



Emily
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TWO IS A PATTERN



CHAPTER 1

THIRTY-SIX DOWN WAS AN EIGHT-LETTER word for *rueful*, *remorseful*, *repentant*. Annie picked up her pen and tapped it against the handle of her ceramic coffee mug.

“I’m not a waitress, Anabelle! You know where the coffeepot is,” her mother Patty said, her voice light and airy but her words biting.

Annie looked up from her crossword puzzle, momentarily bewildered, then shook her head.

“Sorry, Mom. No, I was just thinking.” Annie was a fidgety person by nature. Always squirming in her seat, drumming her fingers, clicking her pens restlessly until someone made her stop. Her best friend in undergrad—a tall, blonde brainiac named Lori—had once bought her as a gag gift an expensive pen designed for astronauts to take into space. It had been made to look like the American flag—red and blue anodized aluminum with little white stars—and you could write with it anywhere. Upside down or underwater or on practically any flat surface. Lori had said it was the only pen that might actually outlast a stressed-out Annie during finals.

Annie had given it to her father, Ken, who still had it on his desk in his office. It wasn’t that she hadn’t appreciated the gift or the gesture, but Annie liked her cheap little pens and not having to feel guilty about gnawing up the top of a twenty-four-cent Bic. The pen she held now was resting against her bottom lip, in place to be chewed, but she wasn’t thinking about the crossword anymore. She was watching her mother angrily scrub a muffin tin at the sink.

Her parents had been ticked with her for some time now. Ever since she announced her intention to go back to school.

It was Lori's idea, actually. Not another degree, but the idea of going to school out West. They'd both gone to the University of Mississippi and become friends while Annie worked her way through an economics degree and Lori studied prelaw. They had no classes together their first semester, but Lori had lived three doors down from Annie's dorm room. The next semester, they took the same Russian language class. For the next three years, they were nearly inseparable. After graduation, with their matching caps decorated to say *Class of '87*, Annie was recruited to the CIA and went to Georgetown while Lori went to study law at Stanford.

They still kept in touch, though they weren't as tight as when they were twenty. Annie had mentioned in one of her letters last year that she was thinking about pursuing a second master's degree, maybe something more practical than Slavic languages. The government had technically paid for that one, but she'd recently resigned to figure out what she really wanted to do. Law like Lori? Foreign policy? Education? She could teach, maybe.

Lori had written back, expressing support for the idea. She mentioned that there were some great schools out West where she lived and told her not to discount it simply because her parents thought it was all stoned hippies past the Rocky Mountains. Lori probably meant Northern California because she'd settled in Marin County with her husband, Louis, but once Annie started to research, most of the schools she applied to were in the southern part of the state. She'd settled on criminology; it was a career change that would let her utilize her skillset.

Her mom finished scrubbing the muffin tin, banged it into the dish rack, and started on the big cast-iron skillet she'd used to fry bacon for breakfast.

Annie was three days away from moving cross-country, and her parents still were not entirely on board. Her father thought it a waste of time and money, and he was horrified at the amount of the loan Annie had procured. Her mother never tired of pointing out to her only daughter that by the time *she* was twenty-seven, she had a toddler and a baby on the way, and what would Annie have to show for herself except for a pile of degrees and no job?

“Mom, leave that big heavy pan. I’ll do it,” Annie offered.

“What about next week when you aren’t here anymore?” Patty asked. “Who’ll do it then, hmm? Me, that’s who. So I may as well get used to it.”

Annie sighed, picked up her pen, and returned to her puzzle.

Thirty-six down.

Rueful, remorseful, repentant.

Her pen scratched against the newsprint.

Contrite.

* * *

Three debate trophies in high school and negotiation training by the United States government and it still took Annie most of the summer to convince her father that she didn’t need anyone to drive from Ohio to California with her. At first, both of her parents had insisted on going, and then she’d got it down to just her father.

Two nights before she was due to depart, she got her wish. Her father relented if she promised to stop in Missouri and again in New Mexico to sleep solid nights in hotel beds. He even offered to pay for the hotel rooms, then spent the rest of the evening calling around for the best rates and booking her rooms, reading his credit card numbers over the phone loudly.

Annie hovered in the hallway, fretting.

“He just loves you is all,” her mom said, coming up behind her.

“I know. But it’s too much money.”

“Can’t put a price on your safety, honey. It’ll make him feel better, so you may as well let him do it.”

Annie nodded; the weight of his care heavy enough that it felt difficult to move from the spot.

She’d been feeling guilty about a lot of things lately. Going back to school, moving far away from her parents when she’d just come back to Toledo. Quitting her job with the CIA. Turning down a job offer from the Metropolitan Police Department in Washington DC six months ago even though she had no other prospects. It wasn’t the idea of being a police officer she disliked; it was the way Deputy Chief Mason Worth had offered her the job. Worth was a celebrated and

decorated officer, but the way he praised her—offering her a better-paying job and an alluring life in a new town—made the hair on the back of her neck stand up. He was so desperate to poach from the intelligence community that he contacted her the day after she left the Company. She had no idea how he knew anything about her, and the nicer he was to her, the more her stomach churned and the worse the fight-or-flight feeling got. So she said no and flew home to regroup.

Anabelle Weaver didn't need another authority figure in her life. She'd already learned that lesson the hard way.

She didn't sleep well the night before she was supposed to leave for California. Part of it was her childhood mattress, narrow and squeaky. But it was also her jangly nerves about her sense of direction. The majority of the trip was driving west on Interstate 40, but first she had to find her way out of the city, then negotiate the freeway system once she reached Los Angeles's outskirts.

Annie had thought seriously about going to UC Berkeley, had even tentatively filled out the form to accept, but at the last minute, she'd mailed the one to UCLA instead. Berkeley had more accolades, but UCLA's program allowed her to earn a master's through the law school without having to become a lawyer. The more temperate climate of Los Angeles was a factor as well, as was the anonymity of a sprawling city like Los Angeles. It was a shame that Lori wouldn't be closer, but, realistically, they'd have little time to spend together anyhow, not like they once had. No movie marathons, no nights at the bar. Lori had a family, and Annie, having one master's degree under her belt already, knew exactly how much work was in store for her.

Too nervous to sleep, she rose an hour before her alarm, well before anyone else in the house stirred. She took a quick hot shower, then carefully braided her hair so it would be manageable during the day. Her natural hair was strawberry blonde—not quite red. She had bleached it for her job in an effort to dim her most memorable feature—not the worst thing she'd ever done for the Company—and right now, she had about three inches of strawberry roots. She was happy to see her true color coming through again.

She studied herself in the mirror. Her braid stretched the skin of her forehead back. Her face was shiny, and she looked tired. For the

longest time, she had looked school-age, ambiguously so. If she wore something that pushed her tits up high, she was often mistaken for a coed or a high schooler or the harried grad student she once was. But now time was catching up. She rubbed lotion into the skin around her eyes and onto the dry patch on her forehead.

Walking back to her room, her towel wrapped tightly around her, Annie saw light filtering up the stairs and heard the chug of the coffee maker coming alive. Her parents never bought new things just because they could; they always waited for things to die first. The coffee maker was big, old, and slow, but it still made coffee, so it stayed.

She dressed in jeans, pulled a pair of socks up to her knees. She wore her soft, gray bra, the one that wouldn't dig into her shoulders and poke her in the ribs with the bent, out-of-shape underwire. A long-sleeved white shirt and her sweatshirt over that. She'd be too hot later when the sun came up, but right now she was worried more about comfort. She could always pull over and dig out a T-shirt later.

Her mom was in the kitchen, a pink, quilted robe over her white nightgown. Her hair, mostly white now, stuck up everywhere except at the back of her head, where it had rested all night against her pillow. Her mother greeted her with a smile. It was maybe too early for her to remember that she was sad and hurt and out of sorts.

"Pretty girl," her mother said. "Do you want some coffee?"

She accepted a small cup and sipped it slowly. She wanted to down the whole pot but didn't want to have to stop thirty minutes into her trip to find a bathroom to pee in, or worse.

A little while later, her dad got up. They'd mostly packed the car the night before, filling the trunk and back seat with boxes of clothes, shoes, and books. In the passenger seat was a laundry basket filled with toiletries, towels, and other odds and ends. She'd sold most of the stuff in her apartment when she'd moved back to Ohio, so other than clothes and books, odds and ends were all she had left. And her car, of course, which was by far the nicest thing she owned.

Now her dad loaded the rest, tucking things in wherever there was space. Her mother offered to fix her breakfast, but she waved it away, too nervous to eat.

She didn't want to drag out the goodbyes. She didn't feel ready to leave, but she knew she needed to go and it was time to rip the Band-Aid off, get on the road, and put some miles in before the day got away from her.

There were long hugs and tears, of course. Her dad slipped her two hundred-dollar bills while her mom was busy wiping her eyes. Then her mom slipped her a crisp fifty while her dad was double-checking that the trunk was closed up tight.

Just before she got into the car, her dad handed her the map and handwritten directions he had prepared for her, the addresses and phone numbers of the scheduled motels written in his slanted scrawl. He'd used the astronaut pen. Annie recognized the ink.

Her throat felt thick as she drove away, watching them get smaller in the rearview mirror.

But she didn't cry. Annie was an expert at leaving.

* * *

She stopped the first night in Kansas City after driving nearly eleven hours. It was just a Motel 6, but the lobby was clean, and she was weary and ruffled and starving half to death. The man behind the desk barely looked at her, uninterested in a woman traveling alone.

He gave her the key, pointed at the glass door to the lobby, and said, "Go to the left and park over by the fence. You're on the second floor."

She thanked him, returned to her car, and parked where he had indicated.

After checking that the car was locked and nothing valuable showed through the windows, she lugged her suitcase up the stairs and into her room. Then she stepped out to use the pay phone at the end of the walkway.

Her mother picked up after one ring. "Anabelle?" she asked anxiously.

"Yes, it's me," Annie said, equal parts exasperated and grateful. It was quite a burden, all the love her family heaped on her. She didn't always feel like she deserved it, and carrying the weight was sometimes a struggle. "I made it to Kansas City."

They chitchatted briefly as her dad yelled from another room and her mother repeated what Annie had said. She spent another minute and a half trying to extricate herself from the call, promising to rest tonight and drive safely tomorrow, reassuring them that the car hadn't made any funny sounds. Annie had been making good money when she bought the car new a few years back, and she had been out of the country as much as she'd been in it, so the car mostly had sat in her garage. This trip would be the most miles she'd put on it yet.

She hung up and listened as her coin clinked down to the bottom of the pay phone. She froze when she heard footsteps shuffle on the ground below. She moved quietly to the railing and looked down but couldn't see anything. Had someone been listening to her? Not much to hear, really, but it was hard to shake the prickly feeling along the back of her neck.

Then she saw the glow of a cigarette as it arced out and landed on the parking lot blacktop. She heard steps and the sound of a door opening and closing below.

Paranoid, that's what she was. There was no longer any reason to look around corners, to double back to make sure no one was following her, but she found herself doing it all the time. Even here in the States, where she was just another fair-haired and corn-fed American. Nothing special anymore.

That was the way that she wanted it, why she'd left.

She returned to her room and pulled on her hooded sweatshirt. Picked up the canvas shoulder bag that she used for a purse and slung the strap over her head. She had to find dinner, and if her car weren't full of crap and low on gas, she'd drive somewhere. Instead, she walked across the dark parking lot toward the nearest fast-food joint with her hood up and the sleeves of her sweatshirt pulled down to her fingertips.

She bought a sack of greasy fries, a cheeseburger, and a bright blue slushy drink that was so sweet it made her teeth hurt and her blood sing. Sugar could right any manner of wrongs. She walked back to her room with the smell of fries driving her slowly insane, then ate every scrap of food in the bag before falling asleep with the TV on.

She woke up after midnight and stumbled into the bathroom. After she washed her hands and face, she looked in the mirror and saw that the slushy had stained her entire mouth blue.

* * *

The next night, Annie spent in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and then it was a straight shot through the Southwest until she picked up Interstate 15 in California.

She honked her horn as she crossed the state line from Arizona, but alone in the car, the gesture made her life seem small. She had listened to the same five cassette tapes on the entire drive, and as she approached civilization, she was happy to switch back to the radio. Even staticky commercials were a refreshing change.

She'd had second thoughts from the moment she left Toledo. Was this the right thing to do? More school and going into debt? No one but her would be paying for this degree, and she wasn't even sure what she wanted to do besides help people in a less shadowy way. Wasn't that what academically inclined people did in times of doubt—fall back on more education to buy time?

She liked to have a plan, to have all the answers before she started something, and this was not that. Still, maybe venturing into the unknown would be good for her. She could go to classes, learn something, figure it out as she went. But it was nerve-racking too. She didn't even have a goal past getting the master's.

She'd overslept that last morning, which meant a delayed start, and she stopped at a gas station somewhere in West Covina to call the residential office to say she'd be arriving later than expected.

She got turned around once she entered the city and had to pull over to study a map. She finally found the campus by dumb luck, then asked someone walking along the sidewalk for directions to the building.

The plan was to live on campus in a tiny graduate student apartment, but when she got to the residential office, an undergrad working the late shift looked up from his book and passed her a voucher with a shrug. She looked at it. At the bottom was a line for when the voucher

expired. Someone had written in “8/31/92,” which was exactly a week away.

“Stuff fills up fast,” the student said. “The university puts up overflow students in a motel for a week while they make other arrangements.”

“Other arrangements,” she echoed, too exhausted to be mad. “What does that mean exactly?”

“Come back tomorrow,” he said. “My boss will be here from eight to five, and he can explain.”

“And where is this motel?” she asked, flapping the voucher at him.

“Oh, it’s like three blocks from here, I think,” he said with another shrug. “Like...north?”

“Write down the address. Written directions, please.”

He closed his book with a sigh, pushed back from the desk, and stood up. “Let me ask.”

It turned out that the motel was close, though she drove past it the first time. Someone honked at her, maybe because she was going too slow, maybe because she still had Virginia license plates. Maybe Californians liked to honk. She flipped on her turn signal when she saw the motel sign again, parked outside the lobby doors, and shut off the engine. She allowed herself a few moments to collect her thoughts and assess. There was no point in being mad at the situation. The kid at the desk didn’t seem to know much at all. She would get everything sorted out in the morning.

Anyway, what was one more night in a motel after two thousand miles?

* * *

Annie made the man explain it three times. What it came down to was this: they always overbooked graduate dorms because there were usually a few students who dropped out at the last minute. Financially, it made more sense to overbook than to have empty rooms. But this year, no one had dropped out, and since Annie had waited so long before accepting her slot at UCLA, she was at the bottom of the barrel.

“We give you a week to make other plans,” the man said.

“Other plans?” she screeched. “I had plans! You’re the one who made them fall through!”

“I understand our system can be complicated—”

“You think it’s my failure to comprehend your system?” She made air quotes. “You think that’s the problem here?”

“Ma’am—”

“Look, I have been in California for about twenty minutes, and I’m really not equipped to go house hunting on my own. So either you find me the school housing that was promised to me, or you produce a better option.”

He pushed his glasses up to rub the bridge of his nose. His plastic name tag said *Paul*.

“I can’t help with outside apartment rentals, but I can give you a list,” he said finally. “We usually only give it out to postdoctoral and foreign exchange students, but because of this unique circumstance, it might be a good solution for you.”

“What list?” she asked.

“It’s a list of faculty who are willing to take in students. Rent out rooms in their houses for a quarter or two. It’s meant to be short-term, but it should be enough to get you into student housing later.”

Annie held out her hand. “Give me the list.”

* * *

She shoved the list of names into her bag and made her way to the registrar building to sign up for classes. That involved several hours in line. By the time she’d finished, she needed lunch. Then she went to buy books. It wasn’t until she got back to the motel and moved the most valuable things out of her car that she even remembered the list.

She called her parents, knowing they’d be out, and left a cheerful but vague message, promising to call again when she was more settled. She’d lie to them if she had to, but she’d rather put off telling them anything for as long as possible. She certainly wasn’t going to tell them about this motel, about the overflow situation in student housing, or about how she’d spent all that cash they’d slipped her on textbooks in one fell swoop. And she wasn’t going to tell them about feeling totally, helplessly adrift.

She'd made this life, these choices, and she wasn't going to give up in the first week. It couldn't be any harder than moving out of her parents' house the first time or the weeks of endless training at the CIA, no harder than being in a foreign country with a fake name and a list of impossible goals.

While she ran a hot bath, she dug the list out of her bag, smoothing the wrinkles on the narrow desk. There were only about twelve names on it, and she quickly realized that there were only two female names. Something about moving into the house of a male stranger just seemed untenable.

One of the names included a phone number. The other gave only a faculty office number and office hours. That simplified the matter. She'd call the first number in the morning, and if that didn't pan out, she'd stake out the office of this Professor Helen Everton and see what she could find.

CHAPTER 2

THE PROFESSOR WHO HAD ANSWERED the phone number attached to Annie's Hail-Mary list apologized and said the room was already occupied. So that was that. As Annie made her way onto campus, she read the list of names again and tried to decide which of the men sounded the least threatening.

Michael R. Darby.

As long as he didn't go by Mike.

Neal Halfon.

She crossed that one out with her chewed-up pen. The man could be Santa Claus or Jesus Christ or Patrick Swayze, but she could never have a normal conversation with someone named Neal.

Someone brushed against her, and she looked up. She'd wandered into some sort of new-student orientation fair. Tables were set up displaying banners of different clubs and departments. It seemed to be aimed at undergraduates because there were a fair number of parents escorting their wide-eyed teenage children.

Someone at a table beckoned her to come over and check out something called Bliss and Wisdom International.

She looked down at what she was wearing: jeans, sandals, and a pink T-shirt. Oh God, she looked like an undergrad. She veered away to avoid the girl at the table and looked again at the campus map that she'd stapled to her list.

Everton's office was in the criminal justice building, which meant she taught in that department. Annie paused at the foot of a busy staircase and considered. Did she even want to bother? Would one of her prospective professors even let her rent a room? But Annie didn't remember signing up for a class taught by anyone named Everton, and

maybe she was nothing more than an adjunct professor. Tenure-track professors usually didn't need to rent out rooms in their houses.

Beggars couldn't be choosers, and time was ticking down. She had to at least scope this woman out or she might end up living with—she glanced at the list—Aaron L. Panofsky. She'd dated a boy named Aaron once. She crossed that name out too.

Everton might not even be in her office, Annie reminded herself. Classes didn't officially start until next Monday. She'd already shaken a second voucher out of Paul, but she wasn't going to get another one, and she was ready to get out of the motel. Plus, she couldn't avoid calling her parents forever.

She stopped to consult her map and then, leaning against a low wall under the shade of a tree, peered down at the row of buildings. There weren't many people going in and out of Everton's building, though plenty of people were walking by. Since all her classes were going to be in this building, she decided to go in and do a little recon. She could walk around until she found the professor's office.

The dry heat seeped into her like an oven, despite the shade of the tree. She was used to the swampy summers of the Midwest and DC, but the intensity of the California heat was something else entirely. The building beckoned her with the promise of centralized air conditioning.

The first couple of floors were classrooms, and she quickly found the ones where she'd be attending classes. When she climbed the stairs to the third floor, the atmosphere changed. The closed doors were identified with placards. She looked around until she found the room she was looking for at the end of the hall.

H. Everton-323

Compared to the size of the classrooms on the floors below, Everton's office didn't look bigger than a glorified closet, barely big enough to hold a desk, two chairs and maybe a filing cabinet, if she was lucky. The office door had no window, so she couldn't see whether it was light or dark inside, but it sure didn't sound like anyone was in there. She twisted the doorknob gently. It was locked.

It would be hard to stake this spot out inconspicuously, so she went back the way she'd come in. She had passed a room earlier that

seemed to be the department office, and when she passed by again, a woman was sitting at the front desk.

Annie plastered a smile on her face. "Hi."

The woman glanced up and smiled in return. She wore a shapeless sweater complemented by a frumpy haircut. "Do you need some help, hon?" she asked.

"I sure do," Annie said in the gushy, saccharine voice she used for church and her mother's crochet circle. "I'm starting classes here on Monday, and I was just wondering if the faculty start their office hours this week or next." She leaned in conspiratorially. "I'm not from around here. I'm just trying to get my bearings."

"Well," said the woman, "not until next week officially, but most of them will pop in at some point this week."

"That's good to hear. I'm Annie, by the way."

"I'm Deb Larson," the woman replied. "I'm sure we'll get to know each other very well over the next few years."

"A pleasure to meet you. This campus is just so beautiful, and the whole city looks like the movies!"

"Where did you move from?" Deb asked.

"Toledo, Ohio, ma'am," she said. "It's not exactly bumpkin country, but it's sure different from here."

"I imagine so!"

"Say, do you all do rosters? The faculty, I mean. I'd like to get a sense of who's who before classes start."

"No," Deb shook her head. "But the library has a set of yearbooks. You'll find faculty photos in any one of them. They republish the same ones every year."

"Good to know." Annie grinned. "Thank you so much for your time today."

"Here to help," she said. "Good luck, honey."

As soon as Annie turned around, the smile disappeared from her face. She pounded down the stairs and headed for the door, nearly colliding with a woman carrying a red-faced baby in a car seat. Annie stood aside to let her pass, then pushed out into the heat and sunshine, intent on the library.

The building was swamped with people being issued new student IDs. Since Annie needed one too, she abandoned her plan to find the yearbooks and instead stood in line to get her photo taken, then stood in another line while someone pasted it onto an ID card and ran it through a laminator. By the time she had her card, she was done for the day.

In her motel room, the piles she'd left everywhere had been straightened up by the maid. She called her parents.

"Anabelle Weaver!" her mother chastised. "You have been purposely calling when we've been gone!"

"No, Mom, that's not true," she lied. "You know it's earlier here. I just forget about the time difference!"

Annie didn't want to admit to her mother that her home life was shaky at the moment, so she told her there was a gas leak in the apartment building where she was supposed to live and that they had her and the other students in a motel until it got fixed. The fib slid out far more easily than any truth.

"What happens if it isn't fixed by Monday?" her mother asked, concerned.

"I don't know. I guess they'll keep us on or make other arrangements," Annie said. "I'll let you know when I'm settled." It was a lie so good, she wished it were true.

After hanging up, Annie warmed up a frozen dinner and watched TV until the sun went down. She didn't think she'd sleep, but even scratchy sheets and the sound of traffic outside didn't keep her awake. She woke once in the night to use the bathroom, banging her elbow into the doorframe, but then she stumbled back to bed and slept until her alarm went off.

The library the next morning was much quieter, and the girl behind the desk wrote down a call number on a slip of paper and directed Annie to an upper floor.

"They're toward the bottom, the newest ones," she said. "I don't think they get used a lot, but there should be one from last year up there." She gestured to the large computer monitor in front of her. "We're still converting everything from cards to a database, so it's been kind of crazy."

The yearbooks were tucked away on the lower part of a tall, dusty shelf. Some of them went back well into the 1950s, taking up one shelf on the bottom. The newer yearbooks were one shelf higher. They were slimmer, cleaner, brighter. Annie crouched down, found the one stamped with *1991* on the spine, and pulled it out.

She ran her finger down the table of contents, found the faculty section, and flipped to the back, leafing through until she hit the names beginning with E. She scanned the pictures: Edison, Engle, Epstein, Ettinger.

But no Everton. Not even an asterisk for the not pictured. Was she new?

She slammed the yearbook shut and slid it back onto the shelf.

She was just going to have to figure this woman out the old-fashioned way. Hunker down outside the building and hope she turned up. Look her up in the phone book, see if her address was listed. Annie was good at finding people; she'd been doing it professionally for years now. She'd find H. Everton.

She went back to Everton's building and sat in the shade on the same low retaining wall where she had sat the day before. She'd checked out a book from the library, and she pulled it out of her bag to use as a prop, opening it to a random page in the center. From this post, she could watch for a while, see what kind of people went in and out.

She should be settling in somewhere, looking for a job, prereading her textbooks, or thinking about her upcoming classes. Buying a binder, maybe, or a pack of pens. Instead, she was doing exactly what she was trying to get away from. God, maybe she'd been wrong to leave. Maybe this really was the only thing she was good at, and she was never going to find anything that suited her better. Maybe she should have learned to live with the things that haunted her: an epic failure, a leering boss who promised her there was nothing in the outside world waiting for her.

A man and a woman went into the building. He held the door open for her. Annie glanced down as if studying her book.

When she looked up again, the man had come out alone. He was of medium height and thin. His black hair was cropped close to his

scalp. He wore beige shorts and a powder blue T-shirt. She looked down again, turned the page.

She looked up when someone wearing beige work coveralls steered a squeaky cart along the walkway between her and the building. She watched him until he rounded a bend. The cart squeaked even after he left her field of vision.

Which is why she didn't notice the stroller or the attractive woman steering it until she reached the wall and the shade where Annie was perched. She turned her head to peer into the stroller at the sleeping baby, soon realizing it was the same baby she'd seen yesterday, the one in the car seat. Of course, it was the same woman who'd been carrying it.

The woman pulled the stroller parallel with the wall, then set down her purse and began rummaging through a beat-up brown diaper bag that she was holding against her hip. Her bobbed, dark brown hair reflected auburn in the sunlight and fell forward, obscuring her face except for a pair of wire-framed glasses with large lenses that peeked out between her locks. She wore scruffy clothes.

Annie returned her attention to her book, still watching the woman from the corner of her eye, not looking up until the woman said, "Shit!" The bag had fallen to the ground, its contents spilling everywhere.

The woman sat down on the wall and looked at the mess. Only the stroller separated them; the baby slept tucked under a light blue blanket.

"Here, let me help." Annie set her open book down on the wall, spine up.

"It's okay. It's fine. I'm fine," the woman said, shaking her head. She rubbed her hands on her jeans and half closed her eyes.

"How old is he?" Annie asked, nodding toward the baby as she crouched and started picking things up—a gold tube of lipstick, a tampon, a crumpled receipt.

And an identification badge with the woman's picture attached to a lanyard. The woman hopped off the wall and snatched it away but not before Annie read her name and title.

Helen Everton, Adjunct Professor

Annie handed Helen Everton the items she'd picked up, forcing the woman to stop jamming things back into her bag. When she accepted them and everything was back inside, she gave it a good shake.

"Four months," she finally said, reaching down to pick up her purse. "Almost five now."

"He's beautiful." And it was true. The baby, light-skinned with a tuft of dark hair, was sleeping peacefully.

"Thanks," she said. "He's colicky as hell."

Annie started to laugh and then caught herself. "He your first?"

"Third." She shook her head, her hair swaying with the movement. "No. I mean, I have two of my own, but he's a foster baby. I've only had him for six weeks, and we're still getting used to one another."

"Wow," Annie said. "How old are your other two?"

Everton pushed up her glasses and rubbed at her face. She had no makeup on. She looked tired.

"Eight and ten."

"So you have your hands full," Annie glanced at the entrance to the building.

Everton smiled thinly, then hefted the purse onto her shoulder and picked up the diaper bag.

Sensing that Everton was about to extract herself from Annie's invasive questions, she searched for something to latch onto. Just one small fact about Helen Everton that she could exploit for her own gain.

"I'm Annie, by the way," she said. "Just so I'm not a complete stranger. At least you know my name." She resisted the urge to stick out her hand, thinking Everton wouldn't take it.

"Annie," Everton repeated. "Thanks for your help."

She started pushing the stroller toward the building. As much as Annie wanted to keep talking to her, she didn't want to scare the woman off.

If they went into the building, they'd have to come out again.

They came out much sooner than Annie expected. She'd waited five minutes and then ran into the building to use the first-floor restroom, certain she'd have to sit for a couple hours, waiting for Everton and the baby to emerge once more. But forty-five minutes later, Everton

came out, holding the wailing baby and a bottle. The baby's cheeks were bright red in the sunlight.

Annie had moved away from the retaining wall and was sitting on a patch of grass far enough away that the woman wouldn't see her immediately when she came outside again. Sometimes an extra few seconds of observation made the difference between a successful contact and a failed one.

Everton was trying to soothe the child, but the cries were getting louder. Annie closed the book on her lap and squinted. After watching for a few moments, she put the book away, slung her bag onto her shoulder, and approached Everton.

"Hi again!"

Everton looked at her, her expression confused at first and then annoyed.

"Is he okay?" Annie asked.

"As I mentioned." Everton bounced the baby, "colicky."

"I bet he's just overtired," Annie said. "I have, like, a bunch of younger cousins and a baby niece."

Everton nodded distractedly.

"He doesn't want to eat?"

"Oh, I don't know." Everton's voice was tinged with exhaustion. "He never wants anything."

All at once, Annie saw everything she needed to know about Helen Everton. She wore her hair in a sensible shoulder-length bob. Her light-wash jeans showed signs of wear. Her button-down shirt had a small stain at the front hem, like it had accidentally been dragged through someone's dinner plate. Her loafers were scuffed, and her purse strap was fraying.

She was an adjunct professor, so she probably wasn't making a lot of money. And while her clothes were well-made, they were old and worn, suggesting she'd had money at one point but was living leaner these days. She was a mother, but the third baby was much younger and a foster baby. Had she had a change of heart? Was she helping out a family member or friend who had lost custody? Or was she in it for the money that the state paid foster parents?

Annie decided to see if she could get Everton to trust her.

“You look like you could use a break. Want me to hold him for a minute?”

Everton, who'd been spinning in place trying to calm the baby down, looked over at her with suspicion.

“I'm not going to steal him. I'm a really slow runner, I promise. But I am good with babies. Even colicky ones.”

Everton studied her a moment longer, then with one more ear-piercing wail in her ear, she decided to trust this complete stranger and shoved the boy into her arms.

Annie couldn't quite believe the woman had agreed, except for the fact that getting people to trust her was something Annie had always been good at. Still, it never ceased to amaze her. It was a game now, in a way, to see how much she could get someone to hand over to her and how quickly. Today it was a harried woman and a foster baby.

The shift was enough to startle the boy into a moment of silence while he reassessed his environment. Annie snatched the bottle before he could begin crying again and put the nipple to his lips, guiding it in and praying that the lie she had spun about being good with children was going to pay off.

She'd had a younger brother, but she'd been only two when Danny was born, so she didn't really remember having a baby in the house. Still, how hard could it be? Feed them, let them sleep. Change a diaper every once in a while.

As luck would have it, the baby started sucking at the bottle greedily, quiet in Annie's arms.

* * *

Annie's first out-of-country assignment had been five years ago in St. Petersburg, though it was known as Leningrad back then. She wasn't sure she could ever think of it by any other name. The CIA had been eager to take advantage of *perestroika*, Russian Premier Mikhail Gorbachev's policy reform. Her bosses thought that the restructuring of the political and economic systems would open new leads for informants.

Annie joined the CIA at the height of this disaster. She didn't know that, of course. Most of the turmoil was internal, and they recruited

hard that year—visiting universities across the country, promising good pay and a life of excitement.

Annie hadn't seen the recruitment flyers or heard anything about it, though. She'd been studying economics, considering a possible career in finance, or perhaps becoming a high school teacher. Her mother had taught in an elementary school for a few years before she married Annie's father. It never occurred to her that she could work for the government or that they might want her.

She didn't go to the recruitment session, but a recruiter sat in on one of her Russian classes. Annie was almost fluent in German, having taken it in high school, and she was tearing through Russian, listening to language cassettes in her spare time and reading ahead in the textbook. She liked languages; it was like doing puzzles backwards. They were exotic and beautiful, and she liked taking them apart piece by piece.

They had done an exercise that day, performing little conversational skits at the front of the class. Annie was grouped with another woman and a young man. The man was the weak link, fumbling through his lines, sweaty and embarrassed.

Acting was just another language to Annie, and she could spout off simple phrases without effort.

"*Dobriy vyecher,*" she said. "*Meenya zavoot Annie.*" The male student was struggling, and she fed him his lines in a stage whisper, causing the rest of the class to laugh through their three-minute performance while the professor scowled and scolded them.

When she went back to her seat, she noticed the man in the dark suit watching them. She noticed him again when she went outside.

"Annie," he said as she passed him. "*Tebe nravitsya puteshestvovat?*"

"Sorry?" She understood the question, but she didn't understand why he was asking it.

He continued in Russian, asking her if she was proud of her country. His pronunciation and accent were perfect, but she could tell he wasn't a native speaker.

"My father's a lieutenant colonel in the army," she answered. "You won't find a more patriotic person than me."

It was a good sales pitch; the recruiters had it down to an art form. She didn't need much convincing. The background checks were inconvenient, but the worst things on her record were a few parking tickets and some detentions in high school for talking too much during class. She said yes when they offered her a job on the day she graduated. Drove out to Virginia with her father; he tried to talk her out of it the whole way. He had spent his career employed by the United States government and knew well the ups and downs, but his jaded warnings could not overcome the high of being wanted by her country.

It wasn't until she was mostly through her training that she realized why the CIA was so desperate for agents; everyone they had in the Soviet Union had disappeared and they didn't yet know why. Would they assign a green twenty-one-year-old to the Soviet–East European division? Surely not!

They did hold her back, for over a year, because she excelled at basic interrogation, and they wanted to beef up those skills. She also took Czech along with more Russian-language classes. In a lot of ways, it was like she'd never left school, only now they were paying her instead of her father writing checks.

Annie landed in Leningrad completely fluent in Russian and German, close to fluent in Czech, and with orders to pose as a university student. She was to look for political students ready to turn on their country and for the wealthy children of known KGB agents. They also told her—informally—that if she could figure out the leak, that'd be great.

Twenty-three, first time out of the country, in over her head.

In the beginning, she was only so-so at actually recruiting potential informants, but she was great at talking to people and found that once she got them warmed up, it was better to hand them off to a more experienced agent for the hard sell. No, what she mostly did in Leningrad was interrogate the CIA's own people. Other agents, support staff, even her superiors. She easily got them talking about nothing, about anything, about everything. Half the story was out before they realized what was happening. Everyone told her over and over that it was a gift, a rare one, and she thrived on the praise. She even had a crack once at a suspicious senior agent named Aldrich Ames,

though he was too drunk to really be useful. She had soon discarded him in her mind as too incompetent; on top of being intoxicated, he had been sloppy and arrogant.

She spent nine months in Leningrad before being recalled to the States, not because she hadn't accomplished her goals there but because there was no one left to interrogate, and no one wanted to talk to her anymore.

That became her *modus operandi*—Berlin for six months, then home for six, working at Langley. Eight months in Ankara and then home just in time for her parent's thirtieth wedding anniversary. Four months in Kyiv before someone broke her cover and she had to tuck tail and leave. She took more language classes here and there, sometimes by mail, and after Ukraine, she asked for a stateside assignment to finish up the coursework and ended up with a master's degree in Slavic languages. After that, she wanted to stay put, tired of the travel, but they sent her to Minsk, where she befriended the wife of a mid-level politician. She tried for nearly three months to get her husband to flip.

One day, she showed up to their meeting place, a small shed at the edge of their property, and discovered the woman and her two-year-old daughter shot in the head. The husband was never found. Two agents assigned to figure out what happened were killed too, and the whole unit was pulled and sent home. All because of Annie.

Annie was unused to failure of any sort, and she arrived back in the United States rattled, immediately resigning. Director Clifton was livid, yelling at her until he was red in the face, telling her she would regret leaving, that no one left his division until he said they could. At the time, she was sure it was a bluff.

She showed up at her parents' door in Ohio, underweight and alone, everything she planned to keep packed into her car.

They let her stay, of course, but she couldn't, and wouldn't, explain herself, and they hadn't been happy about it.

She never did find the mole.

* * *

"Please tell me how you did that," Helen Everton said.

On the one hand, Annie knew more about the mysterious professor now than she could have ever gathered from watching the building, but on the other hand, she desperately needed a place to live. There was no easy way to ask for something as personal as a room in someone's house. Maybe this baby was the icebreaker she needed.

"Oh, sometimes babies just want a change of scenery." Annie smiled down at the baby and then back up at Everton. "I mean, you have two older children, so you know what I mean."

"You must have a special touch," she said. "Usually, once he starts fussing, he cries forever. He's nothing like my first two." She looked at her watch.

"Everything okay?"

"I have a lot to do today."

"I'm happy to walk back up with you if you need to get back to work."

"Up?"

"To your office." Annie nodded toward the building. "You said you worked here."

Everton looked at Annie uncertainly. "Did I?"

"Well, you certainly don't look like a student here." Annie tried to steer the conversation away from suspicion.

"Hmm."

Clearly, Everton was not going to be swayed by Annie's charm alone, so she would have to go all in. If she failed, she failed, and she'd figure out a new plan.

"Actually, I know you work here." She held the baby a little tighter. "Helen Everton, I've been looking for you."

* * *

Everton was quiet as they entered the building and rode the elevator to the top floor, her mouth a hard line. She kept a tight hold on the stroller and a sharp eye on the woman carrying her baby. Annie let her stew; it was better to explain herself once they got to the privacy of her little office.

Deb was at her desk and smiled when she saw Annie, but her smile froze when she saw Everton. There was some bad blood there, or at

least a clash of personalities. Or maybe Deb just didn't like babies. Annie shrugged at the older woman as if to say, *What can you do?* Deb nodded at her gravely. If Everton saw the exchange, she didn't acknowledge it. But then Everton didn't look at Deb at all. She walked past with her nose in the air.

Her office was as small as Annie had imagined. The desk was small too, leaving room for a love seat and just enough space for Everton to walk around to her desk. She parked the stroller in the hallway and left the door open; there was no way the stroller was going to fit.

"Hey, listen—"

Everton plucked the baby out of Annie's arms without a word and laid him down on the love seat. After the bottle, he was drowsy and quiet.

Everton turned to face Annie with a glare. "Who are you?"

"I'm Annie Weaver, ma'am," she said. "You're Professor Helen Everton. I didn't catch his name, though."

"Zachary," Everton said. "Well...Zach, I guess. We call him Zach."

"It's kind of a long story," Annie said. "I was supposed to live in graduate student housing, and when I got here after driving across the country, they didn't have a room for me, so I've been living in a motel. The people from Student Housing gave me a list of professors who rent rooms, but the list was mostly men. There was one other woman and you. The other lady already rented her room out, so I was hoping yours is still available."

"My name is on that list?" Everton asked, holding one hand over Zach as if Annie might try to touch him again.

"Yes, ma'am."

"I asked last year for them to take my number off."

Annie's heart sank. *Shit*. What was she going to do?

"Yours was the only one without a phone number, so I had to hunt you down," Annie said dejectedly. "That's all."

Everton snorted. "I asked them to remove my number, and they literally took the phone number off and left the rest of my information on there." She shook her head. "Idiots."

“So no room, then,” Annie said, annoyed that she’d wasted her whole morning on this endeavor. “Well, thanks for your time anyway. It was nice to meet you and Zach.”

“I’m sorry,” Everton said, and she sounded sincere. “When I put my name on that list, I had a husband and one less kid. We were always going to convert the garage to a spare room, but we didn’t get past getting it insulated. The shower doesn’t work, and there’s no kitchen or hot water.”

“I understand,” Annie said. “I get it. I do. I don’t want to come off as desperate, but if you told me that you had a pole with a blanket draped over it to rent, I would take it.”

“There’s not much to it,” Everton said uncertainly.

“This is my department, so I’m not going to be a stranger,” Annie said. “I can pay you in cash every month. I assure you I could pass every background check you can muster.”

Everton looked down at Zach, who was completely asleep.

“It would be temporary until student housing became available, which they’ve assured me is no later than next quarter,” Annie said. “And I don’t have more than what I could fit in my car, so I don’t even have a lot of stuff. Just clothes, mostly, and books.”

“Okay, okay. Stop,” Everton said. “You are teetering dangerously on the edge of desperate.”

Annie laughed nervously, which seemed to break the tension. A tendril of hope sprouted inside of her.

“It’s not up to me. I have two other kids, and we’re a family, so taking in a tenant is a family decision.”

“Okay.”

“Come to dinner tomorrow night. You can meet Kevin and Ashley. We’ll see how it goes. God knows I could use the money.” Everton pulled a business card out of a desk drawer, flipped it over and wrote something on the back, then handed it to Annie. “That’s the address.”

Annie took the card and stuffed it in her pocket. “Thank you.”

“Seven o’clock,” Everton said. “Don’t be late.”

CHAPTER 3

ANNIE WAS GOING TO BE late.

She had left early—better to sit in her car and wait for time to pass than be late when Helen Everton had specifically told her not to be. But then she got on the freeway going in the wrong direction, and when she finally managed to turn around, she'd gone almost seven miles out of her way.

She'd been distracted when she left. Two cars were always parked in her motel parking lot—a blue Pontiac and a brown Buick—but never at the same time. They always parked in the same space, and she never saw either one arrive or leave. Earlier, she'd walked by the Pontiac and pretended to drop her purse so she could mark the back tire with chalk. When she checked on it later, it hadn't moved.

By the time she'd been ready to leave, the Pontiac was gone and the Buick was in its place.

She knew she was being paranoid, and yet... The cars were both unremarkable, but it was as if they were *trying* to be unremarkable. They were old but not old enough to be interesting. Dirty, but not filthy enough to be noticeable. Annie had learned a lot about blending in during her time undercover, and the way she kept seeing these cars but never the people they belonged to made her suspicious. Maybe they belonged to motel employees. Maybe students were illegally parking in the lot. It could be anything.

She'd thrown her stuff in the car and peeled out of the parking lot, flustered and berating herself for her unshakable paranoia.

She finally found the correct freeway exit, but she was confused by the neighborhood layout, and the sign for Everton's street was ob-

sured by a tree. She made another U-turn and crept slowly along the street while she squinted at the faded numbers stenciled on the curb.

The house was yellow.

Something about that pinged at Annie's heart. It wasn't like the house was familiar to her. It didn't look like her parents' house or any of the dumpy apartments she'd lived in or the halfway decent one in Virginia. But it *was* homey, with a big tree in the front yard and a small porch. Nothing like the wraparound porches from her youth, but large enough to hold a potted plant and a welcome mat.

She parked on the street and turned the engine off.

She slipped her purse onto her shoulder and grabbed the box of chocolates she'd bought. Her first thought had been wine, but that seemed kind of an irresponsible choice with a house full of kids.

And that was the weirdest part. She was so desperate for a permanent address that the idea of moving into a place with three kids seemed like a good idea.

She knocked and waited, waited a few more seconds, then rang the doorbell right as the door opened. Helen Everton looked up at the sound of the bell and then looked back at Annie, scowling a little.

"I...I wasn't sure you heard me knocking," Annie said, embarrassed.

"I did. And the bell."

"Yes," Annie said. "Well, I'm here!" She thrust the box of candy out to Everton, who stared at it uncertainly for a moment, then took it. "Thank you for inviting me, Professor Everton."

"You can call me Helen. Come on in," she said. "We just got home half an hour ago, so excuse the mess, but you should know the truth about how we live, I guess." Helen's glossy, dark hair was up in a ponytail, but several strands had escaped, too short to stay trapped in the scrunchie. She wore a faded plaid shirt over a pair of faded jeans, but the loose shirt couldn't hide her trim figure.

Helen kicked aside a pink canvas bag that had been dropped haphazardly by the entryway. It landed in the hall under a row of hooks piled with an assortment of jackets. She gestured as she led the way. "Living room, den. There's a half bath down here. The kitchen is in the back. All the bedrooms are upstairs."

She stopped at the foot of the stairs. "Ashley! Come down, please!"

A small boy sat at a wooden table in the large kitchen. He was painstakingly printing something with a yellow pencil. Zach was lying in a combination bouncer-rocker toddler seat on the table next to him.

“Kevin, this is Annie,” Helen said. “Annie, this is my son, Kevin.”

Now, this child looks like his mother, Annie thought. No mistaking this one for a foster child. He had her coloring and the shape of her eyes, though his were dark brown and hers were blue. He looked up at her curiously, then returned to his task, seemingly unimpressed.

“And you know Zach.” Helen went to the stove and stirred whatever was in the large pot.

“I do,” Annie said. “Hi, Kevin. Hi, Zach.”

“Hi,” Kevin mumbled. He continued working. Annie glanced down at the large lettering scrawled across the page. His name was printed at the top.

“Homework?” she asked.

He covered the page with his arm and said nothing.

Footsteps on the stairs announced the appearance of Helen’s daughter, Ashley. She was less of a copy of Helen but still looked like part of the family set. Her chestnut-brown hair was in two tight braids. She wore a black leotard, pink tights, and a black sweater that wrapped around her and tied at her side.

“I told you to change!” Helen said.

“I had to go to the bathroom,” Ashley shrugged.

“You had to take it all off to do that. Why didn’t you just change?” Helen asked. Ashley gave her mother the same dead-eyed stare as her brother had. “Go change, Ash. Now.”

The girl spun on her heel and went back upstairs.

Helen put her hands on her hips. “That was Ashley.”

“Ah,” Annie said.

“She’s ten going on sixteen.”

Annie chuckled nervously. Helen turned back to the stove. Kevin continued scratching out his letters with his pencil.

She was still wearing her light jean jacket, still clutching her bag at her side. Then, realizing that Helen had too much to deal with to make Annie feel at home, she took the matter into her own hands and

hung her bag on the back of one of the kitchen chairs. She kept her jacket on, despite the warmth of the kitchen. Her flowered dress was sleeveless and she didn't want to show her bare arms right away. The invitation to dinner was an interview, after all.

Unsure what else to do, Annie touched the baby, resting her hand on his warm stomach. He looked at her when she made contact, gurgled, and smiled. His legs were bare, his thighs chubby rolls. He wore a onesie today, blue stripes with a little train appliqué. The plastic edges of his diaper peeked out at the bottom.

"I hope spaghetti is okay," Helen said. "Ashley has dance on Saturdays until six, so we eat a little later than usual."

"Smells great," Annie said. "Thanks for having me."

"You said that," Helen pointed out with a smirk.

"Sorry," Annie said. "I'm, uh, out of my element."

"Kevin, honey, go set the table."

"It's Ashley's turn."

"She'll do it twice later."

"But I'm watching the baby," Kevin countered.

"I can keep an eye on him," Annie said, slipping her finger into the curl of his little fingers. He hung on tight.

Kevin glowered at her but slid off his chair.

She didn't want to stare at the baby, so she looked out into the backyard instead. Behind the house was a small building that backed up to the fence running along the alley. A gate next to the building provided access to the alley from the yard. The building from the outside looked bigger than her motel room. It might have been a garage at one time, but if so, the fence now blocked where the garage door had been.

"I'll show you after dinner," Helen said.

Annie turned guiltily as if she'd been caught doing something besides looking out the window.

"That'd be fine," Annie said. "Can I help?"

"You can make the garlic bread," Helen said, gesturing with a wet wooden spoon at a loaf of French bread on the counter next to her. Annie hesitated. "There's margarine in the fridge. I find it spreads easier."

Bread and butter; that wasn't too hard. She'd seen her mom make dinner a million times. Helen pulled a serrated knife out of a wooden block and handed it to her.

"Thank you," Annie said.

"Where did you say you were from?"

"Lots of places now," she replied. "But I went to high school in Toledo, and that's where most of my family still lives."

"A good Midwestern girl." Helen's voice sounded slightly mocking, but maybe Annie was feeling defensive, backed into a corner, and desperate to make a bad situation bearable.

"I guess so." Annie pulled open the refrigerator door—covered in drawings and magnets and pictures of the kids—and scanned inside for the margarine. She found a family-sized brown tub, pulled it out, then glanced back at the baby.

Kevin returned and slipped back into his chair.

"Napkins and glasses too?" Helen asked.

Kevin got back up with a heavy sigh.

Annie concentrated on slicing the loaf in half evenly, but when she finished, it looked like it had been sliced by a maniac with a jigsaw. She slathered each half with margarine, hoping no one would notice her botched work.

"Garlic?" she asked.

"There's some garlic powder in the cabinet just there." Helen nodded in the general direction of the cabinets. "I use paprika and parsley usually, but however you like it is fine."

"I'm more of a buy-a-bag-of-rolls kind of cook," Annie admitted.

"There's no such thing as too much garlic," Helen said. "Just a light dusting of the other two."

"I can do that," Annie said, not at all certain that she could. She set the open loaf halves on a cookie sheet and sprinkled everything on. When she was done, Helen looked over her shoulder and nodded.

"Good." She popped the cookie sheet in the oven. "We're almost there."

* * *

After everyone had eaten and the adults cleaned up the kitchen, Helen picked up the baby and sat with him on her lap. He reached for her wineglass that was just out of his grasp. Annie had a glass of wine too but was reconsidering the box of chocolates she'd brought that sat forgotten on the counter. If she'd brought wine, she could've kept the entire box for herself.

She picked up her glass and sipped. It was white wine, and Annie preferred red if she drank wine at all, but she was grateful for anything that might help calm her nerves.

The older kids had gone upstairs. They seemed indifferent toward her at best. She'd asked them a few polite questions, gauging their interest in interacting with her. Kevin had been the most responsive. Ashley had given short, clipped answers and glared right back at her mother's stern expression. It wasn't that it went badly; they just didn't take to her right away. Most people didn't.

"You want to see the unit before it gets too dark?" Helen asked finally. Annie hadn't wanted to bring it up, hadn't wanted to pressure her, even though it was the entire reason she'd come this evening. The late summer sun was still setting, and everything was awash in orange-and-gold light.

"Sure."

The backyard was nice, though in need of some attention. Judging by the raised wooden box still full of soil, there had once been a vegetable garden. But now there were only weeds. The whole yard, the whole house even, seemed like it belonged to a woman who once had more time.

Helen, with the baby on one hip, led Annie down the narrow, buckled sidewalk to the side door of the former garage. As Helen reached for the doorknob, she swore.

"I have to go get the key," she said. "Can you take him?"

"Sure." Annie reached out and took Zach. At the exchange, he looked like he might start fussing, but then he melted against her. She propped her arm under his bottom and let him rest his head against her shoulder.

"I'll just be a minute. I'm going to check to make sure my children haven't drowned one another," Helen said as she turned back to the house.

Annie was sure she was kidding. Well, pretty sure.

"Okay, let's peek into this window," Annie said to Zach, though he'd just been fed and was drowsy in her arms. He smelled sweet and clean, and she pushed her nose against his head and breathed him in.

She stepped closer to the window and peered inside, but it was dark and hard to see anything. Mostly, it seemed empty.

"Well," Annie said, "she let *you* stow away on the good ship Everton, so why not me, right?"

Helen came back a few minutes later, keys in hand. "He's asleep!"

"Is he?" Annie asked. She couldn't see his face, mashed up against her shoulder like it was. "We were just chatting."

"You're like a Zach magician." Helen unlocked the door, pushed it open, and flipped on a switch. A single bulb came on, dimly lighting the vacant room. A large area rug covered most of the concrete floor, and she could see a toilet and a narrow shower through the open bathroom door. Her mom and dad's camper had one about the same size.

"Nice," Annie said.

Helen laughed, a low bark. "Well, if you want it, it's yours."

"Really?"

Helen shrugged. "Sure. You don't seem crazy, the kids didn't cry, and the baby likes you. And I could use the money." She cocked her head. "You aren't crazy, right?"

"I mean, I went back to school for a second master's, so I'm not completely sane, but I'm not going to run through the neighborhood naked or anything, no."

"Good," Helen said. "I was thinking three hundred dollars a month."

"Seems fair."

Helen eased the key off her key ring and handed it to Annie.

"I'll pay for my part of the phone bill, of course," Annie promised.

"All right."

Annie took the key with a strong wave of relief. The baby gurgled into her neck.

* * *

On the last day before the quarter started, she spent the morning packing up her motel room. She had a voucher for another week, but the place was noisy and small. She just wanted to be settled, even if it was in someone's garage. Obviously, it was not ideal to live on a concrete floor with no kitchen, but she could eat on campus. And how cold did Los Angeles get anyway? Compared to Toledo—hell, compared to Eastern Europe—it might feel like a tropical vacation.

The whole school thing didn't even feel real. The housing situation had eaten up the time she'd buffered in for adjustment, and now here she was, waist-deep and unprepared like always. She still only half believed she'd gone through with this harebrained scheme of applying, then driving across country alone just so she could figure out a way to help people instead of hurting everyone around her.

She'd signed up for three classes this first quarter, all required core classes, including Criminal Law and Legal Research. She hoped that would leave her enough time to get a job. Something part-time. She had some money saved and had gotten a loan, but it'd be nice to have a little extra money coming in. Something for groceries and gas. She wasn't sure what kind of job, though. She was not cut out for retail, was overqualified to wait tables. Maybe something on campus?

Most of the clothes strewn around the room were dirty, so she shoved everything back into her suitcases. She'd forgotten to ask Helen about laundry. Hopefully, there was a washer and dryer in the house. Hopefully, Helen wouldn't mind if she used it.

It took longer to get everything back into her car because her meticulous dad had packed it the first time. Now there were things piled on the passenger's seat, but she just had to go ten miles, so it should all hold for now.

When she pulled up to the house, it looked locked up and empty. The other night, a red Jeep Cherokee that Annie assumed belonged to Helen had been parked in the driveway. Annie pulled around back, easing her car up the alley and parking where the garage door used to be.

Luckily, the gate to the backyard wasn't locked. She used the key that Helen had given her to open the door. It was cool inside and kind of dark, but when she turned on the light, she saw that the area rug had recently been vacuumed. And the bathroom smelled like bleach. Helen had cleaned. That was sweet.

It took an hour for Annie to carry everything in from her car and line it up against one wall. She spent another ten minutes sitting cross-legged on the floor and making a list of what she needed. There was no closet, so she needed someplace to hang or fold her clothes. Also a bed. A table. A hot plate. Everything, basically.

She was just pulling out of Helen's street to head back downtown when she passed the red Jeep going in the opposite direction. Helen didn't glance her way, but then she probably wasn't familiar with Annie's car.

Helen's house was right on the edge of Inglewood, a little closer to the airport than to campus. Annie had looked up a lot of the addresses on the list the residential advisor gave her, and most were within a few miles of campus, some within walking distance even, but Helen was far off the map. It would never work for international students who couldn't drive in a foreign country, so she must have intended it for postdocs or wayward souls like Annie. It was strange; Annie was usually good at reading people, but she couldn't quite get a read on Helen. Who takes in a foster baby as a single mom with a young family and then rents out a room to a stranger?

And would Social Services really entrust Zach to a woman who was suddenly on her own?

Still, Annie had to be careful about asking too many questions in case Helen had questions of her own. Annie had what she needed—a permanent address—so she'd simply steer clear of Helen and her children as much as possible. She wouldn't give them any reason to regret letting her camp out in their yard for a single quarter. At worst, she could live in the former garage until January or until it got cold, if it ever did.

It certainly wasn't cold in the army-navy surplus store, where she bought a cot and a sleeping bag, or at Sears, where she bought plastic bins for her clothes and a hot plate. The place with the best air-con-

ditioning was WalMart, where she bought cans of soup, spiral-bound notebooks, shampoo, and a new backpack.

Nothing made her feel every single year of her age like buying a backpack for a new year of school. She could throw a rock and practically hit thirty. Was she really doing this? Too late for second-guessing now, so she threw the forest-green backpack into the cart and kept moving.

She filled up with gas before she headed home, unloaded her car from the alley, and then drove around to the front of the house and parked on the street.

It felt weird to walk through the house, so she let herself in at the side gate by the trash bins and edged along the side of the building, wishing herself invisible as she crossed the yard and disappeared into the garage. She surveyed the pile of goods she had purchased and the green army cot that was still folded up to fit in her trunk.

She held the pillow she had brought with her to her face; it still smelled like home. Something twinged in her chest, and she thought for a moment that she might cry. Instead, she cleared her throat, swallowed her tears, and figured out how to open the cot. Then she dragged it to the corner away from the window and tossed her sleeping bag and pillow on it.

“Home sweet home,” she muttered. It was temporary. Maybe she’d buy a real mattress. Maybe the cot would be fine. Everything was temporary if you thought about it long enough.

Someone knocked and opened the door before Annie could decide whether to let them in. It was Helen’s daughter, Ashley, her hair tied up in a high ponytail. She was wearing jeans and a sleeveless shirt with an attached hood—normal kid clothes. Though skinny, Ashley didn’t look underfed or scrawny like Annie always had at that age, no matter how much she ate.

“Oh,” Annie said, surprised at the sight of her.

“Mom says come in for dinner.”

“Oh,” Annie said again. “I hadn’t—I wasn’t going to intrude.”

Ashley stared at her blank faced and sighed. “It’s enchiladas. Wash your hands first. She can always tell.” She turned and walked out the door.

Annie had planned to heat up chicken soup on her hot plate and eat her way through most of a loaf of sourdough bread, but it seemed rude to ignore the invitation, so she dug hand soap out of the WalMart plastic bag and washed her hands in cold water, wiping them dry on her pants.

She crossed the yard slowly, pausing for a moment at the back door just in time to hear Ashley say, "Like a stretcher with legs and a sleeping bag?"

Helen said, "Hmm."

Enchiladas covered with cheese and sour cream were a pleasant surprise, and they were not too spicy for her taste. She ate two while she listened to Kevin complain about having to learn cursive and Ashley talk about some girl named Kerry who had a purple pen even though they were all still supposed to use pencil in class.

"What are you taking?" Helen asked. It took Annie a moment to realize she was being addressed. She looked up and smiled nervously.

"Uh, only three classes. Criminal Law, Legal Research, and something called Crime Control Policy." She shook her head. "I may be in over my head."

"Not taking my class, I see," Helen said dryly.

"Why, what are you teaching?" Annie had followed the university guidelines for first-year grad students when choosing her classes. She didn't have a choice when it came to core classes, so rather than seriously overload her quarter, she'd stuck with the recommended three classes.

"Just two this quarter, on child welfare," she said. "Speaking of which, where's the baby monitor? Kevin?"

"It's right there." Ashley pointed at the counter where a thick antenna was sticking up from behind a bowl of fruit. Helen pushed her chair back and picked it up, holding it to her ear.

"He's fine. We can all hear him when he wakes up without that," Ashley said. "He's the loudest baby ever."

"Thank you for your opinion, Ash," Helen said. "You two clear your plates and go watch TV until it's time to brush your teeth."

"You don't have to feed me," Annie said when the kids were gone. "I mean, thank you. But I don't expect it."

“There’s no kitchen out there, no hot water, and it’s not furnished. The very least I can do is feed you.”

It was a fair point, and it wasn’t like Annie was in a position to turn down a free meal, so she thanked Helen again.

“Which reminds me. I called about getting someone to look at the water heater out there, but they can’t come out until next week. It’ll be inconvenient, but you’ll have to come in the house to use the shower.”

Annie nodded. That was going to be awkward.

“I’m not going to subject you to the kids’ bathroom. It’s bigger, but it’s always a disaster. Use the one in my room. And you can do your laundry here too, of course. The laundry room is just down the hall. And you know you can always use the kitchen. The key I gave you opens the front and back doors of the house, so you don’t have to worry about creeping around. You can just come in whenever you need to.”

“I wasn’t creeping,” Annie said.

“No?”

“I was respecting your space.”

“Yeah, okay,” Helen said with a small smile. “When is your first class?”

“Ten.”

“We’ll all be out of here by eight thirty, so you can shower in the morning. Will that work for you?” Helen asked.

“Yes, ma’am,” Annie said. “Thank you.”

Helen laughed. “You’re welcome.”

* * *

It was still light out, so Annie decided to go for a walk around the block. Her parents always went for a walk after dinner in the summers, and she enjoyed it too. She put on her white sneakers and a light sweater—even though it was still a little warm—and let herself out through the gate into the alley, her purse slung over her shoulder.

No matter where she looked, no matter what direction, she could always see a palm tree. No one had told her that about California.

At the end of the block, she noticed a blue Pontiac with the same license plate as the one that had been camped out at her motel by campus, a good ten miles up the 405.

“You sons of bitches,” she muttered, marching up to the car and peering into it. No one was inside, and she saw nothing but a crumpled-up McDonald’s bag on the floor of the passenger’s side. Still, she was scared and mad and apparently not paranoid enough after all. They’d been watching her all week, maybe longer. She should have trusted her instincts, trusted every time the hair on the back of her neck had gone up since leaving Ohio. Since leaving DC, even. Probably since leaving Minsk.

She looked around but saw no one. She rummaged through her bag and pulled out the Swiss army knife her dad had given her on her thirteenth birthday, flicked open the blade and jammed it into the back tire. Listened with satisfaction as the air hissed out. Dropped the knife back into her bag and pulled out a tube of pink lipstick and wrote STOP in large, bright letters across the back window.

She turned back to the house, threw the lipstick into the trash bin by the side of Helen’s house, and locked herself in the garage for the night.

* * *

Annie climbed the stairs of the quiet house carrying a little bag of toiletries, a newly purchased towel, and clean clothes. Just like college all over again, walking down the hall to the showers.

Ashley’s room was painted pale lavender, Kevin’s bright blue. She didn’t see a room for the baby, but when she found the main bedroom, there was a crib squeezed against the wall between the bed and dresser. A pile of laundry lay on the floor, diapers were stacked on the dresser, and a white laundry basket held tiny onesies, little socks, and crumpled-up pants.

How did Helen do it? Where did the baby go during the day when Helen was working? And if she was only teaching two classes part-time, what else did she do?

Helen’s shower was small but clean and still damp. Annie stood under the hot water spray, enjoying the warmth while popping open

bottles of unfamiliar products and sniffing them. The shampoo was what Helen smelled like the most. Her curiosity satisfied, she washed her hair and let the conditioner set while she shaved. The shower was small, requiring some contortion, but she was small too, so it wasn't difficult. It was a good thing about being fair-haired too; when she missed shaving a spot, no one noticed.

She borrowed Helen's blow-dryer, then put on a pair of clean underwear and her bathrobe before returning to her garage room.

She left the house early to give herself plenty of time to find parking. When she got to the end of the street, the Pontiac was gone.

Part of why she'd gone back to Toledo as quickly as she did was because she didn't expect her ex-boss's threats to extend past the Beltway. Frank Clifton was a respected agent of nearly thirty years, and while he was king of his division, he wasn't the head of the whole organization. If he followed through on what he was threatening, his career would be in jeopardy, and Annie wasn't worth all of that, no matter how much Frank had invested in her or what he felt he was owed for his efforts.

So to see now that his reach might be bicoastal sent a shiver up her spine. She hoped he was just rattling her cage, hoping to spook her back into his clutches.

She shook off her concerns and spent the drive thinking about Helen's bedroom. She had a nice bed, a simple, sturdy frame that matched the wooden dresser. The towels in the bathroom were taupe, as were the mats on the floor. She had no pictures, though. Annie's own parents' bedroom was crowded with pictures—of her and her brother, of their granddaughter, not to mention their own wedding portrait hanging on the wall over the bed.

Finding parking on campus took some time. She ended up in the student parking garage. Luckily, she had a parking permit, though it cost her a small fortune; she wouldn't have needed the most expensive one if she'd been living in student housing, though it was a small consolation that they had at least they had reimbursed her for that quarter's payment.

She had two classes today, the same two again on Wednesday, and the third on Tuesdays. Which gave her a four-day weekend every week

that she hoped to fill with a job. But with dealing with finding housing and trying to figure out if she was being watched, she worried there'd be no jobs left by the time she got to the work study office.

She'd go between classes today.

In class, she sat at a desk against the back wall. In a briefing or a meeting, she would have sat closer to the front. Today's subject matter was interesting, but her attention wandered.

Everyone in class seemed already familiar with one another. While she'd been hopping around looking for a place to live, they'd been attending orientation and get-to-know-you mixers. Annie felt like a stranger—old too. Everyone in class appeared to be in their early twenties, and she was at the far end of that. There was one older man in a brown V-neck sweater and corduroy pants who did seem even older than Annie, though. This had to be a real career change for him. He might even have a wife and family at home. She took some comfort in that.

When class was over, she gathered up her things. It was almost three hours before her next class started, and she wasn't really excited about searching for a nonexistent job, so she didn't rush out. As she slung her backpack over her shoulder, the man, who had been hovering behind her, spoke.

"Hi. I'm Chris."

"Uh, hi, Annie," she said, glancing around at the room's departing students. Most of them carried totes or messenger bags. She seemed to be the only one with a backpack. It made her look young, but she didn't really care.

"I didn't see you at the mixer on Friday," he said.

"You must be some kind of detective." She wasn't sure why her immediate reaction was sarcasm, except that she was wary of strangers now. "I mean, I wasn't there."

"It wasn't that fun," he said. "Where are you headed?"

"Oh, Work Study Office," she said. "Actually, I should go."

She glanced up front just as the door shut behind the professor. They were alone in the classroom.

Chris' warm smile dropped, and he stood expansively between her and the aisle. Getting around him would be a real challenge if he didn't step aside.

The door opened.

Annie's heart sank.

Before being assigned to his division, Frank Clifton had been one of her trainers. He wasn't someone she would have chosen as a mentor, but he'd taken a shine to her early in training, so she wasn't surprised when she ended up under his supervision. He taught her to be ruthless, and that was a valuable skill, one she'd used many times both professionally and personally, but it made her wary of him as a boss, and it made her even more nervous to see him out of context in her classroom on the first day of what was supposed to be her new life.

"You owe me a tire, Miss Weaver," he said, nodding toward Chris—a name she now knew was a fabrication. "Chris" left them alone in the room.

"No. I left everything nice and square. Plenty of notice. Trained my replacement. Left on good terms. Fulfilled my three-year commitment. Why can't you just let me be gone?"

He chuckled. "Your replacement. You and I both know there's no replacing someone like you. Anyway, do you know how much money we poured into you? Your education and training? I thought we had an understanding. A gentleman's agreement."

"I guess I'm no gentleman," Annie replied.

"That used to be one of the things I liked about you." He looked her up and down.

"I'm not coming back," she said. "So now you're just burning up more money you could use on someone else."

"Everyone has hard assignments, Miss Weaver, and everyone takes breaks. It's fine to take a few months to get your head on straight. But this is throwing away everything we built together."

She shook her head. She didn't have to explain herself to him, especially since she had asked herself the same question not so long ago. To her, Clifton was a boss. To Frank Clifton, Annie Weaver was a possession, a rare gem he did not want to lose. At first it was flattering, but then she grew distrustful of what started to feel like someone

blowing smoke. Was she really so special? Was her knack for languages worth all this? Her out-of-line actions had led to the death of two agents, who probably had families.

“Come back to DC, and you’ll get a much higher salary step. You won’t have to go overseas,” he said. “There are plenty of people right here on our own soil who need your special skill set.”

“You said all this already, and I turned you down. Mr. Clifton, I have things to do.”

“Ah yes, you need a job. You need a bed. You need hot water.” He smiled. “Shame about your housing situation.”

She sank down into a desk chair. “What else is going to go wrong, I wonder, if I don’t come back?”

“What else indeed?” He sat across the aisle from her. “Computers are a miraculous invention. It wasn’t hard to hack into the UCLA housing database. Our whole lives are accessible now, Miss Weaver. No matter where you go, I will be there.”

She shook her head. “If you force me to return, I’ll never be the loyal employee you want. You have to know that.”

“You know, the Minsk investigation is still pending. Two dead agents, a missing potential informant with a dead family. A dead *child*. Someone needs to take the fall for that. We both know that person *should* be you.”

She felt lightheaded and gripped the edge of the desk to anchor herself.

“Jeffries told you to stay away from the wife, didn’t he? It was in the paperwork. But you didn’t, did you?”

“No,” she whispered.

“Two dead agents,” he said again. “Could be a lot of trouble. We could press charges if we wanted. Label you a traitor. Charge you with treason!”

“Stop. I get it. Stop.”

“On the other hand, if you come back with me today, that could all go away,” he snapped. “Your secrets are my secrets, Annie.”

She sat up, feeling her gut instinct rising behind her belly button, above the panic, tossing her a life vest.

“Your secrets are my secrets,” she repeated. “Your hands aren’t exactly clean.” They both knew that Clifton hadn’t gotten to where he was playing by the rules. He would order a bottle of scotch and claim it as an expense. He handpicked his favorites and manipulated them like he did to Annie now.

“No,” he acknowledged. “Which is why we’re offering a compromise.” He reached into his suit jacket and pulled out a little black pager. He leaned across the aisle and set it on the edge of her desk, pushing it toward her. “From time to time, different law enforcement agencies need the talents of someone like you.”

“Someone like me,” she repeated in a low voice, looking down at the dark screen of the pager.

“It’s a good deal,” he said. “It’s good for us to loan out personnel in the spirit of departmental cooperation. It’s good for you too. Technically, you’ll be paid as a contractor.”

“Meaning I can technically disregard the rules about interrogating our own citizens?”

“Don’t be crass,” he dismissed her. “No one’s going to ask you to torture anyone. You’ll be asked to talk to people occasionally. That’s all.”

“I won’t take less than \$100 an hour.” She grasped for a number high enough that he would have to refuse.

But he nodded in agreement. “We’ll take care of all that. But on call is on call, and when that pager goes off—whether it’s the FBI, the DEA, or any area that LAPD covers—you’ll have one hour to answer.”

“I don’t... I’m not going to miss my classes.”

“I’m sure we can work around those.”

“I don’t really see what’s in this for you, though,” she said.

“Keeping you active is what’s in it for us,” he said. “Because one day, that thing is going to buzz, and it’s going to be your country needing you to step back up to the plate.”

Her laugh was hollow. “Baseball metaphors? Really, Frank?”

She’d never called him by his first name before, and he frowned. “You’re a very lucky girl, Miss Weaver. To have thrown away your position and have a way back in. Do this for a few years while you while

you work on your degree or come back to us now. Those are your only options.”

“Stop having your goons follow me,” she said, grabbing the pager and dropping it into the side pocket of her backpack.

He shrugged. “Sure.”

She stood up and shouldered her backpack while he watched. “Goodbye for now, Anabelle Weaver. And don’t bother calling this in. You won’t be able to reach anyone higher than me. I’ve already told them that you called me and begged for your job back. That you were hysterical. I told them I would take care of it.” His eyes glinted in the harsh light of the classroom, and she could feel his gaze on her as she walked out.

TO CONTINUE READING,
PLEASE PURCHASE

TWO IS A PATTERN

BY EMILY WATERS

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