

The Santini Vendetta

Kyle MacDonald, prequel

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Dedication



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This book is a work of fiction. Names, places, characters, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

This book is written in Canadian English, except where the use of U.S. English terms were appropriate.



To Kay Clark, for her diligent editing and suggestions.

A grudge leads to a deadly feud;
a ransom that cannot be paid;
a showdown with a powerful Mafia family.

Chapter 1

Playa Hermosa, Costa Rica. January 2005

Kyle gazed out to sea across the white sands of Playa Hermosa. Gulls hung suspended in the air on the ocean breeze, occasionally diving into the water when spying a tasty morsel. Small boats rocked and pulled on their tethers while heads of swimmers bobbed like corks in the rolling surf. A cacophony of sounds invaded his ears—the gentle sound of the waves lapping on the shore; birds chirping to compete with the exuberant voices of children playing; background music from the hotel's sound system—all soothing sounds as he closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep under the large umbrella that sheltered him from the merciless sun. The smells of the ocean, mingled with that of suntan lotion and bougainvillea, filled his nostrils. It was a rare time for relaxation for Kyle as owner of the Hotel Playa Hermosa, and he was thankful for the reduced occupancy during the low season. Images of Anna, his executive assistant, came into his mind, but he quickly dismissed them and forced his thinking to the proposed renovations he planned to make. The distant sound of a jet caused Kyle to open his eyes briefly, and he saw contrails drawing white lines across the sky, going to places he could only dream about with Anna. He was aware that his infatuation with her was something he had to keep under control.

Kyle had made a success of the hotel over the last few years. He enjoyed improving it each year and loved mingling with the guests, and listening to their

stories. A major hotel chain had expressed interest in the location, but he wasn't about to sell yet—maybe in a couple of years.

Several men wandered around the property in suits, trying to be nonchalant. But their constant glancing in all directions and the telltale coil of wire dangling from one ear gave them away as security guards. Oversize jackets concealed Uzi machine guns and holstered pistols. One of his repeat customers was a Chicago mobster, Giuseppe (Peppe) Santini, who liked to chill out at this specific location. He rented the whole top floor of the hotel for him and his entourage, which included his wife and children. Of course, he stayed in the honeymoon suite—a large and opulent suite of rooms that Kyle had specially fit up for his high-end clients. Peppe rented the fifth floor beneath it for the security team. He had several business interests in Central America, and travelled by helicopter from the hotel to Tobias Bolaños International Airport in San José, where he kept his Gulfstream private jet. From there he would fly to the major cities in Panama, Honduras, San Salvador, and Mexico, then back to Chicago.

Peppe, like many second generation mobsters, was born into wealth, but unlike his father, he generated wealth through legitimate investments. Graduating from Oxford College in England with a Master's degree in economics and business management, Peppe had diversified his investments into real estate, specifically, shopping centres. Drawn to the culture in Latin America along with learning Spanish in his early years, he decided that it was a good place to invest in the retail sector. His analysis of the market showed that there was a steady increase in discretionary spending in most Central American countries, except Nicaragua. This meant an increase in retail outlets resulting in a demand for shopping centres. The threat that on-line shopping had on the bricks-and-mortar retail businesses caused concern, but all indications were that a strong market for growth existed.

One of Kyle's staff awakened him from his nap.

"Señor MacDonald. The internet is down and the phone lines are out."

Kyle was a little agitated at being awakened over something so trivial. "Okay, use your cell phone to report it."

"That's the problem, *señor*, there is no cell phone signal either."

Now that was strange. The reception at the best of times was sporadic, but two or three bars always showed when he made calls. He picked his iPhone from the table and looked at the screen. The top left icon read 'no signal'. At that moment, the staccato sounds of automatic gunfire permeated the quiet of the beach. People screamed and ran back to the hotel for cover, grabbing infants in their arms as they abandoned their idyllic setting. Adrenaline pumped as Kyle grabbed the staff member and dived for cover under the small table beside his lounge chair and peered out, looking around for the source of the chaos. A *pop, pop*, sounded and one guard seemed to stumble and fall to the ground while another attempted to return fire, but a subsequent *pop, pop*, rang out, and the guard fell to the ground. Kyle was unsure where Peppe was, but suspected that he may be the target of the attack. Kyle and the staff member were now the only ones on the beach with three other guards, who were lowering their weapons and raising their hands. Several black-clad men toting AK-47s emerged from the nearby bushes and walked up to the guards, securing their weapons and forcing them to lie down with their hands

behind their heads. Peppe had six guards and with two shot, which meant that there was one guard unaccounted for. Three attackers entered the hotel while two attended to the guards. A sixth man walked up to Kyle.

“Mr. MacDonald. *Buenos Días.*”

Kyle got up from the below the table, brushing sand from his body. “Do I know you?” he said, surprised to hear the man mention his name. The staff member trembled beside him.

“No, you don’t. But you will.”

“What is it you want?” Kyle asked. “What’s the meaning of shooting up my hotel and killing guests?”

Kyle’s concern was for the guests and staff, especially Anna, and wondered where she was.

“No one has died—yet. Simply a tranquilizer. What is going on will become clear soon enough. In the meantime, I would like you to return to the hotel.”

Kyle and his staff member made their way to the hotel, the man following behind him. They entered through the glass doors of the restaurant and headed for the lobby. Two men were herding guests into a conference room appended to the lobby.

“Is that your Cadillac?” the man said as they walked by Kyle’s car. He was referring to the 1991 Sedan de Ville Brougham parked in the reserved spot.

“Yes, it is.”

“Nice car. You are an aficionado of older cars?”

“Not really.” Kyle said, reluctant to engage in a conversation with him.

“I have a 1970 Boss 302 Mustang.”

Who cares, thought Kyle, and didn’t respond.

The stranger instructed Kyle to activate the Evac portion of the fire alarm system, and the man grabbed the microphone. He addressed the occupants in English:

Ladies and gentlemen, this is not a drill. You are all to assemble in the ground floor conference room immediately. Armed personnel have taken over the hotel, and we will shoot on sight anyone found in their room or anywhere else on the hotel property.

He repeated the message in Spanish and turned to Kyle with a smug look on his face. “That should get their attention. Now señor MacDonald, please join the others and take a seat.”

Kyle entered the conference room where they had arranged chairs for a meeting later that day. Many people still wore their bathing suits and huddled closely with their children, panicked looks on their faces. They herded several more people into the room who Kyle recognized as staff, along with a frightened Anna who came to Kyle’s side.

“What’s happening?” said Anna.

“I don’t know yet. I would suspect that they maybe after Peppe Santini.”

The man asked for the attention of the gathered people. “Ladies and gentlemen. My name is Alberto Caporalos. Do as we say and no one will get hurt. We have a mission that does not involve any of you, so please do not be foolish enough to get

in our way. We may be here for a while, so make yourselves as comfortable as you can.

“We have blocked the road to the hotel, so if you were expecting anyone, they will not be coming. We have shut the internet down and a signal blocker prevents any cell phone transmission, so essentially you are all incommunicado.”

Alberto grabbed a master key card from one of the hotel maids and handed it to one man.

“Okay Ruben, take Daniel and ferret out Peppe and his family.”

“Sure boss,” Daniel said, and the two of them each took a stairwell, scaling them to the top floor.

* * * * *

Ruben peered around the Exit door and noticed Daniel doing the same at the other end. There was no one else in the corridor and the Honeymoon Suite door, in front of Ruben, was closed. Daniel inched toward the suite until both men were standing beside the door.

Ruben slid the key card in the lock and several rounds of bullets peppered the door, sending splinters of wood flying into the corridor. He laid down, activating the lock again, this time depressing the handle. Another salvo of bullets greeted him, but they sailed harmlessly above him. He gave the door a shove and slid a clip of ammunition in the gap to keep it from closing.

“Come out with your hands up,” Ruben shouted.

More holes appeared in the door, so Daniel reached into one of his pockets and pulled out a stun grenade, pulled the pin and launched it through the door that Ruben had now pushed open with his foot. They ducked behind the wall and covered their ears. An ear-splitting explosion rocked the floor and a bright flash framed the partially open door. Ruben and Daniel rushed into the room and found a man writhing on the floor, in a foetal position, covering his ears. Daniel rolled him onto his stomach and cuffed him. Ruben shouted through the closed bedroom door, “Come out with your hands in the air.”

The door to the bedroom slowly opened, and a dazed Peppe walked out.

“Please don’t hurt my family,” he said, as his wife and three crying children came out of the bedroom. One child was an infant, and his wife carried it in her arms.

“We have no intention of hurting anyone,” said Ruben.

The woman said, clutching the infant, “I can’t put my hands up.”

“That’s okay,” said Ruben, patting Peppe down for any weapons. “Just keep your hands where I can see them.”

“What is the meaning of this?” Peppe said, forcing a brave front for the sake of his family.

“All in good time,” said Ruben. “All in good time.”

Chapter 2

In the conference room, another round of gunfire sounded, although subdued. Kyle surmised it was coming from the fifth or sixth floor as the attackers no doubt were being repelled by the last guard. A muffled explosion shook the hotel and rattled the windows. Guests cowered into each other as Alberto stood there smirking.

“Just a stun grenade. We expected some resistance.”

Moments later, two assailants ushered a dishevelled Peppe into the room with his hands behind his back, tethered with plasticuffs. Behind him, an attractive woman, with two young children clutching her legs and an infant in her arms, crept apprehensively along in front of two men holding pistols, their AKs slung over their shoulders.

“Ah! Our guest of honour. Ladies and gentlemen, meet Peppe Santini, one of Chicago’s finest. For those unfamiliar with the Santini family, they are notorious for extracting money from people using whatever illegal means open to them—drugs, prostitution, money laundering, gambling—you name it, they have done them all. Our friend here thinks, because he channels those ill-gotten gains into legitimate enterprises, that he does not differ from his father and other members who used illicit means to get their money. Much of it is blood money; many people died who opposed the Santinis, my father being one of them.”

With that announcement, Peppe, who was sitting with his head hung low, perked up.

“Of course,” Alberto continued speaking to Peppe, “you would know nothing about that. My father was working in one of your restaurants when your men approached him to distribute drugs. He refused and when he got home, two of your men were there with a gun to my mother’s head. I watched from behind the door as my father pleaded, in his limited English, to let my mother go. He agreed to be a distributor. But then the man holding my mother began fondling her breasts. My mother struggled with him and my father tried to intervene.” Alberto seemed to relive the incident in his mind as he told the story. “The bastard shot him in the chest and my mother tried to help him. He was bleeding heavily and my mother was crying ‘call an ambulance’. But the men ignored her, then left. I went to my father and I remember all the blood. My mother ran next door because they had a phone. She called the ambulance, but they arrived too late. I sat with my father as he bled out and died.”

There was an air of melancholy as Alberto told his story. Peppe hung his head again, more in shame this time because although not personally involved in this incident, he was aware of many more like it. He had always tried to distance himself from the actions of his family, but he was still using the proceeds to finance his legitimate business ventures. His brother maintained his involvement with the illegal activities and ran the drug distribution and prostitution ring from various clubs in the Chicago.

“So, what do you want?” Peppe whispered, not looking up.

“First, I want the men responsible for my father’s death. Then I want ten million dollars as compensation.”

Peppe raised his head and looked at Alberto.

“Firstly, I am sorry about your father, but I’m sure you know that I had absolutely nothing to do with that. As for your demands, I don’t think there is any

way that my father will give up the two men you claim killed your father. The money I will try to negotiate for you, but I'm not confident he will pay."

Alberto walked over to him and slapped him hard across the face. A dribble of blood appeared in the corner of Peppe's mouth, and there were gasps from the huddled guests. He grabbed him by the shirt, pulling him to his feet. Their faces were inches apart. "Understand one thing," he snarled, a small amount of spittle projecting from his mouth. "I have waited over 20 years to avenge my father's senseless murder. Your family with their high-priced lawyers had the police in their pockets and, what was the death of another illegal alien to them, anyway? They buried the investigation even though my mother and I identified the men from a line-up. They both had iron-clad alibis, no doubt arranged by your father, and we could not afford a lawyer to press the charges further."

He released his hold on Peppe's shirt and propelled him back into the chair, the chair tipping backward, crashing to the floor on its back. Peppe rolled out of the chair and stood defiantly in front of Alberto. Peppe now took the situation seriously.

"If you hurt me or any of my family," he said, his face red with anger, "we will hunt down you and your cohorts. Let my wife and children go and I will consider your demands; it is me you have an issue with, not them."

"How gallant and noble of you to protect your family. Actually, not only do I not have an issue with them, I don't even have an issue with you—you are all merely tools for me to get what I want. So no, I am not letting your wife and children go until your father meets my demands. And you are in no position to make demands on me."

Alberto pushed Peppe back into another chair.

"Make no mistake, I will carry out any threats I make. If your father wishes to trade the lives of his men for those of you, his daughter-in-law and grandchildren, then so be it. Your lives mean nothing to me, any more than my family's lives meant to the men who killed my father."

"So, how do we do this?" said Peppe resignedly.

"Do you have an office we can use?" Alberto said to Kyle.

"Sure, this way."

Alberto grabbed Peppe from the chair and propelled him after Kyle, following in step behind them. When they entered the office, Alberto again shoved Peppe into a chair. "This is how we are going to do this. Our good friend Kyle here will be the go-between."

"What?" said a befuddled Kyle. "Why me?"

"Because you know and have met Lorenzo, Peppe's father."

"I don't know him. I only met him once casually when he came to visit Peppe here at the hotel."

"But you have met him and he will recognize you as being part of the hotel. That way, there can be no doubt of his son's situation."

"But I am not a negotiator," pleaded Kyle.

"Come now Kyle, you do not do yourself justice. You completed bomb disposal training while in the Canadian Forces, and you successfully completed a hostage negotiation with a suicide bomber. Got him to give himself up and allow you to diffuse the bomb."

“But that was years ago. I only did that because it would have taken too much time for a trained negotiator to get there.”

“They commended you for your actions. Didn’t your commanding officer recommend you to join their negotiating team?”

“How do you know all this shit? That’s all confidential information on my service record.”

“I have my ways.”

“Take the woman and children back to their room,” Alberto ordered the men standing next to her.

“Peppe?” his wife called out.

“Go with them Sweetie, they will not hurt you.”

Mrs. Santini gathered the young boy and girl and ushered them out of the room with the infant in her arms.

“Mr. Santini. Call the helicopter back here. Tell the pilot you have someone going back to the San José Tobías Belaños Airport. Call your pilot and tell him to take *señor* MacDonald to Chicago. You will call your father and tell him my demands and tell him to expect Mr. MacDonald. Make it quite clear to him also that any harm to Mr. MacDonald will be met with the same actions on you.”

That made Kyle feel a little more comfortable.

“Pack your bags, Kyle. And pack warmly—it’s freezing in Chicago this time of year.”

Chapter 3

Kyle returned to his room and threw a few things into a suitcase, annoyed about being forced into this situation as a go-between for Alberto. Especially as it meant associating with a ruthless organization such as the Chicago Mafia. He closed the case, stuffed his passport into a pocket of his satchel, and slipped his arm through the shoulder strap, then proceeded downstairs to the lobby.

The Santinis were one of the most notorious Mafia families with ties back to the *Cosa Nostra* in Sicily, Italy. Born in Chicago, Lorenzo Santini is a first-generation American whose parents immigrated to the US in the early 1900s from Palermo, Sicily, when Mussolini cracked down on the Italian Mafia. It was during prohibition in the 1920s that the American Mafia flourished by providing illegal liquor to the public. One of the more famous characters in Chicago’s organized crime scene was Al Capone. It was from Al where Joe, Lorenzo’s father, learned the nefarious ways of the business as a member of his ‘family’ (family in the sense used for mafia organizations did not necessarily refer to blood relatives). Lorenzo, born in 1945, is the youngest of three children. He never knew his father, who died in a shoot-out with rival gangs when Lorenzo was two years old. His uncle helped his mother raise him, his brother and sister; all three being recruited into the ‘family’ after completing their education. Lorenzo was not one much for studying and, against the wishes of his mother and uncle, worked in the organization instead. He had no qualms about using ruthless methods to further the goals of the organization, and had to maintain a large entourage of bodyguards

to protect him from his numerous enemies. After less than twenty years, at 39, Lorenzo became the 'Don' of the family.

Lorenzo married in 1975 and fathered two legitimate children and one illegitimate, Peppe being the illegitimate child whose mother was, supposedly, a showgirl at one of his clubs. Peppe became a favourite of Lorenzo's and received the best of everything; education, exotic travel destinations and, when he turned 21, a brand new Ferrari. While Peppe appreciated the lavishing of such exotic gifts, it distanced him from his friends who drove beat-up Hondas or one of the more affordable 'pocket rockets' popular at the time. His older brothers were 'chips off the old block' and both followed in their father's footsteps. But Peppe shied away from the violence and mobster way of life, preferring to use his talents pursuing legal opportunities, which he did well. He was the only one in the family to attend University and over the years, built a substantial real estate portfolio that gave him a net worth far greater than that of the illegal enterprises his brothers ran, although it didn't generate as much cash.

Kyle heard the *whupp, whupp* of the approaching helicopter and made his way to the large expanse of grass where it would be landing. Alberto accompanied him, and they waited as they watched it circle around the hotel and gently land on its skids.

"I know you are apprehensive Kyle, but it is something I must do. I need closure for the murder of my father, and this operation is the only way to get it. Those bastards are immune to any lawful way to make them pay for their crimes."

Kyle thought about what Alberto said and realized that he, himself, would likely feel the same way after witnessing the murder of one of his parents. But he wasn't about to condone the vigilante way Alberto was going about it. He recalled his wife's killing by her ex-husband and, if police had not shot him at the scene, Kyle would have harboured thoughts of retribution.

"Of course, it won't bring your father back. It will only give a sense of retribution, but that doesn't make it right."

"You don't have to lecture me on morals—I've lived with the injustice of this for over 20 years. It was only recently that I could build the forces I needed to plan this operation. I have had many people help me—put up their own money to finance the things I needed. I will repay them from the money I get from the Santinis."

The pilot feathered the blades and opened the door of the helicopter, emerging and walking over to the two men.

"Mr. MacDonald?"

"Here," said Kyle and handed him his bag. The pilot took the bag and walked back to the helicopter with Kyle in tow.

Alberto said, "*Buena suerte*. I expect frequent updates from you."

Kyle did not respond verbally or turn back to face him. He merely waved his hand in the air in a 'whatever' fashion and boarded the craft.

Kyle elected to sit next to the pilot, donned the headsets and fastened his seatbelt.

"Gonna be a little rough as we approach San José," the pilot said as he lifted the collective, allowing the blades to bite into the air and provide lift. "Bit of weather moving in as I left, but we should be okay."

Kyle was a licenced fixed-wing pilot but did not like 'Whirly Birds' and 'should be okay' was not an expression that sat well with him. The ground receded as the helicopter gained altitude, and Kyle noted the lone Alberto appear smaller and smaller as the craft banked until it obtained a northerly heading, then tilted its nose and sped toward San José. Kyle could see the dark clouds ahead and saw flashes of lightning within them. He did not reveal his nervousness to the pilot as they plowed ahead toward the storm clouds.

"First time in a helo?" asked the pilot.

"No. Made lots of trips in the armed forces in Canada. Not my favourite way of travelling though."

"Lots of people don't like helicopters, more because of the noise and vibration. They seem to be happier when the wings are still and not rotating," he laughed.

They flew at an altitude of about 4,000 ft. until they were in the hills surrounding the capital. San José sat at an elevation of about 4,000 ft. and they would need to climb soon, but that would mean entering the clouds below which they were flying. Kyle watched the radar as they climbed into the clouds. From his boating experiences, he was familiar with instruments to rely on in cases of poor visibility. But most of his flying was with VFR (Visual Flight Rules), where you operated only in conditions where you can see. The pilot did not seem fazed by having to fly by instruments (IFR) as he likely has done it many times.

"Ten minutes to the airport," the pilot announced. *Not too soon for me*, Kyle thought.

A loud crack sounded and the helicopter pitched violently to the left.

"*¡Mis Dios!*" The pilot exclaimed as he fought with the collective to right the craft as it continued to pitch.

"What happened?"

"Hit by lightning."

Kyle looked at the instrument panel and to his horror, none of the instruments showed any readings.

"There are no readings on the instruments," Kyle said superfluously, looking at the pilot for words of encouragement.

The pilot continued fighting with the collective.

"Mayday! Mayday!" he said into his mouthpiece. "Flight 2550 from Playa Hermosa to San José. Hit by lightning and all instruments failed. What is my position?"

"Flight 2550, this is air traffic control at Tobias Bolaños International Airport in San José," the voice sounded through the headsets. Kyle was glad that at least the radio was still working. "You are approaching the airport on a heading of 15° at an altitude of sixty one hundred feet. Your AGL is twenty two hundred feet and you are a mile from the periphery. Maintain your heading and altitude; we have cleared all traffic from the area." Kyle recognized the acronym AGL for above ground level.

"Thank you control," said the pilot. Kyle noticed the nervousness now in the pilot's demeanour, which didn't make Kyle feel any better.

The helicopter was still pitching, and the pilot was having trouble maintaining a straight flight.

"Flight 2550, you are over airport property and can land any time," came the voice from the control tower."

"Roger control."

Peering out of the window, Kyle could not clearly see the ground. Rain was now pouring and streaked in rivulets across the bubble-shaped front glass. More lightning flashed in the distance and both Kyle and the pilot were hoping it would not hit them again. Lightning seldom strikes aircraft because they are not grounded. However, a charge can build up on the airframe that can conduct the built-up energy formed in the clouds. As the craft lowered, the ground became clearer.

"AGL at eighteen hundred feet," Kyle heard in his headset.

Suddenly, the engine noise died and Kyle saw the rotor blades slow and stop. With all lift gone, the helicopter plummeted toward the ground.

"Jesus Christ!" Kyle shouted as he braced himself in his seat. The pilot fought with the controls again and the rotor blades started turning, but the engine wasn't running. Kyle looked quizzically at the pilot.

"Autorotation," the pilot said.

Kyle had heard about autorotation in rotary-winged aircraft, and it was the equivalent to a 'Dead Stick' landing in a fixed-wing craft after engine failure. When the engine loses power, the rotor blades automatically disconnect so they can freely rotate. Forward momentum and the drop speed combine to spin the rotors and build up inertia in them. Just before landing, the pilot reverses the blades to give lift. It can result in a hard landing, depending on several factors; wind shear, up draughts, and air pockets.

"Is this all theoretical?" asked Kyle, unable to hide the nervousness in his voice. "Or are you saying you can land this without engine power?"

"Should be able to, but it may be a hard landing."

"How hard a landing are you expecting?" Kyle said as his grip tightened on the edges of his seat.

"Depends. Should get it down in one piece though."

You're not making me feel any better, Kyle thought.

It was eerily silent as the helicopter plummeted, its rotors spinning much faster now. The more Kyle thought about it, the more it made sense. It worked much like a windmill; a concept used for centuries. But being able to build up enough inertia in the rotor blades to arrest the helo before it hits the ground? Kyle wasn't sure he wanted to ask any more questions and just place his trust in the pilot, who didn't seem too fazed at the situation.

"Have you done this before?" said Kyle, nervousness in his voice

The pilot looked at him.

"Autorotation landings? Sure, several times." He paused, then said. "In a simulator."

"Damn!" Kyle muttered under his breath. "Great, just frigging great."

"Just kidding," he said. "It's part of flight training to do EOLs."

Kyle knew the acronym, EOL, was short for Engine Off Landings, as he had to do them in his flight training.

From the height above ground that the incident happened, the pilot determined that he would have less than sixty seconds before reaching terra firma. As the helo

approached the ground, the pilot, using all his skill, ‘flared’ the craft at the right moment, which added more speed to the rotors. This involved angling the nose up to slow the forward speed and, right before it touched the ground, he levelled the helicopter and pulled up on the collective. The descent slowed as the rotors bit into the air, providing lift. The pilot landed with a slight jolt and the rotors slowed to a stop. Kyle breathed a sigh of relief, reached over with his hand, grabbed the pilot’s hand and shook it.

“Thank you,” said a relieved Kyle. “Thank you very much.”

“You’re welcome.”

Emergency vehicles, lights flashing, now surrounded them, and they both got out of the helicopter to stand in the rain. Sporadic lightning still flashed and thunder crashed around them. A large SUV pulled up beside them, and a uniformed man got out and spoke to the pilot. They were speaking Spanish and Kyle had a hard time understanding what they were saying, more because of the noise of the pelting rain. The man beckoned to Kyle to get into the SUV, and Kyle grabbed his bag from the helicopter.

“They’re taking us back to the terminal,” the pilot said, getting in the vehicle’s front. Kyle nodded and got into the rear. They sped over the grass to the tarmac and followed the various coloured ground lights to the terminal building.

The pilot turned to Kyle. “He’s dropping me off at the main terminal, then taking you to the private terminal where your plane to Chicago is waiting.”

“Okay, and, thanks again.”

Chapter 4

Kyle exited the SUV, thanked the driver, and stepped into the small terminal building reserved for private planes. Rain-soaked clothes dripped on the floor as he approached the counter and announced himself to the attractive Latina woman behind it.

“I’m Kyle MacDonald. I am to meet a pilot for a flight to Chicago.”

“Yes, *señor* MacDonald. Your pilot is waiting over there.” She pointed to a small room where he could see a man sitting in a lounge chair reading a book.

“Thanks. Can you show me to a washroom? I need to change into dry clothes.”

“Washroom?” she queried.

“*Baños.*”

“*Si. Baños.* Right over there.” She pointed to a door opposite the room where the pilot sat.

“*Gracias.*”

“*De nada.*”

Kyle sauntered over to the washroom and entered. He laid his case on the floor and opened it, taking out a dry shirt and pants, exchanging them for the wet ones he was wearing. He bundled up the wet clothes and threw them into the trash container, then left the washroom and headed for the small lounge.

“I’m Kyle MacDonald,” he said to the man seated there. The man closed his book and stood. He was in his mid-thirties and about the same height and build

as Kyle. He sported a close-cropped red beard and wore a navy blue jacket and pants. The jacket had four gold rings around each sleeve, and epaulettes on the shoulders carried the same four bars—a captain's insignia. Red hair protruded beneath the peeked hat.

"I am Captain Luigi Palermo," he said, with an obvious Italian accent as he proffered his hand. "You can call me Louie, or Red."

"Pleased to meet you Louie, please call me Kyle."

"So, you were in the helicopter that performed an EOL. That must have been exciting."

"The kind of excitement I can do without, thanks."

"Weather's a little rough now. I set a flight plan for wheels up at 8:00 p.m. and it's about five hours flying time, so should be there by 1:00 a.m. tomorrow morning. You can stretch out and sleep on the plane."

Kyle looked at his watch. It was 4:45, and he was feeling hungry.

"Where can I grab something to eat?"

"In the main terminal, but there are vending machines here."

"I'll just grab a sandwich from the vending machine."

"Around the corner," he pointed.

Kyle proceeded to the small alcove where several vending machines sat. One dispensed soft drinks and water, while another offered various chocolate bars, chips and pretzels. A third seemed more interesting as it displayed several sandwiches and other snacks. He chose a salami sandwich on a Kaiser roll, popped it into the microwave oven and nuked it for 30 seconds. The fourth machine provided hot beverages, so he selected an American coffee, black, and sat down at a table. He had almost three hours to wait until they took off, which, considering the current weather, was fine with him. As he glanced out the window, he could see that rain was still falling, although much lighter now, and the incidences of thunder and lightning were reducing. He withdrew his iPhone from its holster and checked the local weather forecast. It showed that rain would taper off as the evening progressed, and they expected clear skies around 8:00 p.m. Perfect.

Kyle finished his meal and returned to the lounge. The captain was still there, reading his book. He acknowledged Kyle as he entered the room. Kyle sat opposite him and extracted his laptop from his satchel. He would busy himself searching and reading about negotiating tactics until it was time to leave.

At 7:30, Louie closed his book and stood. "Time to go."

Kyle closed his laptop and returned it to the satchel, then collected his bag and followed Louie out of the room. A customs official stood behind a lectern just before the door to the jet-way. He casually inspected Louie's and Kyle's passports and placed an exit stamp on them. The rain had stopped and vapour now rose from the concrete surfaces. The clouds had cleared and a myriad of stars studded the ink-black sky. A Gulfstream jet sat on the apron and maintenance crews were finishing the fuelling. The co-pilot stood at the top of the gantry and Kyle followed Louie up the stairs, ducking slightly to clear the doorway. The interior of the plane was plush with generous amounts of walnut trim and leather seating.

"This is Andrew. He is our co-pilot."

"Pleased to meet you," Kyle said as he offered his hand. "I'm Kyle."

"Pleased to meet you Kyle," Andrew said as he relieved him of his suitcase and stowed it. "Take any seat you want. They all recline to a flat position if you want to lie down and have a nap. Wheels up in fifteen minutes. Once we get to cruising altitude, I will be back to offer snacks and beverages."

"Thanks," said Kyle as he selected one of the front seats. He elected to sit in a forward-facing seat as he deemed it more natural than to travel backward. A small table separated the seats on which he placed his satchel.

"You will have to stow that during take-off," Andrew said. "You can place it below the seat."

"Okay," said Kyle as he tucked it under the seat and buckled his seatbelt.

Andrew left to join Louie in the cockpit while Kyle sat back to enjoy the flight. After a few minutes, the engines started one at a time and the cabin lights dimmed. Kyle had to crane his neck downward to see out of the small oval-shaped windows. Ground crew were standing with their red-tipped flashlights, waiting for the signal to guide the plane from the apron to the runway. The engines spooled up, and the plane began moving. The ground crew waved their lights, beckoning the plane forward. Before long, they sat at the end of the runway after following several commercial jets, likely delayed by the weather. The engines whined as they built up thrust until the pilot released the brakes, pinning Kyle to his seat as the Gulfstream jet accelerated down the runway and climbed into the night sky. The lights of San José filled Kyle's view as the plane banked sharply to the left as it gained altitude. Before long, the cabin lights illuminated and Andrew appeared again.

"Anything to eat or drink?" he asked.

"No thanks. Just had a snack in the terminal."

"How about a beer? Wine? Liquor?"

"Maybe a Bailey's, if you have it."

"Sure. Straight up or on the rocks?"

"On the rocks please."

It was an uneventful flight and Andrew returned a few hours later with a choice of hot or cold snacks and more alcohol. Kyle declined the alcohol as he did not know when he was meeting with Lorenzo, and he did not want to be in any way intoxicated. It was closer to 1:30 a.m. when they landed at Chicago's Gary airport, situated about 30 minutes from downtown. As they taxied onto the apron, Kyle spied a large black limousine waiting for them. He deplaned and walked over to the limousine, thanking both Louie and Andrew for their hospitality. A uniformed chauffeur opened the rear door for Kyle while Andrew placed his suitcase in the open trunk. Kyle got in and sank into the plush upholstered seats. The driver got in and manoeuvred the large car away from the many aircraft and around several hanger buildings. He pulled up to a gated exit post and a customs officer emerged from his hut. Kyle's window came down, the officer lowered his head, shone a flashlight in Kyle's face and asked for his passport, which he scrutinized.

"What is the purpose of your visit?" he asked.

What was the purpose of his visit? Kyle thought. *I'm here to negotiate the payment of 10 million dollars from a Mafia kingpin and ask him to send two of his men to Costa Rica so someone can kill them.*

"I'm here for a business meeting."

"How long do you plan to be in the United States?"

"One or two days."

"Anything to declare?"

Yes. I want to declare that I must be crazy.

"No."

"Enjoy your stay," he said as he returned the passport to Kyle.

The driver eased out of the exit when the gate raised and turned left onto airport road. He made his way to Route 912 and joined I-90 to downtown Chicago. Taking the 41 turnoff, he headed toward downtown to E. Walton Street and turned into the Waldorf Astoria, where he pulled up to the front entrance. He popped the trunk lid, got out and opened the rear door for Kyle, then retrieved the suitcase, pulling the handle up and handing it to Kyle.

"There is a room reserved in your name," he said.

"Thanks."

Kyle wheeled his suitcase and walked up to the front doors that parted as he approached. A cheerful young black man smiled at him from behind the reservations desk.

"Welcome to the Waldorf Astoria," he beamed, showing a perfect set of teeth.

"Kyle MacDonald. I'm told I have a reservation."

"Ah, yes, Mr. MacDonald. We have been expecting you," he said as he punched a few keys on his computer. "Do you need help with your bags?"

"No thanks."

"One of our best rooms," the receptionist said. "The Gold Coast Suite, room 906. Your personal concierge will see to any of your needs."

Kyle thanked him, accepted the offered key-card and made his way to the elevators. Although he got an hour or so nap on the plane, his head was too wired to sleep deeply. Now exhausted, he wanted to crash, so he kicked off his shoes after entering the lavish suite, walked into the bedroom, slipped his satchel bag off his shoulder and let it drop to the floor, then sat on the bed. Kyle laid back and instantly fell asleep.

Chapter 5

Kyle MacDonald was the oldest of three sons born in Canada to a Scottish immigrant father and a French-Canadian mother. Angus MacDonald, a sergeant in the British Army, entered Canada in 1960 as an explosives expert to assist in training Canadian Special Forces. During this time he met, fell in love with and became engaged to Denise Lalonde, a French-Canadian corporal in the Royal Canadian Air Force. He returned to Britain and applied for immigrant status to the Canadian Consulate in London. Returning to Canada in August 1966, they married in Ottawa on a bitter February day the next year.

Angus worked for several construction companies as a demolition expert and eventually set up a business as an explosives consultant in the small town of Smiths Falls, approximately 30 miles south of Ottawa. While Angus was in Britain, Denise applied to teacher's college, and when they moved to Smiths Falls, she

taught at the local school. When Kyle was born in July 1970, Denise opted to stay home and devote her time to the new family. A year-and-a-half later, she gave birth to Daniel and by the time Kyle was three years old he had gained another brother, David. Angus became popular amongst the residents of this small town of less than 10,000 people. He belonged to all the service clubs and after a few years as a councillor, ran for Mayor. He served in that position for 14 years until an untimely death, at 55 years old, from complications surrounding what should have been a simple appendectomy. At 20 years old, Kyle imagined his world had ended, but as the oldest son, knew he needed to be strong to support his mother and brothers during their time of grief. He started his third year of an electrical engineering programme at Ottawa University, but his two brothers had left school at grade 12 and 13 respectively, and started a small painting and decorating business with experience they gained from previous summer employment.

Denise moved to Ottawa to be close to her sons and returned to teaching. David was the motivation behind the business and built a large clientele whereas Daniel knew how to get the work completed and manage the workforce. Within three years, they had a thriving business employing ten tradespeople working on renovations, additions and remodelling of houses.

Kyle graduated magna cum laude and applied to the Armed Forces, enrolling in their Officer Programme, initially specialising in generation equipment for the many portable and standby plants, and spent a lot of time travelling to the various bases, overseeing maintenance inspections and upgrading control sequences. After four years, he enrolled in their Special Forces Program, designed to combat the growing incidences of terrorism, especially with the increase in hi-jackings. Kyle not only became an expert in Close Quarters Combat but also developed an expertise in Special Electronics and Surveillance. This included bomb disposal training and knowledge of the various explosives in use by terrorist groups. He received an honourable discharge after eight years of service due to an injury received while in combat training. Joining forces with a representative of one of the diesel generator manufacturers, they formulated a company building diesel generator sets. At first, they handled small units for farm use and pumping stations, which were assembled in an old warehouse originally used for manufacturing machine parts for the war effort. The demand grew significantly when they won several contracts with DND (Department of National Defence) for larger generators used for mobile operations. Within five years, the company expanded to a new assembly plant and won a major contract with DND to provide continuous duty generator sets, with 100% redundancy, for the NORAD (North American Aerospace Defence Command) early warning sites forming an arc along the northernmost reaches of the Canadian arctic.

Just before his discharge from the services, Kyle met Casey—a tall, buxom, fair-haired interior designer at one of his brothers' business gatherings. She provided the design layouts for much of the remodelling, and although Daniel offered her a permanent position; she preferred to stay with the design firm. Casey infatuated Kyle from the start, but she continually declined his offers to have lunch or go to a movie. He later found out she was separated, had a three-year-old son, and still being abused and harassed by her husband. Understandably, she was somewhat disillusioned with men in general. Kyle was not keen on inheriting a family, but

the infatuation with Casey continued to gnaw away at him. When he opened his business, and wanted to remodel his offices, he called Casey for a consultation, but insisted they meet for lunch. She agreed, and he finally won her over during the ensuing months. Casey filed for divorce on the grounds of cruelty and six months after it was finalized, they married.

Kyle was tall and filled out his 6 ft. 2 in. frame, weighing in at 200 lbs. He was devoid of excess fat, due mainly to a rigorous exercise routine. During the winter months, his activities included cross-country skiing, and once the golf courses opened in April, that's where you would find him. He also became a certified SCUBA diver and each year would plan a trip to one of the Florida or Caribbean dive centres. A thick crop of black hair and dark features framed a handsome face with deep-set brown eyes. A wide and prominent nose gave way to a thick and healthy moustache. On occasion, he would grow a beard, but since meeting Casey, she convinced him it hid his handsome features, so he shaved it off and kept just the moustache. Thin lips surrounded a wide mouth that frequently formed a smile to reveal a perfect set of white teeth.

Kyle had developed a love for cars and collected some classics, owning a 1969 Series 2 Jaguar XKE, referred to as an 'E-Type', and a rare 1978 Ferrari 308GTS. His favourite, however, being a 1960 Bentley S2 sedan.

Casey's son, Bobby, adapted to Kyle the first time they met and Kyle grew to love him as his own. Strangely, they never got around to planning any more children and Bobby became an only child. They purchased a ten-acre hobby farm in Kars, on the outskirts of Ottawa, which had over 1,000 ft. of frontage on the Rideau River. Casey devoted her time to Bobby, busying herself with small design jobs for her brothers-in-law while Kyle spent endless hours at work. For recreation they enjoyed boating and built a permanent dock to moor their 18-foot Glastron bow-rider.

Casey's ex-husband, Brian, was a dentist and became involved with cocaine, both as a user and later, a dealer. After a deal had gone bad, desperate for money with nowhere to turn, he looked to Casey and her new husband, Kyle.

Chapter 6

Chicago. January 2005.

Kyle awoke from his deep sleep to the warbling of the hotel phone. He reached for it and placed it to his ear.

"Yes," he slurred.

"Good morning, Kyle," a youthful female voice said. "I am Carlita, Lorenzo's Executive Assistant. You are to meet with him this morning at 10:00 a.m. at his office. A car will pick you up at 9:30."

"Thank you," he said, and replaced the receiver to its cradle. He looked at the nightstand clock. It read 8:15. He noted that he still had on the clothes he wore yesterday, so he swung his legs off the bed, grabbed his suitcase and groped for his travel kit. The bathroom was as opulent as the rest of the suite, with gilded-

framed mirrors and gold-coloured faucets. Plush towels abounded, as did the array of toiletries. He turned on the shower, undressed, and stepped into the steam-filled stall. He dried off and finished his ablutions, then dressed in the only suit and tie he owned. Feeling hungry now, he phoned the concierge and ordered breakfast, which arrived several minutes later. It was 9:15 when he descended to the lobby and waited for his ride. The same limo and driver showed up at exactly 9:30, and the hotel doorman opened the door for Kyle. The driver sped off to the Santini offices, which, not surprisingly, were located in the Santini Plaza. The limo descended several levels after entering the underground parking garage, and stopped outside an elevator lobby, where the driver got out and, once again, opened the door for Kyle.

"Thanks."

They walked to the elevator lobby, and the driver summoned the car. When it arrived, the driver stepped in, used his key-card to access the penthouse floor, and then stepped out of the elevator. The high-speed car accelerated upwards, and the floor lights illuminated in quick succession until the cab slowed and the 'PH' light flicked on. When the doors slid open, Kyle exited into a large reception area and walked up to the middle-aged woman sitting behind a bar-height desk, and announced himself.

"Welcome Mr. MacDonald. Please take a seat. Someone will be with you shortly. Coffee?"

"No, thank you. Just had breakfast."

She smiled and continued staring at her screen and tapping keys. Kyle checked his watch—it was 9:55. He picked up a magazine from the table but did not have a chance to glance through it because he heard his name called, and he looked up. A petite, pretty, young woman stood there. "I am Carlita, please follow me." He recognized her voice as the one who had called him earlier this morning, advising him of the meeting.

Kyle put down the magazine and trundled after her. They navigated through several corridors and came to a large set of double doors. She opened one panel. "You may go in now."

"Thank you," Kyle said, stepping into a large corner office with floor-to-ceiling windows on two sides. Rich mahogany panelling adorned the other two sides, except for two doors set into them, through one he had just entered. An over-sized rosewood desk sat in front of one window, behind which sat a white-haired man who Kyle suspected was in his early seventies. Because of the back-lit effect caused by the large window behind Lorenzo, Kyle could not make out details of his face, except that it was clean-shaven. Lorenzo wore what Kyle presumed to be a designer shirt with a cravat bundled around his neck. A large gold chain hung from his neck and age-spotted hands sported several gold rings on various fingers. A large man stood beside Lorenzo with his arms folded and legs slightly parted. Not the office boy, Kyle suspected. Lorenzo looked up as Kyle approached the desk and reclined himself in the black leather chair.

"Welcome Mr. MacDonald. Please sit." He gestured to one of the wing-back chairs facing his desk. As Kyle moved towards the chair, the large man moved toward him and gestured for Kyle to raise his arms to the side. He patted him down and, when satisfied Kyle was devoid of an arsenal of weapons, he resumed

his stance next to Lorenzo's desk. Kyle took the offered chair, sat down, crossed his legs and placed his hands in his lap—and said nothing.

"Quite a situation going on down in Costa Rica," Lorenzo said.

"You might say that."

"Does this guy Alberto think he can get away with this? Challenging one of the most powerful organizations in North America? This is like the mouse taunting the tiger."

"He seems to have the upper hand right now, wouldn't you think?"

"He thinks he does, and that will suit our purposes for now."

"What do you mean by that?"

Anger showed on Lorenzo's reddening face. "Do you really believe we are going to roll over and give into this overzealous spic? A money-hungry Latrino thinks he can extort money from us and demand we send two of our men back there to be slaughtered? I think not."

Kyle remained calm and composed, despite Lorenzo's outburst. "It would seem that the two men he wants are guilty of murdering his father."

"So he says. There were no charges brought against them. The police treated it as a nuisance complaint, a case of mistaken identity, and that he and his mother just wanted someone to pay for the unfortunate shooting. They chalked it up to a robbery gone wrong and closed the case."

What bullshit, Kyle thought. *They had nothing, not even a telephone to call 911. Why would anyone want to rob them?* Clearly, the police had little interest in bringing charges against one of the Santini family.

"So, where do we go from here? Alberto is expecting me to return to Costa Rica with the two men and \$10m."

"That ain't gonna happen," Lorenzo said bluntly.

"Aren't you concerned about the safety of your son and his family?"

"Of course I am. But if I give him what he wants, there will be no end of similar kidnappings to extort money from us. Even the government doesn't negotiate with terrorists, for obvious reasons."

"So, what's your plan?"

"We need him to believe we are cooperating, that we need time to raise the money. It's Friday now and the banks are closed for the weekend. Nobody has \$10m in cash lying around—it wouldn't make sense. We need to cash in available stocks and bonds to raise that amount of money—and the stock markets are closed tomorrow and Sunday. Much of our investments aren't liquid and are tied up in real estate. Even if we tried to leverage it for a loan, it would take weeks to do the paperwork."

"Okay. I'll tell him you need more time. Shall I say Tuesday?"

"Tuesday for now, sure."

"Fine. Is there anything else?"

"Not at the moment. The hotel room is yours for as long as you stay here."

"Thanks."

Kyle got up and walked to the door, opened it and gave a nod to Lorenzo's assistant as he walked to the elevator. She politely nodded in return. "Press P4 and our driver will take you back to your hotel."

“Thank you,” Kyle said as he entered the elevator cab and pressed the P4 button. Sure enough, the driver was waiting for him, with the car door open, and he drove Kyle back to the hotel.

* * * * *

Lorenzo pressed a button on his phone and Carlita, his assistant, answered.

“Yes, sir?”

“Tell Al and Enzo to come in here right away.”

“Yes, sir.”

Alphonso (Al) Santini was the oldest son and headed the drugs and money laundering divisions of the family operations. Enzo Santini was second oldest and is head of gambling and prostitution. Al entered his office first and sat down in the chair previously vacated by Kyle.

“What’s the scoop on this Alberto guy?” Lorenzo asked.

“Alberto Caporalos. His father worked in one of our restaurants about twenty years ago. We apparently tried to recruit him as a pusher, but he refused. Marco and Sergio were sent to his home to encourage him, but something went wrong and the guy was shot. Wife and son IDed them and pulled them from a line-up, but we had solid alibis for them and they dropped the case.”

“What have you found out about any close friends or relatives?”

“Not much so far. We traced him to a small town, San Rafael, just outside San José, but haven’t been able to do any further research on him yet. Got someone down there now asking around. He and his mother were illegal aliens and were sent back to Costa Rica after the shooting incident. We should be able to locate his mother.”

Enzo then walked into the room.

“Have you got the team together?” Lorenzo asked.

“Yes, we have eight men available, which should be enough. That’s as many as we can carry aboard the Gulfstream. Marco and Sergio are among them, and I put Marco in charge. They have full riot gear, automatic weapons, grenades and body armour. Should be a walk in the park.”

“Let’s not underestimate this guy,” said Al. “He was able to overcome Peppe’s security detail.”

“True,” said Enzo. “But they were not expecting an attack and were caught off guard. It will be different this time. We will be the ones prepared and equipped.”

“When is the team leaving for Costa Rica?” asked Lorenzo.

“This afternoon. Scheduled time is three p.m. which should get them there by eight. We don’t expect any issues with Costa Rica customs as we have been there many times and they never search the plane.”

“Good,” said Lorenzo. “Keep me posted. And Al. Find the guy’s mother.”

Both men got up and left the room. Lorenzo made a note to himself to call Kyle later.

Chapter 7

Ottawa, Canada. August 1999

"Call for you on line 2," Kyle's receptionist said when he picked up the phone.

"Thanks," he said, depressing the line key.

"Kyle MacDonald."

"Mr. MacDonald," said the unfamiliar French-accented voice. "This is Inspector Thibodeau of the Ottawa Police. I'm afraid your wife and son were involved in a car accident. I am at the Ottawa General. Can you come down here?"

A surge of adrenaline pumped through Kyle's body. "What? How...? Jesus Christ, are they okay?"

"Your son is fine but your wife is in critical condition, I'm afraid to say."

"Okay, I'll be right there."

Son of a bitch, he thought grabbing his coat and shooting out the door. His mind raced. Casey in critical condition? *God! Let her be okay.*

The office was less than fifteen minutes from the hospital, with little traffic to slow progress on a Saturday. He pulled into the hospital entrance and parked the car in a 'No Parking' zone because he was not prepared to waste time parking in the public parking lot. The automatic doors of the Emergency Admissions slid open as he approached them, and he scurried over to the main reception desk.

The receptionist informed him that Casey MacDonald was in Intensive Care in the Trauma Unit on the second floor. "Follow the yellow line to the elevator. Up one floor and check in at the Station on your right," the courteous Negro woman directed. Kyle detested the antiseptic smell of hospitals and visited them only as often as necessary. Beds cluttered the corridor occupied by patients with a variety of maladies or injuries. Other patients sorrowfully sat in wheelchairs, an umbilical cord of life-giving nectar dripping from intravenous bags dangling on portable stands. He followed the directions and came upon the Nursing Station with a sign over it saying:

B-206 TRAUMA UNIT

He addressed the attractive dark-haired nurse seated behind the counter.

"Casey MacDonald. I'm here to see Casey MacDonald," he said with nervousness in his voice.

"Are you Mr. MacDonald?"

"Yes, I am."

"Mrs. MacDonald is in surgery right now. A police officer over there would like to talk to you," she gestured to her left.

To Kyle's right stood a fair-haired man of medium build, dressed in a light brown suit, white dress shirt and pattern-less dark brown tie. He acknowledged Kyle with a nod as he looked in his direction, then walked up to him.

"Are you Kyle MacDonald?" he asked in French-accented English.

"Yes, I am. What's going on?"

"My name is Inspector Thibodeau," he said, offering a card. "Please sit down." He gestured to a well-worn leatherette-upholstered couch over by the wall, and guided Kyle, by the elbow, to it. They both sat down and the Inspector produced a

small notebook from an inside pocket, which he flipped open, then selected a pencil from the other inside pocket and poised it over the paper.

"Monsieur MacDonald. Your wife and son were involved in a shooting," he started.

"A shooting? What...?"

Kyle struggled to compute what was happening.

"Please, *Monsieur*. I will explain everything I know. Your wife is in surgery now. They say she is in critical condition; she took a gunshot wound to the abdomen. Your son has received a nasty blow to the head, but his condition is stable—concussion, is what the doctor said. He should be fine and is in the Children's Hospital."

"Casey? Oh no." he buried his head in his hands. "Who did this? How...?"

The inspector held up a hand. "As far as we can piece together now, the shooting was an unfortunate accident triggered by a collision between the car your wife and son were travelling in and a truck running a red light. A Brian Dolan, your wife's ex-husband..."

Kyle's face flushed with anger at the mention of her ex-husband's name. "Brian? That creep? What the hell did he have to do with this?"

"As I was saying," the inspector continued, "from what we can piece together, Brian Dolan, who is also a convicted drug offender, was likely holding them at gunpoint. The gun was obviously being held with the safety off—he no doubt had little gun sense—because it went off when the vehicles collided."

Kyle felt dizzy and his stomach nauseous, and he thought he might throw up.

"Monsieur? Are you okay? I know this is difficult. Do you wish to lie down?" He signalled a nurse.

"No. I'm okay. Just a little dizzy. I want to see Casey—and Bobby."

"That may not be possible right now for your wife. I understand she is in surgery having the bullet removed."

"When can I see her?"

"I do not know. We will have to wait until she comes out of surgery. We have many questions also to ask when she is able to answer. This is being treated as an attempted murder."

"What about that bastard Brian? Have you arrested the son-of-a-bitch?"

"Police killed him in a shoot-out at the scene of the accident."

Kyle had trouble believing this was happening. His initial reaction was, of course, denial. He had known Bobby for 10 years—since he was three years old—and treated him like his own son. And Casey. His sweet, adorable Casey. In critical condition? This can't be happening.

"I will head back to the Station now. I have left instructions to be called when your wife and son can answer questions. Are you sure you will be okay? The nurse here will help you if you need anything. *Au revoir* for now."

"What about Bobby? Can I see Bobby?"

"As I said, they have moved him to the Children's Hospital." With that, the inspector turned to leave.

Kyle sat there not knowing what to do, or what to think, and felt utterly helpless. He got up from the couch and paced for several minutes. Not being a religious man—agnostic is how he described himself, a testament to his

engineering background, no doubt—he envied those that had the faith to justify tragedy by believing it is God’s will. How nice it would be to ease the hurt and pain he was now experiencing by believing it to be part of some divine plan—a spiritual contrivance under which we all play a part. No, he couldn’t bring himself to accept that. He subscribed to random behaviour—the wrong time, wrong place argument. Casey and Bobby were the victims of unfortunate random behaviour—a string of circumstances, any of which would have changed the outcome if they had been different, sometimes by a fraction of a second.

He shot a glance to the Nurse’s Station. A youngish man in pale green scrubs was talking to the nurse at the counter, and she pointed over to Kyle. The man then approached him.

“Mr. MacDonald? I am Dr. Chandra. Please take a seat over here.” He motioned to the same couch. The doctor had to be barely thirty year’s old and sported a salt-and-pepper close-cropped beard that covered much of his olive-skinned face. His tousled hair was similarly black, with premature greying at the temples. “First of all, let me say how sorry I am to see this happen to your family,” he said with genuine remorse. “We have removed the bullet from your wife’s spine. She is not out of danger yet and will remain in Intensive Care until her condition improves. The bullet passed through her intestines and her spleen. The danger in these types of injuries is the release of bile into the internal cavities. Unfortunately, this bile acts as a toxin when released internally.”

Kyle listened intently, still somewhat nauseous.

“When can I see her?”

“You can see her briefly now, but she may not regain consciousness for some time. She has been severely traumatized and is suffering from shock. The nurse will take you to her.”

“What about Bobby?”

“Your son suffered a mild concussion from a blow to his head. He’s going to be fine. We sent him over to the Children’s Hospital for treatment.”

Dr. Chandra got up and beckoned a nurse from the Station. “I will check on her often within the next few hours,” he said to Kyle as he offered his hand, which Kyle accepted. “Believe me, we are doing everything possible.”

“Thank you doctor. She’s very special to me, you know,” Kyle’s emotion showing through his glazed eyes and quivering voice. The doctor merely nodded as if to say, *I understand*, and disappeared down the hall.

“This way, Mr. MacDonald.” A female voice from behind caused him to turn and face the young nurse whose facial expression was as sombre as his. He followed her down the hall and through a double swing door into a large room where several curtained-off beds lined each side. She stopped at the second one and pulled aside the curtain to reveal the patient lying in the bed. On a shelf above the bed, several oscilloscopes recording various data from the patient, giving an ominous beep with each pulse. To one side, a machine whirled away and a small bellows oscillated in tune with the patient’s breathing. A multitude of tubes and wires connected the patient to the life support and monitoring systems. It wasn’t until he walked to the side of the bed that he recognized Casey. She looked so pale and lifeless laying there with her face partially obscured by the oxygen mask, her long ashen hair draped on her shoulders and the pillow. He reached for her

slender hand that felt cold when cupped in his, and gently gave it a squeeze, then leaned over and brushed her cheek with his lips.

“Hi honey,” he whispered, choking back the tears. “It’s me.”

Casey showed no signs of acknowledgement as she lay there, her chest rising and falling with each shallow breath. The only communication being the ‘beep’ ‘beep’ of the monitor as each pulse left a spike on the ‘scope, signalling that vital signs were within acceptable tolerances. Kyle hated the audible representation of the heartbeat because he always feared that it might stop. Then, as if his worst fears were to be realized, the signal became erratic. He looked at the monitor and the spikes now appeared uneven.

“Nurse!” he shouted. “Nurse!”

The nurse came rushing in and immediately depressed the red button on the wall.

“Sir?” she turned to Kyle as two more medics rushed into the room. “You will have to leave. Now.”

Kyle stepped back and allowed the emergency crew to attend to Casey, involuntarily finding himself whispering, “Please God, please don’t take her now.” Dr. Chandra rushed into the room and glanced at the monitors. The monotone sound of the heart monitor droned inside Kyle’s head, and he could see the display showing a flat line just before the nurse closed the curtains, leaving him with the eerie tone signifying that Casey’s heart had stopped beating. He staggered to one of the nearby chairs, feeling nauseous and weak, listening to instructions being given behind the curtain—so many milligrams of this and so many milligrams of that. Then the monotone ceased. A dejected Dr. Chandra emerged and looked sombrely at Kyle. “I’m sorry,” was all he said.

“N-o-o-o!” Kyle screamed, then buried his head in his hands. He sensed a hand on his shoulder—it belonged to the nurse.

“Come,” she said in a soft voice. “You need something to calm you down,” and reached for his arm. He allowed his weak legs to support him as the nurse led him out of Intensive Care and into an accompanying room, where she guided him to a bed. Another nurse appeared with a small paper cup and a glass of water.

“Take these. They will help you feel better.”

He took the tablets in a bewildered fashion and chased them down with the water. Within minutes, he fell asleep.

Chapter 8

Chicago. January 2005.

Kyle called Alberto as soon as he got back to his room.

“How did the meeting go?” Alberto asked.

“As good as can be expected. I don’t believe he intends to agree to your demands.”

"That doesn't surprise me. It would be more of a pride thing with him. I may have to demonstrate how serious I am, and that will mean people will get unnecessarily hurt."

"What do you mean by that?"

"That's not your concern right now. I presume he is asking for time to raise the money?"

"Yes. He said Tuesday."

"He's stalling for something, but I expected that."

"How is everything at the hotel?"

"Fine. The staff is looking after the guests and the kitchen is keeping everyone fed. Talked to Frederico of the San José police. They do not want to risk harm to any of the guests or staff, so are staying away for now. Any local police are there for rounding up rowdy tourists, so not worried about them."

"That's good. I know Frederico well—he stays at the hotel often. I'll let you know of any developments from my end."

Kyle broke the connection and pondered what his course of action should be now. He didn't trust Lorenzo, and it wouldn't surprise him if he planned to launch a rescue attempt on his son and family. That would be disastrous and result in further unnecessary bloodshed—and Anna may be at risk. He could do nothing now but wait. Kyle had become infatuated with Anna, married recently and just returning to work from maternity leave. Initially reluctant to hire her because of the attraction he felt when interviewing her, she was by far the best applicant, and he was sure he could handle the situation. As time went on, it became increasingly difficult to ignore her, and he sensed signals she put out as well. He would make excuses to talk to her about an insignificant issue with the hotel, only to have the conversation eventually revert to a discussion about her personal life, or his. Rather than hand various papers requiring his signature to him over his desk, she would walk around and stand next to him, intoxicating him with her scent. As the months went on, the side-glances, chance meetings in confined spaces and light, affectionate touches, all served to build a bridge that was slowly meeting in the middle—which would be disastrous for both of them. Kyle realized that he actually missed her smiling face and that he looked forward to getting back to the hotel to see her again.

His phone rang, and he looked at the display—unknown number.

"Yes?"

"Kyle," Lorenzo said.

"What is it, Lorenzo?"

"We need some information from you."

"What information?"

What the hell was Lorenzo's game now? Kyle thought.

"Let's have dinner at one of my clubs at 7:00 this evening. My driver will pick you up."

Kyle was reluctant to have more contact with Lorenzo, but his curiosity got the better of him.

"Sure. Gotta eat somewhere."

* * * * *

In one respect, Kyle was enjoying the royal treatment by the Santinis. Luxury hotel, limousine service, and now dinner at an upscale club. His regular 'taxi' showed up on time and drove him to the Picasso Club where the maitre'd directed him to a private dining room, seated him, and summoned the hovering waiter.

"Mr. Santini will join you shortly," the waiter said. "May I offer you something from the bar?"

"No, thank you. Just water, with lemon."

"San Pellegrino?" He referred to the popular Italian sparkling water similar to France's Perrier.

"Sure. Thanks."

The waiter returned with a large bottle of San Pellegrino, a glass filled with ice, and a slice of lemon. He poured the fizzing beverage into the glass and placed the bottle on the table.

"Thanks," said Kyle.

Kyle took a sip of the effervescing liquid as Lorenzo entered the room and took a seat opposite him.

"Good evening, Mr. MacDonald. I hope you are being treated well."

"Can't complain," said Kyle as he put down the glass.

"Just water?" Lorenzo queried.

"For now."

Lorenzo summoned the waiter and asked for a vodka martini.

"So, you invited me here. Said you needed information from me."

The waiter returned with the martini that drowned three olives on a toothpick. Lorenzo took a sip and nodded approval to the waiter.

"He's been making martinis for me now for over 5 years and knows exactly how dry to make them, but always waits for my approval."

"A little encouragement and gratitude goes a long way."

"Indeed it does."

"The information..."

"Ah. Yes," Lorenzo composed his thoughts. "Maybe we should order our meal first. I highly recommend the Beef *Bracirole*."

Kyle did not open the menu and agreed to Lorenzo's suggestion.

Lorenzo turned to the waiter, "A plate of antipasto and two Beef *Bracirole*—with a bottle of Amarone."

"Certainly sir," the waiter said as he collected the menus.

"Excellent selection of wine," Kyle commented. "Amarone della Valpolicella, one of Italy's finest exports. Made primarily from the Corvina grape from Verona Province in the Veneto region."

"Who cares about all that shit," Lorenzo scoffed. "I drink it because I like it and it is expensive."

So much for Lorenzo's cultural achievements.

When the waiter was out of earshot, Lorenzo continued, "We do not want to give in to this terrorist's demands. I regret the incident that happened 20 years ago—sometimes my men get overly aggressive. But it is done and nothing will bring his father back."

"I'm sure he knows that all too well. It is more payback or restitution that he wants."

“So he wants to become a rich man because of his father’s death?”

“That is not a good way to put it. They deported him and his mother back to Costa Rica after his father’s death, and suffered hard times there trying to survive. Had your people not senselessly murdered his father, they could have made a reasonable living here in the U.S. To deprive a family’s livelihood can carry a monetary value, as courts often do in such cases.”

“But ten million dollars?”

“Maybe that could be a point of negotiation,” Kyle offered. “Offer him five million and see if he bites.”

“Why not start at one million? That will go a long way in a third-world country.”

“Costa Rica isn’t a third-world country.”

“Well, you know what I mean. It will sure buy a lot of burritos and tacos.”

“They are Mexican dishes.”

“Whatever,” Lorenzo said, waving a dismissive hand.

Lorenzo, in his ignorance, had no clue on the lifestyles of people in Costa Rica, a very typical issue for many people when it comes to other countries—the world revolves around them.

“You still haven’t told me what information you want from me.”

“First of all, I will need your cell phone. I can’t risk any information I give to you going back to the hostage takers.”

“And if I refuse?”

“Innocent people will die.”

Kyle pondered the words, then handed over his iPhone. Lorenzo took it and slipped it into his pocket.

“We plan on mounting a rescue attempt for my son. To eliminate any collateral damage, we need complete details of your hotel layout and where the hostages are being kept.”

Just as Kyle and Alberto had expected; a raid on the hotel to free his son and family.

“No matter what I tell you, innocent people will get killed in a shootout between your men and his. You are also risking the life of your son and his family.”

“My son knows the risks associated with being a Santini. The more information we have, the better we can target the terrorists.”

“You do not train your guys in the tactical ability to rescue hostages. Also, Alberto isn’t stupid; he will anticipate a rescue attempt and be prepared for it. His men will surround your family with an order to shoot as soon as any sign of a rescue is detected.”

“That is a chance I am willing to take, but I need the layout of the hotel to minimize collateral damage.”

The waiter returned with the wine and ceremoniously removed the cork in front of them and poured a sample into the host’s glass. Lorenzo performed the ritual of swirling it while noting the density of colouring, raising it to his nose, taking a sip and rolling the velvety and rich liquid in his mouth. He signalled an approval to the waiter who poured several ounces into Kyle’s glass, then topped up Lorenzo’s. After setting the bottle on the table, the server removed the chargers.

Lorenzo held up the glass and gestured for Kyle to do the same.

“Here’s to a successful rescue with no collateral damage.”

Kyle was reluctant to give any indication of approval for the raid, but felt that such a toast, given that the raid will no doubt take place anyway, was reasonable.

"Cheers," Kyle said. "To no collateral damage."

They clinked glasses, and each took a sip of the excellent Italian red wine.

"So, when is this raid supposed to take place?"

Lorenzo looked at his watch.

"They should have landed in San José by now. My team is just waiting for information from you on the hotel layout."

"If you can give me access to a computer, I can download floor plans from my files."

"Under supervision, of course. Wouldn't want you to alert this Alberto guy."

"I see no benefit in notifying him. I'm sure he is expecting a raid, anyway."

"Suspecting and knowing are two different things."

Lorenzo reached down into a satchel and came up with a laptop computer.

"Login details?"

Kyle gave him the website address and password for his hotel's page. Lorenzo pecked at the keyboard and turned the screen to Kyle.

"Access the file with the drawings," he said as he passed the computer over to him. Kyle clicked through several directories until he came to one with the CAD drawings of the hotel. He turned the computer back to Lorenzo. "There you go."

Lorenzo punched a few keys on his cell phone and sat back. Almost immediately, Carlita came into the dining room and Lorenzo gave her the laptop.

"Get these drawing files to Marco."

"Yes, sir," she said as she walked away with the laptop.

"Now, where are the hostages being held?"

"At the time I left, they were all in the Pelican Room, one of my conference rooms. Alberto gave certain staff latitude to provide services for the guests, especially the kitchen."

"Where is Peppe and his family?"

"Peppe was with the hostages when I left and his family is in the room, the honeymoon suite, on the sixth floor."

Lorenzo was keying in information on his cell phone as Kyle was speaking.

"Thank you. That should do it."

Lorenzo looked up at the waiter standing with a plate of antipasto in hand.

"Ah. Just in time," said Lorenzo as the waiter placed the plate between them. "Now let's enjoy our meal before all this talk gives us indigestion."

Chapter 9

Kars, Canada. August 1999

The funeral took place in a small church outside Kars, a suburb of Ottawa, with close family members only in attendance. On a rainy August afternoon, they lowered Casey into her final resting place amongst tears and bitterness from the sombre gathering. The entourage of umbrellas slowly ebbed until only two solitary

figures remained, standing with their heads lowered and hands clasped in front of them. With each sob, Bobby's head bobbed up and down, causing his drenched hair to shed rain streaking down his face to mix with tears emanating from tightly closed eyes. Kyle choked back the tears and put an arm around Bobby's shoulder. After several minutes, Kyle walked to the headstone, knelt in front of it and lightly placed a kiss on it.

"I love you sweetheart, and I wish I had told you so more often," he whispered through halted breaths, stepping back and looking at her grave. "I'm really gonna miss you."

Bobby turned his tear-stained and rain-soaked face up to Kyle. "Why did God have to take mom away?"

"I don't know Bobby—I really don't know."

Kyle swept back his sopping-wet hair with his hands, turned from the funereal scene and, with an arm still around Bobby, sluggishly walked back to the road and the waiting car.

Over the next few months, Kyle moped around the house and tried to immerse himself in his work. Memories of Casey haunted him each night and frequently, he did not sleep at all. He tried taking sleeping pills prescribed to him, but these seemed to create more problems and so he stopped taking them. Lack of sleep would gradually take its toll and he fell asleep at work and once dozed in the car. Although he realized he must move on with his life, he couldn't accept that Casey was gone, flipping through photos of them on vacation and of Bobby's growing years, only to relive the grief of her passing.

Kyle tried to be strong for Bobby's sake, but Bobby was also despondent, and it concerned Kyle that his parenting skills sadly lacked—he could barely look after himself, let alone a 13-year-old boy. One time, when Casey's parents were over visiting, they talked about the notion of them looking after Bobby. Kyle talked it over with Bobby and explained how his grandmother would do a lot better job at parenting than he could. He also explained that properly cooked meals would be better for him than the micro-waveable products they now ate. He would miss the company Bobby gave him, but that was a selfish consideration. Bobby didn't like the idea at first, but then remembered all the nice cookies and cakes grandma made. Reluctantly, he agreed to go to his grandparents for a trial period to see how it would work out.

Christmas day was the most difficult. He awoke and went into the living room as they always had on Christmas morning.

It seemed so empty.

As crazy as it seemed, he even purchased gifts for Casey, hoping she would somehow be there to open them. Normally, Bobby would run around excitedly in his pyjamas, scrambling at the gifts below the tree. Kyle would start the Christmas music while Casey made coffee and Bobby did his best to contain himself. Kyle always played Santa and handed out the gifts, sitting back to absorb the cheerful faces from each of them when they finally removed the wrapping paper, revealing the presents. He always derived more pleasure from giving than receiving gifts and would always portray that expression of embarrassment when opening a gift—that 'you shouldn't have' attitude that always seemed to annoy Casey. This Christmas morning was so different. Bobby had stayed with him after they returned from

their friend's home on Christmas Eve. He played the Christmas music, made the coffee, then they both sat there staring at the tree.

Bobby cried as he turned to Kyle. "I wish mom were here. I really miss her."

Kyle put his arm around the young boy's shoulders to console him, barely able to hold back tears of his own. "We both do son—we both do."

The phone rang and snapped them out of their reminiscence. It was Casey's mother calling, reminding them not to be late for Christmas dinner.

After the holiday season, he arranged with his partner to take a leave of absence for an indefinite time. After first arranging with an architect friend to subdivide the property into valuable river lots, he placed it for sale with a Realtor. He left his collection of cars with his brother Daniel, who would set them up at an upcoming auction. He packed a couple of suitcases and placed them in the trunk of his BMW, and realized he had eventually come to grips with the reality, finally leaving his old life behind and starting a new one. His only regret was leaving Bobby, but he held comfort because he was much better off with his grandparents, and he could not take him with him. Heading out of the driveway, he drove south, not looking back.

* * * * *

Kyle entered Costa Rica six months after he left Ottawa, after spending two months in Mexico visiting many of the resort and cultural areas. He enjoyed the Costa Rican casual lifestyle and the Spanish culture, coupled with a diverse geography and Eco-climates. Many consider their political system the most stable of the Latin-American countries, with elections every four years, mandatory voting and no incumbent can serve consecutive terms in office. They have an excellent health system with modern hospitals and medical facilities, available to all. Some say Costa Rica is the only country a man may not be able to afford a new pair of pants, yet can afford a heart transplant.

The realtor advised that all the five two-acre lots and the house had sold. After paying off the mortgage and development costs, he arranged with a financial planner to invest the money in a balanced portfolio, with sufficient money placed in a bank account to finance his travelling. He negotiated a buy-out with his partner to be paid out over four years, realizing he would not be returning to his business. His accountants added net proceeds after taxes to his portfolio.

During his travels in Costa Rica, he stayed in a small, 15-room hotel on a quiet beach called Playa Hermosa (beautiful beach), and fell in love with the idyllic setting and tranquil environment. A Canadian couple owned and operated the hotel and to his delight, it was for sale, along with a 42-foot sailboat. It needed repair, and he eventually bought it for a reasonable price. He inherited the staff, including the hotel manager, and elected himself as a handyman to fix the multitude of items that had fallen into disrepair. Within 6 months, the hotel took on a new lease on life and he relished in the vast improvements he had made. Kyle replaced the noisy through-wall air-conditioners with a central fan-coil system controlled from the front desk. He installed a new telephone system, high-speed Internet access, and a satellite TV system, along with new card-key door hardware for increased security. Within a year he had added 20 more rooms and secured arrangements with several agencies that promoted the resort.

Although he had begun dating a year after the tragedy, most of the women he met left him with an empty feeling. Some physical characteristic—nice boobs or a pretty face or shapely legs—would initially attract him, but several hours with them would reveal little character depth and the interest would fade. He found it difficult most times to carry on a meaningful conversation with some, especially the local women, even though his Spanish improved over time. On some occasions he had sex with a few, but it merely satisfied a lustful urge and he invariably ended up leaving right afterwards feigning some urgent appointment, which usually pissed them off and he never saw them again. He found it odd that when married, the fantasy of an extra-marital affair was always there, and he often became infatuated with various women he would meet, thinking *I wonder what it would be like*. But throughout the many opportunities that arose, especially when he travelled away from home, he never compromised himself, always taking the moral high road and honouring his commitment to Casey.

Chapter 10

San José, Costa Rica. January 2005.

The Gulfstream jet landed at Tobías Bolaños International Airport at 8:10 p.m. and taxied to the private terminal. Louie and Andrew deplaned and entered the terminal building, then came out shortly after, followed by a customs agent. The agent climbed the steps to the plane and requested passports from all the passengers. Louie had explained that they are all attending a conference at the Hotel Playa Hermosa. The agent stamped the passports and left the plane, inspecting none of its cargo. Marco opened his laptop and saw the email from Carlita with the file attached. He opened the file and scanned the drawings with Sergio, along with the text message from Lorenzo about the suspected locations of the hostages, Peppe and his family. Marco then opened Google Maps and searched for the hotel, set the image in satellite view and zoomed in as far as the system would permit. Access would be a challenge as there was very little foliage surrounding the property, except for a few landscaping shrubs.

“How about a beach approach?” asked Sergio.

“Not equipped for that,” said Marco. “It is dark and we should have no problem getting to the hotel unseen. I want you and Delano to climb up to the sixth floor balcony where the honeymoon suite is. That is where Peppe’s wife and kids are. Once the family is safe, we go in after Peppe.”

“Okay,” said Sergio. “What’s the plan for getting Peppe?”

“They will probably hide him behind hostages, so we kill the hostages. They won’t be expecting that, and it will give us an advantage.”

“Sweet,” said Sergio.

Marco addressed the team.

“I don’t care who dies to get Peppe free. We’ll teach those chili shitters not to screw with the Santini family. If you see any of the kidnappers, shoot them dead.”

Nods of acknowledgement came from each man.

Two black Chevy Suburbans drove up to the plane.

"The cars are here," said Louie.

"Thanks," said Marco. "Okay, everyone suit up and into the vehicles. They dragged the large carryalls from the plane's cargo hatch and unloaded the riot gear suits. The suits were Damascus Flexforce, similar to those used by police forces around the world. They provide substantial protection against blunt force trauma with hard-shell body panels covering chest, back, forearms, thigh and knees. Each member of the squad selected their pre-arranged suit that was tailored to their size. Another carryall contained weapons and ordnance. Sig-Sauer P226 pistols with Guide Rod lasers, carbine variants of the AR-15 assault rifle, Mk II fragmentation grenades and M84 stun grenades.

Each SUV carried four men with ordnance in the back; Marco drove one vehicle and Sergio the other. Marco punched the hotel location into the navigation system and the two vehicles peeled out of the airport, heading south. The customs official picked up his cell phone and keyed in some numbers.

"Alberto?"

"Yes."

"They're on their way."

"How many?"

"Eight, heavily armed with riot gear."

"Thanks."

* * * * *

Alberto punched the 'end' button and summoned his men. They had expected a rescue attempt and now it was confirmed. His primary task now was to empty the hotel to prevent any innocent people from getting harmed. The bus he had arranged was sitting outside with the engine running. Fortunately, being off season, there were only 32 guests, including Peppe and his family, and 12 staff. All the guests and staff, except Peppe and his family, were ushered outside to the bus, and they boarded it in an orderly fashion. They loaded Peppe and his family into a GMC Denali with one of Alberto's men. Under the circumstances, Alberto thought it wise to keep the staff and other guests separate from the Santinis. Another of Alberto's men guarded the guests as the bus eased out of the hotel entrance, followed by the Denali, and proceeded north toward Hwy 34. They had rented a large meeting room in another hotel in Barrio Santa Lucia about 8 miles away where they would stay until the situation at the Hotel Playa Hermosa was resolved. Alberto now had three men to help him stage the reception for Santini's men. He had no disillusion about the type of men Santini would send on a team to rescue his son. It is unlikely that they would be concerned about collateral damage, hence the decision to evacuate the hotel. It was about a 2-hour drive from the airport, so he would expect them around 10 p.m. He had two men with a barricade on the road to Playa Hermosa from the NE and another two men on the SW approach. He removed the barricades and moved these men back to the hotel. Each approach was visible from the ocean-view balconies, so Alberto placed a man as a lookout for the two SUVs.

One idea Alberto considered was to just leave the hotel—the rescue squad would find it empty, and that should be that. However, the squad would try to find out

where the occupants had gone and Alberto decided it was better to eliminate or subdue the squad as a sign of superiority over the Santinis. The plan was to allow the rescue squad to enter the hotel as it would be easier to contain them there. Although they could try to gun them down outside, there were too many places for concealment and, whereas they may get a few of the men, the others could essentially mount a siege or worse, set fire to the hotel, forcing him and his men out.

Alberto's ear bud crackled as the lookout announced approaching vehicles from the north east.

"Two sets of headlights," the lookout said. "Can't determine vehicle type yet."

A moment later the lookout said, "They're slowing down. Lights now turned off. Two large black SUVs."

"That's them. Take up your positions."

Counting the men from the barricades, Alberto had eight, including himself. The hotel had a main entrance door and one through the restaurant. There was also a door at the rear used mainly for staff and deliveries. All the ground floor conference rooms had doors leading directly to a seating area, but they had panic hardware and could not be opened from the exterior. The only other door was at the end of the ground floor corridor, into which the stairwell exited. Alberto placed two men in the ground floor corridor—one in the exit stairway and one at the lobby end, hidden in a service room. Alberto and one man, Daniel, staked out the main lobby, Daniel concealing himself behind the reception counter and Alberto in the concierge's luggage storage room. Two men guarded the rear staff entrance, two the ground floor corridor while the last two covered the restaurant.

From Alberto's vantage point, he could see anyone approaching the main entrance through the expanse of glass windows and doors.

Chapter 11

"That's the hotel ahead," said Marco as he extinguished the car's lights. Sergio followed suit. He touched his throat mic. "Sergio. You and Delano secure the sixth floor honeymoon suite."

Sergio and Delano exited the vehicle and opened the rear door to gather their climbing gear. They had ropes and cloth-covered grappling hooks, but also selected a boat ladder that had two loops on the top. Their plan was to loop the ladder on the balcony railings and make their way to the 6th floor, floor by floor. They made their way to the end of the building—the honeymoon suite had two balconies facing the ocean at the far end of the hotel. Sergio looped the end of the ladder on the second-floor railing and climbed it to the balcony. Delano followed suit, and they repeated the process until they stood on one of the honeymoon suite balconies. Sergio tried one door and found it locked. Delano tried the other door, and it slid open. They each stood beside the door opening, listening for any movement inside. They heard nothing. Sergio nodded to Delano, and opened the door sufficiently to ease his heavy frame through, the ocean breeze causing the curtains to billow into the room. He was in a living room furnished with a large

sofa, two side chairs and a coffee table. A flat-screen TV filled most of one wall and a large painting the other. Attached was a dining area behind which was the kitchen. The kitchen door led into a corridor with three doors; the entrance and two bedrooms. They stole their way along the corridor and opened the first bedroom door and peered inside. A king-size bed occupied the left wall and a tallboy the right. There was no one in the bed. They crossed the room to check out the bathroom, but it too was empty. They retraced their footsteps to the corridor and entered the second bedroom. It had two queen-size beds on the left wall and a similar tallboy on the right. The beds were not occupied and nor was the bathroom. Sergio touched his throat mic.

"No one here, Marco."

"What?"

"There's no one here. We've checked the entire suite, and it's empty."

"Shit," spat Marco. "Where the hell is Peppe's family?"

"No idea. The whole place seems like a bloody morgue. It's only ten thirty and there doesn't seem to be anyone around."

Marco noticed this too as he walked around to the pool and restaurant. Lights were on inside the restaurant, but nobody appeared to be there. There were cars in the parking lot, but no lights showed from any of the suites. He could see the illuminated lobby, but no one was at the registration desk.

"I don't like this," he said to his men. "Something ain't right."

"Maybe they moved everyone somewhere else," Sergio said.

"Everyone back to the vehicles," Marco ordered. "Sergio and Delano get back down here."

Marco pulled out his sat phone and called Lorenzo.

"We're at the hotel and checked out the honeymoon suite where Peppe's family was supposed to be. It's empty. The hotel seems deserted. We think they may have suspected a rescue attempt and moved everyone."

"Damn!"

"What do we do now, boss?"

"Make sure the hotel is empty, then call me back."

"Sure boss."

"Okay," Marco said as he put away the sat phone. "The boss wants us to check out the hotel and make sure it is empty. Proceed with caution. It could be a trap."

The squad chambered rounds into their pistols and left the rifles, as they were not the weapon of choice in close-quarters combat. Marco sent two men to skirt the hotel and make their way to the rear staff entrance while he sent another two men to the restaurant entrance.

"Sergio. I want you and Joe to cover the ground floor conference room doors—try to find one unlocked. Delano and I will handle the main entrance."

Marco and Delano looked into the main entrance but saw no one. They eased their way up the front steps and approached the door, which opened as soon as they got close to it. They stood on either side of the door, peering in. Marco, gun out-held in a two-hand stance, entered the lobby, swinging the gun from side to side, the red laser penetrating the brightly lit lobby. Delano followed behind, using a similar stance.

* * * * *

Alberto saw two men pass by the entrance carrying a short ladder with hoops on the end. He realized they were going for the honeymoon suite from the outside and gain access from a higher floor. However, they could only get down using the elevator or stairs, and his men covered both from the lobby. Once they realized that there was no one in the honeymoon suite, they may sense a trap. Men milled around outside and one was using his phone, the glow of the screen illuminating his face. When the man stopped talking on the phone, they all returned to their vehicles. *Maybe they sense a trap*, Alberto thought.

"Guys have riot gear," he whispered into his mic, "so aim at the joints of the suits... arms, legs, crotch, neck. Centre mass hits won't be effective."

It was not long before he saw men approaching the main entrance while others made their way around the building. The doors opened when the motion sensor detected someone close to them, and Alberto watched as two men entered, brandishing automatic pistols. Alberto's men had instructions not to open fire until they receive word from him—the raiders must be inside the hotel before being challenged. His ear bud came to life as one of his men at the rear entrance signified that two men had entered. Later, he got a similar notification from the restaurant. He awaited word from the men covering the ground floor corridor as he watched the intruders scour the lobby and make their way to the stairs. The word came, and Alberto advised everyone to challenge the intruders.

"Freeze," Alberto ordered. Marco turned and fired several shots in his direction. Alberto ducked back into the baggage storage room as bullets showered splintered wood and plaster on him. The lobby then erupted in gunfire as Daniel opened fire. Alberto also opened fire on the two men caught in the middle of the lobby with no cover. Both men fell and Alberto slowly advanced, keeping his pistol pointed at them. Daniel emerged from behind the reception counter, keeping his gun trained on the downed men. One lay still while the other was writhing in agony. Alberto kneeled by the still man, checked for a pulse and found none. Blood oozed from a neck wound.

"Dead," he said to Daniel.

He pulled the face mask and helmet off and reeled, adrenaline cursing through his veins. He sensed his pulse pounding in his neck. Although 20 years older, he recognized him as the man who shot his father. He recalled the name as Marco.

One down, he said to himself. He wondered if Sergio was part of the team.

Daniel pulled out a pair of plasticuffs and secured the hands of the injured man after removing his face mask. Gunfire sounded from other parts of the hotel as his men engaged the rescue squad.

Chapter 12

Ruben and Rodrigo covered the restaurant area and watched as two men covertly entered through the glass doors that opened when approached. The men scanned the eatery as they inched their way into the restaurant, their guns' red lasers scanning the room. One skirted the left of the room, the other the right.

When they were completely in the room, Ruben stepped from his cover and challenged them.

“Freeze!”

Both intruders dropped to their knees and let off a barrage of bullets toward Ruben. Rodrigo fired at them from the other side of the room, dividing their targets. Neither Ruben nor Rodrigo had a shot as the men hid behind the restaurant furniture. Ruben did a barrel roll and flattened himself on the floor. He could see one man through the myriad of chair and table legs and fired three shots. There was a yell to signify he had found his mark. The other man was close to the kitchen and darted toward it. Rodrigo fired at him and the man fired back, hitting Rodrigo in the left arm. Rodrigo cried out and dropped his weapon so he could clutch his arm. Ruben unloaded his gun at the man’s legs and some shots must have found their mark, because he crashed to the floor before reaching the kitchen.

Ruben secured the injured men and then attended to Rodrigo, who had his right hand clasped onto his left bicep, blood seeping through his fingers.

“You okay?”

“Just a flesh wound, but it hurts like hell.”

Ruben opened one of his pockets, withdrew a field dressing and applied it to Rodrigo’s arm.

“Report,” Alberto said into his mic.

“Two men down in the restaurant. Rodrigo took a hit, but he seems okay.”

“Thanks Ruben.”

* * * * *

Nicolas and Manuel covered the staff entrance and watched as the door slowly opened. First one, then another man entered. Nicolas, standing behind the door, crept up and smashed his pistol on the back of the last man’s neck. The riot gear he was wearing had protection pads on just about everything but the joints, and the blow did not provide the desired effect. The man swung around, gun in hand, and Nicolas had to parry the man’s gun arm while he delivered a crushing blow to the man’s face with his gun. Again, the protection afforded by the riot gear diminished the blow and the man staggered backward, but recovered and levelled his gun at Nicolas. By this time, however, Nicolas had recovered his stance and fired several shots aimed at the joints in the suit. The man dropped to the floor screaming in agony. Meanwhile, the second man had turned and trained his gun on Nicolas. Manuel fired several shots at the second man that were absorbed by the bullet-proof panels of his suit. The man ran toward the staff washroom and entered the ‘Ladies’, ducking from Manuel’s bullets.

Alberto’s voice sounded in his ear bud, “Report”

“Nicolas here. Have one man down and one holed up in a staff washroom.”

“Break down the door and throw in a stun grenade. That should get him out.”

Nicolas did just that—opened the door and threw in the grenade. The man came running out with his hands raised. The grenade exploded, propelling the man to the floor with the concussion.

* * * * *

Adrian watched as the exit door to the ground floor corridor opened and a man's head peered in, then ducked back out. A few seconds later, the head appeared again, and the door opened further to allow him access to the corridor. Another man followed, both with guns extended. They had no cover as they crept along the corridor, their backs to the wall. Hugo hid himself in the exit stairway at the far end of the corridor and Adrian at the lobby entrance. Adrian cracked the door open and said, "Drop your guns!"

The men turned and ran back down the corridor when Hugo exposed himself and fired two shots over their heads—it was not advisable to shoot at the men because he may hit Adrian. The men stopped, dropped their weapons and thrust their hands in the air.

Adrian heard Alberto's call for a report.

"Adrian reporting. Both men in the corridor have surrendered."

"Great. That's all eight. Bring the bodies and the live ones into the lobby area. I want to take a picture to send to Lorenzo."

Alberto's team hustled Santini's men into the lobby, plasticuffs securing their hands. Two men were dead and another seriously wounded. Alberto checked the faces of all the intruders.

"So, Mr. Patrucci," he said to Sergio. "I know I asked Lorenzo to send me the bastards that killed my father, but I wasn't expecting him to send a whole team."

Sergio's face showed fear. "I didn't kill your father; it was Marco who pulled the trigger."

"While you were getting touchy feely with my mother?"

Sergio was sweating now and shaking, suspecting that he would die.

"Look, I'm sorry. I know that doesn't make up for losing your father, but nothing's going to bring him back."

Alberto smashed him in the face with his pistol. Sergio spat out a broken tooth along with bloodied saliva. Alberto then walked away.

"Line them up. Dead ones on the floor and live ones standing behind them."

They shuffled the men into position behind the corpses. Alberto said, "Smile," then snapped a picture with his smart phone. He checked Marco's phone for text messages from Lorenzo and found a number. He used this number to text Lorenzo the picture, with the caption: *Thank you for sending the men who killed my father.*

* * * * *

Lorenzo fumed when he received the text message and a picture of his rescue team either dead or trussed up. This was not going well, and he was nowhere near getting his son back. It was time to initiate plan B, but that would require paying Alberto the ransom sum first. Now he heeded Kyle's suggestion to bargain with him and reduce the amount. He had nothing to lose to try.

Lorenzo called Alberto.

"Lorenzo," Alberto said when he answered the phone.

"I guess you win," Lorenzo feigned defeat. "But I cannot raise \$10m—most of our assets are not liquid and we don't have that kind of cash available on short notice."

Bullshit, thought Alberto. They deal in large amounts of cash for their drug, prostitution and gambling businesses. They have more of a problem laundering the money than anything else.

“So, what are you proposing?”

“Two million.”

“No deal. You are in no position to bargain with me. I still have your family and make no mistake, I will carry out my threats.”

“That’s my best offer.”

“I’ll get back to you,” Alberto said and pressed the ‘END’ key.

“Bring everyone back to the hotel,” Alberto announced. “Tell the hotel guests to check out when they get here. The staff are to remain. Load Peppe and his family back in the SUV and put them in the honeymoon suite.”

Chapter 13

Lorenzo called Kyle and advised him someone will pick him up in the afternoon at 2:00 p.m. and bring him to his office. It was a statement and not a request, so Kyle stood outside the hotel and waited for the driver. Lorenzo showed anger after receiving a text at the restaurant last night. He returned Kyle’s phone to him without revealing what the text was all about, so he called Alberto and got the lowdown. So, he tried a rescue operation that failed—that would explain the anger. He wondered now what the meeting was for this afternoon.

The limo arrived, and the doorman opened the back door for Kyle. Once in and the door closed, the driver headed downtown.

Kyle repeated the procedure to access Lorenzo’s office and now sat in the same wing-back chair.

“Where do we go from here?” Kyle said, crossing one leg over the other. He knew Lorenzo had offered only \$2m, and Alberto did not accept.

“I’m calling Alberto again and see if he has accepted my offer. I want you here to talk some sense into him.”

“Why would he listen to me?”

“Maybe he has more respect and trust in you than he does me.”

“Maybe?” Kyle snorted.

Lorenzo ignored the comment and called Alberto.

“Yes, Lorenzo.”

“I have Kyle here with me and am putting the phone on speaker.” Lorenzo touched a key and set the phone on the desk.

“Alberto,” said Kyle.

“Kyle,” The tinny voice from the speaker announced. “How are things in Chicago? The Santinis treating you well?”

“Yes, they are.”

“Enough small talk,” Lorenzo said. “I want this situation resolved so we can each go about our businesses. I have made you a very respectable offer. So, how about it?”

"It seems," The disembodied voice said, "that I am not making myself clear in that I demand—not request—demand, the full ten million dollars. To stress my demand, I have your daughter-in-law and three grandchildren in front of me. I will let you choose which one is to die."

Kyle's face took on a look of complete shock.

"Alberto," Kyle said. "These are innocent people. You can't just shoot women and children to further your goals."

"Done all the time, my friend. The Santinis had no qualms about shooting innocent people to further their goals."

"But that makes you no better than they are," Kyle pleaded.

"I am no better than they are. Fight fire with fire." Anger crept into Alberto's voice. "Choose, Lorenzo."

"I will not choose someone for you to shoot. For Christ's sake, don't do this. You have the men who shot your father and one is dead already."

"Eenie, meeny, miny, moe."

"Don't do this, Alberto," Kyle pleaded again. "Please..."

A shot rang out, followed by a woman's scream.

"Jesus Christ!" Kyle exclaimed. He glanced at Lorenzo and the look of horror on his face.

"I'm sorry to say," The voice announced, "that you have one less grandson. Now, about the ten million."

Lorenzo sat there with an incredulous look on his face. "You bastard," he said, his face beet red. "You damned bastard. You've shot my grandson."

A distraught female voice through the speaker, "*Papa*, it's Gloria," she said in tears. Gloria is Peppe's wife and Lorenzo's daughter-in-law. "He shot Angelo. My God. He shot Angelo."

Alberto's voice came from the speaker. "You have two more grandchildren to go before your daughter-in-law, then we'll work on Peppe. Can I count on you to get together the ten million dollars by Tuesday?"

"Yes, yes," Lorenzo said in a daze, then looked at Kyle. "He shot my grandson. The bastard shot my grandson."

"I don't know what to say," said Kyle, visibly shaking. "I... I never thought he would do it. I thought it was just a bluff."

"What do I tell Lucy?" Lucy is Lorenzo's wife, although not Peppe's mother. Currently, Lorenzo did not appear to be the hard-ass person he always portended to be. He somehow looked frail and every bit of his seventy-two years.

"He shot my grandson," he said again, shaking his head. "The bastard shot my dear Angelo. My God. He was only seven."

"I'm so sorry about all this," Kyle said, himself finding it all hard to believe. "It's so tragic." The expression—live by the sword; die by the sword—came to his mind, and he thought how appropriate it was. Lorenzo had spent a lifetime being responsible either directly or indirectly for people's death. Now he will experience the grief so many of his victims faced.

* * * * *

Kyle accompanied Lorenzo to pick up the \$10m. No one bank carried that amount of cash, so they used an armoured truck that had to make several stops.

The banks dispensed it in \$100 bills and it weighed 225 lb, taking up 4 cubic feet of space. Each stack of \$100 bills (\$100,000) measured just over 4 in. and there were 100 stacks. This fit into five gym bags containing 20 stacks, and each bag weighed 45 lb. They drove the money to the airport and loaded it onto the Gulfstream jet. Kyle boarded the plane and Louie, with his co-pilot Andrew, manoeuvred the sleek jet to the runway, then accelerated to take-off speed and climbed into the air.

Kyle reflected on the actions the other night when Alberto had shot Lorenzo's grandson. Many innocent people die, and for what? Where does it end? Will Lorenzo allow Alberto to get the better of him? Kyle figured not. If it were him, and someone shot one of his family, he would spend the rest of his life hunting down the killer. He felt helpless when Casey's ex-husband shot her, because police shot him dead at the scene. Had that not been the case, Kyle would surely exact revenge. However, you don't know how you will react unless put in that position.

Kyle napped once they reached cruising altitude, and he remembered little until shaken awake by bad turbulence. He checked his watch and determined that there was only an hour and fifteen minutes remained to touchdown. He visited the washroom to refresh himself and then returned to his seat and picked up a magazine stacked in the rack beside him. It was a travel magazine, and Kyle reminded himself that he needed to get away for a while. The hotel had kept him busy over the last several months and he needed a vacation.

* * * * *

Alberto stood on the apron waiting for the Gulfstream and the money. Kyle stepped from the plane, the heat and humidity immediately blasting him. Alberto's men were already loading the gym bags into the Chevy Suburban, and Kyle watched as Peppe got out of one side of the vehicle, followed by a young girl, maybe four years old. Peppe walked around and opened the door for Gloria. Gloria stepped out, again holding the infant in her arms. Then a seven-year-old boy stepped out. Kyle looked at Alberto, his jaw agape.

"Did you think I am such an animal as to shoot a child?"

"Well, n-no," stuttered Kyle. "But... but Gloria..."

"Yes, she put on quite the act, didn't she?"

"But why? Why would she fake that you shot her son?"

"I really didn't give her an alternative. She had to act it or experience it for real."

"And if she hadn't?"

"But she did."

Obviously, he would not give Kyle the satisfaction of knowing whether he would have shot the child if she did not cooperate. But no mother would risk her child's life, and would do whatever necessary to spare him or her.

Kyle's assessment of Alberto improved now he showed he was not the kind of man to harm an innocent person to further his gains, especially a child.

"The Santinis are the animals in this game, not me," said Alberto. "I was merely resorting to their methods to get restitution."

"And did you? Get restitution, that is."

"Yes, I did. The man who shot my father is now dead and I have ten million dollars to compensate many of the people caught up in Santini's ruthless

operations. They forced many young women, my sister included, to work as prostitutes in their bars and nightclubs, many of them being abused and enticed onto drugs. I contacted many of these families, and they offered to help me put together this operation, in return for some compensation for the pain and suffering they had to endure at the hands of the Santinis. Some lost daughters to drug overdoses, while others mysteriously disappeared. Yes, I got some restitution, although none of it will erase the painful memories of those family members lost.”

Kyle listened to Alberto’s tale of woe and couldn’t help feeling sympathetic. Would he have reacted similarly? It’s hard to say.

Alberto reached into one bag and came up with a wad of \$100 bills, which he tossed to Kyle.

“I’m sorry about the damage to your hotel resulting from the raid. Hopefully, this should cover your expenses. Thanks for everything.”

Kyle stood there somewhat bewildered, looking at the wad of bills, knowing it was \$100,000, and didn’t know what to say.

Chapter 14

Kyle awoke to the bright rays of sun entering the room—he had neglected to close the drapes. He looked at the bedside clock—it read 6:56—and decided it was time to get up, anyway. After completing his morning routine, he ambled to the restaurant for breakfast. He wondered if Anna had arrived yet—she usually came in before 8, sometimes as early as 7. She lived in Parrita, about 30 minutes from the hotel.

“*Buenos Días*,” the cheerful voice said from behind him.

Kyle recognized the voice and his face lit up. “Anna,” he said, getting up from his chair. He turned and almost gave her a peck on the cheek, thinking better of it in front of staff. “Have you had breakfast yet?” He gestured to the chair for her to join him. She sat, but only sideways on the chair—she wasn’t staying.

“Yes, I ate. How was your trip?”

“Great... everything turned out well.”

“That’s wonderful. Will you have time to go over the financials today? The accountants need them this week.”

“Sure. I’ll come and see you later today. I have urgent matters to attend to right now.”

“Okay, see you later,” she said and headed for the door.

“I’ll call you when I’m ready,” Kyle said to her back. She gave a perfunctory wave, but did not turn around.

* * * * *

By the time Kyle cleared his backlog of work, and was able to see Anna, it was close to 3:00 p.m.

“Sorry things took so long,” he said as he entered Anna’s office.

“No problem,” she said, and moved her chair to the side of her desk. This allowing Kyle to pull over the other chair in her office so both could see her

computer screen. She tapped on the keys and various screens from the QuickBooks software appeared. It was a good year, with profits increased substantially from last year. This is good for his planned addition later in the fall, when reservations slowed. Occupancy year over year had shown an upward trend, and many times they had to turn away potential guests because they were full.

It was getting dark when they finished and she asked him to go for a walk with her on the beach, which he was glad to do. They each removed their shoes and walked through the warm surf as it washed up onto the sand.

Kyle tried to come up with non-work-related subjects, yet didn't want to pry into her private life. "How's the young lad doing? How old is he now?"

"Oh, Alphonse? He's fine, nearly two now. Thinks the nanny is his mom," she chuckled. "I don't see him much during the week. By the time I get home, he's usually in bed."

Kyle sensed a pang of guilt because things were exceptionally busy at the hotel and he needed her there. "That's... that's unfortunate," was all he could muster to say. He wanted to reach for her, but refrained.

Every now and again, Anna stooped to pick up a shell and inspect it before tossing it back onto the beach. The setting sun created wonderful hues of red as it painted the wisps of clouds that draped the sky. When they had reached the rock outcrop and unable to go further, they turned and proceeded back to the hotel. As the light faded, she reached for his hand. The soft and sensual hand in Kyle's aroused him, and he didn't like where this was going—but he wasn't going to stop it.

"Things are not good at home," she confided. "My husband is becoming very abusive and I am afraid for Alphonse."

He pulled her closer to him and wrapped a comforting arm around her shoulder.

"Kyle?" she said, looking at her feet as the surf gently washed over them. "You must know my feelings for you. I sense you feel the same way too. I so look forward to coming here and seeing you each day."

Kyle was afraid to answer—afraid to admit that he had the same feelings. He frequently considered allowing his emotions to develop, but always came to the same conclusion—it was wrong. But this was different now. Anna had now confessed her feelings to him, which was not the same as just suspecting them.

"Anna?" he said, stopping and facing her with his hands on her shoulders. "I do have strong feelings for you and have since you first walked in the door, but it was just infatuation then and I was confident I could be professional about it and keep it in perspective. I don't think I can now—it's not infatuation anymore."

He pulled her to him and gave her an affectionate hug, savouring the sweet smell of her as he buried his face in her hair.

"Don suspects I have affections for someone else," she said, trying to hold back the tears. "I don't know what to do. He is a very powerful man in Costa Rica and can cause mucho trouble for you." Her husband, Don Ameche, was Deputy Director of Tourism, and could indeed create problems for Kyle's business.

Kyle heard her sobs and caressed her back. He held her by the shoulders and eased her body away from his, then placed a hand under her chin and turned her face up toward his. Whether it was the slight breeze swaying the palms; the rhythmic sound of the waves lapping on the shore; the incredible beauty in Anna's

face; or the glow of the reddening sky shining in her hair and highlighting the streaks of tears on her cheeks—but he kissed her full on the mouth. She responded with a slightly open mouth, into which Kyle eased the tip of his tongue. Anna's warm and moist tongue greeted it, as they lowered themselves to a kneeling position on the soft sand, then fell sideways in a passionate embrace.

Kyle had misgivings about what was happening and considered he may be taking advantage of Anna, who was very vulnerable now. When he tried to break the embrace, Anna cried, "Please, please, take me now Kyle. Please don't stop." God, she felt so good, but something again told him this was wrong. However, if they were going to do this it would be prudent to do so behind closed doors, but he was reluctant to take her back to his room.

"We need to get off the beach," he said, breaking the embrace and getting to his feet. Extending his hand, he helped Anna get up, and she brushed the sand from her clothes. Kyle led her to one of the cabanas that lined the beach. Once inside, he reached for her and they embraced again, passionately kissing and fondling each other. Not breaking the embrace, they moved toward the large padded lounge and lay down. It had been some time since Kyle had experienced sex, and then only for biological release, but the pent-up feelings for Anna were now welling up inside of him. Kyle wanted her...more than he had ever wanted anyone in his life. Not satisfied with feeling her through fabric, he systematically removed what few articles of clothing she was wearing...blouse, skirt, bra and panties...and revelled in her nakedness enhanced by the fading twilight of the setting sun. Kyle began to undress, but Anna said in a sultry voice, "No, let me."

Anna knelt on the mattress and gazed into Kyle's eyes while she slowly undid the buttons of his shirt, peeling it off to reveal his bare chest. Kyle sported a six-pack of abs from his rigorous exercise program and swirls of black hair on his pectorals. Meanwhile, he explored Anna's naked body with his hands as she moved to undo his shorts, pulling them down to his knees. Kyle sat back and removed the shorts and underwear and pulled Anna down on top of him. They both let their hands wander over the other's body while kissing passionately. Now beyond the point of no return—beyond the point of rational thinking, Kyle's inborn carnal desire took over as he rolled over on top of her—and in less than a minute it was over.

Kyle rolled back onto the mattress and stared at the star-studded sky visible through the blowing curtains of the cabana, the reality of the situation setting in. Not only was she an employee, but married with a young child. How did he allow this to happen? What was he experiencing? Was he in love with her?—yes, he was sure he was in love with her—but he did not want to be responsible for breaking up her marriage. It was like history repeating itself. He had flashbacks of Casey and Bobby and the circumstances of that broken marriage. And, of course, there was Anna's husband's position that could make things very difficult for Kyle's hotel.

Anna propped herself up on one elbow and looked deep into Kyle's eyes. "Do not blame yourself, my love," she said, and kissed him tenderly on the cheek. "I love you, and it is clear to me now what I must do."

They got dressed and left the cabana, Anna reaching her hand for him.

"Coming, my love?"

Kyle accepted her hand and got up. They swaggered back to the hotel with their arms around each other in an affectionate embrace, not saying a thing. When they reached the beach gate, Anna reached up to kiss him.

Kyle said between kisses, "What did you mean, '... and it is clear to me now what I must do'?"

"Do not concern yourself, my love," she said tenderly, and gave him a passionate kiss, then ran to the parking lot sobbing.

The following morning Kyle found a letter on his desk, which was obviously from Anna. It surprised him when he did not find her at her desk when he arrived, because she always liked to start work early, so she could get home to her family before it got too late. She had obviously been in already and prepared a letter. Kyle looked at it for several minutes before deciding to open it. Somehow realizing it to be a letter of resignation—of goodbye—and he really did not want to confirm his suspicions. He reached for the letter opener on his desk, slowly slit the envelope, retrieved the single folded manila sheet and unfolded it. She had printed it on hotel letterhead. He read:

My dearest Kyle:

I knew when I first met you I would fall in love with you. I found I looked forward to going to work each day, just to see your smiling face. Just seeing you every day was destroying any hope of making my marriage work.

If Don found out about us, he would try to ruin you. He is not only abusive but also a very vindictive man. I must also consider my son, Alphonse, for he needs to grow up with his father. I can handle the abuse for now, because I know that if I left Don, he and his family would take Alphonse, and that I couldn't bear.

I find I must now protect the ones I love, my son and you. I must therefore tender my resignation, effective immediately, for I cannot go on seeing you without wanting you close to me.

Last night was wonderful. A night I will never forget for as long as I live.

God speed my love.

I love you dearly.

Anna.

A deep regret came over him as he re-read the letter over again several times, somehow hoping that it would say something different—but of course, it didn't. The thought of not seeing her again troubled him deeply. He suspected the small round bubbling marks on the bottom of the letter were tear stains. He folded the letter and placed it in his desk drawer.

Chapter 15

Playa Hermosa, Costa Rica. February 2005

As the weeks went by, Anna's departure played heavily on Kyle's heart, more so than he ever imagined it would. True, he missed her at the hotel as his executive assistant, but he missed her more knowing she was gone from his life—an impossible love that now has ended. He looked around the hotel—at his life now without Anna—and began re-evaluating things. Was this what he really wanted? There were buyers seriously interested in the hotel and he knew he could sell it to a major chain for a tidy sum and probably retire from the proceeds, but he was too young to retire. He had often considered buying a charter boat and setting up dive and fishing trips. The phone rang:

"MacDonald."

"It's Alberto."

"Hi," Kyle said a little curtly, not expecting to hear from him again. However, regardless of the recent incident and him being reluctantly involved, he had a certain respect for Alberto. He sympathized with the fact that as a child, the witnessing of the murder of his father caused a psychological stain that could only be erased with some form of restitution against the people responsible. He hoped that the death of Marco, the one who shot his father, would bring some consolation—and Alberto did let Sergio go.

"We need to talk. Can I drop by and see you?"

"Sure. What's up?"

"I'll tell you when I get there. This afternoon around three?"

"I'll be here. See you then."

Kyle naturally wondered what Alberto wanted to talk to him about, but realized that wondering would present no answer, so he put it to the back of his mind and waited until he got here.

* * * * *

Alberto's arrival was signified by the rumble of a large V8 that resonated through the building. Kyle suspected it was the Boss Mustang.

"A Mr. Caporalos here to see you," Kyle's new assistant announced a few moments later.

"Thanks. Show him in."

Kyle looked at the clock on his desk—it was 2:58.

The assistant showed Alberto and another man into the office, but Kyle did not stand to greet them, nor did he offer his hand.

"Didn't expect to see you again," Kyle said.

"Likewise."

"So, what's this all about?"

"This is Alex, an associate of mine."

"Hi Alex," Kyle said, still not attempting to shake his hand.

"Hello," said Alex.

"They've kidnapped my mother," Alberto blurted out.

"What!"

"The Santinis kidnapped my mother and say they will kill her if I don't return the ten million."

Kyle's face took on an expression of disbelief. "Shit," he said as he sat back in his chair.

"I'm sure they took her back to Chicago."

"So, what are you going to do?"

"Most of the ten million is gone. I used it to pay off debts to the people who helped me stage Peppe's abduction. I can't get it back—at least not all of it."

"How long did they give you?"

"Three days."

"I realize we are playing with your mother's life and we don't want to risk any harm—but it is in their best interest to get the money rather than carry out their threat. So, I suggest the first thing is to explain the situation to them—you have expended the money and it will take time to get it back—and ask for more time."

"I thought of that. How much time should I ask for?"

"How much money is left?"

"About four million in cash."

"Maybe show that as a sign of good faith, you will return one million in three days and another million every two days as long as you receive verification that no harm has been inflicted on your mother."

"Do you think they'll go for that?"

"You won't know until you ask."

"But I can't get it all back. We are merely prolonging the inevitable, that they will kill my mother."

"But it gives us time to find another solution."

"There is another solution." Alberto said.

"And what is that?"

"Go to Chicago and get her back."

Kyle took on a surprised look. "Are you serious?"

"Absolutely. I don't think there is another option. And there is something else..."

"What?"

"My mother has cancer—leukaemia. One reason I needed money is to pay for her stem cell treatment. It is very expensive—over \$100,000—and not covered by the Costa Rica health plan. It is only done in Panama, so I took her there last week, but she needs medication and it is still at her home."

"So, they kidnapped her, and she doesn't have her medication?" Kyle asked.

"Right."

Kyle sat in thought, stroking his chin.

"How are you supposed to get the money to them?"

"They are sending the plane down when I have it."

Kyle assessed all that had happened recently, and it was clear to him that there was someone else involved in this.

"You're not doing this alone," Kyle said. "Who is helping you?"

Alberto looked bewildered.

"What do you mean?"

"There is no way you could get all the help and support for the kidnapping without some assistance."

"I told you, there were many people helping me. People who were wronged by the Santinis."

"But many people aren't people with the contacts and influence to pull off an operation like this. So, who is helping you?"

Alberto sat back and placed his hands on his knees. "I'm afraid I can't tell you that."

"So, how do you plan to go about rescuing your mother? Do you know where they are holding her?"

"Well... no. But that is where you come in."

"Oh no, not again," Kyle said, holding up both hands, palms facing the men. "No bloody way."

"You are the only one who can do this... and there's another hundred grand in it for you."

"What do you mean, I am the only one who can do this?"

"Our plan involves uploading a spyware onto Lorenzo's phone, but it has to be in Bluetooth range to do it, and you are the only one he will trust to get close to him. Once you upload the spyware, we can trace his calls and the phone's location. That is why Alex is here... he is a tech expert."

Kyle sat there pondering.

Alberto's face took on a pleading look, "It's the only way we can save my mother. Please Kyle."

"That's all you want me to do? Load up the software onto his phone?"

"Yes, that's all. We'll do the rest."

Kyle pondered a moment more. He thought this was over and he neither had the time nor the inclination to become involved again. However, he would feel somewhat responsible if his reticence led to Alberto's mother's death.

"Okay," Kyle reluctantly agreed.

A relieved Alberto said, "Thanks, Kyle. Thanks a lot," as he stood and offered his hand. Kyle looked at it for a moment, then reached out and shook it.

"The software is known as a cell spyware," Alex explained as Kyle handed him his cell phone. "It uses Bluetooth to intercept the cell's wireless signal and surreptitiously uploads a program onto the target phone. Once uploaded, any cell phone activity on the target phone will be duplicated on your phone: calls, text messages, websites, etc. We can also find where the phone is as all location information is discoverable."

"How do I get it onto his phone?"

"It takes about a minute for the program to upload. When you are close to him, you need to access your phone and look for his phone in your Wi-Fi settings."

"How can I tell it's his phone?"

"That depends on the number of phones in the area. It will, of course, pick up all phones transmitting a signal. Not a good idea in a restaurant or near many people."

"The meeting will probably be in his office, so I don't expect a lot of phones."

"Make a ploy to access your phone—respond to a text, or whatever—then click on his Wi-Fi signature, open the app and upload. Then you can put the phone back in your pocket."

"Okay, I think I've got that."

"Let's do a dry run on my phone," suggested Alex.

Kyle followed the procedure and successfully uploaded the software on to Alex's phone. "Once it is done, I will be able to access the information from your phone. That way, I can track any number he calls."

“Okay.”

“We’re good to go then?” said Alberto.

“When is this happening?”

“Not sure yet... I will let you know after I speak to Lorenzo.”

Chapter 16

Alberto called Lorenzo and nervously awaited for him to answer.

“Lorenzo,” the gruff voice said.

“It’s Alberto.”

“Mr. Caporalos. Do you have my money?”

“There is a problem with that, but I have a solution.”

“I’m listening.”

“I distributed most of the money to friends and relatives who helped me put together your son’s kidnapping. It will take some time to get it back.”

“You’re stalling,” Lorenzo said, but inwardly knew it to be the truth. It would take a lot of money to stage the operation he did—more money than a man in his position would likely have access to.

“No. It’s the truth. I can pay you a million every two days as I get the money back.”

“That’s twenty bloody days,” blurted Lorenzo. “I’m not waiting three weeks for my money.”

“But I can’t guarantee I will get the money back sooner than that,” Alberto pleaded.

“Tell you what, seeing as I’m a nice guy. I will accept half the money in two days and the other half a week later. That’s a better deal than I would give many of my other debtors.”

Alberto realized, as is often the case in hostage situations, that any improvement in terms of payment is a victory. But he wasn’t finished negotiating because he couldn’t raise five million.

“I can get my hands on four million right away—I can send that. I can probably get another three by week’s end and the last three a week later.”

Lorenzo pondered a while. He wanted this done sooner than two weeks. The longer you hold a hostage, the more issues can develop. He didn’t want to nursemaid Alberto’s mother any longer than necessary, and he certainly didn’t want the terms dictated by Alberto. But, he was a business man and had to find the best way to get his money back, so asking the impossible would not serve either of their interests. In the past, Lorenzo had debtors killed for not meeting their obligations and made sure that he spread the news. Debtors will usually treat money they owe as a low priority, favouring essentials like food, shelter, medical payments, and family commitments—and sometimes drugs. With no incentive to pay, the mob would never get their money. Better to sacrifice a debt to show others the penalty for not paying. But this case was a little different as it did not involve local people and the sum of money was a lot higher than normal.

"Deal. I will send the plane right away. Make sure the money is there when it arrives."

"It will be," a relieved Alberto said. "Thanks. Now, can I talk to my mother?"

"Just a minute," he said, and the line went dead. After 30 seconds, he heard his mother's voice.

"Alberto?"

"*Mamá*," Alberto's excited voice answered. "How are you?"

"I'm fine, they are treating me well."

"Don't worry *mamá*, I will get you out of there as soon as possible. I need to raise money, and that will take time."

"That's okay *mi hijo*, I know you will do your very best."

There was silence on the line and Alberto thought the call was dropped, but Lorenzo's voice came on the line again.

"Satisfied?"

"Yes, thank you for not harming her."

"Make sure the money is on the plane. It will be at Tobías Bolaños International at 2:00 p.m. tomorrow."

"It'll be there."

* * * * *

Since owning the hotel, Kyle met many prominent Costa Ricans, one of which was the San José Chief of Police, Frederico Gomez. They had many long chats, and Kyle maintained his discretion about the different women who would accompany him on each trip.

Barely making five foot four with thick heels, Frederico Gomaz was vertically challenged, but was a very jovial character given to laughing out loud often. Despite his short build, he had very handsome features and disguised his mid-fifties age well. He was proud of his accomplishments to lure beautiful women to Kyle's hotel for a few nights at a time. He would sit with Kyle and ask his opinion on each of them, and Kyle enjoyed the game. During a lavish dinner Frederico would introduce his new belle to him, ordering "the best Champagne", and then disappear to his room with his companion. After an hour or so he would reappear and the two of them would drink on the beach while Frederico was getting his second wind, so he could go back and try another position. Kyle couldn't help liking the guy.

He called Frederico and at once recognized the thunderous roar at the other end of the line.

"Kyle MacDonald. You old bastard," he said jovially in excellent English. "How in hell are you? Haven't heard from you in ages," "Where the hell are you?"

"I'm at the hotel. I have an issue I want to discuss with you."

"Sure. Anytime. Let's meet for breakfast tomorrow."

"Sounds good. Julio's at 9?"

Julio's was a diner restaurant that specialized in American-style food.

"Sounds good. See you there."

Kyle severed the connection and pondered how Alberto would try a rescue attempt on his mother when he had no clue where she was. Chances are she was

being held in a hotel somewhere, but the mob had so many properties they owned, she could be anywhere—and the clock was ticking.

The phone rang, and he picked it up.

“Kyle. It’s Alberto.”

“Any developments?”

“I called Lorenzo and pleaded with him to give us the extra time. Surprisingly, he agreed to a stepped payment plan of four million now, another three million in a week and the final three million the week after that. He also let me talk to Carmen, my mother.”

“She’s okay?”

“Scared, but okay. They seem to be treating her well.”

“Any clues on where they are holding her?”

“None at all.”

“Is this ever going to end though? If you get her back, what’s preventing the Santinis from kidnapping her again, or anyone else close to you?”

“We have to find a solution that ends it, other than paying back all the ten million which I won’t be able to do. I’m wishing now I didn’t take on a mafia mobster. What was I thinking?”

“Too late for regrets now. What’s done is done.”

* * * * *

Kyle drove into San José to meet with Federico. He saw him sitting in a booth near the back of Julio’s and waved acknowledgement. Federico got up as Kyle approached and held out his hand.

“Good to see you, my friend,” Federico said with a grin.

“Likewise.”

Both deposited themselves in the booth and slid along the seat. Federico was already nursing a coffee. Before long, a server appeared and Kyle ordered a café Americano.

“Have you ordered breakfast yet?” Kyle asked.

“No,” said Federico, looking at the smiling waitress. “But she knows what I always have.”

“Two eggs over easy, home fries, brown toast,” Kyle said, ordering a traditional North American breakfast listed as a speciality with Julio’s.

“*Gracias*,” the server said and scurried away.

“So, what’s on your mind?”

Kyle outlined the story about Carmen’s kidnapping. Federico was well aware of the raid on Kyle’s hotel by Alberto and his group.

“Not unexpected,” Federico said.

“No,” agreed Kyle. “It was dangerous to take on a powerful organization such as the Santini family. But that’s water under the bridge now. What’s worse is that Alberto’s mother needs medication for a treatment she’s undergoing.”

The server returned with a steaming mug of coffee.

“*Gracias*,” said Kyle.

“*De nada*,” she said as she topped up Federico’s mug.

“The other problem is,” continued Kyle, “is that Alberto doesn’t have the money now to pay back to Lorenzo. He says he has four million left in cash, but there’s no

way he can raise the rest. That means that his mother's going to die unless they can get her back."

"How do they intend to do that?"

"Alberto wants me to meet with Lorenzo and upload a spyware onto his phone so they can track his calls and location to find out where they are keeping her. He had another man, Alex, upload the software onto my phone. Once they have her location, they can go and get her."

Frederico sat in thought, wanting to say something, but electing not to.

"Santini is sending down the jet to collect his money. I am supposed to convince Lorenzo to allow me to return on the plane with Carmen's medicine."

"Maybe he will suggest putting the medicine on the plane."

"Possibly, but I will insist that I go along to make sure nothing happens to her."

"You realize, however, that you are going into the lion's den. When the phones are linked, and the software is being uploaded, the screen lights up. If he notices it, he may suspect something, especially if he knows about the existence of the software."

"I guess I just have to be careful."

"What is it that you want from me?"

"Just wanted to run it by you, that's all. I know this is more up your street than mine. I know I am just the messenger and shouldn't worry about Lorenzo taking his wrath out on me."

"I don't think that is a major concern, as long as he doesn't detect the loading of the software. I will call a friend of mine in Chicago who will help you with anything you may need if you run into any trouble. I'll text you his number."

"Thanks for that," Kyle said.

Their breakfasts arrived, and they both stopped talking to enjoy the meal. When finished, they engaged in small talk and the server removed the plates and topped up their coffees. When finished, Frederico bade his goodbye to Kyle and returned to his office.

* * * * *

Kyle called Lorenzo and explained about the medication for Carmen and that he would bring the money with him.

"Trying to build up your frequent flier points with Santini Air?" Lorenzo quipped.

"I just want to see that she gets her medication."

"Why are you so interested in helping this guy? Didn't he just raid your hotel?"

Kyle really did not have an answer to that. It was true that Alberto had put his guests in danger, but it was clear that he had no malicious intentions to anyone, including Peppe and his family. Alberto and others like him had certainly been taken advantage of by the Santinis, who used them as second-class citizens to further their corrupt empire. Kyle liked to root for the little guy, and it was evident that Alberto was the little guy in this issue.

"Just there to mediate any issues."

"What issues should there be? He knows the deal and the consequences if he breaks it."

"There are always issues in situations like these."

“Okay. Just make sure you have the money with you.” Lorenzo said, and the line went dead.

Chapter 17

Kyle stood on the apron of the Tobías Bolaños Airport, shielding his eyes from the bright afternoon sun, and watched as the Gulfstream taxied to the area in front of the private terminal. Carrying \$4m in cash in two carryall bags made him a little uncomfortable, and he would feel better once on the plane. Fortunately, the private terminal did not have X-ray scanners, and no one asked what was in the carryalls. Warmer clothes and a winter jacket covered the stacks of \$100 bills, plus a travel kit, but moving a few items in the bag by any inspection would reveal the money.

Louie appeared in the doorway as the door lifted up and he unfolded the steps. Kyle climbed the steps and greeted Louie.

“How are you?” Kyle said.

“Great,” Louie responded offering his hand.

Kyle shook his hand and Louie stepped back to allow him into the plane. He found a seat, and Louie retrieved the steps and closed the door. Kyle could see the back of Andrew’s head in the co-pilot’s seat as Louie joined him. The plane taxied to the end of the runway and took off. They climbed to cruising altitude and Kyle reclined the seat, taking the opportunity to catch up on some sleep. Two hours later he awoke, and Andrew came through the cabin with drinks and snacks. He advised Kyle that there were about three more hours of flying time and, after consuming the food and drinks, Kyle laid back and dozed again.

Kyle awoke when the plane hit the runway at Chicago; hardly believing he had slept another three hours. He looked at his watch—it was 7:35. The trip had taken just over five hours, and Kyle retired to the washroom to change clothes and freshen up.

The bitter cold hit Kyle as he descended the gangway and trudged through the dusting of snow to the terminal. No car waited for him this time, so after clearing customs—he left the money on the plane with Louie—he called for a cab after booking a room at a Holiday Inn Suites—a lot less pretentious than the Waldorf Astoria. He checked the iPhone’s weather app and determined it was 14°F with light snow, tapering off over night, but more snow in the forecast for tomorrow. Since leaving Canada over ten years ago, he didn’t realize how much he hated the cold weather.

The cab arrived. The driver placed his bag in the trunk and Kyle got in the back after giving the driver the name of the hotel. They exited the terminal and headed toward downtown. Wipers oscillated back and forth to clear accumulated snow from the windshield as traffic slowed to a crawl on I-90. Even when they finally exited the freeway, the traffic was still slow. The cabby stopped at an intersection showing a red light, then eased away, wheels spinning, when the light turned green. The road they were crossing had four lanes and a stationary large truck obscured the inner lane.

Kyle shouted, "Watch out!"

A car skidded through the intersection in the inner lane, wheels locked, and headed for the cab. The cabby braked, but had insufficient speed to attempt any evasive manoeuvre. Kyle braced for the inevitable crash as the car slid toward them. Kyle could see the panicked look on the woman's face driving the other car as she tried desperately to turn the wheels, but the car plowed ahead, being an older car and not fitted with anti-lock brakes. It was also front-wheel drive which, despite some manufacturer's claims, is the worst configuration for vehicle control in such situations. If she had taken her foot off the brake, she may have had enough traction to avoid the taxi. But the normal reaction, except for trained drivers, is to keep your foot on the brake, causing understeer. The two vehicles collided. The taxi spun through 45° while the other car glanced off, coming to rest facing the same direction as the taxi. Kyle, sitting on the right-hand side of the cab, ducked down, placing his head on the next seat. The cab driver would have been propelled into the passenger seat if not for the wheel to grasp onto.

Kyle raised his head and said to the driver, "You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

Kyle opened the door and stepped out of the cab, only to slip and fall on the icy road. He forgot he had shoes on with no grips. Getting up, he half slid and half shuffled his way to the other car, and tapped on the window.

"You okay?" he said to the distraught woman. She was clearly in shock, but apparently unharmed. The airbag, if fitted, did not deploy. She looked dazedly at Kyle, then wound down the window.

"I am so sorry. I just couldn't stop. Is anyone hurt?"

"No, we're fine. Just shaken up a little. Looks like you have a few dents to the front of your car."

The cabby came over to them, an annoyed expression on his face.

"Look what you've done to my cab," he said, pointing at the crumpled fender and scattering of plastic fittings and broken lenses. "Do you realize how much money I lose while it's in for repair?"

"I am so sorry," she said again and burst into tears. "I tried to stop, but couldn't."

Kyle walked the cabby away from the woman. "No point in making her feel any worse than she does. You could have ensured all traffic was stopped before pulling into the intersection."

The cabby's face turned red. "So, it's my fault now? I had the green light."

"No, it's not your *fault*, but one could say you had the last clear chance of avoidance."

"Bullshit!"

"Look," said Kyle, reaching in his back pocket for his wallet. "Here is my card. I can be a witness. How much do I owe you?"

"I'll have to check the meter," he said, walking back to the cab.

"And call another cab please," Kyle shouted after him, and returned to the other car.

"Does the car still run?"

She turned the ignition key, and it started.

"Seems to be fine," she said, still sobbing.

“Here is my card,” said Kyle as he handed it to her through the window. “I can be a witness if anyone needs one.”

“Thank you,” she said, drying her eyes on a soggy tissue. “I’m on my way to the hospital, I’m a night nurse there. Guess I will be late.”

Kyle was unsure of the protocol for accidents in Chicago. In some areas, there was no requirement to call police in cases of minor damage and no injuries. Surely, the cabby knew the proper course of action. After paying the cabby Kyle waited for an alternate ride which, considering the weather, took over 30 minutes.

It took over an hour to reach the hotel, passing several other fender-benders on the way. Kyle had sent a text to Lorenzo advising his arrival and requested a meeting in the morning. He received a reply an hour later to meet in his office at 11:00 a.m., which suited Kyle fine.

* * * * *

Alberto’s mother, Carmen, sat despondently in the small room that looked like a bedroom. Furniture comprised a single bed, a chair with a padded seat, and a small chest of drawers. There was no window, and she presumed she was in a basement. The only illumination came from a single curly-que bulb dangling from the centre of the ceiling with a pull cord to turn it on and off. She barely remembered the abduction—dragged from her home after being ousted from her bed.

“Pack a suitcase,” the man had said, “You’re going on a trip—and pack warm.”

When she asked where they were going, she got a null response. Because she lived in Costa Rica most of her life, except for the few years living in Chicago with her family, she really did not need warm clothing. She rustled up a sweater and coat she hadn’t worn for years, plus a pair of ankle boots and a pair of woollen socks.

Hustling her out of the door to a waiting car, they drove to the airport, ushering her up the steps of a private jet. It was only when the plane took off that she realized that in her hurry to pack, she had thrown in some make-up but forgot her medication. When first returning from Panama after the stem-cell implants, Alberto had arranged for a private nurse to attend to her and give the injections necessary to stop her antibodies from rejecting the stem cells until they had a chance to develop naturally within her body.

She tried to rest for the five hours on the plane, but sleep evaded her. Her mind tried to process what was happening, and she knew it was something to do with the recent skirmish her son had with the Santini family. She tried to talk him out of it when he outlined his plan to get restitution for his father’s killing, but she knew it fell on deaf ears. Alberto would not forget the experience of seeing his papa shot down in front of him and often vowed revenge. She thought he had put it out of his mind, but the need for money when she got sick reignited the reprisal thoughts.

The plane landing in Chicago confirmed her fears; that the Santinis had abducted her. She shivered from the cold when she stepped from the plane, wrapping her arms around herself as they led her to an awaiting limousine. The trunk was open and her abductor reached for the suitcase and threw it into the

trunk. He then unceremoniously propelled her into the trunk after it. She hit her head on the suitcase and suffered a blow to the leg as it hit the open edge of the trunk.

“Make a sound and you’ll never see your son again,” he said as he slammed the lid down, the last inch being pulled closed by the soft-close mechanism. It would not be possible to get her through customs and they rarely, if ever, asked to check the trunk while leaving the private terminal. The darkness in the confined space overwhelmed her, the only illumination being a faint halo of light around the taillight housings. In order not to collide with other items in the trunk with the car’s movement, she tried to wedge herself against the sides. She lost track of time, not knowing how long she was in there. Thankfully, the car finally stopped, and the trunk opened. Before helping her out of the trunk, they blindfolded her with a black scarf, then led her up a path. Her other senses kicked in but told her little. The sound of footsteps crunching in the snow; a dog barking; a distant siren of an emergency vehicle. Carmen stumbled as her foot hit a step, and the two people assisting her raised her by lifting under the elbows. She counted four steps, then a key clattered in a lock and a door opened. A waft of warm air hit her in the face, and they helped her over the threshold. She felt the cold nose of a dog on her hand, which startled her.

“Willy won’t hurt you,” the man said.

The blindfold removed, they led her downstairs and into a room.

“Can I use the washroom please?” she asked before she entered the room. The man considered this, then led her down the hall to another door, opened it and stood aside for her to enter after switching on the light. The noisy fan hummed away as she looked at her dishevelled face in the mirror. A red mark showed on her forehead, a result of the blow she received from hitting it on the suitcase in the trunk. She rolled up her pant leg and inspected the small laceration caused by the trunk release mechanism. She finished her ablutions and stepped out of the washroom. The man led her back to the other room, and she entered.

“May I have my purse and suitcase, please?”

The man said nothing and closed the door. Minutes later, he returned with her purse and suitcase. Rifling through her purse, she noticed they had removed her cell phone.

After several hours, she heard the key turn in the lock and her captor stepped into the room, holding out a cell phone.

“Someone wants to talk to you.”

She presumed it would be Alberto as she took the phone and placed it to her ear.

“Alberto?”

“*Mamá.*”

They spoke briefly, then the man grabbed the phone from her and left the room. Carmen heard the key turn in the lock.

Chapter 18

Kyle had lots of time before the 11:00 a.m. meeting with Lorenzo, so he made a few calls after finishing his shower and dressing in a shirt and pants more suited to the Chicago climate. He called Alberto and let him know he was there, and that he planned to see his mother with the medication later in the day. Next, he called Alex to go over the process again for uploading the software—he would have a small window of opportunity and didn't want to screw it up. He went downstairs to the hotel lobby and walked outside to a waiting cab.

"Santini Tower."

"Okay," the driver said, then engaged *Drive* and pulled into the traffic. As forecast, it did snow again during the night and the roads were slushy but not slippery. He arrived at the Santini offices at 10:50, paid the cab and made his way through the revolving doors to the reception. He announced that he had a meeting with Lorenzo Santini and the receptionist asked his name, then keyed in a number and spoke to someone at the other end—probably Carlita, his personal secretary.

"Someone will be down for you shortly. If you would take a seat."

Kyle made his way to one of the many lounges positioned around the cavernous lobby. The ceiling had to be at least 30 feet high with huge chandeliers looking like suspended stalactites. Several high-bay LED recessed fixtures provided general lighting and, due to the overcast skies, were fully illuminated. Designers dotted small trees among the lounges, illuminated with special UV-producing sources to mimic daylight. A man ambled up to Kyle.

"Mr. MacDonald?"

"That's me," said Kyle, getting up out of his seat and following the man to the elevators. They stepped into the cab and the man used his keycard to access the penthouse floor. When Kyle stepped out of the cab, Carlita was there waiting for him.

"Mr. Santini will see you now," she said with a smile.

"Thanks," Kyle said as he followed her, trying not to ogle her ass as he did so. She opened the door and stepped aside for Kyle to enter. Lorenzo sat behind his desk, on the telephone, with the same goon as before standing next to him. The goon approached Kyle, gesturing with his arms spread for Kyle to do the same. Kyle raised his arms, and the goon patted him down. He pointed to something in his pocket and Kyle took it out.

"Medication."

That seemed to satisfy him, and he walked back to stand beside Lorenzo. Lorenzo continued his conversation on the telephone and gestured to Kyle with his hand to one of the wing-back chairs, the same one he sat in previously. Kyle took the opportunity to walk to the window and reached in his pocket for his phone. The view was spectacular from here as he gazed out over Lake Michigan. An exceptionally cold January and February had caused ice to form along the shores for as far as he could see, but Lake Michigan, unlike some other Great Lakes, has never completely frozen over. He held his phone in front of him as he heard Lorenzo still talking, somewhat animatedly, on the office phone. He navigated to *Settings*, *Wi-Fi* and looked at the available Wi-Fi connections. Fortunately, he saw one labelled *Lorenzo's iPhone*. Bingo, he thought. He tapped on the connection and uploaded the spy software.

"We meet again," Lorenzo said as he hung up the phone. Kyle placed the phone in his pocket without turning it off as the software was still uploading. Lorenzo's demeanour was not the same as before, and Kyle suspected it would be an arduous conversation. He did not offer a hand, and neither did Kyle. This was not a meeting of friends or business associates. It was a meeting of necessity to resolve an issue. As Kyle sat down, he could see the iridescent glow of Lorenzo's phone beneath his jacket, signifying the uploading of the software. He hoped that his nervousness was not evident.

"Yes, we do. You have the money and now I would like to speak to Carmen and give her the medications."

"Carmen?" Lorenzo said with a quizzical look. "Is that her name?"

Kyle ignored the ignorance of the question and reiterated his request. His cell buzzed, signifying a text message. He retrieved the phone from his pocket and looked at the display—it showed one new text message. Clicking on it, he saw a message from Alex: *Upload successful*. He immediately deleted the message.

Lorenzo nodded to the man standing next to him, and the man pulled out his phone and dialled a number. *Shit!* Thought Kyle. *He's not going to use his own phone.*

The man waited on the line and Kyle pulled out his phone again, going through the same procedure, and saw several other Wi-Fi selections. Which was the one being used? He selected one and clicked *upload*. The screen showed a message *Target phone in use—try again later*. At least it was the right phone. He would wait until he finished the conversation before he could upload the spy software to the new phone.

The man held the phone out to Kyle, and Kyle put it to his ear.

"Alberto?"

"No, it's Kyle MacDonald, Alberto's friend. I have your medications here for you."

"Yes, Kyle, I remember Alberto mentioning you. You own the Playa Hermosa Hotel?"

"Yes, I do. How are you being treated?"

"As well as can be expected. Thank you for bringing my medications, I am overdue for an injec..."

The man snatched the phone from Kyle's hands, ended the call and placed it back in his pocket. Kyle reached for his own phone, used his *Touch ID* to turn it on. It was still in the Wi-Fi mode, and he pressed the upload icon.

"Thank you for letting me speak to her," Kyle said to Lorenzo. "She is overdue for her medications and I would like to administer them for her."

"Can't anyone do that?"

"No. It requires an injection, and not everyone can do that."

"So, you have medical training now?"

"Yes, in the armed forces."

Lorenzo rubbed his chin as he seemed to do often when thinking.

"Okay," he finally said. "You can either be blindfolded, or ride in the car's trunk. Your choice."

"I think I will take the blindfold."

"Call the limo," Lorenzo said to his bodyguard, "and tell him he will be taking a passenger to the woman."

“Do you have the medication with you?”

Kyle patted his right-hand jacket pocket. “Yes, I do.”

“Goodbye Mr. MacDonald,” Lorenzo said with a dismissive wave of his hand. “Take the elevator to level P4.”

Kyle stood and walked to the door, letting himself out. He smiled at Carlita and pressed the elevator button ‘P4’. The limo was waiting for him, and when he got in, another man occupied the back seat. As the car pulled away, the man pulled out a black hood and placed it over Kyle’s head.

The man put out his hand, and said, “Your phone.”

Kyle reached in his pocket and handed over the phone.

Chapter 19

Kyle tried to assess where he was going, but there were too many stops and turns as they drove through the city. He estimated they had driven for 30 minutes and the car stopped; the door opened and someone grabbed Kyle’s arm. He stumbled out of the car onto a snow-covered walkway and another hand grabbed his other arm. They lifted him as he approached some steps and he tested them with his foot. He counted four and stood on a landing. Then someone rapped on a door. Kyle felt a rush of warm air as the door opened and he sensed the smell of food. He also heard the panting of a dog—that may be a problem for any rescue attempt. After being ushered inside, he felt the wet nose of the dog on his hands. A door creaked open and they led him down a flight of stairs. The blindfold now removed, he adjusted his vision to the brightly lit corridor. They were, by his reckoning, in the basement of a residence. Three doors led from the corridor and a man unlocked one and stepped aside for Kyle to enter.

Carmen, sitting in the lone chair, got up when Kyle stepped into the room.

“Kyle?”

“Yes. How are you?”

“Scared. How is Alberto?”

“Alberto’s fine, just worried about you.”

“Alberto is a good boy,” she said as she sat back down in the chair. Kyle sat on the bed and removed his jacket, taking out the medication and laying it on the night table. “He takes all the issues of the world on his shoulders, then tries to make everything right. He never got over his father’s shooting and his sister’s abduction to work in the clubs—she was only fourteen.” Tears flowed as she recalled the injustices their family had to suffer at the hands of the Santinis.

Kyle estimated Carmen to be in her late fifties. But despite hardships she endured over the years, she was still a beautiful woman. Jet black hair fell to her shoulders and framed an attractive face. Deep-set brown eyes that, sadly, had seen lots of tears in her lifetime, looked affectionately at Kyle. A perfectly formed nose and soft, full lips completed the facial features. Generous breasts with an hour-glass figure and shapely legs added to her attractiveness.

“I have your medication here. Do you want me to administer it now?”

“Yes. Thank you very much.”

Kyle undid the syringe's packaging and took out a vial. After removing the cap from the needle, he inserted it into the soft plug of the glass vial, held it up, and withdrew on the plunger. Kyle transferred the liquid to the syringe and tapped the glass to force any bubbles to the top, then depressed the plunger until a small squirt of liquid ejected from the end of the needle. Kyle removed a rubber tourniquet and wrapped it around her bicep, tying it in a knot. He tapped the veins in the crook of her arm, finding one that stood out, and injected the liquid into it.

"Thank you," she said as Kyle withdrew the needle and placed a small wad of dressing on the puncture mark. Carmen placed her finger on the wad as Kyle unrolled a short section of surgical tape and secured the dressing in place.

Kyle did not want to take a chance that someone overheard their conversation, so he reached over and whispered in her ear, in Spanish.

"We're going to get you out."

Carmen's face lit up.

"Is Alberto here?" she whispered.

"I don't know. I am here to give you the medication, but they told me they plan to get you out of here."

Her elation dwindled somewhat. "When is this all going to stop? Even if you can get me out of here, what is there to prevent them taking me again, or anyone else in our family? How long must we live in constant fear from the Santinis? What is it they want from Alberto?"

Kyle didn't know how much Alberto told her about the earlier incident, but obviously not much. He decided it was not his place to give her the details.

"The Santinis want something Alberto can't provide, so we have to get you out. We must also try to end this before more people get hurt."

The door opened; a man entering the room.

"Finished?"

"Yes, we're finished."

"I'll leave the medication here and be back in a couple of days for another injection," Kyle said to Carmen.

"Thank you so much. Give Alberto my blessings."

"Will do."

They led Kyle out and placed the hood over his head again, then guided him back to the car. After 30 minutes or so they dropped him off at his hotel, removing the hood.

"My phone?" Kyle asked.

The man reached into his pocket, pulled out Kyle's phone and handed it to him.

* * * * *

Kyle entered his hotel room and made his first call to Alberto.

"How is she?" asked Alberto.

"She's fine and holding up well. I gave her the medication and will be back in a couple of days for another dose."

"There's another issue," Alberto said.

Kyle gave an exasperated sigh. "What now?"

"Our plan to get Carmen out has run into some snags. We can't get there in time. The Border Patrol have blocked our entry into the United States until we can get new IDs."

"That means they will kill Carmen if you don't get the money to Lorenzo."

"Yes, unless..."

"Unless what?" Kyle asked, not wanting to know the answer.

"Unless you get her out."

"No damned way," Kyle blurted. "These guys have guns. Are you trying to get me killed? I don't have any weapons or gear to do the job."

"No, I'm not trying to get you killed, I am trying to save my mother from being killed. You can pick up gear from most hardware stores and likely get a stun gun at a gun shop."

"I'm sorry, Alberto. If I screw it up, both your mother and I will be on a slab in the morgue."

"I think you give yourself less credit than you deserve. I know you can pull this off."

"Too dangerous. For me and for her. Sorry, but I can't do it."

"Won't do it," Alberto corrected.

"Okay, won't do it."

"All right," said Alberto dejectedly. "I really can't blame you, but I'm out of options, and Lorenzo wins again."

Kyle ended the call and a while later his phone rang.

"MacDonald."

"Hey Kyle," Alex said. "So, you had to upload to a second phone."

"Yeah, I couldn't believe that after successfully uploading to Lorenzo's phone, he gets his muscle to make the call."

"No problem. I have the other phone and have gone through the numbers he called. We traced the number he called just before the upload to a burner phone located near 26 West Franklin Street in Wheaton. Check it out on Google Maps. Mostly larger houses there, so it appears to be an upscale neighbourhood."

"Thanks Alex, but it looks like Alberto won't be here in time to get his mother out. Some issue with being blocked entry into the U.S."

"Yeah, he told me about that. Did he ask you to get her?"

"Yes, he did. But I'm not equipped to do that, so I declined."

Kyle ended the call and sat thinking for a while. How come he was put into this situation? Initially, he was only to get close enough to Lorenzo to upload software so they could find her location and go get her out. Now they can't get here in time to make the rescue and are asking him to do it. The phone rang again.

"MacDonald."

"Hey Kyle." It was Frederico.

"Hi Frederico. Seems like things have gone to hell in a hand basket here."

"Yes, it appears that way," Frederico agreed. "Alberto and Ruben are on their way there, but cannot guarantee they will make it in time."

"I heard that. And they want me to make the rescue attempt."

"Yes, I am aware of that. Seems you're the only one that can do so."

Kyle sighed and anger crept into his voice. "Why is everyone putting the onus on me?"

“Because you are the only one in a position to save Carmen’s life,” Frederico said, a little too curtly.

“And get my head blown off in the process?” Kyle shouted. “What bothers me, is that Alberto is getting help and advice from someone else; someone with influence and contacts in the right places.”

“Really?” said Frederico, feigning ignorance.

“Really. There’s no way he has either the resources or connections to do this without help. He had cell-phone blockers and sophisticated weapons that are not readily available in Costa Rica. Also, why was there no police presence during the whole thing?”

Frederico thought a few seconds, then revealed the information Kyle was looking for.

“The help came from me.”

“What!”

“I am the one helping him, but you cannot reveal that information. Alex is my tech expert. As Chief of Police, they cannot see me to be helping someone in the performance of a crime.”

“So why did you help him?”

“It’s a long story.”

“I have time.”

“I have my own grudge against the Santinis,” Frederico started. “When I finished university here in San José, I applied for a Master’s program in Criminology at Loyola University in Chicago. Fortunately, they accepted my application, and I enrolled there. This was about 30 years ago when I was in my early twenties. As part of the program, we worked on cases with the Chicago PD along with the detective assigned to the case. One case involved Lorenzo Santini, who they brought up on drug-related charges. The primary evidence against him was a witness being kept under a witness protection program. At the time, I was seeing a girl, and it was quite serious. We talked about her coming to Costa Rica when I finished the Master’s program. Next thing I knew I got a call from Lorenzo saying they have my girlfriend and that they needed the name of the witness and where he/she was being kept. Of course, I initially refused, and he said that was a pity because Janice, my girlfriend, would never get to lead a normal life again from a wheelchair. He said they would hold the witness until after the trial, then let him or her go. I didn’t know what to do. I couldn’t bear the thought of Janice being maimed for life. After all, they just wanted to hold the witness until the trial was over. I relented and gave him the name of the witness and where they were keeping him. Of course, he didn’t keep his word, and they raided the safe house; killed the witness and one police officer guarding him, and left another guard relegated to a wheelchair with a bullet in his spine. They let Janice go on the basis that if I told anyone about the incident, her wheelchair was waiting.”

“Holy shit,” said Kyle. The more he learned about Lorenzo Santini, the more he realized what a monster he was. He could see why Frederico would take the opportunity to get some payback, yet stay in the background, supporting Alberto in his endeavours to wreak havoc on the Santinis. As the stories unfolded, Kyle began to develop a hatred for Lorenzo. It wasn’t right he should continue with impunity ruining people’s lives, or those whose life he didn’t expunge.

"I've lost many nights of sleep over that incident," Frederico continued. "Janice came to Costa Rica, and we married two years later. Unfortunately, it didn't last, and we divorced three years after that, and she returned to Chicago."

"Did Janice know the details of the events surrounding her abduction?"

"No, I never told her. I didn't want her to feel responsible for the death of the police officer and the witness."

"How did you get involved with Alberto?"

"Alberto placed feelers out over the years for people wronged by the Santinis. It was a vendetta he wanted to set up to find closure for his father's murder. I said I would help as long as he kept my involvement anonymous. I also agreed to fund the operation and suggested the ransom money. Alberto at first just wanted the men responsible for killing his father, but I convinced him to demand money as well to pay back all the people who had submitted hard-earned money to his campaign."

There was silence on the line while Kyle pondered what Frederico said. He didn't want another senseless death to happen, especially if he was in a position to prevent it.

"How would I do this?" Kyle finally said.

Frederico outlined a plan, and Kyle reluctantly agreed to make the rescue attempt.

"Call the guy I suggested," Frederico said. "I called him, and he said he will provide anything you need. He is also a security agent in a similar business to mine and has lots of connections in Chicago."

"Okay, I'll call him."

Chapter 20

Kyle entered the address Alex had given him in his Google Maps app and zoomed into the residence. The location marker did not show exactly on the house, but closer to one than the others. It showed a large building with a separate garage and another small building. The lots for the houses in the area were big, probably half an acre, with four properties to a block, each bordering on two streets. An alleyway separated the properties that should allow clandestine access to the house from the rear. He moved the 'little man' symbol in the bottom corner of the map to the road for a horizontal view and scanned the front of the house listed as #26. The picture wasn't current because it showed abundant landscaping, not snow. However, he noticed a stone walkway leading from the driveway to stone steps—and there were four. He moved the 'little man' down the road to the next house and then up the road, then swung it around to the other side. He was sure the first house is the one where they held Carmen. Based on Frederico's suggestions, he planned to scout out the house for a couple of days to see any comings and goings. Kyle hoped he would recognize one or more of the goons that accompanied him there, just to be certain. The 'supplies' he needed for getting into the house necessitated a trip to a hardware store. He would need a

car, so he took a cab to the nearest Hertz location and rented a Ford Escape SUV with all-wheel drive, then drove back to the hotel.

* * * * *

Kyle set out after dark to surveil the house after speaking with Alex and confirming that the target phone was still at the location. He had purchased an inexpensive dash cam and stuck it onto the window. This allowed him to slink down in the car seat and see the screen for any movement around the subject house, parking between street lights so that any passers-by would be less likely to see him. He made sure it wasn't a 'no parking' zone like the opposite side of the road. A police car crept along the road and turned at the end. Kyle's adrenaline shifted up a notch when a car's headlights appeared behind him, and he heard the engine shut off and a door open and close. He waited for someone to approach his car, but no one did, so he poked his head up and saw a woman crossing the road to the house on the other side. Kyle continued to watch the iridescent screen of the dash cam. After an hour or so, he saw a car pull into the laneway of the observed house, its lights turn off and the interior light illuminate. He sat up and started the car—he wanted to get a close-up view of the person or persons entering the house. Crawling past the house, he looked at a man walk up the steps and enter the house. It was difficult to tell from a rear view, but he resembled one man who escorted Kyle last night. He circled the block and parked again where he had before, shut off the engine and continued to spy on the residence. The cell-phone signature confirmed at least one other person was in the house before the recent visitor, so at least two with which to deal. Now it was almost midnight, and no one came out of the house, so he returned to the hotel, planning another sojourn tomorrow.

Back in his room, Kyle contacted the Playa Hermosa Hotel and downloaded the latest information from his new assistant he hired to replace Anna. Everything was fine with very few issues with guests; it still being off season and occupancy low. The main A/C unit acted up again, so she had to call the mechanical contractor. Kyle was trying to wring more life out of it, not wanting to spend the money to replace it. However, seeing as the prime season was next month, he authorized her to go ahead with the replacement.

His mind wandered back to Anna for a moment, and a pang of hurt shot through his heart like an arrow. Eradicating the thoughts from his mind, he called Alberto again to give him an update.

"I'm pretty sure I've found the house. From the Google Maps view, it looks like the same driveway and steps they led me up last night blindfolded. I also saw someone go into the house who resembled one of the men, but I didn't see his face. I'm going there tomorrow and chance sitting out during the day to see if someone comes out who I recognize."

"That's encouraging. Any idea how you will get in?"

"I have a plan," Kyle said without elaborating.

There was a pause on the phone.

"We're not going to get the three million for Friday."

"I was afraid of that. As today is Wednesday, that means I'll have to do this tomorrow night."

“I’m sure he will carry out his threat and kill her if we don’t get her out of there.”

“You’re probably right and I would not like to roll that dice.”

This placed Kyle in an uncomfortable position. Reconnaissance is vital to any plan where lives are at stake. He had to be sure it was the right house, although he had no concerns about that now. He would have liked to wait for the best opportunity to carry out his plan, and he still needed to research the house and how to get entry. When he checked the long-range weather forecast earlier in the day, a snow storm brewing over Lake Michigan will hit Chicago tomorrow night, just when he would plan the raid. This could be a bonus as visibility will be poor and layers of snow would reduce noise—but not the best for a fast getaway.

Kyle returned to the hardware store and bought a white hooded parka, sheepskin-lined gloves and a pair of Mukluks. With the temperature plummeting to 10°F overnight, he wasn’t sure how long he would be out in the cold.

Chapter 21

After breakfast at a local McDonald’s, Kyle drove back to W. Franklin Street and drove around the house, first down the block and then through the alleyway. Unfortunately, the high fence behind the property prevented Kyle from getting a good view of the back of the house. A gate led into the alleyway and several garbage cans sat outside it. He drove back to the street, parking where he did the previous night, and slunk down in the seat, using the dash cam to watch the house. The car that had driven up yesterday was still there. Kyle hoped the driver would leave so he could identify him. At noon, the front door opened, and a man stepped out. Kyle started the car and inched forward, pulling his hat down as far as he could over his face and putting on his sunglasses, even though the sun wasn’t shining. The man looked his way as he entered the car, and Kyle recognized him as the one who placed the hood over his head. Bingo, he thought.

There was no need to stay in the area, so he accelerated away and returned to his hotel. When he got there, he called Alberto and told him he had verified the house and planned to go in tonight to rescue Carmen.

“Be careful... and good luck,” said Alberto.

Kyle then called Lorenzo and requested access to Carmen again to administer her medication.

“You are aware that if I don’t get the money tomorrow, as promised, there isn’t any medication that will do her any good.”

Kyle ignored the comment, asking when he could get a ride to where she is being held.

“Come at two o’clock. I’ll have the car waiting outside my offices.”

“Thanks,” said Kyle as he ended the call.

Now almost 1:30, Kyle left for the Santini Towers, parked in the underground public parking and made his way to the ground floor. It was less than five minutes before the limo arrived. The same man he spied leaving the house earlier stepped out and beckoned Kyle to get in. After he entered the car, the man sat beside him and pulled out the hood. “You know the drill.”

It was interesting for Kyle now because he already had a visual imprint in his mind of the house. He would carefully note any other details of the place when they removed the hood again.

Following the same procedure as before, they led him into the house. This time, though, he made a special point of petting the dog, and the animal responded affectionately, licking his hand. He noticed the creak from the un-oiled hinges of the door and tucked that away in his mind, then felt his way down the stairs, counting them in his mind, before someone removed the hood. While they were unlocking Carmen's door, he took in his surroundings before being led in to see her. Happy to see him, she got off of the bed and ran to him, giving him a big hug and a kiss on the cheek.

"Buenos Tardas," she said as she let go of him.

"Buenos Tardas, ¿Como esta?"

"Esta muy bien."

"Are you ready for your medication?"

"Si," she said and sat back down on the bed.

Kyle unwrapped the medication pack and repeated the procedure for the injection. He reached over and whispered in Spanish. "Be ready tonight. Dress warmly, because it is cold outside."

A look of glee appeared in her eyes and she gave a slight nod in understanding.

Kyle gave her a peck on the cheek, then got up to leave, giving her a wink as he went out the door. The hood was placed over his head again and they returned to the Santini Towers, where he retrieved his car and returned to his hotel.

Kyle laid out all the paraphernalia he had purchased for Carmen's rescue. He obtained a Smith and Wesson revolver from Frederico's friend, Dale, and a stun gun. Kyle did not ask for the revolver, but Dale convinced him to take it, using the expression: 'Don't bring a knife to a gun fight'. Satisfied that he had everything he needed, he packed them in a carryall and busied himself until it was time to leave, which he had decided will be 1:00 a.m. After a quick supper in a nearby Denny's, he returned to the hotel and lay down for a nap, setting his iPhone alarm to 10:00 p.m., although he doubted he would sleep that long.

He woke up at 9:45, shaking the grogginess from his head, then got up and peered out the window. The snow had been falling for a while now with a significant accumulation, leaving a blanket of white on everything. He could see the flashing lights on plows as they attempted to move the snow from travelled roads and pathways. It was a shitty night weather wise, but that would mean there would be fewer people on the roads—hopefully. Accordingly, he left earlier than planned because travel would be slow-going. He dressed in his Mukluks, put on his parka, grabbed the bag and left the room. He rode the elevator down to the parking level and threw the carryall into the back of the Ford Explorer—he was going to be thankful for the all-wheel drive. He navigated his way around the snow-covered cars after exiting the underground garage and pulled into the street. It was snowing heavily now, and the wind whisked it around in swirls, sometimes reducing visibility to a few yards. Kyle's worst fear was being involved in a fender-bender and losing the window of opportunity to rescue Carmen. Tomorrow was the deadline for the next payment to Lorenzo, and Alberto had confirmed that he could not make it.

The wipers became encrusted with snow and Kyle had to stop occasionally and clear them. Other than plows, tow-trucks and buses, few vehicles were on the road, making the going easier. He got to the house just before midnight and parked a block from it. He donned the hood on his parka, grabbed the bag from the rear of the SUV, and trundled through the snow to the alleyway behind the house. It was slow-going because snow removal crews had not yet cleared side streets or sidewalks—and likely would not until later. In most cities having to deal with snow removal, they consider residential streets a low priority, and all plows are used to keep main arteries open. This was good for Kyle because no one was around. Snow swirled around him, and he had to make his way through gathering drifts, sometimes coming over the top of his Mukluks, which, thankfully, he had laced tightly around his pants. He estimated that there had been at least 6 in. of accumulation so far, or only half the forecasted 12. He came to the alleyway and made his way along it until he reached the back of the house. Kyle had to reach up and unclasp the gate, but had to move snow out of the way of the bottom to open it. The snow had accumulated here in drifts and he lumbered through it to the rear door. The door had six sections of window, and he selected the one closest to the lock, reached into his bag for the roll of duct tape and taped the small pane completely. He then withdrew the spring-loaded punch and placed it in the centre of the window and pushed. The punch's spring wound up and the internal hammer released and punched the window, shattering it. The tape held the pieces of glass in place so it didn't fall to the floor. However, the dog started barking.

Crap, thought Kyle as he frantically removed the glass and reached in for the lock and turned it. As he entered, the dog ran up to him and thankfully recognized him and stopped barking, wagging his tail. Kyle stooped down to pet the dog, a Golden Retriever, and was rewarded with a slobbering lick on his face. He realized he stood in a large kitchen with a centre island.

"Good boy," Kyle whispered as he petted him.

Kyle heard movement from inside the house, and he ran to the interior door, his snow-covered boots slipping on the tile floor, and pressed himself against the wall behind it. Footsteps approached, but the damned dog would not leave him alone.

"Shoo! Shoo!" Kyle whispered, waving his hands, but the dog just stood there wagging his tail.

"What's up, Willy?" the male voice called before he entered the kitchen, switching on the light. The man couldn't miss seeing the broken window, mainly because the snow was blowing through it. Kyle reached around the door and shoved the Taser into the man's neck, causing him to convulse and fall to the floor. Kyle caught him before he actually hit the floor and waited there in silence for any other noises from the house. Willy continued to slobber Kyle's face with his abundant tongue. Once confident that no one else was coming to investigate, he reached into the pocket of the man's dressing gown and retrieved a small Beretta 9mm, placing it, along with the Taser, in his pocket. He removed his boots and peered around the door into the dark expanse beyond. The light from the kitchen cast beams down the corridor, and Kyle noticed the door to the basement a few feet away. He inched along the wall, peering up the stairs as he did so, until he reached the door and opened it. The door creaked on un-oiled hinges, which made Kyle cringe and stop before advancing. He glanced down the dark stair and

chanced switching on the light. It was unlikely that anyone would be down there except Carmen, so he crept down the stairs, keeping his weight to the outside of the steps to alleviate creaking. At the bottom, he recognized the corridor and proceeded to the door where Carmen was being held, unlocked it and entered. Carmen had the light on and ran to embrace him as he stepped into the room.

"Shhh!" Kyle said, placing his finger on his lips. He saw she was ready, so he grabbed her hand, leading her out of the room. She gave his hand an affectionate squeeze as they made their way to the stairs and ascended them. Kyle held the Beretta in front of him as he reached the landing and pushed the door open, stepping into the front corridor. He heard the click of a gun cocking and the cold feel of a barrel against his head.

"Drop it," a voice said.

Shit!

Kyle dropped the gun and raised his hands. The man stepped from behind the door, picked up the Beretta and gestured them to go back down the stairs. Carmen returned to her room and Kyle followed her.

"Not you," the man said, motioning him down the hall. He locked Carmen's door and pushed Kyle along the corridor to a door at the end.

"Open it."

Kyle opened the door, and the heat wafted out—he stepped into a boiler room.

"Sit."

Kyle looked around—there were no chairs.

"Where?"

"On the damned floor. Over there," he motioned with the gun to a corner beside the boiler.

Kyle shucked off his parka, wandered over and sat cross-legged on the floor with his back to the wall. The man rummaged around a nearby bench, coming up with a few plastic ties.

"Vino?" someone called out.

"In here, Danny."

Danny came into the room—it was the man Kyle Tasered.

"Bastard Tasered me," he said as he took two strides over to Kyle and kicked him in the head. Kyle, seeing it coming, shifted his head sideways and the man's foot struck his chin a glancing blow.

"Ease up Danny. Want to see what Lorenzo has in store for these two."

Danny walked over to Kyle and ransacked his pockets, retrieving his gun and the Taser. He shoved the Taser into Kyle's neck and watched as he convulsed on the floor.

"Take that, you bastard," he said as he prepared to Taser him again.

"That's enough," said Vino. "Keep your gun on him, I'm going to bind his hands and feet."

Vino daisy-chained the ties to make them long enough to go around Kyle's ankles and wrists. He wrapped Kyle's arms around a heating pipe and applied the ties.

"That should hold him. C'mon, Danny, I don't want to wake Lorenzo now, so I'll send him a text for him to get back to us in the morning."

The men left the room and Kyle pondered his predicament, his body still numb from the jolt of electricity he received from the Taser. His rescue attempt had failed, and will probably cost both he and Carmen their lives. He tried to move his wrists, but the ties were too tight, and the plastic bit into his skin. Blood trickled from his mouth from the kick Danny gave him, but that was the least of his problems. He had no options from where he was now and sat dejectedly, pondering potential outcomes. Would Lorenzo shoot him to stress his point and let Carmen live to allow more time to gather the money? Killing Carmen might cost him six million dollars—not a good business decision. Alternately, would he kill Carmen and Kyle and move on? It seemed Kyle was on the menu, no matter what. Anna came to mind, and he imagined how upset she would be if she learned of his demise. He wished now he hadn't agreed to such a foolish venture.

Kyle must have sat for several hours before he dozed off, the heat in the boiler room tiring him. A commotion upstairs startled him awake, then two gunshots rang out.

Jesus Christ! He thought. *Carmen.*

Another shot and someone hit the floor. Footsteps approached the boiler room.

This is it, Kyle thought as he watched the door knob turn. He tried another frantic attempt to free himself from the cable ties, to no avail. The door swung open; a gun appeared; a man stepped through, pointing the gun at Kyle.

Chapter 22

Kyle awaited the shot that didn't come. He looked up at the gunman, astonished.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Kyle asked.

"Good to see you too," said Alberto.

"I thought you were still in Costa Rica," Kyle said, a look of bewilderment on his face.

Alberto pulled a knife from his pocket, cut the ties. "As I said, they held us up at the airport because our names were on a no-fly list to the States. Probably one of Lorenzo's connections, and they said it could take several days to sort out. So Ruben and I flew to Toronto yesterday, picked up a car and drove here. It was supposed to be an eight-hour drive, but the weather was so bad it took us closer to twelve. We had a few errands to do, and it concerned me that we wouldn't get here before Lorenzo's deadline later today."

"Great to see you. I was on my way out of here with Carmen earlier, but one of their goons stopped me and shoved us back down here. We would be dead if you hadn't shown up."

"Okay," said Alberto, "Let's get the hell out of here. It's a blizzard out there right now, and someone may have reported gunfire."

Kyle grabbed his parka, followed Alberto out of the room, and met Ruben and Carmen in the corridor.

"Check it out," Alberto said to Ruben, gesturing to the stairs. Ruben climbed the stairs and peered around the door.

“Clear.”

The three of them scaled the stairs and stepped into the ground floor corridor. A man lay in a pool of blood, and Kyle could see it was Danny.

They went into the kitchen where Vino lay sprawled on the floor, again in a pool of his own blood. Willy lay beside him with his head on Vino’s chest—must have been his dog.

“Sorry about that, Willy,” Kyle said as he stooped down and patted the dog on the head. Kyle donned his Mukluks and followed the others through the door.

“Where are you parked?” asked Kyle.

“Just behind a blue Explorer, which I presumed was yours.”

“It is.”

They stepped into the blizzard, slogging their way through the deepening snow. Only Kyle had snow boots on with Alberto and Ruben in sneakers. Carmen had low boots, but the snow came over the top. Alberto had to carry Carmen’s case because even with wheels, he would have to drag it through the snow.

“What the hell’s in here?” Alberto complained as he stopped and laid the case down. Ruben picked it up, and they continued their trek.

Kyle used his remote to unlock the car and helped Carmen into the back seat, then opened the rear to allow Ruben to deposit her case there.

“I’ll take her back to my hotel and get her a room so she can clean up. What are you guys going to do?”

“We’re going after Lorenzo,” said Alberto. Carmen heard him through the open door.

“Alberto,” she said. “This is crazy. It will never stop. You’re both going to get yourselves killed.”

“She’s right,” said Kyle. “Lorenzo has a 24-hour security team around him wherever he goes. How do you think you will get close enough to him to kill him?”

“I have a plan. Remember the expression, ‘the enemy of my enemy is my friend’?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I have teamed up with one of Santini’s enemies and will get the weapons I need to take him out.”

“If you’re going to do that, then I’m coming with you. I would be a dead man now if it weren’t for you.”

“If it weren’t for me, you wouldn’t even be in this mess.”

There was truth to that, Kyle thought.

“I don’t care, I’m coming with you.”

“Okay, if you insist.”

“Let’s go back to my hotel,” Kyle said. “We can clean up and get Carmen her room.”

“You guys are crazy,” said Carmen. “Just a bunch of testosterone-filled adventure junkies. You’re all going to get yourselves killed.”

“We can look after ourselves,” said Alberto, smiling and closing the door.

“Follow me,” Kyle said as he got in the driver’s side and started the engine. It took a few minutes to remove the piles of snow that had accumulated on the car. Thankfully, there was a snow brush to help him whisk away the powdery white substance. He waited for the engine to warm so the heater would keep the snow

off the windshield. Alberto and Ruben had also rented an all-wheel drive vehicle and fell in behind Kyle as he made tracks in the deepening snow.

Kyle pulled into the underground parking of the hotel and Alberto found a spot at the front. Kyle assisted Carmen from the car, grabbed her case and took the elevator to the ground floor where he approached the reservations desk.

Alberto booked a room for Carmen, and she said, "I think I will go to my room. It has been quite a day."

"Sure," said Alberto and gave her a kiss on the cheek. Carmen came over to Kyle and gave him a big hug, then kissed him on the cheek.

"*Gracias.*"

"*De nada.*"

The three men retired to Kyle's room, and they sat to discuss Alberto's plan. Kyle sat in the chair while Alberto and Ruben sat on one of the queen beds.

"So," said Kyle. "Who is Santini's enemy, and who is your friend?"

"One of Lorenzo's arch enemies is Luciano Pellini, another mob family. They have been at loggerheads for years over disputed territory and operation areas. Every so often, when one family wrongs the other, it starts the feud all over. At the moment, Luke is really pissed at Lorenzo over a girl he allegedly stole from one of Luke's nightclubs to work in one of Lorenzo's. Lorenzo says she came willingly and applied for a job, but Luke knows they hold something over the girl's family."

"How does this help you?" Kyle asked.

"He likes the idea that someone not involved with his family wants to take out Lorenzo, so he has agreed to provide us with the arsenal of weapons I need to rid the world once and for all of Lorenzo Santini."

"How, exactly, do you plan to do this?" Kyle persisted. "A security detail is around him at all times."

"We just make sure we are better armed than the security detail. We have procured MP5 machine guns and Sig Sauer 226 pistols, along with plenty of spare magazines. I have also got two grenade launchers..."

"Grenade launchers?" Kyle interrupted.

"Yes, grenade launchers. I intend to fire grenades into his house tonight and burn the son of a bitch out, then shoot the bastard."

"Have you reconnoitred the property yet?"

"I've only looked at it from Google maps so far. It is a large house on about an acre of property on the lake shore. Looks like a gate surrounds the perimeter with a gate house. I got info from Luke about the security set-up. They have two guys 24/7 in the gate house. Luke estimates he has at least five security people inside the house at all times. His limo is bullet proof, and he always travels with one car in front and one behind; two men in each with automatic weapons. Not a good idea to attack him on the road, so I thought his house would be the best option."

"We take the men in the guard hut and use a Semtex charge on the gate if we can't open it. Sometimes, you can only open security gates from inside the house. This will alert the guards inside the house and they will take up defensive positions. Originally, Ruben and I were planning to take the front and the back, but with you added to the mix, we can cover more of the house. We will use the AK-74 with the GP-25 grenade launcher attached, loaded with incendiary

grenades. We will pump several grenades through the windows and wait until people come out.”

“Sounds like a reasonable plan,” said Kyle, “but you can get a better look at the property using an iPad’s map function.” He pulled out his iPad and selected the map icon, then keyed in the address. An aerial view of the property loaded and Kyle selected the ‘3D’ feature and the screen depicted a three-dimensional view. Pinching the screen and moving his fingers from side to side, they saw the house and surrounding area as if circling with a helicopter. It showed the front gatehouse and surrounding fence, including the boathouse and gates facing the shore.

“Neat,” Alberto said, amazed at the ability to see this kind of detail without leaving your house.

“Comes in handy often, but doesn’t work everywhere.”

Alberto continued, “We expect Lorenzo to make a run for it in the limo. A couple of grenades pumped into the engine should stop it. I also have a clip of armour-piercing shells for the AK to penetrate the bullet-proof glass.”

“Sounds like you have all the bases covered. What about police response?”

Ruben said, “Normal response time, according to Luke, is about ten minutes, depending where the nearest patrol car is. That could be an issue, but if only one car shows up initially, we should be able to pin him down before reinforcements arrive.”

“Will we know for certain if Lorenzo is there?” Kyle asked.

“According to Luke, he should be. One of his guys is tailing him and will confirm he is there.”

Kyle looked at his watch—it was 5:14 a.m.

“Let’s get some sleep before heading out tonight. Doubt you guys have had much shut-eye over the last few days.”

“No,” Alberto said, “we haven’t. We’ll head back to our hotel and grab some sleep and meet up again tonight. I want to get my *mamá* on a plane to Costa Rica later today if I can, and also take a drive by the property.”

“Sounds good. Call me when you’re ready. I think you need to buy more appropriate clothing.”

“Right,” said Alberto as he walked out the door, Ruben behind him.

* * * * *

Kyle laid down and closed his eyes for a while. He wanted to call home, but it was too early, especially considering the one-hour time difference. He napped for about two hours and woke up at 7:50 a.m., then proceeded downstairs and took advantage of the hotel’s continental breakfast.

The snow had stopped falling, and the sun was shining. Mountainous snow banks lined the roads and parking lots where snow-clearing vehicles were hard at work removing the record precipitation. Trees strained at the weight of the snow and ice that had formed on their branches. It was a veritable winter wonderland though as people set about enjoying the blanket of white: kids on sleds, cars with ski-racks full of skis and others with trailers carrying snowmobiles heading for the hills and trails. For most people though, it was not as much fun, as they laboured

with shovels to clear sidewalks and driveways. Those more fortunate had snow blowers to help with the manual labour.

He called home an hour later after returning to his room, knowing his assistant always came in before 8:00 a.m. She greeted him enthusiastically and updated him on things going on in the hotel. A large group had booked a conference in April, which was good news as it is a good money-maker for hotels.

Kyle called Alex to update him on the situation, telling him about the failed attempt to rescue Carmen and the fortunate appearance of Alberto. He also told him about the planned raid on Lorenzo's house.

Kyle said, "Seems like Alberto wants to end this once and for all. He blames Lorenzo indirectly for his father's death and for his sister's recruitment into prostitution. His mother's abduction was the last straw."

"Can't blame the guy, really."

"I plan to call you late this evening to get a trace on Lorenzo's phone to confirm where he is."

"Okay. I'll be standing by."

"Great, talk to you later."

Chapter 23

Alberto called to advise Kyle that they were able to get Carmen on the JetBlue 7:00 a.m. flight tomorrow morning routing through Fort Lauderdale to San José. They had picked up all the arsenal from Luke and were ready to launch the raid. Lorenzo normally left the office around 6:00 p.m., but the time varied. Sometimes, he would go to one of his clubs to eat and in that event, got home anywhere from 8 - 10:00 p.m. Alberto said he wanted to plan the raid for after midnight, which made sense to Kyle as there would be fewer people around.

"Did you hear from Lorenzo yet?" Kyle asked.

"Yeah, he called me. He's really pissed." Alberto chuckled. "I told him it was me who rescued you and Carmen and that I was going after him next."

"What was his reaction to that? Was that a good idea to alert him? Take away the element of surprise? He will probably double up on security."

"You're probably right, but I wanted him to sweat a bit."

"Part of the psychological game, I guess."

"We've modified the plan a little. I have the loan of two snowmobiles, so we plan to launch a simultaneous attack on the front and the back of the building. You and Ruben will drive the Skidoos along the lake shore to the rear of his property, and I will launch the attack through the front gate."

"What do they have as security along the lakefront?" Kyle asked.

"Not much. The iron fence goes all around the property with a small gate for people to access and a larger one for hauling boats onto shore. It will be difficult to open these gates because of the accumulated snow. The boathouse is the best means of access because there is a man door. We have snowshoes for you to get around once you get through the door—I'm sure being from Canada you are familiar with them."

"Yes, we had a cottage north of Ottawa where we used to go Skidooing, snowshoeing and cross-country skiing."

"Great. Ruben has had experience with them also during his militia training, so you are the best ones for the rear assault. I will wait until you are both in place near the rear of the house before I blow the gate."

"Sounds good." Kyle then asked, "Where do we access the lake?"

"There is a boat ramp about three miles south of the property."

"I hope this isn't a silly question, but is the ice thick enough for the weight of the Skidoos?"

Alberto chuckled. "Yes, plenty thick enough for several miles from the shore. If it hadn't snowed recently, you probably would have found several snowmobile trails along the shore."

"Thanks for the reassurance."

"I also have arctic riot gear for all of us. They have pads over most of the body that will repel small arms fire and are white, so easier to blend in with the landscape."

"That's good to know," said a relieved Kyle. "You seem to have thought of everything."

"Luke was a great help in getting us all the equipment and ordnance. Wouldn't have been able to do this without him."

"So, when are we grouping for the raid?" asked Kyle.

"Ruben will pick you up at your hotel at eleven p.m. with one of Luke's trucks and the trailer with the Skidoos. You will both drive to the boat ramp and unload the Skidoos and don your gear. It will take about twenty - thirty minutes to get to the property—you'll be breaking trail because a shit-load of snow fell yesterday. Ruben has a GPS, so it won't be any trouble finding the property."

The amount of planning that had gone into the raid impressed Kyle, giving him confidence in seeing a positive outcome—for them, not Santini.

* * * * *

Kyle called Alex and asked for a location on Lorenzo's phone.

"The phone is located at his lakeshore residence, but that doesn't necessarily mean he is."

"Good enough for me." He thought about calling Lorenzo on a pretext to make sure that he was at his phone, but decided against it.

Kyle was ready and waiting in the hotel lobby when he saw the Dodge Ram Crew Cab drive up towing a trailer carrying two snowmobiles side by side. His boots crunched on the snow as he reached for the door handle, opened the door and climbed into the truck.

"*Buenos Noches*," he said to Ruben.

"*Buenos Noches*. Ready?"

"Ready as I'll ever be. Did we get confirmation that Lorenzo is at his residence?"

"Yes, we did... and he is there."

Kyle was experiencing feelings of trepidation and anxiety; normal when one is about to embark on a venture from which you may not survive. As much pre-planning as you may do, there is always the unexpected; the unplanned; the unrealized. Even with protective equipment, it does not cover all parts of the body,

and a stray shot to an unprotected area could seriously hurt or kill you. However, once the plan is in full operation, the adrenaline rush takes over and razor-sharp senses with lightning-fast reactions replace any fears.

Ruben turned into the park where the boat launch ramp was located, the big off-road tires plowing through the deep snow, throwing rooster-tails of the soft white substance from each wheel. Two tracks appeared behind them as they made their way to the ramp. Ruben stopped, and they both got out. The park, not being in use now, had the parking lot lighting turned off, and they fumbled their way in the dark using their LED flashlights. Ruben released the tilt on the trailer and started one of the powerful Skidoos. He backed it into the parking lot and let it idle there for a moment while he retrieved the other Skidoo. As the snowmobiles were warming up, Ruben and Kyle donned their arctic and riot gear suits. Looking much like the Michelin Man, they slung their MP5s over their shoulders and pocketed their Sig Sauers. Ruben slung the AK-74 with the attached grenade launcher over his other shoulder and sat astride one of the Skidoos. He had attached the Garmin GPS unit, pre-programmed with Lorenzo's residence, to the Skidoo. The glow of the screen lit up Ruben's face when he turned it on. Engaging the drive, he slowly made his way through the deep snow to the ramp. Kyle straddled the other Skidoo and followed in Ruben's tracks.

They took the ramp onto the frozen lake and headed out perpendicular to the shore. Ruben's intention was to make their way far enough from land so they would not attract attention—just some snowmobilers heading up the lake. The snow was not as deep here because the prevailing winds had blown it toward the opposite shore. However, there were drifts in layers—much like sand dunes in the desert—so they had to crash through them, sending sheets of snow in the air, caught by the slight breeze and whisked away. After travelling about a mile they turned north, staying in the troughs of the drifts until they had to turn on a westerly heading toward the house. After about twenty minutes, Ruben held up his hand and pointed to his left, then turned off his headlight. Kyle did the same and followed him as they headed toward the shore, plowing through the drifts once more.

It was an overcast night and while there was no moon, the white blanketing of snow reflected the city's glow from the low clouds, making the good visibility unwelcome. As they neared the shoreline, they could see the outline of Lorenzo's house, fully illuminated with flood lights all around.

Guess they're expecting us, thought Kyle.

The glow of the floodlights extended to the shoreline even though it was several hundred yards from the house. Chances are, however, that the bright reflection from the snow would prevent anyone seeing their approach. They throttled back, lessening the noise, and stopped in front of boathouse. The large, garage-type lakeside door was closed, but it only came to within a couple of feet of the ice surface. Kyle and Ruben dismounted from their snowmobiles, crawled under the door and entered the building. There was little snow inside except that which had blown under the door. Light flowed through the side windows from the floodlights, illuminating the interior of the space. A large centre-console boat was suspended from pulleys attached to the reinforced ceiling. The door to the boathouse was on their left, evidenced by the exterior lights shining through the multi-paned

window. Ruben unlocked the door after peering through the glass and fortunately, it opened inward as piles of snow built up against the door fell into the boathouse. They both strapped on their snowshoes and made their way to the nearest clump of landscaping that would conceal them from the house. It was impossible to cover their tracks as there were two trails made by the snowshoes. Once they were within 10 yards of the rear of the house, Ruben used his throat mic to contact Alberto.

“We’re in place.”

“Okay,” came the reply. “Ready to go in ten minutes. I am at the front gate. I’m going to take out the guards, then blow the gate. Wait two minutes for me to get into position, then blast the house with the grenades.”

“Roger.” He unslung the AK-74 and inserted an incendiary grenade into the GP-25 launcher.

Chapter 24

Alberto crouched down behind the wall next to the gatehouse. He elected not to wear snowshoes because someone had plowed the laneway. He made his way to the structure, edging his way along the deep snow at the wall and peering into the window. Both guards sat at a table in front of CCTV monitors, oblivious to his presence, and the only door into the hut was on the secure side of the gate. There didn’t seem to be a subtle way to approach the storming of the hut, so he attached sufficient C4 to take the gate off its hinges, inserted a detonator and set it for two minutes. He scurried back along the wall and waited, counting down on his watch. When his watch read ‘0’, a brilliant flash of light lit up the night, accompanied with a deafening explosion and shock wave. Alberto ran from his hiding place to the gatehouse with his automatic extended in a two-hand stance. He took advantage of the few seconds for the guards to recover from the concussive effects of the blast. When he reached the gate, twisted remnants scattered the landscape, and the hut was on fire. One guard came running out with his gun extended and Alberto did a double tap of his gun and the man went down. The other man emerged, hands extended above his head. Alberto grabbed a pair of plasticuffs and ordered the man to lie down with his hands behind his head. He slipped the cuffs over the exposed hands and pulled them tight.

Alberto ran up the driveway and saw several men coming from the house. He set off a barrage of bullets in their direction with the MP5, and they retreated inside.

* * * * *

Kyle and Ruben heard the explosion, followed by two gunshots and then a burst from an SMP. They checked their watches and counted down the two minutes. When the stopwatch read ‘0’, Ruben stood and launched a grenade through the large expanse of patio doors. The momentum of the grenade punched through the glass doors and a second later, a fiery explosion lit up the inside of the room. Ruben chambered another grenade and fired it into an adjacent window, repeating the conflagration. Kyle trained his MP5 on the windows and doors, but there was

no movement. He then shot out the floodlights. Ruben lay down in the fresh snow, virtually invisible to anyone, and covered the rear of the house while Kyle made his way to the front to assist Alberto. Kyle lumbered his way through the drifts along the side of the house, somewhat impeded by the heavy riot gear and arctic suit, coupled with the awkwardness of the snowshoes.

"I'm coming around to the front," Kyle said, thumbing his throat mic. Just as he spoke, there was an explosion and a window above him blew out in a mass of flames, wood frame and broken glass, which showered down onto him.

"Hey," Kyle said again into the mic. "I'm coming around the south side."

"Sorry," said Alberto as Kyle heard another explosion.

* * * * *

Alberto chambered a round into the launcher and pumped an incendiary shell through another window, this time to the left of the main entry. Staccato small arms fire emanated from various windows of the house and Alberto would spray them with his MP5, switching alternately to the AK-74 to launch another grenade. As expected, the garage door flew outward as the armoured Cadillac limousine burst through it. Alberto pumped a grenade into the front grill, launching the hood into the air on a bed of flames. The car swerved and collided with a snow bank and came to rest on top. Alberto fired two armour-piercing rounds through the windshield as he ran toward the car.

* * * * *

Kyle swung around the corner of the house just as the limo crashed through the door and he had to duck when a large piece of it sailed over his head. He was now on the driveway and reached down to shed his snowshoes, running after the car. Kyle felt the concussion of the blast from Alberto's grenade hitting the car, and saw the hood sail into the air. The vehicle then mounted a snow bank and stopped. The rear door opened and Lorenzo jumped out, running down the driveway, gun in hand. Kyle chased after him, firing his pistol over his head. Lorenzo turned and let off a leash of bullets in Kyle's direction. Kyle felt a numbing pain as a bullet hit him in the chest, the pads of the suit preventing it from piercing his body—but it hurt like hell. Lorenzo, wearing only street shoes, slipped on the hard-packed snow that had melted in the sun and now re-frozen. He fell face-first on the pavement, and the gun clattered on the driveway. Just as he was getting up and regaining his balance, Kyle made a rugby tackle and took him down again, both men crashing to the frozen pavement. They both got up and Lorenzo took a swing at Kyle, which he easily evaded, then Kyle drove a fist into Lorenzo's face. Lorenzo fell backward over the snow bank and into the deep snow beyond. He got up again and tried to run away, but Kyle leaped onto the snow bank and hurled himself at Lorenzo. They scuffled a while in the snow with Lorenzo's punches having no effect on Kyle's riot gear, except when he punched him in the chest where the bullet had hit him. Kyle rolled Lorenzo over onto his back and straddled him, immobilising him.

* * * * *

Alberto fired several rounds at the front door with his MP5 as people within the house were trying to get out. He then ran over to Kyle and Lorenzo, pushed Kyle off, grabbed Lorenzo and stood him up, holding his pistol to Lorenzo's head.

"Don't do it," yelled Kyle.

"I have to do it... to end this feud once and forever," said Alberto through gritted teeth. "For my father and for all the suffering he has brought to our family."

"It's plain murder," Kyle pleaded as he stood up. "It will make you no better than he is."

Rage still showed on Alberto's face. "Scum like this shouldn't be allowed to continue to prey on people."

"There'll always be someone else to take his place," Kyle tried to reason with him.

Lorenzo's face had panic written on it as the realization of his imminent demise hit him. He felt a dizziness, then a staggering pain in his chest. He clutched at the area of pain and squinted from the enormity of it.

Alberto gave a quizzical look. "What's happening?"

"Heart attack," Kyle said as he pushed the gun away from Lorenzo's head and grasped him. "Call an ambulance and let's get the hell out of here."

Lorenzo fell limp in Kyle's arms and fell to the snow. Kyle removed his gloves, felt for a pulse and found none.

"He's dead. Massive heart attack."

"Son of a bitch. And I didn't get to kill the bastard."

Kyle looked down the driveway and saw a crowd gathering to watch the action.

"Tell Ruben we're coming around and we'll meet him in the boat house."

Alberto did not move and stood staring at the corpse lying in the snow.

"Now!" shouted Kyle as he ran to the side of the house.

The plan was to use the Skidoos to ex-filtrate because they knew when the fireworks started, leaving through the front gate would be impossible.

Alberto keyed his throat mic. "Ruben. Lorenzo's dead. We're outta here. Meet us in the boathouse."

Sirens sounded in the distance and the three of them peppered shots at the house as they ran to the back. Kyle retrieved his snowshoes, secured the bindings, and suggested that Alberto try to follow in his tracks. Alberto stumbled several times, but made it to the boat house where Ruben had both machines running. Alberto hopped on behind Ruben and they made their way away from the boathouse, again running perpendicular to the shore with their lights off. Even with the overcast sky, visibility was good, and they travelled three miles in the trail they made on the way in. Blue and red lights flashed in the distance as they turned south and made their way back to the launch ramp. Someone would easily track their path through the trail they made, but they would be long gone by then.

They approached the ramp, drove to the parked truck/trailer and dismounted from the machines. After discarding their arctic gear and riot suits, they threw them in the back of the truck's rear seats with the ordnance. Ruben drove the Skidoos onto the trailer, secured them and they took off to where Alberto had parked his car three blocks from Lorenzo's house, then Ruben dropped Kyle off at his hotel.

* * * * *

The 5:00 a.m. morning news carried the report of the fire and of Lorenzo's death.

An early morning attack, thought to be from rival gangs, decimated the home of Santini family don, Lorenzo Santini. Mr. Santini suffered a heart attack during the invasion and was pronounced dead at the scene after medics failed to resuscitate him. Police are investigating and at the moment, no suspects have been identified, although rumours suggest that it may be a vendetta perpetrated by a Costa Rican rebel who earlier had kidnapped and ransomed Lorenzo's son, Peppe.

Kyle called Alberto.

"The news reports a rumour that this may be linked to a Costa Rican rebel. Probably came from one of Lorenzo's men. I'm sure the police will be scrutinizing people returning to Costa Rica."

"Yeah, we figured that, so we plan to drive back to Toronto and leave from there."

"Smart thinking. How about Carmen? Did she get to the airport okay?"

"Yes, she did, but ran into a problem because she doesn't have a passport. Border officials took her away, but I'm sure when she explains how she got into the country on Lorenzo's plane, they'll allow her to fly back home."

"I hope so," said Kyle.

"When are you heading back?"

"I booked a ticket on the 2:10 p.m. Interjet flight through Mexico City. Gets me into San José at 11:00 p.m."

"Sounds good. We'll be returning all the vehicles and gear to Luke later today. He figured they would blame him for this, so all his men have iron-clad alibis for the time of the raid."

"Good thinking."

"Let's meet up for a beer when we get back to San José."

"Sure, I'd like that."

Chapter 25

Kyle stared in the mirror at the large bruise on his chest from the impact of the bullet—better however than having a hole in his chest. It was still too early to call home, but wished Anna were still employed there when he got back to Costa Rica. The problem was that he rarely socialized and spent all his time working at the hotel. If it wasn't administration it was remodelling, maintenance or Human Resources, not to mention accounting and the odd game of golf for recreation. He never had time to develop a relationship with anyone. On occasion, he would meet a pleasant woman staying at the resort, but any chance of a relationship ended when she returned home. Not only was Kyle attracted to Anna, it was 'convenient' as she was there virtually every day, and her unavailability insulated them from a serious relationship.

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Interjet's Airbus 320 Flight 3922 touched down at Juan Santamaria International Airport at 10:36 p.m. and taxied to the terminal. Kyle watched the seatbelt sign and when the plane ceased moving and it extinguished, a multitude of clicks resounded through the plane. Travellers stood in unison to retrieve their baggage from the overhead bins. Kyle had travelled business class and was near the front of the plane when it came time to exit. He grabbed his bag and made his way through customs and took the next available cab, who was happy to have a fare to Playa Hermosa.

Kyle lived in the hotel and occupied one of the ground floor units. He had plans to build a house, but those plans kept being placed on the back burner. He really didn't have a need for a house anyway, and living in the hotel had its advantages.

The cab pulled up to the hotel at 1:15 a.m. and Kyle paid the cabby, adding a generous tip.

"*Buenos Días señor MacDonald,*" the night receptionist welcomed Kyle.

"*Buenos Días,*" Kyle responded. "*¿Cómo está?*" How are you?

"*Estoy bien,*" I am fine, he replied.

Kyle made his way to the room, cast off his shoes and dropped his bag on the floor. He then crashed on the bed and fell into a deep sleep.

* * * * *

The warbling of the phone pierced Kyle's dream of Anna.

"Kyle."

"Hey Kyle, Alberto here."

"Alberto? How are things going?"

"Great. Just wondering if you wanted to go for that drink."

"Sure. When did you want to do it?"

"Are you heading into San José soon?"

"I could head in this weekend. Let's have dinner."

"Great idea. How about Saturday at eight?"

"Saturday at eight's fine. Anywhere in particular?"

"How about La Criollita on Av. 7? Have you been there?"

"No, but if you say it's okay, then that's fine with me."

"Great. See you Saturday."

* * * * *

Kyle headed into San José to meet Alberto and pondered things in his mind. Yes, could be it was time to sell the hotel. The more he thought about it the more it made sense. He could start the charter business he always wanted. God! He missed Anna, and the hotel only reminded him of her.

Alberto sat in a booth when Kyle entered the restaurant. He got up as Kyle approached.

"Good to see you," Alberto said, offering his hand.

Kyle accepted the hand. "Good to see you too."

They both slid into the booth and sat facing each other.

"So," Kyle said. "What's new?"

"A few things. I have accepted a position with Frederico as an agent for his security agency."

Kyle's face lit up. "That's great news. He told me he supported your vendetta against Santini."

"That's good he told you...I couldn't under the circumstances."

"It wasn't for you to tell."

A server approached, asking if they wanted something to drink. Both ordered a local beer, and she departed.

"Seems he's planning to build the business for when his term as Chief of Police is done."

"I know. He asked me to join him, but I'm not ready for that. But I am thinking about selling the hotel."

A surprised look appeared on Alberto's face. "No shit!"

"It isn't the same now, Anna's gone, and I want to get into something else."

"What would that be?"

"I've always wanted to run a charter dive and fishing business, so that's what I am looking at now."

"Sounds exciting. Maybe I will get to charter your boat for some fishing."

"That would be fun."

The server came back with their beers and asked if they were ready to order. They realized they hadn't even looked at the menus.

"Can you give us a few more minutes?" Alberto asked.

"Sure," she said as she ambled off to attend to another customer. They each perused the menu.

"Anything you recommend?"

"If you like sea food, they have a great range of sea bass dishes."

"Love sea bass," Kyle said as he navigated to the sea food section. Kyle ordered the traditional Costa Rican black soup, *sopa negro*, and decided on sea bass with a shrimp sauce for the main course. Alberto started with an *ensalada César* followed by the buttered sea bass. The server returned, and they placed their order.

"How's your mother?"

"She's fine—none the worse for her ordeal. Had an issue at the airport because she didn't have her passport. But when she produced a driver's licence and other identification documents, they let her on the plane."

They chatted a while longer until their meals came and ordered a second beer.

"Do you have assignments with Frederico yet?"

"Not at the moment. There will be an orientation period and he is setting me up with another one of his agents... a Jimmy someone... for a few weeks until I learn the ropes. Frederico says that they do mostly simple investigation; finding people and surveillance on cheating spouses. But he says he gets interesting projects occasionally."

"Did you hear again from the Santinis?"

"Not a word."

"I guess that's good. However, Peppe has cancelled his long-standing order for rooms at the hotel. That will be quite a loss, money-wise."

"Sorry about that."

“Fortunately, they base the financials on the last three year’s results, so it won’t affect the selling price of the hotel...and the two hundred grand I got from you will more than offset any losses.”

“So, no one else you’re romantically involved with?”

Kyle chuckled. “No. I guess I had all my eggs in one basket with Anna, and that was going nowhere. I met an interesting lady staying at the hotel over Christmas. Jenny was her name. We had lots in common, and she was very excited about the potential charter business. She’s really into SCUBA diving. Pretty little thing. Divorced; thirty something; blonde; petite.”

“Sounds like she caught your attention.”

“I guess she did, but she also caught Anna’s attention and I would get dirty looks and the cold shoulder from her.”

This brought a chuckle from Alberto. “Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.”

“I think this was another reason Anna quit—it hurt her to see me pay attention to another woman, yet she was committed to another man. It was a very awkward relationship, and I should have ended it sooner, but I enjoyed her too much.”

He almost mentioned the lovemaking incident on the beach, but decided not to as it would be tantamount to bragging. Kyle didn’t want to diminish the act in any way. Also, one never knows how word might get back to Anna’s husband. *Loose lips sink ships*, the wartime posters used to say in England.

Chapter 26

Nine months had gone by since the Santini incident and Anna’s leaving. Kyle noticed Jenny had booked again for Christmas, and he looked forward to seeing her again. Staff were busy putting up Christmas lights and Kyle loved to get involved with that. He wrapped thousands of lights around the palm trees and even rented a cherry picker to do so. When complete, he stood back to admire his work. Jenny arrived on Friday the 23rd and planned to stay two weeks until January 6th. They spent much of the time together and planned several dive excursions, but kept it on a platonic level. There didn’t appear to be any romance brewing, which seemed to satisfy them both. They talked about Kyle’s plan to one day set up a charter business and sell the hotel.

* * * * *

In June the following year, Kyle sold the hotel and went on a serious hunt for a charter boat. He noted a 2-year-old 60-foot Hatteras convertible sport fisherman on the block while perusing the DEA auction list. According to his requirements, this will be perfect for his charter operation. The boat came equipped with twin 1,500 hp Caterpillar diesels that will ensure excellent cruising speeds. It could accommodate four passengers, plus crew, in three cabins, and had a large cockpit suitable for fishing or diving. Kyle left for Miami to inspect the boat, apparently seized in a drug raid, and attended the auction. Buyers showed little interest in the boat and, except for several dealers, he was the only bidder. He snapped it up for a fraction of its retail value and then did a surprising thing. He called Jenny.

"Hi," Kyle said as he heard her voice on the phone.

"Kyle, what a wonderful surprise. I was just thinking about you."

"In good terms, I hope."

"Very good terms. I was perusing a few dive magazines and thought about our conversations. Did you decide on whether to sell the hotel and buy a charter boat?"

"Sold the hotel and just bought a boat."

Kyle pictured the look of amazement on her face. "That's awesome. When...what...?"

"Whoa there," Kyle said chuckling. "The hotel's closing is in six weeks, but I have turned it over to a management company in the meantime. I just bought an 18 metre—that's 60 feet—Hatteras convertible. Beautiful boat, only two years old and seized in a drug raid."

"Sounds great. I'm so excited for you."

"That's the purpose of my call. I don't want to sound presumptuous, but I will need someone to help me bring the boat from Miami to the west coast of Costa Rica."

"Are you asking me to go with you?"

"Well... I... eh... yes... I guess."

She had a gleeful tone in her voice. "I'd love to go with you."

"It will be a long trip—maybe two weeks."

"That's no problem. When did you plan to leave?"

"As soon as possible. I will move the boat to a local marina here in Miami. How soon can you get away?"

"I need to round things up at the university—get a fill-in. I am planning to quit after this semester anyway and go do something else. How about the end of next week?"

"That's fine. I have lots of preparation to do for a marina in Costa Rica. Have to set up the business, start advertising, etcetera."

"That's so wonderful, Kyle. I'm so glad you thought of me. Thank you. It's going to be quite the adventure."

"Of that I am sure. Okay then, see you in two weeks... and we need a name for the boat."

"I'm so much looking forward to it, and in the meantime, I'll try to come up with a name."

"Okay, bye."

Kyle felt a sense of elation when he ended the call. He didn't have any romantic feelings for Jenny, but liked her a lot—they seemed to have plenty in common, and he doubted that any long-term relationship would develop.

He was wrong.

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A week later, Jenny met Kyle in Miami and they prepared for the long journey to Costa Rica. She had a list of potential names and they selected PEGASUS as the one they both liked. They provisioned the boat and left the marina on a hot and humid day in July. Their journey took them along the coast of the Florida Keys to Key West, their first stop. They stopped at Playa Del Carmen, a small resort town

on the Mexican coast, just south of Cancun, after heading across to the Yucatan Peninsula. The weather for the next few days not being promising for cruising, they took advantage of the clear days and explored the corals around Cozumel, one of the finest diving areas in the World.

When the weather improved, they headed south along the Mexican coast to Panama, through the canal, and north to Puntarenas, on the west Coast of Costa Rica. The entire journey took them 12 days. Kyle had previously surveyed the local marinas for an appropriate base of operations for his dive charter business and settled on a small establishment near Puntarenas, easily accessible and close to services he would need. Over the years, on many days, Kyle and Jenny took off for a diving excursion in the crystal blue waters of the Pacific. It was on one of those dive trips to Cocos Island that changed both of their lives forever.

