

Absolute Power

by David Baldacci, 1960-

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Dedication

TO MICHELLE, my dearest friend, my loving wife, my partner in crime,
without you this dream would have remained a feeble glint in a weary eye
TO MY MOTHER AND FATHER, no parents could have done any more
TO MY BROTHER AND SISTER, for putting up with a lot from their
younger sibling and still always being there for me

“Absolute power corrupts absolutely.”
—LORD ACTON

Chapter 1

HE GRIPPED THE STEERING WHEEL LOOSELY AS THE CAR, ITS lights out, drifted slowly to a stop. A few last scraps of gravel kicked out of the tire treads and then silence enveloped him. He took a moment to adjust to the surroundings and then pulled out a pair of worn but still effective night-vision binoculars. The house slowly came into focus. He shifted easily, confidently in his seat. A duffel bag lay on the front seat beside him. The car’s interior was faded but clean.

The car was also stolen. And from a very unlikely source.

A pair of miniature palm trees hung from the rearview mirror. He smiled grimly as he looked at them. Soon he might be going to the land of palms. Quiet, blue, see-through water, powdery salmon-colored sunsets and late mornings. He had to get out. It was time. For all the occasions he had said that to himself, this time he felt sure.

Sixty-six years old, Luther Whitney was eligible to collect Social Security, and was a card-carrying member of AARP. At that age most men had settled down into second careers as grandfathers, part-time raisers of their children’s children, when weary joints were eased down into familiar recliners and arteries finished closing up with the clutter of a lifetime.

Luther had had only one career his entire life. It involved breaking and entering into other people’s homes and places of business, usually in the nighttime, as now, and taking away as much of their property as he could feasibly carry.

Though clearly on the wrong side of the law, Luther had never fired a gun or hurled a knife in anger or fear, except for his part in a largely confusing war fought where South and North Korea were joined at the hip. And the only punches

he had ever thrown were in bars, and those only in self-defense as the suds made men braver than they should have been.

Luther only had one criterion in choosing his targets: he took only from those who could well afford to lose it. He considered himself no different from the armies of people who routinely coddled the wealthy, constantly persuading them to buy things they did not need.

A good many of his sixty-odd years had been spent in assorted medium- and then maximum-security correctional facilities along the East Coast. Like blocks of granite around his neck, three prior felony convictions stood to his credit in three different states. Years had been carved out of his life. Important years. But he could do nothing to change that now.

He had refined his skills to where he had high hopes that a fourth conviction would never materialize. There was absolutely nothing mysterious about the ramifications of another bust: he would be looking at the full twenty years. And at his age, twenty years was a death penalty. They might as well fry him, which was the way the Commonwealth of Virginia used to handle its particularly bad people. The citizens of this vastly historic state were by and large a God-fearing people, and religion premised upon the notion of equal retribution consistently demanded the ultimate payback. The commonwealth succeeded in disposing of more death row criminals than all but two states, and the leaders, Texas and Florida, shared the moral sentiments of their Southern sister. But not for simple burglary; even the good Virginians had their limits.

Yet with all that at risk he couldn't take his eyes off the home—mansion, of course, one would be compelled to call it. It had engrossed him for several months now. Tonight that fascination would end.

Middleton, Virginia. A forty-five-minute drive west on a slingshot path from Washington, D.C. Home to vast estates, obligatory Jaguars, and horses whose price tags could feed the residents of an entire inner-city apartment building for a year. Homes in this area sprawled across enough earth with enough splendor to qualify for their own appellation. The irony of his target's name, the Coppers, was not lost upon him.

The adrenaline rush that accompanied each job was absolutely unique. He imagined it was somewhat like how the batter felt as he nonchalantly trotted the bases, taking all the time in the world, after newly bruised leather had landed somewhere in the street. The crowd on its feet, fifty thousand pairs of eyes on one human being, all the air in the world seemingly sucked into one space, and then suddenly displaced by the arc of one man's glorious swing of the wood.

Luther took a long sweep of the area with his still sharp eyes. An occasional firefly winked back at him. Otherwise he was alone. He listened for a moment to the rise and fall of the cicadas and then that chorus faded into the background, so omnipresent was it to every person who had lived long in the area.

He pulled the car further down the blacktop road and backed onto a short dirt road that ended in a mass of thick trees. His iron-gray hair was covered with a black ski hat. His leathery face was smeared black with camouflage cream; calm, green eyes hovered above a cinder block jaw. The flesh carried on his spare frame was as tight as ever. He looked like the Army Ranger he had once been. Luther got out of the car.

Crouching behind a tree, Luther surveyed his target. The Coppers, like many country estates that were not true working farms or stables, had a huge and ornate wrought iron gate set on twin brick columns but had no fencing. The grounds were accessible directly from the road or the nearby woods. Luther entered from the woods.

It took Luther two minutes to reach the edge of the cornfield adjacent to the house. The owner obviously had no need for home-grown vegetables but had apparently taken the country squire role to heart. Luther wasn't complaining, since it afforded him a hidden path almost to the front door.

He waited a few moments and then disappeared into the embracing thickness of the corn stalks.

The ground was mostly clear of debris and his tennis shoes made no sound, which was important, for any noise carried easily here. He kept his eyes straight ahead; his feet, after much practice, carefully picked their way through the slender rows, compensating for the slight unevenness of the ground. The night air was cool after the debilitating heat of another stagnant summer, but not nearly cool enough for breath to be transformed into the tiny clouds that could be seen from a distance by restless or insomniac eyes.

Luther had timed this operation several times over the past month, always stopping at the edge of the field before stepping into the front grounds and past no-man's-land. In his head, every detail had been worked and reworked hundreds of times until a precise script of movement, waiting, followed by more movement was firmly entrenched in his mind.

He crouched down at the edge of the front grounds and took one more long look around; no need to rush. No dogs to worry about, which was good. A human, no matter how young and fleet, simply could not outrun a dog. But it was the noise they made that stopped men like Luther cold. There was also no perimeter security system, probably because of the innumerable false alarms that would be caused by the large populations of deer, squirrel and raccoon roaming over the area. However, Luther would shortly be faced with a highly sophisticated defense package that he would have thirty-three seconds to disarm—and that included the ten seconds it would take him to remove the control panel.

The private security patrol had passed through the area thirty minutes earlier. The cop clones were supposed to vary their routines, making sweeps through their surveillance sectors every hour. But after a month of observations, Luther had easily discerned a pattern. He had at least three hours before another pass would be made. He wouldn't need nearly that long.

The grounds were pitch black, and thick shrubs, the lifeblood of the burglary class, clung to the brick entryway like a caterpillar nest to a tree branch. He checked each window of the house: all black, all silent. He had watched the caravan carrying the home's occupants parade out two days ago to points south, and carefully took inventory of all owners and personnel. The nearest estate was a good two miles away.

He took a deep breath. He had planned everything out, but in this business, the simple fact was that you could never account for everything.

He loosened the grips on his backpack and then glided out from the field in long, smooth strides across the lawn, and in ten seconds was facing the thick,

solid-wood front door with reinforced steel framing together with a locking system that was rated at the top of the charts for holding force. None of which concerned Luther in the least.

He slipped a facsimile front-door key out of his jacket pocket and inserted it into the keyhole without, however, turning it.

He listened for another few seconds. Then he slipped off his backpack and changed his shoes so there would be no traces of mud. He readied his battery-operated screwdriver, which could reveal the circuitry he needed to fool ten times faster than he could by hand.

The next piece of equipment he carefully pulled from his backpack weighed exactly six ounces, was slightly bigger than a pocket calculator and other than his daughter was the best investment he had ever made in his life. Nicknamed "Wit" by its owner, the tiny device had assisted Luther in his last three jobs without a hitch.

The five digits comprising this home's security code had already been supplied to Luther and programmed into his computer. Their proper sequence was still a mystery to him, but that obstacle would have to be eradicated by his tiny metal, wire and microchip companion if he wanted to avoid the ear-piercing shriek that would instantly emit from the four sound cannons planted at each corner of the ten-thousand-square-foot fortress he was invading. Then would follow the police call dialed by the nameless computer he would battle in a few moments. The home also had pressure-sensitive windows and floor plates, in addition to tamperproof door magnets. All of which would mean nothing if Wit could tear the correct code sequence from the alarm system's grasp.

He eyed the key in the door and with a practiced motion hooked Wit to his harness belt so that it hung easily against his side. The key turned effortlessly in the lock and Luther prepared to block out the next sound that he would hear, the low beep of the security system that warned of impending doom for the intruder if the correct answer was not fed into it in the allotted time and not a millisecond later.

He replaced his black leather gloves with a pair of more nimble plastic ones that had a second layer of padding on the fingertips and palms. It was not his practice to leave any evidence behind. Luther took one deep breath, then opened the portal. The shrill beep of the security system met him instantly. He quickly moved into the enormous foyer and confronted the alarm panel.

The automatic screwdriver whirled noiselessly; the six metal pieces dropped into Luther's hands and then were deposited in a carrier on his belt. Slender wires attached to Wit flashed against the sliver of moonlight seeping through the window beside the door, and then Luther, probing momentarily like a surgeon through a patient's chest cavity, found the correct spot, clipped the strands into place and then flipped on the power source to his companion.

From across the foyer, a slash of crimson stared down at him. The infrared detector had already locked on Luther's thermal offset. As the seconds ticked down, it patiently waited for the security system's "brain" to pronounce the intruder friend or foe.

Faster than the eye could follow, the numbers flashed across Wit's digital screen in neon amber; the allotted time blinked down in a small box at the top-right-hand corner of the same screen.

Five seconds elapsed and then the numbers 5, 13, 9, 3 and 11 appeared on Wit's tiny glass face and locked.

The beep stopped on cue as the security system was disarmed, the red light flashed off and was replaced with the friendly green, and Luther was in business. He removed the wires, screwed the plate back on and repacked his equipment, then carefully locked the front door.

The master bedroom was on the third floor, which could be reached by an elevator down the main first-floor hallway to the right, but Luther chose the stairs instead. The less dependent he was on anything he did not have complete control over the better. Getting stuck in an elevator for several weeks was not part of his battle plan.

He looked at the detector in the corner of the ceiling as its rectangular mouth smiled at him, its surveillance arc asleep for now. Then he headed up the staircase.

The master bedroom door was not locked. In a few seconds he had his low-power, nonglare work lamp set up and took a moment to look around. The green glow from a second control panel mounted next to the bedroom door broke the darkness.

The house itself had been built within the last five years; Luther had checked the records at the courthouse and had even managed to gain access to a set of blueprints of the place from the planning commissioner's office, it being large enough to require special blessing from the local government as though they would ever actually deny the rich their wishes.

There were no surprises in the building plans. It was a big, solid house more than worth the multimillion-dollar price tag that had been paid in cash by its owner.

Indeed, Luther had visited this home once before, in broad daylight, with people everywhere. He had been in this very room and he had seen what he needed to see. And that was why he was here tonight.

Six-inch crown molding peered down at him as he knelt next to the gigantic, canopied bed. Next to the bed was a nightstand. On it were a small silver clock, the newest romance novel of the day and an antique silver-plated letter opener with a thick leather handle.

Everything about the place was big and expensive. There were three walk-in closets in the room, each about the size of Luther's living room. Two were occupied by women's clothes and shoes and purses and every other female accoutrement one could rationally or irrationally spend money on. Luther glanced at the framed prints on the nightstand and wryly observed the twenty-something "little woman" next to the seventy-something husband.

There were many types of lotteries in the world and not all of them state-run.

Several of the photos showed off the lady of the house's proportions to almost maximum degree, and his quick examination of the closet revealed that her dressing pleasures leaned to the downright sleazy.

He looked up at the full-length mirror, studying the ornate carvings around its edges. He next surveyed the sides. It was a heavy, nifty bit of work, built right into the wall, or so it seemed, but Luther knew that hinges were carefully hidden into the slight recess six inches from the top and bottom.

Luther looked back at the mirror. He had the distinct advantage of having seen a target like this full-length model a couple of years ago although he hadn't planned to crack it. But you didn't ignore a second golden egg just because you had the first in hand, and that second golden egg had been worth about fifty thou'. The prize on the other side of this private looking glass he figured would be about ten times that.

Using brute force and the aid of a crowbar he could overcome the locking system built into the mirror's carvings but that would take precious time. And, more than that, it would leave behind obvious signs of the place having been violated. And although the house was supposed to be empty for the next several weeks, one never knew. When he left the Coppers there would be no obvious evidence he had ever been there. Even upon their return the owners might not check the vault for some time. In any event, he did not have to take the hard route.

He walked quickly over to the large-screen TV located against one wall of the vast chamber. The area was set up as a sitting room with matching chintz-covered chairs and a large coffee table. Luther looked at the three remotes lying there. One to work the TV, one for the VCR and one that would cut his night's work by ninety percent. Each had a brand name on it, each looked pretty much like the other, but a quick experiment showed that two worked their appropriate apparatus and one did not.

He walked back across the room, pointed the control at the mirror and pushed the lone red button located at the bottom of the hardware. Ordinarily that action meant the VCR was recording. Tonight, in this room, it meant the bank was opening for business for its one fortunate customer.

Luther watched the door swing open easily, silently on the now-revealed no-maintenance hinges. From long habit, he replaced the control exactly where it had been, pulled a collapsible duffel bag out of his backpack and entered the vault.

As his light swept through the darkness he was surprised to see an upholstered chair sitting in the middle of the room, which looked to be about six feet by six feet. On the chair's arm rested an identical remote, obviously a safeguard against being locked in by accident. Then his eyes took in the shelves down each side.

The cash, bundled neatly, went in first, then the contents of the slender boxes that were definitely not costume jewelry. Luther counted about two hundred thousand dollars' worth of negotiable bonds and other securities, and two small boxes of antique coins and another of stamps, including one of an inverted figure that made Luther swallow hard. He ignored the blank checks and the boxes full of legal documents, which were worthless to him. His quick assessment ended at almost two million dollars, probably more.

He took one more look around, taking care not to miss any stray nook. The walls were thick—he figured they had to be fireproof, or as fireproof as man could make something. The place wasn't hermetically sealed; the air was fresh, not stale. Somebody could stay in here for days.

* * * * *

THE LIMO MOVED QUICKLY DOWN THE ROAD FOLLOWED BY THE van, each driver expert enough to accomplish this feat without the benefit of headlights.

Inside the spacious back seat of the limo were a man and two women, one of whom was close to being drunk and who was doing her best to undress the man and herself right there, despite the gentle defensive efforts of her victim.

The other woman sat across from them tight-lipped, ostensibly trying to ignore the ridiculous spectacle, which included girlish giggling and much panting, but in reality she closely observed every detail of the pair's efforts. Her focus was on a large book that sat open in her lap where appointments and notes battled each other for space and the attention of the male sitting across from her, who took the opportunity of his companion wrenching off her spike heels to pour himself another drink. His capacity for alcohol was enormous. He could drink twice the amount he had already consumed tonight and there would be no outward signs, no slurring of speech or impeded motor functions—which would have been deadly for a man in his position.

She had to admire him, his obsessions, his truly raw edges, while at the same time his being able to project an image to the world that cried out purity and strength, normalcy but, at the same time, greatness. Every woman in America was in love with him, enamored with his classic good looks, immense self-assurance and also what he represented, for all of them. And he returned that universal admiration with a passion, however misplaced, that astonished her.

Unfortunately, that passion had never pointed itself in her direction despite her subtle messages, the touches that lingered a shade too long; how she maneuvered to see him first thing in the morning when she looked her best, the sexual references used in their strategy sessions. But until that time came—and it would come, she kept telling herself—she would be patient.

She looked out the window. This was taking too long; it threw everything else off. Her mouth curled up in displeasure.

* * * * *

LUTHER HEARD THE VEHICLES ENTER THE FRONT DRIVE. HE flitted to a window and followed the mini-caravan as it went around back, where it would be hidden from view from the front drive. He counted four people alighting from the limo, one from the van. His mind scrolled swiftly through possible identities. Too small a party for it to be the owners of the house. Too many for it to be someone simply checking on the place. He could not make out any faces. For one ironic instant Luther debated whether the home was destined to be burgled twice on the same night. But that was too enormous a coincidence. In this business, like a lot of others, you played the percentages. Besides, criminals did not march up to their targets wearing clothing more suitable for a night on the town.

He thought quickly as noises filtered up to him, presumably from outside the rear of the house. It took him a second to realize that his retreat was cut off and to calculate what his plan of action would be.

Grabbing his bag, he raced to the alarm panel next to the bedroom door and activated the home's security system, silently thanking his memory for numbers. Then Luther slipped across to the vault and entered it, carefully closing the door

behind him. He pushed himself as far back into the little room as he could. Now he had to wait.

He cursed his misfortune; everything had been going so smoothly. Then he shook his head clear, forced himself to breathe regularly. It was like flying. The longer you did it, the greater your chance of something bad happening. He would just have to hope that the house's most recent arrivals would have no need to make a deposit in the private bank he was now occupying.

A burst of laughter and then the drum of voices filtered up to him, together with the loud beep from the alarm system, which sounded like a jet plane screeching directly over his head. Apparently there was slight confusion about the security code. A bead of sweat appeared on Luther's forehead as he envisioned the alarm exploding and the police wanting to examine every inch of the house just in case, starting with his little roost.

He wondered how he would react as he listened to the mirrored door being opened, a light blazing in, without the slightest possibility of missing him. The strange faces peering in, the drawn guns, the reading of his rights. He almost laughed. Trapped like a fucking rat, nowhere to go. He hadn't had a cigarette in almost thirty years, but now he desperately craved a smoke. He put his bag down quietly and slowly let his legs out straight so they wouldn't go to sleep.

Heavy steps on the oak plank staircase. Whoever they were they didn't care who knew they were there. Luther counted four, possibly five. They turned left and headed his way.

The door to the bedroom opened with a slight squeak. Luther searched his mind. Everything had been picked up or put back in its place. He'd only touched the remote, and he had replaced it right in line with the slight dust pattern. Now Luther could only hear three voices, a man and two women. One of the females sounded drunk, the other was all business. Then Ms. Business disappeared, the door closed but wasn't locked, and Ms. Drunk and the man were alone. Where were the others? Where had Ms. Business gone? The giggles continued. Footsteps came closer to the mirror. Luther scrunched down in the corner as far as he could, hoping that the chair would shield him from view but knowing that it couldn't possibly.

Then a burst of light hit him right in the eyes and he almost gasped at the suddenness of his little world going from inky black to broad daylight. He blinked rapidly to adjust to the new level of brightness, his pupils going from almost full dilation to pinpoints in seconds. But there were no screams, no faces, no guns.

Finally, after a full minute had passed, Luther peered around the corner of the chair and received another shock. The vault door seemed to have disappeared; he was staring right into the goddamned room. He almost fell backward but caught himself. Luther suddenly understood what the chair was for.

He recognized both of the people in the room. The woman he had seen tonight already, in the photos: the little wife with the hooker taste in clothes.

The man he knew for an altogether different reason; he certainly wasn't the master of this house. Luther slowly shook his head in amazement and let out his breath. His hands shook and a queasiness crept over him. He fought back the grip of nausea and stared into the bedroom.

The vault door also served as a one-way mirror. With the light on outside and darkness in his little space, it was as though he were watching a giant TV screen.

Then he saw it and a fist of breath kicked out of his lungs: the diamond necklace on the woman's neck. Two hundred thou to his practiced eye, maybe more. And just the sort of bauble one would routinely put away in a home vault before retiring for the evening. Then his lungs relaxed as he watched her take the piece off and casually drop it on the floor.

His fear receded enough to where he rose and inched over to the chair and slowly eased himself into it. So the old man sat here and watched his little woman get her brains screwed out by a procession of men. From the looks of her, Luther figured that some members of that procession included young guys making minimum wage or hanging on to freedom by the width of a green card. But her gentleman caller tonight was in an altogether different class.

He looked around, his ears focused for any sound of the other inhabitants of the house. But what could he really do? In over thirty years of active larceny, he had never encountered anything like this, so he decided to do the only thing he could. With only an inch of glass separating him from absolute destruction, he settled down quietly into the deep leather and waited.

Chapter 2

THREE BLOCKS FROM THE BROAD WHITE BULK OF THE UNITED States Capitol, Jack Graham opened the front door of his apartment, threw his overcoat on the floor and went straight to the fridge. Beer in hand he flopped down on the threadbare couch in his living room. His eyes quickly perused the tiny room as he took a drink. Quite a difference from where he'd just been. He let the beer stand in his mouth and then swallowed. The muscles of his square jaw tensed and then relaxed. The nagging prickles of doubt slowly drained away, but they would reappear; they always did.

Another important dinner party with Jennifer, his soon-to-be wife, and her family and circle of social and business acquaintances. People at that level of sophistication apparently didn't have mere friends they hung with. Everyone served a particular function, the whole being greater than the sum of the parts. Or at least that was the intent, although Jack had his own opinion on the matter.

Industry and finance had been well represented, brandishing names Jack read about in the *Wall Street Journal* before he chucked it for the sports pages to see how the 'Skins or Bullets were doing. The politicians had been out in full force, scrounging future votes and current dollars. The group was rounded out by the ubiquitous lawyers of which Jack was one, the occasional doctor to show ties to the old ways and a couple of public-interest types to demonstrate that the powers that be had sympathy for the plight of the ordinary.

He finished the beer and flipped on the TV. His shoes came off, and the forty-dollar patterned socks his fiancée had bought for him were carelessly flung over the back of the lamp shade. Given time she'd have him in two-hundred-dollar

braces with matching hand-painted ties. Shit! Rubbing his toes, he seriously considered a second beer. The TV tried but failed to hold his interest. He pushed his thick, dark hair out of his eyes and focused for the thousandth time on where his life was hurtling, seemingly with the speed of the space shuttle.

Jennifer's company limo had driven the two of them to her Northwest Washington townhouse where Jack would probably move after the wedding; she detested his place. The wedding was barely six months off, apparently no time at all by a bride's standards, and he was sitting here having severe second thoughts.

Jennifer Ryce Baldwin possessed instant head-turning beauty to such a degree that the women stared as often as the men. She was also smart and accomplished, came from serious money and was intent on marrying Jack. Her father ran one of the largest development companies in the country. Shopping centers, office buildings, radio stations, entire sub-divisions, you name it, he was in it, and doing better than just about anyone else. Her paternal great-grandfather was one of the original Midwest manufacturing tycoons, and her mother's family had once owned a large chunk of downtown Boston. The gods had smiled early and often on Jennifer Baldwin. There wasn't one guy Jack knew who wasn't jealous as hell of him.

He squirmed in his chair and tried to rub a kink out of his shoulder. He hadn't worked out in a week. His six-foot-one body, even at thirty-two, had the same hard edge it had enjoyed all through high school where he was a man among boys in virtually every sport offered, and in college where the competition was a lot rougher but where he still managed to make first-string varsity as a heavyweight wrestler and first-team All-Academic. That combination had gotten him into the University of Virginia School of Law, where he made *Law Review*, graduated near the top of his class and promptly settled down as a public defender in the District of Columbia's criminal justice system.

His classmates had all grabbed the big-firm option out of law school. They had routinely called with phone numbers of psychiatrists who could help coax him out of his insanity. He smiled and then went and grabbed that second beer. The fridge was now empty.

Jack's first year as a PD had been rough as he learned the ropes, losing more than he won. As time went on, he graduated to the more serious crimes. And as he poured every ounce of youthful energy, raw talent and common sense he had into each of those cases, the tide began to turn.

And then he started kicking some serious ass in court.

He discovered he was a natural at the role, as talented at cross-examination as he had been at throwing men much bigger than he across a two-inch-thick mat. He was respected, liked as an attorney if you could believe that.

Then he had met Jennifer at a Bar function. She was vice president of development and marketing at Baldwin Enterprises. Dynamic in presence, she had the added skill of making whomever she was talking to feel important; their opinions were listened to if not necessarily followed. She was a beauty who had no need to rely solely on that asset.

When you got past the eye-catching looks, there was a lot more there. Or seemed to be. Jack would have been less than human had he not been attracted to her. And she had made it clear, early on, that the attraction was mutual. While

being ostensibly impressed at his dedication in defending the rights of those accused of crimes in the Capital City, little by little Jennifer had convinced Jack that he had done his bit for the poor, dumb and unfortunate, and that maybe he should start thinking about himself and his future, and that maybe she wanted to be a part of that future. When he finally left PD, the U.S. attorney's office had given him quite a send-off party, and good riddance. That should have told him then and there that there were a lot more of the poor, dumb and unfortunate who needed his help. He didn't expect to ever top the thrill he had felt being a PD; he figured times like that came around once in life and then they were gone. It was time to move on; even little boys like Jack Graham had to grow up someday. Maybe it was just his time.

He turned off the TV, grabbed a bag of corn chips and went to his bedroom, stepping over the piles of dirty laundry strewn in front of the doorway. He couldn't blame Jennifer for not liking his place; he was a slob. But what bothered him was the dead certainty that, even spotless, Jennifer would not consent to live here. For one thing it was in the wrong neighborhood; Capitol Hill to be sure, but not a gentrified part of Capitol Hill, actually not even close.

Then there was the size. Her townhouse must have run five thousand square feet, not counting the live-in maid's quarters and the two-car garage that housed her Jag and brand new Range Rover, as if anybody living in D.C., with its traffic-strangled roads, needed a vehicle capable of driving up the vertical side of a twenty-thousand-foot-high mountain.

He had four rooms if you counted the bathroom. He reached his bedroom, stripped off his clothes and dropped into bed. Across the room, on a small plaque that had once hung in his office at work until he had grown embarrassed looking at it, was the announcement of his joining Patton, Shaw & Lord. PS&L was the Capital City's number-one corporate firm. Legal caterer to hundreds of blue-chip companies, including his soon-to-be father-in-law's, representing a multimillion-dollar account that he was credited with bringing to the firm and that, in turn, guaranteed him a partnership at the next review. Partnerships at Patton, Shaw were worth, on average, at least half a million dollars a year. That was tip money for the Baldwins, but then he wasn't a Baldwin. At least not yet.

He pulled the blanket over him. The building's insulation left a lot to be desired. He popped a couple of aspirin and washed them down with the rest of a Coke that was sitting on his nightstand, then looked around the cramped, messy bedroom. It reminded him of his room growing up. It was a warm, friendly memory. Homes should look lived in; they should always give way to the screams of kids as they dashed from room to room in search of new adventures, of fresh objects to break.

That was the other thing with Jennifer: she had made it clear that the sound of little feet was a distant project that was far from certain. Her career at her father's company was first and foremost in her mind and heart—maybe more so, Jack felt, than he was.

He rolled over and tried to close his eyes. The wind pushed against the window and he glanced in that direction. He looked away, but then with a resigned air, his eyes drifted back over to the box.

It held part of his collection of old trophies and awards from high school and college. But those items were not the object of his focus. In the semidarkness he

reached out a long arm for the framed photo, decided against it, and then changed his mind again.

He pulled it out. This had almost become a ritual. He never had to worry about his fiancée stumbling onto this particular possession of his because she absolutely refused to enter his bedroom for longer than a minute. Whenever they slid between the sheets it was either at her place, where Jack would lie on the bed staring up at the twelve-foot ceiling where a mural of ancient horsemen and young maidens shared space while Jennifer amused herself until she collapsed and then rolled over for him to finish on top of her. Or at her parents' place in the country where the ceilings were even higher and the murals had been taken from some thirteenth-century church in Rome, all of which made Jack feel that God was watching him being ridden by the beautiful and absolutely naked Jennifer Ryce Baldwin and that he would languish in eternal hell for those few moments of visceral pleasure.

The woman in the photo had silky brown hair that curled slightly at the ends. Her smile looked up at Jack and he remembered the day he had taken the picture.

A bike ride far into the countryside of Albemarle County. He was just starting law school; she was in her second year of college at Mr. Jefferson's university. It was only their third date but it was like they had never lived without each other.

Kate Whitney.

He said the name slowly; his hand instinctively traced the curves of her smile, the lone dimple right above the left cheek that gave her face a slightly lopsided look. The almond-shaped cheekbones bordered a dainty nose that sloped toward a pair of sensual lips. The chin was sharp and screamed out "stubborn." Jack moved back up the face and stopped at the large teardrop-shaped eyes that always seemed full of mischief.

Jack rolled back over and lay the photo on his chest so that she stared directly at him. He could never think of Kate without seeing an image of her father, with his quick wit and crooked smile.

Jack had often visited Luther Whitney at his little row house in an Arlington neighborhood that had seen better days. They spent hours drinking beer and telling stories, mostly Luther telling and Jack listening.

Kate never visited her father, and he never attempted to contact her. Jack had found his identity almost by accident, and despite Kate's objections, Jack had wanted to get to know the man. It was a rare thing for her face to hold anything but a smile, but that was one thing she never smiled about.

After he graduated they moved to D.C. and she enrolled in law school at Georgetown. Life seemed idyllic. She came to his first few trials as he worked the butterflies from his stomach and the squeak from his throat and tried to remember which counsel table to sit at. But as the seriousness of the crimes his clients were accused of committing grew, her enthusiasm diminished.

They had split up his first year in practice.

The reasons were simple: she couldn't understand why he had chosen to represent people who broke the law, and she could not tolerate that he liked her father.

At the very last breath of their lives together he remembered sitting with her in this very room and asking, pleading, for her not to leave. But she had and that was four years ago, and he hadn't seen or heard from her since.

He knew that she had taken a job with the Commonwealth Attorney's office in Alexandria, Virginia, where she was no doubt busily putting former clients of his behind bars for stomping on the laws of her adopted state. Other than that Kate Whitney was a stranger to him.

But lying there with her staring at him with a smile that told him a million things that he had never learned from the woman he was supposed to marry in six months, Jack wondered if Kate would remain a stranger to him; whether his life was destined to become far more complicated than he ever intended. He grabbed the phone and dialed.

Four rings and he heard the voice. It had an edge that he didn't remember, or maybe it was new. The beep came and he started to leave a message, something funny, right out of the blue, but then right on cue he got nervous and quickly hung up, his hands shaking, his breathing accelerated. He shook his head. Jesus Christ! He had done five murder one cases and he was shaking like a goddamned sixteen-year-old sucking up the courage to call his first date.

Jack put the picture away and imagined what Kate was doing right that very minute. Probably still in her office pondering over how many years to take off somebody's life.

Then Jack wondered about Luther. Was he at this very minute on the wrong side of someone's doorstep? or leaving with another bundle of financial joy slung over his back?

What a family, Luther and Kate Whitney. So different and so much the same. As focused a pair as he had ever encountered, but their respective focuses occupied different galaxies. That last night, after Kate had walked out of his life, he had gone around to Luther's to say good-bye and to drink a last beer. They had sat in the small well-tended garden, watching the clematis and ivy cling to the fence; the scent of lilacs and roses lay thick like a net over them.

The old man had taken it all right, asked few questions, and wished Jack well. Some things did not work out; Luther understood that as well as anyone. But as Jack left that night he had noticed the glistening in the old man's eyes—and then the door closed on that part of his life.

Jack finally put out the light and closed his eyes with the knowledge that another tomorrow was close upon him. His pot of gold, his once-in-a-lifetime payoff, was one day closer to reality. It did not make for easy sleep.

Chapter 3

AS LUTHER STARED THROUGH THE GLASS, THE THOUGHT struck him that the two made a very attractive couple. It was an absurd opinion to have under the circumstances, but that didn't make the conclusion any less valid. The man was tall, handsome, a very distinguished mid-forties. The woman could not have

ventured far into her twenties; the hair was full and golden, the face oval and lovely, with a pair of enormous deep blue eyes that now looked up lovingly into the man's elegant countenance. He touched her smooth cheek; she nestled her lips against his hand.

The man had two tumblers and filled them with the contents of the bottle he had brought with him. He handed the woman one. After a clink of glasses, their eyes firmly set on each other, he finished his drink in one swallow while she only managed a small sip of hers. Glasses put down, they embraced in the middle of the room. His hands slid down her backside and then back up to the bare shoulders. Her arms and shoulders were tanned and well-toned. He grasped her limbs admiringly as he leaned down to kiss her neck.

Luther averted his eyes, embarrassed to be viewing this very personal encounter. A strange emotion to have when he was still clearly in danger of being caught. But he was not so old that he could not appreciate the tenderness, the passion that was slowly unfolding in front of him.

As he raised his eyes up, he had to smile. The couple was now engaged in a slow dance around the room. The man was obviously well-practiced at the endeavor; his partner was less so, but he gently led her through the simple paces until they again ended up beside the bed.

The man paused to fill his glass again and then quickly drained it. The bottle was now empty. As his arms encircled her once more, she leaned into him, pulled at his coat, started to undo his tie. The man's hands drifted to the zipper of her dress and slowly headed south. The black dress slid down and she slowly stepped out of it, revealing black panties and thigh-high stockings, but no bra.

She had the sort of body that made other women who didn't instantly jealous. Every curve was where it was supposed to be. Her waist Luther could have encircled with both hands touching. As she turned to the side to slide out of her stockings, Luther observed that the breasts were large, round and full. The legs were lean and defined, probably from hours of daily exercise under the watchful eyes of a personal trainer.

The man quickly undressed down to his boxers and sat on the side of the bed watching the woman as she took her time slipping out of her underwear. Her rear end was round and firm and creamy white against the backdrop of a flawless tan. With her last piece of clothing shed, a smile cut across the man's face. The white teeth were straight and thick. Despite the alcohol, his eyes seemed clear and focused.

She smiled at his attention and slowly advanced. As she drew within his reach, his long arms gripped her, pulled her to him. She rubbed up and down against his chest.

Again, Luther began to avert his eyes, wishing more than anything else that this spectacle would soon be over and that these people would leave. It would only take him a few minutes to return to his car, and this night would be filed away in his memory as a unique, if potentially disastrous, experience.

That's when he saw the man grip the woman's buttocks hard and then slap them, again and again. Luther winced in vicarious pain at the repeated blows; the white skin now glowed red. But either the woman was too drunk to feel the pain or

she enjoyed this sort of treatment, because her smile didn't fade. Luther felt his gut clinch again as the man's fingers dug into the soft flesh.

The man's mouth danced across her chest; she ran her finger through his thick hair as she positioned her body inside his legs. She closed her eyes, her mouth gathered into a contented smile; she arched her head back. Then she opened her eyes and attacked his mouth with hers.

His strong fingers moved up from the abused buttocks and started to gently massage her back. Then he dug in hard until she winced and pulled back from him. She half-smiled and he stopped as she touched his fingers with hers. He turned his attention back to her breasts and suckled them. Her eyes closed once again, as her breathing turned perceptibly to a low moan. The man moved his attention again to her neck. His eyes were wide open, looking across at where Luther sat but with no idea of his presence.

Luther stared at the man, at those eyes, and didn't like what he saw. Pools of darkness surrounded by red, like some sinister planet seen through a telescope. The thought struck him that the naked woman was in the grip of something not so gentle, not so loving as she probably anticipated.

The woman finally grew impatient and pushed her lover down on the bed. Her legs straddled the man, giving Luther a view from behind that should have been reserved for her gynecologist and husband. She hoisted herself up, but then with a sudden burst of energy he roughly pushed her aside and went on top of her, grabbing her legs and lifting them up until they were perpendicular with the bed.

Luther stiffened in his chair at the man's next movement. He grabbed her by the neck and jerked her up, pulling her head between his legs. The suddenness of the act made her gasp, her mouth a bare inch from him there. Then he laughed and threw her back down. Dazed for a moment, she finally managed a weak smile and sat up on her elbows as he towered over her. He grabbed his erection with one hand, spreading her wide with the other. As she lay placidly back to accept him, he stared wildly at her.

But instead of plunging between her legs, he grabbed her breasts and squeezed, apparently a little too hard, because, finally, Luther heard a yelp of pain and the woman abruptly slapped the man. He let go and then slapped her back, viciously, and Luther saw a patch of blood emerge at the corner of her mouth and spill onto the thick, lipstick-coated lips.

"You fucking bastard." She rolled off the bed and sat on the floor rubbing her mouth, tasting her blood, her drunken brain momentarily lucid. The first words Luther had clearly heard spoken the entire night hit his brain like a sledgehammer. He stood up, inched toward the glass.

The man grinned. Luther froze when he saw it. It was more like the snarl of a wild animal close to a kill than a human being.

"Fucking bastard," she said again, a little more quietly, the words slurred. As she stood up he grabbed her arm, twisted it, and she fell hard to the floor. The man sat on the bed and looked down triumphantly.

His breathing accelerating, Luther stood before the glass, his hands clenching and unclenching as he continued to watch and hoped that the other people would come back. He eyed the remote on the chair and then his eyes shot back to the bedroom.

The woman had raised herself half off the floor, the wind slowly coming back to her. The romantic feelings she had been experiencing had vanished. Luther could see that in her body movements, wary and deliberate. Her companion apparently failed to notice the change in her movements and the flash of anger in the blue eyes, or else he would not have stood up and put out a hand for her to take, which she did.

The man's smile abruptly vanished as her knee caught him squarely between the legs, doubling him over and ending any arousal he had been experiencing. As he crumpled to the floor, no sound came from his lips, except for his labored breathing while she grabbed her panties and started to put them on.

He caught her ankle, threw her to the floor, her underwear halfway up her legs.

"You little cunt." The words came out in short gasps as he tried to get his breath back, all the time holding on to that ankle, drawing her closer to him.

She kicked at him, again and again. Her feet thudded against his rib cage, but still he hung on. "You fucking little whore," he said.

At the menace he heard in those words, Luther stepped toward the glass, one of his hands flying to its smooth surface as if to reach through it, to grab the man, make him let go.

The man painfully dragged himself up and his look made Luther's flesh turn cold.

The man's hands gripped the woman's throat.

Her brain, clouded by the alcohol, snapped back to high gear. Her eyes, now completely filled with fear, darted to the left and right as the pressure on her neck increased and her breath started to weaken. Her fingers clawed at his arms, scratching deeply.

Luther saw the blood rise to the man's skin where she attacked him but his grip did not loosen.

She kicked and jerked her body, but he was almost twice her weight; her attacker didn't budge.

Luther again looked at the remote. He could open the door. He could stop this. But his legs would not move. He stared helplessly through the glass, sweat poured from his forehead, every pore in his body seemed to be erupting; his breath came in short bursts as his chest heaved. He placed both hands against the glass.

Luther's breath stopped as the woman fixed on the nightstand for an instant. Then, with a frantic motion, she grabbed the letter opener, and with one blinding stroke she slashed the man's arm.

He grunted in pain, let go and grabbed his bloody arm. For one terrible instant he looked down at his wound, almost in disbelief that he had been damaged like that. Pierced by this woman.

When the man looked back up, Luther could almost feel the murderous snarl before it escaped from the man's lips.

And then the man hit her, harder than Luther had seen any man hit a woman. The hard fist connected with the soft flesh and blood flew from her nose and mouth.

Whether it was all the booze she had consumed or what, Luther didn't know, but the blow that ordinarily would have crippled a person merely incensed her. With convulsive strength she managed to stagger up. As she turned toward the

mirror, Luther watched the horror in her face as she suddenly viewed the abrupt destruction of her beauty. Eyes widening in disbelief, she touched the swollen nose; one finger dropped down and probed the loosened teeth. She had become a smeared portrait, her major attribute had vanished.

She turned around to face the man, and Luther saw the muscles in her back tense so hard they looked like small pieces of wood. With lightning quickness, she again slammed her foot into the man's groin. Instantly the man was weak again, his limbs useless as nausea overcame him. He collapsed to the floor, rolled over onto his back, moaning. His knees curled upward, his hand protectively at his crotch.

With blood streaming down her face, with eyes that had gone from stark horror to homicidal in an instant, the woman dropped to her knees beside him and raised the letter opener high above her head.

Luther grabbed the remote, took a step toward the door, his finger almost on the button.

The man, seeing his life about to end as the letter opener plunged toward his chest, screamed with every bit of strength he had left. The call did not go unheeded.

His body frozen in place, Luther's eyes darted to the bedroom door as it flew open.

Two men, hair cropped short, crisp business suits not concealing impressive physiques, burst into the room, guns drawn. Before Luther could take another step they had assessed the situation and made their decision.

Both guns fired almost simultaneously.

* * * * *

KATE WHITNEY SAT IN HER OFFICE GOING OVER THE FILE ONE more time.

The guy had four priors, and had been arrested but ultimately not charged on six other occasions because witnesses had been too frightened to talk or had ended up in trash Dumpsters. He was a walking time bomb ready to explode on another victim, all of whom had been women.

The current charge was murder during the commission of robbery and rape, which met the criteria for capital murder under Virginia's laws. And this time she decided to go for the home run: death. She had never asked for it before, but if anybody deserved it, this guy did, and the commonwealth was not squeamish about authorizing it. Why allow him life when he had cruelly and savagely ended the one given to a nineteen-year-old college student who made the mistake of going to a shopping mall in broad daylight to pick up some nylons and a new pair of shoes?

Kate rubbed her eyes and, using a rubber band from the pile on her desk, pulled her hair back into a rough ponytail. She looked around her small, plain office; the case files were piled high around the room and for the millionth time she wondered if it would ever stop. Of course it wouldn't. If anything it would get worse, and she could only do what she could do to stem the flow of blood. She would start with the execution of Roger Simmons, Jr., twenty-two years old, and as hardened a criminal as she had ever confronted, and she had already faced an army of them in her as yet short career. She remembered the look he had given

her that day in court. It was a countenance totally without remorse or caring or any other positive emotion. It was also a face without hope, an observation substantiated by his background history, which read like a horror story of a childhood. But that was not her problem. It seemed like the only one that wasn't.

She shook her head and checked her watch: well after midnight. She went to pour some more coffee; her focus was starting to wander. The last staff attorney had left five hours ago. The cleaning crew had been gone for three. She moved down the hallway in her stocking feet to the kitchen. If Charlie Manson were out and doing his thing now, he'd be one of her milder cases; an amateur compared to the monsters roaming loose today.

Cup of coffee in hand, she walked back into her office and paused for a moment to look at her reflection in the window. With her job looks were really unimportant; hell, she hadn't been on a date in over a year. But she couldn't pull her eyes away. She was tall and slender, perhaps too skinny in certain areas, but her routine of running four miles every day had not changed while her caloric intake had steadily dwindled. Mostly she subsisted on bad coffee and crackers, although she limited herself to two cigarettes a day and was hoping with luck to quit altogether.

She felt guilty about the abuse her body was taking with the endless hours and stress of moving from one horrific case to another, but what was she supposed to do? Quit because she didn't look like the women on the cover of *Cosmopolitan*? She consoled herself with the fact that their job twenty-four hours a day was to make themselves look good. Hers was to ensure that people who broke the law, who hurt others, were punished. Under any criteria she reasoned she was doing far more productive things with her life.

She swiped at her own mane; it needed to be cut, but where was the time to do that? The face was still relatively unmarked by the burden she found increasingly difficult to carry. Her twenty-nine-year-old face, after four years of nineteen-hour days and countless trials, had held its own. She sighed as she realized that probably would not last. In college she had been the gracious recipient of turned heads, the cause of raised heartbeats and cold sweats. But as she got ready to enter her thirties, she realized that what she had taken for granted for so many years, that what she had, in fact, derided on so many occasions, would not be with her that much longer. And like so many things you took for granted or dismissed as unimportant, being able to quiet a room by your mere entrance was one she knew she was going to miss.

That her looks had remained strong over the last few years was remarkable considering she had done relatively little to preserve them. Good genes, that must be it; she was fortunate. But then she thought of her father and decided that she wasn't very lucky at all in the genes department. A man who stole from others and then pretended to live a normal life. A man who deceived everyone, including his wife and daughter. A man you could not depend on to be there.

She sat at her desk, took a quick sip of the hot coffee, poured in more sugar and looked at Mr. Simmons while she stirred the black depths of her nighttime stimulus.

She picked up the phone, called home to check messages. There were five, two from other lawyers, one from the policeman she would put on the stand against Mr. Simmons and one from a staff investigator who liked to call her at odd hours

with mostly useless information. She should change her telephone number. The last message was a hang-up. But she could hear very low breathing on the end, she could almost make out a word or two. Something in the sound was familiar, but she couldn't place it. People with nothing better to do.

The coffee flowed through her veins, the file came back into focus. She glanced up at her little bookshelf. On top was an old photo of her deceased mother and ten-year-old Kate. Cut out from the picture was Luther Whitney. A big gap next to mother and daughter. A big nothing.

* * * * *

"JESUS FUCKING CHRIST!" THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED States sat up, one hand covering his limp and damaged privates, the other holding the letter opener that a moment before was to have been the instrument of his death. It had more than just his blood on it now. "Jesus Fucking Christ, Bill, you fucking killed her!" The target of his barrage stooped to help him up while his companion checked the woman's condition: a perfunctory examination, considering two heavy-caliber bullets had blown through her brain.

"I'm sorry, sir, there wasn't time. I'm sorry, sir."

Bill Burton had been a Secret Service agent for twelve years, and a Maryland state trooper for eight years before that, and one of his rounds had just blown apart a beautiful young woman's head. Despite all his intense training, he was shaking like a preschooler just awakened from a nightmare.

He had killed before in the line of duty: a routine traffic stop gone wrong. But the deceased had been a four-time loser with a serious vendetta against uniformed officers and wielding a Glock semiautomatic pistol in a sincere attempt to lift Burton's head from his shoulders.

He looked down at the small, naked body and thought he would be sick. His partner, Tim Collin, looked across at him, grabbed his arm. Burton swallowed hard and nodded his head. He would make it.

They carefully helped up Alan J. Richmond, President of the United States, a political hero and leader to young, middle-aged and old alike, but now simply naked and drunk. The President looked up at them, the initial horror finally passing as the alcohol worked its effects. "She's dead?" The words were a little slurred; the eyes seemed to roll back in the head like loose marbles.

"Yes, sir." Collin answered crisply. You didn't let a question from the President go unanswered, drunk or not.

Burton hung back now. He glanced at the woman again and then looked back at the President. That was their job, his job. Protect the goddamned President. Whatever it took, that life must not end, not like that. Not stuck like a pig by some drunken bitch.

The President's mouth curled up into what looked like a smile, although neither Collin nor Burton would remember it that way later. The President started to rise.

"Where are my clothes?" he demanded.

"Right here, sir." Burton, snapping back to attention, stooped to pick up the clothes. They were heavily spotted— everything in the room seemed to be—with her.

“Well, get me up, and get me ready, goddammit. I’ve got a speech to give for somebody, somewhere, don’t I?” He laughed shrilly. Burton looked at Collin and Collin looked at Burton. They both watched as the President passed out on the bed.

* * * * *

AT THE SOUND OF THE EXPLOSIONS, CHIEF OF STAFF GLORIA Russell had been in the bathroom on the first floor, as far away from that room as she could get.

She had accompanied the President on many of these assignments, but rather than growing used to them, they disgusted her more each time. To imagine her boss, the most powerful man on the face of the earth, bedding all these celebrity whores, these political groupies. It was beyond comprehension, and yet she had almost learned to ignore it. Almost.

She had pulled her pantyhose back up, grabbed her purse, flung open the door, run down the hallway and even in heels took the steps two at a time. When she reached the bedroom door Agent Burton stopped her.

“Ma’am, you don’t want to see this, it’s not pretty.”

She pushed past him and then stopped. Her first thought was to run back out, down the stairs, into the limo, out of there, out of the state, out of the miserable country. She wasn’t sorry for Christy Sullivan, who’d wanted to get screwed by the President. That had been her goal for the last two years. Well, sometimes you don’t get what you want; sometimes you get a lot more.

Russell steadied herself and faced off with Agent Collin.

“What the hell happened?”

Tim Collin was young, tough and devoted to the man he was assigned to protect. He was trained to die defending the President, and there was no question in his mind that if the time came he would. Several years had passed since he had tackled an assailant in the parking lot of a shopping center where then presidential candidate Alan Richmond had been making an appearance. Collin had had the potential assassin down on the asphalt and completely immobile before the guy had even gotten his gun fully out of his pocket, before anyone else had even reacted. To Collin, his only mission in life was to protect Alan Richmond.

It took Agent Collin one minute to report the facts to Russell in succinct, cohesive sentences. Burton solemnly confirmed the account.

“It was either him or her, Ms. Russell. There was no other way to cut it.” Burton instinctively glanced at the President, who still lay on the bed oblivious to anything. They had covered the more strategic portion of his body with a sheet.

“Do you mean to tell me you heard nothing? No sounds of violence before, before this?” She waved at the mess of the room.

The agents looked at each other. They had heard many sounds emanating from bedrooms where their boss happened to be. Some might be construed as violent, some not. But everybody had always come out okay before.

“Nothing unusual,” Burton replied. “Then we heard the President scream and we went in. That knife was maybe three inches from going into his chest. Only thing fast enough was a bullet.”

He stood as erect as he could and looked her right in the eye. He and Collin had done their job, and this woman wasn't going to tell them otherwise. No blame would be put on his shoulders.

"There was a goddamned knife in the room?" She looked at Burton incredulously.

"If it was up to me, the President wouldn't go out on these, these little excursions. Half the time he won't let us check anything out beforehand. We didn't get a chance to scope the room." He looked at her. "He's the President, ma'am," he added, for good measure, as if that justified everything. And for Russell it usually did, a fact Burton was well aware of.

Russell looked around the room, taking in everything. She had been a tenured professor of political science at Stanford with a national reputation before answering the call in Alan Richmond's quest for the presidency. He was such a powerful force, everybody wanted to jump on his bandwagon.

Currently Chief of Staff, with serious talk of becoming Secretary of State if Richmond won reelection, which everyone expected him to do with ease. Who knew? Maybe a Richmond-Russell ticket might be in the making. They made a brilliant combination. She was the strategist, he was the consummate campaigner. Their future grew brighter every day. But now? Now she had a corpse and a drunken President inside a home that was supposed to be vacant.

She felt the express train coming to a halt. Then her mind snapped back. Not over this little piece of human garbage. Not ever!

Burton stirred. "You want me to call the police now, ma'am?"

Russell looked at him like he had lost his mind. "Burton, let me remind you that our job is to protect the President's interests at all times and nothing—absolutely nothing—takes precedence over that. Is that clear?"

"Ma'am, the lady's dead. I think we—"

"That's right. You and Collin shot the woman, and she's dead." After exploding from Russell's mouth, the words hung in the air. Collin rubbed his fingers together; a hand went instinctively to his holstered weapon. He stared at the late Mrs. Sullivan as if he could will her back to life.

Burton flexed his burly shoulders, moved an inch closer to Russell so that the significant height difference was at its maximum.

"If we hadn't fired, the President would be dead. That's *our* job. To keep the President safe and sound."

"Right again, Burton. And now that you have prevented his death, how do you intend to explain to the police and the President's wife and your superiors, and the lawyers and the media and the Congress and the financial markets and the country and the rest of the goddamned world, why the President was here? What he was doing while he was here? And the circumstances that led up to you and Agent Collin having to shoot the wife of one of the wealthiest and most influential men in the United States? Because if you call the police, if you call anybody, that is exactly what you will have to do. Now if you are prepared to accept full responsibility for that undertaking, then pick up that phone over there and make that call."

Burton's face changed color. He backed up a step, his superior size useless to him now. Collin was frozen, watching the two square off. He had never seen

anyone talk that way to Bill Burton. The big man could have snapped Russell's neck with a lazy thrust of his arm.

Burton looked down at the corpse one more time. How could you explain that so that everybody came out all right? The answer was simple: you couldn't.

Russell watched his face carefully. Burton looked back at her. His eyes twitched perceptibly; they would not meet hers now. She had won. She smiled benignly and nodded. The show was hers to run.

"Go make some coffee, a whole pot," she ordered Burton, momentarily relishing this switching of roles. "And then stay by the front door just in case we get any late-night visitors.

"Collin, go to the van, and talk to Johnson and Varney. Don't tell them anything about this. For now just tell them there was an accident, but that the President's okay. That's all. And that they're to stay put. Understood? I'll call when I want you. I need to think this out."

Burton and Collin nodded and headed out. Neither had been trained to ignore orders so authoritatively given. And Burton didn't want to be calling the shots on this one. They couldn't pay him enough to do that.

* * * * *

LUTHER HADN'T MOVED SINCE THE SHOTS HAD BLOWN APART the woman's head. He was afraid to. His feelings of shock had finally passed, but he found his eyes continually wandering to the floor and to what had once been a living, breathing human being. In all his years as a criminal he had only seen one other person killed. A thrice-convicted pedophile whose spinal cord had collided with a four-inch shiv wielded by an unsympathetic fellow inmate. The emotions sweeping over him now were totally different, as though he were the sole passenger on a ship that had sailed into a foreign harbor. Nothing looked or seemed familiar at all. Any sound now would do him no good, but he slowly sat back down before his trembling legs gave way.

He watched as Russell moved around the room, stooped next to the dead woman, but did not touch her. Next she picked up the letter opener, holding it by the end of the blade with a handkerchief she pulled from her pocket. She stared long and hard at the object that had almost ended her boss's life and had played a major role in ending someone else's. She carefully put the letter opener in her leather purse, which she had placed on the nightstand, and put the handkerchief back in her pocket. She glanced briefly at the contorted flesh that had recently been Christine Sullivan.

She had to admire the way Richmond accomplished his extracurricular activities. All his "companions" were women of wealth and social position, and all were married. This ensured that no exposé of his adulterous behavior would appear in any of the tabloids. The women he bedded had as much to lose if not more as he, and they understood that fact very well.

And the press. Russell smiled. In this day and age the President lived under a never-ending barrage of scrutiny. He couldn't pee, smoke a cigar or belch without the public knowing all of the most intimate details. Or so the public thought. And that was based largely on the overestimation of the press and their abilities to nudge out every morsel of a story from its hiding place. What they failed to

understand was that while the office of the President might have lost some of its enormous power over the years as the problems of a troubled globe soared beyond the ability of any one person to confront them on an equal basis, the President was surrounded by absolutely loyal and supremely capable people. People whose skill level at covert activities were in another league from the polished, cookie-cutter journalists whose idea of trailing down a tough story was asking puffball questions of a congressman who was more than willing to talk for the benefit of the evening news coverage. It was a fact that, if he so desired, President Alan Richmond could move about without fear that anyone would be successful in tracking his whereabouts. He could even disappear from public view for as long as he wished, although that was the antithesis of what a successful politician hoped to accomplish in a day's work. And that privilege boiled down to one common denominator.

The Secret Service. They were the best of the best. This elite group had proved it time and again over the years, as they had in planning this most recent activity.

A little after noon, Christy Sullivan had walked out of her beauty salon in Upper Northwest. After walking one block she had stepped into the foyer of an apartment building and thirty seconds later she had walked out encased in a full length hooded cloak pulled from her bag. Sunglasses covered her eyes. She had walked for several blocks, randomly window-shopping, then taken a red-line Metro train to Metro Center. Exiting the Metro she had walked two more blocks and entered an alley between two buildings scheduled for demolition. Two minutes later, a car with tinted windows had emerged from the alley. Collin had been driving. Christy Sullivan was in the back seat. She had been sequestered in a safe place with Bill Burton until the President had been able to join her later that night.

The Sullivan estate had been chosen as the perfect spot for the planned interlude because, ironically, her home in the country was the last place anyone would expect Christy Sullivan to be. And Russell knew it would also be perfectly empty, guarded by a security system that was no barrier to their plans.

Russell sat down in a chair and closed her eyes. Yes, she had two of the most capable members of the Secret Service in this house with her. And, for the first time, that fact troubled the Chief of Staff. The four agents with her and the President tonight had been handpicked, out of the approximately one hundred agents assigned to the presidential detail, by the President himself for these little activities. They were all loyal and highly skilled. They took care of the President and held their tongues, regardless of what was asked of them. Up until tonight President Richmond's fascination with married women had spawned no overwhelming dilemmas. But tonight's events clearly threatened all of that. Russell shook her head as she forced herself to think of a plan of action.

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LUTHER STUDIED THE FACE. IT WAS INTELLIGENT, ATTRACTIVE but also a very hard face. You could almost see the mental maneuvering as the forehead alternately wrinkled and then went lax. Time slipped by and she didn't budge. Then Gloria Russell's eyes opened and moved across the room, not missing any detail.

Luther involuntarily shrank back as her gaze swept by him like a searchlight across a prison yard. Then her eyes came to the bed and stopped. For a long minute she stared at the sleeping man, and then she got a look on her face that Luther could not figure out. It was halfway between a smile and a grimace.

She got up, moved to the bed and looked down at the man. A Man of the People, or so the people thought. A Man for the Ages. He did not look so great right now. His body was half on the bed, legs spread, feet nearly touching the floor; an awkward position to say the least when one was wearing no clothes.

She ran her eyes up and down the President's body, lingering on some points, an activity that was amazing to Luther considering what was lying on the floor. Before Gloria Russell had entered the room and faced off with Burton, Luther had expected to hear sirens and to be sitting there watching policemen and detectives, medical examiners and even spin doctors swarming everywhere; with news trucks piling up in vast columns outside. Obviously, this woman had a different plan.

Luther had seen Gloria Russell on CNN and the major networks, and countless times in the papers. Her features were distinctive. A long, aquiline nose set between high cheek-bones, the gift from a Cherokee ancestor. The hair was raven black and hung straight, stopping at her shoulders. The eyes were big and so dark a blue that they resembled the deepest of ocean water, twin pools of danger for the careless and unwary.

Luther carefully maneuvered in the chair. Watching the woman in front of a stately fireplace inside the White House pontificating on the latest political concerns was one thing. Watching her move through a room containing a corpse and examining a drunk, naked man who was the leader of the Free World was an entirely different matter. It was a spectacle Luther did not want to watch anymore but he could not pull his eyes away.

Russell glanced at the door, walked quickly across the room, took out her handkerchief, and closed and locked it. She swiftly returned to again stare down at the President. Her hand went out and for a moment Luther cringed in anticipation, but she simply stroked the President's face. Luther relaxed, but then stiffened again as her hand moved down to his chest, lingering momentarily on the thick hair, and then dropped still lower to his flat stomach, which rose and fell evenly in his deep sleep.

Then her hand moved lower and she slowly pulled the sheet away and let it drop to the floor. Her hand reached down to his crotch and held there. Then she glanced at the door again and knelt down in front of the President. Now Luther had to close his eyes. He did not share the peculiar spectator interests of the house's owner.

Several long minutes passed, and then Luther opened his eyes. Gloria Russell was now shedding her pantyhose, laying them neatly on a chair. Then she carefully climbed on top of the slumbering President.

Luther closed his eyes again. He wondered if they could hear the bed squeak downstairs. Probably not, as it was a very large house. And even if they did, what could they do?

Ten minutes later Luther heard a small, involuntary gasp from the man, and a low moan from the woman. But Luther kept his eyes closed. He wasn't sure why.

It seemed to be from a combination of raw fear and disgust at the disrespect shown to the dead woman.

When Luther finally opened his eyes, Russell was staring directly at him. His heart stopped for a moment until his brain told him it was okay. She quickly slipped on her pantyhose. Then, in confident, even strokes, she reapplied her lipstick in the looking glass.

A smile clung to her face; the cheeks were flushed. She looked younger. Luther glanced at the President. He had returned to a deep sleep, the last twenty minutes probably filed away by his mind as an especially realistic and pleasant dream. Luther looked back at Russell.

It was unnerving to see this woman smile directly at him, in this room of death, without knowing he was there. There was power in that woman's face. And a look Luther had already seen once in this room. This woman, too, was dangerous.

* * * * *

"I WANT THIS ENTIRE PLACE SANITIZED, EXCEPT FOR THAT." Russell pointed to the late Mrs. Sullivan. "Wait a minute. He was probably all over her. Burton, I want you to check every inch of her body, and anything that looks remotely like it doesn't belong there I want you to make disappear. Then put her clothes on."

Hands gloved, Burton moved forward to carry out this order.

Collin sat next to the President, forcing another cup of coffee down the man's throat. The caffeine would help clear away the grogginess, but only the passage of time would clean the slate completely. Russell sat down next to him. She took the President's hand in hers. He was fully clothed now although his hair was in disarray. His arm hurt, but they had bandaged it as best they could. He was in excellent health; it would heal quickly.

"Mr. President? Alan? *Alan?*" Russell gripped his face and pointed it toward her.

Had he sensed what she had done to him? She doubted it. He had so desperately wanted to get laid tonight. Wanted to be inside a woman. She had given him her body, no questions asked. Technically she had committed rape. Realistically she was confident she had fulfilled many a male's dream. It didn't matter if he had no recollection of the event, of her sacrifice. But he would damn sure know what she was going to do for him now.

The President's eyes came in and out of focus. Collin rubbed his neck. He was coming around. Russell glanced at her watch. Two o'clock in the morning. They had to get back. She slapped his face, not hard, but enough to get his attention. She felt Collin stiffen. God these guys had tunnel vision.

"Alan, did you have sex with her?"

"Wha..."

"Did you have sex with her?"

"Wha... No. Don't think so. Don't remem..."

"Give him some more coffee, pour it down his damned throat if you have to, but get him sober." Collin nodded and went to work. Russell walked over to Burton, whose gloved hands were dexterously examining every inch of the late Mrs. Sullivan.

Burton had been involved in numerous police investigations. He knew exactly what detectives looked for and where they looked for it. He never imagined himself

using that specialized knowledge to inhibit an investigation, but then he had never imagined anything like this ever happening either.

He looked around the room, his mind calculating which areas would need to be gone over, what other rooms they had used. They could do nothing about the marks on the woman's throat and other microscopic physical evidence that was no doubt imbedded in her skin. The medical examiner would pick those up regardless of what they tried to do. However, none of those things could be realistically traced to the President unless the police identified the President as a suspect, which was pretty much beyond the realm of possibility.

The incongruity of attempted strangulation of a small woman with death caused by gunshot was something they would have to leave to the police's imagination.

Burton turned his attention back to the deceased and started to carefully slide her underwear up her legs. He felt a tap on his shoulder.

"Check her."

Burton looked up. He started to say something.

"Check her!" Russell's eyebrows were arched. Burton had seen her do that a million times with the White House staff. They were all terrified of her. He wasn't afraid of her, but he was smart enough to cover his ass whenever she was around. He slowly did as he was told. Then he positioned the body exactly as it had fallen. He reported back with a single shake of his head.

"Are you sure?" Russell looked unconvinced, although she knew from her interlude with the President that chances were he had not entered the woman, or that if he had he hadn't finished. But there might be traces. It was scary as hell, the things they could determine these days from the tiniest specimens.

"I'm not a goddamned ob-gyn. I didn't see anything and I think I would have, but I don't carry a microscope around with me."

Russell would have to let that one go. There was still a lot to do and not much time.

"Did Johnson and Varney say anything?"

Collin looked over from where the President was ingesting his fourth cup of coffee. "They're wondering what the hell's going on, if that's what you mean."

"You didn't te—"

"I told them what you said to tell them and that's all, ma'am." He looked at her. "They're good men, Ms. Russell. They've been with the President since the campaign. They're not going to do anything to mess things up, okay?"

Russell rewarded Collin with a smile. A good-looking kid and, more important, a loyal member of the President's personal guard; he would be very useful to her. Burton might be a problem. But she had a strong trump card: he and Collin had pulled the trigger, maybe in the line of duty, but who really knew? Bottom line: they too were in this all the way.

* * * * *

LUTHER WATCHED THE ACTIVITY WITH AN APPRECIATION THAT he felt guilty about under the circumstances. These men were good: methodical, careful, thought things through, and didn't miss anything. Dedicated lawmen and professional criminals were not so different. The skills, the techniques were much

the same, just the focus was different, but then the focus made all the difference, didn't it?

The woman was now completely dressed, lying exactly where she had fallen. Collin was finishing with her fingernails. A solution had been injected under each, and a small suction device had cleaned away traces of skin and other incriminating remnants.

The bed had been stripped and remade; the evidence-laden sheets were already packed in a duffel bag for their ultimate destination in a furnace. Collin had already scoped the downstairs area.

Everything any of them had touched, except for one item, had been wiped clean. Burton was now vacuuming parts of the carpet and he would be the last one to leave, backing out, as he painstakingly extinguished their trail.

Earlier Luther had watched the agents ransack the room. Their obvious goal made him smile in spite of himself. Burglary. The necklace had been deposited in a bag along with her plethora of rings. They would make it appear as if the woman had surprised a burglar in her house and he had killed her, not knowing that six feet away a real-life burglar was watching and listening to everything they were doing.

An eyewitness!

Luther had never been an eyewitness to a burglary other than those he had committed. Criminals hated eyewitnesses. These people would kill Luther if they knew he was there; there was no question about that. An elderly criminal, a three-time loser, was not much to sacrifice for the Man of the People.

The President, still groggy but with Burton's aid, slowly made his way out of the room. Russell watched them go. She did not notice Collin frantically searching the room. Finally, his sharp eyes fixed on Russell's purse on the nightstand. Poking out from the bag was about an inch of the letter opener's handle. Using a plastic bag, Collin quickly pulled out the letter opener and prepared to wipe it off. Luther involuntarily jerked as he watched Russell race over and grab Collin's hand.

"Don't do that, Collin."

Collin wasn't as sharp as Burton, and certainly wasn't in Russell's league. He looked puzzled.

"This has his prints all over it, ma'am. Hers too, plus some other stuff if you know what I mean—it's leather, it's soaked right in."

"Agent Collin, I was retained by the President as his strategic and tactical planner. What appears to you an obvious choice appears to me to require much more thought and deliberation. Until that analysis has been completed you will not wipe that object down. You will put it in a proper container, and then you will give it to me."

Collin started to protest but Russell's menacing stare cut him off. He dutifully bagged the letter opener and handed it to her.

"Please be careful with that, Ms. Russell."

"Tim, I am always careful."

She rewarded him with another smile. He smiled back. She had never called him by his first name before; he had been unsure if she even knew it. He also observed, and not for the first time, that the Chief of Staff was a very good-looking woman.

"Yes, ma'am." He began to pack up the equipment.

"Tim?"

He looked back at her. She moved toward him, looked down, and then her eyes caught his. She spoke in low tones; she almost seemed embarrassed, Collin felt.

"Tim, this is a very unique situation we're faced with. I need to feel my way a little bit. Do you understand?"

Collin nodded. "I'd call this a unique situation. Scared the hell out of me when I saw that blade about to go into the President's chest."

She touched his arm. Her fingernails were long and perfectly manicured. She held up the letter opener. "We need to keep this between us, Tim. Okay? Not the President. Not even Burton."

"I don't know—"

She gripped his hand. "Tim, I really need your support on this. The President has no idea what happened and I don't think Burton is looking at this too rationally right now. I need someone I can depend on. I need you, Tim. This is too important. You know that, don't you? I wouldn't ask you if I didn't think you could handle it."

He smiled at the compliment, then looked squarely at her.

"Okay, Ms. Russell. Whatever you say."

As Collin finished packing up, Russell looked at the bloody seven-inch piece of metal that had come so close to ending her political aspirations. If the President had been killed, there could have been no cover-up. An ugly word—cover-up—but often necessary in the world of high politics. She shivered slightly at the thought of the headlines. "PRESIDENT FOUND DEAD IN BEDROOM OF CLOSE FRIEND'S HOME. WIFE ARRESTED IN SLAYING. CHIEF OF STAFF GLORIA RUSSELL HELD RESPONSIBLE BY PARTY LEADERS." But that had not happened. Would not happen.

This thing she held in her hand was worth more than a mountain of weapons-grade plutonium, more than the total oil production of Saudi Arabia.

With this in her possession, who knew? Perhaps even a *Russell-Richmond* ticket? The possibilities were absolutely infinite.

She smiled and put the plastic bag inside her purse.

* * * * *

THE SCREAM MADE LUTHER WHIP HIS HEAD AROUND. THE PAIN shot through his neck and he almost cried out.

The President ran into the bedroom. He was wide-eyed, but still half-drunk. The memory of the last few hours had come back like a Boeing 747 landing on his head.

Burton ran up behind him. The President started toward the body; Russell dropped her purse on the nightstand, and she and Collin met him halfway.

"Goddammit! She's dead. I killed her. Oh sweet Jesus help me. I killed her!" He screamed and then cried and then screamed again. He tried to push through the wall in front of him but was still too weak. Burton pulled at the President from behind.

Then with convulsive strength, Richmond tore loose and launched himself across the room and slammed into the wall, rolling into the nightstand. And finally

the President of the United States crumpled to the floor and curled up like a fetus, whimpering, next to the woman he had intended to have sex with that night.

Luther watched in disgust. He rubbed at his neck and slowly shook his head. The incredibility of the entire night's events was becoming too much to endure.

The President slowly sat up. Burton looked like Luther felt, but said nothing. Collin eyed Russell for instructions. Russell caught the look and smugly accepted this subtle changing of the guard.

"Gloria?"

"Yes, Alan?"

Luther had seen the way Russell had looked at the letter opener. He also knew something now that no one else in the room knew.

"Will it be okay? Make it okay, Gloria. Please. Oh God, Gloria!"

She rested her hand on his shoulder in her most reassuring manner, as she had done across hundreds of thousands of miles of campaign dust. "Everything's under control, Alan. I've got *everything* under control."

The President was far too intoxicated to catch the meaning, but she didn't really care.

Burton touched his radio earpiece, listening intently for a moment. He turned to Russell.

"We better get the hell out of here. Varney just scoped a patrol car coming down the road."

"The alarm... ?" Russell looked puzzled.

Burton shook his head. "It's probably just a rent-a-cop on routine, but if he sees something..." He didn't need to say anything else.

Leaving in a limo in this land of wealth was the best cover they could have. Russell thanked God for the routine she had developed for using rented limos without the regular drivers for these little adventures. The names on all the forms were dummies, the rental fee and deposit paid in cash, the car picked up and dropped off after hours. There were no faces associated with the transaction. The car would be sterilized. That would be a dead end for the police if they ever snagged that line, which was highly doubtful.

"Let's go!" Russell was now slightly panicked.

The President was helped up. Russell went out with him. Collin grabbed the bags. Then stopped cold.

Luther swallowed hard.

Collin turned back, grabbed Russell's purse off the nightstand and headed out.

Burton started up the small vacuum, completed the room and then left, closing the door and turning off the light.

* * * * *

LUTHER'S WORLD RETURNED TO INKY DARKNESS.

This was the first time he had been alone in the room with the dead woman. The rest of them had apparently grown used to the bloody figure lying on the floor, unconsciously stepping over or around the now inanimate object. But Luther had not grown accustomed to the death barely eight feet away.

He could no longer see the pile of stained clothing and the lifeless body inside of them, but he knew it was there. "Sleazy rich bitch" would probably be her informal

epitaph. And, yes, she had cheated on her husband, not that he seemed to care about that. But she hadn't deserved to die like that. He would've killed her, there was no question about that. Except for her swift counterattack, the President would've committed murder.

The Secret Service men he could not really fault. That was their job and they did it. She had picked the wrong man to attempt to kill in the heat of whatever she had been feeling. Maybe it was better. If her hand had been a little faster or the agents' response a little slower, she might be spending the rest of her life in jail. Or she'd probably get death for killing a President.

Luther sat down in the chair. His legs were almost numb. He forced himself to relax. Soon he would be getting the hell out of there. He needed to be ready to run.

He had a lot to think through, considering that they were unwittingly setting up Luther Whitney to be the number-one suspect in what would no doubt be deemed a heinous and gruesome crime. The wealth of the victim would demand that enormous law enforcement resources be expended in finding the perpetrator. But there was no way they would be looking to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue for the answer. They would search elsewhere, and despite Luther's intense preparations, they might very well find him. He was good, very good, but then he had never faced the types of forces that would be unleashed to solve this crime.

He quickly thought back through his entire plan leading up to tonight. He could think of no obvious holes, but it was the not-so-obvious ones that usually did you in. He swallowed, curled and uncurled his fingers, stretched his legs to calm himself. One thing at a time. He still wasn't out of here. Many things could go wrong, and one or two undoubtedly would.

He would wait two more minutes. He ticked off the seconds in his head, visualized them loading the car. They would probably wait for any further sight or sound of the patrol car before heading out.

He carefully opened his bag. Inside were much of the contents of this room. He had almost forgotten that he had come here to steal and in fact had stolen. His car was a good quarter mile away. He thanked God he had quit smoking all those years ago. He would need every ounce of lung capacity he could muster. How many Secret Service Agents was he confronted with? At least four. Shit!

The mirrored door slowly opened and Luther stepped out into the room. He hit the remote one more time and then tossed it back onto the chair as the door swung closed.

He eyed the window. He had already planned an alternate escape through that aperture. A hundred-foot coil of extremely strong nylon rope, knotted every six inches, was in his bag.

He made a wide berth around the body, careful not to step in any of the crimson, the position of which he had programmed into his memory. He glanced only once at the remains of Christine Sullivan. Her life could not be brought back. Luther was now faced with keeping his own intact.

It took him a few seconds to reach the nightstand, and probe down behind it.

Luther's fingers clutched the plastic bag. The President's collision with the furniture had toppled Gloria Russell's purse on its side. The plastic bag and its immensely valuable occupant had fallen out and slid down behind the nightstand.

Luther's finger nudged the blade of the letter opener through the plastic before secreting it in his duffel bag. He went quickly over to the window and carefully peered out. The limo and van were still there. That wasn't good.

He went across to the other side of the room, took out his rope, secured it under the leg of the enormously heavy chest of drawers, and ran the line across to the other window, which would drop him at the opposite end of the house, hidden from the road. He carefully opened the window, praying for a well-oiled track, and was rewarded.

He played out the rope and watched it snake down the brick sides of the house.

* * * * *

GLORIA RUSSELL LOOKED UP AT THE MASSIVE FACE OF THE mansion. There was real money there. Money and position that Christine Sullivan did not deserve. She had won it with her boobs and artfully displayed ass and her trashy mouth that had somehow inspired the elderly Walter Sullivan, awakening some emotion buried deep within his complex depths. In six months he would not miss her anymore. His world of rock-solid wealth and power would hurtle on.

Then it struck her.

Russell was halfway out of the limo before Collin caught her arm. He held up the leather bag she had bought in Georgetown for a hundred bucks and was now worth incalculably more to her. She settled back down in her seat, her breath normalized. She smiled, almost blushed at Collin.

The President, slumped in a semicatatonic state, didn't notice the exchange.

Then Russell peeked inside her bag, just to be sure. Her mouth dropped open, her hands frantically tore through the few contents of the bag. It took all her willpower not to shriek out loud as she stared horror-stricken at the young agent. The letter opener was not there. It must still be in the house.

Collin tore back up the stairs, a thoroughly confused Burton racing after him.

Luther was halfway down the wall when he heard them coming.

Ten more feet.

They burst in the bedroom door.

Six more feet.

Stunned, the two Secret Service men spotted the rope; Burton dove for it.

Two more feet, and Luther let go, hitting the ground running.

Burton flew to the window. Collin threw the nightstand aside: nothing. He joined Burton at the window. Luther had already disappeared around the corner. Burton started to head out the window. Collin stopped him. The way they had come would be faster.

They bolted out the door.

* * * * *

LUTHER CRASHED THROUGH THE CORNFIELD, NO LONGER concerned with leaving a trail, now only worried about surviving. The bag slowed him down slightly, but he had worked too hard over the last several months to walk away empty-handed.

He exploded out from the friendly cover of the crops and hit the most dangerous phase of his flight: a hundred yards of open field. The moon had disappeared

behind thickening clouds and there were no streetlights in the country; in his black clothing he would be almost impossible to spot. But the human eye was best at spotting movement in the darkness, and he was moving as fast as he could.

* * * * *

THE TWO SECRET SERVICE AGENTS STOPPED MOMENTARILY AT the van. They emerged with Agent Varney and raced across the field.

Russell rolled down the window and watched them, shock on her face. Even the President was somewhat awake, but she quickly calmed him and he returned to his half-slumber.

Collin and Burton slipped on their night-vision goggles and their view instantly resembled a crude computer game. Thermal images registered in red, everything else was dark green.

Agent Travis Varney, tall and rangy, and only vaguely aware of what was going on, was ahead of them. He ran with the easy motion of the collegiate miler he used to be.

In the Service three years, Varney was single, committed entirely to his profession, and looked to Burton as a father figure to replace the one killed in Vietnam. They were looking for someone who had done something in that house. Something that involved the President and that therefore involved him. Varney pitied whoever he was chasing if he caught up to him.

* * * * *

LUTHER COULD HEAR THE SOUNDS OF THE MEN BEHIND HIM. They had recovered faster than he had thought. His head start had dwindled but it still should be enough. They had made a big mistake by not jumping in the van and running him down. They had to have known he would have transportation. It wasn't like he would have coptered in. But he was grateful that they weren't quite as smart as they probably should have been. If they had he would not be alive to see the sun come up.

He took a shortcut through a path in the woods, spotted on his last walk-through. It gained him about a minute. His breath came in quick bursts, like machine-gun fire. His clothes felt heavy on him; as in a child's dream, his legs seemed to move in slow motion.

Finally he broke free from the trees, and he could see his car and was again grateful for having taken the precaution to back in.

* * * * *

A HUNDRED YARDS BEHIND, A THERMAL FIGURE OTHER THAN Varney's finally came alive on Burton's and Collin's screens. A man running, and running hard. Their hands flew to their shoulder holsters. Neither weapon was effective long-range but they couldn't worry about that now.

Then an engine roared to life and Burton and Collin ran like a tornado was raging at their heels.

Varney was still ahead of them and to the left. He would have a better line of fire, but would he shoot? Something told them he would not; that was not part of his training, to fire at a fleeing person who was no longer a danger to the man he

was sworn to protect. However, Varney did not know that at stake here was more than a mere beating heart. There was an entire institution that would never be the same, in addition to two Secret Service agents who were certain they had done nothing wrong, but were intelligent enough to realize that the blame would fall heavily on their shoulders.

Burton was never much of a runner, but he picked up his pace as these thoughts flew through his head, and the younger Collin was hard-pressed to keep up with him. But Burton knew it was too late. His legs started to slow down as the car exploded out and turned away from them. In moments it was already two hundred yards down the road.

Burton stopped running, dropped to his knee, aimed his gun, but all he could see was the dust kicked up by the fleeing vehicle. Then the taillights went out and in a moment he lost the target entirely.

He turned to see Collin next to him, looking down at him, the reality of the whole event starting to set in. Burton slowly got up and put his gun away. He took off his goggles; Collin did likewise.

They looked at each other.

Burton sucked air in, his limbs shook. His body was finally reacting to the recent exertions now that the adrenaline had stopped flowing. It was over, wasn't it?

Then Varney came running up. Burton was not too distraught to note with an envious twinge and a small measure of pride that the younger man wasn't even out of breath. He would see to it that Varney and Johnson didn't suffer with them. They didn't deserve that.

He and Collin would go down, but that was all. He felt bad about Collin; however, there was nothing he could do about that. But when Varney spoke, Burton's thoughts of the future went from complete and absolute doom to a small glimmer of hope.

"I got the license plate number."

* * * * *

"WHERE THE HELL WAS HE?" RUSSELL LOOKED incredulously around the bedroom. "What? Was he under the goddamned bed?"

She tried to stare Burton down. The guy hadn't been under the bed, nor in any of the closets. Burton had examined all those spaces when he was sanitizing the room. He told her so in no uncertain terms.

Burton looked at the rope and then the open window. "Jesus, it was like the guy was watching us the whole time, knew right when we left the house." Burton looked around for other possible bogeymen hovering nearby. His eyes rested on the mirror, then moved on, stopped and went back.

He looked down at the carpet in front of the mirror.

He had gone over that area repeatedly with the vacuum until it was smooth; the carpet nape, already plush and expensive, had been a good quarter inch thicker by the time he was finished. No one had walked there since they had come back into the room.

And yet now as he stooped down, his eye discerned very rough traces of footprints. He hadn't noticed them before because now the whole section was

matted down, as if something had swept out... . He slapped on his gloves, rushed to the mirror, pulling and prying around its edges. He yelled to Collin to get some tools while Russell looked on stunned.

Burton inserted the crowbar about midway down the side of the mirror and he and Collin threw all their weight against the tool. The lock was not that strong, depending on deception rather than brute strength to safeguard its secrets.

There was a grinding sound and then a tear and a pop and the door swung open.

Burton plunged inside with Collin right behind. A light switch was on the wall. The room turned bright and the men looked around.

Russell peered in, saw the chair. As she looked around, her face froze on the inner side of the mirror door. She was staring right at the bed. The bed where a little while before ... She rubbed her temples as a searing pain ripped through her skull.

A one-way mirror.

She turned to find Burton looking over her shoulder and through the mirror. His earlier remark about someone watching them had just proven itself prophetic.

Burton looked helplessly at Russell. "He must have been right here the whole time. The whole goddamned time. I can't fucking believe this." Burton looked at the empty shelves inside the vault. "Looks like he took a bunch of stuff. Probably cash and untraceables."

"Who cares about that!" Russell exploded, pointing at the mirror. "This guy saw and heard everything, and you let him get away."

"We got his license plate." Collin was hoping for another rewarding smile. He didn't get it.

"So what? You think he's going to wait around for us to run his tag and go knock on his door?"

Russell sat down on the bed. Her head was spinning. If the guy had been in there he had seen everything. She shook her head. A bad but controllable situation had suddenly become an incomprehensible disaster, and totally out of her control. Particularly considering the information Collin had relayed to her when she had entered the bedroom.

The sonofabitch had the letter opener! Prints, blood, everything, straight to the White House.

She looked at the mirror and then at the bed, where a short time before she had been on top of the President. She instinctively pulled her jacket tighter around herself. She was suddenly sick to her stomach. She braced herself against the bedpost.

Collin emerged from the vault. "Don't forget he committed a crime being here. He can get in big-time trouble if he goes to the cops." That thought had struck the young agent while he peered around the vault.

He should have thought a little more.

Russell pushed back a strong urge to vomit. "He doesn't have to exactly go and turn himself in to cash in on this. Have you ever heard of the goddamned phone? He's probably calling the Post right now. Dammit! And then next the tabloids and by the end of the week we'll be watching him on Oprah and Sally being shot on

remote from whatever little island he's retired to with his face blurred. And then comes the book and after that the movie. Shit!"

Russell envisioned a certain package arriving at the Post or the J. Edgar Hoover Building or the U.S. Attorney's office or the Senate Minority Leader's office, all possible depositories promising maximum political damage—not to mention the legal repercussions.

The note accompanying it would ask them to please match the prints on it and the blood with specimens of the President of the United States. It would sound like a joke, but they would do it. Of course they would do it. Richmond's prints were already on file. His DNA would be a match. Her body would be found, her blood would be checked and they would be confronted with more questions than they could possibly have answers to.

They were dead, they were all dead. And that bastard had just been sitting in there, waiting for his chance. Not knowing that tonight would bring him the biggest payoff of his life. Nothing as simple as dollars. He would bring down a President, in flames and tatters, crashing to earth without a chance of survival. How often did someone get to do that? Woodward and Bernstein had become supermen, they could do no wrong. This topped the hell out of Watergate. This was too fucking much to deal with.

Russell barely made it to the bathroom. Burton looked over at the corpse and then back at Collin. They said nothing, their hearts pounding with increased frequency as the absolute enormity of the situation settled down on them like the stone lid of a crypt. Since they could think of nothing else to do, Burton and Collin dutifully retrieved the sanitizing equipment while Russell emptied the contents of her stomach. In an hour they were packed and gone.

* * * * *

THE DOOR CLOSED QUIETLY BEHIND HIM.

Luther figured he had a couple of days at best, maybe less. He risked turning on a light and his eyes went quickly over the interior of the living room.

His life had gone from normal, or close to it, straight to horror land.

He took off the backpack, switched off the light, and stole over to the window.

Nothing—everything was quiet. Fleeing from that house had been the most nerve-racking experience of his life, worse than being overrun by screaming North Koreans. His hands still twitched. All the way back, every passing car seemed to bore its headlights into his face, searching out his guilty secret. Twice, police cars had passed him, and the sweat had poured off his forehead, his breathing constricted.

The car had been returned to the impoundment lot where Luther had "borrowed" it earlier that night. The plate would get them nowhere, but something else could.

He doubted they had gotten a look at him. Even if they had, they would only know generally his height and build. His age, race and facial features would still be a mystery, and without that they had nothing. And as fast as he had run, they probably figured him for a younger man. There was one open end, and he had thought about how to handle that on the ride back. For now, he packed up as

much of the last thirty years as he could into two bags; he would not be coming back here.

He would clear out his accounts tomorrow morning; that would give him the resources to run far away from here. He had faced more than his share of danger during his long life. But the choice between going up against the President of the United States or disappearing was a no-brainer.

The night's haul was safely hidden away. Three months of work for a prize that could end up getting him killed. He locked the door and disappeared into the night.

Chapter 4

AT SEVEN A.M. THE GOLD-COLORED ELEVATOR DOORS opened, and Jack stepped into the meticulously decorated expanse that was Patton, Shaw's reception area.

Lucinda wasn't in yet, so the main reception desk, solid teakwood and weighing about a thousand pounds, and costing about twenty dollars for each of those pounds, was unmanned.

He walked down the broad hallways under the soft lights of the neoclassical wall sconces, turned right, and then left and in one minute opened the solid-oak door to his office. In the background, a smattering of ringing phones could be heard as the city woke up for business.

Six floors, well over one hundred thousand square feet in one of the best addresses downtown housing over two hundred highly compensated attorneys, with a two-story library, fully equipped gymnasium, sauna, women's and men's showers and lockers, ten conference rooms, a supporting staff of several hundred and, most important, a client list coveted by every other major firm in the country, that was the empire of Patton, Shaw & Lord.

The firm had weathered the miserable end to the 1980s, and then picked up speed after the recession had finally subsided. Now it was going full-bore as many of its competitors had downsized. It was loaded with some of the best attorneys in virtually every field of law, or at least the fields that paid the best. Many had been scooped from other leading firms, enticed by signing bonuses and promises that no dollar would be spared when chasing a new piece of business.

Three senior partners had been tapped by the current administration for top-level positions. The firm had awarded them severance pay in excess of two million dollars each, with the implicit understanding that after their government stint they would be back in harness, bringing with them tens of millions of dollars in legal business from their newly forged contacts.

The firm's unwritten, but strictly adhered to, rule was that no new client matter would be accepted unless the minimum billing would exceed one hundred thousand dollars. Anything less, the management committee had decided, would be a waste of the firm's time. And they had no problem sticking to that rule, and

flourishing. In the nation's capital, people came for the best and they didn't mind paying for the privilege.

The firm had only made one exception to that rule, and ironically it had been for the only client Jack had other than Baldwin. He told himself he would test that rule with increasing frequency. If he was going to stick this out, he wanted it to be on his terms as much as that was possible. He knew his victories would be small at first, but that was okay.

He sat down at his desk, opened his cup of coffee and glanced over the *Post*. Patton, Shaw & Lord had five kitchens and three full-time housekeepers with their own computers. The firm probably consumed five hundred pots of coffee a day, but Jack picked up his morning brew at the little place on the corner because he couldn't stand the stuff they used here. It was a special imported blend and cost a fortune and tasted like dirt mixed in with seaweed.

He tipped back in his chair and glanced around his office. It was a good size by big-firm associate standards, about fourteen by fourteen, with a nice view up Connecticut Avenue.

At the Public Defenders Service, Jack had shared an office with another attorney and there had been no window, only a giant poster of a Hawaiian beach Jack had tacked up one repulsively cold morning. Jack had liked the coffee at PD better.

When he made partner he would get a new office, twice this size—maybe not a corner just yet, but that was definitely in the cards. With the Baldwin account he was the fourth biggest rainmaker in the firm, and the top three were all in their fifties and sixties, looking more toward the golf courses than to the inside of an office. He glanced at his watch. Time to start the meter.

He was usually one of the first ones in, but the place would soon be stirring. Patton, Shaw matched top New York firm wages, and for the big bucks, they expected big-time efforts. The clients were enormous and their legal demands were of equal size. Making a mistake in this league might mean a four-billion-dollar defense contract went down the tubes or a city declared bankruptcy.

Every associate and junior partner he knew at the firm had stomach problems; a quarter of them were in therapy of one kind or another. Jack watched their pale faces and softening bodies as they marched daily through the pristine hallways of PS&L bearing yet another Herculean legal task. That was the trade-off for compensation levels that put them in the top five percent nationwide among all professionals.

He alone among them was safe from the partnership gauntlet. Control of clients was the great equalizer in law. He had been with Patton, Shaw about a year, was a novice corporate attorney, and was accorded the respect of the most senior and experienced members of the firm.

All of that should have made him feel guilty, undeserving—and it would have if he hadn't been so miserable about the rest of his life.

He popped the final miniature doughnut into his mouth, leaned forward in his chair and opened a file. Corporate work was often monotonous and his skill level was such that his tasks were not the most exciting in the world. Reviewing ground leases, preparing UCC filings, forming limited liability companies, drafting memorandums of understanding and private placement documents, it was all in a

day's work, and the days were growing longer and longer, but he was learning fast; he had to in order to survive, his courtroom skills were virtually useless to him here.

The firm traditionally did no litigation work, preferring instead to handle the more lucrative and steady corporate and tax matters. When litigation did arise it was farmed out to select, elite litigation-only firms, who in turn would refer any nontrial work that came their way to Patton, Shaw. It was an arrangement that had worked well over the years.

By lunchtime he had moved two stacks of drift from his in to his out basket, dictated three closing checklists and a couple of letters, and received four calls from Jennifer reminding him about the White House dinner they would be attending that night.

Her father was being honored as Businessman of the Year by some organization or other. It spoke volumes about the President's close nexus to big business that such an event would be worthy of a White House function. But at least Jack would get to see the man up close. Getting to meet him was probably out of the question, but then you never knew.

"Got a minute?" Barry Alvis popped his balding head in the door. He was a senior staff associate, meaning he had been passed over for partner more than three times and in fact would never successfully complete that next step. Hardworking and bright, he was an attorney any firm would be fortunate to have. His schmooz skills and hence his client-generating prospects, however, were nil. He made a hundred sixty thousand a year, and worked hard enough to earn another twenty in bonuses each year. His wife didn't work, his kids went to private schools, he drove a late-model Beemer, was not expected to generate business and had little to complain about.

A very experienced attorney with ten years of intense and high-level transactional work behind him, he should have resented the hell out of Jack Graham, and he did.

Jack waved him in. He knew Alvis didn't like him, understood why, and didn't push it. He could take his lumps with the best of them, but then he would only allow himself to be pushed so far.

"Jack, we've got to get cranking on the Bishop merger."

Jack looked blank. That deal, a real pain in the ass, had died, or at least he thought it had. He took out a legal pad, his hands twitching.

"I thought Raymond Bishop didn't want to get into bed with TCC."

Alvis sat down, placed the fourteen-inch file he was carrying on Jack's desk and leaned back.

"Deals die, then they come back to haunt you. We need your comments on the secondary financing documents by tomorrow afternoon."

Jack almost dropped his pen. "That's fourteen agreements and over five hundred pages, Barry. When did you find out about this?"

Alvis stood up and Jack caught the beginnings of a smile tugging at the other man's face.

"Fifteen agreements, and the official page count is six hundred and thirteen pages, single-spaced, not counting exhibits. Thanks, Jack. Patton, Shaw really

appreciates it.” He turned back. “Oh, have a great time with the President tonight, and say hello to Ms. Baldwin.”

Alvis walked out.

Jack looked at the bundle in front of him and rubbed his temples. He wondered when the little sonofabitch had really learned the Bishop deal had been resurrected. Something told him it wasn’t this morning.

He checked the time. He buzzed his secretary, managed to clear his schedule for the rest of the day, picked up the eight-pound file and headed for conference room number nine, the firm’s smallest and most secluded, where he could hide and work. He could do six intense hours, go to the party, come back, work all night, hit the steam room, shower and shave here, finish up the comments and have them on Alvis’s desk by three, four at the latest. The little shit.

Six agreements later, Jack ate the last of his chips, finished off his Coke, pulled on his jacket and ran the ten flights down to the lobby.

The cab dropped him at his apartment. He stopped cold.

The Jag was parked in front of his building. The vanity plate SUCCESS told him his soon-to-be date for life was up there waiting. She must be upset with him. She never condescended to come to his place unless she was upset with him about something and wanted to let him know it.

He checked his watch. He was running a little late, but he was still okay. He unlocked his front door, rubbing his jaw; maybe he could get by without shaving. She was sitting on the couch, having first draped a sheet across it. He had to admit, she looked stunning; a real blue blood, whatever that meant these days. Unsmiling, she stood up and looked at him.

“You’re late.”

“I’m not my own boss you know.”

“That’s no excuse. I work too.”

“Yeah, but the difference is your boss has the same last name, and is wrapped around his daughter’s pretty little finger.”

“Mother and Dad went on ahead. The limo will be here in twenty minutes.”

“Plenty of time.” Jack undressed and jumped in the shower. He pulled the curtain aside. “Jenn, can you get out my blue double-breasted?”

She walked into the bathroom, looked around in ill-concealed disgust. “The invitation said black tie.”

“Black tie optional,” he corrected her, rubbing the soap out of his eyes.

“Jack, don’t do this. It’s the White House for godsakes, it’s the President.”

“They give you an option, black tie or not, I’m exercising my right to forgo the black tie. Besides, I don’t have a tux.” He grinned at her and pulled the curtain closed.

“You were supposed to get one.”

“I forgot. C’mon, Jenn, for chrissakes. Nobody’s going to be watching me, nobody cares what I’ll be wearing.”

“Thank you, thank you very much, Jack Graham. I ask you to do one little thing.”

“Do you know how much those suckers cost?”

The soap was stinging his eyes. He thought of Barry Alvis and having to work all night and having to explain that fact to Jennifer and then to her father, and his

voice got angrier. "And how many times am I going to wear the goddamned thing? Once or twice a year?"

"After we're married we'll be attending a lot of functions where black tie isn't optional, it's mandatory. It's a good investment."

"I'd rather put my retirement funds into baseball cards." He poked his head out again to show her he was kidding, but she wasn't there.

He rubbed a towel through his hair, wrapped it around his middle and walked into the tiny bedroom where he found a new tux hanging on the door. Jennifer appeared, smiling.

"Compliments of Baldwin Enterprises. It's an Armani. It'll look wonderful on you."

"How'd you know my size?"

"You're a perfect forty-two long. You could be a model. Jennifer Baldwin's personal male model." She wrapped her perfumed arms around his shoulders and squeezed. He felt her considerable breasts push into his back and inwardly cursed that there wasn't time to take advantage of the moment. Just once without the goddamn murals, without the cherubs and chariots, maybe it would be different.

He looked longingly at the small, untidy bed. And he had to work all night. Goddamned Barry Alvis and the wishy-washy Raymond Bishop.

Why was it every time he saw Jennifer Baldwin he hoped that things could be different between them? Different meaning better. That she would change, or he would, or they both would meet somewhere in the middle? She was so beautiful, had everything in the world going for her. Jesus, what was wrong with him anyway?

* * * * *

THE LIMO MOVED EASILY THROUGH THE DREGS OF POST-RUSH-hour traffic. Past seven o'clock on a weeknight, downtown D.C. was pretty much deserted.

Jack looked over at his fiancée. Her light but very expensive coat didn't conceal the plunging neckline. The perfectly chiseled features were covered by flawless skin that occasionally flashed a perfect smile. Her thick auburn hair was piled high on top of her head; she usually wore it down. She looked like one of those one-name supermodels.

He moved closer to her. She smiled at him, checked her makeup, which was immaculate, and patted his hand.

He stroked her leg, slid her dress up; she pushed him away.

"Later, maybe," she whispered so the driver wouldn't hear.

Jack smiled and mouthed that later he might have a headache. She laughed and then he remembered there would be no "later" tonight.

He slumped back in the thickly padded seat and stared out the window. He had never been to the White House; Jennifer had, twice before. She didn't look nervous; he was. He tugged at his bow tie, and smoothed his hair as they turned onto Executive Drive.

The White House guards checked them methodically; Jennifer as usual got second and third looks from all of the men and women present. When she bent down to adjust her high heel, she almost spilled out of her five-thousand-dollar

dress and made several White House staffers far happier men for it. Jack got the usual envious looks from the guys. Then they moved into the building and presented their engraved invitations to the Marine sergeant who escorted them through the lower-level entry corridor and then up the stairs to the East Room.

* * * * *

“DAMMIT!” THE PRESIDENT HAD BENT DOWN TO PICK UP A copy of his speech for the night’s event and the pain had shot up to his shoulder. “I think it nicked a tendon, Gloria.”

Gloria Russell sat in one of the wide, plush chairs with which the President’s wife had decorated the Oval Office.

The First Lady had good taste if not a lot else. She was nice to look at, but a little light in the intellect department. No challenge to the President’s power, and an asset in the polls.

Her family background was impeccable: old money, old ties. The President’s connection to the conservative wealth and influence segment of the country had not hurt his standing with the liberal contingent in the least, however, owing mainly to his charisma and skills at consensus-building. And his good looks, which counted for a lot more than anyone cared to admit.

A successful President had to be able to talk a good game, and this President’s batting average was up there with Ted Williams’s.

“I think I need to see a doctor.” The President was not in the best of moods, but then neither was Russell.

“Well, Alan, then exactly how would you explain a stab wound to the White House press?”

“What the hell ever happened to doctor-patient confidentiality?”

Russell rolled her eyes. He could be so stupid sometimes.

“You’re like a Fortune 500 company, Alan, everything about you is public information.”

“Well, not everything.”

“That remains to be seen, doesn’t it? This is far from over, Alan.” Russell had smoked three packs of cigarettes, and drunk two pots of coffee since last night. At any moment their world, her career, could come crashing down. The police knocking on the door. It was all she could do to keep herself from running screaming from the room. As it was nausea continuously swept over her in vast waves. She clenched her teeth, gripped the chair. The image of total destruction would not budge from her mind.

The President scanned the copy, memorizing some, the rest he would ad-lib; his memory was phenomenal, an asset that had served him well.

“That’s why I have you, Gloria, isn’t it? To make it all better?”

He looked at her.

For a moment she wondered if he knew. If he knew what she had done with him. Her body stiffened and then relaxed. He couldn’t know, that was impossible. She remembered his drunken pleadings; oh how a bottle of Jack could change a person.

“Of course it is, Alan, but some decisions have to be made. Some alternative strategies have to be developed depending on what we find ourselves faced with.”

"I can't exactly cancel my schedule. Besides, this guy can't do anything."

Russell shook her head. "We can't be sure of that."

"Think about it! He'll have to admit to burglary to even place himself there. Can you see him trying to get on the evening news with that story? They'll put him in a rubber room in a New York minute." The President shook his head. "I'm safe. This guy cannot touch me, Gloria. Not in a million years."

They had worked out a threshold strategy on the limo ride back to town. Their position would be simple: categorical denial. They would let the absurdity of the allegation, if it ever came, do their work for them. And it was an absurd story despite the fact that it was absolutely true. Sympathy from the White House for the poor, unbalanced and admitted felon and his shamefaced family.

There was, of course, another possibility, but Russell had chosen not to address that with the President just yet. In fact she concluded it was the more likely scenario. It was really the only thing allowing her to function.

"Stronger things have happened." She looked at him.

"The place was cleaned, right? There's nothing left to find, right, except her?" There was a hint of nervousness in his voice.

"Right." Russell licked her lips. The President didn't know that the letter opener with his prints and blood on it was now in the possession of their felonious eyewitness.

She stood up and paced. "Of course I can't speak about certain traces of sexual contact. But that wouldn't be linked to you in any event."

"Jesus, I can't even remember if we did it or not. It seems like I did."

She couldn't help smiling at his remark.

The President turned and looked at her. "What about Burton and Collin?"

"What about them?"

"Have you talked to them?" His message was clear enough.

"They have as much to lose as you, don't they, Alan?"

"As *us*, Gloria, as *us*." He fixed his tie in the mirror. "Any clue to the Peeping Tom?"

"Not yet; they're running the plate."

"When do you think they'll realize she's missing?"

"As warm as it's been during the day, soon I hope."

"Real funny, Gloria."

"She'll be missed, inquiries will be made. Her husband will be called, they'll go to the house. The next day, maybe two, maybe three tops."

"And then the police will investigate."

"There's nothing we can do about that."

"But you'll keep on top of it?" A trace of concern crossed the President's brow as he thought swiftly through various scenarios. *Had he fucked Christy Sullivan? He hoped that he had. At least the night wouldn't have been a total disaster.*

"As much as we can without arousing too much suspicion."

"That's easy enough. You can use the angle that Walter Sullivan is a close friend and political ally of mine. It would be natural for me to have a personal interest in the case. Think things through, Gloria, that's what I pay you for."

And you were sleeping with his wife, Russell thought. *Some friend.*

"That rationale had already occurred to me, Alan."

She lit a cigarette, blew the smoke out slowly. That felt good. She had to keep ahead of him on this. Just one small step ahead and she would be fine. It wouldn't be easy; he was sharp, but he was also arrogant. Arrogant people habitually overestimated their own abilities and underestimated everyone else's.

"And nobody knew she was meeting you?"

"I think we can assume she was discreet, Gloria. Christy didn't have too much upstairs, her gifts were slightly lower, but she understood economics with the best of them." The President winked at his Chief of Staff. "She had about eight hundred million to lose if her husband found out she was screwing around, even with the President."

Russell knew about Walter Sullivan's odd viewing habits from the mirror and chair, but then again, for the assignments he didn't know about, didn't get to watch, who knew what his reaction would've been? Thank God it hadn't been Sullivan sitting there in the dark.

"I warned you, Alan, that one day your little extracurricular activities would get us into trouble."

Richmond looked at her, disappointment on his features. "Listen, you think I'm the first guy to hold this office to catch a little action on the side? Don't be so goddamned naive, Gloria. At least I'm a helluva lot more discreet than some of my predecessors. I take the responsibilities of the job ... and I take the perks. Understand?"

Russell nervously rubbed at her neck. "Completely, Mr. President."

"So it's just this one guy, who can't do anything."

"It only takes one to bring the house of cards tumbling down."

"Yeah? Well there are a lot of people living in that house. Just remember that."

"I do, Chief, every day."

There was a knock at the door. Russell's deputy assistant leaned in. "Five minutes, sir." The President nodded and waved him off.

"Great timing on this presentation."

"Ransome Baldwin contributed heavily to your campaign, as did all of his friends."

"You don't have to explain political paybacks to me, sweetheart."

Russell stood up and moved over to him. She took his good arm, looked intently at him. On his left cheek was a small scar. A souvenir from some shrapnel during a brief stint in the Army toward the end of the Vietnam War. As his political career had taken off, the female consensus was that the tiny imperfection greatly enhanced his attractiveness. Russell found herself staring at that scar.

"Alan, I will do whatever it takes to protect your interest. You will get through this, but we need to work together. We're a team, Alan, we're a helluva team. They can't take us down, not if we act together."

The President studied her face for a brief moment, and then rewarded her with the smile that routinely accompanied front-page headlines. He pecked her on the cheek, squeezed her against him; she clung to him.

"I love you, Gloria. You're a trouper." He picked up his speech. "It's showtime." He turned and walked out. Russell stared after his broad back, carefully rubbed at her cheek and then followed him out.

* * * * *

JACK LOOKED AROUND THE OVERSTATED ELEGANCE OF THE immense East Room. The place was full of some of the most powerful men and women in the country. Skillful networking was taking place all around him, and all he could do was stand and gawk. He looked across the room and spied his fiancée cornering a congressman from some state out west, no doubt plying Baldwin Enterprises's needy case for the good legislator's assistance on riparian rights.

His fiancée spent much of her time gaining access to holders of power at all levels. From county commissioners to Senate Committee chairmen, Jennifer stroked the right egos, fed the right hands, and made certain that all the important players were in place when Baldwin Enterprises wanted another mammoth deal orchestrated. The doubling of the assets of her father's company during the last five years was due in no small part to her excelling at that task. In truth, what man was really safe from her?

Ransome Baldwin, all six feet five inches, thick white hair and baritone voice, made his rounds, solidly shaking hands with politicians he already owned and rubbing elbows with the few he didn't as yet.

The award ceremony had been mercifully brief. Jack glanced at his watch. He would need to be getting back to the office soon. On the way over Jennifer had mentioned a private party at the Willard Hotel at eleven. He rubbed his face. Of all the friggin' luck.

He was about to pull Jennifer aside to explain his early exit, when the President walked up to her, was joined by her father, and a moment later all three headed his way.

Jack put his drink down and cleared his throat so he wouldn't sound like a complete fool when the words stumbled out of his mouth. Jennifer and her father were talking to the President like old friends. Laughing, chatting, touching elbows like he was cousin Ned in from Oklahoma. But this wasn't cousin Ned, this was the President of the United States for godsakes!

"So you're the lucky fellow?" The President's smile was immediate and pleasant. They shook hands. He was as tall as Jack, and Jack admired that he had kept trim and fit with a job like his.

"Jack Graham, Mr. President. It's an honor to meet you, sir."

"I feel like I already know you, Jack, Jennifer's told me so much about you. Most of it good." He grinned.

"Jack's a partner at Patton, Shaw & Lord." Jennifer still held on to the President's arm. She looked at Jack and smiled a cutesy smile.

"Well, not a partner yet, Jenn."

"Matter of time is all." Ransome Baldwin's voice boomed out. "With Baldwin Enterprises as a client, you could name your price at any firm in this country. Don't you forget that. Don't let Sandy Lord pull the wool over your eyes."

"Listen to him, Jack. The voice of experience." The President raised his glass and then involuntarily jerked it back. Jennifer stumbled, letting go of his arm.

"I'm sorry, Jennifer. Too much tennis. Damn arm's giving me problems again. Well, Ransome, you look like you've got yourself a fine protégé here."

"Hell, he'll have to fight my daughter for the empire. Maybe Jack can be queen and Jenn can be the king. How's that for equal rights?" Ransome laughed a big laugh that swept everybody up with it.

Jack felt himself redden. "I'm just a lawyer, Ransome; I'm not necessarily looking for an empty throne to occupy. There are other things to do in life."

Jack picked up his drink. This wasn't exactly going as well as he would have liked. He felt on the defensive. Jack crunched an ice cube. And what did Ransome Baldwin really think about his future son-in-law? Especially right now? The point was Jack didn't really care.

Ransome stopped laughing and eyed him steadily. Jennifer cocked her head the way she did when he said something she thought was inappropriate, which was most of the time. The President looked at all three of them, smiled quickly and excused himself. He went over to the corner where a woman was standing.

Jack watched him go. He had seen the woman on TV, defending the President's position on a myriad of issues. Gloria Russell did not look very happy right now, but with all the crises in the world, happiness was probably a rare commodity in her line of work.

That was an afterthought. Jack had met the President, had shaken hands with him. He hoped his arm got better. He pulled Jennifer aside and made his regrets. She was not pleased.

"This is totally unacceptable, Jack. Do you realize how special a night this is for Daddy?"

"Hey, I'm just a working stiff. You know? Billable hours?"

"That's ridiculous! And you know it. No one at that firm can make those demands of you, let alone some nothing associate."

"Jenn, it's not that big a deal. I had a great time. Your dad got his little award. Now it's time to go back to work. Alvis is okay. He's kicking my butt a little bit, but he works just as hard, if not harder than I do. Everybody has to take their lumps."

"This isn't fair, Jack. This is not convenient for me."

"Jenn, it's my job. I said don't worry about it, so don't worry about it. I'll see you tomorrow. I'm gonna grab a cab back."

"Daddy will be very disappointed."

"Daddy won't even miss me. Hey, hoist one for me. And remember what you said about later? I'll take a rain check on that, maybe we can make it my place for a change?"

She allowed herself to be kissed. But when Jack was gone she stormed over to her father.

Chapter 5

KATE WHITNEY PULLED INTO THE PARKING LOT OF HER building. The grocery bag clunked against one leg, her overflowing briefcase against the other as she jogged up the four flights of stairs. Buildings in her price range had elevators, just not ones that worked on a consistent basis.

She changed quickly into her running outfit, checked her messages, and headed back out. She stretched the cramps and kinks out of her long limbs in front of the Ulysses S. Grant statue and started her run.

She headed west, past the Air and Space Museum, and then by the Smithsonian castle that, with its towers and battlements and twelfth-century-style Italian architecture, looked more like a mad scientist's home than anything else. Her easy, methodical strides took her across the Mall at its widest point and she circled the Washington Monument twice.

Her breath was coming a little quicker now; the sweat began to seep through her T-shirt and blot the Georgetown Law sweatshirt she was wearing. As she made her way along the fringes of the Tidal Basin, the crowds of people grew thicker. The early fall brought plane-, bus- and carloads of people from across the country hoping to miss the summer crush of tourists and the infamous Washington heat.

As she swerved to avoid one errant child she collided with another runner coming the other way. They went down in a tangle of arms and legs.

"Shit." The man rolled over quickly and then sprang back up. She started to get up, looked at him, an apology on her lips, and then abruptly sat back down. A long moment went by as camera-toting clans of Arkansans and Iowans danced around them.

"Hello, Kate." Jack gave her a hand up and helped her to a spot under one of the now bare cherry blossom trees that encircled the Tidal Basin. The Jefferson Memorial sat big and imposing across the calm water, the tall silhouette of the country's third President clearly visible inside the rotunda.

Kate's ankle was starting to swell. She took off her shoe and sock and began to rub it out.

"I didn't think you'd have time to run anymore, Jack."

She looked over at him: no receding hairline, no paunch, no lines on the face. Time had stood still for Jack Graham. She had to admit it, he looked great. She, on the other hand, was an absolute and total disaster.

She silently cursed herself for not getting that haircut and then cursed herself again for even thinking that. A drop of sweat plunged down her nose, and she brushed it away with an irritable swipe of her hand.

"I was wondering the same thing about you. I didn't think they let prosecutors go home before midnight. Slacking off?"

"Right." She rubbed her ankle, which really hurt. He saw the pain, leaned over and took her foot in his hands. She flinched back. He looked at her.

"Remember I used to almost do this for a living and you were my best and only client. I have never seen a woman with such fragile ankles, and the rest of you looks so healthy."

She relaxed and let him work the ankle and then the foot, and she soon realized he had not lost his touch. Did he mean that about looking healthy? She frowned. After all, she had dumped him. And she had been absolutely right in doing so. Hadn't she?

"I heard about Patton, Shaw. Congratulations."

"Aw shucks. Any lawyer with millions in legal business could've done the same thing." He smiled.

"Yeah, I read about the engagement in the paper too. Congratulations twice." He didn't smile at that one. She wondered why not.

He quietly put her sock and shoe back on. He looked at her. "You're not going to be able to run for a day or two, it's pretty swollen. My car's right over there. I'll give you a lift."

"I'll just take a cab."

"You trust a D.C. cabbie over me?" He feigned offense. "Besides, I don't see any pockets. You going to negotiate a free ride? Good luck."

She looked down at her shorts. Her key was in her sock. He had already eyed the bulge. He smiled at her dilemma. Her lips pressed together, her tongue slid along the bottom one. He remembered that habit from long ago. Although he hadn't seen it for years, it suddenly seemed like he had never been away.

He stretched out his legs and stood up. "I'd float you a loan, but I'm busted too."

She got up, put an arm against his shoulder as she tested the ankle.

"I thought private practice paid better than that."

"It does, I've just never been able to handle money. You know that." That was true enough; she had always balanced the checkbook. Not that there was much to balance back then.

He held on to one of her arms as she limped to his car, a ten-year-old Subaru wagon. She looked at it amazed.

"You never got rid of this thing?"

"Hey, there's a lot of miles left on it. Besides, it's full of history. See that stain right over there? Your Dairy Queen butterscotch-dipped ice cream cone, 1986, the night before my tax final. You couldn't sleep, and I wouldn't study anymore. You remember? You took that curve too fast."

"You have a bad case of selective memory. As I recall you poured your milkshake down my back because I was complaining about the heat."

"Oh, that too." They laughed and got in the car.

She examined the stain more closely, looked around the interior. So much coming back to her in big, lumpy waves. She glanced at the back seat. Her eyebrows went up. If that space could only talk. She turned back to see him looking at her, and found herself blushing.

They pulled off into the light traffic and headed east. Kate felt nervous, but not uncomfortable, as if it were four years ago and they had merely jumped in the car to get some coffee or the paper or have breakfast at the Corner in Charlottesville or at one of the cafés sprinkled around Capitol Hill. But that was years ago she had to remind herself. That was not the present. The present was very different. She rolled the window down slightly.

Jack kept one eye on traffic, and one eye on her. Their meeting hadn't been accidental. She had run on the Mall, that very route in fact, since they had moved to D.C. and lived in that little walk-up in Southeast near Eastern Market.

That morning Jack had woken up with a desperation he had not felt since Kate had left him four years ago when it dawned on him about a week after she had gone that she wasn't coming back. Now with his wedding looming ahead, he had decided that he had to see Kate, somehow. He would not, could not, let that light die out, not yet. It was quite likely that he was the only one of the two who sensed any illumination left. And while he might not have the courage to leave a message

on her answering machine, he had decided that if he was meant to find her out here on the Mall amidst all the tourists and locals, then he would. He had let it go at that.

Until their collision, he had been running for an hour, scanning the crowds, looking for the face in that framed photo. He had spotted her about five minutes before their abrupt meeting. If his heart rate hadn't already doubled because of the exercise, it would've hit that mark as soon as he saw her moving effortlessly along. He hadn't meant to sprain her ankle, but then that was why she was sitting in his car; it was the reason he was driving her home.

Kate pulled her hair back and tied it in a ponytail, using a braid that had been on her wrist. "So how's work going?"

"Okay." He did not want to talk about work. "How's your old man?"

"You'd know better than me." She did not want to talk about her father.

"I haven't seen him since..."

"Lucky you." She lapsed into silence.

Jack shook his head at the stupidity of bringing up Luther. He had hoped for a reconciliation between father and daughter over the years. That obviously had not happened.

"I hear great things about you over at the Commonwealth's Attorney."

"Right."

"I'm serious."

"Since when."

"Everyone grows up, Kate."

"Not Jack Graham. Please, God, no."

He turned right onto Constitution, and made his way toward Union Station. Then he caught himself. He knew which direction to go, a fact he did not want to share with her. "I'm kind of rambling here, Kate. Which way?"

"I'm sorry. Around the Capitol, over to Maryland and left on 3rd Street."

"You like that area?"

"On my salary, I like it just fine. Let me guess. You're probably in Georgetown, right, one of those big federal townhouses with maid's quarters, right?"

He shrugged. "I haven't moved. I'm in the same place."

She stared at him. "Jack, what do you do with all of your money?"

"I buy what I want; I just don't want that much." He stared back. "Hey, how about a Dairy Queen butterscotch-dipped ice cream cone?"

"There's none to be had in this town, I've tried."

He did a U-turn, grinned at the honkers, and roared off.

"Apparently, counselor, you didn't try hard enough."

* * * * *

THIRTY MINUTES LATER HE PULLED INTO HER PARKING LOT. HE ran around to help her out. The ankle had stiffened a little more. The butterscotch cone was almost gone.

"I'll help you up."

"You don't have to."

"I busted your ankle. Help me relieve some of my guilt."

"I've got it, Jack." That tone was very familiar to him, even after four years. He smiled wearily and stepped back. She was halfway up the stairs, moving slowly. He was getting back in his car when she turned around.

"Jack?" He looked up. "Thanks for the ice cream." She went into the building.

Driving off, Jack did not see the man standing near the little cluster of trees at the entrance to the parking lot.

Luther emerged from the shadows of the trees and looked up at the apartment building.

His appearance from two days ago had drastically changed. It was lucky his beard grew fast. His hair had been cut very short, and a hat covered what was left. Sunglasses obscured his intense eyes and a bulky overcoat concealed the lean body.

He had hoped to see her one more time before he left. He had been shocked to see Jack, but that was all right. He liked Jack.

He huddled in his coat. The wind was picking up, and the chill was more than Washington usually carried at this time of year. He stared up at his daughter's apartment window.

Apartment number fourteen. He knew it well; had even been inside it on a number of occasions, unbeknownst to his daughter, of course. The standard front-door lock was child's play for him. It would've taken longer for someone with a key to open it. He would sit in the chair in her living room and look around at a hundred different things, all of them carrying years of memories, some good times, but mostly disappointments.

Sometimes he would just close his eyes and examine all the different scents in the air. He knew what perfume she wore—very little and very nondescript. Her furniture was big, solid and well-worn. Her refrigerator was routinely empty. He cringed when he viewed the meager and unhealthy contents of her cabinets. She kept things neat, but not perfect; the place looked lived in as it should have.

And she got a lot of calls. He would listen to some of them leaving messages. They made him wish she had picked a different line of work. Being a criminal himself, he was well aware of the number of real crazy bastards out there. But it was too late for him to recommend a career change to his only child.

He knew that it was a strange relationship to have with one's offspring, but Luther figured that was about all he deserved. A vision of his wife entered his mind; a woman who had loved him and stood by him all those years and for what? For pain and misery. And then an early death after she had arrived at her senses and divorced him. He wondered again, for the hundredth time, why he had continued his criminal activities. It certainly wasn't the money. He had always lived simply; much of the proceeds of his burglaries had been simply given away. His choice in life had driven his wife mad with worry and forced his daughter from his life. And for the hundredth time he came away with no compelling answer to the question of why he continued to steal from the well-protected wealthy. Perhaps it was only to show that he could.

He looked up once again at his daughter's apartment. He hadn't been there for her, why should she be there for him? But he could not sever the bond entirely, even if she had. He would be there for her if she so desired, but he knew that she never would.

Luther moved quickly down the street, finally running to catch a Metro bus heading toward the subway at Union Station. He had always been the most independent of people never relying to any significant degree on anyone else. He was a loner and had liked that. Now, Luther felt very alone, and the feeling this time was not so comforting.

The rain started and he stared out the back window of the bus as it meandered its way to the great rail terminus, which had been saved from extinction by an ambitious railway-shopping mall renovation. The water bubbled up on the smooth surface of the window and clouded his view of where he had just been. He wished he could, but he couldn't go back there now.

He turned back in his seat, pulled his hat down tighter, blew into his handkerchief. He picked up a discarded newspaper, glancing down its old headlines. He wondered when they would find her. When they did, he would know about it immediately; everyone in this town would know that Christine Sullivan was dead. When rich people got themselves killed, it was front-page news. Poor people and Joe Average were stuck in the Metro section. Christy Sullivan would most certainly be on page one, front and center.

He dropped the paper on the floor, hunched down in his seat. He needed to see a lawyer, and then he would be gone. The bus droned on, and his eyes finally closed, but he wasn't sleeping. He was, for the moment, sitting in his daughter's living room, and this time, she was there with him.

Chapter 6

LUTHER SAT AT THE SMALL CONFERENCE ROOM TABLE IN THE very plainly furnished room. The chairs and table were old and carried a thousand scrapes. The rug was just as ancient and not very clean. A card holder was the only thing on the table other than his file. He picked up one of the cards and thumbed it. "Legal Services, Inc." These people weren't the best in the business; they were far from the halls of power downtown. Graduates of third-rate law schools with no shot at the traditional firm practice, they eked out their professional existence hoping for some luck down the road. But their dreams of big offices, big clients and, most important, big money faded a little more with the passage of each year. But Luther did not require the best. He only required somebody with a law degree and the right forms.

"Everything is in order, Mr. Whitney." The kid looked about twenty-five, still full of hope and energy. This place was not his final destination. He still clearly believed that. The tired, pinched, flabby face of the older man behind him held out no such hope. "This is Jerry Burns, the managing attorney, he'll be the other witness to your will. We have a self-proving affidavit, so we won't have to appear in court as to whether or not we witnessed your will." A stern-looking, forty-something woman appeared with her pen and notary seal. "Phyllis here is our notary, Mr. Whitney." They all sat down. "Would you like me to read the terms of your will out to you?"

Jerry Burns had been sitting at the table looking bored to death, staring into space, dreaming of all the other places he would rather be. Jerry Burns, managing attorney. He looked like he would rather be shoveling cow manure on some farm in the Midwest. Now he glanced at his young colleague with disdain.

"I've read it," Luther replied.

"Fine," said Jerry Burns. "Why don't we get started?"

Fifteen minutes later Luther emerged from Legal Services, Inc., with two original copies of his last will and testament tucked in his coat pocket.

Fucking lawyers, couldn't piss, shit or die without them. That was because lawyers made all the laws. They had the rest of them by the balls. Then he thought of Jack and smiled. Jack was not like that. Jack was different. Then he thought of his daughter and his smile faded. Kate was not like that either. But then Kate hated him.

He stopped at a camera shop and purchased a Polaroid OneStep camera and a pack of film. He didn't plan to let anyone else develop the pictures he was going to be taking. He arrived back at the hotel. An hour later he had taken a total of ten photos. These were wrapped in paper and placed in a manila folder that was then secreted far down into his backpack.

He sat down and looked out the window. It was almost an hour before he finally moved, sliding over and then collapsing onto the bed. Some tough guy he was. Not so indifferent that he could not flinch at death, not be horrified by an event that had ripped the life out of someone who should've lived a lot longer. And on top of it all was the fact that the President of the United States was involved in all of it. A man Luther had respected, had voted for. A man who held the country's highest office had almost murdered a woman with his own drunken hands. If he had seen his closest relative bludgeon someone in cold blood, Luther would not have been any more sickened or shocked. It was as though Luther himself had been invaded, as though those murderous hands had been around his throat.

But something else gripped at him; something he could not confront. He turned his face to the pillow, closed his eyes in a futile effort to sleep.

* * * * *

"IT'S GREAT, JENN." JACK LOOKED AT THE BRICK AND STONE mansion that stretched more than two hundred feet from end to end and had more rooms than a college dorm, and wondered why they were even there. The winding driveway ended in a four-car garage behind the massive structure. The lawns were groomed so perfectly that Jack felt he was staring at an enormous jade pool. The rear grounds were triple-terraced, with each terrace sporting its own pool. It had the standard accoutrements of the very wealthy: tennis courts and stables, and twenty acres—a veritable land empire by northern Virginia standards—on which to roam.

The Realtor waited by the front door, her late-model Mercedes parked by the large stone fountain covered with fistsize roses carved out of granite. Commission dollars were being swiftly calculated and recalculated. Weren't they a terrific young couple? She had said that enough to where Jack's temples throbbed.

Jennifer Baldwin took his arm and two hours later their tour was finished. Jack walked over to the edge of the broad lawn and admired the thick woods, where an eclectic grouping of elm, spruce, maple, pine and oak jostled for dominance. The

leaves were beginning to turn and Jack observed the beginnings of reds, yellows and oranges dance across the face of the property they were considering.

"So how much?" He felt he was entitled to ask that question. But this had to be out of their ballpark. His ballpark anyway. He had to admit it was convenient. Only forty-five rush-hour minutes from his office. But they couldn't touch this place. He looked expectantly at his fiancée.

She looked nervous, played with her hair. "Three million eight."

Jack's face went gray. "Three million eight hundred thousand? Dollars?"

"Jack, it's worth three times that."

"Then why the hell are they selling it for three million eight? We can't afford it, Jenn. Forget it."

She answered him by rolling her eyes. She waved reassuringly to the Realtor, who sat in her car writing up the contract.

"Jenn, I make a hundred twenty thou a year. You make about the same, maybe a little more."

"When you make partner—"

"Right. My salary goes up, but not enough for this. We can't make the mortgage payments. I thought we were moving into your place, anyway."

"It's not right for a married couple."

"Not right? It's a friggin' palace." He walked over to a forest-green-painted garden bench and sat down.

She planted herself in front of him, arms crossed, a determined look on her face. Her summer tan was starting to fade. She wore a creamy brown fedora from under which her long hair tumbled across her shoulders. Her pants were perfectly tailored to her elegantly slender form. Polished leather boots encased her feet and disappeared under the pant legs.

"We won't be carrying a mortgage, Jack."

He looked up at her. "Really? What, are they giving us the place because we're such a terrific young couple?"

She hesitated, then said, "Daddy is paying cash for it, and we're going to pay him back."

Jack had been waiting for that one.

"Pay him back? How the hell are we going to pay him back, Jenn?"

"He's suggested a very liberal repayment plan, which takes into account future earnings expectations. For godsakes, Jack, I could pay for this place out of accumulated interest on one of my trusts, but I knew you'd object to that." She sat down next to him. "I thought if we did it this way, you'd feel better about the whole thing. I know how you are about the Baldwin money. We *will* have to pay Daddy back. It's not a gift. It's a loan *with interest*. I'm going to sell my place. I'll net about eight from that. You're going to have to come up with some money too. This is not a free ride." She playfully stuck a long finger into his chest, driving home her point. She looked back at the house. "It's beautiful, isn't it, Jack? We'll be so happy here. We were meant to live here."

Jack looked over at the front of the house but without really seeing it. All he saw was Kate Whitney, in every window of the monolith.

Jennifer squeezed his arm, leaned against him. Jack's headache moved into the panic zone. His mind was refusing to function. His throat went dry and his limbs

felt stiff. He gently disengaged his arm from his fiancée's, got up and walked quietly back to the car.

Jennifer sat there for several moments, disbelief chief among the emotions registering across her face, and then angrily followed him.

The Realtor, who had intently watched the exchange between the two while seated in her Mercedes, stopped writing up the contract, her mouth pursed in displeasure.

* * * * *

IT WAS EARLY MORNING WHEN LUTHER EMERGED FROM THE small hotel hidden in the cluttered residential neighborhoods of Northwest Washington. He hailed a cab to the Metro Center subway, asking the driver to take a circuitous route on the presumption of seeing various D.C. landmarks. The request did not surprise the cabbie and he automatically went through the motions to be replicated a thousand times before the tourist season was officially over, if it was ever truly over for the town.

The skies threatened rain but you never knew. The unpredictable weather systems swirled and whipped across the region either missing the city or falling hard on it before sliding into the Atlantic. Luther looked up at the darkness, which the newly risen sun could not penetrate.

Would he even be alive six months from now? Maybe not. They could conceivably find him, despite his precautions. But he planned to enjoy the time he had left.

The Metro took him to Washington National Airport, where he took a shuttle bus across to the Main Terminal. He had prechecked his luggage onto the American Airlines flight that would take him to Dallas/Fort Worth, where he would change airlines and then head to Miami. He would stay there overnight and then another plane would drop him in Puerto Rico and then a final flight would deposit him in Barbados. Everything was paid for in cash; his passport proclaimed him to be Arthur Lanis, age sixty-five, from Michigan. He had a half-dozen such identifying documents, all professionally crafted and official-looking and all absolutely phony. The passport was good for eight more years and showed him to be well-traveled.

He settled into the waiting area and pretended to scan a newspaper. The place was crowded and noisy, a typical weekday for the busy airport. Occasionally Luther's eyes would rise over the paper to see if anyone was paying more than casual attention to him, but nothing registered. And he had been doing this long enough that something would have clicked if he had anything to worry about. His flight was called, his boarding pass was handed over and he trudged down the ramp to the slender projectile that within three hours would deposit him in the heart of Texas.

The Dallas/Fort Worth run was a busy one for American, but surprisingly he had an empty seat next to him. He took his coat off and laid it across the seat daring anyone to trespass. He settled himself in and looked out the window.

As they began to taxi to the takeoff runway, he could make out the tip of the Washington Monument over the thick, swirling mist of the clammy morning. Barely a mile from that point his daughter would be getting up shortly to go to

work while her father was ascending into the clouds to begin a new life somewhat ahead of schedule and not exactly easy in his mind.

As the plane accelerated through the air, he looked at the terrain far below, noted the snaking of the Potomac until it was left behind. His thoughts went briefly to his long-dead wife and then back to his very much alive daughter.

He glanced up at the smiling, efficient face of the flight attendant and ordered coffee and a minute later accepted the simple breakfast handed to him. He drank down the steaming liquid and then reached over and touched the surface of the window with its queer streaks and scratches. Wiping his glasses clean, he noted that his eyes were watering freely. He looked around quickly; most passengers were finishing up their breakfast or reclining for a short nap before they landed.

He pushed his tray up, undid his seat belt and made his way to the lavatory. He looked at himself in the mirror. The eyes were swollen, red-blotched. The bags hung heavy, he had perceptibly aged in the last thirty-six hours.

He ran water over his face, let the droplets gather around his mouth and then splashed on some more. He wiped his eyes again. They were painful. He leaned against the tiny basin, tried to get his twitching muscles under control.

Despite all his willpower, his mind wandered back to that room where he had seen a woman savagely beaten. The President of the United States was a drunk, an adulterer and a woman beater. He smiled to the press, kissed babies and flirted with enchanted old women, held important meetings, flew around the world as his country's leader, and he was a fucking asshole who screwed married women, then beat them up and then got them killed.

What a package.

It was more knowledge than one person should be carrying around.

Luther felt very alone. And very mad.

And the sorry thing was the bastard was going to get away with it.

Luther kept telling himself if he were thirty years younger he would take this battle on. But he wasn't. His nerves were still stronger than most, but, like river rock, they had eroded over the years; they were not what they were. At his age battles became someone else's to fight, and win or lose. His time had finally come. He wasn't up to it. Even he had to understand that, to accept that reality.

Luther looked at himself in the tiny mirror again. A sob swelled in his throat before it reached the surface and filled the small room.

But no excuse would justify what he had not done. He had not opened that mirrored door. He had not flung that man off Christine Sullivan. He could have prevented the woman's death, that was the simple truth. She would still be alive if he had acted. He had traded his freedom, perhaps his life, for another's. For someone who could have used his help, who was fighting for her very life while Luther just watched. A human being who had barely lived a third of Luther's years. It had been a cowardly act, and that fact gripped him like some savage anaconda, threatening to explode every organ in his body.

He bent low over the sink as his legs began to fail him. He was grateful for the collapse. He could not look at his reflection anymore. As choppy air buffeted the plane he was sick to his stomach.

A few minutes elapsed and he wet a paper towel with cold water and wiped it across his face and the back of his neck. He finally managed to stumble back to his seat. As the plane thundered on his guilt grew with each passing mile.

* * * * *

THE PHONE WAS RINGING. KATE LOOKED AT THE CLOCK. Eleven o'clock. Normally she would screen her calls. But something made her hand dart out and pick it up before the machine engaged.

"Hello."

"Why aren't you still at work?"

"Jack?"

"How's your ankle?"

"Do you realize what time it is?"

"Just checking on my patient. Doctors never sleep."

"Your patient is fine. Thanks for the worry." She smiled in spite of herself.

"Butterscotch cone, that prescription has never failed me."

"Oh, so there were other patients?"

"I've been advised by my attorney not to answer that question."

"Smart counsel."

Jack could visualize her sitting there, one finger playing with the ends of her hair, the same way she had done when they studied together; he laboring through securities regulations, she through French.

"Your hair curls enough at the ends without you helping it."

She pulled her finger back, smiled, then frowned. That statement had brought a lot of memories back, not all good ones.

"It's late, Jack. I've got court tomorrow."

He stood up and paced with the cordless, thinking rapidly. Anything to hold her on the phone for a few more seconds. He felt guilty, as though he were sneaking around. He involuntarily looked over his shoulder. There was no one there, at least no one he could see.

"I'm sorry I called late."

"Okay."

"And I'm sorry I hurt your ankle."

"You already apologized for that."

"Yeah. So, how are you? I mean except for your ankle?"

"Jack, I really need to get some sleep."

He was hoping she would say that.

"Well tell me over lunch."

"I told you I've got court."

"After court."

"Jack, I'm not sure that's a good idea. In fact I'm pretty sure it's a lousy idea."

He wondered what she meant by that. Reading too much into her statements had always been a bad habit of his.

"Jesus, Kate. It's just lunch. I'm not asking you to marry me." He laughed, but knew he'd already blown it.

Kate was no longer fiddling with her hair. She too stood up. Her reflections caught in the hallway mirror. She pulled at the neck of her nightgown. The frown lines were prominent on her forehead.

"I'm sorry," he said quickly. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean that. Look, it'll be my treat. I have to spend all that money on something." He was met with silence. In fact, he wasn't sure if she were still on the line.

He had rehearsed this conversation for the last two hours. Every possible question, exchange, deviation. He'd be so smooth, she so understanding. They would hit it off so well. So far, absolutely nothing had gone according to plan. He fell back on his alternate plan. He decided to beg.

"Please, Kate. I'd really like to talk to you. Please."

She sat back down, curled her legs under her, rubbed at her long toes. She took a deep breath. The years hadn't changed her as much as she had thought. Was that good or bad? Right now she had no way to deal with that question.

"When and where?"

"Morton's?"

"For lunch?"

He could see her incredulous face at the thought of the ultra-expensive restaurant. Wondering what type of world he now lived in. "Okay, how about the deli in Old Town near Founder's Park around two? We'll miss the lunchtime crowd."

"Better. But I can't promise. I'll call if I can't make it."

He slowly let out his breath. "Thanks, Kate."

He hung up the phone and collapsed on the couch. Now that his plan had worked, he wondered what the hell he was doing. What would he say? What would she say? He didn't want to fight. He hadn't been lying, he did just want to talk to her, and to see her. That was all. He kept telling himself that.

He went to the bathroom, plunged his head into a sink of cold water, grabbed a beer and went up to the rooftop pool and sat there in the darkness, watching the planes as they made their approach up the Potomac into National. The twin bright, red lights of the Washington Monument blinked consolingly at him. Eight stories down the streets were quiet except for the occasional police or ambulance siren.

Jack looked at the calm surface of the pool, put his foot in the now cool water and watched as it rippled across. He drank his beer, went downstairs and fell asleep in a chair in the living room, the TV droning in front of him. He did not hear the phone ring, no message was left. Almost one thousand miles away, Luther Whitney hung up the phone and smoked his first cigarette in over thirty years.

* * * * *

THE FEDERAL EXPRESS TRUCK PULLED SLOWLY DOWN THE isolated country road, the driver scanning the rusty and leaning mailboxes for the correct address. He had never made a delivery out here. His truck seemed to ride ditch to ditch on the narrow road.

He pulled into the driveway of the last house and started to back out. He just happened to look over and saw the address on the small piece of wood beside the door. He shook his head and smiled. Sometimes it was just luck.

The house was small, and not very well kept up. The weathered aluminum window awnings, popular about twenty years before the driver had been born, sagged down, as if they were tired and just wanted to rest.

The elderly woman who answered the door was dressed in a pullover flowered dress, a thick sweater wrapped around her shoulders. Her thick red ankles told of poor circulation and probably a host of other ailments. She seemed surprised by the delivery, but readily signed for it.

The driver glanced at the signature on his pad: Edwina Broome. Then he got in his truck and left. She watched him leave before shutting the door.

* * * * *

THE WALKIE-TALKIE CRACKLED.

Fred Barnes had been doing this job for seven years now. Driving around the neighborhoods of the rich, seeing the big houses, manicured grounds, the occasional expensive car with its mannequinlike occupants coming down the perfect asphalt drive and through the massive gates. He had never been inside any of the homes he was paid to guard, and never expected to be.

He looked up at the imposing structure. Four to five million dollars, he surmised. More money than he could make in five lifetimes. Sometimes it just didn't seem right.

He checked in on his walkie-talkie. He would take a look around the place. He didn't exactly know what was going on. Only that the owner had called and requested a patrol car check.

The cold air in his face made Barnes think about a hot cup of coffee and a danish, to be followed by eight hours of sleep until he had to venture out again in his Saturn for yet another night of protecting the possessions of the wealthy. The pay wasn't all that bad, although the benefits sucked. His wife worked full-time too, and with three kids, their combined incomes were barely enough. But then everybody had it tough. He looked at the five-car garage in back, the pool and the tennis courts. Well, maybe not everybody.

As he rounded the corner, he saw the dangling rope and thoughts of coffee and a creamy danish disappeared. He crouched down, his hand flying to his sidearm. He grabbed his mike and reported in, his voice cracking embarrassingly. The real police would be here in minutes. He could wait for them or investigate himself. For eight singles an hour he decided to stay right where he was.

Barnes's supervisor arrived first in the stark white station wagon with the company's logo on the door panel. Thirty seconds later the first of five patrol cars pulled down the asphalt drive until they were stacked like a waiting train in front of the house.

The window was covered by two officers. It was probable that the perps had long since exited the premises, but assumptions were dangerous in the police business.

Four officers went to the front, two more covered the back. Working in pairs, the four policemen proceeded to make their way in. They noted that the front door was unlocked, the alarm off. They satisfied themselves with the downstairs and cautiously moved up the broad staircase, their ears and eyes straining for any trace of sound or movement.

By the time they reached the second-floor landing, the nostrils of the sergeant in charge told him that this would not be a routine burglary.

Four minutes later they stood in a circle around what had recently been a young, beautiful woman. The healthy coloring of each of the men had faded to dull white.

The sergeant, fiftyish and a father of three, looked at the open window. Thank God, he thought to himself; even with the outside air the atmosphere inside the room was stupefying. He looked once more at the corpse, then strode quickly to the window and sucked in deep gulps of the crisp air.

He had a daughter about that age. For a moment he imagined her on that floor, her face a memory, her life brutally over. The matter was out of his bailiwick now, but he wished for one thing: he wished to be there when whoever had done this atrocious thing was caught.

Chapter 7

SETH FRANK WAS SIMULTANEOUSLY MUNCHING A PIECE OF toast and attempting to tie his six-year-old daughter's hair ribbons for school when the phone call came. His wife's look told him all he needed. She finished the ribbon. Seth cradled the phone while he finished knotting his tie, listening all the while to the calm, efficient tones of the dispatcher. Two minutes later he was in his car; the official bubble light needlessly stuck to the top of his department-issued Ford and aqua blue grille lights flashing ominously as he roared through the nearly deserted back roads of the county.

Frank's tall, big-boned frame was beginning its inevitable journey to softness, and his curly black hair had seen more affluent days. At forty-one years old, the father of three daughters who grew more complex and bewildering by the day, he had come to realize that not all that much in life made sense. But overall he was a happy man. Life had dealt him no knockout punches. Yet. He had been in law enforcement long enough to know how abruptly that could change.

Frank wadded up a piece of Juicy Fruit and slowly chewed it while compact rows of needle pines flew past his window. He had started his law enforcement career as a cop in some of the worst areas of New York City where the statement "the value of life" was an oxymoron and where he had seen virtually every way one person could kill another. He had eventually made detective, which had thrilled his wife. At least now he would arrive at crime scenes after the bad guys had departed. She slept better at night, knowing that the dreaded phone call would probably not come to destroy her life. That was as much as she could hope for being married to a cop.

Frank had finally been assigned to homicide, which was pretty much the ultimate challenge in his line of work. After a few years, he decided he liked the job and the challenge, but not at the rate of seven corpses a day. So he had made the trek south to Virginia.

He was senior homicide detective for the County of Middleton, which sounded better than it actually was, since he also happened to be the only homicide detective the county employed. But the relatively innocuous confines of the rustic Virginia county had not lent itself to much demanding work over that time. The per capita income levels in his jurisdiction were off the scale. People were murdered, but other than wives shooting husbands or vice versa or inheritance-minded kids popping off their parents, there hadn't been much excitement. The perps in those cases were pretty self-evident, less mental work than legwork. The dispatcher's phone call promised to change all that.

The road snaked past wooded area and then opened out onto fenced, green fields where leggy thoroughbreds lazily faced the new morning. Behind impressive gates and long, winding driveways were the residences of the fortunate few, who were actually very plentiful in Middleton. Frank concluded that he wasn't going to get any help from the neighbors on this one. Once inside their fortresses they probably saw or heard nothing on the outside. Which was undoubtedly the way they wanted it and paid dearly for that privilege.

As Frank approached the Sullivan estate he straightened his tie in the rearview mirror and pushed back some stray wisps of hair. He had no particular affinity for the wealthy, nor did he dislike them. They were parts of the puzzle. A conundrum that was as far from a game as you could get. Which led to the most satisfying part of his job. For amidst all the twists, turns, red herrings and plain mistakes, there lurked an undeniable truism: if you killed another human being, you came within his domain and you would be ultimately punished. What that punishment was, Frank usually did not care. What he did care about was that someone stand trial and, if convicted, that someone receive the meted penalty. Rich, poor or in-between. His skills may be somewhat dulled, but the instincts were still there. In the long run, he'd always go with the latter.

As he pulled in the drive he noticed a small combine chewing under the adjacent cornfield, its driver watching the police activity with a keen eye. That information would soon be passing through the area in rapid movements. The man had no way to know he was destroying evidence, evidence of a flight. Neither did Seth Frank as he climbed out of his car, threw on his jacket and hustled through the front door.

* * * * *

HANDS DEEP IN HIS POCKETS, HIS EYES MOVED SLOWLY AROUND the room, taking in each detail of the floor, walls, and venturing to the ceiling before coming back to the mirrored door and then to the spot where the deceased had lain for the last several days.

Seth Frank said, "Take a lot of pics, Stu, looks like we'll need it."

The crime unit photographer paced through the room in discrete grids outward from the corpse in his effort to reproduce on film every aspect of the room including its lone occupant. This would be followed by a videotaping of the entire crime scene complete with a narrative. Not necessarily admissible in court, but it was invaluable to the investigation. As football players watched game films, detectives were more and more scrutinizing the videos for additional clues that might only be seized upon on the eighth, tenth or hundredth examination.

The rope was still tied to the bureau and still disappeared out the window. Only now it was covered with black fingerprint powder, but there wouldn't be much there. One usually wore gloves to climb down a rope, even a knotted one.

Sam Magruder, the officer in charge, approached, having just spent two minutes leaning out the window sucking in air. Fiftyish with a shock of red hair that topped a plump, hairless face, he was having a hard time keeping his breakfast down. A large portable fan had been brought in and the windows were fully open. All the CU personnel wore floater masks, but the stench was still oppressive. Nature's parting laugh to the living. Beautiful one minute, rotting the next.

Frank checked Magruder's notes, noted the greenish tint to the OIC's face.

"Sam, if you'd stay away from the window, your sense of smell would go dead in about four minutes. You're just making it worse."

"I know that, Seth. My brain tells me that, but my nose won't listen."

"When did the husband phone in?"

"This morning, seven-forty-five local time."

Frank tried to make out the cop's scribbles. "And he's where?"

"Barbados."

Frank's head inclined. "How long?"

"We're confirming it."

"Do that."

"How many calling cards they leave, Laura?" Frank looked over at his ident technician, Laura Simon.

She glanced up. "I'm not finding much, Seth."

Frank walked over to her. "Come on, Laura, she's gotta be all over the place. How about her husband? The maid? There's gotta be usables everywhere."

"Not that I'm finding."

"You're shitting me."

Simon, who took her work very seriously and was the best print lifter Frank had ever worked with, including at NYPD, looked almost apologetic. Carbon dusting powder was everywhere, and there was nothing? Contrary to popular belief, a lot of criminals left their prints at the scene of the crime. You just had to know where to look. Laura Simon knew where to look and she was getting zip. Hopefully they would get something after analysis back at the lab. Many latents just weren't visible no matter how many angles you hit them with the light. That's why they called them latents. You just powdered and taped everything you thought the perps might have touched. And you might get lucky.

"I've got a few things packaged to take back to the lab. After I use the ninhydrin and hit the rest with the Super Glue I might have something for you." Simon dutifully returned to her work.

Frank shook his head. Super Glue, a cyanoacrylate, was probably the best method of fuming and could pull prints off things you couldn't believe. The problem was the damn process took time to work its magic. Time they didn't have.

"Come on, Laura, from the looks of the body the bad guys have had enough of a head start."

She looked at him. "I've got another cyanoacrylate ester I've been wanting to use. That's faster. Or I can always speed-burn the Super Glue." She smiled.

The detective grimaced. "Right. The last time you tried that we had to evacuate the building."

"I didn't say it was a perfect world, Seth."

Magruder cleared his throat. "Looks like we're dealing with some real professionals."

Seth looked at the OIC sternly. "They're not professionals, Sam, they're criminals, they're killers. It's not like they went to goddamned college to learn how to do this."

"No, sir."

"We sure it's the lady of the house?" Frank inquired.

Magruder pointed to the photo on the nightstand. "Christine Sullivan. Of course, we'll get a positive ID."

"Any witnesses?"

"No obvious ones. Haven't canvassed the neighbors yet. Gonna do that this morning."

Frank proceeded to make copious notes of the room and its occupant's condition and then made a detailed sketch of the room and its contents. A good defense attorney could make any unprepared prosecution witness look like a candidate for the Silly Putty factory. Being unprepared meant guilty people went free.

Frank had learned the only lesson he would ever need on the subject as a rookie cop and the first on the scene of a breaking and entering. He had never been more embarrassed or depressed in his life as he had when he had gotten off the witness stand, his testimony torn to shreds and actually used as the basis to get the defendant off. If he had been able to wear his .38 in court, the world would have had one fewer lawyer that day.

Frank crossed the room to where the Deputy Medical Examiner, a beefy, white-haired man who was perspiring heavily despite the morning chill outside, was lowering the skirt on the corpse. Frank knelt down and examined one of the small Baggie-clad hands, then glanced at the woman's face. It looked like it had been beaten black and blue. The clothing was soaked through with her body fluids. With death comes an almost immediate relaxing of the sphincters. The resulting smell combination was not pleasant. Luckily the insect infestation was minimal, despite the open window. Even though a forensic entomologist could usually ascertain time of death more accurately than could a pathologist, no detective, despite the increased accuracy, ever relished the thought of examining a human body that had become an insect buffet.

"Got an approximate yet?" Frank asked the Medical Examiner.

"My rectal thermometer isn't going to be much use to me, not when body temperature drops one and a half degrees an hour. Seventy-two to eighty-four hours. I'll have a better number for you after I open her up." The ME straightened up. "Gunshot wounds to the head," he added, although there was no doubt about the woman's cause of death to anyone in the room.

"I noticed the marks on her neck."

The Medical Examiner looked at Frank keenly for a moment and then shrugged. "They're there. I don't know what they mean yet."

"I'd appreciate a quick turnaround on this one."

"You'll get it. Not many murders out this way. They usually get a priority, y'know."

The detective winced slightly at the remark.

The Medical Examiner looked at him. "Hope you enjoy dealing with the press. They'll be on this like a swarm of honeybees."

"More like yellowjackets."

The Medical Examiner shrugged. "Better you than me. I'm way too old for that crap. She's ready to go whenever."

The Medical Examiner finished packing up and left.

Frank held the small hand up to his face, looked at the professionally manicured nails. He noted several tears in two of the cuticles, which seemed likely enough if there was a struggle before she'd gotten popped. The body was grossly distended; bacteria raged everywhere as the putrefaction process raced on. Rigor had passed long ago, which meant she had been dead well over forty-eight hours. The limbs were supple as the body's soft tissue dissolved. Frank sighed. She had indeed been here awhile. That was good for the killer, bad for the cops.

It still amazed him how death changed a person. A bloated wreck barely recognizable as a human, when just days before ... Had his sense of smell not already gone dead, he would have been unable to do what he was doing. But that came with being a homicide detective. All your clients were dead.

He carefully held the deceased's head up, turning each side to the light. Two small entry wounds on the right side, one large, ragged exit hole on the left. They were looking at heavy-caliber stuff. Stu had already gotten pictures of the wounds from several different angles, including from directly overhead. The circular abrasion collars and the absence of burns or tattooing on the skin's surface led Frank to conclude that the shots had been fired from over two feet away.

Small-caliber contact wounds, those fired muzzle to flesh, and near-contact wounds fired from a distance of less than two inches from the target, could duplicate the types of entry wounds present on the victim. But there would be powder residue deep in the tissues along the bullet track if they were looking at a contact wound. The autopsy would definitively answer that question.

Next Frank looked at the contusion on the left side of her jaw. It was partially hidden by the natural blistering of the body as it decomposed but Frank had seen enough corpses to tell the difference. The surface of the skin there was a curious amalgamation of green, brown and black. A big blow had done that. A man? That was confusing. He called Stu over to take pictures of the area with a color scale. Then he laid the head back down with the reverence the deceased deserved even under the largely clinical circumstances.

The medico-legal autopsy to follow would not be so deferential.

Frank slowly lifted the skin. Underwear intact. The autopsy protocol would answer the obvious question.

Frank moved around the room as the CU members continued their work. One thing about living in a rich, although largely rural county, the tax base was more than enough to support a first-rate if relatively small crime scene unit complete with all the latest technology and devices that theoretically made catching bad people easier.

The victim had fallen on her left side, away from the door. Knees tucked partially under her, left arm stretched out, the other against her right hip. Her face was pointed east, perpendicular with the right side of the bed; she was almost in a fetal position. Frank rubbed his nose. From beginning to end, back to the beginning. Nobody ever knew how they were going to eventually exit this old world, did they?

With Simon's help he did the triangulation of the body's location; the tape measure made a screeching sound as it unwound. It sounded somehow unholy in this room of death. He looked at the doorway and the position of the body. He and Simon performed a preliminary trajectory path of the shots. That indicated the shots most probably came from the doorway, which with a burglary you'd expect the other way around if the perp was caught in the act. However, there was another piece of evidence that would pretty much confirm which way the slugs had traveled.

Frank again kneeled next to the body. There were no drag marks across the carpet and the bloodstains and spray patterns indicated the deceased was shot at the spot she had fallen. Frank carefully turned to the body, again lifting up the skirt. Postmortem, blood settles to the lowest portions of the body, a condition called livor mortis. After four to six hours, the livor mortis remains fixed in position. Consequently, movement of the body does not lead to a change in distribution of blood. Frank laid the body back down. All indications were strong that Christine Sullivan had died right here.

The spray patterns also reinforced the conclusion that the deceased was probably facing toward the bed when she met her end. If so, what the hell had she been looking at? Normally a person about to be shot would look in the direction of the assailant, pleading for their life. Christine Sullivan would have begged, Frank was certain of that. The detective looked at the opulent surroundings. She had a lot to live for.

He eyed the carpet carefully, his face barely inches from its surface. The spray patterns were irregularly distributed as though something had been lying in front of or to the side of the deceased. That could prove to be important later on. Much had been written about spray patterns. Frank respected their usefulness, but tried not to read too much into them. But if something had partially shielded the carpet from the blood, he would want to know what that something was. Also the absence of spotting on her dress puzzled him. He would catalogue that one away; it might mean something too.

Simon opened her rape kit and with Frank's assistance swabbed the deceased's vagina. Next they combed through both the hair on her head and her pubic hair with nothing readily apparent in the way of foreign substances. Next they bagged the victim's clothing.

Frank looked over the body minutely. He glanced at Simon. She read his mind.

"There's not going to be any, Seth."

"Indulge me, Laurie."

Simon dutifully lugged her print kit over and applied powder to the corpse's wrists, breasts, neck and inside upper arms. After a few seconds she looked at Frank and slowly shook her head. She bagged what they did find.

He watched as the body was wrapped in a white sheet, deposited in a body pouch and taken outside where a silent ambulance would transport Christine Sullivan to a place everyone prayed they would never have to go.

He next viewed the vault, noted the chair and remote. Dust patterns on the floor of the vault had been disturbed. Simon had already covered the area. There was a smudge of dust on the chair seat. The vault had been forced though; the door and wall were heavily marked where the lock had been broken. They would cut out the levered piece of evidence, see if they could get a tool print. Frank looked back through the vault door and shook his head. One-way mirror. That was real nice. In the bedroom too. He couldn't wait to meet the man of the house.

He went back into the room, looked down at the picture on the nightstand. He looked over at Simon.

"I've already got it, Seth," she said. He nodded and picked up the picture. Nice-looking woman, he thought to himself, real nice-looking in a come-fuck-me kind of way. The photo had been taken in this very room, the recently departed seated in the chair next to the bed. Then he noticed the mark on the wall. The place had real plaster walls instead of the usual drywall, but the mark was still deep. Frank noted the nightstand had been moved slightly; the thick carpet betrayed its original position. He turned to Magruder.

"Looks like somebody slammed into this."

"Probably during the struggle."

"Probably."

"Find the slug yet?"

"One's still in her, Seth."

"I mean the other one, Sam." Frank impatiently shook his head. Magruder pointed to the wall beside the bed where a small hole was barely visible.

Frank nodded. "Cut the section and let the lab boys pull it out. Don't screw with it yourself." Twice in the last year ballistics had been rendered useless because an overzealous uniform had scraped a bullet out of a wall, ruining the striations.

"Any brass?"

Magruder shook his head. "If the murder weapon ejected any spent shells, they've been picked up."

He turned to Simon. "Any treasures from the E-vac?" The evidence vacuum was a highly powerful machine that, utilizing a series of filters, was used to comb the carpet and other materials for fibers, hairs and other small objects that more often than not turned out big dividends because if the perps couldn't see 'em, they weren't going to try to remove 'em.

Magruder tried to joke. "My carpet should be that clean."

Frank looked at his CU team. "Did we find any trace, people?" They all looked at one another not knowing if Frank was kidding or not. They were still wondering when he walked out of the room and went downstairs.

A representative from the alarm company was talking with a uniformed officer at the front door. A CU member was packing the plate and wires in plastic evidence bags. Frank was shown where the paint had been slightly chipped and an almost microscopic metal shard indicated that the panel had been removed. On the wiring were small toothlike indentations. The security rep looked admiringly at the lawbreaker's handiwork. Magruder joined them, his color slowly returning.

The rep was nodding his head. "Yep, they probably used a counter. Looks that way anyway."

Seth looked at him. "What's that?"

"Computer-assisted method of ramming massive numbers of combinations into the system's recognition bank until they hit the right combo. You know, like they do to bust the ATMs."

Frank looked at the gutted panel and then back at the man. "I'm surprised a place like this wouldn't have a more sophisticated system."

"It is a sophisticated system." The rep sounded defensive.

"Lotta crooks using computers these days."

"Yeah, but the thing is, this baby has a fifteen-digit base, not a ten, and a forty-three-second delay. You don't hit it, the gate comes crashing down."

Frank rubbed his nose. He would have to go home and shower. The stench of death warmed over several days in a hot room left its indelible mark on your clothes, hair and skin. And sinuses.

"So?" Frank asked.

"So, the portable models you'd most likely have to use on a job like this can't crunch enough combos through in thirty seconds or so. Shit, based on a fifteen-digit configuration you're looking at over a trillion-three in possibles. It's not like the guy's gonna be lugging around a PC."

The OIC piped in. "Why thirty seconds?"

Frank answered. "They needed some time to get the plate off, Sam." He turned back to the security man. "So what are you saying?"

"I'm saying that if he knocked this system over with a numbers cruncher then he had already eliminated some of the possible digits from the process. Maybe half, maybe more. I mean maybe you got a system that'll do it all right, or they might've rigged something up that could pop this cage. But you're not talking cheap hardware and you're not talking some bozos off the street that walked into a Radio Shack and came out with a calculator. I mean they're making computers faster and smaller every day but you gotta realize that the speed of *your* hardware doesn't solve the problem. You gotta factor in how fast the security system's computer will respond back to all the combos flowing in. It's probably gonna be a lot slower than your equipment. And then you gotta big problem. Bottom line if I were these guys I'd want a nice comfort zone, you know what I'm saying? In their line of work, you don't get second chances."

Frank looked at the man's uniform and then back at the panel. If the guy was right he knew what that meant. His line of thinking had already moved in that direction by virtue of the fact that the front door had not been forced or even nominally tampered with.

The security company rep continued, "I mean we could eliminate the possibility entirely. We have systems that refuse to react to massive combos being forced down their throat. Computers would be jackshit useless. Problem is those systems are so sensitive to interference they were also routinely slamming down on owners who couldn't seem to remember their numbers on the first or second try. Hell, we were getting hit with so many false alarms the police departments were starting to fine us. Go fucking figure."

Frank thanked him and then moved through the rest of the house. Whoever had committed these crimes knew what they were doing. This was not going to be a quick one. Good pre crime planning usually meant equally good post-planning. But they probably hadn't counted on blowing away the lady of the house.

Frank suddenly leaned against a doorway and pondered the word used by his friend the Medical Examiner: wounds.

Chapter 8

JACK WAS EARLY. HIS WATCH SHOWED ONE-THIRTY-FIVE. HE had taken the day off, spending much of it deciding what to wear; something he had never concerned himself with before, but which now seemed vitally important.

He pulled at his gray tweed jacket, fingered a button on his white cotton shirt and adjusted the knot in his tie for the tenth time.

He walked down to the dock and watched the deck hands clean the CHERRY BLOSSOM, a tour ship built to resemble an old Mississippi riverboat. He and Kate had gone on it their first year in D.C. during a rare afternoon off from work. They had tried to hit all the touristy attractions. It had been a warm day like today, but clearer. Gray clouds were now rolling in from the west; afternoon thunderstorms were almost a given this time of year.

He sat on the weathered bench near the dockmaster's small hut and followed the lazy drift of the sea gulls across the choppy water. The Capitol was visible from his vantage point. Lady Liberty, minus the collective filth of over a hundred and thirty years of residing outdoors thanks to a recent cleaning, stood imperiously on top of the famous dome. People in this town were encased in grime over time, Jack thought to himself, it just came with the territory.

Jack's musings turned to Sandy Lord, the firm's most prolific rainmaker, and the biggest ego Patton, Shaw had ever seen. Sandy was close to being an institution in the legal and political circles of D.C. The other partners dropped his name as though he had just that moment stepped down from Mount Sinai with his own version of the Ten Commandments, which would have commenced with "Thou Shalt Make Patton, Shaw and LORD Partners As Much Money As Possible."

Ironically, Sandy Lord was part of the attraction when Ransome Baldwin had mentioned the firm. Lord was one of the best, if not the best example of a power lawyer the city had to offer, and it had dozens in that league. The possibilities were limitless for Jack. Whether those possibilities included his personal happiness, he was far from certain.

He was also not certain what he expected from this lunch. What he was sure about was that he wanted to see Kate Whitney. He wanted that very much. It seemed as though the closer his marriage came, the more he was emotionally retreating. And where more likely a spot to retreat than to the woman he had asked to marry him over four years ago? He shuddered as that memory engulfed him. He was terrified of marrying Jennifer Baldwin. Terrified that his life would soon become unrecognizable to him.

Something made him turn, he wasn't sure what exactly. But she was standing there, at the edge of the pier, watching him. The wind whipped her long skirt around her legs, the sun battled the darkening clouds, but still provided enough light to sparkle across her face as she moved the long strands of hair from her eyes. The calves and ankles were summer brown. The loose blouse bared her shoulders, showing off the freckles, and the tiny half-moon birthmark Jack had the habit of tracing after they had finished making love, she asleep and he watching her.

He smiled as she walked toward him. She must have gone home to change. This was clearly not her courtroom armor; these clothes represented a far more feminine side to Kate Whitney than any of her legal opponents would ever witness.

They walked down the street to the small deli, ordered and spent the first few minutes alternately staring out the window watching the approaching rain as it whipped the trees around, and exchanging awkward glances, as if on a first date and afraid to make steady eye contact.

"I appreciate your making the time, Kate."

She shrugged. "I like it here. Haven't been for a while. It's nice to get out for a change. I usually eat at my desk."

"Crackers and coffee?" He smiled and stared at her teeth. The funny one that curved inwardly slightly, like it was giving a quick hug to its neighbor. He liked that tooth the best. It was the only flaw he had ever noticed about her.

"Crackers and coffee." She smiled back. "Down to two cigarettes a day."

"Congratulations." The rain came at the same time their orders did.

She looked up from her plate, her eyes swept over to the window and then abruptly to Jack's face. She caught him staring at her. Jack smiled awkwardly and took a quick gulp of his drink.

She put her napkin on the table.

"The Mall's a big place to accidentally run into someone."

He didn't look at her. "I've been having a run of good luck lately." Now he met her eye. She waited. His shoulders finally collapsed.

"Okay, so it was less of an accident and more premeditated. You can't argue with the results."

"What are the results? Lunch?"

"I'm not looking ahead. I'm just taking it one step at a time. New life resolution. Change is good."

She said with more than a little contempt, "Well, at least you're not defending rapists and murderers anymore."

"And burglars?" he shot back, and then instantly regretted it.

Kate's face turned gray.

"I'm sorry, Kate. I didn't mean that."

She pulled out a cigarette and matches, lit up and blew smoke in his face.

He waved the cloud away. "Your first or second of the day?"

"Third. For some reason you always make me feel daring." She stared at the window, crossed her legs. Her foot touched his knee and she quickly jerked it back. She stabbed out her cigarette and stood up, grabbing her purse.

"I have to get back to work. How much do I owe you?"

He stared at her. "I invited you to lunch. Which you haven't even eaten."

She pulled out a ten and tossed it down on the table and headed for the door.

Jack threw another ten down and raced after her.

“Kate!”

He caught up to her just outside the deli. The rain had stiffened and despite holding his jacket over their heads they were quickly soaked. She didn’t seem to notice. She climbed in her car. He jumped in the passenger side. She looked at him.

“I really have to get back.”

Jack took a deep breath, wiped the moisture off his face. The heavy rain drummed on the car’s exterior. He felt it all slipping away. He was far from sure how to handle this situation. But he had to say something.

“Come on, Kate, we’re dripping wet, it’s almost three o’clock. Let’s go get cleaned up and hit a movie. No, we can drive out to the country. Remember the Windsor Inn?”

She looked at him, absolute astonishment on her features. “Jack, by any chance, have you discussed this with the woman you’re engaged to marry?”

Jack looked down. What was he supposed to say? That he was not in love with Jennifer Baldwin despite having asked her to marry him? Right at that moment, he could not even recall asking her.

“I’d just like to spend some time with you, Kate. That’s all. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“There is everything wrong with that, Jack. Everything!” She started to put the key in the ignition but he held her hand back.

“I’m not looking to make this a battle.”

“Jack, you’ve made your decision. It’s a little late for this now.”

His face curled into disbelief. “Excuse me? My decision? I made a decision to marry you over four years ago. That was my decision. It was your decision to end it.”

She pushed wet hair out of her eyes. “Okay, it was my decision. Now what?”

He turned to face her, gripped both her shoulders.

“Look, it suddenly occurred to me last night. Oh what the hell! It’s been every night since you left. I knew it was a mistake, goddammit! I’m not at PD anymore. You’re right, I don’t defend criminals anymore. I make a good, respectable living. I, we ...” As he looked at her astonished face, his entire mind went blank. His hands were shaking. He let go of her, slumped back in the seat.

He stripped off his drenched tie, stuffed it in his pocket, and stared at the little clock on the dashboard. She checked out the motionless speedometer, then glanced at him. There was kindness in her tone, although the pain was evident in her eyes.

“Jack, lunch was very nice. It was good to see you. But that’s as far as we can go. I’m sorry.” She bit her lip, a movement he didn’t see because he was getting out of the car.

He poked his head back in. “Have a good life, Kate. You ever need anything, call me.”

She watched his thick shoulders as he walked through the steady rain, got in his car and drove off. She sat for several minutes. A tear traced its way down her

cheek. She angrily flicked it away, put the car in gear and drove off in the opposite direction.

* * * * *

THE NEXT MORNING, JACK PICKED UP THE PHONE AND THEN slowly put it back down. What was the point really? He had been in the office since six, wiped out his backlog of high-priority work and moved on to projects that had been on the back burner for weeks. He looked out the window. The sun ricocheted off the concrete and brick edifices. He rubbed the glare out of his eyes and pulled the blinds down.

Kate was not going to suddenly plunge back into his life and he had to adjust to that. He had spent the night turning every possible scenario over in his head, most wildly unrealistic. He shrugged. Things like this happened to men and women every day in every country in the world. Things sometimes did not work out. Even if you wanted them to more than anything else. You couldn't will someone to love you back. You had to move on. He had plenty to move on to. Maybe it was time for him to enjoy the future he knew he did have.

He sat down at his desk and methodically moved through two more projects, a joint venture for which he was doing low-level, no-brain grunt work, and a project for the only client he had other than Baldwin, Tarr Crimson.

Crimson owned a small audiovisual company, was a genius with computer-generated graphics and images, and made a very good living running AV conferences for companies at area hotels. He also rode a motorcycle, dressed in cut-off jeans, smoked everything including an occasional cigarette, and looked like the biggest burnt-out druggie in the world.

Jack and he had met when a friend of Jack's had prosecuted Tarr for drunk and disorderly, and lost. Tarr had come in dressed in a three-piece suit, briefcase and neatly trimmed hair and beard, and argued persuasively that the officer's testimony was biased because the bust was outside a Grateful Dead concert, that the field test was inadmissible because the cop had not given the proper verbal warnings and lastly because an improperly functioning piece of equipment had been used to administer the test.

The judge, burdened with over a hundred D&Ds from the concert, had dismissed the case after admonishing the officer to adhere strictly to the rules in the future. Jack had watched the entire affair in amazement. Impressed, Jack walked out of the courtroom with Tarr, had a beer with him that night, and they quickly became friends.

Except for occasional, relatively innocuous brushes with the law, Crimson was a good, if unwelcome, client to the halls of Patton, Shaw. It had been part of Jack's deal that Tarr, who had fired his last attorney, would be allowed to follow Jack to Patton, Shaw as if the firm would have actually said no to their new four-million-dollar man.

He put down his pen and moved once again to the window as his thoughts drifted back to Kate Whitney. An idea lumbered across the forefront of his mind. When Kate had left him originally, Jack had gone to see Luther. The old man had had no words of wisdom, no instant solution to Jack's dilemma. Indeed, Luther Whitney was the unlikeliest person in the world to have the answer that would

reach to his daughter's heart. And yet Jack had always been able to talk to Luther. About anything. The man listened. He really listened. He didn't merely wait for you to pause with your own story so he could plunge in with his own troubles. Jack wasn't sure what he was going to say to the man. But whatever it was he was certain Luther would listen. And that was probably going to have to be good enough.

One hour later Jack's computerized calendar buzzed a warning. Jack checked the time and threw on his jacket.

Jack moved quickly down the hallway. Lunch with Sandy Lord in twenty minutes. Jack was uncomfortable about being with the man, alone. Legions had been spoken about Sandy Lord, mostly true, Jack assumed. He wanted lunch with Jack Graham, Jack's secretary had told him this morning. And what Sandy Lord wanted he got. Jack's secretary also reminded him of that in a hushed whisper that made Jack slightly repulsed.

Twenty minutes, but first Jack had to check with Alvis on the Bishop documents. Jack smiled as he remembered Barry's face when the drafts had been placed carefully on his desk, thirty minutes before the deadline. Alvis had scanned them, the astonishment clear on his features.

"This looks pretty good. I realize I gave you a tough deadline. I don't usually like to do that." His eyes were averted. "I really appreciate the hustle, Jack. I'm sorry if I screwed up your plans."

"No sweat, Barry, that's what they pay me for." Jack had turned to leave. Barry had risen from his desk.

"Jack, uh, we really haven't had a chance to talk since you've been here. Place is so damn big. Let's have lunch one day, soon."

"Sounds great, Barry, have your secretary give mine some dates."

At that moment Jack realized that Barry Alvis wasn't such a bad guy. He had dinged Jack, but so what? Compared to how the senior partners ran their underlings, Jack had gotten off easy. Besides, Barry was a first-rate corporate attorney and Jack could learn a lot from him.

Jack passed Barry's secretary's desk but Sheila was not there.

Then Jack noticed the boxes stacked against the wall. Barry's door was closed. Jack knocked, but there was no answer. He looked around and then opened the door. His eyes closed and reopened as he looked at the empty bookcases, at the rectangular patches of unfaded wallpaper where a slew of diplomas and certificates had hung.

What the hell? He closed the door, turned and bumped into Sheila.

Normally professional and precise in her manner, without a hair out of place and glasses set firmly on the bridge of her nose, Sheila was a wreck. She had been Barry's secretary for ten years. She stared at Jack, fire flashed through her pale blue eyes, and then was gone. She turned around, walked quickly back to her cubicle and started packing up boxes. Jack stared blankly at her.

"Sheila, what's going on? Where's Barry?" She did not respond. Her hands moved faster until she was literally throwing things into the box. Jack moved over next to her, looked down at the petite frame.

"Sheila? What the hell's going on? Sheila!" He grabbed her hand. She slapped him, which shocked her so badly she abruptly sat down. Her head slowly went down to her desk and stayed there. She began to quietly sob.

Jack looked around again. Was Barry dead? Had there been a terrible accident and no one had bothered to tell him? Was the firm that big, that callous? Would he read about it in a firm memo? He looked at his hands. They were trembling.

He perched on the edge of the desk, gently touched Sheila's shoulder, trying to bring her out of it, but without success. Jack looked around helplessly as the sobs continued, rising higher and higher in their intensity. Finally, two secretaries from around the corner appeared and quietly led Sheila away. Each of them gave Jack a not very friendly glance.

What the hell had he done? He looked at his watch. He had to meet Lord in ten minutes. Suddenly he was very much looking forward to this lunch. Lord knew everything that happened at the firm, usually before it actually did happen. Then a thought tickled the back of his head, a truly horrible thought. His mind went back to the White House dinner and his irate fiancée. He had mentioned Barry Alvis by name to her. But she wouldn't have ... ? Jack practically sprinted down the hallway, the back of his jacket flapping behind him.

* * * * *

FILLMORE'S WAS A WASHINGTON LANDMARK OF FAIRLY RECENT vintage. The doors were solid mahogany and bedecked with thick, weighty brass; the carpets and drapes were handwoven and supremely costly. Each table area was a self-contained haven of intense mealtime productivity. Phone, fax and copier services were readily available and widely used. The ornately carved tables were surrounded by richly upholstered chairs in which sat the truly elite of Washington's business and political circles. The prices ensured that the clientele would remain that way.

While crowded, the pace of the restaurant was unhurried; its occupants unused to being dictated to, they moved at their own level of intensity. Sometimes their very presence at a particular table, a raised eyebrow, a stifled cough, a knowing look, was a full day's work for them, and would reap huge rewards for them personally or for those whom they represented. Money and raw power floated through the room in distinct patterns, coupling and uncoupling.

Waiters in stiff shirts and neat bow ties appeared and then disappeared at discreetly placed intervals. Patrons were coddled and served and listened to or left alone as the particular occasion called for. And the gratuities reflected the clientele's appreciation.

Fillmore's was Sandy Lord's favorite lunch spot. He peered over his menu, briefly, but methodically surveyed with his intense, gray eyes the broad expanse of the dining room for potential business or perhaps something else. He moved his heavy bulk gracefully in his chair and carefully coaxed a few gray hairs back into place. The trouble was, familiar faces kept disappearing as time moved forward, stolen away by death or retirement to points south. He removed a fleck of dust from one of his monogrammed shirt curls and sighed. Lord had picked this establishment, maybe this town, clean.

He punched on his cellular phone and checked his messages. Walter Sullivan hadn't called. If Sullivan's deal came through, Lord could land a former Eastern Bloc country as a client.

A whole goddamned country! How much could you charge a country for legal work? Normally a lot. The problem was the ex-communists had no money, unless you counted rubles and coupons and kopecks and whatever else they were using these days, all of which might as well be used for toilet paper.

That reality did not trouble Lord. What the ex-commies had in abundance was raw materials that Sullivan was salivating to acquire. That was the reason Lord had spent three godforsaken months there. But it would be worth it if Sullivan came through.

Lord had learned to have his doubts about everyone. But if anyone could pull this deal off, Walter Sullivan could. Everything he had touched seemed to multiply to global proportions, and the droppings that went to his cohorts were truly awe-inspiring. And at almost eighty, the old man hadn't flowed a step. He worked fifteen-hour days, was married to a twenty-something babe right out of a drive-in movie. He was right this minute in Barbados where he had flown the three highest-ranking politicians for a little business and entertainment Western style. Sullivan would call. And Sandy's short but select client list would grow by one, but what a one it would be.

Lord took note of the young woman in the painfully short skirt and tiptoe heels strolling across the dining room.

She smiled at him; he returned the look with slightly elevated eyebrows, a favorite signal of his because of its ambiguity. She was a congressional liaison for one of the big 16th Street associations, not that he cared about her occupation. She was excellent in bed, that he did care about.

The view brought back a number of pleasant memories. He would have to call her soon. He jotted a note to that effect in his electronic notebook. Then he turned his attention, as did most of the ladies in the room, to the tall, angular figure of Jack Graham striding across the room, heading straight for him.

Lord rose and extended his hand. Jack didn't take it.

"What the hell happened to Barry Alvis?"

Lord introduced one of his blank stares to the confrontation and sat back down. A waiter appeared and then was dismissed by a short wave of Lord's hand. Lord eyed Jack, who remained standing.

"You don't give a person a chance to catch their breath, do you? Straight out the mouth and into the fire. Sometimes that strategy is smart, sometimes it isn't."

"I'm not kidding, Sandy, I want to know what is going on. Barry's office is empty, his secretary is looking at me like I personally ordered a hit on him. I want some answers." Jack's voice was rising, and with it the stares increased.

"Whatever you have on your mind, I am sure we can discuss it with a little more dignity than you're mustering right now. Why don't you have a seat and start acting like a partner at the best damned law firm in this city."

Their eyes stayed locked for a full five seconds until Jack slowly sat down.

"Drink?"

"Beer."

The waiter reappeared and went away with an order for beer and Sandy's potent gin and tonic. Sandy lit a Raleigh and casually looked out the window, then back at Jack.

"You know about Barry then."

"All I know is he's gone. Why he's gone is what I want you to tell me."

"Not much to tell. He was let go, effective today."

"Why?"

"What's it to you?"

"Barry and I were working together."

"But you weren't friends."

"We didn't have a chance to be friends yet."

"Why on God's earth would you want to be friends with Barry Alvis? Man was permanent associate material if ever I saw one, and I've seen plenty."

"He was a helluva lawyer."

"No, technically, he was a highly competent attorney, proficient in the area of corporate transactional matters and tax, with a subspecialty in health care acquisitions. He's never generated a dime in business, and never would. Thus he was not a 'helluva lawyer.'"

"Goddammit, you know what I mean. He was a very valuable asset to the firm. You need somebody to do the friggin' work."

"We have roughly two hundred attorneys who are very well suited to do the friggin' work. On the other hand, we have only a dozen or so partners who bring in any material clients. That is not the proportion one should strive for. Plenty of soldiers, not enough chiefs. You see Barry Alvis as an asset, we saw him as a high-priced liability without the talent to leverage himself. He billed enough to keep himself very highly compensated. That is not how we, the partners, make the most money. Thus a decision was made to sever our relationship."

"And you're telling me you didn't get a little nudge from Baldwin?"

Lord's face contained genuine surprise. A lawyer with over thirty-five years' experience blowing smoke in people's faces, he was a consummate liar. "What the hell do the Baldwins care about Barry Alvis?"

Jack scrutinized the corpulent face for a full minute and then let his breath out slowly. He looked around the restaurant suddenly feeling silly and embarrassed. All this for nothing? But if Lord was lying? He glanced again at the man, but the face was impassive. But why would he lie? Jack could think of several reasons, but none of them made too much sense. Could he have been wrong? Had he just made a complete ass out of himself in front of the firm's most powerful partner?

Lord's voice was softer now, almost consoling. "Barry Alvis was let go as part of an ongoing effort to clear out the deadwood near the top. We want more attorneys who can do the work and produce the rain. Hell, like you. Simple as that. Barry wasn't the first and he won't be the last. We've been working on this for a long time, Jack. Long before you ever came to the firm." Lord paused and looked keenly at Jack. "Is there something you're not telling me? We're going to be partners soon, you can't keep things from your partners."

Lord chuckled inwardly. The list of secret deals he had had with clients was a long one.

Jack was close to biting, but decided not to.

"I'm not a partner yet, Sandy."

"Pure formality."

"Things don't happen till they happen."

Lord shifted uncomfortably in his chair, waved his cigarette smoke like a wand. So maybe the rumors that Jack was contemplating jumping ship were true. Those rumors were the reason Lord was sitting here with the young lawyer. They looked at each other. A smile tugged at Jack's mouth. Jack's four million in legal business was an irresistible carrot. Particularly because it meant another four hundred grand to Sandy Lord, not that he needed it, but not that he would turn it down either. He had the reputation of being a big spender. And lawyers didn't retire. They worked until they dropped. The best made a lot of money, but compared to CEOs, rock stars and actors they were strictly minor-league compensation-wise.

"I thought you liked our shop."

"I do."

"So?"

"So what?"

Sandy's eye roamed the dining room again. He spotted another female acquaintance encased in a sleek and costly business suit under which Sandy had good reason to believe she wore absolutely nothing. He swallowed the rest of his gin and tonic, looked at Jack. Lord grew more and more irritated. The stupid, green sonofabitch.

"You ever been to this place before?"

Jack shook his head, surveyed the thick menu, searching for a burger and fries and not finding it. Then the menu was yanked out of his hand and Lord leaned into him, his breath heavy and saggy in Jack's face.

"Well, why don't you take a look around then?"

Lord lifted a finger for the waiter and ordered a Dewar's and water, which appeared a minute later. Jack leaned back in his chair, but Lord inched closer, almost straddling the ornately carved table.

"I've been in restaurants before, Sandy, believe it or not."

"Not this one though, right? You see that little lady over there?" Lord's surprisingly slender fingers sliced through the air. Jack's gaze fell on the congressional liaison. "I've fucked that woman five times in the past six months." Lord could not help but smile as Jack appraised the subject and came away duly impressed.

"Now ask yourself why a creature like that would condescend to sleep with a big old bag of fat like me."

"Maybe she feels sorry for you." Jack smiled.

Lord did not. "If you actually believe that, then you possess a naïveté that borders on incompetence. Do you really believe women in this town are any more pure than the men? Why should they be? Just because they have tits and a skirt doesn't mean they won't take what they want and use any means at their disposal to do so.

"You see, son, it's because I can give her what she wants, and I don't mean between the sheets. She knows that, I know that. I can open doors in this town only a handful of men can. And the quid pro quo for that is she lets me fuck her.

It's a straight commercial transaction entered into by intelligent, highly sophisticated parties. How about that?"

"How about it?"

Lord sat back in his chair, lit a fresh cigarette and blew precise rings to the ceiling. He picked at his lip and chuckled to himself.

"Something funny, Sandy?"

"I was just now thinking how you probably got a kick out of people like me when you were in law school. Thinking how you were never going to be like me. Gonna go defend illegal aliens wanting political asylum or do death row appeals for poor sonofabitches who've butchered a few too many people and blamed it on getting spanked by their momma when they were bad. Now come on, tell the truth, you did that, didn't you?"

Jack loosened his tie, took a sip of beer. He had seen Lord in action before. He smelled a setup.

"You're one of the best lawyers around, Sandy, everybody says so."

"Shit, I haven't practiced law in years."

"Whatever works for you."

"What works for you, Jack?"

Jack felt a slight but perceptible clinch in his gut as he heard his name pass through Lord's lips. It suggested a coming intimacy that had startled him, despite Jack's knowledge of its inevitability. Partner? Jack took a breath and shrugged.

"Who knows what they want to be when they grow up?"

"But see you are grown up, Jack, and it's time to pay the man at the door. So what's it gonna be?"

"I'm not following this."

Lord leaned in again, hands clenched, like a heavyweight pressing the exchange, looking for the tiniest opening. Indeed, for a moment, an attack seemed imminent. Jack tensed.

"You think I'm an asshole don't you?"

Jack picked up his menu again. "Recommend anything?"

"Come on, kid, you think I'm a greedy, egocentric, power-happy asshole who doesn't give a shit about anything or anybody that can't do something for me. Ain't that right, Jack!" Lord's voice was rising, his thick body half out of his chair. He pushed Jack's menu back down to the table.

Jack nervously scanned the room, but no one seemed to be paying attention, which meant every word of the exchange was being carefully absorbed and dissected. Lord's red eyes focused directly on Jack's, pulling them to him.

"I am, you know. That's exactly what I am, Jack."

Lord settled back in his chair, triumphant. He grinned. Jack felt inclined to smile in spite of the repulsiveness.

Jack relaxed a notch. Almost as if sensing that slight release, Lord slid his chair over next to Jack's, crowding him. For a moment Jack seriously contemplated decking the older man—enough was enough.

"That's right, I'm all those things, Jack, all those things and more, much more. But you know what, Jack? That's who I am. I don't try to disguise it or explain it. Every sonofabitch that has ever met me has come away knowing exactly who and

what I was. I believe in what I do. There's no bullshit there." Lord took a deep breath, and then slowly let it out. Jack shook his head, trying to clear it.

"What about you, Jack?"

"What about me?"

"Who are you, Jack? What do you believe in, if anything?"

"I've got twelve years of Catholic school, I've got to believe in something."

Lord shook his head wearily. "You're disappointing me. I heard you were a bright kid. Either my reports are wrong, or you've got that shit-eating grin on your face because you're afraid of what you might say."

Jack grasped Lord's wrist in a viselike grip.

"What the fuck do you want from me?"

Lord smiled and gently tapped Jack's hand until the grip was released.

"You like these kinds of places? With Baldwin as a client you'll be eating in places like this until your arteries are hard as drill bits. In about forty years, you'll keel over in some sand trap in the Caribbean and leave behind some young and suddenly rich third-time-around honey; but you'll die happy, believe me."

"One place is the same as another to me."

Lord's hand came down hard on the table. This time several heads did turn. The maitre d' glanced in their direction, trying to conceal his apprehension behind his thick mustache and quiet air of competence.

"That's my whole goddamned point, son, that goddamned ambivalence of yours." His voice lowered, but he continued to lean into Jack, crowding him. "One place is definitely not the same as another. You have the key to this place, you know. Your key is Baldwin and that nice-looking daughter of his. Now the question becomes: will you or won't you open that door? Which query interestingly enough leads us right back to my original question. What do you believe in, Jack? Because if you do not believe in this"—Lord spread his arms wide—"if you do not want to become the Sandy Lord of the next generation, if you wake up at night and laugh at or curse my little idiosyncrasies, my assholiness if you will, if you really and truly believe you are above that, if you really hate whaling away at Ms. Baldwin and if you don't see one single item on that menu that you care for, then why don't you tell me to fuck off? And get up and walk out that door there, your head high, your conscience clear, and your beliefs intact? Because frankly this game is far too important and intensely played for the uncommitted."

Lord slumped back in his chair, his mass extrapolating outward until it fully engulfed the space.

Outside the restaurant a truly beautiful fall day was unfolding. Neither rain nor excessive humidity marred the blue sky's perfectness; the gentle breeze rustled discarded newspapers. The torrid pace of the city seemed to have momentarily slowed a notch. Down the street at LaFayette Park, sunseekers lay in the grass, hoping for a few more moments of tan before the really cold weather set in. Bike messengers on break prowled the area looking for unconcealed legs and blouses open just a peek.

Inside the restaurant Jack Graham and Sandy Lord were staring at each other.

"You don't pull any punches do you?"

"I don't have time for that, Jack. Not for the last twenty years. If I didn't believe you could handle the direct approach, I would've just bullshit with you and let it go."

"What do you want me to say?"

"All I want to know is whether you're in or out. The truth is, with Baldwin, you could go to any other shop in town. You chose us, I'm presuming, because you like what you saw."

"Baldwin recommended you."

"He's a smart man. Lots of people would follow his lead. You've been with us one year. If you choose to stay, you'll be made a partner. Frankly, the twelve-month wait was purely a formality, to see if we were a good fit. After that you will never have any financial concerns, not counting your future wife's considerable monies. Your main occupation will be to keep Baldwin happy, and to expand that piece of business, and to bring in anybody else you can. Because let's face it, Jack, the only security any lawyer has are the clients he controls. They never tell you that in law school and it's the most important lesson you have to learn. Never, never lose sight of that fact. Even doing the work should take a back seat to that. There'll always be bodies to do the work. You will be given carte blanche to chase more business. You will have no one supervising you, except Baldwin. You will not have to monitor the legal work being done for Baldwin, we have others who will do that for you. All in all, not such a terrible life."

Jack looked down at his hands. Jennifer's face appeared there. So perfect. He felt guilty for having assumed she had had Barry Alvis fired. Then he thought of the numbing hours as a PD. His thoughts finally turned to Kate, and then quickly stopped. What was there? The answer was nothing. He looked up.

"Stupid question. Do I get to keep practicing law?"

"If that's what you want." Lord eyed him closely. "So do I take that as a yes?"

Jack glanced down at the menu. "The crab cakes look good."

Sandy exhaled smoke to the ceiling and smiled broadly. "I love 'em, Jack. I goddamn love 'em."

* * * * *

TWO HOURS LATER, SANDY STOOD IN THE CORNER OF HIS massive office suite staring out onto the busy street below, while a conference call plodded forward on the speaker phone.

Dan Kirksen walked in the door, his stiff bow tie and crisp shirt concealing a slender jogger's body. Kirksen was the firm's managing partner. He had unwavering control over everyone in the place except Sandy Lord. And now perhaps Jack Graham.

Lord glanced at him with uninterested eyes. Kirksen sat down and waited patiently until the conference call participants said their good-byes. Lord clicked the phone off and sat down in his chair. Leaning back, he eyed the ceiling and lit up. Kirksen, a health fanatic, inched back from the desk.

"You want something?" Lord's eyes had finally come to rest on Kirksen's lean, hairless face. The man consistently controlled a shade under six hundred thousand in business, which guaranteed him a long, secure home at PS&L, but

those numbers were chickenshit to Lord and he did nothing to hide his dislike of the firm's managing partner.

"We were wondering how the lunch went."

"You can handle the softballs. I don't have time to play fucking softball."

"We had heard unsettling rumors, and then with Alvis having to be terminated when Ms. Baldwin called."

Lord waved a hand through the air. "That's taken care of. He loves us, he's staying. And I wasted two hours."

"The amount of money at stake, Sandy, we, we all felt it would be better, it would convey the strongest possible impression if you—"

"Yeah. I understand the numbers, Kirksen, better than you, I understand the numbers. Okay? Now, Jacky boy is staying put. With luck he might double his fishing line in ten years, and we can all retire early." Lord looked over at Kirksen, who seemed to grow smaller and smaller under the big man's gaze. "He's got balls, you know. More balls than any of my other partners."

Kirksen winced.

"In fact, I kind of like the kid." Lord stood up and moved over to the window, where he watched a procession of preschoolers attached together with rope cross the street ten stories below.

"Then I can report a positive to the committee?"

"You can report any goddamn thing you like. Just remember one thing: don't you boys ever bother me with one of these things again, unless it's really, really important, you understand me?"

Lord glanced once more at Kirksen and then his eyes returned to the window. Sullivan still had not called. That was not good. He could see his country slipping away, like the little bodies disappearing around the corner. Gone.

"Thank you, Sandy."

"Yeah."

Chapter 9

WALTER SULLIVAN STARED AT THE FACE, OR WHAT WAS left of it. The exposed foot showed the official morgue toe tag. While his entourage waited outside, he quietly sat alone with her. The identification had already been formally made. The police had gone off to update their records, the reporters to file their stories. But Walter Sullivan, one of the most powerful men of his era, who had made money from nearly everything he had touched since he was fourteen, now suddenly found himself bereft of energy, of any will whatsoever.

The press had had a field day with him and Christy after his marriage of forty-seven years had ended in the death of his first wife. But at almost eighty years old, he had just wanted something young and alive. After so much death, he had wanted something that would most certainly outlive him. With close friends and loved ones dying around him, he had passed his tolerance level as a mourner. Growing old was not easy, even for the very rich.

But Christy Sullivan had not survived him. And he was going to do something about that. It was fortunate that he was largely ignorant of what lay ahead for the remains of his late wife. It was a necessary process that was not in the least designed to comfort the victim's family.

As soon as Walter Sullivan left the room, a technician would enter and wheel the late Mrs. Sullivan into the autopsy room. There she would be weighed and have her height confirmed. She would be photographed, first fully clothed, and then in the nude. Then X-rayed and fingerprinted. A complete external exam would be conducted, with the intent of noting and obtaining as much usable evidence and as many clues as possible from the body. Fluids would be taken and sent to toxicology for drug and alcohol screens and other testing. A Y incision would split her body shoulder to shoulder, chest to genitals. A horrific chasm for even the veteran observer. Every organ would be analyzed and weighed, her genitalia checked for signs of sexual intercourse or damage. Every trace of semen, blood or foreign hair would be sent for DNA typing.

Her head would be examined, wound patterns traced. Then a saw would make an intermastoid incision over the top of the skull, cutting through the scalp and down to the bone. Next, the front quadrant of the skull would be cut away and the brain removed through the frontal craniotomy and examined. The one slug would be extracted, marked for chain-of-custody purposes and held for ballistics.

Once that process was completed, Walter Sullivan would be given back his wife.

Toxicology would verify the contents of her stomach and traces of foreign substances in her blood and urine.

The autopsy protocol would be prepared, listing the cause and mechanism of death and all relevant findings, and the official opinion of the Medical Examiner.

The autopsy protocol, together with all photographs, X-rays, fingerprints, toxicology reports and any other information constituting the entire case file would be deposited with the detective in charge.

Walter Sullivan finally rose, covered the remains of his deceased wife and left.

From behind yet another one-way mirror, the detective's eyes followed the bereaved husband as he left the room. Then Seth Frank put on his hat and quietly exited.

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CONFERENCE ROOM NUMBER ONE, THE LARGEST IN THE FIRM, held a prominent center position right behind the reception area. Now, behind the thick sliding doors, a meeting of the entire partnership had just convened.

Between Sandy Lord and another senior partner sat Jack Graham; his partnership not yet official, but protocol was not important today and Lord had insisted.

Coffee was poured by the housekeeping staff, danishes and muffins were distributed around, and then the help retreated, closing the doors behind them.

All heads turned to Dan Kirksen. He sipped his juice, tapped his mouth affectedly with his napkin and rose.

"As I'm sure you've heard by now, a terrible tragedy has befallen one of our most"—Kirksen glanced quickly at Lord—"or I should say, our most significant client." Jack looked around the sixty-foot marble-top table. Most heads remained

trained on Kirksen, a few others were filled in on the events by whispers from their neighbor. Jack had seen the headlines. He had never worked on any of Sullivan's matters but he knew they were extensive enough to occupy forty attorneys at the firm on almost a full-time basis. He was, by far, Patton, Shaw's biggest client.

Kirksen continued. "The police are investigating the matter thoroughly. As yet there have been no developments in the case." Kirksen paused, glanced again at Lord, and then continued. "As one can imagine, this is a very distressing time for Walter. To make matters as easy as possible for him during this time, we are asking all attorneys to pay particular attention to any Sullivan-related matters, and, hopefully, to nip any potential problem in the bud before it escalates. Further, while we do not believe that this is anything other than a routine burglary with a very unfortunate result, and is in no way connected to any of Walter's business affairs, we are asking each of you to be alert for any unusual signs in any of the dealings in which you are engaged on Walter's behalf. Any suspicious activity is to be reported immediately to either myself or Sandy."

A number of heads turned toward Lord, who was looking at the ceiling in his customary fashion. Three cigarette butts lay in the ashtray in front of him, the remains of a Bloody Mary beside it.

Ron Day, from the international law section, spoke up. His neatly trimmed hair framed an owlish face partially obscured by slender oval spectacles. "This isn't a terrorist thing is it? I've been putting together a string of Middle Eastern joint ventures for Sullivan's Kuwaiti subsidiary, and those people operate under their own rules, I can tell you that. Should I be worried for my personal safety? I'm on a flight this evening for Riyadh."

Lord swiveled his head around until his eyes fell on Day. Sometimes it surprised him how myopic if not downright idiotic many of his partners were. Day was a service partner whose main, and in Lord's mind only, strength was his ability to speak seven languages and politely kiss the ass of the Saudis.

"I wouldn't worry about that, Ron. If this is an international conspiracy, you're not important enough to dick around with, and if they do target you, you'll be dead before you ever see it coming."

Day fiddled with his necktie as an uneasy mirth quietly circled the table.

"Thank you for the clarification, Sandy."

"You're welcome, Ron."

Kirksen cleared his throat. "Rest assured that everything that can be done to solve this heinous crime is being done. There's even talk that the President himself will authorize a special investigative task force to look into the matter. As you know, Walter Sullivan has served in various capacities in several administrations, and is one of the President's closest friends. I think we can assume that the criminals will be in custody shortly." Kirksen sat down.

Lord looked around the table, elevated his eyebrows and crushed out his last cigarette. The table cleared.

* * * * *

SETH FRANK SWIVELED AROUND IN HIS CHAIR. HIS OFFICE WAS a six-by-six pen, the sheriff warranting the only spacious area in the small headquarters

building. The medical examiner's report was on his desk. It was only seven-thirty in the morning but Frank had already read every word of the report three times.

He had attended the autopsy. It was just something detectives had to do, for a lot of reasons. Although he had been present at literally hundreds of them, he had never grown comfortable with seeing the dead tinkered with like the animal remains every college biology student had sunk their digits into. And although he no longer became ill at the sight, it usually took him two or three hours of driving around aimlessly before he could attempt to settle back down to work.

The report was thick and neatly typed. Christy Sullivan had been dead at least seventy-two hours, probably longer. The swelling and blistering of the body, and the bacteria and gaseous onset in her organs, substantiated that time range with pretty good accuracy. However, the room had been very warm, which had accelerated the postmortem putrefaction of the body. That fact, in turn, made ascertaining the actual time of death increasingly difficult. But not less than three days, the medical examiner had been firm on that. Frank also had ancillary information that led him to believe that Christine Sullivan had met her death on Monday night, which would put them smack in the three-to-four-day range.

Frank felt himself frowning. A minimum of three days meant he was facing a very cold trail. Someone who knew what they were doing could disappear from the face of the earth in three or four days. Added to that was the fact that Christine Sullivan had been dead a while now and his investigation was really no further along than when he started. He could not remember a case where the trail was so nonexistent.

As far as they could ascertain there were no witnesses to the incidents at the Sullivan estate, other than the decedent and whoever had murdered her. Notices had been placed in the papers, at banks and shopping centers. No one had come forward.

They had talked to every homeowner within a three-mile radius. They had all expressed shock, outrage and fear. Frank had seen the latter in the twitch of an eyebrow, hunched shoulders and the nervous rubbing of hands. Security would be even tighter than ever in the little county. All those emotions, however, yielded no usable information. The staffs of each of the neighbors had also been thoroughly questioned. There was nothing there. Telephone interviews had been conducted of Sullivan's household staff, who had accompanied him to Barbados, with nothing earth-shattering to report back. Besides, they all had ironclad alibis. Not that that was insurmountable. Frank filed that away in the back of his mind.

They also did not have a good snapshot of Christine Sullivan's last day of life. She was murdered in her house, presumably late at night. But if she had indeed been murdered on Monday night, what had she been doing during the day? Frank believed that information had to lend them something to go on.

At nine-thirty in the morning on that Monday, Christine Sullivan had been seen in downtown Washington at an upscale salon where it would cost Frank two weeks' pay to send his wife for a pampering. Whether the woman was gearing up for some late-night fun or this was something the rich did on a regular basis was something Frank would have to find out. Their inquiries had turned up nothing on Sullivan's whereabouts after she had left the salon around noon. She had not

returned to her apartment in the city, nor had she taken a taxicab anywhere that they could determine.

If the little woman had stayed behind when everyone else went to the sunny south, she had to have a reason, he figured. If she had been with someone that night, that was someone Frank wanted to talk to, and maybe handcuff.

Ironically, murder in the commission of a burglary did not constitute capital murder in Virginia, although, interestingly enough, murder during the course of an armed robbery did. If you robbed and killed, you could be sentenced to death. If you burgled and killed, the most you'd be looking at was life, which wasn't that great of a choice given the barbaric conditions of most state prisons. But Christine Sullivan had worn much jewelry. Every report the detective had received indicated she was a great lover of diamonds, emeralds, sapphires; you named it, she wore it. There was no jewelry on the body, although it was easy enough to see the marks on the skin the rings had made. Sullivan had also confirmed that his wife's diamond necklace was missing. The beauty salon owner also remembered seeing that particular piece on Monday.

A good prosecutor could make out a case of robbery on those facts, Frank was sure of it. The perps were lying in wait, premeditation the whole way. Why should the good people of Virginia have to pay thousands of dollars a year to feed, clothe and house a cold-blooded killer? Burglary? Robbery? Who the fuck really cared? The woman was dead. Blown away by some sick goon. Legal distinctions like that did not sit well with Frank. Like many law enforcement people, he felt the criminal justice system was weighted far too heavily in favor of the defendant. It often seemed to him that lost in the entire convoluted process with its intricate deals, technical traps and ultrasmooth defense attorneys was the fact that someone had actually broken the law. That someone had been hurt, raped or killed. That was just flat-out wrong. Frank had no way to change the system, but he could peck around its edges.

He pulled the report closer, fumbling with his reading glasses. He took another sip of the thick, black coffee. Cause of death: lateral gunshot wounds to the cephalic region caused by high-velocity, large-caliber firearm(s) firing one expanding, softnose bullet causing a perforating wound, and a second slug of unknown composition from an unidentified weapon source causing a penetrating wound. Which, in ordinary English, meant her brain had been blown apart by some heavy-duty hardware. The report also stated that the manner of death was homicide, which was the only clear element Frank could see in the entire case. He noted that he had been correct in his conclusion of the distance from which the shots had come. There were no traces of powder in the wound track. The shots had come from over two feet away; Frank surmised that the distance was probably closer to six feet, but that was only his gut talking. Not that suicide had ever been a consideration. But murders for hire were usually of the barrel-to-flesh variety. That particular method cut down considerably on the margin of error.

Frank leaned closer to his desk. Why more than one shot? The woman most certainly was killed with the first round. Was the assailant a sadist, pumping round after round into a dead body? And yet they could account for only two entries into the body, hardly the lead barrage of some madman. Then there was the issue of the slugs. A dum dum and a mystery bullet.

He held up a bag with his mark on it. Only one round had been recovered from the body. It had entered below the right temple, flattened and expanded on impact, penetrated the skull and brain, causing a shock wave of the soft brain tissue, like rolling up a carpet.

He carefully nudged the caged creature or what was left of it. A gruesome projectile that was designed to flatten upon impact and then proceed to rip apart everything in its path, it had worked as designed on Christine Sullivan. Problem was dumdums were everywhere now. And the projectile deformity had been immense. Ballistics had been next to useless.

The second round had entered a half-inch above the other, traversed the entire brain, and exited the other side, leaving a gaping hole much larger than the entrance wound. The bone and tissue damage had been considerable.

This bullet's resting place had given them all a surprise. A half-inch hole in the wall against the bed. Ordinarily after having cut out the piece of plaster, the lab personnel, using special tools, would have extracted the slug, being careful to preserve the grooving of the bullet, which would enable them to narrow down the make of gun from which it was fired and hopefully to eventually match it to a particular piece of ordnance. Fingerprints and ballistics identification were as close to certain as you got in this business.

Except in this case, while the hole was there, there was no slug in the hole, and no other slug in the room. When the lab had called him to report that finding, Seth Frank had gone down to see for himself. That was as angry as he had gotten in a long time.

Why go to the trouble of digging out a slug when you still had one in the corpse? What would the second slug show that the first wouldn't? There were possibilities.

Frank made some notes. The missing bullet could be a different caliber or type, which probably would show there were at least two assailants. Strong as his imagination was, Frank could not realistically envision one person wielding a gun in each hand and popping off at the woman. So now he had a probable two suspects. That would also explain the different entry, exit and internal wound patterns. The tumbling dumdummy's entry hole was larger than the other slug's. So the second slug wasn't a hollow or softnose. It had blown right through her head, leaving a tunnel half the width of a pinkie in its wake. Projectile deformity had probably been minimal, which was meaningless since he didn't have the damn slug.

He looked over his initial scene notes. He was in the collection-of-information stage. He hoped he would not be stuck there forever. At least he didn't have to worry about the statute of limitations expiring on this one.

He looked at the report one more time, and his frown returned.

He picked up his phone and dialed. Ten minutes later he was sitting across from the Medical Examiner in the latter's office.

The big man pried at his cuticles with an old scalpel and finally glanced up at Frank.

"Strangulation marks. Or at least *attempted* strangulation. Understand, the trachea wasn't crushed, although there was some swelling and hemorrhaging in the tissue, and I found evidence of a slight fracture of the hyoid bone. Got traces of petechia in the conjunctiva of the eyelids too. Nonligature. It's all in the protocol."

Frank turned that over in his mind. Petechia, or tiny hemorrhages in the conjunctiva, or mucous membrane, of the eyes and eyelids, could be caused by strangulation and the resulting pressure on the brain.

Frank leaned forward in his chair, looked at the degrees lining the wall proclaiming the man opposite from him to be a long-dedicated student of forensic pathology.

“Man or woman?”

The Medical Examiner shrugged at the inquiry.

“Hard to tell. Human skin isn’t a stellar surface for prints, as you know. In fact it’s pretty impossible except in a few discrete areas, and after about half a day, if there was anything there, it won’t be anymore. Hard to imagine, though, a woman trying to strangle another woman with her bare hands, but it’s happened. Doesn’t take much pressure to crush a trachea, but bare-handed strangling’s usually a macho method of inflicting death. In a hundred strangling cases, I’ve never seen one where it was proved that a woman committed it. This was from the front too,” he added. “*Mano a mano*. You’d have to be pretty damn confident of your strength advantage. My educated guess? It was a man, for what a guess is worth.”

“The report also says there were contusions and bruises on the left side of her jaw, loosened teeth and cuts on the inside of her mouth?”

“Looks like somebody belted her a good one. One of the molars almost penetrated her cheek.”

Frank glanced at his case file. “The second bullet?”

“The damage inflicted leads me to believe it’s a large caliber, just like the first.”

“Any guesses on the first?”

“That’s all it would be. Maybe .357, .41. Could’ve been a 9mm too. Jesus, you saw the slug. Damn thing was flat as a pancake with half of it dispersed through her brain tissue and fluid. No lands, grooves, twists. Even if you find a probable firearm you’re not going to get a match there.”

“If we can find the other one, we might be in business.”

“Maybe not. Whoever dug it out of that wall probably messed up the markings. Ballistics won’t be happy with that.”

“Yeah, but it might just have some of the deceased’s hair, blood and skin imbedded in the nose. That’s some trace I’d love to get my hands on.”

The ME rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “That’s true. But you’ve got to find it first.”

“Which we probably won’t.” Frank smiled.

“You never know.”

The two men looked at each other, knowing full well that there was no way in hell they were going to find the other slug. Even if they did, they couldn’t place it at the murder scene unless it had trace evidence of the deceased on it, or they could find the gun that had fired it and placed the weapon at the murder scene. A potential double whammy.

“Find any brass?”

Frank shook his head.

“Then you got no pinprick either, Seth.” The Medical Examiner was referring to the unique imprint left by the firing pin of a gun on the base of the shell casing.

"Never said it would be easy. By the way, state guys giving you room to breathe on this one?"

The Medical Examiner smiled. "Remarkably silent. Now if it had been Walter Sullivan getting whacked, who knows? I already filed my report in Richmond."

Then Frank said the question he had really come to ask.

"Why two shots?"

The Medical Examiner stopped picking his cuticle, put down his scalpel and looked at Frank.

"Why not?" His eyes crinkled. He was in the unenviable position of being more than competent for the opportunities presented him in the quiet county. One of approximately five hundred Deputy Medical Examiners in the commonwealth, he enjoyed a thriving general practice but had a personal fascination with both police investigations and forensic pathology. Before settling into a quiet life in Virginia he had served as a deputy coroner for Los Angeles County for almost twenty years. It didn't get much worse than L.A. for homicides. But this was one he could get his teeth into.

Frank looked at him intently and said, "Either shot would have obviously been fatal. No question. So why fire a second? You wouldn't for a lot of reasons. Number one being the noise. Number two, if you want to get the hell out of there, why take the time to pump another round into her? On top of that, why leave behind another slug that could ID you later on? Did Sullivan startle them? If so, why did the shot come from the doorway into the room, and not the other way around? Why was the firing line descending? Was she on her knees? She probably was or else the shooter was off the scale height-wise. If she was on her knees, why? Execution-style? But there were no contact wounds. And then you have the marks on the neck. Why try to strangle her first, then stop, pick up a gun and blow her head off? And then blow it off again. One slug's taken. Why? A second gun? Why try to hide that? What's significant about that?"

Frank stood up and moved around the room, his hands stuck deep into his pockets, a habit of his when thinking intently. "And the crime scene was so fucking clean I couldn't believe it. There was nothing left. And I mean nothing. I'm surprised they didn't operate on her and pull out the other slug.

"I mean, come on, this guy was a burglar or maybe that's what he wants us to believe. But the vault *was* cleaned out. About four and a half million taken. And what was Mrs. Sullivan doing there? She was supposed to be sunning in the Caribbean. Did she know the guy? Was she screwing around on the side? If she was, are the two incidents related in any way? And why the hell would you waltz in the front door, knock out the security system, and then use a rope to climb out the window? Every time I ask myself one question another one pops up." Frank sat back down, looking slightly bewildered at his outpouring.

The Medical Examiner leaned back in his chair, twirled the case file around and took a minute to read over it. He took off his glasses and wiped them on his sleeve, tugged at a corner of his lip with his thumb and index finger.

Frank's nostrils quivered as he watched the ME. "What?"

"You mentioned nothing being left at the crime scene. I've been thinking about that. You're right. It was too clean." The Medical Examiner took his time in lighting up a Pall Mall—unfiltered, Frank noted. Every pathologist he had ever worked with

had smoked. The Medical Examiner blew rings in the air, obviously enjoying this mental exercise.

"Her fingernails were too clean."

Frank looked puzzled.

The Medical Examiner continued. "I mean there was no dirt, nail polish—although she was wearing it, bright red stuff—none of the ordinary residues you'd expect to find. Nothing. It was like they had been scoped out, you know what I mean?" He paused and then continued. "I also found minute traces of a solution." He paused again. "Like a cleansing solution."

"She'd been to some fancy beauty salon that morning. For a nail job and all that."

The ME shook his head. "Then you'd expect to find more residue, not less, with all the chemicals they use."

"So what are you saying? That her nails were deliberately cleaned out?"

The Medical Examiner nodded. "Someone was real careful not to leave any ident material behind."

"Which means they were paranoid about being identified, somehow, by the physical evidence."

"Most perps are, Seth."

"To a degree. But squirting out fingernails and leaving a place so clean our E-vac came up basically empty is a little much."

Frank scanned the report. "You also found traces of oil on her palms?"

The ME nodded, looked closely at the detective. "A preservative/protective compound. You know, like you'd use on fabrics, leathers, stuff like that."

"So she may have been holding something and the residue was left there?"

"Yep. Although we can't be sure exactly when the oil came to be on her hands." The Medical Examiner put his glasses back on. "You think she knew the person, Seth?"

"None of the evidence points that way, unless she invited him over to burglarize the place."

The Medical Examiner had a sudden inspiration. "Maybe she set up the burglary. You know? Tired of the old man, brings in the new bedroom buddy to conveniently steal their nest egg and it's off to Fairy Tale Land?"

Frank considered the theory. "Except they have a falling out or there's a double cross all along, and she gets the business end of some serious lead?"

"It fits the facts, Seth."

Frank shook his head. "From all accounts the deceased loved being Mrs. Walter Sullivan. More than the money, if you know what I mean. She got to rub shoulders, and probably other parts of her anatomy, with famous people all over the world. Pretty heady for somebody who used to flip burgers at a Burger King."

The ME stared at him. "You're kidding?"

The detective smiled. "Eighty-year-old billionaires sometimes get strange ideas. It's like where does the eight-hundred-pound gorilla sit? Anywhere he damn well pleases."

The Medical Examiner grinned and shook his head. Billionaire? What would he do with a billion dollars? He looked down at the ink blotter on his desk. Then he

put out his cigarette and looked back at the report, then at Frank. He cleared his throat.

"I think the second slug was a semi- or full-metal jacket."

Frank loosened his tie, put his elbows on the desk. "Okay."

The Medical Examiner went on. "It blew through the right temporal bone of the cranium and burst through the left parietal bone, leaving an exit wound over twice the size of the entry."

"So you're saying definitely two guns."

"Not unless the guy was chambering different types of ammo in the same gun." He looked keenly at the detective. "That doesn't seem to surprise you, Seth."

"It would have an hour ago. It doesn't now."

"So we probably have two perps."

"Two perps with two guns. And a lady how big?"

The Medical Examiner didn't need to refer to his notes. "Sixty-two inches tall, one hundred and five pounds."

"So a little woman and two probable male perps with heavy-caliber hardware who try to strangle her, beat her up and then both open fire on her, killing her."

The Medical Examiner rubbed at his chin. The facts were more than a little puzzling.

Frank glanced at the report. "You're sure the strangulation marks and beating came before death?"

The Medical Examiner looked offended. "Positive. Pretty mess, isn't it?"

Frank flipped through the report, making notes as he went. "You could say that. No attempted rape. Nothing like that?"

The Medical Examiner didn't answer.

Finally Frank looked up at him, took off his glasses, put them down on the desk and leaned back, sipping the black coffee he had been offered earlier.

"The report doesn't say anything about a sexual assault," he reminded his friend.

The Medical Examiner finally stirred. "The report's correct. There was no sexual assault. No trace of seminal fluid, no evidence of penetration, no overt bruising. All that leads me to conclude, officially, that no sexual assault occurred."

"So? You're not satisfied with that conclusion?" Frank looked at him expectantly.

The Medical Examiner took a sip of coffee, stretched out his long arms until he felt a comforting pop deep within the confines of his aging body and then leaned forward.

"Your wife ever go in for a gynecological exam?"

"Sure, doesn't every woman?"

"You'd be surprised," the Medical Examiner replied dryly, then continued. "Thing is, you go in for an exam, no matter how good the ob-gyn is, there's usually some slight swelling and small abrasions in the genitalia. It's the nature of the beast. To be thorough, you have to get in there and dig around."

Frank put down his coffee, shifted in his chair. "So what are you saying, she had her gynecologist visit her in the middle of the night right before she got popped?"

"The indications were slight, very slight, but they were there." The Medical Examiner paused, choosing his words carefully. "I've been thinking about it ever since I handed in the protocol. Understand, it could be nothing. She could have done it herself, you understand what I'm saying? To each their own. But from the looks of it, I don't think it was self-inflicted. I think somebody examined her shortly after her death. Maybe two hours after, maybe earlier."

"Checked her for what? To see if something had happened?" Frank did not try to hide his incredulity.

The Medical Examiner eyed him steadily. "Not much else to check a woman for down there in that particular situation, is there?"

Frank stared at the man for a long moment. This information merely added to his already increasing temple throbber. He shook his head. The balloon theory again. Push one side in and it bulges out somewhere else. He scribbled down some notes, his eyebrows bunched together, the coffee sipped unconsciously.

The Medical Examiner looked him over. This was not an easy one, but so far, the detective had punched all the right buttons, asked good questions. He was puzzled, but then that was a big part of the process. The good ones never solved them all. But then they also didn't remain puzzled forever. Eventually, if you were lucky and diligent, maybe more of some on one case than on another, you would break it open, and the pieces would come tumbling into place. The Medical Examiner hoped this was one of those cases. Right now, it didn't look all that good.

"She was pretty drunk when she bought it." Frank was examining the toxicology report.

"Point two-one. I haven't personally seen that number since my college frat days."

Frank smiled. "Well I'm wondering where she got that point two-one."

"Plenty of booze in a place like that."

"Yeah, except there were no dirty glasses, no open bottles, and no discards in the trash."

"So, maybe she got drunk somewhere else."

"So how'd she get home?"

The Medical Examiner thought for a moment, rubbed the sleep from his eyes. "Drove. I've seen people with higher percentages behind the wheel."

"You mean in the autopsy room, don't you?" Frank continued: "The problem with that theory is that none of the cars in the garage had been driven from the time the household left for the Caribbean."

"How do you know that? An engine isn't going to be warm after three days."

Frank perused the pages of his notebook, found what he wanted and slid it around to his friend.

"Sullivan has a full-time chauffeur. Old guy named Bernie Kopeti. Knows his cars, anal as a tax lawyer, and he keeps meticulous records on Sullivan's fleet of automobiles. Has the mileage for every one of them in a log book, updated daily, if you can believe it. At my request he checked the odometer on each of the cars in the garage, which presumably were the only ones the wife would have access to, and in fact were the only cars in the garage at the time of the discovery of the body. On top of that Kopeti confirmed that no vehicles were missing. There was no

additional mileage on any of them. They hadn't been driven since everyone cleared out for the Caribbean. Christine Sullivan didn't drive home in one of those cars. So how did she get home?"

"Cab?"

Frank shook his head. "We've talked to every cab company that operates out here. No fare was dropped off at the Sullivan address on that night. It'd be pretty hard to forget the place, wouldn't you think?"

"Unless maybe the cabbie whacked her, and isn't talking."

"You're saying she invited a cabbie into her house?"

"I'm saying she was drunk and probably didn't know what the hell she was doing."

"That doesn't jibe with the fact that the alarm system was tampered with, or that there was a rope dangling outside her window. Or that we're probably talking about two perps. I've never seen a cab driven by two cabbies."

A thought struck Frank and he scribbled in his notebook. He was certain Christine Sullivan had been driven home by someone she knew. Since that person or persons had not come forward, Frank thought he had a pretty good idea why they hadn't. And exiting out the window via a rope instead of the way they'd entered—through the front door—meant that something had caused the killers to rush. The most obvious reason was the private security patrol, but the security guard on duty that night had not reported anything out of the ordinary. The perps didn't know that, however. The mere sight of the patrol car might have prompted such a hasty exit.

The Medical Examiner leaned back in his chair, unsure of what to say. He spread out his hands. "Any suspects?"

Frank finished writing. "Maybe."

The Medical Examiner looked sharply at him. "What's her husband's story? One of the richest guys in the country."

"The world." Frank put his notebook away, picked up the report, drained the last of his coffee. "She decided to opt out on the way to the airport. Her husband believes she went to stay at their Watergate apartment in town. That fact has been confirmed. Their jet was scheduled to pick her up in three days and take her down to the Sullivan estate outside of Bridgetown, Barbados. When she didn't show at the airport, Sullivan got worried and started calling. That's his story."

"She give him any reason for the change in plan?"

"Not that he's telling me."

"Rich guys can afford the best. Make it look like a burglary while they're four thousand miles away swinging in a hammock sipping island bug juice. Think he's one of them?"

Frank stared at the wall for a long moment. His thoughts went back to the memory of Walter Sullivan sitting quietly next to his wife at the morgue. How he looked when he had no reason to believe anyone was watching.

Frank looked at the Medical Examiner, then got up to leave.

"No. I don't."

Chapter 10

BILL BURTON WAS SITTING IN THE WHITE HOUSE SECRET Service command post. He slowly put down the newspaper, his third of the morning. Each carried a follow-up account of the murder of Christine Sullivan. The facts were virtually the same as the initial stories. Apparently there were no new developments.

He had talked to Varney and Johnson. At a cookout over the weekend at his place. Just him, Collin and their two fellow agents. The guy had been in the vault, seen the President and the Mrs. The man had come out, knocked out the President, killed the lady and gotten away despite the best efforts of Burton and Collin. That story didn't exactly match the actual sequence of events that night but both men had unfailingly accepted Burton's version of the occurrence. Both men had also expressed anger, indignation that anyone had laid a hand on the man they were dedicated to protect. The perp deserved what was coming to him. No one would hear of the President's involvement from them.

After they had left, Burton had sat in his backyard sipping a beer. If they only knew. The trouble was, he did. An honest man his entire life, Bill Burton did not savor his new role as prevaricator.

Burton swallowed his second cup of coffee and checked his watch. He poured himself another cup and looked around the White House Secret Service quarters.

He had always wanted to be a member of an elite security force, protecting the most important individual on the planet: the quiet resourcefulness, strength and intelligence of the Secret Service agent, the close camaraderie. The knowledge that at any moment you would be expected to and in fact would sacrifice your life for that of another man, for the benefit of the common good, made for a supremely noble act in a world more and more devoid of anything remotely virtuous. All that had allowed Agent William James Burton to get up with a smile each morning and sleep soundly at night. Now that feeling was gone. He had simply done his job, and the feeling was gone. He shook his head, sneaked a quick smoke.

Sitting on a keg of dynamite. That's what they all were doing. The more Gloria Russell explained it to him, the more impossible he thought it was.

The car had been a disaster. Very discreet inquiries had traced it directly to the goddamned D.C. police impoundment lot. That was too dangerous to push. Russell had been pissed. But let her be. She said she had this under control. Bullshit.

He folded up the paper, placed it neatly away for the next agent.

Fuck Russell. The more Burton thought about it the madder he became. But it was too late to go back now. He touched the left side of his jacket. His .357, filled with cement, along with Collin's 9mm, was at the bottom of the Severn River at the most remote point they could find. To most perhaps an unnecessary precaution, but to Burton, no precaution was unnecessary. The police had one useless slug and would never find the other. Even if they could, the barrel on his new pistol would be squeaky clean. Burton wasn't worried about the ballistics department of the local Virginia police bringing him down.

Burton hung his head as the events of that night raced through his mind. The President of the United States was an adulterer who had roughed up his lay for the night so badly she had tried to kill him and Agents Burton and Collin had to blow her away.

And then they had covered it all up. That's what made Burton wince every time he looked in the mirror. The coverup. They had lied. By their silence they had lied. But hadn't he lied all this time? All these late-night trysts? When he greeted the First Lady each morning? When he played with their two kids on the rear lawn? Not telling them that her husband and their father was not nearly so nice and kind and good as they probably believed he was. As the whole country believed he was.

The Secret Service. Burton grimaced. It was an apt title for an unlikely reason. The crap he had seen going on over the years. And Burton had looked the other way. Every agent had, at one time or another. They all joked or complained about it in private, but that was all. That particular, if unwelcome, function came with the job. Power made people crazy; it made them feel invincible. And when something bad happened it was the working stiffs of the Secret Service who were expected to clean up the mess.

Several times Burton had picked up the phone to call the Director of the Secret Service. Tell him the whole story, try to cut his losses. But each time he had put the phone back down, unable to say the words that would end his career and, in essence, his life. And with each passing day, Burton's hopes grew a little brighter that it might all blow over, even though his common sense told him that could not possibly happen. Now it was too late to tell the truth, he felt. Calling in a day or two later with the story might be explained away, but not now.

His thoughts turned back to the investigation of Christine Sullivan's death. Burton had read with great interest the findings of the autopsy, courtesy of the local police at the request of the President, who was so, so distraught over the tragedy. Fuck him too.

A shattered jaw and strangulation marks. His and Collin's shots had not inflicted those injuries. She had good reason to want to kill him. But Burton couldn't let that happen, under no circumstances could he let that happen. There were few absolutes anymore, but that was sure as hell one of them.

He had done the right thing. Burton told himself that a thousand times. The very action he had trained virtually his entire adult life for. The ordinary person couldn't understand, could never possibly comprehend how an agent would think or feel if something bad went down on their watch.

He had talked to one of Kennedy's agents a long time ago. The man had never gotten over Dallas. Walking right beside the President's limo, nothing he could do. And the President had died. Right in front of his eyes, the President's head had been blown apart. Nothing he could do, but there was always something. Always another precaution you could have taken. Turned to the left instead of the right, watched one building more closely than you had. Scan the crowd with a little more intensity. Kennedy's guy had never been the same. Quit the Service, divorced, finished his human existence in obscurity in some rat's hole in Mississippi, but still living in Dallas for the last twenty years of his life.

That would never happen to Bill Burton. That was why he had hurled his body in front of Alan Richmond's predecessor six years ago and caught twin .38 caliber steel jackets for his trouble despite his body armor; one through the shoulder, the other through the forearm. Miraculously, neither had struck any vital organs or arteries, leaving Burton only with a number of scars and the heartfelt gratitude of an entire country. And, more important, the adulation of his fellow agents.

And that was why he had fired upon Christine Sullivan. And he would do the same thing today. He would kill her, kill her as often as it took. Pull the trigger, watch the one-hundred-sixty-grain bullet slam into the side of the head at over twelve hundred feet per second, the young life over. Her choice, not his. Dead.

He went back to work. While he still could.

* * * * *

CHIEF OF STAFF RUSSELL WALKED BRISKLY DOWN THE corridor. She had just finished briefing the President's press secretary on the appropriate spin for the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The bare politics of the matter dictated backing Russia, but bare politics rarely controlled the decision-making process in the Richmond administration. The Russian Bear had all the intercontinental nuclear forces now, but Ukraine was in a much better position to become a major trade player with the Western countries. What had tipped the scales in Ukraine's favor was the fact that Walter Sullivan, the good and now grieving friend of the President, was homing in on a major deal with that country. Sullivan and friends, through various networks, had contributed approximately twelve million dollars to Richmond's campaign, and garnered him virtually every major endorsement he needed in his quest for the Oval Office. There was no way he could not make a significant payback on that kind of effect. Hence, the United States would back Ukraine.

Russell looked at her watch, counting her blessings that there were independent reasons for siding with Kiev over Moscow, although she felt sure Richmond would have come out the same way regardless. He did not forget loyalty. Favors must be returned. A President just happened to be in a position to return them on a massive, global scale. One major problem out of the way, she settled down at the desk and turned her attention to a growing list of crises.

Fifteen minutes into her political juggling, Russell rose and slowly walked over to the window. Life went on in Washington, much like it had for two hundred years. Factions were scattered everywhere, pouring money, massive intellects and established heavyweights into the business of politics, which essentially meant screwing others before they got around to screwing you. Russell understood that game, better than most. She also loved and excelled at it. This was clearly her element, and she was as happy as she'd been in years. Being unmarried and childless had started to worry her. The piles of professional accolades had grown monotonous, and hollow. And then Alan Richmond had come into her life. Made her see the possibility of moving up to the next level. Perhaps to a level where no woman had ever gone. That thought weighed so powerfully inside her head that she sometimes shook with anticipation.

And then a goddamned hunk of metal exploded in her face. Where was he? Why hadn't he come forward? He must, had to know what he had in his possession. If

it was money he wanted, she would pay it. The slush funds at her disposal were more than adequate for even the most unreasonable demands, and Russell expected the worst. That was one of the wonderful things about the White House. No one really knew how much money it actually took to run the place. That was because so many agencies contributed parts of their budget and personnel to help the White House function. With so much financial confusion, administrations rarely had to worry about finding money for even the most outrageous purchases. No, Russell thought to herself, money would be the least of her worries. She had many others to concern herself with, however.

Did the man know that the President was totally oblivious to the situation? That was what was tearing Russell's stomach apart. What if he tried to communicate with the President directly, and not with her? She started to shake, and plopped down in a chair by the window. Richmond would immediately recognize Russell's intentions, there was no question of that. He was arrogant but no fool. And then he would destroy her. Just like that. And she would be defenseless. There would be no good exposing him. She couldn't prove a thing. Her word against his. And she would be relegated to the political toxic waste dump, condemned and then, worst of all, forgotten.

She had to find him. Somehow get a message to him, that he must work through her. There was only one person who could help her do that. She sat back down at her desk, collected herself and resumed working. This was no time to panic. Right now she needed to be stronger than she had ever been in her life. She could still make it, still control the outcome if she just kept her nerves in check, used the first-rate mind God had bestowed upon her. She could get out of this mess. She knew where she had to start.

The mechanism that she had chosen to use would strike anyone who knew Gloria Russell as particularly odd. But there was a side to the Chief of Staff that would surprise those few who claimed to know her well. Her professional career had always come foremost to the detriment of every other facet of her life, including the personal, and the sexual relationships that were spawned from that area of one's life. But Gloria Russell considered herself a very desirable woman; indeed, she possessed a feminine side that was in the sharpest contrast to her official shroud. That the years were going by, and rapidly, only increased the apprehension she had been starting to feel regarding this imbalance in her life. Not that she was necessarily planning anything, especially in light of the potential catastrophe she was confronted with, but she believed she knew the best way to accomplish this mission. And confirm her desirability in the process. She could not escape her feelings, no more than she could her shadow. So why try? Anyway, she also felt that subtlety would be lost on her intended target.

Several hours later she clicked off her desk lamp and called for her car. Then she checked the Secret Service staffing for the day and picked up her phone. Three minutes later Agent Collin stood before her, his hands clasped in front of him in a pose standard to all the agents. She motioned for him to wait a moment. She checked her makeup, performing a perfect oval with her lips as she reapplied her lipstick. Out of the corner of her eye she studied the tall, lean man standing next to her desk. The magazine-cover looks would've been difficult for any woman to consciously ignore. That his profession also dictated that he lived on the brink of

danger and could, indeed, be dangerous himself, only added favorably to the total package. Like the bad boys in high school girls always seemed to be drawn to, if only to escape, momentarily, the dullness of their own existence. Tim Collin, she surmised with reasonable confidence, must have broken many a female heart in his relatively short life.

Her calendar was clear tonight, a rarity. She pushed her chair back and slipped into her heels. She didn't see Agent Collin as his eyes shifted to her legs and then quickly back to stare straight ahead. Had she seen, she would have been pleased, not least of all for the obvious reason.

"The President will be giving a press conference next week at the Middleton Courthouse, Tim."

"Yes, ma'am, nine-thirty-five A.M. We're working on the preliminaries right now." His eyes stared straight ahead.

"Do you find that a little unusual?"

Collin looked at her. "How so, ma'am?"

"It's after working hours, you can call me Gloria."

Collin shifted uncomfortably from one foot to another. She smiled at him, at his obvious awkwardness.

"You understand what the press conference is for, don't you?"

"The President will be addressing the"—Collin swallowed perceptibly—"the killing of Mrs. Sullivan."

"That's right. A President conducting a press conference regarding the homicide of a private citizen. Don't you find that curious? I believe it's a first in presidential history, Tim."

"I wouldn't know about that, ma—Gloria."

"You've spent a lot of time with him lately. Have you noticed anything unusual about the President?"

"Like what?"

"Like has he appeared overly stressed or worried? More than the usual?"

Collin slowly shook his head, not knowing where this conversation was intended to go.

"I think we might have a slight problem, Tim. I think the President might need our help. You're ready to help him, aren't you?"

"He's the President, ma'am. That's my job, to take care of him."

Rummaging in her bag, she said, "Are you busy tonight, Tim? You're off at the regular time tonight, aren't you? I know the President's staying in."

He nodded.

"You know where I live. Come over as soon as you're off duty. I'd like to talk to you privately, continue this discussion. Would you mind helping me, and the President?"

Collin's answer was immediate. "I'll be there, Gloria."

* * * * *

JACK KNOCKED ON THE DOOR AGAIN. NO ANSWER. THE BLINDS were drawn and no light emitted from the house. He was either asleep or not home. He checked the time. Nine o'clock. He remembered Luther Whitney to rarely be in bed before two or three A.M. The old Ford was in the driveway. The tiny garage door

was shut. Jack looked in the mailbox beside the door. It was overflowing. That didn't look good. Luther was what now, mid-sixties? Would he find his old friend on the floor, cold hands clutching at his chest? Jack looked around and then lifted up a corner on a terra-cotta planter next to the front door. The spare key was still there. He looked around once more, then put the key in the door and went in.

The living room was neat and spare. Everything was stacked where it should be.

"Luther?" He moved through the hallway, his memory steering him through the simple configurations of the house. Bedroom on the left, toilet on the right, kitchen at the rear of the house, small screened porch off that, garden in the back. Luther was in none of these rooms. Jack entered the small bedroom, which, like the rest of the house, was neat and orderly.

On the nightstand a number of picture frames containing various photos of Kate looked at him as he sat on the side of the bed. He turned quickly away and left the room.

The tiny rooms upstairs were mostly bare. He listened intently for a moment. Nothing.

He sat down in the small wire and plastic kitchen chair, looked around. He didn't turn on a light, but sat in the darkness. He leaned across and popped open the refrigerator. He grinned. Two six-packs of Bud looked back at him. You could always count on Luther for a cold brew. He took one and opened the back door to step outside.

The small garden looked beaten down. The hostas and ferns drooped even in the shade of a thick oak and the nelly moser clematis clinging to the board-on-board fence was painfully withered. Jack looked at Luther's prized annuals flowerbed and noted more victims than survivors of the Washington late-summer heat furnace.

He sat down, put the beer to his lips. Luther had clearly not been here for a while. So? He was an adult. He could go where he wanted, when he wanted. But something just felt wrong. But it had been several years. Habits change. He reflected a moment more. But Luther's habits would not have changed. The man was not like that. He was rock-solid, as dependable a person as Jack had ever met in his life. Stacked-up mail, dead flowers, car not in the garage, that was not how he would have voluntarily left things. *Voluntarily.*

Jack went back inside. The answering machine tape was blank. He went back into the small bedroom, the musty air hitting him again as he opened the door. He scanned the room once more, then started to feel a little silly. He wasn't a goddamned detective. Then he laughed to himself. Luther was probably living it up on some island for a couple of weeks, and here he was playing the nervous parent. Luther was one of the most capable men Jack had ever met. Besides, it was no business of his anymore. The Whitney family were not his concern, father or daughter. In fact why was he even here? Trying to relive old times? Trying to get to Kate through her old man? That was the most unlikely scenario one could imagine.

Jack locked the door on the way out, replaced the key under the planter. He glanced back at the house and then walked to his car.

* * * * *

GLORIA RUSSELL'S HOME OCCUPIED A CUL-DE-SAC IN A QUIET upper-brackets Bethesda suburb off River Road. Her consulting work on behalf of many of the country's largest corporations coupled with her sizable professorship, and now Chief of Staff salary and many years of careful investing, had left her with a deep purse, and she liked to be surrounded by beautiful things. The entrance was framed by an aged arbor interlaced with strong, thick ivy. The entire front yard was enclosed by a waist-high brick and mortar serpentine wall and set up as a private garden complete with tables and umbrellas. A small fountain bubbled and hissed in a darkness broken only by the shallow light thrown from the big bay window in the front of the house.

Gloria Russell was sitting at one of the garden tables when Agent Collin pulled up in his convertible, back ramrod straight, suit still crisp, tie knotted rigidly. The Chief of Staff had not changed either. She smiled at him and they walked up the front walk together and into the house.

"Drink? You look like a bourbon-and-water person." Russell looked at the young man and slowly drained her third glass of white wine. It had been a long time since she had a young man over. Maybe too long, she was thinking, although the alcohol guaranteed that she wasn't thinking that clearly.

"Beer, if you have it."

"Coming up." She stopped to kick off her heels and padded into the kitchen. Collin looked around the expanse of the living room with its billowy professionally done curtains, textured wallpaper and tasteful antiques and wondered what he was doing here. He hoped she hurried with the beer. A star athlete, he had been seduced by women before, from high school on up. But this was not high school and Gloria Russell was no cheerleader. He decided he would not be able to endure the night without a heavy buzz. He had wanted to tell Burton about it, but something had made him keep quiet. Burton had been acting aloof and moody. What they had done was not wrong. He knew the circumstances were awkward, and an action that would ordinarily have brought them praise from the entire country had to be kept secret. He had regretted killing the woman, but there were no other options. Death happened, tragedies occurred all the time. It was her time. Christine Sullivan's number had just come up.

A few moments later he was sipping his beer and checking out the Chief of Staff's derriere as she fluffed up a pillow on the broad couch before sitting down. She smiled at him, delicately sipped her wine.

"How long have you been in the Service, Tim?"

"Almost six years."

"You've risen quickly. The President thinks quite a lot of you. He's never forgotten that you saved his life."

"I appreciate that. I really do."

She took another sip of wine and ran her eyes over him. He sat erect; his obvious nervousness amused her. She finished her examination and came away very impressed. Her attention had not been lost on the young agent, who was now hiding his discomfort by examining the numerous paintings that adorned the walls.

"Nice stuff." He pointed at the artwork.

She smiled at him, watched him hurriedly gulp his beer. *Nice stuff.* She had been thinking the same thing.

"Let's go sit where it's more comfortable, Tim." Russell stood up and looked down at him. He was led from the living room through a long, narrow hallway and then through double doors into a large sitting room. The lights came on by themselves, and Collin noted that through another set of double doors the Chief of Staff's bed was clearly visible.

"Would you mind if I take a minute to change? I've been in this suit long enough."

Collin watched as she went into her bedroom. She did not close the doors all the way. A sliver of the room was visible from where he was sitting. He turned his head away, tried to focus all his attention on the scrolls and designs of an antique fireplace screen that would be seeing activity soon. He finished his beer and instantly wanted another one. He lay back in the thick cushions. He tried not to but he could hear every sound she made. Finally, he couldn't resist it. He turned his head and looked straight through the open doorway. With a pinch of regret he saw nothing. At first. Then she moved across the opening.

It was only a moment, as she lingered by the end of the bed, to pick up some article of clothing. Chief of Staff Gloria Russell parading naked in front of him sent a jolt through Collin, although he had been expecting it, or something close to it.

The night's agenda confirmed, Collin turned his head away, more slowly than he probably should have. He licked the top of the beer can, absorbing the last few drops of the amber liquid. He felt the butt of his new weapon dig against his chest. Normally the mass of metal felt comforting against his skin. Now it just hurt.

He wondered about fraternization rules. Members of the First Family had been known to become quite attached to their Secret Service agents. Over the years there had always been talk of fooling around, but the official policy was clear on that point. Were Collin discovered in this room with a naked Chief of Staff in her bedroom, his career would be short-lived.

He thought rapidly. He could leave right now, report in to Burton. But how would that look? Russell would deny it all. Collin would look like a fool, and his career would probably be over anyway. She had brought him here for a reason. She said the President needed his help. He wondered now who he would really be helping. And for the first time Agent Collin felt trapped. Trapped. Where his athleticism, his quick wits and his 9mm were useless to him. Intellectually he was no match for the woman. In the official power structure he was so far below her, it was like he stared up from an abyss with a telescope and still couldn't glimpse the bottom of her high heels. It promised to be a long night.

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WALTER SULLIVAN PACED WHILE SANDY LORD WATCHED. A bottle of scotch occupied a prominent position on the corner of Lord's desk. Outside, the darkness was marred by the dull glow of street lamps. The heat had returned for a short spell and Lord had ordered the air conditioning to remain on at Patton, Shaw for his very special visitor tonight. That visitor stopped his pacing and stared down the street where a half-dozen blocks away sat the familiar white building, home to Alan Richmond, and one of the keys to Sullivan and Lord's grand scheme.

Sullivan, however, was not thinking about business tonight. Lord was. But he was far too cunning to show it. Tonight he was here for his friend. To listen to the grief, the outpouring, to let Sullivan mourn his little hooker. The quicker that was done, the sooner they could get down to what really mattered: the next deal.

"It was a beautiful service, people will remember it for a long time." Lord chose his words carefully. Walter Sullivan was an old friend, but it was a friendship built on an attorney-client relationship and thus its underpinning could experience some unexpected shifting. Sullivan was also the only person in Lord's acquaintance who made him nervous, where Lord knew he was never in complete control, that the man he was dealing with was at least his equal and probably more.

"Yes it was." Sullivan continued to look down the street. He believed that he had finally convinced the police that the one-way mirror was not connected to the crime. Whether they were completely convinced was another matter. In any event it had been quite an embarrassing moment for a man not accustomed to such. The detective, Sullivan couldn't remember his name, had not given Sullivan the respect he deserved and that had angered the older man. If anything, he had earned the respect of everyone. It did not help matters that Sullivan did not feel the least bit confident in the local police's abilities to find the persons responsible.

He shook his head as his thoughts returned to the mirror. At least it had not been disclosed to the press. That was attention Sullivan could not tolerate. The mirror had been Christine's idea. But he had to admit he had gone along with it. Now as he looked back, it seemed ludicrous. At first it had fascinated him, watching his wife with other men. He was beyond the age where he could satisfy her himself, but he could not reasonably deny her the physical pleasures that were beyond him. But it had all been absurd, including the marriage. He saw that now. Trying to recapture his youth. He should have known that nature bowed to no one, regardless of their monetary worth. He was embarrassed and he was angry. He finally turned to Lord.

"I'm not certain that I have confidence in the detective in charge. How can we get the federals involved?"

Lord put his glass down, lifted a cigar from a box hidden within the recesses of his desk and slowly unwrapped it.

"Homicide of a private citizen isn't grounds for a federal investigation."

"Richmond is getting involved."

"Fluff, if you ask me."

Sullivan shook his massive head. "No. He seemed genuinely concerned."

"Maybe. Don't count on that concern lingering for too long. He has a thousand cans of worms to handle."

"I want the people responsible for this caught, Sandy."

"I understand that, Walter. Of all people, I understand that. They will be. You have to be patient. These guys weren't nickel-and-dimers. They knew what they were doing. But everybody makes mistakes. They'll go to trial, mark my words."

"And then what? Life imprisonment, correct?" Sullivan said contemptibly.

"It's probably not going to be a capital murder case, so life is what they'll end up getting. But no chance of parole, Walter, believe me. They'll never breathe another

drop of free air. And getting a little prick in the arm might seem real desirable after a few years of getting bent over every night.”

Sullivan sat down and stared at his friend. Walter Sullivan wanted no part of any trial. Where all the details of the crime would be revealed. He winced at the thought of all of it being rehashed. Strangers knowing intimate details of his life and that of his deceased wife. He could not bear that. He just wanted the men caught. He would arrange the rest. Lord had said the Commonwealth of Virginia would imprison for life the persons responsible. Walter Sullivan decided right then and there that he would save the commonwealth the cost of that lengthy incarceration.

* * * * *

RUSSELL CURLED UP ON THE END OF THE COUCH, BARE FEET tucked under a loose-fitting cotton pullover that stopped slightly above her calves. Her ample cleavage peeked at him where the fabric suddenly dipped. Collin had fetched himself two more beers and poured her another glass of wine from the bottle he had brought with him. His head was now slightly warm, as though a small fire were burning inside. The necktie was now loosened, the jacket and gun lay on the opposite couch. She had fingered it as he had taken it off.

“It’s so heavy.”

“You get used to it.” She did not ask the question he was usually confronted with. She knew he had killed someone.

“Would you really take a bullet for the President?” She looked at him through drooping eyelids. She had to remain focused, she kept telling herself. That had not stopped her from leading the young man to the very threshold of her bed. She felt a large measure of her control slipping away. With a masterful effort she started to regain it. What the hell was she doing? At a crisis point in her life and she was acting like a prostitute. She needn’t approach the issue in this way. She knew that. The tugging she was feeling from another sector of her being was disrupting her decision-making processes. She could not allow that, not now.

She should go change again, retreat back to the living room, or perhaps to her study where the dark oak paneling and walls of books would quash the unsettling rumblings.

He eyed her steadily. “Yes.”

She was about to get up but never made it.

“I’d take one for you too, Gloria.”

“For me?” Her voice quavered. She looked at him again, her strategic plans forgotten, her eyes wide.

“Without thinking. Lot of Secret Service agents. Only one Chief of Staff. That’s the way it works.” He looked down and said quietly, “It’s not a game, Gloria.”

When he went again for more beer he noticed that she had moved close enough that her knee touched his thigh when he sat down. She stretched her legs out, rubbing against his, and then she rested them on the table across from them. The pullover had somehow worked itself up, revealing thighs that were full and creamy white; they were the legs of an older woman, and a damned attractive one. Collin’s eyes moved slowly across the display of skin.

"You know I've always admired you. I mean all of the agents." She almost seemed embarrassed. "I know sometimes you get taken for granted. I want you to know that I appreciate you."

"It's a great job. Wouldn't trade it for anything." He chugged another beer, and felt better. His breathing relaxed.

She smiled at him. "I'm glad you came tonight."

"Anything to help, Gloria." His confidence level was going up as his alcohol intake increased. He finished the beer and she pointed with an unsteady finger to a stand of liquor over by the door. He mixed drinks for them, sat back down.

"I feel I can trust you, Tim."

"You can."

"I hope you don't take this the wrong way, but I don't feel that way with Burton."

"Bill's a top agent. The best."

She touched his arm, left it there.

"I didn't mean it that way. I know he's good. I just don't know about him sometimes. It's hard to explain. It's just an instinct on my part."

"You should trust your instincts. I do." He looked at her. She looked younger, much younger, like she should be graduating college, ready to take on the world.

"My instincts tell me that you're someone I can depend on, Tim."

"I am." He drained his drink.

"Always?"

He stared at her, touched his empty glass to hers. "Always."

His eyes were heavy now. He thought back to high school. After scoring the winning touchdown in the state championship. Cindy Purket had looked at him just like that. An all-giving look on her face.

He laid his hand on her thigh, rubbed it up and down. The flesh was just loose enough to be intensely womanly. She didn't resist but instead inched closer. Then his hand disappeared under the pullover, tracing over her still firm belly, just nicking the undersides of her breasts, and then returning into view. The other arm encircled her waist, drawing her closer to him; his hand dropped down to her bottom and gripped hard. She sucked in air and then let it out slowly, as she leaned into his shoulder. He felt her chest push into his arm, up and down. The floating mass was soft, and warm. She dropped her hand to his hardening crotch and squeezed, then lingered her mouth over his, slowly pulling back and looking at him, her eyelids moving up and down in slow rhythms.

She put her drink down, and slowly, almost teasingly, slid out of the pullover. He exploded against her, hands digging under the bra strap until he felt it give way and she poured out to him, his head buried in the loose mounds. Next, the last remaining piece of clothing, a pair of black lace panties, was ripped from her body; she smiled as it was sent sailing against the wall. Then she caught her breath as he lifted her effortlessly and carried her into the bedroom.

Chapter 11

THE JAGUAR DROVE SLOWLY UP THE LONG DRIVE, STOPPED, and two people got out.

Jack turned up the collar on his coat. The evening was brisk as rain-heavy clouds marched into the area.

Jennifer walked around the car and settled in next to him as they leaned against the luxury car.

Jack looked up at the place. Thick sheets of ivy swept across the top of the entrance. The house had a heavy substance to it, real and committed. Its occupants probably would absorb a good measure of that. He could use that in his life right now. He had to admit, it was beautiful. What was wrong with beautiful things anyway? Four hundred thou as a partner. If he started bringing in other clients, who knew? Lord made five times that, two million dollars a year, and that was his base.

Compensation figures of partners were strictly confidential and were never discussed even under the most informal circumstances at the firm. However, Jack had guessed correctly on the computer password to the partner comp file. The code word was "greed." Some secretary must have laughed her ass off over that one.

Jack looked over a front lawn the size of a carrier flight deck. A vision galloped across. He looked at his fiancée.

"It has plenty of space to play touch football with the kids." He smiled.

"Yes, it does." She smiled back at him, kissed his cheek gently. She took his arm and encircled her waist with it.

Jack looked back at the mansion, soon to be his three-point-eight-million-dollar home. Jennifer continued to look at him, her smile broadening as she gripped his fingers. Her eyes seemed to glisten, even in the darkness.

As Jack continued to stare at the structure, he felt a rush of relief. This time he only saw windows.

* * * * *

AT THIRTY-SIX THOUSAND FEET, WALTER SULLIVAN LEANED back in the deep softness of his cabin chair and glanced out the window of the 747 into the darkness. As they moved east to west, Sullivan was adding a number of hours to his day, but time zones had never bothered him. The older he became the less sleep he needed, and he had never needed very much to begin with.

The man sitting across from him took the opportunity to examine the older man closely. Sullivan was known throughout the world as a legitimate, although sometimes bullying, global businessman. Legitimate. That was the key word running itself through Michael McCarty's head. Legitimate businessmen typically had no need of, nor desire to speak with, gentlemen in McCarty's profession. But when one is alerted through the most discreet channels that one of the wealthiest men on earth desired a meeting with you, then you attended. McCarty had not become one of the world's foremost assassins because he particularly enjoyed the work. He particularly enjoyed the money and with it the luxuries that money inspired.

McCarty's added advantage was the fact that he appeared to be a businessman himself. Ivy League good looks, which wasn't too far afield, since he held a degree in international politics from Dartmouth. With his thick, wavy blond hair, broad shoulders and wrinkle-free face he could be the hard-charging entrepreneur on the way up or a film star at his peak. The fact that he killed people for a living, at a per-hit fee of in excess of one million dollars, did nothing to dampen his youthful enthusiasm or his love of life.

Sullivan finally looked at him. McCarty, despite an enormous confidence in his abilities and a supreme coolness under pressure, began to grow nervous under the billionaire's scrutiny. From one elite to another.

"I want you to kill someone for me," Sullivan said simply. "Unfortunately, at the present time, I do not know who that person is. But with any luck, one day I will. Until that time comes, I will place you on a retainer so that your services will always be available to me until such time as I need them."

McCarty smiled and shook his head. "You may be aware of my reputation, Mr. Sullivan. My services are already in great demand. My work carries me all over the world, as I'm sure you know. Were I to devote my full time to you until this opportunity arose, then I would be forgoing other work. I'm afraid my bank account, along with my reputation, would suffer."

Sullivan's reply was immediate. "One hundred thousand dollars a day until that opportunity arises, Mr. McCarty. When you successfully complete the task, double your usual fee. I can do nothing to preserve your reputation; however, I trust that the per diem arrangement will forestall any damage to your financial status."

McCarty's eyes widened just a bit and then he quickly regained his composure.

"I think that will be adequate, Mr. Sullivan."

"Of course you realize I am placing considerable confidence not only in your skills at eliminating subjects, but also in your discretion."

McCarty hid his smile. He had been picked up in Sullivan's plane in Istanbul at midnight local time. The flight crew had no idea who he was. No one had ever identified him, thus someone recognizing him was not a concern. Sullivan meeting him in person eliminated one thing. An intermediary who would then have Sullivan in his control. McCarty, on the other hand, had no earthly reason to betray Sullivan and every motivation not to.

Sullivan continued, "You will receive particulars as they become available. You will assimilate yourself into the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area, although your task may take you anywhere in the world. I will need you to move on a moment's notice. You will make your location known to me at all times and will check in with me daily on secured communication lines that I will establish. You will pay your own expenses out of the per diem. A wire transfer will be set up to funnel the fee to an account of your choosing. My planes will be available to you if the need arises. Understood?"

McCarty nodded, a little put off by his client's series of commands. But then you didn't get to be a billionaire without being somewhat commanding, did you? On top of that McCarty had read about Christine Sullivan. Who the hell could blame the old man?

Sullivan pushed a button on the armrest of his chair.

"Thomas? How long until we're stateside?"

The voice was brisk and informed. "Five hours and fifteen minutes, Mr. Sullivan, if we maintain present air speed and altitude."

"Make sure that we do."

"Yes sir."

Sullivan pressed another button and the cabin attendant appeared and efficiently served them the sort of dinner that McCarty had never had on a plane before. Sullivan said nothing to McCarty until the dinner was cleared and the younger man rose and was being directed to his sleeping quarters by the attendant. Registering on a sweep of Sullivan's hand, the attendant disappeared within the recesses of the aircraft.

"One more thing, Mr. McCarty. Have you ever failed on a mission?"

McCarty's eyes turned to slits as he stared back at his new employer. For the first time it was evident that the Ivy Leaguer was extremely dangerous.

"Once, Mr. Sullivan. The Israelis. Sometimes they seem more than human."

"Please don't make it twice. Thank you."

* * * * *

SETH FRANK WAS ROAMING THE HALLS OF THE SULLIVAN home. The yellow police lines were still up outside, fluttering softly in the increasing breeze and thickening bank of dark clouds that promised more heavy rain. Sullivan was staying at his Watergate penthouse downtown. His domestic staff were at their employer's residence on Fisher Island, Florida, catering to members of Sullivan's family. He had already interviewed each of them in person. They were being flown home shortly for more detailed questioning.

He took a moment to admire the surroundings. It was as though he were touring a museum. All that money. The place reeked of it, from the superlative antiques to the broadbrush paintings that casually hung everywhere, with real signatures at the bottom. Hell, everything in the house was an original.

He wandered into the kitchen and then into the dining room. The table resembled a bridge spanning the pale blue rug spread over the refinished parquet flooring. His feet seemed to be sucked into the thick, heavy fibers. He sat down at the head of the table, his eyes constantly roaming. As far as he could tell nothing had happened in here. Time was slipping by and progress was not coming easily.

Outside the sun momentarily pushed through the heavy clouds and Frank got his first break on the case. He wouldn't have noticed it if he hadn't been admiring the moldings around the ceiling. His father had been a carpenter. Joints smooth as a baby's cheek.

That's when he observed the rainbow dancing across the ceiling. As he admired the parallels of color, he began to wonder about its source, like the folklore of tracking the pot of gold at the end of the striped apparition. His eye scanned the room. It took him a few seconds, but then he had it. He quickly knelt down beside the table and peered under one of the legs. The table was a Sheraton, Eighteenth Century, which meant it was as heavy as a semi. It took him two tries, and perspiration broke across his forehead, a trickle entering his right eye and making him tear for a moment, but he finally managed to budge the table and pull it out.

He sat back down and looked at his new possession, maybe his little pot of gold. The little piece of silver-colored material acted as a barrier between the furniture

to prevent the wet carpet from causing damage to wood or upholstery and also stopped leaching into the damp fibers. With the aid of sunlight, its reflective surface also made for a nice rainbow. He had had similar ones in his own house when his wife had gotten particularly nervous about a visit from her in-laws and decided some serious household cleaning had to be done.

He took out his notebook. The servants arrived at Dulles at ten tomorrow morning. Frank doubted in this house if the small piece of foil he was holding would have been allowed to remain in its resting place for very long. It could be nothing. It could be everything. A perfect way to gauge the lay of the land. It would probably fall somewhere in between, if he were very, very lucky.

He hit the floor again and sniffed the carpet, ran his fingers through the fibers. The stuff they used nowadays, you could never tell. No odor, dried in a couple of hours. He would know soon enough how long it had been; if it could tell him anything. He could call Sullivan, but for some reason, he wanted to hear it from someone other than the master of the house. The old man was not high on the list of suspects, but Frank was smart enough to realize that Sullivan remained on that list. Whether his place descended or ascended depended on what Frank could find out today, tomorrow, next week. When you boiled it down, it was that simple. That was good, because up to now nothing about the death of Christine Sullivan had been simple. He wandered out of the room, thinking about the whimsical nature of rainbows and police investigations in general.

* * * * *

BURTON SCANNED THE CROWD, COLLIN BESIDE HIM. ALAN Richmond made his way to the informal podium set up on the steps of the Middleton Courthouse, a broad block of mortar-smearred brick, stark white dentil moldings, weather-beaten cement steps and the ubiquitous American flag alongside its Virginia counterpart swooping and swirling in the morning breeze. Precisely at nine-thirty-five the President began to speak. Behind him stood the craggy and expressionless Walter Sullivan with the ponderous Herbert Sanderson Lord beside him.

Collin moved a little closer to the crowd of reporters at the bottom of the courthouse steps as they strained and positioned like opposing teams of basketball players waiting for the foul shot to swish or bang off the rim. He had left the Chief of Staff's home at three in the morning. What a night it had been. What a week it had been. As ruthless and unfeeling as Gloria Russell seemed in public life, Collin had seen another side of the woman, a side that he was strongly attracted to. It still seemed like a careless daydream. He had slept with the President's Chief of Staff. That simply did not happen. But it had happened to Agent Tim Collin. They had planned to see each other tonight as well. They had to be careful, but they were both cautious by nature. Where it would lead, Collin did not know.

Born and raised in Lawrence, Kansas, Collin had a good set of Midwestern values to fall back upon. You dated, fell in love, married and had four or five kids, strictly in that order. He didn't see that happening here. All he knew was he wanted to be with her again. He glanced across and eyed her where she stood behind and to the left of the President. Sunglasses on, wind lifting her hair slightly, she seemed in complete control of everything around her.

Burton had his eyes on the crowd, then glanced at his partner in time to see the latter's gaze riveted for an instant on the Chief of Staff. Burton frowned. Collin was a good agent who did his job well, maybe to the point of overzealousness. Not the first agent to suffer from that, and not necessarily a bad trait in their line of work. But you kept your eyes on the crowd, everything out there. What the hell was going on? Burton made a sideways glance at Russell, but she stared straight ahead, seemingly oblivious to the men assigned to protect her. Burton looked at Collin once more. The kid now scanned the crowd, changing his pace every now and then, left to right, right to left, sometimes up, occasionally he would stare straight ahead, no trace of a pattern a potential assailant could count on. But Burton could not forget the look he had given the Chief of Staff. Behind the sunglasses Burton had seen something he did not like.

Alan Richmond finished his speech by staring stonily out at the cloudless sky as the wind whipped through his perfectly styled hair. He seemed to be looking to God for help, but in actuality he was trying to remember if he was meeting the Japanese ambassador at two or three that afternoon. But his faraway, almost visionary look would carry well on the evening news.

On cue he snapped back to attention and turned to Walter Sullivan and gave the bereaved husband a hug befitting someone of his stature.

"God, I am so sorry, Walter. My deepest, deepest condolences. If there is anything, anything that I can do. You know that."

Sullivan held on to the hand that was offered to him, and his legs began to shake until two of his entourage invisibly supported him with a quick thrust of sinewy arms.

"Thank you, Mr. President."

"Alan, please, Walter. Friend to friend now."

"Thank you, Alan, you have no idea how much I appreciate your taking the time to do this. Christy would have been so moved by your words today."

Only Gloria Russell, who was watching the pair closely, noticed the slight twinge of a smirk at the corner of her boss's cheek. Then, in an instant it was gone.

"I know there are really no words I can say to do justice to what you're feeling, Walter. It seems more and more that things in this world happen for no purpose. Except for her sudden illness, this never would've happened. I can't explain why things like this occur, no one can. But I want you to know that I am here for you, when you need me. Anytime, anyplace. We've been through so much together. And you've certainly helped me through some pretty rough times."

"Your friendship has always been important to me, Alan. I won't forget this."

Richmond slid an arm around the old man's shoulders. In the background microphones dangled on long poles. Like giant rods and reels, they surrounded the pair despite the collective efforts of the men's respective entourages.

"Walter, I'm going to get involved in this. I know some people will say it's not my job and in my position I can't become personally involved with anything. But goddammit, Walter, you're my friend and I'm not going to just let this slide away. The people responsible for this are going to pay."

The two men embraced once more as the photographers popped away. The twenty-foot antennas sprouting from the fleet of news trucks dutifully broadcast this tender moment to the world. Another example of President Alan Richmond

being more than just a President. It made the White House PR staff giddy thinking about the initial preelection polls.

* * * * *

THE TELEVISION CHANNEL-HOPPED FROM MTV TO GRAND OLE Opry to cartoons, to QVC to CNN to Pro Wrestling and then back to CNN. The man sat up in bed and put out his cigarette, laid the remote down. The President was giving a press conference. He looked stern and appropriately appalled at the abominable murder of Christine Sullivan, wife of billionaire Walter Sullivan, one of the President's closest friends, and its symbolism of the growing lawlessness in this country. Whether the President would have made the same pitch if the victim had been a poor black, Hispanic or Asian found with his throat cut in an alley in Southeast D.C. was never addressed. The President spoke in firm, crisp tones with the perfect trace of anger, of toughness. The violence must stop. The people must feel safe in their homes, or at their estates in this particular case. It was an impressive scene. A thoughtful and caring President.

The reporters were eating it up, asking all the right questions.

The television showed Chief of Staff Gloria Russell, dressed in black, nodding approvingly when the President hit key points in his views on crime and punishment. The police fraternity and AARP vote was locked up for the next election. Forty million votes, well worth the morning drive out.

She would not have been so happy if she knew who was watching them right this minute. Whose eyes bored into every inch of flesh on both her and the President's faces, as the memories of that night, never far from the surface, welled up like an oil fire spewing heat and potential destruction in all directions.

The flight to Barbados had been uneventful. The Airbus was a vast ship whose massive engines had effortlessly ripped the plane from the ground in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and in a few minutes they had hit their cruising altitude of 36,000 feet. The plane was packed, San Juan acting as a feeder for tourists bound for the clusters of islands that made up the Caribbean vacation strip. Passengers from Oregon and New York and all points in between looked at the wall of black clouds as the plane banked left and moved away from the remnants of an early-season tropical storm that had never hit hurricane status.

A metal stairway met them as they departed the aircraft. A car, tiny by American standards, shepherded five of them on the wrong side of the road as they left the airport and headed into Bridgetown, the capital of the former British colony, which had retained strong traces of its long colonialism in its speech, dress and mannerisms. In melodious tones the driver informed them of the many wonders of the tiny island, pointing out the pirate ship tour as the skull and crossbones ship pounded through still rough seas. On its deck, pale but reddening tourists were plied with rum punch in such levels that they would all be very drunk and/or very sick by the time they returned to the dock later that afternoon.

In the back seat two couples from Des Moines made excited plans in chirrupy patters of conversation. The older man who sat in the front seat staring out the windshield had his thoughts mired two thousand miles north. Once or twice he checked where they were headed, instinctively craving the lay of the land. The major landmarks were relatively few; the island was barely twenty-one miles long

and fourteen miles across at its widest point. The near constant eighty-five-degree heat was ameliorated by the continual breeze, its sound eventually disappearing into one's subconscious but always nearby like a faded but still potent dream.

The hotel was an American standard Hilton built on a man-made beach that jutted out on one end of the island. Its staff was well-trained, courteous and more than willing to leave you alone if that was desired. While most of the guests gave themselves wholeheartedly to the pampering efforts, one patron shunned contact, leaving his room only to wander to isolated areas of the white beach or the mountainous Atlantic Ocean side of the island. The rest of the time was spent in his room, lights set low, TV on, room service trays littering the carpet and wicker furnishings.

On the first day there Luther had grabbed a cab from in front of the hotel and taken a ride north, almost to the edge of the ocean, where atop one of the island's numerous hills stood the Sullivan estate. Luther's selection of Barbados had not been arbitrary.

"You know Mr. Sullivan? He's not here. Went back to America." The cabbie's lyrical tones had brought Luther out of his trance. The massive iron gates at the bottom of the grassy hill hid a long, winding drive up to the mansion, which, with its salmon-colored stucco walls and eighteen-foot-high white marble columns, looked strangely appropriate in the lush greenery, like an enormous pink rose jutting out from the bushes.

"I've been to his place," Luther answered. "In the States."

The cabbie looked at him with new respect.

"Is anyone home? Any of the staff maybe?"

The man shook his head. "All gone. Dis morning."

Luther sat back in his seat. The reason was obvious. They had found the mistress of the house.

Luther spent the next several days on the broad white beaches watching cruise ships unload their population into the duty-free shops that littered the downtown area. Dread-locked residents of the island made their rounds with their battered briefcases housing watches, perfumes and other counterfeit paraphernalia.

For five American dollars, you could watch an islander cut up an aloe leaf and pour its rich liquid into a small glass bottle for use when the sun started to nip at tender white skin that had lain dormant and unblemished behind suits and blouses. Your own handwoven corn rows cost you forty dollars and took about an hour, and there were many women with flabby arms and thick, crumpled feet who patiently lay in the sand while this operation was performed upon them.

The island's beauty should have served to free Luther, to some degree, from his melancholy. And, finally, the warming sun, gentle breezes and low-key approach to life of the island populace had eroded his nervous agitation to where he occasionally smiled at a passerby, spoke monosyllables to the bartender and sipped his mixed drinks far into the night while lying on the beach, the surf pounding into the darkness and gently lifting him away from his nightmare. He planned to move on in a few days. Where to, he wasn't quite sure.

And then the channel hopping stopped at the CNN broadcast and Luther, like a battered fish on an unbreakable line, was sent reeling toward what he had spent several thousand dollars and traveled several thousand miles trying to escape.

* * * * *

RUSSELL STUMBLED OUT OF BED AND WALKED OVER TO THE bureau, fumbled for a pack of cigarettes.

"They'll cut ten years off your life." Collin rolled over and watched her naked machinations with amusement.

"This job's already done that." She lit up, inhaled deeply for several seconds, put the smoke out and climbed back in bed, snuggling butt-first to Collin, smiling contentedly as she was wrapped up in his long, muscular arms.

"The press conference went well, don't you think?" She could feel him thinking it through. He was fairly transparent. Without the sunglasses they all wore, she felt.

"As long as they don't find out what really happened."

She turned to face him, traced her finger along his neck, making a V against his smooth chest. Richmond's chest had been hairy, some of the tufts turning gray, curling at the edges. Collin's was like a baby's bottom, but she could feel the hard muscle beneath the skin. He could break her neck with no more than a passing motion. She wondered, briefly, how that would feel.

"You know we have a problem."

Collin almost laughed out loud. "Yeah, we've got some guy out there with the President's and a dead woman's prints and blood on a knife. That qualifies as a big problem I'd say."

"Why do you think he hasn't come forward?"

Collin shrugged. If he were the guy he would've disappeared. Taken the stash and gone. Millions of dollars. As loyal as Collin was, what he could do with that kind of money. He would disappear too. For a while. He looked at her. With that kind of money would she condescend to go with him? Then he turned his thoughts back to the discussion at hand. Maybe the guy was a member of the President's political party, maybe he had voted for him. In any event why bring yourself that kind of trouble.

"Probably scared to," he finally replied.

"There are ways of doing it anonymously."

"Maybe the guy's not that sophisticated. Or maybe there's no profit in that. Or maybe he doesn't give a shit. Take your pick. If he was going to come forward, he probably would have. If he does, we'll sure know soon enough."

She sat up in bed.

"Tim, I'm really worried about this." The edge in her voice made him sit up too. "I made the decision to keep that letter opener as is. If the President were to find out..." She looked at him. He read the message in her eyes and stroked her hair and then cupped her cheek with his hand.

"He's not going to find out from me."

She smiled. "I know that, Tim, I really believe that. But if he, this person, were to somehow try to communicate with the President directly."

Collin looked puzzled. "Why would he do that?"

Russell shifted to the side of the bed, let her feet dangle several inches from the floor. For the first time Collin noticed the small reddish oval birthmark, half the

size of a penny, at the base of her neck. Next he noticed that she was shivering, even though the room was warm.

"Why would he do that, Gloria?" Collin edged closer.

She spoke to the bedroom wall. "Has it occurred to you that that letter opener represents one of the most valuable objects in the world?" She turned to him, rubbed his hair, smiled at the vacant expression that was slowly coming to a conclusion.

"Blackmail?"

She nodded at him.

"How do you blackmail the goddamned President?"

She got up, threw a loose robe around her shoulders and poured another drink from the almost-empty decanter.

"Being President doesn't make you immune from blackmail attempts, Tim. Hell, it just gives you that much more to lose ... or gain."

She slowly stirred her drink, sat down on a couch and tipped her glass back, the liquid warm and soothing going down. She had been drinking much more than usual lately. Not that her performance had been impaired, but she would have to watch it, especially at this level, at this critical point. But she decided she would watch it tomorrow. Tonight, with the weight of political disaster lurking above her shoulders, and a young, handsome man in her bed, she would drink. She felt fifteen years younger. Every passing moment with him made her feel more beautiful. She would not forget her primary goal, but who was to say she couldn't enjoy herself?

"What do you want me to do?" Collin looked at her.

Russell had been waiting for that. Her young, handsome Secret Service agent. A modern white knight like the kind she read about as a wide-eyed girl. She looked at him as the drink dangled from her fingers. She used her other hand to slowly pull off her robe and let it drop to the floor. There was time enough, especially for a thirty-seven-year-old woman who had never had a serious relationship with a man. Time enough for everything. The drink soothed away her fear, her paranoia. And with it her cautiousness. All of which she needed in abundance. But not tonight.

"There is something you can do for me. But I'll tell you in the morning." She smiled, lay back on the couch and put out her hand. Obediently he rose and went to her. A few moments later the only sounds were intermingled groans and the persistent squeaks of the overwrought couch.

* * * * *

A HALF-BLOCK DOWN THE STREET FROM RUSSELL'S HOME, Bill Burton sat in his wife's nondescript Bonneville and cradled a can of Diet Coke between his knees. Occasionally he would glance at the house that he had observed his partner entering at 12:14 a.m. and where he'd caught a glimpse of the Chief of Staff in attire that didn't indicate the visit was a business one. With his long-range lens he had gotten two pictures of that particular scene that Russell would have killed to get her hands on. The lights in the house had moved progressively from room to room until they reached the east side of the place, when all lights were dramatically extinguished.

Burton looked at the dormant taillights of his partner's car. The kid had made a mistake. Being here. This was a career ender, maybe for both him and Russell. Burton thought back to that night. Collin racing back to the house. Russell white as a sheet. Why? In all the confusion Burton had forgotten to ask. And then they were smashing through cornfields after someone who shouldn't have been there but sure as hell had been.

But Collin had gone back in that house for a reason. And Burton decided it was time he found out what that reason was. He had a dim feeling of a conspiracy slowly evolving. Since he had been excluded from participating, he naturally concluded that he was probably not intended to benefit from that conspiracy. Not for one moment did he believe that Russell was interested solely in what was behind his partner's zipper. She was not that type, not by a long shot. Everything she did had a purpose, an important purpose. A good fuck from a young buck was not nearly important enough.

Another two hours passed. Burton looked at his watch and then stiffened as he saw Collin open the front door, move slowly down the walk and get in his car. As he drove by, Burton ducked down in his seat, feeling slightly guilty at this surveillance of a fellow agent. He watched the wink of a turn signal as the Ford made its way out of the high-priced area.

Burton looked back up at the house. A light came on in what probably was the living room. It was late, but apparently the lady of the house was still going strong. Her stamina was legendary around the White House. Burton briefly wondered if she exhibited that same endurance between the sheets. Two minutes later the street was empty. The light in the house remained on.

Chapter 12

THE PLANE LANDED AND THUNDERED TO A STOP ON THE SHORT strip of tarmac constituting National Airport's main runway, hit an immediate left a few hundred yards from the tiny inlet that accessed the Potomac for the swarms of weekend boat enthusiasts, and taxied to gate number nine. An airport security officer was answering questions from a group of anxious, camera-toting tourists and did not observe the man walking rapidly past him. Not that identification was going to be made anyway.

Luther's return trip had followed the circuitry of his exit. A stopover in Miami, and then Dallas/Fort Worth.

He grabbed a cab and watched the south-moving rush-hour traffic on the George Washington Parkway as weary commuters threaded their way home. The skies promised more rain, and the wind whipped through the tree-lined parkway meandering lazily on its parallel course with the Potomac. Planes periodically rocketed into the air, banking left and rapidly disappearing into the clouds.

One more battle beckoned Luther. The image of a righteously indignant President Richmond pounding the lectern in his impassioned speech against violence, his smug Chief of Staff by his side, was the one constant in Luther's life

now. The old, tired and fearful man who had fled the country was no longer tired, no longer fearful. The overriding guilt at allowing a young woman to die had been replaced with an overriding hate, an anger that surged through every nerve in his body. If he was to be, of sorts, Christine Sullivan's avenging angel, he would perform that task with every ounce of energy and every shred of ingenuity he had left.

Luther settled back into his seat, munched on some crackers saved from the plane trip, and wondered if Gloria Russell was any good at playing chicken.

* * * * *

SETH FRANK GLANCED OUT THE CAR WINDOW. HIS PERSONAL interviews of Walter Sullivan's household staff had revealed two things of interest, the first of which was the business enterprise Frank was now parked in front of; the second could keep. Housed in a long, gray concrete building in a heavy commercial area of Springfield just outside the Beltway, Metro Steam Cleaner's sign proclaimed that it had been in business since 1949. That was stability that meant nothing to Frank. A lot of long-standing legitimate businesses were now money-laundering fronts for organized crime, both Mafia, Chinese and America's own homegrown versions. And a carpet cleaner that catered to affluent homeowners was in a perfect position to scope alarm systems, cash and jewelry nests and patterns of behavior of the intended victims and their households. Whether he was dealing with a loner or an entire organization Frank didn't know. It was more likely that he was headed toward a dead end, but then you never knew. There were two patrol cars stationed three minutes away. Just in case. Frank got out of his car.

"That would have been Rogers, Budizinski and Jerome Pettis. Yep, August 30, nine A.M. Three floors. Damn house was so big, it took all day even with three guys." George Patterson consulted his record book while Frank's eyes took in the grimy office.

"Can I speak to them?"

"You can to Pettis. The other two are gone."

"Permanently?" Patterson nodded. "How long had they been with you?"

Patterson's eyes scanned his employment log. "Jerome's been with me five years. He's one of my best people. Rogers was about two months. I think he moved out of the area. Budizinski had been with us about four weeks."

"Pretty short stays."

"Hell, that's the nature of the business. Spend a thousand bucks training these guys and wham they're gone. It's not a career-type job, you know what I mean? It's hot, dirty work. And the pay ain't exactly going to put you on the Riviera, you hear what I'm saying?"

"You got addresses for them?" Frank took out his notebook.

"Well, like I said, Rogers moved. Pettis is in today, if you want to talk to him. He's got a job to do out in McLean in about a half hour. He's back loading his truck now."

"Who decides which crew goes to which house?"

"I do."

"All the time?"

Patterson hesitated. "Well, I got guys who specialize in different stuff."

"Who specializes in the high-dollar areas?"

"Jerome. Like I said, he's my best guy."

"How did the other two get assigned to him?"

"I don't know, we juggle stuff like that. Depends on who shows up for work sometimes."

"You remember any of those three being particularly interested in visiting the Sullivan place?"

Patterson shook his head.

"What about Budizinski? You got an address on him?"

Patterson consulted a notebook crammed with paper and wrote on a slip of paper. "It's over in Arlington. Don't know if he's still there."

"I'll want their employment file. Social Security numbers, birthdates, job history, all that stuff."

"Sally can get that for you. She's the gal up front."

"Thanks. You got photos of these guys?"

Patterson looked at Frank like he was nuts. "Are you kidding. This ain't the FBI, for crying out loud."

"Can you give me a description?" Frank asked patiently.

"I've got sixty-five employees and a turnover rate of over sixty percent. I usually don't even see the guy after he's hired. Everybody starts to look the same after a while anyway. Pettis'll remember."

"Anything else you think might help me?"

Patterson shook his head. "You think one of them might have killed that woman?"

Frank stood up and stretched. "I don't know. What do you think?"

"Hey, I get all kinds in here. Nothing surprises me anymore."

Frank turned to leave, then turned back. "Oh by the way, I'll want records of all homes and establishments cleaned by your firm in Middleton in the last two years."

Patterson exploded out of his chair. "What the fuck for?"

"You have the records?"

"Yeah, I got 'em."

"Good, let me know when they're ready. Have a good one."

* * * * *

JEROME PETTIS WAS A TALL, CADAVEROUS BLACK MAN IN HIS early forties with a perpetual cigarette hanging from his mouth. Frank watched admiringly as the man methodically loaded the heavy cleaning equipment with a practiced hand. His blue jumpsuit announced that he was a senior technician with Metro. He didn't look at Frank, kept his eyes on his work. All around them in the huge garage white vans were being similarly loaded. A couple of men stared over at Frank but quickly returned to their work.

"Mr. Patterson said you had some questions?"

Frank parked himself on the van's front bumper. "A few. You did a job at Walter Sullivan's home in Middleton on August 30 of this year."

Pettis's brow furrowed. "August? Hell, I do about four homes a day. I don't remember them cuz they aren't that memorable."

"This one took you all day. Big house out in Middleton. Rogers and Budizinski were with you."

Pettis smiled. "That's right. Biggest goddamned house I'd ever seen and I've seen some bad places, man."

Frank smiled back. "That's the same thing I thought when I saw it."

Pettis straightened up, relit his cigarette. "Problem was all that furniture. Had to move every damn piece, and some of that shit was heavy, heavy like they don't make no more."

"So you were there all day?" Frank hadn't meant the question to come out that way.

Pettis stiffened, sucked on his Camel and leaned against the door of the van. "So how come the cops are interested in how the carpets were cleaned?"

"Woman was murdered in the house. Apparently she mixed it up with some burglars. Don't you read the papers?"

"Just the sports. And you're wondering if I'm one of them dudes?"

"Not right now. I'm just collecting information. Everybody who was near that house recently interests me. I'll probably talk to the mailman next."

"You're funny for a cop. You think I killed her?"

"I think if you did, you're smart enough not to stick around here waiting for me to ring your doorbell. These two men who were with you, what can you tell me about them?"

Pettis finished his smoke and looked at Frank without answering. Frank started to close his notebook.

"You want a lawyer, Jerome?"

"Do I need one?"

"Not as far as I'm concerned, but it's not my call. I don't plan on pulling out my Miranda card if that's what you're worried about."

Pettis finally looked at the concrete floor, crushed out his cigarette, looked back at Frank. "Look, man, I've been with Mr. Patterson a long time. Come to work every day, do my job, take my paycheck and go home."

"Then it sounds like you have nothing to worry about."

"Right. Look, I did some stuff a while back. Did some time. You can pull it off your computers in five seconds. So I'm not gonna sit here and bullshit you, okay?"

"Okay."

"I've got four kids and no wife. I didn't break into that house and I didn't do anything to that woman."

"I believe you, Jerome. I'm a lot more interested in Rogers and Budizinski."

Pettis eyed the detective for several seconds. "Let's take a walk."

The two men left the garage and walked over to an ancient Buick as big as a boat that had more rust than metal. Pettis got inside. Frank followed.

"Big ears in the garage, you know?"

Frank nodded.

"Brian Rogers. Called him Slick cuz he was a good worker, picked up things fast."

"What'd he look like?"

"White guy about fifty, maybe older. Not too tall, five eight, maybe a buck fifty. Talkative. Worked hard."

"And Budizinski?"

"Buddy. Everybody here has a nickname. I'm Ton. For *skeleton*, you know." Frank smiled at that one. "He was a white guy too, a little bigger. Maybe a little older than Slick. He kept to himself. Did what he was told and nothing more."

"Which one did the master bedroom?"

"We all did. We had to lift the bed and the bureau. They weighed a couple tons each. Back still hurts." Jerome reached in the rear seat and pulled out a cooler. "No time for breakfast this morning," he explained as he pulled out a banana and an egg biscuit.

Frank shifted uncomfortably in the worn seat. A piece of metal jabbed into his back. The car reeked of cigarette smoke.

"Were either of them ever alone in the master bedroom or the house?"

"Always somebody in the house. Man had a lot of people working there. They coulda gone upstairs by themselves. I never kept a watch on them. Wasn't my job, you know?"

"How'd Rogers and Budizinski come to be working with you that day?"

Jerome thought for a moment. "I'm not sure, come to think of it. I know it was an early job. It might've just been they were the first ones here. Sometimes that's all it takes."

"So if they knew ahead of time you were going to do a place like that early, and they got here before everyone else, they could hook on with you?"

"Yeah, I guess they could. Man, we just look for bodies, you know what I'm saying? Don't take no brain surgeon to do this shit."

"When was the last time you saw them?"

The other man scrunched up his face, bit into his banana.

"Couple of months ago, maybe longer. Buddy left first, never said why. Guys come and go all the time. I've been here longer than anybody except Mr. Patterson. Slick moved away, I think."

"Know where?"

"I remember him saying something about Kansas. Some construction work. He used to be a carpenter. Got laid off up here when commercial went belly up. Good with his hands."

Frank wrote this information down while Jerome finished his breakfast. They walked back to the garage together. Frank looked inside the van, at all the hoses, power handles, bottles and heavy cleaning equipment.

"This the van you used to do the Sullivan place?"

"This been my van for three years. Best one in the place."

"You keep the same equipment in the van?"

"Damn straight."

"Then you better get a new van for a while."

"What?" Jerome slowly climbed out of the driver's seat.

"I'll talk to Patterson. I'm impounding this one."

"You're shitting me."

"No, Jerome, I'm afraid I'm not."

* * * * *

“WALTER, THIS IS JACK GRAHAM. JACK, WALTER SULLIVAN.” Sandy Lord sat down heavily in his chair. Jack shook hands with Sullivan and then the men sat around the small table in conference room number five. It was eight o'clock in the morning and Jack had been in the office since six after pulling two all-nighters. He had already consumed three cups of coffee and proceeded to pour himself out a fourth from the silver coffee pot.

“Walter, I've told Jack about the Ukraine deal. We've gone over the structure. The Hill word looks real good. Richmond pushed all the right buttons. The Bear's dead. Kiev got the glass slipper. Your boy came through.”

“He's one of my best friends. I expect that from my friends. But I thought we had enough lawyers on this deal. Padding the bill, Sandy?” Sullivan heaved himself up and looked out the window at the pristine early-morning sky that promised a beautiful fall day. Jack glanced sideways at the man as he made notes from the crash course on Sullivan's latest deal. Sullivan didn't look all that interested in completing the multibillion international monolith. Jack didn't know that the old man's thoughts hung back at a morgue in Virginia, remembering a face.

Jack had caught his breath when Lord had ceremoniously appointed him to play second chair to Lord on the biggest transaction currently going on in the firm, leapfrogging over several top partners and a host of associates senior to Jack. Hard feelings had already started to roll through the plush hallways. At this point Jack didn't care. They didn't have Ransome Baldwin as a client. Regardless of how he had gotten it, he had rain, substantial rain. He was tired of feeling guilty for his position. This was Lord's test case on Jack's abilities. He had as good as said it. Well, if he wanted the deal rammed through, Jack would deliver. Philosophical, politically correct ivory tower babble didn't cut it here. Only results.

“Jack is one of our best attorneys. He's also Baldwin's legal eagle.”

Sullivan looked over at them. “Ransome Baldwin?”

“Yep.”

Sullivan appraised Jack in a different light and then turned once more to the window.

“Our window of opportunity, however, is growing more narrow by the day,” Lord continued. “We need to firm up the players and make sure Kiev knows what the hell they're supposed to do.”

“Can't you handle it?”

Lord looked at Jack and then back at Sullivan. “Of course I can handle it, Walter, but don't assume you can abdicate right now. You still have a major role to play. You sold this deal. Your continued involvement is absolutely necessary from the point of view of all sides.” Sullivan still did not stir. “Walter, this is the crowning glory of your career.”

“That's what you said about the last one.”

“Can I help it if you keep topping yourself?” Lord shot back.

Finally, almost imperceptibly, Sullivan smiled, for the first time since the telephone call from the States had come to shatter his life.

Lord relaxed a bit, looked over at Jack. They had rehearsed this next step several times.

"I'm recommending that you fly over there with Jack. Shake the right hands, pat the right shoulders, let them see you're still in control of this tiger. They need that. Capitalism is still a new game for them."

"And Jack's role?"

Lord motioned to Jack.

Jack stood up, went over to the window. "Mr. Sullivan, I've spent the last forty-eight hours learning every aspect of this deal. All the other lawyers here have just been working on a piece of it. Except for Sandy, I don't think there's anyone at the firm who knows what you want to accomplish better than I do."

Sullivan slowly turned to Jack. "That's a pretty big statement."

"Well it's a pretty big deal, sir."

"So you know what I want to accomplish?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well why don't you enlighten me as to what you think that is." Sullivan sat down, crossed his arms and stared expectantly up at Jack.

Jack didn't bother to swallow or catch his breath. "Ukraine has massive natural resources, all the things that heavy industry around the world use and want. The issue becomes how to get the resources out of Ukraine at minimal cost and minimal risk, considering the political situation over there."

Sullivan uncrossed his arms, sat up and sipped at his coffee.

Jack continued. "The hook is you want Kiev to believe that the exports your company will be making will be matched by investments in Ukraine's future. A long-term investment, I gather, you do not want to commit to."

"I spent the bulk of my adult life being scared to death of the reds. I have about as much belief in perestroika and glasnost as I do in the tooth fairy. I consider it my patriotic duty to strip the communists of as much as I can. Leave them without the means to dominate the world, which is their long-term plan, despite this latest hiccup of democracy."

Jack said, "Exactly, sir. 'Strip' being the key word. Strip the carcass before it self-destructs ... or attacks." Jack paused to check both men's reactions. Lord stared at the ceiling, his features unreadable.

Sullivan stirred. "Go on. You're getting to the interesting part."

"The interesting part is how to leverage the deal so that Sullivan and Company has little or no downside exposure and the maximum upside potential. You'll either broker the deal or you'll buy direct from Ukraine and you'll sell to the multinationals. You sprinkle a little of those proceeds around in Ukraine."

"That's right. Eventually the country will be almost cleaned out, and I'll walk away with at least two billion net."

Jack again looked at Lord, who now sat straight in his chair, listening intently. This was the hook. Jack had thought of it only yesterday.

"But why not take from Ukraine what really makes them dangerous?" Jack paused. "And triple your net at the same time."

Sullivan stared intently at him. "How?"

"IRBMs. Intermediate-Range Ballistic Missiles. Ukraine has a shitload of them. And now that the '94 Nonproliferation Treaty fell apart, those nukes are a major headache for the West again."

“So what are you suggesting? That I buy the goddamn things? What the hell would I do with them?”

Jack watched Lord finally lean forward, then continued. “You buy them for bottom dollar, maybe a half-billion, using a portion of the proceeds from the raw materials sales. You will buy them using dollars, which can then be used by Ukraine to purchase other necessities in the world markets.”

“Why bottom-dollar? Every Middle Eastern country will be bidding on them.”

“But Ukraine can’t sell to them. The G-7 countries would never allow it. If Ukraine did, they’d be cut out of the EU and other Western markets, and if that happens, they’re dead.”

“So I buy them and sell them to whom?”

Jack couldn’t help but grin. “To us. The United States. Six billion is a conservative estimate on their worth. Hell, the weapons-grade plutonium those babies contain is priceless. The rest of the G-7s would probably pitch in a few billion. It’s your relationship with Kiev that makes this whole thing work. They look to you as their savior.”

Sullivan looked stunned. He started to rise and then thought better of it. Even to him the amounts of money potentially out there were staggering. But he had enough money, more than enough. But to remove part of the nuclear equation from the collective miseries of the world...

“And this was whose idea?” Sullivan looked at Lord as he asked the question. Lord pointed at Jack.

Sullivan leaned back in his chair and looked up at the young man. Then he rose with a swiftness that startled Jack. The billionaire took Jack’s hand in an iron grip. “You’re going places, young man. Mind if I tag along?”

Lord beamed like a father. Jack couldn’t stop smiling. He had started to forget what it was like to hit one out of the park.

After Sullivan departed, Jack and Sandy sat at the table.

Finally Sandy said, “I recognize it was not an easy assignment. How do you feel?”

Jack couldn’t help but grin. “Like I just slept with the prettiest girl in high school, kind of tingling all over.”

Lord laughed and stood up. “You’d better go home and get some rest. Sullivan’s probably calling his pilot from the car. At least we got his mind off the bitch.”

Jack didn’t hear the last part as he quickly left the room. For now, for once in a long time, he felt good. No worries, just possibilities. Endless possibilities.

That night he sat up late telling a very enthusiastic Jennifer Baldwin all about it. Afterward, over a very chilled bottle of champagne and a platter of oysters specially delivered to her townhouse, the couple had the most gratifying sex of their courtship. For once, the high ceilings and murals did not bother Jack. In fact, he was growing to like them.

Chapter 13

THE WHITE HOUSE RECEIVES MILLIONS OF PIECES OF nonofficial mail each year. Each item is carefully screened and appropriately processed, the whole task handled by an in-house staff with assistance and supervision by the Secret Service.

The two envelopes were addressed to Gloria Russell, which was somewhat unusual since most of this type of correspondence was addressed to the President or members of the First Family, or frequently the First Pet, which currently happened to be a golden retriever named Barney.

The handwriting on each was in block letters, the envelopes white and cheap and thus widely available. Russell got to them about twelve o'clock on a day that had been going pretty well up until then. Inside one was a single sheet of paper and inside the other was an item she had stared at for some minutes. Written on the paper, again in block letters, were the words:

Question: What constitutes high crimes and misde meanors?

Answer: I don't think you want to find out. Valuable item available, more to follow, chief, signed not a secret admirer

Even though she had expected it, in fact had desperately wanted to receive it, she still could feel her heartbeat increase to where it pounded against the wall of her chest; her saliva dwindled down to where she reached for and gulped down a glass of water and repeated the procedure until she could hold the letter without shaking. Then she looked at the second item. A photograph. The sight of the letter opener had brought the nightmare events rushing back to her. She gripped the sides of her chair. Finally the attack subsided.

"At least he wants to deal." Collin put down the note and photo and returned to his chair. He noted the extreme pallor of the woman and wondered if she was tough enough to make it through this one.

"Maybe. It could also be a setup."

Collin shook his head. "Don't think so."

Russell sat back in her chair, rubbed at her temples, downed another Tylenol. "Why not?"

"Why set us up this way? In fact, why set us up at all? He's got the stuff to bury us. He wants money."

"He probably got millions from the Sullivan heist."

"Maybe. But we don't know how much of it was liquid. Maybe he stashed it and can't get back to it. Maybe he's just an extremely greedy person. World is full of those."

"I need a drink. Can you come over tonight?"

"The President is having dinner at the Canadian embassy."

"Shit. Can't you get someone to replace you?"

"Maybe, if you pulled some strings."

"Consider them pulled. How soon do you think we'll hear from him again?"

"He doesn't seem too anxious, although he might just be acting cautious. I would in his situation."

"Great. So I can smoke two packs of menthols a day until we hear from him. By then I'll be dead of lung cancer."

"If he wants money, what are you going to do?" he asked.

"Depending on how much he wants, it can be accomplished without too much difficulty." She seemed calmer now.

Collin rose to go. "You're the boss."

"Tim?" Russell went over to him. "Hold me for a minute."

He felt her rub against his pistol as he gripped her.

"Tim, if it comes down to more than money. If we can't get it back."

Collin looked down at her.

"Then I'll take care of it, Gloria." He touched his fingers to her lips, turned and left.

* * * * *

COLLIN FOUND BURTON WAITING IN THE HALLWAY.

Burton looked the younger man up and down. "So how's she holding up?"

"All right." Collin continued to walk down the hallway, until Burton grabbed his arm, spun him around.

"What the fuck's going on, Tim?" Collin loosened his partner's grip.

"This isn't the time or the place, Bill."

"Well, tell me the time and the place, and I'll be there because we need to talk."

"What about?"

"You gonna fucking play stupid with me?" He roughly pulled Collin to a corner.

"I want you to think real clearly about that woman in there. She doesn't give a shit about you or me or anybody else. The only thing she cares about is saving her own little ass. I don't know what kind of story she's spinning on you, and I don't know what you two are cooking up, but I'm telling you to be careful. I don't want to see you throw everything away over her."

"I appreciate the concern but I know what I'm doing, Bill."

"Do you, Tim? Does fucking the Chief of Staff come within the purview of a Secret Service agent's responsibilities? Why don't you show me where that is in the manual? I'd like to read it for myself. And while we're talking about it, why don't you enlighten me about what the hell we went back into that house for. Because we ain't got it, and I guess I know who does. My ass is on the line here too, Tim. If I'm going down I'd like to know why."

An aide passed by in the hallway and stared strangely at the two men. Burton smiled and nodded and then returned his attention to Collin.

"Come on, Tim, what the hell would you do if you were me?"

The young man looked at his friend and his face slowly relaxed from the hard line he normally wore while on duty. If he were in Burton's position what would he do? The answer was easy. He'd kick some ass until people started talking. Burton was his friend, had proven it time and again. What the man was saying about Russell was probably true. Collin's reasoning hadn't totally evaporated in the presence of silk lingerie.

"You got time for a cup of coffee, Bill?"

* * * * *

FRANK WALKED DOWN THE TWO FLIGHTS OF STAIRS, TURNED right and opened the door to the crime lab. Small and in need of paint, the room was surprisingly well-organized due in large measure to the fact that Laura Simon was

a very compulsive person. Frank imagined her home to be every bit as neat and well-kept despite the presence of two preschoolers that kept her sufficiently haggard. Around the room were stacked unused evidence kits with their unbroken orange seals creating a bit of color against the drab, chipping gray walls. Cardboard boxes, carefully labeled, were piled in another corner. In yet another corner was a small floor safe that held the few physical items requiring additional security measures. Next to it was a refrigerator that housed evidence requiring a temperature-controlled environment.

He watched her small back as it curved over a microscope at the far end of the room.

"You rang?" Frank leaned over. On the glass slide were small fragments of some substance. He couldn't imagine spending his days looking at microscopic pieces of who knew what, but he was also fully aware that what Laura Simon did was an enormously important contribution to the conviction process.

"Look at this." Simon motioned him over to the lens. Frank removed his eyeglasses, which he had forgotten were still on. He glanced down and then raised his head back up.

"Laura, you know I never know what I'm looking at. What is it?"

"It's a sample of carpet taken from the Sullivans' bedroom. We didn't get it on the initial search, picked it up later."

"So, what's significant about it?" Frank had learned to listen very attentively to this tech.

"The carpet in the bedroom is one of those very high-priced models that cost about two hundred dollars a square foot. The carpet just for the bedroom must have run them almost a quarter mil."

"Jesus Christ!" Frank popped another piece of gum in his mouth. Trying to quit smoking was rotting his teeth and adding to his waistline. "Two-fifty for something you walk on?"

"It's incredibly durable; you could roll a tank across it and it would just spring back. It's only been there about two years. They did a bunch of renovation back then."

"Renovation? The house is only a few years old."

"That's when the deceased married Walter Sullivan."

"Oh."

"Women like to make their own statement about those things, Seth. Actually, she had good taste in carpets."

"Okay, so where does her good taste get us?"

"Look at the fibers again."

Frank sighed but obeyed the request.

"You see at the very tips? Look at the cross section. They've been cut. Presumably with not very sharp scissors. The cut is pretty ragged, although like I said these fibers are like iron."

He looked at her. "Cut? Why would anyone do that? Where'd you find them?"

"These particular samples were found on the bed skirt. Whoever cut them probably wouldn't have noticed a few fibers clinging to his hand. Then he brushed against the skirt and there you are."

"You find a corresponding part on the carpet?"

"Yep. Right under the left side of the bed if you're looking toward it about ten centimeters away at a perpendicular angle. The cut was slight but verifiable."

Frank straightened back up and sat down on one of the stools next to Simon.

"That's not all, Seth. On one of the fragments I also found traces of a solvent. Like a stain remover."

"That might be from the recent carpet cleaning. Or maybe the maids spilled something."

Simon shook her head. "Uh-uh. The cleaning company uses a steam system. For spot cleaning they use a special organic-based solvent. I checked. This one is a petroleum-based, off-the-shelf cleaner. And the maids use the same cleanser as recommended by the manufacturer. It's an organic base too. They have a whole supply of it at the house. And the carpet is chemically treated to prevent stains from soaking in. Using a petroleum-based solvent probably made it worse. That's probably why they ended up snipping out pieces."

"So presumably the perp takes the fibers because they show something. Do they?"

"Not on the sample I got, but he might have cut around the area just to make sure he didn't miss anything and we got one of the clean specimens."

"What would be on the carpet that someone would go to the trouble of cutting one-centimeter fibers out? It must've been a pain in the ass."

Both Simon and Frank had the same thought and indeed had it for several moments.

"Blood," Simon said simply.

"And not the deceased's either. If I remember correctly, hers wasn't anywhere near that spot." Frank added, "I think you got one more test to run, Laura."

She hooked a kit off the wall. "I was just getting ready to go do it, thought I'd better buzz you first."

"Smart girl."

* * * * *

THE DRIVE OUT TOOK THIRTY MINUTES. FRANK ROLLED DOWN his window and let the wind course over his face. It also helped dispel the cigarette smoke. Simon was constantly giving him a hard time about that.

The bedroom had remained sealed under Frank's orders.

Frank watched from the corner of Walter Sullivan's bedroom as Simon carefully mixed the bottles of chemicals and then poured the result into a plastic sprayer. Frank then helped her stuff towels under the door and tape brown packing paper to the windows. They closed the heavy drapes, cutting out virtually all traces of natural light.

Frank surveyed the room once again. He looked at the mirror, the bed, the window, the closets and then his eyes rested on the nightstand and at the gaping hole behind where the plaster had been removed. Then his eyes moved back to the picture. He picked it up. He was reminded again that Christine Sullivan had been a very beautiful woman, as far removed as one could get from the destroyed hulk he had viewed. In the photograph she was sitting in the chair beside the bed. The nightstand was clearly visible to her left. The corner of the bed made its way into the right side of the picture. Ironically so, considering all the use she had probably

made of that particular vehicle. The springs were probably due for their sixty-thousand-mile checkup. After that, they probably wouldn't have much to do. He remembered the look on Walter Sullivan's face. Not much left there.

He put the photo down and continued to observe Simon's fluid movements. He glanced back at the photo, something bothering him, but whatever it was popped out of his head as quickly as it had sprung into it.

"What's that stuff called again, Laura?"

"Luminol. It's sold under a variety of names, but it's the same reagent stuff. I'm ready."

She positioned the bottle over the section of carpet where the fibers had been cut from.

"Good thing you don't have to pay for this carpet." The detective smiled at her.

Simon turned to look at him. "Wouldn't matter to me. I'd just declare bankruptcy. They could garnishee my wages from here until eternity. It's the poor person's great equalizer."

Frank hit the light, plunging the room into pitch-black darkness. Swishes of air were heard as Simon squeezed the trigger on the spray bottle. Almost immediately, like a mass of lightning bugs, a very small portion of the carpet started to glow a pale blue and then disappeared. Frank turned on the overhead light and looked at Simon.

"So we got somebody else's blood. Helluva pickup, Laura. Any way you can scrape up enough to analyze, get a blood type? DNA typing?"

Simon looked dubious. "We'll pull the carpet to see if any leaked through, but I doubt it. Not much soaks into a treated carpet. And any residue has been mixed with a lot of stuff. So don't count on it."

Frank thought out loud. "Okay, one perp wounded. Not a lot of blood, but some." He looked for confirmation from Simon on that point and received an affirmative nod of the head. "Wounded, but with what? She had nothing in her hand when we found her."

Simon read his mind. "And as sudden as her death was, we're probably talking cadaveric spasm. To get it out of her hand they would've almost had to break her fingers."

Frank finished the thought. "And there was no sign of that on the autopsy."

"Unless the impact of the slugs caused her hand to fly open."

"How often does that happen?"

"Once is enough for this case."

"Okay, let's assume she had a weapon, and now that weapon is missing. What kind of weapon might it have been?"

Simon considered this as she repacked her kit.

"You probably could rule out a gun; she should've been able to get a round off, and there were no powder burns on her hands. They couldn't have scraped those off without leaving a trail."

"Good. Plus there's no evidence she ever had a gun registered to her. And we've already confirmed that there are no guns in the house."

"So no gun. Maybe a knife then. Can't tell what kind of wound it made, but maybe a slash, probably superficial. The number of fibers that were snipped out was small, so we're not talking life-threatening."

"So she stabbed one of the perps, maybe in the arm or leg. Then they backed up and shot her? Or she stabbed as she was dying?" Frank corrected himself. "No. She died instantly. She stabs one of them in another room, runs in here and then gets shot. Standing over her, the wounded perp drips some blood."

"Except the vault's in here. The more likely scenario is that she surprised them in the act."

"Right, except remember the shots came from the doorway into the room. And fired *down*. Who surprised who? That's what keeps bugging the ever-loving shit out of me."

"So why take the knife, if that's what it was?"

"Cause it IDs somebody, somehow."

"Prints?" Simon's nostrils quivered as she thought of the physical evidence lurking out there.

Frank nodded. "That's how I read it."

"Was the last Mrs. Sullivan in the habit of keeping a knife with her?"

Frank responded by slapping his hand to his forehead so hard it made Simon wince. She watched as he rushed over to the nightstand and picked up the photo. He shook his head and handed it to her.

"There's your goddamned knife."

Simon looked at the photo. In it, resting on the nightstand was a long, leather-handled letter opener.

"The leather also explains the oily residue on the palms."

Frank paused at the front door on the way out. He looked at the security control panel, which had been restored to its operating condition. Then he broke into a smile as an elusive thought finally trickled to the surface.

"Laura, you got the fluorescent lamp in the trunk?"

"Yeah, why?"

"You mind getting it?"

Puzzled, Simon did so. She returned to the foyer and plugged it in.

"Shine it right on the number keys."

What was revealed under the fluorescent light made Frank smile again.

"Goddamn that's good."

"What does it mean?" Simon looked at him, her brow furrowed.

"It means two things. First, we definitely got us somebody on the inside and, second, our perps are real creative."

* * * * *

FRANK SAT IN THE SMALL INTERROGATION ROOM AND DECIDED against another cigarette and opted instead for a cherry Tums. He looked at the cinder block walls, cheap metal table and beat-up chairs and decided this was a very depressing place to be interrogated in. Which was good. Depressed people were vulnerable people, and vulnerable people, given the appropriate prodding, tended to want to talk. And Frank wanted to listen. He would listen all day.

The case was still extremely muddled, but certain elements were becoming clearer.

Buddy Budizinski still lived in Arlington and now worked at a car wash in Falls Church. He had admitted being in the Sullivan house, had read about the murder,

but beyond that knew nothing. Frank tended to believe him. The man was not particularly bright, had no previous police record and had spent his adult life performing menial tasks for a living, no doubt compelled by his having finished only the fifth grade. His apartment was modest to the point of near poverty. Budizinski was a dead end.

Rogers, on the other hand, had produced a treasure trove. The Social Security number he had given on his employment application was real enough, only it belonged to a female State Department employee who had been assigned to Thailand for the last two years. He must have known the carpet cleaning company wouldn't have checked. What did they care? The address on the application was a motel in Beltsville, Maryland. No one by that name had registered at the motel in the last year and no one fitting Rogers's description had been seen there. The state of Kansas had no record of him. On top of that he had never cashed any of the payroll checks given to him by Metro. That in itself spoke volumes.

An artist's sketch based on Pettis's recollection was being made up down the hallway and would be distributed throughout the area.

Rogers was the guy, Frank could feel it. He had been in the house, and he had disappeared leaving behind a trail of false information. Simon was right this minute painstakingly examining Pettis's van in the hopes that Rogers's prints were still lurking somewhere within. They had no prints to match at the crime scene, but if they could identify Rogers, then dollars to donuts he had priors, and Frank's case would finally be forming. It would take a great leap forward if the person he was waiting for would decide to cooperate.

And Walter Sullivan had confirmed that an antique letter opener from his bedroom was indeed missing. Frank feverishly hoped to be able to lay his hands on that potential evidentiary gold mine. Frank had imparted his theory to Sullivan about his wife stabbing her attacker with that instrument. The old man hadn't seemed to register the information. Frank had briefly wondered if Sullivan was losing it.

The detective checked his list of employees at Sullivan's residence once more, although by now he knew them all by heart. There was only one he was really interested in.

The security company rep's statement kept coming back to him. The variations generated by fifteen digits to get a five-digit code in the correct sequence was impossible for a portable computer to crunch in the very brief time allowed, particularly if you factored in a less than blazing fast response from the security system's computer. In order to do it, you had to eliminate some of the possibilities. How did you do that?

An examination of the keypad showed that a chemical—Frank couldn't remember the exact name although Simon had recognized it—which was revealed only under fluorescent light, had been applied to each of the number keys.

Frank leaned back and envisioned Walter Sullivan—or the butler, or whoever's job it was to set the alarm—going down and entering the code. The finger would hit the proper keys, five of them, and the alarm would be set. The person would walk away, completely unaware that he or she now had a small tracing of chemical, invisible to the naked eye, and odorless, on their finger. And, more important, they would be totally ignorant of the fact that they had just revealed

the numbers comprising the security code. Under fluorescent light, the perps would be able to tell which numbers had been entered because the chemical would be smeared on those keys. With that information, it was up to the computer to deliver the correct sequence, which the security rep was certain it could do in the allotted time, once given the elimination of 99.9 percent of the possible combos.

Now the question remained: who had applied the chemical? Frank at first had considered that Rogers, or whatever his real name was, might have done it while at the house, but the facts against that conclusion were overwhelming. First, the house was always filled with people and to even the most unobservant a stranger lurking around an alarm panel would arouse suspicion. Second, the entry foyer was large and open and the most unsecluded spot in the house, lastly, the application would take some time and care. And Rogers didn't have that luxury. Even the slightest suspicion, the most fleeting glance and his whole plan could be mined. The person who had thought this one up was not the type to take that sort of risk. Rogers hadn't done it. Frank was pretty sure he knew who did.

* * * * *

UPON FIRST GLANCE, THE WOMAN APPEARED SO THIN AS TO convey the impression of emaciation perhaps due to cancer. On second glance, the good color in the cheeks, the light bone structure and the graceful way she moved led to the conclusion that she was very lean but otherwise healthy.

"Please sit down, Ms. Broome. I appreciate your coming down."

The woman nodded and slid into one of the seats. She wore a flowery skirt that ended midcalf. A single strand of large fake pearls encircled her neck. Her hair was tied in a neat bun; some of the strands at the top of her forehead were beginning to turn a silvery gray, like ink leaching onto paper. Going on the smooth skin and absence of wrinkles, Frank would have put her age at about thirty-nine. Actually she was some years older.

"I thought you were already done with me, Mr. Frank."

"Please call me Seth. You smoke?"

She shook her head.

"I've just got a few follow-up questions, routine. You're not the only one. I understand you're leaving Mr. Sullivan's employment?"

She noticeably swallowed, looked down and then back up. "I was close, so to speak, to Mrs. Sullivan. It's hard now, you know ..." Her voice trailed off.

"I know it is, I know it is. It was terrible, awful." Frank paused for a moment. "You've been with the Sullivans how long now?"

"A little over a year."

"You do the cleaning and ... ?"

"I help do the cleaning. There's four of us, Sally, Rebecca and me. Karen Taylor, she does the cooking. I also looked after Mrs. Sullivan's things for her too. Her clothes and what-not. I was sort of her assistant, I guess you could say. Mr. Sullivan had his own person, Richard."

"Would you like some coffee?"

Frank didn't wait for her to answer. He got up and opened the door to the interrogation room.

"Hey Molly, can you bring me a couple of javas?" He turned to Ms. Broome. "Black? Cream?"

"Black."

"Make it two pures, Molly, thanks."

He shut the door and sat back down.

"Damn chill in the air, I can't seem to stay warm." He tapped the rough wall. "This cinder block doesn't help much. So you were saying about Mrs. Sullivan?"

"She was really nice to me. I mean she would talk to me about things. She wasn't—she wasn't, you know, from that class of people, the upper class I guess you could say. She went to high school where I did right here in Middleton."

"And not too far apart in years I'm thinking."

His remark brought a smile to Wanda Broome's lips and a hand unconsciously moved to cajole back into place an invisible strand of hair.

"Further than I'd like to admit."

The door opened and their coffee was delivered. It was gratefully hot and fresh. Frank had not been lying about the chill.

"I won't say she fit in real well with all those types of people, but she seemed to hold her own. She didn't take anything from anybody if you know what I mean."

Frank had reason to believe that was true. From all accounts the late Mrs. Sullivan had been a hellion in many respects.

"Would you say the relationship between the Sullivans was ... good, bad, in between?"

She didn't hesitate. "Very good. Oh I know what people say about the age difference and all, but she was good for him, and he was good for her. I truly believe that. He loved her, I can tell you that. Maybe more like a father loves his daughter, but it was still love."

"And she him?"

Now there was perceptible hesitation. "You've got to understand that Christy Sullivan was a very young woman, maybe younger in a lot of ways than other women her age. Mr. Sullivan opened up a whole new world for her and—" She broke off, clearly unsure of how to continue.

Frank changed gears. "What about the vault in the bedroom? Who knew about it?"

"I don't know. I certainly didn't. I assume that Mr. and Mrs. Sullivan knew. Mr. Sullivan's valet, Richard, he may have known. But I'm not sure about that."

"So Christine Sullivan or her husband never indicated to you that there was a safe behind the mirror?"

"My goodness no. I was her friend of sorts, but I was still just an employee. And only with them a year. Mr. Sullivan never really spoke to me. I mean that's not the sort of thing you would tell someone like me, is it?"

"No, I guess not." Frank was certain she was lying, but he had been unable to unearth any evidence to the contrary. Christine Sullivan was the very type to show off her wealth to someone she could identify with, if only to show how far she had suddenly risen in the world.

"So you didn't know the mirror was a one-way looking into the bedroom?"

This time the woman showed visible surprise. Frank noticed a blush under the light application of makeup.

"Wanda, can I call you Wanda? Wanda, you understand, don't you, that the alarm system in the house was deactivated by the person who broke in? It was deactivated by the appropriate code being put in. Now, who set the alarm at night?"

"Richard did," she replied promptly. "Or sometimes Mr. Sullivan did it himself."

"So everyone in the house knew the code?"

"Oh no, of course not. Richard did. He's been with Mr. Sullivan for almost forty years. He was the only one other than the Sullivans who knew the code that I know of."

"Did you ever see him set the alarm?"

"I was usually already in bed when the system was set."

Frank stared at her. *I'll bet you were, Wanda, I'll bet you were.*

Wanda Broome's eyes widened. "You're, you're not suspecting that Richard had anything to do with it?"

"Well, Wanda, somehow, somebody who wasn't supposed to be able to, disarmed that alarm system. And naturally suspicion falls on anyone who had access to that code."

Wanda Broome looked like she might start to cry, then composed herself. "Richard is almost seventy years old."

"Then he's probably in need of a nice little nest egg. You understand what I'm telling you is to be held in the strictest confidence of course?"

She nodded and at the same time wiped her nose. The coffee, untouched, was now sipped in quick little bursts.

Frank continued. "And until someone can explain to me how that security system was accessed, then I'm going to have to explore the avenues that make the most sense to me."

He continued to look at her. He had spent the past day finding out everything he could about Wanda Broome. It was a fairly average story except for one twist. She was forty-four years old, twice divorced with two grown children. She lived in the servants' wing with the rest of the in-house staff. About four miles away her mother, aged eighty-one, lived in a modest, somewhat run-down home, existing comfortably on Social Security and her husband's railroad pension. Broome had been employed by the Sullivans, as she said, for about a year, which was what initially had drawn Frank's attention: she was by far the newest member of the house's staff. That in itself didn't mean much, but by all accounts Sullivan treated his help very well, and there was something to be said for the loyalty of long-standing, well-paid employees. Wanda Broome looked like she could be very loyal too. The question was to whom?

The twist was that Wanda Broome had spent some time in prison, more than twenty years ago, for embezzlement when she had worked as a bookkeeper for a doctor in Pittsburgh. The other servants were squeaky-clean. So she was capable of breaking the law, and she had spent time on the inside. Her name back then had been Wanda Jackson. She had divorced Jackson when she got out, or rather he had dropped her. There was no record of arrest since then. With the name change and the conviction far in the past, if the Sullivans had done a background check, they might not have turned up anything, or maybe they didn't care. From

all sources Wanda Broome had been an honest, hardworking citizen these last twenty years. Frank wondered what had changed that.

“Is there anything you can remember or think of that might help me, Wanda?” Frank tried to look as innocent as possible, opening his notebook and pretending to jot down some notes. If she were the inside person, the one thing he didn’t want was Wanda running back to Rogers, which would result in his going even further underground. On the other hand, if he could get her to crumble, then she just might jump sides.

He envisioned her dusting the entrance hall. It would have been so easy, so easy to apply that chemical to the cloth, then casually brush it against the security panel. It would all look so natural, no one, even staring directly at her while she did it, would have given it a thought. Just a conscientious servant doing her job. Then sneaking down when everyone was asleep, a quick sweep of the light and her part was done.

Technically, she would probably be an accomplice to murder, since homicide was a reasonably likely result when you burglarized someone’s home. But Frank was far less interested in sending Wanda Broome away for a large portion of the rest of her life than he was in bagging the trigger man. The woman sitting across from him had not concocted this plan, he believed. She had played a role, a small, albeit important role. Frank wanted the master of ceremonies. He would get the Commonwealth’s Attorney to cut a deal with Wanda to accomplish that goal.

“Wanda?” Frank leaned across the table and earnestly took one of her hands. “Can you think of anything else? Anything that will help me catch the person who murdered your friend?”

Frank finally received a small shake of the head in return and he leaned back. He hadn’t expected much on this go-round, but he had made his point. The wall was beginning to crumble. She wouldn’t warn the guy, Frank was certain of that. He was getting to Wanda Broome, little by little.

As he would discover, he had already gone too far.

Chapter 14

JACK THREW HIS CARRY-ON INTO THE CORNER, TOSSED HIS overcoat on the sofa and fought the impulse to pass out right there on the carpet. Ukraine and back in five days had been a killer. The seven-hour time difference had been bad enough, but for someone closing in on octogenarian status, Walter Sullivan had been indefatigable.

They had been whisked through the security checkpoints with the alacrity and respect Sullivan’s wealth and reputation commanded. From that point forward a series of endless meetings had commenced. They toured manufacturing facilities, mining operations, office buildings, hospitals and then had been taken to dinner and gotten drunk with the Mayor of Kiev. The President of Ukraine had received them on the second day, and Sullivan had him eating out of his hand within the hour. Capitalism and entrepreneurship were respected above all else in the

liberated republic and Sullivan was a capitalist with a capital C. Everyone wanted to talk to him, shake his hand, as if some of his moneymaking magic would rub off on them, producing untold wealth in a very short time.

The result had been more than they could have hoped for as the Ukrainians fell in line on the business deal with glowing praise for its vision. The pitch for dollars for nukes would come later at the appropriate time. Such an asset. An unnecessary asset that could be turned into liquidity.

Sullivan's retrofitted 747 had flown nonstop from Kiev to BWI and his limo had just dropped Jack off. He made his way into the kitchen. The only thing in the fridge was soured milk. The Ukrainian food had been good but was heavy, and after the first couple of days he only picked at his meals. And there had been way too much booze. Apparently business could not be conducted without it.

He rubbed his head, tussling with sleep deprivation of massive proportion. In fact he was too tired to sleep. But he was hungry. He checked his watch. His internal clock said it was almost eight A.M. His watch proclaimed that it was well after midnight. While D.C. was not the Big Apple in its ability to cater to any appetite or interest no matter the time of day or night, there were a few places where Jack could get some decent food on a weeknight despite the lateness of the hour. As he struggled into his overcoat, the phone rang. The machine was on. Jack started to go out, then hesitated. He listened to the perfunctory message followed by the beep.

"Jack?"

A voice swarmed up on him, from out of the past, like a ball held underwater until it's free and explodes to the surface. He snatched up the phone.

"Luther?"

* * * * *

THE RESTAURANT WAS HARDLY MORE THAN A HOLE IN THE wall, which made it one of Jack's favorites. Any reasonable concoction of food could be gotten there at any time, day or night. It was a place that Jennifer Baldwin would never set foot inside and one that he and Kate had frequented. A short time ago, the results of that comparison would have disturbed him, but he had made up his mind, and he didn't intend on revisiting the question. Life was not perfect, and you could spend your entire life waiting for that perfection. He was not going to do that.

Jack wolfed down scrambled eggs, bacon and four pieces of toast. The fresh coffee burned his throat going down. After five days of instant java and bottled water, it tasted wonderful.

Jack looked across at Luther, who sipped on his coffee and alternated between looking out the dirty plate-glass window onto the dark street and passing his eye around the small, grimy interior.

Jack put his coffee down. "You look tired."

"So do you, Jack."

"I've been out of the country."

"Me too."

That explained the condition of the yard and the mail. A needless worry. Jack pushed the plate away and waved for a refill on his coffee.

"I went by your place the other day."

"Why was that?"

Jack had expected the question. Luther Whitney had never taken anything other than the direct approach. But anticipation was one thing, having a ready answer another. Jack shrugged.

"I don't know. Just wanted to see you, I guess. It's been a while."

Luther nodded agreement.

"You seeing Kate again?"

Jack swallowed a mouthful of coffee before answering. His temples started to throb.

"No. Why?"

"I thought I saw you two together a while back."

"We sort of ran into each other. That's all."

Jack couldn't tell exactly, but Luther looked upset with that answer. He noticed Jack watching him closely, then smiled.

"Used to be, you were the only way I could find out if my little girl was doing okay. You were my pipeline of information, Jack."

"You ever consider just talking to her directly, Luther? You know that might be worth a shot. The years are going by."

Luther waved the suggestion off and stared out the window again.

Jack looked him over. The face was leaner than usual, the eyes puffy. There were more wrinkles on the forehead and around the eyes than Jack remembered. But it had been four years. Luther was at the age now where the onslaught of age hit you quickly, deterioration was more and more evident every day.

He caught himself staring into Luther's eyes. Those eyes had always fascinated Jack. Deep green, and large, like a woman's, they were supremely confident eyes. Like you see on pilots, an infinite calmness about life in general. Nothing rattled them. Jack had seen happiness in those eyes, when he and Kate announced their engagement, but more often he had seen sadness. And yet right beneath the surface Jack saw two things he had never seen in Luther Whitney's eyes before. He saw fear. And he saw hatred. And he wasn't sure which one bothered him the most.

"Luther, are you in trouble?"

Luther took out his wallet and, despite Jack's protests, paid for the food.

"Let's take a walk."

A taxi cab ride took them to the Mall and they walked in silence to a bench across from the Smithsonian castle. The chilly night air settled in on them and Jack pulled up the collar of his coat. Jack sat while Luther stood and lit a cigarette.

"That's new." Jack looked at the smoke curving up slowly in the clear night air.

"At my age who gives a shit?" Luther flung the match down and buried it in the dirt with his foot. He sat down.

"Jack, I want you to do me a favor."

"Okay."

"You haven't heard the favor yet." Luther suddenly stood up. "You mind walking? My joints are getting stiff."

They had passed the Washington Monument and were headed toward the Capitol when Luther broke the silence.

"I'm in kind of a jam, Jack. It's not so bad now, but I got a feeling it's going to get worse and that might happen sooner rather than later." Luther didn't look at him, he seemed to be staring ahead at the massive dome of the Capitol.

"I'm not sure how things are going to play out right now, but if it goes the way I think it's gonna go, then I'm going to need a lawyer, and I want you, Jack. I don't want no bullshitter and I don't want no baby lawyer. You're the best defense lawyer I've ever seen and I've seen a lot of them, up close and personal."

"I don't do that anymore, Luther. I push paper, do deals." It struck Jack at that moment that he was more a businessman than a lawyer. That thought was not an especially pleasing one.

Luther did not seem to hear him. "It won't be a freebie. I'll pay you. But I want someone I can trust, and you're the only one I trust, Jack." Luther stopped walking and turned to the younger man, waiting for an answer.

"Luther, you want to tell me what's going on?"

Luther shook his head vigorously. "Not unless I have to. That wouldn't do you or anybody else any good." He stared at Jack intently until it made him uncomfortable.

"I gotta tell you, Jack, if you're my lawyer on this, it's gonna get kinda hairy."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean people could get hurt on this one, Jack. Really hurt, like not-coming-back hurt."

Jack stopped walking. "If you've got some guys like that on your butt it might be better to cut a deal now, get immunity and disappear in a Witness Protection Program. Lots of people do. It's not an original idea."

Luther laughed out loud. Laughed until he choked and ended up doubled over, coughing up the little that was in his stomach. Jack helped him back up. He could feel the older man's limbs trembling. He did not realize they were trembling with rage. This outburst was so out of character for the man that Jack felt his flesh crawl. He realized he was perspiring despite watching his breath produce small clouds in the late-night chill.

Luther composed himself. He took a deep breath and looked almost embarrassed.

"Thanks for the advice, send me a bill. I gotta go."

"Go? Where the hell are you going? I want to know what's going on, Luther."

"If something should happen to me—"

"Godammit, Luther, I'm growing real tired of this cloak-and-dagger shit."

Luther's eyes became slits. The confidence suddenly returned with a touch of ferocity. "Everything I do is for a reason, Jack. If I'm not telling you the whole scoop now you better believe it's for a goddamned good reason. You may not understand it now, but the way I'm doing it is to keep you as safe as I can. I wouldn't be involving you at all except I needed to know if you'd go to bat for me when and if I needed you. Because if you won't, forget this conversation ever happened, and forget you ever knew me."

"You can't be serious."

"Serious as shit, Jack."

The men stood looking at each other. The trees behind Luther's head had shed most of their leaves. Their bare branches reached to the skies, like bursts of dark lightning frozen in place.

"I'll be there, Luther." Luther's hand swiftly settled into Jack's and the next minute Luther Whitney disappeared into the shadows.

* * * * *

THE CAB DROPPED JACK OFF IN FRONT OF THE APARTMENT building. The pay phone was right across the street. He paused for a moment, gathering energy and the nerve he would need for what he was about to do.

"Hello?" The voice was full of sleep.

"Kate?"

Jack counted the seconds until her mind cleared and identified the voice.

"Jesus Christ, Jack, do you know what time it is?"

"Can I come over?"

"No, you cannot come over. I thought we had settled all of this."

He paused, steeled himself. "It's not about that." He paused again. "It's about your father."

The extended silence was difficult to interpret.

"What about him?" The tone was not as cold as he would have thought.

"He's in trouble."

Now the familiar tone returned. "So? Why the hell does that still surprise you?"

"I mean he's in serious trouble. He just proceeded to scare the living shit out of me without really telling me anything."

"Jack, it's late and whatever my father is involved in—"

"Kate, he was scared, I mean really scared. So scared he threw up."

Again there was a long pause. Jack tracked her mental processes as she thought about the man they both knew so well. Luther Whitney scared? That didn't make sense. His line of work necessarily demanded someone with steel nerves. Not a violent person, his entire adult life had been spent right on the edge of danger.

She was terse. "Where are you?"

"Right across the street."

Jack looked up as he saw a slender figure move to a window of the building and look out. He waved.

The door opened to Jack's knock and he saw her retreating into the kitchen where he heard a pot clattering, water being poured and the gas on the stove being lit. He looked around the room, and then stood just inside the front door feeling a little foolish.

A minute later she walked back in. She had on a thick bathrobe that ended at her ankles. She was barefoot. Jack found himself staring at her feet. She followed his gaze and then looked at him. He jolted back.

"How's the ankle? Looks fine." He smiled.

She frowned and said tersely, "It's late, Jack. What about him?"

He moved into the tiny living room and sat down. She sat across from him.

"He called me up a couple hours ago. We grabbed some food at that little dive next to Eastern Market and then started walking. He told me he needed a favor.

That he was in trouble. Serious trouble with some people who could do some permanent damage to him. Real permanent.”

The tea kettle started whistling. She jumped up. He watched her go, the sight of her perfectly shaped derriere outlined against the bathrobe bringing back a flood of memories he wished would just leave him the hell alone. She came back with two cups of tea.

“What was the favor?” She sipped her tea. Jack left his where it was.

“He said he needed a lawyer. He might need a lawyer. Although things might turn out so he wouldn’t. He wanted me to be that lawyer.”

She put her tea down. “Is that it?”

“Isn’t that enough?”

“Maybe for an honest, respectable person, but not for him.”

“My God, Kate, the man was scared. I’ve never seen him scared before, have you?”

“I’ve seen all I need to see of him. He chose his lifestyle and now apparently it’s catching up to him.”

“He’s your father for chrissakes.”

“Jack, I don’t want to have this conversation.” She started to get up.

“What if something happens to him? Then what?”

She looked at him coldly. “Then it happens. That’s not my problem.”

Jack got up and started to leave. Then he turned back, his face red with anger. “I’ll tell you how the funeral service goes. On second thought, what the hell would you care? I’ll just make sure you get a copy of the death certificate for your scrapbook.”

He didn’t know she could move that quickly, but he would feel the slap for about a week, like someone had poured acid across his cheek, a truer description than he realized at the moment.

“How dare you?” Her eyes blazed at him as he slowly rubbed his face.

Then the tears erupted from her with so much force that they spilled onto the front of the robe.

He said quietly, as calmly as he could, “Don’t shoot the messenger, Kate. I told Luther and I’m telling you, life is way too short for this crap. I lost both my parents a long time ago. Okay, you have reasons for not liking the guy, fine. That’s up to you. But the old man loves you and cares about you and regardless of how you think he’s screwed up your life you have to respect that love. That’s my advice to you, take it or leave it.”

He moved toward the door but she again got there before him.

“You don’t know anything about it.”

“Fine, I don’t know anything about it. Go back to bed, I’m sure you’ll fall right asleep, nothing important on your mind.”

She grabbed his coat with such force that she jerked him around, even though he outweighed her by eighty pounds.

“I was two years old when he went to prison for the last time. I was nine when he got out. Do you understand the incredible shame of a little girl whose dad is in prison? Whose dad steals other’s people’s property for a living? When you had show-and-tell at school and the one kid’s dad is a doctor and another’s is a truck driver and it comes to your turn and the teacher looks down and tells the class

that Katie's dad had to go away because he did something bad and then she'd skip to the next kid?

"He was never there for us. *Never!* Mom worried sick about him all the time. But she always kept the faith, right up until the end. She made it easy for him."

"She finally divorced him, Kate," Jack gently reminded her.

"Only because that was the only choice she had left. And right when she was just getting her life turned around, she finds a lump in her breast and in six months she's gone."

Kate leaned back against the wall. She looked so tired, it was painful to witness. "And you know what the really crazy thing is? She never once stopped loving him. After all the incredible shit he put her through." Kate shook her head, having a hard time believing the words she had just spoken. She looked up at Jack, her chin trembling slightly.

"But that's okay, I have enough hate for both of us." She stared at him, a mixture of pride and righteousness on her features.

Jack didn't know if it was the complete exhaustion he was feeling or the fact that for so many years what he was about to say had been pent up inside him. Years of watching this charade. And brushing it aside in favor of the beauty and vivaciousness of the woman across from him. His vision of perfection.

"Is that your idea of justice, Kate? Enough hate balanced against enough love, and everything equals out?"

She stepped back. "What are you talking about?"

He moved forward as she continued to retreat into the small room. "I've listened to this goddamned martyrdom of yours until I'm sick of it. You think you're some perfect defender of the hurt and victimized. Nothing comes above that. Not you, not me, not your father. The only reason you're out there prosecuting every sonofabitch that comes into your sights is because your father hurt you. Every time you convict somebody that's another nail in your old man's heart."

Her hand flew to his face. He caught it, gripped it. "Your whole adult life has been spent getting back at him. For all the wrongs. For all the hurt. For never being there for you." He squeezed her hand until he heard her gasp. "Did you ever once stop to think that maybe you were never there for him?"

He let go of her hand as she stood there, staring at him, a look on her face he had never seen before.

"Do you understand that Luther loves you so much that he's never tried to contact you, never tried to be a part of your life, because he knows that's how you want it? His only child living a few miles away from him and he's completely cut out of her life. Did you ever think about how he feels? Did your hate ever let you do that?"

She didn't answer.

"Don't you ever wonder why your mother loved him? Is your picture of Luther Whitney so goddamned distorted that you can't see why she loved him?"

He grabbed her shoulders, shook her. "Does your goddamned hatred ever let you be compassionate? Does it ever let you love anything, Kate!"

He pushed her away. She stumbled backward, her eyes locked on his face.

He hesitated for a moment. "The fact is, lady, you don't deserve him." He paused and then decided to finish. "You don't deserve to be loved."

In one furious instant her teeth gnashed, her face contorted into rage. She screamed and flew at him, hammering her fists into his chest, slapping his face. He felt none of her blows as the tears slid down her cheeks.

Her assault stopped as quickly as it started. Her arms like lead, they clutched at his coat, holding on. That's when the heavens started and she sank to the floor, the tears bursting from her, the sobs echoing through the tiny space.

He lifted her up and placed her gently on the couch.

He knelt beside her, letting her cry, and she did so for a long time, her body repeatedly tensing and then going limp until he felt himself growing weak, his hands clammy. He finally wrapped his arms around her, laid his chest against her side. Her thin fingers clutched tightly to his coat as both their bodies shook together for a long time.

When it was over she sat up slowly, her face red, splotchy.

Jack stepped back.

She refused to look at him. "Get out, Jack."

"Kate—"

"*Get out!*" Despite her scream the voice was fragile, battered. She covered her face in her hands.

He turned and walked out the door. As he headed down the street he turned to look at her building. Her silhouette was framed in the window, looking out, but she wasn't looking at him. She was looking for something, he wasn't sure what. Probably she didn't even know. As he continued to watch, she turned from the window. A few moments later the light in her apartment went out.

Jack wiped at his eyes, turned and walked slowly down the street, heading home after one of the longest days he could ever remember.

* * *

"*GODDAMMIT! HOW LONG?*" SETH FRANK STOOD NEXT TO THE car. It was not quite eight in the morning.

The young Fairfax County patrolman didn't know the significance of the event and was startled by the detective's outburst.

"We found her about an hour ago; an early-morning jogger saw the car, called it in."

Frank walked around the car and peered in from the passenger side. The face was peaceful, much different from the last corpse he had viewed. The long hair was undone, streamed down the sides of the car seat and flowed across the floorboard. Wanda Broome looked like she was asleep.

Three hours later the crime scene investigation was completed. Four pills had been found on the car seat. The autopsy would confirm that Wanda Broome had died from a massive overdose of digitalis, from a prescription she had filled for her mother but obviously had never delivered. She had been dead for about two hours when her body was discovered on the secluded dirt path that ran around a five-acre pond about eight miles from the Sullivan place just over the county line. The only other piece of tangible evidence was in a plastic bag that Frank was carrying back to headquarters after getting the okay from his sister jurisdiction. The note was on a piece of paper torn from a spiral ring notepad. The handwriting was a

woman's, flowing and embellished. Wanda's last words had been a desperate plea for redemption. A shriek of guilt in four words.

I am so sorry.

Frank drove on past the rapidly fading foliage and misty swamp that paralleled the winding back road. He had fucked that one up royally. He never would have figured the woman for a suicide candidate. Wanda Broome's history pegged her as a survivor. Frank couldn't help but feel sorry for the woman, but also raged at her stupidity. He could've gotten her a deal, a sweetheart deal! Then he reflected on the fact that his instincts had been right on one count. Wanda Broome had been a very loyal person. She had been loyal to Christine Sullivan and could not live with the guilt that she had contributed, however unintentionally, to her death. An understandable, if regrettable, reaction. But with her gone, Frank's best, and perhaps only, opportunity to land the big fish had just died too.

The memory of Wanda Broome faded into the background as he focused on how to bring to justice a man who had now caused the death of two women.

* * * * *

"DAMN, TARR, WAS IT TODAY?" JACK LOOKED AT HIS CLIENT in the reception area of Patton, Shaw. The man looked as out of place as a junkyard mutt at a dog show.

"Ten-thirty. It's eleven-fifteen now, does that mean I get forty-five minutes free? By the way, you look like hell."

Jack looked down at his rumpled suit and put a hand through his unkempt hair. His internal clock was still on Ukraine time, and a sleepless night had not helped his appearance.

"Believe me, I look much better than I feel."

The two men shook hands. Tarr had dressed up for the meeting, which meant his jeans didn't have holes in them, and he wore socks with his tennis shoes. The corduroy jacket was a relic from the early 1970s, and the hair was its usual tangle of curls and mats.

"Hey, we can do it another day, Jack. Me, I understand hangovers."

"Not when you got all dressed up. Come on back. All I need is some grub. I'll take you to lunch and won't even bill you for the tab."

As the men walked down the hallway, Lucinda, prim and proper in keeping with the firm's image, breathed a sigh of relief. More than one Patton, Shaw partner had walked through her turf with absolute horror on their face at the sight of Tarr Crimson. Memos would fly this week.

"I'm sorry, Tarr, I'm running on about twelve cylinders lately." Jack tossed his overcoat over a chair and settled down miserably behind a stack of pink message slips about six inches high on his desk.

"Out of the country, so I heard. Hope it was someplace fun."

"It wasn't. How's business?"

"Booming. Pretty soon, you might be able to call me a legitimate client. Make your partners' stomachs feel a lot better when they see me sitting in the lobby."

"Screw 'em, Tarr, you pay your bills."

"Better to be a big client and pay some of your bills than a teeny client who pays all of his."

Jack smiled. "You got us all figured out, don't you?"

"Hey, man, you seen one algorithm, you've seen 'em all."

Jack opened Tarr's file and perused it quickly.

"We'll have your new S corp set up by tomorrow. Delaware incorporation with a qualification in the District. Right?"

Tarr nodded.

"How're you planning on capitalizing it?"

Tarr pulled out a legal pad. "I've got the list of potentials. Same as the last deal. Do I get a reduced rate?" Tarr smiled. He liked Jack, but business was business.

"Yeah, this time you won't pay for the learning curve of an overpriced and underinformed associate."

Both men smiled.

"I'll cut the bill to the bone, Tarr, just like always. What's the new company for, by the way?"

"Got the inside track on some new technology for surveillance work."

Jack looked up from his notes. "Surveillance? That's a little off the mark for you, isn't it?"

"Hey, you gotta go with the flow. Corporate business is down. But when one market dries up, being the good entrepreneur that I am, I look around for other opportunities. Surveillance for the private sector has always been hot. Now the new twist is big brother in the law enforcement arena."

"That's ironic for somebody who got thrown in jail in every major city in the country during the 1960s."

"Hey, those causes were good ones. But we all grow up."

"How does it work?"

"Two ways. First, low-level orbit satellites are downlinked to metropolitan police tracking stations. The birds have preprogrammed sweep sectors. They spot trouble and they send an almost instantaneous signal to the tracking station, giving precise incident information. It's real time for the cops. The second method involves placing military-style surveillance equipment, sensors and tracking devices on top of telephone poles, or underground with surface sensors on the outside of buildings. Their exact locations will be classified, of course, but they'll be deployed in the worst crime areas. If something starts to go down, they'll call in the cavalry."

Jack shook his head. "I can think of a few civil rights that might be trampled."

"Tell me about it. But it's effective."

"Until the bad guys move."

"Kinda hard to outrun a satellite, Jack."

Jack shook his head and turned back to his file.

"Hey, how're the wedding plans coming?"

Jack looked up. "I don't know, I try to keep out of the way."

Tarr laughed. "Shit, Julie and I had a total of twenty bucks to get married on, including the honeymoon. We got a justice of the peace for ten dollars, bought a case of Michelob with the rest, and rode the Harley down to Miami and slept on the beach. Had a helluva good time."

Jack smiled, shook his head. "I think the Baldwins have something a little more formal in mind. Although your way sounds like a lot more fun to me."

Tarr looked at him quizzically, remembering something. "Hey, whatever happened to that gal you were dating when you were defending the criminal elements of this fair city? Kate, right?"

Jack looked down at his desk. "We decided to go our separate ways," he said quietly.

"Huh, I always thought you two made a nice-looking couple."

Jack looked across at him, licked his lips and then closed his eyes for a moment before answering. "Well, sometimes looks can be deceiving."

Tarr studied his face. "You sure?"

"I'm sure."

* * * * *

AFTER LUNCH AND FINISHING UP SOME OVERDUE WORK, JACK returned half of his phone messages and decided to leave the rest until the following day. Looking out the window, he turned his thoughts fully to Luther Whitney. What he could be involved in Jack could only guess. The most puzzling aspect was that Luther was a loner in private life and with his work. Back when he was with the PD, Jack had checked on some of Luther's priors. He worked alone. Even on the cases where he hadn't been arrested but had been questioned, there was never an issue of more than one person involved. Then who could these other people be? A fence Luther had somehow ripped off? But Luther had been in the business much too long to do something like that. It wasn't worth it. His victim perhaps? Maybe they couldn't prove Luther had committed the crime but nevertheless held a vendetta against him. But who held that sort of grudge for getting burglarized? Jack could understand if someone had been hurt or killed, but Luther was not capable of that.

He sat down at his small conference table and thought back for a moment to the night before with Kate. It had been the most painful experience of his life, even more so than when Kate had left him. But he had said what needed to be said.

He rubbed his eyes. At this moment in his life the Whitneys weren't especially welcome. But he had promised Luther. Why had he done that? He loosened his tie. At some point he would have to draw the line, or cut the cord, if only for his own mental well-being. Now he was hoping that his promised favor would never come due.

He went down and got a soda from the kitchen, sat back down at his desk and finished up the bills for last month. The firm was invoicing Baldwin Enterprises roughly three hundred thou a month and the work was accelerating. While Jack had been gone, Jennifer had sent over two new matters that would occupy a regiment of associates for about six months. Jack quickly calculated his profit sharing for the quarter and whistled under his breath when he got an approximate. It was almost too easy.

Things were really improving between Jennifer and him. His brain told him not to screw that up. The organ in the center of his chest wasn't so sure, but he was thinking that his brain should start taking command of his life. It wasn't that their relationship had changed. It was only that his expectation of that relationship had. Was that a compromise on his part? Probably. But who said you could manage to

get through life without compromise. Kate Whitney had tried and look what it had gotten her.

He phoned Jennifer's office, but she wasn't there. Gone for the day. He checked his watch. Five-thirty. When she wasn't traveling, Jennifer Baldwin rarely left the office before eight. Jack looked at his calendar. She was in town the whole week. When he had tried her from the airport last night there had been no answer either. He hoped nothing was wrong.

As he was contemplating leaving and heading over to her house, Dan Kirksen popped his head in.

"Could I trouble you for a minute, Jack?"

Jack hesitated. The little man and his bow ties irritated Jack, and he knew exactly why. Deferential as hell, Kirksen would have treated Jack like a piece of manure had he not controlled millions in business. On top of that, Jack knew that Kirksen desperately wanted to treat him like a piece of shit anyway, and he hoped to accomplish that goal one day.

"I was thinking about heading out. I've been hitting it pretty heavy lately."

"I know." Kirksen smiled. "The whole firm's been talking about it. Sandy better watch out—by all accounts Walter Sullivan is very enamored with you."

Jack smiled to himself. Lord was the only person whom Kirksen wanted to kick in the ass more than Jack. Lord without Sullivan would be vulnerable. Jack could read all those thoughts as they passed behind the spectacles of the firm's managing partner.

"I don't think Sandy has anything to worry about."

"Of course not. It'll just take a few minutes. Conference room number one." Kirksen disappeared as quickly as he had appeared.

What the hell was all this about? Jack wondered. He grabbed his coat and walked down the hallway. As he passed a couple of fellow associates in the hallway, they gave him sidelong glances that only increased his puzzlement.

The sliding doors to the conference room were closed, which was unusual unless something was going on inside. Jack slid back one of the thick doors. The dark room confronting him exploded into bright light, and Jack looked on in amazement as the party came into focus. The banner on the far wall said it all:

CONGRATULATIONS PARTNER!

Lord presided over the lavish affair of drinks and an expensive, catered spread. Jennifer was there, along with her father and mother.

"I am so proud of you, sweetie." She had already consumed several drinks and her soft eyes and gentle caresses told Jack things would only get better later that night.

"Well, we can thank your dad for this partnership."

"Uh-uh, lover. If you weren't doing a good job, Daddy would cut you loose in a New York minute. Give yourself some credit. You think Sandy Lord and Walter Sullivan are easy to please? Honey, you pleased Walter Sullivan, stunned him even, and there's only a handful of attorneys who have ever done that."

Jack swallowed the rest of his drink and contemplated that statement. It sounded plausible. He had scored big with Sullivan, and who was to say Ransome

Baldwin wouldn't have taken his business elsewhere if Jack hadn't been up to the task?

"Maybe you're right."

"Of course I'm right, Jack. If this firm were a football team, you'd be MVP or rookie of the year, maybe both." Jennifer took another drink and slid her arm around Jack's waist.

"And on top of that, you can now afford to support me in the lifestyle I've grown accustomed to." She pinched his arm.

"Grown accustomed to. Right! Try, from birth." They stole a quick kiss.

"You'd better mingle, superstar." She pushed him away and went in search of her parents.

Jack looked around. Every person in this room was a millionaire. He was easily the poorest of them all, but his prospects probably surpassed all of theirs. His base income had just quadrupled. His profit sharing for the year would easily be double that. It occurred to him that he too was now, technically, a millionaire. Who would've thought it, when four years ago a million dollars seemed to be more money than existed on the planet?

He had not entered law to become rich. He had spent years working as hard as he ever had for what amounted to pennies. But he was entitled now, wasn't he? This was the typical American Dream, wasn't it? But what was it about that dream that made you feel guilty when you finally attained it?

He felt a big arm around his shoulder. He turned to look at Sandy Lord, red eyes and all staring at him.

"Surprised the hell out of you, didn't we?"

Jack had to agree with that. Sandy's breath was a mixture of hard liquor and roast beef. It reminded Jack of their very first encounter at Fillmore's, not a pleasant memory. He subtly distanced himself from his intoxicated partner.

"Look around this room, Jack. There's not a person here, with the possible exception of yours truly, who wouldn't love to be in your shoes."

"It seems a little overwhelming. It happened so fast." Jack was more talking to himself than to Lord.

"Hell, these things always do. For the fortunate few, wham, zero to the top in seconds. Improbable success is just that: improbable. But that's what makes it so damn satisfying. By the way, let me shake your hand for taking such good care of Walter."

"Pleasure, Sandy. I like the man."

"By the way, I'm having a little get-together at my place on Saturday. Some people are going to be there you should meet. See if you can persuade your extremely attractive Significant Other to attend. She might find some marketing opportunities. Girl's a natural hustler just like her daddy."

* * * * *

JACK SHOOK THE HAND OF EVERY PARTNER IN THE PLACE, SOME more than once. By nine o'clock he and Jennifer were headed home in her company limo. By one o'clock they had already made love twice. By one-thirty Jennifer was sound asleep.

Jack wasn't.

He stood by the window looking out at the few stray snowflakes that had started to fall. An early winter storm system had settled in over the area although accumulations were not supposed to be significant. Jack's thoughts were not on the weather, however. He looked over at Jennifer. She was dressed in a silk nightgown, nestled between satin sheets, in a bed the size of his apartment's bedroom. He looked up at his old friends the murals. Their new place was supposed to be ready by Christmas, although the very proper Baldwin family would never allow patent cohabitation until the vows were exchanged. The interiors were being redone under the sharp eye of his fiancée to suit their individual tastes and to boldly cast their own personal statement— whatever the hell that meant. As he studied the medieval faces on the ceiling it occurred to Jack that they were probably laughing at him.

He had just made partner in the most prestigious firm in town, was the toast of some of the most influential people you could imagine, every one of them eager to advance his already meteoric career even further. He had it all. From the beautiful princess, to the rich, old father-in-law, to the hal lowed if utterly ruthless mentor, to serious bucks in the bank. With an army of the powerful right behind him and a truly limitless future, Jack never felt more alone than he did that night. And despite all his willpower, his thoughts continually turned to an old, frightened and angry man, and his emotionally spent daughter. With those twin beauties swirling in his head he silently watched the gentle fall of snowflakes until the softened edges of daybreak greeted him.

* * * * *

THE OLD WOMAN WATCHED THROUGH THE DUSTY VENETIAN blinds that covered the living room window as the dark sedan pulled into her driveway. The arthritis in both grossly swollen knees made getting up difficult, much less trying to move herself around. Her back was permanently bent and the lungs were dense and unforgiving after fifty years of tar and nicotine bombardment. She was counting down to the end; her body had carried her about as far as it could. Longer than her daughter's had.

She fingered the letter that she kept in the pocket of her old, pink dressing gown that failed to completely cover the red, blistered ankles. She figured they would show up sooner or later. After Wanda had come back from the police station, she knew it was a matter of time before something like this happened. The tears welled up in her eyes as she thought back to the last few weeks.

"It was my fault, Momma." Her daughter had sat in the tiny kitchen where, as a little girl, she had helped her mother bake cookies and can tomatoes and stringbeans harvested from the strip of garden out back. She had repeated those words over and over as she slumped forward on the table, her body convulsing with every word. Edwina had tried to reason with her daughter but she was not eloquent enough to dent the shroud of guilt that surrounded the slender woman who had started life as a roly-poly baby with thick dark hair and horseshoe legs. She had shown Wanda the letter but it had done no good. It was beyond the old woman to make her child understand.

Now she was gone and the police had come. And now Edwina had to do the right thing. And at eighty-one and Godfearing, Edwina was going to lie to the police, which was to her the only thing she could do.

"I'm sorry about your daughter, Mrs. Broome." Frank's words rang sincere to the old woman's ears. A trickle of a tear slipped down the deep crevices of her aged face.

The note Wanda had left behind was given to Edwina Broome and she looked at it through a thick magnifying glass that lay on the table within easy reach. She looked at the earnest face of the detective. "I can't imagine what she was thinking when she wrote this."

"You understand that a robbery took place at the Sullivan home? That Christine Sullivan was murdered by whoever it was that broke in?"

"I heard that on the television right after it happened. That was terrible. Terrible."

"Did your daughter ever talk to you about the incident?"

"Well of course she did. She was so upset by it all. She and Mrs. Sullivan got along real well, real well. It broke her up."

"Why do you think she took her own life?"

"If I could tell you, I would."

She let that ambiguous statement hang in front of Frank's face until he folded the paper back up.

"Did your daughter tell you anything about her work that might shed some light on the murder?"

"No. She liked her job pretty much. They treated her real well from what she said. Living in that big house, that's real nice."

"Mrs. Broome, I understand that Wanda was in trouble with the law a while back."

"A *long* while back, Detective. A *long* while back. And she lived a good life since then." Edwina Broome's eyes had narrowed, her lips set in a firm line, as she stared down Seth Frank.

"I'm sure she did," Frank added quickly. "Did Wanda bring anyone by to see you in the last few months. Someone you didn't know perhaps?"

Edwina shook her head. That much was the truth.

Frank eyed her for a long moment. The cataract-filled eyes stared straight back at him.

"I understand your daughter was out of the country when the incident happened?"

"Went down to that island with the Sullivans. They go every year I'm told."

"But Mrs. Sullivan didn't go."

"I suppose not, since she was murdered up here while they were down there, Detective."

Frank almost smiled. This old lady wasn't nearly as dumb as she was making out to be. "You wouldn't have any idea why Mrs. Sullivan didn't go. Something Wanda might have told you?"

Edwina shook her head, stroked a silver and white cat that jumped up on her lap.

"Well, thank you for talking to me. Again I'm sorry about your daughter."

"Thank you, I am too. Very sorry."

As she wrenched herself up to see him to the door, the letter fell out of her pocket. Her weary heart skipped a beat as Frank bent down, picked it up without glancing at it and handed it to her.

She watched him pull out of the driveway. She slowly eased herself back down in the chair by the fireplace and unfolded the letter.

It was in a man's hand she knew well: *I didn't do it. But you wouldn't believe me if I told you who did.*

For Edwina Broome that was all she needed to know. Luther Whitney had been a friend for a long time, and had only broken into that house because of Wanda. If the police caught up to him, it would not be with her assistance.

And what her friend had asked her to do she would. God help her, it was the only decent thing she could do.

* * * * *

SETH FRANK AND BILL BURTON SHOOK HANDS AND SAT DOWN. They were in Frank's office and the sun was barely up.

"I appreciate your seeing me, Seth."

"It is a little unusual."

"Damn unusual if you ask me." Burton grinned. "Mind if I light one up?"

"How about I join you?" Both men pulled out their packs.

Burton bent his match forward as he settled back in his chair.

"I've been with the Service a long time and this is a first for me. But I can understand it. Old man Sullivan is one of the President's best friends. Helped get him started in politics. A real mentor. They both go way back. Just between you and me, I don't think the President actually wants us to do much more than give an impression of involvement. We are in no way looking to step on your toes."

"Not that you have jurisdiction to do that anyway."

"Exactly, Seth. Exactly. Hell, I was a state trooper for eight years. I know how police investigations go. The last thing you need is somebody else looking over your goddamned shoulder."

The wariness started to fade from Frank's eyes. An ex-state trooper turned Secret Service agent. This guy was really a career law enforcement person. In Frank's book you didn't get much better than that.

"So what's your proposal?"

"I see my role as an information pipeline to the President. Something breaks you give me a call and I'll fill in the President. Then when he sees Walter Sullivan he can speak intelligently about the case. Believe me, it's not all smoke and mirrors. The President is genuinely concerned about the case." Burton smiled inwardly.

"And no interference from the feds. No second-guessing?"

"Hell, I'm not the FBI. It's not a federal case. Look at me as the civilian emissary of a VIP. Not much more than a professional courtesy really."

Frank looked around his office as he slowly absorbed the situation. Burton followed that gaze and tried to size up Frank as precisely as possible. Burton had known many detectives. Most had average capabilities, which, coupled with an exponentially increasing caseload, resulted in a very low arrest and much lower conviction rate. But he had checked out Seth Frank. The guy was former NYPD

with a string of citations a mile long. Since his coming to Middleton County, there had not been one unsolved homicide. Not one. It was a rural county to be sure, but a one hundred percent solve rate was still pretty impressive. All those facts made Burton very comfortable. For although the President had requested that Burton keep in contact with the police in order to fulfill his pledge to Sullivan, Burton had his own reason for wanting access to the investigation.

"If something breaks really fast, I might not be able to apprise you right away."

"I'm not asking for miracles, Seth, just a little info when you get a chance. That's all." Burton stood up, crushing out his cigarette. "We got a deal?"

"I'll do my best, Bill."

"A man can't ask for more than that. So, you got any leads?"

Seth Frank shrugged. "Maybe. Might peter out, you never know. You know how that goes."

"Tell me about it." Burton started to leave and then looked back. "Hey, as some quid pro quo if you need any red tape cut during your investigation, access to databases, stuff like that, you let me know and your request gets a top priority. Here's my number."

Frank took the offered card. "I appreciate that, Bill."

* * * * *

TWO HOURS LATER SETH FRANK LIFTED UP HIS PHONE AND nothing happened. No dial tone, no outside line. The phone company was called.

An hour later, Seth Frank again picked up his phone and the dial tone was there. The system was fixed. The phone closet was kept locked at all times, but even if someone had been able to look inside, the mass of lines and other equipment would have been indecipherable to the layperson. Not that the police force ordinarily worried about someone tapping their lines.

Bill Burton's lines of communication were open now, a lot wider than Seth Frank had ever dreamed they would be.

Chapter 15

I THINK IT'S A MISTAKE, ALAN. I THINK WE SHOULD BE distancing ourselves, not trying to take over the investigation." Russell stood next to the President's desk in the Oval Office.

Richmond was seated at the desk going over some recent health care legislation; a quagmire to say the least and not one he planned to expend much political capital on before the election.

"Gloria, get with the program, will you?" Richmond was preoccupied; well ahead in the polls, he thought the gap should be even greater. His anticipated opponent, Henry Jacobs, was short, and not particularly good-looking or a great speaker. His sole claim to fame was thirty years of toiling on behalf of the country's indigent and less fortunate. Consequently, he was a walking media disaster. In the age of sound bites and photo ops, being able to look and talk a big game was an absolute necessity. Jacobs was not even the best among a very weak group that had seen

its two leading candidates knocked out over assorted scandals, sexually based and otherwise. All of which made Richmond wonder why his thirty-two-point lead in the polls wasn't fifty.

He finally turned to look at his Chief of Staff.

"Look, I promised Sullivan I'd keep on top of it. I said that to a goddamned national audience that got me a dozen points in the polls that apparently your well-oiled reelection team can't improve upon. Do I need to go out and start a war to get the polls where they should be?"

"Alan, the election's in the bag; we both know that. But we have to play not to lose. We have to be careful. That person is still out there. What if he's caught?"

Exasperated, Richmond stood up. "Will you forget him! If you'd stop to think about it for a second, the fact that I have closely associated myself with the case takes away the only possible shred of credibility the guy might have had. If I hadn't publicly proclaimed my interest some nosy reporter might have pricked up his ears at an allegation that the President was somehow involved in the death of Christine Sullivan. But now that I've told the nation that I'm mad and determined to bring the perpetrator to justice, if the allegation is made, people will think the guy saw me on TV and he's a whacko."

Russell sat down in a chair. The problem was Richmond didn't have all the facts. If he knew about the letter opener would he have taken these same steps? If he knew about the note and photo Russell had received? She was withholding information from her boss, information that could ruin both of them, absolutely and completely.

* * * * *

AS RUSSELL WALKED DOWN THE HALLWAY BACK TO HER office, she didn't notice Bill Burton staring at her from a passageway. The look was not one of affection, not anywhere close.

Stupid, stupid bitch. From where he was standing he could've popped three slugs into the back of her head. No sweat. His talk with Collin had cleared up the picture completely. If he had called the police that night, there would have been trouble, but not for him and Collin. The President and his skirted sidekick would've taken all the heat. The woman had snookered him. And now he was barely hanging on the edge of all that he had worked for, sweated for, taken bullets for.

He knew far better than Russell what they were all confronted with. And it was because of that knowledge that he had made his decision. It had not been an easy one, but it was the only one he could make. It was the reason he had visited Seth Frank. And it was also the reason he had had the detective's phone line tapped. Burton knew his course of action was probably a long shot, but they were all well outside the range of guarantees of any kind now. You just had to go with the cards you had and hope Lady Luck would smile on you at some point.

Again Burton shook with anger at the position the woman had put him in. The decision her stupidity had caused him to make. It was all he could do not to run down the stairs and break her neck. But he promised himself one thing. If he lived to do nothing else, he would ensure that this woman would suffer. He would rip

her from the safe confines of her power career and hurl her right into the shit of reality—and he would enjoy every minute of it.

* * * * *

GLORIA RUSSELL CHECKED HER HAIR AND LIPSTICK IN THE mirror. She knew she was acting like a damned love-struck teenager, but there was something so naive and yet so masculine about Tim Collin that it was actually starting to distract her attention from her work, something that had never happened before. But it was a historical fact that men in power positions usually got some action on the side. Not an ardent feminist, Russell saw nothing wrong with emulating her male counterparts. As she saw it, it was just another perk of the position.

As she slipped out of her dress and underwear and into her most transparent nightgown, she kept reminding herself of why she was seducing the younger man. She needed him for two reasons. One, he knew about her blunder with the letter opener and she needed absolute assurance that he keep quiet about that, and, second, she needed his help to get that piece of evidence back. Compelling, rational reasons and yet tonight, like all the nights before, they were the furthest things from her mind.

At that moment she felt she could fuck Tim Collin every night for the rest of her life and never tire of the feelings that flooded through her body after each encounter. Her brain could rationalize a thousand reasons why she should stop, but the remainder of her body was, for once, not listening.

The knock on the door came a little early. She finished primping her hair, quickly checked her makeup again, and then awkwardly slipped into her heels as she hurried down the hallway. She opened the front door and it felt like someone had plunged a knife between her breasts.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

Burton put one foot inside the half-opened door and one massive hand against the door itself.

“We need to talk.”

Russell unconsciously checked behind him for the man she had expected to make love to her tonight.

Burton noted the glance. “Sorry, lover-boy ain’t coming, Chief.”

She tried to slam the door closed, but couldn’t budge the two-hundred-and-forty-pound Burton an inch. With maddening ease he pushed open the door and went inside, shutting the door behind him.

He stood in the entranceway looking at the Chief of Staff, who was now desperately trying to understand what he was doing there at the same time she was trying to cover up strategic parts of her anatomy. She was not succeeding with either.

“Get out, Burton! How dare you come barging in here? You’re through.”

Burton moved past her into the living room, barely brushing against her as he walked by.

“Either we talk here or we talk someplace else. It’s up to you.”

She followed him into the living room. “What the hell are you talking about? I told you to get out. You’re forgetting your place in the official hierarchy, aren’t you?”

He turned to face her. "You always answer the door dressed like that?" He could understand Collin's interest. The nightgown did nothing to hide the Chief of Staff's voluptuous figure. Who would've thought? He might have been aroused despite twenty-four years with the same woman and four children spawned from that marriage, except for the fact that he was absolutely repulsed by the half-naked woman standing across from him.

"Go to hell! Go straight to hell, Burton."

"That's probably where we're all going to end up, so why don't you go get on some clothes and then we're going to talk and then I'll leave. But until then I ain't going anywhere."

"Do you realize what you're doing? I can crush you."

"Right!" He pulled out the photos from his jacket pocket and tossed them down on the table. Russell tried to ignore them, but finally picked them up. She steadied her trembling legs by placing a hand on top of a table.

"You and Collin make a beautiful couple. You really do. I don't think the media will lose sight of that fact. Might make for an interesting movie of the week. What do you think? Chief of Staff gets brains screwed out by young Secret Service agent. You could call it *The Fuck Heard 'Round the World*. That's catchy, don't you think?"

She slapped him, as hard as she had ever slapped anyone. Pain shot through her arm. It had been like hitting a piece of wood. Burton took her hand and twisted it sideways until she screamed.

"Listen lady, I know every fucking thing that's going on here. Everything. The letter opener. Who's got it. Most importantly, how he got it. And now this recent correspondence from our little larcenous voyeur. Now any way you cut it, we got us a big problem, and seeing that you've screwed everything up from the get-go, I think a change of command is in order. Now go get out of the hooker clothes, and come back in here. If you want me to save your horny little ass, you'll do exactly what I tell you to do. Do you understand? Because if you don't then I suggest we go have a little chat with the President. It's up to you. Chief!" Burton spat out the last word, communicating unequivocally his absolute disgust with her.

Burton slowly let go of her arm but still towered over her like a mountain. His massive bulk seemed to block out her ability to think. Russell gingerly rubbed her arm and almost timidly looked up at him as the hopelessness of her situation started to sink in.

She went immediately to the bathroom and threw up. It seemed like she was spending an increasing amount of her time doing that. The cold water on her face finally started to work through the throes of nausea until she was able to sit up and then walk slowly to her bedroom.

Her head spinning, she changed into long pants and a thick sweater, dropping the negligee on the bed, too ashamed to even look at it as the garment floated down; her dreams for a night of pleasure shattered with terrifying abruptness. She replaced her red stilettos with a pair of brown flats.

Patting her cheeks down as she sensed the rush of blood there, she felt like she had just been caught by her father with a boy's hands far up her dress. That event had actually occurred in her life and probably contributed to her absolute focus on her career to the detriment of everything else, so embarrassed had she been by the

entire episode. Her father had called her a whore and beaten her so badly that she had missed a week of school. She had prayed her entire life that she would never feel such embarrassment again. Until tonight that prayer had been answered.

She forced herself to breathe regularly and when she went back into the living room she noted that Burton had taken his jacket off and a pot of coffee sat on the table. She eyed the thick holster with its deadly occupant.

“Cream and sugar, right?”

She managed to meet his gaze. “Yes.”

He poured out the coffee and she sat down across from him.

She looked down at her cup. “How much did Ti ... Collin tell you?”

“About the two of you? Nothing really. He’s not the kind of guy who would. I think he’s fallen for you pretty hard. You’ve fucked with his head and his heart. Nice going.”

“You don’t understand anything, do you?” She almost exploded out of her chair.

Burton was maddeningly calm. “I understand this much. We’re about one inch from the edge of the cliff and where we’re headed I can’t even see the bottom. Frankly, I don’t give a shit who you’re sleeping with. That’s not why I’m here.”

Russell sat back down and forced herself to drink the coffee. Her stomach started to finally settle down.

Burton leaned across and held her arm as gently as he could.

“Look, Ms. Russell. I’m not going to sit here and bullshit and tell you I’m here because I think the world of you and I want to get you out of a jam, and you don’t have to pretend to love me either. But the way I look at it, like it or not, we’re in this thing together. And the only way I see us making it through is to work as a team. That’s the deal I’m offering.” Burton sat back and watched her.

Russell put down her coffee and dabbed a napkin against her lips.

“All right.”

Burton immediately leaned forward. “Just to recount, the letter opener still has both the President’s and Christine Sullivan’s prints on it. And their blood. Correct?”

“Yes.”

“Any prosecutor would be salivating for that thing. We’ve got to get it back.”

“We’ll buy it. He wants to sell it. The next communication will tell us how much.”

Burton shocked her for the second time. He tossed the envelope across.

“The guy’s savvy, but at some point he has to tell us a drop point.”

Russell took out the letter and read it. The writing was block print as before. The message was brief:

Coordinates coming soon. Recommend advance steps be taken for financial backing. For such prime property suggest mid seven figures. Would suggest consequences of default be considered thoroughly. Respond via Post personals if interested.

“He’s got quite a writing style, doesn’t he? Succinct, but he gets his point across.” Burton poured another cup of coffee. Then he tossed across another photograph of what Russell was desperately hoping to retrieve.

"He sure likes to tease, doesn't he, Ms. Russell?"

"At least it sounds like he's ready to deal."

"We're talking some big bucks. You prepared for that?"

"Let me worry about that piece, Burton. Money won't be the problem." Her arrogance was returning just in time.

"Probably not," he agreed. "By the way, why the hell didn't you let Collin wipe that thing clean?"

"I don't have to answer that."

"No, actually you don't, Madam President."

Russell and Burton actually smiled at each other. Maybe she had been wrong. Burton was a pain in her ass, but he was cunning and careful. She realized now that she needed those qualities more than Collin's gallant naïveté even if it was accompanied by a fresh, hard body.

"There's one more piece to the puzzle, Chief."

"And that is?"

"When it comes time to kill this guy, are you gonna get squeamish on me?"

Russell choked on her coffee and Burton had to literally pound her on the back until she started breathing normally again.

"I guess that answers that."

"What the hell are you talking about, Burton—killing him?"

"You still don't understand what's going on here, do you? I thought you were some brilliant professor somewhere. Ivory towers ain't what they used to be I guess. Or maybe you need a little dose of common sense. Let me explain this real simply for you. This guy was an eyewitness to the President trying to murder Christine Sullivan, Sullivan trying to return the favor, and me and Collin doing our job and taking her out before the President gets stuck like a side of beef. An eyewitness! Remember that term. Before I found out about this little piece of evidence you left behind, I figured our asses were cooked anyway. Guy leaks the story somehow, some way and it snowballs from there. Some things we just can't explain, right?"

"But nothing happens and I figure maybe we all got lucky and this guy is too afraid to come forward. Now I find out about this blackmail shit and I ask myself what does that mean."

Burton looked questioningly at Russell.

She answered, "It means he wants money in exchange for the letter opener. It's his lottery. What else could it mean, Burton?"

Burton shook his head. "No, it means this guy is fucking with us. Playing mind games. It means we got an eyewitness out there who's getting a little daring, a little adventurous. On top of that it took a real professional to crack the Sullivan nest. So this guy is not the type who's gonna scare too easily."

"So? If we get back the letter opener aren't we home free?" Russell was dimly beginning to see what Burton was getting at, but it still wasn't clear.

"If he doesn't keep photos of it, which might end up on the front page of the *Post* any day now. An enlarged photo of the President's palm print on a letter opener that came from Christine Sullivan's bedroom on page one. Probably make for an interesting series of articles. Grounds enough for the papers to start digging around. Even the slightest hint of a connection between the President and

Sullivan's murder and it's over. Sure, we can argue the guy's a whacko and the picture's a clever forgery, and maybe we'll succeed. But one of those photos showing up at the *Post* doesn't concern me half as much as our other problem."

"Which is?" Russell sat forward now, her voice low, almost husky, as something terrible was beginning to dawn on her.

"You seem to have forgotten that this guy saw everything we did that night. Everything. What we were wearing. Everybody's name. How we wiped the place clean, which I'm sure the police are still scratching their heads over. He can tell them how we arrived and how we left. He can tell them to check the President's arm for traces of a knife wound. He can tell them how we dug one slug out of the wall and where we were standing when we fired. He can tell them everything they want to know. And when he does, they'll at first think he knows all about the crime scene because he was there and was actually the trigger man. But then the cops will start to realize that this was more than a one-man show. They'll wonder how he knows all this other stuff. Some of which he couldn't have made up and which they can verify. They'll begin to wonder about all those little details that just don't make sense but that this guy can explain."

Russell stood up and went over to the bar and poured her self a scotch. She poured one for Burton too. She thought about what Burton had said. The man *had* seen everything. Including her and an unconscious President having sex. Miserable, she pushed the thought from her mind.

"Why would he come forward after he'd been paid off?"

"Who says he actually has to come forward? Remember like you said that night? He could do it from a distance. Laugh all the way to the bank and take down an administration. Hell, he can write it all down and fax it to the cops. They'll have to investigate it and who's to say they won't find something? If they got any physical evidence from that bedroom, hair root, saliva, seminal fluid, all they need is a body to match it against. Before there was no reason for them to look our way, but now, who the hell knows? You get a DNA match against Richmond, we're dead. Dead.

"And so what if the guy never comes forward voluntarily? The detective on the case is no bonehead. And my gut tells me that, given time, he's gonna find the sonofabitch. And a guy looking at life in prison or maybe the ultimate penalty will talk his head off, believe me. I've seen it happen too many times."

Russell felt a sudden chill. What Burton said made absolute sense. The President had sounded so convincing. Neither of them had even considered this line.

"Besides, I don't know about you, but I don't plan on spending the rest of my life looking over my shoulder waiting for that shoe to drop."

"But how can we find him?"

It amused Burton that the Chief of Staff had fallen in with his plans without much argument. The value of life apparently did not mean much to this woman when her personal well-being was threatened. He hadn't expected less.

"Before I knew about the letters, I thought we had no chance. But with blackmail, at some point you gotta have the payoff. And then he's vulnerable."

"But he'll just ask for a wire transfer. If what you say is true, this guy's too smart to be looking for a bag of money in a Dumpster. And we won't know where the letter opener will be until long after he's gone."

"Maybe, maybe not. You let me worry about that. What is imperative is that you string the guy along just a bit. If he wants the deal done in two days, you make it four. Whatever you put in the personals make it sincere. I'll leave that up to you, Professor. But you've got to buy me some time." Burton got up. She grabbed his arm.

"What are you going to do?"

"The less you know about it the better. But you do understand that if the whole thing blows up, we all go down, including the President? There's nothing at this point I could or would do to prevent that. As far as I'm concerned you both deserve it."

"You don't sugarcoat things, do you?"

"Never found it useful." He put on his coat. "By the way, you realize that Richmond beat Christine Sullivan up bad, don't you? From the autopsy report it looks like he tried to turn her neck into a spaghetti loop."

"So I understand. Is that important to know?"

"You don't have any children, do you?"

Russell shook her head.

"I've got four. Two daughters, not much younger than Christine Sullivan. As a parent you think about things like that. Loved ones getting messed up by some asshole like that. Just wanted you to know the kind of guy our boss is. That is, if he ever gets frisky, you might want to think twice."

He left her sitting in the living room contemplating her wrecked life.

As he climbed into his car, he took a moment to light a cigarette. Burton had spent the last few days reviewing the preceding twenty years of his life. The price being paid to preserve those years was heading into the stratosphere. Was it worth it? Was he prepared to pay it? He could go to the cops. Tell them everything. His career would be over, of course. The police could get him on obstruction of justice, conspiracy to commit murder, maybe some bullshit manslaughter charge for popping Christine Sullivan and other assorted nickel-and-dime stuff. It would all add up, though. Even cutting a deal he was going to do some serious time. But he could do the time. He could also endure the scandal. All the shit the papers would write. He'd go down in history as a criminal. He'd be inextricably linked to the notoriously corrupt Richmond administration. And yet he could take that, if it came to it. What the hard-as-rock Bill Burton could not take was the look in his children's eyes. He would never again see pride and love. And the absolute and complete trust that their daddy, this big hulk of a man, was, indisputably, one of the good guys. That was something that was too tough even for him.

Those were the thoughts that had been racing through Burton's head ever since his talk with Collin. A part of him wished he hadn't asked. That he had never found out about the blackmail attempt. Because that had given him an opportunity. And opportunities were always accompanied by choices. Burton had finally made his. He wasn't proud of it. If things worked out according to plan, he would do his best to forget it had ever happened. If things didn't work out? Well, that was just too bad. But if he went down, so would everyone else.

That thought triggered another idea. Burton reached across and popped open the car's glove compartment. He pulled out a minicassette recorder and a handful of tapes. He looked back up at the house as he puffed on his cigarette.

He put the car in gear. As he passed Gloria Russell's house, he figured the lights there would remain on for a long time.

Chapter 16

LAURA SIMON HAD JUST ABOUT GIVEN UP HOPE OF FINDING IT. The exterior and interior of the van had been minutely dusted and then fumed for prints. A special laser from the state police headquarters in Richmond had even been brought up, but every time they found a match, it was someone else's prints. Someone they could account for. She knew Pettis's prints by heart now. He was unfortunate enough to have all arches, one of the rarest of fingerprint compositions, as well as a tiny scar on his thumb that had in fact led to his arrest years earlier for grand-theft auto. Perps with scars across their fingertips were an ident tech's best friend.

Budzinski's prints had shown up once because he'd stuck his finger in a solvent and then pressed it against a piece of plywood kept in the back of the van, a print as perfect as if she had fingerprinted him herself.

All told, she had found fifty-three prints, but none were of any use to her. She sat in the middle of the van and glumly looked around its interior. She had gone over every spot where a print could reasonably be expected to exist. She had hit every nook and cranny of the vehicle with the handheld laser and was running out of ideas where else to look.

For the twentieth time she went through the motions of men loading the truck, driving it—the rearview mirror was an ideal spot for prints—moving the equipment, lifting the bottles of cleaners, dragging the hoses, opening and closing the doors. The difficulty of her task was increased by the fact that prints tended to disappear over time, depending on the surface containing them and the surrounding climate. Wet and warm were the best preservatives, dry and cool, the worst.

She opened the glove compartment and went through the contents again. Every item had already been inventoried and dusted. She idly flipped through the van's maintenance log. Purplish stains on the paper reminded her that the lab's stock of ninhydrin was low. The pages were well-worn although the van had had very few breakdowns the three years it had been in commission. Apparently the company believed in a rigorous maintenance program. Each entry was carefully noted, initialed and dated. The company had its own inhouse maintenance crew.

As she scanned the pages, one entry caught her eye. All the other entries had been initialed by either a G. Henry or an H. Thomas, both mechanics employed by Metro. This entry had J.P. initialed beside it. Jerome Pettis. The entry indicated that the van had run low on oil and a couple of quarts had been added. All that was terribly unexciting except that the date was the day the Sullivan place had been cleaned.

Simon's breathing accelerated slightly as she crossed her fingers and got out of the van. She popped the hood and began looking at the engine. She shone her

light around and within a minute she found it. An oily thumbprint that preened back at her from the side of the windshield washer fluid reservoir. Where someone would naturally rest their hand when they were applying leverage to open or close the oil cap. And a glance told her it wasn't Pettis's. Nor was it either of the two mechanics. She grabbed a file card with Budizinski's prints on it. She was ninety-nine percent sure they weren't his and she turned out to be right. She carefully dusted and lifted the print, filled out a card and nearly ran the entire way to Frank's office. She found him with his hat and overcoat on, which he quickly removed.

"You're shitting me, Laura."

"You want to check with Pettis to see if he remembers Rogers adding the oil that day?"

Frank called the cleaning company, but Pettis had already gone for the night. Calls to his home went unanswered.

Simon looked at the lift card like it was the most precious jewel in the world. "Forget it. I'll run it through our files. Stay all night if I have to. We can get Fairfax to access the state police AFIS, our damn terminal's still down." Simon was referring to the Automated Fingerprint Identification System housed in Richmond, where latent prints found at crime scenes could be compared against the ones on the state's computerized database.

Frank thought for a moment. "I think I can do one better."

"How's that?"

Frank pulled a card out of his pocket, picked up the phone and dialed. He spoke into the phone. "Agent Bill Burton please."

* * * * *

BURTON PICKED UP FRANK AND THEY DROVE DOWN TOGETHER to the FBI's Hoover Building, located on Pennsylvania Avenue. Most tourists know the building as bulky and rather ugly and as a place not to miss on a visit to D.C. Housed here was the National Crime Information Center, a computerized information system operated by the FBI, consisting of fourteen centralized-distributed types of databases and two subsystems that constituted the world's largest collection of data on known criminals. The Automated Identification System (AIS) component of NCIC was a cop's best friend. With tens of millions of criminal print cards on file, Frank's chances of a hit were measurably increased.

After depositing the print with FBI technicians—who had clear instructions that this assignment was to be moved to as near the top of the pile as possible—Burton and Frank stood outside in the hallway nervously sipping coffee.

"This is gonna take a little while, Seth. The computer's gonna kick out a bunch of probables. The techs will still have to make the ident manually. I'll hang out and let you know as soon as a match comes back."

Frank checked his watch. His youngest was in a school play that started in forty minutes. Her role was only that of a vegetable, but was right now the most important thing on earth to his little girl.

"You sure?"

"Just leave me a number where I can reach you."

Frank did so and hurried out. The print could turn out to be nothing, a gas station attendant, but something told Frank that was not the case. Christine Sullivan had been dead a while now. Trails that cold usually stayed as cold as the victim resting six feet under, the longest six feet any of them would ever have to face. But a cold trail had suddenly turned blazing hot; whether it would flicker out remained to be seen. For now, Frank was going to enjoy the warmth. He smiled, and not just at the thought of his six-year-old running around dressed as a cucumber.

Burton stared after him, smiling for a very different reason. The FBI used a sensitivity and reliability factor in excess of ninety percent when processing latents through the AFIS. That meant that no more than two probables, and most likely only one, would be kicked out of the system. In addition, Burton had obtained a higher priority for the search than he had told Frank. All of which gained Burton time, precious time.

Later that night, Burton stared down at a name that was totally unfamiliar to him.

LUTHER ALBERT WHITNEY.

DOB 8/5/29. His Social Security number was also listed; the first three digits were 179, indicating it had been issued in Pennsylvania. Whitney's physical description was given as five foot eight, a buck sixty, with a two-inch scar on his left forearm. That comported with Pettis's description of Rogers.

Using NCIC's Triple I (Interstate Identification Index) database, Burton had also gotten a good snapshot of the man's past. The report listed three prior felony convictions for burglary. Whitney had records in three different states. He had done lengthy time, last coming out of prison in the mid-1970s. Nothing since then. At least nothing the authorities knew about. Burton had known men like that before. They were career guys who just kept getting better and better at their chosen profession. He was betting Whitney was one of those types.

One hitch, the last known address was in New York and was almost twenty years old.

Taking the point of least resistance, Burton walked down the hallway to a phone cubicle and grabbed up all the phone books for the area. He tried D.C. first; surprisingly it was a blank. Northern Virginia was next. There were three Luther Whitneys listed. His next phone call went to the Virginia State Police, where he had a longtime contact. Division of Motor Vehicles records were accessed by computer. Two of the Luther Whitneys were twenty-three and eighty-five years old respectively. However, Luther Whitney of 1645 East Washington Avenue, Arlington, had been born on August 5, 1929, and his Social Security number, used in Virginia as the driver's license number, confirmed that he was the man. But was he Rogers? There was one way to find out.

Burton pulled out his notebook. Frank had been very courteous in letting Burton go through the investigation file. The phone rang three times and then Jerome Pettis answered. Vaguely identifying himself as being with Frank's office, Burton asked the question. Five long seconds followed while Burton tried to keep his nerves intact as he listened to the shallow breathing of the man on the other end of the line. The response was worth the short wait.

“Damn, that’s right. Engine almost locked up. Somebody had left the oil cap loose. Got Rogers to do it cuz he was sitting on the case of oil we carry in the back.”

Burton thanked him and hung up. He checked his watch. He still had time before he would have to leave Frank the message. Despite the mounting evidence, Burton still couldn’t be absolutely certain Whitney had been the guy in the vault, but Burton’s gut told him Whitney was the man. And although there was no way in hell Luther Whitney would have gone anywhere near his house after the murder, Burton wanted to get a better feel for the guy and maybe get some indication of where he’d gone. And the best way to do that was to check out where he lived. Before the cops did. He walked as quickly as he could to his car.

* * * * *

THE WEATHER HAD TURNED WET AND COLD AGAIN AS MOTHER Nature toyed with the most powerful city on earth. The wipers flapped relentlessly across the windshield. Kate didn’t exactly know why she was there. She had visited the place exactly once in all these years. And on that occasion she had sat out in the car while Jack had gone in to see him. To tell him that he and Luther’s only child were getting married. Jack had insisted, despite her maintaining that the man wouldn’t care. Apparently he had. He had come out on the front porch and looked at her, smiling, an awkward thrust to his body that proclaimed his hesitation in approaching her. Wanting to congratulate but not knowing exactly how, given their peculiar circumstances. He had shaken Jack’s hand, pounded him on the back, then looked over at her as if for approval.

She had resolutely looked away, arms folded, until Jack had climbed back in and they had driven off. She had caught the reflection of the small figure in the side mirror as they pulled away. He looked much smaller than she remembered, almost tiny. In her mind her father would forever represent an enormous monolith of all that she resented and feared in the world, that filled all space around it and dragged one’s breath away with its sheer, overpowering bulk. That creature obviously never existed, but she refused to admit that fact. But while she had not wanted to deal with that image ever again, she could not look away. For more than a minute as the car gathered speed her eyes dipped into the reflection of the man who had given her life and then taken it and her mother’s away with brutal finality.

As the car pulled away he had continued to look at her, a mixture of sadness and resignation on his features that had surprised her. But she had rationalized it away, as another of his tricks to make her feel guilty. She could not attribute benign qualities to any of his actions. He was a thief. He had no regard for the law. A barbarian in a civilized society. There was no possible room in his shell for sincerity. Then they had turned the corner and his image had disappeared, like it had been on a string and was suddenly pulled away.

Kate pulled into the driveway. The house was pitch dark. As she sat there her headlights reflected off the rear of the car parked in front of her and the glare hurt her eyes. She switched off the lights, took a deep breath to steady her nerves and climbed out into the cold and wetness.

The previous snowfall had been light, and what little residue there was crunched under her feet as she made her way up to the front door. The temperature promised icy conditions developing overnight. She placed one hand against the side of his car to balance herself as she walked. Despite not expecting to find her father home, she had washed and styled her hair, was encased in one of her suits normally reserved for court and had actually applied more than a dab of makeup. She was successful, in her own way, and if chance brought them face-to-face, she wanted him to realize that despite his maltreatment she had not only survived, she had flourished.

The key was still where Jack had told her it was so many years ago. It had always seemed ironic to her that a consummate burglar should leave his own property so accessible. As she unlocked the door and slowly went inside, she did not notice the car that had pulled to a stop on the other side of the street or the driver who watched her intently, and who was already writing down her license plate number.

The house had the built-up musty odor of a long-abandoned place. She had occasionally imagined what the place would look like on the inside. She had figured it to be neat and orderly and she was not disappointed.

In the darkness she sat down in a chair in the living room, not realizing it was her father's favorite and totally unaware that Luther had unconsciously done the same thing when he had visited her apartment.

The photo was on the mantel. It must've been almost thirty years old. Kate, held in her mother's arms, was swaddled from head to toe, a few wisps of tar-colored hair visible from under the pink bonnet; she had been born with a remarkably thick head of hair. Her father, calm-faced and wearing a snapbrim, was standing next to mother and daughter, his muscular hand touching Kate's tiny outstretched fingers.

Kate's mother had kept that same photo on her dressing table until her death. Kate had thrown it away the day of the funeral, cursing the intimacy between father and daughter that the image displayed. She had hurled it away right after her father had come by the house where she had exploded at him with a fury, an outburst that became more and more out of control since its target did not respond, did not fight back, but stood there and accepted the barrage. And the quieter he had become, the more angry she became until she had slapped him, with both hands, until others had pulled her away and held her down. And only then did her father put his hat back on, lay the flowers he had brought down on the table and, with an inflamed face from her pounding and water-filled eyes, he had walked out the door, closing it quietly behind him.

And it occurred to Kate as she sat in her father's chair that he too had been grieving that day. Grieving for a woman he had presumably loved for a good portion of his life and who certainly had loved him. She felt a catch in her throat and rushed to forestall it with pressure from her fingers.

She got up and moved through the house, peering cautiously into each room and then backing away, growing more and more nervous as she penetrated further and further into her father's domain. The bedroom door was ajar, and she finally decided to push it open all the way. As she moved into the room, she risked

turning on a light, and as her eyes adjusted to the exit from darkness they fell upon the nightstand and she drew nearer, finally sitting down on the bed.

The collection of photographs was, in essence, a small shrine to her. From the earliest age upward, her life was retold here. Each night as her father went to sleep, the last thing he saw was her. But what shocked her the most were the photos from later in life. Her graduation from college and law school. Her father had certainly not been invited to these events, but they were recorded here. None of the photos were posed. She was either walking or waving to someone or just standing there obviously unaware of the camera's presence. She moved on to the last photo. She was walking down the steps of the Alexandria Courthouse. Her first day in court, nervous as hell. A petty-misdemeanor case, General District Court Mickey Mouse stuff, but the big smile on her face proclaimed nothing less than absolute victory.

And she wondered how in the world she had never seen him. And then she wondered if she had but just would not admit it.

Her immediate reaction was anger. Her father had been spying on her all these years. All those special moments of her life. He had violated them. Violated her with his uninvited presence.

Her second reaction was more subtle. And as she felt it rising through her she abruptly jumped up from the bed and turned to flee the room.

That's when she thudded right into the big man standing there.

* * * * *

"AGAIN, I'M SORRY, MA'AM, I DIDN'T MEAN TO STARTLE YOU."

"Startle me? You scared the living hell out of me." Kate sat on the side of the bed, trying to regain her nerves, to stop shaking, but the chill in the house didn't help.

"Excuse me, but why is the Secret Service interested in my father?"

She looked at Bill Burton with something akin to fear in her eyes. At least he read it as fear. He had watched her in the bedroom, swiftly gauging her motives, her intent from her subtle body movements. A skill he had spent years developing, scanning endless crowds for the one or two true dangers that might be lurking there. His conclusions: estranged daughter and father. She had finally come looking for him. Things started to add up, and maybe in a very positive way for his purposes.

"We're not really, Ms. Whitney. But the police in Middleton County sure as hell are."

"Middleton?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'm sure you've read about the Christine Sullivan homicide." He let that statement hang out there to test her reaction. He got the expected one. Complete disbelief.

"You think my father had something to do with that?" It was a legitimately asked question. And not one framed particularly defensively. Burton deemed that significant and another positive for his plan, which had been forming the minute he'd laid eyes on her.

"The detective in charge of the case does. Apparently your father, as part of a carpet cleaning crew, and using a false name, was in the Sullivans' house a short time before the murder."

Kate caught her breath. Her father cleaning carpets? Of course, he had been casing the place. Figuring its weaknesses, just like before. Nothing had changed. But murder?

"I can't believe he killed that woman."

"Right, but you can believe he was trying to burgle that house can't you, Ms. Whitney? I mean this isn't the first time, is it, or the second?"

Kate looked down at her hands. Finally she shook her head.

"People change, ma'am. I don't know how close you've been to your father lately"—Burton noted the small but discernible jerk in her expression—"but the evidence is pretty strong that he was involved somehow. And the woman is dead. You've probably gotten a conviction on less evidence than that."

Kate looked at him suspiciously. "How do you know about me?"

"I see a woman sneaking into the house of a man the police are looking for I do what any law enforcement officer would do, I ran your license plate. Your reputation precedes you, Ms. Whitney. The state police think the world of you."

She looked around the room. "He's not here. It doesn't look like he's been here for a while."

"Yes, ma'am, I know. You wouldn't happen to know where he is, would you? He hasn't tried to contact you or anything?"

Kate thought of Jack and his late-night visitor. "No." The answer was quick, a little too quick for Burton's taste.

"It'll be better if he turns himself in, Ms. Whitney. You get some trigger-happy beat cop out there..." Burton expressively raised his eyebrows.

"I don't know where he is, Mr. Burton. My father and I ... we haven't been close ... for a long time."

"But you're here now and you knew where he kept the spare key."

Her voice rose an octave. "This is the first time I've stepped foot in this house."

Burton scrutinized her expression and decided she was telling the truth. Her unfamiliarity with the house had already led him pretty much to that conclusion, and also that she and her father were estranged.

"Is there any way you can get in touch with him?"

"Why? I really don't want to get involved in this, Mr. Burton."

"Well I'm afraid you already are, to a degree. It'd be better if you'd cooperate."

Kate slung her purse over her arm and stood up.

"Listen, Agent Burton, you can't bluff me, I've been in the business too long. If the police want to waste their time questioning me, I'm in the phone book. The government phone book under Commonwealth's Attorney. See you around."

She headed for the door.

"Ms. Whitney?"

She whirled round, ready for some verbal sparring. Secret Service or not, she wasn't going to take any crap from this guy.

"If your father committed a crime, then he should be tried by a jury of his peers and convicted. If he's innocent, he goes free. That's how the system's supposed to work. You know that better than I do."

Kate was about to respond when her eye caught the photos. Her first day in court. It seemed a century ago and was, in a lot more ways than she could ever admit to herself. That smile, the pie-in-the-sky dreams everybody starts with, nothing less than perfection the only goal. She had dropped back to earth a long time ago.

Whatever barbed remark she was going to come back with had just escaped her, lost in the smile of a pretty young woman with a lot she wanted to do with her life.

Bill Burton watched her turn and leave. He looked over at the photos and then back at the empty doorway.

Chapter 17

„YOU SHOULDN'T HAVE FUCKING DONE THAT, BILL. YOU SAID you were not going to interfere in the investigation. Hell, I ought to throw your keester right in jail. That'd go over real well with your boss.” Seth Frank slammed his desk drawer and stood up, eyes blazing at the big man.

Bill Burton stopped pacing and sat down. He had expected to take some lumps over this one.

“You're right, Seth. But Jesus I was a cop for a long time. You were unavailable, I go over there just to reconnoiter the place, I see some skirt slipping in. What would you have done?”

Frank didn't answer.

“Look, Seth, you can kick me in the ass, but I'm telling you, friend, this woman is our ace up the sleeve. With her we can nail this guy.”

Frank's tensed face relaxed, his anger subsiding.

“What are you talking about?”

“The girl is his daughter. His friggin' daughter. In fact his only child. Luther Whitney is a three-time loser, a career crim who's apparently gotten better with age. His wife finally divorced him, right? Couldn't take it anymore. Then when she starts to get her life in order, she dies from breast cancer.”

He paused.

Seth Frank was all attention now. “Go on.”

“Kate Whitney is devastated by her mother's death. Her father's betrayal as she sees it. So devastated that she totally breaks off from him. Not only that, she goes to law school and then goes to work as an Assistant Commonwealth's Attorney where she has the reputation of being one hard-assed prosecutor, especially for property-related crimes—burglary, theft, robbery. She goes for the max on all those guys. And usually gets it I might add.”

“Where the hell did you get all that info?”

“A few well-placed phone calls. People like to talk about other people's misery, it makes them feel their own life is somehow better when it usually isn't.”

“So where does all this family turmoil get us?”

“Seth, look at the possibilities here. This girl hates her old man. Hates with a capital H underscored.”

"So you want to use her to get to him. If they're estranged that badly, how do we do it?"

"That's the twist. By all accounts, all the hate and misery is on her side. Not his. He loves her. Loves her more than anything else. He's got a goddamned shrine to her in his bedroom. I'm telling you the guy is ripe for this."

"If, and it's still a big if in my mind, if she's willing to co-operate, how does she get in touch with him? He sure as hell isn't going to be hanging around his phone at home."

"No, but I bet he checks in for messages. You should see his house. This guy is very orderly, everything in its place, bills probably paid ahead of time. And he's got no idea we're on his ass. Not yet anyway. He probably checks his machine once or twice a day. Just in case."

"So she leaves him a message, arranges a meeting and we nail him?"

Burton stood back up, flushed two cigarettes from his pack and flipped one over to Frank. They both took a moment to light up.

"Personally, that's how I see it going down, Seth. Unless you got a better idea."

"We still have to convince her to do it. From what you said, she didn't seem too willing."

"I think you need to talk to her. Without me there. Maybe I came down a little too hard on her. I have a tendency to do that."

"I'll hit it first thing in the morning."

Frank put on his hat and coat and then paused.

"Look, I didn't mean to jump all over your butt, Bill."

Burton grinned. "Sure you did. I would've done the same thing if I were you."

"I appreciate the assistance."

"Anytime."

Seth started to walk out.

"Hey, Seth, little favor to an old-fart ex-cop."

"What's that?"

"Let me in on the kill. I wouldn't mind seeing his face when the hammer comes down."

"You got it. I'll call you after I talk to her. This cop's going home to his family. You should do the same, Bill."

"After I finish this smoke I'm outta here."

Frank left. Burton sat down, slowly finished his cigarette, then drowned it out in a half cup of coffee.

He could've withheld Whitney's name from Seth Frank. Told him there had been no match by the FBI. But that was too dangerous a game to play. If Frank ever found out, and the detective could through a myriad of independent channels, Burton would be stone-cold dead. Nothing could explain that deception other than the truth, which wasn't an option. Besides, Burton needed Frank to know Whitney's identity. The Secret Service agent's plan all along was to have the detective hunt the ex-con down. Find him, yes; arrest him, no.

Burton stood up, put on his coat. Luther Whitney. Wrong place, wrong time, wrong people. Well, if it were any solace he wouldn't see it coming. He'd never even hear the shot. He'd be dead before the synapses could fire the impulse to his brain. Those were the breaks. Sometimes they went for you and sometimes against

you. Now if he could only think of a way to leave the President and his Chief of Staff high and dry, he would've done a good day's work. But that one, he was afraid, was beyond even him.

* * * * *

COLLIN PARKED HIS CAR DOWN THE STREET. THE FEW remaining multicolored leaves gently cascaded down on him, nudged along by the breeze that lazily made its way past. He was dressed casually: jeans, cotton pullover and leather jacket. There was no bulge under his jacket. His hair was still damp from a hasty shower. His bare ankles protruded from his loafers. He looked like he should be heading to the college library for a late-night study session or hitting the party circuit after playing in the Saturday afternoon football game.

As he made his way up to the house, he started getting nervous. It had surprised him, her phone call. She had sounded normal, there was no strain, no anger in her voice. Burton said she had taken it pretty well, considering. But he knew how abrasive Burton could be and that was why he was worried. Letting him keep Collin's appointment with the lady probably was not the smartest thing Collin had ever done. But the stakes were high. Burton had made him see that.

The door opened to his knock and he walked in. As he turned, the door closed and she was standing there. Smiling. Dressed in a sheer white negligee that was too short and too tight everywhere that counted, she stood tiptoe in her bare feet to kiss him gently on the lips. Then she took his hand and led him into the bedroom.

She motioned for him to lie down on the bed. Standing in front of him she undid the straps holding up the flimsy garment and let it drop to the floor. Next her underwear slid down her legs. He started to rise up, but she gently pushed him back down.

She slowly climbed on top of him, running her fingers through his hair. She slid a hand down to his erection and nicked at it through his jeans with the tip of her fingernail. He almost screamed as the confines of his pants became too painful. Again he tried to touch her but she held him down. She slid his belt off and then undid his pants. They dropped to the floor. Next she freed his explosion of flesh. It sprung up at her and she cradled it between her legs, squeezing it tightly between her thighs.

She dipped her mouth down to his and then nestled her lips against his ear.

"Tim, you want me, don't you? You want to fuck me so bad, don't you?"

He groaned and clutched at her buttocks, but she quickly moved his hands away.

"Don't you?"

"Yes."

"I wanted you so bad too, the other night. And then he showed up."

"I know, I'm sorry about that. We talked and—"

"I know, he told me. That you didn't say anything about us. That you were a gentleman."

"That part was none of his business."

"That's right, Tim. It was none of his business. And now you want to fuck me, don't you?"

"Jesus Christ yes, Gloria. Of course I do."

"So bad it hurts."

"It's killing me. It's goddamn killing me."

"You feel so good, Tim, God, you feel so good."

"Just wait, baby, just wait. You don't know what good is."

"I know, Tim. All I seem to think about is making love to you. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes." Collin was in so much pain now his eyes watered.

She licked at the drops, amused.

"And you're sure you want me? You're absolutely sure?"

"Yes!"

Collin felt it before his mind actually registered the fact. Like a blast of cold air.

"Get out." The words were spoken slowly, deliberately, as though practiced a number of times, to get just the right tone, the correct inflection; the speaker savoring each syllable. She climbed off him, taking care to apply enough force to his erection that he gasped for breath.

"Gloria—"

His jeans hit him in the face as he lay there. When he pulled them away and sat up, her body was covered in a thick, full-length robe.

"Get out of my house, Collin. Now."

He dressed quickly, embarrassed, as she stood there watching him. She followed him to the front door and as it opened and he stepped across the portal, she abruptly pushed him through and then slammed it behind him.

He looked back for a moment, wondering if she were laughing or crying behind the door or maybe displaying any emotion at all. He hadn't meant to hurt her. He had clearly embarrassed her. He shouldn't have done it that way. She had certainly paid him back for that embarrassment, bringing him to the threshold like that, manipulating him like some laboratory experiment and then bringing the curtain crashing down on top of him.

But as he walked to his car the memory of that look on her face made him relieved their brief relationship had ended.

* * * * *

FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE JOINING THE COMMONWEALTH'S Attorney's office, Kate called in sick. Bedcovers pulled up to her chin, she sat propped up on pillows staring out at a bleak morning. Every time she had tried to get out of bed, the image of Bill Burton loomed up in front of her like a mass of sharp-edged granite, threatening to crush or impale her.

She slid down lower in the bed, sinking into the soft mat tress like immersing herself in warm water, just below the surface where she could neither hear nor see anything that transpired around her.

They would be coming soon. Just like with her mother. All those years ago. People pushing their way in and firing off questions Kate's mother couldn't possibly answer. Looking for Luther.

She thought of Jack's outburst from the other night and tightly closed her eyes, trying to hurl those words away.

Goddamn him.

She was tired, more tired than any trial had ever made her. And he had done it to her, just like he had to her mother. Drawn her into the web even though she wanted no part of it, detested it, would destroy it if she could.

She sat up again, unable to breathe. She held her throat with her fingers, tightly, trying to prevent another attack. When it subsided, she turned over on her side and stared at the photo of her mother.

He was all she had left. She almost laughed. Luther Whitney was all the family she had left. God help her.

She lay on her back and waited. Waited for the knock at the door. From mother to daughter. It was her turn now.

* * * * *

AT THAT MOMENT, BARELY TEN MINUTES AWAY, LUTHER stared again at the old newspaper article. A cup of coffee sat near his elbow, forgotten. The small refrigerator hummed in the background. In the corner CNN droned on. Otherwise the room was absolutely quiet.

Wanda Broome had been a friend. A good friend. Ever since their accidental meeting in a Philadelphia halfway house after Luther's last prison term and Wanda's first and only. And now she was dead too. Had taken her own life, the newspaper article said, slumped over in the front seat of her car with a bunch of pills stuffed down her throat.

Luther had never operated in the mainstream, and yet, even to him, this was all a little much to take. It could have been some continuing nightmare except that every time he awoke and stared in the mirror, cold water dripping from features that grew more and more grizzled, more and more sunken with each passing day, he knew he was not going to wake up from this one.

What was ironic, in the shadow of Wanda's tragic death, was that the Sullivan job had been her idea. A miserable, terrible idea looking back, but one that had leapt from her surprisingly fertile mind. And an idea to which she had held doggedly, despite warnings from both Luther and her mother.

And they had planned it and he had done it. It was really that simple. And in the cold face of retrospection he had wanted to do it. It was a challenge, and a challenge combined with a huge payoff was too tough to resist.

How Wanda must have felt when Christine Sullivan hadn't gotten on that plane. And no way for her to let Luther know that the coast was not nearly so clear as they thought it would be.

She had been Christine Sullivan's friend. That part had been absolutely sincere. A last reminder of real people in the midst of the sybaritic life Walter Sullivan lived. Where everyone was not only beautiful, like Christine Sullivan was, but educated, well-connected and sophisticated, all things Christine Sullivan was not and never would be. And because of that burgeoning friendship Christine Sullivan had begun to tell Wanda things she shouldn't have, including finally, the location and contents of the vault constructed behind a mirrored door.

Wanda was convinced that the Sullivans had so much, they couldn't possibly miss so little. The world did not work that way, Luther knew, and Wanda probably did too, but that didn't matter now.

After a lifetime of hardship, where money was always too scarce, Wanda had gone for her lottery win. Just like Christine Sullivan had, neither of them realizing just how high the price for such things really was.

Luther had flown to Barbados, would have gotten a message to Wanda there if she hadn't already left. He had sent the letter to her mother. Edwina would have shown it to her. But had she believed him? Even if she had, Christine Sullivan's life had still been sacrificed. Sacrificed, as Wanda would have seen it, to Wanda's greed and desire to have things she had no right to. Luther could almost see those thoughts running through his friend's mind as she drove out, alone, to that deserted spot; as she unscrewed the cap to get at those pills, as she drifted into permanent unconsciousness.

And he had not even been able to attend the funeral. He could not tell Edwina Broome how sorry he was, without risking getting her pulled into this nightmare. He had been as close to Edwina as he had to Wanda, in some ways even closer. He and Edwina had spent many nights trying to dissuade Wanda from her plan, to no avail. And only when it dawned on them that she would do it with or without Luther did Edwina ask Luther to take care of her daughter. Not let her go to prison again.

His eyes finally turned to the personals in the newspaper and it took him only a few seconds to find the one he was looking for. He did not smile when he read it. Like Bill Burton, Luther did not believe Gloria Russell had any redeeming qualities.

He hoped they believed this was only about money. He pulled out a piece of paper and began to write.

* * * * *

"TRACE THE ACCOUNT." BURTON SAT ACROSS FROM THE CHIEF of Staff in her office. He sipped on a Diet Coke but wished for something stronger.

"I'm already doing that, Burton." Russell put her earring back on as she replaced the phone in its cradle.

Collin sat quietly in a corner. The Chief of Staff had not yet acknowledged his presence although he had walked in with Burton twenty minutes ago.

"When does he want the money again?" Burton looked at her.

"If a wire transfer does not reach the designated account by close of business, there will be no tomorrow for any of us." She swept her eyes across to Collin and then returned them to Burton.

"Shit." Burton stood up.

Russell glowered at him. "I thought you were taking care of this, Burton."

He ignored the stare. "How does he say he's going to work the drop?"

"As soon as the money is received he'll provide the location where the item will be."

"So we gotta trust him?"

"So it would seem."

"How does he know you've even gotten the letter yet?" Burton started to pace.

"It was in my mailbox this morning. My mail is delivered in the afternoon."

Burton collapsed in a chair. "Your fucking mailbox! You mean he was right outside your house?"

"I doubt if he would have allowed someone else to deliver this particular message."

"How'd you know to check the mailbox?"

"The flag was up." Russell almost smiled.

"This guy has got balls, I'll give him that, Chief."

"Apparently bigger ones than either of you." She concluded the statement by staring at Collin for a full minute. He cringed under the gaze, finally looking down at the floor.

Burton smiled to himself at the exchange. That was okay, the kid would thank him in a few weeks. For pulling him out of this black widow's web.

"Nothing really surprises me, Chief. Not anymore. How about you?" He looked at her and then at Collin.

Russell ignored the remark. "If the money is not transferred out, then we can expect him to go public somehow soon thereafter. What exactly are we going to do about it?"

The Chief of Staff's calm demeanor was no sham. She had decided that she was through crying, through vomiting every time she turned around, and that she had been hurt and embarrassed enough to last the rest of her life. Come what may, she felt almost numb to anything else. It felt surprisingly good.

"How much does he want?" Burton asked.

"Five million," she replied simply.

Burton went wide-eyed. "And you got that kind of money? Where?"

"That doesn't concern you."

"Does the President know?" Burton asked the question knowing full well the answer.

"Again, that doesn't concern you."

Burton didn't push it. What did he care anyway?

"Fair enough. Well, in answer to your question, we are doing something about it. If I were you I'd find a way to pull that money back somehow. Five million dollars isn't going to do much to someone not among the living."

"You can't kill what you can't find," Russell shot back.

"That's true, that's so true, Chief." Burton sat back and recounted his conversation with Seth Frank.

* * * * *

KATE WAS FULLY DRESSED WHEN SHE ANSWERED THE DOOR, thinking, somehow, that if she were in her bathrobe the interview would endure longer, that she would appear more and more vulnerable as each question came her way. The last thing she wanted to appear was vulnerable, which was exactly how she felt.

"I'm not sure what you want from me."

"Some information, that's all, Ms. Whitney. I realize you're an officer of the court, and believe me, I hate to put you through this, but right now your father is my number-one suspect in a very high-profile case." Frank looked at her with a pair of earnest eyes.

They were sitting in the tiny living room. Frank had his notebook out. Kate sat erect on the edge of the couch trying to remain calm, although her fingers kept

fluttering to her small chain necklace, twisting and turning it into small knots, tiny centers of bedlam.

"From what you've told me, Lieutenant, you don't have much. If I were the ACA on that case I don't think I'd even have enough to get an arrest warrant issued, much less a bill of indictment returned."

"Maybe, maybe not." Frank eyed the way she played with the chain. He wasn't really there to gather information. He probably knew more about her father than she did. But he had to ease her into the trap. Because, as he thought about it, that's what it was, a trap. For someone else. Besides, what did she care? It made his conscience feel better anyway, to think that she didn't really care at all.

Frank continued. "But I'll tell you some interesting coincidences. We have your father's print on a cleaning van that we know was at the Sullivan place a short time before the murder. The fact that we know he was in the house, and in the very bedroom where the crime was committed, a short time before. We have two eyewitnesses to that. And the fact that he used an alias and a false address and Social Security number when applying for the job. And the fact that he seems to have disappeared."

She looked at him. "He had priors. He probably didn't use his real info because he didn't think he'd get the job otherwise. You say he's disappeared. Did you ever think he just may have taken a trip? Even ex-cons go on vacation." Her instincts as a trial lawyer found her defending her father, an unbelievable thought. A sharp pain shot through her head. She rubbed at it distractedly.

"Another interesting discovery is that your father was good friends with Wanda Broome, Christine Sullivan's personal maid and confidante. I checked. Your father and Wanda Broome had the same parole officer back in Philly. According to certain sources, they've apparently kept in touch all these years. My bet is Wanda knew about the safe in the bedroom."

"So?"

"So I talked with Wanda Broome. It was obvious she knew more about the matter than she was letting on."

"So why aren't you talking to her instead of sitting here with me? Maybe she committed the crime herself."

"She was out of the country at the time, a hundred witnesses to that effect." Frank took a moment to clear his throat. "And I can't talk to her anymore because she committed suicide. Left behind a note that said she was sorry."

Kate stood up and looked blankly out the window. Bands of cold seemed to close around her.

Frank waited for some minutes, staring at her, wondering how she must feel, listening to the growing evidence against the man who had helped create her and then apparently abandoned her. Was there love left there? The detective hoped not. At least his professional side did. As a father of three, he wondered if that feeling could ever really be killed, despite the worst.

"Ms. Whitney, are you all right?"

Kate slowly turned away from the window. "Can we go out somewhere? I haven't eaten for a while and there's no food here."

They ended up at the same place Jack and Luther had met. Frank started to devour his food, but Kate touched nothing.

He looked across at her plate. "You picked the place, I figured you must like the food. You know, nothing personal, but you could stand to put on some weight."

Kate finally looked at him, a half-smile breaking through. "So you're a health consultant on the side?"

"I've got three daughters. My oldest is sixteen going on forty and she swears she's obese. I mean she probably goes one-ten and she's almost as tall as me. If she didn't have such rosy cheeks, I'd think she was anorexic. And my wife, Jesus, she's always on some diet or another. I mean, I think she looks great, but there must be some perfect shape out there that every woman strives for."

"Every woman except me."

"Eat your food. That's what I tell my daughters every day. Eat."

Kate picked up her fork and managed to consume half her meal. As she sipped her tea and Frank fingered a big trough of coffee, they both settled themselves in as the discussion wound its way back to Luther Whitney.

"If you think you have enough to pick him up, why don't you?"

Frank shook his head, put down his coffee. "You were at his house. He's been gone for a while. Probably blew out right after it happened."

"If he did it. Your party bag is all circumstantial. That doesn't come close to being beyond a reasonable doubt, Lieutenant."

"Can I play straight with you, Kate? Can I call you Kate, by the way?"

She nodded.

Frank put his elbows on the table, stared across at her. "All bullshit outside, why do you find it so hard to believe that your old man popped this woman? He's been convicted of three prior felonies. The guy's apparently lived on the edge his whole life. He's been questioned in about a dozen other burglaries, but they couldn't pin anything on him. He's a career crim. You know the animal. Human life doesn't mean shit to them."

Kate finished sipping her tea before answering. A career criminal? Of course her father was that. She had no doubt he had continued to commit crimes all these years. It was in his damn blood apparently. Like a coke addict. Incurable.

"He doesn't kill people," she said quietly. "He may steal from them, but he's never hurt anyone. It's not the way he does things."

What had Jack said specifically? Her father was scared. Terrified so badly he was sick to his stomach. The police had never scared her father. But if he had killed the woman? Perhaps just a reflex, the gun fired and the bullet ended Christine Sullivan's life. All that would have transpired in a matter of seconds. No time to think. Just to act. To prevent him from going to prison for good. It was all possible. If her father had killed the woman, he would be scared, he would be terrified, he *would* be sick.

Through all the pain, the most vivid memories she held of her father was his gentleness. His big hands encircling hers. He was quiet to the point of rudeness with most people. But with her he talked. To her, not above her, or below her as most adults managed to do. He would speak to her about things a little girl was interested in. Flowers and birds and the way the sky changed color all of a sudden. And about dresses and hair ribbons and wobbly teeth that she constantly fiddled with. They were brief but sincere moments, between a father and daughter, smashed between the sudden violence of convictions, of prison. But as she had

grown up those talks somehow became gibberish, as the occupation of the man behind the funny faces and the big but gentle fingers came to dominate her life, her perspective of Luther Whitney.

How could she say that this man could not kill?

Frank watched the eyes as they blinked rapidly. There was a crack there. He could feel it.

Frank fingered his spoon as he scooped more sugar into his coffee. "So you're saying it's inconceivable that your father killed this woman? I thought you said the two of you hadn't really kept in touch?"

Kate jolted back from her musings. "I'm not saying it's inconceivable. I'm just saying ..." She was really blowing this. She had interviewed hundreds of witnesses and she couldn't remember one who had performed as badly as she was right now.

She hurriedly rummaged through her purse for her pack of Benson & Hedges. The sight of the cigarette made Frank reach for his pack of Juicy Fruit.

She blew the smoke away from him, eyed the gum. "Trying to quit too?" A flicker of amusement crossed her face.

"Trying and failing. You were saying?"

She slowly exhaled the smoke, willed her nerves to cease their cartwheels. "Like I told you, I haven't seen my father in years. We aren't close. It's possible that he could have killed the woman. Anything's possible. But that doesn't work in court. Evidence works in court. Period."

"And we're attempting to build a case against him."

"You have no tangible physical evidence tying him to the actual crime scene? No prints? No witnesses? Nothing like that?"

Frank hesitated, then decided to answer. "No."

"Have you been able to trace any of the stuff from the burglary to him?"

"Nothing's turned up."

"Ballistics?"

"Negative. One unusable slug and no gun."

Kate sat back in her chair, more comfortable as the conversation centered on a legal analysis of the case.

"That's all you've got?" Her eyes squinted at him.

He hesitated again, then shrugged. "That's it."

"Then you got nothing, Detective. Nothing!"

"I've got my instincts and my instincts tell me Luther Whitney was in the house that night and he was in that bedroom. Where he is now is what I want to know."

"I can't help you there. That's the same thing I told your buddy the other night."

"But you did go to his house that night. Why?"

Kate shrugged. She was determined not to mention her conversation with Jack. Was she withholding evidence? Maybe.

"I don't know." That, in part, was true.

"You strike me, Kate, as someone who always knows why she does something."

Jack's face flashed across her mind. She angrily pushed it out. "You'd be surprised, Lieutenant."

Frank ceremoniously closed his notebook and hunched forward.

"I really need your help."

"For what?"

"This is off the record, unofficial, whatever you want to call it. I'm more interested in results than in legal niceties."

"Funny thing to tell a state prosecutor."

"I'm not saying I don't play by the rules." Frank finally caved in and pulled out his cigarettes. "All I'm saying is I go for the point of least resistance when I can get it. Okay?"

"Okay."

"My information is that while you may not be wild about your father, he is still out there pining for you."

"Who told you that?"

"Jesus I'm a detective. True or not?"

"I don't know."

"Godammit, Kate, don't play fucking games with me. True or not?"

She angrily stabbed out her cigarette. "True! Satisfied?"

"Not yet, but I'm getting there. I've got a plan to flush him out, and I'm looking for you to help me."

"I don't see that I'm in any position to help you." Kate knew what was coming next. She could see it in Frank's eyes.

It took him ten minutes to lay out his plan. She refused three times. A half hour later they were still sitting at the table.

Frank leaned back in his chair and then abruptly lurched forward. "Look, Kate, if you don't do it, then we don't have a chance in hell of laying our hands on him. If it's like you say and we don't have a case, he goes free. But if he did do it, and we can prove it, then you've got to be the last goddamned person in the world that should tell me he should get away with it. Now, if you think I'm wrong about that, I'll drive you back to your place and forget I ever saw you, and your old man can go right on stealing ... and maybe killing." He stared directly at her.

Her mouth opened but no words came out. Her eyes drifted over his shoulder where a misty image from the past beckoned to her, but then suddenly faded away.

At almost thirty years of age Kate Whitney was far removed from the toddler who giggled as her father twirled her through the air, or the little girl who divulged important secrets to her father she would tell no other. She was all grown up, a mature adult, out on her own for a long time now. On top of that she was an officer of the court, a state prosecutor sworn to uphold the law and the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Virginia. It was her job to ensure that persons who broke those laws were appropriately punished regardless of who they were and regardless of to whom they were related.

And then another image invaded her mind. Her mother watching the door, waiting for him to come home. Wondering if he were okay. Visiting him in prison, making up lists of things to talk to him about, making Kate dress up for those encounters, getting all excited as his release date came closer. As if he were some goddamned hero out saving the world instead of a thief. Jack's words came back to her, biting hard. He had called her entire life a lie. He expected her to have sympathy for a man who had abandoned her. As if Luther Whitney had been wronged instead of Kate. Well, Jack could go straight to hell. She thanked God she had decided against marrying him. A man who could say those awful things to her

did not deserve her. But Luther Whitney deserved everything coming to him. Maybe he hadn't killed that woman. But maybe he had. It wasn't her job to make that decision. It was her job to make sure that decision had an opportunity to be made by men and women in a jury box. Her father belonged in prison anyway. At least there he could hurt no one else. There he could ruin no more lives.

And it was with that last thought that she agreed to help deliver her father into the hands of the police.

Frank felt a twinge of guilt as they got up to leave. He had not been entirely truthful with Kate Whitney. In fact, he had downright lied to her about the most critical piece of the case other than the million-dollar question of where Luther Whitney happened to be. He wasn't pleased with himself right now. Law enforcement people had to occasionally lie, just like everybody else. It didn't make it any easier to swallow, especially considering the recipient was someone the detective had instantly respected and now heavily pitied.

Chapter 18

KATE HAD PLACED THE CALL THAT NIGHT; FRANK HAD wanted to waste no time. The voice on the machine stunned her; it was the first time in years she had heard those tones. Calm, efficient, measured like the practiced stride of an infantryman. She actually began to tremble as the tone sounded and it took all her will to summon the simple words that were designed to trap him. She kept reminding herself how cunning he could be. She wanted to see him, wanted to talk to him. As soon as possible. She wondered if the wily old mind would smell a trap, and then she recalled their last face-to-face meeting, and she realized that he would never see it coming. He would never attribute deceit to the little girl who confided in him her most precious information. Even she had to give him that.

It was barely an hour later when the phone rang. As she reached out for it, she wished to God she had never agreed to Frank's request. Sitting in a restaurant hatching a plan to catch a suspected murderer was quite different from actually participating in a charade designed solely to deliver your father to the authorities.

"Katie." She sensed the slight break in the voice. A tinge of disbelief blended in.

"Hello, Dad." She was grateful that the words had come out on their own. At that moment she seemed incapable of articulating the simplest thought.

Her apartment was not good. He could understand that. Too close, too personal. His place, she knew, would be unworkable for obvious reasons. They could meet on neutral grounds, he suggested. Of course they could. She wanted to talk, he certainly wanted to listen. Desperately wanted to listen.

A time was reached, tomorrow, four o'clock, at a small café near her office. At that time of day it would be empty, quiet; they could take their time. He would be there. She was sure nothing short of death would keep him away.

She hung up and called Frank. She gave him the time and the place. Listening to herself it finally dawned on her what she had just done. She could feel everything suddenly giving way and she could not stop it. She flung down the

phone and burst into tears; so hard did her body convulse that she slumped to the floor, every muscle twitching, her moans filling the tiny apartment like helium into a balloon; it all threatened to violently explode.

Frank had stayed on the phone a second longer and wished he hadn't. He yelled into the phone but she could not hear him; not that it would have made a difference if she had. She was doing the right thing. She had nothing to be ashamed about, nothing to feel guilty about. When he finally gave up and cradled the receiver, his moment of euphoria at growing ever close to his quarry was over like a flamed-out match.

So his question had been answered. She loved him still. That thought for Lieutenant Seth Frank was troubling but controllable. For Seth Frank, father of three, it made his eyes water and he suddenly didn't like his job very much anymore.

* * * * *

BURTON HUNG UP THE PHONE. DETECTIVE FRANK HAD BEEN true to his promise to let the agent in on the kill.

Minutes later Burton was in Russell's office.

"I don't want to know how you're going to do it." Russell looked worried.

Burton smiled to himself. Getting squeamish, just like he predicted. Wanted the job done, just didn't want to get her pretty nails dirty.

"All you have to make sure you do is tell the President where it's going down. And then you make damn sure he tells Sullivan before the fact. He has got to do that."

Russell looked puzzled. "Why?"

"Let me worry about that. Just remember, do what I tell you." He was gone before Russell had a chance to explode at him.

* * * * *

"ARE THE POLICE SURE HE'S THE ONE?" THERE WAS A HINT of anxiousness in the President's voice as he looked up from his desk.

Russell, pacing the room, stopped to look at him. "Well, Alan, I'm assuming that if he weren't they wouldn't be going to all the trouble to arrest him."

"They've made mistakes before, Gloria."

"No argument there. Just like us all."

The President closed the binder he had been examining and stood up, surveyed the White House grounds from the window.

"So the man will shortly be in custody?" He turned to look at Russell.

"So it would seem."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Only that the best-laid plans sometimes go awry."

"Does Burton know?"

"Burton seems to have orchestrated the entire thing."

The President walked over to Russell; put his hand on her arm.

"What are you talking about?"

Russell relayed the events of the last few days to her boss.

The President rubbed his jaw. "What is Burton up to?" The question was said more to himself than to Russell.

"Why don't you buzz him and ask him yourself? The only point he was absolutely insistent on was your relaying the message to Sullivan."

"Sullivan? Why the hell would ...?" The President did not finish his thought. He rang for Burton but was told he had suddenly become ill and gone to the hospital.

The President's eyes bored into his Chief of Staff. "Is Burton going to do what I think he's going to do?"

"Depends on what you're thinking."

"Cut the games, Gloria. You know exactly what I mean."

"If you mean does Burton intend on making sure that this individual is never taken into custody, yes, that thought had crossed my mind."

The President fingered a heavy letter opener on his desk, sat down in his chair and faced out the window. Russell shuddered when she looked at it. She had thrown the one on her desk away.

"Alan? What do you want me to do?" She stared at the back of his head. He was the President and you had to sit and wait patiently, even if you wanted to reach across and throttle him.

Finally he swiveled around. The eyes were dark, cold and commanding. "Nothing. I want you to do nothing. I better get in touch with Sullivan. Give me the location and time again."

Russell thought the same thing she had earlier as she recounted the information. *Some friend.*

The President picked up his phone. Russell reached across and put her hand on top of his. "Alan, the reports said Christine Sullivan had bruises on her jaw and had been partially strangled."

The President didn't look up. "Oh really?"

"What exactly happened in that bedroom, Alan?"

"Well, from the small pieces I can remember she wanted to play a bit rougher than I did. The marks on her neck?" He paused and put down the phone. "Let's just put it this way: Christy was into a lot of kinky things, Gloria. Including sexual asphyxiation. You know, people get off when they're gasping for air and climaxing at the same time."

"I've heard of it, Alan, I just didn't think you'd be into something like that." Her tone was harsh.

The President snapped back: "Remember your place, Russell. I do not answer to you or anyone else for my actions."

She stepped back, and quickly said, "Of course, I'm sorry, Mr. President."

Richmond's face relaxed; he stood up and spread his arms resignedly. "I did it for Christy, Gloria, what can I say. Women sometimes have strange effects on men. I'm certainly not immune to it."

"So why did she try to kill you?"

"Like I said, she wanted to play rougher than I did. She was drunk and she just went out of control. Unfortunate, but those things happen."

Gloria looked past him out the window. The encounter with Christine Sullivan did not just "happen." The time and planning that had gone into that rendezvous

had eventually taken on the elements of a full-blown election campaign. She shook her head as the images from that night poured back to her.

The President came up behind her, gripped her shoulders, turned her to him.

"It was an awful experience for everyone, Gloria. I certainly didn't want Christy to die. It was the last thing in the world I wanted. I went there to have a quiet, romantic evening with a very beautiful woman. My God, I'm no monster." A disarming smile emerged across his face.

"I know that, Alan. It's just, all those women, all those times. Something bad was bound to happen."

The President shrugged. "Well, as I told you before, I'm not the first man to hold this office to engage in those types of extracurricular activities. Nor will I be the last." He cupped her chin in his hand. "You know the demands of the office I hold, Gloria, better than most. There's no other job like it in the world."

"I know the pressures are enormous. I realize that, Alan."

"That's right. It's a job that really requires more than is humanly possible to deliver. Sometimes you have to deal with that reality by relieving some of that pressure, from pulling yourself out from between the vise occasionally. How I deal with that pressure is important, because it dictates how well I can serve the people who have elected me, who have placed their trust in me."

He turned back to his desk. "And besides, enjoying the company of beautiful women is a relatively innocuous way of combating that stress."

Gloria stared angrily at his back. As if he expected her, of all people, to be swayed by the rhetoric, by a bullshit patriotic speech.

"It certainly wasn't innocuous for Christine Sullivan," she blurted out.

Richmond turned back to her; he was no longer smiling. "I really don't want to talk about this anymore, Gloria. What's past is past—start thinking about the future. Understand?"

She bowed her head in formal assent and stalked from the room.

The President again picked up the phone. He would deliver all the necessary details about the police sting to his good friend Walter Sullivan. The President smiled to himself as the call was being placed. It sounded like it wouldn't be long now. They were almost there. He could count on Burton. Count on him to do the right thing. For all of them.

* * * * *

LUTHER CHECKED HIS WATCH. ONE O'CLOCK. HE SHOWERED, brushed his teeth and then trimmed his newly grown beard. He lingered over his hair until it met with his satisfaction. His face looked better today. The phone call from Kate had worked wonders. He had cradled the phone in his ear playing the message over and over again, just to hear the voice, the words he had never expected to hear again. He had risked going to a men's store downtown where he bought a new pair of slacks, sports coat and patent leathers. He had considered and then discarded the notion of a tie.

He tried on his new coat. It felt good. The pants were a little loose on him; he had lost weight. He would have to eat more. He might even start with buying his daughter an early dinner. If she'd let him. He'd have to think about that one; he didn't want to push it.

Jack! It must've been Jack. He had told her of their meeting. That her father had been in trouble. That was the connection. Of course! He had been stupid not to see it right away. But what did that mean? That she cared? He felt a tremble start in his neck and it ended at his knees. After all these years? He swore under his breath at the timing. The fucking timing! But he had made up his mind and nothing could change that decision now. Not even his little girl. Something terribly wrong had to be set right.

Luther was certain Richmond knew nothing about his correspondence with the Chief of Staff. Her only hope was to quietly buy back what Luther had and then make sure no one ever laid eyes on it again. Buy him off, hoping he'd disappear forever and the world would never know. He had verified that the money had arrived in the designated account. What happened to that money would be their first surprise.

The second surprise, though, would make them forget all about the first. And the best part was that Richmond would never see it coming. He seriously doubted that the President would actually do any time. But if this didn't meet the criteria for impeachment he didn't know what did. This made Watergate look like a third-grade prank. He wondered what impeached ex-Presidents did. Withered in the flames of their own destruction, he hoped.

Luther pulled the letter out of his pocket. He would arrange for her to receive it right about the time she'd be expecting the last set of instructions. The payoff. She would get her payoff. They all would. It was worth it, letting her squirm like he knew she had all this time.

No matter how often he tried he couldn't erase the memory of the woman's leisurely sexual encounter in the presence of a still warm body, as though the dead woman was a pile of trash, not to be bothered with. And then Richmond. The drunken, slobbering bastard! Again the visions made Luther seethe. He clenched his teeth, then abruptly smiled.

Whatever deal Jack could cut him he would take. Twenty years, ten years, ten days. He didn't care anymore. Fuck the President and everybody around him. Fuck the whole town, he was taking them down.

But first he was going to spend some time with his daughter. After that he really didn't care anymore.

As he walked over to the bed, Luther's body took a jolt. Something else had just occurred to him. Something that hurt, but which he could understand. He sat on the bed and sipped a glass of water. If it were true could he really blame her? And besides, he could just kill two birds with one stone. As he lay back on the bed, it occurred to him that things that looked too good to be true usually were. Did he deserve any better from her? The answer was absolutely clear. He did not.

* * * * *

WHEN THE MONEY TRANSFER HAD REACHED DISTRICT BANK, automatic prewire instructions kicked in and the funds were immediately transferred out of the account to five different area banks, each in the amount of one million dollars. From there the funds followed a circuitous route until the total sum was once again assembled in one place.

Russell, who had put a tracer on the flow of money from her end, would find out soon enough what had happened. She would not be particularly pleased about it. She would be far less pleased about the next message she received.

* * * * *

THE CAFÉ ALONZO HAD BEEN OPEN ABOUT A YEAR. IT HAD the usual array of outdoor tables with colorful umbrellas in a small space on the sidewalk enclosed by a waist-high black iron railing. The coffee was varied and strong; the on-premises bakery was popular among the morning and lunch crowds. At five minutes to four only one person sat at the outdoor table. In the chilly air the umbrellas were collapsed down resembling a column of giant drinking straws.

The café was located in the ground floor of a modern office building. Two stories up hung a scaffolding. Three workers were replacing a glass panel that had cracked. The entire facade of the building consisted of mirrored panels that gave a complete image of the area directly opposite it. The panel was heavy and even the burly men struggled with the weight and bulk.

Kate bundled her coat around her and sipped her coffee. The afternoon sun was warming in spite of the chill, but it was fading rapidly. Long shadows had commenced to creep over the tables. She felt the rawness in her eyes as she squinted at the sun suspended directly over the tops of a number of dilapidated row houses that sat diagonally across the street from the café. They were destined for demolition to make room for the continued renovation of the area. She did not notice that the upper-story window on one of the row houses was now open. The row house next door had two windows smashed out. The front door on another was partially caved in.

Kate looked at her watch. She had been sitting there for approximately twenty minutes. Used to the frenetic pace of the prosecutor's office, the day had dragged interminably. She had no doubt there were dozens of police officers in the vicinity waiting to pounce once he walked up to her. Then she thought about it. Would they even have a chance to say anything to each other? What the hell could she say anyway? Hi Dad, you're busted? She rubbed her raw cheeks and waited. He would be there right at four. And it was too late for her to change any of it. Too damned late for anything. But she was doing the right thing, despite the guilt she was feeling, despite breaking down like that after calling the detective. She angrily squeezed her hands together. She was about to hand her father over to the police, and he deserved it. She was through debating it. She now just wanted it to be over.

* * * * *

MCCARTY DID NOT LIKE IT. NOT AT ALL. HIS USUAL ROUTINE was to follow his target, sometimes for weeks, until the assassin understood the victim's patterns of behavior better than the victim did. It made the killing so much easier. The additional time also allowed McCarty to plan his escape, to allow for worst-case scenarios. He had none of those luxuries on this job. Sullivan's message had been terse. The man had already paid him an enormous sum on his per diem, with another two million to follow upon completion. Under any yardstick he had been compensated—now he had to deliver. Except for his first hit many years ago,

McCarty could not remember being this nervous. It didn't help matters that the place was crawling with cops.

But he kept telling himself things would be okay. In the time he had he had planned well. He had reconnoitered the area right after Sullivan's phone call. The row house idea had hit him immediately. It was really the only logical place. He had been here since four in the morning. The back door to the house opened into an alleyway. His rental car was parked at the curb. It would take him exactly fifteen seconds from the moment the shot was fired to drop his rifle, make his way down the stairs, out the door and into his car. He would be two miles away before the police even fully understood what had happened. A plane was leaving in forty-five minutes from a private airstrip ten miles north of Washington. Its destination was New York City. It would carry one passenger, and in a little over five hours McCarty would be a pampered passenger on board the Concorde as it descended into London.

He checked his rifle and scope for the tenth time, automatically flicking away a grain of dust on the barrel. A suppressor would have been nice, but he had yet to find one that worked on a rifle, especially one that was chambered with supersonic ammo as his weapon was. He would count on the confusion to mask the shot and his subsequent departure. He looked across the street and checked his watch. Almost time.

McCarty, while being a very accomplished killer, could not have possibly known that another rifle would be trained on his target's head. And behind that rifle would be a pair of eyes as sharp if not sharper than his own.

* * * * *

TIM COLLIN HAD QUALIFIED AS AN EXPERT MARKSMAN IN THE Marine Corps, and his master sergeant had written in his evaluation that he had never seen a better shot. The focus of that accolade was now sighting through his scope; then he relaxed. Collin looked around the confines of the van he was in. Parked down the street on the curb opposite from the café, he had a straight shot to the target. He sighted through his rifle again, Kate Whitney appearing fleetingly in the crosshairs. Collin slid open the side window of the van. He was under shadow of the buildings behind him. No one could notice what he was doing. He also had the added advantage of knowing that Seth Frank and a contingent of county police were stationed to the right of the café while others were in the office building lobby where the café was located. Unmarked cars were stationed at various locations up and down the street. If Whitney ran he wouldn't get far. But then Collin knew the man wasn't going to run anywhere.

After the shot Collin would quickly disassemble the rifle and secrete it in the van, emerge with his sidearm and badge and join the other authorities in pondering what the hell had happened. No one would think to check a Secret Service van for the firearm or shooter who had just wasted their target.

Burton's plan made a lot of sense to the young agent. Collin had nothing against Luther Whitney but there was a lot more at stake than a sixty-six-year-old career criminal's life. A helluva lot more. Killing the old man was not something Collin was going to enjoy; in fact, he would do his best to forget it once done. But that was life. He was paid to do a job, had in fact sworn to do that job, above all

else. Was he breaking the law? Technically he was committing murder. Realistically he was just doing what had to be done. He assumed the President knew about it; Gloria Russell knew about it; and Bill Burton, a man he respected more than anyone else, had instructed him to do it. Collin's training simply did not permit him to ignore those instructions. Besides, the old guy had broken into the place. He was going to do twenty years. He'd never make twenty years. Who wanted to be in prison at eighty years old? Collin was just saving him a lot of misery. Given those choices, Collin would've taken the round too.

Collin glanced up at the workmen on the scaffolding above the café as they struggled to right the replacement panel. One man grabbed the end of a rope connected to a block and tackle. Slowly the piece began to rise.

* * * * *

KATE LOOKED UP FROM STUDYING HER HANDS AND HER EYES locked on him.

He moved gracefully along the sidewalk. The fedora and muffler hid most of his features but the walk was unmistakable. Growing up she had always wanted to be able to glide along the ground like her father, so effortlessly, so confidently. She started to rise and thought better of it. Frank had not said at what point he would move in, but Kate didn't expect him to wait very long.

Luther stopped in front of the café and looked at her. He had not been this close to his daughter for over a decade, and he was a little unsure how to proceed. She felt his uncertainty and forced a smile to her lips. He immediately went to her table and sat down, his back to the street. Despite the chill he took off his hat and put his sunglasses away in his pocket.

McCarty sighted through his rifle scope. The iron-gray hair came into focus and his finger flipped off the safety and then floated to the trigger.

* * * * *

BARELY A HUNDRED YARDS AWAY, COLLIN WAS MIRRORING those actions. He was not as hurried as McCarty since he had the advantage of knowing when the police were going to move in.

* * * * *

MCCARTY'S TRIGGER FINGER CROOKED BACK. EARLIER, HE had noticed the workmen on the scaffolding once or twice but then had put them out of his mind. It was only the second mistake he had ever committed in his line of work.

The mirrored panel suddenly jerked upward as the rope was pulled down and the panel cocked in McCarty's direction. Catching the falling sun directly on its surface, the panel threw the reflection, red and glimmering, full in McCarty's eyes. Momentary pain shot through his pupils and his hand jerked involuntarily as the rifle fired. He cursed and flung down the gun. He made it to the back door five seconds ahead of schedule.

The bullet struck the umbrella pole and severed it before ricocheting off and imbedding into the concrete pavement. Both Kate and Luther went down, father instinctively shielding daughter. A few seconds later Seth Frank and a dozen

uniforms, guns drawn, formed a semicircle around the pair, facing out, their eyes scanning every nook and cranny of the street.

“Shut this whole fucking area down,” Frank screamed to the sergeant, who barked orders into his radio. Uniforms spread out, unmarked cars moved in.

The workmen stared down at the street, completely oblivious to the unwitting role they had played in the events unfolding below.

Luther was pulled up and handcuffed and the entire party hustled into the lobby of the office building. An excited Seth Frank stared at the man for one satisfying moment and then read him his rights. Luther looked across at his daughter. Kate at first could not meet his gaze, but then decided he at least deserved that. His words hurt her more than anything she had prepared for.

“Are you all right, Katie?”

She nodded and the tears started to pour, and this time, despite squeezing her throat in an iron grip, she could not stop them as she crumpled to the floor.

Bill Burton stood just inside the lobby doorway. When an astonished Collin came in, Burton’s look threatened to disintegrate the younger man. That is until Collin whispered in his ear.

To his credit Burton assimilated the information rapidly and hit upon the truth a few seconds later. Sullivan had hired a hit man. The old man had actually done what Burton had intended to falsely set him up for.

The wily billionaire rose a notch in Burton’s estimation.

Burton walked over to Frank.

Frank looked at him. “Any idea what the fuck that was all about?”

“Maybe,” Burton answered back.

Burton turned around. For the first time he and Luther Whitney actually looked at each other. For Luther, memories of that night again came hurtling back to him. But he was calm, unruffled.

Burton had to admire that. But it also was a great source of concern for him. Whitney was obviously not overly distressed at being arrested. His eyes told Burton—a man who had participated in literally thousands of arrests, which normally involved adults blubbering like babies—all he needed to know. The guy was planning to go to the cops all along. For what reason Burton was unsure and he really didn’t care.

Burton continued to look at Luther while Frank checked in with his men. Then Burton looked over at the huddled mass in the corner. Luther had already struggled with his captors in an attempt to go to her, but they were having no part of it. A policewoman was making awkward efforts to console Kate but with little success. Traces of tears worked their way down the thick wrinkles in the old man’s cheeks as he watched each sob wrack his little girl.

When he noticed Burton right at his elbow, Luther finally flashed fire at the man until Burton led the old man’s eyes back over to Kate. The men’s eyes locked again. Burton raised his eyebrows a notch and then settled them back down with the finality of a round being fired into Kate’s head. Burton had stared down some of the worst criminals the area had to offer and his features could be menacing, but it was the absolute sincerity in those features that turned hardened men cold. Luther Whitney was no punk, that was easy enough to see. He was not one of the blubberers. But the wall of concrete that made up Luther Whitney’s nerves had

already started to crumble. It swiftly finished dissolving and the remnants trickled toward the sobbing woman in the corner.

Burton turned and walked out the door.

Chapter 19

GLORIA RUSSELL SAT IN HER LIVING ROOM AND HELD THE epistle in her quavering hand. She looked at the clock. It had come right on time, via messenger; a turbaned older man in a beat-up Subaru. A Metro Rush Couriers logo on the passenger door. Thank you, ma'am. Say good-bye to your life. She had expected to finally have in her hand the key to wiping away all the nightmares she had suffered. All the risks she had taken.

The wind was starting to howl in the chimney. A cozy fire burned in the fireplace. The house was scrupulously clean thanks to the efforts of Mary, her part-time maid, who had just left. Russell was expected at Senator Richard Miles's home for dinner at eight. Miles was very important to her own personal political aspirations and he had started making all the right noises. Things had finally started to go right again. The momentum had shifted back to her. After all those torturous, humiliating moments. But now? But now?

She looked at the message again. The disbelief continued to sweep over her like an enormous fishing net, dragging her to the bottom, where she would remain.

Thanks for the charitable contribution. It will be greatly appreciated. Also appreciate the extra rope you just gave me to hang you. About that item we had discussed, it's no longer for sale. Now that I think about it, the cops will probably need it for the trial. Oh, by the way, FUCK YOU!

It was all she could do to stagger up. Extra rope? She couldn't think, she couldn't function. She first thought to call Burton, but then realized he would not be at the White House. Then it hit her. She raced to the TV. The six o'clock news was just recounting a late-breaking story. A daring police operation conducted jointly by the Middleton County Police Department and Alexandria City Police had netted a suspect in the Christine Sullivan murder case. A shot had been fired by an unknown gunman. The target was assumed to be the suspect.

Russell watched as footage from the Middleton police station was run. She saw Luther Whitney, staring straight ahead, not in any way attempting to hide his face, walk up the steps. He was far older than she had imagined he would be. He looked like a school principal. That was the man who had watched her ... It never even occurred to her that Luther had been arrested for a crime she knew he had not committed. Not that that revelation would have prompted her to do anything. As the cameraman swung around, she glimpsed Bill Burton with Collin behind him as they stood listening to Detective Seth Frank make a statement to the press.

The goddamn incompetent bastards! He was in custody. He was in fucking custody and she had a message right there in her hand that guaranteed the guy

was going to make sure they were all brought down. She had trusted Burton and Collin, the President had trusted them, and they had failed, failed miserably. She could hardly believe how Burton could be standing there so calmly while their entire world was about to flame out, like a suddenly used-up star.

Her next thought surprised even her. She raced to the bathroom, tore open the medicine cabinet and grabbed the first bottle she saw. How many pills would be enough? Ten? A hundred?

She twisted at the cap but her shaking hands couldn't get it off. She continued to struggle; finally the pills spilled into the sink. She scooped up a handful and then stopped. In the mirror, her reflection stared back. For the first time she realized how much she had aged. The eyes were gaunt, her cheeks had caved in and her hair looked as if it were graying before her eyes.

She looked at the mass of green in her hand. She couldn't do it. Despite her world shattering in front of her, she could not do it. She flushed the pills, turned out the light. She telephoned the senator's office. Sickness would prevent her from attending. She had just lain down on the bed when the knock came.

At first it seemed like the distant beating of drums. Would they have a warrant? What did she have that could incriminate her? The note! She tore it out of her pocket and tossed it in the fireplace. As it ignited and a burst of flame sailed up the chimney, she smoothed down her dress, put on her pumps and walked out of the room.

For the second time a stab of pain seared her chest as her eyes fell upon Bill Burton at the front door. Without a word he walked in, threw off his coat and went straight to the liquor.

She slammed the door.

"Great job, Burton. Brilliant. You took care of everything beautifully. Where's your sidekick? Getting his damned eyes examined?"

Burton sat down with his drink. "Shut up and listen."

Ordinarily such a remark would have sent her off. But his tone stopped her dead. She noted the holstered weapon. She suddenly realized she was surrounded by people carrying guns. They seemed to be everywhere. Shots were now being fired. She had thrown in her lot with some very dangerous people. She sat down and stared at him.

"Collin never fired his weapon."

"But—"

"But somebody did. I know that." He swallowed most of his drink. Russell thought about mixing herself one, but decided against it.

He looked at her. "Walter Sullivan. That sonofabitch. Richmond told him, right?"

Russell nodded. "You think Sullivan was behind this?"

"Who the fuck else could it be? He thinks the guy killed his wife. He has the money to hire the best shooters in the world. He was the only other person who knew exactly where it was going down." He looked at her and shook his head in disgust. "Don't be stupid, lady, we don't have time for stupid."

Burton stood up and paced.

Russell's thoughts went back to the TV. "But the man's in custody. He'll tell the police everything. I thought it was them at the door."

Burton stopped pacing. "The guy's going to say nothing to the police. At least for now."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about a man who will do anything so his little girl can keep on living."

"You, you threatened him?"

"I got my message across real clear."

"How do you know?"

"Eyes don't lie, lady. He knows the game. Talk and his daughter goes bye-bye."

"You, you wouldn't really—"

Burton reached down and grabbed the Chief of Staff, effortlessly lifting her off the floor and holding her in midair so she was eye-level.

"I will kill any fucking person who is in a position to fuck with me, do you understand that?" His tone was chilling. He threw her back into the chair.

She stared up at him, the blood gone from her face, her eyes filled with terror.

Burton's face was crimson with fury. "You were the one who got me into this. I wanted to call the cops right from the get-go. I did my job. Maybe I killed the woman, but there ain't a jury in the world that would've found me guilty. But you sucker-punched me, lady, with all your global disaster talk and bullshit concern for the President, and stupid me, I fell for it. And right now I'm about one step away from pissing away twenty years of my life and I'm not happy about it. If you can't understand that, tough."

They sat without speaking for several minutes. Burton cradled his glass and studied the carpet, thinking intently. Russell kept one eye on him as she tried to stop shaking. She could not bring herself to tell Burton about the note she had received. What good would it do? For all she knew Bill Burton would pull out his gun and shoot her on the spot. The thought of violent death so close to her made her blood turn to ice.

Russell managed to sit back in her chair. A clock ticked in the background; it seemed to be counting down the last remaining moments of her life.

"You're sure he won't say anything?" She looked at Burton.

"I'm not sure of anything."

"But you said—"

"I said the guy will do anything to make sure his little girl doesn't get herself killed. If he takes that threat away, then we'll be waking up the next few years staring at the bottom of a bunk bed."

"But how can he take that threat away?"

"If I knew the answer to that, I wouldn't be so worried. But I can guarantee you that Luther Whitney is sitting in his cell block right now thinking of precisely how to do that."

"What can we do?"

He grabbed his coat and pulled her up roughly. "Come on, it's time to talk to Richmond."

* * * * *

JACK SHUFFLED THROUGH HIS NOTES AND THEN LOOKED around the conference table. His transaction team consisted of four associates, three

paralegals and two partners. Jack's coup with Sullivan had spread throughout the firm. Each of them looked at Jack with a mixture of awe, respect and a little fear.

"Sam, you'll coordinate the raw materials sales through Kiev. Our guy over there is a real hustler, plays close to the edge; keep an eye on him, but let him run with things."

Sam, a ten-year partner, snapped his briefcase shut. "You got it."

"Ben, I checked your report on the lobbying efforts. I agree, I think we should push hard on Foreign Relations, can't hurt to have them on our side." Jack flipped open another file.

"We've got approximately a month to get this operation up and running. Of chief concern is Ukraine's tenuous political status. If we're going to hit the brass ring we have to do it pretty quickly. The last thing we need is Russia annexing our client. Now I'd like to take a few minutes to go over—"

The door opened and Jack's secretary leaned in. She looked edgy.

"I'm terribly sorry to bother you."

"It's okay, Martha, what's up?"

"There's someone on the phone for you."

"I told Lucinda to hold my calls except for an emergency. I'll get back to everybody tomorrow."

"I think this might be an emergency."

Jack swiveled around in his chair. "Who is it?"

"She said her name was Kate Whitney."

Five minutes later Jack was in his car: a brand-new copper-colored Lexus 300. His thoughts raced. Kate had been near hysterical. All he managed to understand was that Luther had been arrested. For what he didn't know.

* * * * *

KATE OPENED THE DOOR ON THE FIRST KNOCK AND NEARLY collapsed into his arms. It was several minutes before she started breathing regularly.

"Kate, what is it? Where's Luther? What's he charged with?"

She looked at him, her cheeks so puffy and raw it looked like she'd been mugged.

When she finally managed to breathe the word out, Jack sat back stunned.

"Murder?" He looked around the room, his mind going too fast for him to register. "That's impossible. Who the hell is he supposed to have murdered?"

Kate sat up straight and pushed the hair out of her face. She looked directly at him. This time the words were clear, direct and cut into him like chunks of jagged glass.

"Christine Sullivan."

Frozen for a long moment, Jack exploded out of the chair. He looked down at her, tried to speak and found he couldn't. He staggered over to the window, threw it open and let the cold beat into him. His stomach churned pure acid; it reached up into his throat until he was barely able to push it back. His legs slowly regained their rigidity. He closed the window and sat back down next to her.

"What happened, Kate?"

She dabbed raw eyes with a ragged tissue. Her hair was a mass of tangles. She had not taken off her overcoat. Her shoes lay next to the chair where she had

kicked them off. She collected herself as best she could. She wiped a strand of hair from her mouth, and finally looked at him.

The words rolled out of her mouth in quiet bursts. "The police have him in custody. They, they think he broke into the Sullivans' home. No one was supposed to be there... . But Christine Sullivan was." She paused and took a deep breath. "They think Luther shot her." As soon as she uttered those last words her eyes closed, the eyelids seemed to ram down by themselves under a terrible weight. She slowly shook her head, her forehead a stack of wrinkles as the throbbing pain clicked up a notch.

"That's crazy, Kate. Luther would never kill anybody."

"I don't know, Jack. I, I don't know what to think."

Jack stood up and took off his coat. He put a hand through his hair as he struggled to think. He looked down at her.

"How did you find out? How the hell did they catch him?"

In response, Kate's body shook. The pain seemed to be so strong as to be visible, hovering above before it plunged repeatedly into her lean frame. She took a moment to wipe her face with another tissue. It took her so long to turn to him, one inch at a time, that she seemed like an ancient grandmother. Her eyes were still closed, her breathing interrupted by gasps, as if the air was being trapped and was having to struggle mightily before escaping.

Finally her eyes opened. The lips moved but no words came out at first. Then she managed to say them, slowly, distinctly, as though she were forcing herself to absorb every blow that accompanied them as long as possible.

"I set him up."

* * * * *

LUTHER, DRESSED IN AN ORANGE JAIL SUIT, SAT IN THE SAME cinder block interrogation room that Wanda Broome had occupied. Seth Frank sat across from him watching him closely. Luther stared directly ahead. He wasn't zoned out. The guy was thinking about something.

Two other men came in. One carried a recorder that he placed in the middle of the table. He turned it on.

"You smoke?" Frank extended a cigarette. Luther accepted it and both men exhaled tiny clouds.

For the record, Frank repeated, verbatim, Luther's Mi randa warning. There would be no procedural miscues on this one.

"So you understand your rights?"

Luther vaguely waved his cigarette in the air.

The guy was not what Frank had been expecting. His record was certainly a felonious one. Three priors, but the last twenty years were clean. That didn't mean much. But no assaults, no violent acts. That also didn't mean much, but there was something about the guy.

"I need a yes or no to that question."

"Yes."

"Okay. You understand that you've been arrested in connection with the murder of Christine Sullivan?"

"Yes."

"And you're sure you want to waive your right to have counsel present on your behalf? We can get a lawyer for you, or you can call your own."

"I'm sure."

"And you understand you do not have to make any statement to the police? That any statement you make now can be used in evidence against you?"

"I understand."

Years of experience had taught Frank that confessions early on in the game could spell disaster for the prosecution. Even a confession given voluntarily could be shredded by the defense with the result often being that all evidence obtained through that confession was thrown out as tainted. The perp could have led you right to the goddamned body and the next day he walks free with his attorney smiling at you and hoping to God his client never shows up in his neighborhood. But Frank had his case. Whatever Whitney added to it was just gravy.

He focused intently on the prisoner. "Then I'd like to ask you some questions. Okay?"

"Fine."

Frank stated the month, day and year and time of day for the record and then asked Luther to state his full name. That was as far as they got. The door opened. A uniform leaned in.

"We got his lawyer outside."

Frank looked at Luther, turned off the recorder.

"What lawyer?"

Before Luther could answer, Jack burst past the officer and entered the room.

"Jack Graham, I'm the accused's attorney. Get that recorder out of here. I want to talk to my client alone, right now, gentlemen."

Luther stared at him. "Jack—" he began sharply.

"Shut up, Luther." Jack looked at the men. "Right now!"

The men began to clear the room. Frank and Jack did an eye-to-eye and then the door was closed. Jack put his briefcase down on the table but didn't sit.

"You want to tell me what the hell's going on?"

"Jack, you gotta keep out of this. I mean it."

"You came to me. You made me promise I'd be there for you. Well goddammit here I am."

"Great, you did your part, now you can go."

"Okay, I go, then what the hell do you do?"

"That doesn't concern you."

Jack leaned into his face. "What are you going to do?"

Luther's voice rose for the first time. "I'm pleading guilty! I did it."

"You killed her?"

Luther looked away.

"Did you kill Christine Sullivan?" Luther didn't answer. Jack grabbed him by the shoulder.

"Did you kill her?"

"Yes."

Jack scrutinized the face. Then grabbed his briefcase.

"I'm your lawyer whether you want me anymore or not. And until I figure out why you're lying to me don't even think about talking to the cops. If you do I'll have you declared insane."

"Jack, I appreciate what you're doing, but—"

"Look, Luther, Kate told me what happened, what she did and why she did it. But let me tell it to you straight. If you go down for this, your little girl is never going to recover. You hear me?"

Luther never finished what he was about to say. Suddenly the tiny room seemed about the size of a test tube. He never heard Jack leave. He sat there and stared straight ahead. For one of the few times in his life, he had no idea what he should do.

* * * * *

JACK APPROACHED THE MEN STANDING IN THE HALLWAY.

"Who's in charge?"

Frank looked at him. "Lieutenant Seth Frank."

"Fine, Lieutenant. Just for the record, my client doesn't waive his Miranda rights and you're not to attempt to talk to him outside of my presence. Understood?"

Frank folded his arms across his chest. "Okay."

"Who's the ACA handling this?"

"Assistant Commonwealth's Attorney George Gorelick."

"I'm assuming you got an indictment?"

Frank leaned forward. "Grand jury returned a true bill last week."

Jack put his coat on. "I'm sure they did."

"You can forget about bail, I guess you know that."

"Well, from what I've heard, I think he might be safer hanging with you guys. Keep an eye on him for me, will you?"

Jack handed his card to Frank and then walked purposefully down the hallway. At the parting remark, the smile faded from Frank's lips. He looked at the card and then toward the interrogation room and back at the rapidly disappearing defense counsel.

Chapter 20

KATE HAD SHOWERED AND CHANGED. HER DAMP HAIR WAS swept straight back and hung loosely down to her shoulders. She wore a thick indigo blue V-neck sweater with white T-shirt underneath. The faded blue jeans hung loosely around her narrow hips. Thick wool socks covered her long feet. Jack watched those feet as they moved up and down, propelling their lithe owner about the room. She had recovered somewhat from earlier. But the horror was still lurking in her eyes. She seemed to be battling it with physical activity.

Jack cradled a glass of soda and sat back in the chair. His shoulders felt like a two-by-four. As if sensing that, Kate stopped pacing and started massaging.

"He didn't tell me they had an indictment." Kate's voice was angry.

"You really think cops are above using people to get what they want?" he shot back.

"I can see you're getting back into the defense attorney state of mind."

She really dug into his shoulders; it felt wonderful to him. Her wet hair dipped into his face as she bore down on the stiffest points. He closed his eyes. On the radio Billy Joel's "River of Dreams" was playing. What was his dream? Jack asked himself. The target seemed to keep jumping on him, like spots of sunlight you tried to chase down as a kid.

"How is he?" Kate's question jarred him back. He swallowed the rest of his drink.

"Confused. Screwed up. Nervous. All the things I never thought he could be. They found the rifle, by the way. Upper-story room of one of those old townhouses across the street. Whoever fired that bullet, they're long gone by now. That's for sure. Hell I don't even think the cops care."

"When's the arraignment?"

"Day after tomorrow, ten o'clock." He arched his neck and gripped her hand. "They're going for capital murder, Kate."

She stopped massaging.

"That's bullshit. Homicide in the commission of a burglary is a class one felony, murder in the first degree, tops. Tell the ACA to check the statute."

"Hey that's my line isn't it?" He tried to make her smile, but didn't succeed. "The commonwealth's theory is that he broke into the house and was in the middle of the burglary when she caught him in the act. They're using the evidence of physical violence—strangulation, beating and two shots to the head—to sever it from the act of burglary. They believe that takes it into the realm of a vile and depraved act. Plus they have the disappearance of Sullivan's jewelry. Murder in the commission of armed robbery equals capital murder."

Kate sat down and rubbed her thighs. She wore no makeup and had always been one of those women who didn't need to. The strain was telling though, especially in and under her eyes, in the slope of her shoulders.

"What do you know about Gorelick? He's going to be trying this sucker." Jack popped an ice cube in his mouth.

"He's an arrogant asshole, pompous, bigoted and a terrific trial lawyer."

"Great." Jack got up from his chair and sat down next to Kate. He took her ankle and rubbed it. She sunk down into the sofa and put her head back. It had always been that way with them, so relaxed, so comfortable in the company of each other, like the last four years had never happened.

"The evidence Frank told me he had wasn't even close to getting an indictment. I don't understand, Jack."

Jack slipped off her socks and rubbed her feet with both hands, feeling the fine, tiny bones. "The police got an anonymous tip on the license plate of a car seen near the Sullivan place on what was probably the night of the murder. It was traced to the D.C. impoundment lot on that night."

"So. The tip was wrong."

"No. Luther used to tell me how easy it was to pick up a car from the impoundment lot. Do a job and then return it."

Kate didn't look at him, she appeared to be studying the ceiling.

"Nice little chats you two used to have." Her tone held the familiar reproach.

"Come on, Kate."

"I'm sorry." Her voice was weary again.

"The police checked the floor matting. Rug fibers from the Sullivan bedroom were found there. Also present was a very peculiar soil mixture. Turns out that exact same soil mix was used by Sullivan's gardener in the cornfield next to the house. The soil was a special blend made up for Sullivan; you won't find that exact composition anywhere else. I had a chat with Gorelick. He's feeling pretty confident I can tell you that. I haven't gotten the reports yet. I'll file my discovery motion tomorrow."

"Again, so what? How does that tie in to my father?"

"They got a search warrant for Luther's house and car. They found the same mixture on the floor mat in the car. And another sample on the living room rug."

Kate slowly opened her eyes. "He was in the house cleaning the damn carpets. He could've picked up the fibers then."

"And then he took a run through the cornfield? Come on."

"It could've been tracked in the house by somebody else and he stepped in it."

"That's what I would've argued except for one thing."

She sat up. "Which is?"

"Along with the fiber and dirt, they found a petroleum-based solvent. The police pulled traces of it out of the carpet during their investigation. They think the perp tried to clean some blood away, his blood. I'm sure they've got a handful of witnesses ready to swear that there was no such thing used on that carpet prior to or at the time the carpets were cleaned. Therefore Luther could've picked up traces of the carpet cleaner only if he had been in the house *after* that. Soil, fibers and carpet cleaner. There's your tie."

Kate slumped back down.

"On top of that they traced the hotel where Luther was staying in town. They found a fake passport and through that tracked Luther to Barbados. Two days after the murder he flew to Texas, then Miami and then on to the island. Looks like a fleeing suspect doesn't it? They've got a sworn statement from a cab driver down there who drove Luther to Sullivan's place on the island. Luther made a reference to having been in Sullivan's place in Virginia. On top of that they've got witnesses who will testify that Luther and Wanda Broome were seen together several times prior to the murder. One woman, a close friend of Wanda's, will testify that Wanda told her she needed money, badly. And that Christine Sullivan had told her about the safe. Which shows Wanda Broome had lied to the police."

"I can see why Gorelick was so free with the info. But it's still all circumstantial."

"No, Kate, it's a perfect example of a case with no home-run direct evidence linking Luther to the crime, but enough indirect stuff to where the jury will be thinking 'come on who are you kidding you did it you sonofabitch.'"

"I'll deflect everywhere I can, but they've got some pretty heavy stones to hit us with. And if Gorelick can get in your Dad's priors, we might be finished."

"They're too old. Their prejudicial value far outweighs their probative. He'll never get them in." Kate's words sounded more sure than she felt. After all, how could you be sure of anything?

The phone rang. She hesitated to answer it. "Does anyone know you're here?"

Jack shook his head.

She picked up the phone. "Hello?"

The voice on the other end was crisp, professional. "Ms. Whitney, Robert Gavin with the *Washington Post*. I wonder if I could ask you some questions about your father? I'd prefer to see you in person if that could be arranged."

"What do you want?"

"Come on, Ms. Whitney, your father is front-page news. You're a state prosecutor. There's a helluva story there if you ask me."

Kate hung up. Jack looked at her.

"What?"

"A reporter."

"Christ, they move fast."

She sat down again with a weariness that startled him. He went to her, took her hand.

Suddenly, she turned his face toward hers. She looked frightened. "Jack, you can't handle this case."

"The hell I can't. I'm an active member of the Virginia Bar. I've handled a half-dozen murder trials. I'm eminently qualified."

"I don't mean that. I know you're qualified. But Patton, Shaw doesn't do criminal defense work."

"So? You have to start somewhere."

"Jack, be serious. Sullivan is a huge client of theirs. *You've* worked for him. I read about it in *Legal Times*."

"There's no conflict there. There's nothing I've learned in my attorney-client relationship with Sullivan that could be used on this case. Besides, Sullivan's not on trial here. It's us against the state."

"Jack, they're not going to let you do this case."

"Fine, then I'll quit. Hang up my own shingle."

"You can't do that. You've got everything going for you right now. You can't mess that up. Not for this."

"Then for what? I know your old man didn't beat up a woman and then calmly blow her head off. He probably went to that house to burgle it, but he didn't kill anybody, that I know. But you want to know something else? I'm pretty damn sure he knows who killed her and that's what's got him scared to death. He saw something in that house, Kate. He saw *someone*."

Kate slowly let out her breath as the words sunk in.

Jack sighed and looked down at his feet.

He got up and put on his coat. He playfully pulled at her waistband. "When's the last time you actually had a meal?"

"I can't remember."

"I recall when you filled out those jeans in a way that was a little more aesthetically pleasing to the male eye."

She did smile that time. "Thanks a lot."

"It's not too late to work on it."

She looked around the four corners of her apartment. It held no appeal whatsoever.

"What did you have in mind?"

"Ribs, slaw and something stronger than Coke. Game?"

She didn't hesitate. "Let me get my coat."

Downstairs, Jack held open the door of the Lexus. He saw her studying every detail of the luxury car.

"I took your advice. Thought I'd start spending some of my hard-earned money." He had just climbed inside the car when the man appeared at the passenger door.

He wore a slouch hat and had a gray-trimmed beard and skinny mustache. His brown overcoat was buttoned up to his neck. He held a minicassette recorder in one hand, a press badge in the other.

"Bob Gavin, Ms. Whitney. I guess we got cut off before."

He looked across at Jack. His brow furrowed. "You're Jack Graham. Luther Whitney's attorney. I saw you at the station."

"Congratulations, Mr. Gavin, you've obviously got twenty-twenty vision and a very winning smile. Be seeing you."

Gavin clung to the car. "Wait a minute, c'mon just a minute. The public is entitled to hear about this case."

Jack started to say something, but Kate stopped him.

"They will, Mr. Gavin. That's what trials are for. I'm sure you'll have a front-row seat. Good-bye."

The Lexus pulled away. Gavin thought about making a run for his car but then decided not to. At forty-six, he and his soft and abused body were clearly in heart attack country. It was early in the game yet. He'd get to them sooner or later. He pulled up his collar against the wind and stalked off.

* * * * *

IT WAS NEARING MIDNIGHT WHEN THE LEXUS PULLED UP IN front of Kate's apartment building.

"Are you really sure you want to do this, Jack?"

"Hell I never really liked the murals, Kate."

"What?"

"Get some sleep. We're both going to need it."

She put her hand on the door and then hesitated. She turned back and looked at him, nervously flicked her hair behind her ear. This time there was no pain in her eyes. It was something else, Jack couldn't quite put his finger on. Maybe relief?

"Jack, the things you said the other night."

He swallowed hard and gripped the steering wheel with both hands. He had been wondering when this was going to surface. "Kate, I've been thinking about that—"

She put a hand to his mouth. A small breath floated from her lips. "You were right, Jack ... about a lot of things."

He watched her walk slowly inside and then he drove off.

When he got home his answering machine had run out of tape. The blinking message indicator was so full the light was reduced to one continuous crimson beacon. He decided to do the most sensible thing he could think of so he

pretended they weren't there. Jack unplugged the phone, turned out the lights and tried to go to sleep.

It wasn't easy.

He had acted so confident in front of Kate. But who was he kidding? Taking on this case, by himself, without talking with anyone at Patton, Shaw was akin to professional suicide. But what good would talking have done? He knew what the answer would have been. Given the choice, his fellow partners would have slit their collective flabby wrists rather than taken on Luther Whitney as a client.

But he was a lawyer and Luther needed one. Major issues like this were never that simple, but that was why he fought so hard to keep things as black and white as possible. Good. Bad. Right. Wrong. It was not easy going for a lawyer perpetually trained to search for the gray in everything. An advocate of any position, just depended on who your client was, who was filling the meter on any given day.

Well he had made his decision. An old friend was fighting for his life and he'd asked Jack to help him. It didn't matter to Jack that his client seemed to be growing unusually recalcitrant all of a sudden. Criminal defendants were seldom the most cooperative in the world. Well, Luther had asked for his help and he was sure as hell going to get it now. There was no gray in this issue anymore. There was no going back now.

Chapter 21

DAN KIRKSEN OPENED THE WASHINGTON POST AND started to take a sip of his orange juice. It never reached his mouth. Gavin had managed to file a story on the Sullivan case consisting chiefly of the information that Jack Graham, newly ordained partner at Patton, Shaw & Lord, was the defendant's counsel. Kirksen immediately called Jack's home. There was no answer. He dressed, called for his car and at half past eight walked through the lobby of his firm. He passed Jack's old office where boxes and personal items were still clustered. Jack's new quarters were just down the hall from Lord's. A twenty-by-twenty beauty with a small wet bar, antique furnishings and a panoramic view of the city. Nicer than his, Kirksen recalled with a grimace.

The chair was swiveled around away from the doorway. Kirksen didn't bother to knock. He marched in and tossed the paper down on the desk.

Jack turned slowly around. He glanced at the paper.

"Well at least they got the firm's name spelled correctly. Great publicity. This could lead to some big ones."

Kirksen sat down without taking his eyes off Jack. He spoke slowly and deliberately, as though to a child. "Have you gone insane? We don't handle criminal defense work. We don't handle any litigation whatsoever." Kirksen stood up abruptly, his long forehead now a shiny pink, his diminutive body shaking with rage. "Particularly when this animal has murdered the wife of the firm's largest client," he said shrilly.

“Well, that’s not entirely correct. We didn’t handle criminal defense work but now we do. And I learned in law school that the accused is innocent until proven guilty, Dan. Maybe you forgot that.” Smiling, Jack eyed Kirksen steadily. *Four million versus six hundred thou pal. So back off, dickhead.*

Kirksen slowly shook his head and rolled his eyes. “Jack, maybe you don’t fully understand the procedures we have in place at this firm before any new matter is undertaken. I’ll have my secretary provide you with the pertinent provisions. In the meantime, take the necessary steps to have yourself and this firm taken off this matter immediately.”

With a dismissive air, Kirksen turned to leave. Jack stood up.

“Listen, Dan, I took the case and I’m going to try it and I don’t care what you or the firm’s policy has to say about it. Close the door on your way out.”

Kirksen turned around slowly and looked at Jack with intense brown eyes. “Jack, tread cautiously. I am the managing partner of this firm.”

“I know you are, Dan. So you should be able to *manage* to close the goddamned door on your way out.”

Without another word, Kirksen spun on his heel, shutting the door behind him.

The pounding in Jack’s head finally subsided. He returned to his work. His papers were just about completed. He wanted to get them filed first thing before anyone could try to stop him. He printed out the documents, signed them and called the courier himself. That done he sat back in his chair. It was almost nine o’clock. He would have to get going, he was seeing Luther at ten. Jack’s entire brain was overflowing with questions to ask his client. And then he thought about that night. That chilly night on the Mall. The look in Luther’s eyes. Jack could ask the questions, he just hoped he was ready to handle the answers.

He threw on his coat, and in another few minutes was in his car on his way to the Middleton County Jail.

* * * * *

UNDER THE CONSTITUTION OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF virginia and its criminal procedure statute, the state must turn over to a defendant any exculpatory evidence. Failure to do so was a terrific way for an ACA to abruptly derail his or her career, not to mention getting a conviction thrown out and letting a defendant walk on appeal.

Those particular rules were giving Seth Frank a very large headache.

He sat in his office and thought about the prisoner sitting alone in a cell less than a minute’s walk away. His calm and seemingly innocuous manner didn’t trouble Frank. Some of the worst offenders he had ever arrested looked like they had stepped out of the church choir right after they had split open somebody’s skull for a couple of laughs. Gorelick was putting together a good case, methodically collecting a bagful of little threads that when woven together in front of a jury would make a nice sturdy necktie for Luther Whitney to choke himself on. That also didn’t trouble Frank.

What did trouble Frank was all the little things that still didn’t add up. The wounds. Two guns. A bullet dug out of the wall. The place sanitized like an operating room. The fact that the guy was in Barbados and then came back. Luther Whitney was a pro. Frank had spent the better part of four days learning

everything he could about Luther Albert Whitney. He had pulled off a crackerjack crime that except for one glitch would probably have remained unsolved. Millions from his heist, a cold trail for the cops; he's out of the country, and the sonofabitch comes back. Professionals did not do those things. Frank would've understood him coming back because of his daughter, but Frank had checked with the airlines. Luther Whitney, traveling under an alias, had returned to the United States long before Frank had hatched his plot with Kate.

And the kicker was this: was he really supposed to believe that Luther Whitney had any reason on earth to check Christine Sullivan's vagina? And on top of that somebody had tried to kill the guy. This was one of the few times Frank actually had more questions after he had arrested his suspect than he had before taking his guy into custody.

He felt in his pocket for a cigarette. His gum stage had long since passed. He would try again next year. When he looked back up Bill Burton was standing in front of him.

* * * * *

"YOU UNDERSTAND, SETH, I CAN'T PROVE ANYTHING BUT I'M just letting you know how I think it went down."

"And you're sure the President told Sullivan?"

Burton nodded, fiddled with an empty cup on Frank's desk. "I just came from meeting with him. I guess I should've told him to keep it mum. I'm sorry, Seth."

"Hell, he's the President, Bill. You gonna tell the President what to do?"

Burton shrugged. "So what do you think?"

"Makes sense. I'm not gonna let it lie, I can tell you that. If Sullivan was behind it I'll take him down too, I don't care what his justification was. That shot could've hit anybody."

"Well, knowing the way Sullivan probably operates, you ain't gonna find much. The shooter's probably on some island in the Pacific with a different face and a hundred people who'll swear he's never even been in the States."

Frank finished writing in his log book.

Burton studied him. "Get anything out of Whitney?"

"Right! His lawyer has him clammed shut."

Burton appeared nonchalant. "Who is he?"

"Jack Graham. Used to be with the Public Defenders Service in the District. Now he's a big-shot partner with some big-shot law firm. He's in with Whitney now."

"Any good?"

Frank twisted a swizzle stick into a triangle. "He knows what he's doing."

Burton stood up to go. "When's the arraignment?"

"Ten tomorrow."

"You taking Whitney over?"

"Yeah. You want to come along, Bill?"

Burton threw his hands over his ears. "I don't want to know anything about it."

"How come?"

"I don't want anything leaking back to Sullivan, that's how come."

"You don't think they'd try anything again?"

"The only thing I know is that I don't know the answer to that question and neither do you. If I were you I'd make some special arrangements."

Frank looked at him intently.

"Take care of our boy, Seth. He's got a date with the death chamber at Greenville."

Burton left.

Frank sat at his desk for some minutes. What Burton said made sense. Maybe they would try again. He picked up the phone, dialed a number and spoke for a bit and then hung up. He had taken all the precautions he could think of for transporting Luther. This time Frank was confident there would be no leak.

* * * * *

JACK LEFT LUTHER SITTING IN THE INTERROGATION ROOM AND walked down the hallway to the coffee machine. In front of him was a big guy, nice suit and a graceful tilt to his body. The man turned around just as Jack passed him. They bumped.

"Sorry."

Jack rubbed his shoulder where the holstered gun had struck him.

"Forget it."

"You're Jack Graham, aren't you?"

"Depends on who wants to know." Jack sized the guy up; since he was carrying a gun he obviously wasn't a reporter. He was more like a cop. The way he held his hands, his fingers ready to move instantly. The way the eyes checked out every feature without seeming to.

"Bill Burton, United States Secret Service."

The men shook hands.

"I'm kind of the President's earpiece on this investigation."

Jack's eyes focused on Burton's features. "Right, the news conference. Well I guess your boss is pretty happy this morning."

"He would be if the rest of the world wasn't in such a godawful mess. About your guy, hey, my feeling is they're only guilty if the court says they are."

"I hear you. You want to be on my jury?"

Burton grinned. "Take it easy. Good talking to you."

* * * * *

JACK PUT THE TWO CUPS OF COFFEE DOWN ON THE TABLE AND looked at Luther. Jack sat down and looked at his empty legal pad.

"Luther, if you don't start saying something I'm going to have to just make it up as I go along."

Luther sipped the strong coffee, looked out the barred window at the single bare oak tree next to the station. A thick, wet snow was falling. The mercury was plunging and the streets were already a mess.

"What's to know, Jack? Cut me a deal, save everybody the hassle of a trial and let's get this over with."

"Maybe you don't understand, Luther. Here's their deal. *They* want to strap you onto a gurney, insert an IV into your arm, pump nasty little poisons into you and pretend you're a chemistry experiment. Or I think now the commonwealth actually

gives the condemned a choice. So you can opt for having your brain fried in the electric chair. That's their deal."

Jack stood up and looked out the window. For a moment the flash of a blissful evening in front of a toasty fire in the huge mansion with the big front yard with little Jacks and Jennifers running around went through his head. He swallowed hard, shook his head clear and looked back at Luther.

"Do you hear what I'm saying?"

"I hear." Luther eyed Jack steadily for the first time.

"Luther, will you please tell me what happened? Maybe you were in that house, maybe you burgled the safe, but you will never, ever make me believe you had anything to do with that woman's death. I know you, Luther."

Luther smiled. "Do you, Jack? That's good, maybe you can tell me who I am one of these days."

Jack threw his pad in his briefcase and snapped it shut. "I'm going to plead you not guilty. Maybe you'll come around before we have to try this thing." He paused and added quietly, "I hope you do."

He turned to leave. Luther's hand fell on Jack's shoulder. Jack turned back to see Luther's quivering face.

"Jack." He swallowed with difficulty, his tongue seemed as big as a fist. "If I could tell you I would. But that wouldn't do you or Kate or anybody else any good. I'm sorry."

"Kate? What are you talking about?"

"I'll see you, Jack." Luther turned and stared back out the window.

Jack looked at his friend, shook his head, and knocked for the guard.

* * * * *

THE SNOW HAD CHANGED FROM FAT, SLOPPY FLAKES TO PELLETS of ice that clattered against the broad windows like handfuls of slung gravel. Kirksen paid no attention to the weather but looked directly at Lord. The managing partner's bow tie was slightly askew. He noticed it in the reflection from the window and angrily straightened it. His long forehead was red with anger and indignation. The little fuck was going to get his. No one talked to him like that.

Sandy Lord studied the dark clusters making up the cityscape. A cigar smoldered in his right hand. His jacket was off and his immense belly touched the window. The twin streaks of his red suspenders jumped out from the background of his highly starched monogrammed white shirt. He peered intently out as a figure dashed across the street frantically chasing down a cab.

"He is undermining the relationship this firm, *you*, have with Walter Sullivan. I could only imagine what Walter must have thought when he read the paper this morning. His own firm, his *own* attorney actually representing this, this person. My God!"

Lord digested only a fraction of the little man's speech. He hadn't heard from Sullivan for several days now. Calls to his office and home had gone unanswered. No one seemed to know where he was. That was not like his old friend, who kept himself in constant contact with an elite inner circle of which Sandy Lord was a longtime member.

"My suggestion, Sandy, is that we take immediate action against Graham. We can't let this lie. It would set a terrible precedent. I don't care if he has Baldwin as a client. Hell, Baldwin is an acquaintance of Walter's. He must be livid as well about this whole deplorable situation. We can convene a meeting of the management committee tonight. I don't think it will take long to arrive at a conclusion. Then—"

Lord finally held up one hand and cut off Kirksen's ramblings.

"I'll take care of it."

"But, Sandy, as managing partner I believe that—"

Lord turned to look at him. The red eyes on either side of the large and bulbous nose cut right into the slender frame.

"I said I'll handle it."

Lord turned to look back out the window. Kirksen's hurt pride was of absolutely no consequence to him. What concerned Lord was the fact that someone had tried to kill the man accused of murdering Christine Sullivan. And no one could reach Walter Sullivan.

* * * * *

JACK PARKED HIS CAR, LOOKED ACROSS THE STREET AND closed his eyes. That didn't help since the vanity plates seemed to be imprinted on his brain. He jumped out of his car and dodged traffic as he made his way across the slippery street.

He inserted the key in the lock, took a quick breath, and turned the doorknob.

Jennifer sat in the small chair by the TV. Her short black skirt was matched by black heels and patterned black stockings. A white blouse was open at the collar where an emerald necklace fired dazzling color into the little room. A full-length sable was draped carefully on the sheet covering his ragged couch. She was clicking her nails against the TV set when he walked in. She looked at him without speaking. The thick ruby lips were set in a firm, vertical line.

"Hi, Jenn."

"You've certainly been a very busy boy the last twenty-four hours, Jack." She didn't smile, her nails continued to click.

"Gotta keep hustling, you know that."

He took off his coat, undid his tie and went into the kitchen for a beer. He reemerged, and sat across from her on the couch.

"Hey, got a new piece of business today."

She reached in her handbag and tossed across the Post.

"I know."

He looked down at the headlines.

"Your firm won't let you do it."

"Too bad, I already did it."

"You know what I mean. What in God's name has gotten into you?"

"Jenn, I know the guy, okay? I know him, he's a friend of mine. I don't believe he killed the woman, and I'm going to defend him. Lawyers do that every day in every place where there are lawyers, and in this country that's basically everywhere."

She leaned forward. "It's Walter Sullivan, Jack. Think about what you're doing."

"I know it's Walter Sullivan, Jenn. What? Luther Whitney doesn't deserve a good defense because somebody *says* he killed Walter Sullivan's wife? Excuse me but exactly where is that written?"

"Walter Sullivan is your client."

"Luther Whitney is my friend and I've known him a lot longer than I've known Walter Sullivan."

"Jack, the man you're defending is a common criminal. He's been in and out of jails all his life."

"Actually he hasn't been in prison for over twenty years."

"He's a convicted felon."

"But he's never been convicted of murder," Jack fired back.

"Jack, there are more attorneys in this city than there are criminals. Why can't another lawyer handle it?"

Jack looked at his beer. "You want one?"

"Answer my question."

Jack stood up and hurled the beer bottle against the wall.

"Because he goddamn asked me!"

Jenn looked up at him, the frightened look that had crossed her face passing as soon as the glass fragments and beer hit the floor. She picked up her coat and put it on.

"You're making a huge mistake and I hope you come to your senses before you do *irreversible* damage. My father almost had a coronary when he read that story."

Jack put his hand on her shoulder, turned her face to his and said quietly, "Jenn, this is something I have to do. I would've hoped you could support me on this."

"Jack, why don't you stop drinking beer and start thinking about how you want to spend the rest of your life."

When the door closed behind her, Jack slumped against it, rubbing his head until he thought the skin would start to peel away under the pressure his fingers were exerting.

He watched from the tiny, dirty window as the vanity plates disappeared into the blur of snow. He sat down, looked at the headlines again.

Luther wanted to cut a deal but there was no deal to cut. The stage was set. Everyone wanted to see this trial. The TV news had given a detailed analysis of the case; Luther's photo must have been seen by several hundred million people. They already had public opinion polls about Luther's guilt or innocence, and he was running far behind in all of them. And Gorelick was licking his chops thinking that this was the vehicle to catapult him into the Attorney General's office in a few years. And in Virginia, Attorneys General often ran for, and won, the Governor's Mansion.

Short, balding, big-voiced, Gorelick was as deadly as a rattler on speed. Dirty tactics, questionable ethics, just waiting to bury the knife in your back at the first opportunity. That was George Gorelick. Jack knew he was in for a long, tough fight.

And Luther wasn't talking. He was scared. And what did Kate have to do with that fear? Nothing was adding up. And Jack was going to walk into court tomorrow and plead Luther not guilty when he had absolutely no way to prove

that Luther wasn't. But proof was the state's job. The problem was they probably had just enough to put them over the top. Jack would peck and chip, but he had a three-time loser as a client, even though the record said Luther had remained clean for the last two decades. They wouldn't care about that. Why should they? His guy made for the perfect ending to a tragic story. A poster boy for the three-strikes rule. Three heavies and your life is over, starring Luther Whitney.

He tossed the newspaper across the room and cleaned up the broken glass and spilled beer. He rubbed the back of his neck, felt the underused muscles in his arms and went to his bedroom and changed into sweats.

* * * * *

THE YMCA WAS TEN MINUTES AWAY. AMAZINGLY JACK found a parking space right in front and went inside. The black sedan behind him wasn't as lucky. The driver had to circle the block several times and then pull down the street and park on the other side.

The driver wiped his passenger-side window clear and checked out the front of the Y. Then he made up his mind, climbed out of his car and ran to the steps. He looked around, glanced at the gleaming Lexus and then slowly walked inside.

Three pickup games later, the sweat was pouring down Jack's body. He sat down on the bench as the teenagers continued to run up and down the court with the inexhaustible energy of youth. Jack groaned as one of the lanky black kids dressed in loose gym shorts, tank shirt and oversized sneakers tossed the ball at him. He tossed it back.

"Hey man, you tired?"

"No, just old."

Jack stood up, rubbed the kinks out of his aching thighs and headed out.

As he was leaving the building he felt a hand on his shoulder.

* * * * *

JACK DROVE. HE GLANCED AT HIS NEW PASSENGER. Seth Frank looked over the interior of the Lexus. "I've heard great things about these cars. How much it run you, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Forty-nine-five, loaded."

"Like hell! I don't even come close to making that in a year."

"Neither did I until recently."

"Public defenders don't make the big bucks, I've heard."

"You heard right."

The men fell silent. Frank knew he was breaking more rules than they probably had written down and Jack knew that too.

Finally Jack looked at him. "Look, Lieutenant, I'm assuming you didn't just come out here to check my taste in automobiles. Is there something you want?"

"Gorelick's got a winning case against your guy."

"Maybe. Maybe not. I'm not throwing in the towel if that's what you're thinking."

"You pleading him not guilty?"

"No, I'm gonna drive him down to the Greenville Correctional Center and inject the shit into him myself. Next question."

Frank smiled. "Okay, I deserved that. I think you and I need to talk. Some things about this case don't add up. Maybe it helps or hurts your guy, I don't know. You willing to listen?"

"Okay, but don't think this flow of information is going to be a two-way street."

"I know a place where you can actually cut the meatloaf with a butter knife and the coffee's passable."

"Is it an out-of-the-way place? I don't think you'd look good in a deputy's uniform."

Frank looked over at him, grinning. "Next question."

Jack managed a smile and then drove home to change.

* * * * *

JACK ORDERED ANOTHER CUP OF COFFEE WHILE FRANK PLAYED with his first. The meatloaf had been terrific and the place was so isolated, Jack wasn't even sure where they were. Rural, southern Maryland he thought. He looked around at the few occupants of the rustic dining room. No one was paying them any undue attention. He turned back to his companion.

Frank looked at him in an amused fashion. "I understand you and Kate Whitney had a thing going a while back."

"Did she tell you that?"

"Hell no. She came down to the station a few minutes after you left today. Her father wouldn't see her. I talked with her for a while. Told her I was sorry about how things had gone down."

Frank's eyes glistened for a moment and then he continued. "I shouldn't have done what I did, Jack. Using her to get to her old man. Nobody deserves that."

"It worked. Some people would say don't argue with success."

"Right. Well anyway the subject got around to you. I'm not so old yet that I can't see a gleam in a woman's eyes."

The waitress brought Jack's coffee. He sipped it. Both men looked out the window where the snow had finally stopped and the whole earth seemed to be covered with a soft, white blanket.

"Look, Jack, I know the case against Luther is just about all circumstantial. But that's sent plenty of people to jail."

"I'm not arguing with that."

"The truth is, Jack, there's an awful lot of shit that doesn't make any sense."

Jack put down his coffee and leaned forward.

"I'm listening."

Frank looked around the room and then back at Jack. "I know I'm taking a chance doing this, but I didn't become a cop to send people to jail for crimes they didn't commit. Plenty enough guilty people out there."

"So what doesn't add up?"

"You'll see some of it for yourself in the reports you'll get in your discovery, but the fact is I'm convinced Luther Whitney burgled that house and I'm also convinced that he didn't kill Christine Sullivan. But—"

"But you think he saw who did."

Frank sat back in his chair and stared wide-eyed at Jack. "How long have you thought that?"

"Not long. Any ideas on the matter?"

"I'm thinking your guy almost got caught with his hand in the cookie jar and then had to actually hide in that cookie jar."

Jack looked puzzled. Frank took a few minutes to explain about the vault, the incongruity of the physical evidence and his own questions.

"So Luther's in the vault all this time watching whoever gets it on with Mrs. Sullivan. Then something happens and she gets popped. Then Luther watches whoever wipe away all traces."

"That's how I got it figured, Jack."

"So he doesn't go to the cops because he can't without incriminating himself."

"That explains a lot."

"Except who did it."

"The only obvious suspect is the husband, and I don't believe it was him."

Jack thought back to Walter Sullivan. "Agreed. So who's not so obvious?"

"Whoever she was meeting that night."

"From what you've told me about the deceased's sex life, that narrows it down to a couple million."

"I didn't say it would be easy."

"Well, my hunch is it's not some ordinary Joe."

"Why's that?"

Jack took a swallow of coffee and looked at his slice of apple pie. "Look, Lieutenant—"

"Make it Seth."

"Okay, Seth, I'm walking a fine line here. I hear where you're coming from and I appreciate the info. But..."

"But you're not absolutely sure you can trust me, and in any event, you don't want to say anything that might prejudice your client?"

"Something like that."

"Fair enough."

They paid the bill and left. Driving back the snow started again with such velocity that the wipers were having a hard time keeping up.

Jack looked over at Frank, who stared straight ahead, lost in thought or maybe just waiting for Jack to start talking.

"Okay. I'll take the chance, I don't have a helluva lot to lose, do I?"

Frank continued to stare straight ahead. "Not that I can see."

"Let's assume for the moment that Luther was in the house and saw the woman murdered."

Frank looked over at Jack; there was relief in the detective's features.

"Okay."

"You've got to know Luther, know how he thinks, to understand how he would react to something like that. He's about as unshakable a person as I've ever met. And I know his record doesn't indicate it, but he's about as trustworthy and dependable as you can get. If I had kids and needed to leave them with someone I'd leave them with Luther because I know absolutely nothing bad would happen to them on his watch. He's incredibly capable. Luther sees everything. He's a control freak."

"Everything except his daughter leading him into a trap."

"Right, except for that. He wouldn't have seen that coming. Not in a million years."

"But I know the kind of guy you're talking about, Jack. Some of the guys I've busted, except for the little habit of taking other people's property, they're some of the most honorable people I've ever met."

"And if Luther saw this woman killed, I'm telling you he would've found some way to deliver the guy to the cops. He wouldn't have let it go. He just wouldn't!" Jack stared grimly out the window.

"Except?"

Jack looked over at him. "Except for a helluva good reason. Like maybe he knew the person or knew of him."

"You mean the kind of person people would have a hard time believing could do something like that so Luther figures why even bother?"

"There's more to it than that, Seth." Jack turned the corner and pulled up next to the YMCA. "I've never seen Luther scared before this all happened. And he's scared now. Terrified in fact. He's resigned himself to take the rap for the whole thing and I don't know why. I mean he left the country for godsakes."

"And came back."

"Right, which I still cannot figure out. You have the date by the way?"

Frank flipped open his notebook and told him the date.

"So what the hell happened after Christine Sullivan was killed and before then to get him to come back?"

Frank shook his head. "Could be anything."

"No, it was one thing and if we could find out what that was, we might be able to figure this whole thing out."

Frank put away his notebook, absently rubbed his hand across the dashboard.

Jack put the car in park and leaned back in his seat.

"And he's not just scared for himself. Somehow he's scared for Kate too."

Frank looked puzzled. "You think somebody threatened Kate?"

Jack shook his head. "No. She would've told me. I think someone got the message to Luther that he either keeps quiet or else."

"You think the same people who tried to take him out?"

"Maybe. I don't know."

Frank made a fist with both hands and looked out the car window. He took a deep breath and looked back at Jack. "Look, you've got to get Luther to talk. If he can deliver us whoever did Christine Sullivan, I'll recommend probation and community service in return for his cooperation; he won't do any time. Hell, Sullivan would probably let him keep what he stole if we could nail the guy."

"Recommend?"

"Let's put it this way, I'll cram it down Gorelick's throat. Good enough?" Frank extended his hand.

Jack slowly took it, eyeing the policeman steadily. "Good enough."

Frank got out of the car and then poked his head back in. "For what it's worth, as far as I'm concerned, tonight never happened and everything you've said stays with me, no exceptions. Not even on the witness stand. I mean it."

"Thanks, Seth."

Seth Frank walked slowly back to his car as the Lexus pulled down the street, turned the corner and was gone.

He understood exactly the kind of guy Luther Whitney was. So what the hell could scare that kind of a guy so badly?

Chapter 22

IT WAS SEVEN-THIRTY IN THE MORNING WHEN JACK PULLED into the parking lot of the Middleton police station. The morning had broken clear but bitterly cold. Amid a number of snow-covered police cars was a black sedan with a cold hood that told him Seth Frank was an early riser.

Luther looked different today; the orange prison clothes had been replaced with a brown two-piece suit, and his striped tie was conservative and professional. He could be an insurance salesman or a senior partner in a law firm, with his thick gray hair neatly trimmed, and the remnants of his island tan. Some defense attorneys saved the nice citizen clothes for the actual trial where the jury could see that the accused wasn't such a bad guy, just misunderstood. But Jack was going to insist on the suit throughout. It wasn't merely game playing; it was Jack's firm conviction that Luther didn't deserve to be paraded around in neon orange. He might be a criminal, but he wasn't the kind of criminal where if you got too close you might get a shiv in your ribs or find a set of criminally insane teeth on your throat. Those guys deserved to wear the orange if only to make sure you always knew where they were in proximity to everyone else.

Jack didn't bother to open his briefcase this time. The routine was familiar. The charges against Luther would be read to him. The judge would ask Luther if he understood the charges and then Jack would enter the plea. Then the judge would take them through the dog-and-pony show to determine if Luther understood what a plea of not guilty entailed, and whether Luther was satisfied with his legal representation. The only problem was Jack had a nagging feeling that Luther might tell him to go to hell right in front of the judge and plead himself guilty. That was not unprecedented. And who knew? The damn judge might just accept it. But the judge would most likely follow the book closely, since, in a capital murder case, any screw-up along the way could be grounds for appeal. And death penalty appeals tended to last forever anyway. Jack would just have to take his chances.

With any luck the entire proceeding would take all of five minutes. Then a trial date would be set and the real fun would begin.

Since the commonwealth had gotten an indictment against him, Luther wasn't entitled to a preliminary hearing. Not that having one would have done Jack any good, but he would've gotten a quick look at the commonwealth's case and a crack at some of their witnesses on cross although the circuit court judges were usually diligent in not letting defense counsel use the prelim as a fishing expedition.

He also could have waived the arraignment, but Jack's thinking was to let them work for everything. And he wanted Luther in open court, for all to see, and he wanted that not guilty plea heard loud and clear. And then he was going to hit

Gorelick with a change of venue motion and get this case the hell out of Middleton County. With any luck Gorelick would get bumped for a new ACA and Mr. Future Attorney General could stew on that disappointment for a few decades. Then Jack was going to make Luther talk. Kate would be protected. Luther would spill his story and then the deal of the century would be cut.

Jack looked at Luther. "You look good."

Luther's mouth curled up more in a smirk than a smile.

"Kate would like to see you before the arraignment."

The response shot out of Luther's mouth. "No!"

"Why not? My God, Luther, you've wanted a relationship with her forever and now that she's finally willing to come around, you clam up. Damn, I don't understand you sometimes."

"I don't want her anywhere near me."

"Look, she's sorry about what she did. It tore her up. I'm telling you."

Luther swiveled his head around. "She thinks I'm mad at her?"

Jack sat down. For the first time he finally had Luther's attention. He should have tried this before.

"Of course she does. Why else won't you see her?"

Luther looked down at the plain, wooden table and shook his head in disgust.

"Tell her I'm not mad at her. She did the right thing. You tell her that."

"Why don't *you* tell her?"

Luther abruptly stood up and walked around the room. He stopped in front of Jack.

"This place has a lot of eyes, you hear me? You understand me? Somebody sees her in here with me, then somebody might think she knows something she doesn't. And believe me that is not good."

"Who are you talking about?"

Luther sat back down. "Just tell her what I said. Tell her I love her and I always have and always will. You tell her that, Jack. No matter what."

"So you're saying this somebody might think you told me something even if you haven't?"

"I told you not to take this case, Jack, but you wouldn't listen."

Jack shrugged, flipped open his briefcase and took out a copy of the Post. "Check out the lead story."

Luther glanced down at the front page. Then he angrily threw the paper against the wall. "Fucking bastard! Fucking bastard!" The words exploded out of the old man's mouth.

The door to the room flew open and a beefy guard poked his head in, one hand on his standard issue. Jack motioned that it was all right and the guy slowly backed out, his eyes glued on Luther.

Jack went over and picked up the paper. The cover story had a photo of Luther taken outside the police station. The headline was in bold three-inch letters normally reserved for when the 'Skins won the Super Bowl: SULLIVAN MURDER SUSPECT ARRAIGNMENT TODAY. Jack scanned the rest of the front page. More killings in the former Soviet Union as ethnic cleansing continued. The Defense Department was preparing for another budget hit. Jack's eyes glanced over but did not really register on President Alan Richmond announcing his intent to take

another stab at welfare reform and a picture of him at a children's center in impoverished Southeast D.C. that made for a nice photo op.

The smiling face had hit Luther right between the temples. Holding poor black babies for all the world to see. Fucking, lying asshole. The fist hit Christine Sullivan again and again and again. Blood flew into the air. The hands wrapped around her neck like a wily serpent, crushing life without a thought. Stealing life, that's what he had done. Kissing babies and killing women.

"Luther? Luther?" Jack gently laid a hand on Luther's shoulder. The old man's frame was quaking like an engine in dire need of a tune-up, threatening to fly apart, no longer able to confine itself within a quickly eroding shell. For a terrible moment Jack wondered if Luther had killed the woman, if his old friend had perhaps gone over the edge. His fears were dispelled when Luther turned and looked at him. The calm had returned, the eyes were clear and focused once more.

"Just tell Kate what I said, Jack. And let's go get this over with."

* * * * *

THE MIDDLETON COURTHOUSE HAD LONG BEEN THE CENTER-piece of the county. A hundred and ninety-five years old, it had survived the British in the War of 1812 and the Yankees and the Confederates in the War of Northern Aggression or the Civil War depending on what side of the Mason-Dixon the person you asked hailed from. A costly renovation in 1947 had given it new life and the good townspeople expected it to be around for their great-grandchildren to enjoy and occasionally go inside, hopefully for nothing more than a traffic ticket or a marriage license.

Where before it had stood alone at the end of the two-lane road that made up Middleton's business district, it now shared space with antique shops, restaurants, a grocery market, a huge bed-and-breakfast and a service station that was all-brick in keeping with the architectural tradition of the area. Huddled within walking distance was a row of offices where the shingles of many a respected county lawyer hung with simple grace.

Normally quiet except on Friday morning, which was motions day for the civil and criminal docket, the Middleton Courthouse now held a scene that would have caused the town's forefathers to do somersaults in their final resting places. At first glance one could almost imagine that the Rebels and the Union Blue had returned to settle, once and for all, the score.

Six television trucks with thick call letters emblazoned on their white sides held forth directly in front of the courthouse steps. Their broadcast masts were already rising skyward. Crowds ten-deep pushed and prodded against the wall of sheriffs reinforced by grim members of the Virginia State Police who stared silently at the mass of reporters pushing pads, microphones and pens into their faces.

Fortunately, the courthouse had a side entrance, which was at this moment surrounded by a semicircle of police, riot guns and shields front and center, daring anyone to come near. The van carrying Luther would come here. Unfortunately, the courthouse did not have an inside garage. But the police still felt they had matters under control. Luther would only be exposed for a few seconds at most.

Across the street, rifle-toting police officers patrolled the sidewalks, eyes sweeping up and down, looking for the glint of metal, an open window that shouldn't be.

Jack looked out the small window of the courtroom that overlooked the street. The room was as large as an auditorium with a hand-carved bench that rose a full eight feet high and swept more than fifteen feet from end to end. The American and Virginia flags stood at attention on either side of the bench. A lone bailiff sat at a small table in front of the bench, a tug boat before the ocean liner.

Jack checked his watch, eyed the security forces in place, then looked at the crush of media. Reporters were a defense attorney's best friends or worst nightmare. A lot depended on what the reporters thought about a particular defendant and about a particular crime. A good reporter will cry loud and hard about his or her objectivity on a story at the same time they're trashing your client in the latest edition, long before any verdict is in. Women journalists tended to go easier on defendants accused of rape, as they tried to avoid even the appearance of gender-bias. For similar reasons, the men seemed to bend over backward for battered women who had finally struck back. Luther would have no such luck. Ex-cons who murder rich, young women would receive the battering rams of all wordsmiths involved, regardless of sex.

Jack had already received a dozen phone calls from Los Angeles-based production companies clamoring for Luther's story. Before the guy had even entered a plea. They wanted his story and would pay for it. Pay well. Maybe Jack should tell them yes, come on in, but only on one condition. If he tells you anything you have to let me in on it, 'cause right now man, I've got nothing. Zip.

He looked across the street. The armed guards gave him some comfort. Although there were police everywhere last time and the shot was still fired. At least this time the police were forewarned. They had things pretty much under control. But they had not counted on one thing, and that one thing was now coming down the street.

Jack swung his head around as he watched the army of reporters and plain curious turn en masse and race to the motorcade. At first Jack thought it must be Walter Sullivan, until he saw the police motorcyclists followed by the Secret Service vans and finally the twin American flags on the limo.

The army this man had brought with him dwarfed the one that was preparing to receive Luther Whitney.

He watched as Richmond exited the vehicle. Behind him stepped the agent he had talked to earlier. Burton. That was the guy's name. One tough, serious dude. His eyes swept the area like a radar beam. His hand within inches of the man, ready to pull him down in an instant. The Secret Service vans parked across the street. One pulled into an alleyway across from the courthouse and then Jack looked back at the President.

An impromptu podium was set up and Richmond began his own little news conference as cameras clicked and half a hundred grown adults with journalism degrees tried to push and pull past their neighbor. A few ordinary and saner citizens were hovering in the back, two with video cameras recording what to them was certainly a special moment.

Jack turned to find the bailiff, a granite wall of a black man, beside him.

"Been here twenty-seven years and never had the man out here before. Now he's been here twice in the same year. Go figure."

Jack smiled at him. "Well, if your friend had invested ten mil in your campaign you might be out here too."

"Lot of big boys against you."

"That's okay, I brought a big bat with me ..."

"Samuel, Samuel Long."

"Jack Graham, Samuel."

"You gonna need it, Jack, hope you loaded it with lead."

"So what do you think, Samuel? My guy gonna get a fair shake in here?"

"You ask me that question two, three years ago I'd say yeah, damn straight you will. Yes sir." He looked out at the crush of people. "You ask me today, I say I don't know. I don't care what court you're in. Supreme Court, traffic court. Things are changing, man. Not just the courts either. Everything. Everybody. Whole goddamn world's changing and I just don't know anymore."

They both looked out the window again.

The door to the courtroom opened and Kate entered. Instinctively, Jack turned around and looked at her. No courtroom attire today, she had on a black pleated skirt that tapered at the waist where a thin black belt encircled her. The blouse was simple and buttoned to the neck. Her hair was brushed back off her forehead and hung to her shoulders. Her cheeks were rosy from the bitter cold, a coat was draped over her arm.

They sat together at the counsel table. Samuel discreetly disappeared.

"It's almost time, Kate."

"I know."

"Listen, Kate, like I told you on the phone, it's not that he doesn't want to see you, he's afraid. He's afraid for you. The man loves you more than anything."

"Jack, if he doesn't start talking, you know what's going to happen."

"Maybe, but I've got some leads to go on. The state's case isn't as foolproof as everyone seems to think."

"How do you know that?"

"Trust me on that one. Did you see the President outside?"

"How could you miss him? It's okay with me though. No one paid a bit of attention to me walking in."

"He definitely relegates everybody else to wallflowers."

"Is he here yet?"

"Soon."

Kate opened her purse and fumbled for some gum. Jack smiled and pushed her quivering fingers out of the way and pulled the pack out for her.

"Couldn't I at least talk to him on the phone?"

"I'll see what I can do."

They both sat back and waited. Jack's hand slipped over Kate's and they both looked up at the massive bench where in a few short minutes it would start. But for now they just waited. Together.

* * * * *

THE WHITE VAN ROUNDED THE CORNER, PASSED THE SEMICIRCLE OF police officers and came to a stop within a few feet of the side door. Seth Frank pulled up directly behind the van and got out, radio in hand. Two officers alighted from the van, scanned the area. This was good. The entire crowd was in the front gawking at the President. The officer in charge turned and nodded to another man inside the van. A few seconds later Luther Whitney, ankles and hands manacled, and his suit covered by a dark trench coat, emerged. His feet touched the ground and, with an officer in front and back, he started to make his way to the courthouse.

That's when the crowd hit the corner. They were following the President, who was purposefully striding down the sidewalk to where his limo was parked. As he passed the side of the courthouse, he looked up. As if sensing his presence, Luther, whose eyes had been pressed to the ground, also looked up. Their eyes locked for one terrible instant. The words escaped Luther's lips before he knew what was happening.

"Fucking bastard." It was said quietly, but each officer heard something, because they looked around as the President walked by a mere hundred feet away. They were surprised. And then their thoughts focused on one thing only.

Luther's knees buckled. At first both officers thought he was intentionally making their job harder until they saw the blood streaming down the side of his face. One of them shouted an expletive and grabbed Luther's arm. The other pulled his gun and swung it in wide arcs at where he thought the shot had come from. The events that happened in the next few minutes seemed a blur to most people who were there. The sound of the shot was not entirely clear over the screams of the crowds. The Secret Service agents heard it, though. Burton had Richmond on the ground in a second. Twenty dark suits carrying automatic weapons made a human cocoon around them.

Seth Frank watched as the Secret Service van tore out of the alley and blocked off the now hysterical crowd from the President. One agent emerged wielding a machine gun and scanned the street, barking into a radio.

Frank directed his men to cover every square inch of the area; every intersection was cordoned off and a building-by-building search would commence. Truckloads of officers would arrive shortly, but somehow Frank knew it was too late.

In another second Frank was beside Luther. He looked on in disbelief as the blood drenched the snow, warming it into a sickening pool of crimson. An ambulance was called and would be there in minutes. But Frank also knew it was too late for ambulances. Luther's face had already gone white, the eyes stared blank, the fingers were curled tight. Luther Whitney had two new holes in his head and the damn round had put a hole in the van after exiting the man. Someone was taking no chances.

Frank closed the dead man's eyes and then looked around. The President was up and being hustled into his limo. In a few seconds the limo and the vans were gone. Reporters started to flock to the murder scene, but Frank motioned to his men and the journalists were met by a brick wall of infuriated and embarrassed police officers who brandished their batons and hoped somebody tried something.

Seth Frank looked down at the body. He took off his jacket despite the cold and laid it across Luther's torso and face.

Jack had made it to the window a few seconds after the screams started. His pulse was off the chart and his forehead was suddenly drenched in sweat.

"Stay here, Kate." He looked at her. She was frozen, her face having already registered a fact that Jack hoped beyond hope wasn't true.

Samuel had emerged from the inner sanctum.

"What the hell's going on?"

"Samuel, keep an eye on her, please."

Samuel nodded and Jack hit the door running.

Outside there were more men with guns than Jack had ever seen outside of a Hollywood war flick. He ran to the side of the courthouse and was about to have his head cracked open by a two-hundred-and-fifty-pound baton-wielding trooper when Frank's voice boomed out.

Jack warily approached. Each of his steps in the tight-packed snow seemed to take a month. All eyes seemed to be on him. The crumpled figure under the coat. The blood soaking the once pristine snowfall. The anguished and at the same time disgusted look on Detective Seth Frank's features. He would remember each of these things for many sleepless nights, perhaps for the rest of his life.

When he finally crouched down beside his friend, he started to draw back the jacket but then stopped. He turned around and looked back from where he had just come. The sea of reporters had parted. Even the wall of cops had hinged back just enough to let her through.

Kate stood there for a long minute, no coat on, shivering in the wind that swept down through the funnel-like space between the buildings. She looked straight ahead, her eyes so focused they seemed to register on nothing and everything simultaneously. Jack started to rise, to go to her, but his legs did not have the strength. Just a few minutes ago, juiced and prepared to do battle, mad as hell at his uncooperative client, now every scintilla of energy had been stripped from his being.

With Frank's help he rose on unsteady legs and went to her. For once in their lives, nosy reporters did not attempt to ask questions. Photographers seemingly forgot to take their requisite shots. As Kate knelt beside her father and gently laid her hand on his still shoulder, the only sounds were the wind and the distant whine of the approaching ambulance. For a couple of minutes the world had stopped right outside the Middleton County Courthouse.

* * * * *

AS THE LIMO WHISKED HIM BACK TO TOWN, ALAN RICHMOND smoothed down his tie and poured a club soda. His thoughts ventured to the headlines that would drown the upcoming papers. The major news shows would be salivating for him, and he would milk it. He would continue on his normal schedule for the day. The rock-solid President. Shots fired around him and he doesn't flinch, goes on about the business of running the country, of leading the people. He could envision the polls. A good ten points at least. And it had all been too easy. When was he ever going to feel a real challenge?

Bill Burton looked over at the man as the limo neared the D.C. line. Luther Whitney had just caught the business end of the most deadly piece of ammo Collin could find to chamber his rifle with, and this guy was calmly sipping soda water.

Burton felt sick to his stomach. And it still wasn't over. He could never in his wildest dreams put any of this behind him, but perhaps he could live the rest of his life as a free man. A man whose children respected him, even if he no longer respected himself.

As he continued to look at the President it occurred to Burton that the sonofabitch was proud of himself. He had seen such calmness before amidst extreme and calculated violence. No remorse because a human being's existence had just been sacrificed. Instead, a rush of euphoria. Of triumph. Burton thought back to the marks on Christine Sullivan's neck. To the busted jaw. To the ominous sounds he had heard from behind other bedroom doors. The Man of the People.

Burton thought back to the meeting with Richmond where he had filled in his boss on all the facts. Other than seeing Russell squirm it had not been a pleasant experience.

Richmond had stared at each of them. Burton and Russell sat side by side. Collin hovered next to the door. They were clustered in the First Family's private quarters. A component of the White House the eager public was never permitted to see. The rest of the First Family was on a brief holiday visiting relatives. It was best that way. The most important member of that family was not in a pleasant mood.

The President was, finally, fully cognizant of the facts, the most remarkable of which had been a letter opener bearing some particularly incriminating evidence, and which had ended up in the hands of their intrepid and felonious eyewitness. The blood had almost frozen in the President's veins when Burton had told him. As the words fell out of the agent's mouth, the President had swiveled his head in Russell's direction.

When Collin recounted Russell's instructions not to wipe the blade and handle clean, the President had stood up and hovered over his Chief of Staff, who had pushed herself so far back in her chair that she seemed to have become part of the fabric. His stare was crushing. She finally covered her eyes with her hand. The underarms of her blouse were soaked in perspiration. Her throat was devoid of saliva.

Richmond had sat back down and slowly crunched the ice from his cocktail and finally turned his gaze out the window. He was still dressed in a monkey suit from yet another engagement but the tie was undone. He was still looking out to nowhere when he spoke.

"How long, Burton?"

Burton stopped looking at the floor. "Who knows? Maybe forever."

"You know better than that. I want your professional assessment."

"Sooner than later. He's got a lawyer now. Somehow, some way the guy's gonna pop to somebody."

"Do we have any idea where 'it' is?"

Burton rubbed his hands together uneasily. "No sir. The police searched his house, his car. If they had found the letter opener, I would've heard."

"But they know it's missing from Sullivan's house?"

Burton nodded. "The police realize it has significance. If it turns up they'll know what to do with it."

The President stood up and played his fingers across a particularly ugly gothic crystal collection of his wife's that was displayed on one of the tables. Next to them were photos of his family. He never actually registered on their countenances. All he saw in their faces were the flames of his administration. His face seemed to redden before the invisible conflagration. History was in jeopardy of being rewritten and all because of a little K mart bimbo and an overly ambitious and incredibly stupid Chief of Staff.

"Any idea who Sullivan employed?"

Burton again answered. Russell was no longer an equal. Collin was there only to be told what to do. "Could be one of twenty or thirty high-priced hit men. Whoever it is he's long gone by now."

"But you've laid the mental trail with our friend the detective?"

"He knows that you 'innocently' told Walter Sullivan where and when. The guy's plenty smart enough to follow up on that."

The President abruptly picked up one of the crystal pieces and hurled it against the wall where it shattered, sending fragments all across the room; his face contorted into a mass of hate and anger that made even Burton shudder. "Dammit, if he hadn't missed, it would've been perfect."

Russell looked at the tiny shards of crystal on the carpet. That was her life. All those years of education, toiling, hundred-hour weeks. For this.

"The police are going to follow up with Sullivan. I made sure the detective on the case understood Sullivan's possible involvement." Burton continued, "But even though he's the most likely suspect, he'll deny everything. They won't be able to prove anything. I'm not sure where that gets us, sir."

Richmond strolled around the room. He could've been preparing for a speech or getting ready to shake hands with a troop of Boy Scouts from a Midwestern state. He was actually contemplating how to murder someone in a way that absolutely no blame, not even a hint of suspicion, would ever fall his way.

"What if he tried again? And this time succeeded."

Burton looked puzzled. "How do we control what Sullivan does?"

"By doing it ourselves."

No one said anything for a couple of minutes. Russell glanced incredulously at her boss. Her entire life had just gone straight to hell and now she was compelled to participate in a conspiracy to commit murder. She had felt emotionally numb since all of this had started. She had been absolutely certain her situation could not get any worse. And she had been absolutely wrong about that.

Finally Burton ventured an analysis. "I'm not sure the police would believe Sullivan would be that crazy. He's gotta know they're on to him, but can't prove anything. If we pop Whitney, I'm not sure they'd look Sullivan's way."

The President stopped strolling. He stood directly in front of Burton. "So let the police reach that conclusion themselves, if they ever do."

The reality was that Richmond no longer needed Walter Sullivan to regain the White House. Perhaps more important, this was a perfect way to rid himself of the obligation to back Sullivan's Ukraine deal over Russia; a decision that was growing into more and more of a potential liability. If Sullivan were even remotely implicated in the death of his wife's killer, he would be doing no more global deals.

Richmond's support would be discreetly withdrawn. Everyone who counted would understand that silent retreat.

"Alan, you want to set Sullivan up for a murder?" These were the first words Russell had spoken. Her face betrayed her complete astonishment.

He looked at her, with unconcealed contempt in his eyes.

"Alan, think about what you're saying. This is Walter Sullivan, this is not some two-bit crook no one gives a damn about."

Richmond smiled. Her stupidity amused him. She had seemed so bright, so incredibly capable when he first brought her on board. He had been wrong.

The President did some rough calculations. At best Sullivan had perhaps a twenty percent chance of going down for the killing. Given similar circumstances, Richmond would take those odds. Sullivan was a big boy, he could take care of himself. And if he faltered? Well, that was why they had prisons. He looked at Burton.

"Burton, do *you* understand?"

Burton didn't answer.

The President said sharply, "You were certainly prepared to kill the man before, Burton. As far as I can determine, the stakes haven't changed. In fact they're probably higher. For *all* of us. Do you understand, Burton?" Richmond paused for a moment, then repeated his question.

Burton finally looked up and said quietly, "I understand."

For the next two hours they laid their plans.

As the two Secret Service agents and Russell rose to leave, the President looked at her. "So tell me, Gloria, what happened to the money?"

Russell looked straight at him. "It was donated, anonymously, to the American Red Cross. I understand it was one of their biggest single contributions ever."

The door closed and the President had smiled. *Nice parting shot. Enjoy it, Luther Whitney. Enjoy it while you can, you insignificant little nothing.*

Chapter 23

WALTER SULLIVAN SETTLED INTO HIS CHAIR WITH A BOOK but never opened it. His mind wandered back. Back to events that seemed more ethereal, more wholly unconnected to his person than anything else that had ever happened in his life. He had hired a man to kill. To kill someone who stood accused of murdering his wife. The job had been botched. A fact for which Sullivan was quietly thankful. For his grief had subsided enough to where he knew what he had attempted to do was wrong. A civilized society must follow certain procedures unless it were to become uncivilized. And no matter how painful it would be to him, he was a civilized man. He would follow the rules.

It was then that he looked down at the newspaper. Many days old now, its contents continued to beat incessantly into his head. The thick, dark headlines shone back at him on the white background of the page. As he turned his attention to it, distant suspicions in his mind were starting to crystallize. Walter

Sullivan was not only a billionaire, he possessed a brilliant and perceptive mind. One that saw every detail along with every landscape.

Luther Whitney was dead. The police had no suspects. Sullivan had checked the obvious solution. McCarty had been in Hong Kong on the day in question. Sullivan's last directive to the man had indeed been heeded. Walter Sullivan had called off his hunt. But someone else had taken up the chase in his place.

And Walter Sullivan was the only person who knew that for a fact other than his bungling assassin.

Sullivan looked at his old timepiece. It was barely seven in the morning and he had been up for four hours already. The twenty-four hours in a day meant little to him anymore. The older he grew, the less important became the parameters of time. Four o'clock in the morning could find him wide awake on a plane over the Pacific while two in the afternoon might be the halfway point in his sleep for the day.

There were many facts that he was sifting through, and his mind worked rapidly. A CAT scan done at his last physical evidenced a brain with the youth and vigor of a twenty-year-old. And that splendid mind was now working toward the few undeniable facts that were leading its owner to a conclusion that would amaze even him.

He picked up the phone on his desk and looked around the highly polished cherry paneling of his study as he dialed the number.

In a moment he had been put through to Seth Frank. Unimpressed with the man early on, Sullivan had grudgingly given him his due with the arrest of Luther Whitney. But now?

"Yes sir, Mr. Sullivan, what can I do for you?"

Sullivan cleared his throat. His voice had a humble note to it that was as far from his customary tone as was possible. Even Frank picked up on it.

"I had a question regarding the information I had given you earlier about Christy, um, Christine's sudden departure on the way to the airport for our trip to the estate in Barbados."

Frank sat up in his chair. "Did you remember something else?"

"Actually I wanted to verify whether I had given you any reason for her not going on the trip."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Well, I suppose my age is catching up with me. My bones aren't the only thing deteriorating I'm afraid, though I don't care to admit it to myself much less anyone else, Lieutenant. More to the point I thought I had told you she had taken ill and had to return home. I mean I thought that's what I had told you in any event."

Seth took a moment to pull his file, although he was certain of the answer. "You said she didn't give a reason, Mr. Sullivan. Just said she wasn't going, and you didn't push it."

"Ah. Well I guess that settles that. Thank you, Lieutenant."

Frank stood up. One hand lifted a cup of coffee and then put it back down. "Wait a minute, Mr. Sullivan. Why would you think you had told me that your wife was sick? Was she sick?"

Sullivan paused before answering. "Actually no, Lieutenant Frank. She was remarkably healthy. To answer your question, I believe I thought I had told you

differently because, to tell you the truth, aside from my occasional memory lapses, I think I've spent these last two months trying to convince myself that Christine staying behind was for some reason. Any reason, I guess."

"Sir?"

"To, in my own mind, justify what happened to her. To not let it be just a damn coincidence. I don't believe in fate, Lieutenant. For me, everything has a purpose. I suppose I wanted to convince myself that Christine's staying behind did too."

"Oh."

"I apologize if an old man's foolishness has caused you any unnecessary perplexity."

"Not at all, Mr. Sullivan."

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WHEN FRANK HUNG UP THE PHONE HE ENDED UP STARING AT the wall for a good five minutes. Now what the hell had all that been about?

Following up on Bill Burton's suggestion, Frank had made discreet inquiries into Sullivan having possibly hired a contract killer to make sure his wife's presumed killer never stood trial. Those inquiries were going slow; one had to tread cautiously in these types of waters. Frank had a career to think about, a family to support, and men like Walter Sullivan had an army of very influential friends in government who could make the detective's professional life miserable.

The day after the slug had ended Luther Whitney's life, Seth Frank had made immediate inquiries as to Sullivan's whereabouts at the time although Frank was under no delusions that the old man had pulled the trigger on the cannon that had propelled Luther Whitney into the hereafter. But murder for hire was a particularly wicked deed, and although perhaps the detective could understand the billionaire's motivation, the fact was he had probably gunned down the wrong guy. This latest conversation with Sullivan left him with even more questions and no new answers.

Seth Frank sat down and wondered briefly if this nightmare of a case would ever leave his watch.

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A HALF HOUR LATER SULLIVAN PLACED A CALL TO A LOCAL television station of which he happened to own a controlling interest. His request was simple and to the point. In an hour a package was delivered to his front door. After one of the staff handed him the square box he ushered her out, shut and locked the door to the room he was in, and pressed a small lever on a portion of the wall. The small panel slid down silently, revealing a very sophisticated audiocassette tape deck. Behind most of this wall rested a cutting-edge home theater system that Christine Sullivan had seen in a magazine one day and simply had to have, although her tastes in video entertainment ventured from pornography to soap opera, neither of which in any way taxed the electronic muscle of this monolithic system.

Sullivan carefully unwrapped the audiocassette and placed it inside the tape deck; the door automatically closed and the tape began to play. Sullivan listened for a few moments. When he heard the words, no emotion was revealed on his

intricate features. He had expected to hear what he had. He had outright lied to the detective. His memory was excellent. If only his sight were half as good. For he had indeed been a blind idiot to this reality. The emotion that finally penetrated the inscrutable line of his mouth and the deep gray of his introspective eyes was anger. Anger like he had not felt in a long time. Not even at Christy's death. A fury that would only be relieved through action. And Sullivan firmly believed that your first salvo should be your last because that meant that either you got them, or they got you, and he was not in the habit of losing.

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THE FUNERAL WAS CONDUCTED IN HUMBLE SURROUNDINGS and with only three people other than the priest in attendance. It had taken the utmost secrecy to avoid the obvious assaults by the armies of journalists. Luther's casket was closed. The remains of violent trauma to the head was not the lasting impression loved ones typically wanted to carry away with them.

Neither the background of the deceased nor the means of his demise mattered the slightest to the man of God, and the service was appropriately reverent. The drive to the nearby cemetery was short as was the procession. Jack and Kate drove over together; behind them was Seth Frank. He had sat in the back of the church, awkward and uncomfortable. Jack had shaken his hand; Kate had refused to acknowledge him.

Jack leaned against his car and watched Kate as she sat in the fold-up metal chair next to the earthen pit that had just accepted her father. Jack looked around. This cemetery was not home to grandiose monuments of tribute. It was rare to see a grave marker sticking up, most were the in-the-dirt variety; a dark rectangle with its owner's name, dates of entry and exit from the living. A few said "in loving memory," most ventured no parting remarks.

Jack looked back at Kate and he saw Seth Frank start toward her, then the detective apparently thought better of his decision and made his way quietly over to the Lexus.

Frank took off his sunglasses. "Nice service."

Jack shrugged. "Nothing's really nice about getting killed." Though miles away from Kate's position on the issue, he had not entirely forgiven Frank for allowing Luther Whitney to die like that.

Frank fell silent, studied the finish on the sedan, drew out a cigarette, then changed his mind. He stuck his hands in his pockets and stared off.

He had attended Luther Whitney's autopsy. The transient cavitation had been immense. The shock waves had dissipated radially out from the bullet track to such an extent that fully half the man's brain had literally disintegrated. And it was no small wonder. The slug they'd dug out of the seat of the police van was an eye-popper. A .460 Magnum round. The Medical Examiner had told Frank that type of ammo was often used for sports hunting, big game in particular. And it was no wonder, since the round had slammed into Whitney with stopping power equal to over eight thousand pounds of energy. It was like someone had dropped a plane on the poor guy. Big game hunting. Frank shook his head wearily. And it had happened on his watch, right in front of him in fact. He would never forget that.

Frank looked over the green expanse of the final resting place for over twenty thousand dearly departed. Jack leaned back against the car and followed Frank's gaze.

"So any leads?"

The detective dug a toe in the dirt. "A few. None of them really going anywhere."

They both straightened up as Kate rose, laid a small arrangement of flowers on the mound of dirt, and then stood, staring off. The wind had died down, and although cold, the sun was bright and warming.

Jack buttoned his coat up. "So what now? Case closed? Nobody would blame you."

Frank smiled, decided he'd have that smoke after all. "Not by a fucking long shot, chief."

"So what are you gonna do?"

Kate turned and started to walk toward the car. Seth Frank put his hat back on, pulled out his car keys.

"Simple, find me a murderer."

* * * * *

"KATE, I KNOW HOW YOU FEEL, BUT YOU HAVE TO BELIEVE ME. He didn't blame you for anything. None of this was your fault. Like you said, you were pushed into the middle involuntarily. You didn't ask for any of this. Luther understood that."

They were in Jack's car driving back into the city. The sun was eye level and dropping perceptibly with each mile. They had sat in his car at the cemetery for almost two hours because she didn't want to leave. As though if she waited long enough he would climb out of his grave and join them.

She cracked the window and a narrow stream of air engulfed the interior, dispelling the new-car smell with the thick moistness that heralded another storm.

"Detective Frank hasn't given up on the case, Kate. He's still looking for Luther's killer."

She finally looked at him. "I really don't care what he says he's going to do." She touched her nose, which was red and swollen and hurt like hell.

"Come on, Kate. It's not like the guy wanted Luther to get shot."

"Oh really? A case full of holes that gets blown apart at trial leaving everyone involved, including the detective in charge, looking like complete idiots. Instead you have a corpse, and a closed case. Now tell me again what the master detective wants?"

Jack stopped for a red light and slumped back in his seat. He knew that Frank was shooting straight with him, but there was no way in hell he was going to convince Kate of that fact.

The light changed and he moved through traffic. He checked his watch. He had to get back to the office, assuming he had an office to go back to.

"Kate, I don't think you should be alone right now. How about I crash at your place for a few nights? You brew the coffee in the morning and I'll take care of the dinners. Deal?"

He had expected an immediate and negative response and had already prepared his rejoinder.

“Are you sure?”

Jack looked over at her, found wide, puffy eyes on him. Every nerve in her body seemed ready to scream. As he walked himself through the paces of what was, to both of them, a tragedy, he suddenly realized that he was still totally oblivious to the enormity of the pain and guilt she was experiencing. It stunned him, even more than the sound of the shot as he sat holding her hand. Knowing before their fingers ever parted that Luther was dead.

“I’m sure.”

That night he had just settled himself on the couch. The blanket was drawn up to his neck, his bulwark against the draft that hit him chest high from an invisible crevice in the window across from him. Then he heard a door squeak and she walked out of her bedroom. She wore the same robe as before, her hair drawn up tightly in a bun. Her face looked fresh and clean; only a slight red sheen hovering around her cheeks hinted at the internal trauma.

“Do you need anything?”

“I’m fine. This couch is a lot more comfortable than I thought it would be. I’ve still got the same one from our apartment in Charlottesville. I don’t even think it has any springs left. I think they all retired.”

She didn’t smile, but she did sit down next to him.

When they had lived together she had taken a bath every night. Coming to bed she had smelled so good it had nearly driven him mad. Like the breath of a newborn, there was absolutely nothing imperfect about it. And she had played dumb for a while until he lay exhausted on top of her and she would smile a decidedly wicked little smile and stroke him and he would ruminate for several minutes on how it was so crystal-clear to him that women ruled the world.

He found his baser instincts creeping firmly ahead as she leaned her head against his shoulder. But her exhausted manner, her total apathy, swiftly quelled his secular inclinations and left him feeling more than a little guilty.

“I’m not sure I’m going to be very good company.”

Had she sensed what he was feeling? How could she? Her mind, everything about her, must be a million miles away from this spot.

“Being entertained was not part of the deal. I can look after myself, Kate.”

“I really appreciate your doing this.”

“I can’t think of anything more important.”

She squeezed his hand. As she rose to go the flap on her robe came undone exposing more than just her long, slender legs and he was glad she would be in another room that night. His ruminations until the early-morning hours ran the gamut from visions of white knights with large dark spots disfiguring their pristine armor to idealistic lawyers who slept miserably alone.

On the third night he had settled in again on the couch. And, as before, she came out of her bedroom; the slight squeak made him lay down the magazine he was reading. But this time she did not go to the couch. He finally craned his neck around and found her watching him. She did not look apathetic tonight. And tonight she was not wearing the robe. She turned and went back inside her bedroom. The door stayed open.

For a moment he did nothing. Then he rose, went to the door and peered in. Through the darkness he could make out her form on the bed. The sheet was at

the foot of the bed. The contours of her body, once as familiar to him as his own, confronted him. She looked at him. He could just make out the ovals of her eyes as they focused on him. She did not put out her hand for him; he recalled that she had never done that.

“Are you sure about this?” He felt compelled to ask it. He wanted no hurt feelings in the morning, no crushed, confused emotions.

For an answer she rose and pulled him to the bed. The mattress was firm, and warm where she had been. In another moment he was as naked as she. He instinctively traced the half-moon, moved his hand around the crooked mouth, which now touched his. Her eyes were open and this time, and it had been a long time, there were no tears, no swelling, just the look he had grown so used to, expected to have around forever. He slowly put his arms around her.

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THE HOME OF WALTER SULLIVAN HAD SEEN VISITING dignitaries of incredibly high rank. But tonight was special even compared to past events.

Alan Richmond raised his glass of wine and gave a brief but eloquent toast to his host as the four other carefully selected couples clinked their glasses. The First Lady, radiant in a simple, black dress, ash blonde hair framing a sculpted face that had worn remarkably well over the years and made for delightful photo ops, smiled at the billionaire. Accustomed as she was to being surrounded by wealth and brains and refinement, she, like most people, was still in awe of Walter Sullivan and men like him, if only for their rarity on the planet.

Technically still in mourning, Sullivan was in a particularly gregarious mood. Over imported coffee in the spacious library the conversation ventured from global business opportunities, the latest maneuvering of the Federal Reserve Board, the ‘Skins’ chances against the Forty-niners that Sunday, to the election the following year. There were none in attendance who thought Alan Richmond would have a different occupation after the votes were counted.

Except for one person.

In saying his good-byes the President leaned into Walter Sullivan to embrace the older man and say a few private words. Sullivan smiled at the President’s remarks. Then the old man stumbled slightly but righted himself by grasping the arms of the President.

After his guests had gone, Sullivan smoked a cigar in his study. As he moved to the window, the lights from the presidential motorcade quickly faded from view. In spite of himself, Sullivan had to smile. The image of the slight wince in the President’s eye as Sullivan had gripped his forearm had made for a particularly victorious moment. A long shot, but sometimes long shots paid off. Detective Frank had been very open with the billionaire about the detective’s theories regarding the case. One theory that had particularly interested Walter Sullivan was his wife having wounded her assailant with the letter opener, possibly in the leg or arm. It must have cut deeper than the police had thought. Possible nerve damage. A surface wound certainly would have had time to heal by now.

Sullivan slowly walked out of the study, turning off the light as he exited. President Alan Richmond had assuredly felt only a small pain when Sullivan’s fingers had sunk into his flesh. But as with a heart attack, a small pain was so

often followed by a much larger one. Sullivan smiled broadly as he considered the possibilities.

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FROM ATOP THE KNOLL WALTER SULLIVAN STARED AT THE little wooden house with the green tin roof. He pulled his muffler around his ears, steadied his weakened legs with a thick walking stick. The cold was bitter in the hills of southwest Virginia this time of year and the forecast pointed unerringly to snow, and a lot of it.

He made his way down across the, for now, iron-hard ground. The house was in an excellent state of repair thanks to his limitless pocketbook and a deep sense of nostalgia that seemed to more and more consume him as he grew closer to becoming a thread of the past himself. Woodrow Wilson was in the White House and the earth was heavily into the First World War when Walter Patrick Sullivan had first seen the glimmer of light with the aid of a midwife and the grim determination of his mother, Millie, who had lost all three previous children, two in childbirth.

His father, a coal miner—it seems everyone's father was a coal miner in that part of Virginia back then—had lived until his son's twelfth birthday and then had abruptly expired from a series of maladies brought on by too much coal dust and too little rest. For years the future billionaire had watched his daddy stagger into the house, every muscle exhausted, the face as black as their big Labrador's coat, and collapse on the little bed in the back room. Too tired to eat, or play with the little boy who each day hoped for some attention but ended up getting none from a father whose perpetual weariness was so painful to witness.

His mother had lived long enough to see her offspring become one of the richest men in the world, and her dutiful son had taken great pains to ensure that she had every comfort his immense resources could provide. For a tribute to his late father, he had purchased the mine that had killed him. Five million cash. He had paid a fifty-thousand-dollar bonus to every miner in the place and then he had, with great ceremony, shut it down.

He opened the door and went inside. The gas fireplace threw warmth into the room without the necessity of firewood. The pantry was stocked with enough food for the next six months. Here he was entirely self-sufficient. He never allowed anyone to stay here with him. This had been his homestead. All with the right to be here, with the exception of himself, were dead. He was alone and he wanted it that way.

The simple meal he prepared was lingered over while he stared moodily out the window where in the failing light he could just make out the circle of naked elms near the house; the branches waved to him with slow, melodic movements.

The interior of the house had not been returned to its original condition or configuration. This was his birthplace but it had not been a happy childhood amid poverty that threatened never to go away. The sense of urgency spawned from that time had served Sullivan well in his career, for it fueled him with a stamina, a resolve before which many an obstacle had wilted.

He cleaned the plates, and went into the small room that had once been his parents' bedroom. Now it contained a comfortable chair, a table and several

bookcases that housed an extremely select collection of reading material. In the corner was a small cot, for the room also served as his sleeping chamber.

Sullivan picked up the sophisticated cellular phone that lay on the table. He dialed a number known only to a handful of people. A voice on the other line came on. Then Sullivan was put on hold for a moment before another voice came on.

"Goodness, Walter, I know you tend to keep odd hours, but you really should try to slow down a bit. Where are you?"

"You can't slow down at my age, Alan. If you do, you might not start back up again. I'd much rather explode in a fireball of activity than recede faintly into the mists. I hope I'm not disturbing something important."

"Nothing that can't wait. I'm getting better about prioritizing world crises. Was there something you needed?"

Sullivan took a moment to place a small recording device next to the receiver. One never knew.

"I only had one question, Alan." Sullivan paused. It occurred to him that he was enjoying this. Then he thought of Christy's face in the morgue and his face became grim.

"What's that?"

"Why did you wait so long to kill the man?"

In the silence that followed, Sullivan could hear the pattern of breathing on the other end of the phone. To his credit Alan Richmond did not start to hyperventilate; in fact, his breathing remained normal. Sullivan came away impressed and a little disappointed.

"Come again?"

"If your men had missed, you might be meeting with your attorney right now, planning your defense against impeachment. You must admit you cut it rather close."

"Walter, are you all right? Has something happened to you? Where are you?"

Sullivan held the receiver away from his ear for a moment. The phone had a scrambling device that made any possible tracing of his location impossible. If they were trying to lock in his position right now, as he was reasonably certain they were, they would be confronted with a dozen locations from which the call was supposedly originating, and not one of them anywhere near where he actually was. The device had cost him ten thousand dollars. But, then, it was only money. He smiled again. He could talk as long as he wanted.

"Actually I haven't felt this good in a long while."

"Walter, you're not making any sense. Who was killed?"

"You know I wasn't all that surprised when Christy didn't want to go to Barbados. Honestly, I figured she wanted to stay behind and do some alley-cattin' with a few of the young men she had targeted over the summer. It was funny when she said she wasn't feeling well. I remember sitting in the limo and thinking what her excuse would be. She wasn't all that creative, poor girl. Her cough was particularly phony. I suppose in school she used the dog-ate-my-homework with alarming regularity."

"Walt—"

"The odd thing was that when the police questioned me regarding why she hadn't come with me, I suddenly realized I couldn't tell them that Christy had

claimed illness. You may recall that there were rumors of affairs floating in the papers about that time. I knew if I reported her not feeling well, coupled with her not joining me in the islands, that the tabloids would soon have her pregnant with another man's child even if the autopsy confirmed otherwise. People love to assume the worst and the juiciest, Alan, you understand that. When you're impeached they'll assume the worst of you of course. And deservedly so."

"Walter, will you please tell me where you are? You are obviously not feeling well."

"Would you like me to play the tape for you, Alan? The one from the press conference where you gave me that particularly moving line about things that happen that have no meaning. It was quite a nice thing to say. A private comment between old friends that was picked up by several TV and radio stations in the area but that never made the light of day. It's a tribute to your popularity, I suppose, that no one picked up on it. You were being so charming, so supportive, who cared if you said Christy was sick. And you did say that, Alan. You told me that if Christy hadn't gotten sick she wouldn't have been murdered. She would've gone with me to the island and she would be alive today.

"I was the only one Christy told about being sick, Alan. And as I said, I never even told the police. So how did you know?"

"You must have told me."

"I neither met nor spoke with you prior to the press conference. That much is easily confirmed. My schedule is monitored by the minute. As President your whereabouts and communications are pretty much known at all times. I say pretty much, because on the night Christy was killed you were certainly not among your usual haunts. You happened to be in my house, and more to the point, in my bedroom. At the press conference we were surrounded by dozens of people at all times. Everything we said to each other is on tape somewhere. You didn't learn it from me."

"Walter, please tell me where you are. I want to help you through this."

"Christy was never really good at keeping things straight. She must have been so proud of her subterfuge with me. She probably bragged to you, didn't she? How she had snookered the old man? Because in fact my late wife was the only person in the world who could've told you that she had feigned illness. And you carelessly uttered those words to me. I don't know why it took me so long to arrive at the truth. I suppose I was so obsessed with finding Christy's killer that I accepted the burglary theory without question. Perhaps it was also subconscious self-denial. Because I was never wholly ignorant of Christy's desires for you. But I guess I just didn't want to believe you could do that to me. I should have assumed the worst in human nature and I would not have found myself disappointed. But as they say, better late than never."

"Walter, why did you call me?"

Sullivan's voice grew more quiet but lost none of its force, none of its intensity. "Because, you bastard, I wanted to be the one to tell you of your new future. It will involve lawyers and courts and more public exposure than even as President you ever dreamed was possible. Because I didn't want you to be wholly surprised when the police presented themselves on your doorstep. And most of all, I wanted you to know exactly who to thank for all of it."

The President's voice became tense. "Walter, if you want me to help you, I will. But I am the President of the United States. And although you are one of my oldest friends, I will not tolerate this type of accusation from you or anyone else."

"That's good, Alan. Very good. You discerned that I would be taping the conversation. Not that it matters." Sullivan paused for a moment, then continued. "My protégé, Alan. Taught you everything I knew, and you learned well. Well enough to hold the highest office in the land. Fortunately, your fall will also be the steepest."

"Walter, you've been under a lot of stress. For the last time, please get some help."

"Funny, Alan, that's precisely my advice to you."

Sullivan clicked off the phone and turned off the recorder. His heart was beating abnormally fast. He put one hand against his chest, forced himself to relax. A coronary was not going to be allowed. He was going to be around to see this one.

He looked out the window and then at the inside of the room. His little homestead. His father had died in this very room. Somehow, that thought was comforting to him.

He lay back in the chair and closed his eyes. In the morning he would call the police. He would tell them everything and he would give them the tape. Then he would sit back and watch. Even if they didn't convict Richmond, his career was over. Which was to say the man was as good as dead, professionally, spiritually, mentally. Who cared if his physical carcass lingered? So much the better. Sullivan smiled. He had sworn that he would avenge his wife's killer. And he had.

It was the sudden sensation of his hand rising from his side that brought his eyes open. And then his hand was being closed around a cold, hard object. It wasn't until the barrel touched the side of his head that he really reacted. And by then it was too late.

* * * * *

AS THE PRESIDENT LOOKED AT THE PHONE RECEIVER, HE checked his watch. It would be over right about now. Sullivan had taught him well. Too well, as it had turned out, for the teacher. He had been almost certain Sullivan would contact him directly prior to announcing the President's culpability to the world. That had made it relatively simple. Richmond rose and headed upstairs to his private quarters. The thought of the late Walter Sullivan had already passed from his mind. It was not efficient or productive to linger over a vanquished foe. It only set you back for your next challenge. Sullivan had also taught him that.

* * * * *

IN THE TWILIGHT THE YOUNGER MAN STARED AT THE HOUSE. He had heard the shot, but his eyes never stopped staring at the dim light in the window.

Bill Burton rejoined Collin in a few seconds. He could not even look at his partner. Two trained and dedicated Secret Service agents, killers of young women and old men.

On the drive back, Burton sank back in his seat. It was finally over. Three people dead, counting Christine Sullivan. And why not count her? That's what had started this whole nightmare.

Burton looked down at his hand, still barely able to comprehend that it had just curled around the grip of a gun, forced a trigger back and ended a man's life. With his other hand Burton had taken the cassette recorder and the tape. They were in his pocket headed for the incinerator.

When he had checked the telephone tap and listened to Sullivan's phone conversation with Seth Frank, Burton had no idea what the old man was getting at with Christine Sullivan's "illness." But when he reported the information to the President, Richmond had looked out the window for some minutes, a shade paler than he had been when Burton had entered the room. Then he had phoned the White House Media Department. A few minutes later they had both listened to the tape from the first press conference on the Middleton Courthouse steps. To the President commiserating with his old friend, about the whimsical nature of life; how Christine Sullivan would still be alive if she hadn't taken ill. Having forgotten that Christine Sullivan had told him that on the day of her death. A fact that could be proven. A fact that could possibly topple all of them.

Burton had slumped back in his chair, stared at his boss, who silently looked at the tape as if he were trying to erase its words with his thoughts. Burton shook his head incredulously. Caught up in his own mushy rhetoric, just like a politician.

"What do we do now, Chief? Make a run for it on Air Force One?" Burton was only half-joking as he studied the carpet. He was too numb to even think anymore.

He looked up to find the President's eyes full upon him. "Walter Sullivan is the only living person, other than ourselves, who knows the significance of this information."

Burton rose from his chair and returned the stare. "My job doesn't include popping people just because you tell me to."

The President would not take his eyes from Burton's face. "Walter Sullivan is now a direct threat to us. He is also fucking with us and I don't like people fucking with me. Do you?"

"He's got a damned good reason to, don't you think?"

Richmond picked up a pen from his desk and twirled it between his fingers. "If Sullivan talks we lose everything. Everything." The President snapped his fingers. "Gone. Just like that. And I will do everything possible to avoid it happening."

Burton dropped into his chair, his belly suddenly on fire. "How do you know he hasn't already?"

"Because I know Walter," the President said simply. "He'll do it in his own way. And it will be spectacular. But deliberate. He is not a man who rushes into anything. But when he does act, the results will be swift and crushing."

"Great." Burton put his head in his hands, his mind whirling faster than he thought possible. Years of training had instilled in him an almost innate ability to process information instantly, think on his feet, act a fraction of a second before anyone else could. Now his brain was a muddle, like day-old coffee, thick and soupy; nothing was clear. He looked up.

"But killing the guy?"

"I can guarantee you that Walter Sullivan is right this minute plotting how best to destroy us. That type of action does not invoke sympathy from me."

The President leaned back in his chair. "Plainly and simply this man has decided to fight us. And one has to live with the consequences of one's decisions."

Walter Sullivan knows that better than anyone alive.” The President’s eyes again lasered in on Burton’s. “The question is, are we prepared to fight back?”

* * * * *

COLLIN AND BURTON HAD SPENT THE LAST THREE DAYS following Walter Sullivan. When the car had dropped him off in the middle of nowhere, Burton both couldn’t believe his luck and experienced deep sadness for his target, now, truly, a sitting duck.

Husband and wife wiped out. As the car sped back to the Capital City, Burton unconsciously rubbed at his hand, trying to whittle away the filth he felt in every crevice. What turned his skin cold was the realization that he could never wipe away the feelings he was having, the reality of what he had done. The rock-bottom emotional barometer would be with him every minute of every day of the rest of his days. He had traded his life for another. Again. His backbone, for so long a steel beam, had wilted to pitiful rubber. Life had given him the supreme challenge and he had failed.

He dug his fingers into the armrest and stared out the window into the darkness.

Chapter 24

THE APPARENT SUICIDE OF WALTER SULLIVAN ROCKED NOT only the financial community. The funeral was attended by the high and mighty from all over the world. In an appropriately solemn and lavish ceremony at Washington’s St. Matthew’s Cathedral, the man was eulogized by a half-dozen dignitaries. The most famous had gone on for a full twenty minutes about the great human being Walter Sullivan had been, and also about the great stress he had been under and how those under such strain sometimes do things they would otherwise never contemplate. When Alan Richmond had finished speaking, there was not a dry cheek in the place, and the tears that dampened his own face were seemingly genuine. He had always been impressed with his superb oratorical skills.

The long funeral procession streamed out, and, over three and one half hours later, ended at the tiny house where Walter Sullivan had begun, and ended, his life. As the limos scrambled for space on the narrow, snow-covered road, Walter Sullivan was carried down and interred next to his parents, on the little knoll where the view down the valley was by far the richest part of the place.

As the dirt covered the coffin, and the friends of Walter Sullivan made their way back to the realm of the living, Seth Frank studied every face. He watched as the President made his way back to his limo. Bill Burton saw him, registered surprise for an instant, and then nodded. Frank nodded back.

When all the mourners had gone, Frank turned his attention to the little house. The yellow police lines were still around the perimeter and two uniformed officers stood guard.

Frank walked over, flashed his badge and entered.

It seemed the height of irony that one of the wealthiest men in the world had chosen a place like this to die. Walter Sullivan had been a walking poster child for Horatio Alger tales. Frank admired a man who had risen in the world on his own merit, sheer guts and determination. Who wouldn't?

He looked again at the chair where the body had been found, the gun beside it. The weapon had been pressed against Sullivan's left temple. The stellate wound, large and ragged, had preceded the massive bursting fracture that had ended the man's life. The gun had fallen on the left side of the floor. The presence of the contact wound and powder burns on the deceased's palm had prompted the locals to file the case away as a suicide, the facts of which were simple and straightforward. A grieving Walter Sullivan had exacted revenge on his wife's killer and then taken his own life. His associates had confirmed that Sullivan had been out of touch for days, unusual for him. He rarely came to this retreat and whenever he did, someone knew his whereabouts. The newspaper found beside the body had proclaimed the death of his wife's suspected murderer. All the signs pointed to a man who had intended on ending his life.

What bothered Frank was one small fact that he had purposefully not shared with anyone. He had met Walter Sullivan the day he had come to the morgue. During that meeting, Sullivan had signed off on several forms related to the autopsy and an inventory of his wife's few possessions.

And Sullivan had signed those forms with his *right* hand.

It was inconclusive in itself. Sullivan could have held the gun in his left hand for any number of reasons. His fingerprints were on the gun clear as day, maybe too clear, Frank thought to himself.

The physical condition of the gun: it was untraceable; the serial numbers had been so expertly obliterated that even the scope couldn't pull up anything. A completely sterilized weapon. The kind you'd expect to find at a crime scene. But why would Walter Sullivan be concerned about anyone tracing a gun he was going to use to kill himself? The answer was he wouldn't. But again the fact was inconclusive since the person providing Sullivan the weapon could have obtained it illegally, although Virginia was one of the easier states in which to purchase a handgun, much to the dismay of police departments in the northeast corridor of the country.

Frank finished with the interior and paced outside. The snow still lay thickly on the ground. Sullivan had been dead before the snow had started, the autopsy had confirmed that. It was fortunate that his people knew the location of the house. They had come looking for him and the body had been discovered within approximately twelve hours of death.

No, the snow would not help Frank. The entire place was so isolated there was no one even to ask if anything suspicious had been observed on the night of Sullivan's death.

His counterpart from the county sheriff's department climbed out of his car and hustled over to where Frank was standing. The man carried a file with some papers in it. He and Frank conversed for a few moments and then Frank thanked him, climbed in his car and drove off.

The autopsy report indicated that Walter Sullivan had died sometime between eleven P.M. and one o'clock in the morning. But at twelve-ten Walter Sullivan had called someone.

* * * * *

THE HALLWAYS OF PS&L WERE UNSETTLINGLY QUIET. THE capillaries of a thriving law practice are ringing phones, peeling faxes, mouths moving and keyboards clicking. Lucinda, even with the firm's individual direct-dialing lines, was normally the recipient of eight phone calls per minute. Today she leisurely read through Vogue. Most office doors were closed, shielding from view the intense and often emotional discussions going on among all but a handful of the firm's lawyers.

Sandy Lord's office door was not only closed, it was locked. The few partners with the temerity to attempt a knock on the thick portal were quickly on the biting end of an obscene verbal barrage from the room's lone and moody occupant.

He sat in his chair, shoeless feet on the polished desk, tieless, collar undone, unshaven, a nearly empty bottle of his strongest whiskey within easy reach. Sandy Lord's eyes were now mere blots of red. At the church he had used those eyes to stare long and hard at the shiny brass coffin containing Sullivan's body; essentially it contained both their earthly remains.

For many years Lord had anticipated Sullivan's demise and had, with the help of a dozen PS&L specialists, established an elaborate series of safeguards that included cultivation of a loyal contingent on the board of directors of the parent holding company of Sullivan Enterprises, all of which would ensure continual representation of the huge network of Sullivan entities far into the future by PS&L generally and by Lord in particular. Life would go on. The PS&L train would thrive with its chief diesel engine intact and even replenished. But an unexpected development had occurred.

That Sullivan's passing was inevitable, the financial markets understood. What the business and investment community apparently could not accept was the man's death, allegedly by his own hand, coupled with the increasing rumors that Sullivan had had his wife's alleged killer gunned down, something that once accomplished, had prompted him to put a bullet into his own brain. The market was not prepared for such revelations. A surprised market, some economists would predict, often reacts wildly and precipitately. Those economists were not disappointed. Shares of stock in Sullivan Enterprises plummeted sixty-one percent in value on the New York Stock Exchange the morning after his body was discovered, on the heaviest trading volume for a single stock in the last ten years.

With the stock selling a full six dollars a share below book value it had not taken long for the vultures to circle.

Centrus Corp.'s tender offer was, upon Lord's advice, rejected by the board of directors. However, all indications pointed to overwhelming acceptance of the offer by the shareholders, who had nervously watched as a large chunk of their investment had evaporated overnight. It was likely that the proxy battle would be complete and the takeover finalized in two months. Centrus's counsel, Rhoads, Director & Minor, was one of the largest law firms in the country, well-stocked in all areas of legal expertise.

The bottom line was clear. PS&L would not be needed. Its largest client, over twenty million dollars' worth, almost one-third of its legal business, would disappear. Already résumés were flying out of the firm. Practice groups were trying to cut deals with Rhoads, pleading their familiarity with Sullivan's business as a hedge against the dreaded and costly learning curve. Twenty percent of the heretofore loyal PS&L attorney ranks had submitted their resignation and there were no indications the tidal wave would subside anytime soon.

Lord's hand slowly meandered along his desk until the whiskey was tilted back and finished. He swiveled around, checked out the gloom of the winter's morning and had to smile to himself.

There was no deal awaiting him at Rhoads, Director & Minor and, thus, it had finally happened: Lord was vulnerable. He had seen clients bite the dust with alarming swiftness, especially in the last decade where you were a paper billionaire one minute and an impoverished felon the next. He had, though, never imagined that his own fall, if it ever came, would be as terrifyingly fast, as painfully complete.

That was the problem with an eight-figure gorilla of a client. It took all of your time and attention. Old clients dried up and died away. New clients were not cultivated. His complacency had come back to bite him right in the ass.

He calculated swiftly. Over the last twenty years he had netted roughly thirty million dollars. Unfortunately, he had managed somehow not only to spend the thirty mil but a good deal more than that. Over the years he had owned a string of luxurious homes, a vacation place in Hilton Head Island, a hideaway fuck nest in the Big Apple where he had taken his wedded prey. The luxury cars, the various collections that a man of taste and resources was supposed to accumulate, the small but select wine cellar, even his own helicopter—he had had all those things, but three divorces, none of them amicable, had deteriorated his asset base.

The residence he now had left was straight from the pages of *Architectural Digest* but its mortgage matched its stunning opulence stride for stride. And the thing he truly didn't have much of was cash. Liquidity escaped him and at PS&L you ate what you killed and PS&L partners didn't tend to hunt in packs. That was why Lord's monthly draw was so much larger than everyone else's. That revised draw check would now barely cover his plastic bills; his monthly Am Ex alone routinely crept into the five-figure range.

He turned his now-racing gray cells for a moment to his non-Sullivan clients. A rough ballpark estimate gave him maybe a half-million in potential legal business at best, if he pumped them hard, made the circuit, which he didn't want to do, lacked any desire to do. That was beneath him now. Or it had been up until good old Walter had decided life just wasn't worth living despite his several billions. *Jesus Christ. All for a little dumbshit whore.*

Five hundred thou! That was even less than the little prick Kirksen. Lord winced at that realization.

He wheeled around and studied the artwork on the far wall. Within the brush strokes of a minor nineteenth-century artist he found reason to smile once more. He had an option left to him. Though his biggest client had royally screwed up Lord's life, the rotund deal-maker had an asset left to mine. He punched his phone.

* * * * *

FRED MARTIN PUSHED THE CART QUICKLY DOWN THE hallway. Only his third day on the job, and his first delivering the mail to the firm's attorneys, Martin was anxious to complete his task quickly and accurately. One of ten gofers employed by the firm, Martin was already feeling pressure from his supervisor to pick up his pace. After banging the streets for four months with no weapons other than his B.A. in history from Georgetown, Martin had figured his only recourse was to attend law school. And what better place to plumb the possibilities of such a career than at one of D.C.'s most prestigious? His endless trek of job interviews had convinced him that it was never too early to commence networking.

He consulted his map with the attorneys' names listed in each square representing that person's office. Martin had grabbed the map from on top of the desk in his cubicle, not noticing the updated version buried under a multinational transaction closing binder that rose five thousand pages high, the indexing and binding of which awaited him that afternoon.

As he rounded the corner he stopped and looked at the closed door. Everyone's door was closed today. He took the Federal Express package and checked the name on the map, and compared that to the scrawled handwriting on the packing label. It matched. He looked at the empty nameplate holder and his eyebrows converged in confusion.

He knocked, waited a moment, knocked again and then opened the door.

He looked around. The place was a mess. Boxes littered the floor, the furniture was in disarray. Some papers lay scattered on the desk. His first instinct was to check with his supervisor. Maybe there was a mistake. He looked at his watch. Already ten minutes late. He grabbed the phone, dialed his supervisor. No answer. Then he saw the photo of the woman on the desk. Tall, auburn-haired, very expensively dressed. Must be the man's office. Probably moving in. Who'd leave a looker like that behind? With that rationale established, Fred carefully laid the package on the desk chair, where it would be sure to be found. He closed the door on his way out.

* * * * *

"I'M SORRY ABOUT WALTER, SANDY. I REALLY AM." JACK checked the view across the cityscape. A penthouse apartment in Upper Northwest. The place must have been enormously expensive, and the dollars had continued to flow for the interior design. Everywhere Jack looked were original paintings, soft leather and sculptured stone. He reasoned that the world didn't have many Sandy Lords and they had to live somewhere.

Lord sat by the fire that popped pleasantly in the grate, a loose paisley robe covering his bulky frame, bare feet comforted in leather slippers. A cold rain fell against the broad expanse of windows. Jack drew closer to the fire, his mind appeared to crackle and jump like the flames; a loose ember hit the marble surround, flamed and then quickly disappeared. Jack cradled his drink and looked at his partner.

The phone call hadn't been totally unexpected. "We need to talk, Jack, the sooner the better for me. Not at the office."

When he arrived, Lord's aged valet had taken his coat and gloves and then inconspicuously receded into the farther reaches of the home.

The two men were in Lord's mahogany-paneled study, a luxuriously masculine retreat that Jack felt guiltily envious of. A glimmer of the large stone house briefly came into focus. It had a library, much like this. With an effort he focused on Lord's back.

"I'm kinda fucked, Jack." The first words out of Lord's mouth had the effect of making Jack want to smile. You had to appreciate the man's candor. But he caught himself. The tone in Lord's voice demanded a certain respect.

"The firm'll be okay, Sandy. We're not going to lose many more. So we sublease some space, it's no big deal."

Lord finally stood up and went straight to the well-fed bar in the corner. The shot glass was filled to the rim and downed in a well-practiced motion.

"Excuse me, Jack, maybe I'm not making myself real clear here. The firm took a blow, but not one that'll send it down for the count. You're right, Patton, Shaw will weather this broadside. But what I'm talking about is whether Patton, Shaw and Lord will live to fight another day."

Lord lurched across the room and wearily plunged himself on the burgundy leather couch. Jack traced the column of brass nails as they marched across the outline of the heavy piece. He sipped his drink and studied the wide face. The eyes were narrow, no more than penny-wide slits really.

"You're the firm's leader, Sandy, I don't see that changing, even if your client base took a hit."

Lord groaned from his horizontal perch.

"A hit? A hit? I took a goddamned A-bomb, Jack, right up my ass. The heavyweight champion of the world couldn't have hit me any harder. I'm going down for the count. The buzzards they are a circling, and Lord he is the main course; the stuffed hog with the apple in the mouth and a bull's-eye on the butt."

"Kirksey?"

"Kirksey, Packard, Mullins, fucking Townsend. Keep counting, Jack, the list goes on until you get to the end of the partnership roll. I have, I must admit, a most unusual, hate-hate relationship with my partners."

"But not Graham, Sandy. Not with Graham."

Lord slowly edged himself up, perching on one flabby arm as he looked at Jack.

Jack wondered why he liked the man as much as he did. The answer probably lay somewhere in the lunch at Fillmore's way back when. No bullshit. A real-world baptism where the sting of words made your gut clench and your brain hammer out responses you'd never have the nerve to actually deliver. Now the man was in trouble. Jack had the means to protect him. Or maybe he did; his relationship with the Baldwins right now was far from solid.

"Sandy, if they want to get to you, they'll have to go through me first." There, he had said it. And he meant it. It was also true that Lord had given him his chance to shine with the big boys, thrown him right into the fire. But what other way would you know if you could actually pull it off or not? That experience was also worth something.

"The waters might get a little rocky for both of us, Jack."

"I'm a good swimmer, Sandy. Besides, don't look at this as purely altruistic. You're an investment of the firm in which I'm a partner. You're a top-grade rainmaker. You're down now, but you won't stay down. Five hundred bucks says within twelve months you're back in the number-one slot. I don't intend on letting an asset like that walk away."

"I won't forget this, Jack."

"I won't let you."

After Jack had left, Lord started to pour another drink but stopped. He looked down at his quivering hands and slowly put down the bottle and glass. He made it to the couch before his knees gave out. The federal-style mirror over the fire-place caught his image. It had been twenty years since a single tear had escaped the heavy face. That had been at his mother's passing. But now the outpourings were steadily coming on. He had cried for his friend, Walter Sullivan. For years Lord had duped himself into believing that the man meant nothing more to him than a solid-gold draw check each month. The price for that self-deception had come due at the funeral, where Lord had wept so hard that he had gone back to his car until it was time to go bury his friend.

Now he rubbed at the puffy cheeks once again, pushing away the salty liquid. Fucking young punk. Lord had planned everything down to the last detail. His pitch would be perfect. He had envisioned every possible response except the one he had gotten. He had mistaken the younger man. Lord assumed that Jack would have done what Lord himself would have done: pressed for every advantage in exchange for the enormous favor being asked.

It wasn't only guilt that pulled at him. It was shame. He realized that as sickness enveloped him and he bent low over the thick, spongy carpet. Shame. He hadn't felt that one for a long time either. When the nausea subsided and he once again looked at the wreck in the mirror, Lord promised himself that he would not disappoint Jack. That he would rise back to the top. And he would not forget.

Chapter 25

FRANK HAD NEVER IN HIS WILDEST FANTASIES EXPECTED TO be sitting here. He looked around and quickly determined that it was indeed oval in shape. The furnishings tended to be solid, conservative, but with a splash of color here, a stripe there, a pair of expensive sneakers placed neatly on a lower shelf, that stated that the room's occupant was not nearly ready for retirement. Frank swallowed hard and willed himself to breathe normally. He was a veteran policeman and this was just another routine inquiry in a series of endless ones. He was just following up a lead, nothing more. A few minutes and he'd be out of here.

But then his brain reminded him that the person he was about to make inquiries of was the current President of the United States. As a new shock wave of nervousness rushed over him the door opened and he quickly stood, turned and stared for a long moment at the extended hand until his mind finally registered and he slowly moved his out to meet it.

"Thank you for coming down into my neck of the woods, Lieutenant."

"No trouble at all, sir. I mean you've got better things to do than sit in traffic. Although I guess you never really sit in traffic, do you, Mr. President?"

Richmond sat behind his desk and motioned for Frank to resume his seat. An impassive Bill Burton, invisible to Frank until that moment, closed the door and inclined his head toward the detective.

"My routes are pretty well laid out in advance I'm afraid. It's true I don't end up in many traffic jams but it does stifle the hell out of spontaneity." The President grinned and Frank could feel his own mouth automatically turning up into a smile.

The President leaned forward and stared directly at him. He clasped his hands together, his brow wrinkled and he went from jovial to intensely serious in an instant.

"I want to thank you, Seth." He glanced at Burton. "Bill has told me how cooperative you were with the investigation of Christine Sullivan's death. I really appreciate that, Seth. Some officials would have been less than forthcoming or tried to turn it into a media circus for their own personal gain. I hoped for better from you and my expectations were exceeded. Again, thank you."

Frank glowed as though he had been awarded the fourth-grade spelling bee crown.

"It's terrible, you know. Tell me, have you learned of any connection between Walter's suicide and this criminal being gunned down?"

Frank shook the stars from his eyes and his pair of steady eyes came to rest on the chiseled features of the President.

"Come on, Lieutenant. I can tell you that all of official and unofficial Washington is right this very minute savagely attacking the issue of Walter Sullivan having hired an assassin to avenge his wife's death and then taking his own life in the aftermath. You can't stop people from gossiping. I would just like to know if your investigation has led to any fact to substantiate Walter having ordered the killing of his wife's murderer."

"I'm afraid that I really can't say one way or another, sir. I hope you understand, but this is an ongoing police investigation."

"Don't worry, Lieutenant, I'm not treading on your toes. But I can tell you that this has been a particularly distressing time for me. To think Walter Sullivan would end his own life. One of the most brilliant and resourceful men of his era, of any era."

"So I've heard an awful lot of people say."

"But just between you and me, knowing Walter as I did, it would not be out of the realm of possibility that he would have taken precise and concrete steps to have his wife's killer ... dealt with."

"Alleged killer, Mr. President. Innocent until proven guilty."

The President looked at Burton. "But I was led to understand that your case was pretty much ironclad."

Seth Frank scratched his ear. "Some defense attorneys love ironclad cases, sir. See, you dump enough water on iron, it starts to rust and before you know it, you got holes everywhere."

"And this defense attorney was such a person?"

"And then some. I'm not a betting man, but I would've given us no more than a forty percent shot at getting a clean conviction. We were in for a real battle."

The President sat back as he absorbed this information and then looked back at Frank.

Frank finally noted the expression of expectancy on his face and flipped open his notebook. His heartbeat calmed down as he perused the familiar scribbles.

"Are you aware it was right before his death that Walter Sullivan called you here?"

"I know that I spoke with him. I was not aware that it immediately preceded his death, no."

"I guess I'm a little surprised that you didn't come forward with this information earlier."

The President's face fell. "I know. I guess I'm a little surprised myself. I supposed I believed I was shielding Walter, or at least his memory, from further trauma. Although I knew the police would eventually discover the call was placed. I'm sorry, Lieutenant."

"I need to know the details of that phone conversation."

"Would you like something to drink, Seth?"

"A cup of coffee would be fine, thank you."

As if on cue, Burton picked up a phone in the corner and a minute later a silver-plated coffee tray was delivered in.

The steaming hot coffee was sipped; the President looked at his watch, then saw Frank staring at him.

"I'm sorry, Seth, I *am* treating your visit with the importance it deserves. However, I've got a congressional delegation coming to lunch in a few minutes and quite frankly I'm not looking forward to it. As funny as it sounds, I'm not particularly enamored of politicians."

"I understand. This will only take a few minutes. What was the purpose of the call?"

The President leaned back in his chair as if organizing his thoughts. "I would characterize the call as one of desperation. He was definitely not his usual self. He seemed unbalanced, out of control. For long periods of time he would say nothing. Very unlike the Walter Sullivan I knew."

"What did he talk about?"

"Everything, and nothing. Sometimes he just babbled. He talked about Christine's death. And then about the man, the man you arrested for the murder. How he hated him, how he had destroyed his life. It was truly awful to hear."

"What did you tell him?"

"Well, I kept asking him where he was. I wanted to find him, get him some help. But he wouldn't tell me. I'm not sure he heard a word I said, really, he was that distraught."

"So you think he sounded suicidal, sir?"

"I'm no psychiatrist, Lieutenant, but if I had to make a layman's guess about his mental state, yes, I would definitely say Walter Sullivan sounded suicidal that night. It's one of the few times during my presidency that I felt truly hopeless. Frankly, after the conversation I had with him, I was not surprised to learn that he was dead." Richmond glanced at Burton's impassive face, then looked at the

detective. "That's also why I questioned you as to whether you had determined if there was any truth to the rumor that Walter had anything to do with this person being gunned down. After Walter's telephone call I have to admit that the thought certainly crossed my mind."

Frank looked over at Burton. "I suppose you don't have a recording of the conversation? I know that some of the communications here are recorded."

The President answered. "Sullivan called my private line, Lieutenant. It's a secure communication link and no recordings of conversations on that line are allowed."

"I see. Did he directly indicate to you that he was involved in the death of Luther Whitney?"

"Not directly, no. He obviously wasn't thinking clearly. But reading between the lines, the rage that I knew he was feeling—well, and I hate to make this statement of a man who's dead, I think it was pretty clear that he had had the man killed. I have no proof of that of course, but it was my strong impression."

Frank shook his head. "Pretty uncomfortable conversation to have."

"Yes, yes it was very uncomfortable. Now, Lieutenant, I'm afraid that official duty calls."

Frank didn't budge. "Why do you think he called you, sir? And at that time of night?"

The President sat back down, threw another quick glance at Burton. "Walter was one of my closest personal friends. He kept odd hours, but then so do I. It would not be unusual for him to call at that hour. I hadn't heard very much from him for the last few months. As you know, he had been under a considerable personal strain. Walter was the sort to suffer in silence. Now Seth, if you will excuse me."

"It just strikes me as odd that out of all the people he could have called, he called you. I mean the chances were pretty good that you wouldn't even be here. Presidents' travel schedules are pretty hectic. It makes me wonder what he was thinking."

The President leaned back, placed his fingers together, and studied the ceiling. *Cop wants to play games to show me how smart he is.* He looked back at Frank and smiled. "If I were a mind reader I wouldn't have to rely so heavily on the pollsters."

Frank smiled. "I don't think you have to be telepathic to know you're going to be occupying that chair for another four years, sir."

"I appreciate that, Lieutenant. All I can tell you is that Walter called me. If he was planning on killing himself who would he call? His family has been estranged from him since his marriage to Christine. He had many business acquaintances, but few people he would call true friends. Walter and I have known each other for years, and I considered him a surrogate father. I had taken a very active interest in the investigation of his wife's death, as you know. All of that together could explain why he wanted to talk to me, particularly if he was contemplating taking his life. That's really all I know. I'm sorry I can't be of more help."

The door opened. Frank did not see that it was in response to a tiny button on the underside of the President's desk.

The President looked at his secretary. "I'll be right there, Lois. Lieutenant, if there's anything I can do for you, you let Bill know. Please."

Frank closed his notebook. "Thank you, sir."

Richmond stared at the doorway after Frank had departed.

"What was the name of Whitney's attorney, Burton?"

Burton thought for a moment. "Graham. Jack Graham."

"The name sounds familiar."

"Works at Patton, Shaw. He's a partner there."

The President's eyes froze on the agent's face.

"What's the matter?"

"I'm not sure." Richmond unlocked a drawer in his desk and took out a notebook he had compiled on this little extracurricular matter. "Don't lose sight of the fact, Burton, that one very important piece of incriminating evidence, for which we happened to have paid five million dollars, has never turned up."

The President flipped through the pages of his notebook. There were numerous individuals involved, to various degrees, in their little drama. If Whitney had given his attorney the letter opener along with an account of what had happened, the whole world would've known by now. Richmond thought back to the awards ceremony for Ransome Baldwin at the White House. Graham was clearly no shrinking violet. Clearly he didn't have it. But then who, if anyone, would Whitney have given it to?

As his mind spun out neat blocks of analysis and possible scenarios, one name suddenly stood out at the President from within the lines of precise writing. One person who had never really been accounted for.

* * * * *

JACK CRADLED THE CARRY-OUT IN ONE ARM, HIS BRIEFCASE IN the other, and managed to wiggle the key out of his pocket. Before he could put it in the lock, though, the door opened.

Jack looked surprised. "I didn't expect you home yet."

"You didn't have to stop. I could've made something."

Jack went inside, dropped his briefcase on the coffee table and headed to the kitchen. Kate stared after him.

"Hey, you work all day too. Why should you have to cook?"

"Women do it every day, Jack. Just look around."

He emerged from the kitchen. "No argument there. You want sweet and sour or moo goo gai pan? I got extra spring rolls too."

"Whichever you don't want. I'm not that hungry really."

He withdrew and came back with two fully stocked plates.

"You know if you don't eat more you're going to blow away. I half feel like stuffing rocks in your pockets as it is now."

He sat cross-legged next to her on the floor. She picked at her plate while he devoured his.

"So how was work? You know you probably could have stood to take a few more days off. You're always pushing yourself too hard."

"Look who's talking." She picked up a spring roll and then put it back down.

He put down his fork and looked over at her.

"So I'm listening."

She pulled herself up onto the couch and sat there playing with her necklace. Still dressed in her work clothes, she looked exhausted, like a flower collapsed in the wind.

"I think a lot about what I did to Luther."

"Kate—"

"Jack, let me finish." Her voice snapped at him like a whip. In an instant her features relaxed. She continued more calmly. "I've come to decide that I'm never going to get over it, so I might as well accept that fact. Maybe what I did wasn't wrong for a lot of reasons. But it was definitely wrong for at least one reason. He was my father. As lame as that might sound, it should've been a good enough reason." She twisted her necklace some more until it congealed into a series of tiny clumps. "I think being a lawyer, at least the kind of lawyer I am, has made me become someone I don't really like a lot. That's not a real good revelation to arrive at when you're hitting thirty."

Jack reached out his hand to stop hers from shaking. She didn't move it. He could feel the blood pumping through the veins.

"With all that said, I think I'm due for a radical change. In my life, my career, everything."

"What are you talking about?" He got up and sat down beside her. His pulse had accelerated as he anticipated the line she was taking.

"I'm not going to be a prosecutor anymore, Jack. In fact I'm not going to be a lawyer anymore. I submitted my resignation this morning. I have to admit, they were pretty shocked. Told me to think about it. I told them I already had. As much as I'm going to."

The incredulity was stiff in his voice. "You quit your job? Jesus, Kate, you've put a helluva lot into your career. You can't just throw that away."

She suddenly rose and stood by the window, looking out.

"That's just it, Jack. I'm not throwing anything away. My memories of what I've done for the last four years add up to about a lifetime of horror films. That's not exactly what I had in mind sitting in Con Law as a first-year debating grand principles of justice."

"Don't sell yourself short. The streets are a heckuva lot safer because of what you've done."

She turned to look at him. "I'm not even stemming the flow anymore. I got washed out to sea a long time ago."

"But what are you going to do? You're a lawyer."

"No. You're wrong. I've only been a lawyer a tiny fraction of my life. My life before that time I liked a whole lot better." She stopped and stared at him, her arms folded across her chest. "You made that very clear to me, Jack. I became a lawyer to pay back my father. Three years of school and four years of no life outside a courtroom is a pretty big price." A deep sigh emerged from her throat, her body teetered for a moment before she regained her composure. "Besides, I guess I really paid him back now."

"Kate, it wasn't your fault, none of it." His mouth stopped moving as she turned away from him.

Her next words rocked him.

"I'm going to move away, Jack. I'm not exactly sure where yet. I've got a little money saved. The Southwest sounds nice. Or maybe Colorado. I want as different from here as I can get. Maybe that's a start."

"Moving." Jack said the word more to himself than to her. "Moving." He repeated the word as if both trying to make it go away and trying to dissect and interpret it in a manner that was not as painful as it felt at the moment.

She looked down at her hands. "There's nothing keeping me here, Jack."

He looked at her and he more felt than heard the angry response rush past his lips.

"Goddamn you! How dare you say that?"

She finally looked at him. He could almost see the crack in her voice as she spoke. "I think you better leave."

* * * * *

JACK SAT AT HIS DESK UNWILLING TO FACE THE MOUNDS OF work, the small mountain of pink messages, wondering if his life could possibly get any worse. That's when Dan Kirksen walked in. Jack inwardly groaned.

"Dan, I really don't—"

"You weren't at the partners meeting this morning."

"Well, no one told me we were having one."

"A memo was sent around, but then your office hours have been somewhat erratic of late." He looked disapprovingly at the shambles of Jack's desk. His own was unfailingly in pristine condition; more a testament to how little actual legal work he did than anything else.

"I'm here now."

"I understand you and Sandy met at his house."

Jack eyed him keenly. "I guess nothing's private anymore."

Kirksen flushed angrily. "Partnership matters should be discussed by the full partnership. What we don't need are factions developing that will decimate this firm any more than it already has been."

Jack almost laughed out loud. Dan Kirksen, the undisputed king of the faction-builders.

"I think we've seen the worst."

"Do you, Jack? Do you really?" Kirksen sneered. "I didn't know you had so much experience with this sort of thing."

"Well, if it bothers you so much, Dan, why don't you leave?"

The sneer quickly evaporated from the little man's face. "I've been with this firm for almost twenty years."

"Sounds like it's about time for a change then. Might do you good."

Kirksen sat down, removed a smudge from his glasses. "Piece of friendly advice, Jack. Don't throw your lot in with Sandy. If you do that, you'll be making a big mistake. He's through."

"Thanks for the advice."

"I'm serious, Jack, don't endanger your own position in some futile, however well-intentioned attempt to salvage him."

"Endanger my position? You mean the Baldwins' position, don't you?"

"They're your client ... for now."

"Are you contemplating a change at the helm? If you are, good luck. You'd last about a minute."

Kirksen stood up. "Nothing is forever, Jack. Sandy Lord can tell you that as well as anybody. What goes around comes around. You can burn bridges in this town, you just have to make sure there's no one left alive on those bridges."

Jack came around the desk, towering over Kirksen. "Were you like this as a little boy, Dan, or did you just turn into a fungus during your adulthood?"

Kirksen smiled and started to leave. "Like I said, you never know, Jack. Client relationships are always so tenuous. Take yours, for example. It's primarily based on your future nuptials with Jennifer Ryce Baldwin. Now, if Ms. Baldwin happened to find out, for instance, that you had not been going home at night, but, instead, had been sharing quarters with a certain young woman, she might be less inclined to refer legal business to you, much less become your wife."

It only took an instant. Kirksen's back was flat against the wall and Jack was so close in his face the man's glasses were fogged.

"Don't do anything foolish, Jack. Regardless of your status here, the partnership would not look kindly on a junior partner assaulting a senior one. We still have standards here at Patton, Shaw."

"Don't ever fuck with my life like that, Kirksen. Don't ever." Jack effortlessly threw him against the door and turned back to his desk.

Kirksen smoothed down his shirt and smiled to himself. So easily manipulated. The big, tall good-looking ones. As strong as mules and no smarter. About as sophisticated as a brick.

"You know, Jack, you should realize what you've gotten yourself into. For some reason you seem to implicitly trust Sandy Lord. Did he tell you the truth about Barry Alvis? Did he happen to do that, Jack?"

Jack turned slowly back around and stared dully at the man.

"Did he use the permanent-associate, no-rainmaking-capabilities line? Or did he tell you Alvis had screwed up a big project?"

Jack continued to look at him.

Kirksen smiled triumphantly.

"One phone call, Jack. Daughter calls complaining that Mr. Alvis had inconvenienced her and her father. And Barry Alvis disappears. It's just the way the game works, Jack. Maybe you don't want to play that game. If you don't there's no one stopping you from leaving."

Kirksen had been crafting this strategy for a while now. With Sullivan gone, he could promise Baldwin that his work would be the firm's top priority, and Kirksen still had the core of one of the best army of attorneys in the city. And four million dollars of legal business coupled with his own existing business would make him the largest rainmaker at the place. And the name Kirksen would finally go on the door, in substitution for another that would be unceremoniously dropped.

The managing partner smiled at Jack. "You may not like me, Jack, but I'm telling you the truth. You're a big boy, it's up to you to deal with it."

Kirksen closed the door behind him.

Jack stood for a second longer and then collapsed back into his chair. He lunged forward, scattered his desk clear with quick, violent thrusts of his arms, and then slowly laid his head down on its surface.

Chapter 26

SETH FRANK LOOKED AT THE OLD MAN. SHORT, WITH A SOFT felt cap covering his head, dressed in corduroy pants, a thick sweater and winter boots, the man looked both uncomfortable and greatly excited at being in the police station. In his hand was a rectangular object covered in brown paper.

"I'm not sure I understand, Mr. Flanders."

"You see I was out there. At the courthouse that day. You know, when the man got killed. Just went to see what all the fuss was about. Lived here all my life, nothing ever came close to that spectacle, I can tell you that."

"I can understand that," Frank said dryly.

"So anyway I had my new Camcorder, real nifty thing, got an image screen and all. Just hold, look at it and shoot. Great quality. So the wife said I should come down."

"That's terrific, Mr. Flanders. And the purpose of all this?" Frank looked at him inquiringly.

Realization spread over Flanders's features. "Oh. I'm sorry, Lieutenant. I'm standing here rambling, have a tendency to do that, just ask the missus. Retired for a year. Never talked much at work. Assembly line at a processing plant. Like to talk now. Listen too. Spend a lot of time down at that little café over behind the bank. Good coffee and the muffins are the real thing, no low-fat stuff."

Frank looked exasperated.

Flanders hurried on. "Well, I came down here to show you this. Give it to you, really. Kept a copy for myself of course." He handed across the package.

Frank opened it and looked at the videocassette.

Flanders took off his cap, revealing a bald head with cottony tufts of hair clustered around his ears. He went on excitedly. "Got some really good shots, like I said. Like of the President and right when that fella was shot. Got all that. Jesus did I. I was following the President, you see. Ran me right into all the fireworks."

Frank stared at the man.

"It's all there, Lieutenant. For what it's worth." He looked at his watch. "Huh. I gotta go. Late for my lunch. Wife doesn't like that." He turned to leave. Seth Frank stared down at the cassette.

"Oh, Lieutenant. One more thing."

"Yes."

"If anything were to come from my tape, do you think they might use my name when they write about it?"

Frank shook his head. "Write about it?"

The old man looked excited. "Yeah. You know, the historians. They'd call it the Flanders Tape, wouldn't they, or something like that. The Flanders Video maybe. You know like before."

Frank wearily rubbed his temples. "Like before?"

"Yeah, Lieutenant. You know, like Zapruder with Kennedy."

Frank's face finally sagged in recognition. "I'll be sure to let them know, Mr. Flanders. Just in case. For posterity."

"There you go." Flanders pointed a happy finger at him. "Posterity, I like that. Have a good one, Lieutenant."

* * * * *

"ALAN?"

Richmond absently motioned for Russell to come in and then looked down once again at the notebook in front of him. Finished, he closed it and looked at his Chief of Staff; his stare was impassive.

Russell hesitated, studying the carpet, her hands clasped nervously in front of her. Then she hurried across the room and fell rather than sat in one of the chairs.

"I'm not sure what to say to you, Alan. I realize my behavior was inexcusable, absolutely inappropriate, if I could plead temporary insanity I would."

"So you're not going to attempt to explain it away as being somehow in my best interests?" Richmond sat back in his chair, his eyes remained on Russell.

"No, I'm not. I'm here to offer my resignation."

The President smiled. "Perhaps I did underestimate you, Gloria."

He stood up, went around the desk and leaned against it, facing her. "On the contrary, your behavior was absolutely appropriate. If I had been in your position I would've done the same thing."

She looked up at him. Her face betrayed her astonishment.

"Don't misunderstand me, I expect loyalty, Gloria, like any leader. I do not, however, expect human beings to be anything more than that, meaning human, with all their associated weaknesses and survival instincts. We are, after all, animals. I have attained my position in life by never losing sight of the fact that the most important person in the world is myself. Whatever the situation, whatever the obstacle, I have never, never lost sight of that one simple truism. What you did that night displays that you also share that belief."

"You know what I intended?"

"Of course I do. Gloria, I don't condemn you for taking a situation and attempting to maximize its beneficial effect on you. My God, that's the basis upon which this country and this city in particular are built."

"But when Burton told you—"

Richmond held up one hand. "I admit I felt certain emotions that night. Betrayal perhaps foremost among them. But in the time since, I have concluded that what you did evidenced strength, not weakness, of character."

Russell struggled to see where this was going. "Then may I correctly assume that you do not want my resignation?"

The President bent forward, took one of her hands. "I can't recall you ever mentioning the word, Gloria. I can't imagine breaking up our relationship after we've come to know each other so well. Shall we leave it at that?"

Russell rose to go. The President went back to his desk.

"Oh, Gloria. I do have a number of things I want to go over with you tonight. The family's out of town. So perhaps we can work in my private quarters."

Russell looked back at him.

"It might be a late night, Gloria. Better bring a change of clothes." The President didn't smile. His stare cut right through her, then he went back to his work.

Russell's hand trembled as she closed the door.

* * * * *

JACK POUNDED ON THE DOOR SO HARD HE COULD FEEL THE thick, polished wood cut into his knuckles.

The housekeeper opened the door but Jack shot through before she could say a word.

Jennifer Baldwin swept down the curved staircase and into the marbled entrance foyer. Dressed in yet another expensive evening gown, her hair tumbled down her shoulders framing significant cleavage. She was not smiling.

"Jack, what are you doing here?"

"I want to talk to you."

"Jack, I have plans. This will have to wait."

"No!" He grabbed her hand, looked around, pushed open a pair of carved doors and pulled her into the library, shutting the doors behind them.

She jerked her hand free. "Are you insane, Jack?"

He looked around the room with its huge bookcases and well-fed shelves of gilt-edged first editions. All for show, none of them had probably ever been opened. All for show.

"I've got one simple question for you to answer and then I'll leave."

"Jack—"

"*One question.* And then I'll leave."

She eyed him suspiciously, crossed her arms. "What is it?"

"Did you or did you not call my firm and tell them to fire Barry Alvis because he made me work the night we were at the White House?"

"Who told you that?"

"Just answer the question, Jenn."

"Jack, why is this so important to you?"

"So you did have him fired?"

"Jack, I want you to stop thinking about that and start realizing the kind of future we're going to have together. If we—"

"Answer the goddamned question!"

She exploded. "Yes! Yes I had the little shit fired. So what? He deserved it. He treated you as an inferior. And he was dead wrong. He was nothing. He played with fire and he got burned and I don't feel the least bit sorry for him." She looked at him without a trace of remorse.

Having heard the answer he expected to hear, Jack sat down in a chair and stared at the massive desk at the other end of the room. The high-backed, leather desk chair faced away from them. He looked at the original oils adorning the walls, the huge windows with perfectly pooled flowing drapes that probably cost more than he could even guess, the ornate woodwork, the omnipresent sculptures of metal and marble. The ceiling with yet another legion of medieval characters marching across it. The world of the Baldwins. Well they were welcome to it. He slowly closed his eyes.

Jennifer swept back her hair, looked at him, more than a hint of anxiousness in her eyes. She vacillated for a moment and then went to him, knelt beside him, touched his shoulder. The scent of her perfumed body cascaded over him. She spoke low, close to his face. Her breath tickled his ear.

“Jack, I told you before, you don’t have to put up with that sort of behavior. And now that this ridiculous murder case is out of the way we can go on with our lives. Our house is almost ready, it’s gorgeous, it really is. And we have wedding plans to finalize. Sweetheart, now everything can go back to normal.” She touched his face, turned it toward hers. She looked at him with her best pair of bedroom eyes and then she kissed him, long and deeply, letting her lips pull back slowly from his. Her eyes quickly searched his. She didn’t find what she was looking for.

“You’re right, Jenn. The ridiculous murder case is over. A man I respected and cared for got his brains blown apart. Case closed, time to move on. Got a fortune to build.”

“You know what I mean. You never should have involved yourself in that thing in the first place. It wasn’t your problem. If you would just open your eyes you’d realize that all of that was beneath you, Jack.”

“And hardly convenient for you, right?”

Jack abruptly stood up. He was more exhausted than anything else.

“Have a great life, Jenn. I’d say I’d see you around but I really can’t imagine that happening.” He started to leave.

She grabbed his sleeve. “Jack, will you please tell me what I did that was so awful?”

He hesitated and then confronted her.

“The fact that you even have to ask. Jesus Christ!” He shook his head wearily. “You took a man’s life, Jenn, a man you didn’t even know, and you destroyed it. And why did you do that? Because something he did to me ‘inconvenienced’ you. So you took ten years worth of a career and wiped it out. With one phone call. Never thinking about what it would do to him, his family. He could’ve blown his brains out, his wife could have divorced him for all you know. You didn’t care about that. You probably never even thought about that. And the bottom line is I could never love, I could never spend my life with someone who could do something like that. If you can’t understand that, if you really think what you did wasn’t wrong, then that’s all the more reason why we need to say good-bye right now. We might as well flesh out the irreconcilable differences *before* the wedding. Saves everybody a lot of time and trouble.”

He turned the handle on the door and smiled. “Everybody I know would probably tell me how crazy I am for doing this. That you’re the perfect woman, smart, rich, beautiful—and you are all of those things, Jenn. They’d say we’d have a perfect life together. That we’d have everything. How could we not be happy? But the thing is, I wouldn’t make you happy because I don’t care about the things you do. I don’t care about the millions in legal business, or houses the size of apartment buildings or cars that cost a year’s salary. I don’t like this house, I don’t like your lifestyle, I don’t like your friends. And I guess the bottom line is, I don’t like you. And right now I’m probably the only man on the planet who would say that. But I’m a pretty simple guy, Jenn, and the one thing I’d never do to you is lie.

And let's face it, in a couple of days, about a dozen guys a lot better suited to you than Jack Graham are going to be knocking on your door. You won't be lonely."

He looked at her and felt a grimace of pain as he observed the absolute astonishment on her face.

"For what it's worth, anybody who asks, you dumped me. Not up to the Baldwin standard. Unworthy. Good-bye, Jenn."

She still stood there several minutes after he left. A series of emotions competed for space across her face, none, in the end, winning out. Finally she fled the room. The sounds of her high heels against the marble floor disappeared as she hurried up the carpeted stairs.

For a few seconds more the library was quiet. Then the desk chair swung around and Ransome Baldwin eyed the doorway where his daughter had been standing.

* * * * *

JACK CHECKED THE PEEPHOLE, HALF-EXPECTING TO SEE jennifer Baldwin standing there with a gun. His eyebrows raised a notch when he saw who it was.

Seth Frank walked in, shrugged off his coat, and looked around appreciatively at Jack's cluttered little apartment.

"Man, this brings back memories of another time in my life, I can tell you."

"Let me guess. Delta House '75. You were vice president in charge of bar operations."

Frank grinned. "Closer to the truth than I'd care to admit. Enjoy it while you can, my friend. Without meaning to sound politically incorrect, a good woman will not allow you to continue such an existence."

"Then I might be in luck."

Jack disappeared into the kitchen and came back with a brace of Sam Adamses.

They settled into the furniture with their drinks.

"Trouble in wedded-bliss-to-be-land, counselor?"

"On a scale of one to ten, a one or a ten depending on your perspective."

"Why am I thinking that it's not the Baldwin gal that's entirely gotten to you?"

"Don't you ever stop being a detective?"

"Not if I can help it. You want to talk about it?"

Jack shook his head. "I might bend your ear another night, but not tonight."

Frank shrugged. "Just let me know, I'll bring the beer."

Jack noticed the package on Frank's lap. "Present?"

Frank took out the tape. "I'm assuming you've got a VCR under some of this junk?"

* * * * *

AS THE VIDEO CAME ON FRANK LOOKED AT JACK.

"Jack, this is definitely not G-rated. And I'm telling you up front, it shows everything including what happened to Luther. You up to it?"

Jack paused for a moment. "You think we might see something in here that'll catch whoever did it?"

"That's what I'm hoping. You knew him a lot better than I did. Maybe you'll see something I don't."

"Then I'm up to it."

Even forewarned, Jack was not prepared. Frank watched him closely as the moment grew closer. When the shot rang out he saw Jack involuntarily jerk back, his eyes wide in horror.

Frank cut off the video. "Hang in there, I warned you."

Jack was slumped over in his chair. His breathing was irregular, his forehead clammy. His entire body shuddered for an instant and then he slowly came around. He wiped his forehead.

"Jesus Christ!"

Flanders's passing remark to the Kennedy example had not been inappropriate. "We can stop right now, Jack."

Jack's lips set in a firm line. "The hell we can!"

* * * * *

JACK HIT THE REWIND ONE MORE TIME. THEY HAD GONE through the tape about a dozen times now. Watching his friend's head virtually explode was not getting any easier to watch. The only mitigating factor was that Jack's anger was increasing with each viewing.

Frank shook his head. "You know it's too bad the guy wasn't filming the other way. We might've gotten a flash from the shooter. I guess that would've been too easy. Hey you got any coffee? I have a hard time thinking without caffeine."

"Got some pretty fresh stuff in the pot, you can bring me a cup. Dishes are over the sink."

When Frank returned with the steaming cups, Jack had rewound the tape to a demonstrative Alan Richmond saying his piece on the impromptu stage outside the courthouse.

"That guy's a dynamo."

Frank looked at the screen. "I met him the other day."

"Yeah? Me too. That was in my I'm-marrying-into-the-rich-and-famous-set days."

"What'd you think of the guy?"

Jack gulped his coffee, reached for a bag of peanut butter crackers that lay on the couch, offered one to Frank, who took it and then put his feet up on the rickety coffee table. The detective was slipping easily back into the less-structured domain of bachelorhood.

Jack shrugged. "I don't know. I mean he's the President. I always thought he was presidential. What do you think of him?"

"Smart. Really smart. The kind of smart you want to be real careful not to get into a battle of wits with unless you're real sure about your own abilities."

"I guess it's a good thing he's on America's side."

"Yeah." Frank looked back at the screen. "So anything grab your eye?"

Jack punched a button on the remote. "One thing. Check this out." The video leapt forward. The figures jerked around like actors in a silent movie.

"Watch this."

The screen showed Luther stepping out of the van. His eyes were turned toward the ground; the manacles were obviously making it difficult for him to walk. Suddenly, a column of people moved into the video, led by the President. Luther was partially obscured. Jack froze the frame.

"Look."

Frank scrutinized the screen, absently munching peanut butter crackers and draining his coffee. He shook his head.

Jack looked at him. "Look at Luther's face. You can see it right between the suits. Look at his face."

Frank bent forward, almost touching the screen with his face. He recoiled, his eyes wide.

"Damn, looks like he's saying something."

"No, it looks like he's saying something to somebody."

Frank looked across at Jack. "You're saying he's recognized somebody, like maybe the guy who popped him?"

"Under the circumstances, I don't think he'd just be making casual conversation with some stranger."

Frank looked back at the screen, studying it intently. Finally he shook his head. "We're going to need some special talents on this." He rose. "Come on."

Jack grabbed his coat. "Where to?"

Frank smiled as he rewound the tape and then put on his hat.

"Well first I'm gonna buy us some dinner. I'm married, and I'm also older and fatter than you. Consequently, crackers for dinner don't cut it. Then we're going down to the station. I've got somebody I want you to meet."

* * * * *

TWO HOURS LATER SETH FRANK AND JACK WALKED INTO THE Middleton Police Station, their bellies lined with surf and turf and a couple slices of pecan pie. Laura Simon was in the lab; the equipment was already set up.

After introductions, Laura popped the tape in. The images sprung to life on a forty-six-inch screen in the corner of the lab. Frank fast-forwarded to the appropriate spot.

"There," Jack pointed, "right there."

Frank froze the tape.

Laura sat at a keyboard and typed in a series of commands. On the screen, the part of the frame containing Luther's image was blocked out and then magnified in increasingly large degrees, like a balloon being blown up. This process continued until Luther's face seemed to span the entire forty-six inches.

"That's as far as I can take it." Laura spun her chair around and nodded to Frank. He pushed a button on the remote and the screen again came to life.

The audio was choppy; screams, shouts, traffic noise and the blended sounds of hundreds of people served to make what Luther was saying incomprehensible. They watched as his lips moved open and closed.

"He's pissed. Whatever he's saying he is not happy." Frank pulled out a cigarette, got a dirty look from Simon and put it back in his pocket.

"Anybody read lips?" Laura looked at each of them.

Jack stared at the screen. What the hell was Luther saying? The look on his face. Jack had seen that once before, if he could only remember when. It had been recently, he was sure of it.

"You see something we don't?" Frank asked. Jack looked over to see Frank staring at him.

Jack shook his head, rubbed his face. "I don't know. There's something there, I just can't place it."

Frank nodded to Simon to cut off the equipment. He stood up and stretched. "Well, sleep on it. Anything comes to you, let me know. Thanks for coming in, Laura."

The two men walked out together. Frank glanced over at Jack, then reached across and felt behind his neck. "Jesus, you are a stress grenade ready to explode."

"Christ, I don't know why I should be. The woman I was supposed to marry I'm not, the woman I wanted to marry just told me to get out of her life, and I'm reasonably sure I'm not going to have a job in the morning. Oh, not to mention, someone murdered a person I cared a lot about and we're probably never going to find out who it is. Hell, my life couldn't get any more perfect, could it?"

"Well, maybe you're due for some good luck."

Jack unlocked his Lexus. "Yeah, hey if you know anyone who wants an almost-brand-new car, let me know."

Frank's eyes twinkled as he looked at Jack. "Sorry, nobody I know could afford it."

Jack smiled back. "Me either."

* * * * *

DRIVING BACK, JACK LOOKED AT HIS CAR CLOCK. IT WAS almost midnight. He passed the offices of Patton, Shaw, looked up at the stretch of darkened offices and wheeled his car around, turning into the garage. He slid his security card in, waved to the security camera posted outside the garage door, and a few minutes later was in the elevator heading up.

He didn't know exactly why he was here. His days at Patton, Shaw were now clearly numbered. Without Baldwin as a client, Kirksen would ride him out on a rail. He felt a little sorry for Lord. He had promised the man protection. But he wasn't going to marry Jennifer Baldwin simply to ensure Lord's mammoth draw check. And the man had lied to him about Barry Alvis's departure from the firm. But Lord would land on his feet. Jack hadn't been kidding about his faith in the man's resiliency. A number of firms would snap him up in a New York minute. Lord's future was far more assured than Jack's.

The elevator doors opened and Jack stepped into the firm's lobby. The wall lights were on low and the shadowy effect would have been a little unnerving if he hadn't been so completely preoccupied with his thoughts. He walked down the hallway toward his office, stopped at the kitchen and grabbed a glass of soda. Ordinarily, even at midnight, there were a few people beating their brains out over some impossible deadline. Tonight there was only stone-cold silence.

Jack turned on his light and closed his office door. He looked around at the domain of his personal partnership. His kingdom, if only for another day. It was

impressive. The furniture was tastefully expensive, the carpet and wall coverings luxurious. He went down his line of diplomas. Some hard-earned, others freebies that you got for just being a lawyer. He noticed that the scattered papers had been picked up, the work of the meticulous and sometimes overzealous cleaning crew who were used to attorney sloppiness and the occasional full-blown tantrum.

He sat down, leaned back in his chair. The soft leather was more comfortable than his bed. He could visualize Jennifer talking with her father. Ransome Baldwin's face would flame red at what he would perceive as an unforgivable insult to his precious little girl. The man would lift the phone tomorrow morning and Jack's corporate career would be over.

And Jack couldn't have cared less. His only regret was not instigating that result sooner. Hopefully PD would take him back. That was where he belonged anyway. No one could stop him from doing that. No, his real troubles had started when he had tried being something and someone he wasn't. He would never make that mistake again.

His attention shifted to Kate. Where would she go? Had she really been serious about quitting her job? Jack recalled the fatalistic look on her face and concluded that, yes, she had been quite serious. He had pleaded with her once more. Just like four years before. Pleaded with her not to go, not to leave his life again. But there was something there he could not break through. Maybe it was the enormous guilt she carried. Maybe she simply did not love him. Had he ever really addressed that possibility? The fact was he hadn't. Consciously had not. The possible answer scared the hell out of him. But what did it matter now?

Luther dead; Kate leaving. His life hadn't really changed all that much, despite all the recent activity. The Whitneys were finally, irreversibly, gone from him.

He looked at the pink pile of messages on his desk. All routine. Then he hit a button on his phone to check his voice mail, which he hadn't done in a couple of days. Patton, Shaw let their clients have their choice of the antiquated written phone message or the technologically advanced voice mail. The more demanding clients loved the latter. At least then they didn't have to wait to scream at you.

There were two calls from Tarr Crimson. He would find Tarr another lawyer. Patton, Shaw was too expensive for him anyway. There were several Baldwin-related matters. Right. Those could wait for the next guy Jennifer Baldwin set her laser sights on. The last message jolted him. It was a woman's voice. Small, hesitant, elderly, clearly uncomfortable with the concept of voice mail. Jack played it back again.

"Mr. Graham, you don't know me. My name is Edwina Broome. I was a friend of Luther Whitney." *Broome? The name was familiar.* The message continued. "Luther told me that if anything happened to him I was to wait a little bit and then I was to send the package on to you. He told me not to open it and I didn't. He said it was like a Pandora's box. If you looked you might get hurt. God rest his soul, he was a good man, Luther was. I hadn't heard from you, not that I expected to. But it just occurred to me that I should call and make sure that you got the thing. I've never had to send something like that before, overnight delivery they call it. And I think I did it right, but I don't know. If you didn't get it, please call me. Luther said it was very important. And Luther never said anything that wasn't true."

Jack listened to the phone number and wrote it down. He checked the time of the call. Yesterday morning. He quickly searched his office. There was no package lurking there. He jogged down the hallway to his secretary's workstation. There was no package there either. He went back to his office. *My God, a package from Luther. Edwina Broome?* He put his hand through his hair, assaulted his scalp, forced himself to think. Suddenly the name came to him. The mother of the woman who had killed herself. Frank had told him about her. Luther's alleged partner.

Jack picked up the phone. It seemed to ring for an eternity.

"H-hello?" The voice was sleepy, distant.

"Mrs. Broome? This is Jack Graham. I'm sorry for calling you so late."

"Mr. Graham?" The voice was no longer sleepy. It was alert, sharp. Jack could almost envision her sitting up in bed, clutching at her nightgown, looking anxiously at the phone receiver.

"I'm sorry, I just got your message. I didn't get the package, Mrs. Broome. When did you send it?"

"Let me think for a minute." Jack could hear the labored breathing. "Why it was five days ago, counting today."

Jack thought furiously. "Do you have the receipt with a number on it?"

"The man gave me a piece of paper. I'll have to go get it."

"I'll wait."

He tapped his fingers against his desk, tried to stop his mind from flying apart. Just hold on, Jack. Just hold on.

"I've got it right here, Mr. Graham."

"Please call me Jack. Did you send it by Federal Express?"

"That's right. Yes."

"All right, what's the tracking number?"

"The what?"

"I'm sorry. The number on the upper-right-hand corner of the piece of paper. It should be a long series of numbers."

"Oh yes." She gave it to him. He scribbled the numbers down, read them back to her to confirm it. He also had her confirm the address of the law firm.

"Jack, is this very serious? I mean Luther dying the way he did and all."

"Has anyone called you, anyone you don't know? Besides me?"

"No."

"Well if they do I want you to call Seth Frank, Middleton Police Department."

"I know him."

"He's a good guy, Mrs. Broome. You can trust him."

"All right, Jack."

He hung up and phoned Federal Express. He could hear the computer keys clicking on the other end of the line.

The female voice was professional and concise. "Yes, Mr. Graham, it was delivered at the law offices of Patton, Shaw & Lord on Thursday at ten-oh-two A.M. and signed for by a Ms. Lucinda Alvarez."

"Thank you. I guess it's around here somewhere." Bewildered, he was about to hang up.

"Has there been some special problem with this package delivery, Mr. Graham?"

Jack looked puzzled. "Special problem? No, why?"

"Well, when I pulled up the delivery history of this package it shows that we already had an inquiry about it earlier today."

Jack's whole body tensed. "Earlier today? What time?"

"Six-thirty P.M."

"Did they leave a name?"

"Well, that's the unusual part. According to my records, that person also identified himself as Jack Graham." Her tone made it clear she was far from certain of Jack's real identity.

Jack felt a chill invade every part of his body.

He slowly hung up the phone. Somebody else was very interested in this package, whatever it was. And someone knew it was coming to him. His hands were shaking as he picked up the phone again. He quickly dialed Seth Frank, but the detective had gone home. The person would not give out Frank's home phone, and Jack had left that number back at his apartment. After some prodding by Jack the person tried the detective's home, but there was no answer. He swore under his breath. A quick call to directory assistance was useless; the home number was nonpub.

Jack leaned back in his chair, the breaths coming a little more rapidly. He felt his chest where his heart suddenly threatened to explode through his shirt. He had always considered himself a possessor of above-average courage. Now he wasn't so sure.

He forced himself to focus. The package had been delivered. Lucinda had signed for it. The routine at Patton, Shaw was precise; mail was vitally important to law firms. All overnight packages would be given to the firm's in-house gofer team to be distributed with the day's other mail. They brought it around in a cart. They all knew where Jack's office was. Even if they didn't, the firm printed out a map that was routinely updated. So long as you used the correct map...

Jack raced to the door, flung it open and sprinted down the hallway. Completely unbeknownst to him, around the corner, in the opposite direction, a light had just come on in Sandy Lord's office.

Jack clicked on the light in his old office and the room quickly came into focus. He frantically searched the desktop, then pulled out the chair to sit down and his eyes came to rest on the package. Jack picked it up. He instinctively looked around, noted the open blinds and hurriedly shut them.

He read the package label: Edwina Broome to Jack Graham. This was it. The package was boxy, but light. It was a box within a box, that's what she had said. He started to open it, then stopped. They knew the package had been delivered here. *They?* That was the only label he could think to apply. If *they* knew the package was here, had in fact called about it this very day, what would they do? If whatever was inside was that important and it had already been opened, presumably they would already know about it. Since that hadn't happened, what would they do?

Jack sprinted back down the hallway to his office, the package held tightly under his arm. He flung on his coat, grabbed his car keys off his desk, almost knocking over his half-empty glass of soda, and turned to go out. He stopped cold.

A noise. He couldn't tell from where; the sound seemed to echo softly down the hallway, like water lapping through a tunnel. It wasn't the elevator. He was sure he would have heard the elevator. But would he really? It was a big place. The background noise produced by that mode of transportation was so everyday, would he have even noticed it? And he had been on the phone, all his attention had been so concentrated. The truth was he couldn't be sure. Besides it might just be one of the firm's attorneys, dropping in to work or pick up something. All his instincts told him that conclusion was the wrong one. But this was a secure building. But then again how secure could any public building be? He softly closed his office door.

There it was again. His ears strained to pick up its location without success. Whoever it was, they were moving slowly, stealthily. No one who worked here would do that. He inched over to the wall and turned off the light, waited for an instant and then carefully opened the door.

He peered out. The hallway was clear. But for how long? His tactical problem was obvious. The firm's office space was configured such that if he started down one way he was more or less committed to that path. And he would be totally exposed, the hallways were absolutely devoid of furnishings. If he met whoever it was going that way, he wouldn't have a chance.

A practical consideration struck him and he looked around the darkness of his office. His gaze finally fell upon a heavy, granite paperweight, one of the many knickknacks he had received upon making partner. It could do some real damage if wielded properly. And Jack was confident he could do so. If he was going down he wouldn't make it easy for them. That fatalist approach helped to stiffen his resolve and he waited another few seconds before venturing out into the hallway, closing the door behind him. Whoever it was probably would have to make a door-to-door search to find his office.

He crouched low as he came to a corner. Now he desperately wished the office was in total darkness. He took a deep breath and peered around. The way was clear, at least for now. He thought quickly. If there was more than one intruder, they would probably split up, cut their search time in half. Would they even know if he was in the building? Maybe he had been followed here. That thought was especially troubling. They might even at this moment be circling him, coming from both ways.

The sounds were closer now. Footsteps—he could make out at least one pair. His hearing was now raised to its highest level of acuteness. He could almost make out the person's breathing, or at least he imagined he could. He had to make a choice. And his eyes finally fell upon something on the wall, something that gleamed back at him: the fire alarm.

As he was about to make a run for it, a leg came around the corner at the other end of the hallway. Jack jerked back, not waiting for the rest of the body to catch up with the limb. He walked as swiftly as he could in the opposite direction. He turned the corner, made his way down the hall, and came to a stairwell door. He jerked it open and a loud creak hit him full in the face.

He heard the sounds of running feet.

"Shit!" Jack slammed the door closed behind him and clattered down the stairs.

A man hurtled around the corner. A black ski mask covered his face. A pistol was in his right hand.

An office door opened and Sandy Lord, dressed in his undershirt, with his pants halfway off, stumbled out and accidentally plowed into the man. They went down hard. Lord's flailing hands instinctively gripped the mask, pulling it off.

Lord rolled to his knees, sucking in blood from his battered nose.

"What the goddamn hell is going on? Who the hell are you?" Lord angrily looked eye-to-eye with the man. Then Lord saw the gun and froze.

Tim Collin looked back at him, shaking his head half in disbelief, half in disgust. There was no way around it now. He raised his gun.

"Jesus Christ! Please no!" Lord wailed and fell back.

The gun fired and blood spurted from the very center of the undershirt. Lord gasped once, his eyes glazed and his body landed back against the door. It fell the rest of the way open to reveal the nearly naked figure of the young legislative liaison, who stared in shock at the dead lawyer. Collin swore under his breath. He looked at her. She knew what was coming, he could see it in the terror-filled eyes.

Wrong place, wrong time. Sorry lady.

His gun exploded a second time and the impact knocked her slender body back into the room. Her legs splayed, her fingers clenched, she stared blankly at the ceiling; her night of pleasure turned abruptly into her last night on earth.

Bill Burton ran up to his kneeling partner and surveyed the carnage with incredulity, which was quickly replaced with anger.

"Are you fucking crazy!" he exploded.

"They saw my face, what the hell was I supposed to do? Make them promise not to tell? Fuck it!"

Both men's nerves were at their breaking point. Collin gripped his gun hard.

"Where is he? Was it Graham?" Burton demanded.

"I think so. He went down the fire stairs."

"So he's gone."

Collin looked at him and then stood up. "Not yet. I didn't waste two people just so he could get away." He started to take off. Burton grabbed him.

"Give me your gun, Tim."

"Goddammit, Bill, are you nuts?"

Burton shook his head, pulled out his piece and handed it to him. He took Collin's weapon.

"Now go get him. I'll try to do some damage control here."

Collin ran to the door and then disappeared down the stairs.

Burton looked at the two dead bodies. He recognized Sandy Lord and sucked in his breath sharply. "Goddamn. Goddamn," he said again. He turned and went quickly to Jack's office. Trailing his sprinting partner, he had found it right at the moment the first shot rang out. He opened the door and turned on the light. He surveyed the interior quickly. The guy would have the package with him. That was clear. Richmond had been right about Edwina Broome's involvement. Whitney had entrusted her with the package. Shit, they had been so close. Who knew Graham or anybody else would be here this late?

He made another sweep of the room's contents with his eyes. They went past and slowly came back to the desk. His plan came together in a few seconds. Finally, something might be going their way. He moved toward the desk.

* * * * *

JACK REACHED THE FIRST FLOOR AND YANKED ON THE doorknob. It didn't budge. His heart sank. They had had trouble with this before. Routine fire drills and the doors had been locked. The building management said they had fixed the problem. Right! Only now their mistake could cost him his life. And not from any inferno.

He looked back up the stairs. They were coming fast, silence was no longer an issue. Jack raced back up the stairs to the second floor, prayed silently before he grabbed the knob and a rush of relief swept over him as it turned in his sweating hand. He turned the corner, hit the elevator bank, pushed the button. He checked his backside, ran to the far corner and crouched down out of sight.

Come on! He could hear the elevator heading up. But then an awful thought ran through his mind. Whoever was following him could be on that elevator. Could have figured what Jack would try to do and attempt to checkmate him.

The car halted on his floor. At the instant the doors opened Jack heard the fire door smash against the wall. He jumped for the car, slid in between the doors and crashed against the back of the elevator. He leapt up and hit the button for the garage.

Jack felt the presence immediately, the slightly elevated breathing. He saw a flash of black, then the gun. He hurled the paperweight, and threw himself into the corner.

He heard a grunt of pain as the doors finally closed.

He ran through the dark underground parking garage, found his car and a few moments later he was through the automatic door and hit the accelerator. The car raced up the street. Jack looked back. Nothing. He looked at himself in the mirror. His face was drenched with sweat. His entire body was one large knot. He rubbed his shoulder where he had slammed into the elevator wall. Jesus, that had been so close. So close.

As he drove he wondered where he could go. They knew him, knew all about him it seemed. He clearly couldn't go home. Where then? The police? No. Not until he knew who was after him. Who had been able to kill Luther despite all the cops. Who seemed to always know what the cops knew. For tonight he would stay someplace in town. He had his credit cards. In the morning, first thing in the morning, he would hook up with Frank. Everything would be okay then. He eyed the box. But tonight he would see what had almost cost him his life.

* * * * *

RUSSELL LAY UNDERNEATH THE SHEETS. RICHMOND HAD JUST finished on top of her. And without a word he had climbed off and left the room, her sole purpose brutally fulfilled. She rubbed her wrists where he had clenched them. She could feel the abrasions. Her breasts hurt where he had mauled them. Burton's warning came back to her. Christine Sullivan, too, had been mangled, and not just by the agents' bullets.

She slowly moved her head back and forth, fought to hold back the tears. She had wanted this so badly. Had wanted Alan Richmond to make love to her; she had imagined it would be so romantic, so idyllic. Two intelligent, powerful and dynamic people. The perfect couple. How wonderful it should have been. And then the vision of the man startled her back to reality; pounding away at her, with no more emotion on his features than if he had been masturbating alone in the toilet with the latest Penthouse. He had never even kissed her; had never even spoken. He had just pulled off her clothes as soon as she came in the bedroom, sunk his hardened flesh into her and now he was gone. It had all taken barely ten minutes. And now she was alone. *Chief of Staff! Chief Whore more like it.*

She wanted to scream out *I fucked you! You bastard! I fucked you in that room that night and there wasn't a damn thing you could do about it you sonofabitch.*

Her tears wet the pillow and she cursed herself for breaking down and crying yet again. She had been so sure of her abilities, so confident that she could control him. God, she had been so wrong. The man had people killed. *Walter Sullivan.* Walter Sullivan had been killed, murdered, with the knowledge, indeed the blessing, of the President of the United States. When Richmond had told her she couldn't believe it. He said he wanted to keep her fully informed. Fully terrified was more like it. She had no idea what he was up to now. She was no longer a central part of this campaign and she thanked God that she wasn't.

She sat up in bed, pulled the ripped nightgown over her quivering body. Shame rocked her again, momentarily. Of course she was now his personal whore. And his consideration for that was his unspoken promise not to crush her. But was that all? Was that really all?

She huddled the blanket around her and looked into the darkness of the room. She was an accomplice. But she was also something more. She was a *witness*. Luther Whitney had also been a witness. And now he was dead. And Richmond had calmly ordered the execution of one of his oldest and dearest friends. If he could do that, what was her life worth? The answer to that question was shockingly clear.

She bit into her hand until it hurt. She looked at the doorway through which he had disappeared. Was he in there? in the dark, listening? thinking about what to do with her? A cold shudder of fear grabbed her and did not leave. She was caught. For once in her life she had no options. She wasn't sure if she would even survive.

* * * * *

JACK DROPPED THE BOX ON THE BED, TOOK OFF HIS COAT, looked out the window of his hotel room and then sat down. He was pretty sure he hadn't been followed. He had gotten out of the building so fast. He had remembered, at the last minute, to ditch his car. He didn't really know who was pursuing him, but he assumed they were sophisticated enough to trace his car's whereabouts.

He checked his watch. The cab had dropped him off at the hotel barely fifteen minutes ago. It was a nondescript place, a hotel where tourists on the cheap would stay and then wander around the city to get their fill of the country's history before heading back home. It was out of the way but then he wanted out of the way.

Jack looked at the box and then decided he had waited long enough. A few seconds later he had it open and was staring at the object inside the plastic bag.

A knife? He looked at it more closely. No, it was a letter opener, one of the old-fashioned kind. He held the bag by its ends and examined the object minutely. He wasn't a trained forensic specialist, and thus he didn't register that the black crustings on the handle and blade were actually very old, dried blood. Nor was he aware of the fingerprints that existed within the leather.

He lay the bag carefully down and leaned back in the chair. This had something to do with the woman's murder. Of that he was certain. But what? He looked at it again. This was obviously an important piece of physical evidence. It hadn't been the murder weapon; Christine Sullivan had been shot. But Luther had thought it critically important.

Jack jerked straight up. Because it identified who had killed Christine Sullivan! He grabbed the bag and held it up to the light, his eyes searching every inch of space. Now he could dimly make them out, like a swirl of black threads. Prints. This had the person's fingerprints on it. Jack looked at the blade closely. Blood. On the handle too. It had to be. What had Frank said? He struggled to recall. Sullivan had possibly stabbed her attacker. In the arm or the leg with a letter opener, the one in the bedroom photo. At least that was one of the detective's theories he had shared with Jack. What Jack held in his hand seemed to bear that analysis out.

He carefully placed the bag back into the box and slid it under the bed.

He went over to the window and again looked out. The wind had picked up. The cheap window rattled and shook.

If only Luther would have told him, confided in him. But he was scared for Kate. How had they made Luther believe Kate was in danger?

He thought back. Luther had received nothing while in prison, Jack was certain of that. So what then? Had whoever it was just walked up to Luther and told him flat out: talk and your daughter dies? How would they even know he had a daughter? The two hadn't been in the same room with each other for years.

Jack lay down on the bed, closed his eyes. No, he was wrong about that. There was one time when that would have been possible. The day they had arrested Luther. That would be the only time that father and daughter would have been together. It was possible that, without saying anything, someone could have made it crystal-clear to Luther, with just a look, nothing more. Jack had handled cases that had been dismissed because witnesses were afraid to testify. No one had ever said anything to them. It was solely intimidation by the unspoken word. A silent terror, there was nothing new about that.

So who would've been there to do that? To deliver the message that had made Luther shut up like his mouth was stapled closed? But the only people who were there, as far as Jack knew, were the cops. Unless it was the person who had taken a shot at Luther. But why would he hang around? How could that person just waltz into the place, walk up to Luther, make eye contact, without anyone becoming suspicious?

Jack's eyes shot open.

Unless that person *were* a cop. His immediate thought hit him hard in the chest.

Seth Frank.

He dismissed it quickly. There was no motive there, not a scintilla of motive. For the life of him he couldn't imagine the detective and Christine Sullivan in any type of tryst and that's what this boiled down to, didn't it? Sullivan's lover had killed her and Luther had seen the whole thing. It couldn't be Seth Frank. He hoped to God it wasn't Seth Frank because he was counting on the man to get him out of this mess. But what if tomorrow morning Jack would be delivering the very thing Frank had been desperately searching for? He could have dropped it, left the room, Luther comes out of his hiding place, picks it up and flees. It was possible. And the place sanitized so clean a pro had to be behind it. A pro. An experienced homicide detective who knew exactly how to cleanse a crime scene.

Jack shook his head. No! Dammit no! He had to believe in something, someone. It had to be something else. Someone else. It had to be. He was just tired. His attempts at deduction were becoming ludicrous. Seth Frank was no murderer.

He closed his eyes again. For now he believed he was safe. A few minutes later he fell into an uneasy sleep.

* * * * *

THE MORNING WAS REFRESHINGLY COLD, THE CLOSE, TRAPPED air expunged by the storm of the night before.

Jack was already up; he had slept in his clothes and they looked it. He washed his face in the small bathroom, smoothed down his hair, cut the light off and went back into the bedroom. He sat on the bed and looked at his watch. Frank would not be in yet, but it wouldn't be long now. He pulled the box from under the bed, laid it beside him. It felt like a time bomb next to him.

He flicked on the small color TV that sat in the corner of the room. The early-morning local news was on. The perky blonde, no doubt aided by substantial amounts of caffeine as she waited for her break into prime time, was recounting the top stories.

Jack expected to see the litany of various world trouble spots. The Middle East was good for at least a minute each morning. Maybe Southern California had had another quake. The President fighting the Congress.

But there was only one top story this morning. Jack leaned forward as a place he knew very well flashed across the screen.

Patton, Shaw & Lord. The lobby of PS&L. What was the woman saying? People dead? *Sandy Lord murdered?* Gunned down in his office? Jack leaped across the room and turned up the volume. He watched with increasing astonishment as twin gurneys were wheeled out of the building. A picture of Lord flashed into the upper-right-hand corner of the TV screen. His distinguished career was briefly recounted. But he was dead, unmistakably dead. In his office, someone had shot him.

Jack fell back on the bed. Sandy had been there last night? But who was the other person? The other one under that sheet? He didn't know. Couldn't know that. But he believed he knew what had happened. The man after him, the man with the gun. Lord must have run into him, somehow. They were after Jack and Lord had walked right into it.

He turned off the TV and went back into the bathroom and ran cold water over his face. His hands shook, his throat had dried up. He could not believe that this had all happened. So quickly. It had not been his fault, but Jack could not help feeling enormously guilty for his partner's death. Guilty, like Kate had felt. It was a crushing emotion.

He grabbed the phone and dialed.

* * * * *

SETH FRANK HAD BEEN AT HIS OFFICE FOR AN HOUR ALREADY. A contact from D.C. Homicide had tipped him to the twin slayings at the law firm. Frank had no idea if they were connected to Sullivan. But there was a common denominator. A common denominator that had given him a throbbing headache and it was barely seven in the morning.

His direct line rang. He picked it up, his eyebrows arched in semidisbelief.

"Jack, where the hell are you?"

There was a hard edge in the detective's tone that Jack had not expected to hear.

"Good morning to you too."

"Jack, do you know what's happened?"

"I just saw it on the news. I was there last night, Seth. They were after me; I don't know exactly how but Sandy must've walked into it and they killed him."

"Who? Who killed him?"

"I don't know! I was at the office, I heard a noise. The next thing I know I'm being chased through the building by someone with a gun and I barely get out of there with my head intact. Do the police have any leads?"

Frank took a deep breath. The story sounded so fantastic. He believed in Jack, trusted him. But who could be absolutely certain about anyone these days?

"Seth? Seth?"

Frank bit on his nail, thinking furiously. Depending on what he did next one of two totally different events would take place. He momentarily thought of Kate Whitney. The trap he had laid for her and her father. He had still not gotten over that. He might be a cop, but he had been a human being long before that. He trusted he still had some decent human qualities left.

"Jack, the police do have one lead, a real good lead in fact."

"Okay, what is it?"

Frank paused, then said, "It's you, Jack. You're the lead. You're the guy the entire District police force is combing the city for right this very minute."

The phone slowly slid down from Jack's hand. The blood seemed to have ceased flowing through his body.

"Jack? Jack, goddammit talk to me." The words of the detective did not register.

Jack looked out the window. Out there were people who wanted to kill him and people who wanted to arrest him for murder.

"Jack!"

Finally, with an effort, Jack spoke. "I didn't kill anybody, Seth."

The words were spoken as though they were spilling down a drain, about to be washed away.

Frank heard what he desperately wanted to hear. It wasn't the words—guilty people almost always lied—it was the tone with which they were spoken. Despair, disbelief, horror all rolled into one.

"I believe you, Jack," Frank said quietly.

"What the hell's going on, Seth?"

"From what I've been told the cops have you on tape going into the garage at around midnight. Apparently Lord and a ladyfriend of his were there before you."

"I never saw them."

"Well, I'm not sure that you necessarily would have." He shook his head and continued. "Seems they were found not completely clothed, especially the woman. I guess they had just finished doing it when they bought it."

"Oh God!"

"And again they have you on the video blowing out of the garage apparently right after they were killed."

"But what about the gun? Did they find the gun?"

"They did. In a trash Dumpster inside the garage."

"And?"

"And your prints were on the gun, Jack. They were the only ones on the gun. After they saw you on the videotape, the D.C. cops accessed your fingerprints from the Virginia State Bar file. A nine-point hit I'm told."

Jack slumped down in the chair.

"I never touched any gun, Seth. Somebody tried to kill me and I ran. I hit the guy, with a paperweight I pulled off my desk. That's all I know." He paused. "What do I do now?"

Frank knew that question was coming. In all honesty he wasn't sure what to answer. Technically, the man he was speaking to was wanted for murder. As a law enforcement officer, his action should have been absolutely clear, only it wasn't.

"Wherever you are I want you to stay put. I'm gonna check this out. But don't, under any circumstances, go anywhere. Call me back in three hours. Okay?"

Jack hung up and pondered the matter. The police wanted him for murdering two people. His fingerprints were all over a weapon he had never even touched. He was a fugitive from justice. He smiled wearily, then he stiffened slightly. A fugitive. And he had just hung up from talking to a policeman. Frank hadn't asked where he was. But they could have traced the call. They could have done that easily. Only Frank wouldn't do that. But then Jack thought about Kate.

Cops never told the whole truth. The detective had suckered Kate. Then he had felt sorry about it, or at least he had said he had.

A siren blared outside and Jack's heart stopped for an instant. He raced to the window and looked out but the patrol car kept on going until the flashing lights disappeared.

But they might be coming. They might be coming for him right now. He grabbed his coat and put it on. Then he looked down at the bed.

The box.

He had never even told Frank about the damned thing. The most important thing in his life last night, now it had taken a back seat to something else.

* * * * *

"AREN'T YOU BUSY ENOUGH OUT THERE IN THE BOONIES?" Craig Miller was a D.C. homicide detective of long standing. Big, with thick, wavy black hair and a face that betrayed his love of fine whiskey. Frank had known him for years. Their relationship was one of friendship and the shared belief that murder must always be punished.

"Never too busy to come over to see if you ever got any good at this detective stuff," Frank replied, a wry grin on his face.

Miller smiled. They were in Jack's office. The crime unit was just finishing up.

Frank looked around the spacious interior. Jack was a long way from this kind of life now, he thought to himself.

Miller looked at him, a thought registering. "This Graham fellow, he was involved in the Sullivan case out your way, wasn't he?"

Frank nodded. "The suspect's defense counsel."

"That's right! Man, that's a pretty big swing. Defense counsel to future defendant." Miller smiled.

"Who found the bodies?"

"Housekeeper. She gets in around four in the morning."

"So any motive work its way through that big head of yours?"

Miller eyed his friend. "Come on. It's eight o'clock in the morning. You drove all the way in here from the middle of nowhere to pick my brain. What's up?"

Frank shrugged. "I don't know. I got to know the guy during the case. Surprised the shit out of me to see his face on the morning news. I don't know, it just stuck in my gut."

Miller eyed him closely for another few seconds and then decided not to pursue it.

"The motive, it seems, is pretty clear. Walter Sullivan was the deceased's biggest client. This fellow Graham, without talking to anybody at the firm, jumps in and represents the dude accused of murdering the guy's wife. That, obviously, didn't sit too well with Lord. Apparently, the two had a meeting at Lord's place. Maybe they tried to work things out, maybe they just made things worse."

"How'd you get all the inside scoop?"

"Managing partner of the place." Miller flipped open his notebook. "Daniel J. Kirksen. He was real helpful on all the background shit."

"So how does that lead to Graham coming in here to pop two people?"

"I didn't say it was premeditated. The video time tables show pretty clearly that the deceased was here several hours before Graham showed up."

"So?"

"So the two don't know the other's here, or maybe Graham sees Lord's office light on when he's driving by. It overlooks the street, it'd be easy enough to see someone in the office."

"Yeah, except if the man and woman were getting it on, I'm not sure they'd be showcasing it to the rest of the city. The blinds were probably down."

"Right, but come on, Lord wasn't in the best of shape so I doubt if they were doing it the whole time. In fact the office light *was* on when they were found and the blinds were partially open. Anyway, accidental or not, the two run into each other here. The argument is rekindled. The feelings accelerate, maybe threats are made. And bam. Heat of the moment. It could be it was Lord's gun. They struggle.

Graham gets the piece away from the old guy. Shot's fired. Woman sees it all, she has to eat a round too. All over in a few seconds."

Frank shook his head. "Excuse me for saying so, Craig, but that sounds awfully farfetched."

"Oh yeah? Well we got the guy blowing out of here white as a sheet. The camera got a clear shot of him. I've seen it, there was no blood left in the guy's face, Seth, I'm telling you."

"How come Security didn't come and check things out then?"

Miller laughed. "Security? Shit. Half the time those guys aren't even looking at the monitors. They got a tape backup you're lucky if they even review on any consistent basis. Let me tell you it is not hard to get into one of these office buildings after hours."

"So maybe somebody did."

Miller shook his head, grinning. "Don't think so, Seth. That's your problem. You look for a complicated answer when the simple one's staring you in the face."

"So where did this gun mysteriously appear from?"

"A lot of people keep guns stashed in their office."

"A lot? Like how many is a lot, Craig?"

"You'd be surprised, Seth."

"Maybe I would!" Frank shot back.

Miller looked puzzled. "Why do you have such a bug up your ass about this?"

Frank didn't look at his friend. He stared over at the desk.

"I don't know. Like I said, I got to know the guy. He didn't seem like the type. So his prints were on the weapon?"

"Two perfect hits. Right thumb and index. Never seen clearer ones."

Something in his friend's words jolted Frank. He was looking at the desk. The highly polished surface had been defaced. The small water ring was clearly visible.

"So where's the glass?"

"What's that?"

Frank pointed to the mark. "The glass that left that mark. Have you got it?"

Miller shrugged and then chuckled. "I haven't checked the dishwasher in the kitchen, if that's what you're asking. Be my guest."

Miller turned to sign off on a report. Frank took the opportunity to check out the desk more closely. In the middle of the desk was a slight dust ring. Something had been there. Square in shape, about three inches across. The paperweight. Frank smiled.

A few minutes later Seth Frank walked down the hallway. The gun had perfect prints on it. Too perfect more like it. Frank had also seen the weapon and the police report on it. A .44 caliber, serial numbers obliterated, untraceable. Just like the weapon found next to Walter Sullivan.

Frank had to allow himself a smile. He had been right in what he had done, or more accurately, what he had not done.

Jack Graham had been telling the truth. He hadn't killed anybody.

* * * * *

"YOU KNOW, BURTON, I'M BECOMING A LITTLE TIRED OF having to devote so much time and attention to this matter. I do have a country to run in case you've

forgotten.” Richmond sat in a chair in the Oval Office in front of a blazing fire. His eyes were closed; his fingers formed a tight pyramid.

Before Burton could respond, the President continued. “Instead of having the object back safely in our possession, you have managed only to contribute two more entries to the city’s homicide fiasco, and Whitney’s defense attorney is out there somewhere with possibly the evidence to bury us all. I’m absolutely thrilled with the result.”

“Graham’s not going to the police, not unless he’s real fond of prison food and wants a big, hairy man as his date for life.” Burton stared down at the motionless President. The shit he, Burton, had gone through to save all their asses while this prize stayed safely behind the lines. And now he was criticizing. Like the veteran Secret Service agent had really enjoyed seeing two more innocent people die.

“I do congratulate you on that part. It showed quick thinking. However, I don’t believe we can rely on that as a long-term solution. If the police do take Graham into custody he’ll certainly produce the letter opener, if he has it.”

“But I bought us some time.”

The President stood up, grabbed Burton’s thick shoulders. “And in that time I know you will locate Jack Graham and persuade him that taking any action detrimental to our interests would not be in his best interests.”

“Do you want me to tell him that before or after I put a bullet in his brain?”

The President smiled grimly. “I’ll leave that to your professional judgment.” He turned to his desk.

Burton stared at the President’s back. For one instant Burton visualized pumping a round from his weapon into the base of the President’s neck. Just end the bullshit right here and now. If anyone ever deserved it this guy did.

“Any idea where he might be, Burton?”

Burton shook his head. “No, but I’ve got a pretty reliable source.” Burton didn’t mention Jack’s phone call to Seth Frank that morning. Sooner or later Jack would reveal his location to the detective. And then Burton would make his move.

Burton took a deep breath. If you loved a pressure-filled challenge it didn’t get much better than this. It was the ninth inning, the home team was up by one, there were two outs, one runner on, and a full count on the bruiser at the plate. Could Burton close it out or would they all watch as the white orb disappeared into the stands?

As Burton walked out the door, more than a small part of him hoped it was the latter.

* * * * *

SETH FRANK WAS WAITING AT HIS DESK, STARING AT THE clock. As the second hand swept past the twelve the phone rang.

Jack sat in the phone booth. He thanked God it was as cold as it was outside. The heavy, hooded parka he had bought that morning fit right in with the bundled-up mass of humanity. And still he had the overwhelming impression that everyone seemed to be looking at him.

Frank picked up on the background noise. “Where the hell are you? I told you not to leave wherever you were staying.”

Jack didn’t respond right away.

“Jack?”

“Look, Seth, I’m not real good at being a sitting duck. And I’m not in a position where I can afford to completely rely on anyone. Understood?”

Frank started to make a protest, but then leaned back in his chair. The guy was right, flat-out right.

“Fair enough. Would you like to hear how they set you up?”

“I’m listening.”

“You had a glass on your desk. Apparently you were drinking something. You remember that?”

“Yeah, Coke, so what?”

“So whoever was after you ran into Lord and the woman like you said and they had to be popped. You got away. They knew the garage video would have you leaving right about the time of the deaths. They lifted your prints off the glass and transferred them to the gun.”

“You can do that?”

“You bet your ass, if you know what you’re doing and you’ve got the right equipment, which they probably found in the supply room at your firm. If we had the glass we could show it was a forgery. Just as one person’s prints are unique from another person’s, your print on the gun couldn’t match in every detail the print on the glass. Amount of pressure applied and so on.”

“Do the D.C. cops buy that explanation?”

Frank almost laughed. “I wouldn’t be counting on that, Jack. I really wouldn’t. All they want to do is bring you in. They’ll let other people worry about everything else.”

“Great. So now what?”

“First things first. Why were they after you in the first place?”

Jack almost slapped himself. He looked down at the box.

“I got a special delivery from someone. Edwina Broome. It’s something I think you’ll get a real kick out of seeing.”

Seth stood up, almost wishing he could reach through the phone and snatch it. “What is it?”

Jack told him.

Blood and prints. Simon would have a field day. “I can meet you anywhere, anytime.”

Jack thought rapidly. Ironically, public places seemed to be more dangerous than private ones. “How about the Farragut West Metro station, 18th Street exit, around eleven tonight?”

Frank jotted the information down. “I’ll be there.”

Jack hung up the phone. He would be at the Metro station before the appointed time. Just in case. If he saw anything remotely suspicious he was going underground as far as he could. He checked his money. The dollars were dwindling. And his credit cards were out for now. He would risk hitting several ATM machines. That would net him a few hundred. That should be enough, for a while.

He exited the phone booth, checked the crowd. It was the typical hurried pace of Union Station. No one appeared the least bit interested in him. Jack jerked

slightly. Coming his way were a pair of D.C. police officers. Jack stepped back into the phone booth until they passed.

He bought some burgers and fries at the food court and then grabbed a cab. Munching down while the cab took him through the city, Jack had a moment to reflect on his options. Once he got the letter opener to Frank would his troubles really end? Presumably the prints and blood would match up with the person in the Sullivan house that night. But then Jack's defense counsel mentality took over. And that mind-set told him there were clear, almost insurmountable obstacles in the path of such a pristine resolution.

First, the physical evidence may well be inconclusive. There may be no match because the person's DNA and prints may not be on file anywhere. Jack again remembered the look on Luther's face that night on the Mall. It was somebody important, somebody people knew. And that was another obstacle. If you made accusations against a person like that, you better make damn sure you could back it up or else your case would never see the light of day.

Second, they were looking at a mammoth chain-of-custody problem. Could they even prove the letter opener came from Sullivan's home? Sullivan was dead; the staff might not know for certain. Christine Sullivan had presumably handled it. Perhaps her killer had possessed it for a short period of time. Luther had kept it for a couple of months. Now Jack had it and would, hopefully, soon be passing it on to Seth Frank. It finally struck Jack.

The letter opener's evidentiary value was zilch. Even if they could find a match, a competent defense counsel would shred its admissibility. Hell, they probably wouldn't even get an indictment based on it. Tainted evidence was no evidence at all.

He stopped eating and lay back in the grimy vinyl seat.

But come on! They had tried to get it back! They had killed to get it back. They were prepared to kill Jack to take possession of what he had. It must be important to them, deadly important. So regardless of its legal efficacy, it had value. And something valuable could be exploited. Maybe he had a chance.

* * * * *

IT WAS TEN O'CLOCK WHEN JACK HIT THE ESCALATOR HEADING down into the Farragut West Metro station. Part of the orange and blue lines on the Washington Metrorail system, Farragut West was a very busy station during the day due to its close proximity to the downtown business area with its myriad law and accounting firms, trade associations and corporate offices. At ten o'clock in the evening, however, it was pretty much deserted.

Jack stepped off the escalator and surveyed the area. The underground Metro stations of the system were really huge tunnels with vaulted honeycombed ceilings and floors consisting of six-sided brick. A broad corridor lined with cigarette advertisements on one side and automated ticket machines on the other culminated in a kiosk that sat in the center of the aisle with the turnstiles flanking it on either side. A huge Metro map with its multicolored rail lines, and travel time and pricing information, stood against one wall next to the dual phone booths.

One bored Metro employee leaned back in his chair in the glass-enclosed kiosk. Jack looked around and eyed the clock atop the kiosk. Then he looked back

toward the escalator and froze. Coming down the escalator was a police officer. Jack willed himself to turn as casually as possible and he passed along the wall until he reached the phone booth. He flattened himself against the back of the booth, hidden behind its barrier. He caught his breath and risked peering out. The officer approached the ticket machines, nodded to the Metro guy in the kiosk and looked around the perimeter of the station entrance. Jack drew back. He would wait. The guy would move on shortly; he had to.

Time passed. A loud voice interrupted Jack's thoughts. He looked out. Coming down the escalator was a man, obviously homeless. His clothing was in tatters, a thick bundled blanket slung over one shoulder. His beard and hair were matted and unkempt. His face weather-beaten and strained. It was cold outside. The warmth of the Metro stations was always a welcome haven for the homeless until they got run out. The iron gates at the top of the escalators were to keep just such people out.

Jack looked around. The police officer had disappeared. Perhaps to check out the train platforms, shoot the breeze with the kiosk guy. Jack looked in that direction. That man too had vanished.

Jack looked back at the homeless man, who was now crumpled in one corner, inventorying his meager belongings, rubbing ungloved hands back and forth, trying to work circulation into limbs stretched to their breaking point.

A pang of guilt hit Jack. The gauntlet of such people downtown was staggering. A generous person could empty their entire pockets in the span of one city block. Jack had done that, more than once.

He checked the area one more time. No one. Another train would not arrive for about fifteen minutes. He stepped out of the booth and looked directly across at the man. He didn't seem to see Jack; his attention was focused on his own little world far away from normal reality. But then Jack thought, his own reality was no longer normal, if it ever had been. Both he and the pathetic mass across from him were involved in their own peculiar struggles. And death could claim either of them, at any time. Except that Jack's demise would probably be somewhat more violent, somewhat more sudden. But maybe that was preferable to the lingering death awaiting the other.

He shook his head clear. Thoughts like that were doing him no good. If he were going to survive this he had to remain focused, he had to believe he would outlast the forces marshaled against him.

Jack started forward and then stopped. His blood pressure almost doubled; the sudden metabolic change he was experiencing left him light-headed.

The homeless man was wearing new shoes. Soft-soled, brown leathers, which probably cost over a hundred and fifty bucks. They were revealed from out of the mass of filthy clothing like a shiny blue diamond on a bed of white sand.

And now the man was looking up at him. The eyes locked on Jack's face. They were familiar. Beneath the depths of wrinkles, filthy hair and wind-burnt cheeks, he had seen those eyes before; he was sure of it. The man was now rising off the floor. He seemed to have much more energy than when he first staggered in.

Jack frantically looked around. The place was as empty as a tomb. His tomb. He looked back. The man had already started toward him. Jack backed up, clutching

the box to his chest. He thought back to his narrow escape in the elevator. The gun. He would see that gun appearing soon. It would be pointed right at him.

Jack backed down the tunnel toward the kiosk. The man's hand was going underneath his coat, a torn and beaten behemoth that spilled its woolen guts with every step. Jack looked around. He heard approaching footsteps. He looked back at the man, deciding whether he should make a run for the train or not. Then he came into sight.

Jack almost screamed in relief.

The police officer rounded the corner. Jack ran to him, pointing back down the tunnel at the homeless man who now stood stock-still, in the middle of the corridor.

"That man; he's not a homeless person. He's an imposter." The chance of him being recognized by the cop had crossed Jack's mind although the young cop's features didn't betray any such realization.

"What?" The bewildered cop stared at Jack.

"Look at his shoes." Jack realized he was making little sense, but how could he when he couldn't tell the cop the whole story?

The cop looked down the tunnel, saw the homeless man standing there, his face turned into a grimace. In his confusion he retreated to the normal inquiry.

"Has he been bothering you, sir?"

Jack hesitated, then said, "Yes."

"Hey!" The cop shouted at the man.

Jack watched as the cop ran forward. The homeless man turned and fled. He made it to the escalator, but the up escalator wasn't working. He turned and raced down the tunnel, darted around a corner and disappeared, the cop right after him.

Now Jack was alone. He looked back at the kiosk. The Metro guy hadn't returned.

Jack jerked his head. He had heard something. Like a shout, of someone in pain, from where the two men had disappeared. He moved forward. As he did, the cop, slightly out of breath, came back around the corner. He looked at Jack, motioned him to come over with slow movements of his arm. The guy looked sick, like he had seen or done something that disgusted him.

Jack hustled up next to him.

The cop gulped in air. "Goddammit! I don't know what the hell's going on, buddy." The cop again struggled to catch his breath. He put one hand out against the wall to steady himself.

"Did you catch him?"

The cop nodded. "You were right."

"What happened?"

"Go see for yourself. I've gotta call this in." The cop straightened up and pointed a warning finger at Jack. "But you are not to leave. I'm not explaining this one by myself and it sounds like maybe you know a helluva lot more about this than you're letting on. Understood?"

Jack nodded quickly. The cop hurried off. Jack walked around the corner. Wait. The cop had told him to wait. Wait for them to arrest him. He should bolt now. But he couldn't. He had to see who it was. He was certain he knew the guy. He had to see.

Jack looked up ahead. This was a service way for Metro personnel and equipment. In the darkness, far down the tunnel, there was a large bundle of clothing. In the dim lighting Jack strained to see more clearly. As he moved closer he saw that it was indeed the homeless man. For a few moments Jack remained motionless. He wanted the cops to show up. It was so quiet, so dark. The bundle did not move. Jack couldn't hear any breathing. Was the guy dead? Had the cop needed to kill him?

Finally, Jack moved forward. He knelt beside the man. What an elaborate disguise. Jack moved his hand briefly across the matted hair. Even the pungent odor of the street person was authentic. And then Jack saw the stream of blood as it trickled down the side of the man's head. He moved the hair away. A cut was there, a deep one. That was the sound he had heard. There had been a struggle and the cop had hit him. It was over. They had tried to trick Jack and gotten tripped up. He wanted to remove the wig and other elements of disguise, to see who the hell his pursuers had been. But that would have to wait. Maybe it was good the police were now involved. He would give them the letter opener. He'd take his chances with them.

He stood up, turned and watched the cop striding quickly up the corridor. Jack shook his head. What a surprise this guy was about to get. Chalk it up to being your lucky day, pal.

Jack moved toward the cop and then stopped as the 9mm swiftly came out of the holster.

The cop glared at him. "Mr. Graham."

Jack shrugged and smiled. The guy had finally identified him. "In the flesh." He held up the box. "I've got something for you."

"I know you do, Jack. And that's exactly what I want."

Tim Collin watched the smile fade from Jack's lips. His hand tightened on the trigger as he moved forward.

* * * * *

SETH FRANK COULD FEEL HIS PULSE QUICKEN AS HE DREW nearer to the station. Finally, he would have it. He could envision Laura Simon devouring the evidence like it was a slab of aged beef. And Frank was almost one hundred percent certain they would score a hit on some database, somewhere. And then the case would crack open like an egg hurled from the Empire State Building. And finally his questions, the nagging, nagging questions would be answered.

* * * * *

JACK LOOKED AT THE FACE, ABSORBING EVERY DETAIL. NOT that it would do him any good. He glanced over at the crumpled clothing on the floor, at the new shoes covering lifeless feet. Poor guy had probably wangled his first new pair of shoes in ages and now would never enjoy them.

Jack looked back at Collin and said angrily, "The guy's dead. You killed him."

"Let me have the box, Jack."

"Who the hell are you?"

"That really doesn't matter, does it?" Collin flipped open a compartment on his belt and pulled out a suppressor that he quickly twirled onto the barrel of his gun.

Jack eyed the hardware pointed at his chest. He thought of the gurneys wheeling out Lord and the woman. His turn would come in tomorrow's paper. Jack Graham and a homeless man. Twin gurneys. Of course they'd work it so Jack would be blamed for having done in the poor, wretched street person. Jack Graham, from partner at Patton, Shaw to deceased mass murderer.

"It matters to me."

"So?" Collin moved forward, placed both hands on the butt of his weapon.

"Fuck you, take it!" Jack flung the box at Collin's head right as the muffled explosion occurred. A bullet tore through the edge of the box and imbedded itself in the concrete wall. In the same instant, Jack hurled himself forward and made impact. Collin was solid bone and muscle but so was Jack. And they were about the same size. Jack felt the man's breath driven completely from his body as Jack's shoulder connected right at the diaphragm. Instinctively, long-ago wrestling moves came flowing back to his limbs and Jack picked up and then body-slammed the agent into the unwelcoming arms of the brick floor. By the time Collin managed to stagger to his feet, Jack had already turned the corner.

Collin grabbed his gun and then the box. He stopped for an instant as sickness enveloped him. His head hurt from having struck the hard floor. He knelt down, fighting to regain his equilibrium. Jack was long gone, but at least he had it. Finally had it. Collins's fingers closed around the box.

Jack flew past the kiosk, hurdled the turnstiles, raced down the escalator and across the train platform. He was vaguely aware of people staring. His hood had fallen off his head. His face was clearly exposed. There was a shout behind him. The kiosk guy. But Jack kept running and exited the station on the 17th Street side. He didn't think the man had been alone. And the last thing he needed was someone tailing him. But he doubted if they had both exits covered. They probably figured he wouldn't be leaving the station under his own power. His shoulder ached from his collision and his breath came in difficult gulps as the cold air burned his lungs. He was two blocks away before he stopped running. He wrapped his coat around himself tightly. And then he remembered. He looked down at his empty hands. The box! He had left the goddamned box behind. He slumped against the front glass of a darkened McDonald's.

A car's lights came down the road. Jack looked away from them and quickly moved around the corner. In a few minutes he hopped a bus. To where he wasn't sure.

* * * * *

THE CAR TURNED OFF L STREET AND ONTO 19TH. SETH FRANK made his way up to Eye Street and then turned toward 18th. He parked on the corner across from the Metro station, got out of his car and went down the escalator.

Across the street, hidden behind a collection of trash cans, debris and metal fencing, the products of a massive demolition project, Bill Burton watched. Swearing under his breath, Burton put out his cigarette, checked the street, and made his way quickly across to the escalator.

As he got off the escalator, Frank looked around and checked the time. He wasn't as early as he thought he would be. His eyes fell upon a collection of junk that lay against one wall. Then his gaze drifted over to the unmanned kiosk. There

was no one else around. It was quiet. Too quiet. Frank's danger radar instantly lit up. With an automatic motion he pulled his gun. His ears had pricked up at a sound that came from his right. He moved quickly down the corridor away from the turnstiles. There a darkened corridor awaited him. He peered around and at first saw nothing. Then as his eyes adjusted to the diminished light he saw two things. One was moving, one wasn't.

Frank stared as the man slowly rose to his feet. It wasn't Jack. The guy was in a uniform, a gun in one hand, a box in the other. Frank's fingers tightened on his own weapon, his eyes locked on the other man's weapon. Frank stealthily moved forward. He hadn't done this in a long time. The image of his wife and three daughters veered across his mind until he pushed it back out. He needed to concentrate.

He was finally close enough. He prayed his accelerated breathing would not betray him. He leveled his pistol at the broad back.

"Freeze! I'm a police officer."

The man did indeed stop all motion.

"Lay the gun down, butt first. I don't want to see your finger anywhere near the trigger or I'm gonna put a hole right in the back of your head. Do it. Now!"

The gun slowly went toward the floor. Frank watched its progression, inch by inch. Then his vision became blurry. Frank's head pounded, he staggered and then he slumped to the floor.

At the sound, Collin slowly looked around to see Bill Burton standing there, holding his pistol by the barrel. He looked down at Frank.

"Let's go, Tim."

Collin shakily got to his feet, looked at the fallen officer and put his gun to Frank's head. Burton's massive hand stopped him.

"He's a cop. We don't kill cops. We're not killing *any body* else, Tim." Burton stared down at his colleague. Discomforting thoughts flickered in and out of Burton's head at the calm and accepting manner in which the younger man had stepped into the role of conscienceless assassin.

Collin shrugged, put his gun away.

Burton took the box, looked down at the detective and then over at the other crumpled mass of humanity. He shook his head disdainfully and looked reproachfully at his partner.

Several minutes after they were gone, Seth Frank let out a loud groan, tried to rise and then floated back into unconsciousness.

Chapter 27

KATE LAY IN BED BUT WAS AS FAR FROM SLEEP AS SHE COULD possibly be. The ceiling of her bedroom had been replaced with a torrent of images, each one more terrifying than its predecessor. She looked across at the small clock on the nightstand. Three o'clock in the morning. Her window shade was open enough to reveal the pitch-black darkness outside. She could hear the raindrops on the

windowpane. Normally comforting, now they simply added to the relentless pounding in her head.

When the phone rang, at first, she didn't move. Her limbs seemed too heavy for her to even attempt to budge, as if each had simultaneously lost all circulation. For one terrible moment she thought she had suffered a stroke. Finally, on the fifth ring she managed to lift the receiver.

"Hello?" Her voice was shaky, one step from oblivion; her nerves completely spent.

"Kate. I need some help."

* * * * *

FOUR HOURS LATER THEY SAT IN THE FRONT OF THE LITTLE DELI at Founder's Park, the site of their initial rendezvous after so many years apart. The weather had worsened into a hard, pelting snow that had made driving nearly impossible and walking only for the irrationally daring.

Jack looked across at her. The hooded parka was off, but a ski cap, a few days' worth of beard and a pair of thick glasses obscured his features to such a degree that Kate had to look twice before she recognized him.

"You're sure no one followed you?" He looked anxiously at her. A cup of steaming coffee partially clouded her line of vision, but she could see the strain on his face. It was clear he was near the breaking point.

"I did what you said. The subway, two cabs and a bus. If anyone kept up with me in this weather, they're not human."

Jack put his coffee down. "From what I've seen, they might not be."

He had not specifically identified the meeting place on the phone. He now assumed that they were listening to everything, to anyone connected to him. He had only mentioned the "usual" place, confident that Kate would understand, and she had. He looked out the window. Every passing face was a threat. He slid a copy of the *Post* across to her. The front page was revealing. Jack had shaken with anger when he had first read it.

Seth Frank was in stable condition at George Washington University Hospital with a concussion. The homeless man, as yet unidentified, had not been so fortunate. And smack in the middle of the story was Jack Graham, a one-man crime wave. She looked up at him after reading the story.

"We need to keep moving." He looked at her, drained his coffee and then got up.

The cab dropped them off at Jack's motel on the outskirts of Alexandria's Old Town. His eyes looking left and right and then behind, they made their way to his room. After locking and bolting the door, he took off the ski cap and glasses.

"God, Jack, I'm so sorry you're involved in any of this." She shook; he could actually see her trembling from across the room. It took a moment for him to wrap his arms around her until he felt her body calm, relax. He looked at her.

"I got myself involved. Now I just need to get myself uninvolved." He attempted a smile, but it didn't dent the fear she was feeling for him; the awful dread that he might soon join her father.

"I left a dozen messages for you on your machine."

"I never thought to check, Kate." He took the next half hour to tell her the events of the last few days. Her eyes reflected the growing horror with each new revelation.

"My God!"

They were silent for a moment.

"Jack, do you have any idea who's behind all this?"

Jack shook his head, a small groan escaped his lips. "I've got a bunch of loose threads sliding around in my head but none of them have added up to spit so far. I'm hoping that status will change. Soon."

The finality with which the last word was spoken hit her like a sudden slap. His eyes told her. The message was clear. Despite the disguises, the elaborate travel safeguards, despite whatever innate ability he could bring to the battlefield, they would find him. Either the cops or whoever wanted to kill him. It was only a matter of time.

"But at least if they got what they wanted back?" Her voice drifted off. She looked at him, almost pleadingly.

He lay back on the bed, stretched exhausted limbs that didn't seem to belong to him any longer.

"That's not something I can really hang my hat on forever, Kate, is it?" He sat up and looked across the room. At the cheap picture of Jesus hanging on the wall. He would take a dose of divine intervention right now. A small miracle would do.

"But you didn't kill anyone, Jack. You told me Frank's already figured that out. The D.C. cops will too."

"Will they? Frank knows me, Kate. He knows me and I could still hear the doubt in his voice at first. He picked up on the glass, but there's no evidence that anyone tampered with it or the gun. On the other hand there's clear, take-it-to-the-bank proof, pointing to me killing two people. Three if you count last night. My lawyer would recommend my negotiating a plea and hoping for twenty to life with the possibility of parole. I'd recommend it myself. If I go to trial I've got no shot. Just a bunch of speculation trying to tie Luther and Walter Sullivan and all the rest into some landscape of conspiracy of, you have to admit, mind-boggling proportions. The judge'll laugh my ass right out of court. The jury will never hear it. Really, there's nothing to hear."

He stood up and leaned against the wall, hands shoved in his pockets. He didn't look at her. Both his short- and long-term prospects had doomsday written all over them.

"I'll die an old man in prison, Kate. That is, if I make it to old age—which is a big question mark in itself."

She sat down on the bed, her hands in her lap. A gasp caught midway in her throat as the sheer hopelessness sank in, like a boulder dropped in deep, dark waters.

* * * * *

SETH FRANK OPENED HIS EYES. AT FIRST NOTHING CAME INTO focus. What his brain registered resembled a large white canvas on which a few hundred gallons of black, white and gray paint had been poured to form a cloggy, mind-altering quagmire. After a few anxious moments, he was able to discern the outline

of the hospital room in all its stark white, chrome and sharp angles. As he tried to sit up, a hand planted itself firmly against his shoulder.

"Uh-uh, Lieutenant. Not so fast."

Frank looked up into the face of Laura Simon. The smile did not entirely hide the worry lines around the eyes. Her sigh of relief was clearly audible.

"Your wife just left to check on the kids. She's been here all night. I told her as soon as she left you'd wake up."

"Where am I?"

"GW Hospital. I guess if you were gonna have your head pounded in, at least you picked a place close to a hospital." Simon continued to lean over the bed so Frank wouldn't have to turn his head. He stared up at her.

"Seth, do you remember what happened?"

Frank thought back to last night. Or was it last night?

"What day is it?"

"Thursday."

"So it happened last night?"

"Around eleven or so. At least they found you about then. And the other guy."

"Other guy?" Frank jerked his head around. Pain shot through his neck.

"Take it easy, Seth." Laura took a moment to prop a pillow next to Frank's head.

"There was another guy. Homeless. They haven't identified him yet. Same kind of blow to the back of the head. Probably died instantly. You were lucky."

Frank gingerly touched his throbbing temples. He didn't feel so lucky.

"Anybody else?"

"What?"

"Did they find anybody else?"

"Oh. No, but you're not going to believe this. You know the lawyer who watched the tape with us?"

Frank tensed. "Yeah, Jack Graham."

"Right. The guy kills two people at his law firm and then he's spotted running away from the Metro about the time you and the other guy get whacked. The guy's a walking nightmare. And he looked like a Mr. All-American."

"Have they found him yet? Jack? They're sure he got away?"

Laura looked at him strangely. "He got out of the Metro station if that's what you mean. But it's only a matter of time." She looked out the window, reached for her purse. "The D.C. cops want to talk with you as soon as you're able."

"I'm not sure how much help I can be. I don't remember all that much, Laura."

"Temporary amnesia. You'll probably get it back."

She put on her jacket. "I have to go. Somebody's got to keep Middleton County safe for the rich and famous while you're counting sheep in here." She smiled. "Don't make a habit out of this, Seth. We were really worried we might have to hire a new detective."

"Where would you find someone as nice as me?"

Laura laughed. "Your wife will be back in a few hours. You need to get some rest anyway." She turned to go to the door.

"By the way, Seth, what were you doing at the Farragut West Metro at that time of night?"

Frank didn't answer right away. He didn't have amnesia. He recalled the night's events clearly.

"Seth?"

"I'm not sure, Laura." He closed his eyes and then re-opened them. "I just don't remember."

"Don't worry, it'll come back to you. In the meantime, they'll catch Graham. That'll probably clear everything up."

After Laura left, Frank did not rest. Jack was out there. And he had probably initially thought the detective had set him up, although if Jack had seen the paper he would know that the detective had walked blindly into the ambush that had been laid for the lawyer.

But they had the letter opener now. That's what was in that box. He was certain of it. And without that what chance did they have of nailing these people?

Frank again tried to struggle up. There was an IV in his arm. The pressure on his brain caused him to immediately lie back down. He had to get out of here. And he had to get in touch with Jack. Right now he had no idea how he would accomplish either.

* * * * *

"YOU SAID YOU NEEDED MY HELP? WHAT CAN I DO?" KATE looked directly at Jack. There were no reservations on her features.

Jack sat on the bed next to her. He looked troubled. "I've got some real serious doubts about getting you anywhere near this. In fact I'm wondering if calling you was the right thing to do."

"Jack, I've been surrounded by rapists, armed robbers and murderers for the last four years."

"I know that. But at least you knew who they were. This could be anybody. People are getting killed left and right, Kate. This is about as serious as it gets."

"I'm not leaving unless you let me help you."

Jack hesitated, his eyes turned away from hers.

"Jack, if you don't, then I'm going to turn you in. Better you take your chances with the cops."

He looked at her. "You'd do that, wouldn't you?"

"Damn straight I would. I'm breaking all the rules by being here with you now. If you let me in on it, then I forget all about seeing you today. If you don't ..."

There was a look in her eyes that, despite all the horrific possibilities he was contemplating, made him somehow feel fortunate to be here at this exact moment.

"Okay. You need to be my contact with Seth. Outside of you he's the only one I can trust."

"But you lost the package. How can he help?" Kate could not hide her dislike of the homicide detective.

Jack stood up and paced. Finally he stopped and looked down at her. "You know how your dad was a freak for control? Always have a backup plan?"

Kate said dryly, "I remember."

"Well I'm counting on that quality."

"What are you talking about?"

"That Luther had a backup plan on this one."

She stared at him, open-mouthed.

* * * * *

“MRS. BROOME?”

The door opened another notch as Edwina Broome peered out.

“Yes?”

“My name is Kate Whitney. Luther Whitney was my father.”

Kate relaxed as the old woman greeted her with a smile.

“I knew I’d seen you before. Luther was always showing pictures of you. You’re even prettier than your photos.”

“Thank you.”

Edwina jerked the door open. “What am I thinking about. You must be freezing. Please come in.”

Edwina led her into the small living room where a trio of felines were cloistered on various pieces of furniture.

“I just made some fresh tea, would you like some?”

Kate hesitated. Time was short. Then she looked around the narrow confines of the home. In the corner sat a battered upright piano, thick dust on the wood. Kate looked at the woman’s weakened eyes; the pleasures of a musical pastime had also been taken from her. Husband passed on, her only daughter dead. How many visitors could she possibly have?

“Thank you, I would.”

Both women settled into the old but comfortable furniture. Kate sipped the strong tea and she began to thaw out. She brushed the hair out of her face and looked across at the elderly woman to find a pair of sad eyes upon her.

“I’m sorry about your daddy, Kate. I really am. I know you two had your differences. But Luther was as good a man as I’ve come across in my life.”

Kate felt herself growing warmer. “Thank you. We both have had a lot to deal with in that regard.”

Edwina’s eyes drifted over to a small table next to the window. Kate followed the gaze. On the table numerous photographs displayed a small shrine to Wanda Broome; capturing her in happy times. She strongly resembled her mother.

A shrine. With a jolt Kate recalled her father’s own collection of her personal triumphs.

“Yes indeed.” Edwina was looking at her again.

Kate put down her tea. “Mrs. Broome, I hate to jump right into this, but the fact is I don’t have much time.”

The old woman leaned forward expectantly. “This is about Luther’s death, and my daughter’s too, isn’t it?”

Kate looked surprised. “Why do you think that?”

Edwina leaned forward even more, her voice dropped to a whisper. “Because I know Luther didn’t kill Mrs. Sullivan. I know it as if I’d seen it with my own eyes.”

Kate looked puzzled. “Do you have any idea who—”

Edwina was already shaking her head sadly. “No. No, I don’t.”

“Well how do you know my father didn’t do it?”

Now there was definite hesitation. Edwina leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes. When she finally reopened them, Kate had not moved a muscle.

"You're Luther's daughter and I believe you should know the truth." She paused, took a sip of her tea, pressed her lips dry with a napkin and then settled back into her chair. A black Persian drifted across and promptly went to sleep in her lap. "I knew about your father. His past, so to speak. He and Wanda got to know each other. She got into trouble years back and Luther helped her, helped her get back on her feet and get settled into a respectable life. I will always be grateful to him for that. He was always there when Wanda or I needed anything. The fact is, Kate, your father would never have been in the house that night if it weren't for Wanda."

Edwina spoke for some minutes. When she had finished Kate sat back in her chair and realized she was holding her breath. She let out a loud gasp that seemed to echo around the room.

Edwina didn't say anything but continued to watch the young woman with her large sad eyes. Finally she stirred. A thickly wrinkled hand patted Kate's knee.

"Luther loved you, child. More than anything."

"I realize that..."

Edwina slowly shook her head. "He never blamed you for the way you felt. In fact he said you were entirely right to feel that way."

"He said that?"

"He was so proud of you, your being a lawyer and all. He used to say to me, 'My daughter is a lawyer and a damned fine one. Justice is what matters for her and she's right, dead right.'"

Kate's head began to swirl. She was feeling emotions she was ill-equipped right now to deal with. She rubbed the back of her neck and took a moment to look outside. A black sedan pulled down the street and then disappeared. She quickly looked back at Edwina.

"Mrs. Broome, I appreciate your telling me these things. But I really came here for a specific reason. I need your help."

"I'll do whatever I can."

"My father sent you a package."

"Yes. And I sent it on to Mr. Graham, like Luther said to."

"Yes I know. Jack got the package. But someone ... someone took it away from him. Now we're wondering if my father sent you something else, something else that might help us?"

Edwina's eyes no longer looked sad. They had collected into twin masses of stark intensity. She looked over Kate's shoulder.

"Behind you, Kate, in the piano seat. The hymnal on the left."

Kate opened the piano seat and lifted out the hymnal. Inside the pages was a small packet. She looked down at it.

"Luther was the most prepared man I have ever met in my life. Said if anything went wrong with my sending the package that I was to send this to Mr. Graham. I was getting ready to do that when I heard about him on the TV. Am I right in thinking Mr. Graham didn't do any of the things they say he did?"

Kate nodded. "I wish everybody thought like you did."

Kate started to open the package.

Edwina's voice was sharp. "Don't do that, Kate. Your father said that only Mr. Jack Graham was to see what was inside of there. Only him. I think it best if we took him at his word."

Kate hesitated, fighting her natural curiosity, and then closed the package.

"Did he tell you anything else? Whether he knew who had killed Christine Sullivan?"

"He did know."

Kate looked at her sharply. "But he didn't say who?"

Edwina shook her head vigorously. "He did say one thing though."

"What was that?"

"He said if he told me who had done it, I wouldn't have believed him."

Kate sat back, thought for several anxious moments.

"What could he have meant by that?"

"Well, it surprised me, I can tell you that."

"Why? Why did that surprise you?"

"Because Luther was the most honest man I'd ever met. I would have believed anything he would have told me. Accepted it as the gospel."

"So whatever he saw, *whoever* he saw, must have been someone so unlikely as to be unbelievable. Even to you."

"Exactly. That's exactly what I thought too."

Kate rose to go. "Thank you, Mrs. Broome."

"Please call me Edwina. Funny name, but it's the only one I have."

Kate smiled. "After this is all over, Edwina, I ... I'd like to come back and visit if you don't mind. Talk about things some more."

"I'd like nothing better. Being old has its good and bad. Being old and lonely is all bad."

Kate put on her coat and went to the door. She put the package safely in her purse.

"That should narrow your search shouldn't it, Kate?"

Kate turned around. "What?"

"Someone that unbelievable. Can't be too many of them around I wouldn't think."

* * * * *

THE HOSPITAL SECURITY GUARD WAS TALL, BEEFY AND uncomfortable as hell.

"I don't exactly know what happened. I was gone maybe two, three minutes tops."

"You shouldn't have been away from your post at all, Monroe." The diminutive supervisor was in Monroe's face and the big man was sweating hard.

"Like I said, the lady asked for some help with a bag, so I helped her."

"What lady?"

"I told you, just some lady. Young, good-lookin', dressed real professional." The supervisor turned away, disgusted. He had no way of knowing the lady was Kate Whitney and that she and Seth Frank were already five blocks away in Kate's car.

* * * * *

"DOES IT HURT?" KATE LOOKED AT HIM, WITH NOT MUCH sympathy in either her features or her voice.

Frank gingerly touched the bandages around his head. "You kidding? My six-year-old hits me harder." He looked around the interior of the car. "You got some smokes? Since when the hell are hospitals nonsmoking?"

She rummaged in her purse and flipped him an open pack.

He lit up and eyed her over the cloud of smoke. "By the way, nice job on the rent-a-cop. You should be in the movies."

"Great! I'm in the market for a career change."

"How's our boy?"

"Safe. For now. Let's keep him that way."

She turned the corner and looked hard at him.

"You know, it wasn't exactly my plan to let your old man buy it right in front of me."

"That's what Jack said."

"But you don't believe him?"

"What does it matter what I believe?"

"It does. It matters to me, Kate."

She stopped for a red light. "Okay. Let's put it this way. I'm coming around to the idea that you didn't want it to happen. Is that good enough?"

"No, but it'll do for now."

* * * * *

JACK TURNED THE CORNER AND TRIED TO RELAX. THE LATEST storm front had finally wearied of the Capital City, but although there no longer was any pelting icy rain, the thermometer had remained consistently in the twenties and the wind had returned with a vengeance. He blew on stiff fingers and rubbed sleep-deprived eyes. Against a drift of black sky, a sliver of moon hung, soft and luminous. Jack checked his surroundings. The building across the street was dark and empty. The structure he was standing in front of had closed its doors a long time ago. A few passersby braved the inclement conditions, but for large chunks of time Jack stood alone. Finally he took shelter inside the doorway of the building and waited.

Three blocks away a rusting cab pulled to the curb, the back door opened and a pair of low heels touched the cement sidewalk. The cab immediately pulled off and a moment later the street was silent again. Kate tugged her coat around her and hurried off. As she passed the next block, another car, lights out, turned the corner and drifted along in her wake. Her thoughts focused on the steps that lay ahead of her, Kate did not look back.

Jack saw her turn the corner. He looked in all directions before moving, a habit he had quickly cultivated and hoped he would be able to discard very soon. He moved quickly to meet her. The street was quiet. Neither Kate nor Jack saw the sedan's nose as it crept past the corner building's front. Inside the driver zeroed in on the couple with a night-vision device the mail-order catalogue had trumpeted as being the very latest in Soviet technology. And although the former communists had no clue as to how to run a democratic, capitalist society, they did, for the most part, build sound military hardware.

"Jesus, you're freezing, how long have you been waiting?" Kate had touched Jack's hand and the icy feel had coursed through her entire body.

"Longer than I needed to. The motel room was shrinking on me. I just had to get out. I'm going to make a lousy prisoner. Well?"

Kate opened her purse. She had called Jack from a pay phone. She couldn't tell him what she had, only that she had something. Jack had agreed with Edwina Broome that if risks had to be taken, he would take more than anyone. Kate had already done enough.

Jack grasped the packet. It wasn't that difficult to discern what was contained inside. Photographs.

Thank God, Luther, you didn't disappoint.

"Are you okay?" Jack scrutinized her.

"I'm getting there."

"Where's Seth?"

"He's around. He'll drive me home."

They stared at each other. Jack knew that the best thing was to have Kate leave, maybe leave the country for a while, until this blew over or he was convicted of murder. If the latter, then her intention of starting over somewhere else was probably the best plan anyway.

But he didn't want her to leave.

"Thank you." The words seemed wholly inadequate, like she had just dropped off lunch for him, or picked up his dry cleaning.

"Jack, what are you going to do now?"

"I haven't thought it all through yet. But it's coming. I'm not going down without a fight."

"Yeah, but you don't even know who it is you're fighting. That's hardly fair."

"Who said it was supposed to be fair?"

He smiled at her as the wind kicked old newspapers down the street.

"You better get going. It's not that safe around here."

"I've got my pepper mace."

"Good girl."

She turned to leave, then clutched him by the arm.

"Jack, please be careful."

"I'm always careful. I'm a lawyer. CYA is SOP for us."

"Jack, I'm not kidding."

He shrugged. "I know. I promise I will be as careful as I can." As Jack said this he stepped toward Kate and took off his hood.

The night goggles fixated on Jack's exposed features and then they were lowered. Shaky hands picked up the car's cellular phone.

The two clung in an easy embrace. While Jack desperately wanted to kiss her, under the circumstances he settled for a soft brush of his lips against her neck. When they stepped back from each other, tears had begun to form in Kate's eyes. Jack turned and walked quickly away.

As Kate walked back down the street she didn't notice the car until it swerved across the street and almost ended up on the curb. She staggered back as the driver's side door flew open. In the background, the air had exploded with sirens, all coming toward her. Toward Jack. She instinctively looked behind her. There

was no sign of him. When she turned back, she was staring into a pair of smug eyes, framed under bushy eyebrows.

"I thought our paths might cross again, Ms. Whitney."

Kate stared at the man, but recognition was not forthcoming.

He looked disappointed. "Bob Gavin. From the Post?"

She looked at his car. She had seen it before. On the street passing Edwina Broome's house.

"You've been following me."

"Yes, I have. Figured you'd eventually lead me to Graham."

"The police?" Her head jerked around as a squad car, siren blaring, tore down the street toward them. "You called them."

Gavin nodded, smiling. He was obviously pleased with himself.

"Now before the cops get here I think we can work a little deal. You give me an exclusive. The down and dirty on Jack Graham, and my story changes just enough so that instead of an accessory, you're just an innocent bystander in this whole mess."

Kate glared at the man, the rage within her, having been built up from a month of personal horrors, was near its exploding point. And Bob Gavin was standing directly over the epicenter.

Gavin looked around at the patrol car nearing them. In the background, two more squad cars were heading in their direction.

"Come on, Kate," he said urgently, "you don't have much time. You stay out of jail and I get my long-overdue Pulitzer and my fifteen minutes of fame. What's it gonna be?"

She gnashed her teeth, her response startlingly calm, as though she had practiced its delivery for months. "Pain, Mr. Gavin. Fifteen minutes of pain." As he stared at her, she pulled the palm-size canister, pointed it directly at his face and squeezed the trigger. The pepper gas hit Gavin flush in the eyes and nose, marking his face with a red dye. By the time the cops exited their vehicle, Bob Gavin was on the pavement clutching at his face, trying unsuccessfully to tear his eyes out.

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THE FIRST SIREN HAD SENT JACK INTO A SPRINT DOWN A SIDE street. He slid flat against a building sucking in air. His lungs ached, the cold tore at his face. The deserted nature of the area he was in had turned into a huge tactical disadvantage. He could keep moving, but he was like a black ant on a sheet of white paper. The sirens were coming so heavy now he couldn't ascertain from what direction.

Actually they were coming from all directions. And they were getting closer. He ran hard to the next corner, stopped and peered around. The view was not encouraging. His eyes fastened on a police blockade being set up at the end of the street. Their strategy was readily apparent. They knew his general coordinates. They would simply cordon off a wide radius and systematically close that radius in. They had the manpower and the time.

The one thing he did have was a good knowledge of the area he was in. Many of his PD clients had come from here. Their dreams set not on college, law school, good job, loving family and the suburban split-level but on how much cash they

could generate from selling bags of crack, how they could survive one day at a time. Survival. It was a strong, human drive. Jack hoped his was strong enough.

As he flew down the alley, he had no idea what he would encounter, although he supposed the fierce weather had kept some of the local felons indoors. He almost laughed. Not one of his former partners at Patton, Shaw would have come near this place, even with an armored battalion surrounding them. He might as well be running across the surface of Pluto.

He cleared the chain-link fence with one jump and landed slightly off-balance. As he put out his hand against the rugged brick wall to steady himself he heard two sounds. His own heavy breathing and the sound of running feet. Several pair. He'd been spotted. They were homing in on him. Next the K-9's would be brought in and you didn't run away from the four-legged cops. He exploded out of the alley and made his way over to Indiana Avenue.

Jack veered down another street as the squeal of tires flew toward him. Even as he raced in the new direction, a new flank of pursuers rushed to greet him. It was only a matter of time now. He felt in his pocket for the packet. What could he do with it? He didn't trust anybody. Technically, an inventory of an arrestee's possessions taken from him would be made, with appropriate signatures and chain-of-custody safeguards, all of which meant nothing to Jack. Whoever could kill in the middle of hundreds of law officers and disappear without a trace could certainly manage to secure a prisoner's personal possessions from the D.C. Police Department. And what he had in his pocket was the only chance he had. D.C. didn't have the death penalty but life without parole wasn't any better and in a lot of ways seemed a helluva lot worse.

He raced in between two buildings, stumbled on some ice and plunged over a stack of garbage cans and hit the pavement hard. He picked himself up and half-rolled into the street, rubbing at his elbow. He could feel the burn, and there was a looseness in his knee that was a new sensation. As he stopped rolling, he managed to sit up, then froze.

A car's headlights were coming right for him. The police bubble light blasted into his eyes as the wheels came within two inches of his head. He slumped back on the asphalt. He was too winded to even move.

The car door sprang open. Jack looked up, puzzled. It was the passenger door. Then the driver's door flew open. Big hands slid under his armpits.

"Goddammit, Jack, get your ass up."

Jack looked up at Seth Frank.

Chapter 28

BILL BURTON LEANED HIS HEAD INTO THE SECRET SERVICE command post. Tim Collin sat at one of the desks going over a report.

"Come on, Tim."

Collin looked up, puzzled.

Burton said quietly, "They've got him cornered down near the courthouse. I want to be there. Just in case."

* * * * *

SETH FRANK'S SEDAN FLEW DOWN THE STREET, THE BLUE bubble light commanding immediate respect from a traffic population unaccustomed to conveying any whatsoever to fellow motorists.

"Where's Kate?" Jack lay in the back seat, a blanket over him.

"Right now she's probably being read her rights. Then she's gonna get booked on a slew of accessory charges for helping you."

Jack sprung up. "We've gotta go back, Seth. I'll turn myself in. They'll let her go."

"Yeah, right."

"I'm not kidding, Seth." Jack was halfway over the front seat.

"I'm not either, Jack. You go back and turn yourself in, that'll do nothing to help Kate and it'll snuff out what little shot you've got to get your life back to reality."

"But Kate—"

"I'll take care of Kate. I've already called a buddy at D.C. He'll be waiting for her. He's a good guy."

Jack slumped back down. "Shit."

Frank opened his window, reached out and flicked the bubble light off and tossed it on the seat beside him.

"What the hell happened?"

Frank looked in his rearview mirror. "I'm not sure. The best I can figure is that Kate picked up a tail somewhere. I was cruising the area. We were going to meet at the Convention Center after she made the drop with you. Heard over my police radio that you had been spotted. I followed the chase over the airwaves, tried to guess where you might go. Got lucky. When I saw you blow out of the alley, I couldn't believe it. Damn near ran you down. How's the body by the way?"

"Never better. I ought to do this crap once or twice a year just to keep me limber. Get ready for the Fleeing Felon Olympics."

Frank chuckled. "You're still alive and kicking, my friend. Count your blessings. So did you get any nice presents?"

Jack swore under his breath. He had been so busy running from the police that he had never even looked. He took out the packet.

"Got a light?"

Frank flicked on the dome light.

Jack flipped through the photographs.

Frank checked the mirror. "So what do we got?"

"Photos. Of the letter opener, knife, whatever the hell you want to call it."

"Huh. Not surprising I guess. Can you make out anything?"

Jack looked closely in the poor light. "Not really. You guys must have some gadget that'll do some good."

Frank sighed. "I gotta be straight with you, Jack, unless there's something else we don't have much of a shot. Even if we can somehow pull something that looks like a print off there who's to say where it came from? And you can't do DNA testing on blood from a friggin' photograph, at least not that I'm aware of."

"I know that. I didn't spend four years as a defense counsel picking my ass."

Seth slowed the car down. They were on Pennsylvania Avenue and the traffic had grown heavier. "So what's your idea then?"

Jack rubbed back his hair, dug his fingers into his leg until the pain in his knee subsided and then lay down on the seat. "Whoever's behind all this wanted the letter opener back really bad. Enough to kill you, me, anybody else that got in the way. We're talking paranoia at its peak."

"Which fits in with our theory of some big shot with a lot to lose if this comes out. So? They got it back. Where does that leave us, Jack?"

"Luther didn't make these photos just in case something happened to the original article."

"What are you talking about?"

"He came back into the country, Seth, remember? We could never figure that one out."

Frank stopped at a red light. He turned around in his seat.

"Right. He came back. You think you know why?"

Jack carefully sat up in the back seat, keeping his head below the window line. "I think so. Remember I told you that Luther wasn't the kind of guy to let something like this lie. If he could he'd do something about it."

"But he did leave the country. At first."

"I know. Maybe that was his initial plan. Maybe that was his plan all along if the job had gone according to plan. But the fact is he came back. Something made him change his mind and he came back. And he had these photographs." Jack spread them fanlike.

The light turned green and Frank started up again.

"I'm not getting this, Jack. If he wanted to nail the guy why not just send the stuff in to the police?"

"I think that was his plan, eventually. But he told Edwina Broome that if he told her who he had seen she wouldn't have believed him. If even she, a close friend, wouldn't have believed his story, considering he'd have to admit to burglary to convince someone, he probably thought that his credibility was zip."

"Okay, so he has a credibility problem. Where do the photos come in?"

"Let's say you're doing a straight exchange. Cash for a certain item. What's the hardest part?"

Frank's reply was immediate. "The payoff. How to get your money without getting killed or caught. You can send instructions later on for the pickup of the item. It's getting the money that's tough. That's why the number of kidnappings have plummeted."

"So how would you do it?"

Frank thought for a moment. "Since we're talking about the payoff coming from people who ain't gonna bring in the police I'd go for speed. Take minimal personal risk, and give yourself time to run."

"How would you do that?"

"EFT. Electronic fund transfer. A wire. I was involved in a bank embezzlement case when I was in New York. Guy did it all through the wire transfer department at his own bank. You wouldn't believe the dollars that fly through those places on a daily basis. And you also wouldn't believe how much stuff gets lost in the

shuffle. A smart perp could take a little chunk here and there and by the time they caught it, he'd be long gone. You send your wire instructions. The money is sent out. Only takes a few minutes. Helluva lot better than rummaging through a Dumpster in a park where somebody can take a nice little bead on your head with a cannon."

"But the sender can presumably trace the wire."

"Sure. You have to identify the bank it's going to. ABA routing number, you have to have an account at the bank. All that shit."

"So, assuming the sender is sophisticated enough, they trace the wire. Then what?"

"Then they can follow the flow of money. They might be able to dig some info on the account. Although no one would be stupid enough to use their own name or Social Security number. Besides, a real smart guy like Whitney would probably have preset instructions in place. Once the funds hit the first bank, bam they get sent out to another place, and then another and another. At some point, the trail probably disappears. It's instant money after all. Immediately available funds."

"Fair enough. I'm betting Luther did something just like that."

Frank carefully scratched around the edges of his bandage. His hat was pulled down tight and the whole thing was greatly uncomfortable. "But what I can't figure is why do it at all. He didn't need the money after the Sullivan hit. He could've just stayed disappeared. Let the whole thing blow over. After a while they figure he's permanently retired. You don't bother me, I don't bother you."

"You're right. He could've done that. Retired. Given it up. But he came back, and more than that, he came back and apparently blackmailed whoever he saw kill Christine Sullivan. And if he presumably didn't do it for money, then why?"

The detective thought for a moment. "To make 'em sweat. To let them know he was out there. With the evidence to destroy them."

"But evidence he wasn't sure was enough."

"Because the perp was so respectable."

"Right, so what would you do given those facts?"

Frank pulled to the curb and put the car in park. He turned around. "I'd try to get something else on them. That's what I'd do."

"How? If you're blackmailing someone?"

Frank finally threw up his hands. "I give."

"You said the wire transfer could be traced by the sender."

"So?"

"So, what about the other way? Receiver back up the line?"

"Goddamned stupid." Frank momentarily forgot his concussion and slapped his forehead. "Whitney put a tracer on the wire, *going the other way*. The person sending out the money thinks all along that they're playing cat and mouse with Whitney. They're the cat, he's the mouse. He's hiding, getting ready to run."

"Only Luther didn't mention the fact that he was into role reversal. That he was the cat and they were the mouse."

"And that tracer would eventually lead right to the bad guys, probably no matter how many shields you put up, if they thought to put up any at all. Every wire in this country has to go through the Federal Reserve. You get the wire reference number from the Fed or the sending bank's wire room, you got something to hang

your hat on. Even if Whitney didn't trace it back, the fact that he received the money, a certain amount, is damaging enough. If he could give that info to the cops with the name of the sender and they check it out ..."

Jack finished the detective's thought. "And suddenly the unbelievable becomes very believable. Wire transfers do not lie. Money was sent. If it was a lot of money like I'm sure it was here, then that cannot be explained away. That is pretty damn close to bull's-eye evidence. He set them up with their own payoff."

"I just thought of something else, Jack. If Whitney was building a case against these people, then he was eventually planning to go to the police. He was going to just walk in the door and deposit himself and his evidence."

Jack nodded. "That's why he needed me. Only they were quick enough to use Kate as a way to ensure his silence. Later they used a bullet to accomplish that."

"So he was going to turn himself in."

"Right."

Frank rubbed his jaw. "You know what I'm thinking?"

Jack answered immediately. "He saw it coming." The two men looked at each other.

Frank spoke first, the words came out low, almost hushed. "He knew Kate was a setup. And he went anyway. And I thought I was so fucking clever."

"Probably figured it was the only way he'd ever get to see her again."

"Shit. I know the guy stole for a living, but I gotta tell you, my respect for him grows by the second."

"I know what you mean."

Frank put the car back in gear and pulled off.

"Okay, again, where does all this conjecture leave us?"

Jack shook his head, lay back down. "I'm not sure."

"I mean so long as we don't have a clue as to who it is, I'm not sure what we can do."

Jack exploded back up. "But we do have clues." He sat back as though all his energy had suddenly evaporated after that one thrust. "I just can't make any sense out of them."

The men drove on in silence for a few minutes.

"Jack, I know this sounds funny coming from a policeman, but I think you might want to start considering getting the hell out of here. You got some bucks saved? Maybe you should retire early."

"And what, leave Kate swinging in the wind? If we don't nail these guys what is she looking at? Ten to fifteen as an accessory? I don't think so, Seth, not in a million years. They can fry my ass before I let that happen."

"You're right. Sorry I brought it up."

As Seth glanced in his mirror the car next to them tried to do a U-turn directly in front of them. Frank hit the brakes and his car spun sideways, crashing into the curb with a bone-crunching impact. The Kansas license plates on the vehicle that had nearly crashed into them quickly disappeared.

"Stupid tourists. Fucking bastards!" Frank gripped the steering wheel hard, his breath coming in gasps. The shoulder restraint had done its job, but it had dug deeply into his skin. His battered head pounded.

"Fucking bastard." Frank yelled again to no one in particular. Then he remembered his passenger and looked anxiously in the back seat.

"Jack, Jack, you okay?"

Jack's face was pressed up against the door glass. He was conscious; in fact, his eyes were staring at something with great intensity.

"Jack?" Frank undid his seat belt and gripped Jack by the shoulder. "You okay? Jack!"

Jack looked at Frank and then back out the window. Frank wondered if the impact had relieved his friend of his senses. He automatically searched Jack's head for bruises until Jack's hand stopped him and pointed out the window. Frank looked out.

Even his hardened nerves took a jolt. The rear view of the White House filled his entire line of vision.

Jack's mind raced; images hurtled across like a video montage. The vision of the President pulling back from Jennifer Baldwin, complaining of tennis elbow. Only it had been inflicted with a certain letter opener that had started this whole crazy thing. The unusual interest taken by the President and the Secret Service in Christine Sullivan's murder. Alan Richmond's timely appearance at Luther's arraignment. Led me right to him. That's what the detective had said their videotaping citizen had reported. Led me right to him. It also explained killers who killed in the middle of an army of law enforcement officers and walked away. Who would stop a Secret Service agent protecting the President? No one. No wonder Luther felt no one would believe him. The President of the United States.

And there had been a significant event right before Luther had returned to the country. Alan Richmond had held a press conference where he had told the public how terrible he felt about the tragic murder of Christine Sullivan. He was probably fucking the man's wife and somehow she had gotten killed and this slimeball was gaining political dollars showing what a sensitive and good friend he was; a man who would get tough on crime. It had been a tour de force performance. And that was truly what it had been. Nothing about it had been true. It had been broadcast to the world. What would Luther have thought, seeing that? Jack believed he knew. That was why Luther had come back. To settle the score.

All the pieces had been dangling inside Jack's head just waiting for the right catalyst to come along.

Jack looked back once more at the catalyst.

Directly under the lamplight, Tim Collin again glanced down the street at the minor traffic mishap, but could make out no details in the oncoming swarm of car headlights. Next to him Bill Burton was also peering out. Collin shrugged, and then rolled the window back up on the black sedan. Burton threw his bubble light on top of the car, hit his siren, quickly drove the car through the rear White House gate and tore off in the direction of D.C. Superior Court in pursuit of Jack.

Jack looked at Seth Frank and smiled grimly as he reflected on the detective's outburst. The same phrase had erupted from Luther's mouth, right before his life had ended. Jack finally remembered where he had heard it before. The hurled newspaper at the jail. The smiling President on the front page.

Outside the courthouse, staring right at the man. Those same words had exploded out, with all the fury and venom the old man could muster.

"Fucking bastard," Jack said.

* * * * *

ALAN RICHMOND STOOD BY THE WINDOW AND WONDERED IF HE was destined to be surrounded by incompetents. Gloria Russell sat dronelike in a chair across from him. He had bedded the woman a half-dozen times and now had completely lost interest. He would catapult her away when the time was right. His next administration would be comprised of a far more capable team. Underlings who would allow him to focus on his particular vision for the country. He had not sought the presidency to sweat the details.

"I see we haven't gained an inch in the polls." He didn't look at her; he anticipated her response.

"Does it really matter so much whether you win by sixty percent or seventy percent?"

He whirled around. "Yes," he hissed. "Yes, it goddamn does matter."

She bit her lip and retreated. "I'll step up the effort, Alan. Maybe we can pull a shutout in the Electoral College."

"At a minimum, we should be able to do that, Gloria."

She looked down. After the election, she would travel. Around the world. Where she knew no one and no one knew her. A fresh start. That was what she needed. Then everything would be okay.

"Well at least our little problem is cleared up." He was looking at her, hands clasped behind his back. Tall, lean, impeccably dressed and groomed. He looked like the commander of an invincible armada. But then again history had proven that invincible armadas were far more vulnerable than people imagined.

"It's been disposed of?"

"No, Gloria, I have it in my desk, would you like to see it? Perhaps you might wish to abscond with it again." His air was so thick with condescension she felt the urgent need to bring their consultation to a close. She rose.

"Will there be anything else?"

He shook his head and returned to the window. She had just put her hand on the doorknob when it turned and opened.

"We've got a problem." Bill Burton looked at each of them.

* * * * *

"SO WHAT DOES HE WANT?" THE PRESIDENT LOOKED DOWN AT the photograph Burton had handed him.

Burton replied quickly. "Note doesn't say. I can guess that the shape the guy's in with cops on his ass he's looking for some quick funds."

The President looked pointedly at Russell. "I'm very puzzled as to how Jack Graham knew to send the photo here."

Burton picked up on the look from the President, and while the last thing he wanted was to defend Russell they had no time to misanalyze the situation.

"It's possible Whitney told him," Burton answered.

"If that's true, he waited a long time to dance with us," the President fired back.

"Whitney may not have told him directly. Graham could've figured it out for himself. Pieced things together."

The President tossed down the photo. Russell quickly averted her eyes. The mere sight of the letter opener had paralyzed her.

"Burton, how could this possibly be damaging to us?" The President stared at him, seemingly probing through the inner areas of the agent's mind.

Burton sat down, rubbed his jaw with the palm of his hand. "I've been thinking about that. It could be Graham's grasping at straws. He's in a pretty tight fix himself. And his lady friend is cooling her heels in the lockup right now. I'd chalk it up to him being desperate. He gets a sudden inspiration, puts two and two together and takes a flyer on sending us this, hoping it's worth it to us to pay his price, whatever it might be."

The President stood up and fingered his coffee cup. "Is there any way to find him? Quickly?"

"There are always ways. How fast I don't know."

"So if we ignore his communication?"

"He may do nothing, just hightail it and take his chances."

"But again we're confronted with the possibility of the police catching up to him—"

"And him spilling his guts," Burton finished the sentence. "Yeah, that's a possibility. A real possibility."

The President picked up the photo. "With only this to back up his story." He looked incredulous. "Why bother?"

"It's not the incriminating value of what's in the photo per se that bothers me."

"What bothers you is that his accusations coupled with whatever ideas or leads the police can develop from the photo might make for some very uncomfortable questions."

"Something like that. Remember, it's the allegations that can kill you. You're up for reelection. He probably sees that as an ace for him. Bad press can be just as deadly to you right now."

The President pondered for a moment. Nothing, no one would interfere with his reelection. "Buying him off is no good, Burton. You know that. So long as Graham's around, he's dangerous." Richmond looked over at Russell, who had sat the entire time, hands in her lap, eyes pointed down. His eyes bored into her. So *weak*.

The President sat down at his desk and started to sift through some papers. He said dismissively, "Do it, Burton, and do it soon."

* * * * *

FRANK LOOKED AT THE WALL CLOCK, WENT OVER AND SHUT his door and picked up the phone. His head still ached, but the doctors predicted a full recovery.

The phone was answered. "D.C. Executive Inn."

"Room 233 please."

"Just a moment."

The seconds dragged by and Frank started to get anxious. Jack was supposed to be in his room.

"Hello?"

"It's me."

"So how's life?"

"Better than yours, I bet."

"How's Kate?"

"She's out on bail. Got 'em to let her go into my custody."

"I'm sure she's thrilled."

"That wasn't the word I was thinking of. Look, it's getting close to shit-or-get-off-the-pot time. Take my advice and run like hell. You're wasting valuable time right now."

"But Kate—"

"Come on, Jack, they've got the testimony of *one* guy who was trying to hit her up for an exclusive. His word against hers. Nobody else even saw you. It's a slam dunk she'll beat that charge. A slam dunk. I've talked to the Assistant U.S. Attorney. He's looking seriously at dropping the whole case."

"I don't know."

"Goddammit, Jack. Kate is gonna come out of this a whole helluva lot better than you are if you don't start thinking about your future. You've got to get out of here. That's not just me talking. That's her too."

"Kate?"

"I saw her today. We don't agree on much, but on that we do."

Jack relaxed, then let out a heavy sigh. "Okay, so where do I go and how do I get there?"

"I get off duty at nine. At ten o'clock I'll be at your room. Have your bags packed. I'll take care of the rest. In the meantime, stay put."

Frank hung up the phone and took a deep breath. The chances he was taking. It was better not to think about them.

* * * * *

JACK CHECKED HIS WATCH AND LOOKED AT THE SINGLE BAG ON the bed. He wouldn't be running with much. He looked at the TV set in the corner but there wouldn't be anything on he cared to watch. Suddenly thirsty, he pulled some change from his pocket, opened the door to his room and peered out. The drink machine was just down the hallway. He plopped on his baseball cap, donned his Coke-bottle glasses and slipped out. He didn't hear the door to the stairwell at the other end of the hallway open. He had also forgotten to lock his door.

When he slipped back in, it struck him that the light was off. He had left it on. As his hand hit the switch, the door was slammed shut behind him and he was thrown onto the bed. As he quickly rolled over and his eyes adjusted to the light, the two men came into focus. They were not wearing masks this time, which spoke volumes in itself.

Jack started to lunge forward but twin cannons met him halfway. He sat back down, scrutinized each of their faces.

"What a coincidence, I've already made each of your acquaintance, separately." He pointed at Collin. "You tried to blow my head off." He swiveled to Burton. "And you tried to blow smoke up my ass. And succeeded. Burton right? Bill Burton. Always remember names." He looked at Collin. "Didn't catch yours though."

Collin looked at Burton, then stared back at Jack. "Secret Service Agent Tim Collin. You pack a nice little wallop, Jack. Must've played some ball back in school."

"Yeah, my shoulder still remembers you."

Burton sat down on the bed next to Jack.

Jack looked at him. "I thought I'd covered my tracks pretty good. I'm kind of surprised you found me."

Burton looked at the ceiling. "A little bird told us, Jack."

Jack looked over at Collin and then back at Burton. "Look, I'm heading out of town, and I'm not coming back. I don't think you guys need to add me to the body count."

Burton eyed the bag on the bed and then got up and slipped his gun back in its holster. Then he grabbed Jack and flung him up against the wall. The veteran agent left nothing unprobed by the time he had finished. Burton spent the next ten minutes examining every inch of the room for listening devices and other items of interest, ending his search at Jack's bag. He pulled out the photos and examined them.

Satisfied, Burton secreted them in his inner coat pocket and smiled at Jack. "Excuse me, but in my line of work paranoia is part of the mentality." He sat back down. "I would like to know, Jack, why you sent that photo to the President."

Jack shrugged. "Well, since my life here happens to be over, I thought your boss might want to contribute to my going-away fund. You could've just wired the funds, like you did with Luther."

Collin grunted, shook his head and grinned. "The world doesn't work that way, Jack, sorry. You should've found another solution to your problem."

Jack shot back, "I guess I should've followed your example. Got a problem? Just kill it."

Collin's smile evaporated. His eyes glittered darkly at the lawyer.

Burton stood up and paced around the room. He pulled out a cigarette and then crunched it up and put it in his pocket. He turned to Jack and said quietly, "You should've just gotten the hell out of town, Jack. Maybe you would've made it."

"Not with you two on my butt."

Burton shrugged. "You never know."

"How do you know I haven't given one of those photos to the cops?"

Burton pulled out the photos and looked down at them. "Polaroid OneStep camera. The film comes in a standard pack of ten shots. Whitney sent two to Russell. You sent one to the President. There are seven left here. Sorry, Jack, nice try."

"I could've just told Seth Frank what I know."

Burton shook his head. "If you had I think my little bird would've told me. But if you want to insist on the point we can just wait for the lieutenant to show up and join the party."

Jack burst up from the bed and launched himself toward the door. Right as he reached it, an iron fist slammed into his kidney. Jack crumpled to the floor. An instant later he was hustled up and thrown back on the bed.

Jack looked up into Collin's face.

"Now we're even, Jack."

Jack groaned and lay back on the bed, fighting the nausea the blow had caused. He sat back up, caught his breath as the pain subsided.

When Jack finally managed to look up, his eyes found Burton's face. Jack shook his head, the disbelief clear on his features.

Burton eyed Jack intently and said, "What?"

"I thought you were the good guys," Jack said quietly.

Burton said nothing for several long moments.

Collin's eyes went to the floor and stayed there.

Finally Burton answered, his voice faint, as if his larynx had suddenly collapsed. "So did I, Jack. So did I." He paused, swallowed painfully and went on. "I didn't ask for this problem. If Richmond could keep his dick in his pants none of this would've happened. But it did. And we had to fix it."

Burton stood up, looked at his watch. "I'm sorry about this, Jack. I really am. You probably think that's laughable but it's the way I really feel."

He looked at Collin and nodded. Collin motioned Jack to lie back on the bed.

"I hope the President appreciates what you're doing for him," Jack said bitterly.

Burton smiled ruefully. "Let's just say he expects it, Jack. Maybe they all do, in one way or another."

Jack slid slowly back and watched as the barrel moved closer and closer to his face. He could smell the metal. He could envision the smoke, the projectile racing out faster than any eye could follow.

Then the door to the room was hit with an enormous blow. Collin whirled around. The second blow crashed the portal inward and a half-dozen D.C. cops bulled in, guns drawn.

"Freeze. Everybody freeze. Guns on the floor. Now."

Collin and Burton quickly put their guns down on the floor. Jack lay back on the bed, his eyes closed. He touched his chest where his heart threatened to explode.

Burton looked at the men in blue. "We're United States Secret Service. IDs in our right inner pockets. We've tracked this man down. He was making threats against the President. We were just about to take him into custody."

The cops warily pulled out the IDs and scrutinized them. Two other cops pulled Jack roughly up. One began to read him his rights. Handcuffs were placed on his wrists.

The IDs were given back.

"Well, Agent Burton, you're just gonna have to wait until we get done with Mr. Graham here. Murder takes a priority even over threatening the President. Might be a long wait unless this guy's got nine lives."

The cop looked at Jack and then down at the bag on the bed. "Shoulda taken off when you had the chance, Graham. Sooner or later we were gonna get you." He motioned for his men to take Jack out.

He looked back at the bewildered agents and smiled broadly. "We got a tip he was here. Most tips are worth shit. This one. This one might get me that promotion I'm sorely in need of. Have a good day, gentlemen. Say hello to the President for me."

They left with their prisoner. Burton looked at Collin, and then pulled out the photos. Now Graham had nothing. He could repeat everything they had just told

him to the police and they'd just get him ready for the rubber room. Poor sonofabitch. A bullet would've been a lot better than where he was headed. The two agents picked up their hardware and left.

The room was silent. Ten minutes later the door to the adjoining room was eased open and a figure slipped into Jack's room. The corner TV was swiveled around and the back was eased off. The TV was remarkably real-looking and an absolute sham. Hands reached inside and the surveillance camera was swiftly and silently removed and the cabling was pushed through the wall until it disappeared from sight.

The figure opened the adjoining door and went back through. A recording machine sat on a table next to the wall. The cable was coiled up and deposited in a bag. The figure hit a button on the recording machine and the tape slid out.

Ten minutes later the man, carrying a large backpack, walked out of the front door of the Executive Inn, turned left and walked to the end of the parking lot where a car was parked, its engine idling. Tarr Crimson passed the car, and casually tossed the tape through the open window and onto the front seat. Then he proceeded over to his Harley-Davidson 1200cc touring bike, the joy of his life, got on, fired it up and thundered off. Setting up the video system had been child's play. Voice-activated camera. Recording machine kicked on when the camera did. Your standard VHS tape. He didn't know what was on the tape, but it must be something pretty damn valuable. Jack had promised him a year's free legal services for doing it. As he hurtled along the highway, Tarr smiled, remembering their last meeting where the lawyer had balked at the new age of surveillance technology.

Back in the parking lot, the car glided forward, one hand on the steering wheel, the other protectively around the tape. Seth Frank turned onto the main road. Not much of a movie-goer, this was one tape he was dying to watch.

* * * * *

BILL BURTON SAT IN THE SMALL BUT COZY BEDROOM HE HAD shared with his wife through the evolution of four beloved children. Twenty-four years together. They had made love countless times. In the corner by the window, Bill Burton had sat in a much worn rocker and fed his four offspring before reporting for early-morning shifts, allowing his exhausted wife a few minutes of much needed rest.

They had been good years. He had never made a lot of money, but that had never seemed to matter. His wife had gone back and finished her nursing degree after their youngest had entered high school. The added income had been nice, but it was good to see someone who had long sacrificed her personal goals to the needs of others to finally do something just for herself. All in all it had been a great life. A nice house in a quiet, picturesque neighborhood safe, so far, from the ever-expanding war zones around them. There would always be bad people. And there would always be people like Bill Burton to combat them. Or people like Burton had been.

He looked out the dormer window. Today was his day off. Dressed in jeans, bright red flannel shirt and Timberland boots, he could have easily passed as a burly lumberjack. His wife was unloading the car. Today was grocery shopping day. The same day for the last twenty years. He watched her figure admiringly as it

bent low to pull out the bags. Chris, his fifteen-year-old, and Sidney, nineteen, long-legged and a real beauty, and in her sophomore year at Johns Hopkins, with her sights set on medical school, were helping their mother. His other two were out on their own and doing well. They occasionally called their old man for advice on buying a car or a house. Long-term career goals. And he loved every minute of it. He and his wife had hit four out of the park and it was a good feeling.

He sat down at the little desk in the corner, unlocked a drawer and pulled out the box. He lifted the top and stacked the five audiocassette tapes on top of the desk next to the letter he had written that morning. The name on the envelope was written in large, clear letters. "Seth Frank." Hell, he owed the guy.

Laughter floated up to him and he again went to the window. Sidney and Chris were now engaged in a pitched snowball battle with Sherry, his wife, caught in the middle. The smiles were big and the confrontation culminated in all of them landing in a heap next to the driveway.

He turned away from the window and did something he could never remember doing before. Through eight years as a cop, where tiny babies had expired in his arms, beaten to death by the ones who were supposed to love and protect them, through day after day of looking for the worst in humankind. The tears were salty. He didn't rub them away. They kept pouring. His family would be coming in soon. They were supposed to go out to dinner tonight. Ironically, today was Bill Burton's forty-fifth birthday.

He leaned across the desk, and with a quick motion, pulled the revolver from his holster. A snowball hit the window. They wanted their daddy to come join them.

I'm sorry. I love you. I wish I could be there. I'm sorry for all I've done. Please forgive your dad. Before he could lose his nerve he pushed the .357 as far down his throat as he could. It was cold and heavy. One of his gums started to bleed from a nick.

Bill Burton had done everything he could to ensure that no one would ever know the truth. He had committed crimes; he had killed an innocent person and had been involved in five other homicides. And now, seemingly in the clear, the horror behind him, after months of mounting disgust with what he had become, and after a sleepless night next to a woman he had loved with all his heart for over two decades, Bill Burton had realized that he could not accept what he had done, nor could he live with that knowledge.

The fact was that without self-respect, without his pride, his life was not worth living. And the unfailing love of his family did not help matters, it only made them worse. Because the object of that love, of that respect, knew that he deserved none of it.

He looked over at the stack of cassette tapes. His insurance policy. Now they would constitute his legacy, his own bizarre epitaph. And some good would come out of it. Thank God for that.

His lips curled into a barely perceptible smile. The Secret Service. Well, the secrets were going to fly now. He briefly thought of Alan Richmond and his eyes glistened. *Here's hoping for life without parole and you live to be a hundred, asshole.*

His finger tightened on the trigger.

Another snowball hit the window. Their voices drifted up to him. The tears started again as he thought of what he was leaving behind. "Goddammit." The word floated from his mouth, carrying with it more guilt, more anguish than he could ever hope to bear.

I'm sorry. Don't hate me. Please God don't hate me.

At the sound of the explosion, the playing stopped as three pairs of eyes turned as one toward the house. In another minute they were inside. It only took one more minute for the screams to be heard. The quiet neighborhood was no more.

Chapter 29

THE KNOCK ON THE DOOR WAS UNEXPECTED. PRESIDENT ALAN Richmond was in a tense conference with his Cabinet. The press had lately been lambasting the administration's domestic policies and he wanted to know why. Not that the actual policies themselves were of much interest to him. He was more concerned about the perception they conveyed. In the grand scheme of things perceptions were all that mattered. That was Politics 101.

"Who the hell are they?" The President looked angrily at the secretary. "Whoever they are, they're not on the list for today." He looked around the table. Hell, his Chief of Staff had not even bothered to show up for work today. Maybe she had done the smart thing and taken a bottle of pills. That would hurt him short-term, but he would work out an impressive spin on her suicide. Besides she had been right about one thing: he was so far ahead in the polls who cared?

The secretary timidly crept into the room. Her growing astonishment was evident. "It's a large group of men, Mr. President. Mr. Bayliss from the FBI, several policemen, and a gentleman from Virginia, he wouldn't give his name."

"The police? Tell them to leave and submit a request to see me. And tell Bayliss to call me tonight. He'd be cooling his heels in some Bureau outpost in the middle of nowhere if I hadn't pushed through his nomination as Director. I will not tolerate this disrespect."

"They're most insistent, sir."

The President flushed red and stood up. "Tell them to get the hell out. I'm busy, you idiot."

The woman quickly retreated. Before she could reach the door, however, it had opened. Four Secret Service agents entered, Johnson and Varney among them, followed by a contingent of D.C. police, including Police Chief Nathan Brimmer, and FBI Director Donald Bayliss, a short, thickly built man in a double-breasted suit with a face whiter than the building he was now in.

Bringing up the rear, Seth Frank quietly closed the door. In his other hand he carried a plain brown briefcase. Richmond stared at each of them, his eyes finally coming to rest on the homicide detective.

"Detective ... Frank, right? In case you weren't aware you are interrupting a confidential Cabinet meeting. I'm going to have to ask you to leave." He looked

across at the four agents, raised his eyebrows and cocked his head toward the door. The men stared back; they didn't budge.

Frank stepped forward. He quietly slipped a paper out of his coat, unfolded it and handed it to the President. Richmond looked down at it while his Cabinet watched in utter bewilderment. Richmond finally looked back at the detective.

"Is this some kind of joke?"

"That is a copy of an arrest warrant naming you on capital murder charges for crimes committed in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Chief Brimmer here has a similar arrest warrant for murder one accessory charges that will be brought against you in the District. That is, after the commonwealth finishes with you."

The President looked over at Brimmer, who met his gaze and sternly nodded. There was a cold look in the lawman's eyes that told exactly how he felt about the Chief Executive.

"I'm the President of the United States. You can't serve me with anything unless it's coffee. Now get out." The President turned to go back to his chair.

"Technically that may be true. However, I don't really care. Once the impeachment process is complete you won't be President Alan Richmond, you'll just be Alan Richmond. And when that happens I'll be back. Count on it."

The President turned back around, his face bloodless. "Impeachment?"

Frank moved forward until he was eye-to-eye with the man. On any other occasion this would have triggered prompt action on the part of the Secret Service. Now, they simply stood motionless. It was impossible to tell that each one of them was inwardly reeling over the loss of a respected colleague. Johnson and Varney seethed at having been duped as to the events of that night at the Sullivan estate. And the man they blamed for it all was now crumpling in front of them.

Frank said, "Let's cut through the bullshit. We already have Tim Collin and Gloria Russell in custody. They've both waived right to counsel and each has given detailed depositions regarding all of the events involving the homicides of Christine Sullivan, Luther Whitney, Walter Sullivan and the two killings at Patton, Shaw. I believe they've already cut deals with the prosecutors, who are really only interested in you anyway. This case is a real career-builder for a prosecutor, let me tell you."

The President staggered back a step, then righted himself.

Frank opened the briefcase and pulled out a videotape and five audiocassette tapes. "I'm sure your counsel will be interested to see these. The video is of Agents Burton and Collin when they attempted to murder Jack Graham. The tapes are of several meetings at which you were present and at which the plannings for the various crimes took place. Over six hours of testimony, Mr. President. Copies have been delivered to the Hill, the FBI, CIA, the Post, the Attorney General, White House counsel and anybody else I could think of—and no gaps on the tapes. Also included is the tape Walter Sullivan made of your telephone conversation on the night of his murder. It doesn't exactly coincide with the version you gave me. All compliments of Bill Burton. Said in his note he was cashing in his insurance policy."

"And where is Burton?" The President's voice was filled with rage.

"He was pronounced DOA at Fairfax Hospital at ten-thirty this morning. Self-inflicted gunshot wound."

Richmond barely made it to his chair. No one offered to assist him. He looked up at Frank.

“Anything else?”

“Yeah. Burton left behind one other paper. It’s his proxy. For the next election. Sorry, but it seems you didn’t get his vote.”

One by one the Cabinet members got up and left. Fear of political suicide by association was alive and well in the Capital City. The lawmen and Secret Service agents followed. Only the President remained. His eyes stared blankly at the wall.

Seth Frank popped his head back in the door.

“Remember, be seeing you soon.” He quietly closed the door.

Epilogue

THE SEASONS OF WASHINGTON FOLLOWED A FAMILIAR pattern, and a bare week of spring with tolerable temperatures and humidity under fifty percent gave way abruptly to a meteoric thermometer and a humidity level that routinely delivered a full body shower whenever you walked outside. By July, the typical Washingtonian had adapted as much as they were ever going to, to air that was difficult to breathe and movements that were never slow enough to prevent a sudden burst of perspiration under one’s clothing. But in all of that misery, the occasional evening was not ruined by the sudden materialization of a whipping, drenching thunderstorm with multiple branches of lightning that threatened to touch the earth with every explosion. Where the breeze was cool, the air sweet-smelling and the sky clear. Tonight was just such a night.

Jack sat on the edge of the pool set up on the building’s roof. His khaki shorts revealed muscled, tanned legs, hairs curled by the sun. He was even leaner than before, all remnants of office-induced flab banished by months of physical exertion. Cords of well-toned muscle sat just beneath the surface of his white T-shirt. His hair was short, his face as brown as his legs. The water swished between his bare toes. He looked at the sky and breathed deeply. The place had been packed a mere three hours ago as office dwellers dragged tan-free, fleshy bodies to the replenishing powers of the warm waters. Now Jack sat alone. No bed beckoned him. No ringing alarm would disturb his sleep the next morning.

The door to the pool opened with a slight squeak. Jack turned and saw the beige summer suit, wrinkled and uncomfortable-looking. The man carried a brown paper bag.

“Building super told me you were back.” Seth Frank smiled. “Mind some company?”

“Not if you’ve got what I think you’ve got in that bag.”

Frank sat down in a web chair and tossed a beer to Jack. They dinked cans and each man took a long pull.

Frank looked around. “So how was wherever you were?”

“Not bad. It was good to get away. But it’s also good to be back.”

“This looks like a nice place to meditate.”

"It gets crowded around seven for a couple of hours. Most of the other time it's pretty much like this."

Frank looked wistfully at the pool and then started to take off his shoes. "You mind?"

"Help yourself."

Frank rolled up his pants, curled his socks into his shoes and sat down next to Jack, letting his milky-white legs sink into the water up to his knees.

"Damn that feels good. County detectives with three daughters and a mortgage out the ying-yang rarely come into contact with swimming pools."

"So I've heard."

Frank rubbed his calves and looked at his friend. "Hey, being a bum agrees with you. You might want to think about sticking with it."

"I am thinking about it. The idea gets more appealing every day."

Frank eyed the envelope next to Jack.

"Important?" He pointed at the paper.

Jack picked it up, briefly reread the contents. "Ransome Baldwin. Remember him?"

Frank nodded. "What, has he decided to sue you for dumping his baby?"

Jack shook his head and smiled. He finished his beer and fished in the bag and pulled out another cold one. He tossed a second one to Frank.

"You never know, I guess. The guy basically said I was too good for Jennifer. At least for right now. That she had a lot of growing up to do. He's sending her out on some missionary duties for the Baldwin Charitable Foundation for a year or so. He said if I ever needed anything to let him know. Hell, he even said that he admired and respected me."

Frank sipped his beer. "Damn. Doesn't get much better than that."

"Yes, it does. Baldwin made Barry Alvis his chief inhouse counsel. Alvis was the guy Jenn got fired at Patton, Shaw. Alvis promptly walked into Dan Kirksen's office and pulled the entire account. I think Dan was last seen on the ledge of a very tall building."

"I read where the firm closed its doors."

"All the good lawyers got snapped up right away. The bad ones ought to try something else for a living. Space is already rented out. The whole firm gone, without a trace."

"Well, same thing happened to the dinosaurs. It's just taking a little longer with you attorney types." He punched Jack in the arm.

Jack laughed. "Thanks for coming and cheering me up."

"Hell, I wouldn't miss it."

Jack looked at him, his face clouded. "So what happened?"

"Don't tell me you still haven't been reading the papers?"

"Not for months. After the gauntlet of reporters, talk show hosts, teams of independent prosecutors, Hollywood producers and your run-of-the-mill curious person I've had to deal with I never want to know anything about anything. I changed my phone number a dozen times and the bastards kept finding it. That's why the last two months have been so sweet. No one knew me from Adam."

Frank took a moment to collect his thoughts. "Well, let's see, Collin pled to conspiracy, two counts of second-degree murder, obstruction and a half-dozen

assorted lesser included offenses. That was the D.C. stuff. I think the judge felt sorry for him. Collin was a Kansas farm boy, Marine, Secret Service agent. He was just following orders. Been doing that most of his life. I mean the President tells you to do something, you do it. He got twenty to life, which if you ask me was a sweetheart deal, but he gave a full account to the prosecution team. Maybe it was worth it. He'll probably be out in time for his fiftieth birthday. The commonwealth decided not to prosecute in return for his cooperation against Richmond."

"What about Russell?"

Frank almost choked on his beer. "Jesus, did that woman spill her guts. They must have spent a fortune on court-reporting fees. She just wouldn't stop talking. She got the best deal of all. No prison time. Thousand hours of community time. Ten years' probation. For fucking conspiracy to commit murder. Can you believe that? Between you and me, I think she's right on the borderline sanity-wise anyway. They brought in a court-appointed shrink. I think she might spend a few years in an institution before she's ready to come out and play. But I gotta tell you, Richmond brutalized her. Emotionally and physically. If half of what she said was true. Jesus. Mind games from hell."

"So what about Richmond?"

"You really have been on Mars haven't you? Trial of the millennium and you slept right through it."

"Somebody had to."

"He fought right to the end, I have to admit that. Must've spent every dime he had. The guy didn't do himself any good testifying I can tell you that. He was so damn arrogant, obviously lying out his ass. And they traced the money wire straight back to the White House. Russell had pulled it from a bunch of accounts but made the mistake of assembling the five mil into one account before she wired it. Probably afraid if all of the money didn't show up at the same time Luther would go to the cops. His plan worked, even if he wasn't around to see it. Richmond didn't have an answer for that or a lot of other things. They tore him up on cross. He brought in a Who's Who of American Greatness and it didn't help him one little bit, the sonofabitch. One dangerous and sick dude if you ask me."

"And he had the nuclear codes. Real nice. So what'd he get?"

Frank stared at the ripples in the water for a few moments before answering. "He got the death penalty, Jack."

Jack stared at him. "Bullshit. How'd they manage that?"

"A little tricky from a legal-technical point of view. They prosecuted him under the murder-for-hire statute. That's the only one where the trigger man rule doesn't apply."

"How the hell did they get murder for hire to stick?"

"They argued that Burton and Collin were paid subordinates whose only job was to do what the President told them to do. He ordered them to kill. Like a Mafia hitman on the payroll. It's a stretch, but the jury returned the verdict and the sentence and the judge let it stand."

"Jesus Christ!"

"Hey, just because the guy was President doesn't mean he should be treated differently than anybody else. Hell, I don't know why we should be surprised at what happened. You know what kind of person it takes to run for President? Not

normal. They could start out okay, but by the time they reach that level they've sold their soul to the devil so many times and stomped the guts out of enough people that they are definitely not like you and me, not even close."

Frank studied the depths of the pool, then finally stirred. "But they'll never execute him."

"Why not?"

"His lawyers will appeal, the ACLU will file, along with all the other death penalty opposers; you're gonna get *amicus* briefs from all over the planet. The guy took a tidal wave plunge on the popularity scale but he's still got some powerful friends. They'll find something wrong on the record. Besides, the country might agree on convicting the scumball. But I'm not sure the United States could actually execute some guy they elected to the presidency. Doesn't look real good from a global perspective either. Makes me feel kind of queasy too, although the asshole deserves it."

Jack scooped up handfuls of water and let the warm liquid run down his arms. He stared off into the night.

Frank looked keenly at Jack. "Not that some positives haven't come out of all this. Hell, Fairfax wants to make yours truly a division head. I've gotten offers from about a dozen cities to be their chief of police. The lead prosecutor on the Richmond case, they say, is a shoo-in for the AG slot next election."

The detective took a sip of beer. "What about you, Jack? You were the one who brought the guy down. Setting up Burton and the President was your idea. Man, when I found my line was tapped, I thought my head was gonna explode. You were right though. So what do you get out of all this?"

Jack looked at his friend and said simply, "I'm alive. I'm not practicing rich-man law at Patton, Shaw and I'm not marrying Jennifer Baldwin. That's more than enough."

Frank studied the blue veins on his legs. "You heard from Kate?"

Jack took another swallow of beer before answering. "She's in Atlanta. At least she was last time she wrote."

"She gonna stick there?"

Jack shrugged. "She's not sure. Her letter wasn't all that clear." Jack paused. "Luther left her his house in his will."

"I'm surprised she'd take it. Ill-gotten gains and all that."

"Luther's father left it to him, bought and paid for. Luther knew his daughter. I think he wanted her to have ... something. A home's not a bad place to start."

"Yeah? A home takes two if you ask me. And then some dirty diapers and infant formula to make it complete. Hell, Jack, you two were meant to be together. I'm telling you."

"I'm not sure that matters, Seth." He wiped off the thick droplets of water from his arms. "She's been through a lot. Maybe too much. I'm kind of connected to all the bad stuff. I really can't blame her for wanting to get away from it all. Wipe the slate clean."

"You weren't the problem, Jack. From what I saw everything else was."

Jack looked across at a helicopter roaring its way across the sky. "I'm a little tired of always being the one to make the first step, Seth, you know what I'm saying?"

"I guess."

Frank looked at his watch. Jack caught the movement. "Got somewhere to go?"

"I was just thinking we need something a lot stronger than beer. I know this nice little place out by Dulles. Rack of ribs long as my arm, two-pound corn-on-the-cobs and tequila till the sun comes up. And some not-so-bad-looking waitresses if you're so inclined, although being married I will only watch from a respectful distance while you make a complete fool of yourself. We take a cab home because we'll both be shit-faced and you crash at my place. What do you say?"

Jack grinned. "Can I get a rain check on that? It sounds good though."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure, Seth, thanks."

"You got it." Frank stood up, rolled down his pants and flopped across to put on his shoes and socks.

"Hey, how about Saturday you come out to my place? We're grilling, burgers, fries and dogs. Got tickets to Camden Yard too."

"You got a deal on that one."

Frank stood up and headed to the door. He looked back. "Hey, Jack, don't think too much, okay? Sometimes that's not real healthy."

Jack held up his can. "Thanks for the beer."

After Frank left, Jack lay back on the cement and stared at a sky that seemed filled with more stars than there were numbers. Sometimes he would awaken from a deep sleep and realize that he'd been dreaming about the most bizarre stuff. But what he'd been dreaming about had actually happened to him. It was not a pleasant feeling. And it only added to the confusion that, at his age, he hoped would have been long since eliminated from his life.

An hour-and-a-half plane ride due south was probably the surest answer to what ailed him. Kate Whitney may or may not come back. The only thing he felt sure about was that he could not go after her. That this time it would be her responsibility to return to his life. And it was not bitterness that made Jack feel such was imperative. Kate had to make up her own mind. About her life and how she wanted to spend it. The emotional trauma she had experienced with her father had been surpassed by the overwhelming guilt and grief she had endured at his death. The woman had a lot to think through. And she had made it very clear that she needed to undertake that exercise alone. And she was probably right.

He took off his shirt, slid into the water and did three quick laps. His arms cut powerfully through the water and then he pulled himself back up on the tiled apron. He grabbed his towel and wrapped it around his shoulders. The night air was cool and each droplet of water felt like a miniature air conditioner against his skin. He again looked at the sky. Not a mural in sight. But neither was Kate.

He was deciding whether to head back to his apartment for some sleep when he heard the door squeak open again. Frank must have forgotten something. He looked over. For a few seconds he couldn't move. He just sat there with the towel around his shoulders afraid to make a sound. That what was happening might not be real. Another dream that would flicker out with the sun's first rays. Finally he slowly got up, water dripping off him, and moved toward the door.

* * * * *

DOWN ON THE STREET, SETH FRANK STOOD NEXT TO HIS CAR for a few moments admiring the simple beauty of the evening, sniffed the air that was more reminiscent of a wet spring than a humid summer. It wouldn't be that late when he got home. Maybe Mrs. Frank would like to hit the neighborhood Dairy Queen. Just the two of them. He'd heard some good reports about the butterscotch-dipped cone. That would finish off the day just fine. He climbed in his car.

As a father of three, Seth Frank knew what a wonderful and precious commodity life was. As a homicide detective he had learned how that precious commodity could be brutally ripped away. He looked up at the roof of the apartment building and smiled as he put the car in gear. But that was the great thing about being alive, he thought. Today might not be so good. But tomorrow, you got another chance to get it right.

Author's Note

This novel is obviously a work of fiction and intends to be nothing more. It in no way implies that members of the United States Secret Service would do any of the acts attributed to the fictional agents in the novel. The agents in *Absolute Power* were good, loyal men put into an impossible situation. The decisions they made were decisions any one of us might have made if confronted with the total destruction of all we have worked for.

I cannot imagine a more difficult task than the one every Secret Service agent undertakes on any given day. Weeks, months, or years of tedium may, at any moment, be shattered by the actions of those who wish to harm, to kill. Secret Service agents seem, to me, to be the counterparts of football's unheralded offensive linemen. No one praises them when things go right, when the millions of logistical details making up their daily routines result in no assassination attempt, nothing newsworthy. But, of course, we do hear of them on the very rare occasion when something bad does happen. And Secret Service agents must live with that unfairness every day as they protect people whose political survival demands that they do things that make them, in essence, unprotectable. For this and many other reasons, the men and women of the United States Secret Service deserve the respect and admiration of every American. They certainly have mine.

David Baldacci
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