

HIDING IN SUNSHINE

A NOVEL BY

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CHAPTER SIX

One night after dinner, when spring had finally sprung, Gavin was holed up in his lab running an experiment. While the test was underway, Gavin reviewed his security-system tapes as he did once every quarter. His was a good system with fixed-position wireless surveillance that showed the slightest intrusion or motion.

The archival logs visually documented a surprising number of critter intrusions, until Gavin realized this was his first spring at his new home. A wooded property in Concord turned out to have a lot more nocturnal critters meandering by in the dark than one would expect: deer, raccoons, wild turkeys, foxes, the occasional black bear and coyote. Gavin spent a few hours idling with fascination over the screen captures of those critters over recent months before he realized that it was getting late and he still needed to check the alerts early in the year. It was then he noticed that on New Year's Eve, the surveillance camera had inexplicably gone offline, gone blank, for about twelve minutes, at 7:14 p.m.

He mentioned the gap on the security tape to Lisa, and before he knew it he was telling her about being tailgated menacingly the previous month.

"Going to and coming from Boston," he said. "Different cars."

"Both ways? Gavin, what is going on? Do you have enemies I don't know about?"

He had no known enemies. Gavin could be slightly imperious at times in a business setting, but even when he was warning the bank IT security executive that they had better shape up, he did it with diplomacy and collegiality. Having been adept as an entrepreneur who stayed outside corporate bureaucracies for most of his career, he'd avoided even petty

office clashes. He may not have had a wide network of close friends, but he definitely did not have any enemies, at least that he knew of.

“Should we call the police?” Lisa asked. “Maybe mention the tape?”

“And say what? That the power went off for a few minutes four months ago? That would sound a little nutty, especially since there is no physical evidence whatsoever that we were burglarized.”

It was a Friday night, and as usual the family was heading out for dinner, this time in Bedford at All Natural Pizza, an informal place that served an excellent all-organic pizza. As they were halfway down the long driveway, Gavin felt that his Lexus SUV had gone heavy, as if the tires were low on air. It was dark. There were no driveway lights and no road lighting on Monument Street either, a nod to the town’s insistence on preserving the historic nature of the area. He stopped, stepped out, and pressed a fist against the driver’s side rear tire. It was flat. Then he examined the other side. To his alarm, that one was flat, too. As he was bent over the tire, he heard a police siren coming from Monument Street.

“We have a flat,” he told Lisa and the children, who looked at him wide-eyed. He tried to remember the last time he had had a flat tire, and it struck him that neither of the girls had ever experienced that particular motor-vehicle phenomenon. One of the many great improvements in automobiles over the years since Gavin had been a teenager was the tires: Flats used to be common, now they were unusual.

He leaned into the open window. “No worries, we’ll use one of the other cars. I’ll pull this one to the side and I’ll be back in a minute with the other car. You guys stay inside. It’s cold out here... Still!”

He had barely finished the sentence when he saw a police car approaching the driveway. The Concord Police car stopped within inches of the SUV’s front bumper. An officer jumped out. He appeared tense. Gavin stepped into the bright light.

“Sir, is this your car?” the officer asked, aiming a flashlight at the windshield. The bright flashlight beam and the pulsing lights from the cruiser’s roof luridly illuminated the faces of Lisa and the girls.

“My car, my driveway, officer. As you can see, we have a flat.”

“I see two flats, sir,” the officer said, as if correcting inaccurate information supplied by Gavin.

“Two,” Gavin agreed, “which is unusual.”

A second police car, lights snapping through the dark, now bounced down the driveway and came to a stop behind the first.

“Mike, everything okay?” asked an officer who bounded out of the second cruiser.

“I’m looking,” the first officer replied.

Lisa also stepped out of the car, which for some reason alarmed the officer named Mike.

“Ma’am, I’m going to need you to get back in your car,” he said, aiming the flashlight at her. She complied.

Gavin then impatiently asked, “What is going on here?”

“Why were you out of your car in the middle of the driveway in this cold?” Mike asked Gavin.

“Well, as we see, I have a couple of flat tires and was just about to walk back to the garage and get the second car to go to eat in Bedford when you arrived, Officer. But why are you in my driveway?”

“Two flats,” Mike said, as if stating something new.

One of the other officers was on his knees at the SUV’s rear wheel well. He called out, “Hey, Mike, take a look at this!”

Lisa was now out of the car without any objection from the police. She and Gavin stood in the cold, bewildered.

A few minutes later Mike approached them and introduced the other two officers.

“Sir, I’m sorry about this, but I need to ask you. Are you armed? Do you have a firearm on your person?”

“Absolutely not,” Gavin said, raising his arms the way an airline passenger is sometimes required to when passing through a TSA body imager at the airport.

“Okay, sir,” Mike said, his tone now relaxed and cordial. “Please understand, we need to be cautious.” He shone the flashlight toward the house. Gavin was impressed to see that its beam was intense enough to reach all the way. “Are you the new owners?” Mike asked.

“Yes,” Gavin and Lisa responded simultaneously.

“When did you guys move in?”

“About a year ago,” Gavin replied.

“What part of the country did you move from?” asked Mike.

Gavin was a bit surprised. How did a local cop they’d never met before know that they were outsiders? “From California,” he said.

“Makes sense,” Mike said, somewhat cryptically in Gavin’s opinion. “Did you know the previous owners?”

“No,” said Lisa.

Mike tucked his notebook away and said, “It’s cold here. Would we be able to go inside the house and talk for a minute?”

Becky, who was listening at the open car window, called out impatiently. “But I really want pizza, Mommy. I don’t want to go home.”

Lisa shushed her and they all trooped back toward the house, with Gavin carrying Jessica. Out of earshot of the officer, Gavin said to Lisa, “Do we have any hot coffee?”

“Sure,” she said. “The breakfast room. We’ll get some coffee in them, and then we’ll find out what this is all about.”

But the other two officers did not enter the house. Instead, they began poking around the property with their flashlights.

As Lisa got the coffee ready, Mike asked them to send the children to another room. Then when they were settled around the table, he told Gavin and Lisa: “Look, Mr. and Mrs. Brinkley. Your tires didn’t go flat on their own. They were shot out. We found one of the bullet casings nearby.”

“Oh my God,” Lisa gasped.

“But how did you know to get here? Did someone report shots?”

“No,” Mike said. “I’m afraid this gets worse. We had a call from another law enforcement agency that you may be a target of a kidnapping attempt, which is why we rushed here. So tell me what’s going on. Has anybody been bothering you?”

Gavin said urgently and with great agitation, “Wait! What kidnapping? Are you kidding me? Who would want to kidnap us? We just moved here over a year ago. We barely know anyone, and we are very quiet, low-profile people. I don’t understand a word you’re saying.” Gavin looked at his wife, whose face was contorted with fear.

“We have no idea what this is all about. You get crazy people making threats, overheard making threats. These days, there’s crazy all around. But sometimes you need to take crazy seriously, you know? All I know is we were instructed to respond to this address, and to ascertain that you and your family were all right. Jeez, Mr. and Mrs. Brinkley, I know how this must sound, and I wish I could tell you more about what prompted this, but I do know we are supposed to take it seriously. Until we know

more, we'll investigate and circle back. And we'll keep an eye on you, of course."

"Circle back? Meaning what, exactly?" Gavin said with exasperation.

"You haven't noticed anything suspicious lately?" Mike said, ignoring the question. "Say in the last few weeks. Have you hired anybody new for household or maintenance help? Anything going on at work that might be suspicious?"

"I'm self-employed," Gavin said.

Mike wrote that down. Then he asked, "Does anyone outside of the family come and go regularly in the house?"

Lisa answered. "Our cleaning lady, but she's very nice. On extremely rare occasions, the babysitter, a local girl who goes to Harvard, but we trust her implicitly of course or she wouldn't be the babysitter. The Orkin guy once a month, but I'm always here when he comes. The lawn and landscaping guys came by last week for a spring cleaning, but they're always outside."

"All local?" the officer asked.

"Right," Gavin said.

"Do you keep any large sums of cash in the house, Mr. Brinkley?" the officer asked.

"No, of course not."

"Do you travel much internationally, sir?"

The question made Gavin uncomfortable. "Not much. Why do you ask?"

"Which countries?"

"Here and there. Japan and China for ten days last year. I haven't been out of the country since. Again, why do you ask?"

"Just routine."

Lisa said, "Tell him about the tailgating."

Gavin felt a little silly complaining about tailgating, but the situation suddenly made those incidents more fraught with portent, so he explained them. The other two officers had come into the house, though Gavin noticed that one stood by each window, keeping watch on the outside. Mike was taking careful notes.

"Also, and this may be nothing, but I think someone might have tampered with our video surveillance system."

Mike looked at him with interest. “Tampered? How?”

“Well, as I said, it’s probably nothing. But I noticed a twelve-minute gap on the home-surveillance tapes, although that seemed to occur during a short power outage. Nothing else. But look, that was more than four months ago. Nothing out of the ordinary since.”

Mike scribbled more notes and then looked up. “That’s it?” Mike said, sliding his business card toward Gavin.

“I think so,” Gavin said.

“If anything comes to mind, Mr. Brinkley, I need you to call me immediately. I jotted my cell number on the back of my card. Any time, okay? And we’ll be back in the morning to take a closer look around the home, and also examine the security system tapes, if that’s okay with you. A couple of things, meanwhile. Make sure all the security alarms are turned on and working, okay? We’ll be driving by the house all night, and we may also have a patrol car come down the driveway, with the lights on so you know who it is. But call immediately if you need us for any reason.”

“Should we just leave and stay at a hotel tonight?” Lisa asked nervously.

“No, I believe you are safe here with us on patrol,” the officer said.

After the police left, Lisa made some grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup for the kids. Neither she nor Gavin had an appetite. Gavin was very quiet, his usual attitude when he was mentally trying to connect the dots.

“What are you thinking?” Lisa asked softly.

“Nothing, just worried, plain worried. But don’t you be. I’ll figure this out.”

“I am really sorry that I made fun of you about the tailgating,” she said.

“And you think these things, the tailgating, the crazy kidnapping, are related?”

“I worry about that.”

She was close to him. “Should we leave?”

“I think the police are right. We’ll stay calm until we know more.” he said.

Gavin was getting a little irritated. How was he supposed to know what to do, to protect his family as best he could? He had just shared

everything he knew. He wanted to tell his wife there is no point now in talking for the sake of talk, because they had reviewed all of the known evidence and the only thing that remains now is speculation. And speculation feeds on itself as a night wears on. The dots were connected as far as they went. For now.

“You should get some sleep,” he said tenderly.

“I’ll try, but... will you?”

“No. I’m going to stay down here with a book, just to think things through. I’ll check on you and the girls, but I’ll be quiet.”

She was crying when she kissed him good night.

He kept all the lights on inside and outside. He had programmed both of their cell phones with 9-1-1, so they only needed to press one button instead of four. There was a panic button in the security system base that immediately informed the monitoring station and the local police station of an emergency. He stared into space for a long time, feeling the night slowly edge by, sensing shadows adrift in the dark.

CHAPTER SEVEN

There is a concept called “wartime” that combat veterans know about. Both Lisa and Gavin had read about it but had never really experienced it... until now. Wartime is marked by a psychological tunnel vision, an intense shift from the broader perspective of life, with all of its quotidian stimuli as one simply proceeds through a day to a state of intense inner vigilance. It is a parallel and entirely distinct emotional universe. As a result of that one blustery and dark April night, the Brinkleys of bucolic Concord, Massachusetts, were suddenly thrown into a churning vortex of wartime.

Wartime started early. Around six in the morning, just as Gavin was finally dozing off from the tumultuous events of the night before, the home phone rang. The caller ID read: “U.S. GOVERNMENT.” Gavin answered it on the third ring.

For a few seconds, he heard only office noise, with a phone ringing in the background, which seemed odd at this hour of the day. Then a deep male voice came on.

“Is this Mr. Gavin Brinkley?”

“Who’s calling, please?” Gavin needed a few seconds to steady himself for whatever this conversation might bring.

“Mr. Brinkley, my name is Marcus Henley and I’m a special agent with the FBI. I’m sorry to bother you so early on a Saturday morning.”

“That’s okay. What can I do for you Mr. Henley?”

“Actually, it’s what we need to do for you, sir. First, we owe you a few explanations. Then, we have very serious business to discuss. Do you have a few minutes?”

Well, of course I do, Gavin thought. Still, he remained unsettled by the

police visit. He wanted to know for sure whom he was talking to. “Mr. Henley, I hope you don’t mind, but would you give me your number so I can call you right back. I want to make sure I’m actually talking to the FBI.”

This posed no problem. “Absolutely, it’s a very good precaution,” Henley said. “And please take a couple of minutes to double-check that the number I’m giving you is the Boston field office of the FBI. It’s in the book. Or, it’s online as we say now.”

The phone number checked out. Gavin quickly googled “Marcus Henley FBI”—a list of routine mentions and news stories came up: “*according to Marcus G. Henley, a special agent with the FBI in Boston...*” He called back Henley, who answered on the first ring.

“Federal Bureau of Investigation, Special Agent Henley.”

“It’s Gavin Brinkley again.”

“Great. Thanks for calling, Mr. Brinkley.”

“Can you please tell me what is going on?”

“You spoke with the Concord police last night, correct? Is everything okay with you and your family?”

“Yes, but as you can imagine they’re terribly worried... but about what, we don’t know. . . Mr. Henley?”

“I’m here.” The agent breathed heavily into the phone, then said, “Look, I don’t want to go into a lot of detail on the phone. I need to come out there later this morning and talk to you. But I do need you to prepare yourself. The immediate threat is gone, and by immediate I mean imminent. But the danger is real. You’ll need to be prepared.”

“Prepared for what? Can we dispense with this cloak-and-dagger stuff?” Gavin said impatiently.

Henley was not amused. “Mr. Brinkley, you have no idea how serious of a situation we have here. First of all, you need to know that you are in the process of losing your identity. Do not use your computer or any digital device that’s connected to the Internet. Understood?”

“Yes, but—”

“Your credit cards have been compromised. They are now all frozen.”

“That’s crazy!” Gavin shouted.

Marcus spoke calmly and deliberately. “Sit tight for now. I can be out there by seven thirty, okay? Stay off the phone and stay in the house.”

“But—” Gavin protested.

The line went dead.

Lisa had wandered downstairs, dressed but disheveled, when she heard her husband on the phone.

“What’s going on?” she asked fearfully.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you. That was an FBI agent. He’s coming here at seven thirty a.m.”

She rubbed her eyes. “The FBI? Why? Did they give you any indication of what is happening to us?”

“Not really.” Gavin hesitated, unsure whether to tell Lisa more or remain silent. He chose the latter as he didn’t really have anything concrete to share as of yet.

She had her arms around him. “Will we be all right?”

“The police and the FBI say so.”

“This is crazy. Can we call someone?”

“Let me try Cate. The FBI guy said not to use the phone, but that seems a little extreme. She has connections all over. Maybe she can help us make sense of this.”

Lisa did not object. As if in a trance, she went into the kitchen to start the coffee, and then padded upstairs to check on the girls.

Gavin held down the number 7 on his phone and three rings later Cate answered.

“Hey, Gavin, how are you? Are you calling to see if I’m working as early on a Saturday morning as you are?”

“Not really, Cate. I mean, I’m not okay. We have a serious problem that I have no idea how to sort out. Can you check on something for me? A supposed FBI agent named Marcus Henley just called and said that Lisa and the kids and I are in some kind of danger. Last night, the local police came by and said the same thing. We’re on a kind of lockdown here, Cate. This makes no sense. Can you—”

“Gavin, slow down. Give me the details one by one.”

He filled her in. It sounded insane, but she reacted with the logical mind he had come to trust in so many heady financial situations. He appreciated her attentive concern.

“Got it,” she said. “My God, this is horrible.”

“You don’t think I’m nuts?”

“Gavin,” she said, drawing his name out. “You’re the sanest person

I know. Listen, the police and the FBI? You have to take them very seriously.”

“I wonder if it’s just a prank.”

“I doubt that. You saw the cops and you verified the FBI agent. They’re not in the business of pranking respectable citizens.”

“Your firm has sources in law enforcement, correct? Can you make some inquiries on our behalf? I know this is asking a lot—”

“You stop that right now! Of course I’ll check around. I know a guy in the U.S. Attorney’s office, high up. He’s on my speed dial, in fact. And he owes me. Let me sound him out. I’ll get back to you as soon as I know anything. This is all very scary. I’d be very cautious right now. Who knows what’s going on?”

Gavin saw the newspaper delivery van pull up in the driveway and heard the wet thump of the *Boston Globe* hitting the doorstep. He watched the van slowly turn the oval and head back out the driveway, and was glad to see its turn signal blinking red through the trees as she made a right on Monument Road. Was this what life would be like from now on? Afraid of the newspaper delivery woman?

Lisa was in the kitchen with the girls having breakfast. Still in her pajamas, Jessica ran up to Gavin and tugged at his sleeve.

“Daddy, come on!” she said, beckoning toward the bright glow of the kitchen. “Coffee!”

“Not right now, honey, I have some work to do. Go finish your breakfast.”

Jessica made an unhappy face and said, “No work!” as if that was the greatest inconvenience she would face all day.

The phone rang again.

“Cate?”

“Gavin, stay calm.”

“I am calm, I think. It’s hard to be calm when you don’t know what’s happening!”

“Gavin, for some reason unknown to anyone, a very nasty element of the criminal world has got you guys in its sights. I don’t know how to tell you this, Gavin. My guy at the U.S. Attorney’s office practically jumped through the phone at me when I brought up your name. He was, like, stricken. ‘How do you know this?’ he demanded. ‘Mr. Brinkley is a client

and a close friend. He called me,' I said. 'Tell Mr. Brinkley to stay off the phone!' my guy said, very, very agitated."

"But what does this mean? What did I do?"

"Gavin, this is something—"

At that moment the doorbell rang, and Gavin saw a hulking man in a raincoat standing outside. He was by himself.

"I think the FBI guy is here," he said.

"Go!" Cate said. "And call me when you can. Be very careful, Gavin."

* * *

Marcus Henley was a trim, fit man, about six-three, with a conspicuous handlebar moustache. To Gavin he radiated how the movies portray FBI men: confident, businesslike, well-mannered, but with a steely gaze. Gavin felt more secure in his presence.

They exchanged very few pleasantries as the stress on each man was very clearly visible to the other. Suddenly Gavin realized that life was about to change drastically. With Lisa now hovering nearby, Gavin felt his head swimming as Marcus described the full extent of the threat. It felt like he was receiving body blows from an assailant.

The Brinkleys were in dire peril. "You're going to need to get out of here for a while," Marcus told them, carefully watching their reactions.

Lisa gasped. "What are you talking about?" she cried.

"You mean you can't protect us?" Gavin said angrily.

"Not adequately. Look, the compromising of your identity is just the beginning. We have intel—intelligence—that hacking into your personal data was just the prelude before... someone tried to kidnap you."

Lisa sat down shakily beside her husband. "Is it just us?" she asked. "Or have the children also lost *their* identities? Are they still our kids?"

Marcus seemed surprised. "No, it's only you and Gavin. Not the children."

For reasons not yet fully understood, a notorious Serbian criminal outfit called the Enterprise, whose boss was a figure known as ZRK, had not only infiltrated both Gavin's and Lisa's personal identities, but they had also targeted Gavin for personal "intervention," in an encrypted ZRK message secretly intercepted by the FBI.

“Intervention,” Gavin pondered. “Do I want to know what that means?”

“They have a bull’s-eye on you, and that’s an absolute certainty,” Marcus said.

“But why?” Lisa demanded, her face flushed. Gavin held back, listening carefully.

“We simply don’t know. What we do know is that this gang can slip under the radar at will. They’re deadly, and frankly we don’t have a fix on them yet. We will, but we don’t right now. Kidnapping is one of their more benign specialties.

“These people are very sophisticated criminals, highly trained ex-military out of the Serbian army, a very nasty breed, backed up by extremely smart computer expertise. Up until now their game has been money laundering, and we thought we had them pretty much under control, if not defeated. But they’ve begun moving in new directions. Politics. Terrorism. Score settling, and these guys have scores to settle that go back five hundred years.

“Once upon a time they confined their tribal battles to the ancient borders, but they have global scores to settle now, including with the United States for our attack on Serbia in 1999.”

“You can’t catch them is what I’m hearing.”

“Not yet. This is a whole new world. There are no longer any borders.”

“I knew that. Theoretically, mainly. This is the first time I’ve actually been a piece on the board, Marcus.”

“Gavin—can I call you Gavin?—look, I know this is a terrible jolt to you and Mrs. Brinkley.”

“Call me Lisa,” she said hesitantly.

“And Lisa,” he acknowledged. “Naturally, you’re going to get some corrupt elements of the Russian intelligence into a mix like this. Opportunity beckons, plus they are still fuming over losing the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. They have always had blackmail and violence in their bag of tricks, but now they also use some of the most brilliant minds in computing, which is why law enforcement has been caught flatfooted. Now we know they have even penetrated some of the biggest software companies in the world, and we know they’re turning attention to the banks.”

“The banks,” Gavin said. It was not a question; he was beginning to connect the dots. Could it have been someone in the room with Cowan that day before the Super Bowl when Gavin made his impassioned Willie Sutton speech? Could it have been Cowan himself? If that were true, Gavin would have zero idea whom he could trust any more. Perhaps the room itself had been bugged, or other communications had been intercepted? After all, Gavin knew if it had been that easy for him to switch a penny from one of Charles Kroger’s accounts to the other, it couldn’t be that hard for someone even moderately skilled to intercept an email...

“Let me tell you about who we’re dealing with,” Marcus began. “The head of the Enterprise is an American-born, eccentric, UCLA-educated Serbian who graduated at the top of his class in both computer science and forensics. He went on to get a PhD in network security. That is ZRK, the mastermind—absolutely brilliant, both in cyber attacks and in criminal strategy. His deputy goes by the initials LSA and is even more brutal. If ZRK is the brains, LSA is the brawn, the muscle who enforces the writ. LSA used to be a contract killer but later joined forces with ZRK during the Bosnian War.”

Marcus went on, “These characters don’t think for a minute before killing anyone in their way, and local law enforcement is no match for them. They have hundreds of murders in their wake. These guys make the smartest of the Italian mob guys look like country bumpkins. Which brings us to where we are right now.”

“Which is?”

“Which is the threat to you.”

“But why us? Why would the Enterprise pick us?” asked Gavin. Gavin thought he had an inkling of the answer, perhaps they saw Gavin as a threat to their new operations in the highest tiers of banking security, but he wanted to know how much the FBI knew.

“Well, you have something they want, obviously. We can’t be sure what. I’ve been following this outfit closely now for a couple of years, even before they emerged from the shadows to become a real threat in the United States. Some of their most recent actions led us to place you under surveillance—for your own safety—a few months ago. I’m the one who called the Concord Police last night, because we picked up some

information that an operative was making plans to kidnap someone at this house.”

“Last night?!” Gavin was still incredulous.

Marcus shrugged. “The timely intervention by the local cops undoubtedly scared them off.”

“So what now?” Lisa asked.

Marcus took a deep breath and sighed. “Now you move.”

Gavin blinked. “You’re not serious.”

“I am deadly serious,” Marcus told them. “You need to be out of here for a while. We will move you to a secure, undisclosed location.”

“For how long? Do we have any choice? This is an outrage!” Gavin was yelling now, letting the emotions of the past several hours rise to the surface. He couldn’t stop them even if he wanted to, even though he knew his girls could hear him.

Marcus was implacable. He chose to answer only the latter of Gavin’s two questions. “I’m afraid you have no choice. The safety of your family is gravely threatened, Mr. and Mrs. Brinkley.”

The Brinkleys remained in a state of shock as they heard Marcus outline what needed to happen, absorbing perhaps 50% of what they were told. They would need to leave within twenty-four hours. They should pack only the bare necessities, such as clothing and toiletry items. They should not pack anything that could be connected to their current lives. No computers, no DVDs, no CDs, no cell phones, no iPods. Everything that could be traced had to remain behind until it was safe for them to return.

Marcus told them that he would phone with more details later in the day. Later that morning, Cate called back. Gavin, profoundly shaken, hesitated even to pick up the phone for her. When he did, he heard a tone of worry in her voice he had never heard before.

“Listen,” she said, trying to mask her fear with a quiet, firm voice, “I checked high up in the Bureau with a very credible contact of our senior partner. You wouldn’t believe the hoops I had to jump through to get to this person and to get him to say anything at all. The headline is this: Agent Henley may not even know the full extent of the danger. You’re going to have to follow Henley’s lead and go away for now, but they will try to get you back as soon as possible. My heart goes out to you, Gavin. You and Lisa and the children.”

“This can’t be happening, Cate.”

“Get cash, Gavin. As much cash as you can without calling undue attention to yourself. And close your overseas accounts, which are far more vulnerable to criminals than your U.S.-based ones. Can you do that today?”

“I think so.”

“Do it. Let me know what you get done, and if you’d like, I’d be happy to help any way I can.”

“Would you be willing to take care of the finances in our absence?”

There was a long pause; Gavin suddenly realized that Cate would now be on the Enterprise’s radar if she agreed to do it. “Are you OK? Would you be comfortable with that?”

“No, no, I am fine. I will do it.”

Gavin could sense fear and trembling in her voice.

“Are you sure?”

“If I was in this kind of crisis, Gavin—wouldn’t you be there for me?”

Lisa was crying. Gavin, on the other hand, began feeling oddly composed now that, at least, the vague outlines of a plan were coming into focus.

“I don’t know how to thank you for this,” Gavin said, and then hung up with Cate. He and Lisa made a frenetic series of trips to several banks, some of which closed at noon and some at one p.m., and managed to withdraw about \$70,000 in cash.

Soon after they returned, Marcus arrived looking very grave.

“Just to go over a few critical things,” he told them while the girls played upstairs. “One, do not contact anyone from your current life, and I mean *anyone*, under any circumstances until the federal marshals who will be working with you give you explicit approval. If you ignore to do so, it will be at your own and your children’s risk.”

Gavin and Lisa were too stunned to comment. They listened passively as Marcus recited to them a summary that sounded as if it had been memorized from a government text.

“You will be under the authority of the U.S. Witness Protection, Security and Benefit Act, also commonly known as the Witness Protection Program, in which the United States Attorney General authorizes the relocation and long-term protection of a witness or potential witness of

the state or federal government in any proceeding concerning organized crime, or other serious offenses.”

“A witness to what?” Gavin interrupted.

“That’s just a technicality to get you into the program as a potential victim in a high-profile criminal investigation,” Gavin explained.

He went on, “You will be transferred under the protection of United States marshals to an undisclosed location that you will learn about upon arrival. The federal marshals, whom you will become acquainted with very soon, are to be your primary contacts, and your only contacts unless explicitly advised otherwise. So long as you are located within the program and abiding by its various regulations and rules, the government will provide you with a living stipend to be described at your new location, but frankly it’s not a whole lot, so you might at some point think about temporary employment. The marshals will explain everything in full to you. But a few things to really keep in mind: Absolutely no phone calls are to be made to anyone you currently know. You’ll have a contact number for the marshals, and one for me to be used only in dire circumstances. No Internet usage. None whatsoever, because the Enterprise is known to have penetrated even search engines, and they can spot you via algorithms calculated on your previous usage, despite your new identities.”

This hit Gavin like a blow to the head. Lisa stiffened suddenly beside him, her hand locked on his wrist.

“New *identities*?” Gavin said.

Marcus looked at him quizzically. “That’s famously the key part of the program,” he said.

After a long and stunned silence from the Brinkleys, Marcus opened a notebook and read aloud their new names and profile.

“You’ll have a confidential copy of all of this, but ideally we’d like you to have it down right from the start,” Marcus said, asking them to repeat the information to him: new names, new names for the kids, bogus but plausible birthdays. There were utterly false backgrounds to memorize: hometowns, educational résumés, work experience. A whole new fictional family portrait fell out of Marcus’s notebook and was repeated dutifully back to him over a grueling hour’s time.

Marcus gave Gavin and Lisa new identity cards, including driver’s licenses, and asked them to surrender their current licenses. Gavin was now John Robertson. Lisa was Cindy Robertson. In an instant, Becky

became Carrie, and little Jessica was now Erica. Everyone received new birth certificates as well; both children were now a few months older.

Finally, Marcus was finished. He firmly shook both of their hands. "You'll be hearing from me by phone once a month for a while," he told them solemnly. "Hopefully, we're going to get control over this situation before too long and you'll be back here in Concord as if nothing had happened except for a strange little family vacation. Most crucially, you'll all be safe. Any other questions?"

"What about our families?" asked Lisa.

"Please give me any contact information. We have methods for safely letting close family know that you're safe and being protected, but only close family. Parents, for example."

"My parents are dead," Lisa said.

"Mine, too," Gavin said. "We're both orphans, of a sort."

"So much the better," Marcus said. Then he saw on their faces that he had made a human error. "I didn't mean it that way; I'm sorry for your losses. What I meant was, for your safety, the fewer individuals trying to track you down, the better."

Gavin nodded. An insensitive slip of the tongue was the least of his worries. Marcus bid them farewell. Gavin and Lisa watched his car disappear up the long driveway.

Events happened quickly after that. The Brinkleys finished the last of their packing. They received a phone call advising them to be ready sometime after midnight. Finally, at three a.m., Marcus and another agent, Larry Oliver, arrived, both of them armed. They were packed into a black GM Suburban with their six suitcases and three boxes, and whisked away into the night. Gavin had observed Marcus's dictum and had brought along no personal effects, except one: his journals. He couldn't put his finger on why he needed to break this one rule, but he just had a feeling that they were going to be essential for maintaining his sanity.

Events occurred through dawn and the following morning with a staggering speed. Gavin and Lisa were careful to assure their girls that they were bound for an adventure, even as they began a new family game for vacation—calling each other by different names. Becky, who was now Carrie, enjoyed the game and jumped right in; Jessica, who was now Erica, didn't even seem to notice—she was so delighted with the attention she was receiving.

The FBI agents drove the family to Hanscom Field, a big general-aviation airport in Bedford. Two federal marshals transferred their belongings and escorted them onto a waiting government jet that took off as soon as they were in their seats.

One of the marshals remained with them as a flight attendant of sorts. He was taciturn but polite.

“Mr. and Mrs. Robertson, I’m Randy. Please let me know if there is anything you require.” Randy took his seat just up the short aisle, as the plane climbed high above the clouds.

Gavin and Lisa had been deep in their troubled thoughts. They both looked up, startled at being called by their new names.

“Thank you, Randy,” Gavin said. “There is one thing. Can you please tell us where we’re headed?”

“They haven’t told you?” Randy said.

“No.”

“That’s odd. We’ll be arriving in Boise, Idaho, later this afternoon after a stopover near Detroit. It should be a comfortable flight, and there are snacks and sandwiches in the galley. Lunch will be available after Detroit. Would you like some coffee, or juice for the children?”

“Thank you, Randy,” Lisa said.

“*Boise, Idaho?*” Gavin said in utter astonishment, looking deeply into his wife’s eyes. Her shrug just said, “*Whatever.*” She was simply worn out and resigned. The boundary between reality and nightmare had evaporated. In a while, Lisa began muttering softly to herself. Gavin realized that she was repeating her new name and those of her kids.

After the short stop at a general-aviation airport near Detroit, Randy came down the aisle to serve lunch.

“How do you like the ride?” he asked Gavin sociably.

“The plane?”

“Yep. She’s a Learjet 45XR, government fleet,” Randy said proudly, and headed back to the galley.

Beside him, Lisa stirred from her slumber and mumbled something incoherent.

“Honey, what did you say?” he asked.

She cleared her throat and rasped. “Well, you finally got your private jet, John.”