

## Chapter 5

“Cassandra Bannister?”

“Yes,” she replied, tentatively, while leaning a crowbar on a nearby unopened crate in her downtown warehouse.

“I’m agent Sanchez of U.S. Customs and this is special agent Ascot of the FBI,” he said, gesturing towards an attractive redhead standing alert at his side. “We have a warrant to search the premises,” he said, while holding the document high in the air for her to see.

“What is this all about?” she asked, clearly flustered.

The agent turned to make certain that his associates were locking the doors. “We would appreciate if you and your staff would take a seat over there,” he said, while pointing to several chairs sitting under a nearby makeshift plywood table. “We’ll come and get you if we need you but be advised, don’t try to leave the premises.”

“Can I call my attorney?” she asked.

“There will be time for that later,” Sanchez sneered, as he stared off into the depths of the warehouse watching his men tearing open the recently delivered crates.

“What do you expect to find?” she asked, in a quavering voice, while feigning indignance.

“Contraband lady ... didn’t I tell you to take a seat over there?” he barked.

Cassandra walked dejectedly towards the table, where her three employees were already seated wringing their hands.

“What’s going on?” her warehouse manager whispered.

“I have no idea but it can’t be good,” she replied, her usually impeccable composure melting for all to see.

As they sat in silence, a voice cried out from an agent whose upper torso seemed lost within an opened crate as he leaned into it. “Here’s one,” he shouted, “it’s on the list.”

Ascot, the redheaded agent, quickly walked over to the opened crate and lifted the now freed artefact, placed it on top of a nearby sealed box and scanned it with a magnifying glass. “Yup, this is the real thing,” she said. “Sumerian urn in beautiful condition. It’s one of the missing Iraqi pieces. Look for the others,” she demanded.

As packing material filled the air and wooden boards noisily struck the ground, Cassandra began to sweat for the first time in her life. Oh my God, she thought, someone talked ... I’m dead. What’ll I do? I’ll deny everything. After all, who will they believe, an Arab or a member of British aristocracy? I’ll say that I am the victim of smugglers and that they have replaced my legitimate antiques with these obviously stolen goods. Act indignant, that’s it!

While Cassandra contemplated her feeble alibi, six more stolen artefacts were

removed from the sealed crates and verified by agent Ascot, an expert in mideastern antiquities.

Sanchez swaggered over to the plywood table and approached its now covering inhabitants. He glared at the bowed head of Cassandra Bannister while his right hand offered a battered cordless telephone. "I think now would be a good time to call your attorney," he said.

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Fidgeting on the hard wooden chair of the Federal building's backroom, Cassandra tried to recall the details of her hastily constructed defense. "Where have you been?" she asked, when the attorney finally entered the room.

"I was in court when the call came in. I didn't get the message until I left," he replied.

"Have they told you what they have on me?"

"I'll spare you the legalese. Simply put, they've got you for importing stolen goods on the one hand and I can deal with that but ..."

"I've already said," she interrupted, "that I didn't know the crates contained stolen goods."

"OK, we'll get to that but here's the bad news, they claim to have evidence linking the exporters to a terrorist group. Since you paid these exporters, they're alleging complicity."

"What does that mean?"

Beginning to lose patience, the attorney wrung his hands. “It means,” he explained, “they’re claiming that the money you paid for the artefacts was used by the exporters to finance terrorism and that, my fine young lady, is bad news for you!”

Cassandra’s eyes widened and her face contorted in fear. “Oh my God,” she whispered.

“What were you thinking?”

“I didn’t import those artefacts—someone replaced my legitimate antiques with that stuff,” she said with conviction and overly stated anger.

“C’mon Cassandra, tell me the truth or I can’t help you.”

“Are these rooms monitored?”

The attorney gazed about the room and shook his head affirmatively. “Probably,” he said.

“Then that’s my story.”