

Cybil Raven Beginnings

Volume 1

Cybil Raven Chronicles

Tony Timbol, Crystal Craven

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Table of Contents

FALLUJAH, IRAQ..... 5

SAVANNAH, GEORGIA,..... 13

 ONE..... 14

 TWO 17

 THREE 20

 FOUR..... 23

 FIVE 26

 SIX 29

 SEVEN 31

UKRAINE, (FORMERLY A SOVIET UNION STATE) 39

 ONE..... 40

 TWO 43

 THREE 47

 FOUR 53

 FIVE 56

 SIX 60

AUTHOR’S NOTE 65

Fallujah, Iraq

2003

Sitting near the transport helicopter's open side door, Corp. Cybil Raven scanned her deep-blue eyes across the black horizon. A few dots of lights spotted the edge of the sky. At this low altitude, looking down she saw rusty oil barrels containing small fires, the light revealing grungy alleyways strewn with trash, broken-down cars and tires. Small groups of Iraqi men gathered round the sporadic flames. Glancing at her wristwatch she read the time: 0230. The Blackhawk helicopter streaked toward the designated landing zone on the northwestern edge of the Sunni Triangle. The wind was tunneling by loudly, and the rhythmic beating of the blades shook her seat back. Wind currents deflected into the chopper, wildly flapping the loose edges of her desert camouflage uniform. The shifting and moving helicopter banked and turned as usual, the common practice—never fly a straight line in a combat zone. The movement, nonviolent yet strong, jostled the riders. Some of her dark chestnut hair had been whipped out of her ballistic helmet, partially covering her face. She frowned and her eyes flashed lighter for a second before she grabbed her helmet with one hand and pushed her hair back under with the other, thinking, *Almost there.*

She inhaled deeply to rouse her senses. The 0100 briefing at base had taken longer than usual. The mission: crucial. The Snake's mobile IED factory was slippery; several prior missions had failed to find anything but sand, dank-smelling camels and close-mouthed Sunnis.

Cybil looked around the cabin and found Charlie, Sam, Curtis and the captain seated at the bulkhead behind the pilots, all her companions from the 82nd Airborne Division. Curtis was new, a

replacement for Danny, who did not return with them from the last mission, Cybil thought, *Let's all get back*. The captain caught her glance and nodded.

The captain had handpicked Corporal Raven for today's mission. Her intelligence and insights made her invaluable as Communications Specialist. He did not simply want a message relay robot; he wanted a thinker to evaluate the voice traffic, to listen to what was going on *under* what was being said. She was the best, her intuition sharp. Unfortunately for him, that made his clumsy personal advances obvious. When she was assigned to his unit, the only female in the company, he thought she was an overachieving little girl, lost, hiding in the Army: a California beauty pageant winner looking to prove herself more than just a pretty piece of ass. His initial assessment of her was wrong. He smiled at her and raised his right hand to his brow in a small, friendly salute.

The corporal nodded in return and could not suppress a half-smile. Tough and demanding on the job, the captain was fair. He gave her opportunities to excel but never made it easy. She liked the captain, who was tall, well built and single. But romance on the battlefield is complicated. Lust among a band of brothers and sisters tends to knot things up. And the person she was thinking about more recently was not the captain. Cybil took a breath in and closed her eyes and remembered: *Dubai*.

Cybil placed her hands on her knees and then rubbed the outside of her thighs, instinctively doing a quick pre-combat check. Left hip pocket: compass. Left cargo pocket: flask; a gift from the captain. Right hip pocket: memo pad with half-chewed pencil. Right cargo pocket: the photo. She stretched her hand and let her fingers strum the top of her sheathed calf knife just below the knee. She pulled up her hand to feel the photo, her fingers closing in on the edges. Taken in Dubai, during last month's R&R when they—

Just then the chopper's interior red light started flashing, signaling the imminent landing. Seated close to the light, it cast on the captain an intense, pulsing, blood-red.

The choppers landed in a *wadi*, placing them behind protective dunes bracketing the dried riverbed. The team rushed out of the helicopters and quickly unloaded the camp gear. The choppers lifted off, kicking up dust. Cybil's nostrils twitched with what she thought was a new smell; maybe the riverbed was different from the desert. After a few seconds she decided it was not; it was the same—sandy, acrid, dry.

Within an hour the camp was set up and the team assembled, ready to leave. Corporal Raven had lined up everyone's communications gear by rank, the captain's at the end of the table, everyone else's behind his, dress-right dress. She tested the units carefully, and each passed her inspection. The soldiers picked up their unit without confusion, familiar with their fellow warrior's categorizing schemes. Then, without hesitation they streamed into the desert from the camp, a few miles from the objective.

The corporal went straight to her work relaying instructions, clarifications and commands. She watched the mission clock. Timing was crucial; the strike set for 30 minutes before sunrise, on the dark side of dawn. On cue, her heart started racing as the team approached the target and voice traffic slowed. Sitting there staring at the console with headset on, microphone inches from her mouth, she heard her brothers' voices in the air. She mopped her brow with her forearm sleeve. Down her front and back, sweat formed into drops which trailed down and joined others as if on a march. They mixed with the last molecules of her deodorant; she wrinkled her nose at the result, thinking, *Hot shower later*. She glanced up. Through the command tent's faded, yellowing window flap, streaks of light reached toward her from the horizon. *The 82nd*

Airborne Division's boot should be on the Snake's head right about ... now!

*

“Boots on the ground is the only way to win a war!” Cybil had heard this often during Basic Combat Training and Airborne School.

The Snake was now writhing under the 82nd's boot, no longer a threat to the US Military presence.

“He’s a little scrawny for being responsible for so many deaths, isn’t he?” Cybil said, looking over at the Snake, handcuffed and quiet, seated in a folding chair, his head down.

He slowly raised his head and, unsmiling, looked at her. His dark face hovered narrow, triangular; cold eyes, closely set over a pointed nose, peered intently. A trimmed beard set him apart; most Iraqis kept scraggly facial hair. He blinked once, slowly, and lowered his head.

Cybil had entered the captain’s tent, passing by the two armed guards on either side of the entrance, to deliver written orders from FORCECOM. Special black, unmarked helicopters would be landing soon to pick up the war criminal the team had obtained.

“Yeah, turns out Mr. Al-Mahdi’s days of causing a ruckus for us are over,” the captain said while signing a confirmation receipt of the orders.

Al-Mahdi squirmed in the chair, moving slightly, his sandals scratching at the fabric under his feet.

The captain smiled at Cybil and said, “On the way out, Corporal, tell the guards they can get some coffee and come back. I’ll keep an eye on this ass-hat.”

She returned a thin smile, turned on her heels and walked out of the tent. The guards followed her, eager for a break.

A few yards away from the tent Cybil paused. “Shit! I forget the message from the colonel,” she said aloud.

The division commander had sent the captain an “attaboy” and an invitation to dinner tonight. He had wanted Cybil to deliver it personally. She turned around and started back toward the captain’s tent. Getting closer, she saw a small Arab man step out of the tent; he looked left, then right and took off running toward the desert.

“What the fuck!” Cybil ran toward the tent while shouting for help.

Other soldiers walking nearby stopped, looked over at the running female and sprinted, converging with her. Cybil closed to within 10 feet of the tent when Al-Mahdi appeared at the door with a large knife red with blood. He looked directly at her and smiled. Cybil’s eyes widened and she accelerated fast toward him. He raised his arm to strike downward, but Cybil was too quick. She barreled into him head first, the top of her helmet into his stomach before he could bring the knife down. They tumbled together into the tent. She rolled to her right and sprang to her feet. Her knuckles were white as they gripped the now drawn calf knife in her right hand. But there was no need.

Al-Mahdi lay still on the ground, his head bleeding, next to the tent’s main pole. He moaned faintly. The guards returned and ran into the tent. One went directly to handcuff Al-Mahdi, kicking away the large knife lying next to him. The other guard went over to the captain, who was face down on the tent floor. He was not moving. The guard kneeled next to him and gently rolled him over. The guard’s head dropped for a second. He looked up at Cybil and shook his head. The captain was dead, his neck sliced open, face

covered in blood. Cybil drew in a quick breath, almost a gasp. *Control.* Cybil looked at her commander and friend and did not say a word. She went over to his cot, grabbed a blanket and placed it over the body.

“You will all pay, you dogs!” Al-Mahdi spat out.

The guard had stood him up.

“You think this will stop me!” he said. “Allah is on my side. Your god is nothing. It is only the beginning.”

God, yeah, right. Cybil slowly approached him. The other guard had moved over to Al-Mahdi and held him tight. The sound of the approaching black helicopters grew by the second.

“Your time is up,” she said, her eyes flashing bright. She raised her right hand and slapped Al-Mahdi across the face.

Al-Mahdi’s head turned left by the force of the blow. He slowly turned back to face Cybil. Blood dripped from his upper lip into his mouth. He looked unsure. His face turned darker and he grimaced. “American bitch, how dare you strike me! This I will not forget, ever!”

“Take him out of here,” Cybil said to the guards.

They grabbed Al-Mahdi and shoved him out the tent entrance and escorted him to the waiting helicopters.

Corp. Cybil Raven stood just outside the entrance of her captain’s tent and watched the choppers take Al-Mahdi into the air, the dust cloud circling around the blades, pushing the sand up in swirls, fanning it all over the camp. She stood there for some time, watching the helicopters rise and speed away, becoming smaller and smaller and smaller. *No time for tears.* She could not wait to get back to base, to take a hot shower, to wash off this day.

Savannah, Georgia,

One

Jimmy had overheard Cybil on her cell talking with someone named Sonja from her military past and it sounded interesting. Driving up U.S. I-16, away from downtown Savannah, they had enjoyed drinks at [Saya Lounge](#) to end a full workweek this warm and humid Thursday night. Tomorrow they planned to go back to let off more steam. [Bacchus](#), then moving to the Seed Eco Lounge and, finally, [Club 51 Degrees](#) on Congress Street highlighted their traditional itinerary, with maybe a stop to refuel at their favorite, Sweet Melissa's Pizza. Not only a good friend, Jimmy the photographer held Cybil, Savannah's top model, in high regard. She was classy and took direction like a pro. She always looked great, her skin shone under his lighting. And when she needed to seduce the camera, she did.

Cybil Raven caught her reflection in the car window. The street lights, closely spaced on this section of highway, lit the interior one glimpse at a time. Seeing her eyes looking back stopped her from responding to the query, "Will you take the assignment or pass on this one?" Her eyes had a look she had seen once before and it startled her, exactly when Jimmy asked his question.

Cybil had heard the question, but Sonja's request jogged her memory, about her time at Ft. Bragg in the [82nd Airborne](#) Division, about Iraq, about ... she had not thought about that person for a long time and didn't want to start. She wanted to think about

Martin, the sailing tournament so far away. Why had he not asked her to join him? Her kids were out of town, a rare occurrence. *Was there a problem?*

“Cybil, did you hear me, are you going to take the assignment?” Jimmy asked again.

“Sorry, Jimmy, spaced out for a moment,” she said, looking over at her married friend.

With his glasses, buzz cut and square head, he looked more like an accountant than a photographer of beautiful women. But they felt safe with him; that counted for much.

“Probably,” she said, “it’s a lot like the special projects I did when I was deployed In Iraq. I made some noise over there.” She turned her face away slightly, not wanting him to see her face sadden. The memory of what happened when she returned—*I’m not going to think of that person*, she scolded herself.

“Okay,” Jimmy said, not noticing her pain. “If I didn’t say it before, you look great tonight. Maybe you can wear the blue dress tomorrow, from the Hilton Sea Island shoot. I love that one.”

“Thanks, Jimmy,” Cybil said, turning to look out the window again.

It was one of her favorites; she’d wear it tomorrow. While the form-fitting dress outlined her athletic figure, it was the color that set her eyes ablaze, crystal-blue shimmering pools, in which many sought but few were allowed to dive in. Adding to the look, perfect fashion model makeup, and Cybil Raven was a knockout anytime she went out for the night.

Gazing past her reflection into the night, she felt it again, the familiar sense of readiness, of something coming.

“What the hell!” Cybil cried out. “Jimmy, pull over!”

“What the hell for, Cybil?” Jimmy asked, slowing down.

He pulled over and stopped on the shoulder of the road, and they both turned and looked back through the rear window.

A short, busty blonde, carrying her shoes, waving her arms like windmill paddles, raced toward the back of Jimmy’s SUV. A four-door car with its hood up sat behind her, with two other people standing near it. She ran toward the SUV, stumbling and weaving but not falling. She had the recognizable happy smile showing her partying had started earlier.

Cybil and Jimmy looked at each other and said at the same time, “This will be interesting!”

Two

“Ava, what are you doing? You don’t know who is in that car!” Lane shouted.

Ava kept on going toward the SUV that had pulled over ahead of them. Either she didn’t hear because of the noise of passing cars and trucks or she was ignoring her friend’s warning. She stumbled but kept going.

To be heard over the road noise, Lane had to yell, “I hope they are some nice people,” she said, turning to Derrick, her date for the night. She peered into the car, at the glove compartment where the handguns were stored. “Dad” had insisted that Ava take his .32 automatic. Lane, southern girl, was comfortable with firearms and liked the heft of her Taurus EC (Easy Carry) .38 special loaded with hollow points.

Derrick, appearing not to hear Lane, leaned on the back of the late-motel Nissan Altima, and bent over, head on folded arms. Lane thought, *he better not pass out*. She had won the shots competition at the Bar Bar, a nightly ritual for some locals, surprising an overconfident Derrick and his friend Rick.

Lane saw that Ava had reached the rear of the SUV. A very attractive, well-dressed, fit, dark-haired woman stepped out from the passenger side and a tall, slim man with glasses came from the driver’s side. They walked back to meet Ava, and the three talked for a few minutes. Ava pointed toward the car and continued

talking with the couple. The three of them walked back to the broken-down Nissan.

After a few minutes of greetings and discussion, Ava locked up the Altima for the night, and she, Jimmy, Cybil, Lane, and Derrick piled into the SUV. They headed for the [La Quinta Inn](#) on Abercorn, Lane and Ava's hotel.

Cybil asked, "So sorry you're having car trouble. What do you think is wrong?"

"I borrowed the 'good' car from my Dad so I could make the trip," Ava said. "The engine light came on several times just driving here."

"Where are you guys from?" Jimmy asked.

"Bristol, Tennessee," Lane said.

"Really?" Derrick said.

Lane looked at him and frowned. Apparently he didn't remember the earlier conversation.

"Thanks for picking us up," Ava said. "We really appreciate it. Did we take you out of your way?"

"No, we were done chilling downtown. This is on the way. Cybil and I live in the same neighborhood. We'll go back tomorrow night for sure, though," Jimmy said.

"Ava has a court date tomorrow to try to get her deadbeat ex to keep to his child support. What kind of guy screws his two little ones!" Lane said. Her eyebrows scrunched up and she shook her head.

Cybil turned her head toward the back to hear more.

"Well, I hope it turns out well for you," Jimmy said.

“Hope does not always produce results, Jimmy,” Cybil said, looking at him.

Ava nodded and stared out the side window. The street lights, shops and roads looked familiar but gave little comfort. She let out a deep sigh, thinking about the next day. She looked over at Lane with sad eyes, and Lane patted Ava’s knee softly.

Cybil turned around and focused on Ava in the rear seat. Ava noticed Cybil’s blue eyes grew intense when she started to speak.

“So, you’re worried about tomorrow’s hearing. Tell me more,” Cybil asked. She directed her question at Ava, while looking also at Lane and Derrick.

“Yes, we always seem to get Judge Barry Andrews,” Ava said. “Whenever I complain about my ex’s overdue child support, the judge buys Jerry’s sob stories of extra car repair bills, changing jobs, you name it. A slap on the wrist is all Jerry got the last two times.” Her voice cracking, Ava looked at Lane and began to tear up. Lane smiled and put her arm around her friend. Derrick was sightseeing, oblivious.

“What time is the hearing tomorrow?” Cybil asked.

“Two o’clock.”

“Let me see what I can do. That’s late enough in the day. I can make some calls. I have a few friends in the system that I work with from time to time. Several owe me. No promises. We’ll have to wait and see,” Cybil said, smiling.

Ava smiled back. She felt she had found a friend, but wasn’t sure why a stranger would help, even if she could. Ava sighed and looked out the window.

Three

“Do you think the court will take his side or yours?” Lane asked her friend, Ava, as they sat waiting on the couch in the hotel lobby. Two families with small children had gotten to the counter before they did.

Her face flushing red, Ava said, “Oh, he is so behind in his child support, there is no way he is getting away with anything!”

Ava frowned. “Thanks so much for making this trip with me. I hate it that Savannah is so far away from Bristol, but that’s the divorce court we have. He gets to stay and play around with his girlfriend. I have to move six hours away to be with family. Figures.”

She hadn’t smiled much since the start of the trip, Lane had noticed. They had met three years before when they worked in Dr. Herndon’s office and became friends. Ava was great company after work, helping Lane relax. They both loved Triple-A baseball and went to the games often. Lane helped Ava cope during her divorce from the wandering Jerry D (D for Douche Bag), their pet name for her ex. That he strayed when Ava was carrying their second child especially hurt, as Lane recalled evenings with a sobbing friend.

“I’m worried about the car sitting by the side of the road.” Ava said, looking at Lane.

“It was nice that your dad let you borrow his car,” Lane said, “but I noticed some stalling a couple of times on the on-ramps when we tried to get up to speed.”

“Just what I need on this trip to court, freaking car trouble!” Ava said. “Can you check with the hotel and see if there’s a garage nearby that can go get the car in the morning? I’m too tired now.”

“Sure thing. I’ll check us in and ask them right now. Wait here.”

Lane stepped up to the counter and waited. Looking at her face in the mirror behind the clerk, Lane liked almost all of what she saw. *Damn circles*, she complained to herself. Above the evidence of tired eyes, fine, shoulder-length blonde hair with short bangs framed a tanned face. With her sultry voice, welcoming smile and easy manner, she drew many a moth to her flame.

When the last family left, Lane smiled at the clerk, who checked them in quickly and apologized for the delay. Lane went back to Ava with room keys in hand and sat down.

“Lane,” Ava said.

“Yes?”

“After the hearing tomorrow, no matter what, I’ll take you downtown to where I used to hang out, dance and have some fun. Who knows who we might meet!” Ava stood up from the couch.

“I agree!” Lane said, smiling. “We’ll need a break after sitting in court. It will not be fun sitting anywhere near you know who, the SOB. Not my favorite person.”

“Mine either. Even though he is my baby’s daddy and we have to get along for the kids, he is a douche bag. I tried to tell his girlfriend that he tried to hook up with me when he was visiting the kids last time, but she didn’t believe me,” Ava said. “What kind of proof does she need?”

Lane said, “She’s probably so stupid and believes everything he says. She could find him in a bar with a new girl hanging all over him, and when he says it’s his long-lost sister, she’ll probably say, “Nice to meet you, you look alike!” She laughed.

Ava smiled and started laughing too, the humor lessening her unease. She missed Brianna and Lewis, her children. Ava’s face began to feel flush and warm as she thought about having to fight for her child support, her ex irresponsibly in arrears.

The women walked into the elevator, and Lane punched “6.” The door closed, the elevator rose a few feet, hesitated, continued a few feet, hesitated and then continued on. Lane and Ava looked at each other.

Ava shook her head, saying, “Can’t even get an elevator to work right for me on this trip.”

Lane put her arm around her friend. They didn’t say a word for the rest of the elevator ride.

Four

In a loud voice, the clerk of the court stated: “Docket #A023A1234 is now before the Honorable Judge Wilma Montgomery.”

After a pause, the clerk said, “Are the parties present: plaintiff, Ava R. Burrell vs. defendant, Jerry D. Burrell.”

“Yes, Ava R. Burrell is present,” Ava said.

“Yes, Jerry D. Burrell is present,” Jerry said.

Ava stood at the plaintiff’s table with her attorney, Bill Drayton, who had filed the complaint regarding unpaid child support. They had been assigned one of the smaller courtrooms, in between the larger ones used for criminal trials. No windows, bright florescent lights overhead and faded vinyl-tiled floor made the room feel closed-in. The judge’s bench was the only wood furniture; the rest was metal, plastic and cheap. A rope line separated the front of the courtroom from the back.

Behind Ava and the rope line, Lane sat in the gallery and glared at Jerry. Ava glanced over her shoulder to look at Lane, and smiled. Lane noticed and smiled back at her pretty friend.

Ava’s long blonde tresses falling below her shoulders drew attention to her hourglass figure, still eye-catching despite two children. Her face, behind an open, friendly smile presented unmistakable Greek features. Her marble-white shading set off her

straight teeth, interrupted unfortunately by a missing tooth just off the center. Dental work had to wait when food money was scarce.

Ava quickly swept the courtroom with her eyes and saw few people in the gallery. Her eyes continued scanning until they reached Jerry at the defendant's table. As usual, he wore jeans and his Harley Davidson jacket, his thick black hair groomed for once. His erect, straight up-and-down build slightly more than slim, made him look taller this day. *Still cute. I should be angrier at him,* she thought. Ava looked away, toward the judge, someone she had not seen before.

Judge Montgomery sat on the bench, not the judge that the lawyer and Jerry had come to rely on. Wilma Montgomery, a large black woman with kind eyes behind bifocals, peered actively over them when she talked to you. Her hair pulled back into a bun gave her a matronly look. She had worked nights to get through law school while raising a family of five on her own. Becoming a judge was a lifelong dream after working the full court system from civil to criminal and back. Deadbeat dads had become a particular target for public derision though her instructions for restitution and penalties had an edge of grace.

Ava, seeing Judge Andrews not present, remembered something: part of the conversation in the SUV as Jimmy and Cybil drove them to the hotel, rescuing them from the broken-down car. Not sure what she remembered—the tequila shots that evening had clouded much—but something vague ... something about an offer of help.

“Mr. Jerry Burrell, it says here you are \$5,000 behind on your child support, is that correct?” Judge Wilma asked, peering over her bifocals.

His lawyer spoke up. “Yes, Your Honor, we stipulate to that fact, but there are extenuating circumstances.”

“Mr. Burrell.” Judge Wilma addressed Jerry, ignoring his lawyer. “Your children cannot eat or dress or live a normal life by ‘ex-ten-u-a-ting’ circumstances.”

Jerry looked down at the silver buckles on his riding boots. With his hands in his pockets, he shuffled from one foot to another as if barefoot on hot concrete. He glanced at his lawyer, raising his eyebrows in a quiet plea.

The lawyer said, “Your Honor. Mr. Burrell recently lost his job at the Tybee Sheet Metal factory three months ago, and with the expenses of his move to lower-cost housing, as suggested by the court last time, he cannot maintain the payments. He is sorry and will be able to resume them on the 15th of next month. We agree to a six-month catch-up payment plan for the back due payments.”

Slight smiles became noticeable from Jerry and the attorney. Ava’s shoulders slumped and she cursed under her breath. She looked back at Lane with an open-mouthed expression of disbelief. Lane lifted her hands in a “What the ...?” pose, matching Ava’s concern. This story sounded like the others before, which “worked.” Money was tight, and this latest plan from Jerry would put her further behind.

Judge Wilma said, “That sounds reasonable.”

Ava shook her head and waited for the inevitable ruling.

Five

“Except, I’d like to amend the suggested plan a little,” Judge Wilma added.

Ava thought she perceived the judge smiling.

Lane shifted in her seat, leaning forward to listen. Ava leaned forward as well. Jerry and his attorney’s faces went blank.

“It has come to the court’s attention,” the judge said, “that Mr. Burrell has some assets that could be used to accelerate the repayment plan.”

Ava turned and whispered to Lane, “What assets? Jerry lives paycheck to paycheck.” Both had quizzical looks.

“Well, it seems Mr. Burrell has a couple of old moving violation tickets unpaid, for two different motorcycles. These tickets appeared this morning, sent to my office. Both have resulted in bench warrants, for Mr. Burrell’s arrest.”

“Your Honor—” the lawyer started say.

“Don’t interrupt!” Judge Wilma said, still looking down at her papers. “Both motorcycles are of some value. Mr. Burrell only needs one to commute to work. Since throwing Mr. Burrell in jail is not conducive to his income-producing responsibilities, I’m proposing excusing the bench warrants if Mr. Burrell agrees to sell ...”—Judge Wilma stopped for a second, looking at her papers—“... to sell his Yamaha Road Star Silverado in order to meet his obligations to his children and Mrs. Burrell.”

“You can’t do that!” Jerry jumped up, addressing the judge.

His lawyer tried to keep him quiet and still, his arm reaching over across Jerry’s chest.

Judge Wilma stopped reading. She took off her bifocals and looked at Jerry. “Mr. Burrell, I will excuse your outburst for the sake of your children. The choice is yours. Sell your ride or sit your behind in jail. And I will add contempt of court charges as well, so you can sit a long time to think. Do you really want to do it the hard way?”

“Fine,” Jerry said, and sat down.

Judge Wilma called both attorneys to the bench. After five minutes of quiet conversation, they returned to their tables. Fifteen minutes later the agreements were recorded and signed. Ava’s lawyer told her, with Lane listening, that the judge suggested that Jerry’s attorney advance the proceeds as a sign of goodwill to the court, and settle up with his client since she and her children could not afford to wait. Ava would receive a check that day.

Ava did not say a word. She turned around and hugged Lane for a long time. She thought of Brianna and especially of Lewis, his birthday coming up next month. She breathed a sigh of relief.

After the judge left the courtroom, they waited for Jerry and his attorney to leave before them. Ava had looked over at Jerry often during the proceedings and wanted to hate him more. After a few minutes, smiling, they gathered their things and started to leave.

“Mrs. Burrell,” the clerk spoke up.

Ava stopped and turned around, looking at the officer of the court.

“This is from the judge.” The clerk handed her a note.

Her attorney motioned that he had to go.

“Thank you so much,” Ava said.

“Don’t thank me,” he said. “I don’t know what happened either. Looks like you got someone looking out for you.” He smiled, turned and walked out of the courtroom.

Ava opened the note. Lane leaned in close, putting her arm around her friend’s waist.

Mrs. Burrell,

I am glad I was able to hear your case. I got an early-morning call from a friend of mine, someone who has helped many others, myself included. We had a nice conversation about many things. My friend is always full of helpful observations, especially about balancing the scales of justice. It was a nice chat. When I discussed the day’s docket with Judge Barry Andrew, who also knows my friend, we both felt that rearranging the court’s docket would help us both balance our workload. I am so glad this worked out for you and your children.

WM

Lane and Ava looked at each other and said simultaneously, “Cybil Raven!”

Six

“Meet us at the corner of Congress and Jefferson,” Jimmy’s text to Ava read. Ava and Jimmy had exchanged cell numbers the night before. Ava had texted Jimmy earlier that she and Lane would be downtown tonight celebrating and wondered if they could hang together. The car should be ready in the morning and tomorrow they’d head back to Bristol, Tennessee. Ava wanted especially to thank Cybil—at least buy her a few drinks—and find out how she got Judge Wilma to hear her case. After parking about three blocks away, they started walking down Jefferson Street. The air felt hot, humid, still 90 degrees, even at 10:30 p.m.

Lane looked forward to relaxing after a tough semester of nursing school classes and, happy for her friend, she was all in for tonight. Though she told Ava to remind her to stick to beer and avoid tequila shots. She didn’t want a repeat of the Bristol White Sox baseball team bus incident, the one with the engaged player and his crazy fiancée. Lane, taller than Ava, with a straighter, athletic build, dressed comfortably. White shorts, an orange cotton v-neck blouse and a black clutch gave her a relaxed look.

“Did Jimmy say who else was going to join us?” Lane asked.

Derrick was a washout from the night before, she remembered. Had to call his buddies on his cell to come get him; he couldn’t make it out of the lobby, she recalled, frowning.

Ava and Lane continued walking toward Congress Street, part of the crowds of other night clubbers ahead of and behind them,

and across the street. Sweat trickled down Lane's back, sliding over her tattoo, a calla lily wrapped around a Celtic cross. Next week on her ankle another tattoo would appear: her teenage son's name to celebrate his entering high school.

Ava said, "Cybil has some friends in town and may hang with us. That's what Jimmy told me earlier." Ava, in white pants, wore a gold swirl silk tank top with thin straps. The straps tied behind her neck tastefully, supporting her abundant bosom in a classy, sexy look. With her long blonde hair in a ponytail and perfect-length bangs, the mom of two little ones looked and felt 19 again.

"Hey, gorgeous, look up here," a wide-eyed, beer-bellied guy on a balcony yelled to the street.

Lane and Ava both looked at each other, smiled and continued on their way.

"We're going to have fun tonight, right?" Lane asked.

"You better believe it!" Ava said with a big smile.

"There's Jimmy, at the corner, with Cybil and another guy," Lane said.

They had finally arrived at Congress and Jefferson.

Seven

“How did you do it?” Ava shouted over the noise as she focused on Cybil, sitting next to her.

Ava, Lane, Jimmy, Tom, and Cybil sat squeezed together on the semicircular couch just inside the entrance to the Bacchus Lounge. The music playing sounded better suited for a nightclub than a classy lounge. The place looked full of the weekend crowd of upscale professionals, with a few SCAD ([Savannah College of Arts and Design](#)) students in shorts and sandals. Elie the bartender had just delivered the night’s first round, courtesy of Ava.

“Did what?” Cybil said, smiling.

“Oh, come on now, how did you get the lady judge to hear our case?” Lane asked, leaning over Ava.

She took a sip of her dark ale, waiting for an answer. Ava, Tom and Jimmy leaned in to hear since the bar noise got louder when a group of three women and two men came through the lounge door, talking loudly.

“I made a few calls. Things do tend to work themselves out,” Cybil said. She patted Ava on the knee and winked.

“Well, whatever you did, thank you.” Ava smiled at her. She stood up and motioned to Cybil to stand up for a hug, which Ava gave her.

“I’m glad for you. Tonight, just relax. Tomorrow will have its own troubles. Trust me, I know all about exes,” Cybil said, sitting down. Her smile was replaced by a different look.

Jimmy stood up, excused himself and started toward someone across the room who had waved him over. Tom moved closer to Lane and Ava. Tom, in dress slacks and black shirt, looked older than most of the crowd, with thinning black hair peppered with gray.

“Tom, what do you do?” Ava asked.

“I’m a freelance consultant in the aerospace industry. Used to work for NASA.”

“Really, I’m impressed,” Lane said. “How do you know Cybil?”

“Cybil was working last year’s Comic-Con Conference. She was modeling Space Siren outfits in a mock fashion show. I was there doing research for a concept comic. I wanted to talk to her, but she left before I could track her down. They wouldn’t let me backstage but they gave me her card.”

Cybil spoke up. “I get this e-mail from Tom and we start talking. I look him up on LinkedIn. I get a lot of guys after shows, you know, wanting to meet me. I find out he worked for NASA. My son wants to be an astronaut. Tom hooks me up with all kinds of resources for him. It was sweet.”

“Now he and I are writing a comic book together about a boy astronaut,” Tom said.

“No way, really?” Lane said.

“Yeah, after that I think a graphic novel about Cybil Raven in space would work,” Tom said, smiling.

Cybil talked loudly, to make herself heard. “Tom, you are *not* going to get me back in that outfit, no matter what you come up with!” She grinned broadly.

“We’ll see, we’ll see,” Tom said, smiling back. “Okay, next round is on me.”

He looked over to the bar to get Elie’s attention. Elie saw him and started toward them.

“I don’t believe it!” Lane shouted out.

“No, really, I’m buying,” Tom said.

“No, not that. Ava look, it’s Jerry!” Lane said.

Across the room, to the left of where Jimmy and his friend were talking, was Jerry D sitting at a table. He looked down to his phone, the light illuminating his face. He appeared to be texting. One drink was on the table.

“I’m going to talk to him,” Ava said, standing up.

“What! No, not after what that scumbag put you through, you are not,” Lane protested.

“It’s okay, I’ll be right back. I want to see if his girlfriend is going to show up. He’s probably texting her now,” Ava said.

Cybil stood up. “Ava.”

Ava stopped to listen.

“Just be careful,” Cybil said.

Ava looked at Jerry, then back to Lane, still sitting, and then back to Cybil.

“I just want to talk to him, and *her* if she’s coming here,” Ava said. Her eyes had gotten wider and her voice higher. She left and walked to his table.

“Just freaking great! We come all this way to fight him, and she goes right over there to him,” Lane said.

When Ava reached the table, Jerry, looking surprised, put down his phone and stood up. He pointed to an empty chair for Ava to sit in, which she did. They started talking.

Two groups of people came in one after another. Lane, Tom and Cybil remained on the couch talking. Lane kept an eye on Ava and Jerry, but the milling crowd kept blocking her view. Talking to Tom and Cybil, Lane lost track of time.

“Cybil,” Lane asked, “Jimmy told me a couple of friends were going to hang with us. Who’s missing?”

“Martin left today for his sailing tournament in South America. We’ve been seeing each other this summer. I thought he might take a flight tomorrow. He didn’t. He left.” Cybil’s expression was unhappy.

“So why don’t you just go see him?” Lane asked. “Aren’t your kids with your mom one more week?”

“Lane,” Tom said, “that’s not the point. Martin has to ask.”

“Isn’t that a bit old-fashioned?” Lane said.

“Maybe, Lane. Let me ask you. How do you know a guy is really into you and not just for the quick ride?”

“Well, he tries to spend time with you, not just party,” Lane said.

“Right,” Tom said. “And if he really is interested in a relationship, romantic or business or friendship, he tries. The harder he tries, the more interest he has.”

“And what if he doesn’t know what he wants?” Lane said.

“Then you don’t waste your time on him. After all, we’re not getting any younger, are we, Cy?” Tom said with a grin.

“Tom,” Cybil said.

“Yes?”

“Speak for yourself and ...” Cybil said holding up her middle finger and smiling.

Tom, Lane and Cybil all burst out laughing.

Lane’s phone, tucked in her shorts’ pocket, vibrated several times. She pulled out the phone and looked at the text. The sender’s name: Ava. It read: “with jerry at hotel c you in the am”

Lane’s head spun. She looked toward the table where Ava and Jerry had sat last. The crowd had dispersed, and the table was now empty. Lane stood up. Jimmy was coming back over to the group and saw Lane standing. Cybil and Tom stood up as well.

“Hey, where’s Ava?” Jimmy said, approaching the group, “What’s wrong, Lane, you look pissed!”

“I knew this would happen,” Lane said. “You will not believe where she is.”

“Where?” Cybil asked, her eyes filled with concern.

“With Jerry D at the hotel.” Holding up her phone, Lane snapped out the words: “She said she’ll see me in the morning.”

“It’s okay, Lane,” Cybil said, putting her hand on Lane’s arm. “Give her some room on this one. Ex-relationships are complicated,” Cybil said, looking at her with eyebrows raised high.

Lane seemed to relax. Jimmy moved next to her and grabbed her and Cybil’s hands.

“Let’s dance!” he said.

Tom smiled and waved his hand, telling them he would stay and watch their phones and purses. They moved to the dance floor. Tom ordered another round of drinks.

Though not much room was available, Jimmy, Lane and Cybil found a way to dance and relax. Jimmy, showing some moves, slid around both Cybil and Lane as they jumped up and down to the music, raising and waving their arms. Jimmy would alternate between Cybil and Lane, spinning them around and close-dancing with each of them. All smiles, they kept going until the music shifted, and then they came back to the couch where Tom was waiting.

“You guys looked great,” Tom said. “Jimmy you can dance, man!”

“Next time, join us, Tom,” Jimmy said.

“Let me lose a few pounds and maybe I will,” Tom said, patting his stomach.

Lane said, “Yeah, it would have been fun.”

Cybil sat next to Tom and started going through her purse. There seemed to be a light on inside.

Jimmy smiled and picked up his drink. Lane laughed and sat down on the other side of Tom. Lane glanced at Jimmy, thinking, *Too bad he's married*. She picked up her fresh bottle of ale and attacked her thirst.

Cybil had her phone out and was texting someone. Watching her, Tom leaned forward and drained his White Russian. He had seen this look before on her face. Last year, at dinner, while discussing the comic book storyboards, she left the table after a call and never returned. Tom had not heard from her for a month.

Cybil got up and motioned for the group to go outside. She left first, and Jimmy and Lane followed. Tom went to the bar to close out his tab, and then joined them outside.

In the stifling air, the group crossed the narrow, brick-lined road of Congress Street.

They stopped under a lamppost, where Cybil said to them, “I need to go. Tom, can you and I catch up next week? Jimmy, sorry to cut the evening short. Lane, I am so glad to have met you and Ava, give her my best.” Cybil’s voice was cool, businesslike.

“What is going on?” Lane asked.

“Sometimes Cybil’s work comes, well, unexpectedly,” Tom explained.

“At the most inconvenient of times,” Jimmy said, frowning.

Cybil smiled and looked to her right. At the corner of Jefferson and Congress, about 30 yards away, a large black sedan with dark windows pulled up to the corner and dimmed its lights.

Cybil looked at Tom, Lane and Jimmy, nodded her head, turned and strode toward the car. Her blue chiffon dress clung close to her body, the gathered pleats at her shoulders rustling as she moved. The open-back design formed a large “V,” exposing her muscled shoulders and smooth back, including a small mole on her right shoulder blade. The form-fitting dress hugged her shapely bottom, forming smooth curves of the clinging fabric. Her heels clicked sharply on the brick sidewalk as she quickened her pace, approaching the unmarked sedan.

The rear side door opened and Cybil started to get in. The rear cab was dark; no one seemed to be inside. She paused for a second, hand on the roof and looked back at the group. Even from that distance, the blue color of the dress set her eyes ablaze, and they appeared to flicker before they and Cybil disappeared into the blackness. The door closed, and the car sped away in silence.

Ukraine, (Formerly a Soviet Union State)

One

Cybil Raven, seated in window seat 23F, looked out to see the ground quickly approaching and was thankful the flight was nearing its end. Delta Flight 28, from Atlanta connecting through Paris, had taken over 16 hours in transit before landing at the [Borispol International Airport](#) in Kiev. The flight hit several patches of rollercoaster turbulence after it entered Ukrainian airspace. Despite her preference for sitting in the first car when riding Goliath or Mind Bender at Six Flags of Georgia, airsickness today became a first-time experience. Bent over in her seat, breathing into a white paper bag, she barely noticed the person who handed her ice water and warm towels. With 90 minutes left and after a few bites of homemade rye crackers from the caring flight attendant, her stomach settled down. Her mind clear, she completed memorizing her assignment brief before going to the restroom, shredding the document and flushing it down the toilet—the specially treated paper disappearing instantly in water. After stepping out of the restroom, she stood tall and stretched her athletic frame, reaching her hands high. Several men and a young woman to the rear of the aircraft leaned into the aisle looking forward. Cybil felt their eyes but looked toward the front to the cockpit, thinking, *I'm me again, let's go.*

Outside the baggage claim area, Cybil recognized Oxana Yushchenko from the exchanged e-mails and photos.

“Hello, I’m Angela Johnson,” she said, holding her hand out to Mrs. Yushchenko, who stood in front of her.

Oxana, smiling, looked over the graduate student from Emory University’s study abroad program. “You are pretty as well as smart. Welcome!” she said.

After the luggage went into the back of the minivan, Cybil jumped into the middle seat and sat next to Tatjana, the youngest in the family, at 16. In the front passenger seat the older girl, Bogdana, sat next to her mother, who slid in behind the wheel and with a quick look in the rearview mirror, took off into the exiting airport traffic. Tatjana, sporting short red hair with blonde streaks, jeans and sneakers, unplugged her headphones. Her ear lobes were triple pierced.

“I’m Tatjana. Do you like Red Hot Chili Peppers or Nine Inch Nails best?” she said, her English decent, with a light Slavic tone.

Angela smiled. “It depends on my mood. Nine Inch Nails I use for workouts, Red Hot Chili Peppers, I don’t like.”

Bogdana, wearing a flower-print smock and black shoes, turned around slowly. She had a large book in her lap that was open to pages of graphs and math symbols. Pronouncing every word slowly, she said, “My name is Bogdana, how do you do?”

“Bogdana has only recently begun her English studies,” Oxana explained. “We are so glad you are here during your studies. Sergei, my husband, is waiting at home for us. He baked his father’s holiday bread for your special visit. We hope to learn better how to speak and also more about America. We are to visit the United States on vacation soon.”

Cybil smiled and nodded her head. *Maybe.*

According to Cybil’s brief, Oxana was a former Olympic gymnast turned coach after her broken leg at the 2003 trials when

getting ready for Athens. She met Sergei at the hospital, where he was recovering from radiation poisoning, a hazard in his line of work. It was her second marriage, his first. Cybil looked at Oxana as she recalled these details. Turning her head, she looked out the car window to the streets of the city. Driving through the center of Kiev, they encountered construction projects littering their path. Unfinished buildings and half-built shopping centers with the common Western look signaled hurried international investments.

Ukraine is centrally located in the heart of Europe. Post Soviet Union breakup, it pursued and proved itself to be a reliable ally to the U.S., irritating Russia to no end. The Ukrainian security apparatus, even during the Cold War, went its own way from the KGB. That made the transition easier for Ukrainians to pursue their own national interest with the remaining lone superpower eager for a friend deep in the heart of the former Soviet Union. Cybil's success with her assignment, Sergei Yushchenko, would dictate more the future of this family's fate than any of these three could guess.

Two

Two years ago, Sergei Yushchenko had entered the U.S. Embassy in Moscow and applied for a travel visa, knowing his name would be flagged by American Intelligence. After a year of tentative courtship, Sergei got his offer to “visit” the U.S., his background working with the Iranian nuclear program too enticing for the U.S. Intelligence community. But there were questions: Was he real, or a misinformation plant? So they turned to the Interpol Valid Target Verification program, specially designed for situations like this. Cybil Raven, standout recruit and top graduate of VTV, had a spotless mission record, plus she fit the profile they needed. A young woman easily perceived as a graduate student studying abroad; friendly and talkative with other females and alluring enough, if needed.

Oxana drove the minivan to the underground parking garage of the 15-story apartment building where the family had been living for the last year. A short elevator ride to the lobby from the garage was followed by a walk up seven flights of stairs; the main elevator was out of service. At the end of the long hallway, the door to the Yushchenko home, number 799, awaited. Oxana led the group into the apartment.

“Hello, I am Sergei, nice to meet you.” Sergei shook Angela’s hand.

Tall, well-built, with black hair scattered with gray, Sergei surprised Cybil, who sized him up with, *No luster of desire, he's fatherly. Hmmm.*

"I hope your stay helps your studies," he said, his voice sounding genuine. "I'm fairly busy these days, but if you need something Oxana cannot help you with, she will let me know and I will try."

The five of them sat around the kitchen table sharing warm, buttered bread and some leftover borsch. The girls peppered Angela with questions—Tatjana the most. Oxana looked on quietly, smiling whenever Tatjana squealed at one of Angela's answers about America, music and entertainers. Bogdana's interest centered on education and that Emory University had an advanced mathematics program. Several questions about Atlanta and the warm weather of the South were asked—this past winter in Kiev was especially harsh.

After about an hour of small talk, Angela yawned and asked forgiveness though she was not tired.

Sergei spoke up. "Bogdana, Angela's flight was long. We are being rude. Please take her to her room so she can rest, it is almost bedtime. I am going for a walk, as usual." He rose, bowed to his family and guest and went toward the front door adjoining the kitchen.

Cybil's peripheral vision excellent, she noticed that before he walked out the door, he glanced back quickly at Oxana, who was clearing dirty dishes. His expression was sad. Tatjana went to the sink and started the faucet running. Angela got up and followed Bogdana down the short hall.

"Angela, here you stay, next door me, next door bathroom," Bogdana said.

She opened the door to a small, 10 x 12 room with whitewashed walls. A cheap metal TV dinner tray did double duty as a nightstand. There was no dresser. A single bed covered by a thin cotton blanket was pushed against the wall. Old, worn issues of *People* and *Us Weekly* magazines, in English, lay scattered on the floor beneath the nightstand. A small window above the head of the bed offered no view of the city; this building faced three others around a small square, each multistory apartment staring at the other.

Angela said, “This is fine. Thank you, Bogdana.”

Closing the door, Cybil placed her luggage in the corner and extracted her laptop from her Emory University canvas bag. Sitting on the bed—it creaked even under her light weight—she lifted the clamshell open. After a few minutes the global secure satellite connection started dialing her handler in the Ukraine. Plugging her earphones in, she kept an eye on the door, which had no lock.

The Interpol-encrypted communications software loaded on her laptop soon made the connection and Sonja, her handler, appeared on the screen.

“Cybil, nice of you to check in. You’re late.” Sonja’s voice was clear through the earphones.

Cybil typed in the chat window: “Sorry, small talk and borsch took priority over relieving your boredom. Looks like you got a haircut while waiting for me.” Protocol forbid verbalization unless in a secure, soundproof environment.

“Yeah, this blonde buzz cut will work better for my next assignment. You like it?” she said. Sonja smiled and turned her head left, then right, followed by her hand brushing over the top, smoothing the spiky lengths down, which shot right back up.

“It suits you. Is my package ready?” Cybil typed.

“Yes,” Sonja said, “a personalized gift is waiting for you in locker 7645G-at the [Universytet Train Station](#) off the [Sviatoshynsko-Brovarskaline](#) line. Everything you need for the next six weeks is there. The key to the locker is taped to the standard pickup spot. You have 24 hours to retrieve it before it is removed, as per drill.”

Cybil typed: “Good. See you at the next check-in. Bye.” She closed the clamshell and put the laptop on the floor.

Lying back on the pillow, Cybil looked at the featureless ceiling. Her eyes tried to focus but simply blurred. She turned on her side. Her nose twitched; the sharp smell of bleach remained in the pillow fabric. She blinked a few times, thinking, *I am tired*. A yellowish glow from the apartment’s central square lighting came in through the single window, seemingly shrinking the small room’s white walls. Cybil took a deep breath and closed her eyes. *Universytet Train Station ... morning, easy*. Within a few minutes Cybil Raven fell asleep.

Three

The next four weeks Angela lived with the Yushchenkos and fell into the normal pattern of activities for a modern Ukrainian family living on less than \$200 U.S. a month. *Sergei must be saving his \$100 a month provisional stipend from U.S. Intelligence*, Cybil thought. *It certainly did not show up in the groceries or any extras for Oxana and his daughters.* Breakfasts were small, followed by fruit and bread for lunch and meatless dinners. The repetitive menu made every mealtime seem the same, except for Sunday. Then pork, veal or lamb was added to enrich the meal. Friday nights were family game nights when Angela learned how competitive Tatjana and Bogdana were toward each other, especially at Monopoly, Russian language version. Tatjana would spend time in Angela's room after homework and ask questions about life in America—especially boys and sex. Bogdana kept to herself, reading in her room most nights except for one, when she asked Angela about the cost of graduate studies in the U.S. Both were devoted to their father, sitting with him or at his feet when he came home. He would tell them about his day at work at the Science Ministry, a temporary job beneath him, as he told it. The constancy of family life, with a father present, was unfamiliar to the Yushchenko's guest, with her own father having left her as a child.

Another constant was Sergei's nightly walks, which raised questions—especially since no one talked about them. In anticipation of following Sergei at some point, Angela made sure

that her “study” schedule had her out late several times at the Kiev University library and other locations.

Tonight, she told Oxana, a fellow exchange student had invited her to a local party at the university campus and she would be home late. Tonight, Sergei would have unseen company on his nightly walk.

Later that evening, Cybil stopped in the library bathroom and changed clothes before heading back to the apartment complex to wait for Sergei. On went a loose-fitting, worn sweat jacket and faded, one-size-too-large jeans. Sneakers replaced her pumps. From her train station packet, \$5,000 in Ukrainian currency, an untraceable Glock 9 mm, 6-inch switchblade and collapsible steel baton completed her outfit. As she walked out of the library, a few readers looked up at the androgynous figure with backpack who passed before them.

She hailed a cab and within 30 minutes was at the apartment complex. Across the square she found a discreet spot opposite the entrance that Sergei would come out of. She took her place, relaxed her posture and waited.

Cybil listened to the sounds coming from all floors in this four-building apartment complex. Little dogs barking, a man yelling, one or two children crying, a woman beating a rug on a balcony each thud in slow rhythm. Ukrainians on their balconies sat and drank, listening to radios. The smell of cooking beets, cabbage and pork drifted across the square. Clothes drying on hooks, lines and balcony rails on almost every floor looked much like hanging moss, the kind hanging from the many majestic live oak trees around Savannah, her home. Cybil’s continuous view of the entrance eventually paid off: Sergei stepped out into the complex square.

Cybil followed Sergei as all trained professional tails do, by blending into the foot traffic, staying close to the buildings to dart in and by using side streets to jump ahead and walk in front of the target. Sergei's walking pattern was unexpected. It had all the look of his trying to lose a tail and he was good at it—but not good enough. After 20 minutes Sergei arrived at his destination, a side street off a main thoroughfare. Cybil could not follow him down the short passageway. Passing by the open intersection she doubled back in time to peek around the corner and see Sergei walk up an outside wooden stairwell to a second-story apartment. He knocked on the door several times and looked around and back toward Cybil.

She retreated around the corner, leaned against the wall, putting her hands in her pockets. A couple holding hands walked by while talking with each other and never glanced at her. She strained to hear the faint knocking. Then the sound of a door opening and a woman's voice speaking Russian or Ukrainian. Cybil took a chance and cautiously looked around the corner again. Sergei was gone but she saw the door closing. Staying put, Cybil took a fresh cigarette pack from her jacket pocket, ripped off the cellophane and pulled a cigarette. She lit the thing and took a long, slow puff. She reached into her backpack and pulled out the *Us Weekly* from her room. *Got time.*

After stamping out the second to the last cigarette from the pack, she looked around the corner again. *Nothing.* The temperature had dropped, the night getting deeper, and it was cool. *Good thing it's not winter, I'd be freezing my ass off.* She took out her last cigarette and fired it up. A mechanical street sweeper driven by a large, uniformed fat man with a beard passed by, pushing around the dust and dirt. A small white cloud, lit by the high overhead lamps, floated behind, escorting the machine. The bearded driver turned his head toward her and smiled. She took a

drag, blew smoke into the air and gave the driver a small wave, the lit cigarette between her fingers.

As the drone of the street sweeper receded, a woman's voice became clear, as did the sound of a door closing and the wooden stairwell's creaking. *Damn!* Cybil slowly moved to the corner, her heart racing. Sergei could be walking out through the open intersection right now and spot her. Peeking, she saw him walk away down the street. Reaching the end he took a right turn and moved out of sight.

Cybil looked at the door. She had already texted the location to Sonja. Her team within days would bug the place. *Nothing more to do here.* Picking up her backpack, she started to walk away but stopped. *Got to know.* Returning to her location on the corner, Cybil leaned on the wall and slid down to the cold concrete. She reached into her backpack and pulled out a paperback and a penlight. She read the book, pretended to fall asleep and wake up and read again. She repeated this throughout the night as she waited, awake, all night.

When early risers started filling the street, Cybil stood up and stretched her frame, loosening the kinks. She pushed the jacket hood off and took several deep breaths. Her lower back hurt, so she bent over to extend it. She leaned back on the wall. By midmorning, around 9:00 a.m., she heard the door open again. This time she heard steps on the stairwell and then sharp clicking on stone. She quickly put her sweat jacket hood on, lowered her head, stuffed her hands in her pockets and slumped against the corner, feigning sleep. Cybil's peripheral vision caught a pair of shapely legs set off by yellow pumps and a white flared skirt ending just above the knees. The legs and pumps turned and passed right in front of her.

For the next two hours Cybil followed the woman from shop to shop, including a final stop at a butcher's where two large porterhouse steaks were fresh cut and wrapped with wax paper and string. In one hand the woman held the loops of her shopping bags filled with the day's acquisitions. The other hand carried the meat high under her arm like a rugby football. Cybil noted nothing unusual in the outing; no phone calls, no meetings with trench-coated men or women, merely shopping and a quick stop in a public restroom.

The woman finally returned home, entering via the wooden staircase. Cybil, at the corner, decided to wait till noon to see if anyone else visited the woman. The morning warmed up, and walking traffic increased. Cybil looked up, left and right down the street, leaning against the wall, thinking, *Been here too long, have to move*. The wind rustled tablecloths at the café across the street. Cybil yearned for hot coffee, the rumble in her stomach loud. The outdoor café tables had filled up with late-morning patrons, yet a few tables were open, one on the corner. It offered a clear view of the street and stairwell. Cybil stepped away from the wall, walked to the curb and checked the traffic. Crossing the street to the café, she sat at the table. Cybil took a deep breath, glanced across to the stairwell and ordered coffee and toast with jam.

The service took some time. She checked her backpack and pulled out a hundred-dollar bill from the \$5,000 stack. Eventually breakfast arrived at her table at the same time that two marked police cars of the [Militsiya](#), the Ukrainian National Police Force, pulled up. Their brakes squealed to a fast stop as doors opened and officers flowed out of the car.

A loud voice from inside the café behind her boomed, "Keep your hands in plain sight and stand up slowly. You will accompany us now to station."

Cybil took a sip of coffee before getting out of her seat. Putting the cup down, she held up her hands as she rose. Looking across the street, at the top of the wooden stairwell Cybil could see the woman outside her door, her arms folded across her chest, looking in Cybil's direction. *The bitch is smiling!*

Four

“Angela, your actual name, I do not believe,” the squat Militsiya police officer with a thick accent stated, leaning in. The bright overhead lights shone off his bald forehead. The interrogation room was painted government gray over concrete block. The obligatory two-way mirror hung on the wall opposite Angela. A taller, thin man in a dark suit, beige shirt and narrow tie leaned on the wall next to the mirror. His unfolded badge hung out of his jacket’s front pocket. His head was down as he picked his fingernails with a nail file. He looked up every so often during the questioning but quickly returned to his nails.

“Yes, my name is Angela. I am an American student studying abroad. I am living with the Yushchenkos. You have my passport. I gave you their number. Call them.” Angela insisted for the eighth time. She had to remind herself to be patient.

“Explain please, the contents of your backpack, unusual for a student, do you not think,” the thin man said. This was the first time he spoke, his accent less pronounced.

Angela’s face remained serious. “The baton, my father gave me as a gift for protection before I left. I thought I would buy him a local gun as a gift in return. Yes, it was reckless. I completely understand if you have to confiscate it. But please let me have my money.”

The man stopped his nail hygiene and slowly looked up at Angela. “It is dangerous to carry all that *cash*. Do you not think?”

“Yes, but that’s all I have left to cover my expenses until I leave. All I have is \$2,000,” Angela said to the man in the suit.

The man smiled. “Yes, yes, I understand your needs. Of course, you have to understand mine. Incidents such as this are internal security matters. I may have to report to higher officials. Or I may not.”

“That is your duty and right,” Angela said. “I certainly don’t want to appeal to the American Consulate for help. Too much trouble for me *and you*. The Yushchenko family is probably worried about me right now. I will leave having learned my lesson from your great country and leave with only what I have brought with me.” Angela lowered her head and eyes submissively.

The bald uniformed officer, leaning on the table, looked at his partner, who nodded. Both smiled. His partner walked out of the room. Within 10 minutes he returned with Angela’s backpack containing her clothes. Two thousand dollars in currency remained inside.

“You can go. We have called the Yushchenkos. The mother is coming to pick you up. You can wait outside,” the tall man said. “Do not come back to Kiev.”

The Yushchenkos’ minivan pulled up in front of the police station, Oxana driving and alone. Tatjana was at school and Bodgana at work. Oxana had finished her dawn-to-lunch shift at the nearby bakery, a new job. She did not say a word when Angela got in next to her. Both were silent as they traveled the 30 minutes home, parked, took the elevator and walked into the apartment.

Oxana said, “Well, you must be tired and hungry. I’ll make you some soup.”

“No thank you. Let me explain,” Angela said.

“It is okay, we can talk later. Remember this Saturday we go to soccer. You only have two weeks more. It is best you get some rest now.”

“Thank you. I will,” Angela said before walking past Oxana, to her bedroom. Oxana’s expression puzzled Cybil, causing her to wonder, *What does she think?*

Cybil shut the door and tossed her backpack in the corner. It nudged her canvas bag with the laptop. *I’ll check in with Sonja later.* Sitting on the edge of the bed, she took off her shoes and lay on her back, head on the pillow with hands clasped behind her head, her favorite thinking position. She turned on her side and looked across to the blank wall and stared into the whiteness. Cybil’s eyes did not close for an hour, her mind calculating: *got spotted—how; Sergei’s friend; mistress; handler; Oxana’s too quiet.* Soon the adrenaline in her system drained away, and she surrendered her eyes to sleep ... to dream of yellow pumps and beet soup.

Five

The weekend came, without Oxana and Angela talking about her run-in with the Ukrainian National Police force. Neither Sergei nor the girls brought it up. During the laptop check-in, Sonja, like the ex-sailor she was, reamed Cybil with just about every curse word available for taking unnecessary surveillance risks when a perfectly good set of electronic bugs would do. Cybil took the dressing down and promised to focus on finishing out her assignment: to gather remaining intel on Sergei for her final report.

“Is everyone ready to go?” Oxana said. She wore a soccer shirt a size too small, revealing her still svelte figure.

Sergei, at the door, smiling, wore his soccer shirt. Bogdana’s shirt was a size too large and not helpful to her look. Tatjana refused to wear a soccer shirt and after a fuss, Oxana relented.

“You look nice, Angela, please keep the shirt as our gift,” Oxana said.

Angela walked up to the door wearing her official Ukrainian soccer team yellow and blue shirt over jeans and dark blue flats, her backpack slung over her shoulder, as always.

After the drive to the stadium and waiting in line, the family of four plus one found their section and bench seats. Angela watched the game and cheered for the home team, but had a strong feeling of being watched. Several times she excused herself to the bathroom to take a walk around the stadium. On her third trip she

found her tail—actually three of them—before returning to her temporary family. The match was 0-0 by the end of the first half.

During the break plainclothes Militsiya, badges in front pockets, walked up to Sergei, pulled him aside and had a long conversation with him. Oxana looked at Sergei talking to the officers. She turned toward Angela, her face tense with worry. Tatjana and Bogdana asked their mother what was going on. She told them there was nothing to worry about and to keep watching the game, even though it was halftime. The conversation seemed to end with Sergei nodding. He then accompanied the officers back to his family.

“We must all leave now to go home,” Sergei said.

“Why, the game is not over.” Tatjana, now interested, had found a male friend to talk to in the row ahead of her.

“Do not argue with your father. We must leave,” Oxana said, glancing at Angela.

Sergei said, “These men will accompany us home. Angela and I are to ride with them. You girls go with your mother.”

During the ride home, with the officers in the front seat, Sergei explained to Angela that her visa had been revoked and she had to leave immediately. The officers would take her directly to the airport after she had collected her things.

“Sergei, why is this happening?” Angela said.

“I do not understand. They told me nothing. Did you do anything this week that would cause this?” Sergei asked.

Angela’s breathing started to quicken but Cybil’s training kicked in, slowing it down.

“I am only a student, I have not done anything. I don’t understand,” Angela said while thinking, *Oxana never said a thing to him.*

Angela observed Sergei, his face ashen. He looked forward, at the back of the officer’s head and sighed deeply. He was worried for good cause; defecting to the U.S.A. is risky, and attention from the country’s security apparatus, for any reason, is never a positive. The car stopped in front of the apartment complex. The officer in the passenger seat turned around and looked at Angela.

“You and I will go upstairs to get your things,” he said in perfect English. “We have 15 minutes before my partner calls for help. Any problems and the Yushchenkos will be arrested. Sergei will stay here until we return. Do you understand?”

Angela nodded.

She and the officer went upstairs to the apartment. Oxana and the girls had arrived before them. Oxana was making coffee.

“Here, sir, please have a coffee while you wait. I will make sure our guest packs quickly,” Oxana said.

The officer looked at Oxana and hesitated.

“I make a good cup of coffee. It will be all right. My father is ex-KGB,” she added with a light touch.

The officer sat down and waved his hand, “Get going.”

In the bedroom, Angela and Oxana worked together to pack everything. They talked as they stuffed clothes and other items in the suitcases.

“I am so sorry this happened. It is my fault,” Angela said.

“No, you were only doing what you thought best,” Oxana said. “The police told me what part of the city you were in. You must have followed Sergei.”

Damn! Angela's face started to warm, a sign it would turn red, but she took a few breaths and felt her cheeks cool. *What does she know?*

In a low voice Oxana said, "It is all right, you think perhaps you are helping, to tell me about Sergei. In America, women do not take, how do you say, any shit."

"You are right, I was curious. I interfered," Angela admitted.

"Sergei is Sergei. We need to get to America with him. We love as we have to. Nothing more, nothing less. The family is everything." Oxana shrugged her shoulders, sighed and zipped up Angela's small overnight bag, handing it to her without a smile.

Angela looked at Oxana for a few seconds and then said, "I am so sorry." She walked over to her and hugged her hard, holding her close. Angela could feel her shaking. "Please tell Tatjana and Bogdana I really enjoyed them and I like them a lot."

"Thank you for trying," Oxana said, kissing Angela on the cheek. "You must go now, it is time."

Six

After waiting at the Borispol International Airport in Kiev for eight hours with two surly Militsiya officers, Cybil boarded her 16-hour flight destined for JFK Airport in NY, connecting through Paris. Walking down the ramp to the waiting Airbus jet, she kept glancing back up the gangway. She stopped for a second at the plane's threshold, took a deep breath and walked in, leaving behind Oxana, the girls, her target, Sergei and for the first time on a mission, unfinished business.

On the flight's final approach to JFK airport, Cybil could see the familiar landmarks including, to the side, the World Trade Center site where the 9/11 Memorial continued to be constructed. Cybil paused for a second and then returned to reading. She had bought the latest *Vogue* in Paris. This issue had an article about older fashion models being in demand. After landing and retrieving her luggage, she booked a later flight to Savannah, Georgia. She needed time to file her report. She found the nearest business center with private booths, slipped into the last one in the row and closed the door.

Cybil opened her laptop and plugged her earphones in. The global secure connection dialed quickly, and Sonja appeared on the screen. She was looking to the side, talking to someone. She held up a finger, asking for a minute. After about five, Sonja turned and started talking.

“Cybil, welcome back! Learn anything while overseas ‘studying’?” Sonja said with a crooked smile.

“Yeah, never let you handle me again. Been a while since I had my ass chewed out like that. Sending final report file now.” Cybil smiled, typing her reply.

“Your ass will survive,” Sonja said, grinning. “I’ll file the report for record keeping, but it won’t be needed now.”

“What?” Cybil typed and mouthed the word for Sonja to see.

“They extracted Sergei about eight hours ago while you were still over the Atlantic,” Sonja said. “Some shithead local cop trying to make a name for himself alerted anyone who would listen about the American girlfriend of Sergei. Our side figured that whether he was the real deal or not, we had to get him. I guess your bribe backfired.” Sonja’s face looked somber.

“So when are they arriving?” Cybil typed.

“Sergei is at an undisclosed location for now, being debriefed. His family is still in the Ukraine.”

Cybil typed as fast as she could: “No! What happened?”

“The plan was for the whole family. An emergency extraction applies only to the primary target. Sometimes they refuse, Sergei did not.”

He left them. “Will they be brought out later?”

Picking up on Cybil’s concern, Sonja said with a softer tone, “Not sure. Always uncertain, this business.”

“Do me a favor?” Cybil typed. She leaned forward and started directly into her laptop’s camera.

“Yeeessss,” Sonja said.

Cybil typed furiously: “It is off protocol, but I know you have means to do all kinds of shit I should not even ask about. Could you redirect my mission pay to continue Sergei’s stipend until it runs out, but get it to Oxana instead. And we can call it even about Istanbul.”

Sonja’s expression went blank, her eyes glassy. A slow, wide grin spread across her face. “Hmm, so you’re willing to give up that chit for these folks. Sergei’s stipend was peanuts. You are very well paid. You sure you want them to have it?” Sonja said.

“Look, I have my reasons. Can you do it?” Cybil finished typing and her fingers hovered over the keyboard. She looked up at the screen, her eyebrows high on an expectant face.

“Okay, okay, I’ll see what I can do, no promises,” Sonja said. “I have your report. This call is terminated. The Sergei Yushchenko Mission file is closed.”

Cybil smiled. *No promises from Sonja is as good as yes.*

On the flight home to Savannah, Cybil tried to rest, her mind couldn’t. Left behind, Oxana, Tatjana and Bogdana would have a hard time despite Cybil’s financial gesture. The Militsiya would be sniffing around, the young girls watched as well as their pretty mother; uncertainty a daily reality for the abandoned family. *Sergei left. Men leave.* Cybil hated to know this.

The plane started its descent, shallowing its altitude before making the final approach turn. She leaned against the window looking out into the clouds. They were white and puffy, ephemeral; here one moment, gone the next. She peered the ground. She noticed a large black bird gliding smoothly, alone. *Interesting.* She felt that familiar need to be ready. Looking up, she scanned the horizon, saw the Savannah River and watched it spill itself into the Atlantic Ocean. Large freighters and ships waited off the coast, eager to run against the river’s current. She stared at the ground as

houses became larger and larger. She imagined Sebastian and June, her children playing at home, looking up and seeing her plane and pointing it to, motioning to their watchful sitter. She imagined them waving at the plane, running around in their yard saying mommy will be home soon.

Author's Note

Cybil Raven Beginnings is an original work. Please enjoy this brief introduction to Cybil Raven, the central character in the Cybil Raven Chronicles, a new series of stories set in Savannah, Georgia, and other parts of the world. These three brief tales, loosely based on a series of true events, introduce us to her world.

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Visit www.cybilraven.com to learn about this compelling, close to real-life character and her upcoming adventures.

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Author: Tony Timbol, www.tonytimbol.com

Creative Partner: Crystal M. Craven,
www.crystalmcraven.com

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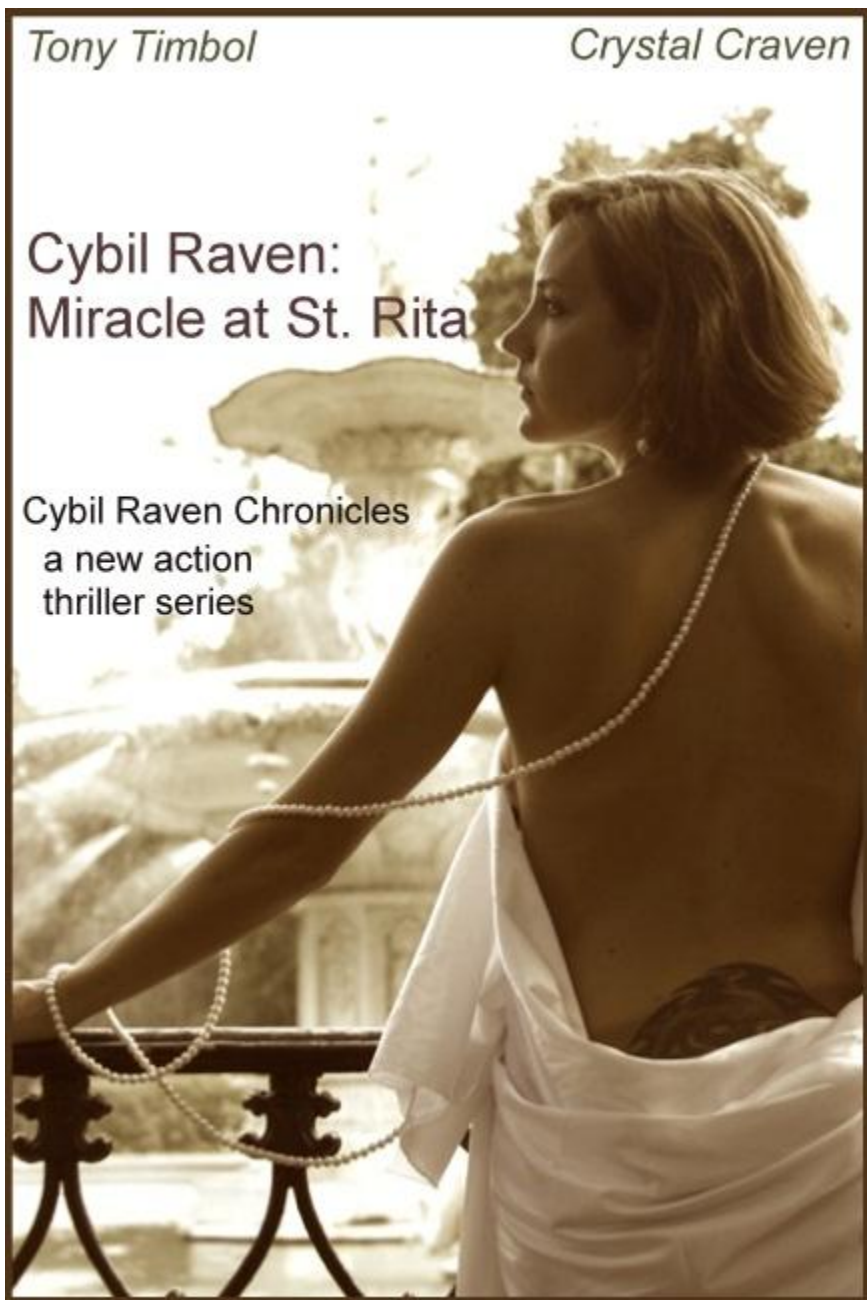
Finally to my creative partner Crystal M. Craven, much thanks and appreciation for her significant artistic and numerous other contributions to, what we believe, is the creation of a compelling story arc and a fascinating character fit for these times.

Tony Timbol

Crystal Craven

Cybil Raven: Miracle at St. Rita

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