

The Silent Reporter

The Reporter Series

Hyder Ali, #1

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Prologue

The morning news was on the television. It had become a sort of ritual at the Hansborough home. Peter was the first to get up, his alarm ringing at precisely 5:30. He quickly took a shower, shaved, and then ran down and put the coffee on to brew.

His wife, Amanda, got up around 6:00. She showered and got ready, which took about half an hour. Afterwards, she proceeded to wake up their six-year-old son David and their eight-year-old daughter Janet.

Meanwhile, Peter sat and quickly took in the highlights of the previous night's sports games. Peter could not go to work without knowing who won and who lost, and by what margin. Peter worked as an IT analyst and he was part of his work's betting pool. Peter had so far been wrong in his selections and he was hoping his luck would turn for the better. It hadn't. The teams he had chosen to win had all lost. This meant he would be tormented endlessly by his co-workers. Peter couldn't blame them. He did the same when someone else was having the luck he had been having lately. Plus, he owed money, and if things didn't get better soon, he would owe a lot.

Amanda escorted David and Janet downstairs and led them straight to the kitchen. They were dressed and ready to go to school. Amanda had already prepared their lunches the night before, so breakfast was the only thing left. In their case, it wasn't too time-consuming either. David preferred a box of chocolate cereal while Janet liked toast with strawberry jam.

Peter came into the kitchen with a sour look on his face.

"Your teams lost again?" Amanda asked.

He nodded. Without saying a word, he began pouring the coffee into mugs.

She came over and kissed him on the cheek.

"Don't worry, honey," she said. "It's a long season."

He managed a smile.

Amanda and Peter enjoyed their coffee—which was all they needed to start their day with, as neither of them was fond of big breakfasts—while David and Janet enjoyed their cereal and toast.

The children's school was on Peter's way to work, so he always took them there. Amanda kissed Peter and the children goodbye and got behind the wheel of her Mini Cooper. She loved the car. It was what she had always wanted after she saw the movie *The Italian Job* years before.

The drive was about an hour, depending on traffic, but she didn't mind, because it allowed her to listen to her favorite tunes.

She had set her favorite station on dial 1. It played music from Duran Duran, Bon Jovi, Blondie, Brian Adams, and many others. She pressed the button and immediately began humming along with a tune by the Commodores.

Amanda was an accountant by profession. She had received her certification not too long ago. She couldn't say it was what she wanted to be growing up. That would be a lie; staring at balance sheets, income statements, and other financial documents was dull and at times tedious. But she found that she was good at it. Contrary to popular belief, being an accountant didn't necessarily mean that you had to be good with numbers, it meant that you understood the principles of accounting and you knew how to apply them.

Once Amanda chose her vocation she never looked back. Plus, the money wasn't bad. Her dad had spent his entire life working for an automobile manufacturer. His long hours on the assembly line finally took a toll on his body, leaving him ravaged by chronic pain later in life. Her mother didn't fare any better. She worked for a large grocery chain where she was either standing behind the cash register for long hours, or she was assisting in stocking and re-stocking items whenever it was required.

Amanda and Peter were very lucky in that sense. Both had been able to get a good education and were now in jobs that at least gave them the comfort of sitting behind a desk.

Amanda had recently moved to a new company. She worked in their internal audit department. It didn't require long hours, which meant she could spend more time with David and Janet. But lately she had been burning the midnight oil. Amanda had found some irregularities with the company's accounting records and had brought it to the attention of her superiors.

She saw the freeway up ahead. Once on it her drive would be straight to her work.

She turned the steering wheel right and the Mini moved up the ramp.

She felt the wheel shake under her grip.

The Mini kept going up the ramp. She accelerated, and soon she was on the shoulder of the freeway.

Amanda looked left and turned the wheel. She had to merge with the oncoming traffic.

When she was on the freeway, she glanced down at the odometer and realized she was going too fast.

She pressed on the brakes, but the pedal showed no resistance.

She pumped the brakes again and again, but the Mini kept going at the same speed.

The car up ahead was only ten feet away. If Amanda didn't slow down she would slam into it.

She pressed down on the pedal as hard as she could, but it made no difference. Amanda broke into a cold sweat. In a matter of seconds she would crash.

Not knowing what else to do she turned the steering wheel right. The Mini abruptly spun and slammed into the concrete guardrail on the side of the freeway.

The airbags exploded and slapped Amanda across the face. The impact was so strong that it nearly knocked her unconscious.

Amanda was disoriented and she felt hot liquid pouring down the side of her face.

She was bleeding, but at least she was still alive.

She looked up; saw the front of the Mini was crushed in.

No matter, she thought. Her insurance would cover it.

She tried to find the seat belt buckle.

Her eyes widened in horror. Coming in her direction was an 18-wheeler truck. And it was coming fast.

The driver blew the horn, but Amanda was too petrified to move or do anything.

She thought of her husband, her kids, her parents.

The truck slammed into the Mini Cooper head on—

1

(One year later)

"Hyder Ali?" the man behind the counter said, looking at the business card.

"Yes."

"You mean, *Hay*-der, right?" The man gave Hyder a wink.

"No, it's *Hy*-der, as in '*hi*, how are you?'" he replied.

The man behind the counter kept staring at him. Hyder knew what the man was thinking, but he kept his mouth shut.

"Where are you from?" the man asked.

"I'm from here," Hyder said.

"No, where were you born?"

Hyder had heard this a thousand times. No matter how much he told them that he was an American, they always wanted to know where his family was from.

Hyder's parents had immigrated to America from Pakistan three decades ago. His dad was born in Lahore and his mother in Karachi. Both Hyder and his older brother had been born in America. They considered themselves more American than Pakistani, but try telling that to every other immigrant they met, especially *desi* (people from the Indian sub-continent) immigrants.

"I was born here," Hyder finally said.

"Okay." The man nodded as if he understood. Hyder could tell that the man didn't.

Most people, those who were familiar with South Asian names that is, thought Hyder's name was misspelled. It should be Haider or Hayder, they would say, but Hyder knew it was spelled correctly.

His father had named him after Sultan Hyder Ali Khan Bahadur, a Muslim king from the 18th Century. Sultan Hyder Ali ruled the Kingdom of Mysore in southern India. He was a brilliant military leader who fought strongly against colonialism.

The present day Hyder Ali possessed none of the accomplishments or accolades of his namesake. He was a reporter whom the *Daily News* had given a temporary position for less than six months.

It was why he was in the convenience store, talking to the man behind the counter.

"Mr. Akram, what time did it happen?" Hyder asked. Hyder had already found out that Mansoor Akram owned and operated the store.

"It happened at two o'clock in the morning," Mr. Akram replied.

"And what did the thief take?"

"A chocolate bar and a can of soda pop."

Hyder stopped writing. He pushed his brow line glasses up his nose. He had bought the pair because his hero Malcolm X wore them. Plus, he felt it made him look older than his twenty-five years of age.

"So, the thief took a chocolate bar and a can of soda pop?" Hyder repeated, trying to confirm this.

"Yes." Mr. Akram nodded gravely.

"Did you call the police?"

"I most certainly did."

"And?"

"They made notes—like you are doing now—and left."

"Did they say what they'll do with the information?"

"I know what they'll do..."

Mr. Akram paused. Hyder waited.

"They'll do nothing," Mr. Akram finally continued. "And you know why?"

Hyder wanted to say, "Maybe because it's not that serious of a crime," but held his tongue.

"Because he was a *gowra*."

"So," Hyder began. "You are saying because the thief was *white* the police won't do anything?"

Mr. Akram tensed up. "I mean... you know how it is, *yaar (buddy)*."

"No, I don't," Hyder replied, sounding neutral. "Please do explain."

Hyder, in fact, knew exactly what he meant. The criminal was white and therefore the police would be more lenient on him. On one hand, Hyder disagreed with this statement, but on the other hand, he knew where the statement was coming from.

Growing up, Hyder had spent much time dealing with racism. He was constantly called a *paki* and other derogatory terms. On top of that, he was also a Muslim, which opened the door for more unkind and cruel comments. Even though he had grown to ignore such remarks, they nonetheless hurt. Try telling an eight-year-old why his peers are taunting and teasing him when his only crime is the color of his skin and his ethnic-sounding name.

Hyder soon came to realize that racism was a form of bullying. He was good in his studies and was good athletically as well. He had taken his high school basketball team all the way to the state championships. This, naturally, had endeared him to many, but also given rise to those who resented him for it.

Sports, however, were not in his cards, as he was only five-ten, which meant success playing basketball at the elite levels would be more difficult to attain. Instead, he chose to pursue journalism.

Mr. Akram coughed.

Hyder kept staring at him. This was making Mr. Akram uncomfortable and Hyder wanted to see how he would react.

Hyder was fully aware that racism existed even in an open society such as the one he lived in, but it was wrong in every shape and form. Mr. Akram believed that racism was preventing the authorities from doing their duties. Hyder hoped that was not the case.

Some of Hyder's closest friends were white, black, and even Asian. What brought them closer to each other were their common interests. They liked the same movies, the same music, and even the same sports. In some cases, what brought them together was the fact that they were different from those around them. Hyder and his friends were considered nerds, a term they were proud to own.

Mr. Akram's face was now covered in sweat. As a fellow Muslim and a Pakistani, he had expected Hyder to agree, and sympathize with what he was going through. Hyder did. It was wrong for someone to be robbed, he believed. Everybody had a right to an honest living.

The country was built upon the American Dream. If you worked hard, no matter who you were, you could succeed.

The owner of the convenience store had every right to be remunerated for his products. What he didn't have the right to, according to Hyder, was thinking just because the offender was white, black, or any other ethnicity, he or she would get away with it. A good society would never tolerate theft of any kind, no matter who perpetrated it.

To Mr. Akram's relief, a customer walked up to the counter. He quickly greeted the customer and proceeded to ignore Hyder.

This was Hyder's cue that the interview was over.

He closed his notebook and left.

2

He banged hard on the door and waited.

He was dressed in an immaculate suit, which was now getting ruined because of the slight drizzle.

Captain Rudyard 'Rudy' Ross brushed off the droplets of water, but quickly realized it was in vain.

He grunted.

He hated having to be here, but it was necessary. He should have come earlier, but he thought he would give it more time. He didn't realize the time was now almost a year.

He glanced around the front of the house. It looked like the grass hadn't been cut in weeks or maybe even months. Weeds had even begun to sprout.

He looked down. Next to his recently polished shoes were stacks of newspapers and unclaimed mail.

He leaned down and lifted some of the envelopes.

They had the familiar words 'Final Notice' stamped on them in red ink.

He shook his head and banged on the door again.

He could have sent someone from the department, but he knew that wouldn't do the job. They always returned to the station shaking their heads.

"It was hopeless," they would say. "He's gone." But Ross would not give up. No matter how much trouble Tom Nolan had been, he was one of Ross' finest detectives.

Ross dialed a number and heard the telephone ring inside the house. As expected, the call went to voicemail; an operator informed him the mail box was full.

Ross placed the phone inside his suit jacket and then moved to the side of the house.

He found a piece of rock, held it in his palms to see if it was heavy enough, and returned to the front door.

He flung the rock through the glass.

He took a few steps back and put his arms behind his back, waiting.

A couple of seconds later, the front door swung open.

A man rushed out with a bat in his hands. He was wearing a black T-shirt and white shorts. His face was covered in a thick beard. His hair was long and dishevelled.

The man cursed as he moved toward the captain. The man's socks were instantly wet from the rain.

"Good morning, Tom," Ross said.

"Morning, sir," the man replied. He looked left and then right. He held the baseball bat high. "Sir, did you see where the hooligans went?"

"What hooligans?" Ross asked matter-of-factly.

"The bums who threw the rock at my window."

"I did."

Nolan made a face. He looked confused.

"Tom, I threw the rock at your window," Ross said calmly.

"Why...? Why would you do that?" he asked.

"So you would come out and greet me."

Nolan lowered the baseball bat and grinned. "Sir, you could have called, you know."

Ross ignored his comment and said, "Can I come in?"

"Sure, but what are you doing here?"

"I wanted to talk to you."

"You could have saved yourself the trouble and just called me. I would have come to you."

Right, Ross thought.

The first thing that hit Ross was the stench. It was the pungent aroma of sweat and alcohol.

The living room was a pigsty. Things were scattered every which way. Ross spotted clothes on the floor and furniture. Styrofoam boxes and pizza boxes littered the coffee table and carpet. Next to the sofa were various alcohol bottles.

"Those aren't mine," Nolan claimed.

"I'm sure they aren't," Ross said, not believing him.

Nolan flopped onto the sofa and pointed at the seat across from him, which Ross took.

"What can I do for you, sir?" Nolan's eyes were bloodshot and his skin was turning pale from being indoors all day.

"I never thought I'd ever see Tom Nolan like this," Ross said.

Nolan shrugged as if to say, *that's life*.

"Tom, I need you out in the field," Ross continued.

"I'm on leave," Nolan said.

"Not anymore."

Nolan gave him a sour look. "Sorry, sir, but as you can see, I'm in no shape to conduct my duties in a manner required by my profession."

"You can if you stop drinking."

"I will repeat," Nolan raised a finger. "Those bottles aren't mine."

"I'm sure they're not," Ross shook his head. "Tom, you can't live like this. You need to get on with your life."

"I'm living my life, can't you see?" Nolan waved his arms around the room.

"You're hurting yourself more than you know," Ross said.

"You can't imagine the pain I've been through," Nolan glared at him. "This is nothing."

"You're right. I can't imagine what you've been through. And I'm truly sorry for what happened, but the way you are going at it doesn't help anyone."

"I don't care," Nolan looked away.

"I do!" Ross snapped back. "Tom, I only came all this way for you. I don't have to be here, but I am."

Nolan looked at him and then nodded. It wasn't every day the captain showed up at an officer's house.

"Sir, I need more time," Nolan said. "I'm not ready."

"You don't have more time," Ross responded. He threw the stack of overdue notices on the coffee table. "If you don't get back to work you will be out on the streets."

"I can't," Nolan put his hands over his face. "I'm no use to you anymore."

"You're still a member of the Franklin Police Department. And until you quit or retire, you will fulfill the duties bestowed upon you, got it?" Ross pointed a finger at him.

Nolan's shoulders sagged. "Sir..."

"I'm not here to argue with you, Detective Nolan," Ross said sternly. "As of right now, your leave of absence has ended. If you don't complete your tasks, then I expect your resignation letter right this minute."

Nolan stared at him. A full minute passed by before he finally grinned. "I didn't know you loved me that much, captain."

"I don't." Ross stood up. "I can't see an officer rot on my watch. You can rot all you like *after* I've retired."

Nolan walked him to the door. "I'll be ready for duty first thing tomorrow, sir."

"No, you'll get ready now."

Nolan was confused.

"I've got a straightforward suicide case for you."

Nolan didn't know what to say.

"And," Ross continued. "If I were you, I'd get cleaned up."

Nolan sighed. "Yes, sir."

3

The First National Building was one of the ugliest buildings in Franklin. It was 25-stories tall. The exterior was concrete with the design resembling an upright cinder block. The building looked cold and uninviting. It was owned by Brownstone Ltd., which also owned the *Daily Times* newspaper.

Brownstone Ltd. occupied the top six floors of the building, whereas the next fifteen floors were leased to other commercial enterprises, which included a private business school, a law firm, and a call center.

The last five floors were allocated to the *Daily Times*, with the basement used as a press center to print the newspapers.

Hyder went through the front revolving doors. Instead of taking the elevator, he took the side stairs. The third floor was referred to as the "beat" room, where journalists spent their time hammering out stories.

Hyder was a temp reporter at the local desk, which required him to cover city-related news. It was why he had been talking to Mr. Akram that morning.

Hyder moved past the rows of cubicles and all the way down to the end of the floor.

Being a temp meant that he didn't have his own cubicle. He had to share it with the temps from other departments. To Hyder's relief, the cubicle was unoccupied.

Hyder placed his laptop on the desk and let it load up.

"Assalamu alaikum," a male voice said. (*Peace be upon you.*)

"Wa alaikum assalam," Hyder replied, not looking up. (*And upon you be peace.*)

Lester Glasgow stood by the cubicle entrance with a lollipop in his mouth. Lester was the same height as Hyder. But while Hyder was slim, Lester was not. Lester weighed close to two hundred and fifty pounds.

"How is my Muslim brother today?" Lester asked.

"You're not Muslim. You know that, don't you?" Hyder said, typing in his username and password. "In fact, what are you?"

"I used to be a Christian, but then I became an Agnostic, now I choose not to take any position."

"Weren't you a Rastafarian for some time?" Hyder asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Only during college."

"What can I do for you, Lester?" Hyder asked.

"I came by to see how your day was."

"Terrible."

"Really?" Lester made a face. "Weren't you covering a robbery?"

"I wish. The thief stole a whole chocolate bar and a full can of soda pop."

"What type of chocolate bar?"

"I guess the one with nuts and almonds."

"Those are pretty pricey, you know."

"I'm sure they are." Hyder dropped himself into the chair. His shoulders sagged.

"I'm guessing you don't have a story then?" Lester said.

"You guessed right." Hyder put his hands through his shaggy hair. "I don't think I can go to Dunny and ask her to put it on the front page," Hyder said, his voice dripping sarcasm.

Caroline Dunny was the editor for the city desk. She was tiny but brutal. She was aptly referred to as Dunny the Killer Bunny.

Right now the Killer Bunny would slaughter Hyder if she found out he came back without a story.

"What are *you* covering?" Hyder asked, trying to change the subject.

Lester shrugged. "Oh, nothing important really; just the Game Expo next week."

"No way!" Hyder jumped off the chair.

Lester worked at the technology desk, which at times required him to cover newly released gadgets and devices.

"Oh yeah!" Lester grinned from ear to ear.

"How did you land that?" Hyder asked.

"I think it had something to do with my irresistible charm."

"I'm sure it did," Hyder said, not believing him.

Hyder's cell phone buzzed. He glanced at the screen and cringed.

"It's the Killer Bunny," he said.

Lester's face widened as if in sheer horror. "I gotta go." Before Hyder could say a word, he was gone.

Hyder was always surprised at how Lester managed to suddenly appear and disappear, considering his body size.

Hyder took a deep breath and hurried off.

4

The house was located on a quiet street. It was not far from the Franklin University Campus. Students and faculty members were known to live in the houses on this street.

Nolan parked his Dodge Charger at the curb and looked at himself in the rear view mirror.

His eyes were still bloodshot.

He rummaged through the glove compartment and retrieved a pair of dark sunglasses. While doing so, he spotted a couple of bottles at the foot of the passenger seat. He looked around to see if anyone was watching.

He then held one bottle in each hand.

"Vodka or whiskey?" he murmured to himself.

He looked up at the house with the yellow police tape around it. A police cruiser was parked in front of it.

Nolan wanted to be anywhere but here.

He took a mouthful of vodka.

He approached the house, ducked under the yellow tape, and made his way to the entrance.

An officer was standing by the door.

"You can't be here, sir," the officer said.

"It's okay, I'm a detective," Nolan said, adjusting his shades.

"Your badge, sir?"

Nolan patted his jacket and checked his pants pockets. "I think I must have left it at home," he said.

"Then I can't allow you to proceed any further," the officer said. "Please move behind the yellow line."

"I'm sure I have it." Nolan looked around as if he had dropped it on his way to the house. "Maybe it's in my car."

As he was making his way back to the Charger, a voice called out, "Nolan!"

A woman was standing by the front door. She was waving him over.

Nolan moved past the officer and said, "I told you I wasn't lying."

"Come on," the woman said as she took his arm and escorted him inside.

Detective Marina Lopez had been with the force for over twelve years. She was considered the best of the best. Captain Ross always spoke highly of her. Nolan held her in high regard as well.

Some on the force, however, thought Ross may have a thing for hot young Latinas, but Nolan knew that was not the case. Captain Ross knew talent when he saw it. Detective Lopez earned everything she got.

"The captain sent you?" Nolan asked.

She smiled. "Only to see how you're doing on your first day back."

"I think I'm doing great so far."

"Are you drunk?" Lopez sniffed.

"Not entirely. Now, where's the body?"

5

He was hanging in the living room with a noose around his neck. The noose was attached to a beam in the ceiling.

"Professor Eric Freeland," Lopez said. "He's sixty-two and he teaches at Franklin U."

"Who found the body?"

"His assistant from the university."

"Where are they now?"

"I have her in my car. She's clearly shaken up. She said the professor had a class in the morning, but when he didn't show up, she came down to check up on him."

"How did she get in?" Nolan asked.

"He had given her a key."

Nolan looked at Lopez. Behind the shades she could tell what he was thinking.

"No," Lopez said. "They weren't seeing each other. She's actually engaged." She smiled. "The big rock around her finger gave that away."

Nolan nodded. He had been a detective for far too long to not consider every avenue.

"What's his marital status then?" he asked.

"He's been divorced ten years now. His ex-wife lives about a two hour drive from here. He has a daughter. We are trying to contact her now."

"This reminds me of the old times," Nolan said.

"You mean, when you and I used to be partners?" she said.

"Yeah."

"That was a long time ago," she said. "Times have changed."

"They have," he said, more to himself than her.

He walked around the limp hanging body. Freeland's eyes were closed and his face was pale. Nolan understood that now that Freeland was dead, there was nothing to circulate the blood up, so it drained to the lower levels of the body.

A stool lay sideways on the floor about a foot away from the body.

A light sparked inside Nolan's brain.

There was something odd about the way the stool lay. It was as if it had been placed there. Anyone trying to kill themselves would have thrashed and kicked as they slowly lost their breath. This looked too... *clean*.

Nolan made no comment and began examining the fingers. If there had been any struggle—a possibility Nolan had to scratch off—then it would show up under the fingernails. He found nothing of significance.

He moved to Freeland's hands. He noticed slight redness around the wrists.

He lowered his shades to get a better view, concluded that they looked like bruises.

He was about to say something when a voice said, "Well, I'll be damned. Look who's here?"

He turned to see Detective Angelo Pascale standing by the front door.

Pascale was an arrogant prick. He walked and talked like he was better than everyone. He was proud that he was a detective and he made sure to let everyone know that. Pascale's father was a retired Deputy Chief, which may have had something to do with him moving up, but no one could prove it. Pascale kept his thick hair greased back. He always wore a black leather jacket and he always kept a toothpick in the side of his mouth.

Nolan always commented that he looked more like a Mafioso than a detective. Pascale was Italian, which made Nolan's comments a bit racist, but Pascale wasn't helping himself by dressing and behaving the way he did.

"What're you doing here, Pascale?" Nolan said.

"I just came to see the show," Pascale replied with a grin.

Nolan knew exactly what he meant. Pascale wanted to see what kind of a fool Nolan would make of himself. Ever since the accident, Nolan had taken to the bottle and he had taken to it hard. Even though the majority sympathized with him, there were still some—like Pascale—who wanted to see how far he had fallen off the wagon.

“There is nothing to see here,” Lopez quickly interjected. “Don’t you have someplace to be?”

Pascale laughed. “I do, but this would be more fun.”

“Get out, Pascale!” Lopez raised her voice. “You wouldn’t want the Captain hearing about this.”

Pascale laughed again, put his arms up. “I’m leaving. Please don’t report me.”

When he was gone, Lopez said, “Ignore him. He’s jealous that you’re a better detective than he’ll ever be.”

Nolan felt a headache coming on.

The only thing he wanted right now was to get back to the Charger and his drink.

6

Hyder took a deep breath and knocked on the door.

“Come in,” said a female voice.

Caroline Dunny was behind the desk reading something. Hyder couldn’t remember if he had ever seen Dunny without makeup. Her lips were always painted bright red, and her hair, which was styled with bangs, was never without highlights. Dunny was petite, but she loved to wear high heels, which mostly included boots that went up to her knees.

Dunny’s office, on the other hand, was a mess. Papers and other items were scattered everywhere. It sometimes took hours to find anything. Dunny never searched herself. She made one of her assistants dig through the pile instead.

Hyder always wondered why she didn’t spend the time she spent getting herself more organized, but he never dared say that to her face.

“Hyder, have a seat,” she said, not looking up from whatever she was reviewing.

Hyder looked around the office. There was nothing that wasn’t covered in stuff, even the coffee table.

Dunny looked up.

“I prefer to stand,” he replied meekly.

“Do you have anything I can print in tomorrow’s paper?” she asked directly.

Hyder gulped. “The story didn’t pan out.”

Dunny dropped what she was doing and leaned back. “Do explain?”

“Well, the information we received was not... entirely correct.”

The *Daily Times* had a sort of agreement with the Franklin Police Department: If anything newsworthy ever occurred, they would, out of professional courtesy, pass on that information to them. In return, if there were stories the force did not want made public right away the newspaper would accommodate them accordingly.

Naturally, both the force and the newspaper tried to take advantage of this agreement. There would be times where the newspaper would hear about an incident but not tell the force until they had their story. And on the other side, the force would not divulge any information until they were certain it wouldn't bring any negative light on them.

Earlier, someone had notified the *Daily Times* of a robbery at a convenience store.

Hyder had been sent to get a story. He had returned with nothing.

"Did a robbery occur or not?" Dunny asked slowly.

"It did, but..."

"Then why don't I have a story?"

"It wasn't worth writing about."

Dunny leaned forward. "*Everything* is worth writing about. If someone slips and falls, even if it looks like it is nothing, we will make a story out of it. Was something wrong with the sidewalk? Were the shoes they were wearing defective? Was there a sign anywhere informing the walker of a dangerous condition up ahead? There are stories all around you. It is your job to find what they are."

Hyder didn't have a response.

Her voice suddenly softened. "Hyder, I know what they call me in this office and quite frankly, it doesn't bother me one bit. The newspaper industry is changing and it is changing for the worse. Our circulation has gone down almost fifty-percent. Our advertisers are running away in droves. They've already forecasted the end of the printed newspaper. It is, therefore, our job to give the readers something they could not get elsewhere, and that is good, solid stories. If we fail to do that then we might as well go find another profession to be in."

Hyder fully grasped her point. If he didn't find stories she could print, he might as well find someplace else to work.

"Got it, boss," he finally said.

7

Hyder returned to his desk, completely deflated. He logged into his laptop and began going through his e-mails.

Twenty minutes later, he heard a knock on his cubicle.

Veronica Ainsworth was in her early forties. She had been with the *Daily Times* from the moment she had graduated twenty years ago. She had started as an assistant to an assistant and had worked her way up to lead reporter at the city desk. This meant if there was anything big happening, Veronica was the first on the list to cover it.

"How'd it go with the Killer Bunny?" Veronica asked.

Hyder made a sad face.

"That bad, huh?"

Veronica had always been good to Hyder. She had sort of taken him under her wing. She was very maternal to him, even going out of her way to shield him from Dunny.

"You should have spoken to me first before going into the lion's den," she said.

"I know," Hyder replied. "But I thought I could handle it."

"Did she give you the speech about her trying to save our industry?"

"Yeah, she kinda did."

"Let me tell you something." Veronica put her hands on her hips. "When the time comes, there is nothing Dunny or anyone else can do to save our jobs; remember that."

Hyder hated to admit it, but she was right.

Hyder had always wanted to tell stories. He'd quickly realized he could tell real stories by becoming a journalist.

Now he wasn't so sure.

"The reason I also came by was to tell you the Mailroom guys were looking for you."

"Do you know about what?" Hyder asked, curious.

"No idea, you'll have to find out for yourself."

With that she was gone.

Hyder looked at the laptop screen and then decided to go check it out.

He took the elevator two floors down and went straight up to the Mailroom counter.

He rang a bell and a man appeared.

Jerry was almost seventy years old. He had been working at the *Daily Times* for over fifty years. There were rumors that when the time came Jerry would be buried under the building.

Hyder wasn't sure if that was true or not.

"Name?" Jerry said as if Hyder had been there for the first time.

Hyder gave it.

Jerry opened a ledger and slowly proceeded to go down it.

"Ali?" he said.

"Yep. That's me."

Jerry disappeared from view. A minute later he returned with a piece of paper.

"A package came by courier and it stated that it had to be signed by you. I sent someone upstairs to look for you, but they couldn't find you. Anyway, you'll have to pick it up yourself from the post office."

Jerry handed him the paper.

Hyder looked at the time. He was in Dunny's office when the courier had come.

Hyder shoved the paper in his pocket and went back up.

As he was moving toward his cubicle he spotted Veronica rushing to leave.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"Just got a call about a suicide," she said.

"Where is it?"

"Franklin U."

"Do you know who it is?" Hyder was curious.

"Yeah, some guy named Freeland."

Hyder's mouth nearly dropped.

"Can I tag along?" he quickly asked.

"Why?"

"He was my professor."

8

"It could be murder," Nolan said, turning to Lopez.

"That's the first thing we assume when we examine a death," Lopez said. "But in this case, I'm not so sure. Come see this."

She took him to the corner of the room. On top of a table was a piece of paper. The text was printed, but a signature below was in blue ink. Without lifting it up Nolan read it.

My name is Eric Freeland and I was a professor at the University of Franklin. When you read this it means that I am either dead or in a state where death is inevitable. I have not been feeling well of late and to stop the pain I have decided to end my suffering. I am truly sorry to those who will be affected by my death, but I have found no other option than this. I want to say I love my family and will miss them when I am gone.

(Signed) *Eric Freeland*

"Short and concise," Nolan said. Over the years, Nolan had seen many suicides. The notes left behind by the victims were usually long and full of personal rambling. Nolan always considered those who committed suicide as victims, because, in his opinion, they were a victim of their illness that pushed them to kill themselves.

"There is something else I want to show you," Lopez said.

He followed her to the second floor of the house and straight to a room. Next to the bed was a side table. On top of the table was a small prescription bottle.

Nolan pulled out a Kleenex and picked up the bottle.

The bottle was half empty. He examined the label on top. The date on the bottle indicated that Freeland had downed quite a lot of pills from the day the prescription was written.

"They are anti-depressants," Lopez said from behind him.

Nolan nodded. He had a full bottle of these very pills in his home. He had been prescribed them after the accident, but he had found other forms of medication to aid him in his suffering.

Nolan put the bottle down and left the room.

Back in the living room, he rubbed his temples. He desperately needed a drink.

"What do you want to do?" Lopez asked.

He knew what she meant. If it was deemed to be a homicide then forensics would be called in. They would gather and tag evidence before the scene became contaminated. If it was not a homicide then the coroner would be called in to remove the body.

There were so many things nagging him about the scene, but the pounding in his head had turned from a headache to a full migraine.

"Call the coroner," he finally replied.

9

Hyder and Veronica reached the scene. Veronica immediately placed herself in the middle of the other reporters. Hyder followed behind.

They were told that soon a spokesperson from the police department would make a statement.

Hyder saw a man and a woman come out of the house.

The woman was well dressed and had a badge around her neck. The man, on the other hand, was dishevelled and wore nothing that indicated he worked for the force.

“Should we go talk to them?” Hyder whispered to Veronica.

She looked over and shook her head. “No point. They won’t speak to us. It’s better if we stay here and get the official story.” She then squinted. “Is that Tom Nolan? I heard he was a mess. They must be desperate to get him back on the job.”

* * * * *

Nolan walked away from the media.

“Do you want to talk to the assistant who found the body?” Lopez asked. She nodded toward her vehicle. A young woman sat inside, wiping tears from her eyes.

“Why?” Nolan asked. “It’s a suicide, isn’t it? Cut her loose.”

“Gotcha,” Lopez said. “I guess I’ll see you at the office.”

“Yeah, sure, maybe later,” Nolan said.

He quickly walked away.

Once inside his Charger he could breathe again. He put the car in gear and drove away from the scene. When he was sure he was a good distance, he parked the Charger by the side of the road and took a long swig of vodka. He felt better, much better, but for some reason the feeling didn’t last long.

* * * * *

The spokesperson showed up ten minutes later and informed those around the scene that the police were treating it as a suicide. The spokesperson gave some more details, enough for the reporters to get their story.

The entire scene felt surreal to Hyder. He remembered having long conversations with Professor Freeland. They talked about life, religion, politics, music, everything. Hyder had learned a lot from him.

Freeland was Jewish and Hyder was Muslim, but they both shared a common trait: a love of God and an appreciation of His people.

Eric Freeland was Hyder’s mentor. Hyder couldn’t believe he was dead, and by suicide no less.

Once the spokesperson had concluded her statement, the reporters left the scene.

None of them noticed a black sedan parked half a block away. The windows were tinted, hiding the sedan’s sole occupant, a man in a suit.

When the man was satisfied that he had seen enough, he started the engine and drove away.

10

Feeling the loss of his professor, Hyder decided to go home.

The house was a three bedroom bungalow in the heart of the city. His parents had bought the house right after they had moved to the country.

It was the only house he ever knew as his home. Deep down, he wished one day he would be able to raise his children in this house. It was in walking distance of everything: the grocery stores, the medical office, the barbershop, even the coffee shop was two minutes away. On top of that, there were several schools nearby. Hyder's grade school, middle school, and even high school were around his house, which meant he never had to be driven to school or take a bus. The first time he actually did take local transit was when he went to Franklin U.

Hyder unlocked the front door and entered.

"*Assalamu alaikum!*" Hyder said loudly. It was taught to every Muslim at a young age that one should always extend greetings when entering a room or place.

"*Wa alaikum assalam!*" a female voice replied.

Hyder went inside and found his mother in the living room.

He kissed her on the cheek.

"How was your day, *beta* (son)?" she asked. "It was okay, *Ammi* (Mom)," Hyder said, falling on the sofa.

Hyder noticed his mom's eyes were transfixed on the television. Figure skating was on the screen. Hyder always found it funny that his mother covered her head with a scarf, prayed five times a day, read the Quran regularly, but loved watching people dance in front of thousands dressed in tight-fitting or at times even skin-baring clothing. He had once asked her about the contradiction. Her response was, "I don't care. I'm not here to judge how they live. I just like the way they skate. It's so beautiful."

In many ways she was right. It didn't matter how someone looked, talked, ate, or even worshipped. What mattered was how they lived their lives.

After his father was gone, his mother was the one person who had the greatest influence on him. Without her, he would not be the man he was today.

The commercials came on. "Are you hungry?" She asked.

He shrugged, not sure.

"I made roti and butter chicken, your favorite."

Hyder loved her cooking, no matter what she made. "Okay," he said.

While she warmed up the food, Hyder went into the washroom and rinsed his hands and mouth.

He went to the kitchen table and found a bowl of butter chicken and a plate of roti.

His mother was back in front of the television watching her show.

Hyder tore a piece of the roti and said softly, "*Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Rahim.*" (*In the name of God, the Gracious, the Merciful.*) Every Muslim was taught to recite those words when starting a new task, which in this case was eating a meal.

When he was done, Hyder washed the dishes and went back to the living room.

"Is *bhai* (*Big brother*) home?" Hyder asked his mother. "No, he'll be late today," she replied, her eyes still glued to the screen.

Hyder's brother, Akbar, was three years older than him, but he acted much older. Maybe it was because his brother had become a father figure for him, or maybe that was the way Akbar was. Regardless, he was glad his brother wasn't home.

His brother wasn't too happy with him getting into journalism. He wanted Hyder to become a doctor, like he was, or get into law, like their father was. It was his mother who convinced his brother to let him pursue his dream. If Hyder wanted to become a reporter she would let no one get in his way.

This was one of the reasons she was his hero.

Right now, after what he had been through during the day, he wasn't so sure if being a reporter was the right choice.

He decided to call it a night.

A devout Muslim prayed five times a day. The main purpose was to be reminded of God. It also kept a person away from social ills and moral deviancy. If one knew he or she had to present themselves before God through the prayers, then he or she would abstain from doing anything wrong.

Hyder knew the importance of Salat (prayers) but he always found it difficult to perform them five times a day. There were too many other things in life that got in the way. He knew he was guilty of placing worldly matters before God, but he always made sure to perform them before going to bed and right after he woke up in the morning. This way he could thank God for the day that ended and thank God for the day that was beginning.

Hyder went to the washroom and performed *wudu* (ablution). The *wudu* involved washing the arms, face, head, and feet. This, according to Islam, prepared the worshipper to stand before God pure and clean. This also allowed someone to become mentally ready to perform the *Salat*.

Hyder placed a prayer cap over his head and unrolled a prayer mat.

He stood on the mat, which faced east toward Mecca—the holiest site in Islam—and began the prayers.

When done, he gently rolled up the mat and placed it to the side.

He went to bed and turned on his television to watch the news. Within minutes he was asleep.

11

Nolan sat at the end of the bar and gulped down another glass of scotch.

He was miserable. He hated being forced by the Captain to work on a case. Suicide or no suicide, work was work.

"Damian!" Nolan yelled. "I need more juice!"

The bartender came over and said, "You sure, Tom? You've been at it for a while."

"Hey, listen," Nolan's words were becoming slurred. "I don't pay you to talk. I pay you to keep my glass full."

"You haven't paid your tab yet," Damian reminded him. "You're lucky I'm still letting you drink."

That was one reason Nolan should be back at work: money. He was running out of it and fast. His romance with the bottle had taken a bite out of his savings (or what was left of it).

"Sorry," Nolan raised his hands in the air. "My bad. You are the boss. I sincerely apologize. May I have another glass? Please and thank you."

Damian eyed him. "One more and that's it. After that you go home, got it?"

"Yes, sir, absolutely, once I'm done, I'll get on the first train home."

"You live around the corner," Damian said. He refilled his glass.

"You are too kind." Nolan bowed to him.

The television behind the bar had the news on. Nolan wanted to ask Damian to change the channel, but if he requested anything else Damian would surely throw him out. So he decided to keep quiet and enjoy whatever was on the screen.

The anchor spoke about a contract that the City of Franklin had awarded to the TriGate Management Group for the extension of the city nuclear reactor plant. The price of the contract was worth close to \$1.2 billion.

Nolan whistled loudly. "That's a lot of money. I could build five nuclear reactor plants if they gave me the money." He looked around the bar, but no one paid any attention to him. "I could, I really could." But still no one looked his way.

Footage of the CEO of TriGate came on the screen. Charles Marshall was over sixty, with thinning gray hair and a double chin that nearly reached his front shirt collar. Marshall was beaming ear to ear. He thanked the city for putting their trust in TriGate and he vowed to have it completed on time and on budget.

"I wish I was that guy," Nolan gushed. "He's so handsome."

Suddenly tears began to flow down his cheeks.

"I'm not him," he cried loudly. "I'm *me*."

"Alright," Damian came over. "You've had enough." He grabbed the half empty glass. "Don't touch it! It's mine." Nolan snapped.

"Time for you to go home, Tom," Damian demanded.

"No, I'm not leaving until I finish my drink!" Nolan yelled back.

"You are going home now," Damian said.

Nolan pulled out his gun.

Damian jumped back from the glass with his hands up. "Alright, no need for that."

"That's right," Nolan said. "I don't like doing this, but you don't mess with a man's drink, got it?"

"Sure, I got it," Damian said.

Damian glanced over at Boris, who was sitting by the door. Boris was the owner of the bar and he was six and a half feet tall.

During the last year Boris and Damian had been through many of Nolan's drunken outbursts. They knew he worked for the police department so they cut

him some slack. Plus, they also knew what had made him start drinking in the first place. So they sympathized with him, too. But not today.

Boris grabbed a piece of 2x4—which he kept for these very occasions—and slammed it across the back of Nolan’s head.

The gun flew out of Nolan’s hand. He wobbled before falling to the floor.

Damian calmly walked over and retrieved the gun. He knew Nolan would come for it when he had sobered up.

Meanwhile, Boris grabbed Nolan by the ankles and dragged him out to the front of the bar.

He left Nolan on the cold pavement.

12

The rabbi stood at the front and spoke about the life of the deceased.

Hyder was at the funeral for Professor Eric Freeland. He wore a black suit and tie and he had made sure to come early.

He was glad he did.

The funeral home had become standing room only. Students, past and present, as well as faculty members from Franklin U were there, along family and friends of the deceased.

When entering the funeral home, Hyder had signed a guestbook and entered a message of condolence for the family.

He spotted an older woman and a younger woman sitting in the front row. Hyder knew the younger woman was Freeland’s daughter. He had seen her photos in his office. The older woman, Hyder assumed, was most likely Freeland’s ex-wife. Freeland never kept any photos of his ex, and why would he?

Freeland’s daughter was crying hysterically. Her mother was doing her best to console her.

The rabbi mentioned that he had known Freeland from when they were young. He provided stories, some funny, and some heartfelt, of their time together growing up. He then mentioned something that was on the mind of many mourners. Freeland had committed suicide, a serious sin in the Jewish religion.

When Hyder had heard of Freeland’s death, he was shocked that it was by his own hands. Freeland, he remembered, would have never done that. Freeland was too devout in his faith to have committed such a sin. But Hyder understood that people did anything and everything, even if it was against their beliefs, to end their pain and suffering.

Hyder had found out that Freeland had been depressed and was on medication. If Hyder had known Freeland was in pain he would have tried to help him. He didn’t know how, but he would have tried at least.

Contrary to what was reported on the news, suicide was also not permitted in Islam. Life was a gift from God and no one had the right to take it away except for God. Hyder had had many discussions with Freeland about Islamist suicide bombers and they both had agreed that no God, no matter from what religion, would accept the death of innocent people in his name.

The rabbi concluded that although he was disappointed and deeply saddened by the way his friend had chosen to leave this earth he would prefer that everyone remember a man devoted to his family, his friends, and his students. The rest was up to God to decide.

The rabbi asked Freeland's daughter to give the eulogy.

Jessica Freeland was beautiful, even in her current state of anguish. She had long auburn hair and her skin was peppered with freckles. It was her eyes that were stunning. They were a bright emerald green.

Jessica spoke about her father, about growing up with him, and about how much he meant to her. She broke down on several occasions. Hyder didn't blame her. She had just lost a parent and it was something Hyder could relate to.

Jessica finished and she was escorted back to her seat.

The rabbi then led the congregation in prayer. The mourners replied with "Amen" at the appropriate times, which Hyder did as well.

The rabbi concluded the service by providing the time and place of the *shiva*, where close mourners remained at home to receive visitors and also observe the intense period of mourning.

Freeland's body was then taken to the cemetery.

Rows of chairs were already placed around the gravesite. The immediate family took their places with the other mourners standing behind them.

The rabbi performed the ritual and recited several prayers. And then the casket was lowered into the grave. The rabbi was the first to perform the *Mitzvah*, placing dirt into the grave. This was followed by the family members. Hyder joined the line. When his turn came, he took a shovel full of dirt and placed it into the grave. He had seen the mourners do it three times, so he did it as well. He couldn't help but see the similarities between Judaism and Islam. In a Muslim funeral, they, too, placed dirt into the grave.

The mourners slowly began to exit.

Hyder was walking toward his Toyota Camry when he heard a voice from behind.

He turned to find Jessica Freeland coming his way.

She was even more stunning up close.

"I'm so sorry for your loss," Hyder immediately said.

"Thank you," she replied. "My dad talked a lot about you."

"He did?" Hyder was surprised.

"Yes," she said. "In fact, my dad said if he had a son, he would have wanted him to be just like you."

Hyder didn't know what to say.

"Your dad was a good man," he finally said. "He taught me a lot."

Jessica looked toward the car where her mother was waiting for her. "I have to go," she said. "But maybe when the time is right, we could meet for coffee or something. I would love to hear stories about my dad."

"I would like that," Hyder said before they parted.

He then continued back towards his car, not noticing that a black sedan was parked across from the cemetery gate.

A man sat behind the wheel, watching the mourners leave the cemetery.

He took a sip of the wine, held it in his mouth, and then gulped it down. It was from an eight-hundred dollar bottle, so it had better taste perfect, he thought. He adjusted the cuffs on his two-thousand dollar suit and leaned back. He checked the time on his gold RADO watch and grunted.

He hated having to wait.

Ian Marshall had been raised in privilege. He had gone to some of the best Ivy League schools in the country. He lived in a seven million dollar house outside the city. He also owned a two million dollar condo inside the city.

He glanced outside the restaurant at his silver Mercedes Benz. He noticed a patch of dirt near the front wheel. Once he returned to the office he'd have one of his assistants take the Benz in for cleaning.

The waiter appeared, asking if he was ready to order.

He was hungry, but he never liked discussing business while he ate. He found it upset his stomach. It was better to get it done during the drinks.

He waved the waiter away.

A man entered the restaurant and came straight toward his table. The man was tall, slim and wore a custom-fitted gray suit.

"Grant, you're late," Ian growled.

The man didn't respond as he took the chair across from Ian.

"Is everything going according to plan?" Ian asked.

"Yes, I'm coming from Freeland's gravesite. He won't be troubling you now."

"He may not be anymore, but did he leave anything that might?"

"I found nothing in his house."

"What about a computer, a USB drive, a DVD, anything?"

"Freeland was paranoid. He believed in a lot of conspiracy theories. He thought the governments were listening in on everything, so he never owned a computer."

"What?" Ian was surprised.

"Apparently, Freeland preferred to keep everything in hard copy. He didn't trust technology. I found a typewriter in his office at the campus. I did, however, find this." Grant placed what looked like a diary on the table.

Ian picked it up and flipped through it. "There are pages missing."

"Freeland must have torn them out and destroyed them."

"Or he must have given them to someone," Ian said quickly. "Do you think that's a possibility?"

"Could be."

"Who?"

Grant shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe his daughter, but I'm keeping an eye out for anything unusual. I've already started surveillance on her. If he did trust anyone with the information, it would have been her."

"You think she knows?"

Grant shook his head. "I don't think so. She would have passed it on to the authorities by now."

"What's in the rest of the diary?" Ian didn't want to be the one to go through it.

"Nothing important, I'm afraid. He used it to keep track of his errands, his appointments with students, lectures dates and times, what to buy for dinner, what bills to pay and when. The rest of it is blank."

Ian pushed the diary back to Grant, who hid it back in his jacket.

"Is anyone suspicious about his death?" Ian asked.

Again, Grant shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. I made it look like a suicide, but I wouldn't be too worried."

Ian waited for him.

"Detective Tom Nolan is working on the case," Grant finally said.

Ian looked confused. "So?"

"He's a drunk and a mess. Last night he was thrown out of a bar for bad behavior. He won't look too deep into the case."

"What if he does?"

"Then I'll deal with it."

Ian looked away. He took a sip of the wine. He didn't bother offering it to Grant. Why waste a good bottle on hired help?

He faced Grant. "You should have been able to get that information out of Freeland. It would have saved us a lot of trouble."

"If I had tortured him the authorities would have become suspicious. Plus, I tried exerting influence."

"How so?"

"I threatened to harm his daughter, but like I said, he believed everything was a conspiracy. He was certain even if he gave me the information I would still kill him and harm his daughter."

"Would you have?" Ian asked, curious.

"Probably. It depends on what his daughter knows, though. That is why I will keep an eye on her."

Ian grinned. "You're a dangerous man."

Grant didn't say anything.

Ian looked at his watch. He was ready to end this meeting and get on with his meal.

"Just make sure every loose end is taken care of. We are paying you quite a lot of money, got it?"

"Are we done?" Grant asked.

"Yeah, sure, whatever," Ian replied, waving him away.

14

Jessica Freeland left her mother's home and drove back to her apartment.

She couldn't bring herself to perform shiva, which could last seven days. Naturally, her mother wasn't too pleased with her, but Jessica didn't care.

She couldn't stay inside the house and meet visitors. They were a constant reminder to her that her father was now gone. This was something she still hadn't come to terms with.

She understood that it would be weeks, months, or even years before she fully accepted that her father would no longer be with her.

She stopped the car by the side of the road and cried.

Her father would never see her graduate. Jessica was getting her masters in child psychology at George Smith College.

Her father would never walk her down the aisle on her wedding day. Jessica was currently single, but one day she would not be.

Her father would never see his grandchildren. This deeply hurt her above anything else.

She let all her emotions out. When she felt a little better she put the car in gear and drove away.

It took her around an hour to reach her building. She parked in the back and went up.

It was a two-bedroom apartment that she shared with a roommate. Jessica had met Chloe at the coffee shop they both worked at. When Chloe's last roommate abruptly left without paying her share of the rent, Chloe was left in a tough spot. Jessica was still commuting from her mother's house when she found out. She quickly jumped at the opportunity and moved in. That was almost eight months ago. Jessica never regretted the decision.

Chloe was clean and organized, just like her. She had also become a friend and confidante.

Chloe was currently at the coffee shop. She had taken over Jessica's shifts so that Jessica could mourn her loss.

The last thing Jessica wanted to do was mourn. What she really needed was to keep busy, to keep her mind occupied, or else she would go into deep depression.

Depression.

She couldn't believe her father had been suffering quietly. At no time did she see any signs that something was wrong when she was with him. It had all come as a surprise.

She went into her room and straight to bed.

Her eyes felt heavy. The crying had worn her out.

She quickly fell asleep.

When she woke up, she felt a bit better, but not a lot.

She needed to get out. Get some fresh air.

She changed and left the apartment.

It was nice to be out. It allowed her to breathe.

She had walked these streets a hundred times now, but today they felt different, as if she was walking them for the first time.

The death of her father had altered her state of mind. She no longer felt like the same person. She had to fully come to terms with the fact that he was gone, but she couldn't do it, it was too soon.

Suicides, accidents, or even murders were so very abrupt. They never allowed the remaining family members to prepare for what was to come. They happened when you least expected them to. Death was the one event that no one really got over. It lingered in the back of the subconscious for the duration of a person's life. The survivors always thought of what the possibilities would still be if the deceased were still alive.

Right now Jessica thought of her father, particularly her last conversation with him on the phone. He sounded distant. Normally, he would be excited to speak to her and would bombard her with a thousand questions. How was school, would be the first question he always asked her. Being in an academic profession, education was paramount to him. This was always followed by, how was her job? Did she need any money? And finally, when was she coming by to see him? Jessica always answered all those questions as creatively as possible to see what his reaction would be. School was okay but she might not graduate as planned. Her job was fickle because her boss was a jerk. Money was tight. In fact, she may not have enough to pay her rent. And as for visiting him, that might not be possible for several months or even years.

This would elicit a loud laugh from him. He knew she was joking, of course. If anything was wrong she would tell him beforehand. That was the type of relationship they had.

And that is what bothered her now about her last talk with him. He neither asked any of those questions nor cared for any answers she gave. When she asked how he was doing, he paused as if he were worried that someone was listening in on their conversation.

She knew her father had wild theories about the world. He always warned her to be careful and never give out too much information, but she never paid much attention to them. He was a professor of contemporary issues. He had spent his entire life reading and dissecting current events. She was certain some of his analysis had made an impact on him, but not to the point that he was a crazy lunatic or something.

He could be weird or odd sometimes. Maybe that was why her mom left him. But deep down, he was as normal as anyone else.

During her last conversation with him, he had told her that he was busy working on something big and that he would call in a couple of days. That was two days before she found out he had killed himself.

Jessica kept walking with her head down. She didn't know where she was going, but she didn't care. She was content in being lost in her thoughts. She then heard a voice.

She turned around to see Chloe racing her way.

"What're you doing here, Jess?" she asked. Chloe had short blond hair, and she always wore a lot of jewelry.

"I couldn't stay at my mom's," Jessica replied with a shrug.

"I saw you through the window at the shop."

Jessica hadn't realized she had passed the coffee shop she worked at.

"Come inside," Chloe said. "I'll make you something warm and we'll talk."

"What about your shift?" Jessica asked.

"Don't worry about it. Ajay is there, he'll take over. We were all worried about you. Now come with me before I drag you kicking and screaming."

Chloe was a good friend. Jessica really did need someone to talk to. And plus, a hot cup of chocolate would do wonders for her.

Hyder was in his cubicle, typing away on his laptop.

There were several stories he wanted to follow up on. He hoped some would lead to bigger and better stories.

One in particular had caught his attention. There were several reports of thieves breaking into the homes of senior citizens. The seniors were not hurt and the thieves never took cash, jewelry or even valuables. All they did was take their medical cards.

Hyder had found this odd and his journalistic instincts told them that there was something bigger at play. Could the thieves be using the medical information to find out when the victims eventually passed away? This would seem like nothing from the outside, but that information could be used to create false identities or even used for identity thefts. Hyder had heard of bank loans, car purchases, and even mortgages under the name of someone who had passed away. This was only a theory, but it was worth checking into. If it did indeed turn out to be something, Hyder would be the first to cover it.

This story could turn into other stories, Hyder thought, as he leaned back on his chair and stared up at the ceiling.

Thieves plus senior citizens plus fraud; there is so much potential for great print material. Heck, maybe even people working in medical offices might be in on it.

Hyder smiled at the last thought.

If his theory turned out to be true and his stories captured readers' attention, Dunny would surely make him permanent at the *Daily Times*.

The phone rang.

Speak of the Devil, Hyder thought.

He answered. "Sure, I'll be there in two minutes."

He hung up. "What does she want?" He thought out loud.

As usual, he found her behind her desk.

"Hyder, come in," she said, not looking up. "I've got a story for you."

"Yes, absolutely," Hyder replied a little too eagerly.

"There is a South Asian Festival happening on the east side of Franklin. I want you to cover it."

Hyder's heart sank. Festivals, although fun to cover, were not really a good springboard to bigger and better stories. They were just fillers for other important stories in the paper.

"I would rather cover something else," Hyder said.

"Like what?" Dunny looked up at him.

He couldn't tell her about the senior citizen story. If it didn't pan out Dunny would have him for dinner.

"Um... a couple of things here and there."

Dunny looked at him. "Drop them," she said. "I need someone covering this festival and you're doing it."

"Is it because I'm brown?" Hyder asked. He hoped to change her mind one last time.

"Last I checked you were," she said without skipping a beat. "Who better to do it than you? Any other comments, Hyder?"

"No, ma'am."

He left.

Hyder found Lester standing by his cubicle.

"Why so down?" Lester asked.

Hyder told him about his meeting with Dunny.

"Really?" Lester's eyes lit up. "Can I come?"

"What? Why?"

"Are you kidding me," Lester beamed. "A festival like that will surely have lots of de-licious food. I can't wait to try the kebabs, the naans, and what's that sweet milky thing that looks like a Popsicle?"

"A kulfi."

"Mmmm... kulfi."

"Are you sure *your* editor will allow you to come?" Hyder said.

Lester grinned. "Sure, I'll tell him it's related to some new product that's coming out."

Hyder rolled his eyes. "What if he doesn't believe you?"

"Then I'll tell him I'll take it as a vacation. There's no way I'm missing Indian food."

16

Nolan scratched his beard as he sat in a diner not far from police headquarters.

He needed a shave, but that was the least of his worries right now. His head throbbed. When he touched the back of his skull, it stung.

Damian had returned his weapon to him. He had made no comment when he did so. Nolan was relieved he did. Right now, Nolan couldn't deal with a lawsuit of any kind against him.

He would leave a bigger tip for Damian the next time he went.

He sipped the coffee and made a sour face. He had requested it be strong and black. He had to give the impression that he was sober when he walked into the office today.

He wasn't looking forward to it.

The last time he had shown up, he nearly had a fist fight with a fellow officer.

Nolan couldn't remember who the officer was, but he clearly remembered the Captain was not pleased. Nolan had been drinking the night before and when he showed up at work he was drunk out of his mind.

An officer had commented on Nolan's state of mind and that triggered something inside him. Nolan was ready to kill the officer had it not been for others who restrained him.

Soon after, Nolan was sent to the force's psychiatrist who had prescribed him medication, which he still hadn't chosen to take. The psychiatrist also recommended he join AA, but Nolan hadn't chosen to go there either.

He would go, though, if he had a drinking problem.

Tom Nolan was not an alcoholic. No sir.

He drank more than some people, but nothing that would impair him from doing his job.

He thought about his job and he suddenly wanted to have a drink.

The cases he had worked on before invigorated him, not so much now. When they placed him on medical leave, he was glad that it happened.

It allowed him to focus his energies on more important things. Drinking, sleeping, more drinking, more sleeping, the possibilities were endless.

He finished the cup and looked at the time.

He didn't have the heart to get up and go. Plus, he still wasn't sobered up enough to meet his colleagues yet. He ordered another strong cup of coffee.

His cell phone rang and he checked it.

It was Sergeant Doug Halton. Halton was a pain in the ass and he was also Nolan's supervisor. After the examination of Freeland's home, Nolan had gone AWOL. He hadn't shown up at the division, which he was planning to do right after he finished his coffee.

Nolan squinted. Was it Halton whom he had the fight with? He wasn't sure. His memory was a little foggy at that time.

Regardless, Halton had it in for him, Nolan was sure. He was as big of a prick as Pascale. If Halton had his way, Nolan would have been fired by now. It was Captain Ross who still wanted to see him employed.

This was another reason why Nolan had not quit. The Captain somehow saw something in him. Nolan did not know what, but it was why Nolan was going to go back.

A thought ran through Nolan's head. Did the Captain feel sorry for him? For what happened to him? Nolan shook his head. That was impossible. If the Captain did indeed pity him, he would have left him to rot in his home. For the Captain to come and summon him in person spoke volumes. Captain Ross wouldn't give up on him and Nolan would do his best not to disappoint him.

He looked at his watch and then at the cup. It was empty.

I should go now, he thought.

Nah, five more minutes, he reassured himself. *Halton can wait.*

17

Hyder was typing up his story on the South Asian Festival when he heard a knock on his cubicle.

"Hi, Mrs. Parker," Hyder said.

Mabel Parker had worked at the *Daily Times* for the last twenty-two years. She was barely five feet tall with gray cropped hair and she always wore bright and colorful dresses. Her dresses were so colorful that she sometimes looked like a walking, talking Christmas tree.

Hyder never paid much attention to the way she dressed. She had always been pleasant to him, which he appreciated. Also, whenever possible, she made sure to bake cookies and cupcakes for him.

Hyder had tasted so many of her sweets that he was beginning to feel physically sick just thinking about them now.

Hyder smiled. "What can I do for you, Mrs. Parker?"

"There's a phone call for you," she said. Mrs. Parker worked at the front desk, which meant she answered all direct calls made to the paper.

"You didn't have to come all this way," Hyder said. "You could have just forwarded it to this line."

"I wasn't sure where you'd be sitting today," she replied. "Plus, I needed the walk."

"Do you know who it is?" he asked as they made their way.

"She wouldn't tell me her name."

A woman? Hyder thought.

He followed her to the first floor, where she handed him the receiver.

"Hello," he said.

"Hyder Ali?" a female voice said.

"Yes, may I know who's speaking?"

"It's Jessica Freeland. I'm..."

"I know who you are. What can I do for you?"

"I was hoping we could meet."

"I remember, for coffee."

"No, not for coffee. I would prefer if we met somewhere public."

"Okay, where do you have in mind?"

"Do you know where Rosetta Park is?"

It was a twenty minute walk from his building. "Sure."

"Can you meet me there in an hour?"

"I can."

"And please come alone."

The line then went dead.

18

Nolan took the elevator up to the fifth floor where the detective division was located. He hoped no one would notice him on his way there. A few gave him an odd look as they entered the elevator but no one said a word to him.

Nolan was wearing dark sunglasses. His shirt was untucked under his blazer and his pants were wrinkled. He hoped he hadn't forgotten to wear socks. When he pulled his pants up, he noticed that he was wearing them, albeit in different colors.

One can't be too perfect, he thought, and shrugged.

The elevator doors opened and suddenly it felt like the air had been sucked out of the room.

Everyone stopped what they were doing and looked his way.

He casually walked in.

He scanned the familiar faces but didn't bother greeting any of them.

He moved past them and went all the way to the end.

He knocked on a door and waited.

"Come in," a voice said from inside.

Nolan didn't respond. He just waited.

"I said, come in," the voice grew louder.

Still, Nolan did nothing.

A female officer stood nearby watching him.

He gave her a smile.

The door swung open. "Didn't you listen, I said..." Sergeant Halton's face was red. "Nolan?" he said, blinking.

"Reporting for duty, sir," Nolan replied, giving Halton a salute.

"You have some nerve showing up now," Halton demanded. "I've been trying to contact you for God knows how long."

"Sorry," Nolan said.

"Sorry?" Halton's face was red again. "You're sorry?"

"Um... very sorry," Nolan mumbled.

"Get in!" Halton slammed the door behind him.

Nolan looked around Halton's office. It was exactly how it was when he was last here.

"Sit," Halton said.

"Yes, sir," Nolan did.

Halton gave him a stern look. "Take those Goddamn glasses off, Nolan."

"I can't, sir," Nolan said.

"Why not?"

"I have a prescription for those."

"You what?"

"I had cataract surgery. Doctor told me to keep them on."

"You're always trying to be a smart-ass, aren't you?"

Nolan didn't say anything.

Halton went around and sat behind his desk.

"Listen, Nolan," Halton said. "I don't like this situation any more than you do. You don't want to work for me and I don't want you to work for me. If it was possible I would rather you quit, but as you are in my office, I guess that's not going to happen."

"You can always fire me," Nolan said.

"I wish, and believe me, I would like nothing better than to do that," Halton said. "But, knowing what you've been through, I would have the union up my ass. Not to mention have the Police Association Board questioning my decision. Plus, the Captain seems to think you are worth something, so I guess my hands are tied, as they say."

Nolan smiled. Halton couldn't do shit to him.

"Wipe that smile off your face," Halton growled.

"Just happy to be back to work, sir," Nolan said.

"I'm sure you are." Halton shook his head. "Now, what's going on with the Freeland case?"

"Who?"

"The suicide!" Halton nearly yelled.

"Right. I'm on top of it. I'm following all leads. We'll have a suspect soon."

Halton was about to lose his temper. "It's a Goddamn suicide! Write the report and close the case."

Nolan nodded. "Gotcha."

"You're an asshole, you know that."

"Yes, sir."

"Get out."

"Right away, sir," Nolan got up and left.

Outside he spotted Detective Lopez.

"What was that all about?" she said. "It sounded like Halton's head was about to explode."

Nolan smiled. "Five more minutes and it would have."

19

Rosetta Park was in the center of the city. It was close to 400 acres, which included sporting facilities, a restaurant in the middle of the park, nature trails, gardens, playgrounds, and even a large pond on the west side of it.

Hyder entered from the north entrance.

He regretted not asking Jessica where they should meet. Actually, he never had a chance to ask her much. She sounded like she was in a hurry and before he could say anything, she hung up.

Also, what did she mean by *come alone*?

Was she in trouble? Hyder couldn't think why.

Maybe she needed someone to talk to. She had just lost her father, after all.

Hyder kept moving deeper into the park. There were oak trees on both sides of his path. The air was cool and crisp. The branches rustled in the wind.

The temperature wasn't chilly or cold, it was just right.

The sun was coming down at full strength. At certain points of the path, where there was little or no shade, Hyder could feel the warmth of its rays.

He stopped and let it hit his skin.

Hyder wondered why he never bothered coming down here more often. It was only a twenty minute walk from the Daily Times to Rosetta Park.

Life, like everything else, had gotten in the way. Hyder was too busy trying to create his own path that he never bothered to stop and smell the roses, so to speak.

That was why he now stood admiring the beauty and nature of the park.

The phrase that popped into his head was Mashallah, an Arabic phrase for praising the magnificence of God.

He was about to keep walking when a hand grabbed him by the elbow. "Just follow me."

He looked back. It was Jessica.

"What...?"

"Please," she said.

They hurried down the path. They looped around the trail, which took them an extra ten minutes to do so, and finally came to a stop at the children's playground.

They found a bench opposite the sand pit, sat.

"What's going on?" Hyder finally asked.

He noticed Jessica's green eyes were even brighter in the sunlight.

"My father did not commit suicide," she said right away.

Hyder didn't know how to respond.

"I know they found a note on his study table," she continued. "And also medication pills, but I am telling you he was not depressed." She bit her lip. "My dad would never have taken anti-depressants... he... he was a bit paranoid about those things."

Hyder was aware Freeland was skeptical on any medication that altered the chemicals in the brain. He thought those drugs were created by the government to control the masses. He had once listened to Freeland speak non-stop for an hour about how true the movie *The Manchurian Candidate* was.

Hyder was never one to make too much of conspiracy theories. He had found them to be a fun alternative to the truth.

Freeland, however, was a fervent believer in them. Hyder never thought Freeland was cuckoo or anything, he just placed him as being eccentric.

"Jessica," Hyder chose his words carefully. "I'm truly sorry that your father is gone now, but you have to consider that he may have been suffering severely. People change their beliefs, their thought process, even their habits, when confronted with such pain. We have to accept that your father took the alternative he thought was best for him at the time."

She narrowed her eyes and stared at him. "How well did you know my dad?"

Hyder shrugged. "Well enough, I guess. I was at Franklin University for four years."

"Did you know my dad kept a diary?" she asked.

Hyder nodded. He had seen him scribble something in a book once or twice before.

"Well, I can't find it," she said. "I have searched his house and it is not there. He always kept it on him. I tried contacting the detective working on the case and he is nowhere to be found."

Hyder scratched his head. He tried to remember the detective's name.

"It's Tom Nolan," Hyder finally said.

"Yes. That's the name they gave me."

"Maybe, he has it."

"I hope so, but why would he take it if it's a suicide?"

Hyder had no response.

"Hyder," Jessica said, but stopped. She then looked away. Children were laughing and giggling as they played on the playground equipment.

"What is it?" he asked.

When she looked back at him, her eyes were moist. "I feel I can trust you."

"But you don't even know me."

"My dad did. He trusted you and I trust him. So I'm going to tell you something."

"Okay" Hyder said, not knowing how else to respond.

"I think my dad was murdered."

Hyder's mouth nearly dropped. "Are you sure about that?"

"Yes, I don't believe my dad was depressed. Even if he was, he would never have taken his own life. It would have gone against everything he stood for."

Hyder nodded. It *was* out of character from the Eric Freeland he had come to admire and respect.

"Also, he had been acting strange the last couple of weeks. I couldn't tell anyone, not even my mom. If I did she would have gone on and on about why she had left him in the first place. My mom blamed his strange antics for the end of their marriage. Anyway, it does seem odd that around the time my dad's behavior changed, he suddenly decided to commit suicide."

"He may have been suffering from mental illness," Hyder blurted out. He suddenly felt sheepish, regretted saying it.

Jessica wasn't offended. "I thought that too, but there's something else."

"What?"

"I think someone's following me."

Hyder nearly jumped out of his seat. "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. In the last day or so I have seen a black sedan parked not far from my apartment. The engine is always running, like someone was inside, watching."

Hyder thought about it. "Is that why you wanted to meet me alone, in this park?"

She nodded.

Hyder rubbed his temples.

This was too much—a murder? He wasn't sure he was ready for this.

"What can I do?" he asked her directly.

"I need your help to find who killed my dad and why."

"I don't know." Hyder stood up.

"Let me ask you this," she said, looking him straight in the eye. "Did my dad mean anything to you?"

"Yes, he did," Hyder replied without any hesitation. "He made me who I am."

"Then will you help me? Please?"

He nodded, said, "But first we have to find Detective Tom Nolan. We have to speak to him."

20

Nolan had been given a desk in the middle of the room.

It was not the desk he was hoping for. The one he wanted was located at the other end of the room, near the windows.

Prior to his leave he would sit and sometimes watch the city below him. It gave him a sense of purpose that he was doing a job that provided some form of security for those walking the streets. If anything ever happened, they were assured that he would do his utmost to find the perpetrator.

Right now, he felt no purpose in his job. In fact, he felt like a prisoner. He was stuck in a room, surrounded by detectives and police officers who were watching his every move.

Somehow, his reputation had preceded him. They were waiting to see what Tom Nolan would do next. Would he pass out at his desk, only to be berated by Halton? Would he explode at another colleague, which would start an altercation of some sort? Or, would he give up and start drinking right where he sat, which would pressure the Captain to sack him once and for all?

Nolan would do none of those things.

Earlier, a clerk had handed him the file on the suicide.

Nolan would go through the details, write up his report, and close the file as instructed.

He flipped the cover over and his head began to spin.

The mere thought of doing anything remotely related to work made him physically ill.

He got up and headed straight for the washroom.

He felt a dozen eyes on him.

He entered and made a bee-line straight for the cubicles. He sat on the toilet seat and put his face in his palms. He wasn't ready to be back; he needed more time to recover.

What he really needed was another drink.

He had a bottle in his car. He could quietly sneak out and take a sip. Just one sip and he would be good to go.

He licked his lips. That was a great idea.

After everything he had been through so far, he deserved it for sure. Until a day ago, he was sitting in his home and resting his delicate body.

Captain Ross had shaken him out of his daily schedule. It would take Nolan several days, or even weeks, to get back into the groove.

It was wrong to jump into another case, he told himself. It was not good for his mental health. He needed to ease himself into it one baby step at a time.

He clapped his hands together. The noise reverberated throughout the washroom.

He was excited. He had a plan, and it was a brilliant plan if you asked him.

He would go down to his car, take a sip or two to control his nerves and he would return and close the file before the day was over. He had never closed a file in less than a day before, but he was certain he could do so now. All he needed was a boost from the stash in his car and he would have the energy to complete his goal.

He left the washroom.

He was heading for the elevator when he saw a man and a woman standing by the main entrance. They were talking to an officer. The officer pointed in his direction.

Nolan froze.

The couple approached him.

"Detective Nolan," the female said. "I'm Jessica Freeland and this is my friend, Hyder Ali."

"Ok, yes, hi," Nolan said.

"I know you are working on my dad's case," Jessica said. "And we were hoping to talk to you about it."

"Now?" Nolan said. *God I need a drink*, he thought.

"Yes, please."

"I'm actually very busy," Nolan lied. His found his vision was blurring. Under the dark shades, which he still refused to take off, he was glad they couldn't tell he was seeing double.

"We won't take long," Jessica replied. "Please, I've been trying to speak to you ever since my father was found dead."

Nolan had a feeling they wouldn't leave until they had spoken to him.

He finally nodded. "Okay, sure. Please come with me."

He escorted them to an interview room.

He gave them a feeble smile. "Have a seat and let me get the file," he said.

He shut the door behind him and took a deep breath.

He rushed back to the washroom, turned on the taps, and splashed cold water over his face. With the shades no longer hiding his eyes, he saw that they looked glossy and distant.

He rubbed water on his eyeballs and covered them with the shades.

He grabbed the file and returned to the room.

"Sorry about that," he said, taking a seat. He placed the file before him. "First, let me extend my deepest condolences about the loss of your loved one." Nolan had spoken to the next of kin of so many victims that he was now well versed in the phrase. This was never done insincerely. He meant every word of it, and he wanted to do everything to provide some form of closure to them.

"Thank you," Jessica said. She and Hyder sat opposite Nolan.

"So, what would you like to tell me about your father?" Nolan said.

"We feel that he was murdered," Jessica replied.

Nolan paused. "You believe this or you know this for a fact?"

Jessica looked over at Hyder. "We believe it and we know it."

He crossed his arms over his chest. "Okay, I'm listening."

Both Hyder and Jessica proceeded to lay out what they knew so far. They mentioned Freeland's behavior days before his death. They mentioned the missing diary, the bottle of anti-depressants and why Freeland never took such medication. They finished by telling Nolan that someone was following Jessica.

Nolan listened attentively. At times his mind wandered off but he willed himself to focus. He finally said, "I know how difficult this must have been for you, to lose your father in such a way, but nothing you have told me proves that he was murdered."

"He was!" Jessica said, raising her voice.

"Okay, what was the motive for his death?" Nolan asked.

"We don't know," Hyder replied.

"What about the murder weapon?" Nolan leaned forward. "There was none, I'm afraid. If there was a knife then we would have something to work with, blood stains, maybe. What about a gun? If there were shots fired, then we could use ballistics to match them to the weapon. In this we had a noose." He paused to let this information sink in. "Also, we found a suicide note."

He opened the file and pulled out a sheet of paper. He slid it across to Jessica.

She read without touching it, looked up at Hyder. Her eyes were moist. He pulled the sheet closer and read it himself.

"I'm sorry," Nolan said. It was never easy for the victim's family. None of the answers they ever received were satisfactory. If someone was murdered, then they wanted to find out who did it and why. When someone committed suicide, they wanted to find out if there wasn't someone else who pushed them to do it.

"It's just not possible," Jessica said, still not believing it. "My dad would have never killed himself."

"Is that his signature?" Nolan asked, pointing to the blue scribble at the bottom of the page.

She examined it. "I think so."

"Then we will assume it is."

She got up. "I have to go."

Nolan stood up too. "Again, I'm sorry."

She left the room.

Hyder followed after her.

21

Nolan felt terrible for Jessica Freeland. He wished he could have given her better news. Suddenly, his thirst for alcohol was somehow mitigated. He no longer felt like going and getting a drink.

He went back to his desk and placed the file before him.

It was now or never, he thought. If he didn't start work on the file right this minute, he might never close it.

Nolan desperately wanted to be done with it and move on.

He flipped through it and quickly realized that pages were missing.

"What the hell?" he muttered. Where was the coroner's report? Even though it was a suicide, the coroner had to examine the body and verify that it was so.

He grabbed the file and left the division.

The coroner's office was only two blocks away, so Nolan decided to walk. He figured it would do him some good.

Nolan was fully aware the lifestyle he had chosen now was not conducive to good health. He didn't care, or maybe he didn't have anything to care for. Regardless, it was taking a toll on him. The walk, which wouldn't have taken him long before, was now becoming tiresome.

When he reached the granite building, he found himself out of breath. His collar was sticky to the touch and he saw stars in his eyes. He leaned on the wall and composed himself. He either had to cut back on his drinking or take the car the next time he came here.

He went inside and took the elevator to the basement.

The coroner's office was a dingy looking place. Most found it suffocating. Nolan was indifferent to it. He had quickly realized that it wasn't supposed to be bright and welcoming.

This was where the dead were brought to be cut up and dissected. It was a serious place that provided a serious service.

There was no one behind a desk to greet visitors. There was a ledger where each visitor was required to sign in and sign out.

Nolan scribbled his name and entered a set of doors.

He went down a short hallway and peered inside a room. He spotted Dr. Herb Lafferty at work on a cadaver. Lafferty was in his sixties. He was bald, slightly overweight, and he walked with a limp.

Over the years Nolan had gotten to know Lafferty and during one visit Nolan had found out that Lafferty had had a skydiving accident that had shattered his left leg in multiple places. His leg had been put back together, but it was never the same as before.

Nolan tapped on the door. Lafferty looked up and waved him over.

Nolan entered the cool room and a chill went up his spine.

Lafferty smiled. "Well, look who's here."

"Doc," Nolan replied with nod.

"What brings you into my establishment?" Lafferty said.

"I missed seeing dead bodies so I figured I'd see if you could hook me up with one."

Lafferty laughed. "I see you haven't lost your sense of humor."

Nolan adjusted his dark glasses. The room already had less lighting and with the shades he could barely see much from far away.

Reluctantly, he removed them.

Lafferty looked at him, but made no comment. It was why Nolan was comfortable coming down here.

"What're you working on?" Nolan asked.

They walked over to a table. "Victim was only sixteen. She was been shot right through the head."

"Wow," Nolan could only say.

"Exactly."

"Perpetrator?"

"Looks like it was the stepfather. He had apparently been abusing her for years and now she was willing to press charges against him. I guess he didn't like that too much. He's saying she did it to herself, you believe that?"

"I'll believe anything if the evidence backs it up."

"The evidence is overwhelming against him. He won't be able to squirm out of this one."

"Glad to hear that. Doc, a body was sent here a day or so ago, the victim's name was Eric Freeland."

"I remember, the professor, right?"

"Yep."

"What about it?"

"The file's missing—your report, in particular. I figured I'd come and get it myself."

"I don't have it."

Nolan was confused. "Then who does?"

"I don't know. Someone came by and picked it up."

"Who?"

Lafferty shrugged. "I didn't catch his name. He said you guys needed the report ASAP and so he was sent to retrieve it."

"Did he sign for it?"

"Sure." Lafferty went to the other side out of the room and pulled out a binder. He flipped through it. "There."

Nolan leaned down and squinted. The signature was nothing but a scribble. There was no possible way to decipher the name of the signatory.

Lafferty said, "Maybe it's sitting on someone's desk and hasn't made its way to you. It's happened before, you know."

"Sure," Nolan said. But something told him that wasn't case this time.

"Can you tell me something from the report?"

Lafferty shrugged. "Sure, I guess, what do you want to know?"

"Was it a suicide?"

Lafferty shook his head. "I couldn't say conclusively."

"What do you mean?"

"When I examined the body I found ligature marks around the wrists. Those marks indicate the victim had been tied up."

Nolan thought about it. "I saw those marks too. If that's the case, then he couldn't have possibly hung himself."

"That's what I noted in my report."

Another thought went through Nolan's head. "Did you find almost half a bottle's worth of anti-depressants in his stomach?"

"No, as a matter-of-fact, I didn't. I even did a blood test and there is no trace of any medication of any kind in his body."

Jessica Freeland was right when she said her dad never took any such medications, Nolan thought.

"Okay, thanks, Doc." Nolan's head was reeling.

"Sure, no problem. I'm sure it'll turn up somewhere."

As Nolan left the coroner's office, he wasn't sure what to think anymore.

22

Hyder returned to the *Daily Times* completely confused. On the one hand, he wanted to help Jessica by finding who killed her father, but on the other hand, there was no proof that her father was murdered.

Detective Nolan had proven that Professor Freeland's death was a suicide. No motive, no murder weapon, equalled no murder. There was no other way to look at it.

Hyder sat back in his chair and closed his eyes.

When Jessica had stormed out of police headquarters, Hyder had tried to reassure her that he would do everything to find her father's killer, but even he knew his words felt hollow. He couldn't tell if she believed him.

She had thanked him for his help and left.

Hyder wished he could have done more for her.

The image of her leaving in tears bothered him. Why was that? Was he interested in her?

He wanted to say no but he knew that was a lie. He was enamored of her. Was it because she had appeared to him in the form of a damsel in distress? She wanted Hyder to find who had killed her father. Hyder wanted to do his part and find who actually did it.

Now he knew that was not possible, which meant he might never see Jessica again.

Hyder sighed.

He logged into the laptop, but quickly realized his mind was still dissecting what had just happened.

It was more than his attraction to Jessica that was propelling him to help her. It was also his strong sense of duty to Professor Eric Freeland.

It was Freeland who had encouraged him to follow his heart. Hyder had come to Franklin U on a business scholarship. He had hoped to become an accountant, but after spending time with Freeland, he quickly realized he was only doing it because of others. What he truly desired was to be a journalist.

In his second year he had changed his majors. It wasn't easy. There was no money in journalism, people said. You're wasting your education. Do something that will secure your future.

It was his mom and Professor Freeland who had kept him going. Whenever he had doubts, he would always remember one of Freeland's sayings: "If you are miserable doing something, why bother doing it all?"

Hyder would be miserable as an accountant. In fact, he probably would have been a lousy one, at that, so why bother pursuing it when his heart wasn't in it?

He really missed Freeland. He wasn't sure why he hadn't kept in contact with him after he had graduated. While a student, he would make it part of his schedule to meet him once or twice a week in his office. After he left Franklin U, he hardly took the time to visit him.

He did call him one time, though, and that was around the time he had been hired at the *Daily Times*. He remembered how excited Freeland was to hear from him. Freeland couldn't stop gushing over his position at the newspaper. Hyder had to remind him several times that it was only temporary, but that did not dampen his excitement.

He had promised Freeland that he would visit him, but he never did.

He now felt terrible for not keeping that promise.

It was maybe why, by trying to help Jessica, he was also trying to help himself. He was trying to overcome the guilt he felt for time not spent with his mentor.

Professor Eric Freeland meant more to both of them than he had realized before.

23

Hyder was relieved when Lester walked in.

"What's up, bro?" Lester said. They bumped fists as a way of greeting.

Hyder shrugged. "I'm okay."

"You don't look okay," Lester replied, looking concerned

Hyder rubbed his temples. "Yeah, I've got a lot on my mind."

"Well, I've got just the thing to make you feel better." From behind his huge girth, Lester brought out what looked like a DVD.

Hyder took it and his eyes widened. "Is that the new NBA game?"

Lester smiled. "Sure is. It's an advance copy for reviewers. I've already played it and noted my comments. I'm not legally allowed to publish them until around the due date, but let's say it's *friggin'* amazing."

"Cool," Hyder said.

"I know you were kind of miffed about not being able to go to the Game Expo, so this is my way to make it up to you."

"Are you allowed to pass it out?" Hyder asked.

"Probably not, but you won't tell, will you?"

"No way!" Hyder replied, grinning. "It'll be top secret."

"Good, cuz I've got it tracked and if you decide to do anything funny like, say, sell it to a third party for an undisclosed sum, then I will swoop in and karate kick you." Lester tried to raise his left leg but only got it up a few feet.

Hyder laughed. "Thanks, bro."

"Don't mention it."

As he watched Lester leave, he spotted a piece of paper next to the laptop.

It was the notice from the courier company.

Hyder looked at his watch. He still had some time available to go collect the delivery.

Instead of taking the elevator, Hyder bounced down the stairs.

He hoped to be back at his desk in less than fifteen minutes, since the courier company was just around the block. There were a couple of stories he wanted to follow up. Dunny would soon come asking for material and he wanted to have something ready for her.

Hyder joined the line at the counter and handed the delivery notice to the girl behind it when his turn came.

She returned with a package. It was thin and light.

He signed for it and left.

Outside, he examined it. His name and the address of the newspaper were handwritten. He turned it over, but there was no return address.

Odd, he thought.

He tore the edge of the envelope and found papers inside.

He pulled them out and realized they had been ripped from some book.

When he scanned them, his eyes went wide.

24

Back at his desk, Hyder couldn't believe what he was holding.

He kicked himself for not catching it from the handwriting on the package. The papers were scribbled by none other than Professor Eric Freeland.

Freeland's handwriting was unmistakable. The way the R's and the Y's were looped, reaffirmed to Hyder that it was the professor's.

The pages belonged to a diary.

Hyder paused.

Was it the diary Jessica had mentioned? The one Professor Freeland always kept to himself? The one he himself had seen him scribble on?

He read the first page.

Today not going well, not knowing what's happening, desire to tell the truth which will make this difficult, maybe tomorrow will meet JVL and will go visit XLX Ltd. and take away the thing that is most important, but the bribes and corruption will continue until we stop it and the murder was something we should have taken to the police but not sure who to trust...

Hyder had to stop. None of it made any sense. He flipped to another page.

Received calls many times from XLX Ltd, but too afraid to answer, must stop meeting or else too dangerous, will have to slow down or will end up like auditor, the seeking of the original cannot be done, we have nothing to help us, must become more cautious, eyes are watching, the walls have ears, and life has become more precious...

Again, he had no idea what Freeland was talking about.

Original, original, we need the original, without it we cannot do anything, we have to find it, until then we don't have anything...

Hyder kept going, spending the next twenty minutes going over the contents of all the pages, but when he was done he was more confused than ever.

It looked as if Freeland had written gibberish. Was this the writings of a sane person? Hyder wasn't so sure.

Could Freeland had been so depressed that, prior to him taking his life, he had written everything down and sent it to Hyder?

Why him in particular, though? Hyder hadn't been in contact with Freeland for some time. So why did Freeland choose him?

The reason was as cryptic as the scribbles on the pages.

Hyder went back to the pages, noticed that certain words and letters were underlined. He began jotting them down. When done, he had no idea what any of it meant, but he knew who he had to contact right away.

25

Jessica lay in bed, feeling terrible.

The trip to the police station had been a waste of time.

The result she was hoping for had not happened. Instead, she felt stupid for bringing Hyder along with her.

She had thought having someone else with her would make it easier in finding out the truth about her father, but that was not the case.

She worried what Hyder thought of her. She wanted him to believe her. Her father had spoken so much about him that she felt in many ways she already knew him.

She felt that she had let her father down by not proving to Detective Nolan her father had been murdered.

More importantly, she would never know what pushed her father to end his life. She rolled over and stared at the alarm clock.

It was easier to watch time go by than ruminate on her current situation. She wanted to close her eyes and shut out the noise inside her head.

She wanted to go back to the time when her father was still alive, when everything was like it was before.

She heard a knock on the door.

"Yes?" she said, not even bothering to look up.

Chloe stuck her head in. "Jessica, there is someone here to see you."

Jessica turned over. "Who?"

"I don't know, but he seems to know you."

Jessica pulled on a robe and went out.

She found Hyder standing in the hallway of the apartment.

"What are you doing here?" Jessica asked.

"I needed to talk to you," Hyder said. "It's important."

"Sure, come in." While Hyder took a seat on the couch, Jessica quickly snuck a peek in the mirror. She moved her hands over her hair, flattening any strands that were sticking out. She hoped he didn't see her do this.

"How did you find me?" she asked.

"I know I shouldn't have done this, but I looked you up in the phone directory."

"You could have called," she said as she sat across from Hyder.

"I did, several times."

Jessica realized her phone was still in her bag. She was feeling so low that the last thing she wanted to do was talk to anyone.

"Jessica," Hyder started to say, but stopped. Chloe was in the kitchen. She quickly realized she might be intruding on something private. When she walked by Jessica, she gave her a smile. Jessica knew what the smile meant. *He's cute.*

When Chloe had shut the door to her room, Hyder said, "Jessica, I have to show you something." He pulled out a thin package from his backpack. He removed a few sheets of paper and placed them on the coffee table before him. "This came through the mail," he said. He could tell she wasn't sure why he was showing them to her. "They are from your father. These pages were taken from his diary."

Jessica's eyes widened. She pulled them closer and began scanning them.

"What do they mean?" she asked, looking back at him.

"I don't know, but I made a list of certain words that were underlined." He showed it to her.

XLX Ltd.
JVL
Whistleblower
Bribes
Murder
Catch Them in the Red
Student
Money
Auditor
Don't Trust
Pandora box
Hold Them

"I don't know what they could be," she said, looking up at Hyder.

"Well, I was hoping you would," he replied. "Your dad could be cryptic when he wanted to be and I have no clue what they are."

She went back to the list. "What if they are clues... about something that happened?"

"Like what?"

"For instance, *XLX Ltd* could be a company. *JVL* could be working for them. There is also a *whistleblower* who was *murdered* because he needed *money*... or something." She shrugged.

Hyder thought about it. "What if *XLX Ltd* was involved in *bribes* and *JVL* is the *whistleblower*? He was killed because he wanted money."

"What if *JVL* doesn't mean a person?"

"Okay, what else could it mean?"

Jessica wasn't sure. "We'll consider *JVL* is a person then. But what about *Catch Them in the Red*, *Student*, *Auditor*, *Don't Trust*, *Pandora Box*, and *Hold Them*? What do they mean?"

Hyder wasn't sure, but he enjoyed brainstorming with Jessica. It gave him an excuse to be with her.

"What if... and I'm going to make this up, so go along with me, *JVL* was a *student* or former student of your dad's. They were now or had been working at *XLX Ltd*. When they stumbled upon the *bribes*, because they were an *auditor* there, they blew the *whistle*. They were *killed* because there was a lot of *money* involved. So your dad wants us to *catch them red handed*—and I think he meant the ones responsible, and *hold them* to their crimes. Also, he doesn't want us to *trust* anyone because our findings could be a *Pandora's Box* filled with severe consequences for those involved."

Hyder waited for her response.

"Wow, I am impressed," she said with a smile. "You actually made it sound plausible."

He smiled back. "Hey, I'm a reporter, aren't I? If there isn't a story out there, I'll make one up."

"What now?" she said. "What do we do with his information, if it is what we think it is?"

"I don't know. We can't go back to the police. They wouldn't believe us."

"We have to start somewhere."

Hyder nodded. "Your dad sent this to me at the Daily Times because he knew I was a reporter. He wanted me to take this information and search for the truth and that is what we'll do. If our story is correct, then JVL was a student of your dad's. We have to get access to the school's records."

"I don't think my dad kept any university stuff at his home. He was paranoid that a student might break in and steal the information."

"Then we'll have to go to his office at Franklin University."

26

Mariam Stenfield was in her mid-twenties. She wore big, round glasses, and had dark hair which fell to her shoulders.

Mariam was still shaken up about the death of Professor Freeland.

"I'm so sorry about your father," Mariam said, wiping her eyes with tissues.

"Thank you," Jessica replied.

Jessica had called her dad's assistant at the university. She had told her that she wanted to grab some personal items from her father's office.

Mariam was more than happy to oblige.

Jessica introduced Hyder. "He's helping me through this tough period."

"That's so nice of you," Mariam said.

Hyder nodded.

Mariam took them down the hall. "Your father's death came as a quite a shock, so we didn't have time to clear anything out of his office yet. You'll find everything as he had left it."

There were a few bouquets of flowers outside the door. Mariam quickly picked them up. "You should have seen it right after we found out what happened. The pile was so high that it made it difficult to even get in. Your father meant a lot to his students."

"I know," Jessica said as a sad look creased her face.

Mariam unlocked the door and opened it for them.

"Do you mind if we had some private time in here?" Jessica asked.

"Sure, of course. Take your time."

Mariam left.

The office was small and cluttered.

Being inside the space suddenly overwhelmed Jessica. The thought and even the smell of her father sent a surge of emotions through her.

Hyder put his hand on her shoulder. "Are you okay?" he asked, concerned.

She bit her lip and nodded.

"I can do this myself. You don't have to be here."

"No, I want to help," she said as she suddenly straightened up. "We have to find his student list."

During the next twenty minutes they went through everything. It wasn't easy, as Freeland wasn't known for being clean and organized. They went through his

desk, his shelves, the boxes stacked by the wall, the piles of paper, and even an old briefcase he used to carry until the handle broke.

The list was nowhere to be found.

Jessica looked at Hyder. "What do we do now?"

"I don't know, but grab a box," Hyder replied.

"Why?"

"We told the assistant we came to pick up some items. It would look suspicious if we left with nothing."

On the way out they dropped by Mariam's desk.

"Did you find what you needed?" she asked.

"Yes, thank you." Suddenly Jessica had an idea. "Would you have a list of my father's students?"

"Yes, of course."

"Can we have a look?"

Mariam looked uneasy. "I'm not sure if we are allowed to show that to non-faculty members."

"Well, you see, there were so many students at my dad's funeral. I just wanted to thank them for coming."

"Oh that's so sweet of you..." she said. "But I'm sorry. We have strict guidelines about that stuff."

"I understand," Jessica said, sounding disappointed.

"You know what? You can go to the Registrar's Office and speak to them. Maybe they can help you."

"What time do they close?"

"Around five."

27

He was snoring loudly.

Nolan was slumped over with his face planted on the table. Drool was flowing from the side of his mouth.

Captain Ross stood behind the two-way mirror with his hand on his forehead.

Next to him was Sergeant Halton, who was fuming. "See? This is what I have to deal with."

Nolan had found an empty interview room and was now taking a nap.

"He is using one of the department's facilities for his personal use," Halton continued. "That is grounds for dismissal."

"Sergeant," the Captain said. "While this looks very bad, I think we need to cut him some slack."

"Slack?" Halton looked like his eyeballs would pop out. "He is sleeping on the job!"

"I can see that."

"And still you are defending him?"

"I am. He has been through a lot and if we abandon him, then we are failing to do our duty to an officer."

"What about his duties? He is failing to do them entirely. On top of that, he is disrespectful, belligerent, and has no respect for authority."

"He seems to respect me," the Captain said. "I asked him to come back and he did."

"What choice did he have?" The Sergeant was beside himself. "If he didn't return, then we would have had to dismiss him."

"And that is something I will not do." The Captain's voice turned hard. "I will not turn my back on him. Detective Nolan was an exemplary member of the force. If tragedy hadn't struck him, I can guarantee you he would have not stayed on as a detective. He would have moved up, perhaps, even taken your position. So I think we will show some compassion in this matter."

The Sergeant looked at the Captain. He then blinked and nodded. "As you wish, sir."

Halton left.

Ross stared at Nolan sleeping peacefully in the room. He wasn't sure when the last time Nolan had gotten a good night's sleep. A part of him wanted to let him be, but he was still the Captain of this department. He was taking a lot of heat for bringing Nolan back, and if he continued to show favoritism, he wouldn't be able to protect him for long.

Ross sighed and went into the room.

He sat across from Nolan and rapped his knuckles on the table.

Nolan kept sleeping.

Ross tapped on the table again. Still no response.

He then slammed his fist on the table.

Nolan jumped up. "Where's the fire? Someone call 9-1-1."

"Hello, Tom," the Captain said calmly.

"Sir?" Nolan looked at him blurry-eyed. "What're you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same thing."

"I... I..." Nolan looked around the room. "I was interviewing a suspect."

"Were you?" the Captain raised an eyebrow. "Where is this suspect now?"

Nolan looked around once again. "He's not here."

"You are right, he's not."

"Then, sir," Nolan said seriously. "We need to let everyone know that a dangerous criminal is running around the building."

"Tom, sit down."

Nolan did.

"What's going on?" the Captain said.

Nolan realized he couldn't bullshit Ross any longer. "It's been a trying day, sir, so I thought I'd shut my eyes for a bit."

"That's understandable. When was the last time you had a drink?"

Nolan made a face. "I'm not sure, what time is it?"

"I'll assume it's been many hours, at least."

Nolan thought about it and nodded.

"So, I'll gather that your preoccupation with the job has so far had some positive effect on you?"

Nolan shrugged.

The Captain leaned forward. "Then my advice to you, Tom, is to keep doing your job."

"I'll try."

"You will do more than that. I stuck my neck out for you. There are those who want nothing better than to see you never work in the department again."

"That comes as a shock to me. I thought everybody loved me."

The Captain didn't laugh. "Over the years, you've managed to piss off a lot of folks here with your smart mouth. You can't blame them for not wanting some form of revenge on you. Remember Fogel?"

Nolan nodded.

Eli Fogel was an up and coming recruit. He was moving his way up the ranks so fast that people thought he'd be chief in no time. But during his brief stint in the detective division Fogel had a disagreement with Nolan. One day, Nolan found out that Fogel had an assault charge on his record when he was a teenager. Fogel was never convicted, though, as the girl, whom he had been dating at the time, retracted her statements. Jumping on the opportunity, Nolan began joking around the office that Fogel was a 'wife beater.' This affected Fogel so much that one night he went on a bender. On his way back from a bar, he crashed his vehicle into a pole.

Eli Fogel was now confined to a wheelchair, his career as a police officer over.

Naturally, Nolan had not forced Fogel to drink that night, but there were those in the division who still blamed him for Fogel's current state.

What many of them didn't realize was that Nolan also blamed himself for what happened to Fogel that night. It was why now he was forcing himself to drink as much as he did, perhaps, to end up with a fate far worse than Fogel's.

Ross stood up. "Get back to work, Tom."

"Yes, sir."

28

Hyder and Jessica were able to find out that the Registrar's Office did indeed keep lists of all the students in the university, past or present. But that list was stored on a network. Breaking into the office, then somehow finding the passwords required, and then locating the list from the university's database would be nearly impossible.

They were, however, able to chat up a student employee in the office who explained that hard copies of all the documents were stored securely in the basement of one of the faculty buildings. This was done as a back-up in the event something happened to the digital records.

They further found out that the employee had once dropped off boxes of records in the East Wing of the engineering building.

That was where Hyder and Jessica were going to now.

"I still don't know about this," Hyder said.

"If you're uncomfortable with it, then I'll do it myself," Jessica said.

Hyder had reservations about their plan. He wasn't concerned about getting caught. He was more concerned whether it was the right thing to do.

Jessica stopped and looked at him. "Listen, I don't want to do this any more than you do. But my father was murdered because he was working on something. If this list leads us to finding out why, then I won't hesitate in the least bit. Think of it this way: we are doing more good than harm."

Hyder thought about it. "Ok, but we can't just go in and hope they'll let two non-faculty members into their storage facility. We're not students, either."

"Don't worry, we'll find a way." She smiled.

This should have reassured Hyder, but it didn't.

They proceeded toward the engineering building, found the East Wing, and took the stairs down to the basement. When they entered, they were confronted with a narrow, winding hall. They moved further in and abruptly stopped.

At the end of the hall was an opening. In the middle was a desk with a security guard sitting behind it.

"I don't think they just store records here," Hyder said.

"How do you know?" Jessica replied.

"Listen."

There was a low humming noise coming from up ahead.

"If I'm correct, they also keep the university's computer servers here."

"So?"

"So that's why they have the security guard stationed here. That equipment can cost hundreds of thousands of dollars. There's no way we are getting through that guard."

Hyder hoped his reasoning might dissuade her. "I'll be back," Jessica replied instead.

She disappeared up the stairs before Hyder could say another word.

All alone, Hyder began to sweat. He was certain the guard couldn't see him from where he was standing, but that didn't alleviate his unease.

Ten minutes passed with no sign of Jessica. Hyder thought about going up but decided to stay put.

What if she showed up and he wasn't there? This would really ruin their plan.

He then heard a noise. It sounded like it had come from an elevator.

He peeked around the corner and spotted... Jessica!

She was pushing a metal cart with a large brown box on top of it.

She said something to the guard, who eyed her suspiciously. The guard then took her around the corner.

Two minutes later the guard returned to his spot, but there was no sign of Jessica.

Beads of sweat rolled down Hyder's temples. His glasses slid down his nose and he pushed them up.

Every minute he didn't see Jessica his heart pounded harder and harder. It was pounding so hard that he felt it might alert the guard.

Thirty agonizing minutes later Jessica appeared from around the corner. She was still pushing the cart with the box on top.

She spoke a few words with the guard, who smiled at her. She went inside the elevator.

Hyder leaped up the stairs and found her on the main floor.

"Grab the box," she quickly said.

Hyder did. It was heavy.

As they were racing out of the engineering building, Hyder asked, "What just happened?"

"I found the metal cart and the empty box in one of the offices," she said. "I told the guard I had come from the Registrar's Office to drop off records. The guard asked for my ID and I made it look like I had forgotten it back at my desk. There was no way I was going to push this cart all the way to the other building. The guard cut me some slack and let me go inside the storage room. I also told him I had to bring back some old records. You wouldn't believe how hard it was to find my dad's file. It is super thick. It'll take us forever to find what we are looking for."

Hyder didn't care. He was just happy that they now had it.

29

On the way back, Hyder decided to stop off at the Daily Times.

He had received a call from Veronica. Dunny was looking for him.

Hyder told Jessica they'd have to take a detour.

He found Veronica in her cubicle.

"What's going on?" he asked her.

"There was a board meeting this morning and it looks like the higher-ups are coming down hard on the newspaper," Veronica told him. "The *Daily Times* has been losing money for some time now and we always thought we could turn it around. Doesn't look like it's happening fast enough. They want us to trim our budget and guess who came down to our floor to speak to all the editors?"

"Mr. Kroft?" Hyder took a guess.

"You got it."

John Kroft, Jr. was the owner and publisher of the *Daily Times*. His family had run the newspaper for two generations now. Mr. Kroft's father, John Kroft Sr., had started the paper from his home. It was told that one of the bedrooms in the house was used by reporters to type up their stories, whereas the living room was converted into an editorial room, and the basement was devoted to printing the editions. Kroft Sr.'s wife was the managing editor at the fledgling paper. But she did more than what her title had stated. She was also the secretary and handled sales. Kroft Sr. was the publisher, but he was also the chief editor and focused on distribution. There were times where he even substituted as a photographer when it was required.

Young John Jr. started at the family paper working as a delivery boy. Along with his older sister, he spent most of his childhood there. As he grew up, he took more responsibilities, working all the way up to becoming publisher once his father died. His sister, after getting married, had already begun to extricate herself from the paper. She was satisfied with John Jr. running it. She did, however, still own a portion of it.

Once John took command, he began buying out the competition. It was a risky move, but one that paid off handsomely. He consolidated all the sales and distribution under one roof. This allowed him to cut expenses and make the paper profitable. Soon the *Daily Times* had become the largest paper in the city. At one point, over half the citizens of Franklin had subscribed to the paper.

But times had changed. More and more readers had chosen to get their news over the internet. Subscriptions were going down along with the ad revenues. The paper was no longer profitable.

It was inevitable that one day the boss would come down and heads would roll. The only question was: whose?

"You think Dunny will fire me?" Hyder said.

Veronica gave a weak shrug. "I don't know, Hyder. But if I were you I'd make myself valuable."

"How?"

"Do you have any stories Dunny could print?"

Hyder suddenly thought of Jessica. She was waiting for him downstairs.

"I think I've got one."

Hyder found Dunny behind her desk.

"Hyder, sit down," she said.

"Before you say anything," Hyder jumped in. "I have something to tell you."

Dunny dropped what she was doing. "I'm listening."

Hyder spent the next twenty minutes telling Dunny everything that had happened to him and Jessica thus far. He even showed her the torn pages he had received from Freeland as proof.

When he was done, he waited for her to respond.

She stood up and went to the window.

She tapped her fingernails on the glass. "This could be very big, Hyder. If what you are telling me is true then we could have a very large corporation involved in murder."

"Yes."

"Are you sure you can handle a story this size?" she asked. "I can get someone to partner with you."

Hyder felt like this was the break he had been waiting for. He also didn't want another reporter hijacking his story. "I can do this."

Dunny thought about it.

"Okay, but keep me updated."

30

Instead of going to Jessica's apartment, they decided to go to Hyder's home.

On the way to his house, Hyder wasn't sure how he would break it to his mom that he was bringing a girl home.

He knew the reason why, of course. Someone was watching Jessica's apartment. It wasn't safe taking the student list there. But, how did he tell his mom that?

He parked the car and checked the time.

His mom was still at work. Mrs. Fatima Ali worked as a librarian, which meant she returned home whenever the library closed. Today, she would return later.

He wondered if his brother was in.

The house looked dark. He hoped it was empty.

Hyder's brother was very traditional, even though he was born in America. His fiancé had only come once to his house and that was when she came with her family. If his brother found out he had a girl in his house he would have a fit.

Hyder would deal with him when the time came.

He grabbed the box that contained the documents from the university and escorted Jessica inside.

"It's nice," Jessica said, examining the interior of the house.

"Thanks. It's small, though," he replied, slightly embarrassed by the size of his home.

"I like it, it's cozy."

"Can I get you something to drink?" he asked.

"I'm fine. Thanks," she said.

"You must have something," he said. "In our religion, we are taught to be hospitable towards our guests. Plus, if my mom found out I didn't give you anything she would be very upset. Trust me."

"What do you have?"

"Nothing alcoholic, I'm afraid."

She smiled. "I know. Your religion forbids it."

He nodded. "How about tea, coffee, juice, soda pop? I think we even have ice cream."

"I'll keep ice cream for later. Juice is fine."

He stuck his head in the fridge. "Apple or orange?"

"Boy, you ask a lot of questions."

Hyder was nervous. It wasn't every day a girl was in his house. "Sorry."

"Apple is fine."

Jessica walked over to a TV stand. She picked up a small picture frame. The photo inside the frame was black and white. A man with thick hair, dark eyes and a thin mustache was smiling brightly at the camera.

"Who is he?" Jessica asked when Hyder returned with her drink.

"That's my dad," he said.

"Does he live with you?"

He shook his head. "He died when I was very young."

"Oh my God," she said. "I'm so sorry."

"Thanks. It was a long time ago."

"What was his name?"

"Karim Ali."

"I can see where you got your good looks," she said, trying to brighten up the mood.

Hyder smiled, handed her the apple juice.

"We should start looking at those records," he said. "It's going to take us quite a long time to go through them."

"Sounds good to me."

The front door opened. Mrs. Ali walked in with plastic bags in each of her hands.

"Assalamu alaikum," she said with a smile. She then saw Jessica standing in the living room and nearly dropped the bags.

Hyder quickly grabbed the bags and escorted his mother into the kitchen.

"What is a girl doing in our house, Hyder?" Mrs. Ali asked.

"She's a friend."

"Just a friend?" Mrs. Ali eyed him.

"Ami, she's not my girlfriend, if that's what you mean."

"What's her name?"

"Jessica."

"Is she Christian?"

"Why is that important?"

"Answer me, Hyder."

"She's Jewish."

"Jewish?!" Mrs. Ali's eyes went wide.

"Ami," Hyder started. "There is nothing wrong with people who are Jewish."

"I never said that," she said, shaking her finger. "Our neighbor, Mrs. Cohen, she's Jewish, and she's lovely. But you couldn't find a nice Muslim girl to be friends with?"

"It's not like that, and Islam allows marriage to people of the book, which are Jews and Christians." He was aware that she knew this better than anyone, but like most traditional mothers they preferred their children marry within their own faith. Hyder shook his head. "Why am I even arguing with you about this? There is nothing between Jessica and me. I'm helping her."

His mom looked at him, suspiciously. "How are you helping her?"

Hyder proceeded to explain who her father was and what happened to him.

When he finished she put her hand over her mouth, "*Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji un.*" (*Surely we belong to God and to Him we shall return.*) It was a verse from the Holy Quran that was recited by Muslims upon hearing of a death. "That poor girl, I had no idea," his mother said. "I had heard you mention Professor Freeland many times. Didn't we meet him at your convocation?"

"Yes, we did."

"Let me go and hug that poor child." With that she was gone.

Hyder went over to the sink and filled a glass with water. He gulped it down. *Mothers*, he thought. *They are so emotional. One minute they are berating you and the next minute they are cuddling you. Go figure.*

He went out and found his mom sitting next to Jessica.

"Are you hungry?" his mom said to her. "You are staying for dinner, right?"

Jessica looked over at Hyder as if to say, *Am I?*

"Yes, mom, *but* we have a lot of work to do first."

Nolan woke up in a cold sweat. He pulled off the bed sheet and sat on the edge of the bed.

He rested his face in his palms but refused to shut his eyes.

The incident had appeared to him again. Like many times before, it had come in the form of a nightmare.

He reached across and grabbed a bottle. He didn't care what was inside it, only that there was enough of it to soothe his pain.

He took a swig and felt the liquid burn the back of his throat and numb his mind.

Whenever he did not know how to cope, he reached for it. He had come to rely on it. It was now his best friend, a friend that was both helping and killing him.

He threw the bottle across the room. He got up and went for his gun. He cocked the hammer and placed the muzzle in his mouth.

All he had to do was pull the trigger to end his suffering.

His hand began to tremble and he began to sob. Hot tears covered his entire face.

He felt like a coward for not going through with it. He had tried to commit suicide many times before, but in the end, he didn't have the guts to do it.

He dropped the gun and curled up into a ball.

The pain was a constant reminder of what he had lost. It had seeped through every cell of his body, leaving him a shell of his former self.

He thought about his life and what it had become after the tragic event. It definitely wouldn't have involved him crying on his bedroom floor.

He lifted himself up and slowly went over to the dresser. Women's make-up and jewelry were neatly placed on top of it as if it had not been touched in over a year. It hadn't.

In the middle was a small box. On top of it were two rings. One belonged to him and the other to his wife.

Simone Helen Nolan was not even thirty when her car was involved in a horrific crash on the freeway. Her SUV had slammed into an oncoming truck, after the truck had been involved in a collision with another vehicle.

She was five months pregnant.

Nolan kissed her ring and held it tight in his hand.

The tighter he held it the more he felt like he was holding her.

But this was not true. She was gone, leaving behind this object that was once a sign of their love.

Nolan remembered what he was doing when he had found out.

He was in bed, the same bed he had just woken up in.

It was early morning and he was fast asleep when he received the call. Simone was on her way to work when the accident had happened.

She worked at the department of social services. A job she loved and was devoted to. But more than that, she was looking forward to taking time off. She wanted to spend it with *their daughter*.

Once they had found out it would be a girl they had started work on a nursery. They had already painted the walls pink and were in the process of filling it with furniture. They were even supposed to go shopping for baby clothes on the day of the accident.

Now the nursery, along with the furniture, lay covered in dust.

Nolan didn't have the heart to go in there. It brought back too many memories of what could have been.

When he had received the call he didn't believe it at first. They were lying, he had told them. They probably mistook him for someone else. But they confirmed his name and address.

The drive to the accident scene was a blur. He couldn't remember much of it and was glad for it. He was probably in shock. He kept telling himself that this didn't happen to people like him, it happened to others.

But it did happen and it changed his life for the worse.

When he reached his destination, what he saw was forever etched in his memory.

The SUV had been crushed from the front end. There was zero possibility the driver inside could have survived.

Nolan was asked to identify the victim.

He wished he didn't have to. It was his wife, and she was dead.

From that moment on, Tom Nolan had stopped wanting to live anymore. There was no point to his life.

While he didn't have the courage to end it, he wished the alcohol or someone else would.

32

Jessica left her apartment with a mission on her mind.

The previous night she and Hyder had spent several hours in his basement going over the student records taken from the university. They had started from the earliest years and worked forward.

Her dad had taught for almost twenty years, which meant there were thousands of students who were in his class.

Luckily, for Hyder and Jessica knew who they were searching for. They focused their efforts on students with the initials JVL.

The letters J and L was very common, but not the middle letter V.

They then conducted a search online to see if any of the people with those initials were still living in the city. This narrowed their search to seven names:

James Vincent Lowry

Jennifer Valerie Little

Janice Voila Landon

Jonathan Vess Lanham

Jasmine Vicky Johnson

Jacob Volker Lett

James Vander Lee

Jessica had taken the first three names on the list while Hyder took the remaining ones. Jessica wasn't sure what to expect when she met them. Would

they deny ever knowing who her father was? Would they even be the person they were looking in the first place? And, would they be willing to go on record to prove there was a conspiracy that included murder?

There were a lot of 'ifs' but she had no choice. She had to forge ahead. She had to prove—at least to herself—that her dad's death was not in vain.

Someone had killed her dad because her dad was close to finding out the truth. What was this truth?

It was up to Jessica to find out.

Hyder and Jessica had at first thought to call the names on the list, but soon they decided against it. What if the person they were looking for refused to even answer their call? Even if they did, Hyder and Jessica would never know if they were telling the truth. The best approach was to meet them face to face. They could decipher from their body movements whether they were being honest or not.

They also wanted to put a face to the initials.

Jessica took the bus to the first address.

The house was located in a nice neighborhood. It was surrounded by a wall with a giant metal gate in the front.

Jessica pressed the buzzer and waited. A few seconds later a female voice said, "Yes?"

"Hi, I'm looking for Mr. James Lowry. Does he live here?" Jessica said.

"He does. What's this about?" the woman said.

"Can I speak to him, please?"

There was a pause. "Wait."

A minute later a man came out of the house. Jessica spotted a young woman holding a baby by the front door. The woman was looking in her direction suspiciously.

The man had salt and pepper hair and he immediately unlocked the gate.

"I'm James Lowry," he said.

"Mr. Lowry, were you a student of Professor Eric Freeland's at the University of Franklin?"

Lowry's face was hard. "I was. How did you know?"

Jessica was prepared for such a question. She couldn't possibly tell him that they had found his name on stolen university records.

She had to bluff and hoped that it worked. "We saw your name on the university's alumni list and we wanted to speak to you."

"Alright," he said, crossing his arms.

The next question would give Jessica the indication whether this was the person she was looking for. "We wanted to let you know that Professor Freeland was dead."

Lowry's face didn't soften. "So? What's it got to do with me?"

Jessica wasn't expecting that response but kept going. "We were creating a web page devoted to him and we wanted to get some quotes from his students to put on there."

Lowry shrugged. "I don't mind saying something about him, but I'm a busy man. It would have been better if you had called instead."

He provided some generic lines. When he was finished, Jessica said, "Where do you work, Mr. Lowry?"

"Is that important?" he said.

"It would be nice to put underneath the quote, to show what Professor Freeland's students had become."

Lowry sighed. "Okay, whatever. I'm the owner and CEO of Lowry Paper Mills. Are we done?"

"Yes, thank you."

As Jessica left, she crossed out James Vincent Lowry's name. Lowry wasn't the person they were looking for.

33

Hyder sat in the office of Jonathan Vess Lanham. Lanham was in his early thirties, but he looked like he was ten years younger. He was portly, with no signs of any facial hair. Lanham was the marketing director for an ad agency.

Hyder had gone through the same routine as Jessica, informing Lanham of the death of Professor Freeland.

When he was about to tell Lanham the reason he was there Lanham broke down in tears. The man sobbed so uncontrollably that Hyder felt like getting up and giving the poor man a hug. Hyder offered him tissues instead, which he took and blew his nose loudly with.

To Hyder's relief his cell phone rang. He politely excused himself and answered it out in the hallway.

"Hello," he said.

"Hyder, it's Dunny," his editor said.

Hyder's back tensed. He had never received a call from Dunny before. Was he in trouble? Was she calling to fire him?

"Yes?" Hyder barely said.

"You know the story you told me about your Professor... well, I want you to drop it."

"Why?" Hyder said.

"I don't think we should be using our valuable resources on a phishing expedition. Plus, Veronica had already printed the story on his suicide."

"But what about the pages he sent to me from his diary?"

"Hyder," Dunny's voice became stern. "We are not the police. We don't investigate a crime, we report it. If you feel your professor was murdered, then you need to speak to the authorities."

"I did," Hyder said.

"And?"

Hyder sighed. "They thought it was a suicide."

"Exactly. So drop it. We need something we can print now. I've got another story for you to follow."

Hyder listened. There was a dispute between two neighbors and Hyder had to get quotes from both of them.

When he hung up, he felt sick to his stomach. How was he going to explain this to Jessica?

He wouldn't, he decided. After speaking to the neighbors, he would continue going down the names on his list.

He was certain Jonathan Vess Lanham was not the person who was somehow involved in Professor Freeland's death, however.

Lanham was still sobbing when Hyder re-entered his office and politely excused himself.

34

Jennifer Valerie Little lived in a two bedroom condo on the south side of the city, near the waterfront.

Right away Jessica knew Little was not the person she was searching for.

There was no possible way a mother of two, aged three and nine months, could have been involved in corruption, bribery, and even murder.

Little was a stay at home mom who spent most of her day tending to her children.

Unlike Lowry, Little had read about Freeland's death in the newspapers and she was deeply saddened by it. She wished she could have gone to the funeral, but it was just not possible with the children.

Knowing this somehow comforted Jessica. She told Little that Freeland was her father. This in turn made Little even sadder.

The two women spent the next hour talking about Eric Freeland. Jessica spoke about growing up with Freeland, and Little talked about her time spent in Freeland's classroom.

When Jessica left Jennifer Valerie Little's condominium she felt much better. Her visit had become therapeutic.

Jessica waited by the elevator when she noticed a man appear by the side stairs. The man was wearing a dark gray suit. His eyes were covered by dark sunglasses and he wore black gloves.

The man was too far for Jessica to clearly see what he looked like, but the way he watched her made her uneasy.

She pushed the elevator button again.

She was on the twelfth floor of the high rise building and the elevator was taking its time to get up to her.

Jessica pressed the button again and again.

"Come on," she said under her breath.

Suddenly, the man began walking in her direction.

She noticed him reaching inside his jacket.

Jessica wasn't going to wait and see what he pulled out. She bolted the other way.

When she reached the other set of stairs she turned and saw the man sprint in her direction.

She raced down the stairs, skipping, and at times, jumping, over the steps.

When she was down three floors she paused, heard footsteps rapidly descending.

Jessica kept going.

As she moved past each floor she felt her legs grow tired and heavy, but she was too terrified to stop.

She reached the bottom floor. She tried the door, but it wouldn't budge. It needed a key to be opened.

She spotted another door. She tried the handle. It didn't open as well.

The man's footsteps drew nearer.

He was maybe a floor away.

She caught a switch for disabled persons and pressed it.

The door slowly began to swing open. Jessica pulled it wide and entered.

She felt cold and quickly realized she was in the condominium's underground parking lot.

She ran past the parked cars and toward the exit sign on the other end.

She heard a door open and close behind her.

She was certain it was the same door she had just come through.

Jessica couldn't allow herself to turn. She was afraid of what she might see.

She turned the corner with the exit sign above it and found herself facing a tunnel that went up. Cars entered and exited the building through it. On top of that, it was steep and winding.

Jessica raced up.

She went around the loop and stopped at a metal door. She looked down at her feet. Jessica wasn't heavy enough to trigger the door to open. Only the weight of a car could do that.

The sounds of footsteps coming her way were getting louder.

Jessica couldn't go through the door and she couldn't go back from the way she came. She was trapped.

The steps became heavier and more distinct.

To her horror, Jessica saw a shadow loom in the corner of the tunnel.

She was certain it was the same man from the elevator.

Jessica braced herself for what was to come.

Suddenly, she heard a noise.

The metal door began to roll up.

A bright light entered the tunnel, nearly blinding her.

To her relief, a car was waiting to enter the parking lot.

She moved past it, startling the driver, and ran away from the condominium.

A bus was approaching a stop.

Jessica quickened her steps and caught it.

When she was safely on it, she turned to see if the man was still after her.

He was nowhere to be found.

Jessica found a seat and sat down. Her lungs were on fire, her heart was pounding, and her legs were burning.

She wiped sweat from her forehead, tried to control her breathing.

When the bus was a good distance away, she finally allowed herself to close her eyes.

He rang the doorbell and waited.

He was wearing a white blazer, with beige khaki pants and black loafers. His beard was still long and thick but he did apply a bit of water to his usually unruly hair.

He removed his sunglasses and patted down the hair on his chin.

The door swung open and a short woman with gray cropped hair said, "Tom, what are you doing here?"

"Hi, Ethel," Nolan said sheepishly.

"Come in, come in," she said as she quickly waved him inside.

He looked around the interior. "I like what you have done with the place."

There was the familiar old gray sofa to one side with a worn out coffee table before it. On top of the table were copies of Reader's Digest stacked high up. The drapes covering the large windows were brown and hadn't been changed in years or even a decade. Nolan had always joked the drapes were once white. A heavy 32" CRT TV was next to the sofa. Nolan remembered that he had nearly broken his back once from trying to move it.

"Sit, sit," Ethel said. "I'll go get you something to drink."

Nolan placed himself on the sofa. "Where's George?" he asked.

"He's out in the back, trying to keep busy. After retiring, he's taking on more projects around the house."

"I gotta see this." Nolan got up and went to the backyard.

He found George in the back shed. George was slim, with full gray hair and a neat and trimmed beard.

George was hovering over an old lawn mower. He pulled the cord, but the mower didn't come to life. He pulled again and again, but after a few coughs it died again.

"You sure you've got gas in there?" Nolan asked.

"Of course, I do," George growled. "What kind of an idiot do you..." he turned and stopped. "Tom, what're you doing here?"

"Ethel asked me the same question," Nolan said.

"I would shake your hand, but my hands are greasy," George replied.

"I understand," Nolan put his hands up. "I wouldn't want to stain this nice jacket of mine."

George eyed the mower from top to bottom. It looked as if he would kick it, hoping that would make it work.

Nolan said, "Ethel told me you've become quite the handyman." This was a joke, of course. George couldn't screw in a light bulb if his life depended on it. That was left for Ethel to do. George had spent thirty years as a mail carrier and that was why he was still in good shape. But that didn't mean he was qualified to repair things.

George shrugged. "The house is falling apart and I plan to make it like it was before."

Nolan knew Ethel would never let George touch anything inside the house. It was one thing to fix a broken lawn mower; it was another to fix the electrical wiring in the house.

Ethel popped her head out. "Tom, George, come inside. I've got refreshments ready."

"You go," George said. "Let me get cleaned up and I'll be there in a minute."

Nolan went back inside and sat on the sofa once again.

Ethel had placed a jug of orange juice, a plate of biscuits and crackers, and a bowl of dried fruits on the coffee table.

"Help yourself," she said.

Nolan filled his glass with the juice and grabbed a couple of crackers.

George came inside and sat next to Ethel.

George and Ethel Barton were Simone's parents. Nolan spotted a picture frame next to the TV. It was of him and Simone on their wedding day. In it, he was shaven and his hair was trimmed and parted from the side. Simone's black hair was curled, with her lips painted bright red and her eyes were covered in black mascara. He remembered telling her how beautiful she looked.

George chugged the glass of juice down in one gulp.

"How are you doing, Tom?" Ethel said.

"I'm doing fine." He shrugged.

"How's work?"

"Okay, I guess." He stared at his shirt.

"We think we know why you're here," she started to say, but then stopped. Today was Simone's birthday and Nolan wanted to share it with her family. "What has happened has happened," she said. "There is nothing we can do to change that." George looked away, his eyes moist. Nolan had lost a wife and he and Ethel had lost their baby girl. "You were always good to Simone," Ethel continued, "and you will always be a part of our family, but you have to move on, Tom. Simone would have never wanted to see you like this."

Nolan said nothing. His eyes were moist too.

Ethel's face brightened up. "But that doesn't mean we still can't have a good time. I have baked a special cake for just this occasion." Ethel had run a small bakery for over eighteen years. She baked some of the best cakes in the city. There was not a single person who would turn down the chance to taste her delicacies. "Now, who wants a piece?"

Both Nolan and George smiled and raised their hands.

36

The glass building was located near the lake in South Franklin. It had been built not more than ten years ago. Prior to its construction, the land was used by the city for social housing. When the city was going into a deficit, TriGate Management Group purchased it to build their new headquarters.

Naturally, the residents of Franklin were not too pleased with a giant corporation displacing the poor and needy. There were regular protests during the

construction of the building and some politicians jumped in to oppose the new building. To defuse the situation, TriGate offered a piece of land on the other side of Franklin for a substantially lower price to the city. To sweeten the deal, they offered to build the new complexes that would house the poor and needy at cost, with no additional markups.

This quickly brought them the positive coverage they needed, and the uproar soon faded.

What most didn't realize was that they had paid only half the market price for the land they now had their headquarters on. If anyone ever did stumble upon this fact, TriGate would argue that the city was under financial hardship and they were only helping by unloading the land upon themselves.

Grant was aware of TriGate and its business practices, but he was never one to judge when it came to taking on a client. He thoroughly researched TriGate, which he did on every new client, and the only thing that mattered was whether they were able to afford his substantial fee.

Grant was known in the corporate world as a fixer. He did things that others would not or could not dare do. Nothing was beneath him, even murder. The clients didn't care how he did his job. They cared only that he made the problem go away.

TriGate's problem came in the shape of Eric Freeland, a professor at the University of Franklin. It was not a difficult or complex problem to solve, one he had done many times before: make the death look like a suicide. But what he had failed to realize was the involvement of others. These people were now making the problem more complicated.

Grant had to deal with it now, before it got out of hand.

He took the elevator up to the fourteenth floor. The TriGate Management Group's logo was clearly visible behind the glass.

He approached the front desk and asked for Ian Marshall.

"Do you have an appointment?" the receptionist asked. "Mr. Marshall is currently in a meeting."

"I don't, but can you please contact Mr. Marshall and let him know that Mr. Grant is here to meet him."

Grant wasn't his real name. It was one he had taken on to serve his purpose. If one of his clients ever decided to change their minds or make their agreement known to the police, Grant would disappear; but not before punishing the client for their betrayal.

The receptionist dialed a number and relayed what Grant had told her.

"He'll be with you shortly," she said. "Would you like to take a seat?"

"I'm fine," Grant said. Ian would leave whatever he was doing and come and see him right away. There was no point in sitting down.

As if on cue, Ian appeared from behind an oak door. He looked angry and bewildered.

"What are you doing here?" he hissed.

"We need to talk," Grant said calmly.

Ian was fuming, but he wasn't about to blow his top in front of the receptionist.

"Not here."

They went down the hall and took the stairs up to another floor. Ian found a vacant board room and when he had shut the door behind him, he said, "Are you out of your mind?! Do you have any idea how risky it was for you to be here!?"

"I tried calling you," Grant said. He had learned never to lose his cool in front of clients.

Ian waved it off. "I've been busy, okay? We are in the last stage of finalizing a big contract."

Grant already knew the contract that Ian was referring to was for the nuclear reactor plant. He had seen it on the news.

"Okay, why are you here?" Ian demanded.

"We have a problem."

Ian crossed his arms. "What's the problem?"

"Freeland's daughter. She's digging into Freeland's business."

"So what?"

"She's already spoken to the detective on Freeland's case."

"It's still open? I thought you made it look like a suicide."

"I did, but this detective doesn't seem to want to close it and I have a feeling it could be because of Freeland's daughter."

"What I want to know is, will it come back to us in any way?" Ian asked.

Grant shook his head.

"Then get rid of her," Ian said.

"You mean kill her?" Grant said.

"Yes, isn't that what you do?"

"I am not a hired assassin," Grant said. "Killing is not my first option. I am a fixer of problems. The Freeland situation could only be fixed by eliminating him. If I eliminated his daughter too, it would not fix your problem. In fact, it would exacerbate it. The police would look into her death even more closely than her father's."

Ian bit his bottom lip.

"There is more," Grant added.

Ian gave him a look.

"Freeland's daughter also spoke to a reporter. He's helping her."

Ian was beside himself. "A reporter? Why's a reporter getting involved in all of this?"

"I think he was one of Freeland's students."

"What's his name?"

"Hyder Ali."

"Where does he work?"

"The *Daily Times*."

Ian rubbed his chin. He was in deep thought. "Okay, leave this reporter to me."

"What're you going to do?" Grant asked.

"I'll deal with it, but what about Freeland's daughter?"

"We can't harm her, at least not yet, but I'll keep an eye on her."

Ian nodded. He then pointed a finger at Grant. "The next time you have to meet me, you don't show up at my workplace, got it?"

Grant didn't respond as he walked out the door.

Hyder returned to the Daily Times. As instructed by Dunny he had interviewed the neighbors who had the dispute. He hated to admit it, but Dunny was right. It was an interesting story, one he would type up as soon as possible and send to Dunny for her approval. He hoped it would make its way into the next morning's paper.

When he reached his cubicle, he saw Lester standing by his desk.

Lester looked grim.

Hyder smiled. "Why so serious?"

"Bro, something big is going down."

"What're you talking about?" Hyder was genuinely confused.

"Dunny came down looking for you."

"Why didn't she just call me?"

"I don't know, but she didn't look happy."

Hyder laughed, asked, "Does she ever?"

Lester grimaced. "It's not funny, bro."

"Don't worry," Hyder replied, reassuring him. "I'm sure she wants to find out if I've got a story for her or not. And believe me I've got a good one. It's so good that you may be reading it in tomorrow's edition."

Lester wiped his forehead. "Wow. That's good to hear. I thought she was gonna sack you or something."

"Nah, not me. I'll be here for a good while." Hyder looked around. "Where's my laptop?"

Lester put his hands up. "Don't blame the black guy. I never touch another man's goods."

Hyder was certain he had left it there.

He sure wasn't carrying it on him when he interviewed the neighbors.

"Oh-oh, I see her coming," Lester said.

Hyder looked and saw Dunny was coming straight for his cubicle.

"I gotta go," Lester said. "It was nice knowing you." He bolted.

Again, Hyder was surprised to see how he managed to disappear. "Hyder!" Dunny said. "My office, now!"

He followed her. "Is everything okay?"

"We'll soon find out."

They entered the office where Hyder found two men waiting for him. They were both wearing dark suits. One had spiked hair and the other was completely bald.

"What's going on?" Hyder asked with a trace of alarm.

"Mr. Ali," the bald man said. "I'm Agent Douglas and this is Agent Lafferty. We are from the FBI."

Hyder didn't know what to say.

"Mr. Ali," Agent Douglas said as he produced a laptop. "Is this your computer?"

Hyder glanced at it. "Yes, but why do you have it?"

"Do you mind unlocking it?"

"Is this some kind of joke?" Hyder was confused.

"I assure you, sir, this is not a joke. Can you please unlock your computer?"

"Can I see your badges?" Hyder's instincts kicked in. He would make sure his civil liberties weren't violated.

The two agents produced them and after Hyder was certain they were who they said they were, he typed in his password.

"Thank you," Agent Lafferty said. He then began going through the contents of his computer.

"Are you sure you are allowed to do that?" Hyder said.

Agent Douglas produced a piece of paper. He handed it to him.

It was a warrant to search his computer.

"Why would you want to see what's on my laptop?" Hyder said.

"We received a tip that an individual has been posting threatening and malicious content from this very computer." Agent Douglas said.

"Are you kidding me?" Hyder said.

"We don't kid about this stuff, sir," he said grimly. "We take this matter very seriously and so should you."

"Found it," the agent working on his computer said. He opened a folder with many files in it. He clicked on one, whereby a video popped up. The video showed a building exploding. It was followed by images of death and chaos. At the end of it was a call for action against the government and big business.

Hyder was beside himself. "I've never seen that video before."

"There are more videos," Agent Lafferty said. "Over a dozen, in fact."

"I don't know how they got on there, I swear," Hyder said, looking over at Dunny.

Dunny refused to make eye contact with him.

"I'm telling you the truth," Hyder pleaded.

Agent Douglas placed his hand on his elbow. "The only way to be sure is for you to come down to the field office with us."

"Am I under arrest?" Hyder asked.

"Not yet, but we would appreciate your cooperation on this. It would be in your best interest to speak to us so that we can sort this out."

Hyder knew putting up a fight would be futile.

He followed the agents out of the *Daily Times*.

38

Hyder was taken to an undisclosed location. From the backseat of their SUV he could barely make out his surroundings through the tinted windows.

They escorted him up to a room on the fourth floor of the building.

The room was spacious but felt constricted. The walls were painted gray, and there was a table in the middle with chairs on opposite sides.

Agent Douglas and Agent Lafferty spent the next hour grilling Hyder on the contents found on his hard drive.

Naturally, Hyder denied knowing their existence.

They probed into his past, asking about his parents, their parents, and so on. Hyder knew what their angle was.

He was a single, young, male Muslim whose family was from Pakistan. The agents never once uttered the word, but Hyder knew what they were trying to allude to.

Terrorist.

The thought sickened Hyder to the core. He was born and raised in the United States of America. He was a proud Muslim who followed his religion with the best intentions. In Islam, all actions were based on *niyyat* (intentions). It was taught that God looked, not only at one's actions, but also at his or her *niyyat* performing those actions. If one did something for someone with the intentions of helping them, then God would look kindly on them. If one did something for someone with the intentions of gaining something from them later, then God would not look favorably on them.

Hyder had made sure to keep his intentions pure whenever he did something. It was not easy, but he tried his best. For instance, he understood he was guilty of not praying five times a day, but he never did it to impress others because his *niyyat* would not be in the prayers.

It was why Hyder was feeling ill now. Propagating violence and destruction on others went against Hyder's belief system. He never believed that a God who was gracious and merciful would want death and misery. According to Hyder, there was one God, and this God had created the heavens and the earth. So if he was mighty and great, able to create the entire universe, why would He care what mere humans did on a single planet?

If this God did in fact want the destruction of people with a certain belief, then *He* could do it himself. Hyder would not take any part in it. And when Hyder's time came, and he was fortunate to meet Him, he would say to Him, "I lived my life with good intentions. I harmed no one and I let no one harm me. The rest is for you to judge."

The discussion with the two agents continued for another half hour.

Finally a man wearing a black suit arrived. He was tanned and had a grayish beard and thick hair.

Agent Douglas stood up. "You can't be here."

"I can," the man said. "My name is Haseeb Malik and I am Mr. Hyder Ali's lawyer." The man dropped his card on the table.

Agent Douglas picked it up and made a face.

"Has my client been charged with anything?" the lawyer asked.

"No." Agent Douglas shook his head. "We were just having a chat."

"Then until you charge him with something, this chat is over. Come, Hyder."

Hyder felt like a little boy whose father had come to get him out of detention. Mr. Malik was a good friend of Hyder's dad. They had grown up in the same village in Pakistan.

"What about my laptop?" Hyder asked.

The agents looked at each other. They weren't sure what to do with it. Hyder had so far answered all their questions. They knew there were many possibilities of how the contents got into his computer and that it would be difficult to prove any of them in court. No one saw him view it, no one saw him distribute it. In

fact, during the interview they couldn't even verify that Hyder had interacted with anyone online regarding the supposed material he was posting. They didn't have a case.

Agent Lafferty handed the laptop to Hyder.

On the drive back, Hyder asked, "Uncle, how did you know where I was?"

"Someone had called your mother from your work." Hyder knew it had to be Lester. "She told your brother and he called me." Hyder felt a headache coming on. It was bad enough that his lawyer had to come get him, but now he would have to deal with his older brother. "So I made some calls," Mr. Malik continued. "It wasn't easy, but thank Allah I was able to find you."

The remainder of the drive was in silence.

When Hyder entered his home, he found his mother on the sofa, crying. Next to her was his brother, Akbar. Akbar looked angry and about to explode.

Akbar Ali was named after the Mughal Emperor, Akbar the Great. Hyder's father had wanted to name both his sons after leaders and conquerors. Hyder could never live up to the name given to him, but in some ways Akbar could.

Akbar was tall, with a neatly trimmed goatee and coiffed hair. He was tall, dark, and handsome. He was also a medical doctor at the Franklin General Hospital. Akbar had also continued his education with the goal of becoming a cancer specialist.

Akbar stood up, ready to scorn Hyder. Mr. Malik motioned to Akbar to follow him to the kitchen.

Hyder went up to his mother. "*Ammi*, I am so sorry," he said.

She wiped her eyes. "Hyder, when your friend told me the police came and took you away, I was so scared."

Hyder put his arm around her. "It wasn't the police, *Ammi*. It was people from the FBI. There was a misunderstanding and it is now cleared up. No need to worry anymore. It's okay."

"Do you want me to make you *roti*?" his mom asked.

She was always concerned whether or not he was eating properly.

He wasn't hungry, but he wanted her distracted.

"Yes, please," he said.

She got up and left.

A minute later, Mr. Malik and Akbar came out of the kitchen.

Mr. Malik gave Hyder a smile as if to say, *don't worry, everything is fine now*. Mr. Malik knew how to defuse a situation. He had children of his own, and he knew how to deal with them.

Akbar approached him and said, "Make sure *Ammi* is not upset. I have to go back to the hospital." With that, he left.

Hyder was relieved to see him go. A lot had happened today and he couldn't handle his brother blasting him.

He thanked Mr. Malik for his help before Malik left.

He washed up and when he came into the kitchen the delicious smell of his mom's cooking filled his senses.

Hyder felt suddenly famished.

Nolan sat in his car, staring at the house across from him.

There was nothing spectacular about the house. It was like the rest on the street. It had a flat roof, rectangular windows, and a square-shaped garage. It had a long driveway, though. A car had just pulled up to it. A man with two children emerged from inside the car. The man was pulling out bags from the back seat while the boy and girl were grabbing items from the trunk.

Nolan watched the Hansborough family take groceries from the car and into their house.

He had come to the house many times before, always parking across from it, but never going up to introduce himself. He lacked the courage to do so. He didn't know what he would say to Peter Hansborough. Like him, he, too, had lost a wife. David and Janet had lost a mother. What could he possibly say to them?

He knew their names by heart. He had read everything about them, most of it from the local newspapers, though.

He didn't blame Amanda Hansborough for what happened that morning. It was an accident, pure and simple.

He wasn't good at the blame game anyway. There was no point to it. It was just that he couldn't find a way to move beyond his loss.

There were times, however, when he thought he was over the pain. That it was now alright to resume his life, but then reality hit him and he was back destroying himself with alcohol.

But, a part of him did, in fact, want to get over the loss. It was draining to have this mournful weight constantly on him. He had severe headaches and they only went away when he hit the bottle, but the relief was only temporary. When he was sober again, the loss would come at him from all angles, slapping him, beating him, punching him, kicking him, until he was left with no choice but drown his sorrows in alcohol again.

Maybe it was why he came here to the Hansborough's house. If he could speak to them, it might open the door to his path to recovery. But then, what if it didn't? What if it only made it worse?

The thought terrified him. It was why it was better to stay inside the car and just watch them.

The family was almost done taking the groceries out of their car.

He squinted, deep wrinkles etched his forehead.

They looked happy, as if they had moved on from their loss. Maybe it was because they still had each other. Who did Nolan have? No one. He had lost everyone important in that accident.

The children were laughing and teasing one another. Even the father was cracking a joke or two.

Nolan envied them. He wished he could be happy, too, but that would not be today.

He missed his wife as much as he did the day it happened.

Getting over that loss would take more time.

He pulled out a bottle from underneath the car seat and took a long, hard swig.

The alcohol burned the back of his throat, but at least it warmed his insides. Nolan started the car and drove away.

40

The next morning Hyder went back to the *Daily Times*. What happened next surprised him: he was fired by Dunny.

Her explanation was that Hyder's position as a temp, the illicit content found on his laptop, and the involvement of the FBI, had left the newspaper with no choice but to terminate his employment.

Naturally, Hyder fought back. The content found on his computer was not put there by him, and the FBI had agreed with that fact. He did concede, however, that he was a temp, but that never diminished his ability to perform his duties.

But in the end, there was nothing Hyder could do or say to save his job.

The publisher was under pressure to reduce costs and Hyder had become too expensive, both financially and publicity-wise, to stay with the paper.

If the competition even got a whiff of the FBI's investigation of an employee of the *Daily Times* they would have a field day, Dunny had said.

The *Daily Times* would not subject itself to such bad publicity. It was better to remove the worm, so to speak, rather than let it spoil the rest of the apple.

With that Hyder was gone.

He handed over his media credentials, grabbed whatever he could, and left the *Daily Times*. A security guard swiftly escorted him out the building.

It happened so fast that Hyder didn't even have time to say goodbye to his colleagues.

On his way out, though, Lester motioned that he would call him.

Hyder felt ashamed for having been fired. He had refused to make eye contact with any of his co-workers and was somewhat grateful that the guard removed him quickly from the premises.

He went across the street to a coffee shop that he regularly visited with his co-workers.

As word spread of Hyder's firing, employees of the *Daily Times* showed up at the coffee shop to say they were sorry and give him moral support.

Lester was the first to come. He gave Hyder a big hug right away. He even had tears in his eyes. He promised Hyder that he would come visit him often. Hyder knew Lester was fond of his mom's cooking, so there would be other reasons for his visits. But Hyder had come to rely on him and he would miss not working with him.

Veronica was the next former co-worker to appear. She was fuming at the way Dunny had fired him. She was prepared to give Dunny a piece of her mind, but Hyder talked her out of it. There was no point in her putting her career on the line for him. He was after all, still a temp. Veronica assured him he would find a paper that would appreciate his talents. Hyder hoped so.

Mabel Parker, the secretary at the *Daily Times*, came by for a quick visit. She told Hyder that she would miss him and if he ever was in the neighborhood he

should drop by to say hi. Hyder told her that he would, but deep down he knew that the *Daily Times* was the last place he'd want to come back to.

In the end, Hyder was left by himself.

He felt utterly alone. He was in a profession that no longer wanted him. He didn't know what else he would do with his life. Worse, he didn't know how he would break the news to his mom. It was bad enough that he had been investigated by the FBI.

It couldn't possibly get any worse, Hyder thought, but then regretted thinking it. He had come to realize that it could always get worse.

41

Nolan sat at his desk, staring at the file before him.

He was back in the detective division and he was once again sitting in the middle of the room. He wished he could get his old desk back. It would be a relief to stare out the window, like he wanted to right now.

"Nolan," a voice chirped. "I didn't know you were psychic."

Nolan turned to find Detective Angelo Pascale standing by his desk. Nolan wanted to make a quip about Pascale's Mafioso attire, but instead he said, "Is that the same toothpick you had in your mouth the last time we met? It's disgusting."

Pascale pulled it out and flicked it away.

"Always a smart-ass, aren't you?" Pascale jerked his head. "At least I get serious work done. Unlike you, I don't stare at closed files."

"I was reading it."

"Like I said, I didn't know you had special psychic abilities."

"I do. I can see through people and all I see right now is a bag full of turds."

Pascale's face turned red and his inner gangster came out. "Listen, you piece of dog shit, the entire department feels sorry for you, but I don't. What happened to you, in my opinion, you had coming."

"I'm glad you think so highly of me, Pascale," Nolan said calmly. "Thank you."

"Kiss my ass, Nolan," Pascale fumed.

"No, thanks, I'll leave the ass kissing to you. You do it way better than everyone."

For a moment it looked as if Pascale would hit him across the face. But then he saw Sergeant Halton walking toward him and he said, "Later," and walked away.

"You stirring up trouble, Nolan?" Halton growled.

"Yes, sir... I mean, no, sir," Nolan gave him a salute.

"You done with the Freeland case?" he asked.

"No, sir."

"Why not?"

"I don't think it's a suicide."

"Then what is it?"

"I don't know."

Halton blanched. "If it's not suicide then it has to be a homicide. Was the victim murdered?"

Nolan thought about it. "I believe so."

"You *believe* so? Do you have any proof?"

"I don't know."

Halton looked as if he was speaking to a five-year-old. "This is what you're going to do," Halton said slowly, so that Nolan didn't miss a single word. "You will close the case as a suicide."

"I can't do that, sir," Nolan replied. "My gut feeling is saying that it may not be."

Halton inhaled deeply. "Okay, then I'll give you three days to prove to me it is not a suicide and if you don't prove it to me, then I'll transfer the case to someone else who will close it as a suicide. After I have taken the file away from you, I will then send you down to storage to help out with organizing the old files. I'm sure you will have a good time being a smart ass with all the paperwork down there."

"What about Captain Ross?"

"Don't worry about Ross." Halton smiled. "Once he finds out how much resources we are wasting on a case that should have been closed on day one, I think he'll see things my way."

Nolan didn't know what to say.

"Three days," Halton put his fingers up. He then walked away triumphantly.

42

Nolan rubbed his beard and scratched his head.

Halton had given him a deadline, and if he didn't meet it the alternative would not be pretty, especially for Nolan.

He couldn't imagine spending his days down in the dungeon, as the storage department was nicknamed.

He had to crack this case or else it would crack him.

He opened the file and began going over the contents inside it.

It still bothered him that he could not locate the forensics report. Who was it that came and retrieved the file from the coroner's office?

He didn't know, but he knew it somehow had something to with Freeland's death.

He read the first few pages of the report from the scene of the crime and something stuck out at him.

The prescription bottle.

Freeland's daughter had been adamant that her father never took such medication. According to her, Freeland was not depressed and was never on anti-depressants.

If that was true, then it would be the break he was looking for.

The department kept evidence of all active files in the detective division. This allowed the retrieval and examination of evidence more efficiently. However, the evidence for cold cases was stored in another part of the building.

Nolan found the bag containing items taken from the scene and brought it back to his desk. Although it was initially categorized as a suicide, Nolan had decided to collect items that he felt would assist him in writing up his report. The prescription bottle was one and the other was the handwritten suicide note.

He had learned a long time ago that even if a case looked straightforward at first glance, it could become something entirely different on separate viewing. He had, therefore, always made sure to tag items that might help him later on.

He scanned the label on the bottle, decided to pay the doctor whose name was on it a visit.

Dr. Jacob Isenberg's office was located on the main floor of a plaza.

Nolan went up to the assistant and introduced himself.

He took a seat along with the patients who were waiting to see the doctor.

Five minutes later a woman appeared from behind the door, followed by a man in a white coat.

Dr. Isenberg looked to be in his early sixties. He was slim, balding, and sported a graying beard. He also wore thick glasses.

The assistant waved Nolan over.

He could tell the other patients were wondering how he got to see the doctor first when they had been waiting before him.

He introduced himself again.

Dr. Isenberg looked like someone who'd had a long day, but he still managed a smile.

"What can I do for you, Detective Nolan?" he said, escorting Nolan into a room.

Once seated, Nolan produced the bottle of prescription medication.

Isenberg adjusted his glasses and examined the label.

"Eric Freeland?" he looked confused. "Excuse me for a moment." He got up and left the room.

He returned with a thick file. He again adjusted his glasses and then began flipping through the pages.

"That is incorrect," he finally said.

"What is?" Nolan asked.

"I never prescribed Eric anti-depressants."

"But your name is on the bottle."

"I can see that, but I assure you, as Eric's practitioner, I never put him on any medication. If I did, I would have had some record of it. His file shows nothing."

Nolan rubbed his beard.

"When was the last time he visited you?" Nolan asked.

"That I can tell you." Isenberg began looking through the file again. "The fifth of last month."

"Why did he come?"

"Eric wasn't sleeping well and he wondered if there were any deficiencies in his body. I took a blood sample and it came back it was normal. So I told him to get more exercise. I've found a good workout to be ideal for a good night's sleep."

Nolan nodded. He palmed the bottle. "Alright. Thanks, doc."

He stood up to leave. Isenberg said, "When was the last time you went to the doctor's?"

Nolan shrugged. "It's been a while."

"If you don't mind me saying, you should get a full checkup," Isenberg opined. "You don't look well."

"You can tell that by looking at me?" Nolan was curious.

"The eyes can tell a lot about what ails someone."

"Good to know, doc. I'll definitely make an appointment with my family doctor. Thanks for your time."

Instead of driving back to the station, Nolan decided to visit the pharmacy listed on the bottle.

When he reached the address he found himself looking at an ice cream parlor. Nolan scanned the surroundings. There was nothing that resembled a pharmacy.

Nolan tapped his fingers on the steering wheel.

Someone had gone through a lot of trouble fabricating the prescription medication.

But why?

It was up to Nolan to find out.

43

Hyder was on the couch, channel-surfing. He never stayed on one for too long before going to the next.

The house was empty. His mom and brother were both at work.

Hyder was depressed and confused. Maybe it was why he couldn't stick to one channel.

He felt restless and lost. Everything had happened so fast. One minute he was employed and the next he was not.

Hyder's mom had tried to make him feel better. She had assured him that one of his uncles would give him a job. Hyder knew that uncle well. He had no desire to work for him. That uncle owned a small accounting firm, and with Hyder having no accounting experience, he would be relegated to a data entry position.

His cell phone vibrated. It was Jessica. This was the fifth time she had called that morning. Hyder felt like crap and the last thing he wanted to do was speak to her.

What would he tell her? That the FBI had accused him of terrorist behavior and because of that he was fired? *Right.*

He let the phone go to voice mail. Eventually, he would muster up the courage to listen to the messages.

But not right now.

At this moment all he wanted to do was feel sorry for himself.

His dream of being a journalist was over. Who would hire him now? Even if he went to the *Daily Times'* competitors, would they take him, knowing the reasons for his being fired? He didn't think so.

He would have to find something else to do with his life, but what? He wasn't qualified for anything else.

Maybe he would become a writer. How hard could it be? The reason he became a journalist was to tell real stories. Maybe now he could write fictional ones.

The thought made Hyder feel a bit better.

He could write about a Muslim reporter who investigated conspiracies around him. And who else better to write this than him? It would surely sell.

But this feeling didn't last long. Did he even have it in him to write them? Would he even be able to make a living off these stories? And above all, would people even read stories with a Muslim character in them?

Hyder suddenly felt depressed. He faced long odds getting people to root for a Muslim hero.

The front door opened. Akbar entered.

Hyder didn't bother greeting him. Akbar went straight upstairs.

Two minutes later, Akbar came down. He was wearing a sweatshirt and sweatpants. He placed his gym bag to the side and came over and sat across from him.

Akbar was everything Hyder wasn't. He was well-educated, made good money, and was also in good shape.

If you placed him and Akbar next to one another, no one would guess that they were brothers.

They were not only physically different; they were also different in personality. While Hyder was an introvert, Akbar was not. While Hyder avoided going to parties, Akbar was the life of the party. While Hyder wasn't very religious, Akbar took his faith seriously. While Hyder loved to stay inside, Akbar preferred to be outdoors. While Hyder wasn't very athletic anymore, Akbar was hitting the gym regularly. Their differences went on and on.

Akbar glanced at his watch. Akbar was always busy. There was always someplace he had to be.

Growing up, Hyder had tried to be more like Akbar by dressing and acting like him. But like everything else, it didn't last long.

Hyder was waiting for Akbar to say something, like how he should grow up and finally take more responsibility with his life. To Hyder's surprise, Akbar gave him a sympathetic look, said, "I'm sorry for what happened. It sucks, and there is nothing I can say or do to make you feel better. But if you keep praying, I am certain Allah will bless you in whatever you choose to do next."

Hyder managed to say, "Thanks."

Akbar nodded. He stood up, grabbed his gym bag and left.

Hyder went back to flipping channels.

44

Jessica put her cell phone down and let out a big sigh.

Hyder had so far not returned any of her calls.

She wanted to speak to him. She wanted to tell him what had happened at the condominium building. The man who chased her had shaken her up badly.

She wasn't sure if this man had anything to do with how her dad had ended up. Plus, she wasn't sure if it was safe to check out the remaining names on the list anymore.

She was at the coffee shop, sitting by the corner windows.

She still hadn't started work yet; Chloe was covering for her. But just coming here and spending a few hours in the shop made her feel secure.

Chloe came over and asked if she needed anything. Jessica shook her head. Chloe was aware of what had happened at the condo and she was doing everything as a friend to make Jessica feel better.

"Just yell whatever you need," Chloe said, walking away.

Jessica went back to staring out the window.

Just a little while ago her life was simple. She was going to her classes at George Smith College and she was working at the coffee shop. Work, study, and squeeze in some time for fun.

Her professors at the college were very understanding of her situation. They were willing to defer her exams to a later date.

This allowed her to focus on finding out what exactly happened to her dad.

This was also why she needed to speak to Hyder. She also wanted to know if he had made any progress in his interviews.

She knew that Hyder didn't really owe her anything. He was doing it out of loyalty to her dad. He was going out of his way to help her. So she couldn't impose on him any more than she already had.

She let out another sigh.

What would she do now? She wasn't sure.

She spent the next couple hours just staring out the window.

When Chloe's shift was over they decided to head back to the apartment.

On the way there, they stopped over at a grocery store and picked up frozen lasagna. They had decided to stay home tonight. They would make dinner and watch a movie. It would be a girl's night in.

It was Chloe's idea, one Jessica was grateful for. She had been through a lot recently and it would be nice to escape for a little while, even if it was in a movie.

With the lasagna in hand they argued about which movies to watch. Chloe wanted to watch a romantic comedy, while Jessica wanted to watch a serious drama. In the end, the romantic comedy won out. Jessica needed something light in her life and a serious drama wouldn't do that.

When they reached their apartment they both stopped.

The front door was slightly ajar.

They looked at each other. They were certain they had locked it before leaving.

Chloe motioned to Jessica that they should leave and come back with the police.

But Jessica shook her head. She wanted to know what was going on.

Jessica pushed the front door back.

She peeked inside and listened. There was no noise.

She put her fingers to her lips. She slowly went down the hall with Chloe following behind.

The living room was a mess. The DVDs they were going to watch were scattered on the floor. The lamp was on its side. The sofa cushions were on the rug. Even the magazines on top of the coffee table were disorganized.

They rushed to their bedrooms.

Jessica's bedroom was in worse shape. The mattress was off the bed, the pillows and blanket on the floor. The closet door was open. Her clothes, still attached to their hangers, were on the bottom of the closet. She spotted papers and other documents next to the side table.

She went out into the hall and saw Chloe looked pale. "My room is a mess," Chloe said, the words barely coming out of her mouth.

"Mine too," Jessica said, putting her arm around her. Chloe was shaking. Jessica took her out into the living room.

"It'll be okay," she said. "Everything will be fine." These words felt hollow. Jessica wasn't sure what was going on but, like Chloe, she too was scared.

She looked around the apartment. It looked like someone had thoroughly gone through it as if they were looking for something.

But what?

45

Jumu'ah was a congregational prayer held every Friday in the afternoon. According to the Prophet Muhammad, this prayer was twenty-five times more blessed than any prayer performed alone. It was, therefore, why Hyder always tried not to miss the prayers. But with a full-time job and other life commitments, he was guilty of missing quite a few.

He took a bath, picked out his best clothes, applied perfume and left his house.

The *Masjid* (Mosque) was about a half-hour drive.

Hyder found a parking spot, grabbed his prayer cap from the glove compartment, and got out.

He was greeted by a couple of men he had grown up with. They were wearing *shalwar kameez*, a traditional dress worn in Pakistan and India. The *shalwar* was pajama-like trousers with legs wide at the top and narrow at the ankles. The *kameez* was a long tunic, almost reaching below the knees, with a western-style collar.

Even though he didn't wear one today, Hyder always enjoyed wearing it as it was loose and comfortable. There was a reason why it was worn in hot countries, he concluded.

He was informed that the *adhan* (the call for prayer) was already performed. *Muezzin*, the person appointed to lead and recite the *adhan* had performed it fifteen minutes ago, which meant the *khutbah*, the sermon given by the Imam prior to the Friday prayer, would begin shortly.

Hyder hurried into the mosque, removed his shoes and found a spot on the carpeted floor not far from where the Imam would give the sermon.

After the service concluded the masjid began to empty as worshippers said a few greetings to those they knew and then quickly departed. Unlike in Muslim

countries, where Friday was a holiday, most people had to get back to their jobs and other duties as it was still a workday.

Hyder didn't have anywhere to be, so he stayed behind.

There was a line of people wanting to speak to the Imam. This line consisted of people who had various problems that they wanted the Imam's opinion on. There were also others who wanted to request prayers from the Imam. And then there were those who just wanted to extend their greetings to the Imam.

Hyder felt lost and confused. He not only wanted to greet the Imam, he also needed his opinion and prayers.

When his turn came the Imam saw him and smiled, "*Assalamu alaikum, Hyder.*" He hugged and kissed him on both cheeks.

"*Wa alaikum assalam, Qazi Sahib,*" Hyder replied.

Mubarik Qazi was medium built. He had dark skin, a dark beard, and wore round glasses.

"I didn't see you at the last *Juma'ah,*" the Imam said.

"Sorry, I've been a little busy," Hyder said.

"It's understandable, but it is my duty to remind you that if you take one step toward Allah, Allah will take ten steps toward you."

Hyder had heard other similar sayings as well. *If one walked toward Allah, Allah ran toward them.*

Hyder could only nod. He wished he came to the masjid regularly. As a child it was the one place where he found peace and refuge from all that was happening out in the world.

"What can I do for you, Hyder?" the Imam asked.

Hyder told him about the loss of his job. He also told him about the death of his professor. Hyder finished by telling him how he was helping Jessica with finding out the truth.

The Imam listened intently and finally said, "Do you believe that your friend's father was murdered?"

Hyder shrugged.

"Do you or don't you? It's a simple question," the Imam continued.

"I do," Hyder said firmly.

"So, let me ask you this: if you are searching for the truth, then this truth will lead to justice, yes?"

"Yes," Hyder answered.

"Then you should keep going. You should find out if your friend's father was murdered or not, and if he was, who did it. Allah wants you to do this."

"*He does?*" Hyder was confused.

"There is a verse in the Qur'an that stipulates this. I will paraphrase: *O you who believe, be upholders of justice, even though it may be against yourself, your parents, or even your kin, and whether it be against the rich or poor: for Allah is a better caretaker for both. So do not follow desires, lest you should swerve. And if you twist or avoid the evidence, then Allah is all-aware of what you do.*"

Hyder hadn't heard his verse before. He was now glad that he had.

The Imam continued speaking. "I can understand that you are emotionally confused right now, but don't let it silence your search for the truth and for

justice. Whatever obstacles come your way, you must push through them. You can't let anything stop you from fulfilling your duty to your friend."

Hyder nodded. "Thank you, Qazi Sahib."

"My pleasure."

Hyder left the *masjid* feeling better.

He was heading to his Camry when he spotted a group of men standing to the side, smoking cigarettes.

One of them waved in his direction.

Reluctantly, he went over to him.

"Hyder, how are you?" the man said.

"I'm good, Sohail," Hyder said. "I didn't expect to see you at the *masjid*."

"The *masjid* is open for everyone, even people like me." He smiled.

"What can I do for you?" Hyder asked.

"A group of us are getting together to protest what they are doing to our brothers and sisters all over the world."

"Who do you mean by *they*?" Hyder inquired.

"These *Kafirs* (*Disbelievers*), you know." "They are trying to wage a war against Islam."

"Are they?"

"Yes, and we must defend against them."

"If I'm correct, don't you have a son out of wedlock with one of these *Kafirs*?"

Sohail's expression hardened.

"So does that make your son half a *Kafir*?" Hyder challenged Sohail.

"I've made mistakes in my past and that is why I am trying to follow the right path now."

"No, Sohail," Hyder replied, pointing a finger. "You always knew the right path. You just never chose to follow it. You know why? Because it was too difficult for you. And I also know the *masjid* is helping you financially, so don't tell me you are doing this to save Islam. And as far as helping our Muslim brothers and sisters in the world, look at the leaders of the countries they are suffering in. Afghanistan. Pakistan. Bangladesh. Libya. Egypt. Iran. It is not these so-called disbelievers who are hurting them, it is Muslims hurting Muslims."

With that Hyder headed to his car, leaving Sohail and his friends to their discussion.

46

Nolan was absolutely certain that someone had staged Eric Freeland's suicide.

His instincts had told him so from the very beginning, but it was his mind—the muddled state it had been in because of the drinking—that kept him from looking into it.

The signs were there from the moment he entered the scene. The bruises on the wrists, the way the stool lay perfectly next to the feet of the victim, and the half empty bottle of anti-depressants, which he later found were never prescribed to the victim in the first place. To finish off the setup, there was the suicide note,

and how it clearly and concisely stated why the victim did what he did. Those who were about to commit suicide were more likely to ramble, their minds at that moment usually not thinking straight.

This was why Nolan was now going over the suicide note in detail.

The note had been typed, which also made it more suspicious. A suicide note was a very personal statement and one that people poured their heart and soul into. This felt very business-like in nature, like someone who wanted to complete a transaction and had provided a side note explaining it.

Nolan wanted to investigate this further.

As he was leaving the division, he bumped into Detective Marina Lopez.

"I heard you were coming into the office lately," she said. "I just didn't believe it myself."

Nolan shrugged. "Yeah, you know me. I'm a workaholic."

"Right," she said. "But at least now you're no longer an alcoholic."

Ever since he took on the case, his drinking had gotten substantially less. Maybe Captain Ross was right in bringing him back. *An idle mind is the Devil's workshop*, Nolan reminded himself.

She smiled. "You look better than the last time I saw you."

Lopez was strikingly beautiful. She had tanned skin, brown shoulder-length hair, and her eyes were hazel in color. In another time and another place, Nolan wouldn't have hesitated to ask her out.

He coughed, clearing his thoughts. "I have to go," he said. "I'm working on a big case."

"Well, I hope you solve it."

"I will and you know why?"

She waited for him.

"A drunk Tom Nolan is very dangerous, but a sober Tom Nolan is downright terrifying."

She laughed. "I'm now afraid for the criminals in this city."

"You may have to light a candle for them," he said, pumping his fist. "Tom Nolan is out to destroy them."

As he left, he could tell she was still laughing.

Nolan drove straight to the university. He was hoping to find documents from Freeland's office that he could use to authenticate the signature on the suicide note.

He found the door to the professor's office locked. As he was walking around the campus, he saw someone familiar. He had seen her at the scene of the crime. More specifically, she was sitting in Lopez's car.

Nolan approached her and introduced himself.

Miriam Stenfield was surprised to see him. "I thought the professor's case was closed."

"It's not."

"Oh," she said. "If you are looking for something from his office, you won't find anything. We cleared it out yesterday."

Nolan scratched his beard.

"His daughter and her friend had come earlier and taken all the personal items so I thought it was okay to clear it. We have another professor moving into that office today."

Nolan nodded, thinking. "Do you by any chance have any of Professor Freeland's old checks?"

Mariam adjusted her glasses. "I'm sure I can find some."

They went to her desk and from one of the cabinets she pulled out a folder. She searched inside and removed a piece of paper. "He had given this to me when I was raising money for the Diabetes Society. My mom is..." before she could complete her sentence Nolan grabbed it and began examining it.

He put the check next to the suicide note and tried to see how they differed.

"What's that?" Miriam eyed the note.

"It's Freeland's suicide statement."

Mariam's eyes watered. It looked as if she would cry.

"Don't worry," Nolan quickly said. "He didn't commit suicide."

"Oh," her eyes cleared up. "That's a relief..."

"He was murdered," Nolan blurted, staring at the papers before him.

Mariam burst into tears.

Nolan immediately regretted opening his mouth.

"I hope you don't mind if I borrow this check," he said, waving it. "I'll return it once I'm done."

Mariam nodded between sobs.

Nolan quickly extracted himself from the situation.

As he was leaving the university he now had proof that Freeland was murdered.

The signatures on the check and the suicide note did not match.

Someone had forged them.

47

Hyder called Jessica and after a few rings he was grateful that she picked up.

"Hyder," she started. "I've been trying to reach you."

"I know," he said. "I've been through a lot lately."

"I can say the same." Jessica told him about the man who chased her in the condo building. She also mentioned that someone had broken into her apartment.

"Oh my God!" Hyder exclaimed. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"What did they take?"

"I don't think it was a robbery," she said. "I think someone came in looking for something."

"Like what?"

"I don't know." She suddenly went silent.

"Jessica? Are you still there?" Hyder said, worried

"Do you still have the pages from my dad's diary?"

"Yes, it's in my backpack."

"Do you suppose they came searching for that?"

Hyder thought about it. It sounded plausible. Suddenly he was concerned about his mom. "Do you think they'll break into my house?"

"I don't know, but I don't think so," she said. "I'm Eric Freeland's daughter. If he had sent it to anyone it'd most likely be me. Do you get the feeling that someone's watching you?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Exactly!" she replied. "I am, and it could be because of the pages from the diary."

"But why? The pages are all gibberish. We had to come up with our own theory—one that we still don't know if it's true—just to make any sense of them."

"Maybe they don't know that," Jessica said. "Maybe they think the pages contain information that implicates them directly to the crime."

"You may be right," he said.

"This would make a great story for your newspaper, Hyder," she said.

"About that..."

Hyder told her about his employment situation.

When he was done, she said, "I'm so sorry. I didn't know."

He laughed. "Yeah, because I just told you now." He tried to brush it off, but it still stung.

"What if..." she started. "You were let go at the paper because it had something to do with my dad?"

"What do you mean?"

"What if someone knew you were helping me and to shut you up they had you fired?"

"You're making it look like a conspiracy," Hyder replied, laughing.

"What if it is," she said, sounding dead serious.

Hyder stopped laughing. "I don't know about that, but you're sounding more like your father. He thought everything was a conspiracy."

"Ok, whatever," Jessica replied. "I'm still sorry for what happened, though. So what're your plans now?"

"I'm going to help you find out the truth about your father. We will bring those guilty of this crime to justice." The words of the Imam were still echoing in his head. "I'm going to go meet the remaining people on the list."

48

Jasmine Vicky Johnson lived in the suburbs in a house on top of the hills.

The house was shaped like a box. It was probably influenced by some new modern look. Hyder wasn't familiar with the architecture so he wasn't qualified to make any comment.

Hyder was thankful he had decided to take his Camry, or else the walk up the hill would have killed him.

He parked the car to the side and walked up the long flight of steps.

He was out of breath by the time he reached the front doors.

He never understood why anyone wanted to live this high up. When he turned, he got his answer.

The view was breathtaking. The sun had started to come down, and it had blanketed the city in orange. It was magical and beautiful.

He could see himself spending the day just staring at the scenery. With a hot cup of chai in his hand, he would almost be in heaven.

His bliss quickly faded when he realized that it would soon be night, which meant getting back to the city from where he was would take time. He had to conduct the interview as quickly as possible.

He rang the doorbell and waited.

When he didn't get an answer, he tried again.

Still no answer. He walked around the house and peeked through the windows. It was dark inside and looked empty.

Hyder thought about waiting but the drive through the winding path back onto the main road would be troublesome in low light.

He would come back and visit Jasmine Vicky Johnson tomorrow.

When he reached his car, his cell phone rang.

Dunny was calling.

Hyder was confused. Why was she calling him? She had already ruined his life. What more did she want from him?

He answered it.

"Hyder?"

"Yes."

"It's Caroline."

Dunny rarely used her first name, especially with her subordinates. Maybe it was because he no longer worked for her.

"What can I do for you?" Hyder's voice was hard.

"Can we meet?" Her voice was low, as if she didn't want anyone else to listen in on their conversation.

"I'm not sure why, though," he replied. "You fired me. End of question."

"I know and I'm sorry." Hyder was shocked. During his employment at the *Daily Times* he had never once heard her use that word. "If you will please meet me, I will explain everything."

Hyder wasn't sure if it was a good idea. He was still angry about being let go.

"Just hear me out, please," she said. Hyder had rarely heard her say *that* word before, either. *This must be important*, he thought.

"Okay, your office, tomorrow?" he asked.

"No, tonight, by the city pier."

"Okay, but how will I find you?"

"Do you know the Guildwood Yacht Club?"

"Yes."

"I'll be waiting for you there." Before Hyder could say yes, the phone went dead.

Hyder looked at the screen and shook his head. He was baffled by what had just happened.

He looked up at the sky. Darkness had suddenly swallowed everything around him. He quickly got in his car and drove back to the city.

The Pier, as it was known, was located east of Franklin. It was on a small body of water and was surrounded by a marina, a water treatment facility, and the beach. A boardwalk stretched from one end of the beach to the other, allowing easy access to the waterfront.

Hyder had walked the three kilometer boardwalk many times. In fact, his house was only a ten minute drive away. During the summer he enjoyed coming down in the morning and watching the water wash up on the sand.

He would see joggers making their early morning runs. He would meet pet owners who were out to walk their dogs. He would greet moms with strollers who wanted to get a few minutes of exercise before their hectic day started.

He found it all very peaceful. It also allowed him to clear his head.

Today was not like that. Darkness had fallen, leaving the boardwalk deserted. The wind was chilly as it came in from the lake.

Hyder pulled his jacket collar up. His ears were cold to the touch. He rubbed his hands and blew hot air on them. His fingertips were becoming numb from the cold.

He wished he had worn his hoodie, but he wasn't sure what type of meeting this would be.

Dunny had asked him to meet her at the yacht club. The club was almost eighty years old and one that still required members and non-members to dress a certain way. Behind the club was the club's restaurant, which also followed the required dress code. Hyder assumed that Dunny might have wanted to conduct their meeting over dinner or at least over some light drinks. So, he had put on a nice dress shirt, dress pants and dress shoes. To ward off the cold, he had put on a light jacket. Now that jacket was doing absolutely nothing to shield him from the bitter wind. Worse, sand had made its way into his shoes.

This is no place to meet, he thought, not on a night like this, anyway.

He had found parking on the other side of the beach, which made his walk even longer.

Hyder cursed and grumbled as he ambled over the boardwalk.

He spotted the club in the distance. He was now shivering. He hurried his steps and reached it in less than a minute.

He looked around. When he did not see Dunny, he decided to go inside.

It was a weeknight so the restaurant was mostly empty. A man at the front desk eyed his attire from top to bottom.

"Welcome, sir," the man said. "Do you have reservations?"

"I'm actually meeting a friend of mine," Hyder said. "It may be under her name. It's Caroline Dunny."

The man scanned his computer screen. "I'm sorry, sir. We don't have any reservations under that name."

"What about under Hyder Ali." Hyder spelled out his name.

The man shook his head. "I don't see anything."

"Um, okay," Hyder scratched his head. "I don't know what else to tell you."

"How about I get you a table? We are not fully booked today so it would be no problem. If your friend shows up, I'll send her right over to you."

"Yes, that sounds great."

The man escorted Hyder to a table by the windows.

A waiter immediately came over. "Wine, Sir?" he asked.

"No." Hyder shook his head. "Just water."

The waiter dropped off the menu and left.

Hyder glanced at his watch. *Dunny must be running late*, he thought.

He grabbed the menu and when he saw the prices, his mouth nearly dropped. There was no way he could afford these meals. Plus, he was now unemployed. He ordered something from the appetizer menu and waited. He dialed Dunny's number and heard it ring on the other end. It then went to voice mail. "Hi, it's me, Hyder. I'm here, so please give me a call."

The appetizer came, which consisted of marinated shrimp with garlic sauce. They smelled delicious, and it made his stomach gurgle. He decided to dive in. He was glad he did, because it was the best shrimp he had ever tasted.

Hyder glanced at his watch again and then took his time finishing the appetizer.

Why did Dunny want to meet him? He wondered. And why did she choose this location?

He wasn't sure, but his mind was conjuring up all sorts of answers. Maybe Dunny had had a change of heart. Maybe she wanted Hyder back at the *Daily Times*. This would explain why she had apologized to him. Or maybe it was someone higher up who had persuaded her to bring him back. Hyder had, in fact, been wrongly accused of something he had no knowledge of. Who this higher up was, Hyder had no idea. As far as he was concerned, he was another temporary reporter at the *Daily Times* who came through the revolving door like many other fresh graduates with a journalism degree.

If, for instance, he was correct in thinking Dunny wanted him back, then this location somehow made sense. To save face, she had decided to meet here, knowing there would not be many people around to see it. She could beg, plead, or do whatever it took to get him back. That sounded good to him.

A smile crossed Hyder's face.

He wouldn't make it easy for Dunny, either. He would make demands. If he did decide to come back, then he wanted it to be on a permanent basis. Also, he would request his own desk. On top of that, he would request a raise. And if she did agree to his terms, he would tell her he would think about it.

He would let her stew for a bit before he told her his decision.

Right now, it was Hyder who was stewing. The waiter had already walked by his table twice. It was time to order his main course.

Then reality sunk in. Dunny wasn't going to show up and she wasn't going to offer him his job back. This was just a sick joke, one he suddenly felt terrible for getting duped into.

He glanced at his watch one last time and decided to leave. There was no point in sticking around.

He apologized to the waiter, explaining his date had stood him up, paid, and left the restaurant.

Outside, the wind was bitter and chilly. Instead of walking back through the boardwalk, he decided to take a shortcut and go through the pier. He walked past a row of parked boats and decided to call Dunny one last time.

He was fuming. He would give her a piece of his mind. Job or no job, this was insulting.

He dialed her number and heard it ring on the other end.

He was walking past the boats when he heard a noise. It was a ringtone and it was coming from one of the boats.

He hung up and realized the ringtone ended as well.

Something wasn't right.

He dialed the number again.

The ringtone sounded from somewhere close by.

He began moving around the various boats, listening carefully. The ringtone was coming from a small boat covered with a blue tarp just ahead of him.

He reached it and pulled the tarp up.

What he saw underneath nearly made him scream.

Hunched over, with her eyes open, was the body of Caroline Dunny. She was staring directly at him. Her skin was pale and her eyes were vacant. There was a hole in her forehead from which blood trickled down her face. She was dead.

Hyder went to the side of the boat and threw up the shrimp he had just eaten.

50

Hyder was in an interview room. Instead of FBI agents sitting across from him, they were police detectives.

Hyder had called 9-1-1 after clearing his stomach. He had told them about Dunny's body. That was why he was now here in the police station.

He had already been introduced to Detective Angelo Pascale and Detective Marina Lopez.

Pascale said, "So, Mr. Ali, how do you know the victim?"

"Do I need a lawyer?" Hyder said. "I just want to make sure."

"Why would you?" Pascale made a face. "You didn't do anything wrong, right?"

"I didn't, but the last time I spoke to the authorities, it was my lawyer who had to come and save me."

Pascale looked over at Lopez and said, "Just tell us what you know and we'll tell you if you need a lawyer, okay?"

Hyder nodded.

"So, what is your relationship with the victim?"

"She used to be my boss," Hyder said.

"Used to be?" Pascale raised an eyebrow.

"Yes, she fired me."

"When?"

"A day or so ago."

"Hmm." Pascale rubbed his chin.

"Hey, I didn't kill her if that's what you are getting at."

"I never said that," Pascale said. He turned to Lopez. "Did you hear me say that?"

Lopez didn't say anything. She just quietly stared at Hyder.

"What I'm saying is that a day or so ago the victim had fired you and now she was found dead, and on top of that you found her body. It kinda looks bad, doesn't it?" Pascale said next.

"I know, I see it too, but I'm telling you I would never harm anyone."

Pascale frowned. "Maybe it was a crime of passion?"

"No, it wasn't," Hyder said. "And if, for instance, I did kill her—which I am not confessing to—then why would I stick around and call the police?"

"He's got a point," Lopez said.

Pascale gave her a look that said you're not helping.

Hyder continued. "Okay, what about the murder weapon?"

"What about it?" Pascale asked.

"Where is it?"

"Maybe you threw it away."

"Okay, what about ballistics? You can check my hands, my jacket, everything. You will not find any gun residue."

"Are you a cop?" Pascale asked.

"No, I'm a reporter, or used to be one," Hyder replied. "Plus, I've seen my share of cop shows to know what you guys are looking for."

Pascale snorted, as if to say *there's one born every minute*.

Hyder bit back a curt reply.

"Who did you work for?" Lopez asked.

"The *Daily Times*."

"And she was your boss?" Pascale asked.

"Yes, she was my editor."

"Okay, let's get back to why you were at the pier in the first place."

"I was there to meet her."

"Why would you want to meet someone who fired you?"

"I didn't, she called me."

"So, she wanted to meet you?"

"Yes."

"Did she say why?"

"No, that's what I went to find out."

Lopez whispered something into Pascale's ear and left the room.

Pascale said, "Do you mind if I looked at your cell phone?"

Hyder pulled it out and slid it across the table.

"Do you mind if I check your call logs?"

"No."

Pascale scanned it. "I'm assuming the last call you dialed was the victim's telephone number?"

"Yes."

Lopez returned. In her hand was another cell phone. She said, "This is the victim's phone. You said she had called you first, yes?"

Hyder nodded.

They checked the logs on the phones. Lopez said, "It does look like she contacted you first, a few hours earlier. So you are correct."

"Thank you."

Lopez said, "In her text logs we can also see that you left her a voice message. I'll read it out: 'Hi, it's me, Hyder. I'm here, so please give me a call.' What did you mean 'I'm here'?"

"I was at the restaurant waiting for her."

"Which restaurant?" Pascale quickly asked.

"The Guildwood Yacht Club. You can confirm it with the staff there. I even paid by credit card, so they'll have a record of my visit."

"I'll go check it out," Lopez said and left the room again.

Pascale felt like he was losing the interview so he tried a more direct approach. "Listen, this is how I see it: you had a motive and you had an opportunity. The victim fired you so you were upset and wanted revenge, hence motive. The victim, for some reason, wanted to meet you, so you have the opportunity to take out your revenge. The semantics looks bad. If I were you I would confess and save us all the trouble. This way the prosecution might go lightly on you."

"I think I should call my lawyer now," Hyder said through clenched teeth.

51

Lopez hung up the phone when she spotted Nolan coming her way.

"What's up?" he asked.

"We found a female with a gunshot to the head," she replied. "We've got a suspect in the interview room."

"Can I see?"

"Be my guest."

On the way there Lopez filled in the details.

"What's his name?" he asked.

"Hyder Ali."

Nolan stopped. "Why does that name sound familiar?"

They entered the adjoining room and through the two-way mirror Nolan immediately recognized him. "I met him before. He came in with Freeland's daughter."

Though the intercom, Pascale was advising Hyder to confess.

"Is he leading the suspect?" Nolan said.

"If you asked him, he'd say he was nudging the suspect towards the truth."

"I don't like him," Nolan said.

"I don't either, but I have to work with him."

"Do you believe him?"

"You mean, Ali?"

"Yes."

"There is motive but so far his story checks out. I just spoke to the restaurant and the manager confirmed Ali was there. And they even provided the exact time, which was less than fifteen minutes before Ali called it in."

"Does the pier have cameras?" Nolan asked.

"It does and we have a person on it right now. Before we let Ali go we want to see what's on those tapes."

Nolan made a noise.

"What's on your mind, Tom?" Lopez asked.

"Something doesn't feel right about this."

"What do you mean?"

"I can't say, but something doesn't add up."

"Talk to me," she said.

"It seems strange to me that when he was helping Jessica Freeland, he was fired and the person who fired him ended up dead. Jessica Freeland had mentioned that someone was following her."

"You think the two are connected? Freeland and Dunny?"

"I can't see how but it does make me wonder."

Over the intercom Pascale was still pressuring Hyder, albeit more bluntly now, to admit he killed Dunny.

Pascale said, "Why don't you just admit that you despised Caroline Dunny."

"I didn't despise her," Hyder replied.

"But you didn't like her either."

"It wasn't just me, others didn't like her either."

"But you were the only one she fired, correct?"

"Yes, but that didn't mean I killed her," Hyder replied.

"Doesn't it?"

"I want my lawyer now."

Nolan listened intently. "I feel like going in and punching him."

"Ali?"

"Pascale."

"He's just doing his job."

"He's a thug with a badge. You strip him of it and he'd be another gangster-wannabe on the streets."

Lopez's cell phone rang. She answered. "Okay, describe him to me." She listened. "And the time?... alright, thanks." She hung up. "Our guy confirms that a camera caught a man dragging the body of a female along the pier."

"What did the man look like?"

"It was too dark and the man's back was to the camera, but our guy says the man looked like he was wearing a suit."

"He doesn't have a suit on." Nolan nodded in Hyder's direction.

"Also, the time on the camera would indicate that Ali was still in the restaurant."

"So, he's telling the truth?" Nolan asked.

"I'd have to say yes."

Nolan smiled.

Nolan stormed the room and said, "This interview is over."

Pascale looked at him, bewildered. "What?"

Even Hyder was confused.

"I'm Mr. Ali's lawyer," Nolan continued. "He has retained me to stop assholes like you from asking him any more questions. Thank you for your hospitality but we will be on our way now."

"What're you talking about?" Pascale was red with fury. "Have you gone crazy, Nolan?"

"You should have seen me last year. I was fully insane."

Lopez entered the room and whispered something into Pascale's ear. He looked at her, not believing. She nodded and then his shoulders sagged.

"You are the asshole, Nolan." He stormed out.

Hyder looked around. "What's going on?"

"You are free," Nolan said.

"I am?" Hyder asked.

"We verified your story and you have an alibi for the time of the murder. So you can go home now," Lopez replied.

Hyder was relieved.

"I'll drive you home," Nolan offered.

"I'll be fine. I'll take a cab," Hyder replied.

"Please, I insist."

Hyder looked at him.

"I think you and I are searching for the same thing," Nolan said.

"Which is?"

"The truth."

53

During the drive, neither said a word.

Nolan kept his eyes on the wheel and Hyder kept his eyes out the window.

Hyder's foot hit a bottle as it rolled back and forth under the seat. Hyder made no comment about it.

Nolan finally said, "I now believe that Eric Freeland did not commit suicide." Hyder turned to him. "So you and your friend were correct."

"Jessica and I told you that at the beginning."

"Yes, but you didn't have any evidence at that time."

"You've found evidence?"

"I haven't found any evidence that he was murdered, if that's what you are referring to. The evidence I've found only proves he didn't commit suicide."

"I don't understand," Hyder said.

"Eric Freeland's suicide was staged. Someone had gone to great lengths to make it look that way. I'm just not sure why."

Hyder bit his bottom lip, thinking. He finally said, "We've found something that may answer that." Hyder proceeded to tell Nolan about Freeland's diary, the

cryptic message on the diary pages that were sent to him, and what his theory was. Hyder also mentioned that Jessica had been chased by a man.

“What did this man look like?” Nolan asked.

“Jessica wasn’t able to describe him. She only said that he wore a suit.”

“A suit?” Nolan nearly jumped out of his seat.

Nolan told him about the footage from the camera at the pier.

Hyder rubbed his temples. “It has to be the same man, but what does Dunny have to do with all of this?”

“I don’t know, but whatever you guys are working on, I would like to be part of it.”

Hyder looked at him. “I don’t know.”

“I am the detective working on Eric Freeland’s case. And if I remember correctly, you did come to me first.”

“And you turned us away.”

“My bad.”

“And...”

“Yes?”

“You’re a drunk.”

“True, but I’m a high-functioning drunk.” Nolan gave him a smile.

Hyder didn’t look convinced.

“Listen, two heads are better than one. Three heads are way better than two. If all three of us got involved, we just might be able to find out what the hell is going on.”

54

Hyder was showing Nolan the pages from the diary when Jessica came in. They were in Hyder’s basement.

Jessica said, “Are you okay? Your mom just told me.”

Hyder had told his mom about Dunny’s death. He had learned a long time ago to always be honest with her. She was one of the most important people in his life. Naturally, Mrs. Ali was very upset and worried for him. But Hyder assured her that everything was fine, now that Detective Nolan was on the case.

“I’m okay,” Hyder said, reassuring Jessica.

Jessica turned to Nolan. “I’m glad you finally believe us.”

“I always believed you, but not really.” He gave her a smile.

“What do you make of the pages?” Hyder asked.

“It looks like it was written by a crackpot.” He then saw the look on Jessica’s face. “I mean a very intelligent crackpot.”

Jessica turned to Hyder. “Are you sure about him?”

Before Hyder could respond, Nolan said, “Hey, I’m the guy with the badge, so whether you like it or not, I’m the best hope you’ve got.”

Hyder nodded. “He’s right.”

Jessica sat down and crossed her legs. She didn’t look happy about it.

Mrs. Ali came down the stairs. She was holding a tray. On it was a plate of samosas, a plate of pakoras, and another plate of hand cut potato fries. On the side were chutneys, both sweet and sour.

"I thought you guys might like some snacks," she said.

She placed the tray on the table.

Nolan's eyes were wide. "Mrs. Ali, you did all this yourself?"

"It didn't take me long to fry them, and please call me Fatima," she smiled at him. Hyder was taken aback. Was his mother flirting with Nolan? "I hope you like them," she said.

"Are you kidding me? I'm gonna love them," he clapped his hands and dove in. With his mouth full he looked at Jessica and Hyder. "You guys want any?"

They both raised their hands and said in unison, "We're fine."

Nolan chewed, burped, and licked his fingers as he finished what was on the plates.

"I wish I had made more," Mrs. Ali said.

Nolan thumped his chest and put his hand up. "That was more than enough for me."

"I'm glad you liked it."

"I loved it. It was delicious."

Mrs. Ali smiled and took the empty plates and tray upstairs. "Let me know if you want anything else."

"I will," Nolan said.

When his mother was gone Hyder looked at Nolan.

"What?" Nolan shrugged. "I was hungry."

"Can we get back to work now?" Jessica said.

Hyder pulled out a sheet of paper and handed it to Nolan. "The following words were underlined in the diary."

XLX Ltd.

JVL

Whistleblower

Bribes

Murder

Catch Them in the Red

Student

Money

Auditor

Don't Trust

Pandora box

Hold Them

Nolan said, "In the car you told me briefly your theory regarding these words. I have to be honest with you. I had no idea what you were talking about. So, do you mind giving me another crash course?"

Hyder proceeded to explain what he believed the words meant. *JVL* was a *student* of Freeland's. He or she may have been working for *XLX Ltd.* *JVL* may have found out that *XLX Ltd.* was providing *bribes* and he or she was tipped off by

an *auditor*. This auditor blew the *whistle* and, subsequently, they were *murdered*. A lot of *money* was involved and Freeland wanted to *catch them red handed* and *hold them* accountable for the crimes. Freeland knew this information that he had been given would be a *Pandora's Box* for those involved and he wanted Hyder and Jessica to *trust* no one.

When Hyder had finished, Nolan didn't say a single word.

He closed his eyes as if he were thinking.

A few seconds went by, and then minutes.

Suddenly, a noise erupted from him. He was snoring!

Hyder and Jessica looked at each other.

Jessica stood up and slammed her hand on the table.

Nolan woke up, startled. "Where is he? I'll strangle him!" When he saw where he was, he relaxed.

"Enjoy your nap?" Jessica asked sarcastically.

"Yes, it was quite lovely, thank you. I was dreaming that I was prancing in a field of sunflowers. It was almost magical."

Jessica rolled her eyes.

Hyder said, "Did you listen to anything I said?"

"I heard everything," Nolan stood up. "I agree with most of your theory; well, it sounds plausible the way you present it anyway, but I think you've made a mistake in two instances."

"Which two?" Hyder inquired.

Nolan turned to Jessica. "Is it correct to say that your father was a conspiracy theorist?"

"Yes, but he wasn't crazy, I want you to know that."

"I'm sure he wasn't, all loonies think they are sane." Nolan began pacing the room. "The words *Catch Them in the Red* and *Hold Them* are not what you think they are."

Hyder and Jessica leaned forward in their chairs.

"Freeland wasn't referring to catching them red handed and holding them accountable, he was making a play with the words."

Both Jessica and Hyder were at the edge of their seats.

"Hold Them is a word play for Holden, as in Holden Caulfield. And Catch Them in the Red is a word play for *Catcher in the Rye*."

Hyder's mouth nearly dropped.

Jessica shook her head. "I think you got it wrong. It sounds too farfetched."

"No," Hyder said. "I think he's right."

"What?" Jessica was surprised. "You actually believe him?"

"Yes, because *Catcher in the Rye* is referred to as the conspiracy theorists' bible. It has been linked to many assassinations. Jessica, your dad was a huge conspiracy theorist; if he was being cryptic or was leaving us clues then I think we may find the answers in the copy of *The Catcher in the Rye* that your dad owned."

"Where do we find this copy?" Nolan asked.

"I think I know where it could be," Jessica said.

They were in Eric Freeland's house.

"It should be here," Jessica said. "This is where he keeps all his books."

They had gone through the bookshelf next to Freeland's desk. It was the same desk that the suicide note had been placed on.

"Your father has a lot of books," Nolan said, scratching his beard.

"He was an academic. Books were his life."

"Right, my bad," Nolan said.

Hyder said, "We should look again. We may have missed it. You don't mind if we pull them out?"

"My dad's gone," Jessica said. "I don't think he'd mind the mess."

They began grabbing the books off the shelf one by one. They threw them on the floor until there was no room left for them to walk.

"It's not here," Nolan said.

"And we went through it twice now."

Jessica dropped on the sofa with her head in her hands. "I don't get it."

"Do you think your dad kept books in other parts of the house?" Hyder asked.

"I don't know, maybe."

"Then we split up and search the entire place. Jessica, you take the upstairs, the bedroom in particular. Detective Nolan, you take the garage and I'll check the other rooms."

"Why do I get the garage?" Nolan asked, sounding annoyed. "As you can see, I'm in no condition to do any extraneous activities."

"Okay, then I'll take the garage and you take the other rooms. Check every nook and cranny."

"Even the bathroom?" Nolan asked.

"Really?" Jessica replied. "You think my dad would keep a book in the bathroom?"

"I read all the time on the toilet," Nolan shrugged.

"You're disgusting," Jessica said.

"Forget the bathroom, but thoroughly check the other rooms from top to bottom," Hyder said.

"Got it, sir," Nolan gave him a salute and disappeared.

Jessica rolled her eyes. "And you wanted to bring him?"

"He was the one who told us about the book, remember?" Hyder said.

"So far we haven't been able to find the book to confirm if he was right, remember?"

Hyder put his hands up. "You win."

Hyder spent the next thirty minutes going through the entire garage. He pulled open every box he could find. Freeland had kept a lot of material from the university. Hyder saw old syllabuses, exams, solutions, teacher's notes, textbooks, and many other materials. What Hyder didn't find was the book.

Exhausted and sweating, he went back inside.

He found Jessica alone on the sofa.

"Where is Detective Nolan?" Hyder asked.

He then heard a flush and out came Nolan from the bathroom. "I don't think the pakoras settled too well." Nolan tapped his stomach.

"What now?" Jessica asked.

Hyder sat next her. He wasn't sure either.

"Maybe, it could be in my dad's office," Jessica said.

"If it was," Nolan said, sitting across them. "It's no longer there."

"What do you mean?" Hyder squinted.

"I was there earlier and it's been cleared out."

There was silence.

Hyder felt like a headache was coming on. He closed his eyes and tried to clear his head. He opened them and abruptly got up.

"What is it?" Jessica asked.

Hyder bent down and picked up a heavy book. He began flipping through it.

Nolan said, "If you think the book is hiding in that big one, then you should start drinking... speaking of which, I'm thirsty." He licked his lips.

Hyder was intently flipping the pages.

"What have you got there?" Jessica asked.

Hyder stopped on a page. "I think I know where the book might be."

Both Nolan and Jessica sat up eagerly.

"According to Greek Mythology *Pandora's Box* wasn't actually a box, but a large jar, which contained all the evils of the world. When opened, it would release things that had severe consequences." Hyder turned to Jessica. "Your dad wasn't just saying that by opening Pandora's Box we would be unleashing the truth onto the world. He *literally* meant that the truth was inside Pandora's Box."

"I don't get it," Jessica said.

"I don't either," Nolan added with a shrug.

"Wait." He looked around the room. "There," he pointed. A large vase sat on the floor near the entrance.

He rushed over and put his hand inside. When he brought it out, in his hand was a copy of *The Catcher in the Rye*.

"The book was in a jar." Nolan marveled with wide eyes. "Now I get it."

Hyder came over and sat down.

He slowly began flipping through the pages. On one page was the letter 'X', on the next 'L', then 'X', then 'Ltd', then '=', and finally, TriGate Management Group.

XLX Ltd = TriGate Management Group.

Hyder flipped through the rest of the pages but there were no markings on them.

"Isn't TriGate one of the largest construction firms in the city?" Jessica said.

"Yes, so does it mean they are involved with bribes and murder?" Hyder said.

"According to my dad, yes," Jessica replied.

"Where's Nolan?" Hyder looked around.

The front door was open. When they went out to check he was already gone.

Nolan drove like a madman. He gripped the steering wheel so tightly that his knuckles turned white.

He was furious at himself. He wanted to slam the car into a pole, the car ahead of him, the bus shelter he was passing, anything. The pain inside him had erupted and he feared he might not be able to ease it back down.

He heard the rattle of the bottle underneath the seat as it rolled back and forth.

Keeping an eye in front of him, he quickly leaned over and in one swoop, snatched it.

With his teeth, he unscrewed the cap and took a long, deep drink from it.

It felt good as it soothed his nerves.

He exhaled loudly.

Why didn't he see it before? Why didn't he make the connection? It was right there all the time. All he had to do was put it together.

He knew the answer and it was simple. There was no need to make a link.

He never once doubted the official report he had been given. It made sense and he believed it. Had he been suspicious even once he would have followed through.

It was why now he was driving like a lunatic.

He had to douse his suspicion or else it would fester and spread like a virus throughout his body.

He parked the car in front of his house and ran in.

"Where is it?" he mumbled to himself. "Where did I put it?"

He searched the living room, the kitchen, the basement; finally, he went to the bedroom.

Next to the bed was a pile of reading materials.

He quickly went through them until he found the folder he had been looking for. It had coffee stains on it and the edges were bent or ripped. Right after the accident, he had spent a month filling the folder with information. He didn't know why but it somehow gave him a focus. It had helped keep his mind off the pain, until the pain became intolerable and he had to relieve it with alcohol.

He flipped the pages until he stopped on a single sheet. It was a brief obituary cut out from the newspaper.

When Nolan read it, he nearly lost his breath. He was suddenly angry at himself again. He wanted to punch something or someone.

He saw the side table and rushed to it. He pulled open the drawer, found several smaller bottles scattered inside. He had kept them there in the event the nightmares reappeared again. They were his emergency supply in case he couldn't tolerate the pain anymore.

He snapped a bottle open and swallowed it down. He opened another and another, until his head began to spin.

He sat at the foot of the bed and put his face in his hands.

Raw emotions were running through his head and he knew if he didn't control them they would take over. He could end up sitting in his room drunk for days. He couldn't allow that. Not right now, at least.

He went into the bathroom and looked at himself in the mirror.

His eyes were bloodshot. He splashed cold water over his face.

He dried his face and went out.

He had to make sure the reason behind how he felt was true. The only way to do that was to go out and confirm it.

He drove straight to the office of Pilster Insurance Company. It was located on the seventh floor of a commercial building.

It took Nolan a couple of minutes to find it, but then he saw the company plaque outside the door and went in.

He flashed his badge and was immediately introduced to Irwin Campbell.

Campbell was in his forties, with receding hair and a big mustache.

When they were seated in his office, Campbell said, "How can I help you, Detective?"

Nolan rubbed his beard. "I need to see an insurance report, but it's a year old."

"That's not a problem," Campbell said. "We store all our paperwork in this location. Do you have a file number or even a name?"

Nolan pursed his lips. "Yes, it's for... Amanda Hansborough."

"Hansborough," Campbell nodded. "I'll be right back with the file." Campbell left.

Nolan leaned back in the chair and stared out the windows. The sun was at full strength and Nolan had to squint to see outside.

A couple of minutes later, Campbell returned, looking pale. "I'm sorry to say, but we don't have the file."

"What do you mean?" Nolan nearly stood up.

Campbell rubbed his hands. "We can't find it. It's logged in our system, but the actual file is not where it's supposed to be. However, when we log a file into our system we make a brief note regarding the file. This helps us know what the file was about without actually pulling out the hard copy. "

He handed Nolan a printout.

Nolan scanned it and looked up at Campbell, "Is this correct?"

"Yes, the agent who reviewed the case made that conclusion based on the information he received from various sources."

Nolan's head was reeling.

He got up and without uttering a word left the office.

He went back to his car and pulled out the folder he had brought from home. The folder was filled with information on the Hansborough family. He lifted the newspaper obituary of Amanda Hansborough. On it, it clearly stated where Hansborough had worked at the time of her death. It further stated what she did for them.

When Hyder had revealed the identity of XLX Ltd, Nolan's mind had flashed to Amanda Hansborough. What triggered this flash was not only the name of the company, but also Hansborough profession, which Freeland had mentioned in his cryptic notes.

Amanda Hansborough was an internal auditor for TriGate Management Group.

Nolan lifted the print out from Campbell. At the bottom, in the comments section, were the following words: CAUSE OF DEATH, FAULTY BRAKES.

Amanda Hansborough didn't have an accident, she was murdered.

The estate was nestled on fifteen acres. It had over twelve thousand square feet of living space. It included six bedrooms, eight bathrooms, a ballroom, and even an indoor swimming pool.

The value of the property was close to six point eight million dollars.

Grant had already done his homework as he made his way through the gate and up the winding road.

Grant parked his car near the entrance. A man in a tuxedo greeted him by the front door.

He was led down the hall and into a room.

The room was spacious but relatively dark. The only lights were coming from small lamps next to the chairs and the large windows on the one side of the room.

There were three people sitting in the room. Their backs were to the windows, casting shadows over their faces.

But Grant knew who they were. It was his job to always keep himself informed.

"Sit down, please," a voice echoed in the room.

Grant knew the voice belong to Charles Marshall CEO of TriGate Management Group. Occupying such a high position in TriGate had allowed him to own this estate.

Grant sat in a chair across from them.

He recognized the other two members. Terry Scott was the President of TriGate, and the person next to him Grant had met many times before, Ian Marshall, Vice-President of TriGate. Ian was also the son of Charles Marshall.

Charles said, "Ian had assured me that you were the right man for the job before we hired you. In fact, you promised us that you would make this problem go away. It hasn't; why not?"

"The variables have changed," Grant said. "More people are involved now. Even Detective Tom Nolan is pursuing Freeland's case."

"Didn't you tell us not to worry about Nolan?" Charles said. "That he was nothing but a drunk?"

"He still is, but unfortunately, this case has rekindled his interest in his job."

"This is not good," Terry Scott piped. "This detective could be on to us. We should have never..."

Charles put his hand up to silence him. "You can deal with this, right?" He was talking to Grant.

"I can," Grant replied. "But you still haven't provided me with the name of the person who was feeding information to Freeland."

Ian spoke up, "We have over twenty thousand employees working for us on various continents. It's not that easy pinpointing the informant."

Grant leaned forward and looked at them directly. "If I already had the name, I would have leaned on this individual and found out what information he or she had provided to Freeland. This would have made my job far easier by allowing me to cut off the loose ends. Instead, I had to work with whatever information that was provided to me. This has made my task far more complicated. I don't like complications, so until you meet your end of the bargain and find who the

informant is, I don't want to be summoned here again." Grant stood up and buttoned his suit jacket. "Can you assure me that you'll be able to find this person?"

There was silence.

Finally, Ian said, "We'll find the mole. I guarantee it."

58

Nolan drained the tall glass in one gulp and waved to the bartender for more.

Damian came over. "Are you sure, Tom? At this time of day?"

"Please, I need more," Nolan said.

He was hiding in one of the booths in the back of the bar. Damian looked over at Boris, who was by the front door. Boris nodded and Damian placed another glass before him.

A man entered the bar, said a few words to Boris, and then made his way toward Nolan.

He slid into the seat across from him.

"What're you doing here?" Nolan asked.

"I wanted to see how you were doing." Hyder said.

"I'm fine, just peachy. How did you know I'd be here anyway?"

"I'm a reporter, aren't I? I have my sources."

Nolan nodded. He stared at the full glass before him. "Can I get you a drink?"

"I don't drink."

"Is it because you're Moslem?"

"Yes, and it's pronounced *Mus*-lim."

"My bad, I apologize," Nolan said, putting his hands together. "You'd be surprised, though, at the amount of liquor some of you Arabs can put down."

"I'm not Arab," Hyder shot back. "There is a misconception that all Muslims are Arabs. Only about twenty percent are, and the majority of Muslims don't even speak Arabic."

"Again, my bad. But some of those Arabs, and not you, of course, make Irish guys like me look like amateurs. I should know, I've seen them do it first-hand."

Damian came over. "You want anything?"

"He doesn't drink," Nolan said, pointing at Hyder. "He's the non-drinking type of *Muslim*."

"I'll have soda water, please."

Damian left.

"So, are you here to make me feel better?" Nolan asked. "Or are you here to tell me more about your religion?"

"I'm here to do neither," Hyder replied. "I just thought you'd want to talk."

"Well, I don't," Nolan put his hand up. "And do you want to know why? It's because I just found out that my wife died not because of something random, but because of something deliberate." He looked Hyder straight in the eye. "That information changes everything. You realize you never had to lose the person you

love. You realize you never had to suffer the way you did. You realize... you could have been happy.”

Hyder understood why Nolan wanted to vent, even if he stated otherwise.

Damian came over with the water.

“Thank you,” Hyder said.

Nolan continued. “I am certain that someone from TriGate Management Group had Amanda Hansborough killed. She ended up killing my wife in the process. They also had Freeland murdered.”

“Do you have proof?” Hyder said.

Nolan stumbled. “I... I have...”

“You have Freeland’s notes and a novel that indicates all this leads to TriGate, that’s it.”

Nolan slammed his palm on the table, spilling liquid from the glass. “Shit, shit, shit,” he grunted. He put his head in his hands.

“We can still nail them,” Hyder said. “We need to find JVL. He or she will lead us to TriGate.”

“Does this JVL even exist?” Nolan said.

“XLX Ltd existed, didn’t it?” Hyder leaned forward. “Listen, Jessica and I have narrowed down the list. With your help we can find JVL. So let’s go.”

“I don’t know,” Nolan shook his head. “I wouldn’t ask you to understand this, but I’m in a lot of pain right now.”

“I understand it.”

Nolan looked at him.

Hyder said, “I lost someone too.”

Nolan waited.

“My father, from a heart attack. He was not even thirty-eight years old. Like your wife, it was unexpected. One moment he was healthy and full of life and the next he was gone.”

“I’m sorry,” Nolan said. “I really am.”

Hyder nodded.

“You want to know something?” Hyder’s eyes were moist. “I don’t remember much about him. I only remember he loved watching James Bond movies.” Hyder suddenly laughed. It wasn’t a laugh of joy, but a laugh of realization. “Now that I think about it, it was odd seeing a man who never drank, never swore, never gambled, never even thought of straying from his marriage, watching and enjoying a character who was his exact opposite.” Hyder looked away. “I miss him, but I can’t bring him back, and knowing this helps me to move on.”

Nolan was silent. He stared at the glass of liquor before him. He nodded, more to himself than to Hyder. “Let’s go and get these bastards,” he finally said.

59

There were three names left on their lists. One name was on Jessica’s list and two on Hyder’s. They had decided to split up. Jessica would work with Nolan and

Hyder would be on his own. Jessica wasn't in favor of the idea. She wanted to take a name by herself, but it was Hyder who insisted she stay close to Nolan.

Someone was after Jessica and this person had already made an attempt on her life during one of her visits. She had managed to escape, but the next time she might not be so lucky.

So, Jessica and Nolan would check out two names: Janice Voila Landon and Jacob Volker Lett, while Hyder would interview James Vander Lee. They had struck out Jasmine Vicky Johnson from the list—the person Hyder had visited, but was not home—because they had found out through Nolan's search that she had moved away.

They had no choice but to deal with her later, in the event the other names didn't pan out.

Hyder left his house and rode his bike to the address on his list.

What he didn't realize was, half a block away, a black sedan was following his every move.

* * * * *

Grant was behind the wheel. He had decided to keep an eye on Hyder instead of Jessica. With Nolan beside her, it would be too risky for Grant to watch her.

Whatever the three were working on, it was now in Grant's favor to be part of it. He had a feeling they would lead him to the mole.

Grant grunted. The idiots at TriGate were running around chasing their tails. They were too afraid of what they'd find that they weren't looking hard enough.

It would be up to him to do their job.

His reputation depended on it. The Freeland job had turned into a fiasco. And if word got out, no one would ever hire him again.

Grant wouldn't let that happen. He wouldn't let a student, a drunk, and a reporter destroy his work.

He was willing to go the extra mile to finish this, even if it meant putting a bullet in each of their heads.

Once the job was finished, he would disappear, at least for a little while. When the heat was off he would resurface and continue his job as a fixer again.

He watched Hyder slow down and then come to a complete stop.

He parked in the distance but kept his eyes on him.

* * * * *

Hyder looked at the number and then back at his list. This was the right house.

James Vander Lee lived in the basement apartment of a row house. There were at least ten houses that were similar to the one he was standing in front of.

Hyder went down the stairs and knocked on the black painted door.

He waited. No answer.

He knocked again. Still no answer.

He saw a buzzer and pressed it. He heard ringing from inside the apartment.

It looked to him like James Vander Lee wasn't home. If Vander Lee was preoccupied, either in the washroom or even with sleep, he would have answered the door by now.

Hyder went up the stairs and out to the pavement.

He was deciding whether to wait or come back later when he spotted someone coming his way.

The man was wearing a blue hoodie, light-brown khakis, and white runners.

Hyder watched him come closer and closer until he was not even twenty feet away from him.

Their eyes met and for a brief second it looked like the man knew why Hyder was there.

Hyder moved toward him.

The man bolted.

Hyder ran after him.

The man raced down the street and turned the corner. Hyder did the same. When he was around the corner, he saw the man duck into an alley.

Hyder followed. In the alley, Hyder saw the man climb up and over a metal fence.

Hyder did the same.

He wasn't about to lose him. This man could hold the answer to all their questions. He could be the missing link in this intricate web of money, corruption, and murder.

When Hyder reached the other side of the fence, he found himself out of breath. He sucked in air, kept going.

He spotted the man down the block. The man was running on the pavement.

Hyder went after him. His legs ached, his lungs were on fire, but he didn't stop.

The man turned and saw him. He hurried across the street.

A car slammed into him.

The man flew five feet up in the air and fell to the ground hard.

Hyder didn't slow down. He reached the man in a matter of seconds. The man was slumped sideways on the concrete road. Blood was oozing out of the back of his head.

Hyder quickly turned to the car. The driver behind the wheel was holding his nose. Blood was pouring out of his nostrils. The impact had dented the front bumper.

But then something happened.

The driver's eyes and Hyder's locked.

For a second it looked like the driver recognized him.

He then pulled out a gun and pointed it directly at him through the window.

Hyder stood frozen.

He realized it was the man in the suit that Jessica had mentioned.

Hyder put his arms in front of his face to shield himself when there was a loud scream.

A woman across the street was wailing at the sight of the bloodied body on the road.

The man looked at the woman and then back at Hyder. He put the car in gear and drove away.

Hyder checked on the man on the ground.

The man's eyes were vacant and hollow, like he was staring at nothing in particular. Hyder had seen those eyes on Dunny.

The man was dead.

Hyder quickly searched the man's pockets. After everything that had just happened, he wasn't about to leave empty handed. He had to make sure that this was the person he had been looking for and not someone else.

He found a cell phone in the pocket of the hoodie, but before he could grab the man's wallet, he heard sirens.

Hyder left the man and ran away.

60

Hyder was pacing back and forth in his basement when Nolan and Jessica showed up.

He had called and told them what had happened.

"Are you okay?" Jessica said, coming over and giving him a hug.

Hyder nodded, but she could tell he was still shaken up.

"You think James Vander Lee is our guy?" Nolan asked.

"I can't be sure," Hyder answered. "But the way he reacted when he saw me makes me think so. Also, this man in the suit was also searching for Vander Lee."

"So this means he didn't know Vander Lee was helping Freeland?" Nolan asked.

"If he did, Vander Lee would have been dead a long time ago." Hyder suddenly sat down. "Oh my God, I led this man straight to Vander Lee. He is dead because of me."

Jessica came over. "No, you didn't know Vander Lee was involved. You can't blame yourself for what happened. You didn't kill him, the man in the car did."

Hyder thought about it, nodded.

Nolan rubbed his chin. "It's just too bad that we won't be able to gather any information from Vander Lee now."

Hyder pulled out a cell phone. "I took it from Vander Lee right before I left."

"How's that going to help us?" Jessica inquired.

"People use cell phones for all sorts of purposes. To take photos, to text, to call someone, or even to store information only they want to see. If we can see what's on here I am certain we'll find something—*anything*. It'll at least give us a start."

Nolan thought about it. "I bet it's locked."

"Don't worry, I know someone who can unlock it."

"You sure he's reliable?" Nolan asked. "We're not doing something that is exactly legal, you know."

"He's a genius with electronic. If there is one person I would give it to, it would be him."

"Okay, then do it," Nolan said.

"There is something else," Hyder said. "I was able to get the license plate of the sedan that killed Vander Lee."

Hyder provided it to Nolan.

"I'll look into it," Nolan said. "In the meantime, we need access to that phone ASAP."

61

Nolan conducted a search of the license plate number through the department's database and it led him to where he was standing now.

Before him was a car rental company.

Nolan had a feeling the man in the suit wouldn't be driving a car registered to him. That feeling had now turned out to be true.

Nolan went inside and introduced himself. He provided the license plate number to the agent behind the desk.

The agent gave Nolan a name: Albert Bush.

Nolan had a feeling it wasn't real. He asked if they had a copy of the man's driver's license.

Luckily, they did.

Nolan left the rental company with the photocopy.

He showed it to Hyder, who confirmed that it was the man in the suit.

Nolan now had a fake name, but he also had a real face.

The next time he saw this man, Nolan wouldn't hesitate using lethal force, if it came down to it.

62

They all waited anxiously, as Lester worked furiously behind his laptop.

They were back in Hyder's basement. It had sort of become their headquarters.

Lester had Vander Lee's cell phone hooked up to his laptop and he was using a software program to crack the password protection.

"How long will it take?" Nolan asked.

"I can't say," Lester replied. "It could take minutes, hours, or sometimes even days to break into these things."

Nolan turned to Hyder. "Days?"

"I know Lester can do it quicker, can't you?" Hyder asked.

Lester shrugged. "Yeah, I'll try. But you gotta keep your end of the bargain."

"I will," Hyder said. "My mom, right now is making your favorite dish—Biryani."

Lester licked his lips, imagining the smell and texture of the meal.

"In fact, I'll even throw in a plate of chicken tikka, if you do it even quicker." Hyder continued.

Lester mouth nearly dropped.

"Is he going to drool?" Nolan asked, looking disgusted.

Lester went back to his work.

Two agonizing hours later Lester said, "I'm in."

They all huddled around him.

The laptop screen showed the interface of the cell phone. Lester first scrolled through the call logs.

"We might need to verify those telephone numbers later," Nolan said.

Lester then opened the images folder. Vander Lee had taken random shots of himself and other things, but nothing they could see that might help them.

They scrolled through Vander Lee's text messages but they, too, were not useful. They were brief and non-specific.

Vander Lee had a lot of applications and games installed on his phone. Lester started checking out the games. "Stay focused, Lester," Hyder reminded him.

Finally, one application caught Lester's attention.

"I have this on my phone too," he said. "It allows you to encrypt notes that you want hidden. For instance, see these odd symbols and text? When decrypted, they will reveal whatever the user was trying to protect."

"How do we decrypt it?" Hyder asked.

"You need a software program for that," he said.

"No kidding," Nolan interjected with heavy sarcasm.

"Where do we get this software?" Hyder asked, ignoring Nolan, feeling like they were so close, but so far at the same time.

"Luckily, I have the software on my laptop," Lester smiled. "By the way, is the Biryani ready?"

"It will be soon." Hyder patted Lester on the shoulder. "Once you are done, you can have the entire pot of it."

Lester hit a few keystrokes and said, "Let the magic begin." He then hit *enter*.

The symbols and images slowly changed one by one until it became readable.

"What is it?" Jessica asked.

"It looks like a username and password," Lester said.

"But to what?" Hyder asked.

"Wait," Lester said. He clicked a few screens. More material was slowly revealed.

"The Cloud Network?" Hyder said, looking at the monitor. "What's that?"

"It's like an online site where you can store and retrieve data from anywhere in the world." Lester then went on to the site, entered the username and password, and waited.

An account labeled "Jim Lee" came up.

"It has to be James Vander Lee's," Hyder said.

Underneath the account name were several folders. They were labeled WORKING PAPERS, EXHIBITS, WORKSHEETS, SCHEDULES, MEMO, NOTES.

"Open the first folder," Hyder said.

Lester did. More files came up onto the screen. Lester clicked on one, which launched a new program.

"What are all those calculations?" Jessica asked.

"I don't know," Hyder said. "But look at the name at the top corner."

"A. Hansborough," Nolan said. His brow furrowed.

"And look at the header," Hyder said.

"TriGate Management Group," Jessica replied.

Lester got up. "I've done my job. I'm now going upstairs to enjoy my reward."

This time no one stopped him.

Hyder got behind the laptop and began going through the contents of the folders. At first neither of them had a clue of what they were looking at until they started from the folders labeled MEMO and NOTES, and slowly worked their way through.

It took them a couple of hours to fully grasp the extent of what they had uncovered. When they were done, they sat down, feeling exhausted.

Lester came down to the basement, fully stuffed with Indian food.

"Man, your mom is an amazing cook," he said. "It was like eating food from heaven."

Jessica raised an eyebrow. "You've been eating the entire time we've been downstairs?"

"Not the entire time," Lester shook his head, correcting her. "I took breaks in between. Hyder's mom showed me Hyder's baby photos."

"I have to see those," Jessica teased.

"He used to be a cute baby," Lester said. "I don't know what happened to him now. It looks like he got deformed as he grew older."

"Thanks for the compliment," Hyder said sarcastically.

"You're welcome, buddy," Lester said. "So, you guys find anything useful?"

Hyder, Nolan, and Jessica looked at each other.

"What? I'm not part of the group now?" Lester said.

Hyder leaned forward in his chair and said, "Lester, the contents of that laptop could destroy a lot of people's reputations, not to mention put them behind bars. We are talking about government officials, union representatives, and high-ranking corporate individuals, very important people. And they all are linked to TriGate Management Group."

"I gotta sit down for this," Lester said as he grabbed a seat. "Fill me in."

Hyder cleared his throat. "This is what we think happened. TriGate has been involved in major projects throughout the city. They have built one of the highways. They have worked on the subway system. They have even remodeled the new football stadium. Those documents show that the reason they were awarded those contract was because of bribes."

"Wow," Lester said. "And it clearly states that in those documents?"

"Not exactly," Jessica said. "The upper management at TriGate were using a secret internal accounting code."

"A what?"

"It was a way for them to hide what they were actually doing."

"So how were they doing this?"

"When they quoted a project to a potential customer they would allocate ten percent of it to procurement costs, which was actually money provided to individuals to gain the contract," Hyder said. "These individuals could be civil servants of various government departments, they could be politicians, they could be heads of corporations with vested interest in the projects; anyone who assisted them in winning the contracts was a beneficiary of these payments. TriGate hid these costs from actual customers in their internal spreadsheets, but recouped them by inflating the salaries of those involved in the projects. So the customer

never thought they were paying for the bribes, they figured it was part of the cost of the project. To keep track of these payments, they made a note at the bottom of each check they paid them with. We saw scanned copies of checks with the letters PPC written on them.”

“What does ‘PPC’ stand for?” Lester asked.

“Project Procurement Costs.”

“So, who blew the whistle?”

“James Vander Lee,” Hyder said.

“The guy whose phone we hacked into?”

“Precisely. Vander Lee worked as an engineer on several projects for TriGate. He knew something wasn’t on the up and up, so he told an internal auditor about this.”

“Who?”

Hyder turned to Nolan. “Amanda Hansborough,” Nolan said.

“She’s the one whose name I saw on one of the documents, right?” Lester asked.

“Yes,” Nolan replied. “Hansborough started looking into it, and when she got too close, they had her killed.”

Lester’s eyes widened. “No way.”

Hyder nodded. “Vander Lee, afraid for his own life, went silent. But the guilt was too much for him, so to expose what was going on, he told one of his professors.”

“My dad,” Jessica said.

“Freeland was assisting Vander Lee in gathering evidence against TriGate,” Hyder continued. “Together they were going to take the evidence to the authorities, but before they could do that, Freeland was murdered.”

Jessica bit her lip.

Lester scratched his head. “How did TriGate know Jessica’s dad was involved?”

Jessica said, “My dad was very suspicious of technology, he felt the government was listening in on everyone.”

“They are, trust me,” Lester confirmed.

“Anyway,” Jessica continued, “in Vander Lee’s cell phone calendar we noticed a recurring note. It was labeled ‘Meeting EF in Office’, which I am certain means, ‘meeting Eric Freeland.’ Vander Lee and my dad would meet at the university to discuss the TriGate situation. And if anyone asked, they could say Vander Lee and my dad were having a professor/student discussion.”

Lester stopped her. “Okay, but you still didn’t answer my question: how did they know your dad was involved?”

This time Hyder spoke, “It was indicated in Freeland’s diary. I remembered reading an entry that at first looked like gibberish, but when I looked at it now it makes absolute sense.” Hyder handed a piece of paper to Lester.

Lester read it out loud. “*Received calls many times from XLX Ltd, but too afraid to answer, must stop meeting or else too dangerous, will have to slow down or will end up like auditor, the seeking of the original cannot be done, we have nothing to help us, must become more cautious, eyes are watching, the walls have ears, and life has become more precious...*” Lester looked up. “I don’t get it.”

"Remember, it was Vander Lee who was feeding information to Freeland from inside TriGate. Vander Lee may have sensed that TriGate was suspicious that something was up, or that he may have almost blown his cover. This would explain why he had called Freeland multiple times in one day, perhaps trying to warn him. Vander Lee's mistake led TriGate to focus on Freeland. I think Freeland realized he was under surveillance and that his life was in danger, which would also explain his odd behavior weeks before his murder, so he chose to send pages from his diary to me. He made them cryptic in case they got into TriGate's hands."

Lester rubbed his head. "Okay, I get that they were working to expose the corruption, but why not take this stuff—all the contents we found on the laptop—to the police?"

Hyder said, "Read further down."

Lester read out loud: "*Orginal, original, we need the original, without it we cannot do anything, we have to find it, until then we don't have anything...*" Lester blinked. "What does it mean?"

Hyder said, "We think Freeland was referring to the original documents, the internal files that, perhaps, Amanda Hansborough had put together. Freeland believed that without them they had no case."

"But it's all here," Lester exclaimed. "We can see copies of it."

"Yes, *copies*," Nolan said, "they are not original documents that were signed by Amanda Hansborough."

"What about the checks?" Lester said. "They were signed by whoever was in-charge and they clearly show at the bottom that internal accounting code you mentioned."

"Agreed, but TriGate could argue that they were fabricated, forged by their competitors to ruin their reputation. And we now know how high up this sordid mess goes. Who knows if those people will let it see the light of day. I believe (but I could be wrong) that Freeland and Vander Lee were going to use this information to pressure TriGate to reveal the original documents. He mentions this in one of his entries in the diary." Nolan picked up a sheet and read, "*Today not going well, not knowing what's happening, desire to tell the truth which will make this difficult, maybe tomorrow will meet JVL and will go visit XLX Ltd. and take away the thing that is most important.*" Nolan put the paper down. "When Freeland said they would take away the most important thing from XLX Ltd, which we know is a reference to TriGate, he meant the original file."

"Do we even know if the original file still exists?" Lester said.

He was met with silence.

"What if the people at TriGate destroyed it?"

"There is a huge possibility that it may be gone now," Hyder conceded.

"Which puts us in the same situation as Freeland and Vander Lee," Lester said.

Hyder hated to admit it but he was right. They didn't have the original and were in no position to do anything.

The mood in the room was somber.

Hyder felt terrible, not for himself, but for Nolan and Jessica. Jessica had lost a father because he was trying to do the right thing. Nolan had lost a wife because she was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Maybe it was why now, more than anything, he wanted to expose TriGate, to give Nolan and Jessica some closure. They had been through a lot and they deserved to move on.

But how to do it? He wondered.

They knew they were up against forces far stronger and more vicious than them. Murder was not beneath their opponents. Who knew, if things had gone the other way, if Hyder and Jessica would still be alive?

Hyder's mom came down, asking if anyone wanted anything to eat.

They all said no, even Lester. They had lost their appetite.

Nolan was the first to get up and leave. Hyder feared he would go and drown his sorrows at the nearest bar. But there was nothing he could do to stop him.

Jessica was next to get up. Hyder put his hand up when she said, "I'm fine, I just need a walk to clear my head."

Hyder nodded. He would give her the space she needed.

Lester looked at Hyder. "I would go," he said. "But I really don't have any place to be, so can I stay?"

"Of course you can," Hyder said, getting up. "Whenever you're hungry, come up and I'll ask my mom to warm something up for you."

"I like the sound of that." Lester gave him a thumbs up.

Speaking of his mom, Hyder thought, he should go and speak to her. Whenever he needed to sort something out, he found talking to her really helped.

She was sitting at the dining table cutting vegetables.

He came over and sat next to her.

"What's wrong, *beta*?" she said. She could always tell when something was upsetting him.

He shook his head. "I don't know. I just don't know what to do anymore."

She put the knife down and said, "Tell me."

He wasn't sure how much he should disclose to her. He was worried it might upset her, or worse, might put her in a difficult situation later. It was better if she was kept in the dark, this way she could always deny having any knowledge of what was going on.

He chose his words carefully. "*Ami*, we were working on something, but now we are stuck and we don't know what to do next."

"Did you find what you were looking for?" she asked. He had briefly mentioned to her that they were searching for someone. He never said that it was James Vander Lee.

"Yes, but what we found will not be much help to us anymore," he said. Vander Lee was dead. He could no longer be used as a witness against TriGate. The data he left behind would require a long investigation, one that could take years, and who knew what TriGate would do to cover up their tracks by then.

"So you are stuck, right?" she asked.

He nodded.

"I'll tell you something, Hyder," she said. "When your dad passed away, I was stuck too. Until then I had been content with being a mother and housewife. My entire world revolved around the walls of this house. I never imagined having to raise two boys on my own, but you know what? I did. I knew that it was up to me to take care of you and Akbar. Even with your uncles and your aunts willing to help out, I knew they couldn't do it forever. Instead of waiting for something to happen, I made it happen. I went to our local library and I told them I needed a job. I told them I would come every day and even if they didn't pay me, I would work for free. I wanted to put that experience on my resume. By the Grace of Allah, they soon hired me. I've been working there ever since. I only hope I was able to give you both the best life I could possibly give."

Hyder held her hands. "*Ami*, there was nothing lacking in our life growing up, and *you* made it all happen."

Hyder kissed her hands and got up.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Instead of waiting for something to happen, I'm going to make it happen."

64

Jessica had returned from her walk and even Nolan came back. He wasn't drunk, as Hyder had feared. He just needed to drive around the block to clear his emotions. Lester was still behind his laptop when Hyder came down to the basement.

"I think I have a solution to our problem," Hyder said. They sat around him as he paced the room. "What if we make it look like that we have the file?"

"But we don't," Jessica said.

"I know, but just think about it. To make a scheme this big work, you'd need a lot of people to work cohesively. You need the lie to keep moving from one person to the next, and you need to hope that no one breaks the lie or else the truth would be exposed." Hyder could tell that they were not following him. He pulled up Lester's laptop and showed them copies of the various checks. "You can see that these were signed by different individuals, which means that many people had their dirty hands in the pot. What we need to do is pressure one of them, just one, so that he would break the continuation of the lie."

Jessica twirled her hair.

Nolan rubbed his beard.

Lester scratched his head.

They were all mulling over what Hyder had told them.

"Who do you have in mind?" Nolan finally asked.

Hyder pulled up a check on the screen. "Terry Scott, President of TriGate Management Group. His signature is on almost all the checks. This means he has more to lose than anyone if the truth ever came out. This also means that he would be willing to make a deal to save his life, if the opportunity was ever given to him."

Hyder looked at the group for approval.

One by one, they all nodded.

65

Terry Scott took a sip from his martini and then took a puff from the cigar. He was in his mid-fifties, with receding hair that had been dyed, and wrinkles on his slim face.

He was married once, but after the messy divorce, he never made the same mistake again. With money he was able to go through a revolving door of women. They were much younger than him and that was how he liked them. They wanted financial security and he wanted their youth. Even if he never married them, he always made sure to shower them with expensive gifts. This, he found, made his life much simpler. They got what they wanted and he got what he wanted.

Scott was lounging in the back room of a classy establishment when the maitre d interrupted his reverie. "Excuse me, sir. A Mr. Hyder Ali is here to see you."

"Hyder Ali?" Scott replied. "I don't know anyone by that name."

"He said he's a reporter and it's important that he speaks to you," the maitre d explained.

Scott mulled this over. "A reporter?"

"Yes."

"Okay, send him in."

Scott placed the martini down and took a long drag from the cigar. Two minutes later a man walked in.

"I'm a busy man so I don't like being disturbed," Scott said. "But what can I do for you?"

Hyder went over and sat down across from him.

This threw Scott off balance. This reporter was not only intruding on his leisure time, he was also rude.

Scott held his tongue.

"Mr. Scott," Hyder started. "I am working on a story that involves corruption, fraud, and even murder. I am here to clear up certain facts from you before I publish this story."

Scott's back tensed. "What are you talking about?"

"I won't waste your time, as I know you're a busy man," Hyder continued, unable to resist a jab at Scott's earlier comment, "but this involves not only you but also those working at TriGate Management Group."

Scott swallowed hard.

Hyder proceeded to lay out the entire scheme. He dropped several names: Amanda Hansborough, Eric Freeland, and everyone else whose signature was on the checks.

He went further by outlining the use of the internal accounting code.

When he was done, the color had drained on Scott's face. Beads of sweat had appeared on his forehead. He bit his upper lip and tried to rub the beads of sweat off, but they reappeared.

He coughed. "Ahem... I'm not going to confirm what you just told me..."

"But you won't deny it, either," Hyder said.

Scott loosened his tie. His shirt collar was damp. "I don't know where you got this story, but I can tell you that if you publish it, our company will sue you and your publisher for defamation."

"So are you going on record to say it is false?" Hyder asked.

"I'm not saying anything on record," Scott claimed. "But I can assure you that what you have told me is nothing but pure fabrication, and unless you have proof, you should be very careful about what you print."

"But I do have proof."

Scott's mouth went dry.

From his backpack Hyder pulled out a piece of paper. He unfolded it and held it up for Scott to see.

"It's a copy of a check signed by you," Hyder said. "As you can see, it was made out to someone working for the city."

"I write a lot of checks," Scott said. "It was probably for a charity or something."

"Call it whatever you want, but the letters 'PPC' at the bottom indicate the money was for other purposes. In my story I will refer to them as a *bribe*."

The cigar nearly fell out of Scott's hands. He coughed, this time loudly. His face was red, as if he were choking.

"These are very strong accusations," he said between breaths. "And we will fight against them vigorously."

Hyder looked at him and then nodded. "That is your prerogative. My duty is to verify the facts before I publish them, and it is why I was here to speak to you." Hyder stood up to leave.

"By the way, where did you get that check?" Scott asked.

"I have many more. In fact, I have an entire *file* filled with these and other documents." Hyder made sure to emphasize the word 'file.'

"Thank you for your time Mr. Scott."

When Hyder had left the room, Scott immediately pulled out his cell phone and dialed a number.

66

Hyder nodded to Nolan, who was sitting in his car outside the restaurant, watching.

Hyder walked down the street and turned the corner. He waited a few minutes, then, as if on cue, Scott came out the front door and headed straight for the parking lot.

Scott got behind the wheel of his Mercedes and drove away.

A few seconds later, Nolan's car followed.

Their plan was now in motion.

Scott was clearly shaken up by what Hyder had told him. They were hoping that he would then do something drastic that would expose the lie TriGate had

been hiding for so long. They weren't sure if this would work, but it was worth a shot.

Hyder had done his part. Now it was up to Nolan to do his.

It had been decided that Nolan would see through the last part of the plan. He was, after all, a member of the police force. Whatever came next, he would be better suited to deal with it. Hyder and Jessica had already dealt with so much. Jessica had been chased by the man in the suit and Hyder had almost been shot by the same man. It was better to leave the rest to the professionals.

Hyder rode his bike back through the streets.

He wasn't sure if what they were about to do was enough, but he was satisfied that he had tried his best. There was nothing more he could have done. He had rattled Scott, and he hoped Scott would lead them to the others who were involved.

He parked in front a coffee shop and went in.

Jessica was waiting for him. She was sitting in the back. She smiled when she saw him.

"Did he take the bait?" she asked immediately.

"Oh, yeah," Hyder replied, grinning. "He was sweating like a pig. For a moment I thought he would pass out."

"So, did you plant it?" she asked eagerly.

"Yep," he smiled. The plan also included placing a small microphone the size of a watch battery in Scott's coat. On the way out Hyder had spotted the coat hanging by the door. He slipped the microphone into its front pocket and left.

Nolan would get close enough to Scott and hopefully record whatever incriminating information he revealed.

Jessica looked relieved.

Chloe came over and asked if Hyder wanted anything to drink. "On the house," she said with a smile.

"Well, in that case," Hyder said. "I'm going to order everything on the menu."

"Don't get carried away," Jessica said with a smile. "You're a friend, not a boyfriend." There was a twinkle in her eyes.

Hyder smiled. "In that case, I'll have a medium coffee with two creams and two sugars."

"You're allowed a snack as well," Chloe teased.

"I wasn't aware of that, but that's good to know. Then can I also get a triple chocolate muffin?"

"Coming right up," Chloe said and walked away.

Hyder and Jessica sat down. .

"Thank you," she said.

"For what?"

"For everything you've done for me."

He shrugged. "Ah, it's nothing. I do this all the time."

She raised an eyebrow. "You always help your former professor's daughter find out who killed her father?"

He smiled. "Like I said, I do it all the time."

"Thanks anyway," she said. "You have no idea how difficult it was to hear that my dad had killed himself when I knew deep down that he would never do such a

thing. My dad was right to trust you. Had he not sent you the pages from his diary, who knows if I would've found out the truth?"

"I'm glad I could help," Hyder said.

"What're you going to do now? I mean, about your job situation?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. I guess I'll bring out my old resume and polish it up. Or, I'll go and work for my uncle in his accounting firm."

"Don't do that. Please," she said. "You've always wanted to be a reporter and it would be a shame if you did anything else."

Hyder looked at her. "Your father said the same thing to me back when I was a student."

"He meant it when he said it then, and I mean it when I say it now."

He nodded. He would do some serious thinking later. But he knew it would involve being a reporter in some way.

Chloe returned with his coffee and muffin.

"Aren't you having anything?" he asked Jessica.

"The courtesy is not extended to employees of this coffee shop; it is only extended to friends of the employees of this coffee shop." Chloe quipped.

They laughed.

"Don't worry," Chloe said. "I'm bringing her drink and mine in a second. I'll be joining you guys too, unless you guys need some private time alone."

"No, please join us," Jessica said.

"Yeah, you can join us now," Hyder quipped.

They laughed again.

67

Nolan slowed the car and watched the Mercedes enter the front gates of a large estate. The vehicle disappeared up the road.

Nolan pulled out the earphones and inserted them in his ears. He listened.

He heard Scott twist and turn inside the Mercedes.

Scott then turned off the engine and slammed the door shut.

Nolan's brow furrowed. The earphones went silent.

Scott must have left his coat in the Mercedes!

Nolan pulled out the earphones and threw them in the passenger seat.

Now they wouldn't be able to record what happened next.

Nolan got out of his car and headed for the gates of the estate.

68

Scott was met at the front door by a butler in a tuxedo.

"Where is he?" Scott demanded.

"Mr. Marshall is currently in a conference call," the man said.

"I don't care, I have to speak to him now." Scott rushed past. The butler tried to protest, but Scott was already down the hall and through the door.

Charles Marshall was sitting behind his desk. He looked up at Scott and then said into the speaker, "Gentlemen, can we continue this later? I have something urgent to attend to." He pressed a button and the line went dead. "Terry, why are you barging into my house like this?" he asked, clearly annoyed.

"I called you earlier," Scott replied. "But your employee wouldn't let me speak to you."

"I was on another call," Charles said. "Now what's this about?"

69

Nolan caught the security camera above him. It was aimed at the front of the gates. He pressed the buzzer and waited.

"Yes?" a male voice said.

Nolan didn't answer.

"Hello? Can I help you?"

Nolan kept silent.

"Please state your reason for coming," the man requested.

Nolan kept his head low and his mouth shut.

Two minutes later, as he hoped, he spotted a butler in a tuxedo coming down the drive.

The butler reached the gate and said, "Sir, unless you have an appointment, I advise you to leave. If you don't, then I will have to call the police."

"That's good to hear," Nolan said, "Because I am the police." He flashed his badge.

70

"Slow down," Charles said. "You're not making sense."

Scott was trying to tell Charles what had transpired between him and Ali, but he was babbling.

Charles got up and poured a drink. He placed it before Scott.

Scott swallowed it in one gulp.

"Now, tell me everything, slowly," Charles said.

Scott nodded. "Hyder Ali came by and told me he knows what we've been doing. He said we were behind Amanda Hansborough's accident, he said he knew we were behind Eric Freeland's murder, and he said he knows about our internal accounting code."

Charles gritted his teeth. "How?"

"I don't know, maybe he got it from Freeland."

Charles shook his head. "Freeland never had anything on us. If he did, he would have already used it against us."

"But I saw a check."

Charles's eyes narrowed.

"And it had my signature on it."

"Did you see an original or was it a copy?"

"A copy."

"Then we have nothing to worry about."

There was a knock at the door. "What is it?" Charles bellowed.

The butler appeared. "Sir, it's your afternoon meal."

"Isn't it early?"

"I thought I'd bring it to you now. I'll be busy with other duties," The butler claimed.

"Fine, whatever." Charles waved his hand. "Put it over there."

The butler went to the corner of the room and placed the tray on the side table. He quickly left.

When the door was shut, Scott said, "How can you tell me not to worry? Hyder Ali knows everything."

"He is trying to rattle you, Terry," Charles said. "He is trying to do what Freeland tried to do—make us nervous, so we would do something irrational."

"But... but he knows... about what we did," Scott stammered.

"So what? What will he do with this information?"

"He could take it to the police."

Charles scoffed. "Do you think they'd believe him? How would it look if he told them that we had something to do with Amanda Hansborough's death? The police would want proof. The report that outlined how the brakes were tampered with no longer exists. We destroyed it."

"What about Freeland's murder?" Scott asked.

"It's still a suicide, unless the police have evidence stating otherwise," Charles said. "Terry, they don't have anything linking us to Hansborough or even Freeland."

Scott slowly nodded. "Ali was very convincing about what he knew."

"Sure he was; that's his job. He wanted to get you to confess to everything. He was hoping for a big story. He is desperate. He was fired from the *Daily Times* and now he needs something to regain his reputation. He will do anything to get a story, even if it means pressuring one of us to go against each other."

"He mentioned the mole, but didn't give me a name," Scott said.

"We know who it is. It was *James Vander Lee!*" Charles slammed his fist on the desk. "If only we knew he was the one behind it all, we would have dealt with him a long time ago." Charles calmed himself. "No matter, Vander Lee will no longer be a thorn in our side."

"Is... he... dead?"

"Grant took care of it." Charles leaned back on his chair and put his fingers together. "Terry, the people with direct knowledge of our system are no longer alive, which means it'll be business as usual."

Scott thought about it and he felt relieved. He was glad he came and spoke to Charles. Charles was the CEO of TriGate so he was in the best position to handle

it. It was, after all, his scheme that made them all rich. But then a thought popped in his head. He said, "What about the *file*? The one Hansborough created as part of her internal audit that outlined the money and the bribes? Ali mentioned it specifically."

"He's lying," Charles said sternly. "He doesn't have it and never will."

71

Hyder was riding his bike when his cell phone rang.

He stopped by the side of the road and pulled it out. He checked, but didn't recognize the telephone number.

"Hello?"

"Is this Hyder Ali?" a male voice said.

"Yes, who is this?"

"My name is John Kroft, Jr." he said. "I believe you used to work for me."

Hyder's heart nearly stopped. Kroft Jr. was the publisher of the *Daily Times*. Hyder was fully aware of his family's history. Kroft Sr. had founded the paper.

While employed at the *Daily Times*, Hyder never once had the privilege of meeting him. He had heard stories about how Kroft Jr. kept the paper afloat and how he kept it away from irrelevancy.

"Are you still there?" Kroft said.

"Um... yes, sir, I am."

"Would it be too much trouble for you to come and meet me?" he asked.

"It... it would be no trouble, sir," Hyder said. "Let me know when and I'll be there."

"How about now?"

"Um... yes, now is fine too."

"Great!" he said cheerfully. "Do you know where my office is?"

Every employee of the *Daily Times* knew where his office was, but only a handful had ever visited it.

"Yes, I do."

"Then I'll wait for you."

The line went dead.

For a few minutes Hyder stood by the side of the road, staring at his cell phone. He couldn't believe he had just had a conversation with the publisher of the *Daily Times*. It felt surreal.

Hyder looked at his watch. He wasn't about to make Kroft wait for him.

Hyder jumped on his bike and rode toward the *Daily Times*.

Hyder pedaled as fast as he could. When he reached the building he was out of breath. He paused to let himself catch his breath and cool down. He then fixed his hair and went in.

He took the elevator all the way to the top floor.

He got out and went through a set of glass doors.

To his surprise there was no secretary there to greet him.

He stood by the desk, not sure of what to do. Should he call Kroft again? Should he just walk in?

Hyder didn't know the protocol.

As he was mulling over his options, the door in the back swung open.

John Kroft Jr. came out, smiling.

He was tall. He wore a black striped suit. His hair was thick and wavy and he had on round spectacles.

"Hyder," he said, coming over and extending his big hands. "Do you mind if I call you Hyder?"

"No, sir," Hyder shook his hand.

"Ah, no need for this sir nonsense, call me John."

"Okay," Hyder agreed, but he was certain he could never get himself to call him by his first name. The man was a legend and Hyder had too much respect for him.

"Come in, come in," Kroft said.

Kroft's office was massive and magnificent. It reminded Hyder of offices he had seen in movies from the 1940s. Everything looked old but fresh at the same time. The desk, the shelves, the chairs, the lamps, everything looked like it had some history to it. Hyder had a feeling some of the furniture was from the time the paper was started.

Hyder's mouth dropped at what he saw next. On one side of the office, an entire wall was covered with frames from the front cover of the *Daily Times*. When Hyder squinted, he noticed the significance of the dates. He saw a cover from the day JFK was assassinated, another from when Neil Armstrong had landed on the moon, and another from when the Watergate Scandal broke.

"It's a reminder of our legacy," Kroft said from behind Hyder. "We've covered almost all the major events in history and we hope to cover many more."

Hyder could only nod. He was speechless.

"Come," Kroft said. "Please have a seat."

Hyder took a chair, while Kroft sat behind the massive desk.

Hyder felt like a little boy sitting across from a big man.

"The reason I called you here, Hyder, is to first tell you how sorry and saddened I am about the death of your old editor, Caroline Dunny. I know she was the one who fired you, but her death will still be felt at this paper. I had come to trust her judgement and had always relied on her opinion whenever it was asked of, but I strongly disagreed with her decision to let you go."

Hyder didn't know what to say.

"This paper needs young men and women like you," he continued. "You are the future, and if we don't tap into that we will become obsolete. As you are fully aware, the news industry is going through massive changes. Print media is on the decline, and some commentators have even gone so far as to predict our death. I think our demise has been greatly exaggerated. I do agree that papers like ours are going through a shift. In fact, I will be blunt and say that we are losing money, but I believe the end is not near. I think we can still change the course. And people like you, Hyder, are the ones to do it. I know talent when I see it, and it is why I would like to offer you a position back at the *Daily Times*."

Hyder thought he would faint.

"Now, I don't want to pressure you," he said. "I know it must have been difficult to lose your job, but what I am saying is, we want you back, and I am willing to offer you a permanent position as the lead city reporter."

Hyder swallowed. He wasn't sure what he was hearing. But then he thought of something, "But Veronica Ainsworth is the lead city reporter." Veronica was his friend, and Hyder would never take her position. "What would happen to her?"

"I wouldn't worry about her. With the editor position now vacant, I'm sure we can put Ms. Ainsworth somewhere." He winked.

"Wow," Hyder said. "I don't know what to say."

"Say yes, and be part of the *Daily Times* family again."

This was happening too fast, Hyder thought. His head began to spin. He was not only going to be permanent, he would also be lead reporter. This was everything he ever wanted.

"Just think," Kroft said. "One day, *you* may have a story that could be on that wall."

Hyder looked at the wall again. A smile crossed his face.

72

"How can you be so certain he doesn't have the file?" Scott asked.

Charles smiled. He stood up and went over to a shelf. He pulled a latch, and a section of it came forward. Behind it was a combination safe. Charles entered a four-digit code and then pulled it open.

"I'm certain he doesn't have it, because I have the original," Charles pulled out a brown folder and held it for Scott.

"You didn't destroy it?" Scott's eyes were wide.

"I kept it in case we needed it."

"I don't get it," Scott said. "That file has incriminating evidence against us. Why would you keep it?"

"There is more at stake than just TriGate," Charles replied.

Scott's face was full of shock and confusion. "You assured me the file had been disposed of. You told me you didn't have it anymore. You told me not to worry."

The truth dawned on Scott. His face hardened. "You were keeping the file so you could use it as leverage. You were afraid that if the police did succeed in finding out the truth, this would be your get out of jail card."

Charles said nothing.

"You knew that file contained names. Politicians, civil servants, union execs, management of certain corporations; they're all mentioned in that file, and if the police got their hands on it, it would do very serious damage to important people. This meant the police would be willing to cut a deal with you to get those individuals." Scott was furious. "Our names are in that file... *my* name is in that file."

"You have it all wrong," Charles claimed.

"Do I?" Scott snapped. "Tell me that I am overreacting. Tell me that you destroyed all the contents in that file."

Charles' face showed no reaction.

"The reason you didn't shred that file, the reason you kept it in own your possession, was so that you could use it as a bargaining chip."

"It's not a bargaining chip for the police," Charles said. "It's a bargaining chip against *you*."

"What're you talking about?" Scott was confused.

"I was keeping it as leverage in case you got any funny ideas," Charles said.

"You didn't trust me? I would never betray this company," Scott said. "I'm as in deep in this as anyone else."

"It can all change if the right pressure is applied," Charles said.

"I would never give in to the police."

"You would if you were looking at a long jail sentence."

It was Scott's turn to go silent.

Charles continued, "We've worked too hard to make this company what it is. We *damn* well won't let it go down because someone got cold feet."

"What do you mean *we*?" Scott's eye narrowed.

The door swung open. Ian Marshall entered.

"My son and I will make certain nothing happens to our family."

Scott was speechless.

73

"So, what will it be?" Kroft asked. "Do you want to join us again?"

Hyder beamed. "Of course, yes, thank you."

"But there is one request I have," Kroft said. "I hope you'll be able to fulfill it."

"Yes, absolutely, just name it."

"Will you cease to publish anything regarding the unfortunate demise of Eric Freeland?"

Hyder was confused. "How did you know...?"

"Dunny told me you were working on this story, and that you believed it has to do with a conspiracy of some sort."

"It does. Freeland didn't commit suicide, he was..." Kroft put his hand up, stopping him.

"Hyder, this newspaper could drown under heavy litigation if you choose to follow that path."

"I'm not sure what you're saying."

"Your conspiracy involves important people, and if we name those people, then we may open ourselves to legal actions. It is better that we steer clear of this matter completely. Agree to come back and I will have you working on bigger and better stories. What do you say?"

A realization struck Hyder.

"You are involved in all of this," he said, giving Kroft a hard look. "If I remember correctly, this building was built by the TriGate Management Group."

Kroft said nothing.

Hyder continued. "You knew what TriGate was up to, their illegal business tactics and how they purchased their contracts. *You* had Dunny fire me when she told you that I was looking into Freeland's suicide. You knew it linked to TriGate and you feared it might somehow link back to you." Then something else occurred to him. "But you couldn't just fire me without any cause, so you had illegal material planted on my laptop. When the FBI got involved—and it was you who had contacted them anonymously in the first place—it made it that much easier to get rid of me. You thought by letting me go you could squash the story and *silence* me."

"You have no idea what you're talking about."

"I see it now," Hyder continued. "But Dunny never agreed with your decision. She did it because you forced her to. She had second thoughts and had called me to tell me the truth. She wanted to do it that night at the pier, but..." His eyes widened in disbelief. "You had her killed."

Kroft face betrayed him.

"You did, didn't you?"

Hyder then felt something cold against his neck. He turned and the color drained from his face.

The killer was behind him.

Hyder looked at Kroft. He refused to meet his eyes. "I'm sorry," he said. "You should have let it go." He looked at the man behind Hyder. "Grant please make Mr. Ali disappear, and do it quietly."

"Get up, Ali. We're going for a walk," Grant ordered Hyder.

74

"You can't do this!" Scott yelled. "I won't let you do it. I'll go to the police."

"And tell them what?" Ian said. "You'll be incriminating yourself as well."

"I don't care. If I go down, you'll go down too."

"Don't be foolish, Terry," Charles warned him. "Remember what happens to those who get in our way."

Scott was horrified.

"Nothing has changed, though," Charles added, trying to calm him. "We can still continue as if it is business as usual."

Scott didn't respond.

"Just think how much money you've made with us," Charles said. "If you keep quiet about all of this, you'll continue to make more money."

"What about the file?" Scott said.

"What about it?" Charles said.

"Will you destroy it?"

Charles hesitated.

"With the file in *your* possession, I will always be at a disadvantage. This file holds evidence that can ruin our lives, it would be better if no one had it."

Charles thought about. He looked over at Ian. He was thinking it over too.

"If you want me to trust you, then you have to trust me. The only way this will work is if that file is no more." Scott demanded.

"Alright," Charles finally conceded. He waited for Ian to protest. When he didn't, Charles said, "I'll burn it right in front of you, so that we can all know that it no longer exists."

Ian walked over and grabbed a metal dustbin

Charles pulled a drawer from under his desk. He retrieved a lighter. He ignited a flame and held it for Scott to see.

He brought the file close to the fire.

"To our continued success," Charles said with a smile.

He was about to light the contents when the door swung open. Nolan entered with his gun drawn.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Nolan said.

"You can't barge in here," Charles said. "You're trespassing."

"Call it whatever you want, but I'm the one holding the gun. And I'm asking you to give me the file."

Charles's face hardened. "What if I don't?"

"Then I'll shoot you," Nolan said calmly.

"No, he won't," Ian said. "He's a police officer. He doesn't have it in him."

Nolan turned the gun on him. "Really? You want to bet?"

Ian swallowed.

"Don't be hasty, detective," Charles said. "We're all civilized here. I'm sure we can come to some agreement."

"I'm okay with that," Nolan shrugged. "Why don't you agree to give me the file?"

Charles didn't move. "You won't shoot me. You could lose your job."

"I've already lost everything," Nolan said. "Do you think I give a damn about my job? And, if I remember correctly, you had something to do with that."

"I'm not sure what you're talking about," Charles said.

"Really?" Nolan walked to the side of the room. He lifted a napkin from the tray that was placed there earlier by Charles's butler. Underneath it was a cell phone. "I put it here," Nolan said. "It recorded everything that was said in this room."

Charles's face was in shock.

"Oh, and don't blame your butler," Nolan continued. "He had no choice in the matter. Now, please give me the file or I will take it with *force*."

Charles hesitated for a millisecond before he finally dropped both the lighter and the file onto the desk.

Nolan walked over to the desk and grabbed the file.

"So, all this trouble was for this one thing?" He held the file in his hands. "Oh, by the way, this is for my wife." Nolan hit Charles in the face with the butt of the gun.

Charles jerked back, holding his nose. Blood gushed down his chin.

"Dad," Ian moved forward.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Nolan warned him, "unless you have the desire to look like your father."

"You won't get away with this," Ian grumbled. "This is assault."

"Well, sue me," Nolan shrugged. "On that note, you're all under arrest. You can call your lawyers from the station. You can also advise them of police

brutality. I don't know if they would care too much once they hear what you boys had been up to."

Ian, Charles, and Scott looked defeated.

75

Grant led Hyder down the hall. It was empty. Hyder quickly realized why he hadn't seen Kroft's secretary at her desk. They didn't want any witnesses.

Grant held the door open. Hyder went in. It was a private washroom used by Kroft and his guests.

"Get down on the floor," Grant instructed.

Hyder got on his knees.

"Please don't do this," Hyder said.

"You weren't supposed to be part of this," Grant said. "Had you not stuck your nose in, you would've never been in this situation."

Grant pointed the gun between Hyder's eyes.

"Can I at least take off my glasses?" Hyder asked.

Grant thought about it, nodded.

Hyder slowly pulled his glasses off.

He threw them at Grant.

Grant swatted them away with the back of his hand, turning for a brief second as he did.

Hyder rushed Grant, rammed his shoulder into the man's chest.

Grant stumbled and the gun flew out of his hands. It rested by the door.

Grant recovered and elbowed Hyder in the back. Searing pain shot through him.

Grant kneed Hyder in the abdomen. Hyder fell to the floor, clutching his stomach. His face was red. He coughed, trying to regain his breath.

Grant came up to Hyder and punched him across the face.

Hyder's cheek ached and burned. He felt disoriented.

Grant pulled out a knife and held it at Hyder's throat.

"You've made my life difficult," Grant said. "I don't enjoy killing, but I will enjoy killing you."

Hyder braced himself for what was to come next, began to pray silently.

A shot rang out.

For a second, nothing happened. Grant just stood there, motionless.

Then his eyes bulged out. He dropped the knife and fell to the floor.

Standing by the door was Jessica. She was holding Grant's gun, and she had a look of grim determination on her face.

Hyder looked over. The man was dead. Blood flowed out of his chest.

Jessica came over and helped Hyder to his feet.

She handed him his glasses. "How did you find me?" he asked.

Lester appeared by the door. He looked at the scene and his eyes went wide. "Whoa, this is some dangerous business."

"Lester saw you enter the building earlier, so he called me to find out why," Jessica explained. "We weren't sure what was up, so we decided to investigate."

"I'm glad you did," Hyder said. He looked at Grant's body.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes, now I am," she said, looking at her father's murderer with grim satisfaction.

76

Nolan soon arrived at the *Daily Times*.

"You guys okay?" he asked as he got out of his car.

Hyder and Jessica nodded.

"I'm fine, too; thanks for asking," Lester said dryly.

"Is it over?" Hyder asked Nolan.

"At this moment, a patrol car is taking the felons of TriGate Management Group down to the station to be booked. Soon they will be charged with everything that is in this file."

Nolan held the file out to Hyder.

Hyder took it and moved his hand over it.

"You know what I'll do with it," Nolan said. "What will you do with it?"

Hyder smiled. "I think I've got one helluva story to write now."

77

Nolan sat in his car, staring at the house across from him. The lights were on and he was certain the family was home.

The Hansboroughs were probably in the process of getting dinner ready. It would be like any other night. The dinner would be followed by some time in front of the television and then the children would move to their rooms, while their father would prepare the house for the night.

The Hansboroughs deserved to know the truth. It was the same truth that had finally provided him some inner peace. It would not be easy, he knew, but he felt it was now time to move on. The Hansboroughs needed to move on too.

Nolan got out of his car and walked up to the front door.

He hoped they would not mind the intrusion.

Peter Hansborough answered. "Hi," he said with a polite smile. "Can I help you?"

"Hi, I'm Detective Tom Nolan of the Franklin Police Department," Nolan replied, holding up his badge. "I have some information regarding the death of your wife."

Peter's eyes widened. "Um, come in, detective," he said.

Nolan began to feel the weight being lifted off his soul.

