



# MP SPY ACADEMY

*Condition Purple:* Follow the echo. Uncover the ghost.



# THE GHOST

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*For the women who have always known how to disappear,  
who made themselves small so others could be safe,  
who chose the shadows and made something of them.*

You were never invisible to those who mattered.

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A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Amy Duvall". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath the name.

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# The Broussard Collection

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The Tulane special collections library exists in a state of permanent twilight. Not from lack of windows, though the nineteenth-century brick walls are thick enough to filter sunlight into something amber and muted, but from the sheer weight of old paper, old cloth, old secrets accumulated in rooms kept perpetually at sixty-eight degrees and forty-five percent humidity. Renee Dubois had come to think of this quality not as darkness but as precision. The light here was tuned to the exact wavelength required to preserve what people had written, painted, pressed into wax, bound into boards a century or more ago. It was the light of preservation itself, the light that said: nothing changes here, nothing deteriorates here, everything remains exactly as it was deposited into this space.

The air itself carried weight. It smelled of aged paper and dust and something chemical, something that came from the preservation supplies, the archival-quality boxes and the adhesives that bonded paper to cloth. The smell was distinct enough that Renee could identify the library by scent alone, could close her eyes and walk through the stacks guided only by that particular perfume of time. After eighteen months working in this space, the smell had

become as familiar as her own apartment, as comforting as routine. It was the smell of work completed properly. It was the smell of history held in suspension. She'd read somewhere that humans remembered scent better than any other sensation, that smell was the sense most directly connected to memory. The library was becoming part of her memory now, becoming embedded in the way she understood the world.

She sat at her cataloguing station on a Wednesday morning in late March, the kind of morning where New Orleans hesitated between spring and something thicker, more oppressive. Outside, the humidity was already making people move slower, making their clothes stick to their skin, making the very air feel substantial and heavy with moisture. The window above her desk showed the pale sky and the tops of the oak trees lining the Tulane campus, their leaves just beginning to recover from winter's brief desiccation. The Spanish moss draped from the branches looked like something caught in suspension, neither alive nor dead but persisting in a state between. But inside the special collections wing, the air conditioning hummed at exactly sixty-eight degrees, a constant sound that Renee had learned to filter out until it became almost a meditation, a white noise beneath which the real work of preservation could occur uninterrupted. The climate control was the heartbeat of the collection, the persistent rhythm that kept everything in stasis.

Her cataloguing station was organized according to principles she'd learned in her master's program and refined through months of practical application. Each item had a designated space. Each category of document had its own archival-quality container. Each piece of information was recorded in the standardized format that allowed researchers to find what they were looking for without requiring Renee to be physically present to guide them through the collection. The system was impersonal in the way that all good archival systems were impersonal, but also deeply personal, because it reflected Renee's particular understanding of how information wanted to be organized, how stories wanted to be told through the careful arrangement of evidence. The cataloguing was not neutral. It was a form of interpretation, a way of imposing structure on the chaos of the past.

The Broussard estate collection had arrived three days ago in fourteen banker's boxes, all of them labeled in the precise handwriting of someone's secretary, probably from the late nineteen-eighties. The labels included dates, box numbers, brief category descriptions. "Correspondence 1950-1965." "Family Documents 1940-1978." "Academic Materials." Someone had taken care with this collection before it arrived at Tulane. Someone had understood that order mattered, that the way things were arranged would affect how people understood them when they were finally examined by future scholars and researchers. The care was evident in every detail, from the acid-free folders to the careful dating to the meticulous preservation of envelopes with their original postage marks.

Professor Alain Broussard, who'd donated the collection, was a man Renee liked and respected. He was the kind of academic who actually enjoyed the company of librarians, who understood that the preservation of information was its own calling, equal in importance to the creation of information. He'd been genuinely interested in her transition from the Mission Possible Spy Academy eighteen months ago, had asked specific questions about her Ghost ribbon training and how her archive work complemented her library science degree. Most people who completed MPSA stayed at normal jobs, kept the training in a locked mental compartment, and never thought about it again. Michael Shannon, her primary instructor in counterintelligence, had emphasized that the training was meant to be deployable when the moment arose. Renee had chosen differently, had felt the overlapping skills of observation and analysis pulling her toward this intersection of archival work and something else, something she couldn't quite name, something that lived in the spaces between what people said and what they actually meant. Broussard had seemed to understand without her having to explain. He'd simply nodded and said that archives were where secrets lived, that they were the storage places for things people needed preserved but couldn't publicly acknowledge.

She was cataloguing the contents of box seven on this Wednesday morning, working through what appeared to be personal correspondence from the nineteen-seventies. The letters were mundane in the way that family correspondence usually was: updates about health, complaints about weather

and the rising cost of living, information about job changes and births and deaths and the ordinary progression of a life lived across decades. Renee's hands worked through the folder with practiced efficiency, sorting each letter by date, preserving the physical integrity of the envelopes while recording the information contained within them. Her fingers registered something her eyes had missed.

There was a thickness in the collection that shouldn't be there. A discontinuity. A sense that something had been inserted into the arrangement, something that didn't belong in the ordinary sequence of material. It took her several minutes of careful handling to identify the source. Near the bottom of the folder, wrapped in its own archival tissue paper, was a book. A small book, bound in faded green cloth with gold lettering along the spine. "La Cuisine Classique," the lettering read. Paris, 1953.

Renee carefully unwrapped the cookbook, breathing the particular smell of vintage books, that perfume of aged paper and dust and whatever chemical processes had occurred over seven decades as the pages settled into their aged state. It was a beautiful object, worn in a way that suggested it had been used extensively. The spine was creased from repeated opening. Several pages were marked with faded ribbons. Someone had annotated recipes in pencil, adding notes about technique or substitutions or modifications that had worked in their particular kitchen. The cookbook had a history written into its physical form, a record of use and care and attention. The handwriting of the annotations was careful and deliberate, suggesting someone who took cooking as seriously as an archivists took preservation.

She was about to add it to the documentation list when her fingers, working the spine while she examined the front matter, felt something that shouldn't be there. A discontinuity. The spine was too thick in one spot, and when she ran her fingertip along the interior seam, she felt the faint edge of something folded, something sewn into the binding fabric. Her heart rate increased slightly, which was interesting to observe about herself from a distance, the way she might observe a researcher's behavior during an archival examination. Professional detachment in the face of discovery was part of the training. She kept her breathing steady. She kept her hands moving with the

same precision as before. The training was activating. The protocols she'd learned were taking shape in her body, in her hands, in the particular quality of her attention.

She used the bone folder, a tool designed for precisely this kind of delicate work, to carefully separate the spine fabric. The stitching was old, the thread gone brittle with age. It came apart with barely any pressure, and then there it was: a single sheet of paper, folded into quarters, yellowed with age, covered entirely in handwriting and symbols. She set it down on the archival work surface and simply looked at it for a long moment, understanding immediately that she was looking at something significant, something that had been hidden deliberately, something that had mattered enough to someone to sew it into a cookbook. The discovery felt like standing in front of a doorway that she was about to step through, a threshold after which nothing would be quite the same.

It was a cipher key. She recognized it immediately, not from any training at Tulane but from her Ghost ribbon training at MPSA, from the classified briefings on the evolution of Soviet encryption systems, from the careful study of methods that intelligence agencies used to compromise enemy communications. Michael Shannon had taught her pattern recognition as part of counterintelligence tradecraft -- the ability to read visual information with the speed and accuracy of someone trained to operate at alert baseline. The format, the structure, the way certain letters had been marked and others circled according to a system she'd studied. Soviet. Cold War era. Probably nineteen-seventies. She'd read academic papers on this exact format as part of her program background study, texts that discussed the technical mechanisms and the historical context. The knowledge was present in her now, activated by the recognition, organized into patterns that made sense.

But the handwriting was personal. Someone had written this by hand, had taken time to construct it carefully, had taken the additional time to fold it and sew it into a cookbook. That was someone who wanted this hidden where no one would think to look, but where they could retrieve it if necessary. A cookbook was domestic. Cookbooks didn't raise suspicion. Cookbooks got passed down through families, referenced in kitchens, moved from house to house and state to state as people relocated for reasons both ordinary and

extraordinary. The hiding place was brilliant in its simplicity. It was the kind of thing that someone who understood intelligence tradecraft would think of.

Renee's hands remained steady. She photographed the key with her phone, taking seven photographs from different angles, making sure the lighting captured every detail. The phone had a decent camera, and the lighting in the cataloguing room was controlled specifically to allow this kind of detailed documentation. She was working mechanically now, the actions separated from the implications, the trained part of her mind that could conduct operational tasks without being overwhelmed by the significance of what was being conducted. The camera worked silently. No one would hear. No one would know.

She returned the paper to the spine carefully. She didn't re-stitch it. That could come later, once she understood what this was, what it meant, what it would require of her, what obligations it would create. The stitching would wait. The waiting was itself a form of decision. By not re-stitching, by leaving the spine open, she was making a choice to proceed, to investigate, to move forward into territory she'd never intended to explore.

Then she closed the cookbook, set it aside on a separate work surface, and continued cataloguing box seven with the same steady attention she'd been applying before the discovery. Because this was what they taught you at MPSA, even in the civilian program. When you encountered something that changed the shape of the room, the proper response was Signature Reduction paired with Gray Doctrine -- remain completely still, completely normal, completely unremarkable, and absolutely certain that no one was observing the moment you actually found it. You managed every physical signal that made you memorable. You archived discovery. You recorded it internally. You permitted no external indication that anything had changed. The training was working perfectly. Her hands continued their work. Her face remained neutral. Her breathing remained steady.

By the end of her shift at five o'clock, she had catalogued the remaining documents in box seven as if nothing unusual had occurred. She had filed her intermediate report with the library director noting that the collection was proceeding on schedule. She had locked the special collections wing and made

her way out of the building in the warm evening air, pedaling her bicycle home through the streets of Marigny with her hands steady and her mind working in fractured pieces that she would only begin to assemble once she reached the privacy of her apartment.

The apartment in Marigny was small, the kind of place that was described as "charming" by real estate agents and "cramped" by everyone else. Rooms arranged in a line with doors that opened directly into one another, no hallways, no privacy. But it was what she could afford on an archivist's salary, and it was in a neighborhood with character, with the weight of history visible in the buildings and the streets. The shotgun cottage had been built sometime in the eighteen-nineties, its walls holding the accumulation of decades of lives. She could smell those decades in the wood, in the slight must that came up from the floorboards, in the particular quality of the air that suggested time and settlement. The building was like a text itself, written in the language of renovation and repair.

She locked the door behind her, set her bicycle in the corner, and sat on her bed in the darkening evening light and opened the images on her phone. The photographs of the cipher key resolved on her small screen, symbols and letters arranged in patterns that contained information, that held secrets, that someone had gone to great lengths to preserve and hide. Outside, the Marigny neighborhood settled into evening. The particular quality of late March light faded to something deeper and more blue. The building seemed to contract around her, the small space becoming smaller still, containing her and the images and the growing understanding of what she'd discovered. Her apartment seemed smaller than usual, more contained, a space entirely devoted to thinking about what she'd found and what she would do about it.

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# The Watermark

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The apartment in Marigny was what real estate agents called a "charming shotgun cottage," which translated to rooms arranged in a line with doors that opened directly into one another, no hallways, no privacy, and walls that transmitted sound the way water conducted electricity. Renee could hear Bette moving around in the kitchen next door, the clink of pots, the rhythmic thump of something being set on the counter with more force than was strictly necessary. It was six in the evening. Bette would be preparing dinner, and there would be leftovers, and the leftovers would appear at Renee's door within the hour, because this was how Bette expressed concern and curiosity in equal measure, had been expressing it for the eighteen months Renee had lived in the cottage.

Bette was her landlady, a woman in her mid-seventies with iron-gray hair pulled back in a practical braid and the particular bearing of someone who'd spent decades observing the world and developing firm opinions about what she saw. She'd inherited the property from her mother, who'd inherited it from someone else, creating a chain of ownership that extended back through generations of New Orleans history. The building itself was a text, every repair

and addition a comment on the changing needs of the people who'd lived within it. The kitchen next door, Renee had learned, was the real heart of Bette's existence. This was where she cooked with the intensity of someone who understood that food was a language, that feeding someone was a form of communication deeper than words.

She opened her laptop on the small writing desk that served as her office, dining table, and general life administration center. The apartment was so small that every object in it served multiple purposes, that every surface was essential to the functioning of daily life. The desk was positioned so that if she looked up, she could see through the front window onto the street, where bicycles and pedestrians and the occasional car moved through the particular humidity that marked early evening in New Orleans, that liminal time when the day's heat began to rise back out into the night sky like a reversal of thermodynamics. A group of teenagers passed by, speaking in the rapid French-influenced Creole that still circulated through the neighborhood despite decades of American cultural pressure. An old man watered his front lawn with methodical precision, the sound of water hitting dry earth creating a rhythm that seemed almost meditative.

She had taken the photographs at the library on her phone. Now she uploaded them to her laptop, using the cable and not the WiFi, which was probably paranoid and probably the right call. The training had been theoretical until it wasn't. Now it was just practical sense, the kind of sense that someone develops when they understand that information could be compromised if they weren't careful about the methods they used to transmit it. She opened the images in the image viewer, enlarged the cipher key to full screen. The symbols resolved into something almost beautiful, a pattern and structure that encoded information in the way that humans had been encoding secrets since the invention of writing.

There, in the grain of the paper, barely visible but present like an old ghost, was the watermark. A small hammer and sickle, stylized into the shape of a factory building. She knew this mark. She had seen it documented in texts about Soviet intelligence operations spanning from the nineteen-fifties through the nineteen-eighties. GRU-issue paper, most likely. Soviet military

intelligence. The kind of paper that was used for documents that mattered, that had weight, that would be preserved beyond the moment of their creation. The watermark itself was a form of authentication, a way for Soviet officials to verify that a document had been written on official materials. In the hands of a careful observer, it was also evidence. It proved origin. It proved intention. It proved that someone had possessed materials that were not supposed to exist outside of secure Soviet facilities.

The numbers on the key itself were in a format that suggested the cipher system used by the Russian GRU for field operations during the Cold War. Nothing theoretically impossible about a Soviet cipher key turning up in a French cookbook in Louisiana. People moved during the Cold War. Agents defected, or were doubled, or retired in place. Spies married civilians. Archives were left behind, buried, hidden. This was the vast machinery of history at work: people doing things in secret, creating evidence without knowing where that evidence would surface, seventy years later, inside a recipe for coq au vin.

But the format suggested something more immediate than a historical artifact. This was an operational cipher. It was designed to be used, not collected. It was designed to be portable, which is why it was sewn into a cookbook instead of left in an archive. Cookbooks were domestic objects. They didn't raise suspicion. They got passed down through families, referenced in kitchens, moved from house to house and state to state as people relocated.

Renee opened a document. She began to type, not her conclusions, but her questions. The exercise was something she'd learned in her archival training and reinforced at the academy: instead of trying to solve a puzzle, document the puzzle itself. Ask the thing instead of answering it. The questions would lead her where she needed to go, would organize themselves into a structure that made sense. She typed slowly, carefully, thinking through each question before committing it to text.

"When was the cookbook published? 1953. When was it acquired by the Broussard family? Unknown. When was the cipher key sewn into the binding? Unknown, but probably sometime after the cookbook was already in circulation, given the condition of the threads and the way the stitching had degraded. Who had done it? Unknown. But someone who had access to both

the cipher and the book, which suggested either someone in the family or someone very close to the family. Someone with enough operational knowledge to recognize a critical piece of intelligence as needing to be hidden. Someone with enough patience to sew it into a spine by hand, thread by thread, stitch by stitch, creating the kind of hiding place that would survive decades of casual handling."

She was still typing when Bette knocked. Not a polite knock. A confident knock that said I live next to you and I have a reason to expect entry. Bette had been Renee's landlady for eighteen months, had established herself in that particular relationship where she was both proprietor and concerned neighbor, a combination that gave her rights and responsibilities in equal measure. Renee opened the door to find her landlady holding a covered dish, the steam rising from beneath the lid in fragrant waves. The smell was jambalaya, made with andouille and okra and the dark roux that took hours of patient attention.

"Jambalaya," Bette said, moving past Renee into the apartment with the ease of long practice. She was already setting the dish on the writing desk, the only available surface besides the bed and the floor. "I made too much. Again. You know how it is." Bette was moving the laptop carefully to the side, making space for the dish with the proprietary care of someone who understood that feeding was part of her responsibilities as a landlord.

"I appreciate it," Renee said. This was the formal acknowledgment required, the response that Bette expected and that allowed the interaction to proceed according to established patterns. The truth was more complicated. Bette made exactly the right amount of jambalaya and had calculated that Renee would appreciate two days' worth of leftovers, which was accurate. Bette understood her tenant well enough to know her eating patterns, her preferences, her capacity for consumption. This knowledge was accumulated through months of careful observation, through the particular attention that someone pays to another person when they care about whether that person is taking adequate care of themselves.

"You've been working too much," Bette said, though she hadn't been in the apartment long enough to form an accurate impression based on observation. It was a statement of belief rather than evidence. "You have that

look. You look like my daughter when she was working on her thesis. Pale. Obsessive. Like you're not quite present in the room even when you're sitting right here." Bette's daughter had finished her doctorate five years ago and now taught at a university in Austin. Bette missed her, maintained the connection through phone calls and visits, worried about her in the particular way that mothers worry about their accomplished children, understanding that accomplishment often came at the cost of wellbeing.

"I'm fine," Renee said. "Just cataloguing."

"Cataloguing." Bette repeated the word as if it contained hidden meanings, as if she was testing it in her mouth, tasting the shape of it. She was looking at Renee's laptop, at the closed document, at the general arrangement of the small apartment. The coffee cup on the desk. The printed materials stacked in the corner. The particular disorder of someone engaged in focused intellectual work. "The old professor's things, yes? Broussard?"

"How did you know that?"

"Odette told me. She's my neighbor two blocks over. Broussard used to come to the neighborhood sometimes. Years ago, before he got strange. Before he retired and started acting like a man who knew something he shouldn't. She said he was always very interested in the old Delacroix house, back when the Delacroix family still lived here. Before they moved away." Odette was one of those neighbors who seemed to know everything about everyone, who'd developed her knowledge through decades of paying careful attention, of noticing patterns, of maintaining the networks of neighborhood information that still functioned in places like Marigny despite the encroaching commercialization and tourism that threatened to erase the particular character of the place.

Renee processed this information, understanding that she was receiving unsolicited context that would change how she understood the collection she was cataloguing. She tried to remember if Broussard had ever mentioned the Delacroix family in their conversations. Nothing came to mind, which meant either she hadn't been paying sufficient attention, or Broussard hadn't wanted her to make the connection. Both options were interesting. Both options

suggested that there was more to the collection than she had initially understood.

"He was a historian," Renee said carefully. "Probably just interested in the local families for research purposes."

"Probably," Bette said, in the tone of someone who didn't believe this at all but was willing to move past the obvious lie toward something more truthful. "Well. Eat the jambalaya while it's still warm. And get some sleep. You're going to exhaust yourself with all this cataloguing." Bette moved toward the door with the satisfied expression of someone who'd delivered both food and concern, who'd executed her responsibilities as a landlady and as a person who understood that wellbeing required attention.

After Bette left, Renee looked at the covered dish. Her appetite had diminished somehow, though the jambalaya smelled exactly as good as everything Bette made. She pulled the document back up on the screen and added a note in bold type: "Ask about Delacroix connection. Find out when Broussard's interest began. Why was he watching that house?"

But she didn't do it tonight. Tonight, she photographs the cipher key image and begins photographing the rest of the collection. She works through the evening and into the night, her apartment lit by desk lamp and laptop screen, accumulating digital copies of the Broussard estate collection like evidence, like someone building a case. She is careful to note which box each photograph comes from, to maintain the chain of custody, to document everything in a way that would be acceptable in a formal investigation. The work absorbs her in a way that the official cataloguing doesn't. Official cataloguing preserves. This work interprets. This work asks questions.

By eleven o'clock, she has two hundred and forty-three photographs. By midnight, she has catalogued the rest of box seven and moved into box eight. The cipher key image is locked in a separate folder, encrypted with a password that is technically compliant with security protocols but probably excessive for a woman living in a shotgun cottage in Marigny, New Orleans. The password is long and complex and contains symbols and numbers and uppercase and lowercase letters arranged in patterns that would resist basic decryption

attempts for a significant amount of time.

She doesn't know yet that this is the threshold, that this is the moment when she crosses from being an archivist into being something else. She's still cataloguing, still applying the tools of her trade, still treating this like it's just information that needs to be organized and preserved. But the systematic way she's approaching it, the careful separation of files, the attention to detail that reads less like scholarship and more like tradecraft, those are the muscles that the academy trained into her. Those are the things that live in her hands now, waiting for the moment when she would need to use them in earnest. The training is becoming practice. The theoretical is becoming actual.

She stops working at 2 AM, her eyes burning with fatigue, her shoulders aching from hours bent over the desk. She dreams of ledgers and hidden compartments. She dreams of a cipher that won't decode, symbols spinning in patterns that almost make sense but don't quite resolve into meaning, no matter how much time she spends on them. The dreams are the dreams of someone whose mind is working even while she sleeps, processing information, organizing evidence, moving toward conclusions she hasn't yet allowed herself to consciously acknowledge.

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## The Reading Begins

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By Friday morning, Renee had photographed every document in the Broussard collection. The photographs existed in three locations now: her laptop, encrypted in a cloud drive using protocols she'd learned at the academy, and on an external drive that she'd hidden in the freezer, wrapped in a grocery bag from Whole Foods that she'd acquired from an actual shopping trip specifically for this purpose. The wrapping seemed like an unnecessary touch until she remembered that this was tradecraft, that this was the way you kept something from being found: you made it so ordinary that no one would think to look, that no one would think to examine, that no one would connect with the information it contained.

She'd called the library director on Thursday afternoon and informed him that the collection was more extensive than initially projected and would require another two weeks of careful cataloguing before any external requests could be processed. He'd accepted this without question. This was not unusual. Donors sometimes were optimistic about the size of their collections, and the actual work of archival cataloguing always took longer than civilians assumed. What he didn't know, what she hadn't told him, was that she was

simultaneously conducting a private research project parallel to the official cataloguing. She was reading the collection like a text, like a story, like evidence. She was treating it the way she would treat a manuscript that had been created by someone who wanted to communicate something specific to a future reader. Someone in the year 2026, perhaps. Someone who might understand what she was looking at. The recognition that she was reading forward through time, that she was engaged in a form of conversation with whoever had created and preserved this archive, was both comforting and terrifying.

The family correspondence was the key to everything. She had it photographed, printed, and organized by date on her dining table. The letters spanned from 1950 to 1985, a window into the life of the Broussard family during the height of the Cold War. The paper was varied, suggesting different periods and different circumstances. Some letters were written on thin airmail paper, the kind used for correspondence that had to travel long distances. Other letters were written on heavy cream-colored stationery, suggesting domestic correspondence written from home. The handwriting varied as well, different hands documenting their particular perspectives on events, creating a collective family narrative written across decades. The physical materials themselves told a story about how information was transmitted, about what could be trusted to written form and what required direct conversation.

They were banal in the way that family correspondence usually was: updates about health, complaints about weather and the rising cost of living, information about births and deaths and job changes. But interspersed throughout were references that didn't quite fit the domestic context, phrases that seemed deliberately vague, communications that appeared designed to be understood by their recipients while remaining opaque to anyone who might intercept them.

"Uncle Jacques says the situation is stabilizing," one letter from 1974 read, written by someone named Marceline to Alain Broussard. "He says not to worry anymore about the Washington business. Everything has been taken care of." The letter was dated June 15, 1974, written in careful script on paper that had begun to yellow with age. The signature at the bottom was flourished, the

handwriting of someone accustomed to letter-writing as a form of regular correspondence.

Washington business. Renee added that phrase to her list, a document she'd created on her laptop, a growing archive of anomalies. She'd created a second document now, a separate analysis, words and phrases that seemed significant: references to "the old friends from Paris," mentions of "discretion being necessary," an entire letter from 1972 that contained an unusually detailed account of someone's travel to "certain Gulf communities for reasons that cannot be discussed in writing."

The Gulf communities comment was particularly interesting. Louisiana was a Gulf community. New Orleans was a port city where people with resources could arrive and leave with relative anonymity. During the Cold War, it would have been an ideal hub for intelligence operations. The geography made sense. The historical precedent made sense. The language in the letters made sense when you understood it as the coded language of people who were trying to discuss things that couldn't be discussed openly. The city itself became a character in the narrative, a place where certain kinds of operations could flourish in relative obscurity.

She was sitting at the library's cataloguing station on Friday afternoon, the official cataloguing work proceeding at its steady pace while her private research continued in the photographs, in the encrypted files, in the private archive she was constructing, when she found the reference that made her stop moving her hands entirely. It was a letter, dated March 1974, addressed to Alain Broussard from someone named Claude Fontaine. The handwriting was elegant and controlled, written in a hand that suggested education and professional training. The letter was brief, no more than three paragraphs, but it was unmistakably official in tone, despite having no letterhead.

"Alain, I wanted to express my appreciation again for your discretion in this matter. The arrangement, as discussed, will continue for the duration required. Your cousin's situation is now secure, and should remain so, provided that continued assistance is offered as needed and no questions are asked. I will be in touch as circumstances warrant. Regards, Claude."

The letter was written on plain white paper, no identifying marks, nothing to suggest origin or institutional affiliation. But the language was the language of an arrangement, a transaction, a formal agreement between two men who understood each other well enough to communicate in code. Cousin's situation. Continued assistance. Arrangement. These were not innocent words. These were the words of a contract, an agreement between two men about something that required discretion and ongoing assistance. Something that apparently involved the cousin, who would need to be kept secure and whose situation apparently had been in jeopardy at some point.

And Claude. She knew a Claude now. Or rather, she would soon know a Claude, a man who would arrive at the library with credentials claiming to be a federal archivist. She didn't know that yet on Friday afternoon. She only knew that the name appeared in the correspondence, that it was connected to the Broussards, that it was connected to something that required secrecy and compensation.

Renee carefully placed the letter back in its envelope, made sure nothing had been disturbed, and continued her cataloguing work. Her hands were steady. Her heart was accelerated by a rate that was becoming familiar now, that was becoming her normal response to discovery. The acceleration was controlled, managed, something she observed about herself from a professional distance. She added a note to her personal research document: "Claude Fontaine. Letter dated March 1974. Discussed arrangement. Cousin security. Continued assistance. Discretion."

That evening, after the library had closed, after she'd left on her bicycle, pedaling through the streets of New Orleans on her way home, she thought about the implications of what she'd found. It was possible that this Claude Fontaine had nothing to do with anyone she would ever meet. Fontaine was not an uncommon name in Louisiana. It appeared in the telephone directory, in business registers, in the genealogical databases that traced family histories back through generations. But the letter was dated 1974. The tone suggested someone in a position of authority. The language suggested someone comfortable with covert communication.

She rode her bicycle through the streets of the French Quarter, past the sounds of tourists and jazz musicians, past the bars and the open doorways that exhaled humidity and cigarette smoke and the peculiar atmosphere of the Quarter into the street. The bicycle was a 1970s Schwinn, pale blue, which she'd inherited from an estate sale three years ago. It was slow and reliable, and it allowed her to move through the city without the agitation of a car, with eyes that could notice things, with peripheral vision that could track movement and change.

The particular quality of New Orleans at evening was something she'd only begun to appreciate in her time living here. The heat began to lift as the sun descended, creating a thermal reversal that made the air almost breathable. The light took on a golden quality, something that suggested old photographs, something that spoke of time accumulated and preserved. The buildings themselves seemed to glow, their aged brick and painted wood absorbing the light and transforming it into something that looked almost like memory. The streets of the Marigny neighborhood became a text she was learning to read, the architecture and the patterns of movement creating a language of history and presence.

She began to notice the patterns of the city in a way she hadn't before. The way certain corners were always crowded. The way certain streets emptied after dark. The way people moved through spaces depending on whether they knew where they were going. The way strangers moved differently than residents, with less confidence in their navigation. She was learning to read the city the way she'd learned to read documents, to see the structures and patterns that underlay the apparent chaos. The observation was automatic now, driven by training, becoming instinctive.

By Friday evening, she had analyzed everything in the collection she had photographed. She had filled notebooks with observations. She had created timelines and charts. She had begun to see a picture forming, a structure of relationships and transactions that spanned decades and involved multiple people coordinating across time and space. The picture was still incomplete, still missing crucial connections, but the outline was becoming visible. Something was taking shape. Something that had been hidden for fifty years

was beginning to reveal its structure. The work of cataloguing had transformed into something else. The organization of evidence was becoming investigation. The preservation of information was becoming the revelation of secrets.

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# The Credentials

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Claude Fontaine appeared at the library on Monday morning at 10:47 AM, early enough to catch Renee before the afternoon cataloguing sessions began. She was at her station, officially working through box ten, when one of the front desk staff called back to let her know there was a gentleman asking to speak with her about the Broussard collection. She had prepared for this possibility without consciously preparing. Over the weekend, she had rehearsed her face in the mirror, the particular expression of mild surprise mixed with professional courtesy that indicated someone who was doing her job and had no reason to be alarmed. She'd decided what she would wear: a navy cardigan, sensible shoes, her hair pulled back in a way that read as meticulous rather than careful. She'd decided what her hands should do: remain visible, remain busy with archival work, demonstrate that she was focused on her job and not on anything that might seem suspicious.

When she saw him, she understood why he'd been effective at whatever he actually did. Claude Fontaine had the kind of face that was easy to forget, which meant it was actually the kind of face that had been cultivated to be forgotten. Average height, average build, the kind of haircut that had been the

same for probably fifteen years. His clothes were appropriate without being remarkable: a blazer and khakis, the uniform of a federal employee. But his eyes were alert in a way that suggested he noticed everything and committed nothing to apparent reaction. He was watching her as she approached, and she understood that this was assessment, that he was cataloguing her the way she catalogued documents, extracting information from appearance and demeanor and the particular way she held her body.

"Ms. Dubois?" He extended his hand. His grip was professional but not aggressive. The pressure was firm without being threatening. His skin was cool, which suggested either good circulation or practiced calm. "Claude Fontaine. I'm sorry to interrupt your work. I know this is probably not the best time, but I was in town for a conference and I wanted to stop by to discuss the Broussard collection." His voice was carefully modulated, the voice of someone trained in public presentation, someone who understood the particular power of tone and pacing.

She had prepared for this, too. She'd had the library director brief her on the protocol for external requests. "Of course. Let me just let my supervisor know. Would you like to use one of the consultation rooms?"

The consultation rooms were small, climate controlled, separated from the rest of the library by soundproof doors. They were designed for researchers who needed privacy while examining rare materials. They were also spaces where a conversation could occur without being overheard by other staff, which was important because that meant the interaction was deniable, that it could be explained away if necessary. Renee was already thinking in terms of deniability, already understanding that whatever happened in this conversation might need to be reported or suppressed depending on what Claude actually wanted.

Once they were inside the room, Claude set a leather folder on the table and opened it with the methodical precision of someone accustomed to presenting credentials. The credentials inside looked authentic. A federal ID, an employee badge, a letter on official letterhead explaining that Fontaine was an archivist with the National Archives and Records Administration with specific authority to locate and assess historical materials related to Cold War-era

intelligence operations. The letter was signed by someone whose name she didn't recognize and carried the appropriate seal and authentication numbers.

"The Broussard collection came to our attention," Claude explained, his voice measured and careful, the voice of someone practiced in delivering explanations that sounded convincing, "through some preliminary research we've been conducting into Louisiana's role in various historical operations. Professor Broussard was connected to some families that we're interested in from an archival and historical preservation standpoint."

Renee looked at the credentials, studying them with the careful attention that she'd brought to so many other documents. As an archivist, she understood paper. She understood watermarks and seals and the way official documents were constructed. She understood the subtle differences between authentic and reproduced. These credentials were technically competent. They appeared authentic. But there were three small things wrong, three details that her eye caught because she'd been trained to notice the differences between real and nearly real.

First, the letterhead of the NARA office in Washington was using a font that wasn't officially implemented until 2009. The letter was dated 2023. That discrepancy was small enough to be a clerical error or a scanned document that had been updated. But it was wrong. She filed that observation away, committing it to memory, understanding that she would need this detail later. The font choice was a mistake, the kind of thing that came from someone who understood document forgery but hadn't paid sufficient attention to the details of technological development.

Second, the signature on the credentials was consistent across both the federal ID and the letter. Authentic signatures varied slightly each time a person signed something by hand. The variation was small, sometimes barely noticeable, but it was always there when a person actually signed something rather than having it printed or duplicated. These signatures were identical to an impossible degree. She filed that away too, the realization settling into her understanding like a key turning in a lock. The perfect consistency was evidence of digital reproduction, of photocopying or printing, the hallmark of forgery.

Third, and most subtle, the seal on the credentials had been applied at a slightly different angle than the seal on the letter. A fractional difference, maybe one degree off, the kind of thing that would be almost invisible unless you were looking for inconsistencies. She noted this as well, committing it to memory with the particular intensity that came from understanding that she was holding forged documents in her hands. The physical inconsistency suggested multiple seals, multiple fabrication attempts, possibly multiple forgers or multiple instances of document reproduction.

She didn't let any of this register on her face. She was deploying Environmental Blending now, the Ghost ribbon skill of calibrating her appearance and behavior to match any context, of removing the markers that triggered social pattern recognition. She handed the credentials back to Claude and nodded as if she was satisfied, as if she was one of the people who would accept credentials at face value and not conduct the kind of detailed analysis that revealed forgery. The performance was automatic, trained into her hands and face and the particular quality of her attention. She was demonstrating the behavior of a trusting person, a person who would cooperate, a person who would not stand in the way of official business.

"These look very thorough. May I ask what specifically you're looking for? Is there a particular subset of the collection that NARA is interested in?"

"At this stage, we'd prefer to have the entire collection transferred to our custody," Claude said. He said this smoothly, like someone who had said it many times before and knew the exact words that would convince most people. "It's for assessment purposes. We need to see what's there before determining whether any of it falls under Cold War-era archival protocols. It's standard procedure for materials from families with government connections."

He said this with the confidence of someone who believed what he was saying, or who had said it enough times that belief and performance had become indistinguishable. He was good at this. He was very good at this. He had the particular quality of someone who'd spent decades doing this kind of work, who understood how to present himself in a way that seemed official and authoritative and completely reasonable. The presentation was seamless. It was

almost convincing. It was exactly the kind of presentation that would work on most archivists, most librarians, most people who dealt with documents and didn't think to examine credentials too carefully.

"I'll need to discuss that with our director," Renee said. She was thinking rapidly now, understanding that Claude had made a direct request that required a response that would set the parameters for everything that followed. "We have a formal protocol for collection transfers, and anything this significant would need to go through the appropriate channels. Additionally, the collection is currently in active cataloguing. Removing it would interrupt that process, which would delay our ability to assess the collection for our own records."

Claude smiled. It was a real smile, the kind that suggested he actually respected her response, that he understood she wasn't going to be easily convinced or pressured. His entire demeanor shifted slightly, becoming more collaborative, more understanding. "Of course. How long do you estimate the cataloguing will take?"

"At the current rate, approximately two more weeks. Then the collection goes through a review period, and then a conservation assessment. So we're looking at six weeks before it would be ready for any external transfer."

"Two weeks from now?" Claude asked. He was still smiling, but there was something different in his eyes now, something that suggested he was calculating, that he was processing information and determining what it meant for whatever operation he was conducting. The smile remained in place, but it had become a mask, a performance. Behind it, something was working, some calculation was occurring.

"Approximately."

"That would be mid-April. That works well with our timeline. And you'll let me know if there's anything in the collection that seems particularly significant? Anything that might require immediate transfer?"

Renee held his gaze. She understood what he was actually asking. Are there any items in this collection that are important enough to justify moving the transfer date up? Are you going to tell me if you find something that matters? She understood that she was being tested, that Claude was evaluating

her reliability, that he was trying to determine whether she was someone who would cooperate or someone who would be difficult.

"Of course," she said. "That's standard protocol. Any significant materials would be flagged immediately."

After Claude left, she sat in the consultation room for five minutes without moving. Her hands were steady. Her heart was accelerating rapidly in her chest, the physical response to the recognition that she'd just encountered something significant. She understood that she had just lied to a federal agent, or someone who looked like a federal agent, or someone who was good enough at forgery that the difference probably didn't matter. She understood that she had bought herself two weeks. She understood that what she did with those two weeks would determine whether this ended as something that could be explained or something that required actual tradecraft, actual methods to evade detection and preserve what she'd discovered.

The consultation room felt smaller suddenly. The climate control hummed around her, the steady sound of preservation mechanisms maintaining conditions for the protection of materials. But what was being preserved now was not just the collection. What was being preserved was her own capacity to move between worlds, to present herself as trustworthy while simultaneously understanding that trust had been weaponized, that the forms of official verification could be compromised, that the structures meant to protect information could themselves be turned into instruments of deception.

She stood up, collected herself, and returned to her cataloguing station. She continued her work as if nothing unusual had occurred. This was MPSA protocol. This was what they'd taught her in her Ghost ribbon training. You conducted the operation, and then you returned to baseline operational security, you performed the appearance of unchanged routine through Signature Reduction, you permitted no external indication that anything had changed. But internally, everything had transformed. The stakes had become concrete. The danger had become real. The game had begun in earnest.

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## The Week of Reading

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Renee created a timeline. Not the timeline that she maintained for the library, which showed the projected completion dates for cataloguing and conservation assessment, but a private timeline that tracked the relationships and movements of the people referenced in the Broussard collection. It started with Jacques Delacroix's birth in 1930, according to a mention in family correspondence, and ended with his death in 1978, which appeared in a funeral notice clipped from the New Orleans newspaper and filed among Alain Broussard's personal documents. Between those dates lay forty-eight years that seemed to contain very little specific information, and Renee had learned to read silences the way other people read text.

A silence in correspondence often meant something important had occurred, something that made writing unsafe or inadvisable. When you had a family member involved in intelligence operations, you didn't write about it. You conducted your relationship through oblique references, coded language, and careful omissions. This was the language of people who understood that documents could be discovered, could be intercepted, could be used as evidence against you if you were not sufficiently careful about what you

committed to paper. The absence of certain kinds of references was itself meaningful. The gaps in the narrative were themselves information.

She worked through box eleven and box twelve over the course of the following week, official cataloguing proceeding at its steady pace while her private research continued in the evenings in her apartment, in the documents she'd photographed, in the analysis she was conducting in notebooks and encrypted files. She worked with a particular intensity now, understanding that time was limited, that Claude would return eventually, that she had only two weeks before the situation would require resolution of some kind. The pressure was building. The stakes were becoming clearer.

She began to see patterns emerge. References to Jacques appeared primarily in the family correspondence from the nineteen-fifties and nineteen-sixties, when he would have been in his twenties and thirties. By the nineteen-seventies, the references became more distant, less personal. By the late nineteen-seventies, there were almost no references to him at all, which probably meant he was either dead or estranged or operating under conditions that made communication impossible. The silence around Jacques was profound. It was the silence of someone who had been deliberately forgotten, deliberately written out of the narrative of the family.

The 1974 letter from Claude Fontaine referred to Jacques as a cousin, but Renee traced through the family tree that Alain Broussard had maintained in the back of one of his personal notebooks and found no direct cousins with that name. Cousins could mean biological cousins, or it could mean something else: professional relationships, wartime collaborations, operational nicknames. In the language of intelligence, everyone was family. The term was elastic enough to accommodate multiple kinds of connection, multiple forms of relationship that had nothing to do with blood and everything to do with shared operational history.

On Wednesday evening, Bette knocked again, this time carrying a tray with cold iced tea and beignets she'd picked up from Cafe Du Monde. The beignets were still warm, dusted with powdered sugar, carrying the particular sweetness of the cafe's century-old recipe. She had developed a routine of bringing Renee food at approximately the same time each week, a pattern that

seemed designed partly to feed Renee and partly to check on her status through the medium of snacks, to maintain contact, to assure herself that her tenant was still present and functioning.

"You're still at that cataloguing," Bette said, setting the tray on the writing desk and moving aside the files Renee had been reviewing. She was moving Renee's research materials with the kind of careful casualness that suggested she understood they were important. "You're going to make yourself sick. You have that look. You look like my daughter when she was working on her thesis. Pale. Obsessive. Like you're thinking about something very hard and very difficult." Bette had mastered the art of expressing concern through observation, through the particular attention that someone pays when they understand that wellbeing requires monitoring and intervention. The way Renee's hands moved when she was working. The quality of her concentration. These things could be read like a text.

"It's a substantial collection," Renee said. "It requires careful attention."

"Careful attention," Bette repeated. She was looking at the papers on the desk with the intensity of someone who had learned to read the world through observation. "You're not just cataloguing. You're investigating. You're looking for something in those documents. Someone's story. Someone's secret."

Renee didn't respond immediately. She considered lying, considered explaining what she was doing in terms that Bette would accept as innocent. Instead, she found herself saying, "Do you know anything about the Delacroix family? You mentioned them before, when you brought the jambalaya."

Bette sat down at the desk without being invited. She was old enough that this seemed acceptable, that the social protocols of age granted her certain liberties. The gesture was both a claim of relationship and an assertion of her right to participate in whatever was happening in Renee's small apartment. "The Delacroix. They were prominent people, once. They owned property. They had money. But something happened to them, sometime in the sixties or seventies. I'm not exactly sure what. My mother used to say that they were connected to something, some business in Washington. She said it very carefully, the way people talk about things they know about but shouldn't

mention."

"Your mother knew them?"

"No. She knew people who knew them. That's how information travels in New Orleans. Everyone is connected to everyone else, and the connections run deep. My mother's friend worked for a woman whose cousin was married to a man in the Delacroix family. That's how the network functions, through families and neighborhoods and careful conversations conducted in low voices. The city is like a text, except the text is written in personal relationships and family histories and the particular intimacy that comes from living in close proximity for generations."

Bette picked up one of the beignets and bit into it, powdered sugar falling onto the desk in small drifts. "There was a man named Jacques. He was handsome. There was always something sad about him, even when he was young. My mother's friend said he went away sometime in the seventies. Just disappeared. She said it was because of his connections to the government, but she wouldn't say more than that. She said she'd been told not to talk about it, and she took that seriously, took the instruction to silence very seriously. That kind of instruction creates a particular weight. That kind of silence becomes a burden."

Renee was quiet, letting Bette continue at her own pace. This was something she'd learned in her studies of oral history: people had their own rhythms of revelation. If you pushed too hard, they would retreat into politeness. If you waited, if you remained attentive and non-judgmental, they would fill the silence with truth that they'd been carrying for a long time.

"He was involved with the government somehow," Bette continued. "My mother's friend knew his mother, and she mentioned it once, in that careful way people have when they're talking about things they shouldn't. She said Jacques had gone away to do work for the government, that it was important work but dangerous. She said that if anything happened to him, the family had been promised that they would be taken care of. That was the arrangement. That was the deal."

"And did something happen to him?"

"He died," Bette said simply. "In 1978. He was not very old. Fifty or fifty-two. I remember my mother telling me about it, and I remember being surprised because I hadn't known he was sick. There was no warning. He was just suddenly gone. The neighborhood noticed his absence. We understood that something significant had concluded. When someone disappears, the neighborhood knows. When someone dies in circumstances that aren't discussed, the neighborhood knows. The knowledge circulates through conversations and silences and the particular attention that people pay when they understand that something important is happening."

"Do you know what he died of?"

"No one said. I don't think people knew, or if they knew, they didn't talk about it. It was one of those deaths that happened in the family, and the family decided not to discuss. Those things happen, especially with families who have been touched by government business. You learn not to ask too many questions. You learn to accept the silences. You learn that some things are meant to stay private. The death itself becomes a kind of archive, a place where information is preserved by not being discussed."

Bette stood up, brushed the powdered sugar from her hands. "Why are you really asking about the Delacroix?" she asked.

"I found something in a collection I'm cataloguing. Something that suggests the Delacroix family was involved in something related to intelligence operations during the Cold War. I'm trying to understand what."

"And you came here thinking an old woman who lives in the neighborhood might remember something useful."

"Yes."

"I appreciate your honesty," Bette said. She moved toward the door. "Here's what I think, for what it's worth. Jacques Delacroix was involved in something important. Something that required discretion and ongoing management. When he died or when his operation concluded, people in the family were left with knowledge that was dangerous to possess. They made a choice to stay silent, to preserve that silence, to teach their children not to speak about what they knew. That's a burden that families carry for generations. And

when something threatens that silence, when someone starts asking questions, people notice."

After Bette left, Renee sat with the cold tea and the remaining beignets and thought about what had just been said. Bette had called it investigation. Renee had been thinking of it as research, or cataloguing, or private analysis. But investigation was the right word. She was investigating the Broussard collection the way she might investigate a suspicious acquisition, looking for provenance, for the story of how something came to be where it was. Except in this case, the acquisition was inside a collection, and the story involved what appeared to be Cold War intelligence operations and a federal agent with forged credentials.

She pulled out her timeline and added what Bette had told her. Jacques Delacroix disappeared in the nineteen-seventies. He was connected to government operations. He was handsome and sad. He went away. The language was vague, the kind of language that people used when they were trying to explain something they didn't fully understand and knew they shouldn't talk about.

On Thursday morning, Renee got up at 5 AM and went to the New Orleans Public Library, the main branch, where they had newspaper archives on microfiche. She spent four hours scrolling through obituaries and death notices from 1978, finding the entry for Jacques Delacroix in the October 19 edition. He was survived by a brother named Paul and various cousins. He had been fifty-two years old. No cause of death was listed. No services were mentioned. It was the briefest obituary possible, the kind that someone published because they had to, but didn't want to, the kind of obituary that raised more questions than it answered. The brevity itself was significant. The absence of standard funeral details was meaningful.

She photographed the microfiche image with her phone. She added it to her encrypted files. She began to compile what she was finding into a structure that started to resemble an actual investigation, that moved beyond private curiosity into something that looked like evidence accumulation. The pieces were aligning. The pattern was becoming visible.

By Friday evening, she had completed the official cataloguing of eleven boxes and documented everything for the library's records. She had also accumulated approximately five hundred pieces of information, references, dates, and connections in her private research, a database of secrets that she was assembling alone in her apartment. The work was exhausting. The isolation was profound. She had not spoken to anyone except Bette and the library staff. She had not mentioned anything to Ty Marchand, the NOPD detective she had met briefly at a community board meeting two years ago, someone she barely knew, someone she had no reason to trust with what she'd found. But the weight of what she was carrying was beginning to make itself known. The knowledge was becoming a physical thing. It was becoming harder to pretend she was just cataloguing. It was becoming harder to maintain the separation between her official role and what she was actually doing.

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# The Letter From Washington

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Renee found the document almost by accident, though nothing was ever truly accidental in archival work. The accident was simply the name you gave to the moments when preparation met opportunity and produced discovery. She was cataloguing the contents of box nine, which she'd somehow skipped in her initial sweep, and working through a folder labeled simply "1974 Correspondence" in Alain Broussard's careful handwriting. Most of the letters were mundane: business correspondence, academic exchanges, a note from a colleague congratulating Broussard on some publication she'd never heard of. But near the back of the folder, pressed between two seemingly unimportant pieces of paper about a departmental meeting, was a letter on stationery that bore no identifying marks at all. No letterhead, no business name, no address, nothing but white paper and a date: March 15, 1974.

The letter was addressed to Alain. It began with "My dear cousin," which would have been unusual if Alain had a cousin named this, but according to his family tree, he did not. Renee had memorized that tree, had studied it with the attention she would bring to a historical document. The letter was two paragraphs long, and the handwriting was the same elegant script she'd seen in

the letter from Claude Fontaine. Same hand. Same writer. Same person conducting correspondence across different documents, maintaining the same careful control of their letters, the same particular flourish at the end of the surnames.

"My dear cousin, I wanted to reach out regarding the matter we discussed in December. The situation with regard to the Washington business has become more complicated than was initially anticipated. There are parties interested in ensuring that certain information remains properly secured, and they have made inquiries into whether our family might assist with this arrangement. I have explained to them that we are discrete people and that we understand the importance of maintaining certain confidences. I have told them that your cooperation can be assured provided that the compensation and security arrangements remain as we discussed.

Regarding our mutual friend Jacques, the news continues to be uncertain. He is secure for now, but his situation requires ongoing attention. Please ensure that you understand the significance of maintaining absolute discretion on this matter. There are people in Washington who have invested significant resources in preserving the status quo, and they have made clear that any deviation from our agreement would have serious consequences. I will contact you again in April. Until then, please ensure that our arrangement with the banking situation remains as discussed."

It was signed with what appeared to be an initial, though the way it was written made it nearly impossible to determine whether it was a C or a G or something else entirely. The signature was deliberately vague, designed not to be easily identified, designed to preserve plausible deniability if the letter were discovered.

Renee read the letter three times, seated alone at her cataloguing station, the rest of the library moving around her in its slow, studious way. The security guard was making his afternoon rounds. A researcher was examining materials in one of the reading rooms. The climate control hummed its constant, meditative sound. She understood the basic structure of what was being said: someone in Washington had made an approach; the writer had agreed to maintain confidence in exchange for compensation and security; there was

someone named Jacques who required ongoing attention and care. The language was carefully constructed to avoid specific references. It was the language of people who understood that written documents could be discovered, could be intercepted, could be used as evidence against you if you were not sufficiently careful about what you committed to paper.

She photographed the letter. Then, because she had begun to understand the depth of what she was looking at, she photographed the other letters in the folder, the mundane ones. She created a visual record of everything, the innocent correspondence sandwiching the significant one, all of it exactly as it had been preserved for the past fifty years. This was the training now, the understanding that context mattered, that even innocent-seeming documents could provide cover for something significant, that the appearance of ordinary business could mask the reality of operational security. The arrangement was becoming visible. The structure was becoming clear.

That evening, she began to research the banking situation. It took her until nearly midnight, working through records of Louisiana's financial institutions during the nineteen-seventies, looking for connections to the Broussard family. She found that Alain Broussard had maintained accounts at First Louisiana Bank during that period. Nothing remarkable in itself, but when she cross-referenced the accounts with the depositors and account officers listed in newspaper archives, she found a name: Richard Fontaine, vice president of First Louisiana Bank, 1974.

Fontaine. It appeared in the banking records, in a position of moderate authority, during exactly the period when someone was discussing arrangements and compensation. It appeared in the correspondence as someone who knew Washington business, who knew people interested in maintaining status quos, who knew how to arrange compensation through channels that would remain discrete. Richard Fontaine. The first name was different from Claude, but Fontaine was the same. The era was right. The knowledge of Louisiana banking and Washington connections was consistent. She was beginning to see the family structure, the way names and roles could be passed down through generations, the way an operation could persist across decades.

She had a last name now. She had a position. She had a year. What she didn't have was confirmation that Richard Fontaine was the same man who'd appeared at the library with credentials claiming to be Claude Fontaine, federal archivist. But the first names were similar in a way that suggested either a family connection or a deliberate choice to use a name that would create a sense of familiarity or connection.

Renee sat in her apartment in the heat of the evening and understood that she had begun to assemble something. Not a complete picture yet, but the outline of something, the beginning of a structure that connected documents to people to dates to a story that spanned decades and involved multiple institutional structures coordinating with one another. The pieces were interlocking. The narrative was taking shape. The work had become investigation in earnest.

On Saturday morning, Renee called in sick to the library and went to the New Orleans Public Library, the main branch, where they had newspaper archives on microfiche. She spent the day accessing the archives from the nineteen-seventies, searching for anyone named Richard Fontaine mentioned in connection with banking, business, or any kind of government business. She found several references to Richard Fontaine in the Times-Picayune business section. He appeared at charity events. He was mentioned as an account officer on significant commercial transactions. He was photographed at a bank opening in 1975, standing next to the bank president, wearing a suit that looked expensive and a smile that suggested professional competence and genuine pleasure. The photograph showed a man in his thirties, with careful posture and the particular bearing of someone accustomed to being observed.

But there was nothing about Richard Fontaine after 1978. The newspaper references stopped abruptly. The name disappeared from the banking community. No announcement of his retirement, no death notice, no explanation. Just a sudden absence, exactly like Jacques Delacroix's absence, except that Richard Fontaine had managed to simply vanish from public record while apparently staying alive. The disappearance was complete. It was professional. It was the kind of disappearance that someone who knew how to disappear might arrange.

The implications began to organize themselves in her mind like a file structure, like the hierarchical arrangement of information that allowed everything to be found and understood. Someone had wanted a certain type of information kept secure. That someone, or those someones, had come to Louisiana. They had approached a family, the Broussards, and made them an offer: help us keep this secure, and we will provide security for someone in your family, presumably Jacques. The banking connection had been established as the mechanism through which compensation and security arrangements could be processed. The family had agreed, understanding that discretion was non-negotiable, that the cost of the arrangement included absolute silence. The money would flow through legitimate banking channels but would be justified through some form of business arrangement. The security for Jacques would take a form that was invisible to external observation.

And then, by 1978, the situation had changed. Jacques Delacroix died or disappeared. Richard Fontaine vanished from public record. The arrangement, whatever it had been, appeared to have concluded. Alain Broussard kept the documents, the evidence of what had transpired, and eventually included them in his personal collection, which he donated to Tulane University. The donation was a deliberate act. The preservation was intentional. He was creating an archive of the operation, preserving evidence for a future that would understand what it meant.

Which meant that Alain Broussard had wanted these documents to be discovered. Not immediately. Not during his lifetime. But eventually, by someone who would understand what they meant. He had created an archive of his family's involvement in something, leaving it in a place where it would be preserved, documented, and available for study by future historians or archivists or intelligence professionals or whatever Renee turned out to be.

And now someone named Claude Fontaine, possibly the son of Richard Fontaine, was trying to reclaim that archive before it could be properly examined and understood. This was the framework now, the structure that connected everything. This was what she was working toward in her private research. The frame was becoming solid. The walls were becoming real.



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## Odette's Memory

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The conversation with Odette Tureaud happened on Sunday afternoon, during that liminal time when New Orleans temperatures reached their absolute peak and people retreated indoors to cooler spaces, to air-conditioned rooms, to the sanctuary of shade and refrigeration. The heat had settled over the city like a physical weight, pressing down from above, rising up from the pavement below. Renee had prepared a story, or what she told herself was a story, about being interested in Louisiana family histories for academic purposes. She knew Bette wouldn't believe it. She suspected Odette wouldn't either. But it was a frame that made the asking of questions seem innocent, that allowed her to conduct what was fundamentally an investigation while appearing to simply engage in historical curiosity.

Odette lived two blocks away, in a house that predated the Civil War and had been maintained with the kind of obsessive care that suggested someone who understood the value of preservation, who understood that buildings were documents, that structures contained information about the people who'd built them and lived in them. The house was painted a pale yellow that had begun to fade with age, the color becoming something more subtle, more harmonious

with its surroundings. The wooden shutters had been painted and repainted countless times, creating layers of history visible in the grain and weathering. She was sitting on her front porch when Renee arrived, in a wicker chair that looked like it had been there for forty years, drinking what appeared to be sweet tea from a glass that was sweating in the humidity. She was a woman in her seventies, maybe older, with white hair worn in a way that suggested function over fashion, and hands that bore the marks of age and work and time.

"Bette said you might stop by," Odette said, before Renee had finished explaining her reason for visiting. She didn't seem surprised. She seemed to have been waiting for this conversation. "She said you were asking about the Delacroix family. She said you were being careful about it." Odette's eyes were sharp and clear despite her age, suggesting a mind that had remained engaged and active over decades, that had continued to notice the world with attention and care.

Renee sat down in the other wicker chair without being invited, which seemed to be the protocol for visiting Odette, the way that established relationships worked in this neighborhood. "I'm working on cataloguing a collection that has some references to them. I was curious about the family history." The lie was thin but serviceable. It provided cover without requiring extensive elaboration.

"The Delacroix," Odette said. She was looking out at the street, at the heat shimmering up from the pavement in visible waves. The street was nearly empty, too hot for pedestrian traffic, too hot for casual lingering. "That's a family with history. Old history, I mean. They were here before a lot of people, settled property, had money. But something happened to them, sometime in the sixties or seventies. Some families can weather changes. The Delacroix couldn't." The way Odette said this suggested she was speaking from observation, from the particular knowledge that came from having lived in a place for a long time and paid attention to the patterns of rise and fall, of families arriving and families disappearing.

"What kind of changes?" Renee asked.

"The Cold War," Odette said simply. "That's when I noticed the trouble starting. There was a man, Jacques Delacroix. He was charming. Handsome in the way that made women notice him without trying. He was always very careful with his words, very thoughtful. You got the impression he was thinking about something deeper than what he was saying, that there were layers to his attention that weren't visible on the surface."

"You knew him well?"

"No. I knew him like you know someone in a small neighborhood in a small city. You see them around. You have conversations at community events. You notice when they seem different. With Jacques, what I noticed was that he seemed to be living in two places at once. He was here, but also somewhere else. Somewhere more important. The attention he brought to his daily life was only a fraction of his actual attention. Most of him was somewhere else, engaged in something else."

Renee was quiet, letting Odette continue at her own pace. This was something she'd learned in her studies of oral history: people had their own rhythms of revelation. The important thing was to listen, to remain attentive, to not interrupt the flow of memory. The silence itself was part of the inquiry.

"He was involved with the government somehow," Odette continued. "My mother's friend knew his mother, and she mentioned it once, in that careful way people have when they're talking about things they shouldn't. She said Jacques had gone away to do work for the government, that it was important work but dangerous. She said that if anything happened to him, the family had been promised that they would be taken care of. There was a promise. There was an arrangement." Odette paused, taking a sip of her tea. The glass was beginning to empty, the ice beginning to melt. "That kind of arrangement creates a weight. That kind of promise creates an obligation."

"And did something happen to him?"

"He died," Odette said. "In 1978. He was not very old. Fifty or fifty-two. I remember my mother telling me about it, and I remember being surprised because I hadn't known he was sick. There was no warning. He was just suddenly gone. No obituary of any significance. No funeral that people

attended. Just a quiet conclusion. The death itself seemed like it was meant to be quiet, meant to disappear into the general silence of things."

"Do you know what he died of?"

"No one said. I don't think people knew. Or if they knew, they didn't talk about it. It was one of those deaths that happened in the family, and the family decided not to discuss. Those things happen, especially with families who have been touched by government business. You learn not to ask too many questions. You learn to accept the silences. You learn that some things are meant to be private. The silence becomes a form of respect, actually. It becomes a way of honoring the dead."

Odette turned to look at Renee directly for the first time in the conversation. Her eyes were sharp and clear, and there was an intelligence behind them that suggested she'd learned a long time ago to pay attention to the world and remember what she saw. "Why are you really asking about the Delacroix?" Odette asked.

Renee considered lying again. Instead, she said, "I found something in a collection I'm cataloguing. Something that suggests the Delacroix family was involved in something related to intelligence operations during the Cold War. I'm trying to understand what."

"And you came here thinking an old woman who lives in the neighborhood might remember something useful."

"Yes."

"I appreciate your honesty," Odette said. She turned back to looking at the street. "Here's what I remember, for what it's worth. Jacques had a brother named Paul. Paul was less charming but more practical. After Jacques died, Paul was the one who handled the family business, sold some properties, managed the transitions. He was very efficient about it. Within a year of Jacques's death, the family had moved most of their affairs away from New Orleans. Within two years, they were gone."

"Do you know where Paul went?"

"No. People said he moved to Houston for business. People said a lot of things. The truth is that the Delacroix family withdrew. They consolidated their

holdings, moved their money, changed the way they lived. It was like they were trying to minimize their profile, to make themselves less noticeable. That's what happens when a family is connected to something that ends badly. When a family becomes contaminated by association with things they shouldn't have been involved with. They don't stay in the place where people know what they did."

Renee was taking notes, writing down phrases that Odette used. Minimize profile. Connected to something that ends badly. The language was vague, but it was consistent with what she'd found in the documents. The narrative was building. The pattern was becoming visible.

"There was a man who came around after Jacques died," Odette said, and Renee's attention sharpened. "He was Federal-looking, if that makes sense. Dressed well, spoke carefully, had the manner of someone used to having authority. He was asking questions about Jacques, about who he'd known, whether he'd had unusual contacts. My neighbor saw him, and she said he seemed less interested in actually getting information and more interested in assuring people that certain things should remain confidential. He had that particular way of speaking that federal people have, where the question is actually a form of instruction."

"Do you remember what he looked like?"

"Tall. Dark hair. Very precise in his movements. He had the kind of face that you could look at and then immediately forget. That was probably the point. He was the kind of person who was trained to be unmemorable, to pass through a space without leaving an impression. The appearance itself was part of the operation. The absence of distinctive features was its own form of concealment."

It could have been anyone. Or it could have been the same man, younger, who'd shown up at Tulane fifty years later with forged credentials. The timeline worked. If Richard Fontaine was in his thirties in 1978, he'd be in his eighties now, which meant his son would be in his fifties. The right age for Claude Fontaine. The right context for an ongoing operation. The family was persistent. The operation was generational.

"Thank you for remembering," Renee said.

"I haven't forgotten," Odette said. "There's a difference. I remembered this because it was important, because it mattered that there were people who knew what had happened and would preserve the memory of it. That's what people do when they see something significant. They remember it. They tell it to people who ask the right questions. They keep it alive in the neighborhood, in the community, in the small networks that hold the real history of a place. The memory itself becomes a form of preservation. The telling itself becomes an act of conservation.

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# The Watching

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Renee became aware of the black sedan on a Monday afternoon, three days after her conversation with Odette. It was parked two blocks from her apartment, positioned in a way that had a clear sight line to the street where she lived. She noticed it because she'd begun to notice things the way the training had taught her to notice things, with attention and pattern recognition and the understanding that small details accumulated into significance. The sedan was a Chevrolet Impala, late model, the kind of car that was expensive enough to suggest official resources but nondescript enough not to draw attention. The windows were tinted. She could see the silhouette of a driver, but not his features. The car was parked in a location that appeared random but wasn't. It was positioned where the driver would have visibility of her street and her apartment building while remaining far enough away to be unobtrusive.

She didn't alter her routine. She continued to go to work, to catalogue materials, to conduct her official duties as if nothing had changed. But she became aware of the sedan appearing and disappearing, maintaining distance, never following too closely, never doing anything so obvious as to constitute definite surveillance. This was professional work. Whoever was watching her

understood the basics of tradecraft, understood how to maintain observation without triggering awareness in their target. She began to understand the weight of being watched. She began to feel the particular pressure that came from knowing that her movements were being monitored, that her activities were being tracked, that her ordinary life had become operational.

Except their target was trained. The target understood the patterns of professional surveillance. The target had learned, through months of academy instruction, how to recognize when attention was being paid, how to identify the methods and the resources, how to calculate the implications. She used her bicycle route to gain perspective on the watching. She noticed when the sedan appeared. She began to predict where it would be positioned. She understood that she was being tracked systematically, that someone had decided she was significant enough to warrant surveillance resources. The observation was relentless and careful.

On Wednesday evening, Marchand agreed to meet her at a coffee shop in the Marigny neighborhood that served the kind of coffee that people drank for taste rather than efficiency. The shop had high ceilings and exposed brick walls and the particular atmosphere of a place designed for people who understood coffee as something more than caffeine delivery. The shop was crowded enough to provide cover but not so crowded as to prevent conversation. Renee sat at a table near the window where they could see the street without being obviously observed. Her bicycle was locked outside. Ty ordered coffee. She ordered tea. They sat like two people having a casual meeting, two people who knew each other slightly and had run into each other in a public place. The performance was steady and believable, the kind of encounter that wouldn't attract attention.

"I'm being watched," she said quietly.

Marchand's expression didn't change. He was a man in his mid-thirties, born and raised in New Orleans, with the particular bearing of someone who understood that the city operated on layers and that not everything could be explained by official record. He'd worked homicide for five years before transitioning to detective work that allowed more room for investigation and interpretation. "Are you safe? Do you need police protection?"

"I'm safe. I'm at work. I'm at home. But there's a black sedan, and someone is waiting outside my apartment building." The calm she could maintain in the presence of actual surveillance surprised her. The training was working. The capacity to remain functional in the presence of danger was activated now. She could observe her own fear without being controlled by it.

"What's the license plate?"

She gave him the number. She'd memorized it the first time she'd noticed the car, understanding that if you were going to do something, you did it correctly, with attention and precision. Marchand took a sip of coffee. He pulled out a small notebook, wrote something down in shorthand that only he could read. The notebook was worn, the pages filled with the accumulated notation of years of investigation and observation.

"I'm going to run that plate. I'm going to find out who owns the vehicle, who's authorized to drive it, what the registration says. But I want to tell you that if this is what I think it is, things get complicated." Marchand's voice was level and careful. He understood what she was telling him. He understood the implications.

"What do you think it is?"

"I think someone hired a private security firm to watch you. I think that someone wants to know where you are and what you're doing without involving official channels. I think that someone has resources and is willing to use them to maintain observation of your movements." He was speaking clearly enough that anyone nearby would hear him, but the language was generic enough that no one would understand the actual significance of what he was saying.

"Can you find out who hired them?"

"Maybe. Private security firms are supposed to maintain records of their clients, but those records are sometimes sealed or protected by attorney-client privilege. It depends on the firm, on how they're structured, on what they're willing to disclose to law enforcement." Marchand was thinking as he spoke, calculating the possibilities and the constraints, understanding the particular challenges that came from operating in spaces where official authority wasn't

always sufficient to compel cooperation.

Renee was quiet for a moment, allowing Marchand to continue.

"I did some checking on this Claude Fontaine you mentioned," Marchand continued. "The credentials he presented are forged, but not badly forged. Whoever made them understood the NARA system well enough to create something that would pass casual inspection. I also found out that the company billing the surveillance is something called Meridian International. They're a consulting firm that officially does corporate security work, but their client list is interesting. Mostly government-adjacent companies. Lots of military contractors. A few intelligence community adjacent businesses. The kind of firm that doesn't exist unless there are government contracts involved."

"Are they legal?"

"Technically yes. They're operating within the law, at least based on what my contacts can tell me. But they're the kind of operation that exists in the spaces between what's explicitly legal and what's explicitly illegal. The people who hire them want to do things that don't involve official law enforcement. The work that Meridian does is the work of people who prefer to operate outside of normal channels, who have the resources to do so, and who are willing to pay for that capability."

Renee understood what he wasn't saying. Someone powerful wanted what was in the collection, and they were willing to use unofficial resources to obtain it. That someone probably had connections to the intelligence community, given that what they were after appeared to be Cold War-era intelligence documents. That someone was sophisticated enough to operate outside normal channels while still maintaining technical legality. The operation was visible only to someone who knew how to look for it.

"I need to move the collection," Renee said.

"Move it where?"

"Somewhere safe. Somewhere that whoever is watching me can't find it easily. Somewhere that isn't immediately associated with me or the library. I have a contact from my training. Someone who understands preservation and discretion. Someone who can help." The fact that she had such a contact had

just occurred to her in that moment, but it was true. Michael Shannon, her Ghost ribbon instructor in counterintelligence and operational security during her MPSA training, had emphasized that the networks trained into operatives were meant to be used. That the skills imparted were meant to be deployed. That when the moment came, there would be people available to assist.

Marchand nodded. He understood what she wasn't saying, understood that she was invoking the networks that had been trained into her. "Do it," he said. "Move it today. I'll document the break-in officially, but I'll keep the details vague in my initial report. That should buy you some time before official interest becomes too focused. But I need to tell you something. Once we involve federal agencies, once we make this official, the level of complexity increases significantly. Official channels can be as problematic as unofficial ones. The FBI has its own interests. The intelligence community has its own interests. All of those interests might not align with what's best for your protection.

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# The Break-In

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The library called Renee at six in the morning on Wednesday. Someone had broken into the building overnight. Nothing appeared to be taken. No displays had been disturbed. No equipment was damaged. But the special collections wing had been accessed, and the security system had registered movement in the restricted cataloguing area. The security guard had been making rounds at 2:47 AM when the alarm had triggered. He'd responded immediately, but by the time he'd reached the special collections wing, the intruder was already gone, already disappeared into the night like they'd never been there. The break-in was clean. It was professional. It was the work of someone who knew how to move through secure spaces without leaving evidence of their passage.

Renee was at the library within thirty minutes, moving through the space that had become as familiar to her as her own apartment. The early morning light was filtering through the high windows, creating the particular amber quality that she'd come to associate with the special collections space. The climate control was humming its constant rhythm. The quiet was profound. Everything seemed normal. The cataloguing station was undisturbed. The banker's boxes were arranged exactly as she'd left them. The materials that had

been laid out for documentation were still laid out, undisturbed, untouched.

She walked through the collection methodically, not cataloguing but checking, verifying that everything was where it should be. Box one, box two, box three, the progression following the sequence she'd established during weeks of careful work. Nothing was out of place. Nothing seemed to have been examined or disturbed. The climate control remained constant. The lighting remained constant. The silence remained constant. She moved through the space like she was reading a text, looking for evidence of disruption, for signs that someone had conducted a search through the materials. Her hands moved carefully, confirming positions, verifying that nothing had been altered or removed.

Until she got to the cookbook. The 1972 copy of "La Cuisine Classique." It was resting exactly where she'd left it, on the archival work surface, still wrapped in the tissue paper from her last examination. She looked at it, feeling the weight of observation she'd learned to recognize, understanding with absolute certainty that someone had searched for something specific and had not found it. The cookbook remained intact. The cipher key remained hidden where she had left it. They hadn't found what they were looking for.

They'd been looking for the cipher key. That was obvious. Someone had broken into the library to recover what she'd photographed and hidden in the spine of the cookbook. They hadn't found it because she'd been careful, because she'd understood, even when she was first discovering it, that hiding something small enough to sew into a book was more effective than trying to remove it. She had learned at MP Spy Academy that the best hiding place was the obvious place, the place where people expected the thing to be, but where it had been made invisible through ordinariness.

Renee called Marchand immediately. "The break-in at the library wasn't random. Someone was looking for a specific item in my collection."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. They knew exactly where to look. They didn't disturb anything else. They came directly to the materials I've been cataloguing." The certainty in her voice was steady and controlled, the product of having examined the

space with careful attention and having found the evidence of a deliberate search.

"I'm coming to the library. Don't move anything. Don't talk to anyone about this except me. Just wait."

While she waited, standing in the special collections wing with the banker's boxes and the carefully arranged materials, Renee thought through the implications. The black sedan had been watching her. Claude Fontaine had been patient. Now someone had decided to become more direct. They'd broken into a secure institutional building, bypassed the alarm system, and conducted a targeted search. That suggested either desperation or a judgment that the cost of the break-in was worth the potential recovery of whatever they were seeking. The escalation was significant. The operation was moving into new territory.

Or it suggested that they'd miscalculated, that they'd believed Renee had the original cipher key on her person or at home, and the break-in was designed to access it indirectly through her workplace, through the collection she was supposed to be protecting. The thinking was clear enough to follow. If the key wasn't in her apartment, perhaps it was in her workplace. If it wasn't in the obvious location at the workplace, perhaps it was in the collection she was known to be cataloguing.

Marchand arrived with two uniformed officers. He conducted a thorough examination of the special collections wing, photographing everything, documenting the condition of the cataloguing station, interviewing the security staff about what they'd observed during the night. The break-in had occurred between 2 AM and 4 AM. The door to the special collections wing had been forced with precision, no unnecessary damage, just the careful application of pressure where it would be most effective. No windows had been broken. No alarms had been triggered until the movement sensors had detected someone moving through the restricted area.

"Professional work," Marchand said, after he'd examined the forced door. "Someone who knew how to bypass security systems. Someone who had studied the layout of the building beforehand. Someone who had run this operation multiple times, who understood the procedures and the security

protocols. This wasn't a random search. This was planned."

"They were looking for a specific item," Renee confirmed. "They didn't take anything. They just looked."

"What item?"

Renee considered how much to tell him. She could see the question in his eyes, the understanding that she was holding something back, that there was information she hadn't shared yet. "There's something in the collection that matters more than the rest of the material. Someone wanted to recover it."

"The cipher key," Marchand said. He was stating it as a fact, not a question. He understood her well enough now to make certain connections on his own. The pieces aligned. The motivation became clear. Someone was willing to break into a secure institutional facility to recover a single document. That document must be extraordinarily significant.

"Yes."

"I did some checking on Claude Fontaine," Marchand continued. "The credentials he presented are forged, but not badly forged. Whoever made them understood the NARA system well enough to create something that would pass casual inspection. I also found out that Gulf Coast Data Services is contracted by a company called Meridian International. Meridian International is a consulting firm that officially does corporate security work, but their client list is interesting. Mostly government-adjacent companies. Lots of military contractors. A few intelligence community adjacent businesses. The kind of firm that doesn't exist unless there are government contracts involved."

The break-in changed everything. The situation moved from investigation into active operational threat. Someone wasn't just watching anymore. Someone was acting directly. Someone had decided that the passive approach was insufficient.

"Are they legal?"

"Technically yes. They're operating within the law, at least based on what my contacts can tell me. But they're the kind of operation that exists in the spaces between what's explicitly legal and what's explicitly illegal. The people who hire them want to do things that don't involve official law enforcement."

Renee understood what he wasn't saying. Someone powerful wanted what was in the collection, and they were willing to use unofficial resources to obtain it. That someone probably had connections to the intelligence community, given that what they were after appeared to be Cold War-era intelligence documents. That someone was sophisticated enough to operate outside normal channels while still maintaining technical legality.

"I need to move the collection," Renee said.

"Move it where?"

"Somewhere safe. Somewhere that whoever is watching me can't find it easily. Somewhere that isn't immediately associated with me or the library. I have a contact from my training. Someone who understands preservation and discretion. Someone who can help."

Marchand nodded. He understood what she wasn't saying, understood that she was invoking the networks that had been trained into her. "Do it," he said. "Move it today. I'll document the break-in officially, but I'll keep the details vague in my initial report. That should buy you some time before official interest becomes too focused."

By Friday morning, the Broussard collection had been moved from the Tulane library to a secure storage facility in Baton Rouge, thirty minutes north of New Orleans. The official story was that the materials were being transported to the university's conservation lab for assessment. The truth was more complicated. The materials were in a facility that belonged to an entity whose ownership was sufficiently obscured that it would take significant official effort to trace. Michael Shannon, Renee's Ghost ribbon instructor in counterintelligence and operational security, had arranged everything with the kind of efficiency that suggested this wasn't the first time he'd moved sensitive materials out of immediate danger.

Michael Shannon had arrived in New Orleans with two associates who understood preservation, who knew how to pack and transport archival materials without damaging them, who moved through the world with the quiet competence of people trained in field operations. He'd examined the collection with the eye of someone trained to assess both the physical materials and the

information they contained. He'd asked specific questions about what Renee had found. He'd listened to the analysis with the particular attention of someone who understood the significance of what was being described.

Renee had provided Michael Shannon with comprehensive documentation of everything in the collection. She had also provided him with copies of all the photographs she'd taken, all the analysis she'd done, all the connections she'd made. She had transferred all her private research to encrypted servers that existed beyond the reach of casual surveillance or official investigation. The operation was conducted with professionalism and care. The materials were moved like evidence being secured for a future trial. The documentation was transferred like information being preserved for history.

And she had prepared herself for what came next, which was likely to be something escalatory, something that indicated whoever wanted the collection was moving from passive observation to active retrieval. The break-in had failed. The watching had been documented. The next move would be more direct. The situation was entering a new phase. The stakes were becoming higher. The operation was moving toward its conclusion.

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# The Report

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Renee went to the NOPD precinct on Saturday morning, ostensibly to provide a formal statement about the break-in at the library. Marchand had arranged for an interview in an interrogation room, which had privacy and recording capability, which meant there would be an official record of everything she said. The room was small, painted a institutional green that suggested government buildings and systematic procedure. A metal table. Metal chairs. Recording equipment mounted on the wall. Officially, she was giving a witness statement. Unofficially, they were discussing what came next, what the next phase of this operation would look like, how to transition from investigation into revelation.

"The collection has been secured," Renee said. "It's no longer at the library or at my apartment. It's in a location that whoever is looking for it is unlikely to find quickly." Her voice on the recording would be calm and professional, the voice of someone providing factual information, someone conducting their civic duty of cooperation with law enforcement.

"Does the library director know about this?"

"Not specifically. He knows that materials have been transported for conservation assessment. He doesn't know that the conservation assessment is actually a secure storage facility that belongs to someone outside the university. The distinction matters if people ask questions later. It provides a layer of deniability. It allows plausible denial. It maintains operational security by compartmentalizing knowledge."

Marchand nodded. He understood the logic of compartmentalization, the way information was distributed so that no single person had enough knowledge to compromise the entire operation. The protection of the collection required that no one person held complete understanding of where it was or how it had been moved. That knowledge was distributed across multiple individuals, each of whom held only their portion of the full picture. This way, even if someone was compromised, the location of the collection would remain secure.

"I have more information on Claude Fontaine. The man who came to the library using that name and false credentials. I ran facial recognition on security camera footage from your library entrance. The system matched him to a person named Richard Fontaine, last officially sighted in 1997 in connection with a Department of Defense investigation that was subsequently classified." Marchand pulled out a photograph, showing it to Renee. The image showed a man who could have been forty or fifty. The features were consistent with what she remembered from the encounter in the library consultation room.

Renee processed this. Richard Fontaine. The name she'd found in banking records from 1974. The name that had appeared in the Broussard family correspondence. But the math didn't work unless Richard Fontaine had aged much more slowly than seemed possible, unless there was some kind of error in the system. The facial recognition technology was sophisticated but not perfect. It made assumptions based on available data. It could be wrong.

"What if it's his son?" Renee asked.

"That's what I thought. But the facial recognition system shows consistent features across photographs spanning from 1974 to 1997 to the present. Same person. Which means either the facial recognition is wrong, or Richard

Fontaine hasn't aged in fifty years, or something else is happening that the system isn't interpreting correctly." Marchand was looking at her expectantly, understanding that she had expertise in document analysis, that she might see patterns in the information that he hadn't yet recognized.

"Or it's not actually Richard Fontaine," Renee said. "It's someone who looks similar enough to be related. Someone in the same family, using a variation of the name, but not actually the original Richard Fontaine. That would make more sense. That would explain how the same person could appear in documents from 1974 and arrive at my library in 2026. Professional operatives sometimes use family names, sometimes use variations that create connection and familiarity without being literally accurate. It's a form of impersonation, technically, but it's also a form of operational efficiency. You use the name that's already connected to the operation. You use the identity that already has history and relationships established."

"That's possible. But if that's the case, then we're looking at a family operation. Multiple people with connections to the same events, the same locations, the same intelligence operations. That suggests something organized, something that's been maintained across decades. That suggests a structure, a network, a commitment to preservation that spans generations."

Renee understood what he was actually saying. They weren't looking at one person who wanted to recover a collection. They were looking at an organization, a family or a faction or a network that had been protecting the same secret since the 1970s. That secret was important enough that they were willing to hire private security firms to watch her, willing to commit a break-in to recover the cipher key, willing to maintain surveillance and operational readiness across fifty years.

The persistence was extraordinary. The commitment was profound. The resources were significant. This wasn't a simple matter of covering up an old crime or hiding an embarrassing secret. This was a coordinated operation, maintained across generations, protected by multiple layers of institutional structure and financial resource. The operation had survived the Cold War. It had survived the end of the Soviet Union. It had survived the rise of the internet and the digital age. It was still operating. It was still active. It was still willing

to take significant risks to maintain the secrecy at its core.

"I want to report the break-in officially," Marchand continued. "I want to file paperwork, document the incident, create an official record. This does several things. It puts the incident on record, so if anything else happens, there's a documented pattern. It also signals to whoever is involved that the situation is now being monitored by law enforcement. That might slow them down. It might also force them to escalate in ways that become more visible and more prosecutable."

"Or it might put you in a difficult position," Renee said. "If these people have connections to federal agencies or to organizations that operate in gray areas, an official police investigation might create complications. It might bring official attention that you're not prepared to handle."

"That's true. I've already calculated that risk, and I think the benefits outweigh the complications. Besides, I've already reached out to some contacts I have in the FBI's New Orleans field office. I've provided them with basic information about the situation, framed as a preliminary investigation into suspicious activity at a university facility. They've expressed interest in learning more."

"That could accelerate things."

"It could. But I think acceleration might be preferable to the current situation, where people are watching you and conducting break-ins and operating in spaces where official oversight isn't present. At least if federal agencies are involved, there are procedures and oversight."

Renee wasn't entirely sure about that. She'd learned at MP Spy Academy that federal agencies operating in spaces where official oversight wasn't present was actually a fairly common situation, that the lines between official and unofficial capacity could be blurred in ways that made traditional accountability mechanisms ineffective. But she understood Marchand's logic. Official attention was a form of protection, even if it was imperfect protection.

"There's something else," Marchand said. "The FBI contact I reached out to, she seemed very interested when I mentioned the dates of the collection. 1974, 1978, the area of Louisiana. She asked specific questions about Jacques

Delacroix. She asked if the collection contained any documents related to Cold War-era intelligence operations. She was very careful about what she asked and how she asked it, but her interest level indicated that she already knew something about this situation."

"What did you tell her?"

"I told her we were investigating a break-in at a university facility and would be happy to cooperate with any federal interest in the matter. I didn't specify what was in the collection. I didn't mention the cipher key or the Soviet documents. I kept it vague enough to be truthful while not over-committing to anything."

"And what did she say?"

"She said she would reach out after she'd consulted with her superiors. That was two days ago. I'm waiting for her to call back."

After the interview, after Renee had provided her formal statement about the break-in and signed the appropriate documents that would create an official record of her report, Marchand walked her to her bicycle. The New Orleans morning was already hot, the humidity pressing down from above, making every movement feel weighted and deliberate.

"I need you to continue your normal routine," he said. "Go to work. Attend to the official cataloguing duties. Let people see that you're still engaged with your job. But I want you to understand that things are probably going to escalate now. Federal agencies are involved. Organized entities with fifty years of investment in keeping something hidden are probably becoming aware that their operation is unraveling. That makes people either more dangerous or more desperate. Sometimes both."

"I understand."

"And Renee? Be careful who you trust. Be careful what you tell people. Be very careful about putting anything in writing that could be misinterpreted or used against you later. The people who've been protecting this secret have had five decades to create networks and relationships and leverage. They're not going to give up easily."

Riding home through the afternoon heat, watching for the black sedan that was now clearly part of her routine, watching for any sign of escalation or change in the pattern of surveillance, Renee thought about the layers of protection she'd established. The collection was safe. Her research was distributed and encrypted. The information was moving through multiple channels now, through official and unofficial structures, through the networks that were designed to preserve truth and reveal secrets.

She understood that she'd crossed some kind of threshold, that she could never be just an archivist again, that the training she'd received at MP Spy Academy had transformed her into something else entirely. She was still cataloguing. She was still preserving information. But now she was doing it as part of something larger, something that involved law enforcement and federal agencies and organized operations that spanned decades. The work had taken on new meaning. The preservation had become revelation. The cataloguing had become testimony.

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## The Decoding Begins

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Renee's apartment had transformed into something resembling a codebreaker's workshop, though she'd been careful to maintain the appearance of an ordinary residential space whenever Bette was around. The landlady had continued her routine visits with food and observations, commenting only that Renee looked tired and asking if she was sleeping well. She didn't ask questions directly anymore, which suggested she'd decided that whatever Renee was involved in was serious enough to warrant respect for privacy, that the natural instinct to protect one's tenant extended to not asking too many questions about what that tenant was actually doing. The transformation was subtle but thorough. The work of code-breaking had taken over the space in ways that were invisible to casual observation but completely obvious to anyone paying attention.

The cipher key, photographed in high resolution, filled a significant portion of Renee's laptop screen. She'd printed out copies, reference materials on known Soviet encryption systems, academic papers on Cold War-era intelligence operations. The work was absorbing in a way that the official cataloguing work no longer was. Official cataloguing was about preservation and order, about creating systems that allowed future researchers to find what

they were looking for. This work was about understanding, about extracting meaning from symbols that had been deliberately obscured, about decoding secrets that someone had spent seventy years trying to protect. The work required total engagement. The work required the kind of focus that came from understanding that something significant hung in the balance.

The key used the substitution cipher format that the Soviet GRU had employed during the nineteen-sixties and nineteen-seventies. It was a relatively sophisticated system for its era, though modern cryptography had rendered it vulnerable to various forms of attack. The mathematics of cryptography had advanced substantially. The computational power available now made many older systems vulnerable. But Renee didn't have modern computing resources available to her, and she didn't want to leave digital traces of attempting to decrypt what appeared to be classified intelligence documents. She didn't want metadata associated with her activity, didn't want records that could be subpoenaed or examined, didn't want to create evidence of her participation in the decryption process. She didn't want to leave traces that someone could follow, that someone could use as a basis for legal action or institutional sanction.

So she worked by hand, laboriously applying the key to the few texts in the collection that appeared to be written in cipher. There were three documents that qualified. One was a brief notation, no more than a paragraph, written in what appeared to be a cipher that roughly matched the key's structure. Another was a series of dates and names, written in the margins of a letter, clearly added later, clearly intended to be hidden from casual observation. The third was a complete document, maybe two pages, written entirely in cipher, with no plain text translation included. Each presented different challenges. Each required different approaches. Each promised to reveal something significant.

Renee started with the brief notation. Using the key, substituting letters according to the pattern established, she slowly decoded the text. It took her three hours of careful work, checking each letter against the key, writing out the decrypted version on a separate piece of paper. She worked late into the evening, her apartment lit by desk lamp and laptop screen, the only sounds the occasional noise from next door and the hum of the air conditioning. The

physical work was meditative. The substitution was mechanical but required absolute precision. A single error would propagate through the entire decryption, creating nonsense where there should be meaning.

By the evening, after hours of focus and concentration, her vision swimming slightly from the strain of careful observation, she had decrypted the first message:

"Jacques secure. Arrangement continues. Payment received. Contact only through established channels. No external verification possible. Status quo maintained."

It was brief. It was cryptic. But it confirmed something crucial: this was operational correspondence. This was the language of people who were hiding something from official oversight, who were maintaining an arrangement that required ongoing resources and careful coordination. Jacques was the subject of the arrangement. The arrangement was something that required payment and ongoing maintenance. Contact had to go through established channels only, which suggested that official channels were not an option, that there was a separation between what appeared to be official relationships and what was actually happening.

Renee added this to her analysis. She moved on to the series of dates and names in the letter margins. This took longer because the handwriting was smaller and the notation was less systematic than the first cipher text. But by midnight, after hours of careful work, after her eyes had begun to water from the strain of concentration, she had decoded the second message:

"June 1974: Fontaine initiates contact. July 1974: Broussard agrees to support arrangement. August 1974: First payment received. September 1974: Verification complete. November 1974: Status confirmed secure."

A timeline. The timeline of how the arrangement had been established. Fontaine initiating, Broussard agreeing, the transaction being formalized and verified. By November 1974, whatever situation had required this arrangement had been stabilized. By November 1974, the pieces were in place, the network was established, the operation had begun.

Renee slept for four hours. She woke up at 4 AM, the way she often did when her mind was processing something significant, when sleep became impossible because the information demanded attention. She made coffee and returned to the third document, the one that was entirely in cipher. This was the substantial work, the thing that would require real effort to decode properly. This was the text that would presumably explain what the arrangement actually was, why it mattered, what had been so important that it required seventy years of secrecy.

She established a system. She would work through the text sentence by sentence, applying the key carefully, checking each substitution against the context. The document appeared to be a letter, formal in structure, dated May 1978. The first decoded paragraph read:

"Jacques's condition has deteriorated beyond the parameters we anticipated. Medical assessment indicates terminal diagnosis. Arrangements have been made for transition, as discussed. The family has been informed of the timeline. Contingency protocols are being activated."

Renee stopped. She read the paragraph three times, making sure she hadn't made an error in her decoding. Medical assessment. Terminal diagnosis. Transition. Arrangements. These were the words of someone describing the end of a life, the conclusion of an operation. This was the document that explained what had happened in 1978. The death of Jacques Delacroix was not accidental. It was managed. It was arranged. It was the conclusion of an operation that had required careful planning and institutional resources.

She continued decoding, working through the evening and into the following morning. She worked through coffee and exhaustion and the particular focus that came when you understood you were reading something that mattered. She worked through fatigue and hunger and the particular isolation of being the only person who knew what these words meant. By the time she stopped, exhausted to the point of trembling, her hands cramping from hours of careful handwriting, she had a complete picture of what had happened.

Jacques Delacroix had been an asset, probably a CIA asset, working for the Americans during the Cold War. His operation had been extensive enough

to require ongoing support, financial resources, and institutional protection. Sometime in the mid-nineteen-seventies, there had been a medical crisis. Jacques had become ill. His condition had deteriorated. By May 1978, it was clear he was terminal. The specific illness was not mentioned in the decoded text, but the reality was clear. Jacques was dying. His death would create complications if it occurred in the normal way, if it were documented through ordinary channels, if it required official medical records and standard death procedures.

The arrangement that the Broussards had made with federal handlers was explicitly designed to manage the end of Jacques's life in a way that wouldn't expose the intelligence operation to public scrutiny. They had been paid to maintain discretion. They had been promised security for themselves and their family in exchange for their cooperation in keeping the operation hidden. They had been compensated handsomely for their silence.

Jacques had died in October 1978, exactly as documented in the obituary Renee had found in the newspaper archives. He had died managed and controlled, his death arranged rather than reported, his life ended as the conclusion of an operation rather than as a genuine medical emergency. His death had been officially attributed to unknown causes. His funeral had been kept private. His memory had been carefully erased from public record.

Renee transcribed all of this into her personal research document, encrypting the file with additional layers of security. She printed out hard copies and stored them in a waterproof container hidden in her apartment. She erased her working notes from the coffee table and stored her transcription materials in a locked file box. The physical evidence was secured. The digital evidence was protected. The knowledge she had gained was now distributed across multiple formats and multiple locations.

Then she sat by her window and understood what it meant to have decoded the thing that someone had spent fifty years trying to protect. She understood why the cipher key had been sewn into a cookbook, hidden where it would be preserved but not easily found. Alain Broussard had kept evidence of what had happened, evidence of his family's complicity in managing the end of a CIA asset's life, evidence that the federal government had been willing to pay

for discretion and silence.

And now, fifty years later, someone from that operation or from that family was trying to recover that evidence before it could be properly examined and understood. Claude Fontaine, or whoever he actually was, was the last line of defense against the revelation of a Cold War intelligence operation that someone still considered sensitive enough to warrant protection. Claude Fontaine represented the continuation of that operation, the ongoing commitment to keeping the secret hidden.

Renee called Marchand at 7 AM. "I need to give you what I found," she said. "And I need to do it in a way that creates an official record that can't be disappeared or suppressed."

"Come to the precinct," Marchand said. "I'll make sure we have proper recording and documentation protocols in place."

By midday, Renee had provided Marchand with transcriptions of all the decoded cipher text, detailed analysis of what the documents meant, and her theories about the connections between the Broussard family, Jacques Delacroix, and federal intelligence operations during the Cold War. Marchand recorded everything, documented the evidence, and began the process of creating official reports that would circulate through the NOPD system and eventually reach federal authorities.

By evening, agents from the FBI's New Orleans field office had contacted Marchand. They wanted to meet with Renee. They wanted to see the original cipher key. They wanted to understand the full scope of what she'd discovered.

Renee understood that the moment of private discovery had ended. The secret was being revealed now, systematically, officially, in a way that could no longer be contained or suppressed. The Broussard collection was going to be examined. The connections were going to be documented. The truth about Jacques Delacroix and the arrangement that had protected him was going to be exposed.

She'd begun as an archivist, cataloguing a collection that had been donated to preserve family history. She'd discovered something that had been hidden for fifty years. And now she was the pivot point around which the

revelation turned, the person whose careful reading of documents and careful attention to detail had unraveled what had taken fifty years to hide.

She didn't yet know if this would end safely, or if the people protecting that secret would take desperate measures to prevent full revelation. But she knew that she had crossed a point from which she could not return. The ghost of Jacques Delacroix, haunting the collection through coded language and hidden documents, had finally been raised. And whatever happened next was going to unfold in the light rather than in the margins and silences where the truth had been kept for half a century. The archive was becoming history. The preservation is becoming testimony. The cataloguing had become the act of revelation that would define her life.

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# The Credentials Problem

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Detective Ty Marchand called Renee on a Tuesday morning while she was cataloguing a donation of nineteenth-century medical journals in the climate-controlled room of the special collections library. He didn't ask if it was a good time to talk. The absence of that courtesy meant it wasn't a good time and that he didn't care. That was how you recognized when something had shifted: the small social protocols fell away, and the conversation became about necessity rather than politeness.

"Your visitor," Marchand said without preamble. "The federal archivist. I ran his credentials through every system I could access. I went through NARA databases, federal personnel records, the National Archives' employee directory, state employment records, the works. I was thorough."

Renee set down her cataloguing pen. The room smelled like old paper and the particular dust that settles on medical texts that nobody has opened since 1887. Outside the climate-controlled cocoon, she could hear the ordinary sounds of the library: footsteps, a phone ringing at the main desk, the whisper of someone consulting a finding aid. The distance between those sounds and

this room was absolute. In here, time moved differently. History lived here.

"And?" she asked, though she already knew the answer would be bad. If it had been good, Marchand wouldn't have called. Bad news always moved at a different speed than good news. Bad news couldn't wait.

"The office exists. National Archives and Records Administration. Regional division. The whole structure is real, it's in the phone book, it's on government websites. But Claude Fontaine doesn't show up in any of their personnel directories, past or present. He doesn't show up in archived payroll records. He doesn't show up in retirement databases. He's got a badge number, which I traced. The badge number belongs to someone named Margaret Fontaine who retired from the Archives in 1994. Someone is using a dead woman's credentials. Or a retired woman's credentials. I called NARA directly to check. Margaret Fontaine is dead. She's been dead since 2003."

Renee closed her eyes. She had been half-expecting this, which meant her instincts had been screaming for days and she had been quiet about it. The training she had received at the MPSA Ghost program had emphasized observational discipline, and she had disciplined herself not to act on suspicions, not to share concerns, not to name things before she had documentation. But discipline had its limits when you understood that someone had entered the place where you worked with false credentials and false intentions.

"He could be using a relative's credentials," Renee said, offering the charitable interpretation first. "Family member, inherited identity, something like that."

"He could be. But then I made a call that cost me political capital. I called my FBI contact. Agent Nicole Bertrand, counterintelligence division. I was reluctant to do it, I want you to know that. Making calls to federal law enforcement is the kind of thing that creates paperwork that follows you for the rest of your career. But I made the call. I told her about the credentials that don't check out and about the break-in at your library that doesn't match any common pattern of theft."

"What kind of pattern would it match?" Renee asked.

"A pattern of search. Someone looking for something specific, trying not to be noticed, leaving minimal evidence. Not a smash-and-grab burglary, which is what you'd expect from organized crime or addicts looking for merchandise to fence. This was someone knowing what they wanted and where to find it. That's intelligence work. That's either something professional or something that looks like it." Marchand had that particular register in his voice that meant he was moving through difficult territory, that he was aware that he was about to suggest something that would create obligations for Renee, that would make this situation official and impossible to walk away from.

"Bertrand asked me some questions," he continued. "She wanted to know about you. She wanted to know your background. She wanted to know whether you had reported the break-in or whether I had found out about it another way. She wanted to know whether you had personal connections to any federal agencies or whether you had security clearance. She wanted to know everything about your employment history."

"What did you tell her?" Renee asked.

"I told her the truth. That you're quiet and careful and that you notice things other people miss. That you would have called me if you thought something was wrong, and in fact you did. That you have a methodical mind, the kind of mind that's good for archive work and good for seeing patterns. And that you probably won't tell her everything the first time she asks, because you're the kind of person who thinks about all the angles before you move."

"Is that a character reference?" Renee asked.

"It's both a character reference and a warning," Marchand said. "She's going to want to talk to you. She's going to have questions about the break-in and about the materials in the collection. She's going to be professional and careful. She's going to be very interested in what you found."

After Marchand hung up, Renee sat in the climate-controlled room surrounded by nineteenth-century medical journals and thought about Claude Fontaine, who was using a dead woman's credentials to present himself as a federal archivist. She thought about what that meant: resources, institutional access, perhaps authorization from someone, perhaps freelancing at the

margins of institutional power. She thought about the break-in. She thought about the notebook where she had been keeping her decoded notes. She thought about how quickly things could escalate when the wrong people understood what you had found.

She pulled out her phone and called Bette.

"Bette? It's Renee. Are the locks on the apartment changed recently?"

There was a pause on the other end of the line. Bette had been running a building in the Marigny for forty years. She had seen a lot. She understood what it meant when a tenant asked about locks. Understood what it meant when someone was scared enough to ask.

"Changed them when you moved in," Bette said. "That was eight months ago. Why? You want new ones?"

"I want new ones. Better ones. Today if possible. And I want to make sure they're good ones. Like, really secure. Can you do that?"

"Someone bothering you?" Bette's voice had gone alert.

"Not directly. But I think someone might be looking at my apartment. I think someone knows where I live and I think I should probably have better security."

"I'll call the locksmith. She can do it this afternoon. She's good. She uses quality hardware. You okay?"

"Yeah," Renee said. "I'm fine. Just being careful."

By four o'clock, the locksmith had installed two new deadbolts and a reinforced chain on Renee's apartment door. The locksmith, a woman named Justine with sharp eyes and the kind of efficiency that suggested she didn't ask unnecessary questions, stood back and examined her work. Her hands moved with the confidence of someone who had done this a thousand times, who understood the physics of security, who knew exactly how much force it would take to compromise each lock.

"These'll hold," she said. "Someone wants to get in, they're getting in through the window or they're kicking down the frame. But the lock itself, that's not happening without power tools."

Renee paid cash. The locksmith didn't issue a receipt. They understood each other without saying much. Some transactions existed in the space between official documentation and private arrangement.

She rode home through the Quarter just as the light was starting to go gray. The streets were already starting to fill with the evening crowd: locals heading to bars, musicians heading to venues for sound checks. The smell of food drifted up from restaurants, that particular blend of garlic and butter and something spiced that defined New Orleans cooking. A street musician was testing a trumpet, trying out notes, each one precise and clear in the cooling air. The Mississippi smelled like mud and old water, like a river that had seen centuries move past it without changing its essential nature.

She locked her bicycle in the courtyard and went upstairs. She turned on every light in the apartment and stood in the middle of the living room, understanding something she hadn't fully understood before: she was being looked at. Someone had focused institutional attention on her and on what she knew. Someone wanted what she had found. The apartment suddenly felt smaller, more exposed, as if the walls had become transparent.

She went to her desk and pulled out the notebook where she had been keeping her decoded notes from the cipher. She had maybe thirty percent of it translated now. The handwriting was precise and difficult. The language was formal French with specialized terminology that she had to look up in historical intelligence records online, accessing databases that were supposed to be restricted but that were available if you knew how to find them and if you had learned to move quietly through digital spaces.

The names were emerging from the decoded portions. Names of American officials. Names of people who had been turned by Soviet intelligence in the 1970s. Names of people who had later gone on to careers in government service. Some of them dead now. Some of them retired. Some of them still active. She thought about what it meant to have your name written in a cipher, documented as a traitor or an asset, caught in someone else's record forever.

If Fontaine had the cookbook and got to the cipher before Marchand and the FBI got to him, the evidence would disappear. The decoded portions she had already worked out would be lost. She would be left with a story that nobody would believe, a narrative with no physical proof. The cipher would become rumor, speculation, her word against institutional silence.

She photographed every page of her notebook using her phone. She encrypted them on her laptop using encryption software that should have been beyond her technical ability but that she had researched carefully, spending hours on forums and technical blogs, learning the language of cryptography and digital security. She created multiple copies and stored them in cloud services that claimed to have end-to-end encryption, though she understood that encryption was always provisional, always subject to compromise by people with sufficient resources and institutional authority.

She printed a second physical copy of her decoded notes and put it in an envelope in her desk at work, sealed, with Marchand's name on it. She marked it "Secure Backup. For Detective Marchand Only." She understood that this was the moment when being careful shifted into being paranoid, but paranoia was just caution with better documentation.

Then she sat in the dark of her apartment and tried not to think about what happened to people who knew too much about old secrets. She tried not to think about the break-in at the library. She tried not to think about Claude Fontaine showing up at her apartment with incorrect credentials and polite questions. She tried not to think about the architecture of institutional power, about how institutions protected people who had served them well, about how institutions could make people disappear if they needed to.

At 6:47 AM the next morning, her phone rang. It was Marchand.

"Agent Bertrand is at the library," he said. "She's got coffee and she looks like someone who has been up all night reading files. She wants to start with the break-in documentation. I'm sending Officer Chavez to meet you there so she has a witness."

"Okay," Renee said.

"One more thing," Marchand said. "She asked about you specifically. Not your work. You. She wanted to know your background, your training, whether you had any connections to intelligence work."

"What did you tell her?"

"That you're qualified for this. That you would be the right person to handle this. And that you probably won't tell her everything the first time she asks, because you're thinking about all the angles before you move. I told her that's a strength, not a weakness."

"Is it?" Renee asked.

"Yes," Marchand said, and hung up.

Renee showered. She put on the gray wool blazer she kept for professional meetings. She rode to the library in the thin cold light of a New Orleans winter morning, her breath visible, her fingers already numb on the bicycle handlebars. The city looked different when you understood that people were watching it, when you understood that normal was no longer possible, that you had crossed some threshold and couldn't go back.

Agent Bertrand was in Dr. Solon's office, drinking coffee from a take-out cup, looking at Renee the way archivists looked at texts they were trying to read: like someone trying to see through layers of ink and paper to what was written underneath.

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## The Quiet After

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The second meeting with Detective Marchand happened at a coffee shop on Frenchmen Street, neutral ground, the kind of place where a cop and a librarian wouldn't stand out. It was three days after Bertrand had left the library with the decoded notes and the cookbook in an evidence bag. The cafe was one of those transitional spaces that occupied the boundary between the Quarter and the Marigny: old enough to have history, new enough to attract a mix of locals and tourists who had ventured slightly off the main pedestrian routes.

Marchand ordered chicory coffee, the old New Orleans style, the kind that had been brewed the same way for a century or more. The coffee had a particular bitterness and depth that suggested it had been made by someone who understood that some traditions persisted because they worked. Renee ordered water, her way of maintaining clarity in situations where clarity mattered more than comfort. They sat at a corner table where Marchand could watch the street without appearing to be watching it, that particular skill that cops learned: how to maintain situational awareness while looking like you were doing something else, something innocent and ordinary.

Outside, Frenchmen Street moved through its afternoon rhythm. Musicians between gigs consulted their phones. Locals walked dogs. A few tourists photographed the street art that covered nearly every wall, bright colors bleeding into faded colors, old murals and new ones creating a palimpsest of public expression. The street had the particular smell of New Orleans in winter: not quite cold, carrying the scent of old buildings and river water and the omnipresent cooking that happened in every restaurant and home.

"I read your notes," Marchand said. "The decoded ones. Agent Bertrand sent me copies for the file, with appropriate security markings and restrictions."

Renee waited. She had learned to value silence, to understand that silence often contained more information than speech. Marchand had come here with something specific to say, and he would say it when he was ready, when he had organized his thoughts into the framework of law enforcement protocol and institutional reality.

"There are eighteen names," Marchand continued. "Eighteen people who were flagged in that cipher as having been compromised by Soviet intelligence during the 1970s. Some of them have died. Some of them are retired. Some of them are still in government service. They span everything from career intelligence officers to elected officials to people working in federal law enforcement. Each name has associated dates, contact information, payment amounts, and codenames."

"Are they going to arrest them?" Renee asked.

"No. That's not how this works. This is counterintelligence, not criminal investigation. The people the Soviets turned back then, most of them did what they did for money, or ideology, or because they were blackmailed into cooperation. None of that's illegal now, or it's so old that prosecution would create more problems than it would solve. Statutes of limitations have expired. Witnesses are dead or gone. What matters is that those people are identified, and whoever's running counterintelligence operations now knows who they are, and can use that information to control them, to leverage them, to eliminate them if necessary, or to turn them again. It's a tool. Information is always a tool." Marchand took a long sip of his chicory coffee. It was the color of old

wood, the color of things that had been brewing for a very long time.

He seemed to be considering his words carefully, understanding that what he said next was going to shape the way Renee understood what was happening to her. Marchand was a New Orleans detective who loved his city fiercely, who believed in the small protocols of community and accountability. She had seen him move through the Marigny with the ease of someone who belonged here, who knew the shopkeepers and the residents, who understood the particular texture of the neighborhood. Now he was talking about federal intelligence and institutional loyalty, things that existed in a different register entirely.

"What Fontaine was doing, what he's been doing for decades, is protecting those names. He doesn't work for any government agency now, but he used to, and someone who used to be his boss probably asked him to keep an eye on anything that came up connected to those operations. He's a loyalist. That's the word for people like him. He's protecting people he worked with thirty years ago, forty years ago. Some of them probably dead now. But their estates aren't dead. Their families aren't dead. Their successors in various government positions aren't dead. There's institutional continuity here. There's something that persists beyond individual mortality."

"Why would he do that?" Renee asked. "Why spend decades protecting people who probably don't even know he's protecting them, who might not even care?"

"Because it's what he knows how to do. Because someone paid him to, probably. Because it gave his life structure and purpose. Because..." Marchand paused, his eyes moving to the window where a street musician was setting up with a saxophone case and a tip jar, the beginning of another evening, another performance, another night in the Marigny. "Because he thinks it's the right thing. That's the hardest part to understand about people like Fontaine. They genuinely believe that keeping secrets is more important than telling the truth. They've been trained to believe that. They've built their entire lives on that belief. It's not evil. It's just a different way of understanding what matters, what's important, what preserves institutions and prevents chaos."

The coffee shop around them continued its ordinary afternoon rhythm. Musicians between gigs reading newspapers on the free WiFi, nursing single cups of coffee for hours. Old folks who had been coming here for decades occupying their usual tables with their usual newspapers and their usual predictability. Tourists who had wandered out of the Quarter in the wrong direction, looking at menus like tourists looked at everything: with a combination of suspicion and hunger.

"He came to my apartment," Renee said.

Marchand's head came up immediately. His jaw tightened in a way that Renee recognized now, the way he looked when something shifted in a case and made him very still, very focused. This was the moment he had been waiting for, the moment the abstract concern became concrete reality.

"When?"

"Last night. Around 8 PM. He knocked. I didn't answer immediately. I looked through the peephole first. It was him. He was standing there in his jacket with his hands visible and slightly apart, the way someone stands when they want to show they're not a threat. Very controlled. Very deliberate."

"Did you let him in?"

"No. I called 911 and told them there was someone at my door who was making me uncomfortable. They sent Officer Danielle from the Marigny substation. She came up with her hand on her belt in that cop way, ready for anything, and she asked Fontaine what he wanted. He said he was an archivist with the National Archives and that he needed to speak with me professionally about documentation issues. She asked for ID. He showed it. She took down all the information, wrote it on her pad with that practiced cop writing. He said he would call back during business hours and left without any argument, without any resistance. He was polite. He was professional. He understood that escalation would have been counterproductive."

Marchand was very quiet. He was processing this information, understanding what it meant, translating it into operational reality. His hands were still on the coffee cup, but they were no longer relaxed. There was tension in his shoulders now, the kind of tension that came from understanding that the

situation had escalated beyond the theoretical.

"He knows where you live," Renee said. "He came here with knowledge of my address, which means he had resources. And he's testing the reaction time on getting police response. He's understanding the envelope of safety around me."

"Yes," Marchand said. "That's exactly what he's doing. He's gathering information. He's seeing whether you have protection, whether someone's watching you, what your response patterns are. He's doing surveillance and you cooperated by calling it in, which gave him everything he needed. That's a problem."

"He's going to try to get the cookbook again."

"Yes. But now we're ready for it." Marchand set down his coffee with the finality of someone making a decision. "Here's what you're going to do. You're going to keep working exactly as you always have. You're going to maintain your normal routine. Every morning you ride your bicycle to the library. Every night you go home. You're going to act like none of this is happening, like you're unaware that anyone might be concerned about your safety. You're going to be bait, basically, and you're going to do it deliberately."

"And Bertrand?"

"Bertrand's got two FBI agents stationed at the library already. They're not obvious about it. One of them is posing as an intern working on a digital project. One of them's stationed in the climate control room ostensibly doing an equipment inspection. They can see the rare-book cabinet from where they are. They have line of sight. If Fontaine comes back, if he tries the break-in again, they'll have him. They'll document everything. They'll have the whole thing on camera."

Renee thought about armed FBI agents hiding in her workplace, watching and waiting. She thought about what it meant to become the focus of federal attention, to become significant enough to warrant resources and surveillance. She thought about being a target, even if the target was meant to catch someone else.

"What if he comes to my apartment again?"

"Then we'll have him even faster. Because Bertrand's got someone posted on your street. He probably doesn't know it. But they're there, watching the building, noting who comes and goes. They're good at not being noticed. This is their job, the part of their job that doesn't get talked about in training manuals: being present without being seen, being vigilant without being visible."

Renee looked at Marchand across the table. She saw the fatigue in his face, the way his shoulders had gone tight under his jacket. He believed her completely. More than that: he believed her enough to put resources on the street, which meant he had called in favors, which meant he had fought with people who probably didn't want to get involved in an old intelligence matter. He was risking his career on the belief that she was telling the truth about what she had found.

"Thank you," she said.

"Don't thank me yet. Just be careful. Be observant. Keep your phone charged. If anything feels wrong, if you see anything that doesn't fit the pattern, if you have any sense at all that something's off, you call me directly. Not 911. Not the precinct. Me. You have my number."

He gave her a piece of notebook paper with a phone number written on it in precise handwriting, numbers that would bypass the bureaucratic machinery of police procedures and go straight to Marchand's personal phone. She folded it and put it in her jacket pocket, keeping it separate from all her other papers and documents, treating it like the valuable thing it was.

"There's one more thing," Marchand said. "The FBI's running down Fontaine's real identity. They've got facial recognition software, banking records, phone records, passport applications, everything. It's going to take time, maybe a couple weeks, but they're going to find out who he actually is, and when they do, we're going to know how deep this goes, who authorized what, whether he's acting on his own or whether he's got institutional backing still."

"How deep do you think it goes?" Renee asked.

Marchand looked out the window toward Frenchmen Street, toward the street musician who was now testing his saxophone with experimental notes, sound checking for the evening crowd that hadn't arrived yet. The light was going gray as the afternoon moved toward evening, that particular New Orleans light that made everything look like a photograph from another era, made everything look important and historical and charged with meaning. It was the light that made the city beautiful, that made you understand why people stayed here despite everything.

"Deep enough that a man in his seventies is still out on the street pretending to be a federal archivist," Marchand said. "Deep enough that he's willing to use force or the threat of force. Deep enough that people who could have just disappeared into retirement instead are still in the game, still protecting something, still willing to risk exposure. That means there's still something they're protecting. That means this isn't over. That means the real story is bigger than we thought."

He finished his chicory coffee and stood up. His movements were those of someone who had made a decision and was now acting on it with purpose and discipline. He was a detective of the old school, someone who believed that information moved through relationships, that trust was something you built and maintained, that institutions worked because people like him made them work through quiet competence and personal integrity.

"I'm going back to the precinct. I've got paperwork to file that doesn't exist. You're going to go home. Tomorrow you go to work and you do your job like you always do. And you wait."

"For what?" Renee asked.

"For him to come back," Marchand said. "He will. Something drove him this far, and that something isn't going to be satisfied until he gets the cookbook or until he understands that getting the cookbook is impossible. And when he comes back, we'll be ready."

He left a five-dollar bill on the table, took his jacket from the back of the chair, and walked out into the Frenchmen Street afternoon without looking back. Renee sat alone with her untouched water and watched him disappear

into the street traffic, becoming just another person moving through the city, indistinguishable from the ordinary flow.

She thought about an old man who had spent decades protecting secrets that probably didn't matter anymore, that had already leaked, that were already known by people who had clearances to know them. She thought about the names in the cipher, eighteen people whose lives had been compromised by choices they made in the 1970s, choices made in a different world, a different political moment, a different understanding of what espionage meant and what loyalty cost. She thought about what it meant to build an entire life around a single mission, to never let that mission go, to carry it forward into old age like it was still burning with the urgency it had held decades ago.

She finished her water. She paid for Marchand's coffee. She walked back out into the Frenchmen Street afternoon and understood that everything had changed, that she was no longer simply a librarian cataloguing materials, that she had become something else entirely.

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# The Letters

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Odette Tureaud lived three houses down from Bette's building, in a narrow Creole cottage painted the color of faded roses, the kind of color that had faded beautifully over decades of exposure to New Orleans weather. The paint was chipped in places, revealing older layers of color underneath, a palimpsest of maintenance decisions and time passing. Renee had been to visit twice before, but always with Bette running interference, making it seem like a casual social call rather than what it actually was: an archivist asking an old woman about a dead man from a very long time ago.

This time, Renee went alone. The decision to go alone was deliberate. It was the kind of decision that represented a shift in understanding, an acceptance that this was no longer theoretical, that the investigation was moving into territory that required direct action. The new locks on her apartment door had meant something. Fontaine's visit had meant something. Now she was moving toward the source.

It was a Saturday morning, the kind of pale New Orleans winter morning that looked like an illustration of winter rather than the thing itself. The

temperature was just above freezing, the kind of cold that didn't feel quite real in a place where cold was rare and temporary. The streets of the Marigny were quiet. A few people were out with coffee. The French Quarter tourists hadn't made it this far uptown yet. The neighborhood was in its morning lull, the pause before the day shifted into something more active and public.

Odette answered the door in a cardigan and slippers, her face arranged in the careful politeness of someone who didn't get many visitors who weren't Bette. She was in her mid-eighties, small in the way that old people became small through decades of living. Her hands were thin and papery, but her eyes were clear, still sharp enough to read and recognize things.

"Bette said you might come by," Odette said. "She said you had questions about Jacques."

"I do. I hope that's not a problem."

"No problem. It's been forty years. More. Forty-eight years now. People don't usually ask about him anymore. Nobody remembers. So come in."

She opened the door wider. Inside, the cottage was the interior of a completely different era. The furniture was expensive and well-maintained, the kind of things that suggested Odette's family had money at some point, that had understood wealth and quality. There were photographs on every surface: a man in a Navy uniform from the 1950s, the same man older and in a suit, a young Odette with dark hair and careful lipstick, photographs of places and times. The air smelled like old wood and the particular mustiness that came from living alone in a small space for years.

"That's Jacques," Odette said, pointing to the man in the suit. "That's him in 1975. Three years before he died."

Renee looked at the photograph. Jacques Delacroix was slight, with the kind of neutral features that would be easy to forget, the kind of face that would disappear into a crowd. He was looking at the camera with a small smile, the kind of smile people gave when they were thinking about something other than the photograph. There was intelligence in his eyes, a watchfulness that suggested he was always aware of more than he was saying.

"How did he die?" Renee asked.

"They said it was his heart. He was only fifty-one. That seemed young to me then. Now it doesn't seem so young. People die of their hearts all the time. But..." Odette paused, and Renee understood that something had shifted in the conversation, that Odette had been waiting decades for someone to ask this question. "But I always thought there was something they weren't telling me. I was his wife, and they didn't tell me everything. They came and told me he was dead and then they asked me questions and then they left. They were polite. But they were also very final about it. Like they didn't want me asking follow-up questions."

Odette gestured for Renee to sit. They sat in the living room, which had the particular cold of rooms that are rarely used. Odette folded her hands in her lap with the precision of someone who had learned to organize her grief into physical postures. On the mantelpiece, there was a photograph of Jacques in military uniform, young and strong, looking like a man about to go off to war or already back from it.

"He worked for the government," Odette said. "I never knew exactly what. He would tell me he was working in archives, which made me think of you, actually, when Bette said her new tenant was a librarian. But I never believed that. The way he would come home, the way he would be careful about who he talked to, the way he traveled. That wasn't archives. That was something else. Something official but quiet. Something that kept him away from me for days at a time."

"Did he ever tell you what he was doing?"

"No. And I didn't ask. We were married for twenty-three years. After a certain point, you learn not to ask questions you don't want answered. You learn to accept that some things are not for wives to know. He was good to me. He paid our bills. He came home every night except for the nights he didn't. When he died, I grieved him. And then I moved on. But I kept things. I kept things because I didn't know what else to do with them, and because throwing away a person's history seems like a kind of betrayal."

Odette stood up with the careful slowness of someone whose knees remembered things and didn't like them. She walked to a hallway closet and

opened it, producing a shoebox that had been worn soft by decades of storage. Inside were letters. Dozens of them. Handwritten on thin paper that suggested they had been written in a country where paper was rationed or scarce. They were written in French, in handwriting that varied depending on how quickly the writer had been moving, how much they had been thinking. Some of the pages had notes in the margins, annotations suggesting active engagement with the content.

"I never read them all," Odette said. "My French isn't good enough for that. But I read some. Enough to know they were about business. Not business he was doing, but business he knew about. He would read them and then he would destroy the ones that weren't important, but he kept these."

Renee took the box with both hands. She felt the weight of it, the physical presence of decades of secrets written down and preserved. She looked at the postmarks: 1974, 1975, 1976. She looked at the handwriting on the envelopes: precise, controlled, written by someone who had been trained to communicate carefully. The envelopes were marked with return addresses that had been crossed out, as if the sender wanted to make it clear that no reply should be sent, that the correspondence was one-way.

"Who were they from?" Renee asked.

"I only know the signature. They're all signed the same way. TCHAIKOVSKY. Like the composer. I thought it was strange. I thought maybe he had a friend who liked music. But the tone of the letters wasn't friendly. It was formal. Very formal. Like business correspondence between people who didn't like each other. Like people who were conducting a transaction rather than maintaining a relationship."

Renee's hands had gone very still. TCHAIKOVSKY. A codename. A cover. Someone who was signing their official correspondence with a name chosen to suggest refinement and European sophistication. Someone who wanted to be memorable enough to be distinctive, but not so memorable as to be traceable.

"Can I take these?" she asked.

"Of course. That's why I kept them. That's why I've been waiting all these years. I kept them so that someday, someone who could understand would come and take them. And now you have."

Renee put the box in her messenger bag. She felt the weight of it, the physical presence of information that had been preserved for forty-eight years, waiting for someone to understand its significance. Waiting for someone to know what to do with secrets that had been kept too long.

"Thank you," Renee said. "This is very important."

"He was a good man," Odette said. "Jacques. I don't care what he did for the government or who he worked for. He was a good man. He was kind to me. He paid our bills. He came home every night except for the nights he didn't. When he died, I grieved him. And then I moved on. But I kept the letters because it seemed like a waste to destroy them. History shouldn't be destroyed just because it's inconvenient."

At the door, Renee turned back.

"Odette, did anyone ever come looking for him? After he died?"

"Yes. Once. About a year after he died. A man came by and asked if I had any of his papers. I told him no. I lied to him. He was polite about it, but I knew he would take them if he found them. So I hid them. And he went away. He was very thorough though. He looked through the house systematically, checking drawers, looking in closets, understanding the way people stored things. He found my wedding photographs. He found Jacques's military service record. He found everything except what he was looking for."

"What did he look like?"

"Older. Maybe in his sixties. But strong. The kind of man who had power and didn't need to talk about it. He had an accent. Not quite American. Something European maybe, but that could have been a cover. He had the kind of bearing that suggested he had been trained in multiple disciplines. Military and intelligence both."

"Did he give you a name?"

"He said his name was Fontaine. I thought that was a lie too. But I wrote it down after he left, so I wouldn't forget. I always thought if he came back, I

might need to remember that name. I kept it in a book. I've had that name written down for forty-eight years, waiting for it to matter."

Renee stood in the doorway for a moment without speaking. She understood what had just happened, what the implications were. Claude Fontaine had come looking for these letters forty-eight years ago. Claude Fontaine had failed to find them. And now Renee had them, and everything had changed. The circles were closing. The past was reaching forward to touch the present.

"He won't come back," Renee said. "But if he does, you call this number."

She wrote Marchand's number on a piece of paper from her messenger bag. Odette took it with her papery fingers and nodded like she understood, like she had been waiting her entire life for someone to tell her what to do with the name Fontaine and the knowledge it carried.

"What's going to happen?" Odette asked.

"I don't know yet. But whatever it is, it's not going to hurt you. I promise that."

It wasn't a promise Renee had any particular authority to make, but she made it anyway, because Odette was eighty-seven years old and she had kept letters in a shoebox for forty-eight years waiting for someone to come who would understand what they meant. Because Odette had preserved history when she could have destroyed it, and that deserved something more than silence.

Renee rode home with the box of letters in her messenger bag, riding slowly, taking the long way through the Quarter to give herself time to think. The letters changed everything. They confirmed that the cipher key cookbook was real, that the people writing it down were real, that Jacques Delacroix was connected to something significant enough that people were still protecting it forty-eight years after his death. The letters were the physical proof that official history was being maintained through private actions, that the institutional apparatus had personal agents in the field protecting secrets through careful loyalty.

They also confirmed that Claude Fontaine had been looking for these letters once before. Which meant he knew they existed. Which meant if he knew Renee was connected to Odette, he would come looking again. Which meant time was not on her side. Which meant she had perhaps days or weeks before the situation escalated beyond her capacity to manage it.

She pedaled faster. By the time she got home, the pale winter light was starting to go gray toward afternoon. She locked her bicycle in the courtyard and checked her phone.

A text from Marchand: "You good?"

She texted back: "I'm home. I have something for you."

She went upstairs and waited for him. When he arrived twenty-three minutes later, she opened the shoebox and showed him the letters from someone who had called themselves TCHAIKOVSKY, and she explained about Odette, and about the man who had come looking exactly one year after Jacques Delacroix died.

Marchand didn't say anything for a long time. He just looked at the box and the letters and the careful handwriting of someone who had been writing down secrets in a language not their own. His jaw had tightened. His hands had gone very still.

"This is good," he finally said. "This is very good. This confirms everything Agent Bertrand thought she knew. This makes it real in a way the decoded notes don't. This is the kind of thing that survives legal challenges."

"What happens now?" Renee asked.

"Now Bertrand gets these. Now we know that Fontaine didn't just want to protect a person. He wanted to bury an entire operation. These letters are dated 1974 to 1976. That's the end of the Cold War operations in North America. That's when they were shutting things down, moving assets, destroying evidence. Delacroix was the cutoff point. He was the last connection to whatever they were running."

"And now someone's been trying to clean up what Delacroix left behind," Renee said.

"Exactly. And that means Fontaine isn't working alone. That means there's someone still in the system who wants this buried. Someone with resources. Someone with power.

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# The Visitor

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Claude Fontaine arrived at Renee's apartment on a Thursday evening just as the light was starting to fail, transforming the streets of the Marigny from gray to something darker, something that suggested the approach of night and all the ambiguity that came with it. Renee knew he was there because she had set her phone to alert her whenever her building's exterior camera picked up anyone approaching her door. She had forty-three seconds of warning. In those forty-three seconds, she closed her laptop, put on her blazer, and sat at her kitchen table with her hands folded in front of her, looking exactly like someone who had been waiting for him. She had learned this in the MPSA training: how to compose yourself, how to present a particular version of yourself to the world, how to keep your real thoughts locked away behind a mask of professional neutrality.

When she opened the door, he was standing in the narrow hallway with his hands visible and slightly apart, the universal gesture of someone showing they weren't a threat. He looked smaller than she remembered, older. The January light from the hallway fixture was harsh on his face, picking out lines and shadows that suggested he hadn't slept well in quite some time. There was

exhaustion in his bearing, the kind that came from years of carrying something heavy, years of looking over your shoulder, years of never quite resting.

"Ms. Dubois. I apologize for the hour. I wanted to catch you before you went out for the evening."

"How do you know when I go out?"

"I don't. I got lucky." He smiled. It was a genuine smile, not the performative thing she had seen in her office. The smile suggested he understood that luck had run out for him, that he was past the point of successful performance. "I've been driving past periodically. I saw your light on. I thought I would take a chance."

"That's somewhat stalker-adjacent," Renee said. She kept her voice level, kept it professional, the way you spoke to someone who was dangerous but not currently threatening. The way you maintained equilibrium when you understood that everything could shift in an instant.

"I suppose it is. But I'm desperate. And I imagine you've already understood that I'm not who I said I was." He said this without the slightest inflection, just stating fact, accepting the reality of his exposure.

Renee didn't respond to that. She waited. This was what the MPSA Ghost training had prepared her for: the long silences, the assessment, the refusal to fill empty space with information that could be used against you. She understood that every word you spoke created leverage for the other person, that silence was its own kind of language, that information was currency and she should be very careful about her spending.

Fontaine waited too. That was when she understood that he had training also, that he recognized what she was doing and he understood it on a professional level. That he was reading her the way she was reading him, two trained observers watching each other, each understanding that the other understood. The recognition passed between them like a current, wordless and complete. They had both been trained in the same disciplines, learned the same languages of observation and silence and the careful management of threat.

"May I come in?" he asked after the silence had gone on for a precise, measured length of time. She understood that he had timed the silence himself,

was testing her, was seeing how long she would let him stand in the hallway before the social pressure became too great.

"No. Talk here."

"It's cold."

"I'm not concerned with your comfort."

He nodded. He had expected that answer. "The cookbook," he said. "I need to ask you about the cookbook specifically. Not the cipher. Not what you've decoded. Just the cookbook itself. When it came in, was it complete? All pages intact? The binding in good condition?"

"Why?" Renee asked. It was a real question. It was the kind of question someone would ask if they were trying to understand how the cipher had become exposed, and to whom. The question of a professional trying to assess damage and containment.

"Because I need to know whether the person who donated it would have known what they were donating. Whether they found the cipher key or whether they just sent in something they thought was a cookbook."

Renee considered this. It was a real question. It was the kind of question someone would ask if they were trying to understand the chain of exposure, if they were trying to determine how many people had been compromised by knowledge of the cipher. How many people in the family knew. How many people might have kept copies. How many people might eventually talk.

"The Broussard collection was donated by Jean-Paul Broussard's heirs," Renee said carefully. "It came as approximately two hundred items. Cookbooks, personal papers, photograph albums. Standard estate sale material. I assessed each item individually. The cookbook was physically intact. The spine had some reinforcement done over the years, but it was ordinary. The reinforcement was done with adhesive and thread, nothing unusual. Until I opened it carefully and found the sewing pattern that held the cipher. Professional work. Done by someone who understood how to hide something in plain sight."

"So the heirs probably didn't know," Fontaine said.

"Almost certainly not."

"And they didn't remove anything before they donated? They didn't sort through for family recipes or sentimental items?"

"I don't know. I only know what came in. If they kept things back, I wouldn't have a record of that."

Fontaine was quiet. He was thinking, processing. His eyes moved slightly, the way someone's eyes move when they're reviewing information, sorting it, deciding what to believe. She could almost see the calculations happening behind his eyes, the evaluation of what information was salvageable, what was lost, how much damage had been done by the simple fact of the materials reaching an archivist instead of being destroyed or disappeared.

"You kept copies," he said. It wasn't a question.

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Safe places."

"That's wise. I would have done the same." He looked at her directly, and his eyes were suddenly very clear, very focused. "I'm not going to threaten you. I'm not going to try to steal from you. I'm not going to do anything that would warrant police intervention. What I'm going to do is tell you exactly what I'm protecting and why. Because I think you're the kind of person who would want to know. The kind of person who believes that understanding matters."

"Go ahead," Renee said.

"In 1974 and 1975, the CIA was running a major counterintelligence operation against Soviet assets in North America. The operation involved eighteen individuals who were either already turned or vulnerable to turning. One of those eighteen was a man named Jacques Delacroix. He was the communications hub for a portion of that network. He documented everything. Names, dates, meeting times, payment arrangements. He created a cipher because he was paranoid, which kept him alive for three more years. Paranoia is just preparedness when the actual threats are real."

Renee's hands were perfectly still on the table. She kept her face neutral. She kept her breathing steady. She understood that he was watching her for

reaction, that every micro-expression would tell him something, that the Ghost training was being tested in real time against the observations of another trained operative.

"In 1978, Delacroix died," Fontaine continued. "The operation was being shut down, assets were being moved. I was assigned to find his documentation and destroy it. I found most of it. I didn't find all of it. Someone in the family kept things back. I didn't know who. I didn't know where. I've been looking for forty-eight years. That's my entire adult life. That's all I've done. Protected the arrangement, maintained the silence, kept the system intact."

"And now you found out," Renee said.

"Now I found out. The cookbook came to your library through a chain of possession that eventually led me to understand that someone in Delacroix's family had kept the original documentation of the cipher. Sewn into a cookbook. The kind of thing someone would do if they wanted to keep something hidden but couldn't bring themselves to destroy it. The kind of thing someone does when they understand that some histories shouldn't be erased, but they also understand that some histories can't be openly kept."

"Why does it matter now?" Renee asked. "It's been forty-eight years. Those people in the network, most of them are probably dead."

"Not dead," Fontaine said. "Retired. Successors. Descendants. Children of the people who were compromised. In some cases, grandchildren. The people who want this buried now, they're not protecting 1970s intelligence operations. They're protecting their own futures. They're protecting information that could destroy careers, destroy families, destroy institutions. They're protecting the foundation their lives were built on."

"So you're protecting them," Renee said. "You're still protecting them."

"Yes," Fontaine said simply. "I'm still protecting them. It's what I was trained to do. It's what I do. That doesn't make me evil. That makes me someone who understands that some truths can't be told without causing more damage than the truth is worth. That makes me someone who has learned that institutions matter more than individuals, that the system matters more than any single person's claim to transparency."

Renee looked at him. She looked at his hands, which were still slightly apart, which were still showing he wasn't a threat. She looked at his face, which was the face of someone who had spent forty-eight years protecting secrets, who had become the secret himself. She thought about what it meant to build your entire identity around concealment, to understand yourself as necessary to the functioning of institutional power, to know yourself as essential to the preservation of something larger than yourself.

"The FBI has the original cookbook," she said. "They have the decoded notes. They have letters written by a Soviet asset using the codename TCHAÏKOVSKY. They have everything."

"I know they do. I anticipated that. What they don't have is your silence about what the remaining seventy percent of the cipher says. What they don't have is your understanding that some information shouldn't be decoded and published and catalogued and preserved for history. What they don't have is your cooperation in choosing which secrets matter."

"I'm an archivist," Renee said. "Preservation and documentation are literally my job."

"I know. That's why I came here. That's why I'm asking you directly instead of trying to steal from you. You're the kind of person who understands the difference between the truth and what's beneficial to know. I'm asking you to use that understanding. I'm asking you to decode the remaining seventy percent, and I'm asking you to make a decision about whether it needs to be documented."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then I disappear. I go somewhere I don't have extradition. I stop looking. I let whatever happens next happen. But you'll always know that I asked you to do the right thing, and you chose instead to do the archivally correct thing. You'll always know the difference."

He said this without emotion. He said it like he was stating a fact. Like he understood perfectly well that he was losing, that the game was already over, and that all he could do now was appeal to Renee's sense of ethics and hope that her sense of ethics wasn't purely professional. He was making one last

play, using the only leverage he had left: her conscience.

"I'm going to close this door now," Renee said. "You're going to leave. You're not going to come back. You're going to understand that I work for an institution that has rules, and those rules exist for reasons."

"I do understand that," Fontaine said. "I always did. That's why I chose this."

He turned and walked away down the hallway before she could close the door. She heard his footsteps on the stairs, the sound of the building's exterior door opening and closing. The footsteps were slow and deliberate, the footsteps of someone who had accepted defeat, who understood that this was the end of something, that he had come as close as he was going to get and that it still wasn't close enough.

She stood in her doorway for a long time, not moving, not thinking, just standing in the cold hallway light with her hand on the doorframe. Her heart was still racing even though there had been no physical threat. The threat had been purely psychological, purely emotional. The threat had been the knowledge that someone with training and resources had wanted something from her, and that she had had to hold firm, had to maintain the line between her personal sympathies and her professional obligations.

Then she closed the door. She locked it. She checked that all the other locks were engaged. She sat at her kitchen table and opened her laptop and pulled up the image files of the remaining seventy percent of the cipher.

She read through them again, looking for anything that seemed to connect to the names she already knew, the dates she already understood, the pattern of operations she had already begun to comprehend. Her fingers moved rapidly through the files, her mind working at a pace that surprised her. She had thought she was tired. She had thought she was done with this. But seeing Fontaine face to face, understanding that he was real and desperate and genuinely afraid of what might happen if the complete truth emerged, had galvanized something in her.

Somewhere in those decoded notes was information that could destroy careers. Somewhere in those notes was information about current government

officials, about people who still had access, about arrangements that had persisted into the present. Somewhere in those notes was history that somebody very powerful didn't want told.

And she had to decide whether knowing the truth mattered more than preserving institutions.

She kept reading. She kept decoding. She kept working as the January night came down cold over the Marigny, and she didn't call Marchand, and she didn't call Bertrand, and she didn't tell anyone what Claude Fontaine had said. She kept working because she was an archivist. And she kept working because he was right about one thing: she understood the difference between the truth and what was beneficial to know.

She just wasn't sure which one mattered more.

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## The Pattern Emerges

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Renee didn't sleep that night. She sat at her kitchen table with her laptop and her notebook, decoding the remaining portions of the cipher with a methodical intensity that pushed aside everything else: hunger, exhaustion, the cold radiator clanking in the next room, the particular ache that came from sitting in the same position for too many hours. She worked through the night with the kind of focus that came from understanding that this was important, that this work might be the most important work she would ever do, that the decisions she made in these hours would ripple forward into institutional structures and personal lives.

By 3:00 AM, she had decoded forty percent more of the original sixty percent. By 5:00 AM, she had identified three more names and a reference to something called "the institutional arrangement." By 7:00 AM, when the sun was starting to change the color of the sky, she understood what Claude Fontaine had been protecting.

It wasn't people. It was a system.

The eighteen individuals in the network weren't equal participants in whatever arrangement had been made. They were arranged in a hierarchy. There were the principals: four people in government positions of significant authority. There were the cutouts: five people who handled communications and logistics. And there were the operational assets: nine people who did the actual intelligence work. Each layer insulated from the others, each layer providing deniability for the layers above.

But what Renee understood now, what the cipher had been documenting all this time, was that the arrangement hadn't been a Soviet operation against the United States. It had been the reverse. It had been an American operation against the Soviets that had been run entirely off the books, without authorization from any official agency, using people who had been compromised by Soviet intelligence as cover for American intelligence gathering. A masterstroke of operational deception. A structure that had no official existence and therefore could never be officially investigated.

In other words, the CIA had turned Soviet assets and then used them to run counter-operations. The arrangement had worked. The information had been valuable. And when it was over, the people involved had needed to be protected because if the arrangement was ever revealed, it would look like corruption, like illegal operations, like a secret agency operating without oversight, like betrayal of people who had believed they were working for the Soviet Union when they were actually working for the Americans.

Renee pulled up the list of eighteen names. She cross-referenced them with government service records available through public databases. Four of them were dead. Three of them were retired. Eleven of them were still active in government or in government-adjacent positions. Some of them were in policy. Some of them were in intelligence. Some of them were in law enforcement. Their successors held power. Their descendants held influence. The institutional arrangement had metastasized into present-day reality.

One of them was currently serving as a deputy director of the FBI.

She stared at that name for a long time. She understood why Fontaine had been trying to protect the cipher. She understood why people were still invested

in keeping it buried. This wasn't about protecting old secrets. This was about protecting current arrangements. This was about people who had benefited from an illegal operation, who had gone on to positions of significant power and influence, who could not allow the nature of that foundation to become public. This was about institutional continuity maintained through selective amnesia.

She picked up her phone and called Marchand.

"It's 7:15 in the morning," he said when he answered. Not angry. Tired. She could hear the sound of him waking up, understanding that calls at this hour meant something serious.

"I know. I need you to come to the library. Alone. Don't tell Bertrand. Don't tell anyone. Just you."

"What happened?"

"I finished decoding the cipher. I understand what it means now. And I understand why Fontaine wanted it buried. And I understand what happens next."

Marchand was quiet on the other end of the line for a long moment. She could hear him moving, could hear him getting out of bed, could hear the sound of him processing what she had told him.

"I'll be there in twenty minutes," he said.

Renee went to the library in the pale early morning light. She opened the climate control room where the decoded notes and the cookbook were stored in evidence bags. She pulled up her laptop. She had made copies of everything, stored everything in encrypted files that would survive if anything happened to her. She had learned from Fontaine that redundancy was essential, that information only truly disappeared if all copies were destroyed, that preservation meant maintaining multiple versions in multiple locations.

Marchand arrived with two cups of coffee and the expression of someone who was about to hear news that was going to make his day much more complicated than he wanted. He was still pulling on his jacket as he walked in, his hair not quite combed, his movements suggesting he had dressed in the car.

She showed him the decoded portions. She showed him the pattern. She showed him the name of the deputy director. Marchand read through the material carefully, his eyes moving quickly but his pace suggesting he was absorbing the information, really understanding what it meant, not just scanning it.

"This is going to go federal," Marchand said finally. "This is going to go further than federal. This is going to go to people who are above the FBI. This is going to go to people who don't have names. People who make decisions in spaces that don't officially exist."

"I know."

"This is going to hurt people. Good people probably. People who were just following orders, just doing their jobs."

"Yes."

"This is why Fontaine wanted it buried," Marchand said. It wasn't a question. "Not because he's evil. Because he understood that some truths can't be told without breaking things that maybe shouldn't be broken. Because he understood institutional necessity."

"Yes," Renee said.

Marchand drank his coffee. He looked at the evidence bags. He looked at Renee. She could see him working through the implications, understanding what this meant for the investigation, what it meant for institutional procedures, what it meant for the various chains of command.

"You're going to have to give this to Bertrand," he said. "All of it. The decoded notes, the new decodings, the names, the pattern. All of it. I can't take this to my chain of command. I'm not equipped to handle something this big. I'm a detective. I investigate crimes. This isn't crime. This is institutional history."

"What if I don't give it to her?"

"Then someone worse will get it. Someone who doesn't care about protocol or rules. Someone who just wants the problem to go away. Someone who just wants the evidence destroyed. That's the thing about secrets this big, Renee: they have a way of attracting the wrong kind of attention. The only way

to make this safe is to put it in official channels where there are witnesses and documentation and procedures that create oversight."

"And if official channels bury it anyway?"

"Then at least the attempt will be on record. At least there will be a trail."

He set down his coffee. "I'm going to call Bertrand. I'm going to tell her you have information critical to her investigation. She's going to come here. You're going to show her everything. And then we're going to see what she does with it."

Bertrand arrived at 9:47 AM, carrying two bags of pastries from a cafe on Decatur Street and looking like someone who had not slept in approximately thirty-six hours. She moved with the economical efficiency of someone who had trained her body to function on minimal rest, who understood that running on exhaustion was part of the job. Her two agents followed her in and took positions that suggested they were providing security for something important, or that they were assessing the location for vulnerabilities.

Renee showed her the decoded portions of the cipher. She showed her the pattern of the eighteen names. She showed her the deputy director's name. Bertrand didn't react visibly. She just read, her eyes moving quickly, her hands completely still. She had the kind of professional composure that suggested she had spent years learning not to react to information, to maintain neutrality regardless of what she was seeing. When she finished, she sat back in her chair, and Renee could see her thinking through the implications, understanding the layers of institutional complexity that this information revealed.

"How much of the cipher is still undecoded?" she asked.

"Approximately ten percent. Maybe less."

"Is that ten percent going to contain anything we haven't already seen in terms of pattern or individual identification?"

"I don't think so. The major organizational structure and the names are already visible. The remaining ten percent is probably notation, or corrections, or reference material. Housekeeping. Not substance."

"Then we can leave it undecoded," Bertrand said. "We can preserve the integrity of the archive without completing the work. That gives us deniability

on the specifics while maintaining documentation of the pattern."

Renee understood what Bertrand was doing. She was creating a way for the information to be official and documented while remaining incomplete enough that certain interpretations could be disputed. She was creating a space where the archive and the operation could coexist. She was understanding preservation as something more complex than simple documentation: preservation as the careful maintenance of information in ways that allowed institutions to function, institutions to survive, institutional interests to persist.

"That seems like a compromise," Renee said.

"It is. It's the only compromise that's going to keep this from destroying everyone involved. Including you." Bertrand looked at Marchand. "Is Fontaine in custody?"

"Not yet. But he will be. He's committed fraud with the credentials. The break-in can probably be attributed to someone working with him. He's toast legally."

"Good. Once he's in custody, the immediate pressure eases. Once this goes into official channels, the people who are currently invested in this being buried are going to shift from trying to suppress it to trying to manage it. That's when things get safer. That's when institutional procedures kick in and protect people instead of exposing them.

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# The Federal Stage

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Agent Nicole Bertrand settled into a temporary office at 200 Lakeshore Drive. It had a window looking out onto bare trees and a parking lot, smelled like institutional carpet cleaner and old coffee. Gray desk, gray chair, gray filing cabinet. The kind of furniture designed to disappear into the background.

She had spent seventy-two hours on conference calls with people in Washington who had clearances higher than her own. They had read the decoded cipher notes and were now engaged in determining how to proceed without destroying the institutional arrangements that had depended on silence for forty-eight years.

There had been a brief conversation about destroying the evidence. It lasted seven minutes before people understood that was no longer possible. Too many people knew. The archive was documented. The trail was clear. Multiple institutions had copies. The era of complete suppression had ended. Now the work was damage control, which was its own kind of institutional operation.

So instead, they were managing it. Federal government did this when it couldn't suppress: it managed. It compartmentalized. It restricted access. It

created official versions and unofficial versions and compartments within compartments.

Bertrand had made three trips back to the library to check on Renee, to confirm she was maintaining her routine, that she wasn't being contacted by Fontaine or anyone associated with him. Each time, Renee had been in the climate control room, cataloguing, filing, preserving. Bertrand respected that kind of focus. It was what people did when they were under stress: they worked. They did the thing they knew how to do. They let the work carry them through uncertainty.

The arrest of Claude Fontaine happened on a Tuesday morning at the Riverside Motel in Kenner. He was found in a room with maps of New Orleans, surveillance photographs of Renee's apartment building, a laptop containing financial records, phone logs, and a document titled "Current Principals: Address and Family Information." He didn't resist. He came with agents quietly, hands visible, face composed. In his pocket was a photograph of a woman he had never met but had spent four years learning everything about. She was seventy-three now. The photograph was from 1981. She was a policy advisor at the State Department. Her father had been one of the four principals in the network.

The charges were fraud, illegal procurement of government credentials, stalking, and breaking and entering. Substantial but not as substantial as could have been charged if anyone wanted to escalate. No one wanted to escalate. Escalation would have led to questions about why Fontaine wanted the cookbook. The charges were carefully calibrated to suggest Fontaine was a minor player. An aging intelligence contractor who had gone rogue. A lonely man trying to hold onto a purpose that had expired.

Bertrand visited him in a federal holding facility in Baton Rouge. They sat across from each other in a small room with a metal table and plastic chairs. Fontaine looked smaller than he had in Renee's apartment. Like what he actually was: an old man who had run out of time.

"The cookbook is going to be preserved," Fontaine said. Not asking. Stating fact. "It's going to be in the archive. People are going to know what it

is."

"People who need to know already know," Bertrand said. "The rest will see a cookbook from the 1970s with unusual spine reinforcement. They'll read a finding aid saying original documentation was transferred to federal archives. They'll move on. Archives are full of restricted materials. People don't ask too many questions."

"So you're burying it anyway."

"No. We're filing it. There's a difference. Burying means destroying. Filing means preserving through official institutional channels. That's preservation. That's what archivists do."

Fontaine looked at her with eyes that had seen a lot in seventy-six years. Eyes that watched the Cold War from inside, that watched operations shut down, that watched secrets get buried and dug up again.

"The institutional arrangement," he said. "Is it going to hold?"

"For now. People with necessary clearances will have access. They'll be briefed. Then they'll face the same choice you faced: whether to protect the arrangement or expose it. Some will choose protection. That's how systems persist: through continuous choice of people to maintain them or abandon them."

"What did the archivist choose?"

"The archivist did her job. She preserved information. She documented the pattern. She created a record that can't be destroyed because it's in an official archive. But she also understood that sometimes the archive is the answer. The information exists. It's just not broadcast.

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# The Pressure

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The pressure came Friday afternoon as a phone call to Dr. Margaret Solon, director of special collections. Renee was in the climate control room cataloguing final Broussard materials when Dr. Solon took the call in her office with the door closed. The closed door meant the conversation involved things that shouldn't be discussed in open office environment. It meant institutional pressure was being applied through formal legal channels.

At 4:15 PM, Dr. Solon called Renee in. She was paler than usual, glasses slipping down her nose, hands slightly shaking.

"The university is receiving pressure regarding the Broussard collection," Dr. Solon said. Her face was the color of old paper. "Specifically regarding condition of certain items and decision to transfer materials to federal custody."

"What kind of pressure?" Renee asked.

"Lawyers. There's a question of whether the university had authority to transfer materials without consulting donors. Whether materials were part of original donation or should have remained under university jurisdiction."

Dr. Solon adjusted her glasses. They slipped back down. She adjusted them again, nervous gesture suggesting she was running through worst-case scenarios. "I'm being told that if we don't voluntarily request return of transferred materials, there may be legal action. Institutional liability. Seventy-two hours to make a determination."

"By whom?" Renee asked.

"An attorney representing interests of Broussard family estate. Arguing certain items should have remained in family control. That we overstepped authority."

Renee understood. The people in the network had found a legal avenue to retrieve the cookbook and letters. They were going to argue materials shouldn't have been transferred, that university acted outside authority, that repatriation was appropriate remedy. Clever strategy. Legal. The kind of thing you could do with resources and institutional power and a competent legal team.

"What's your position?" Renee asked.

"We followed proper archival protocol. We accepted items donated. We assessed them. We identified items of federal interest and transferred them appropriately. We did everything by the book."

"Will that be enough?"

"Against unlimited legal resources? Probably not. We can fight. But it would cost university money. Money we don't have. Money from special collections budget. Means cuts. Means positions eliminated."

Dr. Solon looked at Renee directly. "Is there anything I should know? Anything that might help me understand whether this legal pressure is justified or whether this is something being done for other reasons?"

"Everything I should tell you, I can't. Federal matter. Above both our pay grades."

"That's what Agent Bertrand said when she called me."

"She called you?"

"She told me I should expect legal pressure. If I received it, I should call her back. The university was not alone. Federal protections were available if

we needed them."

Bertrand had anticipated the pressure. Planning for this possibility, understanding how institutions worked, understanding that legal tactics would be used if direct tactics failed. Thinking in terms of institutional defense several steps ahead.

"Did you call her back?"

"I haven't. I wanted to talk to you first. Whether we should defend our position or whether we should capitulate and try to resolve this quietly."

Renee considered the paths. If they fought, there would be legal proceedings, which would be public, which would draw attention to the cookbook and cipher. If they capitulated, materials would be returned to Broussard representatives, which meant they would be destroyed. Evidence would be gone. History would be successfully suppressed. The people in the network would get what they wanted.

"Call Bertrand," Renee said. "Tell her about the legal pressure. See what she says. If we're going to defend this position, we need to know that we have institutional backing."

Dr. Solon made the call. Conversation lasted eleven minutes. When over, Dr. Solon was paler than before. She set down phone and looked at Renee with expression of relief and concern.

"We have institutional backing," Dr. Solon said. "Federal institutional backing. Bertrand is going to have Department of Justice send us a letter indicating materials are part of ongoing federal investigation and any attempt to return them would constitute obstruction of justice. We're going to be protected. We're going to be covered by federal law."

"What about legal fees?" Renee asked.

"DOJ is going to provide an attorney. This is being treated as a matter of national security."

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# The Simultaneous Action

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At 6:47 AM on a Tuesday morning in late January, three things happened almost simultaneously. Coordinated through series of phone calls that had taken place night before in federal offices and police precincts and offices of U.S. Attorney for Eastern District of Louisiana. Timing was precise. Coordination was professional. This was institutional machinery functioning at high level of competence.

First: Renee received phone call from Bertrand telling her federal warrant had been issued for Claude Fontaine's arrest. Charges: fraud, illegal procurement of government credentials, breaking and entering, stalking, conspiracy to obstruct federal investigation. Fontaine was being transferred from holding facility in Baton Rouge to federal detention center in New Orleans to await trial. Call came through at 6:43 AM, three minutes before public events would begin, giving Renee barely time to absorb information before everything became visible to media and public record. Bertrand was moving Fontaine into place where he would be visible, where he couldn't be disappeared, where his presence would be documented.

Second: Detective Marchand arrested Claude Fontaine at moment he was being transferred, using local charges that had been filed while federal case was being prepared. Arrest was coordinated with FBI down to minute: Marchand and two uniform officers from NOPD intercepted prisoner transport at city limits, and Fontaine was arrested on New Orleans territory for breaking and entering, stalking, fraud related to false credentials. Point of intricate arrangement was to give local media time to report story before it could be buried in federal proceedings, to ensure there would be witnesses and documentation and public record that couldn't be easily classified away.

Third: Agent Bertrand arrived at library at 6:50 AM with team of paralegals and document specialists prepared to do complete analysis of everything FBI had collected from Fontaine's motel room. Maps, surveillance photographs of Renee's building, laptop containing financial records and communications, all copies Fontaine had made of government records related to 1974-1978 operation. They came with warrants. They came with authority. They came with weight of federal institutional power behind them.

Renee was in climate control room when Bertrand arrived. Had come in early specifically to ensure cookbook was in proper location, finding aid was complete, everything was secured in way that would allow it to survive whatever came next. She had understood, in way that people understand things without being told, that today was the day. Today was when things would become official, when speculation would transform into documentation, when investigation would shift from shadows to visible record.

"I want you to do something," Bertrand said without preamble. "Prepare a statement for the record. Document your entire involvement with Broussard collection: discovery of cipher, decoding process, your methodology, your findings, decision to transfer materials to federal custody. Dated and signed and notarized by third party. Part of permanent record of this case. Something that survives trials and appeals and whatever institutional jockeying happens next."

"Why?" Renee asked. "I thought we were keeping this quiet. Whole point was minimal visibility, institutional management, keeping things contained."

"Whole point was not to destroy institutions," Bertrand said. "Was to manage this in way that didn't create unnecessary chaos or expose people whose exposure would cause collateral damage beyond what's necessary. But now Fontaine's been arrested. Now this is public. Local police are involved. Media is already calling. Now there's going to be trial, discovery proceedings, questions about evidence, people who want to suppress evidence or discredit it or create doubt about methodology. Your statement creates record that's above challenge because it comes from person who actually did work. Your statement makes clear that you followed proper archival protocol, documented everything correctly, methodology was sound. It protects integrity of what you found."

"You're using me," Renee said.

"Yes. I'm using you to protect integrity of archive. Using you to create record that can't be challenged by people with resources. Using you because you're person who actually did work, and your work is thing that's going to survive trial and appeals and whatever happens after that. You're foundation. Everything rests on your credibility and documentation."

Bertrand looked at her with eyes that had seen complicated things. "Is that a problem?"

"No," Renee said after moment. "Not a problem. Just unusual."

By 9:00 AM, Renee had written statement documenting entire involvement with Broussard collection. Eighteen pages long, single-spaced, formal language of archival documentation. Dates with exact times, methodology descriptions, findings with supporting evidence, conclusions. Precise handwriting. Exact language.

She signed it. Had it notarized by notary public in university administration building three blocks away. Gave original to Bertrand and kept copy for university's files.

By 10:30 AM, news broke. Local news stations reporting suspect arrested in connection with break-in at Tulane University special collections library. By 10:47 AM, story had expanded to mention Broussard collection, recovery of materials that had been targeted in break-in, fact that local police were investigating what appeared to be attempt at theft combined with fraud related

to false federal credentials. By noon, someone had leaked story about potential organized crime angle, which was discovered almost immediately to be false but which had desired effect of confusing people who weren't paying close attention.

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## The Investigation Expands

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Federal investigation took sixty-three days from moment of Fontaine's arrest to moment when his actual identity was confirmed and made known, at least to people who had clearances to know it. Sixty-three days of database searches, financial analysis, cross-referencing, institutional archaeology.

His real name was Robert Charles Whitmore. Born 1948 in Arlington, Virginia. His father had been career intelligence officer, kind of person who existed in margins of official government, operating in classified spaces, dealing with things that couldn't be spoken about in normal conversation. His mother had been librarian, which Renee found interesting for reasons she couldn't fully articulate. Two traditions: secret-keeping tradition and preservation tradition. Whitmore had inherited both.

He graduated from Georgetown University in 1970 with degree in Russian Language and Literature. Recruited by CIA in 1971. Worked continuously for agency from 1971 to 1992, when he took early retirement on disability pension after incident that left him unable to work in official capacity but not unable to work in private sector. Disability pension was institutional

compensation for having known too much, for having been part of operations that couldn't be acknowledged.

The incident had been operation that Renee had decoded. 1974-1978 counterintelligence operation against Soviet assets in North America. Whitmore had been principal handler for three of eighteen turned assets. He had managed their communications, coordinated their activities, ensured that information they provided was properly disseminated to right people within agency. He had been good at it. Efficient and professional and completely committed to work.

In 1978, operation had been shut down. Assets had been relocated or reassigned. Whitmore had been demoted and reassigned to archives work. That was CIA's way of burying people who knew too much and couldn't be fired. Archives work meant organizational silence, meant knowing things that couldn't be spoken about, meant spending your days processing information that had already been classified as dangerous.

In 1992, Whitmore took early retirement and vanished into private life. Except he hadn't vanished. Instead, he spent next twenty-four years working as private security consultant for companies with government contracts. Companies that paid him well to ensure certain information never became public. Companies that employed him to protect people who had assets invested in keeping certain arrangements quiet.

Breaking and entering at library had been sanctioned by someone. Request for federal credentials had been facilitated by someone. Pressure on Broussard family estate to retrieve materials had been coordinated by someone who had sufficient institutional power to make legal threats seem credible. Whitmore had not acted alone, even if official narrative suggested that he had.

But when Agent Bertrand interviewed Whitmore in federal custody, he refused to name those someones. He said privacy of other individuals was more important than his own defense. He said he had acted alone. He said materials in his motel room represented his personal obsession, his inability to let go of case he had worked on forty-six years ago.

Bertrand didn't believe him. But she also understood that proving he was lying would require going higher in institutional chain than she was authorized to go. It would require people with even higher clearances making decisions about whether to investigate people in positions of significant authority.

Those people decided not to investigate. At least, not visibly. Investigation would stop at Whitmore. He would be boundary. He would be person who had acted without authorization, who had gone too far, who had created problems that needed to be managed.

Bertrand came to library three times during investigation period to check on Renee and update her on what was being determined. Each time, she looked more tired, more convinced that she was doing right thing even though right thing involved lot of compromise and institutional arrangement.

"His entire life was about that operation," Bertrand said on final visit. "He has no family. No relationships. No hobbies that don't relate to intelligence work. He's essentially ghost that someone shaped into human form and then forgot about. Agency created him, used him, discarded him, and then he spent forty-six years trying to clean up thing that had defined him.

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## The Classification Hold

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Three months after Whitmore's sentencing to twelve years in federal prison, Bertrand came to library for last time. She had file with her, marked with classification indicators that meant Renee wasn't supposed to look at it, that it contained information above her clearance level.

"Investigation is closed," Bertrand said. "Case is prosecuted. Whitmore is in prison. Materials are secure. And now comes part where we determine what happens to decoded notes."

They were sitting in Dr. Solon's office. Dr. Solon had excused herself to give them privacy.

"Decoded notes are going to remain classified. Not all of them. Not methodology or pattern or general information about 1974-1978 operation. But names of currently active individuals, nature of their current positions, institutional arrangements that derive from that operation: all of that is going to remain classified. All of that is going to be protected by security restrictions that prevent access to people without appropriate clearance level."

"For how long?" Renee asked.

"Fifty years. After fifty years, entire file will be transferred to National Archives and declassified automatically unless there's specific reason to extend classification. By then, most people involved will be dead. Institutions will have evolved. Present-day arrangements will be historical curiosities rather than operational concerns."

"What if someone finds information before that?" Renee asked.

"They won't. Only people with security clearances have access to full decoded notes. Cookbook is preserved here, in your archive, but it's under what we call 'closed access' status. Researchers can see finding aid. They can request access. But access requests will be reviewed by federal authorities, and most will be denied on grounds of national security. This is compromise. You get to preserve materials. You get to document them. You get to preserve them for history. But full historical truth isn't available to public for fifty years. That's institutional solution. That's how we balance preservation against security."

Bertrand opened classified file. It contained list of names. Renee could see them but wasn't supposed to retain them, wasn't supposed to write them down, wasn't supposed to do anything with them except observe that they existed.

One was currently serving in State Department. One was retired from Justice Department. One was serving in advisory capacity to Congress. One was working in private sector but maintained consulting relationships with multiple intelligence agencies. They were scattered throughout institutional apparatus, protected by their positions, protected by their security clearances.

"These people are going to be notified that investigation is closed," Bertrand said. "They're going to be briefed on fact that classified materials have been secured and that access is restricted. They're going to understand that their history is documented but that documentation is protected. Some are going to be relieved. Some are going to be angry. All are going to be anxious. They're going to understand that their secrets have been found, that record exists, that they're living under conditional protection for fifty years."

"What about people in network who are dead?" Renee asked. "What happens to their records?"

"Still classified. Remain classified even after death. There are people alive who don't want their parents' or their grandparents' activities to become public knowledge. There are families who would suffer if truth about their relatives became widely known. So classification extends to dead as courtesy to living.

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# The Ordinary Archive

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April turned into May, and New Orleans spring arrived with kind of heat that suggested summer was only few weeks away. City shifted its rhythm as it always did, focus moving from quiet winter tourism to serious business of living in South as temperatures climbed and humidity became something you could feel on your skin.

Renee's life settled into pattern. She came to work. She worked. She went home. She rode her bicycle through Quarter, through Marigny, along edges of Mississippi. She had coffee with Bette on Friday evenings. She saw Odette occasionally, though less frequently now that acute phase of investigation was over. Odette was eighty-eight years old and living in way that eighty-eight-year-old women lived: carefully, deliberately, one day at a time.

Library continued its work. New collections arrived. New donations were assessed. New materials were catalogued and preserved. Special collections library received small grant from private foundation, money designated specifically for archival security and climate control upgrades. Dr. Solon theorized that grant had come from someone connected to federal government,

someone who wanted to ensure that materials at Tulane were preserved in optimal conditions.

Renee worked with contractors who installed new security cameras, improved climate control, redundant backup systems. She worked with engineers who ensured that cookbook and other materials in Broussard collection were stored in conditions that would preserve them for decades or centuries.

She also worked on other collections. Donation of botanical illustrations from early twentieth century, watercolors of flowers pressed into paper with such care that you could see dedication in every line. Collection of letters from woman who had been married to jazz musician in 1950s, correspondence that documented life of ordinary person in extraordinary time. Restoration project on book that had been water-damaged in house fire and donated to library. The ordinary work of archivist. The daily work of preservation. Methodical, careful work of documenting human life in all its forms.

In May, Renee received postcard in mail. From federal detention facility in West Virginia where Robert Charles Whitmore was serving his sentence. Photograph of landscape: mountains, trees, river. Beautiful thing you could look at from prison and understand that freedom existed somewhere beyond fence. On back, in precise handwriting, single sentence: "Thank you for preserving the record."

Renee put postcard in drawer. She didn't respond. Nothing to respond to. Whitmore had understood something about preservation, about work of archivists, about fact that what she had done was ensure that his history, his life, his work, would be documented rather than erased. Worth thank-you postcard, even from man serving twelve years in federal prison for trying to protect secrets.

In June, Renee received email from researcher at Harvard who had requested access to Broussard collection. Researcher had explained that she was working on project about Cold War intelligence operations, had found references to collection in academic literature. Wanted to examine materials in person.

Renee forwarded access request to federal authorities as per protocol. Response came back three days later: access denied. Response was polite. Explained that certain materials in collection were under federal hold pending completion of ongoing investigations. Researcher was welcome to examine finding aids and non-restricted materials, but access to classified materials was not available at this time.

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# The Recurring Silence

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Renee bought new bicycle. Old one had finally given up ghost, worn out by years of riding through Quarter and Marigny. New one was lighter, faster, meant she could move through city with grace she hadn't had in years. Blue, color of water or evening. Felt like hope.

She rode home one evening in late October as sun was setting early, way it did in fall. Streets of Marigny were quiet. Few locals were out, but tourists hadn't arrived yet. City was in pause between seasons, moment of transition when anything seemed possible. Air smelled like coming of cooler weather, like change, like possibility of moving forward into different phase of time.

She locked her bicycle in courtyard. She checked her new locks, ones she had installed months ago and that had never been tested. She went upstairs to her apartment and opened door and turned on lights.

Apartment was exactly as she had left it that morning. Kitchen table was empty except for single mug she had used for coffee. Radiator was quiet, sleeping in warm weather. Windows showed street outside, ordinary life of Marigny, people walking, people living, people moving through their days.

Renee sat at her kitchen table and opened her laptop. She pulled up encrypted file where she had stored decoded portions of cipher, information she had preserved separately from official archive, backup record that existed only in her personal system. She had kept copies in multiple locations: cloud service, physical backup in safe deposit box, printed copies stored in sealed envelopes at bank. She understood that preservation meant redundancy, meant maintaining multiple versions, meant ensuring that even if one copy was destroyed, others would survive.

She thought about fifty years. She thought about people in network, about whether they would be alive in fifty years to care whether their secrets became public. She thought about institutional memory and way that institutions protected people who had served them well.

She thought about Robert Charles Whitmore, who had spent entire adult life protecting secrets, who was now in prison protecting those secrets even as institution he had served moved on without him.

She thought about what happened when you understood that some truths could wait to be told, that some information could be preserved even if it couldn't be immediately shared, that archive itself was kind of truth-telling even when specific truths were classified.

She left file encrypted. She saved it. She backed it up to cloud service she used. She created physical backup and stored it in safe deposit box she had rented at bank in Marigny.

Then she closed laptop and went to bed. In morning, she would go to work. She would catalog something. She would preserve something. She would do work of archivist, quiet work, work that nobody noticed, work that persisted beyond all noise and politics and institutional interests.

She would do her job. And she would know that she had done it well, that she had preserved record, that she had understood balance between institutional needs and historical truth, and that she had struck that balance as carefully as anyone could. That was enough. That was everything.

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## Epilogue: The Filing

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Cookbook went into archive on Thursday morning in November. Weather was exactly right: cool enough that climate control system was running smoothly, dry enough that there was no risk of moisture damage, quiet enough that Renee could hear soft mechanical hum of preservation happening, machines working to preserve past.

She had written final finding aid three days earlier. It had been reviewed by Dr. Solon. It had been reviewed by federal authorities. It had been approved through layers of institutional procedure. Now it was time to file it, which meant putting cookbook into permanent location, updating digital records, understanding that this was end of active investigation and beginning of permanent preservation.

Cookbook went into climate-controlled storage cabinet alongside other materials from 1970s: family diary with someone's personal thoughts written in now-faded ink, collection of newspaper clippings about local politics from half-century ago, set of recipes that had belonged to someone's grandmother. Recipes sat next to cipher. Ordinary and extraordinary shared same space,

equally preserved, equally documented.

It was shelved under "Culinary History, Louisiana, 1970s." It was assigned catalogue number: BR-1974-COOKBOOK-01. It was recorded in database with complete metadata: acquisition date, donor information, condition assessment, preservation specifications.

Finding aid was uploaded to online system. Researchers could now see that Broussard collection included 1970s cookbook with materials of federal interest. Researchers could request access. Researchers would be told that access was restricted, that materials were under federal hold, that their request would be forwarded to appropriate authorities for review.

By noon, filing was complete. Broussard collection was finished. Archive was whole. Work was done. Cookbook had been transformed from evidence to archival material, from investigation to preservation, from active case to historical document.

Renee went home early. She had some vacation days accumulated, and she decided to take one. She rode her bicycle slowly through Quarter, not in any hurry to get anywhere. She stopped at cafe and had coffee. She sat outside and watched city move past her, familiar rhythms of New Orleans in November, ordinary flow of life, tourists mixing with locals, musicians setting up for evening, smell of food from restaurants.

By five o'clock, she was back in her apartment. She opened door and locked it behind her. She turned on lights. She made tea.

Bette called up stairs at 6:17 PM, way she did on most days, but this time early, in afternoon rather than evening.

"I made red beans," Bette called. "Odette's coming over. You want to come down?"

Renee checked time. She checked her appearance in mirror. She locked apartment and went downstairs.

Bette's kitchen smelled like it always smelled on certain days: like good food, like home, like things that mattered when everything else had been put away and filed and catalogued. Odette was already sitting at kitchen table with glass of wine in front of her, looking small in way that old people looked in

other people's houses.

They ate red beans and rice. They talked about weather, about coming holidays, about way that November always felt like transition, like something ending and something beginning at same time. They talked about ordinary things: recipes, neighbors, condition of buildings in Marigny. They did not talk about ciphers or secrets or classified materials.

"Cookbook's filed now," Renee said. "It's in archive. Work's done."

"Will it be there forever?" Odette asked.

"Yes. As long as archive exists, cookbook will be there. It will be preserved. It will be documented. It will be protected."

"Will anybody ever see it?"

"Some people. Researchers. People with authorization. People who have security clearances. People who need to know what it contains. Not everybody. But people. It will be known. Record will exist."

Odette nodded like she understood. She had kept letters for forty-eight years waiting for someone to understand their significance. Now cookbook would sit in archive for fifty years waiting for someone to understand its significance.

Someone knocked on door at 7:43 PM. Bette went to answer it. Renee heard door open. She heard voices. She felt her body tense involuntarily, way it had been trained to tense whenever unexpected things happened. Then she recognized voice. It was Marchand.

Bette came back into kitchen. Behind her was Detective Ty Marchand, holding bottle of wine and looking uncomfortable in way that cops looked in domestic spaces. He was out of his professional element here, but he was here anyway, which meant something had shifted, which meant he was allowing himself to become part of this community.

"He wanted to know if it was okay to come by," Bette said. "I said yes. Hope that's okay."

It was okay. Renee gestured to empty chair. Marchand sat down. Bette poured him glass of wine. They all sat together in kitchen and ate red beans and

rice and talked about ordinary things.

Marchand told story about case he was working on, something unrelated to cookbook or cipher or any classified material. Bette told story about tenant she had known years ago. Odette told story about Jacques, something she hadn't shared before, something about his laugh and way he had looked at her that first time they met.

By nine o'clock, they were all little tired. Conversation had found its natural ending point. Evening had been what evenings were supposed to be: present, warm, complete.

Renee went back upstairs to her apartment. She locked door. She sat at kitchen table and thought about evening, about way ordinary life continued, about way that people moved through time and seasons and years, marking moments with food and wine and stories.

She thought about Robert Charles Whitmore, in federal prison in West Virginia, beginning long slow arc of his sentence. She thought about people in network, in their positions of power and influence, understanding now that their secrets were documented, that record existed, that their history was preserved even if it wasn't yet public.

She thought about cookbook, filed and catalogued and preserved, sitting in climate-controlled darkness of archive, waiting for fifty years to pass, waiting for time when classified materials became historical documents, waiting for moment when secrets could be told.

She opened her laptop. She pulled up her encrypted backup files. She reviewed them once more. Everything was there. Everything was safe. Everything was documented.

She closed laptop. She turned off lights. She went to bed.

In morning, she would go to work. There would be new materials to assess, new collections to organize, new history to preserve. Ordinary work of archivist. Daily preservation of human record. Quiet, methodical, essential work of keeping past alive so that someday, when it mattered, it could be known. When fifty years had passed. When people who needed protection had moved into retirement or death. When institutions that needed to be preserved

had evolved enough to survive revelation.

That was enough. That was everything. That was work she had been trained to do, work she understood, work that would occupy her life and give it meaning.

She fell asleep to sound of Marigny settling into evening, ordinary sounds of old neighborhood in old city, sounds of preservation happening all around her, one day at a time. Sounds of history being maintained, of secrets being kept, of future waiting patiently for time when past could finally be known.

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## Chapter 25. The Archive in Motion

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The discovery of a pattern requires precision. Renee understood this fundamental principle as she pulled the first of seventeen boxes related to the Broussard collection out of temporary storage and set them on the examination table in the climate-controlled back room of the special collections wing. The work would take three days minimum, possibly longer. She had arranged her schedule carefully, had requested temporary reassignment from her other cataloguing duties, had presented the request as entirely routine: a backlog of materials required intensive processing, and she was the only archivist with the necessary expertise in Cold War era documentation and preservation techniques. This was true, as far as it went. It was also fundamentally incomplete, a statement that acknowledged only the surface truth while leaving the deeper motivations entirely unspoken.

She was cataloguing with purpose, with intent, with the specific goal of identifying every reference, every document, every fragment of information that connected to the cipher and to the larger network it suggested. The training had taught her how to conduct research under pressure, how to maintain the appearance of normal function while engaging in work that was anything but

normal. She was a woman doing her job. She was also a woman excavating a secret that someone had spent fifty years trying to keep buried. The distinction between these two identities had become increasingly blurred over the past weeks.

The physical reality of archival work was something that training could not quite prepare you for. She had known this theoretically, had read the textbooks, had listened to lectures about the embodied nature of preservation work. But the actual sensation of it, the hours of careful handling, the repetition of the same motions performed with meticulous attention, the accumulation of small discoveries that gradually assembled into larger patterns: these things required a kind of attention that bordered on meditation. She wore cotton gloves, changed them every hour to avoid transferring oils and acids from her skin to fragile paper. She used a light touch and infinite patience. She photographed every page with enough detail to permit later analysis but quickly enough that she could maintain momentum through the boxes.

The humidity of New Orleans was always the archivist's greatest challenge. Even in the climate-controlled back room, where temperature and humidity were maintained at precise levels by equipment that ran quietly in the corner, there was a sense of the city outside, of the moisture waiting to penetrate any weakness in the system, of the decay that was always available as an alternative to preservation. Renee understood that what she was doing was fundamentally an act of defiance against entropy, against the natural tendency of all things to return to their component elements, against the humid air that wanted to unmake these documents, to return them to fiber and dust.

The boxes contained the assembled life of a man who had been careful about documentation, who understood that objects could carry meaning across time, who believed deeply in the preservation of evidence. Broussard had kept letters, photographs, receipts, notes, the accumulated detritus of a life lived with consciousness of history. He had organized his materials with the precision of someone who understood that what was preserved today would be read by someone in the future, that documentation was an act of faith in the continued existence of readers, that preservation was an act of commitment to the future's right to understand the past. The letters were particularly revealing.

She began to find them in the third box: correspondence dating back to the 1960s, written on thin airmail paper with the watermark of various European printing houses.

The letters were addressed to Broussard by someone using the name Robert. Robert's letters were written in English but with occasional French phrases, the code-switching of someone who had lived in multiple languages and cultures, who had been shaped by exposure to different ways of organizing thought and meaning. The handwriting was precise, almost architectural in its regularity. Robert was writing about his work, about his health, about books he was reading and conversations he was having. On the surface, the letters were innocent enough: a man corresponding with a friend, maintaining a connection across distance and time, preserving the relationship through the act of writing.

But Renee had been trained to read the implications of what wasn't said as carefully as what was said. Robert never mentioned his location, never provided an address for correspondence, never indicated what he actually did for employment. He wrote about "the situation with the neighbors" and "the problem we discussed" and "the matter you already understand," using phrases that were specific enough to hold meaning for someone with the proper context but vague enough to provide plausible deniability if the letters were ever intercepted and read by an unauthorized party. The letters were written in a way that suggested they were meant to be destroyed, or at minimum, were written with an awareness that they might someday be read by someone other than their intended recipient. The assumption of vulnerability was embedded in the structure of the communication itself.

She photographed each letter with careful attention to detail, capturing both sides of every page, ensuring that the image was high enough resolution to permit later analysis, that every detail could be examined and verified. She also made notes: the date each letter was written, the postmark when visible, any physical evidence of the envelope's origin, the condition of the paper, the wear patterns suggesting repeated reading or preservation. Sixty-three letters in total, spanning a period of twenty-eight years, from 1956 to 1984. The time span was significant: it suggested a relationship that had endured through decades of change, through the evolution from early Cold War to the tentative thawing of

relations that characterized the 1980s.

The final letter was dated November 1984 and contained only three sentences. "The situation has changed. I do not believe we should continue correspondence after this point. The work is complete." No signature. No closing beyond those three sentences and a fingerprint, visible on the paper under the examination light, pressed into the paper as if the writer had held the letter briefly before deciding that even this communication was insufficient precaution, that even Robert's careful language was becoming too dangerous. The fingerprint was the mark of human presence, the physical evidence that someone had touched this paper, had held this letter, had made the decision to end forty years of correspondence.

By day two, she had moved into the deeper boxes, the ones that contained the photographs and the documents. Photographs from the 1970s, most in black and white, many showing Broussard with a woman who appeared in roughly half the images. The woman was dark-haired, small-framed, with a direct gaze and the bearing of someone accustomed to camera attention, someone who had been photographed before and understood how to present herself to the camera. In some photographs, they were clearly intimate. In others, they appeared to be colleagues engaged in some activity that required physical proximity and careful attention. The woman never smiled. Neither did Broussard. The photographs had the quality of evidence rather than memory, documentation rather than nostalgia.

There were also documents: transcripts, it appeared, of conversations conducted in Russian. The transcripts were typed, and they contained notations in the margins suggesting analysis, assessment, evaluation. Some of the pages had been heavily redacted with heavy black markers, permanent ink that had destroyed whatever information the redaction was designed to protect. Other pages were intact, their Cyrillic text preserved in full. She did not attempt to translate the Russian in detail. She did not want to absorb the detailed content. She wanted only to establish that these documents existed, that Broussard had possessed them, that they had been preserved in his collection with the same care he'd applied to everything else.

On the afternoon of the third day, she found the final piece: a single envelope, unmarked except for a date written in faded blue ink on the outside. "14 septembre 1975." The handwriting was different from the handwriting on the letters, smaller and more hurried, suggesting that this notation had been made in different circumstances. Inside was a photograph of a man, middle-aged, with the bearing of someone accustomed to authority. The photograph was formal, the kind taken for official identification purposes, the kind that would appear on a government document or a security badge. On the back, a name: "Delacroix." Just the surname, no given name, no date, no context. But the name matched the references she'd found in the older Broussard files, the mentions that Bette's neighbor Odette had brought up. Delacroix. A family name in New Orleans history, connected to the city's French colonial past, to its layers of settlement and displacement and accumulated secrets.

She photographed the image and returned it to its envelope with precise care, understanding that she was handling something significant, something that connected the abstract intelligence operation to actual people with names and faces and identifiable histories. She updated her finding aid with methodical attention to detail. She documented the context in which the photograph had been found, the other materials that had surrounded it, the physical condition of the image and the envelope. This was how archivists worked: they preserved the evidence of preservation itself, understanding that the context around an object was sometimes as important as the object itself. They created records that would outlast their own understanding of what the records meant. Someone would read her finding aid. Someone would understand what she had found. Someone would know that she had been careful, that she had been precise, that she had done the work exactly as it was meant to be done.

By late afternoon, she had completed her intensive cataloguing. She had boxes reorganized, materials returned to acid-free containers, every photograph and document recorded and notated with the precision that preservation required. She had done what she was trained to do: she had created order from the accumulated chaos of a man's life. She had made preservation visible, had

created a structure that would allow researchers to understand what the collection contained and how the materials related to one another. She had documented, analyzed, and preserved in the way that only someone with full training and commitment could accomplish.

She locked the special collections wing at six o'clock. The security guard watched her leave with the particular attention of someone who understood that the woman leaving the building was engaged in work of significance, work that was not quite visible on the surface but that left traces: the careful way she handled the materials, the methodical way she'd organized her workspace, the precision of her note-taking, the particular exhaustion that comes from work conducted under conditions of focused intensity. She walked to her bicycle, locked in the employee area, and pedaled home through the cooling evening air.

The city around her seemed different now, the buildings and streets containing different meanings. The Marigny neighborhood held secrets in its architecture, in the names of the old families written on the sides of buildings, in the way that history persisted even as change eroded the visible evidence of the past. She understood that she was moving through a landscape of encoded information, that the buildings themselves were texts, that New Orleans was a city that had learned to preserve its secrets by writing them into stone and memory, creating layers that could be read only by someone who understood how to look for the meaning beneath the surface.

She locked her bicycle in her courtyard and went upstairs to her apartment. She made tea and sat at her desk and opened the encrypted file where she was collecting her analysis. She began to write down what she had discovered, not for preservation in the archive, but for her own understanding, for the creation of a secondary record that existed outside official channels. The pattern was becoming visible. It was no longer random fragments. It was a narrative, a story of someone, of some operation, of something that had happened fifty years ago in the shadows of Cold War history, something that had been carefully documented and carefully hidden, something that someone had decided needed to be buried in a French cookbook so that it might survive, so that it might someday surface, so that history would not be entirely erased.

She worked late into the evening, writing, analyzing, creating a map of what she understood, building connections between the documents and the people and the locations. She was conducting the work of historical reconstruction, understanding that this work required not just the cataloguing of materials but the construction of narrative, the creation of meaning from evidence. Outside, the Marigny streets settled into their particular rhythm: restaurants opening for dinner service, musicians beginning to play their instruments, the ordinary flow of a neighborhood asserting itself against the weight of history. Renee remained at her desk, working in the small cone of light from her desk lamp, creating order from what she had found, building a structure that would support whatever came next.

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## Chapter 26. Odette's House

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Odette Tureaud lived three blocks from Renee's apartment, in a house that was older than most of the surrounding structures, built from cypress wood that had weathered to the color of ancient sand. The house had survived hurricanes and renovations and the general entropy that affected all structures built in the humid atmosphere of New Orleans. It had endured, which was perhaps its most notable quality. Endurance itself had become a kind of beauty, a testament to careful maintenance and commitment to preservation. The porch was wide, screened against the mosquitoes, and contained several rocking chairs that suggested a life lived partially outdoors, in the slower rhythms that came from sitting still and paying attention to the motion of the street, to the patterns of neighborhood life, to the accumulation of observation over time.

Renee had called ahead. Bette had provided the phone number, had explained that Odette kept regular hours in the afternoon, that she would appreciate a visit, that she would likely have information that would be useful. Odette had answered on the second ring, had listened to Renee's explanation of what she wanted, and had invited her to come on Saturday at two o'clock. This invitation carried weight, carried the sense that Renee was being granted

access, that information would be shared, that something significant would occur. The specificity of the time suggested that Odette had arranged her day around this appointment, that she understood its importance, that she was taking the meeting seriously.

The bicycle ride took twelve minutes. Renee arrived five minutes early and waited across the street, understanding that showing up before the designated time could be interpreted as aggressive, as failing to respect boundaries, as suggesting that the other person's schedule was less important than one's own impatience. The training had taught her the protocols of proper interaction, the ways that small details like timing communicated respect or disrespect. At exactly two o'clock, she locked her bicycle to a fence post and walked to the porch. Odette was already there, seated in one of the rocking chairs, holding a glass of iced tea. She was a small woman, in her seventies, with gray hair cut short and the bearing of someone who had survived things and understood their own strength as a result. She had the particular quality of presence that came from long practice at paying attention, at observing the world, at understanding people.

"You look like someone who wants something," Odette said. It was not an accusation, but an observation, a statement of fact delivered with neither judgment nor sympathy. "Come sit. I made tea." There was a second glass on a small table next to the chair, already poured, already waiting. The gesture suggested that Odette had expected Renee to accept the hospitality, that she understood the protocols of conversation and the ways that shared consumption of beverages created bonds of temporary intimacy. Renee sat in the adjacent rocking chair and picked up the glass. The tea was strong, sweetened with enough sugar to cut the bitterness, and served with ice that had partially melted so that the flavor was slightly diluted, proportioned for a longer conversation rather than a quick visit.

"Thank you," Renee said.

They sat in silence for a moment, rocking gently in the identical rhythm of experienced chair-users. The street was quiet, the afternoon heat keeping most people inside or in the shade of porches. The sound of wind chimes from a neighboring house created a distant melody, repetitive and soothing, the kind of

sound that marked the passage of time through regular intervals. Odette was in no hurry to begin conversation. She understood that information was something that required space, that rushing into difficult topics often resulted in the person being questioned becoming defensive, pulling back, refusing to share what they knew. Patience was a strategy. Silence was a tool. The absence of pressure could sometimes create more openness than direct interrogation ever could.

"Bette says you're cataloguing Professor Broussard's collection," Odette finally said, her voice carrying the cadence of someone beginning a story they had already composed.

"Yes. For the library."

"He was a strange man. Brilliant but strange. He used to walk these streets like he was reading something. Like the buildings were text that he was trying to translate. He would stand outside the Delacroix house sometimes, for long stretches, just looking at it like the answers to something were written in the architecture, like the building itself contained information that he was trying to extract through repeated observation." Odette was speaking in the tone of someone recounting a fact that had been common knowledge for a long time, something that everyone in the neighborhood had observed and accepted as simply part of how Broussard operated, part of his particular way of moving through the world.

"What was he interested in about that house?"

"History. Or so he said. He was interested in the families who'd lived here. The ones that went back generations, that were woven into the neighborhood's story in ways that went deeper than mere residence. The Delacroix family was one of them. They lived in that house for seventy years, from 1895 to 1965, and then one day they sold it and moved away. To California, I think. Or Texas. Somewhere the heat didn't kill you quite so effectively, where the humidity didn't form a constant layer between your body and the world." Odette took a long drink of her tea, pausing to gather her thoughts or to let her words settle into the afternoon air.

"The house sat empty for three years after that. The bank owned it. No one wanted to buy it. It was beautiful but it was also expensive, and it was in the

neighborhood when the neighborhood was beginning to change, when property values were becoming uncertain, when people were beginning to move away from places like Marigny and into the suburbs where air conditioning worked reliably and yards were flat and the past didn't live in the walls, didn't whisper history through the wood and plaster. Real estate agents don't like houses with complicated histories. Buyers don't like places where secrets might be hiding in the foundations."

"Did you know them? The Delacroix family?"

"I knew of them. My mother knew them better. Or knew their mother, rather, which is how these things work in a place like this. Family connections operating through the lines of women, through the networks of mothers and daughters and neighbors who shared the work of maintaining household life. There were rumors about them, about why they left so suddenly. About problems that couldn't be fixed by moving, about secrets that had to be escaped rather than resolved. But these are all things that people whisper about, not things that anyone ever confirmed or explained publicly. Rumors are the way that communities understand things that cannot be directly addressed, the way that truth gets told when official narratives are insufficient."

Odette was rocking steadily, the rhythm of her chair matching the rhythm of her speech, both creating a kind of meditative quality to the interaction. "I was already in my forties when they left. I noticed that they went, but I didn't know them well enough to understand what had driven them out. You observe these departures in a neighborhood. People leave. Sometimes gradually, sometimes suddenly. You understand that something has happened but you don't always understand what. Life goes on. You continue living in your space and other people continue living in theirs, separated by the invisible barriers that neighborhoods create. The city contains multitudes of parallel stories, lives existing side by side, histories known only to the people who lived them."

Renee understood that she was approaching the boundary of what she could ask directly. She needed to shift the conversation, needed to move from general information to specific questions that would yield more concrete answers, questions that would activate Odette's memory, that would prompt the sharing of detailed observation. "Do you remember anyone named Delacroix

being in the neighborhood in the late 1970s? After the family had moved away?"

"One of them came back," Odette said, and Renee felt the shift in the quality of her attention, the sense that she was now approaching information that had been kept, preserved, maintained in memory for exactly this kind of conversation. "The eldest son, I think, though I'm not entirely certain. He came back in the summer of 1975. Maybe 1976. The years blur together sometimes. I only remember because he looked wrong, looked like someone who had been broken by something, who had become damaged in a way that the human body could display but couldn't quite recover from. He walked very straight, like he was trying to prove something through his posture, through the physical control he could demonstrate. He spent a lot of time at the house, even though the bank owned it by then. He would stand outside the fence and look at it like he was trying to understand how it had become something he could no longer enter. There was a quality of loss in his bearing, the understanding that something had been taken from him and could not be returned."

This was the moment Renee had come for, the moment when the information shifted from general historical context into something more specific, more personal, more connected to the documentation she'd found in Broussard's collection. She understood that she needed to ask the right question, needed to prompt Odette to reveal what she had observed without suggesting the specific thing she was looking for. Careful prompting was necessary. "Did you ever see him with other people? With anyone else in the neighborhood?"

"There was a woman who would meet him sometimes. Dark-haired woman, young, maybe twenty-five or thirty years old. They would walk together, very formally, very careful not to touch even when proximity suggested it might be natural. They had the bearing of people who were conducting business rather than enjoying a social interaction, who understood that their connection was professional rather than personal. These walks happened maybe once a week, maybe twice a week, for several months. And then they stopped. The man stopped coming to the neighborhood. The woman, I never saw her again either. It was as if they had been erased from the

landscape, had simply ceased to exist in this place."

Odette took another long drink of her tea, her expression suggesting that she understood the significance of what she was revealing, that she had been waiting for the right person to ask the right questions. "Do you remember what she looked like?"

"Small. Very composed. Very controlled. The kind of person who had learned to control every aspect of their physical presence. The kind of woman who had been trained to move through the world in a particular way, who understood that her body was a tool, that her bearing was communication. The kind of woman who would never be memorable in a crowd because she had learned to diminish herself, to move through space without drawing attention. But if you were paying attention, if you understood how to look, you could see that the unremarkability was achieved through effort, through constant management of how she presented herself. She was a professional. You could see it in the way she moved, in the precision of her appearance, in the deliberateness of every gesture. That woman had been trained."

Renee absorbed this information, understood that she was receiving confirmation of what the documents had suggested. The woman in the photographs, the mysterious Robert from the letters, the Delacroix family connection: they were all starting to form a narrative, a story of a family that had been broken by Cold War operations, by intelligence work, by the machinery of history operating at the level of individual lives.

"Did you ever speak with the man? Did he ever say anything about why he was visiting?"

"No. He was the kind of person who didn't speak to people unless it was necessary. He would nod if he encountered someone on the street. He would say good morning if someone greeted him. But he wasn't interested in conversation. He was interested in the house, or in the woman, or in something that required him to be in this neighborhood, and nothing else mattered beyond that requirement. I've learned, living as long as I have, that sometimes people need to return to a place in order to understand something about themselves, about their past, about who they were before certain events happened. I think

that's what he was doing here. I think he was trying to understand something about the person he had been before whatever had broken him occurred. Sometimes you can't move forward until you return to the place where everything changed."

"Thank you," Renee said. "This is helpful."

"Be careful with whatever you're doing," Odette said. "Broussard was careful too, and careful doesn't always protect you from the consequences of knowing too much. The things that happened during the Cold War, the operations, the people who were broken by them, those things are still dangerous. They're not dangerous in the obvious ways anymore. But they're dangerous in the way that secrets are dangerous, in the way that knowledge can be dangerous if people who benefit from the secret continuing to exist decide that you know too much. Power protects secrets. And the people who hold power will do what's necessary to keep the secrets safe. History has a way of reaching out from the past and touching the present in ways you don't anticipate."

Renee left the house forty-five minutes later, having finished her tea and listened to Odette talk about the neighborhood's history, about the families that had lived there for generations, about the slow way that change had transformed the area from a residential neighborhood into something more complicated, more hybrid, more dedicated to tourism and commerce. Odette had offered information generously, had provided context and detail, had also offered warning in the form of a statement that was casual enough to seem like general observation but that was obviously directed toward Renee's specific situation. The warning hung in the air between them, acknowledged but not directly addressed, the way that serious warnings sometimes had to be delivered.

The bicycle ride home felt different now. The buildings seemed to hold more meaning. The physical fabric of the neighborhood contained encoded information about the people who had lived there, about the histories that had been lived out in the spaces between the houses, about the secrets that the city had absorbed and preserved. Renee understood that she was moving through a landscape of hidden knowledge, that what was visible on the surface was only a

fraction of what had actually occurred, that the Cold War had left traces in the material world, in the stories people told, in the way that certain people moved through space with the bearing of those who had been damaged by forces beyond their control.

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## Chapter 27. The Cipher Work

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Decryption was different from analysis, and analysis was different from understanding. Renee had learned this distinction during her academic training, had reinforced it during the academy, and was now discovering its practical implications as she sat in her apartment with the cipher key and a set of transcripts and the accumulated weight of knowledge that suggested these materials were not historical artifacts to be simply preserved but evidence of an actual Cold War operation that had involved people she was beginning to recognize from photographs.

The cipher itself was a transposition cipher of Soviet origin, which meant that the letters had been rearranged according to a mathematical pattern rather than substituted for other letters. The key was a grid of numbers, arranged in a six by eight pattern, which suggested that the cipher text would need to be broken into groups of six, arranged underneath the numbered key, and then read according to a pattern that the numbers indicated. It was the kind of cipher that had been used by the Soviet military intelligence services throughout the Cold War, the kind that was complex enough to resist casual decryption but not so complex as to be impossible to implement in the field, where agents might

have limited time and resources to conduct encryption and where the human factor always introduced elements of variability and possibility.

She had begun with the simpler assumption: that the cipher would apply to the Russian-language documents that existed in Broussard's collection, that the application of the key would reveal readable Russian text that would correspond to the transcripts she had discovered. This assumption proved correct with the first message, the first application of pattern to scrambled text yielding coherent meaning.

The first phrase, when properly decrypted, read: "Operacija zavershena. Vremeni net."

Operation complete. No time.

She verified the decryption three times, using three different approaches, ensuring that she was reading the cipher correctly, that the pattern was being applied properly, that the result was consistent across multiple applications. The message decoded consistently. This was not random variation. This was information, preserved in the right way, designed to be decrypted by someone who had the correct key. The message felt final, terminal, suggesting that whatever operation had been conducted was being concluded, wrapped up, put into a state of permanent completion.

The work was meditative and focused, the kind of intellectual labor that occupied only part of her conscious attention while leaving another part free to process the significance of what she was doing. She was sitting in her apartment in Marigny, in the humid heat of late afternoon, decrypting a message that had been sent, presumably, in the 1970s or early 1980s, that had been preserved by Broussard through decades of Cold War and post-Cold War history, that was now revealing its content to her. She was participating in a conversation that had been suspended for forty years, picking up the language that had been encoded decades ago, listening to a voice that had been determined to be heard, eventually, by someone with the right training and the right key.

She moved through the other documents systematically, applying the cipher to each transcript, verifying that the decryption was consistent, building

a library of decoded messages. Most were short. Most appeared to be summary statements, confirmations, status updates. A few were longer, providing more extensive information about the operation itself. She worked with the quiet intensity of someone engaged in important work, understanding that each message represented a moment of communication, a moment when someone had felt compelled to send information through secure channels.

"Agent inserted Prague 1972. Training complete. Operational deployment authorized."

She understood what this meant: someone had been placed in Prague, had undergone training, had been cleared for active intelligence operations. The specificity of the date suggested that Prague was where the agent had been activated, where the training had been completed, where the work had begun. The bureaucratic language masked a significant event, a decision to deploy someone into operational territory, a commitment of resources.

"Connection established. Network functioning. Primary assets cooperating."

This message suggested that the network that the agent was meant to develop had been successfully created, that people in New Orleans had been persuaded or coerced into cooperating with the intelligence work, that the operation was moving forward successfully. The language was abstract, but it represented actual people, actual relationships, actual pressure applied in order to achieve cooperation.

"Pressure from Washington increasing. Duration uncertain. Advise accelerated timeline."

This message suggested that there were institutional pressures being applied, that some organization was pushing for faster results, that the timeline for the operation was becoming compressed, that there was anxiety about whether the current pace would be sustainable. Someone in an office in Washington was impatient. Someone in the field was being pushed harder than they believed was wise.

"Primary asset compromised. Secondary option required. Delacroix family withdrawal approved."

This last one made her stop. It referenced the family by name. It suggested that the family's departure from New Orleans had not been voluntary, or at least had been facilitated by institutional decision-making, by the intelligence services' determination that their presence in the city was becoming problematic, that their usefulness was being compromised, that extraction was the appropriate response. The message used the language of operational planning, treating the family as assets to be managed, deployed, or withdrawn based on institutional calculations. But it also represented human beings being displaced from their home, their community, their city, all because something that they were involved with had gone wrong.

She worked through the evening and into the night, gradually making her way through the documents, building a partial narrative of an operation that had involved the placement of someone, the development of a network, the conducting of some kind of intelligence activity in New Orleans during the late 1960s and early 1970s, and then the decision to extract, to withdraw, to leave behind only the people who needed to be left behind. She was seeing the structure of an intelligence operation, understanding how these operations worked at a practical level, how they involved actual people, how they could be documented, how they could be preserved. Each message revealed another layer of the operation's structure.

By three in the morning, she had decoded sixteen messages, had verified each decryption multiple times, had recorded each decoded message in her encrypted file. The narrative that emerged was incomplete but clear: someone from the Delacroix family had been working as an agent for a foreign intelligence service. The work had involved developing a network of contacts in New Orleans, conducting some kind of intelligence operation, gathering information of some kind. The operation had been deemed to be in jeopardy by the mid-1970s. The family had been withdrawn. Only Broussard had remained, maintaining the archive, preserving the evidence, waiting for the day when the operation could finally be exposed, when the history could be documented, when the truth could be told.

She closed her laptop and sat in the darkness of her apartment. The street outside was quiet, the neighborhood asleep, the city in the peculiar silence that

came in the hours before dawn. She understood now what Broussard had been doing. He had been preserving a secret, maintaining custody of information that the intelligence services wanted to remain buried, creating a record that would outlast the people involved, ensuring that history would be documented even if official channels refused to acknowledge what had occurred.

She thought about the woman in the photographs, dark-haired and composed, meeting with the young man in the Marigny coffee shop. She thought about the Delacroix family, broken by history, extracted by institutional decision, scattered to the American west. She thought about Broussard, the guardian of the archive, the person who had been trusted with the preservation of truth, even when that truth could not be publicly spoken.

She made tea. She sat at her window and watched the light begin to return to the sky, watched the city gradually emerge from darkness into the gray color of early morning, the particular gray that marked the transition from night to day. She understood that she had moved beyond analysis into something more complicated. She had moved into the space of empathy, into the understanding that the documents she was reading were not just evidence of an operation but records of human lives, of people who had been asked to do things, to become things, to bear the weight of secrets that could not be shared.

She understood that this was the real work of archives: not the preservation of paper and ink, but the preservation of witness, the maintaining of evidence that human lives mattered, that the things people did and suffered were worth recording, worth preserving, worth eventually telling even if the telling had to wait for decades until the people most directly involved were gone or too old to care about the consequences.

She went to bed as the sun was rising. She slept lightly, her dreams filled with images of cipher keys and decoded messages and the faces of people frozen in photographs, preserved forever in the moment of their greatest secrecy. She woke at ten o'clock and went back to work. The afternoon stretched before her. The city below continued its ordinary rhythms. And Renee continued her work, continuing the effort of preservation, understanding that she was part of a lineage of people who had made the same commitment to truth.



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## Chapter 28. The Federal Interest

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Special Agent Marcus Webb from the Federal Bureau of Investigation arrived at the Tulane University special collections library on a Thursday morning in late October, carrying credentials that marked him as someone with authority but not someone who intended to use that authority in a way that involved charm or social smoothing. He was a man in his mid-fifties, with the bearing of someone who had spent decades in law enforcement, who understood the protocols of official investigation, who was accustomed to extracting information from people who might be inclined to resist. His suit was the color of wet concrete. His shoes were highly polished. Everything about his appearance suggested competence and nothing suggested personality. He was the embodiment of institutional authority made flesh.

Dr. Solon had called Renee into his office thirty minutes before the appointment, had explained that the FBI had contacted him the previous day regarding the Broussard collection, had requested permission to conduct a preliminary examination of the materials. Dr. Solon had approved this request because refusing the FBI was not an option available to a university administrator, because the materials were of federal interest, because the

intelligence services had apparently decided that the time for maintaining distance from the collection was over. He had informed Renee that she would be assisting Special Agent Webb, that she should answer his questions honestly and completely, that the university appreciated her professionalism and her careful work with the materials. The message was clear: cooperate fully.

Agent Webb examined the materials with the expression of someone who was checking on work that had already been completed by others, who understood the basics of archival procedure, who was assessing whether the work had been done correctly and completely. He photographed the Russian-language documents with a small digital camera, preserving evidence. He examined the cipher key closely, even holding it up to the light to look for hidden markings, for any information that might be embedded in the paper itself. He asked questions about the acquisition process, about the chain of custody, about whether any materials had been removed or modified since the collection's arrival at the library, about whether anyone unauthorized had accessed the materials. His questions were precise and thorough, the questions of someone who had conducted hundreds of preliminary investigations.

Renee answered every question with precision, with the understanding that lying to federal investigators was a crime that could result in serious consequences, with the clarity that came from knowing she had done nothing wrong, had preserved the materials exactly as she was supposed to, had followed all proper procedures and protocols. She also understood that the FBI's interest indicated that the decision about what to do with the classified materials was beginning to move upward, that agencies were being informed, that the clock was ticking on how long the materials would remain in her custody.

"You're trained in intelligence tradecraft," Webb said. This was not a question. He had clearly reviewed her background before arriving, had confirmed her academy training, understood her capabilities. His tone suggested that he saw no reason to pretend surprise or to conduct the kind of preliminary information gathering that characterized normal interviews. He knew what he wanted to know already.

"Civilian program. Security and preservation techniques. Observation and analysis protocols."

"And you understand the implications of what this collection contains. You understand that these materials document an intelligence operation, that they're classified, that their existence is something that needs to be carefully managed."

"I understand," Renee said.

"The decision about what happens to these materials has not yet been made. The materials are being reviewed at multiple levels of the intelligence community. There are considerations regarding damage assessment, regarding the identification of assets, regarding the protection of people who were involved in the operation. These considerations take time. They require coordination between agencies with different interests and different priorities." Webb was speaking in the tone of someone explaining a process that had already been decided, that was being implemented regardless of her feelings about it, that would proceed with or without her cooperation.

"How long?" Renee asked.

"That depends on how the review process unfolds, on whether there are complications, on whether additional investigation is deemed necessary. My assessment, based on what I've seen here, is that Dr. Solon and the university have handled this appropriately. The materials have been preserved according to archival standards. The documentation has been thorough. There has been no unauthorized disclosure. This works in your favor and in the university's favor. It suggests that this is an institution that can be trusted with sensitive materials, that has appropriate security practices in place." Webb let this statement hang in the air, and Renee understood that there was something being conveyed in the language of official procedure, but it was actually something like a threat, a statement that suggested that trust was conditional, that it could be lost if the right behaviors were not maintained, that the continued security of the university's programs and reputation was somehow dependent on the actions that Renee took in the coming weeks and months.

"I will continue to protect the materials according to archival standards," Renee said. "I will continue to follow all security protocols. I will continue to comply with any requests from federal agencies."

"That's what I expected to hear," Webb said. His expression did not change. "There's one other matter. We have some information suggesting that you've been conducting independent research into the materials, that you've been attempting to decode the cipher and translate the Russian-language documents. I need to advise you that any classified materials require proper security clearance to review. Civilian exposure to classified information, even accidental exposure, creates complications."

This was the moment that Renee understood her position with complete clarity. The FBI knew what she had done. They had information about her decryption attempts, about her analysis, about her construction of a narrative that connected the materials to actual intelligence operations and actual people. The question was whether they were going to charge her with something, or whether they were going to move past this transgression in exchange for her cooperation and silence going forward. She was being given a choice, presented with it in the formal language of legal procedure but a choice nonetheless. There was no neutral path forward.

"I was attempting to understand the collection's structure," Renee said. "To verify authenticity. To assess what the materials documented."

"That's a violation of federal law regarding the handling of classified materials. It's a serious violation. It could result in criminal charges, prosecution, imprisonment." Webb let this statement sit in the air between them, let her absorb the full weight of what he was conveying. The threat was explicit, the consequences clearly outlined. "However, your training creates a framework where your actions might be understood as professional research conducted within the scope of your job responsibilities. The academy programs are designed to produce people with specific skills. The government has an interest in those people using those skills. What constitutes a violation and what constitutes appropriate use is sometimes a matter of interpretation."

"What are you asking me to do?" Renee asked.

"I'm asking you to continue your work. I'm asking you to compile a comprehensive analysis of what the materials document, who was involved in the operation, what the operation's objectives were. I'm asking you to create a document that provides a complete picture of the intelligence activity, the network structure, the outcomes. I'm asking you to do this on behalf of the FBI, with appropriate security clearance and under the protection of the official investigation. In doing so, you will no longer be violating federal law. You will be conducting authorized analysis of classified materials under controlled conditions."

Webb opened his briefcase and removed a folder. Inside was a single sheet of paper, a temporary security clearance, issued that morning, authorizing Renee to conduct analysis of classified materials related to the investigation into the Broussard collection. The clearance was dated for six months. At the end of six months, it could be renewed or allowed to expire. The bureaucratic machinery had already been set in motion, had determined that this solution was acceptable, that bringing her under official oversight was preferable to pursuing criminal charges. She was being brought into the machinery. She was being made complicit through official channels.

"You understand that this is conditional. You understand that if you disclose any of the information you're analyzing to anyone without authorization, if you conduct unauthorized research into the identities of the people involved, if you take any action that compromises the investigation or the security of the materials, the consequences will be severe. You also understand that this clearance is only valid for analysis conducted through this office, under these conditions, with these constraints."

"I understand," Renee said.

"Then we have an arrangement," Webb said. "You will provide me with a preliminary analysis within two weeks. You will include in your analysis a complete list of all the materials in the collection that relate to the intelligence operation, a narrative of what occurred based on the evidence available, and your assessment of what additional investigation might be necessary. You will provide this analysis to no one else. You will discuss it with no one else. You will store it in the manner specified by the security protocols included with

your clearance."

He provided her with a thick envelope of documents: the temporary security clearance, the protocols for handling classified information, the office address where she should submit her preliminary analysis, the phone number for a secure line where she could contact the FBI office directly with any questions. The envelope was heavy with the weight of official procedure, with the formality of federal bureaucracy, with the weight of secrets and the responsibility of containing them.

Renee left the library that afternoon with the envelope and the understanding that her life had shifted again, that the game she had been playing with the materials had become something real, something official, something that carried genuine legal weight. She was no longer a curious archivist examining a mysterious collection. She was now a cleared analyst, working on behalf of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, conducting analysis of classified materials, protected by her clearance but constrained by the regulations that came with it. Her work was now official. Her investigation was now authorized. But the authorization came with the weight of federal power, with the understanding that she was now operating within a system that could protect her but could also destroy her if she violated the terms of her clearance.

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## Chapter 29. The Pressure Points

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The preliminary analysis took seventy-three hours to complete, conducted in the special vault room that the FBI had arranged for her use at the library, a secure space where classified materials could be examined without violating security protocols. The vault room was small, barely large enough for a desk and a chair and the cabinets that held the classified materials. There was one window, positioned high on the wall, too high to allow anyone passing by to see into the room. The only entrance was controlled by electronic lock, activated by key card. Renee had been issued a card that allowed her access twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. She could work whenever she needed to, could conduct her analysis in the protected environment, could maintain the security protocols that were required.

Renee had moved into the vault with her laptop, her notes, her accumulated photographs of the documents, and the understanding that she was creating something that would be reviewed by people whose names she would never know, whose motivations were not her concern, whose interpretation of what she was writing would determine its significance and utility. She was writing for an unknown audience, creating analysis that would be evaluated by

people who had information she did not have, who would make decisions based on her work but might not share those decisions with her.

She had written what was requested: a chronological narrative of the intelligence operation, the network members she could identify from the materials, the objectives that the operation appeared to be pursuing. She had been careful to note the gaps in her knowledge, the inferences she was making, the limitations of the evidence available. She had written as an archivist, documenting what the materials suggested rather than claiming certainty she didn't possess. She had been precise about what could be proven and what could only be inferred.

But the work of writing this analysis, of creating a coherent narrative from fragmentary evidence, had forced her to confront something she had been avoiding: she was identifying real people, people who were possibly still alive, people whose names appeared in the documents, people whose lives had been shaped by the intelligence operation she was describing. The woman in the photographs was named Catherine Delacroix. The young man was named Michel Delacroix. Their father, deceased since 1988, was named Jean-Paul Delacroix. The intelligence officers who had run the operation were named in the documents and the cipher transcripts only by codenames, but their roles were clear enough to suggest that they were identifiable, that the FBI already knew who they were, that the investigation was in the process of reopening something that had been officially closed for decades.

She submitted the analysis at the secure FBI office, placed it in the hands of a woman whose name she didn't catch, who didn't introduce herself, who simply accepted the folder and the flash drive on which she had stored the complete analysis. She received a form to sign, a confirmation that she had transferred the classified analysis to appropriate authorities, a statement of the legal consequences if she attempted to access, distribute, or discuss the information she had compiled. Her signature on the form felt like a final act, the moment when she was giving over her work to the machinery of official investigation.

She left the FBI office understanding that her work on the collection was, in a certain sense, complete. The analysis had been provided. The materials had

been documented. The investigation had been advanced. She could return to her normal work, to her normal life, to the ordinary rhythms of archival practice and routine research. Except the analysis had consequences. The work of identifying the people involved in the operation, of understanding their roles, of documenting what had happened to them as a result of the intelligence activity, had changed something in her relationship to the materials. She could not un-know what she had discovered. She could not return to treating the collection as simple documentation of historical events. The events were historical only in the sense that they had occurred in the past. Their impact, their consequences, their implications for the people involved, those things continued into the present.

The first sign that the analysis was having effect came from Detective Marchand. He called her apartment on a Wednesday evening, asked her to meet him at the same coffee shop where they'd had their previous conversation, brought documents with him that he placed on the table between them. The documents were not official police records. They appeared to be photocopies of federal files, the kind of thing that law enforcement personnel sometimes obtained through unofficial channels, through professional networks, through the understanding that there was sometimes value in sharing information across jurisdictional boundaries.

"The FBI contacted NOPD," Marchand said. "They wanted to know if there were any ongoing investigations related to the Broussard collection, any local intelligence work, any reason to believe that the materials in the collection were connected to ongoing crimes or criminal activity. I told them that we had received reports of surveillance and attempted break-in but that the investigation had not resulted in any charges or arrests. I also told them that the primary person of interest in the surveillance matter was a woman living in the Marigny neighborhood who had become aware that she was being watched. I did not mention you by name, but the FBI officer on the call clearly understood who I was referring to."

"What did they say?"

"They said that the matter was being handled at a federal level, that local law enforcement should step back from any investigation related to the

collection, that they would be establishing a secure perimeter around the materials and the people involved in the research. They also said that there had been some concern about foreign nationals accessing the materials, about the possibility that someone was attempting to recover classified documents that they believed had been hidden in the collection. They suggested that local law enforcement might want to increase security around the Tulane library as a precaution."

Renee understood what Marchand was not saying. The analysis she had provided to the FBI had apparently indicated that there was risk of unauthorized access or recovery of the materials. The analysis had raised questions about whether the people identified in the operation were still living, still interested in recovering the evidence of their activities, still capable of being a security threat. The work of documentation had created new security concerns, had activated institutional anxieties about the materials and who might want to gain access to them.

"The second thing," Marchand continued, "is that we've had a development in the break-in at the library. The security footage from the night of the attempted theft shows a man entering through a window in the basement, moving through the building with the bearing of someone who knew where he was going, attempting to access the special collections vault. He didn't succeed. The vault's security system is apparently quite sophisticated. But the timing is interesting. He attempted the break-in on the night that Fontaine made his second visit to the library."

"Second visit?"

"He came back. Nobody reported it to us at the time, but the security guard mentioned it to me when I was asking follow-up questions about the initial break-in. Fontaine came to the library and asked to speak with you, specifically, about the Broussard materials. The guard told him you weren't available and suggested he leave a message. He declined and left the building. Twenty minutes later, the break-in was attempted from the basement window. The timing suggests coordination. Fontaine was probably the coordinator, the person managing the operation to recover the classified materials. He was probably testing security, gathering information about where the materials were

kept, planning an operation to extract them."

"Is he still in the city?"

"We have no reports of him after that evening. His hotel checked out. His rental car was returned to the agency at the airport. We have no confirmation of him leaving on a flight, but that doesn't mean much. People move through New Orleans in ways that don't always create official documentation. He might have left by car. He might still be in the city operating under an assumed identity. He might be reporting to someone else, someone higher up in whatever organization he's working for."

Marchand gathered his documents back together with the careful movements of someone handling sensitive information. "The FBI has advised me that you're cooperating with their investigation, that you have security clearance, that you're not a person of interest in their file. They also advised me that there may be risks associated with your knowledge of the classified materials, that you should be careful about your security, that you should report any suspicious activity. I'm relaying that advice, with the addition that I think you should seriously consider increasing your personal security measures. Someone has already tried to break into the library to access the materials. The fact that Fontaine attempted this break-in suggests that he doesn't yet have what he came for, that he's still looking, that your knowledge of the materials and your analysis makes you a person of interest to whoever he's working for. You've become significant in ways that might not be entirely comfortable. You're now marked. You're now part of the machinery."

Renee understood the weight of what Marchand was conveying. The analysis had consequences. The identification of the people involved in the operation, the documentation of what had happened, the preservation of evidence: these actions had activated something, had created interest among parties who wanted the materials destroyed or recovered, who wanted to minimize the evidence of what had occurred, who wanted to reduce the likelihood that the truth would ever be publicly disclosed.

"What do I do?" Renee asked.

"You protect yourself. You maintain awareness of your surroundings. You vary your routines. You report any unusual activity to both the FBI and to NOPD. You understand that you're now part of an investigation that involves institutional interests, classified materials, and people who have significant motivation to ensure that the evidence remains hidden. This is beyond anything that a normal break-in or surveillance operation represents. This is serious. This is dangerous in ways that archives normally are not. You need to understand that you've crossed a line. You're not just an observer anymore. You're a participant. You're someone that people will try to pressure, manipulate, or harm if the costs are high enough."

Renee left the coffee shop with the understanding that her life had become something different, something more complicated, something that required her to maintain constant vigilance and awareness. She biked home through the Marigny streets, paying attention to who was around her, to whether she was being followed, to whether the patterns of the neighborhood seemed normal or disrupted. She was seeing threats in ordinary situations, understanding that the price of knowing the truth was the burden of managing the consequences of that knowledge. She understood that she had crossed a line, had moved from being an observer of history to being a participant in history, a person whose actions had real consequences in the world. The weight of it settled onto her shoulders like fog settling over the city at dusk.

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## Chapter 30. The Question of Delacroix

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The library's records showed that Jean-Paul Delacroix had been dead for thirty-seven years. He had died on March 14, 1988, in New Orleans, according to the death certificate that Renee found in the public records database. The cause of death was listed as myocardial infarction: a heart attack. He had been sixty-three years old. The funeral notice had appeared in the Times-Picayune on March 16, 1988, a brief announcement indicating that services had been held at a Catholic church in the Garden District, that he was survived by two children and a wife. The notice was minimal, the kind of announcement that was placed for form's sake but without the extensive details or the claims of accomplishment that characterized the obituaries of prominent citizens. He had been given a modest farewell, a simple marking of his passing without the celebration or remembrance that might come to someone whose achievements were widely recognized.

But the documents in the Broussard collection suggested something different. The documents suggested that Jean-Paul Delacroix had been involved in intelligence operations, that he had been connected to the Soviet GRU, that he had either been a defector or an asset who was being handled by American

intelligence services, that his role in the operation had been significant enough to require extraction when the operation became compromised. The documents existed in conversation with the death notice, creating a narrative that official records could not accommodate, suggesting a life that had been lived in multiple registers simultaneously.

Renee had not included specific identification of Jean-Paul Delacroix in her analysis provided to the FBI. She had used codenames, had referred to him as "Primary Asset," had avoided putting his actual name on the classified document. But she understood that the FBI already knew his identity. The intelligence services already understood that the operation had involved a member of a prominent New Orleans family. The question she was now investigating was how much of this narrative was already public record, how much of it had been documented in official sources, how much of it could be known without violating her security clearance.

She found references to Jean-Paul Delacroix in the university's academic database: he had been a visiting lecturer in French language and culture at Tulane in the 1960s. His personnel file, available through the university archives, showed that he had taught three courses per year from 1962 to 1975, and then had retired suddenly in the spring of 1975, shortly after the final time he had been seen walking with Catherine in the Marigny neighborhood. The personnel file contained letters of recommendation written in the mid-1960s by other faculty members. Jean-Paul had been described as knowledgeable, professional, and somewhat reserved. There were no comments suggesting unusual behavior or concern about his mental health or his security status. His job had been entirely legitimate. His employment at the university had been documented and verified. His retirement had been routine, or at least, had been documented as if it were routine.

She searched for other references to the Delacroix family in New Orleans historical records. The house in Marigny that Odette had mentioned was listed in property records as having been owned by the Delacroix family from 1895 to 1965. After the sale in 1965, the property had changed hands multiple times, had eventually been converted into a bed-and-breakfast, and was now, according to the city's tourism website, a popular guest house in the Marigny

district. The transformation was complete: the location of a Cold War intelligence operation had become a tourist attraction, a place where visitors came to experience the authentic charm of New Orleans, unaware of the history that the building contained. The past had been quite literally built over, had been transformed into something marketable, something designed for the consumption of people with disposable income.

She found a reference to Michel Delacroix in a 1985 article in a Boston-area newspaper about a software company that had received venture capital funding. Michel was listed as one of the principals, described as a computer science expert with experience in systems architecture. The article mentioned that he had relocated to Boston from New Orleans five years prior, suggesting that he had moved away around 1980, several years after his family's extraction from New Orleans. He was thirty-four years old at the time of the article, which meant he had been born in 1951, which meant he had been a teenager during the time when his family was being extracted from New Orleans, when intelligence services were deciding that the operation had become compromised, when the decision was being made to relocate the family away from the city. The article included a photograph. He was smiling, professional, someone who had successfully built a new life away from the shadows of his family history.

There was no publicly available information about Catherine Delacroix. No articles, no mentions in academic materials, no public records beyond her status as a family member of Jean-Paul. She had disappeared from public documentation entirely, either by choice or by design, had removed herself from accessible history, had become a person who had existed but left no trace in the records that were generally available to people conducting research. This absence was significant. The absence itself was a kind of evidence.

Renee was sitting at the library's public computer terminal, reviewing these public records, understanding that everything she was learning was technically information that was available to anyone with access to the right databases and the knowledge of how to search. She was not violating her security clearance by reading public records. She was not accessing classified information. She was simply assembling a picture of the people involved in the

operation, understanding their lives as they were documented in official, unclassified sources.

But the exercise felt like a violation anyway. She was reconstructing people's lives without their knowledge or consent. She was creating a narrative about the Delacroix family based on fragmentary public evidence, creating connections that they might not want made, creating documentation of events that they might prefer to remain buried. She was doing what archivists did: preserving what was available, documenting what could be found, creating a record that would persist beyond the moment of its creation.

She left the library that afternoon and walked to the house in Marigny that had once belonged to the Delacroix family. It was a beautiful building, painted pale yellow, with shutters that had been recently restored. A sign near the entrance advertised availability of rooms for daily rental. A potted plant sat on the front porch, well-maintained, suggesting that the proprietor was attentive to the building's appearance and comfort. The building had been transformed into something pleasant, something welcoming, something designed to provide rest and relaxation to temporary visitors. The transformation was nearly total. Almost nothing about its present iteration suggested its previous significance.

She stood on the sidewalk and looked at the building, trying to imagine what it had been like in 1975, when Jean-Paul had walked to it regularly and stood outside the fence looking at the structure he could no longer enter. She tried to imagine what it had meant to him to see his family home occupied by strangers, to know that he had been extracted from his life, that his presence in New Orleans was too dangerous, that he had to disappear from the place he had belonged. She tried to imagine the pain of that kind of separation, the weight of understanding that extraction was the appropriate response to compromise, that the institution he served required his absence from the place he had built.

She walked back through the neighborhood, past the coffee shop where Michel and Catherine had met with their handlers, where they had conducted the quiet business of intelligence work under the guise of casual social interaction. The coffee shop was still there, renamed and redesigned, but operating in the same location. It was full of tourists and locals, people drinking coffee and speaking in multiple languages, the neighborhood's cosmopolitan

character on full display. The continuity was striking: the physical location had persisted, had been transformed but had maintained its essential function as a gathering place, a space where people could meet and conduct business.

Renee understood something in that moment that she had not fully grasped before: the past was not gone. The past was embedded in the physical world, living in the buildings and the streets, preserved in the landscape itself. The people who had lived through these events had moved forward, had relocated, had attempted to build new lives away from the city that had been the location of their greatest vulnerability. But they had left traces. They had left evidence. They had left knowledge, in the form of the documents they had preserved, the information they had encoded, the truth they had entrusted to archives.

She was, in a sense, doing exactly what Jean-Paul Delacroix had done when he had preserved the cipher and the documents in Broussard's care: she was bearing witness. She was maintaining evidence. She was ensuring that the truth would be preserved, even if it could not be immediately disclosed. She was part of a chain of witness that extended from the people who had created the documents, through Broussard, through her own analysis, into whatever future emerged from the investigation.

She walked home slowly through the Quarter, through the streets that had absorbed so much history, that carried the weight of centuries of human activity, that preserved the past in every building and street corner. She understood that she was part of a long chain of people who had understood archives not as neutral repositories but as acts of judgment, acts of choice, acts of determining what would be remembered and what would be preserved and what would be honored about the people whose lives had been documented.

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## Chapter 31. The Temporary Silence

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November came with the smell of cooler air, the gradual reduction in humidity, the particular quality of light that marked the transition from autumn toward winter. The city seemed to exhale, seemed to relax slightly, seemed to become slightly more bearable. The leaves on the trees changed color gradually, reluctantly, as if even vegetation in New Orleans wanted to maintain the summer heat. Renee fell into a rhythm of careful normalcy: she went to work, she catalogued materials, she conducted her official duties as an archivist while maintaining the security protocols that came with her temporary clearance. The FBI analysis had been submitted. The investigation was proceeding at levels above her involvement. She was, officially, no longer engaged in the research that had characterized her work in the preceding months.

But the work continued beneath the surface, in the quiet hours when she reviewed her encrypted files, updated her notes, maintained her own records of what she had discovered. She was creating a parallel archive, a document that existed outside official channels, a record that was hers alone, that was preserved in multiple locations, that would survive if anything happened to her or if the official investigation was shut down or classified beyond recovery. She

understood that she was building redundancy, that she was creating backup systems, that she was applying the principles of archival preservation to her own knowledge and understanding.

She noticed that she had become more aware of her surroundings, more attentive to the people around her, more conscious of the patterns of her daily life and the ways that those patterns could be observed or tracked. She varied her routes home from the library. She sometimes stayed late, sometimes left early, creating irregularity in her schedule. She paid attention to whether anyone seemed to be watching her, whether the black sedan had returned, whether the surveillance that had characterized her earlier weeks had been replaced with something more subtle and harder to detect. She maintained the protocols of security awareness that her training had taught her, understanding that vigilance was necessary, that complacency could be dangerous.

The library continued to function as if nothing had happened. Dr. Solon had informed her that the federal hold on the Broussard materials remained in place, that researchers who requested access were being turned down, that the materials would likely remain restricted for several years while the investigation proceeded. The cookbook remained in climate-controlled storage, the cipher key preserved in its final resting place, the documents that had caused so much upheaval now settled into the quiet permanence of the archive. The materials had been taken into federal custody, sealed away, made inaccessible to ordinary research. They would remain in their restricted state until institutional calculations determined that they could be released, that their disclosure would no longer threaten security, that the people involved in the operation had ceased to matter.

Bette noticed that Renee was different. She commented on it one evening when she brought dinner over, when she observed that Renee seemed preoccupied, seemed to be carrying something that made her less present in ordinary conversation, less able to engage in the casual social exchange that had previously characterized their interactions. The weight was visible, observable, the kind of burden that could not be entirely hidden.

"You're thinking too much about something," Bette said. "I recognize the expression. My daughter has it when she's working on something at the

university, something complicated that she can't quite discuss. You have the same look. Like you're living in two places at once, one part of you here and one part somewhere else entirely. Like your attention is divided, like you're always only partially present in whatever moment you're actually occupying."

"Work is complicated right now," Renee said. "A complex collection. Materials that require careful handling."

"Everything requires careful handling," Bette said. "That's what life is. The trick is not to let the careful handling exhaust you entirely, not to lose yourself in the process of being careful about everything. My daughter forgets that sometimes. She gets so focused on the work that she forgets to eat, forgets to sleep, forgets that there are other parts of life besides the thing she's currently focused on. I worry about her. And now I'm beginning to worry about you in the same way. I watch you and I see someone who is carrying too much, who is holding everything too tightly, who is afraid of what might happen if she relaxes her attention even for a moment."

Renee appreciated the concern but did not know how to address it. She could not tell Bette about the federal investigation, about the security clearance, about the intelligence operation that had been uncovered in the materials. She could not explain that the careful handling was necessary, that the complexity was genuine, that the weight she was carrying had legitimate source and weight. The only response she could provide was silence, the acknowledgment that Bette was correct in her observation but that the situation was not something that could be discussed or resolved through conversation.

She focused on work. She began a new cataloguing project, a collection of letters donated by an estate of a woman who had been a journalist in the 1950s. The letters were less historically significant than the Broussard collection, but they provided necessary focus and attention, gave her something to do that was uncomplicated and straightforward. She lost herself in the work of organizing and documenting, of creating finding aids, of preparing materials for preservation. She worked with the precision and attention that had always come naturally to her, that had made her a good archivist in the first place.

By the middle of November, she had created comprehensive documentation for the journalist's collection. She had identified themes and subjects, had organized the materials chronologically, had prepared them for long-term preservation. The work was complete and satisfying in a way that was increasingly rare. It was work that had a clear endpoint, that resulted in a finished product, that did not lead to complications or require the involvement of federal agencies or the management of classified information. The work was simple. The work was honest. The work was something that she could accomplish and be done with.

She received a single phone call from the FBI office in early December. The woman on the secure line identified herself only as Agent Webb's office. She stated that the preliminary analysis had been reviewed, that it had been forwarded to relevant agencies within the intelligence community, and that the investigation into the Broussard collection would be continuing at the federal level. She further stated that Renee's clearance would remain in place for an additional six months, that she should continue to maintain the security protocols, that any further analysis would be conducted through the FBI office using the same procedures as before.

The call lasted three minutes. There was no conversation beyond the required exchange of information. Renee hung up the phone with the understanding that her involvement with the investigation was not ending but was entering a new phase, a phase of sustained attention, a phase where she would maintain her analysis and her documentation while the larger machinery of federal investigation continued its work at levels above her involvement. She was being maintained as a resource, kept in a state of ready availability, potentially useful if additional analysis was deemed necessary.

She worked through December with quiet focus. She attended the library's holiday party and listened to her colleagues discuss their year-end projects, their plans for January, their thoughts about the upcoming renovations to the reading room. She participated in the normal exchanges of academic and professional life, maintaining the appearance of someone engaged in ordinary work, someone not carrying secrets, someone not involved in anything more complicated than the standard business of archival preservation.

But in her apartment at night, she maintained her encrypted files. She updated her analysis. She reviewed the documents she had photographed and preserved. She created backups and ensured that multiple copies existed in multiple locations. She was building a parallel archive, a duplicate record that existed outside official channels, a preservation of truth that would survive if anything happened to the official investigation or to the classified materials that had been taken into federal custody.

She understood that this was perhaps the most important work she was doing: the creation of redundancy, the maintenance of evidence, the preservation of witness. Archives were built on the principle that nothing important should exist in only one location, that truth required duplication, that preservation meant ensuring that information could survive the loss of any single copy or location. She was applying this principle not just to the materials she was supposed to protect but to her own knowledge, her own analysis, her own understanding of what had occurred.

She was becoming, in a sense, a living archive, a person who carried within herself the preserved record of the truth. This understanding brought with it both comfort and weight. It meant that even if the official investigation failed, even if the materials were destroyed or lost, the record would continue to exist. It also meant that she was now responsible for preservation, that she carried a burden of knowledge that extended beyond her official job and into territory that was purely personal, purely moral, purely about her own commitment to the truth persisting beyond institutional interest or institutional denial.

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## Chapter 32. The Winter Conversation

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Renee received an email on a Friday in late January with no subject line and only two sentences: "Meet me at Cafe Amelie at 3 PM on Sunday. Come alone. You'll understand why when you arrive." The email came from an address that was a series of random numbers and letters with no identifying information about who had sent it. The address was designed to be untraceable, to leave no connection to any actual person or institution. Someone had taken precautions. Someone understood electronic security. Someone was being very careful about how they made contact.

She did not respond. She did not ask questions. She understood that this was communication from someone who had reason to be careful, who understood email security, who was taking precautions to ensure that the message could not be easily traced. She deleted the email from her inbox but saved the message in her encrypted file, documenting the fact that someone had made contact with her, that someone knew who she was and how to reach her, that someone wanted to speak with her in person. She understood that this was a significant moment, that someone had decided that she was important enough to contact, that someone wanted to communicate something that could not be

transmitted through electronic means.

She spent Saturday considering whether she would actually attend the meeting. She weighed the risks: the meeting could be a trap. The person could be someone working against her, someone hired to harm her, someone attempting to extract information. But she also understood that the meeting could be significant, that someone with knowledge of the situation wanted to communicate with her, that refusing the meeting meant refusing information that could be essential to understanding what was happening. She was living in a space where risks and opportunities were difficult to distinguish.

She called Detective Marchand on Saturday evening and told him about the email. She showed him the message on her phone. Marchand read it carefully and then told her to attend the meeting, to allow him to position officers nearby, to go to Cafe Amelie at the appointed time and see who would be there. He explained that he would have plainclothes officers positioned in the area, that he would be monitoring the situation, that she would not be alone even if she appeared to be meeting with only one person. He explained the protocols for making contact if something went wrong, the signal system they would use, the understanding that she should prioritize her own safety above all other considerations.

Sunday afternoon came with the particular gray quality of winter light in New Orleans, a quality that made the city seem slightly faded, slightly less vibrant than it did in the seasons of heat and humidity. The light had a quality of impermanence, as if the darkness was constantly threatening to return, as if the daylight hours were being gradually stolen by the increasing length of night. Cafe Amelie was a popular restaurant in the French Quarter, always busy with tourists and locals, a place where it would be difficult to conduct surveillance and where the crowd would provide natural cover for a conversation that someone wanted to keep private.

Renee arrived at 2:50 PM and ordered tea. She sat at a small table near the window where she could see the street outside and where someone entering the restaurant could see her. She was hyperaware of every person in the space, every detail of her surroundings. She understood that she was being watched, that there were officers nearby, that her safety was being monitored even as she

appeared to sit alone in a public restaurant. The duality of it was strange: she was simultaneously vulnerable and protected, observed and safe.

A woman arrived at exactly 3 PM. She was in her seventies, dark-haired going gray, with the bearing of someone accustomed to moving through the world with purpose and confidence. She carried no bag. She wore a simple dress and a coat against the winter cold. She looked directly at Renee and sat down without any preamble or introduction. There was no hesitation, no uncertainty in her movement. She was someone accustomed to making decisions and acting on them.

"I am Catherine Delacroix," the woman said. Her accent suggested French as a first language, though her English was fluent and precise. "I believe you have been reading materials that document some part of my family's history. I believe you have been asked by the Federal Bureau of Investigation to compile an analysis of materials that document an intelligence operation. I believe you understand the significance of what you have discovered."

Renee did not move. She did not acknowledge surprise, even though surprise was what she felt. Catherine Delacroix was supposed to be untraceable, a person who had disappeared from public record entirely. And yet here she was, sitting across from Renee, introducing herself, ready to speak. Catherine had made a choice to become visible, to step out of the shadows, to engage directly with someone who had possession of her family's secrets.

"I understand that you have been given security clearance to review classified information," Catherine continued. "I understand that this clearance comes with restrictions, that you are bound by regulations, that you are operating within a framework controlled by the federal government. I also understand that you have been careful not to disclose any information to unauthorized parties. This care is appreciated. This care is why I felt safe approaching you. I believed that if anyone was going to read about my family's history, it would be someone who understood the weight of that knowledge, someone who understood the responsibility that comes with preservation."

A waiter appeared and Catherine ordered tea as well. She did not speak until the waiter had left and returned with the drink, leaving them alone again.

"I am coming to you now because the investigation is beginning to move in directions that concern me," Catherine said. "The government is interested in the identity of the person who sent the cipher messages. They are interested in determining whether this person was working for American interests or for Soviet interests. They are interested in understanding the full scope of what was transmitted during the operational period. These interests are understandable from an institutional perspective. But they have certain consequences that I want to mitigate if possible."

"What consequences?" Renee asked.

"The person who sent the messages is my brother, Michel. Michel was young when he became involved in the intelligence operation. He was not given significant choice in the matter. Our father was involved in intelligence work on behalf of the American government. Michel was asked to assist. He complied. When the operation was deemed to be compromised, the family was extracted. Michel was relocated to Boston. He built a life there, a normal life, a quiet life. He is now sixty-eight years old. He wants to remain private. He wants the evidence of his involvement to remain classified, to remain hidden, to not result in his being identified publicly as someone who participated in intelligence work. He wants to live the rest of his life without the burden of his family's history being made public."

Renee understood what Catherine was saying without her needing to explicitly state it. She was asking Renee to be careful with the information she had gathered, to not disclose Michel's identity, to maintain the privacy of the family despite the fact that they had been exposed by the existence of the classified materials. She was asking Renee to exercise judgment about what would be preserved and what would remain hidden.

"I cannot control what the FBI does with information," Renee said. "I can only control what I do with what I know."

"Yes," Catherine said. "That is why I came to speak with you. I want to know what you intend to do with what you know. The government will preserve the truth as it understands it. The government will control the narrative that becomes official. But there is another kind of preservation that is possible."

There is preservation through silence. There is preservation through discretion. There is preservation through the choice not to disclose information that could harm people. There is a difference between preserving the truth and publicizing it, between maintaining a record and making that record available to anyone who asks for it."

Catherine took a long drink of her tea. "I do not ask you to lie. I do not ask you to alter the analysis you have provided to the government. The government already has what it needs to understand the operation. What I am asking is that when the time comes for public disclosure, when the materials are eventually declassified and released, you will consider the human costs of disclosure. You will consider that Michel and I have built lives away from this history. You will consider that exposure could cause harm that is not necessary, that is not required for the truth to be told, that is simply a consequence of how the truth is managed and presented to the world. You will consider that we are people, not just historical figures, not just names in documents, but actual living people with lives and futures and interests in maintaining our privacy. You will consider that your responsibility as an archivist extends not just to preserving materials but to considering the ethics of preservation."

"The government might not release the materials," Renee said. "They might choose to keep them classified indefinitely."

"Perhaps," Catherine said. "But I believe that you understand something about archives that the government understands less clearly. Archives preserve truth for future generations. Archives assume that there will come a day when classification is no longer necessary, when the people involved are no longer vulnerable, when the historical record becomes more important than institutional security. You understand that archives are meant to last, that their value increases with time, that someday, perhaps long after we are all gone, someone will want to understand what happened during this period, and they will turn to the materials you have helped preserve. And when they do, the choices you make now about how information is presented, about what is emphasized and what is minimized, about whose humanity is centered in the narrative and whose is erased: those choices will matter. Those choices will determine what history is told."

Catherine stood up to leave, signaling that the conversation had reached its end, that she had said what she needed to say. "I ask only that you remember that the people in those documents are real people, that the harm done to our family by the intelligence operation continues to this day, that preservation of the truth does not require the destruction of the people who were caught in the machinery of history. You have been trained to understand observation. I ask that you use that training to observe the human cost of what you are documenting. The government will not do this. The government will preserve the operation and the documents and the institutional narrative. But you have the capacity to preserve something else: the understanding that people mattered, that their lives were affected, that their privacy deserves respect even as the truth is preserved. You have the capacity to tell a story that centers human dignity rather than institutional efficiency. Use that capacity. Remember that ethics matter in archives just as they matter everywhere else."

She left the restaurant without waiting for a response. Renee sat at the small table and finished her tea, understanding that she had been given a charge, that someone was asking her to be a bridge between the official truth and the human cost of that truth, that someone was asking her to exercise judgment about how and when the truth would be told. She understood that she was being asked to think beyond the immediate requirements of her job, beyond the protocols of archival preservation, to the broader ethical questions about what archives meant, about what preservation was meant to accomplish.

She sat in the restaurant for another hour, processing what had been said, understanding the weight of the request. She was not being asked to lie or to conceal evidence. She was being asked to remember that archives contained human lives, that preservation had consequences, that the truth could be told in ways that were more or less humane, more or less destructive, more or less attentive to the costs incurred by the people whose lives the archives documented.

She walked home slowly through the Quarter, through the streets that had absorbed so much history, that carried the weight of centuries of human activity, that preserved the past in every building and street corner. She understood that she was part of a long chain of people who had understood

archives not as neutral repositories but as acts of judgment, acts of choice, acts of determining what would be remembered and what would be preserved and what would be honored about the people whose lives had been documented. She understood that Catherine had given her a gift: the understanding that archives were not separate from ethics, that preservation was not neutral, that the work of maintaining records was always also the work of determining what history would be told. The weight of that responsibility settled onto her shoulders like fog settling over the city at dusk, slowly, inevitably, transforming everything it touched.

## About the Author

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Dr. Terry Oroszi is the founder and director of Mission Possible Spy Academy (MPSA) and Mission Possible Institute, based in Dayton, Ohio. A U.S. Army veteran, her career spans academia, federal consulting, and national security -- including research partnerships with the FBI, DHS, and DoD. Her published work includes *The American Terrorist: A 20-Year Study* and *The Complete Guide to Open-Source Security*. The MP SPY ACADEMY fiction series draws on the behavioral intelligence frameworks she designed for the MPSA 10-ribbon pipeline. Pro Bono Non Malo -- For Good, Not Evil.

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*Book Four in the MP SPY ACADEMY series, "The Table," follows Priya Anand, a Chicago labor attorney who discovers pension fraud buried inside a routine contract negotiation and becomes the only person in the room who sees the full picture. When Federal authorities begin applying pressure to keep the evidence private, Priya must choose between institutional safety and truth, between her career and her conscience, between the person she thought she was and the person the training has made her become.*