

Traffic

A Ronnie Lake Murder Mystery

By

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Traffic: A Ronnie Lake Mystery
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PROLOGUE

Marissa Popov stared up at the pointed tip of the soaring steel and glass tower as she and Natalia waited for the light to change. The way it pierced the sky into the fog made her feel as if she could shoot to the moon from the spear-like top of the building.

The tugging on her coat sleeve shifted her gaze back to her ten-year-old sister.

“When I go to college one day, I don’t want a backpack anymore.” Natalia moved one of her pack’s shoulder straps and leaned in against her older sibling as they waited for the light. She played with the strap on Marissa’s small cross-body woven leather bag. “If you get tired of this one, may I borrow it?”

“Probably.” Marissa had forgotten Natalia’s inhaler, and they were backtracking to pick it up before heading to school. She looked up again at the high floors of the building.

“You always look up there.” Natalia nudged Marissa. “How come? Do you think Pappa can see us? You know, when he’s home.”

She laughed. “No, I don’t think he can see us from way up there.”

“When will he come home?” Worry washed over the

girl's face, and she scrutinized the sidewalk under her feet.

"I think tomorrow." The light changed and they held hands. She gave Natalia's a squeeze.

The two dashed across Central Park South, the younger girl's ginger ponytail flying out behind her and the choppy strands of her older sister's honey-blond hair whipping in the chilly November wind. They moved quickly along the sidewalk, Marissa looking ahead to maneuver through the crowd. The girls darted left and right to pass slower pedestrians as they made their way to the tower.

"You won't leave me?" Natalia pulled on her sister's hand.

This was a drill that Natalia and Marissa had repeated many times in the last year, ever since the child's mother had died. Marissa remembered her own broken heart when her mother died twelve years earlier. Her father had remarried quickly. Then along came Natalia, her adorable half-sister.

"We'll stay safe until he comes home?" the girl asked, her voice quivering. Marissa leaned down to give her a hug.

As they swept through the enormous tinted glass doors, Marissa reassured Natalia that all was good. How could they not stay safe—the security in this tower was like Fort Knox, even though most of the residents had not yet moved into their apartments and there was still a lot of construction going on inside the building. Three

doormen, two deskmen, and sentries by each elevator greeted, waved, and high-fived the kid as if she were one of their own. Natalia loved to high-five them right back.

The sisters swallowed to clear their ears as they exited the private super-express elevator to the forty-second floor. Marissa opened her bag for the key and unlocked the door. They walked into the foyer of the spacious, luxe apartment owned by their father, Maxim Popov.

Marissa came face-to-face with a painting that she, a college art history major, never tired of admiring and studying—one of the forest paintings by the Russian avant-garde painter Natalia Goncharova from the early twentieth century. It had been her father’s wedding gift to the last Mrs. Popov, and she’d named her daughter after the artist. The other walls of the foyer displayed additional turn-of-the-century canvasses, further evidence that her Moldovan father’s passion for Russian art knew no limits. Marissa never took for granted living among these great paintings. She picked up the inhaler from the round marble table in the middle of the foyer.

Natalia dropped her pack on the floor, opened it, and dug around inside. Some of her school things spilled out, but she focused on her sister. “Red Bull, please, please, please.” She pulled on Marissa’s arm. “I’m getting one.”

“Okay, okay, Talia! But quickly.” She allowed Natalia to drag her along as the two of them headed to the kitchen.

Right before the door, she glanced up at the last

moment and saw that one of the tiny cameras in the corner near the ceiling looked smashed.

Momentum carried them forward through the door, and it was too late to stop. Marissa noted a figure in her peripheral vision. Before she could grab Natalia and run, three other men out of nowhere joined the first one, all with faces hidden by sunglasses and fleece neck gators, ball caps, or hoodies.

Everything stopped for a split-second and then chaos broke out. One of the men stumbled and knocked into the others. They recovered swiftly and rushed toward the girls, yelling at each other in a jumble of Spanish.

“What do we do?” a younger-sounding one shrieked in panic in accented English. He grabbed Natalia and she screamed. The first man, stocky and strong, bellowed a response in a commanding, gruff voice.

Marissa swung her bag at one of the other intruders and simultaneously lunged forward to protect her sister. But a tall man grabbed her shoulders from behind and pulled her off her feet. She twisted as she fell and her face slammed against the kitchen island, her nose taking the full impact.

“Unhhh,” she exhaled.

“Marissa!” Natalia howled.

Marissa’s arm slapped back against the island surface, trying to grab something, anything, as a weapon. All she could come up with was a glass. It slipped from her hand and crashed onto the floor, breaking into pieces. She cried out as she fell on top of the shards.

“Owww,” she moaned, and the man lifted her roughly into a standing position. She noticed blood dripping from her nose, which hurt like hell, and it was difficult to breathe.

The man shoved her forward, and she pulled away as hard as she could, emitting a loud grunt. She broke free to reach for her sister, but he grabbed her forcefully.

“Marissa!” Natalia cried out again as three of the men dragged them fighting and screaming through a butler’s pantry. Natalia tried to hang onto the handle of the small refrigerator and Marissa grabbed at the dishwasher door, hoping for a weapon but seeing only the blood spatter left by her nosebleed.

She slowed her breathing, attempting to calm herself for her sister’s sake. Natalia was gasping and crying as they stumbled into the dining room.

“I’m right here with you, Talia.” Marissa’s sister gradually quieted down.

The men yelled back and forth and pushed the girls into chairs next to each other. One of the men pulled his shoelaces from his sneakers, threw one to his buddy, and they clumsily bound the girls’ wrists tightly to the leg of the dining table.

“Ow, it hurts!” Natalia started to cry again, kicking her foot several times against the leg of the table in protest.

“Hey, take it easy. You’re scaring her.” Marissa’s heart pounded wildly, and she tried to act calm. “What do you want?”

The stocky man came into the room and registered

surprise and anger at the sight of the sisters tied to the table. He pulled at the shoestrings binding their wrists and looked around the room, complaining in Spanish. He spotted a bundle of cables near a baseboard, pointed at the zip tie keeping the bundle together, and sent the young man back to the kitchen.

An older man, from the sound of his scratchy voice, pulled out his reading glasses and rushed over to a sideboard to examine a photograph of a middle-aged man with the two sisters. “Maxim...” He switched the glasses back to his shades, turned to look at the girls, and started to say something else.

Marissa jumped in. “You don’t need to tie us up—”

“Shut up, lady,” the older man said in heavily accented English, trying to sound tough. Even with his sandpaper voice, something was off. “You talk too much—”

Natalia let loose a high-pitched cry like a mortally wounded animal. It turned into body-wracking sobs that made it hard for her to breathe. Marissa could see signs of an asthma attack coming on.

“Keep your eyes closed, Talia. It will be less scary,” she said in a gentle tone, but her sister still sobbed loudly.

The stocky man, growled something authoritatively in Spanish and left the room again.

Two other guys followed him. That left the tall one. Natalia’s crying showed no sign of subsiding.

“Please,” Marissa pleaded. “Let me help my sister. I may have dropped her inhaler in the kitchen.” She

mimicked sneezing and using an inhaler. “Do you understand? You don’t want her to pass out, especially if your boss plans to call our father. I’m guessing that’s why you’re here. You want something from him?”

“Shut up. Not your business,” he barked at her, his accent Latino, too.

Marissa called out as he left the room, “And please some ice and a towel for my nose.”

“I’m scared.” Natalia’s voice broke and the tears flowed harder.

“Take long, deep breaths,” she said in a quiet voice, hoping to calm her sister. Natalia still squeezed her eyes shut. Marissa worked on loosening her bound wrists.

A few minutes later, the tall man returned with a toolbox and a small metal bowl. He walked into the dining room just in time to catch Marissa trying to free herself.

“Stop,” he ordered. He opened the toolbox and pulled out a couple of zip ties. Natalia continued crying.

“Keep her quiet.” He untied the shoestring around Marissa’s wrists as she spoke to her sister in a soothing tone. He zip-tied one of her wrists to the leg of the table. He then repeated the same process with Natalia and one of her wrists.

He reached into the toolbox and handed Marissa the inhaler. He checked one more time that the tie to her other arm was tight and did the same with Natalia. Then he handed Marissa a kitchen towel and the bowl, which she saw was filled with ice.

“Manuel,” a man called from further down the hallway.

“Thank you, Manuel,” Marissa said as he left.

She helped Natalia with the inhaler, whispering, “It’ll all be okay. Breathe slowly. We will figure out a way.”

After a couple of puffs on the inhaler, Natalia’s eyes popped open. She took one look at her older sister’s bloody nose and sobbed even harder. Marissa rubbed Natalia’s back. Eventually the girl’s breathing slowed down, and her crying turned into whimpering. Marissa wrapped a handful of ice cubes in the towel and, leaning forward, pressed the cubes against her nose.

She could hear the men arguing. “Shhh, Talia. I need to listen,” she said, her tone still soothing, even though she wanted to throw up she was so scared.

She couldn’t make out what they were saying except for a word here and there. “...Popov...”

“...police...”

Marissa put the ice cubes to the side and slid her free hand into her short leather boot until she felt her phone tucked below her ankle. She pulled it out and lifted it, and the device slipped from her hand. She tried to catch it, but ended up accidentally swatting away the phone as it fell to the ground.

With one arm still zip-tied to the leg of the table, she stretched. The fingertips of her free arm touched the edge of the phone, but not enough to grab it. Marissa scrambled to reach farther in order to retrieve her phone.

She paused for a moment, took a few deep breaths,

and tried not to panic.



Samantha James was the most eye-catching bike messenger anyone in the paved canyons of Manhattan could ever hope to see. Her long red hair flew out from beneath her helmet and her ultra-long legs pumped the pedals while she darted between stop-and-go traffic. Often vehicles around her would slow down trying to get a better look as she raced by, clad in her brightly-patterned leggings. Samantha was definitely attention-grabbing, as she deftly negotiated traffic behind the aviator shades that sat on her upturned, slightly crooked nose. Every now and then a cabbie would whistle in appreciation of her bike-handling skills, and she'd respond with her quirky, gap-toothed smile.

Unfortunately, casting directors hadn't been swayed by her unconventional looks and acting talent lately. As she cruised down Fifth Avenue to deliver a package—signed legal papers to an address in the Hudson Yards area—she thought about the audition from the day before. She was sure she'd nailed the part of the rebellious law student. Ben, who was doing the casting, liked her work, and she knew the director, Jerzy White, socially. She'd even had a small semi-regular part on one of his cop shows a year ago, so they knew she was a pro. But there wasn't even a lousy call-back on her phone for this new one.

As she flew around a corner on 38th Street, a taxi almost doored her as the passenger stepped out on the

traffic side of the cab. She'd seen it swing open at the very last minute.

"Hey! Watch out!" Samantha cried out. She'd just managed to swerve away and avoid slamming into the yellow door.

"No, YOU watch out," a woman yelled from the sidewalk. "Crazy jerk!"

"Always weaving in and out of traffic," another woman complained. "You're gonna cause an accident, you hear me?"

Samantha ignored the angry women and felt fortunate to have this new part-time messenger gig since she'd quit her old job to go back to school. She slowed down for an upcoming pedestrian crossing and stopped.

"Hey, babe, where ya goin'?" a younger guy yelled out from a group in the middle of the crossing. His chortling friends fake-slugged him.

Samantha pushed off and ignored them as she pedaled by.

"Bitch!" the guy yelled after her.

CHAPTER ONE

-Appointment at 11:30 cancelled. Can I take my lovely daughter to lunch at noon?

-Sorry, Mom. Got a deadline. Maybe later.

-OK. Next time. Are you

My phone rang and my fingers stopped texting. I clicked connect. “Hi, Brooke.”

“Hi Mom. What are you doing in the city this early? Where are you?”

“Hudson Yards. I just finished an appointment with a silver dealer. It was the only time he could see me today—”

“A silver dealer? What’s going on?”

“I brought a couple of things of your great-grandmother’s and photos of the rest of what I might like to sell. Remember, we talked about this the last time you were at the house?”

“Oh, Mom, you’ve been in major clean-out mode.” Brooke laughed. Even through the phone, it was always music to my ears.

“Honey, I’m asking you again, are you sure you don’t want any of this family silver? If you do, I won’t sell the pieces you’d like to have. You know, for one day when you get married and have a family of your own?” Then I quickly added, “Some of them are from Tiffany’s way, way, way back in the day.”

“Mom, when the time comes, I plan to register at IKEA, not Tiffany’s. What about Jess?”

“Your sister pretty much told me the same thing.” I thought back to Jess’s choice of Amazon, when I’d last spoken with her. “It’s fine. I’ll sell them and donate the money to charity.”

“I know what that means—our local food bank. Sounds like a good plan,” Brooke said. “So, who’s looking after Warrior while you’re in town?”

“Your aunt, Juliana, which is lucky for me.” My sister-in-law had a strong connection with my beloved German Shepherd, and almost always volunteered to babysit.

“Lucky for Warrior,” my daughter said. “What’s next on your agenda?”

“You know me. I come in for one thing and then I add on as the day progresses. Thought I’d see the fun new exhibit at the Costume Institute at the Met and then had hoped coffee with an old friend—”

“Ooooh, Mom. Is that old friend a ‘man’?” Brooke giggled through the phone. “And is he really ‘old’? Like sixty-plus? If he is, you’ll leave him in the dust.”

I laughed. “Hold it, young lady. I was meeting a

friend from college, but it was cancelled—”

“Tell me one thing. Are you dressed like one of those ladies-who-lunch, or do you have on a cool-mom-outfit?”

I glance down at my honey-colored, classic Burberry trench coat, my black wool trousers, and my honey and black plaid Diane B flats with the shiny black buckle, shoes that I’d only ever buy during big-time sales. “Well, I’d like to think cool mom with a *little* bit ladies-who-lunch.”

“Mom, gotta run,” Brooke interrupted. “My boss is waving at me. I’ll text if things change with lunch. Love ya!”

“Love you, too—” *Click*. “—Brooke?” But she was already gone.

Just my luck—an available New York taxi was close by on Ninth Avenue and driving in my direction. I flagged him down, opened the back door, and slid my tote bag onto the seat. As I climbed into the cab, my foot stepped onto something bulky, almost causing me to lose my balance. I bounced onto the seat with a grunt and pulled the door shut.

“I’m heading up town,” I said, giving him the address. “How’s traffic this morning?”

The taxi’s radio crackled over the driver’s gravelly voice. “Not bad, but the President’s here for the UN and a lot of streets are closed off.” He stopped for the light.

“Oh, great.” I looked at the driver’s profile on the screen inside the cab and quickly typed his code into my app.

I gently kicked at the lump that had almost caused me to trip getting in. It was soft. “What’s this?” I tapped it again with my foot.

“What’s going on back there?” the cabbie asked.

“There’s something on the floor.”

“No way. I cleaned it before I started my shift.”

I looked down at the lump more closely. “Unbelievable.” My hand brushed across the famous Louis Vuitton logo design on the pebbled leather of a large duffle bag. “Oh my god. Is this real?”

“Hey,” he barked.

I glanced into the rearview mirror to meet his eyes. “There’s a large duffle bag on the floor.”

“Must’ve been my last fare.”

“Where’d you drop him?”

“Them. A couple. They were in a rush. At the airport. Then I went on break to eat something.” He looked at me with more interest.

“Which airport?”

“LaGuardia.”

I unzipped the duffle and saw an orange Hermès gift box and a soft, stuffed child’s lambie on top. I rooted around the bag to see what else was in there. “There’s a wallet,” I said more to myself. “Maybe I can find a name.”

“Huh, what’d you say?” he growled.

I didn’t say anything as I continued looking through the bag, and the driver glanced back at me. The light turned green, but the bumper-to-bumper traffic moved

agonizingly slow.

“You can’t go through someone’s bag in my cab. Hand it over.” His voice was getting snarky and there was determination in his tone.

It looked like a real Louis Vuitton bag and they cost a lot of money. “Hmm, I don’t know...” I quickly zipped it up.

The driver’s head glanced back again, trying to see the bag. He swerved to avoid a pedestrian.

I grabbed the side door handle to not get thrown to the other side of the backseat. “That was close.”

He reached his arm through the open partition of the cab, waving his hand in the air in a ‘gimme’ fashion. “Here, I’ll take it.”

“Whoa.” I held onto it tightly. “What do you plan to do with it? Maybe with the wallet, I can get it back to the owner.”

“My cab, my bag, my wallet.” His tone had shifted from gravelly to greedy.

“I’d like to track down the owners—”

“Listen, it’s their loss and I’m not asking again—” The driver grabbed his steering wheel at the last moment to swerve out of the way of a Toyota that had cut in front without a turn signal.

“Watch out!” I screamed, quickly shifting my tote and the mystery bag as close as possible as I scooted near the door.

Then he hit the brakes and the Toyota screeched to a halt at the red light at the next intersection. I threw open

the door a moment before he hit the lock button to make me a hostage. I clumsily jumped out, dragging the Louis Vuitton bag behind me. The driver almost lurched through the partition reaching for the duffel, but he could only grab one corner. I twisted my body away from the cab, and the bag's corner slipped from his hand.

“Damn, you f—ing bitch. That’s mine.” He jumped out of his cab in the standstill traffic at the red light, screaming at me, “Bring it back, bitch. I’ve got you on the app paying for the ride. I’ll find you. You’ll wish you’d never f—ed with me.”

I stood on the sidewalk, people dashing in all directions around me. I rushed down a side street jammed with cars and trucks. Darting between a van and a truck that blocked me from the cab driver, I hurried into the first door I came to. My own tote and the mystery satchel banged against the door’s glass panes as I stumbled into the lobby of an office building. I moved to the side and watched for the out-of-control driver through the dark tinted window.

He stood by his cab, yelling. I could see him, but he couldn’t see me.

The light turned green and drivers blasted their horns for him to get moving. Resigned and muttering under his breath—probably profanities—he jumped back into his cab.

I waited until I saw another fare get in and he drove away. *No way was that driver planning to take this bag to lost-and-found. I’ll find the owner,* I thought to myself.

Once again, I clunked through the door with my bag and the duffle, still staring in the direction of the departing taxi and not looking where I was walking. I tripped on the sidewalk, and the motion sent me flying forward off the curb and into the street, dropping the bags around me, but fortunately I didn't fall. I leaned over to pick up my belongings and heard a skidding noise behind me, as well as another string of profanities.

I turned just in time to see a young woman on a bicycle barreling down on me, shouting, "Holy shit, lady. Out of my way!"

She bounced her bike onto the sidewalk to avoid hitting me on her right and a car on her left. She whipped to the side to stop herself, but it was too late. "Watch where you're going!" she cried out, skidding at an angle down the sidewalk. Other people jumped out of the way, yelling at her.

Even though she handled the bicycle expertly and avoided hitting me, the woman crashed to the ground, moaning, "F— me. Owwww."

She still straddled the bike even when she stopped sliding. As she carefully checked her limbs and adjusted her helmet and messenger bag, I could see that her leg and forearm closest to the sidewalk were pretty scraped up.

Pulling my bags with me from the street, I scrambled to her aid. "Are you okay? I'm sorry, I stepped right in front of you. It's my fault." I noticed the scrapes were bleeding. "Can I help you? Let me call 911." I pulled my

phone out of my pocket.

“No! Do *not* call 911!” she said. “I’m fine.” Still on the ground, she examined her bike.

Her phone buzzed as I leaned over to assist her, and she pulled it out of her sports bra inside her vest and fleece jacket. As she checked the message, her face went ashen and her body stiffened as if she’d received an electric shock. I pulled back fast.

“Oh my god, Marissa,” she said under her breath, staring at the screen.

The young woman looked up at me, her eyes shifting from anger to shock to extreme fear in all of a second. Likewise, her body tensed while she quickly scanned the people passing by. It was as if she were readying herself for fight or flight.

“Are you alright?” I asked. “Is everything okay?”

She pushed up and shook me off as I tried to help her. “Besides you causing an accident, you mean?”

“Hey, there’s a good reason why I wasn’t paying attention,” I protested. “Of course, I’ll pay for any damage to your bicycle.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” She continued checking her bike and glancing around nervously.

“Are you expecting someone?”

She looked at me as if she didn’t know what I was talking about.

“You’re looking around as if you’re watching for someone.”

“No. I’m fine.”

Her response was too speedy. I took a deep breath and tried to slow things down. “You got a message that upset you. Are you sure you’re okay?”

Her jaw clenched, and she stared icily at me, not revealing anything. As we appraised each other, I made a snap decision.

“I can help.”

“With what? My bike?” She rolled her eyes as she pushed it back and forth. “I think it’s okay.” She was still jittery as she got ready to pedal away.

“No, with whatever bad news you got.” Thinking of my daughters, who were not much older than this young woman, I was concerned.

“You? You’re kidding. You look like one of those rich ladies who goes to lunch all the time,” she said, sneering. “I don’t have time for this.” She rolled her bicycle to the edge of the sidewalk.

“You received some kind of shocking news about Marissa—”

“How do you know her name?” she snapped, whipping her head back so fast her long red hair almost hit me in the face.

“You said it when you got the message, and you reacted as if it was really bad news.” I fished around my bag, pulled out a business card, and gave it to her. “Here, take it.”

She did take it and glanced at it. She looked at it again and then at me. “*You’re* a private eye? For real? No way.”

“Yes, a licensed private investigator.”

The young woman tucked it in her back pocket then pushed her bike off the curb and onto the street.

“If it’s really serious, you should go to the police,” I urged. “But if you feel you can’t, I can help. And I know other people who can help, too.”

“Right.” She rolled her eyes again before giving me a dismissive wave and pedaling off, merging into traffic.

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