

# ***Danger At the Beach***

**By Sandi Circle**



**Danger At the Beach (Beach Mystery's Series Book 1)**

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## **Dedication**

### **To my Mother, who always wanted to write a book.**

You were the most generous, giving person I have ever known. You would help anyone in need and I strive to be more like you. I will miss you every day of my life, but I'm glad you are no longer suffering in pain. Thank you for teaching me to believe in God, right from wrong, and for always being proud of me.

**I love you**





## Prologue

Sipping drinks on the beach under an umbrella is my happy place.

In times of stress and discomfort I dream of a spot on a deserted beach where I can disappear from life and reality. I can become someone exciting. Someone who doesn't have problems in the real world. Someone who doesn't have a failed marriage and three grown kids with problems of their own. Ahhhhh, it's all so wonderful at the beach....

Then reality would hit me right between the eyes. Bam! I was back.

Back to my ordinary life. Back to my monotonous existence. Back to working in a mind-numbing office, eating boring healthy food, and generally feeling uninspired with life. What am I going to do with the next thirty plus years?

Granted I am only 47 years old. But if God sees fit to give me another thirty or more years who am I to complain. Although I cannot even fathom what I will do with myself for that long.

I need a plan....



## Chapter 1

Typing away at her computer, Sophia Grace Adams has a pencil between her teeth, a furrow in her brow and a look of determination on her face. She has been working many hours, as of late, to complete her latest assignment as a copy editor at The Daily Times in corporate USA. She takes her job very seriously and deadlines make her work even harder to complete her task. No one has ever called Sophia a slacker. Her bosses love her work ethic and she regularly gets praised for her desire to meet her goals.

Sophia is sneaking up on 50 years old, but is still quite appealing in her appearance. With her slight frame of five foot four she has light honey colored hair and crystal blue eyes. Although she has to cover up a few strands of gray hair, she is still very attractive for her age. She dresses conservatively, but professional and her figure is fit and toned. She likes to take care of herself and eat right, which shows. Although the years have been rough on her she has maintained her looks, with the help of as many over the counter products that she can afford. Call it vanity or the desire to hold on to at least one thing from her past. Or maybe it is to have power over one thing to keep it from spiraling out of control. Who knows? But it seems to be working.

“Hey Soph!” Ava called out to Sophia, who still had her head down working diligently. Sophia didn’t respond, so Ava threw a paperclip at her. “Hey!” responded Sophia with a smile when she finally looked up.

Ava was Sophia’s co-worker and cubicle mate. About the same age, they worked closely together on related stories and often shared breaks together to gossip or discuss office rumors. Ava had a juicy one today.

“Guess who just quit?” Ava leaned in and whispered.

“Who?” asked Sophia.

“Luke!” replied Ava as a gasp came from Sophia.

Luke Dalton was the CEO of the paper and very respected for his views on local politics and the community. Not to mention he was drop dead gorgeous and rich. At 52 years of age he stood about six two and had dark chestnut hair and eyes like chocolate. With a few graying strands at the temples and a few laugh lines around his eyes, he was very distinguished in his looks. Away from work he was an avid adventurer so his body was rock solid and ready for whatever came his way.

“No way!” said Sophia too shocked to come up with anything else to say.

Sophia had always had a slight crush on her boss, although it would be politically incorrect to ever mention that to anyone.

“What happened?” asked Sophia surprised.

“Looks like he and the big cheese had a heated difference of opinion, so he told them where to put this job,” stated Ava.

“You know he has always had a dream to relocate to a tropical location and start a business there,” said Ava. “I think he has relatives in the Bahamas.”

“Yes, I have heard him say that before,” said Sophia. “He wants to get back to helping real people instead of all this corporate political business.”

“Well, I personally wouldn’t mind jetting off to a deserted island with the fabulous Mr. Dalton!” whispered Ava. “What a hunk,” she added.

“Well you just might have to wait awhile for that, Ava,” said Sophia. “Isn’t he seeing that famous model now?”

“No, didn’t you see the papers last night? They broke up!” exclaimed Ava. “It’s all over the news that he’s an eligible bachelor now. Maybe I’ll even have a go at him,” laughed Ava. Clearly tickled by her own joke she was practically rolling on the floor giggling.

Noticing Sophia biting her lip, Ava straightened up and looked at her with a questioning look. "Hey, what's up with you? Did I say something wrong?"

"No, not really, I just don't think it's appropriate to laugh about someone else's misfortune," stated Sophia rather matter of factly.

"Since when!" exclaimed Ava. "We are always talking about people in this office and..... oh, wait a minute! You got the hots for Mr. Bossman, don't you?"

"NO I don't!" shouted Sophia. Making several people in the office look up and notice her standing over her computer glaring at Ava.

"Shhhhhh, sit down Sophia.... take a chill," smiled Ava. "Your reaction just convinced me of it. Wow! Who would have known, little old you... falling for that sexy creature. Not that I can blame you, he is quite the catch."

"I'm not falling for him, Ava," whispered Sophia after she had sat back down. "I'm just going to miss him around here, that's all."

"Mmhmmmm... that's all huh? OK, I'll let ya' slide this time," said Ava snickering as she logged onto her computer to get back to work. Smiling she looked back over to Sophia and for the first time noticed how upset she looked at him leaving. Wow, she really did have a thing for Luke, she thought. That gave her an idea...

## Chapter 2

Luke Stormed into his office after having a big blow up fight with the President of the Paper. He could not believe it had come to this. After all these years, and all he had given to this company, it has ended like this. He just could not believe it. He cooled down slightly while he sat down in his luxurious office chair and looked out the window. His office, his window, his view, now gone he thought, as he sat there looking depressed. He did have some good friends here.

He thought about his future while he threw his stuff in his laptop bag and cleared off his desk.

Thought number one – he didn't need the money. His father was the great Lawrence Dalton and had left him a sizable fortune when he passed away from cancer a few years back. Being a successful businessman, along with a substantial insurance policy, made Luke a wealthy man in anyone's eyes. He had always loved his Dad who was very loving and generous.

Thought number two – hadn't he always said that he yearned for a more fulfilling career closer to the people? Not so high in the ivory tower, but down amongst the people where life happens? Had he lost sight of that through the years working here with all the fame and glory that came with this position? Which brought him back to his Dad again. He would always take him to the islands to visit his Uncle Max where they would help out the island people in one way or another, always doing good.

Decision made... this was a good thing. He waited and pondered.

"Yes," he said to himself. "A good thing."

He got up, picked up his bag and started to exit his office just as he remembered someone he wanted to say good bye to. Sophia had always been

so helpful whenever he asked. Whether it was to proof an article or type something up for him quickly, she never minded, and she was good. He would miss her.

He walked back to his phone and called her extension. Half expecting her to be away from her desk and half expecting her to ignore the call... she picked up.

“Hello, this is Sophia,” she answered tentatively after seeing his number come up on her phone display. She wondered why Luke was calling her if he had just quit. Shouldn’t he be leaving the building?

“Hi Sophia, this is Luke,” he said.

“Hello Mr. Dalton, what can I do for you?” she answered curiously.

“Please call me Luke. We’ve worked together long enough that I think it’s ok,” he chuckled. “Would you mind coming into my office for a second? I’m on my way out and I’d like to chat for a moment if I could,” he asked.

“Sure Mr. Dalton, I mean Luke. I’ll be right there,” she responded shyly.

“OK, thanks,” he said before hanging up.

She looked up and Ava was staring right at her with an inquisitive look and a smirk on her face.

“What???” Sophia asked. “He probably just has something he wants me to finish up for him.”

“Well go!” Ava yelled. “Go find out!” pointing to his office and snapping her fingers. “Hurry!”

Sophia got up and hastily turned back and grabbed a pad and paper in case Luke wanted her to take some notes or something. She had no idea what he would want her for. She was driving herself crazy for the past half hour with the thought of him leaving. She shot Ava a questioning look and walked

demurely to Luke's office on the other side of the building. Her desk was in the maze of cubicles in the main office, but Luke had an office down the hall with actual doors and locks and furniture. She had only been in his office a few times. It was intimidating. She knocked on the door and slowly opened it waiting for a response.

"Hello, come in Sophia. Thanks for coming so quickly, I won't be here long". Luke said as he stood up to wave her in. He motioned for her to take a seat directly across from him in an overstuffed lounge chair as he sat on the sofa. She sat down and got comfortable.

"I suspect you have heard the news already Sophia," Luke said.

"Yes, I was hoping it wasn't true," Sophia blurted out without thinking. "I mean, it isn't true is it?"

"I'm afraid it is," Luke said. "John and I have had differing opinions for quite some time on how to run this paper and I guess today was the day it finally came to a head."

"I'm so sorry Mr.... Luke," she smiled. "I have really enjoyed working for you over the years."

"Thank you," Luke replied smiling back at her. "That is one reason that I wanted to ask you in here before I left. I wanted to say good-bye, but also to thank you for all of your help, and to tell you that I think you are a valuable employee. Please, if you ever need a reference don't hesitate to ask. You are proficient, dedicated, and hard working. I could not ask for a better employee." He looked at her directly and said "I would even hire you again if you ever decided to leave this company."

"Well thank you Luke that really means a lot to me," Sophia said blushing and looking at the floor. "I try hard to do my job correctly, and it doesn't hurt



to be a perfectionist," she said shyly. "Where will you be going that you could hire me?"

"Well I haven't quite figured that out yet, but when I do I will give you a call if that's ok," Luke responded.

Sophia just sat there looking at him in awe. She could not believe what she was hearing. He would really hire her at a new company. Could this be the start of her new life she has been so desperately seeking? A new beginning?

"Are you OK?" asked Luke quietly.

"Oh yes, sorry," she grinned. "To be completely honest I have been thinking of a change for a while now and you kind of surprised me. I don't know if it's a mid-life crisis or what, but I just need something different. I want to make a difference. I want to be needed and appreciated for something worthwhile and not just proofing words on a page if that makes sense," she continued. "I just need something more out of life, you know?"

Surprised by her words he said "I completely agree! I know exactly where you are coming from. I guess sometimes you just need that little push from the nest to get on with your life." He sat back content that he had come to that conclusion with her help. He smiled at her and said "If you don't mind could you write down your number for me on the pad of paper you have there? It might take me a few weeks to get situated, but I'm serious about having a job for you. How do you feel about the beach...?"

### Chapter 3

Ava Moore sat in her town house apartment sipping champagne, looking out across the lake at her scenic view contemplating her plan. She had the best view in the city, all because her Daddy was the Mayor. Not many people knew that. Ava was one of those people that liked to make her own way and not live on her family's money. She had always been good at being an editor and it was a job that she really enjoyed. She had never flaunted her family's success and almost never did public appearances with them.

She did however attend several charity functions on her own and donated quite substantially to many black tie events. In fact she was on the board of directors of a fund raiser this year for the local Children's Hospital here in town. They were raising money for a new wing that would specialize in treatments for leukemia patients. The fund raiser banquet is next week-end and it is a staggering one thousand dollars a plate. Many elite players will attend and also those wanting to flaunt their wealth and status. Ava didn't care as long as they brought a full checkbook.

Ava had lost a daughter from leukemia many years ago, and never hesitated to raise money for the cause when she was needed. With the banquet coming up and all the corporate sponsorship she had already acquired; Ava hoped to raise most of the money needed for the new hospital wing. The new wing would be named after her daughter Lily. It was an honor and a privilege to have her daughter linked with this unit. She would always have a remembrance of her beloved daughter.

With a second motive to be excited for concerning this event, she began to plan how she would get Luke and Sophia together. Luke was already a speaker at the banquet, thanks to her Daddy. Luke was a preferred speaker

around town thanks to his handsome appearance and charming demeanor. Plus, he always had one famous model or another on his arm. This year Ava had it on good authority that Luke declined his plus one, as luck would have it, and he would be coming alone. Now to work on Sophia.

Sophia was a very proud woman. Ava knew she would never accept an invitation to a fund raiser without paying the price of admission herself. Ava didn't want her to have to come up with the thousand dollars for her entry. She wanted Sophia to contribute to the event, but also to be her guest. Ava had a great idea! She just didn't know if she would be able to get Sophia to go along with it.

Ava knew Sophia mainly from work. They didn't socialize outside of the office, but Ava considered Sophia a friend anyways. They formed a bond while working together over the years because of their children. Over lunch one day Ava had told Sophia about Lily. Sophia had a similar story about her daughter Jamie...

While attending college Sophia had gotten pregnant. Her parents were very supportive and she had to move back in with them until she had the baby. Unfortunately she had to drop out of journalism school. Sophia was still with the baby's father and they ended up getting married. It was a rocky road for both of them at such a young age, so the marriage did not last long.

Sophia had the baby and it was a girl. Jamie was a beautiful, active toddler, but soon became very sick. Every test available was run and it was discovered that her child had a blood cancer much like leukemia. Jamie received years of treatment and with constant monitoring, since they caught it early enough, she went into remission.

Sophia and Ava could both relate to the pain the other one had when dealing with this terrible illness. They grew close and shared stories of their daughters when they were little.

The issue Ava was having was how to approach Sophia and ask her to discuss this time in her life as a speaker at the banquet. The plan was to have her seated beside Mr. Luke Dalton and the rest would be up to them.

Ava decided to put her plan into motion the next day at work. With that decision made she sat back and enjoyed the rest of her drink and the spectacular view.

Ava arrived at the office before anyone else the next morning because she knew Sophia always came in early.

“Good morning Sophia!” called Ava as Sophia was walking up to the desk.

“Good morning Ava!” Sophia replied. “You’re here bright and early today!”

“Yes, I have something I’d like to talk to you about before we get started today, if you don’t mind?” Ava stated. “Can I treat you to a coffee from the break room?” They both giggled.

“Sure, lets’ go,” said Sophia. “Is something wrong?”

“Oh nothing serious,” said Ava as they walked in the breakroom and started getting the coffee. “It’s just this damn fund raiser I’ve been telling you about. It’s really got me stressed out. I had a speaker cancel last minute and I’m trying to fill the spot. I was really hoping I could get you to talk about Jamie and how the treatments she received when she was little saved her life”.

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Sophia tentatively. “That was a really tough time in our lives. I don’t know if I could even talk about it.”

“Just think of the benefit to the fund raiser you would make,” Ava replied. “A real life success story of what we are trying to fight. It would be a great tribute to the healing processes we are trying to build in that wing. Plus, I’ll be there talking about Lily and we can sit together. What do you say? Please? I’m in a bind and it would really help me out,” Ava pleaded.

“Well, that does make a lot of sense,” answered Sophia. “I guess it wouldn’t hurt to say a few words if you think it would help.”

“Yay!” Ava yelled and gave Sophia a big hug. “Thank you so much! You won’t regret it!”

“But what am I going to wear?” asked Sophia. “I haven’t attended something like this in years.”

“Don’t worry about a thing; I will take care of everything!” Ava said confidently with a gleam in her eye as they walked back to their desks to start working for the day.

That evening Ava phoned the administrator in charge of the seating arrangements for the banquet. He had no hesitation about adding an extra plate for Sophia Adams right beside the seat of Mr. Luke Dalton...

## Chapter 4

Tonight is the night for the fund raiser banquet, so Ava had her driver swing by and pick up Sophia for a day of pampering and shopping. They hit all the salons and boutiques and by the time they were done Sophia had the complete ensemble and looked fabulous. From the new haircut and make over to the long sleek black dress covered in sequins with the sexy slit in the side. And don't forget the five inch black suede heels that make her legs look amazing.

"Oh yes!" Ava thought. "This is going to turn out exactly as I expected."

As they get back into the chauffeured car they both looked great. And after a few cocktails they were relaxed enough to talk about the issue they both had in common. They strode in the front door of the banquet and Ava directed Sophia to the speaker table where she was introducing everyone just as Mr. Dalton came up to take his seat.

"Luke! What are you doing here?" gasped Sophia.

"Sophia! Luke spun around and gazed at her. "It's so great to see you. Wow! Look at you. You look beautiful. I'm speechless. How are you?" he stammered.

Sophia blushed and smiled. "I'm good, nervous, but good. I'm speaking tonight about my daughter's life saving treatments when she was a child."

"That's amazing; I never knew that about you." He smiled at her with a new admiration. "I'm speaking too. This will be fun."

Luke thought about their last meeting and asked "Can we talk later about the conversation we had last week? I've got some more information about what we talked about and I'd like discuss it with you. I actually have an announcement to make later."

“Sure, I’d like that. What’s the announcement?” Sophia tried to pry it out of him, but he just smiled and said “You’ll just have to wait and see. Hopefully you will be a part of it.”

With that they sat down. Sophia tried not to think about them both on the beach somewhere in an exotic location, sipping cocktails and watching the sunset, like she has been doing all week since they last talked.

Sophia looked over at Ava and Ava winked at her with a knowing smile.

What was that about? Sophia thought to herself. Something is definitely going on here. I guess I’ll worry about that later. For now she was content to enjoy an evening full of mingling and fund raising.

The meal was fantastic and the drinks and conversations were flowing freely. After about an hour Ava got up to speak. She was holding in the emotion to try to get through her speech, but once it was over she broke down. Once the applause and tears died down from Ava’s speech it was Sophia’s turn. She confidently walked up to the podium and talked about what her daughter went through and how they beat this cancer thing. During her speech she was getting anxious, so she kept looking at Luke. He was smiling at her with such caring that he instantly made her feel calmer. Sophia was glad when it was over and she got a standing ovation. She just stood there in shock, but she was delighted that everyone enjoyed her speech.

As Sophia made her way back down to the speaker table Luke rushed up and gave her a big hug. Sophia was stunned. Never before had he shown her this kind of affection and she chalked it all up to being an emotional night for everyone.

“Great job Soph!” he told her. “I’m proud of you.”

“Thanks Luke... for keeping me calm,” Sophia grinned up at him and their eyes locked for a brief instant. She was in paradise in his arms at that moment. A paradise she didn’t ever want to end.

The final speaker was Luke. He gave many compliments to Ava and Sophia for their great stories. He sympathized with them on their suffering and pain, and expressed compassion and kindness for Ava’s loss. Then he spoke about the amazing opportunity they all had to participate in the lives of hundreds of children who could be helped with this new hospital wing. He was eloquent, sincere, and genuine and everyone was in awe.

Luke was wrapping up his speech when he said “And now I would like to make an announcement before I go.” He had everyone’s attention at this point.

“Many of you may not know that I have recently left my position at The Daily Times,” Luke continued amongst the whispers in the crowd. “I have been asked to head a team of correspondents to a small island in the Bahamas to investigate and report on a story. It seems there have been multiple disappearances of young women in the area that have not been explained. They have minimal reporting facilities in that area and are in need of some investigative aid. I have volunteered to head up this initiative and I will report back here to let you all know how we are progressing. I do have family in that part of the world, so I am looking forward to heading down there. Thank you for your continued support over the years and I look forward to returning when this story is wrapped up.”

Luke continued to thank everyone for attending the event and directed them on where to go to make their donations. As he made his way back to the table his eyes landed on Sophia.



“So, that’s your announcement huh?” she asked, a little devious smirk on her lips.

“That was it,” he replied with a smile. “Can I drive you home so we can discuss it?”

“Sure, let me just check with Ava to make sure since she brought me here, give me a minute,” she said as she turned and went over to where Ava was standing.

Ava had overheard the whole thing, so before Sophia could even get the words out Ava said “Go.” Then with a grin from ear to ear she hugged Sophia and told her to have fun.

“We are going to talk about this later,” Sophia whispered in Ava’s ear. “Do you hear me? Something is going on with you. I don’t know what it is, but I will find out.” Both ladies had smiles on their lips when they parted. It was a good evening.

Sophia walked back over to Luke and he walked her out of the main entrance. As they emerged from the building a limousine pulled up and she realized it was for them. She looked puzzled at Luke and all he said was “I like to ride in style.” Grinning, he helped her into the vehicle, scooted in beside her and closed the door.

Luke offered her another cocktail, but with what she already had this evening she felt she had to decline. Sophia was already feeling tipsy and thought she better keep her wits about her, especially in this expensive car with this particular gorgeous man.

“Tell me about this job. Are you seriously taking a team?” Sophia inquired.

“Yes, that is the plan. I will be taking three or four people to investigate these disappearances. My Uncle runs a resort on one of the islands in the Bahamas and asked me to come down and look into it. The locals are frightened and they have no real police department there except for on the mainland. There seems to be a pattern forming on the way these young women are vanishing without a trace. One of the people that will be going is my friend David Jackson who I have worked multiple stories with in the past. He is an exceptional investigator. The others are not locked in yet. That is unless you have thought about the offer I made last week about hiring you.” He paused assessing my reaction.

“Well, actually I have thought about it, very much in fact. And now that I hear the details of the trip I think it is a legitimate venture and a worthwhile project,” Sophia replied. “I think I would love to come with you.”

Luke exhaled a breath he didn’t even know he was holding. He was relieved that she accepted this position.

“Great! That makes me so happy. I will need someone with your focus and determination on the team. We can talk salary and benefits later. I know what you were making at the paper and I believe you won’t be disappointed,” Luke added.

“I just want you to know that I don’t want you to come along just as an editor,” Luke said. “I want you to help with the investigation too.”

“Luke, I appreciate that,” Sophia stated. “But even though I did finally get my journalism degree I haven’t used that side of my training for many years.”

“I know that, but I also know you have an eye for picking up details that other miss,” Luke replied enthusiastically. “I have seen it and that’s what I

need on this team. And you won't be alone; we'll all be looking at evidence together."

"OK, I'll give it a shot," Sophia said smiling, resolved to the fact that Luke will again be her boss, and that made her very happy indeed.

Luke looked at Sophia in that moment and finally let himself look at the beautiful woman she was. Not only tonight when she was a knock out, but every day since he has known her. He admired her strength and courage facing some of the challenges she has had. He did not know a lot, but he did know that she has had it rough over the years. She always persevered and did her job without complaints or objections. His heart swelled with pride at the thought of her going with him and the team. He could not help himself, he leaned in while looking into her eyes, and softly captured her awaiting lips in a gentle embrace and kiss.

Sophia didn't know if it was the cocktails or the pent up frustration of working for a man that you lust over, but she fell into that embrace with wanton obsession. Her heart ready to burst she reached for his neck with her hand and pulled him closer. This only made Luke's desire grow as he continued the kiss even deeper as their tongues finally met. Igniting Sophia's longing after so many years. After several minutes they both pulled away with dazed excitement. Neither believing what just happened they looked stunned into each other's eyes for a moment and both started giggling like teenagers.

"That was crazy!" they both exclaimed at the exact same time. Then giggled some more.

"You know?" Sophia said trying to pull herself back into reality.

"Yes?" said Luke sleepily.

“We had better keep things professional between us if you are going to be my boss again,” Sophia reminded him dryly.

“Oh, yes, of course, Miss Adams,” Luke giggled again.

“I’m serious!” she returned.

“OK, I’ll try Sophia, but I can’t make any promises after what I just felt. He said with a wink and a half smile. “But I will try, OK?”

“OK, deal,” she said and then thought curiously. “By the way, where are we going down in the Bahamas? You said it was a little Island.”

“Yes, Paradise Island...”

## Chapter 5

After a couple weeks of preparation and planning the team was getting under way. Immunizations received, passports delivered, job notices given, they were ready to leave. Luke had flown down immediately after the banquet to get started making contacts and to get accommodations ready for all of them.

Sophia was excited, because after days of talking to Ava about the trip Ava approached Luke about being the fourth member of the team. Ava really had no ties to The Daily Times and this was an opportunity she did not want to miss.

Luke jumped at the chance to have her help. Luke was one of the few people that knew who her father was, and those connections might come in handy at some point in the future. Plus she was a damn fine editor. Also, Ava and Sophia got along well together, so it was a good fit.

The three of them, Sophia, Ava and David were buckled in the plane awaiting take-off. Soon they would meet up with Luke and go over all of the evidence collected so far about the disappearances. They were to land on an air strip not far from the resort and get settled in before they all met for dinner. Everyone was excited with anticipation for the upcoming adventure.

They all hoped they could help to solve this mystery and get the missing girls home safe. There was also dread concerning the possibility that the girls were injured or already dead, but they tried not to think about that right now. They just tried to focus on getting there in one piece and getting started.

The group landed at the air strip tired and hungry and ready to relax at the resort. Luke drove over to pick them up in one of the two GMC SUV's he rented for them to use while on the Island. They rolled down the windows and

soaked in the warm tropical breezes and the fragrant smell of palm trees. They heard beach music playing while they were stopped at a traffic light and could feel the vibe of the island already.

“The Palace in Paradise is right up here on the left,” Luke told them. “My Uncle runs it, so we’ll be staying there and using it as our headquarters while we’re here. He has a conference room all set up for us that we can use for organizing evidence and regrouping.”

We pulled into a huge circular drive way and in front of us stood a majestic building grand enough for a queen. Its sprawling design stood at least fifteen stories tall and over looked the most breathtaking island they had ever seen. The building gleamed all shiny and sparkled in the bright sunlight. There were multiple swimming pools dotting the landscape and all around the resort was a pristine beach with beautiful powdered white sand. Sophia was overjoyed beyond words. She could not wait to explore every inch of this island.

Luke took them in to the front desk where they checked into their rooms. He showed them where the conference room was and said “Let’s meet back here at five o’clock then we’ll go to dinner, OK?” They all answered “Fine,” very tired from the trip and ready to relax.

As they all briefly looked around the conference room they saw multiple computers, printers and phones. There was a large board with pins to hang paperwork and a dry erase board. They had a few desks to use and also maps hanging on the walls along with a stocked refrigerator and a couch with lounge chairs. Just outside the sliding glass doors was a small private pool for relaxing. They were serious about this investigation. Someone pulled out all

the stops to make sure they had everything they needed to find out what is going on with these girls.

“Pretty nice, huh?” asked Luke.

“Oh yeah, this is awesome,” David replied.

“You guys go get some rest, unpack and shower and I’ll meet you back here soon,” Luke said as he pulled Sophia by the hand over to the side. “Let me walk you to your room, OK?”

“OK, sounds good,” said Sophia.

They reached their rooms on the tenth floor. They were spacious and comfortable and very clean. They each had their own room with a balcony.

“Here’s yours, Sophia,” Luke stated as he entered the room and told the others good-bye.

“See you guys at dinner,” said Sophia as she closed the door and the others mumbled their good byes.

Sophia walked over to the sliding glass door and went out onto the balcony. With the sun hitting her she grabbed the rail, closed her eyes, tipped her head back and inhaled deeply letting the light breeze hit her face. Oh yes, this was heaven. Luke walked to the door and just stood watching her with a grin on his face and pride in his heart. He was glad she was here. Sophia opened her eyes and looked down at the beach and glanced out into the water. She gasped! Sophia could see vast reefs with every shade of blue you could imagine. She could envision the coral teeming with colorful tropical fish. She smiled turning around hearing Luke behind her. She leaned back slowly against the rail, eyes on Luke, and finally exhaled. Sophia was in heaven. She had finally reached her happy place.

“This place is amazing,” Sophia said to Luke.

“Yes, it is paradise,” he chuckled. Getting the joke, she laughed too.

“So, did you have a good trip?” asked Luke while they were heading back inside the room.

“Yep, all in one piece and ready for a nap,” stated Sophia while trying to stay professional. She had been thinking a lot about how she was going to work with Luke after what they shared in the limo. She told herself that she could be professional if she had to, when all she wanted to do was jump straight into his arms.

“OK,” replied Luke. “I’ll let you rest. Call me if you need anything,” as he squeezed her hand in farewell. Sophia felt like screaming but just said “OK, Bye.” Looking dejected Luke left the room.

Sophia threw herself down on the sofa and blew out a long breath. “How am I going to do this?” she thought. If only he wasn’t so damn sexy.

Sophia got up and unpacked her suitcase into the drawers. She didn’t have much since she was going to buy most of what she needed here. There was no timetable given for this investigation, so no one knew how long they would be here. She took a long hot shower and curled up on the sofa for a little nap after setting the alarm on her phone. She had a dream about the beach...



## Chapter 6

Fully rested and dressed in her favorite flowered sundress and white sandals Sophia made her way down to the conference room at five o'clock. Luke was there organizing some materials he already had laid out when he saw her come in.

"Hello Sophia," he said. "You look very pretty this evening."

"Thanks," she said blushing. No one had told her she was pretty for a very long time.

"I'm just waiting on the rest of the group," he said as he heard both Ava and David walk in at the same time. "Hey guys!" they all said together and then laughed.

"Everyone hungry?" asked Luke. "My uncle has a fabulous chef that is cooking tonight. It'll be a buffet like you've never seen."

"Sounds good, I'm starved," David responded. Ava and Sophia basically echoed David's response.

Luke led them into the resort restaurant. It was pretty deserted at this early hour, but the buffet was all set up and ready to go. They found some seats just as the chef walked out to bring another dish for the buffet.

"Luke! Good to see you again?" the chef greeted him with a pat on the back and a firm hand shake.

"You too Hemi! How you doing? Keeping busy?" asked Luke

"Oh yes, definitely. The crowd will start drifting in here shortly once they get done playing on the beach. I'm glad you came in early so I can chat with you for a bit," replied the chef with a very strong islander accent.

“Guys, this is Hemi! He’s been working with my uncle for over 20 years. He’s originally from Hawaii. Hemi, this is Sophia, Ava and David. This is the team I was telling you about,” Luke explained.

“Glad to meet all of you,” Hemi answered shaking each of their hands firmly. “Good to have you here, and if I can help in any way just let me know. It’s a sad business all these disappearances. I’ll be glad when you all finally find out who’s responsible. I’m sure I’ll be seeing you around, so enjoy your dinner and help yourself,” Hemi said motioning to the buffet, which must be the cue to get started.

“Thanks Hemi,” said Luke. “We’ll definitely let you know if we need anything.”

“Bye Hemi, nice to meet you,” everyone said.

“Let’s eat!” Luke said as he reached for Sophia’s hand and they all got up to fill their plates with delicious island delicacies. She smiled at him and a knowing glance passed between the pair. They tried every kind of seafood you could think of including the local specialties of deep fried conch fritters and yellow fin tuna. There were fruits of every color and size, multiple pasta dishes and over a dozen deserts to choose from. Along with the buffet was a wine tasting table with a large variety of local wines from the vast reserves held here on the island.

“Wow! I’m going to get fat staying here,” exclaimed Ava.

“We’ll just have to work it off on the beach,” answered David as he looked at her and grinned slyly. Ava blushed and looked away.

David was a very handsome man. He had been friends with Luke since college and worked closely with him over the years. He was over six foot tall with rugged outdoorsy looks, blonde, tan and athletic. Ava definitely wanted

to find out his story. He wasn't wearing a ring, so he must be divorced, but she wanted to make sure before anything happened. He was certainly flirting with her, but that did not always mean a guy was single. She had been through that before and had learned her lesson. After a failed marriage she tried to date, but gave up and she decided to let love find her instead of chasing after it. Even though she was only in her mid-forties and still attractive she was content to be single, for now.

"Well, maybe we will," she answered him with a smile.

After everyone was sufficiently stuffed, they were just sitting around drinking some native island beer and chatting. Two men came up to their table and greeted Luke. He stood up and shook hands with the older man while saying, "Hey everyone, this is my Uncle Max," and slapping him on the back.

"Hi Max," everyone said.

"Max is my dad's brother." Luke told them. "He's been running this resort since I was a kid. We used to come down here every year for vacation. My Aunt Irene is around here somewhere too. She handles the kitchen and housekeeping staff."

"Nice to meet you kids," he said as if we were teenagers. Granted he was over seventy.

"About time for you to retire isn't it Uncle Max?" asked Luke tickled with himself.

"This is retirement, wouldn't you say, son?" Max laughed. "Look around! Why would I want to be anywhere else?"

"True!" replied Luke knowing his uncle would never leave this island. "It is definitely a little slice of heaven."

“Yes it is,” said Max turning to the person he had with him. “This here is Luther Black; he is my assistant here at the resort. He’s been with me a couple years now. He handles basically everything I do. For the most part Luther oversees security and maintenance, but when I need help he pitches in with other areas too.”

“Nice to meet you Luther,” David got up to shake his hand. Ava and Sophia both nodded and said hello.

“So, you’re all here to solve this investigation, huh?” Luther asked getting down to business.

“We hope to,” replied David.

“Well, anything you need I’m here to help,” declared Luther. “We’ve got video surveillance footage you can use if you need to, and security personnel we can loan out if necessary. Just let me know.”

“Thanks! That’s very helpful,” replied Luke gratefully. “If I could look at the video from two weeks before each disappearance that would be great.”

“Sure, I’ll send you the links to the surveillance system,” answered Luther.

Luther was about the same age as the team and looked like a shorter version of Kevin Spacey. He was balding on top with numerous wrinkles from the sun, but he seemed eager to help, if he could. At this point the team could use all the help they could get.

“Enough business for now,” declared Max. “Who’s up for an island tour...?”

## Chapter 7

Luther had to get back to work, so the team left in the red SUV's with Uncle Max up front as the tour guide and Luke driving. Sophia, Ava and David all sat on the middle bench. The good thing about the SUV is that it could seat up to 8 people, so it was no problem to get everyone in one vehicle to enjoy the tour.

"Take a right up here as you leave the resort Luke, and follow that road for a bit," Max said as he started to give us some history about the island.

"You know this island has some dubious history involving sheltering pirates and rum smugglers!" Max announced proudly. "Blackbeard himself was supposedly living here at one time! But that was a long time ago. Now it's mainly just a peaceful island community that caters to the tourists mostly."

"Does it ever rain?" asked Ava. "It's so beautiful here."

"Almost never!" answered Max. "We have about 300 clear days a year! So make sure to always have your sunglasses, because it's always sunny in paradise! And if you like to swim the average water temperature is eighty degrees."

"Wow!" exclaimed Ava. "I like that."

"Me too," Sophia chimed in laughing. "Sounds divine."

"Pull up right over here Luke and stop," said Max.

"This is where one of the James Bond movies was filmed. Right over there," he pointed. "There were four altogether, but this is the spot with the big explosion scene! It was quite the excitement for a while," said Max humorlessly remembering the streets shut down and all the movie equipment everywhere.

“OK, keep going Luke,” Max said as he continued giving us lots of interesting information as we drove through the streets and around the different resorts.”

“That one there is the Harbour Club,” remarked Max. “It has some fabulous restaurants inside. Make a right here Luke and follow this around. This hotel here is The Ocean Club, folks. They have a first rate golf course if anyone is interested while you’re here.”

“Oh, really? I might have to check that out!” exclaimed David. “Fancy a round Luke?”

“Sure, I’ve got some clubs I keep at the resort we can use. I’m kind of rusty, so don’t beat me too bad, OK?” Luke chuckled.

“I’m not making any promises,” David snickered. “Maybe we can make it interesting with a little wager and the girls can keep score.”

“Sounds like fun,” said Ava.

“OK, it’s a date,” replied Luke as he looked in the rear view mirror and smiled at Sophia.

“That there is the Beach Tower,” said Max. “A very romantic spot” he winked. “You can see the whole island from up there.”

“Cool,” said Ava glancing at David and then quickly looking away before he saw her.

“If you’re looking for something to do in the evenings there are casinos, shopping, and plenty of night life,” Max stated. “But you must be careful. There are dangers also, and places you should not be. And now with these disappearances going on it’s just not safe. Smugglers Beach is a known spot for drug dealings and other disreputable activity. Steer clear of that place, you hear?” Max demanded looking concerned for all of us. “And its best if the

ladies go out with an escort until we get this investigation closed,” he added with the look of worry and apprehension in his face as he makes them promise to heed his warning. It suddenly got very real.

“There have been 4 young women between the ages of 18 and 22 that have disappeared from two different locations on the island,” said Max grimly. “Two of them were here at this beach right here. Pull over Luke and let’s all get out.” Ava and Sophia looked at each other anxiously.

They all got out and walked over to retaining wall between the parking area and the beach. “This is Honeymoon Cove,” said Max. “It is a favorite spot for sweethearts, but also walkers and shell collectors. The seclusion and the tides make it an ideal location for solitude. See that rise over there? There are some small cliffs that conceal a series of caves. Supposedly there aren’t enough policemen on staff on the mainland to send someone out to take a look through them, even though they said they have opened an investigation. I’m sure there could be some valuable clues in there somewhere.”

“That’s a good place to start Uncle Max,” Luke said excitedly. “We’ll have to start a list of areas we want to check.”

“Well, the other spot is just down the road. Let’s get back in the car; it’ll be quicker to get there, even though the beaches are somewhat connected,” said Max.

Once they reached the next beach they could see where they were connected when the tide was out. “When the tide comes in it virtually closes off this section,” said Max. “It is Sunrise Beach and another two of the girls went missing from here. Look that way, The Palace is just right around that bend.” They all looked up and could see the top few floors of the resort over the cliff.

“It’s getting late, we should head back,” Max said as he started walking back to the car. “You all had better get an early start on this investigation. The sooner we can wrap this up the better.”

“Thanks for the tour,” David replied as they all followed him back to the car. “This gives us some good information to get started on. Hey Max? Can you tell me what all of the girls were doing on the island? Were they tourists?”

“No,” Max replied quietly. “They all worked at The Palace...”



## Chapter 8

At seven sharp the next morning the team was assembled in the conference room, large coffees in hand, to get started on this investigation. Hemi had brought in several platters earlier, piled high with danishes, muffins, croissants, and fruit for the group. Everyone had gotten a plate and were enjoying the food.

“So let’s get started at the beginning,” began Luke as he took a bite of a danish and smiled deliciously. “I want to go over everything we have so far. Then we can decide how to proceed, make some assignments and go from there.

Just then Max walked in looking worn out. “Good morning team,” he said.

“Hi Max,” they replied.

“I hope you don’t mind, but I would like to sit in for a little while Luke, in case you have some questions I can answer,” he explained.

“Sure Uncle Max that would be helpful,” answered Luke. “Didn’t you get much sleep? You don’t look so good.”

“No, I haven’t been sleeping well since this all started and your Aunt Irene is inconsolable with all these girls missing. She is troubled that they all worked here and thinks there must be a connection,” said Max as he took a seat.

“Well if there is a connection, we are going to find it! Right team?” exclaimed Luke.

“That’s right!” they all responded enthusiastically.

“OK,” Luke began again. “The first woman that went missing was Christine Blakely. She is eighteen years old and had been employed at The Palace for about a year.” He turned to hang an 8x10 photo of her on the board

that Irene had printed on the computer from her employee name tag photo ID. She was a cute girl with long brown hair and brown eyes. He then started a timeline on the dry erase board to coincide with the time she was last seen. "Max can you help with when she went missing?"

"Yes, Christine was last seen walking towards Sunset Beach late afternoon about four months ago," Max answered. "The staff likes to go over to that beach on their time off. It's less crowded then our own Paradise Beach and more secluded. Another employee said she saw her leaving and reported it when she never returned."

"What was the name of that employee?" asked Sophia.

"Her name is Lea Monroe," Max said sadly looking at down at the table. "She was actually the second one to disappear."

Everyone looked at him in surprise. "Seems like more than a coincidence," said David. They all agreed.

Luke took out her photo and hung it on the board and added her name to the timeline. She was a tall blonde with blue eyes and very pretty. "When was that Uncle Max?" he asked.

"About 3 months ago," replied Max. "She is twenty-two years old and was like a protector to the other girls working here. Even though she was young she was very mature and acted motherly to them. She didn't have much family to speak of. Come to think of it, none of the girls that went missing had family in this area. Does that seem odd?" he asked looking puzzled, just now thinking if that fact.

"It's definitely something to put down under similarities, but we'll get to that after a while," answered Luke.

“OK,” said Max. “She had worked here about eight months and had mentioned to Irene that she was heading out to collect seashells at Honeymoon Cove. It was early evening, maybe around five o’clock. She didn’t check back in that evening and Irene got worried and came and told me about it. Since Lea lives here we like to keep track of them at night also. Irene usually does a walk through the living quarters before she heads home every night.”

“Do all of the staff live here?” Ava asked questioningly.

“All of the ones that disappeared did, but not all of the staff live here,” Max stated. “Some of our employees commute locally. We do have living quarters for people who have no family in the area or can’t afford to own or rent on the island, though. As you can guess a hotel of this size has over 400 employees ranging from kitchen help and housekeeping to landscaping and maintenance. We house about twenty of those at the moment.”

“OK, good, thanks for that information Uncle Max,” said Luke excitedly jotting down some notes. “Are the women’s room still available?”

“Oh yes,” said Max. “We have not touched anything just in case they return.”

“OK, thanks,” replied Luke.

Picking up another picture Luke told us about the next women that went missing. “This is Bella Francis. She is nineteen and went missing a couple months ago. She worked at the Palace for about six months before that. Max, do have anything to add about her?”

“Yes, a maintenance employee saw her walking towards Honeymoon Beach about four o’clock that afternoon,” he answered. “He said hello to her and she told him she was going for a swim. He only mentioned it to me

because I was walking around the grounds that evening asking people if they had seen her. She was a very nice girl, but very shy.”

The photo showed a demure young woman with very dark brown curly hair and green eyes. She was very pretty. Luke added her name to the time line.

“The last person missing is Susanna Yvonne,” Luke continued as he hung her picture and wrote her name on the time line. She had blonde hair and blue eyes. “She is eighteen years old and has worked here for three months and disappeared a little under a month ago. Max?”

“Same story as the others I’m afraid,” Max replied sadly. “She went out to Sunset Beach early in the evening to take a walk and never came back. It’s just a shame! Max whimpered on the edge of tears. “We have to find out who is responsible for these poor missing girls.”

“We will Uncle Max,” exclaimed Luke as he went around the table to comfort him. “We have some of the top people here to work on this. We will investigate all the information and uncover who is behind this, OK?”

“OK son,” answered Max quietly as he looked up into Luke’s eyes. “But most important, will you bring them back?”

Luke looked around the table pausing at each team member individually, especially Sophia. He felt confident that they could solve this. The unknown variable was if the women were still alive or not.

He remembered Ava and Sophia’s compassion at the banquet concerning their own daughters and knew they were both a good addition to this team. And David was tenacious when it came to uncovering facts.

He thought for a minute and said to his uncle “We will do our damndest...”

## Chapter 9

Max had some work he had to take care of so he left the team to discuss the investigation while he went up to the front desk. They were instructed to call him up there if they needed anything. Everyone had gotten a full belly from the delightful breakfast, and with a refill of their coffee, they were ready to continue.

“Let’s make a list of the similarities,” Luke declared as he pulled out a marker to make some notes on the board. “Anyone?”

“The thing that jumps out at me first,” said Sophia. “Is that there are no dead bodies.”

“Good point!” exclaimed Luke as he wrote it on the board. “No bodies and no evidence of death. That’s a good thing.”

“The obvious similarity is that all of the women worked at The Palace,” Ava pointed out. “All under a year and with no family in the area.”

“Yes,” said Luke while writing.

“They were all young and pretty,” David added. “And they all went missing in the late afternoon or evening.”

“That’s right, anything else?” Luke asked.

“One thing that really bothers me is that the first disappearance was about four months ago and there has been one every month since then,” stated Sophia. “That makes me really scared that there could be another one shortly since the last one was just under a month ago.”

“You are exactly right, Sophia, we need to crack this as soon as possible,” Luke said imploringly as he finished writing all of that on the board.

“Let’s move on to some assignments,” Luke said. “The first thing we need is for someone to interview Irene about the women and look at their rooms.”

We need to find out about their families, where they're from, work they did here, boyfriends, etc., anything that will help."

"I'll do that," stated Sophia.

"OK," replied Luke. "I've already set up an appointment with Irene for nine o'clock this morning, so maybe check out the rooms first. Next we need someone to start looking at the video surveillance footage. Max had Luther send me the digital links to the system already, so we can get right in."

"I can do that," said Ava. She was a wiz at anything electronic.

"OK," replied Luke. "Make sure to look at two weeks before each disappearance. Look for people they were with, any altercations, anything out of the ordinary involving any of the ladies, OK?"

"You got it boss," Ava chuckled as Luke smiled at her. "I'm on it."

"David, if it's ok with you I would like us to go check out the beaches and caves to see if we can find anything," Luke said next.

"OK, yah, sure thing, we can do that," David replied. "I'll stop by my room and grab some boots and flashlights.

"OK, team! Let's get on it and find some clues today," Luke called out.

Everyone agreed and they got down to business. They made a plan to meet back here when the tasks were completed.

Ava settled in at one of the desks and logged into the security system with the passwords supplied by Luther. She took out her note pad that had all the dates from the time line on it and started watching the videos from two weeks prior to Christine's disappearance.

Luke and David took off in the red SUV. They made it to the Honeymoon Cove in just a few minutes, parked the car, and walked out onto the beach. It was relatively deserted and the beach was surrounded by trees and rock

outcroppings and very secluded. There were many possible spots for someone to hide if foul play was involved. It was small compared to the Paradise Beach at the resort, but still stretched out quite a ways. The tide was out right now so the connecting Sunset Beach was accessible. They looked all around over there too. They walked along the water and looked out at the cruise ships anchored offshore. Luke remembered these from when he visited as a kid. Some ships would stay anchored out there for months at a time, his uncle would tell him.

David and Luke didn't find anything along the water out of the ordinary, so they walked around the back edge of the beaches where there were trails heading off into the woods. An eerie feeling came over Luke knowing this might be a spot that one of the women disappeared. They walked up and down a few trails, but found nothing to help their investigation. They did however find multiple spots where lovers could tuck in for a brief interlude in private. By the looks of the foliage and trampled grass the area got a lot of use.

After looking around that area for nearly an hour they decided to look in the caves. They climbed up the slight elevation to reach the opening of one cave. Turning on their flashlights they proceeded to navigate through multiple off shoots of the same cave. Some wound around back to the same spot and others went into the cliff for quite a ways before stopping. They were about to call it quits when they entered a section that opened up into a little room about one hundred yards from the main opening.

"Well this is interesting," muttered Luke.

"Yes, very," replied David.

The room was about 20 feet across and had rocks situated around a fire pit for seating. Other than that the room was bare. They were shining the

flashlights around each rock when David said “Hey, come here and look at this Luke. There are multiple wrappers on the floor behind this rock, but look. They have the logo from The Palace on them.”

“They look like granola bars,” exclaimed Luke.

They were careful not to disturb the evidence by touching it very much, so Luke tucked them into his jacket pocket and zipped it up.

“Could be from some tourists messing around in here or just some kids,” stated Luke. “But we’ll check it out.”

They decided to spend some extra time checking out this room just in case any of the girls happened to be in here at any time. They hadn’t found anything for a while and David had an idea to move the bigger rocks around. It took both of them to move just one of them over, but they didn’t see anything of interest. Then they started moving around the smaller rocks circling the fire pit when something sparkled when the flashlight hit it. Luke reached down and brought up a gold chain that was stuck between the rocks at the edge of the pit.

“Wow, look at this,” Luke said while shining the light on it to get a better look. “It’s a woman’s bracelet and it has the initials of L.M. on it...”



## Chapter 10

Sophia had gone to the front desk to talk to Max about how to locate the women's living quarters. He was done with his work, so he told her he would walk her over to that building. She didn't really have time to do a thorough search before her interview with Irene, but she at least wanted to see where the building was and walk through at least one room if possible.

As they walked across the grounds the living quarters were located behind the main restaurant facility. It was a clean and well maintained building and they went in through the front entrance. There was a small reception and sitting area that Max explained was a common space that everyone could use.

The building was a two story structure with fifteen rooms on each floor. Max told her that they had a policy that the men were assigned to the first floor and women were on the second. He unlocked a door and took Sophia into an empty room on the first floor and explained that all of the rooms looked the same. The room was bigger than she thought it would be. It had a double bed with a desk on one side and a little kitchenette on the other. The attached bathroom was roomy and pleasant with natural light streaming through the skylight. It was very nice.

Sophia walked back into the main space while looking at her watch. She had better get over to Irene's office, but before she went she asked Max "Is each room kept locked when occupied?"

"Yes," he answered. "Each employee has their own key, but Irene keeps copies in case they lock themselves out or lose their key and I have a master key to all of them."

“OK, thanks,” Sophia replied. “Could you possibly show me the way to Irene’s office?”

“Yes, right this way,” he answered while locking the door and motioning to the exit.

Irene’s office was back at the main resort.

Max knocked on the office door and opened it slightly.

“Ok to come in hon?” he called out to his wife.

“Yes dear, come on in,” Irene answered.

“I brought you a visitor,” He said while ushering Sophia into the office. “Sophia meet my wife Irene, Irene this is Sophia Adams. She is on the investigation team with Luke.”

Irene stood up and walked around the desk to greet Sophia. Sophia held out her hand expecting to shake the woman’s hand, but Irene reached out and circled the woman in her arms and gave her a genuine hug.

“I am so glad to have you here Sophia,” Irene whispered in her ear before pulling away from her and taking her hands in her own warmly. “I have heard great thing about you from Luke. He really does admire you, you know?” she revealed with a smile.

Sophia was astounded “I had no idea, but thank you,” she responded with a smile. “There is nowhere else I’d rather be right now. I really want to help with this search.”

The first thing Sophia noticed about Irene was her friendly and down to earth personality. She looked to be in her late sixties, which would make her younger than Max. She was a very stylish woman who was impeccably dressed and put together. Her hair and make-up looked professionally done yet she seemed very gracious and approachable, not aloof or superior.

“I appreciate you meeting with me,” resumed Sophia. “If you don’t mind, can we talk about the women who went missing?”

“Absolutely!” exclaimed Irene. “However I can help, please, just let me know. I feel dreadful about this whole business. I am so worried about those girls. We are like family and this tragedy is just heart breaking.”

“I understand,” said Sophia sensitively as she got out audio recorder she has purchased for this trip and laid it on the desk. “And I hope we can bring them all back safely.”

After turning on the recorder Sophia slipped into her interviewer mode and started asking Irene some questions about each girl.

“Tell me about Christine if you would,” she said. “Where she was from and about her family.”

“Sure,” Irene began. “Christine had just turned eighteen not long ago. She was a referral to us from a hotel on the mainland where she only worked for a few weeks. She confided in me not long ago that she had lied about her age when coming to the island over a year ago. She was a run away from America and had a rough childhood. She was abused by someone in her family and just needed to get away. She told me that she was glad to have a fresh start and was very grateful for this opportunity.”

“Can you tell me where she was referred from?” asked Sophia.

“Yes, the Graycliff Hotel,” Irene replied. “Does that matter?”

“Just trying to get the most information I can, Irene,” Sophia answered. “So you don’t know anything about her family and if they are looking for her?”

“No, I don’t,” Irene said. “I never really thought of that before. I just assumed since she was abused that it might be better for her to live in secrecy, if you know what I mean.”

“She had a room here, correct,” Sophia continued.

“Yes,” answered Irene. “She was always very quiet and kept to herself mostly.”

“What did she do here?” Sophia asked.

“She was in housekeeping and she cleaned guest rooms,” responded Irene.

“Did you ever have any complaints about her stealing or anything?” Sophia asked.

“No! Never!” called out Irene looking upset.

“I’m very sorry,” Sophia said calmly looking into Irene’s eyes and leaning towards the desk touching her hand. “It’s nothing personal; I just have to get the whole picture about these women’s lives, OK?”

“Yes, I understand and I’m sorry,” Irene answered back. “We’ve never had any complaints about any of the girls for any reason. They were all good employees.”

“OK, that’s good to know,” Sophia said optimistically.

“Did Christine have a boyfriend?”

“I don’t think so,” Irene said thinking about the question. “We have a no fraternizing policy here at the resort, so it is unlikely that any of the girls were seeing anyone that worked here and I don’t believe any of them were seeing boys from the island either. I don’t remember anyone ever hanging around or showing up to pick any of them up. Of course I don’t have eyes everywhere, so it would be hard to know for sure. I just don’t have any knowledge of that at this point.”

“OK, that’s fair,” Sophia added. “Can we talk about Lea?”

“Sure,” Irene responded. “Lea was the oldest of the girls that went missing. She was so beautiful. She could have been a model with that long blonde hair and blue eyes. I put her at the front desk to help me out. She was a smart one that girl, definitely manager material. Lea was originally from Canada, but did a lot of traveling after her Mom and Dad died in a car accident when she was 18. She told me that her life ended that day, so she just wandered around trying to find peace. She was an only child and had no family to speak of. I think she found comfort here helping the other girls. They confided in her and she was very protective of all of them. She came down this way on a cruise ship and just never left. I hired her after someone talked to her on the mainland about working here and she showed up to fill out an application.”

“Do you know who approached her?” Sophia asked.

“I don’t. Lea just said it was a man and he gave her my name,” Irene said.

“OK,” Sophia said. “How about Bella?”

“Bella was my little wall flower,” began Irene. “She was so shy and timid, and she was just a tiny thing. She was so cute with her curly brown hair. She worked the morning shift in the kitchen and helped out at banquets too. She came from a resort in France that we get a large supply of wine from. She didn’t have much in the way of work history but came highly recommended from her employer. She said she was an orphan and never knew her parents, but I don’t know that for sure. Bella was a hard worker and kept to herself mostly after her shifts, but she sure loved to swim and lay on the beach.”

Sophia smiled. “She sounds like a very nice woman. Can I ask the name of the referral resort?”

“It was Château de Prye in Burgundy” replied Irene.

“OK good. What can you tell me about Susanna?”

“Susanna hasn’t worked here very long, so I don’t know much about her,” Irene said. “She works in housekeeping. She’s a very outgoing girl and made friends easy with the other employees. A few would always go out shopping together or to the beach. She was a direct hire from a facility we have dealings with in Sweden, Halstad Resort, I believe. She seemed very sweet. I never really had a chance to get to know her or ask about her family or anything.”

“Is it normal to get so many transfers from other places?” asked Sophia questioning this information.

“Well, most of the time we have local people applying for jobs, which we still do, but occasionally we have received transfers from other hotels in the last couple of years,” replied Irene.

As Sophia leaned up to turn off the recorder she said “Thank you Irene, you have been very helpful. If I could ask you one favor, though, I’d like to get keys to all of the girl’s rooms, so I can search their belongings for clues? Irene looked at Sophia very seriously and uttered “I’d be happy to give them to you Sophia, but I’m afraid they are all missing...”

## Chapter 11

Ava was going cross-eyed watching the computer screen all morning. She decided it was time for a break. After refilling her coffee and getting a snack she walked around the room a couple times. Something was irritating her about the video footage for some reason. She rubbed her neck and stretched her arms while pondering what was bothering her. Seated back behind the computer she thought she would give it another try.

Ava hadn't seen anything of interest concerning the first three women within the two week time frame and was starting on the fourth. As she started reviewing the footage from Susanna she noticed something odd. The time stamp was skipping in places. That's it! She thought to herself. She checked back on the previous video of the other missing girls and she was correct! There were multiple periods of time that were missing from the surveillance.

How could that be she wondered? Maybe faulty equipment or bad reception, or maybe someone deleted it! She gasped as that thought entered her mind. After considering the implications of this she had an idea. Maybe I'll get lucky if I look back further than two weeks. With that idea in mind she set to work and was rewarded.

Ava started about a month before Christine disappearance and worked her way forward. About three and a half weeks before Christine's disappearance she found something that might be of interest. Christine was walking through the lobby towards the elevator and a young man with brown hair was slowly walking behind her. It looked suspicious, so Ava watched it in slow motion to see what was happening. She was starting to get worried by what looked like an abduction, but then she realized the man had turned

Christina around and held both of her hands right in front of the elevator. They looked into each other's eyes deeply and smiled. Ava printed that shot.

The next footage Ava thought might be helpful was a few weeks before Susanna went missing. It showed her outside the front of the resort talking to a tall blonde man standing beside a white car. Lea reached up and touched his face and went around and jumped in the car. The camera on the lamp post beside the driveway captured a great shot of both of their faces. That was the second shot Ava printed.

Ava was shocked yet delighted to learn about this discovery. It made her worry though, that someone in this resort might know more than they are letting on, but whom? She settled back in at the computer, coffee in hand, and started reviewing more of the video footage.

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Meanwhile, Sophia was trying to find Max. She was puzzled as to why the spare keys to each room would be missing. They had either been misplaced or someone has taken them, but why?

Sophia checked at the front desk, but Max wasn't there. The woman working there told her that Max was in the kitchen talking to Hemi. Sophia thanked her and headed to the dining room. Upon entering she saw Max talking to Hemi by the buffet, so she went to say hello.

"Hello Sophia! How are you?" Max said surprised to see her.

"I'm good, thanks. Hi Hemi," she smiled.

"Hi hon! You looking for lunch? We were just discussing options for the buffet," replied Hemi. "I saw David and Luke take off earlier, you think they'll be back to eat soon?"



“I’m not sure. They went out to the beach to look around. We are supposed to meet back here later,” Sophia said to Hemi then directed the rest of her question to Max. “Is it ok if I talk to you Max?”

“Yes, definitely Sophia, what’s going on?” he asked taking her by the elbow and directing her to a quiet corner.

“I was talking to Irene earlier about the girls and wanting to get the spare keys to their rooms. She said all four of the spare keys are missing. Did you know about that?” Sophia inquired.

“No, I didn’t!” Max seemed surprised. “I wonder when that happened. I will talk to her about it. If you’d like I can go to the rooms with you and open them with my master key.”

“I would appreciate that, thank you,” said Sophia. “Who else knows you have a master key?”

“Just Irene,” Max stated. “I received it about three years ago when we had all the locks changed in that building and I never told anyone that I had it except her.”

“Can we go over there now?” she asked. “I’d like to look through the rooms and take some pictures before they guys get back.”

“Yes, let’s go,” Max replied as they said their good byes to Hemi and left the dining room.

“See you back here for lunch,” Hemi called out after them...

## Chapter 12

The first room Max unlocked was Christine's. Sophia went in cautiously.

"I'll go unlock the other rooms while you look around," Max said.

"OK, sounds good, thanks," Sophia answered.

Christine's room was pretty messy. Not ran-sacked messy, but teen-ager messy. Clothes were thrown on the floor and empty wrappers and food all over the place. Sophia poked around in the mess to see if anything looked like a clue, but she didn't really know what to look for. She went into the bathroom and there was make up all over the counter and wet towels on the floor. "This room's a mess," she thought to herself. She left the bathroom and walked around the bed and sat by the pillow. Just then Max poked in his head to let her know all the rooms were unlocked and that he would be waiting for her down the hall.

Sophia said "OK," then she proceeded to open the bedside table to look at the contents. Nothing looked out of the ordinary. She moved a couple things around and came across a piece of paper that was sticking up. She picked it up and opened it, it was a note. It said "Please meet me for a walk on our beach at 4:30.... our little secret!" with a little smiley face. "Wow, what was this? And who was it from?" she asked herself quietly. Irene had said that none of the girls had boyfriends. This was important she decided. She opened up a bag that she had brought to put evidence in and sealed it up and labeled it. Then she snapped a few pictures of the room and made her way on the Lea's room.

The first thing Sophia noticed when she entered Lea's room was that it was immaculate. Not one thing was out of place and everything was put away. The room was decorated very chic and sophisticated and even the bathroom

was neat and tidy. There wasn't anything to suggest a struggle in here or even to suggest foul play.

Just like in Christine's room Sophia opened the bedside table. She found a wallet and a cell phone. Tucked into a little pocket of the wallet was a small picture of two young adults holding a little girl, presumably Christine's parents. They looked like a very happy family. Not finding anything else that looked important and knowing Luke would want to take a look at the phone; she put it in a bag with the wallet and sealed it, then labeled it. Sophia then took a few pictures of the room and headed over to Bella's room.

Walking through the door of Bella's room, Sophia thought the room looked relatively clean. Some clothes were on the chair, but for the most part things looked tidy. She did notice, however, the absence of any personal décor other than a framed picture of a large family and a bible on the desk. "That's really odd," thought Sophia. Irene said that Bella had told her she was an orphan. So who was this family? She took some pictures of it to show Luke later and then thumbed through a few pages of the bible. It had someone's family history in the front. Sophia took some pictures of that too. Also tucked in the front of the book was a photo of a young handsome man with blonde hair. Sophia thought that might be useful so she took a picture of it on her phone and replaced the picture. Then she moved on to Susanna's room.

Susanna's room had the least amount of items in it as far as clothing and décor than all of them. She had been here the shortest time of all the missing women so that was understandable. Sophia had thought that Susanna must not have had time yet to go shopping or to decorate. She walked into the bathroom and saw a large bag/purse on the counter. It was loaded with make-up and brushes, and girly type primping products. Sophia looked through

some of the pockets in the bag and pulled out a note card. It said” Let’s take a walk in your favorite spot. I’ll meet you at 5. Don’t tell anyone. We don’t want to get in trouble. \*smiley face\* See you soon.”

“Oh, no!” whispered Sophia. “Not another one.” What was going on here she thought. She put the note in a bag and labeled it and went in search of Max. She saw him at the end of the hall talking to a few girls. They were questioning him about what Sophia was doing in the rooms.

“I’m done Max if you want to lock up the rooms,” Sophia indicated.

“OK. Can I walk you back to the conference room when I’m done?” asked Max. “I’ve got something I need to talk to you about.”

“Sure I’ll wait right here,” Sophia answered.

Max came back shortly and they started walking out of the building.

“What did you want to talk about Max?” Sophia asked.

“Well, I was talking to some of the girls and they thought it was important that I should know that Bella was seen sneaking a tall blonde man out of her room about a week before she went missing...”

## Chapter 13

Luke and David were back in the conference room talking to Ava when Sophia and Max walked in.

“Hello everyone!” said Sophia excitedly, obviously glad to see them.

“Hi Soph,” said Luke as he went over and patted her on the back. Ava saw this and just giggled at them. “Hi Sophia, how are you?” Ava asked.

“Good, I’ve got a lot of stuff to share with the team,” she replied.

“So do we,” said David enthusiastically.

“Hold on, first let’s all go over to the buffet and grab a plate and bring it back here to eat. Then we can get started going over everything. They all agreed.

When they walked over to the dining room it was pretty cleared out since actual lunch hours were coming to a close. Hemi was back out by the buffet checking on low items and cleaning up a little.

“Good! You guys made it. I was wondering if you’d show up,” Hemi said smiling at them. “There’s still some good stuff left so help yourselves.”

“Thanks Hemi,” Luke said. “We are going to fix a plate and take it into the conference room to eat if that’s ok.”

“Sure” Hemi replied. “Just grab the main stuff and I’ll bring in a tray of deserts for later.”

“Thanks!” they all said.

Hemi really outdid himself on lunch today. It looked delicious. He made lemon peppered tuna with cannelloni and stone crab. There was coconut mango chicken and seared grouper and a huge assortment of vegetables and fruit. Not to mention the tempting sweets and treats.

We thanked Hemi generously, made our plates, and went back to the conference room where Max was setting out soft drinks for everyone. He was going to sit in to see what we had discovered today and help if necessary.

After we got settled and started eating Luke reported on their visit to the beach between taking bites. He was about finished with his lunch and got up to make a few notes on the board. He then told us about the granola bar wrappers and put them on the table. Then he pulled out the bracelet with the L.M. on it and we were all in disbelief. He told us about going through the caves and the little room deep inside. He wrote on the board under Lea Monroe about the bracelet that could possibly be hers.

“That’s odd about those wrappers,” said Max.

“Why is that,” said David.

“We only sell those in one place at the resort and that is a vending machine outside of the maintenance building,” he answered. “We get them for the crew to take while they’re doing landscaping and different projects.”

“OK, we’ll have to check that out,” said Luke as he wrote that information on the board. “It might be a good place to show the photos around.”

Just then Hemi wheeled in a cart with more deserts on it then we could eat in a week. It looked fabulous. “We had plenty left over, so I wanted to give you a variety,” he said. We thanked him again and he left the room as we all got up to get desert.

“Ava?” called out Luke. “Did you find anything?”

“Well I didn’t at first,” Ava said. Then she started telling them about the time stamp issue she found during the two weeks prior to each disappearance; and the decision to go back a month. The she played them the two videos she found of Christine and Susanna and showed them the photos.

“Are you suggesting that someone deleted partial images of the footage?” questioned Max looking at the photos in surprise.

“I’m not suggesting that. There may be another explanation,” said Ava.” I just know that the time stamp skipped multiple times before each disappearance by as much as 5 minutes of missing video. We will have to agree on what we think that means.”

“Do you know either of these men, Uncle Max?” asked Luke.

“No I don’t. It might be someone local, but if it’s an employee, depending on how long they have worked here, I may not have met them yet,” answered Max. “I just can’t even imagine all of this.”

“I still have some more video to look at, so I will let you know if I find anything else,” Ava commented.

“OK keep digging. Great job Ava that was good work,” replied Luke as he hung up the photos under Christine and Susanna on the board.

“Sophia, what have you found?” Luke asked her with a smile.

“Well I might have found some evidence to support Ava’s findings on the video plus some other interesting clues,” Sophia answered

Sophia first told them all about her meeting with Irene and the missing keys; and about Max having a master key, but no one knowing it.

“That’s more than a coincidence,” said Luke. “Uncle Max, how many people would know Irene has spare keys to all the rooms?”

“The number would be unlimited,” Max replied. “All the residents in that building knew, plus whoever they told, plus security personnel.”

Luke made some notes on the board as Sophia told them that Irene stated none of the women had boyfriends to her knowledge; and that there was a fraternization policy with the staff. She also told the team about all of the

referrals. Sophia then put all the bags she had collected on the table and described each item and where it came from including the notes.

“Wow, this is huge!” exclaimed Luke. “So, the note in Christine’s room could be from the young brown haired man with her in the elevator photo, and Susanna’s note could be from her tall blonde in the car photo. The fact that the one note said ‘we don’t want to get in trouble’ might mean it’s from another employee. Good work Sophia! We just need to find out who they are.”

Then Sophia got out her phone and had Ava print off the pictures she took of the rooms, the family photo in Bella’s room and the information in the bible. After the pictures were printed and lying on the table Sophia asked Max to relay what he heard from the staff at the living quarter building about Bella sneaking out a tall blonde.

“That’s the same guy!” yelled Ava as she jumped up and grabbed the photo of the blond man from Bella’s bible and rushed to the board.

“The same guy she was sneaking out?” asked David.

“No, the same guy in the car with Susanna!” she exclaimed as they all look at each picture and decided Ava was correct. Bella had a photo of the same man that was seen on the video with Susanna.

Sophia asked Ava if she could possibly get into Lea’s phone and see if there were any photos or texts that would help. Ava picked up the phone and for some miracle there was no password required. She opened the texting app and scrolled through Lea’s recent activity. There was a contact that was just set up as “M” that had multiple entries. The last one being the day Lea went missing. It said “I can explain everything if you meet me at Honeymoon Cove at 5. I’ll see you there. Thanks.” Ava read back several messages and it looked



like they were having a conversation and Lea asked him if he knew where Christine was. This wasn't good.

“Look through the pictures” said Sophia hurriedly.

There were a few saved pictures on the phone and Ava shockingly brought up one of a man that was about twenty years old with brown hair.

“It's him!” Ava shouted. They compared it to the photo of Christine by the elevator and Ava was right again. The same man that was on Lea's phone was also in the video with Christine.

“What the hell is going on here?” bellowed Max. “And who are those boys?”

“We're going to find that out Uncle Max!” Luke promised...

## Chapter 14

It was late afternoon on the first day of the team's investigation and Luke could not believe what they had uncovered already. They spent the afternoon looking over all the evidence again and getting the board updated and organized and were ready to make some additional assignments and re-cap everything. Max had bowed out to spend some time with Irene, so it was just the team.

"Let's put everything in order and come up with a possible scenario," started Luke. "We've got some good leads, we just need to follow them and see where they take us."

"Christine was seen a few weeks before her disappearance with a man with brown hair 'looking friendly,' let's say. She gets a note to meet at the beach. She goes missing. Lea is asking the same man about Christine," Luke continues. "She gets a text to meet at the beach. At some point she ends up in the cave and drops her bracelet. She goes missing. Then Bella gets caught sneaking out a tall blonde man from her room before she goes missing. We will assume she was also lured to the beach, for now. Susanna is seen in a car with a tall blonde man and also gets a note to meet at the beach. She goes missing."

"There is video footage that looks to be deleted and there are spare room keys that have come up missing," Luke says. "It could be someone trying to cover their tracks. I personally do not believe these men were boyfriends. They may have acted like that to the girls, but I think they were being manipulated, but why?"

"Some other information I think we should look at is the referrals to this resort by another resort or by a person. Also, I think we should look into the

families. Something seems suspicious there. "Everyone agree so far?" Luke asked.

"I do," said David as Ava and Sophia also expressed their approval. "Where do you think we should go from here?" David asked.

"Well David, I'm glad you asked," Luke said smiling. "I made an appointment for you for first thing in the morning with detective Laura Hart on the mainland. She's the lead on these missing person cases. I would like you to tell her what we've found so far; and see if there is anything she can tell us that we don't already know. I would also like for you to take the wrappers in to be fingerprinted, if possible.

"OK, no problem," said David. "What time?"

"Nine," said Luke. "You'll have enough time to get some breakfast first and then drive over there. You can take the silver SUV."

"OK," David confirmed while setting an appointment on his phone.

"While David is doing that I'm going to hang around here and show the pictures around and check out the granola bar wrappers. I'm also going to try to see Luther to ask him about the security footage," Luke said.

"Ava, are you still reviewing video?" Luke asked her.

"Yes, but I should be done soon," she replied. "I haven't found anything else yet worth reporting."

"OK," Luke said. "After you finish that, I would like you to take the family information and see if you can locate them. You've got all the girls names and descriptions and Bella's family picture. You also have the family history from the bible. Check with the towns of the resorts they worked at and see if you can find anything, OK? I would also like you to call those resorts and see if they have any information about the transfers. "

“Sure thing!” Ava said eagerly.

Next Luke looked at Sophia and smiled. “Sophia, since you did such a good job with Irene, I would like you to talk to as many other women on staff as you can between the ages of 18 and 22. Show them the pictures of the two men on the video. I want to know if anyone at this resort is considering a liaison with either one of them, OK?”

“That’s a good idea Luke. I would be happy to work on that,” Sophia answered. “I had almost forgotten about the possibility of another disappearance. I’ll get started on that right away.”

“You can start in the morning,” Luke told her then paused for a minute before saying “I was wondering if I could take you out to dinner tonight.”

Sophia blushed and looked at Ava and David who were giving her the thumbs up behind Luke’s back. That made her smile.

“OK, Luke. I’d be happy to do that too,” She replied with a grin.

“Awesome. I’ll come around your room and get you about six thirty if that’s ok,” Luke said.

“Sounds good,” she answered collecting her things and getting ready to go up to her room.

“Well on that note,” David said while turning to Ava holding out his elbow. “Would you care to join me in the fine dining room for a buffet dinner?”

“Absolutely!” she said while taking his arm, smiling at Luke and Sophia as they walked out of the room giggling.

“I’m going to straighten up in here then I’ll walk you up if you want,” Luke told Sophia.

“OK, I’ll help you,” she replied. “Should I take this tray of deserts back to the kitchen or leave it for later?”

“I would just leave it. We can always snack on it tomorrow,” Luke answered.

“Ready?” he asked when they were done arranging things as he held out his hand for Sophia to take.

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” she responded taking his hand...

## Chapter 15

Sophia was nervous after getting out of the shower and putting on the only dress that she had purchased at the resort gift shop so far. It wasn't formal, but it would pass as a dinner dress. She did her hair and make-up lightly and pulled on her strappy heels.

She had thought about this every day since the limo and what it would be like to go out with Luke. She made a decision then and there that she was throwing out all her reasons for not being with Luke. Whether it was personal or professional, whatever reasons she had were irrelevant.

Luke had been her boss for many years and they developed a trusting professional bond through that. Now Luke was her colleague and team mate. True he was paying her salary, but somehow she felt equal on this investigation, more on the same level.

"What could he ever see in me," she thought. "I'm a middle aged woman with graying hair, wrinkles and grown children!" Sophia laughed out loud. She didn't know if it was because she was being silly or because of the irony of finally letting herself be with the man she has loved for years. She was happy.

Right on the dot, Luke was at her door with flowers in hand and a smile on his face when seeing Sophia open the door.

"Wow! You look great!" he said beaming and leaned in to kiss her cheek.

"Thanks, you don't look so bad yourself," she responded with a smile while blushing.

"Let's get going, I made some reservations at The Ocean Club. I've been there a few times, it's fabulous," he added.

They took one of the SUV's and made it to the restaurant in about 10 minutes. Luke walked around the car and opened the door for Sophia. She

thanked him as he led her into a grand resort with everything from terraced gardens adorned with statues to dramatic ocean views of the beachfront.

Sophia was in awe.

“This is marvelous,” she whispered.

“Wait until you taste the food!” Luke said and winked at her. “They have a very innovative menu. You will love it.”

The hostess seated them in a very private alcove and Luke ordered them both a glass of wine. “I’m told they have the best wine on the island right here,” Luke stated. “Not to put down the wine at The Paradise though,” he chuckled. “Would you like me to order for the both of us?”

“Yes, that would be lovely, since you’ve been here before,” she answered.

When the waitress arrived he ordered a plate of sautéed clams with roman artichokes for an appetizer, two lobster carpaccio’s with black truffles, and two veal Milanese. Sophia looked impressed. She also felt very hungry now. They talked for a while about nothing in particular, just enjoying each other’s company and drinking their wine. After a few glasses the appetizer arrived and Sophia’s mouth was watering. Luke was right, it did look fabulous.

As they were eating, a distinguished looking older gentleman came up to the table and greeted Luke very welcoming. Luke stood and shook the man’s hand and said “Sophia, this is my father’s oldest friend Kyle Kaloni. He is from the island.”

Sophia noticed the man was very attractive for his age and was dressed very stylishly in an expensive suit. He carried himself with an air of pride and confidence.

“I was so sorry to hear about your father, Luke,” Kyle said sadly. “He was definitely one of a kind, that’s for sure. Maybe we can catch up soon, how long are you around for, Luke?”

“I’m not sure yet, but I can look you up as soon as I get some time,” Luke replied.

“That would be great,” responded Kyle. “I would like that very much. It was very nice to meet you Sophia. You two enjoy your meal.” They said their good byes and returned to dinner.

They enjoyed their meal in a comfortable silence and were on the second bottle of wine when the desert Luke ordered arrived at the table. It was baked Alaska with honey. Luke loaded up a spoonful and fed it to Sophia and she melted in her chair. It was divine.

“I think that is the most decadent thing I have ever tasted,” Sophia said.

“It is wonderful isn’t it?” Luke responded while taking a bite himself. “I used to love this when I was younger.”

“Can I be honest with you, Sophia?” Luke asked.

“Yes, please,” she responded not sure what was coming.

“I have been going crazy thinking about you since that night in the limo,” He stated unreservedly.

Sophia looked stunned but replied “Well, if we are going to be honest, I have too. I tried to deny my feelings for so long and I just don’t think I can do it anymore. I have admired you ever since we started working together. I really tried to keep it professional between us, but truthfully I had a big crush on you.” Sofia blushed and looked down afraid she would scare him away.

“Oh Sophia, really?” he said while lifting her chin to look into her eyes. “I never even had a clue. You kept it very hidden. I finally realized you were



someone I wanted to get to know that night at the banquet. No! Not in the limo," he smiled. "It was when you gave your speech. I was amazed at your compassion and strength. You're so amazing Sophia," he whispered while sliding his hands over hers.

"Thank you so much, Luke," she expressed quietly. "I have been through a lot in my life, some of which you know, and I think God makes us stronger through adversity."

"I agree," Luke affirmed. "When my father passed away I thought I would never heal. He was such a wonderful man that I couldn't imagine living life without him. Then one day I woke up and it didn't hurt quite so bad. Knowing your loved ones are in heaven looking down at you makes it easier somehow. Knowing they are not in pain or suffering anymore."

Tears welled in Sophia's eyes at hearing the sympathy in Luke's words. "I couldn't have said it better myself."

Luke looked at her thoughtfully for a few moments and took a deep breath. "So, do you think we can make a go of this thing between us Sophia? I would love nothing better for you to say yes."

Sophia couldn't believe her ears. Was she in a dream? What she had dreamed of for so long was finally happening. She smiled at him with pure joy. "I would love that too, Luke. Yes, let's try it."

Luke leaned in and kissed her softly and gently while caressing her cheek with his thumb. After a few moments he remembered where they were and pulled back ever so slightly and whispered "Can I take you back to your room, my love?"

"I would love that, my dear," Sophia giggled softly.

"Check please!" He called out and they both started laughing.

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Back at the resort Ava and David had finished their dinner, with desert, and decided to go back to the conference room to review more video. Neither one wanted the evening to end. They were getting along very well and learned some things about the other that they were wanting to know. Ava found out that David was a widower and David found out that she was in fact the Mayors daughter. They stayed up late and finished looking at all the footage and discovered nothing new. Then David walked Ava to her room and he didn't leave until morning...

## Chapter 16

The next morning found the team back in the conference room at 7 am, as planned. Odd looks were flying around by everyone wondering what happened last night. There were knowing smiles between Luke and Sophia, but also between Ava and David. After a while it was just assumed by all that the two couples were now together and they moved on.

“Before we get started let’s all go get some breakfast,” Luke told them all. They walked over to the dining room and filled up plates with bagels, eggs pancakes, sausage, and fruit. As they found a nearby table Hemi walked out of the kitchen bringing them all cappuccinos on a tray.

“Good morning guys,” he said while putting the coffees on the table.

“Good morning Hemi,” they all replied.

“Wow, thanks for the cappuccino! Just what I needed,” Ava exclaimed grabbing one from the table.

“Rough night?” he asked smirking.

“No, just long,” she laughed looking at David.

“What? Don’t look at me,” David replied amused.

“How’s the investigation going?” Hemi asked.

“We’ve found quite a few clues, so we’re back on it today following up on those leads,” Luke answered.

“Good, glad to hear it,” Hemi replied. “Anything you need just holler. Enjoy your breakfast.”

“Thanks Hemi,” They all said back to him.

They all settled into eating their breakfast while Luke confirmed everyone’s assignments for the day. “So David, you’ve got your appointment with the detective at nine, right?”

“That’s right, and then I’ll head back here, so if anyone needs any help later just let me know,” he answered.

“OK, and Ava, you are going to finish looking at the video ....”

“Actually we finished that last night and didn’t find anything else.” Ava cut him off.

“We?” Luke questioned and looked up at David and Ava who were grinning. “Oh, never mind, I got it. Good, then you can begin right away on trying to locate the families and getting with the referral resorts. You’ll probably be here most of the day on the internet and making calls, so if anyone needs something to do just head back here.

“OK, sounds good,” Ava replied.

“Sophia, I had Irene print you off a list of the staff we need to interview today within the right age parameters. It’s in the conference room,” Luke stated. “It has listed out where they are working today, so you could start with the kitchen workers then move to housekeeping, or whatever you want to do, OK?”

“OK, that sounds like a good idea,” she replied. “I’ll get the list then get started.”

“I’ll be around the resort today also following up a few leads,” Luke stated. “You all have my number, so call if you need anything. I might be able to help out later today depending on what I uncover. I’m going to have Hemi bring us in a tray of sandwiches to the conference room and leave them in the fridge. And we have the deserts from yesterday too. That way we can eat when we have time and keep going on these leads, sound good?”

“Sounds like a good plan!” declared David as they all started getting up and heading back to the conference room.

As they reached the lobby they saw Luther Black entering the conference room. The door was still ajar so they walked in and greeted him.

“Hi” Luther said quickly. “I was just coming around to see how the investigation is going,” he added. “Anything I can help with?”

“Hi Luther!” Luke said shaking his hand. “I’m glad you came in, actually there is. There seems to be some missing footage on the surveillance feeds. We’d like to find out if there was some trouble with the equipment or if it’s possible that it was deleted”

“Oh, really, that’s curious,” Luther said skeptically. “I will have to check with my security staff, but I’m sure it is just a matter of reception or something. Sometimes the feeds go offline for small periods of time, but I will check on it.”

“That makes sense,” Luke responded. “Please just let us know if you find anything.”

“OK, I will,” said Luther. “Anything else you need?”

“Well, I would like to ask you about Irene’s spare keys to the missing women’s rooms. Do you know who might have had access to take them?” asked Luke.

“You mean they’re missing?” demanded Luther.

“Yes, Irene told us yesterday,” Luke replied.

“Well I just don’t know,” Luther answered. “I will have to look into that too.”

“OK, I appreciate it,” Luke said. “Thanks for your help, Luther.”

“No problem. We’ll get to the bottom of this, don’t worry. I’ll get with you later after I ask around,” Luther said as he turned and left the conference room.

'I better get going too! I just have enough time to get over to the mainland. See you all later!' David shouted as he waved and dashed out.

Sophia picked up the list of employees and saw that there were about forty names on it. She'd better get started too. She decided to start with the kitchen staff as Luke suggested. She told Ava and Luke good-bye and exited the conference room after giving Luke a warm smile. He gave her a wave and said bye.

"See you after while Ava," Luke told her as he gathered up his folder of evidence. Earlier he had printed out some additional copies of the men on the video and also of the wrappers. "Call me if you need anything."

"OK Luke. Thanks!" she replied.

Ava settled back in her favorite spot by the computer and opened a new tablet to take notes on. Her first internet search would be The National Database for Missing Persons...

## Chapter 17

David entered the Mainland Police Station at exactly nine o'clock and asked for Detective Hart. Shortly after nine a pretty woman came out dressed in gray slacks, black top and sensible shoes. She looked like she was in her mid-thirties. Her brown hair was cut short in a boyish style, but she made it work.

"David Jackson?" she called out.

"That's me," David said while standing up.

"Right this way please. I'm detective Laura Hart," she said after extending her hand for him to shake.

"Nice to meet you," he said shaking her hand firmly.

"Please have a seat," Laura said while sitting down behind her desk. "I understand you are on the team with Luke investigating the disappearance of these four women."

"That's correct," David answered. "I'd like to let you know about some evidence we came across that might suggest foul play, and to ask you for some help too."

"Go ahead; I'm interested in anything that pertains to this case. Let me start off by telling you that we do not have much in the way of data to support the conclusion of foul play. I have just recently been assigned to this case. In the beginning, to be honest, I think the brass half expected the women to walk back into the resort at some point. There was nothing that pointed to suspicious activity."

"Well, now there is," David declared.

"I'm listening," she replied.

“Firstly, we did a search of security footage for two weeks before each disappearance,” David began. “We found that there were time stamp gaps in the video. It skipped as much as five minutes in places. So we then looked back a month before each time and found two of the women with these men.” He showed her the photos of them being ‘friendly’ with the men.

“Secondly, we did a search of the women’s rooms and discovered two notes asking them to meet at the beach around the time they went missing. In another room we found a phone that had this guy’s picture in it,” David said as he pointed to the video picture. “With a text asking her to meet him at the beach. The contact just said ‘M’. We don’t know who these guys are, but Luke is showing around some pictures today at the resort. Incidentally, the spare room keys for all four women have been misplaced or taken,” he stated.

“Thirdly, Luke and I went through the caves down at the beach and found a room way back inside the cliff where we found a bracelet with the initials L.M on it. Lea Monroe was one of the women that went missing,” he declared as he finished and sat back quietly.

“OK,” Detective Hart said. “You’ve convinced me that there is enough going on to suggest possible criminal activity.”

“There are some other things going on that are also suspicious,” David continued. “In the cave by where we found the bracelet we found granola bar wrappers that have The Paradise Hotel stamped on them. That is one thing I wanted to ask you is if you could get them fingerprinted.”

“OK,” she said while reaching in her drawer and pulling out an evidence bag to put the wrappers in. “I’ll send them in, but I wouldn’t expect too much.” She labeled the bag and set it on the edge of her desk.



“I understand,” David replied. “Another thing is that some of the girls were transferred from other resorts in France, Sweden, and one was here on the mainland. That seems a little fishy for some reason. The person we interviewed said it has been happening more and more in the past couple years. One of girls said she was an orphan when hired, but has a family picture and a family bible in her room. It just doesn’t add up. Also, we set up a time line with the dates of all the disappearances and they occurred once a month for four months in a row with the last one being less than a month ago. We may be running out of time,” David said grimly.

“I agree that things just don’t add up,” Detective Hart responded. “Here’s what we’re going to do. I’m going to come out to the resort with you to look over everything you have collected and look at the video footage you have of these men. I’ll also send in these wrappers for fingerprints. I want to find out what happened as much as anybody, David.” She got up to shake his hand again and motioned for them to leave.

“I have to tell you something that I think you should know,” Detective Hart warned. “These islands are not all tourists, beaches, and fun. There is a dark ugly under-belly that most people never see. I have seen things here that would make you physically ill. There are some very wealthy, powerful people on this island. They run a drug trade, illegal gambling, prostitution, murder and everything else that goes along with that. But the most significant thing that I want your team to be aware of is the growing evidence that there may be organized human trafficking going on...”

## Chapter 18

Luke walked around the maintenance building looking for a vending machine with no luck. He saw some guys getting into a maintenance truck, so he walked over to speak to them.

“Hey there!” he called.

“Hi,” they said.

“You guys work out of this building here?” Luke asked.

“Yah, the office is around back,” the one man replied.

“OK, great, thanks,” Luke said as he started to walk around the building.

“Hey wait a minute. Do either of you know these two guys?”

They looked at both pictures that Luke held out and neither one knew the guys in the photo.

“OK, thanks again,” Luke said to both of them and proceeded to look for the office. The building wasn’t very big, but one side of it had an overhead garage door that was closed. He went around the corner and there was door that had an office sign on it. Luke went in.

The office was not very tidy and smelled of motor oil and fertilizer. He stood there for a few minutes wondering what he should do when an older man in coveralls walked in wiping his hands on a shop towel.

“Hi there, just heard the door,” he stated. “I was out there working on a lawn mower. How can I help you?”

“Hi. My name is Luke. I’m on the team working on the investigation concerning the women that went missing. I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions.”

“Sure thing! I’m Buddy,” He said reaching out to shake Luke’s hand then bringing it back quickly because of the oil on it. “Nice to meet ya. Sorry

business about those girls. Lock up your daughters, if you know what I mean,” he said flippantly. “What you wanna know?”

Luke pulled out the picture of the wrappers. “I understand you have a vending machine in here that carries these granola bars. Is that true?”

“Yah, right over there. The guys take ‘em in their trucks,” he answered.

“Are resort guests allowed in here to buy them?” Luke asked.

“Naw, just us. The security guys come over one in a while to get some too. There a little too uppity if you ask me though. I don’t like ‘em in here. Told ‘em so too,” he said peeved.

“Can I look at the machine?” asked Luke.

“Sure, help yourself,” he said. “Mind if I work while you’re looking?”

“No, go ahead,” Luke answered while going towards the machine. He saw the rows of granola bars with the exact wrapper and took a couple pictures of it.

“Can I ask why you don’t like the security people?” questioned Luke.

“Sure, they just act all high-classed and big-headed. No particular reason I guess. They just act all snooty. Comin’ over here actin’ like their somethin’ special,” Buddy said confidently.

“Would you mind taking a look at these men and tell me if you’ve seen them around here?” Luke asked.

“Yah, that’s two of ‘em,” Buddy said dismissing the photos.

“Two of what?” Luke asked.

“Them two know-it-alls coming in here all conceited, dressed fancy and everythin,” he replied.

“Do you know their names?” Luke probed.

“No, but they work over there in that fancy security building” Buddy answered pointing to the big building across the road. “People driving in and out with all those fancy cars all the time. If you ask me I don’t know why we needed such a swanky building for a bunch of nerdy computer geeks and brain dead rent-a-cops. But, that’s none of my business, I guess”

“Now that is a good question, Buddy.” Then Luke asked just to clarify. “So these two men are security workers?”

“I would imagine. Seen ‘em both around here for about six months or so,” he replied.

“Thanks Buddy. I appreciate your help,” Luke said patting him on the back while walking towards the door.

“No problem, come back and visit anytime,” Buddy replied getting back to his lawn mower.

Luke walked across the street to the security building. It was a stark contrast to the maintenance facility. The double doors opened into a very regal reception area of mahogany and silver accents. There were potted plants by each window and it smelled of tropical island flowers. There were several seating areas dividing up the large space and straight ahead was a long wall to wall desk. Seated at the desk was an exotic black haired woman with darker skin of an island native. She sat up a little straighter when Luke walked in and smiled.

“How may I help you sir?” she said forcing her smile.

“Hi, my name is Luke. What’s yours?”

“I’m Camilla,” she replied.

“Hi, Camilla, nice to meet you,” has said as he offered her his hand and she shook it daintily.

He took out the two photos and said “I’m looking for these two men. Do you know them? They work here.”

“Sorry, I’m afraid not,” she answered. “I’ve only been here a week and the employees use the back entrance, so I never see them.”

“Do you know if they have a computer log of the employees that you could look them up for me?” he asked.

“There might be, but I don’t even know how to log into this thing,” Camilla said shyly. “To be honest I’m just supposed to sit here and say hi to anyone who comes in.”

“Well that’s an easy job” Luke smiled at her. “How’d you get that position?”

“I was actually working on the mainland as a waitress and was offered this job,” she answered proudly.

“Good for you Camilla, I wish you all the luck” Luke told her. “Thank you very much for answering my questions. I do appreciate it.”

“No problem,” she replied. “You have a nice day.”

Luke walked out the front entrance and went in search of Max...

## Chapter 19

Sophia was on her way back to the conference room to get a snack. She had interviewed all the women in the kitchen who were on her list with no luck. No one had seen the men in the pictures or had any plans to meet up with any male that worked here. Hopefully the rest of her search would be helpful.

Sophia noticed that Ava was on the phone so she made her way to the fridge to get a piece of mango cheesecake. Then she went over to fill a to-go cup with coffee and added sugar and hazelnut cream. Just as she settled in at the table Ava hung up.

“Hi Sophia, how’d it go with the kitchen staff?” Ava asked.

“No luck,” Sophia answered. “I came in to get a snack before I go up to the guest rooms to track down some housekeeping personnel. I’ve got about 12 more names on the list. How are your calls going?”

“Pretty good, I think,” Ava stated. “I found out that there was no missing person reports in the US for Christine or Lea, but that didn’t seem surprising since Lea’s parents are deceased and Christine left home under duress. I’m still working on the missing persons from France and Sweden. I was also able to speak to the human resource manager at the Graycliff resort and ask her about Christine’s referral. She looked in her employment file and it said that it was a direct request by a member of The Paradise Resort, but it didn’t list a name. A substantial increase in wages was guaranteed.”

“Wow, that’s interesting,” said Sophia. I wish we knew who.”

“Me too,” Ava told her. “I’ll keep digging.”

Sophia was just finishing her snack when David walked in. Ava looked up and saw him and smiled. She noticed he had a woman with him.

“Ava, Sophia, this is Detective Laura Hart with the mainland Police,” David announced. “She has requested to look over the evidence we have collected so far. I have convinced her that there is more going on here than we thought and she also has some shocking revelations that might help.”

Detective Hart greeted the others and asked them to call her Laura. She explained what she told David concerning the indication of human trafficking on the island. Ava and Sophia were shocked. Laura also let them know she had turned in the wrappers to be fingerprinted.

“I need to get back on my assignment, so I’ll let you guys handle things in here. I’m sure we’ll meet again,” Sophia said to Laura with a smile as she got up, threw away her plate and headed out the door.

“OK, bye Sophia,” Ava called out as she got back to her internet searches and phone calls.

David walked Laura through all the evidence on the board and showed her the timeline they had been working on. She then wanted to review some of the video footage, so Ava set her up at a separate computer and logged into the digital links from the security system. “You don’t think anyone would have a problem with me saving some of the footage to a flash drive do you? I want to have my IT guy take a look at it.”

“I think that would be ok,” responded David. “I mean we are all here to solve this, so any help we can get would be good, right? What do you think Ava?”

“I think Luke would be ok with that,” she answered.

“Good, thanks,” Laura said satisfied and got to work.

“You need any help Ava?” David asked her.

“Sure, here is a list of calls you can make,” she said as she handed him the list and smiled.

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Luke was back inside the main resort building and was on a mission to find Max. What in the world was going on over there?

He marched right up to the front desk, but Max wasn't there. The woman at the desk told Luke that Max should be in his office so he headed across the lobby to the hallway with all of the offices in it. Luke reached the door to Max's office and knocked softly and heard Max say come in.

‘Luke!’ How are you my boy?’ Max asked delighted to see him.

‘I'm good Uncle Max, a little confused, but physically well,’ Luke replied.

‘Tell me how I can help you, Luke,’ Max said sympathetically.

‘First of all, what can you tell me about this grand security building? Luke asked baffled. ‘I'm confused why they need such an impressive structure for handling security surveillance and guard patrol.’

‘Sure, son, I can help you with that,’ Max assured him. ‘About two years ago the board decided to start construction on a new office building for the security department. They wanted to make it separate from the main resort so the guests didn't see all the behind the scenes work being done. The patrol cars could be stored inside garages, so they weren't out all over the street and the computer people could work in their own space.’

‘And the resort paid for all that?’ Luke asked still perplexed.

‘Well, actually,’ Max began. ‘There was a private investor that covered most of the costs, so the resort only covered a few expenses like street and curb repairs and street lamps.’

‘Why is it so luxurious on the inside?’ Max asked.



“I admit it became a little excessive over the first few months, but since the costs were covered we couldn’t really say anything about the designs.”

“OK Uncle Max,” Luke said acceptingly. “The other thing I wanted to talk about was the two men in the video. According to Buddy in the maintenance shop they work in the security building, but he doesn’t know them. They have come in his shop to use the vending machine, though. Is there any way for you to look at the employee ID’s to see who they are?”

“I’m afraid not,” Max answered. They run off an upgraded solitary system over there. They created it that way. In case there is ever a power outages or computer virus the security will not be affected. They have their own generator and everything for the servers.”

“Well that’s just all so fascinating,” Luke said sarcastically. “I’m sorry Uncle Max. It’s just that I thought I had finally found those men on the video. I guess I’ll have to go talk to Sophia to see if she found anyone that knows them...”

## Chapter 20

Everyone was back in the conference room for a late lunch of sandwiches and desert. Hemi really knew how to make a sandwich everyone agreed as they ate everything he had brought in.

Luke got to meet Detective Laura Hart. He was unsettled at the new direction this investigation might be going. He shared with Laura and the others about Buddy and everything that had happened there. He also described the security building and about meeting Camilla; and shared what Max had said about the private investor and the building being constructed.

Sophia spoke excitedly about her interviews with the rest of the staff on her list. "I found two girls who met each of the men on the video. When I showed Julia both pictures she said she met the brown haired man on the beach a couple weeks ago. He approached her and told her she was very pretty and asked if he could sit with her. They exchanged numbers and texted some after that. He told her his name was Michael, which would match the contact in Lea's phone being "M".

"That's amazing!" exclaimed Ava. "Did you warn her about anything?"

"I didn't have to," responded Sophia. "When I asked her if she was meeting him again she said he called her the other day and said he was leaving the island."

"Did she say why?" asked Luke.

"She said that he told her he got another job offer and was flying out in a day or two, which would have been yesterday" Sophia answered.

"What about the other man?" Luke added.

"Well, I was talking to a lady named Alison," Sophia continued. "She recognized the tall blonde man's picture. She said she talked to him in the

lobby once and he introduced himself as Clark and told her he worked in security.”

“Well, that would agree with what Buddy had told me about them,” Luke inserted. “So, we need to find out who Michael and Clark are that work in security. I think we need to talk to Luther. I think I will call him over if that’s ok with everyone.” Everyone agreed.

Luke picked up the phone on the desk and rang Luther’s extension. “Hi Luther, this is Luke. Would it be possible for you to come to the conference room? The team has a few questions we’d like to ask you.” He paused as he was listening and said “OK, thanks.” Luke muttered a couple more things and hung up.

As they waited for Luther to arrive they told Laura about Luther investigating the missing footage and spare keys. When they were done Luther appeared in the door way.

“Hi Luther,” called out Luke. “Come on in. This is Laura Hart from the Mainland Police Department. She helping us sort out some evidence”

“OK, great,” said Luther. “What can I help you with?”

“First thing Luther, did you find out anything about the missing video?” asked Luke.

“Yes, it was most likely what I told you before about the feed going offline for some reason or another. There didn’t seem to be any tampering or corrupt video.

“OK, what about the spare room keys? Was there anyone who might have needed them for some reason?”

“No,” Luther replied. “I asked some people and they didn’t have any reason to use the keys for anything. I think they must have just been misplaced or something.”

“I’ll talk to Irene about that possibility,” said Luke. “Can I ask you to take a look at these photos and tell me who these employees are? I understand they work in security. One is named Michael and the other is Clark.”

Luther took the pictures and looked them over. “Yes, they did work for me, but have recently been relocated to one of our sister facilities in Jamaica. That one is Michael Clayton he pointed to the brown haired man and the other one is Clark Allen. They were good employees, so we rewarded them each with a promotion to oversee operations.”

“Ok, Luther. Would you be able to talk to me about the construction of your new facility? Luke asked. “Is it normal to have a private investor to cover the costs of the building?”

“Yes it is, may I ask who told you about that,” Luther questioned. “That was supposed to be confidential.”

“It was Uncle Max,” responded Luke. “I was just asking him if the resort paid for the new building since it is so grand.”

“The donor asked to keep it private. He uses one of the offices for meeting potential customers and he requested that it be luxurious to impress his clients,” Max answered defensively.

“I think that’s all I have for you,” Luke concluded. “Anyone else have anything to add?”

They all deferred to Luke’s questioning, so they wrapped up the interview.

“Thanks Luther,” Luke stated as he reached out to shake Luther’s hand. “I really appreciate you coming over. I’ll let you know if we need anything else.” With that Luther got up and left the conference room.

After Luther left Luke sat down with a sigh. “Laura? You are more experienced with interrogation. Can you tell me what you noticed about that interview?”

“Well, if you really want to know what I think I will tell you, but you might not like my answer,” she answered waiting for a response.

“Yes, please,” Luke replied. “I know what I think, but I would like a professional opinion.

“Well, he’s definitely hiding something, and by his body language I think he’s lying,” Laura stated dryly.

“I felt that too,” said Luke.

Ava spoke up and said “That guy has always given me the creeps and now he just seems shady. I mean, what was he doing coming in here this morning? Do you think he’s involved somehow?”

David answered her with his own doubts presenting themselves. “What if he saw Michael’s and Clark’s photos hanging up and figured we were getting too close, so he made them leave?”

“That’s a good working theory,” said Laura. “I’ve got some things to work on back at the office, so I will let you guys keep at it. I have a hunch on something, but I want wait and talk to you about it later...”

## Chapter 21

Ava was just making the last of her phone calls to the families of the missing women after a long afternoon of searching. With David's help an exhaustive search yielded some very fascinating discoveries.

Concerning Christine Blakely; Ava and David found her mother Liz who was living in Texas. She was sorry to hear that Christine was missing and admitted that Christine had some issues when she was younger, with her step-dad, and took off after that. Since Liz didn't know where Christine was she couldn't tell her that her step dad died of a drug overdose about six months ago. Liz asked if someone could call her and keep her updated if they found Christine. She also asked them to tell Christine that she loved her and wanted her to come home. Ava promised that she would.

David and Ava also checked into the death of Lea Monroe's parents and everything Lea told Irene was the truth. There was really no family to speak of and they could not find anyone to contact of her disappearance. Ava couldn't help to be sad by the fact that Lea had no family in her life. That might be why Irene is so attached to her. It made Ava very grateful for her father even though she didn't like being in the public spotlight as a mayor's daughter.

The interesting information came out when looking into Bella Francis. Ava searched the internet for the most recent names listed in Bella's family bible. It brought up some names in France of some very influential people. When searching through some online pictures Ava found a man of about fifty that looked like a man in the photo that Bella had in her room. His name was Dominique Francis. They tracked him to his corporate office in Lyon and called him there. He was overjoyed that his daughter was still alive and cried

right there on the phone. They gave him a moment to compose himself, then Ava asked him what happened with Bella.

Dominique explained that Bella went missing from her job at the Château de Prye. The resort could not tell them anything, so they hired an investigator and still had no luck. Bella had just disappeared without a trace. Who would have even thought she would end up in a beach resort on Paradise Island? Dominique told them. He was quite distraught at the thought of her missing again. He told Ava and David that he would be out on the first available flight and would see them soon.

David had worked on locating Susanna Yvonne's family. He tracked her to the Halstad Resort in Sweden, where she had a position before coming to The Paradise. David talked to the Human Resource Manager and supposedly Susanna was approached by a man who offered her more money, so she took the job here. On her job application Susanna listed her mother Ella as the emergency contact, so they gave David that number. He wasted no time calling her. Ella was worried sick because she had not heard from Susanna in 5 weeks. She asked for a phone call to update her on the status of the investigation as soon as they knew anything.

It was early evening and after knowing all of this Ava and David discussed possible scenarios with the team. What would make sense if the trafficking intelligence was to be believed?

"So from everything we know let's create a picture of what might have brought each girl here." Ava started. "First off, keep in mind that all of the girls are pretty and seem to be of different nationalities. Christine was offered a job from someone at the Graycliff resort on the island. Lea was waitressing on the mainland and offered a job by a man. Bella went missing from a resort that we

order wine from and might have been kidnapped. Susanna was offered more money to come here from a sister resort in Sweden.”

David looked shocked by all the similarities and the fact that it was very plausible that it could have happened this way. “They could have all been lured here with a job and money, so they would be close by when needed.”

“That’s a scary thought,” shivered Sophia. “That would make this a massive scale operation to have that many people and countries involved.”

“From the way Laura talked it is very possible,” Luke added. “We will have to run this by her and see what she thinks. I’m very anxious to see what she wants to talk to us about anyways. Why don’t we all go get some dinner and we can discuss everything again later.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” Sophia replied. “I’m starving.”

“Me too!” exclaimed Ava.

Luke took Sophia’s hand and smiled at her and led her to the dining room. David smiled at Ava and they walked arm in arm after the others.

“Guys!” Hemi bellowed as they all walked in. “How are you doing? Come on in. Have a seat over here.” He motioned to a table away from the main walk way to the buffet.

“Hemi the food looks great!” exclaimed Luke. “I don’t know how you do it.”

“You just don’t see all the great chefs I have back in the kitchen. I just take all the credit!” he chuckled. “Truthfully though, I oversee everything and plan the menu, but they are the superstars. I’m very proud of all my staff. It gives me time to take care of some other things, like running this food over to the boat.”

“What boat?” Luke asked wondering what Hemi was talking about.



“There’s a 100 foot yacht anchored offshore of Honeymoon beach. Out there with the cruise ships” Hemi communicated. “I get paid to restock the pantry. I guess the guy is super rich and throws parties on the week-ends, so they need supplies.”

“How long have you been doing that?” asked Luke curiously.

“Oh, about four or five months, I guess,” Hemi said after he thought about it for a few seconds.

“What’s the guy’s name Hemi?” David asked looking suspicious.

“I don’t know his name, I guess he is incredibly private, but Luther is the one that pays me to restock the inventory. He sends me the list once a week...”

## Chapter 22

“Do you really think all of the girls are on that boat?” Sophia shrieked when they were all safely back in the conference room with the door closed. “Oh my God! I just can’t believe that would even be possible.” Luke walked over to Sophia and put his arms around her. She was obviously upset that all four of them could still be right here.

Let’s all just sit down and talk about this for a minute. “If you think about it, it does make sense.” Luke said comfortingly to Sophia while helping her into an office chair.

“But how?” asked Ava.

“Well, if they were taken from the beach in a boat they could have been transported right to the yacht and no one would ever know,” Luke answered. “That would explain Lea’s bracelet in the cave. Maybe they held them there while they waited on the boat.”

“It could also be why someone took granola bars as a snack if they had to wait until dark,” David added.

“Yes, that would explain it,” Luke replied while thinking. “Maybe it was Michael and Clark’s job to lure the girls out to the beach and into the cave to wait for the boat. If they worked for Luther, then he paid them to do it. When he thought we were getting too close he sent them away.”

“But who’s yacht is it?” asked Sophia. “Hemi said he was rich and private.”

“Well where have we heard those terms before?” Luke asked. “I would bet money that it is Luther’s confidential investor in the security building. And what if his business there is to meet with potential clients wanting to attend his parties?”

“I think I’m going to be sick,” moaned Sophia holding her stomach and rocking in her chair about to cry. Ava quickly brought her a glass of water. “Those poor girls, just think what they are going through.” Then the anger started setting in. Sophia sat up a little straighter and calmed herself down. “We have to get on that boat!” she demanded.

“What we need is a plan,” David said and they all agreed.

Luke jumped on the phone and called Hemi. “Hey Luke, what’s up?”

“Hemi, can you come in the conference room for a minute?” Luke asked.

“Sure, be there in a sec,” Hemi replied.

When he walked in Luke asked him to take a seat and asked “When will you be taking the food to the yacht, Hemi?”

“Oh, probably tonight after the dinner rush. Why?” he answered.

Luke told him what they thought might be going on and Hemi was visibly upset that he didn’t make the connection. “How could you have known?” asked Luke. “We are not even one hundred percent sure yet. This is all theory at this point, although it’s starting to sound more feasible the more we talk about it. Tell me how you usually handle the food transfer?”

“I load the food on the resort maintenance boat and take one kitchen employee to help me put the food away on the boat once we get there,” Hemi stated.

“Is it always the same employee?” asked David.

“No, but it’s always a woman,” Hemi replied.

“How do you get on the boat?” questioned Sophia.

“We pull up to the back of the boat and they lower a hoist to bring up all the food at once,” Hemi answered. “Then they lower a step ladder and we

climb to the back deck. The last time I went I asked if the owner was on board and this guy said he only comes out for the parties.”

“How many people did you see the last time you were unloading?” asked Luke.

Hemi thought for a minute then said “A chef, an assistant, and two guys that ran the equipment to bring up the food.”

“OK, Hemi. Thanks for all the info. I am going to call the detective that’s been helping us, but you are not to leave until we have a plan. One of us is going with you...”

## Chapter 23

Luke called Laura at the police station and brought her up to speed on everything the team had found so far and she rushed right over. She brought a couple colleagues with her and they had listening devices and other computer equipment to set up.

After much argument and discussion, it was decided that Sophia would be the woman to go with Hemi. Luke did not like the plan, but did agree she was more than capable of the assignment. The mission was to confirm any evidence of the four missing women on that boat and to find out when the next party was to be held.

Hemi and Sophia would both be wearing ear pieces that either one could communicate with. They would also have a small buttonhole camera attached to their uniforms to get the layout of the boat and images of the people aboard.

Shortly before eight that evening all the food was loaded in the boat and Hemi and Sophia were both dressed in kitchen uniforms. Luke walked them down to the boat while Ava and David stayed with the police and the monitoring equipment.

“Please be careful,” Luke said while giving her a hug on the boat dock.

“I will. I have to do this, Luke. That could be my daughter out there. I feel for those parents,” Sophia replied and Luke knew there was no way he would get her to back out.

“OK then. Get going, stay verbal, and let us know what’s going on,” he stated like he was giving them a pep talk, when in fact it was him that needed it.

“Don’t worry,” Hemi told him. “I’ve got her. I’ve done this many times, in and out. We’ll get what you need and get back as soon as possible, OK?”

“Sounds good, Hemi, thanks,” Luke answered while patting him on the back. “See you soon.”

Luke was back in the conference room and heard Laura testing both of their ear pieces to make sure they were working.

“Yes, I can hear you,” Luke heard Sophia say over the computer.

Hemi pulled out of the dock and took off in the boat. It looked like only a short distance, but actually took about fifteen minutes to get there.

Hemi followed the same routine, so as not to create suspicion. The food was transferred onto the boat by the hoist and they all started carrying small loads at a time to the kitchen. Sophia followed the plan and started acting sick leaning over the side.

“There’s a restroom down the hall,” called out one of the men on the boat. Sophia turned toward him to get a good shot of his face on the camera. That’s when she noticed he had a gun holster on. She started to panic. She really did think she was going to get sick now, so she put her hand over her mouth and started running to the bathroom.

“Calm down Sophia, it’s ok baby,” she heard in the earpiece. It was Luke. His voice instantly calmed her.

“I think your little helper doesn’t like boats,” the man chuckled and said to Hemi as he took in another load of food to the kitchen. “She was looking a little green.”

“Yah, hard to find good help,” Hemi replied and they both started laughing. Hemi was nervous for Sophia now that she was on task. He glanced around uneasy.

Sophia had to act fast. She would only have a few minutes before someone missed her. She quietly slipped out of the bathroom and turned away from the kitchen.

“Go down the stairs to the right,” Laura told her in her ear. Apparently Laura must have previous knowledge of this kind of yacht.

“Now go down that hall and see if there is anyone in the rooms,” she told Sophia.

“I’m just supposed to open the doors?” Sophia asked questioningly.

“Yes, but quietly.... and quickly,” Laura answered.

Sophia had opened a few doors and peeked in when she heard someone coming. She ducked into the next room and closed the door behind her. The footsteps went past her and up the stairs. She started to leave the room when she heard whimpering. She took out her pocket flashlight and pointed it at the far wall. Sitting along the wall on the bed were five women with gags on.

“Good God!” she cried. “You guys getting this?”

“Copy,” affirmed the voice in her ear piece. They were all speechless.

“Thank the Lord!” Sophia exclaimed quietly as she walked over to remove the gags. “My name is Sophia. Am I ever glad to see all of you. I’m with a team of investigators and we are going to get you out of here.” Sophia was weeping as were the girls. “I have to go right now, but we’ll be back. We want to get the guy that runs this whole thing.”

Sophia recognized all the girls from the photos except one and it was Lea who spoke up. “Put the gags back on us. They keep us down here when the food comes. We’re not supposed to make a noise.”

“OK,” replied Sophia as she started to replace the gags. The tears were streaming down her face as she gave each girl a hug and promised to come get them. “Tell me when the next party is. That is when we will return.”

“It’s Saturday,” Lea responded and promptly added “Did you find my bracelet in the cave? I dropped it hoping someone would look there.”

Sophia was shocked. “Yes, we did! That was a major clue. Great thinking Lea.”

“Thanks, I prayed it would work,” Lea admitted.

“I’m so sorry I have to leave,” Sophia whispered. “I promise we will be back in two days. Do you know the name of the guy who owns the boat?”

“No, everyone calls him skipper,” Lea answered. “No one uses names on board, but a man I was with last week slipped up and told me his name was Dan if that helps.”

“OK, thanks Lea,” Sophia said as she replaced her gag. “I promise I’ll be back.” The girls looked at her with such longing. Her heart was breaking.

Sophia stood up and slipped out the door, ran down the hall and up the stairs just as she heard someone yelling wanting to know where she was. He turned around and saw her and shouted “Where the hell have you been?”

Luke was instantly frightened for Sophia. She had no protection. What if something terrible happened to her? He would never forgive himself for putting her in this situation.

“I had to get some air,” Sophia said calmly like it was an everyday thing. “I’m feeling a lot better now. I can help put the food away.”

He looked like he wanted to strangle her, but instead snarled “Well get to it then, and don’t come back on the next delivery!”

“Don’t worry, I won’t,” she added. “Boats and I don’t mix.”



Luke relaxed. Sophia handled it like a pro. The sooner they get out of there the better.

Back in the kitchen the food was about all put away. Sophia and Hemi exchanged knowing glances, but tried to just get done quickly. They climbed aboard the maintenance boat and started their return to the resort. Sophia let out a long breath she was holding, relieved that they found the girls. She still had her ear piece in and was talking to the team. "Who was the fifth woman, Luke?"

Luke spoke up first "I reviewed the tape and I'm pretty sure it was Camilla from the security building..."

## Chapter 24

It was after ten o'clock before everyone was back in the conference room. Luke grabbed Sophia when she came in and hugged her tightly. "Thank God you're ok. I was so worried," he whispered in her ear. "You found them, didn't you?" he said smiling and kissing her cheek.

"Yes we did," Sophia answered. "I was so scared. I don't know if you noticed, but he had a gun on his belt."

"I did, and I was scared for you," Luke said comfortingly. "You're safe now honey, but you were very brave looking for those girls."

"Hemi, you did a great job too," Luke said as he turned to embrace Hemi. "Thank you for your help getting us on the boat. Without you we would never have realized they might be on that yacht."

"It's cool, all in a day's work," Hemi said humbly, looking down, embarrassed by all the attention. Everyone smiled and laughed which made him giggle too.

Luke called his Uncle Max and Aunt Irene down from their room and told them they found the girls. Irene was sobbing and wiping her tears with a handkerchief. Max was stunned that Luther was definitely involved. Luke told him everything they suspected. Sophia told Irene about Lea dropping her bracelet in the cave.

"I knew she was a smart girl, that one!" Irene gushed. "I may have to make her a manger." Everyone laughed at Irene's excitement.

Laura's crew was breaking down the equipment when she asked them to all take a seat. "I think it's time to fill you all in on what we discovered today," she began.

“First, let me say that I had my IT guy analyze the surveillance video footage. There was definitely evidence of tampering. Sections of video were positively deleted, proving Luther lied. Second, David, when you first came to see me at the precinct you brought me some wrappers that you and Luke found in the cave. I sent them out and we got a hit. It was definitely Michael’s fingerprints. That places him in the cave with Lea.

We ran his and Clark’s name through the FAA database and there were two tickets to Jamaica purchased in their names by a business account from the Ocean Club. We contacted the local authorities in Jamaica and had them picked up as soon as they got off the plane and returned here. They are now on the mainland. We interrogated them and they admitted to Luther paying them to lure the girls to the cave. They waited for it to get dark and a boat came to pick up each girl. They also said that Luther was getting nervous and was changing tactics. He was going to hire the girls at the security building, that way no one would miss them when he took them to the boat. That is how Camilla got involved. They also admitted that Luther is the one who asked them to steal the spare room keys. Both Clark and Michael will get lighter sentences for their cooperation, but they will still face kidnapping and trafficking charges for their participation in all this.”

“That’s incredible!” Max stated. ‘So, now you can go arrest Luther, right?’”

“Not yet,” Laura replied. “I need him to get someone into that party on Saturday. Then we take down the whole stinking ring all at once, but we can talk about that tomorrow. We found out something else you should know. We traced back the money from the confidential investor of the security building to the Ocean Club. It came from the same account that paid for the airline tickets. That means it is a very good assumption that the private donor plays a

big part in that organization. They have ties to money laundering, prostitution and gambling. If we can take that down it would be a major hit.”

“I say we do it,” Luke declared looking around the room at his team. ‘Who’s in?’ They all said yes, even Max and Irene.

“Let’s get this island cleaned up. This has gone on long enough,” Max said sadly.

“What do you mean by that, Uncle Max?” Luke asked.

“There has been a seedy element around here for as long as I can remember” he stated. “I don’t think it always went to this extreme, but it was always there, a dark side that I chose to ignore for many years, but no more. Too many people have been hurt. We will fight this with you. ” He took Irene’s hand and they both nodded.

“OK,” said Luke. “What now?” he asked as he looked at Laura.

“First, we need to set up operations away from Luther’s view,” Laura responded as she thought. “Max, do you have a secluded room we could use for a command post?”

“Yes, I can give you any room,” Max replied. “Would higher up be better?”

“Yes,” she stated. “Then we could use our optical equipment to view the yacht.”

“Fine, I will get the room arranged on that side of the building, on the top floor,” Max said as he left the room taking Irene with him.

Laura addressed the team. “Leave up the board and the timeline in the conference room, so if Luther comes by he won’t think anything is amiss. We will gather all of our equipment and set it up tomorrow in the room and get things dialed in. I will also run the plan by you to get someone into that party once I have it nailed down. I have an idea that just might work.”

“Get a good night sleep people,” Laura insisted. “We have a couple days to get this right and I want to make the time count. I’ll see you all at eight tomorrow morning.”

“Good night Laura. I appreciate all your help,” Luke said warmly as she left the room with her crew following behind her.

“I don’t know about you guys, but I need a drink,” Luke stated as he stood up. “Who’s coming?”

“Make mine a double,” Sophia said while laughing and taking Luke’s hand.

“I’ll be along shortly,” Ava said. “I want to call the families and let them know we found their girls.”

“I’ll help you,” David stated. “See you guys at the bar...”

## Chapter 25

The next morning Hemi delivered breakfast to Room 1531 on the top floor of the resort at 7:45 am. There was mushroom quiche, pancakes with mango syrup, French omelets with hollandaise, and homemade yogurt with fresh raspberries. He also wheeled up a large cappuccino machine, and started brewing some coffee.

Laura and her crew were already setting up the monitors and surveillance equipment they would need for the operation. One man was setting up a high powered telescope at the window which would be used to view the yacht. Another man was getting listening devices and cameras ready on the table.

There was a man relaxing on the sofa with a newspaper, drinking a cup of cappuccino that Hemi had offered him. No one paid much attention to him and he looked very casual in his business suit and loafers.

The team started filing in about eight o'clock. Hemi invited everyone to breakfast and coffee, then excused himself and left the room. Laura saw everyone looking at the man on the sofa and decided it was time to introduce him. "Team, can I have your attention please?" she asked. "I'd like to introduce you to our secret weapon," Laura said while motioning to the man. "This is Dominique Francis."

"Bella's Dad?" Shouted Sophia as she ran over and hugged him to everyone's surprise. "I've seen your daughter, she's fine. We're going to get her out I promise, were going to save her!" she was babbling.

"Sophia, it's ok," Laura said. "Domonique is fully aware of the Bella's situation. He contacted me when he got to the island last night and I showed him the video."

“Oh,” Sophia said looking down feeling embarrassed at how she reacted.

Feeling her discomfort, Dominique walked over to her, took her hands in his and looked into her eyes. “Thank you so much for locating my daughter. I will forever be in you and your team’s debt. If you ever need anything, you just let me know. I am a very resourceful man,” he said as he winked at her and grinned. The she giggled.

He sounded very sincere Sophia thought, so she didn’t feel quite so silly. “You are most welcome,” she replied affectionately.

Laura then introduced him to all the team members.

“What did you mean about a secret weapon, Laura?” asked Luke

“Dominique was not lying when he says he has resources,” she began. “He is a retired colonel in the French Army. He has tactical training as well as field combat experience and he will be joining our mission. Meet our party goer!”

“Wow! That’s great” David exclaimed. “How are we going to get him in?”

“Well, that’s the tricky part,” Laura stated. He will be posing as a French Diplomat with an assumed name and making a visit to Luther. We’ve come up with a plausible story that just might get him on that boat.”

“When do you go see Luther?” asked Ava.

“I made an appointment with his secretary for nine o’clock, so I’m going to head over there shortly,” Dominique explained. “I just wanted to meet you all first and of course get this handy listening device installed in my tie clip.”

“It’ll be nice to work with you Dominique,” Luke said extending his hand.

“Please call me Dom, and thank you Luke. I better get going. Are you going to stick around to see how it goes?”

“Yes, we’ll all be here,” said Luke.

“OK, see you soon,” he said as he left the room and headed over to the security building.

While they were waiting, the team ate some breakfast, drank some coffee and reviewed how they were going to get those girls back. It was safe to assume that if the one man on the yacht had a gun, the others would too. They also needed to organize a water rescue where no one got hurt.

“Are you sure Dom is going to be enough to neutralize the threat?” Luke asked. “Shouldn’t we have someone else on that boat?”

“Well, actually, we have infiltrated the service company that provides help on the yacht” Laura replied. “We will have two men undercover, one as a waiter and one as a bartender.”

“That’s a great idea!” Luke said impressed.

Just then Dom’s voice came on the computer. “Test one two, test one two.”

“Copy that,” said the man behind the monitor. “Good luck.”

Footsteps could be heard on the hardwood floor as Dom walked up to the reception desk in the lobby of the security building. “Good morning miss, my name is François and I have an appt with Luther Black at nine o’clock.”

“Yes sir. Please have a seat and I will tell Mr. Black you are here,” said a very pretty oriental lady. Luke instantly thought that she would be the next one to go missing if this plan didn’t work.

“Thank you,” Dom responded and sat down at the closest seat he saw.

A few minutes later Luther came out of an office door and walked toward Dom. “Good morning, right this way please.” They made their way through a maze of elaborate offices and corridors. “Please have a seat,” Luther said



pointing to the chair. He was trying to size up the man, obviously wealthy and nicely dressed. "What can I do for you François?"

"Well, Mr. Black," Dom said in his thickest French accent. "I was given your name at the Ocean Club. I am the attaché to the French Ambassador and I'm here on business. I like, how you say, the female companionship."

"I'm sorry, but I don't follow you," Luther said looking skeptical.

"Oh, come now, must I come out with it?" Dom replied. "A friend I met the other day at the card table, named Dan, told me about a sweet time he had with a Lea on an Ocean Club yacht party. I would like to attend the next party and I will pay double what it's probably worth."

He had Luther's attention now. "It's quite expensive as it is, are you sure you can afford it?" Luther asked.

"I can afford that and more," Dom said as he threw two big stacks of one hundred dollar bills on Luther's desk.

Luther's eyes looked like they were going to pop out of his head in shock. He picked up the money and thumbed through it then looked at Dom. "Be on the docks at nine pm. sharp tomorrow night. Don't be late, and don't tell anyone."

"Deal," Dom reached out his hand across the desk and shook Luther's hand. It was all he could do not to punch the guy right in the face...

## Chapter 26

Cheers erupted in room 1531 at that exact moment. Sophia and Ava jumped up and high fived each other. “Yes!” they yelled. It was a great feeling.

“Thank God he bought that story,” Laura said excitedly. “Now we’ve got some work to do. I’ve got calls to make, a tactical team to assemble and prepare and a rescue to plan.” She looked at the team and thought for an instant. “After Dom returns why don’t you guys take the day off? There won’t be much for you to handle around here, might kind of boring actually. You’ve gotten us this far and you’ve earned a free day. You better take it while you can.”

“Ah, trying to get rid of us, huh?” Luke laughed. “I see. Well David, I guess we could play the round of golf. What do you say ladies? Are you in?”

They both agreed and thought it would be fun. “I want do a little shopping first in the resort boutique to find a cute outfit,” Sophia said.

“Oh me too!” squealed Ava clapping her hands and jumping a few times.

David and Luke just rolled their eyes, smiling and shaking their heads.

Just then Dom walked in and they all gathered around him to congratulate him on a successful meeting, shaking his hand and patting him on the back.

“Nice work,” said Luke.

“Thanks,” Dom responded. “It was all I could do to keep it together, but I kept remembering the goal and I will have my little girl back soon. I need to go call my wife, though. She wanted to come, but I thought it would be better if I just made the trip myself in case I needed to help. I’m supposed to call to keep her updated.”

“That’s fine,” Laura replied. “Just please stay in the hotel, either in your room or in here. I don’t want you recognized or anything jeopardizing this mission. They are taking the day off,” she said pointing to the group. “Luke, don’t say anything to anybody about this case. If you are asked please just deflect and change the subject. I know you are acquainted with people on the island and I don’t want anything getting back to this mystery investor. The party must go on as scheduled, OK?”

“No problem,” answered Luke. “Ready ladies?” he asked Ava and Sophia.

“Yep, let’s go!” they answered.

“OK, we’ll meet you downstairs in the lobby in one hour,” Luke declared. “Come on David, let’s go locate my clubs and shoes, and I think I have some shirts hidden somewhere.”

They all left the room and Laura and her crew got to work.

Luke and David were parked outside under the awning in the red SUV waiting on Ava and Sophia to emerge from the lobby. They had on their khakis and golf shirts and looked very sexy. When the ladies came out David whistled. “Wow! You two look fabulous!”

“I second that,” Luke said smiling devilishly at Sophia.

“Thanks, just a little something we threw on,” Ava giggled. They each had on cute little shorts with summery flowered tops with sandals, perfect for a day outside on a beautiful island.

Luke took them on a scenic tour around the island where they let the music drift in through the windows and the ocean breezes fill their lungs. They reached the golf course and went into the clubhouse. The fees were paid, a couple carts were ordered, and they headed out to the first tee. After a few

holes the ladies were very impressed at how well David and Luke played golf. The bet was for who paid for dinner, so Ava and Sophia had to keep score.

They had brought some snacks and a cooler for cocktails, so by the time they reached the eleventh hole they were all feeling pretty relaxed. Luke had his arm around Sophia and leaned over to kiss her. She looked up into his eyes and just melted.

They came upon a group of four waiting on the next tee. As soon as they pulled up Luke knew one of the men was Kyle Kaloni.

“Hey Kyle! How are you doing?” Luke called out to him.

“Luke! Nice you see you. Sophia, you too,” he said as he tipped his hat to her. “You all out having a fun day?”

“Yes, we thought we’d enjoy the island for a little bit,” Luke replied.

“I heard you were investigating the disappearances of those women. How’s that going?” Kyle asked.

“Oh, nothing really came of it, so we are backing off for a while,” Luke answered. “How’s your golf game these days, old man!”

“Better than ever young whipper snapper,” he chuckled. “We’ll have to get together to test it out.”

“I would love that,” Luke said.

“You guys want to play through?” Kyle asked motioning that the tee was free.

“No go ahead, we’ll wait,” Luke stated. “We might see you later on though. Have a good game.”

“You too,” Kyle said as he waved and took off in the cart to play the next hole.

Luke ended up winning the round, so David had to pay for dinner. They went back to the resort to change clothes and spent the evening out on the town. They started at a restaurant that Luke suggested called The Black Angus. After having seafood every day they were all in the mood for a good steak. It was as wonderful as Luke said it would be.

After dinner they went over to the Atlantis Casino. It is situated on a lagoon and has massive windows overlooking the beach. It was just an incredible view. David and Luke played blackjack while Sophia and Ava played some slots. Everyone had a good time.

They met back up and had a couple drinks in the bar. "Isn't that Luther?" Sophia asked. "It looks like he's going in that room over there."

"That's the high roller room," replied Luke. "We probably had better get going before he sees us. I don't want anything to slip out about tomorrow night if we happen to run into him."

"Good idea," agreed David as they all got up to leave.

Luther did see them leaving though. He had seen them earlier too. It looked they were having a good time and forgetting about their investigation. Maybe this was blowing over, he thought. He would have to call the skipper and let him know the yacht party was still on...

## Chapter 27

The plans were all in place, the equipment all set up, and the people all gathered for the mission. Laura was going over every last detail of how the plan was supposed to be executed. She also went over every possible scenario if things didn't proceed according to the plan. Everyone was in the room including The Team, Max, Irene and Hemi. They were asked to be present just in case Laura needed anything, but really she just thought they deserved to see this unfold. After all, it was their work that found those girls and she would make sure they got the credit they earned.

Dom came in looking well-groomed, suave and sophisticated. He went over to the man in charge of the electronics and was wired up for sound and video. You couldn't even tell by looking at him that he had a microphone and camera on his tie. He didn't have an earpiece in this time. They didn't want to take the chance of someone seeing it. They could not communicate with him, but they could see his every move and that would have to be enough.

Dom didn't seem nervous at all, probably from his experience in the military. He was packing a Ruger SRC9- 9 mm in his boot and was hoping there wouldn't be a search.

"OK, Dominique," Laura said standing up and walking over to him. "You better get over to the docks. It's not going to hurt to get there a little early. We'll have eyes and ears on you. Give the signal and the rescue crew can be there within a minute. Just remember we want to get as much evidence against the owner of that boat as possible before we bring in the cavalry."

"Got it," Dom said. "I'm ready to do this." With that he left the room. We could see on the computer screen him walking down the hall and getting on the elevator. "Testing."

“Copy that. Mission Go.” Was the reply from the command console, more to the people in the room, not to Dom.

When Dom reached the docks it was pretty quiet. He did however see a twenty foot charter boat tied up on one pier with its lights on. That could be them. “Possible transport,” he whispered as he started walking toward the craft. Dom stood a little ways out to get the whole boat in the camera frame. A short time later he heard voices behind him and turned and saw Luther and another gentleman. He pointed the camera towards them as they walked up.

“Francois, correct?” Luther asked as he walked up extending his hand.

“Yes, that’s right. How are you?” Dom asked.

“Good, good. This here is Stephan. He is also a client,” Luther added.

“Nice to meet you,” they exchanged.

“Let’s get on this boat here to take us over; we will wait on 2 more people. Would you care for a drink?” Luther asked. Both accepted a beverage. Shortly after that a couple other men boarded the boat. “Go ahead and take us over to the yacht,” he called out.

“Yes sir,” came the response from the upper deck.

“Have a seat gentleman. It will only take a few minutes,” Luther said.

The trip was quiet and uneventful. No one talked much. When they arrived at the yacht Dom tried to get camera shots of as much as possible including the numbers on the bow.

They pulled up to the back of the yacht and Dom and the other men climbed up the ladder. Luther ushered them to the upper deck where there were about six other men seated around the deck. Some were talking, most were drinking.

The boat was beautiful with its rich wood and shiny chrome. There was a bar set up at one end with every drink imaginable. There was also a buffet table set up loaded with delicious lobster and caviar with exotic fruits dipped in chocolate. Dom approached the bartender and nodded discreetly. This was one of the undercovers.

“Where’s the other?” Dom asked him quietly with his head down.

“Your six o’clock by the potted plant,” he responded in a whispered hush.

Dom casually turned around, while accepting his drink from the bartender, and located the other operative. Their placement would be crucial to achieve tonight’s goals. He walked towards the group of seated men and tried to get them on camera.

Back at the resort everyone was watching the computer screen intently to see if they recognized anyone.

“Oh my God!” yelled Luke. “That’s Kyle Kaloni sitting on the end! Is he seriously there for the girls? What a douche bag. He was one of my father’s closest friends! I can’t believe he would participate in this!” he continued on.

“What?! Where?!” Max echoed Luke’s outrage.

“Ssshhhh!!” Laura told them harshly. “I’m trying to hear what they are saying. Calm down!”

Dom had already turned towards another section of seating, so the team couldn’t see who was speaking but they heard someone saying “... so have another drink gentleman. The entertainment will be up shortly and I’ve got a surprise for tonight, a real exotic beauty.”

“That had to have been the skipper,” Sophia stated. She wished she could tell Dom to turn back the other way.

“Does anyone recognize anybody else?” Laura asked.



“Not yet,” answered Luke. “I didn’t get a good look at a few of them.”

Dom walked back to the bar to get the whole group in the shot. He whispered to no one in particular “I swear to God I’m going to kill that guy.”

On the computer they watched Kyle motion a waiter over and said something in his ear. About two minutes later the waiter reappeared and following behind him were Christina, Lea, Bella, Susanna, and Camilla.

“Holy crap!” exclaimed Ava...

## Chapter 28

The girls were all dressed up in long sleek dresses and high heels. Their hair and make-up were done and they wore tentative smiles like they were all scared. They held hands in a row and Sophia wanted to cry for what was happening. They heard Dom gasp then take a deep breath to steady himself.

Someone yelled, "Hey Skipper! Get up and introduce your girls!" Everyone cheered. Dom turned back to the right and the camera showed Kyle Kaloni walking towards the girls.

"What the hell!" shouted Luke as he jumped out of his chair and pounded his fists on the table. "I've known that man for thirty years. How in the hell could he be doing this? What a sick bastard! It was bad enough to think he was just participating, but to run the whole thing? I swear that man is going down!"

"Sit down Luke," Laura chastised again. "Let's get the information we need, so we can put him away for good."

Kyle introduced each girl and told where they were from and a brief history of each one.

"François?" Kyle bellowed since Dom was back so far. "Come and pick your girl since you are the biggest contributor of the evening!" All the other men moaned and groaned about not being able to go first.

Dom walked forward slowly, his eyes holding constantly on Bella's. Then she recognized him and her mouth fell open and she looked stunned. His lips were pressed together tightly as he slightly shook his head to keep her from saying anything. Bella regained her composure after only a couple seconds. No one could see the tears forming in her eyes.

Dom acted like he was checking over the other ladies then he took Bella's hand and pulled her out of line.

"Good choice, she's a little beauty." Kyle said as he motioned to the waiter and told Dom to follow him. The waiter opened the first door they came to after descending the stairs; and told them they had until midnight.

The door slowly closed and Bella's lip started quivering and she burst into tears falling into Dom. He cradled her in his arms and wept. The only thing the microphone could pick up was her wailing "Daddy" then more sobs.

"It's ok baby, don't cry," Dom told her as he cupped her face in his large hands. "I'm getting you out of here tonight or I will die trying." They clung together for several more minutes and just cried. "I never stopped looking for you, Bella, Never!"

It was an intimate moment and Sophia felt like she was eaves dropping on a private exchange, so she looked away and wiped her tears with a tissue.

Dom suddenly remembered he had on a wire and said angrily "I hope you guys got all that. That asshole is going down."

"Who are you talking to Daddy?" Bella asked confused.

"The team that is getting you out of here," he replied with a smile.

They heard doors closing up and down the hall and Dom knew he had about twenty minutes before he would execute the plan. Until then he sat holding Bella while she told him everything that had happened to her. He comforted her and told her she was very brave. She looked up into his face and finally the realization hit her that she was going home. She was resolved to do anything to help.

“Ok honey, I have to go to work,” Dom told Bella snickering. “What I need you to do is stay in this room and don’t leave until I come back to get you. OK? I want you to promise me.”

“OK Daddy. Please hurry though,” Bella answered.

“Lock the door behind me and don’t let anyone in,” Dom added as he slipped out the door and closed it. He headed up the stairs staggering like he was drunk and headed for the bar.

“A couple drinks my good man,” Dom called out when he reached the bar. Then added quietly “How many left?”

“Luther, and I’m assuming two guards. The rest are wait staff.” he replied softly while looking down cleaning glasses. “Kyle took two of the girls downstairs.”

“Damn it!” Dom exclaimed. “That complicates things. I guess we change to plan B.”

Laura knew what that meant. They would have to rescue the girls from below deck and neutralize the threat at the same time. The chances of the visiting men being armed were slim, but they had to assume Kyle and the guards would be.

“Everything ok, Francois?” Luther asked as he walked up startling Dom.

“Yep, just getting a couple cocktails,” Dom replied trying to slur his words to seem drunk. He picked up the drinks and walked towards to the stairs. “Thanks for asking.”

Passing the undercover waiter on the way down, he told Dom that Kyle was in room 8. He had already warned the kitchen staff and waiters to stay put in the kitchen for a while to keep them out of harm’s way. Dom looked at

his watch and told the waiter to go in 5 as he set the drinks on a table and removed his gun from his boot.

Laura checked her watch and advised the rescue boats to stand by for her command.

The waiter's objective was to take down one guard and then Luther. The bartender was to neutralize the other guard as soon as the waiter initiated the sequence.

Luther went back to sit at the desk after he talked to Dom. He was in a little alcove just off the kitchen. One guard was circling the top deck and one was standing at the top of the stairs. It was a go.

The waiter ran up behind the guard by the stairs and wrapped a hand towel around his mouth and twisted it as hard as he could while kicking in his knees. The guard fell hard to the ground as the waiter grabbed the gun out of the guard's holster and tied the gag around his face. He pulled him into the kitchen where he shoved him in the walk in cooler and put zip ties around his ankles and wrists. He then went to find Luther after he heard gunshots.

At the same time the bartender ran up behind the other guard and put his arm around the guy's neck from behind. He was trying to choke him out, but while doing so got a forceful elbow to the ribs which made him loosen his grip. The guard turned and head butted the bartender. They scuffled and fought for a little bit until the guard was on his stomach with an arm around his neck until he passed out. The bartender zip tied him to the railing and took his gun. Then he went to see if Dom was ok after he heard the same gunshots...

## Chapter 29

Dom had quietly opened the door to room 8, with gun in hand, and saw Kyle in only his slacks facing the bed where the two girls were sitting partially dressed. They saw him enter, but he shook his head vehemently and they looked quickly back at Kyle. Dom crept up behind him and went to put in arm around his neck but his reflection in the window caught Kyle's attention and he spun around surprised.

"Francois! What is going on?" he shouted.

"Oh nothing, just taking out the trash," Dom howled as he charged Kyle and slammed him up against the wall by his middle. "Girls, get over by the door," Dom yelled.

"Are you crazy?" Kyle bellowed.

"Yes, I am," Dom answered him. "I'm your worst nightmare."

Kyle's fists were pounding on Dom's back. Then Kyle picked up a lamp from the night stand and struck Dom in the head making him stumble. It gave Kyle just enough time to rush toward the dresser and pull out a little .380 pistol and aim it at Dom. Just as Dom's head was clearing, he could see the girls charging Kyle and knocking him backwards. As he fell Kyle fired his gun. Fearing Kyle was shooting at the girls, Dom discharged his weapon and it was pointed directly at Kyle.

Luther, hearing the gunshots, pulled a gun out of the desk and ran to the stairs where he was met by the waiter blocking his path.

"Who the hell are you?" Luther screamed.

"The cavalry!" the waiter said while striking him in the face making him take a step back. Luther pulled the trigger and the shot grazed the waiter's arm. The waiter spun around and kicked Luther square in the chest, sending

him flying backwards into a table. Candles and hot wax went flying. Luther was momentarily dazed, so the waiter jumped on him, tied his hands together and took the gun.

The bartender burst into room 8 to find Kyle slumped against the wall with a bullet wound in his chest and two girls huddled with Dom on the floor beside the bed.

“You all ok?” he asked with surprise.

“I think so,” answered Dom shakily. “Get dressed girls, were going home.” Just then they heard yelling from the stairs.

“Get out, get out! Everybody out!” It was the waiter yelling. “The boat is on fire. Go, go, go!” he shouted as people were running out of the rooms pulling on clothes and tripping up the stairs.

Dom ran to Bella’s room and pounded on the door while yelling, “Unlock the door, baby, it’s Dad. “Daddy, hurry!” she shrieked as she unlocked the door and he pulled her to the stairs.

“I’m here honey. It’s ok. Girls, come on.” He cried. “There’s a rescue boat that should already be here. Let’s go, hurry.”

Upstairs there were already police officers boarding the vessel and hand-cuffing Luther and the guards. As the other men rushed upstairs they were also hand-cuffed and put on the rescue boat. The candles were setting everything ablaze, so they had to act fast to get everybody off safely. They got all of the servers off and all of the missing girls were put on a separate boat and rushed directly to the hospital for examinations. The boat was starting to sink. Luther told the rescuers what room Kyle was in, so they put the body on a stretcher and transported him to the hospital.

In the command center they could not believe it was all over. They had one officer shot and one criminal wounded, but otherwise went as planned, and no one dead, yet. Plus they had all the video footage they needed to put them all away for a very long time. The men visiting the boat would be charged with solicitation and everyone else who knowingly participated in the trafficking for purposes of forced labor or prostitution could get up to 15 years in prison.

Laura was communicating with the rescue boats and also the precinct. She was letting them know how many arrests would be coming in. She was also giving praises to the undercover officers for a job well done. The waiter would be examined at the hospital, but should make a full recovery.

Sophia jumped up and stated that she was going to the hospital; so Luke, David, and Ava decided to go too. They took separate SUV's, so they could leave without having to wait for the others. Sophia thought she might like to stay with the girls for a little while. She was curious about some details and wanted to wrap up the investigation too. She was so over joyed that all the missing women were found safely that she cried in the car on the way to the hospital.

Luke comforted her. "You know, we make a pretty good team Ms. Adams," he said while taking her hand and kissing it across the console in the car.

"Oh, you really think so Mr. Dalton? Because I do too," Sophia said smiling at him.

"When this all dies down we need to have a serious talk about our future. I have a few ideas." He told her.

"Ooooooo, I'm intrigued," she replied. "I can't wait."



They got to the hospital and all of the girls were still in exam rooms. The doctor Sophia talked to said they were going to keep them all overnight for observation, but otherwise looked ok. That made them very happy.

Dom was in the waiting room talking to his wife on the phone. Sophia heard him tell her that he would have Bella call as soon as she could.

Ava was calling some of the other family members letting them know their girls were rescued and spending the night in the hospital. She promised them a call back in a few hours with an update.

Kyle was in surgery and it wasn't looking good. The bullet had hit his lung and they were trying to repair it. Luke was very disturbed about this man that he had known for years being involved in this. He just really wanted to talk to him. Hopefully when Kyle was out of surgery he would get a chance to speak with him...

## Chapter 30

Sophia went to the rooms of each woman personally. She wanted a chance to get to know them better and offer her support in any way.

Christina was sitting up in a chair when Sophia entered. "Hello Christina," She said hesitantly. She didn't want to barge in if Christina wasn't feeling up to it.

"Sophia! Come in," Christina said excitedly. "I'm so glad to see you!"

"OK, thanks," Sophia answered while taking a set across from her. "I wasn't sure if you would remember me from the boat or not."

"Are you kidding me?" Christina asked emphatically. "You saved our lives! How would I ever forget that?"

"Well, I appreciate that, but there were a lot of people that contributed to your rescue. I was just a small part," Sophia said humbly.

"Well, you were very brave to come on that boat like you did. You had no idea what you were up against. Those men were ruthless," Christina told her.

Sophia flinched a little just thinking about how much danger she was in going aboard that boat. "I didn't know that at the time. My only objective was to see if you were being held on the yacht. I'm just glad you were!"

"Well, I do appreciate everything your team did to get us out," Christina told her.

"Can you tell me anything about being taken to the boat?" Sophia asked.

"This guy I met started asking me on walks and getting really friendly," she began.

"Michael?" Sophia asked.

"Yes, he was so cute. He sure had me fooled," Christina said looking miserable. "He worked for Luther and I guess Luther paid him to get me to the

cave. From there a boat picked me up and took me to the yacht. I fought hard, but they were just too strong.”

“Just so you know Michael was arrested for his involvement,” Sophia told her. “And he also gave evidence on Luther.”

“Thanks God! I was so worried about that,” she replied.

“It’s over now,” Sophia said comfortingly. “Do you know what you will do now?” she asked cautiously as not to upset her.

“Ava called my Mom when she was in here earlier,” Christina began. “She told me about my step-dad dying and really wants me to come home. I have so many bad memories, though, that I don’t think I would feel comfortable living there again. I think I will just go for a visit and see how it goes. Who knows, maybe I’ll end up back here one day. The doctor did say I should go through some counseling, so I’m going to check into that too.”

“Can we exchanged numbers and keep in touch?” Sophia asked genuinely. “I really do feel like I already know you girls already.”

“Absolutely!” Christina replied. “I would love that. Thanks so much for coming to visit, I’ll be released tomorrow. My mom is sending money to Irene for a plane ticket, so I’ll probably leave in a day or two.”

“Well, you take care of yourself,” Sophia told her as she leaned down to give her a hug. “I appreciate you letting me come and chat for a bit. I hope whatever you decide to do, you are happy.”

“Thank you Sophia, truly,” Christina said sweetly. “We were all alone. No one was coming for us. If you hadn’t of found us no one would have. For that I will be forever grateful.”

Sophia had tears in her eyes and thanked Christina from the bottom of her heart. They parted as friends, not knowing when or if they would ever see each other again. But they had a bond that would never be severed.

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Sophia then went to visit Lea. She was lying in the hospital bed all covered up. When she walked in she was surprised to see Max and Irene there. "Hi!" she greeted them.

"Oh, Sophia, please come in," Irene said as she got up and hugged her. "And you two have already met!"

"Yes, I wish it were under better circumstances," Lea chuckled. "Seriously, I can never repay you for what you did on that boat. You gave us hope! Irene has been filling me in on everything you and the team have done. It was quite the rescue mission!"

"It was your bracelet that started the whole thing," Sophia declared. "That was a smart thing to do. How did you know to drop it?"

"I met with Michael to confront him about Christina. I knew she was secretly seeing him. He must have had it planned to take me also. He forced me into the cave until dark. He had a few granola bars and made a fire. He told me we were going to see Christina, but it just seemed a little shady, so I decided to drop the bracelet when he wasn't looking."

"Well, that took guts," Sophia praised her. "Would you be willing to testify to everything?"

"Definitely," Lea said emphatically.

"Max and I were here to offer Lea a managerial position when she gets released," Irene stated the smiled. "I want to train her to take over for me if I ever decide to retire. She would be invaluable to me. Since Luther and

everyone involved will be in jail for a long time to come, I'm hoping she'll feel safe there again."

"Did you accept the offer, Lea?" Sophia asked.

"Not yet," Lea said thoughtfully. She looked at Max and Irene for a few moments then said, "They have been like parents to me. How could I say no?"

"Wonderful!" cried Irene. "I'm so happy. Max was smiling too and patting Lea on the leg.

"That's great news," Sophia said. "I hope we can stay in touch."

"Me too," replied Lea. "Take care of yourself Sophia. You gave me my life back. For that I will always thank you."

"You're most welcome," Sophia said and hugged them all and headed to Bella's room. She had no doubt that she would be seeing Lea around a lot.

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When Sophia got to Bella's room she heard voices and figured it was Dom and it was. She knocked quietly and said hello.

"Sophia! Come in," Dom called to her. "We just got off the phone with my wife. I put Bella on the phone and my wife couldn't stop crying," he laughed.

"We will be flying out tomorrow," he said.

"I'm sure your wife will be so happy to have her home," Sophia said smiling and turning to Bella. "She probably won't let you out of her sight!"

"I'm sure you're right," Bella agreed in her cute little French accent.

"Can I ask you how you ended up at The Paradise?" Sophia asked puzzled. "Irene told me that you said you were an orphan, but then you had the picture and bible in your room."

"I was taken from my room where I worked in France," Bella stated. "I was told that if I said anything they would kill my family. I was so scared," she

said as the tears fell down her cheeks. "I snuck the picture and bible into my bag. It was the only hope I had that someone might be looking for me. I would pray every day that they were still safe and I never said anything. They brought me here to work and I kept to myself. Then Clark duped me into liking him. He was so charming and I fell for it. He took me to the cave and later a boat picked me up. When I was on the yacht, the man I worked for in France came to a party. I heard him and Luther talking about getting another girl, so I'm sure Luther is the one who arranged my kidnapping. I am prepared to testify against them all if it keeps this from happening to anyone else."

"Oh, Bella," Sophia said wiping her tears. "I'm so sorry for you honey. I will pass that on to the police, though. I'm sure they will want as much evidence as possible to put them all away, Clark included. I'll let you get some rest now. Thanks for letting me stop by. You're Dad has my number so call anytime, ok?"

"Ok, and thanks so much for coming back for us like you promised," Bella said smiling up at Sophia with her sweet little face.

"No problem sweetheart," Sophia said lovingly. "Dom, take care and if I don't see you before you go have a good trip. You know, we couldn't have done it without you."

"Thanks," Dom said as he gave her a big bear hug. "You take care too and take care of Luke. You know he's crazy about you, right?"

Sophia started to grin, "I had an idea, but I'll do my best."

~.~.~

Susanna was in the shower when Sophia walked in so she took a seat by the window and waited. When Susanna came out of the shower she was startled to see Sophia then realized who it was and ran over and gave her a big hug.

“Sophia! I’m so glad you’re here,” Susanna squealed in her native accent. “You did it! You said you were going to get us out and you did! How can I ever thank you?”

‘You being happy is thanks enough,’ Sophia answered.

“I hope those scum bags pay for what they did to us,” she said getting angry. “I mean, what kind of monster does that?”

“With your help, we’ll make sure they go away for a long time,” Sophia promised. “Do you have any plans now?”

“I haven’t really thought about it,” Susanna considered it. “Other than this incident, I really do like it here. I might work for a while and then decide what I want to do.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” Sophia replied. “Is your family relieved you were found?”

“Yes, I talked to my Mom when I first got here,” Susanna said. “She was really worried because I hadn’t called her for weeks. She wanted me to come home to Sweden, but I’m not sure that’s what I want to do. There is so much more opportunity here and the weather is beautiful.”

“Yes, it is,” Sophia said looking out the window. “If I had my way I’d be staying too.”

“Why don’t you?” Susanna asked. “I’d love having you around to do stuff with. My Aunty Sophia!” Susanna giggled.

“We’ll have to see,” Sophia said. “I’m not quite sure what my plans are either.”

“Well, I hope you stay,” she replied. “You are my guardian angel and I will always love you for helping us.”

Sophia had tears again. What is it with these girls instantly having a place in her heart? “Thank you honey, let’s stay in touch, ok?”

“That sounds great,” Susanna told her. “See you soon.”

~.~.~

The last girl Sophia visited was Camilla. Although she didn’t know her very well Sophia still sympathized with what she had just endured; even though she was only held for less than a week. Sophia told her about Luke being on the team that found her and Camilla remembered him. Sophia told her that if she ever needed anything not to hesitate to call. Then Sophia wished her well and left.

Sophia was physically and emotionally drained. She went to wait for Luke in the lobby, which gave her time to think about her future. Would she stay here? She just didn’t know. What were Luke’s plans? He was still her boss, so wherever he went, she guessed she would go too. If she had to leave this place she would be very sad. This was her happy place after all...



## Chapter 31

Max was walking down the hall in the hospital after leaving Irene alone to talk to Lea. He saw Luke sitting in the waiting room and stopped in to see what was going on. "Hi Luke," he said.

"Hey, Uncle Max," Luke replied.

"What's going on?" Max asked.

"I'm just waiting for them to let me go talk to Kyle Kaloni," Luke answered. "He got out of surgery quite a while ago, but his prognosis isn't good. He had a lot of damage to his left lung and they are trying to control the bleeding. They told me if he woke up they would come and get me."

"Are you sure you want to do that?" Max inquired. "I mean, what could he possibly have to say that would explain any of this?"

"I don't know," Luke said woefully. "All I know is that I need some answers."

"Mr. Dalton?" a nurse interrupted. "You can go in now if you'd like."

"Thank you," Luke said as he stood up and the nurse led the way down the hall.

"Uncle Max? Are you coming?" Luke called back as he stopped in the hallway.

"Do you want me to?" Max asked.

"Yes, I would like you to," he answered.

"OK, let's go then," Max replied as they followed the nurse to the room.

They entered the room and Kyle Kaloni was hooked up to several machines. He looked gray. When they reached the side of the bed Kyle opened his eyes and looked like he was trying to recognize them.

His mouth opened to speak and he strained to smile. In a strained raspy breath he said, "Max, Luke, look at you guys visiting an old man."

"You're not looking so good Kyle," Max said. "That hard living is catching up with you."

Kyle coughed when he tried to laugh, "You're right Max. I've had a good long life and today I'm ready to meet my maker."

"Are you sure that's where you're going?" Max asked sarcastically.

"Oh Max, you always knew how to cheer me up," Kyle uttered as he coughed up blood. "Luke, your father wouldn't be very proud of you right now for what you did."

"What do you mean?" Luke asked shocked that Kyle mentioned his Dad.

"I took over the business from him after he passed away. He started all of this years ago. How do you think he would feel knowing you destroyed everything he ever worked for?" he responded in a hushed voice.

"You're lying!" Luke yelled as he bent down to the bed to look closer at him. "Why are you doing this?"

"I'm a dying man, Luke. Why would I lie? Ask your uncle, he knew everything," Kyle replied.

"Uncle Max?" Luke pleaded, getting very upset.

"Luke, your father was into a lot of shady dealings on this island," Max revealed. "He was my older brother and I looked away for many years. I never would have believed he would be responsible for something this horrific. If I had known, believe me, I would have done something."

"Oh my God!" Luke exclaimed putting his head in his hands stunned. "I can't believe this."

“He knew how to do it all,” Kyle whispered in a hoarse tone. “He was an impressive businessman. He ran it better than me, though. I put Luther in charge of that side of the business and he made a mess of it. I financed his building and made him rich and this is how he repays me, by being careless and irresponsible. He ruined everything,” Kyle was gasping and wheezing from getting agitated. “Don’t worry though; the business doesn’t end with me. Our alliance extends into areas you wouldn’t dream of and countries you would never think to look. It would take an army to shut it down.”

Luke bent down again and hissed in Kyle’s face “That’s a challenge I will gladly accept. I will not stand by and have anyone else hurt by your organization’s illegal actions.”

Kyle’s monitor started beeping loudly as he gasped for air and a nurse rushed in. “Stand back please, I need to get in here. She worked with the dials fervently and adjusted the IV. She pushed a button on the wall and called a code red to room 301 stat. A doctor rushed in and started working on Kyle intently and other medical personnel were called in also.

Luke and Max stood back against the wall in disbelief. What the hell was happening? It went on like that for over 20 minutes when the doctor finally had to pronounce him dead...

## Chapter 32

The team was assembled back in the conference room a couple days later. Christine was in Texas with her Mom, Lea and Susanna were back at work, and Bella and Dom were safely back in France. Hemi was also back at work and cooking up a storm.

The news of Kyle's death spread fast across the island. Whether they were re-grouping or strategizing their future was unknown, but there was an eerie silence in the organized crime front. Sophia had called Dom to tell him of the death and he seemed somewhat relieved. He had sworn that he would kill Kyle and now that chapter in Bella's life would be over.

Luke was taking the information he heard about his father very hard. He was still trying to process everything and figure out why he never saw the truth. His relationship with Max was severely strained. Luke believed him about not knowing the whole truth, but the fact the he never told Luke anything hurt the trust they had.

"I asked you all down here so we could discuss some things," Luke told the group. "After thinking a lot the past couple days, I have decided to stay on the island and operate an ongoing investigation into the corruption that has taken over in recent years. I spoke with Laura and she is issuing me a PI license to pursue anything related to Kyle Kaloni and his business. She is also implementing a task force to aid in anything I need help with."

Luke looked around the room to see expressions of pride and confusion. "I'm telling you all of this to let you know that you all have positions in my new business venture if you decide to accept. I'll give you some time to think about it, if you need to. Max is letting me rent out some rooms indefinitely, so we would be staying here until we can relocate to an office somewhere. Let's

take the rest of the day to discuss any questions you might have. My vote is to hit the beach, get some sun, and try to relax. Who would care to join me?"

They all looked at each other and smiled, but Sophia was the first one to speak up. "I would be very pleased to spend the day on the beach with you, Luke. Also, I don't need any time to think about working for you. I am already your employee and will continue to do so for as long as you need me."

"I second that sentiment," Ava stated. "We are a good team and I see no reason to break up a good thing. What about you David? Will you be joining us?"

"Just try to make me leave this paradise," he replied. "I think we all deserve a day of fun in the sun and then we get to work."

Luke sat back very pleased. "I was hoping you would all want to stay. I don't know what the future will hold for us, but I think we can make a real difference here." They all agreed.

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After a fabulous day at the beach Luke and Sophia decided to spend the evening with each other in Luke's room. They bid David and Ava goodnight and headed upstairs. They needed some alone time to process everything their future would hold.

They arrived in the room and Luke turned Sophia around and kissed her gently and said "Finally we have some time alone. This investigation has drained me, but it was all worth it. I would just like to take this time to relax, if that's ok with you. We can order some dinner in if you'd like."

"That sounds wonderful," she replied. "Do you mind if I take a shower first?"

"Of course, go ahead," Luke told her. "You know where everything is."

She kissed him quickly and headed into the bathroom to start the water. Standing under the warm jets felt divine. She closed her eyes and let the water wash all her worries and stress down the drain. She felt movement behind her and turned around in surprise as Luke had climbed in the shower with her.

“You didn’t think I was going to let you have all the fun, did you?” he grinned.

“Another wonderful idea Mr. Dalton,” she whispered in a sexy voice.

Luke picked up the fragrant lavender soap and started lathering up his hands slowly. He caressed her back and shoulders as she sighed heavily. The steam was rising around them as she leaned back against him and their bodies melted into one another. His arms encircled her as he lathered every inch of her body that was longing for his touch.

Sophia felt like she was in a dream and didn’t want to wake up. She started to realize that this was, in fact, her happy place where she could disappear from life and reality. She was someone exciting. Everyone had problems in the real world, but if you just relax and let life happen it could be pure bliss. Ahhhhh, it was all so wonderful at the beach....

~.~.~

*The End*

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