



Into the Fire

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Description: Things are heating up in Arizona in this thrilling novella introducing a page-turning new series by New York Times bestselling author Allison Brennan

Margo Angelhart was recently certified as a private investigator, but she isn't convinced that it's her calling. All of her cases have been minor, mostly for family and haven't paid the bills. She's more than happy to keep bartending and figure out her post-military career later. That is, until prosecutor Andy Flannigan walks into her bar and offers her a case she can't turn down...

Nineteen-year-old Sergio Diaz has confessed to murder—except Andy doesn't buy it. With his own job on the line, Andy asks Margo to work the case discreetly. The more she digs, the more she's convinced an innocent kid is going to prison for a crime he didn't commit. Now she just needs to figure out why he'd confess. Can Margo prove Sergio's innocence and help Andy find the real killer before anyone else dies?

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Though I didn't know it at the time, Fate walked into the bar on Monday night in the form of Andy Flannigan.

"Usual?" I called out to the county prosecutor, holding up a cold mug.

He nodded and motioned that he'd be sitting at a table in the corner. That was odd—he always sat at the bar, unless he was with friends.

I poured Andy his favorite Harp on draft and brought it over to where he sat.

"It's been a while," I said as I did a quick swipe over the table with my rag, then placed the pint on a coaster I pulled from my pocket. He usually came in every week, but I hadn't seen him in more than a month.

"Thanks, Margo," he said. "When you have a few minutes, I'd like to talk to you about something."

"Sounds serious."

He shrugged, didn't elaborate.

I was curious. "Give me fifteen? Scotty will be off his break and I can take a few." It was a quiet Monday night; I could probably take more than a few minutes.

"Thanks," he said.

I went back to the bar, unloaded the dishwasher, checked stock. Andy was acting

more serious than normal. While he was always on the calm, cool, collected side of the line, he had a great sense of humor. Fun and friendly. I'd known Andy most of my life. We'd gone to school together, though he was a couple years older than me and was still friends with my brother Jack and the group they had hung with in high school. The slight frown on his face was a bit disconcerting because Andy was definitely the least serious of the group.

I hoped there was nothing wrong with his parents, who owned the bar, Flannigan's, where I had been working since I left the Army last year. They were in their late fifties, still worked full-time, but didn't want to work most nights or weekends anymore. Hence, I had a pretty good gig with flexible hours. Plus, I liked beer.

By the time Scotty returned from break and I could take my fifteen minutes, nearly half an hour had passed. "Sorry," I said when I finally sat down across from Andy. "So, what's going on? You seem worried...and you only drank half your beer."

"Dad said you finally got your PI license."

I tilted my head. "Finally?"

He gave me a slight smile. "You were dragging your feet for a while."

True. I was still dragging my feet because I didn't know if I really wanted to be a private investigator.

"I haven't had much business," I said. "If you're concerned I'm going to leave your folks high and dry, I'm not quitting anytime soon."

"I want to hire you."

I leaned back and must have given him an odd look because he said, "You're not

doing a very good job of acting like you want business.”

“It’s not a priority right now.”

I was in that place in my life that my mom assured me everyone goes through, though I had my doubts considering none of my siblings had ever been in limbo. I was twenty-five, had changed career paths, and didn’t know if I was doing the right thing.

The few PI cases I took were easy, and most I did for expenses only. A background check for one of my cousins who had concerns about a new hire, finding an elderly man from my grandparents’ neighborhood who had wandered off, then giving his daughter advice and help in securing the house so he didn’t do it again. Strangers had called to check my rates to prove their spouses were cheating; I declined those cases. But I took one from a high school friend who caught his wife in a lie, though she denied having an affair. We were both surprised when I uncovered that she was dealing drugs where she worked at Arizona State University.

“I trust you,” he said. “And this is...well, I shouldn’t be doing this. But I can’t sleep. My entire life, when I get insomnia I know what I’m doing is wrong.”

“Then don’t do it.”

“It’s not that easy. Will you just hear me out?” His eyes were puffy and shadowed. He wasn’t lying about not sleeping.

“Sure.” Maybe he just needed advice, not a PI. I gave advice freely, to the frustration of my siblings and cousins who often didn’t listen to me (but usually wished they had). Andy was practically family.

He visibly relaxed. “Thank you.”

“I haven’t taken the case yet.”

“You will when you hear the story.”

I laughed. “When did you become a psychic?”

“You’re an Angelhart,” he said, as if that explained everything. The weight of my name wasn’t lost on me. A lot was expected from Angelharts.

Andy continued. “It’s about a nineteen-year-old kid who was arrested for armed robbery and murder. He confessed. It’s a slam dunk case. The problem? He didn’t do it.”

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Before Andy started spilling his story, I got up and told Scotty I needed more than fifteen minutes. When Monday night football was over, it wasn't yet baseball season, and the Phoenix Suns weren't playing, Mondays were slow, so leaving Scotty to handle the bar wasn't a problem. Plus, it was cold. Arizonans didn't like going out in the cold. Most didn't own warm coats, just windbreakers and sweatshirts. Yes, it can get very cold in Arizona. People only think about the heat of the summers and the comfortably warm days of baseball spring training, but December and January could bite your ass with sub thirty-degree mornings and sunny days that didn't top fifty. Phoenix was in the middle of a desert. Sometimes, I wondered what people thought when they decided to settle in this valley—did they enjoy battling mother nature? Freezing in January and roasting in August?

Then I would jog into a sunrise bursting with color as it ascended the mountains, or sit outside with friends and a beer to witness a crimson sunset setting the desert aglow, and I knew why. People who didn't live here couldn't understand that with the bad came the good. Phoenix wasn't perfect—no place that topped 120 degrees in the summer for weeks on end could be perfect—but the Valley of the Sun was unique. I never saw myself leaving again. After six years in the Army, away from home, I realized how much I loved and missed my hometown—and my family.

I poured a cup of coffee for myself and walked back to Andy. I sat down and said, "Lay it on me."

"Two weeks ago, a convenience store off Camelback near 19th was robbed, the clerk shot and killed. In the process of canvassing the scene, pulling security footage, talking to witnesses, police questioned Sergio Diaz, a nineteen-year-old who works at a fast-food restaurant two blocks from the scene. The Taco House."

“I know it,” I said. “Best street tacos in Phoenix. My cousin Millie knows the owner.”

“Millie knows everyone,” Andy said.

True, I thought. “Why’d they question Sergio?”

“He’s known to stop there after work, and he has had words with one of the clerks. Not the one who was killed, but a part-time clerk who told police that the week before the robbery, Sergio came in and was short two dollars. When the clerk refused to extend credit, Sergio threw the items back at him, then kicked a display rack on his way out.”

“That might be motive to shoot that clerk,” I said, though it seemed weak.

“It was enough for the police to talk to him. They asked him to come in, he did willingly, didn’t ask for a lawyer. He denied ever kicking a display rack, though admitted he walked out when he realized he was short on funds.”

“Is there video?”

“They record over the old footage every couple of days. The system is ancient with limited storage.”

“So the police talk to Sergio and he just says yeah, I killed the guy?”

Andy shook his head. “Not at first. He claimed he was home by 11:30. Police confirmed that he left work at 11:10 and it’s a fifteen-to twenty-minute walk to his apartment along the route that passes the store. Though the robbery occurred around 11:45, no one saw Sergio enter his apartment when he said he arrived home. They really went at him, he didn’t budge, and they had no hard physical evidence. The weapon hasn’t been found. They let him go.”

“What about the camera? You said it was an old system, but they must have something.”

Andy nodded. “It’s black-and-white, poor quality. Two young white, possibly Hispanic males entered at 11:40 wearing ball caps, brims low. There’s no clear view of their faces. They walked to the back of the store, off-camera, and the clerk appeared to watch them in the mirrors mounted in each corner of the store.

“About a minute later, the third suspect—the shooter—entered. He wore a hoodie with a face mask over his nose and mouth. The clerk immediately went on alert, made a move for the shotgun under the counter, but the suspect pulled a weapon and the clerk froze. Words were exchanged and the clerk opened the register. The suspect took the cash, estimated to be a hundred and twenty dollars.

“The two young men who had entered first came from the back of the store and while in view of the camera, one went over the counter and stole cigarettes and alcohol and the other grabbed junk food. The three left together and the clerk was yelling at them. The one in the mask turned around and shot the clerk twice in the chest.”

“Let me guess. Sergio resembles the shooter, even though the video is indistinct.”

Andy nodded, drained the rest of his beer. “The shooter is five foot nine to five foot ten—Sergio is just over five foot nine.”

“Like half the men in the state,” I muttered.

“After the first interview, the police were leaning away from Sergio, even with the basic physical resemblance. Sergio was polite and forthcoming, expressed concern for the neighborhood and worry about his employer and co-workers.

“Then a couple days later, the lead detective came by his work with follow-up

questions. At first, Sergio was polite. He came out, pulled on a hoodie—a similar hoodie to the one in the video. The detective—Tina Barrios—asked about it. He said that it was his hoodie. She asked him to come to the station. He wanted to know why, and she said that his hoodie matched that of their suspect. He refused, began to act belligerent, and she made the call to arrest him because she feared he would destroy the sweatshirt. They kept him in lockup for twenty-four hours and rushed the tests. The pocket of the hoodie tested positive for gunshot residue.”

“And that was it?” I wasn’t a cop, but I’d been in the military police for half my time in the Army. Generally evidence was important, even with a confession.

“After he was shown the GSR test results and the video of the shooting, Sergio confessed. He claimed that he needed the money and didn’t mean to kill the clerk, then asked for a lawyer. I watched the two interviews—they were night and day.”

“What about the things he stole?”

“He personally didn’t take anything other than the cash, and he said he spent it.”

“Could be.” A hundred twenty bucks wasn’t a fortune. “But you and I both know that a confession without something solid isn’t going to put him in prison. No record, no real motive. It’s not—” I said when Andy cut in.

“Maybe not. But the confession plus the evidence from his clothing? And he has a juvie record. Minor stuff, mostly petty theft, nothing we’d even look at except it would come out in a trial.”

“His attorney might be able to get it suppressed.”

“Not if he negotiates a plea. The county attorney is satisfied with the outcome. The confession is going to save the time and expense of a trial.”

“Did police search his apartment?”

Andy nodded, finished the last of his beer. “Nothing there. No evidence of the crime, no cigarettes or even beer in the refrigerator. Sergio claimed he dumped the gun in the canal south of West Campbell. He could have. It’s out of his usual stomping grounds, but not that far.”

“I don’t know what you want me to do,” I said.

Andy looked pained, and I could see the lack of sleep in his eyes. He was wrestling with his conscience. I knew how that felt.

“The county attorney handed this to me,” Andy continued. “Told me to negotiate the plea, work it through the system. Suggested thirty years, but I could go down to twenty if he gave up the other two. The kid won’t budge. I’ve been a prosecutor for three years—I know that doesn’t seem very long, but I’ve sat down across from dozens of killers, hundreds of thugs who wouldn’t give a rat’s ass about anyone. But Sergio—he’s polite, he’s intelligent, he’s respectful, he’s worked at the same job for three years. He doesn’t fit all the slots, not for me. Maybe—maybe it was the look in his eyes. He seems lost, worried, defeated.”

“Guilt?” I suggested.

“Maybe. We both know the weight of Catholic guilt.” He tried for a smile at his light joke, but it barely made his lips twitch. “Anyway, I wanted to go back to Barrios and ask her to reopen the case, see if there’s something more to it, but my boss wants the plea—it looks good on his numbers. A confession with no hint of police coercion.”

“You don’t like Hawkins?” George Hawkins was the county attorney and had been endorsed by cops, lawyers, council members on both sides of the aisle. Even my mother, who was the outgoing county attorney three years ago, gave her blessing

when Hawkins ran for the office.

Andy didn't say anything.

"I'm not going to gossip about it," I assured him. "Who would I tell?"

"It's not that I don't like George—he's a good boss for the most part, fair and evenhanded. I just think he's wrong about this. He has big shoes to fill, I don't have to tell you that, and his numbers haven't been as strong as the previous county attorney."

My mother definitely had very big shoes. Sometimes just being Ava Morales Angelhart's daughter was daunting, so I could just imagine taking over a position she'd held with esteem.

"Why me?" I asked bluntly.

"Three reasons. First, I know you."

"I'm sure you know a lot of private investigators."

"None I can use. They all contract with either my office or the public defender's office. Second, your ethics and reputation. I know your family." True, Andy even came to my grandfather's retirement party last year, when he left the bench. He continued, "I trust you to find the truth as well as be discreet. George can't know I'm doing this behind his back. I made my case, he disagreed, and I have to start working on the plea deal. I have to get it signed, sealed, and delivered by next Monday."

"Even if I get the kid to tell me he's innocent, that isn't going to mean squat to the cops or your office. I know killers who confess and are one hundred percent guilty, then backtrack when their lawyer tells them they were idiots to confess because the

case was weak.”

“You’ll have to prove it, and I don’t think Sergio is going to be a big help in that.”

“You said three reasons,” I noted.

“Do you remember when Doug Johnson was accused of stealing the money my class raised during spring break to pay for the prom?”

“Sure, but that was a long time ago.”

“You believed him. You were the only person who believed that he didn’t do it.”

“Doug didn’t do himself any favors when he lied about where he was when the money went missing.”

“You convinced him to tell the truth, even though he didn’t want to.”

“Because,” I reminded him, “he was making out with someone else’s girlfriend.”

“Not only did you find the truth, but you found out what happened to the money.”

“It wasn’t difficult. It was a matter of retracing everyone’s steps and then realizing that it was misplaced, not stolen.”

“Everyone was angry and divided, and Doug was nearly expelled.”

The accusation had torn the school apart and caused a lot of friction, but in the end, all was well.

“What does that have to do with this?”

“If you believe that Sergio is innocent, you won’t stop until you find the truth. No matter how many hurdles Sergio puts up. And if you tell me he’s guilty as sin and I’m a bleeding heart for wanting him to be innocent, I’ll believe you.”

Andy knew me better than I thought he did.

“What’s your theory about the hoodie?” I asked. “Was the test flawed? Inconclusive?”

“I think,” he said quietly, “that he knows the killer. That he knows the killer had worn his hoodie. He didn’t think about it until he saw the picture of our suspect. He’s protecting the killer. Maybe a close friend? Someone he works with? I don’t know. I can’t imagine confessing to a murder I didn’t do even if it was to protect my mom, and I’d do nearly anything for my mom.”

“Okay,” I finally said after thinking about everything Andy had told me. “I’ll do it. I’ll find the truth. And if it’s not what you want to hear, you’ll have to live with it.”

“I appreciate your honesty, Margo,” he said. “Here’s a copy of everything I have about the case and Sergio’s life.”

I took the file folder. It was thin and wouldn’t take me long to read.

Andy continued. “We’ll have to be a little...sneaky. Sergio’s public defender is Cheryl Osterman. She won’t let me talk to him without her being present, and if Cheryl knows that I’m questioning the confession, she won’t keep it to herself, which will put my job on the line.”

I wondered if Andy had considered his job would be on the line if I proved Sergio Diaz was innocent. I’d learned in my quarter century on the planet that secrets had a way of getting out when you least expected.

“I know what to do,” I said.

“You do?”

“I am the PI, aren’t I?”

He looked skeptical.

“You just said you trusted me,” I said. “So trust me.”

“Okay,” Andy said with a sigh.

I hoped Andy was right and that Sergio was innocent, but I doubted it. Weak alibi, beef with the store, juvie record—sure, it was a big step going from petty theft to robbery-homicide, but most crimes were stepping stones.

“I need to see the security footage.”

Andy frowned.

“You’ll have to show it to the defense eventually.”

“He confessed. There is no need.”

I stared at him.

“Okay. Tomorrow. But—you can’t come in as a PI or anything. Maybe pretend you’re dropping something off from my parents. I’m sure people in my office know you.”

“I’ll be discreet,” I said.

“Thanks, Margo. I really appreciate your help.” He smiled, reminding me how handsome Andy Flannigan was. Too bad there was no spark, because he was a good guy.

I’m not picky, though my sister Tess certainly thought I was. I just know what I want and what I like and don’t want to waste time with someone who could be my best friend, but didn’t give me butterflies in my stomach.

I wanted a marriage that lasted. Like my grandparents. Like my parents.

I might be single for the rest of my life.

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Knowing that Sergio Diaz had worked for The Taco House prior to his arrest, I devised a plan to gather more information before I met with the confessed killer.

Antonio Perez owned the small chain of fast, authentic Mexican food. I had several family members in the restaurant business, and my cousin Homer Orozco and his wife, Millie, owned and operated a popular Mexican restaurant near my house. Through family, I'd met Antonio a few times, but I didn't know him well enough to start asking too many questions about Sergio. Millie would be the best person to help smooth the path for me.

After talking to Millie to get info on Antonio and her promise to immediately call him and let him know I'd be stopping by, I drove to his office located above his flagship restaurant—the same location where Sergio worked.

This area south of Camelback near the 19th Ave corridor wasn't the safest. During the day it was okay, though drug deals in daylight were common. At night, definitely better to avoid it. Sergio was a man, making it a bit safer, but even men weren't safe from muggings or gang activity. He was either brave or stupid to walk home alone close to midnight. Or broke. Cars cost money and he only lived six blocks away.

I'd read the thin file Andy had given me. Sergio Diaz was born and raised in central Phoenix. His dad had walked out on the family when he was ten, and his younger siblings had been four and five. His mom worked two jobs to make ends meet and they lived in a tiny house she rented. Sergio did odd jobs when he could and watched his siblings after school.

At some point, his mother started using drugs. Maybe she always did but had it under

control; maybe it was a new thing after her husband left. When Sergio was fourteen, she lost her jobs—likely because of drug use. A year later, they were evicted from the house when the landlord proved she hadn't paid rent in eight months. She was arrested for prostitution and possession, given a slap on the wrist, but because she and her kids were living in a one-room flop without running water, the kids were put into the system. She spiraled from there and when Sergio was sixteen, three years ago, she shot a man in a drug dispute and was convicted of attempted murder. It wasn't her first arrest, but the only arrest that resulted in jail time. She likely would have been out after half her ten-year sentence, but while in prison, she killed a fellow inmate.

All of Sergio's juvenile slaps were during the two years after his mom lost her job, but before she went to prison. He stole petty cash, food, clothes. Got probation and cleaned up, not one ding since he'd been sixteen. But that wouldn't matter to some people.

It mattered to me. I wasn't naive. My parents had always been honest and straightforward with us about pretty much everything. There were people who needed to be in prison because they wouldn't stop their criminal ways. They would escalate and hurt more people, and society demands that we protect people from predators of all kinds.

But I did believe in redemption. I believed that people could make mistakes and learn from them. Especially young people like Sergio who had lost his father to who knew what, who had lost his mother to an addiction she couldn't or wouldn't control, who was just a kid himself stealing necessities for his family. Maybe, I thought, as a cry for help. Why did no one see his actions for two years and ask why? Where were the teachers, the neighbors, the churches, anyone who might question why a kid steals food? Look at his home, see how he was living?

Maybe because the story was far too common.

After his mother was arrested, Sergio got his GED and Antonio Perez hired him. There was nothing in the file about where his brother and sister were living.

The Taco House was small, clean, take-out only. Patrons could eat outside at one of the eight cement tables. Customers weren't allowed inside—they placed orders at one window, picked up at the next—which greatly reduced the cost to the business. No public bathrooms, cheaper insurance. Antonio did two things: tacos and churros. Soft, warm corn tortillas, long-simmered or stewed meat, topped with onions, cilantro, Cotija cheese and choice of salsa—red or green—spicy and delicious. I don't know why Antonio never tried to market the salsa to stores—I'd buy it by the gallon. It was better than anyone's, except my abuela's.

Antonio's office was up metal stairs on the backside of the building. The door was open, but the security screen was locked. I knocked on the wood frame. "Mr. Perez? It's Margo Angelhart. My cousin Millie Orozco told you I'd be coming by."

"Margo!" His loud booming voice belied his small frame as he unlocked the door. "Come in, come in. How are Millie and Homer? I haven't seen them in months—nearly a year. We're all so busy, too busy. I told Millie that I'd talk to Anna, have them come over for dinner soon."

He sat down at his desk and started typing at his computer, an older Apple model. "You know you can text and email with the computer? So easy! Sometimes I think Anna and I talk more over the computer than in person these days. And my kids! They are never without their phones. Fingers always moving, moving." He shook his head, his hands mimicking texting on a phone.

"How are your kids?" I asked with a grin. "Isn't Tony graduating this year?"

"Yes, he's going to be a Wildcat. Your parents went to U of A, didn't they?"

“Yes, sir, that’s where they met.”

“Aw, young love. I can only hope that Tony meets as good of a woman as your mother. Millie said you have a case, wanted to talk to me, of all people!” He leaned back in his chair and smiled, as if excited to be helping.

“It’s about Sergio Diaz.”

Antonio shook his head. “I never thought he’d do anything like this.”

“What can you tell me about him? Before his arrest, describe him for me.”

“Polite. Quiet. Dependable. I trust him. He was my assistant manager. He has a key to my office, brought up the deposits each night and put them in the safe. A lot more money than he was accused of stealing. Not once were the receipts off by more than a dollar or two. He turned in his keys, because he said he didn’t want me to spend money to have the locks changed.”

If it were me, I’d still change the locks if I thought my manager was a thief and killer. But knowing that Sergio had never been suspected of dipping in the till made the case marginally more interesting. If he was so desperate for money, as he told the police, he could easily have swiped a hundred from The Taco House receipts and probably talked his way out of it.

There could be another reason why Sergio robbed that convenience store. He could have gone with the purpose of killing the clerk.

“Did Sergio have any problems with customers? Other staff?”

“No, no,” Antonio said shaking his head. But his tone told me something more.

“No one?”

He looked above my head, thinking. “I would say the staff respected him, but there were a few over the years who thought he was too diligent, too nitpicky.”

“Example?”

“Being late, that was a big one for Sergio. He visited his brother and sister twice a week, expected staff to be on time because otherwise he would be late.”

Bells went off in my head. Of course Antonio would know about Sergio’s family. “He’s close to his siblings?”

“Yes, Henry and Sophia. They’re very close, but the kids are in foster care. I think Henry is fourteen and Sophia is twelve—no, thirteen. Just turned thirteen a couple weeks ago, right after the new year. Sergio took a vacation day so he could take her out to a nice dinner. He bought her this pretty little necklace, a tiny garnet for her birthstone. She’s a sweet girl, even with everything that’s happened in their family.”

“Are Henry and Sophia in the same foster home?”

He shook his head. “They were, for a while, but Sophia was moved to another home, I don’t know why. Sergio tried so hard for custody when his mom went to prison, but he was only sixteen. Then, when he was eighteen, he petitioned, but there are so many hoops. He did everything the court said, but still he has no answers. He even spends more for a two-bedroom apartment so that Sophia can have her own room. He has a good job here—and he even has a small savings account I helped him set up.” Antonio frowned. “I don’t know why he would rob anyone. Kill a man! He knew he could come to me if he needed help. Except...” His voice trailed off.

“Except what?”

“Pride. Sergio is prideful. It’s one of the deadly sins, isn’t it? Pride gets in the way of asking for help, causes us to make bad decisions.”

Antonio leaned back. “Why are you asking all these questions? Are you helping Sergio?”

“I’ve been asked to look at the details of the crime and see if they fit Sergio’s statement to the police.”

“He confessed, correct?”

“Would he confess if he was innocent?”

“Why would anyone?” Antonio asked.

I could think of many reasons. Attention, guilt about another crime, to screw with the case, bribery, to protect someone.

Like his brother and sister.

“Antonio,” I said, “if Sergio is guilty, there’s nothing I can do. But if he’s innocent, I might be able to help him. I’m going to talk to him, and I’d like to drop your name since you have a good relationship.” I didn’t know if I could convince Sergio to trust me, but Antonio was my best option.

“You think he might have lied to the police? That he confessed when he did nothing wrong? Did they coerce him? I’ve heard of it, where the police push and push until you’re so tired you’ll say anything for peace.”

“In this case, it seems to be a valid confession.”

Antonio leaned back and stared at me, then he nodded. “I don’t want to believe the confession, but I know good people sometimes make mistakes. But murder... I never saw it in Sergio. If you can help him, if you believe he might be innocent and lied for a reason, yes, please, if telling him I trust you helps, say so.”

“Is there anyone Sergio is close to? Maybe a co-worker, a friend who comes by, someone he might confide in?”

He nodded. “Faith.”

“Employee? Girlfriend?”

“She’s the assistant manager at my Dunlap location, the one near Homer and Millie. Faith Jones. She worked here for a year, then I promoted her to the other location about four months ago. She and Sergio were always friendly.”

“Dating?”

He frowned, shrugged. “I never saw anything to suggest a romance. Sergio is focused on reuniting his family, and Faith is going to college and working. Very driven young lady.”

His phone rang and he glanced at it. “I hate these things,” he said as he picked it up.

I got up, nodded my thanks, and said, “I’ll let you know if I find anything that helps Sergio.”

“Appreciate it.” He smiled a good-bye then answered his phone.

I left, the first half of my plan working like a charm.

I needed to talk to Sergio face-to-face, then talk to Sophia and Henry.

If Sergio was guilty, all bets were off. But if he was innocent—and protecting someone like Andy believed—then protecting his siblings seemed the most logical.

Or he was guilty in order to protect his siblings. Perhaps he had committed the crime...maybe he was forced to.

I didn't buy that. I can see someone being pressured into doing a lot of things, even committing a felony, but murder seemed a bridge too far.

Yet, I didn't know Sergio Diaz. People could kill for a whole host of reasons.

I had a little time before I needed to meet with Andy to view the security video, and I had more to learn.

Time for a little breaking and entering.

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Legally, I couldn't go into Sergio's apartment without permission, and I could lose my license if I was caught. So the trick, I figured, was not to get caught. Besides, I was new at this gig—and I could bullshit with the best of them.

What I wanted was a sense of who Sergio was. If I didn't take anything from his place, then technically I was only trespassing.

And if my PI license was pulled, then that was that and I could find something else to do with the rest of my life.

Sometimes, I wondered if being a PI was what I really wanted. But I also didn't consider being a bartender for the long-term a viable career option, even though I enjoyed working at Flannigan's. Being an Angelhart added weight to every decision I made. I didn't want to be the one who couldn't make up her mind, who flitted in and out of jobs with no direction.

Maybe it was the uncertainty about my decisions of late that had me taking risks by breaking into Sergio's apartment; I didn't know. What I did know was that there were questions that needed answers, and because Sergio had pled guilty, there was no incentive for the cops or prosecutor to find the answers.

Sergio lived on the ground floor of a surprisingly clean apartment building south of Missouri, off 17th and Denton. The dump across the street screamed trouble, but Sergio's building was fully fenced with security cameras, new paint, and shade trees in the front. No lawn, but the common area was landscaped with bushes, benches, and a paved path to the rear buildings.

This was going to be trickier than I thought. When Adam told me where Sergio lived, I assumed a dive. Most of the apartments off 19th were sketchy and would be easy to access.

I parked on the street and put my gun under my seat. If I was caught, better not to be carrying. I walked up to the security door. Electronic lock. Dammit, why couldn't they have an old-fashioned lock? I'd spent months learning how to pick locks. I was good at it and it was fun. But this electronic system was well above my skill set.

Maybe I needed a computer expert to teach me some new skills.

I observed the entrance. People either typed in a code or used a remote to get in.

Two teenagers left through the front gate. They eyed me suspiciously, but I gave them my best grown-up nod and half smile, and walked in before the gate closed. I clicked my car lock on my key fob so it would beep-beep behind me, giving me a bit more authority, I surmised. As if I was supposed to be here.

Looking at the complex map posted next to the mailboxes, I deduced there were a total of forty-eight apartments in six buildings of eight units each, four up and four down. Sergio's apartment was in the southwest corner.

When I was putting in my mandatory hours for my PI license, I'd worked under the direction of semiretired PI Gene Russell. Gene cut a lot of corners and played loose with the rules, but he had a nose for the business like no one else. He had this sixth sense that guided him in how he investigated a case, and while I didn't know if I would ever cultivate his instincts, I'd learned several key rules from him. The first? Always act like you have a purpose—especially when you are breaking rules. Gene called them “rules” not “laws” and I now preferred the term as well, even if it was merely semantics.

So I acted like I was supposed to be here. Walked straight through the complex and right to Sergio's door. Standard lock and dead bolt. I knocked on the door—just in case he had a friend or girlfriend with a key. Like Faith Jones.

No one answered, and I heard no movement inside. I pulled my lock pick set out of my back pocket—a gift from Gene when I got my license—and in less than ten seconds, I'd popped the lock, impressing myself, even though my racing heart reminded me I really, really didn't want to be caught.

I walked in and closed the door.

First, I listened. Just to make sure no one was inside. I didn't hear anyone, not even upstairs or next door. The unit was long and narrow, with the front door facing the back of the property and the rear facing a small common area with trees and a couple picnic tables. The blinds were half-closed in the living room, covering a sliding glass door that led to a walled-off patio.

The apartment was mostly neat with little clutter, though it was clear the police had searched. Some drawers were partly opened, closet doors ajar, papers scattered. I saw a copy of the search warrant on the counter and an index card with instructions and a phone number if anything was damaged, plus a faded list of what they had taken—the bottom sheet of a form in triplicate. They listed clothing, shoes, and a laptop computer. Not much.

I looked at the date. They'd been here Saturday, the day after Sergio's confession. Though the signature was sloppy, I noticed the large B in the last name and assumed Detective Barrios. Her badge number was written below. I took a picture of everything, just in case I needed it.

The kitchen was on the right, small but well designed for maximum counter space. A small round table in the dining area, the living room beyond. The living room was

large for an apartment and had a sectional sofa that was worn but clean. A television was mounted on the wall with bookshelves on either side. Not a lot of books, but a few from the new and used bookstore in Sunnyslope, evidenced by the small stickers on the spine. A stereo and a few CDs. Most people streamed music these days.

I opened the refrigerator. Sparse. But no alcohol. I checked the freezer. No hidden drugs. The small pantry had staples—cereal, rice, bread, canned food. A bowl of bananas and apples were ripe on the counter, but hadn't turned brown yet.

Two bedrooms and two bathrooms. The larger bedroom was masculine with two double beds, another television, and a gaming system. Posters of video game scenes. The second bedroom was painted light purple with a double bed, white dresser, plush purple comforter, lots of pictures filling a cork board. A few girls clothes in the closet and drawers. Maybe Sergio had been allowed to have sleepovers with his siblings? Or maybe they had keys and could come and go as they wanted?

I turned to the pictures. I recognized Sergio. A young, pretty dark-haired girl was in most of the pictures, likely Sophia. I noted that most were older photos from happier times. Sergio, Sophia, and probably Henry, as another boy about Sophia's age was in many of the pictures. At the park. At birthday parties. One of Sophia in her First Holy Communion dress with Sergio and Henry in ill-fitting suits standing on either side of her. I took a picture of that, and one of what I felt was the most recent photo of the three, since Sergio looked so much like his mugshot. Not smiling, his arms protectively around his brother and sister. The photo had been taken at The Taco House. By whom? And why print it? Most young people just kept pictures on their phones.

I looked on the back, being nosy and curious.

Sergio, Henry and Me, Christmas Eve

That was a month ago.

I didn't find anything incriminating, but had there been, the police would have taken it and I would have seen it on the receipt. Sergio was a neat young man with an apartment furnished with his family in mind.

He wanted his family together, yet hadn't been able to make it happen.

Sergio had evidently used the dining table as his work station. A printer with hanging cords that had likely once plugged into his laptop was pushed up against the wall. Next to it was a neat stack of files. I went through them, feeling a tad guilty at invading his privacy. Every folder related to his efforts to gain custody of his siblings. One of the folders had a name of a case worker—I took a photo—and another had the addresses of the foster homes where Sophia and Henry were. I took another photo of that.

Did his brother and sister know he had confessed to murder? Had he told them before he went to the police station? Had they gone to visit since his arrest on Friday? Would they even be allowed to?

I left everything exactly as I'd found it, then drove by The Taco House on Dunlap and inquired about Faith Jones. She worked three to closing.

I didn't leave a message, and headed to Andy's office with a lot to think about.

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Sophia walked away from her friends at the lunch table, giving a vague excuse that she was going to the bathroom.

“I’ll come with you,” Gracie said, but Sophia waved her down.

“I have cramps,” she lied. What she had was a pain in her heart so deep that she didn’t know if it would ever go away. Her stomach was in knots and she wished she had pretended she was sick so she could stay home. But she’d stayed home yesterday by forcing herself to throw up her breakfast; if she did it again, Mrs. Edgar would take her to the doctor.

When her friends started talking about boys, that’s when she had to get away. She walked straight to the bathroom, in case Gracie was watching, but then she slipped down the hall and leaned against the cinderblock wall.

She was trapped. There was no way out.

On Sunday she’d gone to church with Mrs. Edgar. It wasn’t the same church Sophia had attended growing up, but she liked the priest a lot. He was young and he seemed happy, as if being a priest was what he’d wanted his entire life.

She hadn’t paid much attention until the Gospel, which was about the lost sheep. How the shepherd left his entire flock behind to search for the one lost sheep. She used to love the parable when she was little, but now it had a completely different meaning. She’d never felt lost before. Now she was that sheep. And she didn’t think anyone would care if she just wandered away forever.

God might care, but her problems seemed so small compared to everything else going on in the world. Her life seemed small.

She felt small. And scared.

It wasn't school she was afraid of; it was walking home after school.

"Sophia, I've been looking all over for you!"

She jumped, opened her eyes, her lips trembling. "Oh. Henry. Sorry."

She loved her brother, but he scared her now. He had changed.

You should never have moved out. You should have stayed with him, guided him.

She had been selfish, she realized. Sophia asked to change foster homes because she was scared, but she couldn't say that. She didn't want to leave Henry, but Sergio tried to get them moved closer to him, and it didn't happen. He tried to become their guardian, but it didn't happen. So she said that she was uncomfortable being the only girl in a home of boys, that she really wanted an all-girls house. All the stars aligned—or maybe God was watching out for her—and an opening came up at Mrs. Edgar's house. It was only a few blocks from where she'd lived with Henry, but it was completely different.

Mrs. Edgar was a sixty-year-old widow. She'd raised four daughters, who all now had families of their own, and opened her home to four girls who needed semipermanent housing. She'd been doing it for seven years, and she was very kind. She didn't tolerate drugs, violence, bad language, or "attitude." Punishment was usually an extra chore, but the girls who lived there rarely violated the rules. Because three strikes in a month and Mrs. Edgar would ask for a "reassignment."

No one wanted to leave. For all of them, this was the best foster care home they ever had. In fact, it was better than most of their family homes.

“Why are you acting so weird?” Henry asked.

How could he even ask her that?

“You know why!”

“Look, I’m sorry...”

“No, you aren’t.” Don’t cry, don’t cry, don’t cry.

“Sissy,” he said, using his pet name for her, “what’s going on?”

“I don’t like Javier and I don’t want to be anywhere near him. I told you that.”

“That’s not fair. Is that why you didn’t come over yesterday?”

She narrowed her eyes. “You can come visit me,” she said, “but not him. You should stay away from him.”

“He’s my brother.”

“He is not your brother. Your real brother is in trouble and he needs us. Javier is not a good person. You know it.”

“You are such a Goody Two-shoes sometimes.”

She was near tears and she didn’t want to cry. “Don’t let him walk me home today. Please. I don’t like the way he looks at me. I don’t trust him. Please, Henry.”

“I’ll tell him to be on his best behavior. He doesn’t mean anything by the teasing.”

Why didn’t her brother see how Javier looked at her? How he made crude gestures? Henry looked up to him because Javier was older. But he was bad, and Sergio told Henry the same thing. They had argued about it, but Sergio expected Henry to follow his rules.

“We are family, and we’ll be together soon. I promise.”

“You’ve been promising for a year!” Henry snapped.

“I’ve done everything they want. The next home visit is scheduled. Soon.”

“I don’t believe you. It’ll never happen.”

The foster home Henry lived in was run by Brenda Oliver, Javier’s mother. She was a single mom who didn’t care what the boys did, as long as they didn’t bring trouble to the house. She didn’t care when Javier used to come into Sophia’s room and touch her hair. Sophia pretended to be sleeping, but she soon rarely slept. When he started touching her skin, she told him to stop, and he left her alone. But he watched her. Always watched her.

She had never told anyone because she was ashamed, certain she had said or done something to encourage his behavior.

Sergio had asked her what was going on when she moved to Mrs. Edgar’s house. She didn’t tell him, even though he pushed. He might have suspected. But Sophia didn’t want her brother to get in trouble, and if he knew the truth, he might have hurt Javier.

“Henry,” she said, trying to regain her courage. “Javier is dangerous. I’m worried about you. I know you’ve done things—things you shouldn’t.”

He scowled at her. “You don’t know anything. You left me, remember?”

It was an old conversation, a tired conversation.

“What happened when I left you and Sergio on Wednesday?”

“Same lecture our big brother always gives me.” Henry rolled his eyes, but he didn’t look at her.

“Why was Sergio arrested? Mrs. Edgar said he confessed to a murder. I don’t believe it.”

“Stay out of it, Sophia,” Henry snapped. He turned to her and she saw fear in his eyes.

Sophia pushed through her own fear and asked, “What have you done?”

“Nothing.”

But there was something he wasn’t telling her, and Sophia worried that Sergio was in jail because of Henry.

Because of Javier.

But why?

“It was you,” she whispered. “You and Javier did something worse than stealing, didn’t you? Is that why Sergio is in trouble? He tried to stop you?”

“You have no idea what the fuck you’re talking about,” Henry said.

“Don’t swear at me.”

“You fucking goody-goody living in that pretty house. You think that old bitch loves you? She loves the check, just like Brenda. She doesn’t give a shit about you.”

Tears streamed down her face. “Stop. Please.”

“Stop, please,” he mimicked.

“Is... Sergio...protecting you from getting into a bad group?”

Henry sneered. “No, he’s in jail to protect you.”

She blinked. That made no sense.

Henry threw up his hands. “There’s no talking to you! You think you’re so special. Remember, you left me. You walked out.”

Henry waved at a group of his friends, then turned to her. She didn’t like how mad he looked, and she didn’t know how to fix what was wrong.

He reached into his pocket, pulled out a small box, and shoved it into her hand. “It’s from Javier. He was going to give it to you yesterday, but you bailed on us.” Then he walked away without another word.

She stared after him, until he disappeared down the hall. The first after-lunch bell rang and she jumped.

Henry had been moody for months. Sometimes, it was like old times, but mostly she and Sergio walked on eggshells around him.

And now...this Henry was no one she recognized.

She looked down at the box in her hand. She wanted to throw it away, unopened. Instead, she pulled at the uneven bow and the top came off.

It was a green pendant. It looked like an emerald, but it couldn't be real. If it was real, it was worth a fortune.

On the inside of the box Javier had written: Sophia, A token of my affection. Love, Javi.

Sophia began to shake. She wanted to throw it away, but she didn't. She put the lid on and pushed the small box deep into the pocket of her jeans. Her face was flushed and she felt both hot and cold.

This wasn't the first present Javier had given to her. No matter what she told him, he didn't stop. She wanted nothing from him, but he didn't listen. And now, Henry was involved. How could her brother do this to her? He knew how she felt.

She didn't know what to do.

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Inibbled on potato chips as I watched the security video in Andy's office. He was right. There was nothing on the tape that condemned Sergio or helped him. The shooter could be any average-looking male in his mid to late teens.

I watched the video for a third time and then said, "Two things. First, the killer came in with the purpose of killing the clerk."

"You're saying it's premeditated."

"Yep."

Andy obviously didn't agree with me, so I started the recording yet again.

"Look at the way he enters. The two younger accomplices enter first, no masks, heads down, ball caps so we can't see their faces. They know there's security. They put on the masks after they enter, when they're out of view of the camera—see how they go to the back of the store?"

Andy nodded slowly. "Okay, that makes sense. Why do you say they're younger?"

"The way they move. They don't seem mature to me. Teens, definitely. Maybe young teens." I fast-forwarded then played it at normal speed. "See how the shooter comes in? No hesitation. He swaggers in, hyperalert. Possibly hyped on something. A little jittery, but not nervous. He walks in, up and down the aisles; the clerk is wary—customer is wearing a face mask, a hoodie, acts suspicious. It's not clear that he's with the other two kids—see?"

“I see your point, but does that matter? They left together, coordinated the theft.”

I shrugged. I didn’t know, I was just trying to get a sense of what these three were up to. “Look at the whole picture. I think the first two knew they were going to rob the place—that’s why they put on their masks later so they won’t be caught on camera when they grab the cigarettes and alcohol. Your shooter? He comes in with purpose. He wants to intimidate the clerk.”

Andy nodded. “Okay. I see that.”

“And then watch.” I replayed the end, where the three are walking away and the clerk is yelling at them. The shooter turns, fires. “This isn’t the first time your killer shot someone, Andy. It might not even be the first time he killed a man.”

I watched the two police interviews with Sergio next. They had sound and were in color. Sergio behaved exactly as Andy said. In the first interview Sergio was concerned, but forthcoming, polite, worried about the crime.

At one point, Sergio said, “This isn’t the first time. Since Christmas, there’s been half a dozen robberies in the area. Do you have any idea what’s going on? All the businesses are worried. Especially those of us who work at night.”

It seemed like a genuine question about a situation Sergio was aware of because of his job. If the police had leads or suspects, they didn’t tell Sergio.

The second interview was, as Andy had said, markedly different. Sergio was pale, head down, had his hands clasped and appeared defeated, worried, scared. He hadn’t asked for a lawyer, even though Detective Barrios had arrested him. She laid out to him the details about the robbery, showed him the video of the unidentified shooter wearing the sweatshirt Sergio had worn the day before. She showed Sergio the forensic report where his sweatshirt tested positive for GSR.

“Is this you, Sergio?” she asked, pointing to the shooter on the grainy tape.

Sergio looked from the video to the GSR report, then he nodded.

“I need you to speak.”

“Yes.”

“You robbed the Cactus Stop and shot and killed Mr. Rodriguez?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Sergio, why did you kill Greg Rodriguez?” Barrios repeated.

He shrugged. “He said something that made me mad and I snapped. I shot him for no reason and I feel awful about it. I didn’t mean to. I really didn’t mean to—it just happened.”

“Where is the gun?”

“I tossed it in the canal.”

Tina asked more questions, Sergio avoided direct answers. He refused to identify the other two perpetrators, then said, “I think I need to talk to a lawyer now.”

Andy got me on the visitor list for Sergio Diaz at three that afternoon. After moving through an electric door where a guard was posted on the other side of a glass wall, I

entered a visiting room that felt more like a high school cafeteria without food. I sat at the far end of a long row of identical tables with chairs bolted to the floor. Less than half of the forty tables were occupied by prisoners meeting with friends or family. Maybe some were lawyers; I didn't know if those meetings would be in private. Each corner housed a camera, and multiple signs proclaimed that all visitors were photographed and video recorded.

Sergio came in through a guarded door on the opposite side of the hall. Two other corrections officers were stationed at points around the room, watching. He wasn't cuffed; there were different security levels at the MCSO Durango Jail. Sergio, though a confessed killer, was still awaiting sentencing and had no prior convictions or arrests as an adult. According to Andy, he had been a model prisoner for the four days he'd been in the jail.

Sergio looked at me with a combination of confusion and suspicion. He was a slim young man with short dark hair and no visible tats. I knew from his sheet that he had one tattoo on his upper right shoulder with the name Maria in script and a small dove. Possibly an in memoriam tat or a reference to a girl he loved. Tats were all too common. My parents disapproved, so none of us had gotten any—until I enlisted in the Army and decided to get angel wings on my left breast. Yes, a little too on the nose—Angelhart—but they were beautiful and intricate, drawn in fine black ink and only an inch and a half wide. Classy, I thought.

I also thought no one would ever find out. I don't show my breasts to just anyone.

However, my bikini didn't quite cover the tat. A year after I'd gotten the ink, I was on leave for a month at home and swimming in the backyard. I climbed out to my mother standing there on the edge of the pool in her classy black one-piece swimsuit, mouth in a thin, disapproving line.

She said something to the effect of when I had kids the wings would turn into a black

blob. My dad was disappointed. Then later, in private, he said, “While I would prefer you didn’t mar your beautiful skin with ink, I’m glad you chose the wings. Nothing is more important than family, and I’m proud of you and the woman you’ve grown into.”

Then he smiled and said, “If you get another tattoo, put it on your ass so your mother never sees it.”

My dad was the best.

I watched as Sergio crossed the room and sat across from me. He was clean-cut, no scars, no attitude, just wary with a hint of confusion in his expression.

“Hi, Sergio. I’m Margo Angelhart, a private investigator.”

He shrugged. “Okay.”

I’d thought of a lot of ways I could handle this conversation, but didn’t know which would be the most productive. I didn’t think putting on my stern military police persona would work, nor did I think playing the softie would get me anywhere. Besides, I didn’t do “softie” well. Even before the Army, I was a bit of a hard-ass.

I wanted to rattle Sergio but wasn’t quite sure what would work best. I sensed his family was important—maybe the most important thing in his life—but didn’t want to push too hard for fear he’d clam up.

“I talked to Antonio Perez. He’s friends with my family.” Mostly the truth. “He’s upset and confused by your confession. Said he would never have believed that you would rob and kill anyone and surprised you confessed to such a violent crime.”

“I did it,” he said, slightly defiant. “Did you see the video? That’s my hoodie. I did

it.”

“He had nothing but good things to say about you and your ethics. How responsible you are. He entrusted you with his business.”

Sergio frowned, looked at his hands. “What do you want? I said I was sorry. I didn’t mean to do it, and I’m willing to take my punishment.”

“Maybe if you explain to me why, I can explain it to him.”

Sergio shrugged. “I made a mistake. It just happened. I snapped.”

All three sounded like weak excuses.

“I watched the security video from the store. The shooter doesn’t look like you.”

He snorted. “They played the video for me. I told you I did it. Why would I say I killed a man if I didn’t?”

Why indeed.

“Did you tell Sophia and Henry you killed a man? Do they even know you’ve been arrested?”

Anger flashed across his face and he glared at me, his muscles tense and ready to pounce. “Do not talk about my family,” he said through gritted teeth, his fists clenched as he leaned forward.

I didn’t react. “Relax, Sergio. I don’t want you to get in trouble with the guards. You’ve been a model prisoner, and that will help you if you keep up this lie.”

“What lie? I’m not lying.” He sounded defensive.

“You care about your family. You’ve been working to get custody of your brother and sister. I don’t think that someone who has been fighting so hard to be guardian of two teenagers would kill a man for a hundred bucks and cigarettes.”

He stayed silent.

“I watched your police interviews. You said you didn’t kick over a display the week before the murder. I believe you. So why did the clerk lie and say you did something you didn’t? And that wasn’t the employee who was killed. I think a lot more is going on than you told the police.”

“I lied,” Sergio said. “I did it. I kicked the display.”

“What was in the display?”

His brows furrowed. “What?”

“What display did you kick over because you were two dollars short?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I was just mad. Why do you even care? Tell Mr. Perez I’m sorry, I didn’t want any of this to come back on him. Okay? Is that it?”

“Who’s Maria?”

He seemed surprised that I asked.

“You have a tattoo with the name Maria. I’m curious.”

He looked at me like I was weird for asking. Maybe I was, asking about Maria out of

the blue.

“My aunt, not that it’s any of your business.”

No one got a tattoo for someone they didn’t care about.

“Why’d you confess, Sergio?”

He stared at me, more tired and defeated than when he first entered the room.

“If you’re guilty,” I continued, “you should be in prison. But if you’re innocent? The person who killed Greg Rodriguez will kill again. I know it. I watched him pull the trigger. He did not hesitate. My guess? This wasn’t his first rodeo. It won’t be his last. If you’re pleading guilty out of some sense of loyalty to someone, you are guilty of helping him get away with it.” I leaned forward, waited until he looked me in the eye. “If you know who killed Rodriguez, tell me. I can help you.”

He looked me straight in the eye and for a second, I thought he was going to admit he lied. That he was there but innocent. That he knew who’d done it—a friend, a neighbor, someone he wanted to protect. Or someone who scared him.

Then he said, “I killed him. Don’t come here again.”

He got up and walked over to the guard, who checked his wrist band, then unlocked the door, and Sergio exited without looking back.

I left the jail ninety-percent positive that Sergio Diaz was innocent of the crime he’d confessed to.

But why did he confess? Who was he protecting? Was he guilty of other crimes?

Who could have been wearing his hoodie? Because gun residue was pretty conclusive that a recently fired gun had been in his pocket.

I had my work cut out for me, and I wasn't sure I was up to the task.

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Idrove to the convenience store that had been robbed. Greg Rodriguez had been killed less than two weeks ago, and it was back to business as usual.

The Cactus Stop had a couple dozen locations throughout Sunnyslope and central Phoenix, and a few scattered downtown and in Glendale. They were known for being clean and kicking out loiterers, plus they gave teenagers opportunities for first jobs. There was one down the hill from my house and I often stopped there instead of the grocery store if I needed one or two things. I paid more, but they called them “convenience” stores for a reason.

I’d never been in this location, and it was older than others in the chain that I’d seen. Hand-painted ads filled the barred windows and door, announcing which beer was on sale for what price and which tobacco products could be found inside. Beer and tobacco was the bread and butter of the business, but they also sold bread and butter.

Andy’s file on the victim had been thin: Greg Rodriguez was twenty-three, had worked at the Cactus Stop for six months, and lived alone in a dive apartment walking distance from his work, putting him in the same geographic circle as Sergio. There was no known connection between Greg and Sergio, but after the confession, I wondered if the police had even looked for one. They should have run Greg’s record. Had he ever been in prison? Arrested? Any gang associations?

It was well after three, area schools were out, and I saw a half dozen teens going in and out, mostly singles and in pairs. A couple sketchy twentysomethings who looked like they were coming off a high, a mom with a stroller who came out with a paper bag of groceries in the pocket under the stroller seat. One Phoenix PD cruiser rolled by, heading east, on patrol, not riding hot. Even in the bad areas of Phoenix, violent

crime in the middle of the day wasn't common.

After fifteen minutes of observation, I went inside.

This Cactus Stop was definitely more run-down than the Stop by my house. Not as clean, crowded aisles, more alcohol, tobacco, and junk food and less bread, butter, and milk.

Any sign of the robbery and murder had been cleared. The cigarette cage had been replaced. The only other people in the store were two young teen boys in faded jeans and rock band T-shirts inspecting the large selection of chips.

The clerk had a name badge on his green Cactus Stop shirt.

D. Cruz.

Don Cruz was the clerk who had told police that Sergio had kicked a display and left angry after Cruz refused to extend him two dollars in credit.

I went over to the cold beer wall and noted most were cheap and American, with a small shelf for Dos Equis and Modelo. I'm a beer snob. I like dark microbrews best. My brother drinks Coors Light. I would prefer not drinking anything to light beer, but Jack has been helping me with renovations so I try to keep his preferred beer in the fridge. I grabbed a six-pack and headed to the counter.

Cruz looked me over, gave me a cocky grin. "I'm sure you're over twenty-one, but I gotta card ya."

I showed him my ID. He stared at it a little too long and I had the creepy feeling he was memorizing my address.

“I heard you had a murder here a couple weeks ago,” I said.

“Yeah, sure did. Some gangbanger came in and killed Greg.”

“Wow,” I said with fake shock. “For reals?”

Cruz nodded. “This asshole comes in a couple times a week, always a jerk, you know? So, I’m not surprised he went postal. But you don’t have to worry about nothing. We got new cameras and stuff.” He motioned to a lit panel behind the counter.

“How awful. Was he your friend?”

He shrugged. “Naw, not really. I barely knew him.”

“Did you know the guy who killed the other clerk?”

“I’d had a couple run-ins with him. He kicked over a display last time he came in, the week before he killed Greg.” He gestured toward the door. There wasn’t a display there now.

I nodded to the beer. “How much?” I asked because he still had my license.

“Oh, yeah, ten fifty-nine.”

I grabbed my license, paid cash, left.

I had some questions, and wondered if my brother would help me out. He couldn’t actually give me information, but maybe if I asked a bunch of hypotheticals, and if he could just look up some rap sheets for me—not give them to me—it would be a gray area. We had a dinner tonight at Mom and Dad’s, but I didn’t really want my parents

to know what I was doing.

Sometimes, I felt my family didn't approve of my decision to become a PI. It wasn't prestigious like law school for Tess, or public service like Jack, the cop. My dad was a doctor and Nico had loosely followed in his footsteps, becoming a forensic scientist through U of A and now working at the Phoenix Crime Lab. Lulu, the youngest of us five, was graduating from high school in June and had already been accepted to three of the five colleges she'd applied to. The other two would probably accept her as well—she had above a 4.0 GPA, took every honors class she could, and clocked more volunteer hours than the rest of us combined.

Maybe it was my own sense of limbo that had me thinking my family was also disappointed in me. Choosing not to re-enlist in the Army after six years was a surprisingly easy decision—everything since had been fraught with introspection and doubt, leading me to think my initial “easy” decision had been wrong.

Pushing all that aside, I texted Jack.

You going to be at the family dinner tonight?

He responded.

Yep. Lu has an announcement.

First I heard of that. I asked, Which college she picked?

Jack texted, That's my guess. Five bucks she picks U of A. Far enough to be independent, close enough to visit. And mom and dad's alma mater.

I laughed. I'll take that bet. She'll pick out of state to get away from all of us.

Lulu had been accepted to Baylor and Notre Dame, with scholarships. I had a feeling she wanted to spread her wings.

I didn't do as well in school as my siblings. It wasn't that I couldn't do the work, but I really didn't like sitting at a desk all day. It's the primary reason I didn't go to college. The thought of listening to people lecture at me for hours on end made me physically ill. Not that basic training was easy. There were nights I was so sore and exhausted that I wished I had opted for college or, honestly, anything but the Army. But when I graduated I felt like I had accomplished something worthwhile through my own grit and will.

And, for the first time in my life, the Angelhart name didn't mean anything. I was one of many, not expected to do better or worse than my fellow soldiers.

I suppose I could have gone to college now on the GI Bill. ASU had a great program for veterans. But the idea of being twenty-five in college didn't appeal to me any more than listening to lectures. And what would I study?

I knew what I wanted to do—at least, I thought I had when I first got my PI license.

Now I wasn't sure. I didn't know if anything I was doing would prove Sergio didn't kill Greg Rodriguez. Or if I even fully believed he was innocent. Sergio was doing everything in his power to spend the rest of his life behind bars. If he didn't care, why should I?

Except...if he was innocent, that meant a killer walked free. Because Sergio had pled guilty, the police wouldn't be looking for anyone else. That really rubbed me the wrong way. Like fingernails on a chalkboard, the idea that a killer might get away with murder grated.

Besides, I'd promised Andy I would find out one way or the other, and the one thing I

couldn't do was let down a friend.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:32 am

Faith Jones had worked with Sergio at the 19th Ave Taco House until Antonio promoted her to assistant manager of Dunlap. She, more than Antonio, might know Sergio's secrets.

I walked up to the window, ordered a churro, paid, and put a dollar in the tip jar. "Is Faith here?"

"Faith!" the young man called behind him. "There's a woman here to see you!"

The way he said it made me feel old. I was only twenty-five.

A moment later a girl of about nineteen or twenty came up to the window. She said, "Can I help you?"

It was only four, so not too busy. Customers were mostly high school kids hanging out after school.

"Do you have a few minutes to talk in private?" I asked. "It's about Sergio."

A cloud crossed her face, then she glared at me.

"Are you a reporter?" she snapped. "A cop?"

"Margo Angelhart, private investigator," I said. "I'm trying to help Sergio."

Faith's expression said she didn't believe me.

“Who hired you?” she demanded.

“That’s confidential,” I said.

“I don’t have to talk to you.”

“No, but if I tell you that I think Sergio is innocent and covering for someone, would you be willing to chat?”

“You lying?”

“Faith, I’m trying to help Sergio and from what Antonio says, you’re his closest friend. Judging by your animosity, you don’t think he’s guilty. I’m his best chance at proving that.”

She narrowed her eyes, then said in rapid Spanish to her co-worker, “I need to talk to this gringa, five minutes.”

Gringa? Me? I was as Mexican as Faith.

I sat at the only unoccupied table, the one closest to the street, and waited. Faith’s attitude wasn’t worth getting into an argument about, and I needed her help.

I ignored the questions I’d already answered and asked, “Did you know Sergio before you started working at The Taco House?”

She shook her head. “Nope. He had just been promoted to assistant manager when I started working there about eighteen months ago, at the 19th Ave location.”

“And you became friends.”

“Just friends,” she snapped, as if I’d implied something more. I didn’t think I had.

“Okay. Have you met his brother and sister?”

She narrowed her eyes. “Why?”

“If you’re going to be confrontational throughout this conversation, we’re not going to get anywhere in five minutes.”

“They’re good kids, they don’t deserve to be dragged into this.”

“Then maybe their brother shouldn’t have confessed to murder.”

She opened her mouth, shut it.

“Look,” I said, “I just want to find the truth. There is little physical evidence against Sergio. The only thing that connects him to the crime is a white hoodie with a black front pocket. He was wearing it when the police went to interview him the second time, and it tested positive for GSR. The hoodie appears to be the same as the shooter’s in the video. So it seems like a slam dunk case, especially since he confessed. Either he’s guilty and his conscience got the better of him, or he’s innocent and pled to protect someone he cares about. From those I’ve talked to—” which implied more people than I’d actually spoken with “—he cares most about his family, Sophia and Henry. Why would Sergio, who has been fighting to gain custody of his siblings, kill a man for a hundred bucks?”

“I don’t know,” Faith said quietly.

“Do you believe Sergio killed the clerk?”

She shook her head, said, “I tried to see him in jail on Sunday. Jumped through every

hoop, got a visitor's pass, waited. And he wouldn't even come to the visiting area. Wouldn't even talk to me. Sergio is stupid proud. He doesn't take help from anyone. Except, I was helping him with the paperwork."

"For?"

"For custody of Sophia and Henry. Sergio did okay in school, but he's dyslexic, and the legal paperwork can be complicated. He had an attorney helping, but honestly, she was an idiot. I was the one who found out that Sergio could apply for Kinship Caregiver—because he's actual family. Why didn't the attorney know that? It's a streamlined process. So we did it ourselves, and there is still so much paperwork and rules. The big one was Sergio needed a two-bedroom apartment for Sophia. I get it, but honestly? I know families who live in crappier buildings with multiple siblings in one room and no one gives a shit. They would be better with Sergio than in foster care and all the crap they have to deal with there. Especially Henry, who is living in a crap house with crap foster parents."

I agreed with Faith in principle. Sometimes it was safer for kids to be removed from their homes, and sometimes they had no option—their parents were in prison or dead and they had no one else. But the system was flawed and overwhelmed and so many kids slipped through or barely hung on. The system should make it easier—and cheaper—for a family member to gain custody of kids so they didn't have to live in foster care. If they had a job, a roof, and no criminal record, what was the holdup?

"Where was Sergio in the process?" I asked.

"Waiting for the home visit. The same woman who rejected his apartment last year. She canceled on him before Christmas, and he was really upset—he wanted them together for Christmas. She rescheduled then canceled again on Thursday. It's the last hurdle and he was more defeated than angry. He'd promised Henry and Sophia that it was happening and now, more waiting. She rescheduled for end of February! And

now this? I don't know that he'll ever get them."

Not by confessing to murder.

And that was the thing—why Greg Rodriguez? Why that Cactus Stop? And if Sergio was one of the three young men caught on tape, who were the other two?

"I asked him about his tattoo," I said. "He said Maria is his aunt. Do you know her?"

"Never met her, but Aunt Maria was his grandmother's sister. She raised his mom, then died a couple years before his mom went to prison. He was fourteen, I think. It nearly broke him. Maria had been trying to gain guardianship of them after their mom lost their house because of her drug habit."

That explained the tattoo. I had wished Maria was still alive to give me someone to talk to, someone Sergio might listen to.

Faith said, "I don't know how I can help, but I'll give you my number. I want to help, even if Sergio is too fucking stubborn to accept it."

I put her phone number in my contacts.

"Did he ever loan his hoodie to anyone?"

A flicker across her face, then it was gone.

"Faith, this is important."

"He got that hoodie for Christmas, from Sophia. He loved it. He'd never let just anyone borrow it."

She wasn't telling me something, but I didn't push.

When I learned more, I would.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:32 am

I walked into my parents' house off Central Avenue at six thirty Tuesday night. I loved the house I grew up in, on a short cul-de-sac with a wide lawn. Our house had always been filled with friends and family coming and going. Mom and Dad believed that if our friends were welcome here, we were less likely to get in trouble elsewhere. It worked, I supposed, because none of us had gotten into serious trouble.

Nico was getting out of his car as I pulled up. He waited for me and I gave him a hug. We were Irish twins, as they say—eleven months apart. He would be twenty-five in April, and I would be twenty-six in May. We'd been close growing up—honestly, I was close to all my siblings except maybe Luisa. Lulu was nearly eight years younger than me. Jack, Tess, Nico, and I had all been born in a five-year span.

“How's the crime lab?” I said as we walked into the house. “Solve any cool cases?”

“It's good. Not quite as glamorous as being a CSI on television, but I did match up prints on a serial burglar in Paradise Valley.”

“Catch him?”

“Not in the system,” Nico said. “But we connected seventeen crime scenes through his prints.”

“And that's why the prisons are full,” our mother said as she walked into the living room and gave us both hugs.

“Because criminals are stupid,” Nico and I said in unison.

“No gloves is quite irresponsible for a thief,” she said. “But he also knows he has no record so no reason for law enforcement to have his prints.”

“Exactly,” Nico said. “Nothing popped in the major offenders database or federal. But if the police find a suspect, we’ll match.”

My dad got up from his desk—there was a den off the entry, which had been his office as long as I could remember.

“Nico! Margo!” he said with a smile, his blue eyes sparkling as he hugged us. To me he asked, “How’s the house coming along?”

I groaned. “A mess. Now that all the walls are out, I can see the great room concept is going to be fantastic, but I have tile in the kitchen, a different tile in the dining room, and the disgusting brown carpet in the living room, all of which can now be seen from yet the third type of tile in the entry. I need to rip everything out so I can hire someone to smooth the foundation and then Jack and I can lay the hardwood planks.”

“You know, your mom and I would be happy to lend you—”

“Nope. I told you when I bought the place last year that I wanted to do this myself. I’m doing fine, I have a firm budget, so if I have to live in an incomplete house for a couple of months, I’m okay.”

Or, I thought, a couple of years.

I considered what Faith said about Sergio not asking for help because of his pride. If I was in real dire straits—like I couldn’t pay my mortgage or had an emergency that my savings didn’t cover—I would go to my parents and knew they would help as much as they could. Sergio let Faith help him with the paperwork in his custody battle, so why wouldn’t he go to her or Antonio for help before pleading guilty to a

capital crime of which he might be innocent?

We went into the kitchen where my mom checked on the casserole. My mom was an okay cook, it just wasn't her favorite thing to do. Her mom, my abuela? Amazing in the kitchen, but that's not surprising since she ran a taco stand outside the courthouse for years, which turned into a food truck, which turned into more food trucks, then into a business my Uncle Tom now ran—along with his own family restaurant. Aunt Rita often made huge pots of stew or soup that she shared with our clan. My Aunt Rita was one of those people who cooked to alleviate stress, and everything was delicious.

“Cooper,” Mom said as she moved to the stove where she was warming tortillas, “get Margo a beer.”

“I'm good,” I said.

“I found that winter porter you like,” Mom said.

“I thought they were all sold-out.”

“I know people,” Mom said with a smile.

“Just one,” I said. “Save the rest for Sunday dinner.”

Dad poured the microbrew specialty beer into a chilled mug and handed it to me.

I nibbled on chips and salsa and Lulu—only family called my little sister Lulu—came in. “I got these,” she said to Mom and took over cooking the tortillas. Nico and I exchanged a relieved glance. Mom regularly burned tortillas.

“Mom, what do you know about the foster care system?” I asked. “Specifically,

Kinship Care, where a relative can take a kid into their home, like if the parent is in prison?”

“That’s a heavy question,” she said.

“Just something I’m working on.”

“Kinship Caregiving was instituted to help streamline the process for relatives to take in children—such as a grandchild when the parent can no longer take care of their needs for whatever reason. But layers of rules and regulations have made it nearly as cumbersome as the foster care system. Still, it’s better than having these children in a stranger’s home. As long as the environment is safe and the child is well cared for, I think the government should get out of the way.”

“Do you and Aunt Rita handle cases like that?”

“I haven’t, personally, but Rita has some experience, especially if there’s a custody issue. Most of the time you don’t need a lawyer. The process is straightforward—just extensive. You have someone who needs guidance?”

“Maybe.” I hesitated, then gave a version of the truth. “An acquaintance has been trying to gain guardianship of his minor siblings.” I gave her a brief rundown and explained how the social worker canceled two home visits. “I want to understand the process and how I might be able to help him.”

“I’ll ask Rita tomorrow, see if she knows of an advocate. This isn’t my area of expertise.”

“Thanks,” I said, grateful when Jack walked into the house so I could avoid any more probing questions. Jack had brought my nephew, Austin, who was also the love of my life. Austin was three and a half.

“Grandma!” Austin ran full speed and hugged Mom around her knees. “Auntie Margo! Uncle Nico! Wanna see my lizard?”

He reached into his pockets and a bunch of rocks and toys fell out and bounced on the wood floor. He didn’t notice and held up a rubber lizard by the tail. “Mommy hates lizards, but I think they’re cool. I want a real lizard. In a t-t-ter’im.”

“Terrarium,” Jack pronounced clearly.

“Yeah, a glass cage,” Austin said, holding his arms out as far as they could go to show a big enclosure.

Nico got down on the floor and motioned to Austin. “Help me pick up these cool rocks so no one steps on them.”

Austin dropped to help gather the rocks, telling Nico where he found each one.

Jack walked over to the refrigerator and grabbed a beer. “Where’s Whitney?” Mom asked.

“It’s her bunco night.”

I didn’t say anything, but exchanged a brief glance with my mom. She knew I didn’t like Whitney. It was so damn typical that she would bail on family dinner. Even Sundays, which were almost mandatory, Whitney showed up maybe half the time. It bothered Jack, but he never talked to me about it because he knew I didn’t like his wife.

I wish I did, because I loved my brother and I loved my nephew. I wanted someone who was perfect for him.

Whitney wasn't that person.

But I kept my mouth closed. Mostly. Jack would do everything to make his marriage work because that was the man he was. I just wish I could say the same about Whitney.

Tess walked in from the garage with a stack of books, plopped them on the table. "Sorry, traffic was a mess."

She squatted and accepted Austin leaping into her arms for a hug.

Tess was in her last year of law school at ASU and lived with Mom and Dad to save money. Like Mom, she first graduated from the University of Arizona with a dual degree in criminal justice and history. She had recently gone through a bad breakup—she'd been engaged to a guy we all kind of liked (okay, I didn't, but I also tend to be more judgmental than the rest of my family) after dating him for two years. Then, as they started talking about a wedding date and sat down with our priest, he broke it off and said he didn't think she was "the one" for him.

It tore her apart. Tess was eighteen months older than me and out of all of us, she's the one who most wanted a traditional family. Husband, lots of kids, house in the same neighborhood she grew up in. She had recently started to date again, but was being super cautious so we hadn't met anyone yet.

"Cooper, honey, can you get the casserole from the oven? Margo, the salad in the fridge...oh, darn, I need to heat up the beans."

"I got it, Mom," Jack said and retrieved them from the fridge to pop in the microwave.

Five minutes later, we were sitting around the table. Sundays were our regular family

dinner, though half the time we went to my grandparents' or Aunt Rita's. But it wasn't uncommon to get a text from Mom a couple times a month with an open-ended, "Dad and I would love to see you! I'll have plenty for dinner." Like we all got this morning.

Now, we were waiting for Lulu's announcement. After dinner, I hoped to have time to pick Jack's brain about the Cactus Stop shooting, but he wouldn't stay late since it was a thirty-minute drive to his house in Litchfield Park.

We chatted and ate and Lu was surprisingly quiet. Something was up with her. Tess and I exchanged looks. A boy? Could be. Lu was studious, but she'd been dating Steven Prince since she was allowed to date at sixteen (and probably earlier than that). Mom and Dad liked him, knew his family well. He had accepted an athletic scholarship to Baylor, so I wouldn't be surprised if Lu announced she was going there. It was a good school.

Mom said, "Okay, Luisa, you've been quiet all night, and you're the one who called this family dinner." She folded her napkin and placed it next to her empty plate. "You have our undivided attention."

All of us, even fidgeting, chatty Austin, turned to Lu. My sister was gorgeous in every sense of the word. Dark wavy hair that she often straightened into a shiny waterfall, huge round brown eyes, pale brown skin that never hosted a pimple. She was athletic and strong and disciplined, and we all suspected she was our parents' secret favorite. But somehow, none of us were bothered by that.

I loved Lu but had always felt a bit disconnected from her. She was eleven when I left for Fort Hood, which included an eighteen-month deployment at Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar in the middle of my six-year enlistment. She grew from a bratty, sensitive, smart (and smart-ass) younger sister into an intelligent teenager with her own interests and life, much of which I knew little about.

Lu put her hands in her lap and I sensed she was nervous. Why?

What if she's pregnant?

I don't know why that was the first thought to pop into my head, but she was definitely not acting herself.

"I enlisted in the Marines today," Lu said.

Silence around the table. I glanced at everyone, and realized that not only did no one expect such a declaration, but no one knew it was even a possibility. I hadn't even considered it...

Then I remembered a conversation I had with Lu a few months ago. We'd been cleaning up after family dinner, just she and I, and she asked questions about my time in the Army. What I liked the most, what I disliked. I gave her some flip answers, but when she pressed, I had said, "I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life after high school. I didn't want to sit in a classroom for four more years. I really didn't know who I was. I know that sounds weird—I've never lacked for confidence or friends or things to do. But I didn't want to go through the motions anymore. I thought separating from the family and being completely on my own—but with the structure and training the military provided—would help me...well, I guess, be the best me." I laughed, because that sounded silly.

"Did it help?" she'd asked, not laughing.

"Yes," I said honestly. "I needed to find out who I was without the Angelhart name. Don't get me wrong, I love Mom and Dad and everyone else. I love our huge family and grandparents and hundreds of cousins. And honestly, I missed home a lot more than I thought I would. But going through basic training, meeting people from all over the country, all different backgrounds, and having a common goal? Yeah, it

made me a better person.”

Lu didn’t laugh at me, and I was relieved I hadn’t sounded foolish. “Why the Army?” she asked.

“That’s easy. Dad was in the Army, so I went Army.”

“And what did you dislike the most?”

“The food,” I said without hesitation, and we both laughed.

Thinking back on that conversation, I now knew that Lu had been considering enlisting for a long time.

“Why the Marines?” I asked when no one spoke for a good twenty seconds.

Lu glanced at me and looked grateful that I had broken the silence. “For my entire life everything has come easy to me. I’m not complaining, Mom, Dad, I’m really not. But I’ve always done well in school, in sports, anything I tried. I got the first job I applied for when I was fifteen. I was accepted into all five colleges I applied to, with scholarships. I should be happy with the choices I have, and I am, but I don’t want to go to college right now. The Marines isn’t easy. They have a rigorous basic training, and I want the challenge. I want to prove I can do it. That I can be better, stronger, smarter. Part of a team.”

“What about ROTC?” Mom said, her voice cracking. “Go to college and go through ROTC, you’d graduate as an officer, have more opportunities.”

“I considered it,” Lu said, “but I don’t know that I want to be career military. So I enlisted for three years.”

“You—without talking to us?” Mom said.

“I’m eighteen. I don’t need your permission.”

Though her tone wasn’t defiant, the words were. Jack and I exchanged a look, but didn’t say anything. I’d talked to Mom and Dad for months before making the decision to enlist, so they were prepared even if it wasn’t the path they envisioned for me. Like with Lu, they wanted me to go to college first. But the difference between me and Lu was that I was a B student. School wasn’t my thing, never had been. Lu loved school. She was a straight-A student. She was the type of kid who was supposed to go to college and thrive.

No one was standing up for Lu. They were surprised and hurt. I didn’t fault them—but I felt for my sister.

“Only you know what path you should take,” I said. “It won’t be easy, but nothing is better than graduating after basic training and knowing that you are among the best of the best.”

Lu smiled at me again, and I felt her gratitude. “Mom, Dad,” Lu said, “I prayed about this. I talked to Uncle Rafe. Don’t get mad at him,” she added quickly at Mom’s expression. “I asked him not to say anything.”

Uncle Rafe was my mom’s much younger brother and an ordained Catholic priest. He’d recently been transferred to St. Dominic’s, the small church close to my house.

“I would really like your support.” Lu sounded like she was on the verge of tears.

“We will always support you,” Dad said. “This threw us for a minute, but whatever you do with your life, you will shine. I have no doubt.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“Right, Ava?” Dad said pointedly to Mom.

“Yes. When?” Mom said, her voice clipped.

“After graduation.”

That was four months from now.

“What about Steven?” Tess asked.

“We’ve already talked about it a lot,” Lu said. “He supports my decision.”

Mom’s face fell even more, if that was possible. That Lu had talked to her boyfriend and not her family hurt. I felt for my mom, but I understood why Lu did it this way.

Nico said, “We’re all happy for you if you’re happy.”

“I am,” Lu said. “I feel deep down that this is the best decision for me. My ASVAB scores were high and I’m meeting with my recruiter next week to look at options for training. I qualify for pretty much anything I want to do.”

“Of course you did well,” Mom said, her chin up. “You do well in everything you set your mind to.”

And that was mom’s way of saying she supported Lu, even if she didn’t agree with her decision.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:32 am

Because of Luisa's announcement about enlisting in the Marines, I didn't get a chance to talk to Jack last night. We all sensed that Mom and Dad wanted us to leave, and Jack wanted to get Austin in bed by nine. So Wednesday I had my work cut out for me.

Jack wasn't the only cop I knew, but I trusted him to be discreet. I texted him and asked if he was at his office—most detectives in Phoenix worked out of the main headquarters on Washington, but were often in the field.

Fortunately, Jack wasn't downtown—he said he'd be at the Cactus Park precinct all morning conducting interviews on one of his cases. Cactus Park was a long, narrow corridor of Phoenix west of I-17 and where Jack had worked before making detective last summer.

When's a good time? I texted. I'll bring coffee.

I'll be done with interviews around 11, I want lunch, not coffee, especially since you clearly want a favor.

I neither confirmed nor denied the favor, but texted a thumbs-up.

I bought him a large Italian hero from Tony's Italian Deli, one of Jack's favorite places—which was also convenient to my house.

When I arrived at the precinct, I was escorted into the bullpen where Jack sat at a very tidy desk in the middle of the room typing on a computer from his notes.

“Tony’s?” he said with a smile. Then he glared at me. “You must really want something.”

“Naw, just your brains for ten minutes.”

I put the sandwich on his desk. He immediately put it in the drawer. “If anyone sees this, they’ll steal it.”

“At a police station? I’m shocked.”

“Give me one sec,” he said and turned back to his computer, typing as fast as I could—which was pretty fast.

Jack was born to be a cop, and no one was surprised that he made detective early in his career. He’d had his fair share of scrapes and punishments growing up for doing—as he said—”stupid shit,” but he’d always been the guy to go to if you needed help, whether it was moving or fixing your car or getting an ex-boyfriend to leave you alone. In high school, Jack was voted Most Likely to Rescue a Family from a Burning Building, and it fit him to a T.

“Okay!” he said and pushed his keyboard under the monitor. “I’m all yours.”

Now I was nervous. Jack could read me better than most anyone, and lying to him would be difficult, if not impossible.

“I’m looking for a quick, down and dirty explainer of gangs in Sunnyslope,” I said, trying to sound casual.

“You want a week-long class in ten minutes? Why?”

“Fair.” How did I get the information I wanted without giving up Andy? “Did you

hear about the shooting at the Cactus Stop off Camelback? Two Saturdays ago?"

"The one where the clerk was killed? Yeah. Not my case."

"Was there any talk that it was gang related?"

"Why do you want to know?"

Yes, Jack was suspicious about my motives.

"I have a client. I can't really tell you more than that, confidentiality and all, but it's someone who thinks that the guy who confessed might have been pressured to do so."

He narrowed his eyes. "Are you working for the defense? You'd do that to me, try to get me to talk about an arrest for a defense attorney?"

"No, I am not working for the defense." And I couldn't very well tell him I was working for the prosecutor. "I'm not looking to jam anyone up. Just that the shooter had some movements and mannerisms that seemed gang-like." That sounded so flimsy.

Jack leaned back. "You've seen the recording? How?"

Damn. I was going to have to work on being sneakier.

"I can't tell you," I said. "I'm not going to lie to you, okay? But I can't talk about my client."

"At least you have a client."

I frowned, suddenly hurt.

“Hey, that’s not how I meant it.” Jack leaned forward. “You got your license last year but haven’t talked about any case you’ve worked, so I didn’t think you were going to go through with the career change. But I’m glad you are. You’re going to make a great PI.”

“You haven’t seen me work.”

“Don’t have to. I’ve known you your entire life. I think I’m a pretty good judge. Okay, tell me everything you can, I understand about confidentiality. Just don’t burn a cop, or I won’t be talking to you again about any case.”

“Fair enough,” I said. “Yes, I had access to the video. There were several other robberies that fit the same MO as the Cactus Stop, except that no one died. Is there a gang operating in the area? Or just a group of kids acting out? Because the three that went into the Cactus Stop all looked like minors to me.”

“You don’t have to be eighteen to be trouble,” Jack said. “I’ve never worked the gang unit, but I know basics. Most of the Hispanic gangs are affiliated in one way or another with the Mexican Mafia. As you probably know, they consider themselves family. The men—most of the gang leaders are in their twenties—build rapport with young teens, sometimes younger kids. They act like big brothers or father figures. Give them money, phones, attention. Most of the kids who get recruited into gangs have no male role model in their life. Their dads are AWOL or in prison or dead. The gangs know exactly who to target and how to bring them in. These kids crave family. They want to feel like they belong, and then at some point, the gang requires a loyalty oath—an initiation.”

“Like murder.”

“That, or selling drugs, or—depending on the gang—trafficking girls. Most of the gang activity is in the 800.”

Jack was referring to the police precinct.

“Maryvale?”

“Yeah. And downtown to a certain extent. They are known mostly as Westside, Southside, like that, though some have adopted names.”

“What about the area around 19th and Camelback?”

“There are some smaller gangs in that area, but I don’t know the boundaries, and if a call comes in as expected gang activity, the gang unit responds.” Jack looked at me and said, “Margo, if you start asking questions about gang activity, you’re going to put a target on your back.”

“I won’t go that far.”

“See that you don’t.”

“What about robberies? If there’s a small group, maybe not in a gang, just some kids without supervision, making bad choices. Who handles things like that?”

“If it’s a repeat?”

“Yeah, like three kids who no one knows either because they wear masks or they’re not from the neighborhood, walking in and taking shit.”

“The violent crimes bureau has a robbery unit. They’d be called out to something like that.”

“One detective?”

“There’s several, but because of staff shortages, many detectives have been called back to patrol.”

“Who’s in charge?”

“These questions are becoming very specific, sis.”

“Humor me.”

“I feel like I’m going to regret this.” He shook his head. Jack worked in the Family Investigation Bureau, but he would know who was in charge in Violent Crimes. Finally, he said, “Detective Ambrose is who you want. He’s not in charge, but you wouldn’t want to talk to the brass, and they wouldn’t talk to you. Ambrose is a supervisor in the VCB, and he also works cases.”

“Can I drop your name?”

“It’s your name, too.”

Meaning no. That was okay, I didn’t want to get him into hot water for helping me.

Rick Devlin approached Jack’s desk. I knew Rick well—he and Jack had been in the academy together and had become best friends. Last year when Jack took the detective’s exam, Rick took the sergeant’s exam.

Rick looked like crap, but I didn’t say anything. “Hi, Margo,” he said.

“Hey,” I said.

Rick said to Jack, “One of my guys is coming in with a possible DV victim. Can you sit in, assess the case?”

“Sure.”

“Thanks. They’ll be here in five.”

He walked away and I said quietly, “Something happen with Rick?”

“Caroline isn’t coming back from France.”

“What about Samantha?” Rick had a little girl he was head over heels about. “She’s not taking her, is she?”

“No. She gave Rick full custody and she’s asking that Sam be allowed to spend one month every summer in France. It’s all very civil, but he’s devastated.” He glanced around to make sure no one else was listening, then said, “I knew this would happen. As soon as Caroline said she was going to France for six months with her company, I knew she wasn’t going to come back. She’s only seen Sam once since she left.”

“Poor Rick.”

“It really sucks,” Jack said, not looking at me. I followed his gaze—he was looking at a photo of him, Whitney, and Austin at the Phoenix Zoo during the Christmas Lights celebration last month. My heart sank. No matter how much I didn’t like his wife, I didn’t want anything bad to happen to his marriage. It would kill him.

He turned back to me. “I need to get back to work. But Margo, call me if you find yourself in a pickle, okay? I know you can take care of yourself, but some situations are harder to get out of than others.”

“I hear you,” I said. “I’ll call. Promise.”

“I’m holding you to that, sis.”

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I left a message for Detective Ambrose when my call went to voicemail.

Then I went to the library and spent the rest of the morning and well into the afternoon reading everything I could find on crime in the area of 19th and Camelback, plus articles and studies about gangs and gang activity in Phoenix. Maybe this wasn't a gang thing, and my impression of the shooter was wrong. In addition, according to Andy, Sergio had no known gang ties, so why he'd take the fall for a gangbanger made little sense.

So I switched gears and started looking into other robberies. Similar robberies to the Cactus Stop, then robberies in the general area, then I stumbled onto an article about the case Nico told me about—the seventeen linked burglaries. It was interesting—police thought it was two people, possibly three, who stole from homes in Paradise Valley, an upscale community east of highway 51. The culprits entered whether or not there was a security system. Police believed they cased the homes and knew response times—both private security and law enforcement—so even if an alarm was breached, they had a few minutes to grab things.

It was a pretty smart plan, I thought as I read. The burglars broke a window or door and took what they could carry in two backpacks. They always went to the master bedroom first, which was most likely to have easily pawned valuables. They stole jewelry, cash, and small electronics. If there was a security system, they were in and out in less than five minutes. They had never been seen by responding officers or private security. Police suspected they came into and left the neighborhood on foot, using trails and backyards to disappear. Paradise Valley PD and Phoenix PD had created a joint task force to investigate the crimes.

It was interesting, but a wholly different MO than the Cactus Stop thieves. However, I wondered about another set of robberies. There were eight total, including the Cactus Stop, between the day after Christmas and ten days ago—the day Rodriguez was killed.

A crime blog dedicated to central Phoenix—with a writer who, based on his or her posts, had an in with Phoenix PD—detailed each robbery. They all happened in the same one-mile radius, east of I-17 and west of 10th Avenue. I mapped them out. The Cactus Stop was within the boundaries of the crime spree.

In each robbery, three young men came in wearing hats and sometimes masks—whatever they needed to obscure their faces. They grabbed easy pickings and left. At convenience stores, they took junk food and sometimes beer. At a clothing store, they grabbed jackets and sunglasses. At one restaurant, they entered near closing and knocked condiments to the floor, broke dishes, and created a mess. They smashed a small display under the cash register and grabbed the contents—candy.

They acted like bored teenagers with nothing to do and no one paying attention to them.

That didn't sound anything like Sergio Diaz who worked more than fifty hours a week and was fighting for custody of his siblings.

On a whim, I mapped the foster homes that Sophia and Henry lived in—both houses were just inside the crime area. That didn't necessarily mean anything...yet I couldn't help but think that Sergio's confession had something to do with his family.

I couldn't see myself pleading guilty to a murder I didn't commit, but if I were to do such a thing, it would be for family.

I had an hour before school got out so I went up to Orozco's, my cousin's restaurant,

for a late lunch. I needed to think about my options. I wanted to talk to Henry and Sophia, but they were kids. How did I approach them? At school? At their homes? How much did they know about Sergio?

I almost called Gene, the old PI who had trained me. I didn't know what direction to go. I had all this information rattling around in my head, but didn't even know if these robberies had anything to do with the Cactus Stop. What if my instincts were wrong? Maybe I just wasn't ready for a confusing case like this with no straightforward path. Maybe I wasn't cut out to be a private investigator.

"Margo!" Millie Orozco came over to where I sat at the end of the counter contemplating my many flaws. "Homer said you were here. You should have come on back to chat while you eat. I'm just working on receipts." She leaned on the counter and refilled my water from a sweating jug.

"I was going to say hi before I left," I told her as I scooped beans with a tortilla. Everything about Orozco's said comfort food, from the house-made tortillas and pico de gallo to Millie's generous frame and warm expression. I came in a couple times a month and they never gave me a check, but I always left money. Homer said family doesn't pay. I told him our family was so big they'd go out of business.

"Thanks again," I told her, "for setting up a meeting with Antonio Perez. It really helped."

She waved away my thanks. "Anything for you, dear. You know, Paul said he's going to have an opening soon. You need a storefront, what better place than here?"

Paul O'Brien was Millie's brother-in-law and he and Millie's sister owned a lot of property, mostly in North Phoenix, but he'd bought this strip mall when Millie and Homer's first landlord planned to sell to a developer who would have kicked them out. They'd been in this location for more than thirty years.

“He’ll give you the family discount,” she said.

“I’m not even related to Paul by marriage,” I teased.

She harrumphed. “You need an office. You can’t have people coming to your house looking for you.”

I laughed. “An office? I’m barely working as a PI part-time, why would I need an office?” Thinking about it, I realized that I had worked more this week on Sergio’s case than I had in the last two months on every other case combined. “Besides, I have a business card and a cell phone.”

“You need an office,” she insisted. “It’s a small place, husband and wife sell insurance. They’re moving to Surprise.” She wrinkled her nose as if saying a dirty word.

I suppressed a grin. “Surprise is nice.”

“Have you been there? Sure, it’s clean and Paul says there’s very little crime, but what’s there to do? Nothing! And there’s certainly no restaurants like this. The trees are sticks, all planted in neat little rows, the houses are all the same, no personality.” She shook her head. “I don’t understand.”

“The city isn’t for everyone,” I said. You wouldn’t catch me moving to Surprise. It was all young families with kids or retired folks. Millie was right—boring. But some people liked the quiet, boring life. I suppose if I had kids I might want quiet, boring, and safe. Plus, there was a spring training stadium out there.

“So you’ll take it?” she asked.

I wanted to say I didn’t need a space, that I wasn’t even certain being a private

investigator would stick. I didn't even make enough money to pay rent, let alone to commit to a lease. But the hopeful look on her face had me saying, "I'll think about it."

She nodded. "You have time. They're not moving out until end of May."

I should know by May if I was going to succeed in this career or would be bartending the rest of my life. I still didn't think I'd need an office.

Changing the subject, I asked, "Do you know about a series of robberies down off Camelback? Between the freeway and around 12th Avenue?"

Millie's eyes widened. "Yes! They robbed Lyle's Diner. We know the owners well, Julia and Betsy. I wouldn't even say robbed—they went in and smashed stuff, just vandalism. Laughed about it, then broke the candy display and took not even twenty dollars' worth of candy. The display cost more than the candy, but all the damage didn't even reach their deductible for insurance. Paid everything out of pocket." She shook her head, a scowl darkening her round face.

"Laughed about it?"

"Kids have no discipline these days. My brother, sister, and I grew up not far from there. We had a little two-bedroom house, had to share a room until my brother turned thirteen and convinced Dad to let him build out a closet for his own space. They ended up adding on a whole room and family room, oh the mess!" She laughed. "Anyway, things were different then. Sunnyslope was a wonderful place to grow up. If any of our neighbors saw us misbehaving, our mom would have heard about it and punishment would be swift."

"I can relate," I said.

“We weren’t perfect, got into our fair share of scrapes, but we’d never think of vandalizing property.”

“They think the vandals were kids?”

“That’s what Julia said. She and her sister took over Lyle’s Diner from their grandfather when he retired. Good burgers. Their dad never wanted the business, I guess running a restaurant isn’t for everyone.”

“I’ve eaten there,” I said quickly. I loved Millie, but she had stories about everyone and if I didn’t cut her off—as politely as possible—I’d be sitting here for hours.

I wanted to talk to the victims of the robberies. Maybe I could put something together—give me a direction to pursue. It was definitely an idea. I didn’t work at the bar tonight, but tomorrow I was on at four. I had a lot to do in the next twenty-four hours.

Not to mention that Andy needed evidence of Sergio’s innocence by Monday.

Almost conspiratorially, Millie said, “Do you want me to call Julia and tell her you’re stopping by?”

I grinned. “That would be great. Thanks, Millie.” I pushed the plate aside and put a twenty-dollar bill down.

“No—” Millie began, but I refused to take the money back.

“It was delicious. Thanks for your help, I’ll let you know how everything goes.”

I knew what Henry and Sophia looked like from the photos in Sergio’s apartment—and my own snooping on social media—but hanging around the middle

school made me feel weird, so I drove to Sophia's foster home and parked down the street. The middle school was five blocks south, and this was the most direct route home.

The street was well maintained and many of the small ranch-style homes had been updated. Some houses had barred windows, but most didn't. Lawns were neat, winter grass had been seeded, and there was evidence of remodeling in several of the properties. Before I bought my house, I'd toured a couple houses in this neighborhood. I could have stretched my money and bought here, but I liked backing up to the Phoenix Mountains Preserve, and found a great deal on a fixer-upper.

Though at this rate, I didn't know when I would ever be done remodeling my house.

While Sophia's immediate neighborhood was nice, two blocks over there were bars on windows, security screens over doors, plus most houses needed a lot of work. A microcosm of Sunnyslope in the heart of Sunnyslope.

I wondered if foster home records were public. Not the kids—their identities would be protected—but the registered foster parents. I felt I should know that. Would Gene know the information off the top of his head? I worried I was completely ill-prepared for being a private investigator tasked with helping people not only solve problems, but find justice.

What the hell was I doing here?

Discouraged and depressed, I was about to drive away when I saw Sophia walk right past my car and turn the corner toward her home.

She was a pretty girl with long dark hair sun-kissed with red highlights, pulled back into a thick ponytail. She was dressed in jeans and a faded Arizona Cardinals football sweatshirt. It was too big on her. Her head was down, and she clasped the straps of

her backpack so tightly I could see her knuckles were white.

She'd been crying.

I got out of my car as she walked past. "Sophia," I said.

She jumped, turned, clearly skittish. "I don't know you." She took a step away, ready to bolt. She glanced over her shoulder. The foster home was two houses away, on the next corner. She could easily run to it, but she didn't.

"I'm a friend of Sergio's employer, Mr. Perez." I handed her my business card, practically had to force it into her hand. "Margo Angelhart."

The card had my name, phone number, and PI license.

Her lower lip trembled and she bit it, crumpling my card in her fist. "What do you want?"

"You know about Sergio, right?"

She gave a very short nod. "He didn't," she whispered. "I don't believe it. He wouldn't hurt anyone."

"Who are you scared of?"

"No one," she said quickly.

"I want to help your brother, Sophia," I said, trying hard to exude both sympathy and gravitas. "But he confessed to murder and doesn't seem to want to help himself. I think it's because he's protecting someone. Who would he protect?"

“You can’t do anything. No one can. Why do you even care?”

“Because Sergio is making a mistake. He might think he’s doing the right thing, might even believe he’s protecting you and Henry—”

At that sentence her eyes widened and my instincts were validated.

“—but,” I continued, “his actions are enabling a killer to walk free. He will kill again. Next time, it might be someone you care about.”

“No one can help. Please go, before anyone sees you.” Her eyes welled up and I felt bad putting pressure on this young teenager. But she wasn’t ignorant of the world. Her mother was in prison for attempted murder and her dad was MIA. She lived in foster care with other kids who had faced similar situations. So she knew the truth, or a version of it, and I needed her to trust me.

Sophia kept looking over to the house and I asked, “Are you scared to go back to your foster home?”

She shook her head. “It’s so much better than the last place, this is a girls-only house.”

“But you want to be with your brothers.”

“Yes.” Her voice was almost a sob. “I like Mrs. Edgar, but Sergio is family. But now—now it won’t happen and I—I don’t know what to do.”

“Trust me, Sophia.”

“I don’t know you. Sergio confessed. There’s nothing anyone can do. Henry said—”

She stopped herself.

“Sophia, I’m going to tell you what I know. Sergio cooperated with the police and he wasn’t a suspect. Then the police had more questions and became suspicious when he wore a hoodie that looked like the shooter’s. The one you gave him for Christmas. They arrested him, tested the hoodie—it had gunshot residue. He confessed. The physical evidence backs up his confession. He’s going to prison unless I can find out who really killed Greg Rodriguez.”

She stared at me, tears again in her eyes. “Sergio didn’t kill anyone.”

“Do you know who did? Any theory, any direction you can point me—I want to find the truth.”

“I can’t.” Her voice was barely audible.

“On Monday, the prosecution is going to offer him a plea deal. It looks like he’s going to accept whatever they offer. He’s looking at twenty to thirty years.”

Her eyes widened in shock, but she didn’t say anything. She also wasn’t looking me in the eye.

“What do you know, Sophia?”

“I don’t know anything. I don’t.”

She was lying, but she was also scared. How could I convince a scared thirteen-year-old girl to trust me?

“Do you know who wore Sergio’s hoodie the weekend of the shooting?”

She didn't say anything.

"Was it Henry?"

She blinked rapidly and looked terrified, and I thought I'd gone too far, or was way off base. Then I noticed she was looking over my shoulder.

I turned, made a point to stare at the three boys walking down the street toward us. The short one was Henry—I recognized him from the photos in Sergio's apartment. The other two were the same height, about five foot nine, thin. Together, the three looked like Trouble with a capital T.

And I suspected it was these three who were the gang of thieves.

Except, the shooter was wearing the hoodie, and the shooter was taller than Henry.

"Go," Sophia said. "Please."

I opened my car door, but didn't get in.

"You harassing my sister?" Henry said as they came up to us.

"Just needed directions," I told him.

The other two glared at me. One looked younger than I first thought, just tall, and I wondered if he was Henry's age. The other was definitely an older teen—and it was his eyes that told me he was the shooter.

Nothing I could take to court. Nothing I could even take to Andy Flannigan. But I had seen the eyes of a killer before, and it's not something you forget.

Sophia said to Henry, “I waited for you after school. You can visit, but they can’t.” She was trying to keep her voice calm, but I heard a hitch that made me pause.

“Come on, Sissy, we’ll just hang out on the porch.”

“No,” she said. “You can, they can’t.”

“Whatever,” the oldest of the three boys said. “I’ll catch ya at home, Henry.” He gave Sophia a long, lecherous look. She visibly stepped back, her hands shaking as they grasped the straps of her backpack.

Then the kid looked at me. Sized me up and decided I was no threat.

He didn’t know me.

“Hey, chica,” he said and licked his lips, then winked. “Let’s go, Bruno,” he said to the other guy, and they walked back the way they had come.

“I’ll catch up with you later, Javi,” Henry said.

I watched them leave. Javi, probably short for Javier. The same build as Sergio. Eyes of a killer. Was I reading too much into the exchange?

Henry turned to me. “What are you still doing here?”

“What’s your problem?” I said.

Sophia still looked like a deer caught in the headlights, but at my comment, she said to Henry, “Come, Mrs. Edgar has after-school snacks. You can stay until five.”

He was still glaring at me.

Sophia started toward the house without looking back or acknowledging me. Henry followed a moment later, and I got into my car.

I needed to know more about the older kid. Maybe Sergio would tell me if I described him, or I could ask Sophia.

A theory had begun to form about what had happened that night at the Cactus Stop. What I didn't know was why Sergio would take the fall when it was clear on body type alone that the shooter wasn't his brother. A minor as an accessory to murder might get time in juvie, but most likely probation. That was a whole world different than spending twenty years in prison for a crime you didn't commit.

Maybe it was part of the whole, but there was something else going on here. Were my instincts right? Was I developing my PI sixth sense?

Or was I so far off base that I was going to screw everything up?

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Henry was talking, but Sophia put up her hand. She didn't want to hear his excuses. Her entire world was crumbling and she feared she would have no family left.

Even that fear was over-shadowed by Javier Escobar, the boy her brother insisted was "totally cool," but Sophia knew he was dangerous down to his soul.

She unlocked the front door and went to the kitchen, where Mrs. Edgar usually greeted them after school. "Hi, Mrs. Edgar. You said my brother could come over?"

Sophia smiled and hoped it didn't look like a grimace.

"Yes, of course. Henry, so good to see you again. Sophia, dear, help yourself to a snack. Don't forget you and Ana have kitchen duty, but it's easy today. Mac and cheese casserole, the instructions are on the board."

"We'll have it ready, thank you," Sophia said. She retrieved a plate from the cupboard, took some fruit and crackers from the snack shelf in the refrigerator, and a couple cookies from the jar. Mrs. Edgar had been teaching them all to bake, and Sophia loved to cook. Mrs. Edgar said she was a natural and had let her help with the decorated sugar cookies she gave out to her neighbors for Christmas.

Sophia took the plate out to the front porch. Henry, even though he was her brother, was only allowed in the living room, kitchen, and on the front porch. She was the only girl here who had a brother. Ana had no family at all, and the other two residents were sisters whose mom was going through drug rehab. Their mother came to visit once a week. Sophia tried not to be home when she did. She was glad their mom was trying to stay clean, but seeing her reminded Sophia that her own mom loved drugs

more than her three kids.

Henry scowled when she closed the door. “You have too many chores here. You’re her slave.”

“We all help. I like it. Mrs. Edgar is teaching us to meal prep and how to budget and make healthy food. I like cooking.”

“She uses you. They all use us.”

She was near tears. She didn’t want to argue with her brother. “Henry, what happened? Please tell me. I know something happened between you and Sergio after dinner last Wednesday. Did it have anything to do with Sergio telling the police he killed a man? I know he didn’t—he wouldn’t. And I know you had his hoodie that weekend. I know because you gave it back to him on Wednesday!” Sophia hadn’t meant to shout, and she put her hand over her mouth.

Henry finally looked contrite. “Look, I don’t know why Sergio said he killed someone when he didn’t.”

She stared at him. He was lying. She could always tell when her brother was lying. He wasn’t very good at it.

“Tell me the truth! What did you do?”

“I didn’t kill nobody.”

But the way he said it. She didn’t like his tone. The casual shrug in his voice. As if he didn’t kill anyone, but it wouldn’t matter if he did.

He grabbed a cookie and chewed, stared out at the street. Sophia willed herself not to

cry, but the tears escaped.

“Why was there gun residue in the hoodie you borrowed? Why did Sergio tell the police he killed someone? What do you know, Henry?”

“Shh,” he said, glanced around. “Okay, look, it was an accident. I didn’t do it, I swear to God. Javier said the guy was pulling a gun, and he just reacted, you know? Self-defense.”

“You’re making no sense. You can’t say you shot someone in self-defense when you’re...you’re robbing them.”

“Shut. Up. Do you want to get me in trouble?”

“But why would Sergio protect Javier? You, yes! But you should tell the police the truth, tell them about Javier. He’s bad.”

“He’s my best friend,” Henry said defensively. “He’s always been there for me.”

“You’re saying that Sergio is taking the blame for a murder Javier committed because he’s your best friend? I don’t believe that.”

Henry’s expression darkened. “Look, Sophia, the world is a fucked-up place and you really pissed Javier off when you threatened him.”

“Wh-what?”

“When you left last summer you told his mom that he was in your room. How could you?”

“He was in my room!”

“He got smacked around because Brenda lost money when you left. He likes you, Sissy. You act like you’re better than everyone. You should be happy that a guy like Javier wants to take care of you.”

None of this made sense. Henry had changed to the point where she didn’t even recognize him.

“I’m thirteen. I don’t want a boyfriend, and I don’t want Javier in my life. He scares me.”

“And he promised to leave you alone as long as Sergio didn’t tell the police about the robbery. And Sergio didn’t. I didn’t know he was going to tell the police he actually whacked the guy.”

Sophia couldn’t believe the words coming from Henry. She loved her brother...but he was scaring her almost as much as Javier.

“Sergio thinks he’s doing this for you,” she said. “For you, Henry, because he loves you. He’s giving up his whole life for you.”

“No, he’s doing it for you. He wouldn’t lift a finger to help me. He doesn’t care. He doesn’t listen! And besides, he didn’t do it so he won’t be convicted.”

“He confessed. He’s going to plea!”

“That’s on him then.”

“You have to tell the truth,” she begged. “Go to the police and tell the truth. That Javier killed—”

Henry grabbed her by the arms so quickly that she stifled a scream, cowered by the

look of rage on his face. This wasn't her brother. Someone had taken her good, kind brother and turned him into a monster.

“Shut up! We're protecting you. And you're being an ungrateful little bitch.”

He pushed so hard she fell off the chair. He took the plate of snacks and threw it to the ground where it broke. Then he left.

Mrs. Edgar came out and helped Sophia to her feet. “Honey, what happened?” Mrs. Edgar was a kind person, but right now she sounded angry. “Did your brother do this?”

Sophia didn't know what to say, what to do, who to trust. She nodded and cried. Mrs. Edgar hugged her tightly. “Oh, baby, I'm sorry. You need to tell me what happened.”

“I can't.”

Mrs. Edgar put her at arm's length and said, “He hurt you. I don't know why. He has always been a polite young man, until recently. The last few weeks I've seen a change. I know you have, as well.”

“He's hanging out with the wrong people. I should never have left him in that house with those boys. I should have stayed. Maybe...maybe he wouldn't have changed.”

Mrs. Edgar's face hardened. Sophia had told her what Javier did to her in her bedroom. She said, “No, you were right to leave, and I thank God every day that I had a place here for you. You know Javier would not have stopped at simply touching you. You know that, right?”

Sophia nodded, feeling miserable.

“What have they done?”

“I think—Javier might have killed someone.”

“We need to tell the police.”

“The police think Sergio did it.”

“Sergio?” She looked as confused as Sophia felt.

“He confessed. I don’t know what’s going on, Mrs. Edgar. But I’m scared. For Henry, and...for you and everyone here.”

Mrs. Edgar bristled. “Do not be scared for me. I am the adult. I am responsible for you.”

“A private investigator talked to me today.”

“Where? At school?”

“Over there.” Sophia motioned to the corner. “She said that Sergio told the police he killed a clerk at the Cactus Stop. She thinks he’s innocent, that he’s protecting someone. The killer wore the sweatshirt I gave Sergio for Christmas. And...and I know, the weekend this all happened, that Henry had the sweatshirt. We’d gone to see the Christmas lights at the zoo before they took them down, remember? Henry was cold and Sergio gave him the sweatshirt to wear. That was two weeks ago Friday. And the man was killed that Saturday. And then last week, Henry gave it back to Sergio. The investigator said it had gunshot residue in it. But why would Sergio protect Javier? I asked Henry about it, and he says it was self-defense. But that doesn’t make sense. And Henry claims Sergio is protecting me, but why? I didn’t do anything!”

“I want this investigator’s name.”

Sophia reached into her pocket and pulled out the crumpled card, handed it to her.

Mrs. Edgar looked at it, put it in her apron. “First, we call the police. Then we’ll see what options we have. I think you should stay home from school tomorrow, just to be on the safe side. And Henry can’t come over right now. I’m sorry, I know he’s your brother, but I do not tolerate violence.”

“I’m sure he feels bad about it.” But Sophia would never forget the anger in Henry’s eyes. She had never seen him like that before.

“Maybe, but he still needs to apologize with sincerity. And if he’s hanging out with a murderer—he cannot be here. This home is your sanctuary, and it is the sanctuary for the other girls, as well.”

Sophia bit her lip and nodded. She felt so lost and alone, but Mrs. Edgar was right.

Until Henry was away from Javier Escobar, he wasn’t safe to be around.

Mrs. Edgar put her arm around her and led her inside.

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I only had an hour or so before I needed to head to work, but it was enough time to talk to Julia, then check out where Henry lived, which wasn't far from Lyle's Diner.

When I walked in, a pale reedy woman with graying blond hair approached. "You must be Margo, Millie's cousin." She took my hand and squeezed. "I'm Julia Henderson, it's so nice to finally meet you!"

"Don't tell me you've heard about me."

She laughed lightly. "Of course I have. Millie and I go way back. We grew up in the same neighborhood. Come, sit. Coffee?"

"Thanks," I said.

She motioned to the counter. Lyle's Diner was an old-fashioned restaurant with cushioned red vinyl booths and surprisingly comfortable stools. Though the atmosphere looked to be right out of the fifties, the kitchen was modern and immaculate. The cook was in the back wearing all white, including a chef's hat. A single waitress handled the floor, but it was four in the afternoon and the diner had only a few customers. The posted hours were 6:30 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. six days a week, and 7:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. on Sunday.

Julia poured a cup for each of us, motioned to a saucer that had creamer and sugar. I added a little cream. I could drink my coffee black if I had to, but I preferred light. She put in both cream and sugar.

"Millie said that you're a private investigator looking into the kids going around

robbing businesses.”

Now I am, I thought. “I’m very interested in what happened here. You mentioned to Millie and to me, just now, that your impression was of kids. How young?”

“Young teens. I didn’t get a good look at them—they were in and out so quickly, and when we looked at the security tape—it’s stationary and focused on the cash register—we only saw them from the back. They didn’t go for the register, just came in and knocked stuff around. We called the police immediately. Maybe that’s why they left in a hurry. But they didn’t have to break our display. It was an antique, been in the diner since my grandparents opened the place nearly seventy years ago, more a conversation piece than anything. We were so upset about it.”

“And you think young teens? Fourteen, fifteen?”

“Like I said, I didn’t clearly see their faces. But the way they moved, laughed—they laughed and mocked Mr. Gomez, one of our regulars, when he confronted them. I felt they were teenagers, probably around fourteen. One may have been a little older. They were having fun being destructive, as if that was their primary purpose.”

“Did you think they were on drugs?”

She considered, then said, “Now that you mention it, they may have been high. Giggly, you know? Not hard drugs—I’ve seen enough addicts and how they act.”

“In the weeks leading up to the vandalism, did you have any other trouble? Maybe a dine and dash? Loitering out front? Did you report teenagers using drugs? Anything unusual?”

She was shaking her head to each of my questions, and I feared my theory was wrong.

What theory? I just had a vague idea about the motive of these three kids and not much more.

Other than I was ninety percent positive that Henry Diaz was one of the three and his friends from today were the other two.

Julia said, “We started closing earlier because of the increase in crime. We’ve had to call the police a few times to roust homeless people sleeping in our doorway and once, in our dumpster. And we’ve shooed away panhandlers a few times. But we also donate our extra food to the homeless shelter three blocks from here, and I’ve given away my body weight in free coffee every year since my sister and I took over the diner. It’s just become more difficult over the last few years.”

I pulled out my phone and showed her the list of businesses I’d compiled from crime blogs and news reports of similar crimes in this area. “Do you recognize any of these businesses?”

“Why yes—almost all of them. They were all vandalized?”

“Or robbed, eight in the last month since Christmas. I think it’s the same three teenagers. Do you think you could talk to the people you do know, pool your collective memories? You might come up with information that can help the police. Then call the detective in charge of your case. Do you remember the name?”

“I have his card.” She walked behind the counter and reached into a small drawer. “Detective Tomas Villines.”

“Can I see the card?”

She turned it to me, and I took a picture of it. Villines was part of the robbery squad of the Violent Crimes Bureau. “I might want to follow up with him,” I told her.

Especially since Ambrose wasn't returning my call.

"I'll start making calls right now." Julia seemed pleased to be proactive. "If I hear anything important, I'll let you know."

"And you should let the detective know about any new information. I can investigate, but I can't arrest anyone."

I called Scotty and told him I'd be a few minutes late for work, then I called Jack. His phone went to voicemail, so I left a message asking if he knew Villines with Robbery, and could he maybe give him a heads-up that I'd be calling him. Then I headed to Henry's foster care home on 11th Avenue, just north of West Campbell and the canal. Licensed for six foster kids, no infants. Sophia and Henry had been in the home for two years, from when their mother went to prison until last summer, when Sophia moved to the all-girls house. Sergio had the exact date in his notes, but hadn't indicated why she'd moved. Based on my conversation with her, she much preferred the new home.

Andy called me when I was almost to Henry's.

"Hey," I said.

"I haven't heard from you in two days."

"I've been working."

"Do you have anything?"

He sounded almost desperate.

I didn't want to share my theory because I could be wrong, and I didn't want Andy to

get slapped down if this all exploded in our faces. But technically, he was my client, and I couldn't just avoid answering questions like I did with my brother.

"Do you remember when Sergio mentioned other robberies during his first interview?"

"Yes."

"I dug into those. They were mostly vandalism and petty theft. The consensus is that the robberies were committed by three teenage boys, two taller, one shorter—just like the Cactus Stop. The MO is the same, the only difference is that someone died. I think if you compare the security footage from the earlier robberies with the Cactus Stop you'll find that the three suspects are the same."

"So? That has no impact on Sergio's case. And even if his defense lawyer could prove he wasn't part of the other robberies, it doesn't mean he didn't kill Rodriguez."

"But if you compare the tapes and can determine based on height, weight, size, whatever that the shooter was also at the other robberies, then that might go a long way in proving Sergio's innocence. I have a list of dates and times, and except for the Cactus Stop, all the crimes happened before 10:00 p.m."

"It's an outlier then, which doesn't help Sergio. And I can't do anything. I can't even tell his defense attorney to check it out, George would have my ass."

I could, I realized. I might have to. The idea of an innocent man in prison made my skin crawl as much as a killer walking free. Maybe more.

"Just see what you can find out," I said. "Detective Tomas Villines is the investigating officer, out of the robbery squad."

“What else? Because this is thin, Margo.”

I didn’t want to share, but felt I didn’t have much choice at this point. “I can’t prove this,” I said cautiously. “But I think Sergio is trying to protect his brother.”

“His brother is the shooter?”

“No. His brother lives with the shooter in foster care.”

“That doesn’t make any sense to me. Even if he was there at the store, getting the shooter off the street would protect Henry more than taking the blame for murder.”

“Unless there’s something else going on. I talked to Sophia Diaz today on her way home from school.”

“She’s a minor—”

“I’m not worried about that.” There was no crime in approaching the girl. “I think she’s scared of Javier. I only heard his first name in passing, so I don’t have much information about him. I gave her my card and I think she’ll call.” Okay, I didn’t really think she would call. I gave it about a twenty percent chance. But I wanted to sound optimistic for Andy as I continued to follow up on each fact I learned.

“For what it’s worth,” I continued, “I think Sergio is innocent and that he knows a lot more than he said. I don’t have the proof yet, but I believe Henry had Sergio’s hoodie at some point—that’s why there’s GSR in the pocket. Sergio doesn’t want his brother to get in trouble.”

I pulled up to the corner of West Campbell and 11th Avenue, parked.

“That’s shortsighted,” Andy said. “Especially if Henry isn’t the shooter.”

“He’s not. He’s too short. But he was probably there. Has anyone in your office or Phoenix PD done a deep dive into the victim, Rodriguez? Or the other clerk, Don Cruz?”

“I haven’t seen anything. Why?”

“I’m working on getting as much as I can, but one thing you should be asking yourself about is motive. A man as straight and narrow as Sergio will have a motive if he’s going to kill someone. I don’t buy his ‘I snapped’ line. If you told me that Rodriguez had molested his little sister? I might buy it. But to kill someone in cold blood for no reason except he got mad—when he has no history of violence—doesn’t work for me.”

I could hear Andy writing something down. I was glad he agreed with me.

“And while you’re at it, please check up on Henry’s foster home and the kid Javier. He has a look—I know, I know, you can’t arrest someone because they look like a bad kid. But it was his eyes.”

“Juvenile records will be hard to get.”

“Don’t tell me that. I know you and law enforcement can see if a kid has a record.”

“I mean, it’s going to take me a while to find out who’s in that home. Running arrests, probation is easy, but I need full names.”

“I have their address.” I rattled it off.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Andy said and ended the call.

I needed to find something to show Sergio how his confession would make Henry

and Sophia's lives worse.

Then, maybe he'd cooperate.

I was grateful that I had a beat-up car and it wouldn't stand out. Henry's neighborhood, though less than a mile south of Sophia's, was ten times worse.

The houses were run-down, uncared for. I could see why Sophia liked her new place better. This house was large on a tiny lot. An old couch on the porch sagged with the weight of an older white guy smoking a cigarette. Was he one of the foster parents? He looked more like a grandfather than a dad.

I wondered if my mom could get more detailed information about foster families. Even though she was now a private practice lawyer, she'd spent the bulk of her career as a prosecutor and knew all the right people. But if she could, would she tell me?

Doubtful. My mom was willing to bend rules, but she didn't break them.

I sat in my car and watched the street, pretending to read something on my phone in case anyone paid me any attention. I took pictures, not that I knew yet what I would do with them.

As I watched the house, the two skinny kids came out, Bruno and Javier, who I'd seen with Henry earlier. They said something to the man on the porch, then left. Their heads were together and they were walking my way.

I took a couple pictures of them from inside my car, and was about to leave when they crossed the street and headed away from me without a second glance in my direction.

I watched them go. A shorter boy approached them from the corner. It was Henry.

They were a full block away, but I recognized his clothes. The three of them went off together. Even though they matched the builds of the kids in the video, proving it would be next to impossible. There were a lot of kids who hung around in threes.

I wanted to follow, but had to get to the bar for my shift. And what could I do? I had no proof they'd committed a crime.

Andy was right. Even if I proved that these kids had robbed eight businesses over the last month that didn't mean they had robbed the Cactus Stop or killed Rodriguez. Sergio had confessed, and there was evidence on his person. Until we had solid proof he was innocent, he would remain in lockup.

I relieved Scotty at six. He'd worked all day, and I would close tonight. We had two servers until nine, but people didn't come here to eat bar food—though it was decent—they came here for beer and ballgames. The Suns were playing the Kings away in Sacramento, so we had a decent crowd watching the game, which I put on all the screens.

What Andy and I had discussed rattled in my head, and while I worked the bar, I also worked on my laptop. I subscribe to several databases for personal information. All legal stuff. I had Greg Rodriguez's address and birthday from Andy's file, so that helped. I didn't have data on Don Cruz, but after some searching around and narrowing down, I found him: Donald James Cruz. He and Greg were the same age: twenty-three. A little more digging and I found out they both graduated from the same high school—Sunnyslope—the same year. It was a large campus, but they could have known each other.

Social media was an investigator's best friend. It was the one thing I had mastered when Gene took me under his wing; at least I had been able to teach him something.

Both Don and Greg had multiple social media channels and between pouring beer,

chatting with regulars, and closing tabs, I made some interesting discoveries.

The two men did in fact know each other from high school. Neither was involved in sports, band, drama, or any other school clubs that I could find. They were both far more interested in posting about getting stoned and eating pizza. After high school, Don went to community college and lived at home; Greg moved into the dive apartment the month after he graduated, never went to college, and worked in a variety of jobs—his Instagram page had him working at nine different places in five years, some that overlapped. Could be more that he hadn't posted about. They followed each other, which didn't always mean something, but there were several posts where they were tagged together over the years.

Don had a TikTok page and posted mostly silly content. But one post caught my eye.

It was a fifteen-second video taken at night from one of the Piestewa Peak trails. I knew, because I'd hiked virtually every trail in the Phoenix Mountains Preserve dozens of times. It was posted two months ago and I could hear a voice—presumably Don's—saying, "We're on top of the world!" The camera spun around showing the stars, the horizon, a distinctive cactus. The park was closed at night, so they wouldn't have been able to drive to the trailhead, but they could have easily walked or biked.

As the camera spun, I glimpsed another man—and I had to watch it six times to freeze it at just the right second to determine he was Greg Rodriguez holding something shiny. I couldn't get a clear shot of the shiny object. They were both laughing. The text over the short clip read:

When you're sitting pretty you feel like every day you're on the top of the world.

What the hell did that mean?

I saved the video to my phone.

Then I went more carefully through Don's hundreds of posts trying to re-create his life and just how close he was to a man he told me he barely knew.

One more video stuck out to me. It was posted only a couple days ago. Don was clearly standing in the parking lot of the Cactus Stop. His eyes were watery and red, his voice a bit slurred, and I suspected he was high. "Hey, bros, I gotta new partner." He snickered. No one else was in the video, just Don. "A lot smarter than my old partner."

Partner? For what? The Cactus Stop? Wouldn't he say co-worker if that were the case?

Don continued as he walked from what might have been his car to the door. In a conspiratorial whisper he said, "If all goes well, I won't be doing the daily grind here anymore. Wink, wink." He giggled, said something too quiet to hear to someone outside the video range, then the video ended as he opened the door.

I watched again. There was a reflection of another person in the glass door, but it wasn't distinct enough for me recognize him. But maybe someone better at computers could figure it out. Lu was pretty good at this stuff. I saved the video to my phone, then sent it to her.

Lu, you've always been a computer whiz. There's a reflection at the end of this video, is there any way you can make it clearer?

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I visited Sergio at the jail as soon as visiting hours started Thursday morning. Time was running out and while I thought I knew at least part of the truth, I didn't have enough information to take back to Andy, nor could I prove anything. Besides, even if Andy believed my theory, he couldn't do anything about Sergio's confession unless Sergio recanted or I found hard physical evidence of his innocence.

When Sergio saw me, he looked resigned. He didn't have to talk to me, but he still came out, so that told me that he really did want my help—even if he wasn't going to ask.

He shuffled slowly to the metal table where I sat and slid onto the bench across from me.

"I told you to stay out of my life," he said.

But there was no venom in his voice and I wondered if he was having second thoughts about his confession. This was a young man who'd had some trouble as a kid, but seemed to have gotten his life together. Maybe seeing the inside of jail for the first time had scared him and he just needed someone to help. But his pride, as both Antonio and Faith told me, prevented him from asking.

"No games, Sergio. You didn't kill Greg Rodriguez. Whoever did was wearing your hoodie, but it wasn't your brother. You think you're protecting him, but you're not."

"Don't talk about my family."

"I don't want you to go to prison for the next twenty years, and I'm pretty certain you

don't want to go to prison, either. So listen to me. Your brother is hanging around with two kids, Bruno and a kid he called Javi. I think they all live in the same foster home. I think the older kid, Javi, is the killer, and your brother was with him at the Cactus Stop. And I think you know that. So I ask you, why are you taking the fall to protect an asshole who is taking your brother down a dangerous path?"

Sergio was shaking. "You have no idea what you're doing. Stay out of it." His voice cracked and he looked more scared than angry.

I unfolded a print of the photo I took yesterday of the two skinny kids. "These two kids live with Henry in the foster home off West Campbell. I think that Henry and his friends have been robbing and vandalizing businesses in the area. Either they don't think they'll get caught or they don't care. I'm pretty certain Javi—" I pointed to the older one "—is the leader. He's at least sixteen, and he's trouble. I saw it in his eyes. He's the one who killed Rodriguez, isn't he?"

"I did," Sergio said. But his voice was weak, wary.

"The MO is the same as the earlier robberies and you can't tell me you went to Lyle's Diner and smashed their antique candy display case just for the kicks. The only difference with the Cactus Stop is that they were out late and killed someone." As I said it, I realized it was two big differences, but I was almost positive I was right. Knowing and proving were very different.

"They've lain low since," I continued, "but once they feel emboldened they'll start up again, and guess what? They will be caught and thrown in juvie. Or they'll be recruited by a gang. Or they'll be dead. Or all of the above. Without you to watch out for him, Henry is going to fall. You're smart enough to know that. So why did you confess to a murder you didn't commit?"

"Shh!"

He glanced around, but no one was paying us any attention.

“I can help. First, call your lawyer and tell her you’re recanting. Then tell the truth.”

“I can’t,” he whispered. “Do you have brothers and sisters?” I nodded. “Do you love them?”

“Yes,” I said. “More than anything.”

Sergio stared at the picture. “His name is Javier Escobar. Henry—I want to protect him, but he’s made very bad choices. And he’s been so angry lately, angry that Sophia left his foster home, angry that I haven’t been able to get custody of them.” His voice cracked.

“Javier killed Rodriquez, didn’t he?”

Sergio didn’t answer. “Sophia left the first foster home because of Javier. He made her uncomfortable. I wanted so badly to bring her home with me, but—it was so hard, the endless paperwork, the canceled meetings, the expense.”

I remembered how Sophia seemed terrified when she saw Javier on the street yesterday.

When he suddenly stopped talking, I said quietly, “Are you trying to protect your sister? How can you protect her if you’re here, in prison?”

“Do you know how long it takes the police to investigate? Minors don’t spend time behind bars—they get probation, they live at home, they go to school.”

“It depends—”

“If I didn’t tell the police that I killed that man, Javier would have gotten to my sister. He—”

Sergio looked down. His face was hard, red, and he was trying not to cry.

“Javier threatened Sophia?”

He didn’t confirm or deny.

“Sergio, if you’re in here, how can you protect her?”

“He promised he would stay away from her. We have an agreement.”

“You trust him to hold up his end of the bargain? You’re not that naive, Sergio.”

“I was stuck. I didn’t have time to do anything else. The police talked to me again, and I knew what I had to do. I had no other choice.”

He believed that. What could I say to prove him wrong?

“If you’re in prison—and that’s where you’re going as soon as you agree to a plea deal—Javier has no one to stop him from going after your sister. You see that, don’t you?”

He squeezed his eyes shut.

I saw how this may have played out. Sometime last week, Sergio was faced with an ultimatum—confess or Sophia would be hurt. Or maybe he didn’t intend to confess until confronted by the police with the information that the shooter wore his sweatshirt. Perhaps he thought his brother was responsible, until he saw the video and recognized Javier and the threat Javier posed to Sophia. It was a knee-jerk decision

that put him here, and it would take hard evidence to get him out.

But there was no evidence that Javier killed Greg Rodriguez.

Except Henry, if he made a statement.

“Your brother can go to the police and tell them Javier killed the clerk.”

“He won’t. Javier has him so twisted up, as if he cares more for Henry than I do!”

“I can talk to him.”

“He won’t listen! If he won’t listen to me, he won’t listen to a woman he doesn’t know.”

“What do you think is going to happen from here?”

Sergio shrugged, didn’t look at me.

“Call your lawyer, right now, and recant. That’ll get the ball rolling. There will be a hearing on Monday and I hope to have hard evidence of your innocence by then.”

“I do that, and Javier will get to her before I get out. I have no rights! I have nothing. Why do you even care?”

“I hate bullies and Javier Escobar is a bully. You made a mistake, but I understand why. Don’t make another one. Call your lawyer.”

Sergio shook his head. “Not until Sophia is safe. And you can’t promise me that.”

“I can—”

“Don’t lie to me, Ms. Angelhart. You don’t know me, you don’t know my family. Sophia was in danger. I made this deal. I have to believe that Henry will make sure Javier lives up to his end of it and not touch our sister.”

“What if I can find a safe place for Sophia until the police arrest Javier?”

“You can’t just take her away.”

Maybe not, but I had some ideas—starting with talking to her foster mom.

“If I can get her to safety and convince Henry to tell the truth, will you recant? His statement will go a long way.”

Sergio squeezed his eyes shut. “None of this would have happened if they were with me. I’ve been fighting for over a year to have them.”

“Stop feeling sorry for yourself,” I snapped, irritated. “You made a deal with the devil. I’ll help you fix it. But if you don’t recant and tell the police what you know, you’ll never be able to protect your sister.”

“If I do recant, I won’t be able to protect her either!”

We were at a standstill. Dammit, Sergio was stubborn.

But I was more stubborn.

“I’ll prove your innocence.”

“If anything happens to my sister, I will hunt you down,” he said.

I didn’t believe it. Sergio didn’t have a violent bone in his body, which is why he

confessed to murder instead of pummeling sense into his little brother and dragging Javier Escobar over to the nearest cop.

Sergio didn't want my help, but he was going to get it.

One way or the other, I would make sure the right person was in jail.

“If you won't recant, and I don't have the evidence by Monday, at the minimum don't agree to a plea arrangement. Delay. Ask for something outrageous. Anything to buy more time.”

At first, he didn't respond. Then, a small nod of his head.

I left the meeting hall, feeling Sergio's eyes on my back even after the door closed behind me.

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Ineeded help.

I realized, talking to Sergio, that I was a bit like him. I didn't like to ask for help, either. I expect to do everything myself and can't isn't in my vocabulary.

He was stuck. He'd made a decision that he saw no way out from. He believed his sister was in danger no matter what he did.

How much danger? Would Javier hurt her? Kill her?

I went to my mom's law office which wasn't far from the jail.

My mom had been a prosecutor most of her career, then was appointed to Maricopa County Attorney—basically, a district attorney—when her boss resigned following a serious health issue. She won two additional terms, but told us at family dinner when she decided not to run again that she wanted to pick and choose her cases. She felt her hands were tied—that some criminals deserved more time, and some deserved less. That repeat offenders had learned to game the system and first-time offenders often had no support. She joined her sister Rita Garcia at Arizona Legal Services, which was housed in a historic building owned by my grandparents, walking distance to both the modern Chase Field and old St. Mary's Basilica.

“This is a nice surprise,” Mom said when I knocked on her open office door.

“Am I interrupting anything?”

“Nothing that can't wait.”

Mom leaned back in her chair and motioned for me to sit.

My mom always looked put together. So did my sister Tess. In contrast, I rarely put on jewelry, preferred jeans to slacks or skirts, and kept my hair cut long enough to put back in a ponytail and in a simple style that I could wash and go without much fuss.

When I was struggling over my decision about whether to re-enlist, my mom helped me more than anyone. She seemed to intuitively understand my conflict and told me I needed to find my calling. Whether college or the Army or learning a trade or starting a business. That I needed to do something that satisfied me. She also said if I didn't re-enlist, I could always join the reserves. That finalized my decision. I could still give the Army time and energy, but not my entire life.

It had been the right call.

"I need to tell you something confidential," I said. "You may disapprove, but no one can know."

She nodded once, her face unreadable.

"Andy Flannigan hired me to prove someone he's prosecuting is innocent." I told her about the murder, Sergio's confession, what evidence the police had, and my most recent conversation with him. "I don't know that he's told me everything, but he didn't kill the clerk. He confessed because his sister was threatened. I don't know exactly how or when, but something happened the week after the police first talked to him."

"His sister? What about his brother? You said his younger brother was there, correct?"

"The video is poor. No way to ID any of them, but I'm almost positive Henry was

there and Javier Escobar is the shooter. Proving it? I can't. I need Henry to make a statement, but Sergio thinks in the time it takes for the police to investigate, Javier will hurt his sister."

"And possibly his brother, as a witness."

I nodded.

"So you're saying that Sergio was convinced that his family would be in danger if he didn't take the blame."

"Correct. He's having second thoughts, but recognizes that investigations take time and he can't protect his family, in or out of prison. He feels stuck. It was a rash decision that he now can't find a way around."

"Is he recanting?"

I shook my head. "He won't, not unless Sophia is safe. Henry needs to go on record, and I have to find a safe place for Sophia."

"Yet, Henry lives with the boy he would be accusing of murder," Mom said.

I knew that, but I was trying to forget it.

"Can we get him out of the house?" I asked.

I could see her mind working, the way she put her hands to her face, her index fingers pointed like a steeple. She stared at a spot on the wall above my head, as if seeing answers behind me.

"It's a pickle," Mom said. "Moving kids around in foster care isn't done lightly, and

even with an emergency order, it would take a few days. At least twenty-four hours.”

“I’m digging into both Cactus Stop clerks’ backgrounds because something rubs me wrong about them.”

“What do you mean both clerks?”

I told her about Sergio’s alleged altercation with Cruz, which the police used as the impetus for questioning Sergio in the first place. “I was thinking there might be gang ties, but I haven’t seen gang activity around these kids or the store. I think—this is just an impression—that Javier is trying to find a gang. That’s why he’s being reckless. He’s a kid, but he’s an angry kid with no authority figure to guide him. He’s pulling Henry and Bruno, the other kid in his foster home, down into the muck.” I paused, considered what I knew and what I suspected. “I can’t prove anything that I’m saying. This is all just impressions based on what I know. Cruz lied about the altercation. If you watch Sergio’s interviews with police, you would see the same thing—his first statement is the truth. His second is not.”

“Andy should never have let you view those.”

“Mom, please—he doesn’t want an innocent man in prison. But you can’t say anything.”

“There are rules for a reason.” She put up her elegant, manicured hand. “I won’t say anything. You told me confidentially. But someone could find out. I still don’t know what you’d like me to do.”

“I’m going to approach Sophia again, talk to her with her foster parent there. If I can convince them that Sophia needs to go somewhere safe, I’m hoping to then get Henry in to talk to Sergio, have a brotherly heart-to-heart. If Henry agrees to make a statement against Javier, Sergio will recant. But I need Henry out of the foster

house.” A lot of hopes and dreams, I realized.

“Devil’s advocate here,” Mom said. “For the sake of argument, Sergio recants and somehow gets bail. Because they won’t just take his word for it that it wasn’t him wearing his own sweatshirt. They’ll investigate, talk to his brother, the others. Even if Henry states that he was there and witnessed the shooting, the stories contradict. Police could think that Henry is lying to protect his brother. This is a homicide. George is going to want to bring a suspect to trial. If Sergio recants, that doesn’t mean he’s going to be released. He’s also running a risk of his confession being allowed during the trial. Just because he recanted doesn’t mean that the jury won’t be allowed to watch the interview. So Sergio will still be embroiled in a legal battle, and there is no way that the courts will grant him guardianship over his siblings.”

“That’s why I need you,” I said simply. “If anyone can persuade the system to give Sergio a chance, it’s you.”

My mom laughed. “You have a lot of faith in me.”

“It’s justified,” I said and smiled. “I’m going to prove he’s innocent. Will you work on the Kinship Care program? His friend Faith Jones—she manages The Taco House closest to my place—has been helping him. She’s prickly but will give you everything you need.”

“Send me her information, I’ll talk to her.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

“Honey, don’t get your hopes up. Perhaps Sergio is innocent of these charges. But people can disappoint you.”

“Believe me, I know.”

“Rita and I will put our heads together. Maybe we’ll come up with something.”

“Told you my faith was justified.”

“But, honey, there is no hard evidence either way. The only solid evidence is the GSR on Sergio’s clothes. That is pretty damning. Be careful if you go looking for more. If there is gang involvement, it could get dicey.”

“I know,” I said. “I’m being careful.”

I started to leave when my mom said, “Margo?”

“Hmm?” I turned to her, sensing something odd in her voice.

“I didn’t handle Luisa’s announcement well the other night. I hurt her, and I’ve tried talking to her about it, but she doesn’t want to talk, insists it’s fine. I appreciate that you stood up for her. I realize we may not have taken your announcement well, either.”

“Actually, you took mine better than Lu’s. I know why. You didn’t see me as a scholar. Sure, you wanted me to go to college because that’s what everyone is expected to do. But you knew I wasn’t really college material.”

“You are extremely intelligent,” Mom said.

“Why do you think college has anything to do with intelligence? Sure, smart people generally go to college. They become doctors and lawyers and engineers and great, we need people like that. But you can be smart and not get a four-year degree. By college material I mean I’m not someone who sits around well. I would have been bored. Classes don’t interest me, I’m a hands-on learner. But Lu? You think of her as the perfect college student. Supersmart, gets terrific grades, loves learning, always

has her head in a book. You accepted the Army for me because you could picture me there. You don't picture Lu in uniform."

"I really would love for her to go through ROTC. I don't think I would have this reaction if she was going through that program, like your father did."

"Let her prove herself," I said.

"She has nothing to prove to anyone," Mom said.

"Maybe she does—to herself."

I had just slid into my car when my phone rang. The number was what I had for Detective Tomas Villines.

"This is Margo Angelhart."

"You've created quite a stir in one of my cases, Ms. Angelhart."

"Glad I could help," I said.

"Don't call my boss anymore. Ambrose is busy, and he doesn't want to talk to a PI."

I liked that I'd ruffled some feathers over there. "All I wanted was someone in the know to call me back. So thanks."

He paused a beat, as if not knowing what to say to that. "Julia Henderson called together several of her business acquaintances and they compared notes. She told me you were looking into the robberies for a client. Who?"

"That's confidential," I said.

“You seem to have more information than I do.”

“Everything I know is from public records and news reports.”

“One of the victims saw the kids. He now wants to look at yearbooks, because he thinks he can identify them. This puts us in a prickly situation.”

“Yearbooks are public. Anyone can go into a school library and look at them.”

“I can’t, not without cause.”

“I can.”

He didn’t say anything.

“Got it,” I said.

“Ms. Angelhart, I don’t particularly like private investigators. You don’t follow the rules and create more problems than you solve. If anything comes of this, let me know. I can’t have a group of vigilantes chasing down these kids.”

“The same kids were involved in the Cactus Stop shooting.”

“We got that guy.”

“No, you didn’t. And if you compare the recordings from the robberies and the Cactus Stop shooting, you’ll realize it.”

“Take it up with Detective Barrios, it’s her case.”

“An innocent man is going to prison.”

“For shit’s sake, Angelhart. You have a brother on the force. You think we’re all a bunch of bullies? The guy confessed. It wasn’t coerced.”

“I didn’t say a cop threatened him. He had reasons, but he will recant.” I hoped. “I have to go. I’ll let you know if I get an ID.”

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:32 am

Since I was already downtown, I stopped by the Phoenix Crime Lab and called my brother Nico from the lobby. I had some questions that I hoped he would answer for me.

“You’re here? At the lab?”

“In the flesh. Can I come up?”

“Why do I think you’re up to something?”

“Pretty please?”

He sighed. “Remember, I now know how to disappear a body.”

I laughed.

“Stay there, I have to sign you in.”

I waited. Several minutes later, Nico came through a door. He was dressed in slacks, a blue Phoenix lab polo shirt, and a white lab coat. “Do I get a tour?” I asked.

“I already gave you a tour last summer.”

“Why are you so sour?”

“I’m just busy. And I know you want something.”

“Okay, I want something. Can we talk in your office?”

“What makes you think I have an office? I have a cubicle.”

I exaggerated batting my eyes and got a half smile.

Unlike Jack and my dad who were both over six feet tall, Nico—who’d been sickly as a kid—was five foot eight. It used to bother him, I knew, and sometimes I think it still did. He was twenty-four and looked like a young college student.

We went upstairs to the main lab, and Nico walked me to his semi-private cubicle. He had given me a tour shortly after he started working here and it was interesting, but I don’t think I’d have the patience for the meticulous work required of a lab scientist.

“So... I am interested in your Paradise Valley burglaries.”

He shrugged. “I don’t know a lot. Detective Villines is working with Paradise Valley PD. If you want info, you should talk to him or PVPD.”

“Well, not those specific crimes, just a general question. Do you take prints from all robberies?”

He said, “Just spit it out, Margo.”

“Have you been involved in investigating the spree off Camelback that started right after Christmas and culminated in the shooting at the Cactus Stop?”

“Those aren’t connected.”

“How do you know?”

He looked at me oddly. “Because they aren’t. One is a string of robberies by juveniles, one is a homicide investigation.”

“That doesn’t prove they’re not connected.”

“The police haven’t connected them, and I only worked the Cactus Stop.”

“You printed the store?”

“Our field team did. Do you know how many people come and go? We have no useable prints, not even on the door, which was our best chance. Based on the video, the suspects wore gloves.”

“Why do you think they’re not connected to the other robberies?”

He sighed. “I told you. If you want more, you’ll have to ask Villines,” he said.

“I’m asking you.”

“From what I’ve heard, three kids are responsible for the earlier robberies. No weapons. Ran if confronted. Vandalism and petty theft. Completely different M.O. from the Cactus Stop homicide.”

“What if I told you I think they are the same three people.”

“The police have the killer in custody.”

“No, they don’t.”

“Margo, he confessed.”

“Can you find out if any of those other robberies have been printed?”

He stared at me for a long minute, then turned to his computer and typed. “Yes, there were prints taken from three of the crime scenes that could be from the suspects. None matched any active cases.”

“If I get you prints, can you run them?”

“No. You need to go through Detective Villines. However much I might want to, I can’t do it for you.”

I understood his restrictions, I just didn’t like them.

How could I get Henry, Javier, and Bruno’s prints? Maybe if one of the robbery victims identified them, Villines would have cause.

“Are you working for one of the victims?” Nico asked.

“Sort of,” I said. “One of Millie’s friends was a victim.” I wasn’t working for Julia Henderson, but Nico didn’t have to know that.

“So you’re not making any money. You’re a softie.”

“Bite your tongue, little brother,” I said.

He smiled. “Margo the Marshmallow.”

I laughed. “Anything else interesting?”

“I didn’t know PIs were ambulance chasers.”

“Wow, two insults in a row. Now you’re just being mean.” I got up, needing to work through some ideas. “I’ll reach out to Villines.” Again. “Thanks for the info. It helps.”

Nico walked me to the elevator and punched the first floor. “See you Sunday at dinner,” he said as the doors closed between us.

I drove toward the middle school but realized I wouldn’t be able to check out the yearbooks. I would rather have a physical copy to show Julia, though as a last resort pictures might work.

I took a chance and turned to go to Sophia’s house. Maybe I could sweet-talk Mrs. Edgar into letting me see old yearbooks. I wondered if she would have them going back a few years.

After I knocked, I sensed I was being watched though I didn’t see anyone. Through the door, an adult female asked, “Are you a solicitor?”

“No, ma’am. Margo Angelhart, private investigator. I have a couple questions.”

She opened the door. “I’m Evelyn Edgar. Sophia told me you spoke with her. She is a minor.”

It wasn’t a crime, but I thought if I was snippy she might not talk to me. Evelyn Edgar was middle-aged, thin and graying, dressed in practical slacks and a thin sweater.

“Yes, ma’am. Evelyn? I’m trying to help Sophia’s brother Sergio, and I think Sophia also needs help.”

She was hesitant to let me in, but finally opened the door. She locked and bolted it

behind me.

“Did something happen?” I asked as she peered out the window, looking up and down the street, her brow furrowed in concern.

“I kept Sophia out of school today. We called the police yesterday afternoon and gave a report. They said they’d send an officer out but no one has come yet.”

Phoenix PD was seriously understaffed. “What happened? What kind of report?”

“Sophia’s brother Henry pushed her down and broke a plate. I know that sounds unexciting, and I would never have called the police, but Sophia told me some things that have me concerned.”

“What did she say?” I pushed when Evelyn didn’t immediately tell me.

“Henry stated that Javier killed a man. That’s why I called the police. Henry has changed. When Sophia first came here, he was kind, he helped in the yard, he was a sweet boy. But now? He’s angry and I’m scared about what he might do.”

“I believe Henry and Javier were responsible for a series of robberies in the area. Do you have any yearbooks from Sophia’s middle school?”

“I have some old yearbooks from previous girls who left them behind. Some don’t like to remember their time in foster care.”

“What about from the high school?”

“I think Ana has one from last year. I’ll find it. Please wait here.”

I stood in the entry. Sophia came in from the kitchen. She had been crying, her face

pale and splotchy. “Henry doesn’t care that Sergio is in jail. He says we abandoned him.”

“Why did you leave the other foster home?”

She didn’t say anything for a minute.

“Javier?”

She nodded.

“Did he hurt you?”

She shook her head. “He—he made me very uncomfortable. He would come into my bedroom and watch me sleep.”

“Why didn’t you tell anyone?”

“I couldn’t. He’s not in foster care. Ms. Oliver—Javier’s her son. I told her Javier was in my room, but she didn’t care. Said I must have invited him in.”

I remembered the man I saw on the porch. “What about his father?”

She shook her head. “I’ve never met him. Ms. Oliver’s father lives with her. He’s on disability.”

“She could have had her license revoked if her son sexually harassed you.”

Her face reddened. “It would have been very awkward. And he didn’t hurt me, didn’t try to—you know. I told my counselor that I was uncomfortable being the only girl. There were four teenage boys and me. I wanted to go someplace with Henry, thinking

it would be just for a while, until Sergio could take us, but there was a bed available here and I was lucky to get it. I really like Mrs. Edgar and the other girls.”

“Did Henry tell you that Javier killed a man?”

She sucked in her breath, tears returning to her eyes. Her statement would be hearsay, but it might prompt a police investigation.

“I don’t want Henry to get in trouble,” she said.

“Sergio took the blame. He pled guilty. He’s in trouble.”

“For Henry.”

“For you.” Maybe part of it was his little brother, but after talking to Sergio today, I was confident it was primarily Sophia he was protecting.

“Have you talked to Sergio?” Sophia asked.

“Yes. He’s worried about your safety. He’s not going to recant unless he knows you’re safe and Javier can’t get to you.”

“Me?” But the look on her face told me she knew something about this.

“Sophia, I want to help your brother, but you need to be honest with me.”

“Henry said that he was protecting me. But I don’t understand why.”

“Javier threatened you,” I said simply.

Evelyn walked back in with a stack of books. “How?” the woman demanded.

I told Evelyn what Sergio said. Her expression showed deep concern, and she looked at Sophia with motherly compassion. “I think Sophia needs to stay home from school indefinitely,” I said.

She agreed. “That’s a good idea. I still want to talk to the police. Why haven’t they come to take my statement? They said they would.”

“Did you tell them that you have knowledge of a homicide?”

“I didn’t say it like that.”

“Call them back and be clear. Tell them that Sophia’s brother admitted to her that he witnessed a murder. They’ll talk to her.” I didn’t know if keeping Sophia home would be good enough for Sergio, but for the short term it might work.

Evelyn handed me five yearbooks. “What are you looking for?”

“Pictures of Henry, Javier, and Bruno.”

Sophia gasped. “Not Henry. I don’t want to get him in trouble.”

“He’s already in trouble. But he’s young, so if he cooperates, he may get probation. If he cooperates, I will help him.” Or, rather, convince my mom to help. She was the lawyer after all. “But it’s his choice.”

“She’s right, sweetheart,” Evelyn said. “He’s on the wrong path.”

I took the yearbooks. “Do you know Bruno’s last name?”

“Martin,” Sophia said.

I quickly looked up the names. I found Henry Diaz in seventh grade last year. Bruno was two pages after. Javier was in none of the middle school books. I turned to the older high school yearbooks and found Javier as a freshman two years ago. Mrs. Edgar didn't have a more recent book.

"May I take these?" I asked. "I'll return them."

She nodded. "Let me give you my number. If you learn anything please let me know."

I typed her number into my phone and said, "If any of these boys come here, call 9-1-1. I'm working on finding a safe place for Sophia for the duration, but in the meantime, keep her home."

While I drove to Lyle's Diner, I called Detective Villines. He didn't answer. I left a message.

I was surprised to find Millie at the diner talking to Julia, but I shouldn't have been. Millie was that kind of friend. I left the yearbooks with Julia. I had marked the pages, but not the names of the suspects. There were thirty-six photos on each page, that should be sufficient for a fair ID. She promised to show the photos to the other victims and call Detective Villines if anyone recognized one of the thieves.

Then I drove back to the Cactus Stop. Some of the videos Don posted had been bothering me, especially the one up on the Piastewa Trail. But the primary thing that irritated me was that he'd said he hadn't known Greg before Greg started working with him. That was a lie. They'd known each other since high school and they hung out together over the years. Why would he lie about that?

Of course, he didn't have to tell me the truth about anything. He could exaggerate or obfuscate or make up complete bullshit. But I've found that if someone knows a

murder victim or celebrity, they tend to exaggerate the friendship.

Oh, we were best friends since high school! I can't believe he's dead.

Instead, Don had downplayed his friendship with Greg.

I barely knew him.

I walked into the Cactus Stop not knowing what I wanted to say or do, and decided to wing it.

Don Cruz was there, working behind the counter. He saw me, grinned. "Hey, you again."

"Me again," I said with a smile. I went over to the beer cooler and picked up another six pack of Coors Light. I was going to have a fully stocked refrigerator and my brother didn't even drink that much. I put it on the counter, paid.

"My brother and I are going hiking this afternoon, up the Piastewa Peak Trail. Ever done that?"

"Totally. I'm up there all the time. Great views."

"Do you have a favorite trail?"

He shrugged. "Hmm, not really, we like to take our dirt bikes up there."

Bikes weren't allowed, but clearly he didn't care about the rules.

"Sounds fun."

I paid, held out my hand for the change which he counted out, then said, “Do you have a bag for the beer?”

“Anything for you, sugar,” he said with a sly grin. “I get off at eight most days, if you want to get a drink or something.”

I poured the change into the bag, glanced over at the cigarettes, sighed.

“I quit, but sometimes I just need one, you know? Can you toss in a pack of Virginia Slims?”

“Sure.”

I counted out exact change and slid it on the counter. He put the cigarettes in the bag on top of the beer.

“Thanks,” I said and left.

It had been a spur-of-the-moment decision, but I had an idea and would love to get his prints. I didn’t know if the cans would retain them with the moisture on the outside, but the coins and the cigarette box just might.

It was the mountain that tipped me off. Those trails on the east led to all the mountain-side homes in Paradise Valley. According to the article I read, the police believed that the robbers parked outside of the neighborhood and walked in, then escaped through backyards. What better way to disappear from a crime scene than through the maze of trails. They were closed at night and not regularly patrolled.

I may have solved Nico’s big case. Detective Villines should give me a medal.

I was about to drive away when I saw someone familiar walk up to the door and enter

the Cactus Stop. He stopped and looked right at me.

Javier Escobar.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:32 am

Sophia sat on the couch, wringing her hands, and told Detective Barrios everything that Henry had said.

“Sergio didn’t kill anyone. Henry had his sweatshirt the weekend that...that the clerk was killed,” Sophia said. “He gave it back to Sergio at our dinner last week.”

The detective was writing in her notebook, a blank look on her face, but when she finally looked up, Sophia didn’t think the woman believed her.

“Did Henry admit that he was one of the three boys who were at the Cactus Stop the night the clerk was killed?”

“Y-yes. But he didn’t shoot anyone! Javier did. He specifically said that it was an accident, that Javier said the clerk was going for a gun and he shot him. Sergio wasn’t even there!”

The detective looked pointedly at her. “Your brother confessed. The sweatshirt he wore in the video I saw him wearing at work a week later. The lab confirmed that there was gunshot residue in the jacket. You’re now claiming that your other brother was involved with the shooting, and that would make Sergio an accessory after the fact.”

Sophia stifled a cry. “No. He said he was protecting me.”

“He told you that?”

“No, the detective—”

“What detective?”

Mrs. Edgar said, “A private detective.”

Detective Barrios looked irritated. “You’re running on a theory by a private investigator?”

Mrs. Edgar handed the cop the PI’s business card. “She has been working with Sergio. I don’t know if he hired her or his attorney, but she said Sergio is worried about Sophia’s safety. Javier Escobar is the young man who shot and killed the clerk. But until you arrest him, Sergio isn’t going to recant. Javier threatened Sophia.”

“According to Ms. Angelhart.”

“Yes.”

The detective wrote down the information, handed the card back to Mrs. Edgar.

“You believe me, right?” Sophia said.

“In my experience, I’ve never had an innocent man plead guilty to a crime he didn’t commit.”

“Sergio is innocent.” Sophia couldn’t stop tears from leaking out.

“I’ll talk to these boys, see what their story is.”

She got up and Sophia feared she had made a big mistake.

Mrs. Edgar walked the detective to the door. Sophia overheard her say, “Sophia is a good girl—she doesn’t lie.”

“It’s hard when your family is torn up like this. It could be the brothers were in it together.”

Sophia ran down the hall to her room. The detective didn’t believe her. She didn’t believe that Sergio was innocent.

Maybe Sophia could prove it.

She retrieved a shoe box from the bottom drawer of her dresser and went back to the living room. Mrs. Edgar was still talking to the detective at the door. Sophia handed her the box. “Javier has left me presents. I told him I didn’t want them, but he would put them in my locker, or have Henry give them to me.”

“How do you know they’re from Javier?” the detective asked.

“He left me notes. They’re all in there. Most of them. I threw some away, but then I got scared that he would find out, so I hid them.”

The detective took the box and opened the lid. Sophia knew what was inside. A pretty emerald necklace that looked very expensive. Coins that were very old. A unicorn figurine that might have been real crystal. And notes from Javier that repeated over and over that he loved her.

The expression didn’t change on the detective’s face, but her tone was different. “Let me see what I can do.”

When she left, Mrs. Edgar said, “You never told me he gave you gifts.”

“It stopped a few weeks ago. I thought maybe he finally believed me that I wanted nothing to do with him. But then at school the other day, Henry gave me a necklace and said it was from Javier.” She wiped away her tears. “I should have told you,” she

whispered. "I'm sorry."

"Sophia, don't despair. The detective has more information now. I believe in the system. It usually works."

"She thinks Sergio is guilty," Sophia said. "What if she thinks they're both guilty and arrests Henry? Then I'll have no one!"

"Shh," Mrs. Edgar said. "Maybe she now realizes she arrested the wrong man. You did the right thing. Telling the truth is always the right thing."

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:32 am

Detective Tina Barrios sat in her police issue sedan outside of the Edgar home and swore a blue streak.

She hadn't thought Sergio Diaz was the killer until he confessed. After, she was still skeptical until she learned the hoodie had tested positive for GSR and his statement was consistent with the facts.

Now, she wasn't sure what to believe. She had asked him to name his accomplices and he refused. It would make sense that he would protect his brother, that he didn't want the younger kid to get in trouble. And while Sophia Diaz had sounded sincere, she was basing her statement on what she claimed her brother had said.

Yet, Tina knew that this jewelry was the real thing. Where would a seventeen-year-old punk like Javier Escobar get an emerald rock like this?

Tina wasn't positive that Sergio wasn't involved. They could all have been, or maybe Sophia was right. That Sergio didn't know until after the fact. Or she was trying to confuse the situation because her brothers were criminals.

This case had gone from straightforward to a fucking mess in the last thirty minutes.

Tina wished she had talked to both Henry and Sophia after Sergio's confession. Maybe something would have come out then. But the county attorney was happy with the case, and she had sixteen open cases on her desk including a drug-related double homicide that had landed on her yesterday. A signed confession was as good as a conviction, and she didn't have time to waste.

She didn't want to believe that Sergio wasn't the killer, but her earlier doubts rose to the surface and she looked down at her notes.

Javier Escobar, 17. Henry Diaz, 14. Bruno Martin, 14.

All lived together in a foster home that Javier's mother, Brenda Oliver, operated.

Could be that Sergio was somehow involved, but there had been no hint that he was associated with a gang, and his employer said he was a diligent, hardworking employee. No marks on his record since he was sixteen.

Did a kid who was clean for three years just walk into a store and kill a man?

Or maybe, he just hadn't been caught before?

Dammit. She called her supervisor and told him what she had learned.

"Get that box into evidence, then talk to the kids. See what you think after that," her supervisor said. "But Sergio Diaz confessed. Unless you find clear and convincing evidence of his innocence, I don't see the county dropping the charges."

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I left Villines another message, stressing the urgency.

“I’m heading to Flannigan’s, if you want a beer on the house. It’s important that we talk ASAP.”

I relieved Scotty and since the Suns weren’t playing, put a variety of sports on the screens, with Irish music in the background. We only put on sound for sports if it was a local team.

I sent Andy a long message about the events of the day when I couldn’t reach him on the phone, and let him know that Sergio wasn’t going to budge on his statement unless he knew that Sophia was safe. Which, practically, meant proving Javier Escobar was the killer.

Last night I had mapped out the Paradise Valley burglaries that had been identified in the crime blog. I didn’t have addresses, only intersections or a block. Though Nico said seventeen, I had twelve. Looking at it now, my theory held:

Every one of those properties could be accessed from the Phoenix Mountains Preserve.

What I thought and what I could prove were two different things.

My phone rang and it was an unfamiliar number. “Margo Angelhart,” I answered.

“Hello, Margo, this is Evelyn Edgar.”

“Hi. Did you talk to the police?”

“Yes. A detective named Tina Barrios came by. I did not like her, and I did not like the way she talked to Sophia. She’s in her room crying.”

“What happened?”

Evelyn told me that she didn’t think the detective took them seriously and said that Henry could be lying because he doesn’t want his brother to go to prison. Which made no sense to me since Henry told Sophia, not a cop or anyone else in authority.

“I don’t think the detective really listened to us.”

I didn’t know, but I wanted to give Evelyn some hope. My phone vibrated twice, indicating two text messages, but I didn’t look. “Cops aren’t going to tip their hand. You gave her information, she’ll follow up.”

“You think so?”

“She has to make a report of your conversation, and at least investigate your allegation. It might take a couple days.”

“Can you talk to her? Because I don’t feel like we were heard. Sophia is a good girl, Margo. She wants to do the right thing, but the system isn’t working for her and she’s losing hope.”

I believed in the system. My mom worked in it. My brother. Even my dad, as a doctor for the VA.

But I also knew that the system didn’t always work, and justice was not always swift. People slipped through the cracks. Not all crimes were punished. Fighting for justice

was sometimes an uphill battle.

“Let me see what I can do,” I said. “But keep Sophia home tomorrow, okay?”

“I will.”

After I ended the call, I checked my messages. They were both from Lulu.

Hey, I did the best I could on the photo. It’s clearer, so maybe if you know him you’ll recognize him. Thanks again for standing up for me at dinner.

The next message was the image. I zoomed in and immediately recognized the person in the reflection.

Javier Escobar.

I put my phone down and stared at the map I’d created. Three teenagers vandalizing businesses and petty theft, culminating in killing Greg Rodriguez at the Cactus Stop. The crimes started after Christmas and nothing since the murder. Eight robberies over three weeks.

Seventeen burglaries over about five months, the last occurring on January 8. I texted Nico.

Hey, those Paradise Valley burglaries. Any after January 8 that match the MO?

He texted me back almost immediately.

No. Why?

I sent him a smiley face and put my phone down.

No burglaries since a week before Rodriguez was killed.

That wasn't going to last. Javier Escobar was Don Cruz's new partner. Between my sighting today and Lu's picture, I didn't have any doubt. The question in my mind—had he always been involved? He killed Greg, but did they know each other? Or had Don recruited Javier because he had a falling out with Greg?

I wanted to look at the security video again.

Did Javier target the Cactus Stop for the sole purpose of murdering Greg Rodriguez? Had they been partners, or had Javier wanted in on the crimes? Had Don asked—or paid—Javier to kill Greg?

“Penny for your thoughts.”

I jumped, looked around. I was so engrossed in my map and theories that I hadn't seen Detective Villines come in. I had never met him, but he looked like a cop so I made the assumption.

“Tomas Villines?”

“That's me.” He sat down at the stool across from me.

“I'll give my thoughts to you for free. What's your poison?”

“Guinness.”

I grinned. “Man after my heart.” I poured him a Guinness the proper way—which takes time. He saw my maps, frowned. “Yep,” I said. “I've solved your case.”

He shook his head, but I saw he was smiling. “Julia Henderson called me today. She

had a meeting tonight at her diner with the other robbery victims and they identified all three kids in the yearbooks. Javier Escobar, Henry Diaz, and Bruno Martin. Multiple identifications.”

“They live in the same foster home, except that Javier is the son of the foster mom.”

“You know, down at headquarters this afternoon, Tina Barrios went off about you. I was lucky enough to overhear. She is not a fan of yours, so I didn’t share that I’d talked to you.”

I shrugged. I certainly didn’t care.

“She knows that you’ve visited Sergio Diaz twice and thinks you’re working for the defense.”

“I’m not,” I said.

I couldn’t tell if he believed me.

“I have a theory.” I put the perfectly built Guinness in front of him.

He sipped, smiled, said, “Give it to me.”

I told him about how Sophia said Henry had Sergio’s hoodie for nearly a week—including the night that Rodriguez was killed. From the videos, a taller, skinnier kid was wearing it—not Henry.

“I thought initially that Sergio confessed to protect his brother, but after talking to him and Sophia, I think he confessed to protect his sister. Maybe both of them. According to Sergio, Javier threatened Sophia and if Sergio didn’t remain silent about the robbery, Javier said that she’d get hurt.”

“Remaining silent about a crime and confessing to murder are two different things.”

“The confession was knee-jerk. He knew how deep his brother was in Javier’s crimes. That, coupled with Javier’s threats against his sister, had Sergio doing what he thought he needed to do to protect her.” I shrugged. “You and I both know that young men often make split-second decisions without thinking things through. But now, Sergio feels stuck. If he recants, Javier isn’t going to be arrested without evidence. Which puts a target on Sophia’s back.”

“They don’t trust us.”

Tomas took that personally.

“Maybe not,” I admitted, “but these are young people who have seen the worst of the system. They’re in foster care. The system has kept Sergio from gaining custody—at least in their eyes. Henry is angry and latched onto an older teen in his house, a surrogate for his brother. He is the key. We need to convince Henry to tell us everything he knows. He may even have physical evidence of the crimes. He was there,” I emphasized.

Tomas raised an eyebrow. “We?”

“He’s not going to talk to you,” I said. “He might talk to me—or his sister. Arizona is a one-party consent state. She can record the conversation.”

“They’re minors.”

“It doesn’t matter.” True, I didn’t know the exact law, but having Henry state what he knew might be the best way, at a minimum, to get Henry out of Javier’s house. “If we can get Henry and Sophia to another house, a safe place, Sergio will talk.”

Tomas didn't say anything.

"Sergio is not a killer," I said.

"You can't know that."

"I'm a good judge of character."

He stared at me, sipped his Guinness, then leaned back on his stool. I was wearing him down, which made me happy.

I put the bag with the Coors Light, cigarettes, and change on the counter. "I don't know if you can get prints off these, but if Greg Rodriguez's prints don't match the Paradise Valley burglaries, I think the man who handed me these will."

I told him my theory about Don Cruz and Greg Rodriguez—friends in high school who reconnected last summer when Greg started working at the Cactus Shop. "Maybe Don got him the job, maybe not. If you go through their social media accounts—both of which are public—you'll see there are several points where they match up, but for the most part they led separate lives until they started working together. This wouldn't have made me suspicious, except that Don lied to me for no reason."

"Maybe because you're a PI?"

"He didn't know that. I was a customer, I bought a six pack of Coors Light, he flirted with me. Told me that he barely knew Greg, except that they worked at the same place."

I told him about the videos that showed Don was very familiar with the Phoenix Mountains Preserve and Piestewa Park specifically. I showed him the maps I'd

created and how easy it would be to disappear into the mountains. “The burglaries are at night, between eight and midnight,” I said. “I’ll bet if you review the shift schedules for Don and Greg, they’ll both be off those nights.”

“It’s not enough.” He gestured to the bag. “I can’t run these prints.”

“Why? I can make a statement that they’re Don Cruz’s prints.”

“I need cause. I didn’t witness him touching these items. I can’t just take the word of a civilian that he might be a thief.”

“Well, shit,” I said. “What about Greg Rodriguez? Can you check his prints, since the morgue took them? They might match to the burglaries.”

“You think that Don and Greg were connected to these other robberies at the businesses?”

He sounded skeptical.

“No. I think Javier and his gang of brats are solely responsible for the petty thefts and Don and Greg are responsible for the Paradise Valley burglaries. But Javier knows Don. Today I saw him going into the Cactus Stop when I was leaving. And then, in one of Don’s social media posts, Javier’s reflection was in the door.”

“A reflection,” he said flatly.

“Their relationship should be investigated. How do they know each other? How long? Was Javier involved in the burglaries? All? Some? How? Javier is still in high school, but they could have another connection.”

Tomas was thinking. That’s all I needed him to do. Finally he said, “Well, shit. This

is a mess, isn't it?"

"Only until we clean it up."

He stared at me. "I'll clean it up. You be a good PI and write up a straightforward report for me that I can use with my boss with all the facts. I can't run these prints—" he gestured to the bag "—but I'll see if I can find cause and get them myself." He looked at the maps I'd created, grinned. "And include your pretty pictures. My boss likes visuals."

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:32 am

On Friday nights, Flannigan's closed anytime between midnight and two, depending on how busy it was. I announced last call at midnight and locked up just after one in the morning. Running around all day then working all night on my feet had me craving first a hot shower, then bed and sleep. Maybe I'd even get eight hours.

Fortunately, Villines gave credence to my theory and he was following up on it. He had been a jerk on the phone, but a lot of cops were like that—they didn't want "civilians" to interfere with their job. But now that we'd met face-to-face, maybe he would ease off on the "leave this to the police" talk, and I was confident he would seek the truth.

All in all, a productive week.

I showered and collapsed in bed just after 2:00 a.m. I always slept in a tank top and boxers, but it was freezing, so I snuggled under my blankets and down comforter with a satisfied sigh. The only thing that would make tonight better was if I had a boyfriend to invite over. It had been a long time since I cared enough about someone to ask them to stay the night. Maybe I was picky, but that was okay. I might have asked Tomas Villines out, except I noticed the wedding band on his finger. He was attractive and smart, two big pluses in my book. But I didn't poach.

I yawned, closed my eyes, thought about tomorrow. I'd check on Sophia and make sure she was okay after the interview with Detective Barrios. Call Villines with a friendly push, maybe see what my mom and Aunt Rita had been able to learn about the Diaz family and what they could do to help, once I helped clear Sergio. Maybe I was being naive about Sergio's case, maybe his actions had mucked up the entire investigation and he would have this ding on his record forever, preventing him from

getting custody of his siblings.

But I had to believe I could fix it.

I worked tomorrow night at Flannigan's, then had Sunday off. I might even go to St. Dominic's, Uncle Rafe's church, before heading to my parents' for Sunday dinner. I didn't go to church every week, but Catholic guilt was a thing. Some stereotypes are there for a reason and I hadn't been to Mass since...the Sunday after Christmas. Yikes, five weeks. Yeah, I needed to go.

I felt myself drifting off on that lovely plane where thoughts faded and sleep was within my grasp.

A loud explosion propelled me out of bed. My gun was in my hand—I didn't even remember grabbing it off my nightstand. I blinked, and what I thought was a grenade or land mine—I'd heard my fair share of explosions during my time in the Army—wasn't.

It was a shotgun blast and breaking glass. Someone was breaking in?

Almost without thinking, I slipped into my shoes, which I always had next to my bed—another habit left over from my years in the military. If there was broken glass, I didn't want to step on it. Gun close to my side, I left my bedroom.

My phone was charging in the kitchen, but I suspected one of my neighbors had already called in the gunshot.

I heard a car screeching down the street, a crash, and more screeching tires.

I didn't hear anyone breaking in, so I flipped on the lights, looked around.

No one was there.

But someone had shot out one of the two narrow block windows in my entryway. Glass littered the tile. A rock with a note tied around it had been left for me.

I didn't have to touch it to read the threat in block letters:

BACK OFF. OR ELSE.

I gave a statement to the responding officers. I told them that I believed either Don Cruz or Javier Escobar—or both—had thrown the rock. I explained that Don had looked at my driver's license and could have easily memorized my address, and Javier had seen me talking to Sophia Diaz and again at the Cactus Stop.

By the time I was done, I was exhausted and hoped I could sleep, even though it was now four thirty in the morning and I had a hole in my entry window. Then my brother Jack showed up on my doorstep looking both worried and angry.

"Why didn't you call me?"

"You live in the middle of nowhere, could you have gotten here faster than the police?"

"You know what I mean."

"How did you hear?"

"I used to work same shift as Vince Gorel, who was the responding officer. He called me. But you should have."

"I'm fine," I said.

Jack checked my house, inspected the window.

“The police drove through the neighborhood,” I said. “Whoever did this hit two parked cars when they were going around the corner. They’re going to process the paint, collect evidence. Plus, some of my neighbors have security cameras and they might get a license plate or something else identifiable on video. They were stupid to come after me here.”

“I’m staying.”

“The guest bed isn’t comfortable.”

“I know,” he grumbled and I laughed. Jack had stayed over a couple times when we were working on a house project. He was a good brother.

He hugged me. “I know you can take care of yourself, Margo, but that doesn’t mean I’m not going to worry about you.”

“Okay, Dad,” I said sarcastically.

He pinched my arm like he used to do when we were kids, and I slapped his arm.

“I’m going to try to sleep,” I said. I walked down the short hall as Jack headed to the den where I had a hide-a-bed for guests. “Jack?”

He looked over at me. “Hmm?”

“Thanks.”

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I woke to the smell of coffee and bacon. I didn't even know I had bacon in the house.

I got up, slipped into sweatpants, and walked down the hall to the kitchen. Jack was dressed and cooking. It was nine in the morning. He'd already secured the window. I'd have to call for repairs on Monday.

"Where'd you find the bacon? Are you sure it's good?"

"Yep. I just bought it. You have nothing here, except a couple of things in Mom's Tupperware, most of which is moldy. You can clean them out."

"I've been busy." I poured coffee.

"Talk to me."

I told him everything over bacon and eggs, except that Andy Flannigan hired me. I had only told my mom about Andy because I knew she'd keep it confidential. But Jack was a detective, and I didn't want him thinking that Andy was going to start questioning every case brought to him.

When I was done, Jack said, "Villines is a good cop. He'll figure this out. You should back off."

I didn't say anything. Jack knew me better than that.

Fortunately, he didn't call me on it.

After he left, I locked up and headed to Lyle's Diner to warn Julia face-to-face that she needed to be careful for the next few days. I told her about the threat against me, and that if Javier was involved, he might do the same to her or anyone else who identified them.

I drove to check on Sophia. She was still sleeping—Evelyn said she didn't go to sleep until dawn.

“What about the other girls living here?”

Evelyn said, “My youngest daughter took them to her house. She has a nice little place in north Glendale. She's a teacher, so doesn't work weekends. They're going to have a girls' day, then they'll stay over there. I wanted Sophia to go as well, but she didn't want to. I'll be vigilant.”

“Please do. One sighting, call 9-1-1.”

“I will.”

I didn't want to leave them, but there wasn't much I could do here. Plus, I had to work at the bar tonight. Still, I checked all her windows and doors, and gave Evelyn a few security tips that she seemed to appreciate.

Torn about leaving Sophia, I promised to check in later. I left and drove to the Orozco's restaurant.

Millie was her usual warm self and told me everything I already knew about the robberies, but it was relaxing to hear her talk about identifying the “little hoodlums” as she said, and how the police were finally taking the robberies seriously. I thought that the police had always taken them seriously, but between the randomness of the targets and lack of evidence, it wasn't really their fault they didn't catch them until

now.

My phone vibrated and I excused myself. It was Villines.

“Well, we found something interesting. The note left at your house last night had prints on it. They match the Paradise Valley burglaries.”

“Don Cruz,” I said.

“They are technically unknown, but I’m working on it. I have several cops talking to your neighbors, getting security footage, and as soon as I get a match on the vehicle that fled your neighborhood last night, I’ll have probable cause to talk to him.”

“Assuming the vehicle matches Don’s car.”

“Javier Escobar doesn’t have a driver’s license, so if your theory is right, it’s most likely Don who was driving.”

“Good,” I said.

“Keep your head down. This threat seems to be coming from left field, but that could be because they’re panicking.”

“Roger that.”

“I’m serious, Margo. I got a call from your brother this morning.”

“I wish he hadn’t,” I moaned.

I ended the call, tried to tell Millie I didn’t need food, but she fixed me a lunch burrito to go. “You have been working so hard,” Millie said. “Take it, eat it when you have

time. It's good."

"I know it's good. You're the best." I kissed her cheek and headed to my car. My phone rang again. I'd never been this popular before.

I put the bag on the seat next to me and answered the phone. "Hi, Andy, you got my messages?"

"Yes. Sergio still hasn't contacted the court, and he hasn't even spoken to his lawyer. I gently prodded her, but she's expecting to go into a plea negotiation hearing on Monday."

"Sergio isn't going to say a word until he knows his brother and sister are safe," I said. "But it might be a moot point, if Barrios can nail Javier for the Cactus Stop murder."

"You said Henry is a witness. I can't ask around without making George suspicious of my involvement, but do you think the police are following through on that?"

"Yes," I said. "Barrios took Sophia's statement, and that coupled with the identification on Villines's robbery case, and I think they'll track him down. If they talk to him without Javier or any of his friends around, I think he'll do the right thing." I was fifty-fifty on that. I didn't know Henry Diaz. I wanted to believe that he would put family above his friendship with Javier, but I couldn't count on it. "Do you know if Barrios has already talked to the teens?"

"Like I said, I have to be careful," Andy said. "I know she went to the house last night around dinner. The boys were there, and the mom put up major obstacles. They denied they did anything and the mom sent her away. Barrios is working on getting a warrant. Apparently, she's working with Villines who has some evidence from one of the robberies, but I don't have the details."

That was interesting, I thought. Was it the IDs from the businesses? Prints? A camera shot that matched one of them?

Andy said, “The younger boys are wards of the state, so it’ll be a process.”

“But?” I pushed.

“Once she gets the warrant, she can separate and interrogate them. The two wards will have court-appointed advocates. Javier is seventeen, so she can question him as an adult. His mother or an attorney can be present, but she’ll formally question him on Monday. She’s also working on a petition to remove Henry and Bruno from the home, but that’ll only work if there’s a place for them to go. It might be juvenile detention.”

I winced. Not the best option, but if I was right—and I thought I was—they were accessories to murder. Maybe a few nights locked up would compel them to cooperate.

I started the ignition and headed out of the parking lot. I had another question for Andy, but it slipped my mind as I saw Don Cruz driving a damaged Ford sedan. Henry was in the passenger seat. They pulled into the Orozco’s parking area. Before they got out of the car, they pulled on ski masks.

“Andy, call the police and tell them there’s an emergency at the Orozco’s restaurant on Hatcher and Cave Creek. Robbery in progress. Do it now!”

I pulled my car around to the back of the restaurant where a sign read Deliveries Only.

I tried calling Millie; she didn’t answer.

Damn, damn, damn!

The back door was open for both fresh air and ventilation into the cooking area, but the security screen was locked. I pulled out my lock picks, but it took me three times longer than at Sergio's apartment. My heart pounded in my chest; I willed it to stop.

Training took over. Once my heart steadied, the lock sprung. I held the door so it didn't make noise and quietly entered the restaurant.

I heard voices, angry and scared. Don Cruz was shouting, "All of it! Now, old man!"

A gun shot rang out and Millie screamed. "No, no!" she cried out.

"That was a warning. Henry, get the money."

Don sounded like he was losing it. He should be. He was wanted by the police and he was an idiot leaving his prints everywhere. Didn't these young thieves watch crime shows anymore? Did they think the masks would prevent identification? There were security cameras all over the place, and their damaged car would be easy to identify.

"Don't try it, kid," Don said. What kid? Michael? Homer and Millie's son had been working today. Damn.

Please don't try to be a hero, Michael.

"Please, you can take the money," Homer said. "Just put the gun down."

When I had left ten minutes ago, there were only a couple customers in booths. I didn't know if they were still there or had run out. Two cooks in the back. They stood frozen in the kitchen, which could be seen from the restaurant. They were staring at the masked Don and Henry. I gave a low whistle and the one closest to me looked

over. I motioned for him to get down to the floor, slowly. He nodded, caught the other cook's eye, and they both went to their knees.

I had my gun out and hid behind the swinging doors.

Don was ranting as Henry grabbed the money from the register.

"That's it? That's all you have? That's not even three hundred bucks!"

"It's all, I swear," Homer said in a calm voice. "Take it and leave."

"Your purse," Don said, turning his gun to Millie. "Where's your purse?"

"In the back room. Just go, go!"

Don walked over to where Michael, the Orozcos's nineteen-year-old son, was standing at the counter. Michael went to community college and worked here part-time. He was the love of their life—their only child, born years after they married when they thought they'd never have children. Don put the gun to Michael's head.

"Bitch, get your purse now or he's dead."

Millie was sobbing and I sidestepped the swinging doors as she burst through on her way to the back room.

She saw me, eyes wide, but she didn't speak. I motioned for her to get down and pointed to the two cooks. She looked over her shoulder to where she could no longer see Michael or Homer. I nodded, motioned again for her to get on the floor.

She trusted me. I hoped and prayed that her trust was not misplaced.

I would never forgive myself if anything bad happened to her family.

Slowly, I peered through the round window in the swinging door. Henry was standing by the register, his eyes wide and shell-shocked. He held a plastic bag half-filled with cash. Don—taller, leaner than Henry—was standing next to Michael, gun out, but not pointing at anyone directly. While I couldn't see his face, his eyes were visible through wide holes in the thin ski mask. They looked wild and rimmed red. He was high. I don't think he'd slept since he shot at my house last night.

There were several customers huddled in booths, but Don didn't seem to care much about them. He waved his gun to one who moved. "Stop!" he told the young woman, who started to cry.

Homer was calm, even though his eyes were worried.

"Where's your bitch?" Don said to Homer. "She run out? Get the police? They'll find you both dead!"

He turned the gun to Homer.

I pushed through the doors and shouted, "Down!"

My sudden presence startled Don. Homer and Michael both dropped to the floor. Don turned his gun to me, but I fired immediately, aiming for center mass, one-two-three. But I was moving and my aim was slightly off. All three bullets ripped into his upper right shoulder. He dropped the gun and fell screaming to the ground.

I ran over, kicked the gun away toward Homer, then turned to Henry.

He dropped the bag and put his hands up. His eyes were terrified behind the mask.

That's when I heard sirens.

"My sister, my sister," Henry sobbed. "Javier is going to hurt her."

Millie ran in from the back. She hugged Homer and Michael, crying tears of relief. "Margo, Margo, thank you! You saved my family."

"Henry," I said, "Where is Javier right now?"

"He went to Sophia's. He's obsessed with her. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Please help my sister. I didn't mean for any of this to happen. I didn't. Please."

Homer picked up Don's gun from the floor. He didn't look comfortable holding it, but said, "Go, Margo. Go save the girl. I will tell the police everything."

I ran out the back and as I sped down the street, I called 9-1-1.

Sophia stared at Javier as he held a gun on her and Mrs. Edgar.

“W-what are you doing?”

“This is your fault,” Javier said. “You started this, Sophia. Talking to that woman. Telling her lies. She ruined everything! I was building a nest egg to take care of you. You’re mine, you’ve always been mine.”

Sophia was shaking and didn’t know what to say or how to stop Javier from doing something rash. She feared he was on drugs, which scared her even more. She wouldn’t be able to reason with him if his mind was twisted.

“Put the gun down,” Mrs. Edgar said firmly. She sounded calm, but she had to be scared just like Sophia. “Walk away, Javier. I won’t stop you.”

“Not without Sophia.”

Javier’s movements were erratic, his eyes bloodshot; he was sweating. Where was Henry? Had Javier hurt him?

Javier pulled Mrs. Edgar’s purse off the shelf and dumped the contents on the dining table. He grabbed her wallet and car keys.

“Let’s go, Sophia.”

“I won’t go with you.”

She was trying to be strong, but her voice quivered.

Javier rushed to her side so fast she didn't have time to scream. He put the gun to her head and said, "You think you're better than me? You're nothing. Your mother is a fucking drug addict murderer. Your daddy didn't even want you. You should be grateful that I love you. One more word, one more, and you'll understand my wrath."

She couldn't stop shaking.

Mrs. Edgar started to move toward the phone and the gun went off. Sophia screamed.

"The next one goes in your head," Javier told the woman.

The bullet made a small crater in the wall. Mrs. Edgar went from calm to terrified, and Sophia hated that her brother had brought violence into the kind woman's house. How could Henry have called Javier his brother when this boy terrorized them?

She didn't want to cry, but tears fell. She wanted to be strong, but she'd lost Henry and she'd lost Sergio and nothing would ever be the same again. She would die if Javier killed Mrs. Edgar because of her.

"Let's go. And Sophia? If you cause me any more problems, I will tie you up and put you in the trunk. Do you understand? Do you?"

She nodded. Yes, he would do what he said.

He would tie her up. He would hurt her. Would he kill her, too? She didn't want to die.

"I—I—I'll—I'll go with you," she stuttered.

“Sophia, you don’t have to,” Mrs. Edgar said.

But she did. She didn’t want anyone else to be hurt.

Javier grabbed her and opened the front door.

Police cars lined the street. A booming voice came through a loudspeaker. “Put your gun down and your hands up.”

Javier slammed the door and screamed in rage.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:32 am

I heard Javier scream as the door slammed shut.

“Who called the police?” he shouted at the front of the house.

I had arrived five minutes before the police and made a plan. Maybe I was being reckless, but two people were in danger and I was riding high on the adrenaline from what happened at the restaurant. Javier was unpredictable, so I broke a rear window and climbed into the back of Evelyn Edgar’s home. I landed in the master bedroom where a framed picture of Evelyn, her deceased husband, and their four daughters when they were young greeted me.

I would not let those girls lose their mother.

I texted Villines and Jack that I was in the house. I had told 9-1-1 what I planned to do; they advised me not to. I ignored the dispatcher. Someone had to de-escalate the situation.

I called Villines.

“What the fuck are you doing, Margo? We’re only a minute out.”

“I’m putting you on speaker so you can hear everything,” I whispered. “But I won’t be able to hear you.”

I hoped he could hear through my clothing as I pocketed my phone.

Javier paced and ranted, breaking things, acting like a caged animal. Keeping my

back to the wall, I crept silently down the hall until I could better see into the living room.

Evelyn was on the floor. I didn't see blood and she was conscious. She looked worried, her eyes fixated across the room toward the kitchen, presumably on Javier. I didn't see Sophia.

I stared at Evelyn, willing her to look at me. Finally, she did. I put my finger to my lips and I saw in her eyes she understood.

"Okay, okay," Javier was saying. "We're going to go, baby. You and me. We'll go out the back."

"No," Sophia sobbed from the kitchen. I couldn't see her and didn't know how close Javier was to her, whether she was restrained or injured. I would have to wing it.

"Stop fighting me!" Javier said. "It's going to be you and me. I have a place for us. Then you'll understand that everything I did, I did for you. We have to go now before the cops show up. Come on!"

I heard Sophia struggling, then I heard the distinct, loud click of a bullhorn. "Javier Escobar, this is the Phoenix Police Department," the voice said from the front yard. "Come out with your hands in the air."

"No!" Javier shouted. He stomped from the kitchen to the living room, holding Sophia close to him, the fingers of his left hand tight around her bicep, his right hand holding the gun to her side. He angled his head so he could peer through the blinds. "It wasn't supposed to happen like this!"

I feared he was going to start shooting. The police wouldn't fire into the house knowing there were two hostages, but if Javier felt trapped, he might kill Sophia.

I was about to expose myself and try to de-escalate, when Javier said, “Okay, I have an idea.”

I backed away again, because he sounded hopeful, and if he thought he could escape, that bought me a little time.

Javier seemed to have forgotten Evelyn was in the room. He walked past her to the kitchen. If he had looked down the hall, he would have seen me, but he was focused on Sophia, who he still clutched hard to his side. As soon as they were out of view, I motioned for Evelyn to come toward me. She crawled slowly, trying not to attract attention. I whispered into my phone, “One hostage going out rear window,” then nodded to her and motioned down the hall.

She understood, pulled herself up off the floor, and walked briskly to her room.

One down, one to go.

“Yes!” Javier shouted, excited.

“Stop it, Javier! Please,” Sophia begged.

I couldn’t see them and moved down the hall toward the front of the house. Looking around the corner and through the dining room, I saw Javier grabbing bottles and rags from under the sink.

“We’ll just create this diversion, see? Then we’ll run away and be together. Sophia, from the minute I saw you I knew it was you and me forever.”

He turned on the gas stove and put paper towels and rags on the flames. What the hell was he doing? He poured something liquid on the burners.

An explosion rocked the kitchen.

I ran forward as Sophia stumbled from the kitchen, coughing, her hair smoking. I grabbed her and pushed her to the carpet, covering her body, not knowing if she was on fire or if Javier was going to shoot her in the back.

The front door crashed open and I stayed down. Smoke filled the house and I didn't know if the whole place was going to explode, or just the kitchen. Suddenly, big hands grabbed me, pulled me to my feet, half pushed, half carried me outside. From my clouded vision, I saw another man pick up Sophia and follow us. I held on to him, unable to see through the smoke, as we ran outside. As soon as I was on the porch, I stumbled and another cop picked me up and carried me down the stairs.

"I can walk," I said while coughing.

But the cop didn't put me down until we were on the street, behind a police car. The other rescuer put Sophia down next to me. She clutched me and I held her tight.

"What happened?" Villines was saying to me. My ears were still ringing and I could barely hear him. I gratefully accepted his water bottle, then coughed, clearing my throat.

"He—Javier—was doing something with the stove," I said. "He said a diversion."

Villines looked to the front of the house. Four cops brought out Javier. His face was blistered and black, his clothes smoldering, but he was very much alive.

I leaned back and closed my eyes. He was alive, but he would be spending many years in prison.

"You're safe," I told Sophia.

“What’s going to happen?”

“Justice.”

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:32 am

It was my fault that Millie and Homer had landed on Don Cruz's radar. I'd made a tactical error.

I had suspected Don had memorized my address from my license the first time I went to the Cactus Stop. Maybe he thought to rob me, maybe he thought I was cute, I have no idea. But it had crossed my mind...and then I dismissed it.

Idiot, I thought.

It bothered me greatly that my actions had put my family in danger. That Don had followed me and I didn't notice. That he had targeted me and I'd been unaware until it was almost too late.

My instincts were off. I'd been so caught up in my own brilliance at solving both strings of robberies that I hadn't seen the threat right in front of me. What did that say about my PI skills?

Yet, I did solve the robberies and the Paradise Valley burglaries. I was able to help Sophia and Evelyn Edgar, and while her house would need a lot of work, the firefighters were able to save the structure. Javier Escobar was in custody, and there was a good chance that Sergio would be out of jail tomorrow. A killer was caught and an innocent man would soon be set free. That had to mean something.

On Saturday, I'd given my statement to the police, then to Detective Barrios, then I met with Andy and told him everything I knew. He wouldn't have to be proactive, because Barrios had hinted to me that she was re-opening the Cactus Stop investigation. Andy's clandestine investigation would remain a secret. Scotty covered

for me at the bar. I told him I owed him big, but he said nope, he could use the extra money. I needed sleep, but after all the statements and talking to Jack to assure him I was okay, I didn't get home until nearly midnight.

After church on Sunday, I went to my parents' house. I didn't care that I was hours early for dinner, I wanted to be with my family.

My dad hugged me as soon as I walked into the house. "Jack told us what happened. Why didn't you call?"

I shrugged, but happily accepted my dad's hug. I didn't realize how much I needed it.

He led me into the great room where Luisa was making sandwiches. "Hi, Margo. Want a turkey sandwich?"

"That'd be great, thanks."

Mom was in the backyard talking on her cell phone, involved in a heated conversation with someone.

Jack was there, but not Austin. "Where's my nephew?" I said. "I need an Austin hug."

"Home. He has a cold. Sit."

"I'm fine. Really." But I sat on the couch because while I was physically fine, I was grumpy. I had tried to get answers yesterday after I gave my statement, but neither Villines nor Barrios were chatty. Maybe they wouldn't know until after all the interviews and evidence was sorted out. But I hoped Sergio's ill-conceived confession wouldn't prevent him from gaining custody of his siblings.

"I talked to Homer last night," my dad said, sitting next to me on the couch.

“It’s my fault that Don Cruz targeted them,” I said.

“Bullshit,” Jack said and handed me one of the porters Mom had bought for me. He tapped the neck of his Coors Light to my bottle, and we both drank.

“Thanks,” I said. I stared at the bottle. “Cruz had my address. I was stupid and bought beer from him. He carded me and I didn’t think twice about it. I didn’t notice he followed me. What kind of PI doesn’t pay attention to who’s on the street?”

“You don’t know that he followed you,” Jack said.

Dad said, “Homer told me Millie has been spending time with Julia Henderson and the other robbery victims. It would have been just as easy—easier—for the thieves to have seen and followed her.”

They were trying to make me feel better. Maybe they were right.

“I need more training,” I said. “I can’t do this if I put other people in danger.”

“You saved Sophia’s life,” Jack said. “Pat yourself on the back.”

I grunted, sipped my beer.

“I’ll do it for you,” Dad said and patted me on the back.

That made me smile.

Mom came in and said, “Well!” She went to the refrigerator and poured herself a large glass of white wine, then joined us on the couch. “Arizona Legal Services is now representing Sergio Diaz. We’ll have him out of jail tomorrow. And I suspect the charges will be dropped quickly.”

I blinked. “What? That fast? Barrios only said they were reopening the investigation.”

“I’ve been working on this since you first talked to me. He’ll have to make a statement about what he knows, formally recant his confession, and there may be some repercussions, but I think we can make it go away. The most important thing is that we clear his name so he can be reunited with his sister. Rita is going to help him through the process to gain custody. She and that girl you put me in contact with. Faith Jones has detailed notes about every step of the process thus far, and Rita says if I can clear him, she’ll help him get custody of Sophia.”

“What about Henry?” I asked.

“He’s in a great deal of trouble,” Mom said. “Rita is taking his case. She’s better versed in juvenile court issues than I am. He’s already talked and given detailed information about Greg Rodriguez’s murder, about how Javier wore Sergio’s hoodie intentionally wanting to frame him. Javier was obsessed with Sophia and believed that if Sergio wasn’t around, Sophia would turn to him.”

“Sergio said Javier threatened to hurt Sophia, which is why he confessed.”

“Henry was there, witnessed the threat.”

“And went along with it?” Dad said.

Mom shook her head sadly. “He’s an angry, troubled teenager, but I think the last few days have shown him who he should trust—and who he shouldn’t. He’ll be in detention for a while, and I don’t think the court will grant Sergio custody of Henry, at least not immediately, but it may happen if Henry keeps his nose clean.”

“That’s great news,” I said. Henry had made mistakes and needed to own up to them.

I’d made mistakes, too. Yet, I’d not only helped exonerate an innocent man, but also

reunited Sergio and Sophia—and my mom and Aunt Rita were helping keep them together. That mattered.

Mom said, “I talked to Antonio Perez this morning and we’re going to work on moving Sergio and Sophia to another community, in case there is any fallout. Javier is a minor, and I don’t know how long he’ll be in custody. Even with Henry’s statement that Javier killed Rodriguez, I don’t know if they’ll try him as an adult. He won’t walk away from the attack on Sophia and Evelyn Edgar, but how long he’ll get is up in the air. Javier is a troubled young man and I think removing Sophia from his sphere is wise. Antonio has a Taco House north of 101, in Norterra. He’ll send Sergio there, and with the Kinship Caregiver allowance, Sergio should be able to afford an apartment in the same area.”

“Mom—I told you that you can move mountains. Thank you.”

“I wouldn’t have known there were mountains to move if you hadn’t pointed them out to me,” she said with a smile. She leaned over and touched my hand. “Margo, you did good.”

Her praise meant everything to me. Here I was, twenty-five, still needing my family’s approval. Maybe I always would. “Thanks, Mom.”

Mom’s phone rang again and she stepped out.

I’d solved two separate robberies and a homicide and I felt good about it. But I still had much to learn.

I wanted to learn. I might not have the experience yet, but I have the desire.

I wanted to help people like Sergio—people who didn’t have anyone else to help them. I was good at the puzzle, at looking at a wide canvas and making connections where others didn’t.

It would take time to build my business, and I'd probably have to take cases I didn't want. I might have to work for a divorce lawyer to make ends meet. There was a lot of money there, enough where I could take cases like Sergio's for free—or mostly free. Maybe I should look at it from another angle: taking a variety of cases would help me hone my instincts to become a better investigator.

I could work at Flannigan's until I had enough income coming in that I didn't need the regular check. I didn't know how long it would take, but I hoped by the end of the year I would be able to support myself full-time as a PI.

“You okay, sis?” Jack asked.

I nodded. “For the first time, I don't have doubts.”

“About?”

“My decision to be a PI.”

“Good.”

I tilted my head. “What does that mean?”

“It means you were meant to do this—you were the only one who didn't see it.”

I might not know where this path would take me, but it was the journey that was important.

Life is a journey. For the first time in a long, long time, I knew I was on the right path.

It wasn't solving the robberies—or even a murder—that gave me this deep sense of satisfaction and pride. It was how, without me and other people who cared, like Andy

and Detective Villines and even Detective Barrios, an innocent man may have gone to prison. A family could have been destroyed forever. I couldn't fathom how I would feel if this had happened to my family, if someone confessed to a crime they didn't commit to protect the Angelharts.

I hoped I would never find out.