

CHAPTER

1

She should have taken the million dollars. Jessie Mercado squirmed in the back of the police car and tugged at the handcuffs clamped around her wrists. If she'd taken that lucrative job offer, she'd be in San Francisco now, probably pushing her way through a dance club and clearing a path as security director for her twenty-year-old pop-star boss.

And she'd be hating life even more than she did at this very moment. But at least she'd be a millionaire.

Jessie sniffed the air. "Hey," she called out to the uniformed officer sitting in the passenger seat. "This squad car smells like puke. Doesn't somebody hose these things out at the end of every shift?"

Officer Gataki snorted. "Union issues. Deal with it. I have to spend eight hours in this thing every day, so pardon me if I don't feel bad for you."

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“Not looking for sympathy, Gataki.” She glanced around. “So where’s your partner?”

“Probably talking about what in the hell we’ll do with you.”

“You’re taking me to your station, right? I’ll make bail and be home in my jammies in time for Jimmy Kimmel.”

“I didn’t figure you for the jammies type.”

“I use the term loosely. Sweatpants and a tank top.”

“Okay, that I can picture.”

“Please don’t.” Jessie leaned back against the stinky rear seat. She’d just celebrated her two-year anniversary as a private investigator, an occupation that had yielded some decent rewards along with heavy doses of frustration.

This was one for the frustration column.

It was a quarter past 9:00 P.M. in Marina del Rey, and they were parked alongside a ninety-foot yacht that belonged to basketball star Lamar Wood, L.A. Laker point guard and all-around local hero. She’d been arrested after being caught inside the apparently deserted craft. There were now half a dozen police cruisers nearby, flashers on. She suspected most of the cops were here only because Wood himself was expected on the scene at any minute.

Gataki turned back. “So what’s it like in there?”

“Like it belongs to a guy halfway through a five-hundred-and-seventy-million-dollar contract. With a raft of endorsement deals to match. Nice. Really nice. You can see for yourself if you’ll just search the place.”

“We’d need probable cause for that.”

“His kids are on that boat. I’m sure of it. He’s going to leave the country with them.”

“So you say.”

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“So his wife says.”

“His soon-to-be-ex-wife.”

“She’s my client. Wood has been threatening to whisk those kids away for the last year, and I think it’s going to happen tonight. Someone broke into the wife’s house today and stole the kids’ passports.”

“But not *just* the passports,” Gataki said. “From what I hear, they emptied the safe.”

“He had to do that. Otherwise it would be too obvious.”

Rap-Rap-Rap.

Gataki reacted with a start, but Jessie had already seen Lieutenant Dan Wheeler approaching in the rearview mirror. Why in the hell was he here?

“Let me in back,” Wheeler shouted through the closed window.

Gataki unlocked the doors, and Wheeler climbed in next to Jessie. He looked at her and just shook his head. Wheeler was a good-looking cop, maybe forty, with chiseled features and gray-brown hair.

“Doesn’t seem like your beat,” Jessie said. “Did they demote you from homicide, Wheeler?”

“I was in the neighborhood.”

“Ah. So you wanted a selfie with the basketball star.”

“Nah. Not my game. I’m more of a Dodgers fan.”

“Then what brings you here?”

“Like I said, I was in the neighborhood.” Wheeler shot her a sideways glance. “And I guess I’ve gotten a rep as someone on the force who can work with you without wanting to slit my wrists.”

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“Aw, you’re sweet.”

“This isn’t just going to go away, Jessie. Lamar Wood is practically royalty in this city, and the media is already all over it.”

“Good. The whole world will know he’s abducted those kids.”

“His own kids. We’ve already been in touch with him. He says they’re camping with his sister up in Yosemite.”

“Out of cell phone range. Convenient.”

Wheeler shook his head. “Jessie, can you even admit the possibility that you may be wrong?”

“Sure. Just not tonight.”

“You always say that.”

“Ask him when he gets here. See if he’ll let your men search the yacht. How much you wanna bet he won’t?”

A pair of headlight beams swung over the squad car’s rear window. Wheeler leaned back to look. “It’s a big Range Rover. Probably Wood. I’m supposed to apologize to him and do what I can to keep this from becoming a media firestorm.”

“Bring on the firestorm.”

“It wouldn’t be good for you, Jessie.”

“Only if I’m wrong.”

Wheeler sighed. He climbed out of the car, slammed the door closed behind him, and walked over to the Range Rover. After a moment, Lamar Wood emerged. All seven-foot-one of him. Wood was attractive and well proportioned, without the gangly look that many men his size possessed. His aviator sunglasses were his trademark, and he wore them

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even now, at night and in the dim illumination of the marina streetlights.

Jessie saw Wood extend his hand as half a dozen cops converged on the basketball star. Wheeler spoke to him for a minute, gesturing a few times between Jessie and his yacht.

“He’s nervous,” Jessie said to herself. “He’s not happy.”

“You broke into his freakin’ yacht,” Officer Gataki said from the front seat.

“It’s more than that.” Jessie’s eyes narrowed on Wood. “Oh, shit.”

“What is it?”

Wood shook Wheeler’s hand and then bounded up the short ramp to his yacht’s stern. Wheeler walked back to the squad car and made the rolling-window-down motion with his hand. Gataki obliged by powering down the rear window.

“So what’s going on?” Jessie said.

“He’s going in to make sure everything is in order. Then he’ll tell us if he wants to press charges or not.”

Jessie clicked her tongue. “I guess you didn’t notice the outline in his shirt pocket.”

“What outline?”

“Jeez, Wheeler. I could see it from here. It looked exactly like the dimensions of a passport. Maybe two passports.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Nope.”

The yacht’s engine suddenly roared to life.

Wheeler turned back toward the yacht. “No freakin’ way.”

Wood’s boat lurched from its mooring. The cops scrambled, obviously unsure what to do.

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“It’s been untied!” one of the cops shouted. “He’s taking off!”

“Shit.” Wheeler pointed to an officer who had just driven up. “Call dispatch. Get Harbor Patrol on it.”

Jessie leaned out of her open window. “You won’t need Harbor Patrol.”

Wheeler looked back at her with annoyance. “Why the hell not?”

Before she could reply, the boat’s engine sputtered, and the hull echoed with the sound of grinding gears. The boat drifted lazily just a few feet from the ramp.

Wheeler half smiled. “What did you do, Jessie?”

She shrugged. “The engine might need a good flush now. That’s all I’m saying.”

Wheeler turned to the officers. “Get on that boat and search it top-to-bottom. There may be two kids aboard.”

The officers ran down the ramp and leaped over to the yacht.

Jessie called out to Wheeler. “Hey, I can help.”

“Don’t push it, Jessie.”

Ten minutes later, the boat had been tied up and the cops were escorting basketball superstar Lamar Wood from the boat, along with his two children, Tricia and Alexander. Wood glared at Jessie as he was placed into the back of an LAPD squad car.

“Huh,” Jessie said. “I wonder if that one smells like puke, too.”

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Wheeler walked back toward her car and rapped on the roof. “Okay, Gataki. Let her go.”

Without a word, Gataki exited, pulled Jessie from the back, and unlocked her handcuffs.

Jessie smiled at Wheeler. “Where’d you find them?”

“Lamar had the kids hiding in the galley pantry. They thought they were playing the coolest game of hide-and-seek ever.”

Jessie rubbed her wrists. “They probably were. You need anything from me?”

“Nah. The kids’ mother has already been notified. She’s gonna meet them at the station.” He raised his left hand to show he was holding a pair of passports. “Good catch, Jessie.”

“Thanks.”

“It looks like he was headed to Panama if the navigation maps are any indication. From there, who knows? Those kids would’ve been hard to get back.”

“That’s what my client was afraid of.”

He called over his shoulder as he walked away. “Stay out of trouble, will you?”

She replied under her breath. “Easier said than done.”

A familiar female voice called out behind her. “Just another night in the life of Jessie Mercado, huh?”

Jessie turned. “Kendra?”

Kendra Michaels stepped from the shadows. Kendra was probably her best friend, a San Diego music therapist whose powers of observation made her a go-to consultant in several high-profile law-enforcement investigations. Her senses of

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hearing, smell, touch, and taste were honed by her first two decades as a blind person, and since gaining her sight, Kendra took nothing she saw for granted, making her a formidable investigator.

Kendra laughed. “You know, something about seeing you handcuffed in the back of that police car . . . it looked right.”

Jessie smiled. “Screw you. Though I have to admit it’s not the first time I’ve been in that situation.”

“Ooh, I need to hear about that.”

“Another story for another time.” Jessie gave her friend a hug and drew back. “So what in the hell are you doing here?”

“A friend in the LAPD tipped me off. He said you were in police custody and might need a hand. It so happened I’m in town to present a paper at USC, so I came over to see for myself.”

“Glad to give you an evening’s entertainment.”

“You never disappoint. I thought I might help pull a few strings, but you obviously have things under control.”

“This time. But thanks for the thought,” Jessie said.

“I was going to call you anyway.”

“You got a craving for the El Coyote Cantina and their cheap margaritas?”

“I’m always up for that. But this time it’s about a job. I may have a client for you.”

Jessie nodded. “Good timing. It looks like I’m suddenly available. What’s the case? Philandering husband? Sticky-fingered employee?”

“Missing person.”

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Jessie smiled in amusement. “Someone who wants to be missing?”

“Difficult to say. He’s the business partner of a friend of mine. He disappeared two days ago.”

“Sounds like a job for the police.”

“They’re on it, but they’re not taking it seriously. At least not yet. The partner disappeared with a good-size chunk of the firm’s cash reserves.”

“Hmm. What kind of business?”

“I think . . .” She frowned. “Maybe I’d like my friend to explain that to you.”

Jessie wrinkled her brow. “What’s the big secret?”

“No secret. It’s . . . an interesting firm.”

Jessie looked at her for a moment longer. It wasn’t like Kendra to be so coy. “Is it something illegal?”

“No.” Kendra smiled. “Is that the kind of business you think I’d toss your way?”

“No, but sometimes you get drawn into some unusual situations.”

“I just think he can explain it better than I could and answer any questions you might have.”

“If he’s your friend, why aren’t *you* helping him out?”

“That’s what he said. He’s not really my friend. He’s the father of one of my students. I told him that the best way I could help him was to refer his case to you.”

Jessie raised her eyebrows. “And he was okay with that?”

“I didn’t give him any choice. I’m leaving for a symposium in Vilnius tomorrow.”

“Lithuania? Wow. That’s some serious avoidance.”

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“I always told you, my music therapy research comes first.”

“You have a gift, Kendra. You really shouldn’t turn your back on it.”

Kendra shook her head. She’d obviously heard it many times before, including from several law-enforcement agencies that had tried to recruit her over the years. But she ignored it and went her own path. So did Jessie, which was probably why they were such good friends.

“Whatever,” Kendra said. “You want the job or not?”

Jessie shrugged. “I’ll talk to the guy. Have him come to my office tomorrow.”

“Actually . . . he’s anxious. Frantic, even. Any way you can meet with him now?”

“Tonight?”

“He’s texted me three times in the last hour, ever since I told him about you.”

Jessie watched two of the police cars pull away. “Did you tell him I was being arrested?”

“I left that part out.”

“It’s already been a hell of a night.” She thought about it. “Why not? Can he be at my office in half an hour?”

“He lives in the Palisades. I’m sure he can swing that.”

“Fine.”

“Thanks, Jessie.” Kendra raised her phone and tapped out a text. Before she could even lower it, a reply chimed in. She looked up. “Told you he was eager. He says he’ll be there. I’ll follow you there and make the introduction.”

She grinned. “Sounds like a plan.”

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In less than twenty minutes, Jessie and Kendra parked in front of a revival movie theater on Santa Monica's Montana Avenue, in a charming block lined with boutiques and small restaurants. Kendra looked up at the theater's neon marquee, which advertised a double-feature of *Thin Man* films.

"Ever seen a movie here?"

Jessie shook her head. "No, even though I can go for free anytime I want. One of the perks of having a movie theater as a landlord. I do stop in the lobby for popcorn once in a while. It's pretty good."

They walked around the theater's vine-covered east side and headed back toward a metal security gate in the shadows, next to a small plaque that read JESSIE MERCADO INVESTIGATIONS. A silver keypad was mounted next to the door, onto which Jessie punched a six-digit number. The lock buzzed. Jessie opened the door and led Kendra up a long stairway that ended in a small reception area. The carpeted room was decorated with a desk, a sofa, and two wing-backed chairs.

"Did you ever find a new receptionist?" Kendra asked.

"Three since you've been here last. None of them lasted a week."

"You must be a tough boss."

"Why? Because I didn't like that the last one had sex with a client on that desk?"

"Eww."

"Yeah. I fired her *and* the client. And I still may have to burn the desk."

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Jessie flipped on the lights, and they walked back to her main office. The room preserved the 1930s-era design of the theater downstairs with stylish light fixtures and a large mahogany desk. Matching wood accent panels and window shutters lined the corner office, and the rest of the wall was populated by framed photographs.

Kendra listened to the faint bass sounds coming from the theater under them. “I think the movies would bother me.”

“I usually don’t even hear them unless it’s a war film or a Western. *The Wild Bunch* gave me some issues.”

A buzzer sounded from Jessie’s desk phone. She picked it up and heard a man’s voice. “Owen Blake here for Jessie Mercado.”

“You’re in the right place. Come on up.” She buzzed him in, and they heard his footsteps on the steep stairway. After a moment, Owen Blake appeared in the office. Owen was a handsome man with a layered haircut that probably set him back four hundred bucks every month or so, Jessie figured, probably in the same neighborhood where he picked up his expensive blue tailored suit. His shirt was open, but the creases on his collar indicated he’d been wearing a tie earlier in the day. His face was tense, jibing with Kendra’s description of his anxious state of mind.

Jessie crossed behind her desk while Kendra made the introductions. “Jessie Mercado, Owen Blake. Jessie just wrapped up a case tonight—in the last hour, actually—and she’s doing me a favor by opening up the office for you.”

“I appreciate it,” he said. “It’s been a rough time.”

“So Kendra tells me. Mr. Blake—”

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“Owen, please.”

Jessie nodded. “Owen, I usually start by telling prospective clients a little about myself.”

“Not necessary.”

“I appreciate the confidence, but you may want to know—”

“I’ve spent a good part of the day researching you, Jessie. I already know everything I need to know.”

Jessie shot a glance toward Kendra. “Is that right?”

“Yes.”

“It must have been a fascinating day for you,” she said sarcastically.

“Oh, it was. You’ve lived quite a life.” Owen looked at the framed photographs, which illustrated his point. “Two tours in Afghanistan, then one of the all-time champions on the *American Ninja* TV show. I watched some of your clips from that on YouTube this afternoon. Very impressive.”

“Hardly,” Jessie said. “But it paid some bills while I figured out what I wanted to do with my life.”

“And it somehow led to you being a rock star’s security director. How’d that happen?”

Jessie shrugged. “Delilah Winter saw me on that show and offered me a spot on her security detail. After a few weeks, I saw some things that could be improved, and Delilah agreed. She put me in charge.”

“Simple as that?”

“Pretty much. But after a couple of years, I decided to strike out on my own and start this firm. It’s worked out so far.”

“Obviously, but I have one question. It’s about something I read in *Rolling Stone*.”

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Kendra smiled. “Here we go . . .”

Jessie flashed a pained smile. Hardly a day passed that someone didn’t ask her about that story. She’d wanted to strangle Dee for giving it to *Rolling Stone* magazine.

“Delilah Winter said she brought you a million dollars in cash to try and convince you to come back and work security for her world tour. Is that true?”

“Yep. She brought it in a knapsack and dumped it all over this desk.”

“Wow.”

“Excellent salesmanship on her part. Trust me, it looked damn good here. But I turned her down. This is where I belong.”

He nodded approvingly. “Good. That’s what I want to hear. Someone who’s dedicated to her work.”

“That’s me.” Jessie needed to change the subject. She sat and motioned toward the chairs in front of her desk. “Now I need to hear about you.”

“I don’t know what Kendra has told you . . .”

“Less than I’d like.” She cast a sideways glance at her friend. “I know your partner has gone missing. But you can start by telling me about your business. What do you do?”

“We help people go to jail.”

“What?”

He repeated himself, emphasizing each word. “We help people go to jail.”

She crossed her arms. “Tough business model. People usually try *not* to go to jail.”

“True. But if they try that and it doesn’t work, then they

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come to us. We're personal incarceration consultants. I'm an attorney, and my partner is from a private security background. When someone is going to prison for months or years, they need help getting their affairs in order. We work with accountants, financial planners, real estate managers, and whoever else we need. There are families who need to be taken care of, businesses and obligations that still need to be met. The world doesn't stop turning just because they're in prison. We negotiate with creditors and tax authorities, and we sometimes even help them negotiate the job market when they get out."

Jessie nodded. "A full-service operation. I take it most of your clientele has been convicted of white-collar crimes?"

"Mostly. But we do have the occasional drug lord and organized crime figure. And a couple of murderers."

"Of course," she said solemnly. "Just to shake things up."

Owen smiled. "It's never dull."

"So what happened to your partner?"

Owen paced in front of her desk. "His name is Carl Ferris. He disappeared last Friday. I saw him in the office that morning, and in the afternoon, he met with a client at the Twin Towers Correctional Facility downtown. That's the last anyone has seen or heard from him. He was supposed to be back at the office by four for a teleconference, but he missed it. That was highly unusual. He never misses meetings."

"Family?"

"An ex-wife and a kid in Texas. They've had no contact since the last child support payment went through a couple weeks ago."

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“What about his car?”

“Also gone. LAPD hasn’t been willing to do a traffic cam search for it yet, but the vehicle hasn’t been hit with a parking citation.”

“Anyone have a beef with him? Maybe someone from your colorful client list?”

“It’s the first thing I thought of, but no. The clients love him. More than me, to tell you the truth. He’s a people-person.”

“I can vouch for that,” Kendra said. “I’ve seen him in action. He makes an unpleasant experience seem a lot less terrifying for clients.”

Jessie took this in. “Huh. I’d like to hear how he pulls *that* off.”

“Find him,” Owen said. “Then he’ll tell you all about it.”

“I assume the police haven’t been very helpful yet.”

He swore. “No.”

“Let me guess. They told you he’s a grown man who has every right to disappear if he chooses.”

Owen gave her a surprised look. “I think I heard those very words.”

“Not a shock. Adult missing persons cases usually resolve themselves after a few days. The police don’t like to expend a lot of resources on cases like this, especially if there isn’t a family hounding them. But those first days are crucial in any missing persons case. You need somebody on this now.” She shrugged. “You need me.”

“Then you’ll take the case?”

Jessie thought for a long moment. It sounded a hell of a lot more interesting than tailing a movie star’s son around Los Feliz

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to keep him from buying cocaine, which was currently her depressing, if well-paying, alternative for the week. She looked back up at Owen. “Why not? I’ll see what I can do.”

A broad smile lit Owen’s face. “Fantastic. I can’t tell you what a relief this is.”

“Don’t be relieved yet. I still need to find the guy. And if he doesn’t want to be found, it could be difficult.”

“I have faith in you. What do you need from me?”

“I have a whole questionnaire for you to fill out. All his personal information, contacts, prior residences, that kind of stuff. My rates are in there, too. I’ll email you a link.”

Owen gestured toward the desk. “I can fill it out here, right now.”

Jessie smiled. “You *are* in a hurry. Just fill it out later tonight. It’s a web form. You can do it on your phone or computer. It would also be helpful if I had a list of present and prior clients, along with any background on the cases you’d care to share. Especially the client he met with right before he disappeared.”

“That I can help you with right now.” He pulled a thumb drive from his shirt pocket and held it up. “You’ll find several files of that type on here, including some fairly detailed information about Ferris and our clients.”

“Perfect.” Jessie took the drive and picked up her leather knapsack from behind the desk. She pulled out her tablet computer, inserted the thumb drive, and copied the folder labeled CARL FERRIS to her tablet. She gave the thumb drive back to Owen.

He handed her a business card. “My email is on there. Send

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your questionnaire form to that address. I'll probably fill it out in my car before I even drive home."

"I get it. You're in a rush." Jessie used the tablet to email him the link.

Owen's phone chimed in his pocket, and he patted it reassuringly. "Thank you."

"I'll call you in the morning with a game plan. Nice to meet you, Owen."

Kendra signaled to Jessie that she was going to walk him out. She returned less than a minute later. "What do you think?"

"He's hiding something."

"So you noticed that."

Jessie nodded. "He's not my first client who's tried to keep something from me. It's strange he's in such a hurry. I get he's concerned about his partner, but it's a little over the top. You know the guy. What's your read?"

She shrugged. "He's more of a casual acquaintance. I liked his sincerity about helping his daughter. I asked him on the way down about why he's so frantic about this. He just said he and his partner always have each other's backs. I advised him not to withhold anything from you, and he said he wouldn't."

"I think he already is."

"If you don't want to take the case, it's no skin off my nose. If you're uneasy, forget it. Call him. Or go outside and tell him. He's probably sitting in his car, filling out your questionnaire on his phone."

Jessie looked at his embossed card. The name MAMERTINE

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CONSULTANTS was printed in gold leaf, along with Owen's name and contact info. "Who's 'Mamertine'?"

"It's not a who, it's a what. Mamertine was the name of the largest prison in ancient Rome. Saint Peter was locked up there."

"Don't tell me you knew that off the top of your head."

"I didn't. When Owen named his firm, I was just as mystified as you were until he explained it to me."

"Good." Jessie pocketed the card. "But I doubt he has any saints on his client list. Just a hunch."

"I'm sure you're right. Is that where you're going to start? With his clients?"

"Probably. I'll read up on what he gives me and decide."

Kendra nodded. "Good luck. And thanks. I owe you one. I would have felt duty-bound to find someone else if you'd been too busy."

"Not at all." She was suddenly smiling. "Because if I'm still working this case when you get back in town, you're working it with me."

Kendra chuckled. "Is that the deal?"

"That's the deal. When will you be back?"

"A couple of weeks, I'm afraid. I'm collaborating on a research study after the symposium ends."

"Fine. If I'm still on the case when you get back, we're in this together. Okay?"

"Ah, you'll have this all wrapped up in a bow by then."

"Keep hoping. But I've helped you a few times on your cases. I figure you can help me on this one."

Kendra thought for a moment. "We *do* work well together."

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“Damn right we do.”

“It’s a deal. But I should get going. Try not to get yourself arrested between now and the time I get back, okay?”

Jessie picked up her backpack and slung it over her shoulder. “No promises, Kendra. Better bring bail money.”

BROADWAY
SANTA MONICA

Owen parked his car and walked past Third Street Promenade, checking his phone for the address he had entered earlier in the evening. Up ahead, loud music blared from the open doors of a dark bar. Surely *that* couldn’t be the place. No way she would have chosen that place to—

“Will she do it?”

Owen spun around.

There, from a darkened doorway behind him, Natalie Durand stepped into the light. She was a tall, dark-haired woman in her late thirties with olive-toned skin and large brown eyes. As was the case every time Owen saw her, she wore what appeared to be a tailored man’s business suit with unbuttoned shirt cuffs stylishly folded back over the jacket sleeves. “Will she do it?” Natalie repeated, in her southern drawl.

Owen nodded. “Jessie Mercado is in.”

“Too bad Kendra Michaels wasn’t available.”

“Mercado’s very good. I have confidence in her.”

“I hope so. We need to find Ferris before anyone else does.”

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“We will.”

Natalie stepped closer and spoke in a fierce whisper. “If we don’t, Owen . . . Ferris isn’t the only one who will disappear.”

Owen tried not to show how much she rattled him, but he knew he was failing miserably. He forced a smile. “I know a threat when I hear one.”

“Good. Because I don’t think your partner ever grasped the concept. And if Jessie Mercado does manage to find him, we need to make sure he doesn’t talk to her. Or there will be yet another person who needs to disappear. I hope you understand that.”