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Cipher of Deceit

By

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I stepped into Captain Harlan's office a little before 8 a.m. The warm, earthy tones drew me in, and I let my guard down. Captain Harlan gestured for me to sit while she finished a heated phone call. The sturdy wooden chair comforted me and made me feel small, like when I was in Middle School in the principal's office for beating up Sharlana Williams.

Captain Harlan slammed the phone down and stared at me.

"You may as well get with the damn program, Vaughnie," Captain Harlan said. "She will be here today, and you're gonna let her help you whether you like it or not. Are we clear?"

"I don't need help, Captain! I don't play well with others," I said.

"Listen! It's not open for debate, Detective."

A tall blonde wearing glasses walked in just as I pounded both fists on the Captain's desk. She smiled and backed out of the door.

"Come on in, Miss Lewis," Captain Harlan said, giving me a sideways glance. "This is Detective Noir; you will be working with her on the Octagon Key case."

"Hi, I'm Vaughnie, so let's get started so we can find this thing and get this over with," I said.

"That's more like it," said Captain Harlan. "Vaughnie, this is Dr. Isabell Lewis. She has a Ph.D. in Forensic Psychology. I'm bringing her in on this one because, frankly, we need all the help we can get. She can get into the heads of these thieves so we can be one step ahead of them and retrieve that key."

"I'm happy to help wherever I can and call me Izzy," the tall blonde said.

"OK, Izzy, Detective Noir will be working as the lead on this case. She has a lot of experience and has solved some high-profile cases," said Captain Harlan.

I nodded at Izzy.

Captain Harlan leaned in and whispered, "Ladies, the Octagon Key is not just another case; it's a digital dossier of corruption. It's a sophisticated, comprehensive list of the city's power players. Imagine all their dirty laundry neatly compiled on a jump drive."

"Captain, just how deep does the corruption go? Are we talking about a few bad apples, or does it implicate the core of the city's leadership?" I asked.

"What do we know about the person of interest? What's the name of the radical group? What pressures are they under?" Izzy asked.

"We like Malachi Blackwell for this; he has a personal vendetta against the city for the death of his sister; all the info is in his file. Vaughnie will give you more info on Mr. Blackwell," said Captain Harlan.

"I don't see why we need a psychological analysis of him! What we need is hard evidence!" I said.

"Detective! I will not warn you again. This case is far too important for your lone wolf and paranoid behavior. Take these files and your new partner and get out of my office. Go find that key before it ends up in the wrong hands!" Captain Harlan said.

I rolled my eyes at the Captain and opened the door for the new partner she was forcing me to work with.

"Let's go over to Bitty and Beau's, and I'll tell you what I know about Malachi Blackwell," I said.

"OK, is that the place with the cards?" Izzy asked.

"You always ask so many questions?"

"It's the only way for me to pick your brain," Izzy laughed.

We walked to the coffee shop in silence. The city's Southern charm unfolded around us as autumn's first leaves hit the ground and crunched under our feet. I pulled my leather jacket tighter and admired Mrs. Graham's stately antebellum home as the sunlight filtered through her beautiful yard. It would be shameful if Charleston's reputation is ruined because of Malachi's militant nonsense and need for attention.

"OK, we're here. Find a seat. I'll be right back," I said.

She nodded and turned away from me to talk to a server.

I returned to the table with a tray filled with coffee and pastries. Izzy immediately dug in.

"OK, partner, bring me up to speed," she said.

"Let's get something straight, Doc; we are not partners. We have a job to do. Let's do it and move on," I said.

"Look, this case requires collaboration. I'm not trying to be your best friend, but I think it's important that we connect."

"OK, this is not a therapy session; I work better alone, but here's what I know," I said, biting into an eclair.

"Malachi is the leader of L.U.F. or Liberty Uprising Front. He's an arrogant know-it-all who takes pleasure in outsmarting everyone around him, especially politicians," I said.

"What's in his file? Does he have any family besides his sister? Tell me about her," Izzy said.

"OK, quick draw, slow down, slow down. I'm getting to that."

A pretty girl with glasses and fire-red hair cascading to her shoulders walked to our table to check on us. Her eyes sparkled with kindness as she sprinkled us with yes ma'ams and no ma'ams, and I watched as she effortlessly captured Izzy's heart with down-home charm.

"Wow, I could get used to all this sugar," Izzy said.

"You're not thinking of staying after I solve this case, are you?" I asked.

"After we solve the case, I will see what happens."

"Malachi's sister worked here before she passed away, which brings me to his motive. Lily got sick suddenly. She was diagnosed with a rare form of leukemia and needed fast medical treatment. There was some kinda insurance red tape, and she couldn't get into a particular facility in time. Malachi blames Richard Covington, the city commissioner, for the delay because he could have expedited her admission. She died because precious time was wasted," I said.

"So, this prompted him to create L.U.F.?" Izzy asked.

"Yes, and he's on a hell-bent quest for retribution. L.U.F. is somewhat complex. On the surface, it seems to do good things for Charleston, like community outreach, education, and, of course, healthcare reform," I said.

"That seems legit."

"Yeah, but their methods are questionable."

"How so, and how does this sit with you, considering this is where you grew up? Does it make you feel a bit resentful?" Izzy asked.

I raised an eyebrow and narrowed my gaze.

           "Listen, I get it. You're trying to get in my head, but this is not about me. I'm trying to tell you about Malachi and L.U.F., not lay out my emotions for your amusement."

"OK, you caught me, but we're a team now. I figure if we're going to find this Octagon Key and catch Malachi, if he's the one who took it, we need to understand each other."

"Fine, Dr. Izzy, but don't expect me to spill my life story over coffee and pastries," I said.

She smiled smugly.

"Let's go; I got a lead," I said while getting one last sip of coffee.

Izzy stood up abruptly, picked up a pastry, and stuffed another in her mouth.

We drove to an abandoned building in downtown Charleston where my C.I. said L.U.F. was rumored to have a headquarters. As we entered, Izzy stepped lightly on the creaky wooden floors of the neglected and forgotten historical structure. Orange-colored L.U.F. flyers decorated the floor, and the floorboards protested with every step she took.

"Are you sure it's safe to walk in here?" she asked.

"I don't know, but I'm sure we'll find out."

We walked cautiously through the first room and stopped because we heard soft steps above our heads. Shuffling and muffled whispers were all around me. The sounds came from every direction. I reached for my gun and exchanged a glance with Izzy.

"Are you armed, Doctor Izzy?" I asked.

 "All I have is my charming personality."

"Do you know how to use a gun?"

"Yeah."

I reached into my ankle holster and handed her a small twenty-five caliber I kept for emergencies.

The footsteps above moved faster, and the murmurs became louder conversations. I motioned for Izzy to stand still as the footsteps got closer and closer. When I couldn't take it anymore, a hidden door in the wall swung open. With cat reflexes, Izzy stuck out her arm and shielded me from the force of the door propelled forward by an unseen hand. The person on the other side turned and ran. Izzy and I ran after a hooded figure through a narrow hallway. He suddenly burst through a doorway, and daylight rushed in. Just before he left the hallway, he dropped something. Once we reached the door, he was gone. We searched outside the building, but our mystery man was nowhere in sight. I went back to look for whatever he dropped. I found a L.U.F. flyer with writing on the back: SEEK THE SHADOWS A MEETING AWAITS, THE THIEF YOU SEEK IS BEHIND THE GATES.

Izzy walked up and read over my shoulder.

"Well, I guess it's time to see who the hell is behind the gate and where the gate is," I said.

We headed back to headquarters and looked through all our files on Malachi and his known associates. Izzy discovered that the gate was probably at The Circular Congregation Church Cemetery. We agreed to head there after our lunch break.

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I decided to go alone. I walked down an uneven sidewalk toward a weathered, rusted gate on the side of the old church cemetery. The gate was decayed and stubborn. I found a metal pipe on the ground and used it to pry open the gate. I walked deeper and deeper into the silent yard of the dead. I felt eyes on me, and I regretted being alone. Something moved to my right, and a low growl broke the eerie silence. A man dressed in black strolled from behind a crumbling mausoleum.

"Hey, Vaughnie," the man said.

"Malachi?" I asked.

"The one and only. I hear you're looking for me. What can I do for you?"

"Give me the key and turn yourself in.”

Suddenly, he lunged and put me in a headlock. I struggled to get free.

"You don't understand, Detective. This city took everything from me, my sister, my faith, and my livelihood. I won't rest until justice is served," he said.

"Malachi, vigilante justice is not justice."

"The Octagon Key will finally unveil the truth about the rot that festers here in Charleston. I'll expose it all and make everyone on that list pay, no matter the cost. I'll do it for Lily because she deserves better than what she got from this city," he said.

I put my foot behind his leg and flipped him over. I tried grabbing him, but he jumped up and ran toward Market Square. I chased him through the cemetery. I reached the gate just as Izzy drove up.

"Yeah, yeah, I know you're pissed that I left you, and I'm sorry, but we gotta go," I said.

"Where are we headed now? And yes, I am pissed. You can't go off alone like this. It's reckless and dangerous. He could have killed you!" Izzy said.

"I'm not used to having a partner. It won't happen again. Malachi's probably headed to the Market. L.U.F. has a booth there."

The tires screeched as we drove up to the vibrant city market. People gave us skeptical looks while we walked through the crowd. We looked everywhere for Malachi and his group. I spotted a vendor's booth selling African antiques and asked about Malachi.

"Hey, excuse me, have you seen Malachi around here?" I asked in a calm tone. The guy glanced around cautiously and nodded toward an alleyway. "Yeah, he usually hangs out over there. Keeps to himself mostly," the vendor said.

"Thanks."

I did not want to repeat my mistake from earlier, so I texted Izzy and told her to meet me at the entrance of the East Alley. As I approached the alley, Izzy was on the opposite end of the long sidewalk. A figure in a blue hoodie darted down the narrow passageway. I directed Izzy to circle around and cut him off. Halfway down the alley, I heard a noise. Before I could do anything, my gun was kicked out of my hands. I dodged a kick that was aimed at my stomach. I weaved behind some crates to avoid jabs from the assailant. We traded blows, and then Izzy emerged at the end of the alley. My opponent hesitated, and I retrieved my gun. Izzy gave him a kick that left him dizzy and disoriented. I handcuffed the guy we were fighting with and pulled the hoodie off his head. To my surprise, it wasn't Malachi. We rushed the suspect back to headquarters because time was running out for us to find the Octagon Key before the political rally scheduled at city hall for 7 o'clock.

After persuasion from me and mind manipulation from Izzy, the suspect gave up the location of L.U.F.'s main headquarters. Izzy and I rushed to the area. We entered

dimly lit underground tunnels beneath the city. I heard dripping water and faint whispers.

"I can barely see two feet in front of me, even with this flashlight," Izzy said.

           "Rats like the darkness," I said.

We reached an open space, and Malachi emerged. His followers encircled him with precision. In the center of the tunnel sat a man bound to a chair. Sweat dripped off him like an open faucet as he trembled.

I headed over to help him.

"Detective, I see you have a partner now. You both should know that the room is a deadly chessboard of small mines, ready to claim lives with a single misstep," Malachi said.

"OK, calm down. I'm sure we can find a compro—"

"I will not calm down! "There is no compromise in this corrupt city. However, the Octagon's list will purge Charleston by exposing its festering wounds so I can put this city out of its misery forever. I won't rest until Lily's memory is avenged and the truth is laid bare for all to see," he said.

After his speech, I shifted my weight from foot to foot. Izzy and I exchanged a glance.

She yelled, "JUMP!" We leaped simultaneously. To everyone's surprise, nothing happened. Malachi ordered a retreat, which left the man in the chair bewildered. The bound man, overwhelmed by relief, spilled the truth. Malachi had tortured him into giving him the Octagon Key.

Izzy and I raced to the political convention, determined to thwart Malachi's ominous plans. When we arrived at the convention hall, Malachi was there and dressed in a tuxedo. He handed an object to another man dressed in all-black combat gear.

  I ran over and knocked the object away. As I fought with Malachi for the second time in one day, the hitman desperately tried to locate the lost object, but Izzy kicked it down the hallway. Malachi and I exchanged blows. He raised his big fist to hit me, and he unexpectedly collapsed. Izzy wielded a folding metal chair and dealt a final blow. I found the Octagon Key lodged under a trashcan. Uniformed officers arrived to detain Malachi while others ran after the elusive hitman.

After the convention, Izzy and I sat on the historic steps of Charleston City Hall. The octagon key was once a symbol of deceit, but now it unraveled deep-seated corruption, leading to legal consequences for those involved. The city, once bound by dishonesty, was renewed and transparent.

"What do you think about solidifying this partnership, Dr Izzy?" I asked.

"I think that's a great idea partner. I'm glad you decided to trust me," Izzy said.

"Yeah, you're pretty good in a clutch."

"LEWIS & NOIR INVESTIGATIONS will be a real asset to Charleston."

"You mean NOIR & LEWIS INVESTIGATIONS."

In the aftermath of the confrontation at the political convention, Izzy and I stood on the precipice of a revelation that tore through the fabric of trust within our ranks in Charleston, South Carolina. The Octagon Key revealed itself to be a force to be reckoned with. Its limbs stretched far beyond the boundaries of our initial understanding.

Captain Harlan, the figure I had entrusted with upholding justice, unraveled before me. She was a participant in the corruption she swore to combat. We discovered it wasn't a beacon of truth, but a tool crafted to consolidate power. Izzy and I were just pawns in Harlan's game. We didn't realize the depth of our entanglement in her web of deceit. Harlan had assigned us the mission to retrieve the key while plotting to manipulate it for her gain. Izzy sensed the deception because of her training and ability to read people. In the end, I refused to dance to Harlan's devious tune. Instead, I placed the key in the hands of someone I knew I could trust to ensure that justice would win over manipulation.

Harlan's involvement in illegal activities surfaced, and internal investigations shook the foundations of the institution meant to protect and serve. Shockwaves reverberated through the police department, prompting reforms and demanding accountability for the tarnished badge.

Liberty Uprising Front (L.U.F.) and its leader, Malachi Blackwell, faced the repercussions of their actions. The Octagon Key, initially a tool for Malachi's quest to dismantle perceived corruption, had transformed into a double-edged sword. The exposure of Harlan triggered internal debates within L.U.F., forcing a re-evaluation of their methods.

Malachi lost his moral high ground and stood at a crossroads. The city awakened to the systemic issues he sought to address and demanded change through legal avenues. The Octagon Key was designed for vengeance but became a catalyst for long-overdue reforms. Malachi finally got justice for his sister, but he had to serve time for the illegal things he had done.

Izzy and I weathered the storm and formed an unbreakable alliance. The establishment of NOIR & LEWIS INVESTIGATIONS signaled a new chapter in our pursuit of truth and justice. Charleston emerged scarred but resilient and embarked on a journey of healing and reform. Those who once wielded power for personal gain faced the consequences of their actions.