

TIMOTHY R. BALDWIN

Dynasty of Deceit

A Cassie Maddox Mystery, Book 2



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Welcome to Lenape City

Lenape City remembers everything.

The streets keep their secrets, the skyline watches in silence, and behind the polished doors of power, the past is never as buried as people hope.

Private investigator Cassie Maddox has already learned that truth in Lenape City rarely comes easy. What begins as a routine investigation soon pulls her into a web of old money, political influence, and carefully guarded family legacies. The deeper she digs, the clearer it becomes: some names carry power—and some secrets are worth killing to protect.

In *Dynasty of Deceit*, Cassie moves beyond the shadows of her first case and into the halls where Lenape City's most powerful families built their empires. But in a city built on reputation and inheritance, exposing the truth may cost more than she ever expected.

Coming Soon to the Series

Book 3: *Behind the Ivy*

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Paper Trail

The spreadsheet on my laptop had outlived its original purpose. It began as a handful of transactions—fractured into tabs, notes, color-coded cells. Now the page won't fit on my screen without compressing the truth into something unreadable.

I push back from the desk.

February snow slants past the window in heavy flakes. Across from me, Rafi scrolls in silence, the soft click of his mouse the only sound in the office. We weren't hunting surprises anymore. We needed confirmation. Patterns don't materialize. They wait until you've stared at them long enough to admit they were never coincidences.

"Anything?" I ask, unable to keep the frustration from my voice.

Rafi glances up, his warm eyes meeting mine. "Not yet. But the variance is tightening. There's a pattern here."

I sigh, rubbing my temples. "We've been at this for weeks, Rafi."

He sets down his pen, giving me his full attention. "Cassie, these things take time. Your uncle's smart—if he is involved, he's covered his tracks well."

My uncle—Alfred Maddox. Not close. Never close. Just present in the way money is present, especially at his establishment, The Genesee Country Club. His polished smile. The flash of his cuff links, a set paired with every three-

piece suit he owned. The way he called me “kiddo,” though he was as much of a stranger to me as I was to him. During my last investigation, his eyes never quite met mine when I attempted to bait him. It’s like trying to catch smoke—there one moment, gone the next.

“I know, I know,” I mutter, more to myself than to Rafi. “It’s just..”

Rafi leans forward, his voice low and steady. “Trust your instincts, Cassie. They’ve never led you astray before. If you think there’s something here, there probably is.”

My eyes drift back to the laptop screen, determination renewed. “You’re right. Let’s keep digging.”

As we return to our respective tasks, I can’t help but steal glances at Rafi. His presence is a balm to my frayed nerves, even as it stirs up other, more complicated feelings. I push those thoughts aside, focusing on the numbers before me. There’s too much at stake to get distracted now.

The silence stretches between us, broken only by the rustle of paper and the soft tapping of keys. I lose myself in the financial records. But Rafi’s right. We’re close to creating a clear picture of the college admission scheme Mel Albright has herself tangled up in because of my uncle. I only hope we can gather enough evidence to get Mel, one of many likely victims, out of their financial obligations and pin it all on the one who is truly responsible, or so we suspect.

I rub my temples, the dull ache behind my eyes intensifying. The implications of what we’re uncovering hit me like a freight train. A thought I hate, and one I don’t earn with evidence, flares anyway. What if Dad knew what my uncle has been up to?

“Cassie?” Rafi’s voice pulls me back to the present. “You okay?”

I force a smile. My gaze drifts to the window, the cold glass a stark contrast to my warm skin. Outside, a fresh blanket of snow, pristine white, covers the Lenape City skyline, the familiar buildings silhouetted against the darkening, bruised-purple sky. “Do you ever think about what happens after? If we’re right about this, it’s not just Uncle Alfred who goes down. It could be my whole family.”

The words taste bitter in my mouth. I’d seen what Alfred does to obstacles.

They don't just lose; they disappear—jobs, reputations, sometimes whole lives. There's no predicting what my uncle would do to family.

Rafi's chair creaks as he leans in. "This is odd." His finger traces a line on the spreadsheet. "A transfer from Ignite Global to Genesee."

I snap to attention, previous thoughts momentarily forgotten. "Let me see that." I scan the numbers, my heart racing. "You're right. This could be how they're hiding it."

We lock eyes, the excitement of a potential breakthrough palpable. "We need to dig deeper into the Country Club's finances," I say, already reaching for my laptop.

Rafi's gaze sharpens. "I'll see what I can find on their digital trail."

As we dive back in, part of me wants to pull back, to protect my father and mother from the storm that's coming. To do so would make me just as complicit with my uncle's schemes. I chew my lower lip as my eyes hover over the lines of numbers before me. Ignite Global just may be the lead we need to follow a dangerous road to taking my uncle down.

With dramatic flair, the door swings open, and Lila bursts in like a whirlwind of color and energy. "Coffee delivery for the world's most dedicated private eyes!" she announces, her blue-streaked pixie cut bobbing as she sets down a tray laden with steaming mugs.

I can't help but smile at her entrance. "Lila, you're a lifesaver."

"Don't I know it," she winks, passing me a mug. The rich aroma of freshly brewed coffee fills the air, momentarily drowning out the musty scent of old papers.

Lila's eyes narrow as she takes in the cluttered desk and our haggard appearances. "Seriously, Cass? When was the last time you slept? This case is eating you alive."

I take a sip of coffee, savoring the bitter warmth. "We're close to something big, Lil."

"Uh-huh," she says, unconvinced. With an exaggerated eye roll that would put a teenage drama queen to shame, she declares, "That's it. We're going to Phantom Beats tonight. No arguments."

"Lila, I can't just—"

“Nope!” She cuts me off. “You need a break before you turn into one of these dusty old files.”

I turn to Rafi for support, but he raises his hands in surrender. “Don’t drag me into this. You know clubs aren’t my scene.”

Traitor.

Lila’s grin is triumphant. “See? Even Rafi agrees you need a night off.”

I sigh, knowing I’m outnumbered. “Fine, fine. One night out.”

“Yes!” Lila pumps her fist. “But one condition—absolutely no work talk. I mean it, Cassie. Leave the case files at home.”

As she sashays out of the room, I can’t help but chuckle. Maybe one night of normalcy is exactly what I need to face whatever comes next.

I take a sip of the coffee Lila brought, savoring the rich flavor. It’s a stark contrast to the bitter dregs I’ve been nursing for hours. Rafi catches my eye, a hint of amusement playing at the corners of his mouth.

“She’s got a point, you know,” he says, leaning back in his chair. “Even brilliant minds need a recharge sometimes.”

I roll my eyes, but there’s no real annoyance behind it. “I thought you were on my side.”

He shrugs, his expression softening. “I’m always on your side, Cassie. That’s why I agree with Lila. You’ve been pushing yourself too hard.”

The sincerity in his voice catches me off guard. My chest tightens with a mix of gratitude and something else I can’t quite name. To cover the moment, I gesture at the piles of documents surrounding us.

“And what about all this? The trail could go cold if we take our eyes off it for even a second.”

Rafi’s response is calm, measured. “The documents will still be here tomorrow. Your health and sanity, on the other hand..”

I can’t help but laugh. “Are you implying I’m going insane, Alvi?”

“I’m implying that even the most dedicated investigator needs balance,” he counters, his tone gentle. “And Lila has a gift for bringing that balance into our lives, doesn’t she?”

As if on cue, Lila’s laughter echoes from somewhere in the building. It’s infectious, lightening the atmosphere even from a distance. I smile despite

the weight of our investigation.

“She has that effect,” I admit, taking another sip of coffee. The warmth spreads through me, releasing the tension I’ve been carrying. “I don’t know what I’d do without her. Or you, for that matter.”

Rafi’s eyes widen slightly at my admission. He clears his throat, suddenly very interested in the spreadsheet in front of him. “Well, um, that’s what friends are for, right?”

Deep in a case, it’s easy to lose sight of the support system I have.

“You’re right,” I say finally. “Both of you. A night out is exactly what I need.”

Rafi lifts his head. Relief softens his features. “Good. Because if you didn’t agree, I’m pretty sure Lila was planning a kidnapping.”

We share a laugh, the tension of the investigation momentarily dissolving. I turn back to my laptop with renewed purpose. The path ahead is still murky, fraught with potential danger, but I’m not walking it alone. And sometimes that makes all the difference.

As Lila’s footsteps fade down the hallway, Rafi leans forward, his eyes bright with newfound energy. “Cassie, I’ve got something here,” he says, tapping his finger on a column of numbers. “These transfers between the Genesee Country Club and your uncle’s foundation. The timing is... interesting.”

I lean in, my heart quickening as I scan the data. “You’re right,” I murmur, my mind racing. “It’s like clockwork, always right after a major donation to the university. But why route it through the country club?”

Rafi’s fingers fly across his keyboard. “Could be a way to obscure the paper trail. Let’s cross-reference these dates with the club’s event calendar.”

We fall into a familiar rhythm, the quiet hum of computers and rustling papers punctuated by our focused exchanges.

“Here,” I say, pointing to a series of entries. “Check out these ‘private events’ at the club. They line up perfectly with the transfers.”

Rafi’s brow furrows. “And the guest lists for these events?”

“Conveniently missing,” I reply, frustration creeping into my voice. “Of course.”

As we dig deeper, I find my thoughts drifting to my uncle—Alfred Maddox, a name that keeps resurfacing on financial records from a case file we couldn't let rest. At this point, we're acting on speculation, hoping to find that solid shred of evidence on which to hang Mel's case.

"Cassie?" Rafi's voice breaks through my reverie. "Where'd you go just now?"

I blink, forcing myself back to the present. "This goes way beyond just my uncle, doesn't it?"

Rafi's expression softens. "It does. But we're doing the right thing here. You know that, right?"

I swallow hard. "I do. It's just... messy."

"Life usually is," Rafi says with a wry smile. "But hey, that's why they pay us the big bucks, right?"

I snort. "Oh yeah, I'm rolling in it. All those long nights and cold coffee? Totally worth it for my nonexistent fortune."

We share a laugh; the tension easing slightly. As we turn back to our work, I scan the document in front of me, and suddenly, my heart leaps into my throat. "Rafi," I whisper, my voice barely audible over the hum of the office. "Did you see this?"

I slide the paper across the desk, my hand trembling slightly. Rafi leans in, his brow furrowing as he reads. The document is a financial statement from The Genesee's Scholarship Fund, and there, clear as day, is a transaction with Alfred Maddox's personal account.

"Holy shit," Rafi breathes, his eyes widening. "This could be it, Cassie. The smoking gun?"

My mind races, thoughts colliding like pinballs. This is the break we've been waiting for, but the implications...

"We need to verify this," I finally manage, my voice hoarse. "Cross-reference it with the other accounts; see if there's a pattern."

Rafi's already pulling up spreadsheets on his laptop. "On it. But Cassie, if this checks out..."

"I know," I cut him off, not ready to hear it spoken aloud. Pence's rooftop allegations press in—my father's reputation not as spotless as I once believed,

my grandfather's potential mishandling of funds at the old Lenape Savings and Loans. I didn't have the guts to verify these allegations. So, why now? Conducting a deep dive into my uncle's affairs seems somehow safer, easier. But if we do find something, what does that say about the whole of the Maddox name?

We work in tense silence for a few minutes, the only sounds the clicking of keyboards and shuffling of papers. My heart pounds so loud I'm sure Rafi can hear it.

"Cassie," Rafi says softly, breaking the silence. "We've got multiple corroborating transactions. This... this could be the lead we need."

I close my eyes, taking a deep breath. When I open them, I meet Rafi's gaze. "We have to pursue this," I say.

Rafi meets my eyes, his jaw tightening just a fraction. "Are you sure? This could have serious consequences, not just for your uncle, but for you and your family."

I picture my father's face when he finds out. I remember the family dinners. The holidays. Though he was ever elusive, I wanted to believe the image—successful and a part of my family. That is until he offered me the opportunity to go on a guaranteed scholarship to Dartmouth. Something felt off about my uncle's offer, and that's when I followed my parents' lead. I distanced myself from him. That's also why I took on Mel Albright's case. She and countless other students had their futures manipulated, and their hard work undermined by this scheme.

"I'm sure," I say, my resolve solidifies. "We owe it to the truth, and to everyone affected by this scandal. We can't back down now."

Rafi reaches across the desk, squeezing my hand briefly. "Alright then. Let's do this."

As we dive back into our work, the weight of what's coming settles on my shoulders.

"We need to follow the money trail," I say, tapping my pen against a notepad. "These transactions through Ignite Global—they're our best lead."

Rafi's fingers fly over his laptop keyboard. "I can set up an algorithm to track similar patterns across other accounts. If we can establish a consistent

flow of funds...”

“...we might just nail him,” I finish, a mix of excitement and dread coursing through me.

We work in tandem, the familiar rhythm of our partnership falling into place. Rafi’s tech savvy complements my investigative instincts. For a moment, I’m grateful for his unwavering support as we outline our next steps—subpoenas to prepare, interviews to conduct. This is what I’ve trained for, what I’ve built Maddox Investigative Services to do.

But as the adrenaline of the moment fades, reality sets in. I lean back in my chair, the weight of what we’re about to undertake settling over me like a heavy blanket.

“This could tear my family apart.” I whisper, more to myself than to him.

Rafi places a warm, grounding hand on my shoulder. “You’re doing what’s right, Cassie. It’s who you are.”

I take a deep breath. The path ahead is fraught with danger—legal, personal, emotional. I reach for my phone and send a message to my uncle.

Tomorrow. At his house.

If I’m going to dismantle a member of my own family, I’ll do it to his face.

Pressure Points

The imposing structure of Alfred's mansion looms before me. I take a deep breath, straighten my jacket, and approach the entrance. The doorman nods with recognition as if I'm expected—which, of course, I am—and I step into the hushed opulence of the lobby.

My footsteps echo on the polished marble as I make my way toward Alfred's office. With each step feeling heavier than the last, the weight of my suspicions press down through my ribs. I pause outside his door.

"You can do this, Cassie," I mutter, then knock.

"Come in," Alfred's voice calls out, smooth as ever.

I push open the door, plastering on a smile. "Uncle Alfred. Hope I'm not interrupting."

From behind his desk surprise flickers across his face for half a breath before it's replaced by his usual charm. "Cassie. Punctual as usual. What can I do for you?"

I settle into the chair across from him. He closes his laptop and clears a few papers to the side, as if making space for me in his world. On the desk, a framed photo catches my eye—Alfred with another man around his age, both sharply dressed, posed in front of a symmetrical brick building with a distinctive belt course of raised stonework.

I reach for the photograph.

"Is this—"

“Penamore College,” Uncle Alfred says with pride. “And that’s Dean Harold Stratford, Ph.D.D.” His smile turns faintly amused. “You of course know the other handsome devil.”

I return the smile, polite enough to pass, not enough to hide the quickened rhythm in my pulse. “I didn’t know you had ties with the college.”

“The Genesee set up the Genesee–Penamore Action Fund in partnership with the college,” he says. “But that’s as far as the partnership goes.”

I cross one leg over the other, rest my elbow on the arm of the chair, and let my smile sharpen into something deliberate. “Funny you should bring that up. I’m working on a case right now involving financial records. Lots of transactions between educational institutions and private foundations. It’s fascinating how money moves in those circles.”

I wait for a flicker of recognition or discomfort.

Nothing.

Alfred’s expression remains impassive, posture relaxed. Too relaxed.

“Is that so?” he asks with an easy smile. “I’m pleased to offer whatever advice I can. As you already know, the world of finance can be quite complex—especially for large institutions and charitable organizations.”

“Absolutely,” I say. “It’s amazing how intricate some of these transactions can be. I’ve seen some patterns that are... intriguing, to say the least.”

Alfred’s eyebrow rises slightly. “Intriguing? How so?”

“Oh, you know,” I say, aiming for casual. “Unusual patterns of donations. Scholarships that don’t quite add up. That sort of thing.”

As I speak, I concentrate on micro-expressions, shifts in body language—anything.

Nothing.

His composure is infuriating. And I have to admit, impressive.

“Well, Cassie,” he says, leaning back, “I’m sure there are perfectly reasonable explanations for whatever you’re seeing. The world of high-level finance and philanthropy can seem opaque from the outside.”

I bite back a retort. Stay calm. Stay smart. This man is a master of deflection with a facade that won’t easily crack.

I knew that coming in.

PRESSURE POINTS

I uncross my legs and set the photograph back down—slightly off-kilter. “You’re right, Uncle Alfred. But sometimes what seems opaque can become painfully clear under scrutiny. Especially when subpoenas start landing.”

His fingers tighten almost imperceptibly on the armrest. His face doesn’t change.

“Subpoenas?” he chuckles, practiced and hollow. “My dear, you’re letting your imagination run wild. Unless I misunderstood you, you just started working on your little financial case against...” He tilts his head. “Who did you say?”

“I didn’t.” I lean forward, my voice lowering. “But some transactions I’m seeing tell a familiar story. One about a teenage girl receiving a full-ride scholarship in crew even though she never applied for it—never touched a paddle in her life.” I laugh once, sharp. “Imagine that. And when she dropped out, even getting into community college was a bitch.”

For a split second, something flickers behind his eyes—anger, annoyance, a spark of something human.

Then it’s gone.

“Cassie,” he says, tone gentle but firm, “I can assure you I had nothing to do with your poor decisions so many years ago.”

My jaw tightens.

I reach for the Newton’s Cradle nestled on his desk and give a gentle tug on one ball, setting the steel in motion, watching it swing back and forth with mesmerizing precision.

Maybe I do it because I need something in this room to admit cause and effect.

“Maybe not,” I say, voice low and even. “But engaging in bribery and financial fraud raises red flags for an auditor. And that often leads to conviction. Prison time.”

I let the words hang there. Clean. Sharp. Final.

Alfred never lets his eyes settle on the cradle.

He leans forward and adjusts the photograph, straightening it with careful fingers.

“So can libel, my dear niece,” he says. “I do hope you avoid another costly

mistake. Especially one that drags your colleague down with you.” His smile is almost kind. “How’s Rafi, by the way?”

The air shifts.

I bite my lip. For the first time, I’m at a loss for words.

I came in with two of a kind. A pair at best.

He’s holding a royal flush and smiling like he’s doing me a favor.

“I assure you,” he continues, voice soothing, “there’s nothing to worry about. Perhaps you’re simply seeing shadows where there are none.”

I force myself to breathe.

He’s good. I’ll give him that.

But his composure only fuels my determination.

“Maybe you’re right,” I concede, forcing a smile that doesn’t reach my eyes. “I suppose I can get carried away sometimes.”

I stand.

As I turn toward the door, my mind is already racing, plotting my next move. This conversation didn’t crack Alfred’s façade—but he freely admitted ties to Penamore.

And he volunteered a name I didn’t ask for.

That’s something I can use.

Outside, the crisp February air nips at my cheeks as I descend the marble steps, but I barely notice. My thoughts replay every nuance of the exchange like a recording I can’t shut off.

His composure was impeccable—almost too perfect. He didn’t flinch at subpoenas. He didn’t blink at Penamore. But when he said Rafi’s name, he said it like a password.

When I get into my car, I pull out my phone and fire off a text to Dad.

2 Beans Café.

His reply comes almost instantly:

See you there.

* * *

PRESSURE POINTS

I push open the door to 2 Beans Café, the familiar rush of warmth and coffee wrapping around me. Dad's already seated in the back corner, jacket still on, hands cupped around a mug like he's been waiting longer than he'll admit.

"Hey, kiddo," he says, sliding the coffee toward me before I sit. "You've got the face of someone who picked a fight with someone who fights back."

I huff a quiet laugh and take the cup. "That obvious?"

He studies me over the rim. "You've got the Maddox set to your jaw. The one where you learned something you didn't want to be right about."

I don't answer right away. Steam curls between us. Finally, I say, "I talked to someone today. Someone careful. Someone who knows how to stay clean while other people get dirty."

Dad's mouth tightens a fraction. "And?"

"And I couldn't crack him," I admit. "But I rattled him."

"That's not the same thing," he says evenly.

"No," I agree. "It's worse."

He leans back, eyes never leaving mine. "Tell me what he did, not what you think it means."

I consider how much to give him. Then I choose one clean thread.

"He volunteered the name of a fund. One I didn't ask about." I take a sip, buying steadiness. "And he warned me about libel before I accused him of anything."

Dad nods once. "Defensive move. Means he thinks you're close enough to matter."

"Or close enough to crush," I say.

"Same thing," he replies. "Depends on who gets there first."

I trace a finger along the rim of my mug. "He also knew my partner's name."

That gets his attention. Dad's gaze sharpens. "Without you offering it?"

"Yes."

"That's not coincidence," he says. "That's reconnaissance."

The word lands heavy.

I let it settle. "So what do I do?"

He doesn't answer right away. Instead, he asks, "Did you threaten him?"

“I implied scrutiny. Auditors. Paper trails.”

Dad exhales slowly. “Then you’ve done all the talking you’re going to do with him for now.”

“Dad—”

“Cassie.” Gentle. Firm. “If he’s as careful as you say, the next move isn’t conversation. It’s containment.”

I sit back, listening.

“You don’t confront people like that,” he continues. “You box them in. You figure out who touches the money, who files the paperwork, who signs without understanding what they’re signing. You make it impossible for them to keep their hands clean.”

My pulse slows, replaced by something steadier.

A plan.

Dad takes a sip, then adds, quieter, “And you don’t do it alone.”

I hesitate. “I wasn’t planning to bring you in. Not yet.”

A corner of his mouth lifts. “Good. You shouldn’t. Not until you’ve got something that doesn’t disappear the second someone makes a call.”

There it is—the line between us. Still intact. Still tense.

“I’m running into the same thing on my end,” he goes on. “Roadblocks. Missing files. Orders that don’t come in writing.”

“From Burgess?” I ask carefully.

His jaw tightens. “From people who answer to him.”

That’s all he gives me.

And it’s enough.

Dad sets his mug down. “Here’s my advice, Cass. Don’t focus on the man. Focus on the system he’s hiding behind. Institutions get sloppy. People like him don’t.”

It locks into place—the fund name, the threat, the polish, the way he said Rafi like he already owned a file on him.

“Thanks,” I say. “That’s exactly what I needed.”

He studies me for a moment, then nods. “Be careful.”

“I will.”

We stand. There’s an awkward beat—the space where things could be said

PRESSURE POINTS

and aren't. Then he gives my shoulder a brief squeeze.

As I step back onto the street, the cold air clears my head.

Alfred didn't lie to me.

He didn't have to.

He showed me which threads not to pull.

I pull out my phone and text Rafi:

Genesee-Penamore Action Fund. Need filings, admin names, and event calendars. No more conversations. We build the box.

His reply comes seconds later.

On it.

I slip the phone into my pocket and start walking.

This time, I'm not chasing Alfred.

I'm chasing the paper he thought no one would follow.

Recruiting Allies

I burst through the door of my office, purpose hot on my tail. “Did you find anything on Genesee–Penamore Action Fund? Stratford?”

Rafi’s eyes flicker to meet mine. “Good morning to you, too, Cass.”

“Good morning, Rafi,” I say, my eyes shifting away from his gaze and onto a stack of documents. “What’s all this?”

“Dead ends.”

“Shit!”

“Exactly,” Rafi says. He shifts the monitor toward me.

“Nothing there, either?” I ask.

Rafi taps the stack of papers next to him. “Listen, Cassie,” he says. “Setbacks are just part of the investigative process.”

I square my shoulders and suck in a breath. Focus on the institution, not the man, my father had advised. “Let’s table Alfred, the Action Fund and Dean Stratford.”

Rafi’s eyes widen. “Who are you and what did you do with my friend?”

I smile. “Ignite Global. That’s our focus. Secondary is The Genesee. Let’s assume, just for a moment my uncle is clean.”

Rafi’s fingers fly with rapid precision over the keyboard, his skin an amber warmth, his deep brown eyes aglow in the monitor’s light. He catches my gaze. “What?”

Heat radiates to my cheeks. “It’s... warm in here.” I undo my jacket and

loosen my scarf, and lean in. “What’ve you got?”

“We focus on what we’ve got,” Rafi replies, gesturing to the documents. “These financial records are from Ignite Global. We’ve already found some interesting discrepancies. From there, we cross-reference what we have electronically. We build a solid case, one that points to... whoever... is running Ignite Global.”

I’m about to respond when the office door flies open, bringing with it a whirlwind of blonde hair, flakes of snow, and nervous energy. Mel Albright bursts in, her usually graceful movements now sharp with urgency.

“Cassie!” she exclaims, slightly out of breath. “We’ve got a problem.”

I straighten in my chair, my senses on high alert. “What’s going on, Mel?”

She paces the small space, her athletic frame taut with tension.

“I just got back from The Genesee. Mr. Maddox—he said my acceptance to Penamore could disappear overnight if I didn’t do what he wanted.”

My stomach drops. “What? How can he do that?”

Mel runs a hand through her hair, her voice trembling slightly. “I don’t know, but he seemed pretty confident. And with the Gala coming up... Cassie, this could ruin everything I’ve worked for.”

I stand up, moving to place a steadying hand on Mel’s shoulder.

“Tell me exactly what he said.”

“He asked me how excited I was about Penamore. Told me it was a fine institution—very particular about its standards.”

She swallows.

“Then he said admissions files don’t really close when people think they do. That they stay... flexible. Especially when funding is involved.”

I don’t interrupt.

“He asked whether I’d ever had reason to look closely at the source of my scholarship money. Whether I was confident everything attached to my application would hold up to a second look.”

Her voice drops.

“And then he said, ‘I’d hate for something administrative to interfere with your fall plans.’”

She meets my eyes.

“He never used the word revoke. He didn’t have to.”

My mind races, trying to piece together this new development. Is this Alfred striking back? The thought retreats.

“Did he say why?” I ask.

Mel shrinks back. “You know why.”

I exchange a glance with Rafi. “We’re already backing off of my uncle.”

Mel takes a deep breath, her eyes darting between Rafi and me. “There’s more,” she says, her voice dropping to a near whisper. “The Super Sleuths followed us.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “The Super Sleuths? You mean those high school kids?”

Mel nods, her fingers fidgeting with the strap of her bag. “Abby and I were getting into Mr. Maddox’s car, and I swear I saw Alissa and Janice sneaking out of the building after us. They tailed us, but not very well.”

I lean against my desk, processing this information. The Super Sleuths—teenage amateur detectives who’d already caused more trouble than they knew. What are they doing mixed up in all this?

“Did they follow you all the way to The Genesee?” I ask, my investigator’s instincts kicking into overdrive.

“I kept catching glimpses of them,” Mel replies. “It wasn’t until we got to the club that I lost track.”

My mind races with possibilities. Are these kids onto something, or are they just causing trouble? Either way, it’s a complication we don’t need, especially not with Alfred hanging Mel’s acceptance to Penamore over her head..

“Tell me exactly what happened at The Genesee,” I press, leaning forward. “Every detail.”

Mel’s expression tightens. “Well, that’s the thing. Our meeting with Mr. Maddox and Ms. Calhoun was cut short. We were discussing my ‘scholarship,’”—she makes air quotes—“when suddenly Mr. Maddox went rigid. He excused himself, saying he had urgent business. But Cassie,” her voice drops even lower, “I’m pretty sure someone was caught listening in on us.”

My heart rate picks up. “Listening in? Are you certain?”

“Not 100%, but...” Mel bites her lip. “I heard a commotion outside the room. Raised voices, like someone was being chased down. And Mr. Maddox was... scared. I’ve never seen him like that before.”

I exchange a glance with Rafi. This could be the break we’ve been waiting for. But it also means the stakes just got a whole lot higher.

“Mel,” I say carefully, “I need you to walk me through everything you remember. Every word, every reaction. This could be important.”

As Mel recounts the details, my mind whirs with possibilities. Who was listening in? What did they hear? And most importantly—how can we use this to apply leverage our investigation?

Mel’s eyes light up as she finishes recounting the events at The Genesee. “You know what?” she says, leaning in conspiratorially. “You should meet the others. They hang at Slice’s practically every day after school. Maybe they picked up on something I missed.”

I raise an eyebrow. “The others?”

“Yeah, you know—Marcus, Nate, Janice, and Alissa. The Super Sleuths,” Mel explains, a hint of pride in her voice. “They’re sharp, Cassie. They might have crucial information.”

“They may be a liability—legally,” I say, and turn to Rafi. “What do you think?”

“Agreed,” he says. “Hear them out, but they need to understand they are acting as witnesses in your case, not as investigators.”

“Understood,” Mel says. “Texting them now.”

* * *

My fingers drum against the steering wheel as I pull into Slice’s parking lot. The neon pizza slice in the window flickers, casting an intermittent glow across the asphalt. I kill the engine but don’t immediately get out, lost in thought.

“What am I doing?” I mutter to myself, leaning back in the seat. Images of my teenage years flash through my mind—the thrill of investigation, the

rush of uncovering secrets. But also the consequences. The juvenile record that still haunts me.

Mel catches my eye and waves. I give a slight nod in return and climb out of the car. As I approach the group, Mel tilts her head.

“You okay?” she asks quietly.

I plaster on a smile. “Just thinking. Let’s do this.”

We enter Slice’s together, the smell of melting cheese and tomato sauce enveloping us. As we settle into a large corner booth, I study each teen’s face. Their eagerness is palpable, but there’s also an undercurrent of nervousness.

“Alright,” I say, leaning forward. “Before we start, I need you all to understand something. This investigation—it’s not a game. There could be serious consequences if we’re not careful. Are you sure you want to be involved?”

There’s a moment of silence as they exchange glances. Then Marcus speaks up, his voice steady. “Ms. Maddox, we know the risks. But this affects our future, our school. We want to help.”

I take it in—the way they hold their ground, the way no one breaks eye-contact. I recognize the expression because I’ve worn it before. Back when no one bothered to show me how to aim it.

“Okay,” I say finally, feeling a weight lift from my shoulders. “Let’s hear what you’ve found out.”

As the four of them compare notes, the picture sharpens fast. As they talk over each other—dates, donations, whispered warnings—I start fitting the pieces together. Applications reopening. Scholarships as leverage. Reviews quietly re-triggered when money changed hands.

As their recap comes to a close, one question comes to my mind. “Exactly how did you come by all this information?”

Marcus begins. “My—”

Alissa cuts him off. “Someone inside the administration recruited us.”

“To find out what our classmates know,” Marcus adds.

“And do nothing illegal,” Janice says, elbowing Nate in the ribs.

He grimaces. “Yeah. They stressed that one.”

I take a sip of my soda, more to buy time than because I need it. The teens

are watching me closely, waiting for a reaction. It's a delicate balance—I need to be open enough to earn their trust, but professional enough to keep the room from tipping into panic.

"It's... interesting," I say carefully. "And what exactly did you see and hear at The Genesee?"

As Mel starts to answer, my attention drifts to the others. Nate's fingers drum a nervous rhythm against the tabletop. Alissa nods along, her expression intent, like she's matching Mel's words to something already filed away. Janice, though, keeps scanning the pizzeria, shoulders tight, like she's half-expecting someone to recognize her.

I lift a hand. "Hold on a second. Janice—are you okay?"

She hesitates, then shakes her head. "We didn't mean to eavesdrop," she says quickly. "But we were there. Alissa and me."

Alissa straightens. "They were in one of the private rooms," she says. "Mr. Maddox, Mel, and Abby Jenkins. We were in the hallway. We didn't hear everything."

"But enough," Janice adds. "Mr. Maddox kept saying things were 'administrative.' Like admissions decisions weren't really final. Like they could be reopened."

"And he talked about scholarships like they were leverage," Alissa says. "Like funding and acceptance were the same thing."

Janice swallows. "He mentioned Ignite. Said they don't like loose ends."

The table goes quiet.

"Mel told him her future wasn't a transaction," Alissa says. "And he said it was. Just not one she controlled."

Janice hesitates, searching my face. "We left right after. We don't know if we heard it right—or if it even matters."

"It matters," I say. "And you did the right thing telling me."

I turn back to Mel. "Is this an accurate picture of what my uncle told you?"

Mel nods.

Janice startles, her eyes snapping back to me. "Are we really onto something?"

Protectiveness hits hard. They're smart, but they're still just that—kids.

Am I doing the right thing by involving them? The weight of it settles on my shoulders anyway.

“It might be,” I concede. “But remember, our priority is staying safe. If at any point you feel uncomfortable or threatened, you tell me immediately. Understood?”

They nod solemnly. Whatever comes next, it’s on me. This investigation is about to enter a new phase, and I’m not sure any of us are ready for what it’s going to demand.

Marcus leans forward, his hazel eyes intense. “Ms. Maddox, you should know about the scholarship applications we saw. Ms. Calhoun, our guidance counselor, dropped a folder, and... well, something didn’t add up.”

I lean in, my curiosity piqued. “What do you mean, Marcus?”

He exchanges a glance with Nate before continuing. “The applications were filled with inconsistencies. GPAs that didn’t match the transcripts, extracurriculars that seemed made up. And the weird part? All the applicants had connections to Ignite Global.”

My mind races, connecting dots. Ignite Global. Maybe even The Genesee – Penamore Action fund. Provided we can find a connection.

“That’s... concerning,” I say, careful to keep my tone neutral. “Nate, did you notice anything else?”

Nate nods, his bravado subdued. “Yeah, there were notes in the margins. Things like ‘priority admission’ and ‘special consideration.’ It felt... off.”

A familiar tightness settles in my chest—the kind that comes with a lead and everything attached to it. “Alissa, Janice, you mentioned Principal Moss and some photos?”

Alissa leans forward, her voice low but intense. “Principal Moss has been acting weird lately. Secretive phone calls, closed-door meetings. And then there’s what we found at the Genesee.”

Janice pulls out her phone, her fingers trembling slightly as she swipes through photos. “We stumbled onto this hidden room. It was like something out of a movie, all dark wood and plush red velvet chairs. But this is what you need to see.”

She hands me the phone, and I find myself staring at a placard: “Our Legacy

and Our Future.” Below it, a sea of names. I recognize some—prominent families, business leaders, politicians.

“My God,” I breathe, my mind whirling. Every name a thread begging to be pulled.

Eager faces around me await my reply, their expressions a mix of excitement and apprehension. They’ve done good work, but they have no idea of the hornets’ nest they’ve just kicked.

“You’ve all been incredibly helpful,” I say, choosing my words carefully. “But from this point forward, you don’t go snooping around on your own. But if something crosses your path, you bring it to me, or to your administrator. That’s not a suggestion.”

Soon after we wrap up, the teens promise to stay at a safe distance and share what they uncover. I promise to share what I can to keep them safe. They file out of Slices, their heads bent together in excited conversation. A knot forms in my stomach. I pray I haven’t made a terrible mistake.

For now, they’d keep an eye on Principal Moss, Ms. Calhoun, and their classmates. Meanwhile, another idea comes to mind.

Picking up my phone, I dial Rafi. The familiar sound of his voice answers on the first ring, bringing a smile to my face.

“How did it go with the Super Sleuths?” He asks, his tone laced with laughter.

I recount the details of our conversation, then pause before adding. “How would you like to go undercover with me tomorrow?”

Rafi lets out a playful scoff. “Usually, I don’t agree to anything unless I know what it is,” Rafi says. “But sure, fill me in on the plan when you get back.”

The idea of working shoulder-to-shoulder in the field with Rafi sends a charge through me—excitement and anticipation. That’s how I know it matters.