

BICYCLE SHOP MURDER



ROBERT BURTON ROBINSON

Bicycle Shop Murder

by Robert Burton Robinson

This is a work of fiction. The characters and events described in this book are imaginary and resemblance to actual persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

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To Lynda

I love you, Baby!

Books by

ROBERT BURTON ROBINSON

Greg Tenorly Mystery Series:

Bicycle Shop Murder

Hideaway Hospital Murders

Illusion of Luck

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Thanks for reading!

Robert Burton Robinson

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SYNOPSIS

Greg Tenorly lives a quiet and lonely life in a small East Texas town, until he is selected as a juror for a murder trial. A beautiful, mysterious redhead befriends him, and seems to have a romantic interest. But is she merely using him to influence the outcome of the trial?

By the end of the first week, three people connected with the case are dead, and Greg is beginning to fear for his own life. He is now convinced that a powerful Dallas attorney is directing the murder spree in his little town. But why? He is determined to find out.

But his investigation just might earn him a spot at the top of the hit list.

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Bicycle Shop Murder

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Chapter 1

A beautiful, sexy redhead sat across from Greg Tenorly. He was nervous about the closed door, but she had insisted. The slightest hint of impropriety would spark a blaze of rumors.

Greg tried to concentrate on her story. But his mind wandered to his 34-year-old receding hairline and bulging stomach. The part-time music minister had been feeling good about himself ten minutes ago. Time to start exercising again.

“I grew up in Marshall. Graduated from East Texas State, and got a job at a bank in Greenville. Three years ago, I moved here so I could be closer to Mom. She still lives in Marshall. I met Troy at a high school football game. He was fun, down-to-earth. We’ve been married for two years.”

Cynthia Blockerman was a vice president at First State Bank, yet only in her late 20’s. She certainly looked the part, dressed in an expensive brown business suit, matching shoes and tasteful jewelry. And her shoulder-length hair was the kind you only see in shampoo commercials. Greg felt underdressed in his faded golf shirt, baggy slacks, and generic running shoes.

“Everything was fine for the first six months or so. But I guess he was just *playing* the part of a good husband. Then I started to see his *real* personality. As soon as he gets home from work, he goes straight for the beer. By nine, there’s a pile of cans next to his recliner, and he’s calling me names, and throwing things.

“Sometimes he hits me. He did it one time before we got married, but he said he was so sorry. And even broke down and cried. He promised he’d never do it again.”

“Is there anything in particular you say or do that seems to set him off?” It was a dumb question, but the only one he could think of.

“No. It doesn’t matter. I can be extra sweet, or mean, or just ignore him. He still gets mad and crazy. I don’t know what to do. I want to leave him, but I’m afraid he’ll come after me.”

Greg could already hear the voice of Daniel Duretsky, Channel 7 Eyewitness

News.

A friend says that the husband had threatened to kill her if she called the police. So, she moved out of the house while he was at work. But he found her apartment, kicked down the door and brutally stabbed her 57 times. His family says he's a hard worker and a good husband. They can't believe he would do something like this.

Greg had no business acting as a marriage counselor. His own marriage had failed five years ago. And he shouldn't have even been at the church—it was Monday, his day off. But he couldn't just turn her away.

“Could you give me a couple of days to think about this, and try to come up with some ideas for you? I know it's tough when you're dealing with this every day, but

“

“Sure. That's fine. I'd really appreciate any help you could give me.”

“But don't you want to talk to the pastor about this? He's had a lot more experience—”

“—okay, please don't take this the wrong way.” She leaned in, and spoke more softly. “But Dr. Huff seems a little too judgmental. I *like* him. His messages are very good. But I thought *you'd* be more understanding. And not make me feel like it was all my fault.

“A lot of times, men, and even women, treat me differently because of my looks and my job. They think: *What could she possibly have to complain about?* Anyway, I was right. You *are* a compassionate, understanding man.”

Greg felt his face starting to turn red. “Thank you.”

She checked her watch. “I've got to get back to the bank.”

Greg was walking her to the door, when she turned, and moved toward him. Surely she hadn't intended to get quite that close. She would step back a little. Wouldn't she? But as he stood paralyzed, she leaned in even closer. Their lips were nearly touching. Her eyes were a shade of blue he'd never seen before.

“Thank you so much, Greg. You don’t know how much it helps, just to have someone like you to talk to.”

“You haven’t told anybody else?”

He needed to move back, yet he didn’t want to offend her. But if one of the church members could see the two of them standing that close in his office, with the door closed—what would they think? *God* could see. But he could also see Greg’s pure heart. At least he *hoped* it still looked pure.

“The only other person who knows is my mother. I don’t have any brothers or sisters. And I wouldn’t dare tell anyone at the bank.”

As he felt her warm, sweet breath passing through his nostrils, and deep into his lungs, his pulse began to race. He was not doing anything wrong. Yet he was about to have a heart attack, and fall dead right there on the church carpet. He stumbled back a bit, and reached awkwardly for the doorknob.

Even after she was gone, her fragrance lingered all over his body. How does that happen? He never even touched her. She was gone, yet she was still with him. And *would be* for some time.

Now he would slip out of the building, covered in sweet-smelling guilt. He just hoped the church secretary wouldn’t get a whiff.

Chapter 2

Greg Tenorly drove the familiar route from the church to his music studio, studying the homes along the way. He wondered about the families who lived in each one. Like that two-story brick on the corner. What secrets were they hiding? Was the husband abusive? Did a teenager use drugs? Was the family nearly bankrupt? How could anyone know? It was better *not* to know. The mind can only handle so many problems at one time. He wondered where Troy and Cynthia Blockerman lived.

Greg had appeared at the courthouse that morning as part of a jury pool, only to be released. He and the rest of his group would have to return the next morning. He hoped they would not need him. The church would pay his regular part-time salary while he was serving on a jury, but any private lessons he missed would be money lost.

Greg's red 1965 Pontiac Bonneville convertible always turned heads as he drove through the small town. He had purchased it two months earlier from a career Navy man down in Longview who had babied the thing for years. It spent most of its life in the man's garage, coming out only when he was on leave. Most trips were to the car wash or the Pontiac dealer for scheduled maintenance.

Greg gladly paid \$4,000 for it. The sailor called him the very next day and tried to buy it back. He said it was like losing a member of the family. Greg felt bad, but not bad enough to give up the car. How could a 40-year-old car have only 93,000 miles on it? It was dazzling.

His little studio was near the town square, nestled between Coreville Hardware and Susie's Sewing Box. Occasionally he and a student could hear a pipe wrench or hammer hitting the floor on the hardware side. But things were always quiet from Susie's side. At least the soundproofing he had installed kept his neighbors from hearing his students. You can't teach music without hearing both beautiful sounds and sour notes.

Parking the mammoth red beauty behind the building always made him a little nervous. The two pickups next door were in and out constantly. It was only a matter of time before one of those trucks drove out of the alley with red paint across the fender.

He walked through the back door, and into the odor of yesterday's Folgers and aging music scores and textbooks. A welcome aroma.

The message machine was flashing.

Message 1: *Hello Greg, this is Penelope Ragsdale. I'm sorry, but I won't be able to make my lesson today. Thanks.*

That's \$12 down the drain, he thought.

Message 2: *Mr. Tenorly, this is Patty Hansel. Hugh fell out of a tree and broke his collar bone, so he's going to miss his piano lessons for a while. I'll let you know when he can come back. Thanks.*

Why did they name the kid Hugh? Maybe he was named after Hugh Grant or Hugh Jackman. Surely not Hugh Hefner.

Greg had twenty-nine students. Many of them took two lessons per week. He taught piano, voice, guitar, and music theory. His teaching hours were from 1:00-8:00 PM, although there were plenty of open time slots. On an average week, seven or eight students cancelled lessons. He dreaded phone calls, since they were nearly always cancellations.

The phone rang, and Greg reluctantly picked up.

"Hey, man, how's it going?"

It was David Beachton, owner of BeachTone Tanning Salon and a bass in Greg's choir. Greg didn't think tanning was healthy, even in the sun—much less under artificial light. He tried not to think about it too much because David was a good friend.

"I'm fine. How about you?"

"I just wanted to let you know you are *not* off the hook for the big trial."

"How did you find out?"

"Greg, I'm always one of the first to know what's going on in this town. You know that. They only got eight jurors out of today's group. So, they'll have a

shot at you tomorrow.”

“Hope I don’t get picked.”

“Oh, you will. No doubt.”

“But I can’t make a living while I’m spending time on a jury.”

“I hate to tell you, Buddy, but they don’t care. Besides, you want to do your civic duty, right?” David laughed. *He* would hate taking time for jury duty.

“Yeah, right. But what makes you so sure I’ll be picked?”

“Think about it, Greg. They’ll ask if you can be fair—even though the defendant is black and the victim was white. You will say ‘Yes.’ They’ll want to know if you have any relatives or friends directly connected to the case. You will say ‘No.’ You’ll answer each question correctly just by being honest. So, if you don’t want to serve, you’ll have to lie. But you won’t.”

“Oh, man.”

Greg was overdue for some lunch. His first lesson was an hour away, so he locked up, and walked down the sidewalk to Jane’s Diner. He heard the usual ring of the bell and a ‘Hi’ from Jane as he walked in. He sat down in his favorite booth at the front window. He liked to watch the people come and go, around town square.

Things were so different here than in Longview, where he had lived for many years. Like stepping into the mid-1960s in many ways. It only seemed fitting that his car was a 1965 model.

As was often the case, Jane herself waited on him.

“Do you need a menu today, Greg?” She always asked, but he never needed one. He had only lived in Coreyville for about a year, but he ate at Jane’s nearly every day.

“No thanks, Jane. Just give me the turkey on wheat and a Diet Coke.” It was a delicious sandwich, piled high with extra thin turkey slices, fresh lettuce, dark red tomato from a local gardener, and mayo on toasted whole wheat bread. It

came with a huge dill spear and potato chips on the side.

While Greg was waiting for his lunch, he overheard some men talking in the back of the restaurant.

“There’s no doubt he’s guilty. I don’t know why they’re wasting taxpayer money to try that piece of trash!”

Greg was beginning to realize how difficult it would be to find twelve impartial jurors for the trial. Then he heard the 1:30 train barreling through the outskirts of town. It felt like he was tied across those tracks. The murder trial was coming toward him like a locomotive.

Resistance was futile.

His appetite was gone.

Chapter 3

Greg said goodbye to his last student at 8:15 PM, locked up the studio, and got into his car. He always looked forward to his evening rendezvous with Bonnie—his nickname for the Bonneville. He liked to put her top down, and drive her around town in the moonlight. Their route varied from night to night, but the ultimate destination was never in question.

“May I help you?”

The worn-out speaker was crackly, but he still recognized the particularly twangy East Texas voice of Fontana Fry.

Over his six years of vocal training, he had become acutely aware of accents. This is true of all classically trained singers. Great emphasis is placed on precise pronunciation and enunciation. It is mandatory that the singer’s repertoire include works written in English, Latin, Italian, German, and French.

So, by the time Greg finished his graduate degree, his accent had been all but eliminated. He sounded somewhat like a network news anchor instead of an East Texan.

“I would like a large—”

“—a large dipped cone, the usual. Right?”

The Dairy Queen drive-thru ordering station was located out in front of the restaurant, on the right side. He looked up, and saw the 19 year-old waving at him. She looked so cute in her little Dairy Queen outfit. Fontana was in her first year at Kilgore College. She planned to be an elementary teacher. He knew she would be a good one.

Greg had met Fontana a few months earlier when she brought her 13-year-old brother to the studio to enroll for guitar lessons. The boy was holding a U.S. made, 1968 Harmony acoustic guitar his uncle gave him. The body and the frets were badly worn, but the instrument still played beautifully. It looked somewhat like a large violin, with arched top and f-holes. That shape produces a more mellow sound than flattops. And the guitar’s age contributed additional warmth

to the tone.

Hi, I'm Fontana, and this is my brother, Montana. Greg had almost snickered. As it turned out, Montana was musically gifted. He learned faster than Greg could teach him.

Fontana probably wondered why he never came inside to eat. He always opted for the drive-thru, and then parked behind the building, in the back corner of the parking lot.

She gave Greg a tall stack of napkins before he could ask. He parked, and began his nightly ritual—spreading out the napkins meticulously in layers across his lap. Drips *would* be contained. A chocolate stain on his shirt or pants would, of course, be upsetting. But the slightest drip or crumb on Bonnie's pristine interior would be tantamount to desecration.

Just as he bit off the tip of the chocolate covered mountain, his cell phone rang.

Unknown Name. Unknown Number.

Greg figured it was some misdialing drunk. It could be handled quickly. His ice cream was already beginning to melt. He made no attempt to hide his irritation. "Hello?"

It was a woman whispering frantically. The sound was so distorted he couldn't understand her at first, and was about to hang up.

"He's doing it again." She sounded terrified. "He hit me and threw me into the wall. I'm sorry, Greg, I shouldn't be calling you, but—"

Greg heard a man shouting in the background, then a commotion. The phone went dead. He felt sick and helpless, like a kid who had just been spun on a merry-go-round at breakneck speed until he flew off. And the dizziness would not soon go away.

Greg wanted to call the police, but what would he tell them? And why did she call him instead of 911? He would call her back. No, he couldn't—he didn't have her number.

Then he felt something on his leg. The ice cream was melting beneath the

chocolate shell, and it had collapsed under its own weight, and fallen onto the bed of napkins in his lap.

Still dazed, he sat for a full minute studying the ice cream as it dripped down the sides of the cone onto his hand and arm. Gradually the streams of white turned to pink, then to red— running down Cynthia’s face! A cold chill ripped through his body, and jolted him back to reality. He dropped the cone onto the gooey pile, bundled the entire mess, and threw it out of the car, as though it was toxic.

Suddenly Greg felt exposed sitting alone in the convertible, in the dark. He put the top up, locked it in place, and drove home as quickly as he could without attracting local law enforcement. There was nothing to tell the police.

Why had she come to him? He wished he had never met her. Yet he wanted to help her.

It was quiet on his street. Most of the neighbors were retirees, and were already in bed. He turned into his driveway, parked, and hurried toward his back porch. Just before he reached the door, his cell phone rang.

“Cynthia?”

A drunken man yelled back at him. “Who is this?”

Greg snapped the phone shut, and started to throw it into the woods behind his house. But throwing the phone away wouldn’t help. Fear began to flush through his veins, from head to toe.

Greg looked all around, and saw nothing but darkness. Then he thought he sensed movement in the distance. He fumbled with the keys. Why wasn’t the porch light on? Office keys, church keys, car keys. Where was the house key?

Finally, he got it opened, and darted in. He slammed the door, and double-locked it. The light switch was on. What a time for the bulb to burn out.

He moved quickly throughout the house, turning on every light, and all three TVs.

The electric bill was the least of his worries.

Chapter 4

“So, Jenny tells me jury selection is going well,” said Buford, puffing small billows of Cuban cigar smoke into the phone with each syllable.

“Yes, I think so too.”

Kyle was speeding down FM-2208 in his new Lexus SC 430, headed toward Coreyville. He could barely make his lease payments, but he had to have that car. It screamed success— especially with the top down. His wavy head of hair would be easily restored to perfection with a few brush strokes.

“Well, you be sure to take her advice. She knows how to pick a jury.”

Buford figured some of Kyle’s attention would be focused on getting Jenny into bed, but he didn’t think it would jeopardize the case.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Bellowin, I will.”

At only 27, Kyle Serpentine had already developed a successful practice in Longview, defending every kind of crook. Some of them paid handsomely. He idolized Buford Bellowin. Buford had grown up in Coreyville and earned his Bachelor’s and Law degree at University of Texas, graduating near the top of his class.

Now he was a high-priced, infamous defense attorney headquartered in Dallas. Nicknamed ‘The Bell’, he had never lost a case. Even in law school, his mock trial team always won.

And Buford put on a show in the courtroom. So, the gallery was always packed with those who wanted to see The Bell in action. Occasionally, some hotshot would think he could outsmart him. But Buford was the teacher, and it was *his* classroom. Before the prosecutor knew what hit him, The Bell would ring, and school was out.

“The D.A. really thought she could get a jury out of that pool of forty, didn’t she? She thought this was gonna be a cakewalk. They don’t get many murder trials in Coreyville. That’s good for us. And she’ll make more mistakes. Mark

my words.”

“I don’t know. She seems pretty sharp.”

“Just win this case for me and I promise I’ll remember you when I take residence in the Governor’s mansion in a few years.”

“I will do my best, Sir,” practically saluting.

“Now, Kyle, I’m sure you’re beginning to see there’s a lot of prejudice in that little town. The whites make up 72% of the population, and I’m afraid the old hatred and suspicion toward blacks is still right there under the surface. That boy on trial doesn’t stand much of a chance without a great defense. He would have been ‘dead in the water’ with a public defender. That’s why I asked you to take the case. You do your job, son, or he’s going down the toilet.”

“He will have an excellent defense, Sir. I’ve never lost a case,” said Kyle, with confidence.

“Call me when you’re done for the day.” Buford hung up, and was already dialing Jenny’s number before Kyle could respond.

“Hello?” Jenny Slidell answered in her low, mellow voice.

“Keep him in line, Jenny.”

“Good morning, Buford. Don’t worry. I’ll come through for you. As always.”

“Has he asked you why I’ve taken such an interest in this case?”

“No. I don’t think he wants to know what your motives are. Maybe he’s trying to maintain deniability in case something goes wrong.”

Sweet Jenny. She didn’t really know what Buford’s motives were either.

“Smart young man. He should go far in this business.” Buford laughed. “The most important thing is, we’ve got to have Greg Tenorly on that jury. I don’t care what you have to do, Jenny. Make it happen.”

“No problem. We’ve used all of our peremptory strikes. And the D.A. has used

all of hers. Greg Tenorly will be third in line today, so there's no way we can miss. The D.A. will like him. And even if she doesn't, there won't be any legitimate reason to strike him for cause. Believe me, I've done my homework."

Jenny was smart and spunky and blonde and sexy. And almost always right. She was the best jury consultant Buford had ever used. Now if she would only succumb to his advances. He always had his way with the hot babes. It was just a matter of time before she would come around.

"I'm counting on you, Jenny. Call me later."

Buford hung up and directed his attention across his massive mahogany desk to the skinny man sitting quietly in a chair. Marty Crumb must have been plagued with horrible acne as a teenager, because his face looked like oatmeal. His 53-year-old voice sounded like ninety years worth of smoking and hard liquor. Buford felt slimy just being in the same room with him.

"Let's make it quick," said Buford. "Have you taken care of Cynthia Blockerman?"

Marty started to talk, but instead coughed

and coughed. At least he was covering his mouth. Covering it with hands that had strangled, beat and executed untold numbers of innocent people. He sounded like he might cough up a lung. Then he cleared his throat. Buford prayed he wouldn't spit on the carpet. Instead, Marty swallowed it, which was no better.

"Mrs. Blockerman is being cooperative. Apparently, she loves her mother and wants her to go on living."

"Fine. But, that's more than I wanted to know."

Marty flashed an evil smile, revealing decaying teeth.

"Just make sure the jury does the right thing. *If* you want to stay out of prison."

Marty stood up and gave Buford a bone-chilling stare that lasted several long seconds. He didn't have a gun or a knife. There were guards in the lobby. And metal detectors. But Marty didn't need a gun or a knife. He could kill you seventeen different ways.

Just when Buford thought he was about to soil himself, Marty slowly turned, and walked out of the office, leaving the door wide open.

Buford leaned back in his chair, trying to regain his composure, and control over his bladder. He wished he didn't have to deal with someone such as Marty. But his future had been threatened.

Buford's first job had been at Sam's Bicycle Shop, and Sam had been like a father to him. But Sam knew what would happen if he couldn't keep his mouth shut. It was unfortunate, but sometimes sacrifices must be made.

Nobody would stand in the way of Buford Bellowin.

Chapter 5

Angela Hammerly dedicated her life to becoming District Attorney. At 42, she had never been married, or even seriously dated. All she could think about, night and day, was her ultimate goal. And her dream finally came true, thanks to the death of 74-year-old Porter Strickley.

She could not deny that she had learned the job well, working for that old pain-in-the-butt. He was 57 when she interviewed for the position of Assistant District Attorney. At the time, she thought he was 70.

Two months ago, she had become the District Attorney. She loved seeing her name on the door. And she felt a rush of adrenaline every time a judge referred to her as ‘The District Attorney’ in open court. The D.A.’s office would be better than ever—now that *she* was running the show.

There was a soft knock, and Andrea Newly opened the door just enough to peek in.

“Come in, Andrea.” Angela sometimes wondered if she had made a mistake two weeks ago when she hired this timid young lady as her assistant. Angela had been impressed with her resume. But in person, Andrea was quiet, and seemed to be rather intimidated by Angela.

But Andrea was enthralled with every word Angela spoke. And the new D.A. couldn’t resist the prospect of being god to her assistant. She had hired her on the spot, even though she knew Andrea would stress her patience.

But Angela was confident the 25-year-old could be molded into her mentor’s image. And thereby, become a powerful force for justice in the D.A.’s office.

Andrea took a chair across from the D.A. The furniture in the District Attorney’s office was similar to that found in most old government offices—largely unchanged since the 1950s. Yet the hardwood chairs and desks were of such good quality that an exact replacement would be cost prohibitive in today’s market. Angela planned to upsize her diminutive desk as soon as possible, even if the money came out of her own pocket.

“I talked to a couple of old friends in Longview this morning,” said Angela. “One works in the D.A.’s office, and the other is an ambulance chaser. We went to law school together. Neither of them had any idea why Kyle Serpentine would take Kantrell Jamison’s case pro bono.

“Usually when he does a freebee, he’s hoping to boost his reputation. I don’t see that happening with this case. Especially if he loses. And he will surely lose. So, what’s his motivation?” She was talking to herself more than to Andrea.

“Maybe he just wants to help this poor black family. That’s what pro bono is supposed to be for. To help people who can’t afford an attorney.”

“Oh, Andrea

you’re so naive. With a scummy lawyer like Serpentine, it’s always about helping himself.”

The phone on her desk rang three times before Angela bothered to pick up.

“Yes?

Hi, Sheriff

oh, really

” Angela’s cold face slowly melted into a smile—an *evil* smile. “Yes, Sheriff, that information may be very helpful to the case

thank you, goodbye.

“Kantrell Jamison’s been talking to his cellmates, one of which is a regular snitch working for the Sheriff. It seems the defendant is expecting to come into a small fortune after he gets off. He has a cousin in Shreveport he plans to move in with. And once he’s there, he will be buying a flashy new car. He’s not sure whether it will be a Cadillac or a Mercedes.”

“Where would he get that kind of money?”

“When we find out the answer to that question, Andrea, then I believe we will know why Mr. Serpentine took this case.”

“Do you think somebody is paying the defendant to keep quiet about something? Maybe he stole more from Sam Spokane than what we thought. And hid it somewhere.”

“Sam never kept much cash around, or anything else of value except his beloved bikes. No. My guess is Mr. Jamison was hired to *kill* Sam Spokane, and make it look like a robbery gone bad.”

“Wow.”

“Now it’s making sense. The person who wanted Sam dead has paid Kyle Serpentine, or scared him into trying this case. His life might even be at stake. No wonder he’s working so hard to get the jury he wants.”

Maybe the new D.A.’s first murder trial was not going to be so boring after all, Angela mused, already salivating.

*

Kyle Serpentine pulled into the courthouse parking lot, flipped down the sun visor, and brushed his hair in the mirror. As he admired his handsome reflection, he couldn’t help but smile, thinking about how much fun it was to go up against two fine-looking ladies in court. He would mesmerize them with his irresistible, sexy charm while dealing them a devastating loss.

It was better than any drug—to simultaneously feel the power of his manliness while showing off his superior legal skills. Sure, Buford was counting on him to win this case. But, more important to Kyle Serpentine was adding another win to his ever-growing list of victories.

Little did he know that there was much more at stake than just his ego.

Chapter 6

Greg stopped by the courthouse concession stand for a cup of coffee, even though he had already downed four cups at Jane's Diner across the street. The old man behind the counter reached for Greg's dollar with a noticeably shaky hand that looked as though it had held more cigarettes and booze than money in its lifetime.

He took his coffee and walked up the stairs to the second floor. There were about fifty people standing in the hallway outside the courtroom making small talk. He recognized a few of them, but was in no mood to start a conversation.

Only four more jurors and two alternates were needed. With a little luck, he would soon be sent on his way. The coffee tasted bitter, but he continued to sip on it anyway, just to occupy himself.

After a few minutes, a woman walked out of the courtroom and spoke to the crowd in monotone. "Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. We are ready to get started. We did not get enough jurors yesterday for the criminal trial, so we are going to use part of today's panel for that purpose. Those who are not selected for the criminal trial today must appear tomorrow at 8:00 AM for the civil trial jury selection.

"First, I will call the names of the jurors that have already been selected. When I call your name, please go into the courtroom and take your seat in the pews where you sat yesterday. Please sit in the order in which your names are called."

"Alexander Littleton

Gail Silestone

"The crowd carefully analyzed each person as he walked through the group and into the courtroom. "Mary McJohnson

William Biscayne

Judy McPhearson

John Nihmbor

Nancy Novelle

and Troy Blockerman.”

Greg nearly choked on his coffee. Troy Blockerman! That’s Cynthia’s husband. His blood pressure shot up like a bottle rocket, exploding into a headache.

“And now I will call the names of a portion of today’s panel. Those whose names are not called will need to stay here in the courthouse since we might still need you today. I will let you know when you can go home. Again, please sit in the order in which your names are called. Elsie Olstead

Lory Lip-scomb

Greg Tenorly

“

Seventeen more names were called, but Greg didn’t hear any of them. His numb body didn’t feel the coldness or the hardness of the pew on which he sat. Nor did he notice the buzzing fluorescent light fixture located directly above his head.

He could only think about Cynthia’s husband. Apparently, Troy didn’t yet know the name of his wife’s mystery man. But surely it was just a matter of time before Greg’s identity was revealed to the big, mean drunk who was sitting a few feet away.

David Beachton had predicted it. The prosecutor and the defense attorney took their turns asking questions. Greg answered each question almost robotically. He *would* be selected. And there was nothing he or anyone else could do to stop it.

He began to come out of his haze when he heard the judge thanking those who had not been selected. There would be a 15-minute break, and then the trial would begin. Greg needed to use that time to call students and cancel lessons.

As he walked into the hallway, he pulled his cell phone out of his pocket, and turned it on. It began to ring. It was an unknown caller. Probably a student canceling his lesson. Good. It would save him the trouble of calling them.

“Hello? This is Greg.”

“Greg, this is Cynthia Blockerman.”

Greg quickly surveyed the hallway. He couldn’t find Troy Blockerman. Maybe he had gone to the restroom, or down to the concession stand.

Greg whispered, “Cynthia, I got selected to serve on the jury for the murder trial. And your husband is on the jury too!”

“Oh, no.”

“Are you okay? How bad did he hurt you?”

“Yes, I’m alright. Just a little bruised. Sorry about the call last night. I was really scared. But I shouldn’t have bothered you.”

“No, no, that’s okay. But you never called me back, and I was worried. And then *he* called me.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“I hope you didn’t give him my name.”

“No. And don’t worry. He won’t even remember what happened last night. He never remembers anything from when he’s drunk.”

“Good.” Greg looked around to reassure himself that nobody was listening.

“But, Greg, since you’re on the jury I need to tell you something Troy said last night—”

“—wait. I can’t talk about the case.”

“This is not about the case. It’s about Troy. Last night, while he was still sober, he was saying things like, *that black boy ought to be hung. The electric chair ain’t good enough for that scum.* I don’t know whether the man is guilty or not, but I don’t see how he can get a fair trial when a juror has already made up his mind before the trial even starts.”

Greg felt it welling up in his chest—righteous indignation.

“Don’t worry. This will be a fair trial. I will make sure of that.”

He looked up and saw Troy Blockerman standing right in front of him, and quickly ended the call, “I’ll talk to you later.”

“Hey, ain’t you that piano teacher?”

It was a simple question. But would the answer lead to a bloody nose?

“Yes, I teach piano, voice, guitar, and music theory.”

“Yeah, I thought so. My sister’s kid takes piano from you.”

“I don’t recall meeting you.” Surely Greg would have remembered *this* guy. He looked like an offensive tackle.

“No, I didn’t meet you. I just saw you standing in the doorway when I dropped her off.”

Troy leaned in close and Greg flinched.

“This trial should be over by the end of the day. This guy is toast.”

*

Jenny had completed her job and was headed back to Dallas. She turned off the blaring CD player, and made a phone call.

“Mission accomplished, Buford.”

She had once asked him why his parents named him ‘Buford’—not a popular name in 1969 when he was born. And why he didn’t use a nickname instead. He had told her it was his grandfather’s name. And people remembered the name because it was unusual. He liked that.

“So, we got Troy Blockerman *and* Greg Tenorly?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Okay. Great job, Jenny.”

“Sir, if you don’t mind me asking—why was it so important to get those two men on the jury? I can understand why the defense would want Greg Tenorly. But why Troy Blockerman? He’s a redneck who’s obviously going to vote ‘Guilty.’”

“I don’t mind you *asking*, Dear. But, if you want an *answer*, you’ll have dinner with me tonight.”

Jenny wasn’t sure her curiosity was *that* strong.

Chapter 7

The defendant, Kantrell Jamison, looked more like a young business professional than a murderer, dressed in a dark suit, white shirt and tie. His attorney, Kyle Serpentine, sat next to him. Behind them was Kantrell's mother, Ella, and his 15-year-old sister, Jolee.

Angela Hammerly loved nothing more than hearing her own eloquent verbalizations. She spoke each sentence at the perfect tempo, each word with the ideal inflection. Everything she said or did in the courtroom, right down to a subtle raise of the eyebrow was rehearsed, repeatedly, until she had mastered a presentation that would produce the maximum dramatic impact.

"The State will prove beyond all reasonable doubt that the defendant entered Sam's Bicycle Shop on the evening of April 1, 2006 with the intention of robbing the store. But once he got inside, something happened that caused him to become violent.

"Maybe Mr. Spokane tried to talk him out of the criminal act he was about to commit. Perhaps this made the defendant angry. Maybe there was an argument. We don't know.

"However, what we do know is this: instead of just robbing Mr. Spokane, Kantrell Jamison brutally murdered him in cold blood. The evidence will show that the defendant strangled Sam Spokane to death with a bicycle chain and then cleaned out the cash register *and* Mr. Spokane's wallet."

If the D.A. could prove what she was saying, Greg Tenorly might be done by the end of the day. Then he could get back to teaching lessons, and making a living.

Kyle Serpentine could present himself as a polished speaker—a male version of Angela Hammerly. Or he could play the dumb lawyer who turns out to be brilliant. But in this small town, with this jury, he determined that 'country boy lawyer' would be most effective.

"You know, I'm just a country boy, and maybe I'm missing something here. But, I don't know what this evidence is that the D.A. is talking about. She seems like a nice lady. And I know she's just trying to do her job. But what she said about

my client is just all wrong.

“And I can promise you this: you will not see the prosecutor presenting any physical evidence against my client. No fingerprints. No DNA. Nothing. And that’s because there ain’t none, folks. None whatsoever.

“And there are no credible witnesses. Unless you count the woman who was driving by, and saw some black man leaving the shop on a bike. A woman whose eyesight is so poor she probably shouldn’t even have a doggone driver’s license.”

“I object, Your Honor,” said Angela Hammerly.

“Objection sustained,” said Judge Ragsdale. “Mr. Serpentine—”

“—I apologize, Your Honor.”

Kyle went on. “Now, we all feel terrible about what happened to Mr. Spokane.” He glanced at Dorothy Spokane, who was sitting in her wheelchair at the back of the courtroom.

“I didn’t know him, but I understand that he was a wonderful man who was well-loved by his community. He sold bicycles, sure. So does Wal-Mart. But he also fixed bikes. And a lot of times he’d fix kids’ bikes for free while they waited.

“And the kids were crazy about him. They liked to hang around the shop with him. And over the years, quite a few of those kids worked for him when they were teenagers. He was a very special man, and will be sorely missed.”

He paused and seemed to be mourning Sam’s death.

“We all want to catch whoever did this horrible thing and prosecute them to the full extent of the law. But ladies and gentlemen, my client, Mr. Jamison, did not commit this despicable act.

“He was at home with his mother,” he pointed to Ella Jamison, “when the crime took place. Now, where I come from it’s plain and simple. Kyle Jamison is innocent of these charges. So, you’ve got to find him ‘Not Guilty.’”

The first witness for the prosecution was 83-year-old Arabeth Albertson. She walked to the witness stand with the aid of a cane. Considering how frail she looked, a wheelchair might have been more appropriate.

“Mrs. Albertson, we appreciate you being here today,” said Angela Hammerly in a gentle tone.

“Could you please tell us what you saw on the evening of April 1st as you were driving by Sam’s Bicycle Shop?”

“Yes, ma’am. I was on my way home from prayer group meeting. It was a little after 8:00. And when I was driving by Sam’s shop, I saw a black man run out the door, jump on a bicycle, and ride off. He looked like he was in a big hurry to get away from there.”

“The man you saw running out of Sam’s Bicycle Shop—is he here in the courtroom today?”

“Yes. He’s sitting right over there.” Mrs. Albertson pointed directly at Kantrell Jamison. Kantrell’s mother recoiled slightly, and then contorted her face in anger.

After Angela Hammerly sat down, Kyle Serpentine slowly, thoughtfully stood up, and walked over to the witness stand.

“Now, Mrs. Albertson, you say you were coming home from your prayer group meeting?”

“That’s right,” she said with pride, “every Saturday night, from 5:00 to 8:00. We have a lovely dinner at Nancy’s house. Each lady brings a vegetable or salad or desert. Nancy provides the main course. Then we have prayer time, and then fellow ship.”

“That’s sounds wonderful.”

Kyle Serpentine acted as though she was the sweet grandmother, and he was the curious grandson. “How many years have you been attending this prayer group meeting?”

“Oh, I don’t know

probably 12 or 13 years I guess.”

“I bet you never miss it.”

“Hardly ever. Not unless I’m sick.”

“Do you go out any other nights of the week? You know—to restaurants or to the movies?”

Mrs. Albertson smiled. “No. Just for my prayer group.”

“Yes, I can understand that. ‘Cause it’s kinda hard to see at night, isn’t it?”

“Well—”

“—how many years has it been since your last eye exam, Mrs. Albertson?”

“Uh

I’m not sure

“

Angela Hammerly jumped to her feet. “Your Honor?”

“—your Honor, the defense would like to request that Mrs. Albertson be given an eye exam.”

“That seems reasonable, Mrs. Hammerly,” said Judge Ragsdale. “Let’s get Mrs. Albertson to the eye doctor this afternoon. We will adjourn until tomorrow at 9:00 AM”

Angela Hammerly did *not* think it was reasonable. But she knew better than to argue with Judge Rayburn Ragsdale.

It was only 11:30 AM, and the jury was done for the day. What would Greg do with a free afternoon? Free of *money*—since he had already cancelled all of his lessons. Maybe he’d drop by First State Bank, and visit a certain vice president. That could lead to banker gossip, though. Greg wondered whether banker gossip was as bad as church member gossip. He decided he didn’t care.

He could not get Cynthia Blockerman off his mind.

Chapter 8

Greg ordered a turkey sandwich at Jane's Diner and tried his best to block out all the conversation of the lunch crowd. Surely they knew Greg was on the jury. And they knew he was not supposed to be listening to anything about the trial. But they didn't seem to care.

It was not so difficult to ignore them, as he thought about Cynthia. When he finished his lunch, he should have gone to his office, and taken care of some overdue bookkeeping.

Instead, he headed toward First State Bank.

Greg was on some kind of high as he walked toward the bank. It couldn't be love. He barely knew her. Besides—she was married. But it can be intoxicating, to know you're about to do something crazy, yet be determined to do it anyway.

As he entered the bank, he thought the guard looked at him with suspicion. He didn't have an account at First State Bank and didn't intend to open one. He tried to look like he knew what he was doing, and where he was going. That way, nobody would ask the dreaded question, 'May I help you?'

He found a hallway of offices, and walked down it looking confident, he hoped. He checked the name on each door out of the corner of his eye. Where was her office? It had to be there. Unless he was in the wrong bank.

One of the bankers was standing in his doorway, saying goodbye to a client. Greg ignored them, and kept walking. There was one more office. If it wasn't Cynthia's, he would have to turn around. Then he might be asked the question for which he had no answer.

But there it was: Cynthia Blockerman, Vice President. The door was open. He peeked into her office.

"Hi, Cynthia. I need to talk to you."

She seemed less than thrilled to see him. He knew she had been concerned about co-workers learning of the abuse. But, they would not have to know why Greg

was there. He stepped in, and started to close the door. Then he spotted him. Sitting in a chair next to the wall was Troy Blockerman.

“Hey, Tenorly—what are you doing here?”

Greg needed to swallow, but he didn’t want to gulp.

“Need a loan so you can buy some more of that Bach music, or whatever it is you teach?”

“Uh

yeah, something like that.”

Cynthia jumped in. “Mr. Tenorly is thinking about buying his own building.”

“Wow. There must be a lot of mommas making their kids take piano. Good for you, Teny.”

Had Troy Blockerman just accidentally misspoken his name? Or had he decided to coin a derogatory nickname for him. Teny or Tin-ee or ‘tin ear’: *one who has a bad ear for music*. Was Troy even smart enough to come up with that?

“Okay, I’ve gotta go demolish a house.” The grin on Troy’s face looked like that of a devious five-year-old about to put a frog down his sister’s dress. “I love my job! See you tonight, Honey. Later, Teny.”

And Troy was gone—without showing the least bit of concern about leaving Greg alone in the room with his beautiful wife. Greg didn’t know whether to feel relieved or insulted. As soon as Troy was out of the hallway, Greg closed the door.

“You shouldn’t have come here.” She seemed only mildly upset with Greg.

“I know, but I had to see you.” He had to see her because yesterday she had made him feel like a teenager, and he really wanted that feeling again.

“It’s okay, I was going to call you anyway. Troy is planning to bulldoze the rest of the jury into seeing things *his* way. Just like he rips a house apart or knocks over trees with his heavy equipment. He’s going to force the jury into a quick

guilty verdict.”

“But we haven’t even heard all of the testimony yet.” For the moment, Greg was forgetting he was not supposed to discuss the trial with anyone. “He can’t do that.”

“Oh yes he can. He’s always bullying people to get his way. The last time we bought a new car he had the salesman in tears.”

Greg still remembered how Marvin Manly had unmercifully bullied him in high school. He should have just stood up to Marvin. Why had he let himself be pushed around like that?

Not now, he thought. He would go as a knight into battle against the fire-breathing dragon. A ‘fight to the death’ for the beautiful princess. And, of course, for justice.

“I promise you I will stand up to him. If there’s even a hint of reasonable doubt, I will fight Troy all the way. I will not back down.”

Cynthia smiled.

A warm, electric chill rippled through his body. Yes. He would prevail. Greg said goodbye and walked out of the bank without ever talking to Cynthia about the abuse.

Now he was on a quest.

*

A couple of hours later, a few blocks away, Arabeth Albertson was with her optometrist.

“According to our records, your last exam was 18 months ago,” Dr. Phillippi said.

“I couldn’t remember. But I knew I was seeing okay.”

“Your vision has not changed at all. You don’t need a stronger prescription. You’re close to 20/20 in both eyes with your current glasses.”

“I thought so. That lawyer tried to make the jury think I couldn’t see well enough to see what I saw. But I can. And I did.”

Moments after Arabeth Albertson drove away from the doctor’s office, Amy Cinderside, a temporary secretary, stepped out the back door for a smoke break and a phone call.

“Yeah, she just left

She passed the eye exam with flying colors

Now, when do I get the rest of my money?”

Chapter 9

It was 10:30 pm and Arabeth Albertson was sitting in her favorite chair, watching the local news. More road construction in Longview. She instinctively glanced over at Arty to see his reaction to the story. But Arty wasn't in his chair, and had not been for some six years. Still, she couldn't break the habit, and didn't really want to. She liked to pretend he was still there, grimacing over some political candidate's remarks or complaining about taxes or the weather.

Arty and Arabeth had only one child, which had been their plan. Arty had wanted that child to be a boy. His heart was set on having a son named Andy. So, when Arabeth found out she was having a girl, she suggested they go with the name Andie. One look at little Andie erased all of Arty's disappointment. The fact that Andie turned out to be somewhat of a tomboy came as no surprise to anyone, considering all the fishing and athletics Arty had thrust upon her. She always wanted please her daddy, and she always did.

By the time Andie went off to college, she had grown into a very attractive young lady. Arty could not have been prouder. They had tried to hide their devastation when, soon after college, Andie moved to Seattle with her new husband. It was always the highlight of their year when Andie and John and the kids visited at Christmas or during summer vacation. She prayed she would never get Alzheimer's and lose her wonderful memories. There wouldn't be much left to live for without them.

If the weatherman was right, tomorrow was going to be a sunny day. A nice day for a drive to the courthouse. A *perfect* day to make that smart-aleck lawyer look like a fool. She might have been old, but she knew what she had seen that night. And the killer was not going to get away with it!

Sam and Dorothy had been longtime friends to Arty and Arabeth. Andie had a ball working for Sam one summer, learning how to fix bikes. She was 14 years old, and didn't mind getting her hands greasy.

Arabeth was a member of the Neighborhood Watch group on her street. It was an older neighborhood and most of the citizens were over 65. But if a criminal thought he could take advantage of them just because of their age—he would be sadly mistaken. Most of their homes were equipped with alarm systems. Many

carried pepper spray and some even owned a gun. They had a slogan: *If you're not quite ready your Maker to meet, Then don't come messing 'round Mulberry Street.*

Jay Leno started his monologue. She clicked the remote to turn off the TV. Jay Leno and David Letterman were both humorous occasionally, but she preferred reading a book after the news. She was near the end of a good Mary Higgins Clark. Couldn't wait to find out what was going to happen to the hero.

But, where was Marie? She should have been back at Arabeth's feet by now. Her old feline friend had a little passageway at the bottom of the kitchen door, so she could go in and out as she pleased. But the cat never stayed out for very long. Arabeth realized that Marie had gone out just as the news was starting at 10:00. Then she heard a faint 'meow', which seemed to be coming from the back yard.

Arabeth grabbed her cane and walked through the kitchen to the back door. She could hear Marie clearly now. She turned on the back light and looked out the kitchen door window. She couldn't see anything but the steps and part of the sidewalk. Maybe she should consider replacing that 40-watt bulb with something brighter. And the window needed to be washed.

She opened the door and could barely see Marie in the distance, near a tree. The cat seemed to be trying to come to Arabeth, but for some reason, she couldn't. Maybe she had gotten herself tangled in a fallen branch. Arabeth rarely ventured into the back yard at night—but this was an emergency.

She began to make her way very carefully down the stairs with her cane. But when she lifted her left foot to take the second step down, it tripped on something. What was she tripping on—she had studied the stairs for any obstructions before starting down. She tried to catch herself, but it was too late. Down, down she went, as in slow motion. She held her breath, knowing that the impact of the sidewalk below would be bone-crushing. It was.

She felt something pop in her lower back. Her right kneecap disintegrated into the concrete. Somehow, her head had avoided the pavement. A second later, she understood how. Her head had landed on her left arm, which felt like it was broken in several places.

Now what would she do? There was nobody to help her. The neighbors were likely already asleep.

She saw a shadow. Then there was a dark figure leaning over her. The lone source of light, the 40-watt bulb, was at his back. An angel of mercy. She attempted to reach out to him, as though she would have been able to stand up if she just had a helping hand.

But instead of taking her hand, he placed his hands on the sides of her head. What was he doing? Then he pulled her head up off the sidewalk—higher and higher, until she thought her neck would break. He slowly turned her head to the side and then slammed it down on the concrete as hard as he could.

She felt excruciating pain, and then
nothing.

Chapter 10

It was Wednesday, 9:05 AM. Greg Tenorly and his eleven fellow jurors were in their places. He tried to forget Troy Blockerman was sitting three seats away. The prosecutor, the Assistant D.A., and the defendant and his attorney were at their respective tables. Everyone was waiting for Judge Ragsdale to appear.

A young woman walked hurriedly into the courtroom and whispered something to Angela Hammerly. By the time the woman made her departure, all eyes were on her.

The bailiff shouted, “All rise. Court is now in session. The Honorable Judge Rayburn Ragsdale presiding.”

Unlike some judges, who rushed to the bench in an effort to minimize the showiness of their entrance, Judge Ragsdale moved slowly, almost majestically, to the bench.

No sooner than everyone sat down, Angela Hammerly said, “Your Honor, sidebar?”

The judge motioned for the two attorneys to come to the bench. Greg strained his above-average hearing, but only caught bits and pieces, which he could not assemble into anything coherent. Judge Ragsdale seemed very disturbed by whatever Ms. Hammerly was saying.

As the lawyers returned to their seats, the judge said, “The Court is saddened to have to inform you that Arabeth Albertson, who testified in this courtroom yesterday, was found dead this morning in her back yard. A neighbor discovered her body. Apparently she tripped and fell down the stairs sometime last night.”

Kyle Serpentine wasted no time. “Your Honor, with all due respect, in light of the fact that the prosecution’s only witness is not able to complete her testimony, and the fact that her testimony is the only evidence submitted by the District Attorney, I move that all charges against my client be dropped.”

Angela Hammerly was holding up a piece of paper. “Your Honor, we have the report from Mrs. Albertson’s eye exam yesterday. Her corrected vision was

excellent. And we know that she was wearing her glasses on the night in question. So, she would have had no problem seeing the defendant.”

Judge Ragsdale said, “Mr. Serpentine, your motion is denied. The jury has already heard the bulk of Mrs. Albertson’s testimony, and—”

“—but, Your Honor, I wanted to do a demonstration for the court to check her vision in low light. Older people have more trouble seeing at night.”

“It’s not a good practice to interrupt me when I’m speaking, counselor. You would do well to remember that.”

“Yes, Your Honor. I apologize,” Kyle said—but not very convincingly.

“The trial shall proceed, Mr. Serpentine.” The judge glared at Kyle Serpentine over the top of his glasses. “You’ll have an opportunity to make your argument to the jury about the night vision of us older folks. Ms. Hammerly, do you have any further witnesses?”

“No, Your Honor.”

“Okay, then the defense may call their first witness.” The judge leaned back in his plush, high-backed chair.

Kyle Serpentine quickly regained his composure and stood. “The defense would like to call Ella Jamison to the stand.”

Ella Jamison was 45, but looked at least ten years older. Perhaps it was Kantrell who added those extra years to her face.

Kyle Serpentine began what was obviously a rehearsed exchange. “Mrs. Jamison, please tell the court what your relationship is to the defendant.”

“I’m his mother.”

“Do you know where your son, Kantrell, was on the night of April 1, 2006?”

“Yes. He was with me and my daughter, Jolee, all night.”

“And where were you? At home?”

“Yes, we were watching a movie.”

“Okay. About what time did the movie start and when did it end?”

“It was a DVD. We started it at around seven. The movie was over two hours long.”

“Are you saying that you, your daughter, and Kantrell were together for the entire time?”

“Yes. From about seven until after nine.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Jamison.” Kyle made eye contact with the jury before walking to his seat.

Angela Hammerly scribbled something on a pad and slid it over to A.D.A., Andrea Newly. Then she addressed Ella Jamison from her seat.

“You testified that you were watching a DVD. Can you remember the name of the movie?” She stood and walked to the witness stand.

“Yes, of course—it was *Narnia*. Jolee and I really liked it, but Kantrell was not too thrilled with it. But he still watched it all with us.”

“I see. Now, what kind of movie is that?”

“You know—it had the lion and other animals that were animated, but the people were real. I think it was a Disney movie.”

“Right. And you are certain that *The Chronicles of Narnia* is the DVD you watched on the night of April 1, 2006?”

Ella Jamison would not be intimidated by the D.A. “Yes. I’m sure.”

Angela Hammerly looked back to Andrea Newly, who was holding up her PDA. She walked over the Andrea and took the device from her hand. She was trying not to smile as she studied it and walked back to the witness stand.

“Mrs. Jamison, this fancy electronic gadget can access the internet wirelessly. Now, I’ll confess that I don’t know much about these things, but the Assistant

District Attorney does.” She nodded in Andrea’s direction. “And she’s looked up some information about the movie, *The Chronicles of Narnia*. You have testified that you, your daughter and Kantrell were watching the *Narnia* DVD on April 1st, yet that DVD was not released until April 4th. How do you explain that, Ma’am?”

Kyle Serpentine looked as though he wanted to object.

“I don’t know. That must be wrong.” Ella appeared a bit shaken.

Ms. Hammerly stared at Ella for a few moments, as though she expected further explanation. Then she turned toward the jury. “I see. I have nothing further for this witness, Your Honor.”

“Mr. Serpentine, redirect?”

“Yes, Your Honor.” He got up and walked toward the witness stand. “Mrs. Jamison, where did you get the DVD that you and your family watched on the night of April 1st?”

“I believe that Jolee had borrowed it from a friend.”

“So, it could have been a *pirated* copy—an illegal copy of the movie that someone got off the internet. It could have been downloaded before the DVD was officially released, right?”

“I guess so. I don’t know where Jolee’s friend got it.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Jamison. We appreciate your testimony here today.” Kyle Serpentine walked back to his seat.

Chapter 11

Angela Hammerly took a slow, deep breath as she collected her last-second thoughts for the closing argument. For just a moment, some doubts crept in.

Had she made a mistake in not using Daryl Felson as a witness? He would have testified that Kantrell was bragging about his plans to move to Shreveport and buy an expensive new car. That would have gone to motive, if she had presented the case as a murder-for-hire. But who had hired him? She couldn't find any evidence to support the theory.

Or she could have called Mr. Felson as a witness, but not asked him about the money, and just focused on the fact that the defendant told him he committed the murder.

But Kyle Serpentine would have asked him if the D.A. was offering him a deal that would keep him out of prison. And, of course, he'd have to say 'Yes.' Another issue: one of the juror's friends or relatives could have been a victim of Felson's criminal activities, and the juror might have remembered his name. Felson had quite a record of car thefts for a 21-year-old.

If the jury had seen Felson for the lowlife that he was, they would not have believed anything he said. And she would have been giving Daryl Felson a get-out-of-jail-free card in exchange for nothing. And worse yet, she would have damaged her own credibility with the jury.

No. She had made the correct decision. She had presented a strong enough case with Arabeth Albertson's testimony. Besides, she knew this all-white jury wouldn't need much prodding to convict this black defendant. Personally, she hated prejudice of all kinds, but in the courtroom, if it worked to her favor, so that a guilty person would get the punishment he deserved, she rationalized that the end justified the means.

Angela Hammerly walked up close to the jury, placing her hands on the railing in front of them. She spoke so softly that observers at the back of the courtroom could barely hear her.

"Ladies and Gentlemen of the jury, Sam Spokane was a wonderful man." As

anyone could guess, she had started softly so she could crescendo to a dramatic conclusion.

“He touched the lives of hundreds of kids over many, many years at his bicycle shop. We’ll probably never know how many teenagers, at a critical fork in the road, took the right path because of Sam Spokane’s influence.

“He was a father figure to many, a friend to all. I like to think of our town as a community, a family. And our family is hurting today—diminished by the loss of this dear man.”

She pointed to the defendant, but not in a rude, intimidating way. Rather, she seemed to reach out to him. “Kantrell Jamison is also a member of our family. And as such, we hate to see him facing life in prison. But just like the uncle or cousin who can’t seem to stay out of trouble—sometimes there’s nothing you can do to help him. And he must pay for what he’s done—even though he’s part of the family.

“We have no way of knowing what Kantrell Jamison was thinking when he entered Sam Spokane’s Bicycle Shop on the evening of April 1st. But we do know what he did once he was inside.”

She began to act out what she was saying. “We know that he picked up a bicycle chain, gripped it with both hands, got behind Sam Spokane and pulled the chain tightly across Sam’s neck. We know that he pulled the chain hard enough to leave an impression of the chain links around the front and sides of Sam’s neck. We know that he held Sam Spokane in that position for several minutes.

“Now think about that. It’s not like shooting a gun, where you pull the trigger once and it’s all over. That can happen in an instant. And then there’s no way to undo it. But with strangulation, you must maintain the pressure for several minutes. The victim might pass out in less than a minute. But then you have to continue to shut off the air passage even longer to kill him.

“Kantrell Jamison could have changed his mind after a few seconds. If he had, then Sam Spokane would be alive today. But the defendant continued to pull that bicycle chain tight around Sam Spokane’s neck. He still wanted to kill him after ten seconds, twenty seconds, thirty seconds, sixty seconds, two minutes. He never let up. Until Sam was dead.

“If a man makes you mad and you lash out and punch him in the face, it could kill him, if you hit him hard enough in just the right spot. Or you could push him, and he might fall and hit his head, and that might kill him. Either case might be considered an accident—if you did not intend to kill him.

“But, ladies and gentlemen, if you do what Kantrell Jamison did: wrap a chain around a man’s neck and pull back with all your might for several minutes until he dies—it’s murder. There is no way around it. The defendant purposely and brutally choked the life out of Sam Spokane.

“Why did he murder Mr. Spokane? We don’t know. And we don’t *have* to know. Because no matter what his motive was, the inescapable truth is that he murdered Sam Spokane—in cold blood. So, ladies and gentlemen, you have no choice. You must find Kantrell Jamison guilty of murder.”

Greg Tenorly thought the District Attorney had done a good job. But he was still not convinced beyond reasonable doubt. Obviously, *someone* had murdered Sam Spokane. But not necessarily Kantrell Jamison. He wondered if the other jurors were thinking the same thing.

Troy Blockerman’s blood was boiling. He was ready to vote GUILTY. Let’s get it over with, he thought. He didn’t want to waste another minute on that filthy animal.

Chapter 12

Kyle Serpentine started to shake his head as he left his seat and walked toward the jury box. It was time to get back fully into ‘country boy’ mode. “I gotta admit it. The District Attorney is right, folks. I’m as impressed as all get-out.” He turned and looked at Angela Hammerly. “You proved it, Ms. Hammerly. You did.”

Then back to the jury. “She proved beyond a reasonable doubt that somebody murdered Sam Spokane. That person viciously ‘choked the life out of him,’ as the D.A. put it. Yes, they did. She is 100% correct about that.

“And we heard a witness testify that they saw the defendant wrap that cold, greasy bicycle chain around Sam Spokane’s neck and

Wait a minute. That’s not right. Nobody *witnessed* the murder. Nobody saw Mr. Spokane get strangled.

“But we’re fairly sure that some black fella did it. We did hear testimony that a black man was leaving the bicycle shop at around eight o’clock. But

” He seemed to have a revelation. “

what if that was just some guy who walked in to look at a new bike, and instead found a dead body. And what if he was scared out of his wits, and ran away because he didn’t want anybody to see him there, and think he was the murderer?

“Now, you might say: Come on, nobody would think he was the murdered just because he was black, and was standing over the body, and it was dark outside and nobody else was around.” He let it sink in for a couple of seconds.

“But we *did* hear eyewitness testimony from an 83-year-old woman. And she *did* pass her eye exam. But folks, it’s common knowledge that old people have a harder time seeing at night. Think about your own friends or relatives who avoid driving at night, now that they’re older.

“Mrs. Albertson even admitted she only went out driving one night a week—to

her prayer group meeting. She made a special effort to get to that meeting every week because it was so important to her.

“But why didn’t she drive on other nights of the week? Why not make a trip to the Dairy Queen, or to visit a friend or to buy groceries? We don’t know for sure. We didn’t get a chance to ask her that question. But I think it’s pretty easy to it figure out if you just use the common sense God gave you.

“So, what do we have here? On the one hand, we have a witness who probably saw a black man leaving Sam Spokane’s Bicycle Shop. We’re not sure whether it was actually Mr. Jamison or somebody else. And we have no way of knowing whether that black man, whoever he was, actually committed the murder.

“On the other hand, we have the testimony of Ella Jamison, Kantrell’s mother. She said Kantrell was at home all night, watching a movie with his mom and his little sister during the time of the murder.

“Now in my book, folks, you’ve got a ton of doubt here. And I’m telling you: if you swallow what the District Attorney is trying to feed you, it’s gonna leave a bad taste in your mouth. It may seem good when you first take a bite—but wait ‘til the aftertaste kicks in. There’s all kinds of reasonable doubt here. In fact, so much doggone doubt that it’s downright *unreasonable* to find my client ‘Guilty.’

“You’ll never be able to live with yourself if you go along with the D.A. This young man is innocent. And you must not take away his innocence and his future, based on evidence that’s flimsy, at best.

“I’d like to thank each one of you for your participation in this trial. I feel in my heart that you’ll do the right thing, and that justice will prevail.”

It made sense to Greg Tenorly. There was just too much doubt.

Alexander Littleton had no idea which way he would vote. He just wanted to be jury foreman. That would earn him some respect.

At 69, Nancy Olstead thought *her* eyesight was just fine. She had no problem seeing at night. She was not afraid to drive anywhere at any time of the day or night.

Ronnie Nalestorm was trying to listen carefully, but he kept worrying about his

hardware store—and the truck driver he had just hired. The last guy did major damage to his truck and a load of lumber when he fell asleep at the wheel and went into a ditch. Fortunately, he had only suffered a few scratches and bruises. He hoped this new driver was the type of guy who went to bed at a decent hour.

Many in the courtroom may have noticed that one juror, 30-year-old William ‘Sparky’ Biscayne, was looking down much of the time. It appeared as if he was about to doze off. But he was listening as intently as anyone else on the jury. He just had to dig the rest of that grease and grime out from under his fingernails. The effort was pointless. As soon as the trial was over, he would be back at his auto repair shop, rebuilding the crud he was now removing. But he was proud it was Ford and Chevy crud. He refused to work on imports.

During Kyle Serpentine’s closing, Angela Hammerly had been steaming. But she would not let that second-rate ambulance chaser throw her off her game. “If you had walked into Sam’s Bicycle Shop on April 1, 2006 and found him murdered, what would you have done? You would have called the police. If you were driving by Sam’s shop and you saw someone looking suspicious and in a big hurry to get away—would you study their appearance carefully so you could identify them later if needed? Probably. If your son had committed a murder, would you lie to keep him out of prison? Quite possibly.

“So, you see, there is every reason to believe the defendant is guilty. Let’s not wait until he kills somebody else. Get him off the streets and put him where he belongs—in prison.”

Angela knew she had just undone all of Kyle Serpentine’s damage.

Chapter 13

As the jury walked down the hallway and into the jury room, Greg Tenorly knew he could no longer avoid interaction with Troy Blockerman. What if, during the heat of an argument about the case, he stood up in front of the entire jury and declared Troy a wife beater. He deserved it. Back to reality.

Alexander Littleton quickly seized the chair at one end of the long table. He was a short, wiry fellow. A humorless little man. After 25 years in public utilities, he was finally ready to assert himself. It had been his childhood dream to become Mayor of Coreyville. He directed himself to push, prod, control and outsmart the others. He must start from a position of power. Maybe someday he would dominate the city council the same way he was about to dominate this jury. Before everyone had a chance to sit, he said, "Okay, first we need to elect a foreman."

Mary McJohnson and Judy McPhearson were sitting next to each other. 'The Macs', as they would be remembered. They looked at each other as if to say: I don't know who to nominate. They were both 40-year-old stay-at-home moms who seemed more interested in exchanging parenting tips than deciding a man's fate.

Elsie Olstead didn't hesitate. "I nominate Mr. Littleton as foreman." The widow had served on a several juries during her 69 years. She knew the drill.

"I second the motion. All in favor raise your hand," said John Nihmbor. He was sick of looking at four walls. He had just retired after 40-plus years as an accountant for an oil and gas exploration company. The only place he wanted to be was on the golf course. Instead, he was stuck in a stinky little room that wasn't fit for a janitor's closet.

Most of the jurors raised their hands. Troy Blockerman had a better choice for foreman, but the majority had already spoken. The most important thing was to do it fast, and get out of there.

Alexander Littleton said, "Alright then. Why don't we address each other by first names, if that is agreeable?"

“Fine with me, Alex.” Troy figured it would be over soon. He could pretend for a few minutes that this nerd reject actually mattered.

“I *prefer* ‘Alexander.’”

They were already having second thoughts about electing him foreman. He saw himself as *Alexander the Great*. They saw *Alex the Geek*.

Ronnie Nalestorm just wanted to get back to his hardware store. “Could we go ahead and take a vote to see—”

“—Let’s go ahead and take a vote to see where we stand,” Alexander said quickly, as though saying it faster would make everyone forget that Ronnie had just said it. “We each have slips of paper and a pen. We will vote by secret ballot, and then I will read the votes aloud.”

Each juror wrote down his vote and passed it to Alexander. Seven ‘Guilty,’ five ‘Not Guilty.’

Troy couldn’t believe five of the jurors were so stupid. “You’ve got to be kidding me. You *know* he did it!”

Sparky Biscayne chimed in. “That woman saw him leaving the scene of the crime. And he’s black. Probably in some gang.”

Greg couldn’t let that remark slide. “It doesn’t matter what color he is. And we don’t even have any gangs here in Coreyville.”

Troy said, “Look, he’s poor. He wanted some money for drugs, or to buy a car or whatever. It doesn’t matter. He waited until it was late, and Sam was there alone. Then he went in to rob the place, and he and Sam got into a fight. You know how stubborn Sam was—he wouldn’t have given up the money easily.

“So, the kid went off on Sam, and grabbed a bicycle chain, and strangled him with it. He’s *going* to prison. So, those of you who voted ‘Not Guilty’ might as well save us all a lot of time, and switch your vote right now.”

“I disagree.” Greg could see the fire in Troy’s eyes as Troy realized that he was one of the ‘bleeding-heart liberals’ who voted the wrong way. “Even if Mrs. Albertson *did* see Kantrell Jamison outside Sam’s shop that night, it still doesn’t

prove he did it.”

“Yeah, right. He just happened to be out in front right after the murder.” Troy was ready to rumble. If he had a beer bottle in his hand, he would have cracked it across the edge of the table and

“And that might not have even been him. We don’t know how well she could see at night,” said Greg.

“Are you telling me you believe that story about him being at home with his momma and his sister?” Troy had a talent for sarcasm. “They’re a wonderful little family, and they were just watching a heart-warming family film together. And, oh yeah—the DVD had not yet been released, so, no problem—they just got a friend to illegally download it off the internet. And, oh, by the way, they can’t remember the name of that friend. And they just don’t know what happened to that DVD. Yeah. That’s believable.”

“Okay, I’ll admit: that story about the DVD *did* sound fishy. But that could just be a mother trying to protect her son. It doesn’t prove he killed Sam.”

“It does kinda make you wonder why she’s lying for him, though.” Gail Silestone was reconsidering her ‘Not Guilty’ vote. At 30, she was still single, and had not dated in years. Gail was considered by most to be a tomboy. Some thought she was gay. The truth was she liked being alone. Besides, she wasn’t really alone. Hundreds of people came to see her every day at the Post Office. She had worked for the U.S. Postal Service since she was 19, and had extensive knowledge of postal regulations, as well as eleven year’s worth of daily dirt from people who couldn’t keep secrets.

Mary McJohnson spoke up for the mothers of the world. “A mother’s most important job is to protect her children. Of course his mother lied. You can’t fault her for that.”

By the end of the day, after a considerable amount of discussion, everyone was eager to go home. The final vote for the day came in at: nine ‘Guilty,’ three ‘Not Guilty.’

But the day was not over for Greg. He hoped he could find enough energy to make it through choir rehearsal.

Chapter 14

Choir rehearsal would begin in a few minutes. Greg's office at the church was small, but well positioned, right off the choir room. There was an annoying rattle coming from his old computer; but he really loved the new 17-inch flat panel monitor on his desk. One of his choir members had donated it.

His Kimball upright piano was at least fifty years old, but still sounded great. There was a bookcase of solo music and textbooks behind him. In the corner were several boxes of sample choral pieces, which he had not yet reviewed.

Greg rushed to prepare the Order of Service for Sunday morning. Each week, Dr. Huff gave him the topic for the sermon, and Greg selected hymns, choruses, and choral music that would support the message.

Sometimes matching the choral music to the sermon was difficult, since he liked to rehearse a piece for at least three weeks before performing it on Sunday. Normally, the choir would rehearse six to seven pieces per week, since some of them were of greater difficulty.

Margery Allen knocked and poked her head in. "We have a visitor tonight." Margery was the church organist and the official choir rehearsal greeter for the month.

It was so unusual to have visitors at choir rehearsal. Greg constantly sought recruits, but rarely found any. "Great." Immediately, his attention went back to the screen. He wanted to finish up, so he could go home right after rehearsal. He was worn out from a day of arguing with fellow jurors.

"Her name is Cynthia."

It took a couple of seconds to sink in. Greg looked up, but Margery was already gone. No. It couldn't be *her*. But what if it was? Why would she come to choir rehearsal? He was usually relaxed at rehearsals. It was his favorite time of the week. But now he felt tense, and he wondered if it would show. It had to be some other Cynthia.

As he walked into the choir room, he pretended to be organizing his music and

paperwork. He stepped up to his music stand, and said, “Let’s have a word of prayer, and then we’ll get started.

Lord, we thank you for this time to come together to sing your praises. Please help us as we prepare for Sunday, that our singing will bring glory and honor to you. Amen.”

He looked up, and his eyes were immediately drawn to the middle of the alto section. By her gorgeous red hair.

“Uh, everyone, I would like to introduce—”, Margery read it from a card, “Cynthia Blockerman. Cynthia visited our services a couple of times, and says she was impressed with the choir, and wanted to give us a try.”

They were all so pleased, talking among themselves. Some of them, no doubt, were commenting on her beauty.

Margery continued. “So, Cynthia—we hope you enjoy singing with us and will consider joining the choir. No pressure, though.”

Everybody laughed. It was exhilarating to feel that the choir might be *growing* for a change.

Greg hoped his smile didn’t look the way it felt: nervous. “Yes, we’re so glad you came tonight, Cynthia. And we hope we won’t scare you off.”

One of the men quipped, “Well, *Harry* might scare her off.”

Greg usually joked around with the choir a good bit, so tonight should not be any different. “Yeah, Harry—don’t tell any of your corny jokes tonight, okay?” Before the laughter and talking died down, he said, “Alright. Enough goofing off. Take your “When I Survey” and open to page three, the pickup to bar 24. Margery—lead us in, beginning at bar 22.”

The rehearsal went surprisingly well. Greg could hear Cynthia singing. She did have a very nice alto voice. But what a weird day.

Several choir members stayed for a while to visit with Cynthia. Greg had stepped into his office to make some final edits to the Order of Service. Margery offered to walk Cynthia out to her car, but Cynthia wanted to stay and talk to

Greg. So, Margery said goodbye. Everybody else had already gone home.

“Greg, could I talk to you for a minute?”

“Sure, come on in.” He stood and offered Cynthia the same chair she sat in on Monday. Was that really just two days ago?

“Troy’s getting worse.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I hope I didn’t upset you—showing up here tonight without warning.”

“No, not at all. I *was* a little surprised.”

“I loved singing in high school choir and then for a few semesters in college. I was curious to see whether I still had it. I *used* to be good.”

“I heard you tonight. You sounded *very* good. And you were learning your part quickly.”

“Thanks. But I have to admit that one of the reasons I came was to get out of the house. Troy thought I was joking when I told him where I was going. But at least he didn’t try to stop me. Maybe by the time I get home he will have already passed out.”

“He drinks until he’s *unconscious*?”

“Yeah. A lot of nights, he doesn’t even come to bed. When I get up the next morning I find him slumped over in his chair. I don’t know how he manages to go to work. But I’ve got to figure out a way to leave him.”

“So, you’ve made up your mind?”

“I have to. I just can’t take it anymore. Sometimes I wish he would just die. That when I find him in the morning, he’d be dead.”

Neither one of them had noticed Margery walking through the choir room to Greg’s open door. “Sorry to interrupt, but I just wanted to let y’all know that the street light is out. So, if you have a flashlight, you’d better use it to get to your

car. I tripped and nearly fell.”

“Are you okay, Margery?” Greg *was* concerned about Margery’s health. But of greater concern: how much did she hear?

Chapter 15

Cynthia had braced herself for what was coming. It was 10:00 PM, and what did she think she was doing staying out so late? Had she been whoring around? But she didn't care what Troy said tonight. It was worth it. And she discovered that she could still sing, and it was so much fun.

He would throw a fit if she told him she wanted to go every Wednesday night and every Sunday morning. But he was going to yell about *something*. Might as well be something she cared about.

Sports Center was just starting, and Troy seemed more interested in watching baseball highlights than in hassling her. Maybe he just didn't have the energy to abuse his wife tonight.

She decided to say as little as possible. "Hi."

"Yeah, whatever. Hope you had fun," Troy said in his typical sarcastic tone. "From now on, you need to get your butt home at a decent time. I'm not gonna put up with you running all over town for half the night!" He already had a stack of empties mounting beside his recliner. Now he was eating some crackers, cheese and an apple—a fairly healthy snack, except for the beer he was washing it down with.

He liked to use his Bowie knife while sitting in front of the TV. The eight-inch blade was so sharp that cutting an apple was like slicing through warm Jell-O. But the most fun he had with the knife was pointing it at Cynthia while screaming obscenities. That really freaked her out. He loved it. So, he kept it on his TV tray throughout the night, ready to go.

Cynthia walked through the hallway and into the bedroom. She closed the door and hoped it would remain closed until morning. If she were lucky this would be a night spent alone. He seemed well on the way to passing out in his chair.

She preferred showering at night. Although, if Troy decided it was a good night for sex, she would shower again. She couldn't wait to get his smell off of her. The love she once had for him was gone.

The bathroom was one place she had been able to maintain a sense of privacy. And the shower was her favorite place to think. It was nice-sized, complete with massage showerhead and built-in bench. She would sometimes sit and relax in her steamy refuge for thirty minutes or more. As she rubbed the soapy bar of Caress onto her wet, smooth body, she imagined how it would feel to be touched by the hands of a *loving* man—someone the exact opposite of Troy. She longed for a relationship of mutual respect, honesty, and love. She deserved a better life.

*

The man in the black pickup checked his watch: 10:25 PM. His truck was similar to the many Fords and Chevy's parked in driveways and along the street. His cell rang.

"Yeah?"

"Marty, where have you been? I've been calling you for hours."

"My phone died. I had to recharge it."

"So, what's happening with the trial?"

"By the end of the day, the vote was 9 to 3, 'Guilty.'"

"What? You're in charge of this thing, Marty. You've got to get this kid off. Put more pressure on Cynthia Blockerman. That redheaded bombshell can turn Greg Tenorly into a superman in that jury room if she tries hard enough! Make her sleep with him!"

"Don't worry, Boss—I've got it under control," Marty said with calm confidence.

"I'm warning you. If you don't get this done for me, you'll be sorry." Buford hung up.

Marty raised his binoculars. Troy would be ready in a couple of hours.

*

Cynthia had somehow learned to sleep with a drunk, knife-wielding lunatic in

the house. But it was not a *good* sleep. She often had terrible nightmares.

Something woke her at 2:27 AM. The TV was still on in the living room. More than likely, Troy had passed out by now. She stepped into the hallway and walked to the kitchen for a drink of cold water from the fridge. She could hear what sounded like an infomercial. Troy must be out cold. He hated infomercials.

Walking into the living room as quietly as she could, she slipped up behind his chair. He was definitely out—leaning back, head falling to one side, drooling and snoring. There was an empty Ritz cracker sleeve, an apple core

and the knife, lying on his TV tray in front of him.

Cynthia reached slowly, carefully for the knife. Had he really passed out, or was he merely sleeping? It took a large volume of alcohol to knock out this hulking guy. Her pulse was pounding in her head. Could a woman her age have a stroke?

How she hated the knife she was holding in her hand. But he would never again threaten her with it. She positioned the razor-sharp edge just millimeters from his exposed neck. One quick stroke across the jugular would end her nightmares. He would never curse at her again. Never push her down or hit her.

Her brain fast-forwarded. She looked down. Her hands were dripping red onto the beige carpet. The knife in her hand was covered with blood. Had she cut herself?

Then she looked at Troy. He began to convulse in his chair as blood pumped out of the gash in his neck. The blood from his brain was flowing down his chest instead of back to his heart.

She stood in shock for what could have been minutes or just seconds, as the gushing of blood began to diminish. He quit bleeding. Yes, because he's *dead!* Your husband is dead—and YOU KILLED HIM! She dropped the knife on the floor. An ice-cold chill shot through her body, making her shiver violently.

The nightmares were getting too real. She rolled over in bed and tried to go back to sleep.

Chapter 16

Greg had forgotten to close his bedroom window blinds. And after a couple of hours of sleeplessness, his mind began to play tricks on him. The streetlight projected its beams through tree branches, leaves and power lines, forming interesting shapes on the wall across from the window. The longer he studied them, the more fascinating they became.

How could he go to sleep and miss the rest of the show? One shadow looked like Cynthia. The tall, slim body. And there he was, standing in front of her, complete with protruding belly. He *must* go on a diet. It looked like they were talking. He tried to imagine what they were saying. He had been staring at that wall for way too long.

Cynthia was a beautiful, sexy, intelligent, caring woman. And she seemed to really like him. But, Number 1: she was married. Unhappily married, for sure. But still—married. Number 2: If she ever divorced her husband and was free to date whoever she wanted, surely it would not be Greg. She could get a younger, smarter, more handsome guy, with more money and

more everything.

But reality could not quell his imagination. If he tried hard enough, he could almost see Cynthia's shadow kissing his. He could almost taste her sweet lips.

*

Cynthia was so shaken by her dream that she was having trouble falling back to sleep. Nightmares occurred nearly every night—but none this intense. Her mind started wandering to Greg. She was surprised by her attraction to him. He was balding, out of shape, and a few years older than her.

In spite of all that, an image formed clearly in her mind—the two of them in a loving embrace. She felt warm and safe in his arms. But how would she ever break free from her maniac husband?

Besides, how could Greg ever forgive her for what she had done? She sensed that his capacity for forgiveness was much greater than that of most people, but

still

She got out of bed and walked into the kitchen to get a glass of cold water from the fridge. It was refreshing. But then she realized that cool liquid flowing down into her body might only serve to exacerbate the insomnia. She needed to settle down and get to sleep soon in order to have any hopes of functioning normally the next day.

Business customers would not be impressed with a baggy-eyed banker. That woman looked like she was out partying all night, they might say. Is she a heavy drinker? Maybe I should take my business elsewhere.

She could not afford to jeopardize her career.

Cynthia decided to check on Troy. She would turn off the TV if he had already passed out. But she would go into the living room very quietly, in case he was just sleeping. She had made the mistake of waking him one time. He had called her every vile name known to man. The only thing worse than a drunken Troy was a prematurely-awakened drunken Troy.

It was rather dark in the living room, with the TV providing limited, uneven illumination. As she approached the back of his recliner, she noticed something lying on the floor. An object, next to his chair. She couldn't quite make it out. As she inched her way closer, she could not take her eyes off the object. Maybe an apple slice or a crushed beer can or

the Bowie knife?

As she stepped to the side of his chair, she redirected her attention from the floor to Troy. The erratic lighting from a *Law and Order* episode revealed something streaming down Troy's shirt. And his head was resting awkwardly on his chest.

Forgetting about her fear of waking him, Cynthia reached for the nearby light switch. She turned, and was horrified to see that the object on the floor was the Bowie knife—the *bloody* Bowie knife. Troy's shirt looked as though someone had opened a can of red paint and thrown it at him. The thick, crimson liquid flowed down his shirt, onto his pants, and into the fabric of the chair.

She called his name several times. But he didn't move, and didn't appear to be breathing. She pressed two fingers against the inside of his wrist. His skin felt

cool. She could not feel a pulse. Who did this?

Then she realized the killer could still be in the house. She checked the kitchen door. It was locked. The front door was locked. But what about the windows? There was no sign that anything had been stolen or even disturbed. Why did someone want Troy dead? And did that same person want to kill *her*?

Cynthia ran to the bedroom, without considering that the killer might be waiting there. She grabbed her phone from the nightstand, flipped it open and started to call 911—then stopped. She called Greg instead.

“Hello?”

Cynthia was surprised that Greg sounded wide-awake. “I’m sorry for calling you at this hour, Greg.”

“Are you okay?”

“No—no, I’m not.”

“What did Troy do to you?” He could feel his anger building.

“He’s dead.”

Greg had never felt such fear and elation at the same time. Such thankfulness, yet guilt. Troy was out of the way. Great. They both wanted that. But not by *killing* him. Had Troy finally pushed her too far?

He must have beaten her up, and she couldn’t take it anymore. She might have had a gun hidden away in case this day ever came. She probably waited until he was in bed and sound asleep. Greg could picture the blood and brains splattered all over the bed and walls. He could also picture Cynthia in a prison uniform. NO!

“I’ll get there as fast as I can—but, you need to call the police right now, Cynthia.” Everybody knows that it always looks suspicious when you wait to call the police. Surely she could plead self-defense, considering the way Troy abused her. But she never *told* the police about the abuse. She only told her mother

and Greg. That could be a big problem.

“Okay. I will.”

Chapter 17

Greg got dressed in record time, started to rush out the door, and froze—one hand on the doorknob, the other on the light switch. Every cell in his body was screaming *rescue Cynthia*. He wanted to run to her, take her in his arms, and hold her until the darkness passed_._

But he must not get to her house before the police. He paced the floor, looking at his watch every twenty or thirty seconds, forcing himself to wait fifteen minutes.

It was a five-minute drive to Cynthia's house. He stayed well below the speed limit, still not certain he had waited long enough. He barely knew her. Three meetings and a few short phone conversations. Why did he feel so drawn to her? Was she feeling it too?

As he turned the corner onto her street, he could see three patrol cars and a couple of black sedans in front of her house. Good. But maybe he shouldn't be seen there at all. What was his connection to Cynthia Blockerman? Why had she called him? He decided to drive by her house and come back after the police were gone.

Headlights were coming toward him from the opposite end of the street. He could pull into someone's driveway and turn around. No, that would be too obvious. Better to drive by. After all, he was just a Coreysville citizen out for an evening cruise. Yeah, at 3:15 in the morning.

The other car stopped in front Cynthia's house. As Greg was approaching, a woman got out of the car. It was Angela Hammerly—the District Attorney! She looked directly at Greg as he passed.

Greg panicked. He nearly jammed on the accelerator, but caught himself. What if the D.A. had recognized him? What if she thought Greg and Cynthia were having an affair? *Motive*. Why hadn't he thought this through before driving to her house?

This could make quite a scandal. By day, two men serving on a jury, arguing angrily. By night, one man having an affair with the other man's wife, conspiring to knock off the husband. Oh, what a mess. He could be charged in connection

with the murder, and even if acquitted, he would lose his church job and probably all of his private music students.

*

I was nearly 4:30 AM when Greg's cell rang.

"Cynthia?"

"Greg, where are you?"

"I'm sorry. I'm at home. I drove to your house, but then I saw all the cars, and thought I'd better stay away."

"I know. The policemen and a detective and a crime scene investigator and even the D.A. were all over the house. It's good that you didn't stop. I don't know what I was thinking, asking you to come. And they're still there. But, they let me leave. I'm on my way to the Holiday Inn. I couldn't stay at the house. I may never be able to go back there again."

"Cynthia, I'm afraid the D.A. saw me when I drove by."

"You think she recognized you?"

"I don't know, but she might have recognized my *car*. It's the only one like it in town, you know. And if she suspects that we're having an affair, she might figure we plotted to kill Troy."

"An affair? Would she think that?"

"I don't know, but it's going to be hard to look her in the eye tomorrow if I pass her in the hallway."

"I don't think you'll need to be at the courthouse tomorrow. I overheard her say she was planning to ask the judge to postpone jury deliberations until this murder can be fully investigated. I guess she wants to make sure Troy wasn't killed because he was a juror."

"But, I thought that *you*

“

“What? You thought I killed Troy?”

“Well, you didn’t say, and I thought he was beating you, and you were just protecting yourself.”

“No. I got up at about 2:30 to get a drink of water and found him dead in the living room. Somebody cut his throat with his own knife. I was terrified when I found him—trying to comprehend that he was really dead, and then realizing the killer could still be in the house.”

“Cynthia, I’m so sorry you had to go through this. I wish I could have helped you in some way.”

“You did. And you’re helping me right now. Just talking to you makes me feel better.”

“Good.”

“Okay, I’m pulling up to the hotel. I’m going to try to get some rest. Talk to you tomorrow, Greg. Bye.”

“Goodbye, Cynthia.”

*

Mark Myers had investigated numerous murder cases throughout his career in Fort Worth. But by age 55, he was feeling the burnout. He took an early retirement and moved to Coreyville. His mother and his sister lived there, so it had been an easy decision. But after a year of trying to enjoy fishing and golfing, he heard there was an opening for a detective, and couldn’t resist. After all, he was still a relatively young man.

Angela Hammerly didn’t mind getting out of bed in the middle of the night to go to the scene of a murder. Two murders in one year—wow. Coreyville averaged only one murder every five years.

“So, what do you think happened here, Mark?”

“There are no signs of forced entry. So, that makes the wife the prime suspect. And, although she didn’t strike me as someone who would do this—look at that pile of beer cans—on a Wednesday night.

“So, you’ve got a husband who gets drunk every night. Then he starts cursing and beating up on the wife. She puts up with it night after night. Finally, she’s had enough. She waits until he’s passed out, grabs his knife, one quick slice, and her misery is over.”

“Okay, that makes sense,” said Angela.

“Or, she’s having an affair. She wants out of the marriage, but the husband says he’ll come after her if she tries to leave. He’ll track her down like a dog and cut her body into a hundred pieces after he tortures her. So, she waits until he’s good and drunk, lets the boyfriend in, and he does the deed. But if so, they blew it—they should have made it look like a home invasion.”

“Yeah. So, she probably did it herself.”

“That would be my guess—unless the CSI comes up with something. Should we pick her up?”

“No, not tonight. We’ll bring her in tomorrow. She’s not going anywhere.”

Chapter 18

“I’m sorry—the D.A. is not available right now. I’m Assistant District Attorney, Andrea Newly. What can I do for you?”

“This is Dorothy Spokane. I have information regarding the trial. Could you please come to my house and take my statement?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“And I have an important document for you. I would come up there, but I don’t have anyone to drive me. And it’s hard taking a cab because of my wheelchair. You might want to bring the sheriff with you. It could be dangerous.”

“Of course. I have your address here: 207 Maple Street. We’ll get there as soon as we can. Thanks.”

Finally, Andrea would get to do something important.

*

It had been forty-five minutes since Dorothy Spokane had talked to the A.D.A. What was taking so long? The letter in her hand would explain everything. She had already heard about the murder of Troy Blockerman. Word traveled fast in Coreyville.

Although she didn’t want Sam’s reputation to be tarnished, she had no choice now. The truth had to be told. The killings must stop. In her gut, she knew Arabeth Albertson’s death had not been an accident. But she hadn’t said anything because she was protecting Sam.

The man walking toward her house was dressed in a gas company uniform, but Dorothy didn’t recognize him. It wasn’t Jimmy or Hoyt. What if her phone had been tapped? At least she was finally doing the right thing. But what good is that if the truth is lost?

She needed to tell someone—fast. She called the District Attorney’s office. No answer. She could call a friend. No. She needed someone who knew the details

of the trial. Greg Tenorly. Her intuition told her he was honest and smart. She hoped she was right. Hurry, before it's too late.

She grabbed the Coreyville phone book, found Greg's home number and dialed as quickly as she could. She wished she had upgraded to a touch-tone phone. The old rotary dialer was dependable, but so slow. She had never needed to dial this fast before. It began to ring. But maybe he was at his studio

ring

or at the church

ring

or at the diner

ring

or riding around in his big red car!

"Hello?"

"Greg. This is Dorothy Spokane."

Greg was not fully awake. He had gone back to sleep after getting the official call about postponing jury deliberations. "Oh, Hi."

"I need to tell you something important." She sounded frantic.

"Wait—you know I'm not supposed to talk to you. It's against—"

"—a man is about to kill me!"

Greg was now fully alert. "Who? What man?"

"Just let me say what I've got to say before it's too late."

"Okay."

"It's Buford. He's the one behind all of the killings."

“Buford?” Greg was confused. Buford who? What killings?

“Somebody’s at my back door trying to get in!”

“What?”

“Get out of my house, you murderer!”

Greg listened in disbelief, as the phone hit the hardwood floor. Then he heard someone walking toward the phone.

A gruff voice said, “Who is this?”

Greg slammed down the phone and was surprised it didn’t break. He had no idea who Buford was, but he was going to find out. He ran to his computer and googled ‘Buford Coreyville.’ There it was—right at the top. An article from the *Coreyville Courier*, the local paper. He clicked on it and scanned the article quickly.

_Buford Bellowin, who grew up in Coreyville, is now a famous defense attorney practicing in Dallas. Insiders say he is positioning himself to run for governor in a few years. He attended Scarborough Elementary

blah, blah, blah

worked at Sam’s Bicycle Shop as a teenager. _Whoa. That must be the connection. But how? Why would a big-shot Dallas attorney care about what’s going on in this little town?

*

“Am I being charged?”

“No, no, Mrs. Blockerman. We’re still investigating. I just need to ask you a few questions.” Angela, like most district attorneys, and lawyers in general, had perfected her acting (lying) skills. Why should the good guys play fair? The bad guys don’t.

“Okay. I have nothing to hide.”

“We found no evidence of a breakin at your house, but we did find something curious. The doorknob on your back door had no fingerprints.”

“Okay,” Cynthia said, wondering what the D.A. was getting at.

“Don’t you think that’s a little odd?”

“I guess.”

“Did you wipe off that doorknob after the murder?”

“No. The _last_ thing I was thinking about was cleaning.” What a weird question.

“I just thought you might have wiped it off after your boyfriend left.” Angela studied Cynthia’s eyes and face for a reaction. She saw confusion and anger—not the reaction she had hoped for.

“What? I don’t have a boyfriend. Is this why you called me in here—to try to trick me into making a confession? I won’t confess to something I didn’t do.”

Angela was visibly annoyed by the knock on the door. She yanked it open, frightening the young clerk.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Hammerly, but the A.D.A. said to interrupt you.”

The power is already going to Andrea’s head, thought Angela. I’ve got to set her straight about how’s in charge here.

“Dorothy Spokane has been murdered, and her house has been ransacked.”

Angela thanked the clerk and sent her away. She turned back to Cynthia and said, “Thanks for coming in. I will need to talk to you again soon, so don’t leave town.”

I’m not talking to you again without an attorney, thought Cynthia. She felt ill as she walked out of the building to her car. Her husband was dead. Sure, the marriage had died many months ago. She didn’t love Troy anymore, but she still cared about him. Now she was being accused of either killing him or getting a boyfriend to do it. The D.A. was shameless.

As she drove toward the Holiday Inn, her cell rang.

“Hello?”

“Cynthia, it’s Greg. How are you doing?”

“I’m okay, I guess, considering I just got dragged through the slime by our wonderful D.A.”

“What do you mean?”

“She accused me of having an affair, and getting my boyfriend to kill Troy. Can you believe it?”

“What makes her think you have a boyfriend?”

“She said the doorknob in the kitchen was wiped clean, and implied I wiped off my boyfriend’s fingerprints after he left.”

“I’m sorry. What a mess.” Apparently, the D.A. had not mentioned Greg’s name. Hopefully she had not recognized him last night.

“Yeah.”

“Cynthia, I’ve got to make a trip.”

“Where are you going?”

“I don’t want to say over the phone. But I’m afraid if I don’t do this, there will be more murders.”

“Speaking of murders—Dorothy Spokane is dead.”

“I was afraid of that.”

“Why?”

“Cynthia, you should go with me, and I’ll explain what I know.”

“I can’t. The D.A. told me not to leave town.”

“You could be the next one on the murderer’s list. Come with me.”

“You know what? I don’t care what the D.A. says. Come by and pick me up.
Room 112.”

“I’ll be there in five minutes.”

Chapter 19

Marty's king size bed, 27-inch color TV, private bathroom, and air conditioning made him feel like a millionaire. He didn't miss prison at all.

Cynthia Blockerman's room was just below his. With x-ray vision, he could have shot her through the floor from where he stood. He liked her. But he wouldn't hesitate to cut her throat or choke her to death, if necessary. He just wanted to be finished with this job, finished with Buford.

Marty dialed one of Buford's unlisted cell numbers. There was a different number to call every few days. Buford was taking special precautions. If Marty was caught, Buford didn't want the police to have a phone record trail leading back to him.

"Yes?"

"It's me. Troy Blockerman is no longer a problem."

"What do you mean? What did you do?"

"He drank too much beer and passed out in his living room. Then somebody sliced his throat. He won't be voting 'Guilty' anymore."

"Why did you do that?"

"Hey—you told me to make sure the kid gets off. That's what I'm trying to do. Troy Blockerman was determined to hang him, and he was convincing the rest of the jury to go along. I had to stop him."

"But who are the police going to blame for his murder? This could take us both down."

"Nah. Right now, the D.A. believes the wife did it. Apparently, good ole boy Troy was knocking her around every night. The D.A. figures Cynthia just got tired of the abuse. And

there was another problem I had to take care of."

“What?” Don’t tell me you’ve murdered the judge, thought Buford.

“Dorothy Spokane called the district attorney’s office this morning. Good thing I had her house bugged. She asked the A.D.A. to come over so she could give her information about the case. So, I got there first.”

“What did she tell you?”

“She didn’t tell *me* anything. She was on the phone and I heard her say ‘Buford,’ so I shot her.”

“You shot her! What else did she say?”

“Something about Buford being responsible for all of the killings.”

“Did she give a last name?”

“No. And whoever was on the other end of the line hung up. But I couldn’t look up their number because she had an old-fashioned rotary phone. I can get a copy of her phone records.”

“That’s okay. I can take care of that. What did you find in the house?”

“She had a letter that was written by her husband. It was sitting on the coffee table, so I think she planned to give it to the D.A. He had written on the envelope, *Open Upon My Death*. So, apparently he suspected somebody might try to kill him.”

“What did you do with it? You didn’t open it, did you?”

“No. I’m holding it for you.”

“Burn it. Don’t open it, just burn it.”

“Okay.”

“Do it as soon as you hang up.”

“I understand.”

“But, Marty, you’re out of control.”

“Come on—you know I had no choice. She was going to tell them something, and I’m sure it was something you don’t want the D.A. to hear. Look, I don’t care what you did, or what’s in this letter. I’m just doing my job.”

“You know what, Marty? You’re done.”

“What do you mean? The trial’s not over. We have a deal. I’m not going back!”

“It’s okay. I just don’t require your services anymore. Your debt is paid. So, slip out of town quietly and go your merry way. You’re free. But don’t forget to burn that letter. Do it now. Goodbye.”

Marty felt like he had just been fired, and he didn’t like it. He wanted nothing more than to be done with this job. But he wanted to *finish* the job. Marty Crumb might have been one of the lowest of the lowlives—but he was not a quitter. And he could not allow himself to be fired.

As he walked into the bathroom with Sam Spokane’s unopened letter, he placed a Marlboro between his cracked lips and flicked his lighter. He lit his cigarette and took a long drag, studying the handwriting on the envelope. What was this horrible secret about Buford? He would burn the letter over the toilet and then flush the ashes.

*

Buford wanted to kick himself for getting involved with Marty. It had seemed like a good idea—a cheap way to get it done. But Marty had become a loose cannon. If Buford let this go on, everybody connected with the trial would end up dead. And eventually the police would be at his door. He had to take immediate action. He unlocked his lower right drawer and exchanged the cell phone in his hand for a different one.

“Yeah?”

“This is B.B.”

“Who’s the mark?”

“Hang on. What’s this going to cost me?”

“Ten Grand.”

Buford felt a sharp pain in his stomach. “That’s too much.”

“Then get somebody else. Goodbye—”

“—wait. Okay.”

“Then it’s agreed? Ten-thousand?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Who, where, and when?”

“His name is Marty Crumb. He’s currently at the Holiday Inn in Coreyville, Texas, room 212. I don’t know how long he’ll be there. So, do it as soon as possible, and let me know when it’s done.”

“Got it.”

“I didn’t get your name.”

“John X.”

Chapter 20

Greg checked his watch as he walked into the lobby of the Holiday Inn. Nearly 11:00 AM. He was afraid everyone would be watching him.

The desk clerk was talking to a couple who were checking out. A housekeeper was cleaning up the stale pastries and other remains of the breakfast bar. Three or four late risers were reading the paper and drinking coffee. Two men in suits were sitting at a small table, doing business over a laptop.

Nobody seemed to notice Greg. But he should have picked up Cynthia at the back door. They should be keeping a low profile. There was a killer somewhere in Coreyville.

The elevator doors opened as Greg was passing by. He instinctively took a quick glance, and saw a creepy little man standing alone in the elevator, staring at him. Greg reprimanded himself for judging the man by his appearance.

Then he had a chilling thought: what if it was the killer? Greg tried to calm himself. The man was probably a wonderful husband and grandfather, but he was the scariest looking person Greg had ever seen. He just wanted to get Cynthia and get out of town in a hurry.

He located Room 112 and knocked. The light showing through the peephole went dark and Greg knew Cynthia was looking at him. When she opened the door, he was surprised that she was dressed only in a slip.

“I’m sorry I’m not ready yet, but I just got here two minutes ago.”

“That’s okay.” Greg tried to hide the fact that he was freaking out. He might have just passed the killer in the hall. “Why don’t you wear something casual? You know—clothes you wouldn’t normally wear on a workday. Maybe then nobody will recognize you.”

“Yeah, good idea.”

“‘Because if the police catch you leaving town they might arrest you.’”

“That’s a happy thought.” Why was this happening to her? Cynthia’s life had been uncomplicated a week ago. Working at the bank by day, being abused at home by night. An uncomplicated life, but certainly not a *good* life.

“Don’t worry—you won’t get caught. Here—this will help.” Greg had a Texas Rangers cap in his hand. He tossed it on the bed next to her suitcase.

“Good. I’ll put my hair up. Try to look like a guy.”

Her figure was slender, yet curvy in just the right places. “You could *never* look like a guy,” Greg said, smiling.

Cynthia returned the smile, slightly embarrassed.

How could she not know how beautiful she is? Her modesty made her even more beautiful.

She selected some items from her suitcase, picked up the baseball cap, and walked into the bathroom. “Give me five minutes.”

Was he helping Cynthia escape from danger or putting her life in greater jeopardy? He wasn’t sure. But if she was with him, he could do his best to protect her. But *how* would he protect her? He didn’t have a gun or any other weapon. And he was not much of a fighter.

She stepped out of the bathroom, wearing white walking shoes, pink shorts and a pink and white tank top. Greg was amazed at her long, lovely legs.

Cynthia seemed gratified by Greg’s reaction to her appearance. However, if he had kept his eyes on her legs for one more second, he would have gone from admirer to gawker. She had pulled her hair back into two small pigtails and topped it off with Greg’s baseball cap.

Her makeup was gone, revealing a face full of freckles. Greg wouldn’t have recognized her. She looked almost tomboyish—except for those legs. She also looked much younger. Great, he thought—except that people might think he was a dirty old man, having a fling with an under-aged girl. Or they might think she was his daughter. He didn’t know which was worse. Ah, Thursday—a good day to feel old.

“Why don’t you wait for me at the back door, and I’ll drive around and pick you up. The fewer people who see us together, the better.”

“Okay.”

She walked down the hallway, toward the back of the hotel. He headed in the opposite direction.

Greg wanted to run through the lobby and out the door as fast as he could, but he forced himself to walk at a normal pace, so as not to draw any special attention. In fifteen minutes, he and Cynthia would be safely out of town. Once they were on the highway, Greg’s blood pressure might return to normal. There was nobody in the parking lot except a family, busy loading suitcases into their car.

He got into the Bonneville and drove around to the back of the hotel. But the car was just so big and so red. It was like driving a car with a huge billboard on top of it that said *Look everybody, here’s Greg Tenorly leaving town with Cynthia Blockerman*. It was the first time he wished he still had his old beige sedan. Cynthia walked out, get in the car, and they drove away.

Nobody was in the back parking lot. Nobody saw Greg and Cynthia drive off together—except the man standing at the end of the second floor hallway, looking out the window.

He dropped his cigarette butt on the floor and ground it deep into the carpet fibers with his dusty, black shoe. No civilized person would do that. But then, he was not civilized.

He walked to his room, picked up a cell phone and called Buford. “Looks like Greg and Cynthia are leaving town.”

“I told you that your job is done.” Buford was about to tell Marty not to ever call him again, but then he saw the opportunity. “I’m sorry. Thanks for the information, Marty. Hey, would mind doing me a favor and wait there, and let me know when Cynthia returns to the hotel?”

“She may not be coming back.”

“That’s okay. Just wait there for a couple of days. Okay?”

“You’re the boss.”

“Thanks.”

Marty knew Buford was up to something. Buford was skilled in the art of deception, but Marty was a master. And he knew in his gut that the killer was about to become the target.

Chapter 21

Just one more traffic light, and Greg and Cynthia would be out of Coreyville. He glanced over at her. She looked years younger in disguise. The freckles and baseball cap really did the trick.

Something in his rear view mirror caught his eye. It was a police car turning onto Main Street behind him. He checked his speed. He was doing 35 mph—the speed limit.

Be careful—don't run the light. It turned yellow, and he stopped. After the light had been red for what seemed like five minutes, it changed and he drove forward.

Before the police car even started moving, its lights were flashing. He hadn't done anything wrong. Did the cop somehow recognize Cynthia? They had been so close to getting away.

"Sir, I need you to step out of the vehicle." Greg got out of the car as the cop took a long look at Cynthia. She stared straight ahead. Greg walked to the rear of the car with the cop.

"I need to see your license, Sir. Please remove it from your billfold."

Greg handed it to the officer, and glanced around to see who might be looking on.

"Who's your passenger?" he asked, while he began to study the license.

How much jail time could Greg get for lying to a police officer? He should have thought about this ahead of time. If he told the truth, Cynthia would be arrested. How much did he really care about her? How badly did he want to protect her?

"It's my niece, Cindy. I'm taking her down to Kilgore College for an audition. She's going to be a music major in the fall."

"I see."

Was the cop about to reach for his cuffs? He could picture it all. His beloved car

being mishandled by some uncaring, greasy-handed, tow truck driver. Would Bonnie be permanently scarred by such cruel treatment? Greg and Cynthia riding in the back of the police cruiser, handcuffed. He could just punch the cop and run. No, stupid—just stay calm.

“Better advise the young lady to major in something else. You can’t make any decent money with a music degree.”

Greg laughed nervously. “That’s for sure.”

The officer handed Greg his license. “Your inspection sticker has expired.”

“What? How did you see it? You were behind me.”

“I checked your license plate on the computer while we were sitting at the light. That’s how I found out. We do it all the time.”

Wow, Greg was impressed. The Coreyville police department was more high-tech than he had realized.

“You’ve got a five-day grace period, but you’re on the last day. So, you’d better get it taken care of today.”

“Yes, Sir, officer, I will.” He was so relieved that he wanted to hug the cop.

Greg drove away cautiously, afraid of jinxing his good fortune. Once the police car had disappeared from his mirror, he began to breathe again. “That was a close one.”

“What happened?”

“My state inspection sticker expired. But I nearly lost it when he asked who *you* were.”

“What did you tell him?”

“That you’re my niece, and that I’m taking you to Kilgore College for an audition. You didn’t know you were going back to school as a music major, did you?”

“And he believed you?”

“Apparently—which makes me a little sad.”

“Why? We got away.”

“Do I look old enough to be your uncle? Wait—don’t answer that.”

“You worry too much about looks.”

“Well, of course *you* would say that. You don’t have to worry about your looks because you’re beautiful.”

“Gee, thanks, Uncle Greg.”

For a split second, Greg was hurt. But the cute smile on Cynthia’s face made him forget his silly thoughts and smile back at her. She was disarmingly irresistible.

“You haven’t told me where we’re going.”

Cynthia was running away with him to an unknown destination. She really trusted him, he thought.

“We’re going to Dallas, to visit the infamous Buford Bellowin.”

“Isn’t he that big-time trial lawyer who wants to be governor?”

“That’s the guy. He grew up in Coreyville.”

“Really? But what does he have to do with the murders?”

“I don’t know exactly. I was on the phone with Dorothy Spokane when she was killed and—”

“—you’re kidding.”

“No. She called me and said Buford was behind all of the killings. But she didn’t give a last name. So, I googled the name ‘Buford’ along with ‘Coreyville’ and came up with ‘Buford Bellowin.’ There was a puff piece written about him in the *Coreyville Courier*. It mentioned that Buford had worked for Sam Spokane when he was a teenager. So, I’m thinking that must be the connection.”

“But, why would Buford Bellowin want to have people murdered just because he worked for Sam Spokane years ago?”

“I haven’t figured out that part yet.”

“It’s quite a stretch.”

“I know. But there’s got to be some reason. Maybe some deep, dark secret about Mr. Bellowin. Maybe he did something illegal to get one of his murder clients off.”

“But what would that have to do with Dorothy Spokane or Troy?”

“I don’t know. We just need to brainstorm. We’ll think of something. If not, we’ll just try to shock him with some outrageous accusations and see how he reacts. At least then maybe we’ll know if he’s involved.”

“Yeah, but we might find ourselves on the wrong end of one of his lawsuits.”

*

The big red convertible had traveled down FM-2208 to Loop 281. They would soon hit Interstate 20.

Cynthia thought it was about time to confess. “Greg, I need to tell you something. And I hope you won’t hate me.”

Was she about to confess to killing Troy? Perhaps Greg had misjudged her. He was already falling for Cynthia. Not that he was certain she had any feelings for him. But could he really allow himself to be drawn in? If she was a killer, how could he live with that? “What is it, Cynthia?” He braced himself.

“On Monday when I came to see you I was trying to seduce you.”

And you were doing a great job of it, he thought. It had been all he could do to contain himself.

“I was threatened by some man on the phone that morning. He told me that I must do whatever he said, or my mother would have a terrible accident. He sounded mean. I believed him.”

“What?”

“He told me that you would be selected as a juror on the murder trial—I don’t know how he knew that. But he said to flirt with you to get your attention and then influence you to fight for the defendant. He told me if Kantrell Jamison was found guilty, my mother would die.” Tears were welling up in her eyes.

Now it made sense. She was not flirting with him because he was a good-looking, sexy guy. It was because somebody was *forcing* her to do it.

“Now, don’t get me wrong. I really like you—even more as I’m getting to know you. But on Monday I was acting.”

How could he have been such a fool? “What about when you called me Monday night saying Troy was beating you up—was that fake too?”

“No—it was real. He was drunk and he was hitting me, so I decided to use the situation to get your sympathy. I’m sorry.”

“But then Troy called me. He sounded like a madman. What if he had come over to my house and blown my head off?”

“I know—I’m sorry. I had to try to protect my mom. I didn’t know what else to do. But I knew Troy would forget everything by morning. He always forgot what happened while he was drunk.”

Greg calmed down as he reflected on the state of his relationship with this woman. “I guess it worked. I fought Troy and the other jurors long and hard. I was determined to return a ‘Not Guilty.’ I can’t believe I was being manipulated.”

“I am so sorry. And now I still don’t know if my mother’s safe. When I talked to her yesterday, she said she was going to stay with a friend for a while. I think she was talking about her high school friend who lives in Texarkana. I sure hope he can’t find her there.”

“So, maybe this man who called you is the one who killed Troy and Dorothy Spokane. And maybe even Arabeth Albertson.”

“I thought that was an accident. Didn’t she fall down the stairs?”

“I’m not sure I believe that story anymore. Someone might have tripped her. I don’t know if that would leave any evidence.”

They rode for several miles without speaking. The redhead sitting next to Greg looked different now. She was still beautiful. And he wanted to believe her story about the mysterious caller. But how could he know what to believe? And what if *she* had killed Troy? Did he even know if the abuse was real? He wanted to trust her, but doubts were racing through his mind.

Chapter 22

His real name was John Smith. It sounded like a fake name for a hit man anyway, so he opted for a cooler sounding name: John X. He had relocated from Amarillo to Arlington when he was 22, and had established himself as a well-to-do bachelor over the three years he had lived there.

He wore expensive Italian suits and drove a new Jaguar. Nobody really knew him, but the people in his neighborhood, at the grocery store, the bank, and at restaurants seemed to think highly of the image he had created for himself.

He was sitting on a Greyhound bus, traveling to Shreveport, Louisiana. How he detested wearing ordinary clothes. And what was that awful smell—the old man in the seat in front of him?

There were a few rough-looking characters on the bus. They had probably sized up John X, and at 5'6", 160 lbs., he looked easy. They would think they could take whatever money and jewelry he had. If the thugs had known how much cash John was carrying, they would not have hesitated to jump him. But they would have been very sorry. The revolver under his jacket, and his skill of using it, would more than compensate for his lack of stature.

The bus trip was unpleasant, but necessary. He would steal a car in Shreveport, drive it to Coreyville, and do the job. When the police connected that car with the murder, it would lead them to Shreveport—not to Arlington. Some poor sap would have his car stolen, and if he didn't report it right away, would be investigated in connection with the murder. If the guy were lucky, he'd have some kind of alibi.

Earlier, John X had walked to a 7-Eleven and called for a taxi to take him to the bus station in Dallas. It was departing at 12:45 PM, and he was cutting it close. Buford had wanted the job done right away. If the taxi got there soon, he would make it.

He had studied the lunchtime customers as he waited. The Indian guy behind the counter had three people standing in line. There was a fat woman with a cigarette hanging out of her mouth, bouncing around like a conductor's baton, as she demanded a carton of Virginia Slims. Next in line was a construction worker

type. Behind him was an impatient young executive wannabe in a cheap suit, holding a diet Coke and a Snickers bar. He appeared to have already consumed more than his daily allowance of caffeine.

On one of the isles was a young woman holding a crying baby on her hip while scolding her toddler, who had just successfully toppled a giant display of microwave popcorn.

The first bullet would go to the Indian, before he could press an alarm button or go for a gun under the counter. Next, he would take out the construction worker before he could react. The big hulk could have ripped off John's head with his bare hands. But he would never get the chance. One clean shot to the head and he would hit the floor like one of those huge bags of dog food you buy at Wal-Mart.

The young guy would be peeing in his cheap pants. He would be easy to do. The young mother would frantically try to shield her kids. No way she could make it to the exit in a hurry. The fat woman might take a run at him, but he doubted that she could move very fast. The biggest threats from her would be cigarette burns, or suffocation under her gigantic butt.

Too bad all of them would have to die. He really only wanted to kill the construction worker, who reminded him of Peter, Jackie, and Phillip. He had wanted to kill that trio every day of his life since high school. Good thing he didn't get his hands on a gun until after graduation.

A lot of teachers and students could have died. But he didn't have any intention of going to prison. His killings must all be done in such a way that he could escape cleanly. None of his corpses would ever lead the police to him.

He would never actually kill Peter, Jackie, or Phillip. He would get caught if he killed them, because he would want the world to know he did it. He would want his entire graduating class to know that he finally got revenge on those three football player punks who mercilessly picked on him, beat him up and made him the biggest joke of his school. But if he could have, maybe it would have finally ended the laughter that still echoed in his ears.

Instead, he played his favorite video game over and over: *High School Retaliation*. He figured that the people who wrote the game must have been abused in school, just like he was. In the game, he was a character named Johnny

who showed up at school one day with a .44 Magnum. Presumably, the game writers were *Dirty Harry* fans.

As Johnny went from classroom to classroom, he would seek out the punks who had beat him up, pulled his pants off and stuffed him in a locker the day before. A crowd of students had cheered them on. He could blow away some of them too.

John always felt the adrenalin rush when he blew their heads ‘clean off,’ as Harry Callahan would say. Sometimes he would wait until his victim was standing in front of a window so he could watch the head fly off and crash through the glass, leaving the body standing headless for a brief moment before it collapsed to the classroom floor, jerking hopelessly.

Nothing gave John X more pleasure than playing the game—except real killing with real guns. And yes, he even owned a .44 Magnum. But he had never used it on a job. Yet.

The taxi had arrived in time, and John had made it to the bus station, paid the \$35.00 fare and got onboard. He had just murdered five adults and two babies—but only in his mind. Killing them would have served no purpose—other than the sheer joy of it. But it would have been too risky.

And besides, he had a job to do. Marty would be a sitting duck. But John would occupy his mind on the four-hour trip with devising some interesting new way to kill Marty. That was the real fun of it for him. Each murder had to be a little different in some way. He liked being creative with his craft.

*

Marty had decided to wait at the Holiday Inn for Cynthia Blockerman to return, as Buford had requested. Her car was still in the parking lot, but he didn’t expect to see her any time soon. He *did* expect Buford to send somebody to kill him. He knew the killer would come soon, but he didn’t know whether his death would be by gunshot, poison, an explosion, or some other means.

He was not too worried about it. He would take reasonable precautions, but wouldn’t lose any sleep over it. Marty knew he was a dead man. Buford would keep sending hit men until somebody got him. Or he would just call his buddy on the parole board, and Marty would eventually be found and thrown back into

prison. If he couldn't be fishing, he'd just as soon be dead anyway. Years of killing and prison life had numbed his senses.

He had been surprised a few years earlier when a new cellmate's sad story actually revived something in a deep, long-forgotten place in his heart. It was a young black man, who at age 12, had seen his older brother brutally and senselessly murdered. It had destroyed his life. The young man's story had stirred a righteous rage within Marty. He would have hunted down that murderer and slaughtered him if he had known the killer's name.

Marty wanted revenge for him so badly that he would have given his own life just to see that wretched man in the grave. It would have been like Marty killing his own father for the years of misery he had dealt his son. Alcohol had killed him before Marty could work up the nerve to do it himself.

*

Greg and Cynthia were approaching Dallas. Soon, they would meet the notorious Buford Bellowin. In the meantime, Greg struggled with his mixed emotions about Cynthia. He was very attracted to her. But he couldn't let the physical attraction blind him to the fact they she might well be a murderer.

He wanted to believe her story, but he didn't want to be a fool. Was this an innocent, kind woman of high moral value? Or was she a talented liar, capable of killing without remorse? He hoped he could survive the relationship until he knew the answer to that question.

Then Cynthia looked at him and smiled, and he knew he couldn't possibly resist her, no matter what she had done. It felt as though the two of them had just stripped naked, and dived off a high cliff over a beautiful river. The water below looked cool and inviting.

But what if it was only six inches deep?

Chapter 23

Greg and Cynthia walked through the spacious marble lobby to the large, circular reception/security booth, which separated them from the hallway of elevators. A huge digital wall clock read 4:08 PM. Two uniformed men were carefully watching an array of closed circuit television monitors.

In a quick survey of three screens, Cynthia saw a young couple in one of the elevators, a woman walking down a hallway with an armful of folders and a man opening a door.

One of the guards looked up at Greg. “May I help you, Sir?”

“Yes. We’re here to see Buford Bellowin.”

“Do you have an appointment?”

“Uh, no, we don’t.”

“Then I’m afraid I can’t let you go up. You’ll have to call his secretary and set up an appointment. The office numbers are listed over on that board. I’m sorry—but, that’s all I can do for you.”

“Okay. Thanks.” Why hadn’t he lied to the guard about having an appointment? No—the guard would have called Buford’s secretary to verify it.

They walked to the information board and found Bellowin & Associates. It was located on the seventeenth floor. Greg typed the office phone number into his cell phone, but did not press the ‘Send’ button. “Let’s go over there,” he said to Cynthia.

He led her to a small couch close to the lobby entrance. He didn’t want to be within earshot of the guards. “Okay. Here goes.” He pressed the ‘Send’ button.

“Bellowin and Associates. How may I help you?”

“I would like to make an appointment with Mr. Bellowin.”

“Are you one of Mr. Bellowin’s clients?”

“No, I’m not.”

“Well, now, Mr. Bellowin is booked up for the foreseeable future. But one of his associates could see you

next Wednesday at 5:30. Would that work for you?”

What had made Greg think they could just walk right in and meet with the mighty Buford Bellowin?

“No, Ma’am. I’m sorry—this is not about a legal matter. I’m an old friend of Buford’s, from his hometown of Coreyville. I’m in Dallas on business and just wanted to drop by and ‘shoot the bull’ for a while.” He hoped he sounded like one of Buford’s friends. On second thought, he didn’t know whether Buford actually *had* any friends.

“Oh, I see. Well, he’s in court for the rest of the day, but I could probably squeeze you in sometime between 8:30 and 9:00 tomorrow morning. He reads his email during that time, but I’m sure he could spare a few minutes for an old friend.”

“That would be great.” It wasn’t great. Now he and Cynthia would be forced to spend the night in Dallas. They had planned to meet with Buford and be back home by late evening, having solved the mystery of the Coreyville killing spree. It had seemed like a good plan. What were they thinking?

Cynthia had an ear close to Greg’s phone, and didn’t like what she was hearing. But Greg gave her a look that said, ‘We have no choice.’

“Now, what was your name?”

“If you don’t mind, I’d rather surprise him.”

There was a brief pause before the secretary responded. Maybe Greg had blown it.

“Okay. Just tell the guard that you are Buford’s friend from Coreyville. He will call me, and I will give him the okay for you to come up.”

“Oh. Actually, there are two of us. The other one is a lady friend of his.”

The secretary *knew* Buford would not want to miss an opportunity to see a *lady* friend. “Got it. Two friends from Coreyville at 8:30 AM.”

“Thanks. See you in the morning. Bye.”

“What if he figures out that it’s us?” said Cynthia.

“Even if he does, I think he will be curious to hear what we have to say.”

Cynthia’s cell rang, and Greg was about to advise her not to answer—but, he was too late.

“Hello?

Ten o’clock? I would prefer afternoon, if that’s okay.

Good. I will see you at 2:00.”

“Who was that?”

“Andrea Newly, the Assistant D.A. Thank goodness for cell phones. They have no idea I left town. I’ve got to meet with the D.A. tomorrow afternoon at 2:00. Can we be back home by then?”

“I hope so. If we can see Buford before 9:00, we should make it back in time. But we may be cutting it close.”

*

“Bellowin and Associates. How may I—”

“—Millie, it’s me. I just got out of court, and I have special dinner plans tonight. So, I do not want to be disturbed by anyone for the rest of the evening.”

“I understand, Sir.”

“Any important calls?”

“No, Sir. But, you did get a call from an old friend.”

“Who?” Buford had no friends—just associates and clients.

“He wouldn’t give his name. Said he wanted to surprise you. And there’s a lady friend too. They’re from Coreyville.”

“Coreyville?”

“Yes. I told them to come by at 8:30 in the morning.”

“Did they say anything else?”

“No, Sir. That was all.”

“Okay. Thanks, Millie. See you in the morning.”

Buford got into his Mercedes, locked the doors and thought for a few minutes. Who would be coming to see him from Coreyville? He hadn’t been there in eight or ten years. What if Marty had suspected that Buford sent someone to kill him? He might be coming to kill Buford right there in his own office. He wouldn’t care if he got caught. But who was the woman?

What if it was Cynthia Blockerman. And Greg Tenorly? What if Dorothy Spokane had told one of them what Buford had done? Marty had killed Dorothy. But what if she had already told Buford’s dirty secret?

His pistol was locked safely in his office drawer, along with plenty of bullets. He would have it ready to go by the time they got there. He had spent an adequate amount of time at the shooting range to handle this situation. If they knew too much, he could shoot them and say it was self-defense. He could put one of his big, heavy golf trophies in Greg’s dead hands and say that Greg was about to hit him with it.

He would come up with some way to justify Cynthia’s killing as well. He had a very sharp legal mind. He would get himself out of this. And of course, the police would believe almost anything he told them. He was a powerful man. A man who would, in a few short years, be governor of the Lone Star State.

*

Angela Hammerly popped her head into Andrea Newly’s office. “Got Cynthia Blockerman lined up for tomorrow?”

“Yeah. She’s coming in at 2:00.”

“Why not first thing in the morning?” The D.A. was clearly disappointed in her new A.D.A.

“She had a conflict in the morning. I don’t know—”

“—you should have *made* her come in to suit *our* schedule—not hers!”

“I’m sorry. Should I call her back?”

“No. I don’t want it to look like I’m undermining your authority. We need a united front.”

“So, you really think she killed her husband?”

“Well, let’s look at the facts.” Angela walked in and took a seat. “The night of the murder, as I was getting out of my car at Cynthia’s house, I saw Greg Tenorly driving by. Or at least I saw his big red convertible. It’s the only one like it in town. I can’t be sure he was driving it—but, for now, let’s just assume he was.

“Why was he driving down her street at three o’clock in the morning? And one of the vice presidents at her bank said he saw Greg go into Cynthia’s office on Tuesday afternoon. By tomorrow, we’ll have their phone records. That should be interesting.

“We also know that she attended his choir rehearsal Wednesday night, the very night of the murder, and stayed late for a private meeting with Greg. And here’s the best part: the church organist says that she overheard Cynthia telling Greg she wished Troy was dead.”

“Are you thinking Greg Tenorly is the murderer?”

“I don’t know which one of them actually cut Troy’s throat, but I think they planned it together.”

“So, Greg and Cynthia were sneaking around having sex while plotting to kill Troy?”

“Something like that.”

“I can get their credit card records and see if one of them has checked into a hotel lately. If so, we can try to find out what the other one was doing at that time,” Andrea said with a wicked tone Angela particularly liked.

“Now you’re thinking. If we can catch them in bed together, after the fact—then we’ve got ‘em.” Angela almost looked proud of Andrea.

“I just hope they were stupid enough to use a credit card.”

“They’re not stupid. But I can guarantee you they’re not as smart as they think they are.”

Chapter 24

John X stole a silver F-150 pickup from a Wal-Mart in Shreveport. It was easy. The owner had parked it thirty feet away from other cars, probably in an attempt to avoid dings. It was a 2004 model, but looked brand new.

If someone had seen him stealing the truck, he would have been too far away for a positive ID. Even if the owner himself had walked out of the store at the moment John X was popping the lock, he would have had no hope of stopping him. He was just too good. Too fast. Too cool.

He didn't like the George Strait CD or the preset Country radio stations. But it didn't take long for him to find a heavy metal station and crank up the volume. He wasn't happy unless the music made his teeth rattle, even if it blew out the speakers.

He took Interstate 20 West, then Highway 59 North to Marshall. Then he merged into Highway 154. Coreyville was fifteen miles away. He knew Marty was much older than he was, but probably a little wiser too.

But he had no intention of giving Marty any chance to avoid extermination. So, it had to be right—on the first attempt. One perfect shot, delivered without warning. Marty was just an ex-con punk. John X was a professional hit man.

Over the past two years, he had averaged two jobs per month, the first few for a measly \$5,000 each, and then upped his price to \$10,000. He was now ready to raise it again. After all, he'd never failed to complete an objective. A failure could put his employer in jeopardy. And that would mean the end of his career, and maybe his life. It was an extremely dangerous occupation, and the salary should reflect that. His goal was \$50,000 per hit.

John X liked to visualize a kill before performing it, much like a golfer who envisions a perfect putt before stroking the ball. It enabled him to check every detail of a scenario in his mind, and then correct any flaws in his plan.

First, he would steal a uniform. Next, he would find a discarded room service tray outside someone's door. Then he would carry the tray with his left hand and hold his .45 under the tray with his right hand. The silencer would greatly

reduce, but not eliminate the sound of the shot. Cloth napkins draped over the sides of the tray would conceal the gun.

He would knock on Marty's door and say, 'Room Service.' If Marty opened the door, John X would place one bullet perfectly in the center of his heart. A hole in one. John X would calmly close the door, set down the tray and walk away.

But if Marty looked through the peephole and refused to open the door, John X would shoot him several times through the door. It would not be a clean kill, but it would have to do. Because once lost, the element of surprise could not be regained. A wig and glasses would alter his looks sufficiently.

Once he arrived at the hotel, he would check the layout and the environment, the number of guests, escape routes, *etc.* Then he would reevaluate his plan.

*

Marty woke up to the sound of crying children coming into his room. No. They weren't in his room—they were in the hallway. One kid was screaming his guts out. Thankfully, the noise faded as it went down the elevator. Marty checked the clock on the nightstand: 5:55 PM. He was surprised that he had been able to take a nap. Someone could have slipped into his room and stabbed him in the heart. He would have offered little resistance.

But since he was still alive he would have some dinner. He decided to take a shower and change into fresh clothes. That way, he would be nice and clean for the medical examiner. Marty knew Buford had hired someone to kill him, and he knew the killer was near. He could feel it.

*

The Hard Rock Cafe in Dallas occupies a building that was built in 1904 as the McKinney Avenue Church. In 1986, it was converted into a Hard Rock Café—the fourth in the country. The front of the building still looks like either a church or a courthouse. Lettering chiseled in the stone above the entrance says it all: *Supreme Court of Rock and Roll*. Maybe that was one of the reasons Buford Bellwin loved it so much.

After a long day in the courtroom, Buford liked to enjoy a few beers, a big dinner, and a beautiful young lady. Never mind that he had a gorgeous 30-year-

old wife at home. She had been deeply hurt and outraged the first time she had caught him with another woman. He had told her he was going to have dinner with a colleague that night, without knowing his wife was in town. She had decided it would be fun to surprise him. She knew he would be at his favorite restaurant.

When she found his table, it looked like he was leaning over to kiss the young woman sitting next to him. No, he's not kissing her, she thought. He's just whispering something in the ear of a fellow attorney—probably a confidential legal matter. Then she saw Buford's hand under the table between the woman's legs. The patrons' enjoyment of rock music was rudely interrupted by a wild woman screaming and waving her fists. He had been lucky to retain all his body parts on that dreadful night.

But over their seven-year marriage, she had become accustomed to Buford's antics. She knew what he was doing, but she didn't care anymore—as long as he didn't try to divorce her. She'd made it very clear that she would destroy his reputation if he ever tried to dump her. She was determined to hang on, hold her nose, and endure the stench of their marriage. It would be worth it in the end. She was going to ride Buford to the governor's mansion. Maybe even to the White House some day.

The blonde was late. She should have known better than to keep Buford Bellowin waiting. It was 6:05.

He never tired of the Hard Rock Cafe. It was his favorite restaurant in all of Dallas. Sure, a lot of successful attorneys preferred French wine, with filet mignon or chateaubriand. But Buford was a meat and potatoes Texan—and proud of it. He liked fajitas, or chili, or a big juicy cheeseburger and fries while listening to Madonna, or Elvis, or ZZ Top.

Buford wondered if John X had completed his mission. How had things gone so wrong in Coreyville? He'd been foolish to think he could use Marty to manipulate the jury and get an acquittal. Marty had tried his best, in his own clumsy way, to get what Buford wanted. But his tactics had been heavy handed, and before Buford had realized it, Marty had gone completely out of control. Every time he had run into a problem, he tried to solve it by killing somebody.

Instead of attempting to sway the jury, Buford could have paid off a guard to kill

Kantrell Jamison in jail. And that was still a possibility. If the kid had been smart, he would have parked his bike behind the store, and then gone out the back door after killing Sam. It was dark, and Kantrell didn't see anybody out front, so he thought he'd be okay—but you never know when a car might go by. Arabeth Albertson. Why did that old hag have to drive by just as Kantrell was leaving Sam's?

And what about Greg Tenorly and Cynthia Blockerman? He was sure they were the couple from Coreyville who had called his office. What did they want, and what did they know? He figured they would just be fishing. If they knew anything of significance, they would have gone to the D.A. All he had to do was play dumb. They would never discover the truth. His secret would remain with him. His political career had to go on—for the sake of his future constituents.

He looked up from his thoughts and lost his appetite—for food, that is. She was somewhat scantily dressed for meeting a prominent Dallas attorney. But she looked utterly delicious. Those legs. Those breasts. He did a quick check to see if he was drooling.

He tried to act angry. "You're late."

"I'm sorry, Sir."

"Tell you what: let's just skip dinner and go directly to dessert."

Buford threw some bills on the table, stood up, put his arm around her bare waist, and headed for the exit. What smooth skin you have, he thought. The better to tempt you with, he imagined her saying.

Tomorrow's problems could wait until tomorrow. It was time for fun.

Chapter 25

When Greg and Cynthia had checked in at the hotel, Cynthia had offered her credit card. Greg appreciated the fact that she was willing to pay, but insisted on using his card since she was not supposed to be traveling outside Coreyville, and she could be tracked by her credit card use. Although, he doubted the Coreyville police were that sophisticated. Besides, why would they be tracking her if they had no reason to think she had left town?

Maybe he *should* have let her pay. Greg used his debit card for everything—he didn't even have a credit card. And his account balance was getting low.

They were both feeling stressed out. Cynthia had suggested they go to a nice restaurant for a relaxing dinner. Greg said he knew a great place to kick back, have fun, and talk.

They were approaching the entrance when a man in his mid-thirties in an expensive suit walked out with a very young woman. Greg wondered if she was she even 18.

Cynthia was certain the girl was a hooker. Why else would she be dressed like that?

Buford was so busy rubbing up against his new blonde that he didn't even notice Greg and Cynthia. He had never met either of them, but he had seen plenty of pictures. Marty had sent him some sexy shots of Cynthia, taken through a slight opening between her bathroom curtains. Buford would have definitely noticed, and recognized her. Especially if she had come to the restaurant wearing only underwear. At least Marty had done *something* that pleased Buford.

The last time Greg had been to the Hard Rock Cafe in Dallas, he was still married to his ex. The marriage had been all but over. So, he had not been able to fully enjoy the experience. This time he would—if he could just forget about a few things for an hour or so. The hope of keeping his church job and retaining his private music students was fading fast. He and Cynthia could be murdered at any time. And Cynthia might even *be* a murderer. But if he could keep all of that out of his mind for a while, maybe he could enjoy the dining experience.

Greg could not help but wonder what the waitress thought when she was taking their order. What was this woman of supermodel beauty doing with this below-average-looking guy? He must be just a friend, or brother, or a business associate. This *couldn't* be a date.

Cynthia ordered the Tuscan Chicken salad. Greg opted for the bacon cheeseburger and onion rings. He had been trying to watch his diet—but not tonight.

“You know what? I changed my mind. Give me exactly the same thing he’s having.”

After the waitress had walked away, Cynthia said, “I don’t usually pig-out, Greg.”

“That goes without saying. Look at you.”

His muscles began to relax to the sound of Chuck Berry’s *Johnny B. Goode*. Then Cynthia brought him back to the present when she said, “You don’t think the killer followed us over here, do you?”

“No, I doubt it,” he said while looking around the room.

“Good. Let’s not talk about that for a while, okay? I want to know more about *you*. How did you end up in Coreyville?”

“Well, let’s see

I’d been serving as full-time minister of music at Bethany Baptist Church in Longview for three years, and had developed a nice sized music program. We had choirs for children, youth, college students, adults, and even senior adults. And we had several handbell choirs and a small orchestra.

“When I started, they only had four choirs, and no instrumental groups at all. I had put in long hours for those three years. And I’m sure that contributed to the failure of my marriage.

“But she never complained much about the lack of attention. And somewhere along the way, she began to browse the web, looking for something to occupy her time. I’m sure it was all quite innocent at first—until she started meeting

men online.”

“That’s too bad. Sounds like y’all just needed to talk things out.”

“I guess. But by the time we sat down and seriously talked about our feelings—it was just too late. She had started seeing a man she met online and had fallen in love with him. He’s an okay guy, I guess. I don’t blame him for the divorce.”

“That’s awfully big of you. But he shouldn’t have been getting involved with a married woman.”

“Well, he didn’t *know* she was married.”

“Oh.”

“At least, not at first. By the time he found out, he had already fallen for her, and that made everything okay, as far as he was concerned. In *his* mind, *I* was the bad guy—the one who’d been ignoring the devoted wife until she had no choice but to look elsewhere.”

“I could never have done that. No matter how loveless my marriage was, or how abusive Troy became—I could never have cheated on him. It’s just not right.”

“But, you needed to get out of that situation. You needed to divorce him.”

“I know. And I would have found a way out—eventually. But I still wouldn’t have cheated on him. I made a promise before God that I would stay committed to him. And that’s what I did. But I didn’t love him anymore. He literally beat the love out of me.”

“Yeah. You can’t *make* yourself keep loving someone.”

“No. But you can make yourself stay faithful.”

“Cynthia, you are an amazing woman.” Obviously, she had not killed Troy. How could he have even thought such a terrible thing about her?

“So, what was it that made you move from Longview to Coreyville?”

“Well, the divorce forced me to resign my position at the church. Their charter

states that ministers of the church must have only one wife—which means you can't be on the church staff if you're divorced. Even if you remarry. So, I knew my days as a full-time music minister were over.

"I opened a private music studio in Longview. Fortunately many of the students I had taught for free at the church were willing to pay for lessons. Within in a few months, I was making enough money to get by on."

"That worked out pretty well for you."

"Yeah, it did. But before long, I was in a rut. Every time I thought I was finally ready to get out there and start dating, I would run into one of *her* relatives or a church member. It seemed like everybody blamed *me* for the divorce. And even though I knew it was only partially my fault, the guilt was eating at me.

"After four years of that, I needed to get away from there. Then a music director friend told me he had given my name to First Baptist Church in Coreyville. He said they were looking for a part-time music director, and the salary was not bad. I felt like a heavy load had been lifted from my shoulders when I moved to Coreyville. It's a wonderful little town. Or, at least I thought so."

*

As Marty stepped into the elevator, joining the people from a floor above, he looked out of place—but not in the way he *usually* looked out of place. A mom and dad, and two young children were dressed in their swimsuits, apparently on their way to the pool. Marty wore a dark blue suit, a white, starched shirt, and a maroon silk tie. He was ready. Tonight would be the night.

He strode through the lobby and out the main entrance, into the July East Texas night. He felt like a sitting duck, as he followed the sidewalk to the Denny's Restaurant. It wouldn't take much of a sharpshooter to knock him off right now, he thought.

*

John X was busy scoping out the hotel. He had already developed a completely different plan of attack. He would have had a clean shot at Marty as he walked to Denny's, but John X had something better in mind. It was a scenario he had never tried before. He would take one shot—and that shot had to be perfect.

Then, he would have adequate time to escape through the rear exit.

His only regret was that he would not be able to get a video of the kill. Oh, it was going to be so beautiful. He had taped some of his executions, and enjoyed watching them over and over, while gorging on popcorn, Hershey bars, and Dr. Pepper. But this would be the coolest kill yet.

Sometimes his job was better than sex.

Chapter 26

John X had watched as Marty walked out of the Holiday Inn, across the sidewalk and into Denny's. He figured he had at least thirty minutes before Marty returned to the hotel. His wireless network camera and Motorola Q PDA had been well worth the expense. The tiny camera was capable of transmitting video across the internet. With the Q, he could browse the web and pick up the video images.

He positioned the camera on the inside window ledge next to the lobby entrance. He would wait near the big screen TV, which was across from the two elevators, and would be able to see Marty on the PDA as he approached the entrance to the lobby. John X loved using the latest gadgetry.

He would hide on the left side of the huge projection-type TV, behind some large potted plants. After Marty had stepped into an elevator and pressed the button, John X would shoot him just as the doors were closing. The sound of his silenced pistol would blend in with the pop of balls being hit by tennis pros on the TV.

Marty would be carried to the second floor, the door would open and somebody would discover his body. Or maybe nobody would be waiting for an elevator, and he wouldn't be found for several minutes. Either way, John X would be at least a couple of miles away in his stolen pickup by the time anyone was searching for the killer.

*

It didn't take long for Buford to strip and get impatient with his young blonde hooker. "What's taking you so long? You mustn't keep daddy waiting."

The hotel room was menial by Buford's standards. But it was only \$285 a night, and he would only be there for a couple of hours.

"Am I gonna have to come in there and get you?" That might be fun, he thought.

Before Buford had a chance to walk toward the bathroom door, she walked out, wearing a sexy ensemble consisting of a Victoria's Secret bra and panties, made of a little bit of red silk—and a lot of nothing. He reached for her, but she had

other ideas.

“No, no. Let’s try something different than what you’re used to.”

“Like what?”

“Okay. You lie on the bed face down, and I will give you a massage.”

“Honey, I’ve had plenty of massages.”

“Not like this one. Just trust me. You don’t have any heart trouble, do you?”

“No. Why?”

“Cause this is gonna get your heart pumping hard. *Real* hard.”

Buford leaped onto the bed.

She climbed on top of him and began to rub his back.

“Yeah, that feels good. But I’m ready for your *special* stuff. Lay it on me, Baby!”

“You sure you can handle it?” She reached behind her back and retrieved the hypodermic needle that was under her bra strap.

“Oh, yeah, I can handle it.”

“Okay, here goes.” She slowly scratched his back with one hand while she inserted the needle with the other. Then she quickly pressed the plunger all the way down.

“Hey—what was that? It felt like you pinched me.”

“That was from Marty.”

“From Marty?” Buford panicked.

“Yeah. Marty wants you to know that no matter what you do, or where you go, he can get to you. And if you try to kill him—you’re a dead man.”

Buford tried to get up, tried to knock her off his back. But he was already feeling weak, sick. “What did you do to me?”

“You have nothing worry about as long as you leave Marty alone. The shot I gave you will knock you out for a few hours. Sweet dreams.”

He wondered if she was telling the truth. He was feeling drowsy. But was he falling asleep—or was he dying? No, you can’t kill me, he thought. I’m gonna be governor of Texas! He wouldn’t give in to it. He would fight

His mind faded to black.

*

Marty ordered the Country Fried Steak, with an extra side of gravy, a loaded baked potato, and onion rings. He liked Denny’s menu choices, and ate there often. He was particularly impressed with the Coreyville Denny’s because the onion rings were really fresh and hot—not greasy. He loved great onion rings.

How had he stayed so thin? Maybe it was the three-pack-a-day smoking habit. His body was probably eaten up with cancer. It didn’t matter much now. There was a good chance he would be dead by sunrise. Maybe he should have ordered even more gravy and onion rings.

He wished he could have seen the reaction on Buford’s face when Carla drugged him and gave him Marty’s warning. Carla had been more than happy to do it for him.

Marty had met her right after getting out on parole. He had not been with a woman in eight years, and although he had thought she looked a little young, she was offering her services, and he was more than willing to pay. But as soon as he started kissing her, she began to cry. He knew he was ugly and had bad breath, but if she wanted to earn the money, she would do what it took without complaining.

She said she was sorry, but that she couldn’t go through with it. She explained that it was her first day on the job. She was 16 years old and had run away from her mean, drug-abusing mother.

The girl had only been on the streets a couple of days when she ran into Andrew.

He was a smooth-talking young man who seemed nice. He offered her a good-paying job and place to live. Then he raped her repeatedly, and set her up as one of his hookers. She was scared to death of him.

It had been enough to kick in Marty's weird sense of justice. He had murdered numerous people over the years, without remorse. But for some reason, this young girl's story had pushed his buttons. He wanted to restore Carla's innocence, to whatever degree possible. And he was determined to kill Andrew—with maximum brutality.

Marty had asked Carla to call Andrew and say she was quitting. When Andrew tracked her down, Marty was waiting nearby. Just as he started to hit Carla, Marty whacked the side of his head with the butt of his pistol. Andrew fell to the ground, disoriented.

Marty stood over him, and shot him in the leg. Then the other leg. Then each foot. Then each arm. Finally, as Andrew pleaded for his life, Marty shot him in the stomach. Then he and Carla walked away, leaving Andrew to bleed to death.

So, when Marty called up Carla and asked for a favor, she gladly agreed. In truth, nobody was going to carry out a hit on Buford if he killed Marty. But Buford wouldn't know that for sure. He would worry himself to death about it. Hey—he might even be afraid to hire hookers.

It wasn't as good as killing him, but it did make Marty smile, as he took another bite of chicken fried steak.

*

John X had one eye on the tennis match, one eye on the PDA. It had been an hour. Marty was taking his time. He hoped he would come soon, while the lobby was still deserted.

He checked the display on his PDA, and saw Marty walking toward the entrance of the hotel. So, he moved into position. Some women were walking from the back of the hotel, toward the elevators. No sooner than the women had passed by, Marty walked into the left elevator.

But somebody else had just come into the lobby. John X could hear a woman's heels on the ceramic tile. And she was walking toward the elevators. Was his

plan about to be ruined? Marty pressed the button. It was time to shoot him, but the woman was nearly to the elevators. If he took the shot now, she would see Marty go down before the doors closed. She would be blocking his escape route. She'd scream.

The elevator doors started closing. But then, Marty saw the woman approaching, held out his arm and stopped the doors just before they came together.

John X was surprised that Marty had acted like a gentleman, holding the door for the woman.

The woman said thanks, but pointed down the hallway. She didn't need an elevator.

Marty pushed the button again as the woman walked down the hallway. This is perfect, thought John X. He aimed his gun at Marty's heart. It would be a surgical hit. He was an excellent marksman.

Just as the elevator doors began to close, Marty's eyes saw through the greenery, directly into the eyes of his assailant.

John X squeezed the trigger.

Marty could see the bullet coming toward him, headed straight for his heart. The doors were closing—but not fast enough. It was like a movie being filmed in nanosecond frames. Each frame brought the bullet closer. If he could have moved even a micrometer per frame, he would have avoided certain death. But all he could do was watch, as it moved ever closer to his chest.

John X felt nothing but exhilaration, as he watched the impact of his perfect shot thrust Marty's body backward against the elevator wall. The doors closed—on Marty's coffin, he thought. Cool!

Chapter 27

Greg had never spent the night in a hotel room with a woman that was not his wife. And he was feeling some guilt, even though they would be sleeping in separate beds. It was a special situation, and it was all quite innocent. But he wondered what people thought when they saw Cynthia and him walking through the lobby together.

A college-aged boy passed them as they approached the elevators. The punk checked out Cynthia from head to toe, and then made a second pass specifically for legs and boobs. Then he gave Greg a nod that said: *I don't know how a dog like you got this chick, man. But, you must be good. Real good.*

They stepped into the elevator with a well-dressed, older couple. The man smiled at them. His wife checked for wedding rings, and when she saw none, gave Greg and Cynthia a disapproving stare.

Greg was embarrassed.

Cynthia ignored the woman.

Unlike some women who continued to wear their wedding rings long after their husbands died, Cynthia had already taken hers off. She didn't want it to be there reminding her of Troy's abuse or his death. Not that she could forget any time soon.

As Greg and Cynthia walked out of the elevator and toward their room, Greg made the mistake of looking back at the older couple.

The husband was trying to get their door open, struggling with the key card. The wife was still shaking her head at Greg.

Cynthia said, "I'm beat. I need a long, steamy shower. So, you might want to take yours first. 'Cause if you go after me, there may not be any hot water left."

Greg usually took his in the morning. But maybe a hot shower would begin to melt away the layers of stress that had been piled onto his body over the past few days. "Okay."

His mind seemed to revert to that of a teenager as he entered the bathroom. Should he lock the door? Of course not. She wouldn't come in. But what if she did? And what would that mean? There was an amazingly beautiful, sexy woman outside that door.

As the heat flowed down across his naked, wet body, his thoughts brought arousal. Arousal that was quickly muted by the fear of irresistible sin.

When he walked out of the bathroom in a complimentary hotel robe, Cynthia was sitting on her bed. She was watching one of the cable news channels.

"Your turn."

"Thanks. Nice robe." She went into the bathroom.

"Yeah. There's one for you too."

Greg turned off the TV and got into bed. The soft sounds of Cynthia bathing would be more relaxing than the news. Twenty minutes into her shower, he dosed off. When she came out of the bathroom, she was surprised to see him sleeping. They were both worn out. It was only 9:15, but it had been a long, tough day. She turned off the lights, and was asleep in two minutes.

At 3:15 AM, something woke Greg from his deep sleep. For a second, he was confused, trying to figure out where he was. Then he realized Cynthia was moaning in her sleep. The corridor light shining under their door illuminated the room like a nightlight.

Greg saw her getting out of bed, and thought she must be headed for the bathroom. He quickly closed his eyes for a few seconds—she was wearing only a bra and panties. They would have brought a change of clothes with them if they had known it would be an overnight trip.

When he opened his eyes, he thought Cynthia would already be in the bathroom. But she had stopped at the foot of the bed, and was reaching for something that was not there. She picked it up anyway, holding it as though it was a hair dryer, or a hammer. She turned her fist sideways, and made a quick, violent motion in the air from left to right, parallel to the floor.

Then it hit him: she was reliving Troy's murder. But why was she reliving it if

she wasn't the one who did it?

She quickly stepped back, threw the invisible object down, and began crying, "No, no, no! Oh, my God, no!"

Greg jumped out of bed to rescue her from the nightmare. He put his hand on her shoulder and said, "It's okay, Cynthia. It was just a dream."

She jerked around to face him, nearly catching his nose with her elbow. Now she was awake. She grabbed him with both arms and pulled their bodies tightly together.

Later he would remember how wonderful her body felt against his. All he could think about now was how he hated seeing her afraid. "Are you okay?"

After holding him tight for a few more seconds, she said, "Yeah. I'm okay now."

She sat down on her bed, and he sat across from her, on his bed.

"It must have been a horrible nightmare."

"Yeah. What was I doing? Did you see? Was I walking around the room, or what?"

"Just a few feet."

"It was the same dream I had last night. I dreamed I walked up behind Troy while he was passed out in the chair, picked up his knife, and cut his throat. Then I woke up and found him murdered—just the way I had dreamed it."

He moved over to her bed and sat down beside her. When he put his arm around her, she leaned her head toward him, and rested it on his shoulder. As her tears dripped one by one down his chest, Greg whispered a prayer for her.

When she began to feel heavy on his shoulder, he knew she was falling asleep. He eased her down onto the bed, and draped the blanket over her. She looked so lovely, and appeared to be sleeping peacefully. Greg wondered how long it had been since Cynthia had a good night's sleep. He bent down and kissed her gently on the cheek.

*

Something was annoying Buford. Some noise. He just wanted it to go away and leave him alone. But there it was again. What was it? He didn't know, but he had to put a stop to it—now.

He shook himself, and his eyes opened to a hazy darkness. Where am I? Why am I naked? What is that noise? It was his cell phone. He located it on the nightstand. When he sat up, his head began to throb.

“Hello?”

“I’ve already called you three times.”

Buford’s eyes were beginning to focus as he tried to read the alarm clock. 5:08 AM. That can’t be right, he thought.

“It’s done. I need payment.”

Then it clicked—the man on the phone was John X. So, Marty was dead. Good. “Okay. But, I may have something else for you.”

“Okay.”

“Greg Tenorly and Cynthia Blockerman are coming to my office at 8:30 in the morning. They’re from Coreyville. I want you to be on standby, near my office. And be ready to follow them when they leave.”

“Hey—that sounds like a job for a private eye. I don’t do that stuff.”

“Look—I’ll pay \$5,000 for you to be on call. Then, if I need you to take care of them, I’ll pay \$10,000 each.”

Now you’re talking, John X thought. “Fine. I’ll do it.”

“So, be ready, and I’ll call you after they leave.”

“Got it.”

Now Buford was wide-awake. But how did John X get his private cell number? He didn’t remember giving it to him. He hoped nobody had been listening in.

Then he remembered what had happened the night before. The young blonde hooker had been so hot. He had really wanted her. But she had tricked him, and drugged him. Was she crazy? Doing something like that to the powerful Buford Bellowin?

He could have her tracked down and thrown in jail. She would be sorry she had ever messed with him. On the other hand, it might be difficult to explain what he was doing with her in a hotel room. She might even be under-aged.

So, he still had his phone, but what about his wallet? He found it on the floor and checked the contents. It looked like everything was still there. All the cash and credit cards. He was amazed she didn't take the cash—nearly \$500. But where were his clothes?

Then he remembered the message she had given him from Marty: that Buford would never be safe again if he tried to have Marty killed. Stupid Marty. If the girl hadn't drugged him he could have called John X and cancelled the hit. Not that he *would* have.

But now that Marty was dead, Buford wondered if someone was out there just waiting for a good opportunity to kill him. How would they do it? With a sniper rifle? Poison? A bomb? Maybe he should hire a bodyguard.

No. Marty was bluffing. He wouldn't have had enough money to pay for a hit. Marty was practically broke. Buford had only given him enough for a hotel room and meals in Coreville. But—how had Marty paid for the hooker to drug him?

Chapter 28

It was no problem getting past the guards this time. A call was made to verify the appointment of the two visitors from Coreyville, and Greg and Cynthia were on their way to the elevators.

Greg checked his watch as they walked toward Buford's office. They were a couple of minutes early. He was nervous about what he would say to Buford.

Cynthia was not totally convinced Buford was connected to the Coreyville murders. But she trusted Greg.

The suite was very formal and impressive. Lawyers seem to think expensive offices convey their power, knowledge, and success. Greg wondered if the building had been engineered to handle the weight of so much mahogany and oak.

Millie offered them a seat, and said, "I'll tell Mr. Bellowin you're here."

She walked to the end of the hallway, knocked, and entered Buford's office. "Your mystery visitors from Coreyville are here. Shall I show them in?"

"Let me guess. It's a leggy redhead and a balding, plain-looking guy."

"Well, I don't whether I would call him plain-looking."

"But I'm right about the redhead?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Wait five minutes, and then bring them in. Oh—and, this is very important: don't tell them I know who they are."

Millie looked puzzled. "Okay."

"We, uh—wouldn't want to spoil the surprise."

"I understand, Sir."

After Millie had shut the door, Buford realized he had said too much. If anyone ever found out he was able to guess who was coming to see him from Coreyville, it would make him look highly suspicious. If he was not involved in the Coreyville trial and murders, why would he think Greg and Cynthia would be paying him a visit? It was their only possible connection.

Millie told Greg and Cynthia it would be just a few minutes. Greg decided to have a cup of coffee while they waited. He had taken only two or three sips when Millie walked over to where they were sitting.

“Okay. I will take you to Mr. Bellowin’s office now.” Greg dropped the cup in the trashcan as they followed her down the long hallway.

Buford looked surprised when Millie brought Greg and Cynthia into his office. “Millie told me that a couple of old friends were coming by to see me, but—I’m afraid I don’t know either of you.”

Cynthia noticed that Buford’s secretary seemed confused by his statement.

Greg said, “I’m sorry, Sir. We told your secretary that we were old friends because we thought it was the only way to get an appointment with you today.”

“I see. So, are you even from Coreyville?”

“Yes, Sir. That part is true. We have something really important to talk to you about. I hope you’ll give us a few minutes, even though we got in on false pretenses.”

“Well, you were resourceful—I’ll say that for you.” Buford laughed. “I’ve got to give you a few points for that. And, you *are* from my hometown. So, sure—I’ll hear what you have to say. Can you do it in ten minutes?”

“Yes, Sir. Thank you.” Greg couldn’t believe how much respect he was giving the apparent mastermind of a murderous rampage. “I’m Greg Tenorly and this is Cynthia Blockerman.”

Buford shook hands with his visitors, taking a long glance at Cynthia’s cleavage, and offered them a seat. Millie walked out and closed the door.

“So, what can I help you with today?” Buford sat down behind his desk.

If the executive desk was the yacht of desks, then Buford's desk was a battleship. Cynthia wondered what Buford was trying to compensate for.

"I'm serving on a jury in a murder trial in Coreyville, and—"

"—wait. If this is about an ongoing trial, it would be illegal for me to discuss it with you."

Great, Greg thought. Is this how he's going to slither out of it? "No. Actually, I wanted to ask you about something not related to the trial."

"Okay. But, be careful."

We'll never get anything out of this slimy snake, Cynthia thought, as she tried to maintain a pleasant demeanor.

"Yes, I will. I don't know whether you've heard about it, but several people have been murdered in our town this week."

"Wow. I've always thought of Coreyville as a safe, quiet little community. That's pretty shocking."

"So, I got a call from a woman yesterday. And while she was talking to me, somebody shot her."

"You're kidding me? Is she dead?"

"Yes. The killer shot her right after she told me who was behind all of the murders in Coreyville."

Cynthia was watching Buford for even the slightest reaction.

Buford didn't like where Greg was headed, but what could he do? He had to press on, showing interest, but no particular concern for himself. Besides, Marty was dead. Case solved. Maybe they hadn't heard yet. "So, what did she say?"

"She said the person behind all of the murders was YOU."

"What? That's ridiculous. What's the name of this woman who told you that?"

"Dorothy Spokane."

It was slight, almost imperceptible—but Cynthia saw it. A quiver of the lip and the lower eyelids. Greg was right!

“Whoa. Now we’re talking about someone who’s involved in your trial, right? Isn’t that the trial for the murderer of Sam Spokane?”

“Yes. How did you know?”

“Because it’s in Coreyville. And I’m a lawyer.” He must regain control of himself, Buford thought. He must not appear to be nervous. “And I worked for Sam as a teenager. So, I knew Dorothy. I’m so sorry to hear about her. But I can’t talk about it anymore.”

“So, you don’t know why she would say that you’re involved in the murders?”

“I’m sorry, but you’ve got to leave now, before we cause a mistrial.”

Buford hurried Greg and Cynthia out the door. “Maybe we can visit some other time, when it doesn’t put a trial in jeopardy. Goodbye.”

*

It was easy for John X to locate Greg’s big, red Bonneville in the parking garage. He knew he had the right car, even before he checked the license plate. He didn’t know whether Buford would want him to chase Greg and Cynthia, but he would be prepared. He took the box out of the paper bag and carefully, almost lovingly, removed the device from the box.

It was a fine piece of electronics—a GPS tracker, housed in a magnetic case, weighing only seven ounces. He inserted four AA batteries and turned it on. Then he placed it in an ideal spot on the undercarriage, where it couldn’t be seen without crawling under the vehicle.

Now, wherever the car traveled, he could easily track it over the internet with his PDA. If Buford didn’t order him to follow them, it was \$400 down the drain. But it was just part of the cost of doing business.

He had set his cell phone ringer on vibrate, to avoid alerting anyone to his location. Buford was calling. “I’m ready,” he whispered.

“Good. Wait until they get out of town. And try to make it look like an accident. If you do, it will mean an additional ten for you.”

“So, that’s thirty-five altogether, right?”

“Right.” Yeah, whatever, Buford thought. He couldn’t afford to quibble over money when his career, and even his freedom, was at stake.

“I already have a tracker on his car, so there’s no way they can lose me.”

“I don’t want to know details. Just do it!”

John X heard people talking, and it sounded like they were walking toward him, so he hid on the other side of the truck that was next to Greg’s car. He soon realized, from their conversation, that it was definitely Greg and Cynthia.

“So, what was I saying when you saw him flinch?”

“It was when you told him it was Dorothy Spokane who said he was responsible for all the murders. Something funny happened with his lips and eyes. It wasn’t real obvious, but I saw it.

“Yeah. He’s definitely guilty of *something*.”

“But, of what? Hiring a killer? And, if so, how do we prove it?”

“I don’t know, but I’m starved. Let’s get some breakfast and talk about it.”

John X heard them shut their doors, and drive away. Now he would need to select a vehicle for following them. The extended cab Silverado truck he was standing beside would work. Greg and Cynthia were stopping for breakfast. He would have plenty of time to catch up with them on the road.

Chapter 29

“Cancel the rest of my appointments for this morning.”

“But Sir, Mr. Jacobs is already here, waiting,” whispered Millie.

“I don’t care. Make my apologies and reschedule him. And I do not want to be disturbed unless the building is on fire. Do you understand?”

Buford needed time to think things through. Sam was dead. The only witness who saw the murderer at the scene was dead. The bull-headed juror was dead. And he assumed the police now had Marty’s body. They would find his fingerprints at one of the murder scenes. Or there would be someone who had seen him nearby. They could blame the murders on him and close those cases.

Greg Tenorly and Cynthia Blockerman were now Buford’s greatest concern. But John X had taken care of Marty. Surely he could handle those two.

Then there was Kantrell Jamison. There was still a good chance he would be found ‘Guilty,’ even without Troy on the jury and without Arabeth Albertson’s testimony.

It had seemed like a good plan. He had personally done research, and selected Kantrell for the job. He was a poor black teenager who probably wouldn’t graduate from high school. And Buford was sure he could tempt the boy with cash. Back in March, he had mailed a letter to Kantrell:

Mr. Kantrell Jamison, This letter is private. Please do not share it with anyone. The inner envelope contains five one-hundred dollars bills. This money is yours. There are no strings attached. You can spend it any way you wish.

However, if you would like to earn much more money, please be waiting at the pay phone on the corner near Coreyville Car Wash at 7:30 AM on Saturday, March 18.

At that time, I will offer you a job that will allow you earn a large amount of cash. And you’ll only have to work one night. So, think about it. And have fun spending your money!

Kantrell answered the call on that Saturday morning. Buford had used a throwaway cell phone to call him.

“Don’t talk—just listen. Your pay will be \$30,000. You will receive it in cash before you do the job. If you take the cash, but don’t do the job, a hit man will track you down. You will never be safe. He will find you, and kill you. Since you haven’t hung up yet, I will assume you’re still interested.

“The job is to kill Sam Spokane. You will go into his bicycle shop one night next week when he is alone and murder him. I don’t care how you do it. Just make sure he’s dead. Also, you will take all of the money from his wallet and from the cash register. You can keep that money too. Do you want the job?”

Buford had been proud of the scheme he had concocted. He had worn gloves while preparing the envelope and the cash. He had even remembered to wet the stamps with tap water instead of licking them. But he had made one stupid mistake. When he had dropped off the \$30,000 envelope at the post office from his car, he had picked up the envelope with his bare hands.

As soon as he had released it into the box, he realized his mistake. But it was too late. Tampering with the U.S. Mail could send him to prison just as quickly as hiring a murderer.

But had Kantrell Jamison saved the envelope? Apparently he had been smart enough to hide the money. But if that envelope had not been destroyed, and the police ever found it, they would check for DNA. If Kantrell were found innocent, everything would be okay. But that outcome now seemed unlikely.

What if Kantrell decided to make a deal with the D.A.? If Kantrell could produce evidence against the person who hired him, he might get a lighter sentence. That envelope kept Buford awake at night.

*

Greg and Cynthia had not traveled far before stopping at an IHop for breakfast. As they were being shown to a booth, it happened again. And Greg was growing accustomed to it. He didn’t like it, but he couldn’t blame the men for looking. If a shiny, new sports car passed by, you had to check it out—right?

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. So, if beauty is not beheld, is it still

beautiful? Greg Tenorly was a musician, not a philosopher. But sometimes his mind wandered—chased rabbits. And sometimes the chase went on so long he couldn't even remember where it began.

As long as the men were not ogling her, he could try to ignore them. Cynthia had apparently already learned to do just that. Through years of practice, no doubt.

They sipped coffee, and inhaled the aroma of bacon and pancakes, while waiting for their breakfast. There were four police officers devouring a full table of food, just three booths away. They had watched Cynthia as she passed by—but not in such a way that they thought she might be a fugitive. Just another group of beauty beholders, Greg thought.

“Buford was not the only one acting funny,” Cynthia said softly. “When his secretary took us into his office, he was understandably surprised that we were not old friends. But she seemed confused by his reaction.”

“Really? I didn't see that.”

“You were looking at Buford.”

“So, what do you think that meant?”

“I didn't know at the time, but now I'm wondering if it meant he had already told her he knew who we were.”

“But why would it matter?”

“Think about it. We said we were from Coreyville, so he knew that much. But why would he think it was us? Unless he really is involved in the murders.”

“Yeah. If he knows about everything that's been happening in Coreyville, then he would know about us. But why would we be coming to see *him*?”

Cynthia said, “Let's just assume for now that he's responsible for all of the murders. I doubt he personally murdered anybody. So, he must have hired someone to do it.”

“A hit man.”

“I guess. But we still don’t know why he would have wanted those people dead.”

“True. But let’s skip that part for now and assume he has some reason. One thing we know is that all of the victims were involved in the murder trial. Troy was a juror. Dorothy was Sam’s widow. And Arabeth Albertson was the sole witness. I believe *she* was also murdered. The police said it was an accident—that she was old and weak, and just fell down the stairs. But I think somebody tripped her.”

“Well, it does seem like Buford wanted the defendant to go free. Troy was pushing the jury toward a guilty verdict—”

“—and I was trying to stop him—without much luck. Now I realize that I was just a pawn. Buford was playing me.”

“Me too. And Mrs. Albertson was testifying against the defendant.”

“And Dorothy Spokane called to tell me that Buford was the cause of it all. Although—I don’t know how he knew she was about to tell somebody. But now Buford knows that the person she called was me. Or maybe he already knew.”

“Either way, you and I will probably be his next targets.”

“I’m afraid you’re right. Maybe going to see Buford wasn’t such a good idea.”

“No—you were just trying to do the right thing, Greg. But we probably *are* in danger. Maybe we should go to the D.A. and get police protection.”

“Only thing is—I’m not sure the Coreyville police can really protect us. But maybe that’s our only option.”

“The killer might be following us right now.” They both looked around the restaurant, studying each customer, wondering what a hit man might look like.

“We should go home a different way. Most people traveling from Dallas to Coreyville would take I-20 to Longview, and then go up FM-2208. But it would just be too easy to spot my big red convertible on the interstate. So, let’s take Highway 80 instead, and then maybe we’ll even take a smaller highway after we’re on 80 for a while. We don’t want to make it easy for the killer to find us.”

Greg heard something buzzing. Cynthia noticed it too. She reached into her

purse, and retrieved her vibrating phone. She flipped it open, but didn't answer it. "This is not good. I recognize the number. It's the district attorney's office.

*

Stealing the Silverado had been a piece of cake. But John X knew he was taking a chance. His new ride might be reported stolen before he could even get out of Dallas. But taking chances was what made the game fun.

He knew the exact location of his prey. They were currently stationary. So, he pulled into a McDonalds, got a #4 breakfast meal with a two large coffees—one to go with breakfast, one for the chase. Ah, adrenaline and coffee—what a combo. He parked to eat his meal and wait for them to start moving again.

John X really wanted the extra \$10,000 Buford would pay for accidental deaths. But even more than the money, he liked the challenge. He had never done an accident. Most of his hits had been with a gun. He had murdered a family via arson one time. But his employer had not stipulated that it look like an accident.

So, what were the possibilities? If he raced up behind Greg's car and clipped the left end of his bumper at just the right speed and angle, maybe he could cause the Bonneville to turn sideways and then flip. Greg and Cynthia would be in big trouble if that convertible started rolling down the highway. Seatbelts would be of little help when their heads hit the pavement. But the Bonneville weighed over 4,000 pounds, and had a low center of gravity. He wasn't sure he could make it flip.

He could wait until they were on a two-lane highway, drive up beside them on the shoulder, and force their car into the oncoming traffic—preferably an 18-wheeler. That would probably do it.

But if they took Interstate 20, he wouldn't have a chance to do that until they were close to home. He didn't want to do it that late into the trip. Once they got back home, they would probably separate. That would mean two more hits in Coreysville. And considering that the local police were already on the lookout for a killer, he thought it wise to stay away from there if possible.

He decided to follow them for a while and wait for an opportunity.

Chapter 30

Greg and Cynthia had been on the road for about an hour. They had opted for a scenic route back to Coreyville. But not for the scenery—for the safety. Hopefully they could avoid the killer by taking Highway 80.

“Maybe we should switch to smaller roads,” said Greg.

“Fine with me.”

“We could get off Highway 80 at Wills Point, and go north on FM-47. Then we could travel east, through Emory, Quitman and Gilmer. It’ll take longer to get home, but I think it’s worth it.”

“Sounds good.”

Cynthia was so agreeable, Greg thought—especially to the eyes. He was trying to be a caring friend—and nothing more. But he was barely able to maintain the facade hiding his overwhelming urge to hold her in his arms. She had not even buried her husband yet. It was improper, and maybe even immoral to think of Cynthia in romantic terms. But he had no control over what his heart wanted. At best, he could control his actions. He could not control his feelings.

Greg didn’t believe in ‘love at first sight,’ but he knew that every time he had fallen in love, there had been a *spark* at first sight. Some magical attraction. It might go away after getting to know the woman. But if it wasn’t there at their first encounter, he knew it never would be. There had definitely been a spark with Cynthia. More like a *bonfire*.

Cynthia said, “How can you teach piano without being a pianist?”

That question was out of the blue, Greg thought. Maybe she was trying to think about something besides the fact that they were running from a murderer. Seemed like a good idea.

“I was a vocal major in college, but I also took two years of secondary piano. So, I know how to play scales in all of the keys, the correct fingering, dynamics, pedaling, and so on.”

“And that’s enough to be able to teach piano?”

“Beginner and intermediate. I send advanced students elsewhere. Of course, I’m most comfortable teaching voice or music theory.”

“And you also teach guitar, don’t you?”

“Yeah. I started playing guitar when I was 13. Stayed up until after midnight every night.”

“How’d you have time for homework?”

“I didn’t. I nearly failed the eighth grade. But I got some great calluses.”

“On your hands?”

“Fingertips.” Greg showed her his left hand. “Feel them.”

Cynthia inspected his fingertips, rubbing one of them with her fingers. Then she tapped on one with a fingernail. It was hard and smooth, like the cap of an expensive ballpoint pen. “Weird.”

“Yeah. But you’ve got to have them if you want to play well. It’s like a trumpet player developing his lips.”

As soon as he had said the word ‘lips’, his eyes automatically zeroed in on hers. And in his mind, he held her in his arms and kissed her more passionately than she had ever been kissed.

*

Andrea Newly didn’t want to be the bearer of bad news. Especially when it had to be delivered to Angela Hammerly. She had already made a couple of big mistakes since becoming Assistant District Attorney. This might be counted as strike three. “We’ve got a problem.”

“What is it, Andrea?” Angela’s mood was not good. And it was about to get worse.

“First thing this morning I called the sheriff and expressed my concern that

Cynthia Blockerman might try to leave town.”

“Good.”

“And that if she did, she might be traveling with Greg Tenorly. I asked him to have his men be on the lookout.”

“Good idea.”

“Thanks. But thirty minutes later he called me back to tell me that one of his officers stopped Greg yesterday for an expired inspection sticker. He was on his way out of town.”

“Was Cynthia with him?” Angela’s eyes were firing up.

“He told the officer that the young lady traveling with him was his niece. And that he was taking her to Kilgore College. The officer didn’t get a close look at her, but he said she had red hair and a lot of freckles. He described her as ‘Cute.’”

“Have you tried calling Cynthia Blockerman?”

“Several times. She didn’t answer at her hotel room, her house, or her cell.”

“Did you send the police to look for her?”

“Yes. They checked her house and the hotel.”

“What about Greg Tenorly?”

“They couldn’t find him either.”

“Did they go to his music studio? The church?”

“Yes. And the police are asking everyone around town if they’ve seen either of them today. But so far, nobody has.”

“This is getting out of control. We’ve got two, maybe three, unsolved murders. And now our prime suspects in one of the cases have gone—who knows where. Let’s put out an APB on those two. And contact the local TV stations. If the police don’t spot them, maybe a citizen will.”

*

As organist for First Baptist Church, Margery Allen should have kept the information to herself. But it was burning a hole in her gossip pocket. She stopped by Jane's Diner, and could hardly wait for Jane to bring her coffee. When business was light, as it was now, Jane would often sit down and chat with Margery for a while.

"Did you hear about Greg Tenorly?"

Jane looked concerned as she sat down in the booth with Margery. "What happened?"

"He ran off with Cynthia Blockerman. She's a vice president at the bank. You know—the redhead. The one who's suspected of slashing her husband's throat."

"That doesn't sound like Greg."

"Well, have you seen him today?"

"Uh, no. But he doesn't come in for breakfast every day."

"Really? When's the last time he didn't?"

"Okay. Yeah, he comes by just about every morning."

"Well, Wednesday night, she was at choir practice. And I overheard her tell Greg that she wished her husband was dead."

"Oh, no."

"Yeah. Of course, at the time I didn't think she was serious. But now the police are looking for both of them. They think he might be involved in the murder."

"I can't believe that about Greg. He would never do anything like that."

"Yeah, I didn't think so either. But then, I couldn't have pictured him running off with that redhead either."

*

John X was following Greg and Cynthia on Highway 80, staying a couple of miles behind them. The tracking device was working perfectly, so there was no reason to get any closer until he was ready to strike. It would take at least another hour-and-a-half to get to Coreyville, whatever route they took. But if they stayed on Highway 80 all the way, it would be trickier to make it look like an accident. He was still hoping they would get off 80 and take a smaller road. A two-lane road, with no divider, and few witnesses.

He couldn't believe his luck when he saw Greg exit Highway 80, and take FM-47. It was a smaller road, probably two-lane, he thought. It was time to move in. He increased his speed enough to close the gap, but not enough to attract a state trooper. As he turned onto FM-47, he passed a Wal-Mart truck going the opposite direction. This will be perfect, he thought.

He would gradually get closer to Greg and Cynthia. Then he would watch for an 18-wheeler coming toward them. If his timing was just right, he could pull up on their right side and force their car into the path of the oncoming truck. They would be dead. He would be \$35,000 richer.

Then he could collect his cash from Buford, and go home to his fancy townhouse, his Jaguar, and his video games. There was no wife, no girlfriend waiting for him. He didn't trust anybody enough to let them get that close. Hookers were always an option. He could certainly afford them. He had tried it a couple of times, but didn't enjoy it because even that was too intimate for him.

But he didn't really need sex anyway. He got off on killing people. A warm gun was his greatest aphrodisiac.

He popped the glove box and stored his PDA. He no longer needed it for this job. He was close enough to see the big, red Bonneville. He eased in gradually, until he was fifty yards behind them. There were no other vehicles in sight. He would hold his position, and wait for an 18-wheeler of death.

If he was extra lucky, it might even be a tanker truck, filled with something combustible. With a direct hit, the car might get pushed down the road for a while. Then maybe the truck would jackknife and explode. That would eliminate his two marks, as well as the truck driver/witness.

Chapter 31

It was a beautiful July morning. Perfect for a nice drive on a peaceful East Texas country road, Cynthia thought, as she and Greg made their way up FM-47. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been away from the bank on a Friday. She hadn't taken a day of vacation in the past year, and actually dreaded holidays.

The Fourth of July had been a case in point. Troy had grilled some steaks in the backyard. But after a couple of hours of grilling and drinking, the meat was overcooked—and so was Troy. While carrying the burned steaks to the house, he had dropped the platter on the grass, which he had cut earlier that day.

Now the meat was covered with grass and dirt. He immediately began to yell obscenities at Cynthia, who was watching from inside the house. Then he picked up the metal platter, and flung it at her like a Frisbee, hitting and cracking the sliding glass door.

It had only been four days ago that she had met with Greg in his office at the church. She still felt bad about trying to seduce him into pushing the jury to an acquittal. But now Greg understood that she had only done it to keep her mother safe.

She had not doubted the scary-sounding creep who'd called her that Monday morning at the bank. He had told her she must do what he said, or her mother would be murdered. She wondered if that man was the one who had killed Troy and the others.

She couldn't believe what she had done to Greg. But it was almost funny now. Cynthia had never before tried to use her seductive powers, and didn't even know she had any. And it had made her feel a little sleazy.

But something unexpected had happened. Even though she had been acting, she had felt something real. Maybe that was the reason her act had been so believable. She had leaned in so close to Greg that they could feel each other's body heat. Then she had raised the thermostat a few more degrees by peering into his eyes with a red-hot intensity that said, *I dare you to take off all of my clothes, and make love to me—right here, right now.*

Had it been so easy because she really did want to have sex with Greg right there in his office? No. But she had felt an attraction to him. And that attraction was growing stronger. She had never allowed herself to have any romantic feelings for another man after she was married.

But Troy had obliterated the love she once had for him. Still, she had continued to honor her marriage vows. Technically, her marriage contract was now null and void. But her dead husband had not even been buried yet. So, she should feel guilty about what she was feeling for Greg. Instead, she felt guilty about *not* feeling guilty.

John X was maintaining his position in the stolen, extended cab Silverado. He was fifty yards behind Greg and Cynthia. It was only a matter of time before an 18-wheeler appeared, he thought. Then he saw one. He kicked the accelerator to the floor. The automatic transmission downshifted, the big V-8 awoke from its nap, and the truck lunged forward. He was quickly approaching the Bonneville.

Then he realized the 18-wheeler was traveling faster than he had thought. He started to move to the shoulder, and pull up beside the Bonneville. But the timing was off. There wasn't enough time to position the pickup alongside Greg's car, and push it into the path of the big rig. So, he eased up on the gas, dropping back a bit. Next time he would start from a closer position.

Greg looked in his rear view mirror. "This guy's in a big hurry." The 18-wheeler passed by. "Okay. Now you can come around, Dude."

It had only been a couple of minutes before John X saw another tractor-trailer approaching from the north. This time he would get it right. As he closed in on the big red convertible, he almost felt bad about what he was going to do to Greg's beautiful. The poor guy's last thought before dying would be that some idiot in a big pickup had defiled his most prized possession.

"Here he comes again." Greg wondered why the guy had waited until another truck was coming before trying to pass.

John X steered right, onto the shoulder.

Cynthia heard the truck approaching on her side of the car and looked back. "I hate it when people pass on the shoulder."

The Silverado pulled even with the Bonneville. Only two feet separated the vehicles. Greg and Cynthia looked at the driver of the truck.

“This guy’s crazy,” Greg said. Then he realized the driver had read his lips.

John X looked back at Greg with an evil grin.

The 18-wheeler was getting close. The Silverado started moving to the left.

“Just let him go around,” Cynthia said.

Greg lifted his foot from the gas pedal, and they began to slow down. But then the Silverado slowed down too. Greg reacted by speeding up. But the Silverado sped up too. Then the Silverado made contact with Greg’s car.

Oh, no—my beautiful car, thought Greg.

John X pulled the steering wheel hard to the left. The Bonneville was pushed a couple of feet over the middle line. The tractor-trailer was getting very close.

The trucker blew his horn.

John X pushed harder to the left, and the Bonneville was now half-way into the trucker’s lane.

The trucker hit his brakes. But at 70 miles an hour, he would never be able to stop in time.

Greg tried his best to move back to the right, but with no success.

John X was holding the Bonneville in place. The expression on his face was satanic.

They were doomed. The grill of the diesel monster was growing larger, and more menacing by the second. Greg and Cynthia had managed to stay alive this long, but now their luck was running out.

The trucker’s horn was now blasting steadily, eerily. The horn of the angel of death, proclaiming his arrival for the dispatchment of Greg Tenorly and Cynthia Blockerman. Their lives would be crushed in an instant. The seat belts and

custom air bags would be worthless.

Nothing could stop the tons of steel that was rolling ferociously toward them. There would be no tomorrow. No hope of falling in love. No chance of marriage and children. Only death. There was no time to think. Only time to die.

Then Greg jerked the steering wheel to the left as hard as he could. The Bonneville broke free from the Silverado, ripping off the pickup's rear bumper. It clanged down the road and off to the side. The Bonneville went airborne for a moment, and then landed safely and in the gently sloping, grassy field.

Greg's quick move had caught John X by surprise. Now it was *his* vehicle that was directly in the path of destruction. He made a hard turn to the right.

The 18-wheeler's trailer brakes had locked, and its tires were melting into the pavement. The big rig screeched down the highway—barely missing the bed of the Silverado.

But the pickup was out of control. It tipped over and flipped down the highway and then off to the right, finally coming to rest in the grass.

Greg slowed the Bonneville to a stop at the bottom of the hill. “Wow. That was close.”

“That guy was trying to kill us,” said Cynthia, trying to catch her breath.

“Either that or he's on drugs. Are you okay?”

“I'm fine, I think. How about you?”

“Yeah. I'm okay. If that guy is trying to kill us, we'd better get out of here.”

Greg drove up the hill at an angle, and then onto the highway. They saw the Silverado on its side in the field, and were surprised it wasn't burning.

Cynthia said, “I wonder if he's alive?”

“Let's not stick around to find out.”

As they drove away, Cynthia looked back and saw the tractor-trailer. The trucker

was getting out of the cab.

“Good. The trucker looks like he’s okay. He can call the police. If the killer’s still alive, *they* can deal with him.”

“Yeah. And if the trucker reports us for leaving the scene of an accident then we’ll just explain what happened. Besides, I doubt he got a good look at our license plate.”

Chapter 32

As he stepped down from his cab, Willie saw the red Bonneville in the distance, driving away. He did a quick inspection of his rig. He had burned off some tire rubber, but otherwise his tractor-trailer was just fine. Then he saw the Silverado lying on its side in the field. He didn't really want to get involved, but his conscience wouldn't let him leave without checking on the man in the wrecked pickup.

He ran toward the truck, thinking it might catch on fire at any moment. He hoped he would make it in time to pull the driver to safety, without getting himself killed. Apparently, the people in the convertible didn't care if the man died a horrible burning death. They were too busy to save somebody's life.

The Silverado was lying on the driver's side. Willie could smell the steam from the punctured radiator. And the gasoline odor was strong. He jumped onto the upside of the truck, and opened the passenger door, which was already ajar. He kicked the door back, beyond its designed stopping point, causing it to slam down on the front fender. Then he looked into the cab, and saw that the driver was not moving. "Hey, Man?"

John X opened his eyes, as if awaking from a dream, and looked up at Willie.

"Come on. We better get you out of here fast. She could blow at any second."

After struggling to release his seatbelt, John X reached up for Willie's hand. The strong arm of the trucker pulled him to his feet. He started to get out—but then hesitated.

Willie had already jumped down to the ground. "Come on, man. Hurry!"

John X opened the glove box and retrieved his PDA, and put it in his pocket. Then he reached into the back seat of the extended cab and pulled out his suitcase, and threw it to Willie. He climbed up onto the edge of the doorway, pulled his legs out, and jumped to the ground.

They moved away from the hot metal and gasoline as quickly as they could. Once they had reached the road, they turned around, expecting the Silverado to

go up like a bottle rocket. But it turned out to be a dud.

Willie said, “Need an ambulance?”

“No. I’ll be fine.”

Willie wasn’t so sure, but he didn’t have time to argue. “You want a ride? I could drop you off down the road.”

“How about at a restaurant? I need some food.”

“Sure. Come on.” They began to walk toward Willie’s truck. “You’re in luck, buddy. ‘Cause it just so happens I was headed to one of the best little barbecue spots in Texas. It’s just a few miles down the road, in Wills Point. Man, have they got some tasty ribs.”

“Sounds good.”

They got into the cab of the 18-wheeler, and headed down FM-47. John X wanted to go north. But he could catch up with Greg and Cynthia a little later—as long as his PDA was still working. He turned it on, opened the browser, and entered the IP address of the tracking device he had put on Greg’s car. Yes—the cat could still see his mice. They would not escape his claws.

“I don’t believe I got your name,” said Willie.

“John.”

First names only, I guess, thought Willie. “I’m Willie. Good to meet you, John. Glad you didn’t get hurt too bad.”

“Yeah. Thanks.” Just shut up, you country bumpkin. Can’t you see that I’m trying to think?

“What the heck happened back there? It looked like you were trying to push that Pontiac into my lane?”

John X didn’t want to have to kill this dumb trucker. Not that he ever minded killing. But it would have interfered with his current objective—to kill Greg Tenorly and Cynthia Blockerman—and get paid for it. And now it was personal

—since they had almost killed *him*.

“I don’t know. Something weird happened with my steering. I was trying to pass the car on the right side—which was stupid of me, I know. I just got impatient. But then, my pickup started pulling to the left. I tried to turn it the other way, but it felt like my steering was locked up. And by the time I was finally able to turn the wheel to the right—there you were. You nearly creamed me.”

“Sorry, man. But you can’t stop one of these puppies on a dime.”

“Well, I’m just glad everybody survived.” Except Greg and Cynthia. They should have been dead. He didn’t care anymore about the extra \$10,000 for their accidental death. Now he wanted them to suffer—to *know* they were about to die. What kind of cruel torture could he devise?

John X flinched when his cell phone rang. It was an unknown number. Possibly Buford. “Yeah?”

“Is it done?”

“Not yet.”

“Why not? What’s taking you so long?”

“Don’t worry. I’ve got it under control.”

“But that’s just the point—I *do* worry. These loose ends must be snipped—now. When I pay this kind of money, I expect a professional job!”

“You are *getting* a professional job, *Sir!*”

Buford didn’t appreciate his tone. “Just get it done—now!” Buford hung up.

Willie looked concerned for his new friend. “Problem?”

“No. My boss is just a real pain in the butt.”

“Yeah—mine too.

It took only fifteen minutes to get Wills Point. *Cowboy’s Bar-B-Q* was a little cubbyhole of a restaurant.

John X wasn't impressed. "This is it?"

Willie laughed. "Yeah, it ain't much bigger than a phone booth. But, oh those ribs."

"Mind if I leave my suitcase in the truck until after we eat?"

"You'll pretty much have to. Ain't no place to set it down in there." He chuckled.

Willie fit right in with the lunch crowd. John X stuck out like a big-city accountant—who just got mugged.

To John X, everybody in the restaurant looked like a trucker. One of them apparently knew Willie.

"How's it hangin', Willie?"

"You oughta know, Fred."

Willie ordered ribs and a coke. John X asked for the same.

Willie was right, thought John. The ribs were some of the best he'd ever eaten.

After a quick trip to the men's room, they were on their way to the truck. John X got his suitcase out of the cab, and said thanks and goodbye to Willie, and told him someone was coming to pick him up.

A few miles down the road, Willie realized he had never heard John call anybody to ask for a ride. Seemed odd. But he had freight to deliver.

John X stood outside the strip mall, scouting out his next vehicle. After about ten minutes, a very large, fifty-ish looking man parked his silver Mustang, and then waddled into *Cowboy's*. Way too many ribs, John thought.

He carried his suitcase to the Mustang, and before anyone could notice, had popped the lock and was starting the engine. Man, was he good. He would be miles away before the local police were even called. And there would be plenty of time to kill Greg and Cynthia, and then abandon the car on the side of the road before the night was over.

In the meantime, he would plan their demise. He didn't want to drive behind them, and shoot them through the back window of their car. They might not even see it coming. He wanted to be sure that they *did* see it coming—and have plenty of time to worry about it.

He could take them off into the woods and prepare a couple of nooses. Yes. He could hang them, facing each other. Stand them on a log or a chair. Then he would kick the support out from under them.

Greg would try to save Cynthia by holding her up, which would kill him even faster. They would watch each other die right before their eyes, yet be helpless to stop it. And the last sound they would hear as they took their final breaths would be John X laughing his butt off.

Or maybe he would finally use his .44 Magnum. He had waited so long for an opportunity. He could tie them up, back to back. Then he could hold the revolver close to Cynthia's chest and tease her for a while. He would describe to them in sickening detail what was about to happen: the shot would tear a big hole in Cynthia's chest, exit her back, and then rip through Greg's body and come out the other side.

Two lovers' hearts joined together—and blown all over the room by a huge bullet. What a way to go!

Chapter 33

Greg and Cynthia were driving along Lake Tawakoni on FM-47. They would go east on FM-2324. They were both still shaken from their encounter with the Silverado and the 18-wheeler.

“So, it looks like Buford has added us to his hit list,” Greg said.

“Well, at least now we know your theory was right. Buford *is* the one who hired the killer. Or killers.”

“I hope there’s only one. And I hope he’s dead—back there in that pickup.”

“I don’t think that will stop Buford Bellowin. He’ll just hire another hit man. How are we ever going to be safe, Greg?”

It was a very good question.

Cynthia started analyzing the facts. “So, if Buford had Troy killed, and Dorothy Spokane, and possibly Arabeth Albertson —what was his motivation? Why would he want them dead? And I was threatened so that I would persuade you to get a ‘Not Guilty’ verdict for Kantrell Jamison. All of us were involved in the trial in some way.”

“That’s true. First, you were threatened, and you came to my office at the church, and tried to seduce me.”

“I’m still embarrassed about that.”

“Don’t be. I understand. Besides, I sort of enjoyed it.” Greg smiled at her.

“Hum. Now I wonder what that says about you.”

“Well, it did make me uncomfortable. So, there. Does that make me a little less of a horndog?”

“You’re no horndog, Greg. You couldn’t be one of those guys, even if you tried.”

“Thanks.”

“Okay, then. Now where were we? Oh, yeah—Buford wanted you to get him an acquittal.”

“But, wait a minute. You came to see me on Monday. But I wasn’t selected as a juror until Tuesday morning. How did he know I’d be on the jury?”

“Yeah. I wondered about that at the time. He must have been working with the defense attorney.”

“Either that, or he just took a chance, and got lucky. By the time you came to my office, they had already gone through the entire jury panel, yet only eight jurors had been selected. I was set to be on Tuesday’s panel. But how could he know I would be selected?”

“Unless he somehow knew the *order* of your panel.”

“Yeah. I was in seat three.”

“But even if he knew the order, how could he be sure you wouldn’t be rejected by one of the lawyers?”

“Hey, wait a minute. I didn’t think anything about it at the time, but—the judge told the lawyers they had both used all of their free strikes. You know—the peremptory strikes.”

“So, Buford would have known that, if he was in contact with the defense attorney.”

“Yeah, but I still don’t understand how he knew the order of my panel.”

“I don’t know. But then there was Arabeth Albertson.”

“Yeah. She told us she saw the defendant leaving the bicycle shop in a hurry on the night Sam was killed. But the defense lawyer tried to make us think Arabeth’s vision was an issue. He got the judge to send her for an eye exam—which she passed.”

“But before she could make it back to the courtroom the next day, she had an accident. Or was murdered.”

“I really think she was murdered. Somebody tripped her and made her fall down those stairs. Then Troy was next. Probably because he was swaying the jury to vote ‘Guilty.’ I was fighting him all the way—but he was wining.”

“And Buford couldn’t have that. So, he had him murdered.”

“Wouldn’t it have been easier to just kill Kantrell Jamison?”

“Yeah. Why he didn’t do *that*? And what about Dorothy Spokane? She knew that Buford was the one who was behind the murders. But the killer got to her before she could tell her story to the D.A. At least she was able to give me Buford’s name before she died.”

Cynthia thought about that for a few seconds. “If Dorothy knew what Buford was up to, why didn’t she go to the police sooner? She waited until Arabeth and Troy had been killed.”

“I don’t understand that either. Maybe she believed Arabeth Albertson’s death was an accident. But then, after Troy was murdered, she realized Mrs. Albertson had been murdered too.”

“Well, I just hope the Coreyville police can protect us. Because we’re not going to be safe until somebody takes Buford down.”

*

Greg and Cynthia were on FM-182, approaching Quitman. It would take at least two more hours to get home to Coreyville. Greg stopped at a convenience store, and started pumping gas. Cynthia walked into the store, and went into the bathroom.

Just as Greg had returned the nozzle to the pump, and was walking toward the store, Cynthia rushed out and stopped him. There was a look of fear in her eyes. “We’re on the news.”

“What?”

She grabbed his arm, and directed him back toward the car, as she whispered frantically, “They’ve got a little TV in there. And the reporter was talking about two fugitives, wanted by the Coreyville Police Department. It was *us*, Greg!

They're showing our pictures! We're wanted for murder!"

"No."

"Let's get out of here."

They jumped in the car and sped away.

After she had caught her breath, Cynthia said, "You *did* pay for the gas, right?"

"Yeah. At the pump."

"Good. If not, they'd be after us for theft as well."

"Uh-oh."

"What?"

"I shouldn't have paid with my debit card. Now the police can track us. What was I thinking?"

*

John X was driving at the fastest speed that would not get him pulled over. He did not want to kill a cop. The officer would check the vehicle registration, and find out John X was not the owner. He would not allow himself to be arrested. But he didn't want the heat that comes with being a cop killer. Over his brief career, he had done a good job of maintaining a low profile.

He had only driven a few miles when he checked the fuel gauge. It was nearly empty. He stopped at a convenience store, started pumping gas, and then went inside. He had just eaten a big pile of ribs. Now he wanted dessert for the road.

First, he'd do a quick survey of the pastry goods. Hostess Chocolate Frosted Donettes. One of his favorites. A little bit of donut, surrounded by a lot of delicious chocolate. He loved the way it felt when he bit into one of them. The chocolate coating was 'al dente', like properly prepared pasta—firm to the tooth.

A state trooper entered the little store. John X saw him, but acted uninterested. As he continued to peruse the selection of pastries, he heard the trooper talking

to a man who was standing in line at the counter.

“Is that your Mustang out there?” the trooper asked.

“No, Sir. It’s not mine,” the man replied.

Surely the car had not already been reported stolen. The trooper walked to the back of the store, to the refrigerated area, and reached in for a bottle of Diet Pepsi. Then he walked into the aisle next to John X’s, and grabbed a bag of Fritos.

John was ready. He was pretending to study the ingredients on the package of donuts in his left hand. But his right hand was in his pants pocket, holding a Kel-Tec P-32, semi-automatic pistol. At a mere five inches in length, it was always with him, no matter what other weapons he might be carrying.

The trooper started to walk off, but then he turned to John X and said, “Is that your mustang out there at the pump?”

John X slowly slipped the pistol out of his pocket. The trooper could not see the gun from across the top of the shelves.

“Yes, Sir. That’s my mustang. Is there a problem?”

He would hit the trooper with a couple of shots to the head in rapid succession. The cop would be dead before he had a chance to drop the Coke or the Fritos to go for his weapon.

“Yes, there *is* a problem—”

John wondered how many people he would have to kill to get away. He had seen a couple of men at the register, and a female clerk. Did he have enough bullets?

“—your right rear tire is low. Better put some air in it.” The trooper walked away.

John X breathed a sigh of relief as he slid the pistol back into his pocket.

Chapter 34

The Bonneville had been scraped and dented all along the passenger side, although not enough to keep the door from functioning properly. The condition of his car, however, was the least of Greg's worries.

He and Cynthia were in panic mode, after learning they were wanted for murder. They were on FM-182, headed toward Quitman, on their way back to Coreyville. But now the idea of going home, and getting police protection sounded a lot less attractive. The police would protect them, all right—by putting them behind bars.

Greg said, "Maybe we should hide out for a few days."

"But wouldn't we be safe from the killer if we were in jail?"

"I guess so. Of course, we don't even know if he's still alive. But if he is, he could be waiting for us in Coreyville. And this time, he might shoot us. We don't want to walk right into a trap."

"What I don't understand is why he didn't shoot us back there on the highway, instead of trying to run us into that 18-wheeler? Was he trying to make it look like an accident?"

"Probably so. Like with Arabeth Albertson."

"Hiding out for a while might be a good idea," said Cynthia. "But where?"

"I don't know. But we can't pay with plastic—that's for sure."

"Hey—I know a place." She opened the glove box. "You got a Texas map in here?"

"Yeah."

She unfolded the map and searched. "Yeah. There's a place not too far from here. They have cabins for fishermen."

"But don't they book those places way ahead of time?"

“Yeah. But we might get lucky. If they don’t have any vacancies, we can look for a hotel. But this would be perfect, if we can get one. We’d be off in the woods—a lot harder to find. I think we should try. And don’t worry—I have cash.”

“Okay. Let’s give it a shot. Where are these cabins located?”

“On Lake Fork. Troy and I took a vacation there last summer. I hated it.”

“Then why do you want to go back there?”

“No—the cabin was fine. But I went there to spend time with Troy—as a last ditch effort to fix our marriage. But he spent every day fishing and drinking—and ignoring me. At least he didn’t hit me while we were there. But I was bored and miserable the whole time.”

She pointed to a spot on the map. “It’s right in here somewhere. We need to go north to 515. We should make it in twenty minutes or so.”

*

Greg and Cynthia were nearly to FM-515, when Greg said, “Cynthia, how did the killer figure out where we were? We took back roads, but he still managed to find us.”

“I don’t know. I guess he followed us all the way from Buford’s office.”

“But I never saw his pickup behind us until a few minutes before he tried to kill us. How could he follow us if he couldn’t see us?”

“What are saying? You think he put a bug or some kind of tracking device on the car?”

They looked at each other, and made an unspoken agreement. They would not talk until they had checked the car for surveillance devices. Greg pulled into the next gas station, parking away from the pumps. He got out, and began to look under the car. Cynthia searched under the dashboard, and under the seats.

Greg slid out from under the car, stood up, and showed Cynthia what he had found. It was some type of electronic box. And although neither of them had ever seen one before, except on TV, they knew it had to be a tracking device.

Without saying a word, Greg walked to a minivan that was parked at a pump. Its driver and passengers were apparently inside the store. He squatted to tie his shoe, and to attach the device to the underside of the vehicle.

*

It was about 2:30 PM when Greg and Cynthia finally saw the billboard for Johnson's Cabins on Lake Fork. They turned onto the small paved road, and drove for three or four miles at 30 mph.

Greg was not encouraged by the sign in front of the office. "It says they only have seventeen cabins. What are the chances one is available?"

"All we can do is try."

The young lady at the desk didn't seem to notice or care that Greg and Cynthia were not wearing wedding rings. "What can I do for you?"

"I know this is a crazy question, but—do you have a cabin available for tonight?" Greg felt ridiculous. It was the middle of summer. This was a great place for fishing. How could they possibly have any vacancies?

"As a matter of fact—you're in luck."

Greg and Cynthia looked at each other. They had driven all the way to Buford's office, only to be added to his hit list. They were nearly killed on the highway. And now the D.A. wanted them for murder. They were due for some good luck.

The young lady explained, "Some folks were staying in Cabin 17. They had it booked through next Friday. But they got a call a couple of hours ago about a death in the family, so they went home. In fact, they just drove off, five minutes ago."

Cynthia said, "Then we'd like to take their place, and rent that cabin through next Friday. How much is it?"

"Sixty dollars a night, plus tax."

Cynthia reached into her purse, pulled out her wallet and retrieved five \$100 bills.

Greg's eyes widened. Then he tried to act as though it was no big deal. Cynthia signed some papers, took the change and keys, and they were off to their cabin.

The cabins were lined up along a dirt road. Greg wished the houses on his street in Coreyville had this much space between them. Cabin 17 was at the far end. It was the size of a small hotel room. Two double beds, two chairs, a small table, a TV, a little closet, and a bathroom. Greg carried their bags inside.

Cynthia turned on the TV and found the Tyler station.

They watched for any news about themselves.

*

Andrea Newly was not in her office, so Angela Hammerly walked down the hall to the kitchenette. She found Andrea there, getting a cup of coffee.

"Just a got a call from the Sheriff. They got a hit on Greg Tenorly's bankcard. He used it to buy gas over on the other side of Quitman."

"Sounds like they're headed back here."

"Yeah. They're taking the long way around. But it's only a matter of time now. We've got 'em."

*

John X had been driving the Mustang hard, trying to catch up with that red behemoth-of-a-car that had nearly defeated him. But it had not. *He* would win the war. He had monitored the path of the Bonneville on his PDA. When it had reversed course, backtracking over the same roads, he knew Greg had discovered the device, and put it on another vehicle. John X was not easily fooled.

He continued in the direction they had been traveling—north on FM-154. He stopped at every gas station and convenience store to ask if anyone had seen a red 1965 Pontiac Bonneville convertible.

The middle-aged men were the most helpful. They recognized the old makes and models. And they had observed Greg's car with particular envy—especially the

one who had apparently not seen the roughed-up passenger side. If Greg and Cynthia had stopped for the night, John X would locate them before morning.

But he was so busy tracking and scheming, he didn't notice the black Camry that had been following him. The man in the Camry knew how to follow without being seen. He had been watching as John X stopped numerous times to ask about the big convertible. He had seen him try to run the Bonneville into the tractor-trailer. And he had watched him steal the Silverado from the parking garage at Buford's office.

John X was on a mission.

So was the man in the black Camry.

Chapter 35

At 5:10 PM, Channel 7 News gave their report about the two fugitives from Coreyville. Greg and Cynthia had been sleeping for nearly two hours. When the reporter said Greg's name, he woke up. Cynthia was still asleep on her bed.

"Cynthia? We're on the news."

Cynthia's eyes opened wide, and immediately sat up to watch the report.

The authorities believe that the fugitives are somewhere between Coreyville and Dallas, and that they are traveling in a red 1965 Pontiac Bonneville. If you see them, please call the police. Do not approach them. They are considered armed and dangerous.

"Armed and Dangerous? You've got to be kidding me," said Cynthia.

"This is the first time I've ever wished I had a silver minivan instead the Bonneville."

"You wanna steal one?"

Greg looked over at Cynthia to make sure she was kidding. "Why not? What's carjacking, compared to murder?"

"Well, at least they're not offering a reward."

"Yet."

Greg sat up on the side of his bed. "But what are we going to eat, if we can't go out in the car?"

"Guess we'll have to walk. They had some groceries at the office."

"Wonder if they have any clothes—maybe some shorts and T-shirts."

"Yeah, I'd sure like to change into something clean. And we need to try to look different than the pictures they're showing on TV. You're probably okay. Just brush out the hairspray and you'll be good."

“Then my hair will fall down in my face. I hate that.”

“No—that’s good.”

Greg frowned. He had always taken pride in keeping every hair in place—what little hair he had left. But he knew she was right.

“I’ll put my hair in pigtails, take off my makeup, and wear your baseball cap.”

“Yeah—that was good enough to fool the cop. He believed it when I told him you were my niece. But I’m not too sure I like that.”

“Well, with your hair down, you don’t have to be my uncle. You can be my boyfriend.”

That’s more like it, Greg thought. Maybe he’d like to *really* be her boyfriend.

*

Kantrell Jamison was tired of sitting in jail. Kyle Serpentine, his pro bono lawyer, had promised he would get off. But now the trial had been suspended until the police could investigate the murder of a juror. Why couldn’t they just go ahead with an alternate juror? All he could think about was how he would spend his money. He had stashed the envelope containing the \$30,000 in a place nobody would ever look: in a metal file box, buried under the house.

The Jamison’s 1946 home sat on concrete blocks that suspended the floor two-and-a-half feet above the ground. He and his sister, Jolee, had often played games under the house when they were children. It felt great on a breezy summer day. Kind of a poor man’s playhouse—with a low ceiling and a dirt floor.

And their mother could easily call them for dinner from any room in the house, since you could hear *everything* under there. If they didn’t come right away, a couple of stomps on the floor always did the trick. But you learned to stay out from under the bathroom.

Kantrell didn’t know much about the law. But he had seen the movie, *Double Jeopardy*. So, he knew the police wouldn’t be able to touch him after he was found ‘Not Guilty’—even if they caught him with all that cash.

A deputy escorted a very big black man to Kantrell's cell. He looked like an NFL player, at 6'5", 295 pounds. "You've got company, Kantrell," said the deputy, as he unlocked the door. "This is Ben Jones."

"They call me Big Ben."

As the deputy closed the cell door, and locked it, Kantrell said, "No use in locking it, deputy—I think Big Ben could rip it off the hinges if he wanted to." Kantrell's smart mouth was always getting him into trouble.

*

According to the sign on the door, the office would be closing at 6:00 PM—in fifteen minutes. A younger woman named Jennifer was now sitting at the desk. Greg and Cynthia said hello, and began to pick out groceries. Bread, milk, peanut butter, two kinds of cereal, mustard, hot dogs, chips, a variety of soft drinks, plastic utensils, ice, a Styrofoam ice chest, two Dallas Cowboys T-shirts and two pairs of one-size-fits-all stretchy shorts.

Cynthia whispered to Greg, "How are we going to carry all of this stuff?"

He shrugged. "We'll manage somehow."

Jennifer bagged their purchases, while Cynthia made small talk. They paid in cash, and walked out—loaded down like pack mules for the long trek back to Cabin 17.

As soon as the door had closed behind them, Jennifer flipped open her cell phone, and entered the number she had written on the pad. Her thumb hovered over the 'Send' button. She wondered whether those two were really the fugitives she had seen on the news. They looked a lot like them. But what if she was wrong? That would be embarrassing. And the police weren't offering a reward. So, why take a chance? They seemed like nice people. She closed her phone.

Greg and Cynthia walked down the dusty road with their groceries hanging from their bodies in plastic bags. Thankfully, the trees shielded them from the blazing sun. But the humidity was so high they might as well have been walking through a steam room.

“You think the killer’s still alive?”

Cynthia looked around for eavesdroppers, and then said softly, “Maybe we’d better talk about something else while we’re outside.”

She was right. They needed to look and sound like they were on a fishing vacation. Greg couldn’t remember the last time he’d been fishing. Maybe when he was a young teenager.

“I really like Johnny Depp—especially in those *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies,” said Cynthia.

“Yeah, he was good in those. I think he was funnier in the first one, though. But why does he have to wear so much eye makeup?”

They talked about movies and TV shows until they got back to their cabin. And nobody seemed to pay much attention to them as they walked by.

Greg started laughing. “Why did we buy hotdogs? We don’t have any way to cook them.”

“Yeah, that was dumb.”

“Of course, they’re actually pre-cooked. So, if you don’t mind eating them cold

“

“How about peanut butter and jelly for dinner tonight?”

“Sounds delicious. May I be your chef for the evening, Mademoiselle?”

“Why, yes, that would be delightful.”

“Very well. And may I also act as your maitre d’? I have a very special table for you.”

“Oh, really? I’m intrigued.”

Greg pulled one of the chairs out from under the little rickety table, and offered it to Cynthia. “Mademoiselle?”

Greg filled the ice chest with ice, drinks and the hotdogs. Then he used the plastic utensils to make their sandwiches. Peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, Ruffles, and warm diet Coke. They were both so hungry from skipping lunch and taking a long walk that it tasted as good as filet mignon.

*

John X had been chasing Greg and Cynthia all day. And his old friends, caffeine and adrenalin, were beginning to fail him. Even a 25-year-old has to rest sometime. But he continued to push himself. He knew he was getting closer. By the time he found them, they would be sleeping. Then maybe he would take a brief nap himself. But he knew better. Finding them would re-energize him immediately. Just the thought of it made him feel stronger.

They would be so sorry they had caused his truck to wreck. They would wish they'd died in a car crash, as he had intended. That would have been an easier way to go. But now he would torture them. He wouldn't get the extra \$10,000 for making it an accident. But he didn't care. This would be more fun.

He stopped at another convenience store. The old man behind the counter remembered seeing the Bonneville. John X jumped into the Mustang, and drove away. He could hardly wait to see the look on their faces when he whipped out his .44 Magnum.

The man in the black Camry gave John X plenty of lead time. It was more difficult at night, but there was less traffic now. And John X should have noticed that he was being trailed. But he was just too cocky. The man lit another cigarette and pulled onto the road.

Chapter 36

It was 8:20 PM. Kantrell Jamison and Big Ben Jones had stayed on their beds, napping and ignoring each other for three hours.

Kantrell jumped down from the top bunk and walked over to the wooden table and beat-up chairs. He picked up the deck of cards on the table, and turned to Big Ben. “How about a game of poker?”

The bunk bed creaked, as Big Ben began to rouse himself. He rolled toward Kantrell, bleary eyed. “The only game I know is Spades.”

“That’ll do.”

Big Ben lumbered over to the table, and sat down. Kantrell nearly started laughing. His cellmate’s oversized body made the table and chairs look like children’s furniture. Kantrell shuffled the deck. Then they began to take turns drawing their hands.

“What are you in for?” said Kantrell.

“Hot checks. It was stupid. I got laid off. First thing you know, I was broke. But the guys were coming over to watch a big game. The Mavericks were on a roll. I had to buy beer and chips.”

“They threw you in jail for one hot check?”

“No. Four. I was gonna cover that first one, and never do it again. But I never got around to it, and then I needed groceries for the family. Then I needed gas and more beer. I told you it was stupid. And I’m never doing it again. Gotta serve thirty days. Then they’ll let me pay out what I owe.”

“Well, how are you going to pay it back if you don’t have a job?”

“My uncle has a landscaping business. And he said he’d hire me. I really don’t want to work for him. But now I’ve got to. At least until I can get something better.”

They continued to pick cards.

“And you’re the one who’s on trial for murdering Sam the Bicycle Man. Right?”

“Yep.” Kantrell didn’t bother to look up.

“Hope you’ve got a good lawyer.”

“Yeah. He’s pretty good, I think.”

“‘Cause you don’t stand much of a chance in this town. The white people are gonna send *somebody* to the electric chair for that murder. And you’re black, so it might as well be you.”

“Nope. I’m gonna get off. And then I’m moving to Shreveport. Gonna buy me a brand new car.”

“So, you’ve got money, huh? Rich family?”

“Nah. They’re poor. But I’ve got my *own* money.”

“What kind of car?”

“I’m thinking a Cadillac XLR Roadster. A red one.”

“Really? So, you’ve got \$90,000 to spend on a car? Hey—you want to be best friends?” Big Ben laughed at his naive cellmate. “Really—I could use a new car too. How about it?”

“No. I don’t have *that* much to spend. And I’m sure not buying *you* one.”

“Maybe you could settle for a Miata. It’s a girly car, but it might be more in your price range—around \$25,000, I think.”

“I don’t want no girly car.” Kantrell had not even checked the price of his dream car. To him, \$30,000 was a fortune. It should have been enough to buy anything he wanted.

“So, where did you get the money?”

“Where do you think?” A wry smile slowly formed on Kantrell’s face.

“You mean you really did do it?”

“Not so loud.” Kantrell looked down the hallway, checking for guards.

“You killed Sam?”

“No.” His lips lied, but the smirk on his face told the truth.

“You *did* do it. I can see it in your eyes. But Sam wouldn’t have had that much money in the shop. Somebody must have *hired* you to do it. But why? Sam didn’t have any enemies.”

“Yeah, he did. He had at least one.”

“You stupid fool! Don’t you realize what you’ve done? Sam Spokane was a great man. I don’t care what color he was. He cared about everybody. When I was twelve years old, and starting to get into trouble, Sam helped turn me around. I grew up poor, and the only bike we had was so busted up we couldn’t even give it away.

“But somehow Sam found out about me, and offered me a deal. He told me that he and I could take an old bike he had in his shop, and rebuild it together, a few hours a day, after school. Then he’d give it to me. It was great. And I didn’t see it at the time, but all those funny stories he told were actually teaching me lessons.”

“Yeah, everybody talks about how great he was. But he was real old. He didn’t have much time left anyway. And I couldn’t turn down that kind of money.”

“Not everything is about money, punk! That old man was like a grandfather to me. I oughta bust your head wide open!”

Without backing away from the table, Big Ben jumped to his feet, flipping the heavy table onto his cellmate’s chest.

Kantrell’s chair tipped backward. He tried to jump out to the side, but found himself pinned to the chair by the weight of the table.

A bicycle helmet might have saved him. But he had no helmet, nor anything else to protect his bare head from the rock-solid surface. His skull crashed into the unforgiving cold, hard concrete. A coconut thrown against a boulder would have produced a similar crunch. But cracking open a coconut would not have caused

Big Ben to vomit all over himself.

In a single motion, he yanked the table off Kantrell, and threw it into the wall behind him with such velocity that two of the legs broke off. Kantrell didn't appear to be breathing. Big Ben looked at him in horror, fearing he had killed the boy.

"Guard! Guard! Call 911! Hurry!"

*

One of the jail guards had phoned Kantrell's mother right after calling 911. She was pacing the floor in the emergency room when they rolled him through the doors. Kantrell's eyes were closed.

"I want to speak to my son."

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but you'll have to wait," the guard said.

"Besides—he's barely conscious," said one of the paramedics.

"I don't care. I'm gonna talk to my boy!" Ella Jamison was a large, strong woman. She grabbed the stretcher, leaned over Kantrell, and whispered, "Kantrell, this is your mama. Do you hear me?"

He opened his eyes a little, but was in a daze. "Yes, Mama."

"Where did you hide the money?"

"That's my money."

"Kantrell, you gotta think about your poor mama and your little sister. Now, where is the money?"

"I'm gonna buy a new car."

"That's fine. We'll hold the money for you until you get out of jail."

"No, Mama. That's *my* money. I earned it."

"Now you listen to me, Kantrell. You hit your head real hard tonight. What if

you die? Then we won't know where to find the money. Then what are we gonna do?"

"I'm sorry, Mama."

The guard pulled Ella away from the stretcher. And before she could think of what to say next, Kantrell had disappeared through the double doors.

*

Between Cabin 14 and Cabin 15, there was a small road. John X drove down the road until it widened near the lake. He made a u-turn, turned off his lights, and killed the engine. He had finally found the Bonneville. It was parked in front of the last cabin—number 17. He checked his watch. It was 10:45 PM.

Greg and Cynthia would probably be asleep soon, he thought. Unless they were having sex. Maybe he should go now, and find out. It would be fun to crash through the door in the middle of it. But no—that might be risky. It would be safer if they were asleep. Being safe was not normally a high priority for him. But after the fiasco with the 18-wheeler, he was feeling a little more cautious.

He would wait a couple of hours. Then he would walk to their cabin, quietly pick the lock, and slip inside. Then he would flip on the light, and wake them up—with his .44 Magnum in hand. And they would, of course, do whatever he said.

He had decided to use his 'two hearts for the price of one bullet' plan. He would set them up back to back, and then blow a big hole through both of them with one shot. He would enjoy watching them cry and beg for mercy.

Of course, the .44 Magnum would be very noisy. It's a revolver—like an Old West pistol, except bigger and more powerful. And it's impossible to effectively suppress the sound because of the open chambers. But he couldn't resist using it. He had owned the gun for over a year, but had never used it on a job. The people in nearby cabins would definitely hear it, but would initially be afraid to go near the source of the blast.

John X would be long gone before anyone worked up the nerve to investigate, and discovered the gruesome scene in Cabin 17. And if anyone saw the Mustang driving away, that wouldn't matter either. He would dump it a few miles down

the road.

*

Greg woke up to the voice of Jay Leno. He had dozed off during the monologue. Cynthia was asleep in her bed. He clicked the remote to turn off the TV, and tried to go back to sleep. But now his mind was wide-awake.

It had been another wild day in a crazy week. And even though they had nearly been killed in a car wreck, he wouldn't have wanted to be anywhere else. There was something about being with Cynthia that made life special. He had never felt this way about any other woman. Even his ex-wife.

Sure, she was beautiful and sexy. Sweet and caring. Smart and funny. He imagined holding her slender, but curvy body in his arms, while kissing her warm, wonderful lips. It gave him chills. The kind of chills you want to feel every day for the rest of your life.

But it was more than just physical. Much more. He loved talking to her about anything and everything. And joking around with her. Just having fun together. How sad and miserable he would be, if he found she didn't feel the same way. In that case, wouldn't he have been better off not to have ever met her? No. Even if they were only together for these few days, it still would have been worth it.

Worth every minute of it.

Chapter 37

John X had waited until 1:00 AM to leave his car. More than likely, Greg and Cynthia were sleeping, he figured. Hopefully the people in *all* of the cabins were sleeping. But he wondered how the animals in the woods could ever sleep at night—the crickets and the bullfrogs created a wall of sound as loud as a rock concert.

He walked along the lake behind the woods, in the direction of Cabin 17. Each cabin had its own little pathway to the lake. Cabin 17 was surrounded by the road in front, the woods on the right and back, and Cabin 16 on the left. The trail he was on would come out behind number 17. A flashlight helped him avoid snakes and other critters. He was carrying a small overnight bag, containing the .44 Magnum revolver and two rolls of duct tape.

Each cabin had only one window. The bottom half of the window held a large air conditioning unit. Cabin 17's window faced the woods. As John X carefully walked around the side of the cabin, he noticed that there was no light coming from the cabin. He ducked under the window, walked to the front, and put an ear to the door. All he heard was the hum of the window unit.

He picked the lock. It was even easier than he had expected. He turned the doorknob, and eased the door open very slowly, counting on the air conditioner to mask the sound of any squeaky hinges. The room was illuminated only by moonlight. But he could see that they were both in their beds. The top half of the window was uncovered. But since there were only trees and brush in that direction, he didn't care.

He reached into his bag, and pulled out his big, heavy revolver—his most prized weapon. All six rounds were loaded, even though he only intended to use one. Then he felt along the wall by the door for the light switch and flipped it on. "Time to wake up, and die!"

Cynthia simultaneously woke up, gasped, and jumped back against the headboard. Greg opened his eyes, but was frozen in place. The young man standing before them was holding a very big gun in his hand. A gun big enough to hunt buffalo.

“Hello. My name is John. And I’ll be your killer tonight. But first we’re gonna have some fun. Or at least *I’m* gonna have some fun. But you’ll be a big part of it. So, thanks for flying with us.” He laughed.

What kind of a sick maniac is this? Cynthia wondered.

“I think you may have the wrong cabin,” said Greg. But he recognized him as the guy in the pickup who had tried to run them into the 18-wheeler.

“No, I’m in the right cabin. Cabin 17. Greg Tenorly and Cynthia Blockerman’s cabin. Your good friend, Buford Bellowin, sends me with greetings—and a bullet.”

Greg had put the electronic tracker on a minivan at a gas station. Why wasn’t the killer far away, chasing that minivan?

“How did you find us?” Greg asked.

“I just followed the yellow brick road. Or, actually your big red convertible. A lot of people remembered seeing it. And you didn’t honestly think you could lose me, did you? Okay—enough small talk. Cynthia, I want you to move the two chairs over here between the beds.”

Cynthia got out of the bed, pulled one of the chairs away from the table, and carried it to the area between the beds.”

“Make it face the nightstand,” John X said.

She turned it around, as he instructed. Then she picked up the other chair, and moved it. John X told her to put its back against the other chair. The old wooden chairs took up most of the space between the beds.

“Now, sit down in the front chair.”

She obeyed.

“Good. Now, Greg, you sit down in the other chair.”

Greg got out of bed, and sat in the chair.

John X reached down for his bag, while keeping the gun aimed at Cynthia. He placed the bag on Cynthia's bed, pulled out two rolls of duct tape, and sat them on the bed near Cynthia.

"Take one of the rolls of tape, and go around to Greg. Now, tape his left leg to the leg of the chair. Then do the same with his right leg. Go around each one about twenty times."

When she had finished, he said, "Now tape each forearm and hand to the arm of the chairs. About twenty times around. Make it tight."

"Good. Now, wrap tape around Greg's chest and your chair back. Go around about forty times."

By the time Cynthia had finished, her heart was racing. He made her sit down and tape her own legs and left arm. Then he taped her right arm and hand to the arm of the chair. Finally, he ran tape around Greg and Cynthia, pulling her tight against the back of her chair.

Neither one of them could move in any direction—except maybe to tip themselves over to the side. But their position between the beds wouldn't even allow that. They were sitting ducks. He could shoot them, stab them, or set the place on fire. They were completely helpless.

"Why are you doing this?" cried Cynthia. "You don't have to kill us."

"Oh, yes I do, pretty lady. When I take a job, I complete it. Every time. No excuses."

"So, Buford hired you to kill us?" said Greg.

"That's correct. I don't normally give out my employer's name. But in this case, it really doesn't matter. You'll be dead in ten minutes."

"But it doesn't make any sense! We didn't do anything to him! Did he tell you why he wants us dead?"

"No. And I never ask. I don't care, as long as I get paid. Now, I want the two of you to shut up. Or I will duct tape your mouths."

Who cares? thought Cynthia. You're about to kill us anyway. But she tried to think of a way to talk him out of it.

John X had dreamed of this dramatic moment. He began to pace in front of them as he spoke. "I'm sure you both saw the movie *Dirty Harry*. Well, this is a .44 Magnum—the most powerful handgun in the world. Well, that's not really true. There are some that are more powerful. But this is the one Harry Callahan used. And that's what makes it special.

"It's a small cannon, really. And here's what I'm going to do with it. You'll love this—it's something I cooked up especially for you two lovers."

Cynthia forgot she was not supposed to speak. "We're not lovers!"

And now, we never will be, thought Greg.

"Shut up! I *will* tape your face if I have to!" He took a deep breath and regained his cool. "I thought it would be romantic if I could bring the two lover's hearts together in some magical way. So, here's what I'm going to do: I will fire a single shot at close range that will go right through the center of Cynthia's heart."

Cynthia started crying softly.

Greg tried with all his might to free himself from the tape. But even the overwhelming rage he was feeling could not turn him into a superhero.

"Then the bullet will pass through her back, through both chairs, and into Greg's back. Then it will go through Greg's heart, and fly out of his chest, through the wall, into the woods. So, you see, the two hearts shall become one. It's almost like a wedding. Too bad we don't have any candles."

*

The man in the black Camry had followed from afar, all the way to Cabin 17. Now he was positioned in the woods, thirty yards from the window. He could see Greg and Cynthia taped back to back in their chairs through the scope on his rifle. John X was taunting them.

He watched as the young hit man pointed the huge revolver at Cynthia's chest,

and circled her heart with the end of the barrel, as he laughed, and she cried. Greg appeared to be shouting. Then he saw John X step back a few feet, aim the gun with both hands, and bend his knees, to give his shot just the right trajectory.

The man held the rifle perfectly still, as he squeezed the trigger. The suppressor muffled most of the sound. When he saw John X go down, he smiled with satisfaction.

Now he would go in, and finish the job.

Chapter 38

As Marty Crumb walked toward Cabin 17, warm rifle in hand, every vein in his body tingled. He was addicted to taking lives. He had tried weed, cocaine, ecstasy, LSD—you name it. But there was no greater high than the power he felt when he killed a human being. For those few moments—he was God.

Marty wished that Buford's foolish, young hit man had been alive long enough to know who was killing him. John X had shot Marty at the Holiday Inn, as the elevator doors were closing. He had hit the intended target—the center of Marty's chest. But why hadn't John X checked to make sure Marty was dead? Had the boy never heard of a bulletproof vest? The kid was just too cocky. Too sloppy.

Marty had changed while in prison. He had found God. He had learned to pray. And he had made a promise to God that he would never again commit murder. But then Buford Bellowin came into the picture. He pulled some strings to get Marty an early parole. And Marty had been appreciative until he learned he was not really free.

He would be Buford's slave. And it might involve some killing. And if Marty refused, then Buford would make a call to his buddy on the parole board, and Marty would face a trumped-up parole violation. Then he would go back to prison, facing the prospect of being locked up for the rest of his life.

Marty's assignment had been to do 'whatever it takes' to assure that Kantrell Jamison was acquitted. Marty figured Kantrell was actually guilty. But he had no idea why Buford cared about the boy's fate. And he didn't *want* to know. He just wanted to pay his debt to Buford, and be free. He had hoped he could do the job without having to break his vow to God.

But then, there was the problem with the witness for the prosecution—Arabeth Albertson. The defense attorney had suggested her eyesight was poor, and therefore her testimony was invalid. But after she had passed a court-mandated eye exam, Marty was worried she would destroy the defendant's chances. He saw no other solution—he had to kill her before she got back on the witness stand.

So, he used her beloved cat to lure her out into the darkness of the night. Then he tripped her as she walked down the stairs. He finished her off by smashing her head into the pavement. Marty had felt sick at first, then exhilarated.

Then there was the problem with Troy Blockerman. He'd been single-handedly pushing the jury toward a guilty verdict. After slashing Troy's throat, Marty was back—in full murder mode. Just like the old days. It was like giving up cigarettes for a month, as a three-pack-a-day smoker, and then taking a deep draw on ten cigarettes all at once. No—even better than that. It made him feel alive like nothing else in the world. How had he survived all those years in prison without this feeling?

One of the first things he'd done when he had arrived in Coreyville was to put a bug in Dorothy Spokane's house. Buford had warned him that she might be a problem. So, when she called the D.A.'s office, Marty knew he had to act immediately. It had been so easy for him to pull the trigger and blow her away.

But then Buford had surprised Marty when he told him his debt was paid. Marty knew better. He knew Buford had not been happy with his work, and was hiring someone else to finish the job.

He also knew Buford would want Marty taken out first. And Marty felt he deserved it. Not because he had let Buford down. He deserved to die because he had broken his promise to God. Several times. He could have tried to blame it on Buford. But that would have just been an excuse. Marty had made the conscious decision to work for Buford. Maybe God had been testing him. If so, he had failed miserably.

So, he just accepted the fact that he was about to die. He put on his only suit and tie, and started to go out for dinner. Then he had a thought. He could wear a bulletproof vest under his clothes. Then, if he somehow lived through whatever the new killer had for him, he would take it as a sign that God had forgiven him. And that he had been given another chance to redeem himself.

It had seemed like a fair deal to make with God. After all, the vest provided only limited protection. He could have still been killed with a bullet to the head, or an explosion, or any number of other ways.

He had seen John X hiding behind the plant, pointing the gun at him. The bullet went straight toward his heart. It had knocked the breath out of him, as it hurled

him to the back wall of the elevator. Then the doors had closed, and the elevator had gone to the second floor.

After taking a minute to catch his breath, he had walked out of the elevator, into his room, and had been amazed that the hit man had not checked to make sure he was dead.

So, apparently God was giving him another chance. But he felt that the Lord would want him to put an end to Buford's activities first. After that, Marty could live his life for God's glory, and kill no more.

First order of business: stop the new killer. Since jury deliberations were currently on hold, Marty had guessed correctly that John X would report back to Buford before killing anyone else. Marty had been watching for John X to enter Buford's parking garage, when he saw something unexpected—Greg Tenorly's Bonneville. And it appeared that Greg and Cynthia Blockerman were both in the car.

Then he had located the car in the parking garage, and watched from a distance. He had seen John X attaching the tracking device to the Bonneville. So, he knew Buford's new killer would be following them. Marty could have killed John X in the parking garage, or at numerous other times throughout the day.

But that might have allowed Greg and Cynthia to get away. Were they part of the problem? Should he kill them too? There would never be a better opportunity to do it. He had his Bowie knife with him. So, he could do it quietly, and not even disturb the other campers. They would sit helplessly, unable to move, as he slit their throats.

Marty turned the doorknob and slowly pushed the door open with his rifle. John X was sprawled across the floor on his back. His head was at the foot of Cynthia's bed, near the left corner. His feet were under the edge of the table.

Marty took a good look at the punk who had tried to kill him. The top of his head was bleeding. Marty had split his scalp, but not his skull. He wasn't dead, but he was out cold.

The Dirty Harry weapon was on the floor, in the bathroom doorway. If John X came to, and went for the gun, Marty could easily take care of him with a rifle shot to the back. By the time the punk reached the revolver, it would be covered

with his own guts.

Marty looked at Cynthia. Her eyes were red, and her cheeks were wet with tears.

Cynthia said, “Thank you for saving us.”

I’m no savior—I’m just another killer, Marty thought. But he would stop killing soon.

John X had regained consciousness right after Marty had entered the cabin. But he had played dead, and hoped he could fool Marty. But how had Marty survived? he wondered. He knew his shot had been perfect. He even saw Marty fall back when he was hit. Then, he knew the answer. No! Not a bulletproof vest! Marty must have somehow known he was coming.

John X didn’t know where the .44 Magnum had landed. But he knew if he made any sudden movement, Marty would not hesitate to shoot him with the rifle. Then he remembered. His little semi-automatic pistol was in his pocket, as always.

He would slowly move his hand into his pocket. Fortunately, his right side was away from Marty. He opened his eyes ever so slightly. Marty was studying Cynthia’s face. He carefully slipped his right hand into his pocket, and put his fingers around the gun. His trigger finger was ready. Then he turned the gun, inside his pocket, toward Marty, and in rapid succession, released the safety and fired three times.

Marty turned with the rifle and pointed it at John X, who was screaming in pain, and holding his crotch. His pistol was now in the corner of the room, away from his reach. It had flown out of his pocket when he yanked out his hand. His cream-colored slacks were quickly turning red under his hands and on his left pant leg. The three bullets had ripped through his genitals, as well as major arteries in his leg. Greg and Cynthia turned their heads to see what had happened, and then quickly looked away.

Marty walked over to John X, and popped him in the temple with the butt of the rifle. The boy was not dead—but he would bleed to death before waking up. Marty considered it an act of mercy. And it made him feel better that *he* had not killed him. The fool had killed himself.

Marty knew the gunshots would draw attention from neighboring cabins. It wouldn't be long before somebody decided to come check out Cabin 17. So, he needed to go.

But what should he do with Greg and Cynthia? They looked scared to death. They also looked innocent and harmless.

Marty had not broken his new pact with God. And he would not do so tonight. He turned and walked out of the cabin.

Chapter 39

John X was unconscious on the cabin floor. A red, liquid triangle had formed between his legs from his crotch to his knees.

Greg and Cynthia struggled to break free from the duct tape that bound them to their chairs and each other.

“Ouch. That hurts,” Greg said.

“What?”

“I’m getting my left arm out, but the tape is pulling off all the hair.”

“Men can be such little girls.”

“What do you mean?”

“Try getting a bikini wax.”

“No, thanks. Hey—if somebody put wax down there, I’d have to go sit in a hot tub until it melted off.”

“Greg, what if he wakes up?”

“Hopefully, by the time he wakes up he’ll already be dead.”

“What if he’s not?”

“Then we’re in trouble. There—I got it. Now, for the right arm.”

“Greg, I think I saw his head move.”

“I’m going as fast as I can. Left leg done.”

“He *is* moving!”

“Right leg done. Now, my chest.”

John X opened his eyes, and looked directly at Cynthia. He tried to get up, but then he remembered how he had blown off his manhood, and that he was bleeding to death. “I’m going to hell tonight. But I’m not going alone!”

He turned his head to the left, and saw the semi-automatic pistol a few feet away, in the corner. He began to use his arms to drag himself toward the pistol.

“Greg, he’s going for the gun!”

Greg pulled the last piece of tape off his chest, hopped on Cynthia’s bed, rolled to the other side, and jumped to his feet.

John X grabbed the pistol, and pointed it at Greg.

Greg dove for the bathroom doorway.

John X fired, and barely missed him.

Greg’s legs felt numb from the tape cutting off his circulation. He saw the .44 Magnum on the bathroom floor, and picked it up.

The size and weight of the weapon was stunning. Greg didn’t own a gun. He had never even *fired* one. But he would tonight. He cocked it using both thumbs.

“You’re pretty smart, Greg—hiding in there where I can’t see you. So, while I’m waiting for you to come out, I’ll just shoot a few holes in your girlfriend’s face.”

Without thinking, Greg screamed, “No!” and ran out of the bathroom, holding the revolver with both hands. He would be a hero or a corpse. Maybe both. But he would not let any harm come to Cynthia.

No sooner than he had taken the first step, his rubbery legs gave way, and he began to fall. There was no time to aim. He squeezed the trigger. The recoil was ferocious. He fought with all his might to keep the gun barrel from coming down on his forehead like a baseball bat.

At the exact same moment, John X fired at Greg. A slow motion replay would have shown the two bullets passing each other in midair. Greg’s body slammed to the floor, up against the side of Cynthia’s bed.

The huge bullet from Greg's weapon flew like a heat-seeking missile into the mouth of the killer, breaking off front teeth, and exploding out the back of his skull. He would not wake up again.

"Greg? Greg, are you okay?"

*

Everything was hazy. Greg didn't know whether he was dead or just dreaming.

Cynthia knelt beside him. "Are you okay, Baby?"

"I think so," he heard himself say. Did she just call me *Baby*?

"I was so worried about you." Cynthia leaned over to kiss him.

What is she doing? he thought. She's going to kiss me. Oh—this is fantastic. I *must* be dreaming. It couldn't feel this good when you're dead. He wanted her lips on his forever. If this was a dream, he would gladly dream the rest of his life away.

"I thought he shot you," she said. "I thought you were dead."

"No, I'm fine."

"Wait—what's this? Your arm is bleeding, Sweetie."

"It is?"

Cynthia lowered her head to his arm. Her mouth was open, revealing teeth that were beautifully white and straight—and sharp. She bit him with all her might, and ripped a chunk of flesh out of his arm!

*

Greg jerked violently and woke up.

"Greg? Greg, are you okay?" Cynthia's voice trembled.

"I'm okay, Cynthia." He sat up to a throbbing headache, and saw the pile of red goo in the corner that had been a human head. He stood up slowly, and walked to

Cynthia.

“I was so afraid you were dead,” she said.

“Yeah, me too.” Greg began to tear off Cynthia’s tape.

“We need to call 911.”

“I don’t think they can help him,” Greg said with a fiendish smile.

“Greg, you’re bleeding.”

“Where?”

“Your arm.”

Now he understood the dream. “It’s not that bad. I’m sure it’s just a flesh wound.” He pulled off the last piece of tape and stood up. “There you go.”

Cynthia jumped to her feet, and put her arms around him. She held him tightly for twenty seconds. “I thought I had lost you.”

You’ll never lose me, he thought. And I hope you never *want* to.

*

“Come on. Get up.”

“Where are we going, back to the hot tub?” Angie really just wanted to sleep. But she would go along with whatever Buford wanted.

“No.”

“What? The kitchen table again?”

“No. I don’t want any more sex tonight.”

“Then where are we going, Bufee Baby?”

“*I’m* not going anywhere. *You’re* going out the door.”

“Aw, come on, Honey. I was all comfy cozy. I won’t charge extra. You were my last tonight anyway.”

“Look—I only brought you here because my wife is out of town, and I gave the servants the night off. But they’ll all be back tomorrow. And you can’t be here when they show up. Besides, if you wait until daylight, the neighbors will see you leaving. So, get up.”

“Fine.” Angie got out of bed, and began to gather her things.

He led her to the door.

She was already talking on her cell when she walked out. “Yeah, Joey. Can you set me up with another john tonight?”

Buford locked the door, and walked back to the bedroom. He picked up his cell phone. He knew he should be using one of his throwaway phones, but he was too tired to walk down the hall to his study to get one. He would sleep better if he knew Greg Tenorly and Cynthia Blockerman were dead.

John X, where are you? he thought. Why aren’t you answering your phone?

*

The crickets and the bullfrogs could be heard from miles away. And some of the residents had been awakened by the gunshots. But *nobody* heard the cell phone ringing on the front seat of the Mustang.

Chapter 40

“This better be important. It’s two o’clock in the morning.”

“Ms. Hammerly, this is Greg Tenorly.”

The D.A. perked up. “Yes, Mr. Tenorly. Where are you? We’ve been trying to locate you.”

“We’re up on Lake Fork, at Johnson’s Cabins.”

“Did you say we?”

“Yes. Cynthia Blockerman is here with me.”

Angela Hammerly jumped out of bed. “What are you two doing up there?”

“It’s kind of a long story. But now we have a dead man in our cabin.”

“Who killed him?”

“I did. But it was self-defense. He shot me in the arm. I was lucky he didn’t kill me. Anyway, I already called 911, and reported the shooting to the local police. But I thought you might want to come up here too. I think this man might have killed Troy Blockerman, and maybe Dorothy Spokane.”

“Thanks. I’ll get there as soon as I can. You said Johnson’s Cabins?”

“That’s right. We’re in Cabin 17.”

“Okay. And please don’t go anywhere.”

“We won’t.”

*

Marty Crumb prayed as he drove to Dallas.

“Lord, I really do want to keep my vow this time. Yes, I know—I tried to murder

John X tonight. Thank you for saving me from that horrible mistake. I am very accurate with the rifle, as you well know. But you made me shoot a little high, so I would graze the top of his head, instead of killing him. Thank you for helping me keep my promise.

“But John X allowed Satan to control him. He tried to kill me. He would have murdered me in cold blood. But you are righteous and wonderful, Lord. You caused him to aim the gun at his genitals instead of at me.

“Through your power, you protected me, your servant, while causing him to shoot off his own sex organs. And I know at this very moment that he is surely dead. Your will was done tonight.

“I confess that I used to be no better than John X. I have murdered many innocent people in my lifetime. But in prison, I prayed for forgiveness. And you granted it to me. I thank you again for providing Chaplain Cross, who helped me to see things your way.

“So, I made a vow to you. I promised that I would never again commit murder. But then I did. Several times, in Coreville. I don’t count the pimp I killed a couple of weeks ago in Dallas.

“No, that was not murder. It was you, using me to bring righteous judgment upon the head of a rapist. The 16-year-old girl that he had raped, and tried to force into prostitution has been rescued by your hand, through me. But that was not murder.

“I may have been a little out of line when I tortured him by shooting him in the legs, arms, and stomach. Instead, I could have put him out of his misery quickly. But I believe that you looked upon the tortured with favor. Let’s face it, Lord—he deserved it.

“And now there’s the question of what to do with Buford. Clearly, he deserves to die. Yet, I have vowed to you that I will not commit murder. So, what can I do? Because of him, many innocent people have died.

“I will confront Buford Bellwin. And I will depend on you for direction. I know that you can provide a way to bring justice to him, without causing me to break my vow. And I am trusting you to do so. Amen.”

*

“I don’t think we should give the police a description of the man with the rifle,” said Cynthia.

“Why?”

“For one thing, he kept the hit man from killing us when he shot him through the window. So, we owe him.”

“Yeah

“

“And if we give the police a description, and they go after him, he might come after us.”

“But we can’t lie to the police.”

“Maybe just a little *white* lie.”

*

They had already given the local police a full account of what had happened. Then Angela Hammerly and Andrea Newly showed up, along with the sheriff and two deputies. So, Greg and Cynthia went through the entire story all over again.

“So, the man with the rifle—what did he look like?”

“I couldn’t see his face very well. He was wearing a stocking over his head—pantyhose,” said Cynthia.

Greg was not comfortable with lying to the D.A., and he hoped they wouldn’t regret it later.

“Okay. We’re going to have a lot more questions for you. A deputy will drive your car back to Coreyville,” said Angela. “Sheriff, please cuff them, and take them to jail.”

“What? We called you,” Greg said. “We’ve been running from that man all day.

We were nearly killed twice. And now you're putting *us* in jail?"

"I told *her* not to leave town. But she did. And you helped her. So, this is what you get," the D.A. said.

"Buford Bellowin is the one you need to be questioning," said Cynthia. "Ask him why he sent this killer after us."

"Yeah. And ask him why Dorothy Spokane blamed *him* for all of the murders in Coreyville," said Greg.

"When did you talk to Dorothy Spokane?"

"Right before she was murdered. I was talking to her when she got shot."

Angela Hammerly looked at Andrea Newly. Things were getting a *lot* more interesting. What would it do for Angela Hammerly's career if she could bring down the mighty Buford Bellowin? Prosecutors hated him. He had made them look like fools too many times. She would be their hero if she could slay that dragon.

*

Kantrell Jamison's mother, Ella, sat in the ICU waiting room, talking to her daughter, Jolee.

"Mama, what if Kantrell doesn't make it?"

"Then we can kiss that money goodbye."

"But maybe we could still find it."

"Where, Jolee? We've already looked everywhere. Come on—it's time. We can go in again now."

"This time, I'm gonna make sure he wakes up, and tells us."

Kantrell's eyes were closed. And they would have thought he was already dead, had it not been for the monitor displaying his heartbeat.

"Kantrell, this is your sister, Jolee. Can you hear me? Come on—wake up,

Kantrell. Remember all those times I called you a ‘stupid ugly?’ Well, I didn’t really mean it, Kantrell.

“You’re my brother, and I love you very much. You mean so much to me. And to Mama. We’ve had so many great times together as a family. And we’re so sorry you busted your head open tonight.”

“Jolee.” Ella whispered in Jolee’s ear. “Don’t remind him about his head. Just ask about the money.”

Jolee went on. “But you need to let us take care of the money for you. We know it’s *your* money. We’re not trying to take it from you. But what if somebody else finds it? Then *none* of us would get anything. Kantrell?”

Her brother did not move.

“Kantrell?” Jolee was losing her patience. She wanted the money *now*. She deserved a new car. Not anything big or fancy. Just a cute little new car. Sometimes he was such a pain in the butt! “Kantrell?”

Still nothing.

“Okay. So, that’s how it’s gonna be? Then, you know what? I *did* mean it when I called you a ‘stupid ugly.’”

“Jolee, hold your voice down,” Ella said.

“Yeah, and not only are you a ‘stupid ugly, Kantrell—you’re an ‘ugly stupid’ too!”

Kantrell began to stir.

“You *better* wake up, Boy.”

Kantrell jerked violently, and then lay perfectly still. His heartbeat flatlined, and an alarm started beeping.

“No! My baby!” Ella cried.

No! My money! thought Jolee.

Chapter 41

It was 8:25 AM on Saturday morning, and Buford Bellowin's cell phone was ringing. How he wished he had turned it off before going to sleep at 2:00 AM. The wife and the servants would arrive by noon. He had hoped to sleep until 11:00. Through blurry vision, he could see it was Kyle Serpentine calling.

"Don't you know it's too early to be calling on a Saturday morning, Kyle?"

"Yes, Sir. Sorry about that. But I thought you would want to hear the news."

You mean the terrible news about the death of Greg Tenorly and Cynthia Blockerman? he thought. "What news?"

"Kantrell Jamison is dead."

"What? How'd that happened?"

"From what I understand, his cellmate pushed him, and he fell back and hit his head real hard. They took him to the emergency room. But he died during the night."

Buford hoped Kyle couldn't hear the smile in his voice. "That's a shame." Why couldn't this have happened when the boy first went to jail?

"Yes, Sir, it is. I just found out about it a few minutes ago when his mother called me. And she asked me if Kantrell had said anything to me about the money."

Buford cringed. "What money?"

"She said Kantrell had \$30,000 hidden away somewhere. She's desperate to find that money. I told her I didn't know anything about it."

"Were you telling her the truth?"

"Of course. I don't know what she's talking about. He didn't tell me anything about any money. I hate to say it, Sir, but it sounds like somebody hired Kantrell to kill Sam Spokane. I guess he really was guilty after all."

“That’s terrible. And here we were, trying save a poor young black man from the injustice of small-town discrimination.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“And it turns out he was a criminal.”

“But we tried to do something good, Sir.”

“Yes. We tried. Well, thanks for letting me know, Kyle. You did a good job with this trial. And I’ll remember you when I become governor. You can count on it.”

“Thank you, Sir.” That was all Kyle needed to hear. Look out, Austin, here I come, he thought.

Now Buford was wide-awake. Finally, all of the obstacles had been eliminated: Kantrell Jamison, Arabeth Albertson, Troy Blockerman, Dorothy Spokane, Marty Crumb, Greg Tenorly, Cynthia Blockerman, and, of course, Sam Spokane. Too bad so many people had to die. But, successful politicians are tough. They’re not afraid to do whatever it takes.

His troubles were over, and it was going to be a fantastic day. He would celebrate with a drink or two.

*

“Dr. Huff? This is Greg. Sorry for calling you so early.”

He had not talked to the pastor since Wednesday. Dr. J. Marshall Huff was the pastor of First Baptist Church, and Greg’s part-time boss.

“Greg? What’s going on with you? We’ve been hearing a lot of stories. And then we saw on TV that you were wanted by the police.”

“I know. It’s been crazy. But I just wanted you to know that the things they’re saying are not true.”

“I didn’t think so.” There was not much certainty in Dr. Huff’s voice.

“The only thing I did wrong was to take Cynthia Blockerman out of town. The

D.A. had ordered her not to leave Coreyville.”

“I see.”

“But there was a murderer on the loose, and she was in danger. And so was I. The killer followed us, and yesterday he tried to kill us—twice.”

“Well, I heard that you shot a man.”

“I did. But it was self-defense. And he shot me in the arm. I was just trying to protect Cynthia.”

“I didn’t know you owned a gun, Greg.”

“I don’t. It wasn’t my gun.”

“And how did you get involved with this woman?”

Greg didn’t appreciate the pastor’s tone. “It’s kind of a long story. I’ll tell you all about it later. I just wanted to let you know I won’t be able to direct the music for tomorrow’s service.”

“I’ve already asked Henry to fill in.”

“And—one more thing. Do you know a good lawyer? I’m in jail, and this is my one phone call.”

*

It was a lousy place to be, but at least Cynthia finally felt safe—in spite of the fact that two young hookers were staring at her from across the small cell.

“She’s getting a little old for this kind of work,” said Hooker #1.

“Nah. Some guys like ‘em older,” said Hooker #2.

“Or they’re too drunk to care.”

They both laughed.

“What do you think? She’s got to be at least 30.”

“But she still looks good. Check out the beautiful red hair.”

“Yeah. I guess guys would still want to do her.”

“Hey, *I’d* do her.”

They laughed even harder. One of them laughed until she went into a raging smoker’s cough.

Cynthia did feel *safe*. But her stomach was queasy. She nearly barfed on the floor—where someone else had apparently vomited a few hours earlier.

Just hang on, she thought. Surely, this will be over soon.

*

As Buford walked to his study, he felt all-powerful. Nobody could stop him now. He poured himself a well-deserved shot of whiskey. *Buford Bellowin, Governor of Texas*. He loved the sound of it.

“Having a nice day, Buford?”

The familiar voice sent tremors throughout Buford’s body. The shot glass slipped through his fingers, and fell to the floor. He turned around to see Marty Crumb sitting in a chair, pointing a pistol at Buford. “Marty?”

The pistol had a suppressor on it. Buford was ready for an adult diaper. And he knew that by the time Marty was finished with him, he’d be ready for a body bag.

“Yep, it’s me, Buford. What’s the matter? Didn’t expect to see me today? Or ever?”

“No, no. I just thought you’d be out fishing somewhere. You said it was all you dreamed of doing.”

“Yeah. Well, I had to put that off for a while. Had some unfinished business.”

“I see.”

“And, by the way, you’ll be happy to learn that Greg Tenorly and Cynthia

Blockerman are alive and well—no thanks to you. And your young hit man is a doornail. Or, as dead as one, anyway.”

“I’m afraid I really don’t know what you’re talking about, Marty.”

Marty completely ignored Buford’s response. “Yeah, the stupid punk shot himself in the baby-maker. When I left him, he was bleeding to death.”

“Marty, I don’t even know who you’re talking about.”

“Right.” Marty stood. “Come over here, and sit down at your desk, Mr. Big Shot. I want you to be comfortable for this.”

You want me to be comfortable while you murder me? thought Buford. But wait—there’s a pistol in the top right drawer. Maybe if Marty looks away for a second

“There you go. Just relax. I have something here you might be interested in.” Marty held up an envelope, and walked toward Buford. “Recognize the handwriting?” It read, *Open Upon My Death*, and was signed by Sam Spokane.

“You were supposed to *burn* that letter.” Buford was both indignant and horrified.

“I almost did. But then I decided to wait—once I realized you were sending somebody to kill me.”

The career I’ve worked so hard to build, thought Buford, is crumbling before my eyes.

“And he nearly succeeded. He was a good shot, but a little too sure of himself. He put the bullet right in the center of my chest. But apparently he never considered I might be wearing a vest.”

Why did I try to save money? wondered Buford. I should have paid top dollar to get it done right.

“So, after I survived your Mr. John X, I decided it was time to read Sam Spokane’s letter. Then I knew why you wanted Kantrell Jamison to be acquitted. And now I know the biggest secret of all.”

Buford hung his head.

“That’s right. I know about the horrible thing you did back in 1988. It’s what you’ve been hiding all these years. But soon everybody in the world will know what a despicable human being you are.”

Buford’s anger was overtaking his fear. “So, what do you want from me?”

Marty pulled a chair to the side of Buford’s desk, and sat down. “I want you to tell me the entire story in your own words.”

“Why? So you can record it, and send it to the press?”

“No. I’m not gonna record it. I just want the satisfaction of hearing you admit what you did.”

“And if I refuse?”

Marty raised his gun, and held it within three feet of Buford’s head. “I don’t plan to kill you today, Buford. As long as you do what I say. Now, you *will* tell me what happened in 1988. And you will *not* leave out any of the gory details.”

Chapter 42

“So, if I tell you the whole story, then you won’t kill me?”

“Buford, I didn’t come here today to commit murder. I just want to enjoy watching you squirm, while you explain, in full detail, the terrible thing you did.”

“Come on, Marty—it was an accident.”

“No. I don’t want to hear any spin. Just give me the facts.”

Marty rested the gun in his lap. Buford was not at all convinced Marty would let him live. But at least he would live until the end of his story.

And maybe at some point Marty would let down his guard, pace the floor, turn his back to Buford. There was a slim chance Buford could get the gun out of the top right drawer, and get a shot off before Marty could react. A very slim chance. But a chance.

“Okay. On April 1, 1979, a tornado came through Coreyville. It was a Category 3, and it did several million dollar’s worth of damage. And killed several people. After that, every year as April 1st approached, people joked about whether a tornado would make us April Fools again. Nobody thought it could really happen. But on April 1, 1988, it did. The exact same thing happened again.”

“Another Cat 3 tornado?”

“Yes. And it did about the same amount of damage. And two or three people were killed.”

“Weird.”

“Yeah.”

“So, what does that have to do with your story?”

“I’m getting there. In the spring of 1988, I was 18 years old, and a senior in high school. I had worked for Sam Spokane full-time in the summer. Then I went

part-time when school started. He was a great boss. More like a dad, really. More of a dad than my own.

“Sam had always been crazy about kids. But he and Dorothy were not able to have any of their own. So, when he was in his late 20’s, he volunteered as a coach on a little league baseball team. And the kids loved him.

“Well, one day after practice, this boy was having trouble with his bicycle. So, Sam worked on the bike, and got it fixed. A few days later, he fixed another kid’s bike. First thing you know, every kid in town was going to Sam with their bicycle problems.”

“Word gets around fast in a small town,” said Marty.

“Yeah. Especially back then. This was the 1950s. So, he started a little part-time bicycle repair business. He ran it out of his workshop behind the house. But if somebody couldn’t afford to pay, Sam would do the work for free.

“And then he started *selling* bikes. Pretty soon, he had so much business he quit his day job. After a year or two, he decided he needed a real sales floor for new bikes. So, he and Dorothy bought another house, and converted the old house into his new bicycle shop. Sam’s Bicycle Shop - Sales & Service. It was a nice looking store.

“But then on April 1, 1988, the tornado came through, and did major damage to the store. Amazingly, the old workshop in the back was untouched. And we were able to salvage some of the bikes. We actually ran the business from the workshop for a several weeks, while they were building the new store where the old one had been.

“It was very crowded. We had to move most of the bikes outside during business hours, so we would have enough room to do repairs in the shop. Then we’d moved everything back in at night.”

“Almost sounds like you were working full-time,” said Marty.

“No, I went to school too. But I did spend every spare minute at Sam’s. So, one night, a couple of hours after closing, I was driving by, and thought I saw the workshop door ajar. I was sure I had locked it. But, I stopped to check it out anyway.

“As I was approaching the door, I heard a noise coming from inside. Somebody was in there. So, I peeked in and saw a skinny black kid with a flashlight. He was rolling a bicycle toward the door. He was robbing us! I had to stop him.

“So, I flipped the light on, and said, ‘What are you doing in here, boy?’ The kid must have been about 14 years old. He dropped the bicycle, and tried to run out the door. But I grabbed him, and pushed him down. He jumped up, and tried to get away again. This time I pushed him to the floor and sat on top of him.

“I said, ‘You’re gonna be real sorry you tried to rob us. I’m gonna teach you a lesson, boy.’ And then I started laughing at him. I could see he really wanted to hit me. But I had his arms pinned under my knees.

“Then he cleared his throat, and I knew what was coming, but I couldn’t react quickly enough. He spit in my face. Part of it went in my mouth and nose. I was furious. Back then, I had a tough time controlling my temper. And he had just pushed my button, and pushed it hard.

“Before I even thought about it, I grabbed for whatever was nearby on the ground. I was out of my mind with rage when I lifted it over my head. Then he spit in my face again. I held the object with both hands, and swung my arms down with the force of a sledgehammer. I didn’t know, and didn’t care what I was holding, or what damage it would do.”

“What was it? What was in your hands?”

“A big, sharp screwdriver. It went straight into his left eye, and down into his brain, so deep that it hit the back of his skull. His body went limp. Blood started gushing out. I was terrified by what I had done.

“I washed the blood off my hands. Then I locked up the workshop and drove to Sam’s house. He could see the fear in my eyes. He knew something was very wrong. I took him to the workshop, and explained what had happened. We knew we should have called the police.”

“Yes, you *should* have.”

“But Sam knew it was my dream was to become an attorney, and hopefully, someday go into politics. We used to joke about it all the time. He would say, ‘Now, don’t forget you promised me I’d be Texas Bicycle Commissioner when

you become governor.’

“He told me that after this, I would never make it far in politics, because my opponents would always bring up the fact that I had accidentally killed a boy when I was a teenager.

“So, I suggested we bury the body. Sam swore he wouldn’t go along with it. But, I told him he was like a father to me. And I knew my father would want to protect me, and do what was best for my future. And I finally convinced him.”

“You *conned* him.”

“No. He *wanted* to do it for me. So, we buried the boy where the slab was about to be poured for the new shop. He’s still buried under Sam’s Bicycle Shop. Neither of us ever told anybody about it. Until Sam finally told Dorothy. But everything was fine, until earlier this year, when Sam found out he had prostate cancer. He had never been good about getting regular checkups. But he started having so much pain that he couldn’t ignore it anymore. The doctor told him he only had a few months to live.

“He could have tried Chemotherapy, but he didn’t want to go through that. But he knew his time was running out. And he couldn’t go to his grave without confessing what he had done. What *we* had done. So, he called, and told me if I didn’t go to the police, then he would.

“That might have sent me to prison. At the very least, my career would have been destroyed. So, I had to keep him from talking. I decided to find some poor kid in Coreyville, and offer him money to kill Sam.”

“Kantrell Jamison.”

“Yeah. I did a little research. He was black, poor, and about to flunk out of high school. I offered him \$30,000. He never knew who had hired him.”

“Then why were you worried about his trial?”

“Because I made a stupid mistake when I mailed the cash.”

“Your DNA on the envelope?”

“Yes.”

“Idiot.”

“I had been so careful when I addressed it, and put the stamp on. But then when I dropped it off at the post office, I forgot to use my gloves. I realized it as soon as I had dropped it in the chute.

“But I still would have been okay if Arabeth Albertson hadn’t seen Kantrell that night. I had no way of knowing whether he had held on to the envelope.”

“He probably took out the money, and threw it away.”

“But maybe he kept it. And if the trial had been going badly, and it looked like he was going to be found guilty, he might have told his lawyer he was hired to kill Sam. Then his lawyer would have tried to work a deal with the prosecutor to get a reduced sentence in exchange for information about the person who hired him. Then the police might have ended up with the envelope.”

“So, why didn’t you just hire somebody to kill Kantrell? That would have solved your problem.”

“Because, Marty, I didn’t want to kill anybody else.”

“So, you do have a *tiny* conscience. That’s news to me.”

“And—I didn’t know how Dorothy Spokane would react if there were more murders. As much as she must have hated me for Sam’s murder, she knew he didn’t have much time left. And, let’s face it—those last couple of months could have been sheer misery for him. She would have had to watch her husband suffer through it.”

“But if she knew you were behind it, why didn’t she tell the police at the time Sam was murdered?”

“Because she was trying to protect Sam’s reputation. He couldn’t bear go to his grave with our terrible secret. But Dorothy could have lived with it. Sam was well loved and highly respected in the community. She didn’t want to destroy his legacy.

“If she had gone to the police, everything that happened in 1988 would have been made public. Then everybody would’ve known that Sam Spokane had helped to cover up —.”

“—murder. He helped you get away with murder.”

“It wasn’t murder. It was an accident. I didn’t mean to kill that boy. But if it came out now, it would be seen as murder.”

“Yeah. Because why didn’t you call the police if it was an accident?”

“Anyway, that’s why I sent you to Coreyville. And it’s the reason I wanted Troy Blockerman and Greg Tenorly on the jury. I had done my homework. And I knew Troy Blockerman would want to flush Kantrell down the toilet—just because he was black.

“And I knew we had a good shot at getting Greg Tenorly on the jury. And that as a minister, he would fight the other jurors to the bitter end if he thought the defendant was not getting a fair trial.

“Some of the jurors would want to vote ‘Guilty.’ But then, they would find themselves embarrassed to be on the same side as a racist like Troy. So, Greg Tenorly would have convinced them to give the poor black boy the benefit of the doubt.

“After all, nobody actually witnessed the murder. And after the deliberations had dragged on for several days, Troy would have finally caved, just so he could get back to his job. But just to make sure Greg was sufficiently motivated, I had you enlist the help of Cynthia Blockerman.”

“I didn’t enlist her. I *drafted* her.”

“But then you murdered Arabeth Albertson.”

“That’s right. Because she was a major threat to the acquittal you wanted.”

“But at least you made *that one* look like an accident. When you killed Troy Blockerman—it was obviously murder. That’s what caused Dorothy Spokane to call the D.A. She couldn’t live with any more murders. So, you killed her too.”

“I was just trying to do my job. I didn’t *want* the job. You *forced* it on me. And then you decided you didn’t like the way I was doing it. So, you sent in your hit boy.”

“Okay, I’ll admit it. John X was a mistake. He was too green.”

“If he had been better at his job, then I wouldn’t be sitting here right now.”

“Don’t remind me.”

“So, you really made a mess of things, didn’t you, Buford?”

“Yes. I did.”

“Just so you could be governor.”

“Yes. Someday.”

“Too bad you’re never gonna make it to Austin. It would have been amusing to watch you trying to have your way with the legislature.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, it’s a sad story, Buford. But that’s not *all* of the story.”

“Yes, it is. I told you everything. Every detail.”

“No. You told me everything that *you* know. And now I’m gonna tell you what you *don’t* know. All these years, you’ve never known. It’s even worse than you think.”

Chapter 43

Marty had said that he didn't plan to kill Buford. But if that was true, then why was he wearing gloves? Buford wondered if he would ever get a chance to reach for the pistol in his top right drawer. Come on, Marty, he thought, get up and walk around the room while you talk. Turn your back to me for just a few seconds.

Marty said, "Three years ago I got a new cellmate. His name was Henry Brown. And he really annoyed me, because he was always inviting me to go to chapel with him. I told him I had no interest in chapel, or church, or anything to do with God. Then one day, he was telling me about something that had happened when he was a kid.

"He was 12 years old when he moved to this new town with his mom and big brother. He and Harry were good boys. But they were poor. And the other kids made fun of them.

"It didn't bother Henry so much that they made fun of his clothes. But the fact that he didn't have a bicycle—that ate at him. Because every day Henry had to walk to school, while his classmates rode by on their bicycles. So, every night, he would beg his mom to get him a bike. Any old bike would do. Just something that would get him to and from school.

"But his mom was straining just to put food on the table. She told him to be patient. She would buy him a bicycle when she could afford it.

"But finally, big brother Harry, who was 14, decided to stand up, and be the man of the family. He told Henry he would get him a bike. So, that night, Harry took Henry out to get one. Henry wondered how his brother had money for a bike. Harry told his little brother not to worry, as he got the tire tool from the trunk of the family car.

"Henry started to worry when he saw his brother pry open the window with the tire tool. The inside of the building was even darker than outside. But Harry had brought a flashlight. He lifted his brother up to the tall, narrow window so he could climb in. Henry was in awe, as he walked through the small building to unlock the door for Harry. There were about as many new bicycles as there were

used ones.

“Harry quickly picked out an old bike that looked road-worthy. Henry was not sure he agreed with his brother’s choice. He continued to study a couple of other possibilities, which faded into the darkness as Harry turned the flashlight, and began to walk toward the door.

“Henry looked back at his brother, and was about to call to him, when he saw a head peek in the door. He scurried behind a bicycle box, thinking his brother would also hide. But the room went bright, and somebody said, ‘What are you doing in here, boy?’

“He saw Harry try to run out the door. But the other boy was much bigger than his brother. He pushed Harry on the ground, and sat on top of him and said, ‘I’m gonna teach you a lesson, boy.’ Then he picked up a huge screwdriver.

“Henry tried to scream, but nothing came out. He saw the screwdriver going down toward his brother’s face with vicious force. He ducked behind the box. Henry heard the screwdriver hit its target with a sickening crunch. Then the boy walked out, turned off the light, and locked the door.

“Henry called his brother’s name. Whispering at first. Then louder. No answer. He walked toward the flashlight, which was still turned on, facing the door. Henry picked it up, and went to check on his brother. He was not moving. The large screwdriver had gouged his left eye, and blood was all over his face, running down onto the floor.

“Henry ran to the door, unlocked it, and darted out. Then he stopped, turned around and went back to lock and shut the door. He didn’t want to leave any clue he’d been there.”

“I never had any idea somebody else was in there,” said Buford.

“Henry never told anybody. Until years later. After he was in prison.”

“I’m surprised he didn’t go home, and tell his mother.”

“He was too ashamed. He figured it was his fault Harry died. His mother had told him to be patient. But no. He kept begging for a bike, until Harry came up with the plan to steal one. His mother would never have forgiven him.

“People looked everywhere for Harry. The police couldn’t find him either. Soon Henry and his mother left Coreyville. They had come to the little town with nothing, and moved away with even less.”

“So, he didn’t tell his mother what had happened until he was in prison?”

“She was dead by then. OD’ed on sleeping pills, soon after Henry went off to prison. She never knew the truth.”

“How did Henry end up in prison?” Buford didn’t really care—he was just stalling.

“When he was 18, he was sitting on some guy’s motorcycle in a parking lot. He thought it was so cool. And that maybe he’d get one some day.

“But when the owner walked out of the store, and saw the skinny black kid on his motorcycle, he ordered Henry to get away from his bike. And he told him he’d never be able to afford a bike like his. And that he didn’t deserve one anyway. And then he told Henry, ‘If you ever come snooping around my bike again, I’m gonna teach you a lesson, boy.’

“That statement struck a raw nerve in Henry’s brain. It was the exact same words Harry’s killer had said right before stabbing him in the eye with a screwdriver. A rush of adrenalin instantly transformed him into a killing machine.

“He ran at the guy, full-out, and knocked him down. Then he sat on top of him, and proceeded to pound his face, until it was hammered into bloody mush. His brain bounced around in his skull like a ping-pong ball. He was dead before the ambulance showed up.”

Buford wished he hadn’t asked.

“So, see what you’ve done, Buford? See how many lives you’ve ruined? Just think about all the people who’ve died because of you, and all the friends and family members who’ve suffered, and a nice young man like Henry—that you turned into a killer. You really don’t deserve to live, do you?”

“I knew you were lying, Marty. I knew you came here to kill me.”

“No. You’re wrong. Because of Henry, and how he turned his life around, I

finally did start going to chapel. And I made my heart right with God.”

“Yeah, right. And then as soon as you got out of prison, you started murdering again.”

“I know. I broke my vow to God. But after I survived John X, I started praying to God again. I confessed my sins. And he’s giving me a second chance. I won’t blow it this time. No more murders.”

“So, you’re going to just walk out of here, and let me go on with my life?”

“That was my plan all along. Oh, and you can have this.” Marty stood, and tossed Sam’s envelope onto Buford’s desk.

Buford couldn’t believe it. He snatched up the envelope, and pulled out the two sheets of paper.

They were blank.

“What is this? Where’s the letter?”

“I mailed it to Angela Hammerly. She should get it today.”

“No! I’ll be ruined!”

“That’s the idea, Buford.” Marty smiled. It had all been worth it. Just to see the hopeless look on Buford’s face. “So, see—I don’t *need* to kill you. Besides, if I have a change of heart, I could come back later, and pop you any time I want.”

Marty turned, and walked toward the door.

Buford quickly and quietly opened the top right drawer and grabbed the pistol. He pointed it at Marty’s back and squeezed the trigger. But it didn’t fire—it just clicked!

“Oh, Buford. You’re so predictable. I told you I wasn’t gonna *murder* you today. This is self-defense.”

“But you unloaded my gu—”

Buford’s wife would find him, head rested comfortably against the back of his

tall leather chair. At first, she might think he was just taking a quick power nap. Except for the bullet hole in the center of his forehead. And the blood leaking from it.

Too bad. Her ticket to fame and glory in Austin had been cancelled.

Chapter 44

It was Sunday, 1:20 PM. Greg Tenorly felt almost human again, after sleeping for twelve hours. It only took a couple of knocks to get a response.

“Just a minute.”

He had dreamed about her all night long. Cynthia opened the door. She looked even more beautiful than in his dreams.

“Come on in. I’m almost ready.”

The last time he had been in her room at the Holiday Inn, they were just about to begin their big adventure.

“Did you sleep okay?” said Greg.

“Like a rock. And I woke up starved. Where are we eating?”

“Your choice.”

“I hope Dr. Huff understood about you missing church today.”

“Yeah, I’m sure he did. He knows I’ve had a rough week. We’ve had rough week. But it wasn’t all bad. I had a great time just being with you. You know, just talking and joking around. *That* part of it was fun.”

“Yeah, it was.” Cynthia seemed to be only half-listening, while finishing her eye makeup.

“And now I’m going to miss seeing you every day.”

Cynthia put down her makeup, and walked over to Greg. She stepped in close, and looked deeply into his eyes. By the time she spoke, his heart was pounding.

“You can still see me every day. If you want to.”

She leaned in closer, as her eyelids lowered. He leaned down, and gently touched his lips against hers, and realized he could never have prepared himself for the

sensation that began to pulse through his entire body.

Instinctively, he draped his arms around her curvaceous body. Greg wondered if he was overstepping. Then he felt her hands sliding around to his back. Her mouth opened slightly. The tip of her tongue caressing his lips.

Cynthia still had a husband to bury. She didn't know when she would be ready to start 'officially' dating again. But she did know *who* she would be dating. It would be the sweet, kind, loving, funny man she had gotten to know over the past week. His warm embrace felt like home.

*

It was a perfect afternoon to spend on the lake—if you could stand the heat and humidity. And Marty could. He cut the engine, and his boat slowed to a standstill. What a great spot, he thought. And nobody else was around to disturb his joy of fishing.

He flipped open the cooler, dug to the very bottom, and pulled out an ice cold Budweiser. Here was a place where he could fish, and drink beer, and commune with God. But then he remembered he had a little business to take care of first.

He unzipped the duffle bag, and took out a pair gloves and put them on. Then removed the gun and the suppressor from the bag. He carefully wiped them off with a rag one more time.

Then he lowered the two items into the water, and released them. With any luck, they would never be found. At least not in *his* lifetime.

"Buford, if you can hear me, wherever you are

" Marty took a sip from his beer. "

I wish I could say that your debt to society has been paid. But I'm afraid you've only paid *one* of your debts. But if the Good Lord would bring you back to life, I'd help you out with the rest of those debts."

Marty took several more sips. "Really, Buford. I'd be more than happy to kill you over and over and over again. Whatever it took."

Of course, Marty would only do this if God approved it. Because Marty had made a vow. And he would keep his vow.

This time.

THE END

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For more information about Robert Burton Robinson and his novels, please visit: <https://robertburtonrobinson.com>