

CHAPTER 1 Youngstown, Ohio, USA, January 6

Derek Bensusan, a quarter-blood Cherokee from Oklahoma City, was just past the rookie stage, but not yet at the point where a more senior agent liked her wouldn't expect him to do all the driving. When they met at the airport, he acted as if they'd never spoken before, but she recognized him as the rude voice she had first spoken to before being patched through to the SAC.

They were just turning off Porters Corners from the 680 Loop, returning to the FBI residence agency, or "base of operations," as Derek called it with blunt sarcasm. She learned why in the coming week. Bensusan was chattier than she liked a colleague to be, but he was preferable to her last partner back in Manhattan. Derek's age but morose. She told herself to get over it. One bad psych eval, one colleague too many who complained about her 'going it alone' too often. What's done is done . . . Bensusan was rambling on about the Sooners' chances this season. The Sooners? American frontier history—no, football. That was Oklahoma. Youngstown State was Penguins.

"Tell me later," she said.

Banks of dirty snow bordered the Sahara Trail entrance. He parked it and handed her the key. They were sharing until a copy could be made. His supervisory agent had cleaned out his desk drawers in a hurry and taken away files, paper, pens, pencils—even the threehole punch turned up missing. Derek said Petree would have taken the Lexus Sport Cross in the parking lot if he could have found a way to hide it in paperwork. He mumbled something she couldn't make out.

"What did you say?"

"Man was crazy about reports," he said. "He lived for them. Turned downright arachnophobic when it came to leaving the office."

Fear of spiders? Derek kept a chaw of tobacco in his cheek for "outdoor excursions" and gum inside the office. She had to infer every third word because of the wad packed in his cheek.

"You were saying something about the Sooners?" "What? No. My money's on the Crimson Tide."

She stood in front of the elevator while Derek held the door open for her from the inside, finger on the button, waiting for her to step in.

"New York didn't tell me much about SAC Petree's suicide. What is there I should know?"

"Man retired," Derek said. "Went duck hunting, according to his wife. When they fished him out of the pond, his waders were full of rocks."

"That's it?"

"What else do you want?"

She closed her mouth and entered the building. What was the use? Derek was a millennial, three removes from the MTV generation, but afflicted with their short attention span but adept at violent video games and social media. Images and words have been torn asunder in the pop-culture blitzkrieg of America's youth worship. Asking for the meaning of anything was like expecting a lecture on collisionless waveparticle interactions in Pashto. Nowadays you expected things to end where they did; meaninglessness was the rule, not the exception, and every other conversation taught you that much. *Was he Gen Z or Gen Alpha?* She got the generations confused. His remark about Alabama's football team brought a different tide to her mind, the one about the "blood-dimmed tide loosed upon the world."

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