

Chapter 1

Unofficial Business

Saturday June 14th, 2003

New York

Kimberley Forest raised her heavy eyelids and blinked several times. She turned to her left to gaze at the red digital display of her bedside clock; 6:15am. A glance at her cell phone was enough. It was Harriet, her teenage sister. Accompanying the flashing display was a regular low buzzing sound.

It didn't seem like four hours since Kimberley had placed her head on the pillow after concluding a two-day stakeout with colleagues. She'd catnapped like the rest of the team and had jokingly teased she should still have been performing her morning workouts.

As it was, the detectives were pleased to have rounded up one of the city's gun-running gangs, and there were no injuries on the NYPD team. The raids and arrests were the culminations of a three-month undercover operation.

Now trying to bring herself fully alert, the pretty 27-year-old continued blinking her burning eyes and then swiped the screen on her cell. She leaned up on her left arm and pushed her long brown hair back from her right ear. As she listened, she prepared to respond to Harriet.

"Alan, put that thing down," a gruff male voice said on the other end.

"I wanna' see if she has any cute friends—" the other man said.

"You know what you're like with phones. Put it down," the gruff voice said.

Kimberley sat up in bed, threw back the duvet and swung her legs around to sit on the edge of the mattress. Her phone was pressed firmly to her ear, but she didn't speak. Her eyes opened wide, and her lips parted as she felt a cold chill travel up her spine. A sense of dread washed over her, and she forgot her woes and fatigue. A glance at the display suggested it was Harriet's cell.

Judging by the voices fading and getting louder, it sounded like whoever was holding the phone, was waving it around. Kimberley listened intently. She tried to hear if her sister was involved in the conversation. She held back from speaking so she could listen.

"Aw Ben," Alan said. *"You're jealous because I found it first—"*

"I'm not jealous you idiot ... and don't use our fucking names. If you hit the call button, somebody will hear us."

"Shit Ben ... what does that symbol mean?"

"I said, don't use our fucking names," Ben muttered. "Give it to ... aw shit."

"It won't matter," Alan said. "Cos' she's dead man—"

The call ended and Kimberley's brow furrowed as she looked at the screen.

"No," she whispered, her eyes fluttered, her breath shortened and then she fainted.

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"Kimberley ... Kimberley, can you hear me?" Maria said, her Italian accent becoming more pronounced as she raised her voice. She had been doing her morning fitness routine alone in her room when she heard the sound of her friend falling to the floor. They would normally have gone out for a run, or completed an indoor session together, but Maria knew her flat-mate had arrived back late.

Maria was wearing a black leotard and her white indoor sneakers. A bright pink sweatband held her long dark hair in place and beads of perspiration continued to increase on her tanned brow. She was trying to control her breathing, and a cramp started in her thighs. She gritted her teeth and tried to ignore the pain.

Kimberley opened her eyes and realized she was sitting on the bedroom rug, her back against her bed. She was still wearing her red silk pajamas. She blinked as she gazed at her flat-mate and tried to rally her thoughts. Had she been dreaming?

Maria Delano, also a 27-year-old, was a fellow detective with the NYPD. She squatted in front of Kimberley; her eyes screwed up. She was holding her dazed friend gently by the shoulders.

"Maria," Kimberley whispered; her eyes moist. "I want you to do something for me."

"Name it," her roommate said, looking into her blue eyes and wincing as her thigh muscles started to contract. Maria released the grip she had on Kimberley's shoulders and stood up. She stretched the back of both legs but maintained eye contact, squinting down at her friend.

"Look at my cell," Kimberley gasped as she turned to look at the offending instrument lying on the rug beside her. "Please ... check the last caller."

Maria had already seen the cell on the rug but had ignored it to lift her friend into a sitting position. She looked from Kimberley to the cell and then back again, before she squatted down and lifted the offending instrument with her right hand. She wiped the perspiration from her eyes with the sweatband on her left wrist as she stood.

"It was Harriet," Maria said, squinting, even more confused.

"No!" Kimberley screamed, and then burst into uncontrollable floods of tears.

The Italian looked at the cell again, then to its owner and her brow furrowed. She couldn't figure out how Harriet could have upset her sister. The only person closer to Kimberley was Maria herself. She squinted at her friend and was totally mystified.

"She's dead," Kimberley sobbed, her eyes glistening with tears. Her normally pretty features were broken, her face unrecognizable. "My baby sister is dead, Maria."

"I don't understand honey," Maria said. "How could—"

"Two men," Kimberley said and exploded into tears again. "I heard a conversation."

"I still don't get it," Maria said. She eased herself down into a kneeling position, perplexed, dark eyes still squinting at her friend.

"They were arguing about Harriet's cell ... and I couldn't hear her voice." She stared at Maria. "I heard one of them say, 'she's dead man,' and then the call ended."

"Tell me everything, right from the top," Maria said as she dropped Kimberley's cell onto the rug and once again held her friend gently, but firmly by the shoulders.

Kimberley was sobbing as she related everything in short bursts. Tears poured from her eyes. She explained how she awakened to the sound and vibration of her cell, and then she repeated the conversation she overheard. As she spoke her body trembled, caused by her inner fears and the realization of what the call meant.

"Kimberley you're tired," Maria said. "You've been strung out for days."

"I wasn't dreaming Maria," Kimberley said in a whisper. "It was the cell buzzing which woke me."

Maria bent down and retrieved the cell. She pressed the keys to return the call, and then listened. She received an automated message. It reported that the caller's number was unavailable and suggested trying again later.

"Stay there honey," Maria said. "I'll be right back." She got up and left the small room, returning less than one minute later with her cell. She wiped the perspiration from her eyes and forehead again and then knelt down in front of Kimberley. Using only her right hand, Maria started to dial, but a strong hand flew up from the floor and gripped her wrist.

"Who are you calling?" Kimberley said quietly and sniffed as she stared into her closest friend's eyes.

"I'm gonna' call our guys and get the local boys in Greensburg to go around there."

"No," Kimberley said and sniffed again as she wiped the back of her free hand across her tear-stained eyes. "I'm going there." She was staring. "I'm going to check it out."

“What the fuck do you mean you’re going to check it out?” Maria said. “Girl, you’re in no state to check *anything* out.”

Kimberley let go of Maria’s wrist and placed both palms on the floor for support. She took a deep breath before speaking. “What have I told you about my stepfather?”

“You mean apart from the fact he’s an asshole, and neither you nor Harriet have ever liked him?”

“Yes,” Kimberley said, with no trace of humor, “but there’s one other important fact.”

“He’s a detective on the local force,” Maria said and shook her head.

“Yes, he’s a detective, and his partner is a man called Sorenson - *Ben* Sorenson.”

“You get showered first,” Maria said. “I’ll fix breakfast for us before we leave. We must eat because we need to be in good shape to travel so far.”

“What are you talking about, before *we* leave?”

Maria held her friend’s face in both hands and looked into her glistening eyes. “There is no fucking way you are riding your Harley around 700 miles alone honey; not in your condition. Now get your ass in the shower.”

*

Both women sat at the breakfast bar in the apartment, eating in silence and drinking strong black coffee. Kimberley was eating bacon, eggs, and beans, but didn’t smell or taste anything. Her mind was already in another state many miles away. She wanted to be with her sister.

Maria ate and silently planned the sequence of events they would follow after sustenance. Like her friend and partner, Maria was able to maintain a list of tasks in her memory without the need to write them down. Normally Kimberley planned like a chess master, but these were not normal circumstances, so it was down to Maria.

Both of the girls dressed in T-shirt, jeans and sneakers. Kimberley had her hair pulled back in a long ponytail, and Maria’s was in a severe bun up tight behind her Yankees baseball cap. Having no desire to be noticed, neither of them had bothered with make-up.

When it was about time to go, Kimberley appeared from her room carrying a small backpack with overnight gear, and her leather jacket in one hand. In her other was a hip holster, complete with her service weapon. She slipped the holster and weapon into her backpack.

“Wait,” Maria said, turned and headed to her room. She had been thinking during the silent breakfast about how she would handle such a situation.

When she returned a few minutes later, Maria was carrying a shoulder holster. Seated in a small leather pouch was a Walther PPK 9mm. In her other hand, she was clutching two loaded magazines and a suppressor which was the same length as the automatic.

“Leave your sidearm here and take this,” Maria said, holding out both hands. “The serial number is already filed off, and as you know, it may be small but it’s still deadly.”

Kimberley didn’t waste time considering the options. She nodded silently, before accepting the automatic and accessories. She took her service weapon back to leave it in her room. On her return, she packed the illegal pistol and accessories into her pack.

“Give me 20 minutes,” Maria said, “and while you’re waiting, get our road atlas and figure a direct route. Meet me at the southwest corner of the block.”

“Wh—”

“Give me 20 minutes,” the Italian said and left the apartment.

As instructed, 20 minutes later Kimberley was ready to leave, atlas in hand. She stood by the door and looked around the apartment. The detective had a premonition, a vague idea whatever happened on the outskirts of Greensburg, she might not be returning. The aroma of the fried breakfast had all but disappeared. She inhaled the fragrance of the lavender air freshener one more time, placed her baseball cap on her head and quietly closed the door.

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It was 8:35am as the big blue Chrysler cruised west along Route 78. A sign suggested Bethlehem was the next exit. Maria addressed her silent passenger without turning.

“We’ll make up some time when we cross the state line into Pennsylvania.” She glanced at Kimberley. “Are you sure you want to do this alone?” She paused. “I’d be happier going in with you.”

Kimberley nodded but said nothing. She stared straight ahead, as she had been doing since they passed Newark. A few minutes later, she looked over her shoulder into the back of the big sedan as something came to mind.

“I thought you still had a Pontiac?”

“I do,” Maria said.

“How long have you been driving this?” Kimberley inhaled and recognized the aroma known as ‘new car smell’. The Chrysler was a large, comfortable, well-equipped car.

“Since I picked it up this morning,” Maria said. “I got it about two blocks from where we live.” She glanced in the rear-view. “Don’t worry ... I changed the plates with another car.” The attractive Italian/American smiled and half-turned to her friend. “Please, trust me on this.”

Kimberley's grim expression almost broke into a faint smile. For a serving police detective, Maria Delano was unbelievable.

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The two women had met at the police academy years before, in the early days of their training. They had a big argument which had been settled by their physical training instructor. He gave them both gloves and placed them into the boxing ring together. They had knocked Hell out of each other for over 15 minutes. The fight left them both exhausted.

The unscheduled bout impressed and frightened all the other police recruits attending the course. Kimberley and Maria's unbreakable friendship started five minutes after the fight. Since then, they would take a bullet for each other, and nobody ever bothered either of them.

The two girls were both second generation NYPD. Kimberley's father was a New Yorker born and bred and came from a long line of Iroquois; true Native Americans. Her mother was a dentist and had originally come from the picturesque coastal town of Portrush, in Northern Ireland.

Maria's parents were both born and raised in New York. Both sets of grandparents were Italian immigrants. While her mother continued the family restaurant business, her father had served and died with the NYPD, becoming a young girl's role model. Maria was street-smart many years before joining the police.

Kimberley and Maria had been roommates for over four years and the guys who dated them knew not to mess them around. Neither of the girls wanted anything too serious, so they enjoyed life at work and play. They were both good at their job and were well respected in the precinct.

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After a couple of hours driving at the speed limit, Maria pulled over at a gas station outside Mount Pleasant, southeast of Pittsburgh.

"We'll get some gas before we continue," Maria said, but there was no response. "I don't know about you, but I could do with coffee and a bite."

"I'll order coffees and food," Kimberley said, "and when we set off again, I'll take the wheel for a while." Her tone and lovely face were devoid of emotion.

"There's a cash automat there," Maria said. "Withdraw the max from your account. On Monday, use a machine and transfer the rest online to our special account."

Kimberley squinted at her friend, but rather than argue, she knew Maria would have good reason for the suggestion. She nodded and realized she had no detailed plan prepared, but her friend was already thinking ahead on her behalf.

Maria reached out and touched Kimberley's arm briefly before pulling up at the pumps. They exchanged a silent look, and Kimberley's lashes fluttered as she tried to force a smile before she left the car. Dimples hardly formed in her cheeks, before disappearing again.

During the brief re-fueling stop, both girls received admiring glances from guys who were enjoying a break. Maria winked at them and wondered how impressed the same guys would have been if they'd seen them in short skirts, heels, and full war-paint, ready for a night on the town. She absently wondered if she and Kimberley would ever do such a thing together again.

The diner had air-con and two large overhead fans. A mixture of the aromas of coffee, hamburgers and fries assaulted and pleased the senses as the glass door swung closed on the oppressive heat outside.

There was little conversation during the stop, and the pair left, got back into the Chrysler and Kimberley drove as they continued west on Route 70.

"How do you intend to play it when we get there?" Maria said.

"I'm grateful for your help Maria, truly I am, but I want you off the scene before we get to the street. I'd prefer you not to have any other part in this." She glanced at her friend. "If I have to do anything, it will be against all the rules."

"I can't let you put your life on—"

"Promise," Kimberley said and turned briefly.

Maria met her gaze and nodded before turning to face front again. She didn't speak. Maria decided *nodding* didn't constitute a lie.

They drove on in silence again for many miles.

For her part, Kimberley didn't see the scenery, the traffic, or the miles pass. She set the air-con rather than open a window, and her thoughts were of the past and her sister. Harriet was a stunning 17-year-old, who was genuine and caring. All the guys loved her, and all the girls were jealous of her, but everybody liked her. She was a bubbly blonde, with intelligence to spare.

At their mother's funeral only a few months before, Harriet had confided in Kimberley about wanting to go to the police academy too. Kimberley tried to put her off and said if she didn't intend to use her brains, she should consider fashion modeling or advertising cosmetics. Typically, Harriet had laughed. The sisters were as close as two people could be, and understood each other well.

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As the car cruised along the highway, Maria respected Kimberley's silence and took the opportunity to catnap. There were many hours of driving to do, and she wanted both herself and

Kimberley to be ready for whatever awaited them. She hadn't fully made up her mind about leaving her friend on her own, but she would make the decision later.

During the journey, there wasn't much to see, but it didn't matter, neither of the women took any notice of their surroundings; only the rate at which they could cover the distance. There was no music playing, and there was little conversation. The long hot strip of tarmac simply continued to unwind ahead of them, mile after mile.

In the solitude as Maria slept, Kimberley tried to organize her thoughts, but she couldn't erase the conversation she'd overheard on Harriet's cell. More than once she found herself sniffing and wiping tears from her cheeks with the back of her hand.

When the road ahead was clear, and there was no risk of being pulled in, the pedal had been pressed a little harder. A couple of hours passed before Kimberley pulled into a gas station northeast of Cincinnati. At higher speed, the big car had become thirsty.

As before, the pair re-fuelled themselves too. They had a light snack and coffee, both aware of the dangers of a large meal when driving a long way. Apart from the knowledge of traveling on a full stomach, Kimberley had little appetite and ate because she was told to, rather than from a desire.

As they sat with a second coffee, Kimberley stared straight ahead. She looked down only when Maria pushed a sheet of paper and a pen towards her.

"What's this?" Kimberley said. She glanced at the paper and then her companion before reading aloud. "A Bill of Sale?"

"You sold me your Harley for \$3,000 cash," Maria said, paused and pointed to the paper. "We made the deal three days ago."

"I don't understand."

"I need to be able to sell it for you if you end up in a tight situation. Right now, you are gonna' need cash more urgently than you need your bike." She maintained eye contact. "We also need to make sure it looks like it was sold prior to today."

"Three grand is more than it's worth," Kimberley said as she lifted the pen.

"You would have gotten more if I had more stashed in the apartment," Maria said and produced a manila envelope from her purse. She dropped the package on the table and lifted the signed document. "Don't worry about losing the bike. This agreement is simply a precaution." She folded the freshly signed paper and slipped it into her purse.

"You are priceless," Kimberley said and tried to force a smile. "I don't know what I'm going to find. What would I have done without you?"

“Well, I reckon you’d have wrecked your bike and ended up in an ITU, or you’d have been pulled over on the highway for doing a ton.” She winked, and the conversation ended.

When they went outside, Maria took over driving duties, and they set off west again. Once they reached cruising speed, Kimberley distributed the large amount of cash she now had. She dispensed with the envelope as she squeezed wads of bills into jacket pockets, jeans, and purse.

Maria stole a glance at her companion, smiled, and nodded to herself. Spreading the money over her person was preparation, and preparation meant planning. It was at last an outward sign to the Italian. Her partner was coming around to the reality of the situation. Kimberley’s proactive senses were working which was good for her, but bad for anyone who chose to cross her.

Maria was happier - not much; but happier.

*

Greensburg

Indiana

Due to their brief stops and dealing with diversions around construction works, it was 8:15pm when the pair took the exit for Pinewood in the suburbs of Greensburg, Indiana. On the journey, both women had found themselves dozing off for short periods when the other was driving. They were both partly rested on arrival.

Kimberley had dozed off because of the journey and the exhaustion of the recent clandestine operation. Maria had catnapped along the way, knowing she would have to be ready to take over driving, and still be alert. She was worried about Kimberley, but she was also worried about what they might find in a small community outside Greensburg where her partner had grown up.

There were small groups of houses starting to appear on either side of the road. In the middle distance to both sides, there were areas of pine forest, and foothills in the far distance. A road sign indicated Greensburg itself was two miles further. There was no scenery to speak of, unless the nearby woodland and the distant hills counted.

Pinewood was a village-sized community. A large group of houses were situated to the left. Another small group of houses 200 yards along the main road stood, where a sign suggested a town was nearby. Close to the second group of buildings were a couple of stores, a gas station, a diner, and a bus stop.

A church with a spire was visible further ahead on the right. The late evening sun reflected from the roofs of buildings in Greensburg. It served to make the place look closer than it was.

“Okay,” Kimberley said, “this is close enough. Take a left and stop over there.” She paused and turned. “What will you tell Kelly?”

“You leave Captain Kelly to me,” Maria said as she checked the rear-view, flicked the turn indicator and slowed the car. “It’s the weekend, and we’re not on call until Monday. How far away is the house?” She pulled over beside a small area of woodland, after leaving the main road.

“It’s 200 yards along there on the right side,” Kimberley said and nodded across the road to a narrow avenue. “It’s the place with a white picket fence and the black pickup parked in the drive.”

Kimberley unclipped her safety belt, lifted the shoulder holster from her pack and slipped it on. A quick tug on the automatic assured her it was safely in position. She lifted her leather jacket and pulled it on.

Maria squinted along the road. Pinewood was a quiet-looking neighborhood, she thought. There were no more than 100 houses within a half-mile radius, and they were all smart looking with large gardens to front and rear.

“It looks like there’s a lamp on, but there is still some daylight,” Maria said. “Perhaps it’s a lamp in the hallway.” She turned to Kimberley. “Does the pickup belong to your stepfather, Detective Morgan?”

“Yeah, he likes to go off into the mountains on hunting trips with his friends.”

“Right,” Maria said. “What’s with the light on a summer evening?”

“It’s probably not a lamp. It’s the way the setting sun shines into the house from the kitchen, which is to the left.” Kimberley reached out her left hand and held her friend’s hand. “Thank you, Maria, now get the Hell away from here.”

“Have you put a round in the chamber?” Maria asked, practical as ever.

Kimberley lifted the Walther out from under her jacket and pulled back on the action. It was a small, compact weapon, but the grip was comfortable, and the working parts felt solid. When the pistol was ready for use, she slipped it back into the shoulder holster and lifted her jacket over. She turned to Maria again.

The automatic was Maria’s secret handgun, but it provided Kimberley with confidence. She could use it without a trace if there were a need. The pair gazed at each other, both fearing what the near future might hold. They’d been through so much together.

Maria leaned forward, and they hugged as best they could in the front of the big car.

Kimberley pressed the door handle and felt Maria grip her other arm. She looked around.

“Use the back door, honey,” Maria suggested, “and be fucking cautious.”

Kimberley nodded and tried to force a smile, but it stopped quickly and looked as if her lips had merely twitched. She opened the door, and the smell of pine wafted inside. Kimberley lifted her

backpack from the foot-well, and closed the car door quietly. She glanced in both directions before crossing the road. A moment later she strode along the sidewalk towards the houses.

There was no traffic and no pedestrians around. Kimberley crossed at the intersection to the avenue where she'd grown up. She walked past the family home and took the next right which took her to the narrow lane which went behind the row of houses. The young detective stopped briefly to look back up the road.

Maria was at the wheel of the car, observant and alert as ever.
