

VEIL

REGINALD COOK

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VEIL

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This book contains an excerpt from the forthcoming book *The Hammer of God* by Reginald Cook. This excerpt has been set for this edition only and may not reflect content of the forthcoming edition.

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**THIS NOVEL INCLUDES PREVIEW CHAPTERS
OF
REGINALD COOK'S NEXT GREAT SUSPENSE
THRILLER IN THE VEIL SERIES**

**The
HAMMER OF
GOD**

**AVAILABLE
Summer 2006**

**CATHOLIC PRIESTS. UNMATCHED
EVIL.
MEN OF HONOR. SAVE THE CHILDREN.**



*In Loving Memory of
Sallie M. Cook and Ramona D. Cook
I miss you, I love you.*

*To My Father
Romia Cook
You made me. You raised me. You loved me.
Thank you*

*To Ramona Worlds-Arnold
Your impression on my life will last
a lifetime.*

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"The real rulers in Washington are invisible, and exercise power from behind the scenes."

Justice Felix Frankfurter
U.S. Supreme Court Justice

"In politics, nothing happens by accident. If it happened, you can bet it was planned that way."

Franklin Delano Roosevelt
32nd US President

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PROLOGUE

Thirty minutes before my scheduled seven thirty a.m. wake-up call, I rolled out of bed, my back stiff and aching. Like every day since assuming my new position, I knew I could look forward to a long, eventful, tiring schedule. But loved it.

Dallas wasn't my favorite city in the country. In fact, many of the locals despised me, and my advisors said the visit would not be a pleasant one. Someone even took out a full-page ad criticizing my work, even though my second in command was a much-loved Texan—one of their own. It didn't matter. It came with the territory as my duty to serve, and serve them I did.

My staff decided I should spend the night in Fort Worth, then fly to Dallas the following day. There I'd give a luncheon address at the Trade Mart to some of the city's prominent business leaders. I wish we'd flown to Dallas the night before so I could rest a little and spend some quiet time with my wife, Jackie. As happens with most married couples, our marriage went through some difficult times, much of it my fault. My torrid schedule didn't help matters, but after Dallas, we'd spend a couple of days to ourselves. I wanted to make amends for several, shall I say, indiscretions, so my mood was good despite the long day ahead.

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I let Jackie sleep a little longer while I took a quick shower. When I finished, I found her awake, getting ready for the day, and kissed her on the forehead, then the lips.

I marveled, as I often did, how even first thing in the morning she looked absolutely radiant. Yes, when the trip concluded, I definitely planned on spending more quality time with her. She dealt with so much day in and day out; raising a family, being a good wife, and balancing work and home with impeccable style and poise.

We talked briefly while I dressed, mostly about our two children, Caroline, and John Jr. We marveled at how fast time flew by and how both of them grew up so fast. Like most parents, we wanted the best for them and knew they'd grow up to be fine adults.

As we talked, I could tell she would've preferred passing on the events planned. She disliked media attention and hated having so much of our privacy open to the public. It was a sore spot between us, so I didn't address the matter. I simply smiled, gave her an understanding look, and kissed her again.

A knock at the door interrupted our brief moment, and my personal secretary, Evelyn Lincoln, asked if I'd say hello to several of her old friends. Evelyn, more than a secretary to me, was my friend, my confidant, and on more than one occasion, my protector, so of course I told her I'd be happy to oblige.

After I finished getting dressed, I could see that Jackie would be running late—something to do with her hair. It annoyed me a little, but I kept it to myself.

I gathered a few things and stepped out into the hallway to apologize to Marjorie Belew, wife of a local prominent attorney, and Jackie's escort to a breakfast in Fort Worth. Considerate and gracious about the delay, she said she understood, although I could tell she was a little nervous. To lighten the tension I told a few of what I thought were my best jokes, and soon we laughed like we'd known each other for years.

Evelyn arrived a few minutes later with her friends. I greeted them and happened to glance outside the hallway window, amazed at the number of people gathered to hear me speak. A light rain fell, but the crowd seemed unperturbed. It was much more than I expected.

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Mrs. Belew escorted me outside; Jackie was still not ready. There were at least six or seven thousand people waiting, and when I took the stage they burst into a thunderous applause. Let me tell you, if anyone ever tries to convince you that ovations don't affect them, they're lying.

I walked to the podium and the sun came out on cue. The crowd chanted, "Where's Jackie? Where's Jackie?" I pointed towards the hotel suite, still a little peeved she didn't come down with me, and told them she was getting dressed, and that it took women longer. But of course, Jackie looked better. They all laughed.

After the speech came the part I really looked forward to at these events, meeting the people. I walked down into the crowd and shook hands with as many of them as I could. It drove my security team crazy, but I didn't care. Touching them charged me up in a way nothing else could. It gave me strength.

We went back inside the hotel to one of the banquet rooms for breakfast. Famished, I looked forward to my usual soft-boiled eggs, bacon, dry toast with marmalade, orange juice, and coffee.

Jackie finally arrived to the delight of the crowd, and looked marvelous in a pink dress with navy blue lapels and a pink pillbox hat. A true fashion queen, I doubt I would've been so popular without her. We kissed. The crowd applauded wildly and chanted "Jackie! Jackie! Jackie!"

We went to the airport for the short flight to Dallas. When we arrived, I found myself even more shocked and amazed at the number of people waiting to see us. To say they turned out in full force would sell it short. They were everywhere, lined up along the streets as far as the eye could see.

Well, not everyone tendered their support. I did notice this one gentlemen sitting on top of a car, an ugly despicable look on his face, a not too flattering sign in his hands. Hey, my father said you can't please everybody, and you're a fool if you try.

My staff informed me everything was in order for the motorcade procession through downtown Dallas, and on to the Trade Mart. The clear sky signaled an absolutely gorgeous southern day, so I requested the top be removed from the car so we could enjoy it. Besides, it gave the crowd a better look at us.

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Several members of my security staff objected, but I insisted. What good is a parade if you can't see the band and floats? They weren't very happy about it, but indulged me anyway.

Someone presented Jackie with a beautiful bouquet of red roses, and she loved them, and decided she'd carry them with her in the car. Jackie and I sat in the back seat, she to my left. Bill Greer, one of my security staff, drove, and another member of the security team sat beside him. Texas Governor John Connelly and his wife Nellie took the jump seats; Connelly sat directly in front of me.

Riding in a motorcade is always eventful. No, electric. Even the chronic pain in my back couldn't put a damper on the moment and disappeared. People who care deeply about you and the country get a chance to see the man in-charge, and the man in-charge gets a chance to draw closer to the people he's sworn to serve.

We drove along waving to the crowd, and I noticed a little girl holding up a sign. It read, "Mr. President, will you please stop and shake hands with me?" I told Bill to stop, and immediately, children swarmed the car. Trust me, that never gets old.

"They're approaching Houston and Elm," a garbled voice crackled across the car's two-way radio. I looked at my wrist to check the time, but as usual, I'd forgotten my watch.

I waved to the crowd standing to my right. Jackie handled the left side, as was our way. I tried to make eye contact with as many people as possible. It made the moment personal. The people. It's all about the people.

I turned to wave in the direction of a lovely blond haired woman wearing a bright red coat. Through the crowd noise I thought I heard her call, "Over here Mr. President!"

I raised my right hand to wave. A strange popping sound cut through the air. I tried to ask Jackie if she heard it, but something lodged in my throat and I couldn't speak. Everything slowed down. My hearing fell hollow. My vision blurred. Something struck me hard from behind and I lurched forward. I heard screaming, and a searing pain exploded all over my body. I felt dizzy, light-headed, and couldn't breathe. I was choking, on my own blood.

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I wanted to help Jackie, make sure she was okay. I heard Governor Connelly's frantic voice as though it were coming from inside a tunnel. "Oh no, no, no! My God, they're going to kill us all!"

I needed to tell Jackie that I love her, and struggled to get out the words. I desperately wanted someone to help me. I wanted to live!

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a spark of light. My head snapped back like I'd been punched in the face. The right side of my skull burned. My mind went blank. I felt life drain away. Eyes wide-open, I saw only darkness.

They say the last sense to go right before you die is your hearing. It's true. I heard Jackie's echoing voice fade as I fell away from her, down a hole. I struggled to wake up, but couldn't.

"Oh God, they've shot my husband," I heard her say. "I love you Jack."

Then I...

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I

Nikki Thorne rolled a cup of café mocha back and forth in her hands, the condensation pouring from her lips and nose steamier than that rising out of the cup.

“Tell me again why we’re out here freezing our butts off?” she asked, more agitated than curious. “How do we know he’ll show here, at this house, for this judge?” She drained the Starbucks brew and tossed the empty out the window.

“Just a hunch,” said Robert.

Robert Veil understood the rare necessity to kill, but murder, especially that of a federal judge, he couldn’t tolerate and wouldn’t let it happen again if he could help it.

He rubbed his gloved hands together and blew warm air in-between them. Washington D.C. felt artic, unusual for late March. He checked his watch, sucking his teeth. The Sopranos were about to start and he’d have to settle for reruns, again.

He whittled down the killer’s next victim to Judge Zechariah Shaw.

“Why?” Thorne asked again.

His gut tightened. “It just feels right.”

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The killer, psychotic and brutal, held a million-dollar bounty on his head and the Justice Department made it clear. “*We want him alive, but won’t cry over spilled milk.*”

Robert sank back into the black leather seat of Thorne’s new Range Rover and closed his eyes. He hated the *new car smell*, but she promised to hang his balls from her rear view mirror if he so much as passed gas.

“Robert!”

He grabbed the night-vision binoculars off the dashboard.

“Over to the right,” Thorne said, pointing. “At the far end of the wall.”

Judge Shaw’s house lay hidden behind a twelve-foot red brick wall. Thick leafless ivy vines stretched back and forth across it, and large green Virginia pines stood guard at each corner. A dark figure in a ski mask climbed one of the trees and scurried over the wall.

“It’s him,” said Robert, opening the passenger door. “Let’s go.”

“We should call and get back-up,” said Thorne.

“No, we’ll catch this guy *then* call the troops.”

Before she could answer, Robert bolted across the dimly lit street. She ran after him, her Mosberg pistol-grip shotgun dangling from her shoulder like a purse.

They followed the same path as their target, easily scaling the wall. Robert’s recommendation that the judge bathe his house in floodlights went ignored. A mistake.

“Should we call inside to warn them?”

“No,” said Robert. “That might scare this guy off, besides, I don’t want John Wayne in there to come out blasting. We’ll catch this guy inside, beat him down til he passes out, *then* call the police.”

“I like it,” said Thorne.

Robert smiled. “I knew you would.”

Judge Shaw’s two-story colonial, large, but simple, stood behind four ivory pillars, with green and white shutters framing each window. A light snow covered the expansive yard, undisturbed except for the assailant’s footprints.

Stooped behind a large barren cherry blossom tree, they watched the dark clothed figure climb the side of the house, using a white ivy trellis

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to pull himself up. Removing the trellis; another idea dismissed by the judge. The killer easily used it to reach a window on the second floor.

“This guy’s done his homework,” said Robert. “That’s the guest room. It’s unoccupied.”

“He’s inside,” said Thorne. “Let’s go.”

They sprinted across the snow-powder. Robert tugged on the trellis to test its strength. Thorne went first, reached the window, and slipped inside. When he made it in, she stood ready at the bedroom door, peering down the hall.

“The master bedroom’s fifteen feet down the hall to the right,” whispered Robert. “No kids, no pets.”

They slipped out of their black leather jackets. Robert unlatched the holster strap on his Berretta 9mm and peeked into the hallway. A woman’s terrified shriek cut through the air. They bolted and burst through the door.

The killer stood over a horrified Judge Shaw, gun to the magistrate’s head. Mrs. Shaw, clinging to the headboard for life, screamed louder when she saw them.

Robert crashed into the assassin. The gun discharged, but missed. Their momentum carried them over the bed to the floor. The killer scrambled to his feet and pointed his gun down at Robert’s head.

Thorne racked her shotgun. “Drop it muthafucka!” The killer hesitated. She placed the tip of the barrel between his eyes. “And don’t make mommy tell you twice!”

The killer froze, carefully lowered his gun and dropped it on the floor. “You black bitch,” he uttered.

Yeah, that was real smart, Robert thought, recalling the last time he heard the word “bitch” tossed Thorne’s way.

She swung the pistol grip fast and hard across the masked man’s face, knocking him out cold. Robert smiled. It wasn’t the first time his best friend came to his aid. They’d been trading the favor since junior high.

“I owe you one,” he said, joking.

“Hell, I could buy half of Virginia with what you owe me.”

Thorne turned on the lights. Judge Shaw stood in the doorway petrified, his eyes teary, hands quivering. Mrs. Shaw lay crumpled in a heap on the bed weeping into a pillow. Thorne walked over and sat

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beside her.

"It's okay Mrs. Shaw, it's over," she said, gently stroking her frazzled hair.

Thorne never ceased to amaze Robert. She looked like a beauty queen and could be quite kind. In a fight, she hit with the bite of a Great White.

Robert held down a button on his cell phone. Their contact at the FBI answered. He explained the situation, hung up, then turned his attention to Judge Shaw, who, known in the courthouse as tough, dismissive, and arrogant, tried to mouth words, but none came. He stumbled over, took Thorne's place next to his wife and held her, his sobs now audible.

Thorne walked over to the attacker. "Let's get a look at this jackass," she said, her shotgun poised.

Robert pulled off the killer's ski mask. "His jaw's broken." He leaned in close. "It's not him," Robert said, looking up at Thorne. "It's not the guy we're looking for."

Thorne smiled and laughed. "Think we'll get paid for this?"

Three hours inched by. Robert and Thorne answered a barrage of questions from the FBI, Secret Service, and D.C. police. Agent Douglas Sams, their liaison at the FBI, stomped around the house, peeved they didn't call *before* rushing inside.

"If we'd waited the judge and his wife would be dead," said Robert.

"We didn't have time," Thorne added, nodding in agreement.

"Who is the guy anyway?" asked Robert.

Agent Sams eyed them suspiciously and sighed. "His name's Lucas Garland, an Aryan Nation thug."

Thorne's face lit up with recognition. "I remember him. Murder, right?"

"Right," said Sams, crossing his arms. "Judge Shaw gave him life about a year ago. He escaped from the West Virginia State Penitentiary last month."

"Guess he was looking for a little payback," said Robert. "Trying to make it look like our guy."

"Look," said Agent Sams, pointing his finger at Robert. "Next time call us. If you don't want to play ball with the team, then take your

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blood money and leave.”

Robert smiled and leaned forward. “You’re just a field hand Agent Sams, remember that. It’s not your call.”

Agent Sams’ rugged good looks twisted with contempt and he stormed away. Robert and Thorne slipped through the sea of reporters assembled outside and jumped into her Rover.

Well past midnight, the frigid capitol slept. A few cars, limos, and taxicabs inched their way through the icy streets. A light snow fell. Robert stared out at the well-lit monuments visible from the freeway, sank back into the new leather, and closed his eyes. Wynton Marsalis poured soft tones through the speakers. He relaxed.

When he signed up to work for Uncle Sam, Robert never imagined he’d be chasing down international criminals, terrorists, and killers for money. After a stint in the Marines, he ended up working as a Special Forces Black-ops Field Commander. Thorne was his second in command. They figured they’d spend a few years as spooks, and then grab a couple of lucrative security gigs with Fortune Five Hundred companies. It seemed a plausible plan, until Desert Storm.

They were assigned to locate and capture members of Saddam Hussein’s chemical weapons team, including scientists and military personnel. They found them working in a Syrian Desert compound, fifty miles outside of Baghdad, just west of Karbala. Orders came down from on high, *interrogate and execute them all*. Robert and Thorne refused, walked away from the assignment into a court marshal, and out of government service.

After that, they opened up their own shop handling private investigations and security for corporations and the wealthy. Compared to the action they were used to, it was mind numbing, so they quickly acquired a taste for hunting down the worst the world had to offer. They scored big on a couple of high profile captures, and it didn’t take long for the boys in Washington to come calling. Robert and Thorne were given shots at the tough cases, and the hard to solve. They worked off the books, giving the government complete deniability. Some in federal law enforcement scoffed and complained. Robert didn’t care. He enjoyed making them pay.

Wynton gave way to Miles Davis, with Ron Carter on bass. Robert

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dozed off. His cell phone intruded. It was Evelyn Hollis, their office manager. She caught wind of the commotion at the judge's house on the police scanner, and cursed under her breath when Robert confirmed reports the Bear still remained at-large.

Robert checked his watch. "You're still in the office?"

Thorne gave a curious look.

"I had to stay," said Evelyn. "You have a visitor."

"A visitor?"

"Yes, an old homeless guy showed up around eight o'clock. Said he had an appointment with you and refused to leave. Says his name's Charlie. Charlie Ivory."

Robert, silent, watched the city zip by. "Right," he finally said. "The old guy who sleeps in the alley behind our building sometimes. I remember, but I didn't think he was serious. I was just humoring him"

"Oh, he's serious alright," said Evelyn. "When it got late I tried to get him to come back tomorrow, but he refused. He's been sitting in your office all this time. Seems harmless enough."

"Did you ask him what he wants? It can't be much."

Evelyn kept quiet.

"Evie?"

"Robert, he says he killed someone, and he'll only talk to you."

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2

Thorne pulled onto Massachusetts Avenue, passing Embassy Row. Impressive and mansion-like, most of the foreign embassies stood along the boulevard like royalty, French and Italian marble accented, back and under lit with floodlights, some stationed behind high metal gates.

Massachusetts Avenue flowed into Dupont Circle, which passed the Dupont Plaza Hotel, curving 160 degrees to the five-story building that housed their office. Thorne drove into the underground garage and they caught the elevator to the fifth floor. Evelyn gathered her coat and purse when she saw them.

“Okay, here are your messages,” she said, handing each of them a pile of scribbled pink slips. “I’m tired, I’m going home, and don’t expect me until late tomorrow.”

“Is our guest still with us?” asked Robert.

“You better believe it. Hasn’t moved a muscle. He’s sitting there in front of your desk. I gave him a cup of coffee, which is fresh by the way. I have a feeling you guys are going to need it.”

“Thanks Evie,” Thorne said, giving her a hug. “You go home and get some rest.”

“In fact, take tomorrow off,” added Robert. “We can handle things

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for a day.”

Evelyn smiled, and headed for the door. “You don’t have to tell me twice. Just make sure things stay the way I’ve left them.” She glared at Robert sarcastically. “And don’t touch anything on my desk.”

“I know, I know,” he said. “I haven’t forgotten what happened last time.”

Evelyn and Thorne laughed as she closed the door behind her. Robert poured two cups of coffee and handed one to Thorne.

“Let’s go see who our homeless friend has killed,” he said.

“I bet it’s nothing,” said Thorne. “These guys make stories up all the time. He’s probably just glad to be out of the cold.”

Down a short hall to Robert’s office, their feet pounded the hardwood floor like hooves, past black and white photos of men who died fighting by their side in some of the worst places the world offered.

One photograph showed a group of ecstatic Columbian soldiers kneeling over the bullet-riddled body of drug czar Pablo Escobar, a mission they found particularly satisfying, even though they knew it made not so much as a dent in the fairy tale war on drugs.

Charlie whirled around when they entered, stood, and greeted them, nervously wiping his hands on crusty, filth stained work pants. Robert shook the old man’s hand, said hello, and gave him the once over. A putrid odor he couldn’t quite identify assaulted his nose. If he wasn’t used to smelling much worst, he might have vomited.

Thorne smiled and nodded at Charlie, then positioned herself behind him on a worn black leather couch. She always sat in a position of advantage when they questioned someone unknown. Robert did the talking while she watched and listened.

Robert sat down behind his large oak desk and leaned back in the chair. Charlie stood nervously for a moment then eased down into his seat. A dingy blue blanket wrapped around something long, like a curtain rod, leaned up against the desk in front of Charlie. A large black duffle bag rested on the floor at the side of his chair.

“You didn’t have to wait so late for us Charlie,” said Robert. “We could’ve seen you tomorrow.”

Charlie’s head dropped and water filled his eyes. “I know Mr. Veil, but this matter has waited long enough.”

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Robert and Thorne gave each other curious, playful looks.

“Exactly what is this *urgent* matter?” asked Robert.

Charlie fidgeted and squirmed in his chair. Sweat beaded on his crusty wrinkled forehead. He looked up. “Murder is the matter Mr. Veil.”

They listened to Charlie unravel a tale, unbelievable and outrageous. *The old man's a raving lunatic*, thought Robert. Thorne did all she could not to laugh.

“I'm afraid what you're saying is impossible,” Robert told him. “Is there somewhere we can take you? Someone we can call?” *Like the nuthouse.*

Robert had agreed to see Charlie as an after-thought. A few days earlier, he parked in the alley behind their building and paid Charlie a dollar to watch his car, his mind elsewhere when he accepted the old man's request for a meeting. Now, the ramblings he sat listening to made him sorry he said yes.

Charlie fumbled open the black duffle bag sitting next to his chair, and placed its contents on the desk. Photographs, phone records, hand drawn street maps, memos, a plastic bag with spent shell casings, another with several mutilated bullet fragments and what looked like six or seven journals rubber-banded together—all fought for space on Robert's already cluttered blotter.

Charlie continued to drone, unwrapping the long curtain rod-like package, dropping the tattered blanket on the floor. A rifle, complete with scope rested in his hands. At the sight of it, Thorne stood and walked closer to Charlie, her shotgun ready.

He sat the rifle on the desk with the rest of the items and continued to confess the impossible. Robert listened in stunned silence, occasionally glancing up at Thorne who looked just as perplexed. An hour later, he felt truth in what the old man told them, although the magnitude of what he heard demanded he not accept it.

“Why should we believe you?” Robert asked, staring deep into Charlie's tired blue eyes. Thorne, her dark, lean muscular frame obvious, stood next to their visitor, arms crossed, carefully taking stock of Charlie, sizing him up.

Dingy and worn, the old man's filthy, tattered overcoat covered a

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navy blue Georgetown University sweatshirt, equally covered in grime and dirt.

Charlie continued to squirm and fidget. “This evidence speaks for itself, doesn’t it?” he told them. “Or do you think I could make up pictures like these?” His bony, crusty finger pointed to several black and white glossies strewn across the cluttered, overused desk.

Robert picked up the photographs and inspected them closely.

The pictures, taken from various angles, showed a man crouched behind a wooden fence, firing a high-powered rifle similar to the one sitting on his desk. The gunman, much younger than the man who sat before them, wore a plaid jacket and baseball cap, and was unmistakably Charlie Ivory. Robert, dazed by what he’d heard, realized the possibility that the homeless man in front of him—assassinated an American president.

Skeptical, he sat there examining major pieces of evidence Charlie claimed he stole when his handlers failed to tie him to the crime.

The rifle, bullets, and papers looked compelling and could be checked out, but Charlie, homeless on the streets of Washington D.C. for close to forty years, produced something quite startling—chilling photographs of him executing President John F. Kennedy, from behind the grassy knoll that November day.

“These are the days of high-tech,” said Robert, tossing one of the photos back on the desk. “A child could make pictures like these with a digital camera and a computer.”

“Do I look like a child?” the old man said, sitting up straight, wiping his eyes. “Listen, if you have doubts you can send them out to someone who’d know better.”

Robert leaned forward and stared hard at Charlie. “We have every intention of doing just that. But let’s say the pictures and the rest of this stuff are real. Why in the hell would you bring this madness to us? And why shouldn’t we cart you off someplace where they’d care?”

Charlie grinned slightly, his eyes looking as though they held the keys to many secrets. “Because you hate them as much as I do,” he said, pointing to a copy of Fortune magazine sitting on the corner of the desk.

Several captains of industry were on the cover, including Bill Gates, Oprah Winfrey and Edward Rothschild, one of the world’s richest and

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most powerful men.

“They got away with it, they did,” he continued. “And from what I hear of you, I figured you to be the one somebody to put things right. Anyway, I didn’t think anyone else *would* care.”

“You mean you got away with it!” Thorne snapped. She moved next to Robert. “If you ain’t a lyin sack, then you’re the one who got away with murder, and I ought’ a plug you where you sit!” She rested her hand on the shotgun that still dangled from her shoulder. Robert motioned for her to calm down.

“What do you mean—from what you hear about me?” shot Robert. Hear what, from who? What is it you think you know about us?”

Charlie’s mouth turned down at the corners and his eyes emptied. He stared vacantly out the window. “They’ll come for you now,” he said. “They know I’m here and they’ll come for you.”

“Who are *they*?” Robert asked, still not believing what he’d been told. It felt surreal. He didn’t know how to feel, or how much to believe. But on the off chance that Charlie participated in Kennedy’s assassination, the fabled Black Dog Man at the grassy knoll, he wanted to make sure.

“You know, it was all about money,” Charlie groaned, his voice now low and deliberate. “They killed him for more money, more power, more of what they already had.”

“How much money did *you* get to pull the trigger?” Robert fired, his patience wearing thin. “And who the hell paid the bill?”

Robert’s question seemed to strike a nerve. Charlie’s weathered face turned ashen. He dry washed his hands nervously, as though trying to knead them clean.

“Yes, I was paid, and paid well,” said Charlie, his voice cracking. “By Satan himself.” His eyes beet red, they welled up again. “I’m not proud of it,” he continued. “I was a different man back then. Confused and self-deceived.”

“Does the Devil have a name?” Thorne bellowed. She leaned forward on the desk with both hands, her face contorted, nostrils flared. “We don’t have time to play Jeopardy with you. Either tell us who hired you, or take this shit and get out.”

They’d been playing good cop, bad cop since childhood. Thorne

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loved playing it bad. She said it gave her the chance to explore her *masculine* side, but this time he could tell she wasn't playing.

"What my partner's trying to say is that we're inclined to believe you. The evidence is compelling, but without a name and face to this animal, we might as well be talking about the Loch Ness Monster or Bigfoot."

Robert hesitated. "You could be just another nut looking for a little attention," he said. "And you still haven't said why you came to us."

Charlie sat up straight in his chair. "I'm no nut Mr. Veil, not crazy at all. I just need to know you're serious, and that you'll take this to the end if I tell you everything. I've lived with this a long time, but I don't want to die with it."

Thorne's face twisted with disgust. Her eyes rolled up toward the ceiling.

"I came to you because I know you," said Charlie. "I *was* you."

Robert leaned back in his chair and breathed a sigh of disgust and disbelief. "I have no idea what the hell you mean by that, but I'm beginning to agree with my partner. I think you should take these things and get out."

Charlie, somber, composed himself. He reached inside the duffle bag and pulled out an oversized *mason jar*, filled with a cloudy gray liquid. Floating inside were small pieces of brain matter and flesh.

"If the pictures, gun, and bullets don't convince you, then maybe this will," said Charlie.

"What is it?" asked Robert.

"President Kennedy's brain," answered Charlie, sitting the jar on the desk. Thorne leaned in to get a closer look.

Robert remembered something he'd read. President Kennedy's brain disappeared after the autopsy and was never recovered.

The brain tissue in the jar looked tattered and fragile, dancing in the cloudy fluid like sea monkeys. Thorne took the jar and held it up to the light.

"It degenerated over the years," said Charlie. "Decomposed quite a bit, but with DNA you can prove this is Kennedy's brain. Then no one will doubt you, and what I'm telling you will be believed."

Stunned, the hairs bristled on the back of Robert's neck. *How did you get this stuff?* He examined the bullet fragments, shell casings, and rifle

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more closely. The weapon, a Mannlicher-Carcano, bolt action, clip fed rifle, was Italian made. The casings matched. The bullet fragments were so mutilated he couldn't tell by sight if they matched, but a competent lab would be able to with no problem. The rifle's scope, Japanese made, looked cheap, but adequate.

Robert sat the evidence down and stood. "Charlie, I need to see my partner in private. Sit tight. When we come back we'll need those names." He exited with Thorne on his heels.

Charlie sat silent, head low, hands trembling. Fresh tears rolled down his leathery, wrinkled cheeks.

Thorne put it on the line for Robert more times than he could remember. A favor he gladly returned, even when it almost cost him his life.

Suspects often made the blunder of letting their guard down with her. An easy mistake. Her lean body and exotic looks masked her talent for lethal force. By the time they realized it, they were either in jail, or dead.

She survived more than her share of covert operations by being smart and picking her battles carefully.

"We have to look into this. I have a feeling this guy is telling the truth. He's the brass ring."

"I don't care if he is," Thorne snapped. "He's full of it and by the way, fuck a brass ring." She leaned forward on the dark mahogany conference table that nearly matched her complexion. "If this guy's telling half the truth, we won't win this one partner. It'll get mighty hot mighty fast around here. Let's let this one pass."

Arms folded across his chest, Robert took a deep breath, his eyes glued to hers. "Twenty years out in the field, all over the world, and we've never *just let one pass*," he said, his voice steady and controlled. "If half of what this old man says is true. How can we do nothing? These people should pay for..."

"You're not that naive," said Thorne, biting her lip. She dropped her shotgun on the table hard enough to scratch the wood, and flopped down in a chair. "How will this change anything anyway?" she continued. "Except for the fact that our lives won't be worth spit. We have no idea who we'll be after, or who'll be after us."

"Since when do we care who the target is?" he fired. "We've chased

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down drug lords, terrorists. Hell, we even tried to kill Saddam Hussein for heaven's sake. I don't want to change things Thorne, but how many chances do you get to set something like this straight."

Thorne glared. "I'm just not sure about this one Robert. If that old fart *is* telling the truth, once we start, we won't be able to start over."

"Look, if you're out, then you're out. I can ride this one without you," he said, bluffing.

Thorne suppressed a smile and shook her head in light-hearted disgust.

"White boys. Think you can do anything don't you? John Wayne, Tom Cruise. Every time I turn around, it's *white man* to the rescue."

"I'm not kidding. If you won't come in on this one, I'll go it alone."

They sat in silence. Thorne looked at him as if he were a fool.

He walked to the door.

"What about the Bear?"

He paused.

"Or have you forgotten that quickly?"

Robert shut his eyes and cursed under his breath. Caught up in Charlie's confession, he'd forgotten about Andre Perchenkov. The Bear.

A Russian Mafia crime lord, turned serial killer, executed three DEA agents and viciously murdered five federal judges. Grudgingly, Justice Department officials hired Robert and Thorne to find him, dead or alive, for a one million dollar bounty.

Normally the federal law enforcement community didn't work with outsiders, but the FBI and Secret Service were at a stand still, and the White House, desperate to keep U.S. citizens calm, wanted him caught right away.

"You're right," he said, turning to face her. "I forgot about the Bear."

"Then we'll drop this matter," she said, showing a little relief. "Let's tell the old man to shove off."

Robert stroked his chin, walked over to the chair directly across from her and sat down.

Tabling the Kennedy matter for even a minute annoyed him, but Thorne hit a nerve. The Bear would strike again soon, and they needed a break in the case. Fast.

However, the chance to break the Kennedy case, he couldn't pass up.

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The gun, bullet fragments, and brain matter would have to be analyzed, and he'd find a safe place to hide Charlie until he confirmed his story. *No. Both. Charlie and the Bear.*

"Thorne, this is why we left the service. Or have you forgotten? We'll get the Bear. We'll get him. But don't ask me to turn my back and let this one walk away."

Thorne's face twisted in frustration. Robert combed his fingers back through his hair. "Do you remember the day Kennedy was killed?"

"Vaguely," said Thorne. "We were a little young back then."

"Well *I* remember. Eighty-three people were murdered in the United States on November 22, 1963. One of them, President John Fitzgerald Kennedy. Another, Thomas Randolph Veil."

Thorne's face softened. "Your father. I'd forgotten."

"Neither President Kennedy nor my father were perfect men," he continued. "But neither deserved to die the way they did, and in both cases, no one was ever held responsible. Now, my father was just a construction worker, and one death had nothing to do with the other." He stopped, eyes narrow, breathing heavy. He wanted to continue, but couldn't. The rancid flavor of acid rose up in the back of his throat.

"Let's get these guys and burn their asses. Burn'em straight to the ground."

"Robert, I understand how you feel," Thorne said, in a gentle voice. "Some creep took my mother from *me* long ago, but this isn't about us. This is something else, something bigger."

Robert glared through her, his mind traveling back to his parent's kitchen, the day they heard about President Kennedy's death. He didn't fully understand at the time, but he'd never seen his father break down and cry. Later, Thomas Veil went out to the grocery store. Robert had no idea it would be the last time he'd see his father alive. He heard detectives explain to his mother how his dad tried to stop a robbery. They never found the men who killed him. The country wept for Kennedy. Robert cried for a man he'd have to grow up without.

Thorne picked up her shotgun and stood, resting the weapon on her shoulder. "I haven't forgotten why we quit working for Uncle Sam. Deep down I want these bastards too. But you better be right partner. If not..." She smiled. "You know I've got your back. Just promise me if

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this does turn out to be legit, we won't give an inch. It's all or nothing."

Robert's anger leveled. "Agreed," he said, returning her smile.
"Now let's go tell our new friend."

"You mean *your* new friend," said Thorne. "He's goin' down in flames with the rest of em. I don't care how long he's been livin' on the streets."

They walked out of the conference room and down the hall. Robert noticed drops of blood on the hallway floor.

In unison, they quietly stepped to opposite sides of the door and readied their weapons. Robert released the safety on his Beretta. Thorne racked her shotgun.

He carefully tried the doorknob to his office. Open. He signaled Thorne with three fingers.

On three, they burst inside, guns pointing in every direction. Charlie's chair lay turned over on its side next to a small pool of blood. They relaxed their weapons, bewildered.

Charlie and the evidence were gone.

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3

Andre Perchenkov thought himself the perfect hunter. Growing up in St. Petersburg, Russia, the hunting trips he and his brother, Vladimir, took with their alcoholic father were the high point of a debilitating, abusive childhood.

Those trips made up the few pleasant moments he could remember growing up. Killing his father during one of those outings, another.

Hidden in the thick branches of a leafless tree, twenty yards from an elegant Georgetown townhouse, Andre, ski masked and dressed in black, watched Superior Court Judge Jonathan Weiss pack for what looked like a long tropical vacation.

Harsh piercing wind cut through the tree like prickly needles. Andre sat unmoved. Months in Siberian wastelands hardened him to the bitter cold long ago. There to take a life, his sixth judge since this ritual began, nothing else mattered.

He glared into the master bedroom with cold indifference, as though the magistrate were a deer, or a rabbit. The judge disappeared from sight, walking into a large luxurious bathroom. Andre absorbed every detail. The olive colored his and hers towels, the brilliant gold fixtures on the sink and shower, the ice white Italian marble floor, and the Irish

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Spring soap. He watched the judge open a fresh bar, missing the trashcan with the wrapper.

Judge Weiss closed the bathroom door out of habit, Andre supposed. Nobody else was home. He watched the last of the servants leave earlier. Mrs. Weiss left hours ago, and he planned to have the judge decomposing by the time she returned.

He climbed down from the tree. The area, well lit but splotched with plenty of shadows, provided enough cover for him to disappear to the rear unnoticed.

An icy gust whipped up a funnel of snow powder. A rush surged when he reached the rear door, but he suppressed it.

Excited and anxious to kill, his vitals fell steady, his heart rate even. He unscrewed the overhead floodlight. "Never get too excited right before a kill," his father once exhorted. "Your prey can smell your excitement." Andre reflected that his father never smelled *him* coming.

He picked the double locked door with no trouble and found the alarm just as simple. Entering the house increased his sense of excitement and expectation, but he remained calm. Tiptoeing through the kitchen, he smelled the fading aroma of garlic and roast duck, and heard the judge moving around upstairs humming Beethoven's Fifth.

He found his way around in the dark with ease, having entered the place for dry runs twice, once while the staff attended to their duties.

At the top of the stairs, Andre stopped, removed the ski mask, and listened. It was stone quiet except for the judge's self-symphony, which moved from Beethoven to Mozart. *Perfect.*

He inched down the thickly carpeted hallway toward the bedroom door. Luciano Pavarotti replaced the judge's humming. The tenor's aria of Donizetti's La Fille Du Regiment, poured through the wall speakers and filled the townhouse.

From a sheath strapped to his ankle, he slid out a ten-inch buck knife, stopping at the bedroom door. Pavarotti hit an effortless High C and Andre closed his eyes. *One of nine he hit that evening*, he recalled. *New York Metropolitan Opera, 72. I had good seats that night.* He slid the knife back into place. *I'll use my hands tonight.*

Andre cracked the bedroom door open and watched the judge sort clothes. The judge caught a glimpse of him in the dresser mirror, swung

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around, stumbled, and tripped over a suitcase on the floor. Andre smelled his fear. His heart raced. He pounced, punching the judge hard about the face, crushing his nose into a clump of mush and blood.

“Urrhhh,” the judge cried, obviously not used to pain.

A shame. If you'd grown up in Russia, your nerve would be stronger and you might have a chance to survive.

The judge's face transformed from fear and terror to desperate anger. *Good. A fight for a change. I was beginning to think Americans lacked the will to live.* The judge punched and kicked wildly, knocking Andre on his back, jumped to his feet and ran for the door like he was twenty.

Andre, calm, but deliberate, followed his sixth victim down the staircase. The judge ran into the den and slammed the door. Andre heard the lock slide into place, and turned the cherry lined panels into firewood with his shoulder.

Judge Weiss unlocked a gun cabinet hidden in a panel behind his desk. Andre leaped over the oak, landed on the judge, knocking him to the floor.

“Why are you doing this?” the judge asked, collapsing, deflated.

“Because Lenin would want it this way,” Andre told him, speaking in his native tongue.

A woman's scream seared the air. The judge's wife stood rigid in the doorway, a pile of packages and shopping bags at her feet.

“Run Emily!” the judge screamed, fighting, trying to push the Russian off.

Andre, ready to finish, snapped the judge's neck with one quick twist. Mrs. Weiss screamed louder and ran upstairs.

He didn't mind killing women, but considered letting the judge's wife go. Unfortunately, her sudden interruption broke his concentration, ruining the thrill, leaving him unfulfilled. *No matter.*

To Andre's delight, Judge Weiss married a woman half his age. He remembered her smooth velvety skin, round breasts and hard nipples from his last dry run only a few days before.

Yes. I'll kill her after all. Besides, I haven't had sex in awhile.

Veil

4

Gentlemen, gentlemen, please!” Edward chimed. “Let’s save the sparring for another time.”

He paused, allowing each of the four men sitting before him a moment to gather themselves. Each was given the opportunity to debate what he considered *meaningless issues* for almost an hour. Occasionally, he commented on their opinions out of feigned politeness. Now, he wanted their undivided attention.

“I’ve asked you here at this late hour because I have a very special request. As you know, my son Charleston has been Governor of New York for the past three years. What you may not know is that the White House is his next stop. I intend to pave the way for his ascension to the Presidency, and I hope we’ll have your full, unwavering support.”

Edward Rothschild III leaned back into a courtly, burgundy leather chair that held great men from Churchill to Eisenhower. He puffed his Cuban. A rich cloud from Havana’s finest temporarily masked his stern countenance, fierce green eyes and silvery gray hair. The others sat comfortably on sofas and chairs strategically positioned around a highly polished antique coffee table, a precious heirloom from the eighteenth century donated to the Cosmos Club by Edward’s long deceased grandmother.

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The club's main pavilion was closed, with most of the staff gone for the night. A skeleton crew stayed on during the late hours to tend to the small number of members and guests who stayed in the club's residence overnight. Tonight Edward handpicked the servants. Over the years, he'd learned whom he could trust.

The occasions for these men to meet were rare. When they did, things changed. Stock markets rose or crashed, governments struggled or achieved peace, wars started and ended, leaders lived or died. Their very existence as a group fueled the obsession of conspiracy theorists from New York to Moscow, and Edward was their leader—as much as a group of men like these could have one.

A black, white-coated waiter appeared from a hidden wall panel, the lines in his face a testament to years spent weathering storms and hearing many secrets. Smooth and effortless, he glided to Edward's side, leaning over slightly so the wine he caressed in his white-gloved hands could be inspected. Edward gave the bottle a cursory glance. It was from the 1855 classification of Bordeaux, a Chateau Mouton-Rothschild.

The waiter poured a small amount into a crystal wine goblet on the table in front of Edward, who picked it up by its stem, swirled it around in the dim light, then placed the glass up to his proud, regal nose. Eyes closed, lungs fully expanded, he took a full, deep whiff, leaned his head back slightly and poured the entire contents past his lips, making sure the grape touched his tongue first before filling the rest of his mouth. He swirled the juice around for twenty seconds, swallowed, then nodded his approval. His glass was filled halfway, then the waiter moved to the others.

Edward snuffed out his gift from Castro and surveyed the room, reading each man as a parent would a child, condescending, knowing. Only he could call a meeting like this, and only in matters of extreme importance. Up until now, his reason remained a mystery.

"I'm afraid I don't find young Charleston quite ready for the Presidency," said Ian Goldberg, his sausage fingers gripped tightly around the Waterford. "Maybe after another term or two as governor, we can revisit this."

Each of the other three men sat quietly, contemplation etched on their faces. Edward knew Ian would be the first to speak. The portly

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Chairman of the two hundred billion dollar First Global Trust had his own plans for the White House. Rumors speculated he intended to jockey his nephew, a Senator from Arizona, into office.

Edward never cared much for Ian, or anybody outside of his immediate family. However, in addition to being the world's most eminent financial wizard, Ian Goldberg could keep a secret. He did business with some of the world's most notorious characters; individuals who wouldn't trust God, but would yield to Ian Goldberg information that could bring down nations. Edward needed him on the team.

"I agree," added Charles Kinston, waving off the waiter, passing on the wine. "Your son is a fine boy and a very capable politician, but there are others in line ahead of him. I think we should choose someone from the stable we've already prepared. What makes you think he deserves it now anyway? He hasn't paid his dues."

Charles, for once could you pull your nose out of Ian's behind, Edward thought. The waiter disappeared back through the panel.

Charles Kingston. The name synonymous with media, he ran a worldwide empire, including, newspapers, magazines, television, radio, and internet companies that dominated opinions in almost every area of the globe. He held considerable influence over public opinion, yet he often fell in line with Ian like a schoolboy. Edward often wondered what secret Ian held over the media mogul.

"I might remind all of you that having someone of our own choosing sitting as President, someone who will assist us without question, is vital to our continued prosperity," Edward told them. "Having a President we can maneuver and direct is in our best interest, and how much closer can you get than having a son in the White House?" he added, a cold look of brutal seriousness on his face.

"How special for you," shot Victor Roselli. "A son in the White House, how nice. But he's your son, not ours."

Victor Roselli, smooth and dapper. Boss of what Edward termed the *new Mafia*. Without firing a shot, Victor orchestrated one of the biggest takeovers in American history. Organized crime.

Movies like *The Godfather*, and flamboyant, overzealous bosses like Gotti, gave the mob far too much exposure. They were famous. Great if you're Al Pacino, but horrendous for those who actually killed for a

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living. Victor saw to it that many of the old bosses were indicted, sent to jail, or killed. He preferred stocks, bonds, credit cards, IPO's, and mergers over drugs, prostitution and extortion, and except for *The Sopranos*, he even managed to limit newspaper and television coverage. Edward found it amusing that because so many of the old *dons* were dead or in jail, some fools actually believed the Mafia no longer existed.

“Yes Victor, he is *my* son, and the sentimental part of me is a proud father. But first and foremost, I’m a businessman. I never forget my friends—or my enemies. Question is, on which side will you fall?”

Victor’s face told Edward he’d made his point. The others also seemed to grasp the message. However, men like these didn’t achieve success by being bullied. Edward felt the tension rise.

“You wouldn’t be the first man I’ve had to count as an enemy Edward. I don’t like being threatened, you know that. Remember, I’m not your brother Nicholas,” said Victor.

Edward struggled to maintain his composure. Victor struck an especially sensitive nerve. Edward and his youngest brother, Nicholas, went to battle over their father’s empire a decade earlier. Nicholas, every bit Edward’s equal, gained the upper hand. A week before the board was to vote on the matter, his brother turned up dead. Complications from an unknown heart ailment. Speculation surrounded the death. Edward was investigated and cleared. Yes, he murdered his brother, but there was never a shred of proof, only rumor and innuendo.

“I suggest you not forget that fact,” said Edward, calm, controlled. “If family blood won’t stay my wrath, what chance is there for you?” He made sure his malicious eyes fell across the room.

“Now, now, let’s not get personal,” said Vernon Campbell, Director of the CIA. “This is a business decision, plain and simple. I agree with Edward. Having someone in the White House close to us is vital. I’m willing to throw my support behind the Governor. It’s the best advantage we’ve got. No one else will be as easy to influence, or control. Let’s not forget Watergate.”

Vernon’s observation broke the tension slightly. *Who could forget?* Nixon failed to listen when his advisors told him to let the Watergate burglars fry and go to jail. Edward thought Nixon’s penchant for loyalty, in light of such obvious loss, simple-minded and obtuse. When Nixon

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confessed that he'd recorded conversations in the Oval Office, Edward and the others forced him to turn over tapes made when they visited. They cut their losses and forced the President to resign. The fiasco cost them billions.

"No one wants another Nixon," said Edward. "So it's important we seize the opportunity at hand."

Edward finished the statement looking in Victor's direction. Later, he would make him pay for his disrespect. Today, he needed his support, however grudgingly given.

"We should take it under advisement and talk again in a few weeks," Charles said, carefully. "It'll give us a chance to consider all of our options. We shouldn't rush."

"Today is Monday," said Edward, icy and stern. "I'll expect your decision by close of business Friday. If your answer is no, don't bother to call. I'll be in touch with you at a later date. We've come a long way together gentleman. Let's finish on the same team." He stood. "I trust you can find your way out."

Except for Vernon, each man rose silently and gathered his things. Only Victor dared look Edward in the eye. After the last limo pulled out of the circular driveway, Edward sat back in his chair and lit up another cigar.

"They'll come around. They always do," Vernon said, lighting up a cigar of his own. "The bastards are greedy and stubborn as hell, but they're not stupid."

Vernon removed his gold horn-rimmed glasses and shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He set his cigar in the polished, stainless steel ashtray next to his chair, leaned forward, elbows on his knees, a grave look in his eyes. "Anyway, right now they're not your biggest problem," he said, almost in a whisper.

Earlier, Vernon told Edward he wanted to discuss an urgent matter when the others left. He didn't give it another thought. "So, what's so important you're not rushing right over to that Brazilian mistress you keep hidden on the westside," Edward quipped slyly.

Vernon pursed his lips. "Your old friend Charlie Ivory has been acting strange. So it looks like getting your son elected President is the least of your worries."

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Edward felt a twinge, but remained steady. “I thought he was nearly dead. He’s been on the streets for four decades, and my sources tell me he has tuberculosis. What possible threat could he be? What could he gain at this point?”

“He still has the evidence,” said Vernon. “If you recall, it’s the only reason he’s still alive.”

“He’s had it forever, and never so much as blinked our way. What makes us so special now?”

“It’s not *what* he’s done Edward, it’s *who* he’s met with. A former *Company* man. Robert Veil’s his name, and this guy worries me.”

“And who is Robert Veil?”

Vernon picked up his cigar, puffed, and leaned back against the chair. “He was a field commander, first with the Marines, then in black ops with the CIA.” Vernon shook his head with a look of admiration. “I bet the boys would sure like to have him on the team again now that we’re back in the black bag covert business. Now he’s a hired gun, connected, and very good at what he does.”

Edward smirked. “I’m glad you’re impressed. What’s the problem? Kill him.”

Vernon leaned forward again, eyes somber. “If Charlie’s told him our little secret and we miss this guy, it’ll confirm whatever he’s been told. Veil will know it was us.”

Edward stood. He suppressed his emotions, but the news shook him. “If this Robert Veil is the man you think he is, then he may already know it’s us.” He stroked his chin. “Put somebody good on it, and I mean deadly. I don’t want my family fucked out of five generations of progress by a homeless nobody and a second rate bounty hunter.”

“Oh, I’m afraid he’s more than second rate. Much more.” Vernon opened a dark green attaché case and removed a large brown envelope. He handed it to Edward.

“I put together a file detailing this guy. The Justice Department has him on contract at this very moment. He’s helping track down that serial killer, the one who’s been killing judges. Vernon finished his wine, put out his cigar, and stood. “President Kennedy’s ghost just won’t die, will it?”

Edward looked at the envelope, forced a smile, then gathered his

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Fedora and black cashmere from the coat rack. "No, seems he won't," he said. "Keep me informed."

"We can't kill him right away," added Vernon. "We need the evidence first. If Charlie's talking maybe he'll bring it out in the open or lead us to it."

"Where's Charlie now?" Edward asked, his calm façade intact.

Vernon lowered his gaze. "We lost him. Veil and his partner left their office and we searched the entire building. He disappeared."

Edward felt alarm, but held it together. "Vernon, wrap this up quickly. I want my son to announce his Presidential bid as soon as possible. I don't want this hanging in the air."

Edward abruptly left the room and bounded down the winding marble stairs. His chauffeur, Lawrence, a stocky, well-built Englishman, barely made it around to open the door.

Inside, Edward poured himself a glass of B&B. "Take the long route home," he ordered.

"Yes, Mr. Rothschild. Will we be making any other stops?"

"No. Just take your time."

Edward raised the partition and downed the sixty-year-old liqueur in one gulp. His heart pounded as though he were a burglar about to be discovered. Charlie lurked like a phantom from his past. A haunting figure—a nightmare. Vernon and his men watched Charlie for years. Edward even hired his own teams from time to time, to make sure Charlie stayed buried on the streets. Over the years, he let his guard down, convinced the assassin's self-imposed life sentence wore away any possibility of resolve.

The black Lincoln glided onto Pennsylvania Avenue an hour before sunrise. They passed the White House and Edward rolled down his window. Numbing, freezing air rushed in. He stared at the white marble. He needed Charleston to assume the Presidency. His plans depended on it.

His nostrils flared. The Presidential residence disappeared. Edward raised the window and leaned back. His grip tightened around the crystal glass, crushing it. Blood seeped from his rigid fist and he dropped the pieces on the floor. He grabbed a white towel from the bar, wrapped it

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around his hand, then relaxed against the seat and closed his eyes.

His father and grandfather, members of Wall Street's elite, commanded holdings in the railroads, banking and finance, and military equipment. Edward joined the company after finishing graduate school at Cambridge.

John F. Kennedy assumed the Presidency. Not exactly a banner day for the Rothschilds. Most of their political contributions and influence went to Richard Nixon, his father's favorite. The loss hurt, but they recovered just in time to ride the military bandwagon to Vietnam, where they stood to make billions from government contracts. Relationships long nurtured by his grandfather when the CIA was called the Office of Strategic Services, the OSS, kept them square in the old boy network.

Then the President decided to pull out of the war before it really got started. The old boys protested, and Kennedy promised to break the CIA into pieces. The threat spawned whispers, and ultimately ended his life.

It wasn't difficult. Edward's grandfather recruited him to manage a large portion of the details, to be a project manager of sorts. A word here, a suggestion there, and the pieces slid into place. The Kennedy clan counted many friends, but more enemies. Robert Kennedy, the President's brother and U.S. Attorney General, angered mob boss Sam Giancana. Add to the mix a group of pissed off Cuban rebels, still stinging from a failed Bay of Pigs invasion, and it didn't take much to get the ball rolling.

Twenty assassins were considered; two were hired. Lee Harvey Oswald got the nod as patsy, with a team of Cuban guerrillas led by a CIA field officer, actually doing the shooting from the sixth floor of the book depository.

Vernon, a young pup on the intelligence fast track, introduced Edward to Charlie Ivory, a *wet boy*, who killed at the behest of the CIA. At the time, Charlie worked as a freelancer, a hired gun. His reputation as one of the world's best impressed the Rothschilds. A no miss killer with no allegiances, no family, no friends. Edward considered it one million dollars well spent.

With the time and place chosen, a plan agreed upon, they combed through the final details and set everything in motion.

Then, against Edward's advice, the old boys, his father and

Veil

grandfather included, decided not to take any chances, and gave orders for Charlie to take the fall with Oswald. They missed. Charlie got away, disappearing with crucial pieces of evidence.

The assassin surfaced, empty-handed, and despite their best efforts, they were unable to find the pictures, documents, bullet fragments, and other items Charlie had in his possession. Information that could link them all to the assassination.

Edward smelled a payoff. It didn't come. Charlie said he wanted to be left alone. That as long as they kept their distance, the evidence wouldn't surface. Insincere assurances were given. Edward ordered an around the clock tail on him—to no avail. They watched and waited. Charlie didn't so much as cough their way. Until now.

Twenty miles from his estate, Edward opened his eyes. He stretched and picked up the large brown envelope Vernon gave him. Reading it increased his anxiety. *I can't leave this to Vernon to handle alone. If things go wrong, everything will come tumbling down.*

He slid the wooden panel on the car door aside and pulled out a hidden satellite phone. An accessory Vernon suggested. He dialed, examining his *blue blood* soaked hand. *I'm not about to let a dead President sully what I've worked so hard to build.*

The phone clicked several times, routing the call through Paris, Johannesburg, or some other part of the world, then rang. Someone on the other end picked up.

"Hello, this is Edward," he said. "I have a problem."

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5

Daybreak crested the fringe of Washington's skyline and hung on the horizon like a luminous vapor. Charlie stooped low in the brush and waited. Another fifteen minutes and Tim Billingsly, the cemetery's nightshift guard, would finish his rounds and not return for an hour. It would give him just enough time.

Tim disappeared down an endless black road. Charlie picked up his baggage and trotted toward the mausoleum. The icy wind made his bones ache, his knees creak.

Except for three small wooden pews, the mausoleum lay empty. Charlie crept across the white marble floor as though he might wake the dead. Names on the crypts read like a guest list of old friends he'd come to know well. Martha Parker 1933-1986, Loving Mother; Percy Wintergreen 1913-1991, Husband and Father. *So many lives, so many secrets.* He wondered who would mourn for him. *First, unfinished business.*

Each wall of the monument held row upon row of tombs, stacked six high and numbered at the bottom for easy identification. Dim sunlight swelled through the skylights providing just enough illumination for him to find his way. He stopped at row 61D-66D.

Veil

Charlie put the duffle bag and blanket wrapped rifle on the floor next to crypt 61D, pulled a pair of pliers and a screwdriver from his urine stained overcoat, and loosened four screws that held the tomb's marble panel in place. A decorative brass ball no bigger than a marble covered each bolt. Careful not to damage them, he removed each one and pulled a long steel rod from each corner of the slab.

The marble square came easily loose and he gently lowered it to the floor, exposing a dark wooden casket with tarnished gold fittings. He pulled it out halfway and leaned it down to the floor.

An uncontrollable ache hit his lungs. Charlie coughed violently, covering his mouth with a blood-soaked handkerchief. He clutched his chest and hacked, careful not to stain the floor. A rancid odor filled the air. His chest rattled, his eyes watered. He leaned on one of the tombs for balance. It took a few moments for him to regain his strength. Death whispered. *Come.* "Not today," Charlie answered, and quickly went back to work.

Charlie opened the casket, put the duffle bag and rifle inside, locked it, then quickly slid it back into place. The last bolt fastened the slab tight. The door cracked open. *Tim.*

A thousand needles pierced Charlie's lungs and he struggled to suppress the bloody burst. Tim turned down his row, Charlie dipped down the next, and headed for the back door.

"Hey you! Stop!"

Charlie hit the door holding his chest, blood running from his nose. He disappeared into the brush on the south side of the cemetery, just behind the mausoleum.

He struggled over a short metal fence and vanished down a path he'd traveled for four decades. Charlie looked back. Nothing. He fell to his knees and coughed so hard he almost passed out in the grass. Tears filled his eyes. He shut them tight, and saw President Kennedy's head explode, over and over.

The attack passed. He went on his way. The evidence safe once again.

Reginald Cook

6

Robert and Thorne searched their building and the immediate area around it. Nothing. They fanned out separately covering a half-mile radius, but Charlie was a ghost. Robert grabbed a couple of winks on the couch in his office then headed for Skid Row and the homeless area across town. Thorne opted to look for the Bear.

By noon, most of Washington shook off the Monday morning blues and charged full steam into another week of the important and unimportant. Only a trace of the previous night's cold remained, and a clear cloudless sky teased the first hint of spring.

Robert's shark gray Mustang muscled in and out of the traffic. At Constitution Avenue he waited for ten minutes as two busloads of British children crossed the street to the Capitol Building, cameras flashing, fingers pointing. Ten minutes later, the pristine buildings, Hugo Boss suits, leather briefcases, and Rolex watches, disappeared; giving way to the bastard child half of the city's strange dichotomy.

Homeless men, women, and children lined the streets less than a few miles from the White House. Robert pulled past the aftermath of failed lives and empty promises, unconcerned. *Sad, but not my problem.*

He parked in a narrow alley between two dingy brick buildings and negotiated with six grime-covered, half toothless men eager to insure his car's safety. Minutes later, he methodically navigated through an endless

Veil

maze of cardboard condos and rusted-out shopping carts, carefully searching each weathered face, describing Charlie to anyone lucid enough to understand.

“Help me get something to eat?”

“Brother, can you spare a quarter?”

“Mister, I’m hungry and can’t find my mommy.”

“My wallet was stolen and I need carfare to get home.”

“I ain’t gonna lie. I need some money for beer. Will you help?”

Panhandlers, drug addicts, the mentally ill. Some slept under staircases, between garbage dumpsters, and in open fields, their bodies wrapped in large sheets of plastic or copies of the Washington Post. Soup and bread lines stretched for blocks, like concert-goers waiting for tickets to see Springsteen or Madonna. Kids “dumpster dived” for food or things they could trade, and an elderly black man in dark glasses played a plastic flute for spare change.

“No, I ain’t never seen nobody like that,” a bag lady stammered, swigging beer from a can in a brown paper sack. “If ya gots a few dollars I’ll be careful to watch out tho.”

Robert smiled, declined her offer, and moved through a small park in the middle of the area. Crowded with destitute men, prostitutes, johns, drug dealers, addicts, and a few neglected children, used needles and crack vials peppered the grass like common pieces of trash, picked up, examined, and reused at random. Urine and decay fermented the air. Sirens competed for attention with rap music pounding from a boom box. At picnic tables, some played chess and dominos, while onlookers drank wine, stared blankly into space, or just talked to themselves.

Ninety minutes later, Robert got the feeling even if they did know, no one here would tell him where to find Charlie. An outsider, he could expect little more than silence. He finished up in the park and headed back for his car.

“Hey you, Mister,” a cement mixer voice shouted.

A haggard man in a wheelchair waved to him from a half a block away, rolling in his direction. Legless from the knees down, his clothing looked so worn, it was not readily obvious he wore Marine dress blues. Three tarnished medals dangled from his chest.

“Popeye Michaels at your service,” he said, pushing long salt-and-

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pepper hair out of his eyes. "People around here call me Popeye."

Robert introduced himself and shook Popeye's hand. He recognized one of the ornaments clinging to the old vet's chest. The Congressional Medal of Honor.

Popeye wrapped his hair in a ponytail, securing it with a rubber band. "I understand you're looking for someone, and thought I could be of help."

"Can you?" asked Robert.

"That depends on who you are," answered Popeye. "Folks around here ain't big on strangers, especially ones carrying that kind of heat." He pointed to the bulges under Robert's arms. "Looks like nine's from here."

Robert smiled and knelt down. The stench of cheap gin on Popeye was strong, but better than most of what he'd smelled that day.

"Yes, they're nines," said Robert. "Look, Charlie's a friend, and I need to speak to him. It's urgent."

Popeye flashed a mouthful of deep yellow teeth and black cavities. "Everything's urgent around here, Mr. Veil," he said. "And I'm sorry, but Charlie ain't got no friends."

He spun the chair around and rolled away, forcing several cursing people off the sidewalk.

Robert caught up and jumped in his path.

"You idiot," Popeye snapped. "You could've killed me."

Robert took a deep breath. "Listen, Charlie came to my office last night looking for help, then disappeared. No, we're not friends, but it's very important that I see him right away."

Popeye's eyes narrowed into slits. He leaned his head to one side. "Okay," he said, after a long minute. "Follow me into my office."

He wheeled up the street, whirled into an alley, and stopped. "Exactly what do you want with ole Charlie?"

Exasperated, Robert bit his tongue. "Like I said, he came to me with a problem, then disappeared."

"What kind of problem?"

"I can't say. It's confidential."

"Good," said Popeye, a smile on his face. "I like that. You sure you're not a cop?"

Veil

"No, I'm not," said Robert. "Let's just say I'm a freelancer."

Popeye sucked air through one of his cavities then took a deep breath. "I don't exactly know where he is," he said. "Charlie's always moving around, coming and going. And around here, everybody minds their own business."

Robert pulled out his wallet, a business card and two twenty's, and handed them to Popeye.

"I know you probably don't like charity," said Robert.

"Whatever gave you that impression?" answered Popeye, snatching the money from his hand.

Robert laughed. "If you hear or see anything, hit a pay phone and call me."

Popeye pocketed the card and money. "I never said I didn't have any info for you. I just said I didn't know where Charlie was right now."

Robert raised an eyebrow.

"Go over to the Crossroads Rescue Mission on R Street NW. Ask for Patrick Miller. He'll be able to help you. Meanwhile I *will* keep an eye out."

Robert jumped out of the way as Popeye hurled out of the alley. He called out to the crippled vet, who turned his chair.

"Was Charlie sick or injured that you know of?"

"Down here, we're all sick and injured," said Popeye. He turned, and rolled away.

Robert headed for the Crossroad's Rescue Mission. He vaguely recalled the mission's late night commercials soliciting used vehicles and contributions. From R Street he could see the building from nearly three blocks away. Its loud lime paint and huge green and white florescent sign "Crossroads Rescue Mission" stood out even in the daylight, an oasis in a trash-heaped desert.

Something sparked Robert's senses. A wiry, weasel-looking man stared at him from across the street. He'd been stared at all afternoon, but this guy stood out. When Robert's eyes fixed on him, the man abruptly looked away. His clothes were tattered, but his shoes barely worn. His face looked pampered, not weather-beaten and heavily lined like most people in the area.

Robert stepped into the street, but a fast-moving Federal Express

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truck cut him off, splashing mud and slush on his pants and shoes. The truck passed. The weasel was gone.

Except for its bright hue and long food lines, Crossroads appeared more like a four-story office building than a shelter. Unlike the rest of the area, nobody slept on the sidewalk out front or in its alleys. The space around it—clean, immaculate. Not a candy wrapper or empty cigarette pack in sight.

A non-descript truck with a trailer the size of a forty-foot container pulled up, and a mangy, but orderly crowd lined up at the trailer's back door. A group Robert pegged as volunteers, about college age, wearing green polo shirts that matched the building, streamed out of Crossroads, all smiles and waves, greeting some of those in line by name. Brown paper grocery bags, filled with canned food and produce were passed out, and Robert wondered if even so large a trailer could feed such a long line of people.

Inside, the mission buzzed, as more lime green shirts scampered about well-lit hallways like leprechauns, discussing, laughing and pointing people in all directions. Robert noted a room filled with computers, a well-stocked library, and a bustling free clinic. Bronze plaques lined the walls naming benefactors, from Microsoft and McDonald's, to Barbra Streisand and Kirk Douglas.

At the end of the hallway, at the back of the building, a large cafeteria fed row after row of hungry mouths—chomping, chewing, and drinking. It seemed the perfect place for Charlie to hide. One face looked like another. Everyone minded their own business. Secrets remained buried, buried alive.

Robert asked where he could find Patrick Miller. A gregarious Bahamian woman wearing a white lab coat and stethoscope directed him to the fourth floor. The top level, a lively sea of cubicles greeted him; as men and women, some in suits, but most in Crossroads signature polos, hurried about with purpose and determination. He heard someone on the phone ordering supplies, while others solicited donations.

“Now there’s a look I’ve seen before,” a smooth baritone voice said behind him.

Robert accepted the outstretched hand of a tall jovial fellow who introduced himself as Executive Director of Crossroads, Patrick Miller.

Veil

“Most people are a little surprised when they see the operation at work,” he said, a broad smile pinned to his face. “We don’t all stand on corners panhandling, Mr. Veil.”

“You already know who I am?”

“Don’t look so surprised. Most people don’t have cell phones or e-mail out here on these streets, but our system is almost as fast.”

“Then you know why I’ve come.”

“Yes,” said Miller, dropping his voice. “You’re looking for Charlie Ivory.” He looked around, then signaled Robert to follow him.

What Miller’s office lacked in size, it made up for in substance. Plaques, commendations, and celebrity pictures lined the walls like a hall of fame, including a picture of Miller playing golf with the President, William Claymore, at Pebble Beach. Robert took a closer look.

“Great President,” said Miller, “*Not* a very good golfer. I’m going to miss him when he’s gone. He made me look good out on the links. You play?”

“It’s more like golf plays me,” said Robert, wincing at the thought of his last game.

Miller offered Robert a seat and some jellybeans from a large jar on his desk, next to a copy of a popular novel about a young wizard growing up into his own.

“I’d tell you that book was my ten year old daughter’s, but I’d be lying,” said Miller, popping a few jellybeans into his mouth, leaning back in his chair. “So, what does a gun toting bounty hunter want with a beat-up homeless veteran?”

Robert made a mental note. *So, Charlie was in the military.* “He’s not in any trouble with me. In fact, he came to me for help, then vanished.” He gave Miller a few more details than he’d given Popeye. “I need to follow-up and make sure he’s okay.”

Miller stroked his chin, grabbed a few more jellybeans, and shook them like dice.

“It’s kind of strange,” he said, as if thinking to himself. “Charlie’s been coming and going for as long as I can remember, and I’ve been working on these streets for almost twenty-five years. Hell, I spent two or three sleeping on them myself. But as long as I can remember, I’ve never known Charlie to reach out to anyone.”

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Miller's face colored with uncertainty. Robert looked him directly in the eye. "You don't know me from Adam," he said. "But trust me. Charlie needs my help." He grabbed a fistful of jellybeans from the jar and tossed a couple in his mouth. *I haven't eaten all day.*

Miller hesitated, tapping his desk. "He stays here sometimes," he finally said. "We haven't seen him in awhile. That's not unusual for most of the people around here. We only allow them a bed for forty-seven consecutive nights before they have to move on, sixty if it's a woman with a child. If they get lucky, they may get back in after three or four months. So they come and go."

"What about Charlie?" asked Robert, finishing the jellybeans and grabbing a few more.

"Oh he's as regular as clockwork. He shows up every spring and stays as long as we let him, then moves on. Sometimes we see him twice a year. From time to time he even helps out around here."

"Helps out?" asked Robert.

Miller's eyes flashed upward, narrowed, then relaxed. A sign of truth. "Yes," he continued. "Charlie's quite a unique fellow. We get all kinds in here, stockbrokers, government workers, business executives, even one or two White House aides over the years. Talented people who for some reason end up on the street burned out."

Robert wanted more jellybeans but didn't want to be greedy. "And Charlie?"

"That's what makes him so different," said Miller. "Most of the time he's very sharp, clear headed, even shows signs of extreme intelligence. He's never told anyone what he did for a living, but I imagine he was good at it."

Yeah, Robert thought. Real good. "Are there any other places, other missions, where he may have stayed occasionally?"

"None that I know about, but like I said, people come and go. Some make their way across country and back, year after year. There's no telling where Charlie is when he's not here."

Robert grabbed more jellybeans anyway. "Did he have any friends or groups he ran with?"

"Now that was one thing strange about Charlie," said Miller. "Most people out here run in groups, or at least have a partner who'll have their

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back in a pinch. Know what I mean?"

Robert thought of Thorne. "I know exactly what you mean."

"Charlie kept to himself," continued Miller. "He'd help out, but never seemed to get close enough to anybody to say he had any real friends. Miller smiled and popped a jellybean in his mouth. "Then again, I don't know everything."

The phone rang and after the call, Miller asked Robert to join him down in the kitchen where the cooks and kitchen staff, all dressed in white, moved at a pace just short of frantic. From what Robert could surmise, they were getting ready for the dinner rush.

Miller glided through the kitchen tasting food from several pots, smiling, and patting workers on the back. The rich smell of beef stew, baked bread, and apple pie made Robert's stomach rumble violently. Miller offered him a small bowl of stew, which he scarfed down while the director dealt with questions from the staff. The stew was surprisingly good.

Miller looked around the kitchen and smiled. "This is what it's all about," he said. "We serve over a thousand meals a day. When you're out on the street, a decent meal is like gold."

Robert didn't share Miller's enthusiasm for housing and feeding the poor. For him it was the law of the jungle. Eat, or be eaten. "Do you know if Charlie was injured or sick?" he asked, as a whiff of hot bread teased with him. He recounted to Miller an edited version of the scene at his office. The overturned chair. The drops of blood.

Miller's face flashed concerned. "I'm afraid..." Robert's cell phone interrupted. Thorne. The Bear. More dead bodies. Judge Jonathan Weiss and his wife.

Robert hung up cursing loudly. Miller and the others froze. He apologized, but didn't mean it. He pulled out a business card and a small roll of bills, and handed them to Miller. "I have to run. If you come up with anything, or see Charlie, call me right away."

"You don't have to oil me," said Miller. "Like I said, no one has seen Charlie in awhile. He stretched out his hand to give back the money.

"Keep it anyway," said Robert, heading for the exit.

"Remember, Mr. Veil, even the unforgivable deserve forgiveness."

Robert glanced back. *So he does know.*

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He hustled outside and noticed the same weasel-looking man he saw earlier standing across the street from the mission sipping from a bottle and talking to himself. Pressed for time, Robert kept going, reached his car, then drove back by the mission. The weasel stood directly in front looking lost. Miller came outside, put his arms around the derelict and gave him a big bear hug. From his rear view mirror, Robert saw Miller lead the man inside. *Jumped the gun. Just another lazy drunk looking for a free ride.*

Robert hit Pennsylvania Avenue and headed west toward Georgetown. He shifted gears away from the Kennedy case and Charlie, and focused on the matter at hand. The Bear killed again.

Ten minutes later, he pulled through a swarm of media trucks, reporters, and nosey bystanders, past a young policeman who examined his temporary Justice Department credentials and waved him through. Police black and whites, the coroner's wagon, and a crowd of unmarked government vehicles sat in every available space. He spotted Thorne's Rover parked on a lawn next to a gated swimming pool and managed to squeeze in beside it.

Detectives and agents, their game faces on, scoured every inch of the area, some with dogs. Each townhouse loomed large and impressive, sand-colored in rows of five, about four thousand square feet each. Eight-foot English-style lamps, the kind one might expect to see in a Jack the Ripper movie, stood sentry in front of each unit. The judge's lamplight, shattered, posed for the police photographer snapping pictures from multiple angles. The officers and agents barely acknowledged Robert's presence.

Thorne appeared at the front door, a digital video camera in one hand, a notebook in the other, and quickly walked his way.

"It's him for sure," she said. "He broke their necks. Mrs. Weiss was raped."

Broken neck. A message. *Fuck you guys. You're vulnerable.*

"Did you get everything on film?" Robert asked. "We can load it in the computer. Maybe find something these guys missed."

"That's a problem."

"What kind of a problem?"

Veil

"The guys are acting a little stranger than usual," said Thorne. "I was told not to take any pictures and they've kept me out of the loop. They won't even let me get a close look at the bodies. All my information has come second hand."

"But we've been given complete access," said Robert, grinding his teeth.

"Tell it to them sweetheart," said Thorne, pointing to the agents working the grounds.

Robert stormed inside the townhouse. Agent Sams appeared, arms across his chest, a smirk on his face. "Sorry Mr. Veil, we've been ordered to keep the place clear. You and the Mrs. will have to wait outside."

Thorne stepped forward. Robert held her back. The officers and agents working the crime scene stopped to look.

"Who issued that order Agent Sams? You?" asked Robert.

"Like I told you and this android you call a woman..."

Throne slapped the words back down his throat. Even the agents watching winced.

"Didn't your mother teach you manners?" snapped Thorne, staring him straight in the eye. Agent Sams stood with his mouth open, stunned.

"I'd pay close attention to her," said Robert. "Next time she may not be so nice."

Furious, Agent Sams stepped forward. "I could arrest you for that," he bellowed.

Robert backed away. "Go ahead," he said. "I haven't seen her bend up a fool like you in quite some time."

Thorne smiled and blew the agent a kiss. "Come on sugga. Let mommy teach you how to dance."

Agent Sams took another step.

"Agent Sams, stand down," a stern female voice ordered.

The agent abruptly fell back.

A leggy blonde in a plain charcoal gray business suit approached them. Before she spoke, Robert knew she was FBI or Secret Service brass. Definitely not CIA. *Company* agents would have let Thorne and Sams fight, then sort it out later.

"I'm Special Agent in Charge Marilyn London, FBI. This morning

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the Bureau assigned me as lead on this case, and told me to make sure you were given full access.”

Agent Sams sneered and stormed outside.

“Sorry about the inconvenience,” Agent London continued. “You know how it is when you piss in somebody’s pond.”

“We’re invited to this party,” said Robert, shaking her hand. Her grip impressed him. “This is no way to treat a guest.”

Agent London smiled, extended her hand to Thorne, and was left hanging.

“I’ll get started Robert,” said Thorne, eyeing the agent suspiciously.

Agent London stood there, mouth agape.

“She’s not one to insult,” said Robert, a sarcastic smile on his face.

“Well, maybe she should get laid,” Marilyn responded, abruptly walking toward the den. Robert eyed her figure. *Nice.* He shook off the trance. *I’m the one who needs to get laid.*

The den, as Robert expected, housed columns of shelves, floor to ceiling, lined with walls of books. Loose papers cluttered a round oak table and the judge’s desk. Judge Weiss, clad in a half buttoned tropical shirt and khaki pants, lay dead on the floor behind the desk next to a computer workstation, his head twisted grotesquely to one side, eyes open. Photographers snapped pictures, while Thorne moved about the carnage with her camcorder.

“As you can see, His Honor and Mrs. Weiss were on their way out of town,” said Agent London. “We found two tickets to the Cayman Islands on the dresser upstairs.”

“Anything missing?” asked Robert

“Credit cards and ten thousand in cash were found untouched on the dresser next to the tickets. We checked the judge’s bank records and it’s the exact amount he withdrew on Friday. This is definitely our guy. Besides, he left us a little gift on the bed next to Mrs. Weiss. I’ll show it to you later.”

Robert removed a pair of latex gloves from his pocket and knelt down, gently lifting the judge’s head off the floor. It felt loose, like a tetherball on a string. The esophagus, crushed. He lowered the head back down on the emerald green carpet; the crunch of vertebrae vibrating in his hand. Deep black and blue bruises covered the throat. The eyes,

Veil

open, blank and glassy, glistened like a couple of well-matched marbles. Robert detected the scent of cologne, Calvin Klein's Obsession for Men.

The half buttoned shirt exposed a small amount of salt and pepper hair on the judge's chest. Robert opened it all the way. An Air Force skull and crossbones tattoo, surrounded by the words "Mess with the best, die like the rest. AF 463 Vietnam" sat cold. One navy blue deck shoe clung to the judges' right foot; Robert saw the other underneath the desk. A diamond encrusted wedding band shimmered on the magistrate's finger. Out of place in such a gruesome scene.

Thorne knelt down to get a better shot of the bruises.

"The judge tried to defend himself," said Marilyn. "In addition to the broken nose, bruised face and neck, you'll also notice bruising and swelling around the knuckles."

"Well, he certainly didn't go as easy as the others," said Robert. "I bet he caught our Russian friend off guard, but never had a chance."

Marilyn agreed and stepped over to the gun cabinet. "He picked the lock and came in through the back door. We believe things started upstairs."

"What about the alarm?" asked Robert, a smirk on his face. He knew the system the judge installed to be grossly inferior. He'd inspected it himself only a few weeks earlier and suggested an upgrade.

"He beat it without a hitch," said Marilyn, smiling as though she could read his mind. "No wonder. I think he bought it at Toys R Us."

Robert returned the smile then examined the gun cabinet. *Impressive.* He counted fifteen guns. Several immediately caught his eye, including a very rare Model 1803 U.S. Flintlock rifle dating back to the Lewis and Clark Expedition, an almost extinct Israeli Mauser, and a Colt Z 40 semi-automatic, highly prized by collectors and nearly impossible to find. Robert shook his head in sad disgust.

"Yeah, I know," said Marilyn. "All this firepower didn't do the poor bastard a bit of good."

"Anything missing?"

"No, nothing was taken," said Marilyn. "We found the gun inventory in his desk. Every weapon is accounted for."

Robert smiled. He liked Agent London. Beautiful and smart, she appeared to be tough. None of which hurt if a woman wanted to succeed

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in a man's world.

"Looks like Mrs. Weiss walked in on them, dropped her packages and ran upstairs," she continued. "Obviously the Bear wasn't expecting her."

Robert examined the packages. Neiman-Marcus, Saks Fifth Avenue, Prada, spread randomly in front of the study's door. "Well, let's have a look at the Mrs.," he said, standing.

Robert stole another look at Agent London's firm hips and sultry walk as they climbed the soft-carpeted stairs. Thorne shook her head. Her eyes saying keep it zipped up big boy. His partner wasn't the jealous type, but somehow Agent London had landed on Thorne's bad side. A barren place where one stayed for an eternity.

The master bedroom took up most of the second floor. A large marble fireplace dominated, and two inviting, soft leather recliners faced it. Impressive artwork adorned the walls, and the oversized custom bed, the largest he'd ever seen, made Robert wonder just how much a federal judge earned.

Sprawled across the flowered peach comforter, face down, naked, lay Mrs. Weiss. Her neck, unceremoniously twisted, looked more like coiled rope than a human appendage. Her left eye bulged. Her right, swollen shut. Horror plastered her face, and blood trickled down each side of her mouth.

Robert moved closer.

A red puddle soaked the bedding below her rectum. Her left arm a pretzel, it dangled off one side of the bed. A dazzling marquis diamond ring sparkled on her finger.

"He chased her upstairs and kicked in the door," said Marilyn, pointing to the bare hinges. "No flesh under her nails or bruises on her torso. Except for the eyes there're no other marks on her face."

"She gave in to him," said Robert, in a whisper.

"We believe so," said Marilyn. "She tried to cooperate to save her life, but the bastard killed her anyway."

"No witnesses," said Robert. "It's a Russian Mafia rule. Men, women, children and the family dog, it doesn't matter. If they're at the scene when a hit takes place, they die."

Robert examined the body carefully and gave the bedroom one last look. Thorne recorded as many details as possible. After writing down a

Veil

few notes of his own, he removed his gloves and returned them to his pocket. “You mentioned he left a little gift,” said Robert. “Let’s have a look at it.”

Marilyn asked all of the other agents and forensic team to leave. When the room cleared she walked over to Robert, arms across her chest.

“You know, most of the agents aren’t too keen on having you and your partner butt in,” she said.

“No shit Sherlock. We went over all this downstairs,” said Robert, more than a little impatient. “And who cares anyway. Like I said before, they didn’t hire us, the head brass did.”

“I know, I know,” said Marilyn. “You have full access. It’s just that some question your effectiveness. After all, the entire local and Federal law enforcement system is on the case.”

“Yet Judge Weiss and his wife are dead,” said Thorne. “I’m sure they appreciate the government’s effort.”

Marilyn looked her up and down. Then, what started out as a look of contempt, morphed into an insincere, sly smile. She pulled a small plastic bag from her pocket and handed it to Robert, her gaze never leaving Thorne’s.

Robert ignored the two and moved to the window for light.

America:

You have spent years causing pain and suffering all over the world, for no other reason than your own personal gain and greed. I watched your hypocrisy in the Middle East during what you called Iraqi Freedom, and I’ve burned with hatred as you’ve used and abused my brothers and sisters in Russia, pretending to offer support and a helping hand while all the time spying and plotting behind our backs. Men, women, and children continue to die because of your treachery and dishonesty. Your system of justice is a prime example of your bad faith and pretense of piety and virtue. Now you will know pain and suffering, and I will continue to deliver blows to your system of justice, unto death.

The Bear

“We’ll need a copy of this as soon as possible,” said Robert, handing back the letter.

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“I’ll see what I can do,” she said. “I can’t make any promises.”

“Exactly what’s the problem?” Thorne demanded.

“Don’t get your panties in a bunch. I’m just the messenger,” Marilyn snapped.

Thorne walked forward, Marilyn didn’t back down. Robert jockeyed between them and turned toward his partner. “Thorne, wait for me outside.”

Thorne hesitated, then moved back. “We don’t need this Robert, and I won’t take it. Not off her, or any of these other sorry ass stuffed shirts.”

“I know,” he said. “I know. Wait for me outside. I’ll handle it.”

Thorne pierced Marilyn with her eyes, and left the room.

Agent London seemed amused. “Next time,” she mouthed in Thorne’s direction.

“That was out of line, Agent London,” said Robert.

“She had it coming, and feel free to call me Marilyn. We’re going to be working together so let’s kill the formalities. At least when it’s just the two of us.”

She walked over to Robert and stood chest to chest, a playful, inquisitive look on her face. “Exactly *who* at the Justice Department is backing you?”

“That’s classified,” said Robert. “Let’s just say you’ll probably never reach that high.”

“Oh you’d be surprised,” said Marilyn. “You’re not the only one who likes this pretty blonde ass of mine.”

Robert walked toward the door.

“Mr. Veil,” Marilyn called. “If you can stop this guy, fine. If not, then you’re wasting time and money.”

Robert turned. “You can call me Robert, and we’ve never missed yet. Furthermore, this is the sixth judge the Bear’s killed and you haven’t got a clue. So I think you can use all the help you can get.”

Robert started out of the bedroom, then stopped. “And next time you fuck with Thorne, I won’t stop her. Trust me, it’ll be the last person you fuck with for a long, long time.”

“Stop, you’re making me all weepy and nervous.”

Robert smiled and left the room. *Lady, you have no idea.*

Veil

Outside, Thorne leaned against her SUV, smiling. "I wasn't going to kill the cow, just rough her up a bit."

"Yeah right," said Robert. "Remember, I've seen you get rough."

Thorne laughed.

Robert surveyed the grounds once, making sure they didn't miss anything. "So what'd you think?"

"He had it staked out ahead of time just like the others. Knew exactly when to strike and expected the judge to be alone. His wife bought it by accident."

"That means he's definitely not choosing them at random," said Robert. "He has a plan and we don't have a clue. Let's get an updated list of judges and note any who've turned down protection. We better review your tape. Maybe there's something we've missed."

Robert's cell phone rang. He checked the caller ID but didn't recognize the number and ignored it. A few seconds later, it rang again, same number. This time he answered.

"Mr. Veil, this is the D.C. police department calling from the Crossroads Rescue Mission."

"Yes?"

"It's about Patrick Miller. He's dead."

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7

Mommy, can we go to the movies, or the arcade or something?"

"No Jessica. We've already discussed it and the answer is still no."

Fiona Patrick felt bad confining her daughter to the yard. The weather finally shifted and the sun stayed out all day. Perfect, except for the federal agents watching her house.

"We suggest you and your daughter keep close to home, until the Bear is apprehended," they told her.

In all her years as a lawyer, prosecutor, public defender, and now, federal judge, she'd never been frightened or worried, despite dealings with some of the worst murdering gutter-scum in the world. Drug dealers, bank robbers, child molesters, and gangsters stood before her bench, sometimes promising death, and she never once so much as flinched. However, she didn't have Jessica for most of those years, and her husband John stood by her. Now, with him gone, life demanded she handle things differently.

"Honey, why don't we go inside and play video games? How about a little Play Station?"

"No! I want to go out!" Jessica shouted, her bottom lip poking out. "We haven't been anywhere for almost a week!"

"I know honey and I'm sorry. It won't be for much longer." *I hope.*

"This is no way to treat an eight year old. I'm almost an adult."

Veil

Jessica stomped her foot like a horse counting out numbers at a carnival sideshow, arms folded defiantly across her chest.

“Well, I don’t know about that, but tell you what. If you’re good and change that attitude, we’ll go out to dinner later, maybe even the arcade or the movies. In fact, let’s do it.”

Fiona kissed Jessica on the cheek. Normally she’d punish her for such an outrageous outburst, but *she* was a little stir crazy herself. Getting out would give them both a break, and they were going no matter what the *federal stiffness* said. She didn’t like living in fear.

Tonight we’re going to have a normal night out, I don’t care what the Secret Service says.

“Okay mom,” said Jessica, a look of great satisfaction on her face. “Deal!” Jessica ran off into the yard, jumped on her bike, and sped away—her lips spitting motorcycle bursts.

“Be careful honey, it’s still a little slippery out,” Fiona shouted. Jessica disappeared without a word.

Several trucks filled with yard workers and equipment pulled through the gates. With spring finally peeking through, she thought it a good idea to have her flower gardens tilled. *Just the therapy I need. I’ll ask Fernando if we can plant the rose bush bulbs I flew in from South America.*

The crew unloaded the truck. Fiona took a cleansing breath. She loved the therapy of working in the garden. She and John often worked in it together, and he loved it as much as she did, maybe more. She smiled, remembering the night Jessica was conceived there, and ached for John even more.

She watched two Secret Service agents, on loan to her from the White House, speak to Fernando, her head caretaker. The agents finished, and the Guatemalan landscaper made his way to her, all smiles and waves.

“Good afternoon Fernando,” she said, smiling and shaking his hand. “I’m sorry about the inconvenience. I hope they won’t be in your way.”

“No ma’am, don’t be sorry. I read about the crazy man that’s killing judges and I worry about you. Don’t be sorry.”

“Thank you Fernando. Do you think it’s too early to turn the soil and plant rose bulbs?”

“Not too early for the soil, but we should wait a bit longer for the

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roses. I checked the ground and it's plenty soft enough to turn. I brought the big tiller just in case. We'll turn what we can, put the equipment in the shed, and come back tomorrow if the weather stays nice."

"Thank you Fernando. I'm going to start on the main flower garden in the back. If you can spare one of your men, can you send him around to assist me?"

"Don't worry Lady Patrick, I'll take care of everything. I'll send someone as soon as we get settled."

Fernando went back to the truck and Fiona's heart sank a little. Despite the momentary lift, being cooped up in the house depressed her.

She sulked over to a patio chair and plopped down, arms folded across her chest. A second later, she burst into laughter. *So, that's where she gets it.*

Most of the snow melted away in the afternoon sun, revealing more than a few dead flowers and weeds. Fiona picked up a garden hoe and chopped the withered foliage into pieces. She hummed as she worked. The music lifted her out of her funk. Then, as quickly as it came, her good mood floated into a dense depressing fog.

She mourned her close friends, Judge Weiss and his wife Emily. When the FBI informed her they'd been killed, she thought she'd pass out right in front of them.

She forced the agents to describe the murder scene, playing the hard and seasoned magistrate. The grizzly details turned her legs to rubber, like the day John died. Her breathing labored, she felt dizzy and sat down. It wasn't that she couldn't deal with the images, she'd seen and heard much worst. Judge Weiss and Emily, however, were her friends, and hearing how they'd been mangled and killed hit her harder than she anticipated.

Fiona wondered what kind of demented monster could do such a thing. As rapidly as the question ran through her mind, the horrifying answer stabbed at her. *The kind who could kill a little girl.* She stopped working and shut her eyes. Her teeth chattered. Her body trembled.

She shook it off, determined not to give in. A nervous resolve replaced her depression and ghoulish fear. Tomorrow she'd call her good friend and mentor, Barbara. *She'll know what I should do next.*

Veil

“Mommy come play with me. Push me on the swing,” Jessica bellowed from across the yard.

Fiona gathered herself, wiping the pools from her eyes. “Just a second baby,” she called back, her voice scratchy, weak.

Her focus cleared. A landscaper working on the other side of garden startled her. She didn’t hear him walk over, and hoped he hadn’t seen her tears.

The sandy-brown haired man with a push-broom mustache carefully chopped and cleared the soil like he’d done it since birth. Smiling, he seemed to enjoy the work.

“Excuse me,” said Fiona. “I didn’t hear you walk up. I hope I wasn’t rude.”

“No ma’am, not at all,” the gardener answered, in a thick Australian accent. “I saw you were occupied and didn’t want to disturb ya. I hope that was okay.”

Fiona removed her gloves, walked over, and introduced herself.

“Pleased to meet you mum,” he replied, his mustache rising as he smiled.

“Mommy, you said you’d push me,” interrupted Jessica, creeping up behind, and hugging her mother’s leg.

“I was about to, hun, but I wanted to say hello to this nice man first. Introduce yourself.”

Jessica marched over like a soldier, gave the man a brisk handshake, barking out name, rank, and serial number.

“My name’s McPhee,” he said. Stephan McPhee, but you can call me Mick.”

“You talk funny,” said Jessica, giggling, her hands playfully covering her mouth.

“Jessica,” said Fiona, embarrassed. “That’s not a nice thing to say.”

“I was only kidding,” answered Jessica, her hands on her hips.

“Not a problem mum,” said Mick, his smile a little wider. “Where I’m from, *you’re* the ones who talk funny.” All three burst into laughter.

“He’s funny,” said Jessica. “Now can we swing?”

The phone, hanging from Fiona’s hip like a sleeping bat, spit out an abrupt chime and Jessica’s face twisted. “I know what that means,” she said, stomping off toward the swing in a huff.

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Fiona excused herself. Helen, her assistant at the courthouse, needed a word.

“Why don’t I give you your privacy mum,” said Mick. “I’m not here to entertain, but I will go over and push the little tyke for a moment or two till you finish. That is, if you don’t mind?”

“Oh, how nice of you Mick, that would be very helpful. Thank you. She and I are going a little stir crazy around here. We’ve been cooped up for almost a week.”

“I read the paper mum,” Mick said, in a solemn, sympathetic tone. “I understand.”

Rejuvenated, Fiona thanked him again and headed for the house. She liked the Aussies, always friendly and full of life. Mick’s infectious smile and friendly manner made her feel a little better, a great temporary fix.

From inside the kitchen, she looked back. Jessica soared back and forth, swinging and laughing like crazy. It delighted Fiona to see Jessica having a little fun, even if short lived.

She plucked an apple from a bowl on the counter, took one last look at her daughter, polished the fruit on her blouse and disappeared into the living room. *Maybe we’ll eat at Al Tiramisu. Italian sounds good.*

Careful not to push too hard, the Australian sent Jessica high into the air. Stephan McPhee, a common name in Australia, wore several names. Some called him Andre; others called him “the Bear.” None of it mattered.

“This is a fine house you live in,” said Andre. “You must really like it here.”

“It’s okay,” said Jessica. “It was more fun around here when my daddy was alive.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Andre lied. “You must get lonely.”

“I do. I sit there in my room bored most of the time,” she said, pointing to her bedroom window”

Andre memorized her window. Useful information when he came back to kill them. He stopped the swing, walked in front of her and knelt down on one knee. “Well, I’m sure things will change for you soon,” said Andre. “I feel it in my heart. When you least expect it, good things

Veil

will happen and your life will change forever.”

“Do you really think so?” asked Jessica, excited.

Andre stared lovingly into her eyes. She was only a child. It didn’t matter. *No such thing as an innocent bystander. If you’re home when I come to kill your mother, you’ll die too.*

“I know so,” he said, giving her a big hug. “Now go inside and be nice to your mum. She’s going through a lot ya know. She needs your help.”

Jessica hopped off the swing, gave him another hug and took off toward the house. Andre watched her disappear inside, and quietly slipped around back to resume his surveillance, out of the agent’s line of sight.

It took him more than six weeks to sell himself to Fernando. He’d observed the crew clearing snow from Judge Patrick’s estate when he scouted the place three months earlier. The lingering cold weather made the South American immigrant hesitant to add to his crew. A sudden shift in temperature left the groundskeeper a few hands short. The Russian came home from the Weiss’ to a message on his answering machine welcoming him to Salvador Landscaping.

The glue on his phony mustache itched horribly. He shrugged it off. The oversized push-broom hair under his lip required strong adhesive, but did a considerable job of changing his face. Makeup and disguise, a talent he mastered working for the extinct KGB, fed his love of new looks and identities.

Andre scanned the sky. *It’ll be dark soon.* He focused hard, and put his photographic memory to work.

Floodlights, mounted atop ten-foot poles, were equipped with diamond-prism motion detectors. Recently developed, the detectors emitted dense waves of infrared light in a net-like maze across a designated area. The slightest movement within the five to fifteen hundred square foot web, and the lights would spit out blinding white beams, like the sun on an August afternoon.

Two feet above double French doors, a white wood-grained metal box blended in perfectly with the rest of the exterior. Two small, barely perceptible antennas protruded from the top. *A wireless transmitter for a silent alarm system.* He smiled, and made note he’d need a high-grade

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Motorola handheld scrambler, and would need to cut the hard-line backup system.

Fifty yards from the house, a ten-foot stone wall surrounded the estate. Andre moved deeper into the yard, pretending to work an area alongside the white-brick stairway near the main garden. Two large Rottweilers sprawled out behind a metal fence, lay motionless. He lightly tapped his shovel on the stairs. The dogs sprang to attention. Their black eyes locked in and followed his every move. *Magnificent creatures. Obviously well kept and trained.* He thought of poisoning them as they roamed about, however, in his experience, well-trained guard dogs didn't take food from strangers. *No problem. I'll shoot them from the wall with a silencer fitted rifle.*

He heard Judge Patrick laughing and playing with Jessica through an open window on the second floor. *How would the seven-year-old sound crying at her mother's funeral?* No. He would definitely save her the trouble and end her life too. *After all, what was life without a mother?*

"Excuse me sir, no one is allowed to move outside our view," the agent said, catching him off guard. "Please come to the front and let us know when you plan to work in another area."

"Sorry mate" he said. "Had no idea. Just trying to do me job."

Counting the number and types of windows on the side and back of the house, he tried to determine which window led to what room. *Idiots. Fooling them is so easy. In the old Soviet Union, I'd be halfway to Siberia by now.*

Andre needed more information. *No matter. I'll return with the crew tomorrow. Later during the week, I'll break inside for a trial run and learn what I need.*

An hour later, they were finished. Andre helped load the truck, thoughts of his brother, Vladimir, torturing his mind.

They pulled away from the estate and headed back to Salvador Landscaping's company compound. The truck's rhythmic movement lulled Andre into a twilight sleep. He dreamed of home. He saw his brother Vladimir walking past St. Basil's Cathedral in the Kremlin, tall and proud in his military uniform. He called out, but Vladimir didn't answer. He waved good-bye to Andre as American soldiers led him to a bullet-riddled wall. One of the soldiers, a General, blindfolded Vladimir,

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while the others lined up in front of him. The General stepped aside, raised one hand in the air, and slowly counted backwards from three. Andre screamed for them to stop, to take *his* life instead. He was too late.

The General's hand dropped and the rifle's retort violently ripped through the air. Andre screamed again and ran to his brother, helpless. Vladimir's body slumped to the ground, leaving a bright crimson trail streaking down the wall. The General smiled, a taunting, teasing display. The mirth sealed his next victim's fate. The General wore the face of—Judge Fiona Patrick.

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8

After eight o'clock, the regular mix of tourists, political hacks and city veterans, went home for the night, and left traffic light. The city's ceiling, dark but clear, lost its frosty bite, but remained crisp and cold.

Robert treated the streets like a personal NASCAR speedway, barely missed a taxi or two, with Thorne right on his tail.

George Clinton pounded out funky beats from his stereo. Robert's pulse quickened, and his nose snorted air like an angry bull. He bit down on his lip, imagining Patrick Miller's jovial reflection in the windshield. A tight grip on the steering wheel, and his bloodless knuckles turned white.

I should've checked out that weasel who followed me to the mission. Did he have anything to do with Miller's death? He slapped a palm against his forehead.

The Mustang and Range Rover slowed at Constitution Avenue, where speeding cars attracted the attention of Secret Service and Army personnel, strategically hidden near each monument and major government building. Minutes later, they crept into the city's parallel dimension, where murky, dilapidated streets spawned an eerie subculture.

Veil

Bodies crowded the sidewalks in heaps, like scattered islands of misery, magnifying the overwhelming squalor. Bright orange flames leapt up from bonfires. The homeless and hopeless crowded around large metal drums in vacant lots for warmth.

Robert turned off his CD player, concentrating on Miller. *What did he know? Why would someone kill him?* Then he remembered something Charlie said back at the office. *"They know I'm here and they'll come for you."* *Thorne was right.* Robert didn't care.

Normally he didn't indulge in hatred, considering it a waste of time and emotion. Nevertheless, he despised and hated those responsible for President Kennedy's assassination. Robert considered politics a contact sport, where daughters disappeared, interns were seduced, and war a necessity if you wanted peace. Sometimes people died.

However, even for a realist like him, President Kennedy's murder extended beyond the realm of political necessity. He wasn't about to walk away from Charlie's revelation, not with hard evidence *and* one of the shooters. The sensation behind his eyes warned—*Patrick Miller won't be the last to die.*

Robert drove through his second roadblock of the day, passing several fire-trucks and an ambulance. Flashing lights bounced off the brick and asphalt, creating a surreal, psychedelic atmosphere. They parked across the street from the mission.

Robert spotted Popeye, sullen, slumped down in his wheelchair, taking slugs from a bottle in a brown paper sack, watching the police work a large crowd assembled in front of the shelter. He avoided Popeye's gaze, but felt the weight of the old vet's glare.

Inside, uniformed police and plain-clothes detectives nearly outnumbered the homeless, with every room and office being used for questioning. A mix of stress, confusion, and frustration obvious, detectives tried to get information from reticent staff members and shelter residents not inclined to talk with police.

In the cafeteria, several distraught volunteers pointed at him, including the Bahamian woman who directed him to Miller's office earlier. The detectives took note, reluctantly sending them to the fourth floor, escorted by a young female officer, a rookie Robert guessed, for questioning.

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They reached Miller's tiny office and were greeted by another sizeable police contingent, edgier and more frustrated than their cohorts downstairs. Robert asked for the lead detective, and was met with silence and looks of aggravation.

"Mr. Veil?" a muffled voice called from somewhere inside.

In the back of the office near Miller's desk, a man mountain, with a fiery red crew cut, rose up from the floor and towered over the room. He grunted and pulled off the largest pair of rubber gloves Robert ever saw, a proctology nightmare.

Making his way toward them, his considerable girth demanded several people step outside the room to accommodate his movement.

"Detective Ralph Durbin, homicide," he said. "I'm the one who called you."

Robert nodded, introduced himself and Thorne, then extended his hand, which disappeared in the giant's tight grip.

He glanced around the detective to get a good look at Miller's body. The director sat in the chair behind his desk, eyes wide, chin on his chest, jellybeans strewn all over the floor, a bullet hole centered in his forehead. Durbin moved his frame so they could get a clear look.

"We were wondering what you could tell us about our little situation here," said Durbin. "You *were* here earlier were you not, Mr. Veil?"

"I was here," answered Robert. "What makes you think I know something about this?"

Thorne filmed the scene while they spoke.

"Sorry miss, we can't allow that," Durbin told her. "We know who you are, but this isn't one of your cases, so no pictures, no video tape."

"Then why'd you call us here, detective?" Robert asked, stepping inside the office.

"Well, when we got here we found your business card gripped tight in Mr. Miller's fist, and several eyewitnesses place you as the last person seen with him. Can you offer something different?"

Robert looked into Miller's hollow blue eyes. His heart sank. "Like I said, I was here. Doesn't mean I killed him."

"Exactly what was your business with Mr. Miller?"

"A missing person's case," said Robert. "I questioned Mr. Miller as a possible lead."

Veil

“Who were you looking for?” asked Durbin, pulling several sticks of Juicy Fruit from his inside jacket pocket. He wadded them together and tossed them into his cavernous mouth.

“I’m sorry, that’s confidential,” answered Robert, picking up a slight odor of feces from Miller’s body. It wasn’t uncommon for an individual to shit themselves in the face of immense fear or death. In the field, he’d seen it happen to the best. Hell, he’d almost done it himself once or twice.

“Listen detective,” Robert continued. “Do you think I’d leave my name and number in a man’s hand after I killed him?”

“I’ve seen stranger things over the last thirty years. Besides,” said Durbin, sarcastic and matter-of-fact. “Like I said, you were the last person seen with him. Now, you *say* you were following up a lead on a case?”

“A missing person’s case,” Robert repeated, irritated.

“But the only person who knows if that’s true has a bullet in his head. So you see our little problem here?”

Durbin’s repetitive questions annoyed Robert, but he wasn’t going to bring up Charlie. *What would I say anyway? Hey, I’m following up on a case connected to the Kennedy assassination, so back off. The only thing that would get me is a nice long stay in a straight jacket.*

Thorne walked over to the detective. Tall, she still looked up at him. “Listen Detective Durbin, or whatever the hell your name is. If you had anything *real*, Robert would be in handcuffs. You wouldn’t have called him down here; you would’ve picked him up. So either get on with it, or back the fuck off.”

Durbin looked down and smiled the smile of a man who knew his own strength, yet made a conscious decision to keep it under control. “It’s just procedure Ms. Thorne,” he said, gently. “We’re required to follow up on every possible lead. You know that. I’m catching high-heat on this case. Mr. Miller was connected, respected, and well-liked.”

Thorne returned Durbin’s smile, and took a step back.

“We understand,” said Robert. “But I wasn’t involved. If you’d like, I’ll take a gunshot residue test confirming I haven’t fired a weapon. Better still, take my guns and test them. They haven’t been discharged in

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a couple of days, and then only at the range. What was used on Miller?"

"From the size of the entry and exit wound, and the powder burn on the forehead, I'm guessing a twenty-two, twenty-five caliber. Most likely a silencer fitted Colt. That's probably why no one heard anything. Sounds more like a mosquito whisper than a bullet."

Robert stroked his chin. "Then whoever did this is a pro." *Miller knew more than he revealed. Why did they kill him? Did he know where Charlie was and refused to talk? Wouldn't that be more reason to keep him alive?*

Durbin looked as though he were trying to read Robert's mind. "It would be nice if you shared with us Mr. Veil. The man deserves to have his killer hung up by the toes."

Robert agreed. Seeing Miller lifeless only increased his anger. "Like I said, it's a missing person's case," Robert repeated. "I thought Miller might be able to help me find someone."

"A homeless person?" Durbin asked.

"I can't say."

"You need to tell us something."

"Why? I won't say this again. It's a confidential matter, and none of your fucking business!"

Durbin stepped toward Robert, Thorne slid in his way. "Is there anything else detective?"

Durbin's eyes flashed from Robert, to Thorne, then back to Robert. "There's nothing at the moment," he said, backing up. "But I'll take you up on that gun residue test later, after we finish here. If anything comes up before then, I'll call."

Thorne moved a little closer to the detective, with a Grinch-like smile on her face. Gently, but firm, she grabbed his balls. Durbin looked around, embarrassed, grunting. Thorne smiled then slowly let go. "Just wanted to see if they were as big as the rest of you," she said. "I'll wait by the elevator," she told Robert, then left the room.

Durbin thudded back against the wall. Robert remembered something Thorne once told him. "It's hard *not* to be in control with a man's balls in your hand. Without balls, a man's just not a man."

Robert cleared his throat. "Please be in touch, and let me know when you're ready for that test."

Veil

Durbin mumbled something that sounded like, *okay I will*, and Robert caught up with Thorne at the elevator. Outside on the street he pulled her to the side. "A little heavy handed wouldn't you say?"

Thorne flashed a confident smile. "A girl's gotta have her fun."

Robert shook his head in amazement. From the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of Popeye. The old vet waved him over. "Wait here, I'll be right back," he told Thorne, and jogged across the street.

Popeye looked rattled, defeat in his eyes. "Wondered if you'd show up."

"It wasn't me Popeye," said Robert. "I didn't kill him. You must know that."

Popeye took a swig from his brown paper bag and looked off into nowhere. "I know," he said. "I saw you leave. I told everyone to say you were the last one seen with him. It was the only way to make sure you came back."

Robert knelt. "What do you know? Did anyone see or hear anything the police don't already know?"

Popeye sat back in his wheelchair, looked to see if anyone was listening, then leaned in close to Robert's ear. "Charlie was here," he whispered. "I saw him cut through the alley in back of the mission. Next thing I know, the police are all over the place and Miller's dead."

Robert watched Popeye fight back tears. "Did you get a chance to talk to Charlie?"

"Miller was the only one who really cared around here," Popeye said to the night. "A lot of people gonna just fold up and die."

Robert put a hand on Popeye's shoulder. He looked up, and spotted the weasel who tailed him earlier. Their eyes met, the man lowered his head, and quickened his pace in the opposite direction, vanishing down an alley.

"Thorne," Robert called, signaling for her to follow him. "That guy trailed me to the mission earlier today."

Thorne caught up. They reached the alley. The weasel looked back, saw them following, and took off—ass on fire. They sprinted hard and fast but he moved like a cheetah, cutting out of the alley, sprinting down a deserted street, disappearing into another alley at the far end of the

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block.

Robert and Thorne drew their weapons, each falling to a different side of the alleyway, taking cover behind crates and dumpsters.

Robert agreed with Detective Durbin. Most people couldn't tell the difference between a silencer and a mosquito whisper. He wasn't most people.

With a silencer screwed on, the added volume in a gun barrel allowed the gas to expand, and it whooshed out behind the bullet quietly, like air carefully let out of a balloon—a mosquito whisper.

Angry mosquitoes whispered past their ears, ricocheting off the surrounding buildings. He heard the man reload several times, but signaled Thorne not to fire back. He counted the shots, motioned for his partner to cover him, slid out on his belly and crawled toward the crates where the weasel hid.

Halfway there, Thorne bolted to the dumpster he'd just left, drawing fire. She let off a volley of gunfire, keeping the weasel pinned down. He fired back, then focused his attention on Robert, sending streams of mosquitoes rocketing just above his skull.

Robert took a deep breath and pressed closer to the ground. Two clips later, he heard the weasel's gun disengage. *Empty*.

He sprang to his feet, jumped over the crates and garbage cans, crashing down on top of the weasel. Wiry and strong, he wrapped over Robert like a full-grown boa constrictor.

Both men jumped to their feet, punching like cowboys in a western bar room brawl. The wiry little man surprised Robert, landing several fast blows to his face and neck, knocking him to the ground.

Thorne leapt like a panther, knocking the goon to the pavement with a roundhouse kick to the chest. Robert scrambled and rushed forward, like a crazed Chicago Bears linebacker.

Like shotgun blasts, two hard-soled shoes hit Robert hard in the gut, sending him backwards in the air, crashing to the concrete. He righted himself, head spinning.

The weasel sprang to his feet like an Olympic gymnast. Thorne rushed over and hit him with a combination to the body and face, like Sugar Ray Leonard in a Marvin Hagler fight. The man doubled over then snapped upright, back handed her in the head and kicked her hard

Veil

between the legs, sending her crashing into a pile of boxes.

Robert recovered, rushed over, and drop kicked him to the ground. Back to his feet, the weasel picked up his gun and sprinted out of the alley, Robert on his heels.

Congestion on the street didn't slow the weasel. He knocked down unlucky pedestrians, stomping and kicking several rag-covered people asleep on the street. A couple of blocks down, he stopped and fired. His silencer gone, the gun erupted a familiar melody, and everyone dove for cover.

Robert dropped to the ground with them and felt for his guns, but both holsters were empty. The shooting stopped. He snapped to his feet. *Shit!*

The weasel, more than two blocks away, sprinted hard, fast, and disappeared around a corner. When Robert got there, the agile killer, with the strength of an anaconda, vanished.

Thorne limped up next to him breathing heavy, and handed him his guns. They searched the faces along the street, the buildings, and alleyways, but found nothing.

Sirens screamed, coming their way. Unwilling to endure more questioning from Durbin and the police, they gave up and headed back to Crossroads.

They reached the shelter as the coroner loaded Miller's body. A crowd of homeless men, women, and children looked on, sullied, sad. Robert's anger seared like alcohol on an open wound.

Detective Durbin lumbered out of the mission, spotted them and walked over. He stopped in his tracks and looked them up and down. "Should I ask?"

"Don't bother," said Robert.

"Another missing person case I guess," said Durbin, directing a facetious smirk at Thorne.

"Is there something you need from us?" asked Robert, exhausted.

Durbin laughed and shook his head. "It seems you're in the clear. For the moment. Several people say they saw you leave while Miller was still alive, and the coroner's preliminary estimate of the time of death puts you at Judge Weiss' house at the time of the murder. But don't go too far. Doctors make mistakes."

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“As have the police,” said Thorne, wincing, and rubbing her behind.

“Don’t worry detective,” said Robert. “I’m as concerned about Miller’s death as you are. So if you get any ideas let us know.”

“Sure I will,” said Durbin. The detective walked to his car and crammed his girth inside, stressing the black Crowne Victoria’s shocks to their max. “Just as soon as you let me in on your missing person case.”

Durbin slammed the car door, took a long, lustful look at Thorne, then drove off.

“I can’t believe that little fucker kicked me in the puss,” she said, openly rubbing her crotch, to the delight of several officers and onlookers. “Only twenty-four hours and we’re already in the mix. We better find your boy Charlie and figure out exactly what the hell he’s gotten us into. I don’t mind a fight, but I want to know who the hell I’m fighting.”

“I’m with you on that partner,” said Robert, stroking his jaw. “We better find him before that guy in the alley does. Did you notice his fighting tactics?”

“Yes,” said Thorne. “Definitely *Company* trained. I guess the old man told us the truth.”

Charlie told the truth. Miller’s death and the man in the alley are confirmation. “Meet me at the office in the morning,” said Robert. “I need a few hours sleep. I’m going home. I’ll see you around eight. Thorne agreed and walked gingerly to her Rover. Sliding inside, she swore profusely and sped off.

Twenty minutes later, Robert pulled into his parking complex, head reeling. A serial killer he couldn’t find would strike again soon. The murder of a decent man, for reasons unknown, vexed him, and a professional tomcat whipped their asses in an alley. His hands quivered. *President John F. Kennedy. We’re close. I feel it.*

The elevator zipped to the eleventh floor. Robert trudged down the rich burgundy carpet to his apartment, eleven-twelve. He touched key to lock; the door cracked open. He pulled his weapon.

Braced against the wall, eyes closed, he took a deep breath, adrenaline churning. He rolled inside, came up on one knee, and pointed the nine-millimeter back and forth around the pitch-black room.

“No need to be alarmed,” said a calm voice, from the darkness.

Veil

“Hands up in the air,” Robert shouted. “Now!”

The lamp next to his recliner clicked on. Robert trained his weapon. His eyes focused, he holstered his gun, and sat down across from his visitor. *Marilyn London.*

“Sorry I startled you. I wanted to follow up from earlier today.”

Robert rested back in his chair. “Follow up?”

Marilyn stood and removed her coat. A steel blue cat suit clung to her, leaving little to the imagination.

“Yes,” she said, approaching. She straddled him. “I felt like we left things open.”

Robert smiled. “You always this bold?”

“Always,” said Marilyn, pulling close to his lips. “Scared?”

Robert stroked her cheek. “Terrified.”

The next morning, Robert awoke to an empty bed, a note on his pillow. *It was better than I expected. Marilyn.*

Robert laughed, jumped out of bed, and slipped on his pants. He heard stirring in the living room. His smile widened. “I’m glad you’re still here,” he said. “You can’t just leave a note and run. That’s my move.”

He trotted into the living room. Charlie stared at him from the recliner. “She left about an hour ago,” he said. “Nice.”

Robert sat down, forearms on his knees. “How long you been here?”

“Long enough. I waited for you in the stairwell, heard the elevator, and peeked into the hall. I saw your lady friend go inside your apartment, so I headed outside and slept between the dumpsters in the back. She drove off around six o’clock, and I came back upstairs.”

Charlie wheezed. “They killed Miller. They know I talked to you and now they’ll try to kill us all. Unless you get to them first.”

Robert fixed on Charlie’s eyes. “I believe you, I do, but you’ve got to tell me who we’re up against. Who’s running the show? Who are we after?”

Charlie sank deeper into the recliner. He stared at the floor, his face ashen. “Rothschild,” he said. “Edward Rothschild.”

Robert mulled over Charlie’s answer. He knew it would be someone highly placed, and most insiders considered the Rothschild clan as diabolical as they come. Rothschild lived in a class of his own. Rich,

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connected, a Nobel Prize in economics, and very well respected.

“Are you absolutely sure? There’s no room for error.”

Charlie’s face reddened. He coughed and wrenched violently. Blood poured from his mouth. Robert ran to the kitchen for a dishcloth.

Charlie’s coughing worsened. Blood spilled down the old assassin’s chin painting his coat. A few moments later, the coughing stopped. Charlie relaxed.

“Is there something I can get you? Should I call a doctor?”

Charlie shook his head no, leaned back and closed his eyes.

I was right. The old man is sick. Probably why he’s trying to clear the air.

Robert went back to the kitchen to get Charlie a glass of water. He heard a thud and raced back to the living room. Charlie lay face down on the carpet. He dropped the glass, ran over and flipped Charlie on his back. *Unconscious.*

Robert tried CPR. *Nothing. No pulse.* He picked up the phone, hesitated, then dialed. “Don’t die on me old man.”

Veil

9

America has evolved over its brief tenure as a republic, into a great nation. A nation where no person who desires a better life need be left out, and those willing to work hard and sacrifice are rewarded. As we move forward into the twenty-first century, this great country of ours can expect new challenges, uncharted mountains to climb, and fresh opportunities to explore. Whether medical advances and cures for the incurable, or original, exciting technology, Americans stand ready to bring these visions to life. Our strength, energy, and vigor remain unmatched anywhere in the world. And government should stand at the ready, to lend support and leadership to these causes.”

“Like a lighthouse, we who are elected to serve, should safely guide all who wish to navigate these waters of promise, in the land of the free.

As Governor of New York, my administration has maintained an outstanding record of excellence and accomplishment, benefiting of all its citizens and communities. We promised a lower unemployment rate, and delivered. We promised safer streets and less crime, and delivered. We said we would take steps to protect the city and its residents from terrorism, and we have. Now the time has come to expand the level of excellence we have established in New York to the entire nation. We’re here at the steps of the Lincoln Memorial because this great President fought and died for a country based on the Constitution, a country based

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on inclusion. It was a noble effort then; it's a noble effort today. This effort I plan to take up anew, hand in hand with you. I hereby announce my candidacy for the office of President of the United States, because in America, nobody gets left behind."

The Friday afternoon crowd erupted. Charleston Rothschild finished his speech forcefully pounding the podium. Edward joined in, clapping and smiling, a proud father who'd just watched his son score a winning touchdown. He salivated at the prospect of his son occupying the White House. For Edward, the final coup on his long list of conquests—for his family—the crown jewel of legitimacy.

Most important, with Charleston in the Oval Office, he'd complete a power play, and seal the Rothschild legacy forever. Nothing accomplished by his family to date came close.

Three weeks passed since he made his proposition to the men at the Cosmos Club. Eventually, all called with offers of wholehearted, albeit insincere, support.

Photographers and news crews crammed together for better angles. On cue, the crowd chanted. "We want Charleston! We want Charleston!" Pleased, Edward watched the product of his loins masterfully field questions from the media, easy questions, just as Charles Kingston promised.

Fifteen minutes later, they climbed into the limo and rode back to Edward's twenty-story building, where they met more applause from the Rothschild company staff, as per Edward's orders, along with more media and paparazzi. The press shouted questions over the noisy crowd and snapped pictures. Edward's wife, Meredith, and Charleston's wife, Diana, joined them on stage, completing the picture-perfect photo op.

After a few more inquiries from the press, father and son waved their goodbyes, kissed their wives, and caught a private elevator to the penthouse. They met briefly with a small group of business leaders and politicians who unequivocally vowed to support the Rothschild family. Later, he and Charleston adjourned to Edward's well-appointed lair, and relaxed.

"A fine job son, you're on your way. You've made us all proud." A waiter entered and poured them drinks. "Just remember, this is only the beginning. Soon they'll be circling like sharks."

Veil

“Thanks dad, but I’m Governor of New York. I’ve been through this before.” Charleston took his usual, Jack Daniels on the rocks, from the silver tray. “Besides, I plan to send out a few sharks of my own.”

Edward lifted the remaining drink from the tray, a dirty martini, extra-dry. The waiter disappeared.

“Son, this will be quite different. Trust me. You won’t know what hit you if you underestimate the difficulties of running for this office. Kiss the wrong people off and they’ll make you pay dearly. A Governor’s race is child’s play by comparison. Lose it, and no one remembers.”

Charleston drained his glass. *Good. I have your attention.* Edward sat his drink on the coffee table and leaned close. “On the other hand, if you fuck up the White House, then maybe even I’ll forget who you are.”

Charleston squirmed. “I get the picture father,” he said. “I’m prepared to fight hard and win.”

“Good,” said Edward. “Then I’ve made my point.”

Edward complimented Charleston on the speech he gave earlier, then looked past his son at a portrait of his father and grandfather, their faces stern and impatient.

“Have you given any thought to our conversation about Ian Goldstein?”

“For campaign manager? I’ve already decided on Ralph Wright. You know he’s been with me from the start of my career. I trust him. How would it look if I abandoned him now?”

Edward rose to his feet, bumping the coffee table, knocking over his drink. “It would look like you really wanted to win! And by the way, you trust him? No, trust me. Trust me when I tell you that if you don’t start listening, you’ll fail miserably. You trust him. No, you spoiled ungrateful ass! I’m still your father. You trust *me*.”

Charleston’s face twisted. Edward walked over to the large Rothschild portrait and looked up at his namesakes. Their presence gave him a sense of peace during stressful moments. *Likely I’ll come here often during this campaign.*

Charleston walked up behind him. Edward faced him. “Son, look, I’m just saying...”

“You’ve said enough,” snapped Charleston. Fire blazed in his eyes.

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Good, thought Edward, very good.

“Dammit dad. You’re not running for President, I am. And it would do you well to remember that. I need your help, but make no mistake about it. I’ll live without the White House, and live well. How will you sleep?”

“Meaning?” asked Edward.

“Meaning I know you want me in the White House for reasons other than the Rothschild legacy and honor. So if you intend to interfere throughout my campaign, I’ll drop out.”

Edward considered calling the bluff, but decided to let his son walk away. *Too soon to pressure him too much.* It didn’t matter. He’d already offered Ralph Wright a substantial sum to withdraw.

“Calm yourself son.” He gently, lovingly, put a hand on Charleston’s shoulder. “It’s not that important. Let’s pull together on this one. Your grandfather would kick both our blue blood asses if we didn’t.”

Charleston smiled, relaxing like a boy standing up to his father for the first time.

“Move ahead with your plans,” said Edward. “I’m here if you need me.”

They embraced. Charleston thanked him for understanding and ran off to a press conference at the Ritz, energized.

Edward wondered what his son’s face would look like when he and the others met the new President in the Oval Office the night of the inauguration, and fed him a dose of reality. One moment you were the most powerful man in the world, minutes later, the most powerful flunkie.

He sat down and watched the sun ease down behind a panoramic view of Washington, tenderly putting the city to bed for the night. He hit the intercom button. His assistant, Jenny, answered immediately. “Get Ralph Wright on the phone and tell him to meet me at the club at nine tonight,” he ordered, smooth and stern. *Ralph Wright will play along. He better.* Edward puffed away on a Cuban. *If not, there’s no telling how long his stay on earth will last.*

“Mr. Rothschild, Mr. Wright has confirmed,” Jenny said, five minutes later. “Your next meeting is ready in the main conference room.” He thanked her dryly and put out the cigar.

Veil

Edward walked down the long dimly lit hall that led to his private conference room, perusing the photos and portraits of various members of the Rothschild clan. Men willing to go the extra mile come hell or high water.

He paused at a black and white photo of his parents sitting on the patio of their Long Island estate. At the time of the photograph, they were typical Ivy League blue bloods, living a life of privilege during a time of war.

In August, nineteen forty-five, his grandfather and father, steel barons, earned millions from defense contracts and corporate takeovers. World War II ended with two atomic bombs, and Reconstruction and the Marshall Plan brought more money, more power, more influence.

His mother, Katherine, a dedicated social butterfly, seldom showed him any real attention. She believed raising boys was a man's job, leaving Edward to fend for himself, with a hard driving, competitive father who offered little encouragement, praise, or kind words.

Once, in a desperate attempt to gain his father's acceptance, Edward worked feverishly on a school science project. Like most twelve-year-old boys with a busy father, he thought if he could make an impression with his work, it would bring them closer together.

During one of his mother's many parties, Edward overheard a Texas oilman complain about the number of wells he'd shut down because of heavy wax build-up caked around the well's openings, from pumped out crude, leaving millions of dollars in the ground. It gave Edward an idea.

He developed a concept using portable steam generators to heat chemicals to high temperatures. When shot down into the well, the mix would melt the paraffin, allowing additional oil to be pumped out. His grandfather was ecstatic, and helped him get the idea patented.

The project a hit, the Texas oilman offered the Rothschild family millions to license the concept. Edward's father negotiated a handsome fee and placed the money in Edward's trust fund. Edward beamed, but his Dad was stoic, detached, and business-like. When the final papers were signed and the office empty, Edward silently stood in front of his father's massive oak desk. As though sensing his son's gaze, his father looked up, stone-faced. "What next?" he asked, plain and firm.

Edward stood in stunned disbelief.

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"Oh, you want a pat on the back do you?" his father continued.
"Maybe a hug and a lollipop?"

Edward quivered uncontrollably. Tears streamed down his cheeks. His father walked from behind the desk. Relief washed over Edward. His father finally realized his need for attention and comfort from the man he admired most. He stopped shaking. His father slapped him to the floor. His vision cleared. Edward II stared down at him, unmoved.

"As long as you live and carry the name Rothschild, don't you ever weaken or break," his father warned. "If you want pats on the back and hugs, wear a dress and change your name. You can only count on yourself Edward, remember that. The day you forget you'll be finished." His father dropped a handkerchief on his chest, sat back down, and continued to work as if nothing happened, not raising his head as Edward slinked out of the room.

Edward ran from the Fifth Avenue office to Grand Central Station, his tears a trickle, then a flood. He caught the train home and ran to his room, where his grandfather waited.

His grandfather, almost seventy years old, carried himself like a much younger man. Ever the optimist, he'd often rattle on about the future, how one day a Rothschild would sit in the White House. Edward knew his grandfather hoped *he'd* fulfill that dream, but dismissed it as the ranting of an old fool.

"Sit my boy," he ordered, patting the end of Edward's bed. "Tell an old man your troubles."

Edward guessed his grandfather already knew what happened, but felt the need to unload, and poured out his heart. His emotions overflowed in a mixture of confusion and anger. When he'd finished the diatribe, his grandfather sat quietly, studying him as though he were one of the rare coins in his collection. He stroked Edward's short black hair.

"Your father's right son. You have to learn to stand on your own two feet or nobody will ever give a damn about you."

Edward looked up at the old man feeling betrayed.

"Now mind those tears boy, or I'll slap you myself."

"But grandfather, it's not fair."

"It's not meant to be fair," he barked.

Veil

Edward looked at the floor. The old man placed his long, bony finger under his grandson's chin and slowly, gently, raised his head until their eyes met.

"Of all the things I've taught you, never ever forget this."

Edward focused hard not wanting to miss a word.

"You don't get what you deserve in life, you get what you take. And if you're not willing to go after what you want at all costs, then here." He reached inside his jacket pocket and pulled out an old civil war pistol, fully loaded, and cocked back the hammer, pointing it at Edward's head. "If you think life's unfair, then end it. Right here, right now. I'll help you. I've had a good run, we can go together."

Edward edged back and fell off the bed. "I don't want to die grandfather," he said, wiping his eyes with the sleeve of his jacket.

His grandfather lowered the weapon. "Then take what you want out of life. Never let anybody get in your way. Not even your fucking father."

Edward entered the conference room. Vernon Campbell sat, legs crossed, impatiently thumping the arms of the chair with his fingers. His other guest, Simon Lynch, a ferret of a man, remained seated, nonchalantly acknowledging Edward's presence.

"Gentlemen, so glad you could make it," said Edward, looking in Simon's direction.

"Forgive me for not standing, Mr. Rothschild. I've been a little under the weather," Simon droned, in an irritating nasal tone.

Edward took his seat at the head of the table next to Vernon. "I'll get right to the point," he said. "My son has announced his candidacy for the Presidency."

Simon raised forward in his seat. "And might I say, he is a fine lad. I think he'll make a splendid leader of the free world."

"Thank you Simon. Your compliment, however insincere, is noted."

Simon smiled slyly.

"Now that the race for the White House is official, I want our little problem taken care of immediately."

"Because Simon here got happy and killed Patrick Miller at the homeless shelter," said Vernon. "It's going to be a bit more difficult."

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"It was necessary," chimed Simon, casually examining his well-groomed fingernails. "He got a little suspicious after I questioned him. I didn't have a choice."

"You let Veil get a look at you, you stupid fuck," Vernon yelled.

Edward motioned for him to calm down, but Vernon hopped to his feet. "I told you not to bring him in Edward. He's going to blow everything, and we can't afford mistakes."

"Simon, you were careless and messy," Edward scolded. "If Veil had caught you, it would've added immeasurably to my already monstrous problems."

Vernon looked perplexed. "Is that it?"

"Sit down Vernon," Edward ordered.

Vernon sat, bug-eyed with surprise.

"It won't happen again," said Simon, pouring himself a glass of water. "I do, however, agree with my esteemed colleague. Mr. Veil's not an easy mark. And that woman he has for a partner. Christ, she's a real piece."

"You mean the black woman, Thorne?" asked Vernon.

"Yes," said Simon. "And I think we should use the term African-American."

"Gentlemen please, enough," snapped Edward.

Vernon shook his head in disgust. Simon continued to examine his nails, calm, unmoved. "Maybe a different approach is in order," said Simon. "A propaganda strategy perhaps?"

"Yes Edward," agreed Vernon. "A smear campaign. The media will jump through hoops for us; besides, this isn't the first time someone's gotten close to the truth about Kennedy's assassination."

Edward slammed his fist down on the desk and glared at both men. "They have evidence you fools. I want the evidence found and I want them killed. All of them."

"Listen to reason," Vernon pleaded.

Edward stood up. Simon slumped back, his eyes shifting between the two, obviously enjoying the skirmish.

Edward leaned forward, sweat beading on his forehead. "Vernon, I've known you for over four decades. You know me well. You know when I say I'll destroy your family if you don't make this problem go

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away. I mean it.”

Unnerved, Vernon turned beet-red. Edward turned to Simon. “And you, you pathetic little parasite. I know there’s not much in this world you care about.”

Simon grinned.

“Except that little boyfriend of yours in Los Angeles.”

Simon squirmed uncomfortably, horror replacing his smile.

“That’s right you faggot. I know all about him, but don’t worry. I won’t kill him. I’ll just uproot his pretty little bitch ass and transfer it somewhere where they’ll appreciate his, shall I say, finer qualities.”

Edward waited for their reaction. Simon sucked his teeth, making a snake-like hissing sound. Vernon sat, head down, like a scolded child.

“Good,” said Edward. “I see we have an understanding. When this is over, we can all go back to being friends.”

Vernon’s jaw tightened, then relaxed. “Okay Edward,” he grunted. “We’ll play it your way. For now.”

“Good. Now I’d like to introduce someone I’ve added to the team.” Edward opened the door and asked his surprise guest to come inside.

“I believe you already know the lady,” said Edward.

Marilyn London walked in and sat down. “Hello boys, glad to be on the team.”

“What’s this bitch doing here?” Vernon snapped.

“Now, now,” Edward responded, positioning himself behind Marilyn. “We must welcome the opposite sex in the workplace.”

“You think this is some kind of game,” growled Vernon. “If the shit hits the fan, you’ll stink with the rest of us. This whore can’t be trusted. How much does she know?”

“Everything,” said Marilyn. “Look, I’m not thrilled about working with you either. I usually operate alone. But Edward made an offer too good to refuse.”

Simon nervously picked at a scab on his hand. “No offense to the bitch, but I agree. This is no time for new faces.” He looked over at Marilyn. “Or amateurs.”

Marilyn’s ladylike demeanor melted away. “I ought to blow your brains out all over this room. Amateur! That little stunt you pulled down at the mission—that was amateur!”

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Marilyn walked over to Simon and leaned in close to his ear. “And from one bitch to another, if you ever insult me again, I’ll add your prick to my private collection. I have quite a few already, but for you, I’ll make room.”

“Sit down Marilyn,” Edward snarled.

Marilyn returned to her seat, eyes stayed on Simon’s, who glared back, teeth grinding, nostrils flared.

“All of you better listen close,” said Edward. “I want the evidence found and brought to me, I don’t care how you get it done. Or like I said before Ms. London joined us, your family trees will come to an end.”

“Now, you listen to me,” said Vernon. “I don’t know about these high price flunkies. You can treat them any way you like, but I’ve earned more respect than you’ve shown me today.”

Vernon pushed up and marched to the far end of the table. “You helped assassinate a President for Christ’s sake. Do you have any idea what that means, you pompous asshole?”

Edward sat poker faced. Detached. Unmoved.

“Let me give *you* a little warning,” Vernon continued. “I’ll catch and kill Robert Veil and Charlie, but don’t think I’m moved by your threats. If I go down, you and the whole Rothschild clan will burn in hell with me. I promise.”

Marilyn and Simon raised eyebrows. Edward sat quietly.

“Young junior, failed Presidential candidate, will be the least of your problems,” Vernon continued. “I’ll make sure the name Rothschild isn’t worth toilet paper. So don’t ever threaten me again and don’t dream of fucking with me.”

Vernon threw open the conference room door and stormed out.

After a short, awkward moment, Simon rose. “It’s been an enlightening afternoon Mr. Rothschild.” His eyes narrowed. “Pleased to make your acquaintance again Ms. London.”

Edward stayed silent, chilly. Simon pulled a handkerchief and wiped his forehead. “Well, I’ll be going now, but rest assured, I’ll do my best to help put an end to this matter urgently.” He softly closed the door behind him. Marilyn’s mood brightened. Edward pulled a cigar from his inside jacket pocket.

He pushed Vernon as planned. *Necessary*, he thought. He needed the

Veil

evidence, and wanted Veil, Thorne, and Charlie dead, before things got out of hand. He looked over at his trump card. Marilyn London.

Marilyn never failed him. That's why he called her first from his limo the day Vernon informed him Charlie talked to Veil. Marilyn loved to hunt *and* kill. Her greed almost surpassed his. *The perfect killing machine.*

"I want you to take care of Robert Veil and the others as soon as possible," said Edward, lighting the cigar. "You've made contact, right?"

"Certainly," said Marilyn. "He's working on the murders of those federal judges. You know, the Bear."

"So I've heard," said Edward. "Perfect. Then you won't have trouble getting close to him."

Marilyn smiled. "No, I won't."

"What about his partner, Thorne?" Edward asked.

Marilyn's brow furrowed. "I'll kill Veil and Charlie, no problem. But I want that bitch to suffer."

Edward laughed. Thorne managed to get under Marilyn's skin. A feat not easily accomplished.

"There is one small matter to tend to first," said Marilyn. "Money."

"We have a deal already," Edward sneered. "Five million for the lot."

"I didn't know *all* the details. Just how involved were you in Kennedy's death?"

"Kennedy's not the issue here. Five million's the deal; take it or leave it."

"Ten million dollars in my offshore account in the Isle of Man. Half now, half in a Swiss account, to be transferred later as I instruct." She smiled. "Or you can go fuck yourself."

Maniacal bitch. Edward puffed the expensive tobacco. *She's right to squeeze. I would.* "Done," he told her.

Marilyn locked the door, unbuttoned her blouse, walked over and dropped to her knees. She undid his pants and swallowed his manhood. He moaned. *Yes. She is the antichrist.*

Reginald Cook

10

Four weeks passed. Charlie, asleep on Robert's deep cushioned sofa, snored heavily. Robert sipped a cup of coffee, watching the old man from the kitchen, on a slow burn.

Charlie gave him a scare, passing out a month earlier. He thought the old man died right there on his carpet, but finally managed to resuscitate him with mouth to mouth. Reluctantly, Robert called in a favor from Dr. Ronald Jones, an old friend from the Marines whose life he'd once saved. Dr. Jones diagnosed Charlie's condition as advanced stage tuberculosis, and put him on aggressive antibiotic therapy. The doctor couldn't be sure without x-rays, but guessed Charlie probably had very little lung tissue left, and gave him at most six months to live.

Charlie drifted in and out of consciousness, slowly getting stronger and coughing less. Robert didn't bring up Rothschild or the assassination, giving the old man a chance to recover before pressing him. Now Charlie felt better and Robert wanted details.

Thorne arrived with the video equipment, all business, and without so much as a hello, quickly set up the camera and recorders. Robert woke Charlie, who sat up straight and rubbed his eyes. Robert pulled up a chair. Thorne checked the equipment, and signaled.

Veil

“State your name for the record,” said Robert. “Then tell us how you got involved with Rothschild, and what took place that day.” Thorne positioned herself behind the camera next to a small color monitor and tape recorder.

Charlie stated his name, spelled it, then lowered his head. “It’s difficult,” he said, in a broken voice.

Robert’s heart pounded. Thorne’s hand quivered as she adjusted the controls.

“Two governments have always existed side by side. One visible, the other invisible,” said Charlie. “When President Kennedy, arrogant, and so sure of himself, said he wanted to *splitter the CIA into a thousand pieces and scatter it to the winds*, the invisible emerged and ended his life.”

Charlie took a long, slow drink of water from a glass Robert placed in front of him and cleared his throat.

“In other countries,” he continued, “the object of assassination is to shift power from one regime to another. Just look at history. But the object of President Kennedy’s assassination was to keep the country’s power in the same hands. To maintain the status quo.”

Charlie shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “They fell like dominos after that,” he said. “Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Governor George Wallace, John Lennon, even that fiasco at Chappaquiddick. It was all orchestrated to maintain control over the electoral system, to control the power of the Presidency.”

Robert stroked his chin. “To whose benefit?”

Charlie looked blankly at the camera, then looked away. He finished the last of the water. Perspiration beaded on his face. The circles around his eyes darkened, his breathing turned shallow and heavy. Robert tossed him a towel. Thorne poured a fresh glass of water.

“There were four of us riding in a used Ford station wagon that day,” Charlie continued. “Two lookouts, a spotter, and myself. We rode through Dallas in silence. The weather report we received from Langley said it would stay warm and cloudless all day, with the temperature about sixty-eight degrees. I crosschecked the report to make sure it was accurate. If it’d rained, we would’ve called it off. Too many things go wrong in bad weather.”

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Charlie wiped his face again and closed his eyes tight, as though trying to fight off a nightmare. His lids lifted, eyes beet red, hands trembling.

"We knew traffic would be heavy. To avoid it, we mapped out a route around the crowded streets to a short dirt road in the railroad yard behind the knoll. At eleven-fifty a.m., we heard over the Secret Service radio frequency that the President had left Love Field airport. We drove around the yard one last time, then pulled back out onto the street, parked for fifteen minutes, following the motorcade's progression by radio. At twelve-fifteen we went back into the railroad yard to set up."

Charlie asked for a break so he could use the bathroom. Thorne checked the camera. Robert refilled the glass of water. Ten minutes later, Charlie emerged looking more relaxed. He sat down without a word. Thorne restarted the equipment.

"We'd been planning the hit for months and had every angle covered. I'd checked out several spots, including the railroad overpass across the Stemmons Freeway, but from there I'd be too visible."

"The stockade fence on the knoll was perfect. It faced Elm Street dead on, and you couldn't drive past without facing the fence. The President would pass directly in front of me, only a few yards away. Afterwards, we'd be able to get away easily without being noticed. If anyone did run up on us, we'd simply flash our Secret Service credentials and ask them to leave the area."

Charlie wrung his hands and rocked back and forth. "I moved into position at exactly twelve-twenty. While I unwrapped the rifle, the spotter surveyed the area with binoculars and continued to follow the radio reports, moment by moment. The other two men watched our back, pin-pointing a railroad worker in a tower behind us, a little over seven hundred feet away. We thought the tower would be empty because of the motorcade. It didn't matter though. Mr. Bowers told the Warren Commission he saw men moving around the fence, but couldn't be sure because his view wasn't clear. Of course, he died a year later, alone, in a single car accident. They probably didn't want to chance his memory clearing up."

Veil

Charlie gulped more water, spilling it down his chin. "At twelve twenty-five I checked the rifle one last time, propped it up on the fence and waited."

"How did you feel knowing you were about to assassinate your own President?" asked Robert.

"Ice cold," Charlie responded. "At the time it wasn't murder as far as I was concerned. I was trained to kill for political reasons. The assignment paid well, so it was business. I didn't care much for President Kennedy anyway, his politics or his family. That made it easier, or so I thought at the time."

Robert saw Thorne struggling to keep silent, glad she didn't have her shotgun. He quelled his own anger. Anger with Charlie, more with Edward Rothschild. "Go ahead," he told him. "Continue."

Charlie closed his eyes. "The spotter tapped my right shoulder, which meant the President's car was passing the book depository. I pointed the rifle up Elm and noticed the excitement of the crowd increase. To my left, I saw a man holding a film camera, but it was too late to do anything about it."

"The motorcade came into view and everything slowed down. That's how it is. You see things clearly because you're prepared. It's a first for everyone but you, so it moves quickly for everyone else. Your peripheral vision expands and you take in everything around you, then your tunnel vision kicks in, and you only see spots on your target."

"I was told the top would be off of the President's car, turning his limo into a convertible." Charlie swallowed hard.

"I fired at the President twice. My first shot hit him in the neck and the spotter called it out. A quizzical look came across the President's face and he clenched his hands up near his throat, elbows pushed out to the sides. An automatic nervous reaction." Charlie demonstrated.

"The reports I've read say that shot came from the back," said Robert. "Behind the President."

"I know what they said, Mr. Veil. I'm telling you I hit him in the throat. The reports also say the doctors widened the throat wound during surgery. No one could tell it was an entry wound."

"A sharpshooter could've hit him anywhere," said Thorne. "Why the throat? Why not just go for the head shot right away?"

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Charlie winced. "Instructions. Edward Rothschild wanted him to suffer. He wanted the President to know he was about to die." Charlie lowered his head and took a deep noisy breath.

"About this time I became aware of gunshots other than mine. I didn't know there would be another shooter. It didn't surprise me, not on a mission like this. Rothschild and the others wanted to be sure Kennedy didn't make it out alive."

"There were two men posted near the curb where the motorcade passed. One opened an umbrella. The other waved as Kennedy rode by, my signal for the final shot. Governor Connally turned around, as though trying to look at the President, now slumped toward the First Lady. She looked at Connally, then at her husband, now almost in her lap. I'd received specific instructions not to harm her. They said the country would get over the assassination of the President, but not the killing of its Queen."

"I trained my site, squeezed the trigger, and watched the President's head explode in a shower of blood and brain. He was gone. No one ever survives a direct head shot."

Charlie dabbed at his eyes. "I quickly slipped my rifle back into the bag. A low murmur from the crowd turned into full-blown panic and confusion, like it always does. First the crowd is too stunned to react. A few moments later, it sinks in and the commotion starts. The perfect cover for escape. Everyone will say they saw the same thing, but they'll all see it differently. A hundred people, a hundred different versions."

"And that's when they played the double-cross," said Robert.

"Yes," answered Charlie. "I started for the car and spotted one of the men taking pictures of me. Obviously not part of the plan. We chose the area to avoid being seen or photographed. Yes, it was a set-up, a double-cross."

"One of the men rushed me with a large jagged knife, and slashed at my throat. He missed. I grabbed his arm, rammed the knife below his rib cage, and forced the blade up into his heart. By the time he hit the ground one of the others snatched me from behind, while another rushed forward."

"I wiggled free, broke one guy's neck, and kicked the man rushing me to the ground. He scrambled to his feet and ran out of the yard. I

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picked up the camera and bag and tossed them in the car. I could hear people running and screaming.”

“A policeman, gun drawn, ran into the yard in my direction, ordering me to raise my hands. I shouted for him to calm down, identified myself as Secret Service, then showed him my credentials. He looked a little inexperienced, you know, a rookie. I pointed to the guys on the ground and told him to go get a few officers and come back to secure the scene. When he left, I jumped inside the station wagon, pulled out of the yard, and disappeared in the commotion. The police stopped me several times. I just flashed my identification and kept moving.”

“Where did you go after that?” asked Robert.

“Up to that point things happened so fast I didn’t have time to think about what I’d done. I concentrated on staying alive. I took a chance and tried to contact my CIA handler, Vernon Campbell.”

Robert’s eyebrows rose. “You mean the Director of the CIA?”

“Yes, he recruited me in the first place.”

“When I couldn’t get in touch with Vernon, I called Jack Ruby, our failsafe in case something went wrong. I couldn’t find him either. Then came Oswald. I’d met him twice at Ruby’s club, but we never talked. He just sat at the table with his drink, and occasionally whispered to Ruby.”

Charlie took another deep breath. “After his arrest, Oswald said *I’m just a patsy*. That’s how it’s done. We learned it from the Germans. First assassinate, then immediately accuse someone. It draws attention away from the facts, and when the accused is killed or silently stored away, the door is closed. All that’s left are rumors, accusations, and conspiracy theories. Even if someone discovers the truth, no one will believe it. The truth and the lie look the same.”

“The next few weeks flashed by. I contacted my wife and directed her to take our daughter to my safehouse in Kentucky. Samantha was eight years old, but her mother and I married a few months before Dallas. No one knew they existed.”

Charlie broke down and wept like a child. Robert took a few steps, but Charlie waved him away.

“Rothschild paid me a million dollars up front. I established identities for the three of us, and a plan to disappear.” Charlie’s voice cracked. “I never saw them again.”

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"I managed to slip back into Washington. I hid among the crowds flocking to President Kennedy's funeral. I rode the train part of the way and hitchhiked the rest. The whole thing began to unnerve me, and for the first time I had regrets. I'd killed here in the states, but someone usually deserved it, like a gangster, a terrorist, or a radical. This time, traveling through town after town, I saw devastation in the eyes of almost everyone. I wasn't so sure Kennedy deserved to die."

Charlie's eyes pleaded with Robert and Thorne for forgiveness. He didn't get it. Robert swelled with disgust and anger. He believed Charlie deserved to die for what he did, no matter how sorry or beat down he felt.

"I tried to make contact with several of my associates in the Agency. Nobody responded. When the White House and Senate organized the Warren Commission, I knew I didn't have much time. They'd work me in as a suspect, and the manhunt would begin. I knew they had the film Abraham Zapruder shot. It clearly showed my final shot hitting the President in the head, dead on. Not to mention the eyewitness accounts. So I took a big chance."

Charlie stopped to stretch his legs and asked for another break. Thorne declined before Robert could speak, ordering the old man to *sit his ass down and finish*. He looked at Robert who shrugged his shoulders. Charlie reluctantly sat back down.

"I dressed up in Navy officer digs, acquired the proper papers, and marched into the Bethesda Naval Hospital where President Kennedy's autopsy took place. It wasn't the first time I'd been in the hospital covertly, so I knew its security procedures and schedules. I slipped into an area called "cold storage," where the hospital kept sensitive information. I knew any files concerning the President would be there. I killed the guard at the door, dragged him inside, took everything I could find, and left. Autopsy photos, detailed recordings from the coroner on the bullet wounds, projected trajectory angles, and every medical note.

In a large brown enveloped stamped FBI, I found the bullet fragments. In a large tin cylinder sitting in a freezer, I found President Kennedy's brain, mangled and sliced open. I took it all, combined it with the rifle, notes, and everything else, then hid it all where no one would look."

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“I sent a message to Rothschild. Vernon Campbell and several others met me in the basement of Old Ebbits Grill. Things didn’t go well. They roughed me up, and tried to make me tell where I’d hid the evidence. When I wouldn’t, Rothschild showed up. I still didn’t talk. If I did, I’d be dead. I told Edward I’d made arrangements for the evidence to go to the Washington Post if they killed me. They backed off and let me go.”

“They trailed me night and day. The next thing I know, one year turned into almost forty. I could’ve played hardball and blackmailed Rothschild, but the whole thing took its toll. I just wanted to be left alone. The next thing I knew, Robert Kennedy, King, and so many others, died. All the markings of a coup, and I’d started it all.”

Charlie coughed hard into the towel spotting it with blood and phlegm. Robert replaced it with another.

“Who else knew about this, I mean, how far up did it go?” Robert asked.

“I was just a trigger man. These things usually go all the way to the top,” Charlie replied.

“You mean President Johnson?” Thorne asked.

“And Hoover,” Charlie added. “I’m convinced they both knew and didn’t raise a finger to stop it.”

“Now you sound like Oliver Stone,” Robert joked.

“Don’t laugh,” said Charlie, still serious. “He surprised even me.”

Robert leaned forward. “How could you do it? He was the President of the United States for God’s sake. Where was your honor?”

“Things were different back then. *I* was different.”

“Really. You think so?” said Thorne.

“I don’t expect sympathy for what I’ve done,” said Charlie, his voice raspy, almost unintelligible. “I’ve lived a lifetime with the consequences.”

“Why bring it out now?” asked Robert. “Years have passed. Why didn’t you speak out a long time ago?”

“I thought about it every year. I mulled it over, but could never settle on the right moment. Now there’s DNA and other technology. And you’re the right man.”

Robert took a long drink of cold water, and sat the tall glass down on

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the coffee table. "How did you find out about me? You've been out of the loop for a long time. Homeless, living on the streets."

"I still have a friend or two in the right places overseas," Charlie answered. "They said you hate the Rothschild types as much as I've learned to. You're not much different than I forty years ago. I made the wrong choices, you didn't."

"You make it seem like you picked out the wrong shirt," said Thorne. "It's not that simple. We can go after Rothschild, but you pulled the trigger. What the hell do you expect us to do with you?"

"She's right," said Robert. "You're *as* guilty, if not more, than Rothschild. You pulled the trigger. You deserve something worse than death."

"I've lived a life worse than death," Charlie shot back. "I'd rather be dead. If I didn't have the evidence, I would've died a long time ago. If not by Rothschild, then by my own hand."

"Where's the evidence now?" Robert asked.

"Hidden," Charlie told them. "In a mausoleum crypt at a cemetery here in the area. It's been there since this whole thing started. I'd check on it now and then, no small task with Rothschild's men watching. It's the only thing that's kept me going."

"We'll need the evidence if we're going to make a case. Why did you take it back?

"Because you and your partner didn't seem quite sure you were up to the task," Charlie said. "I thought I'd made a mistake."

"And now?" asked Thorne.

"Now it's too late to stop. They know what we're up to so our time is short. But before I give you the evidence, I need to know you'll ride this out to the end."

"We're in all the way Charlie," said Robert. "Only remember. You go down with the rest. You assassinated a President, and I don't care how much remorse you feel or how long you've suffered on the streets. We can't just let you walk away."

Charlie stared at Robert, his face wrinkled with grief. "I understand," he said. "I have come to believe that the whole world is an enigma, a harmless enigma that is made terrible by our own mad attempt to interpret it as though it had an underlying truth."

Veil

“What’s that?” asked Robert.

“Just a quote I like,” said Charlie.

Robert motioned for Thorne to stop taping and follow him into the kitchen. He asked her to take the tapes and secure them in their office safe. He’d go with Charlie to get the evidence. They’d meet back at his apartment and take it from there.

The sound of breaking glass sent them flying into the living room. Charlie lay sprawled out on the couch, blood pouring from his chest and stomach.

Thorne crouched low and slid over to the window, a nickel-plated forty-five in her grip. Shredded curtains and broken glass from the window covered the floor. Thorne spied a dark figure running along the rooftop of the building across the street. “No use,” she said. “He’ll be gone by the time we get downstairs.”

Robert propped Charlie’s feet up and placed a pillow behind his head. He snatched open the old man’s shirt. “Charlie, Charlie. Where’s the evidence?”

Charlie tried to speak. Wisps of air came from his lips. Robert couldn’t make out a word. “Charlie, we need the evidence! Don’t die on us!”

Charlie smiled. Blood gushed from his mouth. He looked relieved. He tried to speak again, but only gurgled. Blood streamed down his cheeks. His chest stopped heaving. Robert checked for a pulse. *He’s dead.*

Thorne leaned down. “What now?” she asked, calm, controlled. “We don’t know where the evidence is, and without it, we’re sunk.”

Robert closed Charlie’s eyes. “First, let’s get rid of the body,” he said. “No police.”

“And then?”

Charlie’s confession pounded like a mallet in Robert’s head. *The evidence. How are we going to find the evidence?*

Two miles away, a shiny black Suburban calmly eased down Pennsylvania Avenue. On the backseat, a high-powered rifle, complete with a heat seeking infrared scope and directional microphone, lay hidden out of view. The vehicle drifted down the empty street. The

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driver slid a Merideth Brooks CD into the player, and sang along with the song “Bitch”.

Marilyn London lit a cigarette and smiled.

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11

Andre Perchenkov didn't always work as a serial killer. In the old Soviet Union, young, brash and arrogant, the KGB served as his private playground.

Good fortune faded when Mikhail Gorbachev opened the door to democracy. Russia's newfound freedom melted into catastrophe and chaos. The haves got more, the have-nots turned desperate for the simplest necessities. The new administration found itself buried in regional military conflicts, a worthless currency, and an uncontrollable beast—the Russian mafia.

Money came quickly, but to Andre's dismay, his brother, Vladimir, kept his hands in politics, supporting an underground movement set on restoring Communism. Soon, Vladimir caught the eye of the West, who labeled him a threat. Andre tried to persuade Vladimir to leave Russia by organizing the biggest heist in Russian history.

Hidden deep in a bunker outside Moscow, near a small town called Tula, lay a billion dollars in flawless counterfeit one hundred dollar bills. From time to time, the phony money bought weapons on the black market, or financed terrorism around the globe, and proved a target grand enough to entice Vladimir away from the CIA's gun sights.

Forty-eight hours after stealing the money, bone-jarring gunfire

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riddled Vladimir's compound. Andre, knocked unconscious, awoke the next morning unharmed, but couldn't find Vladimir. No body, no blood, not a trace.

Months later, the London Times reported the capture of a notorious Russian mafia drug czar. Vladimir Perchenkov. Wanted by the Americans, extradition came swift, conviction faster still. A federal judge sentenced his brother to two consecutive life sentences he'd never serve. They found Vladimir, wrists slit, dead in his cell.

Distraught, Andre plunged into a depression. When he recovered, the killing began.

Andre left his Brentwood Park townhouse for copies of USA Today, the Washington Post, New York Times, and a cafe latte. America he hated, but loved her creature comforts.

He no longer spent time tilling soil in Judge Patrick's garden. Citing security reasons, the Secret Service asked her to reduce the yard crew. Andre got the ax, but managed to scam the layout of Judge Patrick's home and intimate details of her life.

Brentwood Park, a typical, quiet suburb, proved the perfect place to hide. Andre's clean-cut "white boy" façade blended in nicely. No one questioned his comings, goings, or how he managed to afford such an expensive townhouse. He kept to himself, rarely entertaining visitors, except for the occasional prostitute he'd sneak in during the middle of the night.

Andre paused in front of his townhouse and skimmed the front page of the Times. His heart raced. SUPREME COURT CHIEF JUSTICE DIES OF HEART ATTACK. PRESIDENT TO APPOINT FIONA PATRICK.

"Mr. Bardoff! Mr. Bardoff! How are you this morning?"

His neighbor, Gloria Parsons, an attention starved redhead, waved to him from her front door. Still in her nightclothes, a pink sheer robe, she motioned with one finger, inviting him over. The sunlight lit her silhouette from behind. Andre wondered why she wore anything at all.

"Sorry Ms. Parsons, but I'm in somewhat of a hurry this morning," he said, in his best Eastern European accent.

"Now, now, Mr. Bardoff, I'll have none of that," she continued,

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making her way over to him. "We Americans appreciate a good neighbor you know."

Scintillating in the morning glimmer, her forceful, rich green eyes said today's excuses would not go over without a fight. Her hair, usually pulled back into a conservative bun, draped her shoulders like red strands of silk. Propped up on long, alluring, milky white legs, her breasts full and firm, (not the work of a surgeon), her thick dark nipples, like him, were hard, erect. Smiling, she put her hands on her hips and shook her finger at him in jest. "You've turned down my invitation for coffee every time mister, and quite frankly, I'm insulted." Her robe fell open, and a white lace thong snuggled where he now longed to be.

"I'm sorry Ms. Parsons. It's just that I'm so busy and..."

She snatched him toward her place. He didn't put up much of a fight. "*Pussy can do what ten men with machine guns can't, and with not nearly the mess.*" Vladimir's words rang in his ears as she pulled him inside and shut the door.

Gloria pushed Andre back against the door and kissed him hard. His instincts said stop, leave, but his erection offered a different opinion. He kissed her back, his thoughts drifting to Fiona Patrick.

He spun Gloria around, pushed her up against the door, snatched off her robe, and tore off her thong. He licked her body and sucked her breasts hard. "That a boy!" she said, wrapping a long leg around his back. "That's what mama's been waiting for."

Andre threw her down on the couch and quickly undressed. Gloria licked her lips. He closed his eyes and saw himself choking the life from Fiona Patrick's body. The thought excited him. He straddled her, angrily thrusting and ramming hard.

"Oh! You're a bad boy!" Gloria shouted. He flipped her over and sodomized her. "Not so hard honey, it's been a while."

He felt Gloria's muscles tighten. She pounded the couch and screamed. Unsatisfied, he grabbed her by the hair, and forced her down to her knees. He felt the back of her throat, imagining how he'd do the same thing to Judge Patrick. His orgasm erupted, knocking Gloria to the floor.

"Honey, you've got to come over here more often," she said, gasping for air.

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“Sorry,” he said, catching his breath. “It has been a while for me too.”

Andre slipped into his slacks, staring at the newspapers now strewn across the floor. A picture of Judge Patrick, shaking the President’s hand, blanketed the inside page of the Washington Times.

“I think she’ll do great on the Supreme Court, don’t you?” asked Gloria, picking up the paper, not bothering to dress. “Not bad looking either.”

“I don’t concern myself much with your politics.” Andre took the paper from her and folded it under his arm. Outside, he looked around to see if anyone was watching.

“Don’t be a stranger,” Gloria shouted. She winked, smiled, and closed the door.

In his living room, Andre leered at the picture of Fiona Patrick. The article promised a quick confirmation. *Fine with me. The faster she’ll die. First, I’ll send her a little message.*

Veil

12

Robert's cell phone vibrated.

"I need to see you right away," said Barbara Veil. "Stop by as soon as possible."

He tried to put it off for a few days. "Mother, I'm busy."

"No, I want to see you today."

"What's it about?"

"I'll explain when you get here." Click.

Robert hit Interstate Fifteen towards Great Falls, Virginia. The image of Charlie, dead on his living room floor, elbowed its way into his thoughts.

They wrapped the corpse up in sheets and an old rug, hauled it down to Thorne's Rover, and had it cremated by a mortician who owed Thorne a favor. On their way to the office, his partner tossed the ashes in a dumpster. "He'd want it this way," she joked.

Charlie's videotape confession now worthless, Robert focused on the evidence hidden somewhere in the city. *It might as well be at the bottom of the ocean.* Thorne stayed at the office compiling a list of cemeteries and mausoleums. .

Robert growled and slammed his fist on the dashboard. The Mustang swerved, almost hitting another car. A grandmother in a shiny red Volvo blew her horn, and gave him the finger.

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Interstate Fifteen merged onto Route Eighty-Nine. Robert exited Twenty Second Street into Great Falls. Five miles later, he swung into the driveway of a modest red brick colonial with ice white shutters. He shut off the engine. *Where do we start? Popeye. I'll start with Popeye.*

He bounded up the cobblestone walkway. It struck him how things hadn't changed much in the neighborhood in thirteen years. He grabbed the brass lion-head knocker he purchased in Cairo, then remembered his key. The door swung open before he could use it.

"Bobby," Barbara Veil shouted, lunging into his arms. Her strength still amazed him. She stepped back and gave him the once over.

"Haven't been eating again I see."

"Good to see you too mother," said Robert. "Chasing down bad guys keeps you thin."

"Excuses, excuses. Boy, I tell you, what's a mother to do," Barbara responded, shaking her head in jest.

Age stalked Barbara Veil, but at a Dick Clark pace. Her hair, thick and full, showed very little gray, and for a sixty-eight year old woman, her figure held a respectable shape.

"I'm here, so what's up?"

"I need a favor, a small one," she told him, slipping her arm through his, guiding him toward the den.

"A favor? You don't need to ask me for a favor. Just tell me what you need and it's yours."

Barbara pushed the den door open. A bright-eyed little girl with Lego blocks sat playing on the burgundy-gray Persian carpet.

"Good," his mother said. "Then I need you to look after a friend of mine."

On cue, a well-dressed blond, her eyes bluer than his, rose from his dad's old recliner and walked over, a nervous smile on her face.

"Fiona Patrick," she said, her hand fully extended. "And that mass of energy on your mother's floor is my daughter, Jessica."

Robert smiled and shook her hand. "Congratulations on your appointment to the Supreme Court, Your Honor. It's quite an accomplishment."

"Thank you. I only wish it hadn't come at such a trying time."

"Oh?" said Robert, looking at his mother, wondering if he'd been too

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quick to offer an unchecked favor.

“What she’s referring to, son, is the case you’re working on.”

“You mean the Bear?” he said, the picture coming clear.

“Yes,” Fiona jumped in, her smile fading. “Barbara mentioned your involvement several months ago when this psychopath started killing more judges. I didn’t think much of it then, well, not until he killed Judge Weiss. We were very close.”

“I see,” said Robert. “But I understand security has been stepped up since then.”

“It’s not enough,” his mother snapped. “They can’t do the job you can, besides, you’re already working the case. How difficult can it be?”

“It’s not my only case,” said Robert. “Now, I’m sure the Secret Service and FBI will go above and beyond to see that you’re safe. Especially since your nomination.”

“Mr. Veil, if I thought that would be enough I wouldn’t be here,” said Fiona.

“Son, you have Thorne to back you up. Can’t she take your other cases for awhile, at least until after the confirmation hearing?”

“It’s not just for me Mr. Veil,” added Fiona, looking over at Jessica. “Quite frankly, I’m not worried about myself. I just don’t want to take any chances with my little girl.”

Robert looked over at Jessica. He wanted to help, but the Kennedy case made it impossible.

“I’m sorry Your Honor, but my partner and I are at our limit. I’m afraid I won’t be able to help you.”

“Robert, this is important,” Barbara exclaimed.

“They’re all important mother,” he shot back. “I’m sorry. I’ll check with the agents watching Judge Patrick to make sure they’re on top of things. That’s the best I can do.”

“Robert!”

“Barbara, don’t push him,” said Fiona, her eyes swollen and red.

Robert didn’t really know what to say. Fiona turned and left the den. Jessica called out to her mother and gave chase. Barbara stared, her displeasure obvious.

“I don’t understand Robert. It’s not like you to turn away from something like this. Something this important.”

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"Mother, I told you. We just can't right now."

"What are you working on that's more important?"

Robert never kept any secrets from his mother. In fact, he often found her instincts keen, her advice solid. On more than one occasion, he'd sought her counsel.

"I can't talk about it."

"Can't talk about it? Since when?"

"Since I don't want to lose you the way I lost dad."

Barbara's eyes searched his. "Son, ever since your father's murder, we've always played it straight with each other, never holding anything back." She moved closer. "What is it son?"

Robert's stomach tightened. He gently placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Trust me on this one. I'll tell you later. For now, it's just too dangerous."

"I can take care of myself. What's so bad you can't share it with the woman who taught you how to shoot?"

Robert smiled, leaned forward and softly kissed her on the forehead. "All in due time. I promise."

Barbara gave him a sly mischievous look. He knew her appeasement would be temporary. "Fine. Keep your secret, for now. But I still want you to take this assignment."

Too good to be true. "I told you, I can't."

"Dammit Robert, if you don't watch over this woman and her child, I'll do it myself."

"Look, I'll talk to the Secret Service and make sure they're on top of things. That's all I can do. So please, stop asking."

Barbara's face deflated. "I better go check on our guests." She stomped out of the room.

Robert flopped down on the couch, head pounding. His cell buzzed, and Thorne didn't sound excited. She whittled down the number of cemeteries to twenty-five, and each held at least a thousand crypts or more. The news pained him.

"What's Barbara want?"

He laid it out plain.

"Robert, we've got too much on our plate. Don't let her bend you

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this time, like always."

He assured her, not as convinced as he sounded. They agreed to meet at the office after he searched the area around Crossroads, and talked to Popeye. He hung up, rested his head back, closed his eyes and groaned.

"Are you okay mister?"

Robert opened his eyes and smiled at Jessica. He didn't have much experience with children. His selfish ex-wife wouldn't tolerate them. "I'm just fine," he told her. "And you?"

"I'm okay," she said, her voice full of strength and confidence, "But I'm worried about my mom."

Robert checked to see if his mother lurked in the shadows. The heart-tugging scene had Barbara Veil written all over it. "Now why would such a pretty, special girl be worried about her mother?" He picked her up and placed her on his knee. "Your mother seems like a very strong lady."

"She is," said Jessica, assurance in her voice. "But she's worried, I can tell. I hear her on the phone sometimes. She thinks we're really in danger." Jessica tried not to cry, but couldn't.

Robert wiped away her tears. "Thanks mother," he mumbled under his breath. "Your mom's going to be just fine, and so are you. There're a lot of people watching out for both of you. Nobody's going to get close. I promise."

She rewarded him with a big smile. "Aunt Barbara says you're going to take good care of us so we shouldn't worry. That makes me feel better."

Mother, my patience is wearing thin. "You'll be safe Jessica, but I'm not the one who'll be watching you."

A curious look fell over Jessica's round little face. "Why not?" She folded her arms across her chest.

"Well, I'm, really busy right now," he said, reading her irritation. "It's a bad time."

"Why can't you help my mommy?"

"It's a little complicated," he tried to explain. "I'll do what I can, but I can't make any promises."

Jessica hopped off his knee, tears streaming down her cheeks. "You don't care if my mommy dies!" She cupped her face in her hands. "It's

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not fair!"

Robert reached out but she snatched away. "I want my daddy," she said sobbing.

He was dumbstruck. *Where the hell is her father anyway?*

"Now, now, little one. Come with Auntie Barbara," his mother said entering the room, Judge Patrick right behind her. "I have fresh baked cookies. That'll cheer you up."

Robert gave a "you don't play fair" look, as Barbara led Jessica from the room, ignoring him. Judge Patrick sulked over to the fireplace and stared into the flames.

"I'm sorry," she said, not facing him. "Normally I wouldn't be so worried."

"What about her father?" Robert asked, trying not to sound too blunt.

"He died almost three years ago, cancer."

Robert remembered. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'd forgotten."

"Three years is a long time. I've managed to move on."

Robert and Fiona both looked down at their feet, shifting back and forth in uncomfortable silence.

"When the Bear makes a try I want Jessica as safe as possible," Fiona finally said.

"With all due respect, there are a number of federal judges in the area. No one knows when or where this guy will strike next. He may not even come for you. So far, he hasn't targeted female judges. Mrs. Weiss got it by accident."

Fiona pulled a folded piece of paper from her purse and handed it to him. "This came to the courthouse in the mail today."

Robert looked at the note, written in Russian.

"I had a colleague at Georgetown University translate," she said. "It says 'Congratulations. Soon.'"

Robert stared at the note, then at her. "Why haven't I heard anything about this from the police, or on the news?"

"Because I haven't told them. I decided to take another route and called Barbara. She called you, and now you know."

Fiona walked over to the couch and sat down. "To know that monster is so close," she said, her voice cracking. "It's more than I can take."

Robert cursed under his breath. *How can I walk away? It would be*

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just like chasing the Bear, which we're doing anyway. At least that's how he'd sell it to Thorne.

Barbara came back into the room. "There's just too much crying going on in this house," she said, sitting down next to Fiona. "It's going to be alright." She threw her arm around Fiona's shoulders. "You just wait and see."

"Okay," said Robert. "I'll do it, but it won't be full time. I have another case that's important, so Thorne and I will want to set up at Judge Patrick's house and coordinate with the authorities involved. We'll have to clear it with the Secret Service and Justice Department. We'll be in and out, but we'll be there."

"Good enough," Barbara cried, slapping her knee.

Fiona ran over to Robert. "Thank you," she said. "It means a lot to me." She kissed him lightly on the cheek, and for the first time he noticed how good she smelled.

"You're welcome," he said. "Now go tell Jessica."

Fiona left the room. Robert glared at Barbara. "Mother."

"I don't want to hear it Robert," she snapped. "I don't know what you're working on, but whatever it is can wait."

Barbara walked over and stroked his cheek. "Thanks son, this means a lot to me. You're doing the right thing."

"You should've given me more warning than this. Next time..."

"You're always Lord knows where, doing God knows what. Just do this for me. Take good care of her, please."

Robert kissed the palm of his mother's hand, then her cheek, and headed toward the door. He caught a glimpse of his father in a photo hanging next to the door, and stopped. After all the years, it still bothered him.

"If he were alive he'd be proud of you son. You're just like him. Tough as nails outside. Good heart inside."

Robert ran his fingers across his father's face. He remembered what it was like growing up without a father, and thought of Jessica.

The front door closed behind him, the night still and quiet, he heard Thorne cursing in his ears.

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Robert parked in front of Crossroads and called Thorne. He tried the office, then her cell. No answer. She wouldn't like it at first, but watching over Judge Patrick gave them an edge. They knew the next victim. A break.

He examined the note Fiona gave him. White copier paper and a red felt pen. Different from the typewritten letter left at the Weiss murder scene. *Could be a hoax. I'll have Thorne run it against the prints in our files.*

Robert decided to keep the note between him and Thorne, at least for the time being. *The boys at Quantico can get their two cents in later.* He didn't want some over-anxious federal flunkie in their way fucking things up.

He stepped out of the car, his eyes fixed on a distinguished bronze plaque next to the mission's front entrance. The plaque read:

In Memory of
Patrick Orlando Miller
1949-2002

"I have come to believe that the whole world is an enigma, a harmless enigma that is made terrible by our own mad attempt to interpret it as though it

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had an underlying truth."

Umberto Eco

We'll miss you Patrick.

From those who call the streets home.

A large, impressive carving of Patrick Miller's smiling face hung just above it. Robert remembered the quote. The same Charlie mumbled when they videotaped him. Too obscure to be coincidence, it said Patrick Miller knew more than he told. *I have a hunch Popeye knows more too.*

It took thirty minutes to find the old vet. At liquor store number three, Robert watched the tarnished wheelchair glide out onto the sidewalk. Popeye spotted him and almost lost control of the brown paper sack balanced on his lap. He tossed his stringy wet hair back out of his face, gave a rueful sneer, and rolled away.

Robert jogged after him. The wheelchair sped up and disappeared around a corner. When Robert caught sight of him again, Popeye was nearly a block away. He quickened his steps, maneuvering in and out of tattered men, women, and children, some pushing grocery carts, others lugging garbage bag suitcases filled with all they owned.

A few feet from the wheelchair, he caught a whiff of Popeye's cologne—cheap wine and salty urine. Robert opened his mouth. The wheelchair jerked into an alley before he could speak. He followed, but could barely get a fix on Popeye among bodies, some standing, most sleeping next to piles of garbage.

"Ten bucks'll get ya a real good time honey," said a hoarse smoker's voice.

Robert looked down at a smiling heavy-set black woman wrapped in a filthy, faded blanket; most of her teeth rotted, her feet plastered with sores.

"I used to suck a mean one in my day, still can honey. Step up!"

"Not today," said Robert, pulling out a twenty. "Maybe next time."

The woman looked at the money. Her eyes widened. "I'll be right here honey, jus' ask for Mona, I'll hook you up."

"I bet you would Mona," he whispered, peering down the alley.

He spotted Popeye swigging away at a bottle snuggled in a paper

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sack. Robert stood behind him.

"I wondered how long it would take you," said Popeye, without turning around. "Where's Charlie?"

Robert hesitated. "He's dead."

Popeye took a long swig and said nothing.

"I'm sorry about Charlie and Miller," said Robert. "But I had nothing to do with either death."

"Sounds like a crock to me," said Popeye, in a raspy voice. He swigged again, his hand quivering. "They were my only friends. As much as you can have friends in this place."

Robert took a deep breath and looked around the alley, searching for nothing in particular. "I understand, and again, I'm sorry," he said, his voice sincere and steady. "I'm sorry I couldn't prevent their deaths. All I can do now is go after the ones who did it."

"Why did they kill Charlie?" Popeye asked. "What's so important Charlie and Miller had to die? We live on the streets. What could anybody possibly want with a hobo and the director of a homeless shelter?"

"I can't go much into detail. Let's just say it's big and very complicated."

"How big?" Popeye pressed. "My friends are dead. I have a right to know. It's the least you can do."

"I can't say, but I promise I'll catch these people. You have my word."

Popeye took another drink, placed the bottle in his lap, and swung the wheelchair around. "What makes you think you can, and not get somebody else killed?"

"I don't," said Robert. "These people play for keeps. You've been in a war. You know how cheap life can get when the stakes are high."

"I want to know what's going on," Popeye repeated.

Robert's patience thinned. "I don't have time to go back and forth with you. I need to know where Charlie spent most of his time. Where he laid his head."

Popeye glared. "Does this have anything to do with the C-I-A?" His eyes narrowed, cat-like, sly.

"Maybe," Robert answered. "What makes you think that?"

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Popeye pulled a crumpled pack of Newports from his jacket and lit one, the bottle snuggled firmly between his stumps. “Charlie used to mumble things sometimes,” he said. “CIA, FBI. It really seemed to upset him, gave him nightmares. We’d get drunk and he’d say he’d *fucked with history.*”

“Did he ever go into detail?”

“No, he just said he’d done some pretty fucked up things in his lifetime. I told him we all did. He just shook his head and walked off.”

“I need to know where Charlie hid out Popeye. It’s important.”

“On the street with the rest of us,” fired Popeye, squirming in his chair.

“I need direction, clues, something, anything. I need you to come clean. Where did Charlie hole up?”

Popeye took a deep drag on the Newport. Smoke streamed from his mouth and nose. “The Shaw Hotel over on R Street NW,” he said. “It’s about ten minutes from here.”

Robert repeated the name and location.

“Most of the hotels take vouchers over there,” Popeye continued. “We call it the suburbs. Charlie moved around on the streets most of the time, but that’s where he went when he didn’t want to be bothered. He registered there under the name C. R. Peace.”

Robert gave his thanks. Popeye downed the last bit of wine and tossed the bottle across the alley into a dumpster. “He had a friend he’d hole up with sometimes,” said Popeye, rolling his wheelchair closer to Robert.

“Who?”

“Jules,” Popeye said. “His closest friend.”

Robert’s pulse quickened. “Where can I find him?”

“Her,” corrected Popeye. “Haven’t seen her in quite a while. Charlie told me she wanted to move to a warmer climate. She wanted him to go with her. Winters can be pretty brutal here you know.”

“Why didn’t he go?”

“Said he wanted to *put things right*, and that he could only do it here.”

Robert stroked his chin. “Do you know Jules’ full name?”

“Julie. Julie Rice,” Popeye answered. “From Georgia, or somewhere down south.”

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Robert thanked him again. "Can I get you anything?"

"More wine," Popeye said, without hesitation, "and some smokes."

Robert pulled some bills from his pocket and placed them firmly in Popeye's hand. "If you hear anything or need anything, get in touch with me. You still have my card?"

Popeye slid the now smudged card from his front pocket. "Will do," he said, rolling out of the alley. "Think I'll crack a bottle of the good stuff this time. MD Twenty-Twenty. We call it Mad Dog. Been drinkin' it since Nam and that shit still got plenty of kick."

Popeye aimed his wheelchair at a liquor store up the street. "Think I'll give the towel-heads my business this time," he said. "Gotta spread the wealth, you know?"

"I know what you mean," said Robert. "Listen, take care of yourself. I'm being watched, so they probably know we've talked."

Popeye held up a chrome-plated .357 Magnum. "I can take care of myself." He put the gun away and faced Robert. "Mr. Veil. Whatever's goin' on, I sure hope it's worth it." He sped away, whistling as he wheeled.

Relieved, Robert jogged back to his car and headed for the Shaw Hotel.

His phone buzzed. Thorne. He filled her in. Since Jules lived on the streets, finding her was a long shot, but they'd run a national trace.

"You're gonna need those stones between your legs before this is over," said Thorne.

"I'm locked and loaded," he said, laughing.

"So am I big boy. So am I."

Robert remembered Fiona, and cleared his throat. "Thorne."

"I know," she said. "We gotta baby-sit a judge."

"How?"

"Barbara tracked me down and filled me in. Said she's worried about you and drilled me about our cases. I knew she'd talk you into something. I'm just glad you didn't tell her about Rothschild, or I'd be kicking your ass as we speak."

Robert laughed. Thorne didn't.

"I started the setup at Judge Patrick's house," she continued. "The government boys weren't very happy, but we have a hot line to the

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Secret Service, D.C. police, and Emergency Medical on the way.”

“I couldn’t have done it better.”

“No shit.” Thorne also informed him about a reception scheduled for the judge by the White House, to take place the following night at the Ritz Carlton hotel. “I told’em it’s a bad idea, but the White House insisted. Assholes.”

“My thoughts exactly, but we’ll deal with it later.”

Robert parked across the street from The Shaw, rehashed a few details with Thorne, hung up, and stepped out into a nightmare.

Drunks and addicts zombied in front of the hotel, mumbling to imaginary friends, scratching sores, searching for the next hit of black-tar heroin or crack cocaine. Gunshots crackled in the air. Nobody flinched or moved.

A man more skeleton than human offered Robert fellatio in exchange for ten dollars. He ignored the proposition and made a beeline for the hotel.

Barely audible men begged for change, blocking the hotel’s front door. A bright red No Vacancy sign flashed in a cloudy plate glass window, just above a large cardboard sign warning drug dealers and thieves to stay away.

Inside, the hotel looked worn, but surprisingly neat and clean. Aged couches and lounge chairs, with discolored, faded patterns, centered the lobby. Wood grain coffee and lamp tables, chipped, scratched, and beaten, stood sentry. A well-trodden flower-patterned rug covered most of the lobby, and the odor, not nearly as nauseating as outside, reeked of locker-room funk and urine, still too pervasive to ignore.

Even close to midnight, men, women and a few small children, sat around the lobby, some chatting away about the goings-on outside, while others honed their attention in on him. An obvious clear difference jumped out between these folks and the zombies outside. Their clothes bore the requisite Salvation Army feel, common on the streets, but with fewer wrinkles and much less grime. They wore socks and decent shoes, a rarity for the homeless.

“Can I help you honey?” asked a firm female voice behind him.

The voice belonged to a heavyset, dark-skinned black woman, sporting a bright smile and motherly aura. She easily weighed three

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hundred pounds, and her good-natured disposition assured him he'd found a friendly face. He introduced himself. She gently cupped his hand in both of hers. "My name's Josephine," she said. "But around here they call me Aunt Josie. I run this place."

"Nice to meet you Aunt Josie. Maybe you can help me. I'm looking for information on one of your residents."

Josie's demeanor changed. She put her hands on her bountiful hips. "You the police? Cause if you the police, I told ya'll before, no warrant, no information. We don't have trouble in here and I don't want none."

Robert understood why the inside of the hotel differed from the chaos outside. "I'm not the police," he told her. "I'm just looking for information on a friend who died. I need to handle some of his personal business."

"I'm sorry to hear that honey," said Aunt Josie, concerned. "You got a name?"

"Charlie Ivory," said Robert. "But he stayed here under the name C.R. Peace."

Aunt Josie stared for a moment, studying him, taking stock. "You say Charlie's dead?"

"Yes," Robert continued. "He died a few days ago. Did you know him?"

Josie carefully surveyed the lobby. "Step over to the front desk sugga?" She disappeared through a gray door marked *Staff Only* and reappeared behind the desk. "Now just how do you know old Charlie?"

Robert explained what he could without telling her much. He told her Charlie died of a seizure brought on by tuberculosis.

Josie shook her head. "Yes honey, Charlie stayed here. Off and on for twenty years; in fact, he was here ten years ago when I got here. Stayed to himself most of the time, but you could tell he was different from the others. I never could put my finger on it. He was smart and came in useful around here more than a time or two. I got the feeling he was hiding out or running away. Most are down here. Was he in some kind of trouble?"

Robert nodded and gave a wink.

Her face acknowledged his silence. "I've been running this place for ten years," she said. "You should'a seen it when I got here, trash all over

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the place. Seen some of everything in here, things I wish I hadn't. One thing I've learned. You have to know when not to ask questions." She winked back.

"Thanks for understanding," said Robert. "Any chance I can have a look at his room?"

"I'll give you the key," she said, taking one off a pegged board behind her. "These old knees ain't what they use to be honey. Jus' take the stairs to the second floor. Charlie stayed in room 227."

He thanked her and said he wouldn't be long.

"Take your time sugga, no hurry. I'll be right here when you finish."

Josie shooed away a toothless drunk that strolled in through the front door. "Oh no honey!" she scolded. "You know the rules! To the back and wash off before you bring yourself in here! Out!"

Robert heard the others in the lobby chime and back her up, repeating Josie's well-drilled rules. *More Aunt Josies. That's what we need, more Aunt Josies.*

Room two twenty-seven, the last room on the floor, stood at the far end of a long shadowy hallway. Rickety floorboards creaked and cracked beneath a worn-out green carpet that stretched the full length of the corridor. The noise made Robert wonder if Charlie chose that spot knowing any unwanted guest would be ceremoniously announced by the old squeaking floor.

Robert reached the room, and drew his gun when he heard someone moving around inside. Back against the wall, he listened closely, but didn't hear any voices. *Probably one person.*

He turned the knob, nudged the door open a few inches, and peeked inside. A lone figure packed papers and clothing from an old chest of drawers, stuffing a gym bag and brown paper sack. He pushed the door open and rushed inside. "Freeze!"

He jerked his gun from one side of the room to the other, his eyes darting back and forth, scanning for movement. "Drop the bags on the floor and raise your hands up over your head! Now! I won't ask again!"

The raggedly dressed person abruptly dropped the two bags on the floor. One an old, gray, leather gym bag, half open, with socks and a bunch of tattered clothing stuffed inside, the other, a large, brown paper grocery store bag, full of papers now scattered across the floor.

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“Turn around slowly,” Robert ordered, his gun trained directly at the person’s head. To his surprise, the face of a frightened old woman came into view. A black skullcap sat on her head like a tired alley cat. Dirty gray hair protruded from it down to her ears. Rot carved most of her teeth, and her face spoke hardship and survival.

“I’m sorry,” she said, in a panicked voice. “I didn’t mean no harm. I was jus tryin’ to clean out this stuff fo’ a friend. I didn’t mean no harm.”

Robert lowered his gun. She hardly appeared threatening. “Who are you?”

“I’m jus here to clear out some stuff fo a friend,” she repeated, shaken and confused.

Robert’s eyes widened. Popeye’s words hit him. *Julie Rice?* He took a step closer. She moved a few steps back. “What’s your name mother?”

She didn’t speak.

“I’m not here to hurt you,” he said. “You just surprised me, that’s all.”

The old woman took a breath and relaxed. Her hands shook, but the fear in her eyes melted. “Name’s Beth,” she told him. “You a friend a Charlie’s?”

“Sort of,” said Robert, his disappointment obvious only to him.
“Why are you here clearing out his things?”

“Cause he’s dead,” she said abruptly. “He’s dead and he told me if he died, to come get his stuff. Said I could keep what I want and throw the rest away.”

“How’d you know he was dead? It’s not common knowledge.”

“Got’a call from his friend Popeye. I live in the hotel. I know’d Charlie for a long time. Popeye said he died, but didn’t say much else. Charlie’s done, that’s all he said. He hung up, and I run up here.”

Robert rubbed his forehead. Beth bent over and gathered the papers and clothing. Disappointed, he looked around the lifeless room, its army style cot and nondescript furniture, hoping answers would seep out of the walls. He knelt down to help her.

“You must’ve been real close to Charlie for him to leave you all his stuff.”

“Closer than most, not as close as some,” answered Beth.

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“The closest?”

“Knew Charlie for years,” said Beth. “Didn’t get too close to many people. Liked his privacy, ‘cept when it come to Jules. He was real close to her.”

“You mean Julie Rice?”

“You know old Jules too?”

“No, but I’m trying to find her. Any idea where she might be?”

“Haven’t seen her for some time now,” Beth answered. “She and Charlie fell out about somethin, and it must’a been a beaut, cause those two thick as thieves.”

Most of the papers on the floor looked useless and unimportant. Old magazines, newspaper articles, junk mail, coupons, and incoherent scribbling on several legal pads.

But to Robert’s surprise, included in the pile of junk, were more than a dozen cemetery brochures, all featuring mausoleums and crypts.

“I need to take these brochures.”

“Take’em. Don’t know why Charlie kept’em anyway. He always lookin at em, like he was gonna die any day. I told’em carryin those things around was bad luck.”

Robert examined the brochures closely, but didn’t see markings or notes on any of them, not an indication one stood more important than the other. “Did he have a favorite?”

“Never talked about ‘em,” said Beth. “Least not to me. I asked him once. He almost bit my head off. I said to hell with it, and never asked again.”

Robert helped Beth up. He thanked her and asked if she needed any help.

“No, but thank you anyway,” she said, friendly and relieved.

Robert stuck the brochures in the inside pocket of his coat, placed a gentle hand on Beth’s shoulder, said good-bye, and left. *If the evidence is in one of these twelve, we have a chance.* He jumped in his car and threw on Earth Wind and Fire, dialed Thorne, and headed straight for the office.

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14

Old and cliché, visiting the White House no longer held a commanding presence for Edward. Until recently.

Over the years, he held at least one face-to-face with every President since Lyndon Johnson, initially joining his father and grandfather. He marveled at the command and authority the senior Rothschilds exerted over the Commander in Chief. He learned even Presidents took orders, answering to more than Congress or the American people.

His limo reached Pennsylvania Avenue and the White House came into view. President William Claymore twice shunned his request for this meeting, until Edward finally sent an “urgent” message through back channels. He often found himself at odds with President Claymore, who proved a most irreverent and difficult President to control.

However, today Edward wanted to secure President Claymore’s endorsement and support for Charleston’s Presidential bid, a move certain to spark controversy, especially since the Vice President, Lucas Springfield, confirmed his candidacy the day before. A risky move, getting Claymore’s support would be difficult but not impossible. Edward held a few chips he intended to call in. Favors he planned to cash out. Not to mention several Presidential *indiscretions* recently brought to his attention. *I’ll turn the screws if necessary.*

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A procession of sedans, limousines and government vehicles, lined-up in the White House driveway waiting for the impeccably uniformed Secret Service guard to wave them through. The parade included presidential aides, cabinet members and staff on their way to give the early round of briefings, on everything from foreign affairs to the world economy. Edward smiled. Many of these individuals worked on *his* payroll, and provided him with the same information as the President, sometimes more.

They reached the guard, who checked his clipboard, peeked inside the car, and asked for their identification. Once identified, they pulled through the gate to another barrier, where a series of lasers and cameras scanned the car for explosives or weapons. They passed muster and continued to the side entrance, where Sarah Ellison, White House aide, waited at the curb.

“Good morning Mr. Rothschild,” said Sarah, bright and cheery. “The President is looking forward to your meeting this morning.”

“Wonderful,” Edward answered, amused. “Will anyone be joining us?”

“Not this morning sir. The President wants to give you his undivided attention.”

Odd, Edward thought. They passed through another checkpoint inside and continued on to the Oval Office. *President Claymore never meets with me without a witness. Why the sudden change?*

He and Sarah marched in unison along the rich, deeply cushioned, blue carpet, passing portraits of former Presidents; Washington, Lincoln, Jefferson. Sarah headed for the Oval Office on automatic pilot. Edward’s sense of unease increased. The President never met with him alone, and *never* in the Oval Office, a level of respect Claymore denied him. They always met in one of the small conference rooms, an eight-year routine that never once changed.

“Good morning Mr. Rothschild,” said Alice Thurman, the President’s secretary.

“Good morning Alice. It’s so nice to see your lovely face,” he responded, kissing her extended hand. “I trust the President is in a good mood today.”

“It always starts out that way,” she said, with a playful smirk.

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President Claymore's staff, one of the most impressive in several administrations, touted Alice as its crowning glory. Not one to trust important positions to black people, a habit he'd picked up from his grandfather, Edward agreed. Smart, loyal, with the bite of a junkyard dog, Alice's exploits stamped Washington folklore. She fiercely guarded his privacy, and turned down a million dollars from a tabloid to *dish the dirt*.

"Mr. President, Mr. Rothschild is here for your nine o'clock," Alice said into the phone. "Yes sir, I'll send him in right away." She nodded at two burly, stoic Secret Service agents who stepped aside as she pushed past.

Sarah said something about escorting him back when he finished, but his mind shifted away from small talk to the President and the task at hand.

Inside the Oval Office, President Claymore sat conferring with several men whom Edward recognized as Secret Service brass, and didn't immediately acknowledge his presence. Alice motioned for Edward to remain quiet. Seconds later, the President wrapped up and sent the agents on their way.

"Good morning Edward," said President Claymore, stepping around his desk. The six-foot-two Commander in Chief extended his hand as though he and Edward were old friends, then nodded to Alice and Sarah, who left the room.

Edward searched Claymore's face for clues, smiled, and told him how well he looked. The President gripped his hand with an unusual forcefulness. Edward mustered his strength to match it.

"I'm feeling great these days," said the President. "I apologize for not rising when you entered. There's a reception tonight for Judge Fiona Patrick, my Supreme Court nominee. I was finishing a security update on her when you entered."

"No apologies necessary, Mr. President. I'll be attending the reception myself. Judge Patrick is an extraordinary jurist. I'm sure she'll sail right through."

"From your mouth to God's ears," the President said, laughing. "It's the last major appointment before I leave office. My job's almost done and I'm looking forward to fly fishing and time with my grandchildren."

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He motioned for Edward to take a seat on one of the small couches in the middle of the office and sat across from him. "My wife's had enough of politics," he continued. "Now it's *her* time."

They continued their customary small talk for two or three minutes, feigning concern for the minutia of each other's lives.

"So tell me Edward. What can I do for you this morning?" The President rested back in the couch, a smile barely discernable on his face.

"Well, as you know, Mr. President, my son is making a bid for the White House."

"Ah yes, young Charleston. Sure, I'm fully aware. I understand he's doing quite well in preliminary polls. Congratulations. Seems like you might finally get control of this office after all."

So, he does have something on his mind. "Whatever do you mean, Mr. President? I've never had anything but respect for this office, and admiration for those who've held it."

President Claymore sat up and stared him in the eye. "Let's not kid each other Edward. You only admire the things you can own or control. That's certainly not a state secret."

Edward leisurely crossed his legs. *Others might treat you like royalty, but you're more like trailer trash to me.* "We're both cut from the same cloth, Mr. President. You didn't come to this office thinking otherwise. Or have you forgotten your roots?"

The President's eyes danced. "I haven't forgotten, but that was a long time ago, a different place and time. You come to see things differently from this office, a lot differently."

"I understand, Mr. President. It's just funny how men never come to that realization until they're *sitting* in this office. Before getting here, they only want to know how to win."

"Even so, I've always put the country first," said the President, leaning back. "Way ahead of any *personal gain*."

True, you boy scout. You've been more trouble than you're worth.

"You've accomplished many noble things Mr. President. However, none of us can forget our place in the order of things. That mistake has been tragic for many a man in your seat."

President Claymore looked visibly dismayed. "And exactly where do *you* fall in the order of things Edward?"

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“At the top of the food chain, Mr. President. The very top.”

“Some say this office *is* the top.”

“They’re wrong, Mr. President,” said Edward, with the arrogance of Napoleon. “You know that as well as I do, sir.”

Afraid he’d pushed the envelope too far Edward decided to move the conversation in another direction.

“Mr. President, I didn’t come here to spar with you this morning.”

“Why are you here Edward? My Presidency’s a lame duck. You can’t hope to squeeze out more blood. Or can you?”

“One can never have too many friends when running for this office, sir, which brings me to the reason for my visit. I’d consider it a great favor and would be eternally in your debt, if you would come out in support of my son for the Presidency. I’ll let bygones be bygones.”

The President shook his head. “Even if I didn’t consider you the devil’s gift to man, you know that’s not possible. The Vice President is a good man, and a good friend, not to mention my allegiance to the Democratic Party. It’d be suicide.”

Edward wanted to laugh and remind him there were no such things as Democrats and Republicans, but bit his tongue. “Which is why it would mean even more and have a tremendous impact, Mr. President. Breaking rank would signal to the American people a real change in Washington. Trust me, I’ve made the rounds on the Hill. You won’t be alone.”

“It would also mean I’ve lost my political mind.”

“Yes, there will be a few initial tremors,” said Edward, “but they’d pass. In the end you’ll walk away with a legacy of political genius, a maverick ahead of his time.”

President Claymore cleared his throat. “I’ve seen a lot in this office Edward. Seen a lot, and dealt with a lot, including, wars, economic catastrophes, death. I’ve taken it all in stride; it comes with the territory. I have sorrows, but only one regret. Catering to men like you.”

President Claymore walked to his desk, pulled a large red file from his top drawer and sat back down. The file looked familiar. A dossier. It meant the President had a card to play. A move Edward expected.

“Scare tactics are beneath you, Mr. President. There’s nothing you can say about me or my family I don’t already know.”

President Claymore ignored Edward’s comment and opened the

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folder. "I knew this day would come Edward. The day you'd walk through those doors and I'd have to use this file."

Edward sat silent, wondering what the file contained.

"At first I couldn't figure out why a man like you would want an office like this," the President continued, slipping on his reading glasses. "So I looked into your activities. Looked *very* closely."

"You wouldn't be the first," said Edward.

"I know your little secret," said the President, looking up from the folder.

Edward, annoyed, his patience thin, fought to keep control.

"Oil," the President continued.

Edward's blood pressure rose. His face reddened.

"You want control of this office so you can deal with our friends, or should I say, *your friends*, in the Middle East. At least that's what I gather from these reports."

Edward's head pounded. *Stay cool. Just play it cool.*

"Access to our most sensitive nuclear, chemical, and defense technology," the President continued, "including weapons, manpower, and who knows what else, for almost six hundred acres of oil rich territory in the Middle East." The President closed the folder. "My God, Edward, have you given any thought to what this would do to the world? It would destroy our foreign relationships with every ally from Israel to Britain."

"My compliments, Mr. President, but I've done nothing wrong. I don't know where your information comes from, but your report is inaccurate. I've never discussed trading or selling secrets to anybody. That would be treason."

"Not if you controlled policy from this office," said the President. "A Cabinet of your choosing. Greased palms on the Hill and in the Senate. You'd have the run of the castle."

Edward smiled. "Like I said, I have no such intentions, and by the way, discussing oil isn't illegal Mr. President."

"No, it's not. Then again, we're not just talking oil, are we? No westerner has ever *owned* oil-producing property outright in the Middle East, have they? You'd be the first. What's that worth? Ten, twenty billion a year? A hundred? Not to mention the stranglehold you'd have

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over more than a few nations. Japan? Germany?"

Edward girded himself. "If a man did acquire that kind of reach, Mr. President, how do you think he'd treat his friends, *and his enemies*?"

The President took a deep breath and looked out into the rose garden. "I've learned to be content with what I have." He looked back at Edward. "And at this point in my life, I don't worry about my enemies."

"Some would call that foolish," said Edward.

"Some would call you crazy," answered the President.

"If you believe the things you're saying," said Edward, "then why haven't you done something about it?"

"You're right. This is all unconfirmed." The President tossed the folder on the table in front of them. "Or you'd already be in jail. Or worse."

"Please don't threaten me, Mr. President."

"Oh, you're not the man to threaten, Mr. Rothschild. I'll grant you that." The President crossed his legs. "But I guess your good friend Charlie Ivory found that out, didn't he?"

Edward's breath shortened, his heartbeat quickened. The President sat silent, as though watching the noose tighten.

"I'm not familiar with the gentleman," Edward lied. "Should I be?"

"Where were you November 22, 1963?" asked the President.

"At the top of the food chain," replied Edward, his confidence a bluff.

The President stood, towering over Edward. "I can't prove it, you bastard, but I wanted you to know. I know who you are. I know what you've done. You're an evil, despicable man, Edward Rothschild. Now get out of this office. And I hope hell has a special place just for you."

The President stomped over to his desk and pushed a buzzer. Edward sat frozen. He wanted to say something, to fire back, but the words choked up in his throat. He finally stood. The Oval Office door opened. He barely made eye contact with Alice. His head spinning, dizzy, he fought the urge to throw up.

"Oh, and Edward," said the President, not looking up from his desk. "Tell young Charleston I wish him all the best. He's going to need it."

Edward didn't answer. He wandered into the hallway, feeling Alice's glare on the back of his neck. Sarah came bounding down the hallway, all smiles and talking fast, but he couldn't make out a word.

Veil

Familiar aides and staffers greeted him, their words hollow in his ears. He went through the motions, shaking hands, slapping backs, and accepting encouragement for Charleston's Presidential effort.

He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his face. The President knew about his overseas plans. More importantly, he knew about Charlie Ivory. *Who else knows? Why didn't Vernon know about this? What the hell am I going to do?*

Edward slid inside his limo. Sarah's goodbye echoed in a cave. The door closed. His hands trembled. Edward bit his lip. *Think, dammit, think.* He grabbed a bottle and poured a generous brandy. *What the fuck am I going to do?*

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15

Edward's chauffeur, on his instructions, drove around the Beltway, biding time. An hour and three brandies later, anxiety subsided, his trembling hands relaxed.

President Claymore's dossier outlined his two biggest secrets. Charlie Ivory, dead, he could handle. The Middle East oil opened another matter.

Suraya Khomeini, arms dealer from Iran, sent him an invitation five years earlier inviting him to a private reception at the United Nations. Edward eventually agreed to attend, and the large, imposing Iranian told him a pulsating, enriching tale.

Israeli researchers perfected the ground breaking science, *molecular nanotechnology*, and stood a few short steps from being able to manufacture inexpensive oil, without exploration, drilling or refining. The technology provided the breakdown of structured matter, allowing the manipulation of molecular codes, and the production of natural resources the way a tree produced leaves. Israeli oil, for pennies on the dollar, would dominate the global market, and neuter every other country in the region. Israel named it Project Genesis, a new beginning.

Suraya estimated Genesis would be up and running in less than seven

Veil

years, and asked Edward for help. He named his price. Prime oil land ownership for life. Six months later, Suraya sent word. *It's a go.*

Edward set up control of the White House. Suraya and his associates planned Saddam Hussein's downfall. The President of the United States, (Charleston, if Edward succeeded) with strong support from the Senate and Congress, would step in to "help a wounded nation" by providing weapons, military advisors, and humanitarian support. Suraya and his partners would enjoy access to cutting-edge military technology and weapons, including an advanced nuclear program. A unified Muslim front backed up by nuclear weapons, would aggressively attack Israel. Edward's part of the deal would be done. World War III could begin.

Edward ordered his driver back into D.C. proper, called Marilyn, Vernon, and Simon, and ordered them to the club right away. He'd light a fire and get them to find the evidence. He'd be clean. Then it wouldn't matter what President Claymore knew.

Edward stomped the foyer's marble floor like a bull. Patra, the club hostess, greeted him. "Your guests are waiting in private dining room number three."

He gave a gruff thank you and continued through the lobby. The club's old-fashioned elevator, complete with sliding gate and red paisley couch, inched to the third floor. Edward played the situation over in his head. The elevator stopped, he flung open the gate, took a few steps, then paused in front of an antique mirror.

A Rothschild stared back at him, bold, strong, in control. *Nobody's gonna fuck this up! Nobody!*

Marilyn, Simon, and Vernon, seated at the far end of the room, looked puzzled. Edward tossed his coat on a small couch behind Marilyn.

"I was in the middle of an important briefing at the Pentagon," hissed Vernon. "Don't you think this is a little dangerous?"

Edward, hands on his hips, glared at them. "Have you confirmed Charlie's death?"

"Yes," said Marilyn, "I saw to it myself. Two hits, one in the stomach, one in the chest. I used a .30 caliber long-range rifle with armor piercing rounds. He's gone."

"What about the body?" asked Vernon.

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“I don’t know what they did with it. I checked the emergency dispatch logs. There were no calls from Veil’s apartment. No cell phones either. They must’ve disposed of the body or hid it somewhere. It doesn’t matter.”

“Doesn’t matter,” said Simon, sneering.

“No it doesn’t,” she said, cool and matter of fact. “A bullet riddled body would raise questions Veil couldn’t answer, especially after Patrick Miller’s death. He did us a favor.”

“I agree,” said Edward. “Which brings me to my next question.”

Marilyn looked down at the table nervously and cleared her throat. “There’s one problem.”

They all waited.

“It seems Mr. Veil and Thorne videotaped Charlie. I watched them for about thirty minutes waiting for a clear shot. They asked questions and he talked. By the time I fired they were finished.”

“I’ll have their places searched. Maybe we can squash it right away,” said Vernon.

“Tiss, tiss,” said Simon. “Are you sure you couldn’t have killed Charlie *before* they finished the tape? I mean, you heard what they were discussing.”

Marilyn’s face contorted. Simon chuckled.

“Enough,” snapped Edward. “What about the evidence? If we get the evidence, the tape won’t matter.”

“We can track down the evidence,” said Vernon. “At this point Veil is the only one who can lead us to it, so for now, he’ll have to stay alive. Simon can trail them, and call in if he sees something. I’ll have a team ready to go at a moments notice.”

“And I’ll see to it that no more videotapes are made,” Simon added, looking in Marilyn’s direction. Her eyes narrowed.

Edward slid into a chair and cupped his hands on the table. “The White House knows about Charlie, and quite possibly, what we’re up to.”

The trio, their jaws on the table, looked horrified.

“How? What?” Vernon stuttered.

“I met with President Claymore this morning. He hinted that he knew about Charlie. How much, I’m not sure. Others in the White House

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might also know.”

“Then they could already know about all of us,” said Marilyn, panic in her voice. “And you called us right over here. Are you out of your mind?”

Edward leaned forward and backhanded Marilyn across the face. The slap stunned her, shocked Vernon. Simon smiled.

“Calm down,” Edward growled, not missing a beat. “We can still get this situation under control. I need Robert Veil and his partner dead. I need that evidence found and destroyed, and I need it done right away. If we wait much longer, President Claymore isn’t the only one who’ll have our asses on a stick.”

Nobody moved or spoke for several minutes. Edward searched their faces. Marilyn grinded her teeth, Vernon thumped the table with his fingers. Simon calmly sipped a glass of ice water, and watched the others.

“This changes everything Edward,” said Vernon. “It’s one thing to cover up an old mess that should’ve been handled a long time ago. Now we’re digging the hole deeper. I don’t like it Edward. I don’t like it one bit.”

“I agree,” Marilyn said, sill angry, but under control. “This means somebody’s looking over our shoulder watching our moves.”

Edward remained calm. “It’s too late to reconsider,” he told them. “So let’s talk about the problem at hand. Veil and the evidence. Get rid of both and we’ll be in the clear. No one can make a move on us if we destroy the trail completely.”

Vernon sprang to his feet. “We don’t know where the evidence is Edward,” he growled. “We don’t even know if Veil does either. We can’t just snap our fingers and make this go away.”

“You’re the Director of the CIA, Vernon. I suggest you and Miss London use your resources more effectively and take care of it. I’ll handle the President.”

“You’ll handle the President? Just what does that mean?” Marilyn asked.

“That’s my problem,” said Edward, cold and firm.

Marilyn joined Vernon. “I’m sorry Edward. I’ll give back the money. I’m out.”

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"I'm afraid I have to agree," added Vernon. "This has gone too far. If we don't cut out now, we'll burn with you. It's not worth it."

Simon, enjoying the ruckus, said nothing.

Edward slammed his fist on the table and pointed at them. "Let me tell you this," he said. "You can't get out. It's too late. The only way out is to kill Veil and destroy the evidence. It's the only way."

Vernon walked to the door. "I'm sorry Edward," he said. He looked at the others, then left the room.

Marilyn's eyes stayed fixed but she didn't speak. "Goodbye Edward," she finally muttered, and followed Vernon out of the door.

Simon sucked his teeth and examined his nails. "Don't worry," he said, tossing a brown Bogart brim on his head. "I'll track Veil and his partner. Those two are just panicking. They'll come back." He cleared his throat. "You know, in light of the new developments, I think a more appropriate compensation is in order."

He walked to the door all smiles. "I'm sure you'll come up with an amount we can all live with. Let me know and I'll sell the others." He tipped his hat, bid Edward a better day, then left.

Edward looked at the bar, but decided he'd had enough to drink. He called Patra and told her to have his car ready. He'd call Simon later and make them a new offer. He checked his watch. Three-thirty. Four hours before Judge Patrick's reception. He headed for the snail-like elevator.

What more can this day bring?

Veil

16

Robert divided up the brochures he found in Charlie's room with Thorne and searched his half. Neither found a trace of the old man or a clue to the evidence, in the mausoleums or the cemetery office files. The longer they searched, frustration mounted. They decided to make another pass and examine one crypt at a time. Robert went back through Lexington Cemetery in Virginia, but found nothing.

While Thorne continued the search, Robert went to Judge Patrick's estate. Lost in thought walking the grounds, he didn't notice Agent Sams next to him, a huge German Shepherd by his side.

"Just thought I'd let you know we've covered the entire estate. It's clean."

"Thank you Agent Sams. But do you think it's possible you can search it again?"

Agent Sams looked puzzled. "That'll make six times. I think five is more than enough."

"I understand, and you certainly don't have to take orders from me. But please. Indulge me. For the judge's sake."

Sams looked around the estate at his team. "Okay Mr. Veil, but after this I have to pull some of my men to get ready for the reception

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tonight.”

“Thank you Sams. I know it’s overkill, but this guy has slipped through one of the biggest manhunts in history.”

Sams’ face twisted. “And don’t think it doesn’t have us heated. I’m gonna hang this guy’s balls from my rear view.”

“You’ll have to beat me to them first,” said Robert.

They laughed, then Sams stared at Robert, like he had something on his mind.

“Anything else agent?”

“I’m curious about something.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. How is it you and your partner get the run of the farm? I know you worked for the CIA and did a stint in the Marines. I’ve just never heard of such a thing.”

Robert considered the question. Not the first time he’d been asked. “It’s classified Agent Sams. No offense, but let’s leave it at that.”

Robert headed to the main house. His mind drifted away from the Bear, to Iraq. From Rothschild, to Iraqi Freedom. One of his assignments during the war was a clandestine operation, code name: Scorpion. Their mission: assassinate Saddam Hussein and any heirs to his dictatorship. Intelligence on Saddam’s whereabouts proved sketchy. Instead of the monarch, they found members of Saddam’s family including women and children. Their orders clear, *no prisoners*, the mission failed, sabotaged by him and Thorne. That, with their refusal to execute a group of scientists, and the brass had had enough. He and Thorne walked out on the government and never looked back. Connected and well trained. Bounty hunters. Guns for hire.

Robert spotted Fiona standing on the balcony over looking the backyard, and saw the strain on her face. She waved. He answered with an encouraging smile before she turned and disappeared inside the house. Robert didn’t want to add to Fiona’s problems, but something gnawed at him. Something he needed to address.

He crossed the patio and slid through the back door into the kitchen, where Caroline, Fiona’s chef, prepared lunch for the federal agents.

Just beyond the kitchen, Robert admired the most elaborate family room he’d ever seen. Pool and ping-pong tables, a two-lane bowling

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alley, a vintage jukebox, arcade games, and just about every other toy a grown boy needed to stay entertained, surrounded a mammoth entertainment center with a sixty-inch plasma screen.

“I do love sports,” said Fiona, behind him. He turned around. “My father turned me into a sports fiend,” she continued. “I think he really wanted a boy.”

“He could’ve adopted me anytime,” said Robert, noting how lovely she looked in a sleeveless black sundress splattered with lime green flowers. “And you’re certainly no boy.”

The compliment drew a smile from Fiona, who blushed. “Thank you Mr. Veil. I didn’t think you noticed such things. You’re so caught up in your work.”

“You’re right. I do get caught up in my work. But I notice most things, Judge Patrick.”

“Please call me Fiona.”

“Ok *Fiona*, I do notice most things, especially the beautiful, and you should call me *Robert*.” *Flirting with a potential Supreme Court Justice. I’m definitely moving up in the world. She seems to be in a better mood. This is as good a time as any.*

“Fiona, we have a problem.”

“You mean it can get worse,” she said, laughing. “How could there possibly be more?”

“I think the reception tonight is a bad idea,” he told her. “You’ll be far too exposed and I don’t think you should take the chance.”

Fiona’s light-heartedness melted away. “You want me to cancel on the President? The President of the United States!”

“Yes,” he said, firmly. “It’s just too dangerous. And it might be a good idea to send Jessica to stay with a relative, at least until the confirmation hearings are over.”

Fiona walked to the pool table, tears streaming down her face. Robert followed and placed a hand on her shoulder. “It’ll be alright, I promise you. We just have to take extra precautions.”

“To hell with you and your precautions,” she said, knocking his hand from her shoulder. “I can’t wave this off, it’s crucial. Every member of the judiciary committee will be there.”

“They know what’s at stake. They’ll understand.”

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"I'll look like a coward," she said, raising her voice an entire octave. You're supposed to watch out for me, not bury me."

"I'm trying to protect you. Save your life."

"I want you out of here," she screamed. "Now!" She picked up the cue ball and hurled it into a trophy case. The glass exploded. Fiona marched into the den and slammed the door behind her. Several agents scrambled into the room. He put his hands up to let them know everything was okay.

"Is everything alright Mr. Veil?" asked Agent Sams, as the others panned out and inspected the damage.

"It was an accident. Everything is under control," he told them.

Agent Sams gave Robert a knowing look, ordered his men outside, and holstered his gun. "Mr. Veil, this has been hard on all of us. But I think we need to keep things as routine for the judge as possible."

Robert understood. Secret Service agents were trained to protect, but were also skilled at making those they protected feel as normal as possible. He thanked the agent.

Agent Sams turned to leave, then hesitated. "It's no secret most of us resent your involvement."

"I know. It's been a long standing feud."

"Well, the boys in the trenches, myself included, want you to know we understand. We'll be there when, and if, you need us."

"That's a change of heart for you."

"The past is the past," said Sams. "Let's just say making sure the judge lives through this takes precedent. When this is over we can go back to status quo." He smiled and left the room.

Thorne walked in and admired the smashed trophy case. "Well, I see you've got everything under control."

"What about you? I'm sure you've got it all under control and Julie Rice is sitting outside in your car, *with* the missing evidence."

She shot him a *go to hell* expression, picked up the cue ball and tossed it on the pool table. "No," she said. "I didn't find a thing. In fact, I feel further away than when we started."

"What about the cemetery brochures?"

"I checked the records at each, looked at the mausoleums of several. Dry so far. Not a sign of Charlie anywhere."

Veil

“That makes sense,” said Robert, aggravated. “After all, we’re looking for fly shit in pepper.”

“Not really,” said Thorne.

Robert moved in closer. He needed good news.

“Charlie knew he was going to contact us, to bring this whole thing out, right?”

Robert nodded.

“He was smart,” she continued. “A vile little fucker, but not stupid. There has to be something we’re missing. A clue he knew *we’d* find if something went wrong.”

“You’re right,” Robert agreed. “We’ll have a look at the cemeteries again. The brochures are the key. The evidence is in one of them, I know it. After the reception we’ll check.” Robert cracked a smile. “You were right about this one, huh?”

“Fool, don’t get me started.”

“Look at it this way,” said Robert. “It can’t get much worse.”

Thorne cracked a smile. “Well, hold onto your butt’ cause it is.” She crossed her arms and stepped closer. “My friends at NSA tell me there’s been a stirring high in government circles. A revelation about President Kennedy’s assassination. They mentioned you, me, Charlie, and Rothschild.”

Robert stroked his chin. “Did your friends say how far up it goes?”

“To the top,” Thorne answered.

Robert’s face asked the question. *You mean?*

“President William Jefferson Claymore,” she said. “And get this. The President met with Edward this morning. Something about his son Charleston’s bid for the White House. They weren’t sure, but my contacts say Edward left the meeting a little, how shall I say, sullen. They also said Edward’s trying to get his hands on a large parcel of offshore real estate.”

Robert furrowed his brow. “Real estate?”

“In the Middle East,” Thorne clarified. “A *very* large oil field somewhere in the Middle East. The State Department’s about to piss their pants.”

“That’s not possible,” said Robert. “I don’t care how much money that arrogant asshole has. None of the Arab countries would *ever* sell an

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oil field to an outsider. Why would they? It's their base of power."

"Because this asshole's son is about to become President. Word around the intelligence water cooler says Edward intends to orchestrate a mass exchange of nuclear technology in return."

"Israel would never stand for it," said Robert. "And if I recall, I've heard Rothschild speak out about the protection and security of Israel from the Palestinian threat." He smirked.

"Obviously he's full of shit," Thorne answered. "You know how hypocritical these guys can be. Everything is a means to more. The real issue here is how this plays into our situation. With so much at stake, he's gonna be hell warmed over."

Robert paced the room. "Let's rattle the trees. Confront Edward directly. Bluff. We'll tell him we have Charlie on tape, and the evidence, and see what falls out. We expose the Kennedy plot, and the Middle East bullshit will take care of itself. His son won't get close to the White House."

"That's your plan? Suicide?"

"It's better than being sitting ducks," said Robert. "We'll smoke'em out. Rothschild's not working alone and we need to find out who's with him. It'll buy us some time. He wants the evidence, that's why he didn't kill Charlie at first. That's why he won't kill us, at least not right away."

"It's risky," said Thorne, stroking her hair. "But you're right. Besides, you know me. If I have to die, I might as well go out in a blaze."

"Then it's agreed. We'll shake'em up, then burn'em down."

"What about the judge?" Thorne asked. "We still have to baby-sit. What if they think she's involved?"

"It's already too late. They know we're watching over her, if not, they will soon, and they'll keep an eye on her just to be safe."

"Do you think we should tell her?"

Robert looked over at the trophy case and the pile of broken glass. "Not at the moment," he said. "I'll tell her when I think the time is right. We'll be taking a big chance when we do."

"It can't be any bigger than it is now," said Thorne.

"She's a member of the bar, a judge," said Robert. "We'd be providing her with knowledge of a crime. The assassination of President

Veil

Kennedy no less. She might feel compelled to tell what she knows.”

“Well, maybe she’ll be more compelled to keep breathing,” Thorne answered, peering out of the window at the agents checking the grounds.

“I’ll handle that phase,” said Robert.

“Well then, let’s hop to it,” Thorne said, full of confidence.

Robert looked at Thorne and remembered the battles they’d fought together. Bullies, war, even the deaths of parents.

Thorne stared back. “Don’t worry partner,” she said, with the conviction of a fighter pilot. “I wasn’t with it at first, but now I am. I want it as much as you do. We’ll win, or take every last one of them with us.”

They clasped hands, feeding off each other’s energy. They let go and Robert looked toward the den. “I have to get her ready for tonight. Make sure her mind is settled.”

“Go to it big boy, I’ll check on our friends outside. Where’s my room in this place?”

“Upstairs, the second to the right, next to Jessica’s.”

Thorne slapped his shoulder, cut through the kitchen, grabbing several sandwiches from a platter, and hit the back door. Robert heard her bark orders as she chewed. The agent’s dogs barked back anxiously, as though they understood.

Robert, hesitant, went to the den, stopping at the door to collect his thoughts. He understood Fiona’s frustration. She and Jessica were being forced to live like caged animals. She asked him to leave, *but that was the stress talking*. It didn’t matter anyway. He wasn’t going anywhere. If something happened to Fiona or her daughter, he’d never live it down. His mother had a long memory.

He knocked on the door. No answer. He let himself inside. Fiona lay stretched out on a big green sofa, fitful and restless. She turned toward him, eyes red and swollen.

“I’ll be so glad when it’s over,” she said, fighting the sobs.

Robert knelt at her side and used his hands to untangle her disheveled, golden locks. “It’s going to be okay,” he said softly. “I’m sorry if I seemed insensitive, that wasn’t my intention. We’ll go to the reception tonight and deal with it. You concentrate on dazzling the President and the crowd. I’ll worry about everything else. We can

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discuss the rest tomorrow.”

Fiona sat up and wiped her eyes. “You must think I’m a wimp,” she said. “Not exactly as tough as my billing.”

“Not at all. Anyone would have a hard time in this situation, and none of us are as good as our press.”

“Except you.”

Robert cracked a smile. “Even I have my moments.” He fixed on her ocean blues, drawn by her vulnerable charm.

“I really appreciate everything you’re doing for us,” she said.

Before he could respond, she leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek. “Thank you.”

Her eyes and lips invited him to kiss her. His body flinched forward. He pulled back.

“I better help Thorne check the grounds,” he said, standing.

“Yes,” said Fiona. “And I better get ready for tonight.”

He helped her up and headed for the door.

“Robert,” she called.

He turned, wanting to go back. To hold her tight and kiss her hard.

“Again, thank you.”

He smiled and left the room.

Veil

17

Andre lingered in the woods behind a plain two-story house, and waited. He checked his watch. *Four o'clock. He'll be here soon.* He opened the briefcase leaning against his leg. Two hundred thousand dollars in crisp counterfeit bills stared back. He closed the case and lit a cigarette.

Two Winstons later, a black Ford Crown Victoria parked in the driveway, and the driver ran inside. Andre put the third smoke back in the pack, checked the area for nosy neighbors, and quickly strode to the back door. Two knocks and the door snatched open. "You're late comrade."

"It couldn't be helped. Come inside."

Inside, the house looked less impressive than outside.

"You should move up in the world comrade. You've certainly earned enough."

"In due time. Extravagance draws attention I don't need."

Andre understood, and admired the host's restraint. "Here's the money." He tossed the briefcase and made himself a drink. "Count it if you like."

"No need. I trust you," his host said. "And here's the information you requested."

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He handed Andre a thick folder. The Russian tucked it under his arm and drained his glass.

“Aren’t you going to check it?”

“I trust you too comrade,” said Andre, smiling. “Without trust, what do we have?” They laughed. He hugged his host and left. Back in the woods, he lit another Winston, and hummed a Russian tune.

Veil

18

Reporters, on-lookers, and the naturally nosy, all vying for pictures, autographs and stories, packed the lobby, waiting areas, and lounges of the Ritz Carlton Hotel. The capitol city's powerful and elite, polished up in after-five attire, waltzed about shaking hands and talking to the press. Robert and Thorne blended in nicely, an attractive couple, striking and exquisite. He in a midnight black Hugo Boss tuxedo, a Christmas gift from his mother, and a sleek black and gold Versace draped Thorne's statuesque frame like a runway model. They glided through the impressive crowd on opposite sides of the lobby, subtly looking for anything suspicious or out of place.

Robert hated large crowds. Unpredictable, any crazed, motivated fool could slip through unnoticed, despite the tightest security. Often, the problem saw you before you identified them. Robert remembered a peace rally in Israel they both were assigned to, where Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, surrounded by some of the world's preeminent security agents, was gunned down by Yigal Amir, a young right-wing extremist yielding a 9mm Beretta. Thorne, alone on assignment in Mexico, watched presidential nominee, Luis Colosio meet the same fate in Tijuana at a political rally in 94, by a motivated maniac who managed to

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work his way up-close in a crowd.

Robert spotted Secret Service agents scattered liberally throughout the Ritz, visibly scanning the crowd. Well-attired undercover agents, coupled up in man/woman teams, mingled inconspicuously with the reception attendees. Robert remembered the drill. Agents were given false identities for cover, complete with phony family information, jobs that didn't exist, and political allegiances they didn't necessarily hold. Anyone exposing negative chatter about the President or U.S. government received special attention. Sometimes the agents were directed to start negative chatter without provocation, fishing for a potential threat. If a real hazard surfaced, they were quickly, quietly, whisked out to a waiting car and driven far away. If they were lucky, they'd only be detained for a week or two, and even after their release, they remained on a list the agency tracked around the clock.

Thorne caught his attention with her eyes, and flashed a *so far, so good* nod and smile. He acknowledged her with a slight tilt of his head and kept moving, working the room like a pro, not lingering in one place too long, not offending anyone with his exit, gracious, while examining faces, cataloging names.

Robert escaped the chatter of a well-to-do couple from Wisconsin: he, stout, red-faced, with a bulbous head, and she, over-adorned with jewelry and make-up, and eventually reached the ballroom doors. Two Secret Service killer mutant penguins, standing sentry, ran digital magnetic recorders over him, and the encoded identification card issued by the Justice Department.

Inside the spacious, elegant main ballroom, the crème de la crème of Washington talked, planned, bragged, and schemed. Robert gazed at the ceiling, and marveled at the miniature recreation of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, the only one like it in the States. With the ease of a dolphin, he floated about the room, picking up bits and pieces of sensitive chatter.

"I've been told that AquaPlatinum will split this week," someone said.

"We've got Senator Bradley in the bag. He'll push the Gun Control Bill right through," said another. "To hell with the NRA."

Veil

Still another bent the ear of a sympathetic *comrade in riches* with the equivalent of, "you just can't find good help these days."

At the dais, Fiona chatted with a colleague. Robert moved to a spot just beyond her line of sight. Striking and chic in her long charcoal evening gown, she flaunted a beautiful but understated quality, sophisticated, but down to earth. He tried not to stare, but *she's got me*. They almost kissed in her den, but he thought better of it. Now he watched her charm dazzle the room, and hoped the opportunity came again.

Guests filed into the ballroom and Robert gave them the once over. Fiona's eyes caught his. He smiled. She answered with a wink, then turned her attention to the next supporter jockeying for her attention.

"Things seem to be under control," said Thorne, gliding up to his side. She scanned Robert's face, traced a beeline to Fiona, and smiled. "I knew it," she said. "You looked a little too calm and collected back at the house, after you finished consoling her."

"Don't worry. Nothing happened. I've got it all under control."

"Tell that to the little man in your pants."

Robert smiled. "Little?"

Thorne laughed and went to her table on the far side of the ballroom. The schedule, seared into Robert's memory, said President Claymore would arrive thirty minutes after everyone sat down. However, he knew the Secret Service actually never allowed the President to show up at a published time, and never announced which entrance he'd use. Not even the President knew the decision until the very last minute.

In the corner of his eye, Robert caught a glimpse, a flash, of a familiar face. Someone watching, staring. Robert turned. The old man smiled.

Edward Rothschild.

Reginald Cook

19

Andre meticulously studied the facts and photographs his connection supplied for the two hundred thousand. The well-paid contact, a leftover from his days in the KGB, came through as he had from the beginning, providing intimate details of each judge's life, and information regarding security and security personnel.

"Excuse me, waiter, can you please make sure I get the vegetarian meal? I called ahead."

"Not a problem. I'll see to it straight away, as soon as I finish filling the water glasses."

Andre, clean-shaven with coal black hair, latex, and make-up, sported a fifty-pound body suit, complete with beer belly. The servers at the Ritz wore the typical well-pressed, dark burgundy uniforms trimmed in gray with black bow ties, that contrasted with the rich pink linen tablecloths, white fan-folded napkins and gold-plated tableware. He looked like any other South American immigrant serving people who barely knew he existed, and didn't get an awkward glance.

Andre spotted Robert Veil, an intriguing figure highlighted in the file. Across the room, he eyed Nikki Thorne, Veil's partner. Mildly impressed, he spent extra time memorizing details about the two. Not

Veil

out of concern, but competition. He gave Thorne the once over. She intrigued him. The file said no romance existed between the two, something Andre found hard to believe.

Getting a spot on the hotel's banquet crew went smoother than Andre anticipated. He registered with almost every restaurant and event staff employment agency in town.

The Ritz, short-handed, recognized his superior sense of decorum and etiquette, tricks he'd picked up dining at some of Europe's finer bistros. They expedited his security check; ran his driver's license and Social Security number; both came back clean; no felonies, no criminal history. Fifty thousand well spent.

Andre spied Judge Patrick at the dais and looked for an opening, a chance to make his move before the President arrived with a wave of extra security.

He locked in on Robert Veil, and followed his eyes to a stately old man standing twenty feet from where Andre poured ice water.

Veil walked over to the regal old man. Andre edged toward the dais.

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20

Robert glanced over and Thorne gave him a nod. He checked Fiona. An agent stood watch at each end of the stage. Additional agents came inside, some manning the exits, others scattering throughout the room. The President wouldn't be far behind. Agent Sams stood just beyond the kitchen entrance with an easy view of the crowd. *She'll be safe for a few moments.* Robert looked back at Edward. *This is as good a time as any.*

"Mr. Veil, I presume," said Edward, not extending his hand.

"Mr. Rothschild," answered Robert. He smiled. *Hello asshole. How about a bullet in the skull?*

Edward folded his hands behind his back. "I'd say this was a real pleasure, but..."

"But we both know that would be a lie."

"Mr. Veil, is there something I can do for you? I'm quite the busy man you know."

Robert inched closer. "There's nothing you can do for *me*. But there's quite a bit I intend to do for *you*."

Edward raised an eyebrow. "I'm all ears."

"I have several *rare artifacts* you might be interested in, including an exceptionally maintained rifle, in mint condition, one of

Veil

a kind, black and white photographs of a former President, bullet fragments, books and papers of extreme historical value, and brain matter. A President's brain matter. You see, the previous owner's not with us anymore, but he did take time to document his opinions concerning the pieces, on videotape. The whole thing makes for quite a story, and should prove very valuable, especially to a man like yourself."

Edward bristled, but remained calm. "And exactly what does any of this have to do with me?"

"By itself, nothing," said Robert, leaning in close to Edward's ear. "But as I said, the owner of these *artifacts* died, but said quite a bit on the record. Assassination, cover-ups *and you*." Robert stepped back and gently brushed lint off Edward's shoulder. His smile widened.

Edward's eyes stayed on Robert. He leaned forward slightly, never breaking his piercing stare. "Mr. Veil, don't play over your head. There's no upside in it, and someone may pull you from the game."

"Maybe. But before that happens, I'm going to see one of the players suffer. Him, and his entire family. If I get really lucky, I might get to laugh at a funeral or two."

"Now Mr. Veil, let's be reasonable men," Edward said, with a wicked smile. "Certainly there must be a great deal a man like me can do for a man like you."

Robert hesitated as a passerby stopped behind him looking for her seat, located her table, and continued walking. "There is something you can do for me," answered Robert. "In fact, it's something *only* you can do."

Edward's ears perked up. "And that would be?"

"Go back to your office. Write a nice long letter explaining President Kennedy's assassination and your role in it. Smoke your favorite cigar, have a glass of wine, your rarest, if you prefer. Pull a gun from your collection. If you don't own one I'll be happy to lend you mine. Then open your mouth wide and blow."

Edward stole a glance at Thorne, then looked up at Judge Patrick. "You amuse me Mr. Veil. I'll see if I can find some way to amuse *you*."

"That shit doesn't scare me."

"I'm not trying to scare you. I mean what I say." He looked at Fiona again. "You seem quite taken with our Supreme Court nominee. I

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understand you're watching over her. Isn't it ironic how bedfellows can grow out of such trying situations? I understand she has a daughter."

"I told you. I don't scare that easy. However, since you've made something of it, how's your son? Does he know about your plans in the Middle East? I understand the President does."

Hatred burst onto Edward's face. His eyes hardened. "You'll have to excuse me, Mr. Veil. I must get to my table. I believe the President is due to arrive any second."

Edward walked toward his table, then stopped. "Oh, and Mr. Veil. Give my love to your mother. It's been awhile."

Robert headed back to his station. *Okay. Edward Rothschild has to die.*

Veil

21

Andre assisted a wealthy elderly woman and her husband to their seats, all the time studying, calculating, not wanting his plans to grind to a sudden, disastrous halt.

"Thank you young man," said the old woman.

Her gratitude registered faintly in Andre's ears. He smiled and nodded, his eyes tracking, watching.

He watched Robert finish with the old man, then walk over to an agent stationed on the stage to the right of the judge. Robert whispered in the agent's ear. Andre felt perspiration building under his fat suit and swallowed. Despite his cunning and nerve, once the President arrived, *all bets would be off.*

Andre saw his connection, Agent Sams, standing near the kitchen entrance surveying the room like a well-trained German Shepherd. The agent panned the room several times, never once showing any sign he recognized the Russian. *Good. Either my disguise is perfect, or he's ignoring me.*

"Eduardo," a voice whispered.

Melissa Adams, the banquet manager, stood behind him, all smiles. "I need you to take a fresh water pitcher to the dais right away."

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Before the President arrives.”

“Yes. Right away Ms. Adams. It’ll be my pleasure.”

Andre walked past Agent Sams, who gave him the once over. Andre nodded subserviently, showing his slightly yellowed teeth. *Nothing.*

“Here you go Eduardo. Take this up front right away.”

He took the tray and returned to the ballroom. He panned the room, but couldn’t locate Robert or Thorne. Andre straightened up, discreetly slipped a folded note out of his vest pocket, and palmed it under the tray. He reached the right side of the stage where a poker-faced agent nodded and let him on stage. Judge Patrick sat to the right of the podium, caught up in conversation. He gently placed the tray next to the judge, allowing the note to protrude enough to be noticed by a sharp eye.

He scanned the room again, spotted nothing out of the ordinary, and still didn’t see Veil or his partner. He caught one last look at the judge and headed for the kitchen, adrenaline raging, heart pounding. Two steely eyes locked in on his, almost bringing him to a stop. The old man he saw Veil talking to earlier, smiled, nodded, then turned around as if he didn’t see a thing. Andre quickened his steps, but didn’t run.

Ten feet from the kitchen, he saw Thorne take her seat, and Robert make his way to the dais

Andre pushed the kitchen door open, knocking an angry, cursing server backwards. Just short of a trot, he headed for the loading dock area. Agent Sams stood in back of the kitchen, hand pressed to his earpiece, face intense. The agent looked up. *Andre!*

Veil

22

Furious, Robert briefed Thorne about his conversation with Edward. Secret Service agents poured into the lobby through the front door. “CHAMPION must be close by,” he whispered, using the President’s code name. “We better get back to the party.”

Robert went to the stage to tell Fiona they wouldn’t be staying long after the reception, and any photo ops needed to be short. Whispering in her ear, he noticed a folded piece of paper barely visible under the silver serving tray on the table. He slid the note out and read it. Fiona gasped.

DEATH BECOMES YOU. GIVE MY LOVE TO JESSICA. THE BEAR.

Robert motioned to the agents and showed them the note. They frantically yelled into microphones hidden in their lapel pins and sleeves.

“Abort! Abort!” one agent called into his sleeve, ordering the President back to the White House.

Thorne ran onto the stage.

“Fiona, did you see anything?” asked Robert.

“No, Nothing! A waiter put the tray down only a few minutes ago.”

“What waiter?”

“He was just standing over...”

Fiona, shocked and bewildered, pointed towards the camouflaged

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kitchen door.

Robert told Thorne to take Fiona home. Surrounded by agents, they left the stage.

Robert ran through the kitchen, several agents on his heels. The banquet staff, some handcuffed, others spread eagle on the floor, mumbled and screamed in terror.

“He ran out the door! We’re innocent,” a waiter screamed, his face pressed against a freezer door.

“Which way?” shouted Robert.

“The back door to the shipping dock,” whimpered the waiter, now handcuffed and on his knees.

Robert burst into the receiving area, gun drawn. The two agents with him covered each side of the small warehouse, guns pointing up and down and side to side.

They ran into the alley behind the dock. At the far end, Robert saw only agents and flashing lights making their way toward him, searching every inch.

They sprinted back to the dock. Robert signaled each agent to cover opposite sides of the small warehouse, while he covered the center aisle.

Robert crept down the center aisle. At the end of the row, he spotted a foot to the left of the shelves. He slowly, carefully, turned the corner and pointed his gun down at a man sprawled out on the floor. Agent Sams, throat slashed, sat lifeless on the floor in a pool of blood.

“My God!” one of the agents gasped, walking up.

“Code blue! Code blue!” one of the agents shouted into his sleeve. “Agent down in the warehouse off the dock area! We need immediate medical assistance! Code blue!” More agents ran inside, each shaken by the sight.

Almost immediately, an FBI forensic team arrived, complete with black bag laboratories, and enough photo equipment to shoot the Super Bowl.

Robert answered a few questions then hung back out of the way, wondering why the Bear allowed Fiona to live.

“This guy just doesn’t know when to quit,” said a female voice.

Marilyn London, in a short, classy, midnight blue dress, stood a few clicks short of vampish, with one hand on her hip, the other clutching a

Veil

black alligator handbag. He recognized her perfume, Paloma Picasso.

"That seems to be the case," said Robert, agitated. "I hope we catch him soon. This was way too close."

"I agree. The brass and White House are furious."

"I never should've left the room, not even for a few minutes. She's my responsibility."

"Don't think the fellas up top won't let you know it. They *never* allow outsiders this much latitude in our operations to begin with. So for this to happen with you around...well, let's be kind and say you're the perfect scapegoat. Why'd you leave the room anyway?"

"I needed a private word with my partner."

"Oh, so she was also out of the room. You two make quite a pair."

"Look, there was a room full of agents, including several around the stage. I don't think we should shoulder *all* the blame."

"I don't think you deserve all of it either, but this *is* Washington. Somebody has to take the blame. I'm simply pointing out the obvious."

"Didn't your people run background checks on all the workers?"

"Yes," said Marilyn. "But other than the usual illegal immigrants and petty infractions, they found nothing. I'm sure our Russian friend used a phony set-up."

Robert felt stupid for asking. "Of course."

"Mind sharing what you and Thorne were discussing? If it's important or pertained to the assignment, maybe we can keep the sharks at bay."

Robert thought about Edward, Julie Rice, and the evidence. Having another hand on the plow didn't seem like such a bad idea, but he decided against it. "It wasn't that important."

"But important enough to leave your Supreme Court nominee unprotected."

"Then let's just say it's *confidential*."

"No need to get abrupt with me, I'm on your side. You need to be ready when the big boys needle you. Was it another case you're working on?"

"Are you here to grill me, or investigate Agent Sams' murder?"

Marilyn smiled. "So how well did you know Agent Sams?" she asked.

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"As you know, we didn't get along that well," said Robert. "You do remember the incident back at the Weiss murder scene?"

"Ah yes, the slap from your partner. I remember."

"But we seemed to put all that aside to watch out for Fiona...Judge Patrick."

Marilyn's smile grew. "I see. Interesting." She pulled a small notebook and pen from her purse, and brushed by him on her way to the corpse. He followed, kicking himself for the slip of tongue.

They bent under the yellow tape. Robert examined the body again, while Marilyn had a *members only* conversation with her colleagues. The throat wound looked smooth, no jagged edges. *Why did Sams follow without backup? It doesn't make sense.*

"Strange isn't it?" said Marilyn, standing next to him.

"What's that?"

"We never pursue a guy like this alone. Protocol is to radio in the suspect's location, keep'em contained, wait for back-up, and set up a perimeter."

"That's true," said Robert. "Maybe he tried to be a hero. He wouldn't be the first to play lone wolf."

"Oh, he'll be a hero all right," said Marilyn. "Only he won't know it. Let me show you something."

Her sudden coldness surprised him. Unusual for someone looking at a colleague, dead on a warehouse floor. They knelt down.

"Now tell me, Mr. Veil," she continued. "Tell me, what *don't* you see?"

Robert looked close as a photographer's flash bounced off the walls. "His weapon. It's still in its holster."

"You got it big boy. Looks like Agent Sams used incredibly bad judgment. What officer wouldn't immediately pull their weapon in a situation like this? Pure suicide."

"I admire your skills lady." Again, Robert considered telling her about Rothschild and the evidence, and again, he shook it off.

"They walked back to the dock area. Marilyn stopped a few inches from his chest, searching his face, smiling. He took back a step. Her smile widened.

"We really must get together again, Mr. Veil. You know, two

Veil

professionals, sharing information, clearing the air. I know I can come off a little aggressive, but I'm playing a man's game. Sometimes being the house bitch is necessary. I hope you understand."

"No offense taken," he said. "But you *will* tell me about this dress when we sit down. Or is that standard FBI issue?"

"Oh, this little thing?" She pulled her coat back and showed more than she should have. "I was at a party when I got the page and didn't have time to change."

"Good thing you weren't in a hot tub."

Marilyn kissed his cheek. "I'll keep that in mind."

Just my luck. Two amazing women at the wrong time. "Well, agent. Let's hold that thought. I really must get back to the judge. Let me know if you come up with anything new."

"I'll share whatever we get," said Marilyn, tying her coat. "Make sure you do the same."

They shook hands on a promise Robert knew neither would keep. He watched Marilyn glide back to the crime scene, took another look around the warehouse, then headed for his car.

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23

Two miles from the hotel, walking fast, Andre heard the faint squeal of sirens in the distance. He took a left off M Street, stayed in the shadows, and melted into a splattering of homeless on Dupont Circle, striding down New Hampshire Avenue to a large empty house he cased a few days before.

He stomped up the steep driveway and slipped through a window, dropping down to the basement. He bent over to catch his breath, closed his eyes, and smiled.

After the commotion started, sparked by his note, the Russian quickly exited through the dock area just as he intended.

“Andre, Andre. I need you to stop,” said Sams, in a loud whisper.

Andre saw the agent’s weapon tucked in its holster, stopped, and swiped his size thirteen across Sams’ astonished face, spinning him around in a complete circle. Andre smashed his elbow under Sams’ nose, sending bone chips into his sinus cavity and skull. Sams flew backwards off his feet and crashed hard on the cement.

Andre pounced and mangled the vertebrae in his neck with one quick twist. Air wheezed and whistled morbidly from the agent’s mouth. Andre dragged the body out of sight and slammed it against a shelf. Ten

Veil

seconds...nine...Pulled the hunting knife from his ankle...five...four...and slashed Sams' throat with the smooth end of the blade...two...one. He didn't stick around to see the spray of blood.

He sprinted down the alley to the street, and ran fifty yards to another off 22nd Street. Off came the uniform, fat suit, facial latex, and yellowed false teeth. On went a pair of stone washed blue jeans, a Georgetown University sweatshirt, Redskins cap and black leather jacket he hid there as a precaution, one of several spots in and outside the hotel where he stashed changes of clothing. He stepped onto the street a different man.

Andre opened his eyes, stretched, and grabbed a plastic bag hidden under the basement steps. He traded the Georgetown sweatshirt for a blue, button-down Oxford, slipped on a pair of black penny loafers, a navy-blue London Fog windbreaker, and gold-rimmed glasses, pronounced himself *yuppie* and climbed back outside. He hit an empty New Hampshire Avenue and hailed a cab. "Georgetown," he told the driver, in his best American accent; Bostonian this time, his favorite.

The driver turned down M Street, back toward the hotel. Andre spotted a long line of slow moving cars up ahead. *A roadblock*. The cab driver, a burly black man, complained as though he and Andre were well acquainted.

"It's just like that sometimes, Nathaniel," said the Russian, reading the name off the cab license hanging on the dashboard. "Don't worry about it," he added, his enunciation pure Cambridge Ivy League. "I'm in no hurry."

They moved closer to the front. Andre rehearsed an escape scenario in his head, mapping out what he'd do if the police got suspicious and asked him to step out of the cab. He examined his new drivers license and mumbled under his breath. "Bradley Stevenson, Portfolio Manager from Boston. Mutual funds. Fidelity."

They reached the head of the line, where two testy police officers stepped to each side of the cab. "We need to see identification for both of you," said the officer at the driver's window.

Nathaniel handed him his driver's and cab licenses. Andre passed his I.D. to the officer on his side. He leaned inside and bounced his flashlight along the backseat and floor like a prison spotlight. The light hit Andre's face. The Russian dropped his mouth open and tightened his

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forehead, as though genuinely concerned. "What seems to be the problem officer?"

The officer focused hard on Andre's face and license. It took so long for the officer to answer, Andre thought he'd been discovered.

"Where're you heading tonight, Mr. Stevenson?" The officer didn't crack a smile.

"To J Paul's for a little dinner," answered Andre, pushing his glasses up on his nose. "I'm only in town for the night."

Several more glances and the officer nodded to his partner. "No problem, Mr. Stevenson. Sorry about the inconvenience."

"Thank you," said Andre, feigning nervous relief.

Less than ten minutes later, the cab dropped him on the corner of 30th and M. He hoofed it through the crowd to one of his favorite restaurants, J Pauls.

College students, foreigners, business people and tourists, packed the restaurant like sardines, laughing, talking, and joking, unaware a brutal murderer stood only a few feet away. Andre headed for the bar, his usual spot, where he could watch the news report.

"What's up chief?" asked the bartender.

"Spicy shrimp," said Andre. "A double order. And a Guinness stout. I've worked up an appetite."

Americans. So easily fooled, so easily frightened.

"Here ya go my friend," said the bartender, sitting a tall, dark glass of beer down in front of him. Andre took a long, slow swig, eyes half closed, and savored the thick, foamy brew.

He sat the glass down and nodded for another, turning his attention to the soundless television above the bar. A reporter pointed to the Ritz Carlton hotel, as police and agents hustled in and out. Judge Patrick, her face sheet white, dove inside a waiting car with Veil's partner, Thorne, right behind her.

"Hot plate," said a bright-eyed waitress, sitting his food on the bar.

He tipped her and dug into the shrimp, first sucking off the seasoning, then tearing away the shell, swallowing the Cajun flesh whole.

He stopped and looked around. He wished Vladimir were there eating shrimp, getting drunk and laid. Memories of the past played in his head like an old family movie. The more he remembered, the more he

Veil

seethed with venom.

“Can you believe this?” the bartender interrupted, turning up the sound. “Did you hear what happened?”

“No,” Andre lied. “I’ve been working.”

“That nut case tried to kill another judge,” the bartender continued. “Judge Patrick no less.”

“The Supreme Court nominee? That’s a shame.”

“It’s unbelievable what people will do. I hope they fry the asshole.”

“Yeah, he deserves it.” Andre finished his beer and motioned for yet another. A new stout replaced his empty glass, then another, and another. He continued to eat and drink, drink and think. He drained the last stout and paid the bill, tired, sleepy. A line of cabs waited out front. A service for overzealous drinkers.

He gave the driver his address, jumped in back, and fought off the fog of sleep. The confirmation hearings were scheduled to start soon, and he’d put his final plan in motion. He knew his little act at the Ritz wouldn’t stop the judge. *She’s stubborn and arrogant. After she’s sworn in, I’ll make my final statement. Take my final revenge.*

I’m going to kill Fiona Patrick in her chambers. At the Supreme Court.

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24

Halfway to his Virginia estate, Edward received an urgent call from Suraya on his secure line. The Middle Eastern dealmaker and the others involved in their deal, needed to see him, *tonight*. He directed his driver back into the city. To the Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia.

Edward stared out at nothing in particular, calculating his next move. Not since Kennedy's assassination, did he have more at stake. Marilyn and Vernon walked out on him, but returned for an amount he agreed on, against his better judgment. Hesitant, he remembered his grandfather's words.

"Make a man rich and you make a new friend. But bring a man into our rarified world, give him the keys only God can offer, and you'll give birth to a force that'll serve you as though you were the Blessed Father himself. They'll worship and follow you. They'll pray to your very name."

So Edward offered them the chance to be born again, and wrapped it up nicely in fifty million dollars each. More money than he'd ever paid anyone outside the Rothschild family. He wired half to three separate accounts in the Isle of Man, each masked by separate corporate personas. He gave them the account numbers, codes, and instructions. When he

Veil

held the evidence in his hands, and Robert Veil and his partner were dead, the other half would be deposited, and their business done. He never wanted to see the three of them again.

Edward's limousine glided along the asphalt past the Ritz. A few news trucks and police cars remained. He shook his head, astonished at the side-show he witnessed in the ballroom.

After his confrontation with Veil, he pretended to be interested in Ian Goldberg's ranting. A waiter carrying a silver tray of ice water toward Judge Patrick caught his eye. When the waiter sat the tray down, Edward got a quick glimpse of the note. He smiled and returned to his conversation with Ian, relishing the additional pressure Robert Veil would endure because of the incident.

Later, the FBI and Secret Service questioned him privately, asking if he'd seen anything. "Now what kind of American would I be if I saw something and said nothing?" he responded. After a few more questions that led nowhere, they let him go.

His limo pulled into a wide winding driveway and stopped at the Saudi Embassy's black iron gate. Lawrence announced their arrival. Several cameras panned the car and license plate, and a red laser grid passed back and forth over the car, scanning for explosives. Edward admired the Saudis for their diligence when it came to security. Only the Israelis impressed him more. Two minutes later, the gates slowly opened and a Saudi emissary met him at the embassy's marble steps.

"Good evening, Mr. Rothschild. I am Ali. They're waiting for you upstairs in the library. Please follow me."

Edward thanked the tall thin Saudi, who moved with the effortless grace of a swan, and followed. *Just how many men in the Middle East are named Ali?*

Edward considered the Saudi embassy the most exquisite in Washington. It boasted museum quality artwork and a stunning foyer, redecorated twice a year, complete with new artwork, sculptures, and furnishings. Extravagance enjoyed by bottomless oil rich pockets.

He followed Ali up two short flights of stairs then down a long hall adorned with antiques and more art including a Van Gogh original, *Starry Night over Rhone*.

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They reached two heavy mahogany doors, carved images of Saudi cities cut masterfully into the wood. Ali braced himself, clutched what Edward guessed to be solid gold handles, and slowly opened both doors to the library as though their entrance were part of a formal ceremony, announcing Edward as if he were royalty.

“Good evening, Mr. Rothschild. We’re happy you could come on such short notice,” said the Ambassador, Shirin-banoo Muhammadi, a princely fellow with smooth dark skin and knowing eyes. He approached Edward arms extended, and hugged him like an old dear friend, kissing him on each cheek.

“It’s my pleasure, Mr. Ambassador,” Edward lied, irritated at being summoned. “Suraya said you have some concerns. I’m sure I can clear them up without a problem.”

“You’re most gracious sir, especially at this late hour.” The ambassador led him over to a small circle of men, some in suits, others wearing traditional Arab and Persian clothing. “Of course you know the others.”

The five men rose and Ali backed out of the room. Edward greeted them as he did the ambassador, paying compliments and making small talk like a tolerant relative at a family reunion. After the greetings, they sat down in seats arranged in a semi-circle, leaving a lone empty chair for Edward—facing them.

In addition to the Ambassador, the rest of the group read like the Who’s Who of the Middle East power elite. Aziz Bakhtauar, an attorney, dark-skinned with bright, sharp eyes, represented the United Arab Emirates in any negotiations involving their oil resources. Farzeen Dihmubidi, a direct link to the highest levels of influence in Iran, including the military, Hassan Mahmudnizhad, arms dealer to the Palestinians, Muhammad Sa’ud, cousin and Counsel to the King of Saudi Arabia, and Minister of Oil and Edward’s main contact, Suraya Khomeini, representing the interests of both Qatar and Kuwait.

“It seems we have a problem, Mr. Rothschild,” said Suraya, all niceties finished.

“How may I be of help?”

“Yes,” chimed Aziz. “Some of us have received information through our intelligence networks that your government is aware of, and none to

Veil

happy with our plans.”

“I for one would like to know how they found out,” said the Ambassador.

“We’ve got a lot at stake here,” said Hassan, “and we can’t afford to have anyone, or anything, get in the way. You do understand, Mr. Rothschild?”

Edward sat back in the leather chair and smiled. “Gentlemen, the situation is under control. I don’t know how they found out, but there’s no need for alarm. President Claymore is on his way out. Support for my son is on the rise, and once we’re in the White House everything will fall smoothly into place.”

Silence washed over the room.

“Forgive us if we don’t share your unabashed optimism,” said Aziz. “Some of us are risking everything, including our relationship with the United States, a relationship I might add, already on the mend.”

“Understood,” said Edward. “We *all* knew the risks involved when we started down this road. Besides, if Israel starts manufacturing crude oil at two dollars a barrel, and gas prices drop to twenty-five cents a gallon, your relationship with the United States will be the least of your worries. Molecular Nanotechnology and Israel’s Project Genesis will change everything in the Middle East, gentlemen. None of you will be players on *any* kind of scale.”

Edward watched their faces. He knew they were scared to death. Scared of losing their place in the world’s pecking order. Terrified of financial extinction.

“With a small crude-oil field,” Edward continued. “Israel will duplicate oil’s molecular structure, causing it to multiply billions of times over, creating an endless supply. Somewhere in a small compound forty kilometers outside Beersheba, the Israelis are about to change the world. And in one fell swoop, *you* will no longer be relevant.”

“We can always strike a deal with Israel,” said Suraya. “Maybe work out an agreement that includes the disposal of one of their *nagging* problems.”

The others murmured in agreement with Suraya.

“Of course you’re referring to the Palestinians,” said Edward. “Well, anything’s possible, but you’ve been tunneling money to the Palestinians

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for decades. Why would Israel accept your friendship, when in less than a year of introducing Project Genesis, you won't even exist?" Edward crossed his legs and relaxed. "No gentlemen, the only way to preserve your survival is to stop Israel in its tracks. The only way to do that is war, and the only war you can win is the one I can structure for you."

More murmuring filled the room. "Are you still sure you'll be able to orchestrate this deal without interference?" asked the ambassador. "Support of Israel remains very popular. How can you ignore the pressure that will come from Tel Aviv?"

"Mr. Ambassador, you will have nuclear and chemical weapons, technology to fight your common enemy, Israel. When you attack, the United States will stay silent. Yes, there will be an uproar, but one I'll control. You're familiar with the resources already at my disposal. Soon I'll hand pick everybody from the National Security Advisor to the Joint Chiefs and everywhere in-between."

"You're a Jew, Mr. Rothschild," said Farzeen. "How does all of this make you feel?"

"Like a diamond, Mr. Dihmubidi. Very rare and very valuable."

Even Suraya winced, giving Edward pleasure.

"Mr. Rothschild," the Ambassador cleared his throat. "Once again, we would like to offer our assistance. Your problems seem to be mounting, and although we know you to be most capable, it would give us great comfort..."

"Thank you Mr. Ambassador, but I must again decline your gracious offer. I assure you, everything is under control."

"I'm afraid we must insist, Mr. Rothschild," said Muhammad. "Things *have* changed substantially since we last met, and we want to insure our investment in you and your son."

"I'm afraid I don't understand," Edward said, his eyes narrowing. "Exactly what has changed?"

Muhammad reached down and picked up his attaché case, opened it, and handed Edward a thick brown envelope. Inside were pictures and notes. Photographs of Charlie Ivory, Robert Veil, Thorne, Marilyn, Vernon and Simon. The typed and handwritten notes covered details on each of them and summarized revelations about Edward's involvement in the Kennedy assassination. His pulse quickened. He uncrossed his legs

Veil

and looked up.

“You’ve been following me, checking into my business?”

“What did you expect?” said Farzeen. “That we’d just hand over hundreds of billions of dollars in land and oil reserves without knowing everything about you?”

Edward rifled through the file and came across several photos of President Kennedy at the moment his head exploded from Charlie’s final shot.

“It’s not our business how you handle your affairs here in the States,” Suraya continued. “Assassination is a way of life in all our countries, however, your situation is far too explosive. We want to make sure you succeed.”

Edward tossed the envelope back to Farzeen, who fumbled and dropped it on the floor. Pictures and papers splattered across the Persian rug.

“I’ll say it again. I don’t need your help.”

Aziz and Suraya looked at each other, then at Edward. “We’re afraid it’s too late for refusals,” Suraya told him. “We have a team on its way to Washington. They’ll be here in forty-eight hours and they’re set to take action at our discretion.”

Edward’s head went light. *A death squad.*

“We’ve instructed them to eliminate this Mr. Veil fellow. The bounty hunter and his partner, who are giving you so much trouble,” added Hassan. “We need to remove *all* obstacles. We’ll not have anyone, including you, get in the way. Not at the price we’re paying.”

Edward’s head pounded and his mouth went dry. He struggled to keep himself together, and sat back in his seat.

“Okay gentlemen, as you wish. But a death squad is extreme, and unnecessary.”

“Strange words coming from a man who had his own President killed,” said Aziz.

Edward ignored the quip. “Nevertheless, I will cooperate, although I insist on being kept abreast of any move your team makes, and I don’t want anyone killed without my knowledge.”

“Agreed,” said Suraya.

There is one other thing,” said Muhammad. “President Claymore.”

Reginald Cook

“What about him?”

“We’ve prepared our team to kill him too, if necessary. It’s a precautionary measure. We just wanted you to be prepared for the possibility.”

Edward, exasperated, didn’t let it show. For the first time, he wondered *is it worth it*. “I can appreciate your concern gentlemen, but I’m sure your men won’t be needed. My people are very close to shutting down Robert Veil, and President Claymore is no problem at all. I’ll be in touch with you very soon. This predicament will be over. I give you my word.”

“Thank you, Mr. Rothschild,” said the ambassador. “Please remember, our men will be here in two days. Not long after, we’ll turn them loose.”

They stood and bid him well. He acknowledged them with a slight bow of his head. Ali appeared at the door.

“I trust your business went well, Mr. Rothschild,” said Ali.

“Thank you, Ali, it went just fine.”

Green florescent numbers on the limo’s ceiling clock read four a.m. Edward dialed Stuart Hall, the senator slated to chair the confirmation hearings. Senator Hall answered his private line, coughing, annoyed, and agitated. Edward didn’t care. “It’s me,” he said, through grinding teeth. “I need you to turn Fiona Patrick’s life to shit.”

Veil

25

Robert reached the estate and found things predictably intense.

“Where were you and Ms. Thorne?”

“Why did you leave the room?”

“How long were you gone?”

“When did you come back inside?”

Robert hammered back. “You’re the Secret Service. Where were you?” Thorne told them what to kiss and where to put it.

Two hours of interrogation and the questions stopped, but not without assurances of more later.

Robert checked in on Fiona. Two detectives and an FBI agent sat in the den peppering her with questions. She calmly answered each, her left hand shaking, a glass of wine in the other, in a voice tired and raspy. When they finished, Robert took her to see Jessica who lay safe in her room sound asleep. Tired from the day, and after taking the sedative her doctor prescribed, Fiona bedded down for the night. With Fiona safe, Robert and Thorne piled in the Range Rover, pulled out past a lone television truck and headed for the first mausoleum on their list. Parklawn Cemetery.

Reginald Cook

They exited Interstate 270, made a right at Veirs Mills Road, and parked two miles from the front gate. Heavy trees and brush stacked each side of the street, the air, cold and crisp, stood still. They crept alongside the road just beyond the woods. An owl hooted a warning. *You're not welcome here!*

They reached Parklawn's driveway. The gate locked. The fence short.

At the top of a narrow winding road, towered an impressive white marble, gold trimmed mausoleum, with two over-sized bronze lions guarding the entrance. A monument, out of place deep in woods.

Robert checked their rear. The wind whipped up harder. *You're not welcome here!*

"If the stuff's in here, you can't say Charlie didn't have taste," said Robert, admiring the edifice.

"He killed the President, who gives a fuck."

"Walked into that one," Robert mumbled under his breath.

Inside, a dim yellow mist clouded the marble cavern from low-watt lights hanging ten feet apart on the walls.

"I can barely see the names on the crypts," said Thorne, pulling a flashlight from her jacket. "I checked these tombs before as closely as I could, but there're so many I might've missed a few."

Robert shined his own light down the long corridor, keeping the beam away from the stained glass windows. "I'd say you could've missed a few." The crypts, stacked six in a row, floor to ceiling, seemed to stretch a mile. "If it's here, it's in one of the crypts lower to the ground," he continued. "Easy access."

Thorne flashed her light on the wall closest to her. "I'll buy that. I'll take this side. Think he did us a favor and used his real name?" with an *I'm disgusted* shake of her head.

"He knew we were coming," said Robert. "So it's something we'd recognize."

They walked to the farthest end of the row on opposite sides, and worked their way back. Robert made a mental snapshot of the rear exit, aimed his flashlight at the wall, and scanned from the top down.

Hardly naïve about life's limits, it shook Robert how many people his age or younger lay resting behind the marble. *Jonathan Mason-Loving*

Veil

Son-1959-1994, Alicia Vickers-Daughter-Wife-Mother-1962-1999, all not much younger or older than he or Thorne.

Soon, flickers of daylight bounced through the skylights and they put the flashlights away. Robert focused hard on each name, date, and epitaph, struggling to find a puzzle-piece that fit. Two hours later, two-thirds of the way finished, Thorne pulled off one of her shoes and massaged her foot. “I’m feeling more and more like we should just walk up to Rothschild and start shooting.”

Robert opened his mouth...then heard the front door open. He felt for his gun.

“Excuse me,” a feeble voice said. “Can I help you people with something?”

A thin, grandfatherly security guard stood in the doorway, in a Marine pressed uniform, creased and polished.

Robert stepped forward, hand extended. “I’m Robert Veil, and this is my partn...friend Nikki.” Thorne’s eyebrows flinted upward. He rarely used her first name.

“Tim Billingsly,” the guard answered, a benevolent smile on his face. “Can I offer you some assistance?”

Robert started to say no, but thought better of it. “Yes, we’re trying to find the crypt of an old family friend. It’s his birthday and we want to pay our respects. His name’s Charlie, Charlie Ivory.”

Tim lowered his head in thought, took off his cap, and scratched his half-bald head. “Charlie Ivory,” he muttered. “Can’t say I remember a Charlie Ivory, but that don’t mean much. Been here twenty years. So many people come in day to day you just can’t keep up with’em.”

“Do you think they might know at the office,” asked Thorne. “I came in a few days ago, but maybe they missed it.”

Tim scratched his head again. “It wouldn’t be the first time,” he said. “I’m on my way there now, but they’ve been a little testy lately about giving out information.”

“Oh,” Robert inquired.

“Yeah, we’ve had a few break-ins over the last year or so. You know, kids, vandals, homeless looking for shelter.”

“Homeless?”

“Yes sir, I’ve chased a few out myself. They don’t mean no harm

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though, just looking for a warm place to sleep.”

“Ever catch up to one of them?” Thorne asked, her charm and sex appeal radiating. “Ever see what they look like?”

Tim’s back straightened up. “Can’t say that I have,” he said, chest out. “Not worth it to run them down, the police just let’em go. So I just chase’em away.”

Thorne stepped a little closer to Tim. “Now you be careful,” she told him, adjusting his tie. “It can get mighty dangerous out here.”

Tim beamed and slapped his cap like a chivalrous cowpoke donning a Stetson. “I’ll check on the name of that fella for ya. What’d you say it was again?”

“Charlie Ivory,” said Robert.

“Got it,” said Tim, his eyes never leaving Thorne.

“Thanks sugga,” she said, with pouty lips just short of blowing a kiss.

Robert watched Tim mount a shiny blue moped, and putter off toward the cemetery office.

“You don’t play fair,” he said, grinning, shaking his finger at Thorne.

“Just thought I’d make the old fart’s day,” she said. “Maybe get him to look a little harder and save us some time.”

“You’re a tease.”

“Too bad I don’t grind white boys anymore, or you might find out how *real* I can be.”

“You’ve been talking that shit since elementary school,” he said, remembering their feeble attempt at a schoolyard kiss. Thorne laughed and they went back to the search.

Robert heard the mausoleum door open again. This time, multiple footsteps clopped the tiled floor. Five men, guns drawn, stopped a few feet from them. One, lean and somewhat effeminate, wearing a well-tailored seersucker suit and bow tie, seemed vaguely familiar. The others, clean cut and mean, wore all the markings of mercenaries. Thorne stationed herself a foot behind him.

“Well, you’re obviously not here to pay respects to a loved one,” said Robert, his guns budging under his arms.

“Hello Mr. Veil,” said Simon. “Nice day to visit the dead.”

“Yes it is,” said Robert, his mind racing. He’d seen this man before. “So what of it?”

Veil

“I was just curious, that’s all,” Simon continued. “Curious why anyone would come to a cemetery when there are so many more important things to do. You two have been in here for some time. We were getting worried.”

“You’re pretty concerned for a rat-looking asshole I don’t even know.”

“Now, now, Mr. Veil, no need for insults, or such language. I’m here on behalf of a mutual friend.”

“Oh,” said Robert.

“Yes. My name is...well, my name isn’t important...you don’t know me, well, there was that time we danced.”

Robert remembered. Thorne moved closer.

“Sorry I had to leave so quickly that day. I didn’t get a chance to kill you then, but I’ll try not to disappointment you today. But before all that unpleasantness, why don’t you tell me where the Kennedy evidence is hidden. And please, while you’re talking, you and Ms. Thorne slide your weapons across the floor.”

Two of the men circled around behind them. Thorne stepped backward to keep them in sight. Robert locked in on Simon. They both removed their guns, and slid them across the floor.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” said Robert. “Even if I did, why the hell would I tell you?”

Simon clapped his hands sarcastically. “Very good, Mr. Veil, very good indeed. Tough and testosterone filled, but I’m afraid it won’t be enough. You see, normally I wouldn’t care about you, Kennedy, or anybody else, well, there is that little blond-haired surfer in Newport Beach, but I digress. It’s just that, well, I’m being paid a king’s treasury to find those items our dear departed Mr. Ivory gave to you, and for that I’d screw and kill my mother.” He smiled. “I did by the way.”

Robert raised an eyebrow.

“Screw and kill my mother. Now please, tell me where I can find Charlie Ivory’s collectibles.” He waved towards his men. “Put your guns away, we need them alive. At the moment.”

“I told you, I have no idea what you’re talking about, and who is Charlie Ivory?”

Simon stepped toward Robert. “Mr. Veil...”

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Robert spun his body in a whirlwind, smashed a roundhouse kick into Simon's chest and sent him crashing to the floor. The two men closest to Thorne rushed her. A hard, fast blow to the nose, and she sent the biggest to the floor, blinded by blood and watery eyes.

A hard tackle jarred Robert to the floor, fists pounding his face and body. He punched and kicked upward, desperate to get back on his feet. A pile-driving kick to the groin, and one of the men shirked like a haunting spirit.

Robert heard bones break and men cry out. *Thorne's taking care of business.*

He wiggled free and scrambled to his feet. He glanced back at his partner. One man lay on the floor, his kneecap several inches from where God intended, his right arm mangled and twisted like an old, bent coat hanger. Thorne, pinned down on her back, a large guerilla on top, struggled to break free, punching his face like a middleweight. Smiling, the giant grabbed her throat and choked. Robert took a step toward them. A hockey check dropped him to the floor.

Robert hit the ground hard and kicked upward, landing back on his feet.

“My eyes! My eyes! You bitch! My eyes!”

Two gunshots ricocheted off the marble, sending everyone, except Simon, to the floor.

Tim, the security guard, stood just inside the front door, the barrel of his thirty-eight revolver pointing at Simon.

Everybody raised their hands, except the large guerilla. He sat against the wall bawling like a newborn, both eye sockets mushy and covered in blood. Thorne's chest heaved deep and heavy, both thumbs soaked in blood.

“Good job Tim,” said Robert, breathing hard, his hands now on his knees.

“Good job my ass,” said Tim, quivering. “Stay where you are. I've already called the police. They're on their way.”

“But sugga,” said Thorne, “Let us explain.”

“That ain't gonna fly hot stuff. Both you and your boyfriend just stay where you are.”

Veil

In the distance, Robert heard the faint whine of sirens. “Tim, listen to me,” said Robert.

“Yes, Tim,” said Simon. “Listen.”

A mosquito whisper cut through the air, splattering blood and brain on the crypts. Tim’s lifeless body hit the floor like a sack, his nose bubbling foamy red.

Robert looked back, and saw the silencer pointed at him.

“Stop, you idiot,” shouted Simon. “I told you we need them alive! Let’s go! Now!”

Mangled and twisted, Simon’s men hustled to their feet. The giant, blind and whimpering, assisted by two of the others. Thorne took a step forward, her face sculpted in anger. She picked up her gun.

“Thorne,” shouted Robert, pulling her back. “We can’t get caught in here! Let’s go!”

Thorne snatched away and looked down at Tim. His mouth was open, his eyes wide with shock.

Robert put a hand on her shoulder. “Let’s go, Thorne. He’s gone. Let’s go.”

They hit the back door and jumped a fence fifty feet from the mausoleum as tires screeched to a halt, and police rushed inside. More sirens cried in the distance. Thorne’s Rover hit Interstate 270 and sped back towards Fiona’s estate.

Thirty minutes later, a red pond surrounded Tim Billingsley like a putrid moat.

“What a mess,” said one of the paramedics, to detectives organizing the scene. “I knew he was gone as soon as we hit the door, and I saw the back of his head.”

“Must’ve been quite a fight. There’s splatters of blood all over the place,” said the detective. “Who the hell would want to kill a security guard in a cemetery?”

More detectives and officers showed up with the regular team of investigators and forensic analysts. Among them, Marilyn London.

She twice gave the place a once-over, making sure nothing could lead back to Simon or the others. Satisfied, she asked for samples of the blood and fingerprints.

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"Make sure you get a sample of the blood on this crypt over here," she told one of the detectives.

"Which one?" he asked, sounding annoyed.

"Over here," said Marilyn, unconcerned with his attitude. "It's on the third tomb from the right, second from the bottom. It reads *Julie Rice, A Friend Worth More Than Gold.*"

Veil

26

Every muscle in Robert's body ached, but he ignored it. Thorne, silent, showed no sign of stress, strain, or anger. Through schoolyard fights and wars, Robert knew her easy calm meant one thing. Hell lurked just around the corner.

"We better hit the office," she said, her eyes searching, checking the rear-view mirror. "I know the place is probably wired for sound, but the Georgia State Police will be calling about Julie Rice, and we better make sure Evelyn's okay."

Robert pulled out his cell phone and dialed. No answer. Not even the machine. He checked his watch. *Too early for lunch.* "Drive to the alley across the street," he said. "We can cut across and enter from the parking deck."

Thorne sliced through the city like a pro, pulled into the alley a block from Dupont Circle, and parked alongside the Dupont Hotel. They ran down the alley to the street and looked up, mouths agape.

Smoke and flames raged from their office window. Black flakes of ash snowed down on everything, and everyone, with not a fire truck in sight.

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Thorne started for the building. Robert pulled her back. "It's way past too late. See if you can spot Evelyn."

They searched the growing mob for several minutes. Nothing.

"There she is," Thorne said, pointing, breathing a sigh of relief.

Evelyn, surrounded by six other frantic tenants, sprinted from the building and disappeared inside the hotel. Robert's cell phone rang.

"Evelyn, are you okay?" Robert heard her fight back tears.

She arrived at the office late, found it ransacked and full of smoke, dropped her purse and ran.

"I'm glad you're okay," Robert told her.

She sobbed gently. "What if I'd been there when they came to the office? I'd be..."

"You're alive. That's all that counts right now," said Robert. "Look, don't go home," he ordered. "It's not safe. Do you have the safe key?"

"Yes," she replied, blowing her nose.

Inside a locker at Union Station, they kept a large green gym bag filled with emergency items. The bag contained two guns, a forty-five automatic and a ten millimeter Glock, plenty of ammunition, a set of open airline, bus, and train tickets, two encrypted cell phones, keys to their safehouse in upstate New York, and twenty-five thousand dollars in cash. They each kept a key; Evelyn usually pinned hers in her bra. Robert told her to get the bag and take the bus to the safehouse. He'd call when things blew over. Evelyn sniffled and cleared her throat. Thorne took the phone and offered last minute advice. They said their goodbyes, and waited until her cab pulled away.

Fire trucks finally hit the scene and hopelessly showered the building, their job more containment than salvage.

Let's get to Fiona's house," said Robert.

Thorne hesitated. "Robert, we'd better check on Barbara."

He dialed. The phone rang too many times; she always picked up by the third ring. He hung up and dialed again. Three rings, five, six. She finally answered. "I was *indisposed*," she told him.

"I need you to meet me at Fiona's house right away! I'll call ahead so they know you're coming."

Cantankerous, she drilled him for information, demanding to know why.

Veil

“Mother, get over to Fiona’s house! Now!”

Dead silence.

“Okay, son. I’ll leave right away.”

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27

News trucks, police cars, and government issued Chryslers packed every available space in front of Fiona's house. Reporters, camera-toting photographers, and a highly visible contingent of agents and police officers scurried up and down the block, checking every crack and crevice.

The reporters, some Robert recognized from half a block away, looked pensive and restless, standing behind a taped off barrier like groupies.

Thorne, puzzled, leaned forward on the steering wheel. "What the hell is this?"

"I have no idea, but the sharks are out, so the blood must be fresh."

"Or it's Rothschild," shot Thorne.

Before Robert could respond, two black police escorted SUV's with dark tinted windows and flashing lights, led a long black limousine inside the estate. Thorne pulled in behind the caravan, showed the guard their credentials and followed them inside.

They climbed out and looked around. Thorne let out a long, slow whistle. "It looks like Fort Knox around here."

Veil

Robert agreed. "I've never seen this much security at a private residence. It looks like the Quantico training yard."

Thorne shook her head and laughed. "If the Bear makes it past this mess, we should hire him."

Inside the house, new faces scampered back and forth; some on cell phones, others huddled in groups. They passed through the kitchen and playroom into the living room. Loud conversations fell to whispers, stares turned into hard looks.

"Is my bra showing?" asked Thorne. "Or did we make America's Most Wanted?"

"I'm not sure, but right now I don't give a shit

Robert spotted his mother sitting on the couch, next to a portly fellow dabbing his forehead with a handkerchief. Barbara's face lit up when she saw them, and a smile pushed its way across her lips. She excused herself mid-chatter, and stopped half a foot short of Robert's chest.

He gently touched her shoulder. "Glad you made it here okay."

"What's going on Robert? It has to be something important for you to snap at me the way you did."

"I'll explain it to you later. Where's Fiona?"

"She's in the den with the Chief of Staff. Robert, I heard your office burned down. What's going on?"

"Louis Pearle?" said Robert, in an unpleasant overtone. Thorne smiled. "I'll let Thorne fill you in, about our office and all the rest. I need to talk to Fiona right away."

Barbara studied him, searching his face. "Okay, but I want to talk to *you* after you're finished."

Robert stepped toward the den. A tender touch stopped him.

"Whatever it is, son, we'll deal with it."

Even at her age, his mother's tone assured him she meant it.

"I know," he said, kissing her hand. "Just don't hurt anyone till I give the word."

"You know I will," she said in jest, her eyes glassy. "Now go." She shooed him away, dabbed at the corners of her eyes and left the room with Thorne. Robert watched them walk into the garden, wondering how his mother would react. Too old to fight, it didn't mean she wouldn't try.

The den, subdued compared to the rest of the house, still felt thick and

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tense. A handful of yuppie stiff shirts, huddled around a laptop like children watching Sesame Street, packed up and left the room.

Louis Pearle, the President's Chief of Staff, sat in front of the couch, his arms crossed, an unlit cigar in his hand. Across from him, looking up with tired eyes, sat Fiona, her face weary, shoulders slack. She caught sight of him.

"Robert!" she exclaimed, excusing herself from Pearle. She ran over and gave him a firm, prolonged hug.

"Hello Fiona, how are you holding up?"

She hugged him tighter and didn't let go. The Chief of Staff frowned and cleared his throat. Fiona finally let go, but the expression on her face said *save me*.

"I don't understand it," she said. "It was all going so well, then...things just seemed to fall apart after that monster..." She closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

"It'll be alright," said Robert, wiping her cheeks.

Louis Pearle walked over, his gaze shifting back and forth between them.

"Oh I'm sorry, Chief Pearle," said Fiona, with genuine embarrassment. "This is..."

"Robert Veil," said Pearle, hand extended.

"It's been a long time," said Robert, shaking hands only for Fiona's sake.

Robert's memories of Louis Pearle were not exactly pleasant. Pearle worked for the CIA when Robert and Thorne fought in Kuwait. He delivered the orders telling them to execute Saddam's family. When they didn't, he led the call for their court martial. "They're just towel heads," Robert remembered him saying, like the Tennessee redneck he was. "Just a few less Seven-Eleven workers."

"Good to see you back in the trenches," said Pearle.

Fiona looked surprised. "You know each other?"

"Oh, we go way back," Pearle added. "Been through some tense times together."

"And here we go again," said Robert, a stern look on his face.

The Chief of Staff smiled and rolled the cigar between his fingers. "You're just in time," he told Robert. "We're discussing security for the

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hearings. The President wants to take every precaution to make sure our nominee is safe.”

“I hope you don’t plan the same sort of overkill you have here at the house,” said Robert. “It’s a zoo out there, and I’m sure the judge feels a little claustrophobic.”

Fiona looked at Robert with a sense of relief. Chief Pearle looked as though he’d said something ungrateful. “It’s for her protection, and it’s for the best. We don’t want a repeat of what happened at the Ritz, now do we Mr. Veil? You were there, right?”

“Yes, but now we’re at her home, and although we want her safe we shouldn’t overdo it. The hearings start soon and she could probably use a little peace.”

“Robert,” Fiona interjected. “I’m sure they’re just taking precautions. I feel safe *and* comfortable.”

Robert took a step closer to the Chief of Staff. “So, the President’s poll numbers must have taken a huge plunge for him to send all this firepower. CNN or UPI?”

“I’ll ignore that, Mr. Veil. Fact is, the President’s on his way out of office, so he doesn’t care about the numbers. He does, however, care a great deal for this little lady, and wants her as safe as possible.”

“And I’m sure his legacy never entered his mind.”

“Can we please move on to something else,” asked Fiona, annoyed.

“Good,” said Pearle. “Let’s talk about the questions. Now, as I was saying before Mr. Veil walked in, it’s going to get a little more personal than we first thought.”

Fiona sat back down on the couch. “Personal?”

“Yes,” Pearle continued. “We’ve been informed that several of the Senators are going to delve into your personal life. Namely, your relationship with Carlos Medina.”

Robert’s eyes flashed over to Fiona. “The money launderer?” *That’s why all the press outside.*

“Yes,” she said, sounding a little surprised, but not ashamed. “The FBI cleared me. We dated for a short time. Nobody, including me, knew about his dealings with the Columbian cartels. Not the DEA, the FBI, or anyone else. As far as *anyone* was concerned he was a respected banker, a Vice President, and had been for years.”

Reginald Cook

Robert knew a lot about Carlos Medina. One of the biggest money launderers in the United States, he cleaned more than \$10 billion in drug cartel profits a year. The week after he entered witness protection, somebody riddled him with bullets at a Seattle Dairy Queen.

“She was cleared, Mr. Veil,” Pearle added. “We believe her. Carlos Medina fooled a lot of smart people.”

“Then why is it coming up now? If she was cleared by the FBI, why bother?” *It's Rothschild! I know it's him!*

“You know how this game is played,” said Pearle. “Someone has a problem with Judge Patrick and wants her nomination killed. Question is, who and why?”

“Who could it be?” Fiona asked. “I have enemies, but I never thought it would come to this.”

“The White House doesn't have a clue?” *I'm sorry Fiona. It's my fault. Rothschild is after me, not you.*

“No,” said Pearle. “Whoever's rattling the cage is highly placed. Virtually *every* member of the Judiciary Committee has given us the cold shoulder overnight. This hasn't happened since Bork's nomination in '87.”

“I'm sorry all this is happening so quickly, Judge Patrick,” Pearle continued. “We didn't see it coming.” He lowered his head. “And I hate to add more to your plate, but...” Pearle turned to Robert. “It's about you, Mr. Veil.”

“What about me?”

The Chief of Staff sat down next to Fiona. “We believe you'd be better served if Mr. Veil were no longer involved. It was a courtesy in the first place, and only because you insisted. Given the events at the reception and in light of these new developments...well, we have more than enough men to do the job.”

“Out of the question,” snapped Fiona. “He was no more at fault than the Secret Service.”

“I understand how you feel, but even the President has concerns. Mr. Veil's background at the Agency could come into question, and who knows what else? You two *are* being linked as an item.”

“That's ridiculous,” Fiona insisted. “Exactly *who*'s linking us?”

“I'm not here to pass judgment. I'm only telling you what we hear in

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the halls. And please beg my pardon for saying this, but that hug you gave Mr. Veil when he walked in wasn't exactly platonic."

Fiona fell silent. Robert fumed. "That three ring circus you've got out there isn't going to make her any safer," he said, knowing the fix was in.

"And neither did you. The Bear walked right past you at the Ritz, so don't get on that famous high horse of yours," snapped Pearle.

Fiona leaned back against the sofa, head back, eyes closed.

Robert took a deep breath. "Okay, if it'll make things run smoother I'll step out of the picture. But I'll still hang out around here. It's still *her* house, isn't it?"

Pearle nodded his approval. Robert sat down next to Fiona. "Don't worry, they'll take good care of you, and I won't be too far away."

Fiona's eyes watered, the tears didn't fall. "If you say so. I just hope I can get through this in one piece." Pearle handed her a clean handkerchief from his pocket.

"Don't be silly," said Robert. "You're one of the toughest people I know. Who else could hold up under this kind of pressure? Anybody else would've caved weeks ago."

A soft knock on the door, and his mother, tailed by Thorne, entered the room.

"Ahhh, Ms. Veil," said Pearle, walking over to greet her. "It's nice to see you again."

Barbara shook his hand. "Thank you Chief Pearle. And it's a pleasure seeing *you* again. But if you'll be so kind, I need a word with my son and Judge Patrick." She placed a firm hand on Pearle's shoulder. "It won't take long, then this old woman will get out of your way."

"That won't be necessary," said Pearle. "I have to get back to the White House anyway." He walked over to Fiona. "I'll fax over a list of possible questions in an hour."

Fiona thanked him and the room cleared. Robert watched Pearle avoid walking past Thorne, obviously remembering the patented ass whipping he'd received in the desert outside Kuwait.

Barbara stared soothingly at Robert. Thorne sat down next to Fiona.

"What's going on?" Fiona asked.

Barbara moved closer to Robert, her eyes never leaving his. "My son

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has a few things he needs to share with you. Tell her, son, it's all right. I understand, but she needs to know."

"Know what?" said Fiona, looking at Thorne, then up at Robert.

Robert knelt down in front of her, the mound in his throat the size of a grapefruit. He told her the story. Her eyes widened in disbelief. She looked from Barbara to Thorne, as though waiting for the punch line.

"It's all true, honey," said Thorne. Barbara nodded her concurrence.

Fiona put her head in her hands. "My God," she exclaimed. "My God!"

Veil

28

“**M**r. Rothschild, your ten o’clock appointment just pulled into the parking garage.”

“Send him right in when he gets upstairs.”

“Yes sir.”

Seventy-two hours from his sobering meeting at the Saudi Embassy, Edward sat dreading the arrival of Suraya, without the evidence, and no closer to a solution. He thumped his desk in staccato then swiveled around facing the window. A clear view of early morning Washington filled the wide panels of plate-glass like his own personal picture postcard.

What Mr. Veil? What were you looking for at Parklawn? It’s the evidence. It has to be.

He felt the eyes of his father and grandfather on the nape of his neck, staring over his shoulder from the painting behind him. *Don’t fail us! Protect the name! Protect the legacy! Kill them all!*

“Mr. Rothschild, Mr. Khomeini has arrived.”

Suraya swung the door open and rolled his considerable girth through the door. Edward arranged an extra-wide leather chair for the Iranian, a detail not unnoticed by Suraya, effusive in his appreciation. Pleasantries

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aside, the Iranian turned serious, carefully measuring his words as though other ears might be listening. Edward assured him they could talk freely.

“I hope you have good news for us, Mr. Rothschild,” said Suraya. “My partners and I are ready to move in your favor.”

“Thank you, Suraya. Everything is in order. I’d like you and the others to hold off just a little longer. Everything will be over in a couple of days, then we can move forward without interruption.”

Suraya stared Edward down with cold black eyes. “That’s unfortunate,” he said. “Our people are in place and soon they’ll be ready to go. We need your *little situation* to cease *now*, not a few days from now.”

“Listen,” Edward said, his teeth clenched, nostrils flaring. “I too have much riding on this. But there are a few loose ends I must clean up before any action is taken.”

“And what do these *loose ends* entail?”

Edward ran his long pianist fingers across his chin. “As you can imagine, it’s very sensitive or I would’ve taken care of the issue long ago.”

“One wonders,” answered Suraya. “Maybe age has cost you your nerve.”

Edward smiled. “I can assure you and your friends my resolve is the least of your worries.”

“Nevertheless, time is not on our side, is it?” asked Suraya. “We’ve been moving along pretty much as planned, but in sensitive situations it doesn’t take much to catapult things in the wrong direction. So I hope you understand our need to intervene.”

“I understand better than you the importance of resolving this matter. As you probably already know, there’s a Supreme Court confirmation hearing going on for Judge Fiona Patrick.”

“Yes, I’ve met her at receptions on several occasions. So?”

“The hearing figures into my plans. I need you to pull back your men until after the hearing. If the situation isn’t concluded by then, do what you will.”

Suraya rose and walked over to the painting of Edward’s father and grandfather. “They were involved too, no?” he sneered.

Edward’s nostrils flared. “Suraya, I’m afraid if you and your partners

Veil

insist on going forward with your plans, I'll have to withdraw my support, and, as painful as it would be, call off our deal. If there's so much as a hint of your involvement, especially since *nine-eleven*, it won't matter what you're offering."

Suraya, breathing hard, eyes red, leaned forward on the desk. "Our people will proceed immediately," he said, measuring his tone through gritted teeth. "They will handle things expeditiously, including the White House, if it comes to that. They have instructions to carry on as they wish, so they can strike at any moment. Even we will not know when or where. So whatever you have to do Mr. Rothschild, you'd better hurry."

Wet concrete filled Edward's chest. Suraya walked to the door. "It's a mistake Suraya."

"No, Mr. Rothschild, it's war," said Suraya, a *jihad* storm in his eyes. "And don't think for one second our offer places your value above our cause. Our purpose is a holy one and Allah directs our steps. Get in our way and we'll be happy to add the name Rothschild to the list."

Suraya stomped out of the office. Edward slammed his fist down breaking his phone into several pieces. The threat didn't bother him, not having the evidence did. He paced the room. *The cemetery. Why were you there, Mr. Veil?*

He removed a back-up secure cell phone from a wall safe and dialed. "Hello Vernon. It's too late to let nature take its course. We'll have to do without the evidence. Inform Simon and Marilyn, continue to track Veil, and all of you meet me here the morning of Judge Patrick's confirmation hearing. He didn't wait for a comment.

Edward sat back down and stared out at the city, the painting of his father and grandfather reflecting in the window. *Don't fail us! Protect the name! Protect the legacy! Kill them all!*

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29

A bare bones skeleton crew of reporters hovered outside Fiona's front gate. A platoon of agents patrolled the area, their presence not nearly as ominous.

Robert sulked along the garden, hands in pockets. The bright splashes of floral color, red roses, yellow daffodils, lavender and creamy paper-whites, did little to improve his mood. He told Fiona everything. Charlie, Edward, the evidence. Everything. The news brought her to a near breakdown, and she didn't say a word to him afterwards.

His mother sent him outside, so she could talk to Fiona in private. Thorne, sensing his desire to be alone, disappeared upstairs with Jessica.

At the end of the garden, Robert sat down on a white stone bench and leaned back against the wall. Guards and agents, some with shotguns, some with dogs, marched back and forth across the expansive, perfectly cut lawn in pairs, and for the first time he admitted to himself he not only cared about what happened to Fiona, he cared for *her*. She managed to dredge up feelings he kept submerged for a very long time, and he'd see her through the ordeal, or give up his life trying.

Robert left the bench and started back towards the house. *We need help. Another pair of eyes. Someone ballsy enough to handle things*

Veil

without folding. He stopped in the middle of the garden, and dialed his cell. He cursed under his breath. *Voice mail.* “Hello Marilyn, this is Robert. I need your help. Please call me on my cell phone as soon as you get this message. It’s urgent. You have the number.”

He hung up and turned. Thorne stood behind him. “What’s up?”

“I just left a message for Marilyn London. I think we should bring her in to help us out.”

“Have you lost your mind? We don’t know that bitch from Adam.”

Robert noticed several guards looking in their direction, and moved to a more secluded spot. “We need help on this,” he said in a whisper. “We’re running out of time. If we don’t catch a break soon, we’re fucked.”

“Look Robert, I know the confirmation hearings are about to start, and Fiona’s in the hot seat, but this is not the time for new faces. We don’t know enough about *Marilyn London*, and I don’t trust her.”

“We don’t have a choice. We can use another pair of eyes and ears.”

“Why in the hell would she show us that kind of generosity anyway? What makes you think she won’t run to her bosses and turn us in?”

Robert really couldn’t be sure. “It’s just a hunch,” he told her.

“Your hunches got us here, remember?”

“If you have a better idea, let’s hear it.”

“I think we should go around and kill every single one of them,” she answered. “Edward Rothschild, that little weasel asshole who works for him, and anyone else who shows up.”

“It might come to that, and when it does you know I’m good for it. However, for now let’s finish searching those crypts. Parklawn should be clear now; it’s been three days. You check the others on your list. I’ll go back and finish Parklawn, then continue with my half of the brochures. “And if Rothschild’s men show up this time...”

“I’m way ahead of you partner. They show, they die.”

“Be careful,” he told her.

Thorne smiled, went to her Rover, and drove off. Robert tried Marilyn again, and again, got voice mail. He jumped in the Mustang and left.

He reached Parklawn, parked in the same spot he and Thorne used before, cut through the thick trees and brush, and stopped at the fence

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just beyond the mausoleum. He waited for the last flicker of light to disappear over the horizon. An hour later, he stood at the entrance, ripping down police yellow tape. A sign tacked to the door read "Police Crime Scene: Do Not Enter" and detailed penalties for those who chose to ignore the warning.

He heard the faint, distant sound of tires flying down the highway, less than a mile away. He stood at the door and listened. A tail followed him when he left Fiona's, but he lost them downtown before jumping on the freeway. *Nothing. All clear.*

He slipped under the tape and tried the door. Locked, but easily defeated, he cracked it open enough for him to slip through, then relocked it behind him.

Inside, the mausoleum showed no sign of the struggle or murder. No lifeless, crumpled body on the floor, head blown apart. No blood splattered on the crypts and floor. All eyewitnesses eternally asleep.

Robert worked both walls with systematic precision, searching, studying, praying. He thought about Charlie and the things he'd said, hashing and rehashing the assassin's words over in his mind, hoping for a morsel of recognition.

He spotted several "Charlie's" laid to rest behind the marble, "Charlie Williams" "Charles Kensington" and "Charlie Noble" but none registered the slightest spark of discovery.

Outside, the wind kicked up like an enthusiastic worker back from lunch, eager to tackle a satisfying assignment, whistling through unseen crevices in the mausoleum, blowing an eerie, howling symphony, like a ghostly siren's song.

He stopped and listened. *Voices? No, the wind.* Standing statue still, he grazed the grips of his automatics and turned up his internal receiver, tuning in, listening. Several minutes passed. *Nothing. Only the wind.*

Robert resumed the search. Crunch! He spun around. *Twigs, breaking under someone's feet.* He honed in on...a voice, a phrase, a single phrase, one he'd siphoned out of blowing sand in the desert outside Kuwait. A whisper, *Over here* in Arabic. He listened longer, but heard nothing. *My mind must be playing tricks.*

Veil

Robert tip toed to the door, gun now in hand, a slender flashlight in his mouth. He pressed an ear to the door. *All quiet.*

He glanced back at the last few rows. A drum pounded in his ears, his heart thumped, his mouth went dry. He cast the light on one of the crypts and stepped closer. “Shit.” He stared at the name on the tomb, and pressed his hand on the cold marble in disbelief. *Julie Rice! We did it! We’re going to tell the world!*

Lights from an approaching vehicle splattered through the stained glass windows. He peeked outside. *Security.*

Robert trotted to the rear of the building and hid behind a large wooden podium on a small stage in a tiny sanctuary.

“I still can’t believe Tim is dead,” a female voice said, with solace. “Who the hell would blow away an old man, and for what?”

“I know,” said a sober male voice. “Poor bastard. We had his retirement party planned and everything.”

Their footsteps clomped in his direction. Robert tensed. One of them stepped up on stage. He crouched a little lower and caught a whiff of perfume. Bijon. One of Thorne’s favorites. The female guard stood directly in front of the podium, her flashlight illuminating the area behind him.

“This place is empty except for our usual guests. Let’s get out’ a here,” she said.

“Yeah, I’m starving,” said her partner. “How about Johnny O’s? I could use a nice pastrami.”

The woman chuckled. “Fred, you could eat a horse after Thanksgiving dinner.”

They laughed and left the building, locking the door behind them.

Robert waited until he heard them pull away, then emerged and started for the door. A whisper in the wind stopped him in his tracks. Arabic chatter, coming in his direction.

He ran for the rear exit. The front door crashed open. Four men, Middle Eastern as far as he could tell, all armed with automatic weapons, searched the hall with darting eyes.

Robert slid outside, but like a whistleblower, the wind slammed the door shut, and he heard footsteps stampede toward him.

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He bolted over the fence into the woods. Machinegun fire ripped behind him. He darted out to the street, ass on fire, to his car. More gunfire peppered the air sending birds skyrocketing out of the trees, and him diving to the ground. He flipped over and returned fire with both Berettas. The four men hit the dirt, two taking hits in the leg and shoulder.

Robert scrambled to the Mustang and fired up the engine. The back windshield exploded. He crouched low, and smashed the accelerator to the floor.

He checked the rear view mirror. *Nobody*. Back in the city, he swerved off the freeway into downtown Washington and pulled over. Passersby gawked at the blown out windshield and bullet holes, but he didn't care. He sat, fists tight, knuckles white, eyes badger angry. He poured through his memory, struggling to place the exact dialect of his attackers. He closed his eyes and played the words over in his mind, concentrating on their inflection. He lifted his eyelids. *Iraq*.

Somewhere near the Euphrates River, most likely the city Ar Ramadi.

He called Thorne. No answer. He tried again. Nothing. The Mustang's engine growled. Ten minutes later, he pulled past the policeman posted at Fiona's gate, and spotted Thorne's Rover. He parked behind her and headed for the door.

"Mr. Veil," a voice called from behind.

Robert stopped halfway up the stairs. An agent in jeans and an FBI windbreaker stood below.

"Your partner asked us to send you over when you arrived. She's in the garden."

Without a word, Robert bounded down the stairs and found Thorne pacing back and forth. Her short-barreled shotgun hung from her shoulder. Her eyes narrowed. Her teeth clenched. "A hit," she said, gripping the handle. "A mother funkin hit!."

"I know," he answered, his own anger boiling. "They tried to kill me too."

"The assholes followed me inside the first mausoleum I went to, but I got the drop on 'em. Shot one in the face with Bessie here," she said, stroking the barrel.

Robert looked over his shoulder and made sure they were alone.

Veil

“Were they Iraqi?”

Her face lit up. “Yes. I recognized the dialect right away. Definitely Iraq.”

“I think our friend Rothschild has raised the stakes.”

“But the Iraqis don’t hire themselves out for mercenary missions.”

“It must tie in with the deal he’s got going. But it really doesn’t matter, does it?”

Thorne hesitated. “No, it doesn’t. But what the fuck are we going to do?”

“First, let’s get the evidence.”

“That’s what we’ve been trying to do,” she said, her voice rising.

A guard looked in their direction. Robert winked, and the agent kept moving. He leaned in close to Thorne. “I found a crypt with Julie Rice’s name on it. I think we hit pay dirt.”

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30

Only a splatter of people remained inside the house, and most of them security personnel making the last rounds. Robert spotted his mother sitting at the end of the couch in the living room dozing off, her head propped up in one hand, her lap covered with the hand knitted green and white afghan she kept in her trunk. She looked older to him sitting there, and he wondered how much longer he'd have her around. He knelt in front of her. She smiled without opening her eyes.

"How are you son? You made it back." Her eyes opened and she kissed his forehead. "Where's Thorne?"

"I'm all right," he said. "Thorne's outside. We came back to see how you and Fiona are holding up."

"I'm okay, and she'll be fine. Don't worry, she's strong."

Robert dropped his head. "I should've told her sooner, but I..."

Barbara gently placed her fingers under his chin and lifted his head. "Don't second guess yourself Robert. This was not an easy decision. You did what you thought best."

He found comfort in her words, but wanted to hear them from Fiona. "Where is she?"

Veil

“In the den resting. They grilled her pretty hard, reviewing the questions she can expect at the hearing. It’s going to be tough but she’ll make it. I know Fiona, she’s a fighter.”

“I know. I just wish there was more I could do.”

Barbara grabbed his hand. Her eyes watered. “I’m proud of you son and I know your father would be too.” Her voice cracked and she cleared her throat. Robert handed her tissue from a box on the coffee table.

“I met President Kennedy while he was still a senator, and worked on a number of projects at the White House because of him.”

Robert’s eyes widened. His mother never mentioned she’d worked with Kennedy, then again, she never told anybody everything.

“He was a good man,” she continued. “Not perfect, but a good one. When they killed him, they stole our innocence, just as sure as if they’d raped us. Nothing has *ever* been the same.”

Tears rolled down her cheeks. “You get the bastards,” she told him. “Every last one of them.”

Robert kissed her forehead. “I will mother. Now you calm yourself, and try to rest.”

“Don’t worry about me, I’ll be just fine.” Barbara looked at the door to the den. “Be patient with her, son.”

Robert kissed her palm. “I will,” he said. “Now, why don’t you track down Thorne? I think she can use a calming influence right now.”

“I’ll do that,” said Barbara, dabbing away the wetness from her face.

Robert watched her disappear outside, braced himself, and headed for the den. He knocked softly and entered. “Hello Fiona.”

Fiona, sitting in an easy chair next to the couch, didn’t say a word or move. He closed the door. “We need to talk.”

“Sure. What is it now? You know who really killed President Lincoln and want to share that too?”

Robert smiled. She didn’t. He sat down on the edge of the couch. “It was Booth,” he said. “And as far as I know, he worked alone.”

Fiona stared at him, her back ramrod straight, eyes stern and piercing. Silent. Unmoved.

“Fiona, I need to explain.”

“It’s really not necessary, Mr. Veil. I’ve made my decision. I’m

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going to keep quiet about what's happening."

Robert, relieved, took a cleansing breath. "I'm glad you have faith in me."

"This has nothing to do with *you*. I talked to Barbara and she put it all in perspective. If I go to the authorities with a conspiracy story about President Kennedy's assassination, I'll be the laughing stock of the legal community. *Especially* after Edward Rothschild gets finished with me. So I might as well roll the dice."

"You'll come out of this fine, Fiona. I'll break my neck to make sure you do."

"This isn't about *me* either! This is about a President's murder. It's about justice being served, and Rothschild not getting away with it. No matter what happens to *me*."

"I know, I feel the same way, but I'm saying that I know I put you in a precarious situation, and if I could do it all over again I'd..."

"You should've told me, Robert! You should have let me make the decision to stay in this or get out! Now I've got a mass murderer after me, Edward Rothschild out to destroy me and everything I've worked for, and I didn't even have the chance to choose whether I wanted in on this or not!"

Robert anticipated her reaction, but it hurt all the same. "It wasn't an easy decision. I tried to avoid taking this case but you and my mother pushed it. Besides, I began to care for you."

Fiona sprang to her feet and slapped his face. "Don't you dare talk about caring for me, not after this. How could you care and not tell me?"

Stunned, more by her words than the slap, Robert stood up to face her.

"I'm sorry Fiona, I really am. I did what I thought was right. I wanted to protect you and Jessica from this monster, and still go after Rothschild."

"I really don't care about your intentions," she said, pounding her fist in her hand. "I just want to get out of this alive with Jessica safe."

"I understand. I want the same thing. And I think we're close to making that happen."

"How so?"

"We think we know where the evidence is hidden."

Veil

Fiona crossed her arms. “Where is it?”

Robert whispered the details, leaving out the confrontation with Edward’s men and the death squad.

She stepped back. “Are you sure?”

“Not one hundred percent.”

Fiona furrowed her brow. “You’ll need a court order,” she finally said. “I can help you with that. I have a very good friend on the bench who owes me a favor. Not as big as this one, but he’ll stretch for me and won’t ask questions.”

Her offer encouraged him. “Thank you Fiona,” he said, reaching for her hand. She pushed him away.

“Fiona, what do you want from me? How can I make this right?”

“What I want is for you to catch these people, and you can never make this right. It won’t be like before. In fact, when this is over, I don’t want to see you anymore.”

He stepped toward her. “Fiona, I...”

“Robert, please go,” she said, backing away. “Contact Judge Gary Bonner in the morning at the Federal Courthouse. He’ll have your court order ready so you can exhume the casket. I hope the evidence is in there. You’ll need a detective or Federal agent present. Do you have someone you can trust?”

“Yes, she’s FBI. Her name’s Marilyn London, and I’m sure she’ll play ball.”

“Good,” said Fiona. “I’ll let Judge Bonner know. It’s not normal procedure, but he’ll release the order to you. Agent London will have to present it to the cemetery’s managers, and be there when you open the casket.”

“I understand,” said Robert. “And I...”

Fiona raised her hand. He searched her face for some sign she cared for him, but found none. Fiona picked up her purse and left the room.

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31

Friday morning clouds gave way to rain, and the nation's capitol braced for Judge Fiona Patrick's confirmation hearing. The citizens of Washington, conditioned to swallow daily doses of political high drama, prepared to dine on the choicest of political meat.

Political appointees on the skewer were nothing new to veterans of Washington warfare, but what made this day, this happening different, was the killer, the Bear. He'd slipped through one of the most intense, widespread dragnets in American history, and like a modern day *Jack the Ripper* had managed to immerse much of the city in terror, turning them into children, children afraid of a diabolical, mass murdering bogeyman.

The area around the Russell Senate Office Building, Constitution Avenue, First Street, Delaware Avenue, and C Street N.E., locked down as tight as a military base, made members of the Senate and their administrators feel constricted. There were roadblocks and an obvious increase in police patrols. More than a quarter of the staffers and passersby, including a small group of imitation reporters were undercover police, Secret Service, and FBI. To the rest of the world it looked like everyday political theater instead of a desperate attempt to keep a Supreme Court nominee alive.

Veil

Inside the Russell Office Building, a distinguished mix filed through the Roman-style rotunda, past a milky white marble statue of former Senator Richard B. Russell, Jr. Several lucky lottery winners, excited to claim their coveted seats, pointed and gawked like wide-eyed neophytes, at every small detail of the impressive structure.

The Russell Caucus Room, grand, well ordered and richly detailed, boasted a history of important hearings, including those devoted to the Sinking of the Titanic, Organized Crime, the Vietnam War, Watergate, the Iran Contra Affair, and the Supreme Court Nomination of Clarence Thomas.

The architectural influence and mastery of Ecole des Beaux-Arts of Paris was stunningly evident in the seventy-four by fifty-four foot room; treated with paired Corinthian pilasters standing on a continuous pedestal, supporting a richly detail entablature, including, dentils, modillions, and egg-and-dark moldings. The breathtaking ceiling was decorated with a variety of gilded classical motifs—rosettes, guilloche, and Greek key. Six windows stood like exquisite picture frames on the courtyard wall, and four, three tiered chandeliers, original to the room, seemed to float above the fray like crystal clouds, featuring globes etched with national emblems, including, the U.S. Seal, American Indian, and Liberty Cap.

The broadcast crew and sound technicians put the finishing touches on camera equipment and microphones for a broadcast forecasted to be seen by more than sixty million viewers, a hundred fifty million worldwide. Some would watch to see if Fiona would be confirmed, but most, out of a morbid curiosity, wanted to see if she would live.

The members of the hearing committee took their seats. Fiona and her team filed in behind the tables set up below the tribunal. The room fell silent. A grip dropped a microphone and the speakers exploded against the quiet, causing some to clutch their chests and others to clench their bladders. At the pound of a gavel, silence returned. Fiona folded her hands on the dark oak table and smiled. The committee *didn't* smile back.

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32

Latex, make-up, and collagen lip injections molded Andre's face, giving it a full, pudgy swell. His hair, double-dyed jet black and mowed down into a military buzz cut, gave him a dedicated, take-no-shit aura.

False teeth, fit tightly over his own, pushed out into a slight overbite. His eyes flashed ocean blue.

A fifty thousand dollar microchip, surgically implanted by a German black market surgeon, irritated his vocal chords, but gave his voice a perfect baritone pitch.

His identity, flimsy and tenuous, cost him three million dollars. Much of it spent on street and government contacts who could never surface again, it would buy him a week, maybe two.

Sitting in a small reception area outside the office of Captain Mark Reasons, a new crew of security officers for the Supreme Court Building sat waiting for their assignments.

The five men and one woman talked sports and politics, but primarily discussed the confirmation hearings going on in another building less than a hundred yards away. Andre took it all in.

"If you ask me, the guy's just a super nut case," said Bill Hardy, a lean wiry guard with pointy ears and bald head. "How stupid can you be

Veil

to try and kill a Supreme Court nominee?"

"He can't be that stupid," said Judith Staten, a big boned blonde who reminded Andre of women back home. "If you ask me, he's pretty clever. He managed to get by a full secret service detail and Robert Veil."

Andre's ears burned.

"Robert Veil?" Andre asked.

"Yeah," Judith continued. "My brother humped with him in Iraq during Desert Storm. Use to be a *Company* man. Real black bag stuff. Now he works on his own."

"If he's that good, why is he on his own?" asked Andre, a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

"Don't know," said Judith. "My brother lost track of him after the war."

"Well he can't be *that* good," Bill smirked. "That maniac got close enough at the hotel to kill her."

Andre smiled.

"Thomas Flagg," called the receptionist.

Andre stood.

"Captain Reasons will see you now."

He walked, shoulders back, chin up, across the plain, well-trodden carpet and, upon entering, took a mental snapshot of Captain Reasons' office. Large but plain, the only noticeable items were a picture of his wife and two daughters and a photograph of the Captain shaking hands with Ronald Reagan.

They shook hands and Andre sat down in front of the square shouldered black man's government issue gray metal desk. Captain Reason's picked up a file folder Andre recognized marked Personnel: Classified Information.

"Thomas Flagg. Born and raised in Cleveland, Ohio."

"Cleveland Browns country," Andre added, for effect.

"I see you transferred in from the Federal Building in Los Angeles and spent some time in Oklahoma City."

"Yes sir. Oklahoma City was my first assignment out of training. I moved to L.A. just before the bombing." Andre let his voice quiver slightly.

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"I understand, son," said the Captain, sympathetic and sincere.

"Thank you sir. I'm glad they buried him," Andre lied. He considered Timothy McVeigh a hero.

Captain Reasons continued to thumb through the file. "I was considering you for assignment on the main floor, near the Justice's chambers."

Andre forced down the urge to smile. "Thank you sir, that would be an honor."

Captain Reasons stroked his chin. "But I noticed you have extensive experience in electronic surveillance, so I'm putting you in the watchroom at the monitor's desk in the basement. We can't let experience like yours go to waste."

Andre forced a smile. "Thank you sir. I'll do my best."

Veil

33

Edward watched the 60" inch plasma television imbedded in his conference room wall, eager for the morning proceedings to start.

"You can't really believe this is putting pressure on Veil," said Vernon.

Edward spun around and faced his three minions. "Never underestimate the heart, Vernon. I have it on good authority, no thanks to you, that she's something very special to him. And I know for a fact he's feeling the pressure." He leaned forward. "What I don't know is why Robert Veil and his partner have spent so much time at cemeteries," he said, playing dumb. "Who can fill me in?"

"Obviously that's where the evidence is hidden," said Marilyn. "In one of the crypts."

Edward brightened. "Please tell me you know which tomb it's in." Nobody spoke. Edward let them stew in the silence.

Simon cleared his throat. "We haven't a clue as of yet."

"We've gone through the files at Parklawn, and several of the cemetery offices they've visited," added Marilyn. "So far, nothing stands out."

Edward leaned back in his chair. "What about the names of his

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parents?"

"Negative," answered Vernon. "No such luck."

"Then we'll have to make Veil tell us," said Edward.

"That is, *if* he knows," said Simon. "What if he doesn't?"

"It doesn't matter at this point," said Edward. "We're going to kill them anyway, whether they give up the evidence or not."

The three of them looked curiously at each other.

"Is there something I'm missing?" he asked.

Neither of them spoke.

"I *said*, is there something I'm missing?"

Simon cleared his throat again. "There does seem to be a small problem, Edward. You see, we've been following Mr. Veil and his partner closely... and we were wondering if you've hired another team to kill them."

Edward didn't answer.

"Yes," said Marilyn. "There were reports two shootings took place a couple of nights ago. One at Parklawn, and the other at the Congressional Cemetery. Simon trailed Thorne, and I followed Veil with several of Vernon's men, to Parklawn."

"Yes," Vernon chimed. "Then a group of Middle Eastern men, followed Veil into the mausoleum. My guys heard machine-gun fire a few minutes later somewhere in the woods."

Edward calmly drummed his fingers, trying to decide how much to tell. "There is a team, a hit squad, after them," he finally said. "I didn't hire them. My partners brought them in. It couldn't be helped."

"Couldn't be helped!" Vernon barked. "Dammit, you should have warned us!"

"Yes," added Marilyn. "We could have gotten killed."

"It wasn't necessary that you know," said Edward, stoic and cold. "My partners are not patient men, and they wanted this taken care of immediately. As far as getting killed is concerned," he continued, looking over at Marilyn. "It's part of the job."

"You know what'll happen if a Middle East death squad is caught here in Washington," said Vernon. "All hell will break loose and they'll dime us out. We can't trust them and you know it."

"It's not about trust, it's about money," said Edward. "Where the hell

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do you think your millions are coming from, the tooth fairy?"

"We understand that, but how many more people are involved?" asked Marilyn.

Edward sprung to his feet, and slammed his fists down on the table. "If you'd find the evidence we wouldn't have to worry, now would we?"

"So where do we go from here?" Simon asked, unmoved by the outburst.

Edward stroked his chin. "Where's Veil now?"

"My men are due to check in within the hour," said Marilyn. "We'll know then."

"Well, wherever they are, pick them up and take them to my ranch in Virginia. It's quiet there and the servants are off for the week. You can question them without interruption, but I don't want them killed there. Do that somewhere else after you finish."

"Why not just kill them and get it over with?" asked Marilyn.

"I want the evidence if I can get it. So give it a chance before you end them."

Vernon and Marilyn nodded their understanding. Simon turned his attention to the television. "They're about to get started," he said, pointing to the screen.

Senator Stuart Hall sat down and glared at the judge. The other six members of the committee included Eileen Sassin from California, Oliver Franklin from Pennsylvania, Nicholas Alexander from Massachusetts, Carmen Udesco from Hawaii, Lawrence Echols from Georgia, and Ramona Arnold from Arkansas.

Hall guaranteed at least three of them would play ball and trash Judge Patrick completely. Hall asked Edward why he wanted her eliminated, but a hundred grand shut him up.

Fiona smiled, raised her right hand, and swore to tell the truth. Edward turned up the sound.

"Ladies and gentleman, we're here today to examine the President's choice for Supreme Court Justice," began Senator Hall. "Ours is an awesome responsibility. One that will help decide not only the fate of Judge Patrick, but the direction of our nation. It is a responsibility we do not take lightly."

"He missed his calling," said Vernon. "The prick should've been an

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actor.”

They all laughed.

“How many votes does he have with him?” asked Vernon.

“He guaranteed three,” answered Edward. “That should be more than enough to get the ball rolling.”

Marilyn pulled out her cell phone. “I’d better catch up on my voice mail,” she told them, moving to a spot on the other side of the room.

“Judge Patrick,” said Senator Franklin, “Your background in the law and reputation on the bench is well-known and very distinguished.”

“Thank you Senator,” Fiona responded.

“But, as you know, members of the Supreme Court must be above reproach, and the investigation and background check performed by the FBI prior to this hearing revealed several *questionable contacts* of yours. Namely, a major player in the Colombian drug trade.”

Murmurs erupted in the chamber. Fiona didn’t flinch.

“She’s a strong one,” said Simon. “I don’t think she’ll break that easy.”

Simon’s comment annoyed Edward.

“I’m just saying she’s strong, that’s all,” Simon repeated. “It’s not prudent to underestimate one’s enemies.”

Edward, about to speak, stopped when Marilyn walked back to the table. A broad smile on her face.

“Good news?” asked Vernon.

“Oh, it’s better than that,” she said. “I just spoke to our good friend Mr. Veil. He wants me to meet him at Parklawn. Says he needs my help with a very important matter.”

Edward’s face lit up. “Now we’re getting somewhere. What kind of help does he need, and with what?”

“He wouldn’t give details on the phone. He just said meet him at Parklawn right away, and something about a court order. I’d say we hit pay dirt.”

Edward stood. “Vernon, make sure Simon here has access to several of your *best* men.” “Simon, trail Ms. London. As soon as Veil identifies the crypt, take them and the evidence to my ranch and contact me. I want to be there when the casket is opened.”

Veil

All three headed for the door. Edward cleared his throat. "And ladies and gentlemen. Don't fuck this up."

The trio left and he turned back to the hearings, encouraged by the sudden turn of events.

"We interrupt these hearings to bring you a special news bulletin."

Edward watched a solemn looking, gray haired newsman, adjust his tie and earpiece. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said. "President William Claymore was shot today as he exited a breakfast reception at the National Gallery of Art. The President was on his way back to the Oval Office to monitor Judge Patrick's hearing. Witnesses say shots rang out from a car on the street as the President walked to his limousine. The Secret Service gave chase, but no one has been apprehended. President Claymore has been rushed to Capital Hill Hospital and, as of yet, there is no word on his condition."

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Robert and Thorne listened to the news report on the car radio in their rented Ford Excursion.

"My God," Thorne exclaimed. Rothschild can't be that far gone."

Robert's head reeled. "I don't know, but he did it once. I don't see why the bastard wouldn't do it again."

"There have been no updates given on the President's condition," said the reporter. "However, there is new information on the shooters. The D.C. police and Secret Service chased the gunmen, possibly Arab, through Washington into Maryland, just outside of Annandale. The suspects crashed exiting Route 66 killing the driver, but the other suspects, also believed to be from the Middle East, exited their vehicle and began shooting. All three died at the scene. For now, that's all we've been to able to learn."

Robert banged his fist down on the dashboard. Thorne cursed.

"It's them, Robert. Same group that tried to hit *us*. What the hell is going on?"

Robert pulled into Parklawn. "Sounds like Edward Rothschild has killed another President."

Veil

He pulled over to the curb just outside the main office, where he told Agent London they'd meet. They drew their guns and exited the vehicle, surveying the area for anything out of the ordinary. Robert counted four groundskeepers mowing the lawn and attending to the grounds. Another two absently picked dead flowers off gravesites.

"All clear," called Thorne.

Robert took another look around.

"How do you think they'll come at us?" asked Thorne.

"I'm not sure, but let's anticipate the worse. Once we get our hands on the evidence, we'll drive it to Terence Riker's lab in Salem, West Virginia. I gave him a heads up, so he's expecting us."

Riker, the most talented forensic analyst Robert knew, and an avid conspiracy theorist, went back almost as far as he and Thorne.

"Did you tell him what it's about?

"No, but he knows it's hot. So he'll be ready for us."

Robert saw Thorne's mind race. "We can't take a chance and make that drive," she said. "We better fly it out. My twin engine is ready at Reagan Airport."

"Fine with me. The quicker, the better."

Thorne grimaced, eyes cold with anger, body ready for war. "The President, Robert. Those assholes killed another President."

"I know. But this time..."

A dark blue sedan pulled into the cemetery and made its way toward them. He saw Thorne touch the Mac-10 machinegun hidden under her jacket. He felt the imprint of the automatics under his arms, and readied the Uzi submachine gun hanging from his shoulder.

Thorne walked across the street and circled around the back of the car. It stopped five feet from where they were standing. Marilyn stepped out, hands raised, all business.

"I take it you've heard the news," said Robert, lowering the machine gun.

"Who hasn't? The entire department is on high alert. Everyone has been called in, so I hope what you need is *serious*. I'm gonna take heat for disappearing"

Thorne offered no greeting. Marilyn kept her eyes on Robert.

"So, what's so important?" Marilyn asked.

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Robert motioned for her to follow him inside the truck. Thorne stood sentry while he ran down every detail.

"You're kidding," she said. "Don't play games with me. This is not the day, and I don't have time for jokes."

"I assure you it's no game," said Robert. "We think the evidence is hidden in one of the crypts here in the cemetery."

"You mean in the mausoleum where the guard was killed?"

"Right. Rothschild's men shot him to death. We barely got away."

Marilyn searched his face.

"This is no bull," Robert continued. "I wouldn't call you out on a day like this unless it was the absolute truth."

Marilyn breathed a deep sigh. "So what do we do?"

"We need you to serve this court order. Then, if the evidence is there, we'll move the casket to a safe place. Thorne and I will take it from there. From what Charlie showed me, I don't think we'll have any problems getting the right people to listen."

"Of course now that *you* know, you'll be a target. I'm sorry Marilyn, but I didn't trust anyone else."

Marilyn smiled. "I'm glad to hear you trust me. I won't let you down. Now, where's that court order?"

Robert handed her the order and she looked it over. "Judge Bonner. How'd you get that old fart to move so fast? He wouldn't sign a search warrant for me and I practically had a murderer strapped to a victim."

"Let's just say he's a friend of a friend. We better get started and make sure they understand this is a confidential matter. They can't be present when the casket is opened."

"I understand," said Marilyn. "Let's go."

Robert grabbed her arm. "Thanks Marilyn. I won't forget this."

Marilyn's smile widened. "Oh, I don't plan to let you."

They stepped out, game faces on. Thorne scanned the area, both hands gripping the machine gun, "All clear out here," she said. "But we better hurry."

"I'm on it," said Marilyn. She marched inside the building. Thorne looked over at Robert. "Well?"

"She's with us on this."

"She'd better be. I don't need much of a reason to blow her away."

Veil

Robert ran his eyes across the grounds, searching. "Let's just get the evidence and get the hell out'a dodge."

"Here she comes," said Thorne.

A heavy-set man in a dark gray pinstriped suit accompanied Marilyn. His eyes puffy and red, he waddled more than walked.

"This is Larry Welsh. He's agreed to cooperate fully, no questions asked," said Marilyn.

Mr. Welsh sweated profusely. "Did you hear the news? Those towel heads shot the President. I told my wife we can't trust the bastards, not as far as we can throw'em."

"Thank you Mr. Welsh," said Marilyn. "Now if you'll just arrange to have the crypt opened for us, we'll be on our way."

"Right away," said Welsh. "On your way out, stop by the office and sign the release."

"No problem," said Marilyn. "And thanks again for your cooperation."

Flustered, Mr. Welsh hustled across the lawn towards the groundskeepers, about a hundred yards away. Robert, Thorne, and Marilyn drove to the mausoleum and parked. Robert looked back at Marilyn.

"Have you heard anything about President Claymore we haven't heard on the news?"

"Not much. It looks like the work of Islamic fanatics, but the shooters haven't been identified and no group has claimed the attack."

Robert looked at Thorne. "We think it's the same group that attacked us a few nights ago."

Marilyn sat forward, mouth agape. "Attacked you?"

"Yes," said Robert. "We'll fill you in after we secure the evidence, but we think Rothschild may have hired them."

"Two Presidents," mouthed Marilyn, anger in her voice. "I'm gonna make sure I'm there when they haul his ass in."

They got out and went inside. Robert quickly located the crypt with Julie Rice's name on it.

"Julie Rice," said Marilyn. "Who's she?"

"She was a friend of Charlie Ivory," said Robert. "They both lived on the street."

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“How did you figure it out?” Marilyn asked.

“What does it matter?” snapped Thorne. “Let’s just get this over with, fast!”

Marilyn smiled. “Just a little professional curiosity, that’s all,” she said. “No need to get your thong twisted.”

The groundskeepers entered, to Robert’s relief. Thorne looked as though she might shoot Marilyn between the eyes.

“Over here, gentlemen,” said Marilyn, waving them over.

Four groundskeepers went to work on the crypt, removed the bolts that held the marble headstone in place, and lowered the slab of rock to the floor. They pushed a long wooden gurney into place just below the tomb, less than six inches from the wall, and carefully placed the dark wooden casket on the gurney.

Robert gently ran his fingers across the top of it. “Ok, let’s get it loaded in the truck,”

The groundskeepers pulled weapons from their overalls, screaming for them not to move. Robert reached for the Uzi, but froze when he felt the cold tap of steel against his temple. He raised his hands in the air and turned. *Marilyn!*

“Well, well, Mr. Veil,” she laughed. “Don’t look so glum. Did you really think you’d get to waltz out of here with one of the few wonders left in this world?”

“I knew I’d have a problem, but obviously I didn’t think it’d be you.”

“Better luck next time. Oh I’m *sorry*, there won’t be a next time.”

She kissed Robert on the cheek. “What a shame. I thought I’d get another little taste before we killed you.”

“You sick bitch,” said Thorne, her hands raised, her face calm. “I knew it’d be *your* sorry ass.”

“That’s funny,” said Marilyn, taking Robert’s guns. “If you know so much, then why am I about to kill *your* sorry ass?”

The groundskeepers disarmed Thorne. “That remains to be seen,” she said, smiling.

Marilyn stomped over and backhanded Thorne across the face. His partner’s head snapped backward. When it returned, the smile remained.

“Ok, let’s get it loaded in their truck,” said Marilyn. “I’ll call the others.”

Veil

Two of the men quickly rolled the casket outside while the others held them at gunpoint. Marilyn spoke into a small walkie-talkie, and a few minutes later Mr. Welsh, a silencer stuck in his back, walked in, trailed by the weasel they'd run into several times earlier. Welsh, shaking, and sweating profusely, urinated in his pants. Marilyn tossed the weasel Robert's gun.

"Well, hello Mr. Veil," said Simon. "It's so nice to see you again."

"Go to hell," said Robert.

"I'm sure that's in the cards one day," said Simon, putting Robert's gun to the back of Mr. Welsh's head. "But not today."

"What about the real groundskeepers?" asked Marilyn.

"They're in the tool shed," said Simon. "None of them will talk, I assure you."

Simon walked over to Robert and Thorne. "Please allow me to introduce myself. My name is Simon Lynch. I'll be executing you today."

Simon turned, pointed Robert's gun, and shot Mr. Welsh in the head.

"You idiot! You shouldn't have done that here!"

"He said don't kill *them* here," said Simon. "Now let's get everyone tied up and in the truck."

Robert wanted to attack but couldn't find an opening. He looked over at Thorne. Still calm. A good sign.

Marilyn pulled a large black gun from her coat and pointed it at Thorne.

"He said not here," barked Simon.

She ignored him, and fired.

A dart hit Thorne in the shoulder. Marilyn turned the gun on Robert.

"When you wake up, Mr. Veil, you'll be dead."

She fired into his thigh. Thorne crashed to the floor. He watched the room spin, and didn't fight it.

A fog fell over his mind, and Robert fought for one last thought. He thought of Fiona, Jessica and his mother, praying they were safe, and begged God, for one last chance to make things right.

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35

Robert saw everything clearly. He ran down the street behind a black convertible limousine. A crowd lined up along the sidewalk, waved, cheered, and hurled insults. Motorcycles led the procession and several more men in black suits, white shirts and dark ties, ran with him.

In front, riding in the back of the limo, sat a beautiful woman in a pink dress and pillbox hat; waving to the crowd. To her right sat a very handsome man doing the same. Robert heard a popping sound. The man stopped waving and grabbed his throat. Robert struggled to catch up to the car, but couldn't no matter how hard he tried. He looked up ahead to his right, saw Charlie Ivory's face at the fence on the grassy knoll, and pumped his arms and legs harder.

A shot, louder than the others, rang out. President Kennedy's head jerked backwards to the left, exploding in a mess of blood and brain, some splattering Robert's suit. Jackie Kennedy climbed along the trunk, reaching for a piece of skull. This time his legs worked, and he pushed her back into the car. He threw his body on top of Jackie and looked over at the President. He was gone.

Veil

“Robert! Robert!” an echoing voice called. “Robert, wake up!”

Robert struggled to fend off the clouds, shaking his head like a wet collie. Slumped over, head hanging down, a pungent odor stamped his nostrils, but not enough to shake the fog.

The familiar voice grew closer.

“Robert!”

Groggy, he struggled to focus his eyes. “Thorne,” he finally whispered.

“I’m right here, Robert. We’re tied to a pole in somebody’s barn. Wake up and shake it off.”

“How long have you been awake?” he asked, the pounding in his brain clearing with each breath.

“I’ve floated in and out for a couple of days. I’m really not sure.”

“Days?”

“Yes. We’ve been here for at least a week as far as I can tell, maybe more. When I woke up it was daylight outside. Then that rat faced fuck Simon came in and gave us both shots, and I blacked out. He’s been keeping us under.”

Robert took a deep, cleansing breath. “Have you see anybody else?”

“No, just Simon.”

Each slug of air brought Robert a little closer to lucid. Thirty minutes later, still sore, his head cleared, and he surveyed the barn. A single lantern hung next to the barn’s double-door, giving it a misty, shadowy feel. Shiny black saddles, on hooks next to the stalls, were emblazoned with gold “R’s” which told him the barn belonged to Rothschild.

Moonbeams slid in through the slits in the ceiling, flickering on and off as bats fluttered about the roof, disturbing the flow of light. Robert heard Thorne grunt and struggle, trying to break free.

“Damn duct tape. I’ve been trying to weaken it, but the assholes have wrapped it thick.”

Robert strained against his own bonds, to no avail, when his eyes landed on something that made him pause. *The casket.*

Dusty in the dim light, it appeared to be untouched. Wood with gold trim, it sat in the middle of the barn like a monument. Streams of moonlight touched down on it, reminding him of a scene out of the Dracula movies he enjoyed as a kid. He struggled harder against the

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tape, but it cut into his wrists.

“We’ll have to make our move when they cut us loose,” said Robert.

“You mean *if* they cut us loose.”

“All of this expensive riding equipment with the gold R’s means we’re probably on Rothschild’s property. If that’s true, he won’t have us killed here. It’s too risky. He’ll have them take us somewhere else and when they do, we’ll make our move.”

“Got it. And Robert.”

“Yeah.”

“You leave Marilyn London to me.”

Robert smiled for the first time since he’d awokened. “It’ll be my pleasure.”

Sitting there in the dirt, Robert’s thoughts turned toward Fiona and his mother. He wondered if they were safe.

“Thorne, we have to take whatever’s in that casket with us.”

“I don’t have a problem with that,” she said. “Let’s just not miss. And nobody gets to tell this story but us.”

Robert hesitated. He wanted to see Edward account for the things he’d done.

“If we can take Rothschild alive, we should. I’d like to see him fry in public.”

“That’s the point, he *won’t fry*,” she said. “Bastards like him never do. He’ll die of old age before they put him in jail.”

“Not if we take the evidence with us. What Charlie showed us is enough to destroy him, his family, and who knows how many others.”

“I hope you’re right,” she said. “But for all we know, Julie Rice could be in there decomposed and rotted away. Then what?”

“Then we’ll tell them we know where it really is. That it’s back at Parklawn. Anything to get them to move us.”

Hours passed, most of it in silence. More thoughts of Fiona and his mother surfaced but he forced them down, wanting to focus.

A car pulled up outside. He counted three sets of footsteps walking away from the barn, but no voices. Minutes later, a door opened and slammed. The footsteps disappeared.

Minutes faded into hours. Robert heard a door open, and again footsteps hit the pavement. This time toward the barn.

Veil

"It's showtime," he said. "Stay alert."

"All ready," said Thorne. "Just remember. The *bitch* is mine."

Before he could comment, the barn door opened and Edward, Marilyn, and Simon entered. The dim light barely illuminated their silhouettes.

Simon and Marilyn carried rifles fitted with silencers and laser scopes. Edward walked over to Robert and peered down, a malignant sneer dripping from his face.

"Well, Mr. Veil. We meet again. My apologies for not getting here sooner, but I had some pressing business with a few friends from the Middle East. As you can imagine, the ruckus they caused created quite a mess, and it required my personal attention. And of course, my son is running for President."

"And I apologize in advance for killing you," said Robert.

Edward laughed. "That'll be quite impressive given your present circumstance."

"I'm glad I amuse you. Let's see how long it lasts."

"Now, now Mr. Veil. Be satisfied you've gotten this far. Anyone else would be dead by now."

"You mean like Kennedy and Claymore."

Edward's smile faded, and his conceit filled the room like a poisonous vapor. "Touché, Mr. Veil, but you must understand, it's only business, nothing more, nothing less. Besides, President Claymore is alive."

Robert felt relieved. "Don't you think he knows who did it? He'll come after you."

"Oh, I'm sure he has his suspicions, but he won't come after me. You see, our good President Claymore may be a Boy Scout, but he understands how the world works. He's lucky to be alive."

"Not all men are as weak minded as you believe," said Robert.

"True," said Edward. "But there's nothing like almost getting shot to death to remind a man of his place in the order of things."

"And what's your place?"

"At the top of course. Which is why I'll walk away a bit richer with the past buried, thanks to the evidence you helped me find. Which reminds me, where are my manners? Did I forget to say thank you?" He

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bowed his head, hands together, as if he were about to pray.

Robert clinched his fists behind his back, wishing the tape wasn't there. Edward slithered over to the casket and ran his fingers along its surface, as though it were a long lost friend. "Cut them loose," he ordered, without turning around. "Take them to the woods two miles north of here. Kill them. Then come back and meet me here."

Marilyn covered them while Simon cut them loose. Robert shook his arms and legs, trying to regain circulation. Edward walked over and looked them up and down, but gave Thorne an extended examination.

"My dear, you are the looker. I've gone black a time or two, but I must say you...."

Thorne spit in his face. "Go to hell."

Edward removed a handkerchief from his jacket and wiped his face. "Marilyn, before you kill this one have her suffer as long as possible. If you need ideas, I'm sure Simon can be of assistance."

Marilyn smiled. "With pleasure."

Thorne glared hard at Marilyn, her eyes red, muscles bulging.

Not now Thorne, it's not the right time.

"Mr. Veil," said Edward. "Please forgive me. I almost forgot to offer you my congratulations. It seems your girlfriend is now a Supreme Court Justice."

Robert felt a shiver.

"Oh yes," Edward continued. "She's quite the little darling in this town. You see, the first thing President Claymore did from the hospital, was issue a statement reaffirming his support for Justice Patrick. He called it *the most important step at the moment, in assuring our nation's positive and solid constitutional direction*. Quite the political move I must say. Public opinion for her rose sharply, and not even I could stop it. She was unanimously confirmed and sworn in day before yesterday. If I'm not mistaken, she starts her first day this morning. A pity you're not there, but if it's any consolation, both she and your mother looked concerned when she was sworn in."

"So you lost that one," Robert said, struggling to maintain his composure.

"Oh, I haven't told you the best part," said Edward, a hint of triumph in his voice. "It seems your friend Mr. Andre Perchenkov, the Bear, I

Veil

think you call him, is probably going to kill her soon. And inside the Supreme Court building of all places. Imagine that.”

Robert, wanting to lunge, held himself in check. “And how do you know that?”

“Well, it seems your Mr. Perchenkov and I have some of the same friends here in Washington. I saw him plant the note next to Fiona at the Ritz. He’s quite the industrious fellow as you already know.”

Edward put both his hands behind his back, and paced back and forth in front of them, enjoying the moment. Robert glanced over at Simon and Marilyn. *They’re not close enough. They’d never miss.*

“What do you mean?” asked Robert.

“You’re not going to believe this, but this Bear fellow has bought his way into a position on the Court Building’s security detail. His Russian buddies and contacts had a little trouble securing his assignment, so I helped it along.” I have it on good authority that’s where he’ll kill her.”

“You’re lying!”

“I only lie when it’s lucrative. I was going to assist him in his little venture, but like I said, he *is* the industrious one.”

Robert lunged. Simon caught him on the temple with the butt of his rifle, and he fell face first to the ground. He pushed himself up, breathing hard. Marilyn took a couple of steps back, her weapon trained on Thorne, who didn’t move a muscle.

“Get them out of here,” Edward bellowed, turning toward the casket. “And make sure they die. I don’t want any more ghosts showing up like my old friend Charlie Ivory. When you get back, we’ll burn the contents of the casket and be done with it.”

“Outside,” Simon barked, pointing his weapon at Robert’s head.

Marilyn snatched Thorne by her hair and pulled her outside. Robert glared at Edward. “I’ll be right back.”

Edward leaned forward on the casket with both hands. “Get him out of here.”

Outside, Thorne rocked on her knees, throwing up.

“That six pack’s not as hard as I thought,” said Marilyn. “On your feet!”

She snatched Thorne up by her hair and dragged her to a flatbed truck parked a hundred feet from the barn. Marilyn drove. Simon sat in the

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back with them, gun ready. They bounced along a rough dirt road through a heavily wooded area, then stopped about three miles from the ranch.

“Okay, out,” ordered Simon.

Robert looked at his partner. *This is it!*

They shimmied along the truck bed using their legs, and hopped down.

“Let’s take’em into the woods,” said Marilyn. “The further in the better. They’ll be rat food before anyone is the wiser.”

Simon pulled out a huge Bowie knife. “Let’s go,” he said, poking Robert in the back.

They walked in the woods for about three quarters of a mile.

“Stop,” ordered Marilyn. “This is far enough. Turn around.”

Thorne stopped abruptly. Marilyn stepped a foot too close. A roundhouse kick thudded against Marilyn’s chest, sending her crashing backwards to the ground, her weapon firing into the sky. Simon aimed and fired. Thorne ducked into the woods, and disappeared.

Before Simon could turn around, Robert rammed him with a body block, knocking him on top of Marilyn, and ran in the opposite direction. He heard both of them screaming. Machinegun fire filled the air.

“I’ll go after *her*,” Marilyn yelled.

Robert stayed low, running in a wide circle, keeping a sharp eye out for Thorne. He knew she’d do the same.

He couldn’t hear anyone following, but kept running, branches slapping him in the face. He saw a tree in his path and he jumped, but something caught his foot and snatched him to the ground. *Thorne!*

“Shhhh,” she said, a finger to her mouth. “If we lay here we can catch them off guard,” she whispered.

“No,” said Robert. “We have to go back to the barn and get the evidence. Edward’s there alone.”

“They have a truck. They could beat us back,” she said. “We should take them here, then head back.”

Robert thought. “Okay, but nobody gets back to warn Edward.”

Ten minutes passed. The wind whistled through the trees, making it difficult to hear.

“We’ll wait a few more minutes,” Robert whispered. “Then...”

Veil

Robert heard the crunch of underbrush, then spotted Simon and Marilyn together, spaced a few feet apart, crouching low. Simon panned a flashlight back and forth. Marilyn followed the beam with her rifle. Robert gave a hand signal, and Thorne circled around so they could hit them from both sides.

Crawling on his belly, Robert made his way to some brush directly in their path, and waited. The light moved close. He heard whispers ten feet away.

The flashlight hit the brush where Robert hid. They stopped. He saw them look to Marilyn's left, in Thorne's direction. Marilyn shot into the brush, then checked the spot where she fired. As far as he could tell, they found nothing, then continued in his direction.

Good. Just a little closer.

Thorne sprang up behind them, grabbed Marilyn around the neck and snatched her to the ground. Simon turned to fire, but Robert jumped up and tackled him to the ground.

Thorne wailed on Marilyn's face, foregoing the machine gun, which was well within her reach.

Simon scrambled to his feet empty handed. Robert hit him with a reverse forearm on the bridge of his nose, smashing it into mush. Simon's face twisted in rage, like a rabid badger, cornered and crazed. He rushed forward, dropped to the ground, and swept Robert's legs from under him. He tried to get back on his feet, but Simon pounced, punching like his name was Sugar Ray.

He sent a flurry of bombs upward, then snatched Simon by the collar and yanked downward, head butting him in the mouth. He cried out, grabbed Robert around the throat, and squeezed, with vise-grips Robert couldn't pry loose.

He bucked and kicked, unable to throw Simon off, frantically scratching the ground, searching for a weapon. His hand touched a rock and he crashed it against Simon's head, sending the sinewy little man flying. Robert stood up gasping. Simon lay face down, motionless.

Thorne and Marilyn, bloody and bruised, circled each other like prizefighters. Robert took a step, but Thorne held up her hand and he stopped.

She hit Marilyn with a vicious combination; Marilyn retuned it with a

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barrage of her own, and kicked Thorne in the stomach. His partner fell backwards, but sprang to her feet like a cat.

She rushed Marilyn, who refused to retreat, and they lit into one of the most ferocious toe-to-toe flurries Robert had ever seen.

Their punches landed like multiple gunshots with neither giving an inch. Marilyn growled, rushed forward, and rammed Thorne into a tree. Her arms dangled like noodles, her eyes rolled up in the back of her head. Marilyn forearmed her in the face, and kicked her into some brush. Thorne fell out of sight.

“What’s the matter, *girlfriend*,” Marilyn taunted, breathing hard. “You black bitches make a lot of noise, but where you at? I knew your black ass was over-rated.” She turned toward Robert and picked up her rifle.

“Now let’s finish this.”

She fired, grazing Robert’s left arm. He dove to the ground and rolled, bullets whistling by. A scream ripped through the night, and the shooting stopped.

Robert stood. Thorne had Marilyn from behind, her bicep wrapped around the agent’s neck. Marilyn dropped the rifle, and kicked and struggled for her life. Thorne let Marilyn drop to the ground, picked up the weapon and tossed it into the woods.

Thorne circled, watching her catch her breath. “Get your white ass up!”

Marilyn spit blood, wiped her mouth, and stumbled to her feet. “Okay bitch. Let’s go.”

She rushed Thorne and caught a flurry of punches to the body and face. Marilyn swung back, missed, and lost her balance. Thorne hit with a kick and forearm smash, breaking Marilyn’s jaw and nose. She fell on her face and crawled, mumbling and coughing up blood.

Thorne straddled her from behind and leaned close to her ear. “Listen, *girlfriend*. Didn’t your mama tell you to never call a black woman a bitch? You see, we can be, we just don’t like hearing it.”

Thorne placed her other arm around Marilyn’s neck and squeezed. The agent struggled, but the sound of her neck breaking made it moot.

Robert heard bushes rustle behind him. Simon scrambled to his feet and bolted into the woods. They caught him at the clearing in front of

Veil

the truck. Simon picked up his knife and slashed the air like a samurai.

"It's over," said Robert. "Drop the knife and we'll take you back to the ranch."

Simon's face twisted. "I'm afraid that's impossible Mr. Veil. You see, I..."

He rushed Robert, but Thorne grabbed him from behind and slammed him to the ground. Simon dropped the knife. She picked it up, and cut his throat.

"Now it's over," said Thorne. "Let's go."

They hopped in the truck and headed back to the ranch. Thorne checked the glove compartment, and found a .45 automatic. Robert turned the headlights off, stopping about fifty yards from the fence around Rothschild's property.

"Let's walk in from here," said Robert. "We'll head for the barn, secure the casket, then drive the truck up to load it."

"What about Rothschild?"

"We'll take him in if we can," he said. "He'll stand trial for what he's done. It'll send a message"

Thorne looked at him, incredulous. "It won't send a damn thing," she said. "A bullet in his skull will."

Robert smiled. "Let's go."

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“I don’t see anyone,” said Robert.

“Doesn’t mean they’re not there,” said Thorne. “More troops might have arrived while we were gone.”

They jumped the fence and crouched low. Nothing moved in the yard, and they sprinted to the barn.

Robert peaked inside and saw two people, one of them Edward, standing next to the casket, talking softly. They appeared to be alone. Robert held up two fingers. Thorne nodded. On three, they burst inside.

Robert hit the floor and rolled to his left. Thorne rolled to the right.

“Get your hands up,” she shouted, the gun aimed at their heads.

Both men slowly raised their hands. Robert recognized the second man. *Vernon Campbell*.

“I told you we’d be back,” said Robert. “By the way, Marilyn and Simon send their regrets. They’re permanently indisposed and won’t be able to join us.”

“So what?” said Edward, lowering his hands. “Nobody gives a shit about those two.”

“Son, you don’t know what you’re doing,” said Vernon, calm and cool.

Veil

“Really,” said Robert. “Let’s see. We have hard evidence from the Kennedy assassination, and you two assholes who helped plan it. I think I know exactly what I’m doing.” Thorne snickered.

“Look, Mr. Veil,” said Edward. “Let’s keep this business. There’s a lot of money at stake, and you my friend...”

A gunshot exploded past Edward’s head.

“Your money can’t buy you out of this,” said Thorne. “Offer it again, and I’ll blow your ass away.”

Edward’s hands went back up into the air. Vernon stayed calm.

“Now see here,” said Edward, looking at Robert. “Can’t you rein this bitch in?”

Thorne tossed the gun to Robert, walked over to Edward, and hit him hard in the stomach. He bent over and crashed to the ground.

“No,” she said. “He *can’t* rein this bitch in.” Thorne glared at Edward and Vernon, then resumed her position. Robert gave back the gun.

“We’re taking the evidence with us,” said Robert.

“I’m afraid I can’t let that happen,” said Vernon. He slowly reached down and helped Edward to his feet.

Robert shook his head in disgust. “Get the truck, Thorne. We’re getting out of here.”

“With pleasure.”

Thorne turned to leave, but stopped abruptly. “Robert,” she said, in a low careful voice.

He turned and saw three armed men wearing ski masks enter the barn. “Drop the gun,” one of them ordered.

Thorne hesitated. One of the men fired into the ceiling. “I won’t ask again, Miss.”

Thorne tossed the gun on the ground and kicked it over. Robert faced Edward and Vernon.

“Like I said, Mr. Veil,” said Vernon. “I can’t allow you to take this. I have orders.”

“Yes,” coughed Edward, holding his stomach “*My* orders. Kill them, Vernon. Kill them.”

“I’m afraid that’s not quite in the plan either,” Vernon continued, waving one of the masked men over. “Cover Mr. Rothschild. If he even

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so much as farts, kill him.”

Edward looked at Vernon in shock. “What the hell is this?”

Vernon smiled and pulled a cell phone from his inside jacket pocket. Robert struggled to make sense of what was going on. Thorne looked just as puzzled.

“It’s me, sir,” Vernon said into the phone. “No, sir, we haven’t. Yes, right away, sir.” He motioned to one of his men and pointed to the casket. “Open it.”

One of the men put a crowbar to the casket. Robert felt a mix of aggravation and dread, helplessness and relief.

The agent pried at the lock. It didn’t budge. He worked at it for over ten minutes, leaning down on the crowbar so hard his feet lifted off the ground. The lock snapped. Robert and Thorne stepped closer, ignoring the guns at their heads.

“Let them come forward,” ordered Vernon.

Edward straightened up, his face ashen. Vernon grabbed the casket’s lid and lifted it back on its hinges.

“Empty,” Edward whispered. “Absolutely, *empty*.”

“Check and see if there’s a hollow bottom,” ordered Vernon. The agent pawed and knocked on the bottom of the box, then shook his head in the negative.

A chill hit Robert’s spine. *Fiona!*

Vernon walked to a corner of the barn whispering into the phone. The agent continued to examine the casket, tearing away its lining.

Edward, frozen in one spot, mumbled, shaking his head.

The men behind Robert and Thorne drifted closer, straining to get a better look. Robert watched them. *Closer.* He looked over at Thorne. She smiled. *Now!*

They dropped to the ground and swept the legs of the man closest to them. The agents fell backwards, feet in the air, firing into the ceiling. Thorne disarmed her man first, and wounded the agent in front.

Edward fell to the ground and cowered next to the casket. Vernon ducked low in the corner, whispering into the phone.

“Throw down your gun or we’ll kill your pals,” Thorne shouted, aiming at the two embarrassed men lying at their feet. “I mean it! Throw it down, now!”

Veil

Vernon stood up, hands in the air, and nodded. The agent tossed his gun at Thorne's feet.

Robert picked up two machineguns, unloaded one and threw it into a stall. "Get up and walk over to the others," he told the agents lying on the ground.

He and Thorne slid back to the door. Robert, pulsing with rage, stared at Edward, and aimed.

"Robert," called Thorne.

His head snapped.

"Don't do it. You were right. We're not like them."

Robert raised the barrel and fired into the ceiling, sending everyone to the ground. They ran outside and made a break for the truck. Hurtled the fence, and rolled to the ground for cover.

They waited, but nobody came out of the barn.

They jumped in the truck and sped off.

"What the hell?" said Thorne.

Robert looked back again. Still nothing. "It's not like those guys. They'd chase down their mother."

Thorne looked over at Robert. "The house or the court building?"

"The court building. She's probably already there."

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Unbelievable, Edward thought. *What happened to the evidence? How did things go so wrong?* “Why did you let them go?” he bellowed, struggling to recapture his composure.

“I have my instructions,” said Vernon.

“Instructions! What instructions? I give the instructions around here!”

Vernon looked smug and arrogant. “Not exactly.”

“Look Vernon. Don’t let this little setback go to your head. I’m still running this show. Now, let’s get back to my office.”

“There’s nothing left to take care of, Edward. It’s over.”

Edward felt his strength return. He walked over to Vernon and stood face to face.

“Are you coming or not? We have work to do. Don’t forget, you owe me everything you have, even your stinking life. Now, for the last time, are you coming?”

“I’m afraid not, Edward.”

Enraged, Edward whirled around and stormed toward the door. “First you blow it and let Veil get away, now this. I’ll...”

“Stop Mr. Rothschild and bring him back,” Vernon ordered.

Veil

Two agents blocked Edward's path.

"I'm sorry, sir," one of them said. "You'll have to stay inside."

"Get out of my way," Edward snapped, trying to force his way by.

"Dammit, let me by!"

One of the agents strong-armed him back to Vernon and threw him to the ground in front of the casket. Edward jumped to his feet.

"Vernon," he exclaimed. "What the hell is going on here? Let me out or you'll curse the day you were born!"

Vernon looked at his cell phone. "I already dread that day." He handed Edward the phone. "It's for you."

"Who in the hell is this? He placed the phone to his ear. "Hello."

He heard only silence.

"Hello. Who's there?"

"I guess you're not at the top of the food chain after all," the familiar voice said.

Edward felt dizzy. His legs wobbled. *President Claymore!*

"I really wish you'd found that evidence, Edward. It would've given me great pleasure to take it and have you tried for treason, murder, and anything else I could come up with."

Edward couldn't speak. He looked over at Vernon, who stared back with a blank face.

"I know this comes as a shock, Edward. I wanted to stop you sooner, but my directions were to let you find the evidence first. By the way, Ian Goldberg and your other Cosmos Club cronies send their regrets."

"Mr. President," said Edward. "There's no evidence I've done anything." His head reeled. He struggled to regroup. "Although I may have, Mr. President, been out of line from time to time."

"Yes you have, and I'm sure you know things will be extremely different from here on out."

"Yes, Mr. President. I agree. Things will have to be different."

There it is. The weakness. He's going to let me go.

"You know, Edward, I can forgive almost anything. You've been a thorn in my flesh the entire time I've been in the White House, and you've done some pretty despicable things."

"Mr. President, I'm sure..."

"You tried to have me killed, you bastard!"

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“Mr. President, it wasn’t me. It...”

“Don’t deny it Edward. Your friends in the Middle East gave us all the details. Suraya was especially accommodating. He says you hired the death squad. Something about oil, remember? Vernon verified everything.”

Edward looked at Vernon. The Director smiled.

“Mr. President, there’s been a mistake.”

“Yes, not taking care of you a long time ago.”

Edward hung his head, closed his eyes, and took a long, deep breath. “You’ve got me, Mr. President. I admit my intentions concerning the oil, but I did not hire anybody to kill you.”

“What about President Kennedy, Edward? What about him?”

Edward looked at the empty casket. “I have no knowledge of President Kennedy’s killers or conspirators, Mr. President. I’m just as curious as you. I wanted to find the truth.”

President Claymore didn’t answer.

“Mr. President. Sir. Mr. President.”

“Listen, you self-serving son of a bitch,” snapped the President. “You took something this country will never get back. You didn’t pull the trigger, but you killed him just the same.”

Edward gritted his teeth. “Sir, the country was never that innocent, and neither was Kennedy.”

“No, Edward. No he wasn’t. But whatever he was, he didn’t deserve assassination.”

“Who deserves to die is a question for those who have power over life and death, Mr. President. Those in power decide. Who are we to criticize? Who are we to complain?”

“Edward, I have no hope for men such as you, but life and death are God’s decisions.”

“Men are instruments of God, sir.”

More silence.

“Goodbye Edward. I hope hell holds the answers for you.”

The phone went dead and Edward handed it back to Vernon. *So I won’t get the oil fields. So what.*

“I’m going to my office, Vernon. Remember, you’ve disappointed me, and I won’t forget it.”

Veil

Edward tried to force his way past the agents but was pushed back. He spun around, angry. Vernon pointed a gun at his head. "Leave us," the Director said, calm and matter-of-fact.

"Vernon, what's going on?"

The men left. Vernon steadied his aim. "Don't look so surprised Edward. You played the game and lost. You know the rules better than anyone. In this game losers die."

"You were there too! You're as guilty as I am!"

"True," said Vernon. "Life's a bitch, huh?"

Edward watched Vernon's finger flex back on the trigger. He saw a flash, and something burned in his throat. He grabbed at it with both hands, elbows out, and dropped to his knees, choking and struggling for air.

He looked up at Vernon, pleading, begging. The gun discharged again, and the bullet tore through his skull.

He saw his father and grandfather, standing in a fog just a few feet away. Edward reached out for them, but they turned their backs.

You've failed.

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“Hey partner, ready to get started?” a jovial voice asked.

Andre looked up from the control board. Jeff Christian, his partner in the control room, looked down with a big country grin.

“More than ready,” said Andre. “And you’re late.”

“All that good lovin’ at home has a man hooked. You know, newlywed stuff?” He winked at Andre, slapped him on the back and laughed, a gesture the Russian hated.

“I know what you mean, but you better get your butt in gear.”

“Hey, if I’m gonna get fired, good lovin’s just as good a reason as any.

Anything exciting going on so far?

“No, but I see our new Justice is settling in.”

“I’ll say. They say she got here at six this morning. Surprised everyone. Captain Reasons counseled her on calling when she wants to come in early. They all do it when they first start. Eagerness, I guess.”

“I guess,” echoed Andre. “Any changes to her schedule?”

“Yes. I picked up The Watcher on my way down.”

The Watcher, a daily report circulated to security throughout the building, outlined the details of every Justice’s schedule.

Veil

“It says Justice Patrick will be leaving for a luncheon at Georgetown University and be back here late this evening. But it hasn’t been confirmed. We’ll get a final update to the report soon.”

Andre grimaced, then caught himself. *If she intends on keeping that lunch date, she’s sadly mistaken.* .

“Where’s she now?”

At an orientation with the Chief Justice, then back to her office to unpack.”

The phone rang, Jeff answered, and from all the *yes sirs* and his respectful tone, Andre knew Captain Reasons was on the other end of the line. Jeff hung up. “Captain’s on his way down. He wanted to make sure you were here. Said it’s important, and for you to stay until he arrives.”

The fax machine buzzed, and paper filled the tray.

“Really,” said Andre, his heart pounding. “Wonder what that’s all about?”

“Probably wants to give you a raise, promotion, and use of Air Force One.” Jeff laughed so hard his face turned red. “I guess I really better start coming in early, good lovin’ or not.”

Andre laughed. *Have I been found out? How? Who?* He took the fax from the tray and read it. *It’s the revised schedule. She’s in her chambers.*

The door opened and Captain Reasons bounded in, all smiles and backslaps.

“Tom my boy,” he exclaimed. “Good news. Wanted to tell you myself.”

Jeff pretended to focus on the screens in front of him. Andre mustered an inquisitive look. “Good news, sir?”

“Yes. It seems they want a new face over at the White House. Someone with electronic surveillance experience. I sent your file over and they’re reviewing it. The Secret Service wants you over there right away for screening and questioning. So pack up and move out.”

“The White House,” Jeff exclaimed. “No kidding?”

Captain Reasons glared at Jeff. “And I’ll be talking to you later about getting here on time. This isn’t a Burger King we’re guarding.”

“Excuse me, sir,” Andre interrupted. “But I’m not interested in

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working at the White House. This assignment suits me just fine."

Captain Reasons looked puzzled. "Now, son, every officer in this core wants to work the White House. It's the Big Show. I know you might be a bit nervous, but relax. I've got a good feeling about you."

Andre knew his old friends at the KGB would've busted a gut at the scene. However, his cover wasn't good enough to withstand a White House screening.

"I understand that sir, but working for you is just fine for awhile."

The Captain smiled. "Tom, I'm flattered, but *I'll* never get there if I don't send over the best people when requested. Now get your stuff and get moving. That's an order."

Andre felt the dagger he'd brought with him, press up against his stomach, and the weight of his gun on his side. Perspiration dotted his upper lip. He slid his hand down to his side, next to his government issued automatic.

"Something's happening at door SC5," snapped Jeff, pressing buttons on the control board.

The 27" screen above them switched from a hall shot to SC5, the buildings front entrance.

Andre watched Robert and Thorne argue with the guards, trying to get inside. Jeff activated the hidden microphones and turned up the volume.

"We need to see Justice Patrick right away! Tell her it's Robert Veil and Thorne, and you need to contact her immediately!"

"Calm down, sir, calm down. I need you and the lady to step over to the side," a guard told them.

"We don't have time, goddammit," yelled Thorne. "Get your asses in gear and call her now!"

"Gun," screamed one of the guards, pointing to Thorne. "Both of you down on the floor!" They disarmed Thorne.

"I've notified the D.C. police and FBI," said Jeff. "They're on their way."

Andre looked at the fax again. *In her office on the first floor.*

"Tom," Jeff said frantically. "Get on the radio! We need more men down there right away!"

Veil

Andre picked up the radio. *This is it. It's time.* He stood, pulled his gun, and shot Captain Reasons in the head.

Jeff jumped up. "What the hell!" He went for his weapon. Too late. The first shot hit him in the shoulder, the second right between the eyes.

Andre glanced up at the screen. Veil and Thorne were sprawled out on the floor, hands behind their heads. *Good. I have time.* He picked up Jeff's automatic and took extra clips from the dead guard's belt.

He left the room and ran up the stairs to the first floor, heart pumping, face wet. He reached Fiona's chambers and a guard approached.

"Flagg, what are you doing up here?" Andre shot him in the chest, setting off a wild frenzy.

He tried the door. *Locked.* He stepped back and kicked it open. Fiona's secretary dove under her desk and screamed. Andre helped her out of her misery.

Gunshots splattered the wall and he hit the floor. He shot back at the guards, reloaded, and fired again. He tried the inner chamber door. Shit! It's locked! He fired again. Heavy fire returned.

"Careful! We don't want to hit the Justice," he heard one of the guards shout.

Andre reloaded. *Don't worry, she's safe with me.*

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Robert and Thorne lay spread eagle on the cold marble floor. Guards surrounded them, guns drawn. Robert wanted to get up and make a break for it, but he'd be shot on the spot.

"He's here," Robert barked. "The Bear is here! Check with the White House! Call her house! I'm her bodyguard, dammit, she's in danger!"

"Robert," shouted Thorne. "Listen!"

Robert shut up and listened close. As if following the same orders, the guards listened too, their jaws on the floor.

"We repeat, we repeat. Assailant is on the first floor at Justice Patrick's chambers! We have three men down! Send paramedics! We repeat! Three men down! Assailant is armed and barricaded inside Justice Patrick's chambers!"

"Get up there," Thorne yelled. The guards scrambled. Another radio call came over the air.

"We've got two down in the control room," a quivering voice said. "One is Captain Reasons. I repeat. The Captain is down."

"My God," one of the guards said, in a hushed voice.

Robert nodded to Thorne. She snatched two guards down to the floor

Veil

and beat them unconscious. Robert pushed himself up and disarmed the two that remained, tossed a gun to Thorne, and took off toward the gunfire.

They ran to Fiona's chambers and saw two guards shooting inside, bullets streaking back at them, splintering the doorpost and walls. One of the guards took a shot to the throat and fell backwards to the floor. Dead.

"Thorne, take the other side of the door," Robert yelled, and they joined in the fight.

A barrage of bullets exploded from the office. The remaining guard hit the ground dead.

Robert took his position and peeked inside. More gunfire exploded against the doorframe just above his head. He caught a glimpse of the Bear stooped behind a flipped over desk and fired, sending Andre sprawling to the floor.

"The swat team's here. Pull back, but keep him contained," a voice screamed through one of the dead guard's radio.

"I repeat, pull back. The swat team's here, and the negotiator is on his way."

Robert looked over at Thorne. "This asshole's not the negotiating type."

"My thoughts exactly. How do you want to play it?"

Robert heard a loud crash. Fiona screamed. He looked inside. The Bear kicked in the inner-office door and rushed inside.

Robert erupted and tore inside with Thorne right on his heels, both pointing their weapons. Robert saw Fiona duck down behind her desk. "She's in the line of fire, Thorne!"

They hesitated. The Bear fired. They rolled inside her office on opposite sides of the room.

"Stay down, Fiona," Robert screamed.

He rushed Andre, staying low. The Russian fired, missed, and Robert body slammed him to the ground. Both lost their weapons as they hit the floor.

Robert gave Andre a head butt in the mouth. Thorne screamed for him to move. He did. She pulled the trigger. Empty.

Andre caught Robert in the jaw, knocking him backwards. Thorne

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dove on top, but he flipped her over and sent her crashing into a table. He jumped up screaming in Russian, crazed, frothing at the mouth, a long silver knife in his hand. Fiona ran to the back of the office and stood against the wall.

Robert and Thorne scrambled to their feet and circled.

Andre continued to rant in his native tongue. Robert didn't understand what he said, but understood he wanted to kill Fiona. He wanted to see her dead.

Robert charged. Andre sliced his arm. Thorne came up from behind, bear-hugged him, and reverse slammed the Russian to the floor.

The Bear scrambled to his feet, still gripping the knife. Thorne tried to take him. He stabbed and slashed, holding her at bay.

Andre looked at Fiona, mouth frothing, eyes red. He screamed and rushed toward her. Fiona raised her hand, which held Robert's gun, and fired, hitting him in the shoulder.

Andre stopped and admired the wound, smiled, and rushed again.

Robert dove for him and missed. Shots exploded, then stopped. Robert rushed to his feet and looked down. Andre Perchenkov, the Bear, lay on his back, blood oozing from his chest. Thorne knelt down and checked his pulse. "He's dead."

Robert looked at Fiona. "It's over honey, it's..."

Fiona stood against the wall shaking. The Russian's knife in her chest. "Robert." She collapsed.

Robert rushed over. The SWAT team rushed inside.

"Get an ambulance! She's hurt! Get an ambulance!"

He examined the wound. Half the blade made it inside her chest, and blood oozed, soaking her blouse. Fiona tried to raise herself up.

"Don't move," said Robert, bracing himself behind her. "They're on their way." He looked down at her through watery eyes. She smiled.

"I missed you," she said, tears rolling down her cheeks.

"I missed you too," he said.

"Where's that ambulance?" Thorne screamed.

"Jessica," Fiona whispered. "Where's Jessica?"

"Don't try to speak. Rest. Jessica's just fine. *You're* going to be fine."

"Is he dead?" Fiona asked.

Veil

“Yes, he’s gone.”

Fiona closed her eyes and her breathing fell shallow. Robert gave her mouth to mouth. She didn’t respond. Paramedics rushed inside and went to work. One called hospital emergency to report her condition, while the other pressed gauze on the wound. Robert heard them say they couldn’t detect a pulse. He could barely swallow.

They carefully loaded her body on a gurney, tubes in her nose and arm. He followed them outside, Thorne at his side. The ambulance sped off. Robert’s stomach cramped.

“I should have been here,” he whispered, lowering his head. “I never should have left her side.”

“You did the right thing,” Thorne told him. “How could you know the bastard would be inside the building?”

“I should’ve put her first.”

“You put the country first. We did the right thing.”

FBI agents made their way over. They’d be questioned all night, but Robert didn’t care. The woman he loved died and at the moment, the world didn’t matter.

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A cold wind pounded hard against the windows, shaking them violently. Thorne and Barbara sat at the table playing chess, both concentrating hard, Robert's mother holding the upper hand.

Fiona's servants milled around, heads low, faces miserable. Robert, couched in front of the television, shut his eyes, but couldn't sleep.

"What time is he going to speak?" asked his mother.

"In about ten minutes," answered Robert, changing the channel to CNN.

President Claymore would address the nation that night in an attempt to make sense of the past week's turmoil.

A search of Andre's locker uncovered a note ranting and raving about the death of his brother and the usual "hatred of the U.S." diatribe. The note said Fiona's death was his final message, a warning that America was not all-powerful, and that he was the beginning of many to follow after him.

Thanks to a profile on America's Most Wanted, the police found and searched the Russian's apartment, where they found information linking Andre to Agent Sams, and the body of his neighbor, Gloria Parsons, an apparent moth too close to the flame.

Veil

Robert poured himself a drink, Jack Daniels on the rocks. He thought about the evidence, which he knew they'd never find. He and Thorne went back to Parklawn and searched, but couldn't find a clue.

NBC broke Edward's story. Found shot to death at his ranch home, reports called him the victim of a home invasion robbery gone awry.

His son, Charleston, dropped out of the presidential race and offered a million dollars to anyone with knowledge of his father's death. Robert watched as the world mourned a man they deemed a great leader, even calling him a global pioneer.

Robert knew one person who could put things all together. Vernon Campbell. Unfortunately, or conveniently, the CIA Director died in a hunting accident stalking deer in Pennsylvania. An agent who accompanied him on the hunt tripped over a tree stump and blew the Director's head clean off.

"It's starting," said Robert. Thorne and his mother left their game and sat beside him.

Two doors at the White House opened, and President Claymore walked down a long red carpet, stopping at the podium.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. These last few weeks have been trying for our nation. We have suffered indignities and hatefulness. Diseased efforts designed to eat away at our very soul. A madman sought to take away our pride and sense of well-being by taking the lives of those servants sworn to keep the law and the Constitution sacred. Madmen even sought to take my life, but it is not *my* life they wished to take. It is not my body they wished to destroy. They wish to take away *your* way of life, the freedoms of good Americans and good people all over the world. Evil tried, good conquered."

"Now it's time to move forward from this place, this place of hurt and pain. It's time to heal and move on into the future, a future bright and promising. We have been wounded, not killed. Stepped on, not crushed. *Beat down*, not beaten. So let's move forward with the determination to make changes. Positive changes our world cries for, uplifting changes we have the power to make. I have only a short time left in office, but during this time we will energize our country, and take back that which belongs to us all. The right to live free, safe, and secure, in the home of the free, land of the brave. Thank you, and God Bless America."

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The room exploded into a frenzy of applause, questions, and camera flashes.

"Well, partner, we're back in business," said a smiling Thorne. "I'll start searching for a new office first thing tomorrow, maybe something in Georgetown. That is, if the government's check clears."

"I'm surprised they paid us," said Robert.

"Hey, we caught him didn't we?" Thorne jumped off the couch, and headed for the kitchen. Dr. Albert Anthony walked in the den.

"Hello doctor," his mother said. "How's the patient?"

"She's doing just fine. She wants to see Mr. Veil."

Robert ran up the long winding staircase, and inside Fiona's room. A short stout nurse smiled when he rushed inside.

"Hello, Mr. Veil. She's awake. Come right in." The nurse closed the door behind her.

He stood next to the bed smiling, thankful Fiona made it through alive. She opened her eyes and smiled. "You really must get some rest, Mr. Veil. You look tired."

He kissed her on the forehead, and sat down in the chair next to the bed. The knife nicked her heart and she lost a lot of blood, but it did no permanent damage. The doctors said she'd be able to return to the bench in a month or so, when her strength returned.

"You look well," he told her. "Good thing, too. I think your staff's going crazy without you." He leaned in close. "And so am I."

She returned his gaze and her smile widened. "You saved my life. Thank you. I owe you everything."

"Don't talk," said Robert. "You need to rest. Jessica will be back later today, and I suspect you'll need all the strength you can get."

Tears streamed down Fiona's cheeks. "If not for you she'd be... I'd be..."

"I know," he said, wiping her face with tissue. "Now rest."

He stroked her hair. "I love you, Fiona."

"Oh, Robert, I love you too."

They kissed, long and passionate. Robert held her hand until she fell asleep. He watched for a moment, then closed his eyes, and joined her in a rest welcome and peaceful.

Veil

EPILOGUE

On a sticky, humid, Washington afternoon, a dark green taxicab pulled off Lincoln Road N.E. into the nicely kept Glenwood Cemetery and made its way through the calm sea of permanent guests bedded down in eternal sleep. The expansive park of the now long forgotten held an eerie calmness that was curiously inviting for a place most wanted to avoid.

The cab made a left and slowly climbed the semi-steep pavement, stopping at its passenger's request. The cab driver hopped out and pulled his fare's "spare set of wheels" from the trunk. With the precision of a gymnast, Popeye lifted himself out of the cab and lowered his legless torso down into his wheelchair. "I'll only be a minute," he told the driver, rolling past several impressive, custom-made vaults. He stopped at a gothic tomb with the name C.R. Peace engraved across the top.

Popeye lowered his head, too dizzy and tired to pray, moaning in memory of battles lost and friends long passed away. Charlie kept several tombs around the city and asked Popeye to make sure the casket with the Kennedy assassination evidence got moved if something happened to him. He also instructed him to give Robert Veil this information, but Popeye had waited.

Now, with Edward Rothschild dead, the homeless amputee didn't see

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the point. *Why put the country through more agony when it wouldn't help her heal?* Popeye wiped his eyes, pulled a half full bottle of Southern Comfort from under his blanket and took a long full swig.

Ten minutes later, bottle empty and back under the blanket, Popeye made his way home. The doctors at Crossroads gave him six months at the most. Fine with him. He'd done his country one final service and, near death, that's all a patriot could ask.

Veil

PREVIEW

The Hammer of God

**A Novel
by
Reginald Cook**

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Reginald Cook

PROLOGUE

Pope Pius IX, as was routine when in Rome and not traveling, knelt in front of his chamber window at sunrise for prayer. Seven years removed from the start of his Papacy in 1846, and the anxieties of the church had not waned an inch, in fact, as time edged forward, the mire under his feet deepened.

Riot lead to riot, and the pope was pronounced a traitor to his country. Palma, a papal prelate, was shot to death while standing near an open window. On the steps of the Cancelleria where he'd gone to open parliament, his prime minister, Rossi, was stabbed to death, and Pius had been pressured to promise a democratic ministry. Then, draped in a homemade disguise, with the assistance of the Bavarian ambassador, Count Spaur, and the French ambassador, Duc d'Harcourt, Pope Pius escaped from the Quirinal where his enemies had surrounded him.

Pius returned to Italy April, 1850, after the French restored order to Rome, but cancerous opportunists, who struck down his authority, had terrorized the citizens and committed untold atrocities, all in the name of democracy.

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However, nothing vexed the Pope's soul like the vision he'd been wrestling with for the past two weeks. Every morning since it started, he rose before dawn and entreated the Lord with the prayers of an earnest man, begging for the nightmare to pass. This morning, he closed his eyes and moved his lips with wisps, and the heaviness came faster than usual. Sweat flooded his face, burning his eyes, soaking the neckline of his white vestment.

Asmodeus and his band swept into the Pope's chamber unnoticed and encircled the man on his knees deep in prayer, sneering and snorting their delight. Asmodeus towered over the Pontiff. The eleven others formed a semicircle around them both.

Pope Pius continued to pray, squeezing his eyes tight, his murmurs unintelligible. Asmodeus knelt down and whispered in his ear. Tears bled from under Pius's eyelids, he clenched his teeth and sobbed. "Why, Lord, why?"

Asmodeus and the others watched the pope pray harder, this time stretching his hands toward heaven, begging for relief, and they laughed.

The windows of the chamber swung open and a brisk wind swept through. Michael, and eleven of God's strongest angels breezed into Pope Pius's chamber, pushing back Asmodeus and his band of demons.

Michael recognized each fallen angelic being and took note. Asmodeus, Chief of Demons, Balan, Prince of Hell, Buer, Commander of fifty legions of devils, Hecate, Queen of Witches, Jezabeth, Demoness of Falsehoods, Naamah, Demoness of Seduction, Philotanus, Demon of pederasty and sodomy, Python, Prince of lying spirits, Ronwe, Demon commanding nineteen legions of devils, Semiazas, Chief of Fallen Angeles, Sonneillon, Demoness of Hate, and Vetus, a devil who specialized in the corruption and tempting of the holy.

Pope Pius relaxed a bit, the crying abated, but the prayerful murmurs increased.

"What business have you here?" asked Asmodeus, his voice deep, commanding.

"Our task is as always," answered Michael. "One you know well."

"We have permission to be here," bellowed Asmodeus, "Granted by *our father*."

"For what purpose?"

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A hideous, scaly smile spread across the face of Asmodeus. He reached inside his smoldering cloak and pulled out a thick sword. The others in his band followed suit.

Michael looked around at those with *him*. Raphael, Gabriel, Uriel, Anael, Raquel, Raziel, the Archangels. Malakim and Dunamis, both associated with heroes, known to instill courage, also known as “The Shining Ones.” Camael, who wrestled with Jacob. Remiel and Tarshishim, who guide the soul.

Michael turned back toward Asmodeus, placed his hand inside his glowing robe, and pulled out an anvil attached to a long, worn, sturdy oak handle. The other angels did the same.

Asmodeus took a deep breath and blew a smoldering orange flame from his nostrils. The fire wrapped itself around the swords of each of those who followed the demon.

Pope Pius cried out, “No Lord! No! Do not abandon thy servant!”

A light, brighter than the essence of the sun, flashed through the room. When it faded, Asmodeus and the demons lay prostrate on the floor. Michael and the Lord’s host stood strong, their hammers glowing with the Holy Spirit.

Asmodeus and the others scrambled to their feet, violently waving their swords, slashing the air, spewing sulfuric fumes. They floated above the room, flames pouring from their nostrils. “Il Martello de Dio,” whispered Asmodeus.

Michael and the holy hosts rose to the ceiling, each hammer at the ready. Both groups charged forward, clashing into an explosion of fiery thunder. Outside the pope’s window, the sky turned black and lightning clawed the sky. A hard, dense rain pounded everything in sight, and the window shutters slammed against the building until they were torn from their hinges and sucked up into the sky.

Pope Pius jumped to his feet and summoned his aide. He sat behind his desk, dictated a decree, and made a list of twelve priests to be called to him at once. When the aide left the room the pope fell back to his knees. “Bless oh Lord, Il Martello de Dio. The Hammer of God.” Pius wept.

Veil

1

Gazing down into soft blue eyes, Charles Tolbert marveled at the milky softness of his lover's skin. Women had rejected him over the years, casting him aside like a half eaten candy bar, but now, he was in love.

Charles stroked dirty brown hair, soft and billowy, like cotton from a fresh bottle of aspirin. He closed his eyes, took a whiff of fresh washed skin, the scent of clean, a hint of soap, lightly engulfing his nostrils.

When he opened his eyes the beauty before him enticed him to tears, but he gently bit his bottom lip, fending off the surge of feral emotion. Without invitation, Charles pressed his lips against a mouth he could no longer resist, the moist touch of which sent his heart a flutter, his senses a blur. He pulled back sporting a smile that could shame the angels in heaven, but as quickly as it came, his joy dissipated like steam rising from the sea.

"What's wrong?" Charles asked. "Have I done something wrong?"

"I can't do this anymore," his lover answered. "I'm sorry, but this is wrong."

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Fear washed over Charles. He fell to his knees. "Please, I can't bear the thought of losing you. I know we've been under a lot of pressure, both of us. But I promise, it'll get better."

Picking up the white satin that lay across a beaten antique couch, Charles slipped it over velvety arms that caused him to lust, over the head he'd kissed more than a few times, and the body he'd held with great admiration and envy. Charles took a few steps back, and admired his *angel*.

"You always say we'll stop, but we don't," his angel said.

"I know, I know," said Charles. "But let's not talk about it now. We'll talk later. You have my word."

No answer. Just wet eyes and red cheeks.

Charles cleared his throat. "I'm sorry if I hurt you. I love you." *There, I said it.* "We'll talk more in a few days, until then, let's continue to keep it quiet."

Still no answer, just a wounded stare. His lover turned the doorknob, and left the room. Guilt washed over Charles. He'd broken his vows again, caught up in an affair he knew would destroy his relationship.

He fastened his shirt, ice white, high collar, and slipped into his favorite suit, dark, slightly wrinkled. A wood framed full-length mirror as old as the building he worked in, caught his attention, and forced him to look upon the ugliness he so abhorred. He turned away, chest heaving, mouth dry, and plopped down in a blue leather swivel chair behind his desk. *Losing a love that brings me such childlike joy is not something I'm prepared to do. Chocolates, he thought. I'll start with chocolates, then a shower of gifts. It's a bit pretentious, but it's a start.*

Charles smiled at himself in the mirror, his jet black hair and boyish good looks overriding the monster that now retreated within. He checked his watch. *I'm late.*

He grabbed the tools of his trade and headed for the door. The monster in the mirror right behind him.

Veil

2

Strikingly exquisite, the ten-foot stained glass image of the Assumption of Our Lady surrounded by twenty-three angels, in a montage of red and multiple shades of blue handcrafted glass, impressed Robert Veil. Church was not his favorite place to be during the middle of baseball season, but sitting there in a spiritual ports-of-call that played host and home to Chicago's eighteenth century Northern Italian immigrants, Robert's heart pounded, and his palms moistened. He was about to see his godson, Samuel, for the first time in almost six months.

"I bet he's grown an inch or two," Robert whispered to Donovan Napier, Samuels father.

"An inch and a half since you last saw him," Donovan whispered back.

"Shhh," Donavon's wife, Alison, hissed. "You boys will have plenty of time to stick your chests out over Sam when service is over." She gave Donavon a sly smile and sat back against the naked wooden pew. Donavon gave Robert a *We better do as mommy says* look. He smiled back. *She's your mommy, not mine.*

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Robert, born catholic, defected as soon as he could slip under his mother's radar, and had forgotten how opulent catholic churches could be, Chicago's Assumption Church especially so.

Below the stained glass masterpiece up front, hung a stunning recreation of Leonardo da Vinci's masterpiece "The Last Supper" that would've made the Italian master proud. Smaller, but every bit as impressive, was an extensive splattering of stained glass images, in addition to dazzling mosaics and murals prominently displayed on the walls and ceiling. Robert counted five different types of Italian marble on the alter rail, and a dozen museum quality statues standing sentry on three sides of the remarkable sanctuary. Under their feet lay a sea of deep, royal blue carpet, so rich walking on it seemed a sin.

Robert glanced over at Donavon and Alison, still making goo-goo eyes after ten years of marriage. Seeing his old friend so happy amazed Robert, especially since ten years before the marriage, while they were working a CIA surveillance assignment in Bohn, Germany, Donavon swore off the lifetime confinement of matrimony, saying *he'd rather roll around naked in broken glass*.

"After service, there's a few people we need to meet," Alison whispered to Donavon, who took a deep breath, bit his lower lip, then sighed. He looked over a Robert. *Save me.*

Marry one of Chicago's treasures, and that's the price you pay, thought Robert, wanting to laugh.

Melodic Latin phrases from a male falsetto echoed throughout the sanctuary, and Robert watched his godson, Samuel Napier, lead a priest, three other altar boys, and an alter girl, down the center aisle.

Samuel, draped in a white satin vestment, along with the other altar adolescents, looked deadly serious holding an elaborate silver and gold cross stretched out in front of him toward the sky, marching toward the altar at a pace more fit for a funeral procession than a spiritual celebration.

One look at the boy and Robert was sure Samuel had grown more than the inch and a half Donovan mentioned. The dirty-brown haired boy's shoulders were starting to broaden, and Robert could already imagine the ten-year old birthday boy playing linebacker or center field.

Veil

After readings from the book of Isaiah, several more from Matthew, John, and Luke, Robert listened to the priest, a Father Charles Tolbert, launch into an additional series of chants, and a sleeping pill of a sermon that Robert vaguely surmised as an exultation to pray for one's enemies, and those that hate you. The need to yawn was almost more than Robert could bear, and water welled up in his eyes as he fought back the urge.

Samuel and one of the other altar boys, a portly, jovial kid, with fiery red hair, freckles, and friendly eyes, set up the altar for communion. When Samuel turned to resume his position on the far left of the altar, Robert noticed the boy flinch slightly as he passed Father Tolbert. *Must be a little nervous*, thought Robert, remembering Alison's earlier comment that it was Samuel's first time setting the communion table.

After communion, more prayer, benediction, and then dismissal, Samuel, cross held high, lead the evangelical parade back down the aisle and disappeared through ivory painted, gold encrusted double doors. Ten minutes later, Robert milled around outside in front of the church with most of the rest of the congregation, watching them chat, laugh, and wish each other well. Chicago's summer season, in full motion, but sporting a dark, overcast sky, blew crisp air, but not cold, and the wind for which the city got its nickname, toyed with parishioners hats and coats for sport. All were subtle precursors to the harsh winter that always followed.

Robert watched Donavon and Alison work the crowd like seasoned vets. Alison flashed a smile that could disarm the most hardened heart, and Donavon, standing slightly behind her, put on a stellar performance worthy of an Oscar. It was like watching a President and the *first husband* campaign.

“Uncle Robert! Uncle Robert!”

Robert looked over his shoulder and spied Samuel in full sprint, arms pumping, face bright and excited. A foot or two from his godfather, Samuel leapt through the air into Robert's arms, wrapping his legs around him, almost sending Robert backwards to the ground.

“Well hello birthday boy. I’m happy to see you too. Happy Birthday.”

Samuel thanked Robert but didn’t release his grip. When Robert finally pried him loose and lowered him to the ground, he took a step

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back. "Let's have look at you," he said, hands on his chin, inspecting every inch of the boy.

"I've grown two whole inches," said Samuel, beaming with pride.

"I see that," said Robert. "You'll tower over me soon."

At this, Samuels smile broadened and his back straightened. He took Roberts hand and led him over to his mother and father.

"Well, I see you've found your favorite playmate," said Alison, kissing her son on the cheek.

"Yes", added Donavon. Now we won't get an ounce of sleep over the next few days."

"Oh, like you won't enjoy it yourself," chided Alison. "I'll have to find a place to stay for the next two days, the way you three carry on."

"We're not that bad," Robert joked, knowing that they were. When he visited Samuel, the kid inside him shook loose, and he loved it. It was like reclaiming something he'd lost in his own youth, the day his father was murdered.

"Where's Aunt Nikki?" asked Samuel.

"She's going to meet us at the restaurant," answered Robert. "She said to tell you she wouldn't miss your birthday for the world."

Aunt Nikki, Nikki Thorne, Robert's partner and best friend, was a Baptist, as much as he was a Catholic. Thorne passed on morning mass, opting instead to visit an old friend, which Robert knew without asking meant a visit to Nelson Reynolds, a detective on Chicago's police force, and an old flame.

"I'm starving," said Donavon. "Let's head for Spraggia."

Spraggia was Roberts's favorite Italian restaurant. A choice he knew Samuel made with him in mind. "I'm with that," he answered, smiling at Samuel. "We'll eat, and then, presents."

Samuels face beamed and he bounced around like he was going to wet himself.

"Well, this must be the famous godfather I've heard so much about," a voice said behind them.

"Father Tolbert," said Alison, pulsating with charm and respect.

"May I introduce Mr. Robert Veil, from our nations capitol.

Robert shook the priests moist, clammy hand. The cleric greeted Donavon and gave Alison a hug.

Veil

"Our little angel here did a great job today," said Father Tolbert, turning to Samuel, placing his hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Thank you, father," answered Samuel, eyes glued to his feet.

"Now, don't be so modest," said Father Tolbert. "I'll allow a little pride today. It's your birthday."

Everyone laughed, except Samuel, who seemed to force a smile.
"Thank you, father."

"Thank you so much, father, for taking an interest in Samuel. We're very grateful," said Alison.

"Not at all," said the priest. "He's an exceptional child. It's my pleasure."

They continued to banter and make small talk for several minutes, when a black Cadillac sedan swooped up to the curb. The driver, a broad shouldered priest with a pit bull mug, hurried to the rear passenger door and snatched it open. A tall, lean, elderly gentleman unfolded out onto the sidewalk, wearing blood red robes and the air of catholic royalty.

"Cardinal Polletto," Father Tolbert gushed. "I wasn't expecting you for another hour or so," he continued, kissing the elder priest's hand.

"Yes, I know," answered the cardinal. "I left St. Francis as soon as mass was over. I wanted to make sure you and I had plenty of time to spend together."

Father Tolbert introduced everyone. Donovan fell just short of kissing the cardinal's hand, and Alison bowed and curtsied as though she'd just met the pope himself. The episode made Robert feel a bit out of place. He had no intention of bowing or kissing anybody's hand; instead, he opted for a firm, respectful handshake.

"And who's this little fellow?" asked Cardinal Polletto, leaning down to Samuel.

Pressed up against his mother, Samuel eased forward and introduced himself. Father Tolbert added a few compliments on Samuel's performance as altar boy. Samuel looked relieved when the two men turned their attention elsewhere.

Cardinal Polletto and Father Tolbert excused themselves and disappeared inside the church. Robert and the others hustled to Donovan's Lincoln Town car, and headed for Spraggia's.

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“So, have you caught any bad guys lately?” asked Samuel, bouncing in his seat. “Do you have your gun on you? Can I see it? Do you think I can be a bounty hunter when I grow up?”

“No *bounty hunting* for you,” Alison scolded, smirking.

Since leaving the CIA, Robert and Thorne had opened their own firm and chased down high-level criminals all over the world. Samuel loved to hear the details of their exploits. Stories about terrorists they’d captured, serial killers they hunted down, and exotic places they traveled to all over the world. Most of the details he gave Samuel were fabricated, since the majority of the cases they worked were highly confidential, for which they were sometimes paid millions of dollars for their efforts, by governments, and the wealthy.

“I left my gun with Thorne today,” he said. Not the type of thing you should wear in church, and your mother’s right. I see medical school in your future.”

“Not a chance,” said Samuel. “I want to come work with you and Aunt Nikki. We can be a team.”

Donovan looked back at them in the rearview mirror. Robert saw a big smile on his face. Despite all they’d seen working for the government, intelligence was in Donovan’s blood, and a son in the family business was just fine with him. Donovan even wore the bullet in his hip as a badge of honor.

“You looked a little nervous up at the altar today,” said Robert, changing the subject. “I thought you were gonna choke.”

“Me, choke. Never,” answered Samuel. “Just a little game-time jitters. I get the same way before a big game in little league.”

“I understand,” said Robert, kissing Samuel on top of the head. “I get the same way from time to time.”

Samuel smiled and laid his head in Robert’s lap. Robert stroked the boy’s hair and smiled.

Donavon stopped to make a left turn into the restaurant parking lot. Bam! Somebody plowed into them from behind. Robert’s head jerked backwards and snapped forward. The Lincoln lunged into oncoming traffic and crashed into an SUV. The airbags exploded into Donovan and Alison’s faces. Robert covered Samuel as best he could.

“Is everybody okay?” asked Robert, heart and adrenaline pumping.

Veil

“Out of the car, hands up,” a ski masked man shouted, waving an Uzi machinegun. Robert reached for his gun. *Damn!* He counted four men in total, two from each vehicle. *A set up!* One of the men pulled open Robert’s door and snatched Samuel outside.

“Not my son!” shouted Alison, in frantic tears. Donovan jumped out and started cursing. Robert slid out, an Uzi trained at his head. He caught a familiar image running fast in their direction, about fifty yards away. *Thorne!*

Out of the alley across the street from Spraggia’s, another SUV came flying toward them and screeched to a halt. Three of the men holding them at gunpoint scrambled to the vehicle behind them, with Samuel kicking and screaming. Alison took a step, but the forth gunmen fired into the car, sending everyone to the ground, except Robert. Four people jumped out of the SUV that came from the alley, wearing black ski masks, armed with machine guns. “Save the boy!” one of them shouted.

Robert felt the hard end of an Uzi on the back of his head and fell to the pavement. He heard footsteps, more gunfire, and Thorne’s unmistakable bark. He raised his head and saw the four figures from the alley run back to their vehicle and take off after the kidnappers, who’d sped off with Samuel. Robert heard the distinct baritone of a man’s voice, shout orders he couldn’t make out, then lowered his head to the pavement, and blacked out.