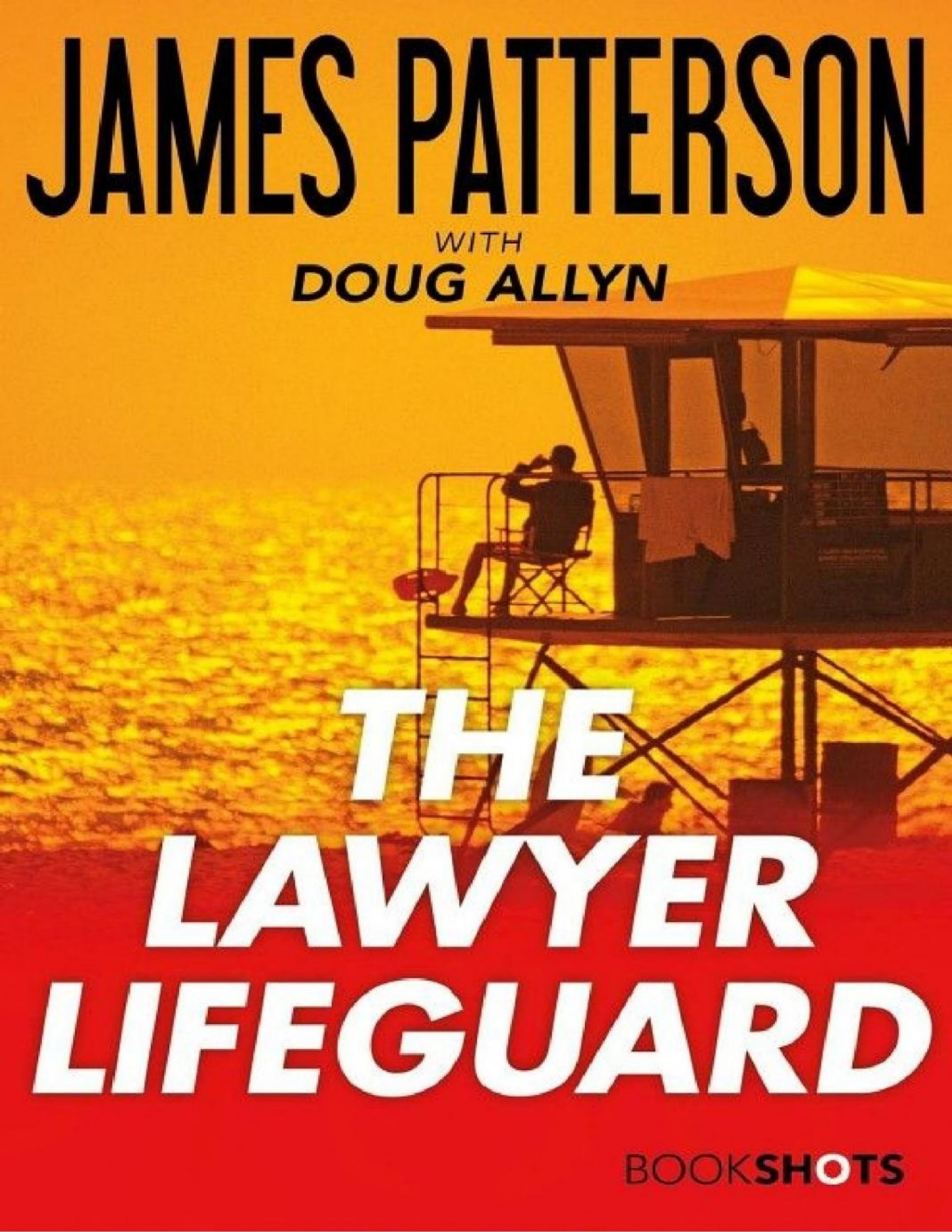


JAMES PATTERSON

WITH
DOUG ALLYN

A photograph of a lifeguard sitting on a lifeguard stand, looking out over the ocean at sunset. The sky is a vibrant orange and yellow, and the water reflects the light. The lifeguard stand is a wooden structure with a roof and a ladder. The lifeguard is sitting on a chair, looking through binoculars. The overall mood is serene and contemplative.

THE LAWYER LIFEGUARD

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THE LAWYER LIFEGUARD

JAMES PATTERSON
WITH DOUG ALLYN

BOOKSHOTS

Little, Brown and Company
New York Boston London

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Chapter 1

It was a clear afternoon on the Lake Huron shore during the last weekend in May, so there weren't many swimmers. Whitecaps slapped against the sand, goosed in by a mild breeze. Gulls keened in the sky overhead.

Down the beach, a kid was throwing a softball for his dog. The big yellow Lab was having a blast, splashing through the shallows, snapping up the ball, and fetching it back to the boy.

Farther out, three teens were waist deep in the breakers, tossing a Frisbee around. A lifeguard in a tower chair was on duty—sort of. He seemed to be more interested in chatting up a gaggle of summer girls in micro-bikinis.

It was a gorgeous afternoon on the darkest day of my life.

And it was going to be my last.

I was sitting on a low sand hill behind my family's beachfront cottage, still dazed, dressed for court in a three-piece Armani pinstripe suit. It was scorched and torn, and spattered with blood.

I had a pistol in my lap.

I wasn't sure whose blood was on me. My fiancée's? Or mine? It didn't matter. The blood was on me.

Hours ago, my fiancée died in a car bombing. I'd managed to escape, yet I knew one thing for certain. Her death was my fault.

And I couldn't live with myself because of it.

Immediately after the accident, I came here. As a boy, the Port Vale shore was my favorite place on the planet. I spent my summers here, swimming, running with my buds, and combing the beach for soda cans to earn ten cents a pop.

In high school, I was a lifeguard. It was a magical job. I got twelve bucks an hour to tone my tan, and scope out the summer girls from my tower chair. At sunset, I enjoyed beers and bonfires on the beach. I was Lord of the Shore in those days.

They were the best times of my life.

And this was the perfect place to finish things up.

I looked down at the pistol again. It was a battered Japanese Nambu automatic my grandfather brought home from Vietnam. “Imagine the stories it could tell,” he used to say. Now it would have one more.

Except...

Guns leave a god-awful mess. My first week as an assistant DA, I was called to an Iraq vet’s suicide. The poor guy did his best to go out clean. He parked a kitchen chair on a tarp in the middle of his garage, then wrapped himself in a plastic sheet before putting the muzzle of a 12 gauge in his mouth...

But...

He’d overlooked the laws of physics. The blast sprayed the garage ceiling with his blood and brains. The cops, the coroner, the EMTs, and I, all had to do our jobs in a steady drip, drip, drip of red goo and gray matter.

I burned my suit afterwards.

Here on my hill, the sand would soak up most of the blood, but...a body’s an awful thing for a little kid to find.

So.

Forget the gun. The surf would do. I’d walk out in the breakers, slip under and breathe in deep.

Maybe they’d never find me at all.

Laying the pistol aside, I rose on shaky legs, swaying slightly. I couldn’t focus. I knew I was forgetting something big. Was it the laws of physics? No. But something just as important. My head was thumping like a bass drum. I couldn’t remember...

Drawing a ragged breath, I took a last look down the shore...

And in that moment, I swear I saw Death. Not the guy with the scythe, wearing the cowl. More like a dark distortion, hovering above the waves, in deep water.

Crouched, poised, ready to strike.

Waiting...

But not for me.

Chapter 2

The boy's softball had splashed down near one of the Frisbee players, who tossed it farther out. Naturally, his Lab chased after it, dog-paddling into deeper water, and into deep trouble.

As she lunged for the ball, a wave broke over her. And with the ball in her jaws, she couldn't close her mouth.

Gagging, in a panic, the Lab thrashed about wildly, attempting to keep her head above water, and then she slipped below the surface.

That's when something in me snapped.

On pure reflex, I went reeling down the beach, barely able to keep steady on my feet. I staggered into the surf after the drowning dog.

The kid was screaming now. The lifeguard looked up, baffled by the racket. He clearly had no freaking idea what was happening.

After splashing through the shallows, I plunged into the surf, swimming desperately toward the spot where the Lab went under. The icy water cleared my foggy mind as I bulled through the waves, fighting the breakers and the drag created from my sodden business suit.

When I popped my head above the water, I'd lost sight of the dog. She'd disappeared completely.

Damn it! If she'd sunk to the bottom, there was a chance I'd never find her— Suddenly, she exploded to the surface of the water. She was hacking and gagging, but she still had the damned ball clamped in her jaws.

Desperate to reach her before she went down again, I sprinted toward her. But the dog started frantically snapping her head back and forth, trying to spot the shore. She kept paddling farther out and as I raced after her, I felt my strength fading fast. With a last, despairing surge, I lunged for the Lab's collar.

Grabbing it, I yanked her head around, trying to swing her toward the beach, and the ball popped out.

But she was out of her mind with fear and rage. The moment I touched her,

she whirled on me, savagely snapping. She bit down on my arm, sending a sharp blaze of pain through my body.

Sweet Jesus, she was going to drown us both! Cursing, I pushed at her with my free hand, trying to break her hold, but she clamped down even harder.

And that's what saved her life.

With her jaws locked on my arm, she couldn't swallow any more water. But I couldn't swim, either.

Rolling over, I managed to support her as I side-stroked back to the shallows with my free arm, hauling her with me until my feet brushed the bottom.

Even then, she wouldn't let go, so I gathered her up. I staggered ashore with the exhausted dog cradled in my arms, her jaws still clamped on me.

Not a soul came to help me. They were all too busy filming the whole episode with their phones.

I dropped to my knees in the sand. The second the Lab's paws touched solid ground, she squirmed free of my arms, and went tearing off to the boy and a woman who were both crying and yelling.

Suddenly the lifeguard was in my face, hauling me to my feet by my lapels.

"Are you out of your freakin' mind?" he shouted. "What the hell were you doing out there?"

"Your damn job!" I roared back. Pushing him off me, I took a wild swing at his jaw that missed the muscle-bound clown by a foot and dropped me to my knees in the sand.

As I struggled to rise, I realized the Lab had ripped my arm open. Christ, blood was everywhere.

I felt my body sinking.

Then the sun winked out...

Chapter 3

I woke in a world of white. White ceiling tiles, sterile white walls, white machines beside my bed. One was for oxygen, I think. The others were... complicated. I had no idea what they were for.

My bracelet was silver, though, because my right wrist was handcuffed to the bed frame.

A heavyset woman in blue hospital scrubs was swabbing down my left arm with disinfectant. She was a big woman with legs like tree trunks and no waist at all. A black flat-top buzz cut, kept boot camp short, adorned her head. She had a tattoo on one bicep and an LGBT tattoo on the other. Three more icons decorated her skin, proclaiming: Man, Woman, Equal. It worked for me.

I tried to sit up, but it was a bad mistake. I sagged back into the pillow, stifling a groan.

“Stay still, sport,” she said without looking up. “Mess up my handiwork and I’ll bite open your other arm. What happened to you? A big dog tear you up?”

“Yes.”

“But that’s not all that happened.” It wasn’t a question.

“No ma’am,” I admitted. “Not all.”

“In addition to the dog bite, we treated you for a dozen contusions and lesions, plus third-degree burns. I’ve seen injuries like yours before in Helmand Province, Afghanistan. Car bomb?”

I managed a nod.

“But not in Helmand, right?”

“In Detroit. Where the hell am I?”

“You’re in the Port Vale Samaritan ER, sport. I’m Dr. Lucille Crane. My friends call me Lucy, but you’ll call me Dr. Crane. You’re Brian Lord, aren’t you? The lawyer who got blown up with your girlfriend a few days ago? It’s been all over the news.”

I nodded.

“I thought so. The police are waiting outside, dying to talk to you. You might want to put that conversation on hold.”

“Why?”

She leaned in close, making sure I could read her eyes. “Listen up, Mr. Lord. You are in shock. I suspect you have been since the explosion. You may have sustained a concussion as well. But a minute ago, just before you came to? You were talking to somebody named Serena, like she was actually here. Was that your girlfriend?”

“Serena Rossi was my fiancée, Doc. She’s dead. It’s my fault and that’s the simple truth. So bring on the cops. I really don’t care.”

“It’s your funeral,” she shrugged.

But she was wrong about that. It wasn’t my funeral.

It was Serena’s.

Chapter 4

Three cops came into the room. The first was a slim redhead in a black Donna Karan jacket and matching skirt. It was stylish, but practical. Her skin was pale as alabaster and if she was wearing makeup, I couldn't see it.

She introduced herself as Lieutenant Beverly Hilliard of Detroit Metro homicide. It made sense, since the car bombing happened in Detroit. Though Port Vale is a beachfront community twenty miles up the Lake Huron shore, Motown detectives work with locals all the time.

Her partner, Stan Buchek, was from the Metro bomb squad. He wore a brush cut, a tweed Sears sport coat, and looked as square and dense as a cement block.

A policewoman trailed them in, but stayed by the door. She was tall and lanky, and a bit older. She was dressed like a nun in a blue shirt and navy skirt. Maybe she worked hospital security. Buchek and Hilliard ignored her.

Buchek started the good cop, bad cop show. He played the bully, which suited him. Hilliard played the sympathetic sister. I knew the game better than they did. I've run it a million times myself.

Buchek threatened me with arrest that included a million years in prison. I didn't say anything till he began reading me the Miranda warning. Literally. He had it on a card. "You have the right to remain silent—"

Blah, blah.

"Save it," I managed. "I'm an officer of the court. I know my rights, and I'm waiving them. I'll help you any way I can. Got questions? Fire away."

"Waiving?" Buchek echoed, looking to Hilliard. "Can he do that?"

"He just did," Hilliard nodded, edging him aside. "Can you tell us what happened the day of the bombing, Mr. Lord?"

"I'm—shaky on that," I said, trying to focus. "I was carrying a suitcase out to the car..." I could feel my eyes closing.

"Snap out of it, pal!" Buchek said, prodding my shoulder sharply.

"Whoa up, Sarge," the tall policewoman by the door said. "That's enough of

that.”

“What? Who the hell are you, lady?”

“That’s *Chief* lady to you, Sergeant. Chief Jean Paquette, Vale County PD. You two are operating in my jurisdiction, or were, anyway. Now I’m thinking we need a word. Outside. Please.”

Buchek glanced at Hilliard in exasperation.

“What the hell is this?”

Chapter 5

Buchek, Hilliard, Paquette

In the corridor, the chief turned to face them. She was taller than most men at six foot plus and as slender as a riding crop. She wore her silver hair in a loose mane and had gray eyes. Buchek had to look up to meet those eyes, and then he looked away. Staring into her line of sight was like staring into a laser.

“Look, lady, or Chief or whatever you are,” he blustered. “You got a quaint little town here, but this beef is out of your league. It’s a murder case, and that mutt in there’s a suspect—”

“He looks more like a victim to me,” Chief Paquette said. “Either way, you don’t lay hands on a fella in a hospital bed.”

“I was getting his attention—”

“You got mine, instead. Did you two ride up together?”

“What? No,” Buchek said, surprised at the question. “We’re from different divisions. We drove separately. Why?”

“Good,” the chief said. “I won’t have to spare a patrolman to drive you home. You’re eighty-sixed, Sergeant. I want you out of my town. Sharing jurisdiction is a privilege, and I’m revoking yours. Go back to Detroit. Lieutenant Hilliard can keep you up to speed on any developments.”

Buchek opened his mouth to argue, then bit it off. There was no point. He couldn’t muscle her. It would be like scrapping with your grandmother; there was no way to win. He closed his mouth and stalked off to the elevators, shaking his head the whole way.

“What about me?” Hilliard asked.

“You’re not axed. But let’s clear the air. Detroit averages a killing a day. In Port Vale, we get two or three a year, mostly domestic disputes that get out of hand. My perps are usually waiting for me on their front steps, bawling their

eyes out when I roll up. So Buchek had one thing right. A car bomb is definitely over my head. I've never worked one. So catch me up. Where are we on this?"

"Since the Towers and with ISIS, every bombing triggers Federal attention," Hilliard said. "TSA, ATF, the whole alphabet shows up whenever they happen. The teams checked the car, did the forensics, and then went back to Quantico or DC or wherever they came from. This one wasn't a terrorist attack."

"How do they know that?"

"The mope who crafted the bomb is already doing triple life in Jackson Prison, but a few of his builds are still on the market. Strictly local street gang stuff."

"So this is a gang thing?"

"We don't know what it was," Hilliard shrugged. "Brian Lord's fiancée was killed. It looks like he was flattened, roughed up pretty good. He's a defense attorney with a lot of low-rent clients. There's a good chance he pissed one of them off."

"So they might try again? Terrific. That's all we need to kick off tourist season. Fireworks. When a bomb goes off in Motown, it barely makes the papers, but not here. Port Vale's a resort town. Peace and quiet's what we sell. Lord's a local boy. His family is here. Whatever he got himself into in your city, I don't want it showing up on my streets like a stray cat. Are we clear?"

"Crystal," Hilliard nodded.

"Good. Then let's try to get something useful out of him."

"What do you have in mind?"

"Definitely not muscle. I don't mind bouncing a perp off the walls if he's got it coming, but Lord's an Afghan vet *and* an attorney. Tick him off, and all we'll get is his name, rank, and serial number."

"So?" Hilliard asked cautiously.

"Let's try making nice instead," Paquette said sweetly. "We'll feed that boy a whole lotta rope. See if he hangs himself with it."

Chapter 6

“Brian?” the older woman said, pulling a plastic chair up beside my bed. “How are you, son? Do you remember me?”

“I should,” I said. “You look fam—you’re Chief Paquette’s wife, right?”

“I was,” she nodded. “Arlo blew out his pump a few years ago chasing down a crack dealer. As head of the 911 division, I was next in line. I believe you were in Afghanistan at the time with my Bobby Ray. Thank you for your service, son.”

“You’re welcome.”

I felt my eyes closing...

“Stay with us, Mr. Lord,” Hilliard said. “Can you tell us what happened the day of the bombing?”

What happened? I tried to think. My head was throbbing and— “Serena was going to the beach,” I said quickly, before I faded out. “She wanted to stay at my family’s cottage over the weekend.”

“Alone?” the chief asked.

“We’d been squabbling, so we thought taking a break might help, but—” I shook my head and pain flashed across my eyes.

“Mr. Lord,” Doctor Crane sighed, “you really should wait awhile before you —”

“No,” I managed, “I can do this. I need to. Serena had packed enough crap for a European tour and I was late for court. I was griping about her luggage as I hauled her suitcase to the car, and—”

I stopped and stared up at the Chief and the Lieutenant.

“That’s all I’ve got. Everything’s a blur after that.”

“That suitcase saved your life,” Hilliard said. “It absorbed most of the blast. The explosion shattered every window on the block. You were thrown backward twenty feet, and landed behind a garden wall. It shielded you from the secondary blast.”

“Secondary?”

“When the gas tank blew up,” she added. “The car was on fire.”

“Fire? My god, was Serena—?”

“The coroner’s report was inconclusive,” Hilliard said quickly. “Her family took her body home to LA. The ceremony is tomorrow. Closed casket. You, um, you are specifically not invited, Mr. Lord.”

I didn’t say anything to that. There was nothing to say.

“That’s enough,” the doc said. “This man has multiple contusions, third-degree burns, and may be concussed. He needs rest. Don’t you people have hearts?”

Hearts.

“Hearts,” I echoed, wonderingly. *That was it!* For a swirling moment I could actually see one. A big red heart, on a card. And then...it vanished like mist.

“What is it, Mr. Lord?” Hilliard asked.

“I had it. Just for a second. Couldn’t hold on to it.”

“Steady down, son,” the chief said. “It’ll come back.”

“You really should stop this now,” the doc said.

“No,” I said. “I want to help. I need to.”

“Go on, Mr. Lord,” Hilliard prompted. “Anything at all.”

“Um, after the blast? I woke up in a hospital in Detroit. Henry Ford, I think. It was the middle of the night and nobody was around. A bedside TV was on, and I realized from a newscast that days had passed and Serena”—I swallowed—“had been killed. But it seemed impossible—I mean, she had been leaving for the goddamn beach!”

I broke off, about to lose it completely. Dr. Crane started to interrupt, but the chief waved her off. After a moment, I pulled it together and went on.

“I guess I wasn’t thinking straight—”

“Which is symptomatic of a concussion, sir,” Dr. Crane said.

“All I could think was, it was all a mistake. That if I could get to my folks’ cottage at the beach, Serena would be there...” I trailed off again, realizing how loony that sounded.

“How *did* you get here?” Hilliard asked.

“Uber. Hired a ride.”

“With your suit all splattered with blood?”

“It was a Detroit hospital,” I said.

That explained the situation. Even the chief smiled.

“Do you have any idea who planted that bomb, Mr. Lord?” Hilliard asked.

“An enemy? A disgruntled client, or—” She stopped speaking because I was staring at her.

“A client,” I said. “That’s it.”

“What is it?” Hilliard asked.

“Just before,” I said. “The image of a heart came to mind. A valentine. This is about Valentine.”

“What kind of a valentine?” the Chief asked.

“Not a what,” Hilliard said. “Valentine’s a who.”

Chapter 7

“Jimmy Valentine is a loser of a client,” I explained. “When I left the prosecutor’s office to work for Garner and Mackey, Jimmy was on the list of castoffs that came with the job.”

“Garner’s offices are on Cadillac Square,” Hilliard said, nodding. “Big step up for an ADA.”

“I didn’t make it on my own. Serena was a paralegal with Garner for years. When we started dating, she got me in. But new hires are bottom of the food chain so I inherited the shit list, the clients nobody else wanted. Jimmy Valentine topped that list.”

“Who is he?”

“Nobody. Jimmy’s a small-time loan shark out of Warsaw Heights. Got busted in a gambling raid in Dearborn. His case is an open and shut loser. Unfortunately for him, it’s also his third fall.”

“So he’s facing a stiff sentence as a repeat offender,” the chief said. “That’s his fault, not yours. Why would this Valentine have a beef with you?”

“He doesn’t. But he thought I could get him a deal with the DA’s office. Offered to swap some evidence against Bruno Corzine.”

That got their attention.

Hilliard’s eyes widened. “Jesus,” she said. “Corzine’s an underboss with the Zeman crime family. How is Valentine connected to him?”

I almost said “a murder,” but caught myself in time. I shook my head. “Sorry. Valentine’s information falls under attorney–client privilege. Corzine’s not a client, so I can give you what I know about him, but that’s as far as I can go.”

“What about your late fiancée?” Chief Paquette asked. “Does she get a vote in this?”

“Serena’s death is on me,” I conceded, “but I can’t compromise Valentine’s rights without spitting on everything I believe in.”

“Lawyers are bound by legal restrictions,” Hilliard said. “We get that,

Counselor. So what *can* you tell us?"

"My old boss, Assistant DA Leon Stolz, caught Jimmy's case. I called Leon, offered to trade what Jimmy knew for a plea bargain. He said he'd get back to me. But word must have leaked out. Next day, Corzine and two thugs were waiting by my car. He warned me to blow off Valentine's deal, or I'd be sorry. And he was right. I am sorry I ever heard of Jimmy Valentine."

"Where did this confrontation with Corzine happen?" Hilliard asked.

"My firm's parking garage, off Cadillac Square."

"Were there any witnesses?"

"Only the thugs with Corzine."

"Did they lay hands on you? Rough you up at all?"

"Bruno's goons held him back. Thank God, or he would have torn my arms off. Why are you wasting time with this crap? You want to know who planted that bomb? I'm telling you who planted it."

"No, son," the chief said mildly. "You're telling us about a dust-up between you and a couple thugs in a parking garage. With no witnesses to back your story, and no hard evidence it happened at all."

"Your evidence is being buried in LA tomorrow, lady. She's my deceased fiancée."

"You were an ADA, Brian," Hilliard put in. "How many cases did you prosecute?"

"I'm...not sure. I was second chair to Stolz for...maybe a hundred. I flew solo on forty or fifty more after that."

"Then you know the rules of evidence. If we hauled this Corzine into a courtroom right now, what kind of a case could you make against him?"

I started to argue, then slowly closed my mouth because she was right. I had nothing.

Damn! I wanted to punch the wall or something, but I couldn't. I was still handcuffed to the bed frame.

"Corzine aside," Chief Paquette said. "Could one of your other clients have done this?"

"I—guess that's possible. Haven't thought about it."

"If we could take a quick look through your files...?" Hilliard began.

"Attorney-client privilege, Lieutenant. You know I can't turn them over."

"Can't? Or won't?"

"Even losers have rights," I said. "Sometimes, it's all they've got. Am I under arrest?"

“No,” Hilliard said, “not at this time.”

“But I’m under suspicion, right?”

The fact that she didn’t answer was answer enough.

“If I’m not busted, then could you please uncuff me and leave?” I said, closing my eyes. “I’ve got a killer headache.”

Chapter 8

Hilliard, Paquette

Outside in the corridor, the two policewomen faced each other.

“No confession, no big breakthrough,” Bev Hilliard said. “But you got a lot more out of him than Buchek would have.”

“Not nearly enough, though,” the chief said grimly. “The coffee they serve here’s terrible, but at least it’s hot. Let me buy you a cup.”

They rode the elevator down to the cafeteria in silence, both mulling over what Brian Lord had told them. In the bright, noisy cafeteria, they filled paper cups at a tall urn, then took a table in a corner, away from the other diners.

“Have you worked with Buchek long?” Chief Paquette asked, eyeing Hilliard over the rim of her coffee cup.

“Not at all,” Hilliard countered. “We’re on different units, so I just met him today. Frankly, I didn’t like him much.”

“Me neither. He’s pushy.”

“Bet you didn’t like when he was razzing on Port Vale.”

“No, he was right about it being a small town. We’re forty thousand in summer, half that when the snow flies. But we’re only twenty-five miles up the road from the most violent city in America.”

“You’re not from Port Vale, though,” Hilliard said. “Not with that accent.”

“South Alabama. I met Arlo at a police convention in Mobile. After three dates, I married him and moved up here. But I was Alabama Highway Patrol twelve years before that. I run a small-town force, but I ain’t no hobby cop.”

“So I’m gathering,” Bev nodded.

“So this Corzine Lord talked about,” the chief said, “do you know him?”

“Know *of* him,” Hilliard said. “He’s a thug on the rise in the Zeman crime family.”

“The Zemans I’ve heard of,” Paquette said. “Last of the old Purple Gang.

They used to run hooch across the lake ice from Canada during Prohibition. Locals say some of those trucks are still at the bottom of the lake with their skeletons sittin' at the wheel."

"I'll bet their hooch is better than this coffee," Hilliard said, and both women laughed, relaxing a little.

"Thing is, these days the mob's mostly into white-collar crime," Hilliard said. "Union skims, credit card fraud, identity theft. Scams that work best when they don't draw attention."

"And bombs draw a whole lot of attention," the chief nodded. "Is this Corzine that stupid, do you think?"

"He has a rep as a dangerous man to cross, but he's no fool. He's never done time."

"Maybe we can fix that," the chief said. "But we'd best get a move on. That boy upstairs? He did two tours overseas. I got two officers who did time in the Sandbox. It ain't like our daddy's wars, where you served your hitch and then came home. Nowadays, they go back tour after tour, in combat almost the whole time. A lot of these heroes come back and have a hard time adjusting, and if Brian believes Corzine did this thing, there's a chance he won't wait long for us to settle up. He might decide to settle it himself, up close and personal. And if he does, his life will be over no matter how it comes out."

"Then we'd better beat him to it, Chief," Hilliard said. "If we're going to work this together, I'll need a desk and a connection to the enforcement nets."

"Come downtown, use my office," the chief said. "We got computers, Wi-Fi, the works. I only play Angry Birds on 'em myself, but my people can hook you up."

"You've never played Angry Birds in your life."

"Never once," Chief Paquette admitted. "But I designed our 911 Emergency System."

"My god," Hilliard said, "all that cornpone's just a front, isn't it?"

"No ma'am, I'm redneck to the bone and proud of it. But up here, if you sound like you're from Alabama, folks automatically subtract twenty points off your IQ. It used to piss me off somethin' fierce. Now? I find it real useful sometimes."

"You take 'em by surprise," Hilliard said.

"See? You're a smart city girl. Two minutes and you've already got me figured out."

"Not even close," Hilliard smiled. "But we're making a start."

Chapter 9

After the two policewomen left, I slept like a dead man. Which was appropriate, because when I woke...

Bruno Corzine was standing beside my bed, glaring down at me.

Gasp! I bolted upright.

"Hey, hey!" a woman's voice said. "Take it easy!"

I slowly released her, blinking as Corzine's shape shifted into that of a tall, slim, African American nurse in hospital scrubs. She was only checking my pulse.

She couldn't have looked less like Bruno Corzine if her hair had been dyed purple.

Still, his image lingered in the room after she left. And I wondered how long it would take for the real Bruno to track me down and finish the job.

I needed to get the hell out of here. The sooner the better.

But nothing's ever simple.

At six in the morning, Dr. Crane popped in to check her handiwork, then had an orderly help me into a wheelchair and roll me off to an elevator to the basement lab.

A cheerful neurosurgeon gave me a thorough examination. I read charts with slanted lines, and followed the path of her fingertip back, forth, up, down, and sideways.

Did I know what year it was? *Yes.*

And the president's name? *Knew that, too.*

How about the day of the week? *A little foggy on that one.*

In the end, even though she said I was the healthiest bombing victim she'd ever treated, she opted for an MRI anyway, just to be on the safe side.

Afterward, I got some good news and bad news. The good news: though I'd suffered a number of physical traumas in the explosion, I was *not* concussed. If the radiologist's report confirmed her diagnosis, they could cut me loose later in

the day.

The bad news? When they rolled me back to my room, Marvin Garner, the senior partner at Garner and Mackey of Cadillac Square, was waiting for me, and I could read my future at the company in his plastic, executioner's smile.

Chapter 10

“Brian, my boy,” Garner said. “How are they treating you?”

“Fine,” I said. “I’ll be out of here in a few hours.”

“No rush, of course,” he said, glancing around uncomfortably. “You’ll need time to rest and recover.”

“Not in here,” I said. “I hate hospitals.”

“I suppose not.” He flashed me that plastic smile again. I’d only met him one other time, on the day I signed on at Garner and Mackey. After that, I’d seen him around the office occasionally, at a distance. With his shock of silver hair and a three-thousand-dollar suit, I thought he looked vaguely presidential. But today? Up close? He looked sleek and slick, and I was empty and aching, and in no mood for phony sympathy.

“Look, Mr. Garner, let’s just get to it. Why are you here?”

“To—settle up,” he said evenly, all pretense of amiability gone. “No one blames you for Serena’s death, of course—”

“Good to know.”

“But,” he continued, annoyed at being interrupted, “she was with us for many years. She’s been with you a matter of months, and, well, here we are. The inference is obvious.”

“Not to me.”

“Then you’re not as bright as she promised you were, when she conned me into hiring you away from the District Attorney’s Office. Clearly that was a mistake. A fatal one for her. Some gangster or mental case you convicted lashed out at you, and Serena paid the price.”

“You’re half right. But the client wasn’t from my past. He was one of the hand-me-downs I got at your firm. Does Valentine ring a bell?”

“Look, today’s a holiday, so I’ll cut to the chase, Brian. The partners have met and voted. Given the appalling incident and publicity? They’ve opted to sever our relationship. Nothing personal. It’s purely a business decision, I assure

you.”

He handed me an envelope. I opened it and found a single sheet of legal paper. A Separation Document. I’ve served them myself.

Effective immediately, Brian Lord is terminated from Garner and Mackey for associations and behavior deemed detrimental to the firm.

“You’ll receive a severance package with ninety days’ salary. Your medical insurance coverage will continue for the same period. We don’t wish to seem vindictive.”

“That’s good,” I said, “because I have one last favor to ask. In the time I’ve been with the firm, I’ve had a half dozen clients assigned to me.”

“Ten, actually. I checked.”

“I’d like to retain them.”

“I...don’t see any problem with that,” Garner shrugged. “They’re not cases any of the partners would want anyway. Anything else?”

There wasn’t. We said polite good-byes and he left, taking my visions of a brilliant legal career at Cadillac Square with him. We didn’t bother to shake hands.

It didn’t matter. We both got what we wanted. Garner got rid of a public-relations disaster for the price of a severance package.

But I got something too. Clients. A loser’s list, maybe, but I wanted them. After my midnight vision of Corzine, I’d lain awake for hours, mulling it over.

Corzine was the obvious suspect. But I’ve learned a few things about the obvious answer.

Like never to trust it.

For most of my time as an assistant DA, I’d worked as second chair for Leon Stolz, a guy who never won a popularity contest in his life. In court, he was the one making charges, working for convictions, grilling the perps in the holding tanks. If someone we’d convicted back then had a beef, they’d be mad at Leon, not me.

The cases I’d prosecuted as a solo were strictly minor league stuff. DUIs, deadbeat dads, petty theft. Other than a few barroom scuffles, I couldn’t think of a single case that involved overt violence. So the bomber probably *wasn’t* some loser out of my past.

He was more likely to be a current client or someone connected to them. Corzine qualified, but he might not be the only candidate. Someone tried to kill

me, and murdered Serena instead.

I damn sure intended to find out who, and would settle up with them.

Legally or otherwise.

Chapter 11

Dr. Crane was giving me a final exam when Lieutenant Hilliard and Chief Paquette visited.

“For a guy who’s been blown up, I’ve seen worse,” Hilliard said.

“Worse is getting buried today, like my fiancée is?” I countered, then sighed. “What can I do for you, Lieutenant?”

“Actually, it’s what I can do for you,” Hilliard said. “I did some serious digging into the name you gave us. Bruno Corzine?”

“And?”

“Because of who he is, it’s not uncommon for a law enforcement agency to have eyes on him. Ever hear of the Riviera Social Club?”

“It’s a Detroit mob hangout,” I said, nodding.

“At the time of the bombing, a dozen witnesses, including two of ours, can place Bruno Corzine at the Riviera Social Club, playing cards with his cronies. He couldn’t have been directly involved.”

“The key word being ‘directly,’” the chief added. “I’ve noticed a funny thing about alibis over the years. Innocent people almost never have ’em. They’re walking the dog or home watching TV. Can’t remember which program because they don’t expect to be asked. A thug like Corzine? It’d be more surprising if he *didn’t* have a rock-solid alibi.”

“I don’t care if he was playing pinochle with the pope. It doesn’t get him off the hook. I appreciate your efforts, though. Thank you.”

“It wasn’t an effort, Mr. Lord,” Hilliard said. “Corzine is a suspect in an ongoing investigation now. I don’t know what you might be thinking, but you need to just let us do our jobs. I know you’re angry and scared, but if you go anywhere near him, you’ll wind up in traction or a cell. I want your word that you’ll leave this alone.”

I just looked at them. Both Hilliard and the chief seemed straight to me. It was a rare thing in the criminal justice system. I didn’t want to lie to them.

So I didn't.

I didn't say anything at all.

They exchanged a glance, then left me to the tender mercies of Dr. Crane.

On her way out, Chief Paquette paused in the doorway. "You need to be careful now, Brian," she said. "If you get sideways of this thing, I'll truly hate locking you up. But I will do it. You understand?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

Chapter 12

That afternoon, I was pacing the hospital sunroom, when I got my first pleasant surprise in a while.

“I’ll be damned,” Carly Delaney said from the doorway, “Brian, the Lord of the Shore. Do your friends still call you that?”

“I don’t have many friends left these days.”

“You’ve got one, at least,” Carly said, sweeping me into her arms in a fierce hug.

“Easy,” I groaned, “I’m a tad fragile.”

“Sorry,” she said, releasing me. “It’s been a long time.”

And it had been. We both took a step back, looking each other up and down.

“The line you’re looking for is ‘gee, Carly, you haven’t changed a bit,’” she said.

“It wouldn’t be true. You’ve definitely changed a lot, all for the better.”

It was true. Her smile lines were a bit deeper, and she still wore her cinnamon hair short enough to comb with her fingertips, but she wasn’t my tomboy beach buddy from my days as a lifeguard. Not anymore.

Carly’d grown up, and the difference was striking. As a girl she’d been cute as a bug. As a grown woman, she was drop-dead gorgeous.

But as impish as ever.

“You’ve changed some,” she said frankly, her smile fading a bit. “Skipping past the bandages, you look—”

“Like I’ve been run through a wood chipper?”

“Sort of,” she nodded, “but the big difference is your eyes. You seem wiped, my friend.”

“I’ve had better weeks.”

“I’ve been following your adventures online. I’m sorry about—hell, Brian. Everything.”

“Thanks. How are you doing?”

“A lot better than I could be, thanks to you.”

“To me? How so?”

“That yellow Labrador you rescued? She belonged to my nephew, Tim, my sister Rhonda’s boy. Do you remember her?”

“I remember a cute little butterball we called Help Me Rhonda. She can’t be old enough to date yet, let alone have a kid?”

“She has two, a boy and a girl. And she’s twenty-six.”

“Jesus, we’re dinosaurs.”

“Speak for yourself, I’m in my prime. I’m Vale County Parks Director now, and on behalf of parks management and staff, I’d like to thank you for your amazing rescue last week. Jerry Koval, the lifeguard on duty, had promised me he’d keep a close eye on Timmy and his dog, but he’s easily distracted. Beach girls, I imagine.”

“He’s a lousy lifeguard, Carly.”

“He’s an ex-lifeguard now,” she sighed. “I had to fire him. Normally, I hate that part of my job, but the dunce tried to lie to me about what happened when the video is all over the web. So, he’s a terrible lifeguard *and* a liar. They don’t make them like they used to. And unfortunately, I have to get back to the office to find a replacement. I definitely owe you a ‘thank you’ lunch, though. It’ll give us a chance to catch up.”

“I’d love that but...look, if you’re serious about owing me? What are my chances of getting my old job back?”

“You mean as a lifeguard? But aren’t you a lawyer now?”

“What I am is in between jobs, Carly. And to tell you the truth, hauling that dog out of the surf was the first *worthwhile* thing I’ve done since I got out of the army. I really need to feel useful again and you need a replacement lifeguard. So? Win-win, right?”

“Win-lose, you mean,” she snorted. “Look, I’ll concede that because your video went viral, you’re probably the most famous lifeguard on the planet, but... No offense, Brian, you said it yourself. You look like you’ve been through a wood chipper.”

“I’ve got a few dings, but they’re mostly cosmetic. I’m in better shape than I look.”

“You’d have to be. For openers, you’d have to be recertified and it’s been years since you tested. Do you remember what the qualification tests are like?”

“More or less.”

“They haven’t gotten any easier.”

“I need to work, Carly. I’ll retest, get recertified, whatever you say.”

“Jesus, you’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Serious as a heart attack. I need this, Carly. And you said you owe me.”

“Not this way, I don’t.”

“At least let me try. You owe me that much.”

“Fine, I’ll give you a shot. Be at the park at dawn tomorrow. And don’t be late.”

“At dawn? Is this something like a duel?”

“No. It’s *exactly* like a duel,” she said.

Chapter 13

A few minutes after Carly left, I was paged down to the front desk. My uncle Josh and my older brother, Tall Paul, were there waiting for me. And they were clearly worried about me.

We embraced fiercely, a miniature Lord family reunion. Uncle Josh is sixty, a construction boss. His brush cut is steel-gray and he's a bit grizzled, but he's lean as an axe handle and just as hard. He doesn't smile a lot. Today, he wasn't smiling at all.

Tall Paul is two years my senior and is six foot seven inches to my six foot flat. He's my big brother in every way. We were hometown basketball heroes for the Port Vale Vikes, which is appropriate since Tall Paul, with his blond beard, actually looks like a Viking and played like one, too. He took no prisoners. We were State Class B champions my sophomore year.

Those were the glory days. After school, I followed Paul into the army. There was no glory there. Paul lost a leg below the knee in Iraq. He still looks like a Viking raider, but these days he runs a shoreline bar and grill called the Beachfront Bistro.

I was a lot luckier. I took two tours in Afghanistan with the military police and made it through without a scratch.

I guess my injuries occurred during life as a civilian.

Outside, Uncle Josh's '70 Chevy step-side pickup was parked in a tow-away zone. We piled in, and I took the middle seat, as usual. Josh was at the wheel with Paul riding shotgun. Neither of them said a word to me until we were rolling through traffic.

"I found that on top of the dune behind the cottage," Paul said as he fished the old Nambu semi-automatic out of his jacket and dropped it in my lap. "Was that where you left it?"

I nodded. "I was having a really bad day. I was still pretty rocky from the car bomb."

“Must have been,” Paul agreed. “You’ve always been wild, Brian, but not that kind of wild. Were you seriously considering—”

“I *thought* about it, Paul. But that’s all I did.”

“Any man who ain’t *considered* eatin’ a weapon at least once has led a pretty quiet life,” Uncle Josh said dryly. “Are you past all that now? Or do we have to keep an eye on you?”

“I’m okay now, Unc. Not a hundred percent, maybe, but better than I was. I blamed myself for what happened to Serena. We were fighting that day. That’s why she was in the car and I wasn’t. That’s on me, and always will be.”

“Any idea who might have done it?” Paul asked.

“A Motown hood named Corzine is top of my list. He threatened me just before it happened. But he has a pretty fair alibi. The police were watching him at the time.”

“So he didn’t do it himself,” Uncle Josh said.

“Or he didn’t do it at all,” Paul added. “Who else?”

“The detectives think one of my clients might have done it, and it’s possible they’re right. They want to check through my files, but I can’t allow that.”

“Why not?” Paul asked. “I mean, what if one of them’s guilty?”

“And what if he’s not? If the law’s looking for a bomber, but finds something else, it’s not like they’ll just forget it. My clients trust me to protect their rights and their privacy. I can’t just hand them over. But...?”

They both glanced at me.

“Nothing’s stopping *me* from looking through my own case files. With a little help from my discreet family and friends.”

“And if one of your clients looks good for it?” Paul asked.

“Then we turn them over to the law.”

“And if that doesn’t work out?” Uncle Josh asked. His tone was neutral, but he’s not the subtle type.

“Then I guess we’ll try something else.”

Chapter 14

The Lord family cottage is a two-story relic on Vale Beach, a few hundred yards up the shore from the park. My great grandfather built it by hand out of rough planks and natural stone.

And that's why the new cardboard boxes stacked on the porch steps looked totally out of place.

"Wait here," Paul said, "I know a bit about bombs." Climbing out, he edged warily up to the boxes. The box on top was open. Paul leaned over and peered in.

"What is it?" Uncle Josh demanded.

"Office stuff," Paul said. "Brian's, I'm guessing."

He was right. The top box held my law license and various papers from my office. Fountain pens, legal pads, and my Rolodex. The others were filled with my client files.

There wasn't even a note, but the message was clear enough. "*Good riddance, from your former employers, Garner and Mackey, Cadillac Square.*" That note sealed my fate. It had finally sunk in that I was actually fired.

But at least I was home again. We carried the boxes into the cottage. It was a comfy old barn of a place, with a country kitchen and great room downstairs, and bedrooms above. Every room has a grand view of the big lake.

Home sweet home. My favorite safe haven.

Upstairs, I changed into jeans and a faded Mötley Crüe T-shirt while Paul busied himself in the kitchen, making sandwiches. Uncle Josh made calls to his construction crews.

Then we gathered at the kitchen table with the stack of files in the center.

"How do we do this?" Uncle Josh asked.

"We divide them up, read through them one at a time," I said, dealing out the files as if they were an oversized poker hand.

"I'm a chef, not a lawyer," Paul said, shoving a steaming tuna melt into my

mouth. It was utterly delicious, especially after a few days of hospital chow. “What should I be looking for?”

“A bomb,” I said flatly. “Any connection to explosives. Military experience, mining, blasting. Or anybody who seems batshit crazy enough to use one. I’m sure we’ll know it when we see it.”

“I’m not sure I’ll know mad bombers when I see them,” Paul said.

“Think back to Iraq,” Uncle Josh said. “You knew a few then.”

We settled into the job at hand, scarfing lunch while we winnowed my client list of losers down to a manageable number.

My personal favorite was still Jimmy Valentine. Because he threatened to rat out Corzine, he made the gangster or one of his goons prime candidates. No lawyer, no deal. I set him aside, saving him for last.

Paul’s first two were easy to pass over. A vagrant hoping to sue a hit-and-run driver and a lush suing Walmart to get his greeter’s job back. Neither case involved violence, or any reason to lash out at me. Most of the cases were similar, bottom of the barrel beefs. Nuisance lawsuits, plain and simple. In twenty minutes of sorting, we culled my client list down to a final three.

Paul came across a file for “Crazy Jack” Bruske, a young outlaw biker who was facing prison time for marijuana possession. His crew, the Iron Disciples, are mad dogs on motorcycles, and notoriously violent, so they might have access to some dangerous material, and have the ability to construct a bomb. And though Jack’s crime seemed pretty low-level to me, and though I couldn’t think of a rational reason they’d want to blow me up, I couldn’t stop focusing on the biker’s name. A rational guy nicknamed “Crazy”? It’s a contradiction in terms.

Uncle Josh came up with Sherry Molinere, a young woman trying to divorce her domineering husband, Dex, who happens to be a corporal in the state police. Dex had been gaming the system to stalk her. He’d filed a blizzard of bogus charges on her, so I fired back with a restraining order and complaints to his department. He had plenty of cause to want me gone. As a tenure cop, Dex may not know about the munitions himself, but he would have sources who would.

Two new names. I read their case files again, thoroughly.

“Well?” Uncle Josh asked.

“It could be any of them—including Corzine,” I said. “Drugs, money, and jealousy are all in play here. But killing me? It seems a little over the top.”

“Let’s say it’s not about you personally,” Josh said. “What if it’s strictly business? What would taking you out of the picture accomplish?”

“Other than making the world a better place,” Paul joked.

I thought about that one. “Corporal Molinere is trying to control his wife. He’s already bullied a public defender into dropping her case. Without me, she’s alone and he wins. The others? At most, it could delay their cases, kick them back to square one.”

“Would that help any of them?”

“It might. Evidence can be time sensitive. Memories fade, witnesses move on. It might be some small detail, and not all the evidence is in these files.”

“Then where’s the rest of it?” Paul asked.

“In the prosecutor’s office. My clients tell me their side of the story, and then the DA hears the rest from witnesses and the police. They’re supposed to share evidence, but things get held back. Accidentally or on purpose.”

“Like hole cards,” Josh nodded. “How do we get a look at ’em?”

“I can set up a meeting with my old boss to work out plea deals. He’ll try to trump my offer by dumping any dirt he’s been holding back. Maybe something will link up.”

“It better,” Josh said. “Because the guy who missed might try again. Does anybody know you’re here?”

“No.”

“Good,” Paul said. “I’ll sleep downstairs on the couch tonight.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“Yeah,” he said. “I definitely do.”

Chapter 15

The next morning, I arrived at the park at first light, while the sun was breaking over the horizon and the surf was driven onshore by the wind.

Carly Delaney was waiting for me at the tower chair, looking fine, fit, and deadly serious.

“You’re on time,” she said, checking off the first box on her waterproof clipboard. “That’s a good start. And before you even ask? I’m going to do you a big favor—”

“I don’t want any special treatment—”

“Great! Because that’s my big favor,” she finished brightly. “I’m gonna bust your ass, my friend. Not because I want you to fail. But as a pal? It’s better if you wash out here than have some citizen drown on your watch.”

“Got it,” I nodded grimly. “Do your worst.”

She peeled off her baggy T-shirt and stepped out of her surfing shorts to reveal a taut, toned frame in a skintight swimsuit.

Slipping the clipboard over her shoulder on a carry strap, Carly sprinted off through the shallows into the surf, then plunged in, swimming hard for the third raft, permanently moored seventy yards offshore, in water fifteen to twenty feet deep.

Watching her slide through the water like a shark gave me serious pause. Ten years had sped by since my last lifeguard certification test, and getting back in the swim wasn’t *anything* like riding a bicycle.

The test is an ordeal designed to thin the herd. Let the games begin.

The first test is toughest of all. I had to tread water in place for half an hour with both thumbs in the air. Carly made it even tougher by needling me and joking around. It’s not easy to laugh and swim at the same time, but I managed. Barely.

Next I swam four quarter-mile stints in the surf at top speed, doing breaststroke, sidestroke, backstroke, and front crawl. Then I swam them again,

towing Carly on a plastic rescue board as she pretended to be my victim. Said victim was razzing me the whole time.

At eighteen, the test had been a challenge. At twenty-eight, it was taking every ounce of concentration I had just to keep from drowning. Carly knew it, too. But instead of lightening up, she did her best to make every segment as grueling as possible. She fell off the rescue board at mistimed moments, and struggled desperately as I tried to keep her afloat.

“Had enough?” she panted, halfway through.

“Hell, no,” I said, gasping for breath. “Is that all you’ve got?”

“It’s your funeral.”

“People keep telling me that. Bring it!”

And she did. She worked me through every possible contingency, until finally we reached the last line on her clipboard. She crossed it out even though we hadn’t done a thing.

“What was that?” I gasped, only a few breaths away from sinking like a rock. “No special treatment, remember?”

“That box is for attitude, my friend, and you’ve got plenty of that. C’mon, take my hand.”

Reaching out, she hauled me up onto the raft, then swiveled around so I could rest my shoulders against hers, back to back. I was freezing, and Carly’s skin radiated warmth like a space heater.

I was so exhausted I could scarcely breathe, but at the same time, I felt elated. The damned test had taken every scrap of energy I had, but somehow, I’d survived.

I was reminded of a simpler life, before the army and law school, when we used to have *fun* on the beach. We sat for a time, resting, both lost in our own thoughts.

“Can I ask you something?” Carly said.

“Sure, shoot.”

“It’s dumb, but it’s always bothered me. Back in the day? You know how we were great friends, partied together, and ran in the same crew?”

“Yeah.”

“You never hit on me. Why was that? Was something wrong with me?”

I was tempted to wisecrack, but her tone told me it wasn’t the day for it.

“The truth? You were my best friend, Carly. In some ways, you were like a sister.”

“Wow, that’s the kiss of death.”

“Besides, every time I got my courage up to make a move on you, you were with somebody else. We had great times, but terrible timing. You married Denny Delaney; I wound up in Afghanistan.”

“Two fails,” she agreed. “But even after you came home, you didn’t say a word to me. The next thing I hear, you were engaged, working in Detroit.”

“I came out of the army like a rocket, in a big hurry to make up for lost time. I picked up my bachelor’s in the service, then doubled up my law school classes and finished in twenty months. Directly from there, I was hired into the prosecutor’s office as an ADA. Another big mistake, by the way.”

“How so?”

“I’d rather help people out when they’re in trouble than lock ’em up. Anyway, then I met Serena...And maybe we were both in too big a hurry. She came on strong and got me a great job at her firm. And now I’m in this god-awful mess.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s okay, I’m still sorting it all out myself. The truth is, we weren’t getting along, and if we’d been honest with each other, and admitted it wasn’t working, she might still be alive.”

“You don’t know that.”

“No, I don’t,” I admitted. “Any other annoying questions?”

“Nope, because our timing definitely hasn’t improved,” she sighed. “After today, I’m going to be your boss. And the department has got strict rules about bosses and subordinates fraternizing.”

It took a moment for what she said to sink in. “Wait, you’re saying I passed? Everything? I’m hired?”

“If you still want the job.”

“Hell, yes, I want it!”

“Then it’s yours,” she said, standing up, slipping the clipboard strap over her shoulder. “C’mon, I’ll race you in.” She shot off the raft in a perfect swan dive, swimming hard for the shore, using every wave as an accelerator.

I watched her go, making no attempt to chase her. I was so low on gas, I’d probably drown. Instead I slid into the water, using the last dregs of my stamina to manage a slow sidestroke to shore.

Still, I felt good. The best I’d felt in...hell, a very long time. It had been a tough test. I’d been lucky to live through it.

I just hoped I’d be as lucky to survive the next test.

The meeting with my old boss, Assistant District Attorney Leon Stolz.

Chapter 16

While I was driving into Detroit in my uncle's truck, I kept getting flashes of Bruno Corzine. I saw him raging at me in the parking garage, held back by his men. Then, looming over my hospital bed.

Except he was never really in my room, of course. Hell, according to Hilliard, he was never anywhere but the Riviera Club, playing cards in front of witnesses. He'd given himself a bulletproof alibi. It didn't make him innocent, but smart.

Really smart...

Hilliard said he was seen at the club the day of the bombing.

Seen by whom? By cops. The Riviera was a well-known mob hangout. So notorious, that feds or Detroit's Organized Crime Division probably had it under surveillance 24/7.

Corzine would have known that. He probably counted on the staked-out cops to confirm his foolproof alibi. If he knew the place was staked out, he'd expect any phone calls made from the club to be monitored. So he wouldn't have given any orders by phone, not even a burner. Because anyone could be listening in.

He would have to send his messages some other way. Something foolproof like a gofer. Because what could be safer and simpler than a messenger?

I straightened in the seat, my hands tightening on the wheel. With all the surveillance tech out there, he'd *have* to pass his orders along the old-fashioned way. And *that* was his weak spot.

He wouldn't have been able to use serious hoods as delivery boys, so he probably used some half-baked wannabe. Maybe the same one every time. If I could figure out which punk Corzine was using to carry his messages, I could charge him as an accessory to murder and get him to flip on his boss.

But first I'd have to find him...

And I couldn't do it myself. I'd already had a run-in with Corzine—he knew me by sight.

That made it harder, but not impossible.

I knew I had to meet with the ADA, but the appointment was going to have to wait a few more moments. I took out my cell phone, and tapped one of my favorites. Grady Baker, *the invisible man*.

Chapter 17

Grady was an investigator who worked for Garner and Mackey by digging up dirt on witnesses, perps, and victims. He said he'd be at a Starbucks near his apartment so I went there to meet him. The place was busy, so I carried my cup to a window seat to wait.

Grady walked past me twice before I realized who he was. Carrying my java, I fell in step with him on the sidewalk.

"Showoff," I said.

"You're lucky I'm not a hit man," Grady said. "You were a sitting duck in that window." Grady is a nondescript guy, like anyone on the street. There's nothing about him that's memorable. Most of us work hard at being noticed, but Grady's perfected the opposite skill.

I explained my problem. He snorted.

"Stake out a mob guy in a mob joint? Why not shoot me in the head now and save Corzine the trouble of cutting my throat?"

"Are you saying it can't be done?"

"Nope. But it'll be a lot trickier than tailing a suburban dad with a hankering for hookers. It'll cost Garner and Mackey double my usual rates, and lately—"

"Bill me personally. I don't work there anymore."

"Seriously? Good for you."

I glanced at him. He wasn't kidding. "Why? What's up?"

Grady pursed his lips, choosing his words carefully. "Garner and Mackey were solid clients for years. Until their checks started bouncing."

"I thought Garner was loaded."

"He was. But he also likes gambling. A lot. To recoup, he's been taking on clients he wouldn't have touched in the old days. Suddenly, the firm's flush again. The situation makes me uneasy. Investigators walk a fine line between the law and the bad guys. I can't risk being on the wrong side of it."

"What do you think's going on?"

“Don’t know and don’t want to. You know how lawyers have rules? Well, gumshoes have a few of our own, too, like not talking out of school. I’m on the Corzine thing, Brian. I’ll call you when I’ve got something. Until I do? You might want to stay away from window seats.”

Chapter 18

The Wayne County prosecutor has offices on the top floor of the Frank Murphy Hall of Justice in downtown Detroit. The place boasts of stained glass windows, walnut wainscoting, and ten-thousand-dollar desks.

Or so I've been told.

I've never actually been to the top floor. ADAs like Leon Stolz cut their plea deals in basement cubicles, where every whisper goes on record and corrections officers are only a shout away.

My old boss was waiting for me. Chunky, surly, and sour, Leon Stolz always needs a shave, and you can guess his lunch by checking his necktie. He treats his staff like serfs, and after I quit to join Garner and Mackey, he branded me a traitor who left public service to cross to the dark side, a defense practice. Winning my first few cases only threw salt in the wound.

I expected to have trouble with him. He didn't disappoint.

"Mr. Brian Lord," he nodded, sliding into a metal chair, facing me across a battered table that looked like war surplus. "Which of your miscreant clients are we throwing under the bus of justice today?"

"Let's start with Jimmy Valentine. He's offering to trade information about a mobster for—"

"Valentine's off the table," he said flatly. "No deal. Who's next?"

"Whoa, hold on, Leon—"

"That's *Mr.* Stolz to you."

"Fine. Jimmy has incriminating evidence on a mob capo, and all he's asking in exchange is a pass on a petty gambling beef. It's a freaking *gift*, Le—Mr. Stolz."

"But it's one I can't take. While I'd love to hear you pule and whine about it, I'll cut to the chase. Word from the top floor is, no deals for anyone in Zeman's crew, *especially* Corzine."

"Since when?"

“Since he became the prime suspect in a certain...explosives case. There’s talk on the street that Corzine was responsible for that bomb, Brian. The DA can’t look weak on this. My orders are explicit. No deals, no wiggle room.”

I leaned back in my chair, eyeing him. “Is something in the wind with that crew? Federal task force? OCB?”

“If I knew, you’d be the last person I’d tell. You’re a Garner and Mackey hack now. You represent the enemy. You’re lucky I’m sharing this at all.”

“I’m not with Garner anymore, actually. I’m on my own.”

“They canned your ass? What a surprise. Same message still applies. No plea deals for anyone in that crew. I hope you didn’t come down here with just one lonely loser. Who’s next on your laptop?”

I didn’t answer for a moment and eyed him instead. “Can I ask you one question, totally off the record? Just two guys in a room, who used to work together?”

“You can try.”

“Turn off the video recorders.”

He thought about that one, then flipped the switch below the desk. “Okay, we’re private. What is it?”

“You’ve seen my client list, and ADAs always know more about suspects than the defense does. They hear comments by arresting officers, off-the-cuff remarks, facts not entered into evidence...”

He nodded, waiting.

“You know details about the bombing—”

“It’s not my case, Brian—”

“But you’ve *heard* things!”

“Dammit, Brian, you know I can’t—”

“I’m asking you like this, as two guys in a room. Is anyone *else* on my client list connected to that case? Am I in danger, Leon? Is my *family* at risk?”

He started to protest, then bit it off. Looked away instead, thinking.

“Those are two separate questions,” he said, facing me again. “First, about connections to the bombing? The honest answer is, no, not to my knowledge.”

“But you’ve gotten orders about Corzine—”

“And I’ve told you what I know, Brian. My orders are to keep a safe distance from that crew, which is probably good advice. The second question, are you at risk?” He shook his head. “You’ve got some *very* problematic clients. One or two are...almost *certainly* dangerous.”

“What does that mean?”

“Exactly what I said, and it’s all I can say without breaking protocol. I’m turning the cameras and recorders back on. Now can we get back to the business at hand?”

And we did.

I ran down my list. Leon bargained hard, but since trials cost money the city doesn’t have, he couldn’t pass up a chance to cut his caseload.

We struck deals on the Walmart greeter who’d shown up to work inebriated, and a woman who’d mistakenly backed into a homeless man, and in her panic, fled the scene. But Leon wouldn’t offer a deal for Crazy Jack the biker.

“Next,” he said, sliding a file out of his briefcase. “Sherry Molinere—”

“She isn’t on my list—”

“This isn’t *your* list, it’s mine. My office has received an allegation of an improper relationship between you and this client. I see you’re handling the case pro bono. A generous gesture for a guy who isn’t with a firm.”

“Check your records. The public defender’s office kicked her case because of a *previous* allegation of improper conduct filed by her husband. He’s a state trooper, Leon. He’s gaming the system. He knows which buttons to push—”

“So your response is—?”

“Sherry Molinere is a client. That’s the beginning and end of our relationship. And,” I added, leaning forward, locking onto his eyes, “I’d think twice before you parrot any of her husband’s bullshit to my face. I’ve had a bad week, Leon. I’m not in the mood.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“Why not? Dex Molinere is using you to threaten me. You’re his bitch, Leon, and you don’t even know it.”

“Accusations of misconduct still have to be forwarded to the bar—”

“Unless you deem them frivolous,” I said, “which they damn well are.”

He didn’t say anything for moment, reading my mood, choosing his words.

“I never liked you much, Brian. You’re cocky, and you wanted too much too soon. Quitting the DA for Garner and Mackey? That was a betrayal.”

I didn’t say anything to that. He was probably right.

“But now? You really need to watch your step. You’re dancing barefoot in a roomful of broken glass.”

Chapter 19

Garner

When the man found the e-mail, it was like discovering his own obituary.

He'd been lounging by the Olympic-sized pool of his Port Vale mansion in a silk robe, but he sat bolt upright when he saw a sender that no longer existed.

It was from a dead woman. A ghost.

He opened it, but there was no message. Only a blank page with an attachment. Swallowing hard, he downloaded the document.

And instantly recognized it.

It was a page copied from a ledger listing fund transfers from the Virgin Islands to the Nacional Banco de Panama. Every single one was from his personal accounts.

Taken by itself, the page wasn't incriminating. But the message was clear, because it came from the middle of the ledger. Whoever sent it had the whole file.

The extortion was beginning all over again, but with a major difference.

A new player must have taken over the game, because the last blackmailer was dead.

After a moment's musing, the man realized who it must be. And exactly how to deal with him.

Still a bit shaken, he glanced around. His estate looked as posh as it had for the past century, a flat roofed tri-level, à la Frank Lloyd Wright.

His new mistress was swimming laps in the pool, nude as a Titian Venus. She was ten years younger than his last mistress, and beautiful, but not exceptionally bright. It was for the best. Sharing your life and secrets with a clever woman can be tiring—and sometimes dangerous.

In the driveway, his hired help was washing the Morgan Plus 8, a classically styled roadster, complete with a leather strap over the hood. The man admired the car, but rarely drove it. Driving was for his inferiors.

And so was the task at hand.

He called for his hired help. The gaunt man perked up and sauntered over.

"Sir?" he asked, smirking a little as he spoke. Both men knew his true role at

the estate. He was a gift from a Serbian arms dealer. He drove the man around, protected him, and dealt with the messier aspects of his business. Including blackmail and murder.

The man outlined the problem to the assassin, speaking slowly and distinctly, to be sure the Serbian man understood. A new player had the stolen file. It was probably on a thumb drive by now. The assassin was to find the drive, find the player, and eliminate both of them.

“How will I know this man?” asked the assassin.

“That part’s easy. He’s famous.”

The man swiveled the notebook to show the assassin the screen. A video was playing of a man in a three-piece suit, soaking wet, and staggering out of the surf with a dog in his arms.

Chapter 20

NO SHIRT, NO SHOES, NO PROBLEM.

The sign over the door of the Beachfront Bistro says it all. It dates from the lumber baron days, built of pine logs that were probably dropped on the spot. The bar offers beers and burgers, and has a jukebox that thumps out pop tunes from the Summer of Love.

Locals love the joint. It's a second home for everyone in the area code.

Tall Paul bought the place with his separation money from the army. He practically lives there. But at least it makes him easy to find.

Paul and my uncle Josh were at a table just outside the office, both suitably dressed for fine beachfront dining. They were barefoot, wearing shorts and Hawaiian shirts. Paul nodded at the barmaid as I walked in, and a cold Budweiser, cheeseburger, and fries arrived as I sat down.

"How did it go?" Uncle Josh asked.

"Bad news, and no news," I said around a mouthful of juicy burger. I explained about the DA's new hands-off policy toward Corzine's crew, and told them about his warning.

"I managed to cut deals for a few clients, but Stolz wouldn't budge on the others. Or give up any info that isn't in the files."

"This warning? Do you think it was about the biker?" Paul asked. "He's not much more than a kid, but he's got the likeliest connections for a bombing. Outlaw crews play rough."

"If Jack's ticked off at me, he's about to be more so," I said, chasing a mouthful of fries with a swig of Bud. "No deal for him, either. Leon wants to look tough for the cameras, and Crazy Jack's a perfect photo op. His cell's already booked."

"But it might get un-booked if his lawyer had an unfortunate accident, right?" Uncle Josh said. "What would happen then?"

"He...would get a continuance to seek new counsel," I conceded. "Then another delay while he brought him or her up to speed. Meanwhile, charges

could lapse, his underage girlfriend keeps getting older, maybe changes her mind about testifying...The whole thing could go away.”

“Sounds like a plan to me,” Josh said, then stopped. “What is it?”

I’d held up my hand like a traffic cop. *Stop*. They both turned to see what I was staring at.

A blond woman, slim as a whisper in a summer shift and flip-flops, was standing in the club doorway, scanning the crowd...for me.

“Sherry?” I called, standing up and waving. “I’m over here!”

“God,” she said, hurrying to our table and clinging to me.

“You’re shaking,” I said, easing her into a chair. “What’s wrong?”

“Dex found me again,” she managed. Paul passed her his drink, and she guzzled it down without caring what it was.

“Slow down,” I said, sitting down beside her. “What happened? Where did he find you?”

“At the Glazers, that job you got me in Royal Oak. As a freaking nanny, for chrissake! I have a degree in software engineering.”

“Easy now, easy,” I said. “Remember? Engineers have to submit job histories, background checks. He could’ve tracked you—”

“He tracked me anyway!” she wailed. “He came to the house this morning in his freaking *uniform*! As a state trooper, he told the Glazers that I was mentally unstable, and a danger to myself and others. Then he showed them my old mug shot...”

She broke down, sobbing like a child. I touched her shoulder, and didn’t know what else to do.

But Uncle Josh did.

“Easy now, miss,” he rumbled in his deep bass voice, the way he’s been soothing Paul and me all our lives. “He found you, but now you’ve found us, and you’re home free. You’re safe. Everything’s gonna be fine. You just take another long slug of whatever this was.” He tapped Paul’s empty glass, motioning to the barmaid, who quickly brought over a refill. Sherry chugged that one at a gulp, too, wincing as she did it.

“Christ, what is this crap?”

“Single malt Glenfiddich,” Paul sighed, “twelve years old.”

“Scotch? I hate Scotch.”

“Could’ve fooled me,” Paul said, eyeing her empty glass. “Would you like something else?”

“Not here,” Uncle Josh said, rising. “If her ex-husband found her once, he

might be following along. I will be leaving with this lady.”

“Where are you going?” I asked. Sherry didn’t even bother. She was already collecting her purse. Uncle Josh is like that. People in need of help are drawn to him, like metal to a magnet.

“If I told you, and someone asks where she is, you’d have to lie, Brian. And you’re a lousy liar, which is shocking for a lawyer. You should practice more. If you need me, you’ve got my cell number.”

He took Sherry’s arm and ushered her out. And she didn’t even look back.

Chapter 21

“Where will he take her?” I asked Paul.

“Unc’s got a half dozen rehab and remodel projects going, mostly for summer people. She’ll be safe at one of those, and untraceable for a while, at least. What are you going to do?”

“Haven’t a clue,” I said honestly. “Her husband’s got her on the run. Every time she lights somewhere, he shows up. I don’t know how he does it.”

“He’s a state cop, right?” Paul said. “Molinere? So it ain’t supernatural. He’s probably got contacts we can’t even dream about. But he’d better hope they don’t work this time.”

“How do you mean?”

“Uncle Josh is a sweetheart and I love him. But if that cop shows up and tries to bully that girl? He’d better have his major medical paid up, because bad things are gonna happen.”

“They already have,” I said. “Molinere’s filed a complaint with the Wayne County DA, trying to get me removed as her attorney. He knows the system, and he’s playing it.”

“So what do we do?”

“Nothing, yet. He filed the complaint with my old boss. Leon may be a jerk, but he’s good at his job. He promised to take a closer look at the guy, and I think he will.”

“If he’s so good at his job, why is your pal Corzine still walking around?”

“Because his flunkies handle the rough stuff while he plays cards in a public place, surrounded by witnesses.” I went on to explain my hunch about the messengers, and that I’d set Grady on the trail.

“How good is this Grady?” Paul asked.

“If you ever meet him, you won’t remember him five seconds later,” I said. “That’s how good he is.”

We sat quietly for half an hour, sipping our drinks and catching up. Then I

excused myself, and walked up the beach to the cottage. It had been a rough day, and tomorrow would probably be even tougher.

I desperately needed to rest.

So naturally, sleep didn't come when I laid in my bed.

I kept thinking about Grady, who was working the Riviera Club alone. Corzine was no fool. He was a rising star in the mob world and a dangerous man.

Had I pushed Grady too close to the problem? Being invisible to cheating husbands or embezzlers is one thing, but would it be so easy around a thug like Corzine?

Damn it.

Grady was the ultimate pro, though. He was practically a legend in the business. I had to trust his talents.

But as soon as I put Grady aside, thoughts of Serena took his place. She'd seemed so...overwhelmingly perfect at first. Smart, pretty, dressed like a runway model. She had a great job with Garner and Mackey at Cadillac Square. After the army, law school, and my crappy job as an ADA, having a woman like her seemed almost too good to be true...

And of course, it was. Our lightning engagement was her idea, and in hindsight, I realized our whole relationship was basically her idea. One that began to sour the day I gave her the ring.

She'd traded it in for a larger stone. She'd paid the difference, and said that she just wanted to impress her girlfriends at work. As though it was all for show.

But it wasn't. Not to me. Before long, we were squabbling almost nonstop. But what if we'd faced up to it, admitted we'd made a mistake, and broken things off?

Maybe she wouldn't have been in the car that day. And that was on me.

It was almost dawn when I finally dropped off. The alarm woke me fifteen minutes later.

I sprung out of bed because I had a big day in store. I was starting a job I hadn't held since high school.

Chapter 22

The morning sun was barely breaking across the bay when I got to the beach. It cut a shimmering silvery path across the gentle surf.

I checked the bonfire pits first, collecting the empties, picking up broken glass, and kicking sand over the charred pits.

For the most part, the shore was in good shape. Beach folks generally police up after themselves, but there are always a few who party late.

I found a young couple under a beach blanket, sound asleep in each other's arms and without a stitch of clothing on their bodies. I told them the beach wasn't open yet, and that they might want to find their clothes before the kids started showing up. When I left them, they were still holding each other, watching the sun rise out over the surf.

My day brightened when I saw Carly coming down the beach, dressed for work. She was barefoot, and in shorts and a Hawaiian shirt. It was the uniform of the day.

"You made it," she said, brightly. "I thought you might change your mind."

"Why would you think that?"

"Because you've been through a heck of a lot, Brian," she said, falling into step beside me. "Hell, you've been blown up. I'm just saying, if you do change your mind—"

"Wow. If this is your 'go get 'em, tiger' pep talk, it needs work."

"Okay, okay," she said, raising her hands in mock surrender. "You're where you need to be. At least for now. If you need me, I'll be in my office. I'll be back at noon to rotate you out for lunch. Otherwise, you're on your own, pal. Good luck."

I watched her walk away, a dynamo of a woman in a coltish frame. She was really something. But once again, our timing was totally askew. I wondered if we'd always be out of sync—a day early, or ten years too late.

I didn't worry about it for long, though, because the first invaders were

already hitting the beach. A steady stream of cars rolled into the parking lot, and screaming kids spilled out, while their moms followed behind in floppy hats and shades toting lawn chairs and blankets and sunblock. There were tots with pails and shovels, and tweens and teens with cell phones and ear buds who were scarcely aware of the water.

I climbed the short ladder up to my tower chair and settled in. I took my first long look up and down the shore. Kids were daring each other to test the waters.

And then I felt myself relaxing, *really* relaxing. I felt the knots that have been wound around my heart since Afghanistan loosen their hold a little. I was fully alert, mindful of every single soul on that shore, but at the same time, I was basking in the beauty of the day. The surf, the wheeling gulls, the laughter of children.

It got better. Women started arriving, but instead of sunning themselves or trolling for men, they were gathering around my chair, chatting me up, taking selfies with me in the background.

I knew that it was only because I was temporarily famous. I was the guy who saved the dog in the video, but still, I was enjoying my fifteen minutes of stardom...

Until I saw the first kid make a fatal mistake.

I was up, out of my chair, sprinting into the surf before I finished my conversation with a beach bunny. Something was wrong. Something serious.

A minute before, a little kid had been paddling around the first raft. It was moored thirty yards offshore in shallow water, only a few feet deep. He was having a great time, plunging into the breakers like a seal.

But he hadn't surfaced. He'd been down too damn long. And then suddenly, he shot out of the water, hacking and gagging, half-drowned. With one arm, I grabbed him before the next breaker could roll him under. I held him clear of the water, letting him breathe and encouraging him to cough the water out of his windpipe. He was good to go in less than a minute, which is exactly how long it would have taken him to drown. He could have been gone just that quickly.

I asked him where his mom was, and he pointed her out. She was on her feet, rushing toward us. I waved that he was okay, then gave her a split-finger "eyes on" signal, and she nodded. I took a deep breath. The boy was my first save.

I went back to my chair.

The sun was still high, the lakeshore was still beautiful, but I'd just been reminded how quickly things can go wrong at the beach.

Or anywhere.

Chapter 23

Carly came by at noon, and I took my lunch break at the Bistro. I had an omelet and coffee, because I didn't want to have anything heavy while I was on duty. I carried my plate out to the patio deck and took a table by the railing. It offered a view of the beach, and a better view of Carly, who was down the shore in the tower. Beautiful on both counts.

Paul popped out of the kitchen. "Hey, lifeguard. Uncle Josh called in at ten. Your friend had a quiet night, and all's well. No sign of her husband. How's your first day on the job going?"

"The best I've felt in a long time," I said around a mouthful. "Almost as good as I do now. You're a great cook."

"I am, brother, which is why I have to get back. No rest for the wick—aw, crap. Here we go."

I swiveled in my seat to follow his stare. Two police cars had pulled into the Bistro lot. One was from the Port Vale PD, and the second was unmarked. Chief Paquette and Lieutenant Bev Hilliard got out separately, but marched in together, heading straight for me. Paul vanished into the kitchen, not an easy thing to do when you're six seven, wearing a toque.

"Mr. Lord," the chief nodded, pulling up a chair, "do you mind?"

"Not at all. I'd recommend—"

"This isn't social," Hilliard said, taking the seat beside the chief. "As you've probably guessed, you're still very much a person of interest in the car bombing."

"I'd be surprised if I wasn't. The husband, the wife, the partner, are always prime suspects. But then again, since I was almost blown to hell myself...? Anyway, why all the muscle, Lieutenant? What is it you want?"

"I'm hoping to get a straight answer out of you for once. Your client, Jimmy Valentine? When did you speak with him last?"

"Not...for a few days. Why?"

“Is that unusual?”

“Jimmy doesn’t punch a time clock. Why are you asking about him?”

“He was under surveillance by the Organized Crime Unit until last night when he...dropped out of sight.”

“They lost him? Where?”

“An after-hours poker game on Dequinder. They couldn’t exactly follow him into a closed room. The other players said he left to use the bathroom, and then he never came back.”

“Did he ditch them on purpose? Or was he abducted?”

Hilliard shrugged.

“Why were they tailing him?”

“Since he’s trying to buy himself a deal by dealing dirt on Corzine, the boss’s people are looking for him.”

“And you were watching *Jimmy*? Instead of Corzine?”

“We were watching both of them. Corzine’s the easy one, because he hangs around his club. But Valentine—”

“Is in the wind. Can you blame him? You have to find him before Corzine’s crew does.”

“Then help us.”

“I can’t. I have no idea where Jimmy is, and no way to contact him. If he calls, I can tell him you’re looking for him. Whether he chooses to contact you is up to him.”

“That’s not good enough.”

“It has to be. Anything he says to me, including his whereabouts, falls under attorney–client privilege.”

“You’re being obstructive.”

“I’m protecting my client, which I’m damned well required to do, by law and oath. I’ll help if I can, Lieutenant, but not by selling Jimmy out.”

“Is he still a client? You’re working as a lifeguard, for god’s sake. Are you even a practicing attorney anymore?”

“I’m a lawyer because I passed the state bar, Lieutenant. Not because I had an office on Cadillac Square. I work for my clients, until they choose to take me off their cases.”

“I doubt many judges will take you seriously if you show up in cut-offs and flip-flops.”

“I take courtrooms seriously, Lieutenant. Besides, if I screw up a case, it can be appealed. On the beach, if some kid makes a little mistake, and I miss it?

There's no mistrial, no appeal. There's only a funeral. So I take both of my jobs seriously. And if your guys had paid closer attention to theirs, maybe they wouldn't have lost Jimmy."

Chapter 24

Hilliard rose, glowering down at me, then wheeled and stalked out. I expected Chief Paquette to follow, but she just shook her head. “You don’t have enough enemies? Trying to add one more?”

“Are you gonna bust my chops, too, Chief?”

“Not about Valentine,” she said, pushing a police file and a mug shot of a haggard, red-eyed woman over to me. “Do you know who this is?”

“Sure. Her name’s Sherry Molinere, and she’s a client who was recently busted for possession. That mug shot is six years out of date.”

“And that’s all she is to you? A client?”

“Here we go,” I sighed.

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning, you’ve received allegations of mental instability and illegal drug use. You’ve heard claims that she’s a danger to herself and others. Off the record? Maybe there have been a few suggestions of improper advances by her attorney, me, toward this client. All filed by her husband, Dexter Molinere, a ten-year corporal in the state police.”

“So far, you’re batting a thousand.”

“Let’s see what your average is. Does anything strike you odd about all this?”

“Sure. The mug shot. Your client was what? Twenty when it was taken, and strung-out at the time. I doubt she looks much like this anymore.”

“She was a college kid who got messed up on meth and oxy, and got busted for possession. While she was in Midland Rehab, the arresting officer, Corporal Molinere, visited regularly and brought her flowers. He seemed to be the only one who cared about her—a white knight. They were married three weeks after her release.”

“But...?” the chief prompted.

“Sherry thought he was a bit stiff at first, but it was a welcome relief after the life she’d been in. Then his white hat fell off. Dexter Molinere’s a control freak.

He dictated every aspect of their lives, clothes, meals, friends. She was practically a hostage. And when she finally filed for divorce?" I gestured toward the mug shot.

"She suddenly gets busted for possession again."

"For drugs that were planted by her husband."

"Can you prove that?"

"Of course not. He knows the system, Chief. He's part of it. The Staties gave Sherry a toxic screening when she was arrested, but then it disappeared."

"A buddy protecting a fellow officer's wife?"

"It wasn't ditched to *protect* her. I think she tested clean, which would prove the charges are bogus. Look, I can understand you feeling sympathetic toward the officer's situation—"

"Sympathetic?" she echoed, raising her eyebrows.

"A cop with wife trouble? Do tell. Divorce rates in law enforcement rank right up there with rock stars. You're a career cop, who's the widow of a cop—"

"With a son on the force, and a nephew who's applied to the academy," she finished. "Which means I know cops a hell of a lot better than you ever will, sonny. My Arlo had a theory about cops. Wanna hear it?"

"Go ahead."

"Some join the force because it's a family business, the way citizens become butchers or coal miners. Others think it's a good job—do your twenty-five, then collect your pension. Some want to serve and protect, and if they weren't cops, they'd be firemen or EMTs. But an unhappy few, like Corporal Molinere? They're bullies. They like pushing people around and the badge gives 'em a license to do it."

"You sound like you know him."

"Only the type. This mug shot tells me a lot more about him than it does her." She tapped the photo with a fingertip. "No man who really loved a woman would *ever* want people to see his wife like this. Still, I've got an official BOLO request from the state police. I have to honor it."

"Are you going to arrest her?"

"Oddly enough, the request is only procedural," she said, leaning back in her chair. "We're here to locate and inform. Is Molinere physically abusive?"

"Not to my knowledge. Sherry's afraid of being brought home. He doesn't want to hurt her. He wants to own her."

The chief mulled that a moment, then shook her head. "He may not be a danger to her, but that doesn't mean you're bulletproof."

“Meaning...?”

“Most officers serve their whole careers without drawing a weapon. Corporal Molinere’s been involved in two shootings in the past three years. Both perps were armed. One was threatening to massacre his family with a machete, and the other had already fired on officers, probably hoping for suicide by cop. There’s no question both shoots were justified, but...?” She leaned forward, lowering her voice.

I leaned in, too.

“The thing is, Counselor? Molinere was on the force eight years before his first shooting. Only nine months before the second. He knows how easy it is to pull a trigger now. Maybe he’s developing a taste for it. If you get crossways of him, you’d best keep that in mind.”

“I’ll remember,” I said.

“You’d damned well better,” she said.

Chapter 25

That night, I snapped awake in the dark. My eyes were wide open as I sat motionless in bed, listening. Then I heard it again. A muffled thump and voices that were coming from downstairs.

Molinere?

If so, he wasn't alone.

Slipping out of bed, I padded silently to the closet, and picked up the Louisville Slugger I'd bought with beach bottle money when I was ten. It's still perfectly balanced and swings like it's part of my arm.

I carefully tiptoed down the stairs, keeping close to the wall to avoid squeaks. Not that I needed to. I could see two figures blundering about the kitchen in the dark. They clearly didn't care if I heard them.

I switched on the light, startling the crap out of both of them. It was a bad idea, because one second later, both men had guns aimed at my head.

They were wearing jeans, boots, and black leather vests over their sleeveless T-shirts. Both were decked in Iron Disciples colors. Bikers.

Crazy Jack Bruske's blond mane fell to his shoulders and tangled in his scruffy beard.

The second man looked like Attila the Hun's cousin. He might as well have been a berserker who'd stepped out of a ninth-century time warp. He had wild hair and a beard that would impress ZZ Top.

"Hey, Brian," Jack said, sliding his weapon back into a concealed-carry shoulder holster. "What's the bat for? Gonna pop up a few flies?"

I'd forgotten I had the Slugger in my hand. The Hun hadn't. His gun was still aimed at my head. I put the bat down.

"What the hell are you doing here, Jack? It's two in the morning."

"We need to talk," he said. "Had to wait for your watchdogs to nod off."

"What watchdogs?"

"Two guys in a blacked-out van, off the road, maybe a hundred yards from

the house,” the Hun said. “They got you staked out. We stashed our bikes beyond them, and walked in. Are they cops?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. Somebody tried to kill me a week ago. I could be on somebody’s watch list.”

“I don’t think so,” Jack said doubtfully. “I’ve seen that van before. They’ve been on you for a while, brother. And I ain’t so sure they’re law.”

“License plate’s muddled up so you can’t make it out,” the second biker added. “They’re pros, whoever they are.”

“This here’s Cujo,” Jack said. “He’s with the Iron Disciples, too. An enforcer.”

The Hun nodded. Neither of us offered to shake hands.

“You got beers?” Jack asked.

“In the fridge,” I said. They helped themselves. We sat at the kitchen table, warily facing each other.

“What’s so important it couldn’t wait till morning, Jack?”

“You were gonna talk to that ADA about my case? Schulz?”

“Stolz,” I said. “Look—”

“No deals,” Cujo growled.

“What?”

“You heard me. Jack can’t take no deal.”

“Stolz didn’t offer one.”

“Whoa, wait a minute. Isn’t there anything you can do?”

“Stolz wants to put you away on the six o’ clock news, Jack, and wants to slap the cuffs on you himself. So unless you’ve got something to trade...?”

“I said no deals,” Cujo said.

“You’re not my client, pal, and you won’t be the one doing the time.”

“How much time?” Jack asked.

“At most, it’ll be a year.”

“Okay, look, I can do the year, Brian. Hell, it’ll probably give me some street cred in the group. Besides, I’d only be, what? Twenty-three when I get out?” He shook his mane slowly as he accepted his fate.

“It’s tough, kid,” Cujo said. “But if you trade in anything on the crew, you’ll get shanked before you hit your bunk. And I’ll get clipped for being your running buddy.”

“You’re saying your own crew will kill you?” I asked.

“It’s the life we’re in, man,” Jack shrugged. “You’re my lawyer. What’s your hotshot legal advice?”

“Do the time. It’s only a year, and if you’re on your best behavior while you’re in there, you stand a good chance to get out early.”

Jack nodded again. “Thanks, Brian. I’ll go with your advice then.”

“I’d appreciate it,” I said, as I walked them out. “Jack? You said something earlier about seeing my watchdog van before. Did you mean before the bombing?”

“Yeah. I stopped by your office last week, but I seen the truck on the street and kept goin’. Thought they might be cops, looking to pick me up, but now? They’re definitely on you, Brian. Watch yourself.”

Chapter 26

At first light, I was up and at 'em. I didn't have breakfast because there wasn't any time for it. Instead, I stalked out to the garage at the rear of the property and uncovered the battered Jeep CJ-7 we keep there as a beach buggy. I fired up the old L6 engine as though it had been run yesterday, instead of sometime last summer.

I came roaring out of the garage, racing down the back trail to the rear of the property where Jack and Cujo had said the black van had been parked the night before. I was hoping to take them by surprise.

But there was no one in sight.

Somebody *had* been there, though. I saw tire tracks that led off the road into an area concealed by brush, one that offered a clear view of the cottage. There were oil spots on the ground. A vehicle had definitely been parked there.

The bikers were right. Somebody was watching the cottage. The black van they'd mentioned sounded ominous, because it indicated that more than one person was doing it. Maybe it was a crew—a band of cops, protecting me? Or maybe it was a posse looking to finish the job the bomber botched?

As I roared out the long dirt road to the highway, a blue sedan pulled out of a brushy area, spraying gravel. It quickly gained speed, tailgating me. Once the lights went on, I knew exactly who it was.

I pulled off on the shoulder and he did the same. He was driving a navy-blue sedan, unmarked, but equipped with a full bank of flashing LEDs in the grille. The cop stepped out in full uniform, including his equipment belt. A Glock automatic, flashlight, and a nightstick, which he drew as he walked up to the Jeep. He paused to casually smash the taillight, then sheathed the stick.

“That’s the official reason why you’ve been stopped,” Dex Molinere said, not bothering to conceal a smirk. “Broken taillight. Don’t feel too bad. The videocam on my cruiser’s broken too.”

Up close, Molinere was smaller than I’d expected, barely above the five eight

department minimum, and a hundred and fifty pounds. But the gun and nightstick gave him all the weight he needed.

“Do you know who I am?” he demanded.

“Corporal Molinere,” I sighed. “The famous taillight breaker.”

“I can break a lot more than that—”

“Actually, you can’t,” I said.

“Why? You think being a lawyer gives you some kind of immunity?”

“The law’s got nothing to do with it. Over the past week, every scratch and dent on my body has been x-rayed, photographed, and catalogued. If I have one more bruise after this conversation? You’ll be swapping that uniform for a jailhouse jump suit.”

He looked away a moment, considering that. He was weak jawed and watery eyed, and seemed to be the type that probably got pushed around every damn day back in grade school. And that probably made him what he was now.

Armed and dangerous.

“You’re assuming you’ll be around to tell ’em we talked,” he said, resting his palm on his gun butt. I didn’t bother to answer.

“I’ll make it simple, pal. Just tell me where my wife is—”

“I don’t know where she is.”

“Then you won’t mind if I take a quick look through your place, just to be sure—”

“That’s not gonna happen.”

“How do you sleep at night? You’re breaking up a marriage—”

“She practically spits when she says your name, Dex. All she wants is to get away. It’s called a divorce. They happen about half the time nowadays. Deal with it. Let her go.”

“She’s bangin’ you already, isn’t she?”

“That’s not true, and you know it.”

“What I know is, somebody tried to kill you and missed, which is lucky for you. But even luckier for me.”

“How do you figure?”

“Because it makes you fair game now, Counselor. I could pop you right here, right now. The local yokel cops will assume it’s connected to the last time. My name wouldn’t even come up.”

“Sure it would. The Port Vale police have already questioned me about you, Dex. Framing Sherry with a bogus possession bust was a mistake. It’ll blow back on you eventually. You’re going to lose everything. Your job, maybe your

freedom. Unless you let her go.”

“Jesus, you don’t get it,” he said, shaking his head. “Whoever tried to take you out probably ain’t done trying. My Sherry, your family, everybody around you is in danger because you’re still breathing. I won’t let you put my wife in danger. I’ll put you in the goddamn ground first. You understand me?”

I understood that Molinere was only one wrong word away from losing control and putting a bullet in my skull. So I didn’t say a word. I looked away, avoiding his eyes. I wasn’t proud of it, but it beat the alternative.

And maybe it worked.

“Think it over,” he said, stuffing a business card in my breast pocket, “and if you decide you want to hand her over, call me.”

It took every ounce of my self-control to keep from punching him in the face.

“And better make it real soon,” he said. “The next time I see you? I’ll break a helluva lot more than a taillight.”

Jerking out his nightstick, he smashed the Jeep’s other taillight before he stalked back to his cruiser.

Chapter 27

Port Vale PD headquarters is housed in a Greek Revival temple in the heart of the Olde Towne district, surrounded by retro shops and offices that date back to the nineteenth century. It's quaint, cute, and touristy.

None of that mattered as I stormed up the stone steps three at a time, blew through the heavy oak doors, and ran straight into trouble. Lieutenant Bev Hilliard was making a call at a desk a few steps from the greeting counter. She slammed down her phone as soon as she saw me.

"Mr. Lord? I need a word. Now."

When a cop uses that tone in the middle of a police station, every head turns. The sergeant at the counter rested his hand on his weapon, but Hilliard waved him off, motioning me to her desk.

"Has Valentine contacted you?" she asked.

"Not yet. If you want to know where Jimmy is, ask Bruno Corzine. I've got troubles of my own. Where's the chief?"

"She's in a meeting upstairs and should be down in a minute. Can I show you something?"

"Sure."

"It's a video. It'll only take a minute. In here, please."

I followed her into a glassed-in office with Chief Paquette's name on the door. There were file cabinets in the corner, a wall full of framed awards and photographs, and a Spartan metal desk with a laptop on top of it. She switched on the laptop, then swiveled the screen toward me.

It took me a moment to grasp what she was showing me. It was a dining room in a crowded restaurant, a bar in the background lined with blue-collar types. Bruno Corzine was at a table in the far corner, playing cards with three other goons.

"The Riviera Club," I said. "You've got it wired."

"Note the time line in the corner of the screen."

“What about it?”

“This video spans nearly seven hours, yesterday, with Corzine in view the whole time. And Valentine went missing during the first two hours.”

“So? Corzine gets a pass because he’s drinking with his buddies on camera at the time? Bin Laden was in Pakistan when the Towers came down. He still got it done.”

“And if Corzine was involved with Valentine’s disappearance, or with what happened to your fiancée, we’ll get him for it. You can see that we’re on him.”

It was true, they were. But that wasn’t all I saw. At the far end of the bar, a nondescript little guy in a baseball cap was nursing a beer, watching the Tigers on TV.

Grady Baker. Mr. Invisible was on the job, too. And Hilliard clearly didn’t know who he was. Score one for our team.

“Okay, you’re on it,” I conceded. “What do you want from me?”

“Work with us, Brian. Tell Valentine to turn himself in. We can protect him.”

“I already told you. If he contacts me, I can tell him what you’re suggesting. That’s the best I can do.”

“Damn it, that’s—”

“Hey!” Chief Paquette said, poking her head in. “If you two want a license to fight, the county clerk is on the third floor. What’s the problem here?” She stepped inside, closing the door behind her.

“No problem,” Hilliard said as she glared at me.

“I definitely have a problem,” I said, “but not with the lieutenant. I just got pulled over by a psycho state trooper.” I quickly recounted my run-in with Dex Molinere.

“Did any witnesses see what happened?” the chief asked.

“The cottage sits on forty wooded acres, so no, no witnesses.”

“You’re an attorney, so you know the procedure, Mr. Lord. File a complaint, and I’ll find the corporal and have a talk with him. But unless he’s dumb enough to admit to it...”

“It’s his word against mine,” I sighed.

“Not quite. He was here yesterday. Paid me a courtesy call, in fact, in full uniform.”

“What did he want?”

“You know what he wanted. To locate his wife. He wasn’t wearing a sidearm.”

“What?”

“He left his weapon in his car to impress the hick town police chief with how harmless he was. Popping in unarmed.”

“Were you impressed?”

“Sonny, we’re only a few miles up the shore from a town they call Murder City. Firearms aren’t optional in my department, and I know that States are required to carry, even off duty. Molinere ignored his own unit’s regulations in order to blow smoke at me, which had the same effect on me as seeing that six-year-old mug shot. This guy’s a wrong cop, which makes him dangerous.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Follow up on your complaint. I’ll pick him up, have a serious talk with him, and hopefully, send him packing. In the meantime, tell your uncle Josh to move his lady friend again. The neighbors have noticed.”

“You know about that?”

“I’m the chief of police. In this town, I know almost everything. Except for one important piece of information.”

“And what’s that?”

“Molinere,” she said simply. “Any idea where he is now?”

Chapter 28

Crouched in a cluster of cedars across from the Lord cottage, Corporal Dexter Molinere wiped the sweat from his eyes. He'd swapped his uniform for his National Guard jungle camouflage, which made him nearly invisible in the piney woods behind the Lord cottage, but the outfit was made of rip-proof canvas that didn't breathe, and he was already sweating, despite the early hour.

He'd been in place for an hour, watching for any sign of life within. A shadow, a blind quivering—any sign from Sherry that gave her away.

She was in there. He damn well *knew* it. And she was alone, now that he'd chased her hotshot boyfriend away. The thought of the two of them together, Sherry opening her robe in front of him, baring her breasts—

His jaw locked. At the same time, he couldn't help savoring the image. He wondered how it would *feel* to watch Sherry put out for someone else.

Maybe they could try that to loosen things up a little. Sherry was always complaining he was too uptight, too controlling. He'd show her how loose he could get and bring a little excitement to the sack.

But first, he had to find her and get her home. Away from the bastard who'd

He shook off the anger that threatened to take him over. First things first. *Find Sherry. Force her to come back.*

Moving out of the pines, he trotted up the driveway to the house. Casing the cottage was easy, because most blinds were up and the curtains were open to the morning sun.

Slinking around the building warily, he peered through every window, keeping low and using his police training to remain unobserved.

He made a full circle of the house without seeing Sherry or any other sign of life. There were no indications anyone was using the place but the lifeguard.

There was one coffee cup on the kitchen table, not two. No blankets or pillows on the sofa, but they'd probably be sleeping together anyway, up in Lord's bedroom.

The second-floor blinds were drawn and there was no easy access to the

room. He couldn't see anything he could climb—no trellis or ladder or trees close enough to the building to give him a quick look.

He'd have to break in.

Damn. Dex didn't like the idea. It was risky, especially since he'd already leaned hard on Lord. The chump could be coming back any sec with the local yokel law, and no explanation would cover his ass if they caught him inside the house. Still...

He *had* to know if Sherry was in there. And there was only one way to find out.

He circled the house to the front porch that faced the beach. With luck, he'd hear a vehicle approaching in time to get away without being spotted. The beach was all but deserted, with a lone person strolling along the water in the distance. But the person was too far down the shore for Dex to see.

Moving quickly, he trotted up the steps to the front door, took a packet of lock picks out of his breast pocket, and went to work on the deadbolt. Christ, the damn thing had to be a hundred years old. The tumblers were rusty and hard to turn, and some interior springs were likely broken.

Twice he thought he had it, but the door wouldn't budge. Not a hair. Sweat was dripping on the backs of his hands as he worked. He decided to give it one last try. If he couldn't pop it, he'd circle around and have a go at the kitchen door.

Taking a deep breath to steady himself, he glanced quickly down the beach—Goddamn! A person was headed straight for the house, barely a hundred yards off now. Was he coming here or just strolling this way? Dex couldn't be sure, but he couldn't get caught on this porch.

Keeping to the shadows, he edged around the corner of the house, crossed the drive to the pines, and then crouched down in the shadows.

He waited to see which way the beach stroller went.

And hoped to hell it was Sherry.

Chapter 29

Someone was in the house.

I knew it the moment I stepped in the kitchen door. I've been coming home to the cottage my whole life. I know every groan and grumble, and the way it *feels* when it's empty.

But it wasn't. Someone was here. I snatched up my Louisville Slugger and circled the ground floor. I slid through the kitchen, the dining area, and the living room, hoping I'd find Molinere lurking...

A floorboard creaked and I froze and listened carefully. No. It wasn't a floorboard.

It was the front porch swing, creaking in the breeze. Only there was no breeze.

I yanked open the door, expecting to find the trooper—

"Hey," Carly Delaney said.

"Hey, yourself. What are you doing here?"

"I've been thinking. After your test? When we talked, on the raft? What you said about...old times?"

"What about it?"

"It's been bugging me. I haven't been able to get it out of my mind. Come sit by me. Please." She patted the seat tentatively, as though she expected me to say no.

I sat down beside her, and the swing fell into an automatic rhythm that put us in sync. That was the way it had always been with us, back when we were too young to know how rare and fine a thing that really was.

Neither of us spoke for a bit. She was lost in thought. I was curious but unwilling to push things. That was something else I remembered from those old days. Pushing Carly was not a good idea.

"So here's the thing," she said abruptly, turning to me. "What you said about our timing being off, back in the day?"

I nodded.

“You were right, it was. Looking back now, it’s almost comical to think about those stupid teenybopper relationships that all seemed so terribly important at the time, that turned out to be...well, to not matter much.”

“You married one of yours,” I pointed out.

“Not for long,” she sighed. “I swear I knew it was a huge mistake right when my dad walked me down the aisle. But the church was full, our friends and families were there. So...? We said till death us do part and split up within the year. Dennis is in real estate now, in Houston, with a new pre-fab family, two of hers, one of theirs. He sends me Christmas cards.”

“Staying in touch? Or rubbing it in?”

“A little of both, I imagine.” She laughed with more regret than humor. But then she cocked her head. “Marrying Dennis was a mistake,” she continued, “but it wasn’t the biggest one I made. You know, back in the day, I almost asked you not to go.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Before you enlisted? I knew you were leaving, and I was—afraid for you, of course, but more than that? I was afraid we’d miss our chance. And we did.”

“Carly...”

“Look, I know we were just kids. If I’d told you how I felt, it probably wouldn’t have changed a thing. But if you’d asked me to wait for you, I would have. I wouldn’t have made the mistake of marrying Dennis.”

She waited a beat, letting her words sink in. Then she sighed. “Maybe our timing’s all wrong again now, and it’s too late. Maybe we had our moment and missed it. But this time, I’m not letting us miss out on something because I didn’t tell you how I feel.”

I didn’t say anything because there was nothing to say. I’d known Carly all my life, but suddenly, I wasn’t sure I knew her at all.

She was right, our timing was terrible. Again. But deep down?

I didn’t care.

She’d bared her heart to me. It was an incredibly brave thing to do. And right now, I was in no position to say anything in response. I think she got that.

“Look at the time,” she said, glancing at her watch and rising from the swing. “Your shift starts in twenty. Can I walk you down?”

“That...would be great,” I said, standing up. “I’ll just lock up.”

We walked down the shore to the park together, barefoot in the sand. Somewhere along the way, we were holding hands. It felt so natural, I’m not

certain she even noticed.

But I did.

Chapter 30

Dex

As he lurked in the shadows, Molinere watched Brian stroll off toward the park with that woman. For a manic second, he'd thought she was Sherry, but a quick glimpse confirmed that he'd been wrong.

He'd drawn his weapon on reflex, but then slid it under his belt at the small of his back. The last thing he wanted was to explain a sidearm to some yokel cop, but it was a chance he'd have to take.

As Dex watched Brian walk away, he realized he had a window of opportunity. He had enough time to get into the house for a quick, thorough search. He'd take Sherry at gunpoint if necessary and get the hell out of Vale County.

After slipping out of the trees, he trotted across the drive to the kitchen door. That lock was new, well-oiled, and he was inside in under a minute.

He closed the door quietly behind him, drew his weapon, and made a quick search of the first floor, clearing each room in turn.

Nothing. No sign of Sherry.

With his weapon leading the way, Dex tiptoed silently up the stairs, pausing at the second floor landing to listen. For a moment he thought he heard a sound from outside. The crunch of gravel? A car rolling up?

He edged to a window that offered a view of the driveway and couldn't see a car, or anything out of place.

He picked up his pace, searching each of the upstairs rooms. Still nothing. Only one room even appeared to be in use. He looked at the graduation pictures of the lawyer with his mom and dad, and another with the lawyer and a taller man in basketball uniforms. This had to be Brian Lord's room.

Dex took special pains to look for any sign that Sherry had been there. He checked the bathroom for her perfume or shampoo, looked under the bed for her suitcase, and peeked into the closets.

But again, there was nothing. Not the slightest hint of her. As his frustration mounted, he grew less and less careful with his search, yanking out dresser drawers, dumping them on the bed, and pawing through them for any trace of his wife.

Shit! Dex lost it, hurling a nightstand across the room to smash the mirror on a closet door.

In a rage now, he dropped to his knees, groping between the mattress and a box spring. He upended the bed, dumping it on its side.

He *knew* she'd been here. He wanted to scream. He wanted to smash every piece of furniture in the place—but he froze.

Damn. There it was again. The same noise he'd heard before. Maybe it wasn't outside the house, though. Was it inside?

He'd searched downstairs so he knew those rooms were empty...

Regardless, it was time to get the hell out. He couldn't risk being caught here.

But as he started down the stairs, he heard the damn noise once more, and realized why he couldn't place it before. It was coming from *inside* the house, and it was muffled. Someone was shifting around in the closet at the foot of the stairs.

Had he checked it? He should have, but he'd been in such a big hurry to get upstairs...he must have walked right past it. And he could only think of one person who'd be scared and dumb enough to hide in a closet.

Taking the final steps two at a time, he jerked open the closet door.

"Surprise!"

But it wasn't Sherry.

A skinny guy in a black suit with dark hair and widow's peak emerged from the closet. He was holding an automatic, aimed straight at Dex's head. The gun was big, about 10 mil or a .45.

But it didn't matter. There was no time for finesse. Molinere had trained for this a million times...

Police procedure 101: Take control.

"Lower your weapon!" Dex roared, dropping to a combat crouch with his hand poised above his gun belt. "Get on your knees! Now!"

But that was when he realized his hand wasn't poised over a sidearm. He wasn't wearing a gun belt. Or a uniform. He was in camo, and his automatic was concealed in the small of his back.

The guy in the closet didn't even blink. "Or what?" he asked mildly. "You'll bleed on me when I blow your head off?"

"I'm a police officer," Dex managed. "I'm going to show you my identification."

"You move your hands and I'll show you what your brain looks like," the man said. "I heard you searching around up there. Did you find the file?"

Dex blinked, trying to craft an answer. Then realized it was already too late.

The man cocked his weapon. Dex wasn't sure which was worse, staring into the gun muzzle, or the eyes of the man who held it. They were both lifeless.

"You don't have any idea what I'm talking about, do you?" he said.

"I—no. I don't know about any file," Dex said, swallowing. "I'm looking for my wife."

"Under the bed?" the man snorted. "Did you find her?"

"No."

"That sounds like a predicament—for both of us. What am I supposed to do with you?"

Chapter 31

The sky was dark, gloomy, and overcast on my second day as a lifeguard. But it wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

With a chill breeze coming off the lake, the sun had barely peeked out before it disappeared behind a wall of dark clouds. A few moms showed up with their kids in tow, gamely unfolding their lawn chairs, and handing out pails and shovels. They were hoping the clouds would burn off.

They didn't.

By midafternoon, some teens got a volleyball game going. A few people gathered to watch, but not a soul dipped a toe in the water.

The empty day gave me plenty of time to stare out over the surf. I thought about Jimmy Valentine going missing and Corporal Molinere showing up.

But mostly, I thought about Carly, and the way she'd laid her heart on the line.

In a way, it was like the bomb had sent my life pinwheeling back through time, and crash-landed me on this beach.

But somehow, it didn't *feel* like a step back. Being on the beach felt like the most natural thing in the world to me. It felt like I was fated to be here, almost. As though I were getting a do-over, a second chance to live my life. This time, I could do things better and get them right...

Suddenly, my cell phone rang. It was Grady Baker.

"Hey Grady, what's up?"

"A lot. I've been working the Riviera Club, watching our friend. I was able to snap a picture of his gofer, but I've got no idea who he is, and Corzine may have spotted me. I think I'm burned, man."

"Jesus! Are you okay?"

"No. I'm in my car, headed for my apartment to pack a bag. I'm bailing out, Brian. If you want the picture, pick it up quick. Once I'm gone, I'm staying off the grid. There's an Irish pub on the corner near my place called Riley's. I'll

wait as long as I can, but you need to get here yesterday, man. I got a bad feeling about this.”

“On my way,” I said, standing up. I checked the beach automatically, remembering that I was still on the job.

I dialed Carly immediately. “Hey, I’ve got trouble. Can you find a sub for me? And loan me your car?”

She didn’t hesitate a second. “I’ve got a kid here looking for more hours. I’ll bring him with me. You can use my car, but I’m coming with it.”

I didn’t argue.

But I should have.

Chapter 32

Carly drove, rocketing down I-94 in her tiny Mini Cooper convertible. As we raced along, I told her who Grady was, what he'd been doing, and the danger he might be in.

It was a danger she might be in as well. Above all, I told her that I needed her to stay clear of this. No arguments.

She promised to drop me at the pub, then circle the block. If I came out alone, she'd pick me up. If I was in trouble or waved her off, she'd bail out, and call 911. It wasn't a brilliant plan, but in the army, troops bet their lives every day on these KISS tactics: Keep It Simple, Stupid.

In the city, we drove slowly, past Riley's Pub. I could see Grady sitting alone at a corner table, a beer in front of him. The restaurant was empty otherwise, despite it being lunch hour, which was odd.

"Okay," I said, "drop me at the corner and remember...?"

"KISS," Carly said. And we did. It was natural and wonderful and much too quick. In the next second, I was gone, and so was she.

I pushed into the pub, and headed for Grady's table. He looked on edge, and had a right to be. As I sat, he avoided my eyes.

And in that instant, I *knew*.

The question was, why had he sold me out? I didn't have to wait long to find out.

Damn. Bruno Corzine came out of the kitchen. He was pulling Carly with him.

Double damn.

I rose to my feet. "Are you okay?"

"She's fine, Counselor," Bruno said as the trio took a booth across the room. "And she'll stay fine, if you play it smart. Sit your ass down."

I sat. I didn't have a choice. There were four of them, and they were all armed. I wasn't. And I couldn't think of a single move that wouldn't get us all

killed.

Not that it mattered.

Because we were probably dead anyway.

Chapter 33

I turned to Bruno Corzine. Up close, he looked even rougher than I remembered. He had a brutal face and a trunk wide as a Mack truck. He was wearing a black silk running suit, though I doubted he was a jogger. Chances were, he was dressed for a funeral. Our funeral. And there wasn't a thing I could do about it.

"I'll do whatever you say, but the lady's got no part in this. She just gave me a lift."

"She's safe, Counselor, as long as you behave. I only want to talk."

"Then talk. What do you want?"

"To get you off my back," he said bluntly. "You're going to get us both killed."

"What are you talking about—?"

"My name isn't Corzine," he said, cutting me off. "It's Benedetto. Detective Anthony Charles Benedetto from the Chicago Organized Crime Unit."

I just stared. "You're a narc? Funny, because the last time we talked, you threatened to tear my arms off. And then my car blew up a few weeks later."

"I had nothing to do with that."

"Right. Because you're undercover. Am I supposed to just take your word for it?"

The pub doors pushed open and we both swiveled in our seats.

Lieutenant Bev Hilliard walked in wearing her black Donna Karan jacket and slacks.

What the hell?

"If you won't take my word," Bruno said, turning to face me again, "maybe you'll take hers."

Chapter 34

“Hey, Lieutenant,” Corzine said, as Hilliard pulled up a chair facing me. “Would you please tell this man who I am?”

“He’s Detective Tony Benedetto, on temporary duty out of Chicago,” Hilliard said. “And that information stays in this room. Life or death.”

I glanced from him to her and back again. She was dead serious. And that’s when I realized Tony Benedetto was telling the truth. Corzine was a made-up identity.

“I’ve been infiltrating the Zeman crime family for months,” Benedetto said. “You know who they are?”

“I was an ADA, of course I know who they are.”

“Benedetto’s risen higher in the crew than any undercover ever has before,” Hilliard offered.

“And it’s mostly thanks to you, Counselor,” Benedetto said.

“To me?”

“Terrible as it was, that car bombing *made* my reputation,” Benedetto said. “Zeman’s crew are mad dogs. I tangle with you, then somebody blows you to hell? They all think *I* did it. It put me in with that bunch instantly.”

“Glad we could help out,” I said bitterly. “Remind me to mention it to Serena.”

“I’m not trying to make light of what happened,” Benedetto said. “I am sorry for your loss.”

I brushed him off and said, “Okay, so you’re a narc. Why are we here? What do you want from us?”

“We need you and that investigator to back off before this gets out of control,” Hilliard said. “You blamed Corzine for Serena Rossi’s death. Clearly, he wasn’t involved, seeing as Corzine doesn’t really exist.”

“Because if the Riviera crew knew a PI was tailing me inside the club?” Benedetto said. “Somebody could’ve ended up dead.”

“Maybe somebody already has,” I said. “Any chance one of your new running buddies tried to do you a solid by lighting me up?”

“I know for a fact none of the Zeman crew was involved,” Benedetto said flatly. “My unit’s got more lines on all of them, and besides, it wouldn’t make sense for them to stick out their necks like that.”

“Why not?”

“Jimmy Valentine is the one making trouble, not you. If the Zemans were going to cap somebody, it’d be Jimmy. And they will, if we don’t fix this. That’s why I’m here. We need your help with him.”

“My help?” I echoed.

“My guys have Jimmy stashed in a safe house in Dearborn. I can’t tell him who I really am, because I don’t trust him.”

“I doubt he trusts you, either. He saw you beat a man to death.”

Benedetto scoffed. “He dreamt up that cock and bull story to get himself a plea deal.”

“Tony’s under surveillance twenty-four-seven for his own safety,” Hilliard added. “So we can confirm that it never happened.”

“He’s still my client. If you want him to drop his story, what does he get in return?”

“Are you serious?” Benedetto demanded. “He’s lying.”

“You want something, so does he,” I said. “That’s why it’s called a *plea bargain*.”

“How about this?” Hilliard cut in. “Valentine stands mute at his hearing, and we withdraw the gambling charges on a technicality. He walks with no time and no fine. Will that satisfy you?”

I mulled that a moment, but it was only for show. I didn’t have any wiggle room.

“Deal,” I nodded. Nobody offered to shake hands.

Benedetto rose, glowering down at me.

“What?” I asked.

“I’m gonna remember this,” he said. “If I ever get jammed up and need a lawyer? I’ll give you a call.”

“Sorry about the cloak and dagger,” Hilliard said, rising. “It was necessary. We had to hold your friend hostage because we thought you might destroy the operation otherwise. No offense, but you’ve been known to act rash. Just look at your past actions. You’ve been sticking your nose where it doesn’t belong.”

I didn’t bother to answer. She followed Benedetto out, leaving me with Grady

Baker.

Carly had a terrified look on her face, but was taking deep breaths, trying to figure out what was going on.

“I didn’t know they were cops, Brian,” he said, holding up his hands in mock surrender. “They grabbed me, told me to call you and get you here. I was just trying to stay alive for five more minutes.”

“I get it, Grady. No problem.”

“Maybe I can make it up to you,” he said. “But I’ll let you see to your girlfriend first. She looks pretty pissed. I’ll be waiting outside.”

Chapter 35

After Carly and I talked, we went outside, where Grady was waiting for me. Carly was clearly upset, and was now sitting in her car, fuming.

"Thanks for showing up tonight," Grady said. "That could have gone badly if you hadn't."

"I shouldn't have gotten you involved."

"You didn't. You offered me a job, and I took it. I knew the Riviera Club was risky. I liked the challenge of being invisible in a roomful of goombahs."

"Except the law was there, too," I said. "I should have guessed."

"You're a lawyer, not a cop. After all you've been through? You may not be thinking all that straight."

"About what?"

"The bombing."

"Five minutes ago, I would have sworn Corzine set it up. Now?" I shrugged.

"Yeah," he agreed. "Corzine's new identity changes everything. For me, too."

"How so?"

"Because you're a client who just saved my ass, and who *might* be in the crosshairs of a *former* client. One we both worked for."

"Marvin Garner? What are you trying *not* to tell me?"

"Just this. A few years ago, before you joined the firm? It was nearly bankrupt. Garner's wife left him, then his mistress..."

I couldn't focus on what he was saying. Hilliard had crossed the street to Carly's car, and the two of them were having a *very* heated discussion. Carly got so fired up, in fact, that she revved her Mini Cooper and roared off, leaving Hilliard staring blankly after her.

Terrific.

"...his *longtime* mistress," Grady added pointedly.

I turned back to him and suddenly realized what he was trying to tell me.

"Serena?" I asked. "Are you saying Serena was Garner's mistress?"

“During his divorce, Garner hired me to dig up dirt on his wife. But watching her meant watching him, too, so... Yes, I found out that Garner and Serena Rossi had a longtime thing. I think Serena expected to become the new Mrs. Garner once the divorce was final. Instead, Garner found a new girl.”

“Monique Kelso,” I said. “I heard gossip around the office about her, but never about Serena.”

Grady nodded. “Monique was tight with the boss, and knew where the bodies were buried, as they say. Now I’m wondering if it’s actually true.”

“What do you mean?”

“After the divorce, Garner’s business flatlined. Then he landed a new client, a Serb arms dealer named Luka Draculic. Overnight, his financial troubles vanished.”

“How?”

“I don’t know, but it had to involve a lot more than legal representation. As part of the deal, one of Draculic’s men became Garner’s driver and bodyguard.”

This Draculic guy sounded like trouble.

“I ran a background check on him. In Eastern Europe, the guy’s the poster boy for organized crime. He has a record with Interpol that’s as long as your arm.”

“What’s he doing here?”

“Whatever Garner says and that’s why I quit taking jobs from the firm, not that there were many anyway. Luka handles Marvin’s security problems these days.”

“By problems, do you mean the bombing?” I asked.

Grady nodded.

“But I’ve only met Garner twice. Why would he come after me?”

“You’re asking me to guess, and I only deal in facts. I’ve told you every damn thing I know to be a fact. The rest, you’ll have to figure out on your own. Look, after getting jammed up between the law and the mob, I’m catching the first bus headed anywhere. Good luck, Brian. You’re gonna need it.”

We shook hands and that was it. Grady vanished around a corner, the invisible man again.

Across the street, Hilliard was leaning against an unmarked gray sedan with her arms folded. Waiting.

“Need a lift?” she asked.

Damned right I did.

Chapter 36

Neither of us spoke for the first few miles of the drive. Hilliard was deep in thought and I was steaming.

“You knew about Benedetto all along,” I said.

“I warned you to stay away from him. I did everything I could.”

“You could have tried telling me the truth.”

“That wasn’t an option, and you know it. I had to do everything I could to protect the identity of the undercover cop. I only told you because I no longer had a choice.”

When I didn’t answer, she added, “We took a big gamble here too, you know. We exposed you to an undercover cop in a very dangerous, unstable crime op. Do you know how risky that was? But we wanted to give you full transparency to the situation so you’d believe us. I’d expect you to appreciate that.”

She was right, but that didn’t make it any easier to swallow.

“What did you say to Carly?”

“I told her to keep her mouth shut about this, on pain of death or incarceration. Sorry about that. Is she your girlfriend?”

“Yeah. Or at least she is for now.”

“She’s pretty mad at both of us,” Hilliard said. “But mostly you.”

“She has a right to be.”

“What did Grady tell you?”

“Good-bye. He’s blowing town to get clear of this case.”

“There is no case, Brian. Since Corzine isn’t a real gangster, you’re at square one. Exactly where I’ve been all along. Now that I’ve shared some very dangerous information with you...”

“Only to protect your undercover.”

“Even so, we’ve trusted you with the truth. Maybe it’s time you trusted us.”

I chewed on that, but not for long. I hadn’t been successful on my own.

“Grady says that before she met me, Serena Rossi was Marvin Garner’s

longtime mistress.”

She glanced at me. “That probably wasn’t fun to hear.”

“It wasn’t all that earthshaking, either. Serena was a few years older than I am, and we didn’t meet in a nunnery.”

“Where did you meet?”

“At Garner and Mackey. I was an ADA and she was a paralegal, and we worked some cases together. We hit it off. Maybe a bit too quickly.”

“Because she was on the rebound?”

“Possibly. Things happened awfully fast, and in hindsight, Serena pushed every decision we made. But I don’t see what that has to do with the car bomb.”

“Maybe Garner was jealous.”

“Of what? He already had a new, younger girlfriend. Besides, he was the opposite of vindictive. He didn’t fire Serena, he promoted her, and hired her new boyfriend. I started working there, didn’t I?”

Hilliard nods. “He sounds like a prince. I’ve got an ex-husband. Our breakup was civil, but I can’t see him hiring my significant other. I guess he’s not as nice as your ex-boss.”

“I’m not that nice, either,” I conceded. Then I blinked, realizing what I’d just said.

Hilliard caught my expression. “What?”

“The thing is, Garner’s kind of a jerk. After the bombing, he made a special trip to the hospital to fire me. Serena’s dead, I’m wounded, and Marvin personally handed me a pink slip.”

“Did he say why?”

“He implied that I was to blame for her death by saying that one of my riffraff clients probably tried to take me out. He said that if Serena hadn’t been involved with me, she’d still be breathing.”

“Any chance he was right?”

“I thought so at the time, because I was sure Corzine was behind it. But I’ve sorted through my other cases, and other than Sherry Molinere’s stalker husband, I can’t come up with a single client who’d want to punch me out, let alone blow me up. It could be someone else after all. I’m just lucky they missed.”

Hilliard fell silent, mulling something over.

“What if...?” She broke off, frowning, then glanced at me sharply. “What if they didn’t miss?”

“What do you mean?”

“Look, most of your clients, no offense, really are—”

“Low rent? I’m aware. Some of my cases are even pro bono.”

“But a bombing isn’t a low-rent enterprise. The device that erased your car had to have been expensive.”

I swung my head to the side, glaring at her. She hadn’t told me that.

“The thing is,” she went on quickly, before I could gripe, “people get murdered in Detroit literally every day. It’s one of the most violent cities in the country. But bombs don’t go off every day. Most victims are shot, stabbed, or bludgeoned. If you want to kill somebody in Motown, you walk up to ’em on the street, cap ’em, and keep right on going. Detroiters don’t call 911, they call Uber. They get in and out, as fast as they can.”

“What’s your point?”

“A bomb doesn’t just kill someone. It erases them. And also erases any... evidence they might be holding. Evidence that might make you hire an old lover’s new boyfriend, for instance.”

I swiveled in my seat, staring at her.

“You’re saying *Serena* was actually the target?”

“I’m not saying anything. I’m thinking out loud. We checked her background, as part of the investigation. She did well for herself as a paralegal, but she lived well above her means. Expensive apartment, new car. At the time, I didn’t think it was relevant, but now—”

She broke off when her cell phone rang. She glanced at the screen, then pressed it to her ear. “Chief Paquette? What can I do for you? Yes. Brian’s with me now.”

She switched her phone to Speaker.

“One of my guys drove past your cottage an hour ago,” the chief said. “He spotted Corporal Molinere’s car hidden in the brush behind the house.”

“That’s right near the spot where he pulled me over,” I said. “He’s probably staking out my place, looking for his wife, but she isn’t there.”

“There’s no sign of him, either, and my guy can track a mayfly across concrete. Any idea where the corporal might be?”

“Did you check the house?”

“It’s locked with no sign of forced entry,” Paquette said. “I’m having the car towed to the station. I’ll have a word with the corporal when he collects it.”

“If he collects it. If he figured out where my uncle’s got Sherry stashed, he may have changed cars to grab her. A client told me a black van’s been tailing me. Maybe Molinere isn’t working alone.”

I turned to Hilliard, placing my hand on her arm. “We have to turn around. Right now.”

Chapter 37

We raced into Port Vale with the lights and sirens blaring. I phoned my uncle Josh on the way. He said that Sherry was fine and that no strangers had been around. He was going to keep an eye out for the corporal, and he knew to dial 911 in an emergency.

But I doubted he'd bother.

Hilliard wanted to take me to Port Vale PD headquarters, but since she could brief the chief as well as I could, I had her drop me at the Vale Parks Department offices. I had a personal fire to put out.

Carly's car was there, but she wasn't. A cheery secretary told me she was at the beach, filling in for...well, me. I thanked her, and marched across the dunes to the park.

It was almost deserted. The overcast was still hanging on, and only a few diehards remained. There was a nanny with three rug rats, and an older woman in a lawn chair reading a Kindle. No swimmers at all.

Carly was in the tower chair, looking out over the water.

"Hey," I called.

"What is it?" she said, without turning.

"You're really mad, huh?"

"You think?" she sighed. "Actually, I'm not. I was mad, now I'm just..." She shrugged.

"Can we talk?"

"I'm on duty."

"I'd be glad to take over. That is, if I still have a job?"

"I'm not *that* mad. On a scale of one to ten, I'm at level four. *Seriously* annoyed. That's down from level seven, where I was after the pub. Ballistic."

"I'll take my chances," I said, climbing up the ladder to sit beside her. "Look, I'm really—"

"Save it," she said. "I know it wasn't your fault."

“What wasn’t?”

“Any of—that stuff in the city. I can’t actually talk about it or I’ll die in prison...That’s what that lady cop said, anyway. I was the one who insisted on coming along and you were too desperate to talk me out of it. It’s okay, I get that.”

“Carly—”

“No! We’re both lifeguards. We know how dangerous situations work. You warned me up front, so I knew what I was getting into. I’m not hurt, I’m just...”

“Scared?”

“In way over my head,” she admitted, taking a deep breath. “Are you in trouble with the police, Brian?”

I mulled on that a moment. “Not exactly. It’s more like...I’ve been causing some problems for them.”

“Really?” she sighed. “I’m shocked. Shocked!”

We both burst out laughing. And then laughed even harder. Not at her lame joke, but in relief. Because whatever the beef was between us, it was going to blow over. After the day we’d had, it felt awfully good to be laughing at anything at all.

We’d both sworn to keep silent about Corzine, but Carly deserved to know the truth about everything else. So I told her all I knew. She offered sympathy in the right places, but also asked pointed questions about the investigation.

I’d forgotten this side of her. Carly was supportive and kind, and very bright. In fact, she was sharp enough to conceal her steel-trap intelligence behind a smile. She hadn’t become the Parks Department supervisor by accident.

She listened to my explanation as we sat shoulder to shoulder in the tower chair while the light faded into the mist over the lake. As the purple shadows came on, we rose and took a long last look over our kingdom before climbing down from our throne.

It was truly ours alone now. There wasn’t another soul in sight.

Without warning, Carly turned and kissed me hard on the mouth, holding me so fiercely I thought we might fall out of the tower. Then she took a step back, staring up into my eyes. Waiting.

“That was...” I said.

“Important,” she said. “Remember it. With the way things are, it might never happen again. So remember it.”

“I will.”

And I would, because in that moment, I realized that Carly was the woman of

my dreams. It was like we were two souls cut from the same cloth and finally stitched together after all these years. I knew I'd do everything I could to make her want to stay in my life this time around.

Carly kissed me again and I felt something rustle in my shirt. I checked my breast pocket, and found the business card Dex Molinere had jammed in there that morning. "Call me," he'd said.

The chief wanted to know where he was. Maybe I could find out.

I dialed the number, and let it ring.

Chapter 38

Ruiz

In the parking lot behind the Port Vale Police Department, Patrolman Gene Ruiz was walking out to his ride when he heard a phone ringing nearby. He followed the sound to the unmarked State Police cruiser that had just been towed in. Had someone dropped a phone? Kneeling, he scanned the ground, and then peered under the car.

Nothing. But the ringing continued. And he realized it was coming from inside the vehicle.

From the trunk.

Chapter 39

Paquette, Hilliard, Ruiz

“Fetch a pry bar, Gene, pop this sucker open,” the chief said, scowling. “Something feels wrong.”

“I can call the Staties and have them send over a master key,” Hilliard suggested. “It’d be easier on the car.”

“That boy could be bleeding out in there. Get the goddamn pry bar, Ruiz, and if I hear one damn wisecrack about woman’s intuition, you’ll be picking up your teeth with your broken arm.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Ruiz trotted off. Every officer in her department loved the chief like family, she was everyone’s favorite Southern gran. But no one ever wanted to cross her.

Paquette and Hilliard stepped aside as Ruiz crammed the bar in the seam just above the license plate and popped the trunk open.

Ruiz took an involuntary step back.

But the chief didn’t. She leaned in over the corpse of Dexter Molinere, chewing the corner of her lip, frowning. She pressed a finger against his carotid, though there was clearly no need. His body was already cooling. Cupping his cheek with her palm, she swiveled his head, examining the bloody third eye neatly centered between his original pair.

She whistled softly to herself. “Heavy caliber,” she said. “I’d make it a 10 millimeter, or a .45. Definitely overkill. See the smudge around the wound? That’s a powder burn. The muzzle was less than an inch away when he fired. At that range, he could’ve used a brick.” She backed out, straightening her lanky frame, and kept frowning down at the body.

“This was an execution,” Hilliard said. “The bullet went through, but I don’t see any spatter or ricochet marks on the vehicle. He wasn’t shot in the trunk.”

“I’d guess Molinere was standing near the trunk when he was capped,” the

chief agreed. “The shooter walked him to the car, turned him around, and *pop!*” She smacked her lips. “Pushed him inside as he fell, barely mussing the dust on the bumper. That tells me he’s done this kind of work before. Damn, I hate to leave his body in the dark but...” She carefully closed the trunk.

“Call the State Police, Gene, tell ’em we got one of theirs. They’ll want their own CSI team to handle the car, but the crime scene’s ours. I want a team back out at the Lord place to scout the ground for blood and find that bullet. We have a dead officer and no one sleeps until we figure out who did this! Now go!”

Ruiz took off at a dead run.

The chief realized Hilliard was staring at her. “Something wrong, Lieutenant?”

“No, ma’am,” Bev said shaking head in wonder. “Not a thing.”

A prowl car rolled up, its strobes blazing, Ruiz at the wheel.

“If you’re waiting on me, you’re already late,” the chief said with a feral grin as she slid into the shotgun seat. “God, I love this job. Hit it, Gene.” Her car roared out of the lot.

Hilliard scrambled into her own car, racing after the chief, burning rubber all the way.

Chapter 40

The chief was already rapping hard on the kitchen door when I came charging up from the beach.

“What happened?” I asked. “What’s wrong?”

“A lot,” she said, looking me up and down. “But not the thing that worried me the most, since you’re still breathing. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Why are you here?”

“We found Corporal Molinere’s car stashed in a turnout a hundred yards up your road. I had it towed in.”

“You think he’s here?” I asked, nodding at the cottage.

“Nope. I know exactly where he is. In a body bag on a bus headed to Wayne County Morgue. Somebody capped him, stashed the body in his own trunk.”

“Jesus,” I said, wincing. “You don’t think I—”

“Oh, hell, no. I pretty much have a handle on where you’ve been all day. I was just concerned you might have run into the same trouble he did. I tried your cell on the way out here. Have you been inside?”

“No, I just came up from the beach.”

“Then we’d best take a look. Lieutenant Hilliard’s scouting the ground where we found the car. That’s most likely where Molinere caught it, but we don’t know that for a fact yet. Step aside, please.”

She drew her sidearm, a Glock automatic, and tried the knob. It turned, and the door opened.

“Do you normally keep this locked?”

“Usually, but it is Port Vale. So not always.”

“Nobody does,” she sighed. “They trust their amazing local police force.”

She pushed the door open, then paused, listening intently. “Wait out here, please.” She eased inside with her weapon at the ready.

Wait out here, my ass. This was my home. I followed her in, and the moment I did, I knew *everything* was wrong.

I glanced around, taking stock, and realized a dozen things were off. Drawers weren't *quite* closed. Closet doors were ajar. Sofa cushions were misaligned, as though they'd been pulled out and then shoved back.

Someone had searched the place thoroughly.

Molinere?

Possibly. But the rogue cop had been looking for his wife. He might have scrounged around for her things, her clothes, maybe a suitcase, but he wouldn't be rummaging under the sofa cushions for her.

Could it be somebody else? Maybe it was the same somebody who stuffed Molinere's corpse in his own trunk...

Chief Paquette was edging silently down the stairs. I hadn't even heard her go up.

"I told you to wait outside."

"Sorry."

"Not as sorry as you're about to be. The bedroom at the top of the stairs has been totally trashed. That one yours?"

I nodded. "That had to be Molinere. He was probably looking for his wife."

"Was she here?"

"Never. This place is in the phone book, for Pete's sake."

"Where is she now?"

I hesitated.

"Mr. Lord, right about now, the county coroner is tweezing shell fragments out of her husband's brain. I need to talk to her."

"My uncle moved her again. She doesn't trust the police, Chief. Every time she's asked for help—"

"Some jerk-off patrolman would call her old man, he'd explain it away as a little tiff with the junkie wife? I get that and I sympathize, Counselor, but this is a murder case now, not a domestic dispute. Your client's delicate sensibilities are way down the list of crap I'm worried about. We don't know who capped her husband or why. She could be next. So blowing me off isn't an option. Clear?"

"Crystal," I nodded.

"Where is she?"

"With my uncle, stashed in one of the homes he's remodeling. I don't know which one."

"I think I do. Don't worry, we'll find him. I'm going to leave a man with you. You're not safe here alone."

I was alone. The realization hit me square in the gut. Carly hadn't followed

me in from the beach. And she should have been here by now.

I didn't know what was wrong, but knew something was. And I'd put Carly right in the middle of it.

"I'll be fine," I lied. "I just need to clean the place up. And I'd like to be there when you talk to Sherry."

"She'll be at the station," the chief said, and she headed out without looking back.

I waited until I heard her car rumble off. Then I took a deep breath and stepped out onto the porch.

"Carly?"

There was a cluster of cedars twenty yards from the house. Carly stepped from behind them, into the open.

She wasn't alone. A man in a dark suit was standing slightly behind her.

Luka. Garner's bodyguard. It had to be.

I swallowed hard, because I knew how dangerous he was. He had to have been the one who shot Dex Molinere, and stuffed the man into his own trunk.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"I want things to go smoothly," Luka said. "No trouble. We talk to Mr. Garner, you give him what you stole, we all part as friends." He gave me a faint smile. It wasn't reassuring.

He was holding a gun at his side, instead of pointing it at Carly, or me. But I knew his reflexes were so fast that it wasn't necessary.

"The way you parted as friends with Molinere?"

"Ah. That's why the police were here? They found the body of the man who broke into your house?"

"The police are still here," I said. "They're just up the road, where you left his body."

"I don't know anything about that," Luka shrugged, the smile totally gone. "You break into people's houses, bad things happen."

He gestured with the gun. "I'm parked down the shore on the access road. I think it's time we head to my car."

Chapter 41

Luka forced me behind the wheel of Garner's Lincoln while he and Carly rode in back. I tried to adjust the mirror to see her face, but he shook his head.

"Keep your eyes on the road," he grunted. "If we get stopped, your friend goes first."

I followed Luka's directions to Marvin Garner's lakeshore estate. It was a magnificent, century-old stacked-stone masterpiece. I would have been impressed, but as we rolled past the sculptured hedges that lined the long driveway, all I could think about was Carly, squeezed in the corner of the backseat with the gunman.

I've never felt so totally helpless. I wanted to tear his goddamn arms off.

He caught me watching him in the corner of the rearview mirror, and just smiled. He knew exactly what I was thinking and it didn't worry him a bit. And that worried me a lot.

"Stop here."

We left the car in the driveway, and circled the house on foot. Luka stayed behind me, well out of reach, keeping Carly close to his side. We found Marvin Garner relaxing by his Olympic pool in a red silk robe.

He straightened in his chair as we approached, but it wasn't out of courtesy. Beneath his cool, stony exterior, I could see he was enraged.

"Mr. Lord," he said, laying his tablet aside on a cabana table by his phone. "You're proving to be a huge goddamn problem."

"And having me kidnapped—?"

"You haven't been kidnapped. You've disappeared. You and your girlfriend have taken off for parts unknown. And given your recent troubles, who can blame you?"

"You can't—"

"Shut your mouth! I only want one thing from you. The files Serena took. I

know you have them. So where are they?"

"Files?" I echoed, genuinely confused.

But Garner has been a trial lawyer for thirty years. He'd been reading juries before I was born. He knew the truth when he saw it. And he knew I didn't know what he was talking about.

"You don't know what files I mean, do you?" he said, darkly.

"No," I said quickly, "but I can help you find them. We both want the same thing, Marvin. We want to get on the right side of whatever's gone wrong. Walk away in one piece." I glanced involuntarily at Luka as I said it, and he followed my line of vision.

In that instant, I knew there wasn't a prayer they'd let us go. We were all in too deep. But as long as I was talking, Carly was breathing. "Tell me what you need," I said evenly. "Let me help."

He considered that a moment, but seemed to come to the same conclusion I had. Nothing he said to me would matter. It would all end here, one way or the other.

"Serena was my mistress for a time," he shrugged, as if he had nothing to lose. "When my wife left me, Serena assumed she'd take her place, but the last thing I wanted was a new wife. Serena didn't take rejection well. After we ended things, she made copies of proprietary files, then tried to sell them back to me."

"Files involving Luka's boss?" I asked.

"Files that were vital to the firm."

"She was blackmailing you?"

"Serena wasn't shy about getting whatever she wanted," Garner shrugged. "I can see now that you aren't, either."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning, cut the crap. This isn't a negotiation, Brian. I need those files."

"I get that," I said, "and I get how serious you are, because your goon over there killed a state trooper today."

When Garner didn't even flinch, my last glimmer of hope vanished. Carly and I had no chance. He wouldn't save us because his head was on the chopping block, too. He would do anything to get the files to save himself.

"Maybe his friend here can tell us," Luka added, seizing Carly's upper arm. "Maybe he'll tell us, if I ask her hard enough."

"No!" I blurted. I cursed myself internally, realizing I'd showed them how much Carly meant to me. "Look, I'll get you the damn files," I said. "But first, let her go."

“You don’t have the files,” Luka said. Then he thrust Carly toward me. I grabbed her to keep her from falling.

“What are you doing?” Garner demanded, getting to his feet. “Don’t be an idiot, Luka, you can’t do anything at the house. I can’t have the police—”

And that’s when Carly pushed Garner, sending him into the gunman. During that split second when Garner was in the line of fire, I charged.

Barreling into both of them, I swept them backward, plunging all three of us into the pool.

Both men cursed as they fell. That curse was the last thing Luka ever said. He was struggling to bring his gun around when I drove a fist into his diaphragm. The stiff punch forced the last burst of air from his body.

He gasped, filling his lungs with water. I grabbed his collar, holding his head down in the pool. He struggled for a moment, firing his gun—once, twice—but only in sheer reflex as his life thrashed away.

Finally, he took a final gasp.

I pushed him away from me. His body drifted slowly down to the bottom of the pool, still clutching the gun in his fist. I swam down to get it and kicked back up to the surface of the water.

At the far end of the pool, Carly was keeping Garner at bay with a skim net, smashing his fingers whenever he tried to climb out. I hauled him out, hacking and choking. Then I drew back my fist—

“Don’t do it,” Carly said.

“Why the hell not?”

“You can’t beat him, Brian. It’ll complicate things with the police.”

She was right. But I really hated that she was.

When the police arrived, Garner was too shaken to lie coherently to Hilliard and the chief, especially with the gunman floating a few feet away in his pool.

They worked together well as the chief asked fresh questions before Garner could invent a workable lie for the one Hilliard had previously asked. Once two of the chief’s officers hauled Luka’s corpse out of the water, Garner broke down completely, babbling a confession.

Carly and I were at the cabana bar, waiting for our turn to be grilled, when a cell phone rang. I picked it up, assuming it would be one of Garner’s accomplices.

But it wasn’t.

“Marvin?” a woman asked.

The bottom of my world dropped out. Because I know the voice as well as I

know my own.

“Serena?”

She didn’t answer, but she didn’t have to. The line went so silent, I could hear her breathing.

“Serena? Is that you?”

Chapter 42

I spent the next hour in a basement cell at Port Vale PD, stonewalling everyone. They asked questions about Luka, but I had nothing to say.

First, a US marshal named Caldwell tried to bully information out of me, then Hilliard and the chief tried sweet reason to make me talk. I told them I was perfectly willing to explain exactly what happened and my part in it. The whole thing.

But first? There was someone I wanted to talk to. Face to face.

They'd get my full cooperation only after I talked to my late fiancée, Serena Rossi.

Finally, they caved. Caldwell led me upstairs to the chief's glassed-in office, but he made me wear handcuffs.

"Sit at the desk, and keep your hands in plain sight at all times," he cautioned. "No sudden movements."

A few minutes later, he ushered Serena in. He held her chair as she sat down, facing me.

No handcuffs for her, I noticed. Caldwell took up a post by the door. He folded his arms and set his face in a permanent scowl.

I'd expected Serena to look train-wreck terrible—as bad as I'd felt in the first days after the bombing. I thought she'd be teary-eyed and sorrowful over the mess she'd made of our lives.

But she looked terrific, albeit strikingly different. Her long dark hair was cropped short and frosted blond. She'd always dressed well, but somehow she managed to look more "uptown" than before. In her short skirt, ecru designer jacket, and stiletto heels, she looked impeccable and even prettier than I remembered.

And yet, far, far less attractive.

I'd loved her once, or thought I had. Now she looked like...a casual acquaintance. She seemed like someone I'd known for a time, and not very well.

It wasn't far from the truth.

I was still dressed for the beach, in shorts and a Hawaiian shirt. My whole outfit was sodden from Garner's pool. I'd tried to hold on to my anger long enough to act outraged with her, but I couldn't even manage that.

"You are one great-looking corpse," I joked. "Are you okay?"

"Better than expected," she said. "How much have they told you?"

"Not a thing. What happened?"

"The day that bomb went off, when I was waiting in the car for you, Marshal Caldwell came charging in to haul me out. He said my life was in danger, and it turned out he wasn't kidding."

"Wait, they knew about the bomb? In advance?"

"We found out a few minutes beforehand," Caldwell interrupted. "I managed to get Miss Rossi to safety, and I was coming back for you when...well. It blew. There was nothing left of the car and no witnesses. You were unconscious. We figured our best chance to keep her alive was to let everyone think she was dead."

"Including me?"

He shrugged, which was answer enough.

"And now?" I asked.

"I cut a deal with the federal prosecutors and the marshals," Serena said. "I'll testify against Marvin and the Serbian crime circle. In return I get witness protection. A new identity, and a new life."

"On your own?"

"Be real, Brian. I hooked up with you because I wanted to make Marvin jealous, and you were the perfect guy for it. Handsome, hungry, and hot. Especially at first. But it wasn't working out for us. We wouldn't have lasted another week, let alone happily ever after."

I couldn't argue the point. She was right.

"And the black van?" I asked Caldwell. "Was that your team? Keeping tabs on me?"

"We were concerned Miss Rossi might try to contact you," Caldwell said. "Witnesses often try to stay in touch with their old lives."

My mind was racing. Serena *had* stayed in touch, but not with me. She must have been the one who blackmailed Garner. And since he thought she was dead, he assumed I'd been doing it.

Serena was the person who'd put me—and Carly—in danger this whole time.

I looked across the table at her, knowing that this conversation could go two

ways. I could out her right there, and she could do some hard time in jail.

Or I could keep quiet, and let her go in peace.

She seemed to notice my hesitancy, because a look of horrified shock crossed her face. Her eyes pleaded with me. They asked me not to blame her.

And I truly didn't.

Because she's not the only one who's starting a new life.

Chapter 43

The next day, I was back on the beach at first light, raking sand over the bonfire embers, picking up the empties, and watching the sun rise out of the breakers.

I was in my tower chair by nine, the Lord of the Shore again. I was watching, waiting for little kids to make little mistakes so I could save them.

At noon, Carly came by to rotate me out for lunch. She was barefoot and wearing a mauve swimsuit. I didn't want lunch, so I stayed on instead, sharing my throne with her. Both of us gazed out over the lake in silence. After everything that had happened, we were a bit uneasy with each other now.

We'd been kids together and good friends once. And now we were a lot more than that.

We'd shared the most earth-shattering kiss up in the lifeguard tower, on my favorite beach in the world.

But being with me had nearly gotten her killed.

And she'd seen me drown a man at the bottom of the pool.

Yet, here she was. Sitting beside me. In a silence that was killing me.

"So...um...I'm guessing you're still really angry with me, right?" I asked. "Level twenty-something?"

"That depends."

"On?"

"On where your resurrected lady love spent the night."

"Seriously?" I asked. "That's what you're mad about?"

"There's a long list of things I'm not happy about. But at the moment, that's the one that tops my list. So?"

"I wouldn't touch her with a ten-foot pole."

"Really," she said, giving me a look.

"Serena left with the marshals last night, Carly. She's agreed to testify against Garner and the Serbs in exchange for witness protection."

“So she’s gone?”

“She’s out of my life. Again. And all the way out this time. For good.”

She turned to stare at me. “And is it good? Having her out of your life, I mean?”

“Carly, she lied to me, and she nearly got us both killed. I don’t wish her harm, but believe me, whatever we had going is definitely over.”

“I see,” she nodded slowly, turning away. “And what about you? What will you do now?”

I couldn’t help smiling at that.

“I’m already doing it. I’m here, with you, watching the breakers roll in. I went to war, and I’ve been hustling my butt off since I came back, trying to make up for lost time. I thought I was doing okay, but now...?” I broke off, uncertain of how to say what needed to be said.

“But now what?” she prompted. She wasn’t looking at me. Instead, she stared straight out across the lake.

“I truly want to start my life over, Carly. Not from the beginning. Just from right...here.”

“Lifeguarding is a summer job, Brian.”

“I know it’s not a career, and I do have options. My ex-boss from the prosecutor’s office, Leon Stolz, called last night. He offered me my old job back.”

“So you’re leaving—”

“Never. I told him I’d think about it, but I was just being polite. I love the law and I’ll keep helping clients, but I don’t need a cubicle at Murphy Hall to do it. And I definitely don’t need an office on Cadillac Square. The view’s a lot better here.”

“Are you kidding?”

“I’m dead serious. Why should I go to work wearing a three-piece suit when I can be on the beach? Soaking up rays, watching the surf roll in?”

We stared out at the water, and I felt perfectly at peace.

Then I leaned back, looked at her, and said, “Look, I know it won’t last forever, but right now? I’m *exactly* where I need to be. A lifeguard lawyer. I don’t want my old job back and I don’t want a new one. I’ve already got the sweetest job on the planet. Right here. If that works for you.”

She didn’t say anything for a bit. She turned away from me, lost in thought. A seagull wheeled over us, keening. It was the loneliest sound in the world.

“What about me?” she asked at last. “What about us? Do I have a place in this

brave new world of yours?”

“You’re the most important part of it. The only part that matters. Maybe I blew our chance back in the day, but it wasn’t our only shot. Serena’s starting over, maybe we can, too. Maybe we can get it right...”

But she didn’t seem to be listening. She was staring out over the water. Counting off the seconds under her breath.

“Too long,” she said abruptly, bolting out of the chair, scrambling down the ladder. “Three kids dove off the second raft. Only two came up. Can’t see the other one.” And then she was off, sprinting into the surf.

Shit!

Impeccable timing, again.

I was only half a step behind her, racing through the breakers toward the raft. Two kids were on it now, pounding their feet and frantically yelling for their friend.

When the waves hit us chest high, we both dove into them. We swam hard through the surf, taking long breaths to prep ourselves to dive down deep to find the lost boy and save him.

Together.

About the Authors

James Patterson has written more bestsellers and created more enduring fictional characters than any other novelist writing today. He lives in Florida with his family.

Doug Allyn is the author of eight novels and more than 120 short stories. He has won many awards for his short mystery fiction.

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