

# Fatal Transaction

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Book one of

*AGENTS IN HIS SERVICE*

By W. Richard Lawrence

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“Our past is not what makes us, but what we do with that  
experience.”



To my wife, Debbie

For all the countless hours you put into helping me with this  
book.

And for never letting me take any shortcuts.

And to Elizabeth

Thank you for the encouragement and input.

# Prelude

"We need to kill her."

Mike sought the easy way out at every opportunity.

Ulrich Levy gazed out the window at the Rocky Mountains. With his back to his men and the sun on his face, he listened to their whining. Mike and the other two men had no recourse but to do as he directed. If they didn't, they would face deadly consequences.

"What makes you think I'm willing to lose one of my most valuable assets before I'm done with her?" Levy pivoted to face his men.

Of the three, only Mike had the intellect to think on his own, but if Mike had any real ambition, he wouldn't be one of Levy's flunkies. The other two were a complete waste of space, throwaways.

"You can't control her. You have her access codes, you can get by without her." Mike was stationed a little in front of the other two men. All three hovered near the door of the office.

"Unlike some of you, she still has a reason to be alive. Besides, it's your job to control her, not mine. So what happened now?"

"She went missing. Again."

Sara was smart, too smart for her own good.

"How?" Levy advanced a few steps.

When he purchased this building as a hideaway from his Denver Tech office, the walls were cracked and the paint peeling. Those conditions were adequate for the people who worked under him, but his office was given a complete makeover before he moved in. Dark cherry wood molding and floors with matching furniture, imported rugs and expensive artwork, all transformed his office into something more comfortable. This room was out of character with the rest of the building, but that didn't matter to him. The important thing was that the work he did in this office turned a good profit, unlike his Denver Tech companies.

"She snuck away again today, a little before lunch. And she's been gone all afternoon. That's the fourth time in the last three weeks."

Were these men that incompetent? How could one girl cause them so much trouble?

"How'd you lose her this time?" He glared at the three, waiting for an answer.

Mike glanced at Ryan before shifting his attention back to Levy. "She took buses all over town. He lost her on the fourth transfer as she got on the light rail. She must have known he was there."

"Why was Ryan the only one following her? He's not smart enough to track a train through a tunnel."

The man's inadequacy for this or any other type of work was only surpassed by his inability to communicate.

Levy switched his focus. "Where was she headed when you lost her?"

Ryan withdrew a half step, "Uh, she, um, got onto the light rail."

“Yes, Mike said that. Which one?”

“Um, I, ah, don’t know. I couldn’t see the, ah, number or anything.”

Levy released his breath slowly. “Don’t know?”

“Uh, parking area was full and I, ah, couldn’t find a place to park. Then I got stuck—”

“Which way was it going?” Ryan pointed.

“East?”

“Uh, no. I mean it was going south. I think?”

“Are you sure it wasn’t north?”

Confusion covered Ryan’s face.

“Step closer, and think real hard.”

“Huh?” Ryan appeared lost.

“I said step closer.”

Ryan advanced a few small steps.

“More.” Levy needed him positioned toward the center of the Persian rug.

Ryan took two more steps.

“Now, think as hard as you can. Think like your life depends on it. Which way was the train headed?”

Ryan stared down at the floor. His jaw clenched tight. After a few seconds his gaze returned to Levy. “I’m, ah, not sure Mr. Levy. I—”

Levy reached inside his coat and extracted his 9 mm Sig Saur.

Ryan scanned the room as if hoping for an escape route. Mike and Jarred stepped to one side, out of the line of fire.

Ryan’s large body would stop the hollow points; Mike and Jarred were safe. For now.

Before Ryan could move, Levy placed two rounds into his chest. He was dead by the time his body plummeted to the floor.

The noise from the blast would barely make it out of the office. With cement walls covered by brick and four inches of insulation, the room was nearly soundproof. Besides, in this neighborhood, who’d notice another gunshot?

Ryan’s body crumpled on the Persian rug. At least he’d had the courtesy to confine the mess to a small area. The rug would need to be replaced, but Levy was tired of the pattern anyway.

Casting a glance at Mike, Levy slipped the gun back into its holster. “After you dump the body, replace the rug with something more up to date. Make it Japanese.”

Then he addressed Jarred. “I have an opening for your cousin. He better not disappoint me.”

Levy grabbed his briefcase, “I have another meeting.”

He stepped over the body. Stopping at the door he added, “Jarred, pay a visit to Sara tonight. But keep it light. I still need her able to think and type.”

# Chapter 1

*Kneeling beside her lifeless body in the dark alley, he pulled her into his arms. He looked into her blank eyes as the driving rain soaked his skin. A streetlight revealed the bullet hole in her temple. Blood trickled out. The deluge washed it away. With trembling fingers he pushed her hair—*

"You okay?" The hand placed on his arm delivered him from the nightmare.

*Tami?* It couldn't be. Tami was dead.

"Yes, yes, I'm fine." Derry Conway blinked twice before swallowing.

"You look like you've seen a ghost." The woman's voice was completely different from Tami's, but her milk chocolate eyes and brown shoulder-length hair were the same.

"Sorry. I—"

"Excuse me." The woman squeezed past him.

Whirling around, Derry wanted to say more but didn't have the chance. His gaze followed as Tami walked away. No, not Tami. Someone else with the same petite frame.

She headed toward the restaurant across the lobby.

He wanted to stay, maybe have dinner there tonight. To see. See what? He knew it wasn't Tami, but the desire to see her again was almost overpowering. Common sense kicked in. Seconds after she vanished through the door, he circled back around and resumed course toward his car.

The image of the young lady's face played tricks in his mind. As he stepped inside the parking garage, the memory of her again transformed into Tami. He tried to remember the woman, but the only form his mind conjured was Tami's.

Dropping into his car, Derry closed his eyes and pounded on the steering wheel. The pain started as a small leak, opening the floodgates of grief that filled his body.

Why?

After six years, he believed he was over it. But he wasn't. Not really. Not today. He banged his fist against the wheel again and stared out the windshield.

That stupid fat Chuck. He lied to me. Yeah, my best friend. And because of him, Tami's—

Derry drew in a deep breath and closed his eyes. He implored God to help him move past this pain. Again.

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"You okay?"

The man who blocked Sara's way gave her the willies.

“Yes, yes, I’m fine.”

He didn’t look fine.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“Sorry. I—”

Now he wanted to talk about it.

“Excuse me.” Sara was headed to an important meeting and he still stood in her way. She pushed past him and headed across the lobby.

Stopping at the restaurant entrance, she inhaled deeply. It was now or never.

Sara peered into the mostly empty upscale restaurant, and wondered about her choice of locations to force this meeting.

“Just one?” the hostess asked.

“No. I’m meeting someone. I think that’s her over there.” Sara pointed across the room to a woman in her mid twenties, just a few years older than herself. The woman glowered at Sara. Yep, that was her.

“Please follow me.”

As the hostess led her to the table, Sara prepared for the assault. “Betty.” Not a question to ensure who this was, or a greeting, just a statement.

The woman waited for the hostess to leave before opening her mouth. “How could you?” Her tone was hard, cold.

Sara slid into the booth across from her. “You left me no choice.” Time to play hardball.

“Look, I told you years ago, when all this blew up in your face, that I wanted nothing to do with it or you.”

“Yes, but you have the connections I need now. Your job in the records department of the State Health Services gives you important access.” Sara refused to raise her voice or lose control.

“I left your world behind. I’m not part of it, and I never want to be part of it.”

“You went through the same thing I did.”

“And I got over it and moved on.”

“So you think—”

“Are you ready to order, or would you like a few more minutes?” the waitress asked.

Sara wasn’t hungry, and this meeting wasn’t about food. “I’ll take a salad. No meat.”

“House salad?”

“That’s fine.” Acid churned in her stomach. Anything more than a light dish would make her pay before the day was over. Betty ordered a Cobb salad with extra bacon.

Sara wanted to get back to business, to get this over with. She glared into Betty’s eyes, waiting for the server to get out of earshot. “You think I enjoyed what happened to me? And then to be dragged through the mud, the lies they told. I asked you to help me, but—”

“But I had a life. The start of a good life. A life without the pain. A life that you wanted to destroy.” Betty leaned in, moving her glass of water aside. “I was about to get married. I was happy. I was doing just fine. Then you came along and wanted me to testify, to save your butt from the fire. If Casey found out about my past, do you think he would have still married me?”

“If he’s so perfect, he’d understand.” It sounded sassier than Sara meant.

“He would have been out of there in a flash. Men don’t want a woman like you. Haven’t you figured that out yet?”

Betty was right. Men didn’t want to hear the truth, and they definitely didn’t want a woman with her past.

“And I didn’t force you to help then. I let you off the hook.” “But now you won’t?”

Her words bit. Betty was one of the lucky ones—she had a life, maybe a good one—but Sara was desperate, and willing to do whatever necessary to save herself. Betty would either help her or live with the consequences.

Sara breathed in deeply to calm herself. “Back then, you felt you had no choice. Well, now I don’t have a choice.”

“You always have a choice. Whatever problems you brought upon yourself are yours, not mine.”

“I—”

The server arrived with their salads, allowing Sara a minute to regain control over her emotions and think.

Without waiting to make sure the server was out of hearing, Sara plowed on. “These problems that you are referring to are partly your fault.”

Betty leaned back and crossed her arms. “Yeah, how?” “Someone found out about my past and they’re—”

“Weren’t you let off or something? Acquitted? And, besides, I have nothing to do with your past.”

“They brought counter charges against me, then offered a deal. But if you would have helped, they would be behind bars and I wouldn’t be in this mess. You refused to help me when I needed it.”

“So you went off and did something else illegal, and you’re telling me it’s my fault. You have a very crazy way of looking at the world.”

Sara rose to her feet. “I’ll send the videos to your husband. He’ll enjoy seeing what your childhood was like.”

“Sit down.” Betty softened. “I already did as you asked. I got what you said you needed.”

Sara eased back down and leaned toward her. “Where is it?”

“First, where are the videos?”

“I have them with me.”

“If I give you the new birth certificate”— Betty pointed her fork across the table —“I don’t want to hear from you ever again.”

“You won’t.” Not if my plans work out that is.

“And I want all copies of those videos destroyed.”

“They will be.”

“How will I know you’ve destroyed them? I can’t trust you. What’s to stop you from coming back to me a year from now and asking for something else?”

The woman was no dummy. Reaching into her pocket, Sara pulled out a jump drive. “Here are all the videos. The only copies I have.”

“So you say.” Betty eyed the jump drive.

“I don’t plan to stick around. With any luck, I’ll never see Denver or Colorado again. So I won’t be here to bother you in the future.”

Betty gave a condescending smile. “That’s why you need the new birth certificate. You’re going to leave the country. Go someplace the police can’t find you.”

“The police aren’t the ones I’m worried about.” The words just slipped out.

Betty reached for the jump drive.

Sara pulled it back. “Where’s the certificate?”

Betty scanned the room, as if someone might care about what they were doing. Reaching into her bag, she eased the brown envelope out. “It’s a duplicate.”

“A copy?”

“No, not a copy. A duplicate. It’ll work as well as the original.”

“I’m sending this to the feds. You sure it will work for a passport?”

“Yes, it should.”

Sara snatched the envelope and opened it. Across the middle of the certificate was her new name: “Sara Chelsea Ramos.”

She handed the jump drive to Betty.

“You know, there were some costs involved.” Betty nodded to the paper in Sara’s hands.

“How much?”

“Five hundred.” Betty slid the drive into her handbag.

“And you’re as big a liar and as greedy as everyone else. I know what you had to do to get this. Why should I give you money for something that cost you nothing?”

“Look, what’s to stop me from reporting that one as a fake?”

Folding the certificate and putting it into her bag, Sara stared into Betty’s eyes. “You really are a snake. What’s to say that what’s on that jump drive is the only copy?”

Double blackmail. Neither of them could turn in the other without risk to themselves.

Betty backed off first. “Tell you what, give me two hundred and I’ll forget I ever saw you.”

Sara reached into her bag. “One hundred, I won’t send the videos to Casey, and you won’t report the certificate as a fake.”

Sara extended an envelope with the cash in it. Betty hesitated. Then quickly snatched it.

“Deal.”

At least her greed was easy to satisfy.

Sara rose, leaving the untouched salad behind. She had what she came for. The hardest part of her plan was complete.

# Chapter 2

Rubbing oil into the six-panel wood doors of his 1920s home, Derry found the work to be mindless. Images of Tami kept popping up. Or were they images of the woman he had run into after work today?

*Did it matter?*

Finishing the last door, he threw the rag aside. Grabbing a clean cloth, Derry wiped his hands and moved to the window for some fresh air. He should have done the work outside, but the threat of rain forced him indoors. Rotating around, he scanned the dining area and kitchen, noting the number of half-done projects. Too many. He'd hoped to have the house restored within a year of buying it, but that date had come and gone several months ago.

Tonight, he worked not to finish the house, but to remove the thoughts of Tami from his mind. It wasn't helping. He reached for his phone. Scrolling through his list of contacts, he selected FBI and waited for the call to go through. He needed to talk to his close friend, Special Agent Lamar Stover, one of the few people who knew his past and had been there that vile night.

"Hey there, what's up?" Lamar's deep rich voice always had a positive effect on Derry.

"Hi. You busy tomorrow night?"

A short pause. "Nope. It's open. Why?"

"Want to grab a bite? I'll buy."

"Sounds good. Just tell me where and when."

"How about Tony's? It's a good halfway point. Around six-ish?"

"That'll work. Is anything up?"

Derry couldn't bring it up over the phone.

"No, not really. Just tired of eating alone." Which was true.

"I know how that is. See you tomorrow around six." Lamar's warm chuckle brought his image to mind. At six foot four and just over 260 pounds of mostly muscle, Lamar was the only black man Derry's stepfather, a karate instructor, had ever backed down from.

The strong scent of oil permeated the house. Sliding his phone into his pocket, Derry examined the five doors lying across the sawhorses. They appeared wet. Much of the oil was still sitting on the surface. He'd wait until tomorrow to move them.

Instead, he grabbed his laptop. Finding a clear place on the couch, he sat down to check his email. It was mostly spam, but there was a new message from Mary, a woman closer to him than his own mother.

She needed help with her books. Again. Mary's heart was pure gold, but when it came to bookkeeping, well, let's just say it was a good thing she had a heart of gold. Since the time he lived in her youth home, as regular as the seasons, every three months he had to fix her accounts. He'd tried to show her how to do the bookkeeping, but she just couldn't get it.

He liked helping Mary. She was a good woman, and she had saved him from living on the streets after his stepfather kicked him out. His stepfather blamed him for Tami's death. Maybe he was right.

Forcing his mind out of the past and back into the present, Derry went back to the email. He fired off a reply and moved the laptop aside.

The hot August night was stifling in this poorly-insulated, non-air conditioned home. He headed out the back door in search of cooler, fresher air. Stepping onto the back deck, his gaze wandered to the double-car garage that faced the alley. It was newer than the house, but had not been maintained. The woman who owned the house before him planned to turn it into a guesthouse and rent it out. She'd hired some men to work on it, but when she became ill, the work stopped.

From the outside, it appeared to be a forty-year-old garage. However, much of the inside work was done. Water, gas, electricity and insulation had all been installed, but there was much remaining to do.

*Another project. Oh joy. Why did I think this would be so much fun?*

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"Where have you been?"

Sara's heart rate spiked. She gripped her apartment key to use as a weapon.

A figure stepped out of the shadows. It was Jarred, one of Levy's dogs.

"What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you."

Sara wanted to ignore him and unlock the door, but she didn't want him following her into the apartment. Lowering her hand, she faced him. "Get lost."

"I asked you where you've been."

"And I heard you. So what?"

Sara scooted back as Jarred moved toward her.

"Get away from me." She raised her empty hand to push him back.

Jarred grabbed her upper arm and thrust her into the brick wall, pinning her there. "You left work early. You were gone most of the day. That's against Mr. Levy's rules. So, I will ask you again. Where did you go?"

He reeked of foul cigarettes and sweat. Controlling her desire to gag, she fought back the fear. Fear would only heighten his suspicion that she was up to something.

"It's none of your business—or Levy's."

"He doesn't like you running off." He squeezed her arm a little tighter with each word.

"Yeah, well, he'll just have to get over it." She tried to yank her arm free, but his hand was too strong.

Jarred tightened even more as he shoved her harder into the rough bricks, rubbing her arms raw.

"Watch your mouth."

"Or what? You going to hit me? Knock me around? Yeah, I bet you'd like that. You'd better call Levy and find out if it's okay first." Sara battled to keep her voice steady, strong.

"You think you're pretty smart."

"A whole lot smarter than you and your buddy Ryan."

Sara anticipated another push, which never came.

Releasing her arm, he lowered his hand. "Don't run off again."

"What I do is—"

“You work for Mr. Levy. You’ll do as he says. Is that clear?” His voice was softer than a minute ago.

“Maybe you better call in and get directions on what to do next.”

“Maybe you’d better do as you’re told before you end up like—”

“Like Steve? But I suppose you think you’re safe. None of us are safe.” Sara edged away from the wall.

Four months ago, Levy had forced Sara to watch as he had Steve executed. He said it was a lesson she needed to understand. That’s when she realized her days were numbered. That’s when she started making plans to run and make Levy pay with the only thing that mattered to him—money.

Jarred shouldered past her, knocking her against the wall one more time.

The rough bricks tore at her shoulder as a hundred insults flooded her mind.

Sara rubbed her arm, and watched Jarred walk away.

She delayed entering her apartment. Once he’d disappeared down the stairs, she turned toward the door. Her hand shook as she struggled to insert the key into the lock. Finding the hole, she quickly unlocked the door and stepped inside.

She leaned against the inside of the closed door, holding her bag tight against her side.

*What am I doing? This is crazy. How did I get into this mess?*

Regaining control, she switched on the lights in the living room and closed the shades. She retrieved her new birth certificate and read the name for the seventh time that night.

*Sara Chelsea Ramos*

It appeared real enough. She rubbed the certificate between her index finger and thumb. It felt real. Was it enough to give her a new identity, a new life?

She plopped down into a chair. Her gaze flitted toward the door.

*Levy sent Jarred to check on me. How much does Levy know?*

Questioning her plans, Sara contemplated running tonight.

No, if she ran without everything in place, she wouldn’t make it out of the state before one of Levy’s men found her and brought her back. She didn’t want to end up like Steve. She had to stick to her plan. It was her only hope to escape Levy’s hooks.

# Chapter 3

*Standing in the dark alley, looking down at the gun pointed at his heart, he reached out and grabbed the barrel. As his hand twisted it, the other boy's finger pulled back on the trigger. A loud boom echoed in his ears. The blinding ash lit up the boy's face.*

Derry jerked to a sitting position, body covered in sweat. Eyes wide open, he surveyed his surrounding, confused. Where was he? The gunshot echoed in his ears.

He rubbed his eyes and face, forcing his mind back to reality. Opening his eyes again, he peered into the darkness. After a few intense seconds, the placement of the window across the room made sense. He was in his bedroom. The shot was just a nightmare.

It was a moonless night, and the room was too dark to convince him that this world was real. He swung his feet to the floor and stood, then groped his way out of the bedroom, the floor squeaking under his feet. Derry headed to the living room. A narrow shaft of light from the nearby streetlight filtered in through the front window. Parting the curtains, he gazed out onto the quiet road. The fragrance of the oily doors permeated his senses.

*What time is it?*

He swiveled toward the kitchen and peered at the clock on his microwave.

4:17.

The sun wouldn't be up for at least two hours, but he wasn't sure if he could get back to sleep, or if he even wanted to try. Back in his bedroom, he put on a pair of shorts, a tee shirt, and tennis shoes. Maybe a walk in the cool night air would clear his head. He charged out the door.

Why were the nightmares back? It had been a couple of years since he'd had one so intense.

As he walked, his speed increased. Before long, he was running, hard. If only it were that easy to run from the bad dreams, from his past.

As he ran, he thought again about his chances of seeing the woman he had run into after work.

Maybe she worked in his building.

His head told him to stop thinking about her.

If only he could.

# Chapter 4

“You going to make the deadline?”

The demanding voice startled Sara, causing her to mistype a command. Hitting the escape key rapidly several times, she barely prevented her computer from removing the wrong files. She frowned in frustration.

“I asked you a question.”

Looking over her shoulder, Sara saw Levy hovering in the doorway. His colorless expression matched the drab windowless office she shared with Kai. Behind Levy was an even uglier sight, Mike, his top tag-along bodyguard.

Sara disliked all of Levy’s lackeys—they gave her the creeps— but Levy was the epitome of evil. He terrified her.

The public adored him. He was charismatic, with a winning smile that complemented his expensive suits. To the people of Denver, he was a great benefactor, helping poor homeless youth. Yeah, he helped them all right. He paid kids to do his dirty work. To the public, he was the man who was always willing to give someone a second chance. The second chance he gave them, however, was to commit crimes and not get caught. Those who did get caught disappeared before they had a chance to talk. Levy had connections in high places.

Levy reminded Sara of the man who played Batman. He resembled Bruce Wayne and, just like Batman, he led two lives.

The big difference was that Levy’s secret life was more like the Joker’s: cold, heartless, and demented.

Swiveling around in her squeaky chair, Sara faced the door. “The routing code’s been downloaded and tested for the credit card banks. It should all be in place this week. And I’ve run tests on the different decryption algorithms. They all work.”

She worked as a freelance programmer for the credit card industry, but Levy was blackmailing her into using her connections to develop a program that would allow him to steal thousands of credit card numbers randomly from around the city and then place fake charges with them. For the past six months, she had been slipping small pieces of code past the rigorous tests of the credit card industry. This code would allow fraudulent charges to slip past the banks’ safeguards and route the money to one of Levy’s accounts. From there, the money would be transferred through several other banks, finally ending up in a secure location.

Sara had also developed the program that would be used to steal the credit card numbers from businesses by using special cards that read information from credit card machines and transferred it to Levy’s system.

“So it will be ready as planned?”

Good news first. Now to give him the bad news. “I’m close. I found a bug, but I came up with a workaround. Once I run a few more tests, I’ll be ready to load new code on the cards.”

Levy moved in, crowding her chair, intimidating her. “A bug?”

The temperature in the room spiked, as most of the air was sucked out. Tipping her head back, Sara stared up at Levy's towering frame.

"It's a small bug. I modified the code to make the cards enter a command into the card reader to switch on the reader's output. All the newer readers have the ability to send data to the cards, but in our first set of tests, I found most of them have it turned off."

Searching for a less vulnerable position, Sara pushed the chair back and stood. It didn't help. At six foot two and two hundred pounds, Levy's frame dominated her view.

"That's sloppy work." His gaze shifted away from her for a fraction of a second, then back. "What new problems will this workaround of yours cause?" His cold blue eyes sent a chill down her back.

Resolving not to show her intimidation, Sara kept her feelings in check. "The change will require the cards to make two passes through each reader."

His eyes bore into her. "Why two?"

"The first pass will determine the type of reader used and send the correct set of commands to turn on the output of the reader. I'm in the process of compiling a list at this time for the different p—"

Cutting Sara off, Levy raised his voice a little. "I'm not interested in your details. I'm only interested in the delays that your lack of foresight is costing me."

"I told you this could be a problem when I started. I asked for more time to research it." It was becoming more difficult to keep her voice steady, but she continued. "In the second pass, the card reader will download the data to our card."

"Why can't it be done in one pass?" Levy backed off enough for Sara to take a breath of air.

"Neither the cards nor the readers are fast enough. It takes several milliseconds for the reader to process the command, and even more time to switch on the outputs. The cards themselves aren't fast enough to change from input to output and back to input mode, plus read the data. It takes time, making it impossible to do it all in one swipe."

"What will the clerk see on the first pass?"

"An error. At that point, they will just swipe the card again. Errors occur all the time. No one will think anything about it."

Levy's voice registered irritation. "How much delay has this problem caused in my schedule?"

The true answer was about three days, but Sara needed more time than that for her escape plan. She stared down at the floor as if calculating the time needed. Fixing her gaze back on his, she sounded as matter of fact as she could. "Two weeks tops. We should have everything fully up and running by end of next month."

"Each day you delay this project costs me more money." Levy leaned forward. "This had better be the last problem."

Unable to maintain eye contact, Sara looked toward the door. Seeing Mike wearing his lopsided grin, she turned back. She wanted to inform Levy it was impossible to know if there were other problems until the testing was complete. She wanted to tell him that was why people ran tests, but she knew better. "It should be. Final testing will start in two weeks." She moved back toward her chair.

Levy glared down at her. "Final testing? I want the whole project completed in two weeks."

Rejecting her natural reaction to back away from danger, Sara forced her fake confidence to the surface. "Can't be done, not if you want it untraceable. It's a complicated program. Every

part of it, everything we do, has to be fully tested, including the commands the cards send out. It all takes time. If it's not—"

Levy raised his hand. "Enough." Turning to Kai, he addressed her. "I want you off your other projects as of now. Give Sara whatever help she needs."

Glancing back at Sara, Levy added, "With two of you working on this, it will go faster. Two weeks."

"That'll help, but much of the testing can't start until—"

The blow knocked her up against the wall. Her head bounced off the cinderblocks.

"Two weeks." His voice boomed.

Sara rubbed her mouth with one hand, and used her other arm to push herself upright.

Levy glanced over at Kai. "How much do you know about this?"

Wide-eyed, Kai rose to her feet. "Only my part."

"What do you know about hers?"

Kai shifted her gaze between Sara and Levy. "Nothing really. It's different than what—"

Levy twisted back to Sara. "Three weeks, and that's it. I don't care if that means you're here twenty-four hours a day, every day of the week. I want every part of this project fully tested and running in three weeks. Understood?"

"Yes, sir." Three weeks would give her the time she needed. She kept her focus on Levy.

"You have something more?"

She didn't want to get hit again. "No. I'll let you know when I'm ready to start field tests."

Just when she thought she was off the hook, Levy reached up behind her. Grabbing her hair and pulling down hard, he forced her into her chair. Leaning over her, he kept her head pinned back and glowered at her. "You do whatever you need to do. Get this done in time. If I learn this is all some trick of yours" —Levy leaned in and whispered in her ear, and she could smell his foul breath— "you'll wish for the quick death I gave Steve."

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"What are you looking at?" Sara's head ached, and Kai staring at her was annoying.

Kai glanced toward the door and back before responding. "You okay?"

Sara could see from her seat that Levy and Mike had descended the stairs. Her lip stung when she touched it. "Yeah, I'll live."

Kai rolled her chair over next to Sara's.

Other than having dark brown hair, the two women had little else in common. Kai was four years Sara's senior. Her family was Hawaiian. She was tall, large-boned, with coffee brown skin. She presented a stark contrast to Sara's small pale figure.

Where Sara's computer skills were mostly self-taught, Kai had over three years of college for computer security. The story around the office was that Kai's father was some type of computer spy before he was murdered during Kai's last year of college. Kai would never say how or who murdered him or even confirm that the story was true.

The second floor of the building was split. One half contained Levy's plush office with its own stairwell. The other half had several offices. Sara's and Kai's was ten by twelve, and sat at the end of the short, wide hall. The structure was one of many that Levy owned or leased around Denver. This one under Mike's name.

Both women had identical top-of-the-line, custom-built computers with two twenty-seven-inch monitors each, allowing them to run and monitor several programs at once. Levy supplied the computers, high-speed Internet and any software they needed to do his work.

Kai lived on the ground floor below, and was happy to be there. Levy supplied her with a five hundred square foot apartment in the back of the building, rent-free.

Leaning in, Kai whispered, "What was all that about?"

Sara wished she could confide in Kai and tell her what she was planning, but the risk was too high. She had to watch out for herself first. "What do you mean?" Sara touched her lip again, finding it sticky.

"The other day you said something about being close to finishing this project. Now you're saying three more weeks?"

"I found a problem. Why?"

Kai cast a glance out the door then back. "It's just—you need to be careful, that's all."

"Look, I found a bug. It needs to be fixed. You think you could do better? Go ahead and take over, and I'll go lie on the beach somewhere."

Kai placed a hand on Sara's shoulder, giving it a slight squeeze. "It's not that. It's—" Kai stole another peek out the door. "Did you hear about Ryan?"

"You mean the one who doesn't have the brains to wipe tables at McDonald's?"

Kai's face registered fear. "I heard Levy got mad at him and"—another quick glance out the door before twisting back—"killed him. Shot him in his office."

Sara was only a little surprised. "Who'd you hear that from?"

"Mi— I just heard it. Last night."

"Mike told you?"

No response, just a blank stare.

"Well, for now, I'm still needed. Levy can't afford to get rid of me."

"I hope so." Kai lowered her hand, and moved her chair back toward her desk.

"So, why are you still seeing Mike? You know he's bad news." Sara didn't want to talk or think about Ryan.

"He's nice to me."

Was it a statement or a question?

"You could do so much better."

"He's safe." Kai's voice was soft.

Did she really believe what she just said? "Safe? He works for Levy. He'll do whatever Levy tells him to do."

"Look, I know you have trouble understanding this, but Mike's a nice man. He'd never hurt me."

Sara wasn't sure whether Kai was trying to convince herself or Sara.

Raising her gaze to meet Sara's, Kai added, "At least I'm not trying to pick a fight with the man who would kill me for getting out of line."

"Hey, I'm just trying to do my work. It's not like I'm here by choice."

Before Levy had learned about Sara's past, she had worked out of her apartment as an expert in encryption-decryption, a skill for which credit card companies were willing to pay good money.

"And you think I am?"

"I'm only here because I was forced into this job." Was it the ache in Sara's head that made her want to argue? It didn't matter.

"It's better than being on the streets." Kai shoved her chair against her desk and leaned back. She insisted she liked working for Levy. After living on the streets, Kai swore she'd never go back. Her eyes narrowed, "So what does he have on you?"

“None of your business.” Levy’s knowledge gave him power over Sara. No one else needed that power.

“What’d you do? Steal? Murder? What?”

“I did what I had to do.”

Kai’s voice became cold. “Yeah, well, so did I. Working for Levy is better than lying on my back.”

Sara shot a hard look at Kai, “I never—”

Kai’s face softened, “I didn’t mean you. I’m sorry. It’s just that so many of the other girls on the street made their money that way. I almost ended up that way. I’ll do whatever is necessary not to go back to the streets.”

# Chapter 5

“You’re in early.”

Derry noticed his boss, Doug, out of the corner of his eye. He shifted his attention away from his monitor. “Yeah, I need to cut out early tomorrow, if that’s okay.”

“That’ll be fine.”

Doug didn’t move. Derry waited. “Is there something else?”

Doug hesitated, “Look, we’re a little short-handed on account managers, and we just landed a new client. I was hoping to send Robert, but the account you’re working on together is taking longer than scheduled.”

“I’m sorry about that.” Was he accusing Derry of the slowdown?

“So, what’s the hold-up?”

*Just how much should he say?* “Robert insists on going over everything I do.” *Great. That sounded like whining.*

“Has he found any problems with your work?” Doug stepped farther into the cubicle.

“Nothing he’s told me about.”

Doug peered over the walls at something Derry couldn’t see.

“Is something wrong?”

“No.” Doug’s gaze returned to Derry. “I want you to take on the new account.”

This was good news. “Our site or theirs?”

“You’ll be doing it at their office. It’s downtown, close to the Sixteenth Street Mall. It should take two to three weeks. Let me know what you think once you’ve had time to evaluate the workload.”

*Well, there go my chances of finding out where that lady works.*

“Sure, I’d be happy to.”

“They’ll be ready for you to start the middle of next week. I’ll send you the details.” Doug pivoted to leave.

“Does this mean I’m an account manager permanently?”

Pulling up short, Doug glanced back. “Maybe. If you do a good job.”

Before Derry could ask more, he was gone.

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It had only been a day since Sara told Levy about the change in the schedule, yet Mike was here bugging her about it. “Levy wants to know when you’ll be ready to set things up at Jasper’s.”

Face full of scars, Mike stood over six feet four inches, and rumor had it he could bench press his own weight. He was an intimidating figure.

She couldn't understand why Kai was willing to date him. Sara loathed Mike. He and the others who worked for Levy weren't worth her time. Even so, she surprised herself last night when she thought about her lack of pity for Ryan. He was better off dead than working for Levy.

Sara focused on her monitor as her fingers moved across the keyboard.

Mike approached and touched her shoulder.

"Get your hands off me."

"I asked you a question."

"I heard you. Can't you see I'm busy with real work?" Sara's gaze never left her screen.

Mike grabbed her chair and spun her around, forcing her to face him. "He wants an answer. Now."

Sara rotated her chair back toward the monitor. "He'll get it in a minute. I'm in the middle of something." Every word dripped with irritation.

She heard Mike take a step back. Sara delayed answering, hoping to irritate him further. She knew he wouldn't try anything in front of Kai—or at least she hoped he wouldn't. She had no respect for Mike, and a small part of her enjoyed giving him a hard time. Better yet, she wished he'd just leave. She hated being in the same room with him.

After several minutes, she stopped working and swiveled around to face him. Peering behind him, she inquired, "Where's your leash?"

"You think you're funny, don't you?" Not even a hint of a smile.

"No, I'm dead serious."

"Soon, Levy will grow tired of your mouth."

"But not yet. He needs me too much." She knew she was pushing her luck.

Leaning down, Mike whispered, "Your days are numbered, and I hope I'm the one who straps you in."

The image of Mike strapping Steve into the chair sent chills creeping down Sara's back. She shoved him away.

He surveyed her body. "You won't take nearly as much juice."

To hold her fears in check, she blurted out, "Unlike you. As dense as you are, he'll have to—"

Mike shoved her chair against the wall.

"Answer the question." Mike leaned in again. "When?"

Knowing she'd pushed him as far as she could, Sara finally gave in. "I don't think Jasper's will work. I don't trust the man, and I'm not sure he's smart enough to pull off his end."

"You don't think anyone is smart enough. Well, bad news, lady. It doesn't matter what you think. Levy has too much invested in Jasper's, and you'll do as he tells you. How long?" Mike's voice grew in intensity.

"I went to that hole of a restaurant the other day. His equipment is outdated. It's completely the wrong kind. Someone will need to give him a whole new setup."

"That someone will be you."

"You can't tell me what to do. I write code. I don't do hardware."

Mike pressed in further. "You are the only one who knows what he needs."

"But I don't have time to go shopping. Not if your master wants this done in three weeks."

"Make a list, and we'll make sure the stuff's ready when you are."

"If I make a list, who's going to read it? You?"

"Do as you're told. Send the list to Mr. Levy. Your equipment will be ready when you need it."

*Stop pushing.* “Levy will have the list today. I need the equipment in place the start of next week.”

“So, you’re saying you’ll be ready to start testing on Monday?”

“No. I’m saying I’ll be ready to set up the equipment on Monday.”

Mike reached down and grabbed Sara’s left forearm, pinning it against the armrest. “You want to learn how to type with only one good arm?”

Sara twisted her arm, freeing it from his grasp. “If the set-up is in place on Monday, I’ll start my test runs on Tuesday or Wednesday. If no big problems are found, and all the money transfers properly, we’ll be ready for a full testing the week after that. I’ll have six more cards ready by then. Tell your master I’ll need six runners, and make sure they’re all over twenty-one. We can’t have kids using credit cards and raising suspicions.”

“Not a problem. And the test runs will be done at Jasper’s? Correct?”

It only sounded like a question. Sara knew it was a command.

She rubbed her arm. “At Jasper’s, the worst Greek food in town.”

“Good.”

Sara swiveled toward her computer, turning her back to Mike as he left the room.

Once the footsteps disappeared down the stairs, Kai spoke up. “Mike’s not that stupid. Why do you push him like that?”

Glancing over her shoulder, Sara couldn’t help but pity Kai. Such a beautiful girl liking someone like Mike. “He’s stupid enough to choose to work for Levy.”

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Hours later, Sara’s previous late night was catching up with her. She’d been up well past midnight working on some additional code, the code that would make Levy pay for what he’d done to her. Using a laptop she bought with cash, she had developed the code at home where Levy wouldn’t find out. The laptop wasn’t nearly as powerful as the computer she used at work, but it served the purpose. The code had to be in place and tested before she went to Jasper’s.

Turning her head slightly and watching out the corner of her eye, she could see Kai pounding away on her keyboard. Would she ever go home? It was past seven, and neither of them had eaten since noon. Sara couldn’t think about food now, but she hoped Kai was hungry. She needed her to leave so she could tap into her computer.

Kai leaned back in her chair to stretch. “You going to work all night?”

“Oh! I didn’t realize the time. I’ve got a little more to do before I can leave.”

“I was hoping we could get a bite together.” Kai turned toward Sara and leaned forward, stretching her hands out past her knees.

For the most part, Kai was okay. This meant Sara could tolerate her company, and at times even enjoy it. “Oh, I’m not hungry. Maybe another time.”

“Come on, you’re too skinny as it is. I can’t have Levy’s top programmer dying on me.” Kai reached for the keyboard and locked her computer.

“Why not? Afraid you’ll have to finish my work?” Sara continued to type. She wasn’t paying much attention to what she was typing; she just needed to keep her fingers moving.

“Yeah, that’s it alright.”

Sara peeked over her shoulder to see Kai smiling at her. “Really?”

“You bet.”

“Well, in that case, I’d better stay and get it done so you won’t have to worry about it.” Sara returned to her work.

“You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“You heard Levy. I don’t have much choice.” She kept her gaze on her monitor.

Standing, Kai grabbed her pack. “Well, I need to run to the store anyway. I’m out of food downstairs.” As she walked through the door, she added, “See you tomorrow.”

“Later.”

Waiting until she heard Kai going down the steps, Sara breathed a silent sigh of relief. She approached the door and listened. The building was strangely quiet, but she needed to make sure the floor was empty before she started her work. This half of the second floor held five offices, counting hers, as well as a common area at the top of the stairs.

Sara made her way out to the common area where a small coffee pot sat, along with some two-day-old muffins. She picked up one of the muffins. Pulling off small pieces, she nibbled on them as she slowly walked down the hall. Glancing into each office, she found them all empty. She was alone, except for the cameras in the hall.

She dropped the stale muffin into a trashcan and headed back to her computer. Stepping out of the camera’s view, she reached into her pocket and pulled out a jump drive. Making sure she was in the clear one more time, she inserted it into her computer.

Sara remotely logged into Kai’s computer and installed one of the programs she had written at home. This program made sure her access into Kai’s computer was untraceable and undetectable. None of the files she accessed would change their timestamps, and none of her keystrokes would be logged.

With this in place, she opened four of the files under Kai’s control. After searching the files for the right locations, she transferred several lines of her code into these program files.

*Kai will never find these. Step one down. Now for step two.*

Returning to her own computer, she repeated the process. Once done, Sara removed the jump drive and accessed the keystroke file that Levy hid on her system. She removed the last thirty minutes’ worth of entries and replaced them with work done the other day. After logging out and locking her computer, she grabbed her bag and stood.

Sara smiled as she took one more peek at Kai’s computer.

*Levy thinks he’s so smart.*

Sara headed down the stairs and out the door. She needed to get some food before her blood sugar got any lower.