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No Serenade for Spies

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NO SERANADE FOR SPIES

Cedric T. Jackson, B.A., M.F.A.

An Abstract presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
Lindenwood University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the Degree of Masters of Fine Art in Writing

ABSTRACT

The focus and purpose of this thesis has resulted in the culmination of a full-length novel. Since fiction is most often categorized by a specific genre, the actions and motivations in terms of characters and plot development will more than likely place this particular project in the genre of either a spy novel or action thriller. The introductory essay further elaborates on my journey as a writer, and the creative process behind the writing of *No Serenade for Spies*.

From the outset the goal was to create a plot-driven story with strong as well as interesting and believable characters. The intent of the prologue is to draw the reader into a mysterious event that may or may not have taken place. The obvious questions raised by the prologue as it relates to the apparent kidnapping, is whether or not the kidnapping actually occurred, and if so, how relevant will the missing college student be to the overall plot.

Chapter one begins in the city of Chicago, and appears to be unrelated to what has occurred in the opening scene back in Boston. However, the two events are inextricably linked. From the moment the female protagonist discovers the mysterious stranger hiding out in the backseat of her car, the

tension and conflict rise quickly, and the reader, from that moment forward, is barely given time to catch his or her breath.

Each chapter introduces the reader to another level of complexity and escalating intrigue, including the onslaught of a domestic and well-organized terrorist organization. Out to foil the ambitions of the terrorists, who believe the government at its core is corrupt, the ambiguous nature of a shadow organization begins to development almost as a sub-plot, which raises questions about their identity, and who do they work for.

Events that take place throughout the story-line ignite a symphony of chaos and unpredictability, sending shockwaves that reach as far as the halls of power in Washington D.C.

Readers can expect a heart-pounding but intelligent suspense thriller, as the ending comes together in surprising and dramatic fashion, offering plenty of twists and turns along the way.

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2009

COMMITTEE IN CHARGE OF CANDIDACY

Professor Michael Castro, PhD., Chairperson and Advisor

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Cedric Jackson

Introductory Essay

It was once said that every individual is either born with or becomes good at something during his or her lifetime. Perhaps it would be somewhat disingenuous to suggest that somehow my writing journey, or the point at which I first began to take a serious interest in the craft, that it all came to me as sort of a natural gift. In fact, it was quite the contrary. While I found the process of writing intensely satisfying, and my ability for storytelling, somewhat effective, the overall quality of the writing left much to be desired.

As I continued to write and churn out what I considered at the time to be polished novels, followed by unmitigated rejection, I simply had a hard time grasping what exactly my writing lacked. I went through the usual process of sending out countless queries to various agents and publishers, which to my surprise began a long string of disappointing outcomes.

Often I would read works of fiction by noted author John Grisham, the writer of such legal thrillers as *The Firm*, *The Partner*, among many others, and who has perhaps had the greatest influence on my desire to become a writer. I was most impressed by the way Grisham plotted his stories by avoiding the pitfalls of extraneous language or overblown dialogue. Yet the pacing never seemed to suffer, nor did the story itself lack depth or substance. And of course I used to ask myself; what did his stories have that mine apparently did not?

The first realization that my writing was not up to par actually came during the writing of my third novel. I decided around the fourth chapter to stop, put it away for a while, and go back and reread my second novel. I had not laid eyes on it for approximately six months, and when I sat down and began reading, I found it difficult to get through a single chapter without cringing.

Everything I admired in Grisham's writing was glaringly absent in what I had written. The language was extraneous, the dialogue was overblown, and the pacing was jarring and uneven. I could barely get

through the first three chapters before giving up, and decided that my first two novels were unsalvageable.

It was perhaps two or three weeks later before I decided to return to my third novel. I wanted to clear my mind and reflect on where I had gone wrong with the previous two attempts. As I began reading the first chapter, the cringe-factor was not quite as apparent, but noticeable nonetheless. I reworked the first three and a half chapters, and then put it away for nearly a month. At that point I felt I was pushing too hard to get it right, rather than allow the process to flow naturally.

When I finally returned to writing, I read the first chapter, and saw that it flowed much more smoothly. There were still some rough edges, which required further tightening with regard to prose and dialogue, but not nearly the run-on effect that doomed the first two efforts.

I forged ahead and finished the fourth chapter, and over the next seven or eight months my third novel had taken shape. It was a story about a married couple in love and truly happy, and how their relationship began to fall apart when the husband insisted that

reconnecting with his childhood friend, who happened to be a single female, was no different than reconnecting with an old male buddy.

My wife was the first to read the fourth novel, simply titled, "Best Friends." I wanted the novel to evoke a certain emotional response from both male and female readers, and when my wife would experience almost a visceral reaction as the characters interacted, I felt a sense of accomplishment. By the time she finished reading the novel, she still felt the need to either agree or take issue with how and why the characters behaved the way they did.

I felt strongly at that point that "Best Friends" was indeed ready for the publishing world. Again I followed the standard routine of sending out queries, with the exception of submitting directly to publishers. By then I had learned that most if not all major publishing houses only accepted agented submissions. So with my focus set squarely on finding an agent, I sent out maybe seven queries.

I made the mistake of allowing my imagination to run wild, and began to imagine selling my first novel for a handsome six figure advance, and subsequently

signing a huge book deal. Nearly three weeks later the rejections started trickling in. One by one all seven agents turned the novel down. Most agents didn't bother to offer specifics as to why they weren't interested, but simply thrust the dagger deeper with a bland form letter.

For a long while I licked my wounds, too shell shocked to even think about sending out more queries. Eventually I turned my focus to finishing my education. I also continued to read success stories of other up-and-coming writers, and their struggles to get published.

Perhaps the most frustrating aspect of having my work rejected was reading a new author's published novel. There's sort of a natural tendency to compare your unpublished work to a new writer's published work.

For the life of me I could not understand what exactly agents and publishers saw in some of the fiction of new authors they apparently did not see in mine. In the case of Grisham and writers such as John Updike, the difference was obvious. When it came to unknown writers, some of which received quite handsome

advances, I found their writing in some instances hampered by clichés', uninteresting plot lines, and even bland prose. And yet they had somehow managed to get their work published.

While reading the bios of most up-and-coming fiction writers, there seemed to be a general consensus about what it took to get a first novel published. Simply put, it was part skill and talent and part luck. Some writers spoke very candidly about knowing of other writers who were perhaps more gifted than they are, but for whatever reason had not caught a break in getting their work published.

It came as somewhat of a revelation to learn that getting published did not revolve solely around craft and skill as a writer. Although the more I thought about it, the more it made sense. When it comes to the art of writing, for the most part, it is purely subjective as to what is considered exceptional, good, mediocre, and of course, terrible.

I've often read book reviews where a critic has raved about how wonderful a particular work of fiction is, but when I picked up the book in a bookstore and browsed through it, I was left wondering what all the

fuss was about. It is perhaps fair to say that what is sometimes well-paced and methodical to some, is tedious and boring to others. What is considered fast paced and riveting to some is perhaps rushed and overblown to others.

Here is where luck comes in. If an author's work lands on the right agent or editor's desk at the right time, he or she could well be on their way to a successful career as a writer. The key words being, right agent or editor, right time. I'm still waiting to have one of my works of fiction land just right.

When I decided to pursue an MFA degree in writing, I didn't know quite what to expect, much less what exactly I would do differently once I earned the degree. I figured the program would consist of a great deal of reading, and of course writing, all of which proved to be very helpful. However, the one aspect of the program I found most beneficial were the workshops. It's one thing to produce a work of fiction or even nonfiction, and have it read and sized-up by a spouse or family member, but to have it read and analyzed by a group of less sympathetic strangers was a completely different experience.

By the time I participated in my third workshop, my perspective on the way I viewed not only my own writing, but writing in general, had changed. I had gained a much greater understanding of such things as voice, more cognizant of point of view, and how to control the overall pace and tone of a particular scene.

I also had to bear in mind something I mentioned earlier, that no matter what you create in terms of fiction, opinions will undoubtedly vary. And while some will invariably like it more than others, I've come to believe there should be at a minimum a tacit recognition of skill and talent on the part of the writer. I've read many novels, short stories, essays, and even nonfiction, where I didn't care much at all for the subject matter, or what the piece was about, but there was no denying the writer's gift for storytelling.

It was during the third quarter of the MFA program that I began to write the novel, *No Serenade for Spies*. At the time I had no intention of turning it in for my thesis. In fact, when I began writing it, I had no idea where the story would end up, or if I

would even finish it. At one point I felt the novel had gotten too big for my skill level, not in terms of page length, but rather in terms of scope and magnitude. The more I wrote the more all the moving pieces somehow had to fit together and make sense. I began to wonder what made me think I could write a small scale, uncomplicated spy novel, and have it contain the same level of suspense and intrigue as novels written by more seasoned writers.

When the idea of writing a suspenseful spy novel first came to me, I wanted to avoid anything resembling cliché', or the obligatory concepts that appear in most spy novels. I wanted to be original and unconventional in the telling of the story, without getting out there too far in the realm of unbelievable. As characters were introduced I wanted them to seem fresh and new, but most of all, addictive to readers. The hard part was keeping the plot moving and avoiding the pitfalls of becoming predictable.

Something I remembered hearing several years ago, and I was reminded of during a fourth quarter workshop. As writers we create the world in which our characters operate. We create the boundaries, and

determine if and when those boundaries are crossed, and by whom. Those bits of reality were pivotal in allowing me to shed the self-imposed constraints on my imagination, and helped propelled the novel forward.

As the plot and story-line began to take shape, and I felt the characters were evolving beyond one-dimensional, I began to entertain the notion of turning the novel in for my thesis. The closer I got to making the actual decision, the more I tried to anticipate possible criticisms. I started over-analyzing every scene, revising, and pouring over specific word choices. Eventually I had to remind myself there is no such thing as a perfect novel, or perfect essay, or perfect piece of writing, period. Again, one reader's idea of perfection is perhaps another reader's mediocre.

I did, however, want to feel reasonably confident the novel was as polished as possible. From past experiences of sending my work out to be judged by others, I would inevitably begin to experience what I refer to as writer's remorse. As soon as the query was in the mail and on its way to an agent or editor, I would start to think about a particular scene and how

I could've worded something differently, or added something to give a scene more of an impact, or taken something out to make a scene flow more smoothly. Any minute detail I thought would surely doom my chances of getting published.

Most if not all writers, whether established or up-and-coming, I would imagine at some point has to come to the realization that no amount of effort will ever produce a perfect work. The question will always remain, perfect by whose definition?

I have come to understand that no matter when or how often I read something that I've written, it's always a matter of time before something jumps out at me that begs revision. I have also come to believe that no matter how often you read your own work with a cold eye, there will always be a paragraph, a sentence, a phrase, or a word that prompts a momentary pause of concern.

My confidence, and hopefully skill level as a writer has grown over the years. Part of the maturation process, as difficult as all the rejections were at the time, was being told that I was not good enough. And as I look back on the first two novels

that I wrote, I would be the first to admit that my writing was fundamentally lacking in most areas.

Ultimately I made the decision to turn *No Serenade for Spies* in for my thesis. I have to know whether or not it's as good as I feel that it is, and whether or not I have grown as a writer as I believe that I have.

Once the process of evaluating the novel is complete, and all the necessary revisions have been made, my goal is to begin the journey that will hopefully lead to publication. At this point I have not decided what path to take in terms of querying agents and editors. My sincere hope is that everything will begin to come together at the proverbial right time and place.

NO SERENADE FOR SPIES

Written By

Cedric Todd Jackson

PROLOGUE

THERE WERE NO SIGNS she had been taken by force.

Just after sunup Wednesday morning, police in Boston were summoned to the Ivy League campus of Lakeside University. Sergeant Rafferty and detective Rita Sanchez were given access to Abigail Tennison's dorm room by the vice president for student affairs. Rumors had begun circulating that maybe Abby needed a break, and decided to fly off to New York, or even LA.

Still, she had never blown off a cram session the way she did Tuesday afternoon, or stopped answering her cell phone. A close friend, Rachel Nolan, alerted school officials the following morning.

When she first settled on college, Abby wanted no part of having a personal bodyguard stand watch over her. She wanted to live a normal life, regular friends, avoid being seen as just another beautiful blond heiress born to a life of money and privilege.

After questioning Rachel, other friends and acquaintances around campus, along with Abby's recent professors, Sanchez and Rafferty weren't convinced of the notion that mid-semester she up and decided to take a break. The apparent disappearance of a twenty-one year old college student, whose recent photo was sure to play well on the evening news, took quite a turn when they realized who Abigail Tennison's father was.

Local news outlets got wind of the story, and within an hour after police received the initial call, news reports began to surface. The national media were not to be outdone.

Moments after news of Abby's disappearance reached official Washington, a flurry of phone calls were made from the senator's office. A full-scale investigation got underway.

ONE

Chicago

WITH ANNUAL PROFITS HOVERING around \$42 million, Barrow & Associates had plenty of sharks in the water looking to swallow the company whole. Over the past several weeks, further takeover rumors were fueled by the conspicuous absence of Kenneth J. Barrow, chairman and CEO. Word had gotten around that he was involved in a series of private meetings in New York, presumably meeting with top brass from multi-media powerhouse, The Kelley Group, about the likelihood of selling his controlling interest in the company.

Grumbling about the direction of the organization soon reached the corner office. Barrow understood the negative aspects of all the rumors surrounding the company's future, and the impact it would eventually have on morale. He disliked not being forthcoming with his employees, particularly those he considered the backbone of the organization.

A late evening, high priority email was in order, aimed at settling the worried minds of the masses. On second thought it was late, and he didn't want it to seem as though he felt pressured, so he decided to hold off on the email for a day or so.

On his way out, sporting a dark cashmere topcoat and carrying a leather portfolio, he met up with one of Barrow & Associates' brightest stars, Pamela Parris, and kept pace down the long, mahogany-trimmed corridor headed

toward the elevators. Pamela had just come from the copy room after putting the finishing touches on a kick-ass presentation, looking to land her third major account in as many weeks. "You didn't hear this from me, but any takeover rumors or a possible merger deal, are dead for now," Barrow assured, giving no indication one way or the other of how he felt about the pending news. Pamela on the other hand could not be more delighted, though well-aware the rumor-mill had churned out bogus facts.

The prospect of having B&A gobbled up by some large multinational, practically overnight, did not have much appeal as far as she was concerned.

"Who's my hero?" she said with only a hint of satisfaction.

"Guess that distinction belongs to me."

"Why am I not surprised?"

"The Kelly Group is not going away quietly. They have two things that make them impossible to ignore, a shit-load of ready cash, and far-reaching influence."

"They can't take what they didn't build," Pamela pointed out.

"You let me worry about Goliath. Besides, with you bringing in top level accounts, we'll soon grow our way into becoming an equal force," Barrow vowed, showing an obvious fondness for his recently promoted senior manager.

"That'll only happen with you at the helm," Pamela said with a weary smile as they approached the elevators. Barrow pressed the button to summon a ride

down to the main lobby. "I appreciate the drive and all the hard work, but there is such a thing as downtime. Wrap it up and go home. That's an order," he said, showing just enough seriousness to make known his concern.

Pamela had great respect and admiration for Barrow, a demanding but honorable business man, and considered him to be not only her boss, but a friend and mentor as well, even addressed him by his first name. So with that she decided to heed her boss's considerate but unflinching directive, and went back to her office and put the most persuasive part of her presentation, bottom-line numbers, into a folder marked, NUNAN CO. She stuck the folder inside the top drawer of her desk, removed her purse from the bottom drawer, fished her keys out, grabbed her coat from off the brass coat-rack next to the credenza, and scooted out the door.

Once she reached the adjacent parking garage, a howling Chicago wind prompted Pamela to turn up the lapels on her coat as she headed toward her car. One of only three that remained parked in the garage. The sound of her two-inch heels striking the pavement echoed sharply throughout the nearly empty facility. It was too late to even think about stopping for takeout, so Pamela had a date with leftover pasta salad waiting at home in the frig. Again she glanced at her watch, then aimed the keyless remote in the direction of her Lexus, followed by quick flashing parking lights.

She settled in behind the wheel of her brand-new black G35 sedan, placed her purse on the passenger seat, started the car and proceeded toward the exit.

Her Blackberry rang the moment she made a right onto Dearborn Street. With her right hand she fished it out of her purse. It was Howard Albrecht, her boyfriend of eleven months. He wanted to know if he'd get a chance to see his occasional roommate tonight. "I'd love to, but I'm exhausted."

"Great sex does wonders to help you relax," the voice on the other end tried to persuade. Smiling a knowing smile Pamela said, "How about a rain check?"

"You sure?"

"I promise to make it up to you."

"I'm a hard man to please."

"I have my ways."

"I'm sure you do."

"Talk to you soon."

She set the phone on the passenger seat next to her purse and allowed the fine leather and new car smell to keep her warm and cozy instead. No stereo, no CD, just the quiet sound of well-deserved success.

So happened during a periodic glance in the rearview mirror, a numbing fear suddenly burst alive inside of her. Barely able to draw breath, her eyes flitted back and forth between the well-lit road in front of her, and the murky stranger's reflection now sitting bolt upright in the backseat of her car.

Deathly afraid, but unable to scream, Pamela sat rigid in silence. Her emotions were in shambles. She even felt as if she was about to lose control of her bladder. Terrifying thoughts of rape, sodomy, mutilation, death or, some other

form of human torture, had suddenly rendered her completely helpless. She barely managed to avoid swerving across the center line and into oncoming traffic.

In a low, deliberate tone, the man stowed away in the backseat of her car demanded she keep her eyes on the road. Pamela managed to steady the car, dividing her wide-eyed stare between the man's eerie reflection, and passing motorists. Out of a sense of sheer desperation, however brief, she entertained the notion of opening the door and jumping from the car, but feared not only the impact of bouncing off the hard pavement, but more so of being splattered by a passing car or truck or, both.

Fear was everywhere. "You live alone?" the stranger inquired, his voice filled with apparent distress.

"No. I live with my boyfriend," Pamela said as convincingly as possible.

"Don't lie to me," he warned, again his voice hampered by what sounded like discomfort. He emerged from the shadows and rested his right arm between the driver and passenger seats. Pamela's heart rate spiked. She looked down and saw that he was clutching some sort of stainless steel handgun. His hand was also covered with blood. Her eyes swelled with massive tears. Anxiety reeked complete havoc on Pamela's fragile composure. "I realize you're scared right now, but you're in no danger."

She wished to God she could believe him. Again she could hear his agonized breathing. "I need your help."

"Are you hurt?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry, but I don't have any medical training."

"I need a place to stay for a while."

"And if I say no."

"I'm hoping you won't," he labored, settling back into the shadows.

"But if I do, does that mean I'll end up bleeding also?"

"You have my word, you're in no danger."

"You'll have to forgive me for having doubts, but right now I'm scared shitless, and I would just as soon you get out of my car and let me be on my way," Pamela said, aware of the huge gamble.

Silence resonated from the backseat. As before she could only see his lurking presence in the rearview mirror. His posture had taken a turn. She offered up yet another silent prayer. "Pull over," the stranger said, his voice trailing off. Not quite sure what to do at that point, Pamela had a tough time believing he would simply let her go, that just like that, she would be allowed to continue on with her life as though the encounter never happened.

She had to resist the natural impulse to ride the brakes hard in the middle of the street, fearful she would run the risk of antagonizing him. As calmly as humanly possible she pulled the car over. She sat still, waiting for him to exit, though not quite so naïve as to believe he would follow through and actually get out. What composure she maintained to she was close to losing. Then

suddenly she heard him move. This is it, she thought.

The stranger heaved himself closer to the door. She could hear sounds of him grimacing. He opened the rear passenger-side door. "Have a nice night," he said, then almost on the count of three heaved himself up and out of the car. Barely giving him time enough to close the door, Pamela sped away in a hurry, breathing a heavy sigh of relief while keeping tabs on the stranger in the rearview mirror.

She fled north on Dearborn Street, thanking God out loud that no harm had come to her. The rush of fear and tremendous unease began to taper off. Her hands though were still trembling. Never in her lifetime had she been so frightened. She turned right onto West Ohio Street. Naturally she thought about calling the police, but figured she was out of any danger. Besides, she never got a good look at the man's face. For now she took comfort in her safety, but in the back of her mind she could not help but wonder who that guy was and, why was he hiding in the backseat of her car and, why was he bleeding? But even harder to fathom, what possessed him to let her go? Why, when apparently he'd been injured, not to mention he was holding a heavy gun, did he simply get out of her car and risk possibly bleeding to death, if the dark cold didn't finish him off first? And what about what he said, his promise that she was in no danger. That too she found to be out of the natural course of things. He'd kept his word.

The sharp questions were nearly just as worrisome. Pamela tried telling

herself to let it go and go on home, and try and forget the incident ever happened, but before she could rationalize her behavior, she made a left at North Wabash Avenue and headed back toward Dearborn. "I must be out of my mind," she said to no one. She drove back to the area where the stranger got out, but there was no sign of him. She parked the car and got out. Hard to imagine he'd gotten far being wounded and all.

She looked up and down Dearborn. It was as if he'd disappeared. There on the sidewalk she noticed a trail of what looked to be fresh drops of blood leading north. Having taken complete leave of all rational she followed the bloody trail. Instead of being home relaxing in a nice hot bath, she was out at nearly nine o'clock at night trying to find out what became of a mass murderer for all she knew. But she hadn't accomplished all that she'd accomplished by playing it safe.

The drops of blood led to another parked car. In no particular hurry, Pamela walked up and peered inside. She could see a body lying on the floor in the back. Before she could stop herself she opened the door. With well-timed reflexes, the stranger pointed the gun from out of the darkness. Pamela was jarred stiff by his quick reaction. When he recognized who it was he lowered the gun and rested his weary arm on the seat. "What are you doing?" he asked, his voice and breathing even choppy than before. Pamela regained a sense of what was happening. "What's with you? You plan to keep breaking into parked cars until someone agrees to help you?" she asked in a subdued and

slightly less terrified tone.

“Why do you care?”

She stared at the wounded stranger for a moment, then offered to him her left hand and said, “Come on, I’ll give you a ride.” What had prompted such remarkable kindness toward a total stranger, a stranger losing a lot of blood and holding a mean looking gun, the man had to wonder as he now considered whether to reach for Pamela’s outstretched hand. He was so taken by the fact that she actually came back, slowly he removed his left hand from his right side where he kept pressure on a pretty nasty wound of some sort, and grasp hold of her hand.

Pamela felt a certain queasiness at the feel of his cold and bloody grip. At first she tried keeping her distance, not get too close, but soon realized he was in worse shape than she had first imagined, requiring her charitableness to extend beyond a sort of stand-offish involvement. She found herself acting as a human truss. The ailing stranger was like a downed soldier being helped off the field of battle. Her smallish frame nearly buckled beneath his overlapping arm.

At six-two, somewhere around two hundred pounds, he tried to avoid shifting much of his weight. And yet with unavoidable awkwardness they made it back to her car. Given the way he winced and grimaced as she helped to get him inside, it became obvious that he’d either been shot or possibly stabbed. Whatever the case he was in pretty bad shape.

Even without the benefit of a medical background, and with the cold night air, the temperature hovering just below freezing, Pamela could tell the wounded stranger had lost a fair amount of blood by the heavy saturation beneath his leather jacket. Something she could do that didn't require medical training was check for signs of a fever.

Hesitant at first, she got up the nerve and placed her right hand, the one with the least amount of blood on it, against the man's forehead. "You're burning up."

With all the craziness going on, willingly helping a bleeding stranger get back inside her car, after feeling so relieved to be rid of him, the last thing she thought she'd find herself taking notice of, how strikingly handsome he was. She thought of him as having flawless brown skin and clever features, with deep-set eyes and wavy black hair to compliment a prominent facial structure. But back to the crisis at hand.

Pamela hurried around to the driver's side, along the way looking down at the bloodstains that in all likelihood had ruined her expensive coat and pricey business suit. Once inside she said, "We have to get you to the hospital." She headed north in the direction of Northwestern Memorial. "You didn't answer my question," the stranger said, his condition deteriorating.

"What question might that be?"

"What are you doing?"

"Right now, trying to get you some medical attention."

“Why did you come back?”

“I don’t know, a lapse in judgment.”

“You hardly seem the type.”

“You’re a complete stranger, you’re armed, and quite possibly dangerous, and you’re bleeding in my car. I’d say that qualifies. For all I know, you could’ve gotten that wound from God knows what,” Pamela said, finding the events since leaving work too wild and crazy to be believed.

“Is that why you came back, because you believe that I’m dangerous?”

“I’ve never been this scared and nervous in my entire life. As to why I came back, I figured if you wanted to hurt me, you would’ve made that clear by now.”

“A risk-taker. I like that.”

“Is it my turn to ask a question?”

“Go right ahead.”

“Who are you? An how were you injured?”

“That’s two questions,” he said, his head resting on the headrest.

“Pick one.”

“Monticello, name’s Tony Monticello.”

“No offense, but you nearly gave me a heart attack.”

“Sorry.”

“Well, Tony Monticello, not to pry or anything, but do you mind telling me what happened to you?”

Unwilling to talk about how he came to be in such a fix, Tony focused his attention instead on trying to slow the bleeding by keeping pressure on the nasty wound. Pamela began to suspect he was in some sort of trouble, and had second thoughts about coming back to help him. Yet he didn't seem to her like the unlawful type. "What's your name?" he asked, changing the subject on a dime.

"Pamela Parris."

"Thanks for coming back, Pamela."

"Can you at least tell me whether you've been shot, stabbed, beaten, or what?"

Tony hesitated for a moment and said, "Knife wound."

"Who? Why?"

Put off by all the probing questions Tony said, "Pull the car over." Of all things to come out of his mouth, Pamela least expected he'd volunteer to get out. "You can barely walk."

"I'll be okay."

"From the looks of things, you've lost a lot of blood. You need medical attention."

"I'll be all right," he said, struggling just to lift his head from the headrest.

"Not for long in the shape you're in."

Tony gave it his best effort to prove her wrong, but the pain grabbed him with the slightest movement. And so weakened by the loss of so much blood he was beginning to lose consciousness, and fast. The hospital was not much

further. Pamela tried to keep him talking, but his speech became all the more impaired, with a steady lurch toward unconsciousness. "Stay with me, Tony! You hear me? Don't close your eyes!" she said, feeling the mounting pressure of him possibly dying in her car.

Nearing the hospital Pamela said, "Tony are you with me?" He could only slur a few words. "By the way, how were you able to bypass the alarm to get inside my car earlier?" Pamela asked, just trying to keep him awake. "Don't die on me! Stay with me! You hear me?" Tony could no longer keep his eyes open as they rolled back in his head.

Pamela pulled up in front of the emergency room entrance at Northwestern Memorial. "We're here! Hang on!" she said, scurrying from the car and rushing inside. She ran up to the nurses' station. The first available nurse got the story with minimal details. And noticing the pattern of blood that had ruined Pamela's designer outfit, the nurse picked up the phone and urgently requested a doctor right away. Good thing it was a slow night.

Two paramedics, who were also on duty, rushed out to the car with a stretcher. Tony's gun had disappeared. An emergency room doctor came out just as the paramedics got the wounded stranger loaded onto the stretcher. Dr. Farache pulled back Tony's black leather jacket, cut away his blood-soaked sweater, and examined the wounded area just below his left rib cage. Pamela stood off to the side, watching the calm and collective effort by the doctor and both paramedics to try and assess the damage, and bring the bleeding under

control. She nearly gagged at the sight of all the blood and the three-inch puncture wound. She followed them inside, queasy stomach and all, where the damaged stranger was hustled away to be tended to.

The nurse stopped Pamela at the desk and said, "Are you also in need of medical attention?"

"No, it's not my blood." Personal questions from the nurse regarding their newest patient left Pamela with not much to offer except a name. Other relevant details of how the stranger came to be in her company were provided in a fairly brief and tidy explanation, minus the part about him having broken into her car, and of course, the gun. "The ladies room is right over there if you want to get cleaned up," the nurse said.

After scouring the blood off her hands, Pamela returned to the nurses' station to find out if there was any news about Tony's condition. "It could be a while before we know anything," the nurse said. Pamela looked at her watch, then sized up the waiting area, including the handful of patients waiting to see a doctor. No telling how long Tony could be under the doctor's care, and it's not like she had an obligation to stick around. She got him to the hospital and that was enough. And with the hour getting late, a quarter after ten, and with an important presentation to give tomorrow morning, Pamela decided she'd had enough excitement for one night and went home.

TWO

LEAVING WORK LESS THAN twenty-four hours after her harrowing experience the night before, throughout the day Pamela had found herself often thinking about Tony Monticello, who is he, and how his stay in the hospital was coming along. When she got to her car she checked the backseat before getting in. A habit she might find hard to break, at least for the next several weeks.

She sat while the car warmed up, again thinking about Tony. If last night was any indication, she doubted she'd get much sleep wondering what happened to him. Before heading home Pamela decided she might as well stop by the hospital. She entered through the main lobby just after six p.m. and went up to the information desk. "I'm here to check on a patient I brought in last night. He had a pretty severe stab wound, his name's Tony Monticello."

His name was fed into the computer. "Mr. Monticello's no longer a patient here," said the heavysset woman behind the desk.

"How could that be? When I brought him in last night he was in pretty bad shape," Pamela said, looking rather puzzled.

"According to our records, he's already checked out."

What she was being told made no sense whatsoever. "How could he have possibly checked himself out in the shape he was in?"

"Doesn't say who checked him out. Just says he checked out at eight a.m."

How strange. Absurd even. Given his condition when they rushed him off, she couldn't imagine that Tony had checked himself out. And anyone who cared at all about his well-being would not have dared try and move him so soon, not without time to recover. A week minimum. "You have no idea who Mr. Monticello left this hospital with?" Pamela said, just to be clear.

"I have no further information."

"There has to be a record of some sort, showing under what circumstance he was released."

"Are you family?"

"No, but like I said, I brought him in last night."

"Sorry, privacy concerns won't allow me to give out any further information."

"How can knowing who checked him out of the hospital violate privacy laws?" Pamela said, becoming a bit annoyed.

"I'm sorry, hospital regulation."

Pamela was getting nowhere with the headstrong receptionist. She glanced at her watch. "May I please speak with the doctor who tended to Mr. Monticello last night?" The receptionist took up the phone and held a brief but guarded conversation with someone on the other end. "Dr. Farache will be right out," she said, putting the phone down.

Nearly fifteen minutes later Dr. Farache finally appeared. A cordial handshake helped to ease the surface tension. "What can I do for you?" Dr. Farache said.

"I'm trying to find out what happened to a patient, Tony Monticello. The receptionist has informed me that he's already checked out."

"And your relationship to the patient?"

"None. I rushed him here last night."

"Mr. Monticello is no longer a patient here."

"Yes, I'm aware of that. What I don't understand is, who would check him out of the hospital so soon after suffering such a serious injury?"

"I have no information with regard to that. All I know is, he was checked out earlier this morning."

"By someone else?"

"That's my understanding."

"You have no idea by who?"

"I've told you all that I know. Now if you'll excuse me, I have other patients to attend to," Dr. Farache said, then disappeared down the same corridor from which he appeared.

What started out as bizarre had suddenly gotten even more bizarre. First this guy breaks into her car and scares her half to death, then voluntarily gets out, having suffered a serious stab wound, she then goes back to help him, rushes him to the hospital, where he has to undergo emergency care, and the very next day, he's gone without a trace. "Is there a forwarding address for Mr. Monticello?" Pamela asked the receptionist.

"None that I'm aware of."

“Who paid his hospital bills?”

“Privacy concerns.”

“Can you at least tell me how his treatment went?”

“Mr. Monticello came through surgery just fine.”

A bone to gnaw on is all Pamela felt she had gotten. There seemed to be a conspiracy of silence as to what exactly became of Tony Monticello. Pamela thought about pressing the issue further, maybe demand to speak with someone higher up, but decided why bother getting more deeply involved in something that really was none of her concern.

Having done all within reason to find out what became of the mysterious stranger who had so abruptly interrupted her life, Pamela let it go and left the hospital. However, the nagging frustration of not knowing what happened to him made it all the more difficult to find closure, and put to rest the night Tony Monticello happened into her life.

THREE

THE ROOM WAS SMALL and dark. Thick black plastic covered every inch of the lone window. She was stripped naked, stretched out and blindfolded in a bed atop a bare mattress.

With both hands bound to the head-rail and both feet bound to the foot-rail, Abby's face and inner thighs showed signs of bruising. The more serious bruises had been caused by the tension from the shackles that bound her to the bed. A steady flow of tears had stained the blindfold that covered her eyes.

She trembled at the slightest noise beyond the groan of a private hell, fearing the return of those who had taken her. She had lost track of how long she'd been there, and the number of times she'd been raped and sodomized. At times she prayed for a quick death, but even at her most critical moments, she clung to the small hope that some trace of humanity would bring this nightmare to an end.

Besides the single bed, no other furniture occupied the small space. Abby's thirst worsened. She estimated she had not eaten or had anything to drink in several hours, though she found comfort in being spared another brutal raping.

A key turning in the lock caused her body to visibly shake. Light from the outer-hallway spilled into the room. She was able to distinguish the lighter footsteps from the heavier ones. She listened, and waited. The sound of footsteps on the hardwood floor came closer. "Please, don't hurt me

anymore,” Abby pleaded, sobbing.

“I’m going to free your hands, you know the rules. If you attempt to remove the blindfold, or if you try anything foolish, bad things will follow,” the female voice said.

Silence loomed at the words of caution. Abby took comfort in hearing the softer voice. She felt relief the moment her pale arms were set free from the steel restraints. Deep reddish and purplish bruises marked both her wrists. Slowly she sat up, nursing the pain and soreness from the binding shackles. “Can I please have my clothes?” she said in a voice that lacked confidence, in the darkness of unknown surroundings. There was no answer. Her hands were placed around two slices of cold bread, presumably some sort of sandwich. “Eat.”

She tasted bad tuna fish, but ate the sandwich as if it were her favorite entree from the menu of her favorite New York restaurant. She sipped water through a plastic straw held by gentler hands. Feeding time lasted ten minutes. “I have to use the bathroom,” Abby said, allowed to clean her hands and mouth with a paper napkin. Her feet were unshackled and she was helped up from the sheet-less bed. Deep reddish bruises on both ankles spelled her captivity. Her balance was unsteady, like a small child contemplating its first infant step. She was helped over to a narrow door which led to a tiny, windowless bathroom. “You got three minutes?” the woman said.

Following the bathroom break, Abby was led back over to the bed where

the shackles awaited. "Can I have my clothes, please?" she begged of her. The only response was the sound of the shackles confining her once again to the semen-stained mattress. "Please. I haven't caused any trouble," she pleaded through a fresh round of tears.

The female finished up, picked up the tray and started out of the room. "They can rape me just as easily with my clothes on," Abby said with no hint toward sarcasm, momentarily troubling the sensibilities of the woman, who after a brief pause, left the room and locked the heavy door. Darkness.

FOUR

ON DAY FOUR OF the Tennison family's worse nightmare, a small package, courtesy of the U.S. postal service, no return address, arrived at the family home in Potomac, Maryland. Mrs. Tennison opened the package in the presence of her husband and youngest daughter, Tori. Inside were strands of blond hair that resembled Abby's. "My God," she winced, hands trembling.

To make sure they were taken seriously, the senator had been warned during a brief phone conversation, which included a \$100 million ransom demand, what would happen if he failed to pay the money. They'd slice Abby up in forty-nine pieces. All forty-nine of his senate colleagues would each receive in the mail a body part belonging to his daughter.

He was instructed to have the money ready in forty-eight hours. At any moment the phone call would come to make the drop. He was also warned not to involve law-enforcement. Outside of his private security detail, no one else carrying a gun should get involved. If he failed to play by the rules, or if he deviated in the slightest bit, his daughter would suffer a particularly gruesome death. Eyes would be watching.

Both the Senator and his daughter Tori felt the same knot in the pit of their stomach at the sight of the blond hair. Tennison took out his cell phone and summoned his private security. Two men sitting in a parked navy sedan outside his home followed orders. He showed them the kidnapper's calling

card. The family was cautioned against leaping to any conclusions. DNA would determine the need for worry.

Tennison's natural instinct was to somehow try and exert his considerable influence to affect the outcome, the way he was accustomed to handling matters during his eighteen years as chairman and CEO of Tennison Technology, a large defense contractor founded by his grandfather back in the mid-forties.

Much of the late Boyd Tennison's life was often shrouded in secrecy. Senator Tennison assumed the helm of running the hugely successful corporation from his father, Stephen Tennison, a mostly private man, who died instantly after suffering a massive coronary. Neither of Tennison's daughters had ever expressed any inclination or desire to follow in their father's line of work, so when a northwestern corporation, twice the size of Tennison Technology, made a lucrative offer to purchase the company, Tennison, with a growing desire to satisfy his political itch, decided to sell his controlling interest.

A year after the deal was done he threw his hat in the political ring and ran for the Colorado open seat in the U.S. Senate. Worth an estimated \$7 billion, Tennison spent close to \$75 million of his own money to win his first senate race. Now sixty-two, serving in his third term, and chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, Tennison found the experience foreign to feel so helpless and vulnerable.

He watched his security guy, Ted Roth, shove his hand inside a clear plastic bag and pick up the strands of hair and turn the plastic bag inside out. Mrs. Tennison cringed and held Tori close. He followed the same procedure for the packaging the strands of hair were delivered in. "We should have an answer in forty-eight hours," Roth said. Tennison's cell phone rang. The caller ID had been blocked. Roth produced his cell phone and ordered a trace on the signal. "Senator, there's a white van waiting outside of your home. You and the two security boys take the money outside and load the cases in the rear of the van. Any attempt to identify, follow, or impede the driver from leaving, or if the cases are wired, Abby won't make it home alive. Are we clear?"

"Yes. I'll hold up my end. You damn well better do the same," Tennison said while biting his tongue. The phone went dead. Not enough time for a trace. Tennison looked at the worried faces of his wife and youngest daughter sitting on the sofa. "They want us to take the money outside and load the cases in the back of a white van waiting out front," Tennison said to his guys.

"We have people highly trained to deal with this sort of situation," Roth said.

"No. We play by their rules. I don't want to give these bastards any excuse to not live up to the agreement. The money means nothing," Tennison said, his word final. With the senator's daughter's life at stake, and given the unknown elements they were up against, Roth and Marquez felt compelled to abide by the senator's strong wish not to involve others directly.

Out of intense anger over his daughter's kidnapping, Tennison had vowed

heads would roll if his private security conducted a covert operation without his knowledge and consent. The same went for the FBI. He wanted absolutely no interference. Roth and Marquez each grabbed the end of one of the metal cases filled with cash and carried it outside. Tennison led the way.

He stood at the rear of the panel van as Marquez and Roth loaded the case inside. The lone driver had his face covered with a black ski mask and dark glasses. Tennison loathed the driver from the rear of the van as Marquez and Roth made two more trips inside his home before loading the final case in the van. "I've satisfied all of your demands," Tennison said to the back of the driver's head. There was no response from the shaded eyes in the rearview mirror. Tennison and Marquez backed away as Roth closed the rear doors. The driver watched the three men diminish in the street from the side mirror as he drove off. Black plastic covered the rear license plate, so any thoughts of running a make on the van was a none starter.

FIVE

PAMELA SAT NEAR THE front of the large oval conference table, waiting her turn to address the meeting with two senior representatives from Vision Computer Network. Landing the VCN account was considered a major coup, credited to Pamela, who had managed to snag the account away from The Kelly Group with a very impressive sales pitch, on rather short notice.

She had gotten wind the relationship had soured a bit between VCN and the industry's King Kong. In less than two days she had put together a short but compelling presentation, managed to schedule an appointment with the head of P&S, and left the meeting with a firm commitment from senior VP Margaret Whitehead, also in attendance, to switch all of VCN's advertising to Barrow & Associates. Another important rung on Pamela's journey up the corporate ladder.

While sitting there listening to Barrow give his usual spiel about the exciting opportunities that lie ahead with the new relationship between VCN & Barrow & Associates, she found her thoughts drifting back to events that took place nearly three months ago, on the night she encountered Tony Monticello. She had never discussed what happened that night with anyone, and yet she couldn't seem to completely put it out of her mind. Perhaps the most difficult part of all to let go of, had to do with the shroud of mystery surrounding Tony leaving the hospital. No matter how often she tried to leave

the whole matter in the past, the fact she never saw him again after that particular night had become a continuous source of wonder. There was just no way she could make sense of it. "I will now step aside and leave you in Pamela's very capable hands," Barrow said in his closing remarks.

Pamela sat there in sort of a daze, unaware the spotlight had been cast on her. "Pamela," Barrow said. She reigned in her thoughts and returned her focus to the meeting, realizing the floor was now hers. "I'm sorry," she said, getting to her feet while trying to appear poised and above all, confident. She managed to pick up where Barrow had left off without missing a step. Impressive as always.

Following the hour and a half long meeting, Pamela, along with Barrow, escorted the representatives to the elevator, where they practically oozed enthusiasm over anticipation of forging a solid working relationship with VCN, thanked them for a productive session, then backed off to allow the forging to commence. On the way back to the conference room Barrow said, "You okay?"

"I'm fine. Why do you ask?"

"You seemed a bit distracted earlier."

"I apologize. My parents are having some trouble in their marriage, and I feel sort of caught in the middle," Pamela said, hating to have to lie to Barrow, but the truth he'd never believe.

"Why don't you take some time off. I can't recall you ever taking a vacation in

the five years you've worked here."

"I'm fine, really."

"You need a break. You've accomplished a great deal in a relatively short period of time. You deserve some time away from it all," Barrow said as they reentered the conference room.

"I have other accounts I'm this close to bringing in the door," Pamela said, a small amount of space between her thumb and index finger illustrating her point, then continued gathering together a folder chalked full of VCN account information.

"There will always be accounts. But if you burn yourself out, what will it matter. Take it from someone who knows of what he speaks."

"What about the Campbell account? We're close to locking it up."

"Mathew can handle it. Maybe not with your incredible charm and personality, but I'm sure he can nail it down for us."

"You sure now would be a good time for me to take a vacation?"

"There's never a good time. You're a lot like me, only younger, and a helluva lot prettier. I'm sixty years old, my wife has to apply loving but stern pressure to get me to take some time off."

"Sort of like you're applying right now."

"Am I getting through?"

"Point taken. Effective Friday, I'm on two weeks' vacation."

"Some time away will help to keep you sharp, trust me," Barrow said, going

over and holding open the door.

“Now all I have to do is figure out how to keep myself busy for two weeks,” Pamela said as she left the conference room.

“Why don’t you and that male-friend of yours take a trip down to the Bahamas.”

“I’m not sure if Howard can get away. He’s in the middle of a court case at the moment.”

“Surely you two can work something out.”

“Maybe I’ll take up a hobby. I might try fly-fishing, or something,” Pamela said jokingly, not exactly the fly-fishing type.

“Find some time to just relax whatever you do, and I’ll see you when you get back.”

“Thanks Ken.”

“You bet.” They parted company near the accounting department, and Pamela went back to her office.

Howard Albrecht had not seen Pamela in nearly a week. Product liability cases are by their very nature, time-consuming. He made it a point to stop by her near north side apartment that Wednesday night, even though he was in desperate need of sleep. Pamela answered the door wearing a pair of sexy pink shorts, and a plain white tee shirt. “Do I know you?” she quipped, alluding to the fact she hadn’t seen him in days.

"I'm the guy who loves you."

"I think I vaguely remember you." He smiled and stepped inside, gathered her up in his arms and kissed her with a great deal of long overdue passion.

"How's your memory now?" he asked.

"Improving, but still a bit fuzzy." From the doorway they made a beeline to the bedroom and spent the next hour or so making love.

After plenty of good sex, Pamela sprang the news about her upcoming two weeks vacation. "When did this happen?" Howard asked, lying in bed next to her with his right arm propped underneath his head.

"Kenneth practically insisted I take some time off."

"Why now?"

"He doesn't want to see me burn myself out."

"The old modern-day burnout. Actually I've never heard you even use the word, vacation."

"Well that's about to change as of Friday."

"You deserve some time off."

"Think you'll be done with the trial in time to join me?"

"Hard to say. My gut tells me the company and the manufacturer want to settle, but they want to drag it out as long as possible to discourage similar suits in the future."

"This case has been going on it seems like forever."

"Four long, painful years. That kid is stuck in a wheelchair for the rest of his

life because of faulty brakes on a two hundred dollar bike.”

“Wouldn’t it have been less damaging to both the company and the manufacturer’s reputation to have settled in the beginning, rather than put up with all the negative media?”

“They’re denying any and all liability. They contend the bike was assembled improperly. Which according to their defense, caused the brakes to fail.”

“Meanwhile, this kid has been given a life sentence in a wheelchair.”

“Both defendants have three main objectives, deny culpability, discourage further lawsuits, and minimize any judgment against them. What happened to Adam is seen merely as a casualty of doing business,” Howard said. Thoughts of the trial, and his client having suffered permanent injury, seemed to grate against his sense of decency. “Guess you won’t be able to get away?”

“Not unless a miracle occurs, and both companies suddenly develop a conscience.”

Howard ended up spending the night, which was not his intent, seeing as though he was due back in court at nine o’clock the next morning to continue the good fight for Adam.

Pamela finished out the week and left the office that Friday evening. First official vacation in five years. She did some last minute shopping before heading home. Since Howard couldn’t afford to take any time off, Pamela had made plans to take a shorter trip to St. Louis to visit her younger sister,

Melanie.

She caught a 9:45 flight out of O'Hare International the next morning, and the plane landed at Lambert International in St. Louis at 10:25 a.m. The forecast called for partly sunny skies, with an unseasonably high temperature around seventy degrees. Reminiscent of an early spring.

She met her sister on the upper-level in front of the American Airline check-in. Both their faces lit up the moment they laid eyes on one another, trading smiles and a warm embrace. Melanie was every bit as attractive as her older sister. Both had dark, reddish-brown hair, infectious blue-green eyes, and bodies that came from good genetics. Melanie's eyes had more of a sparkle, something she inherited from their mother. She was about an inch shorter at five foot five. Hardly a strike against her.

Growing up they were close, and continued to share a bond undisturbed by time or distance. Nearly a year and a half had passed since they'd last seen each other, and both looked forward to spending some time together. "How was the flight?"

"Short, which are the kind I like," Pamela said, never big on flying. Melanie had nearly fallen out of her chair when Pamela called and said she was taking a vacation. She assumed there had to have been some other force at work. The Pamela she knew and loved would never voluntarily take time away from the office. "Tell your boss he's my new hero for persuading you to take some time off," Melanie said as she popped the trunk of her car.

A friendly skycap loaded Pamela's suitcase and carry-on inside, which earned him a gracious smile and a five dollar tip. Next stop, suburbia. During the drive, the notion of Pamela taking an actual vacation remained the hot topic. Not having her daily dose of Barrow & Associates went against a long-standing ritual. Achieving career goals had always outpaced any personal pursuits. "I love my work," Pamela said.

"You're part of senior management now. You've earned a few weeks off to devote to self."

"Enough about me. How's Brad?"

"He's fine."

"How did the grand opening of the hotel go?"

"Other than a minor problem with the lighting in the front atrium, it was great."

"How does he like being in charge of a five-star hotel?"

"He loves it."

"And you, how are you handling all the changes?"

"Giving up my career and making the move from Minneapolis was not easy. I enjoyed my work at Primenet, and we loved our home, but this is a great opportunity for Brad."

"What about you?"

"St. Louis is beginning to feel like home. In the two months we've been here, I've gotten acquainted with the city, and I'm adjusting."

"You planning to go back to work?"

"I miss not keeping up with all the changes in technology, but my career will have to remain on hold for now."

"Why?"

"I'll be on maternity leave in eight months anyway."

Pamela went slack-jaw. "You're pregnant?" she said with total surprise.

"Six weeks."

If not for the fact that Melanie was behind the wheel, she would've been in for the biggest hug and gushing over she'd ever received. Pamela could not have been more thrilled about the news of Melanie and Brad expecting a child. So happy for the both of them. Melanie's joy on the other hand was more like smoldering ash. "Why didn't you call and tell me?"

"We just found out for sure about a week ago. And after the first miscarriage, I don't know, overly cautious I guess."

"Everything will be fine this time."

"From your lips to God's ear."

"How did Brad take the news?"

"Guarded optimism. He really wants a son, or daughter."

"Have you told mom and dad yet?"

"I tried calling, but they're still in Europe."

"The last time I spoke to mom, she said they were thinking about extending their vacation."

“Don’t say anything. I want to be the one to tell them.”

“I won’t say a word.”

Melanie took the Interstate 270 exit and drove south. “You guys started thinking about names yet?”

“Sort of, but we’re taking it one step at a time.”

“You two are going to make terrific parents.”

“And you a terrific aunt.”

Pamela could think of nothing more to look forward to than taking her niece or nephew to the park, or out to get ice cream, whenever she’s in town.

“So when can I expect some exciting news from you?”

“Like what?”

“So far, I’ve shared three major announcements. First, that I was getting married, second, that Brad and I were moving here to St. Louis, and now again about the baby. You, on the other hand, have only shared one major announcement, and that’s when you got promoted to the ranks of senior management. You owe me two big-league announcements. Preferably one involving a man and wedding bells.”

“As I’ve said in the past, I’ll get married when the time is right.”

“When? You’ve been saying that since your freshman year of college.”

“Not everyone can be as fortunate as you to find someone special early on.”

“I thought you and Howard were pretty serious.”

“We are. But I’m not sure we’re serious enough to be contemplating

marriage.”

“You love him?”

“Yes. To what extent, I’m not sure.”

“You’re not looking for an excuse not to commit to a long-term relationship are you?”

“Absolutely not. I’m looking forward to falling madly and hopelessly in love. I just don’t feel like it’s happened yet.”

“Well if Howard’s not the one, you just make sure you’re not buried up to your eyeballs in your career, and let your true love pass you by.”

“As your older sister, it’s my job to spout words of wisdom, not the other way around,” Pamela said with the utmost affection.

“You’re only five years older. And besides, when it comes to affairs of the heart, we both know that’s not exactly your strong suit.”

Pamela had no grounds in which to argue that point. Melanie on the other hand had managed the hat trick, career, true love, and family. By contrast Pamela had always felt the need to make sacrifices. Career above all else.

“Maybe with you taking this vacation, there’s hope for you yet.”

“You never know.”

Melanie’s handsome two-story home in the west county suburb of Chesterfield practically screamed upper middle-class. Pamela admired the overall texture of the neighborhood. Peace and quiet. Manicured lawns. Squeaky clean streets. Foreign automobiles peeking out from inside three-car

garages. Who said there's no such thing as cookie-cutter affluence. After a guided-tour of the lower-level, Melanie showed Pamela the upstairs, including the bedroom she could make herself at home in for whatever length of time she planned to visit.

By it being her first time in St. Louis, Pamela wanted to get out and see the city, so she left unpacking for later. Brad was on the golf course, which left Melanie plenty of time to show Pamela around parts of the city she had become familiar with.

After taking in a few landmarks, followed by lunch and shopping, they arrived back at Melanie's home late that evening. Brad was back from playing golf. "Good to see you again," he said, kissing Pamela on the cheek.

"Good to see you too, daddy to-be."

"I can't wait to have this child," Brad said, clearly looking forward to becoming a first-time dad.

"I'm excited for the both of you."

"He's already buying little league gear by chance it's a boy," Melanie said, going over and slipping her arms around Brad's waist.

"Remain positive, right?"

"Absolutely," Pamela agreed.

She could only imagine what it must be like to be expecting a child. Contrary to what some might think, someday she dreamed of starting her own family. Who knows, maybe even with Howard.

Over the next few days, Pamela and Melanie got to spend some quality time together, catching up on the not so major happenings in their respective lives, as well as reminiscing about when they were kids growing up back in California. Pamela had planned to spend only a week of her vacation in St. Louis, then thought perhaps she'd hop a plane down to Florida and lay out on the beach and just relax for a few days.

On Friday, the last day of visiting with her sister, Pamela had her things all packed, but since her flight didn't leave for another three hours, she tagged along with Melanie to run errands. First up on her to-do list, Melanie and Pamela stopped by the new Huntington Hotel, over near the airport, to drop off a lengthy report that Brad had been looking over at home, and in a rush had walked out that morning and left it lying on the kitchen counter.

A large convention of real estate professionals from around the country were booked at the hotel, many of whom were moving about the main lobby.

"What magnificent architecture," Pamela commented.

"Isn't it. I know my opinion is somewhat bias, but this is by far the nicest hotel the city has to offer," Melanie said as she approached the front desk.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Gibson," the agent behind the desk said with a mandatory smile.

"Hi Kiesha. Is Brad in his office? Or is he wandering around somewhere?"

"One moment, I'll check," she said, taking up the phone to try and locate the

GM. Within minutes she was able to track him down and handed the phone to Melanie.

While she spoke with Brad, Pamela glanced around at the aesthetics of the main lobby and atrium, both trimmed in handsome black marble. Most impressive, no doubt terribly expensive. Suddenly she was struck by a man she noticed getting on one of the elevators across the way about seventy or so feet. She saw him largely from an angle, through a crowd of mingling home-peddlers and mortgage banking types, but in her mind's eye, he bore a striking resemblance to Tony Monticello. Melanie got off the phone and said, "Brad's meeting me in his office."

Pamela had the most poignant look on her face, clearly intrigued by what, or rather who, she thought she may have seen. "Something wrong?" Melanie said.

"No," Pamela replied, trying to look less bothered.

"I'm meeting Brad in his office."

"You go ahead, I'll wait here."

"You sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine. Just thinking about work."

"Well stop it. No thoughts of work while you're on vacation."

"A momentary lapse," Pamela said, aware that her sister had only her best interest at heart.

"I'll run this report down to Brad. It'll only take a minute."

"No rush." Melanie disappeared past the concierge desk.

Again Pamela looked over toward the elevators where she saw the man who resembled Tony get on. She went up to the front desk and said, "Kiesha, hi. I realize it's probably against hotel policy to give out names of hotel guest, but I'm Melanie's sister, and I thought I just saw a guy I went to high school with get on one of the elevators. I was wondering if you could possibly tell me if a guest by the name Tony Monticello is staying here?"

"I'm sorry, but we're under strict guidelines not to give out the names of our guest under any circumstance, unless in the case of an emergency," Kiesha said.

"I understand. I just hate to have to bother my brother-in-law with something so trivial." Kiesha consulted her own sense of discretion, and after giving it further thought, and since Pamela was related to the general manager's wife, she figured what harm could it do to bend the rules this one time. "What was the name again?"

"Tony Monticello."

"M-o-n-t-i-c-e-l-l-o?"

"Yes," Pamela assumed.

Kiesha whisked the name into the computer. "Sorry. There's no one registered by that name."

Pamela thought a moment. "Thanks," she said, then walked away from the front desk.

Something about seeing him again, or at least the possibility she may have seen him again, aroused her curiosity, as she stared across at the elevators. She had a hunch that in fact it was Tony Monticello, and not just someone who reminded her of him.

Melanie returned and they left the hotel. She took care of other errands, swung by the house to allow Pamela to pick up her luggage, and got her to the airport with time to spare. Traffic was heavy outside the terminal. Goodbyes got emotional. "You take extra care of yourself. And call me if you need anything," Pamela said as they stood embracing outside the car.

"I will, if you promise to get off the fast-track every so often."

"I'll try."

"Love you."

"Love you too."

After final good-byes Melanie got back inside the car, and watched Pamela being swallowed up by the airport. Pamela made her way inside and scooted toward the American Airline ticket counter, the thought of believing she had seen Tony Monticello still eating at her. While waiting in line she glanced at her watch. Her flight down to Florida was scheduled to leave in forty-five minutes. At the counter she was ambivalent about getting on the plane. "If I decide to change my departure time, when could I catch the next available flight to Florida?"

The ticket agent checked the computer. "Next available flight is at 4:20."

Again Pamela looked at her watch. Instead of leaving at 1:10 as planned, she would be looking at roughly a three hour delay by taking the later flight. She gave it more thought and said, "Switch me to the later flight."

"No problem." It was done.

Pamela picked up her luggage and returned to curbside. She hailed an on-duty taxi, and had the driver take her back to the Huntington Hotel. Upon arriving she asked him to wait, got out and went in through the main entrance. Convention-goers, business types, and regular vacationers all circulated throughout the lobby. Trying to blend in, Pamela meandered about, paying close attention to faces shuffling back and forth. She was not exactly sure what it was she was hoping to accomplish, but for some unknown reason she felt almost compelled to come back.

She hung around the lobby fifteen minutes with the meter running on the taxi she had waiting out front. How crazy is this, she had to ask herself? After hanging around the lobby five more minutes, she decided it was time to stop the insanity of waiting around for someone she may or may not have seen earlier. She left the hotel and got back inside the taxi. "Take me back to the airport," she told the cabby.

As traffic permitted the driver proceeded to go around the black Lexus parked in front of him. Just about the same time, a rather tall, distinguished looking black gentleman, nice build, handsome, very sophisticated in manner, came out of the hotel and got behind the wheel of the Lexus. This time Pamela

got a good look at his face. Despite the dark glasses, there was no doubt that it was him, Tony Monticello, looking ten times better than when she saw him last. The Lexus pulled out behind the taxi. For now Pamela preferred that he not see her. She kept her focus straight ahead. "See the black car behind us?" she said to the cabby.

"Yeah."

"Pull over and let the driver pass, then follow him."

"What's this about?"

"I'll make it worth your while, but you can't let the driver know he's being followed."

"Lady I'm not looking to get mixed up in anything weird."

"Will an extra hundred make it easier?"

"You're the boss," the cabby said, veering right to allow the Lexus to pass.

Pamela turned her head in the opposite direction to avoid being seen by the driver. The Lexus moved past the courteous taxi and continued the gradual pace along the congested drive. "Stay close without tipping off the driver, I'll throw in another fifty bucks." With that kind of incentive, the cabby followed the Lexus off hotel property, all the way to Interstate 70. He was careful not to get too close. The Lexus headed east along the interstate. "Mind telling me why we're following this guy?" the cabby said.

"How about an even two hundred to drive and skip the questions." For an extra two hundred bucks the cabby was more than happy to mind his own

business.

The Lexus held steady at around 60 mph, until approaching the Natural Bridge exit, then suddenly took off with a heavy dose of speed. "Shit!" the cabby blurted out.

"Don't lose him!" Pamela exclaimed.

"Lady I can lose my license driving that fast."

"It's very important you keep up with him," Pamela said, leaning forward, imploring the driver to drive faster. Against his better judgment the cabby hit the gas and got up to 75 mph. But by the time he got around the bend in the highway, the black Lexus was nowhere in sight. "Fast as that guy took off, I couldn't keep up even if I wanted to," the cabby said, dropping back to about 55. Pamela couldn't begin to fathom which direction the Lexus had taken, north at the Interstate 170 exit, south on 170, or kept straight on Interstate 70. "Whoever that guy was, he sure got in a big hurry all of a sudden," the cabby said.

Having lost sight of the man she knew almost nothing about, Pamela backed off breathing down the cabby's neck, now even more in the dark as to who Tony Monticello really is. An enigma, if nothing else.

SIX

PAMELA FOUND HERSELF BACK at the Huntington Hotel, sitting in the lobby, waiting to see if Tony might possibly return. Her flight was scheduled to leave in less than one hour. The nervous cab driver wanted nothing further to do with chasing after speeding cars, and took off after being paid the extra two hundred bucks promised him. And with all things considered, he was more than happy to go back to conveying the more conventional brand of passenger.

Pamela had to wonder what in the world she was doing. Why the difficulty in letting go of this weird fascination with Tony Monticello, is what she had trouble coming to terms with. She left her luggage parked next to the chair she was sitting in and paid a visit to the front desk. She laid back and waited after seeing a familiar face. "Hi Kiesha. Remember me from earlier?"

"You were here with Mrs. Gibson."

"Right. You checked on a possible guest by the name, Tony Monticello."

"I remember."

"Are you positive he's not staying here? I've seen him twice now going in and out of the hotel."

"Maybe he's visiting someone."

"That's possible. Can you do me one last favor and check once more to be sure?"

“The name again?”

“Tony Monticello.”

Again Kiesha consulted the computer. “Sorry, there’s no Tony Monticello registered here.”

“Thanks,” Pamela said, then returned to where she left her luggage.

She looked at her watch for the fourth or fifth time in the past five minutes. Time was wasting if she still planned to make the 4:20 flight down to Florida. Whether to leave or stay had turned into a much tougher decision than Pamela could’ve ever imagined. Another peek at her watch. She picked up her luggage, but instead of heading toward the exit, she approached the front desk. “Something else I can help you with?” asked Kiesha.

“I’d like a room please,” Pamela said, fished her wallet out of her purse and produced her American Express Platinum card.

“How many nights stay?”

“Just one.”

Check-in took only minutes. “Need help up to your room?”

“I can manage.”

With room key in hand, Pamela grabbed hold of her luggage and moved across the lobby to the elevators. Under no circumstance did her sudden change in plans include running into Brad. The explanation much too complicated. She went up to her room on the eighth floor, and right away phoned the airline to make yet another change in travel plans. Something quite

unexpected had suddenly come up is how she explained having to once again postpone her departure. With that said, she was switched to a later flight bound for Florida, but not scheduled to leave until tomorrow morning at 9:10. Perfect.

Now what, she mused, sitting on the edge of the queen-sized bed, unable to rationalize her behavior, even in her own mind. She could go around and knock on every single door in the hotel as a means of possibly finding Tony Monticello, or at least someone who might know him. Nonsense. She didn't need her Princeton education to realize such a notion was totally impractical, not to mention time consuming. What then? Her gut told her, given the high-speed episode back on the interstate, Tony was indeed staying at the hotel, somewhere. Maybe her first hunch was right. Maybe he was staying under an assumed name or, perhaps with someone else.

Further consideration also had to be given to the possibility that perhaps Tony Monticello was not his real name. Made sense. He was certainly under no obligation, just an alias he tossed out to people of no consequence. But thinking back on that fateful night in early January, when he was cold and bleeding to death in her car, lying about something as innocent and personal as a name, hardly seemed his main concern. Who can say for sure though.

Nothing about that night seemed logical. She couldn't just sit there doing nothing, too much energy, so she grabbed her purse and left the room. The long corridor ran north and south, with rooms on either side. There was maybe

fifty feet of corridor south of Pamela's room before veering east, and what seemed like a mile of corridor stretching north past the elevators. All she could think to do for now was start walking, and maybe finally come to her senses and realize there was no point in what she was doing. Or she thought perhaps she might run into Tony, maybe overhear a conversation about him, something to make what she was doing not seem quite so ridiculous.

She passed the elevators and soon reached the end of the mostly quiet corridor without encountering anything unusual. She took a right turn and ventured past the exit to the stairs down another long stretch of corridor. A middle-aged couple came out of room 817 and passed her along the way. Friendly smiles were exchanged. Pamela continued walking, wondering as she passed each room, whether Tony Monticello was leading a quiet life behind one of the doors.

As she approached the east wing of the hotel, all of a sudden she got this strange sense she was being followed. With a gradual turn of her head, Pamela glanced over her left shoulder. A sleazy looking white male with a stocky build was strolling sort of casually toward her. Pamela looked again, and her first impression was that he seemed out-of-place, like he'd wandered in off the streets. His right hand was tucked inside the pocket of his denims, and he appeared to be staring right at her. She turned back and picked the pace up just a bit.

She felt her heart begin to race like it did that night during her first

encounter with Tony. Out of growing concern for her safety, she again looked carefully over her left shoulder. Very deliberately the man removed his right hand from his pocket, and with a quick flick of his wrist, released the seven inch blade of a wicked looking hunting knife.

Fear snatched hold of Pamela. She felt as if her knees were about to give out. The blood in her body ran thin and cold. And just as she was about to disturb all manner of peace and quiet, the guest in room 805 opened the door on his way out. Having never laid eyes on the guy until now, Pamela rushed over and started calling him Frank, and talking about his sister, Betty, and whether or not she'd finished medical school and on-and-on.

The guy appeared to have no clue whatsoever as to what she was talking about, who she was, or where she came from. Whenever he tried to interrupt the rambling, Pamela simply refused to stop talking, until finally the man got fed up and said, "Lady I have no idea who you are, or what the hell you're talking about." Pamela pretended as if he'd just inquired about her family and kept right on jabbering, while at the same time turning to see if the man apparently stalking her was still there. The corridor was empty. Whoever the guy was he was gone. Pamela gave the guest in room 805 a break and finally stopped talking, her nerves clearly on edge. "You okay? You need me to call the front desk?" the man standing in the doorway said, not sure what to make of Pamela's irrational behavior.

"Sorry to bother you," she said, then took the long way around back to her

room, making sure along the way she was not being followed.

Once back inside the room, she sat quietly on the bed next to the phone trying to steady her nerves. Pretty scary stuff what had just happened in the corridor. Who was that guy? She picked up the phone and was about to call the front desk to report that a man brandishing a knife was loose in the hotel, but that was sure get Brad involved, with him being the general manager, which meant Pamela would have to explain what she was doing there. With that in mind she put the phone down. Getting Brad involved would in turn bring her sister, Melanie, into an already weird situation, and there would be no end to all the worrying and questions.

She considered whether there was still time enough to call the airline and change her departure time back to the 4:20 flight, and forget all about Tony Monticello once and for all. But with roughly twenty minutes to check out and get back to the airport, check in, and still make the flight on time was nearly impossible. Pamela laid back on the bed and rubbed her temple. She couldn't believe how screwed up her vacation plans had gotten, all because of what happened three months ago. Just over an hour later a knock at the door woke Pamela after she'd dozed off maybe fifteen minutes. At that moment she'd rather be aboard a hijacked jumbo jet than by herself in a hotel room. She could only imagine trouble on the other side of the door, and somehow her name was attached to it.

She looked around the room for something to defend herself with. Another

knock at the door. The keys in her purse would have to do. She situated the key to her car between her index and middle finger and made a fist, then eased over to the door and peered out through the peephole, prepared to gouge an eye out if someone tried to cause her harm. She could make out what appeared to be a police uniform, but the person wearing it appeared both big and tall and crowded the door, obstructing most of her view. "Who's there?" she said with the least amount of fear possible.

"Police," the heavy male voice said.

"How can I help you?"

"We'd like to ask you a few questions about a man seen leaving the hotel under suspicious circumstances."

Tough call. If she opened the door and it turned out not to be the police, there could be unthinkable consequences, and if she tried to play it safe and not open the door, she worried somehow Brad would end up getting involved, particularly if the police had in fact been notified. "Would you mind stepping back so I can see your badge?" The apparent officer took two steps back away from the door. Pamela honed in on his badge through the peephole. Off to the right she caught sight of a gangly female, also in police uniform.

Not a hundred percent sure they were who they said they were, Pamela cracked open the door. After sizing them both up further she opened the door wider. "Sorry to bother you. I'm officer Berryhill, my partner, officer Marlin. A hotel guest was found stabbed to death in one of the rooms on this floor,"

Berryhill said. The news hit Pamela like someone had dropped a scud missile on the building. "A housekeeper reported seeing a white male, approximately six feet tall, stocky build, with bloodstains on the front of his clothing. We're questioning guest throughout the hotel to determine if anyone else saw a man matching that description."

Pamela's brain was still trying to process the news about the homicide. And the fact the same man she saw earlier with the knife may have committed the murder, made it all the more difficult to come to grips with. "I saw a man earlier, about six foot, stocky, real creepy looking."

"Where did you see him?" officer Marlin asked.

"The east end of the hotel, near the stairwell."

"Did he appear to have blood on his clothing?" officer Berryhill asked.

"Not that I recall."

"What was he doing at the time?" officer Marlin asked.

"He was behind me for a moment. He gave me the creeps, so I hurried back to my room."

"What do you mean gave you the creeps?" officer Marlin sought to clarify.

"He just did. I didn't know what his deal was, so I got away from him as quickly as I could."

"Was that the only time you saw him?" officer Berryhill asked.

"Yes."

"We appreciate your cooperation," officer Berryhill said.

As officers Marlin and Berryhill were about to leave, Pamela's curiosity got the better of her. "You said the guest found stabbed to death was staying on this floor, was it near the east wing of the hotel?"

"Yes. The victim, Walter Ackland, was staying in room 805," officer Berryhill confirmed. Hearing the victim's room number nearly sickened Pamela in front of the officers. Knowing the same man whose ear she practically talked off was now dead, presumably at the hands of the man she decided not to report to the front desk, was hard to take. But Pamela managed to keep it together until the officers were gone. She couldn't help but feel a great sense of sadness for the victim, as well as regret for not alerting the front desk. Who's to say if it would've in any way prevented his death, but at least she wouldn't feel so guilty right about now.

She went over and sat on the bed to try and allow everything that had happened to sink in. The only consolation was knowing that the creepy suspect was not after her, but as it turned out, the guy she ran to for help was perhaps the intended victim all along. Right then her mind was made up. By the same time tomorrow, she planned to be stretched out on a sandy beach in Florida, wearing a nice bikini, basking in the warm sunlight, sipping on a tropical drink, intent on forgetting all about Tony Monticello, and everything having to do with him.

SEVEN

BY EIGHT A.M. SATURDAY MORNING Pamela was showered and dressed. She zipped up her luggage, grabbed her purse, gave the room the once-over to make sure she hadn't forgotten anything, then scooted over and opened the door. She walked out with happy thoughts of margaritas and suntan lotion. "How'd you sleep?" a creepy sounding voice rose out of nowhere. Pamela turned to her right and saw the strange guy from yesterday standing off to the side of her door, leaning against the wall. He was trimming his fingernails with the same hunting knife he pulled in the corridor, the same knife she assumed he used to butcher the guest in room 805.

She wanted to scream, but feared the knife tearing at her flesh. "I had a feelin' you and me would run into each other again," the man said, as if he had the best of intentions.

"I'm running late. I have a flight to catch," Pamela said, scared out of her mind but trying not to show it.

"Won't take long."

Looking at the way the shiny steel blade pared his dirty fingernails like Swiss cheese, she knew that going back inside the room would mean a second gruesome homicide in as many days. As terrified as she was, Pamela couldn't see herself giving up without some sort of fight. She dropped her luggage and bolted north down the corridor. The man pounced like a mangy alley cat

chasing his favorite meal before she could make it three feet from the door. He grabbed her from behind by the hair and shoved the knife right in front of her face and said, "Make one sound, I'll slice up that pretty face." The mere thought caused Pamela's eyes to well up. "Let's go back inside. We need some privacy," he said, yanking her by the hair back toward the room. "Open the door."

She could almost feel the knife damaging her body, piercing a vital organ, which caused her hands to tremble while opening the door. He shoved her inside and tossed her luggage in behind her. "Have a seat," he ordered, the knife doing most of the talking. Pamela took a seat on the bed. With that stalker walk of his he approached her sitting there. He had the knife behind his back, as if he wanted the initial assault to be a surprise. "Why are you doing this?" Pamela said through streaking tears.

"Normally this would be over by now, and I'd be on my way. But with you, it almost seems a shame," he said, standing over her, tightening his grip on the knife.

"Please don't do this. I'm begging you. Whatever I've done to make you angry I'm sorry," Pamela pleaded, giving into the fear of dying.

"If I was angry with you, you'd be lying in your own blood right now. As it stands, you got time to come to terms with your fate."

"But why? What have I done?" she begged of him.

"A beautiful woman like you, almost wish I could turn back the hands of

time.”

“Is this about me seeing you in the corridor the other day? If it is, I swear I won’t say anything. I’m on my way out of town. I’ll forget all about my trip to St. Louis. I promise.”

“You have ten seconds to make peace with your maker,” he said, his grip nice and firm on the knife.

“God, I don’t understand,” Pamela cried, placing her hand over her mouth at the horror of it all.

“Hope you prayed for me too,” he said, reaching to try and grab her by the throat with his free hand. Pamela struggled.

He figured she would. But taken by her beauty, he wanted to penetrate her flesh as cleanly as possible, rather than hacking away like some half-crazed psychopath. Pamela had other ideas. She was not going to die without a fight. With every ounce of energy she could summon she resisted. He fought off flailing arms and grabbed her by the throat and forced her back on the bed. She tried to bring her knees up to prevent him from climbing on top of her, but the more she struggled the harder he squeezed her slender throat.

In time she began to lose some of her fight. In a fixed position on top of her, he continued bearing down, slowly crushing the life out of her. Still he was so enamored by how beautiful she was, even while dying, he decided not to use the knife. Killing her slowly with his bare hand seemed the appropriate way for her to die. Pamela’s face became flush from all the pressure. She tried

with both hands to pry his vise like grip from her throat, but he was simply too overpowering. She began to lose consciousness. Her struggle became less and less resistant. Harder and harder he bore down. Soon he was all but unopposed. The final moment was at hand.

A sudden loud racket interrupted death. Everything happened so fast. The door was kicked in and a single shot was fired, striking the man straddling his victim in the center of his forehead. He toppled over like falling timber, collapsing on top of Pamela. The allusive Tony Monticello rushed over and pushed the dead attacker off of her. He tapped Pamela lightly on the cheek to bring her around. "Come on," he said. In time she regained awareness. Tony helped her to sit up. "You okay?" She nodded. "We have to move, now."

It took a few minutes for Pamela to shake off the effects of nearly being strangled to death. "You have a helluva lot of explaining to do," she said, still sitting on the bed holding her hurting throat.

"Let's go," Tony said, his gun still drawn. He helped her up from the bed.

"Let's move." Pamela grabbed her purse. A handful of curious spectators had gathered outside the door. Tony ushered Pamela out past the whispering bystanders. "My luggage."

"Leave it," he said, urging her down the corridor past the onlookers.

"Mind telling me what the hell's going on," she said.

"Now's not a good time," Tony replied, checking out two undesirable men storming in their direction from the elevator.

He did an about-face and steered Pamela down the south corridor. She looked back and saw the two men giving chase. Tony stepped it up and got her to the stairwell. They negotiated the stairs with haste and worked their way down flight by flight. "Who are those men and why are they chasing us?" Pamela said between spirals. A gunshot ricocheted through the stairwell. Her curiosity was largely ignored. "Move!" Tony urged. She could not have picked a more critical day to wear flat shoes. And had she known the day would start out so eventful she would've worn her running shoes.

Second and third shots rang out, lodging in the cement and mortar all around them. Tony and Pamela managed to stay two flights ahead of the men shooting at them. At one point Tony stopped and returned fire, creating further distance between them and those in hard pursuit. Tony and Pamela took the last flight of stairs and exploded through the door and into the main lobby like gangbusters. Guests and visitors alike scurried to get out of the way after seeing Tony waving his gun around. They fled through the lobby toward the exit. The two gun-toting guys chasing after them laid violent siege on the lobby, opening fire with no regard for collateral damage. Tony stopped and swung around and took aim at both assailants. "Get down!" he yelled to the sitting ducks still in the line of fire.

Panic erupted throughout the lobby. People were diving to the floor, jumping behind whatever they could to avoid the hail of gunfire. Unfortunately not everyone moved quickly enough. Bodies started dropping.

First one male and two females, then another male, then a female, followed by another female. Tony held his fire until he had a clear shot, then squeezed off two rounds. He wheeled back around and grabbed hold of Pamela's arm and helped her up from the floor and scurried her out of the hotel. Both gunmen lay dead from single gunshots. Tony shuffled Pamela to the black Lexus parked just down the drive.

He sped away while checking all mirrors for a possible tail. Pamela figured at any moment she'd awaken from what could only be described as a horrible nightmare. She kept thinking to herself that none of this could possibly be happening. But the aftereffects of nearly having her trachea crushed confirmed it was no dream. Tony raced toward the interstate. "This can't be happening," Pamela said, still shaken up by someone who tried to kill her, and all the shooting that followed.

"What are you doing in St. Louis?" Tony said.

"What am I doing in St. Louis? What are you doing here?"

"People are dying in case you haven't noticed. Why are you here?"

"I don't owe you--"

"What are you doing here!" Tony insisted on knowing.

She sensed his agitation was not for a lack of not having kept in touch, but still felt she didn't owe him any explanations. But for the sake of getting some of her own questions answered, and he had better believe she had questions, she gave him a pass on the snippy attitude, at least for now. "Not that it's any

of your business, but I came to visit my sister.”

“Shit,” Tony said, not the answer he wanted to hear.

“Why? What law have I broken?”

“Where does your sister live?”

“Why am I the one answering all the questions?”

Tony looked her in the eye with no words, just a real serious, almost angry expression. Pamela got an eerie feeling that her destiny again was about to radically change. “West county. An area called Chesterfield.” Tony jumped on the gas and got up to 85 mph. “Can you get us there from here?”

“I think so.” He raced along westbound Interstate 70 weaving in and out of traffic. “Tony what’s happening?”

“You should’ve gotten on the plane yesterday,” he said, pushing past 95 mph.

Later the Lexus crawled to a curbside standstill outside Melanie and Brad’s home. The house appeared quiet and undisturbed. There were no cars parked in the driveway. “Your sister live alone?” Tony asked, still surveying the outside of the house.

“No. She’s married.”

“Wait here?”

“I’m coming with you.”

“I need you to stay in the car.”

“She’s my sister. I’m coming with you.” Rather than waste time arguing Tony gave in. In tandem they crept up the driveway with Tony at the point. “Are

cars normally parked in the drive?"

"I guess it depends." There was no glass in the garage door to see inside. Once they got to the front door, Tony tried looking through the narrow glass maybe a foot to the left of the solid oak door, but it was hard to make out much of anything inside through the lace covering the side glass. "What does my sister have to do with any of this?" Tony drew his gun and signaled for her to keep quiet. The door was unlocked. With caution in mind he pushed it open and stepped inside the foyer. Not a sound came from within. Pamela followed him over to the stairs. "No one's home," she said.

"They make a habit of leaving the front door unlocked?"

"My sister's a stickler for the smallest detail, and she's never late for anything."

Nothing seemed out of the ordinary on the lower level, so Tony had in mind to check out the upstairs. On the fifth step he noticed stains in the beige carpeting. He looked down at Pamela and said, "There's blood." She hurried up the stairs to take a look. "This was not here a couple days ago," Pamela said, stumbling up the stairs out of growing fear. Tony grabbed her by the arm and said, "Stay close." He moved up the stairs. At the top the blood made a much deeper impression in the carpet. Tony moved around the heavily saturated area. Pamela's heart pounded harder, while at the same time half scared out of her mind, sidestepping the place where of all the blood was.

A heavy trail led toward the master bedroom. Tony motioned for Pamela to

stay put, then tracked his way to a gruesome discovery inside the bedroom. The fully-clothed bodies of a man and a woman were lying in the bed on top of bloody sheets. The man had taken several gunshots to the head and chest, and the woman appeared to have been hacked to death by something sharp. Tony lowered his gun, clearly bothered by the horrific scene.

Before he had time to try and prepare Pamela for what he'd found, he heard a painful groaning sound coming from the entrance. The worse day of Pamela's young life had just gotten a million times worse. The bodies were those of Brad and Melanie. She inched toward the bed with her mind spinning. Tony tried keeping her at a distance, but she pushed his arm away. She stood over her sister's slain body, staring down at her torn clothing, and the heavy concentration of stab wounds to her chest and abdomen. As if her soul suddenly weighed a ton she sank to her knees and let out a wrenching cry.

The pain and sadness was suffocating, even for a man like Tony. Pamela took hold of her sister's lifeless hand and cried from places she never knew existed. He moved away to give her time enough to grieve, and to say goodbye. While standing back watching Pamela mourn the tragic loss of her sister and brother-in-law, his attention wandered toward the clock on the bedside table near Brad's body. The illuminated display claimed it was 9:22 a.m. Tony checked his watch. 9:27. All of a sudden there was no time to waste. "There's a bomb!" he warned. Grief had taken such hold on Pamela, the alarming sound of his voice didn't seem to matter. Tony hurried over and

hoisted her up from the floor. "We gotta get out of here. Now!"

"She didn't deserve this," Pamela lamented over her sister.

Guessing it was only a matter of minutes before the room, or maybe even the entire house would go up, Tony had no choice but to drag her out, all the while trying to get her to understand there was nothing she could do for her sister. They hauled ass down the stairs and out of the house. Pamela wanted to go back for her sister's body. They barely made it back to the car just before a tremendous explosion went off, blowing away the entire second story of the house. Tony got Pamela inside the car, then himself. Debris from the explosion rained from the sky. He circled the cul-de-sac, stopping momentarily to witness the aftermath of the house having been blown apart, but to also allow Pamela a final moment to be near her sister. She stared at what was left of the house, again no words to describe the horror of it all. "How can something like this happen?" she said.

Whoever was responsible for the murders had also seen to it that not even a decent burial would be possible. Before neighbors started filing out of their homes to find out what had happened, Tony knew they had to get moving, and with nothing even close to comforting to offer at the moment, he took off down the street.

After putting reasonable distance between them and what happened back at the house, Tony finally said, "I'm sorry about your sister and her husband." "And my little niece or nephew," Pamela added, occasionally swiping at the

running tears.

“There was someone else in the house?”

“My sister was pregnant with their first child?” Tony well understood that once it started things would turn ugly in a hurry. Not even the unborn was safe.

They drove the next mile or so in silence, except for the sobs and sniffles.

“Why is all of this happening?”

“I don’t know.”

“Bullshit. Some strange guy tried to choke the life out of me. You show up out of nowhere and end up shooting him. Guys with guns start chasing us. We race like hell to my sister’s house, only to find her and her husband shot and butchered. And now you have the nerve to sit here and tell me you don’t know what the hell this is about!” Tony understood the raw emotion. Time for some answers, but only on a need-to-know basis. “Somehow they’ve connected you to me. You’re in play now.”

“In play. What does that mean?”

“It means bad people are after you.”

“Me? What the hell for?”

“Reasons aren’t important now.”

“Not important.”

“These people take it to the extreme, and they do serious damage.”

“Who? What people?” Pamela said, not the least bit impressed by what

sounded so absurd.

“They’re well-organized, well-connected, and very determined.”

With all of this sounding so farfetched, coupled with having to deal with the loss of her sister, Pamela’s emotions were pushed to the edge. She shed more tears while struggling to pull it together. “These people, why are they after you?”

“I’ve caused a few problems in the past.”

“You a former associate of theirs?”

“Not exactly.”

“You a cop?”

“Not exactly.”

“What the hell does that mean? Who the fuck are you?” Pamela practically yelled, agitated by his lack of straight answers. Tony picked up a possible tail in the rearview mirror, a navy SUV. It had been on them from the time they exited onto northbound I-270. “Buckle up,” Tony said.

“What’s happening?”

“Keep your eyes straight ahead, and buckle up.” The SUV was closing fast.

“Hang on. They’re coming.”

Pamela watched the speedometer climbed to 80 mph. The SUV hung close. Tony drove like he’d been chased before, moving in and out of moderate traffic, at times reaching speeds of up to 90 mph. Pamela braced herself given the Talladega like atmosphere, and all the weaving back and forth over the

interstate. She could almost hear the sound of metal on metal. Right on their tail the SUV gained rather than lose ground.

A bullet smashed through the back window and exited through the front, just missing the right side of Tony's head. "Get down!" he said. Pamela scrunched as far as she could. Tony hit a clear stretch and ran the speed up to 100 mph. A barrage of gunshots fired from the SUV riddled the back of the car. "Can you shoot?" he asked.

"A gun?" Pamela said from almost a crouched position in the seat. Tony worked his way over to the far right lane as they approached I-70. The SUV not far behind.

Over Interstate 270 hung a large sign. Northbound motorists, approaching I-70 while traveling in the far right lanes, were prohibited from crossing the double white lines along the final one mile stretch. Intended to prevent last minute lane jumping. Tony raced along as if about to take the I-70 east exit, then at the last possible moment he veered hard to the left and took the I-70 west turnoff. Perfectly legal since he stayed within bounds of the far-right lanes, aside from nearly causing a pile up by cutting off a couple of retirees traveling in a Winnebago. The SUV could not make the abrupt adjustment in time, and was forced to continue heading east.

Tony followed the viaduct around to I-70 and drove west. Anxiety inside the car tapered off. Pamela sat up, emotionally disheveled. "This is insane," she said.

“Just the beginning,” Tony warned, keeping watch in all directions for signs of more trouble.

“Before we were interrupted, you were about to explain this nightmare I now seem to be a part of.”

“This is deep shit we’re in.”

“Why?”

He took the Shoreline Drive exit to double back around to I-70 east.

“Homegrown terrorists, linked to a wide range of criminal activity. Drugs and assassinations mostly.”

“How are you involved in all of this?”

“We got company.”

Pamela’s pulse quickened at the thought of once again being chased and shot at. But instead of accelerating, Tony began to slowdown. “Why are we stopping?”

“Relax,” he said, then pulled the car over. In the passenger side mirror Pamela saw flashing lights from an unmarked patrol car. A sigh of relief. It was three or four minutes before the officer made his approach. No doubt he ran the plates. A uniformed patrol officer, well over six feet tall, walked up to the driver’s side of the Lexus. Tony lowered the window and produced what appeared to be identification. “You know why I pulled you over.”

“Is there a problem?”

“The back of your car has what appears to be multiple bullet holes. Both

taillights are out.”

“I’ll get it taken care of.” The patrol officer studied Tony’s identification, then gave it back and said, “I’d find some new transportation. Have a nice day.”

Pamela didn’t know what to make of being allowed to drive away without offering up some sort of explanation for the bullet holes.

EIGHT

TROUBLE HAD A WAY of sneaking up fast. Time to shift gears. Tony attached a small device to his cell phone before punching in a local number. He reported that he had Pamela in the car with him, but that regrettably two members of her family, with all due respect, were dead. "We need a safe-house," he told the person on the other end. The call lasted two minutes.

"What is that?" Pamela asked, referring to the small gadget.

"Prevents calls from being listened in on."

"What's a safe-house?"

"A place to regroup." He drove to a condominium near Westport, an area just off Page Boulevard, but close to the interstate. A remote control to the garage was stashed in a large shrub left of the front door. Tony pulled the battered Lexus inside and parked next to a metallic silver Porsche 997.

"Whose car?"

"It's a loaner," Tony said, hopping out of the shot-up Lexus. He ran his hand along the border above the door leading to the inside and found a key.

"And this place belongs to who?"

"Friend of mine."

"And you borrow it whenever you need a place to lay low for a while."

"Something like that," Tony went along, unlocking the door and going inside.

Pamela followed, but she didn't buy a word of what he said about the

expensive car, or the condo. The interior was furnished throughout, including food in the refrigerator, and fully stocked cabinets. "Why am I not surprised," Pamela said after checking out the packages of unopened deli items, and bottled water in the frig, as if someone had just returned from buying groceries. Tony brought down a 6 X 9 brown envelope from the top shelf of the hall closet. "I'm beginning to figure some things out," Pamela said. "Really?" Tony doubted, going into the living room and parking on the sofa. "The patrol officer had already decided not to write you a ticket, or ask too many questions by the time he approached the car. That ID you showed him just confirmed it."

"I hadn't done anything wrong."

"He didn't know that. The back of your car looks like it's been through a war zone. Officer, car shot up. What am I missing?"

Inside the envelop an iPhone and nothing more. There was a coded text message waiting. Rather than fill in the blanks for Pamela, he focused instead on the text. "You're some kind of government agent, is that it?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yes it matters. Life is about pluses and minuses, and right now the plus column's empty."

"Why didn't you leave town on Friday?"

"How do you know what time my flight was scheduled to leave?" He froze her in his sight for a moment, then turned his attention back to deciphering the

text. "I didn't leave because I wanted to find you."

"Why?"

"I felt I deserved some answers."

"Answers about what?"

"What happened to you the day after I drove you to the hospital? No one seemed to know much of anything about your release," Pamela said, believing another small piece of the puzzle was beginning to fall into place.

She worked Tony over real good with her eyes, then took a seat in the chair next to the sofa. "The guy with the knife, the one who tried to kill me, it was the same guy who rammed a knife in you that night, and left you for dead." Tony dropped his eyes and continued poring over the text. "Is that why they murdered my sister, because I helped you that night?" He kept reading. "Is that why those bastards murdered my family?" she demanded to know. He also kept silent. Before she could reason otherwise, Pamela lunged from the chair and ripped the phone out of his hand and yelled, "Is that why?"

Persuaded by the desperate look in her eyes, Tony decided no harm in putting her mind at ease about certain facts. "Some friends of mine checked me out of the hospital. I wanted you to forget that night ever happened. I regret getting you involved in the first place."

"But I couldn't let it go. I kept nosing around and asking questions. I even tried following you."

"Money and fear attracts information."

As much as she wanted to believe it was all bullshit, somehow it made sense. She would have to live with the fact that she'd gotten her family involved in something they had nothing at all to do with. Just the thought was painful, but it also made her angry. Tony explained how up until three months ago, these people knew nothing of his existence. He had been identified through a guy named, Woolsey. Back before becoming an anti-government fanatic, Woolsey did a six year stretch in the Georgia state pen for aggravated assault. When he got out he joined up with an extremist group that called themselves The Freedom Rebels. He was the worse piece of shit Tony and his associates had ever stepped in. "How did you and this guy Woolsey first cross paths?"

"Nine members of The Freedom Rebels, including Woolsey, sold their services on the open market. Two are currently serving life sentences, one's on death row, five are dead, and Woolsey got away. During efforts to close them out, we assumed he died along with two others in a house fire in Utah. We later learned he made it out. He put two-and-two together, and there you have it."

"So he joins up with the people trying to kill us?"

"Yes. As they see it, it's about freedom from a corrupt government. A la the various gangsters during prohibition, only much more intense."

"So they kill innocent people."

"Look at what's happening in Mexico."

“How are they financed?”

“Mostly drugs. They’ve suffered two major setbacks in the past year.”

“Thanks to you and your friends.”

“What they lost in street narcotics was worth somewhere around \$140 million.

A serious foot in the ass.”

“Revenge shot to the top of their agenda,” Pamela gathered.

“They couldn’t figure out how distribution channels had broken down. We tend to shy away from publicity and media coverage. Woolsey remembered me from the shadow op that closed out the Freedom Rebels, and we believe he may have ID’d me in Chicago, where a large shipment of drugs was set to arrive.”

“So after drug profits took a major hit, they decided to bring the fight to you.”

“And anyone connected to me.”

A sobering thought now that Pamela believed these people were responsible for Melanie and Brad’s deaths. Just thinking about the reality of never seeing her sister again brought on more tears. “These people, as you say, take what they do very seriously, how does that explain their sloppy attempt at killing you?” she asked while fighting through the painful emotions.

“That night I was taking a taxi back to the hotel. The driver stopped the car in the middle of Dearborn and jumped out. Both rear doors swung open, a gun was pointed at me from the left, and to my right, this guy was standing there holding a seven inch hunting knife. He ordered me out of the car and tried to

gut me like a fish. He said he wanted my death to be slow and painful, so I'd have time to think about what it feels like to die. They jumped in the taxi and took off."

"That's when you broke into my car?"

"The garage where your car was parked was close, and you and I eventually met."

"How'd you get in without the alarm sounding?"

From the right pocket of his jeans Tony produced a small remote control and said, "Left button shuts off your average car alarm, right button pops the lock on most foreign and domestics."

Pamela reached for the small remote to get a closer look. "I don't suppose you can pick one of these up at your local Radio Shack."

"Mine came with opening a free checking account."

Pamela managed a half-hearted smile. "Who are these friends of yours?"

There was nothing surprising in the fact that she wanted more details. Tony had to decide where to draw the line. Then again, they'd already tried to kill her twice, not to mention having murdered her sister and brother-in-law. Certainly there was no way she could possibly imagine being in any more danger than her current situation. "I work with a group of people dedicated to keeping this country and its citizens safe."

"So you are some kind of special agent?"

"You can say that."

"You work for the government?"

"In a sense."

"Is it humanly possible for you to be anymore evasive?"

"Sorry."

"Where did your friends take you after they checked you out of the hospital?"

"A private medical facility?"

"Where?"

"We leave for Colorado tomorrow," Tony said, then got up to make himself a sandwich.

"Colorado. I can't go to Colorado. I have a life to get back to," Pamela said, trailing him into the kitchen.

"Until these people are dealt with, you don't have a life."

"Are you saying I can't go home, or back to my job?"

"Not if you want to stay alive."

"For how long?"

"Until the job's finished."

"That's insane."

"If you go back to Chicago, thinking you can just return to your normal life, you'll be dead within twenty-four hours. And if you do manage to stay alive, the moment you make contact with a friend or relative, anyone these people can interpret as having meaning in your life, they're as good as dead."

Losing anyone else close to her was something Pamela found hard to

stomach. When that regrettable moment does come where she has to tell her parents the painful news about their youngest daughter, doing so could also put them in harm's way. "I'll go to the police," she said.

"And tell them what? How would you know who to trust?"

"How do I know I can trust you?"

"You want to go at this alone, I can't stop you," Tony said, poured himself a glass of apple juice, then took his turkey on rye and went back into the living room.

What was supposed to be a simple and relaxing vacation had turned into anything but simple and relaxing. Regardless of what she decided, Pamela feared her life would never be the same. In thinking about the challenges ahead, and what was best, she'd never felt so helpless. Again she cried. She went back into the living room after rearranging a few of her thoughts. "Will I ever be able to lead a normal life again?"

"I'm the reason you're involved in this. I'll do whatever's necessary to make sure nothing happens to you, and that you get to return to that normal life. But you have to trust me, even when things are happening you don't understand. A moment of hesitation, and people die."

Pamela listened intently to every word Tony had to say. What she was hearing was that the stakes were higher than ever, with no room for errors in judgment. "I trust you," she said without the appearance of misgiving.

"Then we'll get through this."

"You seem to be good at whatever it is you do."

"You want modesty?"

"Only if it's the truth."

"I know how to keep us both alive." Considering everything that had taken place up to that point, Pamela understood there were no guarantees, but that Tony seemed to have a better handle on what was happening than she could ever hope to imagine. "Mind if I make myself a sandwich?"

"Help yourself."

She returned after making herself a turkey sandwich and pouring herself a glass of cranberry juice. "Why are we going to Colorado?"

"So far they've only been able to identify me, and now you. They've chosen to bring the fight to us, we have to make sure they know where to find us."

"Please tell me you're kidding."

"There's a five headed dragon. If we can get to them one by one, the body eventually falls."

"You're talking about slaying the dragon."

"We can't be the only ones playing by the rules."

"You know where to find all five heads?"

"Don't even think about it."

"Since my life is being put on hold, I want to help in whatever way that I can."

"When we get to Colorado, you'll disappear until this is over."

"And be locked away for God knows how long?"

“Your safety is what’s important.”

“Getting the bastards that butchered my sister is even more important. I can’t hide out somewhere living in limbo. They want me dead, I’m willing to make that sacrifice fighting for my sister, and her unborn child that never had a chance.”

Tony saw more in Pamela’s eyes than fear. She didn’t have the look of someone wanting to run and hide. “You better think about what you’re saying.”

“I want to help.”

“We’re at a crossroad. This ain’t the movies, where the good guys always win, and protocol has never been called into question. If you choose to make a stand, we’re talking bare knuckles all the way. Like I said, a split second of doubt, people die.” She shed more tears. “Take some time and consider what’s best. We leave tomorrow,” Tony said, got up and took the paper plate and empty glass into the kitchen. Pamela had pretty much composed herself by the time he returned. Most of her tears were all but dried up. “I want to help,” she said.

“You better be sure.”

“I am.”

Tony sized-up this new attitude, then said, “Bad guys here we come.”

“We get them before they get us.”

Mentally Pamela had to prepare herself to enter a dangerous world she

knew nothing about, where turning back was not an option.

NINE

CAL'S UPSCALE RESTAURANT IN Clayton had a mostly affluent clientele. Tony and Pamela arrived at seven for dinner. Several patrons, including Tony, wore black tie, and Pamela stepped out of the Porsche 997 by all accounts, stunning, in a sexy black halter dress. Her shoulder-length hair was swept behind both ears and pinned up in the back, which not only gave off an air of sophistication, but showed off the Cartier diamond earrings.

An unidentified man and woman had showed up at the condo earlier. They didn't say much. The guy supplied the evening attire, and the woman did Pamela's hair and makeup. They were in and out in ten minutes. The valet caught himself staring. No reaction from Pamela. He hurried around to where Tony stood waiting. "Have my car back in this exact spot in one hour," Tony said, then pressed a twenty in the valet's hand. He then joined Pamela waiting underneath the twenty-five foot canopy that covered the entrance. "Your people have exquisite taste," she said between them.

"It's all about image," Tony said in half his normal voice, while also keeping watch for signs of being compromised. So far so good. With a clutch purse in one hand, Pamela took hold of Tony's arm with the other, and together the handsome couple went inside the restaurant. "Reservation for Courtland," Tony said to the maitre d, who promptly showed them to their table. "Your waiter will be with you shortly."

The atmosphere was showered in elegance, from the softly lit dining room, to the classical piano player softly playing in the background. "Any sign of him?" asked Pamela.

"The table near the painting of the Golden Gate Bridge." She managed to steal a glance at the party of three. "Who's the woman and the large man?"

"His girlfriend and personal bodyguard."

The waiter appeared. Pamela ordered the chicken piccata with a nice Merlot, and Tony the grilled salmon, also with a glass of Merlot as his wine of choice.

The waiter gathered the menus and scooted off. "Any hesitation?"

"You said that assassinations are carried out with tacit approval from the five-headed dragon."

"That's right."

"Then my sister's gone because of him," Pamela said, holding the reigns on her emotions so as not to become teary-eyed and ruin her makeup.

"You okay?"

"Yes."

"Time to go to work."

Pamela gathered her wits about her. Without calling attention to herself, she removed the compact from her purse and checked her appearance. Tony doubted she'd have any trouble getting the attention of Nicolas Turner, not unless he was somehow immune to beautiful women. The girl sitting with him at the table seemed poised and quite attractive to be sure, but Tony had his

money on Pamela to do her thing. "You sure he won't recognize me?"

"Nicolas only cares about sending a message, not about the particulars."

"Wish me luck."

She put the compact away and got up to look for the ladies room. Along the way she turned more than a few heads. And with the lovely dress hugging all the right places, she ended up on purpose walking past Nicolas's table. She got noticed right away. Nicolas, the bodyguard, and especially the girlfriend, each had something to do with the way she carried herself. At the right moment she made eye contact with Nicolas. She flirted without seeming flirtatious. Nicolas certainly recognized being hit on by a gorgeous woman, whether he'd choose to respond was yet to be seen.

While Pamela was busy getting ready for the second act, Tony checked out what was happening at Nicolas's table. Five minutes later Pamela returned from the ladies room. "How'd I do?"

"If not for the girlfriend, he would've followed you right into the ladies room."

"I think we connected."

"He'd have to be blind otherwise."

"Was that a compliment?"

"Stay focused. He's looking this way."

"Let's hope he doesn't sit this one out."

"He won't."

Their food arrived. Both entrees prepared to perfection. The blonde sitting with Nicolas got up and headed back toward the restrooms. "My turn," Tony said, stood and buttoned his jacket, then headed toward the men's room. In his girlfriend's absence, and now her companion, Nicolas didn't waste the opportunity to try and make some inroads with the beautiful woman he was certain he'd picked up a positive vibe from. "I hope I'm not disturbing you." Pamela looked up at the man now crowding her table with a very warm look in her eyes and said, "Can I help you?"

"I couldn't help but notice how you worked the room earlier."

"I'm sorry," she said, stringing him along.

"Your gentleman friend must be awfully confident to leave a beautiful woman like you sitting here alone."

"And your lady-friend, how would she feel if she saw you standing here trying to strike up a conversation with a total stranger?"

"She'd get over it. Mind if I sit for a moment?" Pamela gazed up at him while picking up her glass of wine and taking a sip. Nicolas took that to mean he was welcome to have a seat.

Not a bad looking guy, he assumed the physical attraction between them was mutual. "Nicolas Turner," he introduced himself while offering his hand. Pamela took her time setting her glass of wine on the table, then very casually shook his hand while playing coy with who she was and feinting with her eyes. "I missed your name."

“Mel.”

“An unusual name for such a beautiful woman.”

“Yes, unusual,” Pamela said, doing a nice job at firing up his imagination.

While Nicolas was busy trying to put the moves on the woman he'd come to know only as Mel, his bodyguard had started to wonder what was taking his girlfriend so long in the ladies room, and got up to go check on her. Wouldn't look good to go barging in after her, so he stopped a young woman about to go in and said, “Could you do me a favor, and check to see if a five foot two blonde, hazel eyes, wearing a blue dress is still inside?” The woman came out less than two minutes later and said, “She's in front of the mirror.”

“What else. Thanks,” the bodyguard said, then went across to the men's room. As he stood at one of the urinals, Tony walked up and put his gun to the back of the bodyguard's head. “If I see your eyes you die,” Tony said while checking him for hardware. He took a 9mm off the guy.

“What's this about?”

“Your boss is not a very nice guy. Help yourself by helping me put him down.” Unmitigated silence is what the bodyguard offered instead. “Guess not.”

“You have no idea what's headed your way,” the beefy bodyguard said.

“You nervous?”

“I make others nervous.”

“You must be losing your touch,” Tony said, then took out a folded black

handkerchief from his inside jacket pocket. He squeezed it tightly for roughly five seconds. "The handkerchief or a bullet, your choice," Tony said, nudging the guy in the back of his head with the barrel of the gun to help him decide. He covered the bodyguard's nose and mouth with the handkerchief. His massive body went limp in about twenty seconds.

Tony dragged him over to one of the stalls and sat him on the toilet. "Sleep tight." Waiting outside the bathroom door was the same young woman who was asked to check on Nicolas's girlfriend. "She's still napping," she said, then left the area.

Back at the table, Pamela had gotten Nicolas completely turned around with the notion that he was definitely her type, and that if he played his cards right, she'd take him on the ride of his life. She spoke in roundabout ways about her untapped sexual appetite, which had Nicolas so turned-on, he'd forgotten about his girlfriend, and hadn't noticed his bodyguard's absence. She'd gotten him so wound up that he ordered them both another glass of wine. "What about your gentleman friend?"

"What he doesn't know--" Pamela said, got up and crossed to Nicolas's side of the table. She leaned over real ladylike and pressed her red shaded lips to his. Nicolas couldn't remember the last time a simple kiss had given him such a hard-on. During the brief kiss she managed to slip a small white tablet into his glass of wine. "--won't hurt," she said after the kiss, then returned to her chair. She'd been told the tablet would dissolve in less than fifteen seconds.

Nicolas had to have her. "When can we get together?"

"Say when."

"Later tonight works for me."

"To keeping secrets," Pamela said, raising her glass to toast a tacit agreement for a night of, mischief.

Nicolas took up his glass and said, "Cheers." They drank to a mutual understanding. For the next five minutes, Pamela kept Nicolas sipping wine, while he tried to nail down the exact time and place for their much-anticipated rendezvous. Around seven minutes after consuming several sips of wine, Nicolas began to show signs of becoming disoriented. Blurred vision and slurred speech were telltale signs. He was teetering toward unconsciousness. Pamela removed a brown envelope from her purse.

So as not to attract attention, she again got up and crossed to Nicolas's side of the table. She pretended to give him a hug, but in reality propped him up to avoid having him keel over face-down. At the same time she slipped the brown envelope inside the breast pocket of his dinner jacket.

Tony came up behind her and dropped a \$100 bill on the table to cover the check. She grabbed her purse and the two left the restaurant without raising suspicion. As Tony had requested, the valet had the car waiting out front with the passenger-side door open. Pamela slid in. Tony slipped the valet another twenty, got behind the wheel and drove away. "Make the call." From her clutch purse Pamela took out the cell phone Tony had given her and hit the

speed dial. She reported to the local FBI that Nicolas Turner was having dinner at Cal's restaurant in Clayton, and that he had in his possession information involving the terrorist organization's drug transactions and money laundering. The call lasted a matter of seconds.

The FBI and DEA had been investigating the organization for nearly two years, but had no solid evidence against the five-headed dragon. But that was about to change. Nicolas Turner was about to become the first of the fire-breathers to be indicted on fairly substantial drug charges. "One down," Pamela said.

"Nicolas was the easy one. From here on out things are going to heat up.

When the others find out about Nicolas, they'll raise the stakes."

"Do I look scared?"

"You should be."

By the time the FBI got to Cal's restaurant, Nicolas was still sitting at the table where Pamela and Tony had left him, but the front of his shirt and jacket were covered with blood. He was pronounced dead from a puncture wound to the heart. No so-called evidence linking him or the organization to illegal drug activity was found in his possession, as the anonymous caller had indicated. The bodyguard was later found in the men's room stall, also dead from an apparent punctured heart. In the adjacent ladies room, Nicolas's girlfriend had met with the same fate. Eyewitness accounts described seeing a woman with

cinnamon colored hair sitting with Nicolas shortly before the waiter discovered him slumped over covered with blood.

Tony and Pamela boarded a private jet at Lambert International Airport headed for Colorado. A call came in on Tony's cell phone, informing him of the events gone awry at the restaurant. As usual the call was brief. "How did it go?" Pamela asked.

"Nicolas, his bodyguard, and the girlfriend, were all found dead."

"What?"

"The envelope was gone."

"What happened?"

"The organization got to them first. They weren't sure what Nicolas or the others might've said."

"How did they know?"

Tony was curious about that as well. Who could've given them a heads-up. He ran through in his mind a list of possibilities from the restaurant. "One of the waiters," he said.

"I'm lost."

"One of the waiters must've tipped them off."

"How?"

"Cal's is a popular spot for certain members of the organization, which means certain employees get paid a little extra to keep their eyes open."

“Shit.”

“Like I said, this ain’t the movies.”

“I can handle it.”

“I hope so.”

The small jet was soon airborne bound for Colorado.

TEN

SITTING ALONE IN THE backseat of a black Mercedes parked outside Denver International Airport, Boyd Tibbs was talking on a cell phone to one of many loyal to the cause. He was told the plane carrying Tony and Pamela had landed about fifteen minutes ago, and the two were headed west. Tibbs was still pissed about the fiasco in the restaurant back in St. Louis, the scowl on his face said as much. The driver opened the rear passenger-side door. A well-dressed guy name Monroe Doyle climbed in the back and sat next to Tibbs.

Doyle fancied himself as sort of a black Don Corlion, but with men of his equal. He had a weakness for expensive suits, but never flashy, and prided himself on what he described as merciless sophistication, meaning he once capped an undercover DEA agent, shot him in the head at close range, then had flowers delivered to the home of his grieving widow. "We win the war yet?" Doyle asked.

"Soon. They landed fifteen minutes ahead of you," Tibbs said, then signaled the driver.

"Who's watching our two visitors?"

"Danker and Oakley," Tibbs said.

"We can't afford another fuck up like St. Louis."

"You sure this guy's not FBI or DEA?"

“Not according to my contact,” Doyle said.

“I don’t like this sonofabitch. He appears and disappears like a fucking ghost.”

“His luck’s about to run out,” Doyle promised.

“Both him and the girl should be dead by now.”

“Today’s not a bad day to die.”

Senator Tennison left his senate office just after 9 p.m. accompanied by his top aide, Branson Fitzwater, who drove him over to Stanton Park about three miles from the capital. Since receiving the news a few months ago of the horrifying murder of his daughter, as expected Tennison had been somewhat reserved around his staff and senate colleagues.

A week after paying the ransom demand, Abby’s partially nude body was found in a wooded area outside a small town in Kentucky. The autopsy revealed that she’d been raped and sodomized repeatedly before having her throat cut. The entire Tennison family was still in mourning.

Fitzwater parked near the entrance of Stanton Park and got out. He disappeared somewhere in the shallow darkness. Moments later a rather husky guy appeared at the passenger side door of the senator’s car. Tennison lowered the window, but made no attempt to learn the man’s identity. He could only see his dark blazer from his peripheral. The guy handed him a cell phone. Tennison listened to a man’s voice on the other end without saying a word. “The four-headed dragon is wounded. The spider and the fly have arrived.

They're en route. Be advised trouble ahead. The Hawk has landed." Tennison handed the phone back to the guy standing outside the car, who stuck the phone in the pocket of his blazer and walked away. His face was never seen. Fitzwater later returned, got back inside the car and drove the senator home.

Headed west on Interstate 70 in a black GMC Yukon, Tony and Pamela had both changed into more rugged clothing aboard the plane. "Why didn't we just fly into Aspen?" Pamela said.

"Visitors can only fly in directly between December and April. Besides, the plan is not to attract attention."

"Do they know we're here?"

"They know," Tony said, keeping tabs on a maroon Ford in the rearview mirror, while holding steady at sixty mph. Pamela picked up on the wary tone in Tony's voice and glanced over her left shoulder. "Which one?"

"Maroon Ford on the right."

"It seems we move, they move."

"Keep that in mind," Tony said, looking over at Pamela through dark glasses.

About a mile down the road the maroon Ford changed to the same left lane as the Yukon, but continued to lay back. A quarter mile later a huge tractor trailer passed the maroon Ford and changed lanes, getting in between the Yukon and the Ford. The Ford changed back to the right lane to try and keep tabs on the Yukon.

Another two miles down the road, Tony ran into a rather confusing traffic jam. Flashing lights could be seen coming from patrol cars, an emergency medical vehicle, and a fire truck. Traffic had come to a complete standstill on the interstate. The tractor trailer stood idle behind the Yukon, and a Chevy pickup pulling a 5th wheel trailer was stopped in front of the Ford. Both men in the Ford had lost sight of the Yukon. "What the hell's going on?" the guy behind the wheel said out of growing frustration. Two highway patrol officers were on the scene directing traffic.

Finally after sitting for nearly ten minutes the west bound lanes began to inch along. As the pickup pulling the 5th wheel moved ahead of the tractor trailer, the two men in the Ford inched closer to try and locate the Yukon. When the rear of the 5th wheel moved past the nose of the tractor trailer, the men in the Ford saw the Yukon hooked to the back of one of two tow trucks in the midst of all the confusion. The Yukon was empty.

The second tow truck had hooked to the back of it a clunker that had apparently caught fire and snarled traffic. "Where the fuck did they go?" the passenger in the Ford said. He had a noticeable scar above and below his left eye, and bad teeth. The guy behind the wheel stopped just as the flow of traffic was starting to pick up, and the guy with the nasty scar was about to get out and work his way over toward the tow truck driver now in control of the Yukon.

A patrol officer came along about the same time waving for the lane of

traffic to keep moving. Annoyed by all the confusion, the men in the Ford had no choice but to move on past the incident now under control and continue down the interstate. A quarter mile past the tie-up, the guy with bad teeth took out a cell phone and made a call. "We lost them."

Tennison had trouble sleeping, so he got up without waking his wife, slipped on his flannel bathrobe and went downstairs to watch television. Old movies usually did the trick in making him drowsy. He turned on the light in the family room, grabbed the remote off the coffee table, parked on the leather sofa and turned on the TV. While flipping through channels, Tennison's cell phone over on the roll-top desk near the piano, began ringing. He got to it on the second ring. The caller ID was lit up "Unknown." On the third ring Tennison answered. "Senator Tennison?" the grossly distorted voice on the other end said.

"Yes."

"I know what you've done."

"I beg your pardon. Who is this?"

"If you don't want the world to know your secret, it'll cost you \$50 million."

"Whoever this is, I don't appreciate prank calls this time of night."

"You'll be crucified by the media if the story gets out about what you've done."

"I have no idea what you're talking about. This phone call is over," Tennison

said, about to hang up.

“Amazing the path one takes in a personal desire to reach the highest office.”

Suddenly Tennison was not in such a hurry to hang up. Clearly the anonymous caller had touched a nerve, evident by a lingering silence. “I see I have your attention,” the caller said.

“Don’t confuse my patients with acquiescence,” Tennison bristled, refusing to appear vulnerable.

“Take some time to think about the prospect of a dim future. I’ll be in touch,” the caller said, then hung up. Tennison put the phone down, sleep even less likely than before.

Tooling down Colorado 82 in a silver Land Rover, Tony and Pamela were headed toward Aspen under the cover of darkness. Both were fatigued having adjusted to the high altitude. “I must say I’m impressed by the way your people operate. That diversion back on the interstate was uncanny.”

“What you said earlier works both ways, they move, we move.”

“Staying alive 101?”

“Get used to it.”

“Hanging out with you has aged me ten years.”

“Just make sure you stay sharp.”

Somewhere around one in the morning they made it into Aspen. Tony took Maroon Creek Road and headed into the mountains. “Where exactly are we

going?"

"To get ready for what's coming."

After driving for twenty-five minutes, Pamela had no idea where they were. Further into the mountains, Tony came to a small abandoned cabin in a secluded area surrounded by woods. "Why are we stopping here?"

"This is it," Tony said, removed a flashlight from beneath the seat and got out. Pamela looked around from inside the Land Rover, not particularly eager to get out. She took a deep breath and opened the door and planted both feet on the ground. "We're staying in a run-down shack?"

"We won't be disturbed out here," Tony said, following the beam of light up to the cabin. Surrounded by woods and darkness, Pamela hurried to catch up with him. "What are we going to accomplish in the middle of nowhere?"

"You prefer a nice hotel room, where the maid who comes in to fluff your pillow, might instead blow your head off?"

"But why here? There's no electricity, not to mention this place gives me the creeps."

Tony walked up to the unlocked door and went inside. Pamela loitered on the outside, a bit squeamish about going inside the dark, rickety structure.

"You coming?"

"You're serious about this?" she said, stepping just inside the entrance.

"Close the door." This was really strange for Pamela, seeing cobwebs wherever the light from the flashlight landed. The only thing inside the drafty

cabin besides lots of dust and cobwebs, and maybe a few creepy-crawly things, was a couple of old bar stools, an eyesore of a chair, and a large wooden table.

When the beam of light landed on a door inside the small cabin, and it appeared Tony had found what he was looking for, that's when Pamela really got nervous. He walked over and without hesitation opened the door and shined the light inside. Pamela came up behind him. It appeared to be nothing more than empty closet space. Very tiny closet space. "After you," Tony said. "You have got to be kidding."

"After everything we've been through, you still don't trust me."

She had to think about that for a moment. As strange as all of it seemed, deciding now to question his judgment hardly seemed the right thing to do. She put her doubts aside and stepped inside the cramped space. Tony did likewise and closed the door. "Now what?" He shined the light on a small plank to the right of the door, identical in size and shape as all the others inside the small space. He pressed the loose plank and popped it open. Behind the plank were two buttons. Tony pressed the one on the left. Not built for speed the small enclosure began to descend.

What turned out to be some sort of elevator came to a stop in what amounted to a rather large finished basement. And just when she thought things had gotten about as strange as possible, Pamela couldn't believe such an elaborate, fully functional underground setup was beneath the rundown

cabin. It had a computer, phone, fax machine, sleeping quarters, complete with kitchen and bathroom facilities, with hot and cold running water. Tony went over and logged into the computer. Pamela took a look around. "I'm in the Bat-cave," she said with a sense of awe. She walked over to where Tony sat at the computer and said, "What is this place?"

"Think of it as a training facility," Tony said while sending an untraceable email. Pamela took note of who the email was addressed to, someone by the name, "Hawk."

"I could ask a thousand questions right about now, how all of this came to be, but since I probably wouldn't get a single straight answer, I'll pass."

"You might want to email the company you work for, as well as your boyfriend, let them know you're okay, but that you'll be away longer than anticipated. Family emergency or something." Pamela sent two emails. "We better get some sleep, busy day tomorrow."

"When are you going to tell me about the people you work for?"

"There's a time and place for everything, this is neither," Tony said, going over and stretching out on one of two reasonably comfortable cots.

Pamela relaxed on the second cot. The long day had Tony nodding off within minutes. As exhausted as she was, Pamela found it hard to fall asleep. So much had happened. "Sorry for doubting you earlier."

"Don't worry about it," Tony said, his voice drifting. Pamela tried to endure the silence but found it difficult. "That day at my sister's house, how did you

know there was a bomb?"

"Something you said earlier."

"What?"

"You said there were two things about your sister, she was a stickler for details, and she was always on time."

"And."

"I noticed the clock next to the bed was five minutes slow. If your sister was always on time, I figured she would insist on the clock she woke up to not be a minute fast or slow. Which meant the clock had been tampered with, more than likely rigged to set off the explosion."

"They teach you that stuff in secret agent school?"

"Half of it's training, the other half is instinct."

"I miss her," Pamela said, tears streaming down the side of her face.

"I know."

ELEVEN

FITZWATER NOTICED THE SENATOR seemed more reserved than usual during the morning commute to the capital. "You okay, Senator." "Why do you ask?" Tennison questioned from the backseat, looking at Fitzwater's reflection in the rearview mirror.

"You seem a bit distracted."

"How ambitious are you, Branson?"

"Sir?"

"You've been with me since the beginning. I'm just curious whether or not you have other ambitions."

"I'm not sure I follow."

"You're young, single, well-educated. I'm wondering if perhaps you've thought about going in a different direction, and if so, how would you see yourself going about it?"

Tennison was right about one thing, Fitzwater had been with him since winning his first senate race. At age thirty-six, and a graduate of Stanford University, his top aide had weathered the storm during the darkest hours, even when it appeared his days in the senate were numbered. He stood among the few in Tennison's innermost circle. He knew the senator's secrets. "I'm content working for you and serving my country. That's the extent of my ambition at the moment, Senator."

"You and I share sort of a blood-allegiance. An indelible bond. I'd hate to see that relationship fractured in any way."

"So would I, Senator. Is there a particular reason we're having this conversation?" Fitzwater asked, wondering what brought on such an odd morning topic.

"Just want to make sure we never get our wires crossed about what it is we set out to accomplish."

"My sentiments exactly, Senator."

"Good. I'm glad to hear it."

A makeshift shower and hiking boots were not exactly the kinds of creature comforts Pamela was used to. Also picked out for her and Tony besides the boots were jeans and sweaters. "You ever get to shop for yourself?" Pamela asked while lacing up her size seven and a half boots.

"Once about three years ago," Tony quipped.

"It's not hard to imagine," Pamela said, finding herself again wondering who Tony really was, his background, where was he from. The thought of asking she quickly dismissed. In addition to living life in the shadows, Tony was quite adept at avoiding questions he didn't see a relevant need to answer.

"This life you lead, how do you ever know who's who?"

"Never take anyone at face value. Watch for inconsistencies. Unusual behavior. Most of all, trust your instincts. If something about a situation

bothers you, never dismiss it as nothing, or coincidence. Avoid overreacting, but never allow yourself to be caught off guard," Tony said, then went over and removed a large metal case from a storage cabinet.

Inside were ordnance. "You really are planning to fight a war." Tony inserted a clip in a 9mm semiautomatic pistol and said, "Time you learn how to shoot."

"I've never been comfortable around guns."

"Just like learning to ride a bike."

"I can see the similarities."

Next came two sets of ear plugs and eye protectors. They walked over to a miniature shooting range set up the length of the underground quarters.

"We're going to target practice down here?"

"It's all soundproof." He took her step-by-step through the process of becoming familiar with handling the gun, right up to the point of actually firing her first shot. For the most part she was nervous, but Tony slowly talked her through squeezing off the first round. She grazed the left shoulder of the human outline seventy feet away. Three clips later, Pamela felt comfortable enough to reload and fire the gun completely on her own, surprising to the both of them, hitting the target closer and closer to dead center. Tony spent the next hour going over some of the finer points of marksmanship.

Somehow Pamela managed to amaze herself at how quickly she adapted to reloading and firing a weapon, and how competent she was at it. When target

practice was over, she released the spent clip, and went to give Tony back the gun. "Keep it, and be prepared at any moment to use it," he said. Pamela stood holding the empty gun, trying to come to terms with the very real possibility that if her life depended on it, she might be forced to take another human being's life. Even the pathetic life of a hard-nose killer, who would not hesitate to take hers without giving it a second thought. "I don't know if I could actually kill someone."

"It's not something you look forward to. You have to decide in a split-second who gets to walk away, you, or the person trying to kill you. That's the reality of it."

Over the years Pamela had made many tough decisions in her life, but never anything remotely close to life or death. She needed only to think about her sister, and the innocent lives that were taken for no reason, which made what she might be faced with seem at least rational. She reloaded the gun and set the safety. Tony gave her a side holster and an extra clip. "I work for an offline organization that's been around for quite some time. We're privately funded, with no official ties to any government agency. The bad guys think we are, which makes our job easier."

"Rogue crime-fighters."

"Not exactly. We operate within certain perimeters. We deal with organized crime and terrorists groups operating within our borders. The primary difference between us and conventional law enforcement, we don't believe in

hiding behind legal loopholes. We don't go after those we suspect are bad, we go after those we've confirmed are bad."

"Path of least resistance. You make up your own rules, and if something goes wrong, there's no one to answer to. No checks and balance."

"Which would you prefer to have happen to those who murdered your sister, have them rot in prison, or would you rather put a bullet between the eyes of each individual responsible for her death?"

Pamela didn't expect that such a blunt question would provoke such strong feelings toward vigilante justice. She couldn't say for sure what her reaction would be if she found herself face-to-face with her sister's killer. "The way you feel right now, that anger churning in the pit of your stomach, that's not how we operate. Our purpose is not to administer justice, but rather make sure it don't get ignored."

"Why are you telling me this now?"

"Timing's everything."

She watched Tony load a second 9mm pistol and tuck it in the back holster clipped to his jeans.

"How many are involved in this crime fighting effort?"

"We avoid the numbers game. Too dangerous."

"How long have you been a part of all this?"

"Roughly seven years."

"What about a social life, family?"

“You mean a wife, kids?”

“Yes.”

“Not compatible with this line of work. Easy targets for adversaries,” Tony said, removing a set of three throwing knives from the metal case.

“Not even a girlfriend?”

“I’m dedicated, not celibate. Follow me.”

Pamela took that to mean there was no room in his life for a serious commitment, just a trail of one-night-stands. She stood along side Tony about twenty-five feet from a four foot high block of solid wood. One-by-one, Tony flashed his knife throwing skill by lodging each small knife like a precision dart in the center of the block of wood. Something he picked up after recovering from his stab wound. He walked over and retrieved the knives. “Your turn,” he said, handing her one of the six inch knives. Pamela absorbed everything Tony taught her about the art of knife throwing, the proper form, and how to pinpoint her target.

Soon the knives were finding their mark instead of hitting the block of wood and bouncing off. “Since you’re not connected with any government agency, why did that patrol officer back in St. Louis let us go? And what about the diversion back on the highway?” Pamela asked while continuing to show mark improvement in her technique.

“I said officially connected. And it never hurts to have friends in high places.”

“Government friends?”

“Among others.” Almost without realizing it Pamela had acquired a new skill. Following her final attempt, Tony again retrieved the knives from the block of wood. “Slide this inside your right boot,” he said, giving her one of the knives to hang on to. He propped his right foot up on the table and slid one of the knives in the slot of his boot as well.

“I’m starting to feel lethal.”

“Need an extra gun?”

“One’s plenty,” Pamela said, still trying to get used to carrying a 9mm instead of a briefcase.

Packing two guns and a concealed knife, Tony put the third practice knife back inside the metal case, removed a few extra clips and closed it up. “Time to go.”

“Where?”

“Get something to eat.”

“In public?”

“It’s the only way to get to Boyd Tibbs and Monroe Doyle.”

“Dragons?”

“The most unpredictable pair.”

“They’re both in Colorado?”

“We’ll find out soon enough.”

TWELVE

SARAH MARSHALL, ANOTHER KEY aide to Senator Tennison, along with Fitzwater, were both in Tennison's senate office briefing him on the recent nomination of a Georgia trial court judge to the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals. Based on the background information put together by Sarah on the rulings and opinions offered by Judge Gavin Hayes, Tennison didn't anticipate a problem with moving the nomination through his Judiciary Committee.

"Excellent work as always, Sarah. Very thorough," Tennison said.

"Thank you, Senator."

A graduate of Michigan State, Sarah had always dreamed of working in Washington. She joined Tennison's first senate campaign as a volunteer right out of college, and has been with him ever since. Mrs. Tennison, however, was not too happy about Sarah joining the senator's staff in the beginning. Sarah was young, pretty, and ambitious, three things she thought might be a bad combination to mix with politics. But after giving it some thought, she realized Tennison had no doubt come across those same formidable attributes countless times in business, and figured if he could be tempted to have an affair, he'd already done so a long time ago. "What about the farm bill, Senator?" asked Fitzwater.

"I can't support it. My cholesterol level starts to rise just thinking about the amount of pork weighing it down."

"A firm no vote?"

"Rock solid. Unless or until the bill's modified."

"I'll release a statement to the press."

"Good." Tennison was expected on the senate floor in twenty minutes, so Fitzwater and Sarah wrapped up the morning briefing and left the senator's office. Sarah's cell phone rang on the way out. "Hello--What time?" she said while glancing at her watch.

"Catch you later," Fitzwater said. Sarah nodded. He headed back to his office.

"I can stop by your office around one," Sarah said to her husband on the phone.

"Perfect."

"I still think the house is way too expensive."

"You're married to a future partner of one of the most powerful law firms in Washington. Trust me, we can afford this house."

"I don't know."

"When you see it, I guarantee you'll fall in love with it the same as I did."

"Maybe."

"You will."

"See you at one."

Just after 11:00 a.m., Tony and Pamela pulled into the parking lot of the newly renovated Hobnob restaurant in Aspen. "Remember, it's all about poise

and confidence. Trust your instincts,” Tony said. Pamela took a deep breath to try and sure up her somewhat shaky confidence. “You okay?”

“I think so,” she said, stepping out of the Land Rover ahead of him. They went inside the restaurant. Right away they drew stares. Poker faces all around. An ample-breasted waitress carrying two breakfast menus showed them to a table near the center of the restaurant. “My name’s Jill. I’ll give you a few minutes to decide, and I’ll be right back,” she said with a smile, then walked over to check on three elderly women sitting near the window. Pamela watched Tony’s eyes, the way he noticed people without staring.

On her way back to the kitchen, Jill stopped by their table and said, “Would either of you like coffee while you look over the menu?”

“I’ll have some,” Pamela said.

“Coffee’s good,” Tony agreed.

“Be right back,” Jill said, paid Tony some extra attention, then left to get the coffee.

“Talk about obvious.”

“What’s that?”

“Don’t tell me you didn’t notice the waitress flirting with you.”

“Stay focused.”

Jill later returned and served coffee along with the usual condiments. Tony and Pamela were done sizing up the menu. Pamela ordered pancakes and orange juice, Tony an omelet-over-easy, and orange juice as well. “Like

anything else?" Jill said, directing most of her attention toward Tony.

"That'll be all," Pamela decided. Jill tossed a parting glance in Pamela's direction and said, "Shouldn't be too long."

"I can't believe she's flirting with you right in front of me. I could be your girlfriend, or wife, for all she knows."

"You're getting sidetracked."

"She's blown her tip."

Right before their food arrived, Pamela excused herself and went to the ladies room. She was washing her hands when another waitress came in. "You the one who came in with that good lookin' black gentleman?"

Pamela couldn't believe how aggressive these waitresses were. "I am."

"Better not leave him sittin' too long by himself. Jill's got the hots for him.

Soon as you two walked through the door, she practically begged me to switch stations with her."

"You were supposed to be our waitress?"

"Where you guys are sittin' is my station. Jill's new, and was so adamant about wanting to switch, figured I'd do her the favor." Odd Pamela thought.

She made it back to the table just as Tony finished shaking paprika over his omelet. He sectioned off a piece and was about to give it a try. Jill was hovering, as if awaiting his opinion of the food. Pamela hurried over and said, "Don't eat that!"

So close was the omelet to his mouth, Tony inhaled paprika. His opinion

would have to wait. He lowered the fork back toward the dish. Pamela turned toward Jill and hauled off and punched her in the face, knocking her to the floor. Customers turned toward the commotion. Tony got to his feet. "What's happening?" he said without getting excited.

"Fuck's your problem?" Jill said from the floor, putting her hand to the small cut on her bottom lip.

"Why don't you try the omelet."

Jill picked herself up. Pamela picked up the fork with the bite of omelet still dangling from the end and offered it to Jill. Nursing a bloody lip, she stared at the omelet then cursed Pamela with her eyes. "Eat up," Pamela said.

"They have eyes everywhere," Jill scoffed.

Tony grabbed her by the arm. "Make a scene and you're done," he warned, yanking her toward the door. On their way out the manager of the restaurant appeared. "What's going on?"

"Unless you want the health department to shut this place down for serving tainted food, I suggest you be more careful about the people you hire," Tony said while on the move.

"Where are you taking her?"

"You should be more concerned with making sure no one eats the food at table four," Pamela said while trailing them out.

The moment they set foot outside the restaurant, multiple gunshots from a semiautomatic rang out from a blue panel van in the parking lot. Tony tried to

pull the waitress back inside, but she was hit several times by rapid gunfire and killed instantly. Pamela and Tony managed to scramble back inside and dove to the floor. "Everyone get down!" Tony yelled, as bullets shattered the front glass of the restaurant. By the time the shooting stopped, four people lay dead, including the waitress who tried to poison them. Five others were wounded. Broken glass and bullet holes were everywhere. The blue van had sped away. Tony got to his feet concerned about Pamela, and whether or not she'd been hit. She sat up and brushed pieces of broken glass from her hair and clothing. "You okay?" Tony asked, helping her up from the floor.

"Yeah. What about you?"

"I'm good."

Customers and employees who managed to escape harm were shell-shocked after having their morning ritual interrupted by the mob-style shooting. Tony instructed one of the waitresses to call the police. Meanwhile he and Pamela did what they could to help bring calm to what had become an ordeal. Around the time police were due to arrive, Tony mentioned to Pamela it was time for them to leave and let the local boys take over.

He wanted Pamela, who was close to tears, to drive. Tony climbed in the back. Too shaken up by all the shooting and killing, Pamela didn't think to ask why the backseat and just drove. They got back on Colorado 82 headed east. "We got company on the left," Tony said, looking out of the darkly tinted back window. Pamela looked in the outside mirror on the driver's side and saw a

black sedan moving up. The car pulled even with the Land Rover. Three men were inside, two in the front and one in the back. The hard looking guy, bushy goatee, sitting up front on the passenger side, mimicked a kiss toward the prettiest mark he'd ever hunted down.

Both passengers produced semiautomatic weapons and had a bead on Pamela. Tony lowered the tinted side window and aimed a twelve-gauge shotgun and blasted away, killing both gunmen. The final gun-blast blew out the right front tire, sending the black sedan careening into the concrete divide. Tony raised the window, and Pamela continued down 82.

While having lunch in the senate dining room with his long-time friend and senate colleague, Senator James Harold, from across the aisle, Senator Tennison brought up the most recent Homeland Security measure now working its way through the House of Representatives. He expressed dismay at how a measure so vital to national security had become so politicized. After serving nearly twenty-two years in the U.S. Senate, Senator Harold was strongly considering retiring at the end of his fourth term. He'd grown weary from what he viewed as Washington having lost its way. "You can't seriously be thinking about retiring now," Tennison wondered.

"The spirit of compromise is gone from this great institution."

"Even though we're on opposite sides of the aisle, I'd hate to see you go."

"If I do decide to retire, I'll do so with a heavy-heart."

"I hope this won't be a hasty decision."

"Just like I knew after twenty-seven years it was time to give up cigars, I'll know when it's time to walk away from the senate."

One of two iPhones sitting on the table interrupted talk of leaving Washington. Both senators checked their respective phones. The call was coming in for Senator Tennison. A familiar voice on the other end caused the furrows in his brow to deepen. It was the same garbled voice that claimed to know something about what he'd done in pursuit of more loftier goals, and had demanded \$50 million not to leak what he knew to the media. "Time's running out, Senator. Soon you'll have to decide between darkness and light. In darkness things remain hidden, but if you choose light, everything gets revealed. All the skeletons come out."

"I see," Tennison said to the caller, mindful of sitting across from his fellow senator.

"I understand if it's awkward to speak. The next time you hear from me, I'll expect your decision. Choose darkness, your position in the senate remains unchallenged, choose light, the world will know what I know. Choose wisely, Senator," the anonymous caller said, then ended the call.

"I understand, and I appreciate the insight," Tennison said to no one on the other end. He hardly seemed bothered by the phone call as he put the phone down.

"Demands of democracy?" Senator Harold assumed.

“One of my senior aides.”

“Have you given any thought as to how long you plan to serve?”

“Until I feel that I’ve made a difference,” Tension said as he finished his grilled white fish.

Parked at a busy truck stop eating takeout from a local McDonald’s, still fresh on the minds of both Pamela and Tony was the loss of innocent lives back at the restaurant. “You have to let it go,” Tony said.

“How do you get used to people dying all the time?”

“You don’t. It’s a part of our world. Just because you don’t see it, don’t mean it’s all good.”

“Will it ever be over?”

“Not until the organization is closed out.”

Pamela couldn’t finish her burger just thinking about how things had gotten so out of hand. So crazy. She felt like crying, but figured she’d cried more in the past week than she had her entire life. She tossed the half-eaten burger in the bag now used for trash, picked up a napkin and cleaned her hands. Tony finished off his French fries, drank the last of his soda, and picked up a napkin and wiped his hands. “How did you know the food had been poisoned?”

“I ran into another waitress in the ladies room. She told me how adamant Jill was about wanting to switch stations the moment we walked in. Supposedly because she had the hots for you. Right then I knew something had to be

wrong,” Pamela quipped, trying to find a lighter side to an otherwise shitty afternoon. Tony could appreciate the attempt to lighten the mood. “Good looking out.”

“In far less dramatic fashion than the numerous times you’ve saved my life.”

“The point is, you trusted your instinct.”

“Keeping you from eating poisoned eggs was the least I could do.”

“I’m grateful.”

“Stick with me, we’ll make it through this,” Pamela said, again finding a moment amid the chaos. “If you don’t mind me asking, where are your friends in this fight?”

“They’re around.” His cell phone rang. The conversation would last thirty seconds. “We have a location on Boyd Tibbs and Monroe Doyle.”

“Where?”

“Denver.”

THIRTEEN

TIBBS' ENJOYED A NICE menage a trois almost as much as money and power. He loved beautiful women. A year ago when he bought the seven bedroom, \$2.7 million estate, he put a non-negotiable offer on the table. The agent that showed him the house didn't exactly appreciate the terms outside the standard contract. She had her integrity to consider. They ended up having wild sex in two of the seven bedrooms. Buyer's market. Hard to say when she'd see that kind of commission again.

Angie, Tibbs, and Sai She, had been going at it for nearly an hour when a call came in on the private line in the master bedroom. It had to be important. He untangled himself and answered the phone. His playful mood took a nosedive, followed by a barrage of expletives. He ordered the women to get out. As soon as they scurried out of the room, Tibbs continued chewing the ass of the person on the other end. "I want them fucking dead, you understand me! I don't want to hear anymore of this horseshit about this guy and some pretty bitch playing this hero bullshit! You call me in forty-eight hours with the gruesome details, and no more fucking excuses!" Tibbs said, then slammed the phone down.

No longer in the mood to call his play things back, instead he got up and threw on a silk bathrobe. He stormed the hall and barged into the bedroom Doyle was staying in. Doyle was not alone. He didn't have quite the appetite

as Tibbs when it came to multiple sex partners. One beautiful woman at a time was more his style. What the two men did have in common were volatile tempers. Only Tibbs had more of a tendency to go nuclear when things didn't go as planned. "We need to talk," Tibbs said while making an effort to shy away from staring at Doyle and his lady-friend shaking the sheets. Doyle paused and gave Tibbs a hard look, then said to his companion, "Give us a minute." Tibbs stared at the leggy black goddess as she emerged from beneath the covers. Maybe six feet, lean but shapely. In his most humble opinion, she was fucking gorgeous. She slipped on a bathrobe and scooted to the left and out of the room.

"If this is about the missed opportunity in the restaurant, I already heard," Doyle said, pulling on a pair of sweats.

"It's been one fuck up after another dealing with these two."

"Where are they now?"

"Don't know. They disappeared after wiping out the hit on 82," Tibbs said.

"What if this guy's not some government asshole?"

"A cowboy?"

"Think about it, what government agency uses civilians in their operations?"

Doyle said.

"They're getting intelligence from somewhere. I think this guy's DEA. The girl could be a recruit, maybe even a decoy."

Doyle picked up the phone and made a call. "Find out if Pamela Parris still

works for Barrow & Associates,” he ordered the woman on the other end.

In the parking lot of the Brunzley All Suite Hotel in Denver, Tony and Pamela pulled up and parked the Land Rover next to a red Corvette. Pamela got out and went to the passenger side, and Tony got behind the wheel. Keys were in the visor. Leaving the parking lot Tony looked over at Pamela. “Trust me, I’m ready,” she vowed.

“I know.”

“That look says what?”

“That I trust you,” he said.

“I won’t let you down.”

Tibbs and Doyle were seated at the dining room table having a late lunch, and discussing a mid-size shipment of high-grade cocaine set to arrive in two days. It was coming in concealed in the spare fuel tank and floorboard of a bus carrying the Quicksilver Soccer Team up from Corpus Christi, Texas.

Estimated street value, \$30 million. The transaction was expected to take no more than fifteen/twenty minutes. The point man in charge of handling the exchange was a guy they called, Monster. A mean and nasty SOB.

Intimidating but professional. They spoke openly around the fiercely loyal house staff, which included the cook, housekeeper, and butler. Good pay and a fair amount of fear kept them blissfully ignorant about what they saw and

heard.

Parked about fifty yards from Tibbs's Cherry Creek estate, Tony and Pamela monitored activity around the outside of the half-acre property. Tony was surveying the grounds through a pair of binoculars, while Pamela harnessed her courage. "There's two patrolling the grounds," Tony advised. "No doubt armed."

"With standing orders to shoot us on sight."

Pamela did a quick gut check and said, "Ready when you are."

"Keep it tight."

"I didn't come this far not to finish it."

"And so well shall."

They were about to exit the car when Tony spotted a black Mercedes pull up to the front of the house. Through the binoculars he watched Tibbs and Doyle come out and pile in the backseat. "They're leaving."

"Now what?"

"We see what they're up to." Tibbs and Doyle were driven to the southern edge of the Tech Center. Housed in the area were technological centers, headquarters of several international and national companies. There were also a handful of upscale hotels, mainly geared toward business travelers. The Mercedes pulled in front of a thirty story high-rise, home to Global World Financial Services. "What's Global World?" asked Pamela.

"A place to launder drug money," Tony said while watching through the binoculars as Doyle and Tibbs got out and went inside the Global World building.

"Do we wait and stick with the original plan?"

"We may have to improvise."

Back at Tibbs's Cherry Creek estate was ground zero. Tony parked in the same spot as before. Through the binoculars he surveyed the grounds. Security was tight. "Once we get inside we put the help on lockdown. We have to assume everyone's a potential threat."

"Great, I may have to shoot the housekeeper," Pamela said while trying to banish the thought. Tony put on a Yankees baseball cap and got out. Pamela exited the other side.

At first glance they took on the appearance of a neighborhood couple out for a casual walk. Once they got within ten feet of the private gate surrounding Tibbs's property, Tony looked at Pamela and said, "Oscar time." She produced her gun and tucked it inside of her down-vest with her finger on the trigger. Tony picked her up and cradled her in his arms. Her body went limp. He carried her up to the gate and pressed the button on the intercom. "Yeah," a gruff voice answered.

"A woman has been seriously injured by a hit-and-run driver. I need a phone to call for help," Tony said with a sense of urgency.

"I'll make the call," the voice replied.

"I'm a doctor. She's in pretty bad shape. I need to explain the extent of her injuries." There was silence. "I'll bring a phone out," the voice said after a long pause.

Moments later a guy, medium build, came out and took his time walking down the looping drive to the front gate. Tony made sure the cap was pulled down over his eyes, and he kept Pamela's face from clear view. Standing inside the gate, the guy seemed to be looking for signs of blood and gore from the accident. "Where's the emergency?" he said. Life leapt into Pamela's body as she produced her gun and pointed it at the guy with a steady aim. "Move and you're all done," she said. Tony put her down and drew his gun. "Open the gate," he ordered.

"You did good by coming here, save us the trouble of hunting you both down."

"Don't make me ask twice," Tony said, trying to be as discreet as possible while pointing his gun at the man's chest. Annoyed at being caught off guard, the guy opened the panel to the right of the gate and hit the button to let them in. Tony spun the guy around and patted him down. He relieved him of a 9mm pistol. Pamela closed the gate. "Give me a reason, and I'll put you down," Tony said, then marched the guy up the drive toward the house. Pamela followed while keeping watch. "How many are inside?" Tony said.

"You two are the walking dead."

"Not the answer I'm looking for," Tony said.

The guy must've decided the odds had somehow shifted back in his favor and made a move. He threw a right elbow into Tony's chest, spun around and followed up with a hard left hook that Tony managed to sidestep. Tony whacked the guy in the forehead with the butt of his gun, got behind him and snapped his neck like a pretzel. A bit shaken by the sudden outbreak of violence, Pamela shook it off and stayed focused. Tony dragged the guy over to a row of manicured hedges and hid the body. Pamela followed him up to the front entrance.

He tried the handle and slowly pushed open the door and stepped inside. Nearest he could tell the house seemed relatively quiet. A middle-aged Hispanic housekeeper came out of the dining room and almost had a heart-attack when she saw two strangers standing there pointing guns at her. Tony put his index finger to his mouth, gesturing for her to keep quiet. He got to her quickly and put his gun to her head. "How many are in the house?" "You know whose home this is?" she said with a thick accent, thinking the house was being robbed.

"Wrong answer."

"Four, including me."

"Employees?"

"There's Rauol, the cook, and two personal assistants to Mr. Tibbs."

"Where's the cook?"

"The kitchen."

“What about upstairs?”

“No one.”

“What’s your name?”

“Maria.”

“You’re telling me the truth, right Maria?”

“Si.”

To test her veracity Tony took her by the arm and allowed her to lead the way up the stairs. “Show me to a room hardly ever used.” Maria led them to one of the bedrooms at the north end of the house. Pamela found some fresh bed linen in the middle drawer of a huge dresser and shredded one of the sheets. They bound and gagged Maria and put her inside the spacious closet.

Downstairs in the kitchen the cook was busy dicing tomatoes and onions when he felt the barrel of Tony’s gun poking him in the side. “Don’t make a sound.” Pamela kept watch at the door. “You picked the wrong house to steal from.”

“We need to take a trip upstairs.” Out of the corner of his right eye the cook saw the butcher knife lying on the counter. Tony moved the gun up to the left side of the cook’s head. “It’s not worth dying for.” Any notion of going for the butcher knife quickly faded from the cook’s consciousness. He was taken upstairs to the same bedroom as the housekeeper, bound and gagged and locked in the bathroom facedown in the bathtub. “The guy I saw earlier never came back in,” Tony said.

“Do we look for him?”

“Stay sharp.”

On the way back downstairs they heard the front door open. Tibbs, Doyle, and the driver came in. “Before long, there won’t be shit made in this country. Everything we put our hands on is imported. Fucking assholes and their bullshit patriotism,” Tibbs was overheard saying.

“We have to be smart and not lose sight of what this is about,” Doyle said.

“Trust me, I won’t. I’m looking forward to pissing on the front lawn of the White House.”

“That’s why they call it The Peoples’ House,” Doyle joked as all three men went into the great room.

“It’s only a matter of time before they start to wonder about the help,” Tony said from their perch atop the stairs.

“Say when,” Pamela said, as ready as she’d ever be.

Sure enough the housekeeper’s presence started to be missed. “Where the hell’s Maria?” Tibbs said. He yelled out to her from his favorite leather chair.

“Maybe she got tired of your arrogant ass and quit,” Doyle quipped.

“I fire people, they don’t quit,” Tibbs said, getting up to go look for Maria. He got quite a surprise when he opened the double-doors leading to the foyer.

Tony shoved his gun in Tibbs’s face, forcing him back on his heels. Both

Doyle and the driver reached for their guns. “I blaze, he dies,” Tony said,

grabbing Tibbs by the collar and pressing his gun against his forehead. Pamela

came in with her gun pointed at Doyle, who thought twice about drawing his gun with the odds clearly not in Tibbs's favor. Tony spun Tibbs around and took a 9mm Beretta from a holster clipped to his left side. "No matter what happens here, you two will be dead inside twenty-four hours, guaranteed," Tibbs said.

Tony ignored the chest-thumping. He grabbed the back of Tibbs's jacket collar and pressed the barrel of his gun to the back of his head. "Ask your friends to stand up slowly, using left thumb and index finger, remove the weapons and toss them on the sofa." Tibbs struggled with the idea of giving in. Pamela stood with her gun trained on Doyle, occasionally stealing a glimpse in Tony's direction while sweating out the most intense moment of her life. "Gentlemen, as a favor to me," Tibbs said. The driver waited to backup whatever Doyle decided. Doyle assumed mind-games were unlikely to be effective on Tony, so he turned his focus instead to Pamela. He stared cold and hard. Pamela fought back the fear and tightened her grip on the gun. Doyle thought for a moment he might have seen something, maybe a split second when Pamela may have appeared teary-eyed. He tried to stall for time, thinking she might tip her hand. "Say when, Tony," Pamela said, her voice even, her hand steady.

Doyle turned his attention back to Tony. Playing it cautious he followed instructions and removed his gun and tossed it on the sofa. The driver did the same. "Move over by the fireplace," Tony said.

"Who do you work for?" Tibbs asked.

"Move."

"I don't think so," Doyle said.

"We blaze, is that it."

"You kill us, there won't be a place on this earth for you and the pretty bitch to hide," Tibbs said.

"You won't be around to find out?" Tony guaranteed, sensing something about to jump off.

"Terrible what happened to your sister and her husband," the driver said to get Pamela's attention. "Best piece of ass I had in a long time. I almost hated to slice her up." Pamela turned her gun on the driver. Anger took hold so fast she had to stop herself from pulling the trigger. "Getting her blood on my new shirt really pissed me off though."

"If I blaze, it'll be bad for you," Pamela said, determined not to give him the satisfaction of seeing tears in her eyes.

"Keep it tight, Pamela. You know what he's trying to do," Tony said.

"Each time I rammed my knife into your sister's warm flesh, and hearing that gurgling sound of her choking on her own blood, man, I got such a rush," the driver continued to taunt.

"Tony, I'm real close to shooting this guy," Pamela said calmly.

"I know, just be cool. I have a feeling something's about to jump off."

"Can I help it if your slut sister gave her second to last piece of ass to me," the

driver said.

"You two, over by the fireplace, now," Tony said, handling Tibbs more aggressively.

"What are you doing playing this game? This is way out of your league," Doyle said to Pamela.

"I say fuck 'em both," the driver said.

"You want to try me?" Pamela said, almost daring the driver to make a move.

"You have three seconds to move over by the fireplace, or you try us both," Tony said, tired of all the stalling.

Doyle eyed his gun on the sofa. Rather than seeming worried or scared, Tibbs appeared ready for an all out bloodbath. The driver also seemed anxious for some sort of showdown. Less than ten feet away, and holding the 9mm with both hands, Pamela had a steady bead on the driver. The security guy who left the house earlier came in through the back and maneuvered around the stairs and had an angle on Pamela. Before he could get off a shot, Tony noticed something had suddenly caused the driver's eyes to divert left. In a single motion he swung his gun to the right and fired once, hitting the security guy in the chest. Tibbs turned and lunged toward him. They struggled. Pamela took her eyes off Doyle and the driver following the shot and the ensuing scuffle. Doyle lunged for his gun. So did the driver. Doyle got off a hurried shot, barely grazing Pamela's right shoulder. She returned fire, hitting Doyle in the left side of his forehead. Tony had his hands full with Tibbs. The driver

got to the other gun. To Pamela it all seemed to be happening in slow-motion. Just as the driver raised the gun, she fired twice, hitting him in the upper chest with both shots. After being knocked backwards by a solid left jab, Tibbs picked up a small bronze statue off the end table and tried to bull-rush Tony. He never made it. Tony put two rounds in his chest.

FOURTEEN

SARAH'S HUSBAND WAS RIGHT about one thing, the moment she set foot inside the magnificent home in Montgomery County, Maryland, and stood on the handsome marble flooring, there had to be a deal made of some sort. Banner Realtors, the local office handling the sale of the property, had it listed at \$759 thousand. Terry Armindale, the sales agent showing the house, pointed out to Sarah the many features and amenities the house had to offer, features and amenities her husband, Josh, had already seen and couldn't do without. Sarah loved the soaring ceilings, the fine architecture of the columns in the circular foyer, the huge fireplace in the living room, the master suite to die for on the first level, and the well-appointed and spacious gourmet kitchen.

The guided tour of the four bedroom home wound its way to the hearth room. "Can you give us a moment?" Josh said to Terry. She scooted into the adjacent kitchen to afford them some privacy. "Well, is it everything I said it was?"

"Sweetheart, I love this house."

"I say we make an offer."

"Even if the seller comes down on the asking price, we're still looking at paying well over a half million dollars."

"We can afford it," Josh insisted. Sarah was not completely sold on the price range, but she felt absolutely comfortable in the home, and somehow found a

way to knockdown every single objection she could think of for not charging ahead with the purchase. "Let's do it," she said with no regard for obstacles. "Let's start with an offer of \$700 thousand and go from there," Josh proposed. With a half-serious grimace, Sarah agreed. Josh summoned Terry and put the offer on the table.

High above the clouds aboard a Cessna jet, Pamela sat staring out of the window at the serene white clouds. Tony walked up and sat next to her. "You okay?" She turned away from the window and looked down at her surprisingly steady hands. "How come I don't feel terrible about what happened?" "Hard to say. You did what you had to." "Hearing him talk about murdering my sister made pulling the trigger almost easy," Pamela said, not sure how she felt about not feeling guilty. Tony thought it best not to try and over analyze what had happened. "What does that say about me?" she wondered. "That you're human," Tony pointed out.

Once again the scenic clouds drew Pamela's attention toward deeper thoughts. Tony realized she needed some time alone to try and come to terms with a brutal reality, so he got up and went up front with the pilot.

The jet landed at Hewanorra International Airport in St. Lucia. Tony and Pamela breezed through customs. They each purchased a St. Lucia driver's license at the car-rental kiosk, where a car had already been reserved. Tony

took to driving on the left side of the road like it was second nature. "You think he's heard about Tibbs and Doyle?" Pamela asked.

"Word travels fast."

"You think he knows we're here?"

"He wouldn't be on top if he didn't." They drove eighteen miles to Anse Chastanant, a premier dive resort and Caribbean Inn. Tony parked the car and removed two medium-sized suitcases, along with a duffel bag already inside.

To reach their West Indies style plantation villa on the beach, they first had to climb one hundred and three steps to the top of the forested hill, above palm-fringed Anse Chastanet Beach. Surrounded by mangoes, papayas, banana plants, breadfruit, and other trappings of paradise, Pamela thought about taking off her sunglasses to take in the view, but bear in mind why they were there. After checking in and locating their villa, Tony removed a .40 caliber Beretta, along with a small derringer from the duffel bag. He gave the more easily concealed derringer to Pamela. "How soon do we move?"

"Danny is more of a pragmatist than the others. No less dangerous, but he never allows himself to be put in situations he can't control."

"What if he figures out who I am?"

"Not likely," Tony said, removing a short red wig and a small envelope from the duffel bag. Pamela took the wig, her suitcase, and the envelope and went inside the bathroom.

Ten minutes later she came out with short red hair, wearing dark glasses, a

two-piece, white string bikini, and had a small fake mole on the left side of her upper lip. "What do you think?"

"If I didn't know better, I'd swear Pamela was still in the bathroom." His professional swagger wouldn't allow him to mention how stunning she looked in the bikini. Pamela wrapped the matching sash around her waist. "On the surface, Danny's very charming and polite, underneath, he has a real serious dark-side. If he thinks for one minute you're playing him, he'll bring the drama."

"Where will you be?"

"Always close by."

"I hope I can pull this off without showing my contempt for everything he represents."

"If you don't feel right about this we can come up with a different approach."

"I'm okay. This is the best chance we have of nailing this guy."

"You sure?"

"I can handle it."

"We're not sure how many bad guys are here on the island. If you find yourself in a situation with a stranger, and only when absolutely necessary will one of the good guys make direct contact, say to him or her, "What's better than a day at the beach?" to which he or she should reply, "I simply can't imagine." Any deviation, you do one of two things, walk away, and if that's not an option, you put him down."

“And if Danny invites me back to his villa?”

“Avoid situations where I can’t get to you if things start to go sideways.”

Pamela allowed herself to relax and said, “Ready.” Tony gave her a large beach towel, a fashion magazine, and what appeared to be an ordinary iPod. Before heading out beneath the hot Caribbean sun, Pamela went over and sat on the bed and applied sunscreen to her legs, arms, and stomach. “You mind?” she said, alluding to having Tony apply sunscreen to her back. She got a kick out of watching his reaction. “I have a better idea,” Tony said.

“Oh?” she said with interest.

Tony walked over and sat next to her on the bed and said, “You were wondering what to possibly say to Danny if all else fails, now you know.”

“If I don’t puke my guts out first,” Pamela said after realizing what Tony was suggesting.

“If you’re having doubts...”

“Kidding.”

“The iPod also serves as a way for us to communicate. You can hear my voice through the earphones, and I can hear whatever’s going on through the iPod. This will allow you to talk to me,” Tony said, giving her a tiny mic he took from the duffel bag. “Clip it to the inside of your bikini top.”

Pamela was all set to go after Danny, provided she had the nerve. Tony looked at his watch. “Danny normally sunbathes on the beach around this time.” One last gut-check and Pamela was ready. She got up and walked over

to the door. "Remember, don't seem obvious, and stay clear of secluded areas," Tony warned.

"Got it."

"I'll be there if you need me."

"I'm betting my life on it," Pamela said in a sobering sense, then put her sunglasses back on and left the villa

She strolled along the beach wearing the earphones, with the iPod attached to her left bicep, carrying the beach towel, and magazine. "Any sign of him?" Tony said, his voice coming through the earphones.

"Not yet." Scores of scantily clad sunbathers littered the beach. About thirty feet in front of her, Pamela spotted a man stretched out on a folding chair, wearing coral colored shorts and dark glasses. "I think I see him."

"Is there a tough guy nearby?"

"Sitting just above him." By his receding hairline, she was able to confirm the man in the coral shorts was in fact Danny Hunter the closer she got. "It's him. I'm turning the music up a notch."

On cue the sash slipped from around her waist in front of Danny's chair. No reaction from the man himself. Pamela stooped rather than bend over to retrieve the fallen article. She pretended to pay Danny no mind and continued down the beach. Danny lifted his glasses and sized her up from behind. "You can't dream 'em up any better than that," the tough guy above him said. She was the most beautiful woman Danny had seen in the two weeks he'd been on

the island. "I'm going for a walk," he said, getting up and heading down the beach.

"You need me?"

"Stay," Danny ordered.

He caught up with Pamela further along the beach. She'd found an open spot, and lay perfectly displayed on the beach towel, minus the sash, earphones in, and her nose buried in the magazine. Danny stood over her blocking the sun. "You mind?" she said, looking up at him through the dark glasses.

"Not at all," he replied, moving to his right so as not to hog the sun. Those legs of hers had Danny slightly off his game. He didn't usually stare. Pamela turned the music down and pulled the earphones out and said, "Is there a problem?"

He didn't mince words. "You're beautiful."

"Thanks, but I just want to enjoy the sun, listen to some music, and read my magazine."

Danny took his glasses off. "You here on the island alone?" he said, trying to find his footing.

"Not to be rude, but I'm really not looking for any distractions."

"Ordinarily I'd take the hint, but you make it difficult to just walk away after only one try."

"Like I said, I have everything I need right here." She left just enough of an

opening for him to put out the flames. "What if I sat next to you and said nothing? That way if you decide you want to talk, I'm here also."

"You must be a car salesman. You certainly have trouble taking no for an answer," Pamela said, warming just a bit.

"A beautiful woman alone on a beautiful island, seems such a shame."

"Who said I'm here alone?"

"Mind if I sit?"

"It's a public beach."

"You're either here alone, or your boyfriend's crazy." It was a chess game now. She fed him a story about an ugly breakup with her boyfriend, and a need to get away for a while. Danny was sympathetic. His story was less dramatic.

Every now and then he liked to get away by himself just to relax. "Name's Danny Hunter," he said, offering his hand in polite greeting.

"Natalie Seaver," Pamela said, reaching over and shaking his hand.

"How long have you been in St. Lucia?"

"This is only my second day."

"Planning to stay long?"

"Only a week."

"Would you consider having dinner with me this evening at Trou au Diable?"

"If nothing else you're persistent," Pamela said, giving his proposal some thought.

"Just dinner," Danny said to sweeten the offer.

"Just dinner is fine," Pamela agreed.

"Where are you staying?"

"Why don't I meet you at the restaurant."

"Say six o'clock."

"Six is good."

Danny got to his feet and dusted himself off. "See you at six," he said, then headed back down the beach. Pamela put the earphones back in. "How'd I do?"

"You played it perfect."

"You were right, he's quite charming."

"He give any indication he may have recognized you?"

"None."

"So am I invited to dinner?"

"Wouldn't have it any other way."

Senator Harold excused himself ten minutes early from the Senate Foreign Relations hearing and went back to his office. He telephoned his wife each day around five o'clock to let her know what time she could expect him home.

After nearly thirty years of marriage, she had of course grown accustomed to him putting in long hours. His only daughter, Christine, answered the phone.

Harold was more than delighted. "When did you arrive in town?"

"Just got in today. I have a conference in New York in a few days, so I thought

I'd stop by and visit until then."

"Glad to hear it. It's not often your mother and I get to see you."

"That may soon change if I get this promotion and have to move to New York."

"Jason's okay with leaving California?"

"He's okay with the huge increase in salary."

"Be great if things were to work out."

"I should know something within a couple weeks."

"Great. Your mother around?"

"She's on the other line talking to Judy."

"Just tell her the hearing may run well into the late evening, so I'll be home late."

"I'll give her the message."

"See you soon." An aide to the senator tapped on his office door and poked her head inside. "Yes, Diane."

"The hearing adjourned two minutes ago. I'll have the report finished by noon tomorrow."

"Excellent."

"You need me for anything further?"

"Enjoy your son's recital."

"See you tomorrow."

A text message came in on Senator Harold's cell phone. The number 22.

Harold buzzed his personal secretary's phone to let her know that he was calling it a day. He left his senate office accompanied by special agent, Hugh Sizemore. He followed the senator to his home in Fairfax County, Virginia, in a separate, unmarked black sedan like any normal day. Behind the wheel of the lead black sedan, Marcus Conley, a longtime staffer to the senator, stopped one hundred feet from the senator's home. From the backseat, Senator Harold lowered the window and signaled to agent Sizemore that everything was in order. Sizemore pulled from behind the senator's car and waved as he drove past. Conley waited until agent Sizemore's car turned off at the top of the street, then drove past the senator's home with Harold still a passenger in the backseat. He drove the senator out to a house in the well-to-do suburb of Rockville, Maryland. "How long, Senator?"

"Pick me up in three hours," Harold said, then exited the car under a full-moon sky. Conley watched the senator walk up to the front door and ring the bell. The door opened and Harold disappeared into the warm glow coming from inside.

FIFTEEN

WAITING IN FRONT OF THE beachside restaurant, Trou au Diable, Pamela was in full disguise, and wearing a loose-fitting pastel dress. She checked her watch. Five after six. "He's late," she said, barely parting her lips. Tony was listening by way of a wire concealed inside Pamela's bra. She was at a slight disadvantage and couldn't hear him. They both decided not to risk her wearing an earpiece. "I don't like this," she said. Danny walked up just as Pamela glanced at her watch a third time. "I was beginning to think you stood me up."

"Please accept my apology. I got sidetracked by an important business call."

"Treat me to a nice dinner, all's forgiven."

"Fair enough." They went inside. On several occasions during dinner, Pamela noticed him staring at her. "You have very beautiful eyes."

"I thought we agreed no pressure," Pamela reminded him while slicing her chicken satays with peanut sauce.

"Pressure comes later."

"I didn't realize dinner came with a price."

"I'm teasing."

"I'd hate to think of you as less than a gentleman."

"Would it come as a shock me wanting to sleep with you?" Danny said without reservation, then shoved a forkful of beef satays in his mouth.

“Should I be flattered?”

“I don’t know. Are you?”

“You supply dinner, I provide sex, is that the plan for the evening?”

“We’re both adults, right?”

“And what if I decide not to hold up my end?”

“You’re saying you’re not attracted to me?”

“I’m saying I don’t see making the leap from dinner to having sex.”

“How about dinner, a nice walk on the beach, then sex?”

“Wow. Subtlety is not your strong suit.”

“I believe in being honest.”

“Apparently,” Pamela said, giving him permissive looks with her eyes.

An elderly couple, perhaps in their early to mid sixties, sat three tables over. There seemed to be very little in the way of conversation between them. In his right ear, the gray-haired man was wearing what look to be an ordinary hearing aide.

After dinner Danny suggested a walk along the beach. Pamela greeted the idea with skepticism. Only after Danny agreed to behave himself did she agree. While strolling along the beach they stopped to admire the island’s trademark sunset. “I’m curious how you think this evening should end,” Danny sort of wondered out loud.

“I’ll let you know once we get back to my villa,” Pamela said, not to be out-flanked.

“My villa’s just a short walk from here.”

“Too easy.”

“I’ve prepared something special for the two of us.”

“My point exactly.”

“Let’s not quibble over details. Let’s go back to my villa, and you’ll see what a perfect gentleman I can be.”

“This is the same problem I had with my ex-boyfriend, he always had to have things go his way. Sorry, but this is way too familiar,” Pamela said, not missing a beat improvising.

“You’re comparing me to your ex-boyfriend?” Danny said, crowding her, showing flashes of anger.

“I don’t need some guy I just met getting in my face like this,” Pamela said, turning to walk away.

In less time it took for her to take a step, Danny grabbed her by the arm and said, “Don’t ever walk away from me.”

“One dinner, and you think you have the right to control me,” Pamela said, showing no sign of being intimidated.

“Let’s try and stay calm,” Danny said, with passersby paying attention to the mild commotion.

“Start by taking your hand off me.”

Danny backed off and let go of her arm. “I apologize. I didn’t mean to upset you. Your villa’s fine.”

“Not now. The evening’s gotten off track.”

“I understand. I’ll walk you back, then be on my way.”

“That won’t be necessary.”

Dialing up the charm, Danny gave her the soft eyes and said, “What do you say we get back on track, starting tomorrow. You plan the evening.”

“Maybe.”

“If you decide to give me another chance, I’ll be on the terrace of the Pitons Bar & Restaurant around three tomorrow afternoon.” She didn’t want to give the impression that things between them were too far gone, so Pamela decided not to commit one way or the other. “Good-night,” Danny said, walked away and headed down the beach. Pamela breathed a little easier.

Slightly hunched over, with a gray beard and wearing a straw hat and bifocals, the elderly guy from inside the restaurant appeared out of nowhere.

“You okay, Miss?” he said with a Creole accent.

“I’m fine, thanks.”

“That young man harassin’ ya?”

“Nothing I couldn’t handle.”

“If all’s well, have a good evenin’” the man said, and went on his way.

“You hear that? Chivalry is not dead,” Pamela said, knowing Tony was listening nearby.

On the way back to the villa, she suddenly realized she walked out and left her purse back at the restaurant.

When she opened the door to the second bedroom after going back for her belongings, Tony had a towel wrapped around his waist having just finished showering. "You were taking a shower, while I was out there fending off that asshole," Pamela said in disbelief. "Were you even listening?" she said, throwing the purse down on the cushioned wicker chair.

"I heard every word," Tony said, removing a pair of sweats and a tee shirt from his suitcase. In the midst of becoming angry she noticed what a great body Tony had, but that was beside the point. "Wait a second. What am I missing? There's no way you would leave me out there all alone. Were you at the restaurant?"

Tony placed his gun on the table next to the bed. "I'm not bashful." With a roll of her eyes, Pamela turned around while Tony dropped the towel and slipped on the sweats and tee shirt. "You enjoy the chicken satays?" he said. Flirting with a smirk Pamela turned back. "I didn't see you." "Sure you did," Tony said, grabbing the pillow and sitting on the bed, resting his back against the headboard. Pamela walked over and stood at the foot of the bed. "Where were you?" With his arms folded looking up at her, he gave her time to mull it over. Looking back on the evening, the only person that stuck out in Pamela's mind was Danny, with the only possible exception being the waiter. Then it hit her. "The old guy on the beach." "Never walk out of a restaurant and leave your purse," Tony said in the Creole accent.

"I had no idea."

"I had your back, right up to the moment things started to go south between you and Danny."

"Sorry."

"Don't worry about it."

"Should I meet him tomorrow?" Pamela said, taking off the wig and sitting at the foot of the bed.

"There was something odd about Danny's behavior."

"Like what?"

"You carry yourself like an educated, classy lady, yet he treated you almost like a \$10 hooker."

"And when I told him the evening had gotten off track, he became charming again."

"He was testing you. If you hadn't changed your mind about inviting him back here after he made a point of being an asshole..."

"...he would've become suspicious."

"He has to think you've lost interest."

"By not showing up at Pitons tomorrow?"

"Right. You have to make him come to you."

Just after ten p.m., Conley pulled up in front of Senator Harold's home in Georgetown. Harold got out, walked up and unlocked the front door and went

inside. His twenty-five year old daughter, Christine, met him in the foyer.

They exchanged hugs. "Still trying to save the world?" Christine said.

"Or at least try and make it a better place," Harold said with his arm around his daughter, as the two walked into the family room. His wife Elizabeth, or Beth, as he affectionately referred to her, came in from the kitchen. Christine still saw the same love and adoration between her parents when they kissed and embraced as when she was a child, something she hoped to live up to in her own marriage. "I admire the work you do for your country, but I must admit I look forward to you retiring. That way I can have you all to myself,"

Beth said with sincere fondness.

"You're seriously thinking about ending your crusade in the senate?" Christine said.

"I haven't made up my mind as of yet, but I am considering it," Harold said, taking a seat on the antique leather sofa.

"If you do decide to call it quits, I assume you guys will sell this place and have the one home in California?" Christine said.

"I'd like to sell this place and divide our time between California, and maybe buy a nice farm in the Midwest," Beth said.

"Will that be possible with the hit you guys took in the market?" Christine questioned.

"Hopefully by the time your father retires, if he retires, we will have bounced back from the huge financial setback," Beth said.

“We have plenty of time for things to be decided,” Harold said, caressing his wife’s shoulder with little worry.

SIXTEEN

ON THE WIND-COOLED TERRACE of the Pitons Bar & Restaurant, Danny sat sipping a margarita, waiting to see if the woman he knew as Natalie would show up. His watch had 3:07 in the afternoon. He considered perhaps she was paying him back for being late the other evening, so he continued to wait. By 3:35 he'd finished his drink, and still no sign of Natalie. Rather than being upset, he smiled. When it became apparent she was not going to show, Danny paid the tab and left the bar. He made it his business to find Natalie, and later caught up with her getting off a small sailboat, following an enjoyable time on the water with a nice couple she had met earlier. She saw Danny standing at a distance, and turned and thanked the friendly couple for allowing her to tag along.

Considering it was their honeymoon, she still could not figure out why they invited her to impose on their time together. By happenstance she found herself standing between Danny and the young couple. Suddenly she felt exposed to danger. She looked at the now apathetic faces of the man and woman who had introduced themselves as Allan and Nancy Kramer, then across the way at Danny, who stood with both hands tucked in the pockets of his Polo shorts. If ever she hoped Tony was listening from somewhere nearby it was at that moment. Again she turned toward the stoic couple and said, "What's better than a day at the beach?" Rather tense moments followed.

"I simply can't imagine," Allan said.

Relief on Pamela's face spread quickly. The couple went about the business of turning in the boat. Pamela picked up her towel, but avoided looking in Danny's direction. Figuring she was still upset about the other evening, Danny took the initiative. Casually he walked down to where she was gathering her things. "I see your plans for the evening didn't include me."

"I'm not interested in having someone control my life," Pamela said, taking the iPod, her towel, and bottled water and going on her way.

"Again I apologize for yesterday. I was totally out of line. Please give me a chance to redeem myself," Danny said while keeping pace along side of her.

"I think we should chalk it up as something that was not meant to be."

"A mistake small, but fatal," Danny acknowledged, seeming to admit defeat.

"Enjoy the rest of your vacation, Danny," Pamela said, pretending he no longer mattered.

Not ready to give up just yet, Danny crossed in front of her to try and slowdown a moving train barreling out of his life. "In my line of work, I have to be very careful about the people I allow to get close to me."

"Guess that explains why you behaved like a jerk."

"I did what I did to elicit your reaction."

"Why?"

"I needed to be sure you were being up front with me."

"Sounds like you have a complicated life, one I would just as well not be a

part of," Pamela said, attempting to go around him. With a purely innocuous gesture, Danny held both hands up and stepped again in front of her. "You're right, my life is somewhat complicated, but now that I know everything's on the up-and-up, there won't be a problem."

By not overplaying it, Pamela came off as being moved by his charm offensive. "I just want the chance to get to know you. Please, have dinner with me again."

"Only if you promise to explain this complicated life of yours," Pamela said, figuring the timing was right.

"Deal."

"Say when."

"Tonight, say seven?"

"Fine."

"Trou au Diable, or would you like to find a place we can do some dancing afterwards?"

"Same restaurant's fine."

"Shall I meet you there?"

"Don't be late."

Pleased with himself, Danny took off in the opposite direction. Pamela put the earphones in. "What an asshole."

"He was so determined not to have you slip through his fingers, our boy Danny probably humbled himself for the first time in his life."

"You were right, he was testing me the other evening."

"The final's tonight."

Danny was nearing his villa when a portly woman with chubby red cheeks, maybe in her mid-forties, approached him. "Sorry to bother you, but I was wondering, was that Pamela Parris you were having dinner with the other evening?"

"Who?"

"Pamela Parris, from Chicago. My husband says I need my eyes checked, but except for the short red hair, I could swear it was her. She did some work for my husband's company about a year ago."

"No offense, but your husband's eyesight was a little sharper," Danny said politely.

"I was sure it was her, but they say we all have a look-alike somewhere. Sorry to bother you," the woman said, then disappeared down the beach. Danny was not unlike a man who had just found out his winning lottery ticket was a fake after-all. He harnessed a quiet anger and went inside his villa.

Right before dinner, having missed his morning workout, Senator Tennison made it a point to log twenty minutes on the treadmill. When his low intensity jog was over, his gray sweats showing the results from his effort, Tennison took several drinks from his bottled water, as his heart rate gradually returned

to normal. He'd converted what was once considered a den into a workout room. Besides the treadmill the room contained a weight bench, recumbent bike, free weights, and a weight machine. After injuring his right knee a few years ago playing a recreational game of basketball, and with memories of his father's high blood pressure and cholesterol, Tennison became interested in physical fitness while rehabbing the knee. He swears that staying in shape has taken ten years off his age. While bending at the waist trying to stretch his hamstrings, his Blackberry sitting on the instrument panel of the treadmill rang. Tennison heaved a heavy sigh into the phone. "Hello Senator," the distorted voice said.

He had come to recognize the caller's method of concealing his identity. "What can I do for you?" he said as if speaking to one of his constituents. "Time to choose between darkness and light." "Have you thought this through? Extortion is a very serious matter." "Would you rather we end the conversation, and see how it all plays out?" Such a vague threat was something Tennison had to think about for a moment. "So how do we do this? I give you what you're asking for, and you promise to go away, is that the way it's supposed to work?" "Sarcasm to try and deflate the moment is not very useful, Senator. Expect a phone call tomorrow with instructions on how to deliver the money. After that, you'll have two days to satisfy your end of the deal." "How do I know you won't be back in six months with yet another demand?"

"Fifty million is a lot of money. It'll take a lifetime to spend it all. By then you'll be out of the senate, a footnote in history. Tomorrow, Senator," the caller said, then hung up.

Since the first phone call demanding money, Tennison had been considering his options. "Dad, dinner's ready," his daughter Tori yelled from the kitchen down the hall. Preoccupied with sorting out his thoughts, Tennison allowed his daughter's voice get past him. Moments later his doting wife, Kathleen, came in and said, "Hurry and shower, dinner's ready."

"Yes," Tennison said, still aloof behind the phone call.

"Everything all right?"

"Fine. I'll run up and shower," Tennison said, then scooted past Kathleen and out of the room.

Danny was waiting in front of Trou au Diable when Pamela arrived. "Right on time," he said with a certain appreciation.

"So far, I'm equally impressed."

"The evening's just getting started," Danny said as he escorted her inside.

Seated across from one another by the maitre d', Danny gave off a quiet, almost pensive mood. "You seem much more relaxed," Pamela said.

"You look very lovely this evening."

"Thank you."

Early on Pamela got the sense there was something different about him.

She couldn't quite figure out if he was simply trying to show another side of himself, or what exactly, but something was definitely out of sorts. "Maybe I'll try something exotic," Pamela said.

"By all means," Danny agreed, sitting with both hands folded in his lap. She realized he was doing a lot of staring at her. Only not with the same sense of hoping to get lucky like the other evening. It was almost as if she'd suddenly become fascinating to watch. "What are you having?" she asked.

"Whatever you're having," he said, again staring.

The waiter appeared. "Ready to order?" Pamela had just about sized up the menu, but Danny said to the waiter, "Give us a few more minutes."

"Thought you were following my lead," Pamela said.

"Why don't we skip dinner."

"I'm not sure I follow."

"Let's go back to your place and fuck our brains out," Danny said, his eyes cold and penetrating.

"What?" Pamela said, stunned.

"My appetite's not for food."

Put off by such crude table manner, and fearing something was definitely wrong, Pamela grabbed her purse off the table and said, "Obviously this was a mistake." She got to her feet.

"Don't even think about walking out, Pamela. You'll be dead before you take two steps. Sit down," Danny ordered. Her every instinct leaned toward panic,

something crazy like calling out for help, but Pamela kept her head and sat back down. "Why did you call me Pamela?"

"The red wig's a nice touch. Twenty bucks says the mole comes off just as easily."

How exactly her cover was blown was unclear, so she decided to keep quiet. "You're probably wired, which means your spy buddy is listening from somewhere close by. So here's the deal, you and me are going to get up and walk out together, if anyone tries to stop us, you'll die instantly. I don't know where all of my enemies are, and neither do you. If a bullet happens to find me, you'll get one in return," Danny promised, then got up and crossed to Pamela's side of the table. He planted a firm grip on her left arm as she stood up from the table. "I have no problem with turning this into an all out bloodbath, so unless you're willing to do the same, don't test me." On the way out Pamela noticed a man wearing a straw hat, full beard and mustache, sitting not far away. Her eyes let go of him quickly. "Stay calm, and we both get to see another day," Danny said. Once they were outside the restaurant, Pamela looked around at the many faces moving about and standing around, wondering who, if any, were on her side. Danny led her away from the restaurant and toward his villa. Along the way Pamela surprised Danny by stopping a young couple and asking about a fun place to do some dancing. The guy mentioned a club a short drive down the road, but had trouble coming up with the name. Pamela had all the time in the world as he and his girlfriend

put their heads together to recall the island hot spot. "We'll find it," Danny interrupted, then gave Pamela's arm a harmless tug.

"Maybe we'll see you guys there," the girlfriend said. Danny ushered Pamela past the couple. "Learn that from your spy buddy?" he said.

Inside Danny's villa, he marched Pamela over to the sofa, yanked off the red wig and shoved her down. "You're one gorgeous pain-in-the-ass," he said, and threw the wig back in her face. He took her purse and found the derringer inside. "A gun on a dinner date," he admired, sticking the derringer in the left pocket of his trousers. "I'd love to look for the wire myself," Danny said, hinting for Pamela to make a decision. With barely a notice of hesitation, Pamela unbuttoned the top of her blouse and removed the tiny wire from the inside of her bra. Danny crushed it beneath the heel of his shoe. At the same time he slipped his right hand inside the right pocket of his trousers and produced a knife. Pamela got a look at a wicked blade. As best she could she kept her cool. "You're one helluva good looking woman," Danny said, reaching to stroke the side of her face. Pamela shifted slightly to avoid having him touch her. "We never got around to having any fun," he said. "I'd rather slit my own throat," Pamela shot back. That angered Danny. He folded the knife and put it away. "Since you'd rather die than fuck, I think we'll fuck first," he said while unbuttoning his shirt.

Pamela lurched from the sofa with not much chance of getting away. Danny shoved her back down with hardly any effort at all. He flung his shirt in

the adjacent chair and grabbed hold of Pamela's arms. He forced her back on the sofa and ripped open her blouse. She showed some toughness. For resisting, Danny smacked her twice across the face. He forced a kiss. She bit his lip and snarled at him. Out came the knife, followed by threats of never being able to look at herself in the mirror, ever again.

Paralyzed by fear of having her face sliced up, Pamela could barely breath. Danny again put the knife away. He tried for another kiss, and got instead his face spat in. Rather calmly he wiped saliva from his left eye and cheek. At that moment he decided she was going to die, violently. He'd attack quickly and without remorse. As he went for the knife the phone rang. He got up and dragged her over to the phone and yanked up the receiver. On the other end was Victor Steele. Danny filled him in on what had gone down with Pamela. "Don't kill her. Not yet any anyway. Take her and leave the island, tonight. We can use her to flush out the other cockroaches," Steele said. "We'll leave as soon as possible. I'll be in contact to let you know where," Danny agreed.

For now, his business with Pamela would have to wait. He grabbed the cell phone from his belt-clip and made a call. "Get the jet ready, we're leaving, right now." Another call was made to his second in charge. Plans had changed to include leaving the island ahead of schedule, and to make sure the boys were ready for anything. "Our dance will come later," Danny said, going over and putting his shirt back on.

"Where are you taking me?" Pamela fumed, standing there clutching her torn blouse.

Danny removed a holstered 9mm from underneath the sofa cushion. If only she'd known. Someone knocked at the door. Danny drew his gun. The moment his back was turned Pamela went for the letter opener lying on the table next to the phone. "Don't think I won't shoot you in the fucking head," Danny said. Pamela backed off. Two of Danny's men, Murk and Ian, were waiting outside the door. Both were dressed to blend in with the islanders. "Watch her," Danny ordered, then went upstairs to pack. They'd heard that Pamela was quite a looker, but in person she was not what they expected. "How bout giving us a quick ride on the Pamela express?" Murk said. "Bastards."

Danny came down after throwing his things in a suitcase. "Hotel tab taken care of?"

"Done," Ian said.

Danny threw a souvenir tee shirt at Pamela and gave the suitcase to Ian and said, "Let's go." Pamela put the tee shirt on quickly.

Danny yanked her up by the arm and walked her over to the door. "Better hope your spy buddy plays it smart."

Flanked by Murk and Ian they left the villa. All three men were armed, Ian and Murk, heavily. Somewhat surprised, they made it to the car with no sign of anyone looking to stop them. "Maybe your friend gave you up for dead,"

Danny taunted.

“If you really believed that, I’d be dead too.”

“Your time’s coming.” Somehow Pamela had to believe Tony would find her before then.

SEVENTEEN

MANNING THE COPILOT SEAT aboard the Cessna jet riding the night sky, Tony kept an eye on the moving blip on a hand-held tracking device. From the moment it became clear that Pamela's cover had been blown, he assumed they'd keep her alive to try and flush him out. Also anticipating Danny's sudden urge to leave St. Lucia, a small tracking device had been planted on his private jet. Tony and the pilot tracked the Citation Sovereign back to the states, where the pilot of the private jet was reported to have made contact with Chicago Midway Airport, requesting clearance to land. The jet carrying Tony touched down twenty-five minutes after Danny's jet landed. A car was waiting.

As soon as he got behind the wheel his cell phone rang. He received information that Danny and Pamela had gotten into a black Mercedes headed north-east toward the Lake Shore Drive area. He was also advised to check the glove box. Inside he found a brown envelope, and took off headed toward Lake Shore Drive.

A black Mercedes pulled up in front of Danny's townhouse in the well-heeled Gold Coast area of Chicago. A thick, six-two guy with a surly attitude and his hair slicked back came out and met them at the car. "Take her inside," Danny ordered. Amrik grabbed Pamela by the arm and muscled her inside.

“How does it feel to be back in Chicago?” Danny said.

“Never knew I lived so close to vermin,” Pamela smarted off. Amrik yanked her by the arm. She grimaced.

“With everything that’s happened, your dead sister, you being shot at, you’ve held up surprisingly well. You’ve even had your first taste at killing,” Danny said, standing at the solid brass liquor cart pouring himself a glass of cognac. With Amrik still holding her by the arm, Pamela bit her tongue and wished him dead with her eyes. Danny gestured to turn her loose. “You sonofabitch...” Pamela said before Amrik hushed her up by grabbing her by the throat.

Danny chuckled. “I like you, I really do. That reminds me, you and me have some unfinished business to get to.” Even with her throat in Amrik’s meaty claw, Pamela gave notice she’d put up one helluva fight if he tried to touch her. Danny sipped cognac and said, “Give her the phone.” Amrik let her go and produced a cell phone. “Call your spy buddy, tell him if he wants to see you alive again, be at Discovery Park in Seattle, near the Daybreak Star Indian Cultural Center, tomorrow at noon, Seattle time.”

“Have him walk into a setup, I don’t think so.”

“If you don’t, my associate and I will...”

“Kill me.”

“Take turns sending the big train into your love tunnel,” Danny threatened.

Pamela felt like throwing up. She looked at Amrik. “Mine’s a super train, big

as they come," he bragged. Tough decision. She either put Tony's life in danger, or deal with Danny and Amrik. "By the way, we're in the process of locating your parents. You have to be careful just opening the mail these days." Pamela's only reaction was a clenched jaw and a hard stare. "I see that got your attention. Make the call." Tony was right, this ain't the movies.

She took the phone and dialed. Amrik drew his gun. It was good to hear Tony's voice. "It's me."

"You okay?"

"I've been better." Amrik poked her in the side with the barrel of the gun. "If you want to see me alive again, be at Discovery Park, near the Daybreak Star Indian Cultural Center in Seattle, noon tomorrow."

"You're in Seattle?"

Danny grabbed the phone before she could answer. "You don't show, bad things will happen to our Pamela."

"I'll be there."

He shut the phone off. "I'm tired. I'm going up to get some sleep."

"What about her?"

A call came in on the land line. Amrik picked up. Business call for Danny. Big drug deal. Lots of code words and jargon. "Take her upstairs," Danny ordered.

Pamela found herself alone with Amrik in one of the upstairs bedrooms. Danny had other phone calls to make to set the drug transaction in motion.

Half-hour on the phone, minimum. With the boss preoccupied, Amrik had ideas about making a move on Pamela. "I see why Danny kept you alive a while longer," he said, grabbing hold of Pamela's breast from behind. "If you do this he'll kill you," Pamela said while trying to fend him off. She had a point. Danny wanted her first. Amrik thought twice about pissing him off. The moment Pamela felt he'd come to his senses, Amrik back-handed her across the face. She fell back on the bed somewhat dazed.

Amrik pounced and began kissing and pawing at her. By the time she shook the cobwebs, he seemed almost intoxicated by the way she tasted and smelled. It was no secret he was too big and too strong to try and struggle with. Instead she began to give into his need to have her. Amrik couldn't explain what made her decide not to resist, nor did he care to. He wanted sex. Pamela managed to work both arms free and put them around his bulky shoulders. All the kissing seemed to short-circuit his brain. At the moment all he cared about was getting laid. "Fuck me," Pamela whispered. Amrik was human after all. He wrestled off his jacket and gun holster, and all but ripped off his shirt. Pamela kissed his neck and chest. The un-coerced affection had convinced him that she wanted him.

Pamela was able to maneuver her way on top. Amrik offered only token resistance. Either way it worked for him. He was expecting the best sex he'd ever had. His hands were busy, but Pamela teased him into keeping his arms sprawled on the bed. The hardest part was all the kissing, but it kept his mind

preoccupied. At the same time Pamela worked her right hand down the side of her body close to her thigh. Amrik was waiting for the earth to move. She hiked her loose-fitting dress. Again he tried to get his hands involved, but Pamela convinced him to lie still and enjoy the moment. Her right hand again moved down her right thigh. Instead of being taken on the ride of his life, Amrik's brown eyes suddenly bulged and his lungs seized up. He managed to reach up and get both hands around her neck. Pamela gasped and made an upward thrusting motion, causing Amrik's eyes to bulge even wider.

In a matter of seconds he loosened the chokehold. Pamela made another hard thrusting motion. Like limp noodles, Amrik's arms fell away and collapsed on the bed. Blood gurgled up and ran from his mouth, his eyes dimmed but remained open. Pamela got off Amrik's lifeless body. She'd slipped the knife from the sheath Tony had insisted she hide somewhere on her body. The blood on her hands seemed a harsh reality. She used the bedcover to wipe it off.

No time for remorse, she picked up Amrik's gun and moved over to the door and looked out. When she got to the stairs she could hear Danny still talking on the phone. She made it down the bowing staircase to the entrance of the living room, where Danny was standing near the fireplace finishing up the ins and outs of the drug deal. She tiptoed past the living room and into the foyer. With the gun in her right hand, she finessed the deadbolt and opened the door and slipped out and closed it behind her. She ran for about a block to a

large two-story house.

Pulling it together she rang the doorbell, then lifted up her dress and hid the gun in the band around her thigh. The outside light came on. A live-in nanny appeared wearing a pink housecoat. "Can I help you?"

"I'm hoping I can use your phone? My car broke down, and I need to call a friend to come and pick me up." She looked harmless enough, so the nanny waved her inside. "I really appreciate this," Pamela said while being led into the family room. She tried Tony's cell phone. "Please pick up." After the first ring the line went dead. The same thing happened when she tried the number again. She hung up and called her boyfriend, Howard. "Thank God you're there."

"Pamela?"

"I need you to pick me up."

"I haven't heard from you since I got your email."

"I'll explain later. Right now I need you to come and get me."

"Where?"

"I'm at a house on North Lake Shore Drive. The address?" she said to the nanny.

Worried she might wake the Houstons, the nanny gave her the address so she could hurry and be on her way.

Howard wasted little time in getting there. He arrived within the half-hour. Pamela ran from the house and into Howard's arms. "You don't know how

glad I am to see you," she said.

"You okay?"

"I'll be better once we get out of here."

"Where've you been? I've been going out of my mind worrying about you."

"Can we just go? I'll explain everything later."

They drove off in Howard's black Mercedes. "You in some kind of trouble?" Howard said. Pamela hardly knew where to begin. Much of what she'd been through she couldn't talk about. "My sister and her husband were murdered."

"What? Melanie's dead?"

"Yes."

"What happened?" Howard questioned, shocked to hear about his girlfriend's sister.

"Can we talk about this later?" Pamela said, not yet comfortable with giving out details.

"Can you at least tell me where you've been for the past few weeks?"

"On the move, trying to stay alive."

"Whose house was that I picked you up at?"

"Nobody," Pamela said, her head resting on the seat. She was tired.

Relieved that she was okay, for now he decided not to press for answers. They arrived at his north-side condominium and went inside. Howard took her in his arms and kissed her. "Thanks for coming to get me."

"I'm glad you called."

It felt good to be in his arms. "I love you," she said.

"What are you planning to do now?"

"At the moment I need a hot shower."

"Why don't you go up and make yourself at home. I have some work to finish up, then

maybe we can talk about what you've been through." She kissed him and went upstairs to shower.

Fifteen minutes later, she came down wearing one of Howard's nice business shirts. He was on the phone, but hung up the moment she walked in.

"Hope you don't mind."

"Looks better on you than it ever did on me." She joined him on the sofa.

"You want to talk about what happened?"

"This whole nightmare started months ago, when I helped this guy who had been hurt."

"What guy?"

"Just some guy who needed help."

"You know his name?"

"He was near death when I found him. I drove him to the hospital, and that's pretty much all I know about him."

"What does he have to do with whatever it is you're mixed up in?"

"It seems the people who left him for dead didn't appreciate me not letting

him die.”

“Where’s this guy now?”

“I have no idea. Why’s that important?”

“Maybe he can help explain what he’s gotten you involved in.”

“I don’t think he’s looking to be interrogated.”

“You know how to get in contact with him?”

“No. I’m sure he’s long gone by now.”

“Maybe. I’d sure like to talk to this guy to find out exactly what’s going on.”

Pamela yawned and hit the wall. Howard looked at his watch. “I didn’t realize it was so late. Why don’t you go up and get some sleep. We’ll talk about where to go from here tomorrow.” Exhausted, she leaned over and kissed him, got up and headed toward the stairs. “You coming?”

“I’ll be up in a minute.”

Instead of diving beneath the covers, she sat on the edge of Howard’s bed and picked up the cordless phone. She was about to try again to get in contact with Tony, but heard voices on the other end. “She hasn’t said anything yet,” Howard said.

“We need to find out who this guy works for, or better yet, get her to bring him to you,” the other voice said.

“And if she won’t give him up?”

“Then she’s useless. Shoot her in the head and be done with it.” Pamela recognized the other voice. It was Danny of all people. “Women like her don’t

come along everyday," Howard said.

"You'll get over it."

"About as quickly as watching her sister choke on her own blood."

"Why didn't you fuck her brains out before she died?"

"Who says I didn't?" Pamela almost lost it. She cupped her mouth and cried a controlled cry. "I'll be in touch," Howard said.

"No fuck-ups. Find out as much as she knows, then put her down," the voice of Danny ordered.

"Will do."

Pamela turned the phone off and put it back. She anticipated Danny coming up soon, so she turned out the light and dove beneath the covers. The first thing she had to do was calm herself and get her emotions under control, sooner rather than later. Howard came in. She lay still. Her back was toward his side of the bed. She heard him undressing. Howard got in the bed and draped his left arm over her shoulder. She kept her breathing steady. It was all Pamela could do not to react to him touching her. "You asleep?" Howard whispered. She didn't like the sound of that. She recognized his, I'm in the mood to fuck and go to sleep, voice. There was only so much acting she could pull off. Just lying next to him was performance enough. Not even an earthquake could get her to move. Howard gave up and settled in. A half-hour later, Pamela was still wide-awake, still trapped beneath his overlapping arm. For what seemed like an eternity, Howard had not budged. Pamela held out as

long as she could, hoping at some point he'd turn over. Sleep she couldn't outlast.

No sooner the sun had come up the next morning, Pamela's eyes popped open. Howard's arm no long held her prisoner. She lifted her head off the pillow and turned to see if he'd gotten up. She got quite a scare when she found him propped on his right elbow staring at her. The blue eyes she once adored now seemed cold and mysterious. "You startled me."

"Sorry. How'd you sleep?"

"Better than I have in days..." Before she could finish answering, Howard began unbuttoning the borrowed shirt she'd slept in. Pamela tensed up. He slid his hand inside the shirt and touched her breast. Somehow she kept her emotions under wraps. She tapped into something inside of her, and did a convincing job not to seem repulsed by him. She placed her hand on top of his to prevent things from going any further and said, "I'm still mourning the loss of my sister. Maybe later."

Howard stared for about five seconds then answered back, "Remember what you said to me after my father died?" If only words could be snatched from the universe. "You told me the best thing for a grieving heart is to be with the one you love. You were there for me. The times we spent making love helped me more than you know, and now, I intend to do the same for you," Howard assured, unbuttoning the shirt the rest of the way. In her mind, Pamela tried telling herself it was only sex, just do it and get it over with, but

the resolve was not there. "I'm not in the mood right now. I need to sort some things out. Please try and understand," Pamela said, struggling to keep her voice free of anxiety.

"I do understand, but I have to help you deal with your emotions," Danny said, pulling open the shirt and putting his mouth on her left nipple. Pamela strained to keep it together. Both hands clenched the covers to keep from lashing out at him. Though by not responding she might rouse his suspicion. Again she found that resilient place in her soul and allowed the sex to happen. She smothered the pain, the hurt, and even managed to hide the tears.

When it was over she felt numb inside. Howard rolled over next to her. "There's no other way I'd rather start the day," he said, almost taunting her it seemed.

"Same here," Pamela said while clutching the covers to her bosom. She sat up on the edge of the bed and buttoned the shirt. "You getting up this early?"

"I still have a crisis to deal with."

"What about another kiss to really jump start my day." She forced a smile and leaned across the bed for a closed mouth kiss. Howard wanted more. He tried enticing her back into bed. "I really have to focus on trying to sort things out."

"You're right," Howard agreed, turning her arm loose. Pamela faked more affection then got up and went into the bathroom.

Once the door was closed, the emotions she held in check burst at the seams. She put her hand over her mouth to muffle the crying. To think that

Howard was such a monster. Her flesh crawled as though a million tiny insects infested every pore. She ripped the shirt off and turned the shower on as hot as she could stand it. From head-to-toe the water ran down her body. She needed time to think, to try and put everything in some sort of perspective. She needed to get in contact with Tony.

Howard interrupted by pulling back the shower door. He invited himself in. "You haven't lathered up yet," he noticed, picking up the shower gel and sponge. He didn't wait to be asked and began washing her back. "You have the softest skin." Pamela's eyes closed. She didn't know how much she had left. He moved the sponge around to her breast and pressed himself into her. "Howard I told you, I have other things on my mind right now." "You can start by telling me about the guy you helped that night," he said, reaching around and grabbing her right breast with the other hand. "I've told you everything I know about him." He moved the sponge down to her crotch. "Howard don't." "I think you know more about this guy than you're letting on," he said, pressing himself into her even harder. "Howard stop it," she said, attempting to get out of the shower. He grabbed her by the arm. "You're hurting me." "Why do you want to leave?" he said, reaching over her left shoulder and again grabbing her right breast. "I thought you liked it in the shower." "Well I don't right now."

"Tell me how to find this guy and things will work themselves out," he promised, reaching down and grabbing between her legs.

"Howard stop."

"Who is he, Pamela?" She tried again to get out of the shower. Howard grabbed hold of her jaw and held her face under the water. "Just tell me about the man you helped that night and this will all be over."

"Who said it was night?" Pamela mocked, gasping from holding her breath.

"You've always been too smart for your own good. You think I didn't hear you pick the phone up," Howard said, again forcing her face under the water.

"You sick son-of-a-bitch. I hope you rot in hell," Pamela scorned, again struggling to catch her breath.

"You'll be happy to know, you're better in the sack than your sister was."

"I'll be happy all right," Pamela said through clenched teeth.

"I never thought it would end this way, but if you tell me what I need to know, I'll make it quick and painless. Unlike what happened to beautiful Melanie."

She managed to reach back and claw his face. Howard escaped the fingernails with some minor reddening and a small scratch. He was now angry. He grabbed the back of her hair and pressed her face against the shower door.

"You Parris girls got spirit," he said, slipping his left forearm underneath her chin, and applying pressure to the back of her head with his right forearm.

She pushed against the shower glass as she struggled to breathe. "Good-bye, Pamela," Howard said, going full out for the kill. Things got interrupted when

the shower door slid open. Tony stuck his gun to the side of Howard's head and said, "You don't want to die this way." Howard had heard about this guy, popping up, then disappearing. Like a fucking ghost. He let go of the death grip he had on Pamela. Tony reached in and helped her out of the shower. She grabbed a large bath towel and covered up while trying to clear her lungs.

"Shut the water off and get out," Tony ordered. He turned to look for Pamela, but she was gone. He grabbed the other towel and tossed it to Howard.

"Move." Ahead of Tony he walked out of the bathroom. Pamela had gotten to the gun she'd taken off Amrik, and had hidden underneath the mattress. She was pointing it at Howard. Tony saw the look in her eye, and knew there was a good chance she'd pull the trigger. "What are you waiting for? Shoot his ass," he said. Pamela was hell-bent on putting a bullet right between his eyes, but Tony's voice got inside her head. "He's part of it. He helped murder my sister before he raped her," she said, still aiming the gun at Howard.

"There you go. All the reason in the world to shoot him. Pull the trigger and blow his head off. No checks and balances, right?" As bad as she wanted to squeeze the trigger, Tony's point hit home. He walked over and said, "He's all done." She fought the urge and lowered the gun. "Get dressed, we have to get out of here."

She went over and picked up her dress off the chair and sneered at Howard on the way to the bathroom. Tony handcuffed Howard to the closet door. "At least let me put some clothes on," Howard said.

"Where you're going, your new friends will like you just the way you are."

"When your luck runs out, and it will, we'll see who's chuckling the loudest."

Pamela came out of the bathroom and walked by and blew a hole in Howard's right thigh. "It won't be you," she vowed, then walked out of the room. Howard collapsed on the floor writhing in pain. Tony placed a large brown envelope on the table next to the bed. "She fucking shot me!"

"Maybe you don't know her as well as you think," Tony said, then left the room. He met up with Pamela down the hall. "Feel better?"

"I know..."

"I can't condone shooting a half naked suspect." She stood leaning against the wall holding the gun at her side. "Hearing him gloat, like this was just some game...before I could stop myself, I pulled the trigger. I didn't want to kill him, just remind him of what pain feels like."

"I think you got your point across. I have to ask, were you really aiming for his leg, or further north?" He got her to smile. "Let's go." While driving away in Tony's car, Pamela got on the phone to 911.

EIGHTEEN

LEAVING HIS HOME IN POTOMIC, Maryland on his way to Capital Hill, Senator Tennison noticed a copy of the Wall Street Journal lying on his front stoop. It was odd only from the standpoint he was not a subscriber, so he assumed perhaps it was a free trial subscription. He picked up the paper and tucked it underneath his left arm. His cell phone rang before he made it to the awaiting black sedan parked curbside. "Morning Senator. Inside the Journal, you'll find instructions for routing the money into a private account. If the money's there within forty-eight hours, you won't hear from me again. If not, I'll assume you've chosen to walk in the light," the voice said, then hung up. Inside the car the driver said good-morning to the senator's reflection in the rearview mirror. "Morning, Alex," Tennison said, as if unaffected by the phone call. Inside the paper, between pages four and five, Tennison found a type written note. In it were simple instructions, along with what he presumed were banking numbers to an off-shore account. He folded the note and stuck it inside the left pocket of his suit coat.

Danny slammed the phone down after being told of Howard's arrest and Pamela's unexplained get away. After everything he and the others had built, he was damned if he would allow two pain-in-the-ass toy cops bring it all down. He got on the phone and ordered an immediate hit on both of Pamela's

parents. He wanted them both found and disposed of in such a way to make the evening news.

Hold up in a safe-house in Lincoln Park, Tony and Pamela were both exhausted, and needed time to adjust to all the moving pieces. Pamela was still reeling after yet another part of her life had no resemblance to the way it used to be. "With everything that's happened, why should it surprise me that my ex-boyfriend would turn out to be part of this nightmare?"

"We should hear something soon on how he fits into all of this."

"A man who held himself up as fighting for the underdog, is nothing more than a cold-blooded, masochistic asshole," Pamela said, still hoping to wake up from it all. Tony got a text message on his phone. *ck file 7.*

He pecked away on the laptop. Up came a dossier on Howard Albrecht, complete with photographs. "He's only been connected with the organization for about nine months."

"That's around the time he bought the condo and the new Mercedes. I thought it meant he was doing well at the law firm," Pamela said, scooting closer to read for herself. "He started out doing legal work to help shelter assets, but I guess he got addicted to the money, and decided he liked their pension plan better," Pamela paraphrased. After reading further, Howard's secret life got even more interesting. "He's believed to have murdered at least four people. Three victims were shot in the head, and looks like he may have strangled a

former girlfriend," Pamela read, her eyes welling up. "The police have evidence he's responsible for the murders?" she asked.

"They do now."

"Even after I found out about his involvement in my sister's death, I had to allow him to..." Pamela said, tears running. "Where were you? You said you'd be there," she cried, all of it catching up. Tony put his arm around her shoulder. "I want it to stop," she broke down.

"I had no choice. Moving too soon would've only gotten you killed." She leaned towards him and let it all out.

Tony convinced her to lie back on the sofa and get some rest. To help her relax he moved to the adjacent chair along with his thoughts. "I'm sorry," Pamela said after gathering herself.

"Me too, for what you had to go through. I should've been there."

"If you hadn't shown up when you did, I'd be dead by now."

"I saw you come out of the house on Lake Shore Drive and get in the car with someone. I didn't know at the time it was Albrecht, but you seemed happy to see him, so I figured you were safe."

"I tried to call you after I got away from Danny, but the line went dead."

"Cell phone battery."

"When did you find out about Howard?"

"I received some raw intel on what I thought had to do with Danny. When I followed you back to Albrecht's place, the address matched the address in the

intel. I didn't believe he'd tip his hand right away. I figured he'd try and get to me through you."

"He asked if I knew where you were."

"And?"

"I didn't tell him anything. I was about to try calling you again, that's when I overheard Howard and Danny on the phone."

"I sat outside the house waiting, hoping you'd call when you got the chance. At sunup I got nervous. That's when I came in."

"How did you know I was in Chicago and not Seattle?"

"I tracked Danny's jet back to the states."

Done feeling sorry for herself, Pamela sat up and got her mind back focused. "We still have Danny to deal with."

"From here on out I work alone."

"Don't you dare do this to me."

"No argument this time. You need to start putting your life back together."

"How do you suppose I go about doing that? You expect me to pick up the pieces, move on as if nothing's happened. Everything's different now. I'm different. No matter what happens, I have to see this through," Pamela said, tears starting up again. Tony had all the sympathy in the world for what she'd been through, but last night scared him. "I'll make the arrangements, you'll be safe," he promised, got up and went into the kitchen.

It was not over as far as Pamela was concerned. She was determined to

play out the hand she'd been dealt. Just after she stormed the kitchen, Tony got another text message. "You have no right..." She saw the look on his face. "What is it?"

"They're going after your parents."

"God, no," she said, falling toward the door with no plan in mind.

"Pamela!"

"I'll stop those bastards one way or another."

"Your parents have already lost one daughter."

"What are we going to do, Tony? You and me, what are we going to do?" she said, eyeball to eyeball. He had meant what he said a moment ago, about tucking her away safe somewhere, but like Pamela said, "everything's different now."

"I can't walk away from this, and you know it."

"Do you know where your parents are right now?"

"They should be on their way back from Europe."

"Try calling."

Pamela rushed to the phone. "Answering machine. Should I leave a message?"

"No. When's the last time you spoke to them?"

"Right before my vacation."

"Let's go."

"Where?"

"New Port Beach."

"You think something's already happened," Pamela cringed. Tony wanted to avoid worse case scenarios, but at the same time, he understood the possibility that her parents might already be dead. "We'll get there in time," he promised.

Sarah got a call at her office from her husband, Josh. He had good news. The seller had accepted their offer to purchase the home in the Chevy Chase suburb of Maryland for \$715 thousand. Josh was ecstatic. The news made Sarah happy as well, but also brought on a few jitters. When they first talked about buying a home, they agreed on a price range of \$300 to \$400 thousand. "You sure about this? Seven hundred thousand is pretty steep," Sarah reminded him.

"I know it's more than we talked about, but we can afford it."

"We've also talked about starting a family soon. Buying a house this expensive just seems a bit risky."

"Remember the dream house we talked about once I make senior partner, this is that house."

"Are you being coy with me?"

"How so?"

"Have you made partner and not said anything?"

"Would I keep something like that from you?"

"You might. Have you?"

"Have I what?"

“Josh, made senior partner?” Sarah wondered.

“We’ll talk about it tonight. I’ll bring the champagne.”

In a matter of minutes after the jet carrying Tony and Pamela touched down at Long Beach Municipal Airport, they sped away in a black Charger headed down Pacific Coast Highway toward Long Beach. Pamela turned onto the street her parents lived on. Mr. and Mrs. Parris were walking up the drive toward the front door, both carrying luggage. Tony spotted three men sitting inside a parked car pulling black ski masks over their faces. “They’re here,” he said, reaching into the glove box and removing a second 9mm.

The Buick occupied by the three men pulled into the street headed toward Pamela’s mom and dad. She jumped on the gas to try and get the car between her parents and the men stalking them. Tony climbed outside the passenger side window with his back toward the pavement, looking back over the hood of the car with a gun in each hand. Two gunmen in the Buick leaned out the window with tech-nines and drew a bead on the returning couple. Pamela aimed her gun and pulled the car along the right side of the Buick. Several shots rang out from the slow-moving sedan. “Nooooo!” she yelled, unloading as fast as she could squeeze the trigger. From his perch outside the car window, Tony blasted away with both guns. Both gunmen inside the Buick were hit with a barrage of gunfire.

The driver swerved and slammed into a parked car. Pamela brought the

Charger to a strident stop. Tony climbed out of the car still pointing both guns at the wrecked Buick. The driver jumped out and started shooting. Without hesitation, Tony emptied one chamber, killing the shooter. A wounded gunman staggered out of the Buick. Pamela got out to finish it. The gunman drew first. Before he could get off a shot, she put two rounds in his chest. Tony moved toward the car with Pamela backing him up. All three gunmen were dead.

She left the aftermath for Tony to deal with and ran across the street toward her parents. Mrs. Parris was hovered over Mr. Parris, who lay in the walkway bleeding from a gunshot wound. "Dad!" Pamela said, kneeling beside her father and placing the gun on the ground. Mr. Parris was conscious, and Mrs. Parris was in tears. The bullet had gotten the fleshy part of his right shoulder. "What the hell's going on," he grimaced. Tony came up still toting both guns. "How is he?"

"Thank God he's alive," Pamela said.

"We have to go?"

"Who are you?" wondered Mrs. Parris.

"Dad can you stand up?"

"I think so."

Tony put the guns away and helped her father to his feet. "More trouble's coming," he cautioned, looking at Pamela.

"I'll call Dr. Reid to let him know we're on our way," Mrs. Parris said.

"There's no time. We'll get his shoulder looked at," Tony said.

"His doctor has to be notified."

"Mom, trust him. He knows what's best," Pamela said. Mrs. Parris was at a loss.

"I'll get the car," Tony said.

"What's happening?" Mrs. Parris questioned, not the welcome home she expected.

"I'll explain later," Pamela said. Tony pulled the car into the drive. He got out and helped get Mr. Parris inside. "Let's go Mom."

"What about our things?" she said, referring to their luggage sprawled in the driveway.

To speed things up, Tony threw the suitcases in the trunk. "Keep pressure on it," Pamela said to her mother, who sat in the back next to Mr. Parris. Tony backed out of the drive and sped off. "I'm still waiting to hear something that will come close to explaining all of this," Mrs. Parris frowned.

"I don't even know where to begin," Pamela sighed. Mrs. Parris found Tony's eyes in the rearview mirror, wondering what his connection was to her daughter. "You never answered my question. Who are you?" Given all the drama back in their neighborhood, he left it up to Pamela to decide what to tell them.

"James and Priscilla Parris, this is Tony Monticello."

"Sorry to have to meet under these circumstances," Tony said.

"Whatever's going on, I trust your top priority is keeping our daughter safe," James said.

Tony found his eyes in the rearview mirror, but kept silent. "Tony and I have been through a lot. A lifetime it seems," Pamela said, looking over at Tony with a blank expression.

A hospital in Long Beach is where Tony took Mr. Parris to have his shoulder looked at. The bullet caused no major damage according to the doctor who treated him. When questioned as to how he sustained the gunshot wound, Mr. Parris said that he and his wife had walked in on burglar. Tony had advised that he say as little as possible about what had happened. Given what he knew, saying little was easy. He left the doctor's office with his right shoulder bandaged and his arm in a sling. The others were waiting in a nearly empty emergency room. "How's your shoulder?" Priscilla asked.

"Nothing serious."

"I'll get the car," Tony said.

"What did you tell the doctor?" Pamela asked.

"That my daughter has a lot of explaining to do," James said, only half kidding.

"I know you guys deserve to know what's going on, but I'm not sure how to make it all make sense."

"Are you in some kind of trouble?" asked Priscilla.

"More than you could imagine."

Two men walked into the emergency room carrying pump-action shotguns. Priscilla saw them first and started screaming. Pamela turned toward the entrance while at the same time drawing her gun. Shots rang out before she could aim and shoot. Both men were shot dead from behind as they went to raise the shotguns. Tony stepped over the dead bodies with a gun in each hand. "Let's move." James and Priscilla were scared out of their minds, figuring somewhere between Europe and California they must have stumbled into the twilight zone. Pamela ushered her parents toward Tony and the exit, but stopped short when she saw another gunman loaded up and on his way in. "Behind you!" she yelled, raising her gun and opening fire. She hit the gunman through the glass. "Take cover!" Tony said, seeing more bad guys hoping out of a car. Pamela pushed her parents toward the nurses' station. The killers outside opened fire on the entire emergency room. Glass was shattering all over the place. Pamela raised up from behind the nurses' station and returned fire.

Out in the waiting area, she saw a young woman caught in the cross fire crouching over her tiny daughter. Without thinking she rolled over the top of the station to the floor and kept shooting. She managed to scramble over to where the woman and her child were hunkered down. Tony left his position behind the mortar and steel column and ran and dove over the top of the nurses' station and landed in the midst of James, Priscilla, and two terrified nurses. Under heavy gunfire, Pamela, along with the woman and her daughter

scurried into the adjacent restroom. Tony reloaded, then peered from behind the lower end of the station. Inside the restroom Pamela reloaded also.

“What’s happening?” the woman sheltering her daughter asked.

“A nightmare I can’t seem to wake up from,” Pamela said, opening the door and peering out. The shooting had stopped. Tony waited. A male and female with big guns walked up and stepped through the space in the door where glass used to be. Tony saw his chance and put the female assassin down. The other one turned and started spraying bullets. Pamela timed it perfect and stepped out from the restroom and put three hollow points in the back of the second gunman. Things quieted down after that. Tony helped James up from the floor. “Call the police,” he said to one of the traumatized nurses. The four left the hospital and got back on the interstate and drove all the way to a safe-house in Pasadena.

Their heads still spinning from the rampant violence, James and Priscilla demanded to know what the hell was going on. Pamela was more interested in her father resting his shoulder. She wanted him to go in and lie down for a while. Priscilla wanted him to rest also, but she was more interested in knowing why in the span of a few hours had they been involved in two deadly shootouts. Pamela looked over at Tony. He got up and left the room to make some phone calls. She painted not only a bizarre picture, but one with lots of holes, and it was about to turn heartbreaking. “Melanie and Brad haven’t been

harmful by these people have they?" Priscilla asked, having trouble getting her thoughts around indeed a bizarre tale. Pamela's silence became unsettling. "Is Melanie all right?" Priscilla asked, the feeling in her gut causing her eyes to tear. Pamela held back the steady drumbeat of awful news. She watched her father's firm expression begin to wilt. Hurting as well, she confirmed the worst of it.

"Who is this man, Tony Monticello?" Priscilla asked, despite the broken heart.

"I can't say."

"What the hell do you mean you can't say? Your sister's dead because of a man we know nothing about, and you're telling us you can't say," James scoffed.

"I wish I could tell you everything."

"Who does he work for?" asked Priscilla.

"Mom, Dad, I know this is tough right now, but I'm sorry, I've said as much as I can." None of it sat well with her parents. Aside from the guns and all the shooting, their youngest daughter was dead, and where was the explanation.

"I'm asking you to trust me, and trust Tony," Pamela said, offering little in return. The Parris's were learning the hard way how unpredictable life could be, and one thing for sure, this ain't the movies.

"Where did you learn to handle a weapon? You've never been partial to firearms," James said.

"There's a lot about the old me you wouldn't recognize."

"How did Melanie die?" Priscilla wanted to know. Pamela went further into the gory details. She tried to go easy on the grief, but felt her parents had a right to know that Melanie was also pregnant. More coping followed.

Tony came back in carrying a small satchel. "Whoever you are, I hope my daughter's death is not lost in all of this," Priscilla said.

"I'm sorry for what happened," Tony said.

"I'm not a violent, or hate-filled man, but as a former marine, I hope you show them the same consideration they had for Melanie," James said.

Tony understood the moment, and replied. "I have to go."

"Can I talk to you in the kitchen?" Pamela said. He didn't have to be a mind-reader to know exactly what she wanted to talk to him about. They huddled in the kitchen. "Don't waste your breath," he said right from the start.

"I have to finish this."

"Out of the question."

"My family's been torn apart by what's happened. I've lost my sister, my father's been shot, and you know what my life has become."

"Your parents don't need the worry of losing another daughter."

"I have to do this for me. If I have to hunt them down on my own, I will."

With so much at stake, Tony believed she'd do something crazy and get herself killed. "What do you tell your parents?"

"The truth. You need me to help finish what these people started," Pamela

said, then walked out to deal with her parents. "Mom, Dad, Tony and I have to go."

"Go where?" asked Priscilla.

"We have to find the people responsible for all of this?"

"What do you mean, we? What do you know about dealing with the likes of cold-blooded killers?" James said.

"Dad, I'll be okay."

"You can't be serious," Priscilla said. "You can't put my daughter's life in that kind of danger," she feared, looking up at Tony. He'd already lost that battle, twice.

"Mom, try not to worry. This is something I have to do."

"You're willing to risk your life, to kill if necessary, why?"

The answer came as Priscilla stared into her daughter's eyes. "Whatever's happened, it's changed you."

Pamela took hold of her mother's hand and said, "You and Dad will be safe here. There's someone watching the house at all times to make sure of it.

There's plenty of food and whatever else you might need. Please don't leave the house under any circumstance unless you hear from me or Tony."

"You sure this is necessary?" asked James.

"Yes, it is."

"I don't like it, but I respect your decision. If I was twenty years younger, I'd go with you."

“What if she doesn’t come back? I know you have to make your own decisions, but I’ve already lost one daughter...” Priscilla said, having trouble letting go of Pamela’s hand.

“She’ll be back. She’s all we have left. She’ll come back,” James assured, choking back his own emotions. Priscilla brushed tears from her left cheek. “I have to go,” Pamela said.

“You do like your father said, you come back to us.” Pamela offered up a daughter’s smile.

With a good mind to give Tony an earful, Priscilla decided instead to reach out to him. Tony felt the gentle squeeze of his hand, made eye contact with James, then walked to the door. Pamela gave her parents a hug and kiss and was about to leave with Tony. “James is low on the medication he takes for back spasms. How will he get his prescription refilled?” Priscilla said. A knock at the door. Tony and Pamela produced guns. James and Priscilla braced themselves. Tony looked through the peephole. He saw no one and cracked open the door. On the stoop was a small white package. “What is that?” asked Pamela.

“Relafen nabumsetone.”

“That’s the same medication I take for my back,” James voiced from the sofa.

“Then it must be for you,” Tony said, giving him the package. On the prescription label, James noticed his name and personal information. Inside was a thirty count bottle of pills. “Who called this in?”

“We’ll see you again soon,” Tony said, and walked out the door carrying the small satchel.

“I love you guys. Lock up,” Pamela said, and walked out behind him. In the car she waited for Tony to come clean about the prescription showing up on the stoop, but as usual, he never mentioned it.

NINETEEN

SENATOR TENNISON VOTED WITH Senator Harold on the passage of the senate version of the house bill to federalize a new airport security measure. Both senators had worked in a bipartisan effort to try and prevent the bill from being loaded up with spending unrelated to national security. They had to settle for a good effort. The bill passed by a vote of ninety-seven to three. Aides to both Senators Tennison and Harold followed them out of the senate chamber shortly after the vote. "Want to grab some lunch?" Harold asked.

"I have a few errands to run before session resumes."

"We both know the Airport Security measure will balloon once it goes to the conference committee."

"That's like betting on the sun to come up."

"Wish I could get those odds in Vegas," Harold agreed, then parted ways with Tennison, as he and his aide headed toward the capital subway. Harold glanced at his watch and picked up the pace.

Tennison handed his aide a listing of the nations largest airports to put together some research, and said he'd be back in one hour. After he was alone, Tennison took out his cell phone and told Fitzwater to bring the car around and pick him up in five minutes. While negotiating his way down the capital steps toward the car, at the same time Tennison dialed another number on his

cell phone. "It's been arranged," he said, keeping the call short. Without being told where they were going, Fitzwater drove the senator southwest on Maryland Avenue. From the backseat, Tennison took out the note found between the pages of the Wall Street Journal left on his front stoop and stared for a moment at the account numbers. He dialed his personal banker. "Wire the money."

Danny was pumping thirty pound dumbbells to help tone up his biceps at the FitWorld Gym, his favorite place to work out, usually twice a week, between one and three in the afternoon. Less crowded. Two of the meanest assassins in the organization were also getting in a workout, the guy wearing the muscle shirt doing power squats, and the guy bench pressing two hundred pounds as if inflated balloons were at both ends of the barbell. Perhaps fifteen other people, mostly women, were also working up an afternoon sweat. Danny put in an hour hitting the weights, and finished up with twenty minutes on the treadmill. "That's it for me," he said, taking a long drink from his bottled water. "I'm in the shower."

He took off his sweaty tank top on the way to the locker room. In the outer-hall he grabbed a fresh towel off the rack and hung it around his neck. There was no one else inside at the time but him. At his locker he took a seat on the bench to relax for a moment. He drank more water, then let loose with a loud belch. "Bad manners," Tony said, stepping out from behind the row of

lockers. He was wearing the Yankees baseball cap, and had his gun pointed at Danny as he moved closer. Danny sat relaxed, holding the bottled water, unimpressed by Tony having somehow snuck in unnoticed. "At last, the man himself. The one responsible for trying to fuck up another man's vision," Danny said, taking another sip of water.

"Pretend I'm the quarterback and you're the wide-out, here's the play, you're going to skip the shower and walk out of here. I'll be right behind you. Tell your boys you have some urgent business to take care of, and you'll be back to pick them up in a half-hour. You try and poke your chest out, I put you down," Tony said.

Danny smirked, and showing no sign of concern, reached inside his locker and pulled out his gym bag and placed it on the bench and started to unzip it. "Or, I can put a hot one in your chest right here," Tony said, sliding the bag down the bench away from Danny. Inside, beneath a pair of clean sweats, he found a Walther 9mm handgun. "They give these out when you join?" Tony said, sticking the gun inside his jacket. Danny's swagger took a slight hit. "Between killing you, your family, the beautiful Pamela, and the rest of her family, when will I ever find time to get my workout in?" Danny mouthed off. "Get dressed," Tony ordered, shoving the gym bag down the bench and into Danny's leg. He put on clean sweats over sweaty shorts and smelly armpits. "Where is our lovely, Pamela?" "She's very pissed at you."

“How’s her father doing?”

“He asked that I show you the same consideration you had for his daughter. You can always try something stupid,” Tony said, motioning with the gun for Danny to move. He did some thinking, then picked up the gym bag and started out of the locker room. Tony pulled the cap down over his eyes and trailed him out.

Danny made immediate eye contact with the guy in the muscle shirt over near the butterfly machine. Fortune smiled on Danny when a chubby female passed in front of him. He dropped the gym bag, grabbed her by the throat and spun her around. He thought for a moment he’d leveled the playing field, but Tony had disappeared. His two associates came over. “What’s happening?” the guy in the muscle shirt said.

“That sonofabitch was here,” Danny growled, turning the frightened woman loose.

“Who?”

“Who do you think?” Danny snapped, snatching up his gym bag. “He must’ve slipped out the side. Let’s go. Time to get mean.”

Pamela and Tony were sitting in a Land Cruiser in the parking lot of FitWorld Gym. “You should’ve ended it right there in the locker room,” Pamela said.

“Our job is not to dispense justice.”

“I thought justice was blind.”

“Sometimes.”

Danny and the others came out of the gym and got into a black Mercedes. Moments later a powerful explosion demolished the car, impossible for anyone to have survived. Tony put his sunglasses on as he and Pamela watched the burning wreckage. “This was one of those times,” he said, and drove away.

TWENTY

ASTON MARTINS, BENTLEYS, PORCHES, along with other high-end automobiles, lined the drive of the Wincott's summer chateau in Zurich, Switzerland. Individuals with net worth of anywhere from \$50 million to \$20 billion were arriving at the lavish cocktail party, hosted by Griffin and Olivia Wincott. Tony and Pamela arrived at the black tie affair in a shiny new Maybach. Valets were prompt and courteous. Pamela certainly didn't mind Tony's employer springing for the two and a half karat marquise diamond ring and matching necklace to round out the look.

The handsome couple walked up and rang the doorbell. Tony announced the arrival of Mr. and Mrs. Baldwin. The lanky butler perused the guest list and located their names. The assumed Baldwins were escorted through the nineteenth century home and made their way to the crowded great room, where the other fifty or so guests were scattered about mingling and nursing Dom Perigon. "Better we see him before he sees us," Pamela said.

"I'm not sure how up to speed he is. He's been in Europe for the past month."

"But he knows what's happened to the organization."

"True. But tracking him down here in Zurich tips the odds in our favor. Victor likes to party and have fun. He's a man with many friends, and he's not shy when it comes to living a certain lifestyle." A tray of Dom came around and they each took a glass. Other interracial couples attending the party made them

less conspicuous. "Our hosts at ten o'clock," Tony said, sipping Dom while watching Griffin and Olivia mingle with guests.

A forty-nine year old financier, Griffin had a definite presence for a man barely five feet ten inches tall, as well as being worth an insane amount of money. He impressed most men with a firm handshake and first name recognition, and charmed the ladies with his squinty baby-blues and a gregarious smile. His heart though belonged to Olivia. A former ballerina now in her mid-thirties, Olivia was born and raised in Boston back in the states, and met Griffin when she was only nineteen, during one of his many business trips to New York. They were married a year later. Their fifteen year old daughter is currently attending a renown prep school in Connecticut. Griffin got around to welcoming the late arrivals. "I know everyone else here, so you two must be the Baldwins," he said with a distinguished British accent. "My wife Pamela, and I'm Tony."

Griffin impressed and charmed his new friends. Olivia made her way over. She was equally as impressive and charming. "So you two are close friends of the Borregos?" Griffin said.

"We are. Hope you don't mind having us as substitutes," Pamela said.

"You're more than welcome. When the Borregos R.S.V.P'd and said they couldn't make it, they knew you two were in Zurich, and thought this would be an excellent opportunity for you to meet some new friends while traveling abroad," Griffin said.

"We appreciate the hospitality," Tony replied.

"Any friend of Sean and Kay, we consider friends as well," Olivia said.

"Likewise," Tony replied.

"What line of work are you in?" asked Griffin of Tony.

"Law."

"Attorney?"

"Yes."

"Your specialty?"

"Divorce."

"Never a dull moment I suppose."

"Never in the same year."

"Touche."

Griffin allowed a proper moment to pass then changed the subject. "So what brings you to Zurich?"

"Whenever we have time to travel, we like visiting different parts of the world. We're thinking about buying a second home outside the states," Pamela said.

"How long have you been in Zurich?" Olivia asked.

"Almost a week," Pamela said.

"Your impression so far?"

"What's not to like? It's one of the most beautiful cities we've ever seen."

"Have you been shopping on Bahnhofstrasse?"

“Only briefly, but I intend to pay those fabulous boutiques a more extensive visit.”

“Call me. I’d love to show you around.”

“I’d like that.”

“Where are you two staying?” asked Griffin.

“The Dolder Grand Hotel,” Tony said.

“We’ll have to get together soon, the four of us,” Griffin said.

“That would be nice,” Pamela agreed.

“Enjoy the evening,” Griffin said, as he and Olivia went off to attend to other guests.

“Think we measured up?” Pamela said with the rim of the glass to her lips.

“Time will tell,” Tony said, taking a sip of Dom while continuing to size up the room.

“What really happened to the Borregos?”

“Family emergency.” She knew better than to even ask.

By ten o’clock the guest list had grown by seven or eight. Tony and Pamela continued mingling. “The man of the hour has arrived,” Tony said, looking toward the main entrance. Victor Steele was shaking hands with Griffin. By his side stood a five-foot eleven gorgeous blonde. He leaned in and pecked Olivia on the cheek. Steele came across as a man of considerable means, who also gave off a sense of power. At six-four, he practically towered over Griffin in stature, but Griffin stood taller in the financial arena.

Tony and Pamela descended further into the crowd to avoid being noticed. After chatting up the hosts, Steele and his blonde companion moved around amongst the guests, many of whom he seemed acquainted with. He took part in a lengthy conversation with a man named Jonathan Downey, a mega-rich philanthropist, late fifties, on his fourth marriage. Wife number four was standing next to him, a stunning brunette, under thirty. Steele's indulgence had more to do with making eyes with Downey's young wife than hearing about the building of a home for troubled youths. "Does Griffin know about Victor and his friends?" Pamela asked.

"Not likely. Victor passes himself off as a savvy business man. These people have reputations to protect. I doubt they would be here if they knew the kind of business Victor was involved in," Tony said.

A string quartet hired for the evening began playing an elegant nocturne. Couples responded by setting their drinks down and gathering to dance. With the crowd thinning out around them, Pamela and Tony thought it best to join the masses. While finding a spot on the dance floor they lost track of Steele. "Where did he go?" Pamela said.

"I'm not sure."

"You think he recognized us and made a hasty exit?"

"Victor's never been known to cut and run."

"I see him. He's fifty feet away," Pamela said, watching Steele and the leggy blonde maneuver on the crowded dance floor. Tony spotted them also. "Say

when?" Pamela said.

"We wait until he's away from the crowd, then take him."

Griffin popped up and said, "Mind if I share a dance with your lovely wife?" Offending the host would seem inappropriate, so Tony graciously stepped aside. But not before cautioning Pamela with a glance. "I trust you're enjoying the evening," Griffin said, as he and Pamela danced.

"I'm having a wonderful time. You have a beautiful home."

"This is our favorite place this time of year."

"Where else do you have homes if you don't mind me asking?"

"Not at all. Olivia and I own homes in the South of France, Greece, and stateside of course."

"Where in the states?"

"We own a penthouse in New York, and a home in Malibu, California."

"Boredom for you and your wife must be unheard of."

"I haven't been bored since I was three years old."

"A boredom free life, not a bad idea."

"It works for me."

"And your wife?"

"She manages to keep boredom at bay," Griffin said, staring into Pamela's sparkling eyes. "What about you? You seem like sort of a restless spirit."

"Sometimes, but I haven't found a permanent cure yet."

"May I make a suggestion?"

“By all means.”

“The excitement of taking risks.”

“What sort of risk?”

“You and I could carry on the most exciting and passionate romance imaginable, with complete discretion of course,” Griffin said, his demeanor that of a perfect gentleman.

Pamela’s expression spoke volumes as she reassessed her impression of Griffin. “I hope I haven’t offended you,” he said.

“I must admit, I’m a bit surprised.”

“That was not my intent.”

“You’re asking me to be unfaithful to my husband.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“Please tell me you’re kidding.”

“I never joke when it comes to romance. I’m simply putting forth an offer. It could well be a fascinating adventure for as long as it last.”

“No offense, but I love my husband.”

Tony’s timing was impeccable. “Mind if I ask for my wife back?” Griffin and Pamela stopped dancing. Griffin worked her over with his baby blues, as if to weaken her resolve. “Not at all. Please continue to enjoy the evening,” he said, then excused himself. Tony and Pamela picked up where they left off.

“You two have a nice dance?”

“More like a strange encounter.”

“How long did it take for him to proposition you?”

“You knew and you didn’t warn me.”

“He has a reputation as a womanizer. What better way to test your fidelity,” he poked fun.

“Remind me to...”

“Victor’s moving,” Tony said, watching him leave his girlfriend and exit through a different door. “I’ll see what he’s up to, you keep an eye on the girlfriend.”

The door led to a dimly lit foyer and more doors. He tried the first door on the left, which turned out to be a large closet. The door across from it on the right was a sitting room. A little further down another door on the right. The third door proved unlucky. He was knocked out cold from behind.

Later when he came to, Tony was lying on the floor with blurred faces hovering above him. “You all right?” a voice asked. It took a moment to shake the cobwebs. Around him stood Pamela, Griffin, and Olivia. He was able to sit up. He had a small lump on the back of his head. “Would you like for me to call my private physician?” Griffin asked.

“That won’t be necessary,” Tony said, though feeling like he’d been hit with a sledgehammer. He managed to get to his feet. “Take it easy,” Pamela said, helping him over to the chair.

“I’ll get you a compress,” Olivia said, and disappeared down the hall.

“What happened?” Griffin asked.

"I was looking for the bathroom and nearly had my head caved in before I could find it," Tony said, still woozy, as he loosened his tie.

"Whoever attacked you left this note," Olivia said, returning with a damp wash cloth and the note she found attached to the bathroom mirror.

Pamela read the handwritten note. "Consider this your lucky day. I didn't want to ruin the party of our gracious host by leaving a dead body behind, but I'm sure we'll run into each other again."

"Perhaps the police should be notified," Griffin said.

"It's not that serious. Probably someone who had too much to drink," Tony said.

"Are you sure?"

"Don't worry about it."

"I think we better call it a night," Pamela said.

Tony struggled to his feet. "You're more than welcome to spend the night here if you don't feel up to the drive back to your hotel," Olivia said.

"That's very kind of you, but I think we'll make it," Pamela said, helping Tony to steady himself.

"Please accept my apology for such an unfortunate end to your evening," Griffin said.

Pamela helped to get Tony out to the car and she did the driving. The ride was mostly quiet as he rested his eyes. Back at the hotel he slipped out of his jacket, removed his gun and stretched out on the sofa. "How's your head?"

Pamela asked.

"I'll let you know when the steady drumbeat stops." Tony was nursing a mammoth size headache. Pamela fished a couple aspirins from her purse and got him a glass of water. She took his shoes off and said, "Just lie still and relax."

Around 12:30, Pamela was sitting in the adjacent chair thumbing through a magazine when someone knocked on the door. She went over and looked through the peephole. A man in a hotel uniform was standing on the other side. "Yes," Pamela said.

"Room service," the guy replied.

She was not sold on the French accent. "Just a moment," she said, moved away from the door and over to the end table and picked up her gun. She eased over and gently nudged Tony from his nap. His head felt better than it did a few hours ago. Right away he noticed Pamela holding the gun. "What's happening?"

"Some guy's at the door." Tony got it together and grabbed his gun. They got in position to check out who was on the other side. Pamela went on Tony's signal. "You still there?" No answer. She called out a second time, still no answer. Tony reached for the door-handle and made eye-contact with Pamela. She nodded. Just as he was about to swing open the door, he had a better idea and turned the handle loose. "Move back."

"What is it?" He went to the phone and called the front desk, and requested a

bottle of the hotel's finest wine be sent up. "What's happening?" Pamela asked.

"A friendly knock at the door, you answer, boom." For Pamela, an eerie thought.

Ten minutes later a knock at the door. Pamela took the lead. "Yes," she said, guns still a factor.

"Room service," the guy said. She bought the French accent.

"Is there anything strange attached to the door?" Tony asked.

"Oui."

"Can you tell me what it looks like?"

"Odd."

"Is there a red wire running from the main part to a glob of what looks like clay?"

"Oui."

"I need you to disconnect the red wire from the device, but whatever you do, don't pull the wire out of the glob of clay."

"Oui. I'll try."

"The red wire should be wrapped around a small gold screw. If you can unwrap that wire, it would be a big help."

The young attendant sat the bottle of wine down and followed Tony's instructions. After confirming the red wire had been disconnected from the device, Tony suggested the attendant move back away from the door. He

waved Pamela back as well. "What if you're wrong?" she said, the worry showing.

"We don't have much choice." He cracked open the door and noticed the red wire dangling. The bomb was harmless. The attendant walked up with the bottle of wine. "Who did this?" he asked.

"I think it was meant as a prank," Tony said, taking the bottle of wine and handing the attendant 100 SF. He scooted off confused but happy over the generous tip. Tony removed the device and closed the door. "How much damage could that thing have done?" Pamela asked.

"Enough to make us both dead."

"You must have a nose for bombs."

"It's their favorite calling card." Tony's tuxedo jacket began ringing. He was busy making sure the bomb was safe, so Pamela answered his phone. No one said anything. "Hello," she repeated.

"What's better than a day at the beach?" the male voice on the other end said.

"I simply can't imagine," Pamela remembered from St. Lucia.

"Victor has left Zurich. He's on his way back to the states. I'll be in contact once his final destination is known," the male voice said, then silence.

"What's up?" Tony said.

"Victor's on his way back to the states."

"Time to pack," Tony said, placing the dismantled bomb on the coffee table.

"You feel up to a long flight?"

"I have to ask Victor why he knocked me the hell out," Tony said, got up and went in to pack.

"I have a few questions to ask him myself," Pamela said, trailing Tony into the bedroom.

TWENTY ONE

AT THE LAST MINUTE Senator Harold had to back out of a planned trip to the Middle East with three of his senate colleagues. The purpose for the trip was intended to try and assess the situation on the ground for a possible phased troop withdrawal. Senator Harold came down with a mild case of food poisoning, and thought it best that he not make the trip. Two term Senator Brian Lough was tapped to take his place. At Senator Harold's urging, the matter was kept quiet under the pretext of national security. He also hadn't bothered to mention to his wife that he'd suddenly come down with food poisoning, or his decision not to make the trip. As far as Mrs. Harold was concerned, her husband was aboard an airplane bound for the Middle East on official business.

The flight did leave Washington after an hour delay, but without Senator Harold. Instead of heading home from the capital to recoup from his stomach

ailment, the senator had Conley drive him out to the home he'd driven him to on numerous occasions in Rockville, Maryland. "Will you be staying the night, Senator?"

"No. Pick me up at eight o'clock," Harold said, then exited the car.

Rather than drive all the way back to Washington, only to have to make another trip out to Maryland in three hours, Conley drove over to his favorite Italian restaurant, Il Pizzico, to have dinner and wait for the senator. While seated at a small table waiting for his order of pasta to arrive, a nicely dressed stranger walked up and sat in the empty chair across from him. The guy had a very calm exterior. His presence drew a very curious look from Conley. "Can I help you?"

"Yes you can, Marcus," the stranger said.

"Do I know you?"

"How often do you and the senator make these trips out from the capital?"

Once, twice a week?"

"You must have me mistaken with someone else."

"You've worked for the senator for three years, ever since you graduated from Georgetown. And quiet as it's kept, you developed quite a reputation for hacking into computers. You're a newlywed, married almost a year, you have a mortgage, and between you and your lovely wife, a pile of student loan debt. But the thing that stands out most about you, is your fierce loyalty to your boss," the stranger said, staring across at Conley in a peculiar sense.

“Who are you?”

“I’m here to help you help yourself and your boss avoid any uncomfortable situations.”

“Why don’t you get to the point, or find yourself another table.”

“I like your attitude. So here’s what I know, the owner of the house you dropped the senator off at, recently paid off the balance of the mortgage, as well as all back taxes, totaling nearly \$475 thousand. The owner of the house also special ordered a brand-new Mercedes G500, price tag, \$67 thousand. What’s so curious is the fact that the owner of the house works as a paralegal. Think about the embarrassing questions the senator would have to answer.”

The waiter arrived with a well garnished pasta dish and a glass of red wine. Smelled and looked delicious. The stranger kept silent while the waiter did his job. “Quite frankly, whatever arrangement the senator has with this person is none of my concern. However, where the money’s coming from does concern me.”

“Is the senator being investigated?”

“It could very well lead to that if things are not handled properly? What we need here is candor, along with discretion. I need to know where the money came from. If it turns out to be from the senator’s own resources, or perhaps his lady-friend’s good fortune, then we don’t have a problem. But if it turns out the money came from some other source, then I need to know, so I can try and head off a major shit-storm.”

“Who do you work for?”

“It’s only a matter of time before people start asking questions. You know how things work in Washington, one question leads to a thousand. Find out quietly where the money came from, and meet me back here in three days, noon sharp,” the stranger said, then got up and left the restaurant. Marcus now had more than superb pasta to digest.

A white limousine pulled up in front of Momentum, the newest and hottest nightclub in Los Angeles. Steele, along with three of his closest and most loyal associates, Merl, Everett, and Jabber, stepped out. They were on the VIP list of most L.A. nightclubs, so getting in was not a problem. Even at thirty-eight, Steele liked to get loose on the dance floor, and wasted no time getting into the flow of the music and the lively crowd. The high-energy forum played everything from jazz to hip hop, and Steele loved it. He went up to the second level and asked a hot twenty-something Latino woman to dance. Other than gawking at pretty women, his associates mainly watched his back.

On the third level where the live music was playing, Tony and Pamela had Steele and the others under surveillance from the crowded balcony area. “You think they checked their guns at the door?” Pamela said.

“Not likely.”

“Still think it was Victor who slugged you in Zurich?”

“I sure intend to ask him.” For now they kept a close eye on Steele. Trying to

take him in a crowded nightclub would set off widespread panic. People being trampled was not the idea. Steele bopped around on the dance floor close to forty minutes before taking a breather. He'd taken off his jacket after Carmalita proved she enjoyed dancing as much as he did. Merl, Everett, and Jabber, escorted him up to the bar. Steele ordered a round of drinks. "Are they here?" he asked after tasting his gin and tonic.

"Level three," Jabber said.

"Good," Steele replied, taking another sip of his drink.

A beautiful brunette walked up and asked him to dance. Steele got his second wind and went back out on the dance floor. Tony and Pamela continued to watch from the upper-level balcony. "We're missing a bad guy," Pamela noticed, having lost sight of Merl. Tony had Everett and Jabber near the bar, and Steele doing his thing out on the dance floor. Merl was missing.

Out of nowhere, Tony was hit in the back by a bullet fired from a gun with a silencer. He dropped his club soda and staggered back into a table. Pamela had yet to realize he'd been shot. "Tony what's wrong?" she said, setting her glass down and rushing to try and help him. She managed to keep him on his feet. "Tony what is it?" Her left hand brushed against the back of Tony's bloody jacket. "Oh God," she said, trying to help ease him into the nearest chair. A second shot was fired from the same gun, this time hitting Pamela in the upper torso. She slumped toward Tony. The imbalance sent them both crashing onto the table. They ended up lying on the floor bleeding from

separate gunshot wounds. A crowd quickly gathered around the bodies. Some guy with weird hair and a pierced tongue leaned over for a closer look. "I think they've been shot," he said. 911 calls went out from several cell phones. Since no one actually heard the shots over the loud music there was not much in the way of panic. "Are they dead?" a woman in the crowd asked. "I don't know, but they're losing a lot of blood," the guy with the pierced tongue said.

On the level below, Merl walked up to Steele on the dance floor and whispered something in his ear. Steele whispered something back then continued dancing. Police, and paramedics from a pair of ambulances arrived and made it up to where the shooting victims lay bleeding. They were both alive, and a critical effort got underway to keep them that way. Once they were stable enough to be moved, Tony and Pamela were transported out of the club and loaded into separate ambulances. By the time Merl and Everett pushed their way through the dense crowd and made it outside, the ambulance doors were being closed.

With sirens blaring and lights flashing, both ambulances were quickly en route to the hospital. Merl and Everett followed in the limo. Both ambulances were headed north on Santa Monica Boulevard. A pair of identical ambulances pulled onto northbound Santa Monica Boulevard with sirens blaring and lights flashing, and caught up to the pair transporting Tony and Pamela. A white panel van pulled in front of the limo and slowed down. "Go

around this asshole,” Merl snarled. Everett had to wait for a taxi and a slow-moving Ford pickup to pass on the right before he was able to get over and try and pass the van. “Where did the other two ambulances go?” Merl said.

“I have no clue, but I’d lay odds we’re now following decoys,” Everett said.

They followed the ambulances to The Santa Monica Hospital Medical Center.

Paramedics were seen getting out of each ambulance, but only one was carrying a patient, an elderly woman. “Sonofabitch,” Merl said without much surprise.

On the parking lot of a huge office building, both ambulances arrived and stopped about fifty feet from an awaiting medical evacuation helicopter. Tony and Pamela were taken from the ambulances and rushed aboard the aircraft. Within minutes they airlifted.

TWENTY TWO

THINGS WERE MOVING FAST and without complications in the purchase of the Marshall's new home. Since finding out that Josh had indeed made senior partner, Sarah didn't feel quite as nervous about buying such an expensive home. And in addition to a generous pay increase, Josh sprang a second surprise of having received a healthy bonus. Sarah had heard of K Street law firms handing out sizable bonuses, and she believed Josh to be a topnotch litigator, but this particular bonus far exceeded anything he'd received in the past. With the bonus, and what they managed to save for a down payment, getting into the house was all but a sure thing. Josh had even joked they could probably afford a house twice as expensive. That was out of the question as far as Sarah was concerned. He also mentioned, as sort of an afterthought, that he'd someday like to own a second home on the west coast. Sarah brushed it off as wishful thinking.

The day after closing escrow, she called him at his office and said that she'd found a couple of really nice abstract paintings she thought would look nice hanging in the foyer. "Buy'em," Josh said.

"They're expensive."

"How much?"

"Twenty-five hundred each."

"That's not bad. You saw them at a gallery in Canal Square?"

“The one we stopped in about a month ago.”

“Paintings are a great investment. Buy ‘em.”

“We can probably find something less expensive.”

“Sarah, you’re the wife of a senior partner. We can afford to be a little extravagant.”

“The more I think about it, five thousand dollars is too much to be shelling out for paintings right now. Forget I even mentioned it.”

“You’re going to have to get over your shyness about spending money.”

“You’ve certainly gotten over yours.”

“There’s something intoxicating about success.”

“Well one of us has to stay grounded,” Sarah reminded him, though proud of his accomplishment.

“I just want to make you happy.”

“You do that with or without the trappings of success.”

“And I love you for that, but admit it, you want to live the good life as bad as I do.”

“As long as we don’t get too high for our own good.”

“Does that include starting a family?”

Sarah’s face lit up. “I certainly hope so.”

“Maybe we should talk about it tonight.” Senator Tennison’s chief of staff tapped on the door of Sarah’s small office and popped his head in and said,

“Meeting in five minutes.”

“I have to go, but I want you to know that starting a family would make me very happy.”

“Me too.” Sarah got off the phone and carried happy thoughts into the meeting.

Pamela began to awaken following surgery. She was being administered low levels of oxygen, as her eyes gradually opened to the glare of lights all around her. A woman wearing a white lab coat lifted each of her eyelids and shined a small light to evaluate her pupils. They were dilating properly.

“Welcome back.”

“Who are you?” Pamela asked, her voice not at full-strength.

“I’m Dr. Moranis.”

“What happened?”

“You sustained a pretty serious gunshot wound.”

She seemed confused. “Where am I?”

“You’re safe.”

The events leading up to being shot began to come back to her. “Tony. What happened to Tony?”

“Try and get some rest.”

“Is he all right?”

“He’s alive, but the bullet that struck him did more damage than the one that got you.”

“But he’s going to make it.”

“He has a fifty/fifty chance.”

“I want to see him.”

“Not now.”

“I have to see him,” Pamela said, giving an effort to get out of bed. Ample pain medication allowed her to make the attempt. Dr. Moranis put her hand on Pamela’s shoulder to try and keep her still. “You have to rest. This won’t do either of you any good.”

“You can’t let him die.”

“Tony and I go way back. Dr. Nerbonne and I are doing everything possible to keep him alive.” Pamela believed as much. “Get some rest,” Dr. Moranis said, then left the room. Scared and with good reason, Pamela shed tears.

Dr. Moranis entered Tony’s room, where Dr. Nerbonne was monitoring his condition. Tony had undergone surgery as well, but had not regained consciousness since the shooting. He was hooked to a respirator fighting to stay alive. “She’s awake,” Dr. Moranis said.

“How is she?”

“She’s a fighter, but right now she’s worried about Tony.”

“We all are.”

“I told her his prognosis is fifty/fifty.” Dr. Nerbonne cast a skeptical glance at his colleague and friend. “If I don’t express optimism, how can I expect her

to,” Dr. Moranis said. The next few days were critical for Tony. “He’s a fighter also,” Dr. Nerbonne said.

As time dragged on, Pamela was feeling better. Dr. Moranis began paring back on her pain medication. Each visit from the good doctor brought a plea from Pamela to see Tony. Dr. Moranis had been resistant, wanting her to give her body time to heal. When she made her rounds earlier that morning her answer was still, “No.” She popped in later that afternoon and said, “How are you feeling?”

“Why won’t you let me see Tony?”

“I explained...”

“Did Tony not make it?”

“He’s alive, but his condition remains critical.”

“Then why can’t I see him?”

“The reason hasn’t changed. Besides, he’s still not fully conscious. He probably wouldn’t even know you were there.”

“I need to see him, please. Just a few minutes.”

Dr. Moranis preferred she wait at least one more day before getting up and moving about, but given her persistence, she said, “Let me check with Dr. Nerbonne.”

“Thank you.” She left the room, but not before leaving behind a comforting smile.

Dr. Nerbonne had anticipated that at some point, he and Dr. Moranis would have to give in and allow Pamela to see him. His condition had improved, but Dr. Nerbonne still preferred that he be fully coherent before allowing her to see him. Dr. Moranis came down in favor of a short visit to help put her mind at ease. Dr. Nerbonne saw no harm and gave in.

A male attendant was sent into Pamela's room with a wheelchair. "I'm Jordan. You called for a ride?" he broke the ice. Pamela had already managed to slip on the white robe provided by the medical facility. Jordan helped her into the wheelchair. "I think we're all set," he said, wheeling her out of the room and down the hall. From the looks of things, Pamela got the impression she was not in a typical hospital. There didn't appear to be any other patients besides her and Tony, and for the first time she realized there were few windows. Jordan spun her around and backed his way into Tony's room and wheeled her over to his bedside. He was no longer hooked to a respirator, and seemed to be resting comfortably. "Page me when you're ready for your ride back," Jordan said, giving her a small two-way radio. Dr. Nerbonne came in as the attendant was leaving. "As you can see he's not dead."

"How is he?"

"He's made considerable progress, but he's not out of the woods yet." Seeing him lying there Pamela almost seemed numb. Dr. Nerbonne took it for granted they could use some time alone. "I'll check back in ten minutes."

Pamela wheeled the chair closer to Tony's bedside. "I don't have much time so listen up. You need to hurry and get well. We still have some unfinished business to take care of. I know you're not about to let those assholes win like this. I know you, Tony Monticello, and right now you're every bit as angry as I am. You didn't let them beat you in Chicago, and I know you're not going to allow those bastards to get away with this. I can't do this without you, so do whatever it takes to get out of this bed. We owe Victor a major beat-down," Pamela said in one of her lighter moments. But in all seriousness, she took hold of Tony's right hand. "Don't even think about dying on me," she said, teary-eyed.

Conley was stuck in lunch hour traffic, on his way back to the capital after meeting his wife for lunch. He hadn't picked up on any buzz around Washington regarding his boss being the target of a possible investigation. Prior to having the stranger interrupt his dinner several weeks ago, Conley had always known that Senator Harold had engaged in certain indiscretions that could cause a great deal of embarrassment to the senator and to his family, if ever his secrets were to get out. The part about the money and where it came from was a whole other matter, one that could ruin lives. For the past six months, Senator Harold had paid Marcus handsomely from his private funds to chauffeur him around on unofficial business, and to keep quiet about what he knew about his personal life. If any sort of investigation were to take place,

Conley worried that he would somehow be tarred with the same scandal brush for accepting money on the side from the senator. The IRS would certainly start poking around.

He thought long and hard before deciding two days ago to hack into Senator Harold's personal computer, accessing all of his confidential files. The things he saw conjured up images of the capital being besieged by reporters and news cameras. After five minutes of reading the files, he noticed his heart rate had shot up. As for having missed the meeting with the stranger a little over a month ago back at Il Pizzico, Conley had no intention of ever having anything further to do with him. The guy could've been a political enemy of the senator. He was not about to divulge his boss's private matters to someone who popped up out of nowhere spouting a few facts, and who made no mention of his credentials.

What Conley had found out involving Senator Harold's darker side, he made copies of for safe keeping. A lot of what was in the files was hard to decipher, but he'd been around Washington long enough to know that scandals have a way of cropping up and laying waste to everything in its wake.

TWENTY THREE

STEELE WAS AT THE office of his prosperous downtown Los Angeles construction company. He had legitimate ties to Steele Construction, a reputable company started by his grandfather in the mid-seventies. Number two man, Nick Hennings, largely ran the day-to-day operation. Some business came up with an old acquaintance that required Steele's personal attention. His secretary buzzed his phone and announced Arthur Pantazi.

Only one thing in life Pantazi loved more than high-class call girls, and that was custom tailored suits. With a forty-seven inch waist, and roughly six-feet in height, his tailor did a masterful job in making his massive frame look decent in a business suit. The two men shook hands. "Arthur, good to see you again."

"Wealth does wonders for the soul."

"Have a seat." Pantazi hiked each pant leg an inch and wedged himself in the leather chair in front of Steele's desk. Steele retreated to the other side and sat down. "How's the family?"

"Fine. Now let's cut the bullshit, and tell me when I can expect to be as rich as you." His rough edges made Steele chuckle. "Patience my friend. Soon you'll have more money than you know what to do with."

"Rich enough to wipe my ass with hundred dollar bills?"

"With the distribution network you're setting up to mass market Cocaine X,

your wife and kids will be able to wipe their asses with hundred dollar bills.”

“What about the first shipment?”

“It’s leaving South America today.”

“There’s still the problem with DEA.”

“We’ll hit them soon. No one has anything on the organization. At least no one who’s still breathing.”

“You sure about that?”

“They managed to turn some low-level street dealers, but don’t worry, the penalty’s the same,” Steele vowed, opening the top drawer to his right. “By the way, nice suit,” he said, pulled out a forty-caliber handgun, with silencer, and shot Pantazi twice in the chest.

His body slumped in the chair. Merl and Jabber came in from the adjoining office. Merl pushed in a large rolling dumpster. Jabber searched Pantazi’s dead body. He felt a slight bulge and ripped open his bloody shirt. Pantazi had a small recorder taped to his fleshy midsection. Jabber yanked it loose and placed it on Steele’s desk. “Two years I’ve known this piece-a-shit, and all this time he’s been working on a Pulitzer. A fucking freelance reporter. Get that fat bastard out of here,” Steele ordered. Merl and Jabber hoisted Pantazi’s heavy corpse into the dumpster and covered him with tarp. “The rest of the tapes are likely at his home. Find them. Find out what his wife knows, then get rid of her,” Steele further ordered.

Jabber and Merl pushed Pantazi out through the other office. Steele sent his

secretary on an errand to get her away from her desk. He mentioned also that he was leaving for the day. In the elevator he made a call on his cell phone. Everett picked him up in front of the building. Francisco Kaley was sitting in the backseat of Steele's BMW. The two men exchanged handshakes as Everett circled the block. Kaley was charismatic and handsome, but also bit of a smart-ass. "Did the information I provided prove useful?"

"I'd say so. Mr. Pantazi has gorged his last porterhouse."

"Your organization has suffered in recent weeks. From ghosts and shadows from what I understand."

"Nothing's changed, it just took a while to put good shoe leather on a few cockroaches."

"What if eyes are still on you?"

"We took the fight to them. They lost."

"I hope you're as confident about Cocaine X."

"It'll be the biggest thing to sweep the country since disco."

"\$20 million has been wired into your private account."

"Expect delivery in one week, the usual drop and pickup."

"Have you tried it? I hear it's better than sex, like getting a blow job on cloud nine."

"Don't ever speak to me like I'm some fucking crack-head," Steele snarled.

Menacing looks from Steele had little if any affect on Kaley. "No disrespect intended." Kaley had associates as well, which meant a war would

be costly to both sides. He'd lose in the end, but inflict damage. Steele found a way to tolerate his cocky attitude. He was a good customer with deep pockets. Whatever thoughts he may have had of splattering Kaley's brains all over the inside of his car were set aside. They wrapped up their business, and Kaley was let out in front of his black Porsche.

A close friend of Sarah's had raved about a book she'd read titled, "A Day Without Rain," so Sarah stopped at Glover Books & Music on her way home to pick up a copy. She was still getting used to driving to their new home in Maryland. While browsing through the fiction section she came across the title and plucked the last hardcover off the shelf. She began reading the first chapter to see if it would hold her interest long enough to get through 478 pages. As she got to the part where a four year old boy turns up after being kidnapped two years ago, Sarah felt almost compelled to keep reading. "Excellent book," a female voice commented.

Sarah turned and saw a young black woman, maybe late twenties/early thirties, pretty, and dressed in corporate attire. "You've read it?"

"A Day Without Rain', I couldn't put it down."

"A friend of mine recommended it."

"You seemed pretty engrossed a moment ago. I'd say you're hooked."

"Was I that obvious?"

"The book probably has that affect on most readers."

"I think I'm sold."

"Your husband like to read?"

"He does. Mostly nonfiction. How did you know I'm married?"

"The nice diamond you're wearing."

Sarah felt silly for overlooking the obvious. "My mind must be more engrossed than I thought."

"I understand."

"I'm Sarah," she said, offering her hand in greeting.

"Tina," the woman said while acknowledging Sarah's gesture. "You know, I would've thought your husband would be more taken with fiction."

"Why's that?"

"The money Sarah. Law firms don't just hand out half million dollar bonuses for making senior partner," Tina said, turned and walked away.

Sarah had no immediate reaction she was so blindsided. When the initial shock wore off, she started out after Tina. She stopped when she realized she hadn't paid for the book and rushed toward the counter. "Hold this for me, I'll be right back," she said to the clerk, then raced out of the store. By the time she got outside, Tina had disappeared. She looked up and down Wisconsin Avenue, but there was no sign she ever existed. Sarah went back inside and paid for the book.

When she got home, her encounter with Tina still fresh in her mind, Sarah was surprised to see the paintings hanging in the foyer. The same two

paintings she saw in the gallery in Canal Square. Josh came in from the family room. "You were right, they look great hanging there," he said, proud of himself for having tracked them down.

"When did you buy them?" Sarah said, tossing her keys and purse on the small table.

"Today. I found out these were the two you were interested in, so I bought them," Josh said, then pecked her on the lips.

"You spent five thousand dollars on paintings."

"They'll be worth twice that in ten years."

"I thought we agreed to hold the line on thrill spending until after the baby's born."

"I know, but we have to finish decorating the house before our beautiful new baby arrives," Josh said, turning on the charm by putting his hand on Sarah's flat stomach.

"Last week you went out and bought an expensive home theater system, a few days ago you were talking about buying a brand-new Corvette, and now paintings. You win the lottery and didn't tell me?" she questioned.

"Sarah, we've worked hard to get where we're at. This should be a time in our lives to relax and enjoy life. Besides, the BMW has seen its best days."

"We have to think about the baby's future as well. By the time he or she is ready for college, we may have to mortgage the house."

"Don't worry about our baby's financial future, we'll do all the necessary

planning to make sure he or she is well prepared for every opportunity in life,” Josh promised, wrapping Sarah up in his arms.

She couldn't bring herself to talk about the woman she met in the bookstore. She was even more reluctant to ask him about the handsome bonus. And with Josh earning a comfortable six-figure annual income, she could hardly question how he could afford to buy an expensive theater system, or pay five grand for a couple of paintings, or even buy a brand new Corvette, if his mind was made up. But why the need to throw money around all of a sudden? And how did Tina fit into all of this, and why the interest in Josh?

TWENTY FOUR

IN CELEBRATION OF THE arrival of Cocaine X, Steele was hosting a small cocktail party at his home in the Los Angeles Hills. Everything was on schedule. The first shipment of CX had already been smuggled into the country by way of Mexico. Only a handful of Steele's guests knew the real meaning behind the get-together. Three of the organization's top distributors were also in attendance, each accompanied by huge, ferocious bodyguards.

Miguel Sanchez peddled the bulk of all illegal narcotics along the Pacific Coast and parts of the west. He'd be the only supplier of CX in the region. Frank Botard controlled the Southwest and the mountain states, Reuben Sinclair ran the Midwest and parts of the south, and Francisco Kaley, who sent along his apology for not being able to attend, ran the Northwest, the Mid-Atlantic states, and the remainder of the south. All four men had accumulated long-term wealth from the drug trade. Steele was convinced that without his organization, they'd all still be hustling small-time drugs on street corners. They, of course, saw the organization as simply a means to an end.

With the exception of Kaley, and with a healthy disdain for the government, the others had expressed an interest in filling the shoes of Steele's fallen associates. A lot of power and prestige came with heading what was still considered the most potent domestic terrorist organization around. Circumstances being what they were, Steele no longer felt the need to share

the reigns of power. Running the organization with absolute authority, suited him just fine. He spread himself around among his twenty or so guests, all of whom seemed to be enjoying the intimate gathering.

At a quarter to ten, Steele glanced at his watch, then excused himself from a conversation with a law-abiding couple. He made his way over to where Sanchez and Botard stood chatting and sipping Moet. Sinclair tore himself away from trying to seduce a beautiful redhead and joined the others.

“Gentlemen, at this very moment your merchandise is being delivered.”

“Confirmation should come soon,” Sanchez said, checking his watch.

“To wealth and freedom,” Steele said, raising his glass in honor of the drug trade. As the men were toasting the millions of dollars Cocaine X was expected to bring in, shots rang out from the outer hallway. All three bodyguards, along with Merl and Everett, who were there to keep an eye on things, pulled weapons. Invited guests were uneasy.

Masked gunmen with automatic weapons stormed the entertainment room where the guests had all gathered. Two of the bodyguards were shot and killed immediately. Frightened guests dropped to the floor, some were too scared to move. Merl and Everett shot and killed two of the gunmen. Steele dove behind the Hepplewhite sofa and shot at the gunmen from a low angle. Botard was hit by a spree of gunfire before he was able to get off a single shot. Sinclair found cover inside the large opening of the dormant fireplace. Five guests were hit by random gunfire. Merl went down after taking a bullet in the side of his

neck. Shooting at the gunmen while backing his way toward the large armoire, Sanchez was hit several times and never made it. Three associates not in attendance, including Jabber, who were off in another part of the house, snuck up on the scene after hearing all the gunfire. The four remaining gunmen were ambushed and shot dead. Bodies were lying throughout the room as a result of the deadly shootout. Steele stood from behind the sofa holding the empty gun at his side. From his tight wedge inside the fireplace, Sinclair emerged relatively unscathed, except for having ruined his Armani suit.

Everett and Jabber checked bodies. Among the dead were Sanchez, Botard, and Merl. The two that came in with Jabber pulled the masks off the dead gunmen. "You recognize any of them?" Sinclair said, sticking his gun back in the holster he wore beneath his jacket.

"No. A bunch of hired guns," Steele said. He walked over and stood over the bodies of Sanchez and Botard. Someone had sent a team of killers into his home, and he had a pretty good idea who was behind it. His cell phone rang. News that the first shipment of CX never arrived, all but guaranteed more bloodshed. "Tell me what happened."

Less than an hour ago, the driver had reported that he was in route, and that everything was on schedule. "I waited at the drop point but he never showed."

"Have you heard from him since?"

"Not a word."

"Find out what happened and get back to me," Steele said, then shut the phone

off. "Find Kaley, get the truth about what took place in my home tonight, and find out what happened to the shipment," he said to Everett and Jabber.

Around midnight, six masked and well-armed men dressed in black and wearing night vision, scaled the wall surrounding Kaley's Hollywood Hills home. Two ferocious Dobermans came charging out of the shadows as the men scurried across the grounds of the two and a half acre property. Two shots fired from guns with silencers put the attack dogs down. The six split up in pairs. After killing the alarm system, access to the house was gained from three entry points, from the rear, and from the north and south. A search of the lower level turned up nothing. Four of the six crept up the winding staircase. Room by room they covered the upstairs. A peek inside one of five bedrooms turned up two people in bed sleeping. The four converged on the room and entered quietly. Two gunmen stood on each side of the bed. Night vision was no longer needed. Both gunmen nearest the couple produced miniature flashlights. The man and woman asleep in the bed were hit in the face with a beam of bright light. "Juno," the woman sort of yelped. The guy sat up when he realized there were intruders. "Easy," the gunman to his left holding the light said.

Barely able to make out what was happening with the light shining in his face, Juno caught glimpses of the barrel of a gun being pointed at him. The naked woman in bed next to him clutched the covers and kept her eyes closed.

She didn't want to see anything, especially the grim reaper. "Where's Kaley?"

"Out of town," Juno said, trying to shield his eyes from the light.

"Where?"

"He didn't say where he was going or when he'd be back."

"You hold his balls so they don't get bruised. Try again."

"I'm telling you what I know."

"Let's try another question. What happened to the shipment that never made it to San Diego?"

"You got \$20 million of our money. Along with that comes the responsibility for delivering the product. Killing me does nothing to change the equation."

"You're right," the gunman asking the questions said. He turned off the flashlight and peppered Juno with multiple shots. The woman squirmed from Juno's dead body collapsing in the bed next to her. She fought the urge to scream. "You have one chance to see the sunrise. If you know where Kaley is, now would be a good time to tell us," the gunman to the right shining the light said.

"I heard Juno on the phone with him earlier. He mentioned something about Palm Beach, in Florida I believe."

The gunman shut off the light. "You did good," he said, then sprayed her body with bullets.

Out of the blue Sarah called an old girlfriend of hers and invited her to

lunch. They hadn't seen each other in nearly a year. Since her friend, Robin Chase, owned a small stationary store over on Massachusetts Avenue, they decided to meet at the French restaurant, La Colline, on North Capital Street. Sarah had already been seated by the time Robin arrived five minutes late. She apologized as Sarah stood and the two embraced. A last minute order from one of her biggest customers had held her up. Sarah dismissed Robin's tardiness without giving it a second thought.

The two spent the first fifteen minutes ordering lunch and catching up. Sarah had first met Robin at a dinner party two years ago. It was a typical Washington event, a gathering of mostly lawyers, lobbyist, and political types. "You miss not practicing law?" Sarah asked over her bouillabaisse. "I really don't. One lawyer in the family's enough," Robin said over a bowl of onion soup. "It took courage to walk away from a high-powered Washington law firm to run your own small business." "I simply lost interest in the courtroom. Running the store makes me happy." "What about Paul, any plans to give up law?" "None whatsoever. The courtroom is his playground." "Is it still Hamilton, Atkins & Chase?" "Almost a year and a half now." "I imagine he was excited to make senior partner?" "His dream come true." The waiter came over to check on them. Everything

was to their liking. "What about Josh, still with Van Dien & Wynters?"

"Three years."

"Any whispers of him making full partner?"

"As a matter of fact, he just made senior partner."

"Van Dien, Wynters & Marshall, I like it."

Sarah smiled and said, "The bonus was sure nice."

"Bonus for what?"

"Making partner."

"The only bonuses Paul's ever received have been related to the clients he's brought to the firm."

"No bonus for making partner?"

"I wish. My old law firm never handed out bonuses for making partner either."

There was a slight hitch in the way Sarah tidied her mouth with the napkin.

"Josh's firm gave him a bonus for making partner?" Robin said.

"A weekend getaway at the Plaza in New York."

"To go with a nice milestone, not bad." The time got away and the two parted company outside the restaurant, but not before promising to get together again real soon.

TWENTY FIVE

ARRIVING ON SCHEDULE ABOARD a commercial airliner, Everett and Jabber stepped off the plane in West Palm Beach, Florida at 10:45 in the a.m. Meeting them at West Palm Beach International Airport was an all-around guy from the area named Jurgen. "Where is he?" Jabber said. "At his home near the beach." Jabber and Everett followed Jurgen out to a tan SUV. Another jackhammer for the organization named Mateer was sitting behind the wheel. Jurgen passed an aluminum briefcase over the seat to Everett sitting in the rear of the truck. Inside were two Ruger P12.45 handguns, clips, silencers, and one highly explosive device.

Once they got to Kaley's summer home in West Palm Beach, Jabber wanted to go in right away and get him. Take a hard, mean, and particularly nasty approach to killing him. Everett was gearing up to do the same. A call came in on Jurgen's cell phone. Turned out Kaley was having lunch at Cafe l'Europe. Mateer knew the location. When they arrived he parked about fifty yards from the esplanade, where Jurgen raised a pair of binoculars and spotted a white Benz parked near the restaurant, and a driver sitting inside. "There's one waiting in the white Benz, possibly two more with him inside." "Time to rain on his parade," Jabber said, getting out and heading toward the parked Mercedes.

The careless driver made it easy by leaving the passenger door unlocked.

Jabber slipped inside and shot him once in the chest. Mateer pulled up and Everett and Jurgen jumped out. Everett opened the door of the Benz and caught the driver's slumping body. Jurgen gave the bomb to Jabber, then helped shove the driver inside the SUV, hopped back inside along with Everett, and Mateer drove away. Jabber took the driver's place behind the wheel of the Benz.

Thirty-five minutes went by. Kaley finally came out of the restaurant with a gorgeous Latino woman he'd met in a nightclub a few days ago. Behind them were two guys no doubt carrying guns. Jabber set the timer on the bomb for ten minutes and stuck it inside the glove box. When they got to the car, Kaley waved the men off. They walked across the esplanade to another parked car. He and his lady-friend kissed outside the Benz. The kissing continued once they were inside. Neither paid much attention to the driver sitting up front. Jabber hit the automatic door locks and turned and pointed his gun at Kaley. "I never liked you," he said. Kaley's friends across the esplanade in the other car were smoking cigarettes and talking about the huge tits on his girlfriend. Everett walked up and capped them both in the head.

Inside the Benz, Kaley was getting nervous staring at Jabber's gun. "Why did you send the shooters?" Jabber said.

"Shooters? What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Did I mention that I never liked you?"

"I had nothing to do with ordering a hit on Victor."

“Who said the hit was on Victor?”

“Why else would you be here?”

“Someone jacked the shipment of CX, you know anything about it?”

“Why would I pay \$20 million for something I planned to steal?”

“Guess we’ll never know,” Jabber said, displaying his intense dislike for Kaley by shooting him once in the head and chest. He turned the gun on the girlfriend and shot her once in the head.

With his wife’s twenty-fourth birthday arriving in three days, Conley was running out of time to buy her a nice gift. Last minute shopping was his Achilles’ heel. He took a half-day off from work and drove over to Mazza Gallerie. In the span of an hour he made the rounds to all the high-end stores but nothing caught his eye. Curiosity steered him into the glitzy jewelry store, Pampillonia. Everything sparkled and seemed pricey. He waved the salesperson off and browsed the showcase. A beautiful diamond and sapphire necklace grabbed his attention. The salesperson inched closer. Conley kept browsing, but wound up coming back to the necklace. “Your wife would love such a fine piece of jewelry,” the guy now standing next to him said. Conley recognized him from Il Pizzico.

The guy browsed a bit and quietly left the store. Him showing up like this, Conley somehow didn’t believe was mere coincidence. He charged \$482.00 for the necklace to his Visa card and left the store. The guy was standing

across from Pampillonia munching on a large pretzel. Conley thought about ignoring him, but instead walked across to where the guy was standing. "You certainly have a way of showing up out in the oddest places," Conley said.

"We must have missed each other at Pizzico," the guy said as he started walking. Not all that sure why, Conley walked alongside of him. "Who exactly are you?"

"Someone who tries to prevent disasters from occurring."

"You have a name?"

"John."

Conley didn't buy the easy name he tossed out, but for now, whatever. "And you work for...?"

"Everyone's best interest. You were supposed to find out some information to help me prevent a potential situation."

"I didn't find out anything."

"Then everything should work out," John said, turned and headed off toward the exit. He stopped after taking only a few steps. "Never underestimate how intrusive and unforgiving public scrutiny can be," he said, took another bite of his pretzel and continued walking.

Just like that, Conley thought it might not be such a bad idea to trust this guy. He caught up with John and said, "Meet me here tomorrow, at noon, I'll give you a copy of what I have."

"Tomorrow then," John said, and disappeared in the crowd.

Sitting in a white BMW Roadster, parked outside West Palm Beach International Airport, Tony and Pamela had both recovered nicely from their gunshot wounds. They watched the black Lexus pull up and stop in front of the American Airline check-in. Jabber and Everett got out and went inside the terminal. "Think he's dead?" Pamela asked.

"Dead as dead can be."

"Think he told them anything?"

"No. He knew they'd kill him either way."

"Victor Steele should feel pretty good about himself."

"Like the big dog on the block."

Watching the SUV that dropped off Everett and Jabber drive away, Tony and Pamela got out and headed inside the terminal. "What about the car?" Pamela said. She looked back and saw a guy driving off in the Roadster. "Never mind." They flew back to Los Angeles aboard a chartered jet. Jabber and Everett's flight got delayed, so Tony and Pamela ended up arriving back in LA twenty minutes ahead of them. A silver Mustang was waiting. They drove to the Hotel Bel Air, where Steele was staying while the shootout that took place at his home was under investigation by local authorities. He'd described the shooting, along with other eyewitnesses, as a home invasion with the motive being attempted robbery.

Tony and Pamela sat in the car across the street from the hotel. "Time to

poke a stick at the lion,” Tony said.

“You know what they say about a cornered animal.”

“Most definitely,” Tony said, attached a small device to his cell phone and dialed.

He was connected to Steele’s suite by the hotel operator.

“Steele.”

“A wise man once said, know who your real enemies are,” the bulked up voice said.

“Who the hell is this?...Hello.” Steele put down the phone and picked up his shot of bourbon.

Pamela and Tony watched a Mercedes pull in front of the hotel and Everett and Jabber get out. “The lion’s growling,” Pamela said.

“Somebody’s about to get their ass chewed,” Tony added.

Jabber and Everett walked in feeling good about themselves. “How’d it go,” Steele asked.

“He denied everything,” Jabber said.

“How’d you leave him?”

“He’s done.”

“I never liked that prick, but he’s no good to us dead?”

“He sent the shooters, we’re sure of it,” Everett said.

“There’s too many loose ends. Things aren’t adding up.”

“With Francisco out of the way, things should get back to normal,” Jabber

said.

“How does that explain what happened to a hundred million dollars worth of product?” Steele grumbled. Everett and Jabber had nothing. “Go. Find some answers,” Steele ordered.

Still parked across from the hotel, Tony and Pamela watched Jabber and Everett come out and get in the car. The driver drove off. Tony dialed the hotel and got Steele on the phone. “Thought you were a smart man,” the heavy voice said.

“Listen to me you...”

“Do you know who your real enemies are?”

“What don’t you cut the crap and tell me what’s on your mind.” The caller was gone.

TWENTY SIX

WORKERS WERE BUSY PUTTING his home back in order nearly a week after the shootings. The investigation was ongoing, but authorities had no solid leads in determining a motive behind the murders. Steele had pledged his cooperation.

Annoyed by all the traffic at the house, and with the decorator he'd hired on top of things, Steele decided to drive to the office for a while. In the car he answered a call on his cell phone . "I'm troubled by recent events."

"I know. I'm trying to get a handle on it."

"What about the shipment?"

"No word yet."

"And the investigation into the shootings?"

"Police are still on it. No idea who sent the shooters."

"My advice, make sure you do get a handle on things, and quickly."

Another call came in on his cell phone as he cursed whoever had parked in his private parking space. "Don't take anything for granted," the heavy voice said. Steele didn't waste his breath. The caller hung up. When he got up to his office, he scribbled his signature on some papers his secretary shoved at him, railed against the asshole parked in his space, then headed down the hall to the weekly budget meeting.

Seated around the conference table were operations manager, Bennet

Harris, VP, Gil Sunberg, and the new budget manager, Marilyn Lansing. Harris and Sunberg stood and pumped Steele's hand. Neither of them he wanted much to do with, except introduce him to the new budget manager. Sunberg did the honor. "A pleasure to finally meet you," Lansing said while offering her hand.

"Glad to have you on board," Steele replied, known for not tipping his hand when it came to beautiful women.

At the end of the forty-five minute meeting, Steele chatted with Sunberg and Harris long enough for Marilyn to gather spreadsheets and other budget related details. In mid-sentence they were dismissed with a handshake. "I like the way you handle the numbers."

"It's not exciting, but it's what I do."

"As long as everything falls in the black."

"My job is to see that it does."

Steele walked her out of the conference room. "I was about to grab some lunch, care to join me?"

"I planned to skip lunch and review first quarter expenditures."

"You can't function on an empty stomach. Work will be here when you get back."

"In that case, you twist my arm."

"I'll meet you at the elevator."

"Give me five minutes."

They drove over to Jimmy's, one of Steele's favorite restaurants. He was friends with the owner, so getting a good table was never an issue. Marilyn ordered a seafood salad, and Steele got the white fish with limes. "Food's delicious," she said.

"Best in town."

"I can't disagree."

"So, the breakup with your last boyfriend was amicable?"

"We were at different places in our lives. He wanted to chase his dream of becoming a musician, I was looking for something a little more stable."

"Hard for a man to give up his dreams."

"I didn't want him to, which is why we decided to go our separate ways." The waiter stopped by to push the dessert. Both passed. "So what about you?"

"What about me?"

"No wife, kids. Why not?"

"Haven't found the right woman."

Staked out across the street from the restaurant, Tony and Pamela watched and waited. "You ever think about life before all of this?" she asked.

Tony lowered the binoculars. "Not sure I follow."

"Life before the guns and all the secrets."

"Where's this coming from?"

"Just curious."

"Every now and then. If you're asking have I ever thought about getting out,

sometimes. But whenever the thought crosses my mind, I think about people like Victor, winning.”

Steele and Marilyn came out of the restaurant. It didn't take long for Pamela and Tony to realize they weren't headed back to the office. Instead they drove back to Steele's place. “You've got to be kidding me. She's new to the company, and already she's sleeping with the boss,” Pamela said.

“Job security,” Tony replied.

A beefy guy came out of the house and stood just outside the door and lit a cigarette. Inside, on the way to his private study, Steele apologized for all the repair work taking place. Marilyn remembered hearing something about the shooting on the morning news, but had no idea it was her boss's home. He downplayed the seriousness by portraying what happened as a burglary attempt gone terribly bad. “Drink?”

“I thought we stopped by to pick up some contracts.”

“I'm in no hurry, are you?”

“I think we should get back.”

“You sure?”

“Positive.”

She didn't like being put in that situation. If he was expecting sex, he had the wrong girl. She had a good mind to quit, but needed the job. On the way out she said, “Aren't you forgetting something?”

“Contracts,” he remembered, walked over to his desk and grabbed a folder

from the drawer on the left.

In the elevator back at Steele Construction, Marilyn couldn't resist and said, "Mind if I take a look at those contracts?"

He took in the moment. "Not at all," he replied, and handed her the folder.

She laid eyes on what was inside. The thought of catching Steele in an obvious lie left her feeling somewhat embarrassed. "Everything in order?"

"Seems to be," Marilyn said, giving him back the folder. The doors opened and the two stepped out. "What do you say we have dinner?" Steele gloated.

"Maybe," she said with sort of a smile before turning the corner past the break-room on the way to her office. His office was back the other way.

He'd intended to have his secretary call ahead to Jimmy's, but she was away from her desk. In his office, someone had left a medium-sized package wrapped in plain white paper sitting on his desk. The package was addressed to him, but he couldn't place the local return address. Something didn't feel right. He put the package down and backed away. Again he wondered where his secretary was. He opened the door and bounced her name off the walls of the corridors. Nicole scooted back toward her desk from just down the hall.

"Something wrong?"

"Where did this package come from," Steele said from the doorway of his office.

"It was delivered about ten minutes ago."

"By who?"

“A small delivery company. Is there a problem?”

“No. I want you to go wait in the lobby.”

“I have some...”

“Just go! I’ll let you know when to come back up.”

She figured he’d had a few cocktails and did as she was told. Steele called his man Gruden on his cell phone. He did most of the bomb making for the organization. He got over to Steele’s office right away. Tony and Pamela watched him enter the building. Steele filled him in on the mysterious package. Gruden looked it over. “You touch it?”

“I picked it up?” That told Gruden that whatever it was it was not motion sensitive. He picked it up and looked it over from all angles. “I’ll have to take it with me and get back to you.”

“Fine.” Gruden made sure not to jostle the package too much and headed toward the door. “Call me as soon as you know something.”

“I should have it figured out within the hour.” Steele called down to the lobby and had Nicole come back up.

Police descended on the lake area in The National Mall around two in the afternoon. A body had been reported floating in the lake. Divers fished the dead body out of the water, and police identified the white male as twenty-five year old, Marcus Conley. His Capital Hill credentials, along with his wallet and other personal effects had not been stolen. He’d been shot once in the

head and his body dumped in the lake.

A preliminary examination by forensics suggested the body had been in the water for twenty-four to thirty-six hours. Judging by the crime scene, the chief investigator, Lieutenant Chadwell, believed the victim was murdered elsewhere and his body brought to the lake and dumped.

Forensics couldn't find a shred of evidence in or around the lake to suggest a possible motive or point to a possible suspect. There were no witnesses and no leads to follow. The victim's wife was notified before the media jumped on the story. News of the young staffer's death spread quickly around the capital. Those who knew Conley were in total shock. Senator Harold's office released a statement expressing deep regret for the senseless and tragic loss.

Steele's cell phone rang as he pulled up in front of his home. It was Gruden. "Sorry it took so long to get back to you."

"What did you find?"

"The package was rigged with explosives."

"How much damage could it have done?"

"It was a fairly crude bomb, but it was packed with a shit-load of small nails.

If the blast had gone off, all the shrapnel could've done some serious damage."

"Appreciate it," Steele said.

The housekeeper was coming down the stairs when he walked through the

front door. He had her pour him a glass of bourbon. In the quiet of the great room, Steele nursed his drink on the sofa, trying to figure out who would be insane enough to start a war. His cell phone rang. Again it was Gruden. "I forgot to mention the return address on the package."

"What about it?"

"A few years back a job was carried out using the same address."

"What are you saying?"

"The address is bogus the way it's written. The letters in the street name and the numbers are switched around."

"Meaning?"

"That's Jabber's father's old address."

"I still don't follow."

"It's a twisted story. Jabber's old man used to beat his mother. The last time he nearly killed her. Jabber had me show him how to make a special package to send to his father. He used the same address twice, only he changed the letters and numbers around in the return address, the same return address on the package sent to you."

Steele nearly crushed the glass in bare hand. "Everett knew about the address also. The two of them used it on deliveries sent to old enemies."

"Thanks for getting back to me."

"You need me for anything?"

"I'll let you know."

Steele sat quietly sipping bourbon while mulling over what he'd just found out. He tried piecing together a possible linkage between the missing drugs, two failed attempts on his life, and two of his most reliable foot soldiers.

Across the street from Steele's home, again Tony and Pamela were waiting. A call came in on his cell phone. "The walls are closing in," the caller advised. The call ended.

Tony raised the binoculars and said, "It's starting."

"I can't wait," Pamela replied.

Sarah stopped by the law firm of Van Dien, Wynters, & Marshall, to pick up Josh. His car was in the shop for the second time within the past month. Josh was stuck in a meeting so his secretary invited Sarah to wait in his office. She was only mildly attractive, so Sarah could smile and mean it. While looking around his new office, she noticed what appeared to be an address book sitting on Josh's desk.

With the door closed, Sarah went over and started flipping through the pages. She came across a receipt from a recent transaction at the D.C. Bank in Maryland tucked between the pages. It showed some sort of withdrawal in the amount of \$30 thousand, with a current balance of \$75 thousand. Not only did Sarah not know anything about the money, she didn't realize Josh had opened a separate account at a different bank.

She heard his voice outside the door and quickly put the receipt back where

she found it and closed the book. When Josh came in she was over sitting on the leather couch. "Sorry I'm running late."

"It's okay, I just got here." Josh stuck the address book in the right drawer of his desk, threw some papers in his briefcase and they left the office. "Any word on when your car will be ready?" Sarah asked during the drive home.

"Tomorrow afternoon. The mechanic also said the transmission's going out."

"How much would a new one cost?"

"It's not worth the investment. I've decided to go for the Vette."

"Have you checked out the financing on a car like that?"

"A client put me in touch with a dealer who's willing to cut me a sweet deal."

At least now she understood what the \$30 thousand withdrawal was for. She figured Josh had decided to make a few payments rather than pay the full amount for the Corvette in cash. That way everything would seem normal. Sure enough his hard work would eventually earn him yet another generous bonus, and just like that, no more car payments. She wanted to come right out and ask him where all the money was coming from, but it never seemed the right moment. The more she found out the more reluctant she was to bring it up.

Sound asleep at his home in Brentwood, Jabber had no idea someone had broken in. A man with his face covered and wearing dark clothing could hear loud snoring from just down the hall. He entered the room and crept over and

doused the covers with a concoction of water, sugar, and Tobasco, from a small flask, leaving a trail as he backed his way out of the room. Jabber continued to snore. A second masked intruder appeared at the door with a snarling pit bull restrained on a leash. He allowed the pit bull to pick up the scent from the trail, and as the animal's aggression nearly pulled him inside the room, he turned him loose and closed the door.

Jabber woke up screaming from the dog's razor sharp teeth ripping into the flesh of his right shoulder. He managed to turn over onto his back and tried to defend himself against the savage attack. So surprised by what was happening, he couldn't even comprehend what sort of animal it was. His right arm was literally being gnawed off by the pit bull's gnashing teeth. Flesh was being ripped from bone. He punched the dog as hard as he could with his clenched left fist, but that only worsened the attack.

Jabber was close to going into shock from the nauseating pain. The only relief came when the pit bull let go of his arm and bit the tip of his nose. He got both hands around the dog's neck in trying to fend off more damage to his face, but his right arm was practically useless. He thought about his gun on the table to the right of the bed, but the fierce attack wouldn't let up to allow him to get to it. The pit bull got loose and ripped at more flesh.

Everett pulled up to the garage of his West Los Angeles condo around

three in the morning. As soon as he had clearance he pulled his Porsche inside. When the garage door got about a quarter of the way down, a sniper's bullet broke through the back windshield and struck him in the back of the head. The shot carried no sound. He slumped forward, but not with enough weight to blare the horn. The door closed and the light went out.

Jabber's girlfriend showed up at his place to surprise him. She had a key and let herself in. The downstairs was quiet, so she assumed he was upstairs still sleeping. When she got to his bedroom door, she knocked and said, "Room service." She pushed the door open and popped her head inside. Good thing she hadn't had breakfast. The bed-linen was disheveled and bloody. Jabber lay dead atop the covers with both eyes open.

Besides his mangled right arm, he had deep bite wounds to his face, neck, and chest. Missing in some areas were chunks of his flesh. In his left hand he clutched a .45 caliber handgun. On the floor next to the bed the pit bull lay dead. She ran screaming from the room back down the stairs and called the police.

TWENTY SEVEN

STEELE TAPPED ON THE open door to Marilyn's office and said,

"Busy?"

"Finally I'm getting caught up on the backlog of site reviews."

"The last budget manager was not quite as thorough."

"I'm not sure how I should take that."

"From what I hear, you've done a great job making sure everything's up to speed."

"And you stopped by to tell me that?"

"Actually I stopped by to invite you to dinner."

"I think it's best we keep our relationship strictly professional."

"You're worried about what people might think?"

"Aren't you?"

"I wouldn't be where I am if I did. But I have no problem with discretion."

She tapped her pen and gave it some thought. She also tried to ignore the fact that she was attracted to him as well. She couldn't. Steele got exactly what he came for and let Marilyn get back to work.

He had a quick stop to make at the Los Angeles Hilton and Towers and left the office before noon. In the lobby of the hotel he waited next to a pay phone. Several times he glanced at his watch. The call finally came. "Is this the Ramada Inn?" the male voice on the other end said.

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“What number did you dial?” Steele replied.

“The merchandise will arrive on schedule. The extra precautions are in place.”

“Let me know when it reaches the promise land.”

“I’ll be in touch.”

Sarah took an extra hour for lunch and drove to the D.C. Bank in Maryland. She sat in her late model Volvo on the parking lot for nearly ten minutes trying to work up enough nerve to go inside. Since she was Josh’s wife, she figured she was entitled to know about any secret bank accounts. She couldn’t possibly drive back to Washington without having gone in, so she got out and went inside the bank.

Four customers were ahead of her in the teller line. When Sarah’s turn came to be waited on, she walked up to the open window and flashed an amiable smile. “My husband has an account here, and I’d like to get some deposit information.”

“Is your name on the account?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Do you have the account number?”

“I don’t.”

“What’s your husband’s name?”

“Joshua Marshall.”

“Middle initial?”

“E for Edward.”

“His is the only name on the account.”

“As his wife do I have access to the funds?”

“I’m afraid not. Your name would actually have to be on the account to have access. However, there is a beneficiary listed on the account.”

“Who?”

“May I see some identification?”

Sarah produced her wallet and showed the teller her driver’s license without taking it out of the see-through compartment. “Sarah M. Marshall is the beneficiary listed.”

“As such do I have access to the account?” The question drew an ambiguous look from the teller. “All I want to find out is the date the account was opened, and whether or not you have record of where the initial deposit came from.”

The teller got on the phone and tried to reach her supervisor. She was at lunch.

“It’s very important that I find out,” Sarah said, producing her marriage license and birth certificate to further prove who she was.

Almost positive Sarah had some legal rights to the account, the teller didn’t see much harm in answering a few questions. “It looks like the account was opened June 14th of this year, with funds transferred from a bank in the Cayman Islands.” Sarah didn’t want to risk raising eyebrows, so she backed off asking any further questions. “Thanks for your help,” she said, then left the bank.

On the way back to her car, Sarah noticed someone sitting on the passenger side of the only Volvo parked on the half-empty parking lot. She approached with caution from the driver's side while trying to identify who the person was who'd broken into her car. The closer she got she saw that it was a woman, a black woman. In fact it was Theresa, no Tina, from the bookstore. Sarah opened the driver's side door and said, "What are you doing in my car?" "Your husband's in a lot of trouble Sarah." Given what she'd found out, Sarah had no room to doubt Tina's assertion. She got in and closed the door. "Who are you?"

"I'm here to offer your husband a way out."

"Out of what?"

"If he agrees to return the money, immediately, the entire matter goes away. He can keep what he's already spent, the down payment on the house, the paintings, the car, but that's it, the rest of the money has to be returned to avoid disastrous consequences."

"Is Josh under investigation? Where did the money come from?"

"This is a critical time for the both of you. The offer to return the money is good for thirty-six hours," Tina said, then opened the door and got out. "Think about your unborn child, Sarah," she said, then walked away. Tina crossed the street from the bank and disappeared around the side of a small coffee shop.

While driving back to D.C., Sarah was becoming more and more frightened, wondering what Josh was mixed up in. And with a baby on the

way, she worried what it all might mean to their son or daughter's future.

Steele picked Marilyn up at her home and the two drove to Citrus for dinner. After dining on lobster and sauteed salmon, they decided to skip dessert and drive over to the newly renovated Stringfellows to do some dancing. Marilyn was proving to be the kind of woman Steele could see himself getting serious about. After a few hours of dancing and being the perfect gentleman, he drove her home. "I had a great time," Marilyn said while standing outside of her door.

"Why does it have to end?" he said, playing his hand by leaning in to kiss her.

"You sure you know what you're doing?" Marilyn said just before their lips met.

"Definitely," Steele replied, following through with the kiss. Marilyn went along, then turned and unlocked the door and went inside. Steele saw the door being left open as an invitation to make more of the evening than dinner and dancing. He took her up on the invite and went inside. In a parked car across the street, Pamela and Tony had been on them since leaving the dance club.

TWENTY EIGHT

SARAH WOKE UP AROUND five in the morning and couldn't go back to sleep. After showering and dressing for work, she went downstairs and made breakfast. Josh later came down, also dressed for work. "You're up early."

"It's been awhile since I made breakfast," Sarah said, placing two plates of scrambled eggs and toast on the table. Josh sat down and started eating. "You still make the best eggs." She managed a lukewarm smile while pouring him a glass of orange juice. She poured herself a glass and sat down across from him. "I know about the money," she said, clearly lacking much of an appetite.

Not even lawyer tricks he'd learned in the courtroom had prepared Josh for that sort of an ambush. He picked up his glass of orange juice and took a sip.

"What money?" he said, his courtroom skills taking over.

"The money in the account at D.C. Bank."

"Sarah you're not making much sense."

"Josh talk to me. Tell me what's going on. Where did the money come from?"

His appetite left him. So did words to try and explain. "We can't have a marriage based on lies and secrets. I can't live like that."

"You're not going to like it."

"Is the money stolen?"

"Not exactly. It was more or less given to me by someone who didn't want his

dirty laundry aired.”

“The account at D.C. Bank, is that all of it?”

“No. The bulk of the money is sitting in a bank in the Cayman Islands.”

“How much?”

“Close to fifty million.”

Sarah crumbled a bit. “Who would give you fifty million dollars?”

Josh picked up his fork and ate more eggs. “This is the part you’re not going to like.”

She’d braced herself for what she hoped would be the truth while making breakfast. “The money came from your boss.”

“What? Josh what are you talking about?”

“That story you told me a few years back, about Senator Tennison once making light of maybe having to arrange the kidnapping of one of his own daughters as a means to fuel public sympathy, to reverse his slumping poll numbers in his first bid for reelection.”

“Yeah, and,” Sarah said, confused as to the relevancy.

“Everyone knows the senator’s gearing up to at some point make a run for the White House, so I started thinking, what if Tennison did arrange to have his own daughter kidnapped, and even murdered, in order to start ginning up public support and sympathy for his bid for the Oval Office.”

“Josh that’s insane. He didn’t mean it as some sort of harbinger. He made that comment purely in the context of the bribery scandal that cost Senator

Lundgren his senate seat. He was simply making a statement about politicians who feel they have to win at all cost, politicians who risk everything to turnaround sagging poll numbers.”

“What if your boss no different?”

“It’s not true. What Senator Tennison was alluding to, was how absolutely crazy it would be to have to sink to something so bizarre as having his own daughter kidnapped just to win an election. During a private meeting with his staff, myself included, he made it perfectly clear that if the campaign started to degenerate into an embarrassing spectacle, he’d drop out of the race immediately. And, by the way, the police have had nothing but positive things to say about the way he and his family have cooperated during the investigation.”

“How close are they to solving the case? From what I understand, the police still don’t have a clue as to who was involved.”

“I’m confused, how does any of this relate to you ending up with fifty million dollars?”

Josh washed the eggs down with more orange juice. “I made an anonymous phone call to the senator. I implied that I knew the dark secret surrounding the path he’s chosen to get to the White House.”

“Oh God,” Sarah said, beginning to get the picture. “You blackmailed a U.S. Senator?”

“You can’t blackmail someone with nothing to hide.”

“You have no idea what you’ve done.”

“I know exactly what I’ve done,” Josh said, getting up and putting his empty dish in the sink. “I found a way to get a lot of money out of an insanely rich senator, who may or may not have been involved in the kidnapping and brutal murder of his own daughter. And quite frankly, since he paid the money, that tells me his hands are dirty.”

“Josh you left him no choice. You know how quickly things can spin out of control in Washington. He refuses to pay the money, some anonymous tip gets leaked to the press, and whether it’s credible or not, the senator could suddenly find himself in a media storm of controversy, with all sorts of wild allegations swirling around.”

“It wouldn’t have gotten to that point. If he had flat out refused to pay the money, I would’ve dropped it and gone away. He chose to pay, I remain anonymous, no one got hurt. Fifty million’s a tax write-off for a man with the senator’s wealth.”

“How could you be this naive?”

“Sarah, the whole thing went off without a hitch. We never have to worry about money for the rest of our lives. Our children’s future is secure.”

“You’re being investigated.”

Josh’s confidence took a direct hit. “What are you talking about?”

“A woman came to see me, said her name was Tina. She knows everything, about the money, what you’ve spent, everything. She even knows about the

baby.” This was not the way Josh had hoped to start his morning. He took a seat back at the table. “Who does she work for?”

“I don’t know. She said her job is to offer you a way out.”

“Meaning?”

“A deal. If you return the money, immediately, this entire matter goes away.

As part of the deal, you get to keep what you’ve already spent, but that’s it, the rest of the money has to be returned within thirty-six hours.”

“And if not?”

“The term used was, “disastrous consequences.” He didn’t appear too eager to jump at the deal. “And she never said who she works for?”

“No, but it could be a way of protecting everyone involved. You know better than anyone, if this becomes public, questions will certainly swirl around the senator, and you’ll end up facing some serious prison time. You have no choice but to do the right thing and give the money back.”

“What if we disappear?”

“You mean live our lives as fugitives?”

“We could leave the country. We have enough money to take care of us and the baby.”

Sarah couldn’t believe he’d concocted all of this. She made it clear that running away was not the answer. As time neared for Josh and Sarah to leave for work, he came to his senses and agreed the best thing to do was give the money back. Both agreed that Sarah would wait to be contacted by Tina, and

arrange to have the money returned, and put the episode behind them.

They walked out to the three-car garage together. Sarah reaffirmed her love for him, followed by a kiss. Josh returned the love, got into his newly repaired BMW and headed to work. Sarah backed the Volvo out and also headed toward the haze of Washington.

TWENTY NINE

LONG AFTER SUNSET, A ten-foot cargo van, loaded with the second shipment of Cocaine X, made its way to a vacant warehouse in the small mining town of Julian, San Diego. A black Mercedes carrying four associates of the organization followed at a reasonable distance. They were along as added security. The passenger in the van got out carrying a rather large metal case and went inside the warehouse, where four huge SUVs were arrayed in a semicircle. Parking lights were on.

An old rusted out fifty gallon drum had been moved to the center. Near the ceiling of the warehouse, the glow from the full-moon washed in through the large windows. Sinclair emerged along with his bodyguard from the black Lincoln Navigator. The bodyguard walked over and placed a battery powered fluorescent light atop the drum. Drug bosses that had taken over drug turfs formally run by Sanchez, Botard, and Kaley, all emerged from the other SUVs. They were also watched over by menacing bodyguards. The passenger from the van approached the gathering of well-dressed men.

Meanwhile, about one hundred yards from the warehouse, two armed individuals dressed in black from head-to-toe, surprised the men keeping an eye on things from the black Mercedes. The extraction left one associate unavoidably dead. He couldn't resist the urge to be a tough guy. At the same time, three identically dressed and equally motivated individuals with guns

moved on the van parked outside the warehouse. The driver offered only obligatory resistance.

Back inside the warehouse, the passenger from the van confirmed \$80 million in wire transfers to offshore accounts that belonged to the organization. After he was satisfied with the money end of things, he went over and slid back the large door to allow the driver to pull the van inside. There was empty space where the van was parked. "I don't fucking believe this," he said, looking around outside the warehouse for the driver and the van. "Where the hell's the merchandise?" Sinclair said. "How the hell should I know. It fucking disappeared." "I'm afraid that won't be good enough this time." The other bosses stood with Sinclair, also not happy about the all-of-a-sudden missing drugs. "I'll talk to Victor and find out how he wants to handle this." "You do that," Sinclair said, clearly bitter.

Steele and Marilyn had just finished making love when the phone next to the bed rang. Steele picked up. He was informed of the second shipment gone missing. His anger swelled. "What the fuck happened?" he bristled, throwing back the covers and sitting on the side of the bed.

The guy in charge of the money transfers didn't have much to offer in terms of what happened to the van, the driver, and more importantly, CX, worth an estimated \$100 million. And as far as the watchdogs sent to keep an

eye on things, Steele was given even fewer details as to what happened to them. Marilyn sat up showing obvious concern. "I'm driving down," Steele said, and slammed the phone down.

"Victor what's wrong?"

"Sonofabitch!" he blurted, shoved his right arm in the sleeve of his robe and went downstairs to his private study.

He was on the phone when Marilyn came down wearing one of his many silk bathrobes. The phone call was kept short. "Is everything all right?" she asked.

"Sorry for the way I reacted."

"Something happen?"

"One of our largest worksites was severely vandalized."

"Which location?"

"Down in Anaheim. I'm driving down to take a look."

"Tonight?"

"I need to get an early assessment of the damage," Steele said, heading back upstairs to get dressed.

"You want me to come with you?"

"No need for both of us to lose sleep."

Steele later came down dressed as though heading into the office. "When will you be back?"

"Tomorrow afternoon." His driver called his cell phone to let him know he'd

arrived out front. "I wish you didn't have to go."

"Me too." He kissed her with a gentleness that hardly made him seem suited for the kind of business he was leaving to take care of. "See you soon."

When she called at seven o'clock, Sarah was told by Josh's law firm that he'd left the office around five-thirty. She hadn't seen or spoken to him since their conversation at the breakfast table that morning. He was not answering his cell phone, and Sarah had no idea where he was. In the past, whenever Josh thought he might be late he would always call, which made the fact that it was nearly ten o'clock and she hadn't heard from him all the more worrisome.

She tried hard not to allow herself to get carried away with thinking the worse. Josh didn't hang out in clubs or bars, which made starting points to try and track him down an even greater challenge. She called around to all of his friends she could think of, but none of them had seen or heard from him either. And with a lot of attention still focused on the unsolved murder of the young staffer, Marcus Conley, Sarah was getting to the point of calling the police.

She'd worn a path in the carpet with repeated trips to the window. It didn't bring Josh home any sooner, but she couldn't seem to sit still. By ten o'clock the first tear moistened her cheek. She thought about an old friend of Josh's, a former partner at the firm. She found his home phone number in an old

rolodex in Josh's office. "Is Brian there?"

"Who's calling," the female voice said.

"Sarah Marshall, Josh Marshall's wife."

"Just a moment."

"Hello."

"Hi Brian, it's Sarah Marshall."

"Hi Sarah. It's been a while."

"Yes it has. The reason I'm calling, I was wondering had you heard from Josh today?"

"No. In fact I haven't spoken with Josh in nearly two months. Why? What's up?"

"It's just that I haven't heard from him all day and I'm starting to get a little worried." Brian heard the first crack in Sarah's voice. "Is everything all right, Sarah?"

"Yes. I'm probably overreacting to Josh running late. Sorry to bother you at home."

"Call me if you need anything."

She put the phone down and made another trip to the window. She had imagined things would be on their way back to normal by now. Josh would know about the meeting she had with Tina, and the arrangement to have the money transferred back from the Cayman Islands to a bank in Northern Virginia. The money would go into a fund to be setup to assist the families of

Federal employees who fall victim to various crimes. The fund would be named after Marcus Conley.

By eleven o'clock Sarah had made up her mind to call the police. This was so unlike Josh she figured something had to be wrong. She tried his cell phone one last time. Still no answer. She got as far as dialing nine when she heard the front door open. There was some sense of relief as she put the phone down and hurried out to the foyer. At first glance, Josh seemed okay, but upon further scrutiny Sarah noticed he seemed bewildered. "Where have you been?" she said in almost disbelief at the way he'd caused her to worry.

Josh sat his briefcase down and walked toward Sarah. His face looked haggard, his hair a bit tussled. "Are you okay?" she said, noticing further he didn't seem quite himself. He put his arms around her and held her for an unusual moment. Sarah gathered by his awkward silence that he was anything but okay. She embraced him and allowed him time to collect himself. The moment passed and Josh slowly let go and walked into the living room. Sarah joined him on the sofa. "What happened? Where have you been?"

"Sitting at Dulles Airport."

"What were you doing at the airport?"

"I was going to leave, Sarah. I was going to get on a plane and disappear." His confession weighed heavy on Sarah's heart. "Why did you come back?" she said, pushing away a betrayal of tears.

"I couldn't imagine life without you." Her tears suddenly tasted less bitter.

Josh made things right between them, and eventually they got around to talking about Sarah's meeting with Tina. He promised to have the money wired to the bank in Northern Virginia before noon tomorrow.

Steele's private jet landed in San Diego, where a driver behind the wheel of a black Yukon with blacked out windows sat waiting. Three heavy-hitters with a lot of blood on their hands tagged along to the small town of Julian.

They arrived at the same vacant warehouse where the latest shipment of cocaine X had vanished. The driver flashed the headlights twice to signal to the men inside that Steele had arrived. The heavy door was slid open. The driver pulled the Yukon inside and stopped in the center of the warehouse.

"Where's Vince and Majesky?" Steele said.

"Something's wrong," Orlando sitting next to him said.

"Back it up and let's get out of here," Steele ordered. The driver threw the Yukon in reverse and started to back out.

A swarm of unmarked FBI and DEA mobile units pulled up and blocked off the exit. The driver threw the Yukon into drive and sped across the warehouse and crashed through the metal door on the other side. There was no way out. Agents had the entire warehouse surrounded. An arsenal of weapons were trained on the Yukon. The agent in charge blared over a megaphone the intent to arrest the occupants. "Surrender or blaze?" Orlando said.

"Relax. There's no crime in showing up at an empty warehouse. We took a

wrong turn," Steele said.

"Everyone inside step out of the vehicle with both palms facing the lights," special agent Torruso ordered.

"What's the call?" Hassler said, griping a tech nine while taking his cue from Steele.

"We sit tight," Steele said, paying close attention to the way the driver seemed almost too calm. "It's a setup."

"What?" Hassler said.

"The feds must've had some cooperation for things to come to this," Steele said, pulling out his silver plated berretta to illustrate his point. He put the gun to the back of the driver's head and said, "You made some new friends, McClain?"

Instead of bothering with denials, the driver raised the rigid middle finger on his right hand above the front seat. Agents on the scene hunkered down behind their vehicles after hearing the single gunshot.

Three doors on the Yukon swung open. Four men including Steele got out. They were ordered to drop their weapons and clasp their hands behind their heads. They had other ideas, and began a defiant march toward the agents, raising their guns and opening fire. The combination of DEA and FBI agents returned fire, killing all four men in a matter of seconds.

Once all the guns fell silent, the cleanup operation got underway. Torruso made his way to the black Yukon to check on the driver. He'd been shot once

in the back of the head. He leaned the driver back from the steering wheel and removed the wire taped to his chest underneath his shirt. The wire was courtesy of the FBI. It was not the outcome Torruso had hoped for, but one in which the organization made impossible to avoid.

In a car parked approximately one hundred yards from the warehouse, Tony and Pamela were each watching through binoculars as events unfolded. "Is it over?" she said.

"Yes," Tony replied, lowering the binoculars. "Time for you to get back to a normal life."

"A normal life."

While driving up the coast headed toward Los Angeles, Tony got a call on his cell phone.

"When?... I'll take care of it."

"Take care of what?"

"A few loose ends."

"Such as?"

"Life is waiting for you back in Chicago."

"What was the phone call about?"

"It's over as far as you're concerned."

"Is it?"

THIRTY

TWO DAYS AFTER ATTENDING her late husband's funeral, Denise Conley took a taxi to Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport. She'd decided to take her parents advice and fly to San Francisco to spend some time with family. Both of her parents had flown in for the funeral services, but had to leave shortly after paying their respect.

A highly regarded San Francisco cardiologist, Dr. Dubrava was due in surgery the following morning. Dr. and Mrs. Dubrava were against the idea of their daughter being alone in Washington while mourning the loss of her husband.

Pamela walked up clutching a small carry-on and stood in line behind Denise at the Continental Airline ticket counter. "If you want to find out who murdered your husband, wait five seconds then follow me," she said discreetly, then walked away headed in the direction of Starbucks. Denise felt the blood in her veins run cold, as she watched the strange woman in the navy business suit start to blend into the crowd. For reasons she'd have to consider later, she picked up her suitcase and followed the navy business suit. She kept her distance and followed Pamela into Starbucks and stood next to her at the counter.

Pamela ordered two lattes. She paid for both but only picked up one off the counter and walked over to a small table. Denise picked up the other latte and

followed Pamela over and sat down across from her. "Who are you? And what do you have to do with my husband?"

"I'm here to make sure the truth comes out," Pamela said, taking a small sip of her latte.

"Are you part of the investigation into Marcus's death?"

"The investigation has stalled. Have you had the chance to go through your husband's personal belongings? Maybe items from work."

"Senator Harold's office had a box of personal items from Marcus's desk delivered to the house."

"Have you gone through it?"

"No. I've been a little preoccupied."

"You have my sympathy."

"Why the interest in what my husband kept at his desk?"

"We're turning over stones, Mrs. Conley."

Two federal agents showed up at the home of Gwendolyn Vanop, of Rockville, Maryland, around four in the afternoon. A very attractive woman in her late-thirties, she didn't seem all that surprised when agent Musgrove flashed his badge and ID. They needed to ask her some questions about her relationship with U.S. Senator James Harold. She invited them in.

The thought of being portrayed in the media as just another infamous Washington mistress made her cringe. Musgrove dove right in with questions

regarding her relationship with the senator. Gwendolyn acknowledged they knew one another.

“Would you describe your relationship on a personal level?” Musgrove said.

“How do you mean?”

“Are you friends with Senator Harold?”

“Yes.”

“Close friends?”

“Yes.”

“Intimate friends?”

“What is this about?”

“We’re conducting a federal investigation. Your cooperation in the matter would be appreciated.”

Gwendolyn thought about how some version of the truth always comes out eventually, and how lies would only toughen the media’s resolve once the story got leaked. “James and I have known each other for over three years.”

“Your relationship with Senator Harold is of a sexual nature?”

“Yes.”

“Are you aware that Senator Harold has a wife and family?”

“Yes.”

“Your occupation, Ms. Vanop?”

“Paralegal,” she said, as if embarrassed by the glaring contradiction.

“For a law firm here in Maryland?”

“Yes.”

“Any other sources of income?”

“No.”

“How is it you can afford a \$600 thousand home, and a \$65 thousand Mercedes, on a \$35 thousand a year income?”

It was obvious to Gwendolyn that the FBI had done their homework, and more than likely already knew the answers to most if not all of the questions. She also wondered why the female agent hadn't said much.

From her own knowledge of the law, hindering a federal investigation by deliberately lying was a serious offense. She bared the facts about her financial arrangement with Senator Harold, specifically money wired to a personal account setup in her name. The money always came direct from a Swiss bank in Zurich.

To help bolster the investigation the agents needed proof. Gwendolyn backed up her claim with financial documents showing the amounts and dates of the wire transfers. “Any particular reason the senator has been so generous?” agent Bersett jumped in.

“He wants the best for our son.”

Three blocks from the capital, Senator Harold was sitting in what was once his favorite cigar bar, puffing on a Duke of Windsor cigar. He relished every extraction from the finely aged tobacco. Senator Tennison walked up to the

corner booth where Harold was sitting. "Surprised?"

"Should I be?"

"Please, have a seat." Tennison sat across from his longtime colleague and friend.

Harold released three nearly perfect rings of smoke into the air. He almost seemed to bask in his fellow senator's presence. "How does Elizabeth feel about you taking up cigars again?"

"This is my first one in nearly three years."

"Why the return to an old habit?"

"I felt like living."

"When you called and asked that I meet you here, I wondered why."

"I wanted you to be the first to know that I've decided to leave the senate."

"When did you make up your mind?"

"Earlier today."

"You seem comfortable with your decision."

"The path of least resistance, my friend."

"Any regrets?"

"I've had a good run. Time to lay down my sword, allow some new blood to take up the cause."

"What do you plan to do once it's over?"

"Answer for my sins," Harold said, then savored his cigar.

THIRTY ONE

SINCE ARRIVING BACK IN Chicago, and having had many reflective moments, Pamela found herself sitting in her car, in the parking garage of Barrow & Associates. It was her first day back since a lifetime ago. She left Washington shortly after the story broke surrounding the federal investigation authorities believe led to the suicide death of U.S. Senator James Harold.

A housekeeper at the Washington Grand Hotel had found his fully-clothed body in a bed in one of the rooms. A .38 caliber handgun with a silencer was found in his right hand, and a handwritten suicide letter was left on the table next to the bed. According to news reports, Harold was suspected of having major ties to a large drug and domestic terrorist organization. Some reports even suggested that he may have been the kingpin.

Copies of financial records retrieved from a safe deposit box rented to the late Washington staffer, Marcus Conley, provided investigators with substantial leads in tracing accounts belonging to Senator Harold to banks in Zurich, the Cayman Islands, and London. Funds in the various accounts totaled over \$100 million.

The real bombshell came two days after the story broke about the apparent suicide of a U.S. Senator, when federal investigators, in an effort to preempt leaks to the news media, finally addressed what was contained in the suicide letter.

The FBI confirmed the letter contained a personal apology to Senator Tennison, and his family, for Senator Harold's involvement in the kidnapping and murder of Abigail Marie Tennison. A collective gasp was heard across the corridors of power. Unspecified transgressions were also mentioned in a broader mea culpa.

The moment passed and Pamela got out of the car clutching her purse and carrying a leather portfolio. On the way to the elevator the cell phone inside her purse rang. "I stopped by to say good-bye."

"Where are you?"

"Close by."

She hurried toward the flashing headlights and walked up to Tony sitting behind the wheel of a Modena Ferrari. "Nice car."

"Something to get around in."

"When you disappeared back at my apartment, I didn't think I'd ever see you again."

"Seemed like a good idea at the time." She walked around to the passenger side and got in. "What changed your mind?"

"I spent the past two days trying to leave. I couldn't go out like that."

"When I came out of the shower and saw you were gone, I felt strange, like I was suddenly lost."

"Takes time to get back into the flow of a normal life."

"So much has changed. I've changed."

“Meaning?”

“This life no longer fits. They say that out of tragedy comes purpose.”

“Who said that?”

“So I made it up. The point is...”

“Go back to your life, Pamela.”

“How do I do that? The past several months I’ve been plenty scared, but what scares me even more is the thought of being trapped behind a desk the rest of my life.”

He studied Pamela’s eyes and said, “You don’t want to be late your first day back.”

She turned away and grabbed the door handle, tears about to ruin her makeup. “Will I ever see you again?”

“No.”

She opened the door and got out. With her corner office waiting, Pamela walked around the front of the Ferrari and headed toward the elevator. She stopped about five paces from the car, turned and walked up to the driver’s side and leaned in and hugged him. She kissed him on the cheek then scooted toward the elevator. She heard the Ferrari’s engine come alive but didn’t look back. Tony drove past and made it to the exit with hardly a pause and he was gone.

Details of the meeting Pamela barely kept track of. Earlier that morning

she'd received a cordial welcome back from the other associates. Kenneth Barrow had sent out a high-priority email to key personnel, asking that Pamela's privacy be respected, in light of her recent family tragedy.

Deep down he always thought of her more like a daughter than a subordinate. It showed earlier when he stopped by her office to also welcome her back. Pamela made a conscious effort to focus in on the meeting when it was nearing her turn to address her colleagues. She mainly wanted to thank everyone for their support and sympathy, as she tried to ease back into the flow of things. Phil Nantz, V.P. of marketing, formally welcomed her back, then turned the floor over to Pamela.

Just as she was about to speak, her cell phone sitting on the table began vibrating. "Excuse me for one moment."

"A Supreme Court justice was found murdered, three others have all received death threats. You still terrified of sitting behind a desk the rest of your life?"

Barrow and the others had no thoughts of even raising an eyebrow. Pamela got off the phone more energized than she had been during the entire meeting. "I'm sorry. I know this may sound crazy, but I resign, effective immediately. Thanks for all of your support," she said, then hurried out of the room. Shock left everyone around the table speechless.

Barrow chased her down in the corridor and tried to explore the reason behind such a rash decision. She didn't have time or the inclination to explain, but thanked him for being a friend and mentor. He took heart in the smile she

left him with, much like a father would his daughter leaving home for college.

Pamela made a quick stop by her office to grab her things, then took the elevator to the parking garage. She walked up to the passenger side of the Ferrari and hopped in. "Now we're even," Tony said. She smiled. Echoes of the engine racing and tires screeching hung in the wind, and they were gone.