

1 LAST BETRAYAL by Valerie J Brooks

EXCERPT

CHAPTER 1

If I ever get out of this alive, I'm going to have a tattoo needled on my arm like others of my generation. Of what I don't know. But if I'm alive, I'll be able to make a decision then. I'm throwing off the conservative persona I once had as a criminal defense lawyer. My sister Sophie would be saying, "It's about time."

From Portland, Oregon, I'd hopped a red-eye and was on my way to Hollywood, Florida. I was back in the game and in the right headspace, ready to bring down the Boston mob once and for all while protecting Bibi, my sister Sophie's twin. Bibi needed me. She was tough, but this mob had a new and younger crime boss. Talia "Shawn" Diamandis. She didn't play by the old-fashioned rules of mobsters.

Like the rest of the world, there was no honor anymore among thieves, whether they be members of gangs, political parties, or religious sects. There was no "one for all and all for one." That only happened in the movies. So, to energize my fighting spirit, I put on my headphones, pulled up "Rebel Yell," one of Sophie's old favorites, and put it on repeat. We used to jump up and down to that song in her living room—but that was before the mob.

Yes, I was back in the game, but I wasn't happy that I had to leave my dog Tempest again. How I'd ever come to love a dog that much, I'll never know. Maybe I relate to her being a rescue. More probable is how much we've been through together.

The plane dropped and bumped, almost spilling my coffee. The pilot announced that we were hitting some turbulence and to keep our seatbelts fastened. I shook my head. What did he know about turbulence?

Then the plane bucked and dropped hard, causing a few people to swear and the flight attendant to grab onto a seat. A child cried. I took a deep breath. The plane continued to buck and weave back

and forth. Finally, it leveled out and a collective sigh went up from the passengers. My phone was clutched in my hand. It remained silent.

I closed my eyes and leaned my head back. Why hadn't Bibi texted me? Maybe, hopefully, she'd fallen asleep. Bibi and I had been talking and texting for the past twenty-four hours about Shawn and what to do about her. But what did you do with a mob boss telling you that you were part of her "organization" whether you liked it or not? As my sweet, dead husband Hank would have said, Bibi was in "deep shit." I knew what that deep shit was like. I'd been in it for a few years.

Shawn sure had cojones. She'd already broken into Bibi's apartment—and in broad daylight. What I found frightening was how thoroughly Shawn had prepared. She knew about Otto, Bibi's dog, a dog that should have scared the daylights out of her. But Shawn had fed him a treat while telling Bibi that there would be a meeting of the three partners, and Bibi was expected to join them. Join them, as in becoming one of the partners.

My main question was "Why?" Why would Shawn take such a risk as to get into Bibi's apartment just to tell her that she was expected to make this meeting? She could have met her in the lobby. I had a hunch: Shawn needed to know the layout of the apartment and get friendly with the dog. She planned on breaking into the place again. Again, the question was *Why?*

Bibi reported the "break-in" to management, a report was filed, and the police notified. Security camera footage was watched. But nothing seemed amiss. Shawn never showed her face and seemed to enter the apartment no problem, so she could have had a duplicate keycard. Nothing suspicious. Bibi was pissed because the police said she must have given Shawn a card. As I said to Bibi, a large wad of cash would have bought a duplicate from someone in the hotel or was there some type of master keycard?

My phone dinged, and I jumped. It dinged with two more messages. It was Bibi.

I'm in danger. I'm not paranoid! Otto keeps growling.
There are footsteps outside my door and muffled voices.

I didn't tell you this before, but I found incriminating
evidence against the mob in Betty's stuff. I created a safe
place for it. You'll figure it out.

If something happens to me, promise you'll take care
of Otto. You know what he's like. He's sweet and needs his
ugly striped afghan. He also knows a lot.

I reread the texts. F*ck! It was 4:02 a.m., and we wouldn't land for another two hours. I texted back.

Don't answer the door, Bibi. Don't let anyone in. Call the police.

I tried to stay calm. Footsteps and voices didn't necessarily mean anything. Maybe it was nothing more than late-night revelers or an assignation. Yet my heart raced. Shawn had been there once. Why not again? I texted another message and tried to convince myself that she would text back and say it was nothing. Had Otto barked at the noise? He wasn't much of a barker, more of a growler. He was a big gentle brute the size of a Shetland pony, but there's only so much a dog could do against greedy criminals who were willing to kill people, never mind dogs. But Shawn had already made friends with him. OK, what else? Bibi carried a gun. Good. But you had to be willing to shoot to kill. I knew very few good people capable of that, even in a life-or-death situation.

I sent another text.

Do you still have your gun? Load and keep it handy.

A text came in. I almost dropped my phone.

It was my lawyer. I ignored him.

I squirmed in my seat. Why hadn't Bibi told me about the incriminating evidence before? What had she planned on doing with it? I chewed a cuticle. Maybe she didn't really trust me.

Being trapped on a plane made it impossible to do anything. I had to keep my wits about me though. Did Shawn know about the incriminating evidence? I doubted it. My bet was on Shawn targeting Bibi's inheritances—two huge estates and all the assets. What a rat's nest of relationships! Bibi's godmother, Betty Snayer, had been the crime boss of this mob until she died trying to kill me in Kauai. But before that, Betty had taken in a young, homeless, talented black girl, my half-sister Bibi, and given her a life in the arts. Then Betty had fallen for Shawn, at the time a streetwise, ragged, coke snorter who had addicted Betty to sex and white powder. That left Bibi adrift as to Betty's affections. So, there I was with a new half-sister who didn't know I'd killed her sainted godmother. What a mess.

The first-class flight attendant leaned over the empty seat next to me. “Anything I can get you, Ms. Porter?” She smiled with her bright red lips, her eyes sparkling behind her cat-eye glasses.

“Scotch, please. A double.”

I wiped my sweaty palms on my jeans. After sending another message to Bibi, I waited. Again, nothing. Finally, resigned, I set the cell on the empty seat next to me, and when my drink came, I tried not to knock it back, but that was impossible.

Maybe Bibi *had* called the cops, but I doubted it. I knew she didn’t trust the FBI. Being African American, she probably didn’t trust the cops either, especially after they did nothing to follow up on Shawn. I rubbed my chest, drew in some air, and let it go. Sophie often scolded me, saying I held my breath when stressed. Taking advice from my dead sister? Better late than never.

I pushed up the window cover. The bright light made me wince. Below, the ocean bordered the serpentine edge of land. Lakes littered the middle of the state. The pilot announced we were flying over Orlando and Disney World. People oohed and aahed.

On the seat next to me, I found my notebook and pen under the *New York Times*, and as I flipped open the notebook, my hand trembled. I’d always been pretty good at compartmentalizing, something I found necessary as a lawyer, but it was getting more difficult. I needed to keep my mind busy until I was off the plane and could make calls. I wondered where Gerard was. I figured from our conversations that he was back undercover with the mob. When I told him I was heading to Florida to help Bibi, he told me not to and was upset when I wouldn’t back down. When he realized I wouldn’t change my mind, he said he’d meet me there. Fine.

I made a fist, squeezed, then shook out my hand, needing to write something down, maybe work through what I knew and come up with a plan of sorts. Since my law school days, I’d written to-do lists, observations, even lists of conjectures and theories about people and cases. It kept me focused. It also helped me solve dilemmas, and even, at times, find something that wasn’t immediately apparent. Clients were told to keep a journal of every move they made, with dates and times, plus anything that could help their case. People were unaware of the evidentiary heft a written journal provided when entered into court records. I’d won several cases on the written word alone when the opposition had what I called a wormy case.

But what to write?

The scotch had warmed its way down to my body, and I could feel my nerves relaxing, my brain focusing. I tapped the pen against my lower teeth. Going back to the beginning with Shawn, I wondered why Betty had been interested in her? Bibi said it was cocaine-fueled sex. I believed that. Betty was older and not a looker, so it could have been the excitement and ego boost. I believed Bibi when she said Betty took Bibi in because she saw her talent and wanted to support her. Being a cynic at heart, I figured Betty had done that to make herself feel good. I'm sure it made her look good to her wealthy patron friends. Bibi was beautiful too—a dark version of Sophie—dizygotic twins from different fathers. So that would give Betty even more cred for being inclusive. A great way to get grants for her non-profit art ventures.

There I go again—the cynic.

The flight attendant swooped in and removed my cold coffee. I ordered another scotch, a single this time, thinking about Gerard, my FBI special agent pain-in-the-ass contact. In the beginning, he'd suspected Bibi was another one of Betty's lovers. Men. They always think sex is involved. Sometimes it was. I could attest to that.

So how had Shawn become the crime boss of Betty's mob? Maybe Betty had put her in charge when she went to Kauai. I know that Betty was using heavily by the time she came to the island. She was in Kauai, doing a godmotherly thing—setting up a hit on Bibi's brother who hated Bibi. Bibi was adopted and the parents favored her over their flaky son. Her brother lived communally on Kauai and dressed as the grim reaper to get peoples' attention about climate change. So, he didn't fit his parents' mold. Bibi, however, was the golden child, always thankful for everything they did for her. But they died before the will was changed, and the brother inherited the bulk. Hating Bibi, he gave her nothing. Betty figured she'd get rid of the brother so Bibi would inherit. At least Betty felt she was protecting Bibi. I wonder if Shawn had put that idea into Betty's head, thinking Bibi would eventually bring in even more assets to the “organization.”

When I met Betty in Kauai, I didn't know I had a sister named Bibi. I didn't know a lot of things. I was hiding out from the mob. They wanted the millions my sister Sophie stole. But Betty knew who I was. I was the one who had killed one of her partners—in self-defense. But that didn't matter to her. She must have been overjoyed to think she could take care of two marks on the same trip.

I had to assume that Shawn took over the crime boss position when Betty and her bodyguard never made it back to Boston. Gerard and I thought Shawn was a minor character, one of those people who target the wealthy to live luxuriously for a while, snort coke all day, then when things go dumpster, they disappear. She fooled us.

Plus, I had to remember she was a good actor. Shawn had gone from messed-up street urchin to high couture. What really bothered me was her telling Bibi that she laundered the money for the mob. True? Or was that a way to entrap Bibi? If Bibi knew that, she'd be vulnerable if she didn't join the mob. Shawn was smart, no matter her motive.

I sipped my second scotch. If I kept in lawyer mode, I could keep my shit together. So, who was Shawn? Did she have a police record? What was her M.O.? I'd lost the connection with Snoop, my hacker, just as she was going to tell me what she found on Shawn. I haven't heard from her since, and that's not good.

Shawn might be a psychopath, but she had to be a strategist, someone with patience, someone who had planned her ascent with the crime group. This was conjecture, but her actions pointed to it.

This felt good, building a case, listing all the possibilities, hopefully tracing them to their logical conclusion either with evidence or what I'd discovered in the process.

I listed questions about "Shawn the Strategist":

- Getting Betty hooked on cocaine: loosens the tongue, makes her vulnerable
- Reason for admitting money laundering: trap Bibi into the gang; something else?
- Need background check on her: laundering takes guts, know-how, and connections
- Has Shawn already taken Bibi somewhere? Under guise of meeting?
- How much does Bibi know about Betty?
- Maybe Shawn knows more about Bibi than I do

I suspected that Bibi couldn't live in Betty's house all that time and not notice any illegal activities. But Bibi seemed to have no idea, and as she said, she'd been fully engaged in school, her art, and her friends.

The plane's engine noise changed. We were approaching Fort Lauderdale. I slipped on my shoes and buttoned my military-style jacket, readying myself for landing. I'd dressed with a casual elegance

so people would take me seriously but not authoritatively as with a suit. Instead of perfume or aftershave, the cabin smelled like a locker room, and I hoped I didn't smell that way. I thought of how Gerard would smell when I met him. As if reading my mind, Gerard sent me a message.

I'll get to The Circ before you. Meet you in the
residency lobby.

Between my teeth, I hissed, "Asshole." He'd insisted on meeting me in Florida, but I told him to do *nothing* until I got there. That was like pissing in the wind with him.

I finished the scotch. I couldn't get off the plane fast enough.

The pilot came on the intercom and gave the usual instructions, telling everyone to take their seats, buckle up, seats upright, tray in position. The flight attendant quickly gathered up all the bottles and glasses. I snapped my tray into place, gathered up everything on the empty seat, and threw them in my satchel, something I'd bought because it was more like a briefcase but not a briefcase. The flight attendant had just buckled herself in when the plane dropped like a trap door had opened. Someone squealed. A kid cried. Then the plane leveled off.

With my heart in my throat, I forced my mind back to Bibi and Betty. From everything I knew, Betty wanted Bibi to devote herself to being an artist. What if Betty had recognized Shawn's killer instinct and started grooming her to take over the business?

I checked my cell one more time. Nothing from Bibi.

The plane headed toward the landing strip. I held the notebook against my chest. As a defense attorney, I'd met many criminals and could usually sniff out the liars. Bibi's panicky text from Florida was not something easy to fake. But I had no body language to go with this to assure me she was being straight with me.

Far too many unknowns.

I sat back, closed my eyes, and prepared for landing.