

Becoming Quinn

Jonathan Quinn, prequel

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*For Jon Rivera
A true friend by any definition*

Most careers begin with an interview and a handshake. Others require a little ... something more.

Meet Jake Oliver. The day will come when he's one of the best cleaners in the business, a man skilled at making bodies disappear.

At the moment, however, he's a twenty-two year old rookie cop, unaware his life is about to change.

In a burning barn a body is found—and the fire isn't the cause of death. The detectives working the case have a pretty good idea about what went down.

But Officer Oliver thinks it's something else entirely, and pursues a truth others would prefer remain hidden—others who will go to extreme lengths to keep him quiet.

Every identity has an origin. This is Quinn's.

Chapter 1

May 1996

Durrie wasn't a fool.

No way would he position himself right next to the old barn when the takedown happened. Where one bullet was sure to fly, others would often follow. Once things calmed down, he could move in. That's how he liked to work.

So instead, he'd set up a hundred feet away, behind an old steel tank that looked like it had been empty for years. If a bullet did somehow end up heading in his direction, the tank would rob it of whatever momentum it had before it could reach him.

To keep tabs on what was happening in the barn, he had a small monitor on the ground beside him displaying a feed from a camera inside. The camera and monitor were connected by a long cable that ran through a signal booster so that

the image wouldn't be too degraded. He could have used a wireless camera, but the technology was still new, and didn't always work correctly. Until it did, he preferred to go the tried-and-true hardwired route.

The agent tasked by the Office to perform the termination, a guy named Larson, was already in the barn. Durrie could see him in the monitor, leaning against the wall and taking a sip from the cup of coffee he'd brought along. In addition to Larson, there were four other members of the operation team. Two were hidden near the barn, while the other two were positioned down where the private dirt road met the blacktopped street the target would be arriving on.

The selection of the site was good. Not perfect, Durrie noted, but good. They were on the edge of Phoenix, Arizona, in an area populated mostly by small horse ranches that would undoubtedly be swallowed up by development at some point in the future.

Now, though, the barn's closest neighbor was a half-mile away. A mile would have been better, but you took what you could get. At least it wasn't happening in a hotel room downtown.

Durrie checked his watch, then took a look at the road. Nothing. In the wide-open surroundings he should have been able to see the guy's headlights by now.

Perhaps the target had found out about his reduced life expectancy. It wouldn't have been the first time someone had figured out their services were no longer needed. If that happened, the ops team would have to go on the hunt, and Durrie would have to follow. That was not something he was interested in doing. Durrie was a cleaner, his job to get rid of the body. Anything that made doing his work harder brought with it the potential of discovery. Not a pleasant prospect.

He looked back at the monitor, annoyed. Someone had screwed up somewhere, and he and the ops team were going to have to deal with it. Why couldn't everyone be as good at their job as he was? It would sure make things a hell of a lot easier.

He was about to check his watch again when a pinprick of light caught his eye. He looked toward it. Headlights on the blacktop road, heading this way.

He stared at them, watching them approach, then willing them to slow as they neared the dirt road. As if on command, he saw brake lights flare off the shrub behind the vehicle.

When the car turned, he smiled.

Sure, someone was about to die, but it was the target's tough luck. He should have thought about the likely outcome before trying to make some extra cash selling secrets.

"Heat sensor confirms only one person in the vehicle," one of the spotters near the turnoff said over the radio. "ETA one minute."

On the monitor, Larson set his coffee cup on the ground, and moved into position in the center of the barn. Though Durrie couldn't see it, he knew the man was palming the remote control for the automated rifle mounted in the rafters. As soon as the target was in position:

Click.

Bang.

Done.

Well, that was if your target cooperated. Durrie thought it was unnecessarily complex. It would have been better, in his mind, to have a gun hidden nearby that

the shooter could grab when needed and pull the damn trigger himself. Though no one had said anything, Durrie had a funny feeling someone had decided this was a good opportunity to field-test a new toy.

"Vehicle has stopped." This was a different voice. Durrie recognized it as belonging to Mills, one of the ops team members near the barn.

Durrie looked away from the monitor, and over at the mirror he'd set up so he could see the building around the side of the tank. The target's sedan was parked right next to the barn's door. The driver sat behind the wheel, seemingly frozen in place. Maybe the guy *did* know what was about to happen, Durrie thought. Or at least sensed something was wrong. Durrie sure as hell would have.

Strike that.

Durrie would have never allowed himself to get into this position in the first place. If he sensed he was on the verge of being taken out, he would have disappeared, and no one would have ever found him. He'd already made the preparations. In this business, it was probably more a question of *when* rather than *if* he was going to have to disappear.

Finally, the guy got out of his car.

"Visual on target," Mills said. "ID confirmed."

No going back now, Durrie thought.

The target walked around the sedan to the barn's entrance. He hesitated there a moment, then opened the door and went inside.

Durrie turned his attention back to the monitor. Larson, still in position, had donned a disarming smile.

"Owens," he said. "I was getting worried."

"Took me a little longer to get here than I expected," the target said. He was standing just inside the door, several feet from the kill zone.

Durrie frowned, his eyes narrowing. If he'd drawn up the plans for this operation, Owens would be dead by now, and Durrie would be moving in to wrap up the corpse and get it out of there.

"Sorry about that," Larson said. "The op we wanted to talk to you about is sensitive. So the more isolated, the better."

Owens snorted a laugh.

Oh, he knows, all right.

"Okay," Owens said. "So tell me about it."

"It'll be easier if I show you. I've got some photos and a map you'll need." The agent turned and started walking toward the far wall, then stopped and looked back. "They're over here."

Owens didn't budge. "Are they heavy?"

"No," Larson said, confused.

"Then I like where I am right now."

There was a click over the radio comm, then Timmons—the ops leader and other man stationed at the barn—said, "Prep alt B."

Durrie knew Timmons wasn't particularly fond of the automated gun setup either, but its inclusion had come down from someone above him. Peter, perhaps. He was their employer on this one, head of an organization known only as the Office, so it was either him or someone who worked for him. Thankfully, Timmons

was an experienced operative, and had laid out several options in case their primary plan failed. Something that at the moment looked very possible.

On the screen, Larson continued to the back wall where he'd left a briefcase earlier.

"Mills?" Timmons said.

Durrie realized the other man hadn't responded to Timmons's command.

"Mills, what's your twenty?" the head man asked, wanting to know his colleague's location.

When there was still no response, Durrie's gaze instinctively flicked to the mirror. Everything looked quiet outside the barn.

"Mills, what's your *twenty*?" Nothing. "Mills!"

Durrie tensed. Something was definitely wrong.

He's going to abort, he thought. Durrie would have, in a flash.

He quickly scanned the area around his position, double-checking where everything was—his two kit bags with his tools and supplies, the monitor, and the coveralls he'd resisted putting on so far because of the heat. And the mirror. He couldn't forget the mirror.

"Larson, Durrie. Ac—"

The radio cut off.

Durrie waited a moment, then touched his transmit button. "Didn't copy. Repeat."

He waited, but Timmons said nothing. For a second, he wondered if something had gone wrong with his communication gear. It seemed likely, given that everything else was screwed up. But when he glanced at the monitor, he could see Larson hovering over his briefcase, looking unsure.

Durrie touched his transmit button again. "Larson, touch the left side of the briefcase if you can hear me."

On the screen, Larson moved his hand down and touched the case as instructed.

"Son of a bitch," Durrie said under his breath.

His comm gear was working fine. Something had happened to Mills and Timmons.

He looked at the mirror again. There was a man by the door. Though dressed in dark clothes like the ops team, Durrie was sure this was the first time he'd ever seen him. Where the hell had he come from?

"Larson, find cover," Durrie said. "Unfriendly coming in the front door."

"I thought you wanted to show me something," Owens said, still standing in the barn by the door. "What's up?"

Larson rose, the briefcase in his hand. "Just...making sure I have everything."

In the mirror, the man outside had his hand on the door handle.

"Larson! Quit dicking around and take cover."

One corner of Larson's mouth turned up in a half smile, but he didn't move.

Then, in a near flawless single motion, the briefcase flew open, and Larson's hand darted inside, coming out with a Glock G29 10mm pistol as the case fell away. He fired twice before the briefcase even hit the ground.

While the bullets missed Owens as he dove to his left, they pierced the door, and smacked into the other man just as he started to enter. The one that caught

him in the shoulder didn't matter, but the other went straight through his neck, dropping him to the ground. Even a hundred feet away, Durrie was sure the man would never get up again.

Inside, Larson finally took Durrie's advice and moved behind the cover of a stack of rusted barrels. Owens, in the meantime, had scrambled into the remnants of an old animal stall.

"Guy at the door is down," Durrie said into the radio.

"Your friend is dead," Larson called out.

Owens remained silent.

"Step on out, and keep your hands high."

For a moment, there was still no response, then Owens said, "You brought me here to kill me. Did you really expect me just to let that happen?"

"Hey, I'm just doing a job here. Don't blame the messenger."

"Are you kidding me?" Owens said. "Your *job* is to *kill* me. Like hell I won't blame you!"

"If you've got a weapon, toss it in my direction now," Larson ordered. "Then step out where I can see you."

"No way. I'll take my chances. You against me."

"You really think I'm here alone?" Larson asked.

"No. But my friend took care of your backup."

"Really? How many did he get? One? Two? You don't really know, do you? Because he didn't get a chance to tell you. How do you think I know one of my bullets killed him? I still have people out there."

In response to this, two clicks came over the radio, and both Durrie and Larson knew the two other men who'd been stationed by the road were on their way back. Unfortunately, Durrie also knew it would take them at least two minutes to get to the barn—an eternity in situations like this.

"Even if I believed you, it wouldn't matter," Owens said. "I'm not going to just let you kill me."

"You're making a fool of yourself," Larson said. "Take it with some dignity."

Just go get him, Durrie thought but didn't say over the radio. It was doubtful Owens was armed. He would have played it safe, just in case the others had planned on patting him down when he first arrived. His buddy was probably carrying two weapons, one of which he was undoubtedly supposed to have given to Owens when they reconnected.

But Larson was playing with him, almost like he was teasing his prey.

The angle of the camera in the barn was such that Owens was mostly hidden from view in the stall. Durrie could only see the top of the guy's head and one of his shoulders. He could tell he was moving around, but couldn't see what he was doing.

"Enough, Owens," Larson yelled, but while he was giving the impression his patience was starting to run out, his body language was calm and controlled. "Enough screwing around. Get rid of your weapons and step out now."

"Go to hell!"

Owens shuffled back a couple of feet from the stall divider, instantly giving Durrie a better view. The guy was looking at something in his lap. No, not his lap, his hand.

Durrie pressed the transmit button. "He's calling someone!"

As Owens lifted a mobile phone to his ear, Larson sprinted out from behind the barrels. Durrie could see Owens start to talk, but he couldn't hear what the man was saying. Whatever it was, he didn't get much out before Larson came around the end of the stall and fired twice.

Owens fell backwards, his phone clattering to the ground beside him. Larson checked his pulse, but Durrie had yet to see anyone survive a shot through the forehead. Satisfied the target was dead, Larson picked up the discarded phone and looked at the display.

A second later, his head snapped to the side, his eyes looking directly into the lens of Durrie's camera. "He called 911."

Chapter 2

Jake Oliver waited in the passenger seat of the patrol car while his partner, Tony Haywood, went into Di's Diner.

It was part of their routine—get the brief at the station, drive around for a few hours, then stop at the diner. The main reason wasn't Di's mediocre coffee or a sudden need to use their restrooms. It was Maria, one of the waitresses who worked the swing shift.

More and more Jake had taken to staying outside while his partner went in, sure Haywood liked it better that way. Jake's training officer had made it clear that they were not friends now nor would they ever be.

Jake could see the veteran cop leaning against the counter, two to-go cups of coffee in front of him, and Maria on the other side, smiling.

Suddenly a dispatcher's voice broke over the radio. "All units in vicinity of Goodman Ranch Road and Tyler Way, report of shots fired with possible injuries."

Jake brought up a mental map of the city in his mind. He'd only been in Phoenix for a little over nine months, but he'd made it a priority to know it as well as he could. That included memorizing as much of the layout as possible. In just seconds, he narrowed in on the location. It was in a nearly deserted part of town, about three and a half miles away from their current location.

He was just about to hop out and get Haywood when he saw his partner exit the diner with the two cups in his hand, undoubtedly hearing the call on his radio. He handed the cups to Jake through the open window, climbed in, then grabbed the radio mic. "9-82 Adam, in route Goodman Ranch Road."

"Copy, 9-82 Adam," the dispatcher said.

The moment they hit the street, Haywood flipped on the emergency lights and the siren.

"Coffee," he said, holding out his hand.

Jake gave him the cup with the X on the top. That was the one topped off with cream and sugar. Jake liked his black.

Haywood took a sip, then smiled. "When we get there, slow and cautious. Understand?"

"Yes," Jake said.

Neither man spoke again until they turned onto Goodman Ranch Road.

Haywood nodded at the radio. "Call in and see if they've narrowed down the location."

Jake did.

"Caller disconnected," dispatch reported. "Reported on Goodman near Tyler Way. Nothing further."

A minute later, they pulled to a stop at the corner of the two streets.

"Would have been nice if he had at least told us which side of Goodman he was on." Haywood stared out the windshield for a moment, then opened his door.

"What are you doing?" Jake asked.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" Haywood said as he climbed out.

Jake hesitated a moment, then did the same.

Haywood stood next to the car, his head swiveling slowly as he surveyed the surrounding area. Jake turned his gaze outward, but there really wasn't much to see. Only a few lights pierced the darkness, revealing a handful of small ranches, but that was it. Mostly it was just open desert.

"I see three places over there," Haywood said, pointing across Tyler Way. "And two more behind us. You?"

"I counted three behind us," Jake said.

"Three?"

Jake pointed each of them out. There were two homes across the street from each other, and one large building on another piece of property, set far back from the road.

Haywood frowned. "Yeah. Three."

Jake opened his mouth, hesitated, then decided he should say it anyway. "Do you think maybe it was a prank?"

His partner studied the desert some more. "Won't know until we check. We'll start with the houses on the other side of Tyler, and work our way back."

Chapter 3

Durrie resisted the urge to close his eyes, but he couldn't stop the groan that escaped his lips. What a disaster.

"Don't anyone go anywhere," he said into the radio. "I'm going to need everyone's help."

"Hey," Larson said. "Cleanup's your job."

"Yeah, and killing the target without bringing the police was *yours*. Don't move. I'll be right there."

Durrie unhooked the monitor from the cable, then folded up the mirror, and shoved both into one of the bags. That done, he picked everything up and moved his foot around in the dirt, doing a quick cover-up of the impressions that had been made on the ground.

As he headed back to the barn, he coiled up the cable, and kicked dirt over the imprint it left behind in the sand. But circumstances meant he had to rush, so he knew he wasn't doing the best job he could.

When he stepped inside the barn, he saw that not only was Larson still there, but the other two men—Morgan and Fry—had arrived also.

"You," Durrie said, pointing at Morgan. "Get the camera. And you." He pointed at Fry. "The rifle."

"You're not in charge here," Larson said.

"Bullshit. I am now."

Larson narrowed his eyes.

"What?" Durrie asked. "You want to sit here and argue about whose dick is bigger while the cops try to figure out where that 911 call came from? Are you *that* stupid? Go find out what happened to Timmons and Mills."

He stared at Larson, knowing they were wasting precious seconds. In Durrie's estimation, they had no more than five minutes tops, and with potentially four bodies to deal with, it would require everyone to pull this off.

Larson finally let out a less-than-pleased grunt, then headed for the door.

"You've got forty-five seconds," Durrie yelled after him as he moved over to Owens's body.

The man's dead eyes looked upward at nothing. Durrie didn't bother closing them. He wasn't worried about things like that. Bodies were his job. They were things, nothing more.

Right off, he saw several problems—the blood pooling on the ground, the bits of Owens's head that had adhered to the back of the stall. With the proper amount of time, none of that would be an issue. But that was something Larson's sloppy work had denied him.

Body first, he told himself. Worry about the rest after.

From one of his bags he pulled out a packet of plastic sheeting. He laid it on the ground near the body, avoiding the blood, then rolled Owens onto it. With a deftness that came from years of experience, he enclosed the body and sealed it with duct tape in less than half a minute.

Just about the time he was finishing, the door opened. As Larson reentered, Durrie caught sight of the body of Owens's friend lying just outside, and a plan came to him.

"Mills is dead," Larson said. "Throat slashed. Timmons is alive, but out cold. No wounds I can see, though."

Durrie stood up. "Help me carry this outside."

Together they maneuvered Owens across the barn and through the door. There was no time to go get the van Durrie had parked half a mile away, so they were going to have to use the car Owens had arrived in. Thankfully, Durrie had thought ahead and had snatched the keys from Owens before he bundled him up.

"Back of the car," he said.

Once there, he balanced his half of the body on his chest while he unlocked the trunk. Fifteen seconds later, the interior light of the trunk was permanently disabled, and Owens was tucked inside.

As Durrie ran back into the barn, he yelled at the other two men, "Hey! Aren't you guys done yet?"

"I got the camera," Morgan said. "I'm just helping with the rifle."

"It's stuck," Fry explained.

"You've got twenty seconds, and you can't leave it there," Durrie told them.

He grabbed his bags from where he'd left them and rushed back outside. He placed both in the back seat of the sedan, then withdrew two more packets of sheeting from one of them. Before he shut the door, he flicked the switch killing the dome light.

Just then Morgan and Fry came outside carrying the camera and gun.

"Put them in the trunk, out of the way," Durrie instructed. He opened one of the sheeting packets, tossed the plastic from inside to Larson, then pointed at Owens's dead friend. "Lay it on the ground next to him."

Morgan appeared from around the back of the car, his hands now empty. Durrie tossed him the unopened pack. "You two go wrap up Mills."

"Where is he?" Morgan asked.

Durrie looked at Larson.

"Around the other side," Larson said. "There's a small shed extension. He's in there."

"You've got less than a minute to wrap him up and bring him back here," Durrie informed them.

The two men took off running around the barn.

Durrie knelt down by Larson's first kill. "Help me get him on the sheet."

Together they transferred Owens's partner onto the plastic. As they were folding the sides over the top of the corpse, Durrie noticed something odd under the car. He knew he didn't have time for distractions, but he couldn't help lowering his head to the ground and taking a better look.

Son of a bitch, he thought.

The engine compartment had been modified so that there was a space just big enough for someone to crouch in. It even had a gate across the bottom to keep any arms or legs from accidentally dragging on the ground. The gate was what had caught Durrie's eye. It was on a hinge and had been opened so the occupant—the dead guy next to him—could get out. No wonder the watchers near the road hadn't spotted him in the car. His heat signature would have blended right in with the engine. Durrie reached under the car, and closed the gate.

His attention back on the body, he said, "Grab him by the shoulders."

Larson looked confused. "Aren't you going to tape him closed first?"

"No." Durrie scooted his hands under the plastic, grabbing the body by the legs. "He's not staying in this."

"What are you talking about?"

"I don't have time to go over the finer points of my job," Durrie snapped. "Just do what I say."

With Durrie leading the way, they carried the body into the barn, and placed it roughly in the same place Owens had been.

"I don't understand," Larson said.

"I don't care. Here." Durrie gathered up the plastic and handed it to the agent. "Put this in the trunk, then go get Timmons."

Larson all but ripped the plastic from Durrie's hands, then stormed out. Durrie rolled his eyes. He had no idea how a guy like Larson had lasted even a few months in this business. There was little doubt a bullet with the assassin's name on it was waiting somewhere in the not too distant future.

Durrie searched the body. As he'd suspected, the man was carrying two pistols. He removed both of them, and a knife in a sheath strapped around his ankle. The only other things the man had been carrying were two hundred dollars in cash. That, Durrie left.

Standing, he took a quick look around, making sure there was nothing that would destroy the impression he was trying to create. It all looked good. He glanced once more at the body.

"Tough luck for you," he said.

He could have used Owens for what he had planned. But Owens was the job, and the job was to make him disappear. This guy was collateral damage, and therefore Durrie could use him in whatever way he saw fit.

He stepped back outside just in time to see the others dump Mills's body in the trunk. A few seconds later, Larson showed up with Timmons propped against his side. The team leader was no longer unconscious, but he didn't look like he had a complete handle on what was going on, either.

"Stick him in the car, then you three can get out of here," Durrie said. Their car was parked on a parallel road a quarter mile behind the barn.

"No," Morgan said. "Timmons is coming with us."

"Fine. But you'd better get a move on it."

They hesitated for a moment.

"Go!" Durrie yelled.

That seemed to be what they needed.

Before they'd even rounded the corner of the barn, Durrie was on his hands and knees with a piece of cardboard he'd found in the back of the car. He scooped up the blood Owens's partner had left behind and carried it quickly into the barn. It took three trips, but when he was done all signs of what had happened outside were gone.

Now, the final step.

He opened the car's back door, and from one of his bags withdrew two cans of lighter fluid, an unused rag, and a lighter. He carried these into the barn, doused the body, then moved around, spraying the rest of the building. As he did, he came across Larson's coffee cup. Talk about sloppy. Standard procedure was to always take with you whatever you brought. Durrie knew the fire would probably burn it completely, but he couldn't take the chance. He picked it up, then finished soaking the interior. Ready now, he lit the rag on fire, and tossed it on the body.

With a *whoosh*, flames sprang from the ground. Soon the whole barn would be ablaze. The authorities would find a body that had been shot, but that's all. No identification, no reason why. Nothing to tie back to Durrie's employers.

Durrie allowed himself a smile. Another mess he'd made right. This should be worth a nice little bonus.

But as he exited the barn his smile quickly disappeared. Not far away he could see flashing lights coming down Goodman Ranch Road.

Keeping his gaze on them as they drew closer, he moved sideways to the corner of the barn, ready to run the moment the cop car turned onto the property. But it never slowed, and instead shot past the entrance, not stopping until it reached the intersection another hundred yards down the road.

Durrie looked back in the direction the cops had come, expecting to see more lights heading this way, but there were none. He jogged back to the car and climbed into the driver's seat.

Keeping all the lights off, and his foot away from the brake, he started the engine. He then inched the car around so that it was pointing down the dirt road toward the main road.

The cop car was still at the intersection, like it was waiting there for something. *Backup?*

It was possible Durrie could take the car out the other way, across the desert and to the road the ops team had parked on. But the terrain would be uneven, and he knew the chances were great he'd be forced to use his brakes, betraying his position.

No. Either he drove out to Goodman Ranch Road, or he left the car and disappeared into the night on foot, making his way through the desert back to his van.

It all depended on the police in the cruiser.

It seemed to sit there forever, but finally Durrie saw it move through the intersection and head farther away. Not waiting to see what they would do next, he drove quickly down the dirt driveway, then turned right on Goodman Ranch Road and headed toward the city.

It was a good thing he'd gone when he had. He'd only traveled a quarter mile along the blacktop road when he saw in his mirror the first flames flickering out from the barn.

Chapter 4

"Sorry, Officer. Not a thing." The man in the doorway was wearing a black golf shirt and a pair of jeans.

From not far inside, a TV was blasting and Jake knew even if someone had shot a gun in their front yard, the guy wouldn't have heard it.

"Are you here alone, sir?" Haywood asked.

"My wife's here," he said. "And my kids."

"Is it possible they might have heard something?"

"Kids are asleep, but I'm sure Jenny would have said something if she had."

"Jenny's your wife?"

"Well, yeah." The man gave them a look like that should have been obvious, then turned away from the door. "Jenny, come here for a minute."

A moment later a woman appeared beside him. She was shorter than he was, and not quite as overweight.

"These officers are wondering if we heard any gunshots. I know I didn't," the man said.

"Tonight?" she asked. "I haven't heard any. Why? Were there some?"

Haywood smiled. "We're not entirely sure. Just checking a report, that's all. Sounds like neither of you heard anything, so we won't bother you any longer."

"We'll keep an ear out in case it starts up again," the man said.

"Thank you," Haywood told them. "You folks have a good night."

He stepped off the small porch, with Jake following closely behind him.

"You do the talking at the next one," Haywood said as he opened his car door. "It'll be good practice."

But Jake was barely listening to him. Instead he was looking across the top of the car into the distance. After a second, he said, "That's a fire."

"What?" Haywood whipped around to see what Jake was talking about.

"There," Jake said, pointing. "I think that's one of the buildings we were going to check out on the other side of the intersection."

"Get in!" Haywood shouted.

As they pulled away from the house, Haywood grabbed the radio mic. "9-82 Adam. We have a structure fire on Goodman Ranch Road just north of Tyler Way on the east side. Possible connection to earlier call."

"Copy, 9-82 Adam. Will start fire and back up."

Haywood replaced the mic, and pressed the gas pedal all the way to the floor. When they reached the dirt road that led onto the property where the fire was, he slowed just enough to take the turn, then accelerated down the uneven surface.

"No way the fire department's going to get here in time," Jake said.

The building—it looked like a barn—was nearly engulfed by the flames. The wood that had yet to be touched looked old and dry and ripe for burning.

Haywood skidded to a stop a hundred feet away from the structure. "We've got to make sure no one's in there."

Jake nodded as they jumped out of the car.

They split up and circled the building in opposite directions. The heat from the flames was so intense that every few seconds Jake had to turn away to keep from scorching his face.

"Anyone inside?" he called out. "Hey, anyone in there?"

He wasn't sure what he would do if someone answered. There was no way he could go in and survive. When he reached the back, Haywood was already there.

"Anything?" the veteran cop asked.

"No," Jake told him.

Haywood watched the flames. "Probably abandoned."

"Maybe... maybe the fire was started by a gunshot. Someone could have been playing around, that's why we got the call." They had to be connected, Jake thought. One of his instructors at the academy had said more than once, "Never trust a coincidence."

"Perhaps," Haywood said. "My guess? Some teenagers messing around. Drinking, maybe shooting a little bit. Then they got bored and set this thing on fire." He paused, looking at the blaze. "Take a look around. See if you can find any signs of people running away. They could be hiding out there in the dark, watching their handiwork, so also keep your ears open."

With a flashlight in one hand and his gun in the other, Jake moved out to search the perimeter, but the only noise he could hear was the roar of the fire behind him.

There were footprints all over the place, some obviously older, while others could have been made any time in the past couple of weeks. Phoenix hadn't had any rain in months, and as far as Jake could recall, there had been no real winds

to speak of for some time. That meant a print made today or last week could be almost identical.

With so many tracks, Jake guessed the barn was a popular hangout. Probably a place local teens would come to on weekends to drink and party because no one would see them. Just like Haywood had suggested.

He moved around the barn to the far side, the beam of his light cutting back and forth across the barren ground. Sitting off to the side of the barn was a large tank that would make a perfect place for someone to hide behind.

He knew he should probably get Haywood so they could check the tank together, but thought he should be able to handle this, right? This was what he trained for, after all, and the more initiative he showed, the faster he figured he'd move up the ranks, bringing him closer to becoming a detective. That was his ultimate goal.

He swung his flashlight away from the tank, making it seem like he was checking in another direction, then he switched it off. Though the moon wasn't up yet, the glow of the fire provided enough illumination to see what he was doing.

He went right, circling the tank, his gun held out in front of him in a double grip. Given the location of the tank in relationship to the barn, anyone waiting behind it would probably expect someone to come at them from the other direction.

With each step, he quietly set his foot down, heel to toe. Just a few more feet and he'd see the entire area behind the tank.

Relax, he told himself, as he felt his heart start to race.

In the four months he'd been on the job, he'd responded to domestic disturbances, gas station robberies, traffic accidents, and one suicide, but this was the first time he was in a situation where he might come face to face with a perp on his own.

He could feel his palms start to sweat.

Two more steps. One.

He held his breath as he took the final step, ready to shout, "Don't move!"

But there was no one there.

He flipped his flashlight back on, and held it against his pistol as he swept the beam across the desert.

Nothing. He was alone.

A nervous laugh escaped his lips. He'd almost let himself get psyched up. He couldn't let that happen again, not if he wanted to stay a cop for long. Thank God he hadn't asked Haywood for help. He'd have looked like a fool, and any trace amount of respect the senior cop might have had for him would have disappeared.

Jake closed his eyes for a moment, letting his body calm down. When he opened them again, he noticed something strange about the dirt next to the tank.

He knelt down, and moved his light across the affected area. It looked almost as if someone had kicked up the dirt, erasing marks that had been there. The main area of disturbance was about three feet by three feet, with a smaller patch of rearranged dirt just beyond it.

Jake knew, like with the footprints around the barn, that he couldn't be sure the disturbance had been made in the last few hours, but he couldn't help feeling that they were. He stood up and moved to the smaller disturbance. That's when he

noticed something else that was odd. Starting about a foot away, and circling around the tank, more dirt had been moved. But instead of a roughly square patch, this was almost like a line.

He followed it with his light, then revised his initial thoughts. It wasn't almost like a line. It *was* a line, one that stretched all the way back to the barn.

Jake walked beside it, having no idea why it was there. Then, about forty feet from the barn, he stopped. Whoever had been kicking the sand had missed a spot. He knelt down. It was a shallow depression in the earth, a round trough, less than an inch long. Like...

Like a wire or a cable might make.

He looked back toward the tank, following the line the disturbance made, then turned his head and followed it all the way to the barn. Could the mark have been made by whatever had been used to start the fire? He frowned, knowing that didn't make a lot of sense. Why use something so elaborate on an abandoned barn that a person could walk right up to without being seen?

Jake pulled out the disposable camera he kept on his belt, and took a picture of the mark. He then took a few pictures of the surrounding disturbance. Maybe it was nothing, but better to be safe.

Just as he was putting his camera away, Haywood came around the other end of the structure.

"Find anyone?" he asked.

Jake was about to tell him about the depression, but hesitated. Haywood would probably look at it and think that Jake was making something out of nothing. But before Jake could actually decide what to do, sirens cut through the sound of the fire.

Both cops turned toward the road. Three fire trucks were racing in their direction, and right behind them were the lights of two patrol cars.

* * * * *

Once everyone arrived, Jake and another rookie, Berit Davies, were tasked with keeping civilians off the property. It was amazing that even at night in a sparsely populated part of town, people had gathered to gawk at the fire.

"So how long do we have to be on the force before we're not automatically put on crowd control?" Berit asked as they drove one of the patrol cars down the dirt road to the property entrance.

Jake smiled. Berit was probably his closest friend on the force. They were both sort of outsiders—Berit a woman in a crumbling man's world, and Jake a transplant from Minnesota, of all places.

"Come on," he said. "You love crowd duty. Isn't that what you told me last time?"

"Oh, yeah. My favorite thing in the world," she said as she pulled the car to a stop.

There were at least a dozen people hanging around the opening in the fence. Nearly half of them were actually standing inside the property line.

"All right," Jake announced as soon as he got out. "Everyone's going to have to get on the other side of the fence."

Several of those standing on the property began moving toward the gate. Two men, though, held their ground. Berit headed right for them.

"Excuse me," she said. "Not sure you heard the other officer, but you'll have to step back on the other side of the fence, please."

"Come on," one of the men said. "We're not in anyone's way. We just want to watch the fire."

"And you can do that, sir," Berit said. "But from the *other* side of the fence."

"We want to watch from here," the other one said.

Jake glanced at the rest of the crowd to make sure they were all safely off the property, then headed over to back up Berit.

"I'm sorry, sir," she said. "That's not possible. You and your friend will have to move."

"Really, honey?" the second one asked. "What harm are we doing?"

Jake wanted to step in, and knew that probably any other officer would, but he also knew it wasn't what Berit would want. So he stopped several feet behind her.

In a controlled voice, she said, "Sir, I'm not your honey, and you're not staying. So either you walk through that opening and get on the other side of that fence, or we arrest you for trespassing. Up to you."

The first man put a hand on his friend's arm. "Let's go."

The second man held his place for a moment, scowling at Berit, but then he turned and the two of them walked away.

Jake moved up next to her. "Impressive," he whispered. "For a woman."

"And damn near impossible for a man," she said.

"True," he agreed.

Together they walked over to the gate. For the next several minutes they were peppered with questions from the growing crowd, most of which they answered with "I'm sorry, I don't know the answer to that."

Though there had been no indication the fire was a crime, they knew they had to treat it as such until they were notified otherwise. So, per training, they noted the faces in the crowd, looking for anyone unusually interested in what was going on. But if there was an arsonist in this crowd, Jake was having no success picking out him or her.

It took less than an hour for the firemen to get the blaze extinguished. By then, most of the structure was gone.

"Oliver. Davies," the voice of Sergeant Niccum said over the radio.

Berit touched the mic on her shoulder. "Yes, sir?"

Jake then did the same. "I'm here, sir."

"Be advised, we have a nine-oh-one H."

Both Jake and Berit tensed. A dead body.

"Yes, sir," Jake said. Then, because he couldn't help himself, asked, "May I ask where?"

"No, you may not," the sergeant rebuked him, then signed off.

"Smooth," Berit said to Jake.

"Yeah, I've been practicing," he replied, trying to play it down.

He knew he shouldn't have asked the question, but he and Haywood had been first on scene. He would have thought that gave him the right to know what was going on, but apparently not.

"Don't worry. We'll find out soon enough," Berit said, no doubt sensing what was going through his mind.

If only he'd been thinking that way before he'd asked the question, but sometimes he just couldn't help himself. It was his damn curiosity. A trait he was sure would help him when he became a detective.

If, that was, it didn't sink his career before then.

Chapter 5

By the time Jake arrived home, it was nearly 3 a.m. Sleep took a little while to come, and when it did, it was fitful at best. By 8 a.m., he'd had enough and dragged himself into the shower.

The problem was he couldn't get the fire out of his mind. By the time he'd been released from the scene, investigators had established that the body found inside the barn, while severely burned, had a bullet wound through the neck. There might have been other wounds, too, but the condition of the body made it impossible to check on site.

Was this the guy who had called 911? No one else had mentioned the possibility, but Jake had to believe others were thinking it. No matter what, the fire was obviously meant to cover up the murder.

And what about that depression he'd seen in the sand? Did that have something to do with any of this?

Jake let the water run over his head as he tried to think it through, but everything he came up with was pure speculation, each scenario wilder than the last. Somewhere between the shampoo and the body wash, he decided to return to the barn for another look. He wasn't due in until four that afternoon so he still had most of the day ahead of him.

He threw on some jeans and a dark T-shirt, grabbed a clean uniform and his belt and gun in case he didn't have time to come back to his apartment before his shift began, then headed out to the car. The uniform and belt he put in the trunk, but the gun he slid under the front seat. Almost as an afterthought, he returned to the trunk, retrieved his police badge, and shoved it into his pocket.

Though it was only May, the day was already a hot one. But this being Phoenix, that was not unusual. Jake never complained about the heat. He'd grown up about as far north as a person could get without being Canadian. His hometown of Warroad was right at the western base of the little hump at the top of Minnesota. Even with a population of just a few thousand, it was the biggest town for miles. In the winter, Warroad would get as cold as Phoenix got hot. The cold, Jake had no problems complaining about. He and temperatures below fifty degrees had never seen eye to eye. Arizona, on the other hand, suited him just fine.

He drove his second-hand Honda Civic out to the site of the previous night's fire. As he neared, he could see several vehicles parked down near the remains of the structure. Detectives and ID techs, no doubt, and maybe a fire marshal or two.

There was a cop stationed at the gate, another rookie named Eli Dunbar. Jake turned onto the dirt road, then stopped and rolled down his window.

"Hey, Snowbird," Dunbar said, using the nickname Jake had obtained at the academy. "What are you doing here?"

"Morning, Eli," Jake said, forcing on a smile. He wasn't a big fan of Dunbar's. "Haywood and I were first on scene last night. I was told to swing by after I got up." Not exactly true, but close. He was told to check in with the detectives heading up the investigation before he started his shift. It was never said where, but the implication had been at Jake's substation—where the detectives would be working out of for the next couple of days—not the crime scene.

"That was you, huh? You the ones who found the body, too?"

Jake shook his head. "No, we didn't even know it was there. They found it after they put the fire out."

Dunbar looked back at the barn for a second. "If you ask me, I'll bet you it has something to do with drugs. A deal gone bad, a turf war or something like that. You just wait and see. He'll be Mexican for sure."

Jake wasn't about to start trading theories with him, so he just said, "You might be right."

"You better believe I am."

Jake gave him a nod. "I'd better run," he said, slipping the car back into gear.

Dunbar pointed down the road. "Park near the other cars. And careful where you step. It's still a crime scene."

"Thanks," Jake told him, then started driving away. What he really wanted to say was, "No kidding, asshole. I know it's a crime scene," but you couldn't win with a guy like Dunbar. No matter what you said, or how right you were, they'd think *you* were the asshole.

Jake parked next to a van he knew belonged to one of the identity techs, then got out. There were nearly a dozen people at the barn, split almost evenly between those on the perimeter and those inside the wreckage.

He knew the body had been taken to the morgue the night before, so the attention now would be on processing the scene for any evidence left behind. A couple of the people on the outside seemed to be examining a tire print, while another was shooting photographs of it.

Standing off to the side were two men in suits. Though Jake had never seen them before, they had the unmistakable look of detectives. They probably weren't the primaries on the case—that would have fallen to the guys who'd shown up right after the body was discovered. No, these two would be doing babysitting duty, on hand in case anything came up, but likely to move on to something else the minute they drove away.

One of them was glancing in Jake's direction, so Jake headed over, knowing it was better to take the initiative and introduce himself than hope they'd just ignore him.

"Can I help you?" the detective asked as Jake neared.

"I'm Officer Oliver," Jake said. "I was first on scene last night."

The detective looked at him, clearly waiting for more.

Jake had known he was going to have to explain why he was there, so he had come up with a story on the drive over. Now that he was about to voice it, it seemed ridiculous, but it was too late to come up with anything else.

"We, uh, did a wide perimeter search when we first got here," he said. "You know, in case there was anyone who escaped the fire but might need help."

The second detective raised an eyebrow. "And?"

Jake smiled sheepishly. "This is actually kind of embarrassing."

Neither of the detectives said anything.

"I think I, uh, might have lost a pen my girlfriend gave me."

"A pen," the first detective said, his face blank.

"It's a nice pen. One of those expensive kinds, know what I mean? I got a call when I was walking around." Jake waved at the desert beyond the barn. "When I pulled out my phone, I think my pen might have come out, too. I didn't notice it was gone until I got home."

"So you think your *pen* is out here somewhere?" the second detective said.

"Yeah. I told you it was embarrassing."

"You were right."

"Would you mind if I looked for it?" Jake asked.

"Officer Oliver, I assume you've learned how important it is *not* to contaminate a crime scene?"

"We didn't know it was a crime scene at the time."

Both detectives stared at him. "The building was on fire. There was a pretty good chance something was wrong, don't you think?"

"Yes, sir. It was a mistake. I'm sorry. I should just forget about it." Jake started to turn away.

"Hold on," the first detective said, stopping him. The man then raised his voice. "Pat!"

A man standing inside the wreckage looked up. "What?"

"This guy lost something out in the desert around the barn. Okay if he looks for it?"

The man, Pat, glanced at Jake. "Who is he?"

"One of ours. Was here last night."

Pat shrugged. "We finished up out there, so shouldn't be a problem. Just stay at least twenty feet from the building."

The first detective looked at Jake. "You're in luck. Go have your look, but don't be long."

"Thank you," Jake said, sighing inwardly with relief.

He started with the tank to the left of the building, and immediately saw that the line of disturbed earth leading to the barn had been trampled over by the fire crews. He looked for the trough the rope or cable had created, but it was gone, too. This was evidence he alone now had, evidence he should probably turn over to the detectives. Not the two idiots out front, though. The ones in charge.

He circled around the tank and could immediately tell the firefighters hadn't come back this way. The disturbed earth was untouched. With the aid of the morning sunlight, it seemed pretty clear whoever kicked it up had done so in a hurry. Jake scanned the surrounding area, looking for anything he might have missed in the darkness, but nothing stood out.

He moved on, walking in a wide arc that would take him behind the barn. Unfortunately, now that the structure wasn't much more than a pile of charred wood, he was visible to the detectives pretty much wherever he went. To keep up

the illusion of the lost pen, he focused his gaze more on the ground than on the crime scene.

The few glimpses he did take of the barn told him nothing new.

He paralleled the back of the building, then turned along the other side, and immediately spotted something he hadn't noticed previously. A tree. It was another thirty feet farther into the desert on the left. Its blackened trunk and leafless branches looked brittle. It was actually more a reminder of a tree than a tree itself, doing time until one of the strong winds that blew through the valley on occasion finally brought it to the ground.

This was the side of the barn Haywood had checked out, so it was understandable why Jake hadn't seen it before. He walked toward it, wanting to do a thorough job, so that when he drove off he'd know there had been nothing more to find. Hopefully, that would appease his mind, and his obsession with the fire would wane.

From over at the barn, he could hear a few of the other detectives talking about the upcoming basketball season. The Phoenix Suns had never won the NBA title, but they made the playoffs almost every year. In Jake's opinion, that made it more torturous for fans than if the team never made the playoffs at all. Jake liked basketball, but he couldn't bring himself to give in to the futility of being a Suns fan just yet. A few more years on the force and he was sure to be cheering and groaning with the rest of them.

As he neared the tree he noticed several sets of footprints, many on top of each other. He picked out a set that probably belonged to Haywood. The shape was very much like the ones made by Jake's uniform shoes.

Unfortunately, Jake's partner hadn't been concerned about footprints or marks in the sand. His own steps had trampled over much of what had been there before, but they hadn't completely obscured everything.

Jake crouched down. If he wasn't mistaken, someone had been sitting next to the tree, perhaps even leaning against it. He looked quickly back toward the others. No one was looking his way, so he pulled out his camera and took a couple of quick shots, then examined the markings again.

What he couldn't figure out from looking at them was the same thing he couldn't figure out about the kicked dirt back at the tank—*when* they had actually been created.

With a sigh, he started to stand up, but paused, his eye catching sight of a dark blue piece of paper under a tumbleweed near the base of the tree. Leaning forward, he eased the paper out, then saw that it wasn't just a piece of paper, it was a matchbook. Not necessarily unusual to find discarded in the desert. What was unusual, though, was the fact it didn't appear weathered at all. Even after a few days in the desert, a colored piece of paper or cardboard would start to fade, and become either brittle from the heat or softened by the wind as it tumbled across the ground. There was absolutely no fading of color on the matchbook, nor was it brittle or soft. As far as Jake was concerned, it looked like it had just come out of a fresh package.

There was a logo on the front of the flap, a sun rising over the mountains. And on the back was printed LAWRENCE HOTEL. Below this was an address and phone number.

As he turned it back over, it hit him that he wasn't wearing gloves. He groaned. If this was a piece of evidence, he'd just contaminated it with his fingerprints.

Maybe it's not so bad, he thought. He'd basically only touched the sides and a little bit of the surface. What he really should do was put it in a plastic bag. Of course, he didn't have one.

He could ask the ID techs for one, but knew the second they saw what he was holding, he'd be in trouble. Drop it back on the ground and call them over? They'd still find his prints.

A good cop would turn it in, no matter what, a voice in his head said.

Yes, but the detective named Pat had said this area had already been checked. Maybe they looked at it, and decided it had nothing to do with the case.

It *was* a matchbook at the scene of a fire, though. If one of the matches was missing...

With trepidation, he gingerly teased the flap open.

He almost smiled. None of the matches inside had been used. So, at the very least, this hadn't been what started the fire.

It *was* probably nothing, he told himself. Most likely dropped there by some teenager out for a smoke. Jake's mind took the story a step further. The kid probably grabbed it from a drawer at home. His parents would have put it there after picking it up at a cocktail party at the hotel. All nice and easy.

The matchbook was already in his pocket before he realized he'd slipped it there.

It's nothing, he told himself again.

Chapter 6

Durrie lay on the top of a small rise, a half mile northwest of the barn. Mounted on a short stand in front of him was a pair of high-powered binoculars through which he had a clear view of the activity around the burnt-out structure. At full magnification, he could read license plate numbers and see blemishes on the faces of the cops who were crawling all over the place.

The fact that he was still in town was more than a little annoying. Typically, within an hour of finishing an assignment, he was gone, his mind already purging the details of the previous few days and preparing for whatever was next.

"I need you to make sure we're not going to have any problems," Peter had said when Durrie called in after going back for his van so that there was nothing left anywhere near Goodman Ranch Road.

"No way. I'm done," Durrie told him. He didn't want to be stuck with any mess that might arise from Larson's arrogant stupidity. "My job ended when I disposed of the body." That was something he had done right before he called, by way of a pre-dug grave in the middle of absolute nowhere and a slurry of chemicals that would accelerate body decomposition.

"You're done when I say you're done," the head of the Office told him. "Unless you'd rather I start hiring someone else."

The muscles in Durrie's jaw tightened.

"This should have been an easy in and out," Peter went on. "I'm not happy. My client's not happy. And until we are, you shouldn't be happy, either."

"What do you want me to do, Peter?" Durrie asked. "Shove a gun in your assassin's mouth and pull the trigger?"

Peter was silent for a moment. When he finally spoke, his voice was matter of fact. "Your job is to make sure there are no ties back to us. From your own report, you can't guarantee that. Therefore, your job is not done. What I expect is for you to finish it properly, and make sure there will be no future problems." He paused. "Tell me if there's any fault to my logic."

There wasn't, of course, and that had made Durrie even angrier. But all he could really do was say, "I'm on it."

That was the reason he was lying on the small rise, watching the location of a job he should have been hundreds of miles away from by now. He was annoyed and tired, but he was also a professional and knew how to suppress those feelings and concentrate on the task at hand.

To this point, there had been nothing unusual going on. Just the normal crime scene stuff. Durrie was sure nothing incriminating would be found.

He was starting to feel pretty good about things. Before he arrived at his lookout spot, he'd been concerned that the fire department might have been able to put the fire out before it could do its job, but that had not been the case. The structure was destroyed.

And though he'd seen a tech taking pictures of a few tire tracks that hadn't been obliterated by the fire crews, he knew they would never find the matching tire. The car Owens had arrived in was already across the border in Mexico, and would soon be disassembled for parts. Durrie was nothing if not thorough.

It looked like he was going to be able to report back to Peter that everything was fine, and in another hour or two he should be heading home. The only open question at the moment was what, if anything, the cops might have found when Durrie hadn't been on scene to keep an eye on things. But that was being dealt with, too. Peter had put Durrie in contact with a reliable source inside the Phoenix Police Department, a detective named Kearns.

Durrie checked his watch. It had been two hours since he'd talked to the detective. For God's sake, even if the guy was a complete waste of a badge, he should know something by now. Durrie retrieved his phone and called the detective.

"Kearns," the man answered after two rings.

"This is Special Agent Marsh," Durrie said, using the FBI identity Peter had given him. They were using Kearns's hope of getting hired by the bureau as their means of obtaining his cooperation.

"I haven't got much for you, Agent Marsh."

"Why don't you tell me what you do have?"

In the distance, Durrie could see a car turn off the road, and stop at the opening in the fence of the property the barn was on. He leaned down and looked through the binoculars.

"Really, all we have is a body that's been shot and burned," Kearns said. "There's not much else at all."

Definitely good news. "Any progress on the investigation otherwise?"

Kearns hesitated. "Sir, I'm not sure why you can't go through normal channels on this. If you have questions, you should just call Detective—"

"I was *told* you could help us," Durrie cut in. "Is that not the case? Because if it isn't, I'll need to let the assistant director know."

"No," the detective said quickly. "That's not what I meant."

"Then what did you mean?"

"It's just, well, maybe if you told me why you're so interested I'd be able to assist you better."

Durrie increased the magnification on the binoculars to see if he could get a look at the driver of the car, but the angle was wrong. From the occasional smile on the face of the cop manning the opening, Durrie got the sense the cop and the driver knew each other.

"Detective, what I'm about to tell you is off the record," Durrie said, making it up on the fly.

"Of course."

"I'm working in a special unit focusing on domestic terrorism."

"Domestic terrorism," Kearns said, surprise in his voice. "Did the fire last night have something to do with..."

Durrie followed the car as it headed toward the barn.

"I'm not saying whether your fire has something to do with what we're working on or not, but after Oklahoma City last year, we're being cautious."

"Oklahoma City? Jesus. Is something like that going to happen here?"

"Relax, Detective," Durrie said. "Most likely not, but we have a list of things we look for. When a case ticks something on that list, we like to check it out. Quietly, of course, so that we don't cause a lot of unnecessary excitement. Understand? That's why we're talking to you."

"Oh," the detective said, relief evident in his voice. "I get it."

"Good. Then can you give me an update on the investigation's progress?"

"Absolutely," Kearns said. "The current theory is that it's gang-related. Probably a drug runner or something like that. They don't have any proof, but it wouldn't be the first time."

"I figured it might be something like that." At the barn, the car had parked near the others. Durrie aimed the binoculars so he could get a good look at the driver when he got out. "If that's the case, then I'm sure this will have nothing to do with us."

The car door opened, and a man exited. He was at least a year or two south of twenty-five, and close to six feet tall, though that was hard to tell without an accurate reference. Durrie hadn't seen him before, and figured he must be another crime scene tech—or ID tech, as they called it in Phoenix—because he looked too young to be a detective.

"I'm glad to hear that," Kearns said.

"You still have that number I gave you?" Durrie asked, no longer giving his full attention to the new arrival at the barn.

"Of course."

"Then call me if something new comes up."

"I will."

"Take care, Detective. I'll be in touch." Durrie hung up.

The number he'd given the detective was a temporary relay that would send the detective's calls directly to Durrie's cell phone. In three days, the relay would reroute any future calls to the Office, where a brief summary would appear on an operator's computer screen so he or she would know how to respond to the detective. In all likelihood, though, the detective would never call the number.

Focusing back on the barn, Durrie noted that the new arrival was talking to one of the detectives. As they finished, the cleaner expected the man to walk over to the remains of the building and join his friends, but instead, the man headed toward the water tank.

Durrie followed the man with the binoculars, his interest growing. About thirty feet out from the barn, the man paused and looked at the dirt. It was as if he were searching for something specific. What, Durrie had no idea.

After a moment, the man straightened up, and headed over to the tank. Again, he was looking at the ground. When he reached the tank, he moved around back. Since Durrie could only see the portion that faced the building, he couldn't see what the guy was doing back there.

The fact that the man had headed directly for an area where Durrie had been the night before made the cleaner a bit antsy, but the man's interest could be logically explained. The tank would have been a natural hiding place from where an arsonist could observe his fiery creation.

After several seconds, the man reappeared from the other side, then started moving around the back of the barn. For the most part, he was looking at the ground, but every ten to fifteen seconds he'd take a quick look at the crime scene. What Durrie saw in the man's eyes at those moments was unexpected. The guy looked wary, like he was making sure no one was paying attention to him.

Odd.

The man kept coming around the building, slow but steady. When he reached the near side, he glanced over at an old, dead tree off to the side of the lot, then altered his path and walked toward it.

At the tree, he looked around, then crouched down. After a moment, he reached into one of the bushes. When he pulled his hand back out, he was holding something in it.

Durrie tried to focus on the object, but it was half hidden by the man's hand. The only thing he could make out was that it was dark blue.

He watched as the man examined the object, turning it over, then flipping it... open.

A matchbook.

And not just any matchbook—one that looked brand new.

Now that Durrie knew what it was, he recognized something else.

Details, that was the backbone of good cleaner work. The better you were at noticing them, the better you were at your job. Miss an important detail, and your career—perhaps even your life—would end quickly.

Durrie had seen this matchbook before, or at least several just like it. Not at the job scene, though. It had been at the hotel the Office put them up in. Matchbooks with the place's logo on it.

Son of a bitch.

Timmons? He was the only one positioned outside the barn who had been staying at the Lawrence Hotel. It must have been him, because the only others staying at the hotel had been Durrie and—

Larson. He'd gone outside to bring Timmons back. Could it have been him? Durrie frowned. In truth, it didn't matter who had dropped it. It was there, and now the police had it. A crime scene like this, they'd follow it up for sure.

Then Durrie witnessed his biggest surprise of all.

Instead of putting the matchbook in an evidence bag and carrying it over to his friends, the man slipped it in his pocket.

What the hell?

The guy then circled back around to the front, and climbed into his car. Durrie got a good look at the vehicle's license plate number as the Civic pulled away, then he removed his gaze from the binoculars and stared blankly at the sky as his mind ran through everything.

Who was this guy and what was he up to?

He could find the answer to the first part easily enough. The second would take a little more effort.

So much for leaving town in a couple of hours.

Annoyed all over again, he picked up his phone, scrolled through his contact list, then punched the desired number.

"Steiner? I need you to run a plate for me."

Chapter 7

The Lawrence Hotel was an upscale establishment in the neighboring city of Mesa. It no doubt sold itself as the refined alternative to the traditional business hotel. The guests who stayed there wouldn't be mid-level employees, though. The Lawrence was for the upper tiers. Well-appointed and expensive, it catered to its guests' every need.

Jake had never stayed in a hotel like it before. In his meager travels, he tended to go on the cheap. Youth hostels on his four-week trip to Europe three years earlier, and bargain motels pretty much anywhere he'd gone in the States.

On the drive over to the Lawrence, he thought about what he was going to do when he got there. The approach he came up with would get him in trouble if anyone ever found out, but he didn't see how they would. Besides, the matchbook could be nothing. He was just...curious, that's all. And if his curiosity helped him break the case, that would be a bonus.

He made a stop at a gas station before he reached the hotel, and changed into his uniform in the restroom. It would provide him instant credibility, and open doors that his civilian clothes wouldn't.

He parked around the corner so no one would see the car he arrived in. At the entrance, a doorman in black tails and bowtie opened the glass door and said, "Welcome to the Lawrence, Officer."

Jake gave him a nod as he passed inside.

The lobby was smaller than he expected, but was still large enough to encompass several ornate couches and chairs, a water fountain aged to look like it had been uprooted from an Italian piazza, and a coffee bar with the most elaborate coffee maker Jake had ever seen. At the far end were the reception counter, the concierge desk, and the bellhop station.

Jake headed straight for reception. Both of the people working the desk were with customers, but when the woman nearest him caught sight of him in his uniform, she picked up a phone. A moment later, a third woman came out of the back room.

"Can I help you, Officer?" she asked with a smile.

As he approached the counter, his first instinct was to smile back and put her at ease, but he kept his expression neutral, knowing the uniform would be a more effective tool than a smile. "Yes, thank you. I'd like to speak to the person in charge of security."

Her brow darkened. "Yes, of course." As she picked up a phone, she said, "Is there a problem?"

"Just a routine matter."

She nodded, then said into the phone. "I have an Officer..." She looked at Jake's uniform, reading his nameplate, "...Oliver at the front desk. He says he needs to speak to Mr. Evans... yes, yes... okay. Sure." She hung up, then motioned to one of the chairs in the seating area behind him. "If you'd like to wait over there, he'll be with you in a moment."

"Thank you." Jake moved over to the chair, but didn't sit down.

Two minutes later, a woman and a man came out of an unmarked door near the concierge desk, and walked over to him. The woman looked to be in her fifties and was dressed in a smart, dark gray business suit. The man was maybe a few years older, and wore a black suit and the unmistakable look of retired cop.

"Officer Oliver, is it?" the woman said.

"Yes, ma'am," Jake said.

She held out her hand. "I'm Toni Conway. I manage the Lawrence."

Jake shook her hand.

She then turned to the man beside her and said, "This is Carl Evans. He's head of security."

"Mr. Evans," Jake said, as he shook the man's hand.

"What is it we can help you with?" Evans asked.

"A small matter, really," Jake said. "I'm sure you're aware of the airport transit robberies." The robberies were real. Someone had been forcing Town Cars headed for the airport off the road, then robbing their passengers of whatever valuables they might be carrying. These were always cars heading to the airport, mostly from local hotels, but a few private homes, too. The police had yet to crack the case.

"Sure," Evans said. "We've been taking every precaution to ensure our guests don't become victims."

"May I ask what those are?" Jake said. The question really wasn't important other than to sell his own legitimacy.

Evans said, "We've encouraged most people to use van pools. Those who do go by Town Car, we always send a second car driven by a member of my staff to follow right behind. We haven't had any problems."

"Excellent," Jake said. "That's exactly what we've been encouraging other hotels to do." He paused. "We could use your help on another matter."

"What's that?" Evans asked.

"A matchbook with your hotel's logo was found at the scene of the latest robbery."

Conway's face scrunched up in question. "A matchbook? From here?"

Jake stepped over to a small table between the two chairs. He'd spotted a matchbook, just like the one he'd found at the crime scene, sitting on the table when he'd first come over. Now he picked it up and showed it to them.

"Just like this one."

"Why would that be important?" Conway asked.

"It might not be," Jake said. "But I'm sure you understand that we need to follow up on every lead."

Evans was nodding. "I take it you think that the matchbook might have come from the robber?"

"It's one possibility."

"Those Town Cars go to all the hotels," Conway said. "It could have been in there from a previous ride, and fallen out."

"That's also a possibility," Jake conceded. "And it might already have been on the ground when the car drove up."

Evans smiled in a way that told Jake the head of security was about to say the same thing.

"So what is it you're hoping we can tell you?" Conway said.

Jake looked down, then back at them, his expression more relaxed than before. "I'll be honest with you. I think this is a dead end, but, like I said, we have to follow up on everything. I was assigned to look through your security footage, with your permission, of course."

"Our security footage?" Conway asked. "What do you expect to find?"

"You know who it might be, don't you?" Evans said.

Jake hesitated. "We've... identified several potential perps. My focus would be to see if any of them was here."

"Perps?" the woman asked.

"Perpetrators, ma'am."

Conway looked at Evans. "Carl?"

Evans shrugged. "I don't have a problem with it." He looked at Jake. "How far back do you want to look?"

"Just the last forty-eight hours."

"Easy enough," Evans said.

Conway didn't look completely happy, but Jake could tell she wasn't going to stand in the way. "All right. But, Officer, we can't give you any information about any of our guests. You can look at the footage, but that's all the help we can give."

"That's all I'm asking," Jake said. "If we need anything more, we'll get a warrant so that you're covered in case any of your guests complain."

That seemed to satisfy her. "I'll leave you in Mr. Evans's hands, then."

Chapter 8

"The car belongs to a guy named Jake Oliver," Steiner reported over the phone as Durrie drove back into the city.

From the address Steiner read off, it was pretty clear this Oliver guy lived in either an apartment or townhouse.

"The birthday on his license puts him at twenty-two. Height listed at five-foot-ten, and weight one-sixty-five. You need hair and eye color, too?"

"No," Durrie said. He'd seen the man's hair and eyes.

"I was able to get a social security number and do a little more digging. I assume that's what you wanted."

It was. Durrie remained silent, waiting.

"I'm guessing you might already know this, but your guy's a cop."

"You mean crime scene investigator," Durrie said.

"No. I mean cop."

"He's not a crime tech?"

"Is there a bad connection or something?" Steiner asked. "I said cop. As in police officer, with the gun and the badge and the cars with the lights."

Steiner wasn't Durrie's favorite person in the world. He could be a bit of an ass when he wanted to be. Easy to do when you spent all day sitting around Venice Beach. Steiner owned a mailbox and packing store just around the corner from the boardwalk, but his main income came from forging documents and gathering information.

It was clear his specialized skills made him think he was above most other people. The problem was, he was good at his job. Hence the reason Durrie put up with him.

"Phoenix PD?"

"Yep."

"How long's he been on the force?" Durrie asked.

"Just over four months. Went to the academy first, graduated near the top, then right into the uniform."

"Is that it?"

"Dude, I know I'm good, but you didn't give me a lot of time. That's all I got."

"Send me the bill," Durrie said.

"It's already in your inbox."

Durrie dropped his phone on the passenger seat.

He had two choices: go to the cop's address and check it out, or go to where he was pretty sure Oliver was headed. The house he could visit anytime. Where Oliver was probably headed seemed more pressing.

Thirty minutes later, he parked a block away from the Lawrence Hotel, then walked up to the entrance.

The doorman smiled, and immediately opened the door. "Welcome back, sir."

Durrie had stayed there the last two nights and was still technically a guest, but he had no intention of spending another night in the place, not now that a member of the Phoenix PD had tied it to the situation on Goodman Ranch Road. But he'd deal with that later. Right now the cop was his focus.

He slowed his pace upon entering the lobby and casually looked around, taking everything in. There were two women behind the reception counter, another woman at the concierge desk, and two older men at the bellhop station. One of the women at reception was helping a male guest, while the other was looking intently at a computer screen. Other guests were scattered throughout the rest of the lobby—some talking together, some sitting on the chairs, reading or waiting. But no Jake Oliver.

Maybe Durrie had been wrong.

He checked his watch. He'd give it twenty minutes, then he'd retrieve his bag from his room and find another place to stay. He picked up one of the complimentary newspapers off a nearby table, then took a seat in a wingback chair that afforded him a view of both the hotel entrance and reception. He was just finishing up the front section when the cop made his appearance.

Durrie was surprised to see that Oliver was now dressed in a police uniform. It certainly explained the delay in his arrival, but why wear it now when he wasn't wearing it at the scene? Then the answer, so obvious, hit him.

Authority. People responded to it, and the uniform reeked of it.

For a split second, Durrie wondered if the cop was actually here officially with the full knowledge of his superiors, but quickly dismissed the thought. If that had been the case, Oliver would have turned over the matchbook to the investigators at the scene. Instead, he'd slipped it into his pocket and driven off.

No, this visit wasn't official. Durrie was sure of that. This was a wannabe detective trying to make a mark, and give his fledgling career an early boost. Durrie imagined that Oliver was hoping to gain some respect and maybe even a commendation. Maybe he even had ideas of becoming the youngest detective in Phoenix PD history. But the cop was young still, and didn't quite know how the world worked. Initiative wasn't always rewarded, especially if you looked like you were trying to show up someone else.

The argument, though, was purely academic. If Oliver's little side investigation took him any further, he'd have bigger problems to worry about than the bruised egos of those above him on the force.

As soon as the cop passed by his position, Durrie got up and moved to an open seat on the other side of the lobby, closer to reception. It was angled away from the desk so he didn't have much of a view, but he could hear well enough as Oliver told the woman at the desk he wished to speak to the head of security.

"If you'd like to wait over there, he'll be with you in a moment," she replied.

Durrie could then hear the unmistakable sound of the cop walking toward him, the uniform's leather belt and attachments squeaking with each step. When Oliver finally stopped, he was just two chairs over from Durrie's position.

Close enough to kill.

Durrie frowned at the thought. It was his dark voice, one that he seldom heard. But when he did, it was always throwing out ridiculous things like that. Easy to ignore, but disturbing nonetheless.

The truth was he might *have* to kill Oliver, but there would be none of the satisfaction the voice seemed to imply. In fact, there would be nothing at all. It would be part of the job. Unfortunate, maybe, but necessary.

When the hotel manager and the security man came out, Durrie listened closely to the conversation. He couldn't help being impressed by the rookie cop's resourcefulness. Using the cover of the robberies was excellent. It played right to the hotel's biggest concern—the safety of its guests. Though he couldn't see the kid's face, Durrie could sense no hesitation or uncertainty in Oliver's voice. It was as if the cop truly believed what he was saying. Durrie knew veteran operatives who wouldn't have been able to pull off the deception as well as the kid did.

By the end, the cop had talked himself into a free look at the hotel's security tapes without the need of a warrant or even confirmation from someone higher up in the force. Brilliant.

Also a potential problem.

There was no doubt that Durrie, Larson and Timmons—the two ops team members who'd also been staying at the Lawrence—would be on those tapes. But chances were slim at best that Oliver would peg any of them as people of interest. Like always, standard procedures had been in place, and the three men had acted as if they didn't know each other while at the hotel.

No way the cop would spot them, but damn if Oliver wasn't clever to get this far.

Durrie would give him a day. That would be more than enough to make sure the kid wasn't a threat. And if, for some reason, it turned out he was, Durrie would undoubtedly be ordered to eliminate him.

There *was* a third possibility, but that barely even registered on the cleaner's radar.

Slowly he stood up and lifted his arms, a man stretching after sitting for too long. He twisted at the waist, working out those last creaking muscles that weren't actually bothering him, and took a look around. As he knew they would be, Oliver and the two hotel employees were gone. As for the others still in the lobby, none were looking in his direction.

Durrie was just another anonymous business traveler, here today, gone tomorrow. Or, in his case, here right now, gone in thirty minutes.

He went up to his room to get his bag.

Chapter 9

There was a digital clock in the middle of the wall of monitors. Its numbers were red and impossible to miss, a quick reference for security guards tasked with keeping an eye on the feeds from the hotel cameras.

The monitor room wasn't particularly large, but it was big enough for two to sit behind the laminated desk set back several feet from the monitor wall. There were eleven screens in all: a large one in the center, with ten smaller units surrounding it.

Jake was in the chair nearest the door. Beside him was a guard named Parker. After making introductions and giving Parker a quick rundown, Evans had left them alone, with a simple, "If you need anything else, Parker can find me."

The guard had then routed the archived footage feed to the small monitor in the lower left corner, closest to Jake.

"We have everything on hard drive," Parker explained.

"That must take up a lot of space," Jake said. Most systems he'd come across still relied on tape backups, or DVDs.

"It does. Each day gets its own set of disks." It was obvious Parker was enjoying his role as police assistant. "We have sixty sets in all, so basically we keep footage for sixty days before the set gets used again. The way the system works is that there are six disk ports. One contains today's disks, four contain the last four days', and the last one contains the disks from two months ago that will be used tomorrow."

"Got it," Jake said. "So the days I need to look at are still connected to the system."

"Yep."

Parker showed him how to access the older footage, then Jake got to work.

The hotel had thirty-six different cameras throughout the property, mainly covering the lobby, elevators, outside exits, and employee-only areas.

Even just skimming through the last forty-eight hours, it would take him forever to go through all the different feeds. So his first task was to narrow things down.

Two of the lobby cameras acted as overviews, covering large portions of the space. What one didn't see, the other did. Deciding to concentrate on those first, Jake brought up one of the feeds, and began whipping through it as fast as he could manage and still make out what was going on.

The biggest problem was he didn't know who he was looking for. Had the person who'd dropped the matchbook been a guest? Someone just passing through the lobby? Someone who worked there? Man? Woman? Old? Young?

He hadn't been at it long before he realized how ridiculous this was. What the hell did he actually expect to see? The murderer walking through the frame wearing a T-shirt that said I DID IT?

Unfortunately, he couldn't just get up and walk out. That would raise more questions than his request to view the footage had. Enough, most likely, to provoke Evans or Conway to call the department and ask what was up.

Jake definitely didn't need that.

Having no choice, he focused on the screen.

It took nearly an hour to get through one day of one camera. Not surprisingly, no one stood out to him. He increased the pace, and got through the second twenty-four hours in only thirty-two minutes.

He decided to skip the other lobby camera and move to the one covering the front entrance. In and out, in and out. People coming and going and returning and leaving again. On the screen the day grew later, then night descended, but the flow of people never stopped. In and out, in and out, in and—

Jake tapped Pause, then leaned over the desk, bringing him a few inches closer to the monitor on the wall.

"See something?" Parker asked.

Jake stared at the image. Two men had just come outside. A doorman—not the one who'd let Jake in earlier—was holding the door open for them. They were both dressed casually, dark pants and dark shirts. One was even wearing a dark gray sports coat. They didn't look like they were together, but there was *something* Jake couldn't quite put his finger on.

The camera had captured a good shot of both men's faces. Neither was remarkable. If he'd met either of them before, that might explain the feeling he was having, but he couldn't place their faces, which meant this was the first time he had ever seen them. His memory was exceptional. He'd never forgotten a face before, and was sure he wasn't forgetting one now.

So why did I stop?

"Hey, you all right?" Parker asked.

Jake pulled his eyes off the screen. "What?" he asked, confused.

"You were studying that pretty hard. I was just wondering if you'd seen something interesting."

Jake quickly donned his neutral cop look. "Not sure. Maybe. Is there a way to print out images?"

"Sure," Parker said. "We have a mavigraph. Gives you a nice glossy print. We're not supposed to use it too often because it's expensive, but I'm sure Mr. Evans wouldn't mind."

"Excellent." Jake nodded at the screen. "Can I get a print of that?"

"You got it."

Parker fiddled with a computer keyboard, then a few moments later a machine in the corner behind them began to hum.

"It takes a little while to print," Parker said. "But it's got the image now, so you can continue looking if you want."

Jake nodded, then hit Play and watched the men walk out of frame. He stopped the footage, reversed it to just as they were coming out the door, and noted the time stamp. He then switched over to the feed from a lobby camera right on the other side of the entrance. Using the time code as reference, he went to the corresponding point.

On the screen he could see the backs of the men as they were passing through the door. He began scrolling the footage backwards. As he noted from the other angle, though the men were leaving at the same time, they didn't seem to be together. He followed them to the extent of the camera's range, then found the next camera they were on, then the next. The lighter-haired one had stopped in the lobby, and put his cell phone to his ear. The other, dark-haired one had walked backwards all the way to the elevator where he entered/exited the number two elevator.

Jake turned his focus on the man in the lobby, until he, too, walked to the elevators and went up, in his case riding in car number four. Jake switched to the interior footage from car four, and followed the man in reverse all the way up to the eighth floor. No feeds covered the upstairs hallways, so he couldn't see which room the man went to.

"Here you go," Parker said, setting something on the counter beside Jake's elbow.

Looking down, Jake saw the promised glossy print of the two men outside the hotel entrance. There was a wide white border around the edges that almost gave it a retro feel.

"Thanks," he said.

He returned his attention to the screen, then hit Play, watching in normal speed, forward motion this time. The light-haired man reentered the elevator on

the eighth floor, then headed down. The car made three stops before it reached the lobby: on the sixth, fourth, and third floor.

Jake hit Pause again, scrolled back a few seconds, then let it play once more. When a man entered the car on the third floor, it looked like the light-haired man had given him a tiny nod. Jake played it a couple of times. The movement was so slight it was hard to tell.

The man who had just gotten on turned and faced the door. It could be they'd only recognized each other from when they were checking into the hotel. Then again, maybe it hadn't been a nod at all. Just a tick, or even a glitch in the camera.

Jake continued forward.

It wasn't until the dark-haired man entered the lobby from the number two elevator that Jake stopped again. He'd missed it before but now there was no mistaking it. The light-haired man and the dark-haired man had shared a look. Brief, yes, and most people who saw it would probably have dismissed it, but Jake saw it for what he was sure it was—a signal of some kind. The moment they looked away from each other, the light-haired man put his phone in his pocket and headed for the door. The dark-haired man had then headed in the same direction, a few feet behind him.

Okay, Jake thought. There's a connection between the men, but absolutely no connection to the murder out on Goodman Ranch Road. They could be anybody.

Then his fingers reached out and slammed the Pause key.

The dark-haired man had slowed next to a table, his hand hovering over a bowl filled with matchbooks.

A tingling feeling ran across Jake's shoulders.

He scrolled forward, frame by frame. The man's hand inched downward, first touching the stack of blue booklets, then picking one up and slipping it in his pocket.

Jake stared at the screen, no longer seeing the image it held.

He knew this still didn't prove a damn thing. Dozens of people must have taken matchbooks from that bowl every day. That, and the fact Jake's interest in the man was based on no more than a *feeling*, made it all the more unlikely. Yet, he continued to have a sense that the men were... were...

Different.

That was it. There was something about them that set them off from others. He couldn't put his finger on exactly what that difference was, but he knew it was there.

He finished watching the men exit the hotel. There were no more causes to pause, no more what-the-hell moments.

He checked his watch and was surprised to see he only had a half hour to get to the substation. Where had all the time gone?

He was about to thank Parker and tell him he was done when he remembered the man who'd entered the elevator on the third floor. He knew his sense about this man was even weaker than his feelings about the other two, but it was best to play it safe.

He found the appropriate footage of the man exiting the building a few minutes before the other two did, and paused the picture. The guy was probably in his early forties, in decent shape, and had a bit of a scowl on his face.

He looked at Parker. "Can I get a print of this, too?"

* * * * *

As Jake walked back through the lobby, he considered stopping at reception. He knew there was a very high likelihood that the men had been guests at the hotel, and if one of the women at the desk could ID them, then Jake would have names. The thing that stopped him was the promise he'd made Conway about not asking for any guest information without the proper warrants. If he reneged on that, he'd once more open the possibility of his superiors finding out about his visit.

There was a less official way he could at least get some basic information, though.

As he reached the exit, a different doorman than earlier pulled it open for him.

"Thanks," Jake said as he passed through.

"No problem at all. You have a good day."

Jake slowed. "Say, can I ask you a question?"

"Of course."

Jake unrolled the picture he'd been given of the two men. "Do you recall seeing either of these men?"

"Sure. That's Mr. Redmond," he said, pointing at the light-haired man. He moved his finger to the other guy. "And that's... Mr. Walters."

"They're guests here?"

"They were. Left this morning, I believe."

"Did they have their own cars or..."

"No cars. Taxis. They both seemed to enjoy walking, too. I've seen both head out on foot."

Which could have meant they had a car they weren't parking at the hotel, Jake thought.

He showed him the other picture.

"Yeah," the doorman said. "Saw him a few times, but don't know his name."

"Also a guest?"

"Not sure."

Jake rolled the pictures back up. He had last names now, at least for two of them. It was something, but not much. "Thanks," he said.

"You got it."

Chapter 10

Jake was up early the next morning. Patrol the night before had been uneventful, and both he and Haywood had finished on time. Jake had spent most of the shift as they drove around thinking about the men in the pictures. Could it possibly be that they were connected with the murder? Should he tell someone about them?

He still had no answer for the first question, and his immediate response to the second was no. No one would believe such a tenuous connection. A feeling? But then he'd reconsidered. There was one person he could talk to who wouldn't think he was crazy, not more than usual, anyway.

Around 11 p.m., while Haywood had been doing his flirting thing with Maria the waitress, Jake had called Berit and asked if she wanted to grab breakfast the next morning.

"Breakfast? You mean get out of bed before ten?" she said.

"I was thinking eight-thirty? At Di's?"

"Eight-thirty? Ugh! Why?"

"I've... I've got something I need to talk about."

She was quiet for a moment, then said, "Fine. Eight-thirty. You owe me."

Back at the academy, when they'd both realized they were different than most of the recruits, they'd made an agreement to always be there for each other. A sounding board, a pressure release, whatever the other one required.

This was definitely one of those times.

Jake arrived at Di's fifteen minutes early, took a booth by the window, and contented himself with coffee until Berit arrived. As was her habit, she was right on time. The way she was dressed—a pale green button shirt and blue jeans—people would have been hard-pressed to guess her profession. She just didn't give off that police vibe. But Jake knew her kind eyes and disarming smile were deceiving. It was like she had a thin layer of sweet covering a solid don't-fuck-with-me body.

Like Jake, she was a voracious reader, a habit that led them into conversations about such subjects as microbiology, Middle East history, computer programming, and the future of paper money. They could go on for hours about almost anything. It was like being in college without actually enrolling anywhere.

As Berit slipped into the other side of the booth, their waitress walked over.

"Something to drink?" the woman asked.

"Coffee, please," Berit said.

"Sure thing." The waitress retreated to the counter.

Berit stared at Jake for a moment, then said, "Four and a half hours."

"I'm sorry?" he said.

"Four and a half hours. That's how much sleep I got. I should still be in bed, but I'm not. You owe me three and a half hours of sleep."

"You get eight every night?"

The waitress returned with the coffee before Berit could respond, and set it on the table.

"You guys ready to order?" she asked.

"Oatmeal," Jake said.

"All right. And you, ma'am?"

Berit was holding the coffee to her lips and blowing across the surface. "It's too early to eat."

"So, one oatmeal? That's it?"

"Make it two," Jake said. "She'll get hungry."

The waitress made a quick note on her pad, then left them again.

Berit rolled her head around in a circle a couple of times, and said, "I swear to God this better not be girl trouble. I will *kill* you if it is."

Problems with the opposite sex were another thing they would discuss now and then, though it was more about the men who kept asking Berit out than the few dates Jake went on. It was interesting. They were the best of friends, but not once had either of them even hinted at taking their relationship further. She was a beautiful woman made even more so because of her intelligence, but he just never felt a romantic attraction. There was a very good reason for this: she reminded him of an older version of his sister, and he couldn't deny she was filling the void Jake had created when he'd been forced to basically abandon Liz back home.

"No girl problems," he said.

Her face grew a bit more serious. "Something at work? Is everything okay?"

"Yeah," he said hesitantly. "Everything's fine. It's just..." He paused.

"What?" When he didn't answer right away, she said, "What did you do?"

He cracked a smile. "It's not like that."

"Then what is it?"

"The murder two nights ago," he said. "I may have a lead on who did it."

"Are you serious?"

He nodded, then proceeded to tell her everything. Somewhere in the middle of the story, the waitress returned with their oatmeal, but they barely noticed. When he was through, he pulled out the plastic sandwich bag he'd put the matchbook in at his apartment and showed it to her.

"You took that from a *crime* scene?" she said, staring at him like he was crazy.

"They'd already gone over everything. This could be nothing."

"Or it could be *something*. Why didn't you just give it to someone?"

"Look, I know I probably should have," he said.

"*Probably?*"

"Okay, maybe I... I mean, I should have. But they would have just lumped it in with everything else. Who knows how long it would have taken for someone to follow up on it, if they even did?"

She rolled her eyes. "Did you at least tell someone about the markings you found on the ground? The cable impression? The spot at the tank where someone was sitting?"

"Those could have been made anytime."

"And they could have been made the night of the fire, Jake. What the hell are you doing?"

Several people at nearby tables looked over.

Jake leaned toward her, dropping his voice to just above a whisper. "Think about it, Berit. What do I really have? Nothing that can't be explained away in half a second."

"That's not a judgment for you to make," she replied, the level of her voice now matching his. She frowned, and he could see she was trying to think it all through. Finally, the disapproval on her face softened. "Tell me about these guys at the hotel."

Jake put the two printouts from the Lawrence Hotel on the table.

She examined them, then shrugged. "I don't understand how you know these guys are connected to the murder."

"I *don't* know, not for sure," he corrected her. "It's just... a feeling." He explained how he'd been going through the footage, but had stopped when he'd seen the two men come out the front door, and known immediately there was something different about them. He told her how he'd traced their movements backwards, the subtle communication between them, the matchbook.

"That's it?" she asked. "Nothing connecting them to the murder, or even putting them in the vicinity other than the one guy picking up some matches?"

He shook his head.

"Just a feeling?" she asked.

"Yes."

She frowned, then pointed at the printout of the man by himself. "What about this guy?"

Jake described the incident in the elevator.

"That could have been anything," she said.

Jake nodded. "I know. He's probably not even involved. But I got a print just in case."

She was silent for several moments, then she gestured at the printouts. "These, I can understand you not wanting to tell anyone about. Other than some instinct you seem to have about them, there's no way to connect these guys to what happened. But this other stuff—"

"There's no way to connect them *yet*," he said, cutting her off.

She narrowed her eyes. "What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking I need your help."

"I don't like the sound of this."

"What if we do a little checking? We can see if someone closer to the crime scene might have noticed one of these guys the other night."

She closed her eyes and shook her head.

"I'm just saying it wouldn't hurt anything to show the pictures around," he went on. "If we start now, we could be done by lunch."

"You can't be serious."

He smiled. "Come on. It'll be fun. And when we don't find any connections, you can tell me what an idiot I've been."

"I can tell you that now."

"I promise that when we're done, I'll turn in the matchbook and the pictures I took of the marks in the ground and tell them everything."

"That's... going to get you in a lot of trouble, you know," she said, her voice suddenly uncertain.

"You're the one who's been saying I should, and you're right. Whatever happens to me, I'll deserve it. I'm just asking for a few hours of digging first. That's all."

She huffed out a laugh, then gave him a smirk. "That's all?"

"Yes."

"I swear to God, if I get fired because of this, I'm going to kill you."

"So you'll do it?"

For a moment, she simply stared at him, then she said, "Three hours. That's it."

"Three hours is plenty."

* * * * *

Jake's hope was that if the men from the Lawrence *had* been involved in the Goodman Ranch Road murder, they would have made a stop somewhere on the way—maybe for gas, or a bite to eat to kill the time.

With a few minor variations, there was really just one logical route from the Lawrence Hotel to the crime scene. Before they began their search, though, Jake grabbed his stuff out of his Civic and hopped in Berit's vintage Charger. From Di's Diner, they went to Berit's townhouse, where, with considerable effort, Jake convinced her that they should don their uniforms.

When he saw the skepticism on her face as she came back down to the living room, he said, "Trust me. It'll make things easier."

Her only reply was a low grunt.

They drove out to Goodman Ranch Road, stopping a couple of lots short of the crime scene to make sure they didn't miss any potential places the men might have stopped, then Berit executed a quick U-turn.

Three-quarters of a mile back down the road, they came upon the first possibility, a combination gas station/mini-mart. It only took a few moments before Jake realized a glaring flaw in his plan. If the men *had* made a stop somewhere, it would have been at night. Which meant anyone who had been working on Saturday night probably wouldn't be working that Monday morning.

The look on Berit's face when the clerk shrugged and said, "I don't recognize them, but I get off at four every afternoon" let Jake know she'd realized the same thing. But she didn't say anything.

Rookie mistake, he thought. If you're doing a business-to-business search, you either got the names of whoever might have been on duty at the time of the incident and contacted them directly, or did the search at the same time the incident occurred. But while they *could* get names, contacting them seemed like taking things one step too far.

Already feeling defeated, they continued on. Two gas stations, a coffee shop and a donut place all had the same answer: "Sorry, haven't seen them."

It was as they entered another convenience store that he realized he truly was an idiot.

When the clerk gave him the same response the others had been giving, instead of saying, "Thanks," and leaving, Jake said, "I see you have security cameras."

"Uh, yeah," the clerk said.

Berit had been turning to leave, but Jake's comment stopped her.

"Do you record, or are they just live feeds?"

"Insurance wants us to record," the clerk said.

Jake tried to contain his optimism. "You keep the recordings on site?"

The clerk motioned toward the rear of the store. "In the office."

"How far back?"

"Supposed to keep two months' worth," the clerk said, looking a bit uncomfortable.

"But you don't?" Jake asked.

"I'm not sure."

"Sir, how far back?"

The clerk grimaced as if he were in pain. "Two weeks. The owner doesn't like to waste the money on VHS tapes. Don't tell him I told you, though, okay?"

Jake tried to look stern, while inside he was feeling relief. "I'll tell you what. We won't say anything if you let us take a look at a couple of them."

"Sure. No problem."

"You have a monitor somewhere we can use?"

"Let me show you," the clerk said.

Unlike at the Lawrence Hotel, Jake knew exactly the time range they needed to look at, so it was a simple matter of identifying the correct tape and fast-forwarding to the time in question. Unfortunately, the men had not stepped through the door in the hour and a half prior to the murder. But he didn't let that get him down. He'd found a bandage for his flawed plan, so there was hope.

He and Berit retraced their steps to the places they'd already checked, and in all but one, they were allowed a look at the security footage. Unfortunately, the men had not stopped at any of those places, either.

Because they had to watch video everywhere they stopped, their progress was slower than Jake would have hoped, and soon it was approaching noon.

"This is a waste of time. You know that, right?" Berit said as they pulled away from yet another gas station.

Jake stared out the front window, saying nothing, but thinking the same thing. They probably should just give up, but that feeling that he was right was still nagging at him, telling him to keep going.

"Just another thirty minutes?" he asked.

She frowned, then rolled her eyes. "Thirty minutes. But that's it."

"Thanks."

The next two businesses had no security footage at all. After that, they hit a coffee shop called Oscar's Grind. As they walked in, Jake knew they could make only a couple more stops, at most, before the thirty minutes were up.

Once more they went through their routine with the manager. Oscar's had a camera system, but to save on storage space, the system was programmed to take still images every two seconds instead of shooting continuous video.

"What night was that you wanted to look at?" the manager asked.

They were in the back room, crowded around a small desk that held a monitor and a VHS player.

"Saturday, between seven and nine," Jake told him.

The manager stuck the appropriate tape in the machine, and soon the monitor filled with an image of the coffee shop. The angle was from behind the cash register, looking over the counter. In the foreground was an employee taking orders, her back to the camera, while on the other side was the front of the line of people waiting to be served. In the lower right corner was a time stamp: 6:58 p.m.

The playback was choppy due to the still images, but it was more than sufficient to see the faces of the customers.

"Can you speed it up?" Jake asked.

"A bit."

The manager pushed Fast Forward. On the screen, customers began moving rapidly.

When the time stamp read 7:48 p.m., both Jake and Berit said, "Stop."

The manager hit the Pause button, and the image froze on the monitor.

"Back up a couple of seconds," Jake said.

The manager did as asked.

On the monitor, standing just beyond the register, were the two men who'd left the Lawrence Hotel at the same time. There was no mistaking them. And unlike in the footage from the hotel, they were no longer acting like they didn't know each other.

"You were right," Berit said, her voice barely audible.

"Are these the guys you're looking for?" the manager asked.

Ignoring the question, Jake said, "Can you move to a couple minutes before this point and let it play?"

"Of course."

They watched as customers came and went, then the two men stepped up, placed their order and exited the frame.

The manager reached out to stop it, but Jake said, "No. Let it play."

They watched for another five minutes. The men didn't come back, but Jake hadn't been expecting them to. Who he was really hoping to see was the third man, but there was no sign of him.

"Can you make printouts?" Jake asked.

"Printouts," the manager said, sounding embarrassed. "People can do that?"

Jake stood up. "Don't worry about it. Thanks. That's all we'll need for now."

"Oh, ah, all right," the manager said. "No problem at all."

"How long before you erase what you've recorded?" Berit asked.

"A week."

"We're going to need you to hold on to the cassette," she told him. "You can at least do that, right?"

"Yeah. Sure."

"Good," Berit told him. "We'll be in touch."

Neither Jake nor Berit said anything as they walked through the coffee shop and out to her car. The silence continued after they got in, both lost in thought.

Finally, Berit said, "We have to tell someone."

"Tell them what?"

"What you've found out."

"And what exactly have I found out?"

She looked at him like she couldn't understand what he meant. "The men. They were here."

He returned her gaze, not saying anything, waiting for her to realize what he'd already figured out. That no matter how much they might see the connection, there was still absolutely nothing solid. In fact, there was nothing even remotely close to solid. It was all relying on a hunch, a feeling of a rookie cop who didn't quite fit in with the others.

When it finally hit her, she said, "Then what are we going to do?"

"Dig deeper, I guess," he said. "Find something that can't be ignored."

"And how are we supposed to do that?"

He thought for a moment, then said in all honesty, "I don't know."

Chapter 11

"How much does he know?" Peter asked, obviously not happy.

"No way to know for sure," Durrie told him. He was in his car, trailing Oliver and a woman cop in a Dodge Charger. For the past several hours, the two police officers had been making the rounds of businesses near the crime scene.

"He must know something," Peter said.

"He has a matchbook, that's all."

"*And* the security footage at the hotel."

"He *looked* at the footage, but what are the possibilities he could have picked us out?"

"A pro could have picked you out."

"*Might* have picked us out," Durrie corrected him. "But this guy's not a pro. He's a twenty-two-year-old rookie cop. My guess is, when he couldn't find out anything at the hotel, he decided to check closer to the crime scene. He's just playing out some hunches. In another day or so, he'll forget about the whole thing."

Ahead, the Charger turned off the road into a strip-mall parking lot, and pulled into a slot in front of a coffee shop.

"I have a lot of other things that need my attention now," Peter said, his tone heavily underlined with anger. "I don't need some punk cop distracting me." He paused for a moment. "This can't become a major headache. Do you understand?"

"Don't worry, Peter. It won't be."

"I want to make sure it isn't. I'm sending someone to help you."

"I don't need help."

"I don't care. Larson should be able to get there in a few hours."

"What?" Durrie couldn't help sounding surprised. "I don't need that asshole messing things up."

"I want to be prepared if a termination is necessary. Are you telling me that's something you'd like to do yourself?"

"If there has to be a termination, we can make the call later," Durrie said, slowing his car and pulling into the lot.

"Either work with him, or go home and I'll send in another cleaner to finish the job. Your call."

Through gritted teeth, Durrie said the only thing he could, "Fine. I'll work with him."

"I though you would."

The cleaner found a parking spot at the far end of the lot with a view of the coffee shop's entrance.

"Anything else to report?" Peter asked.

Durrie hesitated a moment. He had yet to mention the fact Oliver had taken on a partner. "Nothing yet," he said.

"Report in if something changes."

Peter hung up.

Durrie allowed himself a few moments just to steam. The last thing he needed was someone else meddling with his operation, especially Larson. The guy had screwed up massively at the barn. People made mistakes all the time in the business, and when it didn't get them killed, they usually learned from it. But Durrie got a sense Larson was not someone who learned much from anything. His

arrogance would get him killed soon enough. Durrie just didn't want to be around to get caught in the crossfire when it happened.

As his anger began to ebb, he focused on the coffee shop. For a second he wondered if he'd been there before. There was something definitely familiar about it. But there was no way he could have been, so he shook the feeling off and kept his eyes on the door.

He wished he knew exactly what Oliver and his woman friend were looking for. At some of the places they stopped, they were only inside for less than a minute. At others, it was sometimes a quarter hour before they reappeared. The coffee shop was turning out to be one of the latter.

Finally, the door opened and the two cops came back outside. Gone was the frustrated look he'd seen on their faces as they'd left the other establishments. Instead they both looked deep in thought.

As they walked to their car, they momentarily covered up the logo painted on the window of the shop. Durrie's gaze stopped on it once they'd moved out of the way. He suddenly remembered.

That's what he'd seen before. The logo.

It had been on the coffee cup that Larson had carelessly left in the barn.

Durrie's eyes shifted to the Charger.

It wasn't possible, was it? Could Oliver have traced *Larson* from the hotel to here?

Who the hell was this kid?

Chapter 12

Jake got to work an hour and a half before his shift, and spent the time looking through mug shots in the various databases the department had access to. But none of the pictures matched the faces of the men from the hotel—and the coffee shop.

He finally gave up and headed out to find Haywood and get ready for another night on patrol.

"Jake!"

He looked back. Berit was at the other end of the corridor, heading in his direction, so he met her halfway.

"I had an idea about your friends from the hotel," she said, keeping her voice low.

"What?"

"Their car."

"They didn't have a car," he said, reminding her of what he'd found out from the doorman at the Lawrence.

"We don't know that for sure. But I might know a way of finding out."

Looking skeptical, he said, "How?"

"I started thinking about the security footage we were looking at today. Then I remembered—the route they would have taken goes right through a few road

expansion surveys. The company hired to do the assessment uses a combination of automated car counting and video. Cameras have been up for months.”

“Where are they?”

She listed off several streets, then said, “I called a friend of mine who works at the planning department. That’s how I found out where some of the cameras are set up and who’s running them.”

He thought for a moment. “This is great. If they drove by one, we can at least tell what kind of car they were in.”

“That’s what I was thinking.”

“When can we look?”

“My friend’s trying to hook us up. I’ll let you know when I hear back from her.”

“Hey, Snowbird! We taking it half-speed today?”

Jake looked back and saw Haywood standing in the corridor, just outside the locker room.

“I’m coming,” Jake told him. He looked back at Berit. “Thanks.”

“Hope it works.”

“Me, too.”

* * * * *

The first part of patrol was taken up with a traffic stop, a call for a possible domestic disturbance that turned out to be a couple of college drama students practicing lines for a play, and the inevitable stop at Di’s Diner for a little Haywood-Maria bonding time. They spent the rest of the shift dealing with an attempted robbery that left a night clerk at a discount motel with a nice bruise on the side of his face, and two suspects known to the clerk making a run for it with nothing more than what they’d had when they arrived.

Jake took preliminary witness statements from motel guests who’d overheard the confrontation, while Haywood concentrated on the clerk. When the detectives arrived, Jake was relegated to his now familiar role of crowd control expert.

When he finally headed out to his Civic at the end of the night, he found Berit half-asleep in her Charger in the next space over.

She stirred when she saw him, and rolled down her window. “What took you guys so long?”

“Attempted robbery. They needed my expertise on scene.”

“Making sure people stayed on the other side of the tape?” she asked, smirking.

“When you’ve got a talent, you’ve got a talent. Why are you still here?”

She waved him closer.

“My friend called me back,” she whispered. “Got us an appointment tomorrow morning at 9:30.”

“Great. Where?”

“Let’s meet at Di’s at nine.”

“Uniforms?”

She frowned, but said, “Yeah, I guess that would help.” She paused. “Jake.”

“Yeah?”

“It doesn’t matter if we can’t prove anything. I think you need to tell what you know.”

He blew out a breath. “Yeah, I know. Tomorrow before my shift.”

“Good.” She looked relieved, as if she’d been expecting a fight. “I’ll see you in the morning, then.”

“Sleep well.”

As Jake pulled out of the secured parking lot a few minutes later, he had the oddest feeling that he was being watched. He glanced around. Though it was dark, there were plenty of streetlights illuminating the area, and, except for a couple of cars that were passing by right at that moment, he could see no one else.

Fatigue, he decided.

Nothing more than that.

Chapter 13

The company’s name was Raef Planning & Logistics. According to Berit, it was a global company with branches in over forty countries. The local RPL office was located in an area of industrial buildings just south of the airport.

The lobby was spartan and functional—chairs for waiting, and a counter with a receptionist behind it. Jake and Berit waited less than a minute before Keith Curtis, the person they were supposed to meet, came out to greet them. Police uniforms were useful in that way. There were few companies that liked officers hanging around their lobbies for any length of time, afraid of the impression that might give to customers.

“Please, come on back,” Curtis said, after everyone had introduced themselves.

He led them through several hallways, and into a conference room with an oval table surrounded by eight chairs. On a portable stand near one end was a television monitor, and on a shelf below it, a computer. Standing next to the monitor was a man about the same age as Curtis.

“Officer Davies, Officer Oliver, this is Doug Prescott, one of our engineers. He’s going to help you out.”

Prescott shook hands with both Jake and Berit.

“Can I offer either of you something to drink?” Curtis asked.

“I’m fine,” Berit said.

“Me, too,” Jake threw in.

“Then I’ll leave the three of you alone and hopefully you’ll find what you’re looking for.”

Curtis closed the door as he left.

“The information I was given was not very clear,” Prescott said. His tone and attitude reminded Jake of several of the engineers he’d met one summer when he was working as a messenger. None of them ever seemed to have time for social niceties.

“I’m sorry for any confusion,” Jake told him. “We’re hoping to look at some of your footage from three nights ago.”

“I didn’t say I was confused. I just said the information wasn’t clear.”

“Right. I’m sorry. What is it that isn’t clear to you?”

"I have the times and the areas you are interested in, but I was not told which direction," Curtis explained in a tone that said the problem should have been obvious.

"Direction?" Berit asked.

"Which direction the traffic was going?"

Both Berit and Jake nodded in understanding. That was an important piece of info. Once they got it cleared up, Curtis played the video for them.

They found the car on the third road they checked. It was a BMW sedan, and clearly sitting behind the wheel was Mr. Walters, the dark-haired man from the hotel. In the passenger seat beside him was Mr. Redman. And, as an extra special bonus, the license plate was completely visible. Both Jake and Berit copied down the number and a description of the car, then thanked Prescott and Curtis and left.

Back in Berit's Charger, Jake called the substation and had someone run the plate number. When the information came back, his elation quickly disappeared.

"What is it?" Berit asked as soon as he hung up.

"It belongs to a BMW, all right," Jake said. "But yesterday the owner reported that they were missing."

"*They?*"

"The plates, not his car," he clarified.

"You're kidding."

"Wish I was." He paused. "The current owner's actually a used BMW dealership. The car was apparently packed into a back lot, waiting to have its transmission replaced."

She frowned. "Smart taking plates from the same kind of car they were driving."

"Yeah. Even better from a dealership over the weekend," he said. "If they got pulled over, it could easily be explained as having not been recorded yet."

Berit was momentarily lost in thought. "Who do you think these guys are?"

"I don't know. But you're right. I need to pass this on. Now."

She nodded. "I'll come with you."

"No," he said. "I should do this alone."

She locked eyes with him. "Jake. Think about it. They're more likely to listen to two of us than just one."

"But it's all based on a hunch that I can't explain," Jake said.

"A hunch that's looking more and more like it was right," she countered.

"That may be, but I can't be responsible for harming your career. Let me do this on my own. If it goes well, I'll make sure they know you were a big part of it, but I'm not going to let you take any of the blame. Besides..." He paused and gave her a smile. "I don't want you to be mad at me later for making you come in on your day off."

She glared at him. "Quit trying to be funny. It's not one of your stronger suits."

She settled back in her seat, not looking happy, but she made no further protest as she started the engine and pulled into the street.

Chapter 14

Durrie exerted all of his control so as not to turn pale in front of Larson.

Smart taking plates from the same kind of car they were driving.

Holy shit.

Before dawn, he had planted bugs in both Officer Oliver's Civic and Officer Davies's Charger. It was the only way to know exactly what was going on, and he hoped that once he heard their conversation he'd be able to honestly say they were no threat.

The two cops had remained relatively quiet on the drive from the diner to what turned out to be a logistics place of some kind. Neither of them said anything that hinted as to why they were going there. But when they came back out, that's when the bomb dropped.

A black BMW. Plates stolen from a different car. "Who do you think these guys are?" the woman had asked.

Who the hell are you guys? Durrie thought.

"Well, I guess we know where things stand now, huh?" Larson said.

Durrie wished he'd been listening to the conversation alone, but because of Peter's mandate, the freelance assassin had to come along. To leave him behind would have brought an angry phone call, and Durrie's immediate removal from the mop-up job.

"I'm not sure we're ready to call this one yet," he said.

"What are you talking about?" Larson asked. "Did you not just hear that? They know about the car, which means they probably know about us. The guy's going to report it, for God's sake."

"I can take care of that. No one will listen to him."

Larson stared at Durrie as if the cleaner had lost his mind. "Do you not understand what's going on here? We have a breach that needs to be closed. No wonder Peter sent me back."

Durrie turned on him, his face suddenly full of rage. "We have a breach because you got sloppy! If you did your job the way you were supposed to—"

"Oh, don't even go—"

"Shut the fuck up! I've got seniority here. And, no matter what, I'm still in charge. If you have a problem with that, *you* can call Peter. In the meantime, we'll take care of things as I see fit."

Neither of them said anything for nearly a minute. Just down the street, the Charger pulled away from the curb. Because he no longer needed to keep them in sight due to the location transponders in the rear fenders of both the Charger and the Civic, Durrie gave it a bit of a lead, then pulled into traffic.

"Are these people *friends* of yours or something?" Larson asked. "I mean, what's the deal?"

"There's no deal."

"Then why are you protecting them?"

"I'm not," Durrie said. "I'm just trying to make sure we know everything first."

That sounded good, but Durrie knew it wasn't really the truth. Larson was right. He was protecting the cops. More specifically, he was protecting Oliver. The kid had achieved a whole hell of a lot with very little, and Durrie wanted to know how.

That would be pretty hard to find out if Larson put a gun to the kid's head and pulled the trigger.

They followed the two rookie cops all the way back to the diner. There, Officer Oliver got out and climbed into his own car.

"Maybe we should split up," Larson suggested. "You can take the girl. I'll take the guy."

As much as he didn't like it, Durrie knew it was a good idea. "You take the girl," he said, then tossed the tracking receiver tuned to the beacon in the woman's car onto Larson's lap.

Larson shrugged. "Doesn't matter to me."

When the assassin didn't move, Durrie said, "I'm not giving you this car. Get out and find your own."

A quick derisive laugh escaped Larson's lips. "That attitude of yours is going to come back and bite you someday."

"Maybe. But you'll never know. Your ego will get you killed before then."

All humor left Larson's face. Durrie could tell the guy was contemplating offing him right there. He almost wished Larson would try. Durrie was a lot faster, and stronger than most people gave him credit for. Any gun aimed at him would soon be pointed back at its owner.

But Larson finally opened his door and climbed out.

"You're only observing," Durrie called out. "Anything else, you consult with me first."

Larson looked back, his face blank, then shut the door and walked away.

Chapter 15

Jake gave himself a couple of hours to think everything through again in case he'd missed something, but he had no new revelations. Knowing he could put it off no longer, he took a shower, got into a fresh uniform, then headed to work.

The detectives handling the Goodman Ranch Road murder were partners named Young and Hubbard. Jake found them in the detectives' room they were using, in lieu of their downtown office, because of its proximity to the murder scene.

"We're a little busy right now. What the hell did you say your name was?" Hubbard asked.

"Oliver."

"Right. Sorry, Oliver. You'll have to catch us later."

Both men were pulling their jackets off the backs of their seats, apparently getting ready to leave.

"I... ah... I might have a lead for you," Jake said.

That stopped them.

"A lead for what?" Young asked.

"The Goodman Ranch Road murder."

Jake's phone vibrated in his pocket. It was the second call he'd received in the last few minutes. The first had come in as he was walking into the room where the detectives were, and he'd ignored it as he tried to steel himself for the task ahead.

Whoever was trying to reach him was being persistent, but they were going to have to wait until he was done.

"What could you possibly know about that?" Hubbard asked, surprised.

Jake froze for a moment, wishing suddenly he hadn't come in here at all. In his pocket, his phone stopped vibrating.

"Are you going to tell us? Or are we supposed to guess?" Young asked.

"I, ah, found something...then did a little...checking, and, and, I, uh, think I might know who's responsible."

Hubbard's eyes narrowed. "You did a little...*checking*?"

"Yes, sir."

The two detectives exchanged a look, then Young said, "Maybe you should have a seat."

* * * * *

Berit grunted in frustration as Jake once more didn't answer his phone. Unlike her previous attempt, she left a message this time.

"You're not going to believe this. I found the BMW. At least I think I did. It got towed into an impound yard yesterday. Same description, same license plate number." She glanced at her watch. The yard would be closing in an hour and a half, and it would take her at least twenty minutes to get there. "Look, I'm going to go check it out and see if it's the same one. I'll call you once I'm there."

She considered putting her uniform on again, but decided against it. There was good chance she'd run into a cop or two at the impound yard. If one was an officer from her station, they might know she wasn't on duty. If she was caught wearing a uniform on her day off, especially since she was a rookie, she'd be lucky to still be on the force come tomorrow.

The only thing she took with her was her badge.

* * * * *

Larson knew from the conversation he and Durrie had overheard that today was the woman's day off. Once he'd established that she was inside her townhouse, he'd settled into the Jeep Cherokee he'd liberated from a box-store parking lot, and turned the air conditioner to full blast.

Why anyone chose to live in this oven, he'd never know. As far as he was concerned, it had already passed unbearable at least ten degrees earlier. And it was only May, for God's sake. *May!* Give him a nice seacoast town with a constant breeze and steady seventy-degree temperature and he'd be in heaven.

When he left here two days earlier, he'd been hoping he wouldn't have to come back for a long time, if at all. But then that bastard from the Office had called him, and insisted he get back here to "help clean up the mess" that the guy implied *he* had created. Last he checked, his job wasn't cleanup. His job was killing. And he'd done that—*twice*, as a matter of fact. As far as he was concerned, any problems now rested squarely on the shoulders of that dipshit Durrie.

But as annoyed as he was, he was smart enough to realize that he should do what Peter asked. The guy was a revenue stream, and revenue streams were everything. So if coming back and taking care of the "mess" meant Peter would look on him more favorably, then so be it.

Durrie was a separate problem. As much as Larson hated the fact, the son of a bitch was in charge. Peter had told him as much when they'd talked on the phone. But screw Durrie. If the time came and Larson needed to show a little initiative of his own, he'd do it.

He looked back at the monotonous row of Spanish-style townhouses. The woman apparently wasn't going anywhere today. Smart, in this heat. But it made Larson all the more antsy.

Then, thirty minutes later, the Dodge Charger appeared at the carport exit. For the first time in hours, Larson smiled.

* * * * *

By the time Jake finished explaining everything, three other detectives had joined Young and Hubbard. On the desk was the printout of Mr. Redman and Mr. Walters from the entrance of the Lawrence Hotel, the matchbook in a plastic baggie, printouts of the pictures Jake had taken of the marks in the sand around the barn, and a piece of paper with the BMW's license plate number written on it. Jake had not shown the picture of the third man from the hotel, since the only evidence that he might have been involved was the subtle reaction of Mr. Redman in the elevator when the man had entered the car.

Hubbard picked up the plastic bag and studied the matchbook inside. "So you found this at the crime scene."

"Yes, sir."

"You didn't tell any of the investigators who were there?"

"I wasn't sure if it was even important," Jake said. "I was told the area had already been checked."

A detective named Kearns said, "Well, don't you think that—"

Hubbard held up a hand, cutting the man off. "Officer Oliver, do you mind waiting here for a minute? I need to consult with my partner."

"Of course. No problem."

Hubbard smiled, then gathered up the items Jake had displayed, and went out into the hallway with Detective Young. The other detectives hung there for a moment, then walked off. Kearns was last to leave. There was pity on his face as he finally went to his desk and picked up his phone.

It's done. I did the right thing, Jake thought.

But the words didn't give him as much comfort as he wished.

* * * * *

The impound yard was on the outskirts of town, a large fenced-off lot bordered on one side by desert and the other side by a concrete manufacturing facility. There were hundreds of cars on the lot, separated in an order that probably made sense to someone.

Berit parked in the visitor area out front, and headed into the office. There were five people queued up in the small, dirty lobby, and a sixth at the counter being helped by a bored-looking white guy who had to be pushing eighty.

She bypassed the line, and walked up to the counter.

"Hey!" a waiting guy called out. "Are you blind? Why do you think we're standing here?"

She didn't even bother replying. She merely pulled out her badge and flashed it at him, knowing that would shut him up.

"Is Stanley here?" she asked the old guy.

"What?" He looked at her, annoyed.

She showed him her badge. "Stanley. Is he here?"

He looked into the back office area, and called out, "Stanley. There's a cop here to see you."

A few moments later, a much younger man came out of the back. Younger, yes, but with the same tired look on his face that told Berit he had to be related to the old man.

"Can I help you?" Stanley said.

She showed him her badge and said, "I'm Berit Davies, with Phoenix PD. We talked earlier?"

"Right. What can I do for you, Detective?"

She cringed a little on the inside as he made an assumption of her position, but said nothing to correct him. "We talked about a car that had been brought in here yesterday. I'd like to take a look at it if I could."

"Sure thing. This way."

He put a hand under the counter and lifted a section like a drawbridge so she could get through, then led her out a back door into the lot. As they stepped outside, the machinery at the concrete plant whined and churned in a constant rhythm, creating a rumbling soundtrack that paid no attention to property lines.

The first row of cars was actually a double stack of vehicles, the top cars raised into the air by metal car holders to create space for another to be parked underneath. As far as Berit could tell, all these slots were filled.

"The newer cars are over this way," Stanley said, raising his voice slightly to be heard over the machinery noise. He took her around the stackers to the third row back. No stackers here, just two parallel rows of cars parked side to side and trunk to trunk. "That was a Mercedes, right?"

"BMW," she told him.

"Oh, right. Yeah, I remember now. It's right down here."

They walked past more than a dozen cars—sedans, station wagons, trucks, SUVs, Fords, Toyotas, Hyundais, Volkswagens. Whatever the make or model, the yard seemed to have one.

She saw the BMW before they reached it. Its black coat showed a layer of dust and grime that had accumulated since the night the car's image had been captured by the traffic camera.

"This is it, right?" Stanley asked.

She checked the license plate number. "Yeah. This is it."

"I gotta head back inside. Take as long as you need." He started to turn away, then stopped. "Doors are unlocked. Didn't have a key."

"Okay. Thank you."

She waited for him to move away, then she walked around the car. As she did, she removed a pair of latex gloves from her pocket and pulled them on. If Jake was right, this car would soon be part of a crime investigation, and the last thing she wanted was for her own fingerprints to cover up any evidence.

She was careful, though, not to touch anything on this first pass, and used only her eyes to do the examination. She'd hoped that she might spot some obvious fingerprints brought to life by the dust, but no such luck. When she reached the point where she'd started, she was satisfied that there was nothing else she could learn without getting more physically involved, so she opened the driver's door, and looked inside.

No visible hairs or marks. A little dirt on the floor mats, but in the desert that was to be expected. She leaned in and looked under the seat. Nothing. Not even a scrap of paper or a candy wrapper.

The center console had two empty cup holders and a fold-down armrest that appeared to have a storage compartment under the padded leather. She wanted to open it, but she knew that would probably be pushing things too far. Leave that to the detectives if the car did indeed turn out to be evidence.

She stood back up and opened the rear door. The backseat and footwells were empty. Not even any dirt on the floor. She moved around to the other side and opened the front passenger door. This time she went against her better instincts and popped open the glove compartment. Absolutely nothing inside. She was pretty sure the car had been stolen, but it was hard to believe that the owner hadn't at least kept a manual or his registration in the box. The men who had stolen it must have emptied it out, then wiped it down.

She closed the box, did a fruitless search for any hair or visible fingerprints on the seat and dash, then shut the door. The only thing left to check was the trunk.

She went around back, unlatched the hood, and lifted it.

* * * * *

Larson assumed the woman was probably going to visit a friend as she headed toward the edge of town. At least that's what he thought until she pulled into the parking lot of the auto storage facility.

He coasted to a stop at the side of the road, and watched the woman walk from her car into the main building.

Wait, or what?

He frowned. She could be there for any number of reasons. She was a cop after all, right? Cops had cases they had to deal with. Cases with cars: accidents, drunk drivers, illegal parking, and... stolen vehicles.

Or what, he decided. He pulled into the lot, parked his stolen car three slots from the Charger, and climbed out.

* * * * *

The BMW's trunk was lined with gray carpet. There were a couple of bungee cords lying to the side, and a blue zip-up bag with a red cross on it pushed to the back. Ostensibly, it was a first-aid kit, but the bag could be acting as a diversion for what was really inside. Her desire to unzip it was nearly overwhelming, but, again, she knew it would be a mistake.

What she did do was check under the carpet but the only visible thing she found was the spare tire. There could have been something underneath it, but she wasn't going to move the tire to check, so she dropped the carpet back down.

There was really nothing else to speak of. A little wear, maybe, and a couple of marks that looked like they'd been there for a long time, but nothing that would tie to the crime on Goodman Ranch Road.

She knew she should be happy she'd found the car—that was huge, actually—but she couldn't help feeling a bit disappointed. She'd been hoping for something concrete that would prove Jake was right.

She pulled out her phone, suddenly wondering if maybe the reason she hadn't heard back from him was because she didn't have a signal out here. But though the signal wasn't as strong as it could be, there was enough to receive a call.

He must be meeting with the detectives, she guessed. If so, she hoped it was going well.

She slipped the phone into her pocket, then reached up to close the trunk.

* * * * *

The security measure used by the impound lot was definitely enough to keep most people out, but most people weren't Larson. He spent ninety seconds assessing the situation, and thirty-five getting from one side of the fence to the other.

Once on the inside, he crouched down behind a blue Dodge Caravan and paused for a full minute, waiting for someone to rush out of the building in response to some unseen motion sensor he might have tripped. No one came.

Carefully, he stepped out from his position and scanned the yard. He didn't see anyone around, but a row of double-stacked cars hid much of the lot from him, so someone could have easily been beyond it.

He headed down the aisle on the far right. It was the farthest away from the main building he could get, lowering the odds that he might be seen.

When he reached the first perpendicular aisle, he paused. He could now see beyond the row of double-stacked cars. Even better, they were now shielding his presence from anyone who might look out from the building.

He scanned the rest of the lot. There were two men way down at the other end. They were talking, their backs partially to him, so he stepped quickly across the intersection and continued to the next aisle.

There was no activity on this one at all, just rows of jailed cars waiting for their owners to bail them out. He moved on.

The third aisle appeared equally empty, but as he started to head for aisle four, he noticed movement near the midpoint. It wasn't exactly in the aisle, though. It was within the row of cars. Whatever or whoever it was had moved out of sight, so he decided to get closer.

To hide his movements, he walked to the fourth row, also empty, and turned onto it. He was seventy-five feet away when a person stood up at the spot where he'd seen the earlier movement, and walked around to the back of a vehicle.

It was the woman. And she wasn't looking at just any car. She was looking at the black four-door BMW he and Timmons had used on the job, then abandoned in a downtown lot.

He could feel his senses heighten as he automatically began to switch out of observation mode.

His assignment had just changed.

Chapter 16

Detectives Hubbard and Young left Jake sitting alone for over five minutes. The urge to look back at the hallway door was nearly overwhelming, but Jake maintained his control, and sat stoically in the chair, the cutting image of the obedient cop.

As the second hand on the wall clock approached the end of the sixth minute, he remembered the calls he'd received. He pulled out his phone. Both had been from Berit. She'd also left a message. He selected it, and hit the playback button.

"You're not going to believe this," Berit's voice said. "I found the BMW. At least I think I did. It got—"

"Officer Oliver?" Sergeant Stroop, his immediate supervisor, was standing in the doorway to the hall.

Jake jerked the phone away from his ear. "Yes, ma'am?"

"Come with me." She turned and disappeared to the left.

Jake stowed his phone and hustled out to the corridor. Berit's message would have to wait.

"Hurry it up," the sergeant called out. She was standing in front of a meeting room door.

He double-timed it down the hall, slowing just before he reached her. "What's going on, ma'am?"

She nodded her head quickly to the right. "Inside."

Jake went in, and the sergeant followed right behind him.

When he saw who was there, he felt the blood drain from his face.

Hubbard and Young were present, of course, as was their immediate boss, Sergeant Sykes. It was the man sitting in the middle on the other side of the table whom Jake had not expected to see at all.

"Officer Oliver, please have a seat," Commander Ashworth, head of the substation, said.

* * * * *

Berit lowered the trunk and latched it back in place.

She may not have found anything to seal the case, but at least she'd found the car. That was a pretty damn good bit of detective work, she had to admit.

She was just about to step around the vehicle and return to the office when something scraped the ground behind her.

Right behind her.

Spinning around, she found a man standing just a few feet away with a smirk on his face. She stepped back, not scared, but definitely surprised.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

He moved back into her personal space. "I was going to ask you the same question."

Instead of retreating again, she put a hand out, an inch from his chest. "Excuse me. Do you mind?"

“Not at all.”

He leaned forward until his shirt brushed the tips of her fingers. She jerked her hand away.

“Look, I’m a police officer. So back off right now.”

“Yeah,” he said. “I know. I’ve always respected cops. That is, as long as they don’t poke into things they shouldn’t.”

He leaned to the side, placing a hand on the trunk of the BMW.

“Don’t do that,” she said.

“Why? Is this yours?” he asked.

“It’s part of an investigation. You could be damaging evidence.”

He snickered, then lifted his hand. “Sorry.”

“What do you want? Do you work here or something?”

“Me?” he asked as he reached up and ran his fingers through his dark hair. “Nah.”

That’s when it clicked. The dark-haired man from the RPL footage. Mr. Walters.

She took a step back, suddenly wishing she was armed with more than just her badge.

“Put your hands on the car, and spread your legs!” she shouted.

For a second, he froze, then he smiled and said, “I thought you told me you didn’t want me touching it.”

“Put your hands on the car. Now!”

“No problem, Officer Davies,” he said, placing his palms on the top of the trunk.

He knows my name! How does he know my name?

“Spread your legs,” she ordered.

“I could say the same to you, but I don’t want you thinking I’m coming on to you.”

“Shut up,” she said, keeping her voice as calm as possible.

“Because I’m not. You’re not my type.”

“I said, shut up.”

“I prefer my women less... curious.”

She grabbed her phone out of her pocket.

“That’s not a good idea,” the man said.

“Don’t move!”

Without taking her eyes off him, she started to dial 911.

“I did warn you,” the man said.

Before the last word was completely out of his mouth, his leg flew up, his shoe smacking into her hand, knocking the phone to the car. She heard it hit then skitter across the ground, but she didn’t take the time to look where it ended up.

Instead, she ran.

* * * * *

Spread out on the meeting room table were the items Jake had shown the two detectives.

“I understand you undertook a little investigation on your own,” Commander Ashworth said.

“I... uh... was just playing a hunch. That’s all,” Jake said.

The commander's face remained impassive. "You removed evidence from the crime scene."

This, Jake knew, was his biggest mistake. He should have turned over the matchbook right away. He could have still looked into things without it. "I didn't mean to, sir. I just didn't think that it was—"

"Let me stop you right there," the commander said. "You are aware that unauthorized removal of evidence from a crime scene is illegal?"

"Uh... well, yes, sir. But I was under the impression that the area had already been—"

"Did you remove the matchbook from the crime scene?"

Jake took a breath. "Yes, sir."

"So now I'm sitting here with one of my officers who's broken the law," Commander Ashworth said.

"A *rookie* officer," Young said.

Ashworth said nothing to correct the detective. His eyes were locked on Jake. "Well?"

"Sir?" Jake said, not sure what Ashworth was asking.

The first sign of displeasure crossed Ashworth's face. "What made you think that you were even qualified to investigate anything?"

"I, um... it's just... uh..."

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry, sir. Nothing made me think that."

"I don't think it was nothing, Oliver," the commander said. "I think it was arrogance and stupidity, wouldn't you agree?"

No, he wouldn't agree. It hadn't been an ego trip that had driven him. It had been curiosity. Besides, the point everyone seemed to be missing was that he'd actually found something.

"Sir, did they tell you what I learned?"

The commander picked up the photo of the two men. "You mean this? Detective Hubbard and Detective Young couldn't explain for me how you were able to link these two men to a *book of matches*."

"Well, sir..." What was he going to say? That he'd seen one of them pick up a book as they left the hotel? They could probably look at the footage and find a dozen other guests who had done the same thing. Tell them it was just a feeling? Jake was screwed. "Sir, we placed them at a coffee shop near Goodman Ranch Road the night of the murder."

"We?" the commander asked.

It took every ounce of Jake's will not to show that he'd made a mistake. "The force, sir. I was talking about us as a whole."

"There was no *we*, Oliver. There was only you."

"I'm sorry, sir. You're right. *I* placed them at the coffee shop near Goodman Ranch Road."

The commander leaned back, his lips pressed tightly together. After a moment, he started picking up each piece of the evidence Jake had given the detectives. "You know what I see here? Crap. It's all crap."

He turned to the side and dumped everything into a trashcan next to the wall.

“Officer Oliver, you are suspended for the remainder of the month. If this ever happens again, you’ll be lucky if I even let you work parking enforcement. Now get out.”

* * * * *

It was fun to toy with her. In most of his assignments, Larson didn’t have that option. His employers liked to play things by the book. Clean, quick and quiet—that’s what they wanted. He could do that, of course. It wasn’t as enjoyable, but he did get a certain sense of satisfaction out of it. Every once in a while, though, he needed a little more. So he was delighted by the unexpected opportunity that had just presented itself.

Calling Durrie had never even crossed his mind. For one thing, the situation had changed too rapidly for Larson to waste time on the phone, but most importantly, it would have denied him this gift.

She hadn’t heard him until the last moment, then he’d heightened her obvious unease from finding him there by crowding her space. That was energizing.

But then the bitch had nearly derailed his agenda.

She *knew* who he was. He saw it in her eyes a second before she ordered him to put his hands on the car. *She knew who he was!*

Durrie had been wrong. The two cops had somehow fingered him on the security footage. That just solidified the fact that the cleaner was an idiot, and that Larson was doing the right thing.

He’d been able to get the phone out of her hand, but she was on the run now. That was fine as long as she didn’t reach anyone.

In fact, it was more than fine. It was fantastic.

* * * * *

Berit’s choices had been to either run toward the main building or away from it. Part of her had screamed the latter wasn’t a choice at all. She should run *toward* the building. Help was there. Witnesses. Escape. But the other part knew she’d left the passenger door to the BMW open, and it would have taken seconds she didn’t have to move it out of her way. So she had gone the other way, toward the back of the lot, and away from any potential help.

The sketchy plan she had in her mind was to get to the next aisle, then race down one of the crossing aisles back to the building. But the man was quicker than she expected, and was only a few feet behind her. On an open straightaway, he’d have the clear advantage.

Yelling for help wasn’t an option, either. She’d never be heard over the sounds of the concrete plant. So she ran across to the cars parked in the next row, but instead of going straight through to the aisle beyond it, she twisted to the left, and turned down the narrow space where the two rows of cars were backed up to each other.

She heard the man smack into one of the cars as he followed her, his footsteps falling a bit further back. Ahead, two cars were backed so close together that their bumpers were touching. Not missing a stride, Berit jumped as she reached them, placing her hands on one of the trunks and using it as a pommel horse. This gained her another ten feet. A few more like that and she thought she could make her move back to the main building.

Opportunity came when the man let out a grunt as he clipped a spare tire mounted on the back of a Jeep and stumbled. She allowed herself a quick glance back, and realized this might be the best chance she had.

She turned down the next gap between cars, and knew in her gut she was going to make it. Her gut, though, hadn't accounted for the bullet that slammed into her shoulder. She hadn't even heard the shot, just a weird spit a half second before she was hit.

The bullet felt like someone had hit her with a boulder. Her body involuntarily pivoted to the right, whacking her against the car beside her. She tried to push herself up, but only managed to roll over then slide to the ground.

She wanted more than anything to just sit there, but she knew she had to keep moving, so she fell all the way onto her back and wiggled under the car. The pain in her shoulder was unreal, but it was either put up with it or feel nothing ever again. There was no question in her mind about that. Jamming her mouth closed as tightly as she could so no moans could escape, she continued toward the other side. She knew it would only be a temporary measure, but she hoped something—anything—would break in her favor.

She could hear him. He was three cars away, then two.

She stopped moving, and kept her breathing as quiet as possible. She heard him reach the spot where she had fallen when she was shot.

She wasn't scared. She had never been scared. Startled, yes, and unnerved for a moment or two, but not scared. The overwhelming emotion she felt was anger—at the man for what he was trying to do to her, at herself for not coming more prepared.

After several frozen moments, the man moved again, coming down the gap. When he was just about parallel with her head, he stopped, pivoted slowly back around, and headed out. He then walked down the gap on the other side of the car before moving on.

She couldn't believe it. She'd been given a break. For a few seconds, even the pain from her wound wasn't enough to cut through her sense of relief.

She carefully turned her head to the left, glancing past the gap she'd fallen in and under the other cars. The man's feet were nowhere to be seen. She turned her head the other way, and the smile that had unconsciously grown on her face vanished.

"I've got to hand it to you. You don't give up easily." The man was crouched in the gap, his head lowered so he could see her. "I'd really been hoping we could have played a bit more, but as disappointed as it makes me feel, it's probably for the best."

She once more considered yelling, but if she couldn't have been heard above the machinery when she'd been running, there was no way in hell she would be heard from underneath a car.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"The last person you're ever going to see." His hand extended under the car. In it was the gun. It had an extra long barrel. *A sound suppressor*, she realized. That explained why she hadn't heard the shot.

She started to squirm toward the other side.

"You'll never make it," he said. "It might take me a couple shots to get it right, though, so you'll be in a lot of pain."

She moved another foot, then stopped. He was right. Instead of looking at him, she closed her eyes. No way was she going to give him that satisfaction. Pushing everything else out of her mind, she thought about her parents.

How supportive they'd been no matter what she wanted to do. Her dad, whose first name graced the middle of hers. Her mom, whose kindness Berit wished she'd inherited more of. How sad she had been when they died.

But now she was no longer sad. In a matter of moments she would be with—

* * * * *

Durrie's phone rang. Larson's number. "What?" he said.

"I need you to do a little bit of that work you're so good at," Larson told him.

"What are you talking about?"

"What do you think I'm talking about?"

Durrie was silent for a moment as the realization of what Larson said hit him. "You bastard! What the hell were you thinking?"

"Are you done?" Larson asked calmly.

Again Durrie paused. "Where is she?"

Chapter 17

"What?" Peter's tone matched exactly how Durrie was feeling. "Who the hell authorized that?"

"Self-authorization," Durrie said into his phone. He was in his car, parked in a supermarket lot, away from the other vehicles.

"Did you tell him he could do that?"

"Negative. He operated *outside* my specific instructions. He was told to only follow and observe. If anything came up, he was supposed to call in."

"Well, he didn't, did he? It's still your responsibility."

Durrie checked his rising anger. "*I* warned you not to send him back here. You can't saddle me with this."

"Go to hell, Durrie! You're the on-scene agent in charge."

Durrie said nothing. He *was* the on-scene in charge, but that didn't mitigate Peter's role in Larson's actions.

On the other end of the line, Peter took a deep breath, then blew it out through his teeth. "Where is he?"

"I sent him to go get cleaned up and cooled off."

"He was agitated?" Peter asked, surprised. Emotion had little place in the world they played in.

"He was..." Durrie paused, thinking of the right phrase. "Pleased with himself."

"Dammit, what a mess. Give me a moment."

There was a click as Durrie was put on hold.

Peter's response about Larson was telling. Usually one of the most efficient men in the business, the head of the Office had apparently been unaware of Larson's penchant for enjoying his job a little too much.

That's what you got when you never really met the people you hired and had to rely on reports from trusted operatives—operatives who, like it or not, formed bonds with the people working under them. Some people, like Durrie, wouldn't let that interfere with the job, and would report everything pertinent, good or bad. Others glossed over things they didn't consider a problem. The people who usually employed Larson as their trigger man fell into the latter category, Timmons among them.

A little sadistic behavior here and there—what harm did that do?

One unnecessarily dead cop, that's what.

Like so many other things in this world, Durrie had seen it coming. Any of the organizations he worked for would do well to hire him to lead them. Of course, he'd never take one of those jobs. He was more than content with his little slice of the pie, and happy to let lesser men handle the big picture. He was satisfied with knowing he was always right.

Peter came back on the line, his tone more controlled. "We need this situation contained. A dead cop has a way of spiraling out of control. I'm counting on you to take care of it."

"It's not going to be a problem," Durrie said, meaning it. "I'll set things up so that, worst case, we can tie the woman into what's going on with Officer Oliver."

He could sense Peter hesitate, and knew the head of the Office was thinking this was a tricky strategy that could easily flare up into a larger issue if not handled properly. Durrie, however, had no doubts. He was the one dealing with it, so it *would* be handled properly.

"It's not going to be a problem," he repeated.

"The connection gets made only if there's no other choice."

"Of course."

"All right. Do it."

It was an unnecessary order. Durrie was already planning to do it.

"About Oliver," Durrie said. "What's the status?"

Earlier, Durrie had received a call from Detective Kearns, telling him that Oliver had been called in to talk to the commander. Durrie had relayed this information to Peter, but had been unable to follow up on it because the situation with Larson and the woman had blown up not long after.

"Oliver's been suspended," Peter said.

"The information he presented?"

"Ignored."

Good. That hole was plugged. Still...

"Were you able to find out what he'd learned?" Durrie asked.

"I was." A hint of anger had returned to Peter's voice. "It seems, in addition to the matchbook, Officer Oliver had a printout from a security camera that showed both Timmons and Larson together."

Durrie was dumbstruck. How had a rookie cop picked out two seasoned professionals from what must have been hundreds of people in the footage, and connected them to the termination at the barn? *How? How? How?*

"That's not all," Peter said. "Oliver traced the two men to a coffee shop near the operation site."

Durrie knew in his bones that's what the cop and his friend had been doing at the coffee shop, but he'd been unable to accept the reality of it until now.

"One more thing," Peter said.

More? How could there be more? This was already too much.

"He had other photos from the operation site. Marks in the sand where someone had been hiding behind an empty tank of some kind..."

The hairs on Durrie's arm began to stand on end. That's where he had been.

"...and one of a mark closer to the barn that looked like it had been made by a wire lying on the ground." Peter paused. "Are you there?"

Durrie was, but he had no idea what to say. This kid had almost single-handedly exposed the entire operation.

"I'll take care of the girl," he finally said. "What do you want done with Oliver?"

"One dead cop we can work with. Two becomes an epidemic. So we'll take his future day by day. Tomorrow is going to be even worse for him than this afternoon was. It's possible you may not have to do anything. Then again..."

"I'll keep an eye on him," Durrie said.

"I know you will."

Before Peter could hang up, Durrie asked, "And Larson?"

"He stays with you."

"Come on, Peter. He's poison."

"He stays with you. Use him, don't use him, I don't care. But know where he is at all times."

The implication was clear. No matter what happened, there was a good chance this was going to be Larson's last job.

The real question was, would it be Durrie's, too?

* * * * *

Jake barely remembered driving to his apartment. He barely remembered opening the door, or dropping down on the couch. The sun going down—he had no memory of it at all.

Suspended.

That was not the notation he'd been hoping to add to his file. He'd be lucky if he ever got out of a patrol car now. He'd been a fool from the beginning. He should have known they wouldn't listen to him, a rookie cop sticking his nose where it didn't belong.

Of course, the brass would have been hard-pressed to believe him even if he'd been on the force for ten years. It was the men at the hotel. No matter how he worked it, there was no way to explain why he'd picked them out of everyone else, other than to say, "I just knew."

Since he'd left Minnesota, Jake had become fascinated by the puzzles created by a crime. Getting the chance to solve them, like he had tried to do with the Goodman Ranch Road murder, was what had drawn him to law enforcement. If that wasn't in his future, then he needed to look elsewhere. He'd have to see how things went, and if it looked like his career had already topped out here, he'd find a police force somewhere else that would give him a fresh start.

The thing he was having the biggest difficulty with was that he knew he was right. Forget how he came to finger the men at the hotel. They *had* been involved somehow. Yes, he was the one who found them, but who cared? No one else would have even looked in that direction. But because it was Jake and not Detective Hubbard or Young, the men were going to get away.

Perhaps another piece of evidence would have helped sway his superiors. Perhaps if he could have shown them—

He sat up.

Berit.

His apartment had turned dark while he'd been sitting there, so he fumbled around on his coffee table, searching for his phone until he found it.

There were no new calls, just the two from Berit and her message. He played it again, listening to the whole message this time.

"You're not going to believe this. I found the BMW. At least I think I did. It got towed into an impound yard yesterday. Same description, same license plate number. Look, I'm going to go check and see if it's the same one. I'll call you once I'm there."

Jake looked at his phone log again. That was hours ago. Why hadn't she called back?

He accessed her number and called her.

Four rings. Five, then, "Leave a number after the beep, and I'll call you back."

"It's Jake. What happened? Did you see the car? Call me. I'm... I'm at home. Long story, but, well, just call me."

He hung up.

Today was her day off, so, with his sudden suspension, it was possible she'd been called in to take his shift. It would certainly explain why she hadn't answered her phone.

He dialed the substation operator, but cut off the call before the connection was made. The operator would see his number and maybe even recognize his voice. Could be it wouldn't matter, but then again someone would wonder why the suspended Officer Oliver was calling Officer Davies.

"Dammit," he said. He would have to wait for her to call him back.

His patience lasted nine minutes.

With a frustrated grunt, he retrieved his phone and keys, then headed out to his car. He could at least make sure she wasn't home.

Chapter 18

The impound yard closed at 5 p.m., with the last of the daytime employees not leaving until 6. In the following three hours, Durrie counted two security guards. They seemed to be taking turns walking the yard while the other stayed in the main office.

The camera situation was minimal, primarily focused on and around the main building, with one camera on each of the gates that allowed cars in and out. Through his binoculars, Durrie was able to determine the brand of the cameras,

and knew that he had a jammer in his kit that would effectively disable the whole lot of them.

The only frustrating thing was, no matter how many variations he ran through for how the rest of the operation would go, he couldn't come up with one that avoided needing Larson's help. With reluctance, he'd told the gunman to meet him at the observation point at 9:15 p.m.

Larson didn't arrive until nearly 9:30.

Asshole.

"What's the plan?" Larson asked as he climbed into the passenger seat.

"You do exactly what I tell you and nothing more."

Larson smirked, but didn't respond.

Durrie swept the binoculars across the impound yard once more, making sure there wasn't anything he missed.

"The body?" he asked without setting the glasses down.

"Straight back from the building. Fifth row. An old, blue Mazda sedan."

The angle from where they were parked was one that gave Durrie a view of much of the lot, so he was able to pick out the car. "Model?" he asked anyway.

"Hell, I don't know. I told you it's a Mazda."

Durrie's already-low opinion of the man sunk further. The cleaner was a firm believer that knowledge could be the difference between living and dying, a philosophy Larson didn't seem to share. In Durrie's mind, even a little thing like knowing the model of a car could be what stood between an agent and a bullet in the head.

He continued his survey, but all was as it had been. He turned his attention to the parking lot in front of the building. There were three cars there—two by the office and one parked closer to the road.

"The car by itself in the visitor's lot," he said. "That's yours?"

"Yeah."

Larson had at least been smart enough to take the woman's car when he left earlier, so it wouldn't be found. Durrie momentarily considered removing the extra car when they finished, but decided it was more effort than it was worth. It was stolen already. Might as well leave it where it would end up anyway. If Larson hadn't been smart enough to avoid leaving any traces of his presence in it, too bad.

He set the glasses down, then laid out the parts of the plan Larson needed to know.

"Easy," Larson said when he was through.

"No improvising."

"Don't worry about me."

Durrie said nothing. Worry was not something he'd ever feel for Larson. Concern about what Larson might do was the issue at the moment, because for the next ten minutes, their lives would be in each other's hands. That didn't sit well with Durrie.

Without any preamble, he started the engine and drove to the impound yard. Instead of pulling into the visitor's lot, he parked at the curb along the street, parallel to the building's entrance.

Durrie pointed out an imaginary path across the parking lot to the fence. "Just like that," he said. "No deviations."

"You're sure?"

Durrie stared at him for a moment. "Yes."

If Larson did as told, Durrie was confident the assassin wouldn't be picked up on any of the cameras. This wasn't just a guess. It was based on camera angles and Durrie's knowledge of the equipment.

"All right. I'll do it," Larson said, as if it had actually been his choice.

Ignoring the comment, Durrie retrieved one of his kit bags from the back seat. From inside he pulled out two sets of comm gear, giving one to Larson, and donning the other himself.

"As soon as you're in position, let me know," he instructed. "I'll tell you when you're clear to move again. Time to go."

Without a word, the smug bastard opened the door and got out. Durrie watched for a few seconds to make sure Larson was sticking to the path, then he pulled the jammer out of the bag. He took a moment to adjust the input settings, then hopped into the passenger seat and opened the window. Carefully, he stuck the magnetic base of the transmitter to the outside of the door so that it was facing the impound yard. Then he waited.

Thirty seconds later, Larson's voice whispered in his ear, "In position."

"Stand by."

Durrie checked the settings on the control box in his lap once more, then flipped the "activate" switch. He could feel the box vibrate, then the digital indicator bar started rising. When it hit sixty percent, he knew the cameras would already be experiencing issues. At seventy percent, they were most likely disabled. But he waited two more seconds until the bars reached eighty-five percent, then said, "Now. And *no* kills."

"You're no fun, you know that?"

Durrie set the control box in the footwell, then scrambled back into the driver's seat. After grabbing his kit, he climbed out, then jogged across the parking lot, not worried about being seen.

By the time Durrie joined Larson inside the secured lot, the assassin had already subdued one of the guards. Durrie gave the unconscious man a shot of BetaSomnol to make sure he stayed under for several hours.

"Any others?" Durrie asked.

"Still inside."

"Wait here."

"You don't want me to—"

"No. I don't."

Durrie found the other guard on a couch inside, fast asleep. Once he determined there was no third member of the security team, he gave the sleeping man the same treatment his partner received, then went back outside.

It would have been nice if Larson had put Davies's body in the trunk of the BMW instead of the Mazda, but his reasoning for not doing so was sound. There was a greater chance someone would show up to examine the BMW than the grime-covered Mazda.

The problem was they now had to do something about both cars.

“Get the BMW,” Durrie said. They were standing in front of the Mazda’s trunk where the woman’s body still lay. “I assume you know how to get it started without a key.”

“Fuck you,” Larson said, then walked off.

When he finally brought the car over—several minutes later than it would have taken Durrie—they transferred the woman’s body into its trunk. From his kit, Durrie pulled out a container of lighter fluid, and used half of it to drench the Mazda’s trunk. He then smashed in the driver’s door window with the butt of his gun, and used the rest of the liquid on the car’s interior. He threw the empty can into the trunk of the BMW with the body.

Not yet ready to torch the Mazda, he waved Larson over. “Show me exactly where you shot her.”

“Over there,” Larson said, pointing beyond the cleaner.

Durrie’s jaw tensed. “*Show* it to me.”

After an exasperated grunt, Larson said, “This way,” then started walking.

Durrie picked up his bag and followed.

“Here,” Larson finally said.

The car Davies had been hiding under when Larson pulled the trigger was one row back and several cars down from where the BMW had been parked.

Durrie set his bag on the ground, pulled out a flashlight and a quart of oil, then held them out to Larson. “Dump the oil on any bloodstains. If you need more, I have more.”

“Come on,” Larson said without taking either item. “That’s your job.”

Durrie didn’t move, his face impassive.

After several seconds, Larson rolled his eyes, then grabbed the flashlight and oil. “Fine.”

He ended up needing two quarts. When he was done, Durrie knelt down and inspected his work. It would do.

He zipped up his kit bag and rose to his feet. Pointing at the two empty oil containers on the ground, he said, “Those go in the back of the BMW.”

Larson picked them up.

“Is there anything else we need to deal with?” Durrie asked. “Did she tear her clothes on anything? Did you?”

Larson thought for a moment, then shrugged. “Nah. Nothing else.”

Durrie stared silently at him.

“That’s it,” Larson said. “There’s nothing else.”

Once back at the other cars, Durrie told Larson to get the BMW started, then he walked over to the Mazda. The smell of lighter fluid was intense. Any barely competent investigator would immediately know what had caused the blaze. But that didn’t matter. Cleaning wasn’t always about making things disappear. More times than not it was about distraction and misdirection. In this case, a burned-out car, its blaze started with the same accelerant used in a rash of recent local auto fires.

He lit a match from a booklet he’d picked up at a convenience store miles and miles away, and flicked it into the back. There was a whoosh as flames instantly engulfed the storage space. He moved around to the broken window, lit a second

match, and tossed it inside. He slipped the booklet back into his pocket, then climbed into the BMW.

“Let’s go,” he said.

Their work that evening was far from done.

* * * * *

After Jake knocked on Berit’s door and received no answer, he checked the carport and saw that her car wasn’t there.

Definitely on duty, he decided.

He quickly dismissed the idea of going back to his apartment. He’d go crazy sitting there alone with only his thoughts. Better to be out doing anything else.

To kill time, he drove around for a while. When he got tired of that, he returned to her place, parked, then went for a walk.

Chapter 19

The staging area for the second part of the evening was a parking lot behind a sporting goods store that had closed an hour earlier. It took them forty-five minutes to get the BMW, Officer Davies’ Charger, and the sedan Durrie had been driving all together there. The car Larson had obtained before meeting up with Durrie at the observation point, they abandoned. It, like the vehicle Larson had left in the impound yard’s visitor lot earlier in the day, would only lead to an owner who would be happy to get it back.

Durrie and Larson parked the BMW and the Charger in the darkest part of the lot, then took Durrie’s sedan to Davies’s townhome complex. To complete the scenario Durrie had mapped out, they would need to pack several of the woman’s things into her own luggage and take them away.

It was the classic leaving town in a hurry ruse. Some ops agents went overboard, creating complicated backstories to explain a person’s disappearance, but in Durrie’s experience, the less the better. If you seeded some basic information and took the right things from the person’s home, then people would jump to their own conclusions.

As for the seeded information, that had been dealt with by another call to Peter, who, though not without displeasure, said he would handle it. It was now up to Durrie to make the woman’s departure look legitimate.

They parked on the street a half-block away, then walked into the complex. The buildings were structurally identical, but the numbers for each unit were clearly displayed, and it was only a matter of minutes before they found the one that matched the address on the woman’s driver’s license.

Durrie’s biggest concern was that it would turn out she had a roommate. That would present a whole new set of problems, ones he had solutions for, but would rather not employ. He took it as a good sign that there were no lights on in any of the windows. He then stepped to the door, and turned so that his ear was hovering right beside it. No sound of a TV, no one talking on a phone, nothing. Still, that

wasn't conclusive proof no one was inside. A roommate could be reading a book or even asleep.

He shot Larson a look, telling him to be ready, then he rang the doorbell. Somewhere inside he could hear a faint double ding, but thirty seconds later, the house remained quiet, and the porch light off.

Durrie pushed the button again. He could feel Larson getting impatient behind him, but it was best to be sure. When there was still no response, he donned a pair of gloves, then pulled out his lock-pick set and made quick work of the deadbolt and knob lock.

They paused just inside, allowing their eyes to adjust to the diminished light. It appeared that they had entered directly into the living room. Immediately to their left was an open doorway that led into a kitchen, and against the right wall was a set of stairs leading up to the second floor.

Durrie motioned for Larson to remain by the door, then indicated he was going to go upstairs and do a quick sweep. As soon as Larson nodded, Durrie eased into the living room, stepping carefully over to the stairs. Since the construction was still relatively new, the stairs barely even acknowledged his presence as he went up.

When he reached the second floor, he found himself in a short hallway with three open doors leading off it. The first door was for the bathroom, the second the master bedroom, and the third a second bedroom. But this room was being used as an office, not someplace to sleep.

No roommate. He activated the mic to his comm gear. "We're clear."

By the time Larson joined him in the master bedroom, Durrie had already located a worn-looking suitcase in the walk-in closet and set it on the bed. He wasn't worried about disturbing the bedspread. That would actually make things seem more believable, underlining the sense that she'd left in a hurry.

The important thing now was to not randomly throw clothes into the bag. They had to be the *right* clothes, clothes she would definitely need and take with her.

Turning their flashlights on, but keeping them on the floor so their beams wouldn't be seen through the windows, Durrie directed Larson on what items to take from the dresser: bras, underwear, tank tops, sweats, T-shirts, and two of the most well-worn-looking pairs of jeans. Durrie then made a survey of the closet, choosing several tops, a single business suit, but leaving all except one of the dresses behind. The dress he did take was a simple black one that could be used for a variety of reasons.

Shoes were next. He went for practical over fashion, assuming a woman cop would know to leave the stilettos in preference of the flats, but made sure to include one pair of dressier shoes with a slightly raised heel. He also grabbed a pair of everyday tennis shoes, and what appeared to be the woman's workout shoes. He put all these in a canvas bag that had also been in the closet, then carried the bag into the master bathroom. There he gathered up make-up, toothbrush, toothpaste, hairbrush, clippers, and a few other items he was sure would look odd if left behind. When he was done, he returned to the bedroom.

Now the hard part.

"Take these downstairs," he told Larson, indicating the canvas bag and the suitcase. "Wait for me by the door."

Larson, apparently in obedient mode, did so without protest.

Durrie conducted a new search of the room, his eye out for more personal items: papers, photographs, birth control pills, and the like. As he came across things he thought she wouldn't leave behind, he piled them on the bed.

It was a lockbox in the back of her closet that made him pause. Inside were the normal things you'd expect: a passport, insurance papers, title to her car, info on her townhouse—which she apparently owned outright—and a small stash of emergency cash. But there was also something else.

In a worn manila envelope, folded over and wrapped with a rubber band, he found a will, a photo and a letter. The photo was of a man and a woman, taken maybe ten or fifteen years earlier. The letter was from an attorney.

Berit,

At the risk of repeating myself, I am so sorry for your loss. Your parents were not only my clients, they were also my friends. There is no way to explain the tragedy of their deaths, so I won't even attempt to do so. I just want you to know if you need anything, you can always count on me. As you requested, enclosed is your parents' last will and testament. We have kept a copy for our records in case anything comes up in the future, but there is no reason to think anything will. Again, if you need me, do not hesitate to call.

It was signed by a lawyer named Brian Fredrick.

Durrie looked at the will.

Mr. and Mrs. Davies had left their entire estate, a little over two million dollars, to their only child, Berit. That explained why the townhouse was paid for. It also told Durrie there was unlikely to be any family pressure to find the missing woman.

He should have been pleased. His job had just become easier. But Durrie didn't feel pleased at all. The only thing he felt was angry.

What a waste. The woman's death had been unnecessary. She'd been a cop, for God's sake, with all indications that she was going to be a good one. Durrie wasn't sentimental, but for some reason the fact that her parents were already dead got to him. Tragedy on tragedy. And, at least in Davies's case, absolutely unnecessary.

Larson. If Peter didn't do something about him, Durrie would. The asshole was a liability, and more good people would die in the future if he wasn't dealt with. The last thing Durrie wanted was for one of those good people to be him.

Reining in his anger, he found another canvas bag, loaded all the remaining items in it, then headed for the stairs.

He was only halfway to the first floor when the doorbell rang.

* * * * *

Jake checked his watch. If Berit finished on time, she should be home by now. He turned and headed back to her complex.

As he'd been walking, a plan had formed in his mind. What he needed to do was stress to the commander that he realized his mistake and sincerely regretted his actions. He would convince his superiors that he hadn't been trying to show anyone up, that he was only curious, that's all. In other words, he would throw

himself on their mercy, and hope that, given time, doing so would mean he'd still have a chance to advance as he'd planned. He didn't know if it would really work, but he had to try.

Tomorrow. I'll go in tomorrow. The sooner, the better.

He crossed the street, then walked down the path leading into Berit's complex. As he neared her place, he could see that the lights were still off. He frowned, wondering if maybe she was putting in some overtime, and decided to see if her car was here before knocking on her door. But as he walked by, he could have sworn he saw movement in the upstairs window out of the corner of his eye.

He paused to take another look. No movement now, but he was sure something had been there. He thought about the inside of Berit's place, and recalled that the window was positioned right where the stairs let out on the second floor. If someone had been going up or down, they would have passed quickly by.

Finally, he thought, thinking she was home after all.

He headed over to her door and pressed the bell.

* * * * *

Staying where he was on the stairs, Durrie twisted to the side so he could look at the door. Larson was standing just a few feet away from it, staring at him.

"Hold your position," Durrie whispered just loudly enough for his mic to pick up.

The bell rang again.

Silence for several seconds, then feet moving a little ways back from the townhouse before stopping again.

"Berit?"

The voice was muffled by the wall, but distinct, and recognizable. Officer Oliver. *Son of a bitch.*

Durrie could see that Larson had come to the same realization. The assassin had slipped a hand under his jacket, and was pulling out his Glock.

"No," Durrie whispered, taking the rest of the stairs down to the first floor.

Larson paused.

"Put it back. He'll leave in a minute and never know we were here."

The gunman frowned, his hand still half in, half out of his jacket.

As Durrie walked toward him, he could see the grip of the Glock. "Put. It. Back."

"Situation's changed," Larson said, his lips barely moving. "He's a problem and needs to be eliminated."

He pulled the gun all the way out.

"Stop," Durrie ordered. "You may be right, but you kill him here, and you'll ruin *everything*. They'll realize something happened to the girl, and they'll be forced to take a closer look at the information the guy gave them. If they do that, then you, my friend, will be on the hottest seat you've ever been on."

Larson seemed to consider this. "Then what do *you* think we should do?"

"He isn't going to be hard to find. So we stay quiet and let him go. Then we finish the job here and leave. When the time's right, we'll deal with him."

"And when do you think that will be?"

"That's not my call, or yours. That's Peter's."

Larson obviously didn't like that answer, but he didn't have a good response for it either.

"Now put it back," Durrie said.

Larson did nothing for a moment, then he finally returned the gun to where he'd been carrying it.

That problem temporarily solved, Durrie moved all the way to the door, and put his eye against the spy hole. Oliver was there all right, looking up at the second floor.

"Berit?" he called again.

It wasn't hard to figure out why Oliver had come over. He'd been suspended that afternoon, and since the woman was obviously a close friend and had been involved in the investigation that had brought on the discipline, he would want to talk to her. Durrie had to assume Oliver had probably been trying to reach her on the phone since he'd been sent home, and had finally grown frustrated enough at not getting a response to come over. Which meant he was unlikely to leave anytime soon.

They would have to be very careful.

* * * * *

Jake realized he must have been mistaken. A reflection on the window from another unit, most likely. That had to be it. In retrospect, he actually felt kind of foolish yelling out her name. She'd undoubtedly hear about it from her neighbors.

He looked at her second-story window for a moment longer, then continued down the path to the parking area. He knew before he even saw the empty slip that her car wouldn't be there. He decided, though, that it would be the best place for him to wait. This way, there would be no chance of him missing her.

He propped himself up on the top of a split-rail fence that ran along the back, and waited.

* * * * *

"We need to know where he went," Durrie said, more to himself than to his temporary partner.

"I'll go," Larson offered immediately.

"No. You stay *right* here. I'll go. Is that understood?"

"I hear you, if that's what you're asking."

Without any warning, Durrie shot out a hand, latching onto Larson's throat, and shoving the younger man backward. At the same time, he stuck a leg behind the other man's calves. Larson thudded to the floor with Durrie coming down on top of him. As the air woofed out of the assassin, Durrie jammed his knee into Larson's gut, and removed the assassin's gun with his free hand. He then leaned down so that their faces were only an inch apart.

"You think you're the smartest man in the room no matter where you are, don't you?" Durrie said. "I know you think the rest of us are a bunch of idiots, and you could do everything better on your own. Well, I've got news for you, Mr. Larson." He grinded his knee into the man's stomach. "You're going to have your chance to prove that, because after this, *no one* is *ever* going to work with you *again*. You are death waiting to happen. And the farther the rest of us can get away from you, the

safer we'll be." He glared at Larson. "Now, back to the question. *Do you understand my instructions?*"

"I... I understand," Larson whispered, his voice raspy.

"I'd like to think you learned a lesson here. But unlike you, I'm not that stupid. We finish this job *my* way, then we never work together again. Agreed?"

"Agreed."

Durrie held his position a moment longer, then stood up, pushing all his weight through the leg still resting on Larson's stomach.

"My gun," Larson squeaked when Durrie was finally on his feet.

"What about it?"

"Aren't you going to give it back to me?"

Durrie stared incredulously at the man lying on the floor. "You really are an idiot, aren't you?" He stuck the gun in his kit bag, checked the spy hole once more, then opened the door and slipped outside.

It took him several minutes, but he finally found Oliver sitting on a fence in the carport area. There were a couple of empty slots nearby so he guessed one must belong to Berit Davies.

Sorry, kid, he thought, meaning it. *You're going to be waiting a long time.*

Holding his position, he activated his mic again. "Larson."

"What?"

"Take the woman's bags and move out now. Go right, not left, when you reach the path."

"But the car's to the left."

"Go right."

"Yes, *sir*."

As Durrie suspected, Larson had learned nothing.

Two minutes later, Larson's voice came back over the comm. "I'm at the car."

"Put the things in the back. I'll be right there."

Durrie pulled the earpiece out so that he didn't have to hear any useless comments Larson might make, but he didn't immediately leave his position. Instead, he continued to watch the cop.

Are you going to give up? Is this it? Or are you going to keep giving me trouble?

Admittedly, Durrie wasn't sure what he wanted the kid to do.

There was something about him. Something...

No. Forget it. Not worth the effort.

He pulled slowly back from where he'd been hiding, then disappeared into the night.

* * * * *

Jake finally gave up at 3 a.m.

He told himself that something big must have gone down to keep her on the clock so long, but there was a small part of him, a little nagging peck, that kept saying it might not be that at all. He pushed the voice as far down as he could, and contented himself with the thought that he'd come back in the morning and buy Berit breakfast.

Though he was exhausted, he thought for sure he wouldn't be able to fall asleep when he got home. He was wrong.

He slept, all right. Unfortunately, it was quite possibly the worst sleep he'd ever had.

Chapter 20

When Berit's car wasn't there the next morning, Jake began to really worry. He decided to chance a call to work, asking for one of the rookies he knew who was working days, and who might—*might*—be willing to talk to him.

"Why are you calling me?" Gary Andrews asked, his voice a tense whisper.

"I just need to ask you a question, okay?" Jake said.

"Are you kidding me? I can't be talking to you. You're in deep shit. I don't want any part of that."

"I'm not going to get you into trouble or anything. I just need to know if Berit is on duty."

"Berit?"

"Officer Davies."

"I *know* who Berit is," Andrews said. "Why do you need to know that?"

Jake had anticipated the question. "She loaned something to me that I was supposed to bring to work today, but, obviously I'm not coming in. I swung by her house, but she wasn't home."

"Hold on."

Jake could hear the clicking of a computer keyboard, then Andrews came back on.

"She's not due in until four."

"Oh, okay. Thanks. Hey, do you know if she was working last night? I tried then, too, but she wasn't around."

"What are you doing? Stalking her?"

"No. Of course not."

A couple more keyboard clicks. "Yesterday was her day off."

"She didn't come in to cover for anyone?"

"Not according to this."

"Thanks."

Andrews hung up without saying anything more.

Not on duty last night? Then where the hell was she?

A boyfriend? Not that Jake knew of, and she certainly would have told him. Maybe she went to visit someone. But that didn't explain why she wasn't answering her cell phone, especially since she had specifically told him she was going to call him back after she checked out the BMW.

The nagging little voice suddenly wasn't so quiet anymore.

The BMW.

Oh, God.

He quickly accessed her voice message again and listened to it. She had found the BMW at an impound yard, but she hadn't said which one. Dammit. The only thing he could do was locate it himself.

At the fourth yard he called, the man on the other end said, "Well, we did have it."

"What do you mean, *did?*?"

"Got stolen last night."

Jake's mouth went dry. "Are you serious?"

"Officer, I don't have time to jerk you around."

"Sorry." Jake paused. "I might come by... just to take a look around."

"Sure. What's one more?"

"Thanks."

It wasn't until Jake hung up that the last thing the man said struck him as odd. But when he pulled into the impound parking lot, he saw what the man had meant. Parked up front were three patrol cars. If they had been from the same substation as his, Jake would have pulled right back out of the lot, but they weren't, so the chances of him knowing any of the officers were slim.

Still, as he walked up to the office, he formulated a story he could use in case he ran into anyone he knew. He kept it simple—a friend's missing car that he offered to check on. The fact that these lies were coming more and more easily was something he tried not to think about. Thankfully, when he stepped inside, he saw the lie would be unnecessary. Though there were three officers in the room, none were familiar.

He walked over to the counter far from the others. After a few moments, one of the men on the other side came over.

"Help you?"

"I called a little while ago," Jake said. "About the BMW that's apparently missing."

"You with the police?" the man asked.

"I am, but I'm not here about the theft."

The man gave him a questioning look.

"My interest is in the car itself," Jake explained. "I wasn't aware it had been taken until I called."

"Well... it's, uh, not here now. Obviously."

"Of course, not. I'm just wondering if I could take a look at where it was. I'm not going to get in the other officers' way. It's a separate case, so I don't want to disturb them. Would that be possible?"

"How is looking around where it was parked going to help you?"

"I'm sure you understand, I'm not at liberty to discuss the details of the case," Jake said, quoting countless cop shows he'd seen on TV.

The man nodded. This was an answer he could understand. "Back this way." He took Jake over to a door at the back of the building and opened it for him. "You want me to show you where?"

"Just point me in the right direction."

"Third row back. You'll see it when you get there. It's the empty spot."

"Thanks," Jake said, then walked off.

He had no idea what he hoped to find, but this was where Berit had been planning on coming. Had she actually made it here? His guess was yes. He would even be willing to bet the reason the car was gone had something to do with her.

As he approached the third row, he saw a couple officers stringing police tape around an empty parking space, and knew that was where the BMW had been. Like with the officers in the office, he didn't recognize them.

Don't think about it. Just do it, he told himself, then turned down the aisle before he could talk himself out of it.

As he neared the empty spot, the two officers looked at him. Instead of avoiding their gaze, he smiled and walked over.

"I hear someone made off with one of the cars," he said.

The older of the two took a step forward. "Can I help you?"

"I'm on the force, too." He held out his hand and, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, said, "I'm Davies."

The older cop shook his hand. "Halen."

His partner nodded at Jake. "Alvarez."

Jake shook his hand, too. "I came by to check on a vehicle involved in a hit and run, and the guy inside told me there was a little excitement here last night."

"Apparently," Halen said.

"They just take the one car?" Jake asked. It was a rational question, one that any curious cop would ask, but one he thought he already knew the answer, too. He was wrong.

"It was the only one they *took*. They set another car on fire back there." Halen looked over his shoulder, further into the lot.

For the first time, Jake noticed several other cops gathered a couple rows back. "Burned? Why would they burn one and take another?"

Halen shrugged. "Who knows? We think it was one of the gangs. Maybe an initiation. They certainly knew what they were doing. Disabled the security cameras and knocked out the guards first. Organized, know what I mean?"

"Gang, for sure," Alvarez said. "I'll bet the missing car was stuffed with coke."

His partner nodded in agreement.

Just then, a voice came over their radio. "Halen, Alvarez. You done?"

Halen glanced at his and Alvarez's handiwork. Tape not only encircled the slot the BMW had been in, but also one car to either side and the three straight back in the row that butted up against them.

He keyed his mic. "Yes, sir."

"Then I need one of you over here," the voice ordered.

Halen and Alvarez exchanged a look, each asking the other what they wanted to do.

"I'll go," Halen said.

"Doesn't matter to me," Alvarez said.

As Halen started to walk off, Jake said, "Take it easy."

"Yeah, you, too," Halen replied.

Jake then gave Alvarez a nod goodbye. "Nice meeting you."

"Good luck with your case," Alvarez said.

Jake turned and started to amble off the way he'd come.

What the hell had gone on here last night? The BMW stolen and a car fire? He had the sudden urge to find out what kind of car the one that had burned was. Had it been involved in the events out on Goodman Ranch Road, too?

He paused in the aisle, and silently admonished himself. *You need to forget about the murder and the fire. You need to forget about all of that. You're only here to try to find out where Berit is. That's it.*

But it really wasn't. Berit and the BMW, it all tied back to the murder and the fire. That's why *she* was coming out here. He looked back toward the slot now surrounded by yellow tape, but the void it created in the row of cars gave him no new information.

As he started to turn back around, he paused. There was something under a Cadillac parked two spaces away from where the BMW had been. It was lying against the front tire, hidden mostly behind it.

He checked Alvarez. The officer had moved to the back of the empty slot, his attention now on the group at the burnt-out car. Jake stepped over to the Cadillac, then, keeping his movements even and smooth, he lowered himself into a crouch next to the fender. The item by the tire was a rectangular piece of black plastic. His initial thought was that it was something that must have fallen off the engine. But as he pulled it out from the shadows of the car, he realized it was a phone.

Still in a crouch, he pressed one of the phone's buttons. The screen came to life, the battery gauge showing that it was half full. There was nothing on it to indicate ownership, so Jake accessed the menu to see if there was any information there. He was given a list of choices, and while his inclination was to try and determine the phone's number, he selected the line for previous calls.

He stared at the new screen in disbelief. There were seven missed calls. Every single one of them was from the same person: "JAKE." He selected one of the calls just to be sure. Contact information came up for the caller—*his* contact information.

The phone was Berit's. She *had* been here.

The possibilities of what might have happened made his head spin.

He started to think she must have been here when the car was taken, but immediately realized that didn't make sense. She had called him during the afternoon. The car had been taken at night. She would have had no reason to be anywhere near the yard then. Her phone must have been there since not long after she'd left him the message.

"What are you doing?"

Jake's head whipped up. Officer Alvarez was standing a few feet away, the look on his face suspicious.

"I, uh..." All the possibilities ran through Jake's mind, paths with different outcomes, none of which seemed to get him where he needed to be. "Dropped my phone." He raised Berit's phone so Alvarez could see it. "Thought maybe it was broken, but still working."

Alvarez eyed him for a moment longer, then smirked. "My wife dropped hers on the driveway. Busted into a million pieces. You're lucky."

"Yeah. I guess I am."

As he was walking away a few moments later, Jake's phone buzzed—his own phone, not Berit's. He checked to make sure Alvarez wasn't watching, then pulled it out.

"Oliver," he said, answering it.

"This is Sergeant Stroop. You are to report here in thirty minutes."

"I'm on suspension, ma'am."

"I'm well aware of that, Oliver. Thirty minutes." The line went dead.

While he had been planning on going to the substation anyway, he had wanted it to be on his own initiative. Given the tone Sergeant Stroop had just taken with him, it sure sounded like he was in for another reprimand.

But what about Berit?

He thought about it as he jogged toward the exit. He'd have to tell them, explain that he was afraid that something had happened to her. It didn't matter how much they dressed him down, as long as they put a team together to try to find her.

That's all that mattered.

Chapter 21

When Jake arrived at work, he was directed back to the same meeting room where his suspension had been handed out the previous day. Walking down the hall, he passed other officers he knew, but it didn't take a psychology major to see that word of his current situation had spread. Most of the officers avoided his gaze, while those who didn't gave him looks of pity or contempt.

Was what he'd done really so horrible? He hadn't actually interfered with the investigation. What he'd been doing was looking into an angle no one else would have even considered. It wasn't like he was a dirty cop or anything. He'd been trying to be a good cop. That's all.

When he opened the door, he expected to find only Sergeant Stroop. And while the sergeant was there, so was Commander Ashworth, and a man Jake didn't know.

"Have a seat, Oliver," Sergeant Stroop said.

The three of them were sitting on one side of the table. A single chair for Jake was on the other. He pulled it out and sat down.

"Before we get started, I'm not sure you know Kenneth Myers," the commander said, indicating the man Jake hadn't recognized. "He's the PLEA representative." PLEA was the Phoenix Law Enforcement Association, the local officers' version of a union.

Jake exchanged a quick nod with the man.

"We've had several discussions since we talked with you yesterday," the commander began. "And in light of new information, we've come to a decision."

"What new information?" Jake asked.

"Jake Oliver, we are here to inform you that as of..." Pausing, the commander glanced at the clock on the wall. "Four minutes past noon, Wednesday, May 22nd, your services are no longer required by the Phoenix Police Department."

"What?" Jake couldn't believe what he'd just heard.

"Consider yourself lucky, Mr. Oliver, that you're only terminated and not arrested."

"But... but I didn't—"

"You can appeal the decision through PLEA." The commander looked over at Myers, who'd been nodding throughout the conversation.

"You *can* do that, yes," Myers said. "But my advice would be to just move on, son. Some people just aren't meant for this line of work. No shame in that."

Fired? Not meant for this line of work?

Forget all that. Forget it! Berit. Remember Berit.

Jake halted his slide into a numbness that threatened to consume him, and said, "Sir."

"What is it?" the commander asked, sounding like he'd been hoping Jake would meekly accept the circumstances and leave.

"I have reason to believe another officer is in danger."

Suddenly he had everyone's attention.

"What are you talking about?" Sergeant Stroop asked. "Who?"

"Officer Davies, ma'am. Berit Davies. I believe she's missing. I found her—"

"Mr. Oliver," the sergeant said. "Officer Davies has asked for and been granted a leave of absence to deal with a death in her family."

"A death in her family? But—"

"I think this meeting is over," Commander Ashworth said. "Mr. Oliver, I'm told your things have been boxed up and will be waiting for you at the desk on your way out."

He barely heard the commander's words. "Officer Davies doesn't have any fam—"

"That's enough, Mr. Oliver," the commander said, standing. "If you feel the need to make more of this, talk to Mr. Myers. But as far as I'm concerned we're finished here."

Ashworth walked around the table, followed by Stroop and Myers. Jake watched in disbelief as the commander walked out the door. Before Sergeant Stroop could do the same, Jake said, "Wait!"

The sergeant looked over. "Yes?"

"Sergeant Stroop, did you personally talk to Berit?"

"That's department business, and you are no longer a member of this department."

He could see the answer in her eyes, though. She hadn't talked directly to Berit. He was willing to bet no one had.

The sergeant's face softened a bit. "You're young, Jake. You'll find something else."

She left.

Myers, who had been waiting behind her, stopped in the doorway. "I trust there won't be an appeal."

"No," Jake said, knowing there was no future for him in the Phoenix PD even if he should somehow win.

"I thought not."

Chapter 22

Jake did everything he could to find Berit. He tracked down what friends she had, and learned in the process that he was probably the one who knew her best. As for family, what he'd been trying to say at the meeting was that she had none, not close anyway. She was an only child whose parents had died in a private plane crash somewhere back east. There might have been aunts or uncles or cousins, but Berit had never talked about them.

She had been from Atlanta, a big city where the name Davies wasn't exactly unusual. When he checked an Atlanta phone book at the Phoenix public library, he'd found over forty listings. Dutifully, he had called them all, but none of those who answered had ever heard of Berit.

For two days he staked out her townhouse, finally breaking in through the back patio door when he began to worry that she might be inside and hurt. He'd been smart enough to use gloves, but the instructions he'd found on the Internet on how to pick a lock had not accurately described how hard it was. It took him nearly thirty minutes to get the door open, and when he was through, he'd made enough scratches on the locks to leave no doubt what he'd done.

What he found inside confused him even more. Though her place was nearly as neat as it always was, it was evident that some things were missing. Clothes and toiletries, mainly—things someone would take if they had to leave in a hurry. There were even indentations on the bedspread that could have been created by a suitcase or a bag.

Had she really left? Had Sergeant Stroop been right?

As much as Jake had thought not, he couldn't refute what his eyes were seeing. *Someone* had been here, and taken the things Berit would have taken with her. Even her running gear was gone.

But if he was wrong, then why was her phone under a car at the impound yard? That aside, why hadn't she tried to get a hold of him at some point? She knew he was on thin ice. She would have wanted to know what happened, at the very least.

For the next several days he kept searching and calling people, but nothing brought him any closer to knowing where she was. Even the few contacts on the force who would still talk to him knew nothing more than that she was on extended leave.

By the second week he'd run out of leads, and was left with visiting the places he knew she liked to go. By the start of the third week, he stopped doing even that, and began to accept that she had indeed left town. Why, he couldn't even begin to imagine, but apparently, given her lack of communication, it wasn't his business. She was probably distancing herself from his problems, and there was no way he could blame her for that.

For the first time since he'd been fired, he started to think about what he was going to do now about *his* life. He'd been away from his home in northern Minnesota for five years now, and while Phoenix had been the place he'd spent the most time, it was no longer home. In fact, it probably never had been.

He needed a fresh start. A new place. New people.

California, he thought. He'd always wanted to live on the coast.

He called his landlord and gave his thirty-day notice. As for where in California he'd end up and what he would do when he got there, he could figure that out later. For now, it was just good to know he was moving on.

But then the next day his phone rang, changing his plans.

"Am I speaking with Jake Oliver?" a male voice asked. In Jake's estimation the man was probably middle-aged, and sounded like he was used to being in control.

"Who's this?" Jake asked.

"Robert Usher," the man said. "Are you Jake?"

"Yeah. Why?" Jake had a sinking suspicion this was some sort of sales call. He poised his thumb above the disconnect button, ready to hang up.

"I got your number from one of the officers at your old job."

Unconsciously, Jake moved his thumb away from the phone. "Who?"

"Officer Haywood."

His former partner? They hadn't exchanged a word since Jake's suspension.

"What is it you want, Mr. Usher?"

"I have a potential job opportunity for you. That is, if you're looking for work."

Usher's words surprised him. "What kind of job?"

"I'm recruiting investigators for my firm, Usher International."

Jake was taken aback. "I'm... not an investigator."

"Don't undersell yourself, Mr. Oliver. I've heard that you have an aptitude for it. Your position would, of course, be as a junior investigator to start, but I'm getting ahead of things. First we'd like you to come out and interview. Are you interested?"

"Come where?"

"Houston, Texas."

Jake looked out the window, staring at a nothing. An investigator job? Sure, it was with a private firm, but did that matter? He knew he could do the job well. So, hell yes, he was interested. Texas was fine, too. It fit right in with his criteria of being out of the cold zone he'd grown up in.

"Mr. Oliver? Are you still there?"

"Sorry," Jake said. "Still here."

"So, can we set up an interview? Or..."

"Yes. I would love that. I'm definitely interested."

"Fantastic. I know this is kind of short notice, but would you be available tomorrow? We'd fly you out, of course."

Tomorrow was quick, but it wasn't like he was doing anything. "Sure. I can do that."

"Great. My secretary will call you with details in a little while. Until then, have a great day, and I look forward to meeting you in person."

"Yeah. I look forward to meeting you, too."

* * * * *

"Yes. I would love that," Oliver said. "I'm definitely interested."

Durrie pulled the headphones off and set them on the table. He didn't need to hear any more. The plan was on. The rest of the details he already knew.

The truth was, he was pissed. Taking the kid out was a borderline call at best. Yes, his continued pursuit of the woman had been an issue, but as Durrie had predicted *and* pointed out, Oliver had started to lose interest when the trail of information dried up. The only question was whether his interest would return in the future.

Durrie had argued that, with the right encouragement, Oliver would put it behind him and not look back. What he kept to himself was that he felt Jake Oliver's death would be as much a crime as the woman's had been. The kid had raw skills and instincts that were better than a lot of operatives who'd been in the business for years. Besides picking out Larson and Timmons from the crowd at the hotel, the stuff the cop had noticed at the Goodman Ranch Road site, the connections he'd made, the path he had followed—the *true* path—had all been brilliant. Then finding the phone at the impound yard?

Durrie had nearly thrown a fit over that. How could Larson not have remembered that the woman had dropped her phone? The job had been riddled with screwup after screwup, every single one traceable back to Larson.

And every single one uncovered by the kid.

That morning when they saw that Oliver had the phone, Larson had wanted to kill him at the first opportunity. Durrie had to practically tie the assassin down to keep that from happening. The thing that really saved Oliver's life was the fact that having two missing rookie police officers from the same substation at the same time would create a much larger problem. Questions would be asked, and where the answers led could be dangerous for some very important people. Durrie had been forced to make the same argument day after day until finally Peter took Larson off the assignment.

The decision to finally remove Oliver had been Peter's alone.

"We just can't take the chance," Peter had said. "He's resourceful. I don't buy that just because he's stopped looking into things now means he's giving up forever. One month from now, one year, ten—it could still be a problem."

Durrie knew he was right, but the waste, the goddamn waste!

The plan was straightforward. Now that some time had passed, they would lure Oliver out of town to a place where no one knew him, and finish things there. Durrie was to stay in Phoenix and empty out both Oliver's and Davies's places, then make sure little things like shutting off utilities were taken care of so that the two cops' "moving out of state" would look legitimate.

No, Durrie didn't like it at all, but it was the job. It was what he was paid to do.

* * * * *

That afternoon Jake made a few calls, checking to be sure Usher International was someplace worth working. According to the people he talked to in Houston, Usher was a well-respected agency, headquartered there, but with offices around the world. Not long after he found this out, Mr. Usher's secretary called with his flight information, and told him the ticket would be waiting for him at the counter. A car would then pick him up at the airport in Houston, and bring him straight to the offices. Did he have a favorite beverage they could have on hand for the meeting? A preference for dinner in case things went long? He told her he was flexible.

After hanging up, he actually felt a bit of hope for the first time in a while, a feeling that things were going to be okay.

He packed an overnight bag in case he would be there longer than a day, then treated himself to a meal out.

Chapter 23

Durrie hadn't slept well.

There were times when he could be a good little soldier, blindly doing whatever he was told. And there were times when he could perform his duties while well aware of the ludicrous nature of the assignment. But never in his nearly two decades in the business had he contemplated what he was contemplating now.

It wasn't an altruistic move born out of a sense of decency or kindness. Those were not qualities Durrie would use to describe himself. It was opportunity and waste—losing the former by committing the latter—that was making him think this way.

He knew better than to share his thoughts on the matter with anyone, so he had spent a rough night tangling with them himself. When he gave up and pulled himself out of bed at 5 a.m., he had two plans in his mind. One, the plan he was expected to carry out, and the other, the plan he thought he should.

The only question he had was, which one would it be?

* * * * *

Jake's flight was scheduled to leave at 11 a.m. It would take only a couple of hours to get to Houston, but with the time zone change he wouldn't arrive until just after 2 p.m. His meeting with Mr. Usher was scheduled for 3 p.m., which seemed tight, but since they were the ones who'd made the arrangements and were picking him up, Jake wasn't going to worry about it.

He was up early enough to go for a run. It was nice to feel the road beneath his feet. He hadn't done any real exercise since he'd been let go from the force. He'd been too wrapped up in first trying to find Berit, and then trying to figure out what he was going to do with his life. But now the warm air and the sweat were revitalizing.

Back home, he showered, made himself some instant oatmeal, then spent thirty minutes trying to decide which tie to wear with his only suit. Finally ready, he headed out to his car.

* * * * *

Durrie spent the time between 5:30 and 8:00 a.m. preparing. Whichever plan he would ultimately go with, there were things that needed to be done first for each. It was a busy two and a half hours, but he needed to be in front of Oliver's apartment building before the kid left for the airport, so he had to make the most of his time.

Once he was in position a block from where Oliver lived, he placed the portable receiver on the dash, and turned it on. It was quiet in Oliver's car—no engine noise, no sound of breathing.

Durrie settled in his seat.

At 8:25, the dead air on the receiver was replaced by the sound of a car door opening. Less than thirty seconds later, the engine started.

* * * * *

The airport was only a fifteen-minute drive away. Jake would easily be there before the recommended one hour prior to departure for domestic flights. He glanced at his overnight bag sitting in the front passenger seat, and went through a quick mental checklist of everything inside to be sure he didn't forget anything. Satisfied, he pulled out of his space in the parking garage, and headed for the exit.

Outside, the day had grown considerably warmer than it had been when he'd gone on his run. He cranked up the A/C a few notches, and switched on the radio.

It's going to be a good day, he told himself. A new beginning.

The idea of that was really starting to appeal to him.

* * * * *

The former cop didn't seem to be in any kind of hurry, then again, the airport wasn't that far away. Durrie followed just a couple of cars behind, his mind still going back and forth. He knew if he waited too long, the decision would be made for him, and Jake Oliver would be flying toward his death in Houston.

Durrie wasn't going to let it come to that. Whatever was going to happen, it would be what he decided was best. To do otherwise would be to take the easy way out, and he hated people who took the easy way. If more people would just take responsibility and make a damn decision, the world might not be as screwed up.

By the time Oliver pulled into the airport parking lot just off Van Buren Street, Durrie knew which plan he was going to carry out.

He turned in after Oliver, the tension of having to make a decision finally gone.

* * * * *

All the spaces closest to Van Buren were taken, so Jake kept driving until he found a spot about two-thirds of the way into the giant lot, up against the fence and far from the entrance. He turned off his engine, and retrieved the cardboard sunscreen he kept folded on the back seat, then propped it up against the front windshield. If there was one thing he'd learned since living in Phoenix, it was how quickly the sun could damage the interior of a vehicle. Case in point, the crack in his dash just above the glove compartment.

Protection in place, he grabbed his bag and climbed out of the car.

* * * * *

Durrie slowed as Oliver turned his Civic into an empty spot.

Yes or no? he thought, giving himself a last chance to change his mind. But the answer was still the same. He rolled forward until his car was blocking the Civic. From the movements inside he was sure Oliver hadn't noticed.

Durrie grabbed the weapon out of his kit bag, and quickly exited his sedan. By the time Oliver opened his door, Durrie was standing just ten feet away.

* * * * *

Jake didn't notice the man until after he'd shut his door and turned toward the parking lot. He thought the guy wanted to get into the car next to his, and was just waiting for Jake to get out of the way.

"Hi," he said. "If you move back, I can get out, then you can leave."

When the man didn't respond, Jake took a hard look at him, and was about to ask what his problem was, but the words caught in his mouth.

It was the third man from the Lawrence Hotel, the one who'd entered the elevator and been briefly acknowledged by the light-haired guy. There was no mistaking him.

Jake took a step forward. "I've got a plane to catch. So if you'll excuse me..."

He kept moving as if he were going to push past the man, but halted in his tracks when the guy raised his hand. In it was a weapon, not a traditional pistol, but something that looked like a cross between that and a Taser device Jake had seen a demonstration of at the station.

"You're not going anywhere," the man said. "Trust me, it's better this way."

Jake let his breathing grow even. At best he had one chance, so he couldn't afford to blow it.

"What do you want?" he asked, casually positioning himself in the middle of the space between the two cars that fenced him in.

"At the moment that doesn't matter."

"I kind of think it does," Jake said.

"Yeah, well... sorry."

The man pulled the trigger.

Jake had anticipated the move, and brought his bag up a half-second before four tiny darts, each attached to a wire, shot out of the end of the weapon.

As soon as they pierced the side of the bag, Jake threw it at the man, then whirled around and rushed toward the fence. Slowing prior to reaching it, he turned again and hopped onto the hood of his Civic, then started to run from car to car, jumping the gaps.

His gaze searched the parking lot, looking for anyone within earshot. He knew if he could get someone's attention, it might be enough to deter the man from pursuing him. But the lot was huge, and the closest person was standing next to the building where the shuttle bus stopped, looking in the other direction.

Jake chanced a brief look back. While the man's car was still parked behind his, there was no sign of the man himself.

As Jake jumped from the hood of a Volvo onto that of an SUV, he could see trouble three cars ahead—a minivan with basically no hood at all. He altered his path as he neared, then jumped higher than usual when he came to the gap, his hands reaching for the van's roof. But his foot slipped as he took off, and his stomach hit the edge where the roof and side met, bending him at the waist like an L.

Momentarily stunned, he hung there for a second.

Keep moving!

His legs heard the message first. They began scrambling around the side of the van and over to the windshield. One foot reached the glass, but something grabbed his other.

He looked back and saw the man holding fast to his ankle with one hand. In his other hand—

A needle!

Jake tried to kick back with his foot, but the man was strong and had been ready for this. To counter, Jake pushed up from the roof, and started to turn onto his back, intending to lash out at the man with his other leg. But just as he

pivoted onto his hip, he felt a prick in his calf. The man immediately let go of his ankle and stepped back.

Jake lost his grip and slipped to the ground. He staggered a moment, but was able to remain on his feet. "What did you do to me?" he yelled.

"You've seen me before, haven't you?" the man asked.

"Hell, yes, I've seen you before," Jake said. "You were at the Lawrence Hotel. You had something to do with the murder out on Goodman Ranch Road. Don't think I'm not going to turn you in."

The man eyed him curiously for a moment. "How did you know?"

Jake felt a sudden disconnect from his skin, as if a thick layer of foam had been injected between it and the tissue beneath. "What did you do... to me?"

"Looks like we both have questions." The man paused. "I'd sit down if I were you. Less chance of bruising when you fall."

Jake was having a hard time understanding what he meant. Less chance of... *what?*

Suddenly he bumped into the van.

"Sit down," the man told him.

Jake did.

"What... what..." Jake desperately searched for other words, but none came.

The man was at his side now. "Don't fight it."

Jake felt his body turn and realized the man was moving him. Soon his back was leaning against the van.

"Don't fight it," the man repeated, his voice becoming a distant whisper. "Don't..."

Jake heard no more.

Chapter 24

The call came exactly five minutes after the plane Jake was supposed to be on had taken off. Durrie didn't need to check the caller ID to know that it was Peter. He left the phone sitting on the table by the door, unanswered. He wasn't ready to talk.

The truth was, he was still stunned by what had happened at the airport parking lot. Not so much by Oliver's ability to improvise and almost get away—that was admirable to be sure but not entirely unexpected. No, it had happened moments before that, when Durrie had confronted him. The ex-cop's eyes had flared in sudden recognition.

He had *seen* Durrie before.

Then, after he had drugged the kid, Oliver had said, "You were at the Lawrence Hotel." Timmons and Larson had not been the only ones Oliver had picked out.

Unbelievable.

The mobile home they were in was located forty-five minutes south of Phoenix, off Interstate 10. It was in the middle of a large piece of nothing, its nearest neighbors miles away on their own little plots of barren land. It had been the safe house for the mission the previous month. If things had gone wrong and any

member of the team had needed to hole up somewhere, this was where they would have gone.

Durrie knew he and Oliver couldn't stay there for long. It may have been a safe house, but it was also a location known to Peter and the Office. They needed to drop completely off the map, someplace no one would ever be able to find them.

The problem was, there were a few things Durrie still had to take care of in Phoenix. He'd been paid for a job, and he had no intentions of not fulfilling his duties. He figured he could use the mobile home for at least six hours, maybe even up to half a day before someone showed up to check it.

From the outside, the trailer looked like just another sad, old home, closer to the end of its usefulness than the beginning. But this was no off-the-assembly-line clone. This was a specially built, composite-fiber-reinforced-frame structure, with an interior layout that was functional and could serve a variety of needs. One of those potential needs was met by the inclusion of a detention cell.

The room was just wide enough for a narrow bed and a toilet. In deference to the heat of the desert, it was air conditioned, but otherwise soundproofed.

Durrie lugged Oliver inside, and laid him on the bed. He then retrieved the large bottle of water he'd purchased during his morning prep, and put it in the room on the floor. Chances were, Oliver would remain unconscious until he came back, but if he didn't, the bottle would be there if he was thirsty.

Durrie closed the door, then engaged the double bar system that secured it to the walls, ceiling and floor. In the living room, his phone was ringing again. He picked it up, and slipped it into his pocket, once more ignoring Peter.

Outside, he reprogrammed the lock with a new combination, then looked at his watch. He'd give himself four hours just to be safe. That should be enough.

* * * * *

It felt as if someone had taken a hatchet to Jake's skull. The pain radiated in a line just off center, from an inch above his left eye all the way back to the nape of his neck. Slowly, he moved a hand to his head and carefully touched his hair, sure he would find a gaping wound. But there was no blood or exposed bone. Whatever was causing his distress was on the inside.

The day came back to him in bits and pieces, like images caught in a strobe light. The man with the weapon, Jake's attempt to get away, falling onto the van, then the man again, a needle in his hand, and finally the prick on Jake's skin.

How long ago that had been, he had no idea. He only knew whatever hope he'd had of fighting off the man disappeared with his own consciousness.

He lay unmoving, willing the pain to subside. While it didn't go away completely, it became more manageable after a while, enough so that he decided he could try opening his eyes. Either he'd gone blind or he was surrounded by complete darkness. He could see absolutely nothing.

He touched the surface he was lying on, and discovered it was a thin mattress sitting on top of a wire-mesh frame. On his right side, there was empty space beyond the frame, but on his left, it butted up against a wall.

Knowing that any sudden movement might bring his pain back, he slowly swung his legs into the open area, and eased himself into a sitting position. His foot banged into something, stinging momentarily and making him realize he

wasn't wearing his shoes. He carefully moved his foot back over, touching the object and feeling around it. It seemed to be metal with sides coming out of the floor and an opening on top. A toilet, he thought.

Moving his hand in front of him, his fingers quickly came in contact with a wall only a few feet away. He slid them across the surface, finding a crease that must have denoted a door, then touching a switch.

Without hesitating, he flipped it up, and a weak light, recessed in the ceiling, came on.

As much as he was glad to know he wasn't blind, he almost wished he'd left the light off. The space was tiny. Other than the bed and the toilet, the only other thing in the space was a bottle of water sitting near the door.

His tongue involuntarily pushed against the top of his mouth at the sight of it. Before he even knew what he was doing, he picked it up and unscrewed the top. As he raised the open end toward his mouth, he hesitated.

Drugged?

He sniffed the opening. Smelled like water, but that didn't mean anything. Reluctantly, he screwed the cap back on and set it down. He couldn't afford to take a chance.

He stood up, and took a closer look at the door. There was no handle on the inside, and nowhere else he could get a grip on it. There were two panels in the door. One was at the floor, and was large enough to slip a plate of food through. The other was at eye level, a rectangle about two inches high and five inches long, covered by Plexiglas on Jake's side and a piece of metal on the other that probably could be slid out of the way so someone on the outside could look in.

He pressed his ear against the rectangular panel, trying to pick up any noise that might give him a better idea where he was. But he could hear absolutely nothing. With little else he could do, he collapsed back on the bed.

Conserve your strength, he thought. *Be ready for any opportunity.*

It wasn't much of a hope, but it was hope.

* * * * *

In the days leading up to this one, Durrie had arraigned for movers from two separate companies to show up at Berit Davies's townhouse and Jake Oliver's apartment at just after noon. To prevent any unnecessary questions, he had sent a letter to the homeowner's association for the woman's townhouse a week earlier. He informed them about the move, notified them that cleaners would be coming in the next day, and that the condo would be listed for sale within a few days after that. Ms. Davies, the letter said, had taken a government job back east, and to assist in the move, her new agency was taking care of the details. This was not unheard of, so no one would question it.

Durrie had thought the trickier one would be Oliver's place. Though he was able to arrange for the movers and cleaners ahead of time, he couldn't contact the landlord until after Oliver was out of the way. But, to his surprise, it turned out that Oliver had already given notice, so the landlord barely even reacted to the news that the movers were coming so soon.

Durrie made several trips between the places, monitoring the moves without actually making his presence known. While he did this, he made several calls to

confirm that utilities had received their final payments and would be turned off on time. On one of his trips between places, he dropped change-of-address cards into a mailbox, and soon all their mail would be diverted to private P.O. boxes—in D.C. for Davies, and Houston for Oliver. From there, the mail would be forwarded through several other blind addresses before arriving on someone's desk at the Office. Any mail that arrived before the changes took effect would be forwarded by the management of each facility.

Once he was sure there would be no problems at the two residences, he moved onto the last item on his list: selling Jake's Civic. It went easy enough. Though the deal the used car place gave him wasn't particularly fair, he wasn't going to haggle. After the details were taken care of, one of the dealership's employees gave him a ride to a rental car agency a block from where he'd parked his car. Done, he headed back out of town.

As he opened the door of the mobile home, his phone began to ring again, and once more he let the call go to voice mail. He knew Peter had to be more than just concerned at this point. First, Oliver had missed his flight to Houston, and second, the man he'd hired to clean up after Oliver was MIA.

Peter was a smart man, though. At some point in the last few hours, he had undoubtedly dispatched a team to Phoenix to find out what was going on. Eventually, that team would check out the mobile home.

He checked the computer security log, and could see that he was the only one to come within a mile of the trailer all day. He removed a small hard drive from his kit bag and connected it to the computer, then ran a program that would erase all records from twelve hours before to twelve hours after that point, effectively erasing his and Oliver's presence.

While that processed, he went over to the detention cell. He flipped the switch that would turn on the interior light, then opened the eye-level panel. He suddenly jerked back. Standing just on the other side, his eyes only inches away, was Oliver.

"Let me out!" Oliver demanded, his voice coming over the intercom speaker on the wall next to the door.

"Please step back," Durrie said.

"Why? So you can come in here and kill me?"

"Step back, and sit on the bed."

"Go to hell."

Durrie frowned at him. "I'd rather not resort to anything extreme, so it would be better if you sat."

"Look, I don't care about what happened on Goodman Ranch Road. Nobody would listen to me even if I did. Just let me go, and I'll keep quiet."

"Mr. Oliver. *Move* to the bed."

"I only told my supervisors about the other two. I never told them about you. I never showed them your picture."

"Sit!" he ordered.

"Please. Just let me go."

Durrie reached over and slid the eye slot shut. He didn't have time to deal with this.

The light switch wasn't the only control next to the door. There was a panel with dials and buttons that accessed a menu displayed on a small digital screen.

The choices ran the gamut from mild to lethal. He made his selection then slid the eye slot open again.

At first, Oliver looked as defiant as before, but soon he began to lose his sense of balance. It was only another moment before he collapsed on the floor.

* * * * *

Durrie made the call two hours later from the parking lot of a truck stop near the New Mexico border. He wasn't worried about his location being traced. The call was being automatically routed through several relays designed to confuse any such attempt.

On the second ring, a woman picked up.

"Yes?"

"I need to speak to Peter," Durrie said, forgoing normal procedures.

"I'm sorry, we don't have anyone—"

"Tell him it's Durrie."

She paused. "One moment."

The delay lasted only ten seconds.

"What the hell is going on?" Peter asked as he came on the line. "I've been trying to reach you all day! Oliver never showed for his plane. You were following him, right? What happened?"

"He's with me."

The pause was long. "What do you mean, he's with you?"

"He's with me."

"Are you telling me you're taking care of the problem?"

"I'm telling you the problem was never Oliver. It was Larson. Killing Oliver would have been a mistake. He can be useful."

"Useful? What the hell are you talking about?"

"I believe he could be an asset, Peter."

"An *asset*?"

"I'll know in a few weeks. I'll contact you then."

"What? Hold on! I agree that this was an... unfortunate termination, but, if you'll remember correctly, Oliver was deemed a potential risk."

"And I'm telling you he's *potentially* the opposite. I'll *know* in a few weeks. If it turns out I'm wrong, the original order will be carried out. But if I'm right, then you and I can talk about what happens then."

"Are you deliberately trying to throw your career away?" Peter asked.

"I'm not throwing anything away. I'm cultivating an asset." Durrie paused. "A free pass for three weeks, that's what I'm asking. No one comes after us. No one bothers us. I've done nothing but good work for you, Peter. I'm not trying to screw you or my career."

"Jesus, Durrie. You can't be serious. What can you possibly see in this cop—this ex-cop—that's worth the risk?"

"The same things you saw that made you decide to get rid of him. I don't like seeing potential wasted."

"You're *way* off the mark this time, my friend."

"Free pass or not? Either way, I'm not changing my mind."

Peter said nothing for several seconds. "Three weeks. If I don't hear from you by then, consider both of your lives sacrificed."

Durrie hung up, not bothering to say goodbye.

Chapter 25

The cabin was fifty miles from the closest town, tucked into the woods in the Rocky Mountains of central Colorado. It was another safe house, though this one belonged to an organization Durrie had done work for several years earlier that had no ties to the Office. In the recent months, the organization had scaled back its Stateside operations, so Durrie had been confident the building would be unused.

He was right.

By the look of things, no one had been there in more than a year.

The cabin wasn't as well-equipped as the mobile home south of Phoenix, but it did have a well-made holding cell in the basement, and that was all that really mattered at the moment.

On three separate occasions during the drive there, Durrie had given Oliver BetaSomnol boosters to keep him asleep. It was more drug than he'd really wanted to administer, but he'd had little choice.

Now that he had Oliver in the cell, the drug was no longer necessary. He could do nothing, however, but provide aspirin for the headache Oliver experienced from the withdrawal. A full thirty-six hours passed before the former police officer's symptoms had lessened enough so that Durrie could move forward.

Using the threat of his stun gun, he had Oliver chain himself to the chair in his room before he carried his own in and sat down.

* * * * *

"You're one very lucky son of a bitch," the man said as he took a seat.

Jake almost laughed. "You might have to explain that to me."

"What do you think I mean?" the man asked.

"I have no idea."

The man considered him for a moment. "You can do better than that."

"Why don't you just tell me, if you think I should know," Jake said. "Or not. I don't really care." Though his headache was gone, he'd never felt so drained in his life, and a verbal game was the last thing he cared about.

The man was silent for a moment, then said, "You don't see it now, but if it wasn't for me, your funeral would already be over."

"Easy to say, hard to prove, but what the hell? Thanks."

"You think you're funny sometimes, don't you? You don't have to answer. I can tell. You should also know that doesn't cut it with me. Feel free to tell your jokes, but don't expect me to laugh."

"I'll remember that," Jake said.

The man stared at him for nearly a minute, then said, "You are going to thank me someday, but not just for saving your life. For changing it completely."

"Whatever you say."

"We'll talk about your choices later."

The man stood up and carried his chair out of the room. For a second, Jake thought he was going to leave him shackled to the chair, but then the guy returned and grabbed Jake's left wrist firmly in one hand. With his other, he unlocked the cuff, then tossed the key on Jake's lap.

With surprising agility, he released Jake's wrist and stepped back out of range.

"After you finish unlocking yourself, slide the key under the door," he said.

"And if I don't?"

"Then you never see me again."

The man started to close the door.

"Wait," Jake said.

The man looked back, silent.

"Do you have a name?"

A moment's pause, then, "Call me Durrie." With that, the man shut the door.

Jake unfastened his other wrist and his ankles, then did as the man—as *Durrie*—instructed, scooting the key through the small space under the door. He wasn't sure if Durrie would follow through with the threat, but Jake felt now was not the time to test him.

He lay back on the bed, replaying the conversation in his mind. When he boiled it down, Durrie had basically told him three things besides his name: 1) that Jake would have been dead if Durrie hadn't kidnapped him, 2) that he had little sense of humor, and 3) that Jake was going to be given some kind of choice.

Of the three things, the only one Jake was sure of was the lack of humor. Beyond that he had to assume it was all just talk. But talk was better than no talk at all, and the longer Jake could keep it going, the better the chance the man would make a mistake. Jake just had to bide his time, and not make a lot of waves.

Easier said than done.

* * * * *

"How?" Durrie asked.

Jake had no idea what time it was. There were no windows in his room. The only thing he knew was that this was their third conversation since his headache had passed, and that he'd slept several hours since the last one.

"What do you mean, 'how'?" Jake said.

"You found the matchbook at the site. Fine. You followed it back to the hotel. That makes sense. You then convinced the hotel manager and the head of security to allow you to view camera footage from the night in question. But how did you pick us out?"

There was no easy answer to that since Jake himself wasn't sure how he'd done it. "Just... a feeling, I guess."

"A feeling." Durrie stared at him. "You're telling me you did it based on a random feeling?"

"Yeah, I guess." Jake was trying to be cooperative. Ultimately what they talked about was unimportant. If it helped increase Durrie's trust in him, that's all that

mattered. But he could tell his captor wasn't satisfied. "Well... um, the two other men—they kind of stood out."

"How do you mean?" Durrie asked quickly.

Jake thought back. How did he mean it? "They were...trying...too hard to blend in, I think. I just got the sense that they didn't really belong."

"You could tell they were trying?"

"That's what I said, isn't it?" Jake blurted out, then regretted it immediately. *Cooperation. Remember!* "Sorry, it's just I'm..."

"Being held against your will?"

The words surprised Jake. "Yeah. I guess that would be it, wouldn't it?"

"I know you still won't believe this, but this was the only way to keep you alive."

It wasn't the first time Durrie had said this, and as much as Jake wanted to push for more, he knew it would be better to wait.

When neither of them said anything for a moment, Durrie asked, "Is that how you spotted me?"

"No. You, I wouldn't have picked out on my own. It was the other guy, the light-haired one who gave you away."

"How?"

"He was in the elevator coming down from his floor. It stopped on number three, and you got on. The other man gave you a look that made me think he knew you. But you didn't respond. To be honest, I wasn't sure if you were involved or not until the parking lot."

Durrie looked away, seemingly lost in his thoughts. Then, without another word, he got up and left the room.

* * * * *

Terminate him. Now, Durrie thought.

That was survival mode kicking in. Any identified threat needed to be dealt with immediately and permanently. It took everything he had to keep from running upstairs, grabbing his gun, and returning to put a bullet in Jake Oliver's head.

Calm down. He was a threat. But not now. Or, at least, not at the moment.

What Oliver had proven once more was that he was gifted. Granted, he lacked training, but his raw skills were impressive. Given the right guidance, who knew what the kid might achieve?

That, of course, was dependent on a couple of factors. Would the kid be open to it? *Really* open to it? And even if he were, would Durrie have the patience to see it through?

The survival part of him was pushing for the kid to be turned over to Peter if Durrie wasn't going to finish the job himself. While the rest was saying, "Isn't this why you brought him here in the first place?"

So, what's it going to be?

* * * * *

Jake was visited twice more by Durrie before he fell asleep again, but never to talk, only to bring in meals. It wasn't that Jake didn't try to engage him, but no matter what he said, Durrie never replied.

When he awoke the next morning—or what he assumed was the next morning—Durrie was sitting in a chair in the middle of the room, staring at the bed. Behind him, the door was open.

Jake sat up quickly, startled.

“Tell me about the marks in the sand,” Durrie said.

“What?”

“The marks in the sand, outside the barn. Describe them.”

Jake took a second to realize what he was talking about, then thought back to the night of the fire. “Which ones? By the tank, or in between the tank and the building?”

“Start with the tank.”

“Okay. The dirt was disturbed.”

“All the dirt was loose in that area. How could you tell it was disturbed?”

“The patterns. There was a portion of the dirt that looked like it was moving in the same direction, but askew to the pattern of the dirt around it. I guess it looked like it had been pushed there.”

Durrie nodded for a moment. “I was in a hurry. If I’d taken more time, you would have never seen it.”

Jake stared at him. This was the first direct confirmation that his theory of the men being involved with the Goodman Ranch Road murder was correct. “You *were* there.”

“Don’t get all excited,” Durrie said. “I’m not the one who pulled the trigger.”

“But one of your friends did.”

“They aren’t my friends.”

“One of the men you were with, then.”

“Tell me about what you found between the tank and the building.”

Jake said nothing for a moment, then, “All right. It was less than an inch long, a kind of rounded cradle in the sand that might have been created by a rope or a thick wire.”

“A cable,” Durrie said.

Jake looked at him, his brow creased. “For what?”

“Video monitoring.”

“Of... what was going on in the barn?”

“How did you find it?” Durrie asked, ignoring the question.

“I... uh, found traces of more disturbed dirt, followed it, and found the mark. I guess it was a spot you missed.”

“I guess it was. That’s what happens when you work with fools and are forced into a hurry-up situation that should have never occurred.”

As much as Jake liked getting answers to questions he’d had for nearly a month, he wasn’t sure Durrie’s openness was a good thing or not. But he couldn’t help himself and asked, “When you say work, you mean murder, don’t you?”

For a moment, it didn’t look like Durrie was going to respond, then he said, “We call it termination.”

“Termination? Like a hit?” Jake asked. That would actually make sense, he realized. If this really had been drug-related, a hit was exactly what it must have been.

Then, as if reading his mind, Durrie said, “This isn’t *The Sopranos*. And I don’t work for organized crime, at least not in the way you define it.”

“Then who do you work for?”

Durrie stood, picked up his chair, and started for the door. “Depends on the week.”

“The night on Goodman Ranch Road?”

Durrie stopped in the threshold. “Uncle Sam.”

He stepped out and shut the door.

Jake immediately dismissed the answer as just something to confuse him.

But it didn’t really matter what Durrie said now. The man had admitted to being involved in the murder. If Jake could get free, he would report what he’d found out. He didn’t think it would be enough to get him back on the force, but it would prove to the assholes who had kicked him out that he’d been right.

Uncle Sam. Right.

* * * * *

There were three more sessions that day. This time Durrie questioned Oliver about the back-trail search he’d done on Timmons and Larson, what he’d found at the coffee shop, and what had happened when he’d presented the information to his superiors.

The kid was playing it really smart. Cooperating completely, while Durrie knew on the inside he was trying to come up with a plan for escape. If he wasn’t, he wouldn’t be worth the time Durrie was putting in.

When the idea had first come to him several weeks before—that Oliver might be a useful asset in the future—he had been thinking about starting him as a courier somewhere, with the possibility that he’d work his way into a frontline ops position. But the kid’s eye for detail was extraordinary. And that meant one thing to Durrie.

Cleaner.

To do the job Durrie did took a special mindset and the ability to see everything. Though he wasn’t sure if Oliver had the mindset yet, the former cop certainly had the missing-nothing foundation required. He also had the smarts to make intuitive leaps that others wouldn’t even consider.

Still, there was a lot more work to do if that was going to happen.

Chapter 26

Over the next two days, Durrie had Oliver run through everything again, this time concentrating on tangential items, such as the makes and colors of the cars parked outside the barn the day Jake found the matchbook, and the descriptions of the lobby décor of the Lawrence Hotel when he’d gone there. His memory wasn’t one hundred percent perfect, but damn close.

One subject Durrie avoided was Berit Davies. Oliver only casually mentioned her a few times, playing down her role in the events. It was obvious he was trying

to shield her from any harm that might come if her true involvement were revealed. Of course Oliver didn't realize, thanks to Larson, it was too late for that.

At some point, the issue would have to be dealt with, and the truth would come out. If this was going to be a successful recruitment, then there could be no secrets. Not that kind of secret anyway.

On the fourth day, it was time to change things up.

* * * * *

Jake had just finished his breakfast when the door opened. Per the procedure they'd developed, he immediately rose, went over to his bed, and sat down. For the last day and a half, Durrie had not required Jake to chain himself to anything. Jake had taken this as a good sign, a building of trust he could use to his advantage when the time came.

This morning, though, Durrie was once more carrying the set of shackles in addition to the ever-present stun gun. He tossed the restraints onto the bed.

"Pick them up."

Wondering what he had done to cause the return of the extra security measures, Jake nonetheless started to put them on without complaint.

"No," Durrie told him. "I said pick them up, not put them on."

Surprised, Jake removed the cuff he'd started to put around his wrist.

"Follow me," Durrie said, then walked out the door.

This was new. Until that moment, Jake had not left the room. He passed through the doorway into a dimly lit hallway. There were five doors other than the one he'd come out of. Two were on the same side of the hall his room was on, two were on the other, and the final door was at the far end of the hallway, closing it off.

"How about a shower?" Durrie asked.

"Uh, sure." A shower sounded great.

"This way." Durrie walked to one of the doors on the opposite wall, and opened it. "This stays open, and I'll be right out here." He raised the modified taser. "I'm pretty sure if this thing hits you in water, it won't be a good thing."

"Then I'd appreciate it if you didn't shoot me, okay?" Jake said as he walked through the doorway.

The bathroom was utilitarian: a shower stall in the far corner, a toilet, and a stainless steel sink coming out of the wall. There was no mirror. There were also no windows, reinforcing Jake's growing belief that his cell was underground. On the edge of the sink, he noticed a tube of toothpaste.

"Sorry, no toothbrush or floss," Durrie said, apparently following his gaze. "Your finger will have to do."

With a shrug, Jake ran some toothpaste through his mouth, then climbed into the shower. The water felt wonderful as it rinsed away the sweat and stink that had been clinging to his skin for days. He washed his body and his hair twice, then let the water soak him.

"That's enough," Durrie said, after what must have been ten minutes.

Reluctantly, Jake turned the shower off and stepped out of the stall.

Durrie tossed Jake a towel. Where he'd found it, Jake didn't know.

"There are clean clothes out here on the floor."

Jake dried off, then found the clothes and dressed.

"Cuffs," Durrie said.

Jake knew it was coming, but he'd been hoping Durrie had forgotten. He put them on. "What now?"

"Down here." Durrie led him to another door, opened it, and let Jake enter first.

The room was about the same size as Jake's cell, but there was no bed or toilet. The only piece of furniture was a single chair sitting near the middle of the room. It faced a wall covered with maps and photographs.

"Sit," Durrie said.

"What are we doing here?"

"Sit and you'll find out."

With little other choice, Jake did.

Durrie moved over to the wall.

"Six months ago, someone began selling secret information he had no right to sell. This leak compromised several operations being conducted by the people I've been working for. Many good people lost their lives, and important work was interrupted. It took four months to pin down the source." He pointed at one of the photos. "This man. Nicholas Owens." He looked back at Jake. "It was determined by those running the organization that Mr. Owens had to be removed. That's the operation you and your partner came upon that night on Goodman Ranch Road."

"The body in the barn was this Owens guy?" Jake asked.

"No. Mr. Owens's body is... elsewhere. The body in the barn was one of his associates. Someone who wrongly thought he could save Mr. Owens."

Jake frowned. "You're trying to tell me this was governmental action?"

"I'm not *trying* to do anything. I'm telling you exactly what happened. It's up to you whether to believe me or not."

Durrie then began an extremely detailed account of what had happened at the barn. He talked about the planning, the makeup of the team, the other preparations, and the operation itself. His description was not a glowing report of an efficient mission. Instead, he laid out all the flaws, explained where everything went wrong, and described the less-than-perfect job carried out by the actual gunman.

Jake couldn't help getting caught up in it. It was like an event from one of the spy thrillers he'd read as a teenager. Yet despite how crazy it seemed, it also sounded surprisingly plausible. In fact, there was nothing in Durrie's description that contradicted the evidence Jake had uncovered.

"So your job was to... get rid of the body?" Jake asked, not quite sure he had that part right.

"Yes. It's my specialty."

"Your *specialty*? Getting *rid* of bodies? You're making that up," he said. "That's just something out of a movie. No one does that."

"I do."

"Right. Okay, sure. Whatever you say. Why would anyone even choose to do that? It sounds..."

"What? Interesting?"

Jake was going to say morbid, but, though he wouldn't admit it, it did sound a little interesting. Creepy and skin-crawling, but interesting. "So that's it? You take the body and run?"

"That's not it. If I do my job correctly, the scene of an operation disappears or is not seen for what it really is."

"You mean the crime scene," Jake said.

"No," Durrie said. "I mean the scene of an operation."

"You're killing people. That sounds like a crime to me."

Durrie took a deep breath and said nothing for several seconds. "The loss of a life is not taken lightly. Usually when someone is *terminated* it is to prevent the deaths of others. It is not something most people can understand. It can be a nasty business, but it is something that *must* be done. Because, believe me, there are others out there, with the same skills as my colleagues and I, who do not think the same way we do. That's why what we do is necessary."

"But it's still breaking the law."

"Really? Then try to take me in and arrest me. If you're not killed first, you'll soon find that you're the one in prison, not me."

Jake thought for a moment, then asked, "Why are you telling me this?"

"Interesting," Durrie said. "If our roles had been reversed, that would have been my first question." He paused. "It's time for you to go back to your room."

* * * * *

After Oliver was locked away, Durrie went back upstairs. It was up to the kid to now either accept that Durrie's information was true, or take the easier route and believe it was all a fabrication. Durrie had left absolutely nothing out, telling Oliver every detail of the job, warts and all. Tomorrow he would go over what had happened after they discovered that Oliver had learned of their presence. But for today, their conversation was done. He wanted Oliver to sit with the story, go over everything himself, and try to poke holes in it.

Durrie headed for the kitchen, intending to start preparing lunch, but when he passed his phone sitting on the kitchen table, he could see he had a message waiting. The phone number indicated it had come from the Office.

He thought about ignoring it. He still had more than two weeks on his deal with Peter, so, as far as he was concerned, they had nothing to discuss. But he knew the message would nag at him until he checked it.

"Durrie, it's Peter. You need to call me as soon as you get this."

Bullshit, Durrie thought, about to hang up.

But then Peter's voice added something. "It's about Larson."

Durrie groaned.

Anything to do with that asshole probably wouldn't be important, either. He tried to think about what it could be, but the only thing he could come up with was that maybe Peter was finally getting around to taking Larson out of circulation, and needed some information from him.

He stood there for a moment, unmoving, a miniature battle going on in his head. Reluctantly, he decided to return the call and get it over with.

"It's Durrie," he said when the call was answered.

This time the woman on the other end put him immediately through to Peter.

"I called you over an hour ago," Peter all but yelled.
"I was tied up."
"With your *project*?"
"What do you want, Peter?"
"Larson's gone rogue."
"What are you talking about?"
"Someone leaked that we were planning on removing him."
"Wonderful," Durrie said, not meaning it. "But I don't see how this should concern me."
"He knows our decision was based on your information. He also knows you have the cop."
Durrie almost smiled. "Are you trying to tell me he's coming after me?"
"Yes."
"He's not going to find me."
"Don't count on that. He may have been a wild card, but he still has connections."
"I don't care what he has, he's not going to find me."
Peter paused. "Indications are he's heading for Colorado. If that's not where you are, then you're right. But if it is..."
There was still no reason to believe Larson would find them. It was a big state, after—
Son of a bitch.
There'd been an operation Durrie had worked on years earlier, an operation Larson had played a minor role in. Their employers at the time had been the same people who had set up the cabin Durrie was now using.
"How is he traveling?" Durrie asked, thinking arrangements could be made to meet Larson if he was flying in.
"Driving from Chicago. He knows we can't watch all the roads."
"When did he leave?"
"At least twenty-four hours ago."
Twenty-four hours? Larson could be here already. "Is he alone?"
"We're not sure."
Durrie swore to himself again. "What are the chances of my having backup on standby?"
"So you *are* in Colorado?"
"Peter, answer the question."
"It could be arranged."
"Then arrange it."

Chapter 27

Jake lay on his bed, thinking about everything Durrie had laid out for him. Truth? A lie? What? It was unbelievable, yet plausible, like a whole different world lying beneath the one Jake knew.

At some point his stomach began to growl and he realized Durrie was late with his lunch. Another hour passed, then two. Soon he wasn't thinking about the morning discussion, but wondering if Durrie had maybe left him there to die.

Finally, the door opened, and Durrie stepped inside.

"Hungry?" he asked, then tossed Jake a couple of apples and an orange.

"This is it?" Jake asked.

"Sorry. Didn't have time to make anything."

Jake frowned, then took a bite of one of the apples.

"Things have changed," Durrie said,

"What do you mean?"

"I told you about the shooter on the op in Phoenix."

The shooter, Jake now knew, was the dark-haired man from the Lawrence Hotel who'd gone by the name Mr. Walters. By Durrie's account, he was a loose cannon who was the root of most of the problems on the mission. "What about him?"

"He's discovered some information that would have been better kept from him."

"What information?"

"He found out his name was put on the termination list, and he thinks I'm mainly responsible for that."

"So he's not happy," Jake said.

"No. He's not. He has also always considered *you* a problem."

"Me?"

Durrie then told Jake about how they had been tracking him since he'd found the matchbook, how they'd known where he'd gone and who he'd talked to.

"If he'd had his way," Durrie said, "you would have been dead before you went to your superiors. You're the one who uncovered things, you're ultimately the one who put the X on his back."

"That's not true. I don't even know his name."

"Larson," Durrie said, without hesitation. "That's what he goes by. And like it or not, you and I are the cause of his problems. Now he's looking for us. Unfortunately, I have a feeling he might know where we are."

Jake felt a sudden chill. "So what are you going to do?"

"Not me. We."

Jake paused for a moment. "All right. What are *we* going to do?"

"Three choices. One, we sit and wait and deal with what comes. Two, we prepare for his arrival. Or three, I wish you luck, and we split up." He paused only a second. "Before you go jumping on option three, I should warn you that's the most guaranteed way of getting yourself killed. You may not want to believe me, but you know I'm right. My vote is option two, but I'll leave it up to you. Which do you—"

"Number three."

"Were you not just listening to me?"

"I'll take my chances."

"And you'll die."

"So *you* say."

Durrie's eyes narrowed as he stared at Jake. "I guess you're not exactly who I thought you were."

Jake stared back. "Is that your way of telling me number three wasn't really an option? That you were just throwing it out to see how I would respond?"

Shaking his head, Durrie said, "No. If you choose option three, then you're free to go."

"Right now?"

"If that's what you'd like."

"That's what I'd like."

Durrie stood there for a moment longer, then turned and walked out of the room, leaving the door open.

* * * * *

This has to be some kind of trap. Probably a way of killing me so it looks like an accident.

As soon as the thought crossed his mind, Jake paused. Look like an accident? Since when did he think like that?

Cautiously, he approached the open door, then peeked out into the hallway. Durrie was gone, but on the floor next to the door were Jake's shoes and a pair of socks. He dropped down against the wall, and quickly pulled them on.

The door at the end of the hallway was open, and beyond it he could see a set of stairs. He started walking toward them, but soon found himself running, his freedom so close. When he hit the bottom step, he slowed again so as not to trip on the steps.

The staircase was longer and steeper than he expected. It was almost as if there was a missing floor between the level Jake had been held on and the one he was headed toward, making him think that the basement he'd been in was deeper than most. Though there were light fixtures lining the stairway, the majority of illumination was streaming down from the open door at the top.

Daylight. The first Jake had seen since the parking lot near the airport.

He paused when he reached the top step, worried once more about a trap. The space beyond was not large. A small foyer with a window directly across from the door. Off to the left of the opening he could hear the sound of movement and things being set down on some sort of surface.

"You're wasting time," Durrie called out.

Jake stood on the step a moment longer, then he curled his hands into fists, tensed the muscles in his arms and shoulders, and stepped out.

Immediately to the right was a large room with windows on three sides. There were kitchen, dining, and living room areas undivided by walls.

Durrie was standing next to a long wooden table in the kitchen. Laid out in front of him were several firearms. By Jake's quick count there were eleven pistols and four rifles. Jake's knowledge of weaponry was not vast enough to know all the makes and models, but he could pick out the Smith & Wesson, the Colt, and the SIG SAUER. Three of the rifles were identical compact semi-automatics, while the other was a long intricate-looking weapon with a very high-tech scope attached. Next to all these was a stack of boxed ammunition.

As much as Jake would have liked to grab one of the pistols, Durrie would be able to easily pick one up and put a couple bullets through Jake's chest before he'd even get close.

"That's for you." Durrie pointed at a worn leather chair in the living area. Sitting on it was an olive green canvas satchel. "There's food inside, and a map and compass. I won't be able to drive you out. You'll have to walk."

Jake stepped over to the chair, and opened the top of the bag. Inside was exactly what Durrie had promised. "Walk out of where?" he asked.

To answer, Durrie merely nodded at the window.

Jake pulled the bag over his shoulders, then took a look outside. There was forest in all directions, and in the distance, tall rugged mountain peaks.

"Where the hell are we?" he asked. He had thought they were still somewhere in Arizona, but this was *not* Arizona.

"Colorado," Durrie told him.

Jake looked out the window again. "We're in the Rockies?"

"Glad to know you're familiar with geography," Durrie said. "My suggestion? Don't stick to the roads. You'll stay alive longer that way."

"How far away is the closest town?"

"Fifty, sixty miles. But don't worry about it. He'll catch you before you get there."

Jake looked at him. "This is some sort of game you're playing, isn't it? Maybe you're just letting me out so you can hunt me. Am I right?"

The look Durrie gave him was almost one of pity, then the man focused on the guns arrayed on the table, carefully moving his eyes over them until he finally stopped on one. He picked it up. Jake saw it was the SIG SAUER, the model number he wasn't so sure about, but that didn't seem important since he thought he was about to be shot.

Then Durrie did the last thing Jake expected. He turned the gun around so that he was holding onto the barrel, then he tossed it across the room at Jake.

Jake, surprised, reacted late, and nearly dropped it on the ground.

"Chamber's empty, but the mag's full," Durrie said. "But in case that's not enough..."

He picked up a box of bullets, quickly whipped a rubber band around it to hold the top down, and lobbed it on the same trajectory he'd sent the gun. This time, Jake had no problem catching it.

"Blanks, right?" Jake said, not willing to believe Durrie would actually arm him.

"Try it," Durrie told him, his face impassive.

"Right. The moment I raise the gun, you shoot me and it looks like self-defense."

"You watch too much TV. But I'll tell you what..." Durrie took a large backward step away from the weapons-strewn table. "Better?"

Now there was no way he could reach one of the guns before Jake got a shot off.

Without hesitation, Jake chambered a round, and pointed the SIG at his captor.

"Go ahead," Durrie said. "You want to know if those are blanks or not? Pull the trigger."

Jake held the gun on Durrie a moment longer, then moved his aim just to the left and pulled the trigger.

The report was deafening in the room. But Jake wasn't paying attention to the sound. His eyes were on the wall behind Durrie, the wall that had most definitely just been hit by a bullet.

"Satisfied?" Durrie asked. He stepped back to the table. "Now go if you're going. He could be here anytime."

Jake wasn't ready to leave quite yet, though. Taking the pack off his back, he removed two bullets out of the box of ammunition, popped the mag out of the SIG, and added the rounds to it so that it was filled to capacity. As he inserted the mag back into the gun, he could see that Durrie was closely watching him.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing," Durrie replied.

Jake pulled the bag back over his shoulders. "Thanks for the hospitality, but I hope you understand if I don't recommend this place to any of my friends."

"You use humor to cover up your nervousness, you do realize that, right?" Durrie said. "It's a tell. Immediately lets me know what you're really feeling."

Jake's eyes narrowed a bit. "Nervousness is not what I'm covering up. It's a growing sense of regret that maybe I shouldn't have moved my gun before I pulled the trigger."

Without taking his eyes off Jake, Durrie pointed off to his left and behind him a little. "The town is that way. Good luck."

Jake walked quickly to the main door. "Yeah," he said, hesitating. "You, too."

He left.

Chapter 28

Jake made a beeline through the clearing that surrounded the cabin, into the woods on the other side. He wasn't about to take Durrie's word on where the town was. In fact, he doubted it was even fifty or sixty miles away, but it seemed prudent to at least give the appearance that he was following directions. If this *was* a trap, Jake wanted Durrie to think that he was heading where he'd been told to go. But as soon as he was deep enough in the trees, he circled around until he found the road leading away from the cabin.

Durrie had specifically suggested he not use it. In one sense, this was sound advice. Walking on the road would make it very easy for Jake to be spotted. But that didn't mean the road wouldn't be helpful. He could travel close to it, in the cover of the woods, and use it as a guide. He was sure there was a much better chance it would lead him to civilization than striking out through the forest.

After about half an hour, he spotted a small rise a little further away from the road, with only a smattering of trees on the top. It would be a good place to get his bearings, and see if he could actually find where he was on that map Durrie had given him.

When he reached the top, he took a moment to eat some of the food Durrie had given him. As he chewed on a piece of cold chicken, he looked around. What he saw did not exactly give him hope.

The forest went on in all directions, broken only here and there by ridges and other high points like the one he was on, except in the West, where the spine of the Rockies rose high above everything else. Nowhere could he see a town or village.

He spread the map on the ground. There was a small X that he assumed Durrie had marked to represent the position of the cabin, but Jake thought it could very

easily be misdirection. It took him several minutes, but by using the landmarks he could see, he was able to make a pretty fair guess of where he was. Surprisingly, this also meant the X of the cabin was in the right spot.

He tried not to think what that might mean as he scanned the map for where he should go. He saw that Durrie had also been truthful when he'd pointed Jake in the direction of the town, and while Jake could get there going the way he was going, Durrie's path would have been at least ten miles shorter.

Double back and try it? Or stick with the road?

If Durrie had been truthful about all this, what else was he truthful about? The dark-haired man who was supposedly coming after them?

He looked at the map again, and decided to stick to the path he'd chosen. By staying near the road, he might come upon other homes hidden in the woods, which could mean shelter or, *please God*, a phone.

He returned the map to the bag, took a few sips from a bottle of water, then headed back down the hill.

* * * * *

As Durrie was coming back upstairs from the basement earlier, he'd been content to let Oliver go. It *was* the option the kid had chosen. Granted, it was the wrong one, but there was nothing he could do about that. Oliver would strike out on his own, and before morning came, he would be dead.

But then the kid had come up the stairs and twice surprised Durrie.

The first surprise had been when he'd actually pulled the SIG's trigger, and sent a bullet flying just past Durrie's head. That showed not only nerve, but confidence. Confidence that he could fire a shot that passed that close to another person without hitting them, and confidence that Durrie wasn't going to retaliate.

The second surprise came just before the kid left. He had made sure to replace the two missing bullets in his mag and thus maximizing his chances for survival. Most people in a similar stressful situation would have just left and not thought about it. Even those who did would probably have just replaced the spent bullet, forgetting that initially there'd been no round chambered in the gun, which meant there was room for a second shell. Jake had automatically pulled two rounds out of the box.

It was a tiny thing, so small, but an important detail. Durrie had found himself staring at Oliver. That was the moment he decided if he let the kid go on his own, it would be the same as Larson deciding Berit Davies had to die.

Durrie gave Oliver a ten-minute head start. During that time, he stored all of the weapons, except two of the pistols and the sniper rifle, in the safe locker built under the kitchen cabinets so no one else would find them. He then packed the pistols and a few other items in his own bag.

When time was up, he activated the tracking device that was tuned to a signal emitted by a chip in the lining of Oliver's satchel. Durrie had intended it only as a way to locate the kid's body when this was all over.

He wasn't surprised to see that Oliver had diverted from the path he'd pointed out. Oliver had no reason to trust Durrie, and following the road was a guarantee of finding civilization somewhere. Only Durrie hadn't been lying to him. Taking the road was also the easiest way for Larson to find him.

Durrie adjusted the straps on his pack, swung the sniper rifle over his shoulder, then headed out.

* * * * *

An engine rumbled in the distance.

Jake paused. A car. It could get him downhill a whole lot faster than on his feet. He listened again, but the way the sound was bouncing off the mountains, it was impossible to pinpoint which direction it was coming from.

He glanced around. A ridge rose just on the other side of the dirt road. He raced over to it, and didn't stop until he was halfway up the slope.

His hope was to find a clear view of the road ahead, but all he could see were a few asphalt-covered spots several miles away. That told him something, though. The road he was following was still dirt, so somewhere ahead it either changed or met a whole new road. His bet was on the latter.

In the farthest spot, he saw a sudden flash of blue. A sedan, he thought, but knew he could be wrong. The glimpse had barely lasted a second, and the distance didn't help.

He hustled back down the ridge, then briefly contemplated using the dirt road before deciding to return to the woods. Better to stay cautious.

He couldn't exactly run through the trees, but he did pick up his speed. If the other road was close and he could get there before the car did, he might be able to flag it down.

Dead branches and needles crackled under his feet for a while, drowning out the sound of the car. But soon the motor grew louder, and Jake knew he was going to be cutting it close.

"Come on!" he silently yelled at the asphalt road ahead. "Where are you?"

With all the twists and turns the dirt road had taken, Jake knew it was possible any intersection was still a mile or more away. So he increased his pace, dodging through the trees and hoping he didn't trip over a root or rock.

Ahead he could see that the trees seemed to end in a distinct line, and realized it had to be the road. He could hear the car, too, maybe a half-mile away at best.

Forgetting his earlier reluctance, he angled over to the dirt road, and sprinted down it.

The path curved, and suddenly, a hundred feet in front of him, it T-boned into the asphalt road.

He was almost there when caution once more exerted itself.

What if Durrie's right? What if that's the shooter?

Jake put on the brakes. As much as he just wanted to run out into the road so the driver could see him, he knew that would be foolish. He had to be sure first, see who the driver was.

Reluctantly, he moved into the cover of the trees, and down to a point along the new road about thirty feet down from the intersection. Though he couldn't see the car, he could hear it. It was just around the bend a hundred yards further down the road. The car was apparently traveling at a leisurely pace, which was good. It would give Jake more time to get a look at the driver before he had to act.

He watched the curve, and waited.

Ten seconds later, the car came into view.

* * * * *

What the hell is he doing? On the tracker, the dot representing Oliver's bag had suddenly darted to the left. Durrie automatically looked in the direction the dot was going.

There was a ridge, but not much else. He glanced back at the tracker. The dot had stopped only halfway up. Was Oliver being chased? Had he seen something and was trying to hide? What?

Then Durrie heard it. A car. But it wasn't particularly close, so Oliver couldn't have been running from it. No, but if he got up on the ridge, he might be able to see it.

Dear God, please tell me he's not going to pull something this stupid.

Durrie pulled out the map he'd stuck into his pocket earlier. A half-mile ahead was a little used country road. That had to be the one the car was on.

"Dammit," he said as he put the map away.

He knew the dirt road was the only way he would be able to make up the time. He moved onto it and began to run. Unfortunately, doing so meant he couldn't monitor the tracker at the same time, and, a few minutes later, he almost blew it when Oliver suddenly emerged from the trees fifty feet ahead of him.

Durrie darted to the edge of the road so that he would blend in with the trees and slowed to a near stop, unsure if he wanted Oliver to know he was following him yet. Thankfully, the kid's attention was focused in the other direction and soon he disappeared around a curve. Once more Durrie picked up his speed. When Oliver came into sight again, Durrie saw that he was standing in the middle of the road near the intersection.

The car sounded close. A minute away, if that.

Just as Durrie was about to yell at the kid to take cover, Oliver did it on his own, moving into the woods on the right. Glad to see that Oliver hadn't lost all of his senses, Durrie entered the woods, too, making a rapid arc around Oliver's position, then hunching down at the edge of the forest, fifty feet further along the country road. He arrived just in time to see a blue Nissan sedan come into view.

* * * * *

Binoculars would be nice right about now, Jake thought, his eyes locked on the sedan.

Though the sun hadn't gone down yet, the shadows had begun to get long, and it was difficult to make out any details inside the car. As it drew closer he could make out the basic shape of someone in the driver's seat. There was no similar shape in the passenger seat, or in the back.

The car moved closer and closer, its speed maddeningly slow.

When it was only a few car lengths away, Jake could see that the person behind the wheel was a woman, and that all the other seats did appear empty. But by the time he decided to step out from his hiding spot, the car had already passed. He ran out into the middle of the road, and began waving his arms, hoping the woman would check her mirrors.

For a moment he thought he'd been too late, then brake lights flashed, and the car began to slow.

She saw me, he thought, allowing himself a smile. *She—*

No, he was wrong. She hadn't seen him. The reason she was braking was so she could turn down the dirt road that eventually led to the cabin. He started running toward her, waving his arms furiously. Halfway through her turn, she glanced out her window. Her eyes opened wide in surprise, and it seemed as if she said something, then the car's brakes slammed on.

Jake had paused when she looked at him, but then, just as he was about to start toward her again, he detected movement in the back seat. At the same instant, the woman looked over her shoulder, as if reacting to the same source. When she looked at Jake again, her eyes were wide with fear.

The woman *wasn't* alone. There was someone hidden in the back, someone who apparently terrified her.

Jake felt the urge to turn and run, but there was no way he could. The look of fear on the woman's face rooted him to the spot. He realized in an instant she was being held against her will, her passenger controlling her from behind somehow.

Jake silently cursed himself for not actually carrying the gun Durrie had given him. It was still in the bag on his back. He reached up and started to ease the satchel off his shoulder, but it was only partially off when the driver's door opened and the woman half jumped, half fell out. She was small and looked Hispanic, maybe in her thirties. As she pushed herself up off the road, Jake could see that she had scraped her hands and arms.

She took a step to run, but a voice from inside the vehicle yelled, "Don't!" She stopped. "Ask him!"

The woman looked at Jake, her eyes pleading for help.

"Ask!" the voice yelled.

"Where... where's Dory?" she said to Jake.

"Durrie!" the voice corrected her. "Where the fuck is Durrie?"

Chapter 29

Durrie pulled the rifle off his shoulder, and aimed it at the car. Even from eighty feet away, he could clearly hear the shouted question, and immediately knew it was Larson. Unfortunately, Oliver and the woman blocked the entire back half of the car from Durrie's view. He needed to reposition.

"Where is he?" Larson shouted.

"I don't know," Oliver said.

"Bullshit. You were with him. Where *is* he?"

The woman, all but forgotten now, was glancing at the car, probably thinking she could make a run for it.

Durrie slipped several feet back into the woods, then started running parallel to the road, hoping he could get to a better spot and end things now before the woman took action.

"I don't *know* where he is," Oliver said again, then paused. "You're the one he said was coming after him, aren't you?"

"What do you mean?" Larson asked.

"He told me last night someone was coming for him. He seemed... annoyed."

Durrie moved back to the edge, using a cluster of saplings as cover. Oliver had moved several steps closer to the car. Durrie checked the woman, and watched as she eyed the car again, then the woods.

Don't do it, he thought. He wasn't overly concerned with the woman as an individual, but the loss of any civilian life always made things difficult.

"Why would he tell *you* that?" Larson asked.

"I think he was trying to scare me," Oliver said, stepping closer again.

Durrie raised the rifle and trained the scope on the car. He could now see a small mirror hovering inside the back of the vehicle. Larson was obviously using it to see what was going on while staying out of sight.

"But when I woke up this morning, the door to my cell was open," Oliver went on.

"Woke up where?"

"In a cabin. Down the road you were turning on."

The woman took a small, tentative step away from the vehicle.

Dammit, Durrie thought.

Oliver seemed to notice it, too. As he spoke again, he took another couple steps closer, angling, this time, toward the woman. "When I went upstairs, the place was empty. My guess is he's not coming back."

"I don't believe you."

Oliver shrugged. "Okay. Feel free to go check. You're already headed in the right direction."

The woman took another, larger step.

Stop!

"Maybe I will," Larson said. "Maybe I'll have you drive me."

"I'm not headed that way."

If Durrie wasn't sold on the kid before, he was now. Oliver came off as a regular guy, average in so many ways, but he was far from that. And the balls on him...

Of course, Durrie would never tell him that.

"I don't care which way you're headed," Larson said. "If I want you to drive me, you will."

Durrie could put a couple bullets through the door. He *might* hit Larson, but if he didn't, things could go very bad very quickly.

The woman started leaning into another step.

"Don't do it, Mrs. West. Another step and that bullet I promised earlier will be on its way."

"Please," she said. "Please. I've done exactly what you've wanted. Just let me go."

Durrie stared at her for a moment.

"Please," she repeated.

* * * * *

"Please," the woman repeated.

Jake knew he had to do something. He knew it was the dark-haired man—the guy Durrie called Larson—in the back seat of the car. He had used the woman as cover to bring him here. She wasn't part of this. She didn't deserve to get hurt.

Almost before he realized he was doing it, Jake jerked to the left, and moved quickly between the woman and the car. "Run!" he shouted at her.

"Not very smart," Larson said.

Jake looked back at the car. "I'll take you wherever you need to go. You don't need her."

Larson said nothing for a moment, then, "Durrie was wrong. You wouldn't have fit in this world."

Jake's eyes narrowed. "What are you talking about?"

"He didn't tell you he was planning on recruiting you? Interesting. Maybe he got smart and changed his mind."

"Recruit me?"

"Probably would have never even considered it if he'd known about your weakness for civilians."

Jake said nothing, his mind still processing the idea that Durrie had been trying to hire him.

"Me?" Larson said. "I'm smarter than that. A rookie cop, still full of ideals? I knew it was something I could exploit."

The hairs on the back of Jake's neck began to tingle, not from what Larson said, but from a sense he wasn't standing there alone.

"It was so nice of you to come down here and make it easy for us," Larson said. Just as Jake started to turn to look behind him, he heard the crack of a gun.

* * * * *

Bad move, Durrie thought as Oliver jumped between the woman and the car.

"Run!" Oliver told her.

The woman took a few steps, but as soon as Larson started talking again, she stopped.

The look of hopelessness that had been etched on her face disappeared. It was replaced by the hardened eyes and disdainful smile of a professional. She turned toward Jake, her back now to Durrie's position.

Silently, she reached around and unzipped a secret pocket on the waistband of her billowing skirt. From inside she withdrew a Beretta Bobcat—a .22 caliber, palm-sized pistol. Not great for distance work, but more than enough firepower when held to the back of someone's head.

She took two silent steps toward Jake, listened to the conversation for a moment, then started to raise her weapon.

Durrie pulled the rifle's trigger.

The force of the bullet hitting the back of her head thrust her forward a few feet before dropping her to the ground.

"Down!" Durrie yelled, as he put three quick shots into the side of the car.

* * * * *

At the sound of the shot, Jake whipped around. He was just in time to see the woman collapse to the ground barely a foot away from him.

"Down!" a voice shouted from the trees. It sounded like Durrie.

Immediately three more shots rang out, whacking into the car.

Jake dropped to the ground.

He heard a car door open, then footsteps running on pavement.

Two more shots flew through the air, then Durrie was suddenly crouching at his side.

"You need to help me get her off the street."

"You... shot her," Jake said.

"Yes," Durrie said. "I did." He grabbed Jake's chin and turned him toward the woman. "Look."

Jake did. She was face down in a puddle of blood. There was a hole where the bullet had entered the back of her head. He didn't want to think about what it looked like where it came out.

"The hand," Durrie said.

Jake moved his gaze to her hands. The left one was empty, but in her right was a small pistol.

"She was about to do to you what I did to her," Durrie told him.

"That's... not possible," Jake said. "She... she was—"

"Working with Larson," Durrie finished. "Now help me. We can't leave her here for someone else to find." He grabbed the woman's arms. "Get her feet. But stay low. He's still out there."

Numb, Jake did as he was told, and half a minute later they'd stowed the body ten feet deep in the woods.

Durrie then pulled off the long rifle that was on his shoulder and moved over to the car. Pointing at what was left of the woman in the street, he said, "Dig a hole and dump the big chunks in, then use some dirt to cover up the blood."

"What am I supposed to carry them with?" Jake asked.

"You've got hands, don't you?"

Jake tried not to think about what he was doing as he picked up the pieces of the woman that were no longer attached to her, then carried them back to the trees and buried them. As he covered the blood per instructions, Durrie started to roll the sedan the rest of the way off the road.

"I'm done," Jake announced, after he dropped the last handful of dirt onto the spot where the puddle had been.

Durrie glanced back, and nodded. "Good. Now help me with this," he said, indicating the car. "We need to get it far enough down the dirt road so no one passing by will see it."

Once they finished, it was almost as if nothing had happened. Even a cop could have driven by and he would have seen nothing that would have made him stop.

Jake glanced back at the woods where the woman's body lay. "I thought for sure she was just trying to get away. I believed her. What...what do we do now?"

Durrie looked into the forest west of their position. "Either he finds us, or we find him. What would you rather?"

Jake's first thought was to get in the car and drive away as fast as they could. But something held him back from voicing it, something that said even if he was able to get away today, Larson would still come after him tomorrow, or the next day, or the one after that.

He gave Durrie's question more serious consideration. "Let him find us," he finally said.

Durrie glanced at him, a curious look on his face. "Why?"

"He wants to kill us, so he'll be looking for us anyway. Let him do the work. We can be ready for him."

"Where did you learn that?"

Jake shook his head. "Nowhere. It's just logical, right?"

Durrie responded with a grunt and a nod. Then he said, "We'll go back down the dirt road a bit. I spotted a small clearing not far from that ridge you climbed up. We can use that."

The mention of the ridge caused Jake to ask, "Why did you follow me?"

Durrie frowned, then slung the rifle back over his shoulder. "Don't make me regret it."

Without another word, he jogged into the woods.

For half a second, Jake thought again about getting into the car. He could get away not just from Larson now, but Durrie, too. He could bring the authorities back here. He could show them the woman, and where he'd buried the remainder of her face. But the thought passed as quickly as it came. He was staying, and he knew it.

He didn't dwell on the reason why. He wasn't sure he wanted to know.

So he headed after the man who had been holding him prisoner, the man who had just saved his life.

Chapter 30

By the time they reached the clearing, twilight had settled over the mountains. There, on the eastern side of the range, the shadows were deep and black, as if night had fully engulfed the ground but not yet the entire sky.

Durrie halted next to a downed tree, setting his pack on it. From inside he pulled out a pouch, then removed two items and handed one to Jake.

"So we can stay in touch," Durrie said.

"We're splitting up?" Jake asked, surprised.

Durrie looked at him for a second, then nodded at the gear in Jake's hand. "I'll leave it up to you to figure out where the earpiece goes. That little square piece attaches to your collar. See the switch on the bottom?"

Jake twisted it around until he found what Durrie was talking about.

"Flip it into the other position. That turns everything on."

Jake did so.

"On the side's a pressure button. In, your mic's on. Out and it's off. Since you're not used to the equipment, just leave it on at all times."

Nodding, Jake activated the mic, then attached the square to his collar. Once that was done, he inserted the earpiece. "You didn't answer my question."

Durrie had just finished checking the mags on the two handguns he'd pulled out of his bag. As he shoved the last mag back into place, he looked out at the clearing. "I want you to move through the woods and over on that side." He pointed across the clearing at the side farthest from the dirt road. "When you get there, find a dry branch about an inch thick." He looked at his watch. "In exactly

five minutes, snap it like you would if you'd accidentally stepped on it. But only once. Quiet after that."

"You took my watch."

Durrie frowned at him. "You know how to count, don't you?"

"What are you going to do?"

From Durrie's pause, Jake sensed the man wasn't used to sharing his plans.

"I'll be on the ridge on the other side of the road," Durrie said. "When I see him go by, I'll follow him. Once he's between us, we'll take him down. If you end up firing your weapon, try not to shoot me." He strapped his pack back on. "You can start counting now."

He took off.

With little choice, Jake headed around the perimeter of the clearing, counting down the seconds in his head. On the way, he found a branch that would do what Durrie had requested. He reached his assigned position with about thirty seconds to spare.

Propping the branch on a rock, he raised his foot, holding it in the air as the final seconds ticked off. Three... two... one... *crack!*

Even as the sound was still reverberating across the clearing, Jake started looking for a place to hide. He found a spot about thirty feet away, where he could see both the clearing and the area where he'd snapped the branch.

He wasn't nervous, in fact, far from it. He was...energized, he realized. Focused, alive, and energized.

* * * * *

Durrie was scrambling up the ridge when he heard the crack. He checked his watch. Right on time. Durrie was the one who was slow.

He saw a shallow depression to his left, and angled over to it. He had barely lain down in it when he spotted a dark shadow race across the dirt road. He brought his rifle around, but was too late.

Son of a bitch! He'd been expecting to catch Larson coming over the ridge, putting Durrie in the position to end it right there. He hadn't expected to see the other man already halfway to the clearing. So much for his plan.

He quickly got to his feet and started down the hill. As he did, he clicked on his mic.

"Oliver?" he whispered.

"Here," the kid answered back.

"I just spotted him on the road. He's heading in your direction."

"Okay."

"Don't do anything stupid. In fact, just stay down. I'm coming in behind him."

"Got it."

"I mean it."

"I said, I got it."

Durrie clicked off his mic.

When he reached the road, he paused. This was the most dangerous part. Larson could be just on the other side waiting for someone to show up. Though it was now full dark, the mountain sky was full of brightly shining stars, making the road the one place a person wouldn't be able to hide.

Crouching low, Durrie made a quick dash to the other side. No bullets, no sound of a gun. Just the breeze through the top of the trees, and the underlying buzz of insects.

Durrie made his way as quickly as he could toward the clearing, while being careful not to make any noise that would betray his position.

"I think I see something," Oliver reported.

Durrie pushed the mic button twice so that the radio would broadcast an audible click. It was a signal to say that he heard, but couldn't talk. He hoped Oliver would understand.

Apparently, he did. "Movements on the side nearest the road," Oliver said. "It was in the trees, but I don't see it now."

Durrie double-clicked again. He wanted to say, "Get the hell out of there," but he was too near the clearing to risk it.

He dropped into a half crouch to lower his profile as he weaved through the trees, then stopped when he finally spotted the clearing twenty feet away. He had taken a much more direct path than Larson's to get there, so there was a chance the assassin hadn't reached that point yet.

Durrie searched the area, but nothing caught his attention. After several seconds, he rose, intending to move closer to Oliver's position. That's when he finally heard a noise. But it wasn't a footstep or clothes brushing against a tree. It was the *whoosh* of something moving through the air.

Instinct kicked in, and even as he turned toward the sound, he dropped his head down and raised his arm as protection. The move probably prevented his skull from being crushed, but the glancing blow of the thick branch against the side of his head was enough to knock him out.

* * * * *

Jake heard a noise off to his left. A *thwack* followed by something falling to the ground.

"Durrie?" he whispered. "Was that you?"

No response.

"I heard something. If it's Larson, he's about fifty yards from me."

Still nothing.

Jake's hand involuntarily tightened on the grip of his pistol. "Durrie?" he said again, but received the same lack of response.

This was not good.

He considered investigating the noise, but held his position. The sound could have very well been part of the same kind of trap he and Durrie were trying to use on Larson.

"Hello? Hello? Is anyone there?" Larson said playfully over the radio. "Hello? Is that you out there, Officer Oliver? If so, I have your friend here, the one you said made a run for it from the cabin. You lied to me, Officer. I'm impressed."

Jake pulled his earpiece out, holding it close enough so that he could hear anything coming over it. When Larson spoke again, he listened carefully to the forest to see if he could determine where the man was.

"I'm sure your conscientious mind would be glad to know Durrie's still alive. Whether he stays that way is up to you."

There was a faint sound coming from the direction where Jake had heard the thwack. He put the receiver back in his ear. Then, leaving his bag, he moved deeper into the woods, and began circling around so he'd come at the sound from the side opposite the clearing.

"Here's how it's going to go," Larson said. "I know you're close to the meadow. That little trick you tried to lure me in with? It did the job. Here I am. Now, step out of the trees, and walk all the way to the center."

Jake needed to keep him engaged, so he whispered, "Why would I do that?"

"Officer Oliver, so good to hear your voice. Why? Because I'll kill him otherwise."

Jake paused behind a dying tree. "Why would you think I'd care? He kidnapped me."

Larson laughed. "I'm not buying that. You've got a cop's mind, which means you can't let someone die if you think there's something you can do about it."

Jake could hear the man's voice ahead, not quite loud enough to make out the words without the aid of the radio, but definitely recognizable as Larson. "I'm not a cop anymore."

"You think getting fired changes the way you think? I know your kind. I know what goes on in a cop's head like yours. It's all about saving lives."

Jake said nothing, worried he was getting too close to respond without giving away his position.

"What's wrong, Officer? A little too close to the bone?" He paused. "Enough chat. Move into the meadow where I can see you, and do it now."

Jake circled to the left, moving closer as he did.

"Oliver!" Larson shouted. Jake froze, thinking he'd been spotted. But then the man said, "Stop wasting time, and move out where I can see you! Goddammit! You do *not* want me to come looking for you!"

Jake could now see Larson standing next to a low, dark rock. Though the man's tone indicated a person losing control, his body language told a different story. The shouts were an act, Jake saw. Larson was very much under control.

Using a wide pine tree to cover most of his body, Jake leaned out just enough to take a better look. Larson was looking toward the meadow, his gun in his hand by his side.

"Oliver! Now!" He looked bored as he yelled the words.

Movement. Not Larson, but at his feet. It was a rock, only it wasn't. It was Durrie.

As Durrie tried to stagger to his feet, Larson put a foot on his back, looking like he was going to push him down, but then he paused and moved his foot away.

With his empty hand, he pulled Durrie up. "Tell him to walk into the meadow where I can see him," Larson ordered. He plucked the mic off his collar, and held it out to Durrie. "Tell him."

"Go to hell," Durrie said.

Larson smiled. "Tell him."

Jake raised his gun.

"I said, go to hell."

Larson shoved Durrie to his knees, then whipped the gun around and pointed it at Durrie's head.

"Drop it," Jake said.

Both Durrie and Larson looked over.

"Well, how about that?" Larson said. "Nice job, Officer. I see Durrie's done a little work with you."

"Drop it," Jake repeated.

Smiling broadly, Larson quickly yanked Durrie back to his feet, turning him into a human shield. "Why don't you drop yours?"

Jake didn't move.

"Is that what they taught you at the academy? To endanger the life of a hostage?"

"Put the gun down," Jake ordered.

"You are one big pain in the ass, you know that?" Larson said. "I should have terminated you the same day I removed your girlfriend."

After everything that had been going on, Jake's mind took a second to process what Larson had said. When it did, a chill overtook his body.

No! Dear, God! No!

Larson tilted his head to the side. "What? You didn't know? What do you think happens to people who get involved in things they aren't supposed to? If you hadn't involved her, you would have been the only one who needed to be dealt with. But you did, so..." He shrugged.

Jake glanced at Durrie. "Is he telling the truth? Is Berit... is she...?"

"Yes," Durrie said. "It was...unsanctioned."

"Unsanctioned? What the hell does that mean?" Jake asked.

Larson let out a laugh. "It means no one else had the balls to make the call so I made it myself. Same with you and this old asshole. I'm cleaning up trash all over the place." His face hardened. "The end's inevitable. This is what I do, and I'm very good at it. So toss the damn gun, and step out so we can finish this."

Jake didn't move, his eyes locked on Larson's.

"You can run if you want. That's an option, too. But that will only delay the end by a few minutes. Could be fun, though."

Jake still didn't move.

"Come on, Officer Oliver. What are you going to do? Shoot me through the hostage?"

Larson may have been a professional, but like Durrie had told Jake before, the assassin was a little too impressed with his own skills, which explained why he was woefully underestimating a twenty-two-year-old, ex-rookie cop.

"No," Jake said. "We're trained never to shoot the hostage."

The bullet that left Jake's gun passed even closer to Durrie's head than the one back at the cabin. But, as before, it missed Durrie and hit what was behind him.

Chapter 31

Jake's otherwise excellent memory went a bit sideways after Larson crumpled to the ground. He remembered helping Durrie to Larson's car, then suddenly they were back at the cabin.

Berit was dead. Berit was *dead*.

She had died helping *him*.

Yes, logically, he knew he wasn't the one who pulled the trigger, but this wasn't the first time in his life someone close to him had died because of his actions, at least in part. A big reason why he'd left home at seventeen was to prevent his sister from suffering a similar fate, and yet now someone almost as close to him was dead. He could not deny the truth. It was his fault.

Oddly, the thing that really should have upset him—that he'd killed someone—barely bothered him at all. It was something that needed to be done, that's all. Revenge, yes, and a little bit of self-defense, but also simply a necessary act. And one, he realized, he would not have hesitated doing again if the situation had been replayed.

Jake began returning to the here and now just about when several cars pulled up in front of the cabin. Half a dozen men piled into the main room, while several others remained outside, watching the woods.

He had no idea what time it was, but it was still dark.

Durrie and one of the men went downstairs for almost half an hour. When they came back up, the man gave the others instructions that included collecting the bodies of Larson and the woman, and cleaning out and scrubbing down the basement and the main part of the cabin.

"Come on," Durrie said to Jake.

"Where?"

"Debrief."

Jake had no energy left to fight anything, so he allowed himself to be led out to one of the cars and driven away.

The debrief turned out to last three days. The location appeared to be a remote portion of a military base. Jake didn't know for sure, because at some point during the trip there he had fallen asleep, not waking again until after they'd arrived.

The questioning was never harsh, but it was always thorough. The first day, it was conducted by a man and woman. On the second and third days, his interrogator was a different man who came in alone. He was older than the other two, maybe in his forties, and was short with a bald head.

"You can call me Peter," he'd said the first time they met, but he gave no other information.

Peter's questions seemed to be focused on the same areas that had drawn Durrie's interest back at the cabin: how Jake had made his connections in the Goodman Ranch Road murder, what made him think the way he had, what his conclusions had been. The only other area that Peter seemed interested in was the events in the woods with Larson.

On the fourth day, Jake's door opened and the man and woman from the first day were back. When they came in this time they didn't sit.

"A car will be here in a few minutes to take you to the airport," the woman said. "You'll be given a free ticket to wherever you would like to go."

"We strongly suggest that you don't return to Phoenix anytime soon," the man said.

"My stuff's in Phoenix," Jake told him.

"Actually, it's not," the woman said. "Currently it's all in storage. After you're settled, call this number and everything will be shipped to you." She handed him a card.

The man clasped his hands. "Mr. Oliver, you possess knowledge of certain events that I'm sure you understand must remain secret. This is a national security issue, and one we expect you to honor."

Jake had already become aware that everything Durrie told him back at the cabin was true. That what he'd stumbled upon on Goodman Ranch Road was not connected to gangs or drugs or anything like that. He could box all that up in his mind and forget it, but there was one thing he couldn't let go of. "Berit Davies was killed. She was a good officer, and my friend. She doesn't deserve to be forgotten."

The woman took a deep breath. "We understand that this is a concern of yours."

"A *major* concern," Jake corrected her.

She forced a smile. "A major concern. But I hope you can also see that we can't let news of what actually happened get out."

"You mean that one of your assassins took it upon himself to *murder* her?"

Both the man and the woman looked suddenly uncomfortable.

"Technically," the man said, "he wasn't *our* assassin."

Jake could barely stifle a disbelieving laugh. "So you're just going to cover it up?"

"Welcome to the real world, Mr. Oliver," the man said. "The way things actually work. The people out there..." He moved his hand around, indicating the world beyond the walls. "They don't want to know anything about it. They want their lives just the way they have them now. If they knew how the world really operated, there would be a hell of a lot more chaos. Our job is to prevent that, to keep the civilians in their happy places, ignorant and content to be so."

"But you can't just make what happened to Berit disappear. She has friends, and probably family. *I'm* not going to let her be forgotten."

"And she won't be," the woman said quickly. "Officially, she just transferred temporarily into an FBI program in need of undercover agents that fit her description. She will die in the line of duty, Mr. Oliver. She will be awarded posthumous citations. The Phoenix Police Department will give her a funeral befitting a fallen officer. There will be a scholarship fund set up at the high school she attended, to be awarded to female graduates interested in law enforcement. She will *not* be forgotten. In fact, she will be well remembered. You have my word."

After several moments of silence, Jake finally nodded. But he wouldn't blindly accept their words. He would wait and see, and if they failed to deliver on any of the promises, he would break his silence.

"This is for you," the man said as he reached inside his suit jacket and pulled out an envelope.

Jake took it. "What's this?"

"For the past week you have been working as a consultant for a Colorado firm. This is compensation for your time."

Jake opened the envelope and looked inside. There was a cashier's check in the amount of twenty thousand dollars.

"We should go now," the woman said. "Please, this way."

They led Jake out of the building and over to a dark sedan sitting at the curb. The man opened the back door. "Go to the Vargas Rental Car booth when you get to the airport. Ask for Ms. Bryant. When she comes, just tell her who you are and where you want to go, and she'll take care of it. Best of luck."

Jake climbed in. As soon as the door was closed behind him, the car pulled away from the curb.

"I take it they treated you well?"

Jake turned at the sound of the familiar voice, and looked at the driver. Durrie was looking at him in the rearview mirror.

Jake stared at him for a moment, then turned his gaze out the window, not responding.

For ten minutes, neither man said anything. Finally unable to contain himself any longer, Jake leaned forward. "Were you ever going to tell me about Berit?"

"I was."

"Everything?"

"Yes."

"I don't believe you."

"I can't prove it, but I can tell you now if you'd like."

Jake fell silent once more, then said, "Tell me."

Durrie did.

* * * * *

After Durrie finished the story, Jake thought about all the things he could have done to keep Berit alive. But it was a futile exercise. Eventually, he forced himself to think about where he might go to take his mind off the pain Berit's memory caused him.

The coast, he thought. He'd start in San Diego, buy a cheap car, then drive north, stopping whenever he wanted. The check he'd been given, combined with what he already had in the bank, would last awhile.

Nearly an hour and a half passed from the moment they'd left the base to when Durrie pulled into what turned out to be a small, regional airport in western Nebraska. He stopped the sedan at the curb in front of the single building that served as the terminal, then turned in his seat and looked at Jake.

Without preamble, he spouted off a series of numbers. "Did you get that?" he asked when he was done.

Jake shrugged, then repeated the numbers.

"And you'll remember it?" Durrie asked.

"Do I need to?"

"That's up to you."

Jake's eyes narrowed. "What is it?"

"When you start to get bored and want to do something interesting with your life, call that number."

"Yours?"

Durrie dipped his head in assent.

"So you're still trying to recruit me."

"I'm offering you the chance to learn about a whole different world."

"Your world? I don't know," Jake said. He reached for the door. "I think I might have to pass."

"That's up to you."

Jake climbed out of the car without saying anything else, then watched Durrie drive away.

The coast. That's where I'll go.

But as he flew west, it wasn't his new life that he thought about. It was the telephone number.

Epilogue

October 1996

Jake was exhausted. Durrie had kept him going fifteen, sixteen, and sometimes even eighteen hours a day—training and learning and practicing. In the four months since he'd become an apprentice cleaner, he'd worked harder than he ever had.

And he'd never been more satisfied.

"Well?" Durrie asked.

They were in an abandoned building in Chicago. In an old office, Durrie had set up a sample job scene, complete with blood, bullet holes and a body he'd obtained somewhere. Jake had been given one minute to survey the scene, then come out and describe everything he saw.

He took a second to recall the room, then recited the details to Durrie.

"That it?" Durrie asked.

"Yes."

"Not bad, Johnny," Durrie said.

He had started calling Jake Johnny from nearly day one.

"You're going to have to create a new identity," Durrie had explained at the time. "I don't care what it is, but I don't want to get used to calling you by your real name, so you're Johnny for now."

In the time since then, Durrie had been pushing him to come up with a new name, something they could use to create a legend around. The veteran cleaner kept reminding him that he couldn't go out on any actual fieldwork until he did.

But Jake had been stuck. Whatever name he chose he would have to live with for a long time, so he wanted it to be right. The problem was he couldn't come up with anything he liked.

Until today.

A month earlier, Durrie had given him a small metal lockbox.

"I shouldn't have this at all," Durrie had said. "Not even sure I know why I still do. I guess because, well, because I knew you would want it."

"What is it?" Jake asked.

"It was your friend's," Durrie said. "Berit's."

Jake had been unable to bring himself to look in the box that day, or all the days after until that very morning. At first, it had felt like he was doing something he shouldn't, but by the time he finished he no longer felt that.

Durrie went back into the staged room, added and changed a few things, then had Jake run through the exercise again. Finally, they cleaned up the room like they would for a real job. When everything was to Durrie's satisfaction, he nodded and said, "Let's go, Johnny."

"It's not Johnny," Jake corrected, deciding it was time. "It's Jonathan."

Durrie arched an eyebrow. "Oh, really? Is there a last name, Jonathan? Or is that it?"

"There is," Jake said.

"I'm all ears."

Jake ignored the sarcastic tone in his mentor's voice. Instead he thought about Berit, and the box, and her parents' will that had been inside.

To our daughter, Berit Quinn Davies, we leave...

Jonathan Quinn opened his mouth, and for the first time, he spoke his new name aloud.

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