

FOREIGN AFFAIRS
A TIARA INVESTIGATIONS MYSTERY

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“The lifeguard’s dead.”

I stood, cooling my heels, next to the bank of elevators at the Hyatt on Windward Parkway in Alpharetta, Georgia. Victoria and Tara waited in line behind our client’s husband at the hotel’s reception desk. He was with a woman who was *not* our client, but was old enough to know better than to do what she was about to do. My Tiara Investigations partners were videoing him checking in, using a tiny camera in Tara’s oversized sunglasses. Then they would peel off and I would get in the elevator with the couple and photograph them entering a room. I could see them from where I stood, and my ear bud was firmly in place so I could track what was being said. I raised my hand, which was covered with an enormous cocktail ring, to my lips like I was about to yawn. I couldn’t help but smile. My sweetie pie husband had given me the ring for my last birthday. “Don’t know anything about lifeguard, but I do see Jackie-O is taping a *videO*.”

Victoria raised her phone again, and either read or pretended to read, something. She lifted her statement glasses to the top of her head and wiped her eyes, then she sniffled. “The lifeguard’s dead,” she repeated.

“Are you crying?” I whispered.

“No.”

“Liar, liar, pants on fire. You are crying.” I went to Tara for verification. She gets teary eyed at the drop of a hat. Was it contagious? “Is Victoria crying?”

Without looking at me, staying in character you might say, Tara gave one quick nod.

I backed behind one of the Hyatt’s Christmas trees. They were lined up like rotund sentinels along all four walls, and had welcomed us up the driveway, too. “We’re private investigators! We do not cry on the job!” Then it hit me, *Lifeguard* was a code name. Last year we started giving our clients code names so we could talk about our cases in public. But who was this guy? “I don’t remember a client called Lifeguard. Who is he? And how did he get himself dead?”

Tara gave her head one shake to the side. I saw her face in profile. She mouthed ‘no.’

“He’s not a client?”

Again, Tara signaled no.

By then Hubby was in possession of a room key and the couple headed my way. The Lifeguard question would have to wait.

He whispered something in her ear and she nodded. Funny, he didn't have that low-rent-*rendezvous* look on his face and neither did she. I turned to face the other direction. I cleared my throat, which means 'over and out.' Mr. Rollings looked about his wife's age, early thirties. He was about my height, five feet, ten inches, and slightly built. His hair was a medium brown, and cut short. She was shorter and looked a tad older. I pressed the button for the elevator, then pretended to check my emails. Actually, there was no pretending to it – I *was* reading my emails. One was from my husband. This latest update informed me he had landed in DC. Ah, the joys of retirement. During deployment after deployment in the Middle East I never knew when I'd hear from him. When he first retired, he couldn't stop texting, emailing, calling me. It was sweet and I'm not complaining, but we're both happier now that he's working part time as a consultant. Then there was the fact that by month six of retirement I knew that if we were going to have a house standing, I had to find a way to curtail his *projects* without hurting his feelings.

Reading my phone gave me an excuse to let them board the mirrored and marbled elevator first, and press the button for their floor. I chuckled. "We're on the same floor." Another chuckle for good measure. I'm fifty-one, which makes strangers believe anything I say, but why take chances.

We arrived, safely, at the third floor and he stood aside to let me exit first. That's the downside to being fifty-one. It's a little hard to follow from the front. I got out and studied the brass plaque on the wall like it was written in Mandarin, therefore a bit of a challenge. The first twenty rooms were to the left. The second twenty were to the right. Got it. I had taken enough time for the couple to head to the right. That was the direction I was going, too. Another coincidence. I didn't chuckle again because that would be laying it on a little too thick.

I turned to follow them and that was when I felt pressure on my arm. Instinctively I shook it off. It was a man, short, balding and mean-looking, who had me by the arm. He leaned in, invading my space. "Are you with them?"

I yanked my arm free. "Yeah, sort of. Now, let go of me."

He relinquished my arm to pull something out of his back pants pocket. When his suit jacket opened up, I saw a gun in a holster. "Then you're under arrest."

The way I jumped back you would have thought he held a snake instead of plastic handcuffs. "The hell you say."

In the three years, Tiara Investigations had been in business we had learned a number of lessons the hard way. It was second nature to me to have an alternative means of egress. My way out that day was the door marked 'stairs.' I leapt for it, and within seconds I was taking the steps down, two at a time.

Some might call this "resisting arrest," but let me explain. You see, it's only that, if you get caught.

The shock had worn off whoever that guy was and I heard the stairway door behind me open. He was hightailing it down after me. “I’m blown.” I live for opportunities to use TV jargon. “Are you in the car?”

“We’re here,” Victoria said. “Which door will you be coming out?”

“If I tell you, the eagle scout chasing me will hear. Just call Detective Kent and tell him to call his dog off. I’ll find you.” I was gaining ground and from the sound of his panting, I figured I’d get even further ahead. Somebody had been ignoring the part aerobic exercise plays in our overall health, and it wasn’t me. The way I could sprint was thanks to our *de-lish* personal trainer, Julio.

Tara was saying, “I’m dialing Jerry now.”

We have a long and sordid history with Detective Kent. You can probably tell that our relationships with him differ slightly, by the fact that I refer to him as Detective Kent and Tara calls him Jerry. He hates me, which is hardly fair when you consider that we’ve solved two murder cases for him. His wife has tried to kill him twice, that we know of, and I was the one that saved his ungrateful hide both times. He’s always been crazy about Tara, but – not being a fool - she married Dr. Paul Armistead last year.

I was nearing the lobby door. I pulled my earbud and cable off. I pushed the door open, then flung the cable down the hallway. It was uncarpeted and so you could hear it pretty darn well. I ran into the lobby, made a quick left and hid behind one of the Christmas trees. And waited. He had fallen for it. He was tracking the sound of the cord I had thrown.

I strolled to the front door, and pulled out my phone to call my partners.

“We see you!” Tara sounded thrilled, like she hadn’t seen me in a month. “We’re coming in hot!”

Victoria’s Lexus SUV was indeed coming my way and I walked to meet them half way. An arm came out the passenger window and Tara was pointing at me. Then I realized she was pointing behind me. I wanted to look and I didn’t want to look. Victoria sped, almost taking the turn into the drop off area on two wheels and scaring the bejesus out of the valet cutie pies. That made my decision for me. I didn’t want to look – I wanted to run. I took off and when the back door swung open I threw myself in, leaving my new acquaintance fuming on the curb. I twisted in the seat to see him pointing his cell phone camera. I gave him my very best, former beauty queen smile and wave.

“What did Detective Kent say?”

Tara, eyes wide from the excitement, turned to face me in the back seat. “I left a message. Who was that guy?”

“No idea,” I said.

Victoria slowed the car and we headed to GA 400. “Looks like we’ll have to wait until Jerome calls you back. Why was he taking a picture of my car?”

“He was photographing the license plate.” I clicked my seat belt and one of those random thoughts came into my head. “Have you ever wondered how we’re able to fasten seat belts just fine in a car, but on a plane you have someone telling you to insert the medal clip into the buckle?”

Victoria used the conversation mirror to look back at me. “I’ve honestly never marveled at that, but I would like to know why Detective Kent would need the number on my license plate. He knows my car and he knows how to reach me.”

Hey, good looking, whatcha got cooking? Tara’s phone was ringing. “But his henchman doesn’t,” she said as she answered the call. “Jerry, your guy chased Leigh out of the Hyatt just now. What’s going on? Wait, I’ll put you on speaker. I’m sure Leigh has a few choice words for you.”

“So you three are still poking your noses into people’s business?” Detective Kent characterizes our very successful detective agency in those terms because he is a serious, serial philanderer.

I leaned up a little so he could hear me good. “As you know, it’s always at a client’s request. What did you tell that guy to make him try to handcuff me? That’s not cricket.”

“What guy?”

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“Lunch?” Tara asked.

“Cracker Barrel?” Victoria answered. “Sounds like an excellent place to lay low. I can’t go home, that’s for sure. He’s probably already run my license plate.”

I was looking out the window and thinking. “We can’t go to our old Cracker Barrel now that they’ve gone and built that police station right in front of it. Let’s go to the one at 400 and Highway 20.” Detective Kent had said he’d make a few calls and get back with us on the identity of my would-be detainee. I’d described the badge, and recounted the events for him. “So, Vic, tell us about the lifeguard.”

“What’s today’s date?” Kind of a strange answer.

“December first.” Tara looked across at Vic, a concerned look on her face. “What’s that got to do with it?”

“It happened exactly six months ago today.” Victoria was tearing up again.

Tara leaned over and patted her shoulder. “What happened, hon?”

“Remember last summer Aidan and Emma rented that house on Lake Lanier?”

I nodded, and looked out like I could see the lake. As the crow flies, we were just a few miles from it, but of course, I couldn’t see it because of the hills and trees. Aidan was Victoria’s son; Emma was his wife. They live in California, and Alexandra, her daughter, lives in Chicago.

Both kids had gone to the University of Chicago. Aidan studied economics and after getting his MBA and PhD last year, he took a job in Silicon Valley. Alexandra is a family physician. Aidan was following in his mother's footsteps, and Alexandra her father's.

"Alexandra came too, and I met her boyfriend, Todd. He's a climatologist."

"What exactly is that?" Tara asked.

"Good question." I thumbed through my emails. "Everybody pretends to know what it is, but I don't think anyone does." There was an email from Jack saying he loved me. Every month or so, he made a visit to the Pentagon. As a recently retired two-star general he could slalom from one global anti-terrorism project to another.

"It's a climate scientist." Victoria hesitated here. "I couldn't get anything more specific. He didn't seem to want to talk about it. Anyway, he brought his mother on the trip. Alex and Todd still see each other on and off. Mostly off, I think."

"I seem to remember something about an accident with one of the toddlers," I said.

"Yeah." Vic rolled her eyes. "What a disaster. On their last day there, or what turned out to be their last day because of what happened, Todd's mother volunteered to take the twins for a walk along the water. There's a strip of sand there. She'd been drinking Mimosas since eight in the morning but Aidan thought it would be okay since they could watch her from the patio. She picked Laurie up, but John is a heavy kid and he had to walk."

"Walk or waddle? Is he fat?" Children are a mystery to me, and I'm the first to admit I don't know the right words to use when talking about them.

"No!" Vic straightened me out. "He's three years old. He's solid and muscular."

"Muscular? Where'd he get that from?" This time it was Tara, who absolutely adores kids, sounding like she could use a little sensitivity training.

I cracked up. She was referring to how Shorty, Vic's six foot seven husband, is a real string bean.

Vic gave up the fight and laughed too. "I guess from Emma's side. Can I get back to my story?"

"Yeah, tell us more about little Laurie and Hoss, I mean, John." My mind was already on the fried okra with my name on it just a few yards away.

"They were walking and John kept getting farther and farther behind -,"

Tara looked out the window, and whispered, "Because he was waddling."

"He fell in the water and almost drowned."

"Shit," I said. "You never told us that part."

“Todd’s mother just kept walking. She didn’t even know what was happening! Aidan and Emma saw him in the water and ran to get to him. All of a sudden this lifeguard came out of nowhere and jumped in and pulled him out. He was already administering CPR by the time they got to the shore. Aidan twisted his ankle and it still hasn’t healed.”

“But the baby was okay?” Tara asked.

“Yes.” Victoria drew the word out, like there were plenty of reservations in her answer. “So many relationships unraveled that day. Aidan and Emma’s marriage hasn’t been the same. Alexandra broke up with Todd, and they were within weeks of announcing their engagement.”

I interrupted here. “So they went from practically being engaged to seeing each other off and on, mostly off?”

Vic nodded. “Yeah, when Alexandra came out of the house and saw the lifeguard in action, Todd, the climate scientist, was left in the dust. Last I heard, Todd wasn’t speaking to his mother. She swore she’d get help for her alcoholism, but I don’t think she ever went into rehab.”

“Have you met this giant among men?” I asked.

She shook her head and looked out the window, day-dreaming. “No,” she let the word drift off. “How can one day ripple so far? I was surprised when I read Alexandra’s text saying the lifeguard had died, but maybe I shouldn’t have been. Maybe death was the only way this could end.” We had stopped at a red light and she reached for her cell phone, and tapped away. “I know it’s illegal to text even at a stop light, but I’m tired of calling him the lifeguard, instead of a name. He saved John’s life and I’ll always be grateful for that.”

We pulled into the Cracker Barrel parking lot and I needed to interrupt her story. “Park in a space by those bushes, and back in. We want to make it hard so see the license plate.” Lucky for us, Georgia cars have plates on the rear only. “How did he die?”

She ran a hand over her brow in a scrubbing motion. We waited in the parked Lexus SUV until Vic was ready to talk again. In a minute she seemed ready to pick up the thread, but before she could answer, her cell phone rang. From the screen on her dashboard we could see it was Detective Kent calling back.

“Why’s he calling *this* number?” Tara asked. What had I heard in her voice?

Vic shrugged her shoulders and pressed the screen to answer. “Hello, Detective Kent.”

“Uhh.” His own name had thrown him? This early in the day? “Yes, this is Detective Jerome Kent, Gwinnett County Police Department. Who is this?”

“Who’s this? You called me. It’s Victoria Blair.”

“And Tara Brown.”

“And Leigh Reed.” He moaned, but I chose to ignore it. “I hope you’re calling to tell us you’ve cleared my good name.”

“Can you meet me at Lanier Marina?”

I didn't look at the Cracker Barrel entrance. Why torture myself like that? We were mere yards from Coca-Cola cake. “Can you tell us what this is all about? It better be good.”

“Depends on your view point. I have an unidentified corpse here with this phone number written on his arm.”

“I pulled my sunglasses from the top of my head to my face, trying for a barrier from the violence that was once again seeping into my safe world. “We'll be there in about half an hour.”

Tara shot a look at me then at Victoria. “This is just swell! We've gone over a year without a murder to solve. I should have known it was too good to be true. Now this! Well, Leigh, isn't this where you say that we'll leave it to the police?”

“Detective Kent? He can't do anything without us.”

“I'm right here, ladies,” the baritone voice said.

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Gwinnett County Police jurisdiction extended onto such a teeny, tiny piece of Lake Lanier. Yet, here we were again.

It wasn't difficult to find Detective Kent at the marina. The yards of yellow crime scene tape were our first clue. A fresh-faced uniformed officer stopped us and for a plug nickel I would have said, "Fine, we'll go away." She looked right out of police academy and I've heard they can be trigger happy, so I kept my mouth shut. She turned and tried to make eye contact with Detective Kent, who was standing near a wooden dock, down the hill. He was writing something on his iPad. He knew we were there, waiting on him, and took his sweet Marie time looking up. Finally, he had had enough power play time and deigned to look our way and nod.

Tara stepped in front of Vic and me, stopping us. She yelled down the hill, "We'll be with you in a minute." Turns out two, or maybe it would be four, could play that game. Then she motioned for us to join her for a little confab on the side.

We turned to hide our faces from the searing look we were getting from Detective Kent. "I don't have anything to say. I just wanted to make him wait." She put her hand on her hip, holiday red nails tapping away to communicate her annoyance.

Victoria checked her phone. "The lifeguard's name is Julian Anders."

"I wonder who the dead person is. Vic, are you okay? Two people you know died." Our backs were to the lake and I was facing the building that housed the ship's store, a service department for boat maintenance, and boats stacked three-high in a covered dry stack rack. I caught a glimpse of a uniformed officer and a man in a wrinkled trench coat going through the double doors marked Ship's Store & Marina Office. What the signage lacked in creativity, it made up for in clarity. To our right was one area of covered, open storage, housing some boats over a hundred feet LOA, or length overall. My own boat is thirty feet LOA. I use a different marina on Lake Lanier, but I might know some people here. A few boats were docked and I read the names. One was Lake Life Baby, another was B.W.C., whatever that meant.

"I wouldn't say I *knew* the lifeguard. After all, I never met him. And I don't know if I know this person...." She trailed off.

Tara pointed back over her shoulder. "Could that be him? Could that be the lifeguard? Remember what happened last year." Like we could ever forget. We had gone to meet a potential client, just to find him dead. Then when we went to Paul's stepfather's viewing, who do we see in the coffin? Our almost client, that's who. We had, let's say, *forgotten* to tell our husbands about Tiara Investigations. And we had neglected to mention it for about three years. This oversight meant we met our clients at the local Cracker Barrel. No hardship there. Anyway, by the end of that case, we knew the time was right to tell them about our highly successful detective agency.

I leaned in. "No, it can't be. If he's unidentified, they can't have notified anyone - I mean, other than us - so Alexandra wouldn't know." I looked down at the swarm of people gathering evidence, photographing the scene and generally trying to make sense of what had happened. "We've punished Detective Kent enough. Let's go."

We marched single file down the gentle slope to the lake. Tara led the way and Kent looked at her the way I had looked at the Cracker Barrel door. We'd only taken a few steps when my phone rang. *It came upon a midnight...*

Tara and Victoria stopped and looked at me with questioning expressions on their faces.

I explained that I had changed the business ring tone for the season, then swiped my screen. "Tiara Investigations. This is Shelley."

"Uh, hi. This is Roxy Rockefeller," a high pitched, quick voice said. "Sorry, I'm a little nervous, I guess."

"You're doing fine, Ms. Rockefeller. Take your time. How can I help you?" I was using a fake name. She was using a fake name. We were practically sisters. A year or so ago, we had given ourselves names to use in public. Victoria became Leslie, as in Leslie Gore. Tara was the new Paula, because she liked the sound of Paul and Paula. And I'm Shelley Fabares. See why I couldn't throw stones?

"I work at the Purple Pinup. It's in Little Five Points in Atlanta."

"Sure," I said, going for a hipster tone. I didn't feel the need to tell her my only knowledge of the establishment was from their bill boards on I-85. If I knew her better I'd ask what had confused the beautiful young women on the signs, because the look on their faces showed utter befuddlement.

"Some state senators are trying to impose a special tax on nightclubs with exotic dancers."

"They refer to it as a Pole Tax, right?" Straight out of the Atlanta Journal Constitution, but more hipster cred.

"Yes, that's it. We thought if people knew how many politicians came here, it might make a difference."

Or it might make for blackmail. I had no idea what she was asking us to do but it seemed like it was going to be a long story. "Ms. Rockefeller, may I have your phone number? I'll speak to my colleagues and call you back when I have some privacy."

Victoria had whipped paper and pen out of her handbag, then as I was talking, she had turned to look at the crime scene. She turned back to me and motioned that she was ready for dictation. I repeated the phone number, then said, "Roxie Rockefeller, Purple Pinup." Vic's hand was trembling, but she took the information down. I thanked Roxie, or whatever her name was, and hung up.

I stuffed the slip of paper in the back pocket of my jeans and we started walking. Our heads were back in the game.

Detective Kent moved to the side, for us to view the young man. Someone had pulled him from the water and his heels had left muddy troughs from the lake to the grass surrounding the dock. His face was contorted in pain, only slightly swollen. If this had happened in August

instead of December, the Georgia sun might have been dried his jeans, navy polo shirt and windbreaker. I wanted to hold and warm him. A fringe of blond hair lay on his brow. I wanted to rub his forehead to ease it before his family saw him. Both sleeves of his jacket had been pushed up to the elbow. I could see the familiar phone number written in blue ink on his left arm, near his wrist.

“Victoria, do you know who he is?” Kent spoke softly, and to his credit, respectful of the dead.

She was obviously trying to match up the bloated face with lips ringed in blue, to anyone she knew. “No, what’s his name?”

He held up a baggy with a water logged leather wallet. “His driver’s license wasn’t in there, but his credit cards are and here’s his work ID. He works for a contractor for the National Science Foundation. His name is Julian Anders. We’re trying to reach his employer.”

The white rectangle he pointed to was bent and scratched and the photo could have been of anyone.

Victoria’s knees buckled, and Tara and I lunged for her. She was terminally honest and I had to stop her from saying anything that her daughter would regret later.

“He was a family friend, I believe,” Tara said. Good girl.

“I’ve never met him,” she said.

Detective Kent squinted and tried to decide whether or not to believe Tara’s explanation for Vic’s extreme reaction to the death of this unknown person.

I interrupted his thinking. “How long have you been out here?”

He looked out at the horizon. “I got here about quarter of an hour before I saw that phone number on his arm and called you. Why?”

Instead of answering, I asked another question. “Who found him?”

He nodded at the building at the crest of hill. “He’s using the facilities in the marina.” Kent said it like he considered that a personal failing. Not something worthwhile people squandered time on.

I stared at parallel mud troughs adjacent to the dock another few seconds, then scanned the docked boats. “Do we know where he went in? Did anyone report anything? Or radio for assistance?”

“Why don’t you think it was here?” I could tell he already knew, or thought he did, and was testing me.

“If he went into the water here, his body would have floated away, and sunk.” I scanned the lake and took a deep breath, then I stepped onto the dock. Kent followed me. Tara and Victoria stayed with the body. It was a floating dock, so we pleasantly swayed. Even in the

middle of the week, in December, Lake Lanier was dotted with boats. “Are you saying he just washed up on shore?”

“No, he was snagged on something -- down there.” He pointed to our feet.

“In between, or against, a float?” I asked.

“Yeah, whatever they’re called.” He made a show of looking at his watch. “I wish that guy would hurry up.”

Tara hadn’t ventured onto the dock in her heels. “Maybe he’s getting sick. Not everyone is used to seeing corpses,” she said.

“You mean, like you three?” he shot back.

I was about to point out that was hardly our fault when a fortyish woman with salt and pepper chin length hair, wearing a badge on the waist band of her black slacks joined us. She ran her eyes over the three of us and seemed to decide she wished we weren’t there. A hasty judgement, if you ask me. “Detective Kent, can I have a word?”

I almost answered, ‘hell yeah, take as many words as you want,’ but stopped myself just in time. He sighed and walked a few paces away. I went to check on Victoria and put my ears-like –a-dog hearing to good use, at the same time. They might say something worth my snooping.

Tara looked at the young man. “So did someone push him in? I sure would like to see if there are any marks showing he was held down.”

“He didn’t drown.” Then I went back to eavesdropping on Detective Kent’s conversation. They had walked further away and I couldn’t hear as much. The one word I heard was one I could have done without. *Antarctica*. “He was electrocuted,” I said.

Detective Kent was walking back our way when his phone rang. “Whatchaya got for me?” Then all of a sudden he yanked his aviator sunglasses off his head and rubbed his forehead with the back of his hand. Whatever the person on the other end of the call had said had had the same effect on him as hearing *Antarctica* had on me. “I should have known it’d be the FBI, but obstruction of justice is pushin’ it.” He rolled his eyes. “Even for them. Who do I need to talk with to get this stopped?” By the time they went back and forth a couple more times, Kent was walking back to us. He hung up and said, “I’m going to have the body removed now. We’ll probably find he slipped and fell in. Maybe he hit his head. Just an accident.”

He turned to the police officer at the top of the hill, and motioned for the three techs to bring the gurney down. The guys wore jackets with FPS, Forensic Pathology Services, logos. Gwinnett County Medical Examiner services were contracted with the private company. FPS conducts postmortem examinations of bodies to determine cause and manner of death in cases where the ME's Office has jurisdiction. One man led and two carried the stretcher down the hill towards us.

Tara raised a stop sign hand in front of Kent’s face. “Leigh has a theory.”

Detective Kent looked up at the sky. “Of course she does.”

“Go ahead, sweetie.” Then without waiting for me, she went on. “She says he was electrocuted.”

The older, more senior, tech leaned over the body. “The victim was electrocuted.” Then he surveyed the area, looking for I didn’t know what. A plugged in hair dryer thrown into Lake Lanier? Finally, he scratched his head. “We’ll know definitively in a day or two.”

Sure he would.

Detective Kent stared at me.

Me on the inside, “Beg me.” Me on the outside, “His death may be the result of electric Shock Drowning, or eSD. It’s caused by alternating current leakage from boats or docks in fresh water.”

“So it was an accident?” Kent and the forensic tech asked at the same time.

I wanted to say I’d let them know in a day or two, in the worse way, but I forced myself to behave. “No, I think you have a murder case. After all, how did he get in the water?”

The tech looked excited. “She’s right! Why would he jump in the lake in December? And in his clothes!” He was pretty proud of himself.

“I meant since he was a lifeguard he would know not to swim within a hundred yards of a marina or boatyard.” I swung my arm around to point out that we were within spitting distance of both, with their posts for electrical outlets.

A slow smile grew on Detective Kent’s face. Before it reached his eyes, I realized my mistake. Pride had gone before a fall. “How did you know he was a lifeguard?”

“What were you saying about Antarctica?” I asked. It was a lame attempt to change the subject, but worth a try. Even though it was a subject I’d been avoiding all year.

Detective Kent was still gloating at catching me withholding information. “Let’s get some lunch. That’ll give Leigh time to make up a real good story. For now, I need to tell you about that phone call. That was an undercover FBI agent, working on a very expensive sting operation, that tried to cuff you at the hotel this morning.”

“Why is he interested in our client’s husband?” Victoria asked.

“No idea. He says you blew his cover.”

“No, I didn’t. The couple had already gone down the hall. He almost blew my cover!”

“You don’t have cover.” Detective Kent looked around the scene. The crowd of uniformed police officers and crime scene techs had begun thinning out. “I need to get a statement from the guy who found the body, then I can go.” He told an older officer to pair up with the younger officer who had stopped us when we arrived and get statements from everyone working at Lanier Marina. Then he turned to another detective and said, “I want that dock

checked for fibers, or anything else that would tell us he and a possible attacker stood on it. Maybe struggled....” He let his voice trail off.

We started walking up the hill, with Kent following a few yards behind. I couldn’t resist turning around for another look at the lake and grassy embankment where the young man’s body had lain. Julian Anders’ physical body had been taken away, but his spirit was still there at Lake Lanier. I had a feeling I would come back to that spot. I wanted to say, “I’ll be back later,” to him. Who was he?

The detective that always seemed to be bringing bad news called out to Detective Kent. Our little group waited for her to make her way up the hill. This time she spoke in front of us mere civilians. “I heard back from the deceased’s supervisor at the National Science Foundation. He sent an email.” She looked at her phone, then back up at Detective Kent with a *please don’t shoot the messenger* expression. “They’re confirming that Julian Anders is in Antarctica. He was listed on the flight manifest, but it doesn’t look like he went through NSF’s scientist intake procedure in Antarctica. They’re checking into that.” They walked away a few paces to talk more about that.

I felt a tug on my sleeve. Tara was leaning in for a conference. “Just to confirm, we’re talking about the *south* pole, right?” she whispered.

I nodded, yes.

Victoria pulled a strand of hair away from her glasses. “Maybe the lifeguard is in Antarctica.” She was holding out hope that her daughter wouldn’t have her heart broken.

“Hon, could Alexandra send us a photo of him?” Tara asked.

She pulled out her phone and tapped away. “Leigh, let’s stop by your house before lunch.”

“See you at the Hartfield Hills Diner,” I called to Detective Kent over my shoulder.

We waited until we were back in Victoria’s car before we started listing all that we didn’t know. The list was long. “I’m assuming you want to go to my house to switch cars?”

“Yeah, when you’re wanted dead or alive, you take precautions,” Vic answered.

Tara was reapplying lip gloss and had her mouth in an exaggerated O, but managed to speak. “Leigh, is that why you suggested the diner instead of Cracker Barrel, because it’s closer to your house?”

“Yup. Vic, do you want to call your kids while we’re there. Detective Kent still has to take that guy’s statement.”

Tara smacked her lips and holstered her gloss. “Speaking as a lawyer, that might not be such a good idea. If this turns out to be murder, you’ll probably be subpoenaed.”

Victoria hit the steering wheel with both palms. “I don’t care. I want to know how Alexandra knew he was dead before the police had even arrived at the crime scene. Remember, Jerome said they had only been there about fifteen minutes before calling us in on the case.”

We cracked up at that.

I said, “Calling us in on the case might be putting too fine a point on it.”

Victoria pulled her glasses up and wiped her eyes. “It’s not exactly accurate, but that’s how it’s turning out. Why *did* the lifeguard, if he is the victim, have my phone number on his arm?”

“He’s never called you, right?” Tara asked.

Victoria shook her head no. Her forehead was back to being furrowed in concentration and worry about her daughter. Alexandra, even as a grown up, caused her mother to live in simmering anxiety. “Maybe I should check my missed calls.” Vic was nothing if not thorough.

We turned into my subdivision. “Park on the right side of the driveway.” I jumped out and went inside. After a quick pat to my Standard Schnauzer, Abby’s, head, and a check of her water bowl, I backed my new Toyota Highlander Hybrid out of the garage, pulling almost to the street so Vic could drive right in, and her car would be hidden.

She and Tara climbed in and Vic’s phone immediately started chiming. “I sent Alex a text asking how she found out about Julian Anders’ death. Here’s what she says...” Vic always sounds chipper when she hears from one of her kids, so I didn’t like the way that sentence dropped off. “She says she’s not supposed to talk about it, but she was in on it.”

“What?!” Tara shrieked.

I turned off the engine. “This is crazy. Stop texting and call her.”

Tara reached up to rub Vic’s shoulder. “Leigh’s right. No more writing.” I guess we had just lawyered up. “If you want to know what she knows, just call her.”

We were in good hands so I backed out of the driveway.

Victoria was staring at her phone, like it had turned on her. Then she was tapping away, but it didn’t look like she was texting. She was hitting the screen one mean beat at a time. Victoria stared at her phone harder. Then her eyes widened. Then she got mad. I wanted to yell out a warning that she was about to blow, but it was no time for joking around. Suddenly, she lowered her window and heaved the poor phone into the shrubbery by the road.

I pulled over and looked at Tara in the backseat. *What should I do?*

Tara looked back at me. *I don’t know. Is she okay?*

I looked at the bushes and then back at Tara. *That phone was expensive.*

And she’s probably in the middle of her contract.

Damn lifeguard.

“Just drive.” Victoria was taking deep breaths to try to calm herself. I, personally, wasn’t breathing and I doubted Tara was. We knew Vic would tell us what had just happened when she was able.

I took a right onto Suwannee Dam Road. By the time we passed the golf course, Victoria had relaxed a couple of degrees. “My phone was hacked. There was a missed call from a Chicago number that I didn’t recognize. The hacker had turned on the voice recorder.”

“Are you sure?” I asked. “How can you tell?”

“I checked the apps.” Honestly, I didn’t know much about that, but Vic understood what was going on and that was good enough for me. “What have I done to my daughter? Have I made her a suspect in a murder investigation?” She twisted in the seat and addressed Tara.

“Obviously, it depends on who was listening and recording. If it was law enforcement, it might be inadmissible considering how it was come by. Sorry, that’s the best I can do with what we know.”

I turned onto Highway 20. “You said the voice recorder was on, but was our conversation being transmitted?” I asked.

“I think we have to assume it was,” Victoria answered. “Why else would someone do it? Sorry for the drama. Tossing the phone might have been overkill, but I don’t know if he, or she, had access to my emails or contacts or location.”

“Who do you think hacked your phone?” I asked.

“When I get home to my computer, I’ll try to find out.”

“Heaven help ‘em,” Tara said. “If I remember correctly, the last person that hacked your computer, got enrolled in a wine of the month club, fruit of the month club, and flowers of the month club. Am I leaving out any?”

“Steak.” Victoria stopped to take a deep breath. “And olive oil. If someone is messing with my kids, it’s going to be much, much worse for them. I still need to call Alexandra.”

“Want to call her from here?” I brought the telephone keypad screen up on my dash and Vic keyed in her daughter’s number. We heard one ring, then two.

“Hello?” Alexandra was one of those people who were too good for this world, but steadfastly carried on. Most people wouldn’t *get* her. That had earned her a special place in my affections. She was naïve and utterly certain of the decency in the hearts of all God’s creatures.

“Hi, Sweetie Pi.” Her birthday was March 16, so Victoria called her that.

“Hmmph.” This was from the back seat.

“Not now,” I whispered.

Tara had made her feelings on Pi known, on many occasions. She says it's a slippery slope. What if they started giving all numbers names? Where would we be then?

"Mom? Is that you? What number is this?"

"I'm calling from Leigh's phone. I lost mine. If you need to reach me, use this number."

Victoria looked at me when she said this, and I nodded. Tara nodded, too. We would be together 24/7. We've never once looked for trouble, but if it was looking for us we'd meet it halfway. In the three years we've been in business, we've gotten the courage to do just that.

"Honey, do you have a photograph of Julian Anders?"

"Sure. Why?"

I jumped into the breach of dead air. "Were you dating him?"

She hesitated, then we heard a sob. "Yes. We saw each other whenever he could come to Chicago. His life was so exciting. Life with him was so different. He joined the Navy last year." I retrieved my Maui Jim sunglasses from their special storage spot. I didn't want Victoria to see the look on my face. That word *exciting*, spoken like that, usually meant 'Caution - smart woman doing something dumb.'

"He was active duty?" I asked.

"Yeah." The tentative voice had been replaced with a note of assurance. Like she wanted to say more.

I obliged. "Where was he stationed?"

"I'm not supposed to talk about it. He's, I mean he was, a Navy SEAL."

"So, where was he stationed?" Was there a C.O. to be notified? Jack could help us with that.

"He was doing something he couldn't talk about in Antarctica, but he was stationed some place in South Carolina."

Something wasn't right about this. A Navy SEAL going to Antarctica? No, a treaty forbids any military operations in Antarctica, except for support, like delivering supplies. I pressed on. "What team was he on?"

"Seven." Bingo.

Tara leaned forward in her seat. "Alex, you're sure he doesn't work for the National Science Foundation?"

"You know about that? That was his *cover*." The way she drew out that last word almost broke my heart. Little Alexandra had had her moment of excitement, but it had all been a fake.

“What about Todd? Is that over?” Victoria asked. Interesting, but not the money question. Which was why did her knowledge of Julian Anders’ death precede St. Peter’s.

“I haven’t heard from Todd in a month or so. Wait- ” Her voice trailed off. “You’re not going to believe this, but that’s Todd calling. I better answer it.”

“Sure. Call me later, Sweetie Pi.”

“Gotta jet.”

After her slightly dated sign off, I took pains to be sure we were disconnected. Then when I was sure we were, I realized I didn’t know where to start. It all tumbled out of me. “There is no action in Antarctica to be killed in! There’s a treaty saying there can’t be. Never will be. Next, east coast SEAL teams have even number designations, west coast teams are odd numbers. He can’t be stationed in South Carolina and be part of Team 7.” Jack had been Army, not Navy, so that wasn’t the source of this bit of trivia. During my reign as Miss Georgia I had visited Naval Submarine Base Kings Bay in Camden County. “And why does the National Science Foundation think he works for one of their contractors?”

Tara leaned forward. “Isn’t the person in Antarctica alive?”

We pulled in to the parking lot of the Hartfield Hills Diner. “Maybe we should bring Detective Kent into the investigation,” I said.

As we got out of the car, I glanced at my phone. “Wait, here’s a text from Alexandra.” I handed my phone to Victoria.

“She says Todd is in Atlanta. His mother went missing two days ago and yesterday she called to say she was here. He flew in last night to look for her.”

“On-again-off-again boyfriend Todd?” Tara asked. “Tell your daughter to not even think about coming to Atlanta for the time being.”

Victoria nodded.

We walked through the parking lot. This whole situation was bothering me more with every step. “I agree. We have way too many coincidences. Atlanta is a hopping place but this is getting ridiculous. The lifeguard died here. Todd and his mother, both of whom might have a grudge against the victim, are now in Atlanta.”

We were about half way to the restaurant when a car horn blared behind me. Tara squealed and Victoria came up on her toes. I turned to see Detective Kent’s Crown Vic.

“Thanks a lot!” I yelled. “I just peed my pants.”

Tara grabbed my elbow. “We all did, but Vic and I didn’t feel the need to tell the entire town of Hartfield Hills about it.”

He opened his car door and unfolded his lanky frame. What he had put us through was no laughing matter, still, he laughed as he lounged over the car. “I’m going to have to take a rain

check on that lunch, ladies.” He jerked a thumb toward the rear of the car. “The guy that found the body seems to have more to tell us. Turns out he knew the victim.”

The young man in the backseat looked at us through the window. It was the guy in the trench coat we’d seen going into the marina. Then I hadn’t seen his face, but now I did and he looked forlorn and resigned but to what, I had no idea. I saw he wasn’t handcuffed and that he was rummaging through the pockets of his coat.

“Todd!” Victoria leapt to the window. He shifted in his seat and put his right palm on the glass, not like a stop sign, but rather trying to make a connection. He was still making eye contact with Vic, who put both her hands on the glass covering his, like one of those chimpanzees in a documentary.

“You know him?” Kent stood up straight.

“No, she doesn’t.” I moved to stand in front of her, but she moved in closer to the car door. Tara tried to pull Vic’s hands away from the window but she resisted - like Todd’s paw was negative and hers was positive.

“Oh, come on! She just said his name,” Detective Kent wailed.

“She said, ‘odd.’ It’s odd someone would find the body of someone they know,” I said.

“It’s Todd!” Victoria repeated, only then moving away from the window.

Tara came up between us and whispered in her ear, “Hon, Leigh is trying to help.” She gave her a look that was supposed to explain that I was trying to direct Kent away from anything that had to do with Alexandra, and we should talk about this later and in private.

This time our mental telepathy failed, and Victoria leaned down to get closer to the young man. “Todd? What’s going on?”

I gave up and shrugged my shoulders. Not everyone could lie - I got that - but those individuals should stand back and let people with the gift work. Maybe *odd* and *Todd* wasn’t my best effort, but I’d done worse.

“Leigh, I have an idea for where you can go to leave town for a while.” Detective Kent slammed the door of his car. “I need to try to talk some sense into you.”

Tara chuckled. “Good luck with that.”

He gave Victoria a sideways glance as he walked around to me, and then shook his head. He didn’t want to believe that she could be involved, but was finding that position harder to hold onto.

His reprimand was lost on her because she was tapping me on the arm. “Can I borrow your phone?”

I passed it to her and she began had typing away. After lunch maybe we could get her a burner.

With a nod of his head, Detective Kent motioned for me to walk with him. “NSF is maintaining the person that flew to Antarctica is Julian Anders. I’m pretty certain our victim is Julian Anders. I finally convinced them that if I’m right, they could very well have a murderer mixed in with their scientists. If I’m wrong, no harm done. I was thinking you could go down and find out.”

I shook my head no. About fifteen years ago my father, a professor at Georgia Tech, died in a plane crash on his way there to study ice cores. Last year when my mother died, her last words to the doctor, Victoria’s husband, Shorty, were for me to find him. Had she been lucid? Or just her usual manipulative self? There had been no mystery surrounding his death. While his body hadn’t been found, most of the wreckage of the plane had been. Or maybe she was talking about bringing his body home for burial. That wasn’t something I could do.

Standing there I had such a moment of clarity that I full-body shivered. My anger wasn’t from the way she had died leaving me with an obligation like that, it was that she had left me.

Kent wasn’t finished. “The FBI agent that tried to cuff you this morning isn’t going away. Someone told him I’d been asking questions and so now he knows that I know how to find you. I can get you a spot on a flight to Antarctica, via Punta Arenas, Chile. There’s a charter flight for the government contractor that provides support for NSF leaving in a few hours. You can fly out this afternoon. Same flight our imposter was on yesterday.”

“Can I take some time to think about it? Aren’t there other flights?” I asked.

“No, you need to go before he puts you on a no-fly list. He’s probably started the process for that already.”

“Can you get three seats?” I turned at Tara’s question. She and Victoria were behind me waiting for his answer.

When I saw the worried look on Victoria’s face, I began to worry, too. “Vic, do you need to stay here with your computer?” I hadn’t forgotten the hacker.

“I can take my laptop with me.”

Tara looked like she was about to speak, but stopped when an older couple got out of their Buick, which they’d just parked in a handicap spot. We stepped back to give them sidewalk room.

“Morning.” I nodded and smiled.

“Good morning,” the lady said. She looked at the curb and hesitated.

I stepped forward and offered my arm. She took it and whispered something so low I had to lean in. “My husband, well, he doesn’t want to admit he needs help.” She looked over her shoulder at him, and I followed her gaze. He was walking with shuffle steps up the ramp.

Tara had read the situation, and was on her way to him. Was it my imagination, or had his steps become even more uncertain?

The Mrs. took in Tara's high-heel boots, tight jeans, and thick hair piled on her head moving toward her hubby. "Old fool," she said.

When we had them on their way, we returned to Victoria and Detective Kent.

"So, what's our cover?" I hated to draw his dog-like gaze away from Tara – not really – but it was time to get to work.

He gave me a disgusted look. "You don't have cover. You're not even real detectives."

"We have a one hundred percent success rate. What about you?" I was talking to him, but I was back to watching the older couple. They were at the restaurant door and, as frail as he was, he held the door for her and she walked through. She didn't thank him because it was expected that he would open the door for her. Their whole lives long. They had grown old together and I thought they looked happy and calm. The last time I felt safety like that it had killed me on the inside. They were in the restaurant now, leaving me to look at the ground at my feet, with the conversation going on around me mere background noise.

"Fine," Tara said. "I'm sure we can come up with our own cover stories. Will someone from NSF tell us what to pack?"

"They'll supply most of the gear you'll need. That reminds me, I better tell them to load two more bags on the plane."

Victoria squinted at him. "They don't know our sizes."

"And they're not going to know mine." Tara harrumphed.

"Just give me your boot sizes." He pulled his phone out of his jacket pocket and prepared to tap.

"Ten," Victoria said.

"Seven," Tara said.

That's when they realized they were one detective short.

"Leigh?" the three called out in unison.

I'm not one to hold back when it comes to going on an adventure, but everything about this seemed rushed. I looked up. "Is it really necessary for me to go to Antarctica? And don't say it's to find out if their guy is Julian Anders. You know that's your victim's true identity – I'm assuming Todd told you." I pointed at the Crown Victoria parked about a few feet away. "I don't want to be someone who runs away instead of facing the music." I'm not that girl.

Detective Kent ran his hand over the top of his head and gave a half nod.

Tara interjected, "Isn't running how you got in trouble in the first place?"

"I mean, I'm happy to stay so we can, uh, help to solve the murder." I was proud of myself for generously adding that *helping*. "There are a number of leads here in Georgia to

explore.” I gave Victoria a look, trying to communicate that we needed to be where we had the best chance of protecting her daughter.

“Let’s say I’m trying to kill two birds with one stone. Obviously, I want to know if he killed my victim. Since the driver’s license was missing, I want to know when he stole Anders’ identification. If he stole it off the dead body, when and did he see anything? And, I’ll admit it, it’s a good place for you to spend a couple of days.”

“A couple of days? As in two?” Tara asked.

“Two, maybe three. There are regular flights out of there.”

Victoria adjusted her eyeglasses and sighed. “Okay.” She drew the word out. “That can be our compromise.” She sounded resigned to our fate and I didn’t want that. None of us should have to go to Antarctica if that’s not what we wanted, but I knew they wouldn’t let me go by myself, any more than I would let either of them.

While they were talking, my mind was tearing ahead, looking down different avenues but not entering any of them. Why would I run away to Antarctica? Why would anyone? Bingo. I looked Detective Kent in the eye. “I have one more condition. Promise us you won’t make an arrest before we return.”

“No way am I agreeing to that!” He had hesitated a beat and that was all it took to let me know he was holding out on me and that I had the upper hand. “Wait, why do you care?” He jerked his head at Todd in the car. “You trying to protect him?”

“Un-huh.” I had hesitated only a beat, and my response may have lacked the appropriate level of enthusiasm. Just like that Kent had the upper hand.

“It’s not him. So, who are you trying to keep me from talking to?”

Nah, we still had the upper hand because he was the one trying to get us to go to a different continent. The thing about upper hands is it doesn’t matter how many times it goes back and forth, she who has it last wins. I laughed, then on cue, the three of us looked up at the sky.

“Unseasonably warm weather we’re having here in Hartfield Hills, isn’t it?” I asked.

“I love it,” Tara said.

“Me, too,” Victoria added.

Kent was starting to sweat, and it wasn’t from the delightfully balmy climate in Hartfield Hills. “I doubt I’ll bring charges since there’s a chance the killer is in Antarctica.”

I needed more information. “Security personnel at the bases in Antarctica can find out who their visitor is, but the important question isn’t who, it’s why--. Why would a murderer run to a place where he would be trapped? They call it the land of the big white cold....” An idea was percolating, and the effort made me squint. “It would be perfect for hostage taking. Wait, where is he now?”

“In Antarctica, you know that!”

“Where in Antarctica?” I asked.

“It’s called Dome C.”

“That’s an international station.” Talks with my father was the source of that tidbit.

Kent nodded, and ran the back of his hand over his brow.

“You want us to find out why someone – hell, anyone – would run to a hostile, life-threatening climate. You want us to do it without causing a panic that might cause people to run outside.”

“Everything in Antarctica is a compromise,” Kent said.

I nodded. “Are we talking about NSF’s prestige in the international community?” He didn’t answer, so assumed I was on the right track. Then I gave his visage a closer look. He was serious. This was more serious than a dead guy in Lake Lanier.

He hesitated. “I don’t know.”

It was too late. Kent’s eyes told me he knew I had cracked the code. “Until you know the time of death, you don’t know if the fake Julian is the killer, or a pickpocket with an amazing alibi. You *do* know that extradition from an internationally protected zone like Antarctica is going to be a bitch. You want us to use our admittedly, sometimes unorthodox means to get him on a plane back here if the real Julian Anders was murdered before he got on that plane. So let me ask you again, will you wait until we get home before you make an arrest?”

“For the love of ...”

I’d been having a problem with my conscience since I saw Todd, and was pretty darn proud I’d been able to think as well as I had. It was one of those karma running over your dogma times. If I kept my mouth shut the police would suspect someone other than Victoria’s daughter and we’d buy time. I couldn’t let an innocent man get sucked into the system. “Will you release Todd after you question him? You know he didn’t kill Anders,” I said.

“I do?”

I felt Victoria move closer to me, and prayed she understood.

“You think he just happened to be at a marina on Lake Lanier, before opening hours, in the off-season, and run into a friend, who happened to be dead?”

I think nobody likes a smart-aleck.

“If he had, he would have pushed him away from the shore, he wouldn’t have pulled him out of the water,” Victoria said. She’d had gotten to the same point.

Kent leaned in for the four of us had a confab. “If I say, hey, I know you didn’t kill your friend, now get out of here you crazy kid, how likely is he to give me the information I need?”

Tara shook her head. “That just seems like a real mean way to do business is all I’m saying.”

With that he began folding his lankiness into the car. Then he stopped midway and got out again. “Victoria, do you want to listen in when we interrogate him?”

I really, really hated to look that gift horse in the mouth, but there was no way around it, with it whinnying like that. “Tara, go with her.” I gave her my car keys.

“Why? We have so much to do before our flight. Shouldn’t we split up?”

“He’s not offering this out of the goodness of his heart. He’s going to question Vic, too.” They nodded in reluctant agreement. “Kent’s antenna is up and he wants answers from her - away from us. It was her phone number on the victim’s arm ---.”

Vic stopped me. “That’s connected to the hacking of my phone.”

I nodded. We had no evidence connecting the two, but it just felt right in my bones.

“You coming?” Kent bellowed.

Tara took the car keys from me with one hand and squeezed the back of my hand with her other. We’re not often separated on cases. “We’ll be right behind you in Leigh’s car,” she said to Detective Kent.

“Whatever. We have paperwork to get through before the interrogation,” he said.

Vic hesitated. “Leigh, how will you get around?”

“I’m fine.” I made sure I was talking loud enough for Detective Kent to hear. “I’m just going to hotwire those old people’s car. Won’t take a second.”

“Very funny.” With that he got back in his car and slammed the door, but not before yelling, “I’ll get a message to you before I make an arrest. That’s as far as I’m going.”

Steering one-handed, he pulled onto Highway 20, taking a very confused Todd away with him.

“Everything’s going to be fine,” Vic called after them. Then she turned to Tara and me. “That’s right, isn’t it?”

We didn’t answer her. There were so many ways this could go south.

“We need to get our passports. I need get a pet sitter for Abby. What else?” I was looking at the diner window. The time for Jack and me to have a life like that couple inside would have to wait. That’s when my phone pinged. The text I’d halfway expected came in. “It’s from Jack. He needs to stay in DC for at least another two days.” That’s explained the lovey-dovey text.

Tara rummaged in her handbag for her phone. “I need to call Paul.”

“We need to find Todd’s mother,” Victoria said.

“I know. Why did she come to Atlanta? Why on the spur of the moment, and without telling anyone?” I asked. The more I thought about that woman, the more questions I had.

“Leigh, can you find her while we’re at the police station?” Tara asked.

“I’ll try, but I can’t do it on an empty stomach.”

Tara started herding us to the door. “Let’s get something to go.”

“Do we know anything other than that she’s somewhere in metro Atlanta? One person among five million, in the 9th largest metropolitan area in the country? And I’m supposed to find her before we catch a flight this afternoon? That’s going to take a lot of sweet tea.”

“It’s in the contact list on your phone, under Todd’s Mother. He wrote her cell phone number on his palm.”

“That makes it official, the stars have lined up,” Victoria said.

“Yeah, lined up against us,” I said.

I’d Uber’d home and called Todd’s mother’s number. It rang and rang, then it rang some more. Finally, voice mail put me out of my misery. To reward me for my patience, instead of a digitized voice reciting the number I’d dialed and giving me the heave-ho, a woman announced, “This is Sheila. I’m sorry but I can’t come to the phone right now.” I may have been reading too much into her tone, but she didn’t exactly seem torn up over it. Though in all fairness, she offered to make it up to me by allowing me to leave a message. She topped this off with a promise to call me back as soon as she was able.

“Hi! This is Leigh Reed!” To say I sounded friendly and nonthreatening, would not be doing me justice. I was like a guardian angel. “Your son gave me your number.” There’s no need for us to quibble over the details here. “He’s quite concerned.” He was also very likely to be quite incarcerated shortly, but I left that part out. Considerate to a fault, that’s me. “Please call me just as soon as you can so we can talk.” By that I meant, we can do this the easy way or the hard way, but you will tell me what I need to know to find Julian Anders’s killer. “Have a nice day.”

A text had come in while I’d been spreading sunshine, or spreading something. It was from Tara. They were at the police station, but Todd’s interrogation hadn’t begun. I called back, hoping to catch them.

“Can you put me on speaker phone?”

“Sure, if you promise to keep quiet. I don’t want Jerome to know you’re listening in. The police wouldn’t appreciate this being broadcast across Hartfield Hills. Vic wants to know if you’ve had any luck finding Todd’s mother.”

“You mean Sheila?”

“You found her already?” Vic asked.

“Oh, hell, no. I got that off her voice mail.”

“It’s show time,” Tara whispered.

After that I heard aluminum chairs scraping along the floor. I assumed that was in the interrogation room, until I heard Detective Kent’s voice and knew my audio was from the side room where my partners were. “Tara, how have you been?”

It was all I could do not to say, “Married! That’s how she’s been, you idiot.” Self-restraint, thy name is Leigh. And there was the fact that I was eating a Reese’s Buttercup fresh from the freezer at the time.

“Fine, and you?” Tara answered.

If he responded, I didn’t hear it. I did hear a door open and close. Then, I distinctly heard Victoria harrumph.

Then I heard Kent’s voice again, but like he’d fallen in a well. “We’re in the Gwinnett County Police satellite station. This is December first and the time is 2:15 pm. State your name and address, please.”

“Todd Plemmons.” Then he paused. “Kenilworth. Chicago. Suburb.” He said it just like that. Maybe it was the stress he was under. I hoped he wasn’t composing a lie in his head. When it comes to lying to the police, kids, do as I say and not as I do. That’s just not something I would recommend to the general populace.

If I needed to google him later, that Kenilworth tidbit would come in handy. I still had that scrap of paper in my pocket with Roxie Rockefeller’s number on it, but I didn’t want to write on it. I sprinted to my kitchen desk and rummaged around for something else to write myself a reminder on. My engraved notecards were all I could find, so I wrote the name of the town on one of those.

“How long have you been in Atlanta?” Detective Kent asked.

“I flew in yesterday,” Todd answered.

“You called 9-1-1 this morning from Lake Lanier. Why had you gone there?” Detective Kent sounded dangerous. Gosh, I started feeling uncomfortable, like I was holding out on him, and he wasn’t even talking to me.

I heard a whole lot of nothing. White noise, maybe the air conditioner, told me we hadn’t been cut off, but no one was speaking. After about a minute, I decided to use my newest super power, which is being able to use two or more functions on my smartphone at the same time. I texted Tara and Victoria. *What’s happening?*

Right away my phone pinged notifying me a text was waiting to be read. Oops, I was supposed to be silent as a tomb. I muted it then read the communiqué. *Todd not answering. He's upset. Jerome waiting him out.*

"I went to meet – someone," Todd said, finally.

"Julian Anders?"

Todd hesitated then answered, "Yeah."

"Did you go alone?"

"Yeah."

"Is that what brought you to Atlanta?"

"Yeah." First, it's a mistake to lie to the police. Next, wouldn't 'I came to help my mother' garner more sympathy than 'I came here to meet someone who's been murdered'?

"What happened when you got there?"

"I didn't see him, so I walked around. Then I saw something in the water, some clothes. I got closer and that's when I saw it was a person."

"What did you do then?" Detective Kent's tone had lightened up a tad, but you still wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of it.

"I pulled him out, then I called the police."

"When did you realize it was your friend?"

Todd interrupted, "He's not a friend! I only met the guy once."

"Okay, acquaintance, then. When did you realize it was Julian Anders?"

Todd grumbled something about the marina being where they'd agreed to meet, so who else would it be.

I heard Detective Kent's voice again. "Lake Lanier seems like an odd place to meet. Who set it up?"

"He did."

"When?"

Hesitation, then Kent spoke again. "Think carefully. We'll find out when you purchased your airline ticket."

"Yesterday."

"So, the deceased telephoned you, and you flew out here? Just like that? You only met him once and you hop on a plane because he wanted to chew the fat?"

Todd's voice was stronger. I knew where this was going. "I want to call an attorney."

Detective Kent chuckled. Lord how I hated that chuckle. "You certainly have that right, but you're not a suspect at this point."

Then I heard Todd speaking. "My mother's not well. I need to check on her. Am I free to leave?"

Detective Kent started to answer but Todd spoke over him. "I won't go far. She's at the Hyatt in Alpharetta." The very hotel we were at a few hours earlier. I swear, you can't make this stuff up.

"Sure," Detective Kent said, "but you won't be allowed to fly. And I would suggest you not try."

The chairs were scraping the floor with a sound indicative of the very cheapest models. Detective Kent was telling the recorder that the interview had ended.

"Where's Victoria?" Kent was back with Tara.

"Ladies room," Tara answered.

"You didn't really answer when I asked how you were," he cooed. "Are you happy?"

"Yes, I am. Paul's a good man."

"I could be"

"Vic!" Tara sounded like she'd found her long lost friend after years of searching. "Ready to go?"

**

Abby had woken up from her post-lunch nap in the foyer, thirsty. On the way to her water bowl she paused to look at me – something a cat would never do. I blew her a kiss and I swear she smiled at me. Ditto, the cat contrast. I got off the stool at the kitchen island and opened the back door for her to go out. She looked at me to say she didn't need to go out, but I nudged her forward out onto the deck. I was going to have to leave again. While she was outside, I placed a call to her sitter.

**

I had changed into something comfortable for a long flight and packed a few toiletries and picked up Victoria. Now we were sitting at Tara's kitchen island snacking on almonds.

"Since Jerry released Todd, he said he would go to the Hyatt to see his mother," Victoria said.

"That's good since we don't have much time before the flight," I said.

Tara dabbed the corners of her mouth with a linen napkin. “And it’s good because if I’m going to represent anyone it will be Alexandra.”

“I’m assuming the reason Todd lied about why he was in Atlanta is because *he* suspects his mother,” I said. They nodding in agreement. My phone rang and I looked at the screen. “This is Alex now.”

“Leigh, are you with my mom?” the unsure voice asked.

“Yeah, here she is.” I handed Vic the phone.

“Oh, Alex, I never get mad at you” Vic said. “Well, almost never.”

I stood there wondering if it would be inappropriate to ask her to put the call on speaker, then I noticed Vic’s eyes widening. “All of your photos were deleted?”

For about half a second, I didn’t really care. Then it hit me. I looked at Tara. “The photos of Julian Anders are gone?” I whispered.

Tara nodded. Or maybe the weight of what we’d learned had pulled her head down, the move was just that slow.

“Listen to me, Sweetie-Pi. Don’t use this phone again. Turn it off and get another. I’ll explain later. Call when you get a new phone. No wait, get a new number. And don’t call this number back, call your Dad and give him your new number. Do you understand?”

I think Alex argued a bit, but Victoria nipped it in the bud. “You didn’t accidentally delete your photos. Your phone was hacked. We need to hang up now.” With all the strength she had, Victoria ended the call.

**

We met Detective Kent in the parking lot at Peachtree-Dekalb airport at five o’clock. We had our carry-on’s, but we’d been promised appropriate gear for our, probably ill-advised, trip.

He walked to the terminal and we fell into step with him. “You’ll transfer planes in Punta Arenas. Your gear bags were loaded on that plane back in Denver,” Detective Kent explained. “That’s where the contractor is based. This leg of your flight is about eight and a half hours, and the flight to Union Glacier Camp is about four and a half hours.”

When we got to our boarding gate I looked out the window and whistled. “For us? The Gwinnett County PD can afford this?” The large jet glimmered in the setting winter sun.

“The NSF contractor can,” he said. “They need to know who’s down there among their scientists. Speaking of scientists, your cover is that you three are Ice Core Researchers.” Then he laughed so loud it almost hurt my feelings. My phone pinged that I had a text. I saw it was from Todd and walked to the window to read it. Tara followed me and I handed my phone to her. *My mother has no memory of anything until late morning.*

Detective Kent joined us.

“Did you get the results of the victim’s fingerprints?” I asked.

“Not yet.”

Victoria was on her phone and hung back. When she joined us she was swiping away on her brand new phone. “Alex’s phone was hacked, but my son, Aiden, sent me this photo of Julian Anders.”

We gathered around and looked the screen. She cropped and enlarged it until we saw the handsome young man with blond hair, obviously the victim. He was grinning ear to ear.

“So this is the lifeguard, Julian Anders. And the person in Antarctica is someone who happens to have the same name?” Tara asked, hopefully, but not realistically.

This is my favorite part of a case – where we start listing what we know and what we don’t know.

“Polar Service’s security chief assured me there are not two employees with that name. They have spoken to their Julian Anders, but this morning’s victim had an employee ID,” Detective Kent said.

“That ID looked dodgy to me. Any teenager wanting to buy a beer could do a better job. The photo looked beat up like someone wanted it obscured.” I took a deep breath. I wanted the police to know everything, well almost, we knew before we got on that plane. That meant reading Kent in on Victoria’s daughter’s relationship with the lifeguard. “Next, he told Alex he was a Navy SEAL. Why would he do that?” I asked.

“I don’t know. He wanted to impress her, I guess,” Detective Kent said. “Wait! What’s this? Who’s Alex?”

“Alexandra is Victoria’s daughter,” I explained.

Then I looked at Victoria and waited. Then Tara turned to her.

“I have more to tell you about the lifeguard,” Vic said. Then she told him about how the young man had become involved with her family and with Todd’s. She left out the part about her daughter’s early knowledge about Anders’s death.

Suddenly Kent saw something over my shoulder that seemed to distress him, and went quiet. “Go!” he said.

I turned and saw the short, balding man from this morning. Detective Kent’s hand was on my elbow and he was trying to turn me back around so that my face couldn’t be seen. I didn’t see the sense in that since Tara and Victoria stood right there and he knew it was us.

I pulled away and walked up to the new guy. Then I threw my arms around him. “I’ll see you when I get back from Antarctica,” I promised.

His jaw dropped open in shock, and I took that opportunity to run to the gate with my colleagues right behind me.

Once we were beyond the desk, I turned to wave good-bye to Detective Kent. Now it was my turn to be shocked. My husband, Jack, was standing with him and giving me a what-the-hell look. Then he turned to give the same look to the FBI agent.

“Welcome aboard,” the pilot, standing in the doorway to the cockpit, in shirtsleeves, said to Tara. He looked to be in his mid-thirties and from what I could see of his biceps he worked out, like all the time.

The plane could have held fifteen people. I sank into a plush seat and got out my phone to text Jack. *I love you*. Because of Victoria’s hacker, I didn’t know who was listening in. I’d have to count on Detective Kent to tell him what was going on. Then I went to sleep. Once I woke to the sound of Tara and the pilot laughing. Once again in the middle of the night to the sound of Victoria typing away on her computer. Then finally, when the wheels hit the tarmac.

“Welcome to Punta Arenas,” the pilot said. “You’ll have a two hour lay-over here before your next flight.”

As our plane taxied I ran a brush through my hair. “I’m hungry,” I said.

Victoria and Tara laughed. Tara said, “We’ve been eating all night so we’re not.”

“We’ll sit with you while you eat,” Vic offered.

The pilot showed us how to get to our new gate where we would board the plane for the second leg of our flight. “The only open restaurant in the terminal is up here.” He pointed straight ahead. Then he saluted us and slung his bag over his shoulder. Then his phone came alive, alerting him to messages, over and over.

“Popular with the ladies?” Tara said with a chuckle.

“I don’t know what the hell this is. I’m going to get some sleep, before I head back to Denver. Too bad I won’t be with you for your return flight.” The way he had saluted was – well, correct.

“Are you former military?” I asked.

“Almost all of us are,” he said.

Now he wore the coat to his pilot’s uniform. That’s why I hadn’t seen it before. His name badge read, Anders.

“Thanks,” I said, practically shoving Victoria and Tara to the gate.

“Aren’t you going to eat?” Anders called out. “You’ve got a couple of hours.”

“Nah, I’ll wait,” I said.

When we got to the boarding area for the charter flight we stopped. A woman in a navy pantsuit was behind the counter shuffling papers.

“I saw it,” Tara said. “I’m texting Jerry now.”

“So that was why he was listed on the flight manifest, but he hadn’t processed through the scientist intake procedure in Antarctica,” Victoria said.

“Are you looking forward to your flight to the big white cold?” the woman at the desk asked, all smiles.

We nodded.

“Can we board now?” I asked.

“Your pilot’s not here yet, but sure, go ahead.”

“Probably safer,” Vic whispered.

We walked the ramp to the much smaller plane that was parked at the gate. “Let’s sit in the back,” I said.

“Why are we sitting anywhere? We don’t need to go to Antarctica now.” Tara said.

Ping. Ping. Tara and I had texts coming in. “Looks like Detective Kent was hoping one of us had our cell phone on.” I read mine to Victoria. *Victim is Rob Miller. Real Julian Anders in Antarctica.*

Tara looked at me and then at Victoria. “So all our pilot is guilty of is having his ID stolen?”

“And murder.” I came across more melodramatic than I meant to. “My father used to call Antarctica the big, white cold.”

“That’s what that woman just called it,” Vic said. “So what?”

“One of the boats at Lanier Marina was named, BWC. I saw it this morning. Whoever killed the lifeguard knew about electric Shock Drowning. Tara, did he say anything about being a sailor?”

“Yeah, he talked about it. He has a boat on Lake Lanier,” Tara said.

Victoria gasped. “Remember all of those messages downloading on his phone? Tara thought they were from women? They were from various services I subscribed to for him. He was the one that hacked my phone!”

I was typing my theory to Detective Kent while she talked. “Good girl!”

“As long as we stay on this plane, we’re safe. He’s going back to Denver, remember?” Victoria assured us.

I nodded. “So we’re going to Antarctica after all.”

A text pinged on my phone. *Get off that plane.* It was from Detective Kent.

“Ladies! Guess what?”

We turned to see Julian Anders stowing three orange gear bags in an overhead bin. “Your pilot is under the weather. I’ll be flying you this morning.”

He shrugged out of his jacket.

I looked down and saw his knuckles were bleeding, which told me the nature of our pilot’s ailment. I looked at my fellow Tiara Investigations Detectives. The door to the aircraft was still open. It was three against one. With a whoop, we ran up the aisle and charged him. He stiff armed us and we went down like bowling pins. He looked down at us and laughed.

“I’m working on clearance to leave early. Fasten your seatbelts. You’re going to have a bumpy ride.”

We had fallen in a heap of arms and legs on the aisle and struggled to get up. Anders went to the cockpit and closed the door.

“We need a weapon,” I said. “Maybe there’s something in the cold weather gear.”

“Hurry, we have to do something before we take off,” Vic said.

Tara ran to the where he had stowed the three orange bags. She pulled them out and we knelt on the floor and began rummaging through them.

Victoria pulled out a silky sock. “We’re not going to need this.”

“We might, or they wouldn’t have given it to us,” I said. The closets of my extra bedrooms were filled with outdoor gear.

“It wouldn’t be the first invention with dubious value. Remember those day-of-the-week panties? What was the purpose of those?” Tara asked.

“They made sense at the time,” I said. The bags seemed bottomless. “There’s nothing hard enough to be used for a weapon in here,” I wailed.

Then we heard the plane’s engine start.

Tara sat back. “In case we die I want to confess something.”

“This is going to be good. You tell us everything, so for you to call it a confession, it must really be hot stuff,” I said.

“Kenny Rogers called and asked me out the night before I got married.”

“What did you do?” Victoria asked.

“I told him no.”

The plane began taxiing down the runway.

“You didn’t take your love to town. That’s good,” I said. I picked up my gear bag to sling it because I was just that frustrated. It went farther than I meant it to since I was just

making a statement. I watched it bounce off the bathroom door. “He took the most important cold weather gear out.” I put my head in my hands. “I don’t have boots or a parka or pants, or anything like that. How about your bags?”

It took a beat for them to realize how bad our situation was, but when they did they grabbed their bags and tunneled through the flimsy things Julian Anders had left us.

“It’s going to be okay. A lot of people work at Union Glacier Camp this time of year. We just have to get word to Jerry and he’ll have security waiting when we land,” I said, going for a confident tone.

Tara was up and running for her handbag. She pulled out her phone. Victoria was right behind her.

“Son of a... My text won’t go through,” Tara said.

“I have no bars. We don’t have WIFI so my email won’t, either,” Victoria said.

I pointed in an arc around the cabin. “This isn’t as nice as the last plane.”

The folding door to the cockpit opened and we turned. I got up off the floor.

“I’ve made a slight change to the flight plan,” Anders said.

“Shouldn’t you be in there flying the plane?” Tara asked.

He looked at her and said, “It’s programmed in. We’re going to Dome Fuji. Ever been there?”

We stared at him, but didn’t answer.

“No? Well,---”

“So Rob Miller stole your ID? Is that right?” I asked. As I said his name I was struck by how normal it sounded. Not exciting.

“Blond kid? Was that his name?” Anders asked. “I never knew.”

“But you knew him when you saw him last night?” I pushed on.

“He was at the store of a marina where I docked. The guy working there knew him. When he said his name, I couldn’t believe it.”

“What did you do?” I asked.

“Nohting,” he said. Liar.

“Your boat’s name is *The BWC*?” I asked.

“Yeah, she’s a beauty.”

“So you went out and did what to the power box at the dock?” I asked.

“I just made a couple of temporary adjustments to the wiring.”

I took a deep breath and hoped Victoria wouldn't react to my next question. “Did you write that phone number on his arm?”

“No, but I sent a little gift to whoever it was. Figured it was a friend of his. Maybe girlfriend or something.” Then he turned to go back into the cockpit.

When the door clicked closed, Tara grabbed the nearest seatback for support.

“You okay?” Victoria asked, reaching for her.

She shook her head. “He only told us all that because he plans to kill us.”

“I think his plan is to get us off the plane. We won't last long outside,” I said.

**

When the plane slowed for approach we were sound asleep. The cockpit door opened and then the exit door. The ladder lowered with a clanking hum and the coldest air I'd ever felt zoomed in.

“Get up,” he yelled.

I was sitting in the row in front of Victoria and Tara and he pulled me up by my sweater. I roared and charged him. The other two pushed me from behind like I was a tackling dummy. I had to keep him on his feet and moving back up the aisle, and I did. The cold air filled the plane and it hurt to breathe but we kept going. Suddenly the space around the plane was lit up. I heard radios squawk, doors slam, and I didn't know what else. I kept going. I could find out what was out there later. We were at the open door and I shoved him down the steps. Within seconds they had iced over and he slid down one bump at a time and into Detective Jerome Kent's arms. Kent flung him to a guy with “Security” on his jacket. Someone was running up the steps to me. It was Jack.

**

When we got to the warmth of Union Glacier Camp, we three thought we were at Dome Fuji. Some nice scientist from Polar Services set us straight and told us how they had hacked into the plane's auto-pilot system, reverting our course back to our original destination. We told them everything we knew about their employee.

When the sun came up we were enjoying champagne and snacks on another luxury jet. “Jack, how did you get to Antarctica so fast?” I asked.

“Merry Christmas,” he said, waving the arm that wasn't over my shoulder around. “I'll be consulting for the next ten years to pay for a plane this size.” He leaned over and kissed me. “You're worth it.”

I didn't bother to say the security detail in Antarctica could have handled Julian Anders on their own since he was clearly enjoying being my knight in shining armor.

This plane did have WIFI and Detective Kent was checking his emails. “Leigh, that FBI agent said if you would do him a favor, all will be forgotten. What’s he talking about?”

“I guess his wife found a note in his pocket with a phone number on it, and he probably wants me to explain it,” I said. “Tell him we have a deal.” I turned to Jack. “He’s the guy you saw me with at the airport.”

“How would you know what’s in his pockets?”

“I put the note in there.”

“So we should keep Tiara Investigations open for another decade to pay for this?” Victoria asked.

I heard Tara singing behind me. “How much have you had to drink?” I asked.

“I was just thinking about when we would know when to close the agency.” Then she was singing again, “You gotta know when...”