

321 LUMINA DOT COM

The Ghost Protocol Treasure Hunt — Book One

BY

Blurt Snodgrass

321LUMINA

© 2026 Blurt Snodgrass · 321Lumina™

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. The magazine 321 Lumina dot com and the treasure hunt described herein are real; the characters in this novel are not.

First Edition, 2026

Published by 321Lumina · 321luminadotcom

The magazine is the map.

The clues are in the stories.

The treasure is the truth.

A NOTE TO THE READER

The magazine described in this story — 321 Lumina dot com — is real. The stories embedded within it are real. The clues hidden inside those stories are real.

If you want to follow the treasure hunt yourself, visit the magazine. Read the stories. Pay attention to what is too specific to be decoration.

The architect's name is hidden in plain sight.

So is the truth about Victoria Ramos.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1 · The Magazine

CHAPTER 2 · The Librarian

CHAPTER 3 · Café Du Monde

CHAPTER 4 · Cassadaga

CHAPTER 5 · The Architect

CHAPTER 6 · The Boat

CHAPTER 7 · Plantation Key

CHAPTER 8 · After

CHAPTER 1

The Magazine

The package arrived on a Tuesday, which is the kind of day nothing important is supposed to happen.

No return address. Miami postmark, but that meant nothing — half the mail in this city comes from somewhere else and pretends otherwise. My name was handwritten on the front in the careful block letters of someone who learned penmanship before keyboards made it irrelevant.

JACK EVANS. INVESTIGATIVE SERVICES. BRICKELL AVE, MIAMI FL.

Inside, wrapped in brown paper, was a magazine.

Not a newspaper, not a file, not the kind of anonymous tip I usually receive in plain envelopes with photographs someone wishes they hadn't taken. A magazine. Printed on heavy stock, the kind that costs money to produce. The cover was clean — dark blue background, a single light source in the upper right corner, like a star or a lamp seen through fog. The title ran across the top in white letters:

321 LUMINA DOT COM

Below it: A Literary Magazine. Issue One.

I set it on my desk and looked at it the way I look at anything that arrives without explanation — with the wariness of someone who has learned that unexplained things are never actually unexplained.

I poured coffee. I sat down. I opened the magazine.

Eleven stories. Two flipbooks advertised on the inside back cover, accessible online. Love stories, a comedy, a crime hybrid, something set in space. The production quality was serious — layout, typography, photography between the pieces. Someone had put real money into this.

I read the table of contents twice before I found it.

Story five. Page forty-seven.

THE GHOST PROTOCOL — A Detective Story.

I turned to page forty-seven. I read the first paragraph. Then I read it again.

The man sitting in my office doesn't exist.

I knew those words. I had lived those words. Six months ago, David Patterson — Michael Brennan — had sat across from my desk with hollow eyes and a week without sleep and a fake identity that went back to a dead seven-year-old in Orlando.

I kept reading. Every detail was accurate. The FBI. Martinez. Marcus Holloway and his office in Coral Gables smelling of old books and expensive cologne. The USB drive. Thomas Brennan's house in Pinecrest. The confrontation, the gun going off, the sirens.

Things nobody knew except me, Martinez, Holloway, and the federal prosecutors who'd put Thomas Brennan away for seventeen counts of murder.

I read the byline. By Dot Com.

I closed the magazine. I opened it again. I read the byline again. Dot Com.

I picked up my phone and called Martinez.

She answered on the second ring. "Jack. I was about to call you."

"You received one too."

"This morning. On my desk when I came in. Nobody saw who left it."

"Mine came by mail."

"Mine didn't. Which means whoever sent yours knew your address and whoever sent mine has access to the FBI field office." A pause. "Or they're the same person and they have access to both."

"Have you read it?" "The Ghost Protocol. Yes. All of it." "Every detail is accurate, Martinez." "I know."

"The only people who know those details—"

"Are us, Holloway, the prosecutors, and Thomas Brennan. Who is currently in a federal correctional facility in Coleman with no mail privileges that would allow him to send literary magazines to private investigators."

I looked at the magazine on my desk. "Victoria Ramos built this."

Martinez was quiet for a moment. “She’s been dead for two years, Jack.”

“She built it before she died. She left it running. And now she’s activating it.”

“Dead people don’t activate things.”

“No. But they can set things in motion that activate after they’re gone. Holloway said she told him to destroy everything. But he kept the USB drive. What if she kept something too? What if this magazine is what she kept?”

Another silence. Longer this time. “Jack, if Victoria Ramos embedded information in this magazine—”

“Then it’s still out there. Whatever Brennan didn’t find. Whatever she hid before she died.”

“Thomas Brennan is in prison. The case is closed.”

“Is it? Because someone just sent us both a magazine that contains classified case details, and I don’t think they did it to congratulate us on a job well done.”

I heard Martinez exhale. “I’ll run the magazine through forensics. See if we can get prints, trace the paper stock, find the printer.”

“Do that. But Martinez — read the other stories first. All of them.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t think The Ghost Protocol is the only thing she hid in here.”

CHAPTER 2

The Librarian

Dorothy Com found the magazine three years ago, which means she has been sitting on whatever it contains for three years, which means she is either very patient or very afraid.

I didn't know any of this when I started looking for her. I knew only the byline — Dot Com — and the fact that someone careful enough to send Martinez a magazine without being seen on FBI security cameras was probably not going to be found through conventional means.

I started with the magazine itself. The publication information inside the front cover listed no address, no phone number, no editorial staff. Just a name: 321 Lumina dot com. And below it, in small type: For subscriptions and correspondence, visit 321luminadotcom.

I visited the website. It looked exactly like the magazine — clean, professional, the same dark blue aesthetic. The stories were there, all eleven of them, readable in full. The two flipbooks were there, animated, one with music that played automatically until I turned it off. There was a masthead. One name. Editor: D. Com.

I spent two days trying to find D. Com through standard investigative channels. No business registration. No copyright filings under that

name. No social media presence, no digital footprint of any kind beyond the website itself.

Which told me everything. You don't have zero digital footprint by accident. You have zero digital footprint by discipline.

I went back to the magazine. I read every story. All eleven of them, carefully, the way I'd read a crime scene — looking for what didn't belong, what was too specific, what was hiding in plain sight.

In *The Catch*, a crab boat captain named Martha Volkov mentions tying up at berth seventeen, harbor section G, Dutch Harbor. Specific enough to be real. Too specific to be decoration.

In *A Tern of Love*, a wildlife researcher catalogs a banded Arctic tern, tag number AL-3219. The tag number is mentioned twice — once in chapter three and once in chapter nineteen, sixteen chapters apart with no other connection.

In *Harvest of Shadows*, a detective identifies an orchid species: *Dracula simia*. He notes its altitude range and its location: cloud forests of southeastern Ecuador.

In *Backup*, a space station hydroponics specialist uses an access code to enter the observation deck: seven-seven-four-alpha. Three chapters later, a maintenance log references a repair authorization code: 774A-NOLA.

NOLA. New Orleans.

I stopped reading.

I went back to the website and looked at the contact form more carefully. It had a field I'd overlooked — a small unlabeled box that looked like a CAPTCHA verification. It wasn't a CAPTCHA.

I typed: 774A-NOLA.

The page refreshed. A new field appeared. It said: Who sent you?

I typed: Victoria Ramos.

The page refreshed again. Plain text appeared:

You are the second person to reach this point. The first took three years. You took eight days. Either you are very good or you are very lucky. Before we meet, I need to know which.

Below the message was a single question:

In *The Ghost Protocol*, Thomas Brennan makes one mistake before Jack Evans confronts him. It is not the mistake Evans describes in his account. What is the real mistake?

I sat back in my chair. I thought about it for a long time. Then I typed my answer.

The page refreshed. One line appeared:

Café Du Monde. New Orleans. Thursday. 7am. I'll find you. — D.

CHAPTER 3

Café Du Monde

New Orleans in October is the city at its most honest. The heat has broken but the humidity remembers it, and the French Quarter smells of coffee and river water and the specific sweetness of beignets frying at a quarter to seven in the morning. I got there early because I always get there early and because the kind of person who could build what D. Com had built was the kind of person who would be watching before I arrived.

I ordered coffee and beignets I didn't particularly want and sat at a table with my back to the wall and a view of the entrance and the river beyond it and waited.

At seven exactly, a woman sat down across from me.

She was maybe thirty-five, with dark hair pulled back and the kind of stillness that comes from years of watching rather than being watched. She was wearing a green jacket and carrying nothing — no bag, no phone visible, no magazine. She looked at me the way people look at something they've been expecting for a long time and aren't sure whether to be relieved or disappointed it finally arrived.

"Jack Evans," she said. "Dorothy Com," I said.

“Dot.” She picked up my coffee and drank from it without asking, which told me she was comfortable or testing me or both. “Thomas Brennan’s real mistake,” she said. “Before you tell me your answer, I want to know how long it took you to figure it out.”

“Twenty minutes.”

Something shifted in her expression. Not quite a smile. “I’ll tell you mine after. What was his mistake?”

“He didn’t burn the house.”

She was quiet.

“When Victoria Reed — your mother — told Marcus Holloway to destroy everything, she wasn’t talking about his files. She was talking about a property she owned outside of Miami, registered under one of the ghost identities. That’s where she kept the real evidence — not on Holloway’s USB drive, which she knew was his insurance policy, which she knew he’d never actually destroy. The USB drive was what she gave him to make him feel safe. The house is what she kept for herself. Brennan found out about Holloway. He never found out about the house. That’s his mistake.”

Dorothy Com looked at me for a long time. “Forty-seven days,” she said. “That’s how long it took me.”

“You had less to work with.” “I had more. I had letters.” She set down my coffee cup. “She wrote to me before she died. Not email — actual letters, mailed from different cities. Six letters over the last year of her life. She told me about the operation, about the people she’d saved, about Oracle — she didn’t know his name, but she knew he’d been

compromised. She told me she'd built the magazine as a container. That everything was in it if you knew how to read it. And she told me that when the right person found it, I would know."

"How would you know?"

"Because she told me the question to ask. She said only someone who had actually worked the case would know the answer. Everyone else would guess the obvious thing — that Brennan underestimated you, or that he should have run instead of fighting. Those aren't mistakes. Those are just how it ended." She looked at me steadily. "The house is the answer. Because only someone who read the full file would know Victoria owned that property."

"Martinez gave me access." "I know. I've been watching the case file access logs for two years." She said it without apology.

"My mother died alone in a rented room in Tampa with a bottle of pills and a note that said she was sorry. The medical examiner ruled it suicide. I don't believe that. I have never believed that. And everything she left me in those six letters points to one conclusion — she was killed by someone who knew about the house and needed her to never tell anyone else."

"Brennan is in prison." "Brennan didn't kill her. Brennan was Oracle — he provided the infrastructure. But Oracle was compromised by someone else. Someone who found out about Oracle's involvement and used it as leverage to get access to Victoria's entire operation. That person is not in prison." She reached into her jacket and produced a single folded piece of paper. "That person is who we're looking for. And the house is where the evidence is."

I took the paper. It was a photograph of a property — single story, screened porch, surrounded by pine trees. On the back, in handwriting I recognized from the magazine’s mailing label:

When you find the right person, give them this. Tell them the house is in Cassadaga. Tell them to look for the door that faces north. Tell them I’m sorry it took so long. — V.

I looked up at Dorothy Com. “Cassadaga,” I said.

“Forty miles north of Orlando. A spiritualist community. Population about one hundred.” She almost smiled. “My mother had a sense of humor.”

“When do we leave?”

She almost smiled. This time it made it all the way. “I’ve been waiting three years, Jack. I can wait until you finish your coffee.”

I looked at the cup she’d already drunk from. “I’ll get a fresh one,” I said.

CHAPTER 4

Cassadaga

Cassadaga calls itself the Psychic Capital of the World, which is either the best cover for a secret or the worst, depending on how seriously you take irony. A hundred people living in wooden houses on quiet streets, most of them spiritualist mediums who will read your aura for fifty dollars or contact your deceased relatives for slightly more. The kind of place where nobody asks why you're there because everyone has a reason they'd rather not explain.

Victoria Ramos had owned a house here for eleven years under the name Ellen Marsh. Property taxes paid through an LLC registered in Delaware. No utilities in her name — the house ran on a generator and a rainwater collection system that a neighbor had assumed was an environmental choice rather than a strategy for leaving no billing records.

Dorothy had the address. She'd had it for eight months, she told me on the drive up from Orlando, but she hadn't gone in alone. She'd stood outside twice. Looked at the door. Left.

"Why?" I asked.

She was quiet for a moment, watching the Florida scrubland slide past the window. “Because once I go inside, I know things I can’t unknow. And I’ve spent three years not being sure I was ready for that.”

“What changed?” “You answered the question in twenty minutes.” She looked at me. “That felt like a sign. I don’t usually believe in signs.”

The house was at the end of a dirt road that a standard GPS would have given up on. Pine trees crowded close on both sides, and the house itself was small and gray-painted and looked like it had been there since before the spiritualists arrived. Screened porch facing south. Generator shed to the east. Garden gone wild — lantana and wild coffee taking over what had once been deliberate planting.

The door that faced north was not the front door. It was a side door, half-hidden behind a stand of palmetto, painted the same gray as the house so that you’d miss it if you weren’t looking. There was no handle, just a keyhole, and above the keyhole, carved into the wood, a number: 3219.

The tag number of the banded Arctic tern in *A Tern of Love*.

Dorothy reached into her jacket and produced a key. Old-fashioned, brass, the kind a locksmith would look at with respect. “She mailed it to me. In the last letter. No explanation. Just the key and the words: when you’re ready.”

The door opened into a single room built inside the house’s existing structure — walls within walls, like a safe deposit box scaled up to human size. Concrete block, no windows, a single battery-powered light that came on when Dorothy found the switch.

The room contained three things.

A filing cabinet, four drawers, padlocked.

A laptop, sealed in a waterproof case, with a sticky note on the outside that said: CHARGE FIRST.

And a letter, in an envelope, with my name on it. Not Dorothy's name. Mine. JACK EVANS.

Dorothy stared at it. I stared at it. "She knew your name," Dorothy said. "Three years ago. Before the case."

I picked up the envelope. Inside was a single page.

Mr. Evans — If you are reading this, then Thomas Brennan has been stopped and my daughter has found someone she trusts enough to bring here. That means you are either very good at your job or very good at being trustworthy. I hope you are both. What is in this room is evidence that Brennan did not act alone. He was the infrastructure. Someone else was the architect — someone who saw what I had built and decided to own it rather than expose it. I have been trying to identify this person for four years. I got close enough that they had me killed. I am writing this six days before I expect to die. I am not afraid. I am angry. There are still people out there living the lives I gave them and they deserve to be safe. The laptop contains everything. The filing cabinet contains the physical records. The padlock combination is the access code from Backup — the one that goes to the observation deck, not the maintenance authorization. You'll know what that means. Find who did this. Protect my people. And please take care of my daughter. She has been carrying this alone for too long. — Victoria Ramos

I read the letter twice. Dorothy was watching me. I handed it to her.

She read it once. Then she sat down on the concrete floor and held the letter in both hands and didn't say anything for a long time.

I found the laptop. I found a power cable. I went out to the generator shed and figured out how to start it. Then I came back and sat down on the floor next to Dorothy Com and waited while the laptop charged and the light hummed above us and somewhere outside in the wild garden something moved through the lantana and the afternoon began to cool toward evening.

"Seven-seven-four-alpha," I said eventually. "That's the observation deck code. From Backup."

Dorothy nodded. "The maintenance code was 774A-NOLA. The padlock is seven-seven-four-alpha. She split them. One to find me. One for you."

"She designed the whole thing as a two-person job." "Yes." "She planned this for years."

"She was FBI for twenty-two years, Jack. Planning things other people couldn't see was what she did." A pause. "The laptop's going to have a name on it. The architect. The person who compromised her operation and had her killed."

"Are you ready for that?"

I thought about David Patterson, now living as himself in Miami. About the fifteen people who hadn't made it. About the note in Victoria's handwriting: I am not afraid. I am angry.

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m ready.”

Dorothy stood up, brushed concrete dust from her jacket, and entered the padlock combination. Seven. Seven. Four. Alpha.

The filing cabinet opened. We got to work.

CHAPTER 5

The Architect

The laptop took eleven minutes to boot.

I know because I counted. There was nothing else to do in that concrete room except sit on the floor next to Dorothy Com and listen to the generator running outside and watch the startup screen cycle through its checks. Dorothy had her knees pulled up to her chest and her back against the filing cabinet, looking at the laptop the way you look at something you've needed for a long time and aren't entirely sure you want now that it's here.

The screen resolved into a desktop. No icons, no wallpaper, no personal touches of any kind. Just a dark background and a single folder in the center of the screen labeled: FOR JACK EVANS.

Dorothy looked at it. Then she looked at me. "She really did plan everything."

"Open it."

Inside the folder were three subfolders: EVIDENCE. NAMES. LETTERS. I opened NAMES first.

It contained one file. A text document, three pages long, formatted like a report. At the top, in capital letters: THE ARCHITECT — CONFIRMED IDENTITY.

Below that, a name. I read it twice. Then I said: “That’s not possible.”

Dorothy leaned over to read it. I watched her face change. “Who is that?” she asked.

“Someone I met six months ago. Someone who cooperated with my investigation. Someone who handed me a USB drive and told me to go after Thomas Brennan.”

“Someone who pointed you at Brennan.” “Yes.” “And away from themselves.” “Yes.”

The name on the screen was Marcus Holloway.

Not Oracle. Not infrastructure. The Architect himself — the attorney in Coral Gables who had smelled of old books and expensive cologne and had looked at me with perfectly controlled eyes when I’d accused him of knowing about the ghost identities.

He had known. He had always known. Not because Victoria Reed had approached him twenty years ago with a story about abuse victims needing new lives. Because he had approached her. Because he had seen what Oracle — Thomas Brennan — was building and had recognized an opportunity. He had spent eighteen years as the silent third party, managing the legal infrastructure, the estates, the money flows, the shell companies, the offshore accounts.

And when the FBI started investigating, he hadn’t just destroyed records. He had given me Thomas Brennan.

He had handed me the USB drive full of just enough evidence to put Brennan away for life, to close the case, to make everyone satisfied that justice had been served.

And he had walked back to his office in Coral Gables and opened his calendar and scheduled his next client.

“He killed your mother,” I said.

Dorothy’s voice was flat and precise. “Show me the evidence.”

There were forty-seven files. Financial records, communications, property documents, photographs. Victoria had been meticulous — she’d spent four years building this, and she had built it the way a former FBI agent builds a case: airtight.

The offshore accounts that had appeared on Brennan’s financial records traced back not to Brennan’s personal funds but to a holding company. That holding company connected to three others. At the end of the chain: Holloway & Associates, through a subsidiary registered in the Cayman Islands in 2004.

Holloway hadn’t just helped manage the ghost identities. He had been skimming the operation for twenty years. Every identity created, every estate managed, every insurance payout from every convenient accident — Holloway had taken a percentage. Not the kind that showed up on tax returns.

When Brennan panicked and started eliminating witnesses, Holloway had seen it as an opportunity. He had helped Brennan identify targets, provided addresses and schedules and access. And when Brennan was arrested, Holloway had been sitting in his office waiting for exactly

one phone call. Mine.

I thought about that drive to Coral Gables. The receptionist who had made a call and then looked puzzled when Holloway agreed to see me immediately. Not puzzled because he was unexpectedly available. Puzzled because he had clearly been expecting me.

Victoria had known. She writes it in the report — she had identified Holloway as the Architect four months before she died. The night she died in that rented room in Tampa, Holloway had been at a charity gala in Miami. The perfect alibi. He hadn't held the bottle of pills himself. He had just made sure she had no other options.

I called Martinez. "Marcus Holloway," I said. "He's the Architect. I have forty-seven files of evidence. Victoria Ramos built the case herself before she died. Holloway ran the financial infrastructure, helped Brennan identify targets for elimination, and orchestrated Victoria's death. He cooperated with my investigation six months ago to point us at Brennan and close the case with himself still standing."

Silence. Then: "Jack. Holloway testified in the Brennan prosecution. He's a protected cooperating witness."

"I know." "If he finds out we're looking at him—" "He'll run. I know that too. How fast can you move?"

"Give me the files. Right now." "I'm in Cassadaga. Victoria Ramos had a property here. The evidence is on a laptop she left in a hidden room. I need a forensics team and I need Holloway's passport flagged before he gets on a plane."

“Cassadaga.” A pause. “The psychic town.” “Victoria had a sense of humor.” “Apparently.”

I heard Martinez already moving. “Jack, who else knows you found this?”

I looked at Dorothy, sitting cross-legged on the concrete floor reading Victoria’s files with the concentrated attention of someone who has been waiting three years for this exact moment. “One person. She’s with me.”

“Keep her with you. I’ll have agents at his office and his home within the hour.”

“He won’t be at either. He’ll be somewhere he considers safe.” I thought about the USB drive. The way he’d pulled it from his drawer like he’d been holding it ready. “He has a boat. Check the marina records. Coral Gables or Coconut Grove. A man like Holloway always has a boat.”

Martinez hung up. Dorothy looked up from the laptop screen. “How long do we have?”

“An hour. Maybe less.” I was already pulling filing cabinet drawers open. “We take what’s in the cabinet. Document everything in place and take the originals.”

Dorothy picked up the first file folder and started reading.

We worked fast. Outside, the October afternoon was cooling toward dusk, and somewhere in Florida, a man named Marcus Holloway was either going about his ordinary business or already moving toward a marina.

And in a concrete room in a town full of people who believed in talking to the dead, two people were finally giving Victoria Ramos a voice.

CHAPTER 6

The Boat

Martinez called back forty minutes later.

“He’s gone. Office locked, home empty, housekeeper says he left this morning with two bags. And Jack — you were right about the boat. Forty-two foot Hatteras, registered to one of his shell companies. The marina in Coconut Grove logged it out at 6 AM.”

“Fourteen hours ago.”

I did the math. At cruising speed, a Hatteras could be in the Bahamas in six hours, Cuba in eight, anywhere in the Caribbean in twenty-four. With fourteen hours of head start and a passport that hadn’t been flagged yet, Marcus Holloway could be sitting on a beach in a country without an extradition treaty, sipping something cold and watching the sun go down.

Unless.

“Martinez. The offshore accounts in Victoria’s files — forty-seven of them. If we freeze those before he can access them—”

“Already working on it. But Jack, we need the originals. Chain of custody matters.”

“We’re bringing them. Two hours.”

Dorothy was in the passenger seat with the laptop on her knees and a file box in the back seat. She’d been quiet since we left the house, watching the Florida scrubland give way to highway. The kind of quiet that had weight to it.

“He’s going to get away,” she said. “Maybe.” “That’s not good enough.” “No,” I agreed. “It’s not.”

I thought about the boat. A Hatteras is a serious offshore vessel, built for open water and self-sufficiency, for the specific possibility of not coming back. Holloway hadn’t bought that boat for weekend fishing.

He had bought it for this. Which meant he had been planning this exit for years. A destination, prepared money, a life already built and ready to step into. The irony was not lost on me. A man who had spent twenty years managing false identities for other people had built one for himself.

“Victoria’s files,” I said. “The CONTINGENCY folder.”

Dorothy opened the laptop. Fourteen minutes later she said: “Plantation Key.”

“What?” “There’s a file labeled CONTINGENCY. A property analysis.” She was reading fast. “A house on Plantation Key, registered to a corporation called Luminary Holdings LLC. Delaware registration, 2019. The beneficial owner—” She stopped.

“Holloway.” “Through four layers of shell companies. But Victoria traced it.” Dorothy looked up. “She found it because the property management company that maintains it — lawn care and utilities and

quarterly inspections — is on the same list of vendors he uses for his Coral Gables office.”

Small mistake. The kind careful people make because they have to trust somebody, and the somebody they trust doesn't know to keep the connection invisible.

“He's not running to the Caribbean,” I said. “He's going to his house. He's sitting in the Keys, waiting to see if anyone comes looking, and then deciding whether to stay or go.”

“Five hours at cruising speed from Coconut Grove to Plantation Key. He's been there since eleven this morning.” I was already calling Martinez. “He's not running. He's waiting.”

Martinez answered before it rang twice. “Plantation Key,” I said. “I'm sending you a file. He has a house there under a shell company. If you move now you can have him before he decides to leave.”

A pause while she read what Dorothy was forwarding. Then: “How did you find this?” “Victoria Ramos found it. Four years ago. She put it in the contingency file.” “She anticipated he'd run.” “She anticipated everything.”

Dorothy was looking at me when I hung up. “You're sure?” she said.

I thought about Marcus Holloway's perfectly controlled expression when I'd accused him of knowing about the ghost identities. The way he had not denied anything but had also not confirmed anything. The way he had reached into his drawer for the USB drive with the ease of someone retrieving a tool they'd been holding ready.

He had sat across from me and told me a story about Victoria Reed coming to him with vulnerable people who needed new lives. He had framed it as charity. A lawyer doing something genuinely good.

He had been the one who built the system that charged those people for their new lives. He had helped Brennan identify which witnesses to eliminate. And when I'd walked into his office, he had handed me exactly enough to put Brennan away and had watched me leave with the satisfaction of a man who has just completed a difficult job.

"I'm sure," I said.

We drove south. The sun was going down over the Gulf side and the sky was doing things with color that only Florida skies do. Dorothy had the laptop open and was reading Victoria's letters — the ones in the LETTERS folder, the ones she hadn't seen before, the ones Victoria had written to herself rather than to anyone else.

I didn't ask what they said. That wasn't mine.

After a while Dorothy closed the laptop and looked at the road. "She was proud of the magazine. That's in the letters. She said it was the best thing she'd ever made. Better than the identity program, better than the evidence files. Because the magazine was real — the stories were genuinely good, the writers were genuinely talented. She said—" Dorothy paused. "She said she wanted the container to be worth keeping even after its contents were emptied."

I thought about that. A former FBI agent who ran an underground protection program and built a literary magazine as her legacy document.

“She was right,” I said. “The magazine is good.” “You read it.” “All of it. Twice.” I glanced at her. “The Catch is the best one. Martha Volkov and the crab boat.”

Dorothy almost smiled. “She loved that one too. She commissioned it specifically because she needed a story set in Dutch Harbor with a reason to mention a specific berth number, and the writer she hired just made it extraordinary.”

“Did the writer know?” “No. None of them did. They just wrote good stories. The clues were Victoria’s additions — small details worked into the final edits, specific enough to mean something and ordinary enough to look like craft.”

We drove in silence for a while. “Your name,” I said eventually. “Com. That’s not your birth name.”

“No. I was Dorothy Ramos. I changed it after she died.” She looked at the road. “She was Dot Com to the people who knew about the website. I made it legal. It felt like — carrying something forward.”

“It’s a good name.” “It’s a ridiculous name. I get questions about it constantly.” “That’s also useful. People remember it.”

“That’s what the judge said when I filed the paperwork. He seemed to think it was charming.” A pause. “He was the only one.”

I drove south through the Florida night, and somewhere ahead of us in the darkness of Plantation Key, Marcus Holloway was sitting in a house he thought no one knew about, waiting to see if the world was going to come for him.

It was.

CHAPTER 7

Plantation Key

The FBI got there before us.

Martinez had moved fast — four agents in two vehicles, coast guard boat covering the water side in case Holloway tried to run for his Hatteras. When Dorothy and I arrived at the house on Plantation Key at 9:17 PM, the place was lit up and cordoned and Marcus Holloway was sitting in the back of a federal vehicle in handcuffs, looking at the Atlantic Ocean with the expression of a man revising his entire understanding of what he thought he controlled.

Martinez came out to meet us. She was holding a coffee cup she wasn't drinking from — I'd noticed she did that when a scene was still live, kept something in her hands so they looked occupied while her eyes did the actual work. She looked at Dorothy first. "You're Victoria Ramos's daughter."

"Dorothy Com." Martinez considered the name for a moment. "Your mother built something extraordinary." "I know," Dorothy said. "I've been living inside it for three years."

"Defense attorneys are already making calls. His people are fast." "The evidence will hold." "Yes. It will." She paused. "He had a go-bag packed.

Passport in a different name — professional quality. Twenty thousand dollars cash. A phone with one number stored in it, no name attached. He was going to make one call and then disappear.”

“To where?” “The number traces to a property manager in Grand Cayman. He had another house there. Another identity.” Martinez shook her head slightly. “He spent twenty years managing false identities for other people. He was very good at building his own.”

“Did he say anything when you took him?” “One thing. He asked how you found the Cassadaga property.” Martinez looked at me. “I told him Victoria Ramos left a map. He was quiet for a while after that. Then he said—” She paused. “He said: she always was better at this than me.”

I looked at the house. Single story, screened porch, water view, well-maintained. A comfortable place to wait out a crisis or start a new life depending on which way things went. Victoria Ramos had found it four years ago and put it in a file labeled CONTINGENCY.

She had been better at it than him.

The evidence transfer took an hour — every folder, every printed document, every photograph logged and tagged with the careful attention that meant this was going to be admissible and Holloway’s attorneys knew it.

I walked over to the federal vehicle. Through the window, Holloway turned to look at me. He was silver-haired and impeccable even in handcuffs, the same measured professional who had sat across from me in Coral Gables six months ago and handed me a USB drive with the ease of a man delivering something he’d been holding ready.

He said one thing.

“She always was better at this than me.”

Then he turned back to the ocean. His attorney arrived forty minutes later and put a hand on his shoulder and spoke quietly. Holloway didn't respond. Whatever he had decided to offer the world, it was that one sentence. The evidence Victoria had spent four years building would do the rest of the talking.

I walked back to where Dorothy was standing with Martinez, watching the evidence transfer complete.

“Is it over?” Dorothy asked. “The easy part,” Martinez said. “Now comes the prosecution.”

Dorothy looked at the federal vehicle, at the silver-haired man inside it, at the ocean behind him that he'd been planning to disappear across.

“My mother spent four years building a case against him. She didn't live to see it used. I'd like to be involved in the prosecution. As a witness, as a resource, whatever is useful.”

“You'll be central to it,” Martinez said. “The contingency files, the letters, the way the evidence was structured — you're the one who can explain all of it. You're the one who maintained the website, who waited, who kept the trail alive until someone followed it.” She paused. “Victoria made the right choice. Sending you the key.”

Dorothy looked at me. I looked at her. She had spent three years alone with a puzzle her mother had left her, carrying it carefully, not opening the last door until she had someone she trusted to open it with. She had trusted me in under twenty-four hours. I was going to

have to think about what that meant.

“We should get a hotel,” I said. “Martinez is going to need statements from both of us tonight and it’s going to be a long process.”

“There’s a place in Islamorada,” Dorothy said. “I looked it up on the drive down. In case.” “In case we ended up here.” “I like to be prepared.” She almost smiled. “My mother’s daughter.”

We drove south toward Islamorada while behind us the lights of the federal operation flickered on the dark water and Marcus Holloway sat in the back of a vehicle and thought about the ocean he wasn’t going to cross.

I thought about a woman named Victoria Ramos who had built a literary magazine in the shape of a map and had died knowing someone would eventually follow it to the right room with the right key.

She had been right. She had always been right. That was, as Holloway had said, her greatest quality.

CHAPTER 8

After

Three weeks later, I was back in my office in Miami on a Tuesday, which is apparently the day things happen to me now.

The coffee was fresh. The window was open. The ceiling fan moved the October air around without actually cooling anything, which is what ceiling fans in Miami do — they redistribute the heat into a slightly more democratic arrangement.

On my desk was a copy of 321 Lumina dot com, Issue One.

I'd read it four times by now. Different things stood out on each reading. The banded tern with tag AL-3219. The berth number in Dutch Harbor. The orchid species in the cloud forests of Ecuador — that one I still hadn't fully decoded, which suggested there were threads Victoria had built that we hadn't pulled yet.

The magazine was real. The stories were genuinely good. Victoria had commissioned real writers, paid them fairly, edited their work carefully, and embedded her evidence in the spaces between the craft. The container was worth keeping even after its contents were emptied.

I was thinking about that when my phone rang. Martinez.

“Holloway’s attorneys filed a motion this morning. Chain of custody challenge on the Cassadaga evidence. Claiming it was obtained without proper authorization.”

“Victoria built the case to withstand that.” “I know. And our people are confident. But Jack—” A pause. “His attorneys are also arguing that Dorothy Com, as the daughter of the primary witness, had a conflict of interest in how the evidence was preserved and transferred. They’re trying to introduce the idea that she had motive to fabricate or alter documents.”

I thought about Dorothy sitting on a concrete floor reading her mother’s letters. The way she’d handled every file with the careful attention of someone who understood that these pieces of paper were the last thing her mother had made.

“That’s not going to land,” I said. “No. But it means the prosecution timeline extends. This goes to trial probably eighteen months from now.” A pause. “Also — Holloway’s passport, the false identity. We’re trying to trace who made it.” “There are more.” “Almost certainly. Holloway spent twenty years in the ghost identity business. He didn’t outsource his own exit strategy to amateurs.”

After she hung up, I looked at the magazine on my desk for a while. Then I called Dorothy.

She answered on the second ring. “Jack.” “How are you?” “Tired. The FBI has had me in depositions for three days.” “That’s Martinez’s team. They don’t do anything halfway.” “I know. I appreciate it.” A pause. “I’m going back to New Orleans tomorrow. The library doesn’t run itself.”

“Right.” I looked out the window at the Miami afternoon. “Dorothy. The orchid.”

“Dracula simia. In Harvest of Shadows.” “Cloud forests of southeastern Ecuador. I haven’t figured that one out yet.”

A pause. “Neither have I. I’ve been working on it for eight months.” Another pause. “I think it’s a location. I think she was pointing at something physical — a place, not a person.” “Something she hid there.” “Or someone she sent there. One of the ghost identities. Someone she moved out of the country when the operation was compromised, someone who knows things even the Cassadaga files don’t contain.”

I thought about that. A witness in Ecuador. In cloud forests at altitude, among orchids with the face of a monkey, living under a name Victoria had given them. Another thread. Another door.

“I’ll call you,” I said. “I know you will.” The almost-smile was audible, which I hadn’t known was possible. “When you figure out the Ecuador piece.” “Maybe before that.” A pause. Longer than the others. “Maybe before that,” she agreed. “Good night, Jack.”

I hung up and sat with the magazine and the coffee and the ceiling fan redistributing the Miami heat and thought about a woman who had built a map into a literary magazine and trusted it to the right people.

The architect was in custody. The evidence was in federal hands. David Patterson was living his real life. Eighteen of Victoria’s people had been reached by the FBI and given their choices back.

But the orchid was still there. The Ecuador thread was still loose. And somewhere in a cloud forest at altitude, someone was living a life Victoria Ramos had given them, holding knowledge that no one else had.

That was a case.

Not today's case. But a case.

I poured a second coffee, which I almost never do, and opened the magazine to Harvest of Shadows and read it again from the beginning, slowly, looking for what was too specific to be decoration.

Outside, Miami continued its business — boat engines and traffic and the late afternoon light doing what late afternoon light in Miami always does — making everything look slightly more significant than it deserves.

Inside, I read.

The work continues.

It always does.

— END OF BOOK ONE —

The Ecuador thread continues in Book Two.

321 Lumina dot com is a real magazine.