

ELLEN SIMPSON



A HEIST STORY



PRELUDE

Wei, at the moment when it all began

THE FIRST DROP FELL QUIETLY, then another, and another. Falling from long-pregnant clouds, bursting forth into downpour in the gray of dawn. Through a crack in the window, the steady fall of rain filled the room, only to be drowned out by the shrill beep of a phone. In the quiet, dark space that existed between the waking and the dream worlds, two figures lay curled together in a bed too small for their togetherness. Bodies nestled under thick blankets against the just-spring chill and the ever-present edges of the bed. The window looked out over a mist-laden haze of rooftops toward the center of London.

Wei Topeté woke with a headache. Sleep clung to her like mud. The lull of the rain pulled her back to dozing just as strongly as the shrill beeping of her phone had her grinding her teeth in irritation. Who could possibly want to speak to her at this hour? Speaking of...what even was the hour? Wei rolled over and tugged her phone from its charger. She ran a hand over her face, exhaustion pressing into her on all sides. It had been a long night already. Too long. Sitting up late. Obsessing over uncontrollable details.

The screen's glow hurt her eyes in the darkness of the not-yet-dawn. LePage was calling. Wei scowled at the screen. He was in the States; it was the middle of the night there. Had something happened? Had LePage finally gone off the deep end and forgotten everything she'd told him about how this was *supposed* to work? There were rules in the game they played, levels of secrecy set up to provide plausible deniability should anyone try to dig deeper than the surface of their investigation. They had one chance,

ELLEN SIMPSON

one, and if LePage screwed it up by harassing her at stupid o'clock in the morning—Wei stopped herself.

Kat would wake up if Wei didn't answer the phone. She was a heavy sleeper, but her waking was, at this juncture, the last thing Wei wanted. She sat up, hissing in displeasure as her feet hit the icy floor. Her sleepshirt was short, barely skirting the tops of her thighs. Gooseflesh rolled up her legs in a steady wave that left her wanting for the warm bed. With a quiet curse, she pulled the throw blanket from the end of the bed around her. She did not want to talk to LePage.

"This'd better be good."

Rain was pooling on the windowsill, the sheer white curtains blowing back into the room, ghostlike in in the cold spring breeze.

"He's dead, Topeté." LePage's voice drifted through the fog, full of static as it came across the ocean. He sounded rough, like a night on the town was only just ending for him, echoing in the tiredness of his voice and the fearful, almost apologetic way he spoke. "Yesterday at noon. I only just heard."

Wei frowned, her fingers twitching at her side. She'd chased him for months, knowing full well that it was only a matter of time until his terminal prognosis took hold and the answers Wei needed fell into her lap. She'd meticulously planned each detail of this moment, down to the final coup de grâce, when he would be dead, and his secrets would be the property of the American government and set to be graciously loaned to her. The pieces were moving now, the plan starting to come together.

"And his estate?"

LePage heaved a weary sigh. "Gone."

A chill shot up Wei's spine, settling at the back of her neck. She rubbed at it and exhaled. This wasn't good. She glanced over to the bed, looking for confirmation, but her companion slept on. Could she have known and simply not mentioned it? Was this the moment their fragile truce finally fell apart?

"Gone? What do you mean, gone?" Her accent grew more pronounced, the French vowels coming fully into her voice as her displeasure mounted. It couldn't be gone, not when they'd worked so hard for so long to find it and ensure the circumstances of its resurfacing ended up in their favor. "That was all that we asked of you."

A HEIST STORY

“I know.”

“You were supposed to watch him. He wasn’t meant to get to a lawyer.”

“I know.”

The repetition was grating.

It was raining harder now. Wei pushed the window closed, and the wind lashed heavy droplets against the pane. Wei choked down her disappointment. What were they going to do now? What could they do but start again, tracking down the lawyer and the—it didn’t do to think of it now, not before a few more hours of sleep or a large cup of coffee. She pressed her fingers to the cool glass, staring out at the bleak dawn. “Where is Mock’s estate?” She leaned against the damp windowsill, phone cradled between her shoulder and ear. She could see Kat this way. She could watch for warning signs.

Kat stirred as LePage spoke. A fond smile drifted across Wei’s face as Kat pulled a pillow over her head and grumbled about the early hour. This was how Wei liked Kat, when the masks fell away and there was nothing left but the ease of sleepy touches. Kat was not often like this, which made this conversation a risk Wei could not afford to take. Especially not now, when they were so close to the end of Wei’s next play.

“Do you have an address for the lawyer?” LePage grunted the affirmative. Wei stared at Kat’s still form, deciding. Could she risk this move so soon? Would it be safe? Would Kat see through the flimsy excuses already tasting sour on Wei’s tongue? She could not afford a slip, not on an investigation of this magnitude. LePage coughed. Wei bit her lip, coming to a decision. “Call the office.”

“You’re going in? It’s five-thirty in the morning.”

“Did she assign you to me so that you could question my decisions?”

“Well,” LePage started. “No, I don’t suppose she did.”

“Exactly.”

“Okay, fine, I’ll send it in.”

When she hung up, Wei turned to see Kat sitting up in the middle of the bed. Words filtered forward, statements of mourning and grief, words that should be said when one loses a dear friend and mentor. But the secrets living between them were such that those words stuck to the roof of Wei’s mouth. All she could do was crawl back into bed and pull Kat’s sleep-warm

ELLEN SIMPSON

body back under the blankets and pretend the world they carved for each other in this apartment was enough.

They clung to each other, no words were spoken. Wei felt sick, her stomach roiling when Kat kissed the skin where her neck met her shoulder. Kat's touch was gentle, her eyes full of warmth. Wei could not look at her. This could be the last time.

PART ONE

The Mastermind, at Conception

CHAPTER 1

Marcey, Going Visiting

FROM WHERE IT SAT, HALF-FORGOTTEN beside her mouse, Marcey's phone buzzed. She glanced down at it out of habit before her eyes flicked back up to her computer, only to have her attention instantly drawn back down again, surprised by the name flashing across the screen.

New Facebook message from: Rebecca Johnson.

"Becks?" she muttered. Disbelief washed over her. She hadn't heard from Rebecca in years—not since her high school graduation when Rebecca had been allowed to walk despite finishing the school year in treatment for a pill habit. A pill habit that Marcey might have enabled. A lot. It had been a particularly miserable time for Marcey: facing down the failure that could have decided her future and the acute loss of her best friend, absent from the proceedings when Rebecca was allowed to be present.

Marcey slid her finger over the screen, taking in the messaging app and the note that followed. Rebecca Johnson had grown into a looker, still rail thin and looking as though sleep was an elusive thing for her. But it wasn't her picture, or her arms wrapped around some girl who wasn't Marcey, that caught Marcey's attention. It was the content of her message.

Rebecca: Hey Marcey—long time no talk! I can't believe where the years have gone. I looked you up the other day, curious as to what happened to you. Imagine my surprise to find you working for your mom. I would have assumed you'd be off saving the world or something...

ELLEN SIMPSON

Marcey stopped reading. The “or something” had a particular bite. She knew where Rebecca thought she should be. Marcey wasn’t going to bother responding. It wasn’t worth it. The “you should be dead,” was implied. Or, she supposed, the message could have read: “You could be locked away for getting someone killed” that Rebecca wasn’t saying. Well, it was a timeworn hypothesis. Marcey’d heard it for years. She’d gotten out of that life. Too smart to run with a gang, too stupid and green to run her own crew.

The screen of her phone, gone black with Marcey staring off into space and being pissed off at the girl she’d fucked in high school for a while, lit up once more.

New Facebook message from: Rebecca Johnson.

“Christ.” Marcey exhaled. “Fucking leave me alone.” She drew her finger across the screen again and forced herself to keep reading. The rest of the first message was just nostalgia about college. Shit Marcey couldn’t care less about. But the new message...

Rebecca: I know I’m the last person you want to hear from after what happened in high school, but I couldn’t...not tell you. My mom’s running for district attorney in November. She’s got this new ad, it’s up on her campaign YouTube channel. You should see it.

Rebecca: I told her...I told her not to, Marcey. I hope you’ll believe me.

Marcey, perhaps out of spite, or perhaps out of a broken heart never quite healed from injuries close to a decade old now, didn’t respond to the message. She glanced over her shoulder at the cubicle that housed her manager’s desk, but the woman’s back was turned and she appeared to be on the phone. Emboldened, Marcey navigated to the campaign YouTube channel.

“Johnson for DA,” the autoplay ad began, before going into all of the many accomplishments of Assistant District Attorney Linda Johnson. She put criminals and would-be terrorists behind bars, kept criminal syndicates out of the local schools, and fought for better protection for police in officer-involved shooting incidents. It was a typical, run-of-the-mill political advertisement, Republican and abhorrent to Marcey, save for one

A HEIST STORY

detail: in the middle of all of it were two crude artist renderings—crude and cartoonish, but obvious to anyone who knew Marcey—of the twin mugshots of Marcey and her best friend, Darius, the day they'd gotten arrested. Their faces were superimposed over a headline from the *New York Post* declaring a prescription drug ring had been brought down by solid investigative work at a local charter school. It was a lie. A lie that pushed Marcey to the edge of her seat, disgust pulling her lips away from her teeth in a snarl.

Rebecca hadn't been lying—this was bad. *Shit*. She had to call Darius. *Shit*, she had to call Darius's lawyer. Marcey's mind raced, but she struggled to see the end of this train of thought. It was too awful. In that moment, the moment when everything horrible running through her mind came to an end, she would know what to do. She had to envision all the possibilities, all the horrible endings, until they were spun into something—something that Marcey could work with.

Her vision blurred and her anger built. The rage of all of this. The audacity of that woman to try again. To try and take Darius's life from him again. And to do it in the court of public opinion.

Linda Johnson—Rebecca's horrible mother—was back. And she was set to ruin Marcey's life in new and exciting ways.

"Fuck her." Marcey's voice was barely more than a growl. She pulled her phone toward her and opened the messaging app. There was something in her that wanted to yell at Rebecca. To cuss her out for the strife this was going to cause, but it didn't seem worth it somehow. Marcey sighed, her teeth grinding and jaw working as she tried to get her reaction under control. She set her phone down, her resolve shaking. "Just...fuuuuuuck her."

"Hmm?" Her cube mate pulled a headphone out of his ear. The low din of conversation was never enough to drown out the unrelenting hum of the office's piped-in white noise. No one was saying anything.

"Nothing." Marcey rolled her chair forward and replayed the advertisement, phone forgotten. Rebecca wasn't worth it. Her mother, however, was a different story. That came with a whole lot more baggage Marcey was more than willing to unpack. "It isn't worth getting into."

"Ohhhh-kay?" Her cube mate shrugged and turned back to his work.

ELLEN SIMPSON

Marcey exhaled. She couldn't tell him, not when these walls had ears. She clicked back into the Johnson for DA campaign's YouTube profile and watched the other advertisements. None of the others mentioned her or Darius, but a few made reference to the case.

It was the case that had made ADA Johnson's career: her redemption after the terrible Mock trial, where she couldn't prove the guilt of a man so obviously guilty it was almost comical. Her failure and the subsequent acquittal had been all over the papers when Marcey and Darius were arrested. Marcey got off because of an exceptionally talented lawyer and a technicality. It was that, more than Rebecca's OD and subsequent rehab, which had landed Marcey forever on ADA Johnson's shit list. Darius hadn't been so lucky. He'd had a good lawyer too, Devon Austin Jackson—a guy Marcey'd been meaning to see, actually, about something else. Devon needed to know about this sooner rather than later. The lawyer'd been decent, but it hadn't been enough to make a jury of Upper West Side shitheads look past the color of Darius's skin and the nature of the crime. He had to do the maximum. He was lucky he'd been only sixteen at the time.

She opened her email and started typing. She could tell him this way, in e-mail, and avoid so many of the complicated feelings that came with articulating the emotions of this in person. But it wouldn't be enough. It was going to have to come out. She was going to have to go into his office and sit across his desk from him and tell him that her goddamn ex's mom was set to fuck up Darius's upcoming parole hearing by running for public office.

Marcey frowned, her lips pursing. Wasn't this slander? Her record wasn't sealed, and it was only by the good grace of nepotism that she'd landed this job at all. But Johnson shouldn't be able to use her picture—even a crude likeness. Not without Marcey's explicit consent.

Her face stared back at her from the paused video. She looked haunted, eyes sunken and hollow. Her hair was sticking up from her school braid, her scowl deep and unflinching in the artist's rendering.

Marcey closed the e-mail window and sat back, fingers knitting together in a bridge over her stomach. This was a nightmare scenario. What the fuck was she going to do? The picture was all wrong. She'd been crying that day. Not scowling. It had been a nightmare. She, just sixteen, was saved serious jail time, while Darius, her best friend and confidant, was sent away for

A HEIST STORY

eight years. The look on Darius's face as the verdict had come down was one Marcey would never forget as long as she lived. She'd begged ADA Johnson in a private meeting room to save Darius before the verdict was read. She'd told the truth: Darius was the only one she'd come out to.

"You came out to my daughter."

"That's different," Marcey had insisted. "She's...she and I understand each other."

"I don't understand her preoccupation with you. Or your continued presence in her life."

"Don't out me," Marcey had begged. She couldn't beg not to be punished for her crimes, that wouldn't have been right—she'd been caught fair and square—but this, this was different. This she couldn't stomach. "He's the only one who knows—outside of Becca." Darius was the only person who had accepted her without question no matter what she told him. He was good people like that. The mess with Becca and the OD and Johnson deciding to gun for Marcey and Darius both—that had been her fault. She'd enabled Becca. She'd let it become a thing when she should have stopped it. Darius just happened to be with her at the time; they shouldn't send him away for something that was all Marcey's fault. She couldn't do that to him. She couldn't.

Johnson had looked down her nose at Marcey and asked her why she had allowed Darius to confess to the crime if he was the only one who loved and supported her. The condescension, and the powerlessness of that moment, still haunted Marcey. Johnson wasn't going to change her recommendation to the judge just because Marcey was a lost little lesbian. She had just wanted to hear Marcey beg for leniency. She'd relished it. Darius was sent away, and Marcey had been left to deal with a homophobic mother and a pseudo-private school that saw her as a problem because of her association with Darius and because of her sexuality.

Marcey was alone then. Truly alone, trapped in a hostile environment at every turn. It had never gotten any easier.

When Marcey was young, she used to fantasize about what sort of person she would become later in life. Her pediatrician had asked her every year, in his kind way, what she wanted to be when she grew up. The answers varied. For a while, she'd wanted to be a mermaid, and then a skateboarder. There was a brief period at around six years old when she wanted, more

ELLEN SIMPSON

than anything else, to be Mulan. As she grew older, Marcey had stopped having easy answers for her doctor. She would look away, mutter some sullen teenage excuse about not wanting to box herself in, and find herself wanting.

She went to school for statistics, because she was good at numbers and liked the probabilities and how easily data could be manipulated. She took the numbers like her mind took possibilities and weighed them to see the best possible choice. Marcey told herself she went to school for statistics so she would never become one, but it wasn't quite true. She already was one, and not one trending in the positive. She wanted to get better at weighing odds, to avoid the bad choices that had gotten her into the situations that plagued her still.

What did she want with her life? What did any kid with a fairly public—though ostensibly sealed—juvenile record want? What did any kid who'd suffered through high school because their best friend was ripped away from them want out of life? Anonymity. To be left in that vacuum of alone they'd dumped her in.

In a single thirty-second sound bite, Linda Johnson's ad tore down the rickety framework of lies and half-truths she'd told her coworkers about her past and her childhood. Marcey never outright lied to her peers—she just had no compunction about omitting the truth. If they really wanted to know, they could use Google as well as anyone else.

By the time the ad finished playing for the third time, Marcey's mind was made up. She picked up her phone and shot a message back to Rebecca.

Marcey: Thanks for telling me. It's good to hear from you. If you're smart you'll lose my number.

There was no way she could continue to allow this to stand. She had to get the ad off the air. By any means necessary. And if she couldn't, she was going to destroy Assistant District Attorney Linda Johnson's career before the election in a very public way. Rebecca and whatever feelings Marcey still had for her be damned.

Rebecca: What are you going to do?

Marcey Daniels has successfully blocked Rebecca Johnson.

A HEIST STORY

Marcey set down her phone and sat back. The sigh on her lips tasted wrong, like the ill-fitting clothes she wore and the curling idea of revenge in her stomach.

Only...she had no idea how to exact a revenge like that. She wasn't a criminal, thanks to her mother putting herself into debt to pay for the lawyer that had gotten her off. She wasn't even a lawyer; she was a kid with a degree in math who saw patterns in things.

She minimized the internet window and exhaled quietly. Her computer wallpaper, a photograph of herself a handful of years younger than her twenty-five years, alongside her best friend, winked into view. They were standing in front of a Starbucks, heads thrown back to catch snowflakes on their tongues. Darius was clad in all black, a cream-colored hat perched awkwardly on top of his just-trimmed fade. Marcey's bright red scarf matched her cheeks. She was wearing Darius's heavy winter jacket. It was one of the last photographs of them happy and together. Rebecca and everything that had come after that awful party...was all a bad memory now. But this—this moment was *pure*.

Marcey stared at it for a long time, heart warm with the memory of that day. His monthly visitation was soon. The first Friday in March. Marcey was going up to visit him again then. Maybe he'd have an answer about Johnson, the mysterious package she'd received a few weeks before, or what to do about the fact that they couldn't talk to each other but in code. Marcey hated the slog of going in and out of a high-security prison once a month. She hated the never-ending guilt.

In a way, she was grateful for the forward thrust of the early stages of revenge.

Anything was better than dwelling in the past.



Marcey didn't get the chance to drive much. It came with living in New York, squatting in the spare bedroom of her mother's already too-small apartment. She relished the opportunity to get behind the wheel and out on the open road, driving up I-90 toward Albany and then on to Canada. Driving was freedom, divorcing herself from the concrete jungle of the city and pulling her into the rolling Adirondack foothills north of the capitol.

ELLEN SIMPSON

Nestled deep amid the forested mountains was a tiny village that played host to the prison where Darius was locked away. Called Dannemora, it hardly evoked the hardened home of some of the worst criminals from the state of New York, picturesque as it gathered at the edge of a national forest that shared the village's name.

ADA Johnson had made sure to send him to the scariest prison she could arrange: Clinton Correctional. The name meant nothing if you weren't from New York, but if you were, and you had any passing brushes with the law, you feared the place. It was where they sent the worst of the worst criminals, where they locked them away and tossed the key into the Hudson.

Or whatever dramatic shit they say on Law & Order, Marcey mused pensively.

Marcey had spent the past few weeks stewing about ADA Johnson's political ad while in meetings with Darius's lawyer. He had to figure out if the ad was illegal, and they'd spent hours debating what to do with the strange package that had arrived on her doorstep. She gripped the steering wheel of her rented Hyundai, trying to focus on the drive. On the seat next to her, sticking out of her purse, was a small black Moleskine notebook. Marcey glanced at it before training her eyes back on the road. *That* was another mess that would only serve to distract her. She and Devon weren't in agreement about the best course of action. It was starting to snow; the road was slick and the prison was fast approaching. Her mind couldn't wander now.

When she sat down across from Darius thirty minutes later, she barely took the time to take in his gaunt appearance and the dark circles under his eyes. His skin was dry when he grasped her hand and pulled her in for the one hug she was allowed at the beginning of the visit. They'd kept him in here longer than they should have—some technicality his previous parole hearing had invalidated the whole process. Marcey didn't want it to happen again. What Johnson wanted to do could change that, somehow keep Darius locked away forever. She couldn't look at him, not without telling him the awful truth. He had to know—it would impact him too.

Marcey swallowed, looking at her hands to avoid Darius's serious brown eyes, and spoke quickly. "Linda Johnson's using our mugshots in a campaign ad. Devon says it's legal and we can't really do shit about it, and

A HEIST STORY

now the entire world knows that I was involved in your arrest and that you're about to come up for parole again."

He stared at her. "You're joking."

"Nope." Marcey paused, forcing herself to look up. She sighed, pushing her hair out of her eyes. "Well, that's stretching it a little. They're cartoonish renderings, but they're very obviously based on our mugshots. I didn't want to ask anyone, but I think if your ma or mine saw it they'd know. Same with anyone who knows us. That's what worries me."

"Man." Darius scrubbed at his face. "You got off for this bullshit."

"I shouldn't have," Marcey said, spitting it out quickly. She always did. He resented her freedom enough as it was. There was nothing she could do about it either, other than be quicker to the punch of her white guilt.

He glared at her. "Don't start." He sat back. "Devon doesn't think it's libel or something?"

"Not as far as any research can figure. I've spent the past couple weeks stewing about it. Talking at him about it. He's looked into it, off the clock. Basically, Devon says it's a matter of public record. And apparently the Super PAC who paid for it isn't known for their scruples. I'm sure they think I'm locked up somewhere too." Marcey pressed her hand flat on the table before them. "I'm not sure what this means for your parole hearing."

"Probably means I'm fucked." Darius's first appearance before the parole board was scheduled for May, when the campaign would be really heating up prior to the summer campaign season. Marcey'd checked those dates too. There was no way to get the ad pulled without a lengthy court battle. Darius rubbed at the back of his head and looked away. "Fuck, man." He looked like he was on the verge of crying.

All Marcey wanted to do was reach out, draw him into a hug, and not let him go. He was her best friend; he knew her secrets and she his. She looked down at her hands, useless on the table. They weren't allowed to touch. The distance opened like a great gash across the space between them. "I'm sorry."

It never sounded like enough.

"Devon's pretty convinced she wouldn't show up in person, I guess because of the campaign. He called me and told me that. This musta been why. Said we'd get some green-eared kid who'd recommend parole and I'd be out in June." Darius seemed to crumple in his tan scrubs. His gaze met

ELLEN SIMPSON

Marcey's. "Man. If she's using this case as a cornerstone for her campaign, she's gotta show up. My ma's gonna have a fit." There were tears in his eyes, borne, Marcey suspected, of frustration. "She wanted me to come home last June. It's been more than eight years."

"What if there was, say, a way we could get back at her?"

"We'd be stupid." His tone was sharp. "There's no way we can do that, Mar. The most you could do is get that group in trouble for using your picture in an advertisement. I got no rights. And it won't fly. If they've done it, it means it's probably legal, no matter how dubious."

"True." Marcey bit her lip and glanced over her shoulder. The guard at the far end of the room was distracted by a young mother's squalling child and not paying her much attention. Marcey leaned forward, her tone dropping and growing urgent. These visits were monitored. She had to be careful. "But I think I might have found something that could help."

He tilted his head, skeptical. "What?"

"I got this book in the mail. I can't show it to you. I left it in the car. But I think it might be the key." Marcey glanced over her shoulder. "You know that guy, the one that Johnson wasn't able to convict right before our case, when the papers were calling for her to be fired and sanctioned by the New York State Bar because of how it ended? The book belonged to him." Marcey prayed Darius remembered. It was so long ago, and she couldn't tell him much else about the strange encounter and series of disagreements she'd had with Devon Austin Jackson about what to do with the book. Darius's lawyer evidently knew the man. He knew everything about him and about the contents of the book before Marcey could even ask about it. He knew and he'd sat there and smiled at her and told her that Linda Johnson was well within her rights about the ad and had asked what she was going to do about it before implying other people were looking for the book as well.

"Are you sure, Mar?"

"There's a story here, Dar. A connection. I just have to pick at it..." She leaned forward, her fingers gripping the edges of the table. "I want to know what it is."

It was a lie. Marcey knew what it was, but she couldn't say it here and they both knew it.

A HEIST STORY

At first, Darius didn't say much at all, sitting hunched over in his tan scrubs. Frowning, Marcey took him in then, saw how the years in this place had shaped him into someone far different from the baby-faced kid she'd cared so much about as a teen. His hair was getting longer, which Marcey liked, and his face was hollow now—it bore the weight of all he'd been through.

"I don't want you doing anything that'd mess up the parole hearing." Darius's eyes took on a resigned look. "Everyone knew there wasn't a snowball's chance in hell to get out a few years early. Then that bullshit happened last year and I got stuck for another year. If you go and fuck it up for me, Mar, I don't think—" He trailed off, but the implication was clear. It wasn't Marcey's place to do this for him. "Don't follow up with this."

"But—"

His expression hardened. "Take your guilt and shove it. Don't. Fuck up your own life."

"It could ruin her, if she's connected to someone like that."

"Is it worth my freedom?" Darius slammed his hand on the table. A guard looked over at them, one hand on his belt. "Everyone knows she wanted you more than she wanted me. Because of Rebecca. She offered me immunity. She offered me *freedom*, Marcey, if I gave you up. I never said shit. Now she's making us look like cartoon villains to make her career."

"Career..." Marcey snatched her hand away from the table, getting to her feet.

"Where are you going?" he demanded, half rising. "We still have fifteen minutes."

"I just thought of something, something that I think will help you when you get paroled."

"Marcey, I told you no! If you look into that guy—that case—you'll poke the bear, and she'll come for you. Then what will you do?"

"Fight back, I suppose." Marcey sat back down. "I want to do this for you."

"I don't need your fucking savior complex." From across the room, the guard gave Darius a stern look, and he scowled at the guard before nodding to Marcey. "You don't need to save me. I can save myself, convince the parole board I should be let out. The ad is damaging, yes, but it will be a hell of a lot worse if you poke the *freaking* bear."

ELLEN SIMPSON

Marcey hung her head. She'd known he wouldn't want her help. Her mind was already back on the book, thinking hard about the contents and the thin threads of connection between its author and the letter he'd sent, and how it all could be tied back to ADA Johnson. That connection couldn't be ignored, no matter how risky it was to Darius. If this was the same guy, as Devon claimed he was, then the risk of possibly turning over some stones to rattle Johnson's campaign wasn't such a bad idea, even if it would make Darius angry.

"I won't," she promised. It was a lie that slid easily from her tongue. She had to do this. For him more than for herself. If it hurt him to get to a better outcome, so be it. The drive to act anyway, and do what she felt was right, it hit her hard and settled in her stomach. Darius would understand. "It's snowing like crazy outside and the eastern half of the state's under some sort of winter storm watch. I want to get on the road before we get upgraded to a blizzard."

He nodded, clearly not quite following. His confusion showed in the furrowing of his eyebrows and the way his lips pitched downward into a frown. Marcey mouthed *I'll tell you later* and said her good-byes. She had a lot to think about on her way back to the city.

CHAPTER 2

Marcey, Stumbling into Something

SIX AND A HALF HOURS into an early-March snowstorm that only seemed to get worse the closer she got to New York City, Marcey's eyes were stinging with the effort of keeping them open. She had three texts from her mother, demanding to know when she'd be home, that she couldn't answer. She didn't dare take her hands off the wheel to text her mother until she'd pulled into the parking lot of a twenty-four-hour storage facility in the Bronx.

I'll be home soon, I still have one more errand to run before I return the car. I got you that syrup from Albany you wanted.

It's snowing. Roads are a mess.

Marcey shoved the phone into her back pocket and tugged on the beanie she'd thrown into the back seat with her coat. Her straight, mousy-brown hair was full of static. Marcey cursed quietly and attempted to smooth it down before leaning into the back seat to retrieve her jacket.

It was humid outside. Snow still fell, and Marcey was grateful for her LL Bean boots as she stepped down into a puddle easily three inches deep of slushy, disgusting water. She wrinkled her nose and scowled as she shook her boot off before hopping through the slush over to the kiosk at the front of the facility.

Her feet were wet. She squelched her way up to the office. The man sitting inside was overweight and dozing, listening to the Knicks on the

radio. He eyed Marcey as she pulled the Moleskine notebook out of her purse.

“Can I help you?” he asked. His shirt read “Ted.”

Marcey nodded. “I need to see”—she flipped to a page toward the back, where the details were copied down in a precise, masculine hand—“unit number five-four-three-three.”

“Ya got a key?”

“There’s a combo-lock.”

Ted grunted and pushed himself slowly to his feet. He flipped the “OPEN” sign hanging from a suction cup on the window over to read “BACK IN FIVE MINUTES” and passed Marcey a clipboard. “Gonna need to see some I.D.”

Marcey frowned. “Why? I thought the whole point of these places was to be anonymous.” She jotted down her name in the messiest handwriting possible.

“Got something to hide?”

It was a lie, but Marcey shook her head. “Nah. Just hate my license picture.” She dug it out of her wallet and passed it to him.

“Don’t we all?” Ted took the license. He glanced at it, and then at Marcey’s face, before passing it back. He picked up a set of keys. “Five-four-three-three is toward the back. Come with me.”

Ted was a lot taller than Marcey had anticipated. He towered over Marcey’s slight frame when he stepped down from the office and shuffled toward the back of the facility. He moved with the grace of someone fifty pounds lighter as well, even if he wasn’t doing much to pick up his feet as he walked. He led Marcey to the back row of bright red doors and pointed. “Down at the end. If you’re not out in an hour, I’ll come check on you.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Marcey answered just a bit too quickly.

He stared at her for a moment. “Suit yourself. Hit the red button beside the unit if you start to panic or anyone back here gives you a hard time. This place gives me the creeps late at night.” He turned and started to shuffle back toward the office.

Marcey glanced out the window at the swirling snow. It was just past seven o’clock, not even that late. “Thanks.” Her words echoed strangely in the corridor. A tremor of excitement shot down Marcey’s spine. She had no

A HEIST STORY

idea what she was meant to find here, but if she was right, it was the first piece of a puzzle left behind as a clue to something bigger.

Unit 5433 did not belong to Marcey, or anyone she knew personally. The number and address were written in the book and its purpose explained to Marcey in a letter from a man who claimed to know her, given to her by Darius's lawyer. How Devon had even had it was beyond Marcey at this point. He'd said it'd been left with him. Marcey wasn't so sure now if it wasn't all part of some elaborate plot.



When the book arrived on her doorstep, Marcey didn't think much of it beyond a passing annoyance at the courier, who'd left it without bothering to knock. Obviously, this book had some value, or it would not have been delivered by one of the city's elite private messaging companies.

"Everything happens for a reason, Mar," Devon explained, offering it to her between two fingers. "This might give you a better idea of why this is happening."

"For me?" She frowned, reading the address in the same slanted handwriting. "I don't even know the guy."

Devon smiled his mysterious smile and retreated behind his desk, leaving Marcey to read. It was...something else. The ramblings of an old man who had mistaken her for someone else. It claimed the writer was her father, and that he was leaving Marcey his legacy as she was an honest woman.

"An honest woman?" Marcey raised an eyebrow. "Sure."

"Well, you are, after a sense." Devon pursed his lips, the corners of his eyes crinkled with amusement. "No jail time on your record."

Marcey actually laughed, flabbergasted and yet not that surprised by what Devon had said. "I wouldn't be here if I didn't have to make an inquiry about that damn ad," she said. "Darius wanted me to stop bothering you when you were prepping for his parole hearing. The book would be in the trash and I'd be going about my life."

Devon put his hands in his pockets and sat back. "That so?"

Marcey scowled at him. He knew her pretty well by this point, and he wasn't exactly wrong in thinking that she was intrigued. Marcey let out a heavier sigh than she'd perhaps intended. "Well...what's this about a job

he didn't get to pull off?" She flipped to the second page. "And what's this about him being my father?"

Devon told her all he knew. It wasn't much. He flipped through the book with her and found the storage unit address and number. "You should go there, see what Charlie had cookin'."

The unit belonged to Charles Mock. The same man that ADA Johnson had failed to convict in a very public, very messy trial, not long before she'd taken Marcey and Darius's case. The man who was apparently Marcey's father. There wasn't much proof of that in his note, just a few scant details on an affair when Marcey's mother was in graduate school at NYU, struggling to support herself. The details were written with such care, though, as though the memories contained in the letter were fond and treasured. Her mother's backstory was something Marcey knew like the back of her hand. For most of her life, Marcey had been told stories to encourage her to work harder, to be a better person. But her mother had apparently lied about everything for twenty-five years.

Marcey wanted to hate Devon when he showed her a photograph, because it made this whole thing real. The person who did this to her was real, an honest-to-god person. Not some sort of joke she could dismiss as Devon being a dick and trying to pull a fast one on her.

"This is Charlie." Devon tapped a man in the center. "He asked me to show you this."

Marcey took the photograph from him. Her eyes narrowed and then went wide with recognition. This was the guy who'd made Linda Johnson look like a goddamn fool right before Darius's trial. There were pictures of him walking out of the courtroom following the abrupt acquittal and near accusation of Linda Johnson's office fabricating evidence all over the newspapers. His head was held high and a wicked smirk danced across his lips. Even though she was in high school at the time, Marcey remembered those pictures. They'd felt like a victory for the little guy and a mockery of all that was corrupt and wrong about the criminal justice system. He looked younger in those photographs than in this picture. *No way...*

She scowled. No matter how cool or badass it was to get off like he had, this man's antics had fucking ruined her best friend's life. This was the guy who sent her this book? This was the guy who was supposed to be her father? She stared at the older man with a head of hair the same color as her

A HEIST STORY

own, curling at the top of his head. He was wearing sunglasses, but his nose was unmistakable. Marcey saw the same nose in the mirror every day. She'd seen that nose before too, on an old man down in the park she'd played chess with on the weekends sometimes, back when she'd still had time for that—back before her entire life had gone to shit.

In the photo, Charlie Mock stood on a beach somewhere, flanked by two women. One was black, taller than Charlie by a good three inches, and smiling broadly behind blood-red lipstick. She was stunning, her arm draped around Charlie's shoulder and her hair damp from the ocean. Beside them, grinning lopsidedly at the camera, was a blonde woman with pretty green eyes clad in a man's oversized white shirt and a long, flowing skirt. She was shorter than the others; Charlie's arm was wrapped around her waist. Her eyes were alive, bright with emotion. Marcey's breath caught in her throat. She was beautiful. Both of the women were.

On the back of the photograph was a carefully printed note in the same masculine hand that filled the Moleskine notebook. *Charlie, Shelly and Kat, Rio, 2013*

The photograph was tucked inside the Moleskine, along with the letter from Charlie Mock to Devon explaining the conditions of Marcey's inheritance. The letter was full of emotions, things she wasn't meant to hear. They were for some image of a child Charlie Mock had in his head, a child Charlie thought would be clever and whip-smart—a child with ambition. Marcey had ambition, yes, but she didn't want it ascribed to her by a stranger she hardly knew, asserting he had some claim on her life.

The papers weren't the only place Marcey had seen him before. The realization hit her hard. She looked up, stunned. "He played chess with me," she said. "When I was just starting high school—before that trial that ruined Linda Johnson's career. Like when I was a freshmen or whatever. He would come to the park and play chess."

Devon's face was impassive. "He was always a coward about interpersonal relationships. Amazing he and Shelly hit it off at all, given how she is about commitment. But whatever. He told me that he couldn't face the idea of ruining your life by telling you these things that your mother wasn't able to bring herself to admit. I'm sorry you had to find out this way."

"Why does he want to lay claim to me like this? I'm not a possession he can just say is his."

“Do you think that’s what he’s saying?”

“I don’t know.”

The conversation died after that. Later, when Marcey returned home, she went through every photograph her mother kept in the apartment. She devoured old address books and diaries, desperate to find a trace of Charlie Mock. The diaries were empty, and the address books held no more answers than the photographs. Marcey was convinced that this was all an elaborate prank by someone who knew her history with Darius and wanted to mess with her. It was a dick move. She went to bed fuming.

In the morning, she called Devon back. “How did he know it was me?”

“You should probably come back into the office.”

So Marcey took the train and walked the ten blocks to Devon’s office filled with a feeling of not quite dread not quite something else entirely. Devon waited until the pleasantries were done before he pulled a file from his desk drawer and paged through it. “The reason he knew is because he had you tested.” He held out a single piece of paper from the file, his brow furrowed and his lips pursed into a thin, disapproving line. “Not that I thought it was a good idea, but that’s white folks for you.”

“Tested?” Marcey took the paper from him. It was a DNA test, establishing a paternal match.

“Charlie told me that he and your mother saw each other on and off for a few years while she was at NYU. He never knew that she’d gotten pregnant until he happened to see a picture of you in the newspaper with her a few years back.” At Marcey’s blank stare, Devon passed her a second sheet of paper, covered in the same spider-like handwriting of the letter and book she received—Charlie’s handwriting. Marcey didn’t like that she recognized it now, and the creeping sense of violation from the idea of being *tested* was taking all of her mental energy to hold back. She’d deal with that later, when Devon wasn’t around to witness her disgust and horror.

Attached to the page was a newspaper clipping from the *Times*, a small black-and-white photo of her mother and Marcey, holding a giant pair of scissors, about to cut the ribbon on the firm’s new offices.

She must have been fifteen in the photo. “This is more than a few years ago.” Swallowing, Marcey leveled her gaze at Devon. Her hand was shaking. She bit the inside of her cheek to keep her expression neutral. She could not—would not—let him see that this bothered her. The idea of

A HEIST STORY

this strange man seeing her in the paper and then jumping to all kinds of conclusions about her. She glanced back down at the date on the picture, thinking back. She'd met Charlie not long after that in the park for the first time. "Kinda creepy if you ask me." It was dismissive, but it did somewhat reflect how she felt.

Devon laughed. "I suppose you're right. But I don't—*didn't*—put much past Charlie. He was always doing questionable things. And hey, time flies."

Marcey set the clipping aside to cover the disgust that swept over her face. "This doesn't prove anything."

"No." Devon shook his head. "But this will." He tapped the paternity test with his pen. "I don't know how he did it, I didn't ask, but somehow he got hold of your DNA, got you tested. I think he used a private investigator friend of his."

That was it. Marcey pushed away from the desk, the chair she'd been sitting on rolling away to slam into a bookshelf full of legal reference books. The terrible revulsion she'd only just been keeping in check boiling over and spewing forth from her lips. "How could someone who wrote such beautiful words—" She'd thrown down the results and stalked over to the window in disgust. "How could he just *do* that without my consent?"

The violation, the creeping sense of knowing *exactly* when Charlie Mock had gotten her DNA—during one of their chess games, he'd pulled a hair from her jacket and flicked it away as though it had been nothing... That must have been it; he must have kept it.

"He was a criminal, Marcey," Devon said, his expression resigned. "Not a good person."



Charles Mock died in a prison.

Marcey thought of Darius, her stomach clenching. She couldn't imagine losing him while he was stuck behind those impermeable walls up at Clinton Correctional. ADA Johnson had her plan: she wanted to keep Darius locked away and she wanted to drag Marcey's name through the mud despite her acquittal. This was a revenge, and a petty one. Marcey wasn't sure why Johnson wanted it, or why it was so important to do it now, when Darius was set to be released in two months. Provided he won the parole request.

ELLEN SIMPSON

Marcey wanted to know why, and if that why was here, in this run-down twenty-four-hour storage facility in the south Bronx, then so be it. She was going to follow the leads and Charles Mock's paper trail until it went cold. She wanted to know if this was all connected to Charles, or if it was truly just about herself and Darius.

Ted's heavy footfalls soon fell silent with his retreat and Marcey was alone. She shivered in the cold air and set her jaw. There was no telling what she would find hidden behind the unit door. Devon hadn't been able to tell her much about what Charles Mock had locked away here.

Her boots were slippery on the concrete floor of the unit. Marcey hummed, thinking back to the meetings with Devon. The whole situation was a mess, and she didn't like anything about how Charlie had confirmed her relation to him. Devon's answer, that he was a criminal, wasn't enough. Marcey hoped there was something in this storage unit that justified why Marcey had to handle the violation of a strange man snooping into her paternity—into her fucking DNA.

No answer would be good enough for Marcey. Just as the crawling feeling at the pit of her stomach of violation. Marcey didn't like being lied to. She didn't like that Charlie Mock had never even bothered to say anything. All she felt was anger. He'd just taken his proof and dumped his last job in her lap. She'd left Devon's office confused and upset. There were no other answers, and the feelings she had were difficult to articulate. She'd thrown herself into researching the book and to making sure she had time to come to explore this storage unit.

The lock in her hand warmed quickly in her palm, sweaty despite the chill at the back of the storage facility. Marcey twisted the knob to the combination she'd memorized almost upon seeing it. Memory was Marcey's greatest asset: she could recall the ebb and flow of numbers across the page, and recognize patterns where seemingly there were none. She put her tongue between her teeth and pulled down on the lock. It didn't budge. She tried again. 15-2-34. After another moment of resistance, the lock clicked open and the rusted bolt of it fell loose. Marcey tugged it away from the latch and tucked it into her jacket pocket. It jangled against her keys.

The door rose about an inch or two from the ground, a small puff of dusty, disused air escaping from underneath it. Marcey bent and grabbed the handle, using her shoulder to throw the door into the ceiling storage

A HEIST STORY

space beyond. It rattled, echoing loudly in the empty hall, almost covering up the click-click-click of approaching footsteps.

Marcey froze. The bright light of the hallway streamed into the unit, but she couldn't look, not with someone close. She jumped up, grabbing at the handle. She had to close it. Charlie Mock's secrets were closely guarded, the sort that could not be shared with even a passerby. Marcey was certain of this. What if this person was investigating Charlie, looking to see if his death was faked? What if this person knew of Johnson's vendetta and wanted to come after her? What if this was one of Devon's people, following her to make sure that she'd stay out of trouble?

Click-click-click-stop.

Marcey peered up the hallway, her knees bent to try and jump up in order to grab the door handle.

A woman approached. She was broad shouldered, her hair impeccable despite the cold humidity of the weather outside. Her long jacket was coal gray and set off against her dark skin in a way that Marcey found fascinating. Most of all, she was beautiful. Her eyes were sharp, but not unkind, and her lips painted a bright red that stood out starkly against the dark color of her dress beneath the jacket and the warm brown of her skin.

When she spoke, it was in an affected voice. It took Marcey a minute to figure out why, before the realization slowly slotted into place. "If you're looking for Charlie," she called, stopping well away from Marcey, her hands in her pockets. "He's gone."

Marcey straightened. "I wasn't."

"This is his unit, you're trespassing." The woman's gaze flicked from Marcey to the open storage unit, narrowing as she took in Marcey's face. "I've been waiting for three weeks now for someone to show up. How did you find it?"

"Er—there's a book," Marcey hedged. "With the combination written inside." She pulled the lock from her pocket and held it up so it caught the light. "And I unlocked the door. Are you a guard or something?"

There was a smile evident in the woman's tone, even if it did not translate to her face. "Or something."

CHAPTER 3

Marcey, Following

THE STORAGE FACILITY WAS QUIET, save for the gentle buzz of the overhead fluorescent lights and the creak of ancient baseboard radiators. Marcey shivered, wrapping her arms around herself. Her jacket was too thin to linger in a place like this. She hadn't meant to linger at all. She wanted to get in, see whatever it was that Charlie had put here, and then go home to figure out her next move.

He'd left her instructions in that letter. Devon had feigned ignorance, but Marcey knew he was intent on making sure Marcey followed through. Was this woman's presence meant to confirm that?

She had to tread carefully. If she didn't, she was bound to run into more situations like this: a standoff that left her naked, unable to act for fear of blowing everything before she had a chance to get started.

Her purse swung from her shoulder, passing into the void of open space behind her—all of Charlie's secrets were back there, and all she wanted to do was slam the door shut and run. Darius was right. She shouldn't be here, digging into something that could make her life worse before it ever got better.

"Who are you?" Marcey was surprised her voice didn't shake. She squared her shoulders, a muscle working in her jaw. She could run away from this woman, duck back out to the rental, and go home. No one would have to know she was ever here. Except this woman. With her full lips and mocking grin. Why was she so damn amused? What was so funny about this? There was nothing funny about her scaring Marcey half to death.

A HEIST STORY

“Aren’t you going to go inside?”

Of course she wanted to go inside. How could she not? This woman was an unknown variable. She did not factor into Marcey’s plans. Marcey bit her tongue, her gaze never leaving the woman’s hard eyes.

“Who are you?” Marcey asked again.

The woman’s body was fluid in her movements, despite her large frame. Marcey wondered if she’d been an athlete—maybe a dancer—when she was younger. She moved with the grace of one used to being nimble on one’s feet. Marcey stepped back, the heel of her boot catching on the edge of the unit. She didn’t stumble, not quite, but it was close. Her foot ached as she straightened, and the woman was there, looking down at her from her great height.

“My name is Shelly Orietti.” She held out a hand. That was why her face was familiar. She was the Shelly from the photograph. “And you are?”

Marcey hesitated before politeness overruled her anxiety about intimidating strangers. “Marcey Daniels.”

“This storage unit does not belong to you, Marcey Daniels, so why are you here?”

Marcey shrugged. “Like I said, there’s a book. Arrived in my mail a few weeks back.”

Stupid, stupid. Why had she brought up the book *again*?

Shelly let out a low curse. “That man.” There was a smile in her voice, even if it didn’t reach her lips. Her tone was rueful. She stepped back from Marcey to plunge her hands into her pockets. “He probably saw something in you then, I’d guess.”

“Weird...because I’ve never met him in any official capacity.” It wasn’t quite the truth, but she didn’t think she wanted to air her dirty laundry about Charlie Mock and the chess sessions where he’d been too chickenshit to tell her who he was.

If this shocked Shelly, she gave little sign, a genuine-seeming smile blossoming at her lips. Marcey tilted her head to one side, watching Shelly. In a moment of relaxation, her entire demeanor changed, and she seemed far friendlier than before, her hands emerging from her pocket, casually falling to her sides. People could not be trusted by their body language alone. The lesson of the lying smile was one Marcey had learned when Linda Johnson nodded at her testimony, a smile at her lips, only to turn

around and use her words to divest Darius of his freedom. Linda Johnson's eyes were hard when she'd listened to Marcey's testimony in that courtroom and later listened to her beg for mercy and leniency, but Shelly's eyes were soft. Kindness seeped into their warm brown, and crow's feet creased at the corners of her eyes.

"So, you're not the heir."

"According to his lawyer, he's my father."

Shelly's eyebrows shot up. "Your father? But that's—"

"Yeah." Marcey rubbed at the back of her neck. "I didn't even know."

Shelly stepped forward, moving almost reflexively. Marcey took another step backward into the unit, and Shelly's fingers twitched, as though she wanted to reach out and hug Marcey. Marcey swallowed. She didn't want a hug from a strange woman in the middle of the Bronx as night fell.

"Oh, child," Shelly said at length. "I am so sorry. Charlie was a piece of work, but he wasn't stupid, at least not stupid like this. I wish I could undo what he did. You don't deserve that." She inclined her head. "But you're here, at his unit, which means he left you the details."

"The details?"

"Of his life. Or at least his last job." Shelly pushed past Marcey, heels clicking on the floor. She crossed to a work bench and began opening the drawers of a small utility storage chest sitting in one corner. "Could you get the light?"

Marcey reached over and fumbled for a moment before her fingers connected with the plastic-and-metal plating. The room flooded with light, and Marcey felt the breath leave her chest. This was it. Somewhere, locked away in this trove of a single man's history, there was the groundwork of a job. And maybe, if Marcey was creative about it, she could use that job to humiliate Linda Johnson. She'd have to look at it. Charlie Mock had beaten Johnson once before. Maybe the way he'd done it was locked away in here. Marcey refused to sit idly by while that woman used her and Darius as a tool for career enhancement.

Charlie Mock had been meticulously organized in life. Just looking at this room where everything had its place spoke volumes about the man. Marcey was no master at understanding body language, but she'd always been able to read a room. Under a layer of dust, there were carefully rolled-up schematics, stacks of notebooks, binders of photographs, and, in

A HEIST STORY

the middle of the far wall of the room, a single photocopy of a painting tacked to the center of a corkboard. It was nothing more than a face. A face contorted in a silent scream.

“That’s some picture.” Marcey leaned forward to get a better look. “Makes the place seem real homey.”

Shelly let out a little snort of laughter, glancing up at the picture. She shook her head before going back to her rummaging. Half muttering to herself, she said, “Kat truly thinks she can reproduce *that*?” She said it like “fat chance” and Marcey frowned.

“Who’s Kat?”

The girl in the picture, the other one, her name was Kat.

“No one.” Shelly answered. She held up a pack of cards. “Got what I came for. You take care now.” She brushed past Marcey and out of the storage unit.

That was...it? She was just going to walk away? No. She could have the answers Marcey wanted about Charlie. Devon hadn’t been able, or was unwilling, to tell her much about Charlie. Marcey lunged for the light switch and flicked it off. She pulled the unit’s door shut and clicked the lock into place. Breathless, she ran after Shelly.

“Wait!” she called, her boots squeaking on the concrete floor. “Shelly, wait!”

Shelly was already nearly out of the building by the time Marcey caught up to her. She cast an annoyed look at Marcey before buttoning her coat up and heading out into the snow. Marcey followed, zipping up her jacket and frowning as the snow thickened. Ted, from his place in the facility window, watched them go with narrowed eyes.

The city was awash with the warm yellow glow of streetlights against freshly fallen snow. Their feet crunched in the two-inch accumulation. The city fell silent when it snowed, and Marcey hardly dared speak for fear of breaking that quiet serenity.

“You know about Charlie.”

“I do.”

“Can you tell me about him, what he did, why he was in prison? How he managed to get off when Johnson had him dead to rights?” Marcey babbled, half a step behind Shelly’s long strides.

Ignoring her, Shelly kept closer to the buildings, turning down several side streets and then up an alley lined with garbage cans. At the far end was

a set of stairs and a glowing neon sign advertising a pool hall and Pabst Blue Ribbon beer. Shelly stepped gingerly around a half-empty Chinese take-out container and popped her collar against the wind. The outline of the pack of cards was gone from Shelly's pocket, vanished up a sleeve or into her purse, Marcey wasn't sure.

"Will you at least talk to me?" Marcey begged. She followed Shelly down into the bar. It was smoke-filled—even though smoking indoors was illegal—and dark. Very dark. Marcey peered around owlishly at the slouching old men at the bar who watched a grainy television feed of the Knicks game and nursed their drinks. A well-muscled man at the far side of the bar jerked his chin to Shelly, who nodded back politely. The guy looked like The Rock, but far scarier. Still, Shelly didn't seem bothered by him, sliding off her coat and then hanging it on the rack beside the door.

Should I just leave? Marcey wondered, as Shelly headed toward the Not-The-Rock. She glanced over her shoulder at the door. She could always wait. Hang out until whatever business Shelly had with these guys was done, have a beer, watch the Knicks lose.

"Marcey?" Shelly called. Marcey whipped around. "Leave your coat out here and come on."

Not needing to be bid twice, Marcey tugged off her coat and hung it beside Shelly's. No one in the bar paid her any mind when she crossed the room.

"Hold out your arms," Muscles said. Marcey did so, and he patted her down. "There's a one-hundred-buck buy-in, kid. You got that?"

There was no time to look to Shelly. Muscles was looking at her with the intensity of a guy who wanted nothing more than to beat the shit out of someone. It didn't matter if she was a tiny girl or not. Marcey nodded mutely and tugged her wallet out of her back pocket. She'd gotten money for the trip and hadn't spent any of it. There were six crisp twenty-dollar bills there for Muscles to see. He grunted his approval and ushered them through the back door.

Beyond the door was a storage room for the bar. Kegs lined the walls. Cleaning supplies were cluttered together with bottles of Budweiser and Miller Lite, dull with dust, on wire structures shoved toward the back. At the center of the room was a low table, with a handful of older women sitting around it. A few raised their hands in greeting to Shelly, and the only man in the place chewed moodily on an unlit cigar.

A HEIST STORY

“We don’t take newbies,” he grunted.

“She’s fine, Earl,” Shelly answered. She nudged Marcey. “Sit over there.” She pointed to a spot across the table from a woman with blue-gray hair and thin lips. “That’s Candy. Next to her is Latoya.” Latoya had a cherry-red wig. Her velour jump suit was shabby, though, the color faded and stained. She gave a little wave.

“What is this?” Marcey hissed, her voice barely above a whisper.

Shelly just winked and took her seat next to Earl. Marcey sat down between Candy and Latoya, confused. This was some sort of underground gambling ring for old folks. Or something.

“Where’s Tony?” Shelly asked, leaning back and selecting a dusty Miller Lite for herself from the rack. “He said he was gonna be here.” She popped the top off her beer and set the cap aside.

“You just wanna see his face when you wipe the floor with him again,” Candy grouched. She lit a cigarette and blew smoke all over Marcey. “It’s unusual for you to bring a friend to our weekly get-togethers, Shelly.”

“What can I say, sometimes I get sick of y’all’s faces.”

“Fat chance.” Candy laughed. Latoya slapped her on the shoulder.

From her pocket, Shelly produced the deck of cards. She cut them neatly, shuffling them with the skill of a casino dealer, the many rings on her fingers flashing in the low light. When she did the bridge, she made sure to leave all the cards face up for a moment. Earl, Candy, and Latoya all leaned forward and squinted at the cards, scrutinizing them.

“Is this a new deck?” Earl asked.

“Yes.” Shelly said. “Bought ’em at the Duane Reed this morning.”

That was a *lie*. Under the table, Marcey’s knee started to bounce. She chewed the inside of her cheek to keep herself from saying anything. Why was Shelly lying? What was this game? Her mind raced as Shelly explained the typical rules of Texas Hold ’Em to Marcey and everyone put their money on the table. *As if they didn’t know*. Marcey’s crisp twenties were small compared to the stacks the others had. Shelly produced a roll of twenties from her pocket the size of Marcey’s fist.

The door opened once more, and Muscles came in with a tray full of empty glasses, a bucket for ice, and a bottle of Jack. Behind him trailed another guy, this one far meaner-looking than the old-timers gathered around the table. He had tattoos running up his arms and was well-muscled

ELLEN SIMPSON

despite his age. He looked over the table as Muscles passed out glasses to everyone and set the bottle and ice on the wire rack next to some scouring powder.

“The fuck is this?” His voice was rough—a smoker too, evidently. “We don’t take outsiders.”

“This is Marcey, Tony,” Shelly said calmly. She sipped her beer. “She’s good for it.”

Tony turned his chair backward and sat down heavily, eyeing Marcey from across the table. “She better be.”

Swallowing back a retort, Marcey glanced to Shelly. Tony set her on edge. She wanted to beat him. Shelly was lying about the deck of cards and where they came from. This was a game. She was being tested.

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