



**THE
MIND
GAME**

M.G. HARRIS

 DARKWATER

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*For everyone who read 'The Joshua Files' and is still reading
my books now. Thank you!*



TRAILER

Dulles International Airport, Washington D.C., five years ago. On a spring morning, the concourse was already rammed with travelers. No one wore masks back then, it was before the pandemic. Remember how things used to be? Everyone breathing the same air, not a thought for microscopic packages of deadly genetic material.

In the line for passport control, twelve-year-old Maxim Santiago clung tightly to his mother's hand. Witnesses say she stared directly ahead. Did Maxim try to catch her eye? Did his mom look away?

Even aged twelve, Maxim didn't think of himself as a kid any more. At school he was afraid of no-one and nothing. His classmates and teachers had never met anyone like him. So maybe he was different. Yet waiting on line that day, beside a mother who trembled with fear, Maxim must have been scared.

It was a busy line, it moved slowly. Scanning tech at the borders was still new, clunky, they didn't trust it. Despite the scanners, half the time guards had to check documents and faces. The line advanced. For just a moment, his mom let go of his hand. Was it for one last check of their documents?

His gaze wandered along the row of people in front of him, settled on a family of five, the Grover-Dysons from Alexandria. When Maxim Santiago looked at you, really looked at you, that wasn't something you easily forgot. Katie Grover-Dyson was thirteen years old at the time and being scooped out of school for a family funeral in Boca Raton. She remembered his eyes, described them as 'haunted.'

Did Maxim know what was coming? Did Masha, his

mom?

If they were forced to leave their home, Masha must have made Maxim promise to keep it a secret. Because he didn't breathe a word. Not to anyone.

By now you're maybe asking – what's my connection to this case? Well, whereas I only slightly knew the influencer Rich Wonders, from my first series, *Who Killed Rich Wonders?* this series will be a lot more personal. Because once, before he disappeared, I was pretty close to Maxim Santiago. We both were.

Back when Maxim and I were kids, I knew a boy, let's call him 'Mike.' Mike and I were in a band with Maxim. Basically, we were the closest thing Maxim had to 'friends.' We hung out together outside of band practice, gamed together, told each other the small stuff you share so easily when you're eleven and twelve.

If Maxim had known he and his mom were leaving, he would have given us some hint. Okay, maybe he'd not have come right out and admitted that everything the three of us had worked so hard for in that rehearsal room was basically for nothing. But he'd have said something. Even if it was just "Oh hey, I can't make tomorrow's practice."

If Mike and I had no clue that Maxim was leaving, it's because Maxim didn't breathe a word. We didn't know anything, so we waited a whole hour that afternoon for him to join us for practice. Mike and I played the whole piece through until we had it down. Maxim would have been happy with how good we sounded, which is partly why we were pissed at him. Until we heard the news.

The night before Maxim and Masha Santiago disappeared at Dulles International Airport, I was over at their house. His mom made us fried-egg sandwiches with ketchup. When it got time for me to go home, Maxim didn't even get up from the sofa. He just turned off his Nintendo Switch and headed for the piano. Not a single hint that this was good-bye.

That's how I remember seeing him the last time, five years ago. A twelve-year old kid with short, bronze hair cut

in a faux-hawk, kicking back on the couch, his face lit-up by the TV in a darkened room, seeming kind of irritated because I had to leave before he'd had a chance to even the score. His mom at the kitchen table, getting ahead on next week's work.

Just another weekend. Not what you expect to see from a family on the brink of skipping town. Yet somehow, between eight and nine the next morning, beneath the feet of the Santiagos, the ground shifted.

Where were they headed at the airport? After they were apprehended at Border Control, where did they go?

What happened to the Santiagos?

A tad nervously, I watched Kenzie's eyes scan the page, once, twice and then annoyingly a third time, even slower than the previous two. I dropped the hopeful act. "You hate it."

He shook his head, put on a pair of wire-rimmed glasses he occasionally used and stroked his chin so thoughtfully, I began to wonder if he was making fun of me. Then I realized he was probably relishing the fact that his chin-stubble was growing back after the last time he shaved. I watched for a second, unsure what I thought about the slight greasiness of his reddish hair. It'd been months and months since he'd been to the barber and this new look of his, curling ringlets drooping into his eyelids and over his ears, made him appear partway between slob and rock-god.

I grew impatient. "You got any notes?"

Kenzie shook his head, the curls waving a millisecond behind. "I'm still not liking 'Mike,' for me."

"You'd prefer 'Marc?'"

"Obviously not, it's my actual name."

"Like anyone other than your parents knows you as 'Marc.' Even teachers call you 'Kenzie.'"

“Let me pick the pseudonym, something cool. How about ‘Pete’?”

I snorted. “‘Pete’? That’s an old-man cool name. Like, ‘Luke’ or ‘Clint.’”

“And ‘Mike’ is the straight-edge cop who busted Pete, Luke and Clint for fighting ‘The Man.’ You can’t win this one Padi, so don’t even try.” He waited for me to give him a grudging laugh. Then, once again he hesitated. “Also, it’s a little unconventional. For a crime pod.”

I bristled, instantly on defense. “Yeah, cos that’s my whole schtick. Remember the opening to *Who Killed Rich Wonders*? I don’t just do crime; I do unsolved mysteries, too.”

“Fair,” he acknowledged. “Also – I probably wouldn’t say ‘clung tightly to his mother’s hand.’”

“Dramatic license, obviously the audience knows I didn’t actually see any of this with my own eyes.”

“But you spoke to an eyewitness, yes? At least, it reads like you did.”

“Yeah, the Grover-Dyson kids, Katie and Celine.”

“Right. So the listener might think Katie and Celine saw Maxim ‘cling tightly’ to his mom. Which I cannot see. With my mind’s eye, y’know? And I actually knew him.”

Kenzie had a point. Maxim wasn’t the clingy type. That part about him being scared of nothing and nobody? That was from me and it was true. I thought about defending ‘clingy’ for another minute but decided to drop it. Kenzie was usually right about stuff like this, which was why I asked him in the first place.

“Fine, I’ll change that up. But otherwise?”

He gave a grudging nod. I’ve seen more enthusiasm over mandatory vaccines. Yet after a moment he said, “It’s good. You’re going to trail with this?”

“Yeah. Downloads on *Who Killed Rich Wonders*? just keep going up. Might as well use the attention.”

“So you talked to the Grover-Dyson girls. Anyone else?”

“Nope. I lucked out with them, obviously, since they’re seniors at school. They saw everything *and* they were standing next to the Santiagos in the line. That’s my next episode, right there.”

“But after that?”

I spread my hands on the table at Starbucks. “Nada. Which is why I’m trailing *What Happened to the Santiagos?* for a month at least. With a pretty-please at the end. Hopefully someone else on line that day, or even just at the airport, will see it. A twelve-year-old kid and his mom don’t just vanish, like smoke. Not even at Dulles.”

“And if the pretty-please goes nowhere?”

I’d be burned, obviously. “Then I’m just another teenager with a podcast. Who gives a damn if I fall on my face?”

Kenzie grinned, suddenly. “It was a good decision to stay anonymous.”

“Pseudonymous, you mean. ‘La Chica Curiosa.’”

“I’m pretty sure you need a normal-sounding name to be pseudonymous.”

“Oh yeah, something like ‘Roni McCurious?’”

We both laughed. Kenzie was incapable of inventing any name not in the ‘FirstName McHilarious’ format.

We recorded the trailer later that day, adding Kenzie’s changes to the script. I managed the whole thing in one take. With the new mic I’d bought for ‘Rich Wonders,’ the sound was sharp as a tack, almost zero production needed. Basically, it was done pretty quickly. We didn’t think too hard about it, at least I didn’t. Just recorded, tweaked and dropped the podcast trailer all on the same night, along with the pretty-please at the end. It was identical to the one that worked so well for ‘Rich Wonders,’ asking listeners to come forward with

thoughts, hints, reactions, theories, whatever. Afterward we went to Wendy's.

Thinking back, Kenzie was kind of quiet at Wendy's. Something was on his mind.

I guessed what it was, but didn't like to say. I was too excited about the new podcast, too eager to experience the rush, the excitement of 'Rich Wonders' all over again. I'd produced that series on a whim and it had done *great*. Kids at school had been talking about it for two weeks now and no sign of slowing up. More were getting on the bandwagon, catching up with binge-listens now that all six episodes were available. I was starting to see comments and downloads from all over the country.

Even so, Kenzie was worried. *What Happened to the Santiagos?* wasn't like 'Rich Wonders,' where basically the whole story was in the public domain. This mystery had the feel of *a can of worms*. Kenzie knew it, I did too.

I knew it when I sensed the jittering of my stomach, when I lay down to sleep. Knew it from the edginess I felt when I checked my phone the next morning and saw fifteen new messages on the podcast trailer. There was something different jangling around my nervous system that day, and it hadn't been there all the time I was dropping new episodes of 'Rich Wonders.'

This time, there was fear. Palpable, honest-to-goodness, fear.

Humans have instincts that protect us, that's how come me and Kenzie and Maxim and *you* got to be alive, unlike all the humans that didn't make it to the 21st century. All those non-existent kids of historic humans that let the snake bite them, they didn't even get to be born. Their would-be ancestors lost the human race. But for our ancestors, yours and mine, a rustle in the grass was enough to make them high-tail it out of there. *Our* ancestors didn't wait to see if a poisonous reptile made those sounds, or just the wind. We're not descended from

the ones who ignored the danger, who told themselves 'I'm sure everything's fine, probably.' No. We're descended from the ones who *listened* to that frisson of fear. That's why they lived long enough to tell the sorry tale on a cozy night, maybe to someone of the opposite sex, maybe enough to persuade them into making a baby. The kind of baby who'd grow up *paying attention*, when nerves came a-tingling.

Take it from me, we aren't descended from idiots like yours truly, who heard the tingle of fear loud and clear, who saw it in the eyes of a best friend – and just plain *ignored* it.

All of this to admit that what happened was my fault. La Chica Curiosa? A good nickname for me, as it turns out. We know what curiosity did to the cat. That should have been a hint to me, right there.

TWO

NOSTALGIA HOUR

Our final International Baccalaureate exam finished at four in the afternoon. Most seniors were headed home. A lot of people went to after-parties, good if you were into that kind of thing, which I was not. All I wanted to talk about was my podcast, but with the whole pseudonymous thing, I'd have to pretend to be a listener - not, y'know, behind the whole thing. No way for me to be chatty without a) feeling like an idiot pretending to fangirl my own pod and b) being the type of idiot who fangirls their own pod.

Kenzie hung back waiting for me but I made an excuse and wandered. I didn't know exactly what I wanted or needed, just that inside of me was a feeling I didn't recognize; a kind of ache, a yearning. I didn't know for what. Maybe I just wasn't ready to graduate. Without parents or even any relatives to celebrate with me, was there any point?

I strolled the halls of D.C. International School, wandered past classrooms I'd sat inside ever since sixth grade. It was easy to remember why I'd chosen to stay at the school after my parents were gone. I'd been happy at D.C. Inter. I *was* happy. No complaints, other than losing my mom and dad at the height of the pandemic. What did Oscar Wilde say about losing both parents, something about it being careless? *That*. Careless of someone, definitely not me.

I lingered outside what had been our home room. The room where I'd laid my head on the table and sobbed, while the teacher cleared everyone else out and

sat with me until I had no more tears. Just questions and the beginnings of fear as I finally allowed myself to ask a question that filled me with terror.

What's going to happen to me?

Had my folks dared to talk to me about how neatly they'd planned the post-them scenario, I'd have experienced less angst. Or not, I guess you can never know. Hence my lingering, that afternoon in the empty, eerily quiet hallway outside of my grade eight home room. I wanted *really* to remember how it'd been back then, how I'd felt when my parents were still around and I was just a regular teenager.

Up until now, I hadn't felt ready to go there. I'd refused therapy, told everyone I preferred to just 'get back to normal.' For some reason, my mind chose that post-exam, summer afternoon to begin to process feelings I hadn't dared to touch for two years. I felt close to tears, but not quite. They bubbled up behind my eyes, yet wouldn't flow. Moving through areas of the school I'd inhabited those days, I was able to walk things back in my mind and was drawn to the very room where I'd last really felt myself to be a child.

No, this isn't going to be one of those grim abuse memoirs, my story isn't in that league. Like I already wrote, it's not about what happened to me, it's about what I *made* happen, by being curious.

And it all began long before the horrible thing with my parents.

The room in question was a music rehearsal room, over in the primary years campus. A short bus ride separated the two campuses and there was a shuttle that teachers could use, which went a few times a day. I spotted the bus in the parking lot on my way out, so I hitched a ride.

The music department in the Georgetown campus had a couple of practice rooms. I'd been back a few times

to the hall for concerts or plays, but hadn't returned for years to the main campus. This being late in summer and end-of-year concerts behind us, everywhere was silent apart from the sound of a soccer ball being kicked on the field behind the main buildings. It was as quiet then as during long-gone afternoons when Marc Mackenzie, Maxim Santiago and I used to practice in a sound-proofed room, playing on a baby grand piano, bass guitar and a drum kit.

My own kit now gathered dust in our attic, untouched for years. Revisiting the practice room that day I finally understood why I'd stopped playing. It'd happened almost immediately after Maxim's disappearance. To this day I don't get why we didn't figure it sooner, neither me or my parents. Why don't people ask the right questions when a sad thing happens? Is it because they're afraid of the answer?

But that day, after my final exams at the school, I was ready to revisit the scene of our childhood bliss. The summer break was close and the music practice rooms were empty. Even the elementary schoolers seemed to be running out of steam. Maxim Santiago wouldn't have given us the afternoon off – not for any reason.

It'd been June then too, a little earlier in the month. We'd been in the practice room every day for weeks – Maxim, Kenzie and me. Maxim could be patient or impatient, insistent or relaxed, but he always knew exactly what to say to get us back in the room. Even when we were bored of the whole thing. Let's face it, what twelve-year-old wants to rehearse *the same tune* every day for six weeks?

Thinking about it, there probably are kids like that, but I'd expect to find them in music schools, which D.C. International was not. Maxim should have gone to a school like that. Instead he glommed onto Kenzie and me and pretty much forced us to help him realize his

ambition of having a jazz trio. Which is another thing no normal twelve-year-old does, but we've already established that Maxim wasn't ordinary.

It wasn't just Maxim's crazy persuasion skills that brought me and Kenzie back to that room every day. We *wanted* to be there. Playing that music together had a hold on us that I didn't understand at the time, playing *The Forgotten Village*.

Alone in the room that afternoon, I sat down at the piano, placed my hands on the keyboard and closed my eyes. Pictured Maxim there, twelve years old and already the most intense, focused person I ever met. All that mattered to him in those weeks was getting us to sound perfect. Not an easy thing for two mediocre, twelve-year old musicians like me and Kenzie.

Maxim on the other hand, was already a brilliant pianist. The principal would wheel him out to entertain parents, carers and the school board, playing Mozart, Scarlatti and Satie. When we played in the trio with Maxim, even Kenzie and I managed to play well. It felt *incredible* to sound that good, the sensation got into my bones and radiated out all the way to my fingertips, so that every piece of the drumkit seemed in some way connected with me.

Yet that wasn't why we kept showing up to rehearse. It was the music itself. There was something haunting about that tune. I noticed it the first time Maxim played it for us with nothing but a metronome to accompany him. A forgotten melody about a forgotten place, like something buried just under the skin for years, that begins suddenly to itch. We just had to scratch. The opening bars of that music were like a gateway. When you entered, you forgot everything. You were just there, inside all that was forgotten. A memory that you could only cling to when you were within that space. Once the

notes faded, so did the feeling, so did the memory. Might as well try to hang on to a dream.

Standing in the empty practice room I selected the same tune on my phone, the original version, plugged in the earbuds and listened. Tears began to flow. Tears for everything we lost when we lost Maxim. Tears for my lost parents. *Finally*. I welcomed them, listened to the piece three or four times, allowing all that sadness to spill out.

Gradually, I became aware of someone else in the room; Marc Mackenzie. I tugged on my earbuds. Was he following me?

He smiled, a little sadly. "I guessed you'd be here. Maxim Santiago, hey? Still talking us into coming back here."

I laughed, wiping tears and feeling a little ridiculous. "I... I don't know why, but I just had this weird feeling of... *nostalgia*."

Kenzie crossed the room to the drum kit. He touched the high-hat lightly, as if to check it was real. "I think it's your podcast trailer. You got me thinking about Maxim. About that time when we thought we were a jazz trio."

"Well, we kind of *were* a jazz trio."

He grinned. "Yeah. We were pretty awesome, for twelve-year-olds."

"We only played one song – *The Forgotten Village*. So I'm not sure that counts as 'good.'"

Kenzie chuckled, then imitating Maxim he complained, "You lazy jerks! I was stuck on *Twinkle Variations* for five weeks when I started violin! We don't leave until you get it right!"

We both burst into laughter. "Omigod. Do you remember? He wouldn't shut up about his Suzuki violin training."

"Yeah, like, 'dude, don't blame us if your teacher was basically OCD.'"

Laughter felt wonderful after my tears. Optimism

surged, relief flooded through me. I wanted to grab Kenzie's hand, to hug him tight. But I was careful about stuff like that, for so many reasons *other* than that we lived under the same roof. We'd stayed best friends for years by not crossing any lines. I was eighty-five percent certain Kenzie wasn't into me, saw me as a buddy, the way I saw him. The unknown fifteen percent, however, made me cautious. The last thing I wanted was to hurt my best friend. And fifteen percent is non-trivial. I knew I had to take care not to push him away, but also not to give him the wrong idea.

It was something of a high-wire situation. A lot of people at school assumed we were a couple. We were both aware. Sometimes we had to deny it, which was also something I did *very* carefully. In general it wasn't the easiest, being besties with a cis, straight boy. So many questions. Ugh.

"You came back here out of pure nostalgia," he mused. "You sure about that?"

"Yeah. I was feeling kind of *blab* after the finals. End-of-an-era-ish."

Kenzie stuck his hands in the pockets of his jacket. "Yeah. Hard to believe it but I'll actually miss this place. Is that why you came back here?"

I hesitated. "I wanted to remember our time in this room."

He waited, eyes brimming, expectant, empathic.

"I guess I'm realizing now that everything changed after Maxim disappeared."

He became thoughtful. "I guess it did. What a selfish dick, getting himself abducted, and all."

I had to smile at that. "You and me, we just stopped playing music. Did you ever wonder why?"

He acted uneasy, again. We were near dangerous ground.

“Maybe that’s why I wanted to make the podcast,” I suggested.

Kenzie looked straight at me. “Maybe you shouldn’t.”

“Why not?”

He didn’t have an answer for that. I think for Kenzie it was just a feeling, something formless, frictionless, impossible to name. For me, however, it *had* a name: the song title that had popped up, out of the blue, in one of the fifteen private messages I’d received since dropping the trailer for *What Happened to the Santiagos?* The name of the song we’d played as a trio. The only song, as Kenzie had reminded me.

“Remember *The Forgotten Village?*”

It was the only message I received that was anonymous. Whoever sent it, they weren’t yet ready to show their cards.

THREE

THE FORGOTTEN VILLAGE

In fact, I actually *had* managed to forget *The Forgotten Village*. At least, until I got the idea to produce *What Happened to the Santiagos*. Then, of course I remembered.

It was the tune that brought us together; Kenzie, Maxim and me. Before that, to me and Kenzie, Maxim was just ‘Maxim Santiago,’ the most famous boy in school, always top in every class, a natural athlete, a kid who oozed such confidence that no-one could believe he was so young. Good-looking, obviously, like all the popular kids. Light-brown-skinned and bronze-blond hair, with a steady gaze from his dark brown eyes.

Maxim was famous and everyone admired him, but in terms of friends he really had none, only kids that lined up to befriend him because he was so cool. These were closer to colleagues; other kids who could help him achieve some goal, like when he created a Jai-Alai team that he got tired of after six months, or to perform a play he’d written and talked a teacher into producing. All this before he turned eleven. *Of course* he was school-famous.

In fifth grade Maxim discovered a new obsession – jazz. Who knows why – he didn’t tell us things like that, rarely talked about anything personal. The music department had started up a rock school program across both campuses, putting kids together in six different bands. Everyone was pleasantly surprised to see Maxim show up. Everyone knew he could play like a dream, but at school events he played difficult and strictly classical piano. Suddenly he wanted to be in a band with two dopes like Kenzie and me? Very odd. Yet that’s what

happened. Then suddenly it wasn't a rock band but a jazz trio. Kenzie and I weren't eager but Maxim persuaded the teacher to basically force us. Persuasion was kind of his thing.

From that day we met every afternoon to rehearse. Literally. Weekdays at school, weekends at Maxim's house. Those weekends, we shifted from being two kids who played in Maxim's band, to being his friends. Met his mom, Masha. Played video games with him, hung out for hours after practice. Two goofballs and the coolest kid in school, who under all that veneer of diffident over-achievement turned out to be just another goofball.

The Forgotten Village by Shai Maestro is a simple enough tune. No fancy runs on the keyboard, although Maxim could do those when needed. The bass and drums just pulse away underneath the main tune on the piano. It took us three weeks to get through the piece without making any mistakes. After that, it was all about getting the mood, the vibe. The tune had a way of casting a spell. The very first to be enchanted were the musicians.

I'd barely thought about that tune since Maxim went. Then, the afternoon after our final exam, a message on the podcast trailer – 'Remember *The Forgotten Village*?' – drew me back to our old practice room.

Who'd sent that message? So far as I knew, only me, Maxim, Kenzie and possibly our parents, (not that they paid much attention to it) knew about *The Forgotten Village*. We hadn't played it in front of anyone yet. Maxim didn't want anyone to hear us until it was 'just right.' This included our music teachers.

Whoever sent the message knew Maxim *personally* – that was for sure. Knew him, knew the name of the tune we'd rehearsed so hard.

When Kenzie showed up a few minutes behind me at the Georgetown campus music department, I instantly

assumed *he* was the sender of the message. I asked him right away.

He looked puzzled. "You got a message... about *The Forgotten Village*?"

I gave him a moment to admit he was playing games, but nothing. The expression on his face should have been enough for me. Kenzie was as taken aback as I'd been. We both understood that only someone who knew Maxim extremely well would send that message. If not Kenzie then, who?

We talked about that all the way back home to his moms' house in Falls Church. Zara, his work-from-home mom, a psychotherapist from Chile, opened the front door. She seemed anxious at how late we were. When we walked into the kitchen we understood why. The moment he opened the door a chorus of 'Surprise' rang out.

Kenzie seemed genuinely shocked at the kids' party set out in the kitchen; a table laid with mini sandwiches, pizza, bowls of chips, cans of soda and a blue-frosted sponge-cake with 'Goodbye High School' spelled out in white icing. Sitting around the table were his other four friends. They were a nice bunch, all kind of nerdy, into board games and such. I liked them all. They had on party hats. Balloons had floated up to the ceiling. There was a banner made by his moms, with the inscription – 'SCHOOL'S OUT!'

"It's *ironic*," Zara insisted, like it was only now hitting her that laying on a kids' party for seventeen-year-olds was kind of bizarre.

Kenzie grabbed a paper plate and loaded it with sandwiches and a slice of pizza. He pulled a dippy grin. His friends – I won't name them, they don't appear again in this tale of awful stuff that happened because I poked my nose where it wasn't wanted – looked relieved and started piling their own plates. Zara put on some music and the party began.

I gave in to the festive spirit. After an hour, Bobbie, his work-at-school mom showed up and the wine came out. They let us have a glass, too. It was kind of cool. I like Kenzie's moms, and not only because they invited me to live with them after I was left alone, which saved me from a random foster home. There was a South American vibe in the house, which made it extra-comfy for me. Even though I never lived in Mexico, I always *felt* Latina and yeah, I speak Spanish. Theirs was 30:70 a Spanglish household.

Later after everyone had left me and Kenzie thanked Bobbie and Zara for the party. His moms had planned it so meticulously that we almost didn't come home to enjoy it, that's how little we suspected. When we wanted to go to bed at nine, Kenzie's moms came over as a tad curious. Perhaps they thought this was finally the night we would make a move on each other or whatever.

Hopefully not. Hopefully, by now you've guessed that Kenzie and I were eager to get back to the subject of what happened to the Santiagos and specifically, who sent me that message about *The Forgotten Village*, something that meant so very much to us and Maxim. Something that only an insider would know.

We changed into pjs and reconvened in Kenzie's room, which was farthest from his moms. He'd thoughtfully brought up two more slices of chocolate cake but didn't touch his. Over the next few hours we tried to figure out:

- ❖ Who sent the message
- ❖ What to include in the second episode (I already had an outline for the first)

The 'who' of it finally came down to Mr. Garibaldi, the teacher that used to run the rock school. Even though Maxim hadn't allowed anyone in the room when we played, we figured that he might at least have told

Garibaldi what we were playing. This seemed like the most innocent possibility.

We agreed it would be kind of creepy for any sender of a friendly message not to sign their name. Who knows, maybe Garibaldi forgot? Apart from him there were no ‘innocent’ possibilities other than Bobbie and Zara. My folks weren’t exactly in a position to send secret Internet messages, and Bobbie and Zara, well, they just wouldn’t do a weird thing like that. Our remaining options were between someone who had gotten to know Maxim *after* he disappeared, or Masha, or Maxim himself.

I think that’s when I got fully committed to the mystery. Was it possible that Maxim was reaching out, sending out a call for help?

We tracked down Garibaldi – an unusual enough name for a music teacher. We located his new school in Maryland. I emailed him from the podcast account to ask if he’d sent me a message about Maxim.

My phone pinged two minutes later. Garibaldi had responded right away.

Hello, of course I remember Maxim Santiago. And it’s great to hear from you too, Veronica! It remains a regret to this day that we never got to witness what I was repeatedly assured by Maxim would be the ‘best damn jazz trio’ the school would ever see. Such a pity that he and his mother left like that, without telling anyone. But I’m afraid that where it comes to your mysterious interlocutor on the podcast, I’m not your man. I didn’t even know you had a podcast. I’ll be sure to listen to your podcast trailer about Maxim, and also the other one that I can see has so many listeners. Many congratulations on your burgeoning career in the media, may you go from strength to strength!

Kind regards, Paul Garibaldi.

“Garibaldi didn’t send the anon message,” Kenzie concluded.

“Are you sure? He replied pretty quickly... And ‘what I was repeatedly assured’ strikes me as a teentsy bit snarky...”

“Agreed – he’s totally dissing us there. But why would he lie about not sending the message? He seems genuinely clueless.”

We agreed that Garibaldi wasn’t our guy. Which left Maxim and Masha.

“Or some rando we know nothing about, who Maxim or Masha talked to.”

I shook my head. “Some ‘rando’ wouldn’t know how important that song was to me. Think about it. To anyone who isn’t me, *The Forgotten Village* is meaningless.”

“So?”

“So, now we know. The sender *knows* we played that tune with Maxim. Which means they’ve figured out who I am. They know that ‘La Chica Curiosa’ is Roni Padilla.”

Kenzie propped himself up on his forearms, looking down from his bed towards where I sat cross-legged on the floor. “Ooh. Busted!”

FOUR

GOING DARK

A little way back in this account of what happened, I mentioned how we're mostly evolved from hyper-suspicious, pre-human types, remember? The type who didn't stop to check whether the grass rustled because of a poisonous snake or from the wind. Well, that's one of the things I learned from Maxim Santiago.

He had a lot of interests, knew more about almost everything than any kid I ever met. Evolution was something he talked about a lot. He seemed to know a ton about it, far beyond what we'd been taught in school. He liked to get into arguments with the religious kids, which did not go down well with teachers. They were afraid of upsetting parents and carers, some of whom would get antsy if teachers spoke up about a whole bunch of topics.

But Maxim wasn't afraid to talk about science. He'd look anyone right in the eye and speak very plainly and directly. Even if a belligerent parent showed up afterward, red-cheeked and yelling, after a moment with Maxim they'd walk away, smooth and steady. I don't know how he did it.

When I first heard him tell that story about our hyper-suspicious ancestors, he was replying to another kid who declared that humans were designed to believe in God. I didn't exactly understand the point Maxim was making, so later in the lunch line I asked him to explain. Before replying he observed me for a few seconds, peered real close, as if to determine whether I was another religious kid hankering for an argument. I wasn't,

yet for some reason the longer he looked at me, the more suspicious he seemed, until his suspicion morphed into surprise.

“What’s wrong?” I said, uneasily. “I’m not even supposed to ask you to explain?”

Then I saw something I never saw again from Maxim. He seemed flustered and at a loss for words. Yeah. If you’re thinking ‘like he was love-struck’ you’d be right. That is *exactly* how he looked.

No boy had ever looked at me that way. I was eleven, close to turning twelve. Definitely the first time, but not the last. So far, so normal, right? Twelve-year-olds can totally feel the first stirrings of a crush. No-one is immune, not even cool, super-smart guys like Maxim.

But this isn’t a story about how me and a boy fell for each other when we were twelve. Because that isn’t what happened. Maxim *had not* fallen for me. He simply *acted* like he had, for a brief moment in the lunch line.

I didn’t imagine it. It was as though I could hear his heart pounding, inches away from mine. As though I could feel the tremor that went through him, because when it was done flowing through him, it jumped across the air between us and surged through me. And then, as suddenly as it had begun, the sensation vanished.

His eyes went back to normal and he answered my question. Normally. “We evolved from human ancestors who saw patterns and meaning in everything. Even when there was nothing there, like the non-existent snake in that story.”

I still didn’t understand so he tried again.

“We see patterns and meanings in weird stuff, but that doesn’t mean there’s really anything there. We invent gods and suchlike to explain the unexplained, not because we’re designed to ‘believe’ but because we can’t help it.”

Remember, we were *twelve*. This was the smartest and most insightful thing I’d heard any kid say, ever, and as

finally I understood what he was saying, I was in awe. “So... thinking that way is what kept our ancestors alive?”

He grinned, delighted. “Right! Exactly.” Then abruptly he asked, “Is it true you play drums?” He pointed across the canteen to the music teacher, Mr. Garibaldi who was seated facing us with two other teachers at their table. “I asked Garibaldi if he knew any drummers, he said you did. You’re Veronica Padilla, yeah?”

The sudden swerve caught me by surprise. “Yeah, I am.”

“Okay if I call you Padi?”

I didn’t know what to say so I probably nodded and that’s where *Padi* began.

Maxim asked me if I knew any bassists, I mentioned Marc Mackenzie and he grinned. “Padi and Kenzie. Good jazz names.”

“Huh...? I mean, I *guess*...”

Before I knew what happened Maxim was talking me into joining his band. A jazz band! If that sounds odd to you now, then you’re close to understanding how strange it seemed to me that day. And yet there I was, nodding and going along as if the previous two minutes hadn’t happened. If something like that happened today, I’d be more wary. I would assume the whole thing was a scheme to get to date me without risking being rejected. But I was twelve and not yet wary of rizz, Which is how come I ended up agreeing to be in Maxim’s band.

The following morning, after our trip down memory lane and the surprise party, Kenzie and I were on the school bus. I asked him something I’d been musing over all night.

“Was it weird yesterday? That I would do something so nostalgic?”

“Not at all. Why?”

“Cause we’re only seventeen. Nostalgia is for, y’know, old people.”

Kenzie thought it over and replied, “Nah. I get nostalgic all the time. The top shelf of my closet is full of Playmobil and Legos and old game consoles. Not because I’m collecting them but because I can’t stand to get rid. All the memories.”

“Like Andy in *Toy Story 3*.”

“Uh-huh. That’s why I followed you to the primary campus, yesterday.” (Primary school being international school lingo for elementary school.)

“You felt it, too?”

He nodded. “Like I said, it’s your podcast. Really takes me back. Those were good times. It felt like something ended when Maxim left.”

“When he *disappeared*, you mean.”

We sat in silence, facing the window as we crossed the Potomac at the Francis Scott Key Memorial bridge. Two rowing eights were racing, almost neck and neck as they passed beneath, the boats slicing neat lines in the smooth, silver surface of the water.

I examined Kenzie’s face as it turned away from mine, his eyes following the eights. His jaw was squaring up, the last traces of puppy-fat melting away. His shoulders were broadening and he’d lost a lot of weight, probably from the long bike rides he did a few times a week to unwind.

Kenzie was my brother-from-another-mother, so I didn’t think there was anything odd about checking him out while he wasn’t watching, but that day I was taken aback at how abruptly he’d stopped looking like a kid. How come I hadn’t noticed before? Then I wondered if *he* ever checked *me* out like that, and I looked away. On second thoughts, maybe it *was* a little weird.

“Y’know,” he mused, “I could try searching the dark web for leads about the Santiagos. Maybe we can find out who sent that message about *The Forgotten Village*.”

I had not even the tiniest idea what he was talking about or how any of that information might be on the dark web. “Or I could just message them back and ask.”

“Sure, but right now the sender has the advantage. They know who *you* are but you still don’t know who *they* are.”

“Are you saying they might lie?”

“Yep. Especially if they had something to do with Maxim and Masha’s disappearance.”

The possibility had occurred to me, but I didn’t take it all that seriously. “Then why would whoever-it-is risk blowing their cover?”

Kenzie shrugged his shoulders. “Could be anything. Maybe for the lulz. Or maybe they want to shut down your mystery pod. Why did you get into this anyhow, Padi? Didn’t you figure that maybe there was something sketchy about what happened to the Santiagos? You never wondered if there’d be folks who didn’t want the whole drama getting dredged up again?”

I had not. It all happened five years ago. I’d presumed that the cops had stopped investigating the Santiagos’ disappearance for a good reason. Honestly, I thought the case was *cold*.

“I can’t stop now,” I mumbled. “I mean, I trailed it and all. Plus the Grover-Dysons gave me such great interviews. Also, isn’t it good that I got the message? It’s a lead, right?”

“Maybe. Only if whoever sent the message isn’t trolling you. You could try to get ahead of that, maybe. Especially if I can find something about them on the dark web.”

At this stage in our conversation, Kenzie had to explain the dark web. I assumed it was the name of a website. You who’re reading this are almost certainly smarter than me and know that it’s a lot more than one website – it’s a network of computers that don’t get

indexed by search engines, a network that you can access anonymously via special software. Unlike searching the open internet, which leaves a blazing trail, basically ‘Padi was here’ over every site I’d clicked.

Kenzie had by then been dipping into the whole ‘hacker space’ for several months. He’d been inspired by the Anonymous and LulzSec efforts against the Third Russian Empire, ever since the European invasions began. Half the planet was horrified by what was going on and either raising money for refugees or actually hosting one. The other half was waiting to see who won the war. The Third Russian Empire had tendrils everywhere and a lot of folk were happy to play nice with the Czar, if it kept the oil and gas flowing.

Kenzie went a step further, is all. I don’t know which citizen cyber-group he’d joined or whether it was all talk. But his cyber-hackery was the main reason why despite living in the same house, we hardly spent time together. Lately especially, he’d had his head down pretty hard in some new project, something I guessed to be very secret. I wasn’t sure if his moms realized, but I had noticed that he’d become super-evasive on the entire topic. So we’d lived separate lives for most of the year – until I started my podcast. Then, for the first time since Maxim’s jazz trio we had an interest in common – the uncovering of hidden information. That I agreed to his offer should in no way be taken as an indication that I understood *any* part of what Kenzie was doing or how dangerous it might be.

In fact I did not, because – well, I refer you to my previous statements re curiosity. And for now you can relax, because as I keep pointing out, this story is about things that happened because of what I chose to investigate, not Kenzie. We’ll just put a pin in the Kenzie thing, for now.

FIVE

DRAWER

The next day was a Saturday. I woke up late after a difficult night with a lot on my mind. Kenzie had already left the house. Bobbie and Zara didn't know where he'd gone. They assumed I did. I had to tell them 'not a clue.' I checked my phone, sure he'd have left a message. But nothing. A little irritated, I sent him a snippy message:

???

The next hour passed quietly. I ate Cinnamon Grahams, showered and dressed, while checking my phone every couple minutes. The message I'd sent Kenzie didn't even register as read. I could see that he'd used the app a few minutes earlier. He'd almost certainly seen my message but evidently wasn't bothering to go into our message thread. Now I was even more annoyed.

Two hours passed. He was definitely ignoring me. I wracked my brain for any reason he'd do that. Maybe he'd met a girl. Or a boy, someone, a friend, and he'd taken off with them. Maybe it had something to do with his possibly secret, possibly dangerous and illegal cyber project. Or maybe he was on a date and too embarrassed to mention it. Bobbie and Zara decided to go with that theory. Obviously I didn't offer up mine. He was also ignoring their messages. They acted like they found it amusing but I noted some tension in Bobbie's jaw as she tried to laugh it off. I made a conscious effort to ignore my phone and instead worked on the script for the second episode of the podcast.

May 29th was uncharacteristically cool that year. Maxim and his mom had on light winter jackets over their T-shirts and wore jeans and hiking boots. In the line behind them, Celine Grover-Dyson recognized Maxim from D.C. International. She'd moved to the senior school by then but remembered the serious-faced young boy with the faux-hawk haircut, who'd entertained parents at her graduation ceremony. From the look of their clothing, she guessed the Santiagos were bound for a cold-weather location.

"I asked them if they were headed for the Rockies. Maxim's mom seemed kind of put out to see me there. It wasn't an official school vacation; my dad had to beg the principal to let us have the time off, which is why I assumed his mom was also embarrassed about taking him out of school. She hand-waved my question and asked if I liked to ski. Then we were talking about skiing. Maxim didn't say a word. They both kept eyeing the window up ahead, where border guards were checking documents. It was taking a long time. People in the line were getting impatient. You could hear muttering like 'what the heck is going on?'"

That's when Celine began to wonder – were the border guards searching for someone in particular? When Maxim and his mother finally arrived at the window, it seemed to confirm Celine's suspicions, because the guard emerged from a cubicle up on the dais and stepped out, leading Maxim and Masha away.

"They marched the Santiagos past the line, back into the main concourse. Everyone went quiet. I tried to smile at Maxim as he passed me. That's when I saw that the color had totally drained from his face. He didn't look back at me. I don't think he even saw us."

The Santiagos followed the border guard like docile lambs in shock. They rounded the corner and disappeared from view. Where did they go next? Were you in Dulles Airport that day, between eight and nine in the morning? Perhaps you saw Maxim and Masha Santiago? Message me please! Let's talk about what happened to the

Santiagos.

I stopped writing and messaged Kenzie again.

Hey, where u at? Working on ep2 script, would love your feedback.

I waited. Nothing. The messaging app said he'd last been seen thirty minutes ago. He was checking in occasionally, but not replying to me. I went downstairs, took an apple from the fridge, chopped it into four pieces and put them on a plate. Kenzie's moms always prepared fruit for us, they did a lot of cute things like that, things my parents never had time to do.

From the day they put me in full-time daycare when I was six-months-old, both my parents worked flat out. Evenings and weekends we often had fun, don't get me wrong, and I loved my kindergarten and school but thinking back I realize that they were always tired, always trying to catch their breath. Only when I saw the different parenting style for people that don't work round the clock, did I notice what I'd missed. Plates of prepared fruit, for example.

I took my plate of apple wedges into our back yard to enjoy, feet up on the deck's rattan furniture. Zara was there too, with a paperback. She gave me a pleasant smile. "What a good idea."

I offered her the apple plate. "Kenzie's still ignoring me."

Zara took the nearest piece and took a delicate bite before replying, "Yes, us too."

"Still think he's on a date?"

"Breakfast was over a while ago. Maybe he's gone to the neighborhood library."

I couldn't think of a single reason he'd do that. The school library was perfectly good enough for our school

work or general reading. Not that Kenzie had actually read a book all the way through for years.

“Why would he?”

“Didn’t he say something about the library?” Zara frowned. “I feel like he might have.”

“When he walked out?”

“Mm-hm. Yes. Definitely. The library.”

“So you talked to him?”

“Not really.” She paused. “I think Bobbie might be worried. She does that.”

“And you’re not?”

“Not if he’s gone to the library.”

I picked up a wedge of apple and set down the plate beside her. “I’ll go check.”

On the way over to the neighborhood library I thought about what Kenzie had said the night before. He’d intended to hunt for clues about the anonymous sender of the Forgotten Village message. I’d gone ahead with my own idea and replied to the sender with:

Hi, thanks. Would you mind introducing yourself?

So far no reply.

“I’ll get ahold of the logs of your podcast host and look at the IP addresses,” Kenzie had told me. “Then I’ll try a reverse IP-lookup. Might lead to an actual address if we’re lucky.”

At the time of hearing, this made as much sense to me as white noise. It’s only much later that I understood what he was actually trying to do. Hopefully I’ve learned enough to explain here. I guess we’ll see.

So, here it is. Kenzie had confessed that what he planned to do wasn’t strictly kosher. Hence the need to source some of the info on the dark web. Don’t ask me exactly how it works, something to do with buying data from hackers and paying them with cryptocurrency. I

knew Kenzie owned crypto of one flavor or another but not the foggiest idea how much. Later I found out. Oh. My. God. Has the world gone insane? I guess that's another story.

Had Kenzie gone to the library to access the Internet so that his IP address at home wouldn't be detected? That's the theory I went with and frankly it calmed me on my bike ride, all the way to the library. But as some readers will already know, turns out you can hide your IP address by using something called a Virtual Private Network, something that Kenzie would obviously know. He didn't need to leave the house to hide his IP address. Neither did whoever left the message on my podcast. The IT guy at the neighborhood library told me all this while I was searching for Kenzie.

Because as you've probably guessed, he *was* not and *had* not been there.

By now I was worried. Sick-to-the-stomach and drained-in-the-face worried. Apple chunks stirred in the pit of my belly, the burn of acid in my throat. A creeping sensation was rounding on me, as if I were wandering a winding alley somewhere far from home and expecting to stumble upon something that had been waiting for me for a long time. An unopened letter in a forgotten drawer.

Beneath me, the bicycle wobbled. I sailed through a red light. A car's screeching brakes jolted me to my senses. I hardly noticed the furious yelling that followed me as shakily, I climbed off the bike and pushed it to the sidewalk, my whole body shivering.

Even through that fog of dread a tiny part of me recognized that this was too much. I had no rational reason to be so scared, at least not yet. It hadn't even been six hours. You can only fight your own mind if you understand that it's tricking you. I didn't know it yet but I was sinking fast into that fog.

Bobbie saw me come through the front door and

knew immediately that I wasn't okay. I was sobbing, barely able to communicate through desperate gulps for air.

“He’s... not there. Something’s... happened to him. I... I know... Something bad.”

SIX

THE RUSSIAN HOUSE

At this time you might want to prepare for an anti-climax, because of course Kenzie eventually showed up. The stress-level of this story only gets worse. If back then I'd known by how much, I'd have made an effort to be more chill.

Bobbie and Zara got me through the next few hours, during which I had some kind of minor breakdown. It didn't take therapy for me to understand why. Behind all those dark thoughts about Kenzie and what might have happened to him, lurked a memory I'd worked hard to avoid.

The memory was of an afternoon two years ago when I'd been called to the principal's office. Bad news, he told me. Things weren't looking good for my mother and father. "You should probably prepare yourself for the worst."

It's not something I want to dwell over. I dealt with it, somehow. Not as well as I thought, perhaps. Which is why I won't be talking about it.

Kenzie evidently has a sadistic streak that made him enjoy the thought of me and his moms suffering for a day, waiting for him to reply to our messages. He claims that he forgot, got stuck in his research and lost track of time. I don't know. Who goes hours without responding to messages from people who are obviously crazy-worried about them? Anyhow, that was the tale told by his wide-eyed-innocent expression, when a couple hours later he sailed through the door. *Forgetfulness*.

I was cried-out by then. Couldn't face him. It took an

intervention from Bobbie and Zara to get me to sit down opposite Kenzie and agree to listen to his excuses.

He shook his head, vehemently. “Oh no, I didn’t go to the neighborhood library. I was at the Library of *Congress*.”

Then followed five minutes of four-way yelling about why he hadn’t bothered to mention that tiny, yet important detail. After that came his account of everything that happened after he got the idea to hack the IP address of my anonymous message-sender.

“I got an early start this morning, while everyone was asleep. Someone in Turkey had dropped me a file with the database I was searching for. It’s a log of traffic to your podcast host.”

“Someone in Turkey, meaning a professional hacker? That doesn’t sound particularly legal,” Bobbie said, clearly anxious.

Kenzie looked shiftily for a second then dodged the issue, continuing; “I was able to get the IP address they used, based on the timestamp of the message. I did a reverse lookup and traced it to a coffee shop in Russia.”

“Russia?!” Obviously, I was a tad alarmed. All you heard those days was Russia this, Russia that, and usually scary stuff.

“Don’t freak out. Russia is almost certainly *not* their actual location. Coffee shops are often used in VPNs to bounce a signal so that it can’t be traced. In fact, I would bet all my remaining crypto that whoever posted this isn’t in Russia. But...” He paused. “On a whim I looked up the address. It’s not just any old coffee shop, it’s inside a museum. In Perm, Siberia. A historic old house, the Elena Atlas House. I cross-referenced all the other databases I have with website analytics and found that same IP address was used to access three other websites. All of them businesses in Mexico City.”

“You’re saying that whoever sent me that message is

in Mexico City?” It didn’t make a lot of sense to me. As an afterthought I added, “What kind of businesses?”

“Just, y’know, nothing special. A tamale restaurant. A spa. And a hotel.”

“So the sender was in one of those places, and bounced their signal from a coffee shop in Siberia?”

He nodded. “Most likely. Can’t believe there’d be many Mexicans in Siberia. And obviously, not many Russians in Siberia order piping hot tamales from a restaurant in Mexico City. Whereas a VPN makes a lot more sense. It’s masking the sender’s true location, which is in Mexico City.”

“Why?”

“My guess? There’s a VPN network node that this person – or persons – in Mexico City is using to mask their real IP address when they access the Internet.”

I repeated, “Why?”

His eyes became animated. Even Bobbie and Zara seemed to be interested. “Why hide his IP address? For privacy. I do it all the time. This stuff is interesting, am I right?”

We murmured our general agreement. Kenzie grinned and ran one hand through his red curls, evidently enjoying the attention.

“That’s why I went to the Library of Congress. I did a search and found a collection of photos there, including of buildings in Russia. You can only see high-resolution images if you physically search from inside the library. Well, I went to check it out.”

“To see a high-res version?”

From under the table he pulled a brown manila envelope. I sensed the tension in the room as he plucked out four 8 by 10 inch color photos of what appeared to be a gingerbread house made from three different types of wood. The roof and window frames were made from a dark, gingerbread-brown wood, the front and sides

were paneled in a pale, coffee-colored wood and the decoration was all in a pale wood, almost white. The eaves and window cornices were intricately carved, very ornate. Each photo showed a different side of the house. It was situated on the corner of a street in Perm and looked to be pretty large, maybe like a six-bedroom house. The only sign that it was a museum was a metal plate to the right of the front door, a three-dimensional portrait of a woman dressed in a Russian fur hat, a style I'd describe as 'benevolent.' The kind of woman who'd donate her house, I imagine.

"Elena Atlas, I presume?"

Kenzie nodded and tapped a finger to the photo. "That's why I wanted a hi-res image. I could see there was something there on the digital photo, but it wasn't clear."

He handed me the photo. In tiny writing below the outline of the woman's face was the inscription 'Elena Arkadyevna Atlas.'

Bobbie cleared her throat. "And the relevance to the disappearance of Maxim and Masha Santiago?"

"Apart from that they all have Russian first names? Who knows?"

I gave him a hard-but-friendly shove. "Get outta here!"

Kenzie beamed. He was right, we were onto something.

"Maxim and Masha have *Russian* names," I repeated. "How did we miss that?"

Zara stood up, sighing. "I can't really see how this is progress, but I'm glad to see you two are friends again." She left to make dinner. Bobbie also made an excuse and left us to what she referred to as our 'scavenger hunt.'

"Maybe Masha got deported to Mexico City," I suggested. "Because she's a Russian spy. That's it, that's the answer."

"Jump to conclusions, much?"

“Hey!” I frowned. “It’s a working theory. Mexico’s full of Russian spies. It’s, like, Spy Central for Chekists. Everyone knows that.”

“Do they, though?”

I stuck out my tongue. “Google it. Plus, their second name is ‘Santiago.’ So they’re *Chilean* Russian spies. Working out of Mexico. Totally makes sense.”

His nose crinkled in ridicule. “What? Now you’re just stringing the names of countries and cities together. And why Chilean? There’s a Santiago in Spain and I’m pretty sure there’s another in Cuba.”

“Cuba? Even better. *Cuban*-Russian spies makes a lot more sense. Mmm, how ‘bout this: if Masha’s a spy then she’d have a cover identity. ‘Santiago’ wouldn’t be their real name.”

“What would a Russian spy be doing in D.C. working as a translator of children’s books?”

“Exactly,” I said. “Why would a translator of kids’ books live in D.C.? Doesn’t make an ounce of sense. Unless Masha was an ‘illegal,’ like in that TV show about the deep-undercover Russian spies.”

“What TV show?” he said, looking confused and irritated.

“*The Americans*. I watched the whole thing, with your moms. About Russian undercover spies in the 1980s. They live in Falls Church too, it’s pretty neat.”

His eyes rolled. “Okay boomer, whatever.”

“Your moms are Gen X,” I countered, with a haughty blink. “And on my theory Masha was an ‘illegal.’ Until her cover got blown and she got deported. Poor Maxim.”

“Not that it isn’t a fun theory,” Kenzie admitted. “But the truth is probably way simpler and less exciting. Like, maybe Masha lived in D.C. because of Maxim’s dad. And maybe said dad heard she was leaving town and put out a stop on his passport.”

“Can you even do that?”

“Oh yeah,” he said. “It’s called an ‘ATRO.’ A parent can stop the other parent from leaving the state with their kid. Bobbie did it to her first wife, Nadine.”

I was stunned. “Wait, what? You never told me that.”

Kenzie began carefully to replace the photos of Elena Atlas House in the envelope. He nodded towards the kitchen, from where we could hear his moms chatting as they cooked dinner. Quietly he continued, “I don’t like to bring it up. But yeah. When Nadine did that they were already divorced, I was spending time with both. She went ballistic when she found out about Zara, tried to take me to Baltimore.”

“Whoa. How come you never said anything?”

He shrugged. “Nadine died when I was five, so...”

“Dude! What else haven’t you told me?”

The look he flashed me then made me snap my mouth shut pretty quick. Kenzie was right; he didn’t owe me a story that could still hurt him.

I thought of him a little differently after that. I’d been assuming Kenzie had what I didn’t – a history of a blissful childhood with two happy parents, no sadness or loss in his past. In fact, I overlooked quite a few things about him, even though we grew up close. Some things can be so in-your-face that you become blind to them.

SEVEN

LOCKED ROOM MYSTERY

Apart from the embarrassing glitch caused by me losing it a bit when Kenzie went AWOL for most of a day, I was having a blast making *What Happened to the Santiagos*. It'd helped me and Kenzie to reconnect with good times in our childhoods, memories we'd suppressed because of the association with Maxim's disappearance. Now that we were talking about it every day, we were both finding it easier to process whatever it was we felt about him vanishing.

Hey-ho, maybe there's something to therapy after all. (Still not going to see a counsellor about my parents. Thank you for your concern.)

Moreover, with the Russia-Mexico connection and my undercover spy theory, it seemed like the mystery had launched. Who can resist a Cold War conspiracy? Not me. So what happened next was a curveball that came out of left field on my blind side and knocked me sideways.

There are certain things you expect from Cold War conspiracies – secret codes, spies, poison, bombs and what-have-yous. So far as the genre goes, the anonymous message about *The Forgotten Village* was in my wheelhouse. Ghosts, not so much.

(It's no joke. Like a ghost leaving untraceable messages in a haunted house. That's where this story is headed.)

The house in question wasn't old, it wasn't deserted and technically it wasn't a house, more of a museum, but you get my drift. Since the only lead we had was the Elena Atlas House, Kenzie decided to look into it. I

didn't know anything about Russia, but Kenzie had his hacker source now, the Turkish guy.

On this occasion however, no hackery was required. We found a website for lawyers who help people buy property in Russia. On the live chat an agent was perfectly happy to explain how to search the Russian Land Registry. By the next day Kenzie had a page of information: six other properties owned by the Atlas group, as well as some company details. The organization seemed to own a collection of architecturally interesting buildings, all formerly private houses. Two were in Russia, one in Cuba, two in Mexico, one in Miami and one in Washington DC. They were all art museums.

Cuba. Russia. Mexico. The USA. My hunch about Cuban-Russian spies hanging out in Mexico City was looking solid. Oh, I was having fun.

Kenzie sent me a link to the Atlas Studios in DC. It was in Georgetown, near our high school. On my phone I flicked through photos of the house. It was built from gray concrete, all hard lines and boxy, like the architect went out of their way to piss neighbors off in the midst of all their pretty brownstone townhouses and tree-lined avenues. I liked the windows a lot. They occupied most of the surface area of the house and had these thick, brown frames, so wide and ugly that it made a glorious statement.

People have been known to call me a Pollyanna, but even I doubted a place like this could have a connection to the Santiagos. Yet as Kenzie pointed out, what other clue did we have?

We visited after school. It wasn't a big place, a ground floor and a basement. The art was all on the ground floor, the basement was where events and workshops happened.

At the front desk was a young woman, probably in her twenties, amazing complexion, lightly applied but

classy makeup and had on a short, tailored dress and expensive-looking shoes. Her hair was coiffed into some glossy, lacquered creation. Honestly, it was like she'd come from a modelling session. She eyed us sullenly, then handed us a leaflet, a guide to the exhibition. Her fingernails were rather surprisingly, a mess. Bottle-green nail polish, cracked and badly in need of a do-over.

I liked her. Those fingernails struck me as a quiet rebellion. Work from two artists was on display – one painted trees using only blue and white, the others were by a sculptor that worked with glass. Honestly, they just looked like amorphous blobs to me. Glass blobs with a lot of bubbles, like soda in a glass.

So much for the art; we were the only people anywhere close to that exhibit. Everyone else was at the front of the house in the tiny coffee shop, six chairs and a rack of fancy notebooks and postcards. We looked around the whole place, searching for any mention of Russia, Mexico, the Santiagos. Nothing. We asked the boujee rebel in the spiffy shoes for a history of the house or the Atlas group.

She knew nothing of use. "They let artists display here in exchange for a few hours watching the store." Turned out Boujee was the painter of blue-and-white trees.

The trip in from Falls Church seemed to have been a waste of time. I looked longingly at the gorgeous notebooks and wondered if I could justify almost twenty dollars for one. I asked to use the restroom while I thought it over. Boujee handed over a key.

The restroom was the highlight of the place. The rest of the house had been given over to the art or coffee but the restroom was itself. Huge enough that sitting on the toilet in one corner, I felt dwarfed by the boldness of the architecture. A shiny industrial duct ran along the length of the ceiling and two concrete slabs flanked the room,

each with a round washbasin made from distressed steel. Two washbasins, only one toilet. There were no windows. Gray slate slabs tiled the floor, narrow gray bricks the wall and ceilings. The basin faucets emerged from a slab of polished stone in the wall. There were no mirrors, so I guess that the stone itself was meant to be the mirror.

Running the hot water, I washed my hands with mandarin-scented liquid soap. As steam rose, it misted over the mirror. I examined the duct work, admiring the aesthetic. This was my kind of place, I decided. Urban chic. I patted my hands on a towel and squirted some of the chamomile-scented lotion provided over my fingers, rubbing it in gently. My skin was so dry.

Perhaps I daydreamed for a moment, maybe realized I was hungry and thought about where we might go for snack nearby. Anyhow, for whatever reason I lost track of time. It couldn't have been for more than a minute or two. Next thing I knew, someone was hammering on the restroom door.

I walked over and unlocked the door. Kenzie was there along with Boujee. Both wore troubled expressions.

She said, "You all right?"

I shrugged. "Yeah, why?"

Boujee flashed me a supercilious smile and stretched out her palm. "Key." But she didn't need to use the room. She just stomped away, back to the front desk.

"Sure you're okay?" asked Kenzie. "You can tell me, she's gone."

"I'm fine."

He shook his head. "If you say so." He seemed reluctant to say more. He paced over to the sink and wet his fingers, wiping his face. "Let's go. Wait." He pointed to the mirror-stone. "What's this?"

"Yeah, not much of a mirror, is it?"

"I meant the writing."

At first I thought I'd misheard him. "Did you say 'writing?'"

He gave me this quirky smile, like he thought we were playing. "Yeah. 'Find unicorns.' Why'd you write that?"

"Me? I didn't write anything."

He continued to point directly at the stone slab. "And yet."

Completely baffled, I closed in for a better look. Then I saw it. The words took a few seconds to register a meaning. An inscription in the fine condensation was fading rapidly but still legible. Traced, very obviously, by finger.

FIND UNICORNS.

My fingertips and nose felt suddenly cold, as if they'd caught a sharp breeze. I swallowed, grasping for a memory that wasn't there.

I repeated, "I didn't write anything."

Kenzie's eyes twinkled. "Then who? Casper the ghost?"

I grabbed his arm, not gently. "I'm being serious, Kenzie. I did not write those words."

He flinched, as if I'd flicked his face. Anger flashed across his face for just a second.

He thinks I'm lying, playing a dumb game.

It's exactly the kind of thing I used to do when we were kids. I would pull scary faces in the mirror and tell him in deadly earnest that there was an evil goblin in the mirror. Then he'd look at my real face and I'd make it as sweet as strawberry pie. Then he'd glance back at the mirror and my face would have changed – you get the idea. Sometimes I'd keep it going for days, until he was scared to glimpse my image in the mirror.

I was sure he enjoyed our game on the quiet, but apparently not. One Halloween when we were eleven he finally yelled at me and admitted that he'd always hated it. So I stopped. And that's what he thought I was doing

that day in the restroom of the Atlas Studios; that I'd gone back to playing the Mirror Goblin. As if we were nine years old, again. He was wrong, I wasn't.

But I didn't insist, I didn't talk anymore about the writing on the wall. I was scared enough for both of us. Because that door was properly locked, and they'd been outside, banging on the door for five or six minutes. No-one but me inside and no windows.

A real locked-room mystery.

EIGHT

FIND UNICORNS

Over the next day or two things were frosty between me and Kenzie. I sensed this wasn't going to be anything either of us could persuade each other over, the way it can be with religion, or vaccines.

He believed I was lying about the writing on the wall. I knew I wasn't but I could see his point. The room had been locked, after all. Then there was the matter of my 'lost time.' I'd heard of 'lost time' from alien abduction stories. It's a classic component of that mythology; lights go weird, observers zone out and when they come to, time has passed. Minutes or hours for which they can't account. That's what happened to me, although it took me a few days to admit it to myself.

Obviously I didn't tell Kenzie. He was already ticked off and I was ninety-percent certain this would only make it worse. I'd experienced a paranormal event, now I was on my own, at least until I understood more. So I went dark awhile. Quiet. Put my head down and did some research.

Also annoying was that Kenzie began to remind me of the *original* theory for why Maxim and Masha had gone missing, the original reason the cops gave for why the entire mystery was dismissed after a few weeks. Kenzie and I hadn't believed it at the time, yet now he seemed seriously to be considering it.

"It's obvious," he insisted. "The cops said it at the time; they were deported. The Santiagos were here illegally. They got caught at the border. ICE got 'em. Happens all the time."

ICE got 'em.

Yep, that was the b-s theory that did the rounds five years ago, when they disappeared. Until the Grover-Dyson girls told everyone they'd seen US passports in Maxim and Masha's hands as they waited on line. That fresh detail slowed the gossip, but by then too many people had already stopped caring. Calling someone an 'illegal' can have that effect. Well, maybe they were 'illegals' – the kind I'd learned about when Bobbie, Zara and I had binge-watched *The Americans*.

Masha and Maxim's Spanish sounded heavily gringified, while their English was one-hundred-percent American. But still – the Santiagos were brown and had a Spanish last name, so I suppose ICE was always likely to be invoked. Honestly, I was disappointed in Kenzie. I didn't like this theory, not a bit.

Even so, the Santiagos' lack of fluent Spanish combined with a Spanish last name had always intrigued me. They didn't vacation in Cuba, they never talked about having lived there. Not that this was *necessarily* a fly in the ointment of my Cuban-Russian spy theory, because of course, it could have been a secret that they had a connection to Cuba. If Masha really was a Russian spy based out of Cuba you'd expect her Spanish to be a) flawless b) Cuban. And her English, presumably, would have some tinge of a Russian accent. At least so I thought, until I spent some time actually researching the tradecraft that had been featured in the TV show about 'illegals.'

Turns out that the Third Russian Empire's foreign intelligence service – known as the Cheka – was still thought to be running 'illegals.' The irony wasn't lost on me – people had gossiped that the Santiagos disappeared because they were 'illegals' and now it seemed they might in fact have been 'illegal' Chekists – spies with deeply buried identities. Illegals were given time to build up a

history of living in the target country under some humdrum identity. They'd have almost flawless, Standard American English. Then, when their cover identities were solid, they'd start spying. I thought about Masha's job. What could be more humdrum than a sweet-natured occupation like a children's book translator?

Everything was falling into place, except for the inconvenient incident of my 'missing' six minutes alone in a locked restroom, while the words 'FIND UNICORNS' somehow materialized in steam on a wall. I didn't want to talk to Kenzie about it. I was pretty sure he didn't want to hear about it. I didn't even like to *think* about it because when I did, unwelcome thoughts bubbled up.

During the day I tried to ignore those thoughts. I filled my time with my podcast. Aside from the research and scriptwriting, there was so much to produce. I thought about asking Kenzie for help, but he was being weird. Basically I was flat out and reaching my bed each night in a state of exhaustion, so busy I had barely time to drink enough water. It was the happiest I'd been since losing my parents.

Even so, I started waking in the middle of the night to find myself in a dark, quiet house, thoughts racing. *Something* was waking me. A dream, perhaps. I never remembered any dream but I could still feel traces of adrenaline coursing through my veins. And those words were there, they'd wormed their way to the front of my mind until when I closed my eyes that's what I saw.

FIND UNICORNS.

Three days after our visit to the Atlas Studios, after one of these forgotten dreams I went downstairs. I poured myself a glass of chilled water. As I closed the fridge door I almost dropped the glass, startled. Kenzie was standing behind the door, like a serial-killer in a horror movie.

“Kenz! You scared the bejesus out of me.”

He glared at me. “Swear to me you really didn’t write on that wall.”

“Still with that? Jeez, Kenzie! I swear! Now will you believe me?”

Almost triumphantly, he relaxed. “Then I’ve figured it out. The writing must have been there already. Someone wrote it before you got there. Steam can do that – you write using something waxy or greasy. The writing stays invisible – until steam reveals it.”

For a moment I could feel a surge of joy and relief. I wanted to believe he was right. But the memory of the writing was very clear in my mind. I had a mental image of water dribbling in the condensation and trickling down from each letter, which surely wouldn’t happen if the steam was just revealing a greasy smear on the stone. Kenzie, however, seemed so eager to convince me. I didn’t have the heart to object. More than anything, I wanted us to be friends again.

“Then it’s nothing to do with me?” I said.

“Didn’t say that. Could be someone followed us to the museum, went into the restroom and left the message for you.”

There were a few holes in that theory. I almost had to bite my tongue to keep from listing them. Kenzie wanted to be friends again, that’s all that mattered.

“Left a message for me – about ‘unicorns?’”

“Right,” he agreed. “It can’t be meant literally. Obviously ‘unicorns’ is code. A clue. Have you maybe looked into that?”

Was he kidding? I’d been way too freaked out to do a thing like that. “I’ve been getting to grips with Cheka tradecraft,” I told him, fudging the issue. “My guess is that unicorn mythology is about to turn into another rabbit hole. But yeah... I have to admit it’s a solid lead.”

“Okay then, can I help?”

“I thought you’d never ask. I’ll Google. You do dark web.”

A hopeful grin began to spread across his lips. “I’m glad you said that... cos I already took a peek.”

“Oh yeah? And?”

“Well... To be honest I did find something. Something pretty dark.”

It was around three in the morning. I wondered if he’d lain awake listening out for me. I mainly wanted to get back to bed, but the way he said ‘something pretty dark’ stopped me even from yawning. I peered into his eyes. No hint of humor.

“You’re serious? How ‘dark?’”

“Child trafficking. Dark.” He said it with a mixture of dread and triumph.

“Damn, that is dark.”

“Yeah, like I said.”

We shuffled across to the kitchen table and he took out his cell phone. Huddling around the glowing blue light of its screen, he showed me what he’d found.

“Your half-assed, ‘illegal’ Cuban-Russian spy theory might not be so far off-base,” Kenzie began.

“That’s because it was always *full*-assed. Unlike your ICE theory.”

“Not *my* ICE theory, but fair. All I mean is that from the facts you started out with, Cuban-Russian spy in Mexico seemed like a bit of a reach.”

“Seemed pretty logical to me.”

“Fine, Holmes, whatever. Anyhow, I started from that theory. Then I searched for leaked government documents.”

I hesitated. “Is that an especially good way to find information about spies?”

“For sure. It’s why people who leak sensitive government information end up doing serious prison time. Supposedly they’re endangering undercover agents.

Brixton Fanning. Certainty Marvel. Ted Storm, if they ever get ahold of him.”

“Yeah, I don’t know who any of those people are.”

“They’re all US citizens who blew the whistle on military secrets.”

“Why would they do that?”

“Because, I don’t know, they thought people should know about the shitty things that were being done in foreign countries by the US military. In our name, without our knowledge. That’s not the point though. What’s important for us, is that every now and then some conscientious intelligence officer or military type dumps a bunch of documents on the Internet. Sometimes they get caught. Either way, the information gets out.”

Nodding, I said, “And you found something about ‘FIND UNICORNS’ in documents like that?”

He pushed his phone closer to me. “I did. On Wikileaks.”

I fumbled with his phone. “What exactly *is* ‘Wikileaks?’”

NINE

VAULT 7

Obviously I'd heard of Wikileaks! The same way I'd heard about Watergate – I knew vaguely it was a big deal to do with government corruption, but I didn't know the details.

"They can't shut down Wikileaks," he told me, "because of the way it was set up. They'd pretty much have to take down the whole Internet. Secrets that get uploaded tend not to stay secrets very long. The main problem is that there's so much material and too few people to investigate."

"Maybe that's what my podcast should be about?"

Kenzie shot me a warning look. "No. Stick to unsolved crime. Getting into the secrets of the rich and powerful isn't for folks like you and me."

His warning, however, had something of the opposite effect. When I'd started investigating the death of Rich Wonders I'd stumbled across a whole online, citizen detective community. It was a lot of fun, frankly. The most fun was when I'd experienced a frisson of danger. It happened a couple of times in the Rich Wonder case. Far from being deterred, it'd sent me in search of another mystery, until I realized I had one in my own past.

Kenzie's phone screen displayed what he'd discovered on Wikileaks. It was a project that contained multiple mentions of 'unicorns.'

"It's part of a document dump called 'Vault 7' – a huge leak of confidential CIA information. Mostly about CIA hacking techniques – they're known as 'weapons.' Also a lot of the info they hacked from a bunch of

sources, like cell phones and TVs that operated as bugging devices.”

“‘TVs that operated as bugging devices?’”

“Yeh, so next time you ‘Netflix and chill,’ bear in mind the NSA might be listening.”

I couldn’t tell if he was joking. I checked the time on his phone. 3:23am. My heart was racing.

“Let me see if I got this straight. The CIA hacked information that mentions ‘unicorns’ – and it’s something to do with child trafficking?”

Kenzie handed me his phone. “Read it for yourself.”

I speed-read the page a few times. It was an email, largely redacted. All the to: and from: information was blacked-out as well as much of the content. Kenzie was right; child trafficking was mentioned once. There was a short list of ‘interested parties.’ This was a bunch of organizations with names I didn’t recognize apart from the Mossad, which I’d heard of: Israeli intelligence. The term ‘unicorns’ popped up twice in one paragraph.

“Meanwhile the unicorn project will remain at K-FDN. (Redacted) assigned to oversee. Interest in (redacted) unicorns expressed at the highest level, expect contact from (redacted).”

“What’s ‘K-FDN?’”

“No clue. There’s no other mention of it anywhere, I already checked. But check the list of so-called ‘interested parties.’ They are *all* secret services. And from a bunch of the worst countries for human rights, at that.”

In the unlit kitchen of Kenzie’s moms at around three-thirty in the morning, the sheer ridiculousness of what we were doing hit me like a brisk slap. I’d been trying so hard to tell a compelling story, one that would hook my podcast listeners. But now, even I could see how slight were any connections between the facts we’d unearthed.

Could we *really* have chanced upon an international child trafficking ring that had stolen Maxim Santiago one

morning at Dulles International Airport? If so, the CIA were probably already involved. Maybe Kenzie was right – Wikileaks stuff might be too spicy for a teenage investigative journalist.

“You know,” I said, my voice slow and tired. “Maybe the Santiagos were deported, after all.”

Kenzie was silent for a moment. Then – “I don’t believe this.”

“Why not? Think about it – even if they had US passports like Celine said, those passports could have been fakes. Maybe the border guards figured that out and ICED them.”

“I mean, I don’t believe *you*,” he said, sighing. “The biggest mystery at this point isn’t what happened to the Santiagos. Can’t you see that? *Who is sending you these messages?* That’s the real question.”

I inhaled slowly, blinking. “Omigod. You’re right. I’m an idiot.”

“Someone wants you to keep on looking into this case. Maybe it’s an insider from the CIA.”

“Oh sure, the CIA want help from *me*. Fun. You’re a funny guy.”

Kenzie ignored my smirk and opened a kitchen cupboard. He took out a jar of Skippy peanut butter. From a drawer he took two knives and handed me one. “Pass the bread.” He joined me at the kitchen table, still in the dark as we spread peanut butter on soft white bread. I spread mine nice and thick, a layer of nougaty goodness on the spongy bread.

“Mmm. Brain food,” I murmured between bites. “Why would a CIA analyst use us to investigate a child trafficking case?”

“Because we actually *knew* Maxim. Has to be that.”

I nodded. “It’s just wild enough to be plausible. Let’s wargame it a bit more. How do we tell this analyst that we’re on the case?”

“They could listen to your next episode? We already know they listened to the trailer.”

“Do we though?”

He frowned, disappointed that I hadn’t caught up with his reasoning yet. Ugh. *You* try being besties with a certified genius.

“Obviously, they’re listening to your podcast. They know you’re an amateur sleuth but more importantly, they kind of had to listen to your pod if they were able to leave a message on it.”

I blushed, glad of the darkness to cover my shame. “I know they *found* my podcast, dummy. What I meant to say is, you think they actually listened to it?”

Thankfully, he didn’t knock that down as a silly question. “I’d say they did, yeah. Whoever it is probably has a search alert on ‘Masha Santiago.’ One day, up pops a link to your trailer. They listen to it. Yeah. Why wouldn’t they? They need the information. They have intel on Maxim, that’s how they know about *The Forgotten Village*. So they send you a message.”

A cold but unmistakable thrill ran through me. A CIA analyst listening to *La Chica Curiosa*! By now I had material for another ten minutes, which was the length of each episode. The story of how our secret informant had sent the first two messages was probably enough, but it would mean disclosing that we had that kind of source.

I wrinkled my nose. “Really? I dunno. Seems a little... *picayune* of them to pick up on a detail like the music we played. No, Kenz, you’re cold, very cold. At least, I think so. And even if somehow, someone at the CIA found about our tween jazz band, which I honestly doubt, if the CIA sent me messages, should I really, y’know, talk about them on the pod?”

“About the messages?”

I nodded. “Frankly, I wasn’t planning on it.”

He paused for thought. “They didn’t tell you *not* to. I’m pretty sure you’re good.”

“It just doesn’t make sense. All we’ve done so far is find the kind of intel that whoever sent the messages *already* knows. For example, a confidential CIA document that mentions ‘unicorns.’ Or this child trafficking case, ‘K-FDN.’ We don’t know what it means. ‘K-FDN’ is probably not even important.”

“Obviously it’s important!”

“Then why wasn’t it redacted?” I objected.

“Everything else was.”

“Well, maybe not. At least according to Wikileaks. Vault 7 docs were only redacted to protect named individuals and hacker secrets. There’s plenty of important stuff left.”

I licked the final traces of peanut butter off my fingers. “Then I say we go back to our alleged CIA informant and tell them about ‘K-FDN.’ Then wait for the next hint.”

“Sounds like a fantastic second episode.”

“Maybe.” I sighed. “If they’re actually CIA and not someone yanking our chain. Which – think about it – could totally be happening.”

“But who’d do that?”

“Not a clue. I’m having a hard time believing this is really happening.”

“Why, Padi? You have a great nose for a mystery. We always figured there was something sus about Maxim’s disappearance.”

“Yeah, but *child trafficking*? Don’t you get it? If Maxim was being trafficked then Masha would have to be involved. And that, I cannot see. Masha seemed so, so nice.”

The idea that our twelve-year old friend might have been trafficked right under the noses of the school community was pretty grim.

"True," Kenzie agreed. "All those times we were over at theirs, we could have been in danger of..." He left the rest unsaid and concluded, "I think I liked your Cuban-Russian spy theory better."

I picked up the glass of cold water I'd poured and drank it down in one go. Beads of moisture on the outside of the glass trickled down my wrist.

"Well anyway, thanks for hanging out," Kenzie said. "I wasn't sure you were awake, since you were ignoring my messages. But I thought I heard you tossing and turning."

I put down the empty glass and wiped my lips with the back of my hand. "Ignoring *what* messages?"

Kenzie showed me his messaging app. He'd sent me two messages in the past hour. Messages I definitely hadn't received, which I proved by showing him my phone.

"Now that's odd," he said, pensively. He fiddled with my phone for a minute then showed me the app again. Suddenly the missing messages were there.

"That's a relief," I chuckled. "For a second there I thought maybe the CIA had hacked *my* phone."

But Kenzie didn't smile. He tapped my phone. "Spyware? Could be. Only one way to find out."

I gasped. "I was joking! You actually think my phone could be hacked?"

"Open it." He took my phone without any resistance from me and for the next minute or so, examined a few things, don't ask me what. "Whoever is sending the messages seems to know where you are. Did you tell anyone you were going to the Atlas Studios in Georgetown?"

"No. But I may have mentioned it somewhere. In a message to you, Bobbie or Zara. Jeez." I took a beat to consider. "Now you think the CIA is surveilling us, are you serious?"

I reached for my phone but he pulled back his hand.
“Give me time and I can find out if your phone is
hacked. But y’know what, Padi? I’m starting to think
maybe we should drop this. Maybe this mystery is too
big, too weird, too dangerous.”

Kenzie hung onto my phone until just before lunch the following day. He stopped by my bedroom to hand it back. "No Pegasus spyware, from what I could tell. I downloaded the Mobile Verification Toolkit from Github and ran various checks. That was kinda fun, thanks, I never did it before."

He lost me at 'Pegasus,' but I was loving his confidence. "Is the phone clean or not?"

"Probably. Or not." He shrugged. "Loan me the phone another day and I can do a more thorough check."

I wiped greasy smudges from the pearly-pink case and the phone screen. "Ugh, Kenzie. Your fingers must be disgusting, gross, all these marks."

Ignoring this, he leaned forward and with sudden earnestness asked, "Can we talk about what happened yesterday? I feel like you're moving kind of fast."

I was totally thrown. "Talk about what?" I managed, eventually.

He sucked in air sharply through his teeth and then paced across the room, dropping heavily onto the end of my unmade bed. With his right foot, he dragged my desk chair around until it was facing him. "C'mon, Padi, I'm just checking in on you."

I racked my brain for another moment, then narrowed both eyes as I realized what was up. "Did Zara put you up to this?"

"What if she did? She cares about you. Obviously."

Sitting down, through gritted teeth I said, "If your

mom wants to shrink my head she could have the decency to do it directly.”

“She reminded me to check in with you, is all. It’s not her fault that I don’t get social cues.”

I sneered. “Oh, you get them. You just don’t want to own that you triggered me.”

“So, you admit it.”

I threw up both hands. “That you triggered some horrible memory about when I found out about my parents? Yeah, Kenzie, I admit it. I’m not the one who left everyone hanging for hours, sick to their stomachs with worry.”

“Do you want to talk about it, though?”

“I literally am!” I exploded.

Kenzie shook his head, eyes downcast. “No. About what happened. About your parents.”

My eyes bulged with suppressed rage, for two, three, four seconds. “No. I really don’t. How about instead we talk about whatever your mysterious cyber project is, the one you were obsessed by until you decided to get all up in my business?”

“Oh-kay,” he replied, briskly. “I respect that, so, let’s ah... Let’s both agree to respect boundaries.” He seemed relieved, after all that. “So, d’you want to get back to your whole...?”

“The investigation, my podcast, the main thing I use to manage my anxiety, would I like to do that? Yeah, I think so, Kenz, think that’d be just awesome.”

He leaned back on his hands and nodded. “What are you going to do?”

I’d decided to keep going, for now. The whole point of my podcast was to unearth unsolved mysteries. I wasn’t the one with something to hide. Until our anonymous benefactor revealed themselves or begged me to keep their secrets, I was an open book.

I opened the podcast messaging app and replied to

the message thread about *The Forgotten Village*, typing a reply: ‘K-FDN?’, the clue we’d gotten from the Vault 7 leaked files that mentioned ‘the unicorn project.’ Guess I could also have written that, but I figured K-FDN was a nice detail, something that’d show we had specific knowledge. I hit ‘send.’

“No going back now,” Kenzie announced with an air of finality.

The next day was uneventful. I kept checking my phone, hoping for a reply from our Anonymous Benefactor, our A.B. who we’d taken to referring to as ‘Abby.’ No activity there.

The following day was also uneventful. I kept working on the script for the second episode, which was going well. I was beginning to wonder if I’d just have to give up and admit to my audience that the trail had gone cold. I’d figured I could probably get away with a third episode to round up and chew over all the different theories to date. It was a stalling tactic I’d also used during ‘Rich Wonders.’ Yet unless we could glean more information from *someone* or *somewhere*, starved of oxygen the Santiagos podcast series looked like tapping out at episode three.

Which is why, when an unmarked black van turned a corner and screeched to a halt in front of me on Wisconsin Avenue, my first instinct wasn’t to panic but instead the fleeting thought: *At least I’ll have something for episode four.*

The thought lasted only a second, but it stole away my critical response time. I should already have been running away. Instead, when the door slid open and a figure in a ski-mask jumped out and shoved me into the back of the van, I was too dazed to make anything more than a useless objection – “Hey, what gives?”

In the next instant a cloth bag went over my head. Then everything changed. My nervous system took a few

seconds properly to engage with what was a totally new and unexpected situation but when it did, it took ahold of my entire body and made me feel like I'd been injected with some mind-altering substance. I felt disoriented, teetering from side to side as the van made rapid turns. The road sounds became jumbled up, no matter how hard I tried to focus on individual noises, here and gone a second later. Fear of a wholly unprecedented nature grabbed my entire body and seemed to shake it violently. Even my toes seemed alert to the fact that I was in danger. I tried to talk and couldn't. It was as though my jaw had locked.

Someone in the van put a hand on my shoulder. "Breathe."

The hand was firm, with only a reassuring amount of pressure. The voice belonged to a man. It was someone who seemed to want me under control rather than someone who was worried if I was about to have a heart attack. I breathed. After a few minutes my breathing became less ragged and shaky.

"Good," murmured the unseen man. "We'll be there soon."

We were in the van another twenty minutes before it slowed to a halt. In the final five minutes I tried to pay attention to the sounds of the road. We'd left D.C., I was certain. Probably ridden the freeway for a little while and then pulled off. I guessed we were somewhere in the country or a quiet, fancy suburb. The van drove into an underground garage, I think. My captor opened the van door and escorted me, still hooded, shuffling up some steps and through a hallway (I know because I touched the walls) until I felt my toes hit something.

"Sit back," said a familiar voice. *Very* familiar. If not for the total disorientation of being abducted I would surely have recognized that voice. But honestly, I

struggled to identify its owner. Isn't that weird? "It's a couch," the woman added, helpfully.

When my unseen escort removed the hood I found myself in the living room of a very simply furnished suburban house. Sitting in a fake-leather tub chair opposite the couch was the person whose voice I knew. It was Olga Garcia, my guardian. To say I was stupefied would be very much too mild.

"Olga? What's happening? Did you do this?"

"I'm sorry, Veronica."

"It's Roni now," I growled.

"Of course. Forgive me, Roni."

I fell silent, seething. Every time I met Olga I wondered why my parents had wanted me to live with someone quite so disinterested in my life. Then again, if she'd liked me more she'd probably have wanted me to live with her in the boonies or wherever this was, and I mightn't have been able to continue at D.C. International.

I surveyed the room, watching Olga send her errand boy, my captor, to bring us some sodas. He'd finally removed his ski mask to reveal a rather sweet face with a chin dimple, tidy, short dark-brown hair, clean-shaven with cheekbones to die for, a slim, lightly-built guy in his twenties. His light brown eyes were soft and gentle, not what I'd have guessed for the tough-guy he was trying to play. He had on what appeared to be box-fresh white sneakers, straight, ankle-length black slacks, a long-sleeved black T-shirt under a thin, charcoal gray, quilted body-warmer, the entire combo screaming 'urban Tokyo style.'

I glared. "Isn't it illegal to abduct a person? Even if they're, y'know, whatever-I-am to you."

The errand boy returned with a tray of Pepsi, Sprite and orange Fanta. I took the Fanta.

"You are my 'ward,' Roni. And yes, technically it's

illegal for me to abduct you. Do you wish to press charges, send me the same way as your folks?"

Scowling, I popped the can of Fanta as aggressively as I could. "Maybe." I peered into the kitchen beyond the living room and to the street beyond. This was a house, not an apartment. Olga lived in an apartment downtown, or so I'd been led to believe.

"This isn't your house, you don't live here."

Olga leaned forward in her chair. She nodded, tight-lipped. "You're right."

"Where are we? Why'd you have your guy steal me?"

Olga stretched her small hands on her thighs, pausing to consider. I surveyed the glass surface of the coffee table. There was nothing else there, no magazines, no coasters. The whole place was minimally furnished, like a show home.

"I had become somewhat concerned that you're being followed."

"You mean, by someone other than you?" I shot back. "What is this anyhow, since when does the World Health Organization have people followed?"

She shifted her shoulders in the most minimal shrug. "In point of fact we only started to follow you today. Other things brought to my attention that you're being followed."

I exploded. "What 'things'?"

"Right now I can't tell you. Sorry."

"Omigod, Olga, really? Then why say anything at all?"

She broke in: "I can tell you, however, that I haven't worked for the World Health Organization for several years. Since before your parents were convicted."

"Since they died to me, you mean" I said, rolling my eyes.

Olga fell silent, her eyes filled with pity. Softly she

said, “Really, Roni? You’re still telling yourself that story?”

I felt cold sweep through me, all the way to my fingertips. After a long time I spoke again, in a voice so parched it cracked. “It’s easier this way.”

ELEVEN

FINALLY, A REAL LEAD

At this point, obviously, I kind of have a confession to make. I may *inadvertently* have given you the impression that my parents died in the pandemic. That view might not be absolutely based in reality, but it's worked to keep me sane. The truth is painful in a very different way. They laundered money for foreign agents, for a government bent on destabilizing the USA. And the worst of it is, they didn't even know. They 'simply and merely' took their money and washed it, almost no questions asked, and found themselves being held responsible for more than they bargained for. Or maybe they knew all along, what they were getting into? The prosecution believed they did, but my parents have always denied it, plead ignorance and greed.

Who knows what they were thinking? So my version wasn't a total lie – I kept one part of the truth. The people I'd believed my parents to be, intelligent, responsible, upstanding citizens and all? Those people were *gone*. In their place were a couple of chumps – and that's the best-case scenario.

"Your mother especially, she misses you a lot," Olga said, gently. "Couldn't you take her calls, at least?"

Tears brimmed in my eyes. "Is this why you stole me, to guilt me into visiting my lying, cheating, *fascist* mom?"

Olga winced. "Don't use that word."

"Why not? It's the truth."

"They have never been fascists."

I shot back, "They laundered money for fascists,

though. Didn't they? For literal Russian oligarchs, funneling money to propagandists. Fascist-enablers."

Olga let out a deep sigh. "It's not a word should be thrown around so easily. The fact is, your mom and dad screwed up. They didn't look closely enough into their clients' background, that's true. They're paying for that crime. But they're still your parents."

I began to laugh, bitterly. "And they're still your friends. Figures. You're another crim."

"I'm not a 'crim' Roni."

"You just admitted to abducting me," I said, wiping away a tear. "So yeah, I think so. And what else? You're CIA? I mean let's face it, that's crim-adjacent."

Olga pressed her lips into a hard line. "I'm not CIA."

"Did my parents make you my guardian after you moved to the CIA? Or before?"

"I said, *not* the CIA. And it was before."

I scoffed. "Great. Such judges of character, my parents."

"You're still upset. I get it."

"Oh, you think?"

She gave a grudging sigh as her eyes met mine – calm focus reflecting back my resentment.

"All right. We didn't ever really get onto the best footing did we? I should have gotten to know you better, Roni. Will you forgive me? I'd like to make amends, starting right now."

I took a deep breath, not sure where to go next.

"Drink your soda," Olga suggested. She picked up her Pepsi and sipped. "Everything's better when you're hydrated. Would you like a snack? Let's eat and drink and catch up, yes?"

I reached for my phone. "Let me just tell Kenzie and his moms where I am."

Olga gave a tiny shake of her head. "Not right now, sorry dear." She reached into the pocket of the knitted

cardigan she had on and withdrew a tiny SIM card. “Your phone. I’ve turned off Wi-Fi, too. No-one can know you’re here.”

A tremor ran through me then, a faint callback to what I’d experienced during my abduction. What if I had horribly misjudged my so-called ‘guardian’?

Olga seemed to notice the shift in my mood because her tone became imploring and two shades warmer. “I get that you need the distraction, Roni. But you need to stop making your podcast.”

I set down the can of Fanta. “You’ve been listening?”

In Olga’s eyes I spotted a flicker of what I’m going to claim as *admiration*. Hey, I’ll take whatever affirmation I can get from a parent substitute. “Did I listen to *What Happened to the Santiagos?*” She suppressed a smile. “I did.”

“And?”

Olga pursed her lips before replying. “I’m not one for a cliché, but in this case I believe it’s appropriate to call it a ‘can of worms.’”

I didn’t respond. If she truly believed that, then I could rule her out as my secret source: Olga couldn’t be ‘Abby.’ *So what* if she’d heard the trailer? That wouldn’t be a huge stretch, since she was my legal guardian. Even if she only called or texted once a month to check in with me, I could imagine that on the quiet, she might actually pay some attention to me, the way parents do.

So – no more mystery about why she’d had me followed. Olga was worried, for some reason. She was looking out for me. Maybe our parents had always known more about the Santiagos than I had. If the child trafficking connection was real, that might also explain the silence from teachers at D.C. International. There are things people really do not like to talk to kids about.

“Roni, I asked you a question,” I heard Olga say, interrupting my train of thought. “How much do you know?”

“I know that Maxim was probably trafficked,” I admitted. Might as well tell Olga, since I’d been planning to tell the whole world in episode three. “But we can’t figure out whether Masha was involved.”

Olga’s flat expression didn’t give much away but I could tell she wasn’t surprised. “All right,” she said. “But what led you to the Atlas place in Georgetown? Was it just a coincidence?”

I faltered, momentarily confused. Olga seemed astonished that we’d tracked down the Atlas Studios, yet not that we’d linked Maxim to child traffickers. Again, I hesitated. It was all going to be in the podcast anyway, so why not just spill?

I told her all about Kenzie’s clever IP-tracking of the message on my podcast and how he’d traced it to the owners of a museum in Russia, which had led us to the Atlas Studios. At this time I didn’t mention his theory of the true origin of the message, which was Mexico City.

All in good time. Even without the Mexico part, Olga really seemed impressed. “Some of his process doesn’t sound strictly legal,” she conceded, “but did your friend at least take the necessary precautions to cover his tracks?”

I nodded a few times despite having no idea what she was talking about. “Totally, he did.”

Olga leaned back into the tub chair, one hand grasping her chin as she fell into a long, pensive silence. I waited, slurping my Fanta and running my eyes over the errand boy/kidnapper once again. This time, my attention lingered on his chin dimple. He was actually pretty hot, if I’m honest. Stockholm Syndrome is real. He swooped by, picked up my empty can of soda and vanished like a butler.

“All right,” she announced, sitting up straight and making eye contact. “Here’s what we’re going to do.”

I waited. Olga seemed to think some more about

whatever it was and then continued. "I'm going to tell you a few things about your friend Maxim and his mother. You can't put any of this in the podcast or publish on the Internet, ever. Which is why you *need* to end the podcast. Ideally, delete the trailer."

"What? But the first episode is ready and it's so good."

She spoke over me. "I'm sorry, Roni, really I am. Hear me out, will you? By the time I'm finished I hope you'll want to help me. And if you want to help Maxim, you'll do as I ask."

I froze. "To help *Maxim*? You know where he is?"

Tersely, she nodded. "I might. That's why I need your help. But first, let's get something out in the open."

Kidnapper/butler showed up right then with a tray of sandwiches and more sodas.

"Peanut butter," he said, indicating the white-bread sandwiches on the left. "Or jelly," he added, pointing to the wholewheat sandwiches on the right.

"PB *or* J?" I observed. "Why not live a little and mix it up?" But by the time I'd picked up a peanut butter sandwich he was gone. They probably teach the vanishing technique in butler school.

Olga finally moved onto her own confession, which was the long-overdue explanation for what she'd been doing since leaving the World Health Organization.

"Your parents and I met at college – you knew that, yes? We all studied computer science. They went into finance and set up their accountancy firm, I went into bioinformatics – examining the data in human genetic code. I'm an expert in big data. That, plus having worked for the World Health Organization led me to working for the United Nations. In the Office of Counter-Terrorism. Analyzing patterns in a different kind of data."

This was a long way from what I'd expected her to say. She acknowledged my surprise. "Not as glamorous as

the CIA or FBI, perhaps. But important, nonetheless. Although as you can imagine, your folks didn't approve."

Glumly, I nodded. My parents had often expressed skepticism of the United Nations, calling it 'useless as a chocolate teapot.' The sad truth was, organizations that laid down international laws, for example against money laundering, were what gave them a business in the first place. I guess they'd managed to persuade themselves that those laws shouldn't exist, because they preferred to think of themselves as ordinary accountants who'd done nothing wrong. "Honestly, I'm surprised they let you be my legal guardian."

"I wasn't their first choice," Olga admitted, wryly. "But I *was* the only option the court would accept. Hey, let's put a pin in a discussion about your parents. Can we? I promise we'll talk a lot more about them. Unfortunately, right now we're in something of a dilemma. Your friend Maxim may be alive. For the first time since he and Masha went missing, we may have a lead on where he is."

"Omigod, you do? Where?"

"A place called Tapachula in Mexico. It's in Chiapas, have you been there?"

I shook my head. My father had some family in Mexico City, so we'd visited a few times, but nowhere else, not even Cancun. Now I was really confused.

"Why's he in Chiapas?"

"We believe Maxim escaped to there from someplace else. And I'm not sure how or why he ended up in Tapachula, if it even is him."

"So were he and Masha deported?"

Olga took a breath, as though it pained her to say what followed. "They weren't officially deported, by which I mean that they had valid papers to remain in the USA. But someone extremely powerful wanted them deported, so that's what happened. They went to Cuba."

“Seriously? They sent a twelve-year old kid to *Gitmo*? That’s even worse than being trafficked.”

“No, not Guantanamo. It wasn’t that type of ‘deported.’ ‘Trafficking’ is closer to the truth. Their abduction was strictly criminal, not political. People were bribed; we know this. Maxim is worth a great deal of money to certain parties. Which is why we need to find him, fast. If I’ve been able to track him to Tapachula, then so will others. His life will be in danger.”

“Maxim is worth money? Why? Specifically him or any kid? Is this, like, some gross Epstein situation? How did you find him? And who else is looking?”

Olga made a damping-down gesture with one hand. “Whoa there, slow it down. I can’t answer all your questions, Roni. Much of this is classified. I’ll tell you what you need to know in order to help me. Deal?”

Of course, deal. *Information? Gimme.*

“At the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism we have access to many private databases. Twenty days ago, the name ‘Maxim Santiago’ showed up on one of these. It happened shortly before your podcast trailer dropped, which frankly made me suspicious. Roni, do you remember how you got the idea to investigate that mystery?” When I blanked her, Olga shrugged and continued. “It’s probably a coincidence. They do happen. In my line of work you tend to suspect everything and everyone, but yes, there are occasionally actual coincidences. Anyway, Maxim Santiago’s name came up in a database of volunteers working with a small charity in Mexico. There’s very little information. No photograph. No biographical details. Just a name.”

“A name, that’s all? There must be hundreds of people called ‘Maxim Santiago.’”

“One hundred and twenty-four. That’s just in the United States. Another fifty-nine in Mexico. And that’s not all. A few days later the same search came up blank

for that database. The record was gone. At first I thought maybe he'd left..."

"But maybe he got the record of his name deleted? Or did it himself?"

Olga gave a couple of nods, looking impressed. "It's what someone who didn't want to be found would do."

"And makes you suspect that your guy in Tapachula is our Maxim?"

She smiled, wistfully and gave a heavy, resigned shrug. "Two parts hunch, one part hope. That's where you come in. Roni, would you recognize Maxim? He'd be eighteen now, he'd probably look somewhat different. You'd know him, wouldn't you? You and Marc Mackenzie."

"That's what this is about? You want me to go to Mexico with you to check out this random Maxim Santiago?" I laughed. "You didn't have to kidnap me to get me to agree to that, 'Auntie' Olga. All you had to do was ask."

TWELVE

SPYWARE

So many questions. What I could have used right then was a time-out, an hour or two to take stock, ideally with Kenzie.

Being ‘kidnapped’ and then discovering that my guardian was behind the whole scheme, was a bit of a shocker. It wasn’t easy to go from seeing her as Dr. Olga Garcia, my parents’ old college buddy, to seeing her as mysterious Olga Garcia, officer of the United Nations Counter-Intelligence Committee Executive Directorate.

Then there was the teeny fact that my guardian was having me followed. This was too much. It was as though the ground were shifting under my feet. Total disorientation.

One minute I found myself believing that Maxim had been dragged along with his undercover agent mom as she left the country on a mission, or got captured, or her cover blown or whatever. One of those spy things, anyhow. Then along came the child trafficking clue. In this scenario they’d been lured to the airport, presumably, perhaps threatened? Then thrown out of the country by corrupt border guards acting on the orders of some shadowy, very powerful person or cabal.

I hadn’t yet gotten to grips with what it could mean. The spectrum of possibilities was so grim, I shied away from the implications. Organ harvesting was at the most horrific end, obviously. If there was a way to help Maxim without ending up on the menu myself, it felt crucial to do what I could.

We hadn’t spoken about it directly, but I was certain

that Kenzie would agree. At this stage I should make something clear: I hadn't yet told Olga everything that me and Kenzie had found out. Partly because she hadn't asked, but also because in the precious few minutes I'd had to reflect, while Olga left me to go to the bathroom, I came to an important realization.

Olga was behaving as though she assumed Kenzie and I had been followed. According to her, that's why she put her own person on me, almost certainly before our trip to the Atlas Studios. Meanwhile, 'Abby,' Message-Sender of Mystery, had left us a breadcrumb trail. That trail led first to the Atlas Studios and then to the leaked 'Vault 7' CIA documents, to mentions of 'the unicorn project,' child trafficking and 'K-FDN.'

It didn't seem like Olga was 'Abby.' Whoever was feeding us hints, seemed to be encouraging us to investigate. Whereas Olga had made it crystal-clear that she wanted the podcast shut down.

And there was more, like Olga's minimalist approach to her professional life. We weren't close, but she was my legal guardian. Didn't I deserve at least to know what she did for a living? She'd tried to breeze over the fact that she worked for the United Nations in a '*didn't I mention it?*' kind of way. I didn't buy that. Certainly, I would have remembered a cool-sounding job in counter-terrorism. Olga had withheld that she no longer worked for the World Health Organization yet now she wanted my help, wanted me to travel to Mexico with her to identify someone who just might be my childhood friend, Maxim Santiago.

It was a bizarre approach to take, given that Olga was eager to talk me into travelling overseas with her. Even though my parents had chosen her to 'guard' me and the court-approved funds left for my education, until I was eighteen, the reality was that I barely knew the woman. Something didn't fit. Or rather, there was too much going

on. The whole picture seemed too crowded. I kept returning to the same over-riding suspicion.

There had to be a simpler explanation.

Why couldn't I see it? I longed to talk to Kenzie, who as well as being an all-round great guy and best friend, was my preferred sounding-board, when it came to the podcast. Why wouldn't Olga let me have my phone? Who was she afraid might be following me?

I cracked my knuckles and wrung my hands. (Yes, really. Before you sneer, next time you're feeling stressed try going without your phone for ten minutes.) A quick check of the corridor told me Olga was still in the bathroom, so I kept riding the paranoia train.

What if our being followed wasn't the real problem? What if Olga wanted to prevent me calling anyone? What if she actually needed me to stay in a confused state?

I sensed myself being drawn toward what Olga wanted me to do. Firstly, it'd mean a trip, and who doesn't love an airplane ride and some foreign adventure? Secondly, Olga would be helping me since apparently, counter-terrorism was her thing. She'd be in charge. If things went south, it wouldn't be all my fault. I'd be able to sit back and enjoy the experience, instead of having this constant itch-you-can't-scratch.

Counter-terrorism. Child trafficking. How did I end up in a world where these terms weren't just things I read on the Internet? I'd listened to Olga speak about those things with evident sincerity, and even so I couldn't quite believe it. Kept thinking I'd wake up in a minute and it would have been a dream. Or she'd round the hallway with her butler and they'd laugh and admit the whole thing was a prank. Yeah, cool Auntie Olga who had me abducted for kicks. A story we'd tell for years to come. Right?

But no. I wasn't waking up and this was feeling all too real.

What did Olga mean about having me ‘watched?’ Had butler-boy been driving around the city, shadowing me? She’d claimed it only started the day we visited the Atlas Studios. I wondered what Kenzie would say. Maybe there was an electronic tracker somewhere on my person? Or *spyware on my phone*.

Once the thought had occurred to me, it lurked in the back of my mind, refusing to leave. Before I could process my suspicion, Olga returned to the living room. She’d changed out of what I assumed were her office clothes – brown slacks, white shirt, smart court shoes – and into pale gray joggers, a plaid shirt and white sneakers. Her straight brown hair was in a simple ponytail and she’d switched contacts for a pair of glasses with tortoiseshell frames.

I immediately felt more comfortable. This was the Olga Garcia I remembered from visits to the office, where briefly during a contract years ago, she and my mom had shared an office. Scientist Olga, not Agent Olga.

She resumed her place in the tub chair and once again engaged me with that forceful gaze.

“Now Roni, here’s the plan. You and I will swing by Marc Mackenzie’s to pick up your passport. You’ll pack. Then you and I will fly to Tapachula via Mexico City. I’ve arranged to visit your uncle Johny – it’s best if we give an excuse for the trip. We’ll go to check out this charity and see if their ‘Maxim Santiago’ is your friend. If he is, great, fantastic. If he isn’t, well that’s useful information, too. We’ll be back in D.C. within four days.”

“All that way for just four days? Are you actively *trying* to burn the planet? Can’t we stay a little while longer? Take Kenzie too, see the sights?”

“If the planet’s your concern, why would you add another carbon-burning passenger?” she replied, tartly.

I hesitated. *Would Olga actually put spyware on my phone?*

It'd explain how she knew to find me at the Atlas Studios. It could also explain how the steam-message got onto the restroom mirror – she'd discovered from my messages that we were headed to the Atlas place and planted the mirror-writing before we arrived. Or she'd had some minion do it. Butler Kidnapper, for example. Maybe I'd seen him there, but too briefly to recognize him later at Olga's house in the 'burbs. I've been known to overlook even a cute guy until the third time I spot them.

“Well? Are you in?”

My lips twisted into a tight smile. “Honestly?”

Olga blinked, waiting for me to answer.

But why surveil me?

I thought some more about what she could discover from my phone. Maybe Olga wasn't 'Abby,' was not feeding me any hints, but she *knew I'd received them*. She'd waited, watched me unravel the mystery. Now she was jumping in with an innocent-sounding trip to help her identify a teenager who'd be almost nineteen years old by now, a guy that Olga-of-the-counter-terrorism-office alleged was in danger of being trafficked by a terrorist organization. For money.

No. *Too much* of this didn't make sense.

“It's just... I have chores,” I finished, weakly. “I can't just check out in the middle of the week.”

“It's Friday tomorrow. We'd be back Monday. A long weekend, that's all I ask.”

I sighed. “Can I think about it? I really need to talk to Kenzie and his moms.”

Olga grabbed both my hands in hers, a gesture fraught with such unexpected tension and at the same time, warmth, that I was caught off guard.

“It's all right, Roni. This must seem terribly sudden. Maybe even frightening.”

I nodded. “Yeah, honestly, it is a little scary.”

“Your phone has been hacked,” she said, with absolute clarity. I stared into her eyes which were now wide open and signaling urgency above anything else. “I ran a check just now.”

“Pegasus...?” I said, uncertainly.

The tension bent for a moment and she let out a startled chuckle, as if she found it adorable that I believed I understood *anything* about what was happening.

“*Pegasus*? No – it’s... Never mind. There are other types of spyware, Roni. And your phone is definitely infected. You’ve been tracked since May 4th – does that ring any bells?”

In a dry throat, I swallowed. May 4th was the day I’d released the trailer for *What Happened to the Santiagos*. “Seriously, what?” I paused. “So *you* didn’t hack my phone?”

“Me? No. is that what you’ve been worrying about?”

“Or send me the hints?”

“What hints?”

I paused to dissect her expression. She seemed genuinely baffled. Yet more confirmation that Olga was definitely not ‘Abby.’ “So you’re *just* following me?”

“Not sure what you mean by ‘just,’” Olga said, warily.

“You said it yourself – my phone is hacked. Kenzie figured it was. I thought maybe you did it.”

She shook her head, her eyes wide. “No. If you’ve been hacked, that’s someone else. We should probably talk about that. I’m just following you. Since the day you went to the Atlas Studios.”

“Why then? Did something happen?”

And how did she know we’d be at the Atlas Studios?

“Bobbie called me. She was worried about you and her son. Upset because he’d spent two thousand dollars of cryptocurrency buying data. That cryptocurrency was his inheritance from Bobbie’s first wife, Nadine, who didn’t have much money but I guess got lucky with

crypto-coin. It's worth quite a lot now, according to Bobbie."

"Wow. I had no idea."

"About a week ago, Bobbie shared that she's worried Kenzie might have broken the law by buying that data. So I thought it best to shadow you both, at least for a little while."

I sat back. "I'm stunned. Kenzie did *not* tell me he'd spent that much."

"Spent it on *stolen* data, no less. The data that led you to the Atlas Studios."

My mind had gone into overdrive by now.

"And you really didn't hack my phone? Cos if you did, Auntie, that might be a bit of an issue. Whoever *did* hack it knows pretty much everything about my investigation."

"Yes, they do," replied Olga, her voice low and serious. "At least they know everything up until when Tobias put you in the van. Until he took out its SIM card, your phone would have been transmitting your every conversation, every location you visited while carrying the phone. They'd have been able to read every message you sent or received – up until Tobias removed the SIM card."

"Oh. My. God. Sidebar – your butler's name is Tobias?"

"Take this seriously, Roni. Someone else has all that information, right now."

"Well fine, who?"

"Who?" My question halted Olga in her tracks and she seemed to gather her patience before replying. "Two main possibilities, one bad, one terrible."

My eyes widened. "And...?"

"Bad would be CIA. Terrible would be Chekists."

"Why would CIA be bad? Aside from the obvious, I mean?"

With half-lidded eyes Olga admitted, "Because the Cheka has operatives everywhere. The CIA is a bureaucratic organization, paperwork has to be filed for everything. Someone, somewhere will leak it. Eventually, Chekists will know about you, too."

We stared at each other. I snapped my mouth shut and listened. Then she continued, "Since Tobias took out the SIM, everything we've shared here is private. What I said about Maxim Santiago, for example. Whoever is spying on you doesn't know what I told you. Roni, they *must not* find out. Do you understand?"

"Got it," I said, trying to brush it off.

Olga seemed ticked off by my nonchalance. "I'm being very serious now, Roni. There are dangerous people searching for him. A hunch led me to guess that this person in Tapachula might be our Maxim, but it won't take others long to connect the dots. *Much* less if they follow us. So we have to leave for Mexico, right away."

"Fine. But after I talk to Kenzie and his moms," I insisted. "I can't just leave the country. Can you give me until tomorrow morning?"

Olga's hand went to her temples this time, rubbing the right side of her face with her thumb for several seconds. She sighed, shaking her head. I could sense her disappointment. But legal guardian or no legal guardian, you have to respect boundaries. You don't jump onto an international flight with *anyone*, not until you've talked it over with someone you trust.

"Good." She nodded, then chucked my cheek with her knuckles. "You drive a hard bargain, *mija*. We'll figure it out. Your mother and father raised you well. Talk it over with Kenzie, Bobbie and Zara. Even though I've already told Bobbie I wanted to take you on a trip to see your uncle. Alright. Give me a few minutes to rebook the flights for tomorrow. I paid for full flexibility – unlimited changes to the booking until two hours before departure.

Always a good idea when travelling with flighty teenagers.”

“No, *you’re* flighty,” I grumbled, but not-so-secretly relieved.

She used her phone to make the changes, then put it down with a tired smile. “All done. I’ve forwarded the booking and login details so you can use your own phone to check in. I’ll stay in a hotel somewhere nearby and pick you up early tomorrow morning.”

But she didn’t. By the next morning, Olga was dead.

THIRTEEN

PATRIA Y VIDA

Astounded, much? I was. And no, I'm not planning to gloss over Olga's death, but I figured a heads-up might be handy at this stage. After all, we don't want anyone getting too attached. This is a story about where my curiosity took me. I don't want people believing that Cool 'Auntie' Olga led me by the nose. Because no, not even a little bit. This is all on me.

In hindsight and especially because of what happened, I've come to think more kindly of Olga. She *was* cool, I know that now. Back then, I wasn't so sure. The day she had me abducted, it shouldn't surprise anyone that I found her to be cold, nerdy and problematic. As I slept in my own bed that night, or rather didn't sleep, I thought a lot about my guardian. Thought about why she had kept information from me and why she continued to do so. Thought about what kind of person she really was, beneath the mask.

Had my parents known the 'real' Olga? I couldn't be sure, ever. There'd always be this doubt now, whatever she tried to tell me. The uncertainty made me so anxious that around midnight I messaged Kenzie, hoping he was still awake. After a few minutes he messaged back.

If you're so worried, don't go to Mexico with her.

And what do I do the rest of my life?
Avoid her?

You'll be an adult in six months. Then ignore?

Without Olga no access to trust fund until I'm 25, so no.

Did Olga ever not give you what you asked for? She was ok with you living with us.

True.

OK then stop stressing and go to sleep. Night.

I rolled onto my back and slid my phone under the pillow. Kenzie was right. Tomorrow morning I'd call the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism and check if Dr. Olga Garcia worked there. If that part was true, the rest of her story would surely make sense. My parents had trusted her. I *had* to believe they weren't the kind of idiots that wouldn't thoroughly check out a person they put in charge of their only child.

I flipped the pillow and hugged the cool side to my face and chest. A little more relaxed, I began to cast my mind over the rest of what Olga had told me before she'd finally taken me home. She'd offered me more sandwiches and I'd downed a second soda. I'd gradually calmed down enough to think more clearly. I'd even managed to begin quizzing Olga, which led to me figuring something out. Something super important.

"The second message we got was left for us in the restroom of the Atlas Studios – FIND UNICORNS. It's got to be code, yes? Olga – is Maxim a 'unicorn?'"

Her extended silence was perfect. Perfectly *guilty*. She wasn't going to help me? Okay, fine. Maybe I could guess some more on my own.

"Makes sense that he is," I continued, watching her

reactions. “Someone wants to find Maxim, they think I might lead them to him if I keep investigating. They feed me hints and tips. All of which makes me think they don’t know what *you* know, Olga.”

She smiled, somewhat enigmatically. “Go on.”

“Am I on the right track?”

“You’re quite good at this, you should consider a career in intelligence or security.”

“Unicorns are... rare. Is that it? Does Maxim have a rare blood type and they want his organs?”

Olga inhaled, noisily. “That’s quite some imagination, Roni. But you’re way off base.”

“Ah – then you *do* know why they refer to him as a ‘unicorn’?”

She blinked twice. Again with the mysterious silence. “We’re not there yet, Roni. I promise I’ll tell you everything – *if* we find Maxim. But please, understand that it’s for your own protection that I don’t tell you now.”

In fact the only other thing I was able to glean from Olga before we waved goodbye outside Kenzie’s house, was a major bit of intel about the organization at which this ‘Maxim Santiago’ was a volunteer. Even that was only on account of my general sleuthiness.

Before we left her safe house or whatever it was, Olga went to the bathroom, this time to pee, not to change her outfit. She left her phone on the table. I was able to get to it before the screen locked. After checking gently that the bathroom door was safely closed, I searched her message app for ‘Maxim Santiago’ and found one mention.

Maxim Santiago Patria y Vida.

Obviously as soon as I got the chance, which was later in my own bedroom, I’d searched the Internet for a charitable organization known as ‘*Patria y Vida*.’ I checked in Tapachula and also the entire state of Chiapas, then all of Mexico. There wasn’t one. No such organization

existed. This was shortly before I'd gone to bed. But on the edge of dropping off to sleep, in that between-time when your brain is halfway to shutting down, it occurred to me to look a little harder.

My Internet search for *Patria y Vida* had been dominated by links to a popular song from Cuba. The words mean 'Homeland and Life.'

I hadn't entirely overlooked this, in case you think my first attempt was sloppy. La Chica Curiosa does her homework, 'kay? In fact, I'd listened to the song just before going to bed. It was a tough, melancholy reggaeton track, a protest song. A message from the generation of 2020 to those idealistic revolutionaries of 1959. The song was a lament over the failure of revolutionary dreams, which now lay in ruins, while the young and old of Cuba today struggle with hunger and poverty. Roughly translated it goes:

*This is my way of telling you
My people cry and I feel their voice
You five nine, me double two
Sixty years of locked dominoes*

I watched the video. It was impossible to ignore the betrayal and anger and sadness in the eyes of the three singers. Then I started reading about what happened when the song was released. One of the artists fled to the USA – he knew the Cuban government would recognize it as a protest. People in Cuba started taking to the streets in actual protest, singing that song. In the USA, out of solidarity Cuban-Americans did the same. The Cuban government shut down street protests, often with violence. From 2020 onwards the island was a pan on the boil. Their government held the lid down firmly. It didn't matter to them how badly they hurt their citizens.

So yeah, I listened to *Patria y Vida* a bunch of times. The lyrics must have been on my mind because as I was about to sleep I thought about the line 'you five-nine, me

double two.’ That’s how the song referred to 1959 and 2020. Not ‘59-20’ but ‘59-22’. You had to know Spanish to hear it, though.

5922. There was something familiar about the number. I knew I’d seen it somewhere recently. But I couldn’t recall *where*. I fell asleep trying to remember. Well, I was so exhausted, I slept through the alarm. When Kenzie’s mom, Zara shook me awake there was a look of genuine alarm on her face, a harbinger of the horror that awaited.

“Have you heard from Olga?”

I shook my head, bewildered.

“Weren’t you supposed to be catching a flight?”

I sat up, still groggy. Zara was pulling clothes from my cupboard and drawers, bustling about. “Put these on.”

I reached for the phone, which was now on my nightstand.

Zara tsked. “Leave your phone. Hurry! You’re supposed to check in at least two hours before! You have to get to the airport in fifteen minutes.”

Only then did it occur to me that Olga *wasn’t* lurking in the living room or kitchen, impatiently waiting for me.

“Wait – so didn’t Olga call you either? Cos she was supposed to pick me up. Maybe it’s fine. The flight’s probably delayed.”

Bobbie swept into the room then, phone in hand. “I’ve checked. The flight is not delayed.”

Kenzie showed up at the door in his pjs. We looked at each other in turn, reaching a mutual understanding without any words.

“Olga gave me access to the booking,” I said, hesitantly. “She said it’s super-flexible.”

“Then you should change it,” Bobbie said. “Because you’re not getting on that flight. Airport security is no joke these days.”

Still reluctant, I picked up my phone. "Change it...? For when?"

"Doesn't matter," Bobbie said. "Why not the same time tomorrow? Olga can change it again if she decides she's ready after all. Then maybe you can catch a later flight today. First you need to talk to her, find out why she's late picking you up."

I yawned. "I'll call her."

I put the cell phone to my ear. It rang six times then went to a robot voicemail. Kenzie tried to say something reassuring to smooth things over with me, so did Zara. Bobbie, however, locked eyes with me and *instantly* got it. Perhaps Olga had shared more than I knew. Either way, Bobbie was under no illusions that this was normal. She knew that something was wrong. At that stage we had not even the faintest idea how wrong.

"Guess I'm not going to Mexico today," I concluded, pulling on a pair of jeans followed by a loose, striped cotton sweater.

"The reservation," Bobbie insisted.

I picked up my phone again, glaring. "On it." Clicking through to the flight reservation, I changed the booking for the following day. "Happy now?"

In a tone more conciliatory than her wife's, Zara said, "I'll drive you to Olga's hotel."

I hunted for my shoes, mumbling thanks. Then I had one of those odd feelings you sometimes get, call it a premonition. A vague sense of unease at the idea of leaving the house.

"Umm... would it be okay if I stayed?"

Zara frowned. "But shouldn't you come too? In case Olga's running late? Then you can leave together, right away?"

"They're not getting on that flight," Bobbie said. She fixed her wife with an expression that was loaded with meaning.

I'm not sure if Zara understood whatever it was that Bobbie was trying to convey, but she nodded at once. "I'll go over there, find out why Olga's plans have changed. Roni, you eat some breakfast."

I didn't eat breakfast, we didn't get that flight, and me not going to the hotel turned out to be a pretty smart move.

FOURTEEN

CONNECTIONS

The night before, while driving me back to Kenzie's house, Olga and I had finally talked about the past. About Maxim Santiago and his mother, Masha.

"Do you remember how you met him?"

In the passenger seat I'd shaken my head, bemused. Not at the situation, which was less tense than it had been earlier that evening, even though our upcoming trip to Mexico already had me buzzing with trepidation. Her question seemed more like an ice-breaker, something she should have asked earlier in the process. But that was Olga – always business first, then fun.

"It was in the third grade. I guess we'd have been seven years old, seeing as how we both started at the same time at the D.C. International School."

"I remember. I recommended that school to them, in fact."

"That figures. Can't imagine they'd have gone for anything so 'globalist' on their own."

"They weren't like that back then," Olga reminded me.

"Anyhow, I started school aged seven. It was weird for me to have classes in French."

"I thought you were in the Spanish program?"

"After fourth grade I was. But when we applied to the school, the Spanish program was full. They got me private tuition in French a couple months before I started. Anyhow, in that first lesson a teacher asked me something in front of the class. I just froze, y'know?"

"You didn't understand?"

“Weirdly, I think I did. But I just couldn’t get myself to say the words in French. So this other new kid, Maxim, watched me for a second. Then all of a sudden he takes my hand and whispers the answer to me in this *beautiful* French.”

I paused, still remembering the feel of his hand. Warm and dry, his hand not much bigger than mine but with all the assurance of a grown-up. The way my ear buzzed from his whispered French. How he observed me for a few long seconds, with those serious brown eyes, far too earnest for the age we were.

“Then in English he says, ‘don’t worry, they want us to be happy, they want us to like them.’ And instantly, I felt calm. He was talking about our classmates. I had no clue, I assumed they were waiting for me to fall on my ass. That was pretty incredible insight for a seven-year old, don’t you think?”

“Perhaps not for Maxim,” Olga had replied, quietly.

Later I would remember how easily she had accepted this. I’d had years to get to know Maxim so for me it didn’t seem like an odd comment. He really *had* seemed wiser than his years. But later, after everything that happened with Olga, I started thinking about what this little aside said about how well she knew Maxim. Pretty well, it seemed. So why did she need me to identify him?

Right after Olga had made the observation, however, I was too absorbed with telling the rest of the story she’d asked for, the story of how I met Maxim.

“After that I saw Maxim as more than an ally, but also a protector.”

I wasn’t being entirely honest with Olga. Truth is, I had a crush on Maxim, the first crush of my young life. It struck so early that I didn’t wholly comprehend what was happening to me, only that I loved sitting beside him in class, loved to see him smile, loved even more the occasional reappearance of that oh-so-serious expression.

Pure soulful concern. I recalled the warm, dry, comforting feel of my hand in his. It was as though, while we had that connection nothing bad could happen. It might seem like a small thing but I couldn't forget it, couldn't stop from wondering – would that ever happen again? And if it did, what would that even mean?

In the fourth grade a spot opened up in the Spanish program. I moved across and Maxim and I were no longer in the same class. Had I known from the start that we'd never be as close again, I might have been heartbroken. But what does any kid know about their future, at that age? My mom promised me that she'd arrange play dates. I believed her, but it didn't happen. Anyway, in the fourth grade they sat me next to Marc Mackenzie and I found a new friend.

Kenzie made me laugh a lot. We used to tease each other, write 'I love Miss B,' draw love-hearts in each other's notebooks and then try to attract our teacher's attention to it. We had an unspoken rule to use pencil so the victim could get to any graffiti with an eraser before 'Miss B' noticed, and a friendly agreement to issue a warning and a hint about where it might be written. Idiot that I am, I once wrote in ink. Don't even ask me why. Kenzie was incandescent. I still remember being shocked that he could be *so* angry with me for *so* long. And yet eventually, he did forgive me.

The vibe between me and Kenzie was a lot more fun than what I felt around Maxim. With Maxim, I'd be unable to stop myself trembling lightly whenever I saw him alone. I'd wonder if he'd come over to talk to me, or if he'd even noticed I was there. When I realized that he never seemed close with anyone, I was relieved. Yeah – relieved to see him alone. I know how it seems, but it's the truth. My jealousy kept rearing up, even though I didn't understand it at the time.

"We didn't hang out much until the fifth grade," I

continued. “That’s when Maxim asked me and Kenzie to form a jazz trio with him.”

Olga nodded, hands at ten and two on the wheel, eyes on the road ahead. She remembered our trio. “Your mom and dad were so excited to see you perform that song.”

Sitting in her car, I’d been shocked into silence. How could I have forgotten that?

Yes, we’d performed for our parents, privately. It’d happened just once; a rehearsal, one week before Maxim and Masha disappeared. Maxim had agreed to Masha’s request that we play *The Forgotten Village* once through at her house, before our parents took us home. Mr. Garibaldi had promised to let us perform in the next school palooza in front of all the community – usually Maxim’s solo spot, but he’d not yet listened to us play. That must be why I didn’t remember earlier, in the music room. We hadn’t played it to anyone *there*. But at Masha’s, we had. We were sounding okay by then, which was the only reason Maxim agreed to let the parents hear. Their faces when they heard us – wow.

“Olga, that’s amazing. I’d forgotten. Thank you,” I’d told her, touching her forearm. “Thank you for reminding me.”

The next morning, as I waited for Zara to return from the hotel with Olga, I checked my backpack one last time and remembered my discussion with Olga the previous night.

I sent a message to Zara:

What’s up? On your way back yet?

Then I lay back on my rumpled bed, phone in hand.

I must have dropped off to sleep again. I woke suddenly, confused to find myself in a bustling open-air Mexican market. Olga was next to me but when she opened her mouth and talked, no sounds came out.

Oh fine, fine, I told myself. *I'm dreaming.*

Dream-me wandered lazily through the aisles admiring mounds of dark green limes, mangos, pale yellow guanabanas, streaked, stubby bananas, apricots – a blaze of color. The air felt warm, heavy and moist. Nearby but out of sight, a tinny stereo played a *cumbia*. Olga materialized in front of me again with a triumphant grin, saying, *Ya chamaca, ya lo encontramos. Hey girl, we found him.* Her finger loomed before my face, an opal-studded ring prominent and matching the blue of her nail polish. My eyes followed this silent, pointing index digit to where fifteen yards away stood a tall, lean, tanned teenager wearing a blue and red tank-top and jean shorts. His light-brown hair was cut in a faux Mohican, shorn at the sides. His jaw was square and clean-shaven. His eyebrows were thick and prominent... then they faded, becoming light and thin. His eyes were blue, then green, then brown. I couldn't make out his face. Feature by feature, he became fuzzy and diffuse.

Because this is a dream, I reminded myself. I woke up. My phone was buzzing, ringing. Zara was calling.

"Stay there," she said. There was a peculiar, muted note to her voice. "I'll be right with you."

"What about Olga?"

"Stay there," she repeated and hung up.

My earlier premonition ought to have kicked in again but in the moment, I ignored Zara's strange tone. The warm, happy memory of locating Maxim in a Mexican market – even though I knew it was a dream – had bled into my waking state. I retained a lingering image of Olga from the dream. She'd looked totally different. Confident as usual, yes, but also supremely relaxed and happy. Her fair hair had been loose and tumbled in waves around her shoulders, she had on these large, super-trendy sunglasses, jogging pants combined with heels and a

crop-top. And on her fingers a collection of colorful rings and perfectly-manicured nails.

So no, I didn't fret. I just checked my bag one last time and waited. All the while humming a total earworm – the *cumbia* tune that'd been playing in the background of my dream. Later I remembered it well enough to use one of those apps to identify the song as *Procura* by Chichi Peralta. Which figures, because my own mind is definitely incapable of composing something so catchy. The clues of this bizarre premonition were there, if I'd been awake.

Zara rocked up a few minutes later. The instant I saw her face, I knew. If my mind had been shielding me from something terrible, the barrier finally came tumbling down.

“What's happened to Olga?”

“The paramedics are with her now...”

Zara put down her handbag and took both my hands. I felt my throat go dry, like coarse sandpaper as I tried to swallow. All the moisture in my face seemed to have evaporated. Even my eyes seemed to creak.

“I'm so sorry, Roni. Olga is dead. It seems likely she had a heart attack. Very sudden. Do you know if she'd been having cardiac problems?”

Of course I didn't know anything about her medical issues. I barely knew Olga Garcia. I'd experienced more connection with her in one brief dream than in all the times I'd hung out with her. But also, I wasn't *entirely* clueless. Olga's death wasn't natural, however it might seem.

FIFTEEN

MY MISERABLE TRUTH

The next hour, I barely remember. I was in shock, for sure. What I recall from the immediate aftermath of hearing that Olga was dead, is astonishment at hearing that Zara had done something completely *wild*.

At first it seemed like cool-wild, but by the end of that day this opinion turned around completely. What she'd done was wildly reckless, thoughtless and extremely dangerous. The *something* Zara had done was to retrieve Olga's cell phone from the hotel room.

Zara was the first on the scene, along with one of the hotel receptionists. They had gone together to the room, after Zara raised the alarm. Olga wasn't answering Zara's calls, nor the door, even though she hadn't checked out. The front desk guy at first wasn't happy to disturb a guest's room, but the panic in Zara's voice had eventually persuaded him. So together they walked in to find Olga's still-warm corpse, wide-eyed and mouth gasping for air. The receptionist called the ambulance. He'd stepped outside the room for just a moment, becoming impatient for the paramedics to arrive. That's when Zara got the brilliant idea to grab Olga's phone.

When the paramedics showed up they bagged Olga's possessions, ready to hand over to the cops, who showed up a little afterwards. No-one noticed that the phone was missing. My first thought when I heard all this was that Olga probably had another one – the work phone from the UN.

Oh yes and Zara managed to unlock the phone she

took. She'd been left alone for a minute with Olga's dead body, so you can guess how.

Returning to her own house, Zara placed Olga's phone on the table. She explained how she'd grabbed it, unlocked it and then changed the screen lock. I was rapt with admiration. We all were. That's some top-drawer detective work. Zara, the sly minx – who'd have thought?

"I was worried that Olga might have some private information about Roni, in her phone," she admitted.

Kenzie flashed me an anxious look. Tears sprung to my eyes. *Zara was protecting me*. I wondered fleetingly if Olga's final will and testament mentioned a new guardian for me. Or if she even had a will. My mom and dad hadn't anticipated that Olga might die before I reached eighteen, so there was no backup guardian. Obviously, I was already thinking that I wanted Zara and Bobbie to adopt me. That Zara would do something so risky to protect me, made me certain that I was right to choose them. If they'd have me, that is.

I picked up the phone and began to scroll through Olga's texts and messages. It didn't take long to find something to make my bones shudder.

FIND UNICORNS.

Over my shoulder, I could sense Kenzie growing still.

Zara asked, "Who sent Olga that message? What does it mean?"

Kenzie and I glanced at each other. I nodded slightly as he prepared to reply; "We don't know who sent it. But someone left the same message for us in the restroom at the Atlas Studios."

Bobbie boggled. "I'm sorry – *what?*"

We explained the whole message-in-steam on the mirror in the Atlas Studios bathroom. Immediately, Bobbie and Zara transformed into a couple of cops doing an interrogation. When did we see it? Why did we

go there? Who knew we'd been? Did anyone follow us? Were we sure? Hadn't we seen anyone come out of the restroom, before I'd gone in there? Roni, try to remember!

I answered with the truth as far as possible, reminding myself that I'd been planning to podcast the whole story. *Been planning* was the salient point, because now I wasn't so sure. Olga had insisted that I cancel the podcast. Now she was dead. It was plain to see that two and two were adding up to four. However, I hadn't yet figured out that it might be smartest to tell no-one else about our investigation. The shock of Olga's death was still settling on me, like snow, fear chilling me slowly from the outside.

"You think 'find unicorns' has something to do with child trafficking," Zara said, frowning as I finished talking. She sounded highly skeptical. "And that Masha might have been involved?"

"Olga told me Masha wasn't involved," I replied, stubborn as you like. "That should be good enough for us."

"But how well did Olga know Masha?" asked Bobbie. She looked at Kenzie and me in turn, as if we might know, which we didn't. Like I said, I hardly knew Olga. "Then why," Bobbie continued, "should it be good enough for us that Olga said she wasn't?"

"I think Olga knew Masha," I said, considering. "Just from the way she spoke about her. Like, she seemed super-confident, just threw it out there without any hesitation or doubt – 'Masha is not a child trafficker.' Or something close to that."

I began to remember the conversation more clearly. Olga had admitted to me that Maxim probably *was* being trafficked by someone and that it was for money. The only part she'd had difficulty believing was that Masha was in on the scam. Not that I shared this with Bobbie

and Zara, although I perhaps should have. I was in shock, not processing anything properly. So *much* shock that it wasn't until much later that evening, alone and trembling under the quilt, that I remembered '5922.'

It had turned into a long, exhausting day. The cops visited in the afternoon to interview me about Olga. I told them the truth, that I'd been abducted by Olga's butler 'Tobias.' If I'd had more presence of mind I might have lied and said that he picked me up after school for a scheduled meet with my legal guardian. But like an idiot, I told the truth.

Maybe it was just as well that I did, because Kenzie, Bobbie and Zara had been trying to contact me in those hours during which my SIM card had been removed. I'd left it out of the phone until I was safely back home. The cops already had the address of the house in the suburbs to where I'd been taken. They'd traced the address from Olga's other phone, the one that had remained with her body, presumably her work phone.

"The house is owned by the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism," one cop told us, sounding a little disappointed. "It's one of the places they house visiting officials."

The whole set-up appeared to be 'clean,' yet I could tell that like us, the cops were wary. Olga's death didn't seem natural to them, either. They'd sent for a toxicology report. It was obvious they expected it to come back with a verdict of poison.

"Can you think of any reason why someone might want to kill your guardian?"

"Maybe because of her job in counter-terrorism?"

"Hmm," the cop said. He didn't buy my alleged ignorance, either. But what could he do?

After they'd gone, Kenzie and I managed to get some alone time in my room. I announced I had a headache and beckoned him to follow me. His moms were

reluctant to let us go but I only slightly had to play up my genuine stress. When I said I needed to lie down, I wasn't kidding.

At this point in the evening I swiftly brought Kenzie up to speed on what I'd discovered about *Patria y Vida* and '5922.' I was certain it was a clue to Maxim's whereabouts. Why else would Olga leave a cryptic, reggaeton-themed message about Maxim Santiago?

Kenzie looked doubtful. It could be that I didn't explain it well enough for him to follow. That's on me; I have a tendency to gloss over stuff.

"Olga sent that *Patria y Vida* message to a cell phone with a D.C. area code," I told him, by way of clarification. I showed him the message. Then in front of him, I tried calling the number from her phone. There was no reply.

"Well, that was dumb," Kenzie commented as I ended the call. "Olga's dead. Now whoever you just called will be able to find out that someone *other* than the cops has her phone."

He was right. I froze, horrified that I could be so stupid. At least I had the presence of mind to open Olga's phone, remove the SIM card and turn off Wi-Fi. I punched his arm, in frustration. "If you knew, why'd you let me do it?"

"Me? Stop *you*?" Kenzie scoffed. "Like that ever works. Anyway, it's done now. You should take out *your* SIM card, too."

I shook my head rapidly, not wanting him to be right. "Seriously? My SIM, in my phone?"

"Yeah, 'fraid so. Your phone was at the same place as Olga's last night. Better to be safe. Padi, do you want to tell me what's really going on? Cos I'm pretty sure you didn't tell my moms and the cops *everything*."

I tried to bluff. "Oh, you're 'pretty sure?'"

"Yep. We've been friends a long time. You think I can't tell when you're hiding something? Remove your

SIM. Don't freak out – you can still use the phone for web stuff.”

I did as he asked, cursing under my breath. I handed him the SIM card, which he crushed under an empty glass. For a moment I turned my back on him so he wouldn't see how red my cheeks had gone. I felt terrible about not sharing everything I knew. By then, the fear had well and truly slipped into my bloodstream. I couldn't think straight. I was making idiot mistakes, such as calling from Olga's phone. What if the next thing I did or said led to someone else getting killed, someone I really cared about? Because when it came to Olga, that was my miserable truth. Olga might have been my legal guardian, might have known all about me. But I didn't know *her*. Until yesterday I had no idea what she did for a living. I'd cared more about her in a dream than ever in waking life. Yet even so, this brush with death was close enough to paralyze me with fear.

What if Olga was murdered because she was searching for the Santiagos? Did that mean they'd be coming for me next, tying up all their loose ends? At that moment, I just wanted to forget all about it and to delete the trailer for *What Happened to the Santiagos*? But there was still '5922' and did I mention that I'm incurably curious? Which is why later, when I should have been sleeping, I jumped right back in.