

ONE

CLARE

The snowboard was still attached to her feet as the slim brunette lay sprawled, almost posed, in the Whistler mountain snow. Bright red blood spread in two pools from her wrists, sparkling in the sun like crystallized suicide. Or murder. The photo of Sacha Westlake's remains had been clawing at Clare since she'd been shown it the previous afternoon. Twenty-three years old. And dead. And Clare's job to make it make sense.

Clare stared at the chess board. She didn't care about the game, but it was better than the image in her mind. Better, too, than staring at Noah, with his shaggy hair that flopped into his face like he couldn't be bothered with anything past it.

"Check," Clare said.

Noah frowned. "It's only check until I take your queen."

"So take my queen." Clare's carry-on bag was waiting at the door. Her cab to LaGuardia would be outside Noah's Chelsea apartment in less than an hour. Her full luggage — along with her next new identity — would be handed to her at the Toronto airport before her flight to Vancouver.

"Come on, Clare. It's no fun winning when you're not playing the game." He moved his knight in to take her queen.

“I’m so sorry,” Clare said, “that in addition to all the other ways I disappoint you, I’m also a dull chess opponent.”

“There’s nothing dull about you.” Noah tugged a string of fluff from his parents’ old blue sofa. He could afford his own sofa, but sticking with ugly hand-me-downs was part of the slacker image he still thought was cool at twenty-nine. “It’s . . . god, you already know what my problem is. You’re flying away to Whistler for who knows how long? It’s a terrific assignment — I’m excited as hell for you — but I’m not looking forward to waiting at home while you’re out there getting boned by some snowboard instructor who doesn’t even know your real name.”

“I’m all yours in real life.” Clare moved her bishop to protect it from Noah’s knight, pulled her feet off the floor, and hugged her legs in. Her sock had a hole in the toe. She didn’t care. “But I need the freedom to jump into my job — completely. In today’s case, that’s Lucy Lipton, snowboarder and soul-searcher.”

“*Single* snowboarder and soul-searcher.”

“Yeah.” Clare shrugged. “Well, snowboarder wannabe — I’m taking lessons when I get there. So, uh, we’ll see about that instructor.”

Noah nudged a pawn forward. “That doesn’t help.”

Clare took Noah’s pawn with another pawn. It was probably a bad move, but she wanted the game to be over. “*You’ve* dated suspects when you’re undercover. You do remember that’s how we met?” Clare loved the memory of meeting Noah, the two of them on their separate poker tour assignments. It had been hot, fun — and kind of dangerous, until she’d learned he was also on the side of the law.

“Right,” Noah said. “And you fell for me despite having a boyfriend back home. Can you see why I might be the tiniest bit insecure?”

Clare felt her chest deflate a little. She kind of saw his point.

Noah shook out two Marlboros and passed one to Clare. “You get so into your cover that you feel real attraction from behind some fake person’s eyes. Then when the case is over, your feelings aren’t.”

On the stereo, Ella and Louis were crooning away to “Let’s Call the Whole Thing Off.” Clare wondered if Noah had played the album on purpose for that song.

“Noah, this is dumb. Should we break up now, before we hate each other?”

“I’ll never hate you.” Noah moved his bishop across to take Clare’s pawn and said, “Checkmate.”

“But you’re not in love with me.” Clare stared at the lines on the hardwood floor, waiting — wishing — for him to contradict her. “And you won’t be exclusive unless I give up what makes me good at my job.”

“Being a slut isn’t what makes you good at your job.” Noah pushed the hair out of his face, smiled crookedly across at Clare to let her know he wasn’t actually calling her a slut. “You have a knack with suspects — male *and* female. They might not always like you, but you always find your way into their inner circle. Man, I can’t believe you got assigned to Sacha Westlake’s death.”

Of course Noah wouldn’t touch the real issue — which was that he’d never told Clare he anything more than liked her, though they’d been dating for nearly a year. He’d said other things, like at the beginning, he said he was *falling for* her, and later, several times actually, that he was *totally into* her. But today that wasn’t enough.

Noah picked up his remote and turned the volume down on the music. “How is this even an FBI case, if Sacha died in Canada? Or are the Mounties drafting you back? Luring you with your very own horse named Northern Lights?”

“Oh, you’re hilarious.” Clare suppressed a grin; she didn’t want him off the hook. “I’m going as FBI.”

“Okay. But why?”

Clare wasn’t officially supposed to tell Noah anything, but their team leader unofficially trusted them to talk freely about their assignments. So she said, “Martha Westlake doesn’t think her daughter killed herself.”

Noah snorted. “And let me guess — because Martha Westlake’s a senator, the FBI jumps when she asks for more men on the job.”

Clare nodded. “Paul Worthington is watching this case personally.”

“The head of the FBI?” Noah pulled a chipped Niagara Falls ash-tray from the floor and set it on the chessboard. “Shit, Clare. That’s fantastic. You crack this, you can be sent anywhere you like.”

Yeah, and if she messed up, she'd be sent nowhere ever again. But she gave Noah a half grin and said, "I've always wanted to see Europe. Maybe you should consider becoming exclusive with me now, in case I become a female James Bond. An international woman of mystery."

Noah leaned forward to ash his cigarette at the same time as Clare did. Their faces came within an inch of meeting. They both pulled away quickly.

"Because James Bond is such a model of fidelity," Noah said. "And you won't be sent to Europe — it would have to be somewhere the FBI operates."

"I'm going to Canada today. We don't officially operate there."

"Sure we do. We own Canada." Noah's mouth corners lifted.

Clare would take the bait some other time. She studied Noah's face, shadowed by a full day's stubble because she'd woken him up early, surprised him on her way to the airport. She wished she was on the couch beside him, nestled into his lean, strong arms. He was right, in a way, that they should fight another day. But Clare couldn't cross the floor to sit with him.

"Do you think Sacha killed herself?" she asked.

Noah nodded slowly. "I only know the case from the news. From what I've seen, yeah, it looks like suicide. She'd been living in Whistler for just over a year, waitressing at a bar without any clear career direction, even though she had a degree from NYU. On the physical side, there was no bruising, no struggle . . . I can see why the local cops are ready to close this."

"No history of self-harm, though," Clare said. "Don't people who slice their wrists to die have a history of cutting themselves?"

"There's a link. It's not absolute." Typical Noah — unwilling to commit.

"Did you know Sacha was on a sedative when she died?" Clare said.

"In her twenties in Whistler? I'd say it's not a stretch if she liked to take drugs."

"Maybe that's why she didn't fight back." Sacha was only a year younger than Clare. Clare imagined herself in Sacha's place, wanting

to fight an assailant but being too doped up to struggle. It would be awful, like swimming in quicksand — or like a dream where your limbs can't move.

“I think the drugs make a better case for suicide.” Noah leaned forward on the couch. “They were talking about that on CNN. There was this doctor, he said a lot of people pop pills before they kill themselves — even guys who shoot themselves or jump off bridges. Helps them take that final step.”

Clare thought of the picture — the snowboard, the blood. It *looked* like suicide. And it didn't.

“Sacha's mom's popularity is way up,” Noah said. “She's been completely out of the public spotlight for the past week and a half, since Sacha died. But now she's second only to Geoffrey Kearnes.” Noah must have seen Clare's blank look, because he said, “Martha Westlake is running for the Republican presidential nomination.”

“Oh.” Clare had heard Westlake's name a lot in the media recently, but she'd assumed it was because of her daughter's death. She found it hard to follow U.S. politics — or maybe she just found it hard to care. “How can a New York senator run for the Republican nomination? I thought New York elected Democrats.”

“We usually do. But . . . here, come see on my computer.” Noah crossed the small room to his desk overlooking dirty, hip Eighth Avenue. He moved his mouse and the screen flickered to life. He held out his rolling desk chair, motioned for Clare to come sit in it.

Clare frowned, but she brought her cigarette and the ashtray over to Noah's desk.

Noah pulled up Martha Westlake's home page. “Westlake is moderate,” he said. “Right wing, but not a total crazy. She got in by a hair when the economy took that huge nosedive. I guess that was before you moved here — you were probably still building igloos.”

“That's really funny, Noah.” Clare wondered when the Canadian jokes would dry up — she'd been waiting eleven months.

She looked at the face staring back at her from the computer. Martha Westlake's features weren't as fine as her daughter's, but their eyes shared an intensity, and they had the same pale white skin and

dark brown hair. Clare looked sideways at Noah. “So Sacha’s death helped her mom politically. Is the senator being investigated as a suspect?”

“Probably. But if Martha Westlake had murdered her daughter, she would hardly have asked the FBI to get involved.”

“Sure she would. Because she can control us.” Clare took a long drag of her cigarette and wondered why she’d never tried to quit. Probably because it felt so damn good, nicotine moving through her veins and relaxing the parts that were tense. “You know it’s most often family members who kill.”

“It’s most often spouses,” Noah said, “or boyfriends.”

Clare laughed. “Is that meant to be menacing?”

“Yes. I’m going to kill you.” Noah stubbed out his cigarette and stood behind Clare, massaging her shoulders. “I meant you’ll likely soon know who Sacha was dating. The press hasn’t been able to find out.”

Clare clicked on a tab that opened Martha Westlake’s photo gallery. Standard shots of a politician on the campaign trail: Martha eating a hot dog in a park wearing a pantsuit she must have been sweltering in, Martha smiling broadly at a baby while she touched the child’s nose, Martha wearing a conservative-length pair of shorts while helping at a car wash with a banner that said *Wash for a Cure*. What struck Clare as strange: there were no photos of Sacha on the campaign trail with her mom. There was one posed studio shot of mother and daughter together. But it almost made the overall picture worse.

Clare spun her chair around to look at Noah. The massage felt great, but it wasn’t solving anything. “You’d think every guy Sacha had slept with would give a teary press statement. Or maybe she wasn’t a slut like me.”

Noah shook his head, like he wasn’t touching that. His eyes met Clare’s and he looked like he’d just lost his puppy.

“Speaking of teary press statements, Sacha’s best friend is my new roommate, starting tonight.”

“Jana Riley?” Noah said. “She looks like a psycho. Be careful.”

“She looks melodramatic,” Clare acknowledged, wondering how come Noah knew so much about this case. She turned back to the computer and Googled *Jana Riley*. “I also have a job interview at the bar where Sacha worked.”

“That’s great.” Noah’s voice behind Clare was flat. “Before long, you’ll be boning Sacha’s boyfriend.”

“Man, I hope he’s hot.” She clicked on a link that took her to Jana’s Facebook profile. Public — surprise, surprise.

Noah sighed. “You don’t get it, Clare.”

“What don’t I get?”

“If you want to be in a committed relationship, you don’t say things like, ‘I hope I get to have sex with a hot stud on this assignment.’”

“I was joking.” But Clare knew he was right.

Jana’s Facebook status said, *Shredding the mountain snow. Trying to fill my days with fun because Sacha was nothing if not fun. Still sad, though.* Well, at least Clare wouldn’t have to wear black all the time in the apartment.

“It’s not funny,” Noah said. “You know how hard this is for me, playing chess with you, browsing websites with you for your last hour in New York?” He grabbed her chair and spun her back around. They locked eyes. “I want to be naked with you — not fucking you, but touching you, feeling your muscled little legs wrapped around me, running my fingers through your hair, kissing your lips, your neck, your body. Why do you think I put on romantic music as soon as you came over?” When Clare said nothing, Noah continued, “Are you even capable of falling in love? As you, I mean. Not as Lucy, or as Tiffany, or whatever cover role you’re playing. It’s Clare Vengel I’m trying to reach. Is she even fucking available?”

Clare couldn’t speak to that, so she went back to Noah’s coffee table and started setting up the chess board. She had time for one more game before her airport cab came.

But as she arranged the wooden men into their orderly lines, the image of Sacha Westlake’s death shot came back to the front of Clare’s mind. No matter what Noah said — or what they said on CNN — the biggest inconsistency was staring right out from that photograph.

Suicide was leaving life. Snowboarding was living it. They didn't go together. That was the killer's mistake.

"You know what, Noah? Fuck this." Clare stood up. "I'd rather stare at the blank walls of the airport gate than sit here and listen to you tell me all my flaws."

"Clare, I . . ."

"Oh, and jazz isn't romantic. It's lame. You want to get me naked, try Depeche Mode or Leonard Cohen. We've been together for a year. I can't believe you don't know that."

Clare grabbed her carry-on and slammed the door shut behind her. She'd cancel her scheduled airport car and hail a cab on the street. She had to figure out what the killer's other mistakes were. Before he — or she — killed again.

TWO

MARTHA

Martha Westlake gazed out the back window of her West Seventieth Street brownstone. A few stories up, in an apartment that backed onto Martha's courtyard from West Seventy-first, a naked, fleshy fortysomething contemplated her wardrobe options. In other windows, a retired couple drank tea with no animation and a shirtless man, maybe in his twenties, danced around his bathroom as he shaved. Her constituents. She hated them right now, probably because they were alive.

How had she failed so completely?

She had a zillion phone calls to return and her email inbox was bulging to the point of overflow, but all Martha wanted to do was sit and stare at photographs.

She opened the fourth giant album, the one where Sacha was three. There should have been twenty-three years to go through, but somewhere along the way the world had gone digital and now no one printed photos anymore.

She touched the photograph on the first page, traced her finger along Sacha in her brown plaid trench coat, marching through Central Park and looking like a tiny reporter. Martha remembered the day she'd taken the picture. One of the rare full days she had

spent with her daughter. The nanny had the flu and Fraser was out of town, so Martha was stuck — she felt that way, *stuck* — looking after Sacha. Near the park entrance, she and Sacha passed a homeless man with a three-legged dog. Sacha looked up at Martha with her big brown eyes and said, “Mommy, can we bring that man home tonight? If I give him my dinner, he won’t have to eat his dog’s other legs.” Martha had hurried Sacha along with some brusque explanation of why inviting strangers into your house was unsafe. She wished now that she’d helped Sacha take the man a sandwich.

She reached for her coffee and took a sip — lukewarm. Why could she not shed a single tear? Martha had always suspected herself of being a cold bitch; now she knew for sure. She touched the photo again and closed her eyes.

Martha’s BlackBerry rang. Ted. She’d been ignoring his calls for over a week. She sighed and picked it up.

“Martha. So sorry to bother you. Kearnes is pulling tricks in Michigan.”

“What kind of tricks?”

A metal snapping sound came through the phone. That would be Ted cracking his first can of Red Bull for the day. Or maybe his second, judging by the speed he was talking. “He’s been making phone calls to your supporters. In particular, he’s aiming to snag Hillier’s endorsement.”

“He can aim all he likes. Reverend Hillier and I had dinner three weeks ago. We shook hands and agreed that I have his support.”

“That was before . . . Kearnes is implying that it’s a good thing this happened now — Sacha’s death — so the Republican Party can see your so-called true colors before making the mistake of electing you as leader. He’s trying to prove that if you’re taking this much time off over one death, how would you handle the presidency in wartime?”

“For Christ’s sake, this is my daughter. Can’t Hillier see that? Can’t Kearnes?”

“Yeah, but you’re not there to defend yourself.”

“How do you know what Geoff Kearnes is saying on the phone, anyway? Or do I not want to know?”

“A college friend is involved in Kearnes’ campaign. He and I grabbed a coffee after the all-candidates town hall meeting in Flint . . .”

The meeting Martha should have been at was the implication and why Ted let his sentence trail. She eyed her photo album and wished Ted would get to the point.

“It’s disgusting,” Ted said. “And don’t worry — voters disagree with Kearnes, if your new popularity is anything to gauge by.”

Martha willed herself not to comment on the absurd stupidity of that statement.

“But . . . and this is bad . . . I called Hillier’s office half an hour ago to make sure things are still good, that we still have his endorsement . . .”

“And?”

“He took the call personally. Says he hasn’t made up his mind.”

Martha clenched her hand tighter around her phone. If Hillier took the call personally, it was a good sign and a bad one. It meant he was still open to backing Martha. And it meant that he wanted something.

“Kearnes is offering a cabinet post.” Ted’s voice was flat.

“Hillier told you that?”

“No — that’s through the grapevine.” Ted’s code for *you don’t want any more details*.

“A reliable grapevine?”

“Yes.”

“Motherfucker,” Martha said. “Let him go, then. Let Hillier endorse whomever he chooses.”

“I wish that was an option,” Ted said. “But we can’t win Michigan without him.”

“So we lose Michigan.” Martha didn’t see the big deal. There were more states.

“We can’t lose Michigan, or Kearnes will have enough delegates to win the nomination.”

“Officially?”

“Effectively — unless you plan on taking him in his home state. But trust me — Michigan is easier. All we need is Hillier and we should have it.”

Martha tried to care — she *should* care — but she didn't. "I'm not giving a cabinet position to anyone with a religious background."

"You have to give him something. He's already out on a limb, supporting the only Republican campaigning on the separation of church and state."

"Meaning?"

"*Reverend* Hillier has a congregation to keep happy. He needs to take them something positive — something to make them understand why you as president is best for their self-interest, even if you are a heathen."

Martha snorted. "We've been through all this, Ted. Three weeks ago, my education plan and the war on drugs were enough for him. And to be frank, I don't care that much anymore. Losing Michigan — giving up this race — is looking tempting."

"Forget about it," Ted said with a nervous laugh. "Your team won't let you fall. Anyway, I called because I need your approval on a statement before we release it to the press. It's loosely aimed at Hillier, but there are others who could use their confidence in you rejuvenated. We want to talk about your grief — how Sacha's death knocked you down — and we'll focus on your bereavement as inspiring your rebirth as a stronger, more compassionate world leader."

"Rebirth? Is that in case I have one lone supporter left from the religious right?"

"Look, you have the moderates, independents, and coastal conservatives locked tight. But it doesn't hurt to use the odd bit of churchy language as a bone to throw to the evangelicals. Like it or not, we will need them eventually."

Martha smiled as she recalled Sacha, age fifteen, saying, *You know that seventy percent of Republicans don't believe in evolution? You're too smart to align yourself with these idiots. Or is it the low taxes you like? Does the Republican ethic work for you because you're rich and you want to keep it that way?*

Ted was still talking. "The idea is for Hillier and the rest of the party to see you as not only a viable candidate, but a better candidate for having gone through this turmoil and come out on top." Poor

Ted. He was a smart enough kid when he wasn't trying to prove how smart he was.

"I don't like it. A news release reeks of excuses when it's obvious to anyone with a brain why I'm not at full strength."

"We have to act, though. If we lose Michigan or Arizona, the battle will be too far uphill. Washington is yours, Alaska isn't significant, but taking Kearnes in Georgia is going to be next to impossible. Unless we can find a prostitute in his closet, or even a blow-up cocker spaniel — but so far no luck on either." Ted paused. "You still say no about bringing up the affair, right? I know it was over twenty years ago, but Kearnes was married; you weren't. We could blow him out of the race with one piece of evidence."

"Yes, I still say no." Martha's head was spinning with the rapid-fire speed of Ted's talking. Her own words felt slow and sluggish in comparison. "Arrange a lunch with Reverend Hillier. I'll tell him face to face that I still plan to win this. Was there anything else?"

"Um, the FBI has been in touch. You cleared them to talk to me, right?"

"Yes."

"They're training an undercover to send to Whistler."

Martha's head began to pound. "When do they think he'll be ready?"

"He's arriving in Whistler this evening. Um, Martha?"

"Yes?"

"I don't think it was suicide, either. Sacha was strong. She loved being alive."

Martha clicked off her phone before she could tear a strip off Ted that he didn't deserve. It wasn't Ted's fault he was twenty-six in Washington.

THREE

RICHIE

Richie Lebar leaned in the doorway between Jana's kitchen and living room. Outside the dirty window, snow was dumping on the village.

Past some other apartment buildings and houses in the Upper Village, Richie saw the Fairmont Chateau Whistler, nestled on its own at the foot of Blackcomb Mountain. Though it was at the base of the hill, that hotel was the peak for Richie. He liked to take Jana there, sit in the bar and order a bottle of Cristal and just lounge there sipping it, living the life. It showed him how far he'd come, how different he was from the rough guy he used to be. With snow cascading down upon its turrets, the hotel looked like a fairytale castle, straight out of Germany or Switzerland.

He wished Jana would hurry up and eat. He wanted to hit the slopes, feel his board glide through powder, burn off some of the nasty energy that had been eating him up for over a week.

"Sacha Westlake was no angel." Jana poked her spoon violently into her Mueslix. "How come every time someone young dies, they're suddenly an honor student with a heart of gold?"

Richie laughed, which felt good because not much was funny these days. "True, that. In high school, my friend got shot. He was

an evil mofo — had his eight-year-old brother selling meth for him 'cause the kid was too young for juvie. Day after he dies, there's a picture in the paper of my friend singing in the church choir when he was, like, five years old. The headline was *Choir Boy Slain.*”

Jana lifted a spoonful of cereal from the bowl and frowned at it. She set her spoon back down. “Seriously. Sacha was awesome, but the press has to stop sticking her on this tragic pedestal. I want to tell the next reporter who calls that she was fucking her married boss and selling LSD into the States.”

“Yeah, but you won't, right?” Richie flicked his tongue against the back of his mouth grill — the gold and diamonds that decorated his teeth and told the world he had money.

“Of course not. I'm not going to throw you and Chopper under the bus. Maybe I'll say the married boss part though. Let Wade squirm.” Jana nudged her green-rimmed glasses up on her nose. They were cute on her. Richie wished she'd wear them out of the house sometimes.

Richie looked past Jana out the kitchen window at the heavy falling snow. First powder day since Sacha died — like the sky was trying to tell them to move on. “Are you planning to eat your cereal, or play with it until it turns to mush?”

“I'm out of Smarties. It tastes boring with just seeds and oats.”

“So add bananas. But speed up.”

Jana pushed back her chair and pulled a banana from the bunch on the counter. “Go without me. I feel like a lazy morning.”

Richie frowned. Since Sacha's death, he didn't like to leave Jana alone. “Keep the door locked.”

“Aw. Are you my big black bodyguard?”

Richie flinched. He knew she wasn't racist, but sometimes it kind of felt like Jana was dating him to piss off her parents, some kind of extended teenage rebellion. Maybe he was being oversensitive. “Is your new roommate coming today?”

“Tonight,” Jana said.

“Be careful with her. Don't let this get out, but there's an undercover coming to town. Maybe already here.”

“And you think it might be my new roommate?”

“Probably not. They say it’s a guy. Still . . .”

Jana glanced at him. “How do you know?”

“Norris told me. But hush. It’s not for everyone’s ears.”

“So I can’t smoke drugs with my new roommate? Man, this is going to be fun.”

“You can smoke pot. But play it safe with the shit you say. No mentioning Sacha’s extracurricular activities, for example.”

“You mean her trips to the States with a knapsack full of acid?”

“Yeah.” Richie grinned. “Things like that.”

A chunk of banana splashed into Jana’s bowl, sending drops of milk flying. It grossed Richie out that she didn’t grab a cloth, just let the droplets land wherever.

“I should never have put that ad for a new roommate up so soon,” Jana said. “Sacha’s mom is paying her rent until the end of March, so it’s not like I need the new girl’s money.”

“You should tell Sacha’s mom to stop paying.”

“I should, right? But she’s rich. I kind of figured it didn’t matter.”

Richie normally found Jana’s full figure attractive. He liked that she had meat he could grab and an ass that wasn’t bony when he squeezed it. But this morning, she looked fat and selfish, like a cat who thought all the cream should be hers.

Jana toyed with the tiny braid in her otherwise loose long hair. “What’s the undercover here for? Drugs?”

“No. He’s here for Sacha.”

“What? Why?”

“Her mom don’t think —” Richie cringed from his own grammar. “*Doesn’t* think it’s suicide.”

“Her mom should get a grip.”

“You think Sacha killed herself?” Richie picked up his ski pants, which he’d slung over the back of a chair the night before.

“I know she killed herself — that’s why I’m so mad at her. She wrote me a letter before she went up Blackcomb.”

“She left a note?” Richie wondered why he didn’t know this

already. Norris should have told him; things were supposed to be transparent between them. Unless Jana was making shit up again.

Jana was tearing up, which Richie wished he had more patience for. If they'd actually been best friends, it would be one thing. But that was all in Jana's fucked-up head — to Sacha, Jana had just been someone fun to party with.

“Have you shown the note to the cops?” Richie asked.

Jana shook her head. “I miss her too much to give up the last thing Sacha gave me.”

Richie dropped his ski pants back over the sofa. He was starting to think there really was a note. “You have to show me.”

“No. It's private.”

“Jana.”

Jana wrinkled her mouth. “This is about your business, isn't it? You think if you show the cops the note, the undercover will go home and you'll be able to keep selling drugs.”

Richie lifted his eyebrows, meaning *Duh*.

“So this note is worth a lot of money.”

“You want me to pay you for it?” Richie wanted to slug her, but kept calm. Hitting women was not in his repertoire — he'd left Scarborough behind, and all his father's ways with it. “How much?”

“I don't know. What's it worth?”

To Richie at that moment, it was worth fifty grand or so — maybe more — if the letter could send the FBI guy away. “I'll give you a thousand bucks for it.”

“No shit?” Jana's eyes lit up. “I'd rather keep the letter, but cool that it's worth so much.”

“We have to show the police — especially now that it's a murder investigation.”

Jana laughed. “A lecture from a drug dealer about how to help the cops. Good one.”

“You want your supply to dry up? That's what's gonna happen while the FBI is here. Chopper's going to stop production, too — so no more Mountain Snow.”

“Fine.” Jana pushed back her chair and stomped into her room. She came out with a piece of paper that she thrust into Richie’s hand. “But I’m not selling it. I want this back by tonight. I’ve been sleeping with it under my pillow.”

“A-ight,” Richie said, and then kicked himself. *So ghetto*. Why did he keep slipping today? That part of him was supposed to already be dead.

FOUR

CLARE

Clare passed the final customs checkpoint at the Toronto airport. It was weird being so close to her hometown and only stopping long enough to grab a coffee and a new identity. She chewed her lip as she searched the crowd for her ex-handler, Amanda.

“Clare!” Amanda smiled broadly and approached. She was struggling with an old hockey bag that was almost the size of her tiny frame. Clare was impressed that she could carry it in heels.

“You should probably start calling me Lucy.” Clare took the bag from Amanda and nearly dropped it to the floor. “Is this my luggage?”

“I know it’s bulky.” Amanda pointed the way to an escalator. “But Lucy is a seriously casual chick. And there’s a snowboard in here. You’ll have to send it as oversized luggage. I had fun shopping for your wardrobe.”

“Oh, I’m so glad.” Clare was trying to be polite. It was just hard. Amanda was one of those girly girls who thought a woman was incomplete without her nails done. *Seriously casual* probably meant dry cleaning was optional.

“Don’t worry,” Amanda said. “There’s nothing pink.”

They reached the top of the escalator and emerged at the

departures level. Amanda dealt with the self-serve check-in. She discreetly handed Clare her new passport before they went through domestic security.

Clare had done this before, and of course she wasn't doing anything illegal, but it always taxed her nerves, clearing security under a false name. They didn't even ask for ID at this stage — all they cared about was the boarding pass — but what if a guard sensed something off about Clare, like they were trained to do? This felt like a test, like if Clare couldn't pass security, she wouldn't pull off her new identity in the world she was about to enter. She tried not to show her relief when she had her bag again, her new phone and laptop packed back into place, and Amanda led the way to the gate for Clare's plane to Vancouver.

At the gate, Clare was pleased to see Tim Hortons — her favorite Canadian coffee chain, which she'd missed, since there was only one that she knew of in New York and it was in crappy touristy Times Square. She was even more pleased when Amanda headed for its lineup. Clare needed a caffeine injection. It was eleven a.m., and she'd been up since five so she could spend time with Noah. In retrospect, she should have slept in.

They loaded up with coffee and found a seating area with a cool view of the runways.

Amanda pulled a thick envelope from her soft leather handbag. She passed it to Clare. "I'll trade you."

Clare lifted her knapsack to her lap and pulled her passport and wallet from the front pouch. She handed it to Amanda. "This always freaks me out. Saying goodbye to my identity in some random airport or café. I always wonder, will I get my real self back?"

"I think you'll be fine. We're not going deep into Communist Russia. Do you know how to snowboard?"

"No." Clare slid her new wallet into her knapsack. It was about as ratty as her old one — maybe there was hope for her new wardrobe.

"That's fine. I've arranged a lesson for tomorrow. You don't have to be a pro on the slopes when you get there. The snowboard is a

hand-me-down from Lucy's older brother. The hockey bag is from her younger brother."

"I get to ride a guy's snowboard?"

"Thought you'd like that. You'll want to get up to speed as fast as you can. Sacha loved snowboarding and her peer group spends most of their downtime on the mountain."

"I've been studying snowboarder lingo," Clare said. "On UrbanDictionary.com, and from movies and stuff. So I'll have a clue what they're talking about."

"Good work," Amanda said.

"Thanks, *boss*." Clare sounded sharper than she'd meant to. But whatever; it was true that Amanda wasn't in charge. "Sorry. I mean, I know I'm on your turf, and I'll cooperate. But I work for the FBI now."

"*Ac-tu-al-ly . . .*" Amanda let the word trail so it sounded like it had about six syllables. She tapped a slender finger against her lips, as if she was trying to break some terrible news and was secretly gleeful about it.

"Actually what?" Clare glared.

"We agreed that the FBI could send an operative, but the RCMP insists on running you jointly."

"Running me." As if Clare were a dog, or a car.

"I'm not a handler anymore, but because you and I have worked together, we all agreed that I could step into the role again. I'll report to both organizations. Your team leader in New York will have your contact info and he can call you for an update anytime. And you can contact him."

"Gee, thanks. I can talk to my boss while I'm working." Clare had to rein this in. She felt like she was visiting her parents — riled to act like a teenager all over again despite everything she'd learned in the world since leaving home.

"Come on, Clare. I'm looking forward to working together."

Clare stared into her coffee. Tim Hortons wasn't as good as she remembered it. "I've learned a lot in the past year."

“I’m sure that’s true,” Amanda said. “But I’m not your obstacle, despite what you seem to believe.”

Clare looked out the window at the runway, wet with Toronto winter slush. In the distance, a plane took off. Half of her wished she was on it, heading back to Noah and her life in New York instead of about to jump on another plane that would take her even farther away. She was glad Amanda was traveling on a different plane so they wouldn’t be seen arriving together. “So what *is* my obstacle?”

Amanda pursed her lips, as if trying to decide how much to share. Finally, she said, “You know that Inspector Norris with the Whistler RCMP wants to close the Westlake case as a suicide.”

“Uh, yeah. This has all been in the news.”

Amanda sighed. “If you prove Norris wrong, his credibility comes into question.”

“If *I* prove him wrong? Is he going to blame me if it turns out Sacha was murdered?”

Amanda tilted her head to one side, which Clare took as a yes.

“Can I meet with him? Maybe in person I can let Norris know I’m not hostile.”

“I don’t think that will help.”

“Why? I can be diplomatic if I have to. I told you I’ve learned a lot.”

“I don’t think he’ll appreciate a twenty-four-year-old trying to placate his professional concerns.”

Clare flashed a super-fake smile. “I love it when you use big words *and* belittle me all in one sentence.” Okay, that wasn’t a great start in the maturity direction.

“More important,” Amanda said, “Inspector Norris doesn’t know your name. He knows you’ll be arriving — for some reason, one of my colleagues saw fit to loop him in that far — but he doesn’t know who you are or where you’ll be staying.”

“So we’re not on the same team?”

“We are . . .” Amanda frowned. “But Norris grew up in Pemberton. That’s thirty minutes up the highway from Whistler. Two of his high

school friends are prime suspects in this case. The decision from above is that the less he knows, the better.”

Clare threw her hands in the air. “Of course the fact he’s local should be a point against the man. No sense treating that as an asset. No wonder he doesn’t want me here. His employers already treat him like garbage.”

“It’s an obstacle, Clare. Don’t turn it into a roadblock. I requested you for this job because I’m impressed by your open mind.”

“You requested me?”

“I think you have the right character to immerse yourself in this culture. You’ll want to add a couple of traits to help you blend in — like an eco-friendly mindset and an appreciation of organic food.”

“Are you asking me to be a vegetarian?”

“No.” Amanda smiled. “Just, if you’re picking up potato chips, grab the hippie kind, with the biodegradable packaging. And drink local craft beer rather than Bud. It’s not a culture of extremists, but they do have a sensibility about preserving the environment. They love the outdoors.”

“Sounds okay,” Clare said.

“You’ll have to watch the marijuana, though. We don’t want you so stoned that you’re not in control of your reactions.”

“I don’t smoke pot. So that won’t be a problem.”

Amanda frowned. “Actually, I think you *should* smoke, at least a little. It’s an unconventional directive, but your new peer group smokes marijuana liberally.”

“Fine,” Clare said, a small grin tugging the corner of her lips. “But you can’t make me inhale.”