

A Race Against Time

The Abducted, #1

by Roger Hayden, ...

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Sarasota, Florida

Phillip Anderson was a wanted man. Lee County Police Department released an APB, and a state-wide manhunt was just around the corner. What authorities didn't know, however, was that he had one destination in mind. And once he got there and did what needed to be done, it would be too late.

He had long since fled Anderson Auto Salvage in a getaway van—and had effectively evaded authorities. They had little knowledge of his frequent disguises and his overall resourcefulness and intelligence. Phillip knew that if he was going to remain free, he would need to utilize his talents like never before.

He often wore wigs, makeup, and even dresses to fool his victims and earn their trust. It had worked every time. At six feet and two hundred and thirty pounds, he wasn't the most convincing woman. But in the interest of his disguise, he often kept a clean shave. The concept of being someone else was something that had always intrigued him.

After going through an Arby's drive-through, Philip parked and applied his makeup in the rear-view mirror. He then put on a frumpy brunette wig and adjusted it accordingly. His red lipstick glistened and his light-blue eye shadow matched well with his rosy cheeks. He scarfed down his sandwich and then changed into a sleeveless light-blue dress that went down to his ankles. He put a pair of sunglasses on and smiled at himself in the mirror. *Phyllis* was ready.

It was early Thursday morning when he pulled onto Miriam Castillo's street, parking a few houses down. He knew that she wasn't going to be home. In fact, he was counting on it. Miriam had joined the hunt for him with the other authorities. She had ruined everything and would hefty pay a price.

Phillip was, however, expecting to see Miriam's daughter, Ana, and her ex-husband, Freddy. It was a risky mission, but he needed to act before Ana went to school. A few buses had already passed him by. He grabbed his purse, stepped out of the van, and headed toward Miriam's quaint home at the end of the cul-de-sac. His loafers brushed against the pavement as he walked across the road and onto the sidewalk, whistling along the way.

Freddy was in the living room, glued to the television. The morning news detailed the raid at the Anderson Auto Salvage Yard, and the subsequent hunt for

their number-one suspect, Phillip Anderson. The other Anderson boys—Greg, Walter, and Jake—had been taken into custody, along with their sixty-something parents, Boone and Judith.

Freddy was uneasy when he heard Miriam's name on television, and then he saw a quick image of her from when she was on the police force.

He leaned closer to the TV, mouth agape, and tried again to call her cell. It rang and rang until she finally answered, apologizing. She was on her way home. One of the detectives at the station was driving her. They'd be there in an hour by her estimate.

"They're talking about you on television," Freddy said excitedly, standing up and adjusting the belt on his bathrobe.

Ana had just woken up and walked across the hall, straight to the bathroom, closing the door behind her.

Freddy continued. "Ana is going to get a kick out of this for sure!"

"Don't tell her too much," Miriam said. "*There are things about this case she doesn't need to know.*"

Freddy paced the living room, a smile across his face. "So, you're famous now? Congratulations!"

Miriam laughed. "Hardly. But thank you."

Freddy turned and looked at the bathroom door down the hall as the toilet flushed. "I have to make breakfast for Ana. Better hurry up if you want some."

Miriam paused. "*Will do.*"

"Drive safely, and we'll see you soon."

"*I will. Thanks.*" She paused again. "*I really appreciate your help. It means a lot to me.*"

"My pleasure," Freddy said, turning back to the television screen. The news anchor was still discussing the story. Before hanging up, he told Miriam, "Maybe we could, uh, talk about things later?"

Miriam sighed. "*I don't know, Freddy. I just think things are fine between us now, and let's keep them that way.*"

Freddy walked toward the kitchen, lowering his voice. "Look. We need to talk. I need this, and I think I've earned it, coming here on short notice to watch Ana while you play detective."

"*All right, Freddy. Drop it,*" she said with increased agitation in her voice. "*We'll talk later. Okay?*"

Freddy smiled, victorious. "I'll have a plate of eggs ready for you when you get here."

Miriam said good-bye and hung up. Freddy walked back to the living room and stood in front of the TV, cell phone in hand. The news flashed a mug shot image of Phillip Anderson. His gray hair, standing on end, and his bushy beard and sunken eyes made him look like a madman. The photo, they said, was from a DUI arrest from two years ago. Anderson had a record, and the news anchor reminded viewers that he was believed to be a dangerous and violent man.

They mentioned Miriam again and showed her official police photo, even though she had quit the force a year ago. An energetic commentator dubbed her a "testament to vigilance." Freddy smiled and walked to the bathroom down the hall, rapping on the door and calling.

“Ana, hurry. Your mom’s on TV!”

The shower turned on. Freddy got the message and walked away, setting his cell phone on a nearby coffee table. Suddenly a knock came at the front door. Surprised, he approached the door, peeking out through the living room curtains where he saw the back side of a large woman in a Sunday dress at the door. What she wanted, he had no idea. It was pretty early for callers.

He neared the front door and looked through the peephole. The woman stood with a purse strap on her shoulder and her hands folded at her front. She wore dark sunglasses and had on too much makeup. Her frumpy brunette hair covered her shoulders on both sides like a fur scarf. Outside of these few oddities, she looked harmless. Freddy ran his hands through his short, thick hair and opened up the door halfway as the outside light beamed into the foyer.

“Hi, can I help you?” he asked, squinting.

The woman smiled. “Hi there! My name is Phyllis,” she said in a perky, but deep southern accent. She extended her thick, meaty hand and Freddy shook it, introducing himself.

“Is Miriam here?” she asked, looking over his shoulder.

Freddy glanced behind him. “No, she’s not.”

“Shucks. Well, I live a couple houses down and I was hoping to catch her. I heard about her on the radio and saw that her car was still here.” She folded her hands and raised them to her face. “It’s so exciting!”

Freddy nodded. “Sure is. She’s still on the road. You can probably catch her later today.”

The woman eyed him intently. “You’re *Freddy*, correct? Ana’s father?”

“That’s me.”

“It’s a pleasure to finally meet you,” she said with a subtle bow.

Freddy nodded back again, searching for an out. Phyllis pressed on with enthusiasm and a smile. “But what I really wish I could get from you is a cup of sugar.”

His face bunched up in confusion. “Sugar?”

“That’s right, *Sugar*,” she said with a laugh as Freddy stood awkwardly holding the door.

“Miriam and I exchange stuff all the time. My husband needs *a lot* of sugar in his coffee if he’s going to get up in the morning. ‘Fraid I’m all out.”

Freddy glanced behind him again, toward the kitchen, then turned back to her. “I really don’t know where she keeps anything. I’m just here babysitting, frankly.”

Phyllis tried to peek past him. “She keeps a big bag in the cupboard next to the fridge.”

Freddy turned again and scratched his head, wishing she’d go away and tell her damn husband, Too bad, no sugar.

“It will only take a minute, I promise. Thanks so much!” she said with another big smile.

“Okay,” Freddy said reluctantly. He opened the door and stepped aside. “Come on in.”

Phyllis thanked him and went in. They walked past the living room, where the television flashed more images of Phillip Anderson’s mug shot from at least five years ago, with the title: “Snatcher on the Loose!”

“I can’t believe that,” Phyllis said as they entered the kitchen. She took her purse and set it on the table. “Just terrible.”

Freddy turned slightly and then went to the cupboard, opening the one nearest the refrigerator. “Yeah, it’s really something.” His back remained to Phyllis as he searched the shelves, coming up short. He opened the next cabinet—nothing but dishes. He moved to the next and found shelves full of spices and condiments.

With his back still turned, Freddy moved some cans aside in the cabinet. Phillip reached into his purse and grabbed a pair of black gloves. After putting them on, she pulled out a long hunting knife.

“I hope they find that awful man,” he said, maintaining his womanly tone. “He looks like a monster.”

Phillip’s eyes remained fixated on Freddy as he continued searching the cabinet.

“Found it!” Freddy said, reaching for a half-full bag of sugar in the back.

Phillip lunged forward, wrapped his thick arm around Freddy’s forehead, and yanked him back into her chest. Freddy’s arms flailed in the air as he screamed out in panic—his cries cut short by the deep slice of the blade across his throat. Blood spurting from the gash right below his Adam’s apple.

Phillip squeezed Freddy’s head back more, holding him as he choked with blood as it sprayed on the kitchen counter, running down Freddy’s chest and soaking his robe. Phillip released his grip and tossed Freddy aside like a rag doll. Blood continued to gush from his wound, forming a thick pool as he smacked face-first onto the tile floor.

Phillip held the bloodstained blade, standing over Freddy and watching as he gasped for his few last breaths. Blood had gotten all over Phillip’s dress. He went to the sink and washed the knife under the faucet. He then wiped the knife clean with a paper towel ripped from the countertop dispense. As he turned the faucet off, he heard the shower cease in the bathroom down the hall.

“Ana...” he said under his breath with a smile.

Freddy’s motionless body lay on the floor. His mouth was open. His eyes were wide and dilated. Phillip stepped over him and went to the table, where he put the knife back in his purse. He stepped around Freddy, knelt down, and lifted him up.

With a grunt, he dragged Freddy’s body to the kitchen table, pushing a chair out with his leg. The TV continued on about the ongoing manhunt and so-called “underground dungeon” discovered on one of the Anderson properties. It was strange for Phillip to hear about himself in the third person; a new kind of fame he hadn’t counted on or desired.

He sat Freddy upright on the chair and patted his hair. Freddy’s head slumped down as fluid leaked from his eyes, nose, and ears. Phillip grabbed the purse and went toward the living room, where he took the remote and muted the TV. Following the silence, a hair-dryer turned on in the bathroom, blowing loudly.

Phillip casually dug into his purse and pulled out a rag and a twenty-ounce bottle of chloroform. He then held the rag to the opening and tilted the bottle, holding it there. The hairdryer stopped. Phillip crept to the bathroom, bottle and rag in hand, and knocked on the door.

“I’m almost ready. Chill!” Ana said from inside.

Phillip knocked again.

“What?” Ana asked, annoyed.

Another knock. Ana swung the door open, angered. “I said—” she began, freezing up in her pink T-shirt and blue jeans. Her eyes widened as she looked up at the stranger before her.

Phillip lunged forward, grabbed the back of Ana’s head, and shoved the rag into her face. Ana’s arms flailed and punched air. She tried to kick. She tried to scream, but she didn’t have a chance. Her cries were muffled. The rag covered her nose and mouth. Her eyes watered. Phillip shoved her face deeper into the rag.

“There, there,” he said. “Go to sleep.”

Ana’s arms fell, and her body went limp. Phillip scooped her up with one arm and left the bathroom. He grabbed his purse from the couch and rushed Ana out of the house, closing the door behind them.

Discovery

Miriam arrived on her street, ready to collapse once she got home. It had been a whirlwind past couple of days, thrust back into a case she never thought she’d re-visit. Lou, a friendly detective who always insisted that she call him by his first name, dropped her off at her house after a long night at the hospital, where two girls, rescued from abduction, had been taken for treatment.

Their suspect, Phillip Anderson, had fled the scene, but Miriam was confident the police would find him. His face was all over TV and the Internet. The case had all the makings of a national crime story: a tight-knit crime family in a small Florida town who dealt in drugs, kidnapping, and murder—Anderson could run, she believed, but he’d turn up somewhere.

Miriam took comfort in that fact as Lou pulled up into her driveway to drop her off.

“Thanks, Lou,” she said smiling.

“You got it. Call me after you get some rest, and we’ll go over the case,” he said as the car idled.

“Sure thing,” she said, opening the door.

“Miriam...” he said as her foot hit the pavement. She stopped and turned. “Yes?”

“Don’t worry about Anderson. He’s on the run, he’s scared, and it’s only a matter of time before he makes a mistake.”

She nodded in understanding, bid him farewell, and stepped out of the car, closing the door. As he backed out, she walked up the driveway with a gym bag over her shoulder—her standard travel bag. She’d been away from home for three days—shorter than planned. The case had been solved, and she could go back to her normal life. There was nothing she wanted more.

Her Tahoe sat in the driveway next to Freddy’s truck. She passed both vehicles, feeling a little better about herself and how everything turned out. She approached the front door and gave it a try. It was unlocked.

She opened the door and walked in. Something immediately seemed off-kilter. The television was on with the sound muted. The air was still—the house silent. The blinds were drawn, and the lights off. It was a little past ten in the morning,

and she assumed that Ana was already at school. But it was strange not to see Freddy anywhere.

“Freddy?” she called out, scanning the darkened living room.

She nearly jumped to see him sitting at the kitchen table with his back to her. She set her gym bag down and went into the kitchen.

“Freddy?”

Her eyes glanced past him to a thick puddle of blood, extending from one end of the tile floor to the other. She called out to Freddy again. He didn’t move. She felt her body shaking, crept around to face him and then covered her mouth, stifling a horrified gasp.

His throat was slashed. Blood soaked his T-shirt and bathrobe. His head was tilted down, his eyes wide, pupils dilated and lifeless. Trembling, she stepped back with the urge to run, but then noticed a note on the table.

You took my playmates, Miriam. Now you and your daughter are all I have left to play with. Love Phyllis.

Her legs shook as a cold chill consumed her body. The connection was clear. Anderson had found her. Her heart raced; she felt light-headed from her rapid breathing. She dropped the note and turned away. The sight of Freddy’s corpse filled her with grief. She tripped and fell back against the counter as one elbow rammed against the microwave.

She felt vulnerable and afraid. Anderson could still be in the house, watching her. She fell to her knees. The shaking had traveled to her hands.

“Ana,” she thought. “*Oh my God, Ana!*”

She reached into her purse and pulled her 9mm Beretta and cell phone out, ready to call 9-1-1. A missed call was displayed on the screen from an unavailable number. Before she could even investigate, the phone buzzed with a call from the same unknown number.

“Hello?” she said in a frantic voice, rising back up. She held the pistol out, crouched down, and moved slowly out of the kitchen, toward the bedrooms. There was breathing on the other end, but nothing else.

“Who is this?” she shouted.

Down the hall, the bathroom door was open. Miriam approached it slowly and looked inside. There were clothes piled on the floor but no sign of Ana. The person on the phone remained silent, but the breathing continued.

Miriam rushed to Ana’s darkened room and saw her school bag on the floor next to her shoes. Ana’s cell phone sat atop her nightstand. She never went anywhere without her phone. Miriam felt a gripping pain in her stomach at the realization of what was happening. Tears welled in her eyes as she kept her phone pressed tightly against her ear.

“*Miriam?*” a metallic, robotic voice said from the other end of the line.

“What do you want?” she asked, frantic.

The caller laughed. “*Did you get my note?*”

Miriam left Ana’s room and raced to her own. The bed was made. Nothing appeared to have been touched.

“Where is she? You son of a—” She paused and tried to contain her rage. “Please let her go. We can work this out.”

“*What’s done can’t be undone.*” The voice was distorted through some kind of voice box. “*You know that as well as I.*”

She ran down the hall, past the kitchen, and to the front door, yanking the door open as sunlight hit her face. “Where are you?” she asked in a demanding tone.

“*You just missed me,*” he said.

She circled the front yard, desperately searching for any sign of Anderson within range.

“*I saw you get home,*” he continued. “*Figured it wouldn’t be long before you saw my little surprise.*”

Miriam stopped in the middle of her yard. The neighborhood was quiet. The other homes and vehicles on her cul-de-sac were all a blur. Anderson was nowhere in sight.

“Phyllis?” she said.

“Yes?”

Miriam paused, biting her lower lip. “Mr. Anderson, I know it’s you. I don’t see the need to disguise your voice.”

“*Call me cautious,*” he answered.

The most important thing for Miriam was keeping him on the line. She assured him that she hadn’t called the cops, and that she had no interest in finding him, and that all she wanted was her daughter back. She pleaded with him as she had never done with anyone before. He listened without interruption, and once she finished, he spoke.

“*Are you done?*”

“Yes. Do we have a deal?” she said, tears streaming down her cheek.

“*Deal?*” He seemed flummoxed.

“Anything you want. Every penny I have, I don’t care.”

“*Save your breath. There’s no deal.*”

“Take me, then! I’m the one you want. Leave Ana out of this. She’s only a child!”

An elderly neighbor, Reba Henderson, was looking out from behind her blinds, startled by Miriam’s yelling.

He continued: “*And because she’s only a child, that makes her perfect,*” he said.

The desire to reach through the phone and rip his eyes out hit Miriam like a rushing current. “If you touch her, I’ll kill you. You hear me? One hair on her head and you’re dead!”

He responded, pleased and amused. “*Now this is the Sergeant Castillo I want to hear.*” He laughed again.

Miriam simmered with rage. She wiped her tears and continued pacing her lawn in a distraught circle.

“*Tell me something, Sergeant Castillo—are you still a cop? I thought you left the force after I shot your partner.*”

She ignored his efforts to push her buttons. “Bring Ana back and take me. I’m begging you.”

“*You call the police and do what you gotta do. I’ll call back soon with my demands.*”

“No, wait—”

He hung up without another word. Miriam kept the phone at her ear, begging him to answer. There was no response. She searched the street again for any sign of him. When she reached the end of her yard, her knees locked as her legs went numb, causing her to fall onto the hard pavement of the road.

Reba Henderson opened her screen door and came plodding outside in a flowery nightgown and flip-flops. "Goodness, Miriam. What happened?" she asked, approaching with a cup of coffee in hand.

With both hands on the ground, Miriam pushed herself up, still clutching her pistol. Though about half her size, Reba tried her best to help Miriam back on her feet.

Miriam began sobbing uncontrollably. "Ana..." She wiped her eyes again and looked directly into Reba's eyes. "Did you see anyone here?"

Reba paused, blinking behind the thick lenses of her glasses. "I don't know. Like who?"

Miriam grabbed Reba's arm, pulling her closer. "A vehicle. Someone pulling into the driveway or across the street. Anything!"

Reba looked startled and confused. "I'm sorry, Miriam. I didn't see anything. Only just looked out the window because I heard you out here."

Miriam knelt down and picked up her cell phone. "It's Ana," she said. "She's missing."

Reba gasped and covered her mouth. "Oh no!"

Miriam didn't yet have the heart to tell her about Freddy. A gruesome revelation like that would be too much for someone her age. But it seemed that Reba's suspicions were already there. She squinted ahead, examining the pickup truck in the driveway as Miriam punched some numbers into her phone. Detective Lou couldn't have gotten too far, and he was the best person Miriam could think of to call. Time was not on their side.

Another neighbor from across the street now looked as if he were leaving. His blue Toyota Corolla was backing out of the garage and down the driveway. Miriam ran past Reba and toward the other neighbor's car as it backed onto the street.

"Wait!" she shouted, phone and pistol in hand. The driver, Brice Holland, a middle-aged banker, slammed his brakes and jerked his head to the side in surprise.

"Brice, my daughter has been abducted," Miriam said as he rolled down his window. "Did you see anything earlier? Maybe ten, twenty minutes ago?"

He looked up, dumbfounded. He kept both hands on the steering wheel, the cuffs of his white dress shirt showing a quarter-inch at his wrist. "You call the police yet?"

Miriam's tone rose in anger. "She was taken right out of the house. Did you see anything?"

"I don't think so." Suddenly, his eyes lit up. "Come to think of it... I did see a van drive by earlier when I went to get the paper."

Miriam felt hopeful. "What did it look like? Did you get a license plate?" Her gray eyes were wild and fiery. Brice flashed a nervous glance, looking at the pistol she was holding. "It was an old Dodge van. Ummm. White. A little rusty." He held a finger up. "Couldn't see the driver through the tinted windows, but they circled the street at least twice."

Concerned, Brice watched her as she walked away from his car with a cell phone pressed against her ear. “Are you calling the police?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said, turning to face him. “And thank you!”

Reba stood awkwardly in Miriam’s yard sipping her coffee as Brice drove away. “Where’s your husband?” she asked her flat out. “Thought I saw him with her.”

Miriam was just out of earshot but heard the question just fine, choosing not answer. Detective Lou was on the line, not sounding the least bit surprised that she had called him back.

“What happened? Got locked out?”

Miriam’s voice was bordering on hysterics. She could barely hold it in anymore. “Ana’s gone! Please come back!”

There was a pause on the line followed by a much more serious tone. *“Miriam... What happened?”*

“Phillip Anderson. He found me. I don’t know how, but he found me. He... he butchered Freddy and kidnapped Ana.”

“The Snatcher? They got a statewide manhunt issued for the guy. I hardly think—”

“He left me a note and called me. It’s him. He’s driving a white van. Old and rusty.” She could feel the tears beginning to flow. “Please just get over here before I lose my daughter forever...”

“Have you called the police yet?” Lou asked.

“No. I can’t even think straight right now. We-We just need to find the van.” Her voice trembled.

“Just calm down. Listen to me. Call 9-1-1 so they can issue an AMBER Alert. I’m turning around right now. Stay cool and we’ll figure this thing out. I promise.”

She thanked him and got off the phone. Mrs. Anderson had overheard some of the conversation and asked her again about Freddy. Miriam looked at her neighbor and tried to lie, but her face said it all. “Please. Just go inside your house,” she said. “The police will be here soon.”

Reba looked around and shuffled back across her yard seemingly distraught with all the news.

The 9-1-1 dispatcher picked up on the other end, asking Miriam what her emergency was.

“My husband has been murdered and my daughter kidnapped!” she said with urgency. They needed to deploy the National Guard, she said. She wanted every force at her disposal to help find her daughter while there was still hope. But she had to keep a clear head.

“What’s your address?” the dispatcher asked. Miriam tried giving her information as clearly and calmly as she could—despite the emotions crippling her. The dispatcher informed her that a unit would be sent to her house immediately. He tried to assure her that everything was going to be okay, but with each passing minute Ana began to feel farther and farther away.

She lowered the phone and stared at her house. There were more people she could call—friends on the force. She could use them to her advantage. From the outside, the house now seemed evil and ominous. It was impossible to think that Freddy sat dead inside. Her next move was uncertain. But she did know one thing for sure—she wasn’t going back in the house.

Four squad cars showed up about ten minutes later. Their sirens could be heard from a mile away, and when they arrived, their lights flashed with the sickening urgency Miriam could feel in her heart. She had called Detective O'Leary at the hospital, where he had been taken with a gunshot wound to his leg, the result of a shootout with one of Phillip's men. The receptionist informed her that the detective was in surgery.

She called her parents, Manuel and Elizabeth, and was met with a misplaced excitement about her name being in the news. Initially, she didn't have the heart to tell them anything, but she got it out anyway. Horrified, they offered to fly down from Pittsburgh immediately. Miriam advised against it. "This isn't over yet," she said. Freddy's parents would have to know. It would be a hard call to make. They never forgave her for divorcing their son.

A fire truck and ambulance pulled up, soon garnering the curious attention of the entire block. Detective Lou arrived in a hurry. His car flew to the side of the road and skidded across the pavement to a halt. Miriam hurried past a group of officers and dashed toward Lou—the only familiar face in the crowd. He got out of his car, adjusting his tie, when Miriam ran into his arms and cried against his chest.

Taken aback, he patted her head and took the pistol out of her hand. "Remember what I said. You have to remain strong."

Miriam took a step back and tried to pull herself together, but her body was shaking. She felt an increasing dread, overwhelmed by the presence of so many officers and emergency personnel on the scene—their numbers having grown to more than thirty.

"They're here to help," Lou reminded her. "The sooner we get this info out about the white van, the sooner we get him."

"He got away before. He can do it again," Miriam said, a deep worry reflected in her eyes.

Several officers approached, ready with questions.

"Good morning, ma'am. Is everything okay?" a boyish deputy asked. His face reminded her of her old partner, Deputy Lang, and he flushed in embarrassment when he seemed to realize what he had asked.

She signaled to her house and walked toward the driveway, feeling a crushing weight pulling her down. The last thing she wanted to do was to go back inside. Lou flashed his badge and told another officer to put an APB out on the white van. He followed Miriam and asked her the make.

"Dodge," she commented. "At least that's what my neighbor said."

Halfway up the driveway, her cell phone rang. She looked at the screen, half-expecting it to be her parents again, only this time it displayed "Unavailable."

She answered the phone asking, "Where are you?"

Lou and the officers looked at her inquiringly.

"Looks like you've got company?" a distorted voice said.

One female officer was busy reeling yellow police tape from her mailbox to a post on the other side of her yard. Suspicious eyes were everywhere, looking out from neighboring homes, and from the faces in her own windows. Then something

occurred to Miriam. She turned away from her house and started walking back into the street. The officers stopped working and watched as Lou chased after her.

Miriam said, "Where are you? Tell me!"

Phillip laughed. *"I assure you, I've long left the area."*

"I want to talk to Ana," Miriam said, wiping her eyes.

Lou approached, she raised a finger, signaling for him to wait. When he saw the look on her face, he leaned in closer.

"Is that him?" he whispered.

Miriam nodded. "Are you still there?" she asked into the phone.

"Seems like you're tied up at the minute. I'll call back later," he answered.

"You have to let me talk to my daughter."

An impatient sigh was his answer. Lou grabbed the phone out of Miriam's hand. She spun around, upset. "What are you doing?"

Lou held his index finger to his mouth, dug out a portable recording device from his pocket, and connected it to her phone with a cable through the headphone port.

Miriam got the hint. He was trying to record the call. She took her phone back, as Lou held onto his recording device.

"Please," she continued into the phone.

"Very well," he responded with surprising cooperation. *"These are my demands. You show me that I can work with you, I'll be more than happy to let you talk to Ana."*

"Okay," Miriam said, after a brief pause.

"The Lee County Police Department have unjustly arrested my parents. My father and mother have no place in jail and no place in an interrogation room as they had nothing to do with the family's criminal activities. See to it that they are freed and I'll let you talk to Ana."

Miriam looked at Lou. He signaled at her to keep it going. "I'll see what I can do."

"You have twelve hours," he said, hanging up.

Crime Scene

Police and investigators alike amassed in and around Miriam's house, sealing the area off as local news vans arrived outside. She sat on her living room sofa with Lou, surrounded by investigators, as the authorities searched her home, which had quickly become unrecognizable, as in a bad dream. All she wanted to do was to wake up.

Her kitchen—where the murder had taken place—had been segregated by caution tape. Small yellow placards littered the floor, marking evidence to be photographed and gathered. A thick puddle of blood remained drying on the kitchen floor. Freddy's body was placed in a body bag on top of a wheeled gurney.

"Where are you taking him?" she asked the paramedics.

They turned to her with uneasiness. There were so many people in the house, it was hard to tell who was who.

“To the coroner, ma’am,” said a thin-haired paramedic, who wore a gray shirt with the words “EMT” stamped on the back.

“No. That’s not right,” Miriam said. “I have to call his parents. They need to have the final say-so here.”

“Those decisions normally go to the spouse,” his young female partner said, pulling out some paperwork. “Which is why we need you to sign these.”

Miriam held her hand up. “We’re separated,” she said, catching a few questioning glances aimed in her direction.

Her black shoulder-length hair was frazzled. Her fair-skinned face had turned red and puffy and was caked with dried tears. She had been asked the same questions for the past twenty minutes and felt as though she was getting nowhere in explaining the situation.

One detective with a protruding gut, bald head, and thin mustache leaned against the couch examining his notepad. He introduced himself as Detective Turner, and his line of questioning, was all business. “So you got home at approximately ten this morning. Found your husband deceased and your daughter missing.” He pointed to the kitchen table across the way, where the note had been placed in a Ziploc evidence bag. “And the perpetrator left you a note and then called your cell phone.”

“That’s correct,” Miriam said, distracted by a female paramedic approaching her. Acting as a surrogate bodyguard, Lou stood up and blocked the slightly confused young paramedic. Lou was a tall man with sideburns, a mustache, and an authoritative manner. “Here, I’ll take those. Just transport the deceased, and we’ll follow up later.”

The paramedic nodded and handed him the papers. Other detectives were busy taking pictures of every square inch of the kitchen. One particular crime scene investigator was busy dusting the counter for prints. A news crew tried to enter the house and was blocked by an officer at the door. One pushy male reporter put up a fight but was pushed away, prompting the officer to shut the door and close the living room draperies.

Detective Turner continued questioning, pen in hand, his expression and tone incredulous and assertive. “So how did this person get your cell phone number? How did they know that you wouldn’t be home?”

“I don’t know,” Miriam said. She could feel her emotions getting the best of her.

“You don’t find that the least bit suspicious?” Turner asked.

“What do you mean?” Miriam asked, glaring at him.

Turner shrugged. “I don’t know.” He looked at two other detectives who were standing close by, quiet and attentive. He then looked back at Miriam. “Whole thing smells kinda fishy.”

Miriam jumped up. Turner shifted back on his heels, surprised. “This is ridiculous!” she shouted. All heads turned to her. The room went quiet. “I told you who it is. It’s Phillip Anderson. He’s driving a rusty white Dodge van with tinted windows and he has my daughter!”

“We have an APB on the vehicle you described,” Turner began. “In order for us to find your daughter, I have to ask questions.”

Miriam looked around at the blurry faces watching her. “I told you his demands. I told you what he wants. Now find him!”

The detectives stared at her, taken aback and not happy. Lou opened his mouth to speak as Miriam stormed off down the hall to the bathroom. She slammed the door, and all eyes went on Lou.

“Give her a moment, guys,” Lou said. “She’s been through hell and back.”

Miriam gripped the sink and stared at her flushed face in the mirror. She had dark eyebrows, full lips, and straight black hair covering one side of her face—nice features, though right now she felt like a wreck. Talking resumed outside the bathroom. The Sarasota PD was setting up camp, but her daughter was still gone. She felt ready to take her car and search for Anderson herself.

“Why not?” she said out loud. “You’ve been down this road before.”

She felt painfully alone, as her mind raced with options. An emotional blow struck—Freddy’s death, making her double over and clutch the rim of the sink. Was it her fault? She gripped the sink tighter and leaned down as her hair hung in her face. Her neck remained bent as she quietly sobbed. Had she never called him over and asked him to watch Ana, he’d still be alive. Had she never gone back to the case to begin with, none of it would have happened. Freddy would be still be alive, and Ana would be safely at school.

What was she going to tell his parents? She needed solace, but there was none to be found. By meddling in the Anderson family’s business, she had failed Freddy and Ana. The thought crushed her. She wondered, just as Detective Turner did, how Anderson had gotten her number and address. None of it made sense. But she couldn’t quit. Not when Ana needed her.

She turned the faucet on and washed her face. The warm water was soothing. She ran soap over her hands and held them under the water, slowly rubbing them together. Afterward, she grabbed a towel and dried her hands and face. It seemed amazing that she could do even these ordinary things. She took Ana’s brush and ran it through her hair. Her eyes met the mirror again. There would be no more doubt. No more blaming herself. No more fear. And once she found Anderson, she was going to kill him. There was no other way.

She left the bathroom to find Lou playing the captured cell phone recording to a circle of detectives, all quietly listening.

“*See to it,*” said the voice, referring to his parents, “*that they are freed and brought to an undisclosed location, and I’ll let you talk to Ana.*” The voice was distorted, ominous sounding.

Lou stopped the recording. “I tried to get a trace, but came up empty-handed.”

“I don’t get it,” Detective Turner said, interjecting. “The guy leaves a note in his own handwriting, but doesn’t leave fingerprints. Calls her up but doesn’t leave a number. Tells her who he is but uses a voice box.”

“It’s pretty simple,” Miriam said, approaching them, steely and determined. “He’s exposing only what he wants to, without leaving concrete evidence.”

Turner turned his head away from Miriam and back to the other detectives. “What about the note?”

“Anyone could have written that,” Lou answered.

“We’ll see,” Turner said. “My team will look into it.”

Miriam broke into the circle and leaned against the couch, eyeing everyone around her. “What are we going to do to meet his demands? The release of the

Anderson parents in exchange for my being able to talk to my daughter seems more than fair to me.”

“Not my area,” Turner said, getting up. He signaled the rest of the detectives to the kitchen. They left as Miriam looked to Lou for help. “Well?” she said. “Who do we need to talk to?”

Lou shifted in his seat uncomfortably and sighed.

“No,” she said, pointing at him. “Don’t tell me it can’t be done. It has to be done. It’s the only chance I have.”

She grabbed the remote and turned on the television. It was uncanny. The local news was reporting from in front of her house, right where police had the area cordoned off. Behind the reporter, in the background, was the ambulance where the EMTs had just loaded Freddy’s body.

“We’re standing here in front of the Castillo residence, where Miriam Castillo, the former police sergeant involved in the so-called “Snatcher case,” is in the midst of another murder investigation. Details at this point are unclear, but retribution against Ms. Castillo is rumored to have resulted in at least one death of a close family member.”

Miriam stared at the screen, rage burning through her. The amount of utter speculation she was hearing was astounding. The well-groomed male reporter went on to say that an APB had been issued for a white Dodge van, possibly ten to twenty years old, with tinted windows. They showed a sample photo of what the real van might look like. Helicopters had been deployed, and the reporter glanced up. Then his face grew solemn and he began speaking as if he had just heard an important piece of breaking news through his earpiece.

“We’re now reporting that an AMBER Alert has been issued for Ms. Castillo’s eleven-year-old daughter, Ana.” Strangely enough, they even had a picture of her—a school photo from the previous year—and displayed her height, weight, and hair and eye color.

Miriam turned to Lou with anguish in her eyes. “How did they get a picture of her like that?” She stared back at the screen, eyes glazed and mouth open.

The man concluded his report by briefly revisiting the Snatcher case and then handing the show back to the studio’s news desk anchor, who launched into a cheery look at sports highlights. Miriam tossed the remote down and headed toward the front door.

“Whoa,” Lou said, running toward her. “Where are you going?”

She whipped around, infuriated. “I want to know how they got a picture of my daughter.”

Detective Turner, who had seen the commotion from the kitchen, advanced toward her, calling: “Perhaps this environment isn’t the best for you right now, Ms. Castillo.”

Miriam did a U-turn from the front door, facing toward the kitchen with her fists balled. Again, Lou blocked her path. “Come on now. This isn’t helping!”

“Helping?” she said, pointing at Turner’s pudgy and indifferent face. “How is any of this helping?” The room went quiet again. The entire Sarasota police force, it seemed, simply stared back at her with blank expressions.

“We’re doing everything we can,” said a lanky detective standing nearby. He had kind eyes and a soft voice and placed a hand on her shoulder. “But in order to catch this guy, we’ve got to gather up every piece of evidence at our disposal.”

Miriam turned away, saying nothing. She grabbed her purse and went right out the front door, toward her red Tahoe. Lou stood aside, as flabbergasted as the other officers. He nodded to the lanky detective and then went out the door, following Miriam.

She rushed out of the door, looking down and ignoring the news crews in the distance. She looked up with dismay to find a police car parked behind her Tahoe. She stopped and sighed as two male officers from out of nowhere approached her.

“Everything all right, ma’am?” one asked.

“One of you is blocking me in. Could you move that car, please?” she asked.

They looked at each other, unsure. Miriam threw her hands up. “Come on. Move it or lose it.”

Three different local news crews moved quickly from their vans and hurried over to Miriam. The two officers turned to them and told them not to pass the driveway.

“Ms. Castillo!” an attractive female reporter shouted. “Can you tell us what happened here?”

“Is this the Snatcher’s revenge?” a male reporter asked.

“Any message for the Snatcher?” an excited male reporter added.

Miriam unlocked her Tahoe, pressing a button on her key and opened the door, ignoring them.

Lou suddenly came around the corner to stop her from leaving. “Miriam, wait. Where are you going?”

“To find that bastard and kill him,” she said, ducking into the driver’s seat. Lou held her door open before she could slam it. “Come on now, wait. You’re blocked in.”

She flashed her fiery eyes at him, clearly not about to be dictated to or deterred. “Tell them to move it before I ram it out of the way.”

Lou kept his grip on the door, not wanting to let her out of his sight. “We’ll take my car. That work for you?”

She jammed her keys into the ignition and then, with both hands on the steering wheel, seemed to have a change of heart. She looked up at him and gave a subtle nod. “Okay, Lou.”

She took her keys out slowly and stepped out of the car. Lou closed her door, and they stood side by side. His white Crown Victoria was parked across the street; they looked at each other, thinking the same thing: This could prove to be a little problematic.

“What about them?” Miriam said, pointing at the news crews.

“We walk through them. Can we keep them from putting your face on TV? No. But we don’t have to say anything.”

“I still want to know how they got that information about Ana.” She paused and looked into Lou’s worried eyes, searching for truth. “Tell me this much: Are you going to help me secure the release of Anderson’s parents, or are we going out to chase white vans all day?”

Lou grinned with a hint of sarcasm in his expression. “I have tell you, I think we’ll have much better luck back in Lee County.”

“So you’ll help me?” Miriam asked.

“As much as I can.”

She nearly hugged him but held back. There were too many cameras everywhere. Lou told the officers in the yard that they were going for a drive. He handed them his card. As he and Miriam approached the end of the driveway, the reporters began to swarm in close.

“Make way, please,” Lou said, creating a path for Miriam and himself, elbowing people out of the way. Video cameras were everywhere. She kept her head high and eyes forward, ignoring their questions. However, one anonymous question felt like a dagger through her heart.

“Miriam, what happened to your husband?”

She ignored the sting and kept walking. Lou’s car felt far away. She could hear him yelling at people, telling them to stay back. It wasn’t going to do a thing. When the news media smelled blood, there was no stopping them.

Lou went around to the side and opened the passenger door for Miriam as questions continued to fly. He closed her door as a cameraman rushed toward him, and then battled his way to the driver’s side. He jumped in and slammed the door with a breath of relief.

“Little aggressive, aren’t they?” he asked, turning to Miriam. She looked out the window, not answering.

“Yes they are, she said, trying to muster a smile.

Reporters surrounded the windows on all sides in a frenzy. She didn’t understand how things had gotten out of hand so quickly. Lou flipped on his siren on and revved the engine. He gently nudged forward, and when he had enough space, he gunned it around the cul-de-sac and down the street, narrowly missing a chasing news crew. The familiar spectacle of being in the media spotlight troubled Miriam. She had seen it before, following the death of her old partner. Now things were different. Her very daughter’s life was at stake.

A New Friend

“Wake up,” a gentle, child-like voice said.

Ana slowly opened her eyes to a darkened room. Her head was pounding and her throat felt dry and scratchy. Everything was hazy and she couldn’t remember how she had gotten wherever she was. She lay flat on her back on some kind of mattress. That much she knew. The air was dank and stifling and she could taste the noxious residue of alcohol in her mouth.

“Mom?” she said faintly.

A figure was kneeling beside her, but she couldn’t tell who it was.

“I’m not your mom. My name is Bobby,” the person responded.

Ana rubbed her eyes and sat up in a sort of disoriented, dream-like state. She squinted to see better but could barely make anything out. A long fluorescent bulb flickered from the ceiling in the distance. She could see stairs leading up.

“Where am I?” was her first question.

“You’re not going to like this,” the person said. “But you can trust me.”

Ana felt confused—annoyed, even. She sat up some more and looked around as her eyes adjusted to the darkness. She was in a basement. It was largely barren, with only a few empty bookshelves and boxes. A potted plant lay on its side with dirt spread across the concrete floor. There were no windows but plenty of cobwebs. Wherever she was, she didn't want to be there.

As reality set in, it was clear enough that she wasn't dreaming. The figure with the non-threatening voice was sitting cross-legged on the floor. He turned the knob on a battery-operated lamp sitting next to him on the floor, revealing himself not as a harmless boy, but a full-grown man.

A vivid memory electrified Ana's mind: the intrusion into her bathroom, the cloth over her face, and the brief glimpse of a woman. She had been taken. She recoiled and jumped back against the concrete wall next to the bed.

"Leave me alone!" she shouted.

The man just sat there with a puzzled expression. He was dressed strangely in child-like overalls with a long-sleeved red-and-white striped shirt underneath. His gray hair was short and tattered. He rocked back and forth playfully while watching Ana, clutching his sneakers. There were a few dolls at his feet. He picked up a plush teddy bear and held it out for Ana.

"Don't be scared. Here, I'll let you hold Mr. Bongo."

She backed further against the wall, quivering. "Stay away from me!"

She looked around, desperate and afraid, for a way out. The only practical exit seemed to be the stairs. The man still held the teddy bear with a patient and knowing expression on his round face. His hair wasn't convincing. It looked like a wig.

"Don't be afraid. Take the bear," he said.

She stood up on the thin, squeaky mattress. It was dirty, and there were no blankets on it. The man waited in anticipation as she extended her arm to grab Mr. Bongo. The man smiled as she took the bear. The doll looked old, and one of its eyes was missing.

"There you go. That's the ticket," he continued.

Bear in hand, she leaned back some, standing over him. He beckoned her to say hello to the bear. She held the raggedy doll at arm's length and looked into its face. Still, the man continued to gaze at her, smiling. Without a second thought, she wound her arm back and launched the bear into the man's face and leapt from the bed.

Her sneakers hit the floor and she bolted off in a frantic attempt at escape. The man tossed the bear from his lap and rolled to his side, grabbing her ankle. The sudden yank sent her flying and landing hard on the concrete floor. The impact sent a white flash through her brain as her chin compacted and struck the floor. A terrified scream bounced off the concrete walls, floor and stairs, which she had almost reached. The man gripped her leg hard, closing down on it like a bear trap. There was no escape. His voice was strangely desperate and pleading.

"You can't go up there! It's not safe. You're better off with me."

Ana struggled, trying to free her leg. She clawed at the ground as her chin dripped with blood. She could even taste a little in her mouth. "Let me go, you freak!" she shouted.

The man kept a tight grip, impervious to her erratic movements. “Ana, I’m only trying to help you.”

She cried out and tried to kick with her other leg. He sat up, holding it more tightly as she flailed frantically. “Shhhh,” he said, quietly. “You’re going to get us in trouble.”

Ana reached toward the stairs, stretching her arm until it hurt. Her fingertips hovered near the first step. She screamed for help, but no one came. She could see up the stairs. The metallic door was shut. It had several deadbolts. She pulled again, trying to kick her leg free, but the man wouldn’t let go. She stopped and lay on the floor, out of breath, with pain running through her jaw.

“You shouldn’t try to run like that,” the man said. “You’ll only get hurt.” He finally let go.

Ana crawled to the wall near the staircase and held her knees to her chest, staring at him.

“Why are you talking like that? Who are you?”

The man swiveled around and sat across from her, placing his hands in his lap. “I told you. My name is Bobby.”

“Okay, Bobby. Why am I here?” Ana asked.

Bobby froze suddenly as if hearing something. His eyes looked up toward the ceiling with deep concern. However, Ana heard nothing from upstairs. She couldn’t make him out completely in the dim light. All she knew was that he was making her feel afraid. After a moment of hushed silence, he looked back at her.

“You were taken here,” he answered.

“By who?” she asked.

He looked up again and then to Ana, speaking just above a whisper. “By a bad man. He sent me down here to be your friend. And if we become friends, I can promise that nothing bad will happen to you.”

Ana looked up. “What does he want with me?”

Bobby leaned in closer. “I don’t know. He won’t tell me.”

For a moment, she felt as if she could confide in Bobby. “Can you help me get out of here?”

His face dropped. “Oh no.” He shook his head back and forth with movements that were fast and emphatic. “No. No. No. No.”

Ana knew she was in danger. She was trapped with a crazy man. Her eyes darted around the room, looking for a weapon of any sort. Aside from a few dusty boxes, she didn’t see anything.

“What’s in the boxes?” she asked.

Bobby stopped shaking his head and then turned to look. “Oh those. Just old junk. Books and stuff.”

Her eyes saw something in the corner—a possible key to her freedom. There amidst the cobwebs was a rusty shovel. She could make it work.

“That person who took me,” she asked. “Where is he?”

“Who?” Bobby asked, inquisitively. He then nodded in understanding. “Oh. You mean Phyllis. Yeah. She’s not here.”

“Why do you keep looking up?” Ana asked. “Do you know a way out?”

Bobby crossed his arms and looked at the ground. “No...”

“So why don’t you help me look before the bad man gets here?” she asked, standing up. Her eyes stayed locked on the shovel across the room. “How am I supposed to use the bathroom cooped up in here? How am I supposed to eat? How am I supposed to do anything?”

Bobby shrugged. “I don’t know.”

She breezed past him, with only escape on her mind.

“Hey,” he said, turning around. “What are you doing?”

Ana froze at the boxes. The shovel was ten feet away from her, barely visible. “This place is so drab,” she answered with her back to him. “We need to clear out these cobwebs.” She turned slightly to see where his attention was. He eyed her with suspicion but didn’t look prepared to stop her.

“You shouldn’t really mess with anything here. If the bad man finds out—”

“Who’s the bad man?” she asked. “What’s his name?”

“I don’t know,” Bobby said. “He never told me. I just call him that because he’s bad.”

“Is this his house?”

Bobby looked around the basement, nodding. “One of them. Yeah.”

Ana looked up the stairs. She had a plan and it seemed plausible when she played it out in her mind. “Can I ask you a favor, Bobby?”

Bobby perked up. Finally, she was responding. “What is it?”

“Can you watch the door for me while I clean?”

He grimaced and looked down with disapproval. “That’s not a good idea.”

“Come on. Just do it. You want to be friends, right?”

His face suddenly brightened up. He nodded with enthusiasm.

“Then do this one favor for me, and we can be friends.”

Bobby pivoted around and inched his way to the bottom of the stairs, where he sat cross-legged and stared at the door, waiting. Ana thanked him and inched past the boxes, moving toward the shovel, which rested just within arm’s reach. She took one last quick look behind her as Bobby remained dutifully on watch. She crept forward, took the wooden handle of the shovel, and gently lifted it up with both hands. There was no room for mistakes.

Bobby was three times her size and at least two hundred pounds or more. She wouldn’t stand a chance if it came down to it. She hummed innocently and held the shovel up while taking careful steps past the boxes and toward the staircase where Bobby sat.

“You’re doing a good job, Bobby,” she said quietly as she inched toward him.

The back of his head made a big, red target. One quick swing, and she’d have enough time to escape. She’d never hurt anyone before, but the urge to hit his head with the shovel came naturally, for survival’s sake. She raised the shovel as high as her arms could take it, gritted her teeth, and closed her eyes.

She swung it down with all her might and was surprised by the resounding thump that echoed through the basement as the force of impact shook her arms and sprained one of her wrists. Bobby shouted in agony and hit the ground with his hands covering his head. She dropped the shovel, hearing it clank on the ground and bolted past him up the wooden stairs.

She had never run so fast in all her life. Her feet leapt stair after stair until she reached the top. She came to the large metal door and gripped the rough edges of the black vintage knob, turning it. The door wouldn't budge. It was locked.

"You little fucking bitch!" Bobby shouted out from the bottom of the stairs.

He lay in a ball with his hands still covering his head. He hadn't made any moves yet, but Ana could see the window of opportunity closing with every lost second. She turned back to the door and jiggled the handle again, pulling and pushing in a distraught frenzy.

Her balled fists pounded on the door as she screamed to be let out. Below, she could hear the stairs creaking. Bobby was up and moving toward her. His boyish, mop-top wig lay on the ground. His real hair was short and gray. His previous friendly demeanor had been replaced with rage. He pushed himself up on one of the treads, keeping one hand on the railing and the other cradling his head.

"You're gonna get it now," he said in a low growl. She looked past him to the shovel lying on the ground, regretting that she had dropped it so easily.

"Stay away from me!" she shouted, pressing her back against the door. She tried the handle again, but nothing would budge. She was locked in.

The man climbed up each step, wincing in pain and scowling at her with fury. Shaking, Ana felt truly afraid. She screamed again as tears flowed from her eyes. He grew closer, only a few steps away. She balled her fists, ready to defend herself. As he took the next step she launched one foot forward to kick him in the head. His hand lashed out and grabbed her foot.

"Gotcha now, baby bitch," he said with malice.

She grabbed the doorknob behind her with one hand, but was yanked away with one wrench. Her screams were silenced with once swift smack across her face. Another white flash and she could taste even more blood in her mouth than before.

Stunned, she tilted her head back and tried to block the next blow as it walloped her ear and sent her head ringing. A smack followed across her face—quick and brutal. She could already taste blood.

The man then gripped her by the neck with one hand and held her up. She clawed at his hand, gasping. Her throat was getting tight and everything went blurry. She tried everything she could do to get free, kicking, trying to bite his hand, butt him with her head, but there wasn't enough room to do it. Panic rattled her bones. He wouldn't stop squeezing. Then suddenly she felt release.

"You're not getting off the hook that easily," he said. With his hand still around her neck, he moved to the side and threw her down the stairs. She tumbled upon each hard step and hit the ground in a barely conscious heap. She could barely breathe, and every bone felt like it had been broken. Ana dared to open her eyes just a bit and saw the man staring at her silently from the top of the stairs.

He fished into his overalls pocket and pulled out a set of keys, unlocking the door. He opened the door, still holding his head with one hand, and then looked down at her. "You get some rest now, because I'm gonna have some fun with you later."

His words faded as Ana saw him leave the basement and slam the door shut, locking it. The shovel lay near her—the key to an escape plan that didn't work out.

Would she ever get another chance? She had no answers. She only hoped that she could endure whatever abuse the man had in store for her.

Phillip Anderson leaned against the kitchen counter while holding an ice pack against his bandaged head. The blow from the shovel hadn't killed him, or even hurt him too badly, but Bobby was gone from his mind, never to surface again. He had changed out of his child-like suspenders and into a pair of jeans and an oil-stained windbreaker. He had managed to stop the bleeding from the gash in his head and had begun to get his thoughts together. Staring out the kitchen window of his dilapidated two-bedroom safe house, he plotted his next move.

The drive from Sarasota had been long and difficult, as he'd been forced to change vehicles multiple times. Having his face plastered all over the local news hadn't helped matters either. But he had help. Two men were posted outside his safe house, located deep within the rural everglades.

Phillip was careful in most of his dealings—and had long ago set up a series of getaway vehicles and safe houses that would allow him to go into hiding whenever the time might make it necessary. What the Lee County and Sarasota Police Departments didn't know was that he'd had an escape route planned out for years. And it wasn't long until he'd flee the country for good, never to be seen again.

He fully expected Miriam to come through for him and secure his parents' release. Though she showed surprising resilience, he believed he had broken her.

His small team of highly compensated men made up his security detail. His safe house was hidden in a rural stretch of land owned under a different name. He believed that the FBI couldn't find it no matter how hard they tried. The small, cabin-like house was concealed under a large camouflaged tarp. Everything was in order, but Phillip wasn't done with Miriam, or her daughter, for that matter. Not by a long shot.

He stepped outside onto the front porch, holding the bag of ice to his head in one hand and a cell phone in the other. His two men, muscular and formidable-looking, stood in the yard scanning the area. One of them was looking through a pair of binoculars. They were both wearing camouflaged clothes and had a fair amount of facial hair. They were also armed with AR-15 rifles slung around their shoulders—all supplied by their boss. Phillip walked down the front steps and into the weeds that surrounded the house. His men turned and looked at him as he approached.

"Damn. You all right?" the one with the binoculars said.

"Yeah," Phillip replied, taking slow and careful steps. "Just had a little accident while trying to make some repairs around the house."

The two men glanced at each other and then looked back at Phillip.

"Gotta be careful out here," the other man added. "Ain't no hospital for quite a ways."

Phillip asked them for an update and if they had seen or heard anything out of the ordinary.

"Nothing," they both replied.

"No one's coming out here," Binoculars replied.

Phillip walked around the front to see for himself. Palm trees and brush extended into the horizon. Beyond the forest lay marshes and wetlands—much of it federal property. Phillip would have to be careful how he moved around. Everything was peaceful and serene, but he never let the obvious deceive him.

“Can’t be here much longer,” Phillip added. “Have to keep moving on.”

“How’s the girl?” the other man asked.

Phillip glared at him, annoyed at the question. The man shifted the conversation quickly to Miriam. “I mean, if we’re going to make the trade with her mother.”

“Just keep an eye out,” Phillip snapped. “I’ll handle the rest.”

“Of course. No problem,” the man said almost apologetically.

“I will say, since you ask, that we may need another one.”

The man blinked, confused. “Another?”

“Another kid,” Phillip said. “That girl is a handful. She needs someone to keep her company.”

Both men nodded. “We’ll look into it, boss.”

Phillip turned back toward the house and climbed the stairs, cringing at the pain in his head but trying not to show it. He sat at a small porch table and set his phone down—twice the size of any smart phone. It had been affixed with a voice box and some wiring to prevent location tracking. Phillip was no fool. He knew what he was doing. Perhaps he thought he knew more than he really did. Perhaps he even underestimated his adversaries. His throbbing head was a reminder of that. He picked up the phone and called a number over twenty digits long. It was time to get the next phase of his plan moving along. He could hear static on the other end of the line, followed by a man’s faint voice.

“Yes?”

Phillip leaned forward and pressed the phone against his ear. “It’s me. What’s the status?”

“*The status?*”

“Yes, the fucking status on my parents.”

“*We’re working on it.*”

Phillip balled his fist. “No, no, no. Just get everything in place. I want that cop bitch to make it happen. Where is she? Did she get to the station yet?”

There was a pause on the other end. Phillip could hear chattering in the background.

“*FBI are here,*” the man replied.

“I don’t give a shit about the FBI. Where’s Castillo?” he barked.

“Hold on,” the man said. There was another long pause.

“She just walked into the station with another detective.”

Phillip smiled. “She did?”

“Yes.”

“Perfect. Keep an eye on her.”

“No problem.”

Phillip hung up the phone and set it back down on his table. He breathed in the fresh air, feeling good about himself. Everything was going according to plan.

Interrogation

Miriam arrived at the station with Lou at her side. It was busier than she had ever seen it. Police and investigators clogged the lobby, halls, and offices—moving with a purpose. The atmosphere was bordering on chaotic. The local media had set up camp outside ever since word got out that the entire Anderson family had been taken in.

There was also news of the FBI being in the building somewhere. The case had drawn immediate and wide attention—the long-suspected crime family who lived on the outskirts of town was now in custody.

The ten acres that made up Anderson Auto Salvage had been cordoned off, seized by the authorities in order to search for evidence, though little had surfaced since taking the Anderson boys—Greg, Walter, and Jake—into custody. Their parents, Boone and Judith, had been placed in a holding room separate from their sons. The police had one main concern: the whereabouts of Phillip Anderson.

The Andersons baffled investigators. On the surface, they seemed a typical blue-collar working-class family who owned and operated their own business. They were tight-knit and proud, a loyal bunch who were distrustful of outsiders and who had a particular disdain for law enforcement. But they weren't being held for their idiosyncrasies. Two kidnapped girls had been discovered underground on a rural stretch of land owned by the family.

The age of the victims—between ten and twelve years old—put the case within federal jurisdiction. Out of six missing local girls, only two had been discovered. The other four, missing for years, were feared dead, though no remains had been discovered. As a result, authorities planned for a mass excavation of the Anderson salvage yard.

The investigation would take hundreds of man-hours at a cost well beyond the town's resources. The Anderson family was needed to give information to fill in the gaps. But so far, they weren't talking. Formal charges hadn't been filed. Every moment was critical. The district attorney had already contacted the sheriff's office. Like everyone else, he wanted answers. The county was overwhelmed with all the attention and demands. The local news media were ready and waiting, eager to take the latest developments in the Snatcher case and sensationalize them.

Miriam pushed through to the front desk to get her visitor's badge with Lou at her elbow escorting her. She knew she had her hands full. The feds were taking over now, which would make her involvement twice as difficult. She'd not only have to convince them to play ball, she'd also have to take on the very same department she'd resigned from a year prior. The deluged desk clerk looked up, adjusting his glasses, and studied Miriam. His round, reddish face had a surprised look. He wasn't expecting to see her again so soon.

"Ms. Castillo. What are you doing back here?" he asked.

"Some things never change, Officer Sherman. Could I get a visitor badge, please?"

People filed by past her, waving their key cards into a scanner and then passing through a set of double doors leading inside where all the action was. The building was high security, but no one would know it from the number of people coming and going. Miriam looked up at a wall clock above Officer Sherman's desk.

It had been an hour and a half since she last heard from Phillip Anderson. If she secured the release of his parents, would he keep his word? Was the word of a child murderer worth anything? Miriam didn't think so, but she felt as though she had no other choice. He had Ana, which meant that he had everything.

Once she was badged, Lou escorted Miriam into the precinct only to have themselves called out from across the way by Captain Richard Porter—a stern but reasonable officer who had supervised the unit for the last five years. He was Miriam's old boss—a constant thorn in her side, as she remembered it. Now he was at it again. However, the look of concern on his face said differently.

"In my office now, please," he said, signaling to them from three rooms down the hall. They forewent the busy homicide division to their right and moved past the hordes of plainclothes and uniformed officers. They all seemed intent on pushing to the holding rooms across the way—where the Andersons no doubt had found residence.

Miriam sighed. Porter was meddling again, just like old times. She wanted Anderson's parents freed, even if she had to smuggle them out of the precinct herself.

"I don't have the patience for this," she said quietly to Lou.

"Let's just see what he wants," he replied. "You can't do this on your own. The sooner you get him on board, the better."

As they got closer to his office, Captain Porter backed into his room and cleared it out. "That's enough, ladies and gentlemen. Start preparing that excavation team." Ten or so uniformed officers exited the room carrying notebooks, their faces worn and tired. Porter's thin, lightly stubbled face looked just as weary.

Miriam hadn't seen him in over a year. His short hair had gone from dark brown to gray. He closed the door behind them, pulled down its blinds, and pointed to a pair of green vinyl chairs in front of his desk.

The office was quiet and the muffled commotion outside seemed to come from a different world. With their main suspect still at large, there was no room for celebration. Papers were scattered all over Captain Porter's desk. Both his office phone and cell phone rang without interruption.

He walked over, placed his cell phone on silent, and took his landline off the hook. He rubbed the bridge of his nose and adjusted his square-framed glasses. He pulled out his swivel chair but didn't speak. Instead, he placed both hands flat on the surface of his mahogany desk and leaned forward.

"First of all, I am sorry to hear about your husband and daughter."

Miriam had managed to hide all signs of anguish before entering the police station.

"Word travels fast," he continued. "The Snatcher is on the loose and he has your daughter."

She rocked back in her seat, burying her face in her hands. It took every last fiber of her being to not have a nervous breakdown in front of her former-colleagues and superiors.

Porter studied her sympathetically and cleared his throat. "I can only imagine how difficult this must be for you. That's why you need to leave it to the professionals."

Miriam looked up and leaned forward, inquisitively. "What are you talking about?"

Lou decided to cut in. "Let me explain—"

Captain Porter raised a cautionary hand, waving it toward Lou. "No, let *me* explain. This five-year investigation goes well beyond kidnapping. The Anderson family faces at least twenty other state and federal violations. This is a great win for our department. Phillip Anderson is on the run, yes, but he won't get far. We've got every lawman from Miami to Pensacola looking for him."

Miriam shot up from her seat, anger rising. "I am not going to rely on the same people who failed to catch a man directly under their nose for five years. Do you think I would gamble the life of my daughter in such a way?"

Detective Lou looked at her nervously. Miriam's face was flushed. Her heart was racing.

Captain Porter had gotten the message, though it seemed to have little effect. After a sigh, he continued. "I understand your skepticism, and I can't imagine what you're going through right now. However, the feds are calling the shots, and your citizen vigilantism, I'm sorry, will only interfere with the investigation."

Miriam pointed at her old boss with a shaky finger. "No one is going to stop me from trying to get Ana back. I don't care if it's the feds or the National Guard!"

"Can I say something?" Lou asked, raising his hand for quiet. Two pairs of eyes locked on him. "Sir. Miriam did find those girls. She's gotten us to this point, and it's cost her greatly. This department owes her. We owe her everything."

Porter scratched his chin and interlocked his hands behind his back. He paced behind his desk in the silence that followed. Miriam wasn't sure what else to say. She knew what she had to do, and was on a mission—with or without the help of her former colleagues and superiors.

"No one doubts the sacrifices she's made," Porter said, speaking almost as though she weren't in the room. "And no one questions her skills as a police sergeant." He paused. "But, Miriam, you're a civilian now, and you need to leave the police work to the police."

Miriam opened her mouth to speak, but Porter cut her off. "We know all about Phillip's demands, how he sent you here to ensure the release of his parents. We know that he's holding the life of your daughter over your head like a bartering tool. That is why it's important that we do everything right to get your daughter back. To capture this monster, once and for all. And we can't do that with you running around in the background with your own priorities."

He paused again to let his words resonate with her—or so he hoped. It was a tough sell. Miriam wasn't one to wait for others to do the work for her. She wasn't going to stand on the sidelines while the cabal of local, state, and federal authorities tried to figure things out. It wasn't their daughter, it was hers. That was what they didn't understand.

“My advice,” he continued. “Spend time with your family. You parents and other relatives. Allow yourself some time to grieve for Freddy. Give us a couple of days and we’ll get Ana back. We promise.”

She pondered his words. They wanted her to step back and walk away, but why? Whatever the reason, she had no plans of recusing herself. Not for all the lectures in the world. “Reinstate me,” she said.

The captain turned to her, curious. “Excuse me?”

“Put me back on the force, and let’s work together on this.”

He appeared incredulous at the idea. “Miriam, I-I hardly think this is the time. You need to—”

“I need to what?” she asked.

Lou looked on, examining the certificates on the wall and not wanting to get involved in another potential battle of words and wills. Before Porter could respond, someone knocked loudly at his door.

“Who is it?” he responded.

“Agent Nettles, FBI,” a booming voice said. He didn’t wait to be invited in. Instead the knob turned, and he stuck his head inside. He was a clean-cut, square-jawed man with an intense blue-eyed glare and dark hair slicked back. He took one quick look around the room and zeroed in on Miriam.

“Is that her?” he asked, looking at Captain Porter.

“Her? As in...”

“The police sergeant who cracked the case?” he asked.

Porter stalled, not wanting to concede such an assessment. The FBI, it seemed, had plans different from his. “Well, Agent Nettles. There was no *one* person responsible. It was a joint effort. Detective O’Leary is recovering from wounds in the hospital as we speak.”

Nettles listened, half-interested. He opened the door fully and stepped inside as clamor from the hall entered the office with him. “Yeah, but she’s the one who found the bunker, correct?” He pointed directly at her as Porter conceded the fact.

Porter then looked up and introduced her to Agent Nettles. Miriam turned to him and shook his hand. His tight grip and direct eye contact immediately made her feel better. Perhaps they could work together. Nettles looked outside into the hallway, then slowly closed the door. As he turned around to address them once more, Porter interjected.

“Ms. Castillo was providing service purely in the role of adviser to Detective O’Leary. She, in fact, no longer serves in the capacity of a peace officer.”

“Okay. So we deputize her,” Nettles said in a matter-of-fact tone.

“I don’t think she’s in any state to be assisting an investigation,” Porter said.

“We need her.” Nettles paused, noticing the skepticism on the captain’s face. “The Andersons are lawyering up. If we don’t charge them with something soon—within the next twenty-four hours—they walk.”

“And what does that have to do with her?” Porter asked.

“That’s who they want to speak to,” Nettles said. “Asked for her by name.”

Porter shook his head in utter confusion. “Why?”

“I don’t know,” Nettles said, but he made his point perfectly clear: The FBI wanted Miriam. She had just been given a voice, the chance she wanted. And she wasn’t going to waste a moment.

The captain reluctantly conceded, but decided to add a few facts he wasn't sure Nettle was aware of. "Her daughter has been kidnapped."

Nettles looked at her, surprised, as Porter continued. "Kidnapped by a man who claims to be Phillip Anderson."

"It *was* Phillip Anderson," Miriam said.

"Her husband was also murdered," the captain added.

Nettles gave another surprised look, eyes even wider.

"My husband and I were separated," she said, looking down. Very little of what had happened had truly sunk in yet. She didn't want to think about it now. Couldn't, in fact. To linger on Freddy's too-recent death would destroy her. She had to keep moving.

The captain waved his hand as if to brush aside the whole idea of deputizing Miriam. "My concern is that Ms. Castillo isn't in the right state of mind." He made direct eye contact. "No one should be expected to operate in any capacity after what she's been through."

Nettles placed his hands on his hips. The sleeves of his white shirt were rolled up. His ID badge hung in front of his red tie. "I didn't know that." He looked at Miriam with what seemed like real sympathy in his eyes. "I don't want you to do anything that you're uncomfortable with."

"I need to do this," Miriam said. "Please."

"Does that mean that you want to be a cop again?" Lou asked.

She looked at all three men as they waited for her answer. "Whatever it takes."

All four holding rooms were occupied. Each room had a window that could not be seen through from the other side. The Anderson brothers were separated and placed in three different rooms. Their parents shared the last room and were seated at the table together. Miriam watched them from behind the glass. They were speaking with a slim, wavy-haired man dressed in a suit. His back was turned toward the window and his briefcase rested on the table.

"The Anderson family lawyer," Nettles said, pointing.

Captain Porter and Lou squeezed into the tight-fitting viewing room, trying to look over Miriam's shoulder. Nettles pressed a small button on the wall next to them. An intercom above them sounded, allowing them to hear the conversation.

The lawyer was saying: "*No one knows where Philip is. He's on the run. But what we want to do is get you out of here. Secondly, you don't say anything. I'll have you out of here before sundown.*"

Captain Porter looked at Lou. "That's all contingent on what we find after the search of their salvage yard."

"How many properties does the family own?" Miriam asked.

"None," Lou said. "Phillip owns them all. And there's twenty of them we know of throughout South Florida."

"And what efforts have been made to search those properties?" she asked.

No one answered. She turned around. "A helicopter? Something?"

"We're working on it," Porter said, not wanting to elaborate any further.

Agent Nettles crossed his arms, watching the couple through the glass. Boone was a large man, over six feet tall, with short white hair and a thin matching beard. His eyes were magnified behind thick glasses, and he looked perpetually

upset. He wore a pair of old-fashioned overalls on his large frame. His wife, Judith, was about half his size, with curly gray hair and an equally perturbed expression. The lawyer continued his promise that they would be released soon.

“Is that slime ball going to be present when she speaks to them?” Captain Porter asked Nettles.

Nettles shrugged, not certain. “His plate is full with three other clients, but ultimately it’s up to the lovely couple in there.”

“They *did* request to speak with her,” Lou added.

Porter shook his head. “Again, I don’t understand. What’s their angle?”

“How much is Philip Anderson worth?” Miriam asked—posing a question of her own.

“He’s believed to have a net worth of three million dollars,” Nettles answered.

Lou nearly gasped. Porter’s eyes widened. Miriam could hardly believe it herself. She turned and patted Lou’s back as he hacked and coughed.

“That psychotic backwoods predator is a millionaire?” Lou said, catching his breath.

“Yes,” Nettles said. “We’re working on freezing his assets.”

“That’s a start,” Porter said.

“He’s not stupid,” Nettles said. “There has been zero activity in his bank and credit accounts.”

Miriam wondered how much the FBI knew about Philip Anderson. She wondered how much they knew about her. With the family lawyer present, it looked like the parents’ release was a foregone conclusion. What did he want with her anyway? Why had she come to Lee County when a fresh crime scene stood waiting at her own house? She pulled her phone out to check for any missed calls—even though her ringer had been fully on. The unlisted number didn’t show.

Nettles knocked and opened the door to the interrogation room. The curly-haired lawyer stopped and turned around, exposing a youthful, clean-shaven face. He looked to be in his early forties. With the amount of wealth Philip Anderson had, Miriam was surprised that an army of lawyers hadn’t descended upon the precinct. She asked Agent Nettles to elaborate on the family’s wealth.

“They all make a decent income, but Phillip is the loaded one,” he said. “The family business and all its wealth belongs to him.”

That one man could have so much power over his family was strange. Whatever the scenario, Miriam could understand his parents’ reluctance to talk.

“Yes?” the lawyer asked from the other room, waiting.

Nettles opened the door and poked his head in, speaking in a moderately sarcastic tone. “All right, your honor, I have Ms. Castillo here as requested.”

The lawyer nodded and grabbed his briefcase. The Andersons stared ahead, stone-like and incongruously indifferent. Nettles stepped aside and let Miriam pass through. She wasn’t sure whom she was supposed to talk to or who had specifically requested her. She wondered about the lawyer. How much did he know? Was he aware of Philip’s whereabouts?

He extended his arm and introduced himself as Michael Kershner, attorney at law. Miriam shook his clammy hand. He had on a gold watch, and his pin-striped suit looked like the real custom-made deal.

Just as soon as he had introduced himself, Kershner picked up his briefcase and excused himself from the room, leaving Miriam looking perplexed and confused. Before he left, he pulled out a chair for her to sit on. Miriam looked at Nettles, who seemed to understand the situation. He left the room as well and closed the door.

She was on her own—though she knew they were being watched. She turned and looked at her reflection in the mirror. She then turned back to the parents. They said nothing, and their faces gave nothing away as they stared at her with two unmistakable frowns. Only Boone moved, taking his wife’s hand in his, and giving her a faint smile.

“You wanted to speak with me?” Miriam said.

Their silence was followed by a tense awkwardness.

“Is there something I can help you with?” she continued.

Judith looked away, but Boone kept his serious eyes on her, not saying a word. Miriam continued with her questions. “Do you know where your son Phillip is?”

Again, they didn’t answer. She felt anger resurfacing and leaned closer to them over the table. “Did you know that he kidnapped my daughter and murdered her father in cold blood? Did you know that?”

Boone cleared his throat but didn’t speak. Miriam could feel tears welling in her eyes. However, the last thing she wanted was to let them see her upset.

“Do you even care?” she asked. Her voice cracked. Their silence got to her, despite her best efforts to stay calm. “How about the children he kidnapped? Do you care about them?”

If that was the case, and they did care, they didn’t show it.

“Then what do you want from me?” she asked, pounding the table. She stopped and took a deep breath, trying to focus on the main goal: securing Ana’s release.

She lowered her head, grimaced, and then whipped her hair back out of her face. “I see your high-priced lawyer is working diligently to release you. And I hope that happens. Just know that if anything happens to my daughter, I’m holding you and your entire family responsible.”

At that moment, her cell phone rang, vibrating in her pocket. She pulled her phone out to see that the unidentified number was finally calling her back. Nervous, she answered, keeping her eyes on the parents.

“Hello?”

“*Don’t say anything else. Just nod from now on,*” the familiar, distorted voice told her. “*Understand?*”

She nodded in response.

“*Good,*” he said as though he were watching. “*I know that you’re in a room with my parents now. And I want you to know that my parents are watching every move you make through the duration of this phone call. So that means you don’t speak, you don’t call the others in, you simply listen. Understand?*”

She nodded. Phillip chuckled to himself. “*It is kind of weird to have a conversation like this. But rest assured, I know your rooms are miked, and I don’t want to take any chances.*”

Miriam looked up at his parents. They were watching her like hawks. The entire set-up seemed suspect. Were they all in it together? The lawyer? The parents? The brothers? How far did the conspiracy go? It would be foolish to let any of them out.

But none of it mattered to her as long as she got Ana back. Thoughts of her daughter consumed her. She could sit in silence no longer.

"Please. Let me say one thing."

"What did I tell you?" the voice growled.

"I need to speak to her. Just one word!"

"Talk again, and I'm hanging up. Got it?"

Miriam nodded as a tear streamed down her cheek. The Anderson parents could see her vulnerability, exactly what she didn't want them to see.

"Good," he continued. *"Here's what's going to happen. Mr. Kershner is going to secure the release of my parents and my brothers. Supervised, of course. I can't imagine the feds just letting them go. Now that I've exalted you to a higher position of authority, you will give these decisions for their release your complete support."*

She resisted the urge to argue. Their supposed deal was for the parents, not for the entire family. Again, she thought of Ana and was ready to embrace whatever scheme he set forth.

"You are not to tell anyone anything I've told you over the phone. You play your part, that's all. Secure their release today and I'll tell you where you can find Ana." He paused, letting the words sink in. *"So now I want you to nod again for yes so that my parents can see that we're in agreement."*

She did as she was told. *"Good..."* he continued. *"Oh yes. And one more thing. My family and my lawyer will neither confirm nor deny knowing about any of this. Don't push them. And remember, there will always be eyes on you."*

With that, he hung up. She held the phone to her ear, ensuring that he was no longer there. Hands trembling, she lowered the phone and put it back in her pocket. She said nothing to the parents as she rose and left the room. Everyone was standing outside the interrogation room, having watched her from the window.

"Well?" Captain Porter said as she walked out.

"What the heck was that all about?" Lou added.

Agent Nettles examined her keenly and with suspicion.

"That was him on the phone, wasn't it?" Lou asked. "That son of a bitch."

She took a deep breath and looked around. "We need to release the Anderson family today."

Porter's eyes widened. "Are you out of your mind?"

Nettles looked increasingly skeptical. "What did he tell you on that phone call?"

"Nothing," she said. "He's playing a game and enjoying every minute of it. Releasing his family is the only way to get close to him."

"But what if we find something at the salvage yard? Some incriminating evidence?" Porter continued. "They just walk?"

"Of course not," Miriam said. Like clockwork, the door opened, and Kershner entered the room, presumably to check on her. "Unless you have some reason to hold them here, I'm requesting that you release my clients within the next hour."

All eyes went to Miriam—the odd woman out. "I agree," she said. She couldn't believe the words as they left her mouth.

Nettles stepped in her path with his hands on his hips, getting into the lawyer's face. "This case is under federal jurisdiction," he said. "We'll hold the family here as long as we damn well please."

Kershner mockingly held out both hands. “Looks like we have a constitutional scholar here, ladies and gentlemen!”

Nettles and the lawyer continued bickering as Lou leaned into her ear. “What did he say to you on that call?”

“The same stuff he’s been saying from the beginning. He wants his family released. Those are his terms.”

Lou touched her shoulder. “We’re going to get Ana back. I promise.”

It was a hell of a promise to make, but she wanted to believe every word of it.

Released

A preliminary search of the Anderson Auto Salvage Yard brought very little in the way of evidence. Lee County had deployed half its police department to cover the ten-acre salvage yard in an intense search for any evidence that would incriminate the family and keep them in custody. The FBI was conducting their own investigation as well throughout several of Phillip Anderson’s land purchases in the area.

The underground bunker where undiscovered horrors had taken place over the years was an official crime scene. The investigation had rocked the small town of Palm Dale. The Andersons, spotlighted through media coverage, were officially public enemy number one, and to release them would be a violation of the public trust. Miriam knew this, as did her colleagues on the force. By the end of the day, however, she felt relieved that authorities had no choice but to release the family.

“Are we sure this is the right call?” Lou asked as he, Miriam, and Agent Nettles convened in Captain Porter’s office.

“We’re keeping tabs on them,” Nettles said. “Twenty-four hours a day, until that bastard comes out of hiding.”

“How can we be sure that he hasn’t fled the country?” Porter asked from behind his desk.

The air of a demoralized police force hung in the air. They had failed to capture the Snatcher for more than six years. Now—after finding him—they were forced to relinquish the only bargaining chip they had—his extended family.

Nettles cut in. “At this point, it would be extremely hard for Mr. Anderson to travel any significant distance. He’s on the no-fly list, and his mug is on posters in every federal building from here to Tallahassee.”

“The news media are going to have a field day with this,” Lou said, shaking his head.

“Have you been watching the news?” Porter asked. “They already are.”

Miriam hadn’t said a word yet. She was too distracted, watching her phone. She had done her part and expected the call to come at any minute. The anticipation was killing her. The sickness in her stomach—the exhaustion and headache—were all symptoms of her frantic pain and worry about Ana. Surely Anderson’s lawyer had contacted Phillip by now and informed him of his family’s pending release.

After scrolling through his phone, Lou looked up suddenly, as if struck by a new concern. “I hate to say it, but is the department taking any measures to ensure the family’s safety?”

Porter shot him a cockeyed glare and took a sip of bottled water. “Which family? Those Anderson scumbags?”

Lou held his phone up for everyone to see. “You should see the comments on some of these news threads. People are out for blood.”

Porter shook his head. “Keyboard warriors are the least of our concern right now. I’m sure the FBI will have things under control. Isn’t that right, Agent Nettles?”

Nettles nodded while running his hands through his hair. “They’ll be under constant surveillance.” He didn’t look quite as confident as he sounded.

Porter raised a hand, waving away the idea of any potential problems. “See. They’ll be fine.”

Lou turned to Miriam, noticing her acute distraction. “You okay?” he asked.

Startled, Miriam looked up, from her phone. “Yes. Yes, I’m fine.”

Nettles turned to her and folded his arms. “What *did* he say to you during that phone call?”

Muffled commotion from outside Porter’s closed door made it clear that the precinct was in a frenzy upon learning about the Anderson family’s release.

Miriam thought to herself, careful not to reveal too much. “In his phone call,” she said, “Phillip only repeated his earlier demands. Only this time, he said he wanted his whole family’s release—not just his parents.”

“And he told you that when that happened, he’d release your daughter?” Nettles asked.

“Yes,” Miriam said, nodding.

Porter cut in. “And you believe him?”

“What other choice does she have?” Lou asked, stepping in.

“Ms. Castillo. You don’t have to do this alone. Let us help you,” Nettles said, reaching for her shoulder.

Miriam looked up again. Their concerned faces didn’t inspire confidence. “For six years this man was able to do what he did under the nose of law enforcement. One year ago he shot and killed my partner during a routine stop. Now... my daughter’s life.” She stopped talking but managed to keep herself together. “If anything happens to Ana, I’ll never forgive myself. Ever.”

Lou approached her, with a somber and sympathetic expression. He was about the only one in the department she trusted anymore. “We understand. But this is too much for one person to go through alone. Let us help you. Let us... do our jobs.”

Miriam’s looked up at him. “Thank you.” She then excused herself from the room, saying that she had to use the bathroom.

“Everything is going to be fine,” Porter said as Miriam opened his office door, causing her to pause.

“I know...” she said, with her back still turned to him.

Porter looked at his wrist watch. “Shit. I have a press conference in five minutes.” He shot up from his chair as she walked out into the crowded hall and toward the holding rooms.

Miriam walked past several uniformed police officers huddled together, shaking their heads and still complaining about the news of the Andersons' release. No one noticed her, and she only recognized a few faces. Much, it seemed, had changed since she left the force the year prior. There were a lot of new officers, but much of the old guard still ran the place.

She couldn't help but miss being a cop. It was a part of who she was. Her father, Manuel, was a retired police chief. Her mother, Elizabeth, was a corrections counselor. Together, they'd had high expectations of their only child.

Fresh out of high school, she joined the Air Force—where she met Freddy. Four years later, they moved to Washington, D.C. She went to school to study criminal justice. Freddy had his sights set on a law degree—but never finished school. The “pressure” made him drink. And his drinking changed everything. Miriam earned her bachelor's and enrolled in the police academy while Freddy got a county job of his own as a bus driver.

By twenty-six, Miriam was a newly sworn-in deputy, following in her father's footsteps. She got pregnant with Ana and took some time off. By Ana's first birthday, they had moved to Miami—a fresh start as a family.

The exact circumstances that brought Miriam to Palm Dale were blurry. The relocation followed her divorce after five years of marriage. She enlisted with the Lee County Police Department as a sergeant and continued her career in law enforcement. Everything had changed, however, on the fateful day her partner was shot during a routine traffic stop. She always blamed herself, and had resigned as a result. Now the shooter was in her grasp. Phillip Anderson would see justice. Deputy Lang deserved that much.

She walked past the third holding room, where Anderson's lawyer, Kershner, was standing and talking with Boone and Judith. In mid-conversation, both parents looked up as if sensing her—their feelings masked behind two wrinkled and emotionless faces. What they thought of her, Miriam didn't know or care.

The Anderson boys exited their holding rooms with officers on each side. They were big men with farmer's tans and varying degrees of reddish, dirty-blond facial hair. Greg and Walter were still wearing their oil-stained mechanic jumpsuits. Jake, the youngest of the three, wore a red flannel jacket and torn jeans. Criminal masterminds they weren't, but Miriam believed there to be much more to them than brutish appearances.

She continued toward the restroom farther down the hall as the entire family paused to watch her. Her eyes remained forward, though she wanted them to see her. Phillip had to know that she was alone. It was only then that he seemed to call her.

“Ms. Castillo!” an FBI man called out.

With her purse around her shoulder, Miriam walked straight into the restroom without turning around. Inside, it looked clean and unoccupied. She took her phone out and went to the corner stall, closing the door. She held the screen up. It stared back at her, displaying two missed calls from her parents and one from her boss at East Coast Trucking. They'd have to wait.

She leaned against the wall and held the phone in both hands. "Come on..." she said, staring down.

The phone suddenly rang, displaying an unlisted number. "Yes. Hello?" she said, her voice wavering.

"You're alone. Good," a voice said, less-distorted than before.

Miriam got to the point. "They're releasing your relatives. I did my part, now let me speak to Ana."

"Hold on, now. Just one minute—"

"We had a deal!" she said.

"Enough!" he barked, sounding frustrated.

Miriam couldn't help herself. She was tired of the games.

"I'll let you speak to Ana as soon as we're on the same page."

"We are," she said. "I told the FBI that releasing your relatives was the only way to handle this. Whatever else you say is between only the two of us."

There was a long pause on the other end.

"Gee, Miriam," he replied. *"I'm starting to take comfort in our little talks."*

His words made her stomach tighten in knots. "Can I trust that you won't hurt my daughter?"

"Your daughter is fine. I mean, I don't think she likes me all too much, but she's fine."

"What... what did you do to her?" she asked in a panicked tone.

"Nothing yet. I'm going to give you the girl, just as promised. I got some guys, and they're going to transport her to another location."

Miriam gripped the phone in her shaking hand. "You said that I could talk to her. I need to talk to her. Don't you understand?"

He moved on, ignoring her demands. *"Write this address down: One Fifty-Fourth Street, North Homestead, Florida."*

She searched frantically through her purse and found a pen, scribbling the address on her hand as fast as she could.

"It's a bit of a drive from where you're at, so I'd get a move on if you plan to be there before nightfall."

He wasn't exaggerating. Homestead, in Miami-Dade County, was at least a three-hour drive from Palm Dale. It was already five o'clock.

"Why so far away?" she asked.

"Because. That's why. Stop trying to pry into my business," he snapped.

"Is this a house? A building?"

"It used to be a place called The Plaza. A theater that shut down years ago."

"Please, Mr. Anderson. Can't you just drop her off at the police station? I don't want her in some abandoned—"

Phillip cut her off. *"Hey, you did me a lot of damage. You ruined my business, tarnished my family's name, and sent me on the run. You want your daughter, you're gonna have to work for it."*

She scanned the address scribbled on her hand. Was he hiding in Homestead? The FBI would certainly like to know. She had the address. The question was, what to do with it? Whatever the answers, she wasn't going to get them over the phone.

"I understand," she said, not pressing him further.

"It's simple," he continued. "You make the drive, get your daughter, and go home. Just consider yourself lucky that I'm not doing to her what I did to your ex."

Miriam covered her mouth and held back her tears, silently sobbing.

"And one more thing—travel alone. You're not to tell anyone. Not a soul. I've got eyes everywhere, Miriam. Don't fuck with me."

"Okay," she said, hanging up. She lowered the phone and cried into her cupped hands—tears of grief or joy, she couldn't tell the difference.

Captain Porter approached the podium inside the conference hall with a dozen cameras and spotlights on him. He was flanked on both sides by other officers, including the chief of police, and was there to explain to an outraged community why the police department was letting a potential crime family back onto the streets.

Aside from due process, he had to explain, to the best of his abilities, that the Andersons would be under close surveillance until the investigation was complete. Tables and chairs had been cleared from the room, and over thirty members of the press were packed inside. To some in the media, it was nothing more than damage control.

Snatcher Escapes Again! Crime Family Freed! County PD Blunders Six-Year Hunt for Child Predator—were just a few of the most recent Internet banner headlines.

Lee County PD was in the midst of losing the narrative on the case. Captain Porter was trotted out to stand before the flashing cameras to try to change that. He wore his dress-blue police uniform, complete with pins and badges, and stared into the cameras with all the confidence he could muster.

Chief Walker stood quietly to the side, and gave a knowing nod to Porter before he reached the podium. *"Don't screw this up,"* he mouthed.

Porter stood directly behind the microphones on his podium and looked down at his prepared statements. He brought a fist to his mouth and cleared his throat, looking up at the cameras.

"Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for being here tonight. There have been some developments that we will release in due time. The Lee County Police Department takes full responsibility for the way this case has been, and will continue to be, conducted. As it stands now, we are in pursuit of our number-one suspect, Phillip Anderson, owner and operator of Anderson Auto Salvage. He has been on the run following the discovery of an underground bunker on one of his properties in the Palm Dale area. Investigators believe this to be the place he imprisoned his six young victims, children he abducted with the possible aid of a local mechanic, Ray Gowdy, who is currently in custody."

Those listening remained quiet, hungry for information, and eager for a new headline. The police officers behind Porter stared ahead—some pensive, others stoic. It was Chief Walker's idea to have them standing behind Porter as a show of unity. Porter knew, however, that they wouldn't be able to shield him from the barrage of questions that were to come his way after his prepared statement.

Greg Anderson, the third eldest son, rode home in the back of an unmarked police car with the window down, taking in the nice breeze. Whatever

his brother, Phillip, did had paid off. He was a free man. Though Greg knew that the damage done to their family name was irreversible.

His wife, Barbara, worked as a teacher's aide for the school district. Would she have to quit her job? What was to become of the salvage yard? The police and feds had taken it over and set up camp. Everything was different, all because of their older brother. A man who had singlehandedly sunk their family.

Greg should have seen it coming. He should have stood up to Phil when he had the chance. But they were all responsible in some way. When it came to drugs, gambling, and racketeering, no one in the family had any trouble taking the money. They were all culpable.

Phil, however, had taken it too far. The screwed-up bastard had to go after children. Greg always suspected that their parents covered for Phil. They could have stopped him. They should have. He scratched his beard in contemplation as Sergeant Lutz, his escort, kept his eyes on the road. Throughout the drive, they had said little to each other. Suddenly, however, something seemed terribly wrong.

"Two-two-four, this is Officer Lutz. We've got a situation here with some local residents. Requesting immediate backup..."

"What the hell?" the shaved-headed Lutz said.

Greg squinted through the windshield. There was a line of cars blocking the rural road ahead. In front of the cars were at least thirty people, standing together, armed with weapons—some with baseball bats and crowbars, others with shotguns and automatics. Lutz was as perplexed as his passenger. He slowed down and turned his dashboard lights on, reminding them that the unmarked Dodge Charger approaching them was police. They didn't seem to care.

"Don't slow down," Greg said.

The officer ignored him, further decreasing his speed. The closer they got, the more Greg could see that the roadblock was deliberate. Lutz unclipped his radio mic from the dashboard.

"Two-two-four, this is Sergeant Lutz. Looks like we've got a situation here off old Route 44. Requesting backup."

Nervous, Greg leaned back and gripped his seat. He tried the door, but it was locked. "Hey. Hey, Sergeant Lutz!"

"Quiet down back there," Lutz said, holding the mic.

"*This is two-two-four, what's your situation?*" a voice asked over the radio.

The locals were out in full force—both men and women of all ages. They looked angry and riled up. An uproar began among the crowd once the Dodge got closer, people yelling, whistling and brandishing their weapons.

"Pedestrians intentionally blocking the road," Lutz responded. "Failure to heed command to clear." Though the command had yet to be given.

"Turn around!" Greg demanded.

Lutz slowed to a stop a fifty feet from the barricade. The mob immediately moved toward them, their eyes widened with hatred and rage.

"Are you out of your mind? Turn the fuck around!" Greg shouted.

"Shut up!" Lutz said, turning his head. He then spoke into his mic. "They're surrounding the vehicle. We're outnumbered here. Requesting immediate back-up."

A rock smashed across the windshield, startling both passengers. The mob encircled the car, hitting the back and side windows with baseball bats, smashing out headlights, taillights, and side windows. Lutz panicked, and looked around all sides of the vehicle while unfastening his pistol from its side holster.

Greg crouched down in the back, covering his face with his arms. "I told you to back up and get us the hell out of here!"

The officer radioed in for back-up again, shifted the car into reverse, and drove backward, though the assaults kept coming. The windows on all sides were cracked and spider-webbed. The front windshield was nearly ready to let go. Some men moved out of the way behind the car, but others jumped on the hood and started to go to town on the rear window.

Greg slumped further down into his seat as the relentless pummeling of the windows continued. He looked up to see Lutz pointing his gun toward the back window, where two large men were riding the trunk.

A tire iron smashed into the windshield. Lutz swerved to the left and slid into a side railing. His head whipped hard against his window. The gun flew out of his hand and into the back seat. Glass from the windshield and rear window exploded into shards. For a moment, everything was still and quiet.

Greg opened his eyes. Shooting pains wracked his neck and back. The police radio blared with cross-chatter. Lutz snapped out of his daze and tried to shift the car into drive. The mob took no time swarming the car. There was no stopping them. They reached in through the window, unlocked Bentley's door, swung it open, stuck a gun to his face, and yanked him out.

Cheering, a group of men threw Lutz onto the road, holding their guns on him. He pleaded, warning them that backup was on the way. The men didn't seem worried. Theirs was a justice that had existed outside the law for generations.

Running out of options, Greg grabbed Lutz's 9mm pistol from the floor and held it up. He looked behind him and saw a man climbing through the back window where it had been smashed out. He fired two shots into the man's head. The people gasped as the man flew back, slumped over, and rolled off the car. If they were angry before, Greg had seen nothing yet.

They smashed the remaining windows out of both doors with crowbars. From the floor, Greg tried to hold the gun steady as a bearded man yanked the door next to him open. But before he could fire, he felt an electric shock hit him, throwing him back against the seat as it surged through his body, immobilizing him.

He screamed out in pain, realizing that a Taser clip had lodged into his chest. His pistol fell to the floor. Hands grabbed him by the ankles and pulled him out of the car in a fury, his head bouncing against the door panel on the way out, and then the ground. He screamed as they dragged him across the pavement on his back, elbows bloodied and bruised, as he tried to dig his heels in. The mob swarmed around him, beating him with sticks, bats, and whatever else they could find. The hits came fast and hard and they wouldn't stop.

Sergeant Lutz lay on the ground, unable to do anything but watch as they pulled Greg across the road to the grass on the other side.

"Where are you taking me?" he shouted.

"Child killer!" they yelled.

"Scumbag!"

“You’re gonna burn in hell!”

The taunts continued as Greg thrashed and fought. They took him to an open field and propped him next to a tree to finish the job.

“Better do this before them cops show up!” an urgent voice in the crowd warned them.

Greg lay in a fetal ball as pain throbbed throughout his body. For a moment, no one said or did anything. He thought they might have finished with him. Then came a blow to his head with a baseball bat. Then another across his back. He screamed out, but gargled blood. A man grabbed his head by the hair and put a rope around his neck. They pulled it tighter, then dragged him by his hands and feet, and then held him upright, leaning against the tree.

His body folded in half. “Not like this!” Greg pleaded between desperate gasps of air.

But it was too late. They had gotten this far, and nothing was going to stop them. The faint sirens in the distance were too far away to end it. The rope was flung over his head and tightened around his neck. Someone tossed the other end over a heavy branch as the crowd cheered at a fever-pitched. Several men hoisted him up and snapped his neck before he could say another word, leaving him there for all to see.

Deadly Exchange

Captain Porter leaned into the microphone to continue his prepared remarks. The room was silent as reporters watched him with veiled skepticism. The department hadn’t had the best record, having twice missed their opportunity to arrest the Snatcher. The result was a public relations nightmare. Porter knew they had to get control of the situation and do it fast. Passing the buck to the feds would do just that.

“We are currently working in conjunction with the FBI to locate Mr. Anderson as well as keeping his relatives under tight surveillance. And we want to emphasize that there is currently no evidence that links the rest of the Anderson family to the crimes of Phillip Anderson.”

Chief Walker scanned the room trying to gage the mood. Porter was losing them. He sounded too scripted and robotic, yet there was uncertainty in his tone.

“This man will not get far, as an official manhunt is currently underway.”

Porter stopped and looked up into the crowd. He adjusted his glasses and pointed at the cameras. “Mark my words. He will be found. Just as our dedicated officers discovered his bunker and rescued Jenny Dawson and Emily Beckett, we will solve this case and bring this man to justice.”

He paused and shuffled through his notes. The silence in the room was deafening. “I also want to remind you that his crimes stretched far beyond our jurisdiction. He abducted children from other counties as well, and they share the responsibility of bringing him to justice every bit as much as we do.”

Chief Walker leaned in, put a hand on Porter’s shoulder, and whispered into his ear. The captain nodded and calmed his aggressive tone. “However. We look

forward to working with the FBI and locating Mr. Anderson. If you or anyone you know has any information that could lead to the whereabouts of this man, please call the Lee County Police Department immediately.”

Several reporters suddenly raised their hands, taking Porter by surprise. The questions one after the other, with no time in between for answers:

“Can the department verify the last known location of Mr. Anderson?”

“Can you answer why former-police sergeant, Miriam Castillo, was brought in on this case?”

“Who is the detective currently undergoing surgery?”

Porter looked around the room, trying to point, but found himself overwhelmed. Chief Walker leaned into his ear again. “Get this room under control!” he forcibly whispered.

Porter outstretched both arms, moving his hands up and down, tamping the air, asking for quiet. “Ladies and gentlemen, please. One question at a time.”

The room briefly went quiet. Porter pointed at a female reporter in the front. “Yes. Ms. Lopez...”

“Captain Porter, what’s your response to the assault against Greg Anderson on Route 44?”

Stunned, Porter blinked. His slight smile dropped. “Excuse me? *What about Greg Anderson?*”

The reporter continued while looking at the screen of her smart phone. “It’s just been reported that the police vehicle escorting Greg Anderson home was attacked and Anderson himself was beaten and lynched.”

The room gasped as the clamor grew. Porter’s face went pale. He turned and looked at the officers standing behind him. No one seemed to know anything about it. He looked to Chief Walker, whose stoic expression didn’t provide any answers. Most of the reporters were now looking at their phones. Porter leaned close to the microphone, his voice wavering as reporters began talking over each other, demanding answers. “We’re not aware of any assault at the moment.”

A clamor of side conversations filled the room. Porter tried to take control, but it did no good. The room descended into chaos.

Miriam had been on the road for close to three hours, borrowing Lou’s car for the duration of her travel. He was reluctant to give her the keys, but with everything going on, she convinced him otherwise. “I’ll be back in a few hours,” she told him.

Any chance that she would make it to Miami before sundown was absurd. But she had hoped that she could race against time. The thought of Ana sitting alone in some abandoned theater, or worse, filled her imagination with terror. There was good reason for Miriam to believe that Ana wouldn’t be alone. She tried not to think about what her daughter had been through. Her father murdered. Did she know it? Had she seen it? Nothing would ever be the same again for either of them. Freddy’s death hadn’t fully sunk in yet. Nothing really had. All she could concentrate on was getting to Miami and doing whatever Phillip Anderson told her to do. Grieving, coping, and healing could wait.

Lou had called her phone repeatedly, but she hadn’t answered. She was afraid of talking to anyone for fear that Anderson would find out. Lou had sent her a text

about Greg Anderson, furthering her anxiety. The horror of it convinced her she could ignore Lou no more.

"Where are you?" he asked on the first ring.

"I'm on the road," she replied.

"Nice time to take a drive. We've got a major situation here."

"I can't deal with any of that right now," she said, watching the road. The Homestead exit was only two miles away.

"They're putting the Anderson family in protective custody. Walter Anderson's home was vandalized. His family barely got out of there."

"What about the parents?" Miriam asked with urgency.

"They're okay. Once Greg was attacked, the squad car escorting his parents came back to the station."

"No!" Miriam said.

"Look, Miriam. I know what you're thinking. It's time you bring the FBI in on your daughter's abduction. You can't do this on your own."

"What happened to Greg Anderson?" Miriam asked, skirting around the notion of accepting FBI assistance.

"He's dead," Lou said. *"Bunch of locals blocked off a road. Took Sergeant Lutz out of his car at gunpoint. They hanged Anderson from a tree."*

Miriam covered her mouth in shock. The world, it seemed, was crumbling around her. Would Phillip retaliate against her? She was so close to Ana she could feel it. He hadn't called her. Perhaps he didn't know. Miriam stopped herself. Of course he knew. It was foolish not to prepare herself for the fallout.

"I did everything he wanted me to!" she said.

"Huh?" Lou remarked.

"The bastard who took my daughter."

"Is that where you're going? Miriam, listen to me. Don't do this on your own. You're putting yourself in danger and isn't going to help anyone."

"Lou..." she began. *"I appreciate your concern, but I'm already here."*

"Where?" he asked, frantically.

"Homestead," she replied. *"She couldn't hold it in any longer. 'I'm only here to get Ana, then I'm going home.'"*

"Don't do this. You can't trust that psychopath."

Miriam glanced at her dashboard. It was 8:30 p.m. She merged onto the Homestead exit. Palm Trees lined the side of the road. *"I don't have a choice. Goodbye, Lou. I'll call you once I have her. Do not tell anyone."*

She hung up feeling that she had said too much. What was done was done, and she'd have to deal with it. Her Beretta rested in the seat next to her, fully loaded. She'd shoot one hundred men if it meant getting Ana back. The GPS attachment on her dashboard directed her to take her first right.

The inland community of Homestead was largely agricultural and run-down in many areas. She could see why Anderson picked it. He hadn't asked for a ransom. Maybe she had done enough to earn her daughter back. Anderson's unstable, irrational reasoning made little sense to her—one of the main reasons she came to the meeting packing.

She looked at every car driving next to her. Was she being watched? She was five miles from the theater and her heart was He hadn't called her yet. The silence

wasn't comforting. She had no way of knowing whether Ana was even at the location where she was heading. But she had made her mind up about something. If Phillip was there, she was going to shoot him. Freddy deserved that much.

She passed a series of hotels and a shopping mall. Her eyes glanced downward at her phone every other second in the off chance that he would call. Then it occurred to her that Phillip Anderson was probably loving every minute of it. He knew that he had her on edge. He was reveling in it. She took a left at a busy intersection, too concerned with the situation at hand to pay attention to landmarks or anything outside of her GPS directions.

She continued down a narrow road with bland, unoccupied buildings and empty parking lots—many enclosed in chain-link fences. It looked as if the area was being cleared for redevelopment. Construction company signs indicated as much. Miriam was beginning to understand why Anderson had picked this area—there was no one around.

The GPS indicated the next building on her left. The shuttered theater. She pulled to the side of the road and slowed down, approaching a run-down building, obscured by trees, with a fence around it. The cracked pavement outside was punctuated with weeds growing in the crevices and scattered with litter. A No Trespassing sign hung lopsided from the fence. Plywood boarded the windows. A box office was in view below a marquee with the word Closed pieced together in crooked letters. There were no other vehicles in sight and Miriam was panicky. She braked and shut off her headlights. Her cell phone screen remained blank. The Plaza looked deserted, inside and out. Beretta in hand, she took her phone and held it up, waiting.

She turned and looked at the building, observing. There didn't even seem to be a way in. Anderson hadn't specified whether Ana would be inside or outside. Miriam knew nothing. She was completely blind, and if her instincts told her anything, the meet-up looked like an ambush. However, she could wait no longer. Ana needed her.

A cool breeze hit her face when she opened the car door. Traffic sounded from the intersection down the road. Dogs barked in the distance. A plane flew overhead, its tiny lights blinking. The world was going on just as it always did. No one knew where she was, except Lou, who only had a vague concept. But whoever was in the theater with Ana knew everything, and all too well.

She crept to the fence, gun drawn, and noticed a large realtor's sign posted on the fence, indicating that the building was sold. To whom? She wasn't sure but had an awful hunch. She stepped to the six-foot fence and looked beyond its rusty chain-links. The air was quiet and still. Nothing looked disturbed or out of the ordinary. It was an abandoned theater, no different from the dilapidated former business district that surrounded it. She grabbed the fence with one hand and looked up. It was a simple enough climb, and there was no point in standing around and waiting for a red carpet.

With the pistol wedged in her side pocket, Miriam put one foot up in between the links and began climbing the fence. It shook and rattled as she reached the top, placed one leg over, and then climbed down the other side.

Her shoes hit the pavement, and she turned around. The building remained ominously quiet and dark, but as she approached, she saw a door ajar at the side

of the box office. She pulled her pistol out in one hand and looked at her phone in the other. A breeze swept through, a cold chill that pushed the creaking door closed.

Miriam stayed low and hurried toward the building with her eyes intense and focused. As she approached the empty box office, a note taped to the window caught her eye—the handwriting eerily similar to the note left on her kitchen table.

Miriam, come on in. The water's fine.

It was all the confirmation she needed. She put her cell phone in her pocket and held the pistol with both hands and backed against the concrete wall, inching closer to the door. Glass from broken beer bottles littered the ground, shards crunching with every step. The metal door hadn't shut completely. Her hand went to the door handle and she pulled it open slightly. She peeked inside and only saw darkness.

"Ana?" she said softly. There was no response.

She steadied her shaking hand and tried to remain calm, despite her heart's rapid thumping. The only thing left to do was to go inside the darkened lobby. She slipped inside with her police instincts sharp and alert. Her eyes adjusted a bit to the low street light seeping inside, and she moved cautiously, but with the quickness born of experience. There was an empty snack bar across the faded green carpet. Anyone could be hiding anywhere. She backed against the wall to her left and called out for Phillip, ready to face him.

There was no movement from behind the snack bar and no response. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she noticed a double-door entrance to the theater directly across from her. Both doors were opened a crack, and she could see a flicker of light beckoning her closer. She looked around, holding her pistol up and then moved across the room in a swift rush.

The crack revealed a line of candles positioned down the aisle. She pulled one door open and looked inside. There were rows of empty vinyl seats. In front was a large stage with the curtain open.

"Who's there?" she called out before entering.

There was no answer.

"Enough games already. Where's my daughter?" she asked with as forceful a tone as she could muster. The silence was frightening. She held her Beretta tightly and moved down the aisle, alongside the candles whose flames wavered as she passed. A man dressed in black suddenly stepped out onstage left, startling her.

He was slim, with long hair past his shoulders and empty, sunken eyes. Miriam took a step back and raised her pistol. Amused, he smiled exposing crooked teeth.

"Bout time you showed up," he said, looking at his wristwatch. It wasn't Phillip Anderson, it was someone else. A man she had never seen before.

"Where is she?" she asked with the pistol aimed ten feet from the stage.

The man put his hand up in a halting gesture. "Let's not do anything rash here. I have the girl as promised. Please lower your gun."

He didn't appear to be armed, but Miriam wouldn't put anything past them. "You work for Anderson?" she asked, searching the stage for anyone else. "Is he here?"

"I do," he said. "And no, he's not here, but that's of little concern. Now lower the gun."

She brought the pistol down but maintained a tight grip. "Okay." She looked behind her, just to be sure. There were only empty seats and candles dripping wax onto both aisles. She turned back to the man. "I came here to get my daughter. That's all I want. I've been more than cooperative." In vain, she tried to keep from pleading.

"We know that. It's just... there have been some complications."

Miriam felt both rage and fear at the man's stalling. Though she thought it best to play dumb. "What *complications*?"

The man smiled and rubbed his chin. "Surely you've heard by now. All that time on the road to yourself. You must have flipped on the radio and heard the news."

Miriam stared ahead with a blank expression. "I didn't hear anything. Where's is my daughter?"

"I'm afraid there's been a change of plans."

Miriam's eyes narrowed. "What are you talking about?"

The man's cold eyes indicated nothing beyond his demands. "Put your gun on the floor first."

Miriam took a few more steps back, scanning the area. "Why would I do that?"

The man looked to his side backstage as though someone was there. He then turned back to Miriam, displaying concern. "Frankly, I don't want to get shot. And neither does your daughter."

Miriam shook her head and then crouched to the ground, placing the pistol at her feet. She stood up and held her arms out with a shrug.

"That's better," the man said. He turned and signaled to the backstage area. "Go ahead and bring her out!"

Miriam's heart stopped. She wanted to leap onto the stage, take Ana into her arms, and run out of the theater without looking back. She was close. Two armed men, dressed all in black, appeared from the shadows backstage escorting a child in between them. Miriam gasped. The child's head was covered by a burlap sack.

"Take that bag off her head!" she shouted.

The man raised his arm, brushing away her protests. "Calm down. It's only necessary." Miriam grew incensed at the sight of the AR-15 rifles in both men's hands. "Let her go, you bastards!"

The two men stopped in the center of the stage near the talker, with the hooded girl between them wearing a pink Hello Kitty shirt and blue jeans.

The talker clapped his hands together and rocked back and forth on his heels. "You'll be reunited with your daughter soon enough, but in light of recent events, Mr. Anderson has changed the terms."

Miriam scowled. "I'm not interested. Enough games! I came here for one thing—"

"He has invited you to be a guest at his safe house. Both you and Ana," the man said.

She shook her head in disbelief. "That's not happening." She looked beyond the men to where his armed buddies stood. "Ana. Come here now. We're leaving."

The girl stepped forward. The men grabbed her arms and pulled her back.

"Don't touch her!" Miriam shouted, falling to her knees. "How much is he paying you? Don't any of you have families? Children?"

The talker shook his head, not responding. He turned around and signaled for the men to take the girl away. As they began to pull her, Miriam leapt to her feet.

“Wait!” she shouted.

The men halted, maintaining their grip on the frightened girl’s arms.

The talker continued. “He expected that news of this new arrangement wouldn’t go over too well, but this is what you need to understand.” He stopped speaking and took a few steps forward. “His brother, Greg, was attacked by angry locals. Murdered in cold blood.”

Miriam’s eyes widened as she maintained her bluff that all of this was news to her.

“His parents were taken back to the station. Walter and Jake are in protective custody as well. This is not what Mr. Anderson wanted.”

As her eyes welled up, she tried her best to hold back tears. “What does any of this have to do with me and my daughter?”

“Mr. Anderson is very concerned. As a result, he would like to discuss his options with you. He needs an insider. Someone he can strategize with.”

Miriam attempted to look beyond the man and get a better look at her daughter. She glanced down at the pistol at her feet. Given the right moment, she felt confident that she could take out the three men on stage without endangering Ana.

“This is really for the best,” the talker said. “He needs you. Now step away from your gun and go ahead and come on stage. No one has to get hurt.”

Miriam paused as the room went silent.

“You can come willingly, or we’ll have to use force. The choice is yours,” he said.

Miriam looked down at her feet. It was her last chance.

“Deal?” he asked.

Miriam did the math in her head: three men total, possibly more. The risks were numerous, but she also knew that by surrendering herself, she and Ana were probably as good as dead.

“Yes,” she said. “But on one condition...”

She paused. The talker put his hands on his hips, waiting.

Miriam pointed past him. “Take that bag off her head.”

He smiled and then turned his head slightly toward the back of the stage—just the opportunity she needed. Miriam fell on one knee, grabbed the pistol, and aimed ahead at the first armed man to Ana’s left.

She fired one shot into his neck. The blast was loud and alarming. The first gunman hit the floor—gurgling and holding his throat as blood rushed down his black shirt.

The long-haired talker stumbled back, wide eyed and astonished. At the moment their eyes met, Miriam fired two shots, blowing holes in his chest. He collapsed against the stage as the remaining bearded gunman pushed Ana to the ground, raised his rifle, and fired toward the auditorium.

Miriam hit the ground as bullets zipped by over her head, turning the vinyl seats into Swiss cheese. She fell flat on her stomach and rolled to the front of the stage, out of sight.

“You gonna die, you crazy bitch!” he shouted, stampeding toward her firing multiple shots all around. Hunched down, Miriam could see shell casings gathered at her feet. Each blast was louder than the other. Her legs were shaking. The man was close. For one second, his firing stopped, and she knew exactly what to do.

With the adrenaline of a locomotive, Miriam jumped up and fired one clean shot straight through his forehead. He jolted back and then hit the stage with a violent thud. Miriam spun around, looking to see if there were any more shooters. Everything was quiet, except for the muffled cries of a petrified girl.

“Ana!” Miriam said. “I’ll be right there, baby!” She climbed onto the stage and sprinted forward, past the bodies and to the center of the stage where the girl stood, frozen.

“Everything is going to be all right. I’m here now.” She touched the girl’s shoulders and squeezed. The girl flinched, her shoulders shaking. The sack was tied at her neck. Miriam’s hands went for the string, tugging at it. “I’m going to take this off now,” said Miriam. “Don’t worry.”

She yanked it loose and then carefully lifted the bag up. A mass of blond hair fell into the girl’s sobbing face. Confused, Miriam pulled her closer. Ana didn’t have blonde hair. Her hair was black. She parted the girl’s hair and saw a face that wasn’t her daughter’s. Miriam froze as her heart sank. The girl’s blue eyes were red with tears. Her face was dirty, and her clothes—on closer inspection—were torn and dirty. The surreal sight had Miriam at a loss, struck with disappointment and anguish. Nonetheless, she crouched down, pulled the girl close, and spoke to her gently and reassuringly.

“It’s going to be okay.”

She pulled back and held the girl by the shoulders, examining her. “What’s your name?”

“Allison,” the girl said meekly.

“Allison, I’m going to take you out of here.” She stood up and took the girl by the hand. “Follow me. We’ll get you home. Where do you live?”

“Miami,” the girl answered with a vapid stare. They began walking as Miriam urged her not to look at the ground. Just as they passed the talker’s body, his cell phone started ringing in his suit jacket.

Miriam stopped. “Wait one minute, honey. Just stand right here for me and don’t look at any of the men.” She turned Allison to the wall, stage right, and moved swiftly over to where the long-haired talker lay, another fresh corpse who died a pointless death. She winced as she reached into his blood-soaked pants pocket to retrieve a small flip phone. There was a number displayed—indicating a Lee County area code. It was a long shot, but she had little recourse.

She opened the phone and held it to her ear, saying nothing.

“*What’s the story? You bring her back here yet?*” a voice—ominous and familiar—asked.

Miriam didn’t respond.

“*Cat got your tongue? Gimme an update,*” he asked.

“They’re dead,” she answered.

A pause, and then a halting response from the other end.

“*Miriam?*”

“You lied to me,” she said. “Where is my daughter?”

Clearly taken off guard, Phillip stumbled over his words. “*How—what happened there? Where’s Milo?*”

“If this is his phone, I shot him. Who is Allison, and where’s Ana?”

Phillip sighed. “*That’s too bad. I was hoping you’d play ball.*”

"I had nothing to do with what happened to your brother. Give me Ana, and you'll never have to deal with me again."

"Oh, Miriam. What kind of leverage do you think you have here?"

"Where are you?" she asked.

He laughed again. *"You had a chance to find out, but you'd rather shoot my friends instead. There's going to be a price to pay for that."*

Desperate, Miriam couldn't suppress her anguish no longer. "Give her back, you son of a bitch!"

"Tell you what. You want Ana so bad, come and get her. I want to see what a good cop you really were. You have twenty-four hours."

"I wouldn't even know where to start. Enough!" she shouted.

"Start at the beginning, and go from there. I've escaped you twice, Miriam. Let's see if you're up for it this time."

An avalanche of tears rushed down her face. "Please don't do this. I'm not..."

"You're not what?" he asked.

"I'm not a good cop. I'm nobody. All I have left is Ana, and you can't take her—"

"You've ruined my life, Miriam, and it's only fair that I repay the favor." He stopped, letting out another sigh. *"But I'm giving you a chance here. Everyone deserves a chance. Even you."*

Miriam held the phone away from her ear and examined the number again. She then looked to Allison, who stood facing the wall. "What happens when I find you?"

"Then we can talk about where to go from there. Who knows, maybe you'll learn that I'm not such a bad guy after all."

He ended the call abruptly, without any final words or directives. The dial tone sounded. Miriam held the phone away from her ear again, examining the screen. There had to be something she was missing. She needed a clue. Some kind of hint. Lou's words about going at it alone came back to her. He was right.

She put the cell phone in her pocket and then knelt down next the talker, searching for a wallet or some kind of identification. He had nothing. She rose and walked over to Allison, taking her by the shoulders and turning her around to face her.

"It's okay now. We can go."

Allison looked up at her with a distant stare. Whatever she had been through, Miriam was certain that it was traumatic. She held the girl's hand as they walked down the steps of the stage to the aisle where a few candles still burned.

"Allison, I'm going to ask you something. Are you listening?" Miriam said.

"Uh-huh," she answered, nodding.

"Did you see a girl named Ana? Wherever you were being held. Did you see her?"

"Yeah," the girl said.

A rush of relief came over Miriam.

"Okay. I need to know everything about the place you were taken. Any details."

"I want my mommy," the girl replied.

"I know, honey. And we'll take you right to her. In the meantime, you have to tell me everything you know."

Allison said nothing in return. Miriam understood that it would be difficult to probe her in such a way, but there was no other choice. The key to finding Ana

was there, somewhere in Allison's recollections. And Miriam wasn't prepared to rest until she got the answers. She was a mom and she would figure out how to do it, and hopefully, without causing Allison any more pain.

Teamwork

Trapped in the basement, Ana wasn't alone for very long before another girl, close to her in age, was brought in to keep her company. Her name was Allison and she was from Miami. She had been abducted while playing in her front yard. The bad man hadn't done it. He never left the house. He had someone else do it. Allison was nine and in the fourth grade. She was terrified, but relieved to find another girl just like her was also being held and seemed to be mostly okay.

"What do they want with us?" she asked Ana.

"I don't know," Ana said. Her face was bruised and she hesitated telling the girl how she got them. Allison looked scared enough.

"How many people did you see?" Ana asked. It had been hours since her capture, and she had yet to see anything beyond the basement. It was all too clear why there was an empty bucket in the room. Whoever was holding her had no intention of letting them see beyond the walls.

Allison, however, was privy to more information. Her abductor—a bearded man who smelled funny—hadn't used any chemicals to knock her out. He simply grabbed her, threw her in a van, and tied her up.

"The man blindfolded me," she replied. "I couldn't see anything."

Ana placed a comforting hand on Allison's. "Allison, listen to me. We have to get out of here. I don't know who these people are or what they want, but we need to find a way out." She stopped talking, silenced by footsteps above.

With the dilapidated state of the basement they were being held in, and the moldering smell of earth and leaves, Ana guessed they were in some kind of cabin, likely some place in the deep woods. She could hear muffled voices talking now above them. And the footsteps were coming from multiple places, telling her that there were more people than she initially believed.

"How did they get you?" Allison asked.

Ana wasn't sure where to begin. She rubbed her forehead; she felt sore all over. Her ribs throbbed with pain from the fall down the stairs. She was lucky to be alive, she assumed. It hurt to think. It hurt to breathe.

"It's hard to remember. I... I think this guy just came in my house and had some kind of rag that he put over my face."

Ana stopped and looked up at the ceiling as the footsteps continued. "Allison, have you ever heard of the Snatcher?"

Allison gave her a funny look and shrugged. "No. Who's that?"

"He's a bad man who kidnaps kids. There were like five girls he kidnapped. I think that's who took us."

Allison covered her mouth in fear. "Oh no. What are we going to do?" She began to cry.

Ana took her hand and squeezed. "We stick together, no matter what."

The muffled conversation got louder upstairs. Someone was angry. They froze and listened. A loud crash was followed by glass shattering.

“What do you mean Greg’s dead?” a man’s voice shouted. “How the fuck did that happen?”

“Mr. Anderson, please,” another voice said.

“Where the hell are my parents?” the man asked.

“I think they’re in protective custody right now.”

“And my other brothers?”

“Jake and Walter were taken back to the station.”

Another loud crash rattled the ceiling. It seemed as though the man had just turned over a table. Allison winced and wrapped her arms around Ana, hiding her face.

“It’s okay,” Ana said, brushing back the girl’s blonde hair. “Don’t be scared.”

All the commotion and yelling suddenly stopped. Ana kept her head tilted up, staring at the ceiling. They remained in the corner near the mattress, with the side of the stairs in view. Upstairs, the man paced and continued talking. Ana could recognize his harsh voice as belonging to the large man who had hit her and thrown her down the stairs, and every time he talked, she got chills.

“Okay. Take the other girl to her. This whole thing is messed up beyond belief.”

“Then what?” another man asked.

“Once she lets her guard down, you get that bitch and bring her to me.”

“I don’t understand why you’re wasting your time with this broad. You have half the damn state looking for you right now.”

“Excuse me?” the man shouted. “I’m not paying for your worldly advice, I pay you to act.”

“All right, Phil. Damn, man. I get it.”

Their conversation ceased as footsteps sounded outside. Ana remained still, so still she could hear her own breathing. Allison had buried herself in Ana’s side. Who were they talking about up there? What did any of it mean?

“Next time anyone comes down here, we have to try to make a run for it,” Ana said.

Allison looked up. “How?”

“He’s big. We can outrun him.”

Allison studied Ana’s bruised face and nervously broached the question. “Did he do that to you?”

Ana paused and nodded. “Only because I hit him on the head with a shovel.”

Ana smiled. “You did?”

“Yep. And I almost made it out, but the door was locked.”

There was a shared confidence between the two girls. They were complete strangers, but in that moment, Ana felt closer to her than any other girl she had ever known. Footsteps suddenly sounded. The same thumping boots Ana knew belonged to the bad man. To their immediate despair, they heard the basement door open. Allison squeezed Ana tightly, and began to sniffle and cry.

“Shhh,” Ana said. “Don’t be afraid.” It was hard advice to follow considering her own creeping terror. A pair of black boots came trudging down the stairs, followed by someone wearing sneakers and blue jeans. Ana tried to stand, but Allison was clinging to her. “Come on. We have to make a run for it.”

Allison shook her head, her eyes clenched shut and tears rolling down her cheeks. It was too late. The man had reached the bottom of the stairs, holding a tote bag in his hands. Any signs of Bobby were gone, replaced by the man's reddened, leering face.

Ana looked up, making eye contact with him, against all her better instincts. For a moment he just stood there and stared, saying nothing. The top of his head was bandaged with a blood-stained cloth that ran across his graying hair, giving Ana a brief moment of satisfaction.

He walked over to the huddled girls and tossed the tote bag onto the floor. Looking at Ana, he spoke. "I took these clothes from your room, but plans have changed."

Ana looked away, saying nothing as Allison buried her face into her chest.

"You there," the man said, pointing to Allison. "What's your name again?"

Allison didn't respond beyond a few faint whimpers.

"Her name is Allison. Now what do you want?" Ana said with as much anger as she dared to muster. It was what her mother would have told her to do: show strength.

The man disregarded her insolence and squatted near them, knees cracking. "Allison," he began in a calm tone. "I need you to change into the clothes in this bag." He pulled out a Hello Kitty shirt and held it up. Ana noticed dirt stains all over it that weren't there before.

"What'd you do to my clothes?" she asked.

"We have to make sure that Ana looks the part," he responded.

"She's not going anywhere," Ana said, staring him down. It was a bold move, but the man wasn't in any mood to argue. Without hesitation, he wound his hand back and smacked Ana in the face, sending a shock through her body as she cried out and fell back against the wall. Allison screamed out and started to cry, clinging more tightly to Ana. Ana freed one of her arms and felt her face, as white spots danced in front of her eyes and in the air all around her.

"You shut your mouth," the man said. He then tossed the shirt to Allison, followed by a pair of jeans. His knees cracked again as he stood up, towering over them.

"Let's go, Allison," he said with his hand out.

Allison held on to Ana, looking away from the man.

"I'm not going to ask again," he said, balling his fists.

"Do it," Ana said softly into her ear. "Take the chance to leave while you can."

The man nodded in agreement. "Now *that*, I can agree with. Listen to her, Allison."

But Allison further attached herself to Ana, refusing to leave. The man shook his head in disappointment and sighed.

"Very well. You leave me little choice."

He swooped down, clutching her legs by the ankles and then jerked her upward. Allison screamed as he yanked her away from Ana and dragged her across the cold, concrete floor.

"You girls have to take the fun out of everything," he moaned. He stopped and picked Allison up, throwing her over his shoulder as she screamed and cried.

Ana stood and rushed over, hitting his legs. "Leave her alone!"

He walked away and continued up the stairs, ignoring the blows.

“Let her go!” Ana screeched at the top of her lungs.

The man stopped in the middle of the stairs and looked down at her. “I’ll deal with you later.” His boots clomped back up the stairs as he carried a flailing Allison with one arm.

Ana ran up the stairs, chasing after them as the door slammed. Allison’s faint cries from outside the room continued. Ana stared at the door trying to conceive a plan. She thought of her parents and how worried they must be about her. Her mother would want her to fight—to do everything she could to get free. At that moment, she was more than certain that if she didn’t escape soon, she was never going to make it out alive.

Miriam fled Homestead in Lou’s Crown Victoria with heightened urgency. Allison swayed in the passenger seat, clinging to her armrest. The car was going at least twenty miles over the speed limit on the interstate, but she couldn’t have cared less. Her mind bolted in a hundred directions as the paramount task of finding Ana in time sent her emotions spinning. Of course she had to return the girl to her parents—that much was clear.

But Allison was also crucial to any chance she had in playing and winning Phillip Anderson’s game. They pulled to a darkened rest stop off the interstate where Miriam took a deep breath and tried to get her thoughts together. She had killed three men and would have to alert the authorities.

There was also Lou. She would need to bring him up to speed. She needed help. She needed every tool at her disposal. Through it all, she had overlooked one main element: Allison’s fragile condition. The girl needed to be admitted to the hospital, to make sure that she was okay. Allison was reticent about what had happened to her, and Miriam had yet to broach the subject in full. They parked next to a restroom, one of the few vacant spots in a lot filled with eighteen-wheel semi-trucks. She turned to Allison and began probing, her voice soft and gentle.

“Just bear with me for a moment, Allison. There’s a lot we have to do.” She pulled out her cell phone and handed it to the girl. “But first, I want you to call your parents and tell them that you’re okay. Then let me talk to them.”

“I don’t know her number,” Allison said with a tinge of shame. “On my phone, it’s just Mom.”

“Okay,” Miriam said. “We need to get you to a hospital and have you checked out.”

“I’m fine,” she said, almost too soon.

Miriam leaned closer to her and brushed back the girl’s hair. “That’s good to hear, but we have to make sure. We’re going to catch the man who kidnapped you, and we need to make sure that no stone is left unturned.”

“I just want to go home,” she said, looking down.

“We will,” Miriam said. “But my daughter is still out there. Ana. You talked about her. I need to get her back from the same man who took you. You can help me with that, right?”

Allison nodded with a sniffle. She rubbed her nose and looked at Miriam glazed sadness in her eyes. “She tried to help me. We were going to escape.”

“I know you were. And now we have to do everything we can to rescue her. Understand?”

Allison nodded again.

“Can you think of anyone to call? Any numbers?”

Allison looked up, thinking. “I don’t know.”

Miriam masked her disappointment and moved on. “We’ll go to Miami and find a hospital from there.” She took her phone and rested it in the middle console. Her fingers traced along the GPS screen affixed to the dashboard. “What school do you go to? I’ll look for it on here.”

“Melrose Elementary,” she answered.

Miriam typed it in and a location popped up, only twenty miles away. She then did a search for hospitals in the Miami-Dade area.

“You’re doing fine, Allison,” Miriam said. “Just hang in there and we’ll find your parents.”

She backed out of the parking space, stopped and reached into her pocket. The Beretta was still warm there. She grabbed her phone and scrolled through the contacts, stopping at Lou. He wouldn’t believe her, not right away. And once he did, he’d simply admonish her for going into such a situation without backup. Either way, she needed him. The crisis had escalated beyond her control. They coasted back onto the interstate, headed for the Miami-Dade Hospital, some twenty-five miles away. She called Lou and held the phone against her ear.

Twenty-four hours, she thought to herself.

Miriam hadn’t slept in days, it seemed, and it was certain to be a long night. Did she even have a chance? Why would Phillip Anderson make it possible to find him? Little made sense, and she was quickly losing control of the situation. Lou could help get her mind right, that was if he’d answer his phone. The call went to voicemail, and Miriam left a message.

“Hey, I need you to call me back as soon as you get this message. It’s important. Thanks.”

She hung up and set her phone down wondering what he was tied up with. Palm Dale was the farthest thing from her mind. The situation there was scary—vigilante justice, in-fighting among jurisdictions, the FBI, the Andersons, and the news media.

Though things weren’t much better at her house in Sarasota either. She had hastily fled a crime scene amid hordes of news cameras crowded outside on her lawn. Then it became clear as day: Her attempts to slip away and start a new life for the past year had failed. She was back in the spotlight again. This was also evident by the number of missed calls on her phone, many from unrecognizable numbers.

They traveled north for about twenty minutes as Miriam scanned the radio for any recent developments. She found hip-hop, classic rock, and salsa stations, but no news. It was almost a relief to her. Allison had remained quiet for the most part, and the small talk they tried to engage in was limited and strained. She was tired. Probably hungry too. Miriam didn’t want to push her too much in her current state.

“Hungry?” she asked finally. “We could stop at McDonalds or something if you’d like.”

Allison stared out the window in a daze as they passed a series of gas stations and fast food restaurants on the busy highway. “Not really,” she responded.

“You’re going to eat once we get to the hospital, okay? That’s non-negotiable.”

Allison shrugged. Ahead, a few blocks down, on their right was a large, bright, four-story building complex with signs pointing every which way and palm trees symmetrically planted along every road. The hospital was in view. Miriam began to feel a little better. Allison could get the care she needed, and Miriam could possibly get answers. As they pulled into the busy patient lot, her cell phone rang with yet another number she didn’t recognize. This time, out of sheer curiosity, she answered it.

“*Ms. Castillo?*” an eager man’s voice asked.

“Yes?”

“*This is Agent Nettles with the FBI—*”

“How’d you get my number?” She was glad to hear from them but also highly skeptical.

“*We’re FBI, ma’am. It isn’t very hard.*”

She wanted to speak to Lou. “Where’s Detective Albini?”

Nettles paused. She could hear a dozen other side conversations around him and didn’t envy him one bit. “Uh. He should be around here somewhere. But I didn’t call to talk about him. I’m calling to get an update from you.”

“An update?” she asked, searching for parking.

“*No one has seen or heard from you in hours. I’m getting calls about a crime scene in Sarasota. Your face is all over the news. Greg Anderson gets beaten and hung from a tree. And the Snatcher is still loose. Ms. Castillo, we’re in a world of shit right now.*”

“I have a situation of my own here,” she responded, pulling into a space at the end of the third lane down.

“*Oh yeah?*” Nettles said.

“That’s right,” she said.

“*Are we going to have to put an APB out on you as well?*” he asked.

“Not necessary. I’m at Mercy Hospital in Miami-Dade County.”

Apparently flummoxed, Nettles didn’t immediately respond. “What are you doing there?”

“I’m with a young girl. Her name is Allison, and she just might be the key in getting to Phillip Anderson.”

Nettles was demanding and pushy. “How... what is going on? What have you gotten yourself into?”

“I need help, Agent Nettles,” she said. “I need all I can get if I ever want to see my daughter again.”

Remembrance

Miriam parked near the emergency room and then took Allison by the hand and walked through the automatic double doors. In their haste, they passed

doctors, nurses, patients, and staff. She checked Allison in at the front desk, describing the matter as one of a delicate nature.

"I'll need the number to the sheriff's department as well, please."

After getting Allison admitted, Miriam did her best to explain the situation to the front desk and subsequently, the doctors and nurses. A bald-headed Indian man with a thin mustache, a Dr. Aji Bhandari introduced himself as the attending physician. He was dressed in a white coat and carrying a clipboard, and jotted a few notes as he talked with Miriam and a nurse checked Allison's vitals in a closed patient's room. Miriam explained Allison's condition as best she could: psychological trauma and perhaps physical abuse. Dr. Bhandari nodded but showed no reaction.

"Once the police get here, I need them to track her parents and bring them here as well."

"Why did you not go to the police first?" he asked. "This man, you say, is still out there."

Miriam signaled the doctor to the side and spoke softly. "She's been through enough as it is. I need to get her in a relaxed setting, have her checked for injuries, and find out what she knows about the man who kidnapped her."

"So you're a cop?" he asked.

"I used to be," she said. "This girl is part of something big that stretches far beyond this county and the next. The FBI will be here soon as well."

Dr. Bhandari's eyes widened. "The FBI?"

She looked at him with an earnest nod and spoke quietly as the nurse pumped the Velcro band wrapped more tightly around Allison's skinny arm. "We're going to need a room where we won't be disturbed. Some place where we can check her for injuries, and let her get some rest."

Dr. Bhandari pressed his lips together and looked around the room. He wasn't pleased. "Maybe you'd have better luck at the police station. We're running a hospital here, and while I respect the situation, we simply don't have the resources to facilitate this investigation."

"You've heard of the Snatcher, right?" Miriam asked, stopping him.

Dr. Bhandari thought to himself. "Yes..."

"And you may or may not have heard that there's a manhunt for him throughout South Florida."

Dr. Bhandari held his hands out at his sides in a gesture of futility. "I heard of him, but did not know about any manhunt."

"This girl," Miriam began, pointing to the side. "She escaped from wherever he was hiding. And she's our only chance of finding him."

"I understand that, but—"

Miriam folded her hands together. "So please... work with me here." She held back from going into too many details involving Ana or anything else, but her intensity convinced Dr. Bhandari that she meant business.

"Okay," the doctor said. "We'll assign her a room."

The hospital soon had its share of law enforcement as a dozen county sheriff's department personnel convened in the lobby and some upstairs, responding quickly after Miriam placed the call for help. The crowd grew even

larger when the FBI arrived on the scene via helicopter, followed by several Lee County investigators, including Lou.

Then followed Allison's parents, Jack and Shelly Clifton, who had arrived disheveled and distraught. They had filed a police report after their daughter disappeared while playing in the yard, and looked both terrified and happy.

Allison's room had been cleared, leaving authorities to loiter in the brightly lit hall outside, discussing their next move, while Allison sat upright in her bed on the other side of the closed door, alone with her parents. Dr. Bhandari looked overwhelmed by the assemblage of police and FBI, but attempted to stay focused and inform Miriam of Allison's shifting condition.

"No signs of physical damage or trauma," he continued, reading from his clipboard. "She had an acute level of dehydration, coupled with a bad level of shock."

"So he never touched her?" Miriam asked.

Dr. Bhandari looked up with a brow raised as Detective Nettles and Lou approached from the side, listening.

"There are... no signs of physical abuse or trauma, like I said," he continued.

Miriam thought to herself, then asked the doctor what he recommended.

"A good night's sleep and plenty of liquids. Some food would be nice too..." he paused.

"She's not eating?" Miriam asked. She recalled Allison turning down McDonalds—almost unheard of for a child.

Dr. Bhandari shifted impatiently as though he had a million other places to be. "Her parents are trying their best right now."

Miriam peeked inside Allison's room, beyond the blinds and could see Allison on her bed with a plate of food on a tray. Her mother held a fork and was trying to feed her. Her father stood over them both, brushing back her hair with his hand. She reluctantly opened her mouth and took a bite.

"How long was she in captivity?" Agent Nettles asked, cutting in.

Dr. Bhandari looked around as a nurse approached, urgently calling his name.

"Thank you, Doctor," Miriam said, ending their conversation, having learned what she needed to know, and noticing how busy he was. He nodded and disappeared—on to his next patient or issue.

Miriam turned to Nettles. He was a young agent, maybe even younger than she was. He had an unappealing cockiness, but if he could bring the FBI effectively into the fray, she'd take whatever she could get. Lou had said little since showing up. Miriam suspected that he was still peeved at her for going it alone earlier that day. She had a lot of explaining to do.

Miriam told him and Nettles about Allison's abduction. "She was reported missing earlier today around 2:00 p.m., after coming home from school."

With a dazed, beleaguered look, Lou rubbed his hands through his hair with an exhausted sigh. "Holy crap. What day is this?"

"Friday," Nettles said. His eyes remained on Miriam. "Then what?"

Miriam tugged at the ends of her jacket, growing tired of recounting the story again. But Nettles needed to hear every detail, and she was ready to work together as a team to bring down the Snatcher once and for all. "Police estimate that she was in captivity for six to seven hours. Where she was held, no one knows. She

was thrown in a van and blindfolded by a man who doesn't fit Phillip Anderson's description."

"So he's got other guys doing this for him?" Lou asked.

"Wouldn't be the first time," Miriam said. "Ray Gowdy? Remember?"

Moving on, Nettles leaned in closer to interrogate her. "And these men you met. They tried to kill you?"

Miriam nodded. "I believed my life was in danger, yes."

Struggling, Lou scratched his head again. "I don't get it. Why would he go through all the trouble to trot out some decoy if he was just going to kill you?"

"He wanted to take me prisoner. Those were his new terms if I was to ever see my daughter again."

Nettles and Lou exchanged glances, then looked back at her.

"So you shot all three men, just like that?"

Miriam's face was hardened, showing no remorse. "They had that little girl wearing a bag. I thought..."

"You thought it was Ana," Lou said, answering for her.

She bit her bottom lip, nodding, then clenched her eyes shut and covered her face with her hands.

"It's all right," Nettles said calmly. "We're going to find this guy. What choice do we have now? It's a complete shit-show at your station, and we've got a massacre at some abandoned theater and a wanted man on the loose. What's not to love about this case?"

Miriam smiled slightly, choking back tears.

"You couldn't leave *one* of those guys alive?" Lou asked. "You know, that would have made our jobs a lot easier." He seemed a tad upset and Miriam could understand. With her daughter's life on the line, she wasn't the easiest person to work with.

"I didn't mean to kill them all," she said innocently.

Nettles shook his head and pointed at her. "We need to get you to a shrink."

Lou and Miriam both laughed nervously. The hallway, recently filled with law men, began to clear out as the Miami-Dade officers considered their job more-or-less done.

A separate FBI team had taken control of the crime scene at the theater. They had been in regular contact with Nettles and when pressed by Miriam for information, he offered a blunt assessment.

"No ID was recovered on any of the bodies, but we're fairly certain that they were contract men."

"Hired guns," Lou added.

"And there's probably a lot more where those came from."

"I thought that his assets were frozen," Miriam said.

"We did too," Nettles said. "Looks like he'd hidden at least one account beforehand. This wily wacko is on the run."

Lou turned to Miriam, notepad in hand, and in full detective mode. "So he called you after the, uh, shoot-out?"

Miriam reached into her jacket pocket. "Not quite." She pulled out the ringleader's flip phone, caked in dried blood. "He called one of the men I shot."

Both Lou and Nettles seemed surprised. Lou turned back to Miriam. "Evidence from a crime scene? Miriam, you should know better."

She handed it to him. "It's all yours. I'm sure you can have a team extract whatever info's on it."

Nettles studied them both while rolling up the sleeves of his white button-down shirt. An ID badge hung around his neck dangling in front of his red tie. He breathed heavily, deep in thought, then touched Miriam's arm like a concerned father.

"This is what we're going to do. We take you in another room and deputize you immediately—FBI assistant, sheriff's deputy, I don't give a shit. You're getting in way too deep."

"You almost got yourself killed back there," Lou added judgmentally.

Miriam could do without the lecture, but personal pride was the least concerning thing on her mind. She needed them.

"We know why you did it," Nettles said. "But maybe Captain Porter was right when he said you need to step back from this."

"Get your head above the water," Lou said, chiming in.

"I've never been more focused," Miriam said. She pointed past them to the window where Allison lay in bed with her parents sitting beside her. "That girl is the only hope we have. At this point, Phillip Anderson wouldn't risk getting caught in order to play out his hand. Whether it's twenty-four, forty-eight, or ninety-six hours, this is just another part of his game."

Lou and Nettles listened attentively, waiting for her to reach the conclusion of her thoughts.

"But what if *we* tricked *him*?" she asked. They waited for more details, as though Miriam were calling the shots. Maybe she was. "We play along. Step by step." She looked past Nettles and Lou, down the hall. "Where's that lawyer? Kershner?"

Lou huffed and cleared his throat. "He's currently cozying up to the relatives, making sure their *civil liberties* are being protected," he said with air quotes at the end.

"We need to talk to him," Miriam said. "For any of the plan to work." She excused herself to use the restroom, leaving Nettles and Lou to ponder the specifics of the plan. Whatever it was, they shared the ominous premonition that more carnage was soon to follow.

They reconvened in Allison's room as she lay in bed, resting, her two concerned parents sitting by her bed keeping, careful watch. A few hours had passed, enough for her to get some sleep. Miriam stood at the end of the bed, cognizant of the parents' watchful observation. They didn't want Allison pushed too much—that much they made clear. They were prepared to give the authorities a brief window for questioning—not to exceed twenty minutes—and then she was to be left alone.

Miriam agreed to the terms, along with Nettles and Lou. Everything was riding on whatever vague recollections of her experience Allison could give them. From the onset, she wasn't much of a talker. While waiting, Miriam had taken the time to be deputized as a probationary agent.

The FBI had kept a tight lid on the theater shooting, while all of the focus of the news media remained on the debacle in Lee County and the search for the lawless mob who had murdered Greg Anderson.

Nettles and Lou sat near the other side of the bed, opposite the parents, with their notepads out, ready to copy. Miriam, it was decided, would do most of the talking, as Allison was already familiar with her. One of the nurses brought ice cream for Allison and handed it to her with a smile.

Allison had loosened up considerably over the past few hours. The presence of her parents and comfortable surroundings had changed her demeanor from catatonic to polite but reserved.

"We want to thank you again for finding our daughter," Shelly, Allison's mother, said to Miriam. Sitting behind his wife, Jack put one hand over hers and looked at Miriam with gratitude through his square-framed glasses.

"Yes. We can't thank you enough."

Miriam looked at Allison, smiling. "All the credit goes to your daughter. After all, she escaped. Didn't you, Allison?"

The girl took a bite of ice cream and shrugged. "I guess so."

Miriam sat at the end of the bed and inched forward. "Remember when we talked about my daughter, Ana? You knew her, right?"

"Yeah," Allison said.

"I need you to help me get her back. Can you do that for me?"

Jack looked up, puzzled. "*Your* daughter has been kidnapped too?"

Miriam turned to him. "Mr. Clifton, please."

From his chair, Agent Nettles leaned past Miriam's shoulder, looking at the couple. "It's a long story, but yes." They hadn't filled the parents in on all the details for fear of compromising sensitive information. The Cliftons were privy to one main detail: their daughter had possible information that could lead to the capture of her kidnapper.

Miriam turned her attention to Allison, trying to keep her focused. "We're going to do a little exercise here? Is that okay?"

Allison took another bite and nodded. Rain drops began pattering across the outside windows—light and then gradually thick and louder.

"I want you to close your eyes and take me back to the first thing you remember from today."

Allison gave her a puzzled look, not grasping where this was leading. "You want me to go to sleep?"

Miriam laughed. The parents kept their watchful eyes on the proceedings. "No. Just close your eyes and think back to when you were playing in your yard."

Allison set her cup of ice cream on her side tray, folded her hands, and closed her eyes as instructed.

"So what are you doing?" Miriam asked.

"I was playing in the yard. I asked Tommy if he wanted to throw the ball, but he said no and went inside."

"Tommy's her younger brother," Jack added.

"So you're in the yard alone. Then what?" Miriam asked.

Allison kept her eyes closed, reciting from memory as best she could. "I went to the garage and looked for my bike, but it had a flat. So I took Tommy's skateboard

and rode it down the driveway.” Allison paused as her brows furrowed. “Then a truck came. A dirty truck with mud all over it. It stopped right by me.” Her voice grew more nervous and shaky with every development.

Jack looked around, upset. “I’m not sure if I like this, Ms. Castillo.”

Miriam held up her hand again. “Please. We’re close, Mr. Clifton.” She leaned forward, closer, as Nettles and Lou wrote into their pads. “Go on, Allison. What next?”

Her voice grew more frightened as she continued. “He threw me in the truck. I didn’t even see his face.”

“What color was the truck?” Miriam asked.

“Red...”

“Then what?”

“He put a blindfold on me and tied my hands up. I was screaming and crying, and then he tied a rag around my mouth.”

Shelly gasped, covering her own mouth. She squeezed her husband’s hand, trying to remain calm. The exercise was more challenging with the parents in the room, but they insisted on being present, and Miriam had no other choice but to comply.

“How long did you drive for?” Miriam said. “Think about how long it took.”

“Maybe an hour,” Allison replied, her eyes still closed. “It felt like forever and I was scared.”

Lou and Nettles continued to write, taking note of every detail she mentioned—from the truck to the distance to the hideout.

“They took me to a quiet place with no traffic. I heard crickets. A big boat motor. It was really loud. There were a bunch of other voices. Other men. They carried me to a house. Then they took the blindfold off.” Allison paused with a shiver.

Miriam placed her hand on the blanket covering her leg. “It’s okay. You can do this.”

“It’s some kind of cabin with, like, wood floors and stuff. It’s in the woods. I saw a bunch of vehicles outside the windows, but the rest was all trees. They take me to a big man. He tells me *welcome*. Then they made me go in the basement.”

Miriam took note of every image Allison described. By the time she reached the part where she met Ana, Miriam could hardly contain her anguish. She quickly wiped her tears away and cleared her throat.

“She said her name was Ana and that we should try to escape. I wasn’t down there long. I don’t know why they took me, but they did.”

“My God, how did you escape, honey?” Jack said, astonished.

Miriam turned to the parents, her eyes welling with tears. “They brought Allison to me, her face hidden inside a hood as a ruse. I’m happy for your daughter, I really am. But now I’ve got to save mine.”

She thanked Allison and gave her a hug. The little girl’s bravery had impressed her from the beginning. She left the family and beckoned Nettles and Lou to join her out in the hall.

“What do you think?” Lou said first.

Nettles examined his notes. “Red truck. Muddy. An hour’s drive to a cabin. Loud engines blaring, boat motor far away? Hmm.” He paused to think.

“Airboats,” Miriam interjected.

They looked at her with stunned realization. “That’s it. Airboats,” Nettles said. “He must be near the Southern Glades. It’s all wilderness out there.”

Lou cut in, excited. “So we check into all of his land purchases around that area and zero in from there.”

Nettles gave Lou a high-five. “Yeah! That’s the ticket. You see, the feds and county can work together just fine sometimes.”

“You said it,” Lou remarked with a smile.

With both their faces beaming with confidence, Miriam spoke up. “We need to speak to the family lawyer.”

Their jubilation ceased as they looked at her.

“What do you want to talk to that slime ball for?” Lou asked.

“Because he’s Phillip Anderson’s eyes and ears, or at least one of them, right?” Miriam asked.

Lou nodded with a shrug.

“If that’s the case, we want Mr. Kershner to know everything that’s coming.”

Showdown

They moved their operations from the hospital to the Miami-Dade Police Department. Allison needed to rest, and the hospital was no place for a dozen investigators and FBI agents to run operations. It was at the station where they met Sheriff Hopkins, a no-nonsense woman who wasn’t thrilled with their unexpected presence. Miriam and the others had gathered in the Sheriff’s office, hoping to curry her favor.

“I don’t know what you all have going on, but we have our own police work to do here,” Hopkins said, right off the bat.

Agent Nettles stepped forward. “Phillip Anderson is wanted for capital murder of a police officer, among other things. We have reason to believe that he is hiding in the area or somewhere nearby. So we would ask that your department cooperate with our efforts here.”

“I don’t need a hundred federal agents hanging out in my building,” she said in response.

“There’s only a few of us, Sheriff,” Nettles said. “But we need your assistance.”

She leaned back and eyed everyone in the room: Miriam, Lou, Nettles, Detective Jade and Detective Belmont—both from Lee County—and Agent Willis from the FBI.

“I want to catch that cop-killing monster every bit as much as you do. I just don’t want y’all moving in here, that’s all.”

“We’re not,” Nettles said.

“Only until we catch him,” Lou said with a smile.

Everyone turned and looked at him shaking their heads.

“And that’s going to happen soon,” he added. “Promise.”

Hopkins leaned back in her chair, brought a hand to her chin, and studied the group suspiciously. “We run a tight ship around here. Our citizens expect nothing less.”

After some deliberation, an agreement was reached, and they were allowed to set up an operations office down the hall. Miriam looked at her phone. Three hours had passed, since Anderson's ultimatum. Twenty-one left. Would he stick to his word? She had no reason to believe it, but it was the only chance she had.

"I've got the lawyer on the phone," Lou said, holding up his cell. Nettles and his partner, Agent Willis, a curly-haired older man, were observing a detailed state map they had just put up on the wall.

All eyes turned to her as Miriam put the phone to her ear. "Mr. Kershner, this is Miriam Castillo."

"Yes, Ms. Castillo. It's my understanding that you wanted to talk to me."

"I'm sure you're busy representing the Anderson family, but there are a few questions I wanted to ask you."

Kershner laughed. *"I'm actually in the process of drawing up a wrongful death suit against the county in light of Greg Anderson's death."* He stopped and took a deep breath. *"But yes, my time is limited, and I appreciate your concern."*

Miriam got right to the point. "I wanted to inform you that we're closing in on your client, Phillip Anderson, so you may want to get over here soon."

There was silence on the other end that told her everything she needed to know.

"Mr. Kershner, are you still there?" she asked.

"Yes, I'm still here. Where are you?"

"Miami-Dade County," she said walking to the map. "There's an abandoned building where we know he's hiding in. You see, your client jumped the gun. A & A Construction? I did a little research. It stands for Anderson and Anderson. He's got a whole slew of buildings in the old business district, ready to refurbish. The Plaza Theater being one of them. But we've got the building he's hiding in and are ready to close in."

Kershner was about to speak, but stopped himself.

"When was the last time you spoke to Mr. Anderson?" she asked.

"Yesterday," he replied. "When I told him to turn himself in."

"What did he say?" Miriam asked.

"I can't speak for Mr. Anderson's decision making process. And I have no knowledge of his whereabouts."

"Well, we do," Miriam said. "I'm sure we'll speak again soon. Thank you, Mr. Kershner."

She hung up the phone and looked at the others. Nettles stepped up to the wall, uncapped a marker and circled the old business district on a second, smaller county map. The other detectives were trying their best to get up to speed.

The flip phone belonging to the dead man at the theater was on top of the desk in a sealed evidence bag. Miriam set her own phone on the desk and waited for the call. There was no way, she felt, that Phillip Anderson could resist calling, certain that Kershner would alert him.

Lou went to work and set up his recording device and GPS tracker, connecting it to the phone. Anderson had managed to block his number and location before, but maybe this time he would be careless. She wasn't counting on it, but it didn't matter anyway. They were close now, and would track him.

In the search of financial dealings and assets, the FBI discovered that the Andersons had ten acres just outside the Southern Everglades preserve. If he was

indeed hiding out on his land, the call from Kershner would throw him off. He'd have no clue that they were closing in on him. At least that was the plan.

For a moment, they just waited, staring at the phone. Miriam wanted confirmation from Anderson. She wanted to hear his cocky, assured tone. She felt closer to getting Ana than ever before. The detectives and FBI agents looked confident as well. There were two FBI helicopters outside the station ready to go.

The Southern Glades were thirty miles south, full of alligators, marsh lands, and the very air boats Allison spoke of hearing. Such high-powered vessels would never be allowed on Federal Reserve land, which led Miriam to believe that Anderson's hideout, wherever it was, was closer to the public channel, where air boats operated among fishermen and tourists.

Her phone suddenly vibrated, displaying an unknown number. Miriam's heart raced. She grabbed for it but stopped and let it ring a few more times.

"It's him," she said. The room stood up and gathered around the desk.

She picked up the phone and answered it.

"Yes?"

"What do you think you're up to?" a thickly distorted voice asked.

"Trying to find my daughter," she answered. "And we're getting close."

"Oh yeah?" he said.

"That's correct."

"Now, I don't want to tell you how to do your job, but..."

He paused.

"But what?" Miriam asked.

"Nothing."

Miriam felt it strange that they were both hiding something from each other, and neither of them wanted to say too much. She quickly changed the subject. "I want to speak to my daughter."

"She's indisposed at the moment."

"Put her on," she said forcefully.

Lou looked at his GPS device as it continued to try to ping the location. He signaled for her to stretch it out. Anderson wasn't playing ball.

"I don't have time for this. Gotta go," he said.

"Wait!" Miriam said.

"What?" he asked, sighing.

"Why'd you call me? There had to be a reason. You sounded like you had something to say."

"Are you with the police?" he asked.

She paused and looked around the room. "Yes. But so what?" Her voice rose with the frustration in her tone. "How else am I supposed to get my daughter back?"

"No police," he said. *"Just you."*

"Damn you! You know that that's impossible!"

"Hey. Listen, you hysterical bitch. I'm giving you a chance here. Anyone else in their right mind wouldn't even bother. And you wanna know what I just did earlier? I brought dinner down to your daughter. How's that for a bad guy?"

Miriam noted he said “down.” The GPS had yet to pick up a signal. Frustrated, Lou looked to Nettles and vented under his breath. “Must be scrambling the signal again.”

Miriam tried her most bold move yet—antagonizing him. “You want to know what I think?”

“Not really, but go ahead,” he said.

“I think that you don’t have my daughter any more than you have one of Obama’s kids.”

He chuckled on the other end. “Really? You don’t think I have her?”

“I don’t know what happened to her. Maybe she escaped.”

“Or maybe I already killed her,” he added.

The comment nearly sent her over the edge, but she maintained her cool and tried to keep her voice from wavering. “Maybe you did... Either way, that explains the decoy, Allison.”

“You keep telling yourself that, Miriam. Maybe I’ll just go on and let you think that. But you’ll never know, will you?” He paused as his breathing became heavier. “You’ll never know!” his distorted voice shouted, crackling over the phone.

“Either way. It’s hopeless,” she said. Why even try to find you if she isn’t there?”

“She’s here, all right. Maybe I’ll just have a little fun with her after this phone call.”

Miriam balled her fist, ready to punch a hole in the wall. Eavesdropping, the men observed her stoic expression and increasingly upset tone, trying to imagine just what kind of conversation she was having. Of course, they’d listen to the recording when it was over.

“Go ahead and make your threats. I’m done. The search is off.” Miriam held the phone away and mimed hanging it up. “Good-bye...”

“Wait!” he shouted on the other end. *“Fine. I’ll let you talk to the little shit. Just hold on.”*

She could hear his footsteps stomping off across a hardwood floor, the sound becoming fainter. A door creaked open as he attempted to muffle the phone with his hands. She heard more wood creaking. A hollow, echoing kind of sound told her he was going down the stairs. Miriam tried to visualize the place as best she could.

“Hi there, Ana...” he said in an enthusiastic and friendly voice, adding a feminine southern drawl. *“Your mama is on the phone and would like to speak with you.”*

The phone crackled some more as a distorted pop sounded. *“You got five seconds...”* a deeper, manlier voice said from a short distance away from the phone. The many facets of Phil Anderson were on eerie display.

“Mom?” a timid and distorted voice said.

Miriam’s eyes watered, as she gasped in relief. “Ana!”

“Mom, help me!”

Miriam heard sounds of struggling. “Ana, where are you?”

“A cabin!” she shouted. *“Mom—”*

Then the call ended. Her bluff had worked, mostly. She set the phone down and rubbed her temples. She was sitting at her desk and feeling as if she was going to pass out. Hearing Ana had raised her spirits, but she also felt sick about bluffing

and possibly jeopardizing the fate of her daughter in such a way. The conversation could have gone wrong in the worst possible way, but it was a risk that, for the most part, seemed to have paid off.

“You okay?” Lou asked, putting a hand on her shoulder.

“Yeah,” Miriam said, wiping her eyes. “Just need a minute.”

Lou pressed play on his digital recorder as they stood and listened to the conversation. The GPS had not picked up a location. Anderson apparently had his own gadgets as well. After hearing the recording, Nettles, standing at the center of the table, looked around the room, ready, it seemed, to share his observations.

“Agent Castillo did good work there. We found out quite a bit.” He held out his palm and began to count on each finger. “They’re staying in a cabin. Miriam’s daughter is being held downstairs. Probably in some kind of basement. The lawyer is in direct contact with Anderson.”

He stopped and pointed to Agent Willis. “We need to pull the records on that call. I want to hear everything they said. And who knows, Kershner could end up in prison next to his buddy.”

Willis nodded.

“It’s not clear why he called, other than to verify what the lawyer had conveyed.”

Lou stepped in. “He didn’t sound angry. Almost sounded disappointed.”

“Some part of him wants to get caught,” Nettles said. “See it all the time, especially with fugitives on the run.”

Miriam joined the circle and offered her own assessment. “We can’t wait much longer. We have to strike now. He isn’t going to hurt Ana, not when he feels safe. But if he feels cornered at any point, that all changes.”

Willis said, “Even if we find this cabin, how the heck are we going to get close enough? He’ll see us coming a mile away.”

“We need a team to go to this abandoned building for starters,” Nettles said. His partner gave him a blank, and he continued: “Either way, word of the raid is getting back to Anderson. That’s one hell of a distraction.”

Miriam looked game but was quiet as she stared at the county map ahead.

“You okay there, *Agent Castillo*?” Lou asked with a smile.

“Sure,” Miriam said. “About as okay as I can get. Trust me, I’ll be able to breathe easy once this is all over with.”

Lou touched her shoulder, offering comfort. She looked up into his eyes and touched his hand.

Nettles jumped in. “Ah! I have something for you.” He turned his back and went to a nearby desk where an FBI bag rested. He unzipped the bag and pulled out a black leather pistol shoulder holster. “This is for your coronation as a probationary agent,” he said, handing it to her.

The group applauded, putting a fleeting smile on Miriam’s face. She slipped the holster on and wore it—a snug fit. She pulled the Beretta from her pocket and holstered it.

For a moment, everything felt as if it was going to work out. Miriam was in good company. But she also knew there was still a long way to go and a million ways in which it could go wrong.

Phillip threw Ana against the wall the moment she shouted into the phone, knocking her out. Somehow, she had always managed to bring out the worst in him, starting with the shovel incident. As she collapsed on the floor, unconscious, he raised his foot, ready to stomp her face. But he hesitated. Killing her would be pointless. She still served a purpose, and would find that out soon enough. Usually it just took Phillip a couple of beers; then he'd have his way with her.

"You're a stupid little bitch just like your mom," he said, staring down at her.

Her eyes were closed, and she was unresponsive. Phillip held on to his burner phone, breathing heavily, and then noticed something out of place on the floor next to her single dirty mattress. The plate of food he had brought her only hours before was missing. He saw plastic utensils sitting on a napkin, but no plate.

Curious, he knelt down and began searching around, slipping his hands under the mattress and then stopping. There was something there. He peeled back the mattress and made an interesting discovery: her glass plate had been broken into sharp, blade-like pieces, grouped together and hidden. He placed the shards in his hand and stood up, smiling.

"Clever..." he said, turning away.

He walked back up the stairs and exited the basement, closing and locking the door behind him. There were five men—hired guns—in the living room of his small cabin, all lounging around on chairs and talking or messing with their phones.

"It's time to act, gentlemen," he said, gaining their attention. Early morning sun was coming through the windows. The men were unshaven and dressed in green camouflaged gear. A line of AR-15 M4 rifles rested on a small table near the kitchen.

"The FBI are closing in and closing in fast," he said.

One of the men jolted up from the couch, rubbing his eyes. "Here?"

"No, on one of my properties in Homestead. I don't know what the fuck they're thinking, but I got a lead about the raid."

"Fuck 'em," another man said, scratching his beard. "Let them go on a wild goose chase. We'll kick it back here."

The other men laughed in agreement.

"This isn't a joke. How long do you think it'll be before they find out about this place too?"

The room went silent.

Phillip looked at his watch. "Just twelve more hours, and me and my relatives will have all the documents we need to flee the country and start new lives."

"You should be safe," the bearded man said. "They'll never find the cabin in time."

"They'll never find the cabin because they'll be dead," Phillip said, silencing the room once again.

"What are you talking about, Mr. Anderson?" a young, disheveled man asked, leaning forward in a recliner.

"I want two of you to load up the truck with explosives and rig the building within the next hour. Might even get a fat insurance check out of it."

The men looked at each other with concern. Livid, Phillip walked into the room and stood in the center of a circle rug. “Need I remind you that we’ve already lost five men? Five *good* men! Colleagues of yours, I might add.”

“Yeah, but—”

“That’s all there is to it!” Phillip barked. “Now you each are making, what? A million, a million and a half each? It’s the least you can do.”

Phillip looked around the room. “Any volunteers?”

Kershner had told him he was working on getting the Anderson family out of protective custody and then taking them to the cabin. From there, they would flee the country via private plane and start new lives. Some where they could start again and not have to face the risk of extradition. So far, everything was going to plan. Perhaps Phillip’s biggest mistake was giving Miriam a chance. He loathed her but also believed in leaving some things to destiny—one of the many paranoid facets of his personalities.

No one was quick to raise his hand. Phillip turned around three-hundred-sixty degrees with his arms out, waiting, as his anger mounted. “Okay,” he said, stopping. “I’ll make it an even two million.”

Still no one would volunteer. Phillip felt his power quickly fading. Money seemed to do little to quell the men’s fears. He stormed out of the room and told them that they were on their own.

Another FBI team had arrived on-site at the Miami-Dade Police Department. In the meeting room Miriam, Nettles and everyone on their team monitored a large, angled screen displaying satellite images of the Southern Glades area at a fifty-mile radius. They had zeroed in on the property marked as Anderson’s. It was a wide-ranging area that would take perhaps all day to search on foot.

By air, however, it was a different story. Through the satellite imagery, Nettles was able to find what looked like two structures—cabins possibly. They were approximately ten acres apart from each other. The question remained, which one was Phillip Anderson hiding in, if any? The plan was laid out. The newly arrived FBI team would raid the office building, providing a distraction while the other team would survey the Southern Glades property and ambush each cabin.

“We’ll be in constant communication with each other,” Nettles told both teams.

Miriam listened to his instructions with a sense of renewed hope. They were close. She had twelve hours left, with no idea what would happen to Ana if she didn’t find her in time. Anderson was erratic. He was unpredictable. And he was insane. The meeting ended, and both teams assembled outside, behind the building, out of view, where they were able to draw equipment and ammunition from an FBI van. Lou handed Miriam a heavy FBI flak vest.

“This doesn’t feel too heavy,” he said.

As she put it over her shoulders, she begged to differ. She filled the slots in her shoulder holster with full magazines as the other agents geared up and got ready. Nettles went over everything again and asked the teams to check their communications.

Each member had a small ear-piece connected to a high-frequency radio. Team A would take the van to the Homestead building to conduct a raid, while Team B—

Nettles, Willis, Lou, and Detective Belmont—would take the helicopters. Their two FBI pilots, Cassie and Douglas, were suited up and ready.

Nettles and Willis were going to ride in the first copter with two SWAT team members while Miriam went into the second helicopter with the other detectives, and two other SWAT officers.

With everything in motion, the teams split up and proceeded with the plan. Miriam climbed into one of the helicopters with Lou and the two Lee County detectives, who looked eager to be a part of the mission.

“This could make us all famous,” Detective Belmont said as the helicopter’s blades began whirring. Each passenger had a helmet with a microphone on it so they could hear each other once the engine started and they were in flight. Nettles could communicate with them from the other copter as well.

The pilot steered them up off the ground while gravity pushed them to their bench seats. Miriam couldn’t remember the last time she had been in a helicopter. Her heart raced with anticipation as they jettied past the police station and across town, headed south.

“*I want to make sure we’re all on the same page here,*” Nettles’s voice said through Miriam’s head phones.

“*So first, everyone do a check, starting with Miriam—I mean Agent Castillo.*”

“Check,” Miriam said.

Everyone followed as Nettles went down the list. The lush, green world below passed them by at twenty-five-thousand feet. They flew over dozens of large, blue bodies of water—Miriam had never realized how many lakes there were in the area. It was just past nine in the morning. The sun was out in full force, lighting the thin, transparent clouds. Then below, there was just flatland, untouched—it seemed. Acres of trees, swamps, sawgrass, and flowing water as far as the eye could see.

“*We’re about ten minutes out from his property,*” Nettles said over the comm. “Everyone keep a careful eye out.”

Lou surveyed the land below with a pair of binoculars. A crackle came over Miriam’s headset. Detective Belmont gave her a curious glance. After a pause, Nettles’s voice came over the headset. “*No stone unturned people. Time to bring a career criminal to justice.*”

An impasse. For a minute, everyone was quiet, until Lou, binoculars in hand, suddenly pointed toward the ground. “Structure sighted!”

Everyone turned to look. A small, abandoned-looking cabin was in the distance, open and exposed. Her heart jumped, but then something was strange about how easy it was to spot. There were no vehicles or people around it either.

“Keep going,” she said to the pilot.

“*What are you doing?*” Nettles said.

“That’s not the cabin,” she said.

“*Looks like a cabin to me,*” Willis said.

“*Take it down,*” Nettles said.

“You guys search that cabin, we’ll get the next one,” Miriam said.

"Just like we planned, right?" Lou added. He looked at Miriam and shook his head, covering his mic. "Damn Feds."

"We heard that!" Nettles said. Miriam looked out the window as the first helicopter swooped low and touched ground. She then searched out the window for the next cabin, or something resembling it. Lou kept careful watch as they flew over a large patch of trees and brush, perfect cover. Miriam remained plastered to the window when a shiny flicker of light caught her eye.

"There!" she said, pointing.

Lou turned and moved to the other window, crouched down and looked out with his binos.

"What do you see?" Miriam asked him.

"I don't know. Nothing but trees."

"It's there," she said. "I know it."

"There's nowhere to land," the pilot said.

"Find something!" Miriam said. "I saw something silver and shiny back there. You have to turn back."

He made a turn and they circled the forest once again. Lou finally zeroed in on whatever it was that Miriam had seen.

"It's a vehicle!" he said.

Detective Belmont lifted his mic. "Agent Nettles, what's your status?"

Faint crackling came over their headsets followed by Nettles's distant voice. "Surrounding the cabin now. Doesn't look like anyone's here."

The pilot turned to Miriam and pointed to a clearing which seemed to be as close as he could get to the area they had identified earlier. Miriam looked closer and could see what looked like an enormous camouflaged tarp hanging from the trees, obscuring the view of whatever was under it.

Bravo Team landed with a jolt and rushed out, leaving the pilot with the copter. About one hundred feet ahead, Miriam saw an old cabin hidden under a camouflaged canopy, with a vacant air to it—though she could feel Anderson's presence. Her legs picked up steam as she rushed ahead, driven by sheer instinct.

As the team rushed forward, Nettles reported that their cabin was clear, all but solidifying Miriam's hunch. When they were twenty feet from the cabin, shots rang out from the inside, blasting from the windows, shattering the glass and hitting the trees all around them. Detective Jade took a shot to the leg and fell to the ground.

"I'm hit!" he yelled.

Miriam pushed forward, moving in between the trees with her Beretta drawn. After a brief pause, more rapid gunfire surrounded them. Lou directed the team to take cover and advance cautiously. Was Ana still inside? Miriam could hardly prevent herself from running ahead to the cabin. Just when it looked as though Bravo Team was going to be pinned down for the long haul, the shooters ran out of the house and toward a muddy Ford F-250, fleeing the scene.

Miriam rushed forward and shot the tires out, taking cover on the side of the cabin. She didn't know how many of them there were, but she saw three in the truck. They turned and started firing back. She dropped to her knees and took cover as wood chunks flew all around her. As soon as the engine started, she turned and fired at the truck, striking the driver in the head.

He slumped to the wheel as the others jumped out of the truck and tried to run. She raised her gun, but couldn't bring herself to shoot them in the back. At that moment, a hail of gunfire blasted from behind her, taking the two fleeing men out. Their backs exploded as their heads jerked back and their hands flew into the air. They dropped to their stomachs, motionless and contorted. Miriam turned around, shocked, to see Detective Jade behind her with his rifle aimed.

"What did you do that for?" she asked. Her exhausted eyes were livid with fury.

"They shot at us!" he said defensively.

She turned from him in disgust. "Come on," she said running to the front porch. "We have to search the house."

She kicked the door open and ran inside, taking cover behind anything she could—a book case, table, and cabinets—making her way forward. As she passed the kitchen, she realized there was no one inside the room, and possibly no one inside the cabin. Even Ana. It looked as though it had been abandoned in a hurry, as was clearly the case. Her feet creaked across the floorboards, and she immediately focused on the basement.

"*Miriam, where'd you go?*" Lou said over the headset, frantic.

"She's here. I know it!" Miriam said. Tears streamed down her cheeks. Any minute her heart would explode. She approached the basement door cautiously, put her hand to the knob, and swung open the door with her pistol drawn. Below was a set of stairs, which was all she could see in the darkness, and nothing more.

"Ana!" she shouted, wiping her eyes. She then cleared her throat and changed to a more authoritative tone. "Philip Anderson, this is Agent Castillo with the FBI. Come out with your hands up high, or I *will* shoot you!"

There was no response. Too fearful to wait any longer she stormed down the stairs and flew to the ground at the bottom on one knee. The vest weighed heavily on her shoulders, making it harder to aim, and the helmet blocked her side vision. On the mattress, not ten feet away, a girl lay motionless with her back toward Miriam. She leapt up gasping and ran to the bed just as footsteps clamored from upstairs.

"Miriam!" Lou shouted.

She dropped to the mattress and turned the girl on her side, facing her. Somewhere under the bruises and cuts on her face was Ana. She was unconscious but breathing.

"Oh my God," Miriam cried, cradling Ana in her arms. She kissed her face repeatedly as waves of relief rushed through her body. In the midst of her jubilation and fear of Ana's condition, she suddenly heard a gun click.

She whipped around and saw Phillip Anderson standing in the shadows. Her mind froze along with her body. She had been taken off guard and had no idea what to do. Her pistol lay on the bed near her knee. Both her arms were around Ana.

Philip glanced at his watch while holding a pistol with a silencer attached to the muzzle. "Record time. I'm impressed." He laughed and shook his head. "I really didn't think you were going to make it."

"Where are you going?" she asked, fighting the fear that was consuming her body.

“Somewhere they’ll never find me. I can assure you that.” He smiled again, and then his face suddenly dropped.

“Now stand up and get against the wall before I put one in your head and your little girl’s.”

Miriam released Ana and slowly rose from the bed. Her own pistol was in view. The minute her eyes glanced at it, Phillip spoke.

“Not happening. One wrong move and you’re fuckin’ history. Understand?”

Miriam looked away from her pistol and rose up from the mattress, keeping a careful distance from Ana with her safety in mind.

“We had a deal,” she said.

Phillip’s eyes remained on her, unblinking. “Tell that to my guys. Some of them had families too, you know. They were strapped for cash and trying to make ends meet. And none of them deserved to die.”

“They were criminals,” she said. “Now, please. I don’t care what you do to me, just let my daughter go.”

Phillip smiled. “Maybe I want to take her with me.”

“Miriam, where are you?” Lou shouted from upstairs. Bravo Team’s footsteps could be heard continuing their search of the cabin.

In that split second, Miriam lunged for her pistol. “No!” she screamed.

Phillip shot two shots into her chest without hesitation while his pistol barely made a sound. Miriam hit the ground, smacking hard against the pavement. As she collapsed, Phillip ran to Ana but froze halfway. The footsteps upstairs were close. They’d be down the stairs in second.

Phillip turned around and ran to the opposite corner of the room where a large bookcase sat. He heaved with all his strength and pushed it to the side, revealing a crawlspace that led to an underground tunnel. Hurried footsteps scrambled down the steps just as Phillip ducked inside. He pulled a rope, sealing the trap door shut, followed by an automatic pulley that moved the bookshelf back against the wall.

Lou was the first to reach the bottom, with Detective Jade behind him.

“Miriam!” he shouted.

He rushed to her as Jade went to Ana.

Lou crouched down and picked Miriam up, holding her. Her face was pale, and she wasn’t breathing.

“Talk to me, Miriam.”

He shook her as her head bobbed and her eyes closed.

“Miriam, come back!”

