

Mind Over Bullies

A MOB Forms

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DEDICATION

Only after darkness does the sun rise.

To all of those currently suffering in the darkness of bullying, be confident that there is a tomorrow where the sun will rise for you.

CHAPTER ONE

The mall was unusually crowded for a Wednesday. The clerk smiled as a teenage boy and girl approached and unloaded a mountain of items onto the counter.

The clerk folded a pair of blue jeans and set them aside. “Good choice. I like these,” she said with a smile at the girl. The teens offered a polite smile in return but nothing more. Erica was restless, shifting her weight from one leg to the other. She stood with her arms folded, sighing as she glanced around the store before looking back at the clerk who was working at a modest pace to scan each article of clothing.

“Picked a good time to stock up like this,” the clerk said, still trying to make small talk. “All of this would have cost a fortune last week, but this sale is one of the best of the year.”

“Mm-hmm,” Will muttered with a smile of impatience. He rubbed his hand over his head, resting his palm on the back of his neck. His free hand rested in his back pocket, and like Erica he began to look around the store.

The clerk scanned the last shirt, neatly folded it, and placed it on top of the pile of clothes already stacked high on the counter. “All righty, let’s see, that will be 222 dollars and 13 cents.”

Erica reached into her purse and retrieved a neat bundle of bills. She counted out three crisp 100 dollar bills and handed them to the clerk.

“Oh, and this,” Will said, placing a belt on the counter.

The clerk checked the price tag. “Okay, so with the belt that comes to 242 dollars and 85 cents,” she said, tapping on the register’s screen.

The clerk's brow abruptly wrinkled in concern, but her head stayed bowed toward the register. The teens saw her expression and looked at each other. Erica peeked around the register. "Oh, shoot! Come on! Come on! We gotta go!" she yelled, pulling Will as she turned to run.

The clerk picked up the store phone and dialed frantically, "Can you send security down? Yes... a boy and a girl, they look like high school kids."

The teens ran wildly through the store and out to the mall's atrium. They dashed through the food court, knocking over trash cans and barely missing other patrons as they made their way to the parking structure. Erica periodically glanced anxiously over her shoulder as she ran.

They neared their car. "Hurry up!" Erica shouted as Will shuffled through his pockets for the car keys. He feverishly pressed the buttons on the key fob. The locks popped open and the teens scrambled to get inside; visible in the rearview mirror was the mall security sprinting toward them. The engine roared, and the red Mustang reversed from the stall. Smoke filled the lot as the tires screeched, propelling the car forward at speeds that would send it airborne with one mistake. Reckless and desperate, the teens emerged from the parking structure skidding dangerously as they turned onto the main street.

Erica clenched her hair in frustration, "That was *not* supposed to happen!"

"What happened?" Will asked.

"The stupid bills changed color."

"Huh?"

"They turned yellow right in her hand." Erica squeezed her eyes tight and slammed her head against the headrest.

Sirens blared behind them and Will checked the rearview again. "You gotta be kidding me," he groaned, seeing a trail of police cars behind him.

Weaving in and out of traffic, Will tried to put distance between the Mustang and the police.

“Oh God, watch out!” Erica yelled as the car narrowly missed a pedestrian.

The thump-thump-thump sound of a helicopter reverberated overhead. The teens sped through red lights and intersections like daredevil stunt drivers. Will screamed as a sharp left turn sent the car onto two wheels. A speed bump sent the car flipping onto its roof and skidding to a halt. The pursuing police vehicles closed in, stopping only feet away from the teens’ overturned car. Uniformed officers exited their vehicles and approached with weapons drawn.

An unmarked blue sedan pulled up. The front passenger door opened and the polished dress shoe of Police Chief Donald Hatton stepped out. “They alive?” the chief called out.

One of the officers near the car nodded. The chief pulled out his cell phone and walked away from the scene to make a call. “We got ‘em... Nope, just two. I’ll have them taken downtown.” The chief hung up and turned to watch as the badly bruised teens were extracted from the vehicle, handcuffed, and loaded into an ambulance.

“This is Victoria Valentine for GWN World News reporting from Oak View, California. At this hour police are preparing to hold what we understand is the first in a series of planned press conferences surrounding recent counterfeiting activity in a four-state area. What we know at this point is that at least fifty students from local high schools are believed to have involvement. The elaborate scheme appears to center around the laundering of counterfeit bills through retail locations. I’m here with Police Chief Donald Hatton. What can you tell us about the investigation Chief?”

“We’ve spoken to several of the kids involved, and it appears they’re being extorted. This group—whoever they are—has the students passing off the bills at all sorts of retail locations,” the chief said.

“At this point, how big is the situation?” Victoria asked.

“Well, at this time the most I can tell you is that city, state, and federal agencies are cooperating in the investigation.”

Chief Hatton went on to explain that the counterfeit bills were possibly being sold to other lower-level criminals. The concern was that the bills would then be used for the sale and purchase of narcotics and other legitimate goods and services.

The concern was so great because the counterfeit bills initially appeared to mimic actual U.S. Treasury notes perfectly. From the watermarks all the way down to the fibers in the paper, the bills looked authentic. With every security feature of the bills duplicated so flawlessly, the bills had been undetectable at first. Not even the detector pens retailers commonly used were able to distinguish real from fake.

After doing a few low-level tests, the counterfeiting group steadily expanded its use of the bills, using vulnerable students to launder the money. A flaw was exposed when detectives in one state confiscated a batch of the counterfeit bills and discovered that after thirty days, the bills developed a yellow tint because of a delayed chemical reaction of the paper to the ink. The thirty-day lead time, however, left authorities and retailers no way to tell who originally used the bills.

The bills began to show up in banks in four new states. Students brazenly began making deposits into their own bank accounts through automated teller machines. Fearlessly they would make withdrawals recognizing that identifying who initially deposited the bills would be impossible.

The plot to use students had been uncovered several days earlier as fourteen students were arrested in rapid succession. The students used a batch of older bills that were more than twenty-nine days old. While attempting to use the bills to make large retail purchases, the bills changed color in the cashiers' hands. The authorities reported that some of the arrested students claim to have made upwards of twenty-five thousand dollars.

“At this point it is unclear just how much money is involved. As the story develops we'll keep you informed. This is Victoria Valentine, GWN.”

Local schools were concerned that more students from the area could possibly get tangled up in the scandal. Interest at Oak View High School began to heat up when two students were found brutally beaten near the campus. The beatings caused the students to be hospitalized. It was feared that the attacks were in retaliation for talking with police about the counterfeiting. Rapidly, the fears of school officials around the district as well as parents and authorities worsened.

Margo Rios, a journalism student at Oak View High School, was invited to cover a conference for administrators from multiple school districts. Margo was pretty, fit, smart, popular, and a firecracker who could be a bit of a jerk at times. She had a passion for photography and journalism. She also had a way with words. Sometimes she brilliantly showcased her promise as a reporter. Other times she only highlighted having a smart mouth. Nevertheless, she was well-liked on campus.

Margo sat in class with her legs crossed, reading a text from her friend Chelsey as she reclined. Chelsey was throwing another one of her legendary parties in the hills. Chelsey was from money so she always pulled out all of the stops for her parties. They were the most exclusive. It didn't matter who knew about the party—if you didn't have an invite you were not getting in.

As Margo left class, a warm welcome from many greeted her in the halls, as well as an invitation to the movies by a semi-popular member of the basketball team. Margo was in rare form as she shot him down in front of his friends and got quite the laugh watching his ego go up in flames. She made her way to the quad to meet her girlfriends: Brenda, Chelsey, and her best of best friends, Kat.

Chelsey, Brenda, and Kat had known each other since preschool. Margo wasn't from money like the other three, but she and Kat clicked during freshman year, and Kat's rep took Margo along for the ride. Surprisingly, even though the other two girls had known Kat longer, Margo and Kat grew to be closer. Margo became part of their crew and a part of the in-crowd from then on. They comprised an unofficial four-girl high school sorority and acted every bit the part.

Her friends lived up on the hillside, and Margo lived about five miles the other way in a working-class neighborhood with nice houses and average folks. Both of her parents worked to maintain their modest

two-story, three-bedroom home, a far cry from the six- and seven-bedroom mansions with pool houses and city views that kids from more affluent families enjoyed.

The girls met up outside while on a break between classes and chatted about the party plans for the following Friday. Margo and Kat talked about Danny, a new guy at school they both found attractive. Neither was willing to openly commit to any real intentions toward him, though it was widely known that Kat was more than interested. Brenda and Chelsey teased Margo about Justin, another guy who had been asking about her, but she blew that idea off.

Kat spotted Felicity and her boyfriend walking by. Recently Kat told the girls of her suspicions that Felicity had accused her to Mrs. Galloway of cheating on her recent history paper. Kat found out that Felicity had visited the health clinic days earlier and took the opportunity to loudly inquire if Felicity had let her boyfriend know about her infection. Felicity and Kat engaged in a killer stare-down. The buzzing crowd and the obvious embarrassment of Felicity's boyfriend were too much for her to take. Felicity quickly walked away in tears. Margo and Brenda cringed at the comment, and Chelsey bore a disapproving look, but none of them tried to rein Kat in. They all laughingly commented on how quickly the Kat claws came out before parting ways and heading back to class.

That afternoon in journalism class, the students discussed stories to run for the school paper. The counterfeiting ring was discussed, namely the recent series of student arrests as reported by the mainstream media.

Mr. Lowman, the journalism teacher, assigned Margo and another student to conduct a series of interviews with several students currently in jail awaiting trial, along with police investigators and school officials.

Jessie, one of the class's lead reporters, switched topics and mentioned a possible story about a bullied student who attempted suicide. After several weeks of cyber-attacks and face-to-face attacks at school, the student intentionally crashed his car into a side railing on the freeway. He survived but was hospitalized and remained in critical condition.

Jessie had already interviewed the bullied student prior to the suicide attempt and wanted to run the story. After taking Jessie's notes and looking them over, Mr. Lowman felt that the details were too controversial. He was also concerned about school liability, so the discussion about the bullying story ended there.

Margo saw how passionate Jessie was about the story but had a quick eye-roll moment as she listened to the whole thing. Margo was thick-skinned and tough-minded. The idea that someone could be pushed to take their own life because of what someone said about them was unfathomable to her. In fact she viewed it as just plain weak. Her feelings about the subject of bullying, along with viewing Jessie as a bit of a know-it-all, made not liking Jessie's story easy for Margo.

When class ended, Margo saw the notes about the bullying incident on Mr. Lowman's desk. She quickly scanned them with her tablet. Lately the media had been saturated with stories of teens who had either committed or attempted to commit suicide because of being bullied. Margo was curious to know what made this particular student want to kill himself. She also wanted information for her Gossipology blog—skimming information like this was how her blog stayed hot. With viewership well over one million, Margo chose to keep herself anonymous and never put a face to her blog for obvious reasons. Anonymity came at a cost, though; with no public figure attached to the blog, she earned less than would other sites with the same viewership. The thirty thousand a year she did earn from advertisers was more than enough for a high school junior, so staying anonymous was fine with her.

Driving home after school, Margo saw Jessie waiting at the bus stop. They lived just a few blocks from one another, but Margo didn't want to be seen with her and hoped Jessie wouldn't notice her. Jessie looked in her direction, smiled, and stepped toward the curb assuming that Margo would stop and give her a ride. Margo acted as if she didn't see Jessie, switched lanes, and zoomed past her.

Instead of going home, Margo headed for the gym. Heavy into her fitness, she kick-boxed, ran, and did light resistance training to preserve her tall, lean physique. The workouts were what allowed her to appear that she was floating down the hallways at school and was what had guys from all over wanting her attention.

Margo was in a full sweat working the punching bag with music from her phone's mp3 player blaring in her ears. She ignored several text messages and a phone call; the gym was her private time and she took it seriously.

She finished her workout and headed downstairs to the locker room. After showering, she read her texts. One was from Kat and one from her other bestie Tony. He was a childhood friend that was more like a brother to her. Tony also tried calling but left no voicemail, and there was also a call from a number she didn't recognize. Margo responded to Kat's text. She confirmed that she would be coming by later that night. She decided to call Tony back later.

Two other girls from school walked into the locker room.

"Margo, right?" one of the girls asked with a disturbed, sarcastic look on her face.

"Margo Rios to be exact," Margo replied defensively. "Do I know you?"

"Hey, look, my beef isn't with you," the girl said, "but you may wanna tell your friend to stay in her place."

From listening to the girl, Margo surmised that Kat had been her usual obnoxious self. The girl complained about a few rumors being spread that had Kat written all over them.

"That's the kinda stuff that can get a person hurt," the girl said.

Margo wasn't one to accept threats lightly, whether directed at her or her friends. "I don't think you two want a war with Kat," Margo said, "and as for your little message you can deliver it yourself. I don't pass messages." Margo finished getting dressed and made her way to her car to head for home.

Margo walked through the front door and called out, "I'm home."

Only Ricky, her older brother, answered from the other room. Margo headed up to her room, jumped on the bed, and whipped out her tablet to look at the notes she'd scanned from Mr. Lowman's desk. Reading the story brought a series of sighs and groans. Margo smacked her lips in disbelief, "Oh come on," she mumbled.

Margo logged into her gossip blog and began to write a full story with every detail from the notes she scanned. Her story blasted the victim. She mentioned his name and showed little concern that her story would heartlessly make details public that were not previously known. Her comments about the incident made it clear to her readers that the bullied student needed to get over the whole thing. Part of Margo's lack of compassion stemmed from the fact that the victim was male. Secondly from her point of view trash talk and gossip were everyday occurrences. She viewed the incident as more of a low blow rather than something to make a person want to take their own life. Her article was blunt and straightforward and clearly had no hint of sympathy for the victim.

Margo glanced at her phone. She checked her voicemails. Tony had called again. His message mentioned needing to talk to Margo and asked if she would call him. The next voicemail was from the number she didn't recognize. It was the jail—where three of the students arrested from the counterfeiting scandal were being housed. She had been granted permission to do an interview. She was advised that she could come down anytime between seven a.m. and four p.m. on Saturday.

Margo jumped. She was startled by the sound of a loud bang. She ran to her balcony and could see smoke coming from the rear room of the house next door. The smoke cloud had a slight blue tint to it, clearly not from a regular fire and possibly not from a fire at all. The windows opened and a chubby red-headed boy stuck his head out of the window, coughing and gagging. He didn't notice Margo watching, and she didn't ask any questions. Before long the boy drew his head back from the window, and Margo went back to her bed.

As she looked at the messages, she received a call from Kat telling her to hurry over. They chatted for a while, during which time Margo mentioned the conversation at the gym with the two girls, and Kat mentioned that they were having a beef over some comments that she had been putting out about one of them--something to do with fooling

around with a teacher. Kat blew it off and told Margo that she would tell her more about it when they hooked up later.

Margo went downstairs to let Ricky know that she was leaving. Ricky came around the corner in sort of a surprise attack. He grabbed Margo around the waist playfully. Instinctively Margo punched him in the stomach causing him to loosen his grip.

“Hey, what was that noise a moment ago?” Ricky asked.

“Some kid next door. Didn’t look like anything serious.”

Margo shook her head, made a quick-witted comment about the punch she landed to Ricky’s stomach, and blew him a kiss as she walked out the door.

CHAPTER TWO

As Margo pulled up to the gate of the Colbert mansion, she stopped to take in the awesome city view. The home was an amazing sight as well, as were the other homes in the neighborhood.

Kat came to the door phone-to-head. She waved Margo in, and closed the door behind her. “Yes Daddy, I miss you too,” Margo heard Kat say. Business took Mr. Colbert all over the world, and more than usual lately. Kat recently revealed to Margo that her father being away so much had become a really big issue for her mother. Over the past few months, Mrs. Colbert became doubtful that the business trips were actually about business. Kat was a daddy’s girl and gave no weight to her mother’s concerns. Her grandmother would always tell her that her father being away so often was one of the costs of living so lavishly. Kat agreed. Margo looked at the marble sculptures lining the staircase admiringly as she followed Kat up the stairs to her bedroom. The inside of the Colbert house was like a palace. “Okay, Daddy. Go-Go is here. I’ll see you when you get back. Love you too,” Kat said.

As soon as Kat ended her call Margo started in about the two girls from the gym.

“What’d you go and spread all of that stuff for?” Margo asked.

Kat reclined on a fuzzy soft rug in the middle of her floor. She crossed one leg over the other and looked at Margo, who sat on her bed. “So, I get to big-faced Fisher’s class, and she gives me this weird look when I walk by. The class is half empty. The entire time before class she never says a word to me, right? So I get to my seat and then the class starts to fill up. As soon as the bell rings, she calls me out about how my paper sounds strangely similar to some book.”

Margo leaned forward, propped her elbow on her thigh, and rested her chin atop her knuckles. *Been doing a lot of that lately, huh?* Margo thought, thinking back on Felicity’s earlier charge.

“I did copy a little, but that’s not the point.” Kat twirled her hair, making animated hand gestures. “The point is, she didn’t have to make a scene.”

“So what about the two girls?” Margo asked.

“I’m getting to it, Kat said. “I see Kelly in the corner giving me the eye... so shady. After class Robin tells me that Kelly dropped a dime on me to Fisher.”

“Of course.”

“So, when I start dropping hints about Robin spending late afternoons in Mr. Jensen’s locked classroom, how was I supposed to know that people would assume they were doing unsavory things in there?”

“You’re killing me,” Margo said.

“Now the dumb little skank is mad at me. Some nerve,” Kat said with a laugh.

Margo rolled her eyes and shook her head. The scenario was typical Kat Drama. In an instant the topic changed. Kat informed Margo of new plans for the evening—they were going to a hot, new club. Kat said she had met the owner who gave her an invite. She was vague when Margo asked exactly where and how the two met.

Margo was reluctant to go. She was particular about how she looked when she went out, and she hadn’t come prepared for clubbing. She and Kat were the same size so Kat offered to let her wear whatever she wanted from her closet.

They arrived at the club that night. Kat valet parked her Range Rover. Margo and Kat walked passed a long line of patrons and up to the club security guard. Kat whispered something in his ear. He paused to look at her before lifting the ropes. The girls giggled as they crossed under the rope and into the club.

The music was loud and lights flashed everywhere. The club was much bigger inside than it looked from the street. There were at least three floors. The place was packed with celebs and some of the most beautiful people in town of all ages. There were very few average-looking people in the mix.

“Look at him,” Kat said as an attractive man passed by. “Hi,” she flirted. The man looked and smiled, then kept walking. “Did you see that?” Kat asked. Margo had her back turned and had been staring into the upper levels.

“See what?” Margo said as she turned around. The man Kat wanted her to see had disappeared into the crowd.

A well-dressed man came over to meet the girls. “Careful, he’s a cop. Follow me,” he said as he escorted the girls to a glass elevator that led to the second-floor deck. They exited the elevator car. A large curtain on the right held Margo’s attention. Two men holding bags and dressed in business suits went through the curtain. Margo caught a glimpse of several hallways that looked to be connected in a maze of sorts.

The escort led the girls through a sea of A-listers to a prime table overlooking the floor below. “So how exactly do you know the owner?” Margo asked again. Kat responded with a crooked smile and a wink. Uncertain what those gestures meant, Margo decided to just enjoy the action without more questions.

Even though they were only seventeen, the girls blended right in. They ordered drinks and took in the scene. Margo became almost enchanted with the curtain after seeing several more people enter and exit. As curious as she was observant, Margo developed a burning desire to know what was going on behind the curtain and who the people were who had access to that portion of the club.

The girls hadn’t been seated for more than ten minutes before a couple of guys came by to flirt. They didn’t look to be anybody important. Margo glanced at Kat to see if they were more of the welcoming committee since Kat seemed to be getting the royal treatment. The twist of Kat’s mouth and her raised brows let Margo know these were strangers.

They were nice-looking and very insistent on buying drinks. “Shall we dance,” one of them said. He extended his arm toward Kat. Margo once again became distracted by the curtain. The reporter in her was obsessed with the mysterious hallway. She noticed a restroom alongside the curtain.

“Sorry guys. I gotta run to the ladies room,” Margo said.

“We’ll wait,” One of the two guys replied.

“You should probably go on without me.” Margo smiled.

It was the perfect escape. More importantly, it provided a cover to explore the rest of the club and possibly satisfy her curiosity about that fancy-looking maze of hallways behind the curtain.

Margo watched Kat take the elevator back down to the dance floor with her two new escorts, then stood and casually made her way over to the restroom. She gripped the restroom door handle and then quickly ducked behind the curtain after checking to make sure nobody was watching her.

The hallway was dark and the walls were lined with a material that felt like velvet. As she walked down the hallways, Margo could hear snippets of several conversations. She paid close attention to her route so she would know how to get back. She encountered the two men who had gone behind the curtain earlier. They stared at her with equal parts suspicion and flirtation as they passed. Margo kept calm and stared straight ahead as if she knew where she was going. She made a turn down a path at the end of the hall, hoping that it didn’t lead to a dead end.

As she passed a door she heard a man speaking in an angry tone. “Are you sure? You’re sure?” he said. The door was slightly ajar and Margo looked in nervously. The man speaking was on his cell phone. Two other men, also in business suits, were in the room with their backs to the door.

“Everything is going fine. How could you have been so careless?” the man on the phone seethed, knocking a bottle from his desk that burst when it hit the ground. “Find out what he wants us to do about

it.” He sat the phone down and spoke to someone out of Margo’s line of sight. “I knew getting involved in this was a bad idea,” he said through clenched teeth.

“Don’t worry,” one of the other men said. “That’s a small problem. We’ve got everything else under control. We can fix this little issue. It’ll be like it never happened. Trust me.”

The man facing Margo’s direction still appeared angry. She shifted to see who he was looking at in the corner but couldn’t get a clear view. She could hear voices coming down the hall and moved away from the door, pulling a small cosmetic mirror from her bag. Giving the best performance she could muster, she pretended to be fixing a wayward contact lens. She didn’t look up as the man and woman passed. Once they rounded the corner she headed back to the curtain.

A very heavy, rough voice called her from behind, and true to her instinct she didn’t turn around; she never responded to guys calling her from behind. The voice called again, and Margo snuck a glance in her mirror. The face attached to the voice was far from A-list caliber like the well-chiseled faces in the main section of the club. This was a face of destruction, punishment, and pain. The scar across his chin made it clear that this guy wasn’t somebody to play with.

She quickened her pace, her heart pounding as she pushed through the curtain. Margo immediately ducked into the restroom and scurried to a stall so she could take a moment to catch her breath. Once she regained her composure, Margo made her way back to the table. As she sat down she saw a very uncomfortable-looking Tony. The two men trailing behind him most likely had something to do with his apparent discomfort. *Hey, what are you doing here?* Margo wondered. She had neglected to call Tony back and now her mind raced, speculating if his being at the club had anything to do with his call earlier.

She sat at the table for a while then got up to look over the balcony, spotting Kat dancing with both guys down on the first floor. When Margo turned around, the man she had seen speaking on the phone was standing directly behind her with a disarming smile. She was startled at his sudden presence but managed to keep a straight face.

He extended his hand. “I’m Gordon, the club owner. Where is Katherine?”

Katherine? It took Margo a minute to realize he was talking about Kat. They’d been Kat and Go-Go for so long that proper names like Katherine and Margo sometimes seemed foreign.

She pointed over the railing and Gordon glanced at the dance floor. His expression became intense as he stared at Kat below. He raised his hand and three men rushed over to him. After whispering something to them he focused his attention again on Margo.

“And you are...?”

She introduced herself and Gordon encouraged her to make herself at home. He told her to enjoy whatever she liked. Then he was gone.

Margo glanced back at the dance floor. Gordon’s three men had gone down and separated Kat from the two men she was dancing with. They were attempting to escort her back up to the second level. Kat jerked away and grabbed the arm of another man standing nearby. He was the same man she had been warned to be careful of by the host at the start of the evening.

“So you’re a cop, huh?” Kat asked as she danced close.

“Who told you that?”

Kat smiled flirtatiously. “That’s not important.”

“What’s your name?” he asked.

The music got louder and Kat could barely hear. She pointed to her ears and nodded. She danced for a while then suddenly slipped her hand into the man’s pocket. She pulled his wallet. The man jumped, startled by her hand. Kat turned her back to him smiling as he reached over her shoulder trying to get to his wallet. She went through the wallet and found two of his business cards from the police department. She turned around and handed him the wallet and signaled for him to give her a pen. The man gave her a pen and she wrote her name and number on one card and tucked the other into her bra. As the song ended and the

noise level dropped, Kat leaned in close. “Hopefully you’ll use that number. I gotta get back upstairs to my friend.” Kat made her way to the elevator.

“What just happened down there?” Margo asked, looking at Kat with friendly suspicion as she approached the table.

“Nothing, just having a little fun.”

“Who is this Gordon to you? Really? And don’t say he’s nobody or just a guy you met.”

To Margo it looked as if Gordon was jealous of the attention the two young men were giving Kat. Kat just smiled and ignored the question for the second time.

“And that other guy you were dancing with down there, who was he?”

“A cop,” Kat answered this time. She smiled as she pulled his card from her bra for Margo to see.

From the corner of her eye Margo could see the two men who were with Tony earlier. They came back from behind the curtain without Tony. A few hours passed while Kat and Margo ate, drank, and danced. Throughout the night Margo kept looking for Tony to come out from behind the curtain, but he never did. When it was time to leave Margo gave the curtain one last look, but no Tony.

The girls stood waiting for the valet to bring their vehicle. A creepy feeling came over Margo. She happened to look up. She gasped slightly. Gordon was watching her and Kat from a third-floor window. It freaked Margo out though she didn’t let it show. On the drive home Kat couldn’t stop talking about everything that went on and how she had the greatest time, but Margo sat quietly.

What was Tony doing there? Margo wondered. I hope he’s all right. And how does Kat really know this Gordon?

It was about two a.m. when the girls returned to Kat's house. Kat was out cold within minutes of getting to her room, but Margo couldn't stop thinking about Tony. She called him and got no answer. Fifteen minutes later she called again and left a message. Another hour would pass before she would finally grow tired enough to fall asleep.

Back at the club, Gordon was in his office dressing down the two young men who were dancing with Kat.

“Don't ever touch her, is that clear? Stay away from her. Don't talk to her and don't smile at her. Ever,” Gordon said. “The last thing I need is one of you spilling details about business that doesn't need to be shared. Especially to her.”

CHAPTER THREE

London, England - The sun was setting. It was around six p.m. and a group of teens had just left the mall and separated to go home. Ellis was sixteen, a friendly boy who found it easy to make friends with the humorous way he carried himself. He zipped up his jacket and walked at a comfortable pace. Having just waved to the last of his friends, he turned to make the trip to the rail station.

There was shouting and the sound of motor bikes behind him as he walked. He ducked his head and quickened his pace. "Hey, Ellis! Ellis!" a voice called out. Ellis looked back over his shoulder, then quickly faced forward. The entrance to the rail station was blocks away. His walk became a trot, then progressed to a run as he ducked between buildings.

After a long run, Ellis came to an open field. There was another rail station just over the chain-linked fence in the distance. If he could get there, he would have a short ride to a stop only one block from his home. Tired from his continuous run, he gave one last burst and ran toward the fence. Bright lights appeared behind him. He panted heavily and pushed toward the fence with the roar of motor bike engines behind him.

Grasping the fence, Ellis climbed anxiously. He began pulling himself up as a hand grabbed him at the ankle. "Don't let him get away," Ethan said. Another hand grabbed his ankle, and then two more hands tugged at his jacket from behind. He fell backwards to the ground.

"What's the bloody idea leaving the bag in my locker?" Ethan asked. Ethan, William, Noah, and Joel traveled in a pack like hyenas. Ethan was always the loudest.

"I couldn't take the rap for it," Ellis said.

"Pull him up," Ethan demanded.

Noah and William lifted Ellis to his feet. Ethan landed one punch to Ellis' stomach. As Ellis gasped, two more punches pounded into his stomach. "If you ruined my scholarship chance, you're dead. Little wanker. I told you to go get that stuff out of my locker."

"Let's help his memory," William said.

Ellis broke free and tried to run. The boys pushed him to the ground. He covered his face as best he could while the boys struck him multiple times in the face and kicked his body. The attack seemingly lasted forever. When it was over Ellis lay clutching his ribs as he watched the tail lights of the bikes illuminate. The rumble of the engines faded as the boys rode away.

Oak View, California- Margo woke up around nine a.m. Saturday morning. Kat was still out cold. Margo quietly gathered her things and went home to quickly change clothes. She hoped to make it down to the jail to interview the three students. She arrived by eleven o'clock. The first two interviews were uneventful, but the third interview was the most intriguing.

At first glance Margo wasn't sure what to make of Brady Collins. He had charisma but tried so hard to look and sound tough that he came off as silly.

"So, how did you get involved with this whole mess?" Margo asked.

"You not gonna use my name are you?" Brady asked.

"Of course not."

Brady took a sigh, then began to talk. "They act real nice at first. Once they get you in though, they act like you in the army or somthin'."

"They, who?"

"Just listen," Brady said. "They ain't scared of nothin' either—not the cops, not the feds, nobody." Brady leaned in close. "They paid two dudes to beat up three smaller dudes at Oak View real bad."

Margo now understood *they* to mean whoever was running the counterfeiting operation. “You afraid of...them?” Margo asked.

“Please.”

“Then why not report what you know to the police?”

“One. Are you crazy? Two. We were all makin’ paper. So why mess that up?” Brady asked.

Margo pressed Brady for more information like names. Brady began to stall. He was obviously afraid of whoever he was dealing with. But he provided insight on how the group chose the people who worked for them.

“Kinda low down really. They go after kids that don’t have a lot of friends, kids that get bullied, picked on, whatever.”

“Go after them how?” Margo asked.

“They tell guys they can do big things. They show ‘em a fast car, girls, you know. The stuff that always gets a guy interested.”

Margo twirled her pen in her fingers as she listened.

“They hooked me, but as you can see I ain't a weenie like the other kids; I just wanted to get paid,” Brady said.

“Right. Please continue.”

“So one day this guy, Brian, came to me and asked if I like makin’ money. Who don’t like makin’ money?” Brady asked. “So the guy tells me I can have what he’s got just from sellin’ a little X.”

“Brian, you said? Got a last name?” Margo asked.

Brady ignored Margo and continued. “Long story short, one night I’m leavin’ a party. I’m almost to my ride and this big dude—I mean big, ugly, scary-lookin’ dude—rolls up on me.”

“Do you remember what he looked like exactly?” Margo asked.

Brady described the man as having a real gruff voice and a scar across his chin. Margo felt her scalp tingle. It sounded like he had just described the man who called out to her in the hallway maze at the club.

Brady continued, “He had like two or three other guys with him. They take my X and beat the sense outta me. Next thing I know, Brian is taking me to meet the head man. He tells me he has a way for me to work off the drug debt and make paper at the same time.”

“And that was from working their counterfeiting scheme?” Margo asked.

Brady nodded. The door to the interview room burst open and a woman wearing a business suit and glasses walked in. She identified herself as Brady’s lawyer and told her client, “Don’t say another word. This interview is over.”

Margo gave her a nasty look, but once the jail guard came in she knew that her day was over.

Kat sat on her bed listening to music and reading magazines. It was her father again. He called to let Kat know he would be delayed. Still away on his business trip, he was calling home because he needed Kat to scan a document that was in his office downstairs and email it to him.

“There’s a folder at the front of the top drawer of my file cabinet. The documents are in there,” her father said.

“When are you coming home? It’s been almost two months,” Kat replied.

“I’ll be home soon I promise. I love you, sweetheart. Please get me that document as soon as possible. I have to go.”

Kat frowned and sat the phone on her bed. She crawled off the edge of the bed and went downstairs to her father’s office. She had never gone into the office before, and being in there was like discovering a whole new part of the house. It was well-decorated with leather sofas and televisions, a man cave of sorts. Kat spotted the file cabinet and

opened the top drawer. She located the folder with the documents her father requested. Curiosity gripped her. She went back to the drawer and began thumbing through the various folders and documents inside. After thirty minutes or so she moved to the second drawer. There were nothing but old business documents, real estate deals, land deeds, and other paperwork that a land developer would normally have.

There was nothing in those drawers that would substantiate any of the strange feelings she was having. In her heart she really didn't want to find anything. She put all of the folders and paperwork back in their drawers and closed them. She knelt down to pick the folder up that she had originally come into the office for, and as she did, that curious feeling came over her once more. There was one other drawer—the bottom one. After a brief pause she set the folder back on the floor and reached for the drawer handle and tugged. It was locked.

Kat stood and looked around the room. She walked over to her father's desk and took his letter opener. She jammed the sharp tip of the letter opener into the lock and twisted right, then left. She tugged on the drawer. Finally the drawer popped open. Anxiously she looked inside. It was empty. Kat turned sharply toward the faint buzzing sound behind her. Intrigued, she gazed at a panel on the far wall that had slid open. The open panel exposed a cubbyhole. Kat looked down at the open drawer, then stood to walk over to the wall.

A closer look revealed two folders neatly placed inside the hidden spot in the wall. Kat removed the folders and sat at her father's desk to examine them. The first folder had banking information for three accounts. Two of the accounts were foreign: one in Paris and one in London. One of the accounts showed the name Quinn Incorporated. Kat was unsure what to make of the account information and set the banking folder aside. She picked up the second folder. It was a smooth blue folder with a marble texture and the papers were bound inside. The first page inside the folder was titled: Investigative Findings. It had a date from almost two years ago. Kat flipped through the pages, pausing at several county records and a sheet detailing what each record was. There was also what looked like a set of profiles. Each profile contained background information on several people that Kat had never seen before. It looked as though her father had been tracking these people.

At the moment, it made no sense to Kat why her father would have those documents locked away or who any of the people or names in the documents were. Obviously there was significance to the report and to the account numbers for that matter, but nothing in the folders stood out to her. Kat scanned several pages from the report and the account numbers from the banking folder then went to return them to the space in the wall.

She looked at the cubbyhole as she reached to return the folders. There was a stapled document inside which had escaped Kat's notice the first time. She studied the document. It was a copy of her grandfather's will attached to a letter from the executor of his estate. The letter was dated almost two years ago. It read:

Dear Timothy Colbert,

This letter is to advise you that in accordance with the terms of the will of Benjamin R. Colbert, you have twenty-four months remaining to secure declarations of relationship from your two living heirs. Should you fail to secure the signed declarations or should you secure them illegally, you will forfeit your right to inherit the estate of Benjamin R. Colbert and Tabitha S. Colbert. The natural death of either heir will release you from the obligation to obtain their signature. However, suspicious circumstances including homicide or conspiracy to commit homicide will result in forfeiture of your right to the inheritance, pending your being cleared of any involvement of such crimes.

Each heir will receive fifteen percent of the estate. Should one sibling precede the other in death, the surviving sibling shall receive thirty percent. The same terms regarding natural death and suspicious circumstance shall apply.

Further, should you be found to be involved in any criminal activity directly or indirectly prior to the disbursement of the assets of the estate, you will forfeit your claim to the estate and all assets will be divided amongst your two living heirs (or sole surviving heir) should you obtain their signatures or not. If either heir is found to have been involved directly or indirectly in any criminal activity, they shall forfeit their share. Should all heirs be disqualified, the estate shall be turned over to your wife Evelyn P. Colbert. These terms are active upon the death of Benjamin R. Colbert. – The offices of Horton and Tilley.

Kat became faint. Her legs weakened beneath her. She slid to a seated position on the floor. The will and the letter were by far the most

shocking of all the documents that she had discovered. If there was no mistake, she had a brother or sister that she knew nothing about. She wondered if her mother had been keeping this secret from her. Clearly her father had been. It was as if a load of bricks had been dropped on her suddenly, leaving her no time to have any emotions.

Kat staggered to her feet. She scanned and emailed the papers her father had requested, and then returned everything as it was before leaving the office. There was some connection between all of the documents she had found. She wasn't sure yet what the connection was, but she knew it couldn't be good.

