Chapter Fifty-One – An Incomplete Plan

Zach briskly walked to the center of Marsh Harbour to get what he needed. He wore cargo shorts and he’d found a Bud Light tank top on the boat. He still had his walrus mustache, sunglasses and cap. With a backpack slung over his shoulder, he could’ve been anyone.

Along Bay Street, the merchants were mostly boat suppliers or in the import-export trade. Zach hiked past markets with crates of fresh seafood or fruit, and open-air bars at every marina. The area was busy with pedestrian and bicycle traffic for a bright, 97-degree afternoon.

Zach watched over his shoulders as he crossed streets. He confirmed the intersections had no cameras as they would’ve back home.

In his mind, he replayed the email exchange he’d had with Katie. After her shock had stabilized, he’d written: “If you think I’m the better researcher, you were always the best presenter.” In college, he’d enjoyed book work, but Katie was the natural speaker. She spoke with confidence –even if bluffing– and never took no for an answer. They made a great team.

So Zach revealed his plan to her.

His strategy had been conceived months earlier, but it was only 80% ready. It started with getting his family to a safe place to carry out his next requests. But current circumstances were changing things. With his face splashed across every media, he knew the Russians would have killers on his trail. That meant local cops *and* Russian mafia, all in a race to seize him.

If the Russians won, they’d torture him before butchering him. His family would never be safe. If the local banana republic cops got him first, they might shoot him, or turn him over to the mob. Zach didn’t trust the locals. He’d read articles about alleged bribes and corruption with the Royal Bahamian Police. The Russians would offer them millions for Zach.

He considered seeking protection in an American Embassy –until he discovered there were none in the Abacos. For his guaranteed safety, he needed the *correct* people to find him. FBI Agent Chesney was the only cop he could trust to not shoot first and ask questions later.

Katie knew the first step of his plan. Zach just needed to invent a way to stage his *big debut.*

He entered the Albury Mercantile, which looked like a cross between a trading post and a department store. He picked-up two more disposable phones, a razor, clear eyeglasses, new shirts, pants, and a golf cap. He paid cash to a shrunken but sweet Bahamian grandmother.

Returning to the outdoor humidity, he looked up as if magnetically drawn to a billboard across the street. It was *the* sign –the “Just Escape” ad for the Bahamian resort with the ship beside it. The first time he’d seen the billboard, he’d been stuck in frozen Indiana traffic, praying for an escape. The second time was during the Vast Oro fishing trip. He had fallen in love with the notion of fleeing to the Caribbean.

But this time, he studied the sign. He’d previously only perceived the images: a towering pink resort, a jade sea for a backdrop. This time he read the dramatic font: “Poseidon Palace Casino and Resort. *Just Escape*…”

*A casino..?* Zach twitched as a new gear clicked into place. There were no cameras on the island and he didn’t trust local cops. *But a casino*…would have a thousand cameras and be as secure as Fort Knox.

Zach inadvertently grinned. He had been evading cameras for months. What if he suddenly had more cameras than he could count? Could this be a stage for his unveiling?

#

“You have the audacity to sit here and *demand* full immunity?” SSA Garcia asked with an incredulous smirk across his large face.

“I do,” Katie replied, her hands folded on the table before her. “My husband –the very alive Zachary Carson– fled for his life and for the protection of our family. We’re now requesting full immunity in exchange for–”

“–He’s an admitted criminal!” Garcia shouted. “Fraudulent medical clinics, not to mention faking his own death!”

At Katie’s side, Sean Negroni interjected, “Regarding the fall from the ship, it was international waters. There are no laws for misrepresenting his demise if not done for profit. Dr. Carson did not file the insurance claim. As for the clinics, he performed *all* services. *Vast Oro* is the party that committed the illegal billing.”

Katie added on cue, “And we’re here about Vast Oro.” She glanced at notes on three-by-five cards like a student. She frowned at Garcia, “You’re the Supervisory Special Agent of Eurasian Organized Crime? Are you really after a chiropractor who has no record? Wouldn’t you rather catch a Russian criminal organization, while saving my family?”

The room was silent. A few agents behind Garcia arched their brows in evident agreement.

After Katie had received Zach’s warning, she’d fled the espresso shop. In an anxious frenzy, she speed-dialed her mom to pack a duffle for her and Jack, and to immediately exit her house. Katie met them at Carmen’s condo, to then drive to the FBI headquarters.

“I’ll fill you in later mom!” Katie had to repeatedly promise Carmen. Little Jack bobbed his head in confusion.

Katie had changed into navy slacks and an ivory top. She pulled her hair up conservatively. She needed to be presentable; she couldn’t look like the wild-eyed spouse of a man on the run. Katie called Negroni to meet her at the FBI, exclaiming she’d explain when he got there.

Four minutes later, Katie received a call from ADT, her home’s security firm. An operator reported an unknown party was attempting to enter her gate. Katie froze with the realization of her fears. With a new resilience, she replied. “Let ‘em in. They can have whatever’s left.”

When Katie marched into the FBI’s lobby, she was met by guards. Garcia and an entourage of suit-wearing clones appeared within minutes with their hands by their Glocks. When they saw the well-dressed Katie, Negroni, and a grandmother holding an infant, everyone calmed. Carmen and Jack were taken to a break room with televisions and vending machines.

Katie and Negroni were led to a medium-sized meeting room with tiered seating and conference tables. Garcia sat across from Katie and Negroni. Six of the squad’s agents observed from seats behind Garcia like it was a stage play.

“Mrs. Carson,” Garcia tried again more calmly. “The only crime we’re 100% sure of, is because you just admitted your husband isn’t dead.”

Katie scoffed, “You know Vast Oro is a criminal organization.” She’d been warned by Zach that they’d play dumb. “And they’re after us *right now*.”

“Why do you think that?” Garcia asked. All heads turned to see Chesney and Heidi enter.

“Miami Beach P.D. just called,” Chesney shouted for all to hear. “A black SUV crashed through Carson’s home. Two armed men on video. They destroyed the place, and got away.”

Katie and Negroni glared at Garcia.

Chesney and Heidi took seats at Garcia’s side. Chesney looked at his boss, “It’s everything I’ve said, Doug. If Mrs. Carson can help us, we need to move *now*.”

Garcia realized all eyes were on him. “The FBI can only recommend immunity. A DOJ attorney has to approve and write it up.”

Chesney cringed at the bureaucracy, “Then get Bronstein down here. He’s on the third floor.”

Katie asked to go to the lady’s room and Sean Negroni offered to walk her. At the bathroom door, Sean suddenly dashed inside with her.

“What are you doing?” Katie asked.

“We need to discuss the immunity,” Sean replied in a low voice. “A female bathroom in the FBI’s building is the only place I’m confident they won’t have microphones.” He peeked under the stalls to assure they were alone. “We’ll insist to speak only to the person with authority.”

“Okay…” Katie frowned to understand, leaning back against a sink.

“We have to convince him it’s in the public interest to give you and Zach immunity.” Sean spoke fast, presuming their time was limited. “Prove that you have information to help them achieve their goals. And any of Zach’s criminal activity was minimal or necessary to survive.”

“Can we both get immunity for everything,” Katie asked.

“They won’t offer that at first. They’ll probably offer the weakest immunity, sometimes called ‘queen for a day.’ It allows you to talk to the government and what you say won't be used against you in a criminal trial with various exceptions. The bad part is, if they get the same evidence against you through other means, they can still come after you.”

Sean leaned forward, “I want to demand *letter immunity* from their attorney. Make them promise they won't use what you say against you, and can’t use any other evidence to come after either of you.” Sean looked into her eyes, “I want you and Zach completely protected, forever.”

Both of their heads turned as the door opened. They met the wide green eyes of Heidi.

“Uh…hi there,” Heidi smiled awkwardly, seeing both of them. “Attorney Bronstein is here.”

Donald Bronstein was tall, forties and bald with hair still on the sides. His trim height made his perpetual business suits always appear perfect. He was cerebral and rarely smiled, but during idle chitchat, loved to discuss nonsense, Hollywood trivia, and endlessly informed others how he went to high school with Johnny Depp.

Katie and Negroni returned to their seats. Negroni began typing on his laptop.

Garcia announced, “Mr. Bronstein is a U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of Florida. He has drafted many unique agreements for the bureau –but only when the witness warrants it.”

Bronstein nodded, “I’ve spoken to the Attorney General and I am fully authorized to grant what we call “queen for a day” immunity–”

“–Nope,” Katie interrupted with dimples. “I’ll require much more comprehensive immunity, especially in light of the evidence I’m here to offer.”

Sean’s eyes sparkled, impressed with his client. “I agree. We are only accepting full letter immunity, including an ability for my client to use her phone on the premises, with a guarantee of no monitoring, and other demands I’ve already drafted and emailing you now.”

Agent Chesney blurted, “Give ‘em what they want.”

Garcia sneered at Negroni, “Aren’t you a probate attorney?”

“*Negroni*…” Bronstein raised his pen, “Are you related to Jose Negroni?”

“I am.” Sean gave a humble nod. “He is my father.”

“So?” Garcia shrugged, “Who’s that?”

“The most creative criminal attorney in the southeast,” Bronstein replied. “Known as the unsung ‘fifth Beatle’ of OJ’s dream team.” He squinted at his laptop, “And from reading Sean’s demands, the apple did not fall far.”

Everyone gazed at the young, thin Negroni who maintained a poker face. Katie half-smiled at Sean, seeing him in a new light. He did seemed very well-rounded.

“Enough red tape,” Chesney shouted. “Lives are at stake –what do you have Katie?”

Katie pulled two printed papers from a folder. Sean gave her a nod of approval.

“Zach’s in possession of five years’ worth of Vast Oro’s records on a flash drive.” She slid the papers to Garcia. “They will illustrate *all* of their illegal transactions. This is just a taste.”

Garcia squinted at the pages of incomprehensible code. He passed it to Chesney, who snatched it. He appeared puzzled but hopeful as he shared it with Heidi.

After a whispered huddle between the three, Garcia turned to Katie. “This is practically meaningless. There’s no proof of its origin. It could be anything –from anywhere.”

The smiles dropped from Katie and Sean’s faces.

Heidi spoke up, “And it’s encrypted, with no key...” She shrugged with a frown.

Garcia shook his head like a disappointed parent. “It’s worthless.”

Chesney plead, “Do you at least know Zach’s location?”

Katie paused like a vulnerable animal. “Not yet... He said it’s for my own safety.”

Chesney waved the prints in the air. “This is what you came here with?”

Garcia scoffed at Negroni, “You should stick with probate.”

Chapter Fifty-Two – The Eyes of Poseidon

“The *Poseidon Palace Casino and Resort* was built with an aquatic ‘god of the sea’ theme, on 250 acres on Great Abaco Island,” according to its Wikipedia page.

Zach sat in his borrowed houseboat, avidly researching. He tensed every time a boat gurgled by or the palms rustled outside. According to the resort’s website, the Poseidon Palace was larger than its closest competitor, the Atlantis Resort in Nassau. The five-diamond Poseidon boasted 1,500 luxurious rooms and had a $150 million aquatic park of pools and water slides. In one photo, he saw a transparent slide called *El Tiburón*, because it ran through an aquarium filled with bull sharks. Zach shuddered at the notion.

The site stated the Poseidon’s casino spanned 60,000 square feet. According to a property map, the casino was located on the ground floor, directly beyond the grand entrance. The only other exits were to the rear, towards the pools and water park. In the center of the casino was its grand foyer, displaying Greek statues, etcetera.

Zach sat back to digest the information. Such an upscale casino would have many *eyes-in-the-sky,* perhaps thousands of security cameras covering every square inch.

The year before, he had taken a behind-the-scenes tour at the Bellagio in Las Vegas. He was fascinated to learn the largest casinos’ security had facial-recognition software that could pick someone's face out of a crowd and compare it to a criminal database. The programs created a mathematical grid of a person’s facial features. Traits such as the distance between the eyes and width of the nose were difficult to change. Within milliseconds, the person’s face would be compared to a database of known casino cheats, as well as wanted felons.

Unconfirmed stories claimed Disney World had similar facial-recognition software. For liability purposes, the cameras scanned the crowds to identify any known pedophiles or other potentially violent criminals. Even if they just strolled through the park, secretive men in suits would step out of hidden doors to mysteriously escort them away.

It was the same for the casinos. If a felon walked through the front doors, he’d have an entire security team surrounding him before he’d reach the center of the room.

Zach typed, “Poseidon casino security.” A 2007 news article instantly caught his eye. It was from the *Nassau Guardian,* “Poseidon Casino Manager Accused of Hiring ‘Blackwater’ Private Security.” Curious, he clicked the link.

The article was from during a hotel employee strike. When tensions had become violent, it was alleged the casino manager, Daniel Jevons, had hired a Blackwater firm as their contract security. The geared troops had been accused of being too violent, allegedly harming and shooting protestors. Jevons had stated, “I can employ any security I deem suitable,” and the matter was not investigated any further.

Zach refreshed his knowledge about Blackwater. They were a contractor the government had utilized to supply “security troops.” Most were retired Special Forces soldiers, who made more money working under security contracts. If a dangerous mission ever went badly, the government could deny liability by not using their own troops. Due to negative publicity, Blackwater changed its name to *Xe Services,* and then *Academi*, and members splintered off into competing firms such as *Onyx Risk, Inc.*

Zach’s conclusion was simple: the casino manager, Daniel Jevons, had a fondness for heavily-armed private protection. Zach knew casinos had inherently strict security. And it was evident the Bahamas had less stringent laws about contract police than the states.

He searched the name “Daniel Jevons” and it appeared in LinkedIn, a professional network. Jevons had been promoted to General Manager of the Poseidon. Zach studied his photo; the man was thin, black, stoic and impeccably dressed. A man who took his job very seriously. Zach then searched Facebook. There were two Daniel Jevons, but only one was black. The settings limited what Zach could see, but his profile image showed Jevons with a seven-year-old boy wearing an *Agape Christian School* shirt, with a cake that read, “Happy Birthday Dmitri.”

Zach inhaled, pondering the value of the information. Was any of it useful? He noticed Aurora’s pink rabbit’s foot sticking out of the USB of his laptop. *Did Katie have immunity yet?* He looked at his watch. Nothing could begin until she obtained full immunity for both of them.

He checked Aunt Bethany’s email account. There was one new message in the draft folder. Zach perked up, blinking in anticipation. He read aloud:

They are not interested in the records.

I think they’re bluffing. Is there ANY proof where the flash drive came from? Sean thinks they’d rather arrest me to force you to speak, with no immunity for anyone.

Do you have anything more to offer?

“Anything more to offer?” Zach shouted with a crazed grin of disbelief. “*Seriously*..?” His scream reverberated within the aluminum houseboat.

The rabbit’s foot was two inches of pink fur, with no proof of anything. Zach’s entire body flinched at a throttling motor. He instinctively ducked and peeked out of a yellowed window to see a marine patrol boat idling by. He held his breath as the boat slowly passed.

Zach collapsed onto the shag carpet with the western sun shining in his face. For the first time, he considered the best tactic to surrender.

#

“Doug, we need Carson *asap*!” Chesney uttered in a loud whisper. Vik and Heidi huddled with Garcia and several of their squad mates in a corner of the room.

“He’ll be found!” Garcia huffed with diminishing authority.

“*We* need him first,” Chesney leaned an inch closer. “FDLE wants him for insurance fraud; Cruise Crimes want him for *high-seas* nonsense; DOH wants him for clinic violations.” Chesney thumbed to himself, “*We’re* the only ones who can shut down an entire Russian crime organization if we get him first!”

“Remember who you work for!” Garcia fumed, “I’m not in the business of handing out immunity like its Friday donut day. Wives are the best leverage –especially if they have kids. We just have to squeeze.”

Heidi cringed at his archaic approach.

Garcia added before turning, “And that printed data was garbage!”

“Not necessarily,” Heidi boldly interjected. The men paused to look at her. She spoke her mind, remaining respectful, “It’s true it was encrypted, but I’d just need a key. If they’re Ukrainian or Russian, it’s probably similar to their ransomware.” She turned to a serene, bald analyst from their squad. “Pierre has a complete database of ransomware keys.”

Agent Pierre Lojy nodded. “Happy to help. We’re a team.”

Heidi shrugged coolly to Chesney and Garcia, “I just need the entire flash drive from Carson. *Squeezing* his wife or son doesn’t do me any good.”

Chesney almost laughed through his teeth. He beamed at her millennial honesty, rarely daunted by authority.

Garcia pinched the bridge of his nose before reacting. He gazed across the room. “Katherine and Negroni have been in to bathroom a long time. Where are they?”

#

Zach remained on his back with an arm draped across his head. He kept his eyes closed as the sun remained directly on him. As he sensed its warmth, he wondered what it’d be like in prison for years, perhaps decades, with no skies at all. He *had* to think of a solution.

His eyelids dimmed. He cracked an eye to see a large cloud eclipsing the sun. “*Thank you, big, beautiful cloud*…” he mumbled as if losing his sanity. “The beautiful cloud…”

Zach opened the other eye. “The *cloud..*.” He sat upright and asked, “The cloud?”

He overturned a Yoo-Hoo bottle and ruffled papers as he rushed to his laptop. He repeated louder, “The cloud?” He accessed his old Zach Carson email and opened the Junk folder. There were over a thousand emails. He did a search: “Nanny-Cam.”

Like an epiphany, the word “cloud,” and his desperate need for evidence had converged like a cyclone. He vaguely remembered the Nanny-Cam’s box stating, “…video can be viewed online or stored *on the cloud*…” But Zach had never renewed the monthly service.

He found an item from eight months earlier titled, “Nanny-Cam Re-Subscribe!” Zach had deleted the email because the camera and hard drive were long gone. He opened the email; it read, “We want you back. Please re-subscribe –all video stored *on the cloud!*”

Zach’s eyes were like baseballs. Would any video ever recorded by the camera be stored on the companies virtual cloud? Saved in hopes that customers would pay for new subscriptions? He quickly clicked the company’s link and signed-on via his old account. It stated it was “Closed,” with a balance due

zach

...All video stored on the cloud?!

Zach rushes to RE-SUBSCRIBE with a Visa gift card. He clicks on the Nanny-Cam’s webpage. A VIDEO FRAME appears; he CLICKS.

A pregnant pause...then FISH-EYE FOOTAGE. There she is: Aurora, in his office, bruised, recounting all of Vast Oro’s sins:

aurora (on video)

*...Tovar is the family sovietnik, counselor. Remember this!*

Zach blinks with disbelief at what he beholds.

aurora (cont’d)

*...Bar Girls. Barely eighteen. Tovar gets them 90-day visas...Hackers seize data from the air...*

Even footage of her handing him the rabbit’s foot. Zach frowns at a new thought. He FAST-FORWARDS as the TIME-STAMP zooms. Zach’s eyes widen with terror at what he witnesses next.

INT. FBI HEADQUARTERS, MIAMI - DAY

Garcia on the PHONE, his LEGAL CRONIES huddling close.

GARCIA

I got a Gulfstream ready on the

tarmac. I want you there. Ready.

CHESNEY (V.O.)

Five years of records?

GARCIA

I'm pushing them. They’re desperate. He actually thinks an "entire team" is on their way to kill him.

EXT. remote airfield, GREAT ABACO - DAY

A barren AIRSTRIP, dirt roads. Tor and Sleek exit their twin-engine CARGO PLANE with TEN MEN in black. Fish out of water.

A DUMP TRUCK pulls up, four BAHAMIANS and RASTAFARIANS. The four men lead the Russians to the truck's BED. Under tarps are ASSAULT WEAPONS, KALASHNIKOV RIFLES and AR-15s.

As Tor and Sleek inspect the payload, the Russians aim MAKAROV PISTOLS and SHOOT the islanders, POINT-BLANK. Tor shouts for his men to board the truck's bed. Tor opens a flip-phone.

Tor (subtitles)

Just landed. Got our baggage.

tovar (v.o. subtitles)

Hold until we have a position. We are scanning all police chatter.

INT. hotel room - DAY

Zach sits in an exquisite HOTEL ROOM, talking on a NEW PHONE.

ZACH

The video I sent will guarantee a deal. Show it once. Then delete it--

Katie’s voice interrupts, emotional.

katie (v.o.)

--It’s your voice..! I’ve missed you so much! I love--

zach (direct)

--I love you too. I need you to do this. Okay? Once I surface, it’ll be on every system. Can you do this?

KATIE (V.O.)

Yes. I can’t wait to see you.

Zach pulls a different PHONE from his bag. Dials a number.

zach

I need to speak to the casino manager. Tell him it’s a family emergency about his son...Tobias.

He pauses, on hold. A deep breath.

zach

You don’t know me. Your casino’s going to be robbed. An entire team, heavily armed. I’m going to tell you when.

int. fbi conference room – night

Katie and Sean, across from a smirking Garcia and his agents.

Garcia

“Operation Flypaper?”

Sean turns to Katie; it’s news to him as well.

katie

Right. Because Zach will attract an entire crew to one location for easy arrests. You need to be there first.

Garcia

Zach needs to turn himself into local law enforcement.

katie (scoffs)

Poor island cops versus Russian mob? Zach prefers a *compound* with high security and lots of walls.

sean

Agents: time is critical. We’ll show the video once. Then disavow all knowledge of the records and the video.

The agents gaze towards a SCREEN. Garcia orders an AV TECH:

Garcia

Please mirror Mrs. Carson’s cell to the screen.

ONSCREEN: They see VIDEO of Zach with an injured AURORA. Hurt yet riveting. She paces his floor, recounting Vast Oro’s crimes.

aurora (on video)

*...They are the Bratva –the Brotherhood...you say...Red Mafia.*

Stunned, agents scribble a flurry of notes. Katie and Sean are equally astounded. Garcia’s captivated.

Garcia

The murdered Ukrainian...Aurora Petra.

Aurora (video, cont’d)

*--You are one of many trades. Their roskrychivat...*

Katie tears-up at seeing Zach’s involvement first-hand. As the video plays seemingly to its end, Katie speaks up.

katie

Zach said to watch the 3:20 mark.

A TIME-STAMP speeds to 03:20. ONSCREEN: Silence -then TWO MEN ENTER the scene. One DRAGS Aurora from behind –he turns towards the camera. It’s Tor. Unmistakable. A FEMALE FBI AGENT gasps.

In the video –with Aurora SCREAMING- Tor SLICES her NECK as the 2nd man, Sleek, covers her in a tarp. The room falls silent.

Katie’s about to dry-heave. Garcia’s eyes ricochet.

Garcia

Get Bronstein in here. Draw-up whatever immunity deal we have to.

Int. poseidon casino floor – night

Zach EXITS an elevator, CLEAN-SHAVEN, no shades, wearing a BLAZER. The CASINO’S full of well-dressed GUESTS. Zach struts, looking up directly at SECURITY CAMERAS every twenty feet.

He enters a large CENTER FOYER. He stops, spreads his arms and turns 360-degrees. Big smile, slowly turning. He looks insane.

A stern PIT BOSS on the side notes his behavior. Into his radio:

pit boss

Pit Four to Sky One: center court, Anglo male, tan jacket. Probably high.

Zach stands like *ta-da!,* smiles, turns, then walks off.

int. casino security control – night

Several SECURITY TECHS are studying video of Zach on MONITORS.

security tech 1

He hasn’t caused any problems?

They ZOOM/FREEZE on Zach’s face. 3-D IMAGING of his features.

security tech 2

Check his biometrics. Run it for any Customs alerts.

int. hacker’s den – night

Roman’s hunched over repeatedly trying to light a joint.

roman (russian)

*Blin!...* *Ahueyet!*