

COLOR ME MURDER
-Sin City

Jerry Bruce

obooko Edition

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CHAPTER ONE

Wednesday, December 22, 8 p.m.

The magnetic latch clicked as Amber closed the shower door while simultaneously pulling the oversize bath towel from the towel bar. Bending over, she let her long, naturally blonde hair fall into the folds of the towel. As she supported her hair with her left hand, she took a corner of the towel in her right and briskly dried the back of her head, gradually working her way forward until all her hair had been toweled. Amber finished drying off and haphazardly tossed the towel

over the top of a clothes hamper as she walked toward the vanity.

Totally nude, she paused in front of the mirror to verify that her bathroom scale was not exaggerating the weight she had lost on her most recent diet. It had taken her a month to undo the Thanksgiving overindulgence that her mother's superb cooking always induced. As she turned and strained to get a glimpse of her derriere, the reflective flash from a metallic object caught her glance. As she turned away from the mirror to see what caused the bright light, Amber had only a millisecond to live.

The finely honed blade penetrated Amber's skull and embedded itself deep within her brain, killing her instantly. The assassin, frozen in the striking pose, did not need to extract the weapon, as Amber's lifeless body limply fell away, freeing the blade. The assassin used Amber's damp towel to wipe away the blood before sheathing the blade, and then turned to the task of documenting the murder.

* * *

Friday, December 31, Midnight

A series of bright, synchronized flashes, followed by loud explosions snapped John to attention and momentarily diverted his gaze toward the window. Regaining his composure, he focused his attention back to the girl.

Her hair, long enough to reach half way down her back, was so saturated with blood it was almost impossible to see that she was a blonde. John wondered if her shocked expression was testament to the pain she felt before death won out. Unfortunately for him, the bloody hair failed to obscure the massive gash that had been opened in her skull.

John could see from the full-length photograph that the nude body belonged to a fairly young woman, probably less than thirty, slender and with long legs. He could not help but wonder, if one were to wash away the blood from her face, would a natural beauty be revealed? Yes, he thought to himself, and she was probably a model, judging by her figure. John was confused by the image his brain was trying to process—a beautiful woman and a gruesome death scene, the two did not belong together.

John thought he was being careful as he moved around the large desk to take a seat in the high backed leather chair. He figured he had found the perfect location to view the fireworks that would be propelled to heights equal to, and sometimes greater than, his sixteenth floor viewpoint. It was perfect, until he accidentally knocked the briefcase off the credenza.

John turned on the high-intensity desk lamp so he could be sure to find everything that had fallen out of the case and onto the hardwood floor. On his hands and knees, he carefully began stacking the various documents on the desktop, while mumbling to himself about his talent for clumsiness. It was then that he noticed the large manila envelope that had been partially hidden by the chair. John did not see the open flap as he lifted the envelope and helplessly watched as its contents, some photographs and a bundle of letters spilled onto the floor. That is when the headshot photograph caught his attention. Picking it up he could see the anguished face and the blood-covered hair. He slowly picked up one of the photographs and studied it for a few seconds before moving to the next one.

Initially John thought he was looking at crime scene photos that the lawyer, whose office he was using, needed for his client's defense. I do not think I could defend someone responsible for such brutality, he thought to himself. He then noticed the half-dozen envelopes bound together with a rubber band. John picked up the stack and could see that the first envelope was addressed in a delicate handwriting, suggesting a female sender. He read the return address and

indeed it was from a woman named Amber Wilson. A cursory glance indicated that the envelope contained a hand written letter. Flipping through the stack, each envelope looked the same as the one before it, the only difference being the postmarks.

As John was reinserting the photos in the manila envelope, he noticed that there was writing on the back of one of them. Curious, he read the message and immediately wished he had not been so nosy. Whoever wrote the note was expecting “final payment” within twenty-four hours and clearly specified that failure to comply would not be well received. The note made it perfectly clear to John that these photographs were given as proof that the woman had been killed “per agreement.” John shuddered at the thought and could feel the sweat beading on his forehead. His assumption that the lawyer was preparing a defense for a client went out the window the moment he noticed that the message was addressed to “Edwin Mayfield,” the same name on the framed certificates that adorned the office walls.

John was considered to be a reasonably intelligent guy, by those who knew him well, but it was doubtful they would have sanctioned his next move. Jumping to the conclusion that the lawyer must be responsible for the woman’s death, John made the snap decision to take the documents with him. First he put the photos in the left inside pocket of his sport coat, and then he put the small bundle of letters in the opposite pocket. Just then Andrea rushed in, threw herself into John's arms, and kissed him passionately.

“Happy New Year, darling.”

* * *

John Waltman’s girlfriend, Andrea Davidson, is employed as a legal secretary for the firm of Mayfield, Abramson and Steiner and has been working for Edwin P. Mayfield for several years. She suggested to John that they gather a few friends on New Year’s Eve for dinner and a trip to her office to view the fireworks. The law firm occupies the entire sixteenth floor of an eighteen-story building that is predominantly occupied by legal, architectural and engineering firms. The building is owned by a banking corporation, which uses only the first floor for bank business, the rest of the building being allocated to income producing leases.

All the partners at Mayfield, Abramson and Steiner have offices located on the West side of the building, facing the Las Vegas “Strip.” The building, being a half-mile away, plays host to a spectacular nighttime view with the bright lights and marquees that adorn the hotels providing a colorful display.

A number of the hotels stage a synchronized fireworks display from their rooftops every New Year’s Eve, when the clock strikes twelve, each hotel setting off the same firework at exactly the same time so that viewers never miss any of the display.

John and Andrea surprised their friends by providing champagne and chocolates for the fireworks viewing which, combined with the wine consumed during dinner, had everyone feeling the holiday cheer by the time midnight arrived.

All the offices were unlocked, except for Mayfield's, so Andrea's guests could take their pick of vantage points. John insisted that Mayfield's office afforded the best view and whined until Andrea reluctantly agreed to unlock the door. By then their friends had stationed themselves in other offices, leaving Mayfield's solely to John. Andrea, in the meantime, was making the office rounds filling up her guest’s glasses and doling out the chocolates.

The private offices belonging to the partners and senior associates are arranged along the outside perimeter of the round building with the support staff and legal secretaries occupying the center core. Andrea made sure that only a minimal number of overhead lights were turned on in the secretaries area, leaving the private offices dark so that her friends could have the best view

of the fireworks. Unfortunately for John, the darkness was the catalyst that triggered a tragic event.

* * *

Saturday, January 1, 1:45 a.m.

“Okay John, now that you have this incriminating evidence against one of the most prominent lawyers on the West coast, what are you going to do with it?” John often talked to himself and joked to friends that he refused to worry about it until he started answering himself. “You certainly have proven your stupidity this time. Why did you take that stuff?” John was carrying on the one-way conversation while looking into a full length, mirrored closet door. He was not seeing what others saw, as John was not the least bit vain, and was not concerned with his appearance. Andrea told him on several occasions that he was desirable, which for John was more than adequate.

One day, when he is almost bald, sporting a paunch and unable to climb a flight of stairs without a rest, it might dawn on him to have a serious look in the mirror, but not now. John is a bit childlike for his thirty-four years, something that initially attracted Andrea. None of his friends, or even John himself, ever thought he could end up with such a beautiful girlfriend since his lack of self-confidence prevented him from striking up conversations with beautiful women. Tall and lanky, John was far from being a movie idol with his almost beak-like nose and slightly protruding ears. However, his personality came out sooner than normal when he first met Andrea at a friends wedding. She could see into his soul and concluded that he was someone she needed to get to know.

John could hardly contain himself, so anxious was he to read the letters he had taken with him. Andrea had a hard time believing that John wanted to go home after the fireworks instead of partying all night with their friends, but he persuaded her to go with the other couples while he went home to his Flamingo Road apartment a few miles west of the Strip.

John took a few moments to hear the inner voice that kept telling him that he did not want to know what the letters had to say, and for once he was going to listen. “I need time to think about this. Yeah, right John, think about it now when it's too late. The time to think was before you stole this stuff.”

John looked at the photographs again and then into the eyes reflected in the mirror, “You really did it this time.”

CHAPTER TWO

Saturday, January 1, 10:30 a.m.

Mayfield had not planned to make the drive to his office on New Year's Day, instead he was looking forward to relaxing and watching football all day while his wife cleaned up the mess from their party. Absentmindedly, he forgot to bring his briefcase home so he could review a deposition before his next court date in a few days. Oh well, he thought to himself as he climbed into his Mercedes 550 SL, traffic should be almost non-existent, and I can get home in no time.

Mayfield felt a chill as he entered his garage only to have a biting cold breeze overcome him as he opened the garage door. Even with the sun brightly shining through a cloudless sky, the day would not reach a high temperature of more than forty degrees.

Mayfield gave a slight wave to the security guard as he passed through the gate on his way out of the Spanish Trail complex on Tropicana Avenue. Making a right onto Tropicana, he glanced over at the dashboard clock and mumbled to himself, “Ten thirty, I should be home by eleven fifteen, easy.” The Mayfield's home was one of the more modest in Spanish Trail, only eight thousand square feet, with seven bedrooms and baths, a five-car garage, the prerequisite pool and spa, and for good measure, a two-bedroom guesthouse. Not too shabby unless one were to compare it to the one-hundred-thousand square foot home that once belonged to the brother of the Sultan of Brunei, which uses up sixteen acres of the valuable Spanish Trail real estate.

The fifty-four year old Mayfield was living the good life that comes from being legal counsel to high ranking political figures, entertainers and some clients that he would prefer not to discuss, but who have been known to exploit the wrong side of the law. A somewhat nondescript individual, balding, slightly overweight and short of stature, Mayfield could walk into a political fundraiser and no one would take note of his arrival. However, when he spoke he commanded the attention of all within listening range, as one never knew when Mayfield might reveal a bit of information gleaned from a conversation with the chairperson of the Federal Reserve Board, or someone of equal stature. When Mayfield spoke, failure to pay attention could deplete one's coffers by millions. Mayfield was not naïve and realized most of those around him would never have allowed him to penetrate their inner circle if not for his influential contacts. He often wondered how many of his “friends” were true in their friendship and not merely taking advantage of their relationship with him.

For all his command of the law, Mayfield had a serious character flaw—he would do anything a client asked, as long as the client was worth millions of dollars in billable hours. This time his greed put him into a position of vulnerability, a position that could cost him his career and possibly his life.

As Mayfield approached the parking structure, the transponder attached to his windshield signaled the gate to open. As usual, he immediately turned right and drove down the lane of twenty parking spaces until he reached the one with the “Reserved for E. Mayfield” sign. His, and his firm's, stature was sufficient to secure the best parking spot in the garage, right next to the elevator. He could not help but notice the temperature reading on his rear view mirror, thirty-one degrees. It's always freezing in this garage once winter arrives, he thought to himself as he exited the car, the only one in the lot.

* * *

Saturday, January 1, 11:25 a.m.

Mayfield gave his wife a quick kiss on the cheek and reluctantly asked if he could help her with the cleanup. Thankfully she refused his help, allowing him the opportunity to cocoon himself in his den. His den did double duty as a home office and was slightly larger than the one at the firm, the only difference being the addition of a big screen TV. Mayfield turned on the TV and clicked through the channels, stopping on the Sugar Bowl broadcast. He knew he could review the deposition while listening to the game without his comprehension being compromised.

It did not take Mayfield long to realize that the contents in his briefcase had been rearranged. His first thought was that the contents shifted when he tossed the case onto the front

passenger seat of his car; then he noticed that the side compartments were no longer snapped shut. Suddenly it dawned on Mayfield that the manila envelope with its cache of photographs and packet of letters was missing. As he fingered through the briefcase contents, a moment of doubt crossed his mind; could he have left them in his desk? No, he was certain he had them in the case as he planned to lock them up in the wall safe at home. As he retraced, in great detail, his actions of the last hour, it occurred to him that he did not have to unlock his office door. When he put his key into the lock and turned it, there was not the familiar click of the bolt releasing. He always locked his door and the night cleaning crew, having previously been scolded, took great pains to ensure that it was locked when they finished their chores. He could only conclude that someone had gained access to his office and went through his briefcase.

The question that came to mind sent a shiver down his spine. Was someone aware of what he had done, and if so, how could they possibly know? His client purposely asked to be spared the details—better to support plausible deniability. That left just one person, the one person who would not want to be associated with the victim—the assassin. The assassin would never provide the photographs only to steal them later, what sense would that make?

Mayfield had the entire weekend to stew over his dilemma. He was at a loss to explain what happened. The only thing he was sure of was that if those photographs and letters fell into the wrong hands, he and his client would never be able to avoid the consequences. His client...he dreaded telling the client about what had happened and decided he would tell him only when there was no other choice. Mayfield deduced that damage control was impossible until he knew more about the missing documents and who had them. He reasoned that the next move would have to come from the person in possession of the evidence. Until then, he was powerless to take any action.

* * *

Monday, January 3, 7 a.m.

Fortunately Andrea was the first to arrive at the office after the holiday weekend. Making her rounds to double-check that all remnants of the New Year's Eve party were cleaned up, she found an empty champagne bottle on a windowsill. She knew that no one would object to the party as long as there was no mess to be cleaned up and that none of the offices were disturbed. Tossing the empty bottle into her wastebasket, Andrea relegated New Year's Eve to history.

* * *

Mayfield was unable to concentrate on the deposition he wanted to review over the weekend; his mind kept straying back to thoughts of the missing photographs and letters. He hoped that once he was in his office his ability to focus would return.

Andrea was scanning her e-mail when Mayfield arrived, earlier than usual. Stopping by her cubicle to drop off a folder for filing, Mayfield offered his New Year greeting.

“Good morning Andrea. Did you have a good weekend?”

“Good morning Mr. Mayfield. I had a great time, how about you and Mrs. Mayfield?”

“We had the usual group over for drinks and a midnight supper.” Mayfield was ready to end the conversation when he noticed the champagne bottle in the wastebasket. “What's this? Somebody has been partying in the office?” He said it with a smile.

“I had a few friends up here to watch the fireworks, that was okay, I hope.” Andrea was sure her boss would not have objected, but wanted to make a show of deferring to his authority, something that she learned early on and which had paid dividends. It worked.

“Not a problem. Various people, including the partners, have done the same thing. As long

as you cleaned up afterward and didn't leave a mess in any of the partner offices!" With that, Mayfield turned and walked toward his office. Andrea quietly breathed a sigh in relief, and then noticed that Mayfield had returned.

"Andrea, by chance, did anyone view the fireworks from my office?" Mayfield quickly realized his question could be misinterpreted, thus failing to draw an honest answer. "I'm just curious if they had any comments about the view, because I think I have the best of the bunch." There was that smile again.

Andrea did not read anything into Mayfield's question and offered a cheerful response. "My boyfriend John. He was the only one that went into your office and he said the same thing, that it afforded the best view."

"Is he the same boyfriend that I met at the Christmas party?" Mayfield was making a great effort and using his court experience to make his questions seem innocent and insignificant.

"Yeah, John Waltman. I've been seeing him for about ten months."

"Ten months! Knowing you, that must be a record! You must really like this guy." Mayfield impressed himself with his composure.

"I think this may be the guy I've been looking for all this time." Andrea was excited that her boss was showing so much interest in her private life.

"I seem to remember talking to him at that party. Seemed to be a fairly intelligent guy. Well, listen to me; he obviously is if he is keeping your attention. I think he told me he was a sales representative."

"Right. John works for a company that sells copy machines. He's more than just a salesman though, he specializes in system solutions, whatever that is!"

"Well now, I hope it works out for you. If you think this guy is the one, then I'm happy for you, Andrea." With that Mayfield went to his office, closing the door behind him.

"So, I'm beginning to see the whole picture." Mayfield was talking to himself under his breath. "Mr. John Waltman has some explaining to do."

CHAPTER THREE

Sunday, January 2, 9 a.m.

"You're putting me on, right?" Darren Poole, John's best friend, was not amused by what he considered John's worst ever attempt at a joke.

Darren, a thirty-three year old, self-employed computer consultant had been John's best friend since their freshman year of college. Darren was known for his persistent nature and analytical mind, requirements in his chosen field. Darren did not present an imposing presence being of average height and weight, but did have reasonably good looks and kept himself in good physical condition by regularly visiting the gym, a task easier said than done with his job taking him on the road with regularity. Darren had one characteristic that drew people to him and enabled him to easily make friends—a warm smile.

"I swear Darren, it's the truth." The fear showing on John's face was either the best acting Darren had ever seen or his friend was genuinely terrified.

“Okay, let me get this straight.” Darren ran through his mind everything that John had told him. “You have not read the letters? How come?” Darren placed the emphasis on the not.

“I couldn't bring myself to do it. Once it dawned on me what I had done, I figured the less I know, the better.”

“John, did it not occur to you that the damage is already done? There is no turning back on this. If Mayfield finds out that you are the one with these photographs and letters, all hell is going to break loose. Besides, maybe the letters will shed a little more light on what actually did happen as opposed to what you think occurred. You may be working yourself up for nothing.” Darren wanted to believe what he was saying, but he was prone to believe that John was thinking along the right lines.

“The only way he can find out is if Andrea tells him. I don't think she would do that. Besides, I haven't mentioned this to her. She doesn't know anything about the stuff I found.”

“You better hope she doesn't. I think now may be a good time for you to show me what you have.”

“Darren, you sure you want to get involved?”

“The minute you told me your story you got me involved. Let's have it.”

John placed his computer bag on the cocktail table that separated the two of them, opened it and removed the photographs and letters. As he handed them over, Darren could see a slight shake to John's hand.

Darren fanned through the photographs, grimacing at times. After he finished, the only thing he could do was exhale loudly, as if he had been holding his breath the whole time.

“I thought you were exaggerating; I wasn't prepared for this.” He tossed the photographs onto the table. “I guess we need to read those letters.”

John removed the rubber band from the packet of envelopes and handed them to Darren. Darren took each envelope, glanced at the addressee and went to the next one. After checking each one he looked at John, who could see by his expression that Darren was stunned.

“What's the matter?”

“Did you notice the addressee on these?”

“Yeah, so what?”

“Jeez, John, you have to pay more attention to the news and expand your horizons. These were sent to a Robert Williamson. Judging by the address, I would say that it is Senator Robert Williamson. Ring any bells now?”

“Holy cow! It never dawned on me that there was a connection.”

Darren arranged the envelopes by the postmark date. He wanted to read each letter in the order in which the senator read them. As he opened the first envelope and unfolded the handwritten letter, he nostrils caught the scent of a delicate perfume. Darren read the two-page letter out loud.

“So Amber Wilson was having an affair with the very much married senator. That is nothing unusual, it happens all the time.” John shrugged his shoulders.

“Maybe so, but Williamson is considered to be the number one contender for the presidency in the next election. If this got out he could kiss his White House aspirations good bye. How many politicians do you know that have reached the presidency after a scandal like this?” Darren opened the second envelope and read the letter.

“Sounds like the senator didn't tell Amber what she was hoping to hear. From her side of the story, it sounds like he must have hinted at breaking off the relationship.” Darren talked while opening the third envelope. “I'm not smelling any perfume on this one.”

After reading the remaining letters, it was clear to them that Amber had threatened to go public with the affair unless Williamson did right by her, which to her meant divorcing his wife and marrying her. She outlined to the senator how he had enough time to get the divorce and after a reasonable time they could go public as a “new” couple and get married. She explained how his career would be better off with her on his arm.

“I guess the senator didn't see it the same way. John, I think Williamson decided that Amber would not make the perfect spouse, especially if she got there by way of blackmail.”

“I can't believe someone could do this, politician or not.”

“A politician didn't. He didn't have the courage to do it himself, he hired a professional.” Darren looked disgusted.

“How does Mayfield fit into the picture?”

“My guess is that Mayfield is the senator's lawyer. Mayfield is known for his high-profile clientele. He must have made the arrangements, thereby putting an intermediary between the senator and Amber Wilson.”

“Darren, I can't imagine a lawyer of Mayfield's status being dumb enough to do that.”

“I would be willing to bet that Mayfield was offered a very lucrative position in the Williamson administration if he made this nightmare go away. You have to remember John, it's all about power. To people like Mayfield, power is all that matters. I've got an idea, let's look on the Internet and see if we can confirm a relationship between Mayfield and Williamson.”

Darren took John into the office he set up in the spare bedroom and pulled a chair up for him next to his, but John refused to sit. Darren clicked his mouse and his computer sprang to life. “We'll do a search on the senator and Mayfield to see if there are any hits.”

After scanning eleven of the most current articles about Senator Williamson, Darren found one that mentioned a news conference with “Williamson and his attorney Edwin P. Mayfield.” The article went on to say that Williamson had his longtime attorney, Mayfield, set up a trust for the senator's estate, leaving undisclosed millions of dollars to charity as well as to his wife and children.

“Bingo. That's the connection we were looking to find.” Darren was satisfied with himself at having added another piece to the puzzle.

“Okay. So now we know that Williamson and Mayfield are linked. Where does that leave us?” John had been pacing the whole time Darren was surfing the Internet.

“Well, it means we can take what we have to the police and turn it over to them. First I want to do some more research.”

“What kind of research?”

“I want to see if I can find out anything about Amber Wilson. I'm just curious who she is, err, was.”

“Why waste time? Let's just go to the police with what we have.”

“Relax. Ah, here's something.” Darren had initiated a search using one of the “people and places” search engines. “Not much here, I'm afraid. It just tells me her age—27, and her addresses for the last several years. All the addresses are in Washington, D.C. so I'm going to search the newspapers to see what they say about the killing.”

“I wonder what she was like. I mean, was she like us, just everyday kind of people? She must have stood out in a crowd for someone like Williamson to notice her. Hey, Darren, you don't suppose she could have been a call girl, do you?”

“I don't know about that, but what I do know is that there is no mention of Amber Wilson in any of the major D.C. papers. Either her body was never discovered, which means it was

disposed of someplace where it would never be found, or..." Darren paused.

"Or what?"

"Or, there is a cover-up to protect the senator."

"What difference does it make? She's still just as dead."

"Yeah, but if it's a cover-up, it means that there could be more people involved. This could have far reaching ramifications if the news got out. Considering the likelihood of people being able to keep secrets in the Capitol, I'd say that it is more likely that the body has been disposed of by whoever killed her."

"So, are we going to the police?"

"Hold on, John. Why don't you go home and relax for a day or two? I want to try to find out more about our mystery woman."

"Don't you think that waiting might piss off the police?"

"Listen. Mayfield is one of the most powerful men in Las Vegas. When we go to the police, we have to be certain that we are talking to the right people."

"So you're going to be checking out the cops too?"

"I think we better."

* * *

Monday, January 3, 11 a.m.

"That's right, John Waltman of Las Vegas. He is in his early thirties, tall and lanky. He is a sales representative for a copier company. I've already had the money transferred to your account. This time, let's do without the photographs; I don't want any more physical evidence floating around. I'll take your word for it, just take care of this—and soon. Whatever you do, make sure you recover and destroy the documents."

* * *

Darren had a day and a half to spare before his scheduled business trip to New Orleans on Tuesday. He figured he should be able to accomplish the software cutover for his client and check it all out in a couple of days. He had thoroughly tested the modifications and had every confidence that the transition would be a piece of cake. At least he hoped so. Far too often these implementations turn into disasters due to the clients forgetting to mention some key requirements. In the meantime he did some research on the Las Vegas police, finding out that the Sheriff of Clark County is also the Las Vegas Metropolitan Chief of Police. There is no police commissioner, per se, that function being performed by the sheriff as well.

Darren managed to piece together enough information to deduce that Sheriff Bart Knowles might not be on his side, having too many ties to some of the more colorful characters in Las Vegas' past. The under sheriff, Harold Miller, now that appeared to be a different story. Miller had bucked heads with the sheriff on several occasions and it was clear that they disagreed more often than not. It appeared that the only reason Knowles kept Miller around was because of his close ties to the media. If he canned Miller, he would lose the best press secretary he could ever hope to have.

Darren added Harold Miller to his good guy list. Having him on your list and getting to talk to him directly were two different matters. It would be difficult if not impossible, so Darren started looking for someone a little lower in rank. He did not have to dig too deeply before coming up with a police lieutenant named Olson who had been assigned to the sheriff. It turned out that Olson, too upright to suit Knowles, was forced to ask for a transfer after the sheriff passed him over for promotion and generally made life difficult for the lieutenant. Darren

decided to add Phil Olson to his list as primary contact in the police department.

Darren called John to tell him the results of his research and they agreed to make an appointment with Olson following Darren's return from New Orleans.

* * *

Thursday, January 6, 1 a.m.

Darren had only been in bed a couple of minutes when his cell phone rang. He had an exhausting day trying to finish up his implementation and was looking forward to some sleep. He had a flight home scheduled for nine a.m. Not wanting to be held over for another day, he decided to work a long day to wrap things up.

"Who could be calling me at this hour?" Darren muttered to himself as he picked up the phone. It was Cindy, his most recent girlfriend.

"Hi Cindy. I know I'm tired, but didn't I just talk to you an hour ago?"

"Darren, listen to me. Something has happened to John. He's dead."

Darren was no longer sleepy; he was shocked into a state of alertness. "What do you mean? How? What happened?" His mind raced with questions faster than Cindy could respond.

"Oh Darren...Andrea called me. The police found her number in John's wallet and called her. He had a terrible accident. The police found an open bottle of scotch in his car and said that it appeared that he had been drinking. He lost control of his car, crashed through a guardrail and went down an embankment off of the beltway. He never made it to the hospital."

"Oh my God. I can't believe it."

"I'm on my way over to Andrea's, I don't want her to be alone. Do you need me to pick you up at the airport?"

"No, I left my car there. I'll meet you at Andrea's. I'll go straight from the airport. I'm already on the earliest flight there is, so I can't get there any sooner than about noon. It's good that you're going over there, she is going to need our help."

"Okay, see you then."

CHAPTER FOUR

Wednesday, January 5, 11:59 p.m.

"What do you mean he didn't have them? Where else could they be? If he had taken them to the police, I would have heard about it by now—one way or another. He must have given them to someone. Find out who and take care of business!"

Mayfield was legitimately worried. Before this latest development he felt matters were still controllable, but not now. If Waltman had given the documents to someone else there was no telling how much the situation could snowball. If Andrea had the evidence, she was not letting on. She seemed perfectly normal, business as usual, and she looked him straight in the eyes when they conversed, something he was sure would be impossible to do if she suspected. Mayfield considered himself more than capable of reading a person's face and demeanor and deducing if he was being told the truth. He did not read anything deceptive in Andrea's face.

* * *

Thursday, January 6, 11:35 a.m.

Darren couldn't manage any sleep in his hotel room, his mind was too busy and his anguish too deep. If it were not for the droning of the jet's engines, he would not have gotten any rest. It was easy for Darren to sleep on planes and this one was no exception.

Far from totally refreshed, Darren was at least rested enough to get through another day. He made the drive from McCarran International Airport to Andrea's apartment on Sahara Avenue in twenty minutes, hoping the whole time that he would not be caught speeding and relieved when he finally pulled into the visitor's parking area and saw Cindy's car. She was obviously in a hurry because she had parked in a way that took up two spots, something she hated when she saw others do it.

As Darren climbed the stairs to the second floor, it suddenly hit him. Probably due to exhaustion, he was not able to single out the reason he felt so uneasy about the circumstances surrounding John's accident. Now that he stopped thinking about it, and let his subconscious work on the problem, it came to him. John hated the taste of scotch!

* * *

Darren persuaded Cindy to go home and get some rest. She and Andrea had been up all night and both were exhausted. She agreed only when Andrea fell asleep on the sofa and Darren assured her that he would stay until Andrea woke up.

With Andrea sound asleep, Darren had plenty of time to think about what happened to John, especially after watching the local news coverage of the accident. Having already shown the first video taken at the accident scene on several broadcasts, the network now focused on the traffic backup caused by workers repairing the guardrail that John's car had torn from its moorings. Only a brief shot of the wreckage being taken away on a flat bed truck gave Darren insight into the severity of the crash. The reporter at the scene stated that the driver must have been traveling at excessively high speed to crash through such a solid barrier and that it appeared the driver must have passed out since there were no skid marks approaching the point of impact.

Most of this "accident" scenario did not hold water, in Darren's opinion. As he ran over the details he came up with too many anomalies, such as the fact that John hated scotch, never drove over sixty miles per hour, and was seldom seen drunk to the point of passing out. As much as he hated the thought, there was only one scenario that fit—John had been murdered.

* * *

Thursday, January 6, 10 p.m.

Cindy came back to Andrea's just as she was waking up, freeing Darren to follow up on a few things, one of which was using Andrea's key to get into the apartment that John had been living in for the last year. If his thinking was on target, there might be some indication that John had been forcibly taken.

It did not take long for Darren's theory to be proven. The instant he walked into the apartment the disarray grabbed his attention. John was fastidious in his cleanliness and never had Darren seen so much as a magazine out of place, yet here he was in an apartment that had obviously been ransacked. Darren poked around the mess, but if anything were missing, he would never be able to tell.

Darren reasoned that whoever staged John's accident must have killed John and then turned over the apartment looking for the photographs and letters. The killer apparently made a

mistake by not forcing John to tell where the evidence could be found, opting instead for the immediate kill.

"This has just become personal." Darren whispered to himself.

* * *

Darren drove back to Andrea's, his mind racing the whole time, trying to put together the facts without letting speculation get in the way.

"Think, Darren. What will the killer's next move be? What would you do if you were in an assassin's shoes?" Darren had used the technique of pretending to be the client when on assignments to ensure a better product. By putting himself in their position and trying to duplicate their actions, he could unearth the details that meant the difference between success and failure.

Before he could answer his own questions, he arrived at Andrea's. The door was unlocked so he just walked in and found Andrea and Cindy sitting in the breakfast nook having a snack. The smell of freshly brewed coffee drew him into the kitchen where he found the coffee pot and helped himself.

Sitting next to Cindy, Darren looked at Andrea for a minute, not taking his eyes off her even as he sipped his coffee.

"Are you feeling better?"

"I think it will be a long time before I feel anything again." Andrea did not have a tear left. "I don't understand it Darren. You know him, you know John never drinks that much. Does any of this make sense to you?"

Darren quickly decided that he could not tell Andrea and Cindy about what John had discovered. He also noticed that Andrea talked about John in the present tense. She had not totally reconciled her mind to the fact that John was gone.

"No, I can't make sense of this. Can we ever make sense of losing someone we love? It's going to be hard on you, I know, but you will get over this one day, and Cindy and I will be here to help you."

"I know you will. You know something Darren, I don't think I'm ever going to be at peace with this until I know why John was drinking so much. It just doesn't make any sense, no sense at all."

Darren wanted so much to tell Andrea everything but he knew he would only add to her anguish if he told her his theory. Knowing the truth would not help her now, maybe later on after she had reconciled herself with John's loss.

"Andrea, the only thing I know for sure is that John loved you more than anything." Darren did not know if his next comment would be inappropriate under the circumstances, but decided to make it anyway. "John confided in me that he was going to propose to you on your birthday next month. He had it all planned. He was going to take you to dinner at the top of the Stratosphere, order a bottle of champagne and pop the question. He even asked me if I would mind if Cindy went with him to pick out an engagement ring. He wanted everything to be perfect."

Andrea showed the slightest beginnings of a smile before a tear ran down her cheek. "Really? I just recently told my boss that I thought John was the right guy for me. I realized at that moment just how much I loved him. Thanks for telling me, Darren. You can't imagine how much this means to me."

Andrea's comment about her boss piqued Darren's interest so he decided to pursue the matter. "Your boss knew about John?"

“Yeah. He met John at our office Christmas party. He and John got along very well. You know John, he gets along with everybody.” There was the slight smile again. “We had a pleasant talk about my relationship with John, it was right after the New Year’s Eve get together. My boss was especially pleased when I told him that John said he had the office with the best view. Mr. Mayfield has a bit of an ego.”

Now Darren knew how Mayfield found out about John. Andrea may have inadvertently given Mayfield the information he needed to find John but there was no way she could lead Mayfield to him. No one knew that John had given him the evidence. Darren felt something surge through his body, unsure what it was at first, before it dawned on him that he was feeling powerful. He was in the driver’s seat, not the power mongers Mayfield and Williamson. Darren thought for a minute about how easy it must be for people like Mayfield and the senator to fall into the trap of being invincible and above the law. Darren figured that since most politicians start out as attorneys, they must think that they know enough to beat the law at its own game. Not this time, he thought to himself, this time you’re going down.

CHAPTER FIVE

Friday, January 7, 9 a.m.

With the knowledge that Andrea had innocently provided, Mayfield had enough information to target John. Darren was sure of that and now he was able to fill in a couple more pieces of the puzzle. He was confident that there was no way Mayfield could know that he had the critical documents, nonetheless, he knew he had to turn everything over to the police. His research made him well aware of the risk should he fail to approach the proper person. Darren could not be totally positive, but if anyone was likely to be on his side it was Phil Olson.

Darren called Olson, and after much discussion, finally persuaded him to meet for lunch at one of the numerous pubs in Las Vegas. Darren refused to go into any detail over the phone and was getting nowhere until he told Olson that he could only talk to an honest cop who would be willing to fight Sheriff Knowles, possibly taking him down a notch or two in the process. At the mention of the sheriff, Olson became interested and agreed to the meeting—providing Darren paid for lunch.

Darren arrived at the pub thirty minutes early. He wanted to make sure he could pick a quiet table with a clear view of anyone getting within earshot. After selecting a corner table, Darren ordered a Guinness stout while he waited for Olson. He told Olson he could be recognized by the bright green Boston Celtics cap he would be wearing.

Precisely at the agreed upon time of noon, Darren saw a man enter the pub. Looking around and spotting the bright green cap, Olson approached the table, pulled out a chair, sat down, paused for a moment to look Darren over and then extended his hand. “Phil Olson.”

Darren shook his hand and responded, “Darren Poole, with an E.”

“Hello, Darren Poole with an E. Is that an E in the Darren or the Poole?”

“Both.”

Olson gave a slight grin. “So what's this all about?”

"Let's order lunch first."

A few minutes later, the waitress saw them put down their menus and came over to take their order. Olson ordered the shepherd's pie and an iced tea; Darren went with a corned beef sandwich and another Guinness.

Darren gave Olson some details on his background while they waited for their meals. He wanted Olson to see that he was not a kook, or delusional, and in possession of a reasonably intelligent, analytical mind. Olson nodded and took it all in, not saying much.

Finally, their lunch arrived and the instant the waitress was out of hearing range, Darren started.

"My friend, John Waltman, was involved in an accident on the beltway recently. His car went through the guardrail and down an embankment."

"I saw the TV reports." Olson interrupted but Darren did not pause.

"The problem is, this was no accident. It was staged to look like an accident. I believe John was dead or incapacitated when his car crashed."

"Whoa, whoa. What makes you think that?" Olson finally showed some interest.

"I'll get to that in a minute." Darren took a bite of his sandwich, chewed for a moment, gulped it down and took a sip from his glass before continuing. "The facts of the accident are that there was a near empty bottle of scotch in the car, John smelled of liquor, and an extremely high rate of speed was involved. All pointing to just another drunk driving accident, all cut and dried and tidily wrapped in a bow. Except for a few minor details, such as John hated scotch—couldn't stand it and would never be able to drink enough of it to get drunk. That's if he wanted to get drunk in the first place, because John seldom got tipsy. He didn't like being out of control. As for the high rate of speed, John would qualify for the 'little old lady from Pasadena' award. I don't think I've ridden in his car when he exceeded fifty-five. If that isn't enough, his apartment was ransacked as if someone was trying to find something in a hurry."

"Okay, let's assume everything you say is true. There is another possible explanation outside of murder. What about him being depressed enough to commit suicide? Isn't that a possibility?"

"Not a chance, Phil. Just a couple of days before, John told me about his plans to propose to his girlfriend. He was floating on air and happier than I've ever seen him."

"Did he propose? Could she have said no?"

"He never got the chance. He was going to ask her on her birthday next month. And to answer your question, she would have said yes. She was very much in love with him."

"All right, I can see why you think it wasn't an accident, and if everything you said can be proven, there is the possibility he could have been murdered. Is that what you want me to believe?"

"Precisely. There is no doubt in my mind. Furthermore, I can prove it, with your help." Darren was going to continue but Olson put up his hand in a stopping motion.

"I want to think about this scenario for a couple of minutes." He finished his lunch and as he pushed away the plate he looked at Darren. "Talk to me about motive and evidence, but if you don't have both, our conversation is over."

Darren reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out one of the letters. He selected the one in which Amber Wilson threatened to go public. Inside the envelope he had also placed the headshot photograph. He handed the envelope to Olson saying, "Look at the addressee."

Darren watched as Olson showed signs of recognition as he looked at the envelope. "Is this who I think it is?" Not waiting for an answer, "Senator Williamson?"

“The one and only Senator Williamson. I have verified the address. Look at the picture and read the letter.”

Olson, even with all his years of experience, could not help but grimace at the gruesome photograph. Putting it aside, he removed the letter, unfolded it and began reading. When he finished, he picked up the envelope and read the return address.

“I assume Amber Wilson is the victim.”

“That's one of the things I need you to determine. It's logical that it is, but when I tried to do research on her, all I got were recent residences—all around Washington D.C. There was no mention in any of the newspapers about her murder.”

“If, and I stress the if, she was indeed having an affair with the senator and if this is her in the picture, then maybe you're on to something.”

“I'm not done yet.” Darren saw Olson's head pop up, his attention turned away from the envelope, with a look of “now what” spread all over it.

“On the back of one of the photographs, yes there are others, was a handwritten note. The message makes it perfectly clear that this was a professional execution. The pictures were proof that the job had been done and the message demanded final payment.”

“This is starting to get interesting. I suppose now you're going to tell how all this relates to your friend. Or should I say, you will tell me how it relates.” Olson stressed the will.

“John was in a lawyer's office on New Year's Eve to watch the fireworks. He accidentally knocked the lawyer's briefcase off the desk. The contents went all over the floor and as John was putting everything back, he saw the pictures and letters. At first he thought it was just a case the lawyer was working on, but when he saw that the message was directed, by name, to the lawyer, he put two and two together. Unfortunately, John didn't think things through and he took the evidence with him, starting this whole chain of events.”

Olson interrupted, “So who is this lawyer?”

“Edwin P. Mayfield.”

“You've got to be kidding. The biggest name in law in this town?”

“The message mentions him by name and John was in his office on New Year's Eve.”

“This is incredible. Okay, so let's recap. We have motive, if it can be proven that Amber Wilson is the victim in the pictures. We have evidence that ties Wilson to the senator. We have evidence that it was a professional hit orchestrated by Mayfield. What we don't have is a link between Mayfield and Williamson.”

“Yes, we do. I did some checking and found out that Mayfield is the senator's attorney. He set up the senator's trust fund among other things.”

“Are you sure you're not a detective, Darren? There are guys in my precinct that could learn from you.” Olson smiled and continued. “I have a question for you. How did John end up in Mayfield's office in the first place?”

John's girlfriend, Andrea Davidson, is Mayfield's legal secretary. She asked a group of us to go up there after we went out for dinner on New Year's Eve. She had champagne and chocolates to serve while we all watched the fireworks on the Strip.”

“So you were there?”

“Yeah, but I was in a different office. Andrea unlocked Mayfield's office so John could have the best view.”

“Did John show you the stuff that night?”

“No, he didn't tell me about it until a couple of days later.”

“So nobody knew he had taken the documents?”

"No one. I was the first, and only, person he told."

"Then the only way that Mayfield could tie John to the evidence is through Andrea. I thought you said she loved John."

"It was an innocent slip of the tongue. I talked to Andrea and she told me about the conversation she had with Mayfield. He was slick. He got her to tell him seemingly innocent things that he used to tie John to the documents. Andrea never suspected that there were any ulterior motives for Mayfield's questions. I'm sure that if John had confided in her, she would never have said anything to Mayfield."

"Does she know about your suspicions?"

"No, I haven't mentioned anything to her. She is in disbelief that John is gone. If I were to tell her how she might have been the catalyst that led to John's death, it would kill her."

"Wow. This is some story. I'll tell you what I want to do. I need to reconcile the identity of the victim. I need to be able to match Amber with the photographs. If I can do that, then we may have a case. The trick is doing this on the sly and without sending up any red flags. We have another problem as well. Is there any way that Mayfield can tie you to John? Any reason he would think that you have the evidence?"

"No, I don't think there's any way he could. John had a host of friends, I'd get lost in the crowd."

"We're good to go then. Where can I reach you?"

Darren handed one of his business cards to Olson. "My cell phone number is on there. You can reach me at any time."

"Here's my card. I'm writing my private cell phone number on the back. If you think of anything else, call me. In the meantime, I'm going to find out everything I can about Amber Wilson. One other thing, I don't suppose you would be willing to give me the rest of those letters and pictures, would you?"

"No chance. I think I can trust you, but I'm not letting those out of my sight, just in case you aren't the man I think you are."

"I understand. By the way, you were right to call me. Anyone else would be beating down the sheriff's door by now, and I don't have to tell you how questionable his associates are considered to be. I'm sure he must have close ties to Mayfield; the two of them have been among the elite in this town for too long. Take care Darren."

"Thanks Olson."

"Call me Phil."

Darren stayed at the pub for a while longer, just enough to down two more glasses of Guinness. He left when he finally realized that there was not enough Guinness in the world to wipe out his thoughts of John.

CHAPTER SIX

Friday, January 7, 5 p.m.

Darren was half a mile from home when his cell phone rang. He did not like to use his

phone while driving, so he decided to wait until he reached home to return the call, especially since he was only a minute or two from home.

Once inside his apartment, Darren's mind started to wander, thinking over his meeting with Olson. As if on autopilot, he went to his refrigerator and took out a can of soda. As he walked into his office he pulled back the tab and had to stop to avoid spilling the contents that had been shaken too much. Darren started up his computer to check his e-mail, all the while trying to remember every word of his conversation with Olson and the tone that Olson used. As he scanned through the unread electronic mail, skipping over the unimportant ones, his desk phone startled him with a loud ring.

"Darren, where have you been? I've been trying to get a hold of you." Cindy was obviously upset.

"I'm sorry. Was that you calling my cell phone? I was almost home and I decided to return the call after I was out of the car but..."

Cindy interrupted him, "Darren, something terrible has happened."

"What is it?" Cindy's tone made Darren anxious.

"Do you remember Bill Adams?"

Darren thought for a few moments to shake his memory. "Oh yeah, he's a friend of John's. I had a few drinks with Bill and John a couple of months ago. John thought I might be able to help Bill with a computer problem he was having. So why are you so upset?"

"Bill's wife just called Andrea and told her that Bill committed suicide."

"Suicide?"

"The police told her that he jumped off the balcony of their apartment, apparently while she was out grocery shopping. They met her in the lobby and wouldn't let her up to the apartment. They took her over to her mother's house."

"Are you still at Andrea's?"

"Of course, how can I leave her at a time like this? She needs someone to be with her."

"I'll be right over."

* * *

"Andrea, what can you tell me about Bill?" Darren wanted to learn as much as he could but the last thing he wanted to do was alarm Andrea.

"Why do you ask?"

"I'm just curious. I met him once, but I got the impression that he and John were good friends."

"Not as close as the two of you. He met Bill through business. Bill called John to his office to discuss buying some new copiers. He was a purchasing agent for one of the Strip hotels. They had lunch a few times and John and I went to dinner with Bill and Sharon a couple of times. I became better friends with Sharon than John did with Bill. She and I talk a couple of times a month and sometimes go shopping together. They had family commitments, so they couldn't join us on New Year's Eve."

"How did their marriage seem to you?"

"They appeared to be very happy." Andrea was too tired to question Darren's motives for asking about Bill. "I'm really tired, I think I'll just turn in early. You guys don't need to stick around. I'm okay now. I'll call you tomorrow Cindy."

"Are you sure? I can stay if you want me to."

"No, you go home where you can be comfortable. You've spent enough time on my couch. I'm sure you need a good nights sleep as much as I do."

“Okay, Andrea. You sleep well.” Cindy gently placed her hand on Andrea's cheek.

* * *

Friday, January 7, 9:32 p.m.

“So you think there's a connection between Bill Adams' suicide and John's death?” Olson was going to need some persuading to buy into Darren's theory. “Frankly, Darren, I think you're being a little paranoid. I'm sure it is just a coincidence, badly timed, but a coincidence just the same.”

“Paranoid or not, can you make some casual queries into the circumstances of Adams' death?”

“I'll see what I can find out when I go to work tomorrow. Until then, relax and get a good night's sleep; stop seeing ghosts in the shadows.” Olson chuckled to himself as he hung up the phone.

Olson may not have felt that there was a connection between John's accident and Bill's suicide, but Darren had a voice inside his head that kept telling him to be wary.

It was several hours before Darren fell into a deep sleep. First he tossed about, sleeping and then waking, every fifteen minutes or so; then he got up for a cold glass of water and walked around for a few minutes. Exhaustion finally won out and he slept peacefully.

* * *

Saturday, January 8, 2:55 p.m.

Darren found it difficult to concentrate on the proposal he was attempting to put together. A company in New York City needed to upgrade their payroll and benefits software and found out that Darren had several successful implementations of the same package. Darren would be able to save them tens of thousands of dollars if they used him for the installation instead of the software company consultants.

He desperately wanted to land this contract; it would mean enough income to give him his biggest year since he became a freelancer. Now that word was getting out about his abilities, he was certain he had a positive future.

“Come on Darren, think only about this proposal.” He muttered to himself several times. “Here it is three o'clock and you've only got half of this done. You should have finished it hours ago. Concentrate.”

Darren finished the proposal, ran it through the grammar and spell checkers, and fired up the printer just as his cell phone rang.

“Hello.”

“Darren, Phil here.”

“Hi Phil. You have some news, I assume?”

“Do I ever. Check this out, I overheard the guy assigned to the Adams suicide tell his partner that the coroner's office wasn't so sure that it was a suicide. They still have to make a definitive study, but indications are that Adams was dead before he went off the balcony.”

“So it's possible that someone killed him and threw him over to make it look like a suicide. Tell me Phil, did they mention if the apartment had been turned over?”

“That was my first thought. I have to be careful; I don't want these guys thinking I'm questioning their abilities, so I have to approach this subtly. I'm going to see if I can hang out with them over a cup of coffee and casually bring up the cases they are working on. If they don't feel threatened, they may fill me in.”

"You know Phil, if Bill's apartment was ransacked, then that means somebody is trying to find the photographs and letters by going through everyone associated with John."

"You catch on quick. Listen, we need to find out how this killer knows who John was close to."

"I don't think the police ever went to John's apartment. They didn't have a reason to search it. When I was over there and saw the mess, I left. Maybe we should check it out and see if there's something that can help us. I'm thinking specifically about the address book on his computer."

"That or his cell phone. Give me his address and I'll meet you there in an hour. In the meantime, I'm going to try to find out more about Adams."

Darren gave John's address to Phil and ended the call. Darren was thinking out loud and pacing, "If John had all his friends and contacts in his computer's address book, that could explain how the killer knows where to look for the evidence. John's cell phone, if I remember correctly, only stored names and numbers, not addresses. Odds are the killer isn't using that to locate these people."

Darren made himself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich before leaving to meet Olson. On his way out the door he stopped, turned around as though he forgot something, and went into his office to grab a USB flash drive. "This just might come in handy."

* * *

Saturday, January 8, 4:15 p.m.

Darren sat in his car for about ten minutes waiting for Olson. Seeing him pull into the parking lot, he met Phil as he got out of his car.

"Hey Phil. Did you find out anything more about Adams?"

"I'll tell you inside. Do you have the key?"

"Yeah."

Darren unlocked the door and as they walked in Phil told him that the Adams apartment had been turned upside down as well, with nothing valuable stolen and Adams' wallet intact, complete with cash and credit cards.

"Somebody did a number on this place. Let's see if John's cell phone is somewhere in this rubble."

"I have a better idea." Darren explained to Phil that the cell phone wouldn't have as much information on John's friends as his computer and led Phil into John's spare bedroom/office.

"My guess is the killer may have done exactly what I'm going to do." Darren spoke as he turned on the computer and pushed the flash drive into a USB port. "I'm going to bring up John's address book and download it to the flash drive. It beats taking the whole computer."

"Look for notes, e-mails and letters that he may have sent to someone mentioning what he found out."

"Good thinking, I'll download all that as well."

It only took a minute for the computer to boot and within seconds Darren had John's address book showing on the screen. "Look at this, Adams is the first entry. Of course, it would be, since it's set to sort alphabetically by last name. I'll export this. Now let's have a look at his e-mail. I feel really strange doing this. Even though John is dead, it still seems like an invasion of his privacy."

"If it will help us nail his killer, it will be worth any invasion."

"I suppose you're right. Still..."

“What's that one?”

“It's in the drafts folder. He never sent it.”

“It's addressed to you, Darren. Maybe John was trying to tell you something else that might be of help to us.”

“That would be too much to hope for, I'm afraid. Besides, judging by the date on this draft, John wrote this last December, before this whole fiasco started.”

The unsent e-mail was expressing John's gratitude for Darren's help and allowing Cindy to help him find an appropriate ring for Andrea.

“There doesn't appear to be anything in the e-mail that can help us. I think I'll have a look at his file listings and see if there's anything that catches our attention.” Darren scrolled through all the miscellaneous files on John's hard drive but didn't spot anything of interest. It was mostly business documents—letters, proposals, and invoices. “I'll put some of these documents, the ones with non-descriptive titles, on the flash drive and look at them later in more detail.”

“Something is bothering me, Darren. Why would the killer think that a business contact like Adams would be close enough to John to warrant being trusted with the evidence?” Phil gave Darren a questioning look as he spoke.

“Let's go back to the address book and have another look.” There was a slight pause, with only the clicking of the mouse breaking the silence, before Darren found the answer. “Look at this entry for Adams. It looks like what you would set up for a friend or acquaintance, not a business. There isn't a business name in the title, or any mention of the company he works for. I'll bet if I look up under the company directory...” Darren's voice trailed off as he worked the keyboard. “Bingo, there it is, an entry for the company with Adams' name. Anyone looking at this address book would assume Adams was a friend, not a business contact, unless they looked specifically under the company directory.”

Olson, with urgency in his voice, “Let's see who's next alphabetically.”

Darren understood the significance of Olson's request and scrolled down and saw an entry under the name of “Nat Carter.” “I know him, he went to college with John and me. John was closer to him than I was, they shared a dorm room their freshman year.”

Olson was writing down Carter's address as he spoke. “I have to find Mr. Carter before our killer does.” With that, Olson quickly walked toward the door while shouting back at Darren, “Let me know if you find anything else.”

* * *

Back at home, Darren was just finishing his search through John's documents looking for anything that concerned the murder or Mayfield. He was not surprised that he did not find anything that could help their cause. Something made him go back to the address book, for what he did not know. As he scrolled through the names, it hit him. Andrea Davidson was the next name after Carter. Darren grabbed his cell phone and darted out of his apartment, calling Phil Olson as he made his way to the carport.

Olson did not answer so Darren left a voice message, “Phil, it's Darren, I just realized something, Andrea is the next name after Carter. I'm heading over to her place right now, meet me there.” Darren gave Andrea's address before ending the call. Darren felt that Mayfield must have told the assassin that it was unlikely for Andrea to have the evidence, otherwise she would have been the first target. But if the killer was going strictly by the address book, without any input from Mayfield, then she had to be next.

* * *

Saturday, January 8, 7:12 p.m.

Olson ignored his ringing phone as he made his way up the walkway to Nat Carter's home. The house was within a gated community of a hundred or so homes. Upper scale, the development was in Spring Valley, just south of the Summerlin area on the West side of town. Olson looked up Carter on the resident list and keyed in the code that would call Carter's home. No one answered so Olson had to either wait for someone to drive up and open the gate or he could call another resident at random and hope they would let him in. Before he could select another resident, a car drove up and opened the gate. The driver, a young woman with a child passenger, gave Olson a suspicious looking over as she drove past and through the open gate. Olson could see her looking over her shoulder as he followed her through. She turned left at the first opportunity while he went straight, looking for Carter's street. "Nice houses," Olson muttered to himself as he made his way to Carter's.

Olson's mind ran through different scenarios. He assumed that Carter would be home since it was just after seven p.m. He was under the impression that Carter must be married and might even have kids, otherwise he would not need what Olson estimated to be a four thousand square foot home. If he is indeed married, why didn't his wife answer the phone? It is possible he and the family went out for dinner, or something. Before he had time to reach other conclusions, he found himself in front of the Carter home.

Olson pushed the button on the intercom doorbell and could hear the loud chimes announcing his presence. He tried a second time but still no response. Suspicious, he decided to try opening the door. Olson did not have to push the latch button as the door opened the instant he touched it. The door had not been closed properly, enabling the deadbolt latch to seat. Stepping inside he yelled, "Police, anyone home?" He tried again, "Police, is anyone here?" Olson listened carefully and did not hear a response, nor did he hear anyone walking around upstairs. He noticed that almost every light was on. He found himself in the living room looking ahead to the dining area and through an archway to the family room and kitchen. After he walked through the arch, he noted a hallway to the left, probably leading to the garage access. He walked into the kitchen and did not see anything unusual until he walked toward the breakfast nook and saw dozens of books, mostly cookbooks, strewn all over floor.

Olson retraced his steps, this time he went down the hallway, past a powder room, past the laundry room and into a downstairs bedroom that was set up as an office. It had been thoroughly turned over, with desk drawers pulled out and emptied onto the floor. Olson turned back and went into the laundry room, finding that it too had been searched. He opened the door to the garage, found the light switch and flicked it on, and was immediately alerted when he saw both garages contained a car. He placed his hand on the hood of one of the cars and it was still warm. Olson estimated that it had been parked within the last hour or two. Both cars present meant that someone should have been home.

Olson drew his revolver and went inside making his way back to the entry hall. Cautiously he made his way up the staircase to the first landing, noticing that the chandelier over the first landing was lit. Peeking to his right and seeing the way clear, Olson slowly rose, step-by-step, to the second landing. Olson glanced around after reaching the last step and found two bedrooms to the left, separated by a bathroom. One bedroom was furnished as a nursery but showed no signs of being in use. The second bedroom was made up with a queen-sized bed, a nightstand and a dresser. Olson carefully opened the closet only to find it totally empty except for some spare linen. Quick reasoning led him to believe that this must be a guest room.

Olson turned his attention to the remaining doorway that led to the master bedroom. The

door was open and he could see a king-sized, four-poster bed against the far wall, a nightstand on each side, their drawers open and with the contents thrown about. Slowly, Olson made his way into the room. He could see another room to his left, through an archway, a retreat with easy chairs, end tables and lamps. With only the master bath left to explore, Olson approached with apprehension, his revolver at the ready. He could see that there was no one in the room by looking at the mirrors that covered the far wall. Their reflections provided a complete reverse view of the room and revealed that there was a large walk-in closet to his right. Two fully mirrored sliding doors, one of which was open, led to the closet. Looking through the open slider, Olson had to swallow to prevent vomiting. On the floor lay two bodies, a man's and a pregnant woman's. Blood saturated the carpeting and Phil noticed blood splatter on the hanging clothing. He did not have to look very hard to see that both victims were killed by having their throats cut.

After catching his breath, Olson noticed that the woman's clothing that hung along the right side wall had been pushed aside, exposing a wall safe. Being careful not to disturb the scene, Olson craned to get a better look at the safe. It was open but showed signs of forced entry. Jewelry was clearly visible.

Satisfied that no one else was in the house, Olson holstered his revolver. He knew he would have to report this, but first he needed to come up with a reasonable explanation for breaking into the house. He thought for a moment and decided to use the story that Nat Carter was a passing acquaintance that he met at a party. He talked briefly with Carter and gave him his card when Carter expressed an interest in skeet shooting, a hobby of Olson's. He would tell anyone who asked that Carter never called him about shooting, but did call to ask him to stop by to discuss a police matter. Carter wanted to talk only with him but did not give any details. This story would serve to get him off the hook but not subject him to any scrutiny. Running over the details in his mind, such as the location of the party and other minutiae, Olson felt ready to make the call to the watch commander. He took out his phone and noticed that there was a message from Darren. Olson decided to call in the homicides before talking to Darren.

* * *

Saturday, January 8, 7:30 p.m.

Darren was relieved when Andrea opened the door. He had been practicing his speech during the drive. First he called Cindy to set things up with her and now he had to convince Andrea that staying with Cindy was a good idea. He gave Cindy a convincing reason—the truth. He had never lied to Cindy, he did not want to do so, and even if he tried, she was too perceptive and would know. Now he had to tell Andrea the whole story and he dreaded the task.

“Hi Darren. I wasn't expecting to see you today.”

“Andrea, I have to talk to you, but not here. I'm going to have to ask you to trust me. Please do as I ask and I will explain everything later.”

“Why so mysterious, Darren? What is it you want me to do?”

“I want you to quickly pack some clothes and personal belongings and come with me to Cindy's place. I want you to stay with her for a while.”

“What? I don't need to do that, I'm coping very well now, Darren. I'll be all right on my own.”

“I asked you to trust me. Once we are at Cindy's, I'll explain everything, but for now I have to ask you to do as I say. You know I wouldn't ask you to do this unless it was of the utmost importance.”

“Obviously, this is important to you and yes, I do trust you. So I guess I'll start packing.

How long am I going to be at Cindy's?"

"Hopefully for just a few days."

Darren looked around while Andrea was in the bedroom packing her clothes and noticed her laptop computer sitting on the coffee table. He powered it down and put it into her computer bag. He did not want to leave anything that could be useful to the killer, if indeed she was a target. He walked around looking for anything that should not be left behind and found an address book sitting by the phone on the kitchen counter. He put it with the laptop.

After a few minutes, Andrea came out of her bedroom carrying a small suitcase; "I have enough to get me through a few days."

"Good. Let me ask you something. Do you have anything, besides the address book, that I found by the phone and your laptop, that has names and addresses of your friends?"

"No, I only keep that in the two places you just mentioned. Why?"

"Let's just get going, I'll take your suitcase, you grab your computer bag. I already put your laptop and address book in there."

* * *

Darren had no idea that, as he was carrying Andrea's suitcase into Cindy's spare bedroom, the assassin was breaking into Andrea's apartment.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Saturday, January 8, 8:45 p.m.

"Okay, Darren. Are you going to explain to me just why it was so important that I come here to stay with Cindy?" Andrea was talking as she and Cindy walked from the guest bedroom to the living room.

"This isn't going to be easy on either of us, Andrea. What I am going to tell you will most certainly upset you. I do ask that you not interrupt me or ask questions until I have finished."

Darren took about ten minutes to explain the situation to Andrea. Her shock quickly gave way to guilt as Darren was not able to convince her that John's death was not her fault.

"If I would have kept my big mouth shut about the New Year's Eve party, none of this would have happened. John would still be alive."

"Andrea, you can't keep blaming yourself. Only Mayfield is responsible for John's death, not you, not anyone else."

"What am I supposed to do now, Darren? I can't go back to work knowing what happened, and if I don't go back, Mayfield is going to be suspicious."

"Truthfully, that is the least of our problems. If I'm correct, all three of us may be in danger."

Cindy gave Darren a questioning look. "Yeah, even you Cindy. You are in John's address book. I believe that the killer is going right down the list."

"Why would he be doing that?" Cindy hoped there was another explanation.

"I figure he found out that since John didn't stash the documents in his apartment, and since he didn't find any evidence of John having a safe deposit box or any other place to store the

documents, he came to the conclusion that John passed it on to a friend. Of course, as you now know, that is exactly what John did.”

“So what can we do?” Andrea was almost pleading for an answer.

“What the killer and Mayfield don't know is that I am the one with the evidence. That gives me a slight advantage, that and knowing what the assassin is doing with John's address book.”

Cindy seemed intrigued by Darren's logic, “So how are you going to protect us and the evidence?”

Just then Darren's cell phone rang. Taking it out of his shirt pocket, Darren could see that Olson was calling and immediately answered.

“Hi Phil.”

“Darren, you were right. The killer is definitely taking each name in John's address book in turn. I just left Nat Carter's house. Nat and his wife have been murdered and their house torn apart. That means the killer is now working on the next one on the list. Who's next, Darren?”

“I take it you didn't listen to the voicemail I left you. Andrea is next on the list. I just brought her over to my girlfriend Cindy's apartment. This is just a stopgap though as Cindy is also in the address book. What do you suggest we do now?” Darren had already decided on a plan of action but wanted to see if Olson had any other ideas.

“To begin with, we need to make sure the killer doesn't get his hands on the evidence, otherwise all these deaths will be in vain. We have to hide those documents someplace where he would never think of looking. At the same time we need to get Andrea and Cindy out of town to a safe house someplace. We don't have any time to waste, Darren.”

“I agree. Can you come over to Cindy's and pick them up? You can take them out of town while I take care of hiding the evidence.”

“Give me ten minutes to get there.”

* * *

Darren looked through the peephole to make sure that it was Phil before he opened the door. “Not bad, you made it in seven minutes.”

“I was in the neighborhood. The Carter house isn't far from here. Everybody ready to go?” Phil gave Andrea and Cindy a smile. “We can do the introductions in the car. Right now I think we need to get moving. We will need to meet someplace later.” Olson turned to face Darren.

“I've already thought of that. We can meet under the large Las Vegas Motor Speedway sign off of Interstate 15.”

“Sounds good. Make sure you constantly check your mirrors to see if anyone is following you. You might even...”

Darren cut him off, “I know, go around the same block in a circle to make sure.”

“Good boy, you have given this some thought. Are you going to tell me where you're going to hide the evidence?”

“Don't worry, if anything happens to me in the next few days, you'll be given the information you need to locate the evidence.”

“Why doesn't that surprise me?”

What Darren had not told anyone was that he was going to place the documents in a post office box that he had rented under his business' name. John's address book did not mention the business so there was no way the killer could know about the company or its link to Darren. Darren knew that if anything happened to him, Olson could get a court order to look inside the mailbox. Once he was certain he wasn't being followed, he intended to stop by the post office to

put the documents inside his box and mail an envelope to Olson that he had already prepared. To ensure that Olson knew where to look, Darren had written him a letter, telling Phil the post office and box number.

"I've already put the suitcases and computers in Cindy's car. You can follow Cindy and make sure you're not being tailed. It's ten o'clock, we should be able to meet up easily by eleven."

* * *

Saturday, January 8, 10:30 p.m.

Darren did not have any problem parking right by the door of the post office on Rainbow Boulevard since the parking lot was empty. He looked around twice, to make sure no one was around, before he got out of the car and went inside. He made his way to the area where the post office boxes were arranged in long rows recessed into the wall. Darren looked around and seeing no one, unlocked his box and placed the envelope containing the photographs and letters inside. On his way out, Darren slid the letter to Olson into the regular mail slot and because of the total silence, heard it drop into the basket on the other side of the wall.

Relieved that the evidence was no longer in his possession, Darren drove north on Rainbow humming to the music blaring from his radio. He did remember to keep checking his mirrors and when he thought the same car had been following him for a while, he made a right turn onto a side street. Turning left quickly onto a cross street, Darren slowed to see if there were any cars following him. Satisfied that he was alone, he made his way back to Rainbow where he connected to highway 95. Darren took highway 95 to the northbound Interstate 15, which would lead him to the speedway off-ramp.

* * *

Saturday, January 8, 10:45 p.m.

Olson got out of his car and lit a cigarette. Though it was barely above freezing, the lack of a wind made it tolerable. Looking up he saw a full moon. "Jeez, you can almost read by that light. A sniper's moon." He muttered to himself.

"What do you suppose is taking Darren so long?"

"Relax, Andrea. It's not even close to eleven yet." Cindy almost laughed at the thought that she was trying to calm down Andrea, when she herself was a nervous wreck.

"Don't worry. I'm sure he is going to be here any minute now." Olson was standing outside Cindy's open window and spoke without taking his eyes off of the ramp leading onto Speedway Boulevard from the interstate. He had no sooner finished his comment than he noticed a car coming down the ramp.

Olson's keen vision immediately recognized Darren's car. "Speak of the devil."

Andrea and Cindy got out of the car as Darren came to a stop. He was barely out of his car when Cindy started to hug him, relieved that he was okay.

"The last hour has been pure hell, I thought you were never going to get here."

"There's a twenty-four hour coffee shop over there," Olson pointed to his left to the cafe. "Why don't we drive over there and have a cup of coffee while we discuss our next move?"

"Sounds good to me. Lead the way." Darren kissed Cindy before getting back into his car.

Once they were comfortable in a corner booth, Darren was the first to break the silence.

"I have the keys to a condo that belongs to a friend of mine. He asked me to keep an eye on the place while he is out of town. I think we can be safe there and comfortable. We only need a

few days to get the evidence into the right hands.” Darren wanted to appear calm and confident to put the others at ease.

“It’s probably going to be longer than that. I wouldn’t feel comfortable bringing the evidence to the under sheriff until this killing spree stops. I would like to see if I could nail this assassin beforehand. With the address book leading the way, I know who is next. If I could get to them before the killer, I could be waiting when he arrives.”

“If you could do that, it would be great, Phil.” Cindy seemed relieved at the suggestion.

“There’s one thing you’re forgetting, Darren.”

“What’s that?”

“We still have to tie the senator with Amber Wilson. I have a source in the FBI that I contacted and he is going to get back to me on Monday. So I think we have to sit still at least until then. I know you guys are scared, but we can’t rush this, we really don’t have enough to nail anybody. Think about it; we can’t connect the senator to a victim, we can only tie Mayfield to a picture of an unknown victim, and we can’t identify the killer. When you get right down to it, we can’t prove that John was murdered. The only thing we can prove is a connection between John, Adams and Carter. That certainly doesn’t add up to an indictment of Mayfield and Williamson. Give me some time to put it all together. We are very close to tying up the loose ends.”

“That’s easy for you to say, you’re not next on the hit parade.” Andrea looked disgusted.

“Don’t flake out on me when we’re this close. Just imagine, if I can catch the killer, all I need is for him to rollover and admit Mayfield hired him to kill Amber Wilson. Presto, instant indictments.”

“Phil, I’m sure you’re a good cop. Positive, in fact, based upon what I’ve witnessed, but do you think you’re in the same league as this assassin? This guy is the big leagues. Taking him dead would be a major accomplishment, but alive...” Darren shook his head negatively.

“You guys aren’t the only ones who are scared. I’ve seen what this guy is capable of, up close and personal. I don’t want to scare you any more than you already are, but this guy had no reservations about slitting the throat of a pregnant woman. Don’t think for an instant that I’m going to let him get close enough to me to do the same. I’ll drop him like a bad habit if he so much as sneezes at me. I’m definitely not a hero.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, Phil. Okay, we do it your way. We’ll stay at my friend’s condo while you continue with your investigation. Do you ladies agree?”

“Do we have a choice?” Cindy managed a smile for a few seconds.

“Let’s go out to my car, Phil. I have a few things to give you.”

Darren led Olson outside so that he could talk to him without upsetting Cindy. “I’ve written you a letter and mailed it to your office. Considering it’s a weekend and the speed of the mail, you should get it in a few days. I don’t want you to open it unless something happens to me. In the envelope there is another flash drive with John’s address book. You can use it to find the next person the killer will target.”

“Thanks, Darren.”

“One other thing is in the package, an envelope addressed to Cindy. If I’m not around, give it to her for me.”

“I may as well tear it up now, because nothing is going to happen to you Darren. I’m going to see to that. Is the evidence in the envelope?”

“No but there are instructions on where to find it.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Monday, January 10, 8:10 a.m.

"This is Olson." Phil was hoping his friend at the FBI would call him early. "Hello Pete, good to hear from you. You have anything I'd be interested in hearing?" Olson was quiet for several minutes, taking notes while his friend filled him in on Amber Wilson. "Thanks, Pete. Let me know if I can return the favor."

Olson got up from his desk and went outside. Everyone was used to seeing him take regular cigarette breaks so no one gave it a second thought. Once outside, Phil lit a cigarette, deeply inhaled the first draw, then completely exhaled with his face looking skyward, eyes closed, soaking up the sun's warmth. It was a typical January day in Las Vegas, cold with a bit of wind chill, but the clear sky allowed the sun's rays to fall unobstructed. Olson took his cell phone from his shirt pocket and called Darren.

"Darren. Guess who just made the link between Williamson and Wilson."

"You verified that Amber Wilson is the victim?"

"Yeah, I thought you might like that. Turns out that our assassin isn't perfect after all. He failed to dispose of the body for eternity. It, I mean she, washed up on a beach. They were able to identify her as Amber Wilson by her dental records. The coroner says a very finely honed blade of some sort, like a meat cleaver, had cut through her skull and into the brain."

"We knew it was a bloody killing, but a meat cleaver? This assassin is demonic."

"You won't get any argument from me in that respect. Listen, I can't talk long, I'm expecting another call. Where can we meet to discuss our next step?"

"How about the same pub where we first met? Say about noon?"

"Good, I'll see you then."

Darren had been down in the dumps, depressed that he could not do anything except wait for Olson; he passed time by reading through every word on John's computer files. He ran across a file that was clearly a rough draft of a marriage proposal John was preparing. Darren thought to himself that this was typical of John, preparing his proposal to Andrea word by word. He knew that John was the kind of guy to spend hours going over what he intended to say only to forget it all at the crucial time and then have to improvise. Darren chuckled to himself as he remembered that John's improvisation always turned out better than the well thought out speech. He toyed with the idea of showing the draft to Andrea but decided to leave things as they were; there was nothing to gain, but it could make her feel much worse.

"It's time for me to meet up with Phil. You guys want me to bring some take out back for lunch?"

"Yeah, that would be great, only not Chinese again."

Andrea's comment caused all of them to smile. The last time, Darren brought back enough Chinese take out to feed the Chinese army. They still had leftovers in the refrigerator.

"Okay, okay, I get the message. No Chinese, how about Thai? Just kidding."

* * *

Monday, January 10, noon

As previously, Darren managed to get a table in a corner of the pub. He did not have to wait long for Olson, who showed up a few minutes early.

Olson sat down and said hello and did not waste any time getting to the point. "Looks like Senator Williamson kept Amber Wilson on a short leash. There is no evidence of a connection between the two except for what we have. The senator was being very careful about their relationship. My FBI contact never offered any information about the senator. I think he would have if he knew of a connection."

"Did he say if there were any clues to the identity of the killer?"

"No, Darren. He told me that the local police did a good job of contaminating the scene before the FBI got involved. They only got the case after the body turned up on a beach in a different state. Before that it was strictly local jurisdiction."

"How did the local cops find out about the murder?"

"That was my first question. Amber's housecleaner has a key and came by on her regularly scheduled day and found the blood. She noticed that Amber's car was there and her purse, wallet and keys were in the apartment."

"Did the police get anything out of her?"

"My source tells me that they didn't interview her very well, just assumed she had nothing to do with the killing and let her go. The FBI followed up with her but while she implied that Amber regularly had a 'visitor,' she didn't ever see him or know who he was."

"So where does the FBI stand on the investigation?"

"My friend says they only have one thing to work with, a small fragment of metal taken from Amber's brain. They think it is from the murder weapon. Not much help is expected from that. Also, every one of Amber's friends, that they could track down, had no knowledge of her having a boyfriend."

"The senator must have made her swear to silence under penalty of death, because you know how women talk with each other. Jeez, that didn't come out right."

"Don't worry, I know what you mean. Unfortunately for Amber Wilson, it was under penalty of death."

"Phil, it looks like we are on our own. Time to think about talking to the under sheriff. Do you agree?"

"Yeah, I agree."

"By the way, I thought you were going to try to nab the killer before he got to the next victim."

"I still am going to try. Turns out the next guy on the list moved out of state. I checked first thing this morning and he was alive enough to answer the phone. I advised him to take a trip for a few days. Next on the list after him is John's boss. I left him at his office about an hour ago. I had him call his wife to get her out of the house and he's not going to go home tonight. I'm going to his place instead to await our assassin. I don't think our killer would have any way of knowing what Hatton looks like."

"You sure you want to do this alone? How about getting another cop to help you?" Darren was genuinely concerned for Phil's welfare.

"I don't want to have to explain to anyone what's going on. If I get another cop involved, there will be all kinds of questions raised. No, it's better that I do this alone. If the killer is watching this guy's house, he'll see me go in and assume that I'm the one he wants."

"Just make sure you take care of number one, Phil."

"Don't you worry about that, my friend. I'll call you tonight if anything happens."

Otherwise, I'll call you tomorrow and we can figure out how we're going to persuade the under sheriff to back us up.”

“I hope to be hearing good news tonight.”

* * *

Monday, January 10, 5:00 p.m.

After Olson left Darren, he scouted out the area around the Hatton residence to familiarize himself with the housing tract during daylight. His plan was to come back about the time the average working man would be getting home from work—after dark this time of the year.

Phil looked over the cars he passed on the way to the house. All were parked in driveways; none were on the street, in keeping with the restrictions that most homeowners associations put in place. Residents cannot park on the streets, only guests, and usually not overnight without a permit.

Phil figured that the killer either parked a couple of blocks away, not ideal for someone in a hurry to leave a murder scene, or had not yet arrived. He assumed the latter. He had Hatton go into great detail about the layout of the house, even to the point of having him describe all the furnishings, including the wall hangings. Phil wanted to be able to walk in the house and feel as comfortable as if he were at home.

Parking in the driveway, Olson got out of the car as casually as he could considering the situation. If anyone was watching, he did not want to send up any red flags. From his pocket, he removed the keychain that Hatton had given him and made his way to the front entry. Putting the key in the lock, Phil turned it and heard the deadbolt retract. He removed the key and then pressed the off button on the key fob to disarm the security system. Phil put the keychain back into his pocket as he opened the door.

Olson reached in to his right, where Hatton had told him the light switch was located, and pushed the large button on the switch. Immediately an overhead chandelier lit up the entry hall giving Phil the opportunity to see first hand what had been so vividly described to him by Hatton. A semicircular staircase on the left led to an open loft on the second floor. To the right were four French doors arranged in pairs that opened out into an atrium composed of three glass walls and a glass roof.

Within seconds, Phil realized that something was different from Hatton's description but he could not nail it down. Hatton said that the entryway light switch was wired in series and would turn on lights throughout the ground floor—hallways, family room, kitchen and atrium. Looking around Olson confirmed that all the ground floor was lit up. Everything appeared to be in order, with no indication of the house being searched or that anything was amiss.

Phil decided to look for a good vantage point. He wanted to find a hiding place that would afford him a good view of anyone entering. The floor plan precluded him being able to see every window and door, but strategic placement could mean a good view of the main entry hall, the outside access from the family room and most importantly, the staircase to the second floor. Once he found a suitable spot, Olson headed up the staircase to light up the second floor. Anyone observing the house would assume he went upstairs to change his clothes.

Olson reached the top of the stairs and looked for the light switch to his left. Then it hit him—what had seemed out of place or different from Hatton's description was the security system. He was supposed to hear two quick beeps emanate from the outside intercom speaker when he disarmed the system.

“It didn't beep.” Olson mumbled as he turned and saw his killer. By the time Olson's hand

reached his revolver, the ultra sharp blade had penetrated his heart. The revolver, barely having cleared its holster, fell from Olson's hand onto the floor while his body began to crumble into a blood stained heap. Olson's lifeless eyes stared at his murderer through open eyelids.

CHAPTER NINE

Tuesday, January 11, 5:00 a.m.

The assassin awoke at precisely the same time every day, fully alert and prepared. Years of mental conditioning had trained the subconscious mind to keep perfect time. Every day began with the same ritual—awake, fifteen minutes of meditation and deep breathing, forty minutes of muscle toning exercises, and finally five minutes of stretching.

The ritual breakfast consisted of a medium-sized glass of orange juice, one egg yolk and three egg whites scrambled, and one half-cup of steamed rice mixed with a boiled and chopped chicken breast. All followed by a full glass of reverse osmosis water, which washed down various amino acids, vitamin, mineral and fish oil supplements.

Staring into the mirror, the assassin thought out loud about the missed opportunity at Andrea Davidson's apartment and now the snafu at the Hatton house. Finding Olson's ID and badge raised numerous questions, some of which were answered when his cell phone call history revealed numerous calls to and from Darren Poole, the same Darren Poole in Waltman's address book. "How did the police get involved in my business? What or who tipped them off? How did they find out what my next move was going to be? There is only one answer—you Mr. Poole. You must have put two and two together, you clever man. This also means but one thing, you have my documents, Mr. Poole. You may think you're very smart, Mr. Poole, but you slipped up by giving me so many clues. I wonder if you will be smart enough to figure out that, as of now, you are my primary target. I'm coming for you Mr. Poole. Make peace with your God."

* * *

Tuesday, January 11, 9:30 a.m.

"Do you think Olson caught the killer, Darren?" Cindy was looking for a ray of hope.

"I think he would have called by now if he did."

"So you think he failed?" Andrea joined the conversation with a seemingly unconcerned air.

"No, not necessarily. Maybe the killer didn't show last night for some reason. Olson told me he would call if he had anything to report, so obviously he doesn't think there is any worthy news." Darren tried to act nonchalant even though he was deeply concerned. "Why don't we go get some breakfast?"

"Excellent idea!" Andrea was feeling better and was contending with the difficulty of John's loss, improving one day at a time.

"You girls get ready and I'm going to go outside and make a call."

Darren walked out the door and onto the porch of his friend's condo. The sun's rays warmed his face and cheered him up making him feel better than he had in a long time.

Fortunately his buddy was on a sabbatical to Egypt, a break from teaching high school seniors, to continue his research on the reign of Ramses II, third pharaoh of the nineteenth dynasty. He gave Darren his key so that he could watch over the place, triggering a fortuitous event that solved Darren's problem of where to hide Andrea, Cindy and himself. Darren took a deep breath and exhaled loudly at the frustration of getting Olson's voice mail message yet again. Three calls and no response could not be a good sign.

"We're ready. Do you have the keys?" Andrea asked before closing the door behind her.

"Got 'em right here." Darren lifted the key ring up and jingled the keys.

"Good, I'm famished." Cindy always amazed Darren with how much she could eat without putting on any weight.

"Well, stop the presses, front page news here."

Cindy gave Darren a gentle slap then a kiss.

* * *

"Come on, leave a message telling me where you are Mr. Poole." The assassin had been waiting patiently for Darren to call. "Eventually curiosity will get the better of you and you will tell your buddy Olson where to find you. Just make it sooner rather than later."

* * *

The three sat in a booth, Andrea across from Darren, with Cindy in the middle. They were working on their second cup of coffee after doing the best they could with breakfast dishes geared toward the appetites of hungry construction workers.

"Did you try calling Phil?"

"Yeah. I called but there was no answer. I'll try again in a couple of hours. He may be in the middle of something and isn't answering his phone. Don't worry Andrea, I'm sure he'll call soon."

"I hope so. This waiting, not knowing what is going on, is beginning to drive me crazy. I want to get on with my life, such as it is."

Cindy reached over and put her arm around Andrea's shoulders and gave a squeeze.

"You're doing great. You are the one giving us the inspiration to keep our spirits up. This will be over before you know it."

"I know what we need; we need to take a drive. How about we head up to Mesquite for a few hours of gambling? We can stay as long as you guys want. We can make a day of it, stay there for dinner and then drive back. What you think?"

"I'm on board, how about you Andrea?"

Andrea thought for a moment, "Sure, why not, let's go have some fun."

"All aboard the Mesquite express."

* * *

Tuesday, January 11, 10:50 a.m.

"Mr. Hatton? Please come with me." Detective Johnson, Olson's partner led Hatton through the detectives area and into an interview room furnished with only a table and several chairs. "Have a seat, sir."

"Thank you."

"Can I get you a cup of coffee?"

"That would be great, black please. Thanks."

Johnson was back in a couple of minutes with two cups of black coffee. "Here you go."

"Thanks. So Olson is your partner?"

"That's right. Tell me Mr. Hatton, why did you tell the desk sergeant you were concerned about the welfare of my partner?" Johnson looked at Hatton intently, even while sipping his coffee. He did not want to miss any hint of deception that might appear on Hatton's face.

"I haven't heard from him since yesterday around noon."

"So why does that concern you?"

"Detective Olson came to see me at my office yesterday morning. He told me that he had reason to believe that my life was in danger and that I shouldn't go home last night."

"Did he give you a reason why he thought you were in danger?" Johnson sat up stiffly, his senses alert.

"He said it was related to an investigation he was conducting and that I was on a list of people who had an association with a particular individual. Apparently this person was being hunted by a killer."

"What else did Detective Olson tell you?"

"That's all. I asked him for more, but he said I should not go home and that he would call me first thing this morning. He hasn't called and he hasn't answered my calls, so I came here to see him."

Johnson had not heard from Olson since yesterday afternoon either. Phil could be a loner at times, but he always checked in with his partner before disappearing. Johnson believed that Hatton was telling him the truth, he just could not figure out why Phil would be involved in an investigation without his knowledge.

"Please give me your home address and a phone number where you can be reached, Mr. Hatton." Johnson slid a pen and a notebook over to Hatton. "I'm going to go over to your house to check things out and then I'll give you a call."

"Here you go. Please call me soon. My wife and kids are eager to get home."

"I'll call you the minute I know anything."

* * *

Tuesday, January 11, 11:30 a.m.

As Johnson approached the Hatton home, he recognized the Buick sedan parked in the driveway. After he parked next to Olson's car, Johnson looked into the Buick and saw that the glove box was open and its contents had been emptied onto the passenger seat. Johnson sensed that something was wrong and removed his revolver from its holster as he made his way to the front door. Seeing the front door slightly ajar, Johnson gave it a push with his left foot. He immediately noticed that the lights were turned on. Moving slowly into the entry hall, Johnson's quick glance right to left did not reveal anything out of the ordinary until his eyes focused on the upper staircase. A shape, similar to that of a body, lay motionless at the top of the stairs.

Cautiously, and with his weapon at the ready, Johnson took each step up without taking his eyes off the shape. When he got to within a few feet of the object, he recognized Olson's favorite suit and the wing tip shoes that he usually wore. Johnson knew he had to check out the second floor rooms to make sure whoever killed his partner was no longer around. Carefully stepping around Olson's body, Johnson turned left and stopped dead in his tracks.

"Son of a bitch, son of a bitch." Johnson forgot about looking for someone hiding in the house; all he could do was keep repeating the curse as he fixated on Phil's head. "Son of a bitch." The assassin had ritually severed Olson's head from his body and carefully placed it upright, facing the body. Johnson screamed a final, "Son of a bitch" before falling to his knees.

* * *

It took Johnson about ten minutes to regain his composure. He called in to report the homicide as he walked down the staircase, out the door and to his car. He could not stay in that house for another minute and would wait in his car.

He did not have to wait very long, the report of a dead officer meant immediate reaction by the homicide division, crime scene investigators and the coroner's office.

First on the scene were two patrol cars that had been nearby. Seeing the young faces of the recently recruited officers, Johnson stopped them from entering the house. "You shouldn't go in there guys; leave it for the CSI and coroner."

"Yes, sir. Is it bad?"

"It couldn't be any worse."

* * *

Tuesday, January 11, 3 p.m.

The noise of the slot machines would make it almost impossible for Darren to hear anything so he stepped out of the main entrance of the casino. The valet parking drive-up was covered, shading the entrance, forcing Darren to seek the sunlit warmth of the adjacent parking lot. A westerly wind was picking up and the wind chill made it feel about thirty degrees.

Darren tried again to reach Olson, only to get the familiar voicemail message. He told himself beforehand that he would not panic if Phil did not answer. Darren had logically analyzed all the possible scenarios and came to the conclusion that Phil must have confronted the assassin and lost. He felt almost as much anguish at the thought of losing Phil as he did when he heard that John had been killed. The short, but intense, relationship with Phil put them in that special place, a place reserved for those in the line of fire.

Darren knew his only course of action now rested with the under sheriff. He was going to have to trust someone he had never met with his life and the lives of Andrea and Cindy. Darren also knew that he could not tell the girls about his suspicion that Olson had been killed. Nothing could be gained from them knowing, but the setback could be devastating. It was decided then, tomorrow he would try to get an appointment with the under sheriff.

CHAPTER TEN

Tuesday, January 11, 4:40 p.m.

Miller was making work out of shuffling the papers on his desk. His heart was not in his work, at least not in the paperwork. When an officer is killed on the job, every police officer feels the pain of the loss, no matter how high their rank.

"Detective Johnson is here."

"Please show him in."

As Johnson walked the ten or so feet to the guest chairs, Miller sized him up, coming away with a positive evaluation.

"Have a seat Detective Johnson. Would you like anything? A cup of coffee, perhaps?" Under Sheriff Harold Miller was known as a compassionate leader, very sympathetic to the

challenges that officers face every day. It was never confirmed, but rumor had it that when Miller was barely past the rookie stage of his career, his partner, while off duty, was killed attempting to stop an armed assault.

"No, sir, I'm fine."

"Are you prepared to talk about what happened today?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why don't you tell me, in your own words, what went down?"

Johnson told Miller everything that he knew about Olson's death. When he hesitated at the part about finding the decapitated Olson, Miller patiently waited for him to regain his composure. After he finished his account, Miller gave him a minute before following up on a few details.

"Did you have any idea why Olson was involved in an unofficial investigation?"

"No, sir. He never mentioned this to me. I was shocked to find out about it."

"Were the two of you working on any case that could possibly be related?"

"No, sir. We've only been working on some liquor store robberies and one missing person."

"Could the missing person have anything to do with this?"

"I don't see how, sir. The missing person in this case is a woman's ex-husband who we think is just trying to skip out on paying alimony and child support. Hardly serious enough to be related to Olson's death."

"I see. Well, I won't keep you any longer. I'll look forward to reading your report. I hate to put undo pressure on you at a time like this, but your report needs to be timely. Every minute we lose puts us further away from finding your partner's killer. Try to get through the report and then take a few days off."

"Will do, sir. I don't suppose you would consider letting me be on the investigative team?"

"I would like to do that, but you know that just isn't advisable. I promise you this—you will be informed of everything the team finds out about your partner's death."

"Thank you, sir. I'd appreciate that."

After Johnson left his office, Miller swiveled his chair around and gazed out the window, not really seeing anything, his mind preoccupied with the mental image of his former partner. Although he knew that there was no way he could have prevented his partner's death, he still felt that he had let him down.

* * *

Wednesday, January 12, 10 a.m.

The skies were a patchwork of bright blue and dismal grey, with occasional raindrops splattering upon the windshield as Darren tried to keep a light atmosphere during the drive back to Las Vegas by singing his rendition of "*On The Road Again*." Unfortunately, his singing was not appreciated.

"Give us a break, honey." Cindy just shook her head disapprovingly when Darren glanced her way.

"Want me to sing a different song?"

"How about you turn on the radio instead?" Andrea jumped in before Cindy could respond.

"You guys have no appreciation for artistry. You've upset me now and you are going to have to beg me to sing for you in the future!"

This time Cindy retorted instantly. "Don't hold your breath waiting for that!"

“Okay, I’ll turn on the radio.” Darren pushed the button and the radio immediately burst into a loud cacophony.

“For crying out loud, Darren.” Cindy yelled as she hurriedly reached for the volume control. “Do you always have it this loud when you’re alone?” Not waiting for a reply she continued, “No wonder I have to yell for you to hear me talking! You’re probably half deaf.” She was about to say something further when Darren held up his hand in a silencing motion.

A news flash caught his attention.

“A Las Vegas police detective, Philip Olson, was found dead yesterday afternoon at a private home owned by a man named Timothy Hatton. Details are sketchy, as Las Vegas Metro is not releasing any information that could hinder their investigation. Attempts to talk to Mr. Hatton, or members of the Hatton family, have been futile; it appears that the Hatton family is under police protective custody. No one at Metro is willing to discuss the cases that Detective Olson may have been working on or their possible relevance to his death. We will bring you updates as they occur.”

As the radio station returned to music, Darren glanced first at Cindy and then into the rear view mirror at Andrea. No one said anything.

* * *

Wednesday, January 12, 10:50 a.m.

“Should I call Mr. Poole?” The assassin considered calling Darren’s cell phone, using some innocuous excuse to see if Darren would give away his location. “No, with the news about Olson’s death being broadcast every five minutes, he will be much too leery of a stranger’s call. I’ll just have to wait it out a bit longer.”

* * *

Wednesday, January 12, 11 a.m.

Johnson had worked late and came in earlier than usual to finish his report. He turned it in and waited—for what, he had no idea—he just knew he did not feel like going home and being alone. Johnson’s supervisor relented to his insistent pleas to keep him on the job even though he knew Johnson would find it hard to concentrate. The caseload was not as important to him as his people and if a few things were put on the back burner or delayed, then so be it.

Fortunately Johnson arrived before the press crews set up camp at the main entrance, begging anyone going in or out to talk to them about the Olson murder. Strict orders had been given that the only comment to be made to anyone was, “No comment.” Tired of the stonewalling, and with a biting cold wind providing incentive, the reporters and video crews took to waiting in their vans. They knew it was only a matter of time before a spokesperson would come forward with a sound bite. Little did they know that the police were also totally in the dark about the circumstances surrounding Olson’s death.

* * *

Wednesday, January 12, 11 a.m.

Darren estimated that they were about ten minutes away from the condo. Since he heard the news about Phil, his mind was racing with thoughts about their vulnerability. He kept running through all the conceivable ways that the assassin could find them and was convinced he had considered every possibility. There was no way the killer could find them unless they wanted

to be found. They would be safe at the condo, at least for the time being. Darren knew that once he contacted the under sheriff that all bets were off. He would be traveling an uncharted route.

* * *

Wednesday, January 12, 11:35 a.m.

"We're going to have to make a statement soon. The boss is eager to talk to the media." Under Sheriff Miller had called in the detectives assigned to Olson's murder. He wanted to add that the boss, Sheriff Bart Knowles, never missed an opportunity to get on camera. "Fill me in."

"I'm afraid we don't have much, sir. When we went to Olson's place all we found was a mess. Somebody did a thorough job of turning the place over." Detective Anders, the senior member of the team spoke first.

"Do we have any idea what the heck happened?" Miller was showing a slight trace of irritability.

"Sir, the only source of information we have is Hatton. We're confident that he has told us everything he knows. He is just as confused as we are why anyone would want to kill him and Olson."

Detective Strobe spoke next. "The CSI team went over the scene and didn't find anything that couldn't be traced to Hatton, his wife and kids, or Olson. Not one single piece of evidence that could lead us to the killer."

"How about the coroner's office?"

Anders fielded the question, "The coroner feels that Olson was dead before he..." Anders found it hard to say more. After a few seconds he continued. "He says that Olson was stabbed through the heart and died within seconds. The decapitation was done after he died."

"Why? I mean, why would you decapitate someone after they are already dead?" Miller was almost speaking to himself, he spoke so softly.

"What, sir?"

"Oh, nothing. I was just thinking out loud. Go on, anything else?"

"If we assume that the killer is also the one who ransacked Olson's place, then we have to conclude that there is something the killer wants that supposedly Olson or Hatton had in their possession." Strobe knew he was not saying anything that was not already obvious to his partner and the under sheriff. "Hatton has no clue what that something could be."

"There's one thing you're forgetting."

Anders and Strobe looked quizzically at each other.

Miller continued, "As far as the killer knew, at the time, Olson was Hatton. If you remember what Hatton said, Olson was pretending to be him, so that means that Hatton was the target and still is the target."

Anders offered his opinion of what happened. "Sir, I believe that the killer felt that Hatton had something of value when he went to the Hatton home. I think that after Olson was dead, his killer figured out that Olson was not Hatton, probably from an ID or something, we don't know for sure because there was nothing on Olson, just his revolver laying on the floor. Olson's car was gone through so there may have been something there with his ID. Anyway, I think the killer found out that Olson was a cop and that whatever Hatton had he gave to Olson."

"What leads you to that conclusion?"

"Well, sir, the Hatton house showed signs of being only partially searched. Surely the killer would have gone over it with a fine-toothed comb. But the partial search lead's me to believe that Olson interrupted the search. That's clear now that we know Olson's place was torn

apart. Clearly Hatton was a target only for what he possessed. I think the killer was watching for Hatton to come home but was confronted by Olson instead. Once the killer figured out who Olson was, there was no need to search the house. Our killer figured that Olson had the goods, not Hatton.”

“So, Anders, how do we find out what this murderer is looking to find?”

“I wish I knew, sir.”

“The boss isn't going to like hearing that we're at a dead end.”

* * *

Wednesday, January 12, noon.

“How are you doing, detective?” The rookie made his mail delivery rounds in a perfectly pressed and spotless uniform. He started to hand the day's mail to Johnson.

“Just put it on Olson's desk. I'll get to it later. Right now I think I'll get some lunch.”

* * *

Wednesday, January 12, 1 p.m.

“Hello, this is Miller.” The under sheriff relented and agreed to take the phone call. “How may I help you?”

“Sheriff Miller, I have some information that you will want to see.”

“Just what is the nature of this information, Mr....?”

“I would prefer to remain anonymous for the time being, under sheriff.”

“How can I be of assistance if I don't know who you are?”

“My life, and the lives of others are in danger and before I place my trust in you, I think we need to meet.”

“I'm sure if you come down to our offices, we can have someone assist you.”

“It is imperative that I speak only with you. When you hear what I have to say, you will understand my cautious attitude.”

“I'm sorry, but I can't commit to talking to someone who refuses to identify himself. If you like I'll connect you with someone who has the time to hear you out.”

“I know why Phil Olson was killed.”

“We have already received a dozen calls from people claiming to be responsible for Olson's death.”

“Did they also tell you about his apartment being ransacked?” Darren knew nothing about Olson's apartment being searched; the police purposely withheld that information from the press. He assumed that the killer was adhering to the same pattern as in the other murders. His guessed correctly.

The under sheriff was aware that only someone with insider knowledge would know about Olson's apartment. “You have my attention. What else can you tell me?”

“I will say only that Olson's murder was carried out by a professional assassin. If this killer's pattern holds true, you do not have any clues to an identity. Meet with me and I can fill in parts of the puzzle. It is vital that no one else know, especially Sheriff Knowles.”

Miller was hooked. “What do you mean by 'pattern'?”

“I can provide you with information that will tie together other recent deaths—all related to Olson's.”

“I will agree to meet with you, but it has to be in my office, nowhere else.”

“I accept.”

“Be here tomorrow morning at ten.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Thursday, January 13, 8 a.m.

Darren could not believe his bad luck. “Of all the days to rain, why today?”

“So, you need to allow a little more travel time, that's all, no biggie.” Cindy gave Darren a peck on the cheek.

“Thanks a lot. Just what I need, advice from someone who is going to be warm and dry, sitting around watching soap operas all day while I have to fight traffic and the rain.”

“You're just edgy about the meeting with Miller.” Andrea lightly touched Darren's shoulder. “Sit down and have some coffee, breakfast will be ready in a minute.”

“The condemned man's last meal?” Darren's joke did not bring a smile to either lady.

“Don't talk like that, Darren. You make me nervous.”

“Sorry, Cindy. I guess that wasn't humorous.”

“You aren't having second thoughts about meeting with Miller are you?”

“No, Andrea, I'm not. It's just that I don't know how he is going to react to what I have to tell him. Not knowing what to expect is alien to me. I like being in control of situations, but I have none once I walk out that door.”

* * *

Thursday, January 13, 9:10 a.m.

Detective Johnson had to fight his way past the throng of reporters who had found out from “unnamed sources” that he was Olson's partner. Before his leaving the previous day, his supervisor told him to be prepared for the onslaught, as he had gotten word that Sheriff Knowles was going to unofficially feed some information to selected members of the media as a delaying tactic.

Johnson almost made a scene when one of the reporters asked, “How does your partner's death make you feel?” He turned toward the man with such rage in his eyes that the reporter backed up a step. Fortunately for the reporter, Johnson ignored the question, regained his composure, turned away and continued to make his way into the building.

Once inside, Johnson went over to his desk, grabbed his coffee cup and headed for the coffee machine. As he attempted to pour himself a cup of coffee, he noticed his left hand shaking to the point that he was forced to put down the coffee pot and grab his cup with both hands. Just then another detective stepped up, “Allow me. I saw what happened outside. I know it's pointless, but I'll say it anyway, don't let them get to you; and remember one thing—we're going to find the bastard.”

Johnson managed an almost inaudible “thanks” as he started for his desk, both hands still firmly grasping the now full cup. He passed by Olson's desk first and remembered he had forgotten to handle the mail from yesterday. Reluctantly he put down his cup and slowly sat down in Olson's chair, running his hands along the armrests, as if to somehow make a connection

with his lost partner. Silence overcame the room as everyone else noted Johnson's actions. They all knew that he needed this moment to start the closure process. When Johnson picked up the few pieces of mail and started leafing through the envelopes, the normal sounds returned.

The only mail that caught his attention was the manila envelope that was marked, "For eyes only of Phil Olson." The sixth sense that all good cops seem to have sent a chill down Johnson's spine. Somehow he could feel that this envelope was related to his partner's death. Curious as he was to know what might be revealed, a gnawing apprehension was preventing him from opening it, so he tossed it onto the desktop and leaned back in the chair, all the while not letting his eyes wander from the manila object. For approximately a minute, Johnson thought about his partnership with Olson, the good times and the bad. When they first teamed up, Olson impressed Johnson as being full of himself, with a superiority complex. Johnson's limited experience did nothing to alleviate the strain until one day when a crazed drug dealer got the drop on Olson. With a nine millimeter pointed at his temple, Olson was just a bystander as Johnson tried to reason with the man. Sensing that the situation was reaching a critical stage, Johnson calmly took aim at the suspect and squeezed off a round, putting the bullet right between the man's eyes. Olson was having a hard time trying to decide whether to hug Johnson or take a swing at him. Ultimately he and Johnson just looked at each other and broke into a chorus of nervous laughter. They never discussed the situation between themselves, but Johnson soon learned that Olson had been relating the incident and telling anyone who would listen what a great partner he had.

Having mentally prepared, Johnson opened the envelope.

* * *

Thursday, January 13, 9:53 a.m.

Darren did his best to evade being caught on camera, staying as far in the background as possible. He knew he was being excessively cautious, but wanted to be safe rather than sorry. He was dressed in slacks, sport coat and a sport shirt covered by a sweater—not too over or understated, just nondescript enough to avoid attention.

Walking through the door of the police building, Darren suddenly realized that he would not be able to keep his identity a secret. He was going to have to sign a guest log and present his identification if he hoped to meet with Miller. He laughed to himself at the thought that Miller had pulled one over on him. "File this one away for future reference, Darren."

Darren signed the guest log, presented his ID to the sergeant at the desk, clipped the access badge to his lapel, followed the sergeant's directions to pass through the metal detector, and made his way toward the elevators.

* * *

Thursday, January 13, 10 a.m.

"Sheriff Miller will see you now, sir."

Miller's secretary was cordial and greeted Darren with a smile when he walked into the reception area. He was one of several individuals that had been waiting to see the under sheriff. The others looked peeved that Darren was able to see Miller almost immediately, while they had been waiting for some time. Even Darren was surprised by the under sheriff's punctuality.

"Please have a seat, Mr. Poole." Miller motioned to one of the two leather covered easy chairs that faced his ornate desk. The other, to Darren's surprise was occupied. "Let me introduce you to Detective Johnson, Phil Olson's partner."

"I'm sorry about what happened to Phil, detective." Darren shook Johnson's hand, and then turning to face Miller he said, "I wanted to speak with you in private, sir."

"Don't you think that Olson's partner deserves to hear what you have to say, especially considering this?" Miller lifted the manila envelope up and let it drop back down on his desk pad.

"Not to be disrespectful, but I'm in a position of having to trust you Sheriff Miller, but I have a choice whether I want to trust Detective Johnson or not. It's my life at risk here, not either of yours."

Miller pondered for a moment before addressing Johnson. "Please leave us alone, detective; wait outside in case we need to talk some more. I appreciate your cooperation."

As Johnson was closing the door, Darren spoke up. "I see you have the envelope I sent to Olson."

"Yes, and you have some explaining to do, Mr. Poole."

"Please call me Darren. I hope to persuade you to be on my side."

"You realize, of course, that from my standpoint, at this instant I am looking at the number one suspect in Olson's death?"

"I know you have to treat me that way, at least for the moment. That's why I need to show you something." Darren reached into his breast pocket and pulled out one photograph and one letter that he had kept for just such a circumstance. Handing them to Miller, Darren continued, "If you look at the photograph first, note the addressee on the envelope, and then read the letter, you will begin to understand why I'm here."

As you would expect from a seasoned police officer, Miller looked at the photograph without changing his expression. He had seen far too many such scenes over the years and it would take something unheard of to invoke a reaction. Darren did notice a slight change of expression, perhaps recognition, when Miller read the addressee before removing the letter. After reading the letter, Miller folded it back up, but instead of placing it back into the envelope, he tapped it gently against his chin, as if the physical connection might give him some incite to its meaning. Darren remained silent as Miller returned the letter to its envelope and placed it on top of the photograph. Looking at Darren for a few seconds Miller finally spoke.

"When Johnson brought in this manila envelope this morning, I didn't know what to make of it. Now, however, it's obvious that you have more letters and photographs stashed away in a post office box. Am I right?"

"Precisely. You'll understand why in a minute."

"I'm ready to hear your story Darren, but I want you to understand something—I'm going to be asking you some pointed questions and since you are a suspect, at this point, you may want to consider having an attorney present."

"Sheriff Miller, once you've heard my story, I'm confident that you will realize that I am the farthest thing from a suspect."

"Okay, but if at any point you feel you could be incriminating yourself, just give the word and I will read you your rights and you can call an attorney."

"I understand."

Miller opened the top right-hand drawer of his desk and pulled out a small tape recorder.

"I give you my word that no one is going to hear this tape unless it is a court."

"Fair enough."

Miller slid the recorder closer to Darren so that it was half way between them and could pick up both their voices. After he pushed the "record" button, Miller made a statement to the

effect that Darren Poole was making a statement without a lawyer being present and without being under duress, then he made a gesture toward the recorder as if beckoning Darren to start his tale.

* * *

Thursday, January 13, 11:23 a.m.

"All right, let's go over some details. For starters, I want to see if I can confirm that Olson has a contact in the FBI. Did he mention a name?"

"No, he didn't."

"Maybe Johnson has some idea, if not I can have the phone logs checked to see if he made any calls to the FBI from this office." Miller was writing a numerical list of his action items as they talked. "Next question. At any point, did Olson give you any information that would lead you to believe he had identified the assassin?"

"No, none at all. I believe he realized that this killer was a finely tuned killing machine."

"Why do you say that?"

"When I expressed my concerns about him trying to set a trap, he indicated that he was not going to let the killer get anywhere close to him. Can you tell me how Phil was killed?"

"I'm afraid not, not now, anyway. Maybe at a later date, but for right now I have to keep a lid on as many details as possible."

"Believe me, I can see why. I've seen some of Sheriff Knowles comments and it's clear to me that all he is concerned about is looking good."

Darren could see an ever so slight grin on Miller's face when he made the comment about Knowles. "Sheriff Miller..."

"How about you call me Hal? I think we have moved beyond the formality stage."

"Hal, if my suspicions are correct, our worst enemy could be Sheriff Knowles. I'm convinced that he can't know anything about this. I'm already looking over my shoulder every minute for some unknown killer; I don't need to be worrying about every cop I see."

Miller sighed loudly enough for Darren to hear. "It's going to be a monumental task keeping Sheriff Knowles on the outside. At some point I'm going to have to release some information about Olson's killer. That's not my major concern though. I'm wondering how I can get the district attorney involved. Mayfield wields a great deal of power in this town. The DA isn't going to pursue this unless it's a slam-dunk case. If I can locate Olson's contact at the FBI and get a copy of the official report identifying the victim in the photographs as Amber Wilson, then I've got enough to take the case to the DA."

"Is there anyone in the DA's office that you know will keep this quiet until the right time?"

"I think so, but you can never be sure. This would be one hell of a high-profile case. Once the media get onto it, all the camera hogs will come out into the open; then, all bets are off."

"How are we going to link the deaths of Olson and my friend to this?"

"That's the downside. Unless we can apprehend the killer, we can't tie them to Mayfield. We have a direct link between Mayfield, Wilson and Williamson. We don't have Amber Wilson's killer but we do have evidence of a contract, and that contract, along with the letters, shows that Mayfield and Williamson were conspiring in a murder. That is, of course, if you do indeed have that photograph with the message."

"It's in the post office box."

"Okay, Darren, I believe you. Just be aware, without that, there is no way we would be able to make a case. The senator could simply say that he broke off his relationship with Wilson

and that her death is unrelated to their relationship. We would be left holding our you-know-whats and pissing into the wind.”

“I don't mind telling you Hal, I'm very concerned about Johnson being in on this. So far he knows who I am and where the remaining evidence is located.”

“Let's put your mind at ease then.” Miller pushed a button on his phone. “Have Detective Johnson come in.”

Johnson quietly opened the door and just as quietly closed it behind him.

“Have a seat detective. I'm going to be blunt and to the point. I need for you to forget what you saw in this envelope.” Miller held the manila envelope up and let it drop back down. “As of this moment the only people who know its contents are in this room. If anyone should find out the information that it contains, I will have to assume it came from either you or Mr. Poole. Since Mr. Poole is likely the target of an assassin, I doubt that he would place his own life in jeopardy. That leaves only you, detective. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, sir. May I say something, sir?”

“Of course.”

“Will that envelope help catch the one responsible for my partner's death?”

“We hope so.”

“Then you can count on me. Right now the only thing I want is to personally cut off the head of Phil's killer, just as he did to my friend.”

Darren flashed a quick look at Miller and abruptly sat up in his chair. Johnson instantly realized that he had revealed something he should not have.

“I'm sorry, sir. I screwed up.” Johnson hung his head at the thought of being so stupid.

“It's all right. I crossed Mr. Poole off our suspect list an hour ago. Just make sure this is the last slip you make; another mistake and it could be your head. I'm going to talk to your supervisor and have you placed on temporary assignment reporting directly to me, should I need someone to do some footwork on this case. Are you okay with that?”

“Yes, sir. Anything I can do for my partner.”

“Fine. You're dismissed.”

“Thank you, sir.”

After Johnson left, Darren, who had been trying his best to maintain his composure, finally had to speak out.

“What did he mean by the head reference? Did I hear him correctly?”

“You did. Phil Olson wasn't just killed, he was beheaded. Fortunately, if you can call it that, he was dead beforehand. We are not dealing with just an accomplished assassin, but a sadistic one. It's as if this killer was going through a ritual of some kind.”

“What do you mean?”

“I've said enough. I don't want to go into it any further. Not that I don't trust you, Darren; it's just the thought of how Olson died. I'll be honest with you; I couldn't care less about prosecuting Mayfield and Williamson for conspiracy. I want to get them to identify the assassin. I want to nail that bastard.”

“That makes two of us, Hal.”

* * *

Thursday, January 13, 2:33 p.m.

Darren drove aimlessly around before deciding to park for a few minutes in an empty lot near the end of Lone Mountain Road on the Northwest side of town. The weather had cleared

and the view across the valley was spectacular. Darren could see the sun so brightly reflecting off the copper-colored roof of the Circus Circus Adventuredome that it appeared to be on fire, while to its right, the Luxor pyramid seemed like a giant triangular mirror, purposely erected to illuminate the valley with the afternoon rays. The mountains east of the Strip were bathed in the orange glow of the rapidly setting sun.

Darren loved this view of Las Vegas; no matter the time of day, it always offered something unique. One day you could see lightening arcing across the valley sky, the next a sunlit panorama so bright that you could not watch without wearing the darkest of sunglasses. Then there was the night, Darren's favorite viewing time. The mountains disappeared, and from a distance, even the garish neon of the Strip took on softness. From his vantage point, Darren could hold up a thumb at arm's length and hide the more than thousand foot tall Stratosphere Tower. At night it was hard to imagine Sin City living up to its name.

Darren knew Cindy would be ill at ease and wondering where he might be, so he headed back to the condo, unable to get his friend John out of his head.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Friday, January 14, 8:45 a.m.

"Are you ready to talk to us, Darren?" Cindy reluctantly let Darren have a peaceful dinner and evening with no questions about his meeting with Harold Miller. She and Andrea assumed his reluctance to discuss the meeting was a sign that all did not go well.

Darren walked over to the coffee maker and poured himself a cup, took a sip, and then sat down at the breakfast nook table. Cindy and Andrea joined him, having just finished preparing breakfast. As Darren applied some blueberry jam to his toast he started to fill them in on his meeting.

"I didn't feel like talking last night. I know it wasn't fair for me to leave you both hanging like that but I just couldn't bring myself to talk about it." Darren paused and had another sip of coffee. "I found out from Miller, some of the details regarding Phil's death." He paused again, and seemed to be having trouble finding the correct words. Cindy could sense his anguish, no matter how much Darren tried to conceal his feelings.

"This is obviously very hard for you, honey. If you don't want to tell us, it's okay."

"No, I want to tell you. I don't want you two to be in the dark, not when your lives are in jeopardy. There is no easy way to say this. Phil went to Hatton's house to wait for the killer to show, but apparently, the assassin was already in the house. I don't have many of the specifics because the police are trying to hold back the details from becoming public knowledge. I do know that Phil was killed before..." Darren had to take a deep breath before continuing. "Before he was decapitated."

Cindy and Andrea were speechless, the shocking news overwhelmed them to the point that they lost their composure. Andrea started to cry uncontrollably as Cindy put her arm around her friend.

It took several minutes for Andrea to calm down enough so that Darren could finish.

"I'm telling you this so that you will have a better understanding about the killer that is after us. We can't underestimate him. Miller thinks that the beheading was some kind of ritualistic thing. So, not only is this assassin highly skilled, but also insane."

"Now that the police are involved, won't this killer back off and disappear? Won't he see that it's too dangerous to keep looking for us?" Andrea was hoping that Darren would agree.

"Miller thinks that with the evidence I have stashed, there is a good case for a murder conspiracy against Mayfield and Williamson. If the evidence doesn't exist, the case falls apart. In other words, the killer is still on our trail, he has to be, so that the case can't be made. If he finds me, he finds the evidence. Destroy the evidence and the district attorney won't be able to do anything."

"Look, Darren. The killer can't be sure that you are the one with the documents. If he did, he wouldn't be going after other people in John's address book."

"Cindy, that would be true except the killer knows I am the one most likely to have the evidence. Miller told me that Phil's cell phone couldn't be found, not in his car, on him, in the Hatton house or at Phil's place. They are assuming that the killer has it. With that he can see all the calls that I've made to Phil over the last few days. It doesn't take a genius to figure out that I must be the one with the goods."

"What about police protection, Darren? Can't they help us?"

"I discussed that with Miller, Andrea. I turned it down. We would be getting other people in the police department involved if we did that. We've already discussed that. We can't take a chance. It's bad enough that Miller and Johnson are already involved."

"Johnson? Who is that?" Cindy asked as she poured Darren another cup of coffee.

"Phil's partner. He's the one who found Phil at the Hatton house. He's really shaken up over this."

"How do we know we can trust him, honey?"

"Miller made it clear to Johnson that if anything we discussed should come out, that it would be him taking the heat. I think we can trust both of them. There is one other thing I want you to know. I mailed an envelope to Phil, at his office, and Johnson found it. He took it to Miller and now they are both aware of the location of the evidence. So, if it's any consolation, should anything happen to me, Miller can get the evidence and go ahead with the case. Unfortunately for me, the killer doesn't know that." Darren managed a smile with the last comment but neither Andrea nor Cindy was amused.

"So you, we, are still targets and we can't count on the police for protection against a crazed assassin. Do I have that right?" Darren did not appreciate the sarcasm in Andrea's voice.

"That brings me to the next thing I wanted to tell you. I think it would be best if I sent you two away and I remain in hiding by myself. Miller and I feel that I am the killer's target, not you guys, but if you're around me, you could be in needless jeopardy. I want you to stay under his radar, just to be sure. We can't get careless."

"I don't want us to be separated." Cindy was upset that Darren would consider the idea.

"It's what's best for all of us. I wouldn't be able to sleep at night if I knew I was putting you two in danger. Besides, there are several good reasons for doing this. Primarily, you two need to get on with your lives. This whole trial process could take months and you would both go crazy being locked up here. I've done some checking around and I can get you both jobs, if you want them, in New Orleans through a client of mine. You could keep busy and go about your business without worry until this whole thing is history. If you don't want to work, that's fine also; I have enough saved up to support us all until the smoke clears. Still, you need to get out of Vegas."

“Are you nuts? What am I supposed to do in New Orleans, or wherever?” Andrea was going to need some persuasion.

“The same thing you do here. What else do you propose? You can't stay here and go back to work for Mayfield!” Darren was becoming edgy and Andrea's attitude was not helping.

“There has to be another alternative, Darren.” Cindy was trying to remain calm and get him to be more relaxed. “How are we going to maintain our relationship when we're two thousand miles apart?”

“I know it isn't going to be easy, but we have to do this. Look at us, it's only been a couple of weeks since this whole mess started and already we're showing signs of stress. We aren't talking about a permanent situation, just a temporary measure.”

“Will you come down to New Orleans so I can see you?”

“Unfortunately, Cindy, I don't think that would be possible. I don't think the police would want me leaving town since I am the only witness to what has been going down.”

“What about us?” Andrea was puzzled by Darren's comment.

“You guys never had any direct conversations with John about the evidence or his suspicions. I did. As far as anyone knows, John didn't discuss this situation with anyone but me. I'm the witness that ties events, here in Vegas, to the evidence that John found.”

Andrea was not going to let matters rest. “Listen, Darren, you could provide a deposition. That would be just as good as being here.”

“She's right. You wouldn't have to stay here if you did that. You could come with us and we could be together in New Orleans.”

Before Darren could respond, Cindy had another thought, one she did not like. “Wait a minute. There's more going on here than you're telling us, isn't there? What are you keeping from us, Darren?”

“Miller and I discussed the possibility of using me as bait to draw out the killer. Catching him could put the frosting on the cake.”

“You can't be considering such a thing! Don't tell me you are seriously thinking about this!” Cindy was livid, flailing her arms in frustration.

“Don't you want to see the guy that killed John and Phil brought to justice?”

Andrea spoke first. “No, Darren. Nobody wants to see justice more than I do, but not at the possible expense of your life. What sense does that make? You shouldn't be thinking about this. Do you think John would want you to do this?”

Cindy did not wait for Darren to answer, “Of course he wouldn't. He would be the first one to tell you that you're insane for even considering such a stupid idea! My God, Darren, Phil was an experienced cop and this assassin got to him. What chance do you think you would have?”

“Phil was acting alone; I wouldn't be, I'd have Miller and Johnson backing me up.”

“Are you sure you want your life in the hands of a desk jockey and one cop who may or may not be trustworthy? It would take a small army to catch this killer, and you said yourself that we can't trust just anybody.” Cindy was pacing, trying to work off some nervous energy.

“I know everything you say is true, but still...”

“Still nothing. I refuse to accept this. I won't let you do it.”

“Listen to Cindy, Darren. It isn't worth it if catching the assassin means losing you.”

Cindy wanted to make sure Darren thought things through. “Darren, you make a living being logical and thorough. You know that no matter how well you prepare, there is always some doubt about unpredictable events. Am I right?”

“Yeah, you're right.”

"Then I beg of you honey, let the evidence speak for itself. If the DA can't make a case with that then there is no hope for justice. It isn't worth another life."

* * *

Friday, January 14, 11:15 a.m.

"I can't say that I blame you, Darren. As I told you when we discussed this before, I would never advise anyone to go ahead with this plan. As much as we want to crucify this assassin, it isn't worth sacrificing yourself."

"I'm glad you understand my position, Hal. Believe me, I gave this a great deal of thought and didn't reach this decision easily."

"I can imagine the anguish you must have gone through. I'll bet your girlfriend is relieved with your decision."

"Definitely, this could have led to irreparable damage to our relationship if I agreed to the plan."

"From a personal prospective, I'm happy with your decision. I just had to make sure you were aware of this option. While I have my doubts, I do think there is a possibility that Mayfield could provide us with a way to get to the assassin. All we would need is a contact method and we could conceivably set up a sting operation."

"What makes you doubt it could happen?"

"Mayfield would insist on a plea bargain before revealing how he contacts this killer. He's no dummy. He would try to get his ass out of the fire by selling out his own mother if he thought he could get away with it. Nothing short of complete immunity would satisfy him."

"Where would that leave the senator?"

"Up the creek without a paddle, I would think. I can't see any district attorney letting both of them off the hook. The DA would probably insist that Mayfield testify against Williamson as a part of the deal."

"Couldn't happen to a nicer guy. It's only fair that the guy who tried to save your butt ultimately screwed it!"

"On a different note, I think we need to discuss turning the evidence over to the FBI, Darren."

"What do you mean?"

"This isn't a local case anymore. What we are left with is a Nevada resident involved in a conspiracy to commit murder in a different state. This is a case of federal jurisdiction taking precedence. If we, the Las Vegas Police, can catch the killer ourselves, we can pursue a local prosecution for the murders committed here."

"So once I turn over the evidence, I'm in the clear?"

"Not exactly, I'm fairly confident that you would have to testify about how you obtained the documents. There's so much legal mumbo jumbo involved in a case like this that I wouldn't dare presuppose anything."

"Hal, are you, not so subtly, trying to tell me that I'm still a target even if I turn over the evidence?"

"I'm afraid so. There are probably a hundred ways a good lawyer could get the evidence thrown out of court. One of those ways is to cast doubt on how it was obtained. You can fill in some of the blanks in that regard, and lend credibility, so hopefully the evidence would be admissible."

"After everything that has happened, you're telling me all three of these scum-bags could

get off Scot free?"

"I just don't want you to be deluded. The only foolproof way to put these guys away is to catch the killer and get him to confess to Mayfield's involvement. Don't get me wrong; I'm not encouraging you to go ahead with the plan to trap the killer. We've already taken that option off the table."

"So I have to stay in hiding and keep looking over my shoulder until I'm needed to testify?"

"I'm afraid so."

* * *

Friday, January 14, 1 p.m.

"So, that's where we stand. I firmly believe you two should get out of town and hide and I think you shouldn't waste any time doing it. Even though you probably aren't targets, the killer could use you guys to get to me, especially you, Cindy."

"Darren, I've already told you how I feel about this arrangement. If you're not going to relent, then I guess I don't have much choice." Cindy was sad and could not hide her emotions. She had fallen in love with Darren but had some doubts whether he felt the same way. She suspected that he needed more time than her to commit to their relationship. Now she was thinking that a separation might be what Darren needed to force him to reassess how he felt about her.

Andrea surprised Darren with her response. "I think you're right, Darren, we need to disappear for a while. I've been thinking it over and I came to the conclusion that there really isn't anything keeping me in Vegas anymore. Whether I stay in New Orleans, or someplace else, isn't the issue, it's starting a new life that's important. Maybe if I leave Vegas, I can put all this behind me."

"Your change of heart surprises me, Andrea. It's a pleasant surprise, though. I think a change of scenery would do us all some good. Unfortunately, my change of scenery will probably mean going to Washington to testify in court."

"I hope you know what you're doing, Darren." Cindy could not think of anything else to say.

"Believe me, I hope I know what I'm doing! Things could easily get out of control, and you know what a control freak I am."

"Just promise me one thing; that if it looks like your staying here is a bad move, that you will get on the first plane to New Orleans."

"You can count on it."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Monday, January 17, 10 a.m.

"Darren, this is Special Agent Tom Morris, of the FBI."

"Hello Mr. Poole."

"May as well cut to the chase and call me Darren. Okay if I call you Tom?"

"You bet."

Each man took one of the chairs facing Harold Miller's desk. Miller began the conversation.

"Tom, I understand that you weren't told too much about what we have going on that involves the FBI."

"That's correct, Hal. I was only told that you have evidence that relates to a murder case that falls under Federal jurisdiction."

"It's Darren who has the evidence. Darren's friend, John Waltman, stumbled upon some photographs and letters that show a victim and a motive. He gave the evidence to Darren and shortly afterward was killed. Several murders have taken place here in Vegas, including a Detective Olson of my department. Olson was contacted by Darren and was investigating the matter when he too was killed. We are assuming that the same professional assassin is responsible for all the killings. The killer is trying to get his hands on the evidence so that a case cannot be brought against the individuals that hired him."

"Wow. That's some story. What will the evidence tell me?"

Darren picked up from Miller. "The photographs are of a woman named Amber Wilson. The letters are from Wilson to Senator Robert Williamson. In the letters, Wilson tries to blackmail the senator into getting a divorce and marrying her. The senator apparently didn't want to do that. One of the photographs has a message written on it to Edwin Mayfield, a local attorney, who just happens to be Williamson's lawyer. The message asks for final payment, supposedly from a professional hit man."

"Let me get this straight, a professional assassin killed Amber Wilson to cover up an affair with a senator. The assassin is killing people here so that he can get his hands on the evidence. Am I right, so far?"

"Yes." Darren and Hal answered simultaneously.

"Do you have any idea who this killer is?"

"No. He has been extremely thorough in covering up his identity. At none of the crime scenes was there the least trace of evidence that could help us. This guy is meticulous. He is also probably insane."

"Why do you say that, Hal?"

"Because of the way some of the victims died. For example, a blow from something like a meat cleaver, to the top of her skull killed Wilson. My detective was stabbed through the heart and after he died, he was beheaded."

"What? Did you just say beheaded?"

"Yes, it looked like some kind of insane ritual."

"Hal, did you tell my superiors about this? Did you ask them to run searches to see if we have this kind of pattern on file?"

"No, Tom. I was told that I should tell you everything and you would do the groundwork of checking the FBI files."

"I will. You can count on that. So, Darren, when can I see the evidence?"

"You can't. I have it stashed away in a post office box for safekeeping and I'm not going to retrieve it until it is for certain that the case is going to trial."

Miller looked at Darren with a surprised look on his face. "What are you talking about, Darren? A case can't be made without the evidence."

"No one in Washington is going to see the evidence until Mayfield and Williamson are

headed into court. The powers that be are going to have to use what I gave you as a sample of what the evidence will show. Tom, you can tell your superiors that the evidence I have links a contract killer to Mayfield and Wilson. There are scads of newspaper clippings on the web linking Williamson to Mayfield.”

“Darren, it would be so much easier if you just gave Tom the documents.”

“Just as it would be equally easy for them to get 'misplaced' once they are in Washington. No. I will turn the evidence over to a judge and only a judge. Those are my terms and if they are unacceptable, then so be it. The evidence stays right where it is.”

“Darren, be reasonable.” Miller was taken aback by this new attitude that Darren was displaying. “Also, consider this, if you keep the evidence and there is no trial, you may as well paint a bulls-eye on your back. That killer will stalk you until hell freezes over. Once you turn over the evidence and testify how you received it, you're off the hook. There would be nothing to be gained by killing you.”

“What you're saying makes sense, Hal. However, can you or Tom honestly tell me that you believe these guys would end up in court if I turn over the evidence now?” Darren looked at both of them and read their faces. “That's what I thought. You both have doubts too. There is only one thing I am sure about, I'm not going to let John Waltman and Phil Olson be cheated out of their day in court. That is the least I can do for them. So, if you aren't prepared to back me up on this, just say so and I'll be on my way.”

“You know I'm on your side, Darren.” Miller wanted justice for Olson just as much as Darren.

Morris spoke up, “I can't make that kind of decision. I will have to talk to my superiors and see what they have to say. If you can give me what you have, Hal, I'll see if that is enough for them to start the process.”

Miller unlocked his center drawer and pulled out the envelope that Darren had mailed to Olson. He reached across his desk and handed it to Morris. Morris carefully handled the photograph and letter and took his time reading the letter.

“It certainly doesn't look good for the senator. This is fairly strong evidence that he was having an affair with Amber Wilson. I'll get this back to Washington and explain Darren's position. Then when they reach a decision, I'll let you know.”

“Thanks, Tom. We will be waiting to hear from you.”

Morris got up and started for the door then paused and turned to face Darren. “For what it's worth, I think I would be doing the same thing if I were in your shoes. Take care, Darren.”

Morris left and Miller did not hesitate to tell Darren how upset he was with this latest development. “You could have told me what you were planning beforehand instead of making me look like an idiot.”

“I didn't plan this, Hal. I had no intention of doing this until I sat down here with you guys. It just hit me all of a sudden and seemed like the right thing to do. I'm sorry if I offended you, but it wasn't intentional.”

“So are there any other plans you've forgotten to tell me about?” Miller gave Darren a slight smile.

“I'm sending Cindy and Andrea away until this is all history. I'm going to stay here, in hiding, until I have to testify.”

“You know don't you, that each day that goes by could put that killer closer to you?”

“You don't need to remind me, I assure you. There isn't an hour that goes by that I don't think about him. I'm just going to have to stay one step ahead.”

* * *

Friday, January 14, 1 p.m.

"Bart, Edwin here, how are you? I haven't seen much of you at the club lately."

"You know how it is, Eddy, one thing after another."

"Been that busy, huh? I guess that detective's killing is keeping you hopping. Are you close to an arrest?"

"Not even close. Whoever did this covered their tracks completely."

"No idea? That's incredible, usually the CSI find something. Oh well, I'm sure you'll get a grip on this before too much longer. Say, Bart, I hate to bother you with this, especially considering what you have on your plate, but I have a client who may be trying to skip on me. He has already missed one court date but I got Judge Dean to let it slide for now. I was hoping that you could track his cell phone and give me a location where I might find him. You know, with that GPS tracking or whatever it's called."

"Sure, all I need is the number?"

"Oh, that would be great, Bart. Got a pencil? Here's the number..."

* * *

Friday, January 14, 4 p.m.

As Darren drove back to the condo, he had been thinking about restaurants where they could go for dinner. He was tired of the usual places they had been frequenting. He noticed the sky darkening and could smell rain in the air, so he wasn't surprised to see the flash of lightening off in the distance.

* * *

"Wow. I can imagine how upset Miller must have been when you sprang that little surprise on him."

"He definitely wasn't a happy camper, but I think I took the sting out of it when I told him that it was just something that came to me on a spur of the moment."

"It does make some sense, even though I feel like you are putting yourself in even more of a precarious position. I wish you would just give the FBI the evidence and drop out of sight. Let them worry about it."

"Cindy, we've been all through this umpteen times. I don't want to discuss it anymore, okay? Let's change the subject. Have you and Andrea reached a decision?"

"Did I hear my name being bandied about?" Andrea walked in, clad in a bathrobe and with wet hair, having just gotten out of the shower.

"Yeah, I was wondering if you guys made up your minds about my suggestion."

"Funny you should ask; Cindy and I have decided to go to New Orleans. You can stay here if you like, but we are going to The Big Easy to party. Mardi Gras, here we come!"

"Calm down, Andrea. I don't want Darren to think we are abandoning him just to go live it up."

"Don't worry about me, I'll be fine here all by my lonesome, eating stale pizza and soup from a can."

"Oh brother. Let me get my violin to play a sad song." Andrea made the motion of playing an imaginary violin.

"Darren, if you're trying to make me feel bad, don't bother. This was your idea, remember? So live with it." Cindy gave him a pinch on the cheek.

“Then I guess we need to spend some time making flight reservations. I'll go on-line tomorrow and check out the fares and flight availability. I'll also call my client and see about what kind of living arrangements we can make. In the meantime, does anyone have an idea as to where we can have dinner tonight?

* * *

Saturday, January 15, 10 a.m.

“I printed out a list of the flights to New Orleans so you guys can pick the one you want. I'll call my client in New Orleans first thing on Monday. He can help me with some of the details of your new living arrangements.”

“We've decided to share an apartment, at least initially, to keep costs down.” Andrea poured the three of them another cup of coffee then gathered the breakfast plates and placed them in the kitchen sink.

“It sounds like you two are getting into this move.”

“Neither one of us has ever visited New Orleans, so it will be a new adventure.” Cindy was almost convincing.

“There is a great deal of history tied to New Orleans. You will not get bored for quite a while. Of course there is the Mardi Gras. Be careful then, it can get a little rambunctious down in the French Quarter. Too many people, all with too much alcohol in their systems, can add up to some outrageous behavior.”

“Sounds like our kind of town, Cindy! Oh, by the way Darren, we've also decided to take you up on your offer of financing us for a bit. We want to enjoy the city before we think about jobs, so make sure you balance your checkbook!”

“Something told me I shouldn't have given you two that option.” Darren shook his head in mock disgust.

“So what's on our agenda for today?” Cindy was getting cabin fever. “I have no intention of sitting around all weekend.”

“How about we take a drive to California?” Darren placed his idea up for discussion.

“Yeah, we could hit all the amusement parks.” Andrea liked Darren's idea.

“In the winter?”

“Sure Cindy, why not. It just means they won't be crowded. Let's go have some fun. Good idea, Darren.”

“It's settled then; ladies, pack up for a couple of days and let's hit the road.”

Darren watched as the girls went into their rooms to pack, relieved that they were willing to leave Las Vegas for a while. He knew it would simplify his life, should things get dangerous.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Tuesday, January 18, 3:30 p.m.

“Hey, Jim, it's Darren. How are things going?”

“Great, Darren.”

“Cool, I'm glad to hear it. Say Jim, remember our conversation about the two friends of mine who might be moving to New Orleans? Well, they have decided to go. They don't want to get jobs right away, you know, the party thing and all. They also decided to share an apartment for a while. Can you give me your opinion on the better neighborhoods to live, and anything else we need to know about living in New Orleans?”

“I'll do even better than that. They can stay with Beth and me for as long as they like. That will give us a lot of time to apartment shop. And before you tell me to check with Beth; this is her idea, so she is definitely onboard.”

“That would be great Jim, I can't thank you enough. I owe you and Beth, big time.”

“Think nothing of it, Darren. You just let me know when their plane arrives and I'll pick them up at the airport.”

“I'll let you know the minute I make the arrangements. Bye.”

“Okay, my client is looking forward to meeting you guys and showing you around New Orleans. It may end up being his wife that does most of the hard work since he works horrible hours; he is a type A personality if ever there was one. I think you will like her, she's great, a stereotypical southern belle, her name is Beth—Jim and Beth Owens. Jim and Beth insist that you stay with them until you find an apartment.”

“We can't put them out like that.”

“Believe me, if you refuse, it will hurt their feelings. These two are the living proof of 'Southern Hospitality' and they wouldn't have it any other way. Besides, Beth loves to shop! It doesn't matter if it's shoes or apartments.”

“Sounds good, thanks Darren.” Andrea was showing fewer signs of stress since their weekend in California.

* * *

Wednesday, January 19, 2 p.m.

“I have some information for you, do you have something to write it down? Good, it's the Windmere condominium complex near Jones and the beltway, on the Northwest side of town. Somewhere in there you will find our Mr. Poole, probably with Andrea Davidson and his girlfriend. Yes, the information is current, within the last twenty-four hours. No, I can't be more specific, the locator in his cell phone gives only coordinates. Okay, the coordinates are...”

* * *

Saturday, January 22, 10 a.m.

“You can just drop us off at the curbside check-in, Darren. No sense parking, we would just have to schlep the luggage around the airport.” Cindy made sense, as usual.

Darren found an opening in the throng of cars, limousines, shuttles and taxis that were dropping travelers off at one of the busiest terminals in McCarran airport. He managed to get within fifteen yards of the curbside baggage check-in. He left the motor running and hit the remote button to release the trunk lid. While Cindy and Andrea pulled out their tickets, Darren unloaded their luggage and walked it over to the check-in attendant.

“I'll come down and see you soon, I promise.”

“You better, mister, or you'll be in deep you-know-what.”

Cindy gave Darren a passionate, good-bye kiss and started for the terminal door. Andrea gave Darren a silent, tight hug then followed Cindy into the terminal.

In all the confusion of getting the car loaded, the women out the door on time and the last

minute preparations, Darren never noticed that they were being followed. The nondescript sedan, being the typical rental car, did not attract any attention. The assassin had been parked across the street from the main gate of the Windmere condo complex for over twenty-four hours, watching each car that left or entered, looking for the make and model registered to Darren Poole. Mayfield had provided as much information as Sheriff Knowles could come up with on such short notice. The assassin did not know that Darren was primarily using a back gate when he and the girls went out for their meals. Unfortunately for them, Darren used the main gate when they left for the airport.

The assassin, acting on and obeying the orders from Mayfield, was now simply observing Darren. The orders were explicit—the evidence had to be secured before Darren was killed. The assassin was going to have to exercise patience and self control.

* * *

Saturday, January 22, 10:50 a.m.

Since he was already near the Southern end of Las Vegas Boulevard, Darren decided to visit the new Apple store that had recently opened. Ever the consummate computer nerd, Darren could hang out there for hours playing with the latest computers and software. All the employees knew him on a first name basis and took turns answering his questions, something the more junior staff did not relish as Darren's knowledge usually surpassed their own.

Darren was putting one of the computers through its paces when a woman approached him and looked over his shoulder. Darren was used to such an occurrence since a large number of the store's customers were average users with basic knowledge of what the machines were capable of doing. This observer could not help but grab his attention as she was about his age and gorgeous. Darren flashed her a smile that she returned.

“Hi, I'm Michelle, I couldn't help but notice how proficient you are with this Mac.”

“Darren Poole. Yeah, you could say I've spent some time working with these. I have my own consulting business.”

“How fortunate for me that I picked an expert to watch!” Her perfect, white teeth contrasted with her pitch-black hair as she smiled.

“Do you own a Mac?” Darren could not stop staring into her hypnotic, gray eyes.

“Yes, a Mac the same as this one. Since I applied the last operating system software update, I've had a problem with occasional crashes. I did the usual preparation, repaired permissions, unplugged peripheral devices, you know, all the stuff you're supposed to do to avoid having the problems I've got! That's why I stopped in here, to see if the experts could give me some enlightenment.”

“It sounds like you know a lot more than the average user.” Darren could not believe this, beautiful, and smart to boot. “There are a couple of other things you could try to isolate the problem. Let me show you a couple of things on this Mac that you can check on yours.”

Michelle watched how Darren effortlessly moved from one window to the next. She asked him to stop momentarily while she hunted through her purse for a notebook and pen. With both in hand she said, “Show me that last screen again, please.”

Darren quickly responded and talked her through the process. He kept spouting detailed instructions as fast as she could write them down. Eventually it dawned on him that he had gone far beyond the helpful stage and was bordering on braggadocio. He backed off and offered an apology. “I'm sorry, I guess I got carried away.”

“That's okay. I don't think I've ever met a man who is in a technical field that doesn't get

caught up when talking about his work. Besides, you've given me a great deal to think about.”

“May I ask you something, Michelle?” Darren had noticed that Michelle wasn't wearing a wedding or engagement ring and felt that it was now or never.

“Sure.”

“Will you have lunch with me?”

“I would be delighted.”

* * *

Saturday, January 22, 12:45 p.m.

“So, tell me about yourself, Michelle Harding. I've been doing all the talking and you know just about everything there is to know.”

“Well, I'm a fashion designer. I've been working in Vegas for the last year on the costumes for a new stage production.”

“Now that sounds interesting. I was under the impression that fashion designers all worked in New York or Paris.”

“Most do, or want to. I was in New York, working for one of the design houses there, but when they had this opportunity come up I insisted on being given the assignment. Not too many designers can have a production like this on their resumes. Eventually, I would like to work in Paris for one of the top houses. With that in my background I could go off on my own. Have you ever been to Paris, Darren?”

“No, I haven't. It's on my list of places to visit. At the rate I'm going, I may have to wait until I retire!”

“All you have to do is plan a vacation for a couple of years down the line. Then you will have the incentive to set aside the money and the time.”

“Easier said than done. In my business you have to work when the client says work. Everybody thinks that being their own boss gives them freedom but it doesn't always work out that way. Most small businesses in the technical arenas are reliant upon clients and contracts. If you aren't flexible the client simply finds someone else to replace you. When they say jump, you ask how high.”

“That must make it hard on your personal relationships.” Michelle gave Darren a coy look.

“What personal relationships? Just kidding. Although it is difficult to carry on long distance romances.” Darren wondered if Michelle was trying to find out if there was anyone in his life. The thought made him realize that he had not mentally committed to a permanent relationship with Cindy. He definitely felt somewhat close to Cindy but wasn't sure it was love.

“I'm sure if you were seriously involved with someone, you would be able to work things out. How does the saying go, love will always win out?”

“I know we've only just met, Michelle, but would you consider going out with me? Unless of course, you are in a committed relationship.”

“Like you, I haven't had the opportunity or desire to get too involved. That is subject to change, however.” She gave Darren that coy look again.

“I take it, that's a yes?”

“Most definitely.”

“What are you doing the rest of the day?”

“I have an appointment at two to go over some material that I need to order. One of my designs calls for a fabric and color that only comes in custom dyed lots. I need to make sure the test samples are what I need. I should be free by evening. What did you have in mind?”

"How about a quiet dinner, maybe a movie, or whatever else we might think up?"

"I'll see you at seven." Michelle handed him her business card after she wrote her address down on the back.

* * *

Saturday, January 22, 7 p.m.

"Hi, Darren, my aren't you the punctual one. I like that, I'm the same way. Come on in. As you can see by the boxes, I'm still getting settled in. I took over the lease on this apartment from a friend. She wanted to live in New York City to see if she could make it on Broadway and since I got the assignment here, it was a natural that we swap leases. Believe me, I came out way ahead on that deal, what with the rent in NYC being what it is."

"I can imagine. Your friend has a thing for basic furniture, I see."

"Yeah, tell me about it. Typical early American furnished apartment! She is definitely not the type to do her own interior decorating. She was absolutely awestruck when she saw my place. Blew her away."

"How did you furnish yours?"

"Ultra modern. I feel that it's the best fit for someone in the clothing design field. I found that living in a modern environment made me think along those lines when designing clothing. I know it probably sounds stupid, but I think it works for me."

"I don't think it stupid at all. People have to do whatever it takes to get into the swing of their business. I couldn't do my job if I tried to work remotely, at least not during the initial phase of learning a client's business and analyzing their needs. I have to be in their environment to really appreciate what I'm up against. Some of my competitors think they can do it all remotely. So far, my clients like me being on site."

"What's funny about that is you need to be on their site while I work best at home. That is my biggest problem here in Vegas; I don't have the comfortable surroundings I'm used to. Like you, though, I did need to see where my designs were going to be used. I spent several days sitting in the showroom by myself, drawing rough sketches as I had ideas. The sets for the show haven't been constructed yet, so I made a few sketches and submitted them to the production manager as suggestions."

"How did that go over?"

"He loved them. He wanted me to do even more and to look over the existing ideas. Without that support, I might be having a much more difficult time coming up with my costume designs."

"That's fantastic. Getting that kind of support will make you that much more successful. I wish I got that kind of cooperation all the time. More often than not, I'm on my own and it can be like pulling teeth out of an elephant getting people to talk about how they do their jobs. The lower level managers and staff think I've been hired to eliminate their jobs!"

"I can't imagine how much it must frustrate you trying to work in that kind of environment. I'd go insane in minutes."

"A creative environment it's not."

"Enough business talk, Darren. Let's have dinner."

"Your carriage awaits, Madame."

* * *

Saturday, January 22, 10:30 p.m.

"I think the waiter wants us to leave."

"I think you're right. Michelle, would you like to go someplace for an after dinner drink?"

"Sounds great. Anyplace special?"

"Well, if it were about fifty degrees warmer, I'd suggest the outdoor lounge at the Rio, but..."

"Maybe when summer gets here we can go there. I don't think I want to play Eskimo tonight."

"Me neither. I'll think about it on the way out. Right now I think we should leave before the waiter gets violent!"

Darren decided to take Michelle to the lounge in the Paris Hotel tower after she casually mentioned that she had not taken the time to view the water show outside the Bellagio Hotel. From their vantage point, the fountains were clearly visible and spectacular.

Darren couldn't help but stare as Michelle watched the fountains gyrate and vary their intensity to the rhythm of Bocelli's "*Con te partiro*." She is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen, he thought to himself as he took in her smile. If she knew he was staring, she did not let on. As the music ended and the fountains became still, she turned her attention back to Darren.

"Thank you for bringing me here. This is something I'll always cherish."

"I'm glad you like it. We can stay till midnight, that's the last show. Even the fountains need to rest."

"No, I don't think so. I want to go back to my place and be with you."

* * *

Sunday, January 23, 9 a.m.

Darren's cell phone woke them both with a startle.

"Good morning. Sorry about the phone, I forgot to turn it off."

"Not a problem." Michelle got out of bed and walked toward the bathroom.

Darren watched Michelle's totally nude figure disappear as he answered the phone. "Hello. Oh hi." He kept his voice low once he knew it was Cindy. "I'm glad your flight went okay. How is Andrea doing? Good. Good. Jim and his wife met you at the airport? That was nice of them to do that. Say, can I call you back? I have a call coming in from Miller. Okay, I'll call you later. Bye."

Darren did not have another call, he just felt awkward trying to act as though everything was normal with Cindy. A bit of remorse came over him and he could not help thinking that he was such an ass. "Cindy no sooner leaves town and you're having an affair, you jerk." Darren whispered to himself.

His self-loathing vanished at the sight of Michelle, still nude, climbing back into bed.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Sunday, January 23, 10:55 a.m.

“Any plans for today, or are you all mine to do with as I wish?” Michelle whispered into Darren's ear and gave his lobe a flick with her tongue.

“I don't have any plans, to answer the first part of your question, and the second part depends on what you wish!”

“Considering that I've ravished you for the last twelve hours, and you definitely deserve a rest, maybe we should go to brunch and then take a drive somewhere. How does that sound?”

“I like the idea. Especially the part about getting some rest. I have a hunch I'm going to need all my energy for later.”

“Oh, you can count on it.”

“It's decided then. I'll make a quick trip home, shower and get fresh clothes. I should be back in an hour or so.”

“I'll be waiting.”

Darren used the time driving back to the condo to give Cindy a call. Most of his guilt subsided by the time they finished talking. It was more evident to Darren that he did not have the kind of feelings for Cindy that he was now feeling for Michelle. “This is crazy.” Darren was talking to himself in the shower. “You barely know Michelle. How can you be so sure about turning your back on Cindy? Don't you think you should be moving a little slower? Give this relationship with Michelle some time before you totally commit. If it's meant to be, it will happen in due time.” Conscious Darren made sense; subconscious Darren wasn't listening, however.

* * *

Sunday, January 23, 10 p.m.

“I had a wonderful time today, Darren. I still can't believe that they built that whole Lake Las Vegas area out of barren desert.”

“It used to blow my mind as well. Just goes to show you what a pile of money can do.”

“The view from there looking towards the Strip is incredible.”

“You're incredible.” Darren gave Michelle a hug and kissed her passionately.

“Did you bring a change of clothes?”

“Yes.”

“Good, then I can rip these off of you!”

* * *

Monday, January 24, 8 a.m.

“Wake up lazy bones.” Michelle was already dressed. “Some of us have to go to work.”

“Where do you get your energy?”

“It must be my type A personality. I have to be going, I'm expected at a meeting of the production company in a half hour.” She leaned over and kissed Darren good-bye.

“I'll call you later.”

“You better, mister.”

Darren took his time getting dressed. He gathered up all his used clothing and stuffed it into his overnight bag. He had laundry piled up at the condo and decided it was a good idea to go home and get it done. Darren hated the day in and day out chores that seemed to never end. At least, he thought to himself, I can get some work done while the clothes are washing.

* * *

Monday, January 24, 10 a.m.

The assassin patiently waited for Darren to leave Michelle's apartment complex, watching from a distance and rarely diverting attention away from Darren's car. "Eventually, you are going to take me to the evidence, Mr. Poole. I can afford to be patient, as long as I get what I want."

Darren was too preoccupied with thoughts of Michelle to notice the other car pulling out of the parking lot a few dozen yards behind his. As Darren drove through the gate into the condo complex, the assassin took up station across the street, as usual.

Try as he might, Darren could not stop thinking about Michelle. He tried to get through his e-mails, several of which needed some research before he could reply. As he poured through his documentation trying to find answers, his mind kept wandering to thoughts of Michelle—her understated perfume, the smell of her hair, the alluring smile and the tenderness of her kisses. He wondered if she was thinking about him and struggling to carry on with her work. Darren could not help but feel that Michelle was as equally spellbound as he, judging by her actions.

"Damn, Darren, concentrate. You definitely need to make some money, so get to it." Darren finally got into his work and got his creative juices flowing enough to make intelligent assessments and recommendations to his hopefully future clients.

* * *

Monday, January 24, 10:30 a.m.

Michelle looked pensively at the photograph she took with her cell phone of Darren as he slept. She touched the screen and gently caressed the image as if he was there and she did not wish to awake him. She had never felt like this before about any guy. Even though she met Darren just a couple of days ago, she feels as though she has known him for months. He has an openness that allows her to be a part of his life instead of the shell most men retreat to when a woman tries to get close.

Darren was worth whatever she needed to do to keep him, even if it meant setting aside her career and settling down in one place. She could forgo the trips to exotic places and the fast pace that her career required. She would have to find out if Darren felt the same way.

* * *

Monday, January 24, 2 p.m.

"Hi. Calling as I promised. How is your day going so far?"

"I have to admit that I have been having trouble getting into my work. This weekend was fabulous, Darren."

"Gee, that's funny, I haven't been able to stop thinking about you, either, and no, I'm not just saying that! I mean it. It took me forever to be able to concentrate on my work and get some things done. Anyway, am I going to see you tonight?"

"Of course. How about seven?"

"Seven sounds good. How about I bring some take out and we spend a quiet evening alone?"

"Well, the take out sounds great, but after I get you in bed, I don't know how quiet it will be!"

"You're so bad! See you at seven."

* * *

Monday, January 24, 3 p.m.

“Okay, Tim, I'll get a hold of Darren and fill him in. If there is any problem, I'll let you know. Talk to you later.”

Miller had just learned that Tim Morris had persuaded his superiors to talk to Darren before refusing to pursue the case against Williamson and Mayfield. It would mean that Darren had to fly to Washington D.C. to meet with them, but at least the door was open to discussion.

Miller dialed Darren's cell phone number expecting to leave a message, but instead Darren answered on the second ring.

“Hi, Hal. What's new?”

“Hi, Darren. I just got off the phone with Tim Morris. I've got good news and bad news. The bad news is his superiors and the authority in D.C. feel that they would not like to pursue a case. The good news is, Morris persuaded them to at least hear your story before making a decision.”

“So what do they want me to do?”

“They want you to go to D.C. and meet with them. Morris feels that if you talked to them and showed them the rest of the evidence, they would probably reconsider. I was thinking that you could bring the evidence back with you. You could probably persuade them to leave it in your care until the trial, if that's what you want.”

“I'm not crazy about the idea of carrying those documents around D.C. to begin with. I have to get them from the post office box, cart them to the airport, carry them around D.C., show them to a group of strangers and then get them back to a Vegas post office. Why does that sound like I would be a moving target?”

“Because you would be. But need I remind you that you had the opportunity to turn it all over to the FBI and chose not to do so?”

“Yeah, I know. I made my bed and now I have to sleep in it. Did they say when I need to be in D.C.?”

“Thursday, one p.m., at the FBI offices.”

“That doesn't give me much time.”

“You know these bureaucrats, everything has to be on their schedule.”

“I'm going to have to think about this.”

“Don't take too long. By the way, I gave your number to Morris so he could contact you directly, I hope you don't mind.”

“That's okay. They would have to get it sometime.”

“That's what I figured. Let me know what you decide, Darren. Oh, let me give you Morris' number so you can call him with your answer. Got a pencil?”

“Yeah, fire away. Got it. I'll talk with you later, Hal.”

* * *

Monday, January 24, 7:45 p.m.

“You've hardly said a word all evening. Is something wrong?”

“I was just thinking about something that I need to tell you.”

Oh no, Michelle thought to herself, he's going to break up with me.

“You know, Michelle, I have never felt about a girl the way I feel about you. You're special. I think I'm falling, or am already, in love with you.”

“Wow. You can't imagine what I was just thinking.”

“Why? What were you thinking?”

“Nothing important. What is important is that I know I'm in love with you. What do you

think about that, Mr. Darren Poole?"

Darren was speechless; all he could do was look into Michelle's eyes and smile.

"I take it that means you approve?"

"Yes, I approve."

Darren leaned over the table meeting Michelle half way and they joined hands and kissed tenderly.

"There's still something we need to talk about. Something very serious."

"What could be so bad that you are finding it hard to tell me?"

Darren told Michelle the entire story of his involvement in the murder for hire nightmare. He knew that no amount of detail could answer all her questions. He was prepared for an onslaught of emotion, as Cindy had done when she first heard the story. Instead, Michelle's reaction surprised him.

"You have to do what you feel is right. No one can or should try to make you do otherwise. What you do is a reflection of who you are. I love who you are and if you didn't follow your instincts, you wouldn't be the same man I love. I cannot visualize you turning your back on your friends and letting these murderers off the hook. That isn't you."

"You really get me, don't you?" Darren squeezed her hands tightly. "I was concerned that I was so much into you after knowing you for only a few days. I see now what people mean by 'love at first sight,' it is possible."

"I had the same reservations. It doesn't seem real, huh?"

"Not at all, but I guess it is."

"So how are we going to handle this minor setback?" Michelle tried her best to smile and make light of the situation.

"I've been thinking over my options. I may be able to go to D.C., turn over the evidence and give a deposition. That may or may not be the end of it. I would, more than likely, have to return to testify. I would like to get out of that part of it but somehow I think my wants won't matter."

"From what you've told me, it sounds like they could get off even with your testimony. I'm not really sure I understand why, but if you say it's possible then..."

"It has something to do with what they call 'chain of evidence,' or something like that. I got the evidence from another party, not Mayfield himself, so I'm not as viable a witness as my friend John would have been."

"Sorry to have to say this, Darren, but it sure sounds to me like you have everything to lose and nothing to gain. Your life is in danger and yet these killers can get away with it."

"That's about the size of it. Frankly, I agree with Miller, when he says that without the assassin being caught and giving up Mayfield, there is no case."

"Then I think you are doing the right thing by giving the FBI the evidence, making a statement and leaving it up to the powers that be. Go to D.C., give them what they want and come home to me."

"I hope it's that easy. I have no way of knowing if the assassin is on to me or not. I could be followed when I go to the post office to pick up the evidence and boom, end of Darren Poole."

"Don't talk like that!" Michelle was upset that Darren would entertain such a thought.

"What do you mean, post office?"

"I guess I didn't tell you. I put the evidence in my business post office box. It's been sitting there for weeks."

"Does the assassin have any way of knowing that you did that?"

"The only people who know are Miller, Olson's partner and the FBI, as if that isn't enough."

"Yeah, any one of them could sell you out."

"I guess I won't know until I go get the evidence."

"Darren, I have an idea. How about if I go to the post office instead of you? Nobody would suspect me of being involved. I'm not the focus of anybody's attention."

"Don't even think about it. There is no way I would put you in the middle of this. That is out of the question."

"Listen to me. Let's assume that somehow this assassin knows about your post office box and is waiting for you to show up. That would be the end of it there and then, no evidence, no Darren. If, on the other hand, I show up, who is going to know? You have to admit that I'm right."

"Unfortunately, you are right. I can't argue with your logic. I just won't agree with it. End of discussion."

"Baloney! We are not through discussing this until I say we are. And I have no intention of saying that until you agree with my plan. Look, Darren, this isn't about you or me, it's about us. We are in this together, like it or not, when you told me you loved me, this became my problem too. Let me pick the stuff up for you."

"I can't believe I'm even considering this, but you may be correct. I just thought of a way to minimize the exposure for both of us. See what you think of this. You go to the post office, open the box, put the envelope with the evidence into another envelope and mail that one right away to the FBI. The evidence never leaves the post office. You walk out empty handed and I go empty handed to D.C."

"Damn, you're brilliant! No wonder I love you. I think we have a plan. Now that all this serious stuff is out of the way, take me to bed mister."

"Just try to stop me!"

* * *

Tuesday, January 25, 10 a.m.

"Hi, Tim, it's Darren Poole. I have something I want to run by you. I intend to make the meeting on Thursday. I've just made a flight reservation that will put me in D.C. at about eleven forty-five. I would appreciate it if you could pick me up at the airport. Good. I also need a ride back for a five o'clock flight back home. I don't want to stay in town if I don't have to. The other thing I want is your mailing address. I want to mail you something that you are going to need for the meeting. I'll send it overnight priority. Yeah, I have a pen, go ahead. Got it. I'm going to mail it this morning so you should have it tomorrow. I expect you to call me when you receive it. Talk to you tomorrow."

"Well, I guess you need to get to the post office."

* * *

Tuesday, January 25, 10:45 a.m.

Darren had a prepaid, priority mail envelope addressed to Morris and ready to go for Michelle. All she had to do was put the evidence in, seal it and drop it into the priority mail slot. He told Michelle that the FBI would be expecting the envelope on Wednesday.

Michelle drove to the post office and nonchalantly made her way over to the P.O. boxes.

Finding Darren's box, she inserted the key, opened the box, and using the description Darren provided, found the envelope that contained the evidence. She placed it inside the priority mail envelope and closed the box. As she made her way over to the outgoing mail slots, Michelle sealed the envelope and then slid it into the priority mail slot. Her task completed, Michelle drove back to her apartment with thoughts of Darren on her mind.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Thursday, January 27, 11:55 a.m. EST

“Thanks for picking me up, Tim. I appreciate it.”

“My pleasure. A taxi would take you for a ride, literally, if you don't know the layout of the city. You would end up spending a fortune in fare, but you'd get a good tour of the town! I can take you back for your return flight also.”

“Great. So what do the powers that be think?”

“That evidence you sent—that was a clever idea, by the way—has them on the edges of their seats. They are eager to talk to you and view the documents. They agreed to take your deposition, but only because they are concerned you might not testify. Not that they doubt you would but...”

“I know—they are concerned I might get killed before I can appear in court. Guess what? So am I.”

“Well, you can hardly blame them, there is still the issue of an assassin on the loose.”

Darren could not believe how cold it seemed when they walked outside to the parking lot. The temperature was only a few degrees colder than when he left Las Vegas, but with several feet of snow on the ground and the high humidity, it seemed much colder. The overcast sky made sure he did not have the warming rays of the sun to make him more comfortable.

* * *

Thursday, January 27, 1 p.m. EST

Tim told Darren the names of everyone who would be attending the meeting so that he would not be surprised to see so many people in the room. Since this meeting was scheduled with a minimal amount of notice, the attorneys that would defend Mayfield and Williamson were forced to defer to members of their staffs to be present for the deposition.

“Guess they take it seriously when a government official is accused of murder.” Darren was being facetious but Morris did not pick up on it.

The court reporter was the first to arrive after Darren and Tim were seated. She set up her equipment at one end of the rectangular table. A tape recorder was already sitting on the table directly in front of Darren who, at Morris' direction sat in the middle.

Morris' two superiors were next to arrive and introduced themselves to Darren. The senior agent explained the process to Darren, stressing that he would be given the oath just as in a courtroom and that attorneys for Mayfield and Williamson would be allowed to question him as well as the attorneys for the government.

Darren was relaxed until the attorneys arrived. While the government attorneys smiled and welcomed Darren to Washington, the opposition's lawyers were barely able to greet Darren with a "hello."

The lead attorney for the government started the questioning after reminding Darren that he had to speak his answers to all the questions since nods cannot be recorded. The attorneys representing Mayfield and Williamson appeared slightly irritated when the government, in anticipation of what they might ask, beat them to the punch and asked similar questions in a manner that would not upset Darren. Darren, for his part, remained calm and when the opposition did finally get their chance to question him, he was simply expounding on previous answers.

The deposition finally over, the opposition attorneys left, followed by the court reporter. The senior agent stopped the tape recorder, removed the tape that was already labeled with "Darren Poole Deposition on January 27, at 1 p.m." and replaced it with another blank tape.

"Mr. Poole, I'm going to keep recording our conversations just so that there can be no mistake as to what was discussed. I do not anticipate that this tape would ever find its way into court, but you can never be certain. The attorneys that were here representing Mayfield and Williamson are not representative of the ones who will be questioning you at the trial. They were junior staff members who were available on short notice. I would be lying if I told you we didn't quite plan it this way. It was to our advantage not to have the first string here to have a stab at you. I assure you, in court they will be ruthless." With that, he pressed the record button.

Darren looked at his watch after everyone left him and Morris alone in the room. "Well, I have just enough time to get back to the airport. That was fairly intense."

"Yeah, and it's going to get worse. Let's make our way to the parking lot, shall we?"

After they were in the car Darren finally asked Morris how he thought the meeting went.

"I think you did a great job. You kept your composure up against some stiff questioning. That may not say anything to them, but if I'm on the jury, I'm thinking that you are telling the truth and being sincere in your testimony. When you get right down to it, that's what matters. If a jury doesn't believe in the prosecution's witnesses, they don't convict. Don't get me wrong, Darren, I'm no lawyer, but it sure looked to me like the government attorneys were sizing you up to see how you came across. From what I could see, my superiors seemed to be pleased with your demeanor also. I know they sure would like to get their hands on the killer. Someone that accomplished at killing just might be responsible for some of the open cases we have never solved. Nabbing him could mean closing the book on who knows how many unsolved murders. It would be a big feather in their caps."

"All I know is I'm glad to be rid of the evidence. Hopefully, now that Mayfield and Williamson know it has been turned over, I won't be a target anymore."

"I would think that the last thing they would want now is another murder on their hands. My guess is they have already called off the contract on you. If not, they are even dumber than I'm willing to admit. If anything happens to you, the prosecution would make sure a jury knew about it."

"I suppose all I can do is go home and get on with my life and hope that I live to testify and see them behind bars."

"I think that is exactly what will happen, Darren."

* * *

Thursday, January 27, 4 p.m.

"That's right, forget about Darren Poole, it's too late now. If you kill him, it could make things worse for us. Our best chance now is for the evidence to be discredited. In any case, no one can connect you and me because no one knows who you are. If you kill Poole there is always the chance something could go wrong and you could get caught. If you get identified, it's curtains for all of us. The best thing you can do is drop out of sight." Mayfield sounded disgusted.

* * *

Thursday, January 27, 11:35 p.m.

"Welcome back." Michelle threw her arms around Darren's neck and kissed him.

"It's good to be back. It was definitely a long day."

"You must be exhausted. I won't bother you with questions. You can go ahead and get some sleep and we'll talk in the morning."

"Thanks, I appreciate that, I really do."

Darren barely got his clothes off before collapsing in bed. He was asleep in a matter of minutes. Michelle joined him after she hung up his clothes.

* * *

Friday, January 28, 10:15 a.m.

Darren sat down and could not believe the breakfast Michelle had prepared for them.

"This is fantastic. You didn't have to make all of my favorites at one time though!"

"You don't have to eat everything. We can save some for tomorrow. I figured you were going to be starving since your schedule yesterday was so tight. I think you thought of everything except eating."

"I did have breakfast on the way there and dinner on the way back. They were just about fourteen hours apart with nothing in between."

"So how did it go?"

"Great. They got the evidence, so that's no longer my concern and everyone, except the attorneys for Mayfield and Williamson, were pleased with how I conducted myself and how I answered the questions. Tim Morris, my FBI contact, thinks that I should be off the hook as far as anyone wanting me out of the way. It's his opinion that if something happened to me, the prosecution would find a way to make sure the jury knew that I was murdered. That would make my deposition even more credible. I don't think it is wishful thinking on my part to agree with his assessment. If that is true, the worst case scenario is that I have to go back to testify in court."

"It sounds like you're feeling good about how things have turned out."

"I am feeling good. When I think about what has transpired over such a short period, I can't believe I've survived. I've probably aged a couple decades the last few weeks."

"If so, it suits you."

"I hope I never have to deal with something like this ever again. I just want my normal life back the way it was."

"Isn't there something that you want in your life that you didn't have before?" Michelle gave him a sly look.

"You know there is. Since you brought it up, I was thinking on the plane ride back home that we need to discuss our futures."

"Did you come to any conclusions?"

"Yeah, that it isn't going to be easy for us to coordinate our careers. We both have so much

traveling that we have to do, it's going to make things difficult.”

“I think we can work it out, if you want to that is, Darren.”

“Of course I do, you're talking like you have doubts about my feelings for you.”

“No doubts. I was just afraid that once the pressure was off from all this murder and stuff, that you might have changed your mind about our relationship.”

“If anything, Michelle, I'm more certain that I want to spend the rest of my life with you. This may sound hokey, but coming so close to death makes you think about what's important. You start to put things into the proper perspective. Doubts? No, none at all.”

“I'm glad to hear that because I can't imagine going on without having you in my life.”

“So, we agree that we are hopelessly in love and that we are both going to have to make some lifestyle adjustments if we are going to be together?”

“Correct, most analytical mister.”

“Well, with that taken care of, I have to get over to my friend's condo, clean it up and take my stuff back to my apartment. Then I need to get down to conducting business. I've let a few things slide that I really need to handle.”

“Do you think it's wise to move back into your apartment? What if the assassin is still looking for you?”

“Michelle, I can't go on like this forever. If he is still on my trail, then I guess there isn't anything I can do about it. I'm tired of hiding. Common reasoning leads me to believe that I'm going to be safe now.”

“Can I at least go with you? I would really love to see your apartment.”

“Okay, but remember, I need to get some work done, so once I settle into my office there can be no frolicking around in your altogether!”

“Oh, darn, you're wise to my intentions. I'll put a few things together so I can stay with you for the weekend.”

“All right, but be quick about it.”

* * *

Friday, January 28, 1:30 p.m.

Darren and Michelle cleaned up the condo, got his belongings together and headed for his apartment.

“I'm glad you came along. I would still be cleaning up the place.”

“See, I'm definitely good for something, Darren.”

“That makes at least two things I know of from first hand experience!”

“And you call me bad.”

Darren searched for his keys while trying to balance a box of toiletries with one hand.
“Ah, here they are.”

Darren turned the key, noticing that the bolt wasn't in the locked position, and pushed the door open all the way so he could walk in with the box. “It wasn't locked.”

“Wow, I suspected that you might be lacking in housekeeping skills, but this is over the top.”

“Looks like the killer turned this place over after I left for the condo. I hope he didn't destroy my computer.”

“It's a good thing you weren't here at the time.”

“You got that right! Well, I guess this is another job for the Darren and Michelle janitorial service.”

“You sure know how to entertain a girl, Mr. Poole. A few more dates like this and I might have to rethink my commitment to this relationship!”

“You fell, hopelessly, into my trap and now it's too late to escape. You are locked in and no longer free to move about.”

“You spend far too much time on planes, you know that?”

“Tell me about it.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Monday, January 31, 10 a.m.

Darren returned to his apartment after having driven Michelle home so that she could go to work. He had stopped by the post office to pick up his mail and figured that it would take him several hours to go through all the correspondence. He noticed that there was a letter from a potential client he was wooing and upon opening it, he discovered that they were interested in having him submit a proposal. Life was slowly returning to normal.

After Darren completed the task of getting his office back together Saturday morning, he made a note to erase all the files on his computer, restore the ones he needed to retain, and make sure that there was not anything out of the ordinary. He could not be sure if the assassin knew enough about computers to leave something behind as a remembrance. Before he moved out, he synchronized his desktop computer to his laptop, now it was time to do a restore. Once that was completed he could get busy on the proposal.

Darren and Michelle agreed that they both had work to accomplish and would not see each other for a couple of days. Michelle explained to Darren how she could go nonstop for a couple of days, hardly taking any breaks, once her creative juices started to flow. Darren was the same way and could understand why she needed some time alone. The next couple of days were predicted to be cold and overcast with a high probability of rain, just what Darren needed as incentive to stay in and get some work done.

The proposal completed, Darren took a few minutes to relax over a cup of coffee. As he glanced out the window at the steady rainfall, he let his mind reflect on the events of the last month. Losing his best friend was not the best way to start a new year, but it seemed as though there was a greater force at work that took away his friend and gave him someone to love in return. Not the staunchest believer in fate, Darren could not help but wonder how much influence a supreme being may have had in the outcome. Raised a Catholic, Darren fell away from organized religion as a whole, seeing it as merely a front for men to make up their own rules of conduct that would lead to vast wealth. No matter how he felt about the church, Darren was not an atheist; he simply found it hard to fathom how so many wonders in the universe could be chalked up to chance or any other theory that science could offer.

Darren came back to reality when he remembered the many conversations that he and John had about the “Big Bang” theory and the pure scientific approach to the creation of the universe. John was ever the exponent of the scientific, and would not admit that there were some aspects of the creation of the universe that science alone could not explain. Sometimes the conversations

would turn into loud discussions that someone unfamiliar with Darren and John would construe as a heated argument.

"I miss you, John. I'll never forget you, my friend." Darren was so close to the window, his words misted up the pane of glass.

* * *

Thursday, February 3, 5 p.m.

"Hi, stranger." Michelle was punctual, as always and greeted Darren with a tight hug and kiss.

"Thanks for meeting me here, Michelle, this is closer to the restaurant where I thought we might have dinner tonight."

"Works for me, I would rather spend time at your place anyway, that apartment I'm using is too much my friend and not enough me. At least here you have some inner you on display and I can relate to that."

"I just decided that I don't want to wear this shirt. I'm going to change and then we can head out."

"Okay, take your time. I think I'll pour myself a glass of wine."

"Great, pour one for me too. I decanted a bottle of 1997 Duckhorn Merlot a while ago, its had enough time to breathe. It's on the counter."

Michelle found the decanter and took two Waterford crystal wine glasses from the cabinet. As she poured the second glass, Michelle noticed Darren's mail sitting on the edge of the counter. A casual glance revealed an envelope turned face down, with a lipstick impression over the flap.

"Sealed with a kiss." Michelle said to herself in a barely audible voice as she picked up the envelope and turned it over. Seeing it was from Cindy Matthews, with an address in New Orleans, Michelle decided to ask Darren about the other woman in his life.

"So, I see you found the wine. How does it taste?"

"I was just going to try it." Picking up her glass, Michelle offered it up in a toast.

"To us." Darren carefully touched his glass to hers resulting in a crystalline ring.

"Yes, to us, and maybe to Cindy Matthews, whoever she may be."

Darren looked down at the stack of mail and saw the incriminating envelope. "I can explain that."

"You most certainly will."

"Cindy is a woman I have been seeing for about the last eight months. It's been kind of an on again off again kind of thing."

"From the looks of the lipstick, I'd say that to her it is more on than off, Darren."

Darren continued to tell Michelle the entire story of how he met Cindy, the ups and downs of their relationship and the part Cindy played in the Mayfield nightmare. He was confident that he put to rest any misgivings that Michelle could have about he and Cindy continuing in a relationship.

"There you have it, the whole story. So you can see that there is nothing to be concerned about."

"When are you going to tell her about me and you being a couple?"

"I'm going to have to make a trip to New Orleans soon for business reasons. I'll tell her then."

"Why do I have the impression that you might make a trip down there and never mention

me to Cindy?"

"I assure you, I will tell her. Now, can we go to dinner, please?"

* * *

Thursday, February 3, 8 p.m.

"Darren, you mentioned that you have to make a business trip to New Orleans. How soon do you have to go?"

"I told my client that I expected to be down there sometime next week. It all depends on whether I hear from a potential client in New York. I sent off a proposal and requested a face to face meeting to discuss how I can help them achieve their objectives. If they want me there next week, then I have no choice but to put New Orleans on a holding pattern. My New Orleans client is only available on Wednesday and Thursday. I'm reasonably sure that I won't hear from New York until late next week, if not later. You know how large companies are, very slow to react and the more people that need to be in the meeting, the longer it takes to schedule. So to answer your question, I plan on being in New Orleans on Wednesday and Thursday. I'll fly down on Tuesday, meet with Cindy and Andrea, take care of business and fly home on Friday."

"So there is the potential that you could then have to go to New York after that?"

"Yeah, I suppose so. At least I would have the break of the weekend. Why the sudden interest in my schedule?"

"I was curious because there is the possibility that I am going to have to make a trip to New York myself. The studio I work for is based there, I think I told you that."

"Yes, you did mention it."

"Anyway, they called and said they may need me to spend a day or two there giving them an update and showing them the designs I've come up with so far. Just more bureaucracy that I have to tolerate. I swear, middle managers can't stand for their underlings to be out of their sight. They assume that no work is getting done without their direct supervision."

"I know what you mean, I see it all the time in dealing with my large corporate clients. It always seems like there are an extra two or three layers of middle management that get in the way of progress. I'm afraid that may be the case with my potential client. Say, maybe we can plan our trips to coincide? What do you think about that, Michelle?"

"That would be great."

* * *

Tuesday, February 8, 9 a.m.

"Well, I guess I'll see you Friday night."

"Have a good trip, Darren. Call me when you get back, and if you aren't too tired, maybe we can have dinner together."

"That sounds like a plan. My flight is supposed to get into McCarran around four or so, I'll call you from the airport."

Darren kissed Michelle good-bye and left her to lock up his apartment when she left for work. He arranged for Cindy and Andrea to pick him up at the airport in New Orleans around seven p.m., perfect timing for a dinner get together. He was looking forward to seeing them again but not to telling Cindy about Michelle. He knew that would be awkward and planned to wait until Friday to tell her. He hoped they could remain friends, but knew that was unlikely. He simply hated the idea of not keeping the close circle of friends that revolved around John intact.

* * *

Tuesday, February 8, 7:05 p.m.

Darren walked out of the airport and over to the passenger pick up area where he agreed to meet Cindy and Andrea. He did not have to search to find them, they were the only ones yelling and waving. Darren wondered what everyone was thinking at seeing a guy being hugged and kissed by two attractive women. Cindy insisted that Darren sit in the back seat with her while Andrea drove back to their apartment. Darren felt awkward as Cindy kept kissing him and for a moment he thought he saw something in her eyes, as if she was reading his uneasiness. After four or five prolonged kisses, Cindy gave Darren the opportunity to talk.

"So how have you two been doing? Seen all the sights, yet?"

"We've been doing our best!" Andrea glanced into the rear view mirror to see Darren as she spoke. "There's a lot to see here and do."

"How are things in Vegas?" Cindy looked at Darren lovingly.

"Not much has changed." Darren almost laughed at his comment and thought to himself, unless you count my love affair and topsy-turvy life.

"What's the latest on the case?" Andrea was looking in the mirror again.

"Nothing. It will probably be a while before it goes to trial. You know how these things work, Andrea, court schedules being what they are and lawyers asking for continuances. I probably won't be contacted about testifying until Christmas!"

"It shouldn't take that long, but it wouldn't surprise me if it did. Mayfield is no dummy, he probably has the best attorney's that his millions can afford." Andrea paused briefly. "You know what is probably killing Mayfield is that Williamson, more than likely, has a team of lawyers that are trying to separate him from Mayfield. This is one of those cases where it is better for each defendant to be on their own, at least from Williamson's standpoint."

"Yeah, I think you're right. I seem to remember one of the DAs in Washington mentioning something about that. He said he wouldn't be surprised if they didn't attempt to have separate trials. He doesn't think that they will be able to pull that off, though."

"I sure would like to be a fly on the wall during those client-attorney discussions!" This time Darren could see Andrea beaming in the mirror.

"Yeah, it would be a blast watching Mayfield squirm."

"All right you two, let's change the subject. Where should we go to dinner tonight? Where haven't you been, Darren? Or has Jim taken you to all the best restaurants?"

"He kept mentioning that one time we would have to go to Commander's Palace, but we never made it."

"When we get to the apartment, I'll call and see if we can get in. I hope you brought your credit card!" Andrea was beaming again.

"Hey, what happened to the southern hospitality? Since when do guests pay?"

"Since this particular guest is the one who made us move here." Cindy gently touched Darren's cheek as she whispered, "I've missed you darling."

* * *

Tuesday, February 8, 9 p.m.

"I have to admit, everything I've heard about this place is true. Especially about the turtle soup, it is truly to die for. I think Jim is going to be pissed off that he didn't get the chance to bring me here."

"You snooze, you lose." Andrea's attitude change was uplifting and comforting to Darren.

"I have to say, Andrea, that New Orleans seems to agree with you."

"I think you are correct, mon cher."

"She's even gotten into the French thing!" Darren was amazed and pleased that Andrea was adapting to her new surroundings.

"Just wait. Once it dawns on her that she is going to have to end the vacation and go back to work, things will change." Cindy laughed as Andrea feigned a pout.

"Since you've brought it up. Just how long am I supposed to have you two on the dole?"

"That depends on you, Darren honey. How much money do you have?" Andrea did her best Scarlett O'Hara impersonation.

Even Darren had to laugh at that comment and its presentation. "Not that much!"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Wednesday, February 9, 9 a.m.

"I can't thank you enough, Jim. You and Beth have been great to Andrea and Cindy. I owe you big time."

"Just remember that when you make out your next invoice!" Jim Owens was an impressive man, both in stature and character. A native of Ohio, Jim was an all-American linebacker at Ohio State who became a resident of New Orleans when the Saints drafted him. His career, cut short by a knee injury, lasted long enough for him to make sufficient money to start his own beverage distribution company.

"So you finally made it to Commander's, huh? I was hoping to take you there during this trip."

"I wouldn't mind going back. Especially if I don't have to pay for it!"

"Ha! The ladies socked it to you, I take it?"

"It was the least I could do, considering how I've uprooted them. Besides, the turtle soup and bread pudding soufflé are worth the price of admission."

"Unfortunately, as my waistline will attest, there is far too much good food in New Orleans." Jim's pronunciation of "nawlins" was testament to his twenty years of residency. He considered moving back to Ohio until the minute he met Beth at a party. Born and raised in New Orleans, she would never have adjusted to life on a farm in Ohio. Jim was smart enough to realize that and in love enough to make a new life for himself. "What I can't understand is how Beth can stay the same weight, she can eat me under the table and doesn't put on a pound."

"From what I've seen, she runs around quite a bit more than you. I'll bet she runs at least five miles a day in the warehouse."

"I think you may have hit on it. She's a buzz bomb, that little girl. I guess that is what's keeping me young! No comments from you, I can see the wheels turning."

Darren had not laughed this much for a long time. He looked forward to being with Jim for that very reason. Jim had a knack for making everyone forget their troubles and laugh at themselves. If ever there was a time when Darren needed someone like Jim around, it was now.

Darren and Jim discussed the work that Darren needed to accomplish and then Jim left

Darren alone. They agreed to get all five of them together for a night on the town later.

* * *

Wednesday, February 9, 8 p.m.

“Beth, I have to tell you something.”

“What's that, Darren honey?”

“If you ever decide to tell Jim to take a hike, I hope you'll keep me in the back of your mind!”

Beth laughed, “I swear, Darren, you will be the first to know. But you know, darlin', I couldn't give up on this dopey guy, he needs me too much!”

Jim turned toward Cindy and Andrea, “Do you ladies see how these two treat me? They act like I'm not even here when they insult me! Why, I wouldn't be surprised if they don't already have a plan to do me in.” Jim finished with an uproarious laugh.

“Looks like you have some competition, Cindy.” Andrea nodded toward Beth.

“Yeah, I guess I'm going to have to brand this doggie.” Cindy gave Darren a sexy look and returned Beth's smile.

* * *

Wednesday, February 9, midnight

Before he left for New Orleans, Darren had assured Michelle, showing her his reservation confirmation as proof, that he would not be staying in the apartment with Cindy and Andrea. He told Cindy that he wanted to stay in a hotel close to Jim's business so that he did not have to spend needless time commuting and that he would be able to save on a rental car, since the hotel was within walking distance. What he did not bargain on was Cindy insisting that she spend the nights with him at the hotel. After their dinner on Tuesday, when Andrea drove them to the hotel, as Darren was getting his luggage out of the trunk, Cindy got out and took a weekend bag out of the trunk as well.

“You didn't think I was going to leave you alone in a hotel room, did you?”

* * *

Friday, February 11, 4:35 p.m.

“Okay, I'll see you later. I'm hungry, but I'll resist the urge to snack.”

Darren was looking forward to being with Michelle; he missed her even though it was only a few days. The whole time he was with Cindy, he could not stop thinking of Michelle.

Once at home, Darren quickly scanned the mail he picked up from his post office box on the way home from the airport and found a letter from the client he was hoping to land in New York. Ripping open the envelope, Darren read the letter and let out a loud, “Yippee!” The proposal was met with enthusiasm and the principals were eager to start on the project. Overjoyed, Darren picked up the phone to call them when it dawned on him that it was a Friday night, he would have to contact them on Monday to arrange the preliminary meetings that would get the ball rolling. Darren thought how the timing could not be better as he did not have any other jobs lined up. This would give him steady employment for a year minimum. The problem he now faced was Michelle and how he was going to handle the separation from her.

That problem was second most however; his first problem was telling her that he did not get around to telling Cindy about his new relationship.

* * *

Friday, February 11, 7 p.m.

"There's something we need to talk about, Michelle." Darren decided to tell Michelle about the New York contract while they waited for dinner rather than after.

"Why do you sound so ominous?"

"Well, it's like this. Remember the New York business I was hoping to get? Well, I got the contract."

"That's good news, not bad."

"It depends on how you look at it. It means I'm going to be living in New York, or may as well be, since I will only be able to come home on infrequent weekends. Most clients do not like having to pay for their contractors to commute across the country. Besides the cost of airfare, I would lose a whole day of productivity for each weekend I come home. I guess what I'm trying to say is that I would only come home every three or four weeks, at best."

"That is definitely not good news. Of course there is another consideration—I can come visit you every couple of weekends. Maybe more often if my office needs me in New York for whatever reason."

"So, you're okay with this?"

"Really, Darren, what choice do I have? We discussed how our careers could affect our personal lives and we came to the conclusion that it is something we are just going to have to live with, right?"

"That doesn't make it any easier to accept."

"I agree, but we just have to deal with it. The only suggestion I would make is that next time you find a client closer to home."

Darren smiled at how understanding Michelle was being. He was not sure how she would react once the reality of their fears had become a fact. "You never cease to amaze me. I was worried how you were going to take the news and it turns out you are handling it better than I am."

"Answer me this, can you afford to turn down this business?"

"No, of course not."

"Then that is your answer. There is no choice."

Their dinners arrived as if on cue. Picking up his wine glass, Darren offered a toast. "To us. May we survive our long distance relationship."

"Now that we've taken care of that business. There is something else we need to talk about, Darren."

"Oh. What might that be?"

"Did you tell Cindy about us?"

Darren thought for a second about lying to Michelle but realized that she would probably catch on. "No. I didn't have the opportunity. There was no right time. But it isn't a big deal, especially with me being tied up in New York. I'm sure everything will blow over and she'll get tired of me not being around and give up."

"That's what you're thinking? You're not going to go the typical, noncommittal male route are you? Tell me, are you thinking the same thing about our relationship?"

"No, of course not. I simply meant that Cindy and I aren't having the same kind of relationship that you and I have. She will realize that she doesn't mean anything to me and it will all be over in no time."

"I know I should be upset with you, but I'm not. I just wish that you had told her where she

stood. It's only fair, to her and to us." Michelle paused to sip some wine then she continued. "What does the timeline look like for the New York contract?"

"I'm going to call them on Monday to see when they want to start the kickoff meetings. Considering some of my past dealings with large corporations, I would be surprised if they wanted me there before the end of the month. So I think we have some time to plan how we are going to handle this situation. Of course, I won't know how they respond to my returning home periodically. There is quite a bit of work that I can do remotely, if they let me have access to their network. Without having met the people I will be reporting to, it's hard to know if they are the kind of managers that have to see the employee to recognize progress rather than just looking at the results."

"It would be great if you could do some work from home. Would it be cheaper for the client if you worked here?"

"Sure, it would save on airfare. I probably wouldn't save on hotel rates though, I would get a monthly rate so it wouldn't matter if I was here or there. Once I've determined about how long the contract will last, I can evaluate the cost of a hotel versus renting an apartment."

"I suppose we just have to wait and see how your client wants to do business."

* * *

Monday, February 14, 1 p.m.

Darren's phone conference with the new client went as he had anticipated. The client would not be ready for him to come on-site until the middle of March. They did set up a two-hour time slot for him to meet with the principal players to get through the introductions. Darren figured he could take a couple of days in New York to familiarize himself with the company's location and the facilities in that part of town. The client assured him that he could probably find a long-term hotel or apartment close to the company, possibly within walking distance or a quick subway ride.

Darren phoned Michelle to fill her in on the situation. "Yeah, I'll be going there for a couple of days next week to meet the people I'll be working with. I want to tap your brain beforehand to see what I can learn about New York City. I'm planning to check out the hotels and apartments closest to the client while I'm there, if possible. How late are you going to work, Michelle?"

"Probably not much later than six."

"Oh, that's good. I'll get some take out or prepare something so we can stay in. I'll see you later."

* * *

Monday, February 28, 3 p.m.

Darren was thinking about Tim Morris moments before his cell phone rang. Seeing from the caller ID that it was Morris, Darren wondered if Tim believed in long distance mental telepathy.

"Hi, Tim. You're not going to believe this, but a few minutes ago I was thinking about you and the trial. I hope you're calling with good news."

Darren was on the phone with Morris for an hour getting updated on the progress of the case. As expected, Mayfield and Williamson had assembled the best teams of attorneys that their substantial checkbooks could provide. Contrary to what everyone thought, they were not looking to drag out the proceedings, but rather the opposite. The lawyers were pushing for an early trial

date. Morris told Darren that the prosecution was speculating that the opposing counsel wanted to minimize the time that the state had to prepare. Tim told him that it made sense since the defendant's legal teams had far more resources at their disposal than the state. They could put their case together much quicker and just might catch the state with its pants down. Morris reminded Darren that he could be called to testify at any time, reminding Darren to make a note to inform his new client that he would have to take time off from the project to appear in court.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Monday, February 28, 9:15 p.m.

"That's interesting, Darren. They think that by speeding up the process the prosecution won't be prepared?"

"Yes, it appears to the prosecutors that the defense teams are trying to take advantage of a lack of resources. I don't pretend to understand everything that is going on, but it seems to me that the prosecution already has as much as they can hope for without catching the killer. I would think that upping the pace could only hurt the defense."

"Your theory sounds reasonable to me, but neither of us is getting paid the big bucks to defend those guys. To change the subject, what does your schedule look like for the next couple of weeks?"

"I'm going to be doing the setup work for the project. Just the usual stuff: putting together task schedules, team assignment sheets, timelines, and whatnot. You know, all the grunt work of project management. I'm trying to get it to the point where all I have left to do once I'm at the client site is fill in the names of my team members."

"If you don't know who is going to be working with you, how can you schedule their tasks?"

"That's the hard part. After I've worked with them for a while, I'll have a better feel for their abilities. Usually it means revising target dates and schedule setbacks. Then the really hard work starts."

"What's that?"

"Explaining to higher management that the schedule needs to be revised because their people are incompetent! Only you can't use that word. Instead you have to make excuses for their sorry asses."

Michelle broke into uproarious laughter at Darren's comments. "I don't think I could pull that off. You have my complete admiration."

"Talk is cheap. Get naked and prove it!"

"I'd say that the pleasure would be all mine, but I know better than that."

* * *

Tuesday, March 1, 8 a.m.

"There's something I forgot to mention to you last night, Darren. I have to make a trip to the New York office. I'll be gone a couple of days."

"When are you leaving?"

"Tomorrow. I should be home by the weekend. You think you can get along without me?"

"Sure. I'll be fine."

"Wrong answer, mister. You're supposed to be upset that I'm not going to be around to take care of you."

"Oops. Guess I'm not quite used to the 'couple' thing."

"Get with the program, buster."

* * *

Thursday, March 4, 6 p.m.

Darren picked up the phone on the third ring, not wanting to stop typing until he finished the last sentence of his document.

"Hello."

"Darren, it's Cindy. I've got to talk to you."

"Oh hi, Cindy." Darren did not want to get into the conversation he was sure Cindy wanted to start, but before he could cut her off, it was obvious she was not calling to discuss their relationship. The tone of her voice brought back memories of the night she called to inform him about John's death.

"Darren, it's happening again."

"What's happening again?" Darren could hardly understand what Cindy was trying to tell him through the sobbing. "Calm down, Cindy, I can't understand you."

"It's Andrea, she's dead. I think it's the assassin again."

Darren felt a stabbing pain in his gut. This cannot be happening, he thought to himself.

"Tell me what happened, Cindy."

"Andrea and I came home a little while ago. I remembered that there was something I needed to pick up at the grocery store so I dropped Andrea off. When I got back, I walked into the apartment and found Andrea. My God, Darren, I thought you said there was no need for the assassin to come after us?"

"There is no reason for him to be after you. Are you still at the apartment?"

"Hell no. I ran away from there. I'm in a booth in a cafe."

"Have you called the police?"

"Yes, I just got off the phone with them. They told me to stay put until they get here."

"Good. I doubt the assassin is still hanging around, but you're safe as long as there are other people around."

"I'm not going anywhere, believe me."

"Are you composed enough to tell me what you saw?"

"I think so."

"Okay. Try to describe to me what happened."

"The door was open when I got back from the store and when I walked in there weren't any lights on. I turned on the lights and called out for Andrea but she didn't answer. I looked around and found her in my room. Oh, Darren, it was horrible."

"It's okay now, Cindy. It's over."

"The police just arrived, Darren."

"All right. You call me when you get the chance. I think the police will be questioning you for some time. If they don't believe you when you tell them who you think did it, tell them to contact me, give them my number."

“Okay, I'll call you, bye.”

Darren was confused and terrified for Cindy. His mind raced trying in vain to make sense of Andrea's killing. He could not sit still and started pacing. He noticed his heart rate had soared and he felt flushed. Darren went into the kitchen and with a shaking hand placed a glass underneath the water dispenser on his refrigerator door. The pause to gulp down the cold water calmed him down enough to steady his hand. Taking a deep breath, he got another glass of water and sat down to think.

Even with his logical thinking, Darren could not reason out why the assassin would still be hunting the girls. If anybody, it was he who should be targeted, the witness, and not innocent bystanders. He was not in hiding any longer; the killer could get to him at any time.

Darren started pacing again and thinking out loud. “Why not me? He knows where I live. Why go after the girls in New Orleans? New Orleans? How did he know they were in New Orleans?”

Darren sat down with a pencil and paper to make a list of everybody who knew that Andrea and Cindy were in New Orleans. He thought about every conversation with Olson, Johnson, Miller, Morris and the attorneys. He could not remember telling anyone that the women were in New Orleans. However, he did remember that he made a point of not telling anyone their whereabouts. The only explanation was that one of the girls told someone where they were staying. Satisfied that he may have found one answer, he still questioned why he was not targeted.

It dawned on Darren that he could not let Cindy remain anywhere near that apartment so he called Jim Owens. Both Jim and Beth agreed that Cindy should stay with them until things cooled down. Jim assured Darren that he would look after her.

* * *

Friday, March 5, 2 p.m.

Darren decided to surprise Michelle when she returned from New York by straightening up her apartment and having dinner waiting when she got home from the airport about six p.m.

He determined that she did not do her laundry on a regular basis, considering the amount of clothing in the hamper, so he separated the clothes into three loads and started the washer.

Turning his attention to the cleaning, Darren started in the kitchen, did the bathroom and lastly Michelle's bedroom.

* * *

Friday, March 5, 6:32 p.m.

“Well, surprise, surprise. I didn't expect to see you here.” Michelle walked over to Darren and gave him a long, sensuous kiss. She looked around and could not help but notice how clean the place was. “You did all this? And something smells very good.”

“I decided to treat you to a free housecleaning and home cooked meal. Don't get used to it, this is a one time deal.”

“I don't know what to say. I'm impressed. I may just keep you after all.”

“Just what does that mean, lady?”

“Well, a girl can't be too careful these days, you know. There are a ton of flakey guys out there. We girls have to do a great deal of screening.”

“I'm going to have to get a shovel to clean up that last mess!”

They both laughed and hugged each other.

"Dinner won't be ready for an hour or so, would you like to check out how well I cleaned the bedroom?"

"Ooh, sounds interesting."

* * *

Saturday, March 6, 10 a.m.

"So how did your trip go? How's the weather in New York?"

"I took care of business, as usual, and the weather was mild. I think you will be seeing the city at the best time when you first get there. Spring is the time to be in New York."

"That may be, but I'll be there through all the seasons before my project is finished. There is no way I'm looking forward to a winter on the East Coast."

"That will be a change of pace for you, but I think your biggest problem is going to be coping with the humidity during the hot summer. That is going to give you fits, you're too used to the dryer climate of Vegas."

"Thanks for reminding me, I've been trying not to think about it."

"Look on the bright side, you'll be there to see the storefronts decorated for Christmas and you can bring in the New Year in Times Square."

"I hope to be here for the holidays, if you don't mind!"

"I would like you to be here as well."

Darren had been putting off telling Michelle about Andrea and decided that now was probably the best time.

"There's something I need to tell you, Michelle. Don't say anything until you've heard me out. I received some bad news from New Orleans. Andrea Davidson was murdered."

Michelle's face did not show shock as much as Darren felt it showed confusion.

Darren continued, "Apparently, the assassin is still taking care of business."

Michelle could not keep quiet any longer, "Darren, does this mean he is coming after you again?"

"I don't know. It doesn't make any sense to me or the police or even the FBI. No one can come up with a reasonable explanation why the assassin would run the risk of being caught at this point. There is nothing to be gained by continuing the onslaught."

"You've said that before and here we are with another murder on our hands. When is this going to end, Darren?"

* * *

Sunday, March 8, 9:15 a.m.

"What the hell are you doing? Why would you kill Andrea Davidson? This was supposed to be over a long time ago. You were told, no more killings."

The assassin hung up the phone, thought for a moment, and then smiled—a deranged smile.

* * *

Monday, March 9, 11 a.m.

"Yes, I talked to Cindy a couple of days ago and she told me about your conversation, Detective Michaels." The New Orleans detective phoned Darren to corroborate Cindy's tale of assassins and murder in Las Vegas.

"Then you can understand my reluctance to believe such an inconceivable story. Would

you care to enlighten me, Mr. Poole?"

"Of course, I'll answer your questions."

"Good. First off, I'd like to know about her claim that Andrea Davidson's killer is a professional hit man."

"It's possible. Without knowing the details of Andrea's death, I can't comment on whether it was a professional that committed the murder, but if you knew the whole story you would see why Cindy believes it's true."

"She told me a few things about some for hire murders in Las Vegas but said she couldn't give me details, that only you could do that."

"That's right. I'm going to be testifying in a federal court as to my knowledge regarding a killing in Washington D.C. and related killings in Vegas. I have been told by the federal prosecutors not to discuss the case with anyone. I would assume that includes you, for at least the time being."

"That isn't going to make my job any easier, Mr. Poole."

"Please, call me Darren. I understand the tenuous position in which this places you but maybe if you tell me something about how Andrea was killed, I might be able to say yea or nay to the hired killer scenario."

"As of right now, I can't give you too many details, Darren. Our coroner is still trying to come up with a cause of death. There was no sign of a struggle. There were choke marks around the victim's throat but it doesn't look like she was strangled. There were a couple of tiny punctures on her neck. The coroner is checking those out to see if they are related. That's all I know. So it's hard to say if it's a professional killing or not."

"Nothing that you have told me is a match to the other killings, but the other murders were all different. The only other similarity is that all the victims knew John Waltman, Andrea's boyfriend. So, I guess I can't help you."

"Well, you have at least given Miss Matthews' story some credibility."

"You could do me a favor, detective."

"What would that be?"

"If you could keep me posted on any findings that your coroner comes up with, I might be able to pass on some other information to you. I can't promise anything, but maybe I can get the federal prosecutors to cut me some slack."

"I'll see what I can do."

"Thanks."

Darren considered all that Michaels had told him but could not make any further sense of Andrea's death. If there was any logic to the assassin's madness, it escaped Darren.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Tuesday, March 10, 1 p.m.

Darren spent hours going over his project plan, making revision after revision before deeming it fit for consumption by the client. The gentleman that Darren would be reporting to,

once he was in New York, had e-mailed him a list of the individuals who would be working on the project. He gave a brief biography of each person, qualifications for being on the team and insight into each person's value to the company. He was smart enough to omit any personal opinions as to an individual's ability. "Smart guy, don't go on record as having said anybody on my team is an idiot," Darren spoke out loud to no one. He knew from prior experience that companies put teams together using a convenience factor—people who have no specific skills, are not assigned to any important projects, or are loose cannons get picked first.

Darren got up from his desk to stretch his legs and walked into the kitchen for a drink of water, pausing along the way to look out the living room window. He looked up and saw one dark, ominous cloud about a mile away. He could tell that it was moving his way and would probably be good for a fair amount of rain. Finishing his water, Darren sat down on his couch to read the morning newspaper. He was just getting interested in an editorial regarding raising the tax rate on the casinos, when his phone rang.

"Hello."

"Darren, this is Paul Michaels, in New Orleans. Remember me?"

"Sure. How are you Paul?"

"I thought you might like to hear an interesting piece of news."

"Sounds like you made some progress."

"Not me, but the coroner did. You remember me telling you that he found a couple of puncture wounds on Andrea Davidson's throat?"

"Yeah, I remember."

"As it turns out, there were traces of a poison in the wounds. Whatever made the punctures was needle like and contained poison."

"Now that is an interesting development. Any idea what kind of poison was used?"

"The coroner said it was a neurotoxin that interferes with the nervous system. He said it would have led to near instant paralysis followed by rapid death. Potent stuff, to say the least."

"Neurotoxin? That's what most poisonous snakes have. Are you telling me she was bitten by a snake?"

"No. The coroner says the punctures were caused by something with short needle like spikes or very short hypodermic needles. Apparently the punctures were just deep enough to make sure the poison would be effective."

"Sounds like a horrible way to die. Please don't tell Cindy about this. No sense in upsetting her."

"I agree on both counts. Anything new on your end?"

"I haven't been in contact with anyone since I talked to you the last time. I do think I'm going to make some calls just to let the concerned parties know the latest development. If I hear anything I'll call you, Paul."

"Okay, thanks, Darren."

Darren forgot about finishing the newspaper and immediately set about making phone calls. He started with Harold Miller.

"Hello, Darren. Been a while since I last talked to you. How are things going?"

"I wanted to give you an update on something I thought might interest you. Do you remember where I told you I was sending Andrea and Cindy?"

"I don't recall you ever telling me. I think you just told me you were sending them away from Vegas."

"Oh yeah, I guess I didn't tell you. Anyway, Andrea was killed in New Orleans. It looks

like the assassin is still taking care of business.”

“That makes no sense, Darren. That killer should have headed for high ground a long time ago. Why would he risk getting caught at this stage of the game; and, why would he go after Andrea? You, if you will excuse my bluntness, are the target I would go after, not her.” There was a pause before Hal continued. “What concerns me is this—how did the killer know where to find Andrea? Who did you tell?”

“If you're confused, imagine how I feel. I can't make hide or hair out of this. The killer can find me easy enough; I'm not hiding anymore. I don't remember telling anyone where Andrea and Cindy were going. I thought I might have told you.”

“I'm certain you didn't, and obviously, I didn't tell anyone. Do you have any details of how Andrea was killed?”

“She was apparently injected with some kind of poison. It paralyzed her and immediately killed her.”

“That sounds like something our guy might do. I'm very sorry to hear this, Darren. Is there anything else; anything I can do for you?”

“No, Hal, I just wanted to fill you in.”

“Thanks for thinking of me, if there is anything I can do for you just let me know.”

“I will, bye, Hal.”

“One down and one to go.” Darren mumbled to himself as he dialed Tim Morris.

“Special Agent Morris.”

“Hi Tim, it's Darren Poole.”

“Hi Darren. What's up with you these days?”

“Well, Tim, I called to tell you that Andrea Davidson was murdered. It looks like the assassin did it.”

“Wait a minute, let me get this straight. Andrea Davidson? She was the girlfriend of your buddy that was killed, right?”

“Correct.”

“What makes you think our killer did it? After all, he should be staying as far away from anyone involved in this case as possible. He has nothing to gain and everything to lose.”

“How many people do you know who died by being injected with a poison that paralyzes and then kills its victim?”

“I see what you mean. Is there anything else that sounds strange about the case?”

“What do you mean, Tim?”

“You know, similarities to the other murders or anything else that might make you think we are dealing with the same assassin.”

“No, nothing else.”

“Darren, if your suspicions are correct, you need to take precautions. Obviously the killer is still in Las Vegas and hasn't been called off the hunt. You have to be a target.”

Darren thought about Tim's response for an instant and realized that Morris thinks the killer is in Vegas. No mention of New Orleans. That would mean he was right, he didn't tell the FBI where he sent the girls.

“That's the strange thing, Tim. I haven't been hiding. I'm back in my apartment and carrying on with my life. If the killer was looking for me, I would be easy to find. I can't do anything to be more visible except short of putting up a neon sign.”

“That isn't strange, it's bizarre. I can't think of a logical reason why the killer would be after Andrea Davidson and not you. She was not relevant to the case against Mayfield and

Williamson, not a witness or anything. Were it not for the unusual circumstances, I'd say that her death has nothing to do with the case. Unless she knew something that the rest of us didn't. Like something Mayfield may have done that she could testify about in court."

"I talked to her at length and there was nothing like that. I'm sure she would have told me if there was anything that she knew that could put Mayfield away."

"Then we're right back where we started—with no reasonable explanation why she was killed. I'll repeat what I said earlier, Darren, you have to be careful. Do you want me to see about getting you some protection? I could probably convince my superiors that you are a target."

"No. That is the last thing I want. I'm tired of hiding out. Besides, I really believe that I am no longer a target."

"We went over this a million times and I agree with you, but Andrea's death puts a whole new light on the matter. I'm just trying to offer you some support."

"Thanks, Tim. I guess I'm just going to have to wait things out and see what happens. Is there anything new on your front?"

"No, at least nothing that I've heard about. The prosecution is still thinking the trial could start a few months down the line."

"Well, I guess I shouldn't keep you any longer. Take care Tim."

"Will do, you too Darren. If it's any consolation, I'll put in the information you've given me and cross-reference it to our case just so we have it on the record. I'll call Hal Miller and get the details from him."

"He can't tell you anything. Andrea was killed in New Orleans. It's the police down there you need to talk to. Ask to speak to Paul Michaels, he is the detective heading the case."

"New Orleans. What was she doing down there?"

"Hiding from a killer."

* * *

Tuesday, March 10, 5 p.m.

"Hi. Am I going to see you tonight?"

"I suppose that could be arranged. Do you want to go out to dinner?"

"No, honey, I'll make something at home. Just come over whenever."

"How late are you planning to work tonight, Michelle?"

"I'm looking to get out of here in just a few minutes. I've had an intense day, worked nonstop from eight this morning, so I'm ready for a change of scenery and some kickback time."

"Well, if you're that tired, why bother making dinner?"

"No big deal, I'll make something simple and quick after you arrive."

"Okay, as long as you don't think it's too much on you."

"Don't worry. It's very relaxing when I'm with you, all my cares seem to melt away and I feel rejuvenated. Didn't know you were good therapy, did you?"

"I didn't have a clue! Are you sure you're not Irish?"

"Irish?"

"Yeah, you're full of blarney!"

"That's strange, I don't remember ever kissing the blarney stone."

"Believe me, you have some Irish in you."

"If you keep picking on me, I'm going to make you bring dinner with you, and I'll make sure it comes from the most expensive place in town!"

"All right, I know when to quit. See you later."

Darren put his phone down on the coffee table, contemplated about finishing the morning paper and decided to take a quick nap instead. "I have the feeling I'm going to need all my energy for later," he mumbled to himself as he reclined on the sofa and quickly faded into a deep sleep.

* * *

Tuesday, March 10, 5:34 p.m.

Darren awoke confused and startled by the loud ring of the phone. He never napped as an adult until recently, when the stresses of John's death and the subsequent events started to take a toll. He was not at the point where he could awake with a clear head and feel refreshed. His naps, while needed, caused him to be uncomfortable for a few minutes after rousing. Before he was fully aware and cleared headed, he picked up the phone and pressed the button. It seemed to take him forever to get the receiver to his ear and muster a "hello" from out of the fog.

"Darren?"

"Yeah, I'm here. I was taking a nap and the phone woke me, so I'm not fully aware yet."

Cindy was upset that she hadn't heard from Darren and wanted to chew him out but on hearing his voice she could only feel tenderness.

"I've been concerned at your not calling. Is everything all right?"

"Sure, I'm fine. I've just been totally wrapped up in getting everything prepared for my new contract. I think I told you about it, the client in New York City?"

"No, I don't remember you mentioning it. You may have and it just didn't register with me because of everything that's been going on."

"I'm sorry, Cindy. I must have some kind of unconscious mental block thing going on. It's like my mind can't process some of the events that are occurring."

"I know what you mean. I'm finding it hard to get my head together also. I think we're entitled."

"You got that right. It's a wonder we aren't raving lunatics by now." Darren managed to add a laugh at the end.

"Give it time. We may achieve that status, yet." This time Cindy laughed. "So when are we going to see each other?"

Darren did not know how to answer that question. A part of him wanted to rush to New Orleans to see and comfort Cindy and another part of him never wanted to see New Orleans again. What part Michelle played in this opera he could not be sure. All Darren wanted was for each of them to be at peace again and happy.

"I wish I knew."

"I feel that we are growing apart, Darren. Are we?"

"I don't think that now is the right time to discuss our relationship, Cindy. Not over the phone, it's too impersonal."

"So when then? If you aren't sure when you will be back in New Orleans, then I'm going to have to return to Vegas."

"I don't know if that is such a good idea. At least not right away. We still have a killer out there looking for us."

"Darren, I'm confused about this killer. Why did he come looking for us? I thought you and the police felt that we were out of danger. Besides, how did he know where to find us?"

"That is what I need to find out before I can be sure if we are still in peril. You are asking the same questions that I have asked myself many times. I don't have the answers."

Darren felt that Cindy had gotten over the shock of Andrea's death and had regained her composure enough for him to see if he could extract further detail of the night Andrea was killed. He paused to see if Cindy was going to respond and when she did not he took the opportunity.

"Cindy, have you remembered anything new about that night, something you haven't already told me?"

"I don't think so. The police followed up with me yesterday and asked the same question. I don't remember what I told you, to be quite honest. The shock of what happened has had my mind in a cloud for a long time."

"Tell you what, repeat your story to me now. Maybe I'll detect something new in your remembrances."

"Well, we came back to our apartment in the evening, I think it was about eight or nine, and I remembered that I needed to pick up something at the grocery store. I dropped Andrea off at the apartment and went to the store. I got back to the apartment about twenty minutes later. When I went in, the apartment was dark, like no one was there. I turned on the lights and called out for Andrea. When she didn't answer, I started looking for her. I didn't find her until I went into my bedroom and saw her body. I rushed out—I don't remember closing the door. I went across the street to the cafe and called the police and you. That's it."

Darren focused on something Cindy said and realized he should have picked up on it the first time she related the story.

"I want to go back to something you said, Cindy. I remember when you first called me and I think you told me then that Andrea was in your bedroom when you found her. You just said the same thing again. Is that how you remember it? Is there any chance you're wrong?"

"No, Darren, I definitely found her in my room. I looked for her in the living room and kitchen and then I went to her bedroom. She was nowhere to be found. Then I went into my bedroom, turned on the light and saw her."

"Why would she have been in your bedroom?"

"I don't know."

"Think hard, Cindy, this could be important."

"Why do you say that?"

Darren did not want to reveal what he was thinking. It had dawned on him that the killer could have been looking specifically for Cindy and not necessarily targeting Andrea. He initially surmised that both could be targets and Andrea, being the only one present, was the only victim.

"Every detail, no matter how seemingly insignificant, can add a piece to the puzzle and help us to see the overall picture."

"I remember now. Earlier in the evening Andrea mentioned something about borrowing some of my stationary to write her mother a letter. I told her it was in my nightstand and she could use it. I must have forgotten about it because it didn't seem important."

"Do you recall seeing the stationary anywhere when you found Andrea?"

"No, I don't."

"Is there anything else that you can remember about that night?"

"I think I've told you everything, Darren."

"Okay, you did good. I'm going to think over all this and let it digest. I promise that I'll call you more frequently."

"You better, or don't be surprised if I show up knocking on your door."

"I promise."

* * *

Wednesday, March 11, 9:35 a.m.

Darren had a restless night, as his mind could not give up on trying to make sense of Andrea's murder. In the middle of the night he got up and sat in his living room looking out the window at the lightening flashes that appeared to be over the mountains, near Mt. Charleston. Finally, with exhaustion setting in, he decided to call Paul Michaels first thing in the morning to see if he could provide any further information. Having decided on an action, his mind was satisfied and allowed Darren to get some sleep.

* * *

"Hi Paul. Do you have a minute to talk?"

"Sure, Darren. What can I do for you?"

"I talked to Cindy and she said something that got me thinking that maybe she was the target and not Andrea."

"Oh, what did she say that makes you think that?"

"It didn't register with me at the time, but Cindy said that Andrea was in her bedroom instead of her own. She said that again last night when I talked to her."

"Let me pull out my notes..." Michaels leafed through his folder on the Andrea Davidson case until he found his notes. "Yeah, here it is. You're correct; she said the same thing to me. From my notes, I can't see that I followed up on the comment. My goof. It didn't register with me and I must have assumed that the bedroom Andrea was in was her own."

"Cindy told me that Andrea had asked her if she could borrow some stationary that Cindy kept in the nightstand. She couldn't remember seeing the stationary anywhere in the room."

Michaels rifled through the folder again, "I'm looking at the crime scene photographs and the nightstand drawer is open. I can't tell what, if anything, is in the drawer, but the drawer is definitely open. Looks like Andrea was in the process of getting the stationary when she was surprised by the killer."

"You know what I think, Paul?" Darren did not wait for an answer. "I think the killer was after Cindy, not Andrea."

"What makes you think that?"

"Put yourself in the assassin's shoes. If you were out to get both of them, wouldn't you have waited around for Cindy to eventually show up? Why would you kill Andrea and then take off?"

"You could be right, Darren, and it would make sense if the assassin had killed Cindy and not Andrea; but he didn't, he killed Andrea."

"That is what kept me awake half the night. This morning it hit me—the assassin doesn't know what Cindy looks like. I've been rethinking everything and I feel positive that the assassin doesn't know which girl is Andrea and which is Cindy. He had names, addresses and phone numbers to work with, not pictures. I think he assumed that whichever girl walked into that bedroom was Cindy."

"How would he know which bedroom was which?"

"There has to be something in one of the rooms that he used to make the determination."

"I don't see anything in the photographs of Cindy's room. Give me a second while I find the photograph of the other bedroom. Ah, here it is. Bingo."

"Did you find something, Paul?"

"I sure did. There is a laptop computer on the bed in Andrea's room. It's open like it was in use. How much you want to bet that if I check it's going to have her name on it?"

“I already know the answer to that. The computer's screen saver is her name, floating around the screen.”

“So we know how the killer determined who belonged to which bedroom. Darren, what we have now is another puzzle—if both girls were not targets, why was Cindy the target?”

“Exactly what I intend to find out.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Thursday, March 12, 7:48 p.m.

Edwin Mayfield was beside himself with anger after he heard from his attorney that the FBI was notified of the murder of Andrea Davidson, his former legal secretary. Out on bail, Mayfield spent little time at his office, going in only to sift through the mail that was left after the other partners had gone through it, looking for anything related to current firm clients. His partners had made it clear to him that until all charges were dropped, he was to avoid all contact with his current and former clients. The others would take up the slack and maintain the firm's relationship with Mayfield's premier clients. They encouraged him to stay away from the office during regular business hours so that the reporters would stop hanging out in front of the building.

Mayfield looked out from his office through the glass wall and stared at Andrea's vacant workstation. He had not found the time or the incentive to replace her before he was arrested. He could not help but think about how well they got along, the fine work she had always done for him and especially how she always seemed to know what he needed before he did. He was perfectly willing to have her executed if it meant saving his own hide, but to have her killed after he had specifically called off the assassin was somehow, in his mind, an immoral act perpetrated by the killer.

He tried to remember the type of person he was dealing with as he dialed the phone number he used to contact the assassin. He always had to leave a message with an answering service and the assassin would call him back, that was the arrangement. On one occasion he had inquired of the service if they kept the identity of their clients confidential only to find out that they did not have any information about the clients. Everything was done on a pay-as-you-go basis. If the client did not send in a payment on time, the service was terminated. The client, known only as a number, was responsible for calling in for the messages.

If the past were any indication, he would not have to wait long for a response as the assassin usually responded within twenty-four hours.

* * *

Thursday, March 12, 11 p.m.

Darren could sense he was going to have another restless night, so instead of sleeping fitfully, he elected to watch some late night news and talk shows. He heard every word that came out of the TV, but none of them got through the barrier his mind had erected to better make sense of the problem it was expected to solve.

Darren was about to nod off when suddenly his subconscious gave him the clue he needed. It reminded him of something that his conscious mind may have been trying to suppress. He had been unable to figure out how the assassin knew that Cindy and Andrea were in New Orleans. Now he remembered—he told Michelle.

Darren turned off the TV, got up and went into the kitchen to get a glass of ice water. He paced as he sipped the water and started talking to himself.

“I must have shut it out of my mind because I didn't want to believe that Michelle could be involved. How can she? Think, Darren, there has to be a logical explanation. Okay, so you told Michelle, how would she know where in New Orleans to find the girls? How could she possibly know?”

Darren paced quietly for several minutes before he restarted his conversation. “The only way she could know where the girls were staying is if she followed me to New Orleans. Let's think about that scenario. She couldn't have been on the same plane, I would have probably seen her either on the plane or at the airport. She would have had to gotten there on another flight and waited for me to arrive. That doesn't sound reasonable. She would have had to wait for hours, in a car, at the same place I met the girls when they picked me up. Not very likely. No, she had to have another way of finding them. Think, Darren, think.”

Darren could feel exhaustion overcoming him, so he decided to try to get some sleep. “I'll still have the problem in the morning.”

* * *

Friday, March 13, 9 a.m.

Darren may not have had a restless sleep, but he awoke with a throbbing headache and a stiff neck nonetheless. After taking three aspirin tablets, Darren made a small pot of coffee and tried to relax over the newspaper. As long as he kept Michelle, Cindy and Andrea out of his mind, he was able to relieve some stress and ease the throbbing. Half way through the paper, Darren crossed his arms and put his head down on the breakfast table. Closing his eyes, combined with deep breathing, relieved his headache in about thirty minutes. Relieved of his headache, Darren had another cup of coffee and finished the newspaper.

Darren spent the day making the final preparations for his trip to New York and the start of his new project. One of his chores was to get all his bills paid and sort through the large pile of ignored mail to resolve anything he had left hanging. Sorting through his mail, he got the feeling that something was missing and try as he might, he could not remember what it was. Shrugging it off, he proceeded to pay bills and discard the junk mail until he was left with nothing to resolve and a small stack of outgoing envelopes. Satisfied that he had finally taken care of the bothersome task, Darren slouched in his chair and exhaled deeply. Remembering his promise to call Cindy, Darren picked up the phone.

“Hi, Cin. How's it going?”

“Well, hi there stranger.”

“I know, I promised to call more often, but I've been going crazy trying to get ready for my new assignment.”

“I understand. When are you scheduled to leave for New York?”

“On Wednesday. I have an afternoon flight, so I'll have the evening to settle in and on Thursday I hit the ground running. I have to admit, I'm looking forward to the distraction. Once I'm there, I think I'll be able to put all that has happened behind me. I never thought I would say that I was looking forward to being swamped with work!”

“Good for you. You need to get away from there and get your mind onto something else. Is there any possibility that you might be able to stop over in New Orleans on your way to New York?”

“I thought about it, but I just don't have the time to spare. The way the flight schedules are arranged, I would waste the better part of a day sitting in airports. It would probably be better for me to fly to New Orleans from New York over a weekend. I'll plan on doing that after I get settled in.”

“Just don't take too long getting settled.”

“I'll try not to. So, how are things going down there?”

“I think there is something bothering Jim. He doesn't seem to be himself lately. I tried talking to Beth about it but she seems reluctant to talk it over.”

“You think they are having marital problems?”

“No, it's not like that. This seems like something external to their relationship is getting them down. I thought that having me staying with them was the problem but they assured me that they like having me here. So I'm not sure what has them down.”

“I'll give Jim a call, maybe he'll open up to me and fill me in.”

“If you find out anything, be sure to let me know. They are normally so happy-go-lucky and now there's this undercurrent of sadness that keeps creeping in.”

“I'll definitely keep you informed if I find out anything.”

“Darren, have you thought about what I wrote you?”

Darren remembered now, the letter that Cindy sent from New Orleans was missing from the stack of mail.

“I have to be honest with you Cindy, I misplaced some of my mail before I had a chance to read it. Just this morning I was trying to find it all because I know there are bills I need to pay. I'm sorry.”

“It's all right. We can talk about it when I see you. Just don't make it too long.”

“Will do. Well, guess I better get to it. I have a million things to accomplish and very little time to do it. I'll stay in touch, I promise.”

“You better. I love you. Bye.”

“Bye.”

Darren wondered if Cindy noticed that he did not return the “I love you.” He knew how perceptive she could be and assumed that she picked up that the subtle lack of response had a deeper meaning. If she suspected something, it would make it easier when the time came for him to tell her about Michelle.

* * *

Friday, March 13, 1 p.m.

Darren thought back to each time he remembered seeing the letter from Cindy sitting on his counter. Then, reluctantly, he tried to place Michelle in the same picture. He remembered the conversation he had with Michelle, after she discovered the envelope, about his involvement with Cindy.

Darren could not believe that Michelle was somehow involved in the whole sordid affair. He had met her by chance one day, or so he thought. Maybe it was not pure chance but arranged. He did meet her immediately after taking the girls to the airport when they left Vegas. Then he let himself think the unthinkable, that Michelle could be the assassin. The mere thought of such a possibility made Darren nauseous. He was so devastated at the idea that he had to lie down.

Darren tried to force the thoughts and images from his mind, desperate to clear his head so he could find a reasonable answer, one that would exonerate Michelle. Instead, all he could come with were further indications that Michelle could be the assassin. He thought back to Michelle's business trip to New York, which coincided with Andrea's murder in New Orleans.

"The timing was right." Darren was talking out loud as he stared at the ceiling over his bed. "If she was jealous of Cindy, and wanted her out of the picture, she might have decided to kill her. If that's the case, then why isn't Cindy dead instead of Andrea?" Darren thought for a minute. "She killed Andrea by mistake, thinking she was Cindy. She screwed up and killed the wrong person. Of course, that makes sense. Michelle has never met Cindy so she has no idea what she looks like."

Darren was torn between feeling proud of himself by coming up with a reasonable scenario and regret that Michelle is a killer and not the person he thought she was. "How is it possible that I could so misjudge a person? How could I not see what kind of demon lurked behind that beautiful face? How could I have been so duped?"

Darren thought about how careless he had been by making it possible for Andrea and Cindy to be in harms way. He felt tears welling up as he blamed himself for Andrea's death.

"How could I have been so stupid?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Friday, March 13, 3 p.m.

Under Sheriff Harold Miller was sitting at his desk going over the day's paperwork when the loud noise of something hitting his window caused him to spin around in his chair. The window had not broken but a dead palm branch from one of the trees outside his office was resting up against it, blown there by the gusting, fifty miles per hour wind. The sunshine that lit his office warmed his skin, despite the dual pane glass. Miller smiled, knowing that the outside temperature of forty-five, combined with the wind chill made it a good day to be inside.

"Darren Poole on line one to speak with you, sir." The voice on the intercom suggested a beautiful, sexy woman was on the other end, not the sixty something secretary who looked after Miller like a mother.

Miller pushed a button and put Darren on the speaker. "Hello, Darren. What can I do for you?" The sheriff's voice was almost jovial at the thought of being able to put aside his paperwork and talk to someone.

"Hi, Hal. I have some information that I think you will find interesting."

"Oh, what might that be?"

"Possibly the identity of the assassin."

"Get your ass over here, now."

* * *

Friday, March 13, 3:45 p.m.

Darren knew Miller would want to see him in person rather than handle matters over the

phone and so he was prepared to walk out the door the minute he talked to him. When he walked into the under sheriff's reception area and identified himself, he was escorted in immediately and without announcement.

Miller was happy to see Darren again and shook his hand gently with both of his. Eager to hear what Darren had to say, Miller motioned toward one of the guest chairs, "Have a seat and start explaining."

"This isn't easy for me, Hal. I have been seeing a woman recently and we've gotten very close. I met her right after I sent Andrea and Cindy off to New Orleans."

"I don't mean to interrupt you, Darren, but I want to hear about the assassin, not your love life."

"I think the woman I met is the assassin." Darren stressed the "is."

"You think the assassin is a woman?" Hal leaned back in his chair with a stunned look on his face.

"Yes, specifically a woman named Michelle Harding."

Miller quickly picked up his pen and wrote the name down on a scratchpad.

"I met her within minutes of taking Andrea and Cindy to the airport for their flight to New Orleans. I left the airport and went to the Apple store in the new Town Center shopping mall off the boulevard. She approached me while I was playing around on one of the computers. We ended up having lunch together. We got along and enjoyed ourselves and one thing led to another and now we are in a relationship."

"Okay, so what makes you think she is our killer?"

"Remember me telling you that I thought I never told anyone where I was sending Andrea and Cindy?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I didn't tell a soul. What did happen, I think, is that Michelle came over to my place and saw a letter that Cindy wrote me. She already knew I was involved with Cindy before I met her. That letter is missing and I seem to remember that the envelope had a return address, a New Orleans address. I think Michelle went to New Orleans to kill Cindy and make sure she was no longer a threat to our relationship."

"Then how do you explain that Andrea was killed and not Cindy?"

"Mistaken identity. I don't think Michelle knew which of the two was Cindy. She had never met Cindy or Andrea. It looks, from the crime scene photos and from Cindy's testimony that Andrea went into Cindy's room to get something only to be confronted by her killer. The killer would have seen Andrea's laptop in the other bedroom and when Andrea walked into Cindy's bedroom, she assumed it was Cindy. She killed Andrea and left before Cindy returned and found the body in her room."

"If the killer followed you to the Apple store, that means she saw you at the airport. Wouldn't she have figured out which girl was Cindy?"

"Not necessarily, all she saw was me unloading suitcases at the curbside check-in, kissing two woman good bye and leaving."

"I'll buy that. So she followed you to the computer store and struck up a conversation."

"And the rest, as they say, is history."

"I guess my question now is why didn't she kill you once she was close?"

"I've reasoned out that what she needed was the evidence I had against Mayfield and Williamson. She was probably under orders to kill me only after she secured the evidence. That would have ensured that both men got off Scot free."

"So what went wrong with her plan?" Miller had been playing devil's advocate to test Darren's logic.

"She developed feelings for me and in the meantime I managed to get the evidence into the right hands. I thought, as we all did, that the assassin had been called off by Mayfield once the evidence was in the hands of the federal authorities. Killing me wouldn't have accomplished anything except to make matters worse."

"So she tried to kill Cindy for reasons unrelated to the case. I have to admit, the pieces fit the scenario. We still have a problem, Darren."

"What problem?"

"Evidence. What evidence do we have against this woman? You haven't shown me anything that I can use to arrest and convict. The only thing you have is that she is the only one beside yourself who knew where to find Andrea and Cindy. I need more. Is there anything else you can think of that might be of use to us?"

"No, I'm afraid not."

"Does she suspect that you are on to her?"

"I don't see how she could. I just came to my conclusion this afternoon and I haven't spoken to her since yesterday."

"You are going to have to make sure she doesn't get wind of your suspicions, otherwise, you could be her next victim. Make no mistake, Darren, if she has any inkling that her cover is broken, you're a dead man. You have two things in your favor."

"Such as?"

"Such as she's in love with you and she doesn't know you suspect her. You have to keep it that way until we can gather some evidence and put her away."

"Are you saying that I have to keep seeing her?"

"Absolutely. Any change in your relationship will raise her suspicions."

"I don't know that I can do that. How would you react if you found out your wife was an assassin?"

"I know it won't be easy, but just remember that your life may depend on it. We need you to help get us some proof of who she is."

"I told you who she is."

"She would never use her real name. You can be our man on the inside. I can arrange for her to be watched around the clock. Every move she makes we can be there to observe."

"I don't know if I can pull it off, Hal. She's no dummy and she's very sensitive to what's happening around her. If you have her watched, she will know and then I'll really be in trouble."

"Then you need to be very cautious. This isn't going to be a walk in the park, Darren. She has left zero in the way of evidence at the crime scenes. She is extremely careful and obviously, ruthless. Never forget that no matter how beautiful she is or how much she loves you, she is a cold-blooded killer. She has killed in ways that defy morality and sanity."

"What about getting the FBI involved?"

"Frankly, all they would do is take over the show and probably get you killed. I know I shouldn't say stuff like that but look how the case is going with them. Those guys are likely to walk because they have better lawyers. If you want them involved then certainly call them. Just leave me out of it. I don't need to lose any more good men to this killer. The final decision is up to you."

"I don't feel comfortable with the feds and neither do you. I was just trying to see if we have any options."

"I don't blame you. If I were in your shoes I'd be looking for options also."

"If I have to act like nothing is wrong, what am I supposed to do about a business trip I'm scheduled to make?"

"Business trip?"

"Yeah. I've got a new contract in New York. I'm supposed to leave on Wednesday. The plan is to stay in New York and come home every other weekend."

"How long are you going to be gone?"

"About a year."

"This could work to our advantage. It takes you away from her and out of town. I know it's asking a lot, but could you get me something with her fingerprints, and maybe her photograph? That would give me something to work with while you're gone."

"Gee, anything else, like a confession?" Darren did not want to sound sarcastic but he realized the serious situation that confronted him.

"Look, Darren. Anything you can get me could lead to her arrest. Maybe we can find out who she is from her prints. There could be a warrant out on her for all we know."

"I'll see what I can do."

"Here is my cell phone number, you get anything, you call me. No matter what time it is, you call me. Are you seeing her tonight?"

"Yes, I am. She's coming over to my place later."

"You could get her prints on a wine or water glass."

"I'll try."

* * *

Friday, March 13, 7 p.m.

"Hi, right on time, as usual." Darren had to force a smile as he greeted Michelle. He was hoping he could hide his feelings, at least for a few days.

"Would you believe, I came straight from work. I couldn't get out of there. This time it was one meeting after another. I guess I'm going to have to expect more of that as the show gets closer to opening."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. I face the same thing with my clients. Everybody starts worrying about the small stuff the closer an implementation date gets. I'll pour you a glass of wine."

Darren had already opened a bottle of pinot noir, Michelle's favorite. He poured her a glass, taking care to avoid getting his own prints on the bowl. He grasped the glass by the stem, forcing Michelle to take the glass by the bowl.

Michelle took a sip of the wine and put the glass down on the counter. "I'm going to use the bathroom."

Darren could not believe his good fortune. He immediately poured the wine from Michelle's glass into another one, taking the original with the prints and stashing it away in a safe place.

When Michelle returned, Darren handed her the glass as they sat down on the sofa. "I didn't get a chance to prepare dinner so I thought we might go out."

"That's fine. I'm in the mood for Italian, how about you?"

"Sounds good. We can go after we finish our wine."

"It won't be long now."

Darren, in his state of mind, did not know what to make of that statement. "What do you

mean?"

"It won't be long before you have to go to New York. What did you think I meant?"

"I guess my mind was just hung up on some of the details I've been trying to work out before I leave."

"You do seem a little distracted. Are you always like this before starting a new assignment, Darren?"

Darren realized he had better regain his composure. "Yeah. I get really nervous. No matter how well I prepare, I get a case of the jitters every time."

"I can sympathize. I'm the same way." Michelle finished her wine. "Let's do dinner."

* * *

Saturday, March 14, 9 a.m.

"Sorry to bother you on a weekend, Hal. I have a glass with some prints for you."

"Fantastic, Darren. I assume since you called me now, that you want to get rid of it as soon as possible."

"You got that right."

"Okay, meet me at my office in an hour."

"Fine, see you then."

* * *

Saturday, March 14, 10 a.m.

Darren seemed surprised at the activity that was going on at police headquarters. "Guess crime never takes a weekend off," he muttered to himself.

The lack of a receptionist and secretary was the only indication that this was a weekend at the sheriff's office, that and the fact that Hal Miller was wearing a sweatsuit and sneakers. He spotted Darren through the open door to his office and yelled at him to come in.

"Close the door behind you, Darren. So you managed to get some prints?"

Darren said hello as he carefully opened a paper bag and removed the wine glass, which was inside a plastic bag. Hal, holding the glass at the base through the plastic, held it up to catch the backlight from the window.

"Excellent set of prints. I don't see any smudges. How did you manage to do it?"

Darren explained his good fortune and Hal just shook his head in amazement.

Miller put the glass back into the paper bag and placed the package in his desk drawer. "I'll get the prints run on Monday. Hopefully, we can get some more information about our Miss Harding, or whoever she may be. She had no idea you were up to something?"

"No. It was almost too easy."

"Just remember to stay on your toes. Does she know where to find you in New York?"

"I don't think I ever mentioned the name of the client company or the hotel where I'm going to be staying."

"Keep it that way. I've got your cell phone number and if I don't hear anything before you leave, I'll call you when I get something."

"Okay, Hal. Thanks for everything."

"Thank you." Hal stressed the "you."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Saturday, March 14, 1 p.m.

"Are you trying to avoid being with me today?" Michelle's voice sounded hurt.

"No, that's not it. I just have so much to get done. You know, trying to tie up loose ends. Besides, didn't you get enough last night to tide you over for a few hours?" Darren laughed to try to lighten the mood.

"All right. I'll cut you some slack...this time. But we are having dinner tonight at my place."

"Okay. I'll be there with bells on."

Darren now had the rest of the day to himself. He knew he would need it to prepare his mindset for the evening. It was hard for him to look at Michelle the way he used to, knowing he should be feeling only disgust toward her, but he could not stop his heart from loving her and was positive that Michelle was truly in love with him as well. Darren had to keep reminding himself that no matter how much he loved Michelle, he could never forgive or forget that she killed his best friend and would probably kill him if it became necessary to protect her identity.

In spite of how things appeared, no matter how many clues pointed to Michelle, Darren found it hard to believe that she could be the cold-hearted killer that not only killed but also mutilated Phil Olson. Nevertheless, he knew he had to know for sure.

Darren decided to try to get a photograph of Michelle as Harold Miller had requested. He devised a plan to pull this off without raising Michelle's suspicions—he would take her picture with his cell phone. He would tell her that it was going to be his phone's wallpaper, visible whenever he used his phone. Once he had the shot he could e-mail it to Miller.

* * *

Saturday, March 14, 7 p.m.

"Um-mm. Something sure smells delicious."

"I decided to make one of your favorites, beef stroganoff. How does that sound?"

"Fabulous. I hope you made a lot, because I haven't eaten anything all day."

"Why not?"

"I got wrapped up in my work and before I knew it the day was shot."

"I'll get us some wine. There's cheese and crackers on the cocktail table. That should hold you until dinner is ready."

Darren sat down on the sofa and sliced some cheddar to snack on while Michelle poured them some wine. Glancing around, he noticed Michelle's laptop was sitting on the end table and the screen was fixed upon the website of "Fashion Designs By Brady." Darren noted that the address was shown as being in New York City. Just as Michelle returned with the wine, Darren asked her who Brady was.

"That's my boss, Brady Madison. He's one of the top designers in New York. He's a fairly shrewd executive as well. While other designers try to keep coming up with radical new designs to stay on top, Brady makes subtle changes, all the while staying mainstream. That's why he gets more than his fair share of work, like my project."

"I thought you got the project on your own?"

“Basically, I did. Brady told me about the potential client and what they were looking to achieve. He felt that I was advanced enough in my thinking to come up with some original ideas that they would like. He gave me free rein and allowed me to present my designs directly to the client. When they liked the concept, Brady gave me full credit. The client signed on with us and everybody's happy.”

“Sounds like a great guy to work for.”

“He is. One of the few who don't have an ego to soothe.”

Darren looked at Michelle as she took a sip of wine. “Hold that pose.” Darren reached into his shirt pocket and used his phone's camera to take a photograph of Michelle holding the wine glass next to her face.

“Why did you do that?”

“Because I'm going to be on the road for weeks at a time and what better way to have you with me.” He finished the commands that set the photograph as his wallpaper and showed it to Michelle. “See, a perfect reminder.”

“You're sweet.” Michelle leaned over and passionately kissed Darren, who found it hard not to return the passion.

* * *

Sunday, March 15, 8:45 a.m.

Darren woke up facing a still sleeping Michelle. He could not believe how beautiful she was, even first thing in the morning. He could not help but think if it was possible that someday he could put aside what she had done, allowing them to be together. He rolled over and looked out the window at the new day, thinking to himself that he was being foolish and unrealistic.

Michelle awoke as Darren turned to face her. They kissed and made love, again.

* * *

Sunday, March 15, 9 p.m.

Darren e-mailed the photograph of Michelle to Harold Miller, attaching it to a note about her employer Brady Madison. Darren asked Miller if he could check out Michelle's story of being in New York during the time of Andrea's murder. Maybe if he had to face the truth that she lied to him, he could resolve some of the conflict.

* * *

Monday, March 16, 8:45 a.m.

Darren was putting items on a list of things he needed to do before leaving town. Getting his laundry done was at the head of the list. It was unseasonably cold on the East coast so he was going to have to pack more clothes than he anticipated. He figured out what he would need for the first two weeks and wrote each item down. Then he started another list of the clothes he would take to New York when he came home on the weekends. Eventually he would get to the point where most of his wardrobe was in New York. Darren went to a drive thru dry cleaner to drop off a couple of suits and asked for overnight service before returning home to tackle the wash.

* * *

Tuesday, March 17, 2 p.m.

“Darren, Hal Miller here.”

"Hi Hal. I guess you got my e-mail over the weekend."

"I did and I already have some results for you."

"Really, that was quick."

"I don't know if this is bad news or good news. I guess it depends on your point of view."

"That sounds ominous. What are you trying to tell me, Hal?"

"Just listen to this. The fingerprints came back negative. No history of them showing up involved in any crimes. I sent the photograph to the NYPD and asked them to check on Harding's whereabouts and they just got back to me."

"What did they find out?"

"Apparently the photograph matches the ID photograph in the personnel records on file at the Brady Madison agency. However, the name doesn't match. Instead of Michelle Harding, their employee is named Monica Hastings."

"That is a new twist."

"I have more. It seems that Monica Hastings was in New York City at the time of Andrea Davidson's death. She was accounted for almost every minute, working long days and spending evenings with management at dinners and social gatherings with clients. So Monica, Michelle or whatever she calls herself couldn't have been the one that killed Andrea."

"Terrific. Now I'm even more confused."

"I can understand that. Welcome to the group."

"You know something, Hal, I'm left with the same question I had before—why kill Andrea or Cindy, if she was the target? It doesn't make sense. For a while it looked like Michelle might have tried to get rid of Cindy to get her out of my life. But if she didn't do it, then what is going on?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, Darren. I think we are back to square one. The only new thing we have to wonder about is why your girlfriend is using an alias. She has to be hiding something."

"Yeah. I'd definitely like to know what. I can't exactly ask her why she is lying to me about her identity. Of course, we're assuming that she is trying to hide something sinister. There may be another perfectly good reason for her using a different name."

"Oh, like what?"

"I don't know exactly. Maybe she is using a different name in case she goes off on her own as a designer. I can only hope there is a logical reason."

"I just have the feeling, based upon many years of being a cop, that something isn't right with our Miss Hastings."

"That certainly appears to be the case. Being the trusting person that I am, I think I'll give her the benefit of the doubt for now."

"Just remember one thing, Darren. She lied. Also, just because I couldn't unearth a criminal history, doesn't mean she isn't hiding something. It just means she hasn't been caught."

"That would be the worst case scenario."

* * *

Tuesday, March 17, 2 p.m.

"What were you thinking?"

"I was just trying to do you a favor."

"We are supposed to be keeping a low profile. We can't do that if you keep going around killing people."

“It won't happen again. It was a mistake.”

“We can't afford any more mistakes.”

“There won't be any more.”

* * *

Wednesday, March 18, 10 a.m.

“Thanks for taking me to the airport, Michelle.”

“I would like to say it's my pleasure, but that wouldn't be true.”

“I'll call you after I get there.”

“Okay. Have a good flight.”

Darren gave Michelle a quick kiss then got out of the car as she popped the trunk. He turned his suitcase over to the curbside attendant, threw his computer bag over his shoulder and waved goodbye to Michelle. Darren could not help but give a long sigh as he headed for his gate, knowing that at least for a couple of weeks he was not going to have to deal with anything but business.

His last few nights were punctuated with restless sleep and he was looking forward to the flight so he could catch up on his rest. He was tired of trying to make sense of the killings, his relationships, the opposing thoughts from Hal Miller and his own uncertainties. He needed a diversion and hoped that the new client would give him the challenge to get his mind off of Michelle, Cindy, Miller and everything else associated with the sordid affair.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Friday, April 3, 5 p.m. EST

Darren had a very productive two-week kickoff. His clients seemed well pleased with the results of his first stint. Now, as he waited for his flight to leave the gate, his thoughts turned to Michelle. Darren had plenty of time to think over the situation during the lonely nights in his hotel room, even though both Michelle and Cindy tried their best to keep him occupied on the phone. He finally managed to impress upon them that he was spending his evenings documenting his daily activities and formalizing his notes. Every night he prepared his battle plan for the next day, forsaking TV and sometimes dinner in the process. Darren knew that this would slow down somewhat the further he got into the project, as the client personnel tired of the extra hour each day and grew a little more comfortable with putting in regular days.

Darren forced himself to nap during the flight, knowing that Michelle would probably keep him up half the night. This was the hard part of the cross-country commute, adapting to the time change for a couple of days and then reverting every couple of weeks. He worked out a deal with the client that would allow him to have three and four day weekends and returning to Las Vegas every three weeks instead of every two. He was not completely into the idea but realized that it meant he would have that many fewer weekends to travel and deal with Michelle.

A part of Darren could not wait to be with Michelle, while another part dreaded that the closeness gave him another opportunity to slip up and reveal his awareness of her identity. He

wanted this to come to a conclusion, no matter what that might be.

* * *

Friday, April 3, 9 p.m. PST

Darren collected his bag from the luggage claim and made his way to the passenger pickup area. Michelle agreed to meet him there around nine, so he was right on time. Just as he reached the designated spot, he saw her pulling away as the parking guard made her leave. Some of the parking guards were more tolerant than others; this one was of the less tolerant variety. He knew it would take her about four minutes to loop back around so he found an open section near the curb and waited. Sure enough, almost to the second, Michelle saw Darren and pulled over to the curb, popped the trunk and gave an icy stare to the parking guard while she waited for Darren to get into the car. She purposely gave Darren a long and passionate kiss to anger the guard, who kept waving at her to leave the area. As Michelle pulled away from the curb, she put her arm out the window, held her hand up above the roof and made a rude gesture to the guard.

Darren seemed aware of what was happening and asked, "You didn't do what I think you did, did you?"

"Who me? You know I would never do anything like that."

"Then how do you know what I'm referring to?"

"I know you. Did you have a restful flight?"

"Slept most of the way. You have to remember, to me it's the middle of the night right now."

"As long as you're wide awake for the next couple of hours, I have plans for you, mister."

"I'll bet you do."

* * *

Saturday, April 4, 10 a.m.

"So what are we doing today?"

"I'm not going to ask you what you want to do, because I know what the answer will be. I want to get out of this bed sometime today."

"Darren, you are turning into a killjoy."

"I do have to get over to my place and do my laundry and pack some fresh clothes. That should take us up to dinnertime, I suppose. We could do a night on the town—dinner and a show. How does that sound to you?"

"Good for a start."

* * *

Monday, April 6, 9 a.m.

"Hi, Darren."

"Hal, how are you? I got your e-mail. What did you want to talk to me about?"

"Didn't the FBI get a hold of you?"

"No, were they supposed to?"

"They said they were, they didn't say when, however. So I guess I'll have to be the bearer of the bad news."

"Is it something about Michelle?"

"No, not at all. It's about the case. The feds have backed off. They don't feel they can successfully prosecute Mayfield and Williamson. They gave them their walking papers on

Friday. I hate to say I told you so, but I seem to remember doing just that.”

“So, that's that. I can't say that I am surprised. That Washington crowd takes care of themselves. I am sure that someone with a big wallet helped make the decision.”

“They did say they were willing to pursue the matter if we could find the assassin because then there would be a direct connection to the victims and them.”

“But there isn't any proof as to who the assassin actually is. All we have is gut feelings to go on.”

“I know, believe me, I know. The only way we will ever nail the killer is if there is another killing and we get the proof we need to make an arrest. You know as well as I do that the assassin isn't going to do any more killing now, at least not anyone related to the Mayfield case.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“We are talking about a professional killer, after all, Darren. There will be other victims, just not anyone tied to Mayfield or Williamson. The assassin is probably looking for a new client.”

“So they are literally getting away with murder?”

“Looks like it. Even worse than that, though is that Mayfield can return to his lucrative practice and Williamson will be able to spin his way out of the mess.”

“You really think so?”

“Definitely. The spin has already started. Check out the morning paper. Williamson's people are making it seem like the good senator volunteered to be arrested! They have gone so far as to say that the senator never had anything to do with Amber Wilson, didn't even know her, in fact. Mark my words, before his spin machine is done, the senator will be back as the lead candidate for the presidency.”

“Incredible. It's bad enough that he's getting off with committing murder, he could conceivably end up running the country. There has to be some way to stop this abomination.”

“Short of the assassin coming forward and telling all, it's a done deal, Darren.”

“I can't accept that, Hal. There has to be a way.”

“Well, in any case, I've delivered the news, for whatever that's worth. Try to accept it Darren and get on with your life. Just be careful with that Michelle.”

“I will, Hal. Thanks for filling me in.”

* * *

Monday, April 6, 10 a.m.

Darren needed to pack for his return trip to New York, in spite of how he was feeling after his discussion with Hal Miller. He knew he could not accept the idea that Mayfield and Williamson were going to get away with murdering his friends John, Phil and Andrea. Darren also knew that he could never look himself in a mirror if he did not do everything in his power to bring Mayfield and Williamson to justice. The thought that Williamson could one day soon be elected to the highest office sent a chill down his spine.

“I am going to find a way to hang those two scumbags.” Darren kept repeating the same phrase over and over, as if trying to convince himself that it was going to happen.

* * *

Friday, April 24, 9 p.m. PST

Michelle picked Darren up at the airport and drove him back to her apartment. She assumed that this weekend would be like their last one together and each one that followed

whenever Darren came back to Las Vegas; Darren, however, had other plans.

Once Darren had finalized his plan, he took advantage of a delay on his client's part to obtain the necessary computer hardware that was required for the project. Darren convinced the client that he did not feel comfortable with charging them for his time during the delay. He offered to suspend his activities until the equipment was ready. The client agreed, happy that they were going to save some money, and that Darren was so conscientious. Darren prepared task lists for the client personnel to work on in his absence. He would periodically monitor their progress and answer any questions by e-mail.

For his plan to be successful, he had to let Michelle think that he would be returning to New York on the usual schedule. This time he would have to come up with an excuse for going to the airport without her, giving him the chance to remain in town without her knowledge.

* * *

Monday, April 27, 9 p.m.

"I don't understand why you need to leave in the middle of the night."

"I'm needed at a former client in Cleveland. This was the only flight I could get on such short notice. I'll only need a few hours there to get things squared away and then I'll go to New York."

"Are you sure you don't want me to take you to the airport?"

"Of course not. There isn't any reason why both of us should be up in the middle of the night. You have a job to go to and you need your rest. I can sleep on the plane."

"Are you going to leave your car at the airport?"

"No, I'm going to have a taxi pick me up. That will be cheaper than long term airport parking."

"Well, it sounds like you have everything under control. So I guess I should get going so you can do your packing. You'll call me?"

"First chance I get."

Michelle kissed Darren goodbye and left his apartment thinking that she would not see him again for several weeks.

* * *

Tuesday, April 28, 9 a.m.

Darren kept the blinds closed on all his apartment windows. He would also leave the living room light on the timer. If anyone was watching, he wanted them to believe he was following his usual out of town routine.

The first thing he decided to do was call a car rental agency to come pick him up. He would rent a car so that if anyone was trying to keep track of him, his own car could not provide any clues to his whereabouts. Once he had the car, Darren filled it with anything he thought he might need and headed off to his friend's condo where he would again be forced to hide out, totally unaware that the assassin knew of its existence and location.

* * *

Tuesday, April 28, 2 p.m.

"Hi, Darren."

"Hello, Hal. Do you have a few minutes to talk?"

"Sure, what can I do for you?"

"I'm calling to convince you that I have a workable plan to catch the assassin."

Miller gave a slight laugh, "Good one. Any more jokes you would like to tell me?"

"I'm serious."

"I know you are and that's what scares me."

"I've done a lot of thinking about this the last few weeks and I'm sure we can pull this off."

"I'm probably crazy for saying this, but let me hear your plan. I'll at least hear you out before I tell you that you're insane and to get lost."

"Hal, if I didn't think this would work, I would never have called you. But to make it work, I have to know I can count on you for support."

"So how does this plan of yours go?"

"It's basically very simple. I need you to set up a 'leak' and make sure that Mayfield gets the word that you have acquired new information in the death of John Waltman. You will say that his death wasn't an accident caused by drunk driving but was actually a murder. Of course, you are going to make it sound like this is all a crock and deny all knowledge."

"Why would he believe this story after all this time?"

"Because you are going to let it get out that I have the evidence that identifies the killer. You can say that I'm in hiding until I need to come forward to testify."

"Then just what do you think will happen after that?"

"Mayfield will have no choice but to contact the assassin to take me out."

"Then what?"

"Then we catch a killer in the act."

"Just like that, huh?"

"Just like that."

"How do you intend to hide your whereabouts from Michelle? Doesn't she already know everything about you?"

"She doesn't know where I'm hiding. As far as she knows, right now I'm in New York."

"Darren, once we put the word out, she will know you're not in New York and will start the hunt."

"We aren't even sure that she is the assassin, Hal. We only think, based upon the weakest of evidence, that she is the one. I'm not convinced that Michelle is the killer. It's just a feeling that I have."

"Is it a feeling worth putting your life on the line to prove?"

"I suppose that is exactly what I'm going to be doing."

"You sure are."

"I take it you're on board, Hal?"

"I never said that. I need some time to think about this before I commit. Give me a couple of days, okay?"

"That's fine. Take as much time as you need."

"If I did that, you'd never hear from me again."

"Take as much time as you need, within a reasonable timeframe."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Thursday, April 30, 1 p.m.

"Hello." Darren was just about to leave the condo to get some lunch when his cell phone rang.

"Darren, it's Hal Miller."

"Hi, Hal."

"I've given your plan considerable thought. I could hardly think about anything else the last couple of days."

"Do you think it will work?"

"I'm sure the plan will work as far as bringing the rats out into the open. I'm not as confident that you will survive the ordeal."

"I was hoping that you could come up with some ideas that might help along those lines."

"I have one or two ideas, Darren. You have to understand that the problem is essentially that we have to place you as a target to bring the assassin out into the open. That alone is the problem. We aren't talking about your run of the mill killer. This is a professional, who from every indication possesses the highest level of skills. Not to put down my officers, but this assassin has already taken out one of my best detectives, one who was specifically hunting the killer in a semi controlled environment. With that in mind, how am I supposed to protect you?"

"I know that there is no way to be absolutely certain of my safety, Hal. I'm willing to take the chance. I have to take the chance." Darren stressed the "have to" to show Hal his commitment.

"Well, then I guess I'm on board. We are going to have to work out the details very carefully."

"When can we get together?"

"How about you come to my office tomorrow?"

"I would prefer to meet somewhere with a lower profile. How about meeting for lunch at a cafe I know about?"

"Works for me."

* * *

Friday, May 1, noon

"Hey, Hal." Darren stood and shook Miller's hand.

"Good to see you again, Darren. Can you believe that it's May already? Seems like it's only been a few weeks since we first met."

"I guess that means we're having fun, Hal." Darren did not smile when he made the comment and neither did Miller.

"I've been thinking over your plan, Darren, and I feel that the way you outlined it to me, it will only be effective if Michelle is indeed the killer. Michelle would assume you put two and two together, or that she slipped up somewhere and you figured it out. If she isn't the assassin, then we have to figure out a way to draw out the real killer and give him a reason to go after you."

"Have you devised a way we can do that?"

"I think so. You know I don't like the idea of placing you in jeopardy, Darren, but if you are set on doing this, I think we can pull it off. We need to get the killer to believe that he screwed up and left some evidence behind. That is easy enough to do. The hard part is making

him want to take you out. We need to convince our killer that the new evidence, in combination with the previously acquired evidence and your testimony, will be enough for a conviction. That may be the only way to get him out into the open.”

“Why is my testimony so important?”

“Because it validates the chain of evidence. Remember, credibility is key here.”

“Hal, this killer has been extremely thorough when it comes to not leaving any evidence behind. What makes you think that he will buy into having screwed up and left something behind?”

“In the process of ransacking Waltman's apartment, he could have inadvertently left a fingerprint or a hair or any one of a number of things that he couldn't go back and find in the mess. What is key here is that we have placed an element of doubt in the killer's mind.”

“I'm with you now. So, when do we start?”

“I think that the decision to put the plan into action is yours. I won't allow this to happen until you give me the word.”

“Consider it given.”

“Okay. I'll let you know when I intend to put the word out. I figure the best way is to let Sheriff Knowles take the credit. He will also make sure that Mayfield gets told immediately. I have a list of officers that I can trust and I will arrange for them to take turns watching out for you.”

“I don't think bodyguards are the way to go, Hal. They would just alert the assassin.”

“Yes, that's true, but don't you think that the assassin would assume that if you are such an important witness that you would have protection? If we don't make a show of protecting you, it might scare off the killer. He might smell a trap. A uniformed officer outside your place will show a presence but certainly won't pose a threat to such an accomplished killer. The second part is to have another officer stay with you. If we approach it correctly, the assassin won't know that you have a live-in guard.”

“A live-in guard?”

“Correct. We can place one guy who will always be inside your place and never leaves. We sneak him in so that no one knows you have company. I realize it may cramp your style a bit.”

“Just how do I manage to carry on a normal relationship with Michelle under those conditions?”

“That is something we need to talk about and work out. On one hand, if she is the killer, she needs to have access to you to show her hand. If, on the other hand, she isn't the killer, we have a problem with keeping her out of harm's way.”

“Whether she is or isn't the assassin doesn't really matter at this point, Hal. I still have to carry on like it is business as usual. Michelle is used to coming over to my apartment and spending weekends. How can I possibly do that with someone else living with me?”

“I see what you mean. We seem to be caught between a rock and a hard place. I have to admit, a solution doesn't come readily to mind.”

“The way I see it, I don't have any choice but to say no to having a live-in guard. I can't see any way around it, especially if Michelle is the killer.”

“I'm afraid I have to agree with you. The live-in is hereby evicted. We will just go with the cop outside. So that leads us back to when we start the plan.”

“I've been staying at a friends condo, so that if Michelle is watching my apartment, she will only see the apartment the way it usually looks while I'm out of town. I even rented a car

and left mine there. She thinks I took a cab to the airport and that now I'm traveling on business.”

“You really have given this quite a bit of thought. I'm impressed.”

“If we agree, we need to implement the plan. Michelle is expecting me to be out of town for a couple of weeks, so that gives us time to disseminate the bogus information. Why don't we plan on my business trip ending in two weeks, on the fifteenth? That would fit the normal pattern.”

“That sounds good to me. I can make all the arrangements by then.”

“Fine. I'll lay low until then. I can call Michelle to have her pick me up at the airport around the usual time Friday night. Everything will appear normal to her or to anyone else.”

“You honestly believe she isn't the killer, don't you Darren?”

“I just have this nagging feeling that she is not capable of killing anyone.”

“While I have just as nagging a feeling that she is.”

“Well, Hal, one of us is soon to be proven wrong.”

“I won't mind being wrong as long as a guy named Darren Poole stays healthy.”

“That makes two of us!”

“I'll keep in contact so you know when I'm releasing the information.”

With that, Miller shook Darren's hand and got up to leave. He took two steps and looked over his shoulder with a smile as he said, “You were buying lunch, weren't you?”

* * *

Thursday, May 7, 10 a.m.

Darren had tried to prepare himself for this the point of no return. He kept telling himself that the plan would work and he would be able to get on with his life and put all the anguish and fear behind him. His only uncertainty was whether Michelle would be moving ahead with him.

Hal Miller had completed his preparations and was due to stand alongside Sheriff Knowles as the sheriff made his announcement before the local media. Miller had hoped to avoid sharing the spotlight but Sheriff Knowles insisted he be present to answer any detail questions. Miller knew that the sheriff was merely using him to cover his own behind should anything go wrong. Miller was surprised that Knowles never questioned him about the safety precautions that would be used to protect Darren, and was shocked that Knowles did not make the least bit of an attempt to feign interest in Darren's well-being.

Miller had gone to great lengths to make sure that his people would be properly positioned to protect Darren when the assassin made his move. He came up with the idea of having two officers stationed next door to Darren, with video and audio surveillance. He sent the elderly couple that rented the apartment next to Darren's on a two week cruise of the Caribbean in exchange for the use of their apartment. His men would be as close to Darren as possible without interfering. Miller assured Darren that the surveillance devices would cover his entire apartment except for the bathrooms and his bedroom. Since the bedroom was the only place Darren would be vulnerable, they agreed that if he needed help he would pound on the common wall to alert the officers. Darren shrugged off Miller's attempt at levity when he cautioned Darren about having headboard banging sex.

Darren glanced at his watch and saw it was time for the press conference as he turned on his TV and found a local news channel. Fortunately for those present, the light rain that had started the night before had ceased and the sun broke through the clouds a minute before Sheriff Knowles took the dais, Miller standing to his left and a step behind. The more Knowles talked, the more irritated Darren became as the pompous sheriff continued to play up his importance in

the investigation of the local murders and their link to the Williamson/Mayfield case. Darren hoped that somehow the sheriff would be caught up in the case and be forced to step down, turning over the department to Miller.

Sheriff Knowles made a point of singling out Miller as the man in charge of the investigation from this point onward, thereby distancing himself should anything go haywire.

"Shrewd and smart," Darren commented out loud at the TV, "set Miller up should anything go wrong and at the same time put yourself in position for the accolades. You bastard."

The press did not ask any questions that required Sheriff Knowles to defer to Miller until the last question, when he was asked how critical the testimony of Darren Poole was to any court proceedings. Anyone focusing on Miller could see how uneasy he was with being dragged before the press only to be made the scapegoat. Miller nonetheless answered the question tactfully and expressed his opinion that without the Poole testimony, the evidence would probably not be enough to garner a conviction.

With the press conference over, Darren again went over the next phase of the plan.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Friday, May 10, 8 p.m.

Darren drove his rental car to the airport and turned it in an hour before Michelle would be picking him up. He loathed the deception he was forced to use, but promised himself he would make it up to her after she was cleared.

"Welcome home."

"It's good to be back. This trip was tiring and I'm looking forward to getting some rest and relaxation. How are things here?"

"Everything is good. There is one thing we need to talk about, though."

"What's that?"

"I'd prefer to wait until we get back to your place."

"Okay."

On past business trips Darren would slide down into the car's seat and close his eyes to rest. Even though he wasn't tired, he pretended and followed the usual pattern. Before he knew it, they were parking in his apartment complex.

"I'll get us some wine, Darren."

"That sounds great."

Darren made a show of returning home, checking around to make sure things were shipshape in the apartment. He threw his suitcase onto the bed and carried his computer bag into his office before changing into a pair of jeans and a tee shirt.

Plopping down on his sofa, Darren let out a loud sigh as if he was glad to be home after an exhausting trip.

"Here's your wine."

"Thank you. Here's to us."

They touched their glasses and Michelle sat next to Darren on the sofa. She gave Darren a

look that made him uneasy.

“Something is on your mind. Spill it.”

“Well, there was a press conference a week or so ago. Sheriff Knowles said that there was new evidence in the murder of your friend John Waltman. He said that with the new evidence, and your supporting testimony that a conviction of Mayfield and Williamson was probable.”

“Did he say anything about the assassin?”

“Yes, that was the point of the press release, the new evidence points to the identity of the assassin. He said that an arrest of the killer would surely lead to a confession implicating Mayfield and Williamson.”

“Damn it!” Darren wanted to sound angered.

“What's wrong?”

“Nobody told me about a press conference. I got a phone call when I was in New York from Under Sheriff Harold Miller. He informed me of the new evidence and that if it led to the arrest of the assassin, I would more than likely be required to testify. He never said anything about a press conference. Did the sheriff name me as a witness?”

“Yes, he did.”

“Oh, that's just great. What's the matter with that joker? Apparently he has no regard for my safety.”

“I'm sure they were just waiting for you to get back in town to assign a security team to you.”

“I just thought of something. How come there's no press hanging around this apartment?”

“He told them you were not in Las Vegas, that you were in hiding.”

“Well, thank heaven for small favors. I'm surprised he didn't give them an address of where I was hiding!”

Michelle could not stop herself from laughing at Darren's comment. Darren looked at her and could not help but laugh.

“I guess I must sound like a raving lunatic.”

“Almost. Seriously, though, I'm concerned about your welfare. What's to stop the assassin from coming after you?”

“I honestly don't know. I can only hope that the assassin will believe that I'm in hiding outside of Las Vegas. Besides, if the police can identify the killer, I would think that he is as far away from here as possible. Why would he risk capture trying to get to me?”

“The sheriff stressed that this is a professional. If that's the case, he might be thinking that you are a loose end that needs to be taken care of.”

“I'm sure that the police will assign someone to watch over me once I let them know I'm back in town. I'm not worried, so you shouldn't be either.”

“For some strange reason, you haven't made me feel any better.”

“Once I testify it will be all over. We can get back to leading normal lives.”

“When are you going to testify?”

“Whenever someone tells me. You almost know more about this than I do. You've been here listening to the news while I've been in New York. I'm sure the police, when I talk to them, will be able to give me some more information. In the meantime, let's just try to get on with our routines. Do we have anything on the schedule for the weekend?”

“Nothing I'm aware of. What do you feel like doing?”

“I suppose we could just kick back and enjoy being together. Maybe take in a movie and go out to dinner. We can play it by ear.”

"Aren't you going to call the police?" Michelle could not believe how calm Darren was acting.

"Once I call, I'm sure that the press will find out and we won't be able to come and go without being hassled every minute. So, I think I'll wait until Monday."

"I suppose you know what you're doing. I have to admit that I can't think of any other alternative."

"As for right now, I think I would like to turn in. Care to join me?"

"Try to stop me."

* * *

Saturday, May 11, 9 a.m.

"Darren, why don't we go out for breakfast?"

"That sounds good. You must have gotten up early, you're already dressed."

"Yeah, I couldn't sleep any longer so I got up and showered. I put on some coffee. Why don't I get you a cup while you get dressed?"

"Excellent idea. I'll hit the shower. I have an idea. After breakfast let's drive down to the Fashion Show Mall. I want to pick up something at the Apple store."

"Does that mean that I can do some shopping at Nordstrom?"

"You can do all the shopping your little old heart desires, as long as I don't get the bills."

"Kill joy."

* * *

Saturday, May 11, 8:30 p.m.

The killer, posing as a maintenance worker earlier in the day, had loosened the light bulb in the overhead fixture that lit up the front of Darren's apartment and now waited patiently for the sun's last rays to fade below the mountains. Nighttime fell suddenly as building storm clouds obscured the quarter moon.

Several hours earlier, patrol officer Dale Harvey relieved the day watch officer and positioned his black and white within eyesight of Darren's apartment. His orders were to keep watch on the apartment but not to act under any circumstances unless Detective Johnson radioed instructions to the contrary. He knew his role was mainly that of putting on a show.

Harvey was slightly startled at the sudden appearance of the figure next to his open window.

"Officer, I wonder if you could give me directions?"

Taking a deep breath, Harvey responded, "Sure, where do you want to go?"

A gloved left hand, holding a folded map, reached toward Harvey then dropped the map into his lap while the right hand hastily went to the back of Harvey's head. With one quick motion, Harvey's head was snapped to the right, the force breaking his neck and killing him instantly. The assassin propped Harvey up so that he would look normal from a distance then retreated to the shadows to don the mask and hood that completed the uniform.

With the cover of darkness, and totally clad in black, the assassin picked the lock in Darren's door, gaining access within a few seconds.

Darren slipped up and had forgotten to leave a light on inside the apartment, as prearranged, so the officers next door could not see the assassin against the dark background. The killer, aided by night vision goggles, stealthily and quickly found a suitable hiding place from which to check out the surroundings. Crouched in a corner, the killer had unknowingly

found the one part of the apartment that was out of camera range. The goggles enabled the killer to take in every detail of the apartment's living room, breakfast area and kitchen. Not finding a place from which to await Darren's return, the assassin crawled down the short hallway and into Darren's bedroom. Finding the walk-in closet, the killer slipped inside and pulled the door shut to within an inch of complete closure. The two officers in the neighboring apartment had not seen nor heard anything.

* * *

Saturday, May 11, 9 p.m.

"Damn it!" It required all the self-control that Officer Rutledge could muster to refrain from yelling the expletive.

Detective Johnson dropped the magazine he was reading and bolted out of the comfortable recliner as if he had received a high voltage charge.

"What's wrong?"

"Poole forgot to leave a light on in his apartment. We're blind."

"Turn up the auditory feed. If we can't see, we can at least listen."

"Maybe I should go over there and turn on a light."

"No, Rutledge. If anyone should be watching, you would give away our position. We are going to have to do the best we can with the situation. My guess is that Poole will be home soon and that'll take care of the problem. In the meantime we have to be as quiet as we can and listen for any noise in his apartment. You put on the headphones so you don't miss anything and I'll watch from the window."

Johnson extinguished the lights and used the low light from the monitor to guide him as he grabbed a dining room chair and carefully positioned himself by the picture window. He could look out a small opening in the drapes and see if anyone approached Darren's apartment. From his vantage point he could also make out the figure of officer Harvey sitting in his patrol car with a nearby street light barely illuminating the vehicle.

* * *

Saturday, May 11, 9:15 p.m.

The assassin carefully scanned every square inch of Darren's bedroom, becoming familiar with the placement of the furniture, all the accessories and every detail until the room was committed to memory. This was to be the battlefield, but before the conflict, it needed preparation. Any advantage the foe could have had to be eliminated.

The killer carefully and silently unplugged both nightstand lamps and the digital alarm clock, lest its glow provide enough light for the enemy to see the shadow of his assailant. The assassin knew that the victim would be confused for a few seconds while he tried to comprehend why the lights were out and mentally make the adjustment. That is when the brief battle would take place. It would be over within the few seconds that it took Darren to mentally adjust.

The killer had but an instant to leave the safety of the closet and close the bedroom door to shut out the light from the other rooms. This was critical, as the killer, accustomed to the dark, would have to do this with eyes shut. While Darren was trying to get over the mental adjustment, his eyes were going to be pressed to adjust to the darkness.

The assassin felt confident that by the time the victim could pose a threat, he would be dead.

* * *

Saturday, May 11, 10 p.m.

Darren and Michelle spent most of the day shopping and browsing before taking in a movie, or “chick flick,” as Darren referred to it. A late lunch, a large bucket of popcorn and a thirty-two ounce soda made dinner not only unappealing but also unnecessary so they decided to return to Darren's apartment.

During the drive home Darren could not help but think the unthinkable, that if Hal Miller was correct, Michelle was the assassin and he would soon be alone with her in his apartment. Since she had not already made a move, he was more convinced than ever that Michelle was not the assassin. While he knew there was a slim possibility that Michelle could be the killer, Darren had not completely resigned himself to a point where he considered how he would defend himself. Suddenly he was faced with the reality of having to deal with a life or death situation. His mind became occupied with the thought of whether he would be capable of killing her, even if it meant saving himself. Before he could panic over his dilemma, Darren realized he had been on autopilot and had driven home without any conscious effort.

* * *

Saturday, May 11, 10:36 p.m.

Darren followed Michelle up the stairs to the second level of apartments. He sensed something was different but did not figure out that the overhead light was off until he had trouble finding the keyhole on his door. Finally successful, Darren wondered if the officers next door had turned off the light for some reason. Michelle entered first and turned on the master light switch, bathing the living room, dining area and kitchen in a pleasing glow.

* * *

“Poole and his girlfriend are back.”

“Yeah, I can hear every word and the picture is clear as a bell.”

“Good. We're back to normal. I'm going to stay by the window. You keep manning the monitor.”

“Roger. Too bad we couldn't put a camera in his bedroom. I think this babe might put on a show.”

“Cool it, Rutledge. Remember why we're here. We're trying to trap the asshole that killed Phil Olson, and don't you forget it.” The anger in Johnson's voice made it clear to Rutledge that his comment was not appreciated.

“Sorry, Johnson.”

“Forget it.”

* * *

“Care for a nightcap?” Darren held up a bottle of scotch.

“Maybe a little wine to help me sleep.”

“Okay.”

Darren removed the stopper from a decanter and poured Michelle a half glass of cabernet that he had opened earlier.

“Let me know what you think of this. It's the latest release from Sequoia Grove.”

Michelle swirled the wine and held the glass up to the light. “Nice legs. Not as good as mine, though.” Michelle gave Darren a coy glance.

“No legs are as fine as yours.”

“Why, thank you, sir.”

“Just stating a fact. How does it taste?”

Michelle sniffed the glass of wine to take in the aroma before taking a sip. “Very tasty. Reminds me of chocolate covered strawberries.”

“Maybe I need to try this, myself.” With that, Darren poured himself about half of what he gave Michelle. He thought that if he got her to drink enough wine, she might be off her game.

“I agree with you. There are definitely undertones of strawberries and chocolate.”

* * *

“Well, if nothing else, I'm getting a lesson in wine tasting.” Rutledge took off the headphones and let the speakers fill the room with the conversation from next door. “Watch the monitor, will you, Johnson. I need to take a leak.”

Johnson stood up and walked over to get a better view of the monitor and could see Darren and Michelle sitting on the sofa.

When Rutledge returned and took his place in front of the monitor, Johnson commented, “It's hard to imagine that a girl so beautiful could be such a cold-hearted killer.

“You mean she's the one we are supposed to be looking for?”

“Maybe. I was told that she is the leading suspect but not necessarily the only one. Apparently there is very little evidence pointing to her, so there is the possibility that someone else is the assassin.”

“Well, if she is the killer, all I can say is what a way to go.”

“Just remember how Olson was killed. Maybe then you won't think she is so attractive.”

* * *

Darren and Michelle finished their wine and agreed that they were both tired and needed to get some sleep.

“I think we're tired from all the walking we did today at the mall.”

“Well, if you could have made up your mind about that dress at Nordstrom, we wouldn't have needed to look in every clothing store in the place. We did the whole mall at least twice, and that's not counting the time you were shopping by yourself while I was in the Apple store.”

“Okay, I surrender. Let's go to bed.”

Darren turned off the lights in the kitchen and dining area, leaving the living room lit until he reached the bedroom, where he would use the switch in the hall to turn off the living room lights.

Michelle had kicked off her shoes and removed her pullover and jeans by the time she reached the bedroom, freeing her to plop onto the bed. She was so exhausted, she closed her eyes in anticipation of falling asleep within a couple of minutes.

Darren, as he had done countless times, flicked off the living room lights while simultaneously reaching for the bedroom switch. This time the living room lights went out but the bedroom remained dark. The two seconds Darren needed to assess the situation and decide to turn on the living room lights were one too many. Before he could turn the lights back on, the assassin sprang from the closet and in one fluid motion slammed the bedroom door with a leaping kick, regained balance and drove a clenched fist into Darren's solar plexus.

* * *

“What was that?”

“The slamming of a door, I think.”

“Do you hear anything else?”

“No. Damn, I wish we would have at least put a mic in the bedroom. It's quiet.” Rutledge looked at the monitor, “And dark. There aren't any lights on. Darren and the girl must be in the

bedroom. Why would they slam the door?"

Johnson remembered that the wind was gusting up to thirty miles per hour. "He may have had his bedroom window open and the wind might have slammed the door. Let me check."

Johnson went to the door with the intention of opening it slightly only to be greeted by a gust that forced the door fully open. Barely catching it before it slammed against the wall, Johnson commented, "I guess I called that one."

Rutledge, attempting to stop their paperwork from flying off the table, and only partially succeeding retorted, "Just close the blessed door before we blow away."

* * *

Darren struggled to regain his breath, gasping for air as he tried to overcome the feeling that his chest had been crushed. He had fallen backwards, his head missing the nightstand by less than an inch. Dazed and confused, he tried to get up when he heard Michelle's voice. Her voice sounded as though she were in a long tunnel, echoing and distant.

"Darren, are you all right? What happened?" Michelle was groggy and confused, caused by the wine and being half asleep, so she thought that Darren must have tripped in the dark.

Darren could barely muster a response, gasping out but two words, "Killer, here."

The words did not immediately register with Michelle as she rolled over the bed toward Darren's voice, her only thought being to help him.

"Don't move."

Michelle and Darren barely heard the assassin's command above their own heartbeats, but they were each shocked by the voice—albeit for different reasons.

Darren's first thought was one of disbelief. His hearing must have been affected by the blow and fall; he could swear that the voice was feminine. Surely, no woman could deliver such a powerful blow.

Michelle froze when she heard the order, unsure if she should speak. "Don't do this Monique."

"Be quiet."

Darren was coming around enough to notice that the voice had moved closer toward him and was only a few feet away.

"I won't be quiet, Monique. You can't do this. Please don't do this, I beg you."

Darren was not sure if his oxygen starved brain was playing games as he fought to make sense of what he was apparently hearing. If his mind could be believed, then thankfully, the woman he loves is not the assassin. "But, how does she know who the killer is? She called her by name." Darren was thinking but thought he may have spoken out loud. As confused and groggy as he was, he decided to take the only course of action he had left.

* * *

Only seconds had passed since they heard the slamming door, yet Johnson was, by instinct, on the alert.

"I don't like this. Go back to the headphones."

Rutledge quickly obeyed, donning the headphones and turning up the volume to the maximum setting. "Still quiet. Not a sound. I think they fell asleep."

"I don't like it. Keep listening."

* * *

"Be quiet, Monica. You know I have no choice. I have to do this."

Darren did not wait for Michelle to respond. The voice was right in front of him, only inches away. His right leg was folded back, placing his ankle within easy reach, giving him the

opportunity to pull the twenty-two automatic from its holster. Without a second thought, just as Johnson had instructed him, he aimed and pulled the trigger three times.

* * *

“Shit! I just heard gunshots!”

Johnson did not wait to radio the patrol car or for Rutledge to abandon the headphones. The heavy winds drove the doorknob into the wall as Johnson flung open the door. Johnson was at Darren's door in an instant, where according to prior agreement, he knew the door would be unlocked. He paused for a fraction of a second before twisting the knob and letting the wind throw the door open.

Crouching low, Johnson could not see a thing in the total darkness. Gambling, he reached up and turned on the lights. By then Rutledge was already inside, his revolver at the ready, his back against a wall. Rutledge scanned the area. “Clear.”

Johnson was making his way to the bedroom when he heard a woman scream.

* * *

Darren felt the cold steel long before the searing pain as the blade penetrated his flesh. The ultra sharp weapon went completely through him and stopped suddenly as it hit the solid floor underneath the carpet. His assailant had fallen forward after taking the three bullets and while still alive, had the presence to drive the blade home with as much force as possible.

The assassin, moaning and trying to move, was on top of Darren, her face next to his. As he tried to push her off with his right hand, she grabbed his throat with her left hand. Fortunately, she lacked the strength to tighten her grip enough to crush his trachea. Amazed at the strength she possessed, Darren grabbed her wrist and pulled her hand from his throat as he tried to turn her over and off of himself, winning out only when she started to weaken from blood loss. As he tried to lift himself up onto his knees, he heard Michelle's anguished scream, right before losing consciousness and falling on top of the killer.

* * *

Johnson knew he was about to face a cop's worst nightmare; he also knew he had no choice. With Rutledge behind him, Johnson charged the closed door and burst through, the force driving him to the floor where he rolled once before stabilizing himself on his knees, revolver at arms length. There was just enough light filtering in from the hallway for Johnson to distinguish Michelle kneeling on the bed, looking down at the two figures in the shadows.

Rutledge, poised in the doorway, shined his flashlight on the floor and quickly realized that Darren was on top of the killer, pinning her down. Seeing the blade protruding through Darren's torso, Rutledge retrieved his handcuffs as Johnson lifted Darren onto the bed. Johnson could not stop Michelle from hugging Darren's limp body, but his uncertainty as to the events that occurred, made him watch her closely.

Rutledge got on his handheld radio to call in the backup units that were on post a block away and to summon medical help.

“Johnson, do you believe this? She took three shots and she’s still alive. Wow, guess what.”

“What?”

“We've caught ourselves a real live ninja.”

* * *

Saturday, May 11, 11:53 p.m.

Darren was motionless on the bed as the paramedic loomed over him trying to take his

vital signs.

“Get that knife out of him!” Michelle screamed.

“Tanto.”

“What?”

“It's a tanto, a knife used by ninjas. I'm supposed to leave things like this intact. Only a doctor should remove it in case further damage is possible.”

“So, you're saying he's still alive?” Johnson had assumed that Darren had succumbed to the vicious assault.

“He's alive, barely. We've got to get him out of here, fast.”

The two paramedics lifted Darren onto the ambulance stretcher and secured the straps. Rushing him into the hallway, they almost collided with the second paramedic team and their stretcher. The late arrivals made way as Darren was hurriedly ushered out of the apartment.

* * *

“This one is stable, we're ready to transport.” Two paramedics had secured the assassin onto an ambulance stretcher.

“Wait a minute.” Johnson approached the stretcher. “I want to get a look at this one.”

Johnson pulled off the ninja's hood and then the mask.

“Now this is interesting.”

Rutledge looked over and could not believe what he was seeing. He had to look at Michelle and back to the stretcher and still found himself speechless.

“You're going to have to come with us, miss.” Johnson was reaching for his handcuffs as he spoke to Michelle. “This puts a whole new twist on things.”

Johnson told one of the officers to take Michelle away then commented to Rutledge, “This has got to be one of the craziest things I've seen in eighteen years as a cop. A professional killer that just happens to be a woman, a ninja and has a twin sister.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Saturday, May 18, 10 a.m.

“Are you feeling up to a couple of visitors?” The nurse gently placed her hand on Darren's.

“Sure, why not. As long as it isn't the media.”

“It's a couple of police officers.”

“Of course, I'll see them.”

“It's a good thing you agreed to see us because we were coming in anyway!” Hal Miller was already walking in before being given the okay and with Johnson in his wake.

“You don't look too much worse than the last time I saw you. Or should I say you don't look any better?”

“Very funny. Did you come to pour salt in my wound?”

“Haven't lost your sense of humor, I see. The doctors that worked on you for several hours say the knife didn't cause any permanent damage. You are one lucky critter, Darren. That blade missed your heart by a hair. You should come out of this okay, must be that thick skin of yours.”

On a serious note, I just wanted to say thank you, Darren. What you did almost cost you your life. You're one brave guy."

"Personally, right now I think stupid is the adjective you're looking for. I can't believe what's happened. How is Michelle, was she hurt?"

"We have not interrogated them. They refuse to say a word until they have a lawyer present and we have to honor that request. No one is going anywhere near those two until their lawyers agree to let us talk to them. We have only read them their rights. We are doing this by the book so that we don't let them get off on a technicality. Oh, by the way, her name is Monica, not Michelle."

"Wait a minute. What do you mean by 'them'? I'm confused. Didn't I kill the assassin? Michelle isn't the killer, which should be obvious. I remember shooting the assassin. I know I was somewhat groggy, but I'm fairly sure I shot her three times."

"So you knew it was a woman, then?"

"Yeah. I was shocked when she spoke. I can't believe the strength she had. She put a blow to my chest that knocked me off my feet and took my breath away. I seem to remember that she was hovering over me, at close range, that's when I shot her. Then she was trying to strangle me with a grip you wouldn't believe."

"Her name is Monique. Monique Hastings. Monica's twin sister."

"What! Are you putting me on?"

"No, I'm serious. We haven't turned up anything on Monique. My guess, for whatever it may be worth, is that they used being twins to establish alibis."

"Do you think they are both killers?"

"That's a tough one. Right now we don't know enough to speculate. I suspect that, but it's just a feeling I have and isn't based on anything substantial."

Johnson finally managed to get in a few words. "If you think about it, it would make sense, but..."

"But, what?"

"If Michelle, I mean Monica, was out to kill you, why didn't she do it months ago? It isn't like there were no opportunities. She could have killed you on any number of occasions."

"I suppose you're right, Johnson. That's why I'm so confused. I truly believe that she loves me. Maybe I'm just being stupid again, but I can't help but feel that way."

"I don't know how things are going to turn out on this case, obviously, but if I were you, Darren, I would try to forget about Monica Hastings."

"I wish it were that easy, Hal."

"Well, I guess we should let you rest up. We'll talk again after you get out of the hospital."

"I'd just like to say one more thing. Thanks for helping us get Phil Olson's killer, Darren. It means a lot to me."

"You're welcome, Johnson."

Darren had never felt this depressed. He immediately fell asleep, his body and mind needing to recuperate.

* * *

Tuesday, May 21, 9 a.m.

"How are you feeling today, Mr. Poole?"

"Not too shabby, Doctor Marshall. When do you think I'll be able to leave here?"

"I was thinking today. Does that suit you?"

"Definitely. I do have one problem, though."

"What problem would that be?"

"I don't have a ride home."

"Maybe I can take care of that." Cindy's voice was gleeful and brought a smile to Darren's face.

"Cindy! You're sure a sight for sore eyes."

Cindy went over to Darren's bed, leaned over and gave him a loving kiss.

"I guess that problem is solved. I'll write up the release order for the nurse."

"Thanks, doctor."

"How are you feeling, Darren?"

"Much better, now that I see a friendly face. When did you get back into town?"

"Last night. Hal Miller called me and told me the whole story, so I caught the first flight I could get. I was talking to the nurses and they said you are going to need several more weeks to recuperate. I assured them that I would take good care of you."

"I'm afraid I don't make a good patient."

"I'm well aware of that! The nurses told me a few stories."

"You sure you want to tackle the job?"

"I'm sure. Just remember, if you give me a hard time, I'll make sure you don't get your pain killers."

"That gives an all new meaning to knowing how to hurt a guy. So, how are things in New Orleans? How are Jim and Beth?"

"There are a few things going on with them, but more of that later. Right now we have to think about how we are going to get you healthy."

"I want to be up and around as soon as possible. More than likely, I'm going to have to testify in court. Besides, I want to get all the details from Miller. I'm still not up to speed about all the aspects."

"I might be able to help you with that. Miller told me quite a bit; I wouldn't let him off the phone. I made him feel guilty about waiting almost a week to call me, so he decided he better spill the beans!"

"Okay. Tell me what you know about Michelle's...or should I say Monica's twin sister. I guess I'm going to have to get used to the name change."

"Before we get into that, will you answer a question for me, Darren?"

"If I can."

"Just what was your relationship with Monica Hastings?"

"Whew, you cut right to the chase. I don't know any other way to say it, so here it is; we were lovers. I met her after you left for New Orleans. Something happened and I fell for her. Maybe that's why I want to know as much about what happened as I can. In the recesses of my mind, I can envision a scenario where she was close to me for the wrong reasons. I need to know the truth and I can't just ask her. I probably won't be able to see or talk to her until we meet up in court. Of course, I'm assuming that she is somehow mixed up in her sister's business and will be brought up on some kind of charge."

"I was hoping that my suspicions were wrong."

"I know this must hurt you, Cindy. I just hope that you can forgive me someday. I value our relationship and I will always want you to be a part of my life."

"The problem, as I see it, is how you define our relationship. Until now, I thought I knew where I stood, now I'm not so sure. But that is a discussion for another time. Right now I'll try to

answer some of your questions. Here is what I know.”

Cindy related to Darren everything that Miller had told her about the Hastings twins.

“That’s an incredible story. I guess Monique’s ninja training and physical conditioning are the reasons she was able to drop me like a rock and almost strangle me with one hand. I’m not embarrassed to admit that I was scared shitless. It all happened so suddenly. I understand now how a professional like Phil Olson could be taken by surprise and killed within a few seconds. Cindy, does Miller have any idea how Monica is involved?”

“If he does, he didn’t tell me. I believe he doesn’t know anything about how they may have teamed up, or if Monica had any responsibility in the killings.”

“It certainly doesn’t look good for Monica.”

“If you ask me, I don’t see how she could not be involved. Do you really believe that she came into your life coincidentally? I think it’s obvious that she was a part of the plan to make sure that you never testified, Darren.”

“I have to agree with you that the signs all point to her involvement, but still, there is something that bothers me about that whole scenario. I find it hard to believe that she didn’t have feelings for me.”

“You are the last person anyone would consider impartial.”

* * *

Tuesday, May 21, 1 p.m.

“Whew. Climbing those stairs took a lot out of me, Cindy. Do you mind if I just get into bed and take a nap?”

“Certainly, go right ahead. When you wake up I’ll have a nice lunch waiting for you.”

“That could be a problem, since I don’t have any groceries in the place. What with all the traveling and everything, I didn’t worry about keeping the shelves stocked.”

“Okay, then. You take a good long nap and I will go do some grocery shopping.”

Darren started for the bedroom then paused, his mind recalling every vivid detail of the last time he entered the room. Cindy could not help but notice and quickly came over to him and put her arm around his waist as if to guide him.

“I can understand your apprehension, but it’s all over now, Darren. Everything is back to normal. In fact, it’s better than normal; Hal Miller told me that detective Johnson and some of the other cops, to show their appreciation, came over and completely cleaned up the place.”

“I can’t believe they did that. All right, I have to go in there sometime, it may as well be now.”

Darren slowly entered the room and looked around. Out of curiosity he turned on the light switch and was glad to see the lights come on. Looking at the floor where he had almost lost his life, he could not see any trace of blood or other indication of the attack. Relieved, Darren let out a big sigh as he gingerly sat down on the edge of the bed.

“Do you want me to turn down the covers for you?”

“No, I think I’ll just lay on top. It’s warm enough in here that I would be too warm under the blanket. Just take off my shoes, if you don’t mind.”

Cindy slipped Darren’s shoes off and placed them in his closet. When she turned around, Cindy could see that Darren was already asleep.

* * *

Tuesday, May 21, 3:15 p.m.

Darren felt better after his long nap and found his apartment permeated with the aroma of something cooking. Making his way to the kitchen, he found Cindy tossing a salad.

"You finally woke up, I see. I was about ready to go rouse you. I was afraid you would sleep away the day and be up all night. But you shouldn't be walking around, get back into bed, the doctor released you with the agreement that you would stay in bed for at least a week."

"Something smells delightful. What did you fix?"

"I made a pasta casserole. It should be ready right about the time we finish our salads. Now let me help you get back to bed. You can't have anything alcoholic with the medications they gave you, so I'll get you some ice water.

"Yeah. I think it's time for me to take one of those pain killers."

Cindy poured the water and fetched Darren's medications. Opening the container, she let one pill fall into Darren's waiting palm. Washing down the pill, Darren drank the entire glass of water and asked for more.

Cindy returned with the water and a bed tray, she sat on the bed next to Darren and they both started eating their salads.

"I want to talk to you about something, Darren. No, it's not what you're thinking. It's about Jim and Beth."

"That's right, we never did get around to talking about them. What's up?"

"Beth told me a few things that are worrisome. I think she is concerned about something and she refuses to go into any detail. She is certain that Jim is in danger."

"How so?"

"That's just it, she won't tell me. All she says is that if Jim isn't careful, he's going to end up in a hospital bed or worse."

"Beth isn't the kind to cry wolf unless there really is a wolf at the door. She didn't tell you anything else?"

"No, she asked me to forget that she ever said anything."

"I guess I should call her and see if she will tell me what's going on. I'm not up to getting into any more problems now, though. I think it's going to have to wait a few days."

"Of course. You have to get yourself healthy before you try to help someone else. I'm sure there is no rush."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Friday, May 24, 11 a.m.

"I didn't wake you up, I hope."

"No, not at all. I've been up for hours. I've got a lot of things to tend to and being house bound makes for a good excuse. What's on your mind, Hal?"

"I wanted to fill you in on the latest. It looks like our buddy Mayfield is getting one of his cronies' firms to represent the Hastings sisters. I wouldn't be surprised if he isn't paying the tab either. If he's smart, he'll get Williamson to kick in half!"

"He's just trying to cover his ass, the slimy bastard."

"So far, he's doing a good job of it. I talked to the ladies' lawyer on Tuesday and he agreed to let me and Johnson interview them yesterday."

"You talked to them yesterday?"

"Yep. I interviewed Monica and Johnson talked to Monique."

"So, what did you find out? Or are you going to make me beg?" Darren was in a testy mood.

"Sorry. We only got to talk to them for about an hour, so there is still a lot more information to be had. There are a couple of interesting things that we gleaned from our interviews. You have to remember that usually when we interrogate suspects separately, we try to convince each one that their peer is selling them out. Although, that technique didn't get us anywhere with the Hastings. They are too sure of each other. We did find out that Monica, from her bearing and the way she talked, was very upset that Monique tried to kill you. Apparently, she didn't know anything about it. For her part, Monique was only willing to admit one thing."

"What?"

"That she decided to kill you on her own. She wasn't acting on any orders from Mayfield or anyone else. She told us that Monica didn't know anything about it."

"I'm surprised she admitted anything at all. Didn't her lawyer tell her to keep quiet?"

"That's the odd thing. She ignored her attorney and was almost bragging about how close she came to taking you out, and then she had a sudden turnaround and was upset that she didn't succeed. She was beating herself up about failing. It was strange, to say the least. If you ask my opinion, that woman is not tuned into reality, ignoring her attorney's advice and all."

"So where do we stand, now?"

"The lawyers want to have psychiatric examinations of both sisters. I think they are going to try getting them off with confinement to a mental hospital or something. I don't think that will work for Monica, it may for Monique, because I think she's crazy."

"She's crazy all right. Only someone with a messed up brain could commit so many brutal murders, Hal."

"Since we found out that she uses ninja weapons, we did some research and the ninja weapon technology fits the methods used in all the murders. We're checking out ninja training sites to see if anyone knows her."

"She has to be in extremely good physical condition, Hal. I know technique has a lot to do with it, but she delivered a blow to my chest that was devastating, and the way she grabbed my throat with one hand..."

"I know, Darren. If she was professionally trained in all the ninja arts, then she was one lethal weapon. Anyway, now you know what I know. I'll call you again in a few days. Take care of yourself and get plenty of rest."

"Thanks for calling, Hal, I appreciate it."

* * *

Friday, May 24, 11:30 a.m.

"I guess I should give Beth Owens a call." Darren only sounded halfhearted about the idea.

"I'm sure she would appreciate hearing from you. I hope she tells you more than she let me in on." Cindy placed the tray with a sandwich and soda on Darren's lap.

"She doesn't know you as well as she does me, so it isn't surprising that she would clam up." As Cindy left his bedroom, Darren picked up the phone and called the Owens house.

Darren was so upset as a result of his talk with Beth that he could not eat his lunch. When

Cindy came in to check up on him and saw the sandwich untouched, she could not resist asking him what had happened.

"I don't want to say anything right now, Cindy. I don't have all the facts. I'm not sure I fully grasp the situation anyway. Beth broke down while she was telling me some of the story and couldn't finish."

"So, how can you help her?"

"I have no idea. I told her that I'm not fit enough to travel but that as soon as I was capable, I would go to New Orleans to see if I could be of help."

"Why does she think that you are the one that can be of assistance?"

"I guess their newspaper carried the story of what happened here, since the senator is involved. Apparently my name was prominently mentioned. That, combined with whatever you may have told her, has her believing that I am some kind of super sleuth. She wants me to do some kind of investigation for her."

"Oops. I guess I may have played up your detective skills too much. You do have to admit that you did just as much, if not more, than the police and the FBI combined to solve this case."

"Thanks for the complement, I think. Now I'm on the hot seat to help out Beth and I haven't gotten through this dilemma. I'm going to have to testify here and possibly in Washington before I can think of helping Beth."

"She may not be able to wait. She made it sound extremely important that I get you to contact her, you know, as if time was of the essence."

"I can't be of help to her until I get my own house in order. My priorities right now are getting healthy, getting the trials behind me, evaluating where I stand business wise and then helping Beth."

"Since you brought up the trial, what do you think is going to happen?"

"From my standpoint, and you may not like hearing this, I feel that Monique is going to get a lot of time for at least attempted murder, if not murder. As for Monica, unless there is a case made for her being involved, she may get off. So far I haven't heard anything definitive that shows her to be an accomplice to any of the murders."

"I guess you would like for her to found innocent."

"I can't hide how I feel, Cindy."

"I just hope you will be able to deal with it should she be found guilty of complicity or some other crime. I just find it impossible to believe that she is white as snow. Darren, you have to admit that it had to be more than a coincidence that she met you at the same time that her sister was plotting to kill you. You've got to put aside your feelings for Monica and be real about this."

"You know, I'm getting tired of everyone telling me what I should be doing. Where were all of you when I was trying to figure out how to keep all of us alive? Hiding out, that's where. Nobody had anything to offer then, but now it's a different story. Well, I'm getting sick of it. I just want to be left alone so I can resolve all the issues in my own mind."

"Every one of us is merely trying to help you. We all care what happens to you and I for one am not going to leave you alone. You're stuck with me, like or not."

"I'm sorry, Cindy. I guess I just had to blow off some steam."

"You're entitled. Just don't make a habit of it or I'll cut off your pain killers!"

"Understood."

* * *

Friday, June 28, 10:30 a.m.

Darren was back to normal, physically, his wounds had healed, but his mental state was far from healthy. He could not get Monica out of his mind no matter how hard he tried. He must have read the letter that Hal Miller gave him two days ago at least ten times, but the words only reinforced what he already knew, that he had to get her out of his head and get on with his life. Her admission to being involved with Monique's murder for hire business destroyed any ray of hope that they could one day be a couple again. Her letter made it perfectly clear that she was involved from the beginning and agreed to have the chance meeting with him at the computer store, never thinking that she would fall in love with him and find herself opposing Monique's plan. The words mattered to him, but unfortunately, would not to a court of law.

Miller confided in Darren, telling him that both Monique and Monica were telling all in the hope that they could receive reduced sentences. Miller felt that Monica would get off with the lightest sentence since she had not actually killed anyone, only provided alibis should they be needed. Monique, on the other hand, was bargaining for life sentences instead of the death penalty. In the process she was freely giving up Mayfield and Williamson, revealing the whole morbid tale. This time they would not be getting off.

* * *

Saturday, June 29, 11:30 a.m.

"Beth, how are you? This is Darren."

"Hi, Darren. I've been reading about you in the newspapers. How are you feeling?"

"I've recovered from my injuries. I'm back to normal, or as normal as I have ever been."

Darren tried to put some humor into the comment but did not succeed.

"This is going to take you some time to get over, darlin'."

"Yeah, but hopefully not too much longer. I called because Cindy said that you were anxious about something. Is there anything I can do to help you?"

"In fact, you can. I can't go into it over the phone. I need to talk to you in person."

"Why can't you discuss it over the phone?"

"I'll tell you what, call me back on my cell phone, okay?"

"Hang up and I'll start dialing." Within seconds Darren was calling Beth's cell phone.

"Okay, Darren. Here's part of the story. I couldn't speak on the other phone because I believe it's being tapped."

"Tapped? Who would be tapping your phone?"

"That's the hard part. I'm not sure exactly who. I have suspicions as to who it may be, but I need proof. I need you to find out for me."

"Why don't you go to the police?"

"You know as well as I do, most of the police in this town are under paid and some are on the take. The people I suspect to be behind this would be the same ones buying off the police."

"Why me?"

"Because, as far as I can see and from what I've heard, you are quite the detective, Mr. Poole. And if that isn't enough, I trust you. I trust you to keep Jim alive."

The comment about Jim struck a chord and Darren knew what he had to do.

"I guess I just made a career change. I'll call you when I get to New Orleans."

###

Other books by the author include THE CONTROLLER-Covenant and THE CONTROLLER-Obsession.

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