

# **COVID ORPHANS**





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**COLLATERAL DAMAGE**

**Teri Peluso**

This is a work of fiction. The names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents, even those based on real people, are entirely fictional.

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# **DEDICATION**



You know who you are, my love.

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*May we live in a world where  
goodness and generosity  
are the qualities we inculcate  
as our better angels  
guide us through the darkness.*

*– Teri Peluso*

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## PROLOGUE

South Floridians waited longingly for that first hint of a break in the humidity that wrapped itself around a body like a second skin. Typically, by this time in October there was some hint of relief. It had yet to arrive.

Early morning gym rats were at their appointed stations when a modestly fit, fiftyish man entered the locker room.

The aroma of disinfectant, sweat, and body odor hung in the air; a musk that was impossible to eradicate, even with the enhanced air circulation that was required since Covid descended on mankind.

Two men were laughing in the next row of lockers over as he opened his gym bag and removed a playing card, a set of keys, and a towel.

He entered a 4-digit code into the lock on #207, slipped the now-empty bag inside the locker and pressed LOCK as he simultaneously inserted a thin playing card through the crack in locker #208.

He picked up his keys and towel, adjusted his facemask and left the locker room. He did a few 220lb lifts on the cable crossover machine as he scanned the gym.

He found his target, a balding, heavy-set short man in his sixties who had been holding up a thigh machine for the last 15 minutes while he read something on his phone.

Satisfied no one had taken notice of him, he picked up his keys and towel, and walked out the door. After weeks of surveilling his target, this would be his last visit to the gym.

The next time he saw his target it would be under very different circumstances.



## CHAPTER 1

“Meemaw, mama’s home!” exclaimed 4-year-old Isabella. She had been waiting all day, sitting on the edge of a battered old sofa, that flanked a washing machine and a couple of lawn chairs, on a makeshift porch covered by corrugated plastic.

She was watching for the arrival of her daddy’s car. On this September afternoon it was carrying precious cargo.

“Okay, Bella, come on in now and let papa and mama get the baby inside. I don’t know how you can sit out there in this sweltering heat with those damn gnats swarmin’ around your head.”

The Honda parked behind an old Ford 150 crew-cab pickup and the rusted hulk of a Dodge Charger which sat on blocks. Marshall got out of the driver’s side and hustled around to help Chandra and their newborn out of the car.

Isabella stood quietly just inside the doorway as her brand-new sister, Makayla, was carried in and settled into a crib in the dining room.

Such an odd place for a crib, but the tiny three-bedroom double-wide in Millen was home to the Singletary family of six plus Chandra, Isabella, and now, Makayla. Chandra, Marshall, and Isabella slept on the tattered fold-out sofa

bed in the living room just a few feet from the dining room and kitchen.

The trailer in Millen was too small, money was too tight, and tempers flared without much provocation.

Millen is in Jenkins County, one of the poorest counties in the state of Georgia. Marshall, being the eldest, helped support his mother and four siblings after his father was killed coming home from work by a drunk driver.

Chandra was only 16 when she found herself pregnant with Isabella and there was no doubt Marshall was the father. Chandra's mother was lost in a fog of drug addiction and prostitution, so Chandra and Marshall agreed that it be best for all concerned if they moved into the Singletary home. Since Isabella's birth, Chandra took care of Marshall's siblings and the household while Marshall and his mother, Linda, worked.

Marshall was a rather good mechanic having completed a program at Jenkins County High School. He worked for the county maintaining their vehicles, doing oil changes and tune-ups. Linda waitressed and bartended at the local watering hole not far from the garage where Marshall worked.

At Halloween Marshall and Chandra drove his brothers, sister, and his baby girls sixteen miles to the Mallards Mill Mall for trick or treating.

"You remember Devon that I went to high school with?" Marshall asked as they walked the mall with Makayla snuggled into a baby sling against Chandra's chest.

"Sure, he was the smart one in your posse, wasn't he?"

"Yeah, smart enough to get the hell out of here as soon as he graduated. He went down to Florida and got a certificate from the community college in heating and air conditioning repair. He says it's a booming business down there."

“Sure does get hot in Florida so I imagine it’s a good job.”

“So we were talking, and he figures if I applied with the school district where he’s working he could put a good word in for me and get me on with them. He says it’s a good, solid place to work with benefits and a pension down the road.”

“Wow, that sounds great, Marshall. Are you thinking of doing it?”

“I was, but then I thought about Momma and the kids. I’m responsible for helping them with my dad gone, and I bring in more money than Momma does. I can’t just leave them.”

“Marsh, I’m not that good with money, but I’m pretty sure that the money you’re bringing home is used up by taking care of us, Isabella, and now Makayla. Do you really think your paycheck is helping your momma? I think the four of us probably cost her more than you make.”

Once the mall circuit was complete, they rounded up the kids and headed back to Millen. Marshall’s siblings were in the back seat taking inventory of their candy haul, while Isabella sat quietly strapped into a car seat that she had outgrown, sucking on a cherry lollypop. Chandra stroked Makayla’s peach-fuzz covered head and stared out the window wondering what life would be like if she could ever escape the pre-determined poverty and struggle of rural Georgia.

The next morning after all the kids were out the door for school Chandra approached Linda.

“Did Marsh tell you about hearing from Devon Johnson?”

“What’s he up to? I know he moved right after school”

“Yeah, he went to South Florida, got a certification in air conditioning repair and has a great job with the school

district. He thinks he could get Marsh in if we moved down there.”

“Sounds like a great opportunity if Devon’s not just blowing smoke out his butt. He always was a big talker.”

“He was that. Doesn’t matter though, Marsh wouldn’t leave you and the kids in a bind, besides who would take care of the kids while you were working?”

“Girl, look around here. You’re smart, you know this isn’t where you want to raise those little girls. It would be hard not having you and Marshall here, mostly because he keeps his little brothers in line, but I won’t stand in your way. I’ve made my bed and I’m layin’ in it every day. It’s not Marshall’s burden. Besides, Franklin’s almost 15 and he can take care of the younger ones until I get home. We’d figure things out.”

It was decided then. Marshall went online during his lunch hour and put his application in with the Broward County School Board. Linda agreed to carry a larger burden of expenses so Marshall could save some money. When March 2008 roared into Georgia like a lion, Marshall and Chandra loaded up the Honda with Isabella and Makayla and all their meager belongings to head south. Marshall still hadn’t heard from the school district, but Devon told him to come anyway. He was sure there would be a job for him.

## CHAPTER 2

Devon tapped his connections and soon after arriving in South Florida, Marshall had a job in the garage maintaining school district vehicles. With their meagre savings, Marshall and Chandra rented a “studio” apartment which was nothing more than a hotel room with double beds, a bathroom and a small area with a refrigerator, stove, and a few cabinets.

Chandra enrolled Isabella in pre-K and placed baby Makayla in Early Head Start. She signed up with a temporary employment agency which found her a housekeeping position in a long-term care facility that had a chain of homes across the U.S. It was Chandra’s responsibility to drop off and pick up the girls, so Marshall took the bus to work.

Within a few months, Chandra’s supervisor asked to speak with her in her office.

“Please sit, Chandra.”

“Thanks, Marta. I hope I didn’t do something wrong.”

“Wrong? Not at all, quite the opposite. We’re very impressed with you. You’re a conscientious worker and we would like to offer you a permanent position with Oakbriar Care. The offer includes better pay and full health benefits.”

“Marta, my gosh, I don’t know what to say! Thank you! Of course, I’ll take the job. You don’t know what a godsend this is, insurance and more money. Thank you again!”

“Wonderful, the pay rate is \$9.75 an hour with overtime. I’ll call over to Sandra in HR and tell her you’re on the way to sign the paperwork.”

Their first year in Florida was going well. Marshall and Chandra juggled the jobs, the kids and spent weekends at the beach and saved what money they could. A picture of the four of them on the beach at Christmas was put on their Christmas card and mailed to the Singletary family and Chandra’s mother in Georgia.

In the fall of 2009, their second year in Florida, Chandra was twenty-two and Marshall was twenty-four. With both working steadily they were able to move out of the motel and into a small 2-bedroom apartment. Isabella was six and Makayla had just had her third birthday. On the surface, things looked like they were going well, but life wasn’t easy. They argued; about money, the kids, the future, each other.

“Marsh, can you help me, please?”

“Sure baby, just wait until this play is over. The Dolphins are kicking a field goal and they’ll tie up the game. You know we don’t want the Patriots winning this!”

“Please, Marsh, I need you to help me get the groceries out of the car. We should’ve realized why we got such a deal on this place, a third-floor walk-up with no elevator!”

“Look at it this way babe, it keeps that sweet ass of yours in nice shape.”

“Fuck you Marsh. Watch your goddam game then. Where are the girls?”

“They were in their room playing. Haven’t heard a peep out of them for a while now.”

“Think you might want to check on that, Marsh? Just sayin’, two little ones playin’, and you don’t hear a peep?”



“Yeah, yeah. Will you get off my case!”

By the beginning of 2010, Marshall began partying more, coming home later and sometimes not at all on weekends. After being the eldest of five children, raising his own two kids was feeling more like a burden than a blessing. One day after work, after picking up the girls, Chandra came home to find all of Marshall’s clothes, his big-screen TV and most of the money in their budget jar gone.

“Mommy, I want to watch ‘tunes. Where did the TV go?”

“Honey, go ahead into your room and change your clothes. Take care of Kayla and then I’ll get you settled in Mommy and Daddy’s room, and you can watch our TV in there.”

Chandra began making calls, “Hi Shelly, Chandra. Can you check with Devon and see if he’s heard from Marshall? Yeah, seems like he’s in the wind. Okay, thanks.”

“Marvin, hi. It’s Chandra. I’m looking for Marshall. Is he around? No, I’m trying to find him, that’s why I’m calling you. Just tell him to call me if you see him, okay?”

Chandra made a few more calls to friends and no one had anything to tell her.

“Mommy! Come turn on the TV for us.”

Chandra didn’t have the luxury to wallow in her sorrow or the time to try and find Marshall. If he wanted to be found, he knew where she lived. Instead, she set about calming the girls down and getting dinner on the table.

“Yum, this is good Mommy.”

“I’m glad you like it Bella, but you need to eat your vegetables too.”

“I don’t want the vegables, I like the mac and cheese.”

“You eat everything on your plate or there’s no TV tonight.”

“I know Mommy, there’s no TV. Someone took it.”

“Yes, baby, someone took it. We’ll read before bed, okay? We have a new book from the library.”

Chandra got the girls to bed and read a chapter from *Mercy Watson Goes for a Ride*. It wasn’t long before Bella and Kayla were fast asleep. Chandra turned off the light and left the door open a crack.

She was exhausted and still hungry even though they had just finished dinner two hours ago. It seemed she was hungry all the time, and thirsty. She poured herself a glass of wine and headed for her bedroom. She stood looking at the empty bed and the tears came. She cried quietly, not wanting to wake Bella who was on the other side of the paper-thin walls. How had her life gone from good to pure shit overnight?

The following morning Chandra moved into the robotic routine of waking the girls, getting them washed, dressed and fed. Chandra called the garage and was told Marshall hadn’t reported to work for the last four days and had officially been fired for no notice.

Chandra called Linda in Georgia. “Hey Linda. Is Marshall there?”

“Marsh? What would he be doing here?”

“Have you heard from him in the last couple of days? I came home yesterday to find his stuff gone and he’s cleaned out what money he could get his hands on.”

“Well, I’m sorry to hear that, Chandra. Last time Marsh called he did share how much of a bitch you’d turned into. Harping on him to do women’s work around the house, not bringing in enough money. What do you think’s gonna happen if you treat a good-looking, hard-working man like Marshall that way? If I hear from him, I’ll tell him to give you a call.” Linda hung up.

She dropped Bella at school and Kayla at Head Start and made it to work with a few minutes to spare.

“Marta, when you have a minute today, could I talk to you?”

“Sure, Chandra. Now’s a good time. Come on in. What’s on your mind?”

“I’m wondering if I could pick up some extra hours on a regular basis. Things are getting a little tight at home.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. We can’t add extra hours on a permanent basis. Corporate only allows overtime as-needed so it would only be a couple of hours a pay period at the most.”

“I understand Marta, just thought I’d ask.”

“How about we do this; you’re up for a review in a month or so. Let me get that ball rolling early and see how much I can get you for a raise. Would that help?”

“It sure would help. Thanks, Marta.”

“Chandra, I know we aren’t friends, but is there something wrong with Isabella or Makayla? Anything I can do for you and the girls, please let me know.”

“No, Marta. They’re doing great. It’s just, well, Marshall’s run off. He just up and left. Took his stuff and the spare money we had. I can’t find him anywhere.”

“I’m so sorry, Chandra. Let’s hope he comes to his senses and comes home. Don’t get me started on men who just up and leave their kids.”

“Marta, if he turns up, I’ll kick his ass to the curb. I’ll never trust him again. I didn’t think things were bad. I asked him to pitch in a little more, but it’s not like he had anything to complain about. I’ll let you get back to work. Thanks again, Marta. Anything you can do, I appreciate.”

That evening on her way to pick up the girls, Chandra was stopped at a light and saw a help wanted sign in the diner on the corner. She and Marshall had taken the girls there a couple of times for root beer floats.

The next afternoon on her lunch break, Chandra applied for the waitress job and was hired on the spot. She

could work weekends and evenings for as many hours as she wanted. The place was a popular spot for regulars so she hoped tips would be good. She could start as soon as she arranged care for the girls.

Chandra had known the coordinator at the Head Start program since she arrived in Florida and always took a moment to say hello and thank you when she picked up Makayla. That evening she told Doreen what was going on and asked if she could extend the hours for Makayla and find some aftercare for Isabella.

“Geez, I’m sorry to hear that, Chandra. Seems women trying to find care for their babies is an epidemic lately. We can add an extra hour to Makayla’s day like we always do, but it doesn’t sound like that’s going to help you much or solve your problem with Bella or the weekends.”

“It just seems so overwhelming, Doreen. I need to make up for Marsh’s paycheck, but I can’t work more because there’s no one to watch the girls. If I had someone to go back to in Georgia, I would.”

“Listen, Chandra. You’re not the only one who finds yourself in a boat without paddles.”

“I know. I don’t want to sound like I’m feeling sorry for myself. I’ll do whatever I can, I just don’t know what to do.”

“I have a friend who’s the pastor over at the Macedonia Baptist Church on Sunrise Boulevard. The church runs an outreach program, an after-school program, even a food kitchen. Tell her I sent you over and see what she can do for you.”

“Her?”

“Yep, one of the few women who tend a flock and she’s amazing. Go talk to her.”

Chandra wasn’t religious. She didn’t find herself in a church very often, and this wasn’t like any church she’d ever set foot in. The large hall that served as the church

was filled with tables and chairs, a play area, and a stage. Dozens of people were eating and the smell of food from a kitchen off to the side of the hall was mouth-watering. Amid a group of children sat a slender black woman with a natural, closely cropped head of hair who was telling a story. As Chandra approached the circle the woman looked up with crystal green eyes and nodded for Chandra to have a seat at a nearby table.

Reverend Felicia McGuire was indeed amazing. As kids played and older folks sat and talked, Chandra told Rev. McGuire her story. “A shared burden is a burden lifted. Let’s see what we can do to share your burden, Chandra.”

As the Reverend spoke Chandra felt a calm sense of well-being come over her. The Reverend waved to another woman who had just come from the kitchen to help clear some tables.

“Elder Stevens, this is Chandra Powell. Chandra’s found herself between that rock and a hard place. See if you can work your magic and guide her through the haze and the maze.”

“Sure will. Come this way, Chandra.”

They passed through a pristine kitchen where a half-dozen people worked in silence, chopping vegetables, cooking a stew that was the source of the mouth-watering smell, and washing dishes. Elder Stevens opened a door with a hand-stenciled sign reading “All Souls Welcome.”

“Have a seat. Can I get you some coffee, tea, a pop before we talk?”

“No, thank you, I’m good.”

“Okay, so let me tell you about myself first. I’m an Elder here at the church, but my day job is as an ACLU attorney who does pro-bono work for anyone in need. As part of our outreach here at Macedonia Baptist, I volunteer my services in navigating that maze the Reverend referred to;

helping people get all the financial aid, housing, childcare, and health care resources they are entitled to.”

“Goodness, I had no idea all of this support was available.”

“Most people don’t, until they need it and if they’re lucky to find us they find their way out of that haze. Okay, let’s get started.”

After an hour of working with Elder Stevens, Chandra had all the paperwork completed to get some financial assistance and had the girls enrolled in the Church’s childcare program which as stunning as it sounded ran 24/7. Since she and Marshall were never officially married, and Chandra had insisted that “Singletary-Powell” be the last name on her girls’ birth certificates, as far as the government was concerned Chandra was a single woman who was the sole support of two young children.

## CHAPTER 3

With the support of the social safety net at the Macedonia Baptist Church, Chandra worked all the hours available at Oakbriar Care and Arnold's Diner. The tips weren't great at the diner, but she had a steady four hours every evening and eight hours on Saturday. Sunday was their day of rest. She and the girls dressed in their best and spent the day with Reverend McGuire and her flock.

Predictably, feeling overwhelmed, vulnerable, and alone, Chandra fell for the first guy who showed interest in her after Marshall left. Not long after meeting him in January 2010, Andre Evans moved in with Chandra and the girls.

For Easter Sunday services at Macedonia Baptist Chandra dressed the girls in matching outfits with hats, gloves, tiny purses, ruffled socks, and patent leather Mary Janes.

"These shoes hurt my feet, Momma," Isabella said as she led the way down the stairs to the parking lot. Chandra followed, carrying Makayla.

As she got the girls buckled into their car seats, Andre called down from the apartment balcony. "Chandra, pick up a six of Lite on your way home."

“Andre, you go to the store, you’re not doing anything but watching soccer. And while you’re there we need milk and bread.”

Talking to herself Chandra mumbled, “Lazy ass wants me to pick up a six for him, so he doesn’t have to pay for it.”

“Momma you have to put a nickel in the bad word jar!” Bella exclaimed.

Reverend McGuire outdid herself with the Easter Service and the church committee put on a fine spread with games and entertainment that filled the afternoon.

Chandra sat with some of the other women while the kids sang along with the band and danced. Reverend McGuire made it a point to speak to everyone and eventually joined Chandra’s group.

“You and the girls look beautiful, Chandra.”

“Thank you, Reverend. That was an inspiring service this morning. I’m sorry Andre missed it.”

“No need to be sorry on Andre’s behalf. None of the Evans’ seem to be interested in praising the Lord. Maybe your good influence will rub off on him. Anyway, I’m happy that you and the girls are with us today.” The Reverend got up and made her way over to greet another group.

Zena, one of the younger women at the end of the table, got up and sat down next to Chandra. “Girl, how long you been with Andre Evans?”

“Not long, just a couple months.”

“He livin’ with you and the girls?”

“Uh huh, he needed a place to stay for a while. Why?”

“Nothin’, none of my business. Just know someone whose been lookin’ for him, that’s all.”

“Who’s looking for him?”



“Sister, I like you and you got those little girls to look out for so I’m gonna say this and you can’t get up in my face all pissed off, okay.”

“Say what you got to say, Zena.”

“Andre’s got a reputation on the street for playing loose. And word is he likes his girls young, like real young. My neighbor’s girl is about to pop, and she says he’s her baby daddy. She’s fifteen.”

Before Chandra could answer Isabella ran up and jumped on her lap. “Momma, my feet hurt.”

“Okay, Bella, go get Kayla and we’ll go home.”

“Don’t be mad at me for tellin’ the truth, Chandra,” Zena said as she watched Isabella coming across the room with Makayla by the hand. “But you better keep an eye on him.”

“You sure about what you’re saying Zena? About Andre being that baby’s father?”

“How am I gonna know that for sure? But I do know Andre Evans. All I gotta say is you take care of those little ones, and yourself. You can do better.”

Bella and Kayla fell asleep in the car on the way home and Chandra made a detour to the beach. She found a parking space and sat in the car listening to the waves thinking about what Zena said. When her time on the parking meter was up, Chandra started the car and headed home.

Andre wasn’t there when Chandra arrived. She checked and there wasn’t any milk or bread either. She got Bella and Kayla bathed and into bed. Once they were asleep, Chandra rounded up all of Andre’s belongings and put them in trash bags and left them by the door. She sat on the couch with a glass of wine and waited. When she heard keys in the door she got up, opened the door, and pointed to the trash bags.

“The girls are asleep, so you just keep your voice down and do what I tell you. You give me that key, take your things, and you leave. You don’t come back, don’t ever come near me, Bella, or Kayla. Don’t even say hello on the street if you see us.”

“What the fuck’s gotten into you woman,” Andre said loudly as he tried to push past Chandra.

She stood her ground, grabbed his arm, and took the keys out of his hand. “What’s gotten into *me*? I don’t know Andre, but I do know what, or should I say who, got into a 15-year-old girl who is about to have a baby. Get your shit out of here.” She picked up one of the bags and shoved it into Andre’s arms, grabbed the other and pushed him and his trash out the door. She locked and chained it and turned out the lights. She waited, wondering if she was going to have to call the police but Andre just kicked the door, cursed, and dragged his bags down the stairs to his car and left.

The following morning Chandra explained to the girls that Andre had found another place to stay and wouldn’t be back.

“That’s good, momma.” Bella said, “He made me feel creepy.”

Chandra felt her stomach drop. “How did he make you feel creepy, Bella?”

“I dunno, he just did. He’d stare at me and Kayla, or sometimes when he’d pick me up, he’d squeeze me too tight.”

“Oh, baby, I’m sorry. I made a mistake letting him come here and stay with us, but he’s gone now. I want you to promise me that if anyone ever makes you or your sister feel creepy, a man, a woman, anyone, you tell me right away, okay? Promise?”

“I promise momma.”

Later that week, Chandra was making dinner when she felt nauseous. The nausea came and went for a few days until she faced reality and a pregnancy test confirmed that she had joined the Andre Evans' baby-momma club.

On November 27, 2010, Chandra gave birth to her third child, a son she named Tristen. The birth certificate listed father "unknown," and Tristen's last name as Powell.

Tristen was two weeks early coming into the world, so Chandra had worked right up to the day she went into labor. With family leave and her meagre savings, she was able to be home with Tristen for three weeks before heading back to work. She enrolled him in the Early Head Start program and her support system at Macedonia Baptist continued to fill in the gaps.

Chandra and the girls spent the morning of New Year's Day, 2011 watching the Rose Parade on TV. She had bought hats and balloons at the Dollar Store to decorate the apartment.

"Why are we wearing funny hats, Momma?"

"Well Bella, it's a new year and the way we say hello to the new year is celebrate with funny hats and balloons. This afternoon we're going to make some Hoppin' John, cornbread, and pot likker soup.

"Who's John?" Kayla asked.

Chandra laughed, "Hoppin John is black-eye peas that we cook with some ham hock and rice. It's really good and if you have it for dinner on New Year's Day, you'll have good luck for the whole year."

"Well, momma, we need all the good luck we can find, don't we!" Bella chimed.

"We sure do baby, we sure do." Chandra said a silent prayer that her luck would turn.

"Momma, do you think Daddy will be back in the new year?"

“Oh, Bella, I don’t think so. I don’t know why he went away but I don’t think he’s coming back.”

“Why not, mamma? Doesn’t he love us?”

“Baby, I think your daddy loves you very much, but sometimes people can’t stay with the people they love. It’s just the way life goes sometimes.”

“Well, I think we should make life go another way.”

“From your mouth to God’s ears, baby girl.”

## CHAPTER 4

Life settled into a predictable, but hectic, routine. Chandra put her hours in at Arnold's Diner and Oakbriar Care but what she brought home barely kept up with the cost of housing. Macedonia Baptist was a lifeline for support and wide shoulders to lean on.

The fall of 2011 Isabella started third grade and Makayla was enrolled in kindergarten. Tristen, who was quick to smile and never fussed, was a favorite with the staff at Early Head Start.

The staff at Oakbriar went out of their way to make any holiday a celebration for the residents, and families of residents and staff were always invited to the parties. The more cognizant residents enjoyed interacting with Bella and Kayla while the nurses and attendants fawned over Tristen.

In November when Tristen turned a year old there were parties at Macedonia Baptist, Arnold's Diner and Oakbriar Care. As Chandra sat with the nurses eating birthday cake, she was grateful that her kids had a dozen grandparents, aunts and uncles given all the people in her extended family.

Each subsequent New Year's Day the Powell family prepared their good luck meal and counted their blessings. Chandra saved what money she could, taught the girls how

to do chores and earn an allowance, and felt grateful for healthy kids and a steady income.

As the kids got older and more self-sufficient, when they weren't in school Chandra was able to bring them to the nursing home and the diner where they would do homework, visit with the residents, or pretend to take orders. Kayla decided she wanted to be a short order cook when she grew up and was always willing to help in the kitchen at home.

Although as time passed and she was less dependent on the support of Macedonia Baptist, to pay it forward Chandra volunteered when the church held special events. At one celebration she saw Zena talking to another woman whose daughter held a little girl who looked too much like Tristen. Chandra's stomach rolled and the thought that the little girl was Tristen's half-sister made her turn around and leave.

In 2015 Oakbriar's Social Coordinator implemented a Companion Animal Program where specially trained dogs visited with residents. The program was very popular, and the dog's owners counted on Bella and Kayla to help make the rounds. Even five-year-old Tristen was allowed to lead the dogs into the rooms or out in the courtyard. Bella seemed to have developed an intuitive sense with animals and decided she was going to be a vet. The only downside to the program Chandra could see was that Tristen began a relentless campaign for a dog of his own.

Despite being a vibrant, good-looking woman, Chandra avoided getting involved with men. She had already been burned twice and after the Andre fiasco she didn't trust her judgement. In May of 2017 she passed the milestone of turning 30 without fanfare or concern.

One afternoon Chandra was cleaning a resident's room and felt dizzy. She sat down and waited until she felt better and finished her work. That evening the dizziness returned

followed by a crushing headache. The next morning, Chandra approached one of the nurses and told her what had happened. Madelyn ushered Chandra into an exam room, drew some blood and took her blood pressure.

“Chandra, how long have you been working here?” Madelyn asked.

“Well, I guess it’s going on eight years now.”

“And, with eight years being around all these nurses and doctors, when was the last time you saw a doctor or had your blood pressure taken?”

“I make sure the kids see a doctor every year but other than having babies and getting our flu shots and vaccines updated I haven’t had to see a doctor.”

“Well, I hate to be the one to tell you, but your blood pressure is coming in at a Stage-2 level for hypertension. Let’s get one of the doctors in here and we’ll see what he thinks.”

“Oh, no, Madelyn, come on. I need to get back to work and I don’t want to make a big deal of this. I’m feeling better. I’ll be okay.”

“You don’t move, got it. Stay right there and I’ll be back.”

Dr. Epstein was on call. Madelyn filled him in on the situation as he followed her to the exam room where Chandra waited.

“Chandra, hello. How are those kids of yours doing?”

“Just fine, Dr. Epstein, growing like weeds.”

“Good. So let me ask you something. Do you want to be around when they get into college?”

“What?”

“If untreated, hypertension will kill you, Chandra, and it can cause very serious complications for other organs in your body. Now, we’re going to put you on some medication. It may take a bit of tweaking with the dosage and initially you’ll feel a bit off, but when we get the dosage

correct and your body gets used to the medication you will feel much better.”

“Madelyn will send that blood work off to the lab and I’m going to make an appointment with the other doctor in my practice for you to get a complete physical.”

A week later, Chandra sat across from Dr. Douglas as he reviewed the results of her blood work and her physical.

“How are you doing on the blood pressure medication Dr. Epstein prescribed?”

“I’m doing okay with it. How long will I need to take it?”

“Chandra, you’re on that medication for the rest of your life. You need to be diligent about taking it as prescribed and you need to begin taking your blood pressure at home. Take it at the same time each day and if you see your blood pressure going up, or down, you need to come in and we’ll adjust the dosage.”

“It won’t go away?”

“No, it won’t and if you stop taking the medication you can have more serious problems. Unfortunately, that isn’t the only issue we found.”

“Oh no, what else is wrong?”

“Chandra, based on your blood work I think you have Type 2 diabetes. We’re going to do a more advanced set of tests for glucose tolerance but based on what you’ve described, always feeling hungry and thirsty, and with the numbers I’m seeing I’m very sure that will be the diagnosis.

“Now I know you’re a single mom and this news isn’t ideal, but those kids need you to take care of yourself. Moms too often neglect themselves and all the attention goes to your kids. You must make yourself a priority if you want to do right by your kids. Will you do that?”

“Yes, of course. This is a lot to get my head around, but yes, I’ll do whatever I have to.”



Chandra left the doctor's office and drove to the beach. Whenever she felt overwhelmed, the sound of the waves and the smell of the ocean seemed to calm her down and clear her mind.

What would happen to the kids if something happened to her? Chandra hadn't heard from her mother in years. She sent birthday and Christmas cards but got no response. Marshall never surfaced and after all this time she didn't want him involved with the girls. Would the kids end up in foster care? Split up? She had to talk to someone.

On her way home she stopped at Macedonia Baptist and found Reverend McGuire chopping onions in the kitchen.

"Chandra! How nice to see you. It's been a bit of a while since I looked out on Sunday morning to see your smiling face and those beautiful children!"

"I know Reverend, I'm sorry. The kids just take up so much time and it seems like I don't have a minute to myself between them and work."

"You don't need to be sorry. It's my own selfishness that wants to see you. You don't need to be in a building to commune with the Lord. But what brings you here today?"

"I need some advice and was wondering when Elder Stevens was available."

"Actually, if you check out in the courtyard, I think you'll find her working on a project for the kids."

"Thanks, Reverend, and we'll be here Sunday."

Chandra found Elder Stevens in splattered jeans standing in front of a wall painted with affirmations of positive self-esteem, responsibility, and respect.

"I didn't know you were an artist as well as an Elder and a lawyer," Chandra said as she approached. "I don't want to interrupt, but I was wondering if I could get some advice when you have some free time."

“Chandra! Hi. As you can see the quality of my artwork isn’t comparable to my skill as a lawyer or my commitment as an Elder. Now’s a good time for a break. Please join me inside where it’s cooler and I’ll grab us a couple of iced teas.”

“Let’s sit over there where we won’t be disturbed,” Elder Stevens said as she led Chandra to a table in the corner of the hall. “So, what can I help you with?”

Chandra explained her recent diagnosis and that she wanted to know what would happen to the children if anything were to happen to her.

“Well, Chandra, unfortunately given your present circumstances, if you were to pass, the kids would become wards of the state and they would be placed in foster care.”

“I was afraid that would be the answer. There’s got to be something else I can do. They can’t be split up.”

“Is there anyone you know who would be willing to become their legal guardian?”

“Oh, Elder Stevens, come on, be real. Who’s going to agree to take in three adolescents or teenagers and be responsible for them!”

“Chandra, please, call me Trisha. My pastoral work as an Elder is a different hat. When I’m ‘lawyering’ as the Reverend likes to call it, just call me Trisha. Getting back to our problem, you might be surprised how generous people can be. Let’s think about it. Is there anyone at work you’re close to?”

“No. I mean we know lots of people but no one that’s close enough that I would ask to make that kind of commitment. I guess we’re a pretty tight unit, just the four of us.”

“Do you have a will?”

“A will, no. I don’t have anything, why would I need a will.”

Over the next hour Trisha explained the function of wills, medical surrogates, and trusts and she insisted how much money or things you owned weren't the only important considerations. Without those legal documents anything you did have would go through probate with the state and could hold up precious resources to take care of your children. She told Chandra about the statewide Guardian Ad Litem program that advocates for children who are under the care of the state.

“So, I'll take care of most of that for you and then we'll meet with one of my colleagues who is a lawyer with Guardian ad Litem to outline how they would step in should the need arise. Sound good?”

“Thank you, Trisha. You don't know what a relief this is. If there's anything I can ever do for you, please don't hesitate to ask.”

“Well, if you don't have to be anywhere right now, follow me and pick up a brush.”

## CHAPTER 5

Early in 2019 a 3-bedroom corner apartment became available on their floor. Chandra had paid her rent on time every month for the past nine years and the landlord offered her a break on the rent for the 3-bedroom, grateful to have a solid tenant. This year marked the ten-year anniversary of Chandra and the girls moving to Florida, and her employment at Oakbriar Care.

In June Isabella celebrated her 16<sup>th</sup> birthday and passed her driver's test. The customers and employees at Arnold's chipped in and bought her \$100 worth of gas cards. Residents and staff from Oakbriar, some of whom had watched the kids grow up, showered Bella with gifts and best of all, an internship with a local veterinary hospital arranged for by the owner of the Companion Animal Program.

In September Makayla turned 12 and entered the 7<sup>th</sup> grade where she seemed more adept at soccer and volleyball than academics. Tristen started 4<sup>th</sup> grade and was better at soccer than Kayla, to his delight and her horror.

Tristen turned nine the day before Thanksgiving and Chandra made the long Thanksgiving weekend an extended birthday party. That weekend Bella, Kayla and Tristen helped decorate the Christmas tree and placed

menorahs in all the Jewish residents' rooms at Oakbriar Care. They painted the windows of Arnold's Diner with snowflakes and stars. On Sunday the family celebrated with their friends at Macedonia Baptist.

"My goodness, how you kids have grown!" Reverend McGuire exclaimed as she welcomed Chandra, Isabella, Makayla, and Tristen. "Come and sit, tell me what's going on in your lives."

"I made the Dean's list," Bella said, "And I'm working at the veterinary hospital every Saturday."

"And, I made my varsity soccer team," Kayla boasted.

"But I'm better than you are, and I'm goalie on my team," Tristen interjected.

"Well that all sounds wonderful. And how about Mom, how are you doing, Chandra?"

"I'm trying to keep up with these guys. But I'm doing fine. How are you? It looks like the congregation grows every time we come to a service."

"I'm blessed by the Best, thank you for asking. Yes, we have about 750 members now. Obviously, not all of them come to every service, but we've been very fortunate in growing our community. Some members support us financially and make our services possible, others, as you know, volunteer their time. Now you all go and catch up with the others. I need to say hello to those folks over there."

Shortly after Thanksgiving, the staff at Oakbriar noticed an increase in flu among the residents, which wasn't unusual for that time of year, even in Florida. Residents and staff were all required to get a flu vaccine, but it was never 100% effective.

Whenever there was an increase in some bacterial or viral infection in the facility, staff moved to a higher level of care. Housekeeping re-doubled efforts to sanitize rooms,

fixtures, clothing, linens, as well as office areas and nursing stations.

Christmas and Hanukkah were festive times, although South Florida decorated palm trees, not pines, and it had only snowed once back in 1977. Visits at Oakbriar increased and the more ambulatory residents left to spend some time with family. Even the regulars at Arnold's seemed to tip better.

As the New Year arrived, residents were still falling ill and those who were already sick were not improving. A few had required additional medical intervention and were transferred to local hospitals. Chandra overheard the EMT personnel mention an increase in the flu causing an unusual number of hospitalizations.

On January 19, 2020 China confirmed its first case of human-to-human coronavirus, followed a few days later by the first confirmed case in Washington State. The medical community slowly began to understand they were dealing with more than just the flu.

During the week of January 26<sup>th</sup> Miami opened its doors to football fans from around the world which culminated in the Super Bowl being played on Sunday, February 2<sup>nd</sup> between the Kansas City Chiefs and the San Francisco 49ers.

The concept of community transmission, a mainstay in epidemiology and virology, would soon become a reality experienced by the mainstream public.

By the end of February 2020 medical examiners across the US began investigating suspected cases of coronavirus, labelled Covid-19, dating back to November 2019. It would later be discovered that reports of respiratory illnesses and sudden onset of pneumonia among indigent populations in the northwest US dated back to August of 2019.

Testing for Covid-19 was generally available only to people who had a travel history or known contacts with the

virus. On March 1<sup>st</sup>, the State of Florida officially announced its first two cases of Covid; a 29-year-old woman who had traveled to Italy and a 64-year-old man who had never left the country. On March 14<sup>th</sup> the CDC issued a "no sail" order for cruise ships suspending operation in US waters, one of the last countries to do so, stranding thousands of passengers and crew members at sea. On April Fool's Day 2020 the Governor issued a statewide "stay-at-home" order.

Only front-line, essential workers were exempt. Nationwide, there were 8,000 confirmed cases of Covid with 101 deaths reported. On April 3<sup>rd</sup>, the CDC issued its guidance for the use of cloth face coverings in public areas to reduce infection based on the increasing evidence that there could be asymptomatic spread of the virus. Criteria for testing for Covid was expanded but was implemented on a sporadic basis due to inadequate supplies of materials and lack of availability of labs to process the tests.

On April 8<sup>th</sup>, Chandra was sanitizing the nurses' station as the afternoon shift change was taking place. Madelyn, the Charge Nurse, approached the desk.

"I have some difficult news to share," she began. "I just spoke with Rachel. Her sister had been feeling ill since they had all gathered for Purim almost two weeks ago. During their last conversation on the phone yesterday, Rachel said her sister could barely speak. She passed away this morning at home. She was only 40 years old but suffered from chronic bronchitis. Rachel also said her sister hadn't been out of state in several years."

As they all absorbed the news, Madelyn continued, "Rachel also asked me to tell you that she has felt fine but is concerned that she may have brought something home and infected her sister. Given the unknowns with Covid the family will not be sitting shiva and Rachel just asks for your prayers as they cope with this difficult loss."

Over the next few days, patients continued to fall ill, some critical enough to be transported to the ER. CDC and state health guidance suggested facilities quarantine patients who were symptomatic. Marta rallied her housekeeping staff to set up a quarantine area, get the rooms sanitized and assist the nurses with moving the patients. All the while Chandra continued to clean and sanitize rooms and common areas.

After cleaning up after an incontinent patient, Chandra stripped off her gloves, dropped them in the hazardous wastebin and went to grab a new pair but the box was empty. Opening the supply closet she inventoried the remaining masks, gloves, and gowns.

“Marta, we need to order some PPE. We’re low on everything. Here’s the count on what’s left.”

“Yes, I ordered supplies a couple of weeks ago, but those will be gone as soon as they arrive. I’ll place another order, but I don’t know when it will get here.”

“What’s the hold up?”

“I don’t know. Corporate won’t let us get supplies locally. We’re required to order through them, and they control the shipping. When I checked on the delay the folks in Seattle just told me they’d check on it. I haven’t heard a word. Just try to be careful with what you use and re-use what you can until our order gets here.”

The shortage of gowns, gloves, masks, and other Personal Protective Equipment staples was getting critical as was the availability of ventilators and intubation equipment in the hospitals.

The medical community now clearly understood the transmissibility and contagious nature of this coronavirus. When Rachel returned to work she expressed concern about the risk of carrying the virus home.

“I’m certain my sister died from this infection and that I’m the one who infected her.”



“Oh, Rachel, you can’t be sure of that. It’s not your fault,” one of the nurses said.

“That’s nice to think so, but come on, we know what’s happening here. This isn’t the flu, this is SARS. Think of what it’s like when MERSA takes hold in a hospital. That’s what we’re dealing with, but you can be infected with this and not show any symptoms. That’s scary as hell. We need to isolate within the facility to mitigate the risk to our families.”

The nurses discussed this further and approached facility management who gave them approval to isolate on site. A small group of support staff also chose to stay, including Chandra.

Chandra facetimed with the kids and explained she needed to stay onsite just to be sure she didn’t bring the virus home. Bella assured her she could hold down the fort at home since schools had closed and nothing was open.

Orders for PPE still didn’t arrive, and staff continued to provide the best level of care possible under increasingly difficult circumstances. By the 2<sup>nd</sup> week of March Oakbriar Care had transferred 14 residents to the ER which represented 17% of their census. None returned to Oakbriar.

Almost daily, the Administrator at Oakbriar Care in Fort Lauderdale contacted the corporate office in Seattle desperately seeking further support or direction on additional measures to be implemented to protect the health and well-being of patients and staff.

Corporate referred her to the guidance coming from politicians, state, and federal officials which was poorly managed, often consisting of contradictory statements or citing unscientific methods and practices which were not recognized by the epidemiological and virology medical experts.

## CHAPTER 6

Throughout March 2020, Chandra and the kids faceted at least twice a day. Chandra explained to Isabella where to find her passwords and how and when to pay bills with online banking. Bella ordered staples and other necessities online from Amazon or Walmart and had them delivered. She only ventured out to a store for milk, eggs, or bread. By this time, it was clear Covid-19 was a killer virus.

“Hi Mom,” the three kids chimed at once.

“Hey babies. Tell me what’s going on. Bella, did all the kinks get worked out with the sites you all need for school?”

“Kind of, but the computer’s so slow and Kayla and Tristen need to be on there at the same time, so I’m going to keep Tristen on the computer and Kayla on your tablet if that’s okay.”

“Of course, that’s okay. Do whatever you have to do. How are you going to take care of your schoolwork?”

“I checked and I can do my work anytime, it’s kind of self-paced study for me. Kayla and Tristen have to follow along with a teacher on Zoom.”

“Have you checked with any of the neighbors? How are things going at the apartment?”

“Mom, nobody’s coming out. They don’t even come out to sit on the balcony. The only people I see are the guys

coming and going who are still working. Twice now I've seen U-Hauls being loaded and people heading out somewhere else. I guess there are counties in Florida that aren't locked down so heavy and people are going there. How are things at work?"

"It's not pretty. We're all stressed out and worried about our families. Every day we have residents' families come by wanting to check up on their loved ones and we have to keep the doors locked and turn them away. Seems like someone else gets sick every day and we're moving people to the hospital every other day or so. Hopefully, this mess will clear up quickly and we'll get back to normal soon. Listen kids, I need to get back to work. I'll check in tonight before bedtime. If you need anything, call me."

"Okay Mom."

"Bye Mom."

"We love you."

"I love you too babies. You take care of each other and say a few prayers."

On April 9<sup>th</sup> Chandra woke early, unable to sleep. She quietly left the room she was sharing with two of the other housekeeping staff, not wanting to wake them. The skeleton food service crew were already up and working and the smell of freshly brewed coffee filled the staff lounge which was connected to the facility's kitchen.

"Morning Chandra, you're up early," the kitchen supervisor said as she brought Chandra a cup of coffee.

"Thanks, Evelyn, that smells delicious."

"Enjoy. Let me know if you want some eggs before your shift starts."

Chandra didn't have much of an appetite, so she finished her coffee and went back to her room to check her insulin level and give herself her morning shot.

Before starting their shifts, all staff got temperature checks since one of the first symptoms of Covid was a

fever. When Rachel took Chandra's temperature it was elevated.

"Chandra, I can't let you work today. Your temp is a bit high. Take some acetaminophen and stay in your room. I'll recheck you in a few hours."

Chandra went back to her room, took a couple of Tylenol®, had a long hot shower and called the kids.

Bella answered the phone. "Hi Mom."

"Hi baby. Are Kayla and Tristen doing their Zoom school?"

"Kayla is but Tristen's teacher keeps losing her connection, so she just gave them some homework to do. He's getting antsy though and doesn't want to do it."

"Go get him so I can say hello."

"Hey Mom."

"Tristen, how's school going?"

"I hate this. It doesn't work. I want to play soccer. All we're doing is sitting around here. It sucks."

"I know, Tristen, but please just get your schoolwork done and mind Bella. Put her on, please. I love you."

"Love you too, Mom. Here's Bella."

"Bella, when Kayla's finished why don't you all take a walk, just stay away from other people, and make sure you have your masks on. I'll say goodbye for now. I'll call you at dinner time."

"Okay Mom. Kayla says hi and she loves you."

"Give her a kiss for me."

"Tell Tristen if he wants to work off some of that energy, I'm sure that place could use a good vacuuming and dusting."

Bella laughed. "Right, Mom, like he'd push a vacuum cleaner!"

At noon, Rachel returned to check on Chandra's temperature and found it another point higher.

“Chandra, I’m sorry but we have to move you over to the quarantine area. I’ll have Dr. Epstein order some antibiotics and steroids.”

Chandra gathered her things and with a sense of foreboding joined three residents in the quarantine area of rooms at the end of the hall. Two sets of heavy plastic sheeting were duct taped to the walls and ceiling with slits down the middle for people and equipment to pass through. In between sets of plastic were bins for disposal of used PPE, but with the severe shortage, nothing was thrown out. As they left the quarantine area, each nurse and doctor had a plastic bag with their name on it where they stored the masks, gloves, and gowns they had worn in quarantine to be reused. It was the best they could do given the circumstances.

Chandra got her first dose of steroids and antibiotics and settled in to read. Not long after her head started to throb, so she took her blood pressure. It had dropped. She told a nurse and Dr. Epstein adjusted her blood pressure medicine.

On and off throughout the day, a nurse checked in on the four quarantined patients. Around 3:30 one of the residents being cared for started exhibiting difficulty breathing and the EMTs were called. They wheeled the resident out through the emergency door at the end of the hall. Within an hour, another resident checked into quarantine.

That evening at dinner time, Chandra called the kids again and Kayla answered.

“Hi Mom, why aren’t you facetimeing?”

“Well, I wasn’t sure if you were on the tablet for school. How was your day today?”

“It was okay, I guess. It’s really boring. The stuff they’re giving us to do over Zoom is stupid. Do you know when we’ll be able to go back to school?”

“No, baby, I don’t. But from what I’m hearing and seeing on the news it’s not going to be anytime soon. You’ll have to get used to it. Just try and mind Bella and be good.”

“I am Mom. Bella’s cool. She’s bored too but she’s working on applications for college and some kind of essay she has to write when she applies.”

“Really, well that’s interesting. That’s a good use of her time. How about you? What are you doing with your time?”

“I’m getting really, really good at Minecraft. I can beat Tristen every time.”

“I’m sure that makes him happy. Put him on so I can say hello.”

“He’s down in the parking lot.”

“Where’s Bella?”

“She’s in her room, I’ll go get her.”

“Hey Mom. What’s going on?”

“Isabella, what’s Tristen doing in the parking lot?”

“Nothing Mom. We went for a walk this afternoon like you said and some of the kids in the complex were kicking a soccer ball around the parking lot. Tristen played a little and he’s just hanging out there. They have masks on.”

“Bella, I know this is hard on you trying to keep those two occupied, but you have to be careful.” Chandra paused before she continued. “Bella, I need to tell you something and I don’t want Kayla there when I do. Is she there?”

“No Mom, she’s in the kitchen. What’s the matter?”

“Baby, I started running a fever today and my blood pressure is all over the map.”

“Mom, oh no, no. Is it Covid?”

“I’m pretty sure it is baby. I’m in the quarantine area and they’ve got me on some steroids and antibiotics. With some luck and prayer, it won’t get any worse, but I want you to promise me you’ll do whatever you need to do to

keep yourselves safe. That means you get Tristen upstairs and no more soccer games in the parking lot. Call him in and tell him I want to talk to him.”

“Mom, please, I’m worried. You can’t be sick. What do I do!”

“Calm down, Bella. I needed to tell you because I don’t know what’s going to happen. I’ve got some paperwork in my closet in a box labelled “Will” that Elder Stevens helped me put together. If anything happens you take that box with you to the Church and find Reverend McGuire. Okay? Now go get Tristen. I’ll hold on.”

“Mom, hi.”

“Tristen, what are you doing outside runnin around with other boys?”

“Don’t be mad, Mom. We just played some soccer. I’ve got my mask on. Some of the kids’ parents say this whole thing is made up anyway.”

“Tristen, you listen to me. It’s not made up. It’s real. I’ve watched people we know, people who watched you and the girls grow up, get carted out of here on stretchers not able to breathe. Those folks aren’t coming back here, Tristen. I don’t care what anyone else’s parent says, I’m your mother and you do what I say, and what I’m telling you is you listen to Bella, stay away from people and I don’t care how bored you are, you don’t go playing with a bunch of guys in the parking lot. You hear me.”

“Yeah, Mom I hear you. I’m sorry, please don’t be mad. Here’s Bella back.”

“Hey. Well, whatever you said might work. I haven’t seen tears in the little twerp’s eyes since he got whacked in the head at that game last year. Mom, is there any chance I can come by and see you tomorrow? I’ll wear a mask, and I won’t stay long.”

“No baby, we aren’t letting anyone inside. The closest you can get is on the other side of the window of my room,

but we can facetime, Bella. I'll use my phone. Besides, how would you get here?"

"I'll walk Mom, it's only a few miles away, and besides you aren't using the car and it would help if I had it here in case I need it."

"You've got a point there. There's a spare set of keys in the top drawer of my dresser. Don't bring your brother and sister, just you, and come in the morning, okay? My room is at the end of the wing on the side of the courtyard. I'll have a flower in the window."

"Okay, Mom. I'll get them logged in to school and I'll be there by 10 at the latest. I love you, Mom. Please don't get any sicker."

"That's the plan, baby girl. I'll see you tomorrow."



## CHAPTER 7

That night Chandra's fever went higher, and she began having trouble breathing. Her oxygen saturation went down to 88%.

Shortly after sunrise, Rachel came in to check Chandra's vital signs.

"Rachel, yesterday I told Isabella that I was sick. She's coming by this morning to pick up the car and visit through the window. I don't want her to see me with oxygen on and in a gown. Can you help me get dressed?"

"Oh honey, of course. Let's get you showered, and you'll feel better after that."

Bella arrived and found the window with the single Gardenia blossom in a vase. Chandra had been watching for her and pointed to her cellphone as Bella's phone rang.

"Did you find the keys?"

"Yeah Mom, I found them. When's the last time you started the car?"

"It's been a while. If it doesn't start, come back and I'll get one of the maintenance guys to jump it."

Bella started to cry, "Mom, you look like you're having trouble breathing. God, can't they help you? Should you go to the hospital? They can do more for you at the hospital, can't they?"

“The hospitals are swamped and they’re taking good care of me here. I’ll keep taking my medicine and I’m sure I’ll turn the corner. Not everyone dies from this, baby.”

“Don’t say that! Don’t say ‘die’,” Bella sobbed.

“Bella, listen to me. What happens is in God’s hands. You, me, nobody controls that and if it’s His choice to take me, then we need to be at peace with that.”

“What do I tell Kayla and Tristen? Do I tell them you’re sick?”

“I guess you should baby, they deserve to know and they’re old enough. Why don’t you go home and talk to them, then we’ll facetime this afternoon, okay?”

By the afternoon Chandra’s oxygen saturation cratered and paramedics were called. With the help of an ER nurse, Chandra facetimed her children and the nurse explained that this was a life-threatening situation. When Bella asked to be able to come to the hospital, she was told that no one was allowed visitation, and the nurse assured her that the doctors would do everything possible to get Chandra through this critical time. Chandra told her kids she loved them and not to worry, that she would see them soon.

Back at the apartment Isabella, Kayla and Tristen sat in shock. Bella struggled to hold back tears as she tried to console her younger brother and sister. “Come on guys. It’s Mom, she’s a superhero, nothing’s going to get the best of her.”

“Don’t act stupid Bella. You saw Mom, and that nurse! She looked like she was from outer space,” Tristen sobbed as tears stained his cheeks. “Dwayne’s dad went in the hospital, and he was dead the same day.”

“Geez, Tristen, I guess this isn’t fake is it!” Makayla cried as she rushed down the hall and slammed the door to the bedroom she shared with Bella.

Back at the hospital, Chandra was transferred out of the ER. A doctor administered sedation that put her into an induced coma, and she was intubated.

In the early hours of the morning of Friday, April 24, 2020 Chandra Powell died alone in an ICU bed.

At the time, she was one of 1,046 souls known to have succumbed to Covid in Florida since March 1<sup>st</sup> when statistics began being compiled.

## CHAPTER 8

At 7:30 in the morning on April 24<sup>th</sup>, the phone rang at the apartment. It woke Isabella who had fallen asleep on the couch. As she answered, Makayla, and Tristen came out of their rooms, eyes swollen from crying and groggy from sleep.

They watched as Bella said, “Hello” and listened to the caller. Bella’s face and tears told them all they needed to know, “Thank you for letting us know,” she said, and she hung up the phone.

Over the next few hours, the kids retreated into themselves trying to understand feelings of loss and grief they had never experienced before.

Bella heard her mother’s voice in her head saying, *do whatever you need to do baby girl*. She prayed for strength and asked the Lord to watch over their mother.

It was dark when Kayla, the short order cook, came out of her room and headed for the kitchen and began rummaging through the fridge and the pantry.

Tristen watched her from the living room where he had been sitting playing Minefield for hours. Being the youngest, Bella guessed he would have either the easiest or the hardest time dealing with these feelings. “What are you doin’ Kayla,” he asked.

“We’re going to have dinner.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“I don’t care if you’re hungry, I’m going to make Hoppin’ John, cornbread, and pot likker soup and we’re going to eat dinner. Mom would want us to eat dinner as a family.”

Bella got up and pulled pots and pans out of the cupboards. She got a knife and started chopping onions and celery.

“Tristen, set the table. Use the good plates and the real napkins.”

“You guys are crazy! Mom’s dead. DEAD! And you want to have dinner. Screw this.” Tristen flew out the front door slamming it behind him.

“Should we go after him?” Makayla asked.

“No, let him go. We’re all gonna need our space,” Bella said as she looked out the front window. “He’s just sitting on the steps.”

By the time the Hoppin’ John was ready to eat it was almost nine. Tristen came inside and went straight to his room. Bella knocked on the door.

“Go away.”

“No, I’m not going away. Can I come in?”

“I don’t care, do what you want.”

Bella sat on the edge of the bed as Tristen laid there staring at the ceiling.

“You okay?”

“No, I’m not fuckin’ okay.”

“Tristen, don’t you talk to me that way! We’re all hurting, but you wouldn’t talk like that in front of Mom, so you don’t talk that way to me or Kayla.”

“YOU ARE NOT MY MOTHER!” he screamed as he jumped up and left the room and Bella followed.

“So, what are you going to do? You going to run out again, run away? You think you can run away from the feelings, do you? Well, Tristen I guess we’re all just going

to have to grow up and figure out what to do next, because if we don't, we're going to end up in foster care, split up and living with some strangers! You want that!"

"What do you mean?" Kayla asked. "You'll be 17 in a couple of months. You can take care of us. Why would we go to foster care?"

"Listen, to me. I'm not an adult. I'm still in school, I don't have a job. We're orphans now. You all understand that? ORPHANS! It's only a matter of time before the State is going to knock on that door and come in and take us away."

Tristen burst into tears, "Bella, no, you can't let them do that to us."

"Look, I don't know what's going to happen with all this Covid crap, but I do know that if anyone figures out Mom's gone and we're on our own, that's game over. So, like I said, we're going to grow up, figure out how to keep moving forward, and pray that I turn 18 before someone figures out what happened."

"That's a stupid plan, Bella. We can't pretend Mom's alive and everything's okay. People know she died," Kayla said.

"Yeah, people know she died, but everyone's locked up in their houses and keeping their heads down. All these weeks when Mom was staying at Oakbriar, we've been on our own, right? And no one's asked any questions. So, if anyone asks, Mom's still an essential worker and she's isolating.

"We keep logging on and doing Zoom classes. We don't go runnin' out the door screaming our fool heads off and crying. We do what Mom would do and we stand up straight and figure out how to keep going. Now, please set the table Tristen, we're going to have a New Year's Day Good Luck dinner for the second time this year and hope our luck changes from here on."

Within a few days Chandra's body was cremated, and Isabella was informed she could claim Chandra's ashes when the lockdown was lifted. There was no viewing or celebration of life at Macedonia Baptist, in fact no one at the church was told of Chandra's passing. Arnold's Diner had closed weeks before and when Isabella called Oakbriar, her call was put through to a person she did not know who told her they were deeply sorry, that they had been informed of Chandra's death, and offered their sympathies.

## CHAPTER 9

During the month of May, Bella did her best to keep everything on a schedule. Monday through Friday, they all logged in to CANVAS and recorded their attendance. June 3<sup>rd</sup> would be the last day of school and they wouldn't go back until August 19<sup>th</sup>. Until then, homework was handed in on time and given the limited interaction with parents and teachers due to Covid there weren't any issues that popped up that would require an adult.

May 15<sup>th</sup> would have been Chandra's 33<sup>rd</sup> birthday. It was a somber mood in the apartment, the kids just didn't know what to do, how to acknowledge the day, so they spent it quietly, each keeping to themselves.

On Saturday mornings Bella would mask up and go to Walmart to shop for perishables. Stores were allowing only a certain number of people inside at one time and she avoided eye contact or speaking with anyone while they waited their turn to shop.

The three of them understood they had to keep their heads down and stay under the radar. They all felt the heavy loss of Chandra's death but each of them handled it in different ways. Bella could sense that Tristen's feelings had turned to anger which simmered under the surface. He didn't hang with the boys in the parking lot though. He kept to himself and spent most of his time in his room.



Makayla cooked, all the time. She made delicious soups and stews and was able to stretch the budget.

Every night before she went to bed, Bella prayed and silently talked to her mother. It helped. The anxiety she felt and the things she worried about seemed a little easier to deal with.

About three weeks after Chandra died, Isabella opened the door to Chandra's bedroom and stood in the doorway. None of them had entered Chandra's room since the day they learned of her death.

Kayla came up behind her. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing, I just wanted to feel Mom," Bella replied. "I'm scared that I'll forget how she smelled, the sound of her laughing, you know, the things that made her mom."

The last Sunday in May Isabella sat down to pay bills. Chandra had walked her through this in March and April, so she knew how to login to the bank and schedule payments.

There would be \$756.12 left in the checking account after she paid the rent, and the savings account showed a balance of \$3250.48 which included money the government had sent in April from something called the CARES Act.

Isabella started a spreadsheet and entered all the bills that she saw had been paid from the bank statement. She had been using Chandra's MasterCard that was tied to Amazon and Walmart and that bill showed a balance of \$1248.74 and a minimum payment due of \$10.00. She read the MasterCard statement and saw information about getting a cash advance and that there was \$3752 left to charge on the \$5000 credit available.

Just before Chandra fell ill, she had signed up with the school district and arranged for laptops and internet service for \$10 per month. They had also distributed 3,000 unlimited data phones to high school students. Isabella

wasn't sure if those deals would continue over the summer break, so she entered what they used to pay for cell phone, cable, and internet on her spreadsheet.

There wasn't anywhere to go or anything else to spend their money on, so if they were careful, between the money in the bank and the MasterCard, she figured they had enough money to last them a few months. What they would do when that ran out, she had no idea, but she wasn't going to worry about it now.

After dinner Kayla took the trash out to the dumpster and passed a man on his way back to his apartment.

"You're Makayla, Chandra's girl, right?"

Makayla hesitated before replying to the stranger, "That be me," she said as she threw the trash bag into the bin.

The man stopped and waited for her, "Haven't seen Chandra around for a while now."

"How do you know my mom?" she asked.

"Don't really know her, just seen her around. We'd bump into each other taking out the trash. I live over there, the apartment with the brown curtains."

"Oh okay, so, see you." Kayla said. As she started for her building, the neighbor followed.

"I'm Lewis, by the way. I know Tristen, too. Not a bad soccer player but haven't seen him out lately."

"Yeah, he hurt his foot, so he hasn't been playing, and we've got finals for school so he's studying."

"Ah, yeah, well you tell Chandra and Tristen I said hey, and if you guys need anything with us all being locked up and all, just holler."

"Sure, I'll let mom know."

Kayla started to climb the stairs to the third floor. On the second floor landing she turned and saw Lewis watching her. He waved, turned around and headed across the parking lot to his building. His apartment was on the second floor with a bird's eye view of their apartment.

Kayla closed the door and watched through the blinds as Lewis sat down on the steps outside his apartment and lit a cigarette, looking over in her direction.

Bella had the news on TV as Kayla finished cleaning up the kitchen. The reporter was explaining how the state unemployment website wasn't working and people who were eligible couldn't get their benefits. They also reported that the federal government was going to add an extra \$300 a month to the benefits from the state.

"Bella, what's unemployment?"

"Well, from what they're saying if you lost your job because the place closed down or had to cut employees, you can apply for unemployment."

"Didn't Arnold's close down right after they locked everything down?"

"Yeah, they did."

"So, wouldn't Mom have been able to collect unemployment?"

"I don't know, I guess so. She still had her job at Oakbriar so maybe not."

"But how would they know if she worked at Oakbriar?"

"Because she got paid and the government knows that."

"From what that reporter said, it doesn't sound like the government knows what they're doing."

Bella changed the channel but couldn't find anything to watch. She opened her laptop and googled "Florida Unemployment." For the next hour she read everything on the site about who could apply and how to do it. There were some updates about Covid and that requirements to physically apply to a certain number of places each week had been suspended.

Figuring she had nothing to lose, she found some old paystubs from Arnold's in Chandra's paperwork and started filling out the application. She didn't run into any of the glitches the reporter talked about.

As she surfed the net a popup appeared on her screen with a “Click Now” for more information on rental assistance from the State of Florida. She clicked and it took her to another site where it asked for an address. Bella typed in their address and another message popped up to tell her the apartment complex was part of the Florida Housing Finance Corporation and they qualified for the program. “Click Here to Apply.” Bella clicked. She found the information about the landlord she needed on the record Chandra had created in the bank’s bill pay file.

If the state sent them money each month and she didn’t have to pay rent, the money they had in the bank could last them for the rest of the year. Maybe there were other ways the government could help. She googled “Help during Covid” and the top website was [www.usa.gov/covid-financial-help-from-the-government](http://www.usa.gov/covid-financial-help-from-the-government). She read every word and clicked on every link following each breadcrumb. She knew about SNAP, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, but there were many other programs that offered help even something called an advance child tax credit. She applied for everything she thought she was eligible for, and it was 2:00 a.m. before she closed the laptop and headed for bed.

As she passed Chandra’s bedroom, she opened the door. This time she entered the room and sat on the edge of the bed. Even though it had been months since Chandra last slept in the bed before she started isolating at Oakbriar, the pillowcase smelled of her. Chandra laid down and hugged the pillow. *Thanks for the help, Mom*, she thought as she fell asleep.

The next morning Bella woke to Tristen standing in the doorway of Chandra’s bedroom. “Why are you sleeping in Mom’s room?”

“I didn’t mean to. I was up late and just fell asleep after I laid down. You can come in. I know it sounds crazy, but I

feel closer to her in here. See if you can smell her on the pillow.”

Tristen approached and sat on the other side of the bed. She offered him the pillow she had fallen asleep clutching and he inhaled.

“Wow, yeah, it smells like Mom. She always smelled so good, like apples and vanilla. I really miss her Bella, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I really miss her too.” She replied as she put her arm around Tristen.

“What are you two doing?” Kayla asked standing in the doorway as she wiped sleep from her eyes.

“Kayla, here, smell. It smells like Mom.” Tristen said as he held out the pillow.

Kayla crossed the room and buried her head in the pillow. After a moment she handed it back to Tristen and wiping tears from her eyes said nothing and left the room.

That evening, Bella got ready for bed and instead of sleeping in the room she shared with Kayla, Bella turned back the comforter on Chandra’s bed and slid between the covers. A few minutes passed and the bed creaked as Kayla slid in beside her. The next morning when they woke, Tristen was sleeping on the floor with his pillow and blanket. Later that day they moved Tristen’s single mattress into Chandra’s room which is where the three of them slept for weeks, until Chandra’s bedroom became off-limits to Kayla and Tristen.

## CHAPTER 10

School officially ended, and without that diversion, boredom set in harder than before. Bella tried to get Tristen interested in some projects she found online for extra credit, but they didn't appeal to him.

Always full of energy and athletic, the last few months of lockdown had been more difficult for him than Kayla or Bella. After promising he would stick with the story about Chandra if anyone asked, Bella let him join the other boys in the parking lot for some soccer.

‘Yo, Tristen, where you been hidin’ dude? How’s that foot?’

“Hey, Lewis. Been around.”

“Good to hear man, good to hear. Ready for a game? The guys are over in Building D’s lot. I’ll walk over with you.”

Tristen headed across the courtyard to Building D with Lewis “Man, you’re looking good, not limp’in’ or nothin’.”

“Why would I be limp’in’?”

“Last time I saw your sister she said you hadn’t been around because you hurt your foot.”

“Oh, oh, yeah, but it wasn’t that bad. Just had to give it a rest and it’s all good now.”

“So, your momma still workin? Haven’t seen her around. Just see your older sister comin and going now and then.”

“Mom’s still working. She’s an essential worker and she has to stay at work, so she doesn’t bring home the virus. We facetime with her a couple of times a day and Bella’s taking care of everything.”

“Hmm. Been a long time she’s had to stay at work. She works over at that nursing home, doesn’t she?”

“Yeah, that’s it.” Tristen said as he waved to his friends and joined the game.

“Tristen, man get in that goal. We’re getting killed by these assholes,” yelled one of his teammates.

Tristen fist-bumped the guys and took his place between the trash cans set up as a goal. Lewis lit a cigarette and leaned against a car as he watched the game.

When Tristen got home, Bella was in the living room on the laptop and Kayla was in the kitchen trying out a new recipe. Tristen downed his second glass of iced tea and leaned against the counter watching Kayla.

“I saw you talking to that guy Lewis when you went out,” she said. “How long have you known him?”

“Just seen him around. Since Covid he’s been around more. He hangs with the guys I play soccer with.”

“Seems a little old for that crowd, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, maybe. He’s okay. Just doesn’t have anything else to do I guess.”

“Does he live alone?”

“I think so. I’ve never seen anyone else with him. What are you making?”

“Jambalaya. It’s real popular in the South, but I’m trying something different and making it with haddock. It’ll be ready in an hour or so. Would you set the table?”

“Sure. I’m starving.”

After dinner, Tristen helped Kayla clean up and Bella decided to get out of the house and take a walk before it got dark.

A paved pathway stretched along one side of the five buildings in their complex which led to a canal that stretched from the Everglades to the Intracoastal. It was popular with fisherman early in the morning and people walking their dogs. On that evening, no one was around.

As she walked, Bella had her earbuds in and was listening to Drake when a man drew up next to her. Startled, she stopped and pulled one of the buds out of her ear, “Can I do somethin’ for you?” she asked as she moved to put some distance between them. The guy stank from cigarettes, a smell that had always made Bella sick.

“Just out for a walk, like you. Saw you leavin’ and thought you might want some company.”

“Dude, I don’t need any company,” she replied as she turned to head back to the apartment.

“Ah, come on, I’m just being neighborly. I live across the lot from you, second floor, brown curtains. I know your mom, and Kayla and Tristen. Haven’t met you yet, I’m Lewis.”

Bella started walking away, “Nice to meet you Lewis, I need to get home.”

“Yeah, guess you should. Can’t leave the kids alone for too long, can you? Got a lot of responsibility with your mom gone.”

Bella froze. “My Mom’s not gone.” She started walking again and picked up her pace.

“No? Well from what I see and hear she hasn’t been around since March. Seems like a long time, being it’s June, even for an essential. After all it’s not like she’s a doctor or something.”

She stopped again and turned. “Well, Lewis, I don’t know what you’re hearing and I’m not sure why you feel



like you have to be watching us, but Mom's working. Her job's important and it's a comfortable place to be staying so she's happy to do that."

"Whatever you say Bella. It is Bella, right? Just so you know, I keep secrets really good," Lewis said as he ground out his cigarette and drew his finger across Bella's cheek, slipped it under her mask and ripped it off, "and, Bella baby, I think you got a few."

Bella recoiled from his touch, "Don't you touch me, freak." Faster than she could react, Lewis twisted her arm. She tried to push away but he pinned her other arm, grabbed her ass, and pulled her into him.

"Bella, you feel that. You do that to me, Bella Beauty."

Bella twisted and tried to get loose as she felt his stinking breath on her neck. "Bella, the more you fight, the harder I get. That's good. I should make you finish me off right here, but our first time's gonna be private."

Stunned she tried to scream. Lewis twisted her arm again and pain shot from her elbow. "Don't you scream, or I'll twist that elbow right out of the socket. You just listen. You and me, we're gonna become good friends. I wanted to be friends with your mama, but she was a stuck-up bitch. Now, I happen to have a friend that works cutting lawns over at Oakbriar and a little bird told him some of the staff got bit by Covid. That wouldn't be your momma, now would it, Bella Beauty?"

Fighting back tears, Bella said, "You don't know shit. Let me go."

Lewis tightened his grip and twisted a little more until Bella winced and stopped struggling, "Okay, Bella, let's call momma, how's that? Use my phone. What's the number over at Oakbriar?"

Bella stopped struggling and sobbed. Lewis relaxed his grip and ran his finger down her neck between her breasts.

“That’s better Bella. Now I’m gonna let you go and I’m gonna walk on home. What you’re gonna do is everything I tell you or I’ll make sure they come and take you all away.

“If you see the curtain on my window open, you’re comin’ over. If you don’t, I’ll be over to get you, or maybe that pretty Kayla. She might be fun. We understand each other Bella Beauty? You’re gonna be mine from now on.”

With that Lewis released her and she fell backwards, stumbling to keep her balance. He turned, walked away, singing to himself, and lighting another cigarette.

Shaken and stunned, Bella dropped to her knees and threw up. She sat until it got dark and an older couple walking their dog spotted her.

“Are you okay, young lady?” the woman asked. Their dog pulled on his leash trying to get closer to Isabella. The man let out some slack and the mutt sniffed around before laying down next to Bella with his head in her lap.

“That’s Awnry. He doesn’t like everybody but seems he’s taken to you. Are you all right?”

“Yes, I’m fine, thanks.” Bella stroked the dog’s head as she struggled to come out of her fog. “Awnry, what a good boy you are,” she said as she scratched behind his ears and started to stand up.

“You look a bit shaken-up. Would you like to walk with us, and we’ll get you home?” the woman offered.

As she dusted off her shorts, Bella thanked the couple again and started home. They watched as she left. Awnry whined and strained on his leash wanting to follow. “Marcel, let’s give her some distance but follow her just to make sure she gets home okay.”

As Bella came between buildings and approached her stairwell, she saw the red glow of a cigarette in the window on the second floor across the lot. A dog barked behind her. She ran up the stairs and through the door. Tristen looked up from his tablet, “Where’ve you been?”

As she rushed to the bathroom she called back. “I went for a walk, and I’ve really got to pee.”

Bella closed the bathroom door and took stock of herself in the mirror. She ran cold water and splashed it on her face, brushed her teeth, and rinsed away the aftertaste of vomit. She cleaned her dirty knees and straightened her blouse, took a deep breath, opened the door, and walked steadily to the kitchen.

As she poured a glass of tea and carried it into the living room, Kayla called to her. “Hey, by the way, Tristen’s friend from across the lot came by just before it got dark and said to tell you he’d see you tomorrow.”

## CHAPTER 11

The next morning Bella woke to the smell of pancakes and waffles filling the apartment as Kayla and Tristen sang “Happy Birthday.” There were balloons around the living room and a “Happy 17” sign taped to the doorway between the dining room and kitchen. It was a bittersweet morning, the beginning of the first day of any kind of celebration spent without their mother.

Bella struggled to act like her world had not been turned upside down the evening before. She avoided looking out the window. She just didn’t know what to do if she looked and saw the brown curtain on the second floor open.

“You’ve been acting nervous all day. Turning 17 got you all jumpy?” Kayla asked as she assembled the ingredients for a homemade chocolate birthday cake.

“Just got things on my mind I guess.”

“You’re thinking about Mom, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, I miss her so much. I just want to talk to her one more time.”

“I know, me too.”

“She’d be so proud of you Kayla. You’re only 13 and already such a good cook. And what you’re doing today to make my birthday special means a lot to me.”

Kayla wiped her hands on her apron and hugged Bella. “Hey, I’ll be 14 in a couple of months.”

Bella laughed, “Yes you will, 14 going on 20.”

“I can’t wait until I’m 17,” Tristen chimed in from the living room. “I’m going to be the star of varsity soccer and I’m going to hook up with the prettiest girl in school.”

Bella cringed at the reference to a hook up, “I can see that happening Tristen. But for now, you’re only 10 and you just need to be thinking about school, not hooking up.”

The light moment was cut short by a knock on the door. Bella’s heart pounded. “I’ll get it,” she said. But Tristen was closer and beat her to it.

“Hey Lewis. What’s up?”

“Tristen, my man. Can I come in?”

“Uh, well, we do that whole distance and mask thing with people if we’re inside, so ....” Lewis moved Tristen aside before he could say more and entered the living room. He looked around the apartment at the “Happy 17” sign and the balloons.

“Just came by to wish Bella a Happy Birthday.”

“How’d you know it was Bella’s birthday?” Tristen asked suspicious of the intrusion and pissed off at the rude shove aside.

“Oh, she told me yesterday. We went for a walk together, didn’t we Bella.”

Lewis crossed the room and took a seat at the dining room table.

“How about somethin’ cold? You have a Coke or somethin’.”

Confused, Kayla looked at Bella, whose face was white as a ghost, and Kayla saw her hands were shaking.

“We have sweet tea. Is that okay?” Kayla responded, getting a glass out of the cupboard and the pitcher out of the fridge. She poured some tea and put it down in front of him on the table.

Taking a long swig of tea, Lewis asked, “Bella, you ready?”

Looking at Kayla he said, “I told your sister we’d do something special to celebrate today.”

Switching his gaze to Tristen he continued, “Since your mom’s not around and all.”

The apartment was silent as a tomb as Tristen looked from Kayla to Bella. Finally, Bella spoke.

“Lewis, I think it would be better if I spent today with my brother and sister.” Tristen moved to her side, feeling something was off.

“Yeah, you said you’d help me with my project for extra credit today. I have to turn that into the summer school teacher tomorrow,” Tristen offered.

“No, little man. Today’s a special day for Bella. Kayla can help you, can’t you Kayla? Or maybe me and Kayla can go have dinner instead. It’s up to you, Bella, but we gotta get a move on here.”

## CHAPTER 12

The inadequate supply of gowns, masks and gloves, and the absence of direction from the corporate office were still issues the Oakbriar Care staff dealt with daily. However, by late May 2020, they felt that they had seen the worst of the Covid epidemic at their facility. After a meeting, the staff decided that they would no longer need to isolate at Oakbriar, and instead would rotate to a schedule of four days on and four days off. Should incidents of Covid tick up, those on duty, who would most likely be exposed, would start isolating again.

Sadly, Chandra's death at the end of April was only the first of three other staff and another seven residents of Oakbriar Care to succumb to Covid. There was a rumor that corporate was ignoring them because they planned to close the facility.

The last week of June, as Marta finished her four-day-on rotation, she passed Chandra's locker and realized no one had ever checked to see if there were any personal belongings left behind. She checked her file and found the master list of combinations. Chandra's was 061803. Marta dialed in the numbers and the lock popped open. Inside was Marta's purse, her car keys, and a few other personal items. The inside door to the locker was pasted with pictures of the kids. One picture was the staff and residents

at Oakbriar celebrating Isabella's 16<sup>th</sup> birthday. She looked at the paper in her hand and realized Chandra's locker combination was Isabella's birthday who had turned 17 just the week before.

Marta took all of Chandra's belongings and put them in a bag. She went back to her office, looked at the personnel file and wrote down Chandra's last known address. She wondered how the kids were doing and who had taken over their care, surely someone had. The thought that they may have ended up in the care of the State of Florida made the sad task of gathering Chandra's belongings all the sadder.

On her third day of her four-day-off rotation, Marta got a call from Oakbriar that another three patients had tested positive for Covid, and they had decided to have the current staff on duty isolate onsite. According to CDC guidelines, Marta could not return to Oakbriar for another ten days. She took advantage of the additional time off catching up with household chores and errands. There was also the matter of finding out where to send Chandra's personal effects.

After the July 4<sup>th</sup> holiday Marta decided to see if any of Chandra's neighbors could help with contact information on Isabella. She pulled into a guest spot in an older apartment complex in one of the lower-middle income neighborhoods of Fort Lauderdale. She found the building listed as Chandra's last address and climbed the stairs to the third floor.

She may as well start with Chandra's apartment, so she knocked on the door of #307 and waited. She saw the blinds in the window move slightly and knocked again. The door opened a crack and a tall, skinny, white man said, "We're not buyin' nothin'," and tried to close the door.

"Wait! I'm not selling anything. Did you know the woman who used to live here? She had three children."



“No, lady. Don’t know anybody.” he replied and closed the door.

Okay, then. Marta decided to try the neighbor next door and knocked. No answer. There were a group of kids playing soccer in the next parking lot, so she headed in that direction.

One of the kids was driving the ball toward a makeshift goal as a defender tried to make a play. The kid placed his left foot and kicked.

“GOAL!”

Marta did a double take, the kid who was scored upon was Tristen Powell. She waved and got his attention, “Tristen, hey, it’s Marta.” He definitely recognized her, but he didn’t look happy to see her. If anything, he looked scared. He told one of the boys on the sideline to take over the goal and walked over to Marta.

“Tristen, I’m so glad to see you. I didn’t think you and the girls would still be here.”

He mumbled hello but wouldn’t make eye contact.

“I have some things that belonged to your mother that you and the girls should have. Is Isabella around?”

Tristen shifted from foot to foot and looked around furtively. “Yeah, she should be at the apartment.”

“Oh? Is your apartment number 307?”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

“I was just there, and a man answered the door and said he didn’t know your mom or any of you. Tristen, who is he?”

Clearly on the verge of tears and very nervous, Tristen said, “Ms. Marta, you need to leave us alone. If you got mom’s stuff, I’ll take it and be sure Bella gets it.”

“Tristen, what’s wrong? Who is that man in your apartment? Are you okay? Is Kayla still with you?”

Tristen broke into a full run down a pathway along the complex away from the apartments and left Marta

standing there stunned. Something was very wrong, and she wasn't sure what to do. Was the man a friend? That couldn't be. If he was a friend why would he lie and say he didn't know Chandra and the kids.

Confused, she followed the pathway which led to a canal. In the distance sitting against a palm tree was Tristen. As she approached, he looked up. The look on his face tore at her heart. This little boy was in so much pain. He had just lost his mother and God only knows what's happened to him and his sisters since then. Why hadn't she checked in on them before!

She edged down next to him and said, "Tristen, I don't know what's happening, but I'm here. Whatever is wrong, I can help you. Talk to me."

"I can't, Ms. Marta. The state will come and take us away. We'll be split up and won't ever be together again," he said between sobs.

She pulled him close and kissed the top of his head and he melted into her arms. "Tristen, have the three of you been living here all alone since your mom died?"

"Yes, ma'am," he sobbed into her shoulder.

"Okay. And Bella's been taking care of you guys?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"So, who is that man?"

"He's a man that lives in the other building."

"Go on, Tristen, what's he doing in your apartment? Is he hurting you?"

Staring at the ground, "He says he's helping us. He says we'll end up in foster care if people think we're living on our own. But before he started up with Bella, we were doing fine, and nobody noticed anything."

"What do you mean 'before he started up with Bella'?"

"Him and Bella hooked up."

"Hooked up? You mean Bella's dating him?"

“Bella tells us everything’s all right, but she’s different. He used to be okay, hanging out with the guys who play soccer, but all he does now is stay in his apartment or ours. You can’t say anything Ms. Marta. Please! At least if he’s there, we won’t be taken away.”

Marta was flooded with feelings of despair that quickly turning to rage. “Honey, that’s not true. Just him being there doesn’t matter. He’s just a neighbor and if he’s hurting you, or Kayla, or Bella, he could be a in a lot of trouble. That’s why he doesn’t want you to say anything.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely, Tristen. Let’s figure this out. Do you have a cell phone?”

“No, we have two. I don’t have my own. Kayla has one and Bella has the one the school gave her.”

“Okay, here’s what we’re going to do. Let’s call Kayla. If she answers do you think that man will be listening?”

“No, she stays in her room. Bella tries to keep Lewis away from her.”

“That’s the man’s name, Lewis?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Okay, I have an idea. Give me Kayla’s number.”

She created a contact for Kayla and tapped the “Call” button. Kayla answered on the second ring.

“Kayla. This is Marta. I worked with your mom. I’m here with Tristen. Are you alone? Can Lewis hear you?”

“Hi, um, I don’t think so. He’s in mom’s room with Bella.”

Marta’s heart sank. “Okay, I want you to leave the apartment, now. Go down to the parking lot where the boys are playing soccer and I’ll meet you there with Tristen. Okay. Can you do that?”

She could hear a door open and then another. “Yes, I’m coming. Is Tristen all right. Is he hurt?”

“No Kayla, Tristen’s fine, and you and Bella are going to be fine.”

Marta and Tristen hurried back to the parking lot. Kayla spotted them coming down the path and ran toward them. Marta opened her arms and wrapped them around the two kids.

“Kayla, it’s okay. Tristen told me what’s happening. Did you hear me knock on your door earlier?”

Kayla shot Tristen a look of concern.

“I heard someone knock and Lewis answered it.”

“Why didn’t you or Bella come to the door?”

“Lewis told us not to. He looked out the window and he didn’t know who you were, so he told us both to go to our rooms.”

“What happened after that?”

“Bella was in my room with me and after you left, he took Bella into mom’s room, and I heard him holler at her and she started crying. Then it went quiet except for him gruntin’ and groanin’.”

“Tristen, why don’t you go back to the guys and wait for us there?”

“No, why? So, I don’t hear what you’re going to talk about to Kayla? No!”

Kayla wrapped her arm around Tristen’s shoulder. “Ms. Marta, you can say whatever you want in front of Tristen. We both hear what’s happening in mom’s room.”

For a second time Marta’s heart broke. “Listen to me, I want you to understand. Bella’s only 17 years old and even if she wanted to be with Lewis, Bella must be 18 to say yes to go to bed with him. No matter what, even if Bella says she wants to be with him, even if she says he’s nice to you and she loves him, what he’s doing is against the law. All she has to do is tell the police what’s been happening, and he can’t hurt her anymore.”

“Ms. Marta, Bella told us to tell everyone Lewis was just helping us and that we have to lie because the police would take us away and put us in foster care.” Makayla explained.

Tristen started sobbing and clung to Makayla, “I don’t want to live with someone else, you’ll make them take me with you, won’t you Kayla? I wanna go home.”

Suddenly Marta said, “We need some time to think and figure this out and I know just where we can go to do that!”

There were only a few cars in the parking lot of Macedonia Baptist when Marta and the kids arrived. They entered the hall and an enticing smell greeted them. Tristen’s stomach growled.

Marta chuckled, “When’s the last time you ate? Why don’t you go over and get something to fill that belly while Kayla and I find a place to talk.”

## CHAPTER 13

“Kayla! And my goodness, is that Marta Vaughn! It’s been ages, how are you?”

“It’s been a long time, Reverend, and I’m sorry to drop in like this but we needed a quiet place to talk some things through.”

“Well of course, of course. You don’t need an excuse to sit in the home of the Lord. You can take my office if you need privacy. Kayla, how’s your mother and Bella? Is that Tristen I see over there? With this horrible scourge we’ve lost touch with so many people. How do you two know each other?”

Kayla seemed unable to respond, and from the look on Marta and Kayla’s faces Reverend McGuire knew she had said something that upset them both.

“Seems like we all three need to talk,” Marta said as she took Kayla’s hand and led the way to the Reverend’s office.

It took only a half-hour to summarize the last three months of the Powell family’s life, starting with Chandra’s passing, which Reverend McGuire was unaware of.

Kayla explained how Bella had signed them up for unemployment and rental assistance and that they were doing fine until Lewis started hanging around. At that point, Kayla’s resolve melted, and she broke down in tears. Reverend McGuire enveloped Kayla in her strong, loving

arms as Marta picked up the story and explained what she had just learned in the last hour.

“I just don’t know what to do, Reverend. We need to get this Lewis character out of the picture, but if we do that, that exposes the kids to family services.”

“Well, first thing we’re going to do is head on over to the apartment and get Bella,” Reverend McGuire said. “Tristen and Kayla can stay here.”

“No, Reverend, we have to go with you. Bella won’t believe you that we’re okay. She’ll think family services have us.”

“You’ve got a point there Kayla, but you’ll both wait in the car. Agreed?”

“Okay, but why do we have to leave to get away from Lewis? Why shouldn’t he have to leave?”

“Well, honey he would if we called the police, but the best we can do without getting them involved is make sure you guys are safe. Has he ever gotten violent with any of you?”

“He’s never hit us, but Bella kind of cringes when he touches her, and I’ve seen some bruises on her wrists.”

Reverend McGuire and Marta exchanged knowing glances. “Okay, then that’s settled. Let’s go.”

Marta and the kids piled into the church van and headed over to the apartment. On the way, the Reverend gave Makayla and Tristen strict instructions to stay in the car, no matter what happened.

The two women climbed to the third floor and Reverend McGuire knocked firmly on the door to apartment 307. When the blinds parted slightly, Marta smiled and waved in that direction. Reverend McGuire’s second knock had the emphatic ring of a SWAT team. “Lewis, open the door. We aren’t leaving without Bella.”

Bella opened the door a crack. “Wow, hi Reverend McGuire. And Marta, hi. What are you doing here?”

“Bella, open the door.”

“Um, what’s going on? I’m uh, not dressed and the place is a mess.”

“Bella, we know what’s going on. Is Lewis in there? Tristen, and Makayla are in the van downstairs. You’re coming with us. Now.” Reverend McGuire said.

A car door slammed and the sound of feet running up the stairs echoed down the catwalk.

Tristen and Kayla skidded to a stop. “Lewis isn’t here, he’s over there, at his apartment, I just saw him get out of his car and go into his apartment,” Tristen explained breathlessly, pointing to the second-floor window with the brown curtains.

“Let us in,” Kayla said as she moved past the women and shoved at the door. Bella stepped back and they entered the apartment and shut the door.

“What did you guys do?” Bella cried. “You know what’s going to happen now!” She was dressed in shorts, a tank top with no bra, her hair was a mess, and her eyes were glassy.

“Makayla, you take Tristen. Get some bags packed with your essentials, get some things for Isabella, and hurry it up.” Marta ordered.

Reverend McGuire guided Bella to a chair. “Bella, sit. Listen to me. You are all going to be okay. We’re not the police. Family service isn’t coming. You’re just going to come back to the church, and we’ll keep you guys safe there until we can figure out the next steps.”

“Ms. Marta, can you come here?” Kayla called from Chandra’s bedroom. Standing, unmoving next to the unmade bed Kayla stared at a pair of ropes wrapped around the bedposts and a used syringe on the bedside table.

“Come on, Kayla, let’s go,” Marta said as she tried to usher her out of the room.



“No, wait.” Kayla responded. She took out her phone and snapped two pictures. “Ms. Marta, what Lewis has been doing to us is blackmail, right?”

“Sort of, honey, but not for money. Come on let’s get your things.”

“Well, why can’t we blackmail him to stay away from us?” Kayla asked.

“Come on, I’ll pack Tristen’s bag; you get yourself and Bella what you’ll need for a few days.”

“But, Ms. Marta, why do we have to leave. Lewis should have to leave. If we blackmail him, he’ll have to leave.”

Marta stopped in the hallway, “Honey, that would be true, but those two pictures aren’t enough to blackmail someone. It doesn’t prove he was in that room, or that Bella was with him. Even if you say he was.”

“But what about this?” Kayla said as she pressed play on a video on her phone. She held the phone up so Marta could watch. Shot from an angle on the floor the video showed Lewis leading a reluctant Bella into the bedroom and closing the door. Although the video only showed a closed door, the audio clearly recorded the click of the lock and sounds of a 17-year-old girl being raped.

“My God, Kayla. Where did you get this?”

“From right there,” she said as she pointed to the dirty clothes hamper that sat in the hallway. “I put it there. One day Lewis told Tristen and I to go play for a few hours. He was in the kitchen, so I put it there and turned it on just before he locked us out.”

“He locked you out?”

“Yeah, that’s what he does when he wants time alone with Bella.”

“Oh, my God, Kayla. I am so sorry you’ve had to go through this. I’ll never forgive myself for not checking on you sooner.”

“Will this help?”

“It sure will honey. Can I have the phone? I won’t lose the video. I just want it for a minute.”

“Okay, I’ll get our stuff.”

“No, you can wait on that. I’ll be right back.”

Marta took the phone from Kayla and told Reverend McGuire to follow her. They left the apartment and headed down the stairs.

Confused the Reverend asked, “What are you doing Marta?”

“Just come with me, Reverend. We’re about to administer some holy karma.”

Marta and the Reverend crossed the parking lot, climbed up the stairs to the second-floor apartment with the brown curtains and pounded on the door.

“YOU LOW-LIFE CREEP, OPEN THIS DOOR!” Marta yelled so loudly neighbors came out of their apartments and looked on from the bottom of the stairs.

“OPEN THIS DOOR, NOW, OR MY NEXT CALL IS THE POLICE!”

“Jesus, woman, you crazy bitch, Hold on,” Lewis yelled as he unlocked and opened his door. “What the fuck do you want.”

With strength she didn’t know she had Marta pushed the door open, throwing Lewis off balance.

“Here’s what’s going to happen, Lewis. You got ten minutes to get whatever you don’t want thrown into the dumpster. You’re going to drive out of here and you’re not coming back. This good thing you think you have going with Isabella is over. OVER.”

“You don’t know what you’re talkin’ about bitch. That girl and I get along just fine. I’m lookin’ out for them, given their mother’s no longer in the picture.”

Reverend McGuire looked around at the pigsty of an apartment. A mirror with a haze of leftover coke or heroin

sat on the coffee table. The smell of cigarettes permeated everything.

“And so, Mr. Lewis, you’ve become the savior of those little children, have you?” the Reverend said as she stood beside Marta.

“Who the fuck are you?”

“She, Lewis, is your worst nightmare. That woman there has more influence in this town than Sheriff Tony. Although she’s a good friend of the Sheriff, aren’t you Reverend McGuire.”

“Sure am, Marta. Got the man’s personal cell on speed dial right here. And he owes me a few favors.”

“Get the fuck out of my house.”

“Now, weren’t you listening to me Lewis? You burned at least five of those ten minutes I gave you.”

“And what makes you think you’re gonna make me leave my house?”

“I’m glad you asked, Lewis,” as Marta pressed play on the video.

Quick as a whip, Lewis reached for the phone in Marta’s hand. Quicker than Lewis, Reverend McGuire grabbed his wrist, twisted it behind his back and brought him to his knees.

Marta looked on stunned. “Well, Reverend, you certainly have some skills.”

“Hmm, hmm. Grew up in Philly. You learn how take care of yourself.”

“Lewis, it looks like your ten minutes are up. Do you mind babysitting a bit longer Reverend? I’m going to round up Lewis’ essentials for him.”

The Reverend gave Lewis a shove between the shoulder blades and planted his face in the dirty carpet. “We’ll be fine here, gonna have a nice chat. You take your time.”

Marta went into the kitchen and found a trash bag. In the living room she collected a wallet and cell phone. She

put a set of keys in her pocket. Stopping in the bathroom, wishing she had a set of gloves, she scooped toiletries into the bag and took stock of the medicine cabinet which contained a dozen prescription bottles for opioids in a variety of names, all from the same doctor. She took pictures and left them there.

From there she entered the bedroom. The bed was unmade, clothes covering almost every inch of the floor. The sheets were dirty and smelled of sweat. She threw everything on the nightstand into the bag and opened the drawer. She took another picture of the bag of white powder and closed the drawer.

She tossed clothes from the closet and dresser drawers into the bag, tied it up, and dragged it back to the living room where the Reverend still had Lewis pinned to the floor.

“I think you broke my fucking wrist bitch.” He whined.

“Oh, no Lewis. You’d know it if I broke anything. Looks like you’re ready to be on your way. I’m going to let you up now. Don’t do anything stupid.”

Marta took the keys out of her pocket and removed the key to a Toyota and threw it on the floor beside Lewis’ head. “I’ll keep the rest. We’re going to give you a head start Lewis and then we’re going to call one of Sheriff Tony’s deputies to come on over and look at what’s in your medicine cabinet and that nightstand drawer. By then you need to be long gone and not looking back. If we ever do see you again, or you come anywhere near those children, I’ll share the link to that video we saved in the cloud with one of those nice sex crime deputies.”

The Reverend and Marta stepped back, out of reach as Lewis got to his feet. He spit at them, cursed, took his trash bag, and threw the door open.

A small group of neighbors had gathered in the parking lot, curious as to what was going on in the second-floor

apartment. From the third-floor catwalk, Bella, Tristen, and Kayla watched as Lewis threw the trash bag into the car, climbed in, and backed out of the parking space.

One, then another, then another of the neighbors clapped. “About time that white-trash, low-life got what was coming to him,” one of them said.

Marta locked the apartment door and followed the Reverend down the stairs. As they crossed the parking lot the clapping continued.

Bella, Tristen, and Kayla waited on the third-floor landing.

As the Reverend approached, she said, “Come on, grab your stuff. We’re going back to the Church. First, we’re going to get a good meal into you and then we’re going plan a celebration of life for Chandra Powell.”

## CHAPTER 14

While the kids ate, Reverend McGuire asked Elder Stevens to join her and Marta in the office. As they began to relate the children's naïve, but valiant, attempt to keep up appearances, Elder Stevens interrupted.

“Reverend, after Chandra had that scare with her health, we worked out all the details of what would happen to the kids if Chandra was incapacitated or passed. I have copies of the documents and they are on file with the court. Chandra had copies as well. The only issue was we had to contact Guardian Ad-Litem to trigger events that would protect the kids' interests when the state took custody.”

As this news sank in, Marta asked, “So, the kids will still be taken by the state and placed in foster care?”

“Technically, yes. The children's fathers are long gone, Chandra had no relatives who could take custody, and she didn't feel close enough to anyone else to ask them to make that kind of commitment.”

“So, after all this loss and pain, those babies are going to be split up after all? That just can't happen,” Marta said.

“Well, I said ‘technically.’ Once Guardian Ad-Litem comes into the picture we had arranged for one of their lawyers, who is a friend of mine, to immediately petition the court to assign a temporary guardian.”

“Who would they assign? A stranger?” the Reverend asked.

“Yes, it would be a stranger, but it would avoid being placed in permanent foster care. At most, the kids would spend two or three nights in an emergency foster placement. Unfortunately, with Covid, there’s very few emergency placements happening. We’re hearing about kids sleeping in family services offices or in cars and vans. Chandra’s kids are just the tip of a very large iceberg which is only going to get bigger because of Covid.”

Marta sat silently taking it all in and then spoke, “Elder Stevens, I’ll do it. I’ll take responsibility for the kids. What do I have to do to be assigned as their temporary guardian?”

The Reverend spoke first, “Marta, I feel the Lord cookin’ up something good with just a bit of spice from His new angel Chandra! I think that’s a perfect idea. And the church will be here to offer you all the services and resources we can. What do we need to do Tricia?”

“First, I’m obligated to call family services. But my next call will be to my friend at Guardian Ad-Litem. There will be some paperwork, a deep background check and a home inspection to be sure you have accommodation suitable for three children. It’ll take a bit of time for all of that to happen.”

“But in the meantime, the kids can come home with me, can’t they?” Marta asked.

“Well, under normal circumstances I’d say that would be unlikely, but as I said, the foster system is imploding here in Florida. If we tap into the right person who is willing to exercise some common sense, we may just be able to make that work.”

“As far as their immediate needs, let’s play it by ear. I’m sure with the Reverend’s vouching for you and since the kids have practically grown up with you, take them home.”

Make sure they get online with school on August 19<sup>th</sup> and let me worry about the rest.”

With tears in her eyes, Marta stood and asked, “Can we tell the kids?”

“Sure, let’s go find them,” Trisha said.

The three women left the office and found the kids in the kitchen. Kayla had taken charge and had the troops watching as she created what she called a custard coffee cake.

“I’ll let you ladies share the news. I’ve got to make some phone calls before everyone goes home today,” Trisha said.

“Kayla, when you can step away from that marvelous creation you’re making, meet Marta and I in the dining hall. Bella, Tristen, come on we have something to talk about,” the Reverend said.

“Wait for me, I’m coming,” Kayla said as she popped the cake into the oven.

Bella, Kayla, and Tristen sat on one side of the long table with Reverend McGuire and Marta on the other.

Marta spoke first. “First, I want the three of you to know that I am so proud of you, and I know your mother would be too. There are some things that your mother arranged with Elder Stevens. They made sure that if something happened to your mother, you kids would be taken care of. How things happened and what you’ve gone through never would have happened if we weren’t in the middle of this awful pandemic.”

The Reverend picked up from there, “Elder Stevens helped your mother with something called a “will” and they had a plan to be sure that you wouldn’t be split up or end up in foster care. I guess your mom thought if something happened to her, we would know right away. This plague’s the work of the devil in so many ways.”

“Reverend, I remember now. Just before she went to the hospital Mom told me there’s a box in her closet



marked ‘Will’ and that if anything happened to her I should take the box and give it to you. I can’t believe I forgot!”

“Well, child, is it any wonder that slipped your mind with all you’ve been going through in the last couple of months. It’s water under the bridge now.”

In an unsteady voice, Tristen asked, “So what’s going to happen to us, Reverend?”

“It may be best if I let Ms. Marta explain.”

Marta looked at each of Chandra’s children, marveling at their resilience and tenacity and thinking what a good job Chandra did raising them. *I’ll take care of your babies for you, Chandra.*

“Well, let’s see. Even though your mom and I weren’t close outside of work, we always had each other’s back. But outside of working with your mom, I guess you don’t really know much about me.

“I was married once, a long time ago. We were together for five years before my husband was killed in an accident at work. We wanted to have kids, but it never happened. I was alone after he died and decided to get a fresh start, so I moved down here to Florida and went to work at Oakbriar.

“Anyway, what I’m trying to say is, I have a big, empty house and I’d be forever grateful if you would come live with me.”

Bella, Kayla, and Tristen looked at each other, then at the Reverend and back to Marta. “You mean, live with you, like you’re our mom. Forever?” Tristen asked quietly.

“Baby, I could never replace your mother, but I can promise you this. You will be safe with me. I will love you and protect you with everything I have. You will always have a home, and we will never forget your momma.”

“So, we would just go home with you? Now?” Bella asked.

“Yes, and Elder Stevens will be speaking with people she knows at family services about making it permanent as quickly as possible.” Marta said. “That is if it’s what you want. If you’re not comfortable with this plan, we’ll go back to the drawing board.”

“Can’t Bella just take care of us? She’s 17.” Kayla asked.

“Bella’s done a great job of doing that this summer, but Bella has to finish school, and what about her dream of being a vet. How is she going to be able to go to college if her job is to take care of you?” Marta asked.

“Can Bella, Tristen and I talk about it?” Kayla asked.

“Of course. In fact, that smell tells me there’s a delicious cake ready to come out of the oven. How about Marta and I go do that and bring back three slices and some milk.”

Reverend McGuire and Marta headed to the kitchen. “You know, those kids have good heads on their shoulders and good instincts, and they watch out for each other. I have no doubt they’ll take you up on your offer but it’s a good sign that they wanted to talk over such a big decision for their family.”

“I agree, Reverend. And whatever they decide, I’ll be there to help. You know, my husband’s accident wasn’t his fault. OSHA came in and investigated and I had a lawyer who held the company’s feet to the fire. The settlement is invested, and I don’t need to work. I just had so much time on my hands I had to do something.

“I used to love my job at Oakbriar. I helped the residents, some of them felt like family. There wasn’t a lot of stress in my job. Of course, that’s changed with all this Covid going around. It’s been heartbreaking how many residents we lost. Chandra’s death really hit me hard, but it was so crazy with no time to stop and think. I guess I didn’t want to think.”

“Oh, Marta. I’m so sorry for your pain, but I’m going to hit you with what some folks think of as a cliché, ‘The Lord works in mysterious ways.’ Let’s go get some cake.”

As the Reverend and Marta served cake and milk, the Reverend asked, “Do you kids have any more questions for Marta? Have you made a decision?”

Bella smiled and said, “We have, but Tristen does have a question.”

“What is it, Tristen?” Marta asked.

“If we come live with you, can I have a dog?”

Laughter erupted and happy tears were shed as everyone dug into a delicious custard coffee cake.

Marta exclaimed, “Wow, Kayla, this is spectacular. I think you’re going to love your new kitchen!”

## CHAPTER 15

The kids spent their first night at Marta's that evening. Marta wasn't kidding when she said it was a big house, although it wasn't the largest in The Acres. There were four bedrooms, an outdoor screened patio and pool, and best of all, a huge fenced-in yard for that dog.

Comfortable sofas and chairs in the living room faced a large TV above the fireplace. Through the living room was the dining room which led into an enormous kitchen with an island bigger than their entire apartment's kitchen. Kayla almost fainted.

Bella continued to look around and realized that when Marta said she lived in a big, empty house, she didn't mean furniture.

The kids got to choose their own room. Bella chose the room that faced east so she could see the sunrise each day. Tristen wanted the room that featured sliding doors that opened to the yard, and Kayla ended up with the room that had French doors opening to the screened porch and the outdoor kitchen.

The next morning, Bella and Tristen sat at the island while Kayla showed Marta how to make "Makayla Powell's Famous Waffles and Pancakes."

"Marta, can I ask you a question?" Bella said.

“Of course, what do you want to know?”

“Well, if you’re all alone, and you’ve been all alone, why do you have such a big house?”

“Well, that’s a good question,” Marta replied. “When I moved here these houses were the best investment you could find in Plantation,” she paused before continuing, “and I thought that someday I’d fall in love again and have a big family, just like I’d planned with Joshua.”

“Well, you’ve got a big family now, Ms. Marta!” Tristen exclaimed as he jumped off his stool and hugged Marta around the waist.

“Yes, I do! And what a beautiful one it is.” Marta said, as Tristen broke away. Movement outside caught his attention and he sprinted out to the back yard. On the other side of the fence was a pony munching on the grass. He ran back in the house, “Oh my God! There’s a pony outside! A real live pony!”

Marta laughed, “He’s not the only one. The Acres is famous for their horses. Almost everyone has at least one, even some chickens and goats.”

“Bella! You can be their vet!” Tristen exclaimed. “Come, look!”

When the pancakes and waffles were ready, Marta went to call Bella and Tristen in for breakfast. She leaned against the doorway and what she saw filled her with a sense of peace and contentment.

Bella stood on the bottom rail of the fence leaning into her neighbor’s yard and Tristen had squeezed between the middle two rails. The pony and his three companion mares surrounded them, whinnying, and vying for attention. Bella spoke to each softly and stroked their long noses and velvety ears.

Kayla came up to her side, “Leave them be. I’ll put their plates in the oven to keep them warm.”

“Okay, let’s eat.” Marta said.

After everyone had eaten and the breakfast dishes were loaded into the dishwasher, they headed back to Macedonia Baptist. Even though no one had symptoms, given their exposure to Lewis they would all be tested for Covid, including Reverend McGuire.

The Reverend had arranged for some of the volunteers to help move the kids' belongings over to Marta's house. It was clear they didn't need furniture or dishes so it was a light load for the van that would go back to Marta's, just the kids' clothes, books, and some mementos.

Bella couldn't bring herself to go into Chandra's bedroom, so Marta helped Kayla pack Chandra's clothes and shoes. Those, along with the furniture, would be unloaded at the church and stored, to be given to people in need. Marta put the shoebox marked "Will" in her car. With all the help it was quick work.

The next day she took Bella to a gynecologist for her first examination. A few days later all the Covid tests came back negative, and Bella had not contracted any STDs, results that the Reverend characterized as, "Blessings from the Lord and some divine intervention of their mama."

On Tuesday, August 11, 2020, Marta escorted Bella to the funeral parlor to claim Chandra's cremated remains.

To end a whirlwind week of changes, on Sunday, August 16, 2020, it was "Covid standing room" only at the Macedonia Baptist Church to honor the life of Chandra Powell. Masks were required and the attendees maintained the recommended six-foot distance except for groups of family members who clustered in pods. The service was also streamed live to the rest of the Macedonia congregation.

A blue and white ceramic urn was surrounded by floral arrangements and a poster-sized picture of Chandra Powell, taken at Bella's 16<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration at Oakbriar. Co-workers from Oakbriar and the owners of

Arnold's were in attendance. Earlier in the week Marta helped Bella write a eulogy that she delivered with Tristen and Kayla standing by her side. It brought tears and laughter to the congregation.

School resumed virtually on August 19<sup>th</sup>. Covid had spiked again, and experts were predicting it would be weeks before hospitalizations and deaths plateaued forcing the School District to scrap plans for a hybrid school term where kids would get at least 50% of their instruction in the classroom.

Marta submitted her resignation to Oakbriar. She was fortunate to have the option to devote her time to her new responsibilities at home, but also it was time. Morale was at an all-time low at the facility. Not only had Covid taken so many, but the staff also felt abandoned by their management.

Trisha Stevens and Reverend McGuire spent their time exerting their influence in the community to convince family services to grant expedited custody of the Powell children to Marta Vaughn. Meanwhile, Marta and the kids focused on creating a new life together.

On September 3<sup>rd</sup> Makayla Powell turned 14 years old. Marta held a small, socially distanced party in the backyard with Reverend McGuire, Elder Stevens and two of her neighbors. Her neighbors to the west, the ones with the horses had befriended Bella. She started each morning in their stalls, mucking, feeding, and watering the horses.

The neighbors across the street had two boys, one 16 and another 12. It was clear Kayla had a crush on the oldest, Mark, but it was also clear the feelings weren't reciprocated. Thomas, who was Tristen's age, happened to be an excellent soccer player and the two of them spent hours practicing footwork.

After all the sadness and loss, even with Covid still wreaking havoc on people's lives, by all appearances the

kids were adjusting to life with Marta very well. Marta had never been happier.

On September 10<sup>th</sup> a reporter from the local TV station requested an interview with Reverend McGuire. Macedonia Baptist was celebrating their 25<sup>th</sup> year of ministry and the reporter's questions centered on the church's outreach and its unique approach to childcare.

"Hillary Clinton made famous the saying, 'It takes a village to raise a child,' and we put that into action," the Reverend said. She went on to explain how important providing 24/7 childcare is to a minority community, especially one dominated by single mothers.

To illustrate her point, she used the example of Chandra Powell, without giving the reporter Chandra's name. She related how Chandra had come to Macedonia Baptist as a single mother, how hard she worked all her life, and what good children the kids were. She conveyed the sadness they all felt when they learned of Chandra's passing, and how what the children went through weighed so heavily on the hearts of her congregation.

As many good pastors do, she left the reporter with an uplifting message of hope when she described how the kids were rescued from their struggle to survive and were now living with a church member who hoped to adopt them.

The following week an edited portion of the Reverend's interview aired. It was widely accepted that the Reverend did an excellent job and that using Chandra's story as an example could be very effective in growing the congregation and donations to their programs.

Early on the morning of September 21<sup>st</sup> Reverend McGuire's cell phone rang. It was Celia, the childcare supervisor, who covered the 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. shift for the Church.

"Reverend, don't mean to bother you, but somethin's happened and you should probably come on in early."



“Celia, are you okay? What’s wrong? I’m on my way.”

“It’s not an emergency, Reverend. Everyone’s okay, but I was leavin’ and when I got out to the parking lot, I saw that all the tires on the church vans were flat. I got Marcus and he looked and says the tires were slit on the sides. It’s not like they run over anything.”

“Did Marcus see or hear anything overnight?”

“No Reverend, he says he did his usual rounds and checked the doors and the lot but didn’t see or hear nothin’.”

“Have you called the police?”

“No Reverend, just you. Should we call them?”

“Yes, go ahead Celia, but don’t call 911. Just call the non-emergency number. I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

When Reverend McGuire arrived, she found Marcus in the security room looking at the recording from the CCTV cameras.

“Reverend, I don’t know what happened, but I got nothing on the camera we have around the back where the vans are parked. I checked all that on Sunday when I changed the tape, and everything was fine.”

The Sheriff’s Deputy arrived and took a report. Marcus showed him the location of the CCTV camera that was missing a feed. On closer inspection the Sheriff pointed out that the wire coming down the corner of the building and running into a small hole in the wall was cut clean through.

“Looks like somebody just reached around the corner here and snipped it. Could’ve done it in a second just walking by. That’s the problem with these old wired systems. Do you have a camera on this corner?”

They went back to the security room and Marcus showed the Deputy the other camera views. Reverend McGuire joined them. “Let’s start watching at little after 11 when your shift started. The only people coming and going should be the childcare staff, some people picking up kids

during the early morning hours after their shifts end, and then around 6 a.m. the kitchen staff comes in to start breakfast for the feeding program.”

“Let’s start on a fast-forward speed to just see if anything catches our eye, then we can go back and take a closer look at normal speed,” the Deputy suggested.

At a timestamp of 3:47 a.m. a lone figure approached the corner of the building from the East and stopped for a second before continuing into the parking area by the vans. “Stop there, run that back at a normal speed,” the Deputy said.

As they watched the video Reverend McGuire gasped.

“You recognize that person, Reverend?” the Deputy asked.

“I think I do, Deputy, I think I do. His build and the way he walks reminds me of someone I had a run-in with a few weeks back. I’ll be right back; I just might have a real good picture of him.”

The Reverend returned with her iPad, logged into her Google drive, clicked on Kayla’s video, and handed the iPad to the Deputy.

After watching and listening for the full 14 minutes, 39 seconds he handed the iPad back and placed a call to his supervisor.

## CHAPTER 16

Just before Halloween 2020, Investigator Harold Bramson of the Broward County State Attorney's office showed up at Macedonia Baptist asking to speak to Reverend McGuire. During the meeting he showed her pictures of various men and asked if she knew any of them. She positively identified one of the men as Lewis but explained she didn't know his last name. The Inspector asked her a few more questions and left.

Later that same day, Investigator Bramson rang the doorbell of Marta's house. He went through the same procedure with Marta, and she also identified one of the men as Lewis.

"Can you tell me what's going on, Investigator?" Marta asked.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Vaughn. All I can say is we have an ongoing investigation and one or more of those men may be involved."

"You can't tell me what the investigation is about? That man did despicable things to one of the children I'm caring for and he intimidated and threatened the other two. I think we have a right to know why his picture is among the men that may be part of your investigation."

Harold Bramson had spent the better part of 30 years working in law enforcement. He was shot in the line of

duty as a Detective with the Broward County Sheriff's office while working undercover in the sex crimes unit. A bust went bad and when they tried to apprehend the creep who had been trafficking young girls after hooking them on pills and heroin, the asshole pulled a Glock and shot him just below his bullet-proof vest. He hadn't been able to eat a proper meal or get an erection since.

Once he felt ready to get back into the fight, he went to work as an Investigator for the State Attorney. He had a bloodhound sense for men, and unbelievably some women, who sexually abused and trafficked boys, girls, and women. Lewis was a small fish in that big pond who had popped up on Harold's radar before Covid hit. When a Detective provided video of Lewis pulling Isabella into a bedroom as part of evidence in their case, he immediately saw a way of hooking a bigger fish and gutting the small one.

"You're referring to Isabella Powell, is that correct?"

"Yes, that's who I'm speaking of. That man took advantage of children under the most difficult circumstances, and he needs to pay for that."

Harold Bramson took the measure of Marta Vaughn and instinct told him this woman had backbone. He liked what he saw.

"Ms. Vaughn, would you be willing to tell me everything you know, even if I can't confirm anything one way or another?"

"Of course, if it brings you any closer to putting that man away, I'll tell you everything I know."

"Okay, let's talk then. Would a cup of coffee be part of that deal?"

"Absolutely, Inspector Bramson, come on back to the kitchen."

They sat side-by-side at the counter overlooking the pool, watching the mares and the pony running the fence

line next door as they talked. More than an hour later, Inspector Bramson, closed his notebook, stood, and stretched.

“Ms. Vaughn, I know I told you I couldn’t discuss the details of this case with you, but I’m going to tell you one thing. That video we have of Lewis and Bella isn’t enough for the DA to charge him. There are issues with something called chain of custody. In addition, from what you told me, you and the Reverend forced your way into his house, restrained him, went through his apartment, and threw him out. What’s to keep a jury from believing you two had something against him and planted those drugs?”

“Inspector Bramson, that’s ridiculous. Well, okay, I see your point about the way the Reverend and I handled the situation but that video, my goodness, that video tells you he’s a sexual predator and he raped Bella.”

“Ms. Vaughn, ...”

“Inspector, call me Marta, please.”

“Okay, Marta, if you’ll call me Harry.”

“Agreed, so Harry, what about the video?”

“Marta, that video, even less than that video would be enough for me to charge Lewis. By the way, his last name is Bennis. But our DA is a real stickler for dotting those ‘i’s and crossing those ‘t’s. I’m sorry, but it takes more.”

“What? What more would it take?”

“Marta, it would take Isabella and Kayla, maybe even Tristen, testifying in court, under oath in front of a jury, with lawyers and people in the courtroom. Do you think they could do that?”

“I could.”

Inspector Bramson and Marta turned to see Bella standing in the dining area.

“How long have you been listening?”

“Long enough.” She closed the distance between them and offered her hand to Inspector Bramson. “What do you want me to do?”

On November 3<sup>rd</sup> Marta was granted guardianship over Bella, Kayla, and Tristen. Trisha Stevens immediately began the process for official adoption, a process that would take months. Reverend McGuire hosted a lunch at the Macedonia Baptist in honor of the occasion.

A good-looking older man was in attendance. He and Reverend McGuire clearly knew each other but he wasn’t introduced to Marta or any of the kids. As lunch concluded and the kids helped clear away the dishes and headed to the kitchen, Reverend McGuire approached Marta.

“Marta, I’d like you to meet someone. This is Alcee Hastings, a very dear friend of mine from way back. He was instrumental in helping us work through the kinks with your guardianship.”

“Oh, my, thank you, Mr. Hastings. I can’t tell you what it means to be able to give those kids a stable home.”

“It’s my honor and my job to help Marta. From what I see, and from what I heard has happened to that family, they are doing remarkably well.” Mr. Hastings observed.

“Alcee, you know what I’ve always told you, ‘When there’s right, there’s might!’ Reverend McGuire said.

“So, you have, so you have, Reverend. And in the years I’ve known you, you’ve showed me how true that is.

“Marta, it was a pleasure to share this occasion with you. Reverend, if you need anything, you know where to find me until the Lord calls me home.”

Makayla worked for days before Thanksgiving and insisted on taking care of the entire meal with all the trimmings. Marta served as her sous-chef and marveled at the young girl’s culinary ability. Thanksgiving dinner was exceptional.

On November 27, 2020, the day after Thanksgiving, Tristen turned 10. Marta found it difficult to gauge how to balance the celebration of “firsts after.” A first birthday, a first Thanksgiving, a first Christmas, after Chandra’s death and still honor Chandra’s memory. Marta wanted more than anything to make this Christmas meaningful for the children. It turns out nothing Marta could have done would have made Christmas a special occasion.

On December 12<sup>th</sup> Inspector Bramson rang the bell at Marta’s house. Beside him was a woman of about forty-five wearing a suit and carrying a briefcase. Marta answered the door.

“Inspector Bramson. I wasn’t expecting you. How are you? Please, come in.”

“Ms. Vaughn, this is Assistant District Attorney Maryanne Kruse. Is there somewhere private we can talk?”

“Of course, let’s go sit by the firepit. Little ears won’t hear us out there, although the horses might.” An Australian Shepherd puppy of about 2 months greeted them enthusiastically as they crossed the yard to the Adirondack chairs that surrounded a firepit. “That’s Tank, the newest addition to the family. Before we sit, can I get you two something to drink? How about some tea or coffee?”

“No, thank you Ms. Vaughn,” said the ADA.

“Nothing for me, thank you,” said Harry.

“Well, I assume this isn’t a social call. What can I do for you?”

“Ms. Vaughn, I will be the prosecutor bringing charges against Lewis Bennis for the rape of Isabella Powell.”

“Oh goodness, thank God, that man will get what’s coming to him.”

“Yes, Ma’am, that would be a good outcome. Unfortunately, we’ve run into a few snags putting the case together.” ADA Kruse said.

“Okay, does that have something to do with the kids? I thought Bella was helpful when you spoke with her last month.”

Marta noticed Harry fidgeting in his chair, and he looked distinctly uncomfortable. She recalled he had characterized his District Attorney as someone who had to have all her facts straight and ducks in a row before she proceeded with a case.

“Yes, Ms. Vaughn. Isabella’s information is compelling, and we were sure she would be an asset to the prosecution.”

“Were? You said, ‘were sure.’ Is that no longer the case?”

“Actually, there is a problem that’s come up. During trial preparation we are required to turn over to the defense a list of witnesses we will call. We did that a couple of weeks ago and the defense approached us with an issue regarding Isabella’s testimony.”

Harry fidgeted.

“And what is that issue, Ms. Kruse?”

“Well, to be frank, the defendant, Lewis Bennis, claims he has proof that Bella illegally filed for unemployment, as well as rental assistance by impersonating her deceased mother. Of course, we investigated that and in doing so we also found that she cashed a CARES Act check in the amount of \$2,200 in the month of April, after her mother died.”

Harry stood. “Excuse me. I need to use your restroom.”

“What are you saying. That you won’t be able to use Bella’s testimony against Lewis Bennis?” Marta demanded.

“Well, yes, that’s the case. But what I’m here today for is to notify you of our intention, rather our obligation, under the law to bring charges against Isabella for fraud.”

Marta shot to her feet, “What the hell are you talking about?”



“Ms. Vaughn, please, sit down. A person who intentionally makes misrepresentations, lies, conceals, or does something else to fraudulently receive state or federal benefits can be charged, tried, and convicted of fraud. I have no choice in this. Defense counsel brought this to our attention, and it is now a matter of record. We must proceed with filing charges, but I assure you I’ll do everything I can to mitigate the impact on Isabella.”

“And, what, Ms. Kruse, would that impact on Isabella be exactly?”

“The penalties can be both civil and criminal. She would be required to make monetary repayment of the benefits she received. She also faces up to one year in jail if I could get the charges pled down to a misdemeanor. If she were to be convicted of a 3<sup>rd</sup> degree felony, which is what the charge would be due to the amount of money involved, that could be a maximum sentence of 5 years and/or fines of up to \$5,000.”

“Get out!”

“Please, I need to explain Ms. Vaughn.”

“No, you need to stop talking. Get out. You won’t speak to Isabella, Makayla, or Tristen without me being present and if you want to speak to me again you can call my lawyer. Her name is Trisha Stevens. She’s with the ACLU office in Fort Lauderdale. Now, get off my property, the gate’s over there, you aren’t welcome in my home.”

Marta walked angrily back to the house and came face-to-face with Harry.

“How could you? How?” she spit.

“Marta, I’m sorry. I didn’t have anything to do with this. It came out of the blue. If I had any idea this would happen, I never would have suggested Bella talk to the DA. Please, believe me.”

“Believe you! I’ll tell you what I told your partner. Get out of my house and you can talk to my lawyer.” She marched to the front door and held it open.

Hanging his head, Harry said, “I’m sorry Marta. I really am,” and left.

She slammed the door and waited until she heard their car pull out of the driveway. Then she sank into her sofa and cried.

## CHAPTER 17

The following day, Reverend McGuire, Trisha Stevens, and Marta assembled in the church office.

“Marta, after you called, I spoke with ADA Kruse, and we have a meeting scheduled for this Thursday. She also told me that this is not something they wanted to pursue and both she and Inspector Bramson feel awful about the impact on Isabella.

“I can attest to the fact that once Lewis’ defense attorney was made aware of the prosecution’s intention to call Isabella as a witness, it would have been incumbent on him to check out Lewis’ contention that she was collecting benefits illegally. It’s now on the record with the court and it must be pursued.

“That being said, we will stand with Isabella, and she will have my full support as her attorney. We will get her through this and mitigate, as best we can, the charges filed and any adjudication of those charges.” Trisha concluded.

“But to put that poor girl through all this. If your plan goes sideways and she is charged and found guilty, it will have repercussions for the rest of her life.” Marta countered.

Thoughtfully, Trisha responded, “I’m going to put this out there. There will be a lot less of a spotlight focused on Bella if she doesn’t testify against Lewis.”

“But...,” Marta began to respond.

“Hear me out. If Kruse puts Bella on the stand she’s going to have to talk about, in very graphic detail, the things that Lewis did to her. In addition, on cross-examination from Lewis’ attorney, who is a public defender by the name of Patrick Gorski, he will attempt to discredit her as a cheat and a liar who defrauded the state and the federal government.

“The nature of this case will make it high-profile and the press, both TV and print, will cover it. It may even get national attention. When I meet with ADA Kruse on Thursday, one thing on my agenda is to determine whether she feels her case is strong enough without Bella’s testimony. If she says it is, my recommendation would be not to put Bella on the stand, and we’ll deal with the fallout on the fraud charges with a lot less attention on Bella.”

The Reverend spoke up. “Trisha, I understand everything you are saying, but this isn’t our decision. It’s Bella’s, so we need to spell all of this out for her and let her decide. She’s your client, have you spoken with her?”

“No Reverend, she’s a minor and before I speak with Bella I need Marta, who is her legal guardian, to be on board,” Trisha replied.

“Bella should be at one of our neighbors. She’s become a regular stall mucker for the McFadden’s horses next door and now she’s got it in her mind that goats would be good therapy animals so she’s working at the Patterson’s who have five of them,” Marta said.

“Give her a call and tell her we’ll be there in twenty minutes,” Reverend McGuire said.

When the three women arrived, Kayla and Tristen were in the study working on their online classes and Bella was washing up. Marta made coffee, tea, and put together a tray of homemade pastries that Kayla had whipped up the day before. Tank greeted them by weaving between their

legs and running around in circles as they settled outside around the firepit. Once Bella joined them, Marta began by telling Bella about her visit from ADA Kruse the day before. Trisha picked up from there and told Bella about the discussion that she and the Reverend McGuire and Marta had that morning.

Bella sat quietly sipping tea during the exchange.

Marta was the first to speak, “Bella, whatever you decide to do, we will support you 100%. There is no reason you should go through the additional trauma of having to testify in court. What you’ll be facing with the fraud charges is enough stress to deal with, especially after what you’ve been through.”

When it was clear there was nothing more to say, Bella rose and walked over to the fence-line where the pony and his mares waited. Tank followed and sat by her feet. She cooed and whinnied at the horses as they jostled for her attention. Almost ten minutes went by before Bella returned to the firepit.

“Can I tell Kayla and Tristen what’s happening?” she asked, “whether I testify or not, this mess is going to affect them. We need to have a family meeting.”

Marta looked at Trisha who nodded. “Of course, Bella, you can tell them. Do you want one of us to come with you?”

“No, Ms. Marta. I need to tell them myself.”

Bella got her tea and walked to the house.

“That girl is something else.” The Reverend said.

“She sure is. Chandra would be proud.” Marta offered.

“Not ‘would be,’ Marta, ‘is.’ Chandra is watching out for her babies now, just like she did when her soul resided in that corporal body.”

“That’s good Reverend, because I have a feeling we’re going to need all the Divine intervention we can get.” Trisha said.

The trio cleaned up the empty cups and plates and headed inside to the kitchen. About a half hour later Bella, Kayla and Tristen joined them.

From their faces, Marta could tell some tears had been shed, but she saw resolve in Bella's eyes.

Bella and Tristen sat on stools at the island. Kayla put on more coffee and brewed some more tea.

"Do you guys have any questions?" Marta asked.

"I do," Tristen answered.

"Okay, ask away."

"What if Bella doesn't testify against Lewis, but Kayla and I do?"

"Trisha, do you want to take that one?" Marta asked.

"Sure. Well, first, the reason they need Bella to testify is because the things that Lewis is charged with, he did to Bella, not either one of you," she answered, and paused, "At least that's my understanding." A look passed between Trisha and the Reverend.

With great care, the Reverend continued, "Kayla, Tristen, did Lewis ever do anything to either of you? Did he touch you?"

Kayla turned from the sink where she was rinsing dishes. "Bella made sure I was never alone with him, but he gave me the creeps the way he looked at me, and it made me sick what he did to Bella."

"How about you Tristen?" Marta asked.

"No, he never tried to do anything bad to me, but he told me that he'd teach me what a man can do the next time some of his friends brought their girlfriends over."

The Reverend stood and walked over to the window, taking in the bucolic setting that these children woke up to every morning. In contrast, she imagined what they woke to each day just a few weeks before. She marveled at the resilience they showed and prayed silently for the Lord to give them the strength she knew they would need over the

next few months. The Reverend's thoughts were interrupted by Trisha, "Tristen, Lewis wasn't a man you want to learn things from."

"I know Elder Stevens. I wouldn't have gone with him when his friends came over. I would've figured out how to get out of it. I have another question."

Marta chuckled, "I think you might make a good detective someday, Tristen. What's your question?"

"Bella says what she did was stealing from the government but that's not what she did. She was taking care of us and the things she did were the same things that our momma would have done. So how is that wrong?" he didn't wait for an answer or take a breath before continuing, "And how come if everyone's going to know about her doing those things why don't we tell them first? I guess that's more than one question." he concluded.

The three women looked at each other and Trisha spoke, "Forget the detective work, he's either going to make a good lawyer or a great public relations person. Tristen, that's a very good idea. Reverend, do you have that reporter's number who did that piece about the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary?"

"Of course, it's here in my phone."

"Good, let me have it," she looked at the kids and Marta, "If I have your permission, I'm going to call her, and we're going to put names and faces to that story she did on the impact Macedonia Baptist has on the community. With any luck, we'll flood the local news with Bella's story and before she takes the stand all of this will be old news."

She turned to Bella and said, "That, of course, assumes you're going to testify."

Bella smiled, "Oh yes, Ms. Stevens, there was never any doubt. I want everyone to know what Lewis did. I didn't do anything wrong. He's the one who should be ashamed and has to live with what he did."

## CHAPTER 18

On the morning of December 21<sup>st</sup> Marta, the Reverend and the congregants of Macedonia Baptist watched as a crew from the local ABC station set up for a taped interview with Trisha and Isabella which was scheduled to air on the noon news.

A petite woman with tawny blonde hair watched from the corner of the room with Trisha and Isabella as Marta approached. “Marta, I want you to meet a friend of mine, Michele Gillen. Michele, this is Marta Vaughn, Bella’s guardian.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you Ms. Gillen. I thought I recognized you. You were a TV reporter here a few years back, and then when you were on *Dateline*.” Marta replied.

“Thank you, Marta. It’s nice that you remember me. I’ve been retired for a few years now.”

“I met Michele when she investigated an incinerator owned by the City of Fort Lauderdale that contaminated all our soil and made many of our black families very sick,” Trisha explained. “I’ve been picking her brain on how to execute our PR effort with Bella’s story. Her contacts and experience have been a blessing and she was kind enough to come today and offer Bella some moral support.”

“Thank you for helping Bella, Ms. Gillen.” Marta said.



“Please, call me Michele. When Trisha reached out for some advice I couldn’t sit on the sidelines. Bella’s story is heartbreaking and compelling. Her strength and her love for Makayla and Tristen is going to come through loud and clear. There will be no doubt Isabella’s intentions were not to defraud any government, but to keep herself and those kids out of a broken foster care system.”

Michele continued, “Believe me, by Christmas day, which is normally a slow news cycle, people all over the country are going to know Chandra’s story and how Isabella, Makayla and Tristen survived until the posse came to the rescue.” She paused and glanced toward the news crew, “It looks like they’re ready for you two.”

The taping, which was originally intended to run for thirty minutes, went on for ninety. The reporter and her producer called the station, and it was agreed they would come back to the station do some editing and run the interview during prime time 6 o’clock news.

Trisha outlined some caveats on what could be aired which included not referring to Lewis Bennis by name and simply stating that incidents that led up to The Reverend and Trisha’s rescue of the children are “currently under investigation.” ADA Kruse’s jury pool would not be tainted and when Bella took the stand it would be unlikely that Lewis’ public defender would want to remind the jury of why Bella looked familiar.

Michele Gillen was wrong on one point. It didn’t take until Christmas Day for the story to go viral. The next day, CNN picked up the local report and ran the interview. Next, AP picked it up and requested an interview. Trisha had amassed a small army of social-media savvy supporters who moved Bella’s story through the internet, monitored comments, likes and retweets.

On New Year’s Eve, a cable news reporter did a live report with the intracoastal waterway in the background.

She informed her listeners that she was waiting on a comment from the President on what the administration thought about the issue of “Covid orphans.” She added that her request to the Governor’s office for comment has so far gone unanswered.

On Tuesday January 5, 2021, Bella, Trisha, and Marta sat in the Macedonia Baptist church office waiting to begin a Webex meeting requested by ADA Kruse to begin. There was a soft knock on the door, and it opened slightly.

“May I join you?” asked Harry Bramson.

Confused, Trisha looked to her left at Marta, who sat stone-faced. If looks could kill, Reverend McGuire would be planning a celebration of life for Harold Bramson later that day.

“Inspector Bramson, we’re about to begin a conference call with ADA Kruse. Are you here on official business?” Trisha asked.

“No, Ms. Stevens, I’m not here in an official capacity. As a matter of fact, my resignation from the State Attorney’s office was official on December 31, 2020. I’m here to support Isabella Powell. If you don’t mind, I’ll just sit over here on the other side of your screen. ADA Kruse doesn’t know that I’m here, but if she happens to say something that may be unclear or if she engages in a bit of obfuscation, I’ll give you a nod.”

Trisha turned to Marta and Bella to ask, “Do you have any objections to Inspector Bramson sitting in on our meeting.”

Bella shook her head. Marta said, “I have a strong objection to Inspector Bramson sitting in, but I would welcome the support of Harry Bramson.” She smiled and added, “But, perhaps it would help if ADA Kruse saw Mr. Bramson sitting in on the meeting.”

This time Trisha smiled and said, “Pull up a chair, Harry.”

Trisha watched Kruse's face carefully as she saw Harry Bramson sitting next to Bella. Kruse scribbled some notes on the papers before her and when the color returned to her face she spoke.

"Ms. Stevens, Ms. Powell, Ms. Vaughn I asked to meet with you to discuss the issues related to Ms. Powell. I was not aware that Mr. Bramson would be attending the meeting."

Trisha started to respond, when Harry said, "Excuse me Ms. Stevens, I'd like to quickly respond to that."

"Of course, Mr. Bramson. Go ahead."

"It's nice to see you, Maryanne. As you know, I am now a private citizen. My involvement in a prior professional capacity in Isabella Powell's life is part of the reason you're having this meeting, so I felt compelled to be here. Of course, I'm aware of the limitations on what information I can share about your case against Isabella, so please be assured that I'm just here as moral support, not to advise these ladies in any way." Harry concluded and withdrew a notebook and pen from his inside jacket pocket and laid it between himself and Bella.

ADA Kruse cleared her throat and began, "First, I'd like to address Ms. Powell's participation as a witness against Lewis Bennis. The wide-spread media attention given Ms. Powell's story has hampered the defense's ability to impeach her as a credible witness, but he will still try to do so. With that on the table, I will tell you that we still intend to call Ms. Powell as a witness. I'd like to know now if that will be a problem."

Kruse picked up her phone and typed something quickly. Trisha's phone pinged with a text, and she glanced down "*Good work, by the way.*"

Bella was the first to speak. "Ms. Kruse. I still want to testify against Lewis."

“That’s welcome news, Ms. Powell, but I need to be certain you are aware of the degree of detail you will be asked to reveal on the stand. That may be more difficult than you realize.”

“I know, Ms. Kruse.”

“Okay, then here’s what we propose. It will be several months before you will need to testify. During that time, we’d like you to see a therapist of your choosing. This is for your well-being, not anything to do with our case.”

Bella looked down as Harry put a check mark on the page between them.

“I’m okay with that. I was thinking of asking Ms. Marta if she thought it would be a good idea for all of us to talk to someone.”

“Next, as we get closer to trial, we will do some role playing to give you an idea of what it will be like on the stand. One of our attorneys will play the part of Mr. Bennis’ lawyer. He will ask you very personal questions about what happened with Mr. Bennis.”

Check.

“Okay. Will Ms. Marta and Ms. Stevens be with me when you do that?”

“Good question, Ms. Powell, in fact, no. The only people involved will be our psychologist, myself, the other attorney and a third attorney playing the judge.”

Bella pretended to think about that as Harry wrote, “*Your therapist and me or no deal.*”

“Ms. Kruse, I want to help, but I want the therapist I’ll be seeing and Mr. Bramson with me or I won’t do it.”

ADA put her own pen down and leaned back in her chair to stretch. She looked at Harry Bramson and for the second time in an hour...if looks could kill. Harry smiled back at the screen.

“Well, of course, Ms. Powell, if that’s what makes you comfortable, we can certainly work with that. I’m sure Mr.

Bramson will be a very strong advocate for you as we go through this together. Ms. Stevens, Ms. Vaughn, do either of you have any questions or concerns so far?”

Trisha allowed Marta to respond first, “Bella is driving this ship. She’s a mature, strong, young woman and I will support her in any decision she makes. Even if she should change her mind later.”

“The children are very fortunate to have you in their life, Ms. Vaughn. Ms. Stevens, any questions?”

“Now that we have that resolved, ADA Kruse, what are your plans with bringing fraud charges against Isabella.”

“That is next on my agenda, Ms. Stevens.”

Kruse continued, “Our office feels that Ms. Powell’s participating as a witness on behalf of the State of Florida in the prosecution of Mr. Bennis presents a conflict for the State in bringing charges against her for fraud.”

Trisha felt tension leave Marta’s body and she reached for Marta’s hand under the table. She asked, “And what does that mean, ADA Kruse? Will you not be filing charges against Isabella?”

ADA Kruse took a breath before responding. Harry tapped his pen against the table.

“In fact, Ms. Stevens, the State will not be bringing charges, we are referring the matter to the United States Attorney for the Southern District.”

Check.

Marta spoke, “I don’t understand, what does that mean for Isabella?”

“Let me explain. Ms. Powell used the internet to file her fraudulent applications and the funds were deposited and withdrawn from a bank. This constitutes Federal Mail and Wire fraud. Additionally, the assistance included \$300 in federal funds and of course the rental assistance and childcare credit was also federal money. As such, we feel

the federal government has a stronger claim against Ms. Powell than the State.”

Check.

Trisha reacted, “That’s a low-blow Kruse, and you know it.”

Check.

“I’m sorry you feel that way, Ms. Stevens, but that’s where we stand. I’ll leave you to discuss this with your client, and please let me know very soon if Ms. Powell is still willing to cooperate as a witness against Mr. Bennis.”

Marta angrily responded, “You think she should still help you after this!”

ADA closed the file in front of her signaling the end of the meeting and said, “I understand this isn’t the news you would have preferred to hear, but you need to understand that we will call Ms. Powell as a witness and if she chooses not to cooperate, we will ask permission of the court to treat her as a hostile witness.”

Check.

“We’ll have to leave it here. I have another meeting. I appreciate you joining me today.” ADA Kruse’s disconnected the call.

They all sat in silence for a moment before Harry spoke, “It’s politics.”

“Politics! It’s Bella’s life, not politics.” Marta responded angrily.

“I mean the decision to go federal with the charges is politics. Kruse’s new boss, the DA, just got elected and he doesn’t think it will help his good standing in the community if his office is bringing charges against a young black girl who the rest of the country thinks is a hero.”

“What Harry’s saying is probably the real reason behind the decision. I know our new DA,” Trisha responded.

“Does moving it to the federal court just mean a different place we have to go for the trial?” Bella asked.

Trisha and Harry exchanged glances before Trisha responded. “It is a different location, but the most significant difference are the penalties.”

Marta took Bella’s hand, “And I assume from that look you just gave each other, the penalties aren’t less.”

“That would be correct, Marta. Federal Mail and Wire Fraud carry maximum terms of 20 years in prison and fines of up to a million dollars.” Trisha explained.

Harry immediately rested his big hand on top of Bella’s and Marta’s, “But that’s not going to happen here. We can’t do anything until the ADA does her thing, so let’s try to get back to normal. Have faith, Bella, you have an awful lot of people pulling for you and some of them carry a lot of weight.” He squeezed their hands and stood. “Whatever the Reverend’s got cooking up in that kitchen smells like heaven, let’s go check it out.”

Bella took his hand and said, “That’s Kayla cooking, come on, I’ll hook you up.” Together they left the office.

As Trisha gathered her things, Marta stared out at the empty doorway. “I do believe I could fall in love with that man.”

## CHAPTER 19

In Florida, the first Covid vaccinations were administered on December 30, 2020 beginning with the elderly in long-term care and first responders, followed by people 65 and older, and those 50–64 years old.

In February '21, Marta found a therapy practice with an excellent reputation for working with children and trauma. Each child had a dedicated therapist they saw weekly and once a month Marta joined them for a group family session. Reverend McGuire set about organizing a team from the congregation who monitored any social media related to Bella. To no one's surprise Bella was hailed as a hero for doing whatever she could think of to keep her siblings safe.

As summer began, Covid cases were on the way down and there was an undercurrent of optimism that the worst was over. Then a new variant labelled “Delta” was identified on May 20, 2021 by the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center.

Hope that Covid would ever be in the rear-view mirror hinged on vaccinations, masking, and social distancing, but people were angry and Covid-weary. They wanted their pre-Covid life back without masks and distancing. Many distrusted the vaccines that had been fast-tracked through development, testing and approval in 2020.



The last day of school was June 2<sup>nd</sup> and on the 18<sup>th</sup> Bella celebrated her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday with a subdued gathering in Marta's backyard.

On Thursday, June 24<sup>th</sup>, ADA Kruse called Marta to inform her that a trial date of September 27, 2021 was set for State of Florida v. Lewis Allen Bennis. It was unknown whether the trial would be held virtually or if Bella would have to appear in court, but Kruse wanted a week for preparing Bella for the worst-case scenario: a courtroom trial.

As far as Marta and Trisha were concerned, having Bella testify remotely was preferred. There would be no spectators and any cross examination over Webex would be less intimidating if Gorski wasn't in her face and Lewis wasn't sitting only a few feet away. They agreed ADA Kruse would prep other witnesses first and spend the week of August 9<sup>th</sup> with Bella.

Marta tried to make the summer of 2021 as normal as possible. They avoided discussion of the upcoming trial and waited for the other shoe to drop with federal charges lodged against Bella.

Kayla spent several days a week at Macedonia Baptist working in the kitchen. She helped prepare nutritious menus, kept inventory for the kitchen manager on what needed to be ordered from the purveyors, and often cooked entire meals without supervision for hundreds of congregants who relied on the church for food. With her help the church organized volunteers who delivered prepared breakfast, lunch, and dinner to members of the food program who were isolating due to Covid.

Tristen spent hours every day playing soccer on the make-shift field he and Thomas created on the Sullivan's three acres across the street. Some days Thomas' buddies from the school soccer team joined them, on other days

Thomas and Tristen practiced footwork and goal tending skills.

Bella seemed more subdued after public defender Gorski took her deposition via Webex. As the summer wore on, she continued to work with the McFadden's horses, and the Patterson's goats. She had thought that once people could be together again her therapy goat program would be a viable idea and had looked forward to testing it out with kids in reading programs and residents of nursing homes. If it was successful, it would look good on her resume when she applied for veterinary school after college.

However, this summer it was clear that it would be wise to forget about those dreams and Bella simply hoped to be able to complete high school next year. It was likely she would be doing college work in a federal prison somewhere. Being in therapy helped her deal with the anxiety of her uncertain future, but it still weighed heavily on her mind. The thought of being separated from Kayla and Tristen was often too much to bear. Everything she had done was to keep the three of them together. At least they were safe with Marta.

On the morning of August 9<sup>th</sup> Harry picked up Bella for their first day of witness preparation. ADA Kruse had rented a small meeting room at a local hotel for the week and set it up with four desks: one as a witness stand, another for the judge and the remaining for defense and prosecution tables. She arranged 12 chairs to the right of the witness stand for the jury. A podium was positioned in front of the judge and angled toward the witness stand and jury box.

Bella and Harry arrived early and met Bella's therapist, Anisa Powers, in the hotel lobby. Harry gave Bella and Anisa some space and told them he'd see them in the meeting room. ADA Kruse and two other attorneys, who

Harry recognized as Simon Hess and Jose Menendez from the DA's office, were already there.

Jose greeted him first, "Harry, good to see you man. How's retirement?"

"Just peachy, Jose. Sitting in on witness prep to make sure a young lady isn't overwhelmed wasn't on my bingo card, but otherwise retirement is good."

"Oh, now Harold, Ms. Powell is an important witness in this trial, and we will treat her as such," ADA Kruse responded.

*Why did she always call me Harold?* "I'm sure you'll try Maryanne, but you forget I've seen Menendez in action playing defense counsel during some of your witness preps, so forgive me if I feel the need to be here." Harry countered.

He turned as he heard Bella and Anisa enter the room. Once introductions were complete, ADA Kruse explained how they would proceed. "Ms. Powell, may I call you Isabella?"

"Sure."

"Okay, Isabella, before we get started, I want to thank you for agreeing to be a witness in this case."

"Excuse me, Ms. Kruse, but I didn't have much choice. You were going to put me on the stand one way or the another."

"Yes, uh, so, I want you to understand that you will be the human face of this case and that your testimony is crucial to our ability to tie Lewis to the trafficking ring."

"Ms. Kruse, I'm sorry, I don't understand. Lewis raped me, so aren't you charging him with rape?"

"Of course, yes, Isabella. Since you were under 18 at the time and Lewis was 28, one of the charges against him is aggravated sexual battery. That is clear cut, and with your testimony and Kayla's video we have no doubt we'll prevail on that charge."

“Maryanne, may I speak?” Harry interrupted.

“Harold, please refer to me as ADA Kruse, if you don’t mind.”

“Certainly, Maryanne, if you’ll call me Harry. I think I understand why Isabella is asking her question.”

“Fine, *Harry*, you have the floor.”

“Isabella, there is no question in our minds that Lewis will be found guilty for what he did to you, but there is more to it. Before I worked for *ADA Kruse*, I was a detective in the sex crimes division. One of the cases I worked on was a sex trafficking ring.

“The man who runs the ring has other men working for him as recruiters and handlers. The recruiters target young girls and boys who are homeless, runaways, illegals, have crappy parents, or something else that puts them at risk. The recruiters exploit what makes the kids and young women vulnerable and groom them to earn their trust.

“Most of the time the recruiters get their victims hooked on drugs and keep them under control with threats and violence. These victims are turned into sex workers, and their handlers move them from one county or state to another where they work in massage parlors, strip joints and on the street as prostitutes.

“The most desirable, usually the youngest and most innocent victims, are groomed for private parties and required to have sex with ‘guests’ at the party. At the end of the party, the victims either go back with their handler or money is exchanged and they are sold to one of the people they had sex with. For the buyers, the sex is a trial run. Essentially, it’s modern-day slavery.

“We know that until his arrest, Lewis was a recruiter for one of the largest trafficking rings operating in the state of Florida. Based on what you’ve told us, it appears he didn’t want his bosses to know about you.”

Isabella interrupted, “So, if he kept me to himself how can I help you prove he was part of this ring?”

ADA Kruse interrupted Harry, “Isabella, we intend to convict Lewis of your rape and ask for the maximum sentence due to the aggravating circumstances. It’s our hope that when faced with that outcome he will cooperate with us against the men he worked for in the trafficking ring. Do you understand?”

Bella was silent for a minute. “Yes Ms. Kruse, I sure do understand. You’re making me testify and you’re using me as bait. And if Lewis helps you what happens? He ends up getting a deal, won’t he?”

ADA Kruse cleared her throat as Harry chuckled. “She’s a sharp one, Maryanne.” Ignoring the comment, Kruse began, “Let’s get started. Isabella, have you ever been in court before?”

“No, but I’ve watched TV shows.”

“Well, real court is different. A lot of time is spent with the lawyers and judge going over procedural details, making motions, waiting for rulings, and then picking a jury. We won’t be covering any of those things, but my point in explaining that is so you understand there will be long stretches of time where you will be waiting to be called as a witness.

“What we will concentrate on with you this week are the points that we need to establish with your testimony. We don’t want you to make anything up, embellish, or diminish what happened. We don’t want you to characterize the facts in a way that you think will help me. And, while the attorneys follow prepared outlines on questions, you as a witness have no script. We want you to simply tell the truth in your own words.

“Both opposing counsel and I are going to ask the same questions in different ways. We don’t want you to get exasperated or impatient at that. Simply answer the

questions to the best of your ability. If you forget a fact that was already brought up in your deposition, just say you don't recall, and you will be allowed to review your sworn testimony in your deposition to refresh your memory.

“When we make objections, you must wait for the judge to rule on whether you can answer or not and we don't want you to react to those objections or rulings.

“However, you can certainly express your emotions when asked and answering a question, especially when we introduce the video Makayla recorded. Just try to be respectful of the court if you get upset.

“As the prosecutor, I'll question you first. I'll introduce the points we want to make through the questions I ask. Then the defense will cross-examine you. The defense can only address facts and statements that were introduced during my questioning or entered into evidence. If there is anything I feel needs more context or clarification after defense counsel cross-examines you, I will have an opportunity to do so on re-direct.

“As I mentioned, you've already given testimony in your deposition. You were under oath to tell the truth at the time of your deposition, and you will be under oath when you testify. If you are asked a question in court and your answer contradicts the answer you gave in your deposition, that discrepancy will be pointed out to the jury which can hurt your credibility as a witness.

“Therefore, it is important that you read your deposition before we go any further and if there is anything that you recall differently or anything you testified to that did not actually happen, this is when you tell us. Finally, we will do the same thing every day until we feel you are adequately prepared for the stand, that you can handle any surprises, and until you feel comfortable and confident talking about what the defendant did to you.”

## CHAPTER 20

“Before we begin, is there anything in your deposition that needs to be clarified or re-stated, Isabella?” ADA Kruse asked.

“No, Ms. Kruse. I answered all of Mr. Gorski’s questions and I told the truth.”

“Good, okay. Here we go.”

For the next forty-five minutes ADA Kruse walked Bella through testimony about Chandra’s death and how Isabella and her siblings feared being discovered by family services and split up in foster care.

Kruse asked Isabella about filing for unemployment, rental assistance and the child tax credit that was deposited in Chandra’s checking account. Isabella answered that she simply did what her mother would have done, and she did not know it was illegal.

Kruse’s next set of questions covered Lewis Bennis. Isabella explained that she had never noticed Lewis around the apartment complex while her mother was alive.

“I didn’t know him by name, but I saw him watching the younger kids play soccer. The first time I knew his name was when he approached Makayla claiming to know my mom and Tristen.”

“When did you personally meet the defendant?”

Bella's chin rose slightly as she looked at ADA Kruse, "It was June 17, 2020."

"You remember that date quite specifically, why?"

"It was the day before my 17<sup>th</sup> birthday."

"Did you approach the defendant?"

"No, he came up behind me. I went for a walk after dinner, before it got dark. I had my buds in my ear listening to music. He just came up close behind me and started walking next to me."

"What happened next."

"I backed up away from him and asked him what he wanted. He said he saw me leaving and thought I might want some company."

"What did you say?"

"I told him I didn't want any company and I turned around and started walking home."

"Where were you at this time?"

"There's a path down one side of the apartment complex that kind of dead ends into this grassy strip that runs along the canal. That's where Lewis came up to me."

"Was there anyone else there, other than you and the defendant, that evening?"

"People fish there and walk their dogs but when he came up to me there wasn't anybody else out there."

"You said you turned around and started to walk home. What happened next?"

"He started to follow me and said something about my mom being gone. I stopped walking and turned around. I lied and told him she wasn't gone, that she was working. He came really close to my face and flicked my mask off. He dragged his finger down my cheek and down my chest. Then he told me that he was good at keeping secrets and that he knew I had one. He said someone at Oakbriar, where my mom worked, told him staff there died of Covid."



He told me to call my mom right there if it wasn't my mom that died."

"What happened next, Isabella?"

Bella shifted in her chair and paused for a minute. "He grabbed my arm and twisted it. He grabbed my butt and pulled me tight up against him and rubbed himself on me. I tried to get away, but he just twisted my arm more and told me he liked it that I fought him. He said he got harder."

"How long did this go on?"

"I don't know. It felt like forever. He stunk like cigarettes and beer. I felt sick. He kept twisting my arm and was breathing on me. He told me that he was going to make me finish him off right there, but changed his mind, that he wanted our first time together to be private." Bella paused to take a sip of water before continuing. Her hand shook slightly.

"What happened next Isabella?"

"He told me I was his from then on. That whenever he wanted me, I was to come to him, or he would come and get me. He said if I didn't do what he said he'd go after Kayla, or he'd call family services and report us. All of a sudden he let go of me and started walking away, singing to himself."

"What did you do after he let you go?"

"I threw up. I just sat in the grass. I couldn't move."

"How long did you stay there?"

"I don't know how long it was, but this old couple was walking their dog and the dog came up to me and laid down next to me."

"Did this couple see what happened?"

"No, they couldn't have seen anything. It was dark when they walked by. It was still light when Lewis left."

In answer to ADA Kruse's further questions, Bella explained that she acted like nothing had happened when

she got home and that the kids had made her breakfast the next morning and decorated the apartment for her birthday. She told Kruse she was upset all day but tried to act normal, but then Lewis was at the door, and he pushed Tristen aside to come in.

“He acted like we went for a walk together the night before, like we were a thing now. He told the kids that he had something special planned for my birthday, but he didn’t know it was my birthday until he walked into the apartment and saw the party stuff.”

“What did you do when he came into the apartment?”

“I tried to get out of going with him, but he said if I didn’t go with him that maybe Kayla would want to go to ‘dinner,’ so I went.”

“Isabella, do you need a break?”

“No, I want to get this over with.”

“Okay, so what happened next? You left with Lewis, correct?”

“OBJECTION! Leading the witness!” Menendez roared.

Bella jumped and her gaze landed on Harry in the back of the room. He nodded his head and held up his hand to say, “it’s okay.”

Simon Hess, the “judge,” responded, “Sustained,” and turned to Bella, “You may answer the question.”

“Uh. I don’t remember what you asked me.”

“Did you leave with Lewis, Isabella?”

“Yes,” she responded meekly.

The “judge” interrupted Bella again, “You’ll have to speak louder Ms. Powell.”

“Uh, okay. I’m sorry. Um, yes, I left with Lewis.”

“Where did the two of you go?”

“He took me to his apartment.”

“What happened in his apartment.”

Bella paused, closed her eyes, and gathered herself before she spoke. “He made me sit on the couch and ....”

ADA Kruse interrupted, “Isabella, open your eyes. You should look at the jury whenever you answer a question. If that’s too difficult you must look at whomever has asked you the question.”

“I’m sorry, Ms. Kruse. I, uh, never had to talk about this in front of so many people.”

“You were asked that question in your deposition and defense counsel was present.”

“I know. It’s just ... different here.”

“Do you need a break?”

“No, I’m okay.”

“Then please, continue. Tell the court what happened when Lewis took you to his apartment.”

Bella looked at the 12 empty chairs which would someday be occupied by a jury of Lewis’ peers and spoke.

“The whole way across the parking lot to his apartment, Lewis had me by the arm. I guess I wasn’t moving fast enough for him because he was squeezing my arm, really hard, and pulling me along. I had a bruise there the next day.”

“Did anyone see Lewis pulling you across the parking lot?” Kruse interrupted.

“I don’t know.”

“Please continue.”

“When we got into his apartment, he shoved me on to the couch and started kissing me. I didn’t have a mask; he didn’t let me bring anything with me. He was mad that I didn’t come over when I saw his curtain was open. The day before he said that was his signal on when he wanted me to come to him, he would open the curtain of his apartment.

“He told me that I needed to be punished because I didn’t listen to him and he made me stand up and told me to take my clothes off. I had never been with a man, and I didn’t know what I was supposed to do, so I just stood up and started to unbutton my shirt.

“He told me to do it ‘real slow and sexy,’ but I didn’t know what that really meant, so he got mad and stood up and pulled me down the hall to his bedroom.”

Kruse interrupted again, “Before you continue, Bella, please describe for the court what Mr. Bennis’ apartment looked like.”

“Huh?”

“Please, describe the defendant’s apartment.”

“Uh, well, he had ratty old furniture in the living room and a small table with chairs in the dining room. He had brown curtains on the living room window and a sheet taped up to the kitchen window. It stunk really bad from cigarettes, and there were dirty dishes in the sink and the trash hadn’t been taken out for a while.”

“Other than those rooms, what other rooms were there.”

“There was his bedroom and a bathroom.”

“Did you use the bathroom?”

“Not right away, later.”

“Describe the bathroom for us please.”

“It was dirty. When I eventually used it, the toilet hadn’t been flushed. The tub hadn’t been scrubbed in a long time.”

“Did you open the medicine cabinet at any time?”

“No.”

“Did you see anything laying around the sink?”

“Just normal stuff like toothpaste and a toothbrush. He had a razor on the counter.”

“Okay, Isabella, you’re doing great. Now, let’s go back to Lewis being mad at you for not taking your clothes off ‘slow and sexy,’ what happened next?”

Bella took a sip of water and stretched her neck back and forth to release the tension. She noticed Anisa sitting next to Harry motioning for her to breath. Anisa had taught her some breathing exercises that really helped

when she was feeling anxious. She took a couple of deep breaths and looked back to the empty 12 chairs.

“I wasn’t taking my clothes off the way he wanted me to. He pulled me down the hall into his bedroom.”

“Please describe Mr. Bennis’ bedroom for the court, Isabella.”

“It was dirty, and it smelled. There was a lamp and an ash tray that was full of butts on the one nightstand and some empty beer bottles on the other. There were clothes all over the floor. He had a dresser with a TV on top of it and there was a closet. And a bed. The bed wasn’t made, and the sheets had sweat stains and what maybe was old blood.”

“Did the bed have a headboard, Bella?”

“Yes.” She answered quietly.

“Ms. Powell, please speak up,” Hess admonished.

Bella looked directly at “Judge” Hess and said firmly, “Yes, there was a headboard. It had two posts and there was rope wrapped around each one.”

“What happened next, Isabella.”

“Lewis raped me.”

“I’m sorry, Isabella, but you need to explain to the court exactly what happened. Did Lewis hit you? Did he tie you up? Did he put his penis in you?”

“OBJECTION! Judge, I’m giving ADA Kruse leeway here because of the sensitivity of the issue and the age of the witness but she’s putting words in the witness’ mouth!”

This time Bella didn’t flinch. She waited for the judge to rule and continued.

“When we got into the bedroom Lewis shoved me down on the bed. He stood over me and told me to unbuckle his belt and unbutton his jeans. I started to, but my hands were shaking so bad I wasn’t doing it fast enough. He told me not to move and left the bedroom and came back with a

beer and handed me a pill. He told me to take it with the beer and that it would help me ‘get into it’.”

“Did you take the pill, Isabella?”

“Yes, but it didn’t work right away. Lewis took his clothes off and then he took mine off. I tried to cover myself up, but he told me not to and tied one of my hands up to the headboard. Then he took a camera out of his dresser drawer, not a cell camera, one of the real cameras, and he told me to put my other hand between my legs and touch myself.” Bella took another deep breath. “He took some pictures of me doing that and then he put the camera on a stand and aimed it at the bed. He had this remote control that took the pictures.”

At the mention of a camera, Harry took out his cell phone and texted ADA Kruse, ‘*u knew he took pics?*’ ADA Kruse’s phone pinged, “I’m sorry Isabella, let me turn this off.” She quickly read the text, turned to Harry, and shook her head no. He rose and quietly left the room.

“Do you need a break, Isabella.”

“Yes, please, I need to use the restroom.”

Hess spoke, “Let’s take our lunch. That will be a one-hour break. Let’s rejoin at 2:00 p.m. sharp.”

ADA Kruse found Harry in a corner of a closed lounge in the hotel. He was in an intense conversation with someone, so she took a chair at a table near the window.

When he was finished with the call, he approached Kruse. “Maryanne, you didn’t know about any pictures or videos Lewis took?”

“No, *Harry*, that came out of the blue. And the defense wouldn’t be compelled to turn over that type of evidence in reciprocal discovery.”

“Who processed Lewis’ belongings after you took him into custody?” Harry asked.

“The BSO Crime Lab, but there wasn’t much. He was living in a roach-infested motel off Dixie when we found him.”

“Shit! It was in his apartment after the Reverend and Marta kicked Lewis out, but that would have been tied to another case file, not yours. We need to find the evidence they booked and get that camera, Maryanne.”

“Okay, let me make some phone calls.”

“You do that, find the camera and call this guy at BSO to get it signed out of evidence. He’ll know what to do with it.”

“What are you talking about, Harold? I know how to process evidence and who should look at it.”

“Trust me, Maryanne. You know that bloodhound sense your department was always so quick to tell folks about when I saved your department’s ass? This bloodhound smells something and if I’m right it needs to be very tightly contained with only a few people I can trust. Can I trust you, Maryanne?”

Kruse looked like Harry’s question hurt her feelings. “Of course, you can trust me, Harry. I’m trying my best to help Isabella through this. We must put these assholes away. That’s all I’m trying to do and if you can help me do that, we’re on the same side.”

“Good, Kruse, because if my instinct pans out on this one, you’re going to be smelling like roses and look like you’re made of gold. I’m going to find Bella and Anisa. I’ll see you in an hour.”

## CHAPTER 21

An hour later everyone reconvened in the meeting room for a continuation of Bella's witness prep.

"Okay, Isabella, we're going to continue. After any kind of break, the Judge will remind you that you are still under oath, and then we would proceed."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Before lunch you testified that Lewis took pictures of you. Did he always take pictures when you were with him?"

"Ms. Kruse, I didn't mean to say that about pictures."

"What do you mean, Isabella. Did Mr. Bennis take pictures of you or not?"

"He did," Bella said softly.

"Ms. Powell, you must speak up," Hess admonished again.

"Again, Isabella, did Mr. Bennis take pictures of you or not?"

Bella sighed, "Yes, he took pictures, but" Bella looked down as a tear dropped on her jeans and she did not continue.

"But what Isabella?" ADA Kruse asked. It was then she noticed Isabella was quietly crying. Abruptly she announced, "Okay, I think that's enough for today. Let's



get back together tomorrow around 10 a.m. Thank you, guys.”

Confused, Hess and Menendez gathered their notes. Kruse turned to get Anisa’s attention and motioned for her to come forward to support Bella and then crossed the room and approached Harry. “Something’s wrong. That girl has been rock solid all along and now she’s upset about pictures.”

His cell phone pinged. “Our guy has the camera. I’m going to head over and meet him. You stay here with Bella and let Anisa spend some time with her. If you two can get to the bottom on the issue with the pictures, let me know what’s going on.”

“Okay. I’ll catch up with you later.”

Kruse said goodbye to Hess and Menendez and turned back to observe Bella and Anisa. After a few minutes, she grabbed a bottle of water on the way past her table. “Isabella,” she said softly, “can we talk?”

Isabella sniffed and wiped her eyes. Anisa spoke first. “Isabella, we’ve done a lot of work these last few months to teach you coping skills and ways to reduce anxiety, but that doesn’t mean you can’t feel what you’re feeling and express how you feel. This is a very difficult thing to go through and you are doing so well. Let’s get out of here and take a nice walk. We’ll get something to eat if you’re hungry and I’ll take you home.”

Bella stared at the 12 empty chairs. “He only took pictures when we were at his apartment, he didn’t have a camera when we were at my apartment. And when we were at his apartment, he didn’t give me any pills. He said he wanted me runty.”

“Runty?” Kruse asked softly.

“Yeah. Like fighting him. He said it made it better. He tied me up a lot and he’d put this thing in my mouth and tie it around my head so no one could hear me scream.”

Sobbing she continued, “It hurt so bad when he put it inside me, like he was ripping me. He did some drugs. The pill he gave me started to work and I couldn’t fight him anymore, so he just did what he wanted. After he finished, he clicked the remote and said, ‘Man, that one’s gonna get 5 stars.’”

Kruse’s watch vibrated with a text from Harry, “*not pics, video, dark web.*”

“Please, Ms. Kruse, I don’t want to say anything about the camera.”

“Why, Isabella? We were going to show the video of him taking you into the bedroom. Why is this different?”

“The video Kayla took didn’t show him doing anything to me. It’s like people can talk trash about you, say one thing or another about you, maybe it’s true or not.

“But you show pictures though, that’s real, right in your face and the pictures go all over the internet. I don’t want anyone to know. This morning it was like I was replaying it all in mind and it just came out. I didn’t know what I was saying.

“I don’t want people looking at me and whispering about me, saying I liked what Lewis did to me, or that I wanted it. I don’t want Kayla or Tristen to ever see what happened. Everybody’s already paying attention to me so I can’t say anything about the pictures. I just couldn’t handle it.”

With that, Bella got up and walked out of the room. Before she followed Anisa said, “Shame is a powerful thing, Ms. Kruse.”

Kruse texted Harry, “where r u done here, need to talk.”

Twenty minutes later, ADA Kruse approached two men in Delevoe Memorial Park. Harry was sitting on a bench with Tom O’Brian, a lead analyst and investigator from the ICAC (Internet Crimes Against Children) Task Force, and Harry’s old partner.

“It’s nice to see you, Tom.” Kruse said as she shook his hand and sat down next to him. “Where did you land after that bust went bad for you and Harry?”

“Nice to see you too, Maryanne.” Harry glanced at them, wondering when they got to know each other on a first-name basis.

“While I was on administrative leave for the shooting, I decided to go back to freshen up my technical skills. I met a guy who was working on a task force that sounded interesting. The more I learned about it, the more I liked the idea, so I went to work for them instead of going back to the BSO. I’m assigned to Broward County, but I work for the State.”

“Tom isn’t associated with this case, so I wanted him to be the person who checked Lewis’ camera out of evidence. I had already talked to Kozinski in the crime lab so he would be the one to analyze it discreetly. Tom’s the tech nerd so I’ll let him explain what Kozy did.”

“I don’t need the nuts and bolts of what the lab did right now, Tom. Just give me a synopsis of what you found.” Maryanne said.

Tom consulted his notes on his phone and began to explain. “It’s not pretty. There are dozens of videos of Isabella Powell on a website on the dark web. The website is like an ala carte menu for pervs. Ms. Powell’s videos are tagged with keywords that get them listed under different sections. I briefly viewed one in each section. The one where he takes her virginity is sickening, but it’s tame compared to the others. After seeing what he did to that girl in just a matter of weeks and given she was a virgin, I would expect her to be broken.”

“How do you know these videos on the web came from Bennis?”

“You said you wanted the synopsis. I can get into the geek detail, but it’ll put you to sleep. Believe me, it’s solid this material can be sourced to Lewis.”

“Okay, go on.”

“These sites mainly deal in bitcoin for payment so it would take more work to figure out how much money’s being made, but it’s still possible to track IP addresses back to the devices that logged in. From a quick look at that information the videos of Ms. Powell are making someone a lot of money.”

“I suspect the site is run by the same sleaze-bags we’ve been watching and Covid’s driven them indoors, off the streets. Lewis had what, in his mind, was the best of both worlds; he could do whatever he wanted to Ms. Powell, and he got paid for it; likely in drugs.”

“That’s what you believe. What can I prove in court?”

“Point taken, and honestly Maryanne we’re a long way from being able to prove anything in court, but we have enough to make Lewis’ life even more difficult. It’s more leverage you can use.” Tom concluded.

“Okay, so why all the cloak and dagger shit?” Kruse asked, “I’m sweating my ass off out here.”

“Sorry, Maryanne, but Tom here is even more paranoid than I am. What we need to talk about has to stay between the four of us.”

“Four?”

“Yeah, don’t forget about Kozy. I trust him and Tom with my life. You, Maryanne, are the wildcard.” Harry said.

“Look, I don’t know what you want me to do. Like, prick our fingers and rub our blood together? I told you that you can trust me and if that’s not enough, I’ll leave you boys to your spy games and go find some air conditioning.” She got up to leave and Harry got a nod from Tom.

“Let’s walk, and Tom will explain,” Harry said.

“After Kozy got what we needed off Lewis’ camera I checked it back into evidence. It was in and out so quickly that if someone gets wind of me checking it out it’ll look like we just wanted to check the make and model or something. It won’t track back to your case or raise any red flags or suspicions, and that’s important.”

“Why? I’m going to bring it into evidence.”

“No, Maryanne, you’re not,” Tom responded.

“I’m not?”

“No, you’re going to keep it very quiet, so quiet it doesn’t come up in discovery,” Harry said.

“You know I can’t do that, Harry. If I can use this to turn Lewis, he needs to know I have it.”

“Forget Lewis, Maryanne. I don’t mean that literally of course, just proceed with your case using Isabella as a witness but don’t mention the camera. Keep it out of the record.”

“Isabella’s very upset she said anything about the camera. It slipped out. As strong as Isabella is, she is still a scared young woman very ashamed of what Lewis did to her. She thinks he just took pictures. When we tell her it’s a video and it’s all over the web, I don’t know what that will do to her.”

“Good, there’s the reason you need to just keep this to yourself.”

“But Menendez and Hess were in on trial prep, and they heard her mention the camera.”

“So, he took some pictures, big deal. That’s all they heard. You pulled the plug and we all left. You and Anisa were the only ones who heard what Bella told you. Anisa is Bella’s therapist and is covered by client privileges.”

Tom picked up the explanation, “Kozy dropped some credentials onto a thumb drive that gets me into the code behind the website. As we speak, I’m running a hack I wrote and it’s pulling all the IP addresses on customers

who logged in, with dates and times. I have another hack that I'll run from a friend who has access to the Tier 1 data centers which will correlate the IP addresses with user accounts."

"Geez, O'Brian, you're almost speaking English."

"Maryanne, what Tom's saying is we'll have the names of every person and location of every device who logged into that website and watched any video, not just Bella's."

"Not only that, with any luck we'll have the location of the site owners, administrators, and content providers." Tom added.

"Holy shit!"

"Yep, and Maryanne, this bloodhound thinks some of those names are powerful, influential folks who would do anything to keep this information private."

"I get that, so if I can't use it in court, and if anyone knows we have it we could end up out beyond the blue water line at the bottom of the Atlantic, what good does it do me?"

"Think big, Maryanne. Think leverage. How many times have you wished, in your lowly life as an ADA, that some judge or politician would just do the right thing, rather than what made them more money or gave them more power?"

"You're talking about blackmailing or extorting these people. Have you lost your mind?"

Tom spoke up. "No Maryanne, we aren't blackmailing anyone. We don't approach or threaten anyone. All that's going to happen is the suspects we can tie to the website will get prosecuted and the evidence used to convict them will reverberate through their higher-profile clientele. It won't take a rocket scientist for them to get the message that there is a list of names out there, stored in multiple places, which could go viral, just like the videos. Whether a person does the right thing at the right time is completely

up to them. There may be a few that don't, but what happens to them will simply serve as an incentive to get with the program and set an example for the others. Que será será, as they say."

"I'll be damned." Maryanne said.

"I think she's seeing the potential, Harry."

"Hmm, yeah I think so too."

"Well, I thought this day was going to end on a shitty note, but you've turned it into a winner. Come on, I'll buy you guys a beer and some ribs." Maryanne said as they crossed 6<sup>th</sup> Street toward BZB BBQ.

After the best baby backs to be found in Fort Lauderdale, Harry licked his fingers clean and asked, "So what's the plan, Maryanne?"

"I want to touch base with Anisa and see what she thinks. If she feels Isabella can continue, we'll do another day of prep, maybe two. If not, we'll give her a couple of days to reset and try again."

At 10 a.m. the following morning, everyone assembled in the meeting room to continue prep. After getting Bella settled back in the witness chair, Kruse continued her questioning.

"Isabella, I've only got a couple of more questions for you. Yesterday you told the court that the first time the defendant raped you was in his apartment. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Did he ever rape you anywhere else?"

"Yes, ma'am. In my mother's bedroom."

"Isabella, how many times did he rape you?"

"I don't know, I wasn't counting. But he did it in his apartment for a few hours every day and he came back to our apartment every night. He made Kayla feed him, then he'd have a few beers. When he wanted me, he'd say, 'it's time to say goodnight' and we'd go into my mom's room."

“He was always high, and when we were in my house he gave me some oxy and I didn’t care what he did.”

Maryanne paused and said sincerely, “Isabella, I am so sorry this happened to you. You are a beautiful young woman and I pray that this experience doesn’t become the defining moment of your life.”

“OBJECTION!” Menendez shouted as he rose from his chair.

“Jesus H. Christ Menendez, shut up.” Kruse said, turned and sat down at her table. “Defense rests.”

The remainder of the day was spent with Menendez cross-examining Isabella. Jose was a talented ADA and a nice guy unless he was wearing his defense attorney hat during witness prep; then he could be a real prick. Nothing he did, nothing he said, threw Bella off her message. As they concluded for the day, Maryanne summed things up.

“Okay. Jose, Simon, what do you guys think? Do we need any more prep with Isabella?”

“I don’t think so,” Jose answered.

“She’s solid Maryanne and you want her to be fresh and spontaneous, not over prepared, so I say we’re finished.” Menendez added.

“Isabella, do you feel you’re ready if we have to be in court facing Lewis?”

“Yes, Ms. Kruse. I hope we are in court. I want everyone to be there and see him when I say what I have to say, and they won’t if we’re doing it over Zoom.”

“Okay, then. I’ll keep you informed on the calendar and any additional issues. Until then, please try to enjoy the rest of your summer, Isabella.”

“Thanks, Ms. Kruse. I start senior year on the 18<sup>th</sup>. Can I ask you a question?”

“Of course, Isabella. What is it?”

“When will I find out about the other trial? Do you think I’ll be able to finish my senior year with my class?”



Maryanne's heart sank. Since she became a lawyer, Maryanne has dealt with thousands of witnesses, but Isabella touched something inside her no other witness had. She wished she could turn back time and change so many things in this young girl's life, but she couldn't. She kept a smile on her face and responded, "I'll always be honest with you Isabella. I don't know. The Federal courts are kind of jammed up because of Covid so their calendars are always changing. Ms. Stevens will be the one who can answer those questions."

## CHAPTER 22

After a family meeting to discuss their options, Isabella, Makayla, and Tristen enrolled in the virtual school program for the 2021–2022 year. They found studying together and participating virtually worked well for them; they had always been a self-contained, supportive unit and that extended to their schoolwork.

Bella made Dean’s list in her junior year despite all the turmoil in her life. Studying and schoolwork provided her with an escape. Kayla and Tristen were average students who did the minimum to get passing grades, but Marta and Bella found ways to make their learning interesting. Kayla applied the principles being taught in her science class to her cooking, and Tristen already understood geometry from playing soccer, although he was years away from it being part of his curriculum.

On Friday, September 3<sup>rd</sup>, Makayla turned 14 years old. Like the old days, the family made it a weekend of celebrations. Macedonia Baptist had a party on Saturday afternoon, for which Kayla insisted she do the baking. Preparing food and serving people brought her joy and made her birthday weekend even more special.

On Sunday, Kayla made Hoppin’ John, cornbread, and pot likker soup for an extra measure of good luck in the

remainder of the year. Harry came over early and helped with setting up tables and chairs in the yard, assisted by Tank, who had grown into a happy, 60-pound ball of hyperactivity. Tom O'Brian and Maryanne Kruse arrived together, which Harry found interesting. Marta's neighbors rounded out the guest list and Bella entertained with stupid pet tricks she had taught Tank and the McFadden's pony.

As it neared dusk and the neighbors went home, Marta, Harry, Tom, and Maryanne settled in around the firepit.

"Marta, how has Isabella been doing?" Maryanne asked.

"She's an amazing young woman. If you didn't know what's facing her and what she went through, you'd never know anything out of the ordinary was going on in her life." Marta replied.

"It could be the therapy. Anisa Powers and her group come highly recommended by our family liaison officers." Tom added, "I just met Isabella, but I'm familiar with her file, and I would never suspect this was a girl who had spent months coping with the stress of taking care of her siblings and being sexually abused."

"I think we got to the kids just in time. If Lewis had been at it longer, I'm sure it would have been more difficult for Bella. She still sees Anisa faithfully every week. Kayla and Tristen only go once a month now, with me, for a family session. While I have all of you here, could I ask a few questions?"

"I can't go into details of the Bennis case, so if that's what you're asking about, I'll excuse myself." Maryanne answered.

"No, I need to understand what's going to happen with the federal case against Bella. Trisha is her lawyer and now that Bella is 18, I don't get involved in their conversations. I know if Bella needs to talk, she'll come to me, but I'm concerned with how this will impact Tristen and Makayla."

“Ask away, Marta. What do you want to know?” Harry offered.

“Well, first I want to know if there’s going to be someone banging on my door at 4 a.m. to arrest her. That’s my biggest fear. That would undo all the progress the kids have made emotionally and psychologically.”

“These are white-collar crimes and given Bella’s age my bet is once an arrest warrant is issued the prosecutor will call Trisha and arrange for Bella to turn herself in.” Harry responded hopefully.

“Well, that’s a relief. It’s kept me up at night wondering about the mechanics of just that part of things.”

“Marta, you know I’m only a phone call away. If anything’s keeping you up at night, and I can be helpful in putting your mind at ease, please call me.”

“Thank you, Harry. I’ve been tempted to text you.”

Harry caught the smile that passed between Tom and Maryanne. Something was definitely going on with those two.

His eyes met Marta’s and he wondered, not for the first time, if this woman could accept him with all his faults and failings. “Is there anything else you’re wondering or worried about, Marta?” Harry asked.

“Yes, specifically, step by step, once she’s arrested, what will happen?”

Harry finished off the Red Stripe he was nursing and continued, “Well, she’ll be told what the charges are, and she’ll be read her rights. If they allow her to turn herself in, it might be at the federal prosecutor’s office downtown, but she’ll be booked and held at the federal detention facility on 4<sup>th</sup> Street in Miami.

“During booking she’ll be fingerprinted, and mug shots will be taken. Her personal property will be inventoried, so it’s a good idea for there to be as little as possible. Whatever they take will be shipped to you.

“She’ll be issued prison clothing and some personal care supplies. They will assign her to a housing unit and then she’ll be taken for a mental health and medical screening. The medical screening can be a trigger for someone who has been sexually abused because it includes a cavity screening. She’ll be held in Miami until Trisha can get a hearing to argue for bail.”

Maryanne added, “When the time comes, Anisa and Trisha will walk through all of this with Isabella, so she knows what to expect.”

Looking a bit overwhelmed Marta asked, “Do we know when that time will be?”

“I can pretty much guarantee that they won’t move to arrest Isabella until after she has testified against Bennis, so not before the end of September. How long after that is anyone’s guess. I tried to get some sense of their plans from a colleague over there, but his lips were sealed.” Maryanne said.

“How long will it take for her to get the bail hearing?”

Maryanne answered, “Marta, it could be a few days. If they arrest Isabella on a Friday, the first opportunity for Trisha to get a bail hearing will be on the following Monday.”

Harry noticed tears welling in Marta’s eyes and reached for her hand. He leaned forward in his chair and asked, “Is there anything else, Marta?”

Squeezing Harry’s hand she asked, “What will it be like in there for her? Will she be alone? Will she be safe?”

Harry caught Tom’s eye before continuing, “While she’s waiting for bail, she’ll be kept with other prisoners who are also waiting for a hearing.

“Bella’s an adult so she’ll be in adult population, and she’ll likely be the youngest and the only one who has never been arrested or in jail. I can guarantee they’ll be a woman who wants to take Bella under her wing and

protect her, and Bella's radar for a predator will go off. In that situation, the best advice you could give her is to keep to herself, don't speak to anyone about her case, don't divulge any personal information, don't look scared even though she'll be terrified, and treat everyone respectfully."

Harry saw a tear fall, only to be quickly wiped away, just as Bella headed their way.

"Hey, Kayla's got some espresso and lattes ready to serve. Anyone interested?" Bella asked.

"Honey, that sounds perfect, let me help you." Marta offered, recovering her composure. Harry watched as Marta walked toward the house with her arm around Bella. The pony whinnied and Tank took off at a hundred miles an hour, chasing the pony up and down the fence line.

Tom was the first to speak. "I don't know about you two, but I think it would be unforgivable if that girl spent one night in jail if there was something that could prevent it."

Harry thoughtfully replied, "I agree my friend. It's time to start working that list of perverts you compiled. Let's see if a fed or two jumps off the page."

"I'm staying out of this," Marybelle said, "I'll go give the girls a hand."

The party broke up about ten with Harry being the last to leave. Marta walked him to his truck, and they stood, looking up at the sky. She turned to him, "Harry, I can't bear to think that beautiful girl won't be able to look up and see the stars. It breaks my heart."

Harry reached out to Marta, and she closed the distance between them. She inhaled his smell of sandalwood and sweat and felt the tension in her body release when he wrapped his strong arms around her. As she looked up, their lips met. It was just a light touch, a whisper of a kiss. Harry cupped her cheek, "You call me if you can't sleep, okay? Doesn't matter what time."

## CHAPTER 23

The first front of the season arrived on September 27<sup>th</sup>. It wasn't quite sweater weather but the break in humidity hinted that the insufferable days of summer were waning.

Despite an offer from ADA Kruse, and the fact that less than 10% of cases nationally actually go to trial, Lewis Bennis declined a plea bargain. Most of the logistics were previously agreed upon, but the customary opportunity offered by the judge to resolve the case through a plea bargain was to be addressed before a jury was selected.

"Mr. Gorski, I understand your client was recently offered a reduced sentence in exchange for a guilty plea." Judge Lynn Buck had been on the bench for nearly 18 years with the last five presiding over criminal cases. She had a reputation for running an efficient court room. You often heard attorneys describe her attitude as, "Buck doesn't give a fuck." She wasn't concerned with being politically correct, didn't care whether you were trying your first case or your fiftieth, and had no patience for any outburst from the cheap seats. She afforded her juries all the comforts available to them and made sure everyone understood justice prevails in her court room. Counsel always knew where they stood with Judge Buck.

"Yes, Judge, my client declined the offer."

“Well, you can’t fix stupid, Mr. Gorski, but I’m going to suggest you take the next hour to convince your client he’ll be better off taking the deal than putting his fate in the hands of a jury.”

“Yes, ma’am. I tried to make that clear.”

“Try again. I’ll be welcoming members of the jury in one hour.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Oh and Mr. Gorski, I’m not a ma’am. It’s ‘Judge’ or ‘Your Honor’.”

“Yes ma’am, er, Judge.”

Judge Buck rolled her eyes and sighed. “Be back at 10 a.m. sharp and be ready to accept the plea or voir dire the jury, Mr. Gorski.”

In chambers the Judge reached for her coffee and smiled at her bailiff, “Kruse is going to eat them alive. Ten bucks?”

ADA Kruse remained at her table going over her notes while Gorski and Lewis moved to a holding area where Gorski now sat trying to convince him to take the deal.

Lewis was in a cheap suit that didn’t fit him. He had lost weight, had been through detox in a jail cell and looked like the ex-junkie, sexual predator that he was. “I’m not takin’ no deal. You’re my lawyer and you need to just tell them that.”

“Lewis, I’m telling you. All that jury needs to see and hear is Isabella Powell. Her testimony is going to fry your ass.”

“How’d I end up with you? They can’t fry my ass for these charges.”

“It’s a figure of speech, Lewis. And you ended up with me because you couldn’t afford a lawyer. I get paid whether you take the deal or not, but my advice is you should take it.”



“Fuck off, Gorski. I’m not taking the deal and I want you to put me on the stand. I told you that before. I got a story to tell, and the jury of my peers needs to hear it.”

“Lewis, I’ve seen the evidence. I’ve interviewed their witnesses, and you and I have spent hours together. I am not putting you on the stand. Whatever you would say up there would either be a lie or seal your fate.”

“You’re a worthless piece of shit, Gorski. I’m not takin’ a deal. Let’s get this party started.”

Gorski sighed, picked up his files, and left the room.

At precisely 10 a.m. all parties were present, and court was gaveled into session. Voir dire took up the remainder of the day, but by 5 p.m. a jury was seated.

Court resumed at 9 a.m. the following morning with opening statements from the prosecution and defense. Kruse painted a damning, and accurate, picture of the evidence she would present and the witness testimony that the jury would hear.

Gorski made a valiant effort to explain why the jury should not convict his client who was innocent of the charges brought against him. When he finished, it didn’t appear anyone one was buying it.

The morning of September 28<sup>th</sup> Harry escorted Marta and Isabella to the courthouse.

Kruse had explained that she wanted to get her expert witness testimony on the record before she called Isabella. That included the detectives who arrested Lewis, the forensic team who processed the motel room where he had been holed up, and the gynecologist who had examined Isabella.

At noon, the court broke for lunch and Isabella, Marta and Harry headed for the Fresh Kitchen across the street from the courthouse.

At 1:30 p.m. court reconvened and at 1:45 the door to the courtroom opened and a bailiff called Isabella's name.

Marta hugged Bella and whispered, "You got this, girl. Your mom's sitting right there on your shoulder. Just tell your story."

Harry was next to put his arm around her shoulder and kissed the top of her head, "Go get 'em tiger." Bella laughed and wrapped her arms around his waist.

Marta and Harry waited until Bella was led into the courtroom, then followed and took their seats in the gallery. Isabella walked to the witness stand, turned to face the room, stopping to take a long look at Lewis, who did not meet her gaze. She held her hand high and swore to tell the truth. Her long-awaited testimony against Lewis Bennis began.

ADA Kruse: "Please state your name for the record."

Witness: "Isabella Singletary-Powell."

ADA Kruse: "Where were you living on June 16, 2020."

Witness: "2964 NW 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue in Fort Lauderdale."

ADA Kruse: "Did you live in a house or an apartment?"

Witness: "An apartment, it was number 307."

ADA Kruse: "How long did you live in apartment 307?"

Witness: "About a year."

ADA Kruse: "Where did you live before that?"

Witness: "In a different apartment on the same floor, apartment 304."

ADA Kruse: "And how long did you live at apartment 304?"

Witness: "My mom and dad moved there when I was about six years old."

ADA Kruse: "Who lived with you in apartment 304?"

Witness: "My mom and dad and my sister."

ADA Kruse: "How old was your sister?"

Witness: "She's four years younger than me."

ADA Kruse: "And how old are you, Ms. Powell?"

Witness: "I turned 18 on June 18<sup>th</sup>."

ADA Kruse: "That's an easy date to remember. Who lived with you in apartment 307?"

Witness: "My mom, my sister and my brother until my mom died and then it was just me, my sister and my brother."

ADA Kruse: "Did your father live with you in apartment 307?"

Witness: "No. He left us when we were living in the other apartment."

ADA Kruse: "Do you know where your father is at this time?"

Witness: "No ma'am, we never heard from him again when he left."

ADA Kruse: "Okay. You mentioned your brother lived with you in apartment 307. How old is your brother?"

Witness: "My brother is seven years younger than me."

ADA Kruse: "When did your mother die?"

Witness: "April 24, 2020."

ADA Kruse: "How did your mother die?"

Witness: "From Covid."

ADA Kruse: "Did you or your siblings have Covid?"

Witness: "We never got sick. My mom isolated at work when they found out about Covid, so she didn't bring it home."

ADA Kruse: "Where did your mother work?"

Witness: "At Oakbriar Care in Fort Lauderdale."

ADA Kruse: "What did she do at Oakbriar Care?"

Witness: "She was a housekeeper."

ADA Kruse: "How long did she work at Oakbriar Care?"

Witness: "I think for ten years."

ADA Kruse: "Did your mother work anywhere else?"

Witness: "She worked as a waitress at Albert's Diner in Fort Lauderdale."

ADA Kruse: “How long did your mother work at Albert’s Diner?”

Witness: “For ten years, I think.”

ADA Kruse: “Okay, so to sum up, there was no father in your home, your mother worked two jobs all of your life, and you have two siblings that are four and seven years younger than you. Is that correct?”

Witness: “Yes, ma’am, that’s pretty much it.”

ADA Kruse: “When your mother was working who took care of you and your brother and sister.”

Witness: “We went to Head Start or school and when we weren’t in school or Head Start, we went to the Macedonia Baptist Church until my mom picked us up.”

ADA Kruse: “Where is the Macedonia Baptist Church?”

Witness: “In Fort Lauderdale.”

ADA Kruse: “Why did you go there?”

Witness: “Because it was our church and because they took care of kids who had parents that worked nights and weekends. They had a food kitchen too.”

ADA Kruse: “How long did you go to Macedonia Baptist Church?”

Witness: “Since my dad left us. We still go there, not for day care, but we still worship there and my sister volunteers with the food kitchen.”

Lewis leaned over to Gorski, “Man, what’s this got to do with anything. Shouldn’t you be objectin’?”

“Shut up Lewis.”

ADA Kruse: “You told the court that your mother died from Covid but that you and your siblings were never sick. Was there contact tracing done to determine how your mother was infected?”

Witness: “I don’t know if they did that. My mom got it at work.”

ADA Kruse: “How do you know that?”

Witness: “Because she wasn’t sick before the residents started getting sick and she didn’t leave the nursing home for the whole month of March until they took her to the hospital in April, and she died.”

ADA Kruse: “Tell me what happened when your mother died.”

For the first time during her testimony, Isabella paused. She took a sip of water, cleared her throat, looked at the jury and answered.

Witness: “Well, during March and April when my mom was isolating at work, we would facetime a couple of times a day. Everything got locked down, but I knew how to get us logged into school and we always cooked together with my sister. Mom told me how to pay bills on the bank website and what her passwords were so I could order stuff we needed on Amazon and Walmart. When she died, I just kept doing that.”

ADA Kruse: “How did you find out she died?”

Witness: “She facetimed us the night before from the emergency room. There was a nurse that helped her do that. She looked really bad and was having a lot of trouble breathing. The next morning before we logged into school someone from the hospital called me and told me she died.”

ADA Kruse: “What happened then?”

Lewis nudged Gorski again, “Man, she’s lookin’ like some kind of saint, you need to object.”

“Lewis, I told you to shut up. There’s nothing to object to.”

Witness: “I saw my mom through the window at the nursing home the day before she went into the hospital. I went over to pick up the car and we talked through the window over the phone. She told me to do whatever I had to do to take care of Makayla and Tristen. That’s what I did.”

ADA Kruse: "Makayla and Tristen are your brother and sister?"

Witness: "Yes ma'am."

ADA Kruse: "And remind the court, how old were you, Makayla and Tristen when your mother died?"

Witness: "I was 16, Makayla was 12 and Tristen was 9."

ADA Kruse: "How did you take care of Makayla and Tristen?"

Witness: "We logged into school and did our work every day. School didn't end until June. I kept paying the bills and I went to the store once a week for things I couldn't get online."

ADA Kruse: "How did you get money to pay the bills?"

Witness: "There was money in the bank and Mom qualified for money from the government."

ADA Kruse: "What kind of money did your mom get from the government?"

Witness: "Some money came in automatically from the government that I found out later was called the CARES Act. Then we were watching TV one night and they were talking about the unemployment money and how there was going to be an extra \$300 added. The diner where mom worked had closed before Covid even got bad, so I went online to see if she would've gotten unemployment. I answered all the questions and didn't have any problems. There was money deposited into the bank the next month."

ADA Kruse: "Did you do anything else to get money?"

Witness: "Yes, when I was on the computer signing up for the unemployment there was a pop-up that asked questions that I answered that took me to a site to sign up for rental assistance. I answered those questions and it told me our apartment qualified. I didn't see any money come in from that so maybe the landlord got it, but I kept paying the rent because I wasn't sure what to do."

ADA Kruse: "Did you apply for any other benefits?"

Witness: "I googled to find out if there were other programs and I found SNAP, and something called the child tax credit. I applied for SNAP, but the tax thing said it would come from the IRS."

ADA Kruse: "Did you file an income tax return in 2021 for the money your mother earned in 2020?"

Witness: "No ma'am. I didn't do that."

ADA Kruse: "Did you ever do anything else to earn money?"

Isabella looked confused for a moment before she answered, "No ma'am."

ADA Kruse: "Do you know the defendant, Lewis Bennis?"

Witness: "Yes ma'am."

ADA Kruse: "Where do you know the defendant from?"

Witness: "He lived in the same apartment complex as we did."

ADA Kruse: "Were you friends with the defendant?"

Witness: "No."

ADA Kruse: "How do you know the defendant?"

Witness: "The first time I saw him was hanging around with my little brother and the kids that played soccer, then he followed my little sister back from the trash dumpster one day."

ADA Kruse: "Were those kids that played soccer the same age as your brother?"

Witness: "Mostly, some were older, but not as old as Lewis."

ADA Kruse: "You said the defendant lived in the same apartment complex. Did he live in your building?"

Witness: "No, he lived in the building across the parking lot, on the second floor."

ADA Kruse: "Could you see his apartment from your apartment?"

Witness: “Yes ma’am. We were one floor up, but his apartment was directly across the parking lot from ours.”

ADA Kruse: “You said the first time you saw him he was watching kids play soccer, and then he followed your sister. When was the next time you saw the defendant?”

Witness: “Well, I saw him a few times after that, but I never talked to him, and he never talked to me until the day before my birthday.”

ADA Kruse: “Tell us what happened next.”

During Bella’s testimony, Menendez had been watching the jury. There were 7 women and 5 men, 3 black and 9 white. When Bella testified about caring for her brother and sister, a couple of jurors nodded their heads and perhaps remembered hearing about the story. During her testimony about applying for benefits, from their expressions and body language it didn’t appear they disapproved of her actions. Kruse was successful in presenting Bella as a young woman fulfilling the last wishes of her dying mother. If Gorski wanted to try to discredit her on cross, good luck.

For the rest of the afternoon, Bella answered each question from ADA Kruse describing her first physical encounter with Lewis when he approached her on the evening of June 17<sup>th</sup> to July 9<sup>th</sup>, the day Reverend McGuire and Marta kicked Lewis out of his apartment.

By the time Kruse had finished with Bella’s testimony, Menendez had noted which jurors had dabbed tears from their eyes, who had glanced at Lewis during difficult descriptions of what Lewis did to Bella, and one older black man that never took his eyes off Lewis after Kayla’s video was introduced as evidence and played for the jury. He had one of those faces that you could read like a book. Hopefully, he was their jury foreman.

“Prosecution rests, Your Honor.” Kruse closed her notebook and sat down.



“Defense counsel, you may cross-examine the witness.” Judge Buck said.

When Gorski said, “Defense has no questions for this witness, Your Honor.” Lewis jumped to his feet. Judge Buck showed no surprise.

“Judge I want to fire him. He doesn’t know what he’s doin’. That girl and I were friends, she made money hustling and selling dime bags for me. I might be guilty of that but we’re just trying to make a living. I never did nothin’ to her she didn’t ask for.”

Isabella looked stunned as the Judge pounded her gavel.

“Bailiff, please escort the jury out of the courtroom. Mr. Bennis, sit down. You speak to the court through your attorney, but since you’ve just fired him, let me ask you a few questions.”

“Sure Judge. Ask away.”

Judge Buck waited until the jury was out of the room. Pulling herself up to her full height, she said, “Mr. Bennis, do I understand that you wish to terminate the services of Mr. Gorski as your defense counsel?”

“Yeah, I want to fire him. He doesn’t know ...” Judge Buck cut him off.

“Mr. Bennis, you need to listen carefully to my questions and answer only the question, don’t go explaining anything.”

“Whatever you say Judge.”

“You’re quite right, Mr. Bennis, what I say goes. Now, Mr. Gorski, do you have any objection to being removed as Defense Counsel?”

“I have no objection to being removed as counsel, Your Honor.”

“Are you willing to advise the defendant in an unofficial capacity should he seek clarification during the proceedings?”

“Yes, Your Honor.”

“Please be seated in the gallery behind the defendant.”

“Mr. Bennis do you wish the court to appoint another public defender to represent you or will you be obtaining counsel?”

“I don’t want no public defender, they don’t know ...” Judge Buck cut him off again.

“Just answer my question Mr. Bennis. Do you wish to have a public defender appointed or will you be securing independent counsel?”

“You mean am I going to pay for a lawyer?”

“Yes, Mr. Bennis, that’s exactly what I mean. Do you want a freebie or are you going to be paying the tab?”

“I ain’t got money for no lawyer. I’m going to be my own lawyer. I can’t do a worse job than this piece of ...” The judge pounded her gavel.

“Do you speak English, Mr. Bennis?”

Menendez leaned over to Kruse, “Uh oh, here comes Buck doesn’t give a fuck.”

“What? Yeah, I speak English.”

“Good, then what don’t you understand about just answering my questions.”

“Nothin’, I got it.”

“Okay, then. This court strongly encourages you to find an attorney to represent you. Do you believe you are capable of representing yourself in these proceedings, Mr. Bennis?”

“What part of my answer don’t *you* understand? Yeah, I’m going to represent myself and I wanna question Bella myself, with the jury here, now.”

Menendez mumbles under his breath, “Oh man, this is gonna hurt.”

Clearly finding pleasure in what was about to happen, Judge Buck said, “The witness is dismissed. Ms. Powell, thank you for your testimony today.”

Bella stepped down from the witness box and took a seat next to Marta in the back row.

Judge Buck continued, “This court finds the defendant in criminal direct contempt of court and orders the defendant be held in the Broward County jail for 90 days. Upon completion of those 90 days on the contempt charge, you will undergo a mandatory 90-day mental health evaluation in a lock-down facility to determine if you are sane enough to proceed with your own defense.”

“What the ...” Lewis started but was interrupted by Gorski, “Shut up Lewis.”

“Thank you, Mr. Gorski, that’s very good advice even though Mr. Bennis is no longer your client.”

“Let’s see, this case will be continued on,” the Judge paused as she checked her schedule, “oh my, the calendar is jammed, let’s see, we’ll reconvene on July 11, 2022. Until then the defendant is remanded to the custody of the Broward Sheriff. Court is adjourned.” With the crack of the gavel Judge Buck rose and exited the courtroom followed by the bailiff.

In her chambers, she turned to her bailiff and held out her hand, laughing, “That goes on the highlight reel. Come on, pay up. I knew Bennis couldn’t hold it together when Powell testified, but I didn’t see it going down the drain that way.”

## CHAPTER 24

Thanksgiving 2021 was lovely in South Florida. Tristen turned 11 the following Saturday and it was decided they would celebrate at the beach for a change. Marta rented a pavilion in Deerfield Beach and rooms at the Wyndham.

Harry took Tristen and his neighbor Tommy to the pier for some fishing while Kayla and Marta unpacked a feast for the guests who included Reverend McGuire, Trisha Stevens, Maryanne Kruse, Tom O'Brian, the McFaddens, the Sullivans, and the Pattersons.

As Tristen opened gifts, Marta and Harry looked on.

"I've never seen those three so happy."

"You're a big reason for that Marta. I can't imagine where they'd be if you hadn't taken them in."

"You know, there wasn't a moment's hesitation, Harry. I just knew it was the right thing to do, for all of us."

"Well, I can say for myself, I'm glad it happened, or I would never have met you."

"Yes, meeting you has been an unexpected bonus."

Harry took her hand. "Let's walk." The sun was setting as they walked along the waterline.

"Marta, I guess it's no secret that I'm very attracted to you."

"Are you, Harry?"

"Yes, I'm surprised you have to ask."

“Well, I’m not a very forward woman, so if you’re waiting for me to make the first move, please don’t.” She stopped and sat in the sand. Harry sat down facing her, with his back turned to the surf.

“Marta, I need to tell you something. You know I retired from BSO after being wounded, but there’s a little more to the story.”

Marta said nothing and waited for Harry to continue.

“Tom and I were serving a warrant early one morning. The whole operation had taken months to put together, but we finally had enough to get a judge to grant the warrant and were ready to go. We had backup with us because the suspect was known to be armed.

“Everything was going as planned, we made entry, roused the suspect and got him in cuffs and out the door. I started to clear a room in the back of the house, like an add-on. It was a small room, and it was full of junk. I had to go through the doorway kind of sideways just to get in.

“So, I got through the door and all I heard was a shot and I was on my back. Tom was behind me and fired once. The guy he hit fell. Tom hit him dead center in the forehead, which was a surprise because at the range Tom had trouble hitting the outside of a target. Anyway, they got me out of there and I was critical. I got hit at close range with a large caliber bullet meant to do maximum damage. I had a vest on, but I got hit below the vest at an angle that tore through my abdomen and pelvis.

“I was in the hospital for a few weeks then transferred to rehab. My marriage had been in the crapper for a couple of years by then, my job was hard on the relationship. My ex took that opportunity to hit the bricks. I wasn’t in any shape to fight her.”

A wave came crashing into Harry’s back and he jumped up and moved to sit beside Marta.

“I can’t pass judgement on someone else, but I don’t know how she could have left you at a time like that.” Marta said.

“Oh, if you knew her, you’d understand. Anyway, I got through the colostomy bags and the bowel resections, and I have limitations on what I can eat and how much.”

“Given the alternative, Harry, that doesn’t sound so bad.”

“No, that’s not the worst part, Marta.”

Harry watched some gulls dive-bombing for bait fish just a few yards offshore.

“Harry? Tell me, what’s the worst part?” Marta prodded, reaching for his hand.

“Over the years, I imagined what this moment might be like if I ever fell in love again.”

“Love, Harry?” Marta said softly.

“Yes, Marta. Love. I’ve fallen in love with you.”

“Harry, I’m patient, but this is stretching it. Look, just close your eyes, and say whatever it is you must tell me. Please.”

“Okay, here goes.” He closed his eyes, took a deep breath and said, “The fucker shot my penis almost clear off. I pee a hundred times a day and I’ll never be able to have an erection.”

Marta erupted with laughter, “Oh, Harry, I’m sorry. I don’t mean to laugh at you.”

His eyes opened wide, “Really, because that’s what that noise sounds like.”

“Oh, Harry, that must have really pissed you off. Now that wasn’t so hard, was it? I thought you were going to tell me you had a month to live or something. Jesus, you scared me almost to death.

“Wow, now you’re the queen of puns? That’s a side of your sense of humor I haven’t seen yet.”

“I’m sorry, that was unkind, and I can see how difficult it was for you. I guess it’s my turn. My story isn’t that difficult to share, but it may help you understand how I feel.”

Bait fish jumped as something chased them to shore. “In my senior year of high school, I met a guy who I ended up marrying. I know now I was just desperate to escape from home and saw that as my only option. We got married during my first year of community college. He was a few years older and had a stable job, but I worked part-time, just so I didn’t have to ask him for pocket money. Things were okay at first, but he got more and more controlling. There’s a saying that you marry your father, or something like that, and in my case, it turned out to be true. It wasn’t long before I felt trapped, and I started doing drugs to self-medicate. Around that time, he stopped hiding his infidelity. All my life the message I got from my parents was I wasn’t worth the effort, and my husband cheating on me just re-enforced that. I know now that I needed to believe I was worth it, but I didn’t understand that at the time.

“Obviously, we didn’t have any kids. After he died, I ran to Florida looking for a fresh start. I got clean and I thought I’d fall in love again and have a family, but I only met a few men who weren’t into drugs and those that weren’t seemed to see dollar-signs when they found out I had some money from my settlement.

“Anyway, I haven’t been intimate with a man since my husband died. At this time in my life, I feel whole and I’m happy. These kids have added something to my life I was missing, but I still want to experience having a man who I love and who loves me, who supports me as me, shares my life, holds my hand, lets me cry on his shoulder; all those mundane, simple things people in love share with each other. That is what I’ve hoped for.”

“So, me never being able to make love to you isn’t a deal breaker?”

“Harry, love doesn’t mean having a penis. All those things I just said, that’s how a woman, at least this woman, wants a man to express his love for her. Now if you grow a mullet and spend your time drinking Bud Light expecting me to clean up after you—that’s a deal breaker.”

They stood. Harry took her in his arms and kissed her deeply. Marta leaned against his chest. “I love you too, Harry.”

Harry tipped her chin up to look into her eyes and asked, “Will you marry me, Marta?”

“Oh Harry, yes. I would be honored to be your wife.”



## CHAPTER 25

Christmas 2021 was the first holiday Bella, Kayla, and Tristen didn't feel the loss of their mother as a weight. By sharing their feelings during family therapy, they realized many qualities they remembered about their mother manifested in each of them. Bella had her sense of responsibility, Kayla her sense of service, and Tristen her tenacity. The adults never shied away from mentioning Chandra and aimed to keep her memory alive for the children.

Kayla prepared their Good Luck meal on New Year's Day and Marta and Harry were married on the 5<sup>th</sup> of February. Tank preceded Marta down the aisle holding a bone decorated with edible orchids in his mouth. Bella was Marta's maid of honor, Kayla a bridesmaid and Tristen served as Harry's best man. Reverend McGuire officiated and the hall at Macedonia Baptist was filled with vaccinated, masked celebrants. Marta and Harry spent seven days in the Bahamas on their honeymoon.

Bella picked Marta and Harry up at the airport on Sunday, February 13<sup>th</sup>. As soon as Marta saw Bella she knew something was wrong. The smile was there, but the eyes held no joy. As they waited for their bags, Bella asked about their trip. Marta relayed all the details including swimming with pigs and sharks. Harry drove, and as they

were exiting the airport to get on 595, Marta turned to Bella in the back seat.

“So, what’s been going on here? Anything new?” Marta asked. “I know something’s happened. I can tell from the way you’re acting.”

“Everything’s been okay. Tristen’s glad to be back in real school. He knows all the guys from Tommy’s soccer team already, so he fit right in. The only thing Kayla seems to be talking about is getting her learner’s permit this fall. Harry, you’ve been elected as the one who’s going to teach her to drive.”

“Happy to serve,” Harry responded as he signaled to change lanes and merge into traffic.

“And what about you, Bella? What’s going on?” Marta pressed.

“I talked to Ms. Stevens on Friday. Anisa went with me” Bella began.

Harry looked in the rear view and reached for Marta’s hand.

“She heard from the prosecutor and they’re getting ready to file the charges against me. They told her I could turn myself in. She told me how everything would work after she took me to Miami. There are some things she’s going to try and get them to agree to, like me not spending time in jail because of Covid restrictions. She said I’ll probably have to post bail, so I told her I had saved some money.”

Marta gasped, “Bella, my god, you don’t worry about bail. You don’t worry about any of that, we will.”

“Did Trisha tell you when they wanted you to turn yourself in?” Harry asked as he looked in the rear view again.

Bella was staring out the window again. “Yeah, tomorrow.” Bella answered. “Sucks, doesn’t it? No matter

what happens the rest of my life, Valentine's Day will always be the day I got arrested and charged."

"Tomorrow! No! Why didn't you call us Bella!" Marta cried. Harry crossed lanes of traffic aiming for the next exit and the nearest parking lot.

"Because there's nothing you can do. I just found out Friday and I didn't want to ruin the last weekend of your honeymoon."

Marta was in tears, "I can't believe they did this. I'm going to call Trisha. They have to give us more time."

"Honey let's talk this through. Bella seems to be okay with what Trisha told her is going to happen. Are you okay?" Harry asked as he turned in his seat to face Bella.

"Yeah, I am. I talked it through with Anisa and I am. I want to get it over with. These last couple of months since I testified against Lewis felt normal. I just want to feel normal again, no matter what it takes."

"Do Kayla and Tristen know?" Marta asked.

"Yeah. Anisa was there when I told them on Friday. Really, Marta, it looks like I'll turn myself in and be home by that night. I'll have to wear an ankle bracelet and I won't be able to leave the house except to go to the doctor or to see Trisha and go to court, but that's just like being locked down for Covid. I can handle that."

They sat for a few moments until Bella broke the silence, "So, Harry, you gonna drive us home or do you want me to take the wheel?"

When they got home Kayla had a lunch spread ready that rivaled what they had in their 5-star hotel in the Bahamas. Tristen was home to welcome them back, but quickly headed across the street with a soccer ball. To Marta's surprise Maryanne and Tom were there along with Trisha.

"We wanted to hear all about your trip." Maryanne said.

“And I figured you may have some questions,” Trisha added.

They ate on the lanai enjoying a mild February day. The food was delicious as usual. As Kayla and Bella cleaned up the adults settled in around the firepit. Tank rested his head on Harry’s lap, content to be scratched around the ears.

“Okay. Let’s just get to it. Where, what time and how are they playing their hand?” Harry asked bluntly.

Trisha responded, “They want us at the detention center for processing at 7:30 a.m. I actually asked for that early time to give us enough time during the day to get Bella in and out without having to stay overnight.”

“They agreed to that?” Harry asked.

“Yes. Between inmates and guards Covid has the jail a mess, they don’t want a young, first-timer in any of the population. I used the ‘guarantee her safety’ card.” Trisha responded. “Bella seemed to be worried about funds for bail, but I assume that won’t be an issue.”

“Not at all, I can transfer money immediately.” Marta said.

“So, listen. This is just the first step in this process, and they are making accommodations that will make the experience as painless as possible under the circumstances. Let’s keep positive for Bella and get her through the next 24 hours. Sound good?” Trisha said with encouragement.

“Trisha, have they assigned the case to a judge yet?” Harry asked.

“Yes, it’ll be Larimar.” Trisha responded.

“Do you know him?”

Trisha shook her head. “I know of him. Been on the bench forever, one of the dinosaurs. A real stickler for the rule of law and not our best draw that’s for sure.” Maryanne replied.

Tom was watching Harry. He knew his old partner and there was a look he got when he was churning ideas. He had that look now.

Bella yelled out from the kitchen, “Hey, anyone for pie? Come and get it!”

Marta’s eyes filled with tears.

“Come on. We need to be as strong for her as she’s being for us.” Harry said as he helped Marta out of the chair and walked arm-in-arm back to the house.

Monday held no surprises. They arrived in Miami early, Bella was taken into custody, charged, bail posted and 12 hours later she was home. It was a lousy Valentine’s Day, but Marta hoped there would be others in Bella’s future that made this one a dim memory.

On March 10<sup>th</sup> Trisha called Bella to arrange a convenient time to stop by. That evening Bella and Trisha spent an hour in the study before emerging to bring Harry and Marta up to date.

Trisha began. “We’ve been given a trial date of October 15<sup>th</sup>, seven months away. I have some preliminary motions that I need to file next week, one of them could be a motion for an expedited trial which if granted could move that date up. I wanted to discuss that and other details with Bella, to go over options and implications. We’ve done that and she’s made some decisions. Bella, would you like to take it from here, or shall I?”

Bella was seated on the floor with Tank sprawled across her lap. She scratched his belly and looked from Harry to Marta. “You know one of the things I want to do is graduate before I go to court. I’ve been worried I wouldn’t have time, so I’ve been taking extra classes. Turns out I qualify for early graduation as soon as April.”

“Well, now that you know you won’t be in court until October, don’t you want to graduate with your class?” Marta asked.

“Not really, I don’t care about that anymore. I haven’t seen the kids I started high school with since my sophomore year and I haven’t kept in touch with anyone. I just want my diploma before I go to jail.”

Harry saw Marta visibly flinch when Bella said “jail.”

Marta looked at Trisha, “If you ask for an expedited trial how soon do you think that would be?”

Trisha didn’t respond. Bella did. “I told Trisha I didn’t want her to do that. After she told me all the options, I decided I want to plead guilty.”

Marta was up out of her chair, “No, you are not pleading guilty. That would mean you go to jail. No that can’t happen.”

Harry was at her side. “Come, sit down. Let’s hear Bella out.”

“Please don’t be upset with me. I just want to get this all over with as quickly as possible and pleading guilty is the way to do that. I don’t want to go through a trial to just have a jury find me guilty.”

“But you’re not guilty, Bella,” Marta insisted.

“Yes, I am, Marta. I filed for that money. I didn’t know I was doing something wrong, but I sent in the paperwork.”

Trisha stepped in. “I am going to file a motion to get the charges reduced. Bella had nothing to do with the CARES Act payment. That was generated and in the bank before Chandra died. As far as the rental assistance, while Bella did file the paperwork, she kept paying the rent and utilities so the parties who committed fraud are the landlord and the utility companies if they accepted the rental assistance. I know they accepted Bella’s payments. They can’t have both.

“That leaves the unemployment assistance, which I will argue should never have been approved in the first place. Chandra had another full-time job; the diner was just part-time. I pulled the application Bella filed and she listed both

the diner and Oakbriar Care as employers. The system screwed up. It should have red-flagged the application and declined benefits immediately, but certainly within the month or two after the first payment was made and the state was aware Chandra had died. Chandra's death certificate was registered on May 5<sup>th</sup>, two weeks after Bella completed the application."

Harry spoke up, "you said you would try to get the charges reduced. What would the charges be?"

"I'll argue for a violation of 18 U.S.C. § 1001, filing a false statement. If I can get the prosecution and the judge to approve that, I'd ask for a fine, home confinement and probation. With any luck, there's no jail time involved."

"Do you think you can do that, Trisha?" Marta asked hopefully.

"All I can do is try my best."

"Bella, is this really what you want to do? If you plead guilty and Trisha can't get the charges reduced it would mean jail time and a much longer sentence." Harry said. "It's a risk when you take your chances with a jury, even though you're a very compelling defendant, if there ever was one."

"I can make the guilty plea contingent on the reduced charges. If they don't go for the reduction, we opt for a jury trial." Trisha said.

"But I just want it over with, I don't want a trial." Bella insisted.

"Listen, we don't need to decide this tonight. I'll take care of the other motions I need to make next week, and we'll table this until we must make a decision, okay?"

"That sounds like a good plan, Bella. Let this play out a little, you don't want anything happening before graduation anyway." Harry suggested.

"Okay, Trisha. I'll think about it." Bella said.

## CHAPTER 26

Easter Sunday 2022 was bright and sunny with a warm breeze out of the South. Kayla had been working with the cooks at Macedonia Baptist since Wednesday, “Good Day”, the date of the Jewish sacrifice of the Passover Lamb, which the Church recognized as their observance of the crucifixion.

After Sunday services the congregation feasted on the fruits of the kitchen’s labor and mingled together.

Bella stood with Kayla at the entrance to the kitchen watching people enjoy the afternoon.

“Do you remember the last Easter we were here before Mom died?”

“Yeah, I think so, your shoes hurt, right? Tristen wasn’t even born yet, but I remember you looked so pretty all dressed up.”

“Look at that girl over there,” Bella pointed, “She could be Tristen’s twin. Isn’t that weird? I read somewhere that every one of us has a twin somewhere.”

“Wow, she does. Do you know who she is?”

“No. Come on, you find Tristen and we’ll take a selfie with them.” Bella suggested.

Bella approached the girl, “Hey, I’m Isabella. I hope you don’t think this is crazy, but you look just like my brother, except of course, he’s a boy,” Bella chuckled, “Anyway, I



read somewhere that everyone has a twin so I thought it would be cool if we took a picture of all of us together. You cool with that?”

“Ah, okay, sure, I’m Senisa.” Kayla and Tristen joined the two. “Wow, look at you two, you could be brother and sister!” Kayla exclaimed, “Tristen, stand beside Senisa, and try to smile. Bella, get on the other side of Tristen.”

A second selfie was interrupted by a slightly built black woman with gray braids down her back. “Hey, Senisa, what’s going on?” she asked as she approached the group.

“Grandma, this is Tristen. He’s Isabella and Makayla’s brother, don’t we look alike?” Before the woman could respond, Reverend McGuire appeared out of nowhere.

“Senisa, I’m glad I found you. Can I see you for a minute?” Senisa looked confused and showed Kayla her phone. “Here’s my number, send me the selfie. See you guys later,” she said as she followed her grandmother and the Reverend toward the other side of the hall.

Marta and Harry were sitting with Elder Stevens when the kids sat down at their table. “That was weird, but cool, wasn’t it?” Tristen said to Bella and Kayla.

“What was weird?” Harry asked.

“Some girl, the one over there with the Reverend, her name’s Senisa and she looks just like me.”

“She does, look we took a selfie.” Kayla offered her phone to Harry.

“Wow, that’s quite a resemblance. Look at that, Marta.” Harry said as he passed the phone to Marta.

Marta took a long look at the phone and then over to the girl who was standing with two other women and the Reverend. Harry noticed the look on Marta’s face and felt that prickly sense he used to get when something important was happening, but he didn’t know what it was.

She handed the phone back to Kayla and said, “That is something. She’s as pretty as you are handsome Tristen.”

“She is pretty,” Tristen said wistfully as he stared at Senisa. She caught his eye and waved.

Harry noticed the sudden change in Marta’s mood and said, “Hey guys, you about ready to go? I’m wiped out.”

Once they were home, Harry and Marta shared a bottle of wine by the firepit and talked. They talked about the highlights of the day, how good the food was, mundane things.

“Seems to me you might have something on your mind you’re not telling me.” Harry finally said.

“Hmm, why do you say that?”

“Well, when you saw that picture of the kids with that girl who looked like Tristen something changed. Do you know who she is?”

Marta sipped her wine before responding. “Guess that intuition is the downfall of being married to a detective.”

“Former detective.”

“You’ll always be a detective, Harry. But, to answer your question, yes, I’m afraid I may know who she is.” Marta offered nothing more.

“Okay, so, ... would you like to share that bit of information?”

Marta finished off her glass and tilted it toward Harry to pour another as she watched the pony and his mares foraging in the field next door.

“I was coming out of my office one day when Chandra was coming out of the ladies room. She looked pale and kind of pasty and I asked her if she was okay, and she almost broke down in tears.

“I took her into my office, and she told me she was pregnant. She had met some guy and let him move in with her. Now, you must understand, I never knew her to date, let alone have a guy living with her and the girls. Ironically, if I recall correctly, it was on Easter Sunday back then that a woman in the church told Chandra the guy living with

her was the father-to-be of a 15-year-old girl who was about to give birth. Mind you, baby daddy was on the south side of his twenties. That night Chandra kicked the guy out and a few days later peed on a stick and found out she was pregnant.”

Harry watched the horses and finally spoke. “So, if we were to ask that young woman what her birthday was it would be just a little after Easter Sunday that year.”

“That would likely be the answer.” Marta replied.

“And that means her father and Tristen’s are likely one and the same man?”

“You are a talented detective, Mr. Bramson.” Marta said with a hint of sarcasm.

“Oh yes I am, ma’am, and this detective noticed the puppy-dog eyes on our young man as he stared at that pretty young woman today.”

“Yep, so did I,” Marta replied as she downed the remaining wine in her glass.

“Well, let’s hope they don’t run into each other again. It’s not like Tristan spends a lot of time at the church.”

“Tristan doesn’t, but Kayla does, and the selfie is on Kayla’s phone. I have a feeling they’ll be running into each other.”

“That could be a problem.” Harry said.

“Very good observation, Inspector Clouseau.”

Harry laughed, “Touché, mon ami.”

They settled into silence and enjoyed another hour by the fire before heading back to the house. When, or if, the time came, they’d deal with Tristen’s half-sister.

It was already sweltering hot for June and Marta was making plans for another beach birthday for Isabella’s 19<sup>th</sup> when Trisha Stevens called for a meeting.

Late one afternoon Marta, Harry and Trisha sat on the lanai while Bella dangled her feet in the pool and threw Tank’s tennis ball into the deep end, waited for him to

bring it back, and threw it again. Tank could spend hours doing this if someone was willing to play with him. Conversation turned to the upcoming trial.

“It’s time to firm up a strategy on how we want to proceed. I’ve been waiting for the prosecution to float an offer for a plea bargain, but it’s crickets from that side. I made some indirect inquiries and got the impression our judge is the problem. He isn’t fond of pleas. In fact, he holds the record for rejecting pleas after all the details have been worked out between both parties.”

“Can he do that when it’s something everyone agrees to?” Marta asked.

“In federal plea negotiations, there isn’t a concrete plea bargain agreement. The judge, within the law, decides whether to accept the charge as pled and the judge makes the ultimate decision on the sentence. So, we can make the first move and offer a plea, which sends a signal to the other side that we have a weak case, go through all the motions and still have the judge toss the plea out and find ourselves at trial.” Trisha explained.

Bella listened as she threw the ball to Tank.

“So, with this judge odds are he’s going to keep the charges as they are and we’re going to trial.” Harry said.

“I think it would be smart if we proceeded on that assumption. If you review his rulings he must say ‘no one is above the law’ or ‘we are guided by the letter of the law’ a hundred times if not a thousand.” Trish responded. “He’s old-school, law and order. I wouldn’t be surprised if he was in favor of corporal punishment.”

Bella stopped tossing the ball and slipped into the water and began swimming laps.

Watching Bella, Harry said, “Give her a chance to mull this over, but in the meantime, what are our options, Trisha?”

“I’d like to prepare for trial, argue that only the unemployment assistance is subject to a claim for fraud and proceed to appeal to the jury’s common sense. We work to seat a jury that understands the system can screw up and we contend the burden on the government to catch the error is at issue and not Bella’s intention to defraud.”

Marta seemed lost in thought while Harry and Trisha hashed out ideas. When it seemed they had finished she spoke, “Trisha, does the jury decide the sentence if it goes to trial?”

“No, once they render a verdict, the jury is dismissed. The prosecution will recommend a sentence to the court, but it’s the judge’s discretion.”

“And what are the odds this judge is going to look kindly on an intelligent, young, black girl who is found guilty of some wrongdoing as he holds her future in his hands.” Marta asked.

“I’d say the odds aren’t good, Marta” Trish conceded quietly.

“I don’t want you telling Bella that.” Marta said emphatically. “If you’ll excuse me.” She rose, cleared the table of used dishes and closed the kitchen door behind her, leaving Harry and Trisha watching Bella and Tank do laps.

## CHAPTER 27

When Harry moved in with Marta and the kids, Marta had redecorated the study to make it Harry's space. The kids were back in school, and in case they needed to do any work virtually, she added desks and chairs in each of their bedrooms. At least once a week, Tom would come over for dinner and spend the rest of the evening with Harry in the study.

Shortly after Kozy and Tom had run the hacks on the website hosting videos of Bella, Harry and Tom began to divvy up tasks and formulate a plan. They were under no illusions that if they scrubbed the website, the content would only pop up again. It was like playing whack-a-mole with crap like this.

They agreed on an objective: hamper the ability of this site to remain viable, replicate, or reconstitute itself with content that included Bella. There was no guarantee that screenshots from her videos weren't on some pervert's hard drive and could surface that way, but they decided to deal with what they could.

Early on, they had quickly agreed that turning the data over to the FBI, even anonymously, had no value. The FBI would take months, if not years to investigate, make deals to make more deals, and more importantly, didn't have Bella's interests as a priority as the driving force behind

their prosecution of the case. The only way Bella's interests remained a priority was for Harry and Tom to retain the list of users.

It was also decided to just keep the hacks in place and accumulate data for as long as possible. There had been a flurry of media attention after Lewis self-destructed in court, but Bella was barely mentioned. She had dropped off the news cycle, so Tom and Harry figured the odds were low of anyone connecting her to the videos and having that blow up on social media. Once her federal trial was in the news, those odds rose significantly. Their plan had to be put into action, then put to bed, before that happened.

Since Tom's skills were more technical, his job was to correlate, index, keyword and tag the data coming from the website and the data centers.

Harry's forte was his intuition. He saw patterns in behavior that were obscure. More often than not, when he started pulling on a thread, it unraveled criminal activity and led to closing cases. As partners, he and Tom had enjoyed the second highest conviction rate in BSO history.

This time around, they were aiming for justice of a different kind. Only one additional person had been added to the team, introduced by Kozy as "Ekmidenízo." Harry got tongue-tied pronouncing the Greek word that translated to "annihilate" so he called him Ekzo. When Harry thought about the videos of Bella, annihilate was a word he found comforting.

Neither Tom nor Harry had ever met Ekzo. Their only contact was through Kozy. Ekzo's part of the plan was to eliminate any trail of the teams' intrusion into the website back end and eventually to execute the finer-tuned hacks that would be kicked off when the proverbial 'send' button was pressed.

Kozy had vouched for Enzo in dramatic fashion: on his mother's life. He claimed Ekzo was in a league of his own when it came to black-hat hacking. Tom later learned Kozy met Ekzo in college and they were life partners, with Kozy choosing to remain in the closet and his partner lurking in the depths of the dark web. They had a lot counting on Ekzo and hoped Kozy's assessment of Ekzo's skills proved true.

They had succeeded in tracing the ownership of the site to Azerbaijan, a country with no extradition treaty or diplomatic ties to the U.S. There was no chance of bringing those players to justice in a US courtroom, but Tom and Harry intended to inflict some pain.

They were ten months into compiling data and designing their plan. With Bella's trial only three months away, it was time for implementation.

Harry poured another scotch for each of them.

"So, bloodhound, what's your gut tell you." Tom asked.

"I don't see any value in waiting any longer." Harry answered. "Let's tell the girls we've decided to head down to Islamorada and do some fishing this weekend."

There was no turning back once they alerted Kozy and Ekzo it was show time. All four would be glued to laptop screens and phones for 8–10 hours. Behavior like that would raise red flags with Marta and Maryanne, who clearly spent more time with Tom than Tom was willing to admit.

A sunset of spectacular purples, blues and oranges painted the sky on Friday night as Tom and Harry checked into a suite at the Cheeca Lodge. They carried go bags and fishing gear to the dock where a 22' Sea Fox was fueled up and ready to go.

They loaded up and headed out to the five-mile mark. As Tom captained the boat, Harry set up two fresh laptops configured with satellite internet. He booted them up,



plugged a thumb drive into each and waited for the software to load. He typed a command line on each machine:

```
C:\D1
```

```
C:\D2
```

Lines of code flooded each screen and ended with:

```
Success D1
```

```
Success D2
```

D1 code had created a mirror of the site and D2 saved the mirror to a stand-alone solid state hard drive that Kozy monitored which he immediately took offline.

As Tom threw lines in the water and opened two Red Stripes. Harry typed:

```
C:\D3
```

```
C:\D4
```

D3 embedded worms and malware in an open source MKV video file on the root. D4 installed code that would migrate the worms and malware to different layers of code and embed a tracer on any device used to view any video on the site. Harry waited for the next prompts to appear:

```
Success D3
```

```
Success D4
```

He put one laptop to sleep, the code it was running would continue to acquire IP addresses of users logging in and instantly move the new data to two cloud servers until the site went dark. On the other he typed:

```
C:\D52E
```

Kozy and Ekzo were in a room in the center of a small warehouse that Ekzo owned which served as their home and his lab. They watched monitors of the live URL of the website, the code executing from each command Harry typed, and a series of squares on one monitor that represented several blockchain wallets that belonged to the site.

When Ekzo's screen pinged with D52E, Ekzo typed "GO" and pressed enter. The hack he created began diverting all the money hitting each blockchain to a series

of new blockchains and ultimately ended up on a cold storage wallet plugged into Ekzo's computer. He carefully monitored activity in the site's admin code to see if anything unusual was happening. Until his sniffer code was triggered, the data and crypto hacks would continue to run.

Turning to another keyboard Ekzo typed:

```
C:\D5IP
```

On the boat, a message pinged on the laptop used to execute the D52E command:

```
D5 In Progress Please logoff
```

Harry shut that laptop down, went to his duffle bag took out a screwdriver and opened the case. He removed the hard drive and threw it into the Atlantic. They trolled a few miles north and east and the mother board met the same fate. Tom changed course to a few miles south and west and Harry disposed of the rest of the machine.

Now all they could do was wait until Ekzo pinged that the site was down. They sipped their Red Stripes and enjoyed a calm night under the stars. The unknown in their plan was how long it would take the security software to detect the hacks and for the administrator to pull the plug on the site.

Months ago, when Tom began digging, he discovered the site had been running for about two years, which had provided a trove of data from past and current users. Two years was a long time in the lifespan of code and Ekzo had suggested the security and admin software probably hadn't been updated since the site went live.

Back in Miami, as the sun came up off the beaches of Islamorada, Ekzo and Kozy watched as the admin console on the site finally came to life. Either a timed sweep of security software ran and triggered on a breadcrumb from the hacks, or an oligarch on the other side of the world finally realized his crypto had gone poof and was nowhere

to be found. Ekso's faith in his hacks led him to believe it was the latter.

They watched as the admin console put the site in maintenance mode, effectively taking it offline. That's when Kozy typed:

**Offline Please Logoff**

On the boat the sleeping laptop pinged. Harry grabbed his screwdriver, dismantled the machine, and they dropped bits and pieces overboard as they cruised back to the dock at Cheeca Lodge.

In Miami, Kozy and Ekzo continued to watch as the remaining hacks Ekzo designed blew up the data and root files. For the next hour, they watched someone scramble to restore files only to have the other bits of malware embedded on multiple layers of code blow up each restore.

Kozy and Ekzo popped a bottle of champagne once it was evident the site was down and was never coming back. Ekzo accessed the cold wallet containing the crypto and was flabbergasted when he tallied up all the currency. In less than 12 hours they had accumulated the equivalent of \$7 million in crypto.

Ekzo moved his agreed upon fee of 10% to his own cold wallet. At 9 a.m. when the banks opened on Saturday morning, Kozy placed the hard drive containing the mirror image of the site in a safe deposit box. He drove to another bank and did the same thing with the crypto cold wallet.

His next stop was CID where he left the key to the mirrored hard drive in an envelope under junk in Tom's desk drawer as he delivered reports from the forensic department. Before heading home, he placed the key to the cold wallet safe deposit box in an envelope, put the envelope between the pages of an old copy of *The Anarchist's Cookbook*, sealed up a Fedex Overnight pack and dropped it in the pickup box in the lobby of CID.

Late Saturday morning, Tom and Harry were asleep in hammocks strung between palm trees when Tom's cell phone rang. It was Maryanne just calling to see how the fishing went. Tom told her we caught some mahi and hooked a shark but released it.

When they finished the call, Harry opened one eye and said, "Want to do some real fishing today?"

## CHAPTER 28

On Sunday afternoon Harry dropped Tom at his apartment and headed home with a loaded cooler full of mahi filets for Kayla. She was planning the menu for Bella's birthday next weekend and the mahi would be perfect for their Saturday picnic at the Deerfield Beach pavilion. The family would spend Bella's actual birthday, that Sunday, at Macedonia Baptist, where Kayla could prepare the rest of the fish as one of the entrees.

On Monday a FedEx package arrived for Harry and Tom collected the envelope Kozy had put in his drawer. Tom stopped by Harry's early on Monday afternoon and the two drove to BT&T bank, opened a safe deposit box, and locked the two keys inside.

They had done everything possible to scrub the web of videos of Isabella, and now they had the unexpected problem of what to do with almost \$7m worth of cryptocurrency, the value of which went up and down like a toilet seat. Before they could strategize on what to do with all that money, they needed to stay on task with Part 2 of their current project, which they referred to as "BUSTED."

For several months Tom had been working on the data coming out of the website and being loaded into BUSTED files. Most people know the term, IP address, and may

even understand how it works, but using an IP address alone to identify physical names and locations doesn't ensure accurate results. The IP must be run against records from the ISP (Internet Service Provider), usually in the form of billing records. Finally, IP geo-location is used as an additional corroboration.

With Ekzo's help he developed a program that was elegantly coded which, when tested, rendered accurate physical locations and names on known accounts. Before Ekzo's blockchain hack had dropped nearly 7 figures into Ekzo's wallet, to compensate him for his work Tom had reluctantly agreed to allow Ekzo to sell his blockchain hacks and the data program on the dark web. With Ekzo's crypto haul exceeding expectations, he was more than compensated for all his work and agreed not to sell anything related to Tom's project to other hackers. Whether he personally used them, Tom would never know, but he hoped Ekzo's better angels would steer him closer to being a white-hat hacker and away from the dark side.

Once Tom ingested the raw data and ran it through his program, he regurgitated it as a database. Harry took the data and built queries using a list of parameters to find patterns in the data. Some basic Artificial Intelligence was built in to process the parameters against the data and spit out a new table of results which was then run through a roll-up process based on username. The result was a clean list of website users, the number of visits and the number of views and more importantly, the actual name and address of the person tied to that IP, the IPS billing and the IP-geo location at the time of the visit.

For this output Harry had asked for users with multiple visits to the site with addresses in the State of Florida. Further, he included the keywords and tags tied to the videos of Bella that Tom had traced back to the content on Lewis' phone. After their fishing trip, the primary objective

of BUSTED had turned from scrubbing the web of Bella's videos to identifying who used the site.

The report ran 1,482 pages beginning in 2020, two years ago, just as Covid locked society down and the dark web saw a proliferation of new porn sites sprout up like weeds. Tom and Harry had split up the file, Tom took usernames A–M and Harry would start working through the rest. After years of being partners, they each had their own approach to working a case and sifting through information.

They had agreed to start with addresses in Dade, Broward, and Palm Beach counties. They used a subscription-based, comprehensive background check application and fed in the names and addresses from the Tier 1 ISP billing file. They decided to flag any names of known offenders, public figures, politicians, notables, and hopefully least, law enforcement. It would be time-consuming, and the more time that passed the staler the information they had compiled would become, so they had to work fast.

As they identified users, Tom began discreetly steering CID resources toward those targets. He claimed his source was a confidential informant who was higher up in the porn world operating in Florida, but who's moral compass found true north when his woman had a baby daughter.

Tom and Harry knew the information was reliable when they found Lewis Bennis on the target list; he was a big fan of his own work. CID assembled evidence and were successful in getting a judge to sign warrants for digital material and equipment on a handful of users who were low-hanging fruit. The searches found hard evidence of porn, charging documents were filed, and if all went as planned, in a few months there would be fewer local creeps doing business in Florida.

Makayla turned fifteen on Saturday, September 3, 2022. Family and friends celebrated on Saturday at the beach and church on Sunday. The following week Kayla completed all the paperwork and testing required for a Lerner's Permit. The next Monday morning Harry and Kayla presented her documentation at the Division of Motor Vehicles. With Harry in the passenger seat, Kayla carefully drove them home.

During Kayla's birthday party at Macedonia Baptist, Reverend McGuire approached Marta and Harry.

"How are two of my favorite people?" she said giving Marta a hug. "I know Bella's trial is coming up next month, and I just want you to know that we are here for any support your need."

"Thank you, Reverend, you've always been such a blessing in these kids' lives." Marta said.

"I've known them since Kayla was a baby, before Tristan was born."

Harry and Marta exchanged a look, and Marta's brow furrowed. "What?" the Reverend asked, "Did I say something?"

"Reverend, you were around in those days when Chandra was pregnant with Tristan. Tristan doesn't know anything about his father and we're wondering, did Chandra ever share anything about him?" Harry asked.

Reverend McGuire looked out over her congregants and her gaze lingered on the younger children, sitting in a circle around Bella who was reading them a story with a goat laying contentedly by her side. What a wonderful, magical place this church had become.

Marta interrupted her thoughts. "To be honest Reverend, we really weren't that curious about Tristan's father. Chandra worked for me when she was pregnant with Tristan and shared her experience with his father and why she kicked him out of their life."



Harry spoke, “Last Easter, when we were here, the kids took a picture with a young lady who strongly resembled Tristan. I think you know who we’re talking about.”

The Reverend paused a few moments before speaking. “Harry, Marta, one of the things I’m most proud of as a pastor is the faith people have in me for protecting their privacy.”

Harry interrupted, “Before you go any further, let me say two things; we aren’t interested in turning anyone’s life upside down, but if Tristan runs into that young lady again the little twinge of interest we saw when he talked about her in April could turn into a full-on, hormone-laden crush.”

The Reverend looked from Marty to Harry and then back out over her flock, “Oh, damn.”

“Is she here today, Reverend?”

“No. Her Grandma is a member, but she lives with her aunt in Miramar. Ironically, her mama also died from Covid. Her name is Senisa, a lovely girl, very smart. Her and her aunt visit on holidays so she’s not here often.”

With an audible sigh of relief, Marta said, “We’re not sure what to do Reverend, but I can’t imagine how Tristan or Senisa will feel if they find out they were related, have lived so close to one another, and the adults who knew never told them. We’d be very appreciative if you’d guide us through this process.”

“I agree with you, they have a right to know. Let me give it some thought and a load of prayer. I almost forgot. The reason I came over to say hello was to wrangle you two into volunteering for some fundraising.”

Harry moaned and Marta elbowed him in the side.

“Reverend, we owe you more than we can ever repay, so of course you can count on us. Tell us what you need us to do.”

“Well, I’ve had a dream for many years and much of what we do here at Macedonia Baptist is rooted in that vision. When all is said and done, this is a place to praise the Lord, and the people we reach come to us having some relationship with Him.

“In the back of my mind, I’ve always questioned how many more we could serve if our programs and outreach were secular and not tied to the church. I’ve thought and prayed, and prayed some more, for many years, and the answer finally started to come; in part because of you, Marta — you and those kids. I’ve watched you open your heart and your home, and how your community surrounded them and helped them heal. So many people are in need, especially now since Covid has left so many families decimated. Children aren’t the only orphans.

“This congregation is strong and I’m ready to pass the baton. There is a young pastor I met a year or so ago and he’s going to join Macedonia Baptist next week. By the end of the year, I will be stepping down, retiring my collar — physically, not spiritually — and I’m going to make my dream come true with a little help from my friends and tons of grace from the Man upstairs.”

“Wow, that’s a lot to unpack, Reverend. When I think of Macedonia Baptist, you are its identity. I can’t imagine anyone taking your place or how the church would be the same without you.” Marta said.

“Oh, Marta, we can all be replaced. What’s important is the footprint we leave, and I’m happy with mine.”

Harry spoke, “Well, then, congratulations are in order. But I’m not clear on what you’ll need our help with.”

The Reverend opened a manila folder she was holding and passed several stapled pages to Harry.

“This is my dream, Harry. If you like the idea, you and Marta can be part of it in any way you feel comfortable, but first I need to get it off the ground and that is the most

daunting part of the project. Where my ministry has been funded by faith, this project needs money, from grants, partnerships with the public and private sector, and donations. Take that home and read it. Give me a call if you would like to join me in my new journey.”

Harry and Marta looked at the cover page of the package and it read:

## **A Home for All**

### **A Multi-Generational, Inter-Faith Intentional Community**

- **safe, nourishing environments for children to grow and thrive,**
- **subsidized homeownership for adults who open their homes to parent an at-risk child,**
- **rent-free condominiums for adults, 55+, with backgrounds in education, mental health, the arts, and childcare willing to mentor and support members of the community.**

“What an interesting concept, Reverend. I have a million questions,” Marta said.

“Read that over. It may answer a few of those million questions and I look forward to answering the rest. Now, that I’ve made that pitch to you, please excuse me, I see another victim over there.”

## CHAPTER 29

With Bella's trial date only weeks away, Trisha found herself struggling with the realization that no matter what strategy she used, her client's fate would be in the hands of a misogynistic, race-baiting, old man who had a job for life and felt omnipotent.

When she had floated a couple of subtle hints that a deal might be considered, she was unceremoniously shut down. She couldn't understand why the Federal government wanted to spend the time and money punishing a young girl with a sympathetic story when they had so many bigger, more consequential fish to fry.

She had read previous case files of the prosecutor and judge assigned to Bella's case. She saw that the prosecutor generally pled his cases and very few went to trial. He wasn't her problem. It was the judge.

In 34 cases that Trisha reviewed, the judge had accepted a plea in only one. In that one exception, the plea was accepted but the multiple charges weren't reduced, the only concession the judge agreed to was the sentences would run concurrently since the 64-year-old would end up dying in prison anyway.

During one of the few Bar Association events she attended, Trisha had struck up a conversation with an older woman who had cut her teeth at the Federal

Prosecutor's office in Miami before switching to private practice handling estates and civil cases. Trisha reached out.

Over drinks Trisha got the gossip on Bella's judge. He had always had a reputation as a letter of the law jurist, but with an edge that had hardened with time. The sharp side of that edge seemed to cut deep against black defendants. He cultivated a churchgoing, devoted husband, family man image. He had a daughter and a son, both grown, who lived out of state. The son had married a Jamaican woman and rumor had it that he was immediately persona non grata in the family.

When Trisha asked for advice on her present dilemma the best her friend could offer was, "Plan on doing better on appeal."

Trisha shared her frustration and concern with Reverend McGuire as they walked to their cars early one evening. The Reverend was troubled by her lack of hope.

"Elder Stevens, you and Isabella Powell are women with good souls and open hearts. You have done important work in the faith community and as a lawyer. Isabella has only begun her journey. With every fiber of my being, I feel she is destined to live a joyous life. Do your best by that girl and have faith. In my experience, the Lord rewards good souls and open hearts."

"Thanks, Reverend. I'm on my way over to Marta's now to help them accept the worst-case scenario."

"Would you like me to join you in breaking the news?"

"No, but I appreciate the offer."

The Reverend turned and started walking back to the church. "Did you forget something?" Trisha asked.

"No, you go on, I'll just be another few minutes. I'm going to add you and Bella to our circle of prayer group."

Trisha smiled. She learned a few years ago never to doubt the power of prayer.

Harry sat in the study, bleary-eyed from pouring over data on the computer screen, when he heard a car door slam. It was a rare afternoon when he was alone. Marta had taken the kids shopping to fill out their wardrobe for the school year and find Isabella some conservative pantsuits to wear in court. He got up to see who had arrived, only to meet Tom coming through the front door.

“Guess I should keep that locked.” Harry said jokingly. Tom was agitated, something highly unusual for his partner. “What’s wrong?” he asked, suddenly concerned.

“Harry, what’s the name of that judge that’s assigned to Bella’s case?”

“Shoot, uh, Larson, Lanigan, something with an ‘L.’ Let me call Trisha.”

“NO. Don’t ask anyone!” Tom said alarmed.

“Okay, okay. Calm down. We can check the court docket.”

“Geez, right, why didn’t I think of that.” Tom said as he strode past Harry into the study.

“Tom, what is it, what’s got your panties in a pinch?”

Tom didn’t answer as he sat down at Harry’s computer, “Dude, you should shut this window down if you leave the machine.”

“Yeah, just like keeping the front door locked. What the hell is going on?”

“Harry, just give me a minute. If what I found in that data pans out, we need to buy some lotto tickets because we are the luckiest sons of bitches to walk God’s green earth. Here!”

Harry stood next to Tom as he read the court docket. “Judge Steven Larimar.” Tom switched over to the BUSTED data window and scrolled back to the ‘L’s and pointed to the data page.

“Holy, fuck!” exclaimed Harry.

## CHAPTER 30

After a grueling, 20-minute workout with 10 pounds of resistance on the abductor while he perused a Facebook group, the target headed for the locker room. He punched in his four-digit code and the lock popped on #208. A playing card fluttered to the floor and landed by his feet. He stared at the image; one he had seen a hundred times. He stooped and picked up the card.



He turned the card over and gasped. He dropped the card like it was on fire. Light-headed, with his heart pounding he sat down heavily on the bench. He bent and picked the card up and examined it carefully.





struggled to get up off the bench. He managed to get dressed and into his car, the pressure in his chest and his head not easing. He started the car and almost made it out of the space before everything went black.

Trisha was sitting at her desk going over the file on Isabella Powell one last time before court convened tomorrow morning when her phone rang.

“Trisha Stevens,” she answered.

“Hi Trisha, Tony Maranello here. I wanted to catch you before you heard this from someone else. We’ll be delaying Ms. Powell’s trial until the court can make some adjustments to assignments.”

“Tony, thanks for the call. Do you mean Larimar’s not going to be hearing our case?”

“That’s correct. I was just informed that Judge Larimar had a heart attack or a stroke after his workout in the gym this morning. He’s in critical condition at Broward Hospital and hasn’t regained consciousness. You’ll be informed when a new judge has been assigned, but we should meet before then. I’ve still got our slot open for tomorrow morning if you want to have coffee at Perked Up about 9.”

“That’s terrible news, Tony. I’ll keep the Judge in my prayers. And, of course, I can meet you at 9.”

“Okay, see you then.”

Trisha hung up the phone and stared at the paperwork strewn across her desk. She had no illusions what impact this sudden turn of events would have on her case, and why Maranello wanted to meet.

Tom O’Brian was at his desk in the Task Force cubicle when a CID detective approached, holding a sealed plastic evidence bag. “Take a look at this, Tom, it’s wild.” He handed over the bag and Tom looked at the front and back of the card inside.

“Hmm, dates, times, file names. Woah, that’s some list of file names! MKV is a video file. Where’d you get this?”

“That’s another wild thing. It was in a gym bag in Judge Steven Larimar’s car. EMT’s took him away. Looks like he had a stroke, and I don’t know if he’s going to make it, but if he’s ‘Gavelin9’ he may wish he stayed in a coma.”

The following morning, over coffee, Trisha listened as Tony Maranello outlined the plea agreement his office was prepared to offer Isabella Powell. Since Isabella was a minor when the crimes took place, the case was being transferred to Federal Juvenile Court. In exchange for her guilty plea to 18 U.S.C. § 1001, filing a false statement, Bella would serve 12 months in home confinement with an ankle monitor, she would be required to check in with the court once a month, reimburse the state and the federal government for the unemployment compensation she received and agree to testify against her former landlord who had cashed her rent checks and accepted the rental assistance from the government. Trisha immediately left Maranello and called Bella who told her to accept the offer.

That afternoon, the BSO CID supervisor, who was also the ICAC Task Force coordinator, called a quick meeting to update his teams.

“It looks like Judge Larimar’s going to make it, but they don’t know if he’ll wake up or what condition he’ll be in at that time. Another gym member was leaving when he noticed the Judge’s car just roll a few feet into a curb and come to a stop. That person started CPR and 911 was there in minutes, but he was in cardiac arrest and the scans show signs of a stroke.”

He picked up the evidence bag and circulated the playing card around the table. When everyone had a chance to examine it, he continued with his briefing.

“Forensics tried to pull up a couple of those files on the web but got nothing. O’Brian, Sebastino, see if any of those

stellar members of the community we have in custody recognize any of those video titles. Compare the evidence of the website porn on the machines we confiscated from them to those names on the card and see what you find.

“We’ve got a warrant for the judge’s house in Coral Ridge, his chambers, and a condo he and the wife own in Marathon. The FBI will be executing the warrants at each location but Maldonado and Davis, I want you at the house in Coral Ridge. That list indicates he watched something every night. If this stuff was on a local machine, it’s likely going to be at the house.”

A week later, Trisha and Bella were in court. Their new judge accepted the plea offered by the Federal Prosecutor with one additional item; her record would be sealed as a juvenile. Her guilty plea would not affect her ability to get into a good school or secure employment in the future.

On Friday evening, Harry met Tom and Kozy in a dive-bar that had been around for decades off Sunrise and A1A. They took a high-top in the corner and Harry went to the bar and ordered a Stella and two Red Stripes.

“I wanted to talk to you guys about our dilemma with the crypto.” Harry began as he placed the beers on the table.

“We can park it somewhere, invest it, convert it to dollars.” Kozy offered.

“It’s crypto, though. It’s worth something today but could be worth nothing tomorrow. I don’t understand it. It feels like a carney trick to me.” Tom added.

“But it’s more like a tax dodge than a carney trick.” Kozy said.

“I want you guys to look at this. Harry took two manila folders out of his briefcase and handed one to each man. Each of us has a vote on what we do with that money. I’m partial to the idea of making sure the dirty money gets clean, not in the money-laundering sense, although that’s

we'll have to do, but clean as in doing something good with it."

"I agree with that," Tom said as he started to read what Harry gave him.

"Me too," said Kozy as he did the same.

Harry sipped his beer and waited until Kozy and Tom finished reading.

When they closed the folders, he said, "I want to convert the crypto to dollars and invest it. Maybe a bank in the Caymans can do that for us. Then I want to create a trust which will fund A Home for All."

Smiling Tom said, "I agree with that."

Kozy lifted his bottled and tipped it in a toast, "Me too."

## CHAPTER 31

On the last Friday of 2022 Reverend McGuire, met in the church office with Marta, Harry, and the Powell children. In another room, Trisha did the same with Senisa Evans, her aunt and grandmother. The news that Tristen and Senisa were half-brother/sister came as a surprise only to the kids; the adults had previously met and agreed on how they would go about sharing something so monumental.

As a testament to the resilience of children, as soon as the conversations were over, Tristen and Senisa met each other in the hallway for the first time as brother and sister. Tristen jokingly shared that he needed another sister like a hole in the head. Senisa came back with, “I always wished for a sister or brother, but why did the one I ended up with have to be so ugly?”

They were inseparable since.

On Sunday, New Year’s Day, 2023, Reverend Oscar Johnson held services for a full house at Macedonia Baptist Church. His sermon was moving and inspirational, a tribute to Reverend Felicia McGuire’s 28 years of service to her faith community.

After services, Hoppin’ John, cornbread, and pot likker soup was on the menu. Kayla, Marta, and Bella had begun preparing the meal on Saturday, while other volunteers, including Harry decorated the hall for the celebration. The

Reverend, (who insisted people now call her Felicia, which no one was able to do) circulated among the congregation accepting words of encouragement for her future.

For the foreseeable future she would be fundraising and meeting with bureaucrats and lawyers to shore up their support for A Home for All. Trisha Stevens had incorporated the non-profit and would serve as the CEO and legal counsel. Once Felicia had the key partnerships in place and had secured at least 60% of the budget for building the infrastructure of her Intentional Community she would find land and break ground.

On Monday, January 2, 2023 Harry escorted Bella to be fitted with her ankle monitor. She was advised that she could leave her home, but only after submitting a request detailing everywhere she would be going and getting the request approved. The technician explained it was waterproof; she could swim with it, and that it was important to keep the thing charged. A dead battery would send the same signal that the device was offline, just as if she removed it. She was also required to pay \$5 per day for the honor of wearing her new accessory.

When they returned home, Bella made a cup of tea, headed for her room, and signed on to her first class as a freshman at the University of Florida.

That June, Marta and the Sullivans had a huge party in the Sullivan's back yard, combining Bella's 20<sup>th</sup> birthday and Mark's graduation from high school. Mark was headed off to Florida Southern College in August to study Business Administration.

In September the family celebrated Kayla's sweet sixteen at Macedonia Baptist. Led by Reverend Johnson the congregation continued to thrive and serve as the heartbeat of the community. Felicia joined them that weekend for the occasion and she sat at a table with Marta, Harry, Tom, and Maryanne watching as Tristen and Senisa

led a group of kids doing the “Nae Nae” that We Are Toonz had made famous the year before.

“Reverend, how’s your Intentional Community coming along?” Maryanne asked.

“Please, it’s Felicia, now. Well, I’ve never worked so hard for something so good in my life!” Felicia began. “Once we got all the legal entanglements cleared up, thanks to Trisha Stevens, I began to focus on fundraising. I almost met the Lord prematurely when Trisha called to tell me that our program had been made the beneficiary of a trust that had enough money to get us started and keep us going for the foreseeable future.”

“Wow, that’s fantastic, Reverend!” Marta exclaimed. “Who did that?”

“I guess ‘Felicia’ is only going to work with folks who don’t know me from the church.” The Reverend chuckled.

“It’s a hard habit to break, Reverend,” Harry said smiling.

Marta repeated her question, “Who made you the beneficiary of this trust?”

“I’m not the beneficiary, it’s the non-profit, and I don’t know. It’s an anonymous bequest.”

“That’s so cool. You always said you were blessed by the Best, Reverend.” Marta said.

“So, how is it all going to work?” Maryanne asked. “I’ve heard bits and pieces of what it’s about, but I still don’t quite understand what you’re trying to do.”

“Okay, here’s the pitch,” Felicia began. “Years ago, I heard about an intentional community program run by a social worker, in Detroit, I believe. I incorporated many of her ideas during my work at Macedonia Baptist, but there was always this feeling that I could do more.

“There are literary millions of kids out there struggling with absent or addicted parents, homelessness, poverty, disabilities, or a dozen other issues that label them as ‘at

risk.' When taken as a whole, I think you'll agree we are failing too many children and need to do better.

"Of course, there are many social programs in the government and private sectors that are intended to act as a safety net. One of those is our foster care system, but we must all be honest and admit that the foster system in our country has been struggling for years, suffering from a shortage of foster homes and foster parents, not to mention the quality of some of those homes and parents.

"Now, add an estimated 1 in every 500 children in the United States who have been orphaned because of a Covid-19 related death of a parent or guardian.

"Also consider all the adult children who have lost parents and parents who have lost children; in every sense of the word, they are also Covid orphans.

"So, what can we do? After many hours of thought and prayer, I came up with my idea to create an incentive and a reward for couples to become foster parents. The objective is to place as many children as possible in safe, nurturing homes. In addition, I want to include older folks who, for whatever reason, no longer have the opportunity of being part of a family and watching children grow up.

"That's the 'what,' now here's the 'how.' The success of A Home for All International Community requires a partnership with the Florida Department of Child and Family Services and the Guardian ad Litem program. Adults who wish to serve as foster parents and grandparents will be vetted by family services and every child placed in the program will have an advocate assigned to them by Guardian ad Litem. Trisha really pulled all of that together. She has a much better understanding of legislation and politics than I do.

"Here's where the incentives and rewards come in. Every foster parent, or couple, will be required to pay only 20% of the mortgage on a home or villa, with our program



subsidizing the remaining 80%. They pay for maintenance, utilities, and their living expenses and they continue to receive their foster parent stipend from the State. They remain in the home as long as they continue to be part of the program and should they do so until the mortgage is paid off, the home belongs to them.

“Any adult over 55 who wishes to serve as a mentoring, supportive member of the community and can assist in areas of childcare, education, mental health, the arts, or just spoiling a kid with love will live rent-free in a condominium apartment for as long as they are in the program. They pay their utilities and living expenses. The program takes care of the maintenance.

“The community will have standards for conduct and by-laws just like an HOA. A Home for All will build the homes, villas, and condos, manage the properties, and maintain all the common areas.

“Now, I’m no stranger to running a program on prayer and grant writing, but this project requires millions in funding, and I figured it would take a couple of years for the partnerships and the funding to come together. Trisha and I were identifying appropriate grants from the state and federal government as well as the private sector when we found out our needs would be met by our anonymous benefactor.

“So, we purchased land in St Lucie County, and we are currently working with an architect and a contractor. We hope to break ground early next year with a grand opening in 2025.”

Harry and Tom smiled as Felicia concluded her presentation. Marta and Maryanne began talking over each other, excited about ideas and committees they could chair as A Home for All became a reality.

## CHAPTER 32

A cold front swept through South Florida in January 2024, bringing wind, rain, and grey skies on the day Bella was officially separated from her ankle monitor after completing her 12 months of monitoring. For Spring Break that year Harry rented a house at The Moorings, an upscale resort just South of Cheeca Lodge where he and Tom went fishing one weekend.

The family spent seven days enjoying snorkeling, jet-skiing and just swinging in hammocks or walking the beach. Tank ran the grounds chasing raccoons and squirrels with Oliver, a 150-pound Newfoundland who served as the water sports ambassador and belonged to the owner of the resort.

That fall Kayla turned 17 and Tristen celebrated his 14<sup>th</sup> birthday. There had been a palpable shift in the rhythm of their home that year with Bella being away at school. The three of them had never been apart. In Gainesville, Bella filled her time with classes and studying, warding off the loneliness she felt being on her own for the first time.

When school closed for winter break, Bella picked up Mark Sullivan at Florida Southern in Lakeland, and they shared the drive home. Four hours later she was swarmed in the driveway by Kayla and Tristen who ushered her into the house and straight through the house to the back yard

where Marta and Harry waited by the firepit. The McFadden's pony and horses and the Patterson's goats had been herded into a corner of the yard by Tank where they couldn't be seen from the driveway.

"Surprise! Welcome Home!" Marta and Harry shouted as Bella came through the kitchen door. At the sound of their voice the menagerie broke away from Tank, who immediately surrendered his post and was the first to make it to Bella. You could barely make out the human form in the middle of the herd that was whinnying, bleating, and barking. Bella stroked, petted, and cooed at the animals that had sustained her through some of her darkest hours over the last few years. She had missed them as much as she had missed her family.

"This was the best welcoming committee we could come up with," Harry said as he made his way into the huddle and took Bella in his arms and kissed the top of her head "Welcome home, Bella. We missed you."

After the humans and animals had their chance to hug, smell, and nudge, Bella led the herd out of the backyard, down her driveway to the McFadden's fence next door. With little more than a hand gesture the goats waited on command as she opened the gate and led the pony and mares into their pasture. She closed the gate, walked past the goats, gave them another hand gesture and the five of them fell in behind Bella, maaing and bleating as they headed down the road for home. The Sullivans, McFaddens, and Pattersons stood in their front yards, laughing at the sight.

Bella, Kayla, and Tristen would remember that Christmas as the first feeling like a true family since their mother had passed. Senisa spent Christmas eve and New Year's Day '25 with them and waved goodbye with the rest of the family when Bella and Mark loaded up Bella's Camry and headed back to school.

In February 2025, Harry and Marta spent their third wedding anniversary in a secluded beach villa on Cayman Brac in the Cayman Islands.

Bella and Mark shared the ride home from school for Spring Break 2025. This year it happened to fall on the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Chandra's passing. Marta and Harry let the kids set the tone and to their relief it was one of warm memories and laughter. They spent hours printing out pictures that had been stored all these years on a cloud account. They listened to music that Chandra loved, and they danced.

Just a few weeks later Makayla Powell walked across the stage to accept her high school diploma. The day before commencement, Bella was heading home for the occasion when at the last-minute Mark called to ask if she'd pick him up so he could come home too.

Marta had a graduation party in the back yard and invited all the neighbors. Kayla baked a horse cake, with ingredients dictated by Bella. As the group watched the McFadden's pony and mares dig in, Mark approached Kayla, put his arm around her and hugged her to his chest. The gesture did not go unnoticed; Harry smiled from across the yard.

When the Powell kids had first moved in with Marta, the only time Mark paid any attention to Kayla was when their little brothers were playing soccer or the Sullivans would celebrate birthdays and holidays with Marta and the kids. As they got older, Mark warmed up to Kayla and they became friends, spending hours binging on Netflix or Hulu, or with Kayla beating him mercilessly at Minecraft.

All Tristen and Senisa could think about over the summer was starting their first year of high school. They went to separate schools but spent almost every weekend together at one house or the other. Senisa was smart as a whip, but her passion was art. Her sketches and

watercolors ranged from hard and edgy to ethereal and mystic. Tristen was singularly focused on earning a place on the varsity soccer team in his freshman year of high school.

On Saturday, July 5<sup>th</sup> the local press interviewed Felicia McGuire and Trisha Stevens as the first five foster families received the keys to their new homes in St. Lucie County.

In August, Marta and Harry drove Kayla to Gainesville for Freshman Orientation. In September they drove back up with Tristen to celebrate Kayla's 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, making a detour to Lakeland to pick up Mark. Tristen turned 15 in November, his birthday always coinciding with Thanksgiving, so the girls were home and the family spent the 4-day weekend at Deerfield Beach. Two weeks later Harry reprised his visit to the DMV and the white-knuckle drive home with a newly permitted Tristen at the wheel.

The Christmas holiday and New Year's '26 went by in a blur of kids coming and going, spending time in St. Lucie with Felicia, and catching up with Tom and Maryanne. In May, Marta and Harry joined the Sullivans for dinner to celebrate Mark's graduation from Florida Southern with a BS in Business Administration. As everyone finished dessert Mr. Sullivan, asked for their attention.

He looked at Harry and Marta, "As you know, I'm in the venture capital business. For the kids, that means I lend people money if they have what it takes to be successful and a good business idea."

Tommy interrupted and asked permission for he and Tristen to be excused. What his dad was about to say didn't have anything to do with them. After they left the table Mr. Sullivan continued.

"During visits to see Mark at school, one of the things we noticed was the proliferation of food trucks around Lakeland. I happened to mention that observation to Mark, and he said I should see what's going on in

Gainesville. He explained there were plenty of food trucks but unlike the trucks in Lakeland, the food wasn't that good.

"That got me to thinking and I did some research. With the right business model there was a nice opportunity for investment in the culinary community in Gainesville."

Harry and Marta had been listening attentively, but Kayla looked like her mind was wandering. Mark was smiling from ear to ear.

"Honey, you may be losing your audience," Mrs. Sullivan said, nodding her head in Kayla's direction.

"Okay, so I'll sum things up. We would like to invest in a food truck business in Gainesville that Mark will run featuring Kayla's recipes."

At the mention of her name Kayla perked up but wasn't sure what had been said. "I'm sorry, what did you say, Mr. Sullivan?"

Mark answered instead, "Kayla, how would you like to go into the food-truck business with me in Gainesville?"

"Uh, me? With you? But I've got three years of school left."

"True, but I don't. I might go on to get my master's but I'm taking a gap year, so I can get things up and running. Look, I've been eating your food and watching you create these cool dishes since before you were in high school. Then you got all those crazy hits when I videoed you cooking, and we threw them up on YouTube. They blew up like crazy."

Harry noticed Marta tense up when Mark mentioned videos on the web going viral. He reached for her hand. "You guys have videos on YouTube?" Harry asked.

"Oh yeah, Mr. Bramson. We've had them up for about three years and this year the channel broke the million-view mark. We've made about \$2,000 with AdSense. I give Kayla 60%. I thought since they were her recipes. and she

was doing the cooking on camera that a 60/40 split was fair.” Mark said proudly.

Harry and Marta looked at each other, then at Kayla. “That sounds very fair, Mark. Kayla, you never mentioned this.” Marta said carefully.

“Yeah, I guess not. It’s like no big deal. We did a few that one summer and I really didn’t think about it again.”

“What have you done with the money you made?” Harry asked.

“Well, at first I donated it to Macedonia Baptist, but since Reverend McGuire opened A Home for All, I’ve been giving it to her.”

Harry felt Marta relax. “That’s very generous of you, Kayla. Mark, where can we see them?” Harry asked.

“Just go on YouTube and type in ‘Makayla Powell’s Famous Waffles and Pancakes.’ That’s all we did was waffles and pancakes.”

“No, we did the New Year’s Good Luck Dinner, too.” Kayla corrected him.

Mr. Sullivan cleared his throat, “So, the waffles and pancakes are one of the food trucks we’d like to get up and running, Kayla.”

Kayla looked at Mr. Sullivan and at Mark, “You really mean that? You want me to develop recipes for your food truck business?”

“Well, not *my* food truck business, *our* food truck business. 50/50, equal partners. Right Dad?”

“That’s right. Unless you’d like to discuss a different split, Kayla. We’re open to any ideas you have.”

In a flash Kayla was out of her chair with her arms wrapped around Mark who was still seated. She kissed his head, his cheeks, and then his lips. Marta and Harry looked on stunned as Mr. and Mrs. Sullivan smiled.

“You didn’t know about them?” Mrs. Sullivan asked.

Marta and Harry just shook their heads. Finally, Harry spoke, “Guess we should have been a little more attentive to what’s been going on in Kayla’s life.”

“Oh, don’t worry, it’s really very innocent, at least it has been so far.” Mrs. Sullivan said as she got to her feet and started clearing the table.



## EPILOGUE 2028

Harry carried boxes through the doorway of a quaint, cape cod on a 3-acre wooded lot in Gainesville. “This is the last of them Bella.”

“Thanks, Harry.” Bella responded from the kitchen, where she was unpacking boxes with Marta and Kayla.

She watched through the window as Tristen explored the back yard with Tank. “Be careful with Tank, Tristan, there’s lots of snakes up here.” Bella called through the window.

“I love this place, Bella,” Kayla said as she stopped unpacking dishes to hug her big sister, “It’s so perfect for you. And we’ll be only a few miles apart.”

“What I love is it’s close to school and it’s brand new, so I don’t have to worry about fixing things up.”

Just two weeks before Bella’s 25<sup>th</sup> birthday Harry had gotten a certificate of occupancy on the first home built on the 125 acres he and Marta had purchased last year for A Home for All Intentional Community II.

This would be Bella’s home, at least until she finished her next three years at the University of Florida School of Veterinary Medicine. Harry and Marta would be living in a new double-wide trailer on the other side of the property which would serve as their home and a construction management hub. The original plan was for Tristan to live

with them until he headed to Florida State in Tallahassee that fall on a soccer scholarship. That changed when Harry and Marta revealed the new home they built. It was for the kids, their safe-place, one they could always call home; somewhere they could lay their heads whenever the need arose. Tristan had jumped at the chance to share it with Bella, and she welcomed having her little brother close for his last summer before college.

Faced with being empty nesters, Harry and Marta had the Plantation Acres home up for sale. They were also selling the townhouse Bella and Kayla had been living in. The proceeds from that would be used to purchase something in Tallahassee that Tristen and Senisa could call home.

Senisa would be joining her brother at FSU. She received a partial scholarship based on her artwork, qualified for financial aid, and was awarded a monthly stipend from an anonymous benefactor. The Digital Communication and Media/Multimedia coursework seemed like it would be a good challenge for her left-brain/right-brain personality. Her practicality had rubbed off on Tristen; she had convinced him that although there was no doubt he would have a successful professional soccer career, a degree in Exercise Physiology would be a good backup.

Harry and Marta knew that freshman year plans would likely change by the time Tristen and Senisa had to really declare a major, but as they learned with Bella and Kayla some childhood dreams shaped adult goals.

A few months before the move into her new home, Bella served as Maid of Honor at the marriage of Mark Sullivan and Makayla Powell on April 24, 2028, eight years to the day that Chandra Powell was called home. Tank took his place at the head of the procession as Harry escorted Kayla down the aisle where Mark waited for his bride. As Mr.

Sullivan had predicted, food-trucks with good food were a winning business model. Kayla graduated the month after her wedding and shortly thereafter she and Mark started their second food truck featuring Southern dishes like Hoppin John, cornbread and pot likker soup.

Twice a year, Tom and Kozy met Harry for Stellas and Red Stripes to document a board meeting of the All for One, One for All Trust. Under their careful management, the assets in the trust grew 20–25% each year, after disbursements and administrative costs.

Not long after BUSTED was put to bed, Tom turned down a promotion and took early retirement. He spent his time fishing and spoiling Maryanne, who won election as the Broward County State Attorney for Florida’s 17<sup>th</sup> Judicial Circuit. Her conviction record, especially those of sexual predators, made her so popular she was running uncontested for re-election.

Not far from A Home for All in St. Lucie County, in a newly built, state-of-the art, smart building hardened against cyberattacks, a white-hat hacker sat in a zero-gravity chair in a room lit only by the glow of a wall filled with monitors. His “Manual Override” program ran continuously, playing whack-a-mole with dark-web porn sites around the world, as the balance in his cold wallet grew.

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*“Fiction is the lie through which we tell the truth.”*

— ALBERT CAMUS

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## AFTERWORD

In 2021 some experts predicted that 1 in 500 children in the U.S. would be orphaned by the loss of a parent or guardian to a Covid-19 related death. Other experts pegged the number at one child being orphaned for every two Covid-19 related deaths. In a study published in *The Lancet (July 2021)*, Dr. Susan Hollis, et.al. estimated over one million children worldwide had been orphaned because of Covid.

However you tally the number, it is staggering how many children will be left to be raised by someone other than a parent. Add to that, all the children who already experience any of the dozen metrics used to define 'at-risk' and it is not hyperbole to say that our social safety nets are inadequate and will be overcome by this human tsunami.

Utilizing the century-old concept of Intentional Communities, *Covid Orphans: Collateral Damage* offers an aspirational lifeboat where kind, generous people rally to nurture, love, and keep children safe when their parents can no longer do so.

In this book The Guardian Ad Litem program was used as a fictitious construct to move the narrative forward.

In reality, The Guardian Ad Litem (GAL) program was established in Florida by the courts in 1980. In 2004, a

statewide GAL Office was created to provide local programs with infrastructure and standardization.

In Fiscal Year 2019-20, GAL represented an average of 23,876 children and certified 2,016 new volunteers in 21 *local programs* in the State of Florida.

Florida statutes require the appointment of a guardian ad litem in

- all criminal cases in which there are charges of abuse, neglect, or abandonment or a child is a witness to a sexual offense committed against a minor;
- all dependency cases in which a child is the victim of abuse, neglect, or abandonment; and
- dissolution/custody cases where verified allegations of abuse, neglect, or abandonment are involved.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I used to read Nancy Drew Mysteries in bed at night by flashlight. Words and books have always been a part of my life. They ignite my imagination, fill me with questions, sometimes with answers, provide an escape, and often leave me wondering — about what's next, what's possible, even what's real.

My first job in publishing, in 1974, was with Macmillan Publishers in their book club division. In 1981 I went to work for two entrepreneurs from Canada, who four years earlier had left the frigid north for the sun-drenched south, to start their own publishing company.

I spent thirty-two crazy, wonderful years in the trenches filling a variety of positions at HCI Books (Health Communications), I even got my name on the cover of nine compilations in the phenomenal Chicken Soup for the Soul series!

*Covid Orphans* is my first novel. I hope you enjoyed it. Thank you for reading it.

Teri Peluso