

BRITTNEY GRINER

COMING HOME

with Michelle Burford

SAMPLE CHAPTERS



1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Published in the UK in 2024 by September Publishing

This edition published by arrangement with Alfred A. Knopf, an imprint of
The Knopf Doubleday Group, a division of Penguin Random House, LLC

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Front-of-jacket photograph by Dana Scruggs

Back-of-jacket photograph by Miguel Negron, U.S. Army South

Jacket design by John Gall

Text designed by Casey Hampton

Composed by North Market Street Graphics, Lancaster, Pennsylvania

Printed in Poland on paper from responsibly managed,
sustainable sources by Hussar Books

ISBN 9781914613753

Ebook ISBN 9781914613760

September Publishing

www.septemberpublishing.org

PROLOGUE

BEFORE

February 15, 2022

My eyelids slide open. *Tuesday. Already. Fuck.* Me and Relle lie in a tumble of sheets, the Arizona sun pouring into our bedroom. I groan. This trip overseas, this final stretch, it came so fast. “When’s your flight again?” my wife asks. “Ten twenty-five,” I mumble. I glance at my phone. *Seven a.m.* I’m a stickler for time. My dad was military, law enforcement. If I’m on time, I’m late. Not today, Pops. Haven’t even finished packing. I’m still on yesterday. I’m still on Relle and me.

Yesterday. A Valentine’s Day with my wife that almost didn’t happen. My season has been the whirlwind they all are. Hooping for the Phoenix Mercury from May to October. Playing in Russia, October to April. Three one-week breaks to fly home and see my baby, three short-ass trips that make me miss her more. Before this break I get Covid. My team, UMMC Ekaterinburg, are reigning champs of the EuroLeague. I’m on the practice court, preparing to throw down in Spain, when I suddenly feel like death. I test positive, and so does half the team. *Game over; break here.*

“You need a negative PCR test to get into America,” the team doc tells me. Google disagrees. A search reveals the rules have just changed, and I insist on the less-sensitive antigen test. The team has its reasons for wanting us to stay. Might get home and be too sick to return. Might miss games. Might jeopardize our shot at another title. Great reasons, but I have better ones: my back, my knees, my ankles, all in throbbing pain, yet nothing compared to my heart. It aches for Relle, for this season to be done. I’ve quietly decided it’s my last.

I test negative and cough my way to Phoenix through a mask. Seven days at home, only six given the time difference, four spent feeling like crap. I’m finally on my feet the night before our special day. I’m going big this year, bigger than I have since we met. Our paths first crossed at Baylor in Waco, Texas. I was a sophomore and star baller; she was brand-new and fine as hell. I stopped by the SUB food court for my usual chocolate shake, and as soon as I picked it up, I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned and saw this girl, cute and classy, with a scarf on her neck and curves for days.

“Excuse me, I think that’s mine,” she said, pointing at my cup. This was my shake, no doubt about it, but one look at her and I let that go. “My bad,” I said, handing it to her. She took it and smiled. “And I think it’s rude you don’t remember my name,” she said. I stared at her. Had we met? “I know your name,” I said, trying to be slick. “So what is it?” she clapped back. *Busted*. “Okay, I don’t remember your name,” I said, “but if you tell me, I promise I’ll never forget.” We cracked up. “Actually, we haven’t met,” she said, extending her hand. “I’m Cherelle Watson.” Thirteen years of love and friendship later, Relle still claims I stole her shake. Wrong. But I don’t argue ’cause I clearly came out ahead. I found my person and my place all at once.

I had no real place before I met Relle. When you’re six foot nine and wear size 17 men’s sneakers, you don’t fit. Not in cars. Not in chairs. Not in beds. Not in crowds. And definitely not in a world that mistakes you for what it most fears: a Black man.

Your presence is a threat. Your Blackness intimidates. Your height and swagger add to the alarm. You walk through the world on high alert, scanning your surroundings and holding your breath. Lower your guard for even a second and boom, you might get taken out. Many have. More will. We're home but not home free. We're seen, but through a warped lens.

That was why I started hooping. It made me feel truly visible. It also made me feel less like an outsider, a giant with no titties. When you're still flat chested by eighth grade, people talk. Girls in the locker room point and whisper, "Is she a boy, a dyke, a freak? Why is her voice so low? Is she tucking—hiding a penis in her underwear?" The stares, the taunts, they hurt like hell, much like the sorrow I carried around: *What's wrong with me, and when will I be normal?*

Basketball was my normal. On court, I wasn't a weirdo. I was an athlete above all, a starter always. Forty minutes of acceptance, four quarters of sanity. At fifteen, I found my sport, my identity. At sixteen, I dunked my way to fame with a YouTube video that went viral. In the world, I was a riddle. But in the arena, I was a star. I soared. I slammed. I sold tickets. I was applauded, affirmed, celebrated. I'd never felt at home in my skin. Basketball brought me the closest.

And then I met Relle. That freedom I experienced while hooping, I felt it all the time with her. At Baylor and beyond, we had our ups and downs, and we were best friends when I asked her to marry me. In 2018, we wed, no fuss or fanfare, just the two of us with a promise: we do, we will, forever. By then our love had been tested by my long stints in China, in Russia, on the road. That continued. Relle was in law school in North Carolina, living between there and our home in Phoenix. Zoom kept us close; the distance kept things exciting. That's the upside of distance. You meet your lover fresh each time you come together, and then while you're apart you support each other's grind. The downside is the longing, the absence of touch. As we watched *Grey's Anatomy* together on FaceTime, I'd imagine holding Relle in my arms.

That got old. I was tired of missing home, missing holidays, missing us. I was also legit exhausted. Your body takes a beating in this sport, and I'd been pounding mine for fifteen years. When that YouTube dunk caught fire in 2007, so did my career. Next thing I knew, I was meeting Shaq, who'd seen the video. Life sped up. Three-time All-American. Number one overall WNBA draft pick. WNBA All-Star. A historic Nike deal. Two Olympic golds, four EuroLeague titles, honors on and on. One blessing after another, with big battles behind the scenes: A cracked back so painful I couldn't sleep. Zero cartilage in my knees. Life under the microscope and on the road, with no steady home, no stability. Every sport has an off-season, but pro women hoopers often work year-round. We earn about 250 times less than NBA players and have a hard cap on our salaries. In the WNBA that year I made around \$220,000. Overseas, I earned a million plus. That pay gap is why I was in Russia in the first place.

A few months before my Valentine's Day visit, my agent and I had negotiated a Thanksgiving break. It was the first time in years I'd been home on the actual holiday, and my wife threw down in the kitchen. Ham, mac and cheese, mashed potatoes, and my favorite, homemade honey-bun cake. Mom and my nephew E.J. flew in from Houston. Relle, a preacher's kid from Arkansas, gave me the tradition I craved. On that break, something in me said, *This is it. I can't go back.*

I take pride in being a breadwinner, promised Relle I'd always provide. That was why I teared up when I told her, "Baby, I'm done." She hugged me. She'd already sensed it. "You're not the only source of income," she reminded me. She'd soon have her law degree. Also, we'd find other ways for me to earn. I honestly wanted to quit right then, but I had to honor my contract. Dad drilled that into me growing up: Finish what you start. So we decided I'd complete this one last season before leaning into the next one. We'd find a church. We'd grow our family. We'd be together. Finally.

For Valentine's Day, I go all out. Relle has been working her butt off in school, making us both proud. So I book a spa day at the Biltmore, a luxury resort. She thinks I'm coming with her. That's the surprise. "This day is all about you," I tell her. "I want you to get pampered. Take your time." I chauffeur her there and kiss her goodbye, promise to pick her up later. While I play golf, she relishes the experience: facial, massage, the works. When I return, she is glowing, as gorgeous as she was when we first met. Out to dinner, we exchange sweet nothings between bites of steak and potatoes. At home I have one last surprise: a massive bouquet of roses. "Babe, you've been holding back on me!" she squeals. "This isn't a bouquet, it's a *garden!*" That evening, in the dark, as I hold Relle close, I think, *I've just gotta make it to April.*

And then.

Just as my blessings come with battles, my *afters* flow from *befores*. Before, I am BG, No. 42, a daddy's girl from Texas. Before, I am hopeful, more than ever, with a future so bright it burns my eyes. I'm on my way to Russia, a place I've called my second home. For eight seasons I've played there, won there, lived there for long stretches, greeted the schoolgirl fans always lined up near my locker room. I'll go back now and grind my way to playoffs, earn this last round of cash for my family. I'll finish strong, with dignity, the way Pops taught me to. Before, I have no clue what's coming. That is the gift of that Valentine's Day.

A short time later and a world away, I wake up in an *after* I'd wish on no one. My horror begins in a land I thought I knew, on a trip I wish I hadn't taken. It's the memory of what I left behind and the gut-wrenching truths I encountered. It's the diary of my heartaches, my regrets, my questions about what a Black life is worth. It's my gratitude to the millions who rallied for my rescue. It's how I endured a nightmare, the most frightening ordeal of my life. And it's the story of us, of Relle and me, and how our love finally brought me home.

PART I

HOSTAGE

The system put a mark on us. You're not the same as everyone else. And nobody ever asked who we were. As Black and brown people, it's as if we were born guilty.

—Yusef Salaam of the Exonerated Five

BG

Hey baby I got stopped by security at customs

If you don't hear from me for like one hour or more get my agent on the phone

Wake up plz

Fuck

Baby text me plz I'm freaking out

Baby

Yo

Baby

Hello

This is it for me

Brittney's first texts on February 17, 2022, from the Moscow airport to her wife, Cherelle, then asleep at 2:02 a.m. at their home in Phoenix

FLIGHT TO HELL

That whole day was strange. On the morning of my Russia flight, my wife and I lingered in bed till the last minute because something in me kept whispering, *Don't go*. "Babe, we gotta get out of here," Relle finally said around 8:30 a.m. *Ob snap. Two hours till takeoff*. Relle was planning to ride with me to the airport and then go to brunch with a friend. She threw on a sundress as I dragged myself out of bed. From then on, everything went sideways.

Relle usually packs for me. I hold the WNBA record for most dunks, and I can practically block a shot in my sleep, but please don't ask me to organize anything. Not a closet. Not a pantry. Not a schedule. And for damn sure not a suitcase. That's my wife's territory and also her talent. I do the hooping, she does the planning. I do the driving, she does the shopping. I open doors, she walks through them. Our skills and desires are complementary, which is what makes us a perfect team. Also, we're both Southerners, old-school traditional. Several months before this trip, however, we'd switched things up. She was in her third year of law school, juggling two jobs and running on

fumes. “Our support has to look different,” she said. *Of course.* “Babe, don’t worry,” I told her. “I got this.” In principle, that was true. In practice, I was a mess.

Even with our new understanding in place, my baby had my back ahead of this trip. Every time I’d fly in on break, she’d do a Target run to stock up on the American foods and seasonings I couldn’t get in Russia: candy, cookies, brown sugar, pancake mix, Worcestershire sauce, Sweet Baby Ray’s barbecue sauce, and of course my Tony Chachere’s Original Creole Seasoning. My mom’s from Louisiana, Cajun country, so I don’t play when it comes to my spices. I love to eat, always have, and my food needs to taste right. Before our Valentine’s Day celebration, Relle had organized all those items into hard-shell roller suitcases, my two checked bags. That left me with my carry-ons to pack: a small roller bag and my Louis Vuitton backpack, the NBA edition. I carry that backpack everywhere.

Soon as I got up, I pulled out my roller. I shoved in my Nintendo Switch, my headphones, all my electronics, a jumble of cables and cords. I then grabbed my backpack, unzipped the large compartment, and slid in my huge MacBook Pro. I didn’t pack many clothes. Just a few pairs of underwear and sweats. I had an apartment in Russia, provided by my team, and most of my stuff was already there. If my wife had packed my carry-ons, she would’ve started by making sure they were empty. She would’ve unzipped the pockets, one at a time, and turned the bags over to dump them out. She then would’ve rolled and zip-tied every cord and stacked them neatly inside the case. I did none of that. No time. My stuff was all over the place, just randomly scattered in the bag. The one thing I was careful about was my passport. If someone stole that, I was in trouble. That was why I always kept mine in my hoodie pocket. In ten minutes flat, I finished packing and pulled on my Cross Colours hoodie, the Black Lives Matter edition. “You’re done that quick?” Relle asked. “Yep,” I said, “I’m ready to roll.”

My iPhone wasn’t. As we were leaving, I couldn’t find it anywhere. We tore up the house in search of that phone, kept

calling it to see if we'd spot it. Nothing, plus I had it on Silent mode. I'm known to lose things—wallet, keys, headphones—and since I always have on gym clothes, stuff falls out of my pockets when I sit down. Not my fault. Something goes missing, but it's usually not *lost* lost, because a minute later I'll be like, "Oh, I'm sitting on it." I wasn't so fortunate on this day, and I couldn't go to Russia without my phone. At 8:45, I was worried. By 9:00, I was manic and sweating. Finally, at 9:20, an hour before my flight, we found it behind our bed's headboard. It takes twenty minutes to get to the Phoenix airport from our place, and I drove our white Audi like I'd stolen it. Relle gripped the seat the whole way. At 9:45 I screeched up to the curb. We said our "I love yous" with the car still running, and she sped off.

The curb agent waved me toward him. Normally, I couldn't have checked bags so close to flight time, but there was nothing normal about that Tuesday. Even my route was different. I usually flew Phoenix to LA and then on to Moscow, with a final connection into Ekaterinburg, aka Ekat, the city where my team was based. But this time I'd go from Phoenix to New York's JFK before going on to Russia, and if I missed this first flight, I'd throw off my whole itinerary. Lucky for me, the agent rushed my bags through to Ekat. He also escorted me through security and to my gate just so I'd make the flight. That was how late I was.

After the agent had walked off, I felt something in my pocket. *Damn*. I called Relle, who was halfway to brunch. "Do not turn off the car," I told her. "Turn around and come back because I still have the keys." Relle chuckled. She knew who she married, and this was right on brand for me. With my flight already boarding, I couldn't run out to the curb. So I spotted an airport worker walking by and said, "Bro, I need your help. I'm going overseas and I messed up." I held up the key fob. "Can you please take these out to my wife?" He quickly agreed. I'm sure it helped that he recognized me and that I handed him all the cash I had on me, about \$250. I snapped a pic of the dude

and sent it to Relle so she'd know who to look for. Minutes later she had the keys and I was headed to New York.

Things went sideways again at JFK. My carry-ons were screened, zero issues, but when I presented my Covid test, the agent said, "This is no good." *What?* For my results to be considered valid, she explained, the test had to be taken within forty-eight hours of my scheduled arrival in Russia. I'd miss that cutoff by twenty minutes based on my time stamp. I was pissed. I rushed to a site at the airport to take the dumb test, the one where they shove a swab up your nose and scratch out your skull. I waited for the results by email, refreshing every second and finally calling Relle to say, "Babe, I'm probably gonna miss this." I did. Big time. So I checked myself into an airport hotel and rang my team with the news. I may lose things, but I'm never late. I'm usually the nerd who's at the airport four hours before my flight. So they understood, no big deal, and rebooked me for the next day on Aeroflot Russian Airlines.

On Wednesday evening I returned to the international terminal, no hassles, no hiccups, no bags flagged. I texted Relle. "Hey, honey, about to take off," I wrote. "I'll call you when I get there. I love you." My plane departed as scheduled, at 7:25 p.m. New York time. I settled in for the nine-hour flight, ate some dinner, listened to music. Later I pulled out my laptop and booted up *Grey's Anatomy*. I nodded off after four episodes, and when I woke up, we were starting our descent. It was noon in Moscow when we landed. My Ekat flight was at three. *One last layover*; I thought as I put away my computer. One short sprint to the end of my final season.

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The air felt different. I'd traveled to Russia dozens of times in eight years and never had this eerie feeling. I went through passport control, got my stamp, and took an escalator down to security for my transfer to the domestic terminal. Two large glass doors slid open. The scene on the other side proved something was off.

The place was crawling with workers. It was usually pretty empty, maybe a couple of screeners, and then you'd sail right through to your connecting flight. This checkpoint was fully staffed: five, six workers near the metal detectors, another bunch huddled by the trays, a screener guy seated behind the X-ray machine. Everyone was in uniform, and a few had on blue military camos. *What the hell is going on?* A blond, skinny police lady walked alongside the passengers, her dog sniffing every bag. The canine smelled the luggage of the person in front of me. All clear. Same thing when the dog sniffed my bags. No reaction. He immediately moved on to the next passenger, but the woman tapped me on the shoulder. She said something in Russian, God knows what, and motioned for me to step aside.

I wasn't the only one pulled from the line. Most of the Russians flew through the metal detectors, but us foreigners were being flagged for additional search. I glanced around at the passports. There was a guy from Pakistan, several from Ukraine, a few from Uzbekistan. I don't know what that dog did when he sniffed their bags, but I was one hundred percent sure how it reacted to mine: totally chill, a day at the beach, absolutely nothing to see here, folks. My father was a cop, a Vietnam vet, and I grew up with police-trained Rottweilers, Malinois, all of them. I know what dog signals look like. When they sniff something suspicious, they normally sit, bark, make weird movements. This dog didn't even whimper. I wasn't nervous when I got yanked, just annoyed at the hassle. I had no reason to be scared. My carry-ons were clean.

I placed my bags on the conveyor and watched them roll away. Before they were even inside the scanner, the screener got up and leaned all the way into the machine. *Strange*. I stepped through the metal detectors, no alarm, then came around to my bags. There stood the screener's teammate, a customs agent. Bald, early forties, hard-nosed, in a tight-knit sweater and chinos. If you're standing in a customer service line, he's the guy you don't want to go to. No smile, no emotion, no nothing.

He gestured for me to unzip my bags. I studied his face to be sure I understood, since in America you don't touch your bags. You stand your butt back while the agent rummages through them. That clearly wasn't the case in Russia, because he signaled again for me to open them. I started pulling stuff out left and right, showing him every item, unzipping small compartments he didn't even know existed. I wanted to get this search over with and move on to my last flight.

I'd worked my way through the backpack when I opened one last zip. I slid in my hand and felt something inside. The agent stared as I slowly lifted out a cartridge with cannabis oil. *Fuck.* I'm a licensed cannabis user in the United States, with a medical marijuana card issued by my doctor. He prescribed cannabis years ago, to help me cope with my debilitating sports injuries. In Arizona cannabis is legal. In Russia it's forbidden. I knew that. Honest to God, I just totally forgot the pen was in my bag. The moment I felt it in that pocket, my stomach sank.

The agent took the cartridge and held it up. "What this substance?" he said in broken English. My tongue was frozen, but my brain was scrambling, trying to find a way out of this. "Um, it's CBD," I finally said. Although cannabis was prohibited, I'd heard CBD was a lesser offense. Not true, I already knew in that moment, but I tried. "What this?" the agent asked again in even choppiest English. *This dude doesn't know what I'm saying.* I pulled out my phone, typed "CBD" into Google Translate, and showed him my screen. He looked at the phone and then back at me. Silence. A moment later he reopened my roller as I stood by, stone-faced. First he pulled out my Nintendo Switch. Next he pulled out the heap of cords, as tangled as my insides. And last he lifted a pair of sweats. A cartridge fell from the pocket and tumbled onto the tabletop. *Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.*

Fear takes many forms. There's the kind you feel when life sneaks up from behind and frightens you half to death. Some people freeze. Others run. I'm usually the one who fights like hell. When I saw those cartridges, not one but two, a different type of fear shuddered through me. There was no instinct to

fight, flee, or freeze. Instead, my body went into a major free fall, as if I'd stumbled off a cliff and plunged into the ocean. Down and down I spiraled, through the depths, in the dark, sinking further and further but never reaching the floor. *Whoosh*. As I dropped I felt empty, disconnected, alone. I was there but not there, alive but numb, lost in a watery underworld.

The agent picked up the cartridge and glared at me. I couldn't speak, think, breathe. I was still falling, still flailing, desperate to slow the spiral. Even after the second cartridge was discovered, I was hoping he'd let it slide, give me a strong warning, allow me to just throw that shit away. Both of the vape pens were practically empty, with not even enough cannabis oil to get you high. Clearly I wasn't a smuggler. If I was truly trying to sneak in drugs, I wouldn't have them in the front zip of a backpack. *Come on, bro*. I'd seen too many episodes of *Locked Up Abroad* to be that foolish. Also, I definitely wouldn't have helped the agent search my bag. Hell no. I was literally pulling stuff out like, "You want to see this?" I cleared pockets, unscrewed bottles. Obviously I wasn't Pablo Escobar. I just fucking forgot the cartridges were in my bag, end of story. And yet the horror was just beginning. Meanwhile, others were breezing through security, all of them appearing to be Russian. Especially since that dog hadn't whimpered at my luggage, I began wondering if I'd been singled out.

The agent pointed at a nearby row of chairs. "You wait," he said, or I think that's what I heard. I collapsed into the seat. When he walked off with the cartridges, I started blowing up Relle's phone. It was just after 2:00 a.m. in Phoenix, and she was dead asleep, with the ringer off. "Hey, nine-one-one, wake up, wake up, wake up, wake up!" I said on her voicemail. "Yo, babe, I need you to answer." I left her a dozen messages like that before getting super real on the last one. "Babe, I think I'm about to get locked up," I said with a crack in my voice. "I really need you to call me. Please." *Click*. My hands were trembling so badly that I almost dropped the phone. I drew in a breath, tried to gather myself, and sent Relle a text. Then

another. And another. And then ten more. Row after row of desperation, each message more distraught than the last. "This is it for me, Babe," I finally wrote. I could no longer feel my fingers but managed to hit send.

When I didn't hear from Relle, I reached out to family. "Hey, I love you," I wrote to my mom. My parents are divorced but still in touch, live close to each other in Houston. I was purposely vague with both Mom and Pops because I didn't want to alarm them. Same thing with my brother, DeCarlo; my sisters, SheKera and Pier; and my nephew E.J., then in tenth grade. We're close. "Shit has gone sideways," I wrote, "but I can't say much. I don't want you to worry about me. Everything is going to be okay." If I'd received that cryptic-ass message from a loved one, I would've been *more* worried, not less. But I wasn't doing the typing, the calling, the pleading. Panic had taken over. I also called my local translator, provided by the team. I gave him the lowdown and told him to contact Max Ryabkov, the team's GM. *Help might be close.*

The screener returned. With him was a young guy, hair slicked back, who introduced himself as Anton. I understood that only because he spoke English. Sort of. At least a bit better than anyone else there. He held up the cartridges. "We take this to forensics," he said in a thick accent. "Forensics?" I asked. I'd heard him. But I repeated the word because I couldn't believe this was happening. "You wait," said the screener. I hadn't caught this first guy's name, thought he was just a random airport employee. He wasn't. Anton explained they were sending the pens for testing. This "screener" was apparently Anton's supervisor, a head honcho in the Russian Federal Customs Service (FCS). *Crap.* "You wait," Anton said. "How long is it going to be?" I asked. He stared at me blankly. So much for his knowing English. I typed my question into Google and held up the translation. Neither of them even looked at the screen. "Wait, wait, wait" is all they would say. I waved the screen in front of Anton again. Same thing. No acknowledgment. They pointed

at my passport, grabbed it from my hand. They also took my Ekat boarding pass and walked away

I waited. I worried. I was too shaken up to weep. I fell deeper into despair by the hour, prayed Relle would soon wake up. Noon turned into 2:00 p.m., which meant I'd probably miss my flight to Ekaterinburg at 3:00. As I sat there these two customs guys darted all over that security checkpoint, shouting in Russian and holding up the cartridges, leaving and returning with the pens. *I thought they were taking them to forensics?* I had no idea what was happening, when it might end, or if it would. The words I'd texted Relle looped through my head. *This is it for me. This is it for me. This is it for me.* I'd watched enough documentaries on Russian prisons to know how inmates were treated. They were tortured. Starved. Stripped of everything. As I slid down in my chair and imagined the worst, my heart pounded away. Fear is one thing. But uncertainty, the unknown, a free fall into mystery—that's much stronger than fear; it's terror. This sitch was going south, spinning out of control fast, and I had no way of stopping it. That scared me most of all.

My phone lit up at 2:30 p.m. *Relle. Thank God.* She'd set her alarm for 4:30 a.m. Phoenix time so she could prepare for a Zoom court session later that morning. She'd awoken to my flurry of messages and went right into lawyer mode: "Who are these people, why do they have you, and what exactly are they saying?" I gave her the full picture in my shaky voice, and she was firm from the beginning: I had nothing to hide. "Babe, you aren't some drug smuggler," she said. "You had two pens in your bag, both of them medically licensed with cannabis legally purchased. Don't freak out. You've done nothing wrong."

That relaxed me a little. Relle worked at a firm specializing in criminal defense. She and her colleagues handled drug and homicide cases all the time, knew this territory well. That was why she felt so strongly that we should hush our mouths and let the truth do the talking. She promised to call my agent, Lindsay Kagawa Colas, who was probably still asleep at her home

in Portland, Oregon. “Don’t you say a word to anyone, don’t you write anything down,” Relle warned. “We’ve got this, baby. We’ll get through it together. We’ll be in contact soon, so keep your phone close. I love you.” She sounded strong, so brave on my behalf, but I heard the same fear in her voice as in my own. After our call she left messages for Lindz and we continued our convo on text. Again she led with her legal instincts.

RELLE: What are the agents saying?

ME: Nothing right now. They told me they’re going to test the pens for drugs.

RELLE: Even when the results come back, say nothing until you’ve heard from an attorney. You didn’t misplace any cartridges in your checked luggage, correct?

ME: Right. Nothing.

RELLE: You may get arrested upon results, my love. I’m not sure what their process is there.

ME: I’m sure I will. I knew I should’ve stayed with you and never come back here. I’m sorry for having you in this with my dumb ass. I just want to come home.

RELLE: It’s okay, babe. You made a simple mistake. We’ll get through this together and discreetly. I have my Zoom so I’ll be busy for a while, but I’ll be quick with court and available to you. I love you. This moment in time doesn’t change that. I’m still proud to be your wife. Keep your head up, your confidence up, your faith in God up. This, too, shall pass.

With all my heart I wanted to believe Relle, prayed this crisis would somehow end. But as time dragged on with no sign of the agents, any hope I had left began slipping away. My baby had studied the law in the United States, knew our Constitution inside out. Yet while due process runs the show in the land of the free, this was Russia. This was Putin’s house. This was hell.