

DETECTIVE BRADEN

A black silhouette of a man with spiky hair, shown in profile from the chest up, holding a handgun in his right hand. The background is a dark grey with a faint, light-colored map of a city street grid. The overall mood is gritty and noir.

THE PLAN

LINDA OLTSAIL

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Linda Oltsail

No AI is used in the creation of this novel.

WARNING, this book is not suitable for anyone under 18 years and contains triggers, such as violence and a descriptive experience of witnessing torture.

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this book to
all homeless people in New South Wales, Australia.

Every one of us deserves a roof over our heads, no matter
what life has thrown at us. I hope to raise funds to assist
homeless people in the Hunter Region of New South
Wales, Australia and the charitable organisations who work
tirelessly to meet their needs.

Big Hairy Audacious Goal

To see houses built, help people get back on their feet
before they switch over to an affordable mortgage.

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CHAPTER 1

Detective Inspector Damon Braden stomped in the front door of his home. It was a late rainy night. He'd been awake nearly sixteen hours and all he craved was his warm, dry bed.

He trudged up the stairs to his bedroom, removed his jacket, peeled off his wet T-shirt and jeans, and crashed onto his bed. Just as he was getting lulled into the clutches of sleep, his phone rang. Without looking at the caller ID, he answered and mumbled, "Tomorrow...call me tomorrow," then hung up.

Shortly after, his phone rang again. "Tomorrow!" He was about to hang up again when he heard a woman's frantic, desperate plea. Women were always his weakness.

"How did you get my number?" he asked.

"That's not important right now. I think I'm in danger, and I need your help!"

"Where are you?"

"Outside your front door."

"Give me a minute."

He sighed and got out of bed. He threw on a clean pair of black jeans and a white T-shirt and grabbed his Glock.

Through the peephole, he caught sight of a lone woman with long red hair wearing a business suit. He cracked the door open and motioned for the woman to enter.

She slowly stepped in. Braden slammed the door shut and twirled her around, throwing her up against the wall. He heard her gasp as he patted her down.

The woman slowly turned around. Her red-rimmed eyes were wide, and her mouth dropped open.

He stepped back. "Sorry, but no details, no trust."

Her eyes kept pivoting between him and the front door.

"You're safe here. Have a seat." He poured a glass of brandy, handed it to her, and sat on a chair opposite her. "Now, what's going on?"

She rushed out, "I overheard something that I...I think I shouldn't have. I think my...my boss might be in trouble. They might have caught me being there." She scanned the room. "I think I'm in danger."

He grabbed a notepad and pen. "Okay, slow down. What's your name?"

"I'm Tilly Jasper. I'm the Executive Assistant to Cian Matheson. Do you know him?"

Braden nodded. Everyone knew of Matheson, the high-end developer. “And how did you get my personal contact details?”

She bit her bottom lip, avoiding eye contact. “I’m a very good researcher.”

Braden raised his eyebrows. “Try again. My number and address are unlisted.” He held back from scowling at her and opted for his usual stoic facade instead.

She sighed. “Oh, alright. River Hunter gave me your contact details, but he asked me not to tell you. He said something about the station being a man short tonight and said you were on call.”

“Bloody Hunter!” he muttered. They might be good mates, but he was getting sick of Hunter’s antics throwing damsels in distress his way just because he was single. Although this damsel seemed to be for real.

Tilly sipped the brandy, holding the glass with shaky hands.

He said in a low and calming voice, “Okay, Ms. Jasper, so tell me what you think you overheard that might be putting your life in danger. Let’s start with where you were.”

“Call me Tilly. After grabbing a coffee next door, I walked back into the building where I work and went up to my office to wrap up the last bit of my work.”

“What time was this?”

“It was about twenty past six. All the staff had gone home. Cian’s office is behind my office space. When I got back, I saw his office door was closed, but I could hear voices. So, I assumed he had a meeting. Then I heard them shouting. One of them was Cian. I don’t know who was with him, but he was threatening him.”

“What did he say?”

“He said, ‘If we don’t get the shipment of the stuff out on time, you’re a dead man.’” She took a shuddering breath. “Then I heard Cian yelling, ‘You know how this works. We need the DA approved before we can let anything on the construction site and not before.’ It sounded like it was escalating. I thought to get out of there.”

“And you have reason to think they were aware of your presence?”

“They knew someone was there,” she said. “When I went to take off, I grabbed my bag and coffee and accidentally knocked something over on my desk. I raced around the corner and hid in one of the other offices. I heard Cian’s

office door open and the other man's voice cursing in another language. Sounded like it was Italian. I heard the office door close. After that, I didn't hear anything. I waited for a while and then went down to level three to grab the file."

"The file?"

Tilly averted her eyes, and her bottom lip started trembling.

"Yes, the development file they were arguing about. It's the only one in the works that we're having difficulty getting DA approval for. The plans suddenly became a rush job, but that only delayed matters. The file has all the plans and documents in it."

"Why is the file on another level?"

"We have numerous developments going at once, and we have a section down on that level just for us. It's a general filing room for all the tenants. I snuck out through the fire escape because the lifts have bells."

"Where is the file now?"

"I have it here with me."

"Let's take a look."

They got up and moved to the dining table. The rain had picked up outside, and lightning started flashing with the

rumble of thunder following it. Sitting side by side at the table, Braden and Tilly looked at the contents of the file.

“There is something odd about this.” Tilly pointed to a road map with markings on it.

“What’s that?”

“Well, this is just a map. It has nothing to do with the development. The draft strata plan and these documents are for the proposed development.” She held them up. “This is what we lodged with the council for approval.”

Braden looked at the map. “Are there other maps like this?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

“See how the marked lines go off the page? Looks like it connects to other maps on both sides. Could it be for transporting building materials?”

“If it were, it’s not our concern. We’re developers. The construction company would deal with that,” she said.

“I take it this file is going to be missed?” Braden asked.

“Yes, and that’s what I’m afraid of. They might still be there.” She started taking short, shallow breaths.

Braden laid his hand on her shoulder. “It’s okay.”

“I really want to know that Cian is alright,” she continued.

“He’s not returning my calls. It’s been hours now.”

“Okay,” Braden said, standing up and giving her shoulder a squeeze. “I have an office here. I’m just going to take a copy of this file. What do you know about the security in your building? Any alarms, cameras?”

A sharp flash of lightning illuminated the room. The lights dipped while the thunder crashed overhead.

Tilly jolted and gasped.

“It’s okay. I’ll get some candles in case we lose power,” he said as he wandered into the kitchen. He came back with some torches as well as the candles.

Tilly sat back down, shaking her head. “Ah...what did you ask again?”

“The security of the building? CCTV cameras, alarms?”

“Oh yeah. Ah...the security is poor. There are no alarms. The only CCTV cameras are outside the building at the front. The lift is locked with a key and so are all the fire doors. You can exit each level, but you can’t go back in.”

“But no alarms or cameras inside, right?”

“No alarms or cameras that I’m aware of.”

Braden took down the address of the office and had Tilly draw a quick map of the office and file room.

After taking a copy, Braden held up the file. “I’m going to return this tonight. Will you be safe getting home?”

At that moment, lightning flashed, cutting the power, followed by the deafening clap of thunder. Tilly jumped up and yelped.

Braden grabbed her arm to steady her. “It’s okay.” He lit the candles, and for the first time, he really stared at the attractive woman, with her pained, pleading stare, beads of sweat on her forehead, and her shaking body.

He was suddenly transported to another time, another face, one that he couldn’t protect. His heart started hammering. He clenched his fists and struggled to maintain his composure. His need to protect overrode any other thoughts.

“You can’t go out in this storm. I have a spare room you can stay in for the night. We’ll sort out everything in the morning.”

Another streak of lightning illuminated the room, casting jagged shadows on the walls. Tilly grimaced.

Braden flicked on a torch and guided her to the stairs. “Spare room upstairs, first door on your left,” he said, handing her the torch. “I’ll be back soon.” He turned to walk the other way but turned back. “Oh, uh, what is your address?”

She suddenly froze on the steps and slowly turned around. Averting her eyes, she stammered it out.

Based on her reaction, Braden knew something more was going on. He wasn't sure before, but now he was.

The lights suddenly came back on.

“Fine,” he said. He flicked on the light switch for the upstairs hall light. “I’ll check it out on my way back. Keep that torch with you. Good night, Tilly.”

After she disappeared up the stairs, Braden blew out the candles and went into the walk-in pantry. His finger clicked on a switch concealed in one of the pantry shelves, and a door opened into a hidden panic room. He set two separate alarms, one for the panic room itself and the other for the house, both with battery backup and video-streaming to his mobile.

He then called his mate Hunter. The time was creeping toward midnight, and Braden heard a yawning hello on the other end, to which he responded, “Up and at ’em, sunshine.”

“What the hell? ...Braden?”

“We’ve got a job to do, and now.”

“What’s the job?”

“Break and enter...”

CHAPTER 2

Hunter met Braden about half an hour later, a block away from the target building. The storm had somewhat eased off, but the rain was steadily pelting the windscreen as they sat in Braden's car. Braden gave Hunter the play-by-play on his unexpected guest.

Hunter scoffed, "Leapin' Lizards! You got me out of bed in this weather just to put some bleeding file back?"

"Says the man who chose to shove another damsel in distress at me."

"Come on, buddy. You must admit this one's a real looker. She's a friend of Nat's. Quite single. Nice curves—"

Braden's glare shut him up. "We're also checking on Matheson!" Braden said. "And if those plans don't go back, Tilly's life could be in real danger."

The rain eased off to a drizzle.

"Okay, let's get on with it so I can get back to sleep."

"Yes, your beauty sleep is more important than people's lives," Braden fired back as he got out of the car. He grabbed a crowbar out of the trunk as a second option in case the picklock didn't work.

Both dressed in black gear and armed, they proceeded to the building. They found the fire escape located at the back of the building as Tilly had instructed but kept their torches off until they got inside.

“You stay here. I’ll go check at the front,” said Braden.

He peered around from the side of the building. There was no external lighting. The storm must have cut the power up there. The cameras were probably still operating, so Braden kept out of sight. He wasn’t expecting any pedestrians at this time of night or out in this weather.

His mind went to homeless people out there, hoping they would have found some shelter from the storm.

A lone car approached with its headlights on. Braden quickly ducked down and waited until it drove past before he wandered to the back of the building. As he approached, he saw the shadow of something descend right toward Hunter. He moved quickly to intercept and skidded to a stop as he saw a drenched animal landing on Hunter’s back.

Hunter spun around. “What the hell!”

A cat meowed in greeting.

Braden laughed. “I didn’t say you could bring your pets along.”

Hunter patted the stray wet kitty and put it down. The cat suddenly arched its back, hissed at him, and then ran off down the lane.

Hunter quickly stepped away. “Well, goodbye to you too.”

Braden used the picklock to open the fire door. They waited...no alarms sounded. Tilly was right. They turned on their torches and went up to level three. Braden worked on the lock, and after a short while, they got in.

Once inside, they did a sweep of the level.

“Someone was looking for something in here,” said Hunter as he swept his torch over the mess of debris.

“I bet it’s this,” said Braden, holding up the file.

“No point in putting that back. We should take it to the station in the morning.”

“Agreed,” said Braden, “but first, we should also go up to where the offices are. That’s where Matheson was last seen.”

“What level are they on?” asked Hunter.

“Level ten,” Braden replied.

“Geez!”

“Don’t bitch. For the damsel in distress, remember?” Braden taunted. He grinned as he watched Hunter face-palm and then trudge up the stairs ahead of him.

They stopped at level ten, where Braden took a bit longer to pick the lock, but they finally got in.

They moved on the soft carpet, just as Tilly described to him earlier. They proceeded cautiously, sweeping their torches to where Tilly's and Matheson's offices were located.

When they got to Tilly's workstation, Braden swept his torch over the space. A cup full of stationary implements had tipped over on Tilly's desk. He opened Matheson's office door only to find it hitting something that blocked their entry. Braden shone his torch toward the obstruction and saw a pair of legs on the ground. He squeezed in through the partly opened door, gun in hand, then quickly scanned the room, seeing nothing but debris. Braden struggled to pull the stiff, lifeless body away from the door. Hunter slid in and helped him. Braden shone his torch on the man's face and saw a bullet wound. He checked for a pulse but knew he was past reviving.

"He's dead," Braden said, standing up and marching out the door. "Call it in. I have to race back home."

"Why?" Hunter asked, following him.

"The dead man is Cian Matheson and Tilly is staying at my place."

“I’m going with you. We’ll call it in from the car.”

They grabbed the file and raced back down to Braden’s car. He drove at breakneck speed to get back to his house while Hunter got on the radio.

Braden drove slowly down his street with the lights off. As they approached his house, he could see a shadowy figure lurking on his front porch. He pulled over a few doors up.

Braden and Hunter quietly got out of the car, moving stealthily toward the front porch. They arrived in time to see a stocky man who had just managed to pick the lock and open the door.

Braden got him in his signature armlock from behind as the alarm went off on his mobile. Assisted by Hunter, they disarmed him and cuffed the perp’s hands behind his back, forcing him onto the ground. Braden called for backup, while Hunter trained his gun on the perp. Braden then proceeded into his house on his own.

The house was dark except for the faint light coming from the hall light upstairs. He knew that perps always had mates. Assuming Tilly was asleep, Braden moved toward the kitchen slowly, keeping his ears sharp.

Just as he entered the kitchen, he felt a sudden knock on his head and something cold being sprayed all over his face. Some of it got in his mouth. Bracing for the effects of poisoning, he tasted...chocolate?

Braden grabbed his attacker and threw down what felt like his broom. As he was subduing his attacker, the realization hit him. His attacker felt soft and curvy.

“Ah, heck!” he yelled over his attacker’s screams. “Tilly, it’s me. Detective Braden!” He held her steady.

A second later, Hunter burst in, switching on the lights and pointing his gun. Hunter took one look at them and roared with laughter.

Braden shot him a look through his chocolate-smearred face. “Check the back door.”

“I thought there was an intruder,” Tilly stammered, shaking. “I...I heard someone trying to get in.”

“Yes, there was. We’ve got him,” Braden said, putting his hand on her shoulder.

Tilly turned around to face him. “Oh my gosh!” she said, her eyes and mouth widened in shock. Her face suddenly turned red as she quickly grabbed paper towels.

Braden caught Hunter’s amused expression, watching Tilly frantically wiping his face.

“Back is clear,” Hunter said, grinning.

“It’s okay, Tilly. I need to go wash this off,” said Braden as he grabbed her hand to stop her.

He wandered upstairs, got cleaned up, and made a call to the station. The officer confirmed that they found bullet wounds in Matheson’s chest and head. Braden also learned that Matheson’s office was ransacked, but Tilly’s working space was largely left untouched. The police sealed off the building, and the scene of crime investigators would be there in the morning. He was also informed a squad car was sent to Matheson’s home to give the grim news to his wife; the car was to stay there until Matheson’s own private security arrived. There was no sign of any break-in or attempted break-in at Matheson’s home.

Braden wandered back into the kitchen, where Hunter was chatting with Tilly. Braden thought of suggesting that Tilly stay with Hunter’s family seeing as she was friends with Hunter’s wife. Then he remembered how small and cramped their house was.

Braden joined them at the dining table, looked around, and frowned. “Why does this place look different?” As he looked, he caught Tilly averting her eyes and biting her lip.

He was too exhausted to figure it out. He had to deliver some bad news to Tilly. “Tilly, you need to brace yourself.”

Tilly stared at him.

“Cian Matheson was shot dead. Both his office and level three were ransacked, and, from the looks of it, someone followed you here.”

Tilly sat in silence. Tears streamed down her cheeks. She put her trembling hands to her head. Hunter, who was sitting next to Tilly, put his hand on her shoulder.

Braden handed her a box of tissues. “I’m so sorry.”

“What’s going to happen now?” asked Tilly, sniffing and wiping her nose.

“We’ve still got the file,” said Hunter. “We will take you to the station in the morning so you can give your statement. Then we’ll try to find you some safe accommodation.”

“You’ll stay here for now,” said Braden.

Hunter raised his eyebrows.

“I’ve got a squad car out front,” Braden said. “You will be perfectly safe here.”

Hunter stood up to leave. “Well,” he said, “it’s been a long day. I need to get some shut eye.” He looked at Tilly and asked, “Are you going to be okay?”

Tilly nodded, holding the tissue to her nose, not looking at either of them.

Braden followed Hunter to the front door. “Get the squad car to take you back to your car and send them back here.”

As Hunter and Braden stepped outside the front door, Hunter asked, “What are you up to?”

“She’s not telling me everything, but she also needs to be protected.”

“It’s on you, man.”

Braden closed the front door and locked it. He grabbed the brandy and poured two glasses. “I think we both need this,” he said, handing her a glass.

“Thanks,” she said as she sipped her drink.

“Is there anything else you need to tell me?”

Tilly looked back at him, shaking her head. Her hunched shoulders, wide eyes, and trembling hands told him otherwise.

They sat in silence for a while, and after they finished their drinks, Tilly got up to wash the glasses.

“It’s okay. I’ll take care of these. You go get some rest. You’ll find T-shirts you can sleep in in the top drawer of the dresser. We’ll head to the station later in the morning.”

Tilly’s eyebrows furrowed. “What about the file?”

“I’ll secure it. Sleep well.”

“Thank you, Detective, for everything. Good night,” she whispered and walked up the stairs.

Braden waited for her to disappear and then wandered back into the panic room and stored the file in a vault that contained an arsenal of weapons and gadgets at his disposal. He cleared the alarm on the panel and reset it for the house. If the alarm went off, it would alert an officer’s mobile in the squad car as well as himself.

He walked back out, turned out the lights, and went upstairs. He stopped just outside Tilly’s door. The light was still on in her room. He turned off the hall light and headed over to his own room. His whole room had been tidied up and his bed made. His wet clothes were hanging in the bathroom to dry. “What the heck?” he muttered.

Braden got out his phone and looked at the camera footage of the main living area and kitchen. He could see Tilly going at it, tidying, dusting, wiping, mopping, and sweeping with the broom she hit him with.

He stood back at his doorway, looked down the hallway, shook his head, and smiled.

CHAPTER 3

The Hood stood in the sumptuously furnished mansion of Dablo Dueno. The place exuded wealth, from its marble floors to its diamond-encrusted chandeliers. To the world, Dueno was a wealthy property investor. To him, Dueno was just another low-life scum drug lord.

Dueno needed his intelligence to pull off this job in the space of one day. They called it “The Plan” and The Hood was being paid handsomely. He meticulously planned it out so that if caught, the crime could never be tied to Dueno or himself.

It wasn’t the money that kept him in this game for the past ten years but the thrill of staying two steps ahead of the law. So, he was not happy at the turn of events that landed him here. What part of “Don’t give his henchmen any information” did Dueno not get, and where the hell was he?

Six henchmen stood before Dueno’s right-hand man, La Destra, who was tall, thin, and had an Aussie accent. A business executive. In this game, he was in over his head. Beside him stood two big, burly men, his enforcers.

La Destra was enraged. “Well?” he thundered.

One of the henchmen spoke. “We couldn’t find them. The office or his assistant’s house. No sign of ’em. Rocko got arrested before he could get to her. The cops have him.”

“I know. I got onto our usual contact to get him out.”

“Where’s the boss?” asked The Hood.

La Destra hesitated and looked down. “Ah, he got called away on an important family matter.”

That figures. La Destra was always in charge in Dueno’s absence. The Hood asked, “Why was Matheson bumped?”

La Destra jerked his head back up. “Matheson didn’t take our threat to kill off his wife seriously enough. He wasn’t cooperating. Looked like he was going to the police. There’s also that bloody assistant of his. I think she’s seen too much.”

The Hood’s blood boiled beneath his calm exterior. *Amateurs.* “And it didn’t occur to you geniuses to come to me first?”

La Destra gave him the stink-eye. “They don’t answer to you. They only answer to Dueno and me! We’re in charge of them!”

“And I’m in charge of The Plan,” he answered coolly. They couldn’t do this operation without him. They all knew it.

La Destra blew out a breath and looked down.

One of the henchmen, alarmed, said, “If the assistant knows, then she probably told the detective. Don’t tell me you’re going to get us to bump off a detective?”

“What detective?” the Hood asked.

La Destra shrugged. “Some guy. Brodie or Broden. Not sure. He’s got the assistant.”

The Hood stiffened. “What does he look like?”

One of the other henchmen spoke up. “I got a good look at him after they caught Rocko. Tall, with dark spiky hair.”

A knot formed in The Hood’s stomach. He knew who they were talking about. He nearly got caught by him five years ago.

The henchman continued, “He’s packed with muscle. Looks intense. Wouldn’t want to get on his wrong side.”

The Hood shook his head. “What are you, a wuss? If you got a good look at him, then he got a good look at you.”

“What do you mean?” asked La Destra.

“He’s bound to have cameras. Your man better have a clean record.” The Hood pointed at the henchmen, directing him, “You lay low for now,” which earned him a glare from La Destra. Not phased, he stared back. “How much do you think the assistant knows?” he pressed.

“We think she has the map. Matheson wouldn’t be that stupid to put her life on the line. We’re more concerned about whether she was at the office when Matheson got bumped.”

The Hood nodded. “Witness to a murder.” He turned back to the henchmen he had just called a wuss. “And what does *she* look like?”

“Oh, she’s stunning. Red long hair, bright green eyes, and curves.” He imitates with his hands. “Way out of your league,” he replied with a scowl.

The Hood ignored the jibe. This wasn’t about her looks. It was about leverage.

One of the other henchmen spoke up, saying, “Why didn’t they make copies of that map?”

“You fool,” La Destra replied as he frowned at him.

The Hood gave a quick snort. “I’m taking over the entire operation,” he said with authority.

La Destra crossed his arms over his chest. With a barely imperceptible nod, the two burly men moved forward.

“Just try it and the whole operation dies with me,” the Hood said, deliberately matching La Destra’s stance.

“What the hell does that mean?”

“It means I’m smart enough to have an insurance policy in place,” he said, tapping his head.

The henchmen looked from one to the other.

The Hood repeated, “I’m taking over this operation. Nothing, and I mean nothing, gets done without my okay. Got it?” His eyes stayed on La Destra, unflinching, despite being one against nine men.

La Destra motioned with his arm to the two burly men who stepped back.

“I have a mess to clean up,” The Hood sneered as he turned and marched out the door. “And tell Dueno my fee just went up.”

CHAPTER 4

Braden awoke to the smell of brewed coffee. He wasn't sure he ever took that coffee maker out of its box. He was about to jump out of bed and head straight downstairs, but he was only wearing his pajama pants. He changed into a pair of black jeans and a gray T-shirt, then headed downstairs barefooted.

Tilly was already busy at work.

He froze. The green flowered T-shirt she wore brought back fond memories of a very special woman and the happy times they spent together. That soon turned to grief. Braden shook himself from his thoughts as he brought his mind back to the present.

“Good morning, Tilly.”

She turned around. Her red eyes widened, traveling from his head to his feet and back up again. She averted her gaze and looked flushed. “Good morning, Detective.”

“Did you manage to get some sleep?”

“Yes,” she said. “Um, I've made some coffee and pancakes for you and the officers outside. I hope that's okay?”

Braden frowned. “You’re my guest, not my housekeeper. First you cleaned up my home and now you’re making breakfast.”

Tilly grabbed the tea towel and gave him a chagrined smile. “Last night, I couldn’t get to sleep until you got back. I was anxious about...I needed to keep myself occupied. This morning is just a thank you for keeping me safe.”

Braden locked eyes with her. “That’s right. We’re going to keep you safe.” The surprised expression on Tilly’s face told him that he’d let his guard down. He straightened up, stepped back, and took in a breath. He had to shake this off. Maybe it was the T-shirt.

“Is it okay if we invite the officers inside?”

“Sure. I’ll go get them.”

Once they were seated at the table, Braden introduced the officers to Tilly, who laid out a large plate of pancakes and coffees and joined them at the table. He asked them for an update.

“There were no further developments since last night. SOCO are due at the office building soon,” said one of the officers.

“I am going to check Tilly’s house next,” said Braden. “It’s a long shot, but if her place has been touched, I’ll get SOCO

to head out there too.” Braden momentarily eyed a strange expression on Tilly’s face, but it disappeared just as quickly.

Tilly was cleaning up and Braden was about to stop her when his phone went off.

“Well, howdy, sunshine.”

“Did you get your beauty sleep?”

“The missus got annoyed at me for sneaking out. It took me ages to convince her I was back on the clock before I could bloody well get any sleep,” Hunter complained.

“Well, since you’re up, you can give me a hand.”

“Sure, buddy. What do you need?”

“I need you to take Tilly to the station. I’m going to check her house.”

“Anything for that gorgeous-looking damsel in distress—Ow!”

Braden laughed as he heard Hunter’s wife scold, “Don’t you talk about my friend that way!”

“She always takes me the wrong way. I’ll be there in a jiff.”

Hunter ended the call.

He arrived about half an hour later. “Morning, Tilly,” he said as he entered the living room. He smirked at Braden and said, “Morning, Damon.”

With an amused smile, Tilly held up her phone. “I just got a text from Nat asking me if you were really helping me out last night.”

“Nice to know my wife trusts me so much,” said Hunter, who huffed at the ceiling.

“You’re a model husband,” said Braden with sarcasm.

Hunter grinned and said to Tilly, “I’m going to take you to the station to give your statement while Damon here is going to check out your place.”

“Damon, is that your name?”

Braden pursed his lips and slowly shook his head at Hunter.

“Yeah, that’s his name,” Hunter replied with an even wider grin.

Tilly asked, “Am I going back home today?”

“No/Yes,” they answered at the same time.

Braden repeated his answer. “No. Not until we know what we’re dealing with.”

“If I’m going to stay here, I’m going to need to get some things from home,” said Tilly.

“If your house is not touched, I’ll take you back there after you have given your statement. If it has been touched, I’ll take you shopping instead to buy some things.” Tilly frowned. Braden wasn’t sure why, but if it was about money, he was happy to pick up the tab.

Hunter held out his arm. “Shall we?”

“Wait!” she said. “What about the file?”

“Don’t worry,” said Braden, “it’s secured.”

“Is it at the police station?”

“No, it’s here,” Braden answered.

“So, you’re all leaving the house with the file here? Is that wise?”

Braden wondered why she was so concerned about the file. He didn’t answer her. He didn’t need to. He just nodded toward the door. “Time to go.”

She slid her hand into Hunter’s arm and glanced back at Braden. Panic was written all over her face as they headed out the door.

After arranging for a relief squad car to remain outside the house, Braden went into the panic room, sat at his desk, and started up his laptop. He then ran back through video footage from the night before.

Two men could be seen approaching the house, one of whom was now in custody. The other had gone around the back. He switched cameras and got the clearest stills of the second man, who was lurking in the shadows. He lightened the images and sent them to Hunter for identification. He then set the alarm on the house to his mobile phone and to a burner he left with the officers in the squad car. He grabbed a couple of nitrile gloves and left to drive to Tilly's house.

The neighborhood was eerily quiet. Indistinct sounds and mumbles floated through the homes of Tilly's nearby neighbors. Her rather solid front door was broken off its hinges. The lock stile was splintered, along with the door jamb. He put on the gloves and went inside.

Debris was strewn everywhere he went. He made a call to get SOCO out, then sent a text to Hunter:

Hey mate. Any logged calls made to the station last night about this address being broken into?

He continued through the property. They had gone all out slicing her bed mattress, lounge cushions, and chairs. All her clothes were strewn all over the bedroom, including her

underwear and lingerie, which he stared at a tad longer than necessary. He moved on space by space through her modest two-bedroom home. His phone pinged.

No buddy. No calls made here. Why?

Before walking into the kitchen, he texted back that he'd see him in a while. Everything on the benches was flung down. A note with red writing lay on the ground: *Do what we say or your mother and father die*. That was either red ink or... Grabbing the corner piece, he laid it on the kitchen bench and took a photo of it.

His mind went back to Tilly's behavior last night and this morning. Her fear was real and warranted. She was here. She knew.

Braden decided to go door-knocking. He was surprised to learn that a few of the neighbors had called the police, but on all three occasions, the officer failed to identify himself. The neighbors were all willing to come to the station and give detailed statements. One of them even got the plate number of a vehicle seen speeding off.

Sometime later, Braden arrived at the station to find Chief Inspector Carlisle wrapping up his interview with Tilly. He nodded at him as he sauntered past toward Hunter's office.

"Hi, buddy. All this paperwork is going to be the death of me," Hunter muttered. He looked up. "What's wrong?"

Braden closed the door and pulled up a chair. He showed him the picture of the note. "Get an urgent search done for her parents. Here's a list of the three neighbors who called the station last night and the plate number of a vehicle seen racing out of the property. I want the witnesses interviewed. I also want to know who was on duty last night. Who was on the beat and who stayed here."

"I'm on it," said Hunter, who sent a message to Madeleine, the station's assistant, to arrange interviews with the three witnesses. "If they are threatening the lives of her parents, what choice does Tilly have?" said Hunter. "She's keeping herself safe to save her parents. It makes sense why she would come to us."

"Yeah, I get that, and I also get why she took the plans to hold leverage over the safety of her parents, but the timing is off," said Braden. "She would have seen the note after she had already taken the file. She must have been asked by someone to grab the file in the first place, or she's lying

about everything that happened, and that makes her a suspect.”

“Yeah, that doesn’t make sense,” Hunter replied.

“I need to get the timeline right on the events to establish whether Tilly is telling the truth,” said Braden. “I want to look at the preliminary autopsy report and establish the time of death. There’s also bound to be CCTV footage available of any movement outside the office building, say from five-thirty that night. Tilly said she ducked out and got back at about six twenty. The perp who killed Matheson must have arrived there after Tilly stepped out.”

“I’ll get someone onto that and get them to trace that vehicle.”

Braden stood up to leave. “Let SOCO know I left the note on the kitchen bench.” Braden clicked on his mobile. “I’ve just texted the photo to you. I’ll log into IPOS from home.” Braden’s hand rested on Hunter’s laptop. “It goes without saying. Nat can’t know anything about this.”

“I know that,” said Hunter. Gone was his usual playful demeanor.

“I’ve got to take our damsel shopping. I’ll catch you later.”

“We’ve got this. See you, buddy.”

Braden headed to the chief's office and tapped on his open door. "G'day, Chief."

"Braden, my boy. Sounds like you've had quite a night. Have a seat. Madeleine and Tilly are having lunch downstairs. We can talk."

"Not sure what we're dealing with here, but a lot of things have happened. We've got a map showing specific routes and an overheard conversation about the shipment of 'stuff.' One man is dead. The map is clearly one of a kind. They ransacked multiple places to find it. They went after Tilly Jasper. I can only conclude the 'stuff' is something illegal, something they had to keep under wraps."

The chief grunted. "Sounds a lot like drugs to me."

"I still don't get why Matheson would be involved at all," said Braden, rubbing his jaw.

"Matheson was a good upstanding citizen. He would not be a willing participant in something like that," said the chief.

"So, you're thinking he was forced to, like threatening the lives of his loved ones forced to?"

The chief nodded. "That sounds typically like something the mob would do if, indeed, that's what happened. If they are shipping drugs, where are they bound for?"

They spent some time speculating on the possibilities since Strikeforce Raptor had cleaned up and virtually decimated several outlaw gangs and clubs in the State. That didn't mean the underworld was no longer in operation, as Braden knew only too well.

“There are two locations on that map. It looks like they needed a site address to ship them to and store them for distribution or collection. There are two addresses on that map, and the routes literally go off the page from entry to exit, which tells me there are probably more of these maps involved— ”

“Which more than likely means more developers are being put under the same type of duress,” the chief interjected.

“I'll check out the second address on the map. Might just lead us to the distributor.”

The conversation moved to Tilly and her involvement with the development company and how much danger she could be in.

“Firstly, we need to keep her safe. We will enter her into witness protection,” the chief said.

“No. Not yet, Chief.” Braden was emphatic. “I'll take care of her myself.”

The chief raised his eyebrows. “Why do you want to take care of her?”

“There’s something she’s not telling us.” Braden showed the chief the photo of the note.

The chief looked alarmed. “Good grief. They’re holding her parents hostage?”

“It looks that way, Chief. They’re desperate for the map. You did say it’s the mob’s tactics. They’ll do an exchange with Tilly. The map for her parents, but you and I both know what will happen.”

The chief nodded and sighed. “That explains why she broke down in the middle of the interview. What if she tries to do this alone?”

“She won’t be able to. I’ve got the file secured where she can’t get to it.”

“So, if they contact her, she’ll be begging you for it.”

“If she doesn’t get a demand by tomorrow morning, I will confront her about the note. I’ve got Hunter doing an urgent search for her parents. Did you find out any other information from her?”

“Nothing glaring I could find,” said the chief. “She was consistent, leading me to believe she’s innocent and not a part of it. She must be beside herself with worry.”

“I know. I’m doing all I can to help her.”

They both stood up. “Go easy on her and keep her safe, Braden.”

Braden nodded just as Madeleine and Tilly came back upstairs.

“Did you both have a pleasant lunch?” the chief asked.

“Yes, very nice. Thank you,” said Tilly, staring at Braden.

“Okay, let’s go,” Braden said as he motioned to Tilly to follow.

She thanked Madeleine, and they headed downstairs, where Braden grabbed one of the patrol cars rather than his own.

“Here, put this on and tuck your hair in it,” he said as he handed her a police hat and black vest to wear. He put on the same gear.

As they headed out of the station, Braden eyed a car parked on the opposite side of the road with two men inside it. The same car that followed them when he was in his own car. Braden kept watch in the rearview mirror. They were not tailing.

He pulled into the shopping center’s car park. “We’re here,” he said.

“What are we doing here?”

“Shopping for you.”

Tilly looked away. “I take it my home was ransacked.”

He wanted to say, “You know it was,” but it was neither the time nor place for that.

They spent the next couple of hours wandering around the busy shopping center, looking like any ordinary people, blending in. Braden grabbed a hot dog for lunch while he waited for Tilly to get all the personal items she needed. He kept his distance and watched everyone like a hawk.

They returned to the police station in the patrol car, still wearing the police gear. They then hopped back into Braden’s car to head back to his home. The same car tailed them again until Braden turned onto his dead-end street.

It was mid-afternoon by the time they got back. Braden helped Tilly take the shopping bags upstairs. She stayed up there while Braden went back downstairs to make a call.

“Hey, man, what’s up?”

“Hi Mate. Can you do a tail for me? Someone is tailing me.”

“Sure, text me the deets.”

Later in the day, Braden was too tired to cook and insisted on getting Chinese takeaway. Once it arrived, they sat down

at the kitchen table to eat. They had a light conversation where Braden learned a bit more about Tilly's background and discovered that she had a business degree and was studying law, wanting to get into property development.

He also learned that she had broken up with her last boyfriend two months earlier. She was ultimately a career woman, not the hausfrau her boyfriend was after. The conversation was pretty much one-sided, with Braden asking all the questions.

Toward the end of the meal, Braden looked at Tilly and casually asked, "You mentioned that your parents are away on holiday. Where have they gone to?"

"Oh, um...Germany." She looked away and started fidgeting.

"How long will they be gone?"

Tears glazed her eyes. "They should be back soon." She had a faraway look.

"Don't they have a return date?"

She shook her head and looked back at him. "Oh...ah, they wanted to see as much of it as they could. They said they would contact me when they were on their way back." She squirmed in her seat, avoiding eye contact.

He didn't bother her with further questions.

A ping went off on her phone. She placed one hand on her stomach while she grabbed the phone with the other, raising it up so he couldn't read the message. She clicked the side button and laid her phone back on the table with shaking hands.

Braden stood up to clear the plates, just looking at her, waiting, hoping, but nothing.

Tilly joined him, washing up at the sink. Just as she was finishing up, wiping her hands, she suddenly gripped the kitchen sink, hyperventilating. She clawed at her throat.

Alarmed, he rushed over to her and put his hand on her shoulder. "Hey, hey! It's okay. Deep and slow." He gripped her arms and breathed in and out with her. Once he saw she was calm again, he released her and guided her to a chair to sit down. He got her a glass of water.

She accepted the glass with shaking hands. "Thank you."

"Tilly, what's going on?"

She shook her head. "It's nothing. I'm fine."

He held her hand. "You know you can tell me anything, right?"

She turned her head away from him. "I think I'm just feeling tired. I need to go to bed."

"This early?" Braden released her hand. "Are you sure?"

She abruptly stood up. “Yes, I’ll be fine. Good night, Detective.” She walked hurriedly toward the stairs and disappeared.

Braden sent a text to Hunter asking him to add to his search whether Tilly’s parents had booked any flights to Germany. He also texted him about Tilly hyperventilating.

His phone rang, and he wandered out the back.

“Hey, buddy, you just reminded me. I didn’t think much of it at the time because it happened before I knew about the note. Tilly received a call on her phone while we were on our way to the station. She said it was a work colleague from her office, but she acted weird on the call. Giving short answers. Didn’t sound like it was someone she knew from her office.”

Braden kept his voice low. “Yeah, she got a text from someone earlier. They’re contacting her. I let her go to bed, but I’ll have to confront her in the morning.”

“Go easy on her. I’ve also got some bad news for you,” said Hunter.

“What’s that?” asked Braden.

“They’ve released the perp who we arrested last night. He’s out on bail and has no doubt gone underground. The

court sealed his personal details because of his personal safety,” replied Hunter.

“Can you look into who funded the bail payment?”

“Will do. Night, buddy.”

Braden quietly went up the stairs and could see that Tilly’s bedroom light was off. That was his cue to go down into his panic room office.

Owen Connor walked toward the safety deposit box at the storage facility. He looked both ways and inserted his key to open it before taking out the single white A4 envelope inside, the front marked “Eyes Only.”

CHAPTER 5

The autopsy preliminary report estimated Matheson's time of death to be between 6:30 p.m. and 8:30 p.m. Probable cause of death was bullet wounds to the head and chest. Braden sighed, rubbing his forehead.

Reports revealed multiple fingerprints and DNA on level three, making it a challenge to identify who ransacked that level. As different areas of level three were used by the tenants in the building, the process would be lengthy and require all tenants and their employees to give their DNA samples. Instead, SOCO would try to isolate any identical DNA and fingerprints found in Matheson's and Tilly's offices as well as Tilly's home and see if they could get a match to level three.

He rubbed his forehead again. Nope, nothing about retrieving CCTV footage had been reported, and no information about tracing the vehicle. He would chase that up with Hunter, as he recalled another officer was put onto that.

Turning his attention to the interview with Tilly, he heard the chief asking her how long she'd been working for Matheson and how well she knew him. The chief ascertained

that she worked closely with him and knew all his associates and contacts he used for the company's property developments as well as the planners in the local council.

Then he heard the chief taking her through the night Matheson was killed.

Chief: *Okay, Tilly, you mentioned to Detective Braden that you hopped outside for a coffee and returned to your office. Is that right?*

Tilly: *Yes, I did.*

Chief: *And at about what time was this?*

Tilly: *It was just after 6 p.m. when I hopped out. I was chatting to the staff at the café, and it was about 6:20 p.m. when I arrived back. I looked at the time because I was going to wrap up my work for the day.*

Chief: *And what happened?*

Tilly: *I was going to put my things down when I heard raised voices behind Cian's closed door.*

Chief: *What did you hear?*

Tilly: *A man said that if they didn't get the shipment of the stuff out on time, he's a dead man. Then I heard Cian yelling back. About needing DA approval before we can let anything on a construction site.*

Chief: *Do you know who the other man could be?*

Tilly: *We do deal with a lot of people. He had an accent. Sounded Italian. If we've dealt with him before, he's not one of our usuals.*

Chief: *Did you hear anything else?*

Tilly: *Their voices became raised and very angry. They sounded like they were going to come to blows. I was so scared I just wanted to get out of there.*

Chief: *Just cast your mind carefully to that moment and see if you can remember anything, anything at all that was said.*

There was a gap of silence.

Tilly: *The other guy who was yelling at Cian was saying something like he doesn't have to deal with the head honcho. Cian was trying to talk over him at the same time. I really can't recall what he was saying. That was when I knocked something over on my desk and had to leave quickly.*

Chief: *And from there, you told Detective Braden that you went straight to the file room on level three to get the file, is that right?*

Tilly: *Yes.*

Chief: *Did someone tell you to go get the file?*

Then, another gap of silence.

Chief: *Tilly, are you okay?*

Then some crying and sniffing sounds.

Tilly: *I'm sorry...*

Chief: *Did someone tell you to go get the file?*

More sounds of crying again, then the interview was suspended briefly before resuming.

Chief: *Where did you go after you left the office?*

Tilly: *I had left the office building as soon as I took the plans and was driving to my friend's place.*

Chief: *How long did it take to get there?*

Tilly: *About forty to forty-five minutes.*

Chief: *Why did you go there instead of home?*

Tilly: *My friend is a legal professional. I needed to get some advice. You know, about mandatory reporting. I*

was concerned if Cian was involved in something illegal, I would be implicated as an accessory.

Chief: *And how long did you stay at your friend's place?*

Tilly: *I stayed for about an hour or so. I tried to call Cian numerous times, but he wouldn't answer or return my calls. My friend offered to let me stay for the night, but I thought it was wiser to get back home in case Cian needed me.*

Chief: *And at what time did you call the police station?*

Tilly: *When I got back. It was around 9:30 p.m. I didn't call the station directly. I called my friend, who is married to Sergeant Hunter. He was home. When I told him of the situation, he wanted me to go straight to Detective Braden's house and gave me his number so I could reach him.*

Chief: *And what did you do after that call?*

Tilly: *I went to Detective Braden's house, but he wasn't home.*

Chief: *Did you go back home?*

Tilly: *No, I waited in the car until he got home, which was about 10:30 p.m., I think.*

Chief: *End of interview at 11:35 a.m.*

Braden rechecked the security camera footage of his home the prior night. She was indeed waiting outside his home for him. She omitted to state that she went home. The time on the video said it was just after 10 p.m. when she first appeared at his place. She had no alibi at the time of Matheson's death, aside from the obvious time it would have taken her to get to her friend's place. It looked like she narrowly avoided being killed herself.

Braden needed to look at her phone. She had choked up when she was asked whether someone told her to take the file.

He couldn't let her go on like this. He was going to show her the note in the morning. He sent a message to Hunter to remind him to provide the CCTV footage and the vehicle trace. There was nothing further he could do. He packed up and left the panic room. After checking and alarming the house, he turned out the lights and climbed the stairs.

Braden walked quietly past the guest room toward his own room. When he wandered inside, he noticed his bed was made and his room tidied up again. It all looked too tidy. He was used to his own nuances. Being this neat and tidy was not one of them. He opened all the drawers and went into his

walk-in closet. Everything had been touched and neatly put back. He knew who and why.

He changed into his pajama bottoms and hopped into bed. He was thinking about how to gain Tilly's trust and how she would likely respond to the note when a light tapping sounded on his door.

Almost as if his thoughts had summoned her, he opened the door to find her standing there in her nightie, a low-cut, short silk nightie that she probably bought earlier that day. His eyes scanned her from head to toe. "Tilly?"

Her eyes did the same to him. "I...I'm sorry to bother you. I didn't wake you, did I?"

"Not at all," said Braden. "I was just turning in." He gestured to her, inviting her inside his room, leaving the door open.

She walked in and turned around to face him. "I had a thought about the map. I was wondering if I could see it again."

"What are you thinking?"

"Well...I...I thought I might recognize the contractors and the transportation points where the contractors operate from. The construction team always hires the same contractors for

our projects, and I know the areas they operate from,” she said.

Braden suspected that very different contractors were being used for this project. “I’m going to be busy tomorrow at the station, but how about later in the afternoon? We can go through them then.”

Tilly started to wring her hands. “M-maybe I can take a look at them in the morning and let you know when you get back.”

Braden looked her straight in the eye. “No, I don’t see the need. We can just go over them in the afternoon.”

“No, please,” she said, clutching him. “I need the file.”

He marched her back against the wall, placing his hands on either side of her head. She whimpered. “Why, Tilly?”

Tears spilled. “I need to save my parents,” she whispered and broke down crying, crumpling against him.

He put his arms around her and let her cry. After some time, he tilted her chin up with his finger. “When I said I would protect you, I meant it. That includes your family. Why didn’t you tell us?”

She whispered, “They said they would kill my parents if you or the police knew. They said they were watching everything going on here.”

Braden held up a finger and walked over to the tallboy. He grabbed a gadget and pointed it around the room. “It’s clean. No bugs here.” He then grabbed his phone to check the live feeds on the security cameras.

Braden noticed she was shaking. He got a blanket and put it around her shoulders. He sat her down on his bed, and he sat beside her. “If this house is bugged, I’ll know. They aren’t watching or listening here. Speak freely.”

“Are you sure? They seemed very confident.”

“Absolutely sure. Nobody can see or hear anything going on here unless they are looking through a window.” Braden showed her the live feeds on his phone.

She nodded, still shaking.

“There was a question the chief asked you, but you didn’t answer, and I’m going to ask it again. Did someone tell you to get the plans?”

“Yes,” she said. “I got a text while I was out of the office getting coffee. I assumed it was Cian texting me from another phone. I went back to my office first to check that the text was from him, but you know the rest. In hindsight, I believe that it was him asking me to take the file. Cian was always alert to every detail of this project. I knew something was bugging him. I just never knew what,” she said.

“So, after you took off, what happened?” Braden asked.

“I went to Mary’s place. She’s a close friend, but she’s also a legal professional. I wasn’t sure if I would be implicated in Cian’s dealings. I kept trying to call and text him, but he wasn’t answering.” Her bottom lip trembled. “Mary wanted me to stay over, but I wanted to head back and confront Cian or help him if he was in trouble. I got home and found my door had been kicked in. Everything was a mess. Then I saw the note....” She broke off crying.

Braden put his hand on her shoulder.

She took a few deep breaths and continued, “I ran out to my car and drove and kept driving until I was sure I wasn’t being followed. Then I pulled over and called Nat.”

“Hunter’s wife?”

“Yes. River was home. I told him only part of what I told you. You know the rest. I started receiving text messages telling me to wait for instructions if I wanted to see my parents alive. I asked who was asking me, but they got nasty...” She broke off with a sob, and Braden rubbed her back. “Then I got a message tonight instructing me to take the map to a location at Murramarang Park tomorrow.”

“How do you know they have your parents?” Braden asked.

“Maybe I should just show you,” she said. She stood up. The blanket slipped from her shoulders as she walked out of his room. Returning a moment later, she pulled up the messages and handed her phone to him.

He looked at the messages she received from one number and the video they sent of her parents, who were bound. He could hear their voices crying out for help. He saw the last text that read:

Take the plans to Murramarang Park. Follow Mount Agony Road to the unsealed road on the left and go all the way up it to the top and wait there, midday tomorrow or your parents die! Tell the detective or the police and your parents die! Call for any external help and your parents are dead! We’re watching you.

Tilly was a mess. It hit him just how much she’d been burdened. He put his arms around her. “You’re not alone anymore, Tilly. We’re going to sort this out.”

“How?” she asked, her head down, arms falling limp at her sides.

He gently tilted her chin up and looked into her eyes. “Trust me,” he said. He held up her phone. “I’m going to need this.”

“Okay,” said Tilly, leaning into him.

“Everything is going to be okay. We’ll get them back.” He could smell the jasmine scent in her hair as he kissed the top of her head. He had no idea what got into him. All he understood was that his past had just caught up with his present.

“Wait!” Her eyes widened. “There is something important I need to show you on that map. We’ll need a candle or match.”

“Okay,” he said, putting the blanket back around her. “Stay here. I’ll be back in a minute.”

Braden got the original plan out of the vault and grabbed one of the candles and a box of matches. He went back into his room, where Tilly was still seated on his bed. He sat next to her. “Okay, what do I need to do?” he asked.

Tilly lit the candle, then held the map up in front of it. Words appeared on the blank side of the map. Instructions.

Prime mover to far east point. Hook up rig. Take haul to site one. Drop off 20. Continue to site two. Drop off 30. Take haul to far west point leave rig.

“Invisible ink? That hasn’t been used in years. How did you know about this?”

“A few days ago, I walked in on Cian holding a piece of paper up against his lighter. He saw me and flicked it off. I saw enough to see words appear. He closed the file and gave it to one of our secretaries to put away before I could get to it.”

“Thanks. This is important.” He blew out the candle. “You need to rest.”

She nodded. He walked her down to her room and tucked her into bed. “Good night, Tilly.” He squeezed her shoulder. “Try to get some sleep.”

She looked at him with shining eyes. “Good night, Detective.”

“Damon,” he said. “Call me Damon.”

CHAPTER 6

He answered an incoming call.

“When am I getting my money?”

“When the job is finished.”

“Prick!” The caller hung up.

The Hood smiled. Money made the world go round, or in this case, money made gamblers desperate to do anything for it. He wandered out into the living area of the run-down house he was using.

La Destra had bowed down to his demand like a good little puppet and provided him with the six henchmen now standing in front of him.

“Who’s guarding the parents?”

Two of them raised their hands and nodded.

“Why aren’t you with them?”

“They’re tied up in the basement. They can’t get out. We’ll be going back soon.”

The Hood nodded. “Okay. You two will meet the daughter at the park, without the parents. Get the map.”

“Aren’t we supposed to exchange the map for her parents?”

“No. Just take the map and go back to the parents. Take care of them.”

The Hood pointed his finger at two other henchmen. “You two will also go to the park and get there first. Report to me if you see anything unusual.” He pointed his thumb toward the other two. “When they’ve taken the map, you’ll take care of the girl.”

The Hood turned to the last two. “You two must be the ones tailing the assistant and the detective.”

They nodded.

“So?”

“Nothing much. They took the girl to the police station. She was there for a few hours. The detective went to her house, then went to the station, then took her back to his place.”

The Hood pointed to the big, burly henchman. “You look like a pro. Wrestling?”

“No, boxing,” he answered.

“Good.” The Hood smiled. “Instead of tailing them, you will wait for the detective to leave his house. Search it from top to bottom for the map.”

“I thought the map was coming from the girl?”

“There are only two places that map could be.”

“What about the detective? What do we do with him?”

The Hood clenched his teeth. “We kill them all.”

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