

ANGEL

by Susan Kinsey

PROLOGUE

Anthony Russo stood in front of his living room window and took in the view of Newark, New Jersey. He had watched the sunset from that spot many times over the past thirty years, but tonight, something about the casting light brought him back to happier times.

Today, he turned seventy-nine and felt confident that the rounded number of next year's birthday may be more welcomed than feared. He held a creased photo of himself with his twin brother, Peter, at the age of five. *He was always the better looking one*, Anthony thought. *That little shit had more women than he knew what to do with.* He felt a smile spread upon his lips as he remembered the two of them trying to fool the girls to no avail. Jersey girls were smart—Peter was the better looking one, and they had been bred to deal with the local boys such as them at an early age.

The innocence in the image seemed like a lifetime ago. Peter's passing at the age of thirty-one had been hard on the family, and Anthony had learned the saying to be true—losing a twin was like losing a part of one's self.

Peter's addiction began in their teens. His use of cocaine, pills, and heroin consumed him—it was everywhere those days. The alleys in-between the brick apartments often called for drug deals, prostitution, and sometimes, murder. Anthony remembered how long and dark those alleys seemed to be at the age of ten. Their mother had warned them to keep clear, but Peter went down one on Anthony's dare and paid for it with a whipping. He may as well have stayed there—Peter's craving for the stuff was unlike anything Anthony had ever seen. Even with his brother's advice and pleading, Peter had no desire to walk away or put any of it behind him.

The day of Peter's overdose was devastating to the family. Anthony knew their ailing mother had never come to terms with the death of her other son, and even though neither one of

them said it, they were both thankful Peter's days of addiction and breaking their hearts were long behind them.

As Anthony grew up in the Russo family, he swore when he took over, he'd never do business with drugs. Money could be made other ways, and where he stood that day mirrored his success. With soldiers and associates eager to land jobs and shine in his good graces, money was of no concern. No job was too small, and oftentimes, many heists, cash, and stolen goods fell upon the family. The monthly money pot did well, and for that, Anthony was thankful.

He had spent years cleaning up those dark alleys of Jersey City and donated often to school drug programs in hopes to make a difference in a young life like Peter's.

Anthony's cousin, Lorenzo Grassi, lived an hour south in Long Branch. Although they were related, Lorenzo stood opposite and ran a team who favored violence, money, and powered the local drug trade. Having two different agendas, the families had worked out their differences and held a great deal of respect for one another. *Stay out of my way and I'll stay out of yours*, was their premise, and for the most part, it worked. The families resided far enough apart, but Jersey was small, and it wasn't uncommon to encounter one another's affairs every so often. Lorenzo admired Anthony for allowing his operations to take place miles from him, knowing he had grieved the loss of his brother all those years ago. Still, money was to be made, and there were too many buyers to turn them away. Lorenzo was a businessman, and if you were looking for class A blow in the outskirts of New Jersey, you went to Long Branch.

Anthony turned from the window and set the photo on his desk. He rested his hand over his stomach and was happy Myra had made him gnocchi for his birthday. He turned to his minibar and contemplated pouring himself a cocktail. The September nights always gave him a craving for the burning feel of an oak-aged scotch.

"Uncle Anthony?"

The unexpected voice startled him. He turned to see Sontos standing behind him in the living room. "Hey, kiddo," he said. "I didn't hear you come in."

Uncle Anthony had been the term the youngsters called him opposed to Mr. Russo. He didn't mind, knowing it was more comfortable for them, being who he was. Besides, it made him feel young.

Sontos walked further into the living room and looked around. “Where’s Myra?”

“On her walk, I assume.” Anthony glanced back out the window at the dusty snow. Winter was approaching, and despite the weather, Myra always walked through their neighborhood after dinner. It was one of her quirky traits that made him fall in love with her. “Has your uncle Paul sent you?”

Anthony had a soft spot for his Underboss’ nephew. Sontos was young, eager, and hungry to get in. He could see his admiration for his uncle having such a place in the Russo family. When Sontos had asked to help with jobs from time to time, Paul had consulted the possibility with Anthony, who deemed him unready.

“He’s too much of a wild card,” Anthony had said. “Too many drugs and not enough discipline to be a soldier, let alone an associate.”

“I agree,” Paul had replied. “I’ll keep him busy in other ways. Perhaps I’ll put him in an office.”

Anthony had chuckled. “I said he wasn’t ready, Paul. I didn’t say kill the poor kid.”

Sontos shook his head. “No, Paul didn’t send me.”

He noticed a bead of sweat surface on Sontos’ forehead and watched with wide eyes as he reached into his waistband for a 9 mm. He removed it and pointed it at Anthony.

Anthony felt his eyes widen. “Sontos—?”

“Don’t talk!” Sontos shouted.

Anthony was shocked he would do something so bold. “Put the gun down,” he said, assuming he was high. “You don’t know what you’re doing.”

Sontos cupped his other hand over the gun handle. “I said, don’t talk!”

“Sontos,” he said in a soothing voice. “You know who I am. You won’t get away with this. You know that, right?” He wondered if the kid had it in him to squeeze the trigger and noticed the silencer on the tip. “Please,” he said, hoping he could reason with him. “Just put it down.” He lowered his hands and took a step toward Sontos. “Let’s just stop a minute and—”

Sontos closed his eyes, fired three times, and watched Anthony fall dead before him on his seventy-ninth birthday.

PART I

CHAPTER ONE

3 MONTHS EARLIER

It was the scream that drew Laurel's attention away from the water.

The day of feeding the ducks had tapered to dusk as she tossed the last cracker into the lake. Jonathan tilted his head and giggled as four mallards reached for the saltine crackers and nipped at one another. It was good to hear her son's laugh again. The anguish from his parents' divorce had finally settled, and Laurel did her best to keep things routine, such as taking him to feed the ducks on a Sunday.

That sound! Laurel thought as she rose to her feet. Having made it once herself, she felt a pang in her heart at the familiar lament: *a mother in distress*. Piper was only eighteen-months-old when she fell into the swimming pool and sank to the bottom. She had been distracted, prying open a window in her new home with her husband, Jerry. The unexpected swimming pool in the listing had been a bonus. She fell back when the window opened. *Beat you, you piece of shit!* she had thought. She contemplated walking through the house to check if more were stuck when she sensed the toddler's absence. *The pool!*

Laurel made her way outside to see her fears confirmed: Piper was submerged below the green water. Her eyes shimmered a piercing blue as she gazed up from the bottom. It was a vision that would haunt her for years to come, and one Jerry would never understand. Laurel heard herself scream before she jumped into the pool and pulled her out. The toddler's cry and gasp for air broke her heart, and the following morning plans to drain the pool were underway. That particular day gave her nightmares for years to come, and although Piper was starting college, that moment never left Laurel's heart. Sometimes she'd look at her across the room,

unbeknownst to her that her mother would tear at the memory. That *deep* scream had once paralyzed her before her maternal instincts had kicked in to jump in and grab her, and here was that sound again today.

The ducks had made their way up the bank and tore apart the empty cracker box. Jonathan was lost in the moment as he watched a family on the lake return their paddle boat to the dock. At eight years old, he was starting to outgrow their trips to feed the ducks, but could see how much his mother liked taking him.

“Oh my god,” Laurel said as she took a step up the bank and slipped.

“Mom? What’s wrong?”

She turned to her son and did her best to sound calm. “You stay right here. Do *not* move. Do you hear me? I’m going to go over there and help that woman. I’ll be right back.” She waited for him to respond. “Okay?”

He looked at her with worry. “Okay.”

Laurel ran to the dock and placed her hands on the woman’s shoulders. She turned to look at her and screamed, “My daughter!” She grabbed Laurel’s arms and looked into the water. “She fell! She can’t swim! Please, help her!” Her eyes fixed on the small bubbles surfacing from beneath the brown water. “Please!”

Laurel snapped to attention and jumped into the lake. It was cold. She could taste the algae as water seeped in-between her lips and she reached into the darkness. Clouds of murk swarmed her eyes before she saw the glimpse of a red ribbon. She reached for the girl and lifted her to the surface. She gasped for air and held the girl’s chin up with hers. A crowd of people who were scarce moments ago awaited them with urgency. A man pulled the girl from her arms and another one lifted her onto the dock. She laid down on her stomach and tried to catch her breath.

“*Abigail!*”

Laurel looked up to see the girl’s mother standing with a man cradling her in his arms. The girl coughed and she placed her head back down on the dock and closed her eyes. *Thank you, God*, she thought to herself as she laced her fingers and placed her hands behind her head. She fell limp and listened to the commotion around her.

“What happened?”

“She fell! Call 9-11!”

She heard some scuffling near her head then the sound of a man’s voice. “Are you okay, Miss?”

Laurel lifted her head to see a young man crouched beside her holding a dry T-shirt. She reached for it and held it to her face. She was happy to wipe the water from her eyes and pressed it on her forehead.

“I saw the whole thing,” he said as he set his hand on her shoulder. “You totally saved Paul’s daughter!” Laurel lowered the T-shirt from her face and looked back at the girl in the man’s arms. “You have no idea what you just did, lady,” the young man said as he backed away. “I’d trade places with you in a heartbeat.”

Her thoughts turned to her son. *Jonathan!* She looked across the park to see him standing right where she had left him. Her heart sank when she saw the look of worry on his face. She pulled herself to her knees and gestured for him to come to her. He burst into tears and ran to her embrace. She hugged him tight.

“I told you it was going to be okay,” she said as he cried on her shoulders. She squeezed him tight and pulled back.

“Is that girl alright?” he asked. They both looked over as the paramedics arrived and hustled out of an ambulance.

“Yes, honey. It looks like they have it under control. She’s going to be fine.”

He touched her soaked clothes. “You’re wet.”

She gave him a loving laugh. “Yes, I am, aren’t I? That water was cold, too!” She waited for him to smile. “We’ll just stay a bit to make sure everything is okay and then we’ll go home.”

After a few minutes of watching the paramedics tend to the girl, she collected her bag from the bank and led Jonathan to the car.

“Miss, you saved my daughter’s life.”

Laurel turned to see the man once holding the little girl standing before her. “Oh,” she replied. His calmness surprised her and she did her best to not let it show. “I only did what anyone else would have.”

“You’re an angel,” he said. “I must say, I’m in your debt.”

“Oh, no, don’t say that. Please. No one is in anyone’s debt.” She couldn’t imagine receiving something in return. “Really, I just hope someone would have done the same for us.” She reached over and pulled Jonathan close. “This is my son, Jonathan.”

The man glanced down at him and smiled. “Your mother did a very brave thing.” Jonathan smiled back and clung to her waist. The stranger’s eyes returned to Laurel’s. “And your name, angel?”

“I’m Laurel,” she hesitated giving him her last name, then decided it was more than appropriate, “Parsons.”

“Well, Laurel *Parsons*, you saved my Abigail’s life. I’m sorry you had to go through that all by yourself. My wife Maria doesn’t swim. We’re here for a birthday picnic and I told them to stay away from the water.”

She felt him gazing at her. “I think the most important thing is that Abigail is okay. It all just happened so fast.”

She noticed the crowd had departed. Abigail was with the paramedics and her mother sat beside them. She couldn’t help but wonder why he hadn’t joined his family.

“I mean it when I say I am in your debt. If you ever need anything...anything at all,” he paused and took her in. “You let me know.”

She found herself pulled into his words and realized he hadn’t introduced himself. “And what’s your name?”

He squinted as he smiled, enhancing the creases on his dark skin. His greying temples and pleasant smile were attractive features and it was no surprise to her he was married. She guessed him to be twenty years her senior, and even in his faded blue T-shirt and plaid shorts, she could tell he was a together, impressive man. She caught a glimpse of his shinny watch and assumed it was expensive.

He tapped his forehead with his finger. “Sorry, I do that often. My wife always says I forget to reciprocate. I’m Paul Pedroni. My wife is Maria, and my daughter is Abigail. She just turned six.”

Pedroni? I know that name, she thought. She pulled Jonathan closer. “Johnny is eight.” She looked back at Paul. “I’m just so glad Abigail will be okay and I was able to help.”

“I should get back,” he said as he withdrew his wallet and pulled out a business card. “But this is how you can reach me, day or night. You call me if you ever need anything.”

He held it out to her and seemed intrigued by her hesitation. She took the card with his phone number and email address and smiled. “Well,” she said as she glanced down at her wet clothes. “I’m a mess. We’d better head home. Please, send my best to your family.”

“You take care, angel,” he said. “And don’t lose that card.”

She watched him walk over to the paramedics and was glad to see him join his family. She assumed they were in for few days of recovery as she placed Paul’s card in her tote bag and looked at Jonathan with a big smile. “Come on, honey. Let’s go home.”



Laurel struggled in front of the bathroom mirror with the bobby pins she depended on to get her through the day. At times, she felt pinning her hair back made her look older. At thirty-nine, she embraced her life after her nineteen year-long marriage to Jerry. Piper was born a year after the wedding, and Jonathan had been a later surprise. Although the marriage had been strained for years, they gave it their all for their kids. In the end, the couple had grown apart, and as much as it hurt her, she had learned to let it go.

The news of his engagement to Rita came a year later. With the option of being bitter and hurt, or to be accepting and strong, she opted for the latter and wished him well. That was as simple as she saw it: no grudges, no fights, and no bitterness. It was the only thought process that saw her through tough times.

I guess this will work, she thought as she fastened her last bobby pin in place. She remembered Jerry saying he liked her hair that way. *It brings out the green in your eyes*, he had told her. She contemplated pulling them out then, but they were already behind schedule. She had stayed up late telling her father and Piper what had happened at the park, then caught the story on the news. She watched Paul’s interview with the newscasters, telling them his daughter was fortunate to be amongst her guardian angel—a woman he didn’t get the chance to meet or thank. To her surprise, she found herself thankful. It was hard to unwind after such an emotional event and not having to answer any questions was a relief.

Laurel and Jonathan loaded up in her Volkswagen Jetta and drove to his summer day camp. Those mornings were often stressful, getting him in the car with his things for the next few days at his father's house was often a struggle. Jonathan was a cooperative by who was always eager to please his parents and do what they'd asked. She knew as parents they were lucky when it had come to that.

She dropped off Jonathan and pulled up to work just in time. She had filled Jerry in on what happened to prepare him for their son's story. Jerry had listened to her, intrigued, and assured her she had done the right thing. Her actions of bravery were of no surprise to him.

Laurel had been a bank teller for two years. For her, it was a good job with a steady paycheck. Returning to work after staying home with Jonathan had been hard. Laurel was grateful when her longtime friend Caddie recommended her for the open position.

She ran into the bank, giving herself less than minutes to put her things away and clock in. The smell of coffee filled the lobby.

"Cutting it a little close, aren't you?" Caddie was already working on the night drop deposits.

Laurel ignored her friend, clocked in, and joined her side. "Oh, Caddie, you will *not* believe the day I had yesterday."

Laurel and Caddie had known one another since the tenth-grade. They'd stayed behind in Kingston, New York after high school and alternated part-time jobs and community college together. They couldn't have been more opposite: Caddie being a thirty-eight-year-old overweight black woman with short bleached-orange hair, and Laurel having a cream-colored complexion with a headful of long red hair most people considered auburn. Caddie loved makeup and had long fingernails that were always painted a sharp red or teal. Her eyelids were either a sky or smoky blue, her cheeks a dark rose, and her lip color completed her look in a shade of hot pink.

Laurel remembered when they met in school. She had noticed Caddie staring at her in gym class with a scowl. She feared the large dark girl wanted to start trouble when she approached her and stared into her eyes. Laurel had never been in a fight before, and glanced around to see the others doing warm-ups while the teacher worked with a student. She knew she might be on her

own if Caddie took a swing and assumed she might even be quick enough to duck, run, or knowing her fingernails were long, fight. She felt herself cower with intimidation then smiled when Caddie leaned closer and said, “Girl, I love your new eyeshadow.”

“You’re gonna think I’m lying Caddie, but I pulled a little girl out of the lake yesterday.”

Caddie set the papers in her hands down and looked at her. “Damn girl, are you talking about the girl on the news?” The evening story had been brief and Caddie couldn’t recall if they mentioned the family’s name. “You’re right. I think you’re lying.” Laurel told her everything that happened. Caddie looked astonished. “Are you shitting me?”

“No,” Laurel replied. “I’m not *shitting* anyone. It was really me.”

“Well, goddamn! That’s some story! Them parents better be thanking their lucky stars you’s were even around.”

“Yes, they are.” Caddie was right, it *was* some story—one that would most likely stay with her for a long time.



At 10:45 a.m. a floral delivery-man entered the bank with a dozen white roses. The women’s attention turned to the man with the flowers, each hoping they were for her. The delivery-man approached Laurel’s window and looked at the nameplate. “Laurel Parsons?”

She looked up confused. “Yes?”

“These are for you.” He set the vase on her counter and walked away.

Giggling and disappointed co-workers gathered around her window to watch her read the card. She removed it from the center of the arrangement and opened the small envelope. It read: *Dear Angel, please accompany us tomorrow evening for dinner. 7:00 p.m. sharp. 300 Davis court. Sincerely, Paul and Maria Pedroni.*

“So,” Mary asked on behalf of the group, “Whooo are they frooom?”

“Oh,” Laurel replied, wondering how Paul knew where she worked. “They’re from my brother. He missed my birthday.” She forced a smile. “Guess he remembered.” She wasn’t up for sharing her experience or answering their questions. The news had kept her name out of the story, and she was just as happy to do the same at work. She kept many things, if not *everything* that happened outside of the bank to herself.

“A brother you don't have and a birthday from six months ago?” Caddie mumbled under her breath as she gave Laurel a hip bump. “Mmm-hmm!”

Laurel laughed. “They want me to come to dinner. A way to say thank you I guess. They seem like such a nice family.”

“Who's the family? Are they from around here?”

“I think so. Paul and Maria Pedroni.” Laurel looked at Caddie and winced. “How do I know that name?”

Caddie looked at her with a straight face. “Girl, are you kidding me? Did you just say Paul and Maria *Pedroni*?”

Laurel was uneasy with her reaction. “Yes, why?”

“Tell me you're kidding, Laurel. Just tell me you're *fucking* kidding.”

“I—”

“Girl, the *Pedronis*! As in *Paul and Maria*.” Laurel's face remained blank. “The big M, Laurel.” She mouthed the word *Mafia*. Laurel felt a pang in her gut. She'd heard the name associated with the Russo family in Kingston throughout the years. Every so often there was word of something they'd done for the community. Caddie waved her hand back and forth. “I don't know about you, but I don't know nothin'!” Laurel didn't know how to feel. “Think of what you see in the movies,” she said as if she read her mind. “It's not *all* goodwill and donations.” Caddie couldn't help but laugh out loud. “Darlin', you just saved the life of *substantial* community leader!” She clapped her hands together and swatted her knee. “Good lord, girl! When he said he's in your debt, he actually *means* it.” Caddie could sense she was struggling to comprehend. “Hey, who knows? Maybe you just made yourself a useful friend. A friend who owes you one *hell* of a favor.” She paused and let Laurel absorb the shock. “My advice? Go to that dinner, let them thank you as much as they need to, and then get the hell out of there.” Caddie rubbed her back as she walked past her to get back to work. “Ask for lobster.”

Laurel took it all in and watched her coworkers engage with customers, oblivious to what she had been through. She looked at the clock, noting it was only 11:00 a.m. It was going to be a long day.



Laurel cooked dinner for herself, grabbed a beer from the refrigerator, and took her laptop to her couch. The nights when Jonathan stayed with Jerry left her heart empty. Listening to music or turning on the TV for company often filled the void, but she feared she'd never adjust. She opened her computer annoyed to see Jonathan had changed her screensaver to skulls and clicked on her internet icon to search the name *Paul Pedroni*.

Images of the man she met at the park appeared, followed by links of contact information, People Finder suggestions, charity fundraiser articles, and his construction company website. She scrolled to the bottom and found an article about a woman who had filed a sexual harassment charge against him seven years prior. She clicked on it to read the story of a secretary who tried to sue Paul and the case was dismissed. The rest of the search didn't turn up anything more than local photos and a few of him with his family. She couldn't imagine fearing the man whose daughter she had saved and chose to not let it worry her. She'd attend their dinner party tomorrow night and accept their gratitude. After that, she'd be removed from everything associated with Paul and his family and would put the whole matter behind her.



Paul sat in his leather wingback chair and reflected on the past few days events: Abigail's accident, the hospital visit, and meeting Laurel. Other than a scratchy throat, Abigail was in good spirits and had been released to go home. It was midnight, and Maria was tucked away in their daughter's bed in fear of what might happen while she slept.

Paul sipped a neat whiskey and thought about Laurel. He had no regrets about keeping her out of the news. He was cautious about his family affairs when he could help it. The less the public knew about Laurel and the event, the better. When onlookers asked him who saved his daughter, he repeated her guardian angel was in the right place at the right time.

Paul grew up near the Bronx, watching his father collaborate with the notorious Russo family in Jersey City. He was too young to understand the logistics, but quickly learned that Anthony Russo was a powerful man. As a child, Paul hid under the stairs and listened to them talk around the dinner table, fascinated by the favors Anthony asked of his father. Paul was eager to win Anthony's approval, and began shoplifting and snatching purses in hopes of being noticed. It wasn't long before Anthony's associates were asking him to run small jobs, and taught him the

ins, outs, and loyalties of the lifestyle. As the years passed, Paul grew into less demanding positions, until he fell into his father's role as their family Consigliere when he was taken from cancer. Paul was then a thirty-eight-year-old family friend—a rare choice for such a position, but Paul had been well-suited to advise Don Anthony. He could mediate, offer insight, and most important, be trusted.

Anthony had partnered with other family members in construction and real estate companies in Newark and West Orange for laundering. He had contemplated who to appoint, and with Paul's business senses and political connections, he knew he'd be the best choice. Anthony trusted a then younger Paul, and when he accepted the offer, Anthony was pleased. Paul moved Maria from their quaint home in Bay Shore to West Orange to chaperon Anthony's shell companies. Paul's association with the boss was quiet, and things ran smooth. Paul checked in often and traveled the eight miles to see him as needed. Through time, Paul had paid his dues and earned enough respect from the Russo family to honor the role of Capo when he was forty-one, where his daily world consisted of his own army. Associates, agents, inspectors, and all walks of authorities gave him the clearances he needed for the Russo's affaires and they were nothing less than eager to assist him. For their assistance and discretion, they were paid handsomely.

Paul went over to his desk logged on to his computer. He pulled up his search engine and googled the name *Laurel Parsons*. As images surfaced, the face he remembered didn't. *No social media?* he wondered. He started his next search attempt when his cell phone rang. He checked the caller ID and saw it was Al. "Hey, there, Al."

Al was also from Bay Shore, having had followed Paul west and lived on the outskirts in Montclair. He was a soldier to both Paul and Anthony, but had been Paul's number one for well over ten years. Paul considered him one step closer to family and knew he could trust Al with his secrets, his money, his wife, his possessions, and lastly, his life.

"Jesus Christ, Paul. I saw the news. How's she doing?"

"She's doing well. Thanks for checking in." He told Al about the ordeal.

"That's some story, Paul. I'm glad she's safe." Out of respect, he made sure he spent enough time giving condolences to his friend before moving onto the reason he had called. "Listen, on another note, I've got something to run by you. You remember Sam?"

Sam was merely a blank face and name to Paul, one he remembered meeting through Al years ago. Something about him being a new dealer out west in southern California.

“Somewhat. What’s this about?”

“I guess he was doing some work with a guy up here named Nate. Said one of his packages never made it out here. My guess is it was on its way to the Grassis. Anyway, Sam says Nate told him it never arrived. He’s looking at a thirty-grand loss here, and I’m wondering how you feel about me putting Gail on this? Just long enough to get a bite. Sam doesn’t want too much on my end, just if I could look into it.”

Paul tapped his fingers upon his desk. He’d always sensed Al was leery to ask him for favors. As far as Paul was concerned, anyone who sent drugs through the mail were complete and utter idiots. “For you, Al, I’ll say okay, but only if Gail has the time *or* interest. I don’t want her in over her head.” The idea of helping anyone with a drug run under Anthony’s watch made him uncomfortable. “You just make sure it gets returned to where it belongs.”

Though Paul employed Gail, she was more-so Al’s assistant. She was thirty-two and had been recommended by her brother Chris when the need for a female arose. To Paul’s surprise, she had come in handy, and he continued to use her in matters when the others couldn’t be burdened.

Paul paid many people, and though he had substantial ties to the Rosso family, his income was minimal. Most of his business practices were his own real estate investments, but a great deal of his wealth came from online sports betting. As a practice, it had been shut down in the states, but had learned to work around it by dabbling in south American countries where it was legal. Between his winnings, real estate profits, and overseeing his own laundering practices through shell companies in the islands, Paul Pedroni was living well. He had learned a thing or two about gaining respect and power from the Russos. He spent his time in West Orange engaging with the community, the council, and maintaining tabs on the local drug trade. Al was Paul’s eyes and ears and kept him updated with the growth of newcomers, and his presence was a gentle reminder that things needed to be in order. Paul and Al had agreed it couldn’t have worked out any better.

“Yeah, I got you, Paul. Thanks. I’ll just send her over to ask a few questions. Butter him up a bit. You know Gail, she can hold her own.”

Paul agreed. “Alright. Make it a quick job. A week at the most. If you don’t get anywhere, have Sam send his own guys down. He’s lucky he has you for such favors.”

Al gave a light laugh. “Thanks, Boss. I’ll keep you posted. Feel free to contact her if you need anything in-between.”

“Sure thing. Before you go, I want you to do something for me. Get me everything I need to know about Laurel Parsons as soon as you can.”

“Okay, you got it. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

They hung up and Paul knew Al would find everything before the sun rose.