruth grinned at the tall woman's pout. With no warning at all, the most peculiar feeling came over her and she found herself fighting the urge to lean down and kiss Spencer Rollins full on the lips. Where the hell had that come from?

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Ruth laid awake that night thinking about what had come over her earlier. Spencer was lying beside her, the slow, deep breaths a sure sign that she was asleep. Ruth had never been drawn to a woman before, not emotionally and certainly not sexually. All of her sexual urges up to this point had been for men. One man, actually, and that was Skip. But she'd never really been attracted at all to Skip when it came to emotions. In the four years they'd spent together, they hadn't really connected at all.

What she felt for Spencer was such a contrast to all of that. It was definitely emotional; and it wasn't like any of her other friendships. When her friends were sad or happy, she could easily share that with them; but with Spencer, she did more than share, and none of it was conscious. When this woman beside her felt something, she felt it too. It didn't matter if it was anxiety, relief, frustration, or hope. Ruth took it on, and in her mind, it drew them closer. Whether Spencer felt that way or not was anybody's guess, but she'd never given off any kind of warning for Ruth to keep her distance.

Now, the sexual thing...well, that was new. If she were honest with herself, she'd have to admit that she'd gotten her very first flicker of that the moment Spencer told her she was gay. But was it really sexual? The urge to kiss someone like she'd wanted to do earlier was definitely tied to her libido, which hadn't been sparked in almost three years. That was when she first learned that Skip was getting his sexual needs met elsewhere.

Whatever it was that was jolting her now, it was kind of exciting to think about. And when she considered what the enigmatic woman had said jokingly about her willingness to share a bed, she wondered if maybe Spencer felt the same little spark.

On the other hand, maybe all of these strange feelings were just stress and anxiety, and concern for Spencer's safety. After all, the programmer had been practically at death's door just a week ago, and today's meeting with Elena had brought all of that danger to the forefront of her thoughts again.

Or maybe she was just analyzing everything to death and she should just go to sleep.

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Spencer awoke to the strangest feeling - pain. In the night, Ruth had migrated across the center of the bed to rest her hand and cheek on her injured shoulder. The wound was over a week old and had been feeling better for the most part, but the pressure was definitely unpleasant.

Carefully, she pulled away, hoping not to wake her companion. Ruth would probably be mortified to find herself sleeping like this, she thought with a chuckle. But Spencer had to admit, it was kind of nice to get a cuddle from her pretty friend, even if it was unintentional.

As soon as she extricated her arm, Ruth rolled over, pressing her backside against Spencer. That was impossible to resist, and with little thought at all, the taller woman turned on her side, wrapped her arm around the small body and fell right back to sleep.

## **Chapter 21**

Just like the Sunday before, the occupants of the trailer were awakened by a robust pounding on the front door.

"Pancakes and bacon in ten minutes!" Viv shouted.

Jessie rushed into the back bedroom to find her mother and Spencer untangling awkwardly. "Viv is making pancakes again!"

"So we heard," Ruth answered sleepily. "You better go pick out something to wear, don't you think?"

The child happily raced back to her room to get dressed as the grownups pulled themselves from the bed.

"Gee, what shall I wear today?" Spencer teased, picking up her last clean t-shirt and yesterday's jeans.

Ruth grabbed her own clothes and disappeared into the bathroom, embarrassed by just the thought of dressing in the same room with Spencer. Why that bothered her so much, she didn't know, but all of a sudden it was like they were girlfriends or something. She had awakened just before dawn to find the older woman wrapped completely around her, a long leg draped between her own. She'd had no inclination at all to pull away. Lying with Spencer like that just seemed perfectly normal.

Right on time, the threesome walked through the back door at Viv's, Jessie making a beeline to see the puppies. Willy was getting quite a belly, and hadn't yet shown any interest in playing. Viv had said that Labs were like that for the first few weeks, but that they spent the rest of their lives making up for it.

"It's supposed to be pretty today, probably one of the last nice days before it turns cold for good." Viv had laid out a huge breakfast, and everyone was digging in. "I was thinking a picnic might be a good idea."

"A picnic!" Jessie exclaimed. She and her mommy had gone on picnics a lot when they only saw each other on the weekends.

"Yes, a picnic," Viv went on. "It's kind of chilly, so there won't be a big crowd out there."

Spencer shook her head. "I don't think I should go, but you guys ought to. It would be fun."

"Why can't you go?" Jessie demanded.

"Because I don't want people to see me," Spencer answered simply, not realizing the questions that would raise.

"Why not?"

Ruth nervously kicked the brunette under the table. It wouldn't be good to get into a hiding discussion around Viv. Jessie would let the cat out of the bag for sure.

"Because I'm supposed to be at work. But I'm not because I'm...."

"Lazy!"

"That's right."

Viv left the kitchen and returned, tossing a cap and sunglasses on the table beside her tall guest. "You know, I was thinking we could drive down I-66 in the Jeep to Front Royal and then take Skyline Drive south until we found a nice place to stop. There are a lot of pretty lakes out there with picnic tables and trails."

"I wanna go!" Jessie shouted. "Please!"

Even Ruth was a little anxious about being seen, but she knew she had to get past that; the whole reason for running away was so they could have a new life, and they shouldn't have to live it in hiding.

"Okay, I'll go too," Spencer announced, slipping on the glasses and hat.

That sealed it for Ruth. They were going on a picnic.

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Spencer sat in the back seat of the Jeep Cherokee with Jessie, the two of them poking each other and laughing until Ruth threatened to have Viv pull over and put them both out. The drive to Front Royal was otherwise dull and uneventful, but things perked up when they reached the parkway. Even with the trees already bare, the lakes and woods were beautiful.

"I haven't been over here in ten or twelve years," Viv said.

"Tell us about the last time," Ruth prodded.

The landlady blew out a deep breath. "It was with Sheila. That's my daughter. We used to come out here when she and Robby were little. Robby's my son. He lives in Richmond now. Last I heard, Sheila was in Kentucky or Ohio or someplace."

"You don't see her anymore?" For Ruth, estrangement from parents was familiar territory.

"I guess it's more like she doesn't see me. I brought her out here for a drive because we'd always had a good time here. I wanted to have a good time with her for a change. We were always fighting about one thing or another." The landlady sniffed and blinked back the tears that threatened to fall.

"So where did you two leave things, Viv?" Spencer asked softly from the back seat.

"We got along up until the day she left, but both of us were holding back, trying not to go off on each other. Then that last day, all...heck broke loose, and she walked out telling me she wasn't coming back." Viv tried to gather herself; she was driving, after all. "And she hasn't."

"I'm so sorry." Ruth put her hand on the woman's shoulder.

"I'm not," she sighed. "Well, I'm not sorry she hasn't come back like that. I am sorry that she stopped being that little girl who liked picnics, and dogs, and her family. The woman she grew up to be liked drinking and drugs, and any man she could get to pay for it."

The foursome rode along quietly for several miles, Jessie pointing out cows and horses as they came into view.

"What about Robby? Do you see a lot of your son?" Spencer was looking for a way to get the conversation back on something more upbeat.

"He comes up every two or three months. He works maintenance at the Capitol. It's a good job for him. He didn't get blessed with a lot in the sense department, but he works hard and he's always checking in."

"Does he have family?"

"He got married about three years ago to an older woman. She's good for him. But I don't think they're planning on having children."

"You never know," Ruth offered.

"No, I've given up on having any grandkids. You better watch out, though. I'll spoil that one back there if you let me." Viv nodded her head in the direction of the four-year-old in the back seat.

Ruth was so touched by the statement that her own eyes suddenly filled with tears. "That'll mean a lot to her, Viv. And to me, too."

"Somebody's already spoiled her," Spencer piped up. "She's so rotten she smells."

"I do not."

"Do too."

"You're lazy."

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After driving an hour on the parkway, Viv pulled off at Otter Lake, where a short walk led them to a picnic table near the water. No one was hungry, but the novelty of eating outside was too exciting for Jessie to put off, so they all had an early lunch.

"Can I go feed the ducks with Viv?" the child asked when she'd finished her chips.

Ruth didn't answer, just cocked her head and raised her eyebrows in question.

"May I go feed the ducks with Viv?" she clarified.

"Yes, you may. That was very good that you remembered."

She hadn't remembered, but Spencer had been mouthing the words behind her mother and that reminded her of what to do. The little girl crawled off the bench and grabbed her bread scraps. Viv had brought a whole extra loaf of bread.

"How about you? You want to see where that trail goes?" Spencer invited.

"Sure." Ruth walked over and told her landlady where they were going, asking if she'd mind watching Megan. Viv just waved her away.

"I really like Viv a lot, don't you?" Spencer started.

"She's great. Just look at her with Jessie. She's so patient and sweet. It's hard to imagine her daughter turned out so badly."

"Well, somewhere along the way, Sheila made the wrong choices."

That comment hit home for the blonde, and she began to shake her head. "I sure wish I could go back and choose over."

"Don't be so hard on yourself. Look at that." Spencer turned and looked back through the bare trees at the four-year-old gleefully feeding the ducks. "That was a good choice."

"Jessie's probably the only thing I did right."

"It's going to work out, Ruth," Spencer assured, draping her arm around the smaller woman's shoulder for a quick hug. Like Viv, she had hoped for a day when they could all set their problems aside and have fun. But some problems were too big to outrun, she guessed.

"So what about you? Did you ever do anything that made your parents pull their hair out?"

Spencer warmed all over as Ruth answered the hug by wrapping her arm around her waist. Something was going on here; she wasn't sure what it was but it felt very nice.

"Probably the worst thing I ever did was to pick State over Duke or Carolina," Spencer answered with a chuckle.

"Why was that such a big deal?"

"My father taught statistics at Carolina, and my mother was on the faculty at Duke's med school. They went back and forth for years about where I'd go, and I blew both of them off."

"So is that really the worst thing you ever did?"



"Mmmm, probably. I was a good kid, and we were pretty close. I liked my parents. We did a lot of things together."

"How'd they handle you being gay?"

"They were okay. College professors tend to be more liberal than most, I think. They both liked Elena a lot. Even after we split up, she'd still come home with me for long weekends at the lake and Mom would trash her for letting me get away. Elena always threatened to pull her taxes."

"That's too funny! It's all just so foreign to me. I can't even imagine having a good time with my family," Ruth said sadly.

"Then maybe it's time you got a new family."

When they reached a footbridge crossing a narrow stream, Spencer took the blonde woman's hand and led her onto a smaller trail that went away from the lake. Still unsure if she was imagining things, she loosened her fingers but didn't let go. Instead of dropping her own hand, Ruth asserted herself, gripping tighter to keep the connection.

Silently, they walked deeper into the woods, both very aware and excited that there was something brewing between them. When they reached a log that had fallen across the creek, they stopped. Its mossy cover was inviting, and Spencer grabbed the smaller woman's waist and hoisted her into the comfortable seat, straddling the narrow stream to stand between her parted legs.

Now at eye-level and only inches apart, both women gave in to the electrical surge, and their faces began to slowly move toward the other. Spencer slipped her fingers through the soft blonde hair to the back of Ruth's neck and pulled her closer. Their first kiss was soft, a simple declaration that they both felt this.

"Spencer, I don't...."

"Yes, you do," she whispered.

Again, their lips met, this time more deliberate, more searching. Ruth reveled in the softness of Spencer's mouth, the smoothness of her face, and the tender way the warm tongue stroked against her own. So nice.

When they broke, their eyes held one another as each searched for clues of what had just transpired. Finally, Ruth smiled softly and reached out to caress Spencer's face.

"You're right, I do."

"I knew you would."

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George Roscone gave the burgers one more turn and mashed them flat with the spatula, the dripping juice causing the fire underneath to flare. This would be his last cookout for a long time; maybe even the last one ever with this family he loved.

Last night, George had lain awake long after making love with his wife of thirteen years, despising himself for his greedy pursuits. No one in his family suspected his duplicity, but they would all pay for his mistakes.

Nearby, George, Jr. and his twin sisters were playing together on the Jungle Jim. Would they ever get past their father's crimes? George hoped so, but they deserved a father who would do the right thing, who would take responsibility for his actions.

Elena Diaz was closing her net. She'd found out about the other accounts, though it was still a mystery who had tipped him off. It would be far better if he turned himself in now and begged for a plea bargain, even if it meant risking the wrath of the drug cartel. Surely, the government would help him if he offered evidence against the bigger fish.

Tomorrow morning, he would walk into Diaz's office and give himself up. But today, he was a family man.

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"I guess we should be getting back, huh?"

Spencer returned the smile and nodded, very encouraged by what she was reading in the warm green eyes. Wordlessly, they had kissed over and over, finally reining in a passion that threatened their self-control. All of the things she knew about Ruth Ferguson had come together in a package that beckoned her, and she wanted more...much more. Holding hands, they followed the trail back toward the picnic area.

"I think you should say something to Viv." The women could see the older woman on the shore of the lake, breaking off bread crumbs so the delighted child could feed a family of ducklings.

"What do you mean?"

"I think you ought to tell her who you are, and what you're running from."

Ruth shook her head. "I don't want to put her in the middle of this. Besides, the more people who know, the more we're at risk."

"I understand that, but just thinking about things right now...what if you were driving home one day from Wal-Mart and got stopped by the cops? Suppose they somehow figured out who you were? Would you want Viv to just step forward and say 'Here's the little girl you're looking for,' or would you want her to protect Jessie from going back to her father?"

"What if she doesn't want that kind of responsibility?"

"Look at her."

Spencer was right about the bond that was growing between her landlady and her daughter. "You really think I should?"

"Yeah. And it would probably take some of the pressure off Jessie about keeping things so secret."

When they got back to the picnic site, Spencer invited Jessie to walk with her to see the waterfall in the creek. That gave Ruth the opportunity to talk with Viv.

"They won't take her if I have anything to say about it!"

"I sort of hoped you'd feel that way," Ruth said gratefully. "I really hate putting you in the middle of all of this, especially on top of everything that's going on with Spencer."

"I want to be in the middle of it. It makes me feel like I'm getting another chance."

It made Ruth feel exactly the same way.

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"So what have we got?" Chad Merke had gathered the entire team in his living room for an update. Elena Diaz had driven straight to his house after her meeting with Ruth on Saturday morning, knowing that her FBI surveillance team would assume she was going to discuss the break in the Roscone case.

"So far, it's checking out. The program does just what Rollins says," their Visual Basic expert offered. "And the parts that she said were inserted really stand out. It's pretty obvious they were written by someone else."

"Is there any way to know when this bogus program went into operation?"

"Not from this, but we can probably find it on the server at Margadon. It'll have a time stamp." This time, it was their network expert who spoke up.

"What if they've altered it?" Elena asked.

"We've got tools to determine that sort of thing," he explained. "Unless you really know what you're doing, it's pretty hard to get rid of something completely. But even if you can, you leave a big ugly mark that says something's been changed."

"Okay, so that part's coming together," Chad continued. "What have we got on the finances?"

This was Elena's domain. She'd been handed three auditors yesterday afternoon, and they'd all worked into the night and throughout the day today. "Well, as you already knew, we've got evidence of large amounts of cash moving through the hands of two FBI agents, Akers and Pollard. We have major purchases of high-end luxury items - cars, boats, houses - in the last fourteen months for Peter Crowell, the cytokines supplier; for Adam Huffman, the production manager in Little Rock; and for James Thayer. But we've come up empty on Stacy Eagleton."

"Are you certain she's involved in this?" their boss asked.

"Spencer seems to think so. She clearly fabricated her statements for the newspaper to throw more suspicion on Spencer. Not sure why she would do that if she weren't involved."

"Maybe she just doesn't like Spencer," he countered objectively. "Or maybe she was just repeating gossip. You know how these stories sometimes take on a life of their own."

"That's possible, Chad," Elena conceded. "But she happens to be the manager for the Kryfex contract. I don't like that coincidence."

"Agreed. So we'll keep looking. What's our next move?"

"I want to bring Spencer in and put her in protective custody."

"Fine. Do it." Chad could see the wisdom of getting their star witness out of harm's way.

"And I think we ought to do the same for the informant, and for her child."

"Why do they need to be protected?"

"Because these guys have a habit of killing people who know things."

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In all the excitement of the day, Jessie missed her nap and barely made it through her bath without falling asleep. Once she was down for the night, Ruth closed the bedroom door and returned to the living room, her breath catching at the sight of the dark-haired beauty staring at her from across the room.

Spencer was sitting in the straight back chair, her long legs stretched out in front and her arms folded across her chest. It was a commanding posture.

"Do you want to talk about this afternoon?" she asked.

The electricity between them had filled the air when they walked back into the trailer. Every look, every gesture, every casual touch only served to heighten its charge. And now, they were alone again.

Ruth sat down on the arm of the recliner, adopting a pose that belied her lack of confidence. "Okay."

"Are you alright about it?"

"Sure," the small voice said. Ruth was unable to remove her eyes from the tacky symmetrical pattern on the vinyl floor.

Spencer chuckled and leaned forward, dropping her forearms to her knees. "Look at me."

Guiltily, the green eyes finally met hers.

"If it makes you too uncomfortable to even look me in the eye, I suppose asking where you want to go next with this is kind of pointless."

Ruth grimaced, not at Spencer's words, but at her own confusion. Her head was saying one thing, but her heart and body seemed to be saying something else altogether. She found herself inexplicably pulled toward this woman, driven to care for her, and compelled to have her physically close.

"I was surprised. Not by you, but by me. I didn't expect to do that, and when I did, I didn't expect it to feel like that," she admitted.

"How did it feel?"

"It felt...I liked it...a lot."

"I liked it, too. But I don't want to lead you somewhere you really don't want to go. We're both under a lot of stress right now, and I'd hate to think either of us was just looking for a port in a

storm."

The blonde woman nodded in agreement, still barely able to look into the piercing blue eyes. "Is that what you're doing?"

Spencer shook her head. "No."

"Then what are you doing, Spencer?"

The silence was almost deafening as the dark-haired woman considered her response. What indeed?

"I'm just drawn to you, Ruth," she answered softly. "There's a lot about you that reaches out to me. You're brave; you're beautiful; you have a good heart. And I'm comfortable with you. It feels good to be here, with you and with Jessie."

Those were all words Ruth had told herself she'd never hear. If Skip had liked anything about her, he'd never said so. Spencer had just laid it all out there for her, and it was exactly the way she felt too.

Hoisting herself slowly from the recliner, she took the woman's long hand in her own and tugged her toward the hallway, clicking off the small lamp on the end table as she walked by.

Once they reached the bedroom, Spencer closed the door, pressing the button lock to avoid being surprised by the four-year-old.

"It feels good to have you hold me," the blonde whispered as she stepped into the long arms.

Spencer hugged her tightly and brushed her lips against the blonde crown. With her fingers, she tipped the chin upward and delivered a warm kiss, then pulled her close again. Her body was way ahead of this simple embrace, hot with want but tempered with uncertainty.

After a long time, Ruth pulled out of her grasp and turned down the spread. Unhurriedly, she pulled off her t-shirt and reached around to unclasp her bra. Without taking her eyes off the blue ones that bore through her, she pushed her jeans and panties to the floor and lifted the blanket, settling in to watch the tall beauty do the same.

Suddenly self-conscious as hell, Spencer started to undress. Once she was naked, she crawled up from the bottom to her side of the bed, pulling back the covers as Ruth watched her. Gradually, she scooted over until the length of their bodies made contact.

Ruth gently moved against the silky-smooth legs that tangled with her own. It was very sensual, as was this feeling of warm skin against her side, and the soft patch of hair pressing into her hip.

Still unsure of how far Ruth wanted to go, Spencer draped an arm across the smaller woman's waist, luxuriating in the feel of her naked body. If this was all Ruth needed tonight, it would be

nice indeed, but she frankly doubted she would sleep very much.

But Ruth had other ideas, ideas that began to spiral as soon as she gave in to the intimate desire to lie naked together. She found Spencer's hand and boldly moved it to the center of her chest, softly stroking the back of her fingers.

Spencer took the cue and began to glide her fingertips gently across the bare torso, stopping at the edge of the bristly curls and tracing the path back up to a trembling chin. From there, she ventured back down, across the collarbone from one shoulder to the other. With a featherlike touch, she trailed her fingers to a breast, encircling its firm outline. No sooner did her nails scrape against a nipple did the hand dart away to start the circuit once again.

Ruth could feel her body come to life; Spencer was teasing her senseless with this delicate caress. She took several deep breaths to still her excitement as Spencer reached centimeters lower toward her center, stroked her breasts more firmly, and lingered over her now-hardened nipples. When the hand finally engulfed a breast and squeezed possessively, her gasp was swallowed by a hot mouth that covered hers. For a long minute, she nearly drowned in the kiss; it was only when the long fingers slid between her legs she remembered to draw another breath.

## **Chapter 22**

*I've fallen in love with her.*

Spencer knew it as sure as she knew her own name. In her whole life, she'd never felt the need to show her heart as she had when she'd touched Ruth last night.

And it scared her half to death. Spencer had had enough overnight flings - or even weeklong flings - to know that people could share this sort of thing without the feelings attached. This time, it felt different for her; but she couldn't even guess what Ruth was feeling.

All she knew for sure was that her lover of just a few hours ago was gone from their bed, not in her arms as she had dreamed. Damn! This was going to be awkward as hell.

Dreading the moment, the tall woman dragged herself from the bed, pulling on the jeans and t-shirt that she'd thrown on the floor last night. After a quick stop in the bathroom, she walked barefoot down the narrow hallway.

Ruth and Jessie were sitting at the kitchen bar, their backs to the living room as they paged through the coloring book.

"This one's very nice," the mother said.

"Can we put it on the refrigerator?" Jessie asked.

"Yes, we certainly can," Spencer announced from behind, startling both of the blondes.

"May," Ruth corrected, turning to eye the new arrival.

"Will," Spencer trumped. Reaching between them, she gently tore the page from the book and fished in the drawer for tape, which wasn't to be found.

"Wait, I have some." Ruth got up and went back to the bathroom, returning with the white roll from her first aid supplies.

"That's perfect." Spencer held out her hand and stared pointedly into the green eyes as Ruth laid the tape in her palm, her hand lingering in a questioning caress. The tall woman almost sighed with relief. "Lots of things are perfect."

Ruth met the smiling blue eyes, and something passed between them that set her anxious mind at ease. Spencer was feeling this too, and it wasn't just the physical part that they'd shared last night.

When Ruth awoke this morning, she'd stared at that beautiful face for the longest time, the other woman's touch still fresh on her body. In all her life, she'd never felt so possessed by another, as if her soul was already owned. But despite their intimacy, she couldn't read how deep Spencer's feelings for her ran. Soon - in a few days, perhaps - this awful episode would be wrapped up and the programmer would have her life back. Ruth worried that she might not be part of that life.

When she'd heard Jessie stir this morning, she'd hastily gotten up, knowing she had no answers for the questions her daughter might ask. Now, as she gazed at Spencer's tender look, she was assured that it was all real; there would be time to talk later about what it all meant.

"I guess I should go call Elena again. You think she's had enough time to look into all that stuff you sent?"

"Knowing her, she's been on it since Saturday."

"What do you think she'll do?"

"I don't know, but listen to every detail. There might be clues there and we can figure it out when you get back. Oh, and I wouldn't use the same phone you used last time. Remember, you said you were headed home, so your bank should be somewhere else."

This time, Spencer wrote the directions for a shopping center in Fairfax, where Ruth should again find a payphone and place her call directly to Elena's office. Before the younger woman left, they retreated to the bedroom, where they shared an emotional hug and a kiss that briefly caused their passion to flare.

"Let me go get this done." After two more quick kisses, she grabbed her keys and stopped at the



door to give her daughter a hug. "Be sweet, honey. I'll be back soon."

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Thomas Fennimore reshuffled the papers on his desk, pushing his glasses up for the hundredth time today. Anyone walking by his cubicle would be appalled at the apparent chaos, but Thomas knew exactly where everything was, and what it meant to his case.

*His case.*

Elena had given him his own case, a story and a loose set of clues beneath which he *might* uncover wrongdoing. Eager to prove himself, he'd worked until midnight on Saturday and all day yesterday, pulling records and cross-checking, and laying all the pieces end to end.

Thomas understood greed, but his favorite flaw was stupidity. Unless he was mistaken, Drummond Appliances had committed both. As neatly as his excited hand could, he filled out the request form for travel expenses and two local auditors in Madison, Maine.

Silently, he laid the forms before his boss, grinning broadly as she signed her approval. He was about to speak when her phone rang.

A payphone in Fairfax, Virginia.

"Internal Revenue Service, Special Agent Elena Diaz. How may I help you?"

"Agent Diaz?"

It was the woman who had come to the park, Ruth Ferguson.

"Yes, this is Agent Diaz," she said calmly, waving at her assistant to alert him to the call.

"This is the woman who talked with you the other day, about George Roscone."

"Yes, thank you very much for calling back. I had a chance to look over the papers that you gave me, and that's exactly the sort of evidence we're looking for. I've gotten approval for a reward, but we need to move quickly. Can you come to my office?"

Chad had approved her plan to pick up this informant and drive immediately to where Spencer was hiding. From there, they would be ushered to a safe house to await the execution of the warrants.

"I don't know about that. Can I still be anonymous?"

"You can remain anonymous," the agent assured. Obviously, that meant her informant didn't quite trust where she stood. Her apprehension was understandable, considering she was wanted for felony kidnapping.

"Good. So should we meet in the same place?"

No, that wouldn't work. They needed to be further away from the surveillance van, and close to a place where Ruth could be whisked away by a waiting car. "What if we met at the Lincoln Memorial? By the vendors on Independence Avenue?"

"Okay, I can do that. What time?"

"Can you come now?" Elena was getting anxious.

"Does it have to be right now?"

"Once the decision is made to move ahead, we try to get things done as quickly as possible. We just don't want to leave any opportunities for things to go wrong at the last minute," Elena explained, now impatient about this woman's paranoia. Spencer's life was at risk, as was the informant's. "I really need for you to trust me on this," she added.

"Okay, by the Lincoln Memorial. I'll come now."

Returning the phone to its cradle, Elena sat back and sighed. This danger for Spencer was coming to an end. The events of the past few days had been a wake up call for her, one that made her acknowledge how she truly felt about the beautiful friend who had once offered her heart.

This case was going to rock the District hard, and Spencer wouldn't enjoy the attention at all. When it was all over, they should get away for awhile. Maybe they could go to one of the islands for a couple of weeks. They could sun and swim, and who knows, maybe even....

"Elena?" the intercom buzzed.

"Yes?"

"There's someone here to see you. He says he wants to turn himself in."

The baffled agent stood and poked her head into the hallway, craning her neck to see the reception area. There stood George Roscone.

\*\*\*\*\*

Mike Pollard stepped back into the van after his walk across the mall. He didn't feel comfortable talking to Akers with the technician present, so his habit was to go outside and walk around.

Akers was pissed this morning because of the new asshole he'd gotten, courtesy of Stacy Eagleton. They had two more days to find Rollins or she was pulling the plug on everything.

"Did I miss anything?"

"Not much. That woman called back about Roscone. She's going to meet Diaz at the Lincoln Memorial. Diaz got the reward approved for her."

"Wonder why she's meeting her there?" At least if Diaz was out of the building, they could take a break from the phones.

"The informant said she wanted to stay anonymous."

"Hmm." That was odd...not that they were meeting outside, but that they were meeting in a different place. Why? "Rewind that tape, let me listen."

The technician did as he was asked while Pollard settled in with the headphones. He didn't like what he was hearing. Why the insistence that they meet right away and why at the Lincoln Memorial? The informant hadn't even asked how much the reward was.

"Hey, Jack. Is today a bank holiday?"

"If it was a bank holiday, you'd be here by yourself," the technician chuckled.

Then why wasn't this informant at work?

Mike Pollard needed to take another walk and talk with his partner about this Roscone informant. He had a sinking feeling that Spencer Rollins had gotten under their radar.

\*\*\*\*\*

The urgency in the IRS agent's request to come immediately was unmistakable, but it was the last thing Ruth had expected...or wanted. There was something about moving ahead so fast that was unsettling, but she wrote it off as nervousness about being on the run. She needed to trust Elena Diaz, just as she'd been asked, especially now that Elena held her fate in her hands.

There wasn't time to go back to the trailer. Spencer would worry, but maybe Elena could find a way to get in touch with Viv and let her know things were alright. Or maybe they were ready to

bring Spencer in. That would get her out of danger and they could go after the real killers. Whatever they had planned, the agent was expecting her, and if she didn't show up she might miss a window for ending this peril.

From Fairfax, Ruth drove to the Franconia-Springfield station, the same place she'd parked the other day. Before buying her ticket, she studied the layout of the Metro system, looking for the closest stop to the Lincoln Memorial. She had a few choices - Arlington, Farragut West, Smithsonian - all about the same distance away, but none particularly close. With a five dollar fare card in hand, she boarded the train and settled in for the ride.

It would be over soon, she repeated in her head as she jostled back and forth in the orange vinyl seat. At least it would be over for Spencer. The more she thought about her own situation, the more she doubted there was anything anyone could do. If Elena let her walk, she and Jessie would need to find a new home, she realized dismally. The respite of the last week would be over, along with that glimmer of hope she'd had for a new start here with friends like Viv...and with Spencer. She and her daughter would try again in a new place.

When her stop was announced, Ruth stood up and exited onto the platform. The tall escalator took her to street level, where the chilly breeze prompted her to pull up the collar on her jacket. She could see the back of Lincoln Memorial at the other end of the Arlington Bridge.

It will soon be over, she said again.

As she started across the Potomac, a black government sedan pulled silently alongside her. A suited man in a trench coat emerged, flashing his badge as he blocked her path on the bridge.

"Michael Pollard, FBI. I need you to get in the car, please."

Ruth's heart began to pound as the blood left her face. They were FBI!

"In the car, now," he ordered sharply.

Shaking and dazed, she hesitated until he grabbed her arm forcefully and shoved her to the curb. There he opened the back door and guided her inside. Sliding in beside her, the agent shut the door and the car picked up speed as it crossed the bridge and turned the corner onto Independence Avenue.

\*\*\*\*\*

Elena Diaz continued to pace the area around the Lincoln Memorial, scanning the crowds of tourists for the blonde woman who had called her almost two hours ago. For whatever reason, Ruth Ferguson had changed her mind about keeping their appointment.

Either that, or the FBI agents were on to her ruse and had picked her up en route. And if that was the case, both Ruth and Spencer were in grave danger.

And on to the thrilling conclusion! Oh, wait...I said I wasn't going to call it a thriller. [Part 5 \(conclusion\)](#)

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[The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive](#)

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## ~ Malicious Pursuit ~

by KG MacGregor

**Disclaimers:** By now, you should know this part by heart. If you like to envision these characters as familiar faces, I won't mess with that.

This is an action/adventure story. I wanted to call it a thriller, but I thought that was a little presumptuous. However, it is my hope that you have to read the whole thing in one sitting. Oh, and there's romance between women. Thought you'd appreciate that.

Thanks very much to TNovan & Ann who helped me out with the technical details. Any errors you find are questions I forgot to ask, things I didn't clarify, or stuff I made up. If you find mistakes, please let me know.

A HUGE thanks also to Tami, my beta reader en fuego, and to the "fresh eyes" who gave it a read. And thanks also to my Sweetcakes, not just for her editing, but for talking through all of the critical parts until we got things to work.

**Malicious Pursuit 4**

**By KG MacGregor**

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[kgmacgregor@yahoo.com](mailto:kgmacgregor@yahoo.com)

### **Part 5**

### **Chapter 23**

Ruth caught a glimpse of the lettering over the main glass doors as the car slowed: *Federal Bureau of Investigation*. The black sedan turned and started down a ramp to the underground garage. The short ride had been quiet; so quiet in fact that she still didn't know if this was about Spencer Rollins, Ruth Ferguson, or Karen Oliver.

"I don't have the evidence with me," she offered.

Neither man responded as the driver pulled into a marked space near the elevator. When they stopped, he got out and opened her door, uttering his first words.

"Step out of the car and place your hands behind your back."

Continuing to shake, she stood and slowly turned around. Too slowly, it seemed, as the driver pushed her shoulder hard to bring her hands together for the cuffs. Next he patted her down, removing her car keys and the small wad of bills she'd stuffed into her back pocket. Roughly, he seized her elbow and thrust her toward the elevator.

When they reached the fifth floor, they escorted her more casually down a hallway of offices to a small interior room - an interrogation room from the looks of it. Six chairs sat at a rectangular table underneath an array of fluorescent lighting. The agent who identified himself as Pollard pulled out a chair and indicated that she should sit.

Ruth did so and leaned back uncomfortably on her arms, her hands still bound by the metal cuffs.

"Are these really necessary?" she asked.

Again, they ignored her, stepping back into the hallway and closing the door.

Fine! Her mind had been spinning all the way over about how she was going to play her part. These assholes had just helped her decide. She wasn't going to tell them jack shit about anything. Thankfully, she'd had the foresight to leave her wallet in the glove compartment of the Taurus. If this wasn't about Karen Oliver, they'd never find Jessie. For that matter, they wouldn't find Spencer either.

The driver, the surly one, came back in and took a seat opposite her across the table. "Why don't we start with your name?"

"I have nothing to say to you."

"Then it's going to be a very long night, because I'm not leaving here until I've had my questions answered," he stated firmly.

This time, Ruth didn't reply.

"So let me ask again. What is your name?"

"Hearing problem?" she mumbled.

Akers' jaw flinched in anger. He needed this woman to tip her hand, and that wouldn't happen if she didn't talk at all. "Very well, then I'll start. I'm Special Agent Calvin Akers of the FBI.

Special Agent Pollard and I are conducting an investigation in conjunction with Elena Diaz, an agent with the IRS. You spoke with her from a payphone in Reston on Friday afternoon, claiming to have information on one George Roscone. On Saturday morning, you met with Agent Diaz on the mall and passed her a blue folder, purportedly containing evidence regarding Mr. Roscone's accounts. You called Agent Diaz again this morning from a payphone in Fairfax and you were on your way to a second meeting at the Lincoln Memorial when we intercepted you. That is what we already know. What we are missing is who you are and why we should believe that you have knowledge of a bank account belonging to Mr. Roscone."

"I was promised a reward," Ruth answered, sticking with her original story. This was almost certainly about Spencer, or they wouldn't have known about her calls.

"And there is a reward. Your reward is that you will be allowed to leave once you have given us the information we seek."

The blonde woman fell silent again. The clock on the wall said 11:45; Spencer would be expecting her. In a couple more hours, the programmer would get worried and take action; Elena Diaz and her team would find her and end this.

"Of course, if it's money that interests you, I do happen to have a case I'm working on that involves a \$25,000 reward." He pulled from his pocket a photo of Spencer Rollins and pushed it across the table, looking carefully for her reaction. "Do you know this woman?"

Ruth looked at the photo as if for the first time and shook her head. "No."

"Have you seen this picture before?"

"No."

"Do you ever watch the news or read the newspapers?"

"No."

"Surely, you've seen the news at least once or twice in the last week, haven't you?"

"Not that I remember." Ruth needed to stop answering his questions. He seemed to be having too much fun, as though she were playing into his hand somehow.

"Have you heard about the recent murders at Margadon, the pharmaceutical company in Bethesda? One of the victims was an Albino." That was the sort of information that people would have remembered. "His picture was in the paper too. Did you happen to see that? He looked just like somebody had powdered his face, you know what I mean?"

This man was despicable, Ruth thought. "No," she repeated furiously.

That had gotten a nice rise, he thought. One would almost think she'd known Henry Estes to

evoke that sort of angry response.

"Course, he wasn't white like that when we found him. He was sort of purple, what with that little hitch knot around his neck." He watched with satisfaction as the woman's face reddened.

"Did you happen to know Henry Estes?" he asked. "I mean, you look a little like you're getting pretty upset at hearing about all this."

"I'm not used to hearing people talk so callously about the dead," she answered coldly.

Akers chuckled. "I guess we do get a little desensitized to these sorts of things after a while. But then there's the other end of that spectrum, where we learn to be very sensitive to things. Over the years, I've developed quite a sense of smell, especially for rats. And that's what I'm smelling here: a rat. See, I'm not buying this story about Roscone. I think you're perpetrating a hoax on the good people of the IRS, and I'm prepared to hold you here until I learn otherwise. Am I clear on that?"

"Now that you're finally accusing me of something, I suppose this would be a good time for me to ask for an attorney." Ruth knew there was no way in hell that her wish would be granted, but she needed a little more leverage against this son of a bitch.

"I'll be happy to summon an attorney for you. Who shall I say is calling?"

"I'm requesting a public defender."

"You're getting nothing until I get a name."

"Then you can consider these my last words to you," she sneered, "Calvin."

\*\*\*\*\*

Spencer looked at the clock again, miserable to see that only three minutes had passed. Ruth was late - very late. The shopping center at Fairfax was only thirty minutes away, forty-five in heavy traffic, but it wasn't rush hour. She'd been gone over three and a half hours.

Even if Elena had called her into the city, she would have known that the others would be worried and she'd have found a way to call Viv or something. And if she wasn't in Elena's hands, she was in unspeakable danger.

"Jessie?" Spencer tiptoed into the bedroom to wake the napping child. "Sweetie, we need to go over to Viv's. I need to go out. Can you finish your nap there?" As she talked, she gathered the sleepy child in her arms, picking up the Lisa doll and the soft pink blanket the little girl used for



her naps.

Stumbling onto the porch, the pair were met by Viv, who held the door and directed them to the guest room. Jessie settled down quickly and went right back to sleep.

"Viv, I need to borrow your car. Ruth should be back by now. I have to go see about her. I may have to make a call to my friend."

"Won't they be listening? Maybe I should go."

"No, it doesn't matter. If those bastards have picked up Ruth, I don't care what happens to me. I need my friend to get her out before they find out about Jessie."

"Be careful," the older woman advised, handing over her keys. "And don't do anything foolish."

In twenty minutes, Spencer was sitting at the shopping center. There was no trace of Ruth's car, which at least meant that she hadn't been picked up while she was on the phone. But if she wasn't here, where would she have gone? Ruth didn't know DC well enough to find her way around. She knew the Wal-Mart, she knew the shopping center in Reston where she'd called from last Friday, and she knew the Franconia-Springfield stop on the Metro. And if she'd gone to the city, her car would be there.

The programmer wheeled the vehicle back onto I-66, hopping onto the Beltway and heading south for the Franconia exit. As she approached the parking garage, she was reminded of Viv's admonition not to do anything foolish. Driving into a place where it was possible the agents were waiting certainly fell into that category. If they'd figured out who Ruth was, they'd use her as bait. Spencer needed to be smarter than that, for both their sakes.

Turning off Franconia Road, she stopped in a small strip mall, where a payphone was mounted under the awning near an ATM machine. This needed to be fast, and she needed to be able to get the hell out of there in a hurry. Thankfully, they wouldn't recognize the Jeep.

Nervously she dialed Elena's cell phone and waited.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Are you sure she didn't just get cold feet?"

"I thought about that, Chad. But when I got back here, I found out that Pollard wasn't in the van," Elena explained.

Her boss raised his eyebrows in question.

"I walked over there and knocked on the goddamned door!"

"And you're assuming the reason he's not there is because he went to intercept our informant?"

"Chad, Pollard is always in the van. Except when he's sitting in his car watching my house. If he's not there, it's because he's doing something more important. And he just happens to do it when our informant goes missing? You know how I hate coincidences."

"I wish I had a little more." They had agreed when they got their case together, they would involve the senior FBI field agent who supervised Akers and Pollard, Chad's equivalent for the Bureau. Chad was certain his counterpart would help if their evidence was solid, but the first instinct of any agency would be to circle the wagons.

"If we could-"

The cell phone in her pocket interrupted her thought.

"It's a payphone in Franconia," she said. "This is Special Agent-"

"Where is she?"

Spencer! "I don't know. She was supposed to meet me and she never showed." Elena was pacing the room, waving her arms excitedly to let them know who was on the phone.

"They've got her, Elena. You have to get her out of there."

""I'm working on it. You need to come in. You'll be safe here."

"I can't!" She had to protect Jessie and Viv. They knew enough to get killed for their part in this. "Not yet. I'll call you when I'm ready."

Abruptly, she hung up the phone and raced for the Jeep. She needed to get the hell out of there before the police arrived. She had no way of knowing that the technician who had monitored her call was left without such instructions.

\*\*\*\*\*

Ruth had been left alone in the room for almost two hours when the two agents finally reappeared.

"We have great news for you...Miss Ferguson." Akers delighted in the look of shock on the

blonde woman's face. "That's right. It seems one of the interns in the hallway recognized you from your picture on our recent update and he thought to offer his congratulations for making your arrest."

Ruth glared at the two of them defiantly. There were no conditions under which she'd reveal where her daughter was. Even if they sent her back to Maine and locked her up forever, Jessie was going to be free.

"So maybe we should take a step back and re-evaluate your situation. You've got a little girl you'd like to keep. You've also got some information I'd like to have. Sound like an even trade to you?"

"I'm not telling you where my daughter is. I don't care what you do with me."

"Let's forget about your daughter for a moment. Hell, just for the sake of argument, let's assume that I don't give a rat's ass about where your daughter is. What I want to know is what you know about Spencer Rollins and George Roscone." If she really knew about Roscone, chances were that she wasn't involved in the Rollins case at all.

"Nothing! I don't know shit about Roscone. It was a scam for the reward."

"How did you know about it?" Was this finally the truth coming out? If it was, it wasn't what they were looking for after all.

"I looked it up in the paper. I sat for three days, going through back issues until I found the right story."

The agents looked at her skeptically, but appeared to be listening.

"Look, I worked in a bank when I lived in Maine. I heard a story about somebody pulling a scam like this for the reward money. I thought I could pull it off if I strung her along. I need money!"

For what felt like an hour, the agents traded questioning looks until Akers finally slapped his knees and stood.

"Take her upstairs and lock her up. And call the boys in Maine to come take out their trash."

## **Chapter 24**

Thomas Fennimore stepped off the Ratheon Beech turboprop onto the tarmac at Augusta Airport, his bulging briefcase in one hand, a garment bag in the other. He didn't expect to be here very long, and didn't care if he didn't sleep tonight. This was going to be great fun.

The connecting flight from Boston had been delayed a bit, but not enough to crimp his plans.

The auditors would meet him at five o'clock at the appliance store - a half hour before closing - where he would present a federal warrant to review the books. If they found what they were looking for, they'd need one more warrant, and Elena was on standby in DC to secure it.

Following the line of passengers into the small terminal, Thomas unknowingly passed his quarry. Roland Drummond, Sr. and his son Skip were ticketed for the next flight to Washington National, where they would confront Ruth Ferguson and bring their little girl back home where she belonged.

\*\*\*\*\*

Spencer stormed through the back door of the house, this time without bothering to knock.

"Viv?"

The landlady rushed to the back porch for the news. The four-year-old was watching television in the den, already anxious about her mother.

"They've got her. The feds picked her up about three hours ago."

"Oh, no!" At once, the older woman realized the gravity of the situation. Ruth wasn't coming back, and it was time to honor the promise she'd made just yesterday. "We have to hide Jessie."

"That's right. It won't be for long, Viv. My friend will get her out before anything happens. But you two have to get out of here before they find us. Is there someplace you can go till this blows over?"

"We can go to Jerry's. He's from the church."

"Can we trust Jerry?"

"Of course. We've known each other for years. And he has a barn where we can hide the car."

"Great! How soon can you be ready?"

"Ten minutes," she answered, pitching the contents of her laundry basket.

"I'll put Jessie's things in the car. Hurry!"

When she'd loaded a few clothes and all of Ruth's valuables, Spencer ran back onto the back porch, nearly falling over a laundry basket full of puppies and a bewildered Maggie and Thor.

"Come on, you two. Let's go for a ride." She picked up the basket and slid it into the Jeep's cargo area. The older dogs followed, immediately nosing the puppies to make sure everything was alright.

Viv and Jessie appeared at the back door, the latter holding her pink blanket. Spencer helped the little one into the back seat and clipped her seat belt. Viv stowed the dog food and a few of her own things.

"Where's Mommy?"

"She's in the city, meeting some people."

"When is she going to come home?"

"I'm not sure, honey."

"Where are we going?"

"We're going to stay with a friend of Viv's for a little while."

"Why?"

"Because," she hesitated, "some people are coming over and we don't want to see them."

"Are we hiding from Daddy?" This she understood.

"Yes, Jessie. We have to hide, but it's going to be okay," Spencer assured.

"How will Mommy know where to find us?"

"I'm going to tell her where we are."

"Are you going to see her?"

"No, but I'm going to tell my friend to go see her. And my friend will bring her to us." Spencer hoped like hell that she was telling the truth.

"I want to go see her too." The four-year-old could tell that Spencer and Viv were worried, and that made her worried too. "I want to be with her."

"You can't right now, sweetie. You have to stay with us," Viv soothed, sensing how confused the child must be.

"No!" she shouted, and started to cry.

"Jessie? Listen to me, okay?" Spencer said softly. "Your mommy will come as soon as she can."

She wants you to stay with us, not to come where she is." The driver strained to make eye contact in the rear view mirror. "Please, honey? It'll be okay."

"Will you stay with me?"

"I'll stay until we get everything settled at...", she looked quickly to the landlady.

"Jerry's."

"...until we get settled at Jerry's. Then I need to go tell my friend where we are so your Mommy can find us. While I'm gone, will you help Viv look after the puppies?"

The child's blubbering stopped as she stretched to look behind her at the dogs. "Okay," she finally answered.

"Thank you. I really appreciate you being such a big girl, Jessie."

\*\*\*\*\*

"Well, look at it this way," Pollard said chuckling. "Diaz still looks like a fool."

"At least that's something," Akers agreed.

The two agents had stopped for a leisurely lunch after the excitement of their morning. Their boss would be pleased that they'd nailed a fugitive, even if it wasn't the one they were looking for. A collar like that would keep the pressure off them on the Rollins case. The Bureau hated to spend resources and get nothing in return.

"Why don't you drop me back at the van so I can check in with the techies? I'll grab a taxi later to pick up my car."

Akers pulled over at the curb on Constitution Avenue. "I'm going to head home and get some sleep. I'll relieve you over at the house about nine."

Pollard slammed the door and strode to the van.

"Anything happening here?" he asked casually.

"Didn't you get my call?"

"What call?"

"I left you a voice message about two hours ago. Rollins called in and wanted to know where the woman was. Diaz told her she never showed-"

Fuck! Pollard stormed back out of the van to see Akers disappear into the distance. The Ferguson bitch was working with Rollins all along, and they'd just turned her over on a kidnapping warrant. Angrily, he pulled the phone from his pocket, the window indeed announcing a voice message. He placed the call to Akers, dreading the tirade he knew would come.

"Akers."

"Cal! The Ferguson woman...she's working with Rollins."

"What the hell? How do you know?"

"Rollins called Diaz about two hours ago to find out where she was."

"Why didn't that stupid fuck call and let us know?"

"He says he did, but the idiot must have dialed the wrong number or something." Pollard wasn't about to admit that he'd forgotten to check his messages.

"Stay where you are in case she calls again. I'm going to go get some answers from this bitch if I have to break her arms," he growled.

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"Hey, Elena, birthday cake in the break room," her fellow agent announced, jerking her head toward Chad's office.

For the last two days, Elena had fought the urge just to yank the bug off the bottom of her desk and crush it with her boot; but they'd all agreed that it was better to work around it than to worry about it showing up somewhere else. Chad's office was swept several times a day and deemed secure, so all of their business with the Spencer Rollins case was conducted there.

"What is it?"

"We got the dirt on Stacy Eagleton," Lori Pruitt proclaimed with a grin. "She had a little trouble about eight years ago when she worked for Southern Health Supply in Atlanta. They started an investigation into some inventory problems, but they dropped it when she resigned."

"What kind of inventory problems?"

"Short shipments, it would appear, a lot like what's happening at Margadon. But at Southern, she was pulling the cash out of her own budget instead of spending it on her vendors. Southern let it go quietly because they didn't want to call attention to the shipments that went out under spec."

"Akers and Pollard must have found out about it and confronted her. So she set up another scheme and cut them in on it," Elena concluded. "Is that what you're thinking, Chad?"

Her boss nodded with satisfaction. "Makes sense to me. How are we going to prove it?"

"Why don't we pull her phone records and see if she has any calls to these agents?"

"That's a start. Have we heard from Rollins again?"

"No. But I did confirm that the FBI has Ruth Ferguson in custody and that's she's awaiting extradition back to Maine. Apparently, they haven't made the connection between her and Spencer, so we're good there. But..."

"But what?" Chad asked, knowing already what Diaz would request.

Elena looked sheepishly at the other agents in the room, prompting her boss to dismiss them so they could discuss this alone.

"We're moving on that case as well. Agent Fennimore is arriving in Madison, Maine right about now to start going over the books at Drummond Appliances. If we have any leverage for keeping Ruth Ferguson here in DC, I'd like to call that in."

"We're no match for a federal kidnapping warrant, Elena."

"Chad, this woman risked her freedom to help with this case. I'm not asking for a pardon here. I'm just asking that we hold her here until Fennimore completes his work."

"We can't use the IRS to strong arm people into giving up their kids. You know that," he scolded.

"But there's something wrong with this case. This mother should never have lost her kid in the first place, and Thomas thinks maybe the judge was bought. That makes it our jurisdiction and our obligation to investigate."

"What kind of evidence are we looking at?"

"Drummond Appliances was her ex-husband's company and it had a huge write-off right about the time the case went to court. It wasn't carried over to the next quarter like their other bad debts; and it wasn't handed to their collection agency. It was like they just gave something away."

"That's all you've got?"



"For Christ's sake, Chad! Just give him twenty-four hours to look into it. You know how I-"

"I know, I know. You hate coincidences."

## **Chapter 25**

Ruth leaned back against the concrete wall counting her blessings. Jessie would be safe. Spencer and Viv would see to that, and nothing else on earth mattered. In a few days, Elena would find a way to end the Margadon case, and Spencer would be safe.

But by that time, it would be too late for anyone to help her. An agent had stopped by to explain that they'd received her extradition papers and she was to be sent under escort of a US Marshall to jail in Maine - with or without revealing her daughter's whereabouts. They had already begun the search.

But they wouldn't find her, she told herself again. They were probably already gone from the trailer, and Jessie would be taken to a safe place. She was sure of it.

Startled from her ruminations by a creak of the door, Ruth looked up to see a very angry Calvin Akers. With his red face and the prominent veins on his neck and forehead, the man looked like he was about to have a stroke.

"Why, hello again, Calvin," she said sarcastically. "Did you miss me?"

"Miss Ferguson, I've just been apprised of your involvement in another federal case, and I think it would be a good idea for us to discuss some options that might be available to you." Akers was so angry that he wanted just to grab her throat and squeeze, but the only way they were going to catch Rollins was to cut a deal - or at least to appear as though they were cutting a deal. If Ruth Ferguson knew the details of the Rollins case - and it was apparent that she did - her fate was a foregone conclusion. He just had to figure out how it would happen.

"Don't waste your time. I'd rather rot in jail, thank you."

"Would you?" he sneered. "You know we're going to find your little girl eventually, Miss Ferguson. What's going to happen when she starts school next year and the kid next to her has her picture on his milk carton? Or when we send out the flyers to the schools? You think she's going to stay hidden forever?" Ferguson's face showed both her anger and her fear. This was good. "Let me answer that. No, we're going to find her. And when we do, she goes back to that awful place you didn't want her to be, that place that was so bad, you risked everything just to get her away. And you're going to be in jail, unable to do a damn thing about it."

"Except you're not going to find her," she argued, her voice more hopeful than certain.

"Let me give you another scenario to think about. You and Jessie Drummond get a nice house

somewhere in a small Midwestern town. You get a new job that pays good money, enough so that you and your daughter can have nice things. You both get new names and the trail for Ruth Ferguson and Jessie Drummond goes ice cold. Agents get pulled off the case and reassigned. You never have to worry again. How does all that sound?"

Those were just about the same plans Ruth had made for herself. She didn't need this dickhead's help for that. Except that she was in jail and Jessie was hiding out there with Spencer and Viv.

"And all you have to do is tell me where I can find Spencer Rollins." His offer was simple...and a bald-faced lie. But she was their best chance, their only real chance.

"Go to hell."

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"I really appreciate this, Jerry, especially on such short notice and all."

"I know you wouldn't be asking if it wasn't important. Besides, it's about time I got the chance to start paying you back for all you've done for me over the years." Jerry was an electrician, a widower in his late fifties. He kept a few horses on his land, including a couple that he boarded for the extra money he could earn.

"You don't owe me a thing and you know it. We settled that a long time ago," Viv said firmly, squeezing the big man's shoulder. Jerry fell on hard times a few years ago when doctors diagnosed a ruptured disc that required surgery. With no medical insurance, he had no way to pay; and he couldn't work because his back hurt too much. Viv heard about his troubles through the church, and showed up at his house one day with a check.

Nobody in Manassas had any idea that Viv Walters was worth so much, and she wasn't about to tell. At one time, she'd owned all the land that bordered the few acres that now held only her small house and the trailer. She'd sold it back when Sheila and Robby were little, her late husband's farms and rental properties too much to manage. For over twenty years, the profits had sat in CDs at several banks around town, rolling over every couple of years while she drew the interest to live on.

Jerry had enough room for everybody at his big farmhouse, and just as Viv said, the Jeep was out of sight in the barn. Jessie was playing with the puppies; Viv was fixing dinner for everyone; and Spencer was pacing on the front porch, trying to figure out what she would do next.

As long as she was free, the FBI would keep putting the pressure on Ruth. They had probably offered her freedom - freedom to take Jessie and run - but there was no way they would ever let her go. She knew too much. If Spencer turned herself in, Ruth would lose her only value.

"Spencer?" Viv came onto the porch. "We have a problem."

"What is it?"

The landlady sighed. "Lisa."

"Goddamn it! How could we forget Lisa?" Spencer walked inside to find a sobbing Jessie.

"She's all by herself," she wailed.

"I know. But she'll be alright, Jessie. She's been by herself before."

"Not this Lisa," she argued, hiccupping amidst her tears.

Spencer sighed. Lisa wasn't just a doll to Jessie. She was an anchor, a constant; and Jessie needed to have her to be okay.

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Thomas Fennimore and the auditors found exactly what they looking for in only two hours, following the theory they'd developed back in Washington. Skip Drummond was even stupider than Thomas had predicted.

Drummond and Ruth Ferguson had appeared in court in October of the previous year for their final divorce hearing. That was when permanent custody of Jessie Riane Drummond was awarded to her father.

It was also the month that Drummond Appliances wrote up a bill of sale for a state of the art home entertainment system worth over eight thousand dollars. The purchaser was a William Johnson, no address, no phone. But the best part - at least if you were an IRS agent looking for wrongdoing - was that there was no record of payment, either partial or otherwise. And the debt was written off as uncollectible two months later, with no record of billing.

It appeared that Skip Drummond had been too cheap to pay for his own bribe. That was greedy. But it was the stupid part that excited Thomas so much: The delivery logs for that day showed the entertainment system going to the home of Judge Malcolm Howard.

Thomas was ready for the second warrant.

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"So Diaz is still in her office?" Akers had canceled his nap after learning that Rollins had surfaced.

"Yeah, but she hasn't gotten any more calls."

"I don't like it, Mike. They're up to something. Hold on, I need to take this other call." He placed his partner on hold and punched the blinking line. "Akers."

"I found it," the intern said excitedly. "An old Ford, just like you said. It was in the garage at Franconia-Springfield."

"Was there anything in it?"

"Yeah, there was a wallet in the glove compartment with a driver's license for Karen Michelle Oliver, address 843 Old Richmond Road in Manassas."

"That's the jackpot, Andrew. Good work." Akers clicked back to the blinking light. "We have an address. I need you to find a way over to the office ASAP. We're going out to see Spencer Rollins."

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The wall clock in the third floor conference room said eight o'clock, and the small group had already started to gather. Elena Diaz, three IRS special agents, and six members of the support staff took seats around the long table to await the arrival of their boss.

Elena checked the battery in her phone for the fourth time to be sure it was fully charged. Missing a call from Spencer at this stage of the game would be disastrous.

Chad Merke entered quietly with another gentleman, unknown to most of the staff, but not to Elena. This was the director of the FBI's District Field Office, Jeffrey Wilkinson. Like Chad, Jeff was in his early fifties, a few pounds slower than when he'd worked cases, but not a man to be taken lightly. He'd had a stellar career, and was well-respected by all of the local law enforcement agencies, including the IRS.

Chad made the introductions, and then turned the meeting over to Elena so that she could make her case.

Before she began, she disclosed her close friendship with Spencer Rollins. It was only fair that Wilkinson should have all the facts - though their sex life was none of his business - when he considered the evidence.

Step by step, she laid out their case, beginning with Stacy Eagleton and her history at Southern Health Supply. The first evidence against the two FBI agents was that they missed - or more likely, overlooked - the reasons for her resignation from that company.

From there, Elena described the evidence against the four Margadon employees: the doctored program that diverted funds from the federal contract into a hidden account; the extravagant purchases; and a record of personal contact during the FBI's background checks with agents Akers and Pollard.

Next, she produced tax returns for both agents, followed by a copy of the bill of sale for Pollard's vacation home and receipts for Akers' travel and expenses in gambling locations.

Finally, she showed a chart that outlined the significant events of the past ten days, from the murder of Henry Estes to the arrest - the abduction, in fact - of Ruth Ferguson.

"But Ruth Ferguson is wanted on federal kidnapping charges," Wilkinson point out. "Picking her up was under their jurisdiction."

"With all due respect, Agent Wilkinson, Akers and Pollard knew that Ms. Ferguson was en route to meet me when they picked up her. It's my contention that they did so to prevent further contact with our office and to gain access to Spencer Rollins."

A staffer from their offices upstairs entered the room and quietly dropped several pages onto Elena's chair. The agent walked over to examine the contents, smiling wryly and nodding. "And here's another piece of evidence I'd like you to consider. In the past ten days alone, Stacy Eagleton has made six calls to Agent Akers. That strikes me as unusual."

"It's not unusual to me, Agent Diaz. Agents Akers and Pollard have been assigned to investigate two murders of Margadon employees. It's perfectly understandable that they would maintain contact with company officials. As you know, the Bureau has a lot of resources dedicated to this case, including our surveillance of you in the event you are again approached. If Spencer Rollins is innocent, that can all be sorted out when she comes forward. This...evidence, as you call it...should be considered as part of a bigger picture."

Elena couldn't decide if the man was being sincere or obstinate. While he might offer an alternate explanation for the individual elements of her evidence, he surely couldn't dismiss the suspicious nature of all of it taken together. She was about to challenge his reasoning when Chad mercifully interrupted and saved her from sending the senior agent into a more defensive posture.

"Jeff, we're aware of how serious these allegations are, and we also understand that you'd rather have more ironclad proof of wrongdoing before acting against two of your own agents. What we'd like to ask of you is that you pull Akers and Pollard off this case while we continue our

investigation and that you place Ruth Ferguson in protective custody right away. On our end, we're fairly certain they're involved, and we plan to proceed with this case against all the parties we've named as an official investigation of the Internal Revenue Service."

"Why does Ferguson need to be in protective custody?"

"We fear that she's in danger because she knows about these events."

"In danger from my agents?" That was ridiculous!

Merke merely nodded.

Wilkinson heard the plea for what it was, a desperate favor from fellow investigators who were genuinely convinced that two of his agents were involved in not only embezzlement, but murder. The financial data on his two agents was unsettling, but he needed to weigh it in light of the IRS agent's personal interest in the suspect. If he took action and they were wrong, it would cost him the support of his entire staff. On the other hand, if he ignored them and they were right, it would cost him his career.

## **Chapter 26**

With her recent practice, Spencer had gotten to be an old hand at moving through the woods in the dark. It was too big a risk just to drive back to the house so she'd gotten directions from Viv on how to get access from a neighboring road. If someone were there already, she'd just turn around and leave; otherwise, she would go on in the back door, get the doll, and go back through the woods.

The house was totally dark when it finally came into view. According to Jessie, Lisa was still "taking a nap" so that meant she was on the bed in the guest room. Foregoing the lights, Spencer walked purposefully through the house, banging her knee hard on a table she hadn't remembered. Finding Lisa was the only way to bring even a thread of comfort to the little four-year-old, whose whole world seemed to be unraveling all at once.

Her eyes adjusting to the darkness, she spotted the small figure on the bed and scooped it up, turning to go back out the way she came, this time more cognizant of the table. When she reached the kitchen, a ray of light swept through the whole house, like headlights moving down the drive.

Spencer froze as she picked up the sound of a car creeping along the freshly spread gravel. Her heart pounded as her brain tried to force her feet to move.

"You take the trailer. I'll get the house," a male voice ordered.

There were two of them and they were in the back where Ruth usually parked. Quickly, she ran

to the front door, banging her knee on that goddamned table again. In the dark, she fingered the thumb bolt, and turned the knob. Viv seldom used this door, and the top corner stuck when she tried to open it. With a hard yank, it came free.

The storm door was locked and she worked her long fingers frantically in the dark to flip the latch. She could hear the back door squeak, and when she finally pushed the storm door open, it sent a stiff breeze through the whole house. Careful not to let it bang, she lost precious seconds waiting for the hydraulic closer to release its air.

Moments later, she was off the porch and headed for the woods on the side of the house. She would have to circle behind the trailer to get to where she'd left the Jeep. With any luck, they'd-

"Mike!" It was the agent inside the house. The other one appeared in the doorway to the trailer. "Get the flashlight. I think somebody just went out the front door."

Oh, bloody hell! Spencer pushed along in the darkened woods, staying low to avoid the anticipated sweep of the flashlight. The recent rains had made the ground soggy, so at least she wasn't making a lot of noise rustling the leaves. Over her shoulder, she could see the men entering the woods where she had gone in. If they found her trail in the wet leaves, they would close quickly.

The woman was behind the trailer now, picking up speed. Only a hundred more yards through the woods and she'd come out where the Jeep was parked.

"Go get the car and see if there's another way around."

Fools! She'd won this game last time at Margadon, and she would win it again. On a dead run, Spencer cleared the woods and climbed into the Jeep, tossing the still sleeping Lisa into the back seat, where the rear window suddenly exploded in an ear-splitting blast. The vehicle lurched forward, fishtailing and spraying the air with gravel and mud. As she reached the main road, the long black sedan turned to block her escape.

"You can't be serious," she muttered, jerking the gearshift into four-wheel drive as she bounced across the culvert, catching the front of the car with the powerful SUV and pushing it to the ditch on the other side of the road.

Triumphant once again, she sped away, turning as soon as she could onto a secondary road that would take her back to Jerry's. She needed to get this Jeep stowed as soon as possible, and then it might be a good idea for all of them to move again.

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The bespectacled agent in a rumpled suit stood on the doorstep of the yellow Cape Cod home, flanked on both sides by deputies from the Somerset County Sheriff's Office. The porch light suddenly came on, and the tall door swung open.

"Can I help you gentlemen with something?" Deputies often came to Judge Howard's home in the evening to get warrants signed, but they usually called first.

"Uh, we have a warrant, Judge Howard," one of them stammered.

"Very well. But you should have called first," he scolded, taking the document as he held the screen door open. "Come on in. I need to get my glasses."

The deputies and the IRS agent stepped inside, the latter following the sound of a sitcom that emanated from the den off the main hall.

"That appears to be what we're looking for, deputies," Fennimore said, standing in the doorway and pointing to the expansive entertainment system. "Would you verify the serial numbers for me?"

"I beg your pardon," the judge said indignantly. "Who are you, and who gave you the right to go wandering through my home?"

"My name is Thomas Fennimore. I'm a Special Agent with the Internal Revenue Service. That warrant you're holding was signed by a federal judge in Washington, DC, and it gives me the authority to search these premises for a JVC home entertainment system, delivered to this home by Drummond Appliances on October sixteenth of last year. According to their records, this system was never purchased and it was written off as uncollectible debt. While you are certainly allowed to receive such a generous gift, Drummond Appliances is not allowed to deduct its value as a business loss, and is therefore in violation of the Federal Tax Code." Thomas observed with satisfaction the ghastly look on the judge's face and he dropped the other shoe. "I'll be returning for your statement once I've completed the other phases of my investigation. Of course, if you wished to be forthcoming about any unusual circumstances pertaining to how you came to acquire this gift, I would be most grateful to take that information and your cooperation under consideration as the Federal Government proceeds with this case. I assure you that all violations will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law."

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"I'm really sorry about your car, Viv."

The gray-haired woman waved her hand flippantly. "It's just a car. Thank goodness you weren't hurt."



"Okay, the truck's packed, puppies and all," Jerry announced. He'd loaded up their things as soon as Spencer had gotten home. The whole group was headed out to stay with friends of his cousin. The underground network was coming to life tonight to help, all because Viv had helped Jerry out when he needed the surgery.

"Listen, Viv, when Jessie gets settled, I'm going to ask Jerry to borrow his truck so I can go find a phone. I need to call Elena again and see what's happened." Spencer hoisted the tired little girl into the front seat.

"You should take Jerry with you. He might be some help."

"I don't want to put him in danger, Viv. It's bad enough that I've put all of you at risk. And now Ruth's been caught...." The emotion overwhelmed her for a moment and her voice shook while her blue eyes filled with tears.

"Don't worry about us. We'll be okay. I promised Ruth I'd take care of this child and if it takes my last ounce of strength, that's what I'll do."

Spencer drew the older woman into a hug then helped her up into the truck beside Jessie and her doll. On the way to the next house, Spencer asked Jerry about borrowing his vehicle.

"You don't need to go find no phone. You can just use my cell phone."

"It's not that simple. They'll trace the call back to you and then you'll be part of all of this too."

"I'm already part of it. Besides, they ain't gonna trace my phone," he said cockily.

"What do you mean?"

"Mine don't broadcast," he said with a grin.

"How'd you manage that?"

"It's one of those old analog phones. I took it apart once to see how it worked and I had a couple of pieces left over when I put it back together. Ever since then, it don't flash a caller ID, and if we drive around out in the boondocks, they won't even be able to triangulate the signal."

Spencer was skeptical, but Jerry was an electrician, which made him the closest thing to an expert they had. But there was a hell of a lot at stake here. "Are you sure?"

"Positive."

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Cal Akers dumped another load of gravel from inside his folded jacket into the ditch beneath the rear wheel. If they could just get a little more traction, they could get back up onto the road.

"Okay, let's try again." They'd been at this for over an hour. As Pollard gently applied the gas, Akers bounced on the rear fender, pushing it into contact with the ground, throwing rocks and mud against his shins as he cursed. Finally, the sedan jolted forward, catching the lip of the ditch as it sent one final spray of mud in the face of the frazzled agent.

"Where to?" Pollard asked innocently.

"I need to change my clothes," he answered sarcastically. "Then we have to head back downtown. We need to do something about Ferguson before she talks."

"What did you have in mind?"

"I was thinking you might bring her back out to the trailer to identify some of her belongings. A desperate woman like that might escape."

Pollard didn't like that idea. It would reflect on his service record if she got away under his watch. But Akers was the senior agent, and he'd done the dirty work on Estes and Thayer.

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Elena Diaz was dead on her feet. Since Saturday morning, she'd had only a few hours of sleep, most of that coming early Sunday. But things were finally coming together.

Twenty-three critical warrants sat on her desk, all signed by a federal judge and awaiting execution: the IRS would freeze all accounts for the individuals suspected of involvement; Margadon's Kryfex operations would come to a halt and the company's network would be disabled; suspects would be taken into custody; and Spencer, Ruth, and Ruth's daughter would be transferred to protective custody. Ideally, the operation would be initiated when Spencer turned herself in, as she was the one person who could pull the whole case together.

"Agent Diaz?" Chad stood in her doorway, his tie loosened and his coat thrown over his arm.

"You calling it a night?"

"Yeah, for both of us. Come on, I'll walk you down." Elena got up and walked into the hallway, away from the listening devices.

"I don't know, Chad. I have a feeling Spencer's going to call again. I think I should wait here."

"You need some sleep, Elena. There's nothing you can do from here that you can't do from home."

Elena nodded in resignation, returning to her office to gather her things. As she and her boss started down the stairs, the phone in her pocket rang.

Glancing at the display, she shook her head in confusion. "Elena Diaz."

"Did you get to her? Is she okay?"

Relief rushed through the agent's veins. It was Spencer.

"She's in custody. She's due to be extradited tomorrow morning." The agent hated delivering the bad news, but this wasn't the time for sugar coating. "But we're on it, and things look pretty good for her. We have to deal with you now," she said firmly, knowing that the sons of bitches in the van were tuning in.

"They know who she is, Elena. They know she's with me."

"I don't think so. They know she's-"

"They know! They came to look for me."

Elena held up her hand to shush her boss, who was encouraging her to have Spencer come in.

"Okay, listen, we're not ready for this yet. I need for you to stay out of sight for at least another day. I tell you what, Spence...here's what I want you to do: tomorrow, the pizza place, usual time. Do you understand?"

"Tomorrow?"

"That's right, Tuesday, same time as before."

"I've got it."

"Stay out of sight until then. And take care of yourself, okay?"

"Take care of Ruth."

"Don't worry about her. We're on it."

The call ended and Elena cracked her first smile in nine days. The boys in the van were scratching their heads about this one. She was a genius.

"What's happening?"

Elena looked at her watch. "We need to get rolling with the warrants, Chad. She's coming in in about two hours."

"What's the 'pizza place' all about?" Chad was totally out of the loop.

"It's kind of personal, Chad," she answered sheepishly. "But she's going to walk into an all-night grocery in Alexandria at one a.m. and we need to arrange for a black and white to bring her into custody and take her to their precinct."

"But you told her tomorrow."

"I said Tuesday, same time. She knows what I mean."

"So we're rolling?"

"That's right. It's time to get everyone in place."

## **Chapter 26**

"The pizza place," Spencer chuckled. "Good call."

"What?"

"I've got good news and bad news, Jerry. The good news is that you get to get rid of me, and in a day or so, your life might be back to normal. The bad news is that I need you to drop me off in Alexandria at one o'clock in the morning."

"No problem." Jerry enjoyed the excitement, and if it helped Viv, he wanted to do it.

Spencer smiled to herself at her ex-lover's coded message. When their respective libidos ignited on their first date, she and the IRS agent skipped the restaurant and went right to Elena's townhouse. At one a.m., they emerged from their carnal explorations, starving, but with nothing in the house to eat. Spencer insisted that she was owed a dinner, so they picked up a frozen pizza at an all-night grocery nearby, later feeding it to one another in bed. To this day, it was always their recommendation when someone suggested going for pizza.

"Why don't we go back so I can tell Viv what we're doing? She's going to need a way to know when it's safe for her to go home."

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"What the hell does that mean?" Calvin Akers was pissed as hell. They'd caught the conversation when Rollins called in, but Diaz was trying to give them the slip. "The pizza place, same time."

"I guess Rollins and Diaz had a favorite place they'd meet for pizza," Pollard offered.

"Ya think?" There were times Akers thought seriously about offing his stupid partner.

The surveillance team reported that Diaz and her boss had gone home for the night, but Akers didn't trust this woman as far as he could throw her. It was time to call out the troops.

"Look, I'm going to drop you at the office. Go ahead and take care of Ferguson and I'll handle Rollins."

"What's your plan?"

"Just do your part and don't worry about mine," Akers growled with irritation.

Akers pulled to the curb and watched Pollard go inside. On his cell phone, he dialed the memory code for Jeffrey Wilkinson. His best chance was to make this about ego.

The director had gone home after his meeting at the IRS, still unsure of what action he should take. But the more he thought about it, the more he concluded that Elena Diaz was too close to the suspect in this case to be objective. There might be something illegal going on at Margadon, but the idea that two of his agents were involved in crimes - murders, no less - was absurd.

"Hello, Jeff? Akers. Listen, something's moving with the Rollins case, but we can't tell what it is. She called in and Diaz gave her some sort of code for coming in. I don't trust her. Rollins is going to slip through our fingers if we don't go full force to bring her in. We're not just going to lose this collar; we're going to be the laughingstock of the Bureau if she pulls this off right under our noses."

Wilkinson grew incensed as he heard his agent's report. If Akers and Pollard were up to something, they wouldn't be playing it out in front of the whole force. Diaz and Merke had crossed a line with their little cat and mouse game, and it was time to remind them that the Bureau was the King of the Hill.

"Tell me what you need."

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Jessie and Lisa were sleeping soundly in a room with twin beds, the other bed occupied by the nine-year-old girl who lived there. Spencer eased down to sit by Jessie, brushing the blonde curls from the little girl's face. She'd held up pretty well considering the excitement of the night and the separation from her mother. From what Ruth had said, the poor child was used to being with adults who treated her like she was a bother, so at least that wasn't the case here. They'd all been welcomed by these friends of Jerry's cousin.

Leaning down, she gently kissed the child's forehead. "Be safe, Jessie. Your mom loves you very much." Careful not to wake the girl, she stood and tiptoed out of the room to say her goodbyes to Viv.

"I think you should plan to wait at least three days before you call. And use Jerry's phone like I did. You can't let them know where you're staying." Spencer was outlining what Viv should do if she didn't return right away.

"Do you think I can go to a bank? I'm going to need some cash."

Spencer nodded. "Just be careful. If it hangs up, take off."

"Good luck to you." Viv pulled her into a motherly hug.

"And to you. Jessie couldn't be in better hands."

With that farewell, the programmer got into the truck and closed the door.

"So what's this about a pizza place?" Jerry asked.

Spencer gave him directions to the all-night grocery, anxious to have this part end. Once she was out of danger, she could at least get Ruth out of the hands of the agents who were tracking her. She'd be of no use to them any more. She had to hope that there was some way Elena could help her avoid what awaited her in Maine. Maybe if she were a witness in this case, that would get her special consideration.

"Is this alright?" Jerry had pulled into the store's parking lot. Only a handful of cars were parked out front at this hour.

"Yeah," she sighed, directing him to a dark corner of the lot. "Thanks for everything, Jerry."

"Glad I could help."

"You should get out of here. Okay?"

The man gave her a friendly salute, which she returned as he drove away. Her eyes nervously scanning the lot for the black sedan, Spencer walked toward the store. When the automatic door

opened, she turned immediately to the produce aisle on the far right, anxious about finding a rear exit.

In the tilted mirrors that lined the back wall, she watched as two uniformed officers strode through the front door, one following her route, the other heading directly to the back of the store. Gradually, she inched toward the corner, where a swinging door led to the storage area and loading dock.

Studying her options, she watched as they drew closer. Both of them were in her line of sight, a barrel-chested African-American approaching from the produce aisle, a wiry Hispanic man from along the meat display in the back. The closer they came, the more her heart pounded in her chest.

"Spencer Rollins?" the Hispanic officer asked.

Almost imperceptibly, she nodded, her eyes wide with apprehension.

"I'm placing you under arrest for the murders of Henry Estes and James Thayer. You have the right to remain silent...."

His instructions droned on as he cuffed her hands in front of her and gave her a cursory pat-down. The store's few shoppers had congregated in the neighboring aisles to watch the arrest, seemingly dismayed at the ease with which the suspect was taken.

Spencer was escorted back through the store, out the front door, and into the back seat of a waiting cruiser. The African-American officer took the wheel and the Hispanic officer sat up front beside him, a metal screen separating them from their suspect.

The car pulled out of the lot and turned, parking almost immediately on a dark street. The din of the police radio was the only sound, and Spencer suddenly worried that she'd just made a big mistake. Shouldn't these two be taking her somewhere?

The Hispanic officer turned around and opened a sliding window. "Hold your hands up here; I'll unlock the cuffs."

Still fearful, Spencer raised her hands and watched as he removed the metal links.

"There's a vest under the seat. You should put it on."

"Why?"

"Agent Diaz's orders."

Spencer visibly relaxed at hearing her friend's name, slumping back against the seat. Elena had arranged the whole scenario. "What's next?"

"When you get that on, I'm going to call in that we have a suspect en route and she'll meet us at the station."

"This is kind of tight," she said, struggling to get the body armor pulled down over her sweatshirt."

"You should probably take off your shirt and wear it underneath. That's what we do," he explained. "Having it on the outside is kind of like wearing a sign that says 'shoot me in the head.'"

Spencer could have gone all night without hearing that. "Are you expecting any trouble?"

"No, this is just a precaution. What Agent Diaz wants, she gets." He and his partner faced forward while she pulled her shirt off and slipped into the vest.

"Yeah, she's kind of forceful, alright."

"We're glad to do it. Last year, she put a commendation in our file for some work we did for her. Most people don't take the time to do something like that, but it really meant a lot to both of us."

That sounded like Elena, Spencer thought, always looking to shore up the right allies. When she needed a cop, she wanted a good one.

"You all set?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, I need for you to put the cuffs back on, but you don't have to make them too tight."

Spencer did as she was told, feeling more confident when they pulled away from the curb.

"This is unit 416. We have a suspect in custody and are en route to the precinct."

*"Unit 416, can you clarify what suspect?"*

*"Female shoplifter; not identified."*

*"Roger out."*

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Calvin Akers sat in the black sedan, its front and rear fender smashed and one headlight out. The condition of his car was the very least of his worries.



Caffeine would be his constant companion for the next twenty-four hours. He needed to stay awake and monitor the situation with Rollins. It was doubtful that a pizza place would be open all-night, but he couldn't take the chance. He'd already called all the shops in Alexandria, figuring that one near the agent's home was the best bet. Two of them were open until one a.m. That was fifteen minutes from now and he had the directions in his head.

With the portable unit in the console, Akers was privy to all of Diaz's telephone conversations, plus the bug Pollard had placed on her end table when they came the first time to question her about Rollins. He had almost nodded off when the phone rang loudly inside the house. Sitting up straight and shaking his head, he adjusted the volume to hear the exchange. But after four rings, the call went to voicemail.

"What the fuck?" The bitch wasn't even home.

Yanking out the earpiece, Akers started the car and dialed the dispatcher at the field office. "This is Special Agent Akers. I need all available units in Alexandria for Operation Top Dog. Suspect is presumed to be in the area."

*"We have three units in the Alexandria vicinity."*

"Send more," he said gruffly.

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Field Office Director Jeffrey Wilkinson pulled into the underground garage, irritated beyond measure at the actions of the IRS, especially in light of his promise to take their concerns under consideration. Even if he had decided to do what they wanted, it wasn't going to happen now. They were not to be trusted.

Wilkinson had made the special trip back in tonight so he could have a look at the duty logs. He'd given the go-ahead for Akers to commandeer all available agents as needed - calling it Operation Top Dog had been his idea - but now, the director wanted to spearhead this operation himself. He would get great satisfaction out of taking custody of Rollins away from the IRS under a federal warrant.

As he approached his office on the fifth floor, Wilkinson was surprised to see Agent Mike Pollard turn the corner at the far end of the hall. Pollard was Akers' partner. Shouldn't he be out in the field?

His curiosity getting the better of him, Wilkinson walked on, stopping at the last office on the right. "Was that Agent Pollard that was just here?"

Agent Jill Burke practically leapt from her chair, startled at the sight of her boss. He almost never came to the offices during her shift. In fact, she'd only met him once in two years. "Uh, yes sir. He said he was...", what had he said? "Oh, he was picking up a prisoner and taking her to a scene."

Odd. "Did he say which prisoner?"

"No, sir."

Wilkinson continued down the hallway, pushing the side door to enter the stairwell. The prisoners were housed one flight up on the top floor. As he reached the landing, he was met by Pollard, who was escorting a petite blonde woman wearing handcuffs. What the hell was going on?

"Agent Pollard?"

The young man froze as he came face to face with his boss. "Yes, sir?"

"I was hoping to have a word with you, but I can see that you're busy."

"Yes, sir, this woman is being held on a kidnapping warrant. I'm escorting her to a trailer in Manassas where she's been living so that she can recover her personal items."

"At one o'clock in the morning?"

"Yes, sir. She's being returned to Maine first thing tomorrow."

Wilkinson nodded vaguely. "Agent Pollard, would you mind bringing your prisoner in here for a moment so I can get your input on a case?"

Pollard hesitated briefly, but with no way to avoid his boss's request, he complied. Wilkinson held the door while the agent pushed the woman through.

"Just go into that office right there and wait for me." He nodded toward an open door, then turned to poke his head into Jill Burke's office again. "Agent Burke? Can you step across the hall with me for a moment?"

The woman hurriedly stood and rounded the desk, astounded that the man even knew her name. Oh, it was on the nameplate on her desk.

"And bring your gun."

Burke's eyes grew wide as she processed the request. Her gun?

Wilkinson and Burke entered the office across the hall, the director immediately moving to

position himself between Pollard and the prisoner. Removing his own gun from its shoulder holster, he took control of the situation.

"Agent Pollard, will you very carefully place your gun and your badge on the desk and step toward the window?"

Oh, fuck.

"Agent Burke, would you collect this agent's gun?"

She did.

"Now, Agent Burke, I'd like for you to escort this prisoner back to her cell. When you reach the sixth floor, would you ask two of the guards to come at once to Room 523?"

"Yes, sir."

Mike Pollard stared into the barrel of the director's gun. He was toast.

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*"Calling all units." That was the FBI frequency. "Operation Top Dog is suspended effective immediately. All agents are to stand down and return to regular assignment."*

Like hell! If Top Dog was over, that could only mean that Wilkinson had pulled the plug. But Akers wasn't backing out now.

The stubborn agent had just intercepted the kind of transmission he'd been waiting for. Unit 416 of the Alexandria Police Department had picked up an unidentified female shoplifter and was en route to the station. A shoplifter at one a.m.? It had to be about Spencer Rollins.

Akers pulled past three cruisers at the curb at the Mill Road station, blocking a dumpster at the end of the row. Within seconds, a fourth black and white arrived and two uniformed officers escorted a tall woman with long dark hair into the jail.

Yes, indeed! That was Spencer Rollins.

His cell phone chirped, announcing a call from Jeffrey Wilkinson. He had ignored the earlier order to stand down; this call likely meant that his boss was taking Diaz's word against him. If he could just take care of Rollins, there would be no evidence against him, no matter what they thought they knew. He let it ring, tossing it onto the passenger seat as he climbed out of the car.

Through the front window of the building, Akers could see Rollins being escorted out of the receiving area, presumably to a holding cell. He entered and approached the officer at the desk, flashing his badge as he introduced himself.

"I'm Special Agent Calvin Akers of the FBI. There's a federal warrant for the person your officers just delivered, a Spencer Rollins. I'm here to take custody of the prisoner."

"I'm sorry, Agent...."

"Akers."

"Agent Akers. The suspect who was just delivered was not identified as Spencer Rollins."

"Look Officer...Ellis. I don't know who that woman said she was, but I assure you, she's Spencer Rollins and she's wanted for two murders in Maryland. She also has knowledge of the whereabouts of a four-year-old girl who is missing tonight and is probably alone and in grave danger. Now you can sit on your hands and fret about who she claimed to be, or you can let me question her at once. If you choose right, we might just save that little girl's life tonight."

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"You'll be safe here. Agent Diaz said she'd come as soon as she got the call."

"Thank you. Thank you both." Spencer rubbed her freed wrists and watched her saviors disappear down the hall to the office area where they would file their report.

For the first time in ten days, Spencer allowed herself to think that this ordeal might be over. As soon as she was free, she would take on Ruth's fight, wherever it was. She'd spend her last dime making sure they hired the best lawyer in Maine to get the kidnapping charges dropped and the custody issue settled once and for all.

And maybe when they got things taken care of in Maine, Ruth would want to come back down to Virginia and really start over, free and clear. Spencer had tried not to think about it too much, but she really wanted Ruth in her life and in her arms.

God, was that just last night that they'd made love?

Spencer looked up to see the officer from the front desk unlocking her cell. Elena must have arrived, she thought with relief.

"Step this way, ma'am." He held the door open as she stepped into the narrow hallway and waited for him to swipe a card that would open the exterior door. "First door on your left."

Spencer did as she was told, confused at seeing a table and four empty chairs. The door closed behind her and she whirled, finally spotting the figure in the corner of the room.

"Good evening, Ms. Rollins."

Recognition was instant as she stared into the cold face of Henry's murderer.

"Help! Officer! Help! He's a murderer." Frantically, she crossed the room to the other side of the table to put distance between herself and the menacing agent.

"Even if they could hear you - which they can't - I can't imagine they'd be surprised at your calls for help. I'm the FBI, Ms. Rollins. They all know how much trouble you're in now."

In a fluid move, the surprisingly nimble agent vaulted the table, his arm straight as he aimed his service revolver directly at her chest. "You shouldn't have gone for my gun like that."

The next two seconds seemed to pass in slow motion. In terror for her life, Spencer lunged forward, both hands reaching out to push the gun away. The sudden blast reverberated off the concrete walls as a hammer hit her chest and a fire erupted in her belly.

In the next heartbeat, Elena and Chad stormed through the door, the latter's weapon already drawn. On their heels were the duty officer and the two patrolmen who had brought her in.

"Spencer!" The female agent rushed to the crumpled figure.

"She went for my gun," Akers declared. "I had to shoot her."

Elena rolled the woman over to check her wound.

"Bullet-proof, my ass," Spencer hissed, the pain in her gut greater than any she'd ever known.

Elena lifted the sweatshirt and saw the perforation. Even the highest grade of body armor couldn't handle a bullet from point blank range. She lifted the vest to see blood dribbling freely from a wound just above the pelvis.

"Get an ambulance!"

The desk officer returned quickly to his station and placed the call. Never lowering his own gun Merke ordered the two patrolmen to take Akers into custody.

"No fucking way." Calvin Akers placed the barrel of his gun against his temple and pulled the trigger.

## Chapter 27

The clunky sound of plastic dishes stirred the unfortunate occupants of the sixth floor of the FBI field office. Ruth pushed herself up on the rigid cot and swung her bare feet to the cold tile floor, angry at herself for being hungry enough to eat. To her thinking, if she refused to participate in this incarceration, she would be spared the memory when she was finally freed. It was bad enough that they'd dressed her in this orange jumpsuit.

How frightened Jessie must have been at spending the night away from her. At least Spencer was there with her, and the bond she'd seen growing between those two was her only real source of comfort. Between Spencer and Viv, Jessie would be protected from her mother's probable fate, a return to the dismal place from which she'd fled.

Sitting now in the stark environs of the eight by six concrete room, Ruth couldn't help but turn her thoughts inward; though introspection at this juncture was moot. Going out on a limb to see Spencer to safety was not an action she would second guess, unless it meant that Jessie's new life had been compromised. She hoped that her efforts weren't in vain, and that Elena was still working on bringing Spencer in. From the looks of things, there hadn't been anything the agent could do for Ruth Ferguson.

Two pairs of footsteps - one decidedly female - grew louder as they approached her cell, and before she ever saw the face, Ruth knew one would be the IRS agent. A tired-looking Elena Diaz waited while the guard opened the door and motioned her out.

"Good morning, Ruth." She held up her hand to silence the question on the prisoner's lips. "We're going to go to a conference room so we can talk privately about where everything stands."

Ruth nodded once and followed her down the hallway, the guard bringing up the rear. Once they were situated, he closed the door and took his leave.

"Is Jessie okay?"

"I honestly don't know the answer to that." Elena saw the frantic look and continued quickly. "We don't know where your daughter is, but I think it's safe to assume that Spencer left her in good hands."

"Spencer left her?"

"We brought Spencer in last night. She...we had some trouble at the station with one of the FBI agents - Akers - and she was shot."

"Oh, my god!"

"Don't worry, she's okay." The agent stretched out her hand to pat the arm of the woman across from her. It was clear that Ruth Ferguson had come to care for her friend, and from what Elena could gather from Spencer's insistence that she come here first thing this morning, the feeling

was mutual. "She was wearing a vest and the bullet struck her chest plate and ricocheted to her lower abdomen. She had surgery last night, but she's going to be fine."

Ruth couldn't stop the tears that came as the horror of Spencer's close call overwhelmed her. "Is it over?"

In simple terms, Elena explained what had happened last night. The evidence in the case was frozen; and the suspects were taken into custody. All would be arraigned this morning, including Pollard, who now occupied a cell in the opposite corner of the sixth floor from her own. Akers had died instantly of his wound.

"So what happens now?" the blonde woman asked.

"You mean with the case?"

"No, with me."

Elena sighed and leaned back, forcing herself to look the woman in the eye. "A US Marshal is slated to take you back to Maine this morning. I can't stop that, Ruth. I wish I could."

The prisoner dropped her head, her lower lip quivering in frustration and worry. "And Jessie?"

"Things with Jessie are really complicated, but we have a few options to play with here. And I do have some good news for you."

Ruth looked up to see a glint of encouragement in the agent's brown eyes.

"My assistant, Special Agent Thomas Fennimore, has been up in Madison going over the books at Drummond Appliances. He found an interesting transaction - a rather expensive gift to a Judge Malcolm Howard - right about the time of your divorce and custody hearing. We're pretty sure it was a bribe, and I think we'll be able to force the facts out one way or another."

"A bribe!" Suddenly, it all made sense. No wonder the judge had simply accepted Skip's word. It was all arranged.

"That's right. And the real fun is going to start in about half an hour. That's when your ex-husband and his father are due downstairs to meet with the agent in charge."

"Why would they come here? I mean, I'm supposed to be sent back today, right?"

"Right, but they came to collect Jessie. At least, that's what I heard they were ranting about yesterday. But when they show up today, they're both going to be arrested, and I get to do the honors," the agent grinned slyly.

Ruth would love to see that. But it wouldn't answer the question about her daughter's fate. "So you said there were options...with Jessie?"

"I did, and this is where you're going to have to make a tough choice, Ruth. Custody issues really aren't my area of expertise, but I know that you're going to be asked to produce your little girl to the court to show that she's okay. Until otherwise decided, she's supposed to be with her father. My guess is that the Drummonds will post bail, and she'll probably be sent back there."

Ruth was already shaking her head at that scenario. No way was Jessie going back to that. She'd promised.

"Another option is that you leave her where she is. If you do that, your chances of being released any time soon aren't very good; and the odds of you ever being given permanent custody are probably nil. But if you think she's safe where she is and that it isn't worth the risk to give her up, just don't tell anyone where she is."

"But then I might not ever see her again."

"You have to decide if keeping her out of your ex-husband's hands is worth that."

Ruth needed to reach deep inside to answer that question. Winning custody for the sake of winning was Skip's game. "He beats her, hard enough to leave bruises. She's terrified of being there, and no one - no one at all - loves her but me."

"Maybe that's your answer then," Elena said calmly.

"To keep her hidden?" The tears poured again as Ruth weighed the ramifications of that choice.

"I was actually thinking that you needed to fight for her. If you're really the only one who loves her, it seems like she needs for you to do that," she explained. "And the bribery thing might work in your favor."

"How?"

"I think at the very least, there will be a new hearing with a different judge. I have to be honest, though. The kidnapping charge is going to work against you. But we can probably leverage what we have on Drummond Appliances to get some concessions from your ex. I like to see people like that do time, but we'll bend to get the best outcome for your daughter."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"No, really, Elena. I appreciate all that you're doing here. I know that Jessie and I really aren't your concern."

The IRS agent chuckled. "That's where you're wrong. Spencer Rollins is my concern, and what you did for her makes you my concern too."



As Ruth had noticed in the park, Elena Diaz softened at the mention of her ex-lover's name, and her brown eyes sparkled.

"You really love Spencer, don't you?" the blonde woman asked, even as she dreaded the answer.

"She told you?"

"Yes."

"I love her more than I realized. I can't believe I...well, at least we get another chance."

Ruth drew a shallow breath as she fought the mounting pressure in her chest, an inevitable despair sinking deep into the pit of her stomach. She opened her mouth to speak, but the words wouldn't come. Pushing back from the table, she stood.

"I suppose I should get my head ready to deal with all of this. Can you find out from Spencer where Jessie is?"

"Of course."

"And, uh...tell Spencer I said thanks for everything, and good luck."

## **Chapter 28**

Spencer turned the old Chevy Cavalier onto the dirt road, stopping to collect her mail from the row of boxes. A half mile ahead, the road ended at what used to be the Rollins property, a sprawling acre with an expansive view of Jordan Lake.

Spencer had swapped the coveted vista where her parents' house had once stood for a wooded half acre on a cove with a three-bedroom cabin. She'd hired out the renovations to one of her neighbors, a contractor who remodeled the kitchen and baths, updated all the wiring, and added insulation for year-round comfort. The finishing touches were a dock for the boat she didn't yet own, and a gazebo for the parties she would probably never have.

But the cabin was now home. In February, she finished her first six weeks of training in Albany, Georgia; after which she started her new job as a criminal investigator with the IRS, applying her skills to the hunt for business fraud. That had been Chad's idea, and one that her best friend had enthusiastically supported. The disappointment - at least for Elena - had been Spencer's request to be stationed permanently at the field office in Raleigh.

She needed a new start, and here she had it. Special Agent Spencer Rollins had a new career, a new home, and a new Kawasaki. And if she ever decided that she wanted to try picking up chicks again...well, now she had a gun, too.

The dark-haired woman grinned as she turned into her dirt driveway, immediately recognizing Elena Diaz's Acura sedan. Her friend had been noncommittal about the invitation to spend the weekend at the lake, so she was a little surprised, but pleasantly so. They'd gone through a rough patch right after the shooting, when Spencer realized that her ex-lover had had an epiphany of sorts about their relationship. But the magic was gone for Spencer...or rather, it was elsewhere.

"You made it!" The programmer entered through the sliding glass door on the side to find her taller friend coming in from the screened in back porch. In three quick steps, they were hugging fiercely.

"It's good to see you," Elena said.

"You too! How long can you stay?" Spencer had offered to take a couple of days off if Elena wanted to stay past the weekend.

"I'm actually not staying," her visitor squeaked.

"What? What do you mean you're not staying? What, are you here for work or something?"

"No, I just came down to talk to you about something important."

Spencer lost her smile. "Are you okay? Is everything alright?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine. Nothing's wrong."

"Then what?" Spencer followed Elena to the leather sofa and sat close, imploring her friend to explain this before her heart jumped out of her chest.

"I figured out something recently and I wanted to come share my revelation."

Spencer was intrigued, but she was going to throttle this woman if she didn't start talking faster. "What?"

"See, when things chilled with us, I kind of figured you were still under a lot of stress about being shot, and having to hide, and...and then I considered the fact that you might have been yanking my chain all along and when I called your bluff you freaked out."

"That wasn't the case at all, Elena."

"Yeah, I know that. But what I just figured out is that you were hung up on somebody else."

That her words lingered there unchallenged was all the confirmation she needed.

"Why didn't you tell me, Spencer?"

The programmer squirmed uncomfortably, unable to meet her friend's brown eyes. "It didn't matter. It wasn't...she didn't feel the same way. How did you know?"

"Ruth Ferguson called me on Monday."

Ruth Ferguson. Just hearing the name caused Spencer's spirits to drop. She hadn't even seen Ruth in the five months since their ordeal, the latter pulling away almost immediately. Their two or three phone conversations were friendly, but formal; and Ruth discouraged her from coming to Maine. There were lots of reasons she would do that, Spencer had told herself. Maybe Ruth was disappointed in her after her assurance that Elena would help. Instead, she'd been sent back to Maine in handcuffs. Or maybe she didn't want to compromise her chances for custody of Jessie by starting a relationship with a woman. Or maybe she just didn't feel the same way Spencer did. Whatever the reason, it was out of Spencer's hands.

"So is she doing okay?"

"I think she's better now than she was. She said she and Jessie weren't fitting in back in Madison, so they packed up and came back down. She's staying for the time being in that trailer out in Manassas."

Spencer hoped that things were finally working out for Ruth. The young mother had spent almost a month in jail back in Maine before the kidnapping charges were dropped. Bit by bit, the prosecutors worked behind the scenes to see that the wrongs were righted, and that the best interests of the four-year-old child were served. The Drummonds avoided jail, but paid a heavy fine for their tax error. In the end, Skip relinquished all claim to Jessie Riane Drummond, forever closing that unfortunate chapter of his life.

Spencer knew every detail thanks to Thomas Fennimore, whom she called every week until the case was resolved. She'd bypassed Elena, thinking it best not to hurt her further by raising suspicions about her feelings for Ruth, since it looked like nothing was to come of it anyway.

"When she called, she asked how we were doing, you and I."

"Why would she ask that?"

"Well, it seems she looked you up in the book - said you'd told her once that she should do that - and your number had been disconnected. So I guess she assumed that you were living with me."

"How did-"

"Don't stop me now! I'm getting to the good part."

Spencer threw herself against the couch back in frustration. She thought she heard someone laughing outside but when she strained her ears to listen, it stopped.

"You remember that morning in the hospital after you'd been shot? How you insisted I leave you

and go see Ruth?"

Spencer nodded.

"Well, I did. And we talked about her options with her daughter, and what our office would try to do to help, just like I said I would. Somewhere in the middle of that conversation, I told her that I loved you, and that I wanted another chance to show you how much." Even after being turned away almost six months ago, Elena's voice still held a bit of optimism, as if her friend need only say the word.

"Oh, Elena," she whispered, the tears ready to fall again at the heartache she'd caused her dearest friend.

"But what I didn't know was that the two of you were...whatever the word is...."

"Elena, it wasn't something either of us really had a handle on. We didn't...I don't think she...really...."

Out back, a dog began to bark and a child's voice got louder. "Go get it, Willy!"

Elena held out her hand to lead her friend to the back porch, Spencer hoping against hope that she'd see what she wanted to see. There by the back door were two large duffle bags, a plastic knap sack, and a Lisa doll.

"I think she did."

"I'll be damned!" Spencer whispered.

"Anyway, I brought you a couple of visitors. I don't think she's got two dimes to rub together. I told her I'd be back to pick her up in a week or two, or whenever you called."

"And if I don't call?"

Elena chuckled. "If you don't call, then I'll figure it out." Yeah, this had been a good idea. "I'm going to head out of here now and give you guys some space. Is that okay?" She was still holding the other woman's hand and she gave it another squeeze.

"You don't have to go, you know."

"Yeah, I do. I've gotten on with my life, Ms. Rollins. I'll have you know I have a date tomorrow to do the Museum of Natural History."

"With who?" Spencer didn't believe her for a minute.

"Her name's Jill Burke. She's FBI."

"You like her?"

"Yeah."

"Well you tell her she better treat you right or I'm going to have to come up there and kick her ass."

"Will do." Elena gave her old friend a strong hug and took her leave out the sliding glass door, knowing that the part about getting on with her life needed to be true.

Spencer walked out on the porch to watch the laughing child play fetch with a chocolate Labrador.

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Ruth tapped her toe on the gazebo's wooden floor, rocking the swing in a steady rhythm. She'd heard the car pull up and knew Spencer was inside. Elena would talk to her about them staying for a little while; that was the plan.

She and Jessie had arrived back in Virginia a week ago, the old Taurus wagon heaving its last breath the next day. Out of money and out of luck, Ruth finally got up the nerve to call Spencer, thinking she might ask to borrow a little cash for a down payment on a used car. She hoped to get a job soon, maybe in a bank. Thomas Fennimore had gotten her record expunged and she had seven years experience and good references. That should count for something, she hoped.

She was genuinely surprised to learn that Spencer and Elena hadn't gotten back together after all. And when the agent told her about Spencer's career change and the move back to her home state, it was like a stab in the heart to think she would probably never see the woman again.

Disheartened at all the changes, and nearly defeated by her own lack of resources, Ruth resigned herself to push ahead. She and Jessie would get through this. She would go to work soon; they would somehow get another car; they would find a nice place to live; they would make friends. She was going to make her life in Manassas, Virginia.

And then Elena came by the next day to say that she was driving down to see Spencer on Friday and thought they should come along. Ruth declined at first, feeling now like she'd treated Spencer badly, pushing her away when she'd gone back to Maine.

*"That doesn't matter."*

*"But I don't want to show up and have her think it's just because-"*

*"It doesn't matter, Ruth. None of that matters to Spencer. She'll be happy to see*

*you. Whatever happens between you two is going to depend on what you do now, not what either of you did before. Spencer would want you to come."*

Ruth sure hoped Elena was right.

"Spencer!" Jessie saw her first and made a beeline to the tall woman, the excited puppy nipping at her heels.

Spencer caught her on the run and swung her high in the air. "I missed you!"

Ruth got up slowly from the swing, marveling at how lovely and relaxed the tall woman appeared here at her home. She walked over to join them, smiling nervously, secretly wishing for a similar reception.

Spencer balanced the child on her hip and held out an arm to bring the mother into the circle, hugging her tightly...very tightly. "I missed you, too," she said, her voice filled with emotion.

Ruth basked in the warm reception, very nearly crying when she felt the taller woman's lip press hard to her temple. This was a whole lot more than she'd hoped for, a whole lot more than she thought she deserved.

When Ruth's arms went around her waist, Spencer felt like they were halfway home.

The vibrant Labrador impatiently clawed at their legs, jealous and excited to meet the newcomer.

"And this is Willy?"

"He's big!" Jessie boasted.

"He sure is. And so are you."

Like they'd never missed a beat, Spencer took Ruth's hand and wove their fingers together, turning the mother and daughter toward the cabin. "I hear you've gone back to the trailer."

"Yeah, we just...we didn't belong in Madison anymore."

"How's Viv?"

"She's great. But she's got the house up for sale."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah, she and Jerry got married in March and they've decided to live in his big old farmhouse."

"Viv and Jerry?"

"Can you believe it? She said they really got to know each other last year while we were

disrupting everybody's lives."

"It's interesting how tough times can bring people together, people who might not have found each other at all had it not been for...."

"You mean like us?"

"Yeah, like us," Spencer agreed, squeezing the fingers. "It's nice to know that Viv and Jerry thought it was enough to build on."

Ruth wouldn't let herself read too much into that, but her heart wanted to cling to the hope that Spencer thought they too might have enough to build on. Even in these few minutes since they'd been reunited, all the feelings had rushed back full force and she found herself unable to resist the pull.

Spencer stopped and turned toward the blonde woman, this time tugging Jessie close. "I know you guys just got here, but I'd really like it if you'd think about making this place home. There are lots of good jobs, the schools are great...it's a beautiful area."

"Can we?" Jessie already liked it, especially the lake. "I mean may we?"

That got a laugh from both women, though Ruth blushed at her daughter's forward request.

Did Spencer mean this place, as in North Carolina, or this place, as in...this place? "We'll see, honey."

Spencer tossed an eyebrow, no more satisfied with that answer than Jessie had been.

"I think that we might stay a while and see if we like it." She needed to add the next part so they'd both know that there were no expectations. "But I don't want us to wear out our welcome."

"You can stay here as long as you need to, Ruth. Take your time to sort things out, to see what you want." To see what we want.

Jessie had had enough of this grownup talk. Willy wanted to play with the ball some more.

"And what about what you want?" Ruth asked seriously.

Spencer pulled her into an embrace and looked her right in the eye. "I just want to feel the way I did the last time I held you like this."

And then their lips met in a sweet kiss, one that reignited their past and gave them both hope for their future.

**The End.**

Thanks very much for reading. As always, I'd love to know what you thought: things that worked; things that didn't.

Drop me a note at [kgmacgregor@yahoo.com](mailto:kgmacgregor@yahoo.com), and the next time you stop in at one of those wonderful sites that hosts the stories you like, let the webmasters know how much they're appreciated. Thanks again.

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