

The Undertaker

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.



First and foremost to my wife Fern, for all her love, support, and time spent proofing and reviewing. But I'd also like to thank our friends Andi Kunio, Judy Williamson, and Julie Horewitch for their diligent editing and proofing on this and my other books over the years—proofing is pain best shared with others.

Prologue

We decided to put it all down on paper
in case they came after us again.

I know exactly what Louie must have gone through that night. Exactly. He would have woken slowly, blinking, looking up into a bank of harsh, white lights set in the ceiling high above him. White. Everything in the room was white: the ceiling, the walls, even the floor tile. So waking up, the bright lights would have hurt his eyes, the back of his head would have throbbed in pain, and he was cold—a teeth-chattering, shivering cold.

As his eyes slowly cleared and the fog inside his brain cleared, he realized he was lying on his back, staring up into a bank of bright, white fluorescent lights set in an acoustical tile ceiling. Slowly, painfully, he raised his head and looked around the room. There were no windows, nothing but those gleaming, white tile walls, a set of tall glass-front cabinets set against the wall behind him, and an odd-looking aluminum table to his right and one to his left, leaving him even more confused. He looked down at himself, at the fat, pale-white mound of his own chest and stomach, and realized he was stark naked. No wonder he was so damned cold. He was laying buck-ass naked on some kind of strange, cold, aluminum table. He tried to get up and roll onto his side, but he couldn't move. Something was holding him down. That was when he would have felt the thick, leather straps—one across his upper chest, one across his lower abdomen, and one across his knees—and the smaller straps with heavy buckles that held his wrists and legs down. He could kick and strain and yank on his arms until he wore himself out, but there was no give in those thick leather straps and heavy buckles.

His eyes darted around the room. Everything looked immaculately clean. The tall, glass-front cabinets and cases behind him held a curious array of sharp

knives, rubber tubes, and clamps, all neatly arranged on clean white towels. And there was that strange, sticky sweet odor. He sniffed the cool air of the room and swore there was a soapy, antiseptic smell to the place with the faintest hint of something else lurking just beneath? What was it? Flowers?

"Ah, Louis, you are finally awake," a friendly voice called to him from the far end of the room. "How nice of you to join us. Virgil gave you a pretty good rap on the back of the head and I was beginning to wonder." That was when he would have recognized the voice and realized where he must be. And that was when the real panic would have set in. He would have bucked and kicked and struggled even harder against those damned leather straps, to no avail.

The other man finally walked into his field of vision and stared down at him. He was tall, well built, and very distinguished in an expensive, dark-blue suit with a blue and gold silk tie and white shirt. He held his arms across his chest and looked down, studying him like a doctor making his rounds. However, this was no doctor. He looked down and smiled as he watched the fat man strain, pulling and pushing against the thick leather straps until he finally fell back on the table, exhausted and shivering in a pool of his own sweat.

"You've been a very bad boy, Louis. You've been talking to Jimmy's people in New Jersey again, haven't you?"

"Ralph, what do you think you're...? You can't do this."

"Sure I can, Louis. I can do anything I want to you, because you're already dead. Remember?" he stated quietly, confidently. "Now tell me where they are. We've torn your office apart. We've torn your house apart. Where are they?" He stared down at the fat man, but he could see there was no answer coming. Finally, he shrugged. "Have it your way, Louis," he said as he turned away. He took off his suit coat and carefully hung it on a brass hook on the wall, pulling out a white cotton smock from a drawer in one of the cabinets. It was the kind with a high neck in front and the opening in back. The fat man watched as he pulled it on and carefully tied the drawstrings around his waist. Then the man stepped over to one of the glass-front cabinets, opened a door, and reached inside. When he turned back and looked down at the fat man, he was slipping his hands into a pair of thin, latex gloves. He pulled them on and let the wrist bands snap in place with a loud, dramatic flourish.

"There. All set," he smiled again as he reached back into the cabinet. This time his hand came out with a stainless-steel scalpel. He held it up and let the edge of the razor-sharp blade catch the light.

"What?" the fat man blustered. "You think you're going to torture it out of me?"

"No, Louis, I think I'm going to kill you," he answered with a thin, cruel smile. "I'm going to start opening a vein here and an artery there until you slowly bleed to death."

"You're crazy!" The fat man starred up at him, heart pounding.

"Oh, no, Louis, quite the opposite," he said as he stepped over to the table and held the blade in front of the fat man's face. "I'm the sanest man you've ever met. More importantly, I've done this before, many times before. I assure you, when the blood starts to run out of you, you will talk. And the more it flows, all sticky, warm, and wet, the faster you're going to talk. That's when you're going to tell me

where they are, Louis, because there are no secrets down here, not then, not at the end, at the very end.”

He bent over and lightly touched the fat man at the base of his neck with a fingernail. The fat man jumped. He began to breathe heavily and sweat began to pour off him again.

“That's the carotid artery and the jugular vein in there, Louis. Nick those babies and it'll be all over in a couple of minutes.”

The fat man couldn't take his eyes off the sharp edge of the scalpel as it came closer and closer to his neck, and he began to shake.

“Personally though, I prefer the iliac. That's down here near your hip and groin.” The man droned on, his voice calm, as if he was discussing the weather or a favorite golf club. He stood up and let his eyes slowly scan the white, flabby body from head to toe. “That is, if I can find it. You are a mess, Louis, an absolute mess. Look at you – all fat and so out of shape. Now where are they!” he suddenly screamed and lashed out with the scalpel. The blade flashed in a big arc and sliced lightly across the fat man's gut, cutting deep enough to draw blood.

That did it! The fat man's head shot up. He saw the blood and the cut. His face turned deep red. He felt the panic rise in his throat as a sharp, angry pain exploded in his chest. “Ahhhh...!” he groaned as the pain pounded and sucked the life out of him. Then, there was nothing. His head dropped back on the metal table with a loud *Clang!* His eyes grew round and his body went limp against the leather straps, and he was dead.

Chapter 1

Boston: where California meets Jersey...

I knew I was in trouble when Gino Parini shoved that .45 automatic in my face and made me read my own obituary. I'm not talking about something vague or California-cosmic, like the San Andreas Fault will turn Nevada into beachfront property, or those McDonald's French fries will seal my arteries shut, or second-hand smoke will give me lung cancer. I'm talking about my own honest-to-God black-and-white obituary ripped from page thirty-two of that morning's Columbus, Ohio newspaper:

TALBOTT, PETER EMERSON, age 33, of Columbus, died Sunday at Varner Clinic following a tragic automobile accident. President and founder of Center Financial Advisors of Columbus. Formerly of Los Angeles, a 1999 graduate of UCLA and a lieutenant, US Army Transportation Corps...

That was me. I was Talbott, Peter Emerson, 33 years old, and formerly from Los Angeles. I had graduated from UCLA and I had been a lieutenant in the Army. Coincidence? I didn't think so. There was only one of me and I didn't die in the

Varner Clinic or anywhere else last Sunday. I was an aeronautical software engineer and I had never been to Columbus or heard of Center Financial Advisors much less been its President. Still, when you're looking into a set of hard, dark eyes and a .45 automatic, it's hard to argue the fine points.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

That day began normally enough. For the past two months, I had been settling into a new job as a systems designer and software engineer with Symbiotic Software in Waltham, Massachusetts. It was one of a hundred programming shops in those big, mirror-glass office buildings that dot the Route 128 Beltway around Boston. You know the kind: no hard walls, no doors, just dozens of low, pastel-colored cubicles filled with a mixed bag of grungy 20-somethings in every size, shape, color, orientation, and gender. My cubicle was like all the others, except for the cheap plastic nameplate that said "Peter E. Talbott, Senior Systems Engineer" hanging at the entrance. Inside, the wall behind my chair featured a framed poster of Eric Clapton, signed by The Man himself, ripped-off from a LA record store back in my younger and much crazier days. On the wall across from my desk hung a beautiful Air Mexico travel poster: a color shot of a beach at sunset near San Jose down on the Baja, with a thin, solitary young woman in a bikini walking away down the sand. That was where Terri and I were supposed to go that last fall, but she got sick and we never made it. Other than the simple 8" x 10" photograph of her sitting on my desk smiling up at me, the Baja beach poster was easily my most prized possession.

It was already 5:30 PM. Headset on, I stared at my big, flat-screen computer, pounding away at the keyboard, dressed in my treasured, but badly faded, Rolling Stones 1995 Voodoo Lounge World Tour T-shirt, blue jeans, and a worn-out pair of Nikes. Like the shoes, I was a tad older and more scuffed than the rest of the hired help, so clothes helped me fit in during those first awkward weeks after I moved there from LA. Anyway, I had just finished a crash project and was slowly coming back down as I listened to the last tracks of a two CD set of *Clapton's Greatest Hits*. When I really get into a problem, the building could go up in flames, and I'd never notice unless my monitor went blank.

I leaned back in my chair, eyes closed, playing air guitar riffs along with "Tears in Heaven," when a cold hand lifted one of the ear pieces and whispered in my ear. "Earth to Petey, you *are* going to have the sub-routines done by tomorrow, aren't you?"

"You said 'tomorrow', as in 'close-of-business tomorrow,' not 'tomorrow-tomorrow,' or 'tomorrow morning', or 'today-tomorrow,'" I answered.

"I know, but I've got a problem and 'tomorrow' just became first thing tomorrow."

Looking over my shoulder was Doug Chesterton in his "harried boss" costume: a wrinkled white shirt, a cheap necktie with soup stains, and a pocket full of pens. It read MIT all the way – smart as hell, but dumb as a rock.

"Douglas," I smiled. "Having anticipated that you'd be a completely disorganized and unreasonable asshole..."

"And your brother-in-law, your boss, and the magnanimous owner of the company."

"They're done. I e-mailed them to you twenty minutes ago."

"That's why I brought you here, big guy," he said as he gave me a big bear hug and planted a disgustingly loud, wet kiss in my right ear, tongue and all. "You're like a bloodhound when you get the scent, Petey, you're fucking relentless."

"Relentless with a wet ear, you moron."

Doug leaned in over my shoulder and looked at the screen. "Then what the hell are you still working on? Wait a minute. That's the Anderson job I gave Julie, isn't it?"

"Don't get pissed at her; it was my idea. She had some meetings at school with her kids, so I said I'd help her out."

Doug laid his hand on my shoulder. "I'm not pissed. I'm glad. I know it's been hell for you since Terri died, but you moved here to get a fresh start and Julie is drop-dead gorgeous. She's divorced and she's exactly what you need."

"Julie? Oh, come on, I'm just helping her out, I wouldn't..."

"No, *you* probably wouldn't, but she would. Trust me. The faithful widower? Half the secretarial pool wants to take you home and mother you, and the other half wants to have your baby. They think you're a saint."

I looked over at Terri's smiling photo. I knew he was right, but that wasn't what I wanted or what I needed. He saw me look, too.

"She's gone, Pete. It's been a year now and it's time you moved on. She was my sister and I loved her as much as you did, but that's what she'd tell you, too."

"I know, Doug, I know." The truth was, Terri did tell me that, almost every day at the end and almost every day since. That was where Doug and all the others had it wrong. I wasn't alone. I still had all my memories of Terri, and my life was full, so full I didn't have anything left to give to anyone else. Someday, maybe, but not then."

"Look, I didn't come out here to bug you," Doug said. "But accounting keeps gnawing on me about your social security number. The IRS still has your account blocked."

"I've called them three times. They keep mumbling something about a "numeric anomaly."

"It's no anomaly. They've got you mixed up with somebody else with the same name and they think you're dead. So, if you want to see a paycheck anytime soon, get the damned thing fixed."

I shrugged and put it on my list of things to do. Maybe it was number fifty-nine, but it was there. Besides, Doug was right. He was boss. More importantly, he saved my life.

I was born in Los Angeles—a child of the Golden West, raised on a steady diet of hard rock, fast cars, Pacific beaches, and the trend-du-jour. After UCLA, I went to work at Dynamic Data in Pasadena. It was Terri who introduced me to her MIT techno-nerd brother. We both bounced around Pasadena, going from one hot software shop to another, doing what we both loved and what we were good at. I was smart, but Doug was always smarter. He sold his old Porsche and moved to Boston with his three mangy cats, sinking every dime he could beg or borrow into his own start-up software company, which he named Symbiotic Software. The title was just vague enough to let him take on all sorts of work. However, trading the beaches and sun of Tinseltown for a long, gray winter of snow and ice in New

England wasn't my idea of fun, so I stayed in LA. Shows what we knew. Doug's little company found a niche and he never looked back.

Back then, LA was the "land of milk and honey," where the growth curve only pointed to "UP" and "MORE UP." Like the white rabbit told Gracie Slick though, "one pill makes you larger, and one pill makes you small." Gracie had no idea how small. Outsourcing was a new word to us "left coasters." Layoffs and downsizing were something for the Midwest autoworkers and the steelworkers in Pittsburgh with the beer guts and lunch pails to worry about. This time however, it was us smart guys with the white shirts and the glasses of Napa chardonnay who found ourselves on the chopping block. Yep, ask not for whom the HR manager tolls, he tolls for me and for thee.

I became a WOOWCP-WFP as we Southern Californians called ourselves—or at least the ones who still had a sense of humor. That's a White-Out-of-Work-Computer-Programmer-With-Few-Prospects. The big aeronautical engineering firm in Glendale that I was then doing software design for was spinning off people faster than an Oklahoma tornado. Half of the parking lot was empty and the signs on the executive parking spaces had hastily painted-over names or no names at all. We'd been downsized and out-sourced to India and Pakistan and most of my friends were now calling themselves house-husbands, shoe clerks, the Orange County Militia, or alcoholics. My defense mechanism had always been a cynical black humor, but even that gets real old, real quick. So does the weekly humiliation of the unemployment line, a McJob that wasn't worth going to, or sharing my afternoons with Oprah. When Doug phoned me from Boston and offered me the job, I packed the Bronco, did a reverse Horace Greeley, and headed east. Why not? Terri had died of cancer the year before and there was nothing holding me in California anymore. All I had left were my memories of her, but I soon discovered they were surprisingly portable. I could take her with me anywhere I went, and she never complained, not once.

Terri and I met at a Bruce Springsteen Concert in Oakland when we were young and Bruce's liver was a lot older. She was a reporter for an on-line weekly e-paper and rock blog in Mendocino, a stringer actually, all bright-eyed and serious, hoping to catch the big break with an in-depth retrospective piece on the inner meaning of Springsteen's lyrics. Me? I had cut class for the week and hitched my way up the coast from LA, hoping to catch the music and some fun with the tailgaters and groupies in the parking lot. Don't ask me why, but for some strange reason we stuck. The unity of opposites? Who knows, but we had eight incredible years together and a lot of good times, right to the bitter end. When it came, I was left with a lot of pain and a gaping hole where someone else should be—a hole I thought could never be filled. Fortunately, I had all those good memories of her too. Memories. Without my memories of Terri, I would never have made it. They were the parts of her I could tuck away in the back corner of my mind and pull out whenever things got really bad, when the hurting parts of me ripped loose and started to fly away. Those were the times I needed something firm to hold onto until I could pull myself back together. That was why they could kill me if they wanted to, but I refused to let them hi-jack my memories of Terri. They were too precious. I owed them everything.

There's an old saying, "that which doesn't kill you makes you stronger," but it's not true. Things can maim and hurt too, and leave you an emotional cripple. I've got to hand it to Terri. She fought the disease for many months and as she did, she taught me what real determination and courage were all about. When she finally did die, I fell into a black hole. I couldn't help it, but I had had more than I could stomach of doctor's offices, hospitals, medicine smells, denatured alcohol, pill bottles, flowers, funeral homes, and the musky smell of freshly turned dirt. Funeral homes. I swore I would never enter one again, not on my feet anyway. Even today, the smell of cut flowers and organ music can push me right over the edge, and all because of one tiny little lump, a growth no bigger than a pea.

I was numb at her funeral. When it was over, I piled into my Nissan 350-Z and headed south to Mexico, determined to drink them out of tequila. The next three weeks were a blur. Like Jimmy Buffet, I ended up with a blown flip-flop, an unwanted tattoo, and vague memories of too many barroom floors. I'm still not sure where I was or what I was doing, but they say my 350-Z hit a semi head-on out on the main highway. The Mexican cops found a charred body inside. Everyone assumed it was me, but it was probably some poor, dumb Mexican kid having the time of his life in a drunken gringo's Japanese sports car. Whatever, they packed the crispy critter back to LA and buried him next to Terri, and I'm told they threw me one Hell of a funeral. Coming right on the heels of Terri's, our friend's worst problem was to make sure they wore a different dress or a new tie. They didn't even have to ask for directions. It was sympathy squared, with tons of tears and an instant replay for those who missed the first show.

Whatever, the crispy critter wasn't me. I saw a copy of the Mexican death certificate and the florid obituary that somebody wrote for the Pasadena newspaper. The eulogy was so stirring; they said Doug never did stop crying. When they finally let me out of the drunk tank in San Jose and I talked my way back across the border a few weeks later, it really pissed off a lot of people. Talk about your emotional pratfall. All those tears wasted, all those interrupted vacations, all the schedules that had to be rescheduled—how rude.

That was their problem. Me? I had hit bottom. No, I had crashed through bottom and landed in my private little hell somewhere below the sub-basement. Funny though. Even when I sank to the lowest point I could get, after mopping up half the bars in Baja, Terri didn't abandon me. I saw her face staring up at me from the bottom of every tequila glass I downed. She was watching me from the dark shadows in the corner of the filthy hotel room I crashed in. Whenever I paused to raise my blood-shot eyes to the puffy, fast-moving clouds in that high, blue Mexican sky, I saw her face up there on the clouds looking down, watching over me. No, Terri had not deserted me. She would always be there, but I knew she was not very happy watching what I was doing to myself.

When I got back to LA, they put me on medical leave. They called it stress, but the place was shutting down anyway. Four months later, they locked the doors and I found myself standing at the end of the unemployment line like everyone else. Let's face it, there was nothing left for me in LA and I was ready for a change of scene. I'd proven I couldn't in fact drink all the tequila in the world no matter how hard I tried, and that there were easier ways to kill myself if that was what I really want to do. But I didn't. Terri was up there watching me. I couldn't put up

with her frowns and unhappy looks any longer, so I got myself dried out. No AA or twelve-step method, I simply took a good look at myself in the mirror one morning and stopped cold.

Two months later, the phone rang. It was Doug, desperate for a systems programmer. He didn't need to ask twice. Most people wouldn't look forward to a five-thousand mile drive all by themselves, but it didn't bother me one bit. I'd spent most of the year practicing being alone and had gotten good at it. Besides, it was easier for me to drive across the country for a week than to spend another night alone in LA.

In a way, I came to enjoy those long days in the Bronco. My first choice would have been to have Terri in the front seat next to me, anytime and anywhere, but out on the open road I had our music and our memories to keep me company. The truth was, I still had her. Every now and then, even cold sober, I heard her speak to me. Not always in so many words, but I understood what she was telling me. And I would get those looks. She was up there in the clouds looking out for me, as she did down in Mexico. She was worried about me, not that I could blame her. If I had a brain in my head, I'd be worried about me too. I understood what she was saying. It was the same thing she said to me that last night in the hospital before she died. She wanted me to get out of LA, she wanted me to make a new life, and she wanted me to find someone I could be with, for my sake as much as for hers. If I didn't, she told me she would haunt me forever, and we both knew what a single-minded pain-in-the-ass Terri could be when she wanted to.

It was shortly after 9:30 PM when I finished the stuff for Julie and switched off my computer monitor. The old Chinese janitor who was vacuuming the aisle glanced up at me as I walked by. He was probably wondering why the Barbarian was working this late. My back and legs wondered too. I was bleary-eyed and in a computer-induced fog as I grabbed my empty thermos and headed for the door.

Outside, I looked up at the night sky, as had become my habit in the past year. Just checking in again, I told her as I took a few deep breaths. After a long day in air conditioning, the warm, damp evening air felt good. I guess there were a couple of dozen other cars scattered about the parking lot, not that I paid them any attention as I trudged toward my dirty red Ford Bronco sitting in the middle. It was a grizzled veteran of the commuter battles on the LA expressways. Our friends jokingly referred to it as the "OJ Simpson" model. It didn't get good mileage, but it had a big gas tank and the cops could chase you all day in it.

I pulled out my remote key and pressed "unlock." Totally brain dead, I heard the doors pop open and got inside. I tossed the thermos in the back seat, pulled the door closed and fastened my seat belt. I stuck the key in the ignition and was about to crank the engine when the passenger door opened and very large guy slipped in next to me. His slick, jet-black hair was pulled back into a stubby ponytail and he had a weight lifter's body that stretched the seams of his sharkskin sports coat. He wore a dark-red silk shirt open at the throat and a half-dozen gold chains around his neck. More importantly, he held a chrome-plated .45 caliber automatic pointed at my chest. Having spent two years in the Army, I knew what a .45 could do to on the pistol range. I didn't want to know what it could in the front seat of my Bronco.

"You Peter Talbott?" he asked, glaring at me.

"You want the Bronco? It's yours."

"No, I don't want the freakin' Bronco."

"It's yours, really," I told him as I reached for the door handle.

"Look, Ace, this ain't no carjack, and if it were, I'd pick something better than an old piece of shit like this," he said as he raised the .45 a few inches higher and I stopped moving. "Now, you Talbott, or not?"

"Yes, yes, I'm Talbott."

"Peter Emerson Talbott? 33 years old?" I nodded, ready to agree to anything. "From California? Went to freakin' UCLA? UCLA?" His eyes narrowed as he repeated the name of the school. "You know, I lost two large on those dumb bastards in the NCAA tournament last year. I oughta..."

"Yeah," I kept nodding. "They're real dumb bastards, really dumb."

"But you weren't there then, were you? Says you graduated back in '98." More nods, wondering where this was heading. "I guess I can't blame you then, can I?"

"Uh, no, I wouldn't."

"Shut up! You were in the Army and then you went to work for something called Netdyne out in LA. Right?"

"Yeah, software and aeronautical engineering computer stuff," I kept nodding as the feeling of stark terror was beginning to wear off. After all, he hadn't shot me yet.

"You moved here to Boston two months ago and you're living in that little suck-ass apartment over in Lexington? So where's your wife?"

"Where's my wife?" Now it was my turn to get pissed. I sat up and glared. "She's dead. She died a year ago back in LA."

"Yeah? You freakin' sure about that?"

"Yeah, I'm freakin' sure about it!" The .45 or not, I'd had enough.

"Okay, Ace, then how do you explain this?"

He reached into his shirt pocket, pulled out a bad Xerox copy of an old newspaper story, and dropped it in my lap. One glance and I knew exactly what it was:

TALBOTT, PETER EMERSON, age 33, died last Tuesday in a tragic automobile accident in Baja California. A 1998 graduate of UCLA and former lieutenant in the US Army Transportation Corps, he was a software engineer with Netdyne Systems in Long Beach and the husband of Theresa June Talbott who preceded him in death here last month following a lengthy illness. A memorial service will be held at the Montane chapel in Long Beach at 2:00 PM on Thursday.

"Oh, not this again," I laughed and shook my head, recognizing the old obituary from the LA Times.

"You see something funny, smart guy?"

"That obituary, it was all a big mistake."

"A mistake?" He raised the .45. "I'm all freakin' ears."

I tried to explain to him about the trip to Tijuana, the 350-Z, the semi, the dead Mexican kid, and the memorial service in Long Beach.

The guy sat and listened, as he said, he was all ears. When I finally finished, he sat there for a minute as if he was studying me. "Okay, then how do you explain Columbus?"

"Columbus?"

"Yeah, Columbus. In Ohio. You never heard of it?"

"Sure, I've heard of it."

"So what were you doing there? Having more funerals for the hell of it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. I've never been there."

"Never?" he glared, looking deep into my eyes. "What about that dip-shit accounting office of yours down on Sickles?"

"Accounting office? I'm a software engineer, a computer programmer; I don't know anything about accounting. Look, whoever you're looking for, I'm not him."

"Okay, if that's the way you want to play it, how do you explain these?" he said as he dropped two other slips of torn newsprint in my lap.

They were two more obituaries. I picked the first one up and read:

TALBOTT, PETER EMERSON, age 33, of Columbus, died Sunday at Varner Clinic following a tragic automobile accident. President of Center Financial Advisors. Formerly of Los Angeles. A 1998 graduate of UCLA and a lieutenant, US Army Transportation Corps. By authority of Ralph Tinkerton, Executor. (See also TALBOTT, THERESA JUNE, wife, accompanying). Funeral services for both at 2:00 PM tomorrow, Greene Funeral Home, 255 E. Larkin, Peterborough, Ohio. Internment, Oak Hill Cemetery, following.

"You making a fuckin' hobby out of these?" he asked, but all I could do was stare at it. Coincidence? How many 1998 graduates of UCLA were there? How many were thirty-three years old and from Los Angeles? How many of those were alumni of the "Fighting" Transportation Corps, "an officer and a gentleman by Act of Congress" named Peter Emerson Talbott? Only one that I could think of. I had never heard of a company named Center Financial Advisors, much less owned one, and I had never heard of the Varner Clinic or a man named Ralph Tinkerton, either.

Worse still, I looked at the other one. It was the companion piece for Terri:

TALBOTT, THERESA JUNE, age 33, of Columbus, died Sunday at Varner Clinic following a tragic automobile accident. Loving wife of Peter. (See also TALBOTT, PETER EMERSON, Husband, accompanying). Formerly of Los Angeles and a 1999 graduate of Berkeley. By authority, Ralph Tinkerton, Executor. Funeral services for both at 2:00 PM tomorrow, Greene Funeral Home, 255 E. Larkin, Peterborough, Ohio. Internment, Oak Hill Cemetery, following.

This was no mistake. That couple in the newspaper was supposed to be Terri and me, no doubt about it. It was a lie and in that instant I got very angry. They could do what they wanted to me. My name and my reputation meant nothing, certainly not after Baja, but when they dragged Terri into it, something inside me snapped. This was worse than identity theft. It was memory corruption. They were stealing her, stealing my memories of her, wrapping their greasy fingers around

them and warping them. Something snapped inside me and I knew that was something I couldn't let happen. I didn't care about this Bozo with the Soprano suit and the .45, and I didn't care about the odds. I was going to stop them. It's funny how when you have nothing to lose, as I did back then, it's easy to think really stupid thoughts like that.

He stared at me. "You look like you saw a ghost."

"More than you'll ever know. Where did you get these?"

"This morning's *Columbus Daily Press*."

"Today? I don't get it."

"Yeah, neither do we. You ever heard of Jimmy Santorini?"

I shook my head.

"How about Rico Patillo? Bayonne? East Orange?"

"In New Jersey? You're kidding, right?"

His eyes grew hard. "Do I look like I'm freakin' kidding? I don't suppose you ever heard of Ralph Tinkerton either?" He stared at me, trying to read my eyes as I shook my head again. "Ah, shit," he finally said in disgust, then opened the passenger side door and started to get out. He turned and looked back at me, pointing the .45 at my old blue jeans and the Rolling Stones Voodoo Lounge World Tour T-shirt. "Freakin' California. Ain't you a little old for that shit?"

I looked at his gaudy chain and the sharkskin "lounge-lizard" jacket and replied, "Freakin New Jersey. Ain't you a little young?"

"A smart ass, huh?" he answered with a glint of humor in his eye as he got the rest of the way out. "I like that, but you be real careful, Ace. Keep both hands on the steering wheel, drive straight out of the parking lot, and don't look back until you reach that "suck-ass" dump you're renting in Lexington. You got that?"

"But what about..."

"Forget about it. Tinkerton may have made one mistake, but he won't make a second one, and neither will I. So get out of here. Forget all about everything I told you and forget all about me. You got that? 'Cause if I see so much as a brake light come on, you'll get a slug through the rear window."

I did what he said. I drove away and I didn't stop, not that I thought he really was following me or that he'd shoot that big cannon at me, but there was nothing to be gained by finding out. I drove to Lexington, pulled into a parking space next to my little "suck-ass" dump and turned off the motor. Too bad I couldn't turn mine off. It was just getting going. Screw him, I thought, as I leaned over and opened the glove compartment. I pulled out my dog-eared Road Atlas. That was when I noticed the three newspaper clippings lying on the floor. The grease-ball had dropped them there. He wanted me to have them. I had to give him credit; he was pushing all the right buttons and there was nothing I could do to stop myself. Not that I really cared what kind of scam they were pulling or what they were using my name for, but they had crossed the line when they began messing with Terri. She was out of bounds.

Columbus, Ohio. I opened the Road Atlas to the mileage table on the back page. My finger ran down the left hand column until I found Boston column, then ran it across to the Cs until I found Columbus. It was 783 miles from Boston, about a twelve-hour drive in the Bronco. I looked at the clock on the dashboard. It was 10:17 PM. Plenty of time to run inside, make a fresh thermos of coffee, throw some

stuff in an overnight bag, and make it there my funeral at 2:00 PM tomorrow. After all, I missed the one in LA and I would feel really bad if I missed this one too.

Looking back on it all, if I knew then what I know now, the smartest thing I could have done was exactly what the grease-ball told me to do—forget about it. But if I had listened to him and went home and went to sleep, I would never have made it to Columbus or Chicago, I would have never met Sandy, and my life today would be infinitely poorer.

Chapter 2

Columbus, Ohio: a funeral in the cornfields...

The drive from Boston to Columbus wasn't all that hard, not if you are used to long, boring drives by yourself and you have a large thermos and enough rock stations to keep you company. It was Interstate all the way and I reached the eastern suburbs of Columbus around noon. I stopped in a friendly Marathon station in Pataskala for a refill, a \$2.00 Central Ohio road map, and a visit to the restroom to change clothes. This was the second day for the Rolling Stones T-shirt and I thought something more formal might be in order. Unfortunately, being from California, the most formal attire I owned was an old, blue blazer with gold buttons. All in all, it added just the requisite touch of restraint and class to my faded jeans, a green and yellow Polo shirt, and docksiders. I didn't bother with socks, since it was my own funeral and there wouldn't be anyone there I cared about offending anyway.

Like most Midwestern cities, there was a circular beltway around Columbus. Looking at the map, scenic Pataskala was on the rural, far-eastern fringe of the city at about 3:00 on the clock dial. The town of Peterborough, where the funeral home was located, was up at 12:00, followed by a right turn up into the next county. The funeral was at 2:00 and I didn't think it would take very long to drive up there. As I rolled out of the gas station, I pulled out my cell phone and figured I'd better give Doug a call and let him know I was taking the day off.

"Sharon? Hey, it's Pete Talbott. Is the boss in?"

"No, he's having another "out of body experience" with the venture capital guys in the conference room."

"Again? Jeez."

"Money. Ain't it the pits?"

"Yeah, the root of all evil. Say, did he get the subroutines I e-mailed him?"

"Oh, yeah, I think you saved the corporate ass with that one."

"Good, tell him I'm taking today and tomorrow off."

"What's up, Petey? You finally get lucky?" she asked in a husky voice. "It's about time."

"No, Sharon, I didn't get lucky."

"Too bad, 'cause God knows you could use some. Me? Unfortunately I'm married, but you blow in my ear sometime and..."

"Sharon, I had to go to Ohio, for a funeral."

"A funeral? Oh, sorry. Me and my mouth. Whose is it?"

"Mine."

"Okay, be that way. But when you get back, I want you to meet my friend, Doris."

"Your friend, Doris?"

"I'm serious. With Doris, you don't even have to get real lucky, Petey, all you got to do is show up. And you really do need some R&R."

"Sharon, I gotta go," I said as I hung up. R&R with her friend Doris? As if that was what I really needed. But it was the same way back in LA. No matter how far or how fast I ran, it couldn't be far enough or fast enough to get away from all the misguided, unwanted help from my friends' wives and my wife's friends, all of whom thought that if I just had sex with another woman, I would get over the loss of Terri. What one had to do with the other I'd never understand. What I needed was Terri back. I didn't need to get laid.

These days, one urban beltway looks about like another. The traffic might not be as thick as it had been back in LA, but if you've driven past one suburban office building and big interchange shopping center, you've driven by them all. I steered the Bronco around the long, looping beltway until I found the Cedarville Road exit and got off. This was a broad commercial street with strip malls and a gazillion fast-food restaurants, banks, and gas stations that took me north through the suburbs, ex-urbs, and no-urbs until the development turned into cornfields. That was where I found the small town of Peterborough, Ohio. Town? It was more like a wide spot between the cornfields, where a couple of two-lane country roads crossed up in Campbell County about eight miles north of the beltway. Still, this was a beautiful, early-summer afternoon, all hot and humid, and the cornfields were a radiant, green, the farmhouses looked refrigerator white, and you could almost imagine that kinder and gentler America the politicians get all teary-eyed about, when they aren't railing about "values" or the moral quagmire of California pop culture. Me? I was never into the County Fair scene with all those hot sweaty animals, hot sweaty people, ferris wheels, cotton candy, and corn dogs. I kinda liked the moral quagmire. Besides, driving around the beltway had shown me that "kinder and gentler" rural Ohio appeared to be having its problems too; they were paving over the corn with strip malls, big-lot subdivisions, and mini-marts just like the rest of the country.

Fortunately, Peterborough hadn't been given the opportunity to sink that far, not yet any way. Gathered around the intersection at the corner of "walk and don't walk," I found a couple of dozen turn-of-the-century clapboard Victorian houses with picket fences and window boxes full of geraniums, a Sunoco gas station, a drive-in branch bank, a State Farm insurance agent, two antique shops, a Pizza Hut, and four stop signs. The streets were lined with big oaks whose roots had buckled and tilted the concrete slabs of the sidewalks. By the look of them, it could have been back when FDR was President. Quaint, but other than the neighborhood skateboarders, I doubted anyone cared.

I had no idea where the funeral home was, but the address in the obituary said East Larkin. At the four stop signs that marked the center of town, the cross street said Larkin, so I took a wild stab and turned right, figuring that had to be east.

Sure enough, a quarter mile down the road I saw the sign for the Greene Funeral Home. It looked like I expected it to look: a big brick Georgian with white columns. The thought of entering another funeral home sent cold shivers down my back. I hated funerals, but I was angry enough to put up with almost anything for an hour or two, even if it was my own.

The front entrance of the building faced the road and there was a drive-thru portico on the left side for loading the cars and hearses. The parking lot had only one entrance and it wrapped around the front and left side of the building. When I pulled in, the lot was nearly empty. In the far corner beyond the portico, sat two gleaming, black Cadillac limos, an even longer hearse, and five nondescript sedans that must belong to the hired help. I also saw a big, brown sheriff's cruiser parked in the shade of a big, overhanging oak. The Sheriff? The Talbott funerals must be a really big deal here in Peterborough. They brought the town cop in for crowd control.

The only other car in the parking lot was a white Lincoln Town Car parked in the middle. I parked my Bronco in the front row, where I was sure it would be noticed. I got out, put on the blazer, and took the opportunity to slowly stretch my cramped muscles. At six feet two inches tall with a lean runner's build, my back and legs would tighten up like piano wires after a long drive. I looked around the parking lot again. Other than the Lincoln Town Car, the only people coming to the funeral looked to be the county sheriff and me. *Well, if this was the price one had pay for being such a monumental smart-ass, I'd remember to take my nice pills from now on.*

The sheriff's cruiser was sitting in the deep shadows under the tree. I couldn't see clearly inside, but there was a guy in a brown uniform slouched in the front seat, his arm hanging out the window, a cigarette dangling from his fingertips. He wore a pair of those "FOP-approved," silver-lensed, aviator sunglasses like Ponch wore on CHIPS when I was a kid, the kind no "real" cop would be caught dead without. He was watching me with that bored-curious look that only a cop with nothing better to do would know how to give. I smiled and blew him a kiss as I walked past. At least that got him to move. He flicked the cigarette aside and I could see his head following me.

The Greene Funeral Home was one of those long, low, one-story brick colonial things that was supposed to give the bereaved a feeling of history and permanence. The shrubs were neatly trimmed and the grass was green enough to have been spray-painted. The outside walls were a thick, dignified, brown brick and there was a tall white cupola on the roof, complete with a wrought iron weather vane and a crowing rooster. The main entrance had three broad concrete stairs and a set of double glass doors. Yep, the place looked sturdy and prosperous. It looked permanent. It looked positively eternal. Bet Mr. Greene didn't offer too many cut-rate deals on coffins. Bet he didn't even try.

When I started out from Boston the night before, I had a full head of angry steam inside, but as I closed in on the front door of the funeral home and saw those two black hearses under the portico, my knees grew weak. The heat rippled off the asphalt and my pace slowed to a crawl. It wasn't me. It was my feet. They said not to go any further, and feet are rarely wrong. All the pain and anguish I kept locked away these many months had grabbed me by my coattails and

stopped me dead in my tracks. I closed my eyes. I couldn't breathe. It felt as if the funeral home itself was pushing me back, telling me to run back to the Bronco and get the hell out of town while I still could. Why did I come up to Columbus in the first place, it whispered? Why dredge up all those horrible memories? Why? The obituaries? They must have been a mistake, some crazy coincidence or somebody's idea of a cruel joke. Whatever, they weren't worth this price.

I wanted very much to give in, to cut and run, but I couldn't let myself do that. I forced my eyes open and stared at the front door, focusing on it, on the glass and my reflection. I saw my face and forced myself to concentrate on Terri and to remember why I had come here to Ohio. They could fool with me, but not with Terri and not with my memories. With those thoughts, I took a deep breath, then another, and slowly, slowly, I blew on the coals, again and again until the anger burst into flames and became a raging bonfire inside me again. I needed it and I used it, because my memories of Terri were the one weapon I had to keep my feet moving forward. The anger. It was my ally. It built and churned inside me and I knew it was the weapon I would use to defeat anything this funeral home could throw at me.

I gritted my teeth and pushed on through those front doors, but the Greene Funeral Home wasn't done with me yet. Once inside, I felt the sticky-sweet smell of cut flowers and the soft drone of organ music wrap themselves around me like a hot, wet blanket. It brought back all the pain, the grief, and the plastic insincerity. It turned my stomach. I wobbled back and forth fighting the nausea, trying desperately to keep my grip on the anger, because without it, I could never force myself to go on.

I took a deep breath and slowly opened my eyes. I was standing in a spacious foyer. Muted lighting. Soft pastel colors. Carpet so thick you could sink into it up to your ankles. And the furniture? Ethan Allen, top of the line. The music? Probably a twelve-hour tape. The sweet flower smell? Some phony spray in the air conditioning ducts. That way, Greene could use artificial flowers and save a ton of money. Well, at least the place wouldn't play havoc with my allergies. As for my claustrophobia? No help there. Funeral homes closed in and squeeze the life out of me like a giant Anaconda every time I stepped inside one. Maybe that was why I hated them. That, and too many dead people.

In the center of the foyer stood a large pedestal table with a monstrously large flower arrangement that looked like a bomb had gone off in a Hawaiian garden. A wide, carpeted hallway went off to the right and to the left with a chapel on each side. The doors on the closest two were open, but the two at the far end were closed. On each side of the corridor, I saw a black, framed plaque on the wall. The one on the left read "Schirmerberger" in gold press-on letters. The one on the right read "Talbot." Beneath the family name, in smaller type, I saw "Peter and Theresa." I stood there and stared at the plaque. Terri hated that name "Theresa" and seeing it in bright gold letters pushed me right to the edge. My memories of Terri were intensely private and these clowns had no right to stomp around inside my head with their dirty work boots. It made me want to rip that black plaque off the wall and jam it and the Hawaiian flower arrangement down someone's throat.

The doors to the "Talbot" chapel were wide open. At the door stood a small writing stand with a curved reading lamp, an open guest book, and a ballpoint

pen. I walked over and looked down. The book was open. The page was blank. Not a single entry. Somehow, that didn't surprise me.

Well, as the guest of honor, I didn't think it was polite to hold things up, so I stepped inside. The chapel had perhaps fifteen long, wooden pews on each side and could easily hold a couple of hundred people if it had to. Today it didn't. The crowd consisted of me and two cheap wooden coffins sitting on draped biers at the front of the room. They lay in a "V" with the far ends angled in so they almost touched. The coffins were matching, of course, and closed, with a large floral blanket lying across the center of each. Coffins. Funny how these two didn't bother me very much, probably because I knew I wasn't in the one and I knew Terri wasn't in the other. I strode down the center of the aisle for a closer look, but there was nothing to see. The coffins were shut tight, their covers screwed down, so I turned around, intending to take a seat in a pew halfway back and wait.

That was when I discovered there was another man in the room. It was the grease-ball with the chrome-plated .45 who shared the front seat of my Bronco with me last night. He stood in the right rear corner of the chapel watching me through a pair of dark, wrap-around sunglasses with an expression of faint amusement. Today he was dressed in a nicely tailored summer-weight beige suit and a dark blue silk shirt, open at the collar, with a matching floppy handkerchief in the coat pocket. He had the same set of gaudy gold chains hanging around his neck and his black hair combed straight back into a ponytail. With the clothes, the chains, and the ponytail, he didn't fit here in Buckeye land any more than I did. He took the sunglasses off and began to slowly clean the lenses with his handkerchief, staring at me the entire time. And there was no evasion in those eyes. They were cold and analytical, like a butcher sizing up a fresh slab of beef in a frosty meat locker.

I finally looked away and took a seat in a middle row, left. At precisely 2:00 PM, the organ music faded to silence and a tall, silver-haired man in a superbly tailored black suit materialized through a side curtain in one of the front alcoves. He wore an expensive blue silk tie with a matching handkerchief and his suit jacket remained buttoned. Very formal. Very proper. His crisp, white shirt had large, gold cuff links and he wore a sapphire ring on his pinkie finger. Tanned and fit, his mane of silver hair looked so stiff and lacquered, you could drop him on his head from a third floor window and he'd bounce. This couldn't be some junior assistant. This had to be Greene himself. With his head slightly bowed, he glided silently to the center of the room in front of the caskets. Ah, he seemed to be saying, life was indeed good, but if you play it right, death could be even better. The man paused there for a moment between the two coffins, his hands clasped in front of him, looking down, serious, contemplative, and very well practiced. When he finally looked up and saw me and the big gumba in the rear corner, I saw the slightest flicker of surprise in those soft-brown cow eyes, but Greene's expression never changed. Clearly, he didn't expect to see either one of us. Probably didn't expect to see anybody. Surprise? Annoyance? Yes, but oddly detached. And curious.

With a soft cough, he began to speak in a thick, baritone voice. "My friends, it was the wish of Peter and Theresa, as conveyed to me through their executor, that no memorial service be held at this time." Great ad-libbing, I had to concede.

"They knew how sad their untimely passing would be to their many friends," Greene continued on autopilot without a hint of doubt or shame. "And Peter and Theresa very much wanted to spare them any further grief. Naturally, we will respect their wishes today. So, let us now bow our heads for a moment of silent prayer in their memory."

After a brief pause, I heard another soft cough and had to stifle a laugh. If a straight line is the shortest distance between two points, I guess a mortician in Ohio measures a silent prayer as the shortest time between two coughs.

"On behalf of the family of Peter and Theresa, we truly appreciate your coming," he continued as he looked up and studied me for a moment. "A private internment will follow, but at the request of the deceased, it is limited to the immediate family. Thank you and have a safe drive home." Appropriate, I thought, as I stared at him and he stared back at me. No, not at me, more through me than anything else. Then the eyes swung away. They looked past me toward the back of the room where the guy in the blue shirt and gold chains was sitting. Greene's eyes paused again, as if he saw something there that bothered him a whole lot more than I did. Finally, he turned away and glided back into his alcove as silently as he had come.

It only took a minute or two for the empty, oppressiveness of the room to wrap itself around me again and start to squeeze. If I sat there much longer, it would crush the life out of me. Besides, there was nothing more to be gained here and I wanted to talk to the grease-ball in the beige suit before he disappeared on me again. I stood and turned, but he must have slipped out the aisle into the corridor and he was already gone.

My knees were weak and trembling, but I hurried after him through the lobby and out the front doors into the parking lot, but he was too fast. He jumped into the white Lincoln Town Car, started it up, floored it, and roared past me, kicking up a billowing cloud of dust as he bounced his way out onto Larkin Road. Tires screaming, the Lincoln turned east and disappeared down the road, leaving me standing alone in the middle of the hot, sun-drenched parking lot. Well, not completely alone. The deputy sheriff continued to sit there in the shade in his big brown police car, watching and waiting. For what, I wondered? Obviously not for reckless drivers in Lincolns. Great. Other than a silent prayer and some quality time with two caskets in an air conditioned chapel, my foray into the world of Buckeye mortuary science had accomplished absolutely nothing. I had scratched all the new itches that had bothered me since I read the obituaries the night before and got that out of my system, but in the end, all I found were the same old sores festering underneath.

I turned and walked back to the Bronco, tossed my blazer across the passenger seat, and got inside. The mid-day sun had turned the interior into a sauna, so I rolled down the windows and turned the air conditioning up to Max, waiting for the big SUV to cool down. That morning I found a good rock station in Columbus, QFM-96, and this afternoon they were featuring some back-to-back-to-back Mariah Carey. She was one of Terri's favorites, so I leaned against the headrest and closed my eyes as her music filled the car. There are some things you can never get too much of, and chocolate, a good Napa cabernet, and Mariah are near the top the list. With the car finally cooled down, I dropped it in gear and took a slow loop around the parking lot, past the deputy sitting in his cruiser. I smiled at

him as I drove out of the lot and turned west on Larkin. The deputy didn't smile back. I didn't expect him to.

There was a Sunoco gas station a few doors down at the corner. I pulled in and drove around to the rear of the building where I found some shade under a big poplar. The area was mostly open cornfield. From my vantage point, I could see the Greene Funeral Home, its side portico, and the two black hearses parked at the back of the lot. That's where I decided to wait.

Twenty minutes later, two men in dark suits emerged from the side entrance, strode back to the hearses, and drove them under the portico and parked them side-by-side. They got out, walked back to the side doors and held them open as two more dark-suited men came out pushing two gurneys that were carrying the coffins. They opened the rear door of the hearses, pushed the coffins inside, and I heard the doors slam shut. The drivers and their helpers got inside and the two long, black cars drove out to the street with the brown sheriff's car finally stirring and taking up the rear of their short convoy. They exited the lot and turned west. After they passed the Sunoco station, I waited a decent interval, put the Bronco in gear, and followed from a safe distance, keeping a couple of hills or a line of trees between us, not that they were hard to follow.

Two miles and a handful of stop signs later, they turned north and passed through the tall, wrought-iron gates of Oak Hill. It was one of those modern cemeteries that put an emphasis on open space. I held back as the two hearses and the sheriff turned in and followed the main road as it curved off to the right. Once they were around the bend, I turned in and took an inside track, keeping the procession in sight. Except for a scattering of tall cedars, some evergreen hedges, and a lot of flowerbeds, there was nothing to break the view across the rolling green lawns. No tombstones. No big gaudy mausoleums. No tall marble spires. No winged angels or miniature Pietas looking down on the graves in perpetual grief. What it had was row after row of small bronze plaques mounted flush to the ground and very little cover to hide a Bronco.

They stopped near a large green-and-white striped canopy on a low rise near the rear corner of the cemetery. I pulled behind a low hedge about two hundred yards away and parked. Moving on foot, I cut the distance in half and slipped behind a tree where I could see what they were doing. The men in the black suits already had the rear doors of the hearses open and were pulling out the first coffin. The four men carried it over to the tent and set it on the ground on one side of the hole. They went back and got the second coffin and placed it on the other side. Two cemetery workers in blue denim overalls stood waiting next to a large open grave with a wheeled A-frame hoist. No crowds. No preachers. No grieving next-of-kin. No standing on ceremony. They hooked up the first casket to the frame and quickly rolled it over the grave. As the deputy watched, they turned the crank and the casket slowly disappeared into the hole and out of sight. In a matter of minutes, the second one followed next to it. Terri would love this. Her mother always said that if she married a bum like me she'd end up in a doublewide sooner or later. If she only knew.

Finally, I saw the cemetery workers pick up their long-handled spades and set to work shoveling the loose dirt back into the big grave. Clods rained down on the wooden boxes with a muffled "Thump." Ashes to ashes, I thought, dust to dust. A

“private internment?” Was that what undertaker Greene called it? “Limited to the immediate family?” They have such odd ways of describing things here in Ohio. What a crock. Unless this Mr. Peter Talbott came from a long line of Teamsters or gravediggers, none of these characters were in the family tree.

As the dirt continued to fly, the black suits finally relaxed. Their job done, they gathered around the deputy. I saw puffs of smoke from freshly lit cigarettes and heard loud laughter. Obviously, they knew each other and weren't worried about the graveside humor. As the cemetery workers finished and patted down the low mound with their spades, one of the attendants looked at his watch. He motioned to the others as he ground his cigarette butt into the bare dirt and waved good-bye. The four attendants got back in their hearses and slowly drove away and I figured it was time for me to do the same.

I hurried back to the Bronco and headed for the main gate, hoping to make it around the circle before they did. I beat the hearses back, but not the deputy sheriff. His big brown cruiser lay across the road blocking the exit. The sheriff was leaning against its fender with his arms crossed, the sun glinting off the silver lenses of his sunglasses, watching me as I drove up and stopped a few feet away. Cocky and self-sure, he paused for a moment before he finally pushed his large frame off the side of the car and sauntered over to me. He looked to be around fifty years old, big and beefy with graying hair around the temples. He had colonel's eagles on his shirt collar, a sizable beer gut, and a black nine-millimeter Glock automatic riding on his hip, just what your average hick county sheriff needs to hold back the invading criminal hordes from the city and to bring down the occasional rogue elephant.

Slowly he took off his sunglasses as he stepped next to the Bronco. I rolled the window down and he leaned-in, resting his meaty forearms on the Bronco's window frame. He scanned the SUV's interior then focused his eyes on me, narrow and hard. “You got some kinda problem here, Mister?” he asked.

I looked the plastic nameplate on his shirt. It said *Dannmeyer*. I smiled my most polite and innocent smile. “Nope, everything's just fine, Deputy Dannmeyer.”

His expression turned even harder. “That's Sheriff Dannmeyer, not deputy.”

“Oh, excuse me there, Sheriff.”

“I know I saw you and this vehicle back at the Funeral Home, and I know you heard Mr. Greene say this here was a private service. He said immediate family only.” He held out his hand. “Now, lemme see some ID.”

I pulled out my wallet and handed him my driver's license.

He stared down at the card and said, “Talbott, Peter Emerson.” He frowned, peered in at my face again, down at the card, then back at me. “Talbott?” he asked suspiciously. “That's the same name as the deceased. You related?”

“In a round-about-kind-of-sort-of-way.”

He stared at the driver's license again, his face more troubled now. “This here license says you're from California,” he said.

I tried hard to look just as serious. “That's because I'm from California, or I was. I moved to Boston recently, but the license hasn't caught up.”

“Hasn't, huh?” He kept looking at the license. “So whadaya do out there in California or Boston, or wherever the hell it is you're from, Mr. Talbott?”

"Me? I'm an aeronautical systems engineer, a computer programmer. I evolve mathematical constructs for computer simulations."

He gave me a blank stare. "Sounds interesting."

"It isn't. What about you, sheriff? Whadaya do?"

"Me? I keep people from getting their noses stuck in places they don't belong."

"Now that does sound interesting."

"Sometimes it is. Sometimes it saves 'em a lot of time and trouble." He seemed to be studying me, not sure. "Like you, for instance. You came all the way here from Boston? That's a long damn way to come for a funeral."

"Well, you know how close us Talbotts are, Sheriff." I looked down and saw Dannmeyer had a U. S. Marine Corps emblem and *Semper Fi* tattooed on his hairy forearm. "Semper Fi? Well, goddamn! Were you in the Crotch?"

"Hey, is there anything else?" Dannmeyer suddenly beamed.

"No shit, what unit?"

"Fifth Marines. And you?"

"Me? Oh, I was in the Army, but I just love those cute jarhead tattoos."

His eyes narrowed. His smile faded and he couldn't quite make up his mind whether I had put him on or insulted him. Whichever, he knew he didn't like it. Slowly he backed his head out of the car and handed me back my driver's license, but those hard eyes never left me.

"The fuckin' Army, huh," he said as he spat on the ground, gave me a two-fingered salute, and slowly put the silver-lensed sunglasses back on. "You be real careful driving back to Boston. We had to scrape the last two Talbotts off a bridge abutment out on I-71 and you wouldn't want to put us through all that mess again, now would you?" Then he turned and walked back to his cruiser. He got in and slowly backed the big car away from the gate.

I tried not to smile, but I couldn't help it as I drove on through, turned south, and didn't stop until the cemetery was long gone from my rear view mirror.

A private family funeral? The whole thing stunk even worse now than it had before. Maybe it was Greene and that expression of surprise on his face when he looked up and saw me sitting in the chapel. Maybe it was the callous indifference of those men in the black suits as they stood under the awning, smoking and laughing while clods of dirt thumped down on the two wooden caskets. Or, maybe it was Sheriff Dannmeyer's attitude that got to me most, that look of dim-witted power and arrogance. I turned the car around and headed back toward Peterborough. I wanted some answers, and I figured the best way to get was to put the screws to the good Mr. Greene.

Chapter 3

All it takes is one slippery mortician...

It was nearly 3:00 by the time I got back to the funeral home. The parking lot was as empty as it had been when I left. Looking in the far corner, I saw that the

five employee cars were still there, but some of those must belong to the crew that had taken the coffins to the cemetery. In any event, the day's business appeared to be finished and it was too early for the evening's schedule of wakes to begin, so I had the parking lot all to myself. I stepped inside. Other than the gaudy floral arrangement in the center of the room, the foyer was still empty. They'd switched off the organ music. Even the sticky-sweet flower smell had vanished. Figured.

I walked down the hallway to the right and found Greene's business office at the far end. There was a black felt sign on the wall next to the door with the usual gold letters that said "Enter," so I did. There was no one in the outer office. It was well appointed, like the rest of the place, with a beautiful couch and loveseat, two tall wingback chairs, and colonial prints on the wall, straight out of the Ethan Allen catalog. The secretary's big, L-shaped mahogany desk was empty. It had a laser printer, a modem, fax machine, cables, wires, and a large computer with a flat screen. Impressive. And expensive. Greene probably had his own web page too. I could just picture those two hearses outside rolling down the fast lane of the Information Super Highway. Why should that come as a surprise either?

I heard a familiar, syrupy male voice coming through the doorway to the right. There was a bright red light on one of the extensions on the secretary's telephone console, so I walked over and peered around the doorframe. It was Greene all right, the silver-haired undertaker himself, leaning back in an over-sized leather desk chair, feet up on the desk, his eyes closed, talking on the telephone.

"Yes, very tragic, very tragic indeed, Mrs. Casey, but you can take comfort from the fact that your mother led a full, rich life right up to the end, didn't she?" Greene was still wearing his suit coat, tie up, jacket buttoned. Habit, no doubt, like the thin plastic smile and the expression of mournful empathy. Maybe it was pinned in place or painted on, like a mannequin's. "No, no, Mrs. Casey, you have other things on your mind right now. I shall contact the hospital myself, personally... Yes... and we'll see to all the arrangements."

Odd. His voice was animated and very empathetic, but his expression never changed. It showed no emotion at all, as if it was detached, or it was a recording, and I felt another cold shiver run down my back. Maybe this guy had been around too many dead bodies and too much grief, I thought, but he was scary.

Finally, Greene opened his eyes and saw me standing in the office doorway. He never blinked. Not the slightest hint of surprise. "Mrs. Casey, I promise you I will call you back in the morning. Yes, I will take care of everything... Now never you fear, just try to get some rest... Yes, you too."

His delicate white hand placed the telephone back in its cradle and he looked up at me with those sincere, brown cow eyes. "I'm sorry, but Miss Sturgis has left for the day."

"I assume you're Mr. Greene, of the funeral home Greenes?"

"Indeed I am. Lawrence Greene, the proprietor," he said as he dropped his legs to the floor and straightened his jacket, his eyes not leaving me. "Is there some way I can be of assistance?"

"Well, I was curious about the Talbott funeral."

"Ah," he said as he drew the word out in a soft sigh. "Now I remember. You were there in the chapel, you and that other man."

"I was there for the... service," I answered as I looked around his spacious office. There wasn't a sheet of paper on his desk, not a file folder to be seen. Showroom clean.

"Ah, yes," he continued to study me carefully, eyeing me from head to foot. Did you know them, then? Mr. and Mrs. Talbott?"

"Not nearly as well as I should have."

"Isn't that always the case?" came the syrupy reply.

On the far wall hung the usual array of licenses and certificates from the state, the Chamber of Commerce, even the Boy Scouts. "You throw a nice funeral service here in Peterborough, Mr. Greene. Brief and to the point. Not much of a crowd, though."

"All too typical when people die so young, so tragically," he shrugged, his lips forming a soft, commiserating smile. "Friends? Relatives? Sometimes, they can't bring themselves to come to the service, they can't bear the pain."

"The closed caskets?"

"It was a very bad accident."

"I bet. A fire, wasn't it?"

"No, their automobile was struck by a train at one of those unguarded crossings over on the east side somewhere. You know how dangerous those things can be at night. As I said, it was very bad. And you are ...?"

"Mr. Talbott."

I saw a flash of surprise cross Greene's face. "Oh? A relative, then?"

"Me? Oh, no, I'm the deceased."

The soft brown eyes narrowed, ever so slightly, and the thin smile began to fade. "If this is some kind of joke, sir, I fail to see..."

"It's no joke, Mr. Greene. That was me you buried." I pulled out my wallet and handed him my driver's license. "I'm Peter Emerson Talbott, thirty-three years old, from Los Angeles, a lieutenant in the Army, UCLA, and all the rest." I stepped closer to his polished mahogany desk and leaned on it with both hands, getting right up in his face. "I could show you my Visa card, my old business card, and my library card if you want, not that it matters to me, but I'm the guy you buried, all right."

Greene looked up at me. My eyes locked on his and I saw him flinch. I saw it. In that moment of surprise and uncertainty, the brief look in Greene's eyes told me everything I wanted to know. I had him. The bastard was lying, but he was a pro. He was doing the backstroke as fast as he could and doing an admirable job of keeping his head above water, but it was too late. For that split second, I saw the truth in his eyes.

He coughed and sat up, carefully studying my driver's license again. "Well, uh, it does indeed appear that your name is Peter Emerson Talbott, I will concede you that," he shrugged. "And a remarkable coincidence, I would say."

"Coincidence? You bury some guy who's pretending to be me and you call that a coincidence?"

"The name," he looked up, appearing to study me. "Perhaps the age and race. Those are the only similarities I see. As for the rest of it, your delusion that someone was pretending to be you; well, I'm not in any position to comment about

that. Frankly, you do not even look like the man," he smiled pleasantly. "Or more correctly, what was left of him."

"I guess we'll never know, will we?"

Greene blinked again. "Mr. ... Talbott? What are you suggesting?"

"That something's seriously wrong here. That wasn't Peter Emerson Talbott you buried today. It wasn't my wife Theresa June Talbott either, and I want some answers."

"How dare you," he puffed, but he couldn't pull it off.

I stared down at that stuffed shirt and felt the heat rising. I wanted to reach across the desk and slap the smile off his face, but I didn't.

"Dare? How dare I? You see, that's what got my juices flowing last night. You can screw around with my name and reputation all you want. They aren't worth very much to begin with," I said, leaning over the desk again, my face getting even closer to him, my eyes blazing. "But when you dragged my wife into your little game, you made it very, very personal.

The look in my eyes must have been hot enough to scorch paint. Greene blinked and turned away, his eyes dropping to my driver's license again. "But this says you are from California," he flicked the edge of the driver's license with his index finger, quickly changing the subject. "The Talbotts were from Columbus, right here in Ohio. So, I'm afraid you've lost me again, Mister Talbott. Who are you and why are you here, anyway?"

"Here? You mean in Columbus, or alive and walking around?"

"Mr. Talbott, if that really is your name, you're being entirely too melodramatic and too flippant about a very painful matter. Did someone send you here to cause trouble for me? Because if this is some kind of practical joke, I really don't appreciate it."

"A joke? Suppose you tell me about the guy you buried."

"You mean Mr. Talbott?"

"I think we've already established that he wasn't Mr. Talbott."

"We have done nothing of the sort, young man." Greene leaned forward and looked up at me with feigned anger. He had taken a couple of good body shots, but he was already picking himself up off the canvass. His voice turned more calm and confident as he tried to reestablish his authority. "I will admit that you share the same name and that you have some similarities in your backgrounds, but this is a very big country, Mister Talbott. I'm sure we would both be amazed by the number of people who share your last name."

"Do you have death certificates?"

"Of course we have the death certificates; it's the law here in Ohio."

"Signed by a doctor, a real one?"

"You should not make light of what was a very tragic situation. Mr. and Mrs. Talbott's mortal remains were forwarded to us by a very reputable medical facility, the Varner Clinic. Doctor Varner himself signed them and they are completely in order, I assure you."

"Doctor Varner? Who identified the bodies?"

"It was Doctor Varner himself and Mr. Ralph Tinkerton, their executor. He is a very prominent attorney with Hamilton, Keogh and Hollister downtown, the *managing* partner, I might add, so you should think twice before you go around

impugning the reputation of a man of Mr. Tinkerton's standing or mine. He has many highly placed friends in this town. So do I."

"Like Sheriff Dannmeyer?"

Greene blinked again and looked surprised. "Yes," he finally answered. "Friends like Sheriff Dannmeyer."

"Friends like the late Mr. and Mrs. Peter Emerson Talbott? Did you know them, by the way? Did he keep your books, too?"

"No. Regrettably, I was not acquainted with the deceased, but that is hardly unusual in this business. Mortuary science can be a solitary profession and we rarely know our clients. I am told the gentleman operated a small, but very successful accounting business on the near north side of Columbus, but I did not avail myself of his services. Mr. Talbott was however very involved in the local community. I believe Mr. Tinkerton knew him and frankly, sir, that is a lot more than I can say for you."

I stared down at him, knowing I was running out of ammunition. "All right, what about fingerprints. Did you check those?"

"Why would I want to do something like that?"

"Because they weren't Peter and Terri Talbott, that's why."

"Then you should take the matter up with the sheriff's office or with the Varner Clinic. As for me, there were legal death certificates, all signed and sealed in the proper manner, and that is all that the law requires of me."

"No autopsy either, I bet?"

"Mr. Talbott, we have very precise laws in this state. Autopsies are performed when we do not know the cause of death. In this case, there was no question. Doctors had attended both of them at the time of their deaths. A train struck their car. There was massive physical trauma and tissue loss, so no further analysis was required practically or legally and an autopsy would have been an unwarranted intrusion."

"Funny, Dannmeyer said the accident happened out on the Interstate."

"Then the good sheriff was mistaken, wasn't he?"

"The jarhead won't like you saying that."

"You have exhausted my patience, Mr. Talbott. If you have any additional questions, I suggest you take them up with the sheriff himself. You'll find his office up in the town of Campbell right next to the courthouse... right next to the county jail."

"And here I thought he ran things from your parking lot. How silly of me."

"I resent that. We provide a necessary and valuable public service, Mr. Talbott. Some people may find the mortuary business unpleasant or even discomforting. That is why we try to be as discreet and private as we can, which is what our clients expect of us. As for your suggestions that I'm involved in some conspiracy to knowingly bury another person under your name, I think you've been watching too many movies."

"Not after what I saw and heard today."

"You are right of course." Greene broke into a sarcastic smile. "Why, just last week Lee Harvey Oswald stuck his head in to say 'Hello.' We handled his funeral too, you know. And Adolph Hitler's and Howard Hughes' as well, as I recall. Out

front? That was Elvis Presley trimming the front hedges around the front door as you came in. Now good day to you, sir!"

Having dazzled Greene with my footwork, intellect, and style, I turned and left peacefully. Of course, he was lying, but tossing his place wouldn't have added very much to what I didn't already know. Besides, the guy could be right. Other than the name and that newspaper obituary, I didn't have a damned thing to go on except my feeling that this thing was all wrong.

I got in my Bronco and headed back south on Cedarville Road toward Columbus. As I neared the beltway, I could see the sign for the entrance ramp that read "I-270 East, Wheeling." That was the route back to Boston. I knew I should take it and say to Hell with Ohio, to Lawrence Greene, to Sheriff Dannmeyer, and to those obituaries, but I wasn't ready to do that. Not yet. There was something about this whole business and the arrogant send-off I got from Greene and his buddy Dannmeyer that told me I was right and I needed to know more. So I drove on past the exit ramp. Going to the funeral in Columbus was probably my first mistake and driving past the exit ramp that would have taken me back to Boston was undoubtedly the second, but I was going to make a whole lot more before this day was over.

Farther down the street, I saw a cluster of economy motels. My dwindling funds being what they were, I opted for the Motel 6. I told the young, blond college girl with the bright blue eyes behind the desk that Dave sent me and asked if they really did leave the light on, but she just stared at me. I'd like to think she'd heard that one before, but maybe she just didn't get it.

After dinner, I made another call to Boston, to Doug Chesterton. "Is this him or his machine?" I asked.

"It's his machine."

"When he comes back, tell him Pete Talbott got delayed a bit longer in Ohio."

"Twice in one day? It's gotta be something you met in a bar. Heather? Bambi? Or was it George?"

"Yeah, right."

"Well, just don't catch anything, Peter."

"I'll be careful, coach."

"Good. And get your ass back here as soon as you can. Those sub-routines were great and they got us back on track with the contract, but I can't crank on the next phase without you."

"A couple of things came up that I gotta look into tomorrow morning, then I'll be back on the road. Honest."

"Fine. But be here by Friday or I'm road kill, okay?"

"Gotcha, boss, Friday it is."

I knew I should have taken Dave's room keys back to the desk and piled my stuff back in the Bronco right then and there. I could have made it into West Virginia or Pennsylvania that night, slept there, and cruised into Boston the next day, but I was exhausted from being up for two days straight. That was what I told myself, but I just couldn't make myself leave. As I sat there in the motel room and stared at the telephone, I realized this business with the obituaries, the funeral, and with Greene and Dannmeyer had lit some fires deep inside me that hadn't

burned for a long, long time. I was no longer a stick-man walking. I felt alive, and I liked it.

The loss of the job and Terri had left me a cold, burned-out shell. For the first time in many months, I was hot about something. Love, hate, or whatever, I felt something and I knew I mattered again. Something terribly wrong was going on here and I had to find out what it was. If I cut and ran, and that would have been so easy for me to do, I'd be safe in my little shell, but they would have gotten away with it.

So I decided to stay in Columbus, for one night anyway.

Chapter 4

Pete, we hardly knew ya...

I needed sleep, but I was too wound up to try. One good thing about a Motel 6, the top drawer of the nightstand always contains a Gideon Bible and the drawer below it always has a phone book. Old Dave is nothing if not clean and predictable. The phone book was new. I let my fingers do the walking, flipping back through the white pages to the T's. There were about four inches of Talbotts in Columbus, some with one T, some with two Ts, and a couple of Peters. Sure enough, towards the bottom, I saw: "*Talbott, Peter E., 625 Sedgwick Ave, Worthington, 895-2612*".

Well, I'll be damned, I thought. Whoever the guy was, he had been using my name long enough to be listed in the phone book. That meant this wasn't some spur-of-the-moment thing. They had stashed their Peter Talbott here, him and his wife, and bought him a house and a business to settle into. An accident? Both of them? Not that the world would really miss one CPA more or less, but unless the coffins they buried this afternoon in Oak Hill weren't empty, someone went to a lot of time and trouble to put the guy and his wife here, and a lot more to make him go away.

I picked up the phone and dialed. After three rings, I heard what I expected to hear, "This number is no longer in service in Area Code 614. If you need assistance, please dial..." I hung up and flipped to the yellow pages, to the A's, where the Accountants dwelled, all five pages of them. I saw a simple two-line listing for "*Center Financial Advisors, Accounting and Financial Services, 1811 N. Sickles, 758-9119*." No color graphics or snappy, modern logo like the big accounting firms, not even a boxed ad or bold type, only the two lines of plain black-and-white print. That meant the guy was either very, very successful and didn't need any additional business—and I had never known a bean counter who fell in that category—or his accounting business was so far down in the crapper that a small ad was all he could afford.

The clock radio on the end table said it was almost 6:00 PM. I would have at least an hour or an hour and a half more daylight, so I decided to check out my

alter ego for myself. After all, my busy social schedule was clear for the rest of the night, so why not?

With my Marathon gas station road map spread out on the car seat next to me, the house on Sedgwick and the office on Sickles proved easy to find. They were a couple of miles apart further in toward town. The house was in a quiet, middle-class neighborhood on the northwest side, about three miles from the motel. It was an older Dutch Colonial with white clapboard siding, dark green shutters and door, flower boxes below the front windows, and two big oaks in front. I could imagine Beaver Cleaver skipping down the front walk on his way to school as Ward mowed the grass in his white shirt, tie, and cardigan sweater, smoking his pipe. Unfortunately, Ward wasn't taking care of this one. The grass was thin and mostly overtaken with weeds, the wood siding on the house had faded, the flowers in the window boxes hung limp and ratty, and the hedges were in desperate need of trimming.

I circled the block past the Neighborhood Watch sign with the big eyeball and parked in front of 625. After all, I was Peter Talbott, wasn't I? If this was my house, I had nothing to hide. I strolled up the sidewalk to the front door, rang the bell, and waited. Nothing. The drapes were drawn across the front picture window. There were no lights on, but leaning out as far as I could, I peeked around the edge and caught a glimpse inside. The house was empty. No furniture. No carpets. Nothing but bare walls and bare wooden floors. Interesting. The two bodies were barely in the ground, yet someone had already cleaned the place out.

Following a line of concrete stepping-stones, I walked around to the side of the house, whistling softly and acting as casual as I could in case anyone was watching. The path brought me to a gate in a wooden fence that ran around the back yard. I opened it and stepped inside. Again, empty. Not even a lawn chair, a rake, or a garden hose. They had picked the place clean.

"Can I help you, young man?" I heard a sharp-edged, woman's voice call to me.

I turned and smiled, knowing it wasn't a question. It was an accusation. On the other side of the fence stood a tall, craggy, gray-haired woman leaning on a long-handled garden rake, watching me like a sentry with a pike. She wore a man's oversized denim work shirt and she drew a steady bead on me with a pair of small, hawk-like eyes.

"You know, you just might," I answered her with a big smile. "I've been trying to reach the Talbotts for a couple of days now." I motioned toward the house. "I rang the bell, but nobody answered. Guess they aren't home."

"Nope. Won't be coming back, neither. They're dead, both of 'em, in a car wreck, three days ago."

"That's awful. A car wreck, huh?"

"When you get to be my age, you don't want to speak ill of the dead, 'cause you might be next. But the way Pete drove, didn't come as no surprise."

"You knew them pretty well?"

"Bout as well as I know you. They moved in maybe six months ago and kept to themselves. Didn't talk much to me or anyone else around here, far as know."

I had to laugh. "Warm and friendly?"

"New Jersey. Same difference. She had a mouth on her could curdle milk. And him? All I ever heard from that fat slob was a loud belch. No, sir, they never fit in, not in this neighborhood, and that's the way they wanted it."

She pointed to the rear yard. "Look at the place. Used to be real pretty back when the Battersees lived here, but Pete let everything die. Probably so he'd never have to cut it. He was too damned lazy to do it himself and too cheap to hire it out." She shook her head sadly. "I don't know. It was as if the two of them weren't expecting to be here very long and they couldn't be bothered. So "screw the lot 'a you" was about all we ever got out of them, if you'll pardon my French."

"But the house? It's already empty."

"Yep. A big Allied moving van showed up this morning and took everything."

"This morning? Before the funeral?"

"Yep, lock, stock, and pasta barrel."

"Pasta barrel? I didn't think they were Italian."

"Well, you ask me, they were passin'. Talaberti? Talachetti? Talabuttafucco? Whatever. Maybe Pete changed the name for business, but he wasn't foolin' any of us."

"No kids? No family?"

"None that I ever heard of. Nobody but lawyers."

"Lawyers?" I laughed along with her. "There was a time I had a few of them as dependents myself."

"Nice boys. Short hair. Dark suits. Like those two fellas in "Men in Black", but both of them were white and nowhere near as good looking as Tommy Lee Jones."

"Tommy Lee Jones?"

"That's just to show you I don't miss much, young man."

"Oh, I can see that."

"They sat out there in that gray sedan all morning. Imagine, two lawyers sitting out there in that car, billing by the hour, watching four rednecks load a moving van. I declare."

"No idea where they were taking the stuff?"

"Nope, they didn't say and I didn't ask."

"What about the lawyers?"

"From Hamilton, Keogh, and Hollister, that big firm downtown." She shook her head. "Imagine what they cost? All that overhead. But they were nice and polite, just like you. They showed me their business cards and their papers, 'cause I said I'd call the cops if they didn't. Same reason you're going to show me yours, aren't you?"

Sharp. Very sharp, I thought. She held out her hand and waited for me to produce mine. "Hey, I'd love too," I said. "My briefcase and all my stuff's out in the car. I can go get one if you'd like."

She stared at me with a hint of amusement. "If you say so, but I saw those California plates on that Bronco of yours. I wrote the number down too, 'cause we've had enough of people snooping around here lately and we're beginnin' to know what belongs and what don't."

"Is that what you think I'm doing? Snooping?"

She looked at me and cocked her head. "I don't know. You don't look like that other one, I'll give you that much."

"The other one?"

"A cheap sports coat with sunglasses and all those gold chains. He drove a Lincoln, but there were others before him nosin' around, lookin', and none of them belonged in this neighborhood. Neither did those two Talbotts. And neither do you."

"One look and you can tell, huh?"

"Mister, you asked enough questions for one day. Time for you to move along. I got a .357 Magnum inside the house and that's an NRA Life Member decal on my front window. Now you git."

"Whoa! I'm with First Ohio National up in Toledo. They just moved me back here from California and the Talbotts are four months behind in their car payments. My job's to track down deadbeats. That's why I'm here."

"Which one? His old Buick Electra or the Chevy?"

"Actually both," I said, taking chance out of the equation.

"Then you're half-way in luck. Pete was driving the Chevy when they said he got broadsided by a cement mixer out on the east side some place."

"A cement mixer? That sounds messy."

"Sure does. I hope it wasn't any of that quick setting stuff. As big as Pete was, that would've made it a whole lot worse," she giggled. "My Lord, but that's an awful thing to think, ain't it? Guess it don't matter much though. Dead's dead."

"You're right, it probably doesn't. You wouldn't know where he left the Buick, would you? Is it in the garage?"

"Nope. If it was, those lawyers would have sucked it up along with everything else."

"You got any idea where it is, then?"

"Sure do. It's parked up Sedgwick, under that big oak tree in the middle of the next block, where he always left it."

"And it's still there?"

"It was an hour ago, when I went by, 'cause I don't think the lawyers know anything about it. It's dirty as sin, but it's still there. You can't miss it."

"But why would he park it there?"

"With Pete, you never know. Most of the time he just sat there like a fat slug, but the man was no dummy. He knew that I knew about the Buick. I'd passed him on the street down there when he was getting in or out a couple of times. I asked him what the Hell he thought he was doing parking down there. He said he needed the exercise and then we really laughed. He shrugged and called it his "getaway car." I figured he was jokin' around again, but with them both dead now and you holding the papers, you might as well know where it is, 'cause he ain't gettin' away to anywhere anymore."

"Thanks. First Ohio National really appreciates it. But how come you never told the lawyers about it?"

"Them? I have a strict "don't ask, don't tell" policy with cops and with lawyers, young man. They didn't ask, so I didn't tell."

I walked back to the Bronco smiling, shaking my head. Who said all the nuts had rolled west to California? Some of them stuck and took root right where they dropped out of the tree.

Sure enough in the middle of the next block under a big oak tree sat an old midnight blue Buick Electra. I pulled over, parked a few cars down, and walked back. It had to be ten years old: dirty, covered with leaves, and the exterior rusting around the wheel wells. I glanced around, but the street was deserted. I looked inside. The interior was well trashed, with candy bar wrappers, coke cans, and old newspapers strewn about. I tried, but the doors were locked, all four of them. Interesting, I thought. For now, it was enough to know the car was there. But it might be fun to get inside and see what Pete's "getaway" car held besides the old newspapers and trash.

The sun would not set for at least a half hour. Sickles Avenue was a four-lane commercial boulevard that proved to be no harder to find than Sedgwick. The 1800 block where Center Financial Advisors was located looked like it had once been a fashionable neighborhood commercial street back in the 1920s or 1930s, but that was a long time ago. Now, it was a badly run-down strip of small stores that wouldn't make it any place else. The surrounding residential area showed the first signs of gentrification, but the stores would take a lot longer. The sidewalks were cracked and uneven. The overhead wires sagged in long loops down the street and no one even tried to keep up with the gang graffiti. It would take a lot of gentries and a ton of city money before the Tae-Kwon-Do parlor, the second-hand clothing shop, the adult book store, two gritty neighborhood bars, and a boarded-up Baptist Mission became art galleries, boutiques, trendy restaurants, and a Starbucks.

Half the block was vacant and Center Financial Advisors sat in the middle. Why an accounting firm would locate in this seedy, eclectic mix was beyond me. Center? Of what? Advising whom? About what? Perhaps Pete moved his accounting business here so he could be in the vanguard of the commercial tidal wave soon to follow, but the image of the daring financial entrepreneur didn't exactly fit the slug that let the house on Sedgwick go to hell.

I parked the Bronco along the curb three doors beyond 1811 and walked back. The company name was stenciled on the door and on the front plate glass window. There were no curtains or Venetian blinds to screen the view this time. Looking inside, I saw someone had sanitized the accounting office as thoroughly as they had the house. It was empty from wall to wall, without a broken chair, a cardboard box, or a scrap of paper to be seen anywhere. If I asked around, I'd bet the same Allied van had hit them both.

I kept walking down the street, then turned and followed the cracked sidewalk around the corner. The side street looked even worse than Sickles. Weeds were sprouting through the uneven concrete. Old McDonalds bags, empty beer cans, and glass from broken wine bottles littered the small strip of bare dirt that passed for landscaping between the sidewalk and the curb. I walked to the end of the building and took a quick look around the corner before I turned and set off down the alley. It was cratered with deep ruts and potholes. Someone had tried to fill them with loose rock and pieces of asphalt, but that didn't accomplish very much. Off to my right I could see the rear yards of the two-story houses that fronted on the next street over. Most were cheap three and four flat apartment buildings with brick walls or tall wooden fences along the alley, as one would expect. Looking

down the line, most of them looked badly run down, but every third or fourth building was being renovated. Signs of life? Too little and way too late for Pete.

On the left side of the alley, the rear walls of the stores that fronted on Sickles were another matter. This wasn't the high rent district. The few windows that remained and hadn't been bricked up were set high in the wall, opaque with years of crusted dirt, and covered with one-inch steel bars. The rear doors had been replaced with thick steel plates recessed deep into the doorways. Their hinges and locks were on the inside, where they would be difficult for a burglar to get at. Dumpsters lay at various odd angles up against the rear walls or jammed into the occasional alcoves. I looked over the top of several and saw most were half-filled with trash. When I got to the dumpster for 1811, I peered over the top and saw it was empty. Not just empty, this one was empty as if someone had got in and cleaned it out on their hands and knees. There wasn't a scrap of paper, a banana peel, not even a broken beer bottle to be found. Somehow, after everything I'd seen that day, it came as no surprise. The lawyers in the dark suits, the deputy sheriffs in their big brown cruisers, and even the men in the long, black hearses were nothing if not thorough. For a job like that, I wondered if the Junior Associates at Hamilton, Keogh and Hollister drew straws, or did they hire the work out.

There was nothing more to be gained in the alley, so I continued on to the far end and came back around to Sickles again. As I turned the corner, I saw a car stopped in the street next to my Bronco. It was that big, white, Lincoln Town Car, the one from the funeral home. Its engine was running and the driver's side door was hanging open. Between the Bronco and the Lincoln stood the big guy in the beige suit, blue shirt, and ponytail. I couldn't see his face, but there couldn't be two guys who looked like him in the State of Ohio, much less Columbus. As I watched, he cupped his hand and blocked the last rays of the setting sun as they reflected off the windshield as he looked inside the Bronco.

"Hey," I shouted and ran toward him. "Wait a minute!" As I got closer, he shook his head and looked back at me, frowning, as if I were some minor irritant he'd found on his shoe. When I got within twenty feet, he slipped his hand inside his jacket and pulled out that big chrome .45 automatic again. He didn't bother pointing it at me. That wasn't necessary. He simply let it hang down his pants leg with a casualness and skill that told me I had just made a very bad mistake. First, because he looked like he knew precisely what he was doing. Second, in that neighborhood no one would know or care if he did.

"That's close enough, Ace," he warned.

"Who are you?" I demanded to know, bluffing, but figuring if he hadn't shot me yet I could at least ask.

"No. We're gonna try it the other way. Who the fuck are you?"

"You know who I am, I'm Peter Talbott, from Boston."

"Is that so? Then who was the guy they buried?"

"I don't have the slightest idea," I offered meekly.

His grip tighten on the pistol. For an instant, I thought he might raise it and shoot me, but he didn't. He just stared at me, angry and frustrated. "That bastard Tinkerton!"

"Tinkerton? You're the one who brought me here," I bristled. "I was minding my own business back in Boston until you squeezed your super-sized Soprano's suit

into my front seat and got me all worked up over those obituaries last night. You wanted me to come here. You were baiting me, and you still are.”

“Let's say I wasn't getting anywhere on my own and I thought having another one of you Talbotts show up in Columbus might make things interesting.”

Standing up close like this, I could see he was even bigger and more muscular than he first looked. I was sure he only carried the automatic to scare off idiots like me and to keep them from getting themselves really hurt, because he could have snapped me in two with his bare hands if he wanted to.

He was looking me over, sizing me up too, until he began to laugh. “This is rich,” he said with a loud roar. “This is fucking rich. Tinkerton brings in his Talbott and we bring in one of our own.”

“Why? So you could get a big laugh out of it? Well, I'm not laughing.”

“Neither was Greene or Dannmeyer.”

“You've been following me, haven't you?”

“Yeah, and I bet they crapped their freakin' pants when you showed up. I'd have love to see Tinkerton's face, because mistakes like you ain't supposed to happen.”

“What mistake? What are you talking about?”

“You and your wife—one of you dead and the other one still alive.”

“What's going on here? Are you going to tell me, or not?”

“No. And believe me, you don't want to know,” he said as he slipped the automatic inside his jacket. “Besides, I'm not sure I could. It's all smoke and mirrors like a goddamned shell game.” He relaxed and leaned back against the side of the Lincoln. I would have suggested he be careful and not tip it over, but he still had his hand on that big cannon inside his coat.

“Look, Ace,” he finally said. “I usually don't give free advice and I never give it twice, so you listen up, and listen good. Go back to Boston. I know I kinda lured you here with those two obituaries, but when you showed up they didn't panic or do nuthin'. In fact, they haven't done a damned thing, but blow you off, so that's it. Finito! Go back to Boston, because you're messing in some very serious shit here. Keep poking around and you're gonna end up in a box next to that other Peter Talbott up in Oak Hill. Us or them, you're gonna get your ticket punched.”

He turned and opened the driver's side door of the Lincoln.

“Wait a minute,” I called out to him. “Who's we?”

“You don't want to know,” he sighed.

“Then who are you?” I dared to ask.

He paused and thought it over before he answered. “My name's Parini, Gino Parini. Some people say I kill people for a living. I'm sure that's a major exaggeration, but you don't *ever* want me to see your sorry ass again. You got that?” He gave me one last long, hard look, then added, “By the way, it's good you got rid of that Rolling Stones shit. You ain't no freakin' college kid no more.”

“You're right, but I needed something more formal for my funeral.”

“Still the smart ass, huh? Well, you keep doin' what you've been doin' and it still could be.” Then he got in the Lincoln, slammed the door, and drove away.

Me? I stood there, glad I hadn't wet my pants.

Chapter 5

Marion, madam librarian...

In the morning, after a hot shower, I saw one of those homey, red-sided Bob Evans restaurants at the interstate interchange. Back home in Los Angeles, Terri would have insisted on our usual morning fare of yogurt, granola, bean curd, and green tea. I'd be hungry again an hour later, but it would have been a healthy hungry. Bob's menu had yogurt, granola, and some whole wheat, but I guess Ohio had never heard of bean curd or green tea, because there was none to be found. My baser instincts took over and I forced myself to down four cups of high-test coffee and a really big plate of country biscuits and gravy. Nope, you just can't beat that fine mid-western cuisine. The cholesterol took at least three months off my life, but that Ohio stuff would stick around all day; probably well into the next one, too.

Over my last cup of coffee, I realized I had a ton of questions, but not very many answers. What about those obituaries? The identical names? The private funerals no one attended? Common graves at the cheap end of a country cemetery? A surly sheriff, a greasy mortician, and a lawyer? The empty house and office? Like any good engineer, the vacuum of an unanswered question, much less a whole flock of them, drove me nuts. If I couldn't compute something, measure it, or put a wrench on it, I couldn't ignore it no matter how hard I tried. Questions? Questions, but no answers. And when you have questions you can't answer, the best person to go see, is your friendly, neighborhood librarian.

The phone book at Bob's counter showed that the main public library was downtown. It opened its doors at 9:30 A. M., and I was there. It was one of those big, neo-classic white marble affairs that had been surrounded by taller and more modern steel and glass buildings. I parked in the rear lot and went in the back door only to find the recently renovated interior was as modern and trendy as the exterior was classic. It was filled with primary colors, florescent lights, computer terminals, plastic chairs, and formica tables. From the directory on the entry wall, I saw the building contained a senior center, playrooms for kids, video tapes, audio tapes, CDs, an auditorium, meeting rooms, big civic displays, and a coffee bar. Somewhere in there, I figured they had to stock a few books.

The Reference Room was on the third floor. I trudged up the open staircase to the reference desk wearing my most helpless smile and asked for directions to the newspapers. The lady librarian gave me the kind of look she usually reserved for slow third graders. She jabbed her yellow #2 pencil behind her ear, slipped off her tall stool, and escorted me back through the brightly colored techno-maze to the periodical shelves that lined the back wall, the last refuge of the reader. She explained they kept paper copies of the local dailies for the past three months, piled in neat stacks on the shelves. After three months they were recorded on microfilm, going all the way back to 1896, and were filed in a row of file cabinets near the bank of microfilm readers that ran down the center of the room. Looking

at the stacks of newspapers and the storage cabinets, I figured the last three months would more than do for starters.

I had no idea what I was looking for, but I knew I would find it in the obituaries and I knew the Greene Funeral Home would be at the bottom of it. Settling in at a table, I began with the current issue of the *Daily News* and started thumbing my way back, day-by-day, focusing on the local news, particularly any fatal accidents, and of course the obituaries. I went through the last week of newspaper stories and found nothing about a Peter and Theresa Talbott being killed in a bloody automobile accident out on the Interstate, or killed at a railroad crossing, by a cement mixer, at a bridge abutment, or any other place. Would that have been a big story in a town of a million and a half? Two dead in a bloody smash-up? Hard to say, but based on all the junk news they did carry, I couldn't believe it wouldn't at least have made the local section of the newspaper. There was an expose about cow-doping at this year's state fair, a story about the Governor's upcoming marketing trip to Tanzania, two pages on the Ohio State football team practice, and a big ad for the Cucumber Festival in Emporia, but the early and violent demise of that local accounting giant, Peter E. Talbott and his lovely wife Theresa did not appear to have made the editor's cut. If the funeral and the burial was a closed and very private affair, it looked like the automobile accident was too. Funny, but that was exactly what I expected.

I neatly refolded the sections of the newspapers, returned the stack to the shelf, and carried the next few week's over to the table with a soft *Thump*. I sat down, wondering why libraries always bought the hardest chairs in town. They might be modern and trendy, but no human being could take more than an hour or so in one of them. My backside was used to a modern, ergonomic work station chair and trying to find a soft spot in one of these molded, hard-plastic monsters was hopeless. They probably special-ordered them from the Marquis de Sade Furniture Company. I gave a painful sigh and shifted my butt again, but this was going to be a long, painful morning.

Day-by-day, week-by-week, I worked my way back through the month, poring over the obituaries. There must have been thirty to forty of them each day and I noticed there were at least a dozen different funeral homes in town plus their branches. Doing a rough count in my head, the Greene Funeral Home in Peterborough must handle maybe five to ten percent of them. Throw in the services, the coffins, the embalming, the flowers, the wakes, the hearses and limos, and the burials, it made a nice piece of business, I thought, enough to keep Lawrence Greene in colorful silk ties for the duration. Each time I came across his name, I paid particular attention to the details. After all, next to air currents over airplane wings and non-linear dynamics, if I had read anything over the past year it was obituaries.

I read them and reread them. The devil was in the details, but I saw nothing odd about the dozens of funerals Greene had handled, how the people had died, where they buried them, or the causes of death. Like the other funeral homes in the area, most of Greene's clients were quite old, in their seventies and eighties, and that wasn't what I was looking for. They came in every size, race, occupation, and background. You had to give him that much. Greene was an equal-opportunity mortician. He did old people and young, children and young adults, men and

women, white and black, and the written obituaries were as varied as the people described in them.

Some of the obituaries ran to several paragraphs, some even longer, listing all the civic groups that the deceased had belonged to and listing the sometimes numerous surviving relatives, best friends, military records, hobbies, dogs, cats, and anything else the family could think of. Sometimes they mentioned charities and memorials where donations could be made in lieu of flowers. Usually that was a clue as to how someone died. From the names and titles, I could see these people had died from every conceivable cause, with memorial donations recommended to every charity in town. In stark contrast, some of the obituaries were a brief two or three sentences. Other than that, I saw nothing unusual in the ones for Greene's. No pattern. No hint of anything out of the ordinary in any of them. And as the morning slowly passed, I began to think I was the one who was nuts, a crank and a paranoid who was looking for goblins under the bed when there weren't any there to find.

In fact, I had to go back a full eight full weeks before something unusual did catch my eye. It was just one more obituary in the long line of the hundreds I had scanned over the past hour and a half, but this one jumped right off the page:

SKEPPINGTON, RICHARD C., age 52, of Columbus, died Tuesday at the Varner Clinic following a tragic automobile accident. Mr. Skeppington, formerly of Atlanta, was a warehouse supervisor with a local trucking company. By authority of Ralph Tinkerton of Columbus, Executor. (See also SKEPPINGTON, JUDITH M., wife, accompanying). Funeral services for both at 10:30 AM today, Greene Funeral Home, 255 E. Larkin, Peterborough. Internment, Oak Hill Cemetery, following.

That sounded eerily familiar, and his wife's death notice was just below:

SKEPPINGTON, JUDITH M, age 48, of Columbus, died Sunday at Varner Clinic following a tragic automobile accident. Loving wife of Richard (See also SKEPPINGTON, RICHARD C., above.) Retired after thirty years as a schoolteacher in the Atlanta area. By authority of Ralph Tinkerton of Columbus, Executor. Funeral services for both at 10:30 AM today, Greene Funeral Home, 255 E. Larkin, Peterborough. Internment, Oak Hill Cemetery, following.

Interesting, I thought. And not very original. The language was almost a boilerplate to Terri's and mine. Another automobile accident. Husband and wife, both dead. Again, the ever-popular Varner Clinic and the Greene Funeral Home. Burial at Oak Hill Cemetery by the authority of that eminent local barrister Mr. Ralph Tinkerton of Columbus, Executor. Suddenly, the hard plastic chair wasn't nearly as uncomfortable. I leaned back, positively clucking to myself now. I had found something. Amazing. And with that happy realization, the frustration seemed to melt away. I eagerly pulled down the next stack of newspapers and waded into them at a more leisurely pace, knowing that I had found the link and convinced that I would find a whole lot more if I kept at it.

I worked my way back through a full ten months of newspapers, between the stacks of newsprint and the microfilm reader. In all those issues, I found three more bell ringers. Two of them were pairs of husbands and wives who had died together in various accidents. There was a Mr. and Mrs. Thomas K. Pryor formerly of Phoenix, Arizona. He was a retired autoworker who managed the Hampton Inn on U.S. 40 in Hilliard, near Columbus, until his death. The other couple was Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Brownstein formerly of Portland, Oregon. He was a retired carpenter. Mr. Pryor was fifty-seven years old and his wife twenty-six. Mr. Brownstein was forty-four and his wife was forty-two. One couple had died in a car wreck and one in a boating accident out on Buckeye Lake. I guess they threw in the boat to prove they had a touch of originality. The last obituary was for a single man: Edward J. Kasmarek, thirty-two years old, formerly from Chicago. He was an automobile mechanic with Jeffries Honda in Grandview, Ohio. Every one of them had the red flags of the Varner Clinic, the Greene Funeral Home, Oak Hill Cemetery, and the honorable Ralph Tinkerton, esquire as executor.

I got up and stretched. It was a nice little package they had put together, I had to admit. A perfect little scam. Who would ever notice? Other than the typesetter at the newspaper, who reads the thousands and thousands of obituaries you see in a big city newspaper during a typical year anyway? And once read, who would ever remember the details? Especially in the plain vanilla ones? It was clever. Very clever. And it was definitely a scam. But why?

Looking down at my notes, I could see what they were doing and I even knew how they were doing it, but I didn't have a clue as to why. What could they possibly be accomplishing? I read them over again and recognized a few more similarities. They were shorter than most of the other obituaries and lighter on details. None of them listed any living relatives. No relatives meant no one to quibble over the fine print, like the identity of the bodies, and that was important. I also noted that all seven people had died at the Varner Clinic. Add in the two Talbotts and that made nine people, none of whom had a photo in the obituary of the deceased. To be fair, only about half of all the others in the paper had photos, but none of the Varner Clinic ones did, but even the IRS would consider fifty percent versus *zero* to be a "statistical anomaly." And all nine had the key elements: they were younger, it was an accident, Varner issued a death certificate, Larry Greene and his pals in the black suits boxed them up, there were no photographs, they had a private service, they had all been planted under one of those pretty green awnings in the back row of Oak Hill Cemetery, and Ralph Tinkerton, Esq. was the executor.

I sat back and thought about that for a moment. Ralph Tinkerton of Hamilton, Keogh, and Hollister. What was it Lawrence Greene called him? The managing partner in one of "our finest law firms." He said I should be careful running around "impugning his reputation." I figured the managing partner of a big downtown law firm would charge three or four hundred dollars per hour easy. So why would a public transit staffer, a motel desk clerk, a car mechanic, a carpenter, and a low-end bookkeeper hire high-priced legal talent like that to handle their estates? Pro bono? Hardly. It made no sense.

I stared down at the obituaries again. What could be the link? Different ages, different hometowns, all big cities far away from Columbus, and each one in a

different occupation. Mostly lower income. Fairly generic jobs. Sometimes when you can't see something that's right in front of your nose, you have to ask yourself what isn't there. There was no next-of-kin. Like my own Columbus funeral, I doubted there was any audience, either. No one knew these people and no one else knew or even cared what was going on. They had all come from some place else, some place far away, and they all died in Columbus, mostly from accidents. But why? It wasn't for the money, or at least not mine or the dumb schlep who lived on Sedgwick, because neither of us had any.

Mr. and Mrs. Richard C. Skeppington, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas K. Pryor, Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Brownstein, Mr. Edward J. Kasmarek, and the new "Talbotts". Could it be medical malpractice? Over a ten-month period, did the quacks at the Varner Clinic screw up a whole bunch of operations and accidentally kill all nine of them? Was this some new way to cover up botched surgeries? Was there some new disease cutting a swath through the Great Buckeye Heartland? One that would strike down a husband and the wife at the same time? Maybe biological warfare from Michigan? Nah. There were Health Departments and Centers for Disease Control for all that stuff. Eventually someone would wonder what happened to them. Someone would start asking why so many people were going in the Varner Clinic and coming out dead. Besides, how did that explain me or Terri? We had never set foot in the Varner Clinic. And what was the Varner Clinic to begin with? A fat farm? A nursing home? Maybe a drug rehab center or a private surgery theater?

That left me stumped, so I tried to work my way through it logically a second time. First, scratch any good problem and you will find a lawyer lurking underneath. That was a given. Second, it was impossible to hatch a conspiracy of any size without a really big law firm to confuse things and muddy-up the waters. Still, any self-respecting lawyer's motivation was always money, and lots of it. Could it be that the eminent Ralph Tinkerton, Executor Extraordinaire, had been cleaning out his client's trust accounts and decided to clean out the clients, too? Nah. Any big corporate lawyer worth his salt could figure out a hundred ways to skin a trust account without spilling a drop of blood. Terri and I had no money and neither did CPA Talbott. I couldn't explain it. Why would someone in Columbus, Ohio want people to think Terri and I were dead to begin with? Suddenly, I sat bolt upright. That wasn't it. Terri already was dead and due to that old LA obituary from my trip to Baja, maybe they thought I was dead too. Maybe this whole thing had nothing to do with the names or biographies in the obituaries. Maybe it was all about the bodies. Someone was making people disappear by planting them under the names and IDs of people who were already dead, figuring that no one in Columbus would notice. Who would, especially if the people were already dead and buried halfway across the country, like Terri and I were. If the real people were dead and buried in Atlanta, Portland, Los Angeles, and Chicago, who would ever know?

What was it Talbott's neighbor said? That old, gray-haired battle-axe in the denim work shirt? The Talbotts moved in about six months ago, husband and wife, a decent interval after Terri's funeral and my almost-funeral out in LA. The other Talbotts would have started living here in Columbus, living openly under phony IDs, right after that. In Pete's case, he was running an accounting business

and using my name. That took help, the kind of big league help that a prominent law firm like Hamilton, Keogh, and Hollister and its managing partner Mr. Ralph Tinkerton could easily provide. Yes, the eminent Ralph Tinkerton was definitely worth a second look.

What were those names Gino Parini threw at me back in the parking lot in Boston? Jimmy Santorini and Rico Patillo? Weren't those the names he mentioned, along with East Orange and Bayonne, New Jersey?

Carefully and without making a sound, I tore the Skeppington obituaries from the newspaper and slipped it into my shirt pocket. I fed the printer a couple one-dollar bills and got copies of the ones on microfilm and then I walked over to the long row of encyclopedias. I tried the *Britannica*, the *Americana*, and *Colliers*, but I found no reference to any Jimmy Santorini. I looked him up in *Who's Who*, with no better results. Finally, I turned to the big green leather and gold lettered volumes of the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* and began flipping through the recent issues. I didn't find very much until I got back almost a year and found a flurry of stories. I jotted down the references in *Time*, *Newsweek*, and several pieces in the *New York Times*. I went to the magazine racks and it didn't take me long to find the stories.

Jimmy "the Stump" Santorini was the mafia boss of eastern New Jersey, or he used to be. Lots of color pictures of a short, dark, very dapper-looking guy with a big cigar clamped grimly between his teeth trying to hide his face from the cameras. He had been an underling of the Gotti Mob across the river in the Big Apple and he was up to his eyeballs in the docks, trash hauling, drugs, prostitution, and the unions in Newark, Hoboken, and Jersey City. They called him "the Stump" because of his build and because nothing could knock him down. Probably cute and cuddly like old tree bark, too.

Unfortunately, the last couple of years had not been kind to poor Jimmy. First, he got himself in a bruising power fight with the Patillo Mob out of Philadelphia. That cost him a lot of his coastal New Jersey territory like Bayonne and East Orange and most of his prestige fighting them off. Rico Patillo, Bayonne, and East Orange? Those were the rest of that grease-ball Parini's puzzle pieces and it was all starting to fit now. After Patillo finished battering him, the Feds grabbed what was left and "the Stump" found himself locked away in the big, new, federal maximum-security prison in Marion, Illinois along with a gaggle of his former lieutenants and muscle. Jimmy was none-too-happy about it, and none-too-happy that the Patillos moved in and took over most of the Jersey side of the River with him gone. However, locked up in the cornfields of central Illinois doing fifty-five years to life, there wasn't much poor Jimmy could do about it. He was fifty-three years old when he went in and his prospects didn't look good for him to make to one-hundred and eight.

Jimmy Santorini's troubles started with a series of prominent U. S. Senate Hearings on organized crime. I vaguely remembered all the dramatic TV coverage—bright lights, politicians with make-up, and a ton of demagoguery. A flashy new Senator from Illinois named Hardin led the charge, tanned, fit, and white capped teeth flashing. When he finally got the gumbas under oath in front of the cameras, he patiently painted them into a tight little corner. Someone had done his homework, because the hearings blew the lid off the Santorini mob and goosed the

Justice Department into what they later described as, “one of the most intense investigations in the history of the Department.” A year later, “the Stump” was wearing a not-too-stylish orange jump suit in a broom closet of a cell in Marion.

Big trial. Big name lawyers. Lots of press. What finally put Jimmy behind bars was the defection and testimony of several of Santorini's top “button men”: Richie Benvenuto, Johnny Dantonio, Paul Mantucci and Clement “the Mole” Aleppo, topped off with a bean counter named Louie Panozzo. Without them, the Feds would never have made their case. With them, it was a slam dunk. Apparently, the Federal Witness Protection Program sounded better than spending twenty-five to life behind the razor wire at Marion in the cage next to Jimmy. It was a good thing Marlon Brando was dead, though. Omerta must have died with the Godfather.

Looking at the more recent news stories, I found some dealing with the investigation, the arrest, and the trial, but not much after that. The trial lasted months, but the half-life of a mob trial is only a week or two once it was over. Besides, it was mostly a New York/ New Jersey story to begin with. With the exception of a few quick blips, it faded as fast as Jimmy's suntan inside Marion. The *New York Times* put the best wrap on it:

“When all is said and done, after all the prosecutors and politicians have done their final preening for the cameras, after all the big name lawyers have cashed their 7-figure checks and the reporters have written their last word, putting Jimmy “the Stump” to the Federal pen had all the permanence of throwing a rock into a big lake. Not that Jimmy Santorini didn't get what he deserved, but after the big splash, the hole in the pond quickly fills back over, the ripples fade to nothing, and some new “wise guy” has muscled his way in to take his place. In the end, we must ask ourselves, “What difference did any of it make?”

I returned to the Reference Desk and found the same polite librarian sitting on her stool, staring across the counter at me.

“If I wanted to find out about a lawyer, do you have a book or something I could look him up in?” I asked.

“Some people have the damndest hobbies,” she commented, straight-faced. “Why on earth would you want to do that?”

“Oh, I'm just curious,” I smiled. “I want to make sure I'm hiring the right one, you know.”

“You mean the one with the sharpest teeth?” She asked without blinking. “Well, each to his own. Come along, we'll see what we can find.”

She led me back into the labyrinth of the reference shelves and paused in front of a long row of thick, yellowy-gold, black-lettered tomes. “That's the new edition of the *Martindale-Hubbell Law Directory*,” she offered proudly. “All thirteen volumes, divided by State and City. It'll tell you everything you ever wanted to know about every law firm and every lawyer in the Country—except which ones are honest and which ones ought to be strung up and hung.”

She looked up at me and flicked her finger against my shirt pocket where I had hidden the obituaries I ripped out of her newspapers. “Just don't go tearing anything out of these babies, okay? 'Cause if I catch you, it won't be pretty.”

"Yes, ma'am," I said as she turned and walked away, leaving me standing there with an embarrassed grin on my face.

I had no idea there were that many lawyers in the country. Each volume of the Martindale-Hubbell set contained well over a thousand pages and each page consisted of two columns of very small print. It really made you wish for an open hunting season to thin out the herd. The thick, middle volume contained North Dakota, Ohio, and Oregon. Lawyers. They're nothing if not logical. In the middle of the thickest part containing Ohio, after hurrying past all the dead weight of Cincinnati and Cleveland, I found the long, alphabetical roster for Columbus.

I flipped to the H's and found the heading for Hamilton, Keogh, and Hollister in big, bold, italic letters. Under the name was the address, Suite 1400, Fidelity National Bank Building, 147 South High Street. In smaller lettering I read, "General Trial, Appellate, and Federal Practice, Criminal, Federal Procedures, Business, Commercial, Corporate, Labor, Employment, Taxation, Estate Planning, Bankruptcy Probate, Real Estate, and Insurance." It didn't mention chasing ambulances, getting scumbags off the hook, or being on the O. J. Simpson Dream Team, so how good could they be?

Below the heading, I saw a long list of "Members of the Firm" which ran to eight pages, not including the Associates. The first among the many was:

Tinkerton, Ralph McKinley, Managing Partner, Hamilton, Keogh, and Hollister, Columbus, 2004-Present. Born Amarillo, Texas, September 9, 1961. Admitted to the Ohio Bar, 2003. Also member in Texas, New York, Florida, and New Jersey; U. S. District Court, U. S. Court of Appeals, 6th Circuit, and the U. S. Supreme Court. Education: University of Texas, (BA, 1983, Phi Beta Kappa) Harvard Law (JD, 1993, magna cum laude) Editor, Law Review. Adjunct Professor Georgetown. Special Counsel, U. S. Justice Dept. Past President, Association of Prosecuting Attorneys. Former U. S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York, 2001-04. Assistant U. S. Attorney for South Florida, 1998-01. Special Counsel, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1996-98. Agent, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1993-96. Captain, Special Operations, U. S. Marine Corps, 1983-90, Central America Military Assistance Command.

Very impressive. Tinkerton was not your basic homegrown Buckeye. No, he was a transplanted Texan and ex-marine who went on to be a top-level Fed, a heavy-duty criminal prosecutor, U. S. Attorney, and an agent in the FBI. Hardly one of your typical family law snakes who lived on wills, deeds, and divorces, the kind you'd expect to find handling the minor executor duties of an autoworker, a motel desk clerk, a car mechanic, a warehouse supervisor, or a carpenter. Nope, there was no way a Ralph McKinley Tinkerton would come within five miles of the Skeppingtons, the Pryors, the Brownsteins, Edward J. Kasmarek, or Mr. and Mrs. Peter E. Talbott of Columbus, Ohio, unless he was about to throw them in the slammer, or get them out.

The more I looked at Tinkerton's entry, the less sense it made. I looked at my watch. It was nearly noon and 147 South High Street was only a few long blocks away. They say you can tell a lot about a person from the books he reads, the

company he keeps, and the way he keeps his office. I wondered what that would tell me about Ralph McKinley Tinkerton.

Chapter 6

Carryout can kill, and mind the pickle, too...

My first glimpse of 147 South High Street came from the sidewalk three blocks away. It was a twenty-eight story high-rise office building built of gleaming brown marble and dark tinted glass. Like a big magnet, I had felt it pulling on me and sucking me in all the way from Boston. Remembering back, maybe those were its first light tugs I felt when Gino Parini shoved that obituary at me. But I was here now and I had to climb that mountain and confront Ralph McKinley Tinkerton. Still, standing on the sidewalk and looking up at his lair, I felt more alone than I had felt since Terri died.

The building looked expensive and state-of-the-art. You could find the same twenty-eight stories of polished granite and mirror glass in Westwood, Reston, on Sixth Avenue in New York, on North Michigan Avenue in Chicago, or looking out on the harbor of Boston. It featured a gleaming two-story lobby with three tones of contrasting marble, an atrium full of oversized plants that looked like they'd grown up near a nuclear power plant, and banks of whirring, high-speed elevators that shot the harried lawyers, bankers, and stock brokers to the upper floors in quick, ten story bites.

I walked inside and took a quick glance around, but there was no tenant directory on display, only a guard in a dark blue uniform eyeing me from behind a round, marble-clad reception desk. It was strategically placed to block the path to the elevators, so the guard could scan all comers with the same dull, plastic smile. In this era of 9/11, with suicide bombers, eco-terrorists, postal clerks with assault rifles, militiamen with drums of fertilizer, angry husbands, angry wives, and every garden-variety local nut with a grudge, I didn't find it very surprising. Corporate anonymity was in vogue. Back in LA, you would not find very many logos on the exterior of the buildings any longer. No corporate names on the doors. No tenant directory inside the lobby. Especially not for a big law firm. If you didn't know the name of the person you wanted to see, who he worked for, and the location, you were shown the door. Even if you did, if that person didn't know you and expect you; if you had to ask or even hesitate, blink, or didn't maintain that downtown, get-out-of-my-way three-piece suit and button-down collar gait as you walked up to the guard, you still had a Hell of a time getting inside. One wrong look and he would point and pull you over like a motorcycle cop on an LA freeway.

The Martindale-Hubble Directory said they were on the 14th Floor. One look at the lobby told me the odds of my making it upstairs, through the front doors of Hamilton, Keogh, and Hollister, and into Ralph Tinkerton's suite were zip if I tried to stroll past the guard or walked over and asked him directions, not the way I was dressed in blue jeans, a Polo shirt, and Docksidors. Without a pinstriped suit, an

expensive briefcase, and a pair of Florsheim wing tips, getting in was going to take stealth and guile.

I made a quick U-turn and went back out through the revolving doors. Across the busy six-lane street, I saw the round, blue and white striped sign for the Bouncing Bagel Kosher Deli. Using my best Heisman Trophy moves, I bobbed and weaved my way through the passing cars and buses to the deli on the other side. The menu looked pretty good, but I didn't go there to eat. I ordered two large corned beef sandwiches and a pastrami with extra mustard, a couple of pickles, and two bottles of Doctor Brown's Crème Soda. Sometimes life forces us to make accommodations and sacrifices. Even though I was only having lunch with a lawyer, it wasn't civilized to eat corned beef without a Doctor Brown's.

For an extra thirty dollars I got them to throw in one of their designer "wear-it-at-home-and-make-your-own-sandwich-like-we-do" aprons with a big, bright-blue, Bouncing Bagel logo stenciled across the front and one of their silly, white paper hats with a smaller version of the same logo. With that hat and apron on, the last place anyone would be looking was my face. Hefting two large, white delivery bags with the sandwiches and drinks, I put on my sunglasses and re-crossed High Street. This time I hit the lobby moving fast, swimming up-stream through the exiting early lunch crowd like a spring salmon in heat. Ahead I saw the elevator bank for Floors 1-8 and then the ones for Floors 9-17, so I went for it and completely ignored the guard. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him looking me over as I passed by. He raised his arm and motioned me to stop, but I was past him and in an elevator before he could get his butt up out of the chair and cut me off. Gotcha, I chuckled. Child's play.

As the elevator doors closed behind me, I could see my reflection in the brightly polished brass on the inside of the doors and the big grin on my face. Crack security? That guy was a hick rent-a-cop, but God it felt good to have the juices flowing again, to be alive, and moving.

I looked at the control panel and saw that the light for the 14th Floor was already lit, so I leaned back against the wall and let the elevator carry me upward. My traveling companions were three giggling, gossiping secretaries and a young man standing in the opposite corner dressed in a badly ironed white shirt and cheap clip-on tie, no jacket, carrying a tall stack of manila file folders in his arms. Probably a summer intern. One of the secretaries got off on nine, the other two on twelve, and the elevator was slowing for the fourteenth floor before I had time to make much of a plan.

The stops on the lower floors gave me a good idea what to expect. The lobby on fourteen was small like the others. To the right stood the formal cherry-wood and glass entrance to the offices of Hamilton, Keogh, and Hollister. Their partnership name was spelled out in heavy brass letters on the wall beside the doors and I could see through the glass into the spacious, expensively furnished lobby beyond. There were over-stuffed chairs, a couch, coffee tables and expensive art on the walls. There were soft, indirect lighting and track spots highlighting the art. In the center of the lobby, controlling it all was a huge wooden credenza that blocked the entrance to the legal offices beyond. Behind the credenza sat another dull-eyed, security guard, an almost perfect clone of the guy down on the first floor. Flashing past one guard was easy. Doing it a second time? That was pushing my luck.

As I stood there for a moment debating, the fellow with the file folders got off behind me. He didn't turn right toward the glass doors. Instead, he turned left and headed toward a plain metal fire door set in the wall at the opposite end of the lobby. It had an electronic key pad fastened to the wall and a large magnetic lock set above the header. We had one of these on our rear service entrance in LA and an elephant couldn't pull the door open once the magnet had engaged. I watched the intern balancing the file folders on a raised thigh with one hand, while he reached for the key pad with the other, so I made the snap decision to follow him.

"Dude, you're going to drop those things. Here, let me help you," I volunteered.

"Thanks man. I should've gone back for a cart, but I ducked out for a smoke and ran out of time."

"Been there," I told him as I reached to help him with the files.

"I got these," he said. "Just pull the door open," he nodded at the handle.

"Isn't it locked?"

"Shit, these damned things never work."

He was right. The door swung open as if there was no lock at all. "Some security system," I smiled.

"Yeah, but I'm not complaining," he answered as I followed him inside. "I fight 'em all day long on this floor and most of the others, but it beats going all the way around through the big lobby and getting hassled by the gargoyles and gatekeepers."

"Tell me about it, man. Try to deliver a sandwich before it gets cold."

"Yeah, half the time the keypads got the codes wrong and the other half some secretary's stuck her gum in the lock so she can take a short cut to the john."

"Speaking of sandwiches, is Mr. Tinkerton's office still in the back corner?" I asked, figuring the headman's office is always back in the far corner.

"Last time I looked. "First star to the right and straight on 'til morning." You can't miss it,"

"Thanks, man, I'll have three deliveries done and be gone before they even know I was here."

"Well, if they catch you, don't tell them how you got in."

"No sweat. And thanks," I said as I turned the corner and strode off down the perimeter corridor, head-up, whistling as if I belonged there. The office decor was a very classy light gray with dark gray accents, thick carpet, large partitioned workstations, can lights in the ceiling, colorful framed prints on the walls, big leafy plants, and computers everywhere. Around the perimeter, glass-fronted offices ran around the window walls, each one with a small, engraved brass nameplate on the door, probably arranged in some pecking order by size and view according to rank and seniority. The secretaries, clerks, and younger associates were stuck with the cubicles in the middle. Glass or cube, everybody was out in plain view. When you're billing by the hour, you don't want half the staff spending their time on fantasy football. I wondered which cubes belonged to the two associates who watched the moving van up on Sedgwick a couple of days ago.

Both the offices and cubicles were nicely furnished, with cherry-wood desks, credenzas, and armchairs, but the desks got successively larger as one went from the small cubicles to the larger ones, to the perimeter and on to the corner offices.

In each corner sat a larger office: more like a suite, with its own reception area and a side conference room. Probably for the general partners, I thought.

In the far corner, I saw an even larger suite that must be the cave of the Managing Partner. Guarding the approach was a huge, fortress-like desk complete with its own resident Troll to ward off the uninvited. Her graying hair was cut short and straight. She wore only the faintest hint of make-up and a conservative, dark-blue business suit, just like the lawyers. She had thick, half-round glasses that made it easy for her to tip her head forward and survey her domain over the top lens. As I approached, she was talking on the phone and writing a note on a steno pad, with one eye on her computer screen and the other eye on me. I had to hand it to her; this was a woman who could multi-task with the best of them. The eye focused on me narrowed as I got closer, but her expression never changed, as if she were waiting for me to come in range.

Behind her, I saw the tall, mahogany door to Ralph Tinkerton's inner sanctum. It was closed. Like any good rottweiler, I knew she would instantly attack if I threatened her turf in the slightest way, sinking her teeth into my leg and hanging on as I dragged her across the floor dying, rather than let me pass. That being the case, she gave me no choice but to employ my most devastating weapon. I smiled. She smiled back, and then she thought better of it when she realized she didn't have a clue who I was. She turned my way and started to say something, but I was already three moves ahead of her and that was too little and too late.

I faked right. She twisted in her chair, intending to head me off, but before she could get to her feet I gave her my best double-juke, turn-around, in-the-lane, blow-by tomahawk windmill jam move, while I slid to the left around her desk. She tried to counter with a now desperate right-to-left, side-ways stretch to block, but I was already past her. My hand was on the doorknob and I gave it a quick twist. I looked back in triumph as she toppled out of her chair and fell on the floor. Slam-dunk. Two points. She lost. I won.

I closed the door behind me and locked it as I gave Tinkerton's office a quick scan. Nice. Very nice. They designed it to impress the hell out of people as they entered the room, and I had to admit it did. He had two walls of floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out over half of the State of Ohio. Like any good Texan, I guessed Ralph must crave those wide-open spaces. The room itself was large enough to hold two leather couches, a coffee table, a couple of high-backed armchairs, a big wooden desk you could land a 747 on, and a shrine. It was sitting in the far corner under the glow of three track-mounted spotlights. On each side stood a flagpole with a shiny brass floor plate and large American eagle, wings spread, standing on top. One was an American flag and one was a blue and gold flag with a wreathed eagle and the letters "U. S. Justice Department." Between the two hung a rogue's gallery of photographs. There was row after row of Ralph Tinkerton shaking hands with both George Bushes, Bill Clinton, Janet Reno, John Ashcroft, Don Rumsfeld, William Webster, a host of Attorneys General, FBI Directors, and a scad of other big-name Washington politicians, judges, police chiefs, and dogcatchers. Each photograph bore some kind of hand-written inscription and in the very center of the shrine hung a big, carved wooden U. S. Marine Corps emblem. Below it, in black, gothic lettering was the framed inscription, "*Zero Defects.*" Impressive. All he needed was running water, a stain

on the wall, and a young girl on her knees to make it Our Lady of Law Enforcement.

Behind the desk, leaning back in an oversized black leather chair, sat Ralph McKinley Tinkerton himself, talking into a telephone he held cradled in the crook of his shoulder while his tapped a gold Cross pen on a pad of legal paper. I had no idea what Tinkerton looked like, but it had to be him. That was what the nameplate on the desk said and no else one in that law office would have had the balls to sit in the managing partner's chair and put their stocking feet up on his desk, not with his pet Troll lurking outside the door. He was a big man: tall with long legs, broad shoulders, and the neck of an offensive tackle. He looked to be in his late 40s, trim and fit, but with the first signs of crow's-feet digging in around his eyes and mouth. His hair was thick and dark, which made me wonder if he had a little bottle of Grecian Formula 16 hidden somewhere inside that big desk. A big-time lawyer with a big-time ego trying to cheat the clock? Who would have guessed? Not that he didn't look comfortable, hiding away here in his inner sanctum. He'd rolled up the sleeves of his white shirt to his elbows. He'd pulled his tie down and his vest was unbuttoned. However, from his expression, the managing partner did not look as if he was managing to have a good day, and that was before I barged in.

I set the two white bags on the coffee table and plopped down on Tinkerton's expensive brown-leather couch. His eyes followed me across the room as he listened, talked, and wrote on the legal pad. Good job, I thought, wondering whether he got it from the Troll or she got it from him. With some luck though, he could triple-bill and in a place like this, that was all that mattered. I'm not sure how much of his brain had focused on me yet. Probably not much. I stuck my nose inside the bag and pulled out two sandwiches and one of the bottles of Doctor Brown's. That was when Tinkerton finally noticed me. His eyes were battleship gray and as cold as a rainy November day as they looked me up and down. He frowned. Why would a mere sandwich delivery boy barge into *my* office, uninvited, and plop his ass down on *my* expensive Spanish leather couch, he was probably asking? Sufficiently aroused, he dropped his feet to the floor, looked at his solid-gold Rolex watch, and put his hand over the mouthpiece of the phone.

"Can I help you?" he snapped in an exasperated West Texas twang that sounded like it blew straight in from a hot, dusty oil field.

"That's a real nice watch you've got there, Ralph," I pointed. "They gave my grandfather a silver one when he retired from the Santa Fe, but it was nothing like that big goober you got. Guess he should have tried the Justice Department, 'cause it's amazing the loot you can score these days in public service. Now, which do you want? The corned beef or pastrami?"

"Pastrami? What? Who in the Holy Hell are you?" he demanded to know as the office door rattled back and forth, as someone on the outside tried frantically to open it.

I heard a key rattling in the lock. The door suddenly flew open and his angry and somewhat disheveled Troll stumbled into the office. I looked at her and smiled pleasantly. After all, I was nothing if not a good sport and a gracious winner, but the Troll had not come alone. Behind her, she had brought reinforcements: two young associates who rear-ended her and almost knocked her down. They peered

cautiously over her shoulder, still not certain that “bouncer” was part of their job descriptions.

“Mr. Tinkerton, I don't know what to say,” the flustered Troll stammered. “I called Security...”

“Hi, Ralph. My name's Talbott, Peter Emerson Talbott,” I told him. “Does that name ring a bell?”

Tinkerton started to speak and then he paused. He stared across the desk at me and I swore I could see the wheels going round and round behind those cold, November-gray eyes of his. “That won't be necessary, Edna,” he finally told the Troll with a forced smile. “I have it covered.”

“But Mr. Tinkerton,” she sputtered. “He... he...”

“It's all right, Edna. But thank you for your concern.”

Despite his reassurances, her eyes never left me.

“Edna,” I said to her. “You look like the wild-and-crazy pastrami type. Here, fresh from the Bouncing Bagel across the street, so you enjoy, girl.” I reached out and placed a thick, wax-paper wrapped sandwich in her hands. Her mouth dropped open as she looked over at Tinkerton for help, then at me, then back at Tinkerton as she slowly backed out of the room, not knowing what to do with the sandwich.

The door closed behind her and Tinkerton and I were alone again. I opened one of the corned beef sandwiches and held the other one out to him, but he didn't move. He just stared at me. “You sure?” I offered again as I took a big bite out of mine. “There's a little place on Colorado Boulevard in Pasadena that does it better, but this ain't half bad.”

He hung up the phone, ignoring whoever it was on the other end. “You're pretty damned sure of yourself, aren't you?” he glowered.

“About the corned beef? You'd better believe it. Or do you mean about the scam you guys are pulling?”

“The scam?” he erupted indignantly. “Who the hell are you?”

“Ralph, I haven't got it all figured out yet, not all of it anyway, but I will.” He still had not accepted the other sandwich, so I shrugged and took another big bite out of mine.

“Now I remember,” his cold gray eyes narrowed suspiciously. “You're the individual Larry Greene told me about yesterday.”

“That individual? Yeah, I bet he did.” I laughed, my mouth full of corned beef. Clearly, the managing partner was not accustomed to treatment in this manner, not in his own office, but I was just getting rolling.

“He said someone stopped by his funeral home yesterday afternoon alleging to be the late Peter Talbott.”

“*Alleging?* God, I love you lawyers. *Alleging.*”

“Now see here...”

“It's real simple, Ralph. You screwed up. Me? I got no dog in this fight, as they used to say on those old hardscrabble farms in West Texas. So why should I care about this little con ya'll are running anyway? Me? I'd much rather be minding my own business back in Boston right now, but you Bozos had to piss me off by dragging my wife into this thing of yours, didn't you?”

“Your wife?”

I leaned forward, my eyes boring in as I pointed an angry finger at him. "Yeah, and that was your big mistake, Ralph. I'm not going to let you get away with it."

He sat and studied me for a moment, as if he had missed something, as if he wasn't quite sure anymore. When he did speak, he was the composed, self-assured lawyer carefully choosing his words. "Look, Mr. Talbott, if that really is your name..."

"That's exactly how my conversation with your pal Larry Greene started. I thought you guys talked?"

"Mr. Talbott, you have this all wrong. One of my clients did indeed die in a tragic automobile accident—him and his wife. From what you say, apparently you and he shared the same name and some background. With three-hundred million people in this country, it's a wonder it doesn't happen more often."

"A wonder, an absolute wonder."

"I'm sorry for any inconvenience and emotional distress that may have caused you or your wife, but I don't see how this was any fault of mine."

"My wife's dead, as you well know."

"As I know? See here, Mr. Talbott..."

"So you knew old Pete?"

"Our Mr. Talbott? Of course, I knew him. Not well, I must admit. He ran a small accounting business here in town."

"The one over on Sickles? Don't make me laugh. I doubt an honest 1040 ever came out of a dump like that. He couldn't afford one hour of your billing time, much less the retainer a firm like this would require and I'd have proven it too, except you guys cleaned the place out."

"You guys?" He looked at me in disbelief. "Exactly what are you are alleging I've done, Mister Talbott?"

"Ah, that wonderful word again, *alleging*. You cleaned out his office. Hell, you even cleaned out his dumpster. It was sanitized, like the house on Sedgwick. Packed up, picked clean, and gone down the street before the last shovelful of dirt landed on those caskets up at Oak Hill Cemetery. Yep, you are thorough, Ralph, I'll hand you that much. But who the hell parks two associate partners in a residential street all morning watching some movers pack a truck? Someone with an unlimited budget, or no budget at all."

I was watching his eyes. When I mentioned shoveling dirt up at Oak Hill and the moving truck, he did a double take. He paused and looked across at me with a new, wary appreciation. "I'm an attorney," he finally said. "I don't clean offices, I don't empty dumpsters, and I don't shovel dirt, Peter. If I may I call you that?"

"That would be fine, Ralph. I haven't figured out all the "why's" yet, but I've got most of the "how's." Eventually I will, and when I do, lawyer or not, you're going to the slammer. You, Greene, Varner, Dannmeyer, all of you."

With a heavy sigh, tired and exasperated, Tinkerton leaned forward with his elbows on the desk. "All right, who sent you? Who are you working for?"

"My wife sent me, Ralph," I glared at him, feeling the anger building up inside. "Remember the Blues Brothers? Elwood and his brother Joliet Jake? Well, I'm not on a "mission from God," I'm on a mission from Terri, and my wife doesn't think much of you stealing her name for one of your two-bit scams. Neither do I. Those

memories are all I have left of her. They have to last me a long, long time and I'm not going to let you put your greasy paws all over them. You got that?"

My anger was white hot now, rolling across the room at him in waves. I could see he felt them, as he shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "For the longest time this morning, I couldn't figure it out. Why? I kept asking myself "why?" A retired carpenter, an auto mechanic, an auto-worker, a warehouse supervisor, and now a bean counter?"

"What in *the hell* are you talking about, boy?"

"I'm talking about the Skeppingtons and the Brownsteins, the Pryors from Phoenix, Edward J. Kasmarek from Chicago, and whoever the hell it was you buried under my name up in Oak Hill yesterday."

I didn't have to say anymore. His mouth dropped open and I could tell those names were the knockout punch. To finish the big lawyer off, I pulled the copies of the obituaries from my shirt pocket and held them up for him to see.

"See, it's all right here, Ralph, if you know what you're looking for, and I happen to be the World Champion on obituaries."

Tinkerton's eyes went wide and his face turned beet red. Big-time lawyers are supposed to stand up and shout things like, "Objection!" whenever something happened they didn't like or didn't understand. However, there was no Judge Ito or even Judge Judy in this courtroom. No juries hanging on his every word. No reporters. Not even a TV camera. Only the eminent Ralph McKinley Tinkerton, Esq. and me.

"At first, I figured this was the normal fun and games — you know, greed, theft, lust, maybe drugs and embezzlement, maybe a little kiddie porn. That was the kind of stuff any good California boy can understand. The bodies? Was it kidnapping, murder for hire, or selling used body parts? I don't know and I really don't care."

"You should care, Peter."

"Nah, I figure you're just a bunch of crooks burying people under somebody else's name, people you want to permanently disappear. But the cops can sort all that out later."

"The cops? You need to get a grip, my young friend."

"Yeah, well, that was my first reaction too, until I got a good look at you, at the building, the office, and that little shrine you've got over there in the corner. Now, I see I had it all wrong."

"How's that?" he asked as he slowly rose to his feet and walked out from behind the desk, his hard eyes never leaving me. "Exactly what is it you think you've got all wrong?"

"Sit down, Ralph," I said as I held up the other white bag, the one with the bottle of Doctor Brown's Crème Soda. "I didn't walk in here stupid and I have nothing to lose anymore. Touch me and I'll make a really big mess out of you and this end of the fourteenth floor, and Edna won't like that very much."

He looked at me and at the second white paper bag and stopped dead in his tracks. Ever so slowly, he turned and went back around the desk and sat in his chair.

I motioned to the photos on the wall. "I read your resume in Martindale-Hubbell, very impressive."

"Martindale-Hubbell? My, my, you have been busy."

"Not as busy as you. The FBI? The U. S. Attorney's Office? Special Counsel? Even Marine Corps Special Ops? Where did it all go wrong, Ralph?"

"Go wrong?" he flared. "How dare you?"

"That's real easy. But this isn't some petty little scam, is it? Oh, no. This isn't about money, or drugs, or even politics, is it? It's a lot bigger than that kind of stuff, because you, Ralph McKinley Tinkerton, have the smell of a True Believer."

Tinkerton stopped and, chose his words carefully. "I owe you an apology, Peter. Like you said, you didn't come in here stupid and it would be a mistake to treat you as if you had." He turned his head and looked at his shrine with an embarrassed smile, his voice turning softer and friendlier. "My 'shrine' as you call it may indeed be a bit 'over the top,' but I'm sure you recognize the faces, the names and positions. Those are people I worked for over the years, people I respect, people who could speak to the type of work I did for the government over the past twenty years, if you were to ask."

"I'm sure it makes for a nice resume, Ralph, but why should I care?"

"Why? Because you did indeed stumble into something, Mr. Talbott. Under the circumstances, I have no choice but to inform you that it is important and we hope you will cooperate with us because it deals with National Security."

"I'm shocked, Ralph. Shocked." My mouth dropped open in feigned disbelief. "National Security? Who'd 'a thunk it?"

"I know," he conceded with an embarrassed smile and a wave of his hand. "You're an intelligent man and you're absolutely justified in being skeptical. That tired old excuse of National Security had gray hair on it back in Iran-Contra and even earlier when Gordon Liddy botched that Watergate burglary job."

"Got him his own slot on talk radio though, didn't it?"

"Yes, it did."

"Ollie North, too. Got him a new backyard fence and a run for the U. S. Senate. Boy, oh boy, Ralph, you sure can't beat that old 'National Security' excuse, can you?"

"Dead on, again, but I am being serious. Let us say for the sake of argument that no one sent you here, that you really are working on your own, and that you ferreted out these various tidbits all by yourself." He leaned forward and spoke straight at me in his softest, most sincere lawyer voice. "This really is a matter of extreme National Security and the authorization comes from the highest level, which is government-speak for the White House or something damned close to it. That means Top Secret and we expect you'll help us keep it that way. I need your help, Peter. A little cooperation. Will you give it to me?"

I looked across at him. "Ralph, there's only two things that grow in the dark on a steady diet of bullshit: good mushrooms and bad government. Whatever you cooked up here, it's wrong and it's in dire need of some fresh air and sunshine."

"Fresh air? Sunshine?" He shook his head sadly. "I take it you aren't a big city boy, are you, Peter? Never spent much time in New York, Fifth Avenue, maybe?"

"New York? No, but I spent a lot of time in L.A."

"Well, they have street hustle they play in the Big Apple called three-card monte, the shell game. I know they play it in Chicago. Maybe they play it in L. A. too. Three cards on a cardboard box on the sidewalk. Try to guess which card is

the Queen of Spades. It's all slight of hand, a fast shuffle, a little deception. Maybe you lose twenty bucks, but nobody gets hurt. That's all we're doing here. No harm, no foul."

"No harm? No foul? I don't think so, Ralph. This thing smells."

"Smells?" he sighed. "Well, I guess we aren't going to be friends after all, are we?" But it doesn't matter. You turned over the wrong card. You have nothing."

"I have a lot more than that."

"No you don't. It's like those three cards on the box. The flashing fingers and the distractions have you confused. You're seeing stuff that isn't there."

"Fingers? Funny thing about fingers. They leave prints. When the cops go up to Oak Hill and dig up *your* Peter Talbott, they'll find his fingerprints don't match the ones in my Army records. The body won't match either. And when they dig up Skeppington, Pryor, Brownstein, and all the rest of them, those bodies won't match their medical or dental records, either. What they will find though, is your name, Greene's name, and Varner's name all over the legal documents that put them there. National Security or not, those are state crimes. Your big time Washington pals may not like it, but they can't keep you out of a state pen."

Tinkerton sat silently, staring at me, his eyes turning cold and malevolent.

"*You* can probably stare down a rampaging bull, Ralph, but when they get Greene, Varner, and Dannmeyer under the hot lights, they're going to crack like spring ice. See, I haven't even gotten around to Jimmy Santorini yet."

I threw that one in blind, like tossing a hand grenade over a high wall to see what it might flush out. This time it flushed out plenty. Tinkerton came out of his chair sputtering. "Jimmy Santorini? You fool! What have you done?"

"Not much, not yet, but I will. See, for an amateur I catch on pretty fast." I rose and held the white paper bag in front of me with two fingers, like you'd hold a mousetrap with a dead rat dangling from it, and backed toward the door. "I'm leaving now. Don't try to stop me. If you do, you'll have a bigger mess than you could ever imagine."

That was when my curiosity got the best of me. I looked over at his little framed shrine and asked, "By the way, Ralph, *Zero Defects*? What's that supposed to mean? Some secret jarhead fraternity?"

"It means we don't make mistakes. We can't afford any. And we don't tolerate people who make them."

"Well, you just made a real big one," I told him as I opened the door and let it swing wide. Edna and the two associate bouncers stood outside, looking very serious and very nervous. I paused in the doorway and turned back toward Tinkerton. "See ya later, Ralph. Let's do lunch again some time. Ciao."

Holding the bag high, I walked out between the Troll and one of the bouncers. I dropped the paper Bouncing Bagel hat on her desk, tossed the white apron over the first partition I passed, and walked straight through the office to the elevators. I hit the first floor lobby in full stride. As I passed the security desk, I reached out and carefully placed the white paper bag with the bottle of Dr. Brown's on the security guard's desk.

"A delivery for Mr. Tinkerton on fourteen," I smiled. "Can you see it gets there? Thanks."

As I passed through the revolving doors, I wasn't sure what I had accomplished by going up there. Probably not very much, but I had rattled their cage and I felt damned good about doing it. I was alive and felt positively liberated for the first time in months.

A piece of cake, I concluded. And, I concluded one more thing, too. This snake had a head and that head was Ralph McKinley Tinkerton.

Chapter 7

Personal preferences?

I was on a roll and decided to go for the knock out. The Varner Clinic was located in the small town of Delancy, Ohio, about five miles north of Greene's Funeral Home. How convenient, I thought. It was like one-stop-dying. In L. A., they could add a Brother Bob's New Age Feel-Good Church, a drive-thru liquor store with an ATM, and sell franchises, but things weren't nearly that progressive here in the Great Outback of Central Ohio.

Driving through town, Delancy appeared fairly prosperous. It was the County seat and featured a quaint ivy-covered college campus, a block or two of renovated Victorian shops, the courthouse, and no doubt the offices of that law enforcement giant Sheriff Virgil Dannmeyer. The town stretched out in each direction from the crossroads of Anderson Road and Main Street. Looking at the fronts of the stores, they specialized in antiques, residential real estate, books, and small restaurants that catered to the college crowd with vegetarian food, pizza, and too much coffee. I drove both streets and stopped at a BP station where I asked the attendant where I could find the Varner Clinic. He gave me a very odd look.

"East on Anderson Road about a mile. You can't miss it," he chuckled. "If that's where you really want to go."

He was right. I couldn't. The building was a sprawling low-tech affair that someone had cobbled together from painted cinder blocks, narrow casement windows, and the occasional panel of cedar siding. It had a center core with a peaked roof, and three long, one-story wings that thrust out to the left, right, and rear. The building stood on a slight rise well-back from the road behind a gravel parking lot. A large, well-manicured lawn, no doubt somebody's old bean field, dressed-up with tall hedges and curved flower beds of roses and geraniums, surrounded it. Beyond the nearly empty parking lot stood a dense buffer of big oak and pine trees.

It was about 2:30 when I turned into the clinic's driveway and parked the Bronco in the "Visitor's Parking" space. I knew I shouldn't be doing this. When I left Tinkerton's office I should have driven straight to the State Police Headquarters, the State Attorney General, or even the FBI, but I couldn't. After the stunt with the delivery bags, Edna the secretary, and confronting Tinkerton in his own office, I felt I was invincible. I'd taken on Dannmeyer, Greene, and Tinkerton and they hadn't laid a glove on me. All I needed was one solid chunk of evidence to

wrap it up and tie a bow around it. I figured I'd find it in the Varner Clinic, since that was where the bodies started going cold. Besides, I was two steps ahead of them. There was nothing these clowns could throw at me I couldn't handle now. I was hot. What could Tinkerton do to me? A lawyer? Nothing.

By the same token, what could I do to him? The sad truth was, not very much. The obituaries? The newspaper stories? They were interesting, but not nearly enough to get an indictment much less a conviction. Without hard evidence or one of them talking, the State Police, the State Attorney General, and the FBI would laugh me out of town. Go up against a trio of local, stand-up guys like Ralph Tinkerton, Lawrence Greene, and Sheriff Virgil Dannmeyer on their home turf? The Michigan football team stood a better chance of getting a break here in Columbus than I would. Knowing they were dirty and proving it would be two very different things.

That's why I took a shot at Varner. He was a doctor, an M.D., for Chris' sake. All the ones I knew were invariably risk averse and not nearly as smart as they thought they were once they got outside medicine. Ever watched a doctor invest in real estate? A bar, an office building, or a trendy restaurant? They could lose money faster in oil well scams, cattle, or thoroughbred horses than they could possibly make it. Got something you want to unload? Find a doctor. Better still, find a group of them. You can't lose. Yep, Anias P. Varner was their weak link, particularly if I could get him off balance and keep him that way. If he stonewalled me, I could try the State Police or give it up and turn the Bronco east, but I had to give it one last try.

The exterior of the clinic looked cheap and poorly put together. The siding was grooved, plywood paneling and the brick accents looked to be that cheap, glued-on, fiberglass stuff. As I walked across the lot, I saw a six-foot high chain link fence running around the perimeter of the clinic grounds. It was tucked discreetly into the wall of oak and pine trees and painted black to be nearly invisible. It was the glint of sun on the white electric insulators told me the fence was there and it was carrying some juice. There was also a row of small security cameras tucked up under the eaves of the building. Their overlapping fields of vision covered the entire perimeter, sides and rear. Interesting. With an electric fence and cameras, were they trying to keep people from breaking in, or trying to keep them from breaking out?

The clinic's front doors were those new pneumatic, motion sensor, no-hands models that pop open when you get within five feet. Inside, they had decorated the clinic's small lobby with the taste and sensitivity you'd find in the waiting room of a car wash. No Ethan Allen here, the walls were a practical light beige. There was thin blue carpeting, cheap faux-leather chairs, and framed prints of Impressionist paintings from Wal-Mart on the walls. The chairs looked empty and unused, arranged in small, intimate groupings. The clinic must be real private, I thought, so private that the patients didn't get very many visitors.

In the center of the far wall, I saw another set of double doors. They must be the entrance to the clinic itself. Through the small panes of glass, I could see a long, brightly lit corridor beyond. In the ceiling above the doors was another security camera, pointed right at me. I smiled. There was no sneaking up on these folks.

To my left was a large, U-shaped reception desk with a very large, blond-haired woman holding court behind it. She was dressed in a white nurse's uniform and she eyed me up and down like a St. Bernard in heat. It wasn't that she was unattractive, but she was far too heavily made up for my taste. And way too big. With her broad shoulders, long arms, and round, rosy- cheeks, she could easily fill the heavy weight slot on the Russian women's wrestling team.

I smiled. She smiled. "Hi, I wonder if I could see Dr. Varner."

"And, you have an appointment?" She cocked her head coyly to the side and asked in a deep, husky voice.

"An appointment? Uh, no, I'm afraid I don't."

"Then it would be *tres impossible*," she shook her head. "You see, Doctor Varner is on rounds now. After that, he has appointments and several surgeries that will run well into the evening. That's why the poor man never sees anyone without a referral and an appointment. I'm sure you understand."

"Ah, *certainement!* With his schedule, of course I can. But tell me, what is the Doctor working on now?"

"Well, there's the new Herbal and Holistic Medicine Unit," she ticked them off on her fingers for dramatic effect. "And Weight-loss and Body Recontouring Unit, Substance and Psychic Dependency, Cosmetic Re-engineering, Glandular and Hormonal Re-balance, and of course Dr. Varner's own Personal Preference Surgery."

"Ah, Personal Preference Surgery. I remember now."

"You remember? You mean you've been here before?"

"Oh, my, yes, I'm one of the Doctor's former patients."

"One of Doctor Varner's? *Ree-ally?*"

I leaned forward and whispered, "That's why I *must* see him."

"Personal Preference?" she asked again, still not sure.

"Yes! And *very* personal, as I'm sure you know."

"Oh, yes!" Her eyes flashed.

"So," I gave her a big smile, "if you could be a big dear and give him a message that Peter Talbott has come back to see him, I just *know* he'll pop right out and see me."

"Well," she seemed to glow. "If you'll have a seat for a smidge, I'll let him know you're here. But with his schedule, it may still be quite impossible."

She picked up the telephone and I stepped to where I had a full view of the double doors that led back to the clinic and waited for the explosion. It didn't take long. Within a minute or two, a fat little man in a white smock with a stethoscope hanging around his neck burst into the waiting room. "What is the meaning of this outrage!" he sputtered. His nervous eyes darted around the small lobby until they settled on me. "Who are you?"

"Me? I'm Peter Talbott."

"Peter Tal...?" he frowned, almost losing it.

"Yeah, the real one," I answered, a confident smile forming on my lips. Weak link? One look at Varner and I knew that with a little pressure, he'd crack like a hot chestnut. "And I think we should talk, don't you?"

"Talk? Talk to you?" he scoffed. "Why should I?"

"Because it's me or the State cops and there's nothing your pals Tinkerton or Greene can do to help you then. You're going down."

The receptionist was in shock as she watched the show unfold. Her eyes moved back and forth between us like a referee at a tennis match. "I'm terribly sorry, Dr. Varner," she pleaded. "I had no idea."

"That is all right, Bruce, it isn't your fault." Varner reached out and patted her hand. "We don't want you to pop any stitches, now do we." Varner turned and held the door open for me. "All right, come back to my office. If you insist on talking to me, we will talk."

I glanced over at Bruce as I walked by, but she didn't look very happy about the situation. "A former patient?" She hissed. "I should have known."

Varner ushered me through the double doors into the clinic and down the corridor to the left. The thin blue carpet of the lobby quickly gave way to gray-flecked linoleum, white semi-gloss enamel, and harsh fluorescent lights. His office was two doors down. I felt supremely confident as I walked in and took a chair across from his desk. It was Varner who was fidgeting nervously as he closed the door behind us. I knew I had him.

"See here. I don't know who you are, young man, but I run a legitimate business here. What right do you have to come here and bother me and my staff like this?"

"You mean Bruce? Oh, he'll get over it. You? I doubt it."

"I shall have you arrested."

"Go ahead," I leaned forward and pushed the desk phone toward him. "Call the cops. If you don't, I will, but it won't be your buddy Virgil Dannmeyer who comes this time. It'll be the State Police and the State Attorney General's Office with search warrants. Neither Tinkerton nor his Washington pals can help you then."

His face turned red, and he was having trouble pulling off the outraged innocence act.

Behind him, the wall was covered with framed diplomas, medical degrees, and board certifications. "Anias P. Varner, Doctor of Medicine," I read aloud. "You weren't in the Marine Corps, were you?"

"The Marine Corps?" he sounded flustered. "What are you...?"

"I assume they talked to you—Tinkerton and Greene?"

"Tinkerton and Greene? I have nothing to do with them. If they did something illegal, it is none of my business. None whatsoever."

I pulled the newspaper clippings from my shirt pocket. "None of your business? Let's see. The Pryors? The Skeppingtons? The Brownsteins? Edward Kasmarek? And now, a couple of bogus Talbotts? Do those names ring a bell?"

His eyes shifted nervously from me to the door.

"None of your business?" I laughed at him. "You signed the death certificates, Doctor. You ID'd them. And you put down the cause of death. No autopsies. No fingerprints. No questions. No nothing. That's a felony. A whole bunch of them." My eyes bore in. "But was that all you did, Doc? Falsify a few records? Help with the paperwork? Sign a few forms? Or did you help kill them, too?"

"No! No. I swear." He shook his head violently from side to side denying it, but I could see he was cracking and I'd barely started. "I never touched those people. That was all Tinkerton's work."

I smiled, my voice turning cruel and sarcastic. "When the real cops get finished with you, Doctor, you'll lose your license and you'll probably end up in the slammer, taking care of other people's "personal preferences" for a long, long time."

"I only did what Tinkerton told me to do," he cowered. "Don't you know who he is? Who he is working for?"

"Probably for himself, but you're too dumb to see that."

"No! No, you have it all wrong."

"Yeah? Well, I'm sure he'll clear it all up at your trial. A stand-up guy like Ralph Tinkerton? He'll step forward and set everything straight, won't he?"

"You cannot touch him, you fool."

My eyes narrowed. "Watch me."

"He is protected, him and the sheriff."

"Really? He can talk about the White House all he wants, but those are your state licenses hanging on the wall, Doctor, and the Ohio Attorney General isn't going to accept his Washington "Get Out of Jail Free" card. Not this time. Even if they do, it won't help you. You have a half dozen bodies to answer for, Doctor. You're the fall guy. Tinkerton and his friends are going to run away from you as fast as their feet can carry them."

Varner slumped back in his chair, his eyes glazing over as the slow realization caved-in on him. "I did nothing," he muttered. "Nothing."

"Then come downtown with me."

"What? Downtown?" he mumbled, not understanding.

"Yes, downtown, now, to the State Police Headquarters. If you come clean and tell them everything you know, you might be able to save yourself. If you don't, Tinkerton's going to leave you holding the bag, and you know it."

Varner blinked. "The State Police? Me?"

"You aren't a stupid man, Doctor. It's all unraveling now—the whole thing. That makes you a liability and makes me your only chance to get out of this thing alive."

I felt a slight draft on the back of my neck. As I turned my head and looked over my shoulder, the office door had swung open and behind me stood Sheriff Virgil Dannmeyer.

"You aren't going anywhere, Doc," he snarled as his hand swung down at me. It was holding a black leather sap and there was nothing I could do to stop it. It caught me hard on the back of the head.

The lights went out as I heard him say, "Semper Fi, asshole!"

Chapter 8

A short ride to forever...

If you've never been knocked cold by a sharp blow to the head, it is a little hard to describe. I remember back in sixth grade when Howie Schmidt and I were

playing in his basement and I ran headlong into one of the steel posts holding up the first floor. It took three weeks to get the "Bong" out of my ears. Later, there was the JV football team in high school. At 168 pounds, I was the third-string guard on a three-string team, until we ran a sweep around left end and I met Willie Sanders coming the other way, helmet-to-helmet. I woke up five minutes later and ten yards back. That was when the coaches suggested I switch to track, or to swimming, or to debate.

The hit Dannmeyer gave me was somewhere in the middle. Most of the time I wasn't completely under. Sometimes I heard things and sometimes I understood them, but I couldn't manage to do both at the same time. There were voices, but they were far off and hollow, like the echo at the other end of a long pipe, and they didn't make any sense.

"You talk too damned much, Doc," I heard a gruff voice say.

"I told him nothing. Nothing."

"No? Keep it up and you'll find yourself up in Oak Hill with the rest of them."

"Don't you threaten me, Dannmeyer."

"No, I'll let the captain do that."

"I should never have..."

"You got that right. You never had the balls for it. Neither does your collection of fruits in the beds back there, but you like playing around with them anyway, don't you, "Doctor? And to keep doing that, you need the money."

"Dannmeyer, you bastard!"

"You knew the rules. You never shoulda let this guy inside, you never shoulda talked to him, and you never shoulda opened your big yap about what we're doing."

"Dannmeyer, I swear..."

"Stow it. The captain's gonna have your ass when he gets here. He set this place up for you. Without him and all the Federal money he got you from HEW, you and your bunch of fruits and nuts would still be running around the back alleys of Guadalajara."

"You are a pig."

"Yeah, I am. And don't forget, Larry Greene's always got room for one more. But don't worry. When you're gone, I'll clean up all the little "lose ends" around . Won't that be fun?"

I heard Dannmeyer's obscene laugh fade away down that long tunnel and everything went silent again.

I came out of it slowly, like a deep-sea diver coming up from the bottom, reaching out for the twinkling, silver surface high above, until my eyes finally popped open and the bright lights blinded me. I was flat on my back on the hard linoleum floor of Varner's office, squinting, blinking, and staring up at the ceiling. Everything in the room floated around in circles. As my vision cleared, I became aware of two faces high above me leaning into my field of vision. One was Dannmeyer, dressed in his brown sheriff's suit, and one was Ralph Tinkerton in his suit coat and tie. I tried to focus on each of them, but the back of my head throbbed with a dull, aching pain.

"I bet that really hurts, don't it," Dannmeyer chuxckled. "Nice to see I haven't lost my touch, but that wasn't nuthin', Podner. See, I got ways of hurtin' people they ain't given names to yet."

I closed my eyes again and lay there until my head stopped throbbing. Slowly the pain faded enough for me to feel my tongue, my toes, and my fingers, and I took roll call. Hands? They were pinned beneath me and I couldn't make them move. Handcuffs? Probably Dannmeyer's, I realized. I slowly opened my eyes again, knowing there was no sense putting it off. This time, I focused on Tinkerton's face. He stared down at me, his cold-gray eyes as dull and emotionless as a cruising shark.

"Well, if it isn't our tourist friend from California, or Boston, or wherever you say you are from, and my very favorite jokester." Tinkerton gave me a cold, thin, smile. "The paper bag with the drink you left in the lobby? Sheer genius, Peter. However, you're developing a nasty habit of intruding into places where you don't belong, dangerous places, and making a pest of yourself. Not that I didn't warn you, but now it's too late."

I looked from Tinkerton to Dannmeyer, then back again. "Is he your muscle, Ralph?" I asked.

"My 'muscle?' Tinkerton seemed amused at the thought. "Oh, come now, Peter. That term is so pathetically out of date. Today all it takes is a telephone call, maybe a fax or an e-mail to *www.hitman.com*, for all I know. With my contacts, a quick glance in the right quarters is all I'd need to eliminate a clown like you."

I fixed Tinkerton with a hard stare. "I'm a Special Investigator with the State Attorney General's Office. If you come downtown with me right now, I'll forget the assaulting a police officer charge and see what I can do to help you negotiate a plea on all the rest. It's not much, but it's the last chance we're going to give you."

Tinkerton stared down at me, speechless, and then broke out in a gut-wrenching belly laugh. "My God, but you do have nerve! I love it, I love it!"

Dannmeyer frowned. He didn't look nearly as happy or as confident. "You don't think it could be true then?"

"Not a word of it, Virgil," Tinkerton answered.

"You're positive about that?" I asked him.

"Yes, I'm afraid I am," Tinkerton answered. "If anything like that *was* going on downtown—and I mean anything—I would have known about it weeks ago."

"So, who is he then? Just some crazy drifter?" Dannmeyer asked hopefully.

Tinkerton studied me for a moment. "No, that would be far too simple. He is no drifter and I know he is not crazy."

"Then who the fuck is he?" Dannmeyer suddenly raged.

"Ah, that is the question, isn't it."

"I'm Peter Talbott," I said. "Like I told you."

"I don't think so," Tinkerton shook his head confidently. "The real Peter Talbott died in a car wreck in Baja a year ago, right after his wife. I have a copy of the death certificate and a photograph of the grave in L. A."

"That was some dumb Mexican kid who stole my car. The grave is empty now and the Mexicans rescinded the death certificate. Check it out."

Varner shifted uncomfortably. "Ralph, you don't suppose..."

"Shut up, Doctor," Tinkerton snapped. "You talk too much."

"But the computers? Aren't they supposed to check all that stuff out?"

Tinkerton looked down, studying me. "The *wizards* warned us the system isn't perfect, that something like this could happen. They said it was *statistically inevitable*, but controllable. When you need a husband and a wife, both of whom are dead, with the right timing, age, and background from as far away as we can find them, the choices are somewhat limited. There is always a minor but manageable chance that someone could notice."

"You think it's that simple?" Dannmeyer asked.

"That, or he is lying again." Tinkerton cocked his head and looked down at me with a sadistic smile. "That is the question, isn't it? How much does our new friend "Peter" really know and how much of it is pure crap."

"He's wrong, Virgil. You don't really think I'd come walking in here alone, do you?" I said confidently. "You're the one who's going to end up holding the bag."

"I don't think so," Tinkerton sighed. "But you are right about one thing. Virgil and I can't take any chances, can we? We've got to make sure," Tinkerton's eyes flashed, "because there is one little question that I've got to have an answer to, one you are going to give me, if it takes all night."

"Boxers or briefs?" I asked.

"No," he laughed along with me. "Back in my office, you dropped the magic name of Jimmy Santorini on me. Perhaps you thought you were being cute, or perhaps you threw it in blind, not really knowing about the Pandora's Box you were opening up, but that move cost you your amateur standing. You can save yourself a whole lot of pain if you tell me what you really do know about him."

"Santorini? He ran a little wine bar up in Carmel. Or was that Santoucci?"

"Did Jimmy hire you?"

"Hire me? I can't cook pasta and I'd drink up all his cabernet. It'd never work."

"Was it that bastard Rico Patillo or someone else in New Jersey? Or some little staff toad over in Justice."

"Washington? DC? Never even visited the place."

"Good! That's what I expected," Tinkerton smiled. "More jokes. I'm glad you didn't lose that fabulous sense of humor of yours. If you had opened up and started talking, I still wouldn't have believed a word you said, but it might have confused things. I wouldn't have known what was true, what was a lie, and what was just a bit of creative stretching. This way, we'll assume that everything you say is a lie until the very, very end."

"The *very, very* end?" I asked. "That sounds a bit melodramatic even for you, Ralph."

"Very melodramatic, but in the end you'll tell me the truth and you won't find it one bit funny."

"You're sure about that?"

"Sergeant Dannmeyer and I have done this before, *Peter*, in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Iraq, in Saudi Arabia after the first war, and in a half dozen hellholes in between," Tinkerton's smile slowly faded. "So, I will know when you're telling me the truth. I assure you, I will know."

He turned toward Dannmeyer. "Run another NCI record check on him, just to be sure. If you come up with anything new, anything at all, let me know immediately."

"What if he shows clean again?"

"It doesn't matter," Tinkerton shrugged. "He's going to disappear all the same."

Dannmeyer looked down at me with a sly grin. "What about that truck of his?"

"Drive it down to the east side and dump it near the Interstate."

"The east side?" Dannmeyer sounded pained. "Oh, come on, captain. A nice Bronco like that? Jeez, they'll have it picked clean by midnight."

"Sometimes you can be an idiot, Virgil. That's the whole point." Tinkerton snapped. "Now see to it!" He looked up and turned his attention to Varner who was cowering in the corner, giving him an equally hard look as he motioned toward me. "Doctor, if you please."

Above me, I saw Varner's worried face come into view. He held a hypodermic needle in his fingers. Carefully, he swabbed my arm with a cotton ball and alcohol before he stuck the needle in.

Dannmeyer laughed. "Alcohol? You gotta be kiddin', Doc. The guy's going to be dead by midnight and you're worried about him getting some germs?"

Varner looked flustered. "Don't tell me that! I don't want to know what you're doing, Dannmeyer. Just get him out of here. I'm sick of this whole business."

"You? You're *sick* of this whole business, Doctor?" Tinkerton's voice lashed him. "How unfortunate. We'll have to do something about that, won't we, Sergeant?"

"No, no," Varner quickly shook his head. "That was only talk, Ralph. That's all. I'm scared. You never told me I'd be involved like this. Not like this."

Tinkerton stared at him for a long moment. "You are absolutely right, Doctor. You weren't supposed to be involved "like this", but now you are. In for a penny, in for a pound. I hope you understand that, I really do, for your sake. Now send the ambulance around to the service door. I want him run down to Greene's and I want it done now."

"Yeah, Doc," Dannmeyer added. "Larry Greene ain't nearly as squeamish about doin' what he's told. And personally, I like his clientele one hell of a lot better than I like yours."

Within minutes, I was out like a light. No hollow pipe. No echoing voices, either. I was out and I remembered nothing of the ride. The next thing I knew, and only dimly at that, was when the two ambulance attendants dropped me on my head. They had backed the ambulance to the rear loading dock of Greene's Funeral Home. None of the outside lights were on and I was lying on a stretcher. The two attendants carried it out the back door of the ambulance onto the dock when I heard a husky male voice say, "Oops!"

"Christ, Ernie, I can't believe you did that." another male voice said.

"Yeah? Well, I can't believe they didn't turn on the goddamned lights out here."

"You dropped the guy right on his head."

"My hand slipped, George. So what? It's a stiff. It ain't like he's gonna sue us or anything, is he?"

"Help me get him back on the stretcher," George fumed. I felt hands lifting me up and turning me over. That was when I groaned.

"Christ, he's still alive!" Ernie jumped back and dropped me again as the service door opened, flooding the loading dock with light.

I opened my eyes and blinked. I was lying on my side on the bare concrete and everything was spinning around in big looping circles. I saw the side of the

ambulance, a pair of white pants, some white shoes, white shirts, and white faces, all disjointed, bent over and staring down at me. Then I saw other legs come into view wearing black pants and shiny black leather shoes.

"Hey, Mr. Greene, this guy's still alive," Ernie said, astonished.

"He groaned and his eyes opened. He's still alive," George added.

"Yes, we know all about it, George," I heard a familiar, syrupy voice answer. "Rest assured, we shall take good care of him. You gentlemen may leave now."

"But Mister Greene," the white legs closest to me said uncertainly. "Don't you think we oughta run him over to the hospital?"

"Yeah, he don't look so good."

"As I told you, everything is perfectly fine here." Greene's measured voice tried to reassure them. "The gentleman is in good hands. We'll see he is well taken care of."

"Mr. G., no offense, but this is a funeral home."

"George, do us a favor and do what you're told," Greene tried to silence him, tried to regain control. "Wasn't it Doctor Varner who told you to bring the fellow over here?"

"Well, yeah, but..."

I heard their feet shuffling and saw the white pants slowly back away. Other hands picked me up and tossed me back on the stretcher, none-too-gently. I tried to focus on them, but I couldn't. I tried to speak, but my lips wouldn't move as they picked up the stretcher and carried it toward the building.

"You two have made some other "special" deliveries here before, haven't you?" Greene asked. "You've transported—how shall I put it—some of Doctor Varner's more *unusual* and *delicate* patients. And you know things are not always what they appear. Some of his patients want very private work done, so that's what we provide, George."

"Yeah, but..."

The service door opened again. I turned my head and saw the towering hulk of Ralph Tinkerton step between Greene and the two ambulance attendants. "Gentlemen, gentlemen," he said. "Let us have no more, "Yeah buts". If the two of you can no longer honor our little requests, then I'm certain Doctor Varner can find some new employees who will be more than willing to do the job."

"Uh, no, no, Mister Tinkerton, we didn't mean nuthin'."

"Good, very good." Tinkerton stepped even closer, intimidating them with his presence. "See you keep it that way, or the next time your ambulance shows up out here, you might be the ones riding in the back. Better still, Doctor Varner might keep you right there at the clinic and try out some of his *personal preference* surgery on the two of you. How does that sound?"

I heard the quick shuffling of feet on concrete as the doors on the ambulance opened and slammed shut. The ambulance's engine started up with a loud roar as I was carried through the doorway on the stretcher. The thick, metal service doors of the mortuary closed behind me and I wanted to scream, but I couldn't. My tongue wouldn't work.

"Take him downstairs," Tinkerton ordered.

"Uh, look, Ralph," I heard Greene whisper. "Given all that's happened lately, I was thinking..."

“Larry, you aren't doing that again, are you? Thinking? Like those two moron drivers of Varner's? I thought we agreed you'd leave the thinking to me, because you know what it does to your stomach.”

“But Ralph...”

“Do what you're told, Larry. Take our mouthy “friend” downstairs, then you and your people can go home. I'll handle the rest of it.”

“But Ralph...”

“Go home, Larry.”

I never heard them finish the argument, if they ever did. Tinkerton's voice faded away into the darkness, taking the sound of the ambulance along with it.

Chapter 9

Keep out of reach of children...

The next thing I felt was a numbing, shivering cold. I opened my eyes and tried to focus, but the room wouldn't stop spinning. My head pounded like an angry bass drum. I relaxed and laid there for a few moments before I tried to raise my arms, but they wouldn't move. Slowly I realized I was lying flat on my back on something hard and cold, and my arms wouldn't move because they were strapped down to the table. My legs were strapped down too. That was when I felt panic grab me by the throat. I closed my eyes and forced myself to relax. Calm down. Forget the straps. Take a few deep breaths. Inventory the body parts, one at a time. See if anything's dented, broken, or missing. As I did, the room began to stop its spinning, the fog began to lift, and slowly I felt myself coming out of it.

My fingers and toes were all there. I could wiggle them and count them. I could feel my legs, my arms, my shoulders and my back. All of the moving parts seemed to be where they were supposed to be, so I opened my eyes again. This time they managed to focus. The floor was a clean, light-gray linoleum. The walls were white ceramic tile. And I found myself staring up at a stark white, acoustical-tile ceiling. I blinked and realized my head wasn't hurting as severely now. At least the back side where Dannmeyer had clubbed me wasn't. This time it was my forehead that hurt like hell. I frowned. My forehead? That was when I remembered George and Ernie, the two klutzes from the ambulance who dropped me on the concrete loading dock.

I raised my head a few inches and looked around. Whoa! No wonder I was cold. I was lying flat on my back, stark naked, on a long, stainless steel table, and it was ice cold on my bare butt. How odd. The table had a deep, rounded gutter and a raised lip that ran all the way around its outer edge. I looked around. The rest of the room was still fuzzy, probably from whatever was in the hypodermic needle Varner gave me. Varner! There was a hot corner of hell reserved for quacks like him.

I tried to get up, but there were three wide, leather straps holding me down to the table. One ran across my chest, one across my waist, and one across my

knees. The one across my waist passed under my forearms and had two separate buckles that held my wrists down, rendering my arms immobile. The one across my knees held my legs down. I struggled with them for a few minutes and found I could raise my shoulders, but that was as far as I could get and I stopped. It was no use, anyway.

But where was I? I strained my ears, listening for any sound, but all I heard was the soft humming of the air conditioners. My nose twitched. What was that smell? Soap and disinfectants? Yes, but underneath I swore I smelled was the sugary-sweet aroma of flowers. My head dropped back on the stainless steel table with a painful "Clang." I tried to think. As I did, I realized my head was slightly higher than the rest of me. No, that wasn't quite right. It was the table. The top was sloped. The far end where my feet were was three or four inches lower than my head.

Then it hit me. My head shot up and I looked around the room in stark terror. I knew exactly where I was. I was in the embalming room in the basement of Greene's funeral home, strapped to an embalming table. I strained at the straps in earnest, thrashing and flopping back and forth like a cod on the deck of a Gloucester fishing trawler. I tugged with all my might, but it was no use. A Clydesdale could pull a line of beer wagons with one of those leather straps and there was no way I was going to break free from them.

There was a large, round clock on the wall. It showed 9:20. But 9:20 when? Morning? Night? I had no idea how long I had been lying there unconscious and I found it strangely unnerving to have no idea whatsoever what time or even what day it was.

To my right were two other embalming tables. They were identical to the one I was strapped to, except the far table, where I saw my clothes, all neatly folded in a stack. On the far wall, beyond the other tables, was an elevator and a short flight of stairs that went up and turned to the right before it passed out of sight. To the right of the stairs stood a row of stainless steel refrigerator doors designed to hold a half-dozen bodies. No matter how cold I felt lying on that stainless steel table, I knew I'd be a whole lot colder if I ended up inside one of them.

Twisting around and looking back over my shoulder, I saw a row of tall, white enamel cabinets lining the wall. They had glass doors and glass shelves. In the first cabinet, I saw a gruesome array of brightly polished scalpels, scissors, saw-toothed knives, augers, forceps, and clamps of all sizes, lying neatly on clean, white towels. In the next cabinet, were large-bore needles, coils of rubber tubing, bowls, basins, sponges, jars, and tubes of makeup, combs, hairbrushes, and sprays. *Well, you sure can't beat Larry Greene for a good time, can you?*

I turned and looked the other way. High above my left shoulder, my eyes were drawn to two tall metal cylinders clamped to the wall. Clear, plastic tubes ran down from the top of the cylinders and plugged into a metal box that sat on a small stainless steel table below. The box had dials and switches and it plugged into an electric outlet. I figured it had to be a pump of some kind and there was a second yellow-rubber tube coming out the front, with a nasty looking, big-bore needle at its end. I tried to read the label on the cylinder closest to me. It was upside down, but it had a line of cute green and yellow daisies running across the top, the name "Nature's Own," and the word "Formaldehyde" in red. Below that

was a black skull-and cross-bones emblem, the word "Poison" and the warning "Keep Out of Reach of Children." *Can't argue with that one*, I thought. Too bad they didn't keep it out of the reach of me too, because I had a good idea what Greene had in mind for that tank of "Nature's Own" and for that big, ugly needle.

"Excellent! You finally woke up," I jumped as I heard Tinkerton's loud, west Texas twang call to me from the bottom of the stairs. He wore the same dark business suit he had worn in his office. "For a moment there, I thought Varner gave you a bit too much of his *joy juice*. He's such a quack, you know. He doesn't appreciate you nearly as much as I do and it would have been so very unfortunate if you had left us prematurely, Pete."

"I couldn't agree more, Ralph."

"Ah, that's the ticket. You're regaining that irrepressible sense of humor of yours. And that's a good thing," he said as he walked across the room toward me. "Bright-eyed. Bushy tailed. With all your faculties intact. That is marvelous, because I will have your undivided attention when we have our important, but somewhat brief conversation."

I jerked at the straps again, wishing I could wrap my undivided attention around his throat. "Look, Ralph," I forced a smile. "I can take a joke as well as the next guy..."

"A joke? Is that what you think this is?" he said as he circled the embalming table, looking down at me.

"You've made your point, okay?"

"And what would my point be, Peter?"

"That I should mind my own business and get the hell out of town."

"Oh, you'll be doing that," he chuckled. "You'll be getting out of town soon enough. I have no doubt about it. And you'll be happy to know that Larry Greene has picked out a lovely spot for you in the back row up at Oak Hill, right next to the other Talbotts and your old pals from New Jersey."

He stopped at the far end of the table near to my feet as he looked down at my body from toe to head with a cold, professional eye. "You have my compliments. You are in excellent physical condition. Trim. No fat. Good muscle tone. Nice coloration."

"Gee, thanks. You have no idea how good that makes me feel."

"Well, the body is God's temple, you know."

"And God doesn't think much of you tying his temple down to this table, Ralph."

"Probably not, but most of Larry's customers don't try to get up and run away."

He turned toward the intercom on the far wall and punched one of the buttons. The sparking notes of a Mozart Piano Concerto filled the room. "I hope you like that," he said as he closed his eyes and drank it in. "You have no idea how much I detest that crap they play upstairs."

Tinkerton opened one of the lower drawers in a supply cabinet and pulled out a starched, white surgical gown. "You know, when you cut away all the flowers, the organ music, and all that other sanctimonious crap, even Larry Greene admits it's a pretty simple process—cut and flush, that's about it." He unbuttoned his suit jacket and hung it on a peg near the cabinet. "Any amateur can perform one, really." He pulled the smock on over his white shirt, pausing to look at the big,

solid-gold Rolex on his wrist. "The night is young," he said as he turned toward me. "And you and I have all the time in the world."

"I'm afraid you've lost me, Ralph. What are you talking about?"

"What am I talking about?" He paused and looked down at me with a puzzled expression. "Why, the embalming process. That should be obvious by now."

"Embalming?" I asked, not knowing whether to laugh or scream.

"Precisely. It is crucial that you understand what is going to happen. Once you do, and once I begin, you *are* going to tell me everything you know. Everything. In fact, you'll be so damned eager to tell me, the truth will come gushing out of you like shit from a Christmas goose."

"You can't be serious."

"Can't I?" he answered, smiling at me as he buttoned the smock. Even now, I think that was the coldest and most malevolent smile I had ever seen, before or after. "I'm as serious as lung cancer, boy. In fact, you've never met anyone in your miserable, little life who is halfway as serious as me. You see, when you showed up yesterday, you caused a great deal of consternation, not with me, because I know what I'm doing. I believe in our mission and I know it's right, but you really spooked the others. I'm sure that was exactly what you had in mind, but now it is my turn. Simply put, I want to know why you *are* here, why you're bothering us, Mr. Whomever-you-are. I want to know what you know, everything you know, and who you're working for."

"Who I'm working for?"

"Is it Jimmy Santorini's people or Rico Patillo's? If it isn't one of them, maybe it's someone at Justice or the FBI who suddenly developed a queasy stomach over our little operation. Is that it? Or, are you really working for the local snoops downtown, as you said you were? Which is it?"

"You can't get away with this."

"Peter, Peter," he looked down at me, amused and disappointed. "Do you have any idea how many times I've gotten away with 'this'? No, you couldn't, could you? Well let me assure you that the handful of graves you found up in Oak Hill with those grease balls from the Santorini mob in New Jersey, they are only the very small and most recent tip of a very large iceberg."

"I'm going to be missed, Ralph."

"By whom? We've tracked back on all your cell phone calls, the ones you made and the ones you received. And we've analyzed every piece of plastic in your wallet, your bank records, and every credit card charge you've made for the past year."

"My phone calls? My credit cards? What..."

"Every dime you've spent and everything there is to know about your pathetic little life—where you've been staying, what you had for breakfast, your shoe size, where you had your car fixed, everything you've bought, every bill you paid, everything."

I was stunned. And I'd never felt more alone in my life.

"As a fellow professional, I must admit that the legend they wove for you—all the background and documents—they are first class, as good as I've ever seen. Someone went to an amazing amount of trouble to put you in place. Unless of course you really are who you say you are."

"That's what I've been trying to tell you."

"Ah, but that's the problem, isn't it? We need to find out which is true."

"People know I'm here."

"Who? Your friend Doug in Boston? If that's who he really is, then that's one more loose end we'll have to take care of, all in due time of course, but it will be taken care of. A little "collateral damage," I think they call it."

I pulled hard again on the straps holding me down, desperate to find some wiggle room, but there was none.

"Please understand, I *will* get the whole story out of you before this evening is over, in about twenty minutes, I suspect. As "Old Blue Eyes" sang, *Set 'em up Joe, there's no one in the place, except you and me*. Nooo-body, Pete, nobody except you and me."

He circled the table again, staring down at me with that same thin, sadistic smile. "You know what the men in our little detachment down in El Salvador and Nicaragua called me? They called me the undertaker. Funny, isn't it? Here we are in Larry Greene's funeral home and I'm the one they call the undertaker," Tinkerton chuckled. "It started as a little joke Sergeant Dannmeyer came up with. We were part of an ecumenical little group that was tasked to liaison with the local counter-insurgency people. Liaison, my ass. Our job was to eliminate the communist infrastructure in the villages. Eliminate, disappear, call it what you like, it was a polite way of saying we killed people. We needed information and we made people talk to get it. That is what I do. I pry the truth out of people and I'm quite good at it. Yes, before the end comes tonight, as you feel yourself slipping away into that dark forever, you'll start to talk, all right. You'll talk, and you'll talk, and you'll talk, until you can't talk anymore."

"Look, Ralph..."

He dismissed the protest with a wave of his hand. "All in good time. All in good time. I just wanted you to appreciate where we are headed, that's all. Like a good vintage wine, a little terror helps one focus the mind."

He opened the door of one of the glass cabinets and examined the knives. "What marvelous toys. When I was in counter- intelligence, we never had nifty tools like this. Just coat hangers, penknives, electric cords, pliers, and our boundless imaginations, of course. But this stuff of Larry's is great."

He picked up a scalpel and let the light flash off the razor-sharp blade. "I watched Larry do a couple of them down here. Professional interest, of course. First, he opens a vein or two and lets the blood drain out. Not much to it really, and it doesn't take very long. A small incision in a major vein in one of the lower extremities, a couple of shunts, and gravity does the rest. Personally, the system is a bit messy for my taste, but that's why the table is sloped and what the gutters along the sides are for."

"Look, Ralph, you've got this thing all wrong."

He completely ignored me. "Then he opens an artery or two up top and pumps in the formaldehyde to flush everything out. Nothing tricky about that either. After he's finished, a couple of clamps, a half dozen stitches, a bit of Crazy Glue, and voila! Finished, except for the makeup and the cosmetic repairs." Tinkerton looked down and smiled. "Sorry, but we won't be worrying about the artsy stuff tonight."

Tinkerton reached his hand out and I felt a cold finger touch me at the base of the neck above the collarbone. I jumped as if I had been touched by a high power

line. "That's where the carotid artery and the jugular vein are located," he chuckled softly. "Larry likes using them. Simple and easy to get at, you see."

His hand moved down and he grabbed my upper arm. I fought him, but with my wrist strapped down it wasn't hard for him to turn it outward. "Now, some embalmers prefer to use the ones here, inside the bicep, but they're a bit harder to get at."

I strained against the straps, trying to pull my arm away, but it was hopeless.

"Me? Perhaps I'm old fashioned. If I had to choose, I'd pick the femoral artery and vein right here in the hip and groin." I never saw his hand move, but suddenly his fingers passed lightly across my abdomen and hip and I felt myself shiver. "That's the iliac. It's less obvious, you know, out of sight and out of mind."

He chuckled as he turned away; tapping the tall metal cylinders and picking up the rubber tube with the big bore steel tube at its end. "Put this baby in an artery and turn on that pump. With twenty pounds of pressure, it doesn't take very long. Everything simple and very painless," he said with that cold, hard smile again. "Of course, that assumes the subject is dead." He picked up a can of talcum powder and dusted his hands. He pulled on a pair of disposable latex gloves one at a time, letting the wrist bands snap. "I have been forewarned that when one is working on Californians, one cannot be too careful regarding the transmission of certain diseases, you know."

When he turned back toward me, he was holding a scalpel, looking down at my body with a cold, almost scientific indifference. I stared up at him, wide-eyed, my eyes following him around the table. I felt his hand on my thigh and I almost took the table with me through the ceiling.

"My, my, but we are touchy tonight, aren't we?" He laughed.

"Touchy? You bastard, I'll show you how touchy I can be." I bucked, kicked, and rolled from side to side, but it was no use. The straps held me down, but I kept bucking up and down anyway.

Tinkerton stood there with an amused smile and waited me out. "Keep fighting it like that and you're going to hurt yourself," he said as he laid his hand on my thigh again, ever so gently this time. "Easy, now. Easy. Easy," he said as he slowly lowered the scalpel toward my stomach. "This may sting a bit."

I forced myself away from it, drawing further and further back until I couldn't move any more. "You bastard!" I whispered, my eyes riveted on the thin, shining blade as it touched my lower abdomen.

Then he pulled the blade away and looked deep into my eyes. "Now that we have the preliminaries completed and you know precisely where you stand, or where you lay as the case may be... Damn! See what you've done. A few minutes alone with you, and you've already infected me with that God-awful California humor. Yes, I really will miss you, and I'm going to miss you a whole lot faster if you don't tell me who you're working for."

"I'm not working for anybody and I don't know a damned thing!" I sputtered, incapable of taking my eyes off the glittering blade in his hand. "I saw the obituaries in the newspaper and you guys got me mad, that's all."

His smile faded and ever so gently, he drew the scalpel across the left side of my lower abdomen. My head shot up. I didn't feel any pain, just a soft touch like a feather. He held up the scalpel and I saw a thin, red coat of blood on the blade. I

looked down and saw a shallow, three inch cut across my stomach. I opened my mouth to scream, but I was so terrorized nothing came out.

"That's only the epidermis. It's the outer layer," he said in a calm, detached voice. "I still have the dermis and the subcutaneous tissue before I reach the artery. So you can bull-shit me two more times before things get really serious and you begin to bleed to death."

"You're nuts! I can't believe this. You're nuts, all of you — you, Greene, Dannmeyer, Varner, all of you."

"Pete, boy, you just don't seem to understand what's at stake here. As I told you back in my office, this involves National Security—*top* National Security—because we're the good guys. I told you that too. I even asked for your help, but you wouldn't stop nosing around, would you? Nothing personal, but you brought up Jimmy Santorini's name, not me, and you are the one who said you were working for the State AG's office, remember? So you have no one to blame but yourself," he said as he lowered the scalpel toward my stomach again.

"You bastard!" I screamed, trying to break free with all my might until I heard the loud "Ding" of the freight elevator. It had reached the basement level and its doors opened. Tinkerton heard it too. His head snapped up and he looked toward the far end of the room.

Me? I couldn't take my eyes off that damned scalpel.

Chapter 10

Bert and Ernie, and a brick wall...

"What are you two doing down here?" Tinkerton quickly turned and demanded to know. "I told you to get back to the clinic."

"Well, uh," I heard a man's voice and pulled my eyes away from the scalpel long enough to look. It was those two klutzy ambulance attendants, George and Ernie. They stood in the open door of the elevator dressed in their white uniforms. They looked at each other for support as if neither was sure what to do next or had the guts to do it.

"Is Mister Greene around?" George finally asked.

"Get out of here!" Tinkerton ordered.

"No, don't!" I screamed. "You guys gotta help me. He's nuts; he's gonna kill me."

There I was, strapped naked to an embalming table, with Tinkerton hovering over me with a bloody scalpel in his hand, and these two clowns couldn't make up their minds. "Come on, guys," I begged them. "Look at him. You can't leave me down here. He's going to kill me."

They took a few tentative steps into the room, still not sure, but it was a start. "We don't want no trouble over this, Mister Tinkerton." Ernie tried his best to placate the lawyer. "But we need to talk to Mr. Greene."

"No, no trouble." George repeated as they stepped farther into the room and drew closer to me. Ernie nudged his partner. "Jeez, look at that guy, George. He's bleeding. This ain't right."

"Out! Get out of here, now, both of you," Tinkerton bellowed as he crossed around to the other side of the table, positioning himself between them and me.

"What are you doing to him, Mister Tinkerton?" Ernie pointed at the scalpel.

"He's fucking torturing me, you dork!" I screamed at them, my voice trembling. "What do you think he's doing? Now get me out of here."

The two attendants exchanged quick, knowing glances, as if they were confirming something they had already decided. "If you don't mind, Mister Tinkerton, we're gonna take this guy to the hospital," George said.

"Yep," Ernie agreed, puffing out his chest. "That's what we're going to do, so we'd appreciate you stepping aside."

"Yeah," George added. "You got some problem with that, Mister Tinkerton, we can sort it out later. But we ain't leaving without that guy, not this time we ain't."

Tinkerton glowered at them. "This is none of your business. Get out of here," he said as he swung the blade back and forth and took a few menacing steps toward them.

Neither of the attendants had expected Tinkerton to come at them like that. The lawyer pointed the scalpel at Ernie and backed him against the next embalming table.

"Hey!" Ernie shouted as he stumbled. He raised his hands in defense, but the blade caught him across the palm of his left hand and sliced it open, sending blood flying. Ernie screamed in terror and grabbed his hand. He stared at it, wide-eyed and watched as blood ran down his arm and dripped on the tile floor. George tried to help. He pushed Tinkerton away, but he was off balance himself as Tinkerton lashed out with the scalpel again. In truth, I'm not sure the big lawyer even saw George standing there, but the scalpel didn't care about intent. With his long arms and tall, powerful frame, the backhanded stroke caught George across the throat.

"No!" I screamed, too late. George's eyes went as wide as ping-pong balls. He raised his hands to his neck and tried to speak, but all that came out was a wet gurgle as a raw, six-inch gash opened at the base of his throat and blood pumped down the front of his white uniform. He staggered, wobbling back and forth, and toppled backward onto the floor. Tinkerton stared down at him as he too suddenly realized what he had done.

Ernie cradled his bleeding hand to his chest and looked down at his pal. He was as big and more muscular than Tinkerton, but he was scared to death. Before the lawyer could turn on him with the scalpel a second time, Ernie swung his right fist around and caught Tinkerton with a looping right hook. The blow struck the lawyer flush on his temple and he went down hard. As he fell, Tinkerton's head struck the rounded corner of the embalming table with a hollow "Clang." He knocked the table back a good six inches, then slumped to the floor. His eyes rolled up in his head and he was out cold.

Ernie stood shaking, staring down at George and at Tinkerton lying next to each other. "Jee-zuz," Ernie muttered as he turned white, blood still flowing down his right hand and arm. "Jee-zuz Christ!" Tinkerton wasn't moving but George wasn't

moving either. He was lying very still in a widening pool of blood. "George..." Ernie called out to his partner, before he turned away and threw up on the floor.

"Ernie, get a grip, man. Help me up." I struggled against the leather straps. "Come on, unbuckle these things for me," I called to him, but he was in shock. He backed away, shaking and stumbling, cradling his bleeding hand as he headed back to the elevator.

"Ernie, please," I called to him again. "You can't leave me down here."

Finally, Ernie snapped out of it. He turned back and saw me. From his expression of shock and horror, perhaps that was the first time he realized I was there. He blinked, but he did come back to the embalming table and unbuckled the strap on my right arm. "My God," he stammered. "He killed George. Just like that, he killed him. Why?"

I pulled my right arm free. "I don't know, but you and I are getting the hell out of here," I said as I fumbled with the other buckles and freed my left arm and my legs. I rolled off the table onto the cold tile floor, legs unsteady, still stark naked.

Ernie stood watching me, pale and wooden. "You're bleeding to death. Come here," I told him. He stepped gingerly over Tinkerton and the growing pool of blood around George as I reached into the equipment cabinet, grabbed a towel, and wrapped it around his bleeding hand. "That ought to hold you until we can get you to the hospital, Ernie. Now stay right here while I get my clothes on."

I grabbed a second towel and pressed it against my abdomen, but the scalpel cut didn't look all that serious. I turned my back on Ernie long enough to grab my clothes. As I pulled on my pants, Ernie stumbled past me, moaning and mumbling, "Hospital, got to go to the hospital," then he headed for the freight elevator.

"Ernie, no! Wait there, man," I called to him, but he stepped inside and the doors closed behind him. I hopped after him, pulling on my shoes and shirt, zipping up my pants, and grabbing my other stuff all at the same time, but it was too late. Ernie was gone.

I ran up the stairs, taking them two at a time. He must have come in the ambulance, and I wasn't about to let him drive off and leave me behind. If Dannmeyer did get rid of my Bronco, that ambulance was the last stagecoach out of Dodge and I wasn't going to miss it. When I reached the first floor landing, Ernie was nowhere to be found, so I turned, ran for the rear service exit, and out the door to the loading dock. It was dark outside. The sky was lit with a thousand stars but there was only a thin, quarter moon to see by. The ambulance was still there though, engine running, headlights on, and the dome light burning bright inside the cab. After all those hours on that cold, stainless-steel table, the sticky early-summer night air made me feel like I'd been dipped in a vat of caramel, but I was happy to be outside, upright and alive.

I ran to the ambulance. Ernie was sitting behind the wheel with a vacant, dazed expression, trying unsuccessfully to close the driver's side door. "Ernie, stop!" I called out, but he wasn't listening. I ran around to the passenger side of the truck and jumped inside just as Ernie finally managed to slam the door shut and drop it into gear. The dashboard of the ambulance was cluttered with lights, two radios, a writing pad, and four banks of dials and switches. I looked over at Ernie and saw

he was in no condition to walk and chew gum at the same time, much less drive anything as complicated as that big ambulance.

"Ernie, this isn't a good idea. How about letting me drive?" I pleaded with him. I reached for the key to turn the ignition off, but he shoved my hand away and hit the gas. "Ernie, come on," I tried again as the ambulance speeded up and careened wildly around the parking lot. Ernie was a big man and his good hand had a white-knuckled death grip on the steering wheel that he wasn't about to give it up. That was when I looked out through the front windshield and saw Dannmeyer's police cruiser pull into the driveway of the funeral home. In the harsh glare of the ambulance's headlights, I saw the sheriff behind the steering wheel. The dome light was still on inside the ambulance's cab and I could tell from his angry expression that he could see me too.

Dannmeyer immediately swung his car sideways and blocked the funeral home's only driveway exit. As dazed and dim-witted as Ernie was, he knew enough not to hit the cop car. He spun the steering wheel and took the ambulance in a long, wobbly loop around the outer edge of the parking lot. Dannmeyer got out of his car with an excited grin on his face. He pulled that ugly, black, nine-millimeter Glock from his holster, pulled back the slide, and took a casual off-hand shooting position at the side of his car. He pointed it at us and tracked the ambulance around the lot. When Ernie swung around again, Dannmeyer walked quickly to his right toward the funeral home for a better shot, deftly cutting off the arc, forcing Ernie to swing away again. Having marked our erratic orbit, Dannmeyer chose his ground next to the building and waited patiently for us to come back around one last time.

The ambulance's bright headlight beams cut across the front of the funeral home and caught the sheriff in their glare. He dropped into a professional, bent-kneed, two-handed crouch with the Glock extended out in front of him, but the bright headlights suddenly blinded him. He raised his off hand to screen his eyes from the glare, trying desperately to aim at the front of the ambulance as it bore down on him.

"Ernie, no!" I lunged across the seat and grabbed for the steering wheel again, but it was too late. Dannmeyer began shooting. I shot a forty-five automatic in the Army, but I had never had the pleasure of having a big-caliber handgun fired *at me* before. I ducked below the dash as three nine-millimeter slugs punched holes through the center of the windshield, ripping through the upholstery precisely where my chest had been only moments before and filling the front seat with shards of flying glass. With the ambulance's headlight beams in his eyes, Dannmeyer must have aimed where he thought I was, or where he thought I should be. Whatever, he missed, and that was when I knew that the good sheriff wasn't trying to stop the ambulance, he was trying to kill me.

As the distance closed and the ambulance bore down on him, Dannmeyer finally realized he was the one with the problem and turned his attention to the driver. "Ernie, get down!" I screamed, but it was too late. Three more nine-millimeter slugs shattered the windshield on the driver's side. At least two caught Ernie in the upper chest and punched him backward, bouncing him off the front seat. His body flexed stiff as a board. As it did, his leg straightened and pressed the gas pedal flat to the floor.

Dannmeyer didn't expect that. The ambulance's engine roared and the ex-Marine discovered he wasn't quite as quick as he once was. I caught a glimpse of him over the top of the hood as he squinted into the bright headlights and unloaded his last three rounds into the ambulance's front grill. Typical jarhead. He'd watched too many John Wayne movies and thought his gun and three ounces of lead could stop two tons of onrushing steel. They were too little and way too late.

The ambulance must have been going thirty miles an hour when it slammed into Dannmeyer with its front bumper and grill, crushing him like a bug against the side of the funeral home and caving in the wall. The rear end jumped off the ground and the side doors popped open. The ambulance hung there in mid-air as the bricks began to fall. The top half of the wall wobbled and then it collapsed onto the ambulance's hood, bringing part of the roof with it, burying the sheriff and the front half of the ambulance under a pile of brick and mortar. The last brick bounced off on the hood and other than the sputter and hiss of the radiator, there was nothing left but silence. The engine was dead. So was Dannmeyer. So was poor Ernie. There was no more shouting and no more gunshots, only a cloud of dust and the groan of twisted metal as the ambulance settled down and died.

The crash had pinned Ernie upright in the front seat behind the steering wheel and I found myself lying on the floor, wedged between the dashboard and the seat, covered with broken glass. Every inch of me ached. As my head cleared, I smelled raw gasoline and I knew I had to get out of the cab quickly. Straining, I pushed and crawled my way along the floor of the cab and out the side door until I fell out on the ground.

I rose to my feet and stumbled away, but my ribs and my lower back were screaming in pain. I hoped nothing was broken, but I didn't care. My mind focused on getting the hell out of there and back to Boston. These people were crazy. I had no further interest in Columbus or whole State of Ohio for that matter. I didn't care about Greene, Dannmeyer, or Tinkerton. All I wanted was to forget today, forget yesterday, and forget everything that happened after Gino Parini climbed into the front seat of my Bronco.

I turned my head and looked back at the funeral home. A fifteen-foot section of the sidewall had collapsed on top of the ambulance, bringing part of the roof down with it. I could even see into one of the chapels. It had been laid out for a funeral in the morning, complete with chairs, flowers, and a casket at the far end. Some wake. If it all wasn't so damned real, I'd have fallen down laughing.

Good thing I didn't. It was the smell of gasoline that brought me back to reality. The ambulance's gas tank must have ruptured and a dull, orange glow spread beneath the ambulance. In seconds, the flames raced along the length of the vehicle. That was when I forgot the pain and began to run.

There was a Mercedes parked at the rear of the lot. Probably Tinkerton's. I ran around it trying all the doors, but they were locked. On the other side of the lot, Dannmeyer's police cruiser was still sitting across the entrance, its headlights on and engine running. The driver's side door was hanging open, just as the sheriff left it, and it didn't require a whole lot of thought to realize it was my only way out. I jumped inside and slammed the door. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a man in a bloody white smock stumble out through the rear service door and fall on the

loading dock. He got to his knees and wobbled back and forth. It was Tinkerton. Like Rasputin, somehow that big bastard was alive and still coming after me.

I wasn't about to wait. I dropped the sheriff's car into drive and pushed the pedal to the floor. The big cruiser did a donut in the funeral home's front lawn, kicking up grass and dirt until I got it pointed in the general direction of the highway. Behind me, the dark night erupted in a ball of bright orange flames as the ambulance's gas tank exploded. I spun the steering wheel to the right. The car bounced over the curb, through a ditch, and shot out onto the highway.

Forget today? Forget yesterday? Forget the whole thing? Not very damned likely, not anymore.

Chapter 11

Big boys need lots 'a toys...

My mind was exploding. I kept hearing the words of that song, "I would walk five-hundred miles, and walk five-hundred more." Walk? I'd run that far to get away from that funeral home, I thought, as the lyrics kept ringing in my ears. Two days before, I had been a software engineer and rock music aficionado minding my own business in my new job in Boston. Now I was a soon-to-be-very-much-wanted cop killer racing down the dark, country roads of central Ohio in a stolen sheriff's cruiser. I drove on into the night, heading west and south through the cornfields. My back ached, my ribs ached, and my head ached in two places. I took several deep breaths to relax and clear my head, trying to turn my mind loose on the problem, knowing I needed to come up with a plan. I had to get rid of Dannmeyer's car and I had to get away from Columbus as fast as I could. It no longer mattered whether I was guilty or innocent, or that I had barged into the Varner Clinic with the very best of intentions. I left three bodies back there in the flames and rubble and I was the one they would be after.

The digital clock on the dashboard read 10:15, which meant I had eight, maybe nine hours of darkness left. Even at night, the big, brown cop car would stick out like a sore thumb. After the sun came up? Forget it. The Bronco was probably toast. When Dannmeyer drove back into Greene's parking lot a few minutes ago, I had a sneaking suspicion he was coming back from dumping it off on the East Side. It was already in some chop shop or on its way to Cleveland, and I needed to find a new set of wheels.

That bastard Tinkerton. How much time did I have before the alarm bells went off, I wondered? With the side wall and the roof of the building collapsing like it did and the ambulance going up in flames, the funeral home had taken some serious hits. It should be a couple of hours at least before they figure out what happened, even if Tinkerton talks. Dannmeyer's body was buried deep under the bricks and I doubted anyone else even knew he was there, so why would they come looking for his car?

When they finally put the out flames and dug into the rubble, they'd discover George lying in the basement with his throat slit and blood all over the place, Ernie wedged in the front seat of the burnt ambulance with two nine millimeter slugs in his chest, and one slightly crushed sheriff lying under a pile of bricks with a smoking Glock in his hand. All in all, this would be the damndest collection of bodies Campbell County had seen in a long time, and that didn't count one badly dented and bruised Ralph Tinkerton, Esq. lying on the loading dock. Those were four good reasons not to be caught in Dannmeyer's car. But who else besides Tinkerton, Dannmeyer, Greene, and Varner even knew about me to begin with? That was the problem with a tight little conspiracy. They'd have as much problem explaining it to the real cops as I would.

Tinkerton and his pals may be super-patriots with badges, working for what they thought was some greater good, but they were wrong. Besides, what could he do? Call in his buddies from Washington? Maybe. Even if old Ralph had that kind of clout, which I doubted, help wouldn't come overnight. Without local police support, even the FBI would have a lot of ground to cover once they get here.

With one eye on the dark, country road, I looked quickly around inside Dannmeyer's car. He must have just come back from a cop convention. God, but they do like their toys. He'd outfitted the cruiser like the cockpit of the Millennium Falcon, with doo-dads all over the dashboard and console. To my right sat a big two-way police radio, a bracket-mounted portable computer, a mobile Bearcat scanner, lights, switches, buttons, and even a writing pad. That was a stretch. A jarhead? I was surprised there wasn't a pad for his comic books and a holder for some crayons.

The radio and the scanner had been quiet since I jumped in, other than some routine police chatter. The voices were calm and the language pure, boring cop-speak straight out of Rescue 911 on TV. I'd have traded them all for one good FM radio station and some back-to-back REM. Even some Twisted Sister belting out, "*We're Not Going To Take It Anymore*," would do.

A dashboard bracket held a sleek Vascar radar unit that was pointed out the front windshield, a video camera, an extra-long flashlight, and a can of Mace. With a collection of toys like those, I could only imagine what he had at home in his basement. There was a steel rack welded to the hump in the middle of the floor that held a 12-gauge shotgun and a high-power hunting rifle with a scope. I shook the barrel. Californians must be out of season, because Dannmeyer had them locked-up tighter than Fort Knox. The key was probably one of the dozen or so on the big ring in the car's ignition, but I didn't know what I would do with a shotgun or a rifle to begin with, so I let it be. He also had a big, round "Smokey the Bear" sheriff's hat hanging from the headrest on the passenger side of the car, where nothing would dent its lovely round crown. They were great for election posters, parades, and cop conventions. Too bad he wasn't wearing it a few minutes ago, I thought. The brick wall would have crushed that sucker flat.

The quick inventory reminded me, what did I have? I had thrown on my clothes so fast I hadn't even looked. I felt my hip pocket and realized my wallet was missing. I patted down my front pocket. My cell phone was gone too. Tinkerton had taken them, which meant I had no money, no credit cards, no phone, and no ID. That would make things damned inconvenient. What else did I have to work

with? I felt my shirt pocket. The obituaries and stories I had taken from the library were still there, which was a relief. Tinkerton must not have noticed the shirt, so at least I had something.

Speaking of clothes, my pants leg was torn. The shirt was badly soiled from crawling across the floor of the ambulance, and there were fresh bloodstains from the cut Tinkerton made on my lower abdomen with his scalpel. Hardly the appearance of a solid citizen, I concluded. I pulled over to the road shoulder and stopped so I could open the glove compartment and take a quick look inside. Unfortunately, I found very little of use—maps, car manuals, some spare flashlight batteries, an extra book of traffic tickets, a couple of Hershey's chocolate bars, and a pint of cheap bourbon. With a sleaze-ball like Dannmeyer, the Hershey bars were probably for the little girls and the bourbon was for their mothers. Seeing the Hershey bars reminded me, I was hungry. I hadn't had anything to eat since the corned beef sandwich in Tinkerton's office at lunch. Was that really today? It seemed like a year ago. I pulled out the two chocolate bars, tore the first one open with my teeth, and devoured it. Dry, stale, and hard as a rock, but I couldn't recall anything ever tasting better, as I washed it down with a swallow of Dannmeyer's bourbon to clear my head.

Squirreled away in the back of the glove compartment I saw a tin Band-aid box with "Sheriff's Coffee Fund" hand-written on the outside. I shook it and popped the top open. Inside was a big wad of twenty, fifty, and a couple of one-hundred dollar bills wrapped with a rubber band. I figured there had to be eight or nine hundred dollars in there, not counting the loose change. You could OD on Starbucks with that much cash.

That was when I heard the first calls on the Bearcat scanner. It was a fire call to the Peterborough Fire Department. Then another. Finally came the calls for assistance from other police units in the area. More fire units. Campbell County, Westchester, Dalton, and even Columbus. County and state cops, too. I was at least five miles away now, heading west and south, so I doubted I'd run into any of them. However, with all those flashing lights and sirens racing around out there, I had to be even more careful.

First, I had to ditch the police cruiser. Maybe I could steal a car or a pick-up truck from one of the farms I passed. However, country people usually had big dogs and shotguns, and what would that gain me? They'd see it was gone all too soon, and when they saw the brown sheriff's cruiser nearby, they'd immediately come looking for the new car. No, it would be better to dump the sheriff's car in a built-up area of Columbus, out at some suburban shopping mall, or maybe at a truck stop on the Interstate. Then what? Hitch a ride? Maybe a bus or airplane? Somehow, I needed to push east toward Boston.

Doug was the owner of a growing business there. He was established. He was somebody. Once I got out of this hick town and out of this hick state, even if nobody believed me here, in Boston they'd have to listen to Doug. Not that I wanted to drag him into this thing; I had already gotten three people killed and I didn't want to add a friend to the list, but I was out of options. Besides, Tinkerton already knew about Doug. What was it he said? Doug was a "loose end," something he would take care of "later." It looked like I had gotten Doug involved, and I had to warn him.

What other choice was there? Head back to LA? They might not be expecting that, but it was a long way to go. Maybe I should try something closer, like Detroit, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, or even Indianapolis. They were only a few hours away and big enough for me to get lost in for a while. Not a bad choice, all things considered.

One of my favorite math classes in college was “Non-Linear Dynamics”, more popularly known as the theory of random events and regular chaos. What it said was that the best pattern was no pattern at all. If you want to remain unpredictable in a mathematical sense, then always do the illogical and the totally unexpected. Yeah, that was what I needed if I wanted to stay free—a little unpredictability and a dose of regular chaos to jam into Ralph Tinkerton's spokes.

It did beg the question. What was I doing trying to outrun the police in the first place? I hadn't done anything wrong. Those guys had kidnapped me, drugged me, and would have killed me if I hadn't broken free. True, a couple of people died and a funeral home was totaled, but none of that was my fault. It was Tinkerton's. Maybe I shouldn't shy away from the police at all. Maybe I should do exactly what I told Varner I was going to do: take it to the State Police, lay the whole thing in front of them and let them sort it out. That was my best choice, no doubt about it, provided I got rid of Dannmeyer's car. If they caught me in it, I'd never get a chance to explain anything.

That was when I heard the second set of radio calls. “All units, an APB has been issued for a brown Campbell County sheriff's cruiser, license plate DEL-O23. Observe and report. Do not attempt to apprehend. The driver is an escaped mental patient wanted in the disappearance of Sheriff Virgil Dannmeyer. Suspect is believed to be armed and dangerous. Repeat. Armed and Dangerous. Observe and report only. Do not apprehend.”

“Escaped mental patient?” Nice touch, Ralph. “Observe and report?” To whom? Ralph Tinkerton, Esq.? You bastard! Too bad Ernie didn't hit you harder. It had to be him. The more I thought about it, the more I knew I had it figured all wrong. They couldn't have found Dannmeyer's body so soon, but Tinkerton saw me drive away. Maybe old Ralph was trying a new angle to box me in. Very clever. Label me as a psycho who kidnapped a county sheriff. Soon it would be “cop killer” and there would be no hope of turning myself in. Every cop in Ohio knew that was cop-speak for “shoot on sight for resisting arrest.”

There were two highway maps in the glove compartment. One was for Greater Columbus and the other was for the State of Ohio. I turned on the dome light and unfolded the Ohio map. Ditching the car way down in the city was out. There was too little traffic at this hour and the sheriff's car would stand out. Where then? Leave it at a truck stop on the Interstate and hitch a ride out of town? No, too exposed, and a dead give away that I'd left town that way. My best bet was to dump it near office building or a shopping center near the Interstate. That would leave Tinkerton with a whole lot more guesses than answers.

I looked at the map more closely. I wasn't sure which road I was on, but if I kept driving west it looked like I'd hit Route 42 fairly soon. I could take that south to Route 33 and back into Columbus. I remembered from my earlier trips that the expressway interchanges were full of shopping centers and big office and

warehouse buildings. Maybe I could ditch the car and find a friendly trucker or thumb a ride out of town. Yeah, that was my best shot.

Then I heard the third radio call. Short, sweet, and to the point, it made my blood run cold to hear the pleasant female dispatcher say, "Mister Talbott, we would appreciate it if you'd call the office. You can pick up the microphone hanging on the dashboard and push the little red button, or you could get out of the car and use a pay phone. No big deal, someone here would like to talk to you before things get any further out of hand."

To anyone else who happened to be listening, it sounded like she was calling the typewriter repairman or the plumber, but she wasn't. She was calling me. I pictured the hulking frame of Ralph Tinkerton standing behind her, breathing down her neck as he listened. That meant that Tinkerton wanted to keep this whole business quiet, and that meant something. But me talk to Ralph Tinkerton? Go in and give myself up? After the embalming table and the scalpel, that didn't sound too appealing, so I ignored the radio call and pushed the pedal to the metal. The next time I talked to old Ralph, it was going to be on my terms, not his.

In two minutes, I was on Route 33 headed south toward the bright lights of Columbus. It had four lanes and it carried me across the I-270 Beltway and down into the northwest suburbs. The first big intersection I came to was Longacre Boulevard. It had large strip centers on all four corners, complete with fast food restaurants and big box stores further down the street. The stores were mostly closed at this hour, but I drove into the first strip center on my right. It had a large food store and bowling alley and it backed up to a wooded hill. Perfect, I thought as I continued around back and saw a dark spot between the food store's dumpster and the trees where the sheriff's car couldn't be seen from the highway or the parking lot. The stores would open up at 9:00 or 10:00 in the morning and the workers might arrive a half-hour before. So, if there were no cops or security guards checking the parking lot, and if I was very lucky, Dannmeyer's car might sit here all night without being noticed.

I found a rag under the front seat and ran it over the steering wheel, the dashboard, the door, the maps, and anything else I could remember touching. I scooped up the big wad of bills from the sheriff's coffee fund, jammed it into my pocket, and got out of the car. The trunk was the only place I hadn't looked. I popped the hood. In the dim light, I saw a spare tire and jack, a metal evidence storage box, a first aid kit, and a garment bag. The evidence box had a hasp with a big combination lock. No hope there. In the garment bag were a blue nylon windbreaker and a softball uniform with Yankee pinstripes with "Kiwanis Knights" lettered across the back and #10 on the front of the shirt. I unzipped the garment bag and found a sports coat and slacks on hangers. I stripped off my shirt, opened the first aid kit, and taped two of the big gauze pads over the scalpel cut. That should hold for a while. I put on Dannmeyer's baseball shirt and windbreaker. They were a tad big for me, but at least they were clean. They would do.

Underneath the clothes lay a long, brushed aluminum gun case. Out of curiosity, I opened it. Inside, there was a place for the hunting rifle and the shotgun and several other cut-outs for handguns, two of which were occupied. I looked at the handguns. Should I take one? No. If it came to guns, I was a dead

man anyway and I didn't want to give Tinkerton an excuse, so I closed the case and pushed it back in the trunk.

That was when I noticed an old-fashioned "Jimmy" bar lying in the corner of the trunk. It was a piece of thin spring steel with a handle, designed to slide down a car window until you could pop open a door lock. Most cop cars carried them, because there were often some very legitimate reasons for a cop to open a car door. Maybe someone had lost his keys. Maybe a kid got himself locked inside. Maybe the cops needed to move a car fast or to tow it because of some emergency. Whatever, that's why you usually see a Jimmy in the trunk of a cop car.

That was when it dawned on me that I had the perfect use for one. I needed some wheels that would get me out of Columbus without being immediately ID'd and caught. My Bronco was dead. A cab or bus? Too easy to trace and the odds of my catching either one out here at this hour were zilch. The bus station? The train station? The airport? Too obvious. Tinkerton would have people watching those. Hitchhiking might work, but it would also leave me too visible and too vulnerable. No, what I needed was a car. Stealing one might also work, but that was only a short-term solution and it would inevitably add to my problems. The only car I could think of that no one else was laying claim to at the moment was the Buick my illegitimate twin brother, "Pete" left parked under that oak tree on Sickles. With the Jimmy, I could get inside. If I could get it started, I could get well away from Columbus without constantly looking over my shoulder. Now, all I had to do was figure out how to get there.

Chapter 12

Give the man a cigar...

Walking alone down a major commercial boulevard in the middle of the night dressed in Dannmeyer's baseball shirt and windbreaker made me fair game for every suburban cop who happened to be out on patrol, not that I had much choice. I put my feet in gear and set off around the far side of the shopping center, walking south through the parking lot to Longacre Boulevard, the next main street, putting as much distance as I could between the Campbell County sheriff's car and myself. Longacre appeared to be an unbroken string of strip shopping centers, big-box stores, big electronic stores, big sporting goods stores, and big banks, but there was very little traffic at this hour. When an occasional car did come by, I'd stick out my thumb and put on my friendliest smile. After all, I didn't look like a total derelict and this wasn't LA. Folks don't drive down the road with one hand on the wheel and the other on a .357 Magnum, waiting for some sucker to smile wrong or tell them to have a nice day. Even still, the few drivers that passed by looked away and ignored me.

My prospects were looking grim until a fat guy on a Honda Gold Wing motorcycle swung over to the curb and stopped next to me. His arms were as thick as hams and he wore a leather Viking helmet with two twelve-inch, black-and-

white cow horns poking out the sides. His chinstrap was a bicycle chain. He wore a stonewashed, denim vest, and his bushy, gray beard stuck out the sides of his black, Plexiglas visor like a hairy halo. He gave me a quick once-over and pointed over his shoulder to the bike's padded rear fender.

"You want a ride bad enough, hop on," he said in a hoarse, gravelly voice.

It was a scary thought. I couldn't see his eyes through the dark visor, but my choice was Hagar the Horrible and his motorcycle or nothing. I threw my leg over the rear seat and grabbed onto his denim vest, not waiting for a second invitation.

"Mind the glittery stuff back there, now," he warned.

I looked down and saw the hand-painted face of Elvis Presley staring at me from the back of the blue denim vest, complete with rhinestones and silver glitter. It was The King all right—the Las Vegas stage shot with the white jumpsuit and the dancing fringe. Elvis was humping the microphone, his right arm thrust upward in mid-wiggle, and his black hair falling in his eyes.

"Got it at Graceland as part of the King's Sixtieth Birthday Commemorative Package," he announced proudly. "She's a real collector's item now, you know."

"I'll bet," I said, de-gripping the vest and shifting my hands to the seat frame.

"Where you going?" he asked.

"Sedgwick. It's a residential street east of Sickles, maybe 3000 north."

Hagar nodded. "We'll find it."

"You're a real lifesaver, man. I really appreciate it."

"No problem. The name's Morrie, by the way," he said as he threw a big paw over his right shoulder.

"Mine's Pete," I answered as we shook hands. "But I thought you bikers always used names like Ax Handle, or Eric the Red, or something like that?"

"Biker? Me? I'm an internal auditor with the State Treasurer's office. My wife hates the bike," he said as he fondly patted the gas tank of the Honda. "If I don't sneak it out of the garage once or twice a week and blow the carbon out of the pipes—mine and the bike's—I'd go nuts."

Ah, the sweet taste of freedom, I almost said, but I didn't want to walk. "So, you're just cruising around town?"

"Going everywhere and nowhere," he grinned, as he roared off down the deserted street and I felt the wind whip my face.

This was great, I thought, but Morrie had asked me a good question. Where was I going? By morning, my face would be plastered across the front page of every newspaper in the state with headlines that screamed out, cop killer, building wrecker, flag burner, child molester, litterer, and anything else Tinkerton could make up. They'd pin my picture to the targets on the police pistol range and take particular delight in punching me full of holes. Boston? LA? From the rear fender of Morrie's Gold Wing, they might as well be on the dark side of the moon. What other choices did I have? Pay a house call on Jimmy Santorini's pals in New Jersey? Catch him on visitor's day over at Marion? Something told me I didn't want to play with them any more than I wanted to keep playing with Ralph Tinkerton or the Campbell County cops.

If I wanted to unravel their little plot, I had to find a loose end or two and start picking and pulling at them with everything I had. A loose end? What about the other obituaries? If there was a problem with mine, maybe there was a problem

with some of the others, too. Skeppington was from Atlanta, Pryor from Phoenix, and Brownstein was from Portland, Oregon. Those three might as well be LA, as far away as they were, but Edward J. Kasmarek was from Chicago. He was only thirty-two years old and Chicago was at least reachable for me. The guy must have family, friends, or drinking buddies up there who remembered him. Maybe I could get a copy of his Chicago Death Certificate and a copy of his obituary in the Chicago Tribune. Maybe I could find a photo, a high school or college yearbook, medical or dental records, something that would make his identification irrefutable. Yeah, the more I thought about it, the guy in Chicago was my best shot. Hell, he was probably my only shot.

We turned right on Sickles and roared south until I saw the sign for Sedgwick. Morrie geared down. "Which way on Sickles?" he asked.

"Right here's fine. You don't have to take me all the way."

"No sweat, I'll take it slow and we'll only wake up part of the neighborhood."

"Left, then," I smiled as Morrie turned the Gold Wing east on Sedgwick.

Two blocks down, we came to the big oak and I was relieved to see the Buick was still parked where it had been. "Right here," I told him and Morrie swung the big bike into the shadows. "Morrie, that was great," I said as I climbed off, slightly bowlegged, my back stiff and sore. "I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't come along."

"Hey, like I said, I was looking for any excuse to rumble off, "where no man has gone before," and you provided me with the perfect one." He waved farewell and the big bike drove away. As he passed through the glow of the next street light, I'd swear I saw the King's glittery eyes wink at me as he faded into the night.

The Buick was as dusty and leaf strewn as it had been the previous afternoon. I took a quick glance at the nearby houses. Except for the occasional porch light, they were all dark, so I pulled the Jimmy from my pants leg, where I had hidden it, and stepped to the driver's side door. I had no trouble slipping it between the window glass and the weather strip. Funny how breaking and entering, picking locks, slipping the latch on a window, and every other illegal trick and stunt in the book always looked so easy in the movies and so damned hard when you try to do it yourself. I shoved the bar down as far as it would go, but nothing happened. I pulled it halfway out worked it back and forth, trying again and again to find the lock mechanism. That didn't work any better, but I couldn't stand out here with a burglary tool fooling with this door much longer. Eventually a car would come by and I would have a real problem. I pulled the bar up and slid it up and down, starting at the doorframe and working my way forward. There! About twelve inches over, the bar hit something hard. I began working around the spot until I felt something give way. The door lock popped up and I was in.

When I opened the door, the dome light came on, so I slid in as quickly and closed the door behind me. I knew I had to hot-wire the car, but I'd never find the ignition, much less the right wires if I didn't take a couple of deep breaths and calm down. I popped the glove compartment and to my pleasant surprise, I found a flashlight. The batteries were almost dead, but they would do. I spun around in the seat and ducked under the steering column for a better look. Fortunately, this clunker was old school. I found the starter wire and the battery lead, touched them together, and the old Buick turned over. With some gas and a bit of coaxing,

it coughed and sputtered, but I got it started. I sat up, dropped it into drive and slowly pulled away from the curb.

Up ahead somewhere, I knew I would find a sign for or the I-270 Beltway. That would take me to I-70 and on to Indianapolis, where I could work my way north to Chicago. Once out of town, I needed desperately to get some food, ditch this Campbell County Kiwanis Club softball shirt, and get some new, clean clothes. After that, I intended to take a leisurely look around the Buick. The gray-haired harpy on Sedgwick said Old Pete called this his "getaway car." A curious phrase, I thought, making me wonder what he might have hidden inside.

I debated the best way to get out of the city and finally decided to backtrack along the route Morrie had driven, keeping the Buick below the speed limit and being careful to stop at every traffic light and stop sign, staying invisible. An hour and a half later, I passed beneath big white arch at the Ohio border and into the relative safety of Indiana. I wasn't out of the woods, not yet, but I was getting there. When I reached the outskirts of Indianapolis, I took the beltway around to I-65 and Chicago. About ten miles up the road, I saw the sign for a big 24-hour truck stop called Uncle Ike's. It had a truck repair shop, gas, food, and a general store—everything a harried long-haul trucker might need on a lonely road.

I ate two large cheeseburger platters and drank a full pot of coffee, then wandered through the store and picked out a red-and green plaid shirt, a pair of stone-washed blue jeans, a leather belt with a silver Colorado Centennial belt buckle, a small shaving kit, and a baseball hat that advertised Briggs and Stratton power mowers. For a California boy trying to pass as a long-haul truck driver, I figured that was as good as it got.

I slipped into the restroom to change and got a good look at myself in the mirror. The way I looked, it was a wonder they even served me breakfast. I had nasty black-and-blue rings around my wrists and across my thighs from fighting the straps on the embalming table, and my right side and shoulder got some large purple and green bruises when the ambulance hit the funeral home's front wall. The slice from Tinkerton's scalpel had finally stopped bleeding, but I tucked a half-dozen paper towels under my belt just in case and threw my old clothes into the dumpster on the way out.

Time to search the Buick. I drove it around to the rear side of the lot behind several rows of trucks and parked under a tall light pole. I started with the glove compartment. Inside, I found an old owner's manual, as dirty and abused as the car itself, and a big pile of crumpled MasterCard gas receipts. The name on all the charges was Peter Talbott. He was using the Sedgwick address and a scribbled signature that didn't look anything like mine. In the very back, I found three wrinkled road maps, from New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. There was an Ohio DMV registration card for the Buick with the Talbott name and same address. Other than that, all I found was a stick of stale gum, a handful of loose change, and an almost-dead flashlight.

I got out and popped open the trunk. Slim pickings there too: a nearly-flat spare tire, a rusty jack, and a box of road flares that were probably too old and too wet to light. I felt around inside, under the insulation, inside the spare tire, under the carpet, and along the sides. Nothing. But there had to be something in the Buick. There had to be. I went around front, popped the hood, and examined every inch

of the engine compartment with the dying flashlight. I unscrewed the air cleaner cover. Nothing inside but a very dirty filter. I felt inside every nook and cranny where something might be hidden. Still, nothing. I closed the hood and felt around inside all the wheel wells. Other than getting my hands filthy, I found nothing there either.

That only left the passenger compartment. I started with the back seat and went through the trash. Carefully, piece by piece, I picked up each section of newspaper, each coke can, and each candy bar wrapper, felt them, looked inside them, tore them apart, and stacked each piece on the ground outside. Nothing. I felt under the front seat. With the flashlight, I rolled over and looked underneath the seats to see if anything was wedged up in the springs or in the seat mechanism. Nope. I sat up, frustrated. I knew I was smarter than this guy. There was no question he hid something inside, but there were only so many places left where he could have put it. Slowly and methodically, I felt my way across the front and rear seat cushions looking at each seam, but there were no bulges, no cuts, and no re-sewing.

Finally, I looked at the padded door panels. Like most cars, they were fastened to the doorframe with plastic clips. I got the flashlight up close and worked my way around the edge of each panel, looking for any scratches or signs it had been pried off. I started with the driver's side front, then went to the passenger's side front, and on to the passenger side rear before I finally saw something. Along the top edge, the painted metal doorframe bore the unmistakable signs of having had been scratched. I didn't care about leaving more marks, so I wedged the Jimmy under the panel and popped it off. Sure enough, I saw what appeared to be a cigar box duct-taped to the inside of the door.

I ripped it loose and leaned back in the seat with a huge grin on my face. The box said White Owl cigars. Figured. That was about as cheap of a brand as you could buy, and I could picture 'Pete' with a White Owl in one hand and Racing Forum in the other, leaning back in his desk chair in that dumpy accounting office on Sickles. Inside the box lay a dirty business-size #10 envelope with a rubber band wrapped tightly around it. Inside the box was a New Jersey Driver's License in the name of George Deevers. The photo was of a fat man with thinning hair and round cheeks. DMV photos anywhere were notoriously out of focus, but this guy bore a striking resemblance to one of the photos I saw in the public library yesterday morning. I tried to remember which one, then it suddenly came to me. It was Louie Panozzo, Jimmy Santorini's bean counter who ratted him out and put him in the Federal pen in Marion. That answered a lot of questions. I stuck the driver's license in my pocket. I could say I had lost a hundred pounds working out with Fergie at Weight Watchers. After all, when you have no papers, even a bad ID is better than no ID at all.

In the envelope, I also found a New Jersey insurance certificate in George Deevers' name, a Visa card, and \$2,500 in cash. So you *did* have an escape plan, eh, *Pete*? In the bottom of the box, under the money, I saw three small computer flash drives and knew I had just hit the Power Ball Lottery.

A flash drive is smaller than a lipstick tube and the latest in data storage devices: cheap and very easy to use. Even one could hold an unbelievable amount of data—reports, spreadsheets, data files, photos, whatever you might want. The

top one had a black “#1” written on it in Magic Marker. The others were similarly labeled “#2” and “#3.” You had to give bean counters high marks originality, but other than the three numbers, there were no other markings or hints as to what they contained. Louie had been a Mafia accountant, and I'd bet the farm these were copies of the financial records of the Santorini crime Family in New Jersey. No doubt, they were what Tinkerton had been trying to pry out of me on the embalming table, and what he had tried to pry out of the other 'Pete', and that had made my life a whole lot more interesting and a whole lot more dangerous.

Chapter 13

Indiana: Get thee behind me, Satan...

Uncle Ike's parking lot was the size of several football fields. Seventy or eighty 18-wheelers were parked three-deep, filling the lot, plus twenty more sitting around the perimeter and out on the exit road leading back to the Interstate. Most were big, fully equipped, over the road rigs. Like the pioneers out west who circled their wagons in Indian country, they used these big truck stops to keep an eye out for each other at night. Having them all in one place was a whole lot more efficient for the hookers, fences, bookies, and drug dealers. If there was strength in numbers, there were discounts for volume, too.

I started at the exit, figuring I'd catch the ones leaving early and work my way back. Four big rigs rolled past me, but they didn't stop despite a thumb and my best smile. I walked back up the ramp, but the first three I passed that were parked were dark. Their drivers must be asleep. The next guy was awake, but that guy completely ignored me. The one after that at least leaned out and asked where I was going. When I said Chicago, he said, “Sorry, I'm peeling off on I-80 and going west.”

With the fifth truck, I got a break. The driver of, a big White long-haul rig, motioned me over for a closer look. “We ain't supposed to pick nobody up,” he said.

“I know, but I really need a ride.”

“Yeah, you look like you do,” he said as he eyed me up and down. “Okay, hop in, son,” he pointed at the passenger side door. I didn't wait. I ran around and climbed up before he could change his mind. Even in the dim light from the dashboard, I could see he was a big man, maybe in his late-fifties, with muscular forearms from wrestling with steering wheels for too many years to think about. He wore a plaid, flannel shirt like I did, with his sleeves rolled up to his elbows. Under the shirt, I saw a set of long johns, which I suspected he wore summer, winter, spring, and fall, along with the pointy-toed, snakeskin cowboy boots and the greasy Boston Red Socks baseball cap. With a beer gut that hung out over his belt, he was a classic.

“I'm George, George Deevers,” I told him.

"Marty Sims," he answered as he dropped the big White into gear and steered it down the long ramp toward the Interstate.

I looked around the cab, surprised at how spacious it was. It even had a built-in sleeping compartment up behind the front seats. "This is nice in here, Marty. You could almost rent out rooms."

"Yeah, but when you're in here all day long except for meals, for maybe a couple of weeks on-end, it don't seem big at all." He looked over and studied me for a moment. "Where you goin', Son?"

"There's a wedding in Chicago I've got to be at."

"Yeah? Looks like you're travelin' light. No suitcase? No bag? I had to do that myself a couple of times, travel light and fast, and staying one step ahead of the cops."

"You were a bad guy, Marty?"

"I wouldn't say bad exactly, but I shot a man once."

I didn't quite know how to respond to that, so I didn't try. I sat back in the seat and tried to relax as the truck picked up speed. The cab was plush, with nice seats, all leather, and a laptop computer and a CB radio on brackets fastened to the dashboard.

"A laptop?" I asked. "You've got to be kidding. "

"A driver's worst problem used to be a bad disk in his back or hemorrhoids. Now it's a bad disk in his computer and viruses in his e-mail. Most truck stops have Wi-Fi now and our "paper work" is all electronic. I have to check in every night to get new pick-up orders, routings, bills of lading, all the rest of that crap."

"And a CB? What's happening out there?" I asked.

"Not much. A couple of accidents, some come-ons from the hookers back in Indy, and warnings about where the bears got their radar set up. The usual stuff."

"The usual stuff, huh?" I said, relieved.

"Now, there was a lot of commotion about two or three hours ago back in Ohio. Some sheriff went missing up in Campbell County, north of Columbus. Him and his car."

"No kidding?"

"Name was Dannmeyer, and all the little bears are tearing up the woods trying to find Papa." I saw a sly grin cross his lips. "Funny thing, at least a half-dozen truckers called in sayin' they'd go the bail for whoever it was put that big prick down."

"Really! A hard ass, huh?"

"Last year he beat up a couple of truckers in that cracker-box jail of his. Word is he does even worse to women."

"Maybe he got what he had coming."

"You know, maybe he did. Maybe he did, at that." Marty said with a twinkle in his eye as he looked across at me again.

I leaned back in the seat and relaxed. After all the stressful things that had happened to me that day, we weren't on the road for five more minutes before I fell asleep in the corner, slumped against the door. As I faded into that floating world of half-sleep and half-dreams, I saw Terri's face hanging in front of me, all hazy and ephemeral. I wanted to reach out and touch her, but my arms wouldn't quite reach that far. Finally, I dropped into a deep, black well of sleep and I felt her wrap

herself around me like a thin, protective haze. Terri. It was strangely comforting to know she was there with me like that. I only wished she would learn how to talk. It would make figuring her out a whole lot easier.

I felt the truck stop and awoke with a start. We were in another big parking lot with dozens of other trucks. "Where are we?" I asked.

"A truck stop near Portage, maybe a half hour south of the turnoff to Chicago. I'm getting' some coffee. You want some, George?"

I reached in my pocket and handed him one of Dannmeyer's twenty-dollar bills. "Here, my treat. The coffee's all I need, but if you're going, bring us back a box of donuts. And would you mind if I use your computer for a few minutes?" I asked as I pulled the three flash drives from inside my pants pocket.

"No problem. Looks like you know what you're doing with that thing, so as they say, *mi casa, es su casa, amigo.*"

A computer. I beamed as if I had run into an old, dear friend. The laptop was already booted-up, so I slipped Louie's drive #1 into the USB port. Immediately, "ACCESS DENIED" popped up on the screen. I let my fingers do the walking and tried the obvious things to open the disk's directory. Same result, "ACCESS DENIED." I tried "Run." I tried "Setup." I tried "Browse." I tried getting in through DOS and all the other little tricks I knew, but nothing worked. Same thing for the other two disks. Each one had a file encryption program in place.

Wanna play games, eh, Louie? I muttered to myself. Not to worry. You can run, but you can't hide, not from me, anyway, because I know just the kind of can opener that will pop these babies open.

The blue icon on the laptop showed that a Wi-Fi system was in range, so I clicked on it and quickly found myself out on line. I went to Google and typed in "Data Encryption Satan." I had used "Satan" many times before and it would open almost any data lock this side of the CIA or the National Security Agency, some more quickly than others, but it would find all the little back doors and wormholes. To download the program, I needed \$299, and I couldn't think of a better use for Louie Panozzo's "George Deevers" MasterCard. In less than a minute, I had Satan downloading to the laptop. I figured the credit card linked to some secret bank account that neither Tinkerton, the FBI, nor the mafia knew anything about it. Even if I was wrong, even if they had an alert out on the card, they would have a hell of a time tracing it to this truck and finding it before I got off in Chicago.

The download was finished when Marty opened the door and handed me four big chocolate covered donuts and a cup of hot coffee. "You all set, sport?" he asked.

"Good to go," I smiled at him. "If you don't mind, I'm going to keep playing with this thing for a few minutes."

"That's okay by me. Like I said, it looks like you ain't no stranger to a computer, so knock yourself out."

He put the big White in gear and drove off as I opened the "Satan" program and turned my attention to the first flash drive. From the program's start-up menu, I clicked the box for "Permanently De-Crypt All Files," and hit "Enter." Ten minutes later, the Directory opened in English and all the files were decrypted. I smiled again. Louie must have been using some simple, off-the-shelf encryption program.

That would probably be good enough for a New Jersey bean counter who wanted to keep the Gumbahs from snooping, but if Louie had been a real pro, it could have taken hours.

In the directory, I saw a list of thirty Excel spreadsheets. They included names like, "Bayonne Solid Waster Management," "Atlantic Tire and Recapping," "Villa Palazzo Restaurant," "Santucci Chevrolet," and the "Ramada Inn, Bayside" in the titles. I'll bet. The file dates on the directory were from 2002 through 2006. Below them were seven other directories. I saw, "Financial Statements," "Payables," "Receivables," and "Account Ledgers." Below that was, "Pay-Offs '01-06." In that happy instant, I knew exactly what I had. I was staring at the financial records of the Santorini Mob's business activities, right up to the point the Gumbas got busted. Some of those companies were undoubtedly illegal, but I could see their tentacles would reach out into dozens and dozens of otherwise legitimate 'front' businesses where they invested and laundered the money from their drugs, gambling, prostitution, and protection rackets. And "Payoffs." This was dynamite.

Louie, I've got you, you fat piece of shit. I've got you and I've finally have some leverage on Ralph McKinley Tinkerton, Esq., too. I have him by the short hairs.

I saved the de-crypted files, put in the second flash drive, and ran the "De-Crypt" routine again. He titled the spreadsheets in this one, "Rapier Imports." That list was shorter, but the individual spreadsheet files were much larger and layered. I had no idea what "Rapier Imports" was, but I suspected it was a big part of the Santorini Family empire. At the bottom of the list, I saw a directory titled "Deposits." I clicked on the title and saw a list with names like Grand Cayman, Geneva, Barbados, Bern, Lucerne, Basel, and Lichtenstein. Fantastic! I had a sneaking suspicion these were Santorini's offshore bank accounts.

I saved those too, and tried the third flash drive. This one was titled, "Amalgamated Construction and Building Products." It was laid out like the others, and there were other files like "Florida Portfolio," "South Carolina Land Deal," "Dallas Buildings," and Canada Oil Wells." That was all I needed to see. The Godfather had become a conglomerate. I saved those files too, deleted the "Satan" program from Marty's laptop, and sat back in the seat, grinning like the Cheshire cat.

"You okay, son?" Marty eyed me with some concern. "You hardly touched them donuts I got you."

"I will now," I said, taking a big mouthful of the first one, quickly devouring it and three others.

"Get what you wanted off the laptop?" he asked.

"Oh, yeah, I got that and a whole lot more." From being down and out and on the run, I felt a huge adrenaline rush. This was power, real power, if I could figure out how to use it. There was enough here to take down Ralph McKinley Tinkerton and the rest of them, and be positively bulletproof in the process.

I looked up and saw we were leaving I-65, getting on the long entrance ramp to the Chicago Skyway. That was where the rust belt of northwest Indiana met the southern extremities of the City of Chicago. We rode up and over a tall, six-lane bridge that spanned the Calumet River. From the top, I saw the city's magnificent skyline laying in an arc ahead of us like a picture postcard. I saw the Sears Tower,

the Hancock Building, and dozens of other skyscrapers in the clear, early-morning air twenty miles to the north.

"Where you want me to drop you?" the driver asked.

"Anywhere. I don't want to put you out; you've done enough already."

"You're not putting me out. There's no traffic yet anyway."

I pointed toward the big buildings. "Downtown, then. I can get a bus from there."

"Downtown it is," he smiled as we entered the city and rolled down the ramp to the Dan Ryan Expressway. Marty eased the big rig over into the Express Lanes. The Local Lanes were three lanes wide and the Express Lanes had another four. Next to us, running down the center of the big expressway was a big mass transit line.

"That's the El tracks," Marty said, pointing out his window. "They're named for the old elevated railway that used to loop around downtown."

It must carry a lot of people, I thought, because every half-mile or so a long, concrete station sat in the expressway median. It had a roof and a long flight of stairs coming down from the cross street up above. There were several dozen people standing on the platform waiting for the train. If Chicago was anything like LA, this was probably the safest time of the day. The pimps, drug dealers, and gang-bangers weren't early risers and never came out this early. The people who did were either very old or very young, mostly women, looking tired, expressionless, sullen, and all black.

On my side of the expressway lay block after block of dirty yellow, ten-story, brick apartment buildings standing like shoe boxes tipped on their sides. "That's the *projects*, the Robert Taylor Homes," Marty announced glumly. "It's gang country, no man's land, like Beirut or Baghdad. They don't make the six o'clock news, because the Chicago reporters are too chicken to go in there. So are the cops."

I looked closer. On the first two floors, all the windows had thick steel bars. On the higher floors, many windows were boarded-up and there were black smudges on the brick fascia above, where a fire must have gutted the apartment. The grounds were even more depressing. Trash lay up against the fences, the playground was little more than bare dirt, and the swing set had no swings. The chains made good weapons and no parent in their right mind would let kids play out there to begin with.

"Drive up State Street over there, you'll see fifteen year-olds with \$500 Starter Jackets, \$200 Nike's, Oakley sunglasses, cell phones, and a wad of green in their pants pockets the size of an apple, and every one of 'em are carryin'. They run the place, and it don't matter what color you are or they are; they're strictly equal opportunity thugs."

Marty turned off the Dan Ryan at 23rd street and cut over to Lake Shore Drive. We rolled past Soldier Field, the Aquarium and the City's other big museums, Grant Park, Buckingham Fountain, and the Yacht Basin, where the white masts of a thousand sailboats stood upright, ready for another day of fun on the Lake.

"Well, George," he said. "You wanted downtown, so downtown it is. I'll drop you off at Michigan and Randolph. That's about as downtown as it gets. From there, if you walk a block left, you can catch the El on Wabash, or you can walk east to the

Prudential Building. There's a big underground train station there where the Illinois Central, the South Shore, and a couple of other commuter trains come in."

Marty cut over to Michigan Avenue and we passed the Art Institute with its pair of bronze-green lions standing on all four feet, alert and on the prowl, guarding the front doors. I'm not sure what for, since the sidewalks were mostly empty at that hour.

"The next traffic light is Randolph," Marty said.

"Hey, thanks for everything."

"No problem," he said as he pulled over and we shook hands. "You helped keep me awake, so the pleasure's all mine. Go on, now, before the light changes. And you be real careful out there... George."

"I will, man. And thanks." I jumped down from the cab and waved good-bye. He drove away and I suddenly found myself alone again. In a big city like Chicago, that can be very depressing and a bit scary.

I patted my pockets and took a mental inventory of my meager possessions. I still had a fistful of cash from the Sheriff's Coffee Fund, the envelope from the Buick, a New Jersey driver's license with a photo that didn't look anything like me, and Louie Panozzo's three flash drives. I wasn't even sure I had my own name anymore, but what bothered me most was the utter loneliness I felt. To be fair, it had been building inside for months, but standing alone on that street corner, it was crushing the life out of me. I had no one to talk to or share my feelings with. Whether I cared to admit it or not, that wasn't my natural state and probably no one else's either.

Chapter 14

Chicago: on State Street, that great street...

Other than some movies and TV shows, I didn't know a lot about Chicago. I figured the best place to start my hunt for Edward J. Kasmarek was in a city telephone book. Marty said there was a train station under the Prudential Building, and that seemed as good of a place as any to find a phone booth. As I entered the brightly lit waiting room, it was still early and they hadn't roused out the last of the bums and hookers. They would be called *the habitationally disadvantaged* and *the alternatively employed* in a more politically correct city like L.A., where they probably wouldn't be roused at all.

There was a big, round clock on the far wall that showed it was 6:45. The ticket booths lined the near wall and a bank of telephone booths were on the opposite side. As I walked across the room, I saw two glassy-eyed hookers sizing me up. One was young and white, with dull, dishwater blonde hair and too much baby fat. She looked to be one Greyhound bus ride out of Kentucky. The other was black and lean, with a short, red party dress and the half-closed eyes of a young, but very old pro. When I did not respond, her eyes went dead again. I had to smile as I remembered the Carl Sandburg poem they drilled into our heads about

another, earlier Chicago, "They tell me you are wicked and I believe them, for I have seen your painted women under the gas lamps, luring the farm boys." Well, I didn't see any gas lamps or farm boys down here, and I preferred to start my mornings with Starbucks, but the custom could be different in the Midwest.

I dug into my pocket and even with the change I'd gotten at Uncle Ike's, I only had five quarters and that wouldn't get me very far on a pay phone these days. I could ask one of the hookers to break a buck, but that didn't seem like a good idea. Most of the ticket booths were empty. The agent in the middle one appeared half-asleep, leaning on one elbow as he read the day's Racing Form so I pushed three one-dollar bills under his window. He wasn't happy about being disturbed, but he pushed three stacks of quarters back at me and went back to the ponies.

The phone was missing in the first booth I tried. I looked in four others before I found one where the phone worked and most of the thick Chicago phone book was there. Opening it to the Ks, I found almost a column of KaZmareks, but only a couple of inches of KaSmareks. The clerks at Ellis Island had to have been the original Beta Test group for "Spelling by Phonics." Edward J. Kasmarek's name was ninth on the list. I dropped in two quarters and dialed his number. I heard a couple of clicks and, "We're sorry, but the number you have dialed is no longer in service in Area Code 312." That told me Edward J. had probably lived alone, or at least he had no wife or immediate family still living there, which confirmed the obituary. Not bad for my first call, and I even got my quarters back.

I looked at the address: 3182 North California. I turned to the city map at the front of the phone book and saw it was on the near north side. Apples usually don't drop too far from the tree and people usually don't move far from their old, familiar haunts. I went back to the Kasmareks, dropped the quarters back in the phone, and tried Alice and Rupert, the first names on the list. Midwesterners were supposed to be the hard-working "salt of the earth." At 7:00 AM, I figured they'd give me a straight answer just to get me the hell off their telephone.

The phone rang and rang, but I never did get an answer. As I worked my way down, I got another "We're sorry...", some no answers, an irritated, half-awake, "Who?", and one, "You mean that boy of Karl and Lurleen? Haven't seen them in years, him either... No, no I ain't got no idea."

This was not going as well as I had hoped. With my next quarters however, I got a woman on the other end of the line who was willing to talk.

"Who? Oh, you mean Little Eddie. Let's see, last time I seen him he was working at the service department of Fishinger's Chrysler up in Lincolnwood, not that it matters much now, 'cause he's dead."

"Yeah, I know. Look, I'm with Acme Mutual Life and there's an old insurance policy he took out. I really need to find his family or next of kin."

"Next of kin? Well, his folks is both dead, died a few years back. He was an only child, you know, so..."

"Isn't there anybody?"

"Well, you could try that little Wop girl he married, Sandy what's her name."

"Little Eddie was married?"

"Some might call it that, but the way I heard it, she tossed him out on his butt long before they got divorced. Of course she never did get along with the Kasmareks."

"And her name's Sandy?"

"Yeah, she's I-talian, and as hot-tempered as a scalded cat, but what do I know. I'm an in-law myself. All them Kasmareks came from Budowicze back in the old country, and everybody knows what shits them people are."

"Little Eddie too?" I asked.

"Oh, especially that Little Eddie. For all I know, she was the one who shot him."

"Shot him?"

"Yep, a real mess. He got himself shot in the parking lot of a bar in Old Town a while back, but I didn't see nuthin' in the papers about her getting arrested for it."

I hung up and looked down at the phone book again. Yep, "salt of the earth." I didn't see any Sandra Kasmarek on the list, but toward the bottom there was a listing for S. A. Kasmarek, Photographer, at 1412 N. Clark. I looked at the map again. Clark was a couple of streets over and the 1400 block was maybe mile and a half north of where I was standing. There was no hawk-eyed librarian watching this time, so I tore the map out, stuffed it in my pocket, and nodded farewell to the two hookers. They didn't even blink.

Up on the street, the early summer air was crisp and the sky a clear, high blue. I walked north on Michigan Avenue crossing over the Chicago River to where the trendy stores were: Saks, Tiffany's, Gucci, FAO Schwarz, Bloomies, even Nieman Marcus. So much for the "city of big shoulders" and the "hog butcher of the world." If it wasn't for the lake and the Tribune Building, this could be Rodeo Drive or 5th Avenue. I turned west on Division, walked over to Clark, and swung north again. There was a wall of tall, trendy apartment buildings along the lakefront, but 1412 Clark wasn't one of them. Older and shorter, it had six floors of brick and glass, and being several blocks back from the lake made all the difference.

As nonchalantly as I could, I walked to the entrance. The outside door wasn't locked. I stepped into the tiny vestibule and quickly scanned the names on the mailboxes. There were twenty-four apartments, four per floor. S. A. Kasmarek's name was on 3-B. I tried the doorknob but the inner door wouldn't open. I peered into the first-floor hallway and saw apartment 1A was on the left and 1B next to it on the front. Satisfied, I went back out and walked back up the street. There was a small deli at the corner with a pay phone. I ordered a cup of coffee and a thick, gooey Danish and dialed Doug's direct line in the office in Boston. It was 7:45 AM here, which meant it was 8:45 there. Sharon answered.

"Hey, Sharon, it's Pete, is..."

"Jesus Christ, Petey! Where you been? Hang on a sec, I'll put him on."

It only took a minute before I heard, "Three people dead, including a sheriff, for Chris' sake! They said..."

"Who said?"

"The goddamned FBI, Pete! They called me in the middle of the night."

"Doug, that's all bullshit. I didn't kill anybody, I didn't hurt anybody, and I doubt the people who called you were FBI."

"Okay, okay, but where the hell are you?"

"On the road, on my way to Atlanta," I quickly ad-libbed. "But they probably have your phone tapped, so I don't want to say too much."

"Atlanta? My phone tapped? What did you get yourself into, man?"

"I can explain everything. I just need some time."

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Yeah, there is. Do you know any good criminal lawyers in Boston? I mean a *big* one with some heavy-duty political connections?"

"I'll find one."

"Good. I'll call you tonight, but you be careful."

"Me? You're telling me to be careful?"

"Yeah, and get some good techies to check the phones for bugs. Your house too, and be careful. These people are dangerous."

I hung up and stood there thinking. If Tinkerton had already contacted Doug, he'd already moved to shut off Boston. If he had, tossing in Atlanta was probably a good ruse. It might buy me some time, but if he truly did have unlimited resources and had already sent men to Chicago, then he was putting on a full-court press and I was in real trouble. I pulled out the page from the train station phone book. Time to try S. A. Kasmarek. On the sixth ring, I got an answer.

"Hi, is this Sandy Kasmarek?" I asked in a bubbly and friendly voice.

"Yeah, wuzzit?" I heard a thick, sleepy female voice at the other end of the line.

"My name's Talbott, Pete Talbott, and I need to talk to you."

"Yeah? 'Bout what?"

"About your former husband, Edward J. Kasmarek. It's very important."

Dead silence. "'Portant? 'Bout Eddie, huh? Lez see, it's what? Not even 8:00 in the goddamn morning? I was out on a shoot all night, got in bed about 3:00, and you got the balls to call me up and tell me you gotta talk to me about that dip shit Eddie?"

"Look, I'm really sorry, but..."

Click. She hung up. I gave her a few minutes to calm down before I dialed her number again.

"Did I catch you at a bad time?"

"Bad time?"

"I know..."

"You don't know squat."

"I can imagine how difficult it is for you."

"Difficult? Difficult!"

"I mean for you to talk about."

"Eddie? Difficult? That bastard is dead: D-E-A-D dead and buried, and the only thing I regret is that I didn't get a chance to pound a stake in his heart before they stuck his sorry ass in the ground."

"A real love muffin, huh?"

"Love muffin? It was bad enough I caught him in the sack with my best friend Annie. When I caught him with my own sister, I could a killed 'em both right then and there. When I caught him with Raoul, the waiter from the Happy Pancake in Old Town, well, that was it... But why the hell am I telling you all this? Who are you?"

"Talbott. Peter Talbott. And we really do need to talk."

"I don't think so."

"What if I told you I owed him money?"

"Then I'd *know* you're full of shit. Nobody ever owed Eddie Kasmarek a damned thing except trouble, 'cause that's all anybody ever got from him." Click.

This time, I didn't wait as long to call back.

"Mrs. Kasmarek, you are absolutely right," I confessed. "I was lying to get my foot in the door so I could see you."

"Why?"

"Because your life may be in danger. Mine already is, and if I'm right, they'll be coming after you next. So don't hang up on me again. Please."

"Why?"

"Because I'm out of quarters."

"No, dumb-ass. Why would somebody be after me?"

"When did Eddie die? His funeral? What was the date?"

"I don't know, I wasn't there. Last year. It was hot out. Maybe August?"

"Nope. They buried him in Columbus, Ohio, in February. And they buried me there two days ago."

"What are you talking about?"

"Five minutes. I can explain the whole thing. You name the place."

More silence. "I gotta be nuts to even talk to you."

"Anywhere. On Michigan Avenue, the Hancock Building..."

"All right. In front of the Water Tower. The park on the west side in a half hour. But what do you look like?"

"Me? I'm about 5' 8" and 200 pounds. I'm wearing a dark blue pinstriped suit, glasses, and a red striped tie. What about you?"

"Look for a tall, leggy blond in a pale-green business suit, carrying a brown leather attaché case. You can't miss me. But remember, I have a black belt and I'll have a .38 in my jacket pocket, so don't mess with me."

I walked back toward her building and found a spot up the street in a doorway where I could hide and watch her building. At 8:15, her curtains moved and I saw a haunting, pale-white face with large, dark eyes look out. She had short, black hair, styled fashionably "messy" with sprigs and clumps sticking out in every direction. Her only concessions to color were a big slash of cherry bomb red lipstick, a wide, bright-red watchband, and bright red nail polish. From the window, she glanced up and down the street, searching for someone or something, then she let the curtains drop back into place and she was gone.

Five minutes later, she came bouncing out the front door. A leggy blonde in a pastel business suit? Hardly. She couldn't be more than five feet tall, slim, and athletic. In the bright morning light, her black hair shone like a raven's wing. It hung down over her forehead and ended at a pair of dark, oversized sunglasses that completely hid her eyes. I smiled. Her "pale-green business suit and brown-leather attaché case" looked like a short, black-leather skirt, bold-patterned, gray hose, a frilly, white-silk blouse with a scoop neck and lots of lace, and a huge, black leather over-the-shoulder bag. Well, she got the leather part right. Considering my dark-blue, pinstripes suit and red striped tie had morphed into a plaid shirt, stonewashed jeans, and Briggs and Stratton hat, I figured we were about even.

When she hit the sidewalk, her head tracked back and forth like radar as she checked out the street, looking for something or someone. Finally, she gave up, pushed a shock of black hair out of her eyes, and set off speed walking south on Clark. If I had to guess, I'd say she was in her mid-twenties. The big, black-leather

shoulder bag she was carrying was big enough to pass for an overnight bag. Over her left shoulder hung a thirty-five millimeter camera with a long telephoto lens. Well, at least she wasn't bull shitting me about being a photographer. She had on a pair of old fashioned, black-and-white high-top Keds gym shoes. Like most big-city secretaries, she probably carried her dress shoes in the purse, but the rest of the clothes weren't exactly "going to the office" togs. What did she call it? A late night "shoot" at 3:00 AM? The clothes were too nice for the day shift at the train station, but I wondered what she really did do for a living, and who or what was it she was 'shooting' in the middle of the night.

As she walked away, her hips moved with a soft, supple, roll and I'd bet the farm she wore black-lace underwear. Probably a thong. Had to be, I thought, if she wore any at all. My God, I thought, terribly embarrassed. Had it really been that long? Maybe Sharon was right. If I ever got out of this thing alive, I really did need to see her friend Doris. Yeah, it had been that long. I turned my eyes up to the high, cerulean-blue, Chicago sky, relieved to see there were no clouds up there. There were no worried faces looking down at me, and no lightening bolts flashing out of the blue to fix my problem, permanently.

I hung back a half block on the opposite side of the street and watched as she continued south. She had no idea I was there, and in that outfit, she proved easy to follow. The streets began to fill with traffic and the sidewalks with fast-moving pedestrians, making it easy to blend in, even in my plaid shirt and Briggs and Stratton hat. She crossed Division and went south on State, and then swung up Rush Street. The restaurants, bars, and jazz clubs were probably a lot trendier at 8:45 at night than they were at 8:45 in the morning with the delivery trucks, trash, broken beer bottles, and puddles of puke in the gutters, but our girl knifed through it all and didn't look as if she cared. Like Tom Petty sang, she was an American girl—full of promises, and she didn't have time for the minor details like the street clutter or the strange man who was following her.

When she reached Chicago Avenue, she turned left and her pace slowed. Up ahead lay the Water Tower and a small park. She stepped back into a shadowy doorway on the opposite corner and braced herself against the wall. The camera with the telephoto lens dropped off her shoulder and she pushed the sunglasses to the top of her head. Those dark eyes darted back and forth across the park, but she didn't go any closer. She stayed on the south side of Chicago Avenue. Smart, real smart, I thought, as she quickly panned across the park, checking the place out. Apparently satisfied, she lowered the camera, looked at her watch, then stepped back further into the shadows. Was she waiting for me? Or, waiting for someone else? There was no way to tell, so I hung back and did the same.

It didn't take long. Two gray sedans with black-wall tires pulled over to the curb next to her. All the gray ones must have been on loan to Columbus, I figured, but anything that ugly had to be government. A goon in a dark suit and sunglasses got out of the passenger seat of the lead sedan. He glanced cautiously around, then walked over to where Ms. Kasmarek waited in the shadows. He wore a dark suit, a tie, and a white shirt with French cuffs, and gold cuff links. French cuffs and gold cuff links on a Fed? That didn't compute. He didn't look too happy as he joined her in the doorway, motioning toward his car as if he wanted her to get in. She shook

her head and wasn't having any of it. She put her hands on her hips and I could see enough of her face to tell the goon wasn't making a dent. I smiled.

The two sedans had small radio antennas on the trunks. More of Tinkerton's elves? How encouraging, they weren't even trying to hide any longer. The girl? Hard to tell whose side she was on. Obviously, my witty banter on the telephone hadn't made much of a first impression. Not only did she want to see me busted, she wanted the film rights too.

The two cars finally pulled away, leaving the head goon standing next to her in the doorway, still working on her. Was he protecting her or making sure she didn't get away? The lead car turned left onto Michigan Avenue and pulled over to the curb a half block down. The driver got out and took up position at the far corner of the park, his arms crossed, intently scanning the sidewalks, trying to look casual. The second car parked even further up the street in a No Parking zone on the other corner. One goon stayed with the car and the other one worked his way west, giving them a man at each of the square's four corners, each with a hand-held radio.

It was 9:00 now. Foot and car traffic was even thicker. Still, I didn't want to take any chances. I eased back from the corner and slipped into a coffee shop. From a booth along the windows, I could see enough of the doorway where the girl and the goon stood to know they were still waiting there. This could take a while, so I ordered some pancakes and coffee. No telling when I was going to eat again. As I watched, every now and then, telephoto lens peeked out and scanned the park. Too bad it wasn't raining. That would have served them both right.

They stood in the doorway until 9:40. That was when the girl must have decided I wasn't coming, because she stepped out onto the sidewalk followed by the head goon. They were arguing. The other three goons got in their cars, circled back around, and pulled up in front of them. The head goon must have had enough of her mouth, because he grabbed her by the elbow and tried to lead her firmly toward his sedan. That was a *really* bad idea. With a slow, graceful Judo move, she took his hand off her elbow and pivoted around, bending it back at the wrist before she tossed him head-first into the brick wall next to the doorway. His knees buckled and he sat down awkwardly on the sidewalk. I almost spilled my coffee, but she wasn't finished with him. She stood over him, hands on hips, telling him something he didn't want to hear, no doubt about his bad manners, then turned and walked quickly and confidently into the park. The head goon slowly got to his feet. He dusted off his slacks and adjusted his cuffs, but he didn't try to follow her. He got back in the lead car, slammed the door, and they all drove off.

I was still laughing as I tossed a ten-dollar bill on the table and hurried out of the restaurant, hoping I could catch up before she got too far away, because I still needed to talk to her. It wasn't until she caught a red light near the Hancock Building that I finally caught up. I slipped in behind and followed her, admiring the view of her and the buildings. Apparently, her mind was somewhere else, because she didn't even bother to look around, not once. For my part, I stopped twice and made a quick scan for government cars and sunglasses, but it appeared they were gone, for now at least.

When she reached the 990 Michigan Avenue Shops, one of those tall, big-city atrium shopping malls, she stepped into the revolving doors and went inside. I

stayed about fifty feet behind her, buried in the crowd as she rode the stainless steel escalator up. It hung suspended in space between the atrium's floors, zigzagging up, and leaving me very exposed. If anyone had been looking for me in there, I'd be trapped.

The girl got off on the fifth floor and walked to the door of what looked to be a small, but very exclusive art gallery. She pulled out a clunky set of keys from that big shoulder bag and opened the door. The name "Le Magnifique" was written across the window in a bold, gold swirl. She stepped inside, dropped the shoulder bag, the camera, the keys, and the sunglasses on a white and gold French provincial table that served as the receptionist's desk. When she turned around to lock the door, she found me standing in the open doorway with my best, warm, friendly smile.

Chapter 15

Of spreadsheets, shoe boxes, and Lil' Eddie...

She stopped in her tracks, eyeing me warily. "*Excusez moi*," she said with a bad French accent and a forced smile. "Ze store does not open until 10:00."

"For a 'tall, leggy blond in a pale-green business suit,' that's some disguise."

With the fastest set of hands I'd seen since Sugar Ray Leonard, she snatched an ornate gold letter opener off the table and dropped into a tight fighting stance, the long blade flashing back and forth in front of her.

I raised my hands in mock surrender. "Hey, you win. All I want to do is talk."

"Talk, huh?" she answered as the accent disappeared and the letter opener flashed past my nose.

"Whoa!" I stepped back and raised my hands higher. "Don't do that, please?"

"Please, my ass. Try anything and you're gonna to bleed."

"Whatever that guy told you, it's a lie."

She feinted with the letter opener and jumped three feet in the air in a spinning karate kick. I leaned back as the heel of her shoe narrowly missed my nose. In the process, I knocked over a tall, brocade armchair and she knocked over a Chinese table lamp.

"Keep that up and we'll total the place. Look, I'm not leaving until we talk."

She backed off and glared at me. The shock of black hair had fallen over her eyes again and she pushed it up and out of the way.

"What did they tell you?" I asked. "It must have been a beauty."

"That you're the North Side serial rapist they've been after: a sicko-pervert who preys on helpless young women."

"Helpless young women? That's funny," I said, looking at the sharp blade and the killer expression in her eyes.

"They said you've already killed three women, three that they know of."

"Jesus! And you believed that?"

"They were the FBI? Why shouldn't I?"

"For starters, if this really was a rape or murder case, it would be the Chicago PD knocking on your door, not the FBI. But why did you call them in the first place?"

"I didn't call them; they called me, right after you did."

"Then they have your phone tapped."

"The FBI? Tap my phone? Get real."

"Yours, my friend Doug's in Boston, his home and office, and probably everyone else I know."

She stared at me, wary, but a little less certain. "They told me they raided your apartment in Evanston and found my name and address on a slip of paper. They figured you were coming after me next, so they called to warn me."

"Convenient, but I don't have an apartment in Evanston. I got in town about three hours ago from Ohio."

"That's convenient, too."

I pointed at her camera. "What's with that? The big photo op? *Feds Grab North Side Rapist. Local Woman Sets Up Vicious Killer*. Is that why the goon in the sunglasses got all uppity? Your camera?"

"The goon in the sunglasses?" I saw a hint of a smile. "No, he kept insisting I go with them. I declined. He got pushy, but he won't do that again."

"Be careful with those guys. They can be nasty."

"So can I. And I'm *always* careful with guys."

So much for Midwestern hospitality, I thought. "I'll bet he didn't appreciate you taking pictures of them, did he?"

"That was one of his issues. I'm a stringer for some local papers and like I told that jerk, it's a living, it's mine, and it's not negotiable."

"Good for you. Even if there is a North Side rapist, I'm not him and they know it. If I had shown up, there wouldn't have been any story and you'd have never seen your film or your camera again. That is, if anybody ever saw you again, or saw me."

"What are you talking about?"

"Hi, my name's Peter Talbott. Hi, I'm Sandy Kasmarek," I said. "Pleased to meet you Peter. You too, Sandy. And now that we've been properly introduced, I'm tired." I picked up the armchair and sat down on it. "

"Great. Another fucking comedian."

"No, I'm a systems engineer. I do computer programming."

"Ah, *pardon*, a fucking rocket scientist. Me, I play third base for the Cubs, but today's an off day over at Wrigley, so I came in to sell some art... Gimme a break."

I stared at her. "I do mathematical paradigms and systems design."

"Yeah? Well take your pair-a-dimes downstairs and drop them in a fucking pay phone. Maybe somebody else will listen to your story, 'cause I'm not."

"Sandy, I came here because I need your help. I don't rape women, and I sure as hell haven't killed any."

"And I'm supposed to believe that because...?" she fired back, holding out her hand. "Let's see some ID."

"I don't have any ID. They took my wallet back in Columbus. I have some newspaper and magazine clippings, but they're going to take some explaining."

"Gee. Why doesn't that surprise me?"

"It's the truth. Look at me. I'm not even half-way good at lying and it took a real pro to dream this thing up."

"A real pro?"

"The goon with the bad manners and sunglasses you tangled with. His boss."

"The FBI? You're telling me they set this whole thing up, just to catch you?"

"They weren't FBI."

"I saw his badge and his ID, and that was a US Government sedan."

"Yeah? Then why didn't you get in the car with him, instead of tossing him into a brick wall? You knew he was bogus. The French cuffs and gold cuff links? Come on. If he was real, after you dented his head, why didn't he arrest you for assaulting a cop? You knew he was a phony."

She studied me a moment and I could see some of it was sinking in.

"Look, I stumbled into something back in Ohio." I leaned back in the chair and tried to look my least threatening. "I haven't figured it all out yet, but back in Ohio they're burying mob guys under other people's names, people who are already dead so no one will notice. When I got too close, they tried to kill me."

"Kill you? The government? You really are crazy."

"Am I? You told me Eddie died almost a year ago."

"Yeah," she answered warily.

"And he was buried here in Chicago?"

"Out by Park Forest."

I pulled out the wad of newspaper clippings and laid the one for Edward J. Kasmarek on the desk in front of her. "Here, read this," I told her, laying the clipping on her desk. She snatched it up and read it, then read it again. "That was in February. They used Eddie's name, but that wasn't Eddie and I know where the grave is. That's why I came here and tracked you down, because we're not the only ones."

"This is nuts."

I pulled out the ones for the Brownsteins, the Skeppingtons, and the Priors, and the ones for Terri and me, and I laid them on the desk. After she read them, I pulled out the three flash drives. "These belonged to a mob accountant named Louie Panozzo; I found them hidden in his car. They're the financial records of the New Jersey mob. He took them with him and I think it's what got him killed." I pulled out the George Deevers driver's license and showed her that too. "This is a phony ID he had, but that's his picture."

She looked at the ID and the three flash drives. She still wasn't sure, but she was listening. There was a thin-screen computer monitor sitting on her receptionist desk. "You've got a PC? Let me use it, I'll show you."

"You aren't going anywhere near it... or near me."

"Fine, fine," I put the first flash drive on her desk and plopped on the floor with my back to the door. "Is this safe enough for you? Go ahead and boot it up yourself. You do know how to use a computer don't you?"

"Yeah, I know how to use one, smart ass! I got my Associates in Photography, but I'm not stupid. I know some bookkeeping, too."

"Great. Put the drive in and bring up the directory."

She picked up the flash drive. "Remember, I still have this," she said as she showed me the letter opener again and slipped behind the desk. "If you're messing

with me, you're gonna hurt in places you didn't know could hurt." It took a few minutes, but before long, she was staring at the monitor, not at me, and I saw her fingers moving across the keyboard. "Okay, they're spreadsheets, general ledger accounts."

"Nice to see the Associate's wasn't wasted."

"Don't start with me," her eyes narrowed. It isn't good salesmanship, especially when you're the one with your ass against the door and I'm the one with something sharp."

"I think those are mob-owned businesses in New Jersey. They probably launder their money there and skim it back off the top."

"Jeez! There's even a spreadsheet here for "Payoffs." And what's this? Foreign bank accounts? Guess he wasn't worried about getting caught, was he?"

"He's dead. He's the guy they buried under my name."

"Did you get a look at the names on that Payoff list? I'm not a political junkie, but even I recognize some of them."

"Still think I'm crazy? There's a lawyer back in Columbus who's running the whole thing. The guys you met today work for him. And they have a doctor, a clinic, a funeral home, and their own cemetery. If I'm right, I know the names of nine people they buried back there, and there's probably more."

"Nine people? How could they get away with something like that? Think of all the paperwork: the death certificates, insurance, taxes, driver's licenses, Social Security. Nobody can do that."

"Sandy, they're the government. Waco? Ruby Ridge? Guantanamo? The CIA? The FBI? NSA? The Patriot Act? They can do anything they want."

"But nine people?"

"Four couples, husbands and wives, and single guy. He's the one they used Eddie's name for. See, they didn't know about you. They thought he was single."

"And what? You think they're after me now?"

"Well, I dropped some names on them – the New Jersey Capo and some of his hoods who are missing, a guy in Atlanta and his wife, a couple from Portland, a couple from Phoenix... and Eddie. Those are the names they buried the hoods under. I was trying to shake them up, that's why I mentioned their names... and Eddie's. Anyway, when I got away and headed for Chicago, they must have put two and two together and found out about you the same way I did. That's why they put a tap on your phone."

"You dumb bastard!" She jumped to her feet and pointed at the door. "I was doing just fine until you came along."

"No, no. They'd have figured it out sooner or later. Then you'd have quietly disappeared some night and never known what hit you."

She continued to stare at me, still angry. "Wait a minute, are you some kind of cop or spy or something?"

"No. All I did was go to the public library and looked back through the obituaries. It's all there in the newspapers, if you know what you're looking for. That's how I found the one for Eddie and decided to come to Chicago. I need to find some hard evidence that shows Eddie died here, not in Columbus. When I got in town a couple of hours ago, I started calling Kasmareks. That's how I tracked you down."

"Yeah? Well nobody was bothering me until you showed up."

"No, you were in danger long before that. But we're safe for the moment. They think I never showed up. And they don't think you know anything."

She looked across at me and shook her head, still trying to take it all in. "Okay, let's say all this stuff you're telling me is true. Why Eddie? Why would anybody pick a weasel like him?"

"He was the right age. No close relatives. And the timing and distance worked for their computer. Who knows? All they wanted was a general match."

"With what? Another shit head?"

"No," I laughed. "He was a nobody, that was the whole point, someone with no ties and no family who wouldn't be remembered. Look, if you want me out of here, I need a copy of Eddie's death certificate from Cook County, maybe his obituary from the Chicago papers or a copy of the insurance payoff. Do you have any of that stuff?"

"I wasn't keeping souvenirs."

"But you *do* have them?"

"Yeah, I have them." She relented. "They're in a shoe box on the top shelf of my closet. Nobody else would do it, so I got stuck closing out his "affairs." The bastard had "affairs" all right, with anything warm that would spread their legs for him."

"Sandy, I really am sorry to stir this all up for you. I know that under all that raw anger, you still hurt. I know."

"Yeah, well, the dumb jerk couldn't even die right." She looked at me and frowned. "And don't try to play me, Talbott. Been there, done that."

"Okay. But, the papers. Can we go over and get them? I can get some copies made and get out of town, and then you can pretend I was never here."

She stared at me for a moment, not comprehending. "What? You want me to go back to my apartment? Now ? With you? Au contraire." She shook her head.

"I'm at the end of my rope, Sandy."

"That's a good place for you to stay. I live up in Winnetka, there's no way..."

"Winnetka? You live at 1414 Clark."

She glared at me again, but all I could do was shrug, trying to look my most helpless. "I followed you this morning. I had to know which side you were on."

"What makes you think I'm on yours?"

"Look, pretty soon the guy in the sunglasses and his three pals will come walking through that door looking for you, so help me, please." It must have been my look of complete hopelessness, but something worked.

"Oh, man," she moaned. "I'm supposed to open up the shop in ten minutes. I'm up to twelve dollars an hour now and if Old Man Fantozzi docks me a day's pay, I'm really going to be pissed."

I pulled out Dannmeyer's coffee money, peeled off a one-hundred dollar bill, and laid it on the table. "That should buy me hour or two."

The expression on her face turned cold and angry as she shoved the money back across the table. "I don't know what you think I am, but I'm not for sale."

"Hey, I didn't mean anything," I quickly back peddled. "All I was doing was making sure this doesn't cost you anything, okay? And I apologize if you took it wrong, but I really do need your help."

She stared at me a while longer before she finally relented. "Okay, I'll get that stuff for you," she said. "I just can't believe I'm letting you drag me into this thing."

"I didn't, Eddie did."

"Men. You're all such bastards."

"Probably," I stood up. "But let's get out of here while we still can."

She picked up a pen and scribbled a quick note on a pad of paper on the desk. "That's for old man Fantozzi. I told him I'm out shopping with his wife."

"Won't he check?"

"Are you kidding? He got grabby in the storeroom last week and he knows if I say a word to his wife, she'd kill him." She looked over at me long and hard once again. "Just remember, if you're bullshitting me, you'll wish I was the FBI."

"With this honest face?" I gave her my best smile.

"Yeah, with your honest face and my total stupidity when it comes to guys, you figured me for an easy mark." She handed back the flash drive. "Well don't get cocky. You may be bigger than me, but I still have the letter opener and I really do have a black belt. Touch me and you'll be in traction."

"One more thing," I asked. "Call me Peter, okay?"

She gave me a long, hard look. "Don't fucking count on it," she said as she picked up her camera and her shoulder bag and headed for the door.

She walked next to me, but she kept her distance. When we reached the escalator, I stopped and stared down into the huge atrium. All I could see was the tops of the heads of as people walked around below. Too many heads. Too many dark suits, and I didn't like it. "Is there another way down?"

"Getting a little paranoid, Talbott?"

"Only when people are trying to kill me."

"We could take the elevators." She pointed to two high-speed, all-glass capsules that ran up and down the atrium wall. They were as exposed as the escalators. She looked around. "Or the service elevator around back. It'll take us down to the loading dock."

"Perfect," I said. It was around a corner, and it had solid walls and solid doors. "Besides," I pointed at her short black leather skirt and lacy white blouse. "You'd be pretty easy to spot in that outfit."

"Me?" her eyes flashed angrily. "You come in here dressed in plaid and old denim, like an ad for Cowboy Bob's Gay Bar in Arlington Heights, and you're giving me crap about *my* clothes?"

"I'm not giving you crap. It's lovely, bold, and very... distinctive."

The elevator arrived and the door opened. She got in and stood in the far corner with her back to the wall. "You know, Talbott, one good thing about you saying all those dumb things you've been saying, is that you've finally convinced me you couldn't be all that bad. Dumb? Yeah. But bad? I don't think so."

"Gee, thanks."

"And you lived in LA?" she asked. "Where? Under a rock?"

"I'm an engineer, Sandy. I work all day with computers."

She looked me over again, from head to toe more slowly this time. "And there's no female touch out there to help un-geek you? No wife? No girlfriend?"

"There was a wife," I answered. I looked away, but the elevator door was polished metal and there was no place to hide from her eyes. This was a

conversation I didn't want to have with anyone, least of all an attractive young woman I barely knew, but I had no choice. "Her name was Terri. That was her obituary. She died a year ago of cancer."

"Oh, Jeez, I'm sorry." I saw her raise her hand to her mouth, legitimately embarrassed. "Me and my big mouth. Well, if you knew me, you'd know I didn't mean anything. I mean, I know you don't know me, but if you really did know me, you'd know I was just joking around. Not that I want you to get... Oh, you know what I mean."

"Hey, it's okay, Sandy. You didn't say anything, honest."

"I did, but I didn't mean to. I know a little bit about pain, too. Maybe that's why I'm always joking around, until some big guy steps in and scares the snot out of me."

We rode the rest of the way down to the loading dock in silence. As we got out, I said, "Most of the people they buried were couples. They used my name and my wife's to bury the bean counter and his wife. That's what really pissed me off. They had no right to hi-jack her name and my memories of her like that. They're all I have left of her now."

She stopped and stared at me, her expression softening. "Must be nice. I mean to have memories of someone you care about, good ones, that mean something to you."

We walked outside through the service door. There were no gray sedans with black-wall tires and no goons in suits and sunglasses waiting for us, so we turned up the alley and headed north. She pulled a cell phone out of her purse and started pressing buttons.

"You better not use that thing. Tinkerton's people will be all over us in minutes."

"No cell? Jeez, I'll be lost," she whined, but she turned it off and dropped it in her shoulder bag. We continued west two blocks and then turned north before she spoke to me again. "Back there," she finally asked. "All that stuff you about your wife, that wasn't more of your bullshit, was it?"

"No, unfortunately it wasn't," I sighed. "Neither was the rest of it."

"Cause I'm a real sucker for stuff like that."

"I wish it was a story. But you lost somebody too,"

"Yeah, but you didn't want to lose yours. Me? If Raoul from the Happy Pancake hadn't shot Eddie first, I would have."

"Funny, one of the Kasmareks thought you did."

"That bunch of shits?"

"She said that too. I think she was another in-law. She called him "little Eddie."

"*Little* Eddie?" she chuckled. "That was *not* one of his problems... Sorry."

"If he was such a big jerk, why did you keep using the last name? It's been what? Almost a year now?"

"I suppose I could blame it on my photography business," she shrugged. "I had just put new ads in the phone book and I would have had to buy all new business cards. They don't come cheap, especially when I'm not making much money to begin with, but the truth is I couldn't deal with it, with any of it."

"Yeah, I know what that's like. I was frozen for months after Terri died. I couldn't even open her dresser drawers or look on her side of the closet, much less box up any of it up. I couldn't even touch her stuff." I looked over and saw her

staring at me with large, wondering eyes as if she was a kid on a field trip to the zoo and I was some strange specimen she found sitting in the back of a cage. "It took five months before I finally let a couple of her friends come over and clean everything out for me. All of it. If they hadn't, I'd still be sitting there in that house in California. I couldn't let her go."

She stopped in the middle of the sidewalk and looked over at me. "Why do I think you've never talked to anyone about this before? I'm right, aren't I?"

I shrugged as I walked away. "I don't know. I can't explain it."

"Then why are you telling me?"

"I'm not, it's just that you kept asking, and... maybe it's easier with a stranger."

She caught up and gave me that puzzled look again. "You are a really strange guy, Peter Talbott," she said, but this time the defensive wall and the hostility weren't there. She opened her mouth as if she was going to say more, then thought better of it and stopped.

When we reached Clark, I paused to look up and down her street. "Why don't we take the long way around," I told her.

"You think they're watching?" she said as she dropped her big sunglasses down over her eyes. "Then I shall go incognito."

Instead of the route we took that morning, we swung west two blocks, then north as far as Schiller, approaching Clark from the far end of her block. It was a nice walk, until we looked around the corner and saw a white sedan parked near her building with two men inside. Sandy's mouth dropped open as that reality sank home. We slipped back around the corner and backtracked a block. There was a narrow walkway that brought us back to the alley behind her building. Peeking around a fence, we saw the rear end of another government car.

"Still think I'm paranoid?" I asked.

"I don't believe this. Maybe I could sneak past them and go upstairs?"

"That's too risky. We can wait them out. When I don't show and you don't either, Tinkerton will pull them off." We walked back down the narrow passageway crossed the next street, and several others, and turned south again.

"Do you know some place we can hide for a while?" I asked.

"We? You mean 'we' as in the-two-of-us-we?"

"A couple of hours, that's all. Until they give up. A friend's? Maybe someone with a computer I can use, and a printer?"

She stopped and studied me through those dark sunglasses. She was hard to read, but I could tell she was deciding about a lot more than just a place to hide.

"I'm not making those cars up, am I?" I asked. "Or the goon with the gold cuff links and bad manners. You saw what was on that computer disk, Sandy: the spreadsheets, the books, the payoff lists, the Swiss bank accounts, all of that stuff. If we can print it out, we can blow this thing wide-open and get both of us off the hook."

"A rocket scientist, huh? And you know all about computers?" She shook her head, still skeptical. "I know I'm gonna hate myself in the morning, Talbott, and that won't be the first time, but okay. I'll trade you. My Aunt Penny has a condo over at Marina Towers. She's out of town, I have a key, and she has a computer. So, I'll take you over there for a while. You can take a look at the disks, then you're going to teach me that computer stuff."

"That computer stuff? I don't know how much time you've got, but it's a deal."

"One thing, though," she looked me over again. "That cowboy costume has got to go. Me and plaid do *not* get along."

Chapter 16

Billy Rae Bob sings in black-and-white...

Marina Towers wasn't far away, on State Street where it crosses the Chicago River. They were two round, contemporary residential towers that stood on the riverbank. They call them "salt and pepper," and they were trendy and expensive. The lower floors were a circular parking garage and I remembered an action flick where a car flew out of one of the towers and took a nosedive into the Chicago River. Her aunt's apartment was on the 10th floor. It was small, but nicely furnished and it had a great view. From the balcony, you could look out across downtown, the lakefront, and half the city.

"I take it your aunt isn't a Kasmarek."

"Oh, God, no, she's *my* aunt, a DePiero."

"Is she coming back soon?" I asked.

"She's in Spain for another month. She's single and I'm her favorite niece, so she lets me use it anytime I want. After the business with Eddie, I really needed to get away. This is where I came to hide."

Her aunt's PC was on a computer stand set against the wall. I went to check it out while Sandy opened the sliding glass door and stepped out on the balcony. She immediately took out her camera, raised it to her eye, and scanned the city. I had quick fingers on a computer keyboard, but hers looked to be just as talented and fast as she worked the lens and light stops, the camera clicking away. Her expression was intense and I felt like I was intruding on something very private and very personal.

While the computer booted up, I looked around. Hanging on the walls were eight large, framed, black-and-white photographs. Each was more interesting and visually stunning than the one before. Their focus was crisp. The lines and contrasts were sharp, some with soft shadows and hazy fade-outs. One was all composition—an eerily empty downtown street with a long pan down a line of storefronts. Another was the front steps of the Art Institute I passed in the truck, its lions standing tall and wet beneath a hazy rain. There was a shot of an empty Lake Michigan beach in the winter, close up, ice piled up, steam rising off the water, with the city's tall buildings in the distance. There was a shot at the zoo, with a line of animal cages, empty, their doors hanging open. Finally, an empty tropical beach with tall overhanging palms, spectacular clouds, and a mirror-smooth ocean. It too was done in black-and-white, not the familiar bright pastels.

Sandy stepped back in the room and saw me as I examined the photos. "You took these, didn't you?" I asked.

"My aunt is my biggest fan. She blew them up and had them framed."

"And I can see why. Nice contrasts. Powerful, very emotional, even moody, but just beneath the surface. Interesting stuff, vivid, and haunting."

"Wow! Think you can analyze me just like that, Talbott? Which is your favorite?"

"The beach."

"I'll get you a copy... if I ever see my darkroom again."

"I'd love one. I have a big airline poster hanging in my office right across from my desk. It's the beach at San Jose down near Cabo on the Baja. But it's in color."

"An airline poster? In color. I bet you got yourself stuffed in a lot of trashcans in high school, didn't you?"

"Baja's where Terri and I were going to go last spring."

"Jeez, I'm sorry. I did it again, didn't I?" She scrunched up her face. "I'm famous for my total lack of sensitivity."

"Maybe you put it all in your photos. You ever think of that?"

She gave me that curious look again and then smiled. "Thank you, that was nice."

I pulled a chair over and sat behind the computer. She came over and stood behind me, watching. That was as close as she had gotten since I walked into her store. Maybe I broke the ice. Maybe it gave her a better shot with the letter opener.

"You said you know some accounting," I asked.

"Well, I keep the books for Old Man Fantozzi—all three sets." Puzzled, I looked up at her and she added, "The ones for the IRS, the ones for his ex-wife, and the real ones. That's the other reason the old bastard won't fire me."

"You'll do fine," I laughed. "Why don't you make us some coffee while I print out some of this stuff. Maybe you can make sense out of the accounting."

As I was working, Sandy came back with two cups of coffee and picked up the first stack of paper off the printer. The makeup was gone and she had changed into a baggy sweat suit. She knew I was watching her as she flopped in a big leather chair, slung her leg over the armrest, and pulled a red felt tip pen from behind her ear.

"Something wrong?" she asked without looking up.

"No, no, you just surprised me, that's all."

"I'm full of surprises, Talbott."

I went back to the computer and the next thing I knew, shadows were cutting across the floor from the patio window. My watch showed it was 4:30 PM and Sandy was lying on the floor. There was a thick pile of printouts next to her and she was doing some very painful looking stretches, watching me intently the entire time.

"You're not going to break something doing that, are you?" I asked.

"You've been at that for five hours. You really get zoned-out on a computer, don't you?"

"Pretty much. You have a total lack of sensitivity and I have a total lack of awareness." I looked at her but she kept staring up at me, stretching, and staring. "What?" I asked, knowing I was being studied. "Am I that interesting?"

"Everyone needs a hobby," she quickly answered.

I looked down at the stack of papers. "Find anything interesting in the printouts?"

She picked up the top sheets. "Talk about your creative accounting. They own half of New Jersey—trash hauling, restaurants, car dealers, construction, and *all* the politicians. They got mega-bucks squirreled away in those foreign bank accounts and in some very complicated real estate deals. It would take years to unravel it all."

On the wall hung a flat-screen TV. She picked up the remote control and turned it on. "The local news should be on. I want to show you something." She flicked through the stations until she came to what looked like highlights from a congressional hearing in Washington. The hearing room was jammed with reporters and cameras, all focused on the tall, curved, elevated dais and on the witness table in the middle, covered with microphones. "That's the Hardin Commission," she said. "He's the good-looking guy in the middle and our Senator from Illinois, 'Tough Tim' they call him now. Great hair, capped teeth, and a tanning bed. Film at 6:00—the locals are eating it up."

"What are they talking about?" I asked.

She gave me that look again. "Organized Crime, you dolt. The mob."

"I thought that was last year."

"It was, but Hardin reconvened them last Monday," she told me. Why bother to read the "book" here, when we can watch the movie."

"His hearings last year got the ball rolling against the Santorini family in New Jersey. Those are his spreadsheets you're looking at." He was theatrically aggressive as he leaned forward and wagged an accusing finger at his witness. The object of his attack was a distinguished, bald-headed man in an expensive suit sitting at the witness table. Other than a thin, condescending smile, he appeared completely unfazed by Hardin's ranting.

"Who's that guy?" I asked.

"I think his name's Billingham. He's a mob lawyer from New York."

"Give him a lollipop; he could pass for Kojak, in the old TV series."

"Hardin's been after him since last year."

"Well, we better keep reading the book, because he hasn't laid a glove on him yet."

She stood up and scratch her head with both hands, violently, shaking it, letting her hair fly around in frustration.

"I was wondering where you had it done," I dared to quip.

She glared at me. "I'll let that one pass, since it was your first, albeit very lame attempt at humor. And I'm hungry."

"We can order in. Maybe a pizza?"

"No. I've got to get out of here. There's a little Korean take out place down the street, I need some air. I'll get us some stuff and a couple of six packs, okay?"

"You think that's a good idea?" I asked, concerned.

"The beer? After all you've been through, I thought you might want to relax."

"No, I mean you going out."

"Don't worry, I can do enough 'girl magic' on myself that my mother wouldn't recognize me. Want to come with?"

"No. Right now, you'd be a lot safer out there without me."

She disappeared into the bedroom. Fifteen minutes later, she came out wearing a peach, summer-weight suit, pastel makeup, and a very real looking shoulder-

length blond wig that completely covered her short raven hair. She topped it off with a white beret.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"My aunt," she said.

"She's a very attractive woman," I smiled.

She cocked her head and gave me that pleasantly puzzled expression again.

"Seriously, it looks really good on you, all of it."

"Thank you, Peter Talbott." She made a small pirouette and opened the front door, then paused and looked back at me. "You really trust me to go out there by myself? You don't think I'll call the FBI on you?"

"Sandy, I'm not holding you here. I think you'll do whatever you want to do. Besides," I pointed to her camera lying on the floor. "I have the Pentax as hostage."

"Sneaky." She stared at me again, debating. "You know, I do a lot better with jerks and assholes. Them, I can figure out."

"Be careful out there, okay?"

"You sound like my older brother, and what I don't need right now is another older brother. See ya," she said as she closed the door behind her.

I shook my head and went back to work on the spreadsheets. I finished looking through the last of them and I had to agree with her. Louie Panozzo might have been a fat slob, but this was a masterpiece of creative accounting. By then, I was brain dead, so I stretched out on my back on the floor. The next thing I knew, the front door was opening and the light from the hallway spilling across the living room floor where I lay. The door quickly closed with a soft "Click" and the room was cast in long, dark shadows again. I snapped wide-awake as someone tiptoed into the room and stepped over me, carrying an armful of bags into the kitchen.

"You shouldn't do that in a skirt." I told her.

"Pervert. You couldn't see a thing."

"Black underwear?"

"Liar. We both know it's too dark in here for you to see much of anything. And you forgot I changed clothes... *all* of them."

She turned on the lights in the kitchen and I lay there watching her unpack the bags. She reached over and turned on the radio. It was country music.

"What a horrible way to wake up."

"Say, what?" She glared over at me, hands on hips.

"No, not you. Billy Ray Bob on the radio."

"You just dodged a nasty bruise," she said as she opened two beers and brought one over to me without waiting for an answer, taking a long pull on hers.

"What time is it, anyway?" I asked.

"Almost 7:00."

"Korean took that long?"

She ignored the question and turned on the living room lights. "Here," she beamed. "Look what I got you." She looked like a little kid at Christmas as she dumped a big bag of clothes on the floor next to me. She picked up a short-sleeved blue-striped dress shirt, a pair of dark gray Dockers slacks, some socks, underwear, a belt, and a stylish light-gray herringbone sports coat. "Usually I know a guy a whole lot better before I go buying him clothes, but that plaid had to go. I guessed at your sizes, so try them on."

I took one of the shirts and a pair of slacks and rose slowly to my feet. I unbuttoned my shirt, and pulled it off. The next thing I knew, she was standing next to me looking intently at the big bruises on my back and ribs.

"Man, I thought you were bull-shitting me," she whistled. "You really are all black and blue back there. They did that?" She walked around me for the full view, running her fingers lightly over the bruises.

"Hey," I winced. They looked worse and hurt a whole lot more than they had in Uncle Ike's and in the nearly twenty-four hours since I acquired them.

"Sorry. The doctor is just checking." Then she grabbed my hands and looked at the bruises around my wrists. "What's with these? They look kinky."

"Kinky?"

"Well, you know..." she tried to feign demure.

"Leather straps."

"Don't you just hate that?" She saw the wad of paper towels stuck to my lower abdomen and her mouth fell open "What the hell is that?" she asked as she took another drink from the beer can, gently pulled the paper towels forward, trying to look underneath.

"Hey!" I pushed her hand aside. "Tinkerton did that with a scalpel. I was strapped naked to an embalming table at the time..."

"Yeah, kinky. Your sex life is your business, but it looks to me that somebody got a little carried away with the moment, didn't he?"

It was my turn to give her a look.

"Okay, I won't go there. But that needs looked at. My aunt's got some first aid things in the cabinet," she said as she turned and walked away. "So down on the floor, I'll be back."

"Sandy..." I tried to argue, but she wouldn't hear about it.

She came back with some alcohol, bandages, and a towel to put under me, and handed me the beer. "Drink and scootch your pants down a little." I looked up at her. "Don't be a child. I'm trying to clean this thing out, not get personal."

I lay back and did what she said. The alcohol stung but I was surprised at how gentle her fingers were as she worked. Finally, she taped some gauze pads over the cut and stood up. "See all the things I can do?" she said. "Now get up and look at the new clothes."

"Thank you," I said sheepishly as I stood up and started to unzip my jeans. She just stood there, so I motioned for her to turn around.

"I have three brothers, you know."

"Yeah, but I'm not one of them. Now turn around."

She turned her back to me and looked out the balcony door to the dark city below while I changed behind her.

"Where'd you get all this stuff, I asked."

"Some men's stores over on Michigan Avenue. Don't worry, I moved fast."

"You paid cash, didn't you?"

"Cash? Oops. I used plastic. I never thought."

"My fault. I should have warned you. When they look at the charge slip and see what you bought, it won't be hard for them to figure out I'm with you, not after you left work and didn't go back home."

"But they don't know where we are," she said.

"True, but Tinkerton will flood the streets with people. You sure there's no way they can trace you here through your aunt?"

"No. She's one of my mother's half-sisters. If you think the Kasmareks are fun, they won't get squat out of the Chickarellis or the DePieros."

"Okay, you can turn back around now," I told her as I slipped on the jacket.

"No need, I've been watching you in the reflection on the sliding glass door," she laughed as she turned around and looked me up and down proudly. "*Voila!* One of my finest creations, the new Peter Talbott."

I looked at myself in the hallway mirror. "You did good, you really did."

She stepped closer, smiling happily for the first time that day. "It was fun buying things for someone who at least half-way appreciates it," she said as she looked up at me. I could tell from her nervous energy that she wanted to touch me or hug me or kiss me if I gave her even the slightest opening, and I couldn't let that happen.

"I appreciate it, really." I turned away, leaving her standing alone in the middle of the room.

"Great," she said awkwardly. "Look, I have another idea." I turned and looked back at her, questioning. "Every now and then, I do get one, you know."

"Did I say anything?"

"You don't have to. I know you think I'm a ditz." I started to argue, but she waved me off. "I'm a sucker for nice guys with puppy-dog eyes, so don't ruin this for me," she warned. "Remember that hearing on TV earlier? Senator Hardin's? Why don't we send him some of the spreadsheets with a note about the funeral home and the bodies in that cemetery back in Columbus. I'll bet "Tough Tim" will know what to do with them. Then we can give him a call and get some real help."

I stopped and looked at her in a new light. "Hardin?" I thought it over. "You know, that's not a bad idea. In fact, it's a very good idea."

She seemed to glow. "I thought so too. There's a Fed Ex service center over on Wabash. If we get it over there first thing, he can have it the next day. Now let's eat before the dumplings and pork get cold and the beer gets warm."

We went into the tiny kitchen and started opening the food containers. "I guess we should spend the night here," she ventured, her eyes on the food.

"That would be great, because I'm exhausted and I really need some sleep. You take your aunt's room and I'll crash out there on the couch."

"She has a king-sized bed," she said quietly. She looked up at me. Our eyes met. She looked scared, but she knew exactly what she was saying.

"I don't think that's a good idea, Sandy," I answered.

"I only meant to sleep, Talbott," she said angrily. "It wasn't an invitation."

"It's still not a good idea."

"When it's an invitation, you'll know it. But Jeez, you really did live under a rock, out there, didn't you?" She picked up the six-pack, stormed into the bedroom, and slammed the door.

We were up early and out the door before 9:00. I was wearing a pair of the new slacks, one of the shirts she bought, and the blazer. Sandy came out in another of her aunt's outfits—designer jeans with a deep green top, her aunt's white beret covering most of her black hair, a pair of clean, white Reeboks, and a bad hangover. She shuffled over to the medicine cabinet, looking half-dead, and

swallowed a handful of aspirin. She continued to stare into the mirror, waiting for them to work, while I went around the rooms throwing out trash and straightening things up.

"How many of those beers did you have?"

"Not enough," I heard her mumble.

Obviously, something was bothering her more than just the hangover, but this wasn't the time for me to find out what it was. She stuffed the blond wig in her shoulder bag, laid the camera in on top of it, and headed for the door. "Let's go," she said. "The sooner we get this done, the happier I'll be."

There was an Irish pub on the corner with an all-you-can-eat egg and corned beef hash breakfast buffet. I had all the above and she had two beers and half of a dry English muffin. By the time we finished, it looked like she might live.

"Your usual breakfast?" I asked. I knew I had to say something. I couldn't leave things like this. "You're pissed at me, aren't you?" I asked.

She looked away and I could see she was close to tears. "Look, this past year hasn't been a lot of fun for me, Talbott, and I did something really stupid last night, something I've never done before. I'm not some bimbo or tramp, and I'm not a one-night stand, but you were there. You seem like a nice guy and I figured I'd never see you again, so I made a big mistake. I reached out for a little warmth and affection..."

"I'm *really* sorry, Sandy."

"Do you know how much you hurt me last night? How humiliated I felt?"

"I didn't want to get you in this thing any deeper."

"It was only sex, Peter."

"It's never *only* sex, Sandy. You might be over Eddie, and maybe that was what you needed last night, but I haven't even begun to be over Terri. It has nothing to do with you. I swear. It's about me. God knows I'd love to. You're beautiful, and smart, and a lot of fun to be with, but I can't."

She glared at me for a moment, then burst into tears. "Damn you, Peter Talbott! Now look what you've done. I can't even get mad at you."

I put both of my hand on hers. "I'm sorry. I'm really sorry," I told her.

"Just when I'm convinced you're the biggest jerk I ever met and I'm ready to throw you out the door, you have to go say something like that. Let's get out of here before I really do kill you." She grabbed my hand and pulled me down the street.

We were in and out of the FedEx service center by 10:00. It took thirty-eight dollars from the Sheriff's coffee fund to buy a padded mailer and send a sample of printouts and a letter to Washington, DC for delivery the next morning, but it was worth it.

"I have another idea." Sandy pointed to a payphone inside the door and said, "Let's give Hardin's office a call and tell him it's on the way." She looked at me, again. "It's not like I have a daily quota, you know."

I called Washington DC information and they connected me to the Senate Office Building's main number. I asked for Hardin's office and then handed the phone to Sandy as they connected us. "Your idea. Go for it."

"Hi," she started in on the receptionist with a warm, bubbly voice. "I know the Senator's probably not in, but I'm calling for Peter Talbott, and... No, the Senator

doesn't know him... Could you tell him that Peter Talbott overnighted a FedEx package to him... Yes, Peter Talbott. It's some spreadsheets on the Santorini mob in New Jersey... Yes, Santorini. They are Louie Panozzo's books... Yeah, I'm sure he will. Look, tell him to be looking for that package and we'll call him tomorrow."

Sandy hung up and we went outside and quickly walked away from the FedEx office. "By the way, did I tell you I worked in Hardin's campaign?" she said. I looked at her, knowing a story was coming. "Well, not really "worked." I stuffed envelopes for two weekends in his office downtown. He has a cute smile and a nice set of buns, but without a nametag, he wouldn't know me from the water cooler. They threw a pretty good party every Saturday night for the volunteers, so I thought it might be fun. He showed up the second weekend. Things got a little drunk and he gave me a ride home."

"The water cooler wasn't available?"

"Nothing happened. It was a month after Eddie walked out on me, and I wouldn't have minded a little hot, sweaty groping to get even. But not from him. He's married and at heart I'm really not a bimbo."

"Not at heart?"

"Thanks!" She glared up at me. "You know, this isn't a particularly good morning for you to give me shit, Talbott. I don't have to be here."

"You're right, I'm sorry, it's none of my business, but you're always joking..."

"Oh, never mind." She walked on, fuming.

"So, you blew off a U. S. senator and nothing happened," I asked as I caught up.

"Not exactly. I think I threw up on his shoes in the foyer of my building."

"He wouldn't have gotten that from the water cooler."

"Hey, after all this time, he won't remember me. And even if he is a complete leech, he was the one who organized all those hearings on the Mafia in Washington, so he's not a complete waste. And neither am I."

As we walked away, I could see she was hurting, and from more than just the hangover. Suddenly I felt a cold shiver. I hardly knew this girl. How long had it been? Twenty-four hours? I was beginning to enjoy her company. She was fun and interesting and I knew if I had given her half an opening the night before she would have been a lot more. A huge rush of guilt washed over me like an ice cold shower and I knew my problem wasn't her. It was me—too much baggage, too much pain. And if I wasn't careful, I could get her killed.

I looked up at the sky. I saw some soft, lazy clouds drifting by, but I couldn't find Terri's face up there anywhere. I got panicky. Where was she? She was always up there scolding and disapproving when I was doing something wrong, so where was she when I needed her help? The buildings were tall and blocking out about half of the sky, so I stepped over to the curb where I could see the sky better. Still, nothing, I couldn't find her.

"Talbott, you okay?" Sandy frowned, sounding concerned.

"I'm fine," I forced a reply and a smile. "It's nothing."

"No, well, you look like you saw a ghost."

"No, the problem is, I didn't... Oh, never mind, it's just a joke," I quickly recovered and tried to smile.

"Where are we going now? Back to my aunt's? Because if you still want that stuff on Eddie that's in my closet over on Clark, I have another idea."

"Another one?" I asked, still searching the clouds.

"Come with Mama," she laughed as she hooked her arm in mine and led me away. We went back west and north on the side streets until we found that walkway between the buildings that got us to the alley behind her apartment building. The gray government car was still parked there with a blue-suited goon sitting inside. She pulled out her cell phone and turned it on. "Relax, watch the pro work." She pulled out an official-looking business card and dialed the number. "I need to talk to Agent Dulaney," she whispered, as if she was in a panic. "He isn't? Hey, this is Sandy Kasmarek. I'm in a little Greek restaurant at Lincoln and Belmont, and that guy Agent Dulaney is looking for? Talbott? Well, he's standing outside watching me, so you gotta help me... No, I can't wait. Oh, God, he's coming in. I'm so scared." Then she snapped the phone's cover closed and grinned.

It took less than a minute for the car to start and tear off down the alley.

"Can I hear a big Amen," she grinned. At the corner, the gray car put a flashing red light on the dash and took a sharp turn west, tires squealing.

"That should hold them for a while, let's go."

"You're pretty good at this, aren't you?"

"I'm pretty good at a lot of things."

Chapter 17

Because the papers say so...

The rear of Sandy's apartment building had an open wooden staircase that zigzagged up from the small, fenced rear yard to the upper floors. She took the stairs two at a time and I followed close behind, across the landings to the third floor. She had her key out and we were through her rear door into the kitchen in less than a minute. Once over the threshold, she stopped and I plowed into her. My first impressions of her kitchen were empty beer cans, fast-food bags, a half-full bottle of vodka, dirty dishes, and a half-dozen scraggly houseplants on the window ledge. But Sandy wasn't looking at any of that. She was looking at the imposing figure of Gino Parini sitting in one of her kitchen chairs. He had a Chicago Sun Times in front of him open to the sports page and his chrome .45-caliber automatic laying next to it.

"Close the door," Parini said as he motioned us to come in the rest of the way. He threw a quick glance around the kitchen and said, "Some housekeeper, your woman,"

"I'm not his woman," she shot back.

He ignored her. "You really are one persistent pain in the ass, Ace. I've been sitting here since last night. Where you been? Shacked up with her?"

"Oh, fuck you!" she shot back.

"A housekeeper with a foul mouth," he snorted. His long black hair hung straight down to his shoulders today and he wore a navy blue, double-breasted

blazer with gold buttons, crisp white slacks, and a maroon silk shirt, open at the neck.

"You off to Newport for the yacht races?" I asked.

"Cut the crap," he growled. "You shoulda done what I told you back in Columbus."

"You told me to get out of town. I did."

"Yeah, but the wrong freakin' way. You didn't go back to Boston; you came here. Now take a seat. You too, Sweet Pea. There's things we gotta talk about."

"You know this grease ball?" Sandy demanded, looking at him and at me.

"His name's Gino Parini," I said with an apologetic shrug. "He's a hit man for the New Jersey Mafia."

"A hit man? For the Mafia?" She slapped herself on the forehead.

"Don't worry, he's not after us."

"A nice guy, with puppy-dog eyes," she muttered. "Jeez, how could I be so stupid again? How?"

"And how do you know who I'm not after?" Parini growled.

"He's the one who showed me the obituaries back in Boston. And he even came to my funeral in Ohio."

"How nice. Did he send flowers?"

"Shut up and sit down," Gino glared at her. "Both of you."

I sat. Sandy didn't. She looked over at me, then at him, then back at me again. "The FBI. The Mafia. And now a hit man." She shook her head angrily. "Non ci credo." *I don't believe this*, she muttered in Italian.

"Cosa t'aspetti?" *What did you expect?* Parini chuckled. "And is that a hint of Palermo I hear underneath that bad Italian?"

"Her Polish in-laws call her 'that little wop girl,'" I added, but she had had enough. She turned and smacked me across the side of the head. I barely saw her hand move, but my ear was ringing. "I thought you were on my side, Gino. How come you didn't stop her?"

"You thought wrong. I ain't on nobody's side and it ain't me she was smackin'," he said as he stood up and pushed her into her chair with one finger to the center of her chest. "Nuthin' personal, but like I said, sit down." With his big arms and barrel chest, he towered over her and her courage shrank into the chair cushion. "Now what do we got here, Ace? A great housekeeper. Speaks Italian. From all the beer cans and bottles, she drinks too damned much. And it says 'S. A. Kasmarek' on the mailbox. So who is she?"

"Eddie Kasmarek's widow," I said.

"Who the fuck's Eddie Kasmarek?"

"Like me, another name they used to bury somebody up in Oak Hill Cemetery, compliments of Messieurs Varner, Greene, Tinkerton, and Dannmeyer."

I had Gino's full attention now. "No shit?"

"No shit. And you followed me here, didn't you? All the way from Columbus."

"All the way from Boston. I put a beeper on your Bronco but you lost it."

"I didn't lose it, they stole it."

"Yeah, well, that made following you a whole lot harder."

"Why didn't you just give me a ride?" I asked. "It would have made the trip a lot easier, but you wanted to see what I'd flush out, didn't you?"

Parini shrugged. "Yesterday morning I saw you checking her out, then you tailed her over to that mall on Michigan, where I lost you. But Tinkerton's clowns still had this place staked out, so I knew they hadn't got you yet. I came back here and waited."

"They laid a trap for me over at the Water Tower," I answered. "But they missed."

"Missed, huh?" Parini studied me for a moment. "Don't let it go to your freakin' head. You been lucky. If Tinkerton really wants you, sooner or later he's going to get you." He motioned toward Sandy and shook his head. "And I'm disappointed in you, Ace. It ain't smart, you draggin' her into this thing. I expected better."

"I needed her help," I answered sheepishly.

"Help? When a guy drags a broad into shit like this, they always screw up and get the guy killed." He focused those hard eyes on me. "So, what was so freakin' important that you had to come to Chicago and get her *help* in the first place?"

"Okay," I tried to explain. "You know how they buried Louie Panozzo and his wife in Oak Hill using my name and my wife Terri's, right? Well, there's another grave up there with her ex-husband Eddie's name on it, and two for a guy named Skeppington and his wife, two for a guy named Pryor and his wife, and two for a guy named Brownstein and his wife. If you dig those up, you're going to find the bodies of some of your old pals from Newark, like Richie Benvenuto, Clement 'the Mole' Aleppo, Paul Mantucci, and Johnny Dantonio. But I think there's more, a lot more. They're only the tip of the iceberg."

Parini stared at me, astonished. "How the Hell did you..."

"I read the newspaper. Panozzo and his wife lived in Columbus for over six months, using my name and my wife's before they had their little "accident." And that's the way they were buried: Mr. and Mrs. Peter Emerson Talbott. The others were all the same. That's how I found them. Accidents. Varner signed the death certificates, Greene buried them, Tinkerton was their executor, and Dannmeyer provided the police protection, not that they needed it, because they thought Terri and I were already dead and buried back in California. In her case, they were right. In mine, they were wrong."

"So they bit on that old obituary in LA papers, the one that said you died in Mexico?" Parini leaned forward and listened intently.

"When I told Tinkerton how they got it all wrong, he just laughed and admitted that every now and then their computers screwed up." I smiled. "What they missed was the fact that I wasn't dead."

"Not yet anyway," Parini snorted as he looked over at Sandy.

"Okay, Gino, a little wager." I leaned forward in the chair. "I'll bet you that .45 of yours that 'the Mole' wasn't married."

Parini leaned back and studied me carefully for a moment, but he didn't bite.

"Come on, Gino. A little gentlemanly wager?" I goaded him.

"Nah, I can read your eyes. You don't bluff so well, kid. You know something."

"I told him he can't lie worth a damn," Sandy interjected. "But while you two keep screwing around, those guys in the gray sedans are coming back."

"I'm right, aren't I?" I ignored her. "The Mole" was single, wasn't he?"

"Yeah, he was single, but how'd you know?"

"With a name like that?"

Parini roared with laughter. "Yeah, my dumb. That was a no-brainer, wasn't it?"

"That's why when they dig up Eddie Kasmarek's grave in Columbus, they're going to find "the Mole's" body inside," I said. "See, they needed the name of a single guy and they thought Eddie was single. They didn't know about Sandy, because they had an ugly divorce last year and none of Eddie's obituaries mentioned her."

"I wouldn't let them," she answered. "I didn't want anything more to do with that bastard."

Parini leaned back and stared at her and at me, then slowly nodded. "You know, you might be onto something, Ace."

"Peter, we need to get that stuff and get the hell out of here," Sandy said.

"What stuff?" Gino asked

"The papers I have on Eddie," she answered. "His death certificate, the obituary from the Tribune, maybe receipts from his insurance, the ambulance, the cemetery, that kinda stuff."

"And if I can get some proof on those other guys: Skeppington, Brownstein, and Pryor, and their wives..."

"Not a bad idea." Gino nodded. "But you got lucky. They've only got a skeleton crew here, pardon the pun, just the three cars so far, but there'll be a lot more pretty soon, Tinkerton too. My big Lincoln's parked two blocks over and you and me, we gotta get out of here, Ace."

Sandy looked at me and almost exploded. "What's this *you and me, Ace* crap? I thought it was you and *me* doing this thing, Talbott, the two of us, *together*, remember?"

"Sandy, look..." I tried to explain.

"What? You're leaving me here? I knew it!"

"They don't have anything on you."

"No? How about a bunch of men's clothes on my credit card, all your size, and your fingerprints all over my aunt's place. Well, at least I don't have them all over me!"

"You can still walk away from all this."

"Walk away? She folded her arms across her chest and glared at me. "Yesterday I was next on their list, *a loose end* they were going to make *disappear*. Remember? Can you say, *accomplice*, and *aiding and abetting*, or maybe *accessory*?"

"I don't want to see you get hurt, Sandy."

"How sweet. Well, fuck you, Talbott. And fuck you too, Parini! I guess all that *stuff* isn't so damned important anymore."

"Some mouth on that woman of yours, Ace."

She raised her hand and would have smacked him too, gun or no gun, until I stepped between them. "Okay, okay. You're right. I can't leave you behind. You can come with."

"What a freakin' wuss." Parini shook his head sarcastically.

"Do you really mean that?" She glared. "Or are you just saying it to shut me up."

"I mean it, honest," I told her. "I couldn't live with myself if anything happened to you. So, come with me, please."

"You're gonna regret this," Parini warned.

"Probably," I replied. "But I got her into it, and I need to get her out. Now go get those damned papers."

"Apology accepted," Sandy said as she looked across at Parini and stuck out her tongue. "And the big Dago's right, you are a wuss." She dashed down the hall to her bedroom and came back out, jamming a large handful of papers into her shoulder bag as she ran past me. She was coming with. Half of me was glad she was and half knew Parini was right. It was a mistake. Being stupid and risking my own life was one thing, but now I was risking hers too.

Parini opened the back door and looked out. "Shut up and stay behind me," he said as he stepped onto the rear porch and motioned for us to follow. We moved quickly and quietly down the twisting flights of stairs with Gino in front, Sandy in the middle, and me taking up the rear. When we reached the bottom, Parini stopped and we stopped behind him. The staircase continued down to the right into dark shadows, where it ended at the basement door a half-floor below, but we weren't going that far. As Gino stepped forward into the yard, I saw a black automatic pistol rise from the shadows in the dark stairwell below and it was pointed at his back, less than five feet away. The arm was in a dark suit coat, with a white shirt, French cuffs, and gold cuff links. Before I could react, Sandy swung her heavy shoulder bag over the handrail. With a ferocious grunt that would have made Anna Kournikova proud, she slammed the bag into the gunman's face and arm, spoiling his aim and knocking him backward down the stairs as he pulled the trigger.

In the narrow confines of the concrete stairwell, the pistol went off with an, echoing, ear-splitting *Blang!* Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Parini grab his leg and go down hard. I had no doubt the gunman's plan was to take Parini out with the first shot and then turn the automatic on Sandy and me. The only reason he failed was Sandy's purse.

The gunman had fallen down the stairs, but he didn't stay down long. He came charging back up with his gun out, swearing angrily. I didn't get a good look at him, but when I saw the French cuff and the flash of gold, I knew this was the head goon in the sunglasses that Sandy threw into the wall. His pistol was already tracking around toward her, when something inside me snapped. Without thinking, I let loose a blood-curdling scream and dove over the railing onto him. In that instant, he came to personalize all of my frustrations going back to LA, Terri's death, losing my job, Columbus, the Bronco, the embalming table in the basement of Greene's Funeral Home, and all the rest of it. The scream distracted him just long enough. After that, the poor bastard could have been Freddie Krueger with his steel fingernails and a chain saw, and he wouldn't have stood a chance.

I landed next to him with feet, elbows, knees, and fists flying. He tried to bring the gun around and take me out, but my right fist found his face first, with everything I could put behind it. The automatic went off a second time and a loud, echoing "*Blang! Blang!*" before my fingers found his wrist. I knocked the gun aside and raked his knuckles down the rough brick wall. He grunted and the automatic fell on the bare concrete floor below.

That was a nice start, but even without the pistol, he had a lot more experience at this kind of thing than I did. I was tottering back and forth on the edge of the

stair above him, losing my balance, as he attacked. He grabbed me by the throat. Hand bleeding, nose swollen, he swung me around and slammed me against the rough concrete wall. His fingers felt like vise-grips as they dug into my throat and closed around my Adam's apple. I tucked my chin into my chest and twisted away, but he was way ahead of me. He squeezed harder and the pain paralyzed me. Somehow, I fought through the haze. I pushed off the wall and drove my shoulder into him. His heels slipped off the stair and he lost his balance. His grip on my throat relaxed just enough for me to get one deep breath and plant a fist in his ribs.

Arms flailing, he toppled over backward and fell down the stairs. As he did, he grabbed my shirt and pulled me down with him, which was a mistake. When we hit the dark concrete landing below, he was upside down, his body under mine. I heard a short, sharp "Snap," like a dry tree branch cracking in a strong wind. The air went out of him and he went limp beneath me. Gasping, I rolled over and looked down at him, expecting to have to hit him again, but he wasn't moving. His neck bent at an odd angle. His eyes were wide open and he looked like a dead trout on a bed of ice in a fish market. Even in the dim light, I knew he was dead. That was when the shakes began. I had never killed anyone before. I leaned against the wall and puked up that morning's breakfast in the corner of the stairwell.

Eventually I heard a voice calling me, "Talbott... Talbott!" It was Parini. "If you're done playing with that guy, get your ass up here. I need help."

I stumbled up the stairs into the bright light of the back yard where Gino lay on the grass holding his bleeding leg. Sandy knelt next to him. I could see he'd been shot in the thigh and his white pants leg was leaking a lot of very unfashionable dark-red blood. "They aren't gonna let you in the yacht club looking like that," I warned.

"You and your fuckin' jokes," he said, obviously in a lot of pain. He unbuckled his belt, pulled it out, and tried to wrap it around his leg, "Godamnit, help me with this thing."

I was still in a daze, but Sandy wasn't. She quickly threaded the belt back through the buckle and drew it tighter around his leg. "More," he growled. "Tighter!"

She gave him an unsympathetic shrug and pulled back with everything she had.

"Good," Parini groaned painfully as he held out his hand to me. "Now help me up."

Gino was more than twice her size and way too heavy for her to handle alone. I got under his other arm. Together, we got him to his feet and headed for the back gate when I remembered something. "Wait a minute," I said as I left him leaning on Sandy.

"Hey," he shouted angrily, but I ignored him and ran back down the stairs. I found the goon's automatic lying next to him. I stuck it in my waistband and pawed through his pockets, pulling out a wallet and a badge case. It was too dark to read what they said, but the mere fact he had one made the hair stand on the back of my neck. I ran back upstairs. When I got there, the two of them were already limping across the yard toward the rear gate and I heard Sandy mumbling,

"I can't believe I'm doing this; I can't believe I'm doing this..." I got under Gino's other arm and we made it through the gate and into the alley.

"That was the FBI guy with the gold cuff links, wasn't it?" Sandy asked. I nodded. "If I hadn't decked him with my purse, he was going to shoot you, wasn't he?"

"He did shoot me," Parini grimaced.

"No, I mean Talbott," she said. "He was supposed to kill Talbott, wasn't he?"

"He was supposed to kill all of us, Sweet Pea, but the smart play was to take me out first. That's how I'd have done it. Then I'd a popped the two of you."

"Just like that, huh?" she said, laboring under his bulk.

"Just like that. Tinkerton would kill his grandmother if he thought he could put this genie back in the bottle, believe me."

"Tinkerton?" she questioned. "That guy was FBI. I saw his ID card and badge."

"You saw what they wanted you to see," Parini answered.

I pulled out the gunman's automatic and looked at it in the light. "It's a Beretta, Gino." I held it up and showed him. "Are the Feds using Italian handguns now?"

"He wasn't no Fed," Parini said as his big paw swallowed the automatic and he slipped it into his pocket. "And you don't want this on you, Ace. It's goin' in the freakin' river."

I pulled out the gunman's badge case, flipped it open, and saw a brass badge with a blue and red crest and an ID card in the name of Michael Alvarez, Special Investigator, U. S. Justice Department. "This says the Justice Department, Gino, the goddamned Justice Department."

"Don't believe everything you read, Ace," he said as he pocketed that too.

"Well, it looked real enough to me," Sandy answered.

"It's supposed to, you ditz. That's why they make 'em. And that Beretta he had was real nice. Top of the line, very expensive. Only a pro, a good contract killer or some serious in-house shooter would have one of those."

"How do we know it wasn't you he was after, Gino?" she asked.

"Because he didn't recognize me. He didn't know who I was."

"How do you know that?" she asked again.

Parini shook his head. "Look, I don't want to brag, but I come with a lot of reputation, and a lot of baggage. I'm what you might call a *consultant* for certain *tri-state area business interests*."

"Yeah, well, now you're a consultant with a bullet hole in his leg," Sandy grunted.

"If Tinkerton had put a hit out on me, I'd find out, and he knows his people ain't good enough to pull it off. I'd kill them and then I'd kill him, and he knows it. So, no, it was you two the guy was after, not me. But that was a nice whack you gave him, Sweet Pea." Parini tried to smile through the pain. "You nailed him pretty good. I owe ya."

"Hey! I'm the one who went dancing down the stairs with him." I reminded him.

She glared at both of us. "And if my Pentax is broken, both of you are going to be dancing, because somebody's going to have Hell to pay."

We kept moving until we reached the next street. Parini was limping painfully, struggling to stay on his feet. He looked quickly to the left and right, but there

were no government cars to be seen. "Looks like we lucked out, he said. "They must still be short-handed, but Tinkerton won't make that mistake again."

"Speaking of mistakes," Sandy groaned as she took a firmer grip on the seat of his sagging pants. "You need to knock off the pasta or get shot with somebody else next time."

"She always this disrespectful?" he asked. When I chose not answer, he added, "That's what I figured. You're either nuts or in love, sport. Either way, you're a freakin' dead man walking."

"Mind your own business," she said as she gave him a small pinch on the handle. When he didn't smack her, that was when I knew Gino must really be hurting and we needed to get him to a hospital.

We hurried over one more street. At the far corner, I saw his white Lincoln Town Car parked by the curb. He reached into his pocket and handed Sandy the keys. "Here, you drive," he told her. "Talbott, get me inside."

I opened the rear door and Parini fell heavily onto the rear seat while Sandy ran around to the driver's side. It took both of us to push and pull him and his bloody leg inside. By the time I got him propped up in back, the rear door closed, and got myself in the passenger seat in front, Sandy was still settling in behind the wheel, adjusting the seat and the rear-view mirrors.

"Godamnit!" Parini roared. "If you reach for your freakin' lipstick, I'm gonna pop you right here. Now get us out of here."

"Hey," Sandy jumped. "Don't blame me if my legs are short." She turned the key in the ignition. She must have found the right pedals because the Lincoln's engine roared and we sped away down the narrow street.

Chapter 18

With two, you get egg rolls...

"Turn left," Parini snapped. "No, your other left."

"I drive a little Toyota, not a damn battleship like this thing, and I've got short legs. You want to do this?" She sounded flustered as she spun the wheel to the left, narrowly missing two parked cars. "Then shut up and let me drive."

"Okay, okay," Parini answered. "But slow down, for Chris' sake. We've got enough people chasing us without you adding more."

"Oh, now you want slow," she snapped at him as she hit the brakes. "Make up your damned mind."

"You two need a time out?" I turned in the seat and looked back through the rear window, but no one was chasing us. Parini told her to make a few more turns. As we drove farther and farther away from her apartment, I began to relax.

"Gino, you need a doctor." I looked down at him.

"No shit, Ace. Hand me that phone up there." Parini groaned as he lay back on the rear seat in pain. I looked around and saw that the Lincoln had a telephone

built into the front console. "Punch Memory, then #3, then gimme the damned thing," he said.

I did as ordered and watched his face as he waited for the other party to answer. "Joey," he finally said. "It's me, Gino... No, in Chicago... Never mind that. Look, I need a doctor and I need one quick... No, for me, you asshole, I got clipped in the leg... Yeah, me! Stop laughin' and tell me where. Yeah... Yeah... I got it... No, no, I'll find it. You just call and make damned sure they'll be there."

He handed the phone back to me. His face was pale now, and he was in a lot of pain. "Sweet Pea," he called to her. "See that console on the dash, above the radio? It's GPS . Push 'Power' and key in 832 West 23rd Street, Chicago, Illinois. No, on second thought, you do it, Ace."

"Hey, I can do it," she said, reaching for the buttons.

"You got enough to do drivin' this thing. Let the brain trust do it."

In seconds, a brightly colored map popped up on the screen with a red dot in the center. "That's in Chinatown," Sandy said.

"Think you can you get us there?"

"Chinatown?" she asked. "Sure, why?"

"'Cause I've got a sudden craving for won-ton. Can you freakin' get us there?"

"Yeah, I can freakin' get you there! Sheesh, you're ornery. You want some aspirin or Tylenol for the pain? I know I got Midol and some codeine cough medicine in my purse. Maybe a joint to help take the edge off?"

"She's a goddamned pharmacy," he mumbled. "Tylenol, then."

She pulled the big bag over and dug her arm down to the bottom, fishing around inside until it came back out with a bottle. She opened it with her teeth and handed the bottle back to him. Parini dropped a half-dozen pills into his hand, popped them into his mouth, and lay back chewing them. "Thanks, kid," he said. "And I take back every ugly thing I said about you."

"The name's Sandy."

We drove west to Halsted Street and south through the city. It was mid-morning and big CTA commuter buses, semi-trailer trucks, and delivery vans clogged the streets and slowed us to a crawl. I turned around in the seat and looked back at him. He had lost a lot of blood and I was getting worried. "You okay, Gino?" I asked.

"I've been shot a lot worse than this."

"Then you need to find a new line of work," she commented.

Parini's eyes were closed, but I saw a thin smile. "Yeah, a new line of work. I'll write that down, so I don't forget." We crossed the Chicago River and continued south through a series of ever more dilapidated commercial areas. "Okay, Talbott, who you really workin' for? Justice? Some rinky-dink local outfit? The Santorini people never heard of you. Who then? Rico Patillo?"

"I work for Symbiotic Software in Waltham, Massachusetts, Gino, or I did until you dragged me into this thing."

"Yeah, and I'm the freakin' Easter Bunny. You expect me to believe you figured all that stuff out by yourself?"

"I'm a rocket scientist, remember." I smiled innocently at him.

"Yeah, right," Parini opened his eyes and looked at me. "Back in Columbus, I saw you at the funeral home and then I saw you at that bogus accounting office

down on Sickles. I didn't know what to make of those, but when you walked inside Tinkerton's office building dressed up like a delivery boy, the only thing I could figure was you were one of them and you were reporting in. Later, when you went strollin' into Varner's fruit clinic and all the rest of them showed up, I had no idea what you were up to."

"I was looking for proof."

"Proof? What you almost got was dead. Tinkerton's a real head case, him and that Sheriff Dannmeyer."

"He was," I smiled.

"Yeah," Parini laughed. "I saw you run over him with that ambulance."

"A sheriff?" Sandy's mouth dropped open. "You ran over a sheriff?"

"Not me, the ambulance driver did. He was the one who helped me escape from the embalming room, before Dannmeyer shot him."

"I don't believe this." She smacked her forehead again. "You killed a cop?"

"That guy deserved it," Parini answered for me. "And Dannmeyer was no cop. He was a stone-cold killer with a badge, like the rest of Tinkerton's people."

"You could have helped me, you know."

"I ain't your Fairy Godmother; you keep forgettin' that."

"Bullshit. You could have stopped him," I said.

"Stop what? I didn't know what he was doin' down there or how far he'd go. What I did know was you were flushing them out and doing my heavy lifting for me."

"You really are a bastard," Sandy told him.

"There goes that mouth again," he chided her. "A nice Italian girl should know better than make negative comments about a gentleman's heritage like that."

"You're a gentleman like I'm a *nice* Italian girl," she quickly responded.

"Okay, okay, Gino." I turned toward him. "So tell me what's really going on."

"Me? Tell you 'what's really' going on?" Parini chuckled.

"You've been using him for bait," Sandy told him. "And you owe him one. You owe me one, too. Time to pay up."

"Come on, Gino," I tried to draw it out of him. "I know what they've been doing. I know who's doing it, and I even know how they're doing it, but I can't figure out why."

"You wanna know why, huh?" Parini thought it over and finally relented. "You heard of the Federal Witness Protection Program, right?" I nodded. "It's run by Justice, all top secret and hush-hush. They say in the last twenty, twenty-five years, the Feds have taken maybe 6500 mopes into that program and maybe 8,000 dependents."

Sandy eyed him suspiciously in the rear view mirror.

"That's right out of *Time Magazine*, Sweet Pea" he reassured her. "Hell, the Feds even brag about it. 'Cause in all that time, with all those people on the lam and hiding out, they claim they never lost one. Not one! Never had any of them clowns run back to our side. Never had any of them hit. Not one. Never. Ever. Unbelievable, huh?"

"Yeah, I guess." I frowned, still not getting the point.

"Think about it. Most of them cruds are small fish, but there's some big ones in there too, like sixteen 'made men' from New York and New Jersey—Jimmy 'the

Bull' Gravano, 'Noodles' Fortuno, Barty Marzini, and your pals Richie Benvenuto, 'the Mole,' Pauli Martucci, even that damned bean counter, Louie Panozzo. And I gotta tell ya, seein' a bunch 'a bums like that sittin' on the beach in Florida, while a stand-up guy like Jimmie Santorini is bustin' rocks in Marion, that ain't fair."

"Yeah, a freakin' tragedy," Sandy mumbled.

"You wanna know what's goin' on, or you wanna keep with the wise cracks?" His eyes flashed and I could see even Parini had his limits. "You gotta figure there ain't nuthin' those East Coast Families would like better than to pop one of them cruds, right? Nothin' they wouldn't do or pay, to crack that "shield of invincibility" the Feds got wrapped around the program. 'Cause most of those mopes were screw-ups to begin with, bottom feeders, low-lives. Well, if they're dumb enough to get caught on some Federal beef, you gotta figure that out of 6,500 of them, there must be dozens and dozens of them stupid enough to screw up again and leave a trail even we could follow.

"Somebody's gonna call an old girlfriend," he went on. "Or he'll lay down a bet with a bookie back east, deal some coke for a little cash, or free-lance a burglary. Maybe his wife's gotta see her mother. Or he can't live without some of that special linguine from Georgio's back in Bayonne. I don't know, but out of 6,500 there's gotta be some do that, right?" He waited until I shrugged. "Well, so far there ain't been one. Every time we get close and one of those guys blows his cover or wants to quit—and that does happen—the guy suddenly vanishes."

"Maybe they moved them some place else," Sandy said.

"Or maybe he has an "accident," under some other name," I chimed in. "Him and his wife."

"Or maybe *you* finally found one of them and got rid of the guy," Sandy said.

"Nah." Gino caught Sandy's eyes in the rear view mirror. "If we want some mope dead, we pop him in a restaurant or we put a bomb under his car, something big and splashy. We don't fake no cheesy car accidents or hide the bodies, because when we hit a guy, it's to make a point, to make an example for all the others. And we don't take out his old lady. That ain't our style. We don't do that, but Tinkerton does. He don't like loose ends."

Sandy looked over at me, then at Parini in the rear view mirror. "Now, wait a minute. You're saying the government's killing their own witnesses?"

"What? You think they're too good for something like that?" Parini barked. "Grow up, Sweet Pea. Compared to them, we're amateurs. Besides, they were "former" witnesses. After the Senate Hearings and the trials, they ain't no use to the Feds anymore, except to prove we can't touch them. Other than that, they're just more mouths to feed. And as for ones that get out of line or try to take off? What do you think?"

"I think they disappear up in Oak Hill under somebody else's name," I answered. "A name and an identity that Tinkerton's computer picks out."

"If that's what it takes to keep the Feds record "spotless," who's to care? They were as good as dead, anyway."

"I don't get this," Sandy interjected. "You said Tinkerton is a lawyer with a big law firm in Columbus. He isn't a Fed."

"Who says?" Parini countered. "My guess is Tinkerton's running some kind of top-secret disposal squad for them. Him, Greene, Varner, and Dannmeyer—they're

mechanics, contract help, whose job it is to clean up those embarrassing little problems the official agencies won't touch, like runaways or the guys who won't follow the rules. But don't kid yourself, one way or the other, he's government."

"Zero Defects," I suddenly remembered.

"What's that?" Parini asked.

"There's a plaque in Tinkerton's office—and a tattoo on Dannmeyer's arm—they said *Zero Defects*. I gave Tinkerton some static about it. He said it means they don't make mistakes and they didn't tolerate people who do."

"Zero Defects, huh? Sounds like him. He's an arrogant bastard."

"I looked up Tinkerton's background," I told him. "He was FBI, US Attorney, Justice, and the Marines, probably intelligence, because he said he had interrogated a lot of people. I think most of them ended up dead."

"You're nuts, both of you," Sandy said.

"Oh, yeah?" Parini leaned forward on an elbow. "Let me tell you about Louie Panozzo. He was a gutless little accountant who got sloppy. The Feds nailed him on wire fraud, petty stuff, but when they threatened him with ten to twenty in Danamora, he caved and copped a plea. First, he talked to that damned Hardin Commission, then he ratted out Jimmy in court."

"I know," I replied. "I read the clippings."

Sandy made eye contact with me, but she never said anything about the accounting records or the printouts we had just sent to Hardin. Neither did I.

"Six months later," Gino went on, "Jimmie's locked away in the Federal pen in Marion and Louie's doin' 1040's in that hole-in-the-wall accounting office in Columbus. Anyway, last month, that little rat has a change of heart and calls Jimmy's lawyer, Charley Billingham, a big rainmaker with Steiner, Ernst, and Billingham in New York."

"That's the bald-headed guy we saw on TV yesterday," Sandy crowed.

"Yeah, I heard they were going after Charley next. Lotsa luck hangin' anything on that guy," Gino chuckled. "He invented slick. Anyway, Panozzo tells Charley he's really sorry and he has a deal for Jimmy. He says he'll recant all his testimony, if Jimmy would call off the open hit he has out on him and let him slide back home."

"I'm sure Jimmy was real understanding," I said.

"Think about it. Louie said he'd go on all the TV talk shows: Oprah, Larry King, Sixty Minutes, the works. He'd swear the Feds made it all up and blackmailed him into saying all those terrible things about Jimmie."

"And that was supposed to get Louie off the hook?" Sandy asked.

"How could Jimmy turn him down? He don't exactly have a lot of options anymore." Gino said. "He'd have to leave Panozzo alone just to prove the fat shit was telling the truth and it was the Feds who were lying, and Panozzo knew it."

"Did Louie tell Billingham he was in Columbus?"

"Didn't have to. The dumb ass used his office phone, and Charley has caller ID. I'm sure he had the Feds on his line to, which is probably how Tinkerton got wind of what Louie was up to. Like I said, sometimes those guys ain't too bright."

I had to admit, there was some logic to all of it. "So, if Jimmy bought the deal, why did he send you there?"

Parini smiled. "It ain't what you think."

"So you're saying you didn't kill him?" Sandy said.

"Hell no! Louie Panozzo was Jimmy's best chance to get out of jail, maybe his last, so why would he have him whacked? Louie was supposed to call Billingham last week and finalize the deal, but he had his "car accident" and that was the end of that. On the other hand, maybe that's *why* he had the accident. Anyway, we weren't sure whether they killed him or just faked the whole thing and moved the fat shit some place else, but we smelled a rat. That's why they sent me to Columbus, *after* he disappeared. I started checking out the stuff in the obituary, the house, and the office, like you did, but I never thought to look for more obituaries. That was brilliant, kid."

After another mile, Sandy turned east on Cermack Road and we crossed through an industrial no-man's land of railroad tracks and run down overpasses. Two blocks later at Canal Street, I saw the first signs of Chinatown. We passed a row of Chinese import-export firms. She turned south again into a busy commercial street full of Chinese restaurants and gift shops. The buildings had colorful green and red oriental tile facings, terra cotta tile roofs, and colorful ceramic lions guarding the doors, big upright ones with slant eyes and long Fu-Manchu mustaches. They reminded me of Grant Avenue in San Francisco. And I'd bet the gift shops and stores carried the same kitsch from Mexico or the Philippines that they sold in every other Chinatown.

"Sure you don't want any won-ton to go, Gino?" she asked. "Last chance."

He looked up at me and shook his head. "Sooner or later, her mouth's going to get you in serious trouble, Ace."

"That's what all the boys tell me," she laughed. "But with you bleeding to death back there, you aren't that much of a threat anymore."

"Yeah, serious trouble," he said, but I saw a thin smile on his lips.

Much to my surprise, the residential neighborhood behind the Peking-kitsch could have been in Bogalusa, Des Moines or Stockton. The houses were small, with brick, clapboard, or wooden shingle siding, mostly two-stories high, and dating from the 1920's. The lots were narrow and they had garages out back.

"There, the fourth house on the left," Parini pointed. "Drive around back." It was an undistinguished, aging Cape Cod with a black shingle roof and dark blue shutters. It had a swing hanging on the front porch, a couple of kid's bikes lying in the neatly trimmed front yard, and geraniums growing in the flower boxes under the windows. It was clean and neat, and it looked like every other house on the street. As we turned the corner into the narrow, rutted alley, Parini had one more piece of information to share. "This place belongs to the Magiori Family in Cicero, so if you don't want a whole lot worse problems than you already got, keep your big mouths shut about it. You two got that?"

We pulled up behind the house and parked. I got out and opened the rear door, intending to help Gino out of the back seat, but four young Chinese men in white medical gowns and surgical masks suddenly materialized next to me. They politely moved me aside and in seconds had Parini out of the back seat and on a hospital gurney. They pushed it up the walkway, across the back porch, and through the rear door of the house.

Sandy and I stood in the alley next to the car staring at each other.

"I sure don't get that with my HMO," I said.

"I'm not leaving until I know he's okay," Sandy said as we looked up at the house. "You coming, Talbott? Or am I going in alone?" She marched up the walkway to the house and I quickly followed. There was a large, double-hung window on each side of the back door. Looking in through the one on the left, I saw a small kitchen, complete with lacy pink curtains, striped wallpaper, flowerpots on the window ledge, a formica breakfast table, a stove, and a modern refrigerator, all Penny's catalogue neat and spotlessly clean.

"Nice," I whispered. "You ought to ask if they hire out,"

I looked into the window on the other side. It was a kid's bedroom, decked out with Spider-Man curtains, a bed, a dresser, and a bunch of toys scattered around the floor. There was no sign in either room of Parini, the stretcher, or the four Chinese men who carried him inside. Puzzled, we pushed the door open and stepped inside and I could not have been more surprised. The room I stepped into bore no resemblance whatsoever to the kitchen I saw through the outside window. It had plain white walls, a white tile floor, harsh florescent lights, two desks, file cabinets, shelves with towels and linen, and two glass-front medical refrigerators. There were no homey kitchen curtains, no stove, no kitchen table, and no kitchen refrigerator. An optical illusion? I looked back at the window and found myself looking at what appeared to be a set of sophisticated rear screen projectors that threw holographic images on the window. Very clever.

Through the open door on the left, I saw a fully equipped medical clinic. As we watched, a white-garbed medical team gently transferred Parini up to an operating table, where busy, gloved hands set to work on him from all sides, putting in IVs and carefully cutting away his bloody pants leg. One of the attendants lowered an oxygen mask over his face, but Gino saw us watching and pushed it aside. He motioned for us to step closer. The Chinese attendants tried to stop us, but Parini growled and they stepped away.

"What are you two still doing here?" he asked.

"Uh, look, Gino..."

"No "look Ginos." Take the ditz and get the hell out of here. Now!"

"Go, but where?" I asked as the nurses began to push us out of the room again.

"Anywhere, so long as it ain't here. Just freakin' go." Parini coughed. "Besides, you ain't listened to me so far, and you ain't been doing too bad on your own. Take the Lincoln. That oughta to square us up. And take her, too."

"But..."

"You shouldn't have brought her into this thing, but you did, Ace, and now she's your responsibility. So get out of here, both of you."

There was no sense arguing with him. Besides, he was right. I grabbed Sandy's hand and we went.

Outside on the sidewalk she said, "Those computer flash drives in your pocket are going to put Santorini even deeper in jail, not get him out. And pals or not, when Gino finds out, he's going to come after us, and he's gonna kill us both."

Chapter 19

Bumper cars on the Dan Ryan...

Parini's white Lincoln was sitting in the alley where we left it, with all four doors hanging open. Inside, two elderly, black-clad Chinese gnomes were hunched over in the back seat using rags, spray bottles, and a bucket of water scrubbing away the last traces of blood from the car's leather upholstery. As we approached, they quickly exited, bowing and smiling as they backed away and scurried off through a gate into the next yard. I looked inside. Unbelievably, there wasn't a hint of blood anywhere. The car's interior was showroom clean.

We both went for the driver's side door, but I got there first. "If you don't mind," I smiled as I edged her aside and slipped behind the wheel. "You had your turn and I'm not sure I could survive another."

"Laugh it up, but you don't know the Chicago streets like I do."

"No, but I can read signs. And you're right about Gino," I finally got up the nerve to say what needed to be said as I drove away. "Between him, Tinkerton, and the Chicago cops, it's not a smart idea for you to stay with me for a whole lot longer."

"You don't, huh?" Her black eyes turned hard and angry again. "Well, who put you in charge?"

"It's too dangerous, Sandy. For all I know, Gino's going to come after me next."

"Great! I got a dead hit man lying in my basement, I'm MIA from my job, you've got me riding around the south side in a white pimpmobile, and now you want to dump me."

"That's not fair. I'm worried about you."

"Let me worry about me." She bristled.

"All I wanted was a copy of those papers of yours, that's all. I don't suppose you'd trust me with them for a couple of days?"

"Trust you? I stopped buying that line in the back seat of Ernie DeMarco's Ford in eighth grade." She clutched her big purse to her chest and turned away, clearly furious at me. "Trust you. That'll be the day. Once you get them, they're gone and so are you. And I heard what Gino told you," she said. "I'm *your* responsibility now."

This line of reasoning wasn't getting me anywhere, besides, she was right, so was Gino. I got her into this and it was my responsibility to get her out. So, I settled down in the seat and drove. I remembered some of the map, so I doubled back the same way we came, driving down Canal until I found Archer, a busy diagonal that bisected Chinatown. I figured it should take me back to Cermack. That might take me east to State Street and the Dan Ryan. Once I found it, I could get my bearings. Hopefully, I could talk her out of the car at a bus stop and I could find the Dan Ryan and get the hell out of town.

At the red light at Archer and Cermack, I reached for the buttons on Parini's car radio. Unfortunately, all I found were jazz and easy listening stations. I was surprised the Chicago Mafia didn't have their own twenty-four hour all-Sinatra station or, *The Best of the Sopranos*. Sandy didn't wait. Her hand reached out and she punched Seek. This time, the radio stopped on a country and western station and I heard the mournful twang of a guitar. "Touch that button again and I'll break your finger," she warned.

"Oh, come on. What's that? Billy-Bob singing about his pick-up truck?" I shook my head thinking State Street couldn't come fast enough. "Okay, but if I hear Achy-Breaky Heart, all bets are off."

She tried to keep a straight face, but I saw it crack. "I suppose you can't line dance, either, can you?" she asked.

"Line dancing? What's an Italian almost-Polish girl from Chicago doing line dancing?"

"Trolling."

I started to smile, but it quickly faded as I looked across Cermack Road and saw two gray sedans and a blue Ford LTD parked right in front of us in the parking lot of a Chinese import-export shop. Bent over a map spread across the hood of the LTD, was none other than Ralph McKinley Tinkerton and four of his goons. He didn't look very happy. The side of his face was badly bruised and his left hand was wrapped in a thick, white bandage. Jacket off, tie down, he waved his arms in the air as he chewed them out. He slammed his fist on the hood and I'm sure he left a dent.

"Get down!" I grabbed her neck and shoved her down on the car seat, her head landing in my lap.

"Talbot, I don't do that on a first date," I heard her mumble.

"That guy Tinkerton? The one you think I'm paranoid about. Well, he's standing across the street," I said as I slid lower, trying to hide behind the steering wheel.

"I want to see." She pushed my hand away and raised her head enough to peek over the dashboard. "That's him?"

"Yeah, and Gino was right. Your smart mouth's going to get us both killed."

I sat there holding my breath waiting for the light to change, hoping I might melt into the upholstery and vanish before Tinkerton looked our way, but that was wishful thinking. I watched him talking and yelling at the other men, but his cold gray eyes never stopped moving. They swept across the white Lincoln and moved on. Then, they stopped and tracked back. Tinkerton squinted in the bright sunlight. He frowned as he focused on the white Lincoln and I knew that was trouble. His eyes opened wide. Even from across the street, I felt the wave of hatred and anger wash over me like heat pouring out of the open door of a blast furnace. His arm shot up and he pointed a long accusing finger at me, mouth open wide, as he shouted to his men.

I didn't wait for the light to change. I pushed the accelerator to the floor, spun the steering wheel to the right, and laid rubber through the intersection. The Lincoln fishtailed out onto Cermack Road, but what the heck. They weren't my tires. I cut between two cars and got ahead of a delivery truck, putting as much distance as I could between Tinkerton and the Lincoln. With its big engine, it could outrun most things on the open road, including police cars and Tinkerton's LTD. In city traffic, it wallowed like an old barge. Still, if I could loose them before they even got started, then the size of the engine wouldn't matter.

"You said you know the city," I shouted to her over the engine roar. "The Dan Ryan, it's up ahead, right?"

"Yeah, keep going straight, to State, then turn south, I guess."

We raced across Wentworth Avenue. The road dropped away and the big car soared into a railroad underpass beyond. The Lincoln bottomed out on its axles

and roared up the other side without skipping a beat. The traffic soon thickened again and I cut left, crossing the double yellow lines, using the westbound lanes to pass a pokey bus and a delivery van. I looked in the rear-view mirror and still couldn't see Tinkerton's cars, so I eased off the accelerator a tad. There was no reason to commit vehicular suicide, not yet anyway. Up ahead I saw a busy intersection with people walking around. The sign read State Street, so I swung the steering wheel and took the turn on two wheels. The car leveled out and we were on a broad, six-lane boulevard, racing south.

"Last chance," I told her. "I can let you out before they catch up and you can disappear into the crowd."

"No, I'm staying."

"We're probably gonna both get killed, you know."

"Nah. Maybe maimed and scarred for life, but not killed. Besides, this is fun."

"You really are crazy."

"Compared to the black hole I've been in the past two years, this is fun, Talbott. You'd be fun too, if you ever let yourself," she said, as she reached over and lightly touched my arm. "Now drive."

I felt a shiver run through me. She was quirky and funny, with sharp edges, but all girl, and I was glad she wanted to stay. I couldn't admit it back then, not even to myself, but I was lonely. I loved Terri and always would, but memories only took me so far. My life had been teetering on the edge since the day she died. I filled it with tequila and then with work, desperately trying to ignore that basic fact, but one light touch of skin on skin had tipped my pat little world upside down and I wasn't ready for that.

I put the accelerator to the floor and tried to focus on the traffic. On my left lay a fenced, railroad embankment filled with trash, broken bottles, and tall weeds. On my right was a long row of ugly, yellow-brown apartment buildings. My God, I groaned, that was "the projects," the Robert Taylor Homes. I had spent two days in Chicago only to come full circle to the same south side public housing I passed on my way in.

I glanced over at Sandy. She had her Pentax out, snapping pictures as I drove. "The camera?" I said. "I don't believe you."

"Believe what you want. This is me."

Yeah, and you're still there, I thought as I looked into the mirror. We had a nice lead, but the two gray sedans were already closing the gap. I pressed the accelerator down again and the Lincoln responded with a throaty roar, but up ahead the traffic was already backing up at the next red light at 28th Street. The on-coming lanes were filled with cars, but there was no way I was going to wait for the light to change. I cut the wheel and drove the Lincoln up on the sidewalk. There was just enough room between the parking meters and the fronts of the buildings for the Lincoln to squeeze through, so I hit the horn, sending pedestrians scattering into doorways as we roared past. The car's left fender struck a newspaper box and sent it cartwheeling high into the street, scattering the newspapers in the wind as we blew through the intersection.

"I hope Parini has good insurance on this thing," Sandy laughed.

Clear of the traffic again, I cut back into the street and floored it. On our right, the cruel ugliness of the projects gave way to the modern black steel buildings of

the campus of the Illinois Institute of Technology. I drove on past 30th Street and 33rd Street, weaving in and out, with one eye on the traffic and one on the rear view mirror. We were running out of options. I could never pull very far away from them and they could never quite close the gap. Ties might work in horseshoes, but when angry men with guns are chasing you around, eventually you're going to lose.

Tinkerton must have realized that too. By the time we reached the big intersection at 35th Street, he had had called for reinforcements. Another sedan, dark green this time, sat sideways across the southbound lanes ahead of us, blocking our way, and there were two men with guns standing behind it, already taking aim. The car might be a different color, but their expressions were as murderous as their pals coming up behind.

"You got any ideas?" I asked. The only choice was 35th Street, so I didn't wait. I spun the wheel hard right and took the corner on two wheels. The Lincoln rode up onto the sidewalk and fishtailed out into westbound 35th Street. As we accelerated away from the intersection, a bullet punched a fist-sized hole in the rear window of the Lincoln and exited through the left front windshield.

Sandy's eyes went round as saucers. "What the hell?" she exclaimed as she swung the camera back on the blue car and began clicking away. "They shot at us! When I get this stuff printed, my photography class will never believe it."

"Get down!" I shouted at her but she wouldn't listen, so I put my hand on the top of her head and pushed her down below the top of the seat again. "I mean it this time."

"Hey, I'm into soft and tender now, Talbott, enough with the rough stuff." She tried to squirm away as another bullet punched through the rear window.

"They've got more, you know." What was left of the rear window broke up in a lacy pattern and a thousand shards of broken glass crumbled into the back seat.

"Okay, maybe I'll stay down here for a while."

Up ahead I saw LaSalle Street, the service road that ran along the east side of the Dan Ryan Expressway and I knew exactly where we were. The green car, the two gray cars, and Tinkerton's big LTD were turning into 35th Street behind us, coming up hard and fast. We were quickly approaching the Dan Ryan, but Tinkerton and the cops already knew that. Coming straight at us down 35th was another of Tinkerton's gray sedans accompanied by two Chicago police cars, their sirens screaming and blue and white light bars flashing, blocking our way, while two other police cars had the entrance ramp to the Dan Ryan shut down. Bad form, Ralph, you brought in the locals. That means he's getting desperate. Maybe he's worried I might actually get away again.

That only left LaSalle Street, a three lane, one-way service road that ran back north along side the Dan Ryan.

"Right, turn right," she screamed. I reached the intersection before the white sedan and the two cop cars, but the Lincoln's speedometer was topping one-hundred as I hit the brake and spun the steering wheel. The tires squealed. The big sedan heeled over and slid through the intersection on two wheels, leaving a black arc of shredded rubber behind us as we swung north onto LaSalle. Not bad driving for an amateur, but Tinkerton's goons were closing fast and they were probably a whole lot more experienced at this than I was. They had chased us

east, south, west, east, and now back north in an ever-tightening circle. No matter how fast I drove or how much rubber I laid, it was only a matter of minutes before they brought cars in from that direction too, blocked the road, and had us trapped.

Sandy pointed down at the expressway median. "Hey, there's the El. If we can get down there."

On the other side of the curb was a sidewalk, a six-foot high chain-link fence, and a long grassy slope. It ended at a three-foot tall concrete barrier next to the Dan Ryan's three northbound local lanes. Beyond that stood another concrete divider and the four express lanes, followed by a third, even taller concrete divider, that separated the expressway from the gleaming El tracks and then the 35th Street Station. I remembered passing it on my way into town. It was a long slab of elevated concrete with a roof and a covered staircase that led to the 35th Street overpass high above.

"No problem," I answered, without a whole lot of time to think about it. "Hang on." I spun the steering wheel left. Parini's white Mafia war wagon hit the curb, bounced up, flew across the sidewalk, and hit the fence. Chain link and a couple of metal posts were no match for a ton and a half of Lincoln Town Car. It flattened three sections of the fence and roared down the grassy slope toward the expressway. I hit the brakes and let the big car slide sideways downhill, its radial tires digging into the soft turf like a battleship turning in molasses, leaving four deep furrows behind us and bringing the Lincoln to a halt six feet from the first concrete barrier. I pushed my car door open and grabbed Sandy by the hand. "You staying or coming?" I asked.

"Oh, I'm coming, God, am I coming!"

"You're sure."

"Oh yeah, I'm sure," she laughed. "Miss this? You gotta be kidding?" She held onto me with one hand and her camera and shoulder bag with the other and scrambled out the car door after me.

Behind us, Tinkerton's blue LTD and two of his gray sedans slid into the intersection from the east, following my skid marks, just as the other gray car and the Chicago police cruiser came racing in from the west. Unfortunately for them, they had all been watching the white Lincoln, not each other, and we heard the crash of metal and the sound of breaking glass as they all collided in the middle. The LTD made it through unscathed, but one of the gray sedans hit a cop car and flipped. It slid across the street on its top while another cop car careened away and bounced off a telephone pole and another slid into the side of a Budweiser delivery truck.

"Jeez, they hit a beer truck," Sandy laughed. "There's gonna be hell to pay in the hood tonight."

We reached the concrete barrier as the shrill sound of still more police sirens came screaming in behind us. I remembered seeing grainy news footage in school about the 1968 Democratic Convention. Hairy-knuckled Chicago cops in baby-blue riot helmets, short-sleeved shirts, nightsticks, German Shepherds snarling, cameras and hand-held floodlights bouncing, as the cops chased longhaired hippies through Grant Park on a hot summer night. I was sure the Chicago Police Department had changed a lot in forty years, but there was no way I was going to

stop and plead the subtleties of my case to an angry cop with a riot gun. The last of those 1968 Neanderthals may have retired years ago, but if the LA cops are any example, the new generation was even worse. We ran across the remaining grass, climbed on top of the first concrete barrier, and looked down on the mid-morning traffic racing past us, thick and fast.

"Who was the idiot who thought this one up?" Sandy asked as three lanes of cars whizzed by us at sixty-five miles per hour, weaving, changing lanes, and honking.

"You are. You wanted to come along, remember?" There was no turning back now. "Pretend it's touch football," I screamed over the loud roar of the traffic. "We're going to run between them and you don't want to get touched."

Chapter 20

Koo-bee Bryant hits a trey...

As we stood on the divider, about to begin our mad dash out into traffic, I looked back over my shoulder. Tinkerton's blue LTD came careening sideways down the slope at us, digging itself axel deep into the mud until it slid to a halt behind the Lincoln. Tinkerton sat behind the wheel and one of his goons rode shotgun. In their case, the goon probably did have a shotgun, but I tried not to think about that. When Tinkerton spotted us standing on the expressway barrier, he pounded his fist on the steering wheel in angry frustration.

"You know, you have a real talent for pissing people off," Sandy quipped.

"Years of practice, honed to a fine edge," I fired back as I took a firm grip on her hand. "Stay with me, one lane at a time." I turned and searched the onrushing flow of northbound traffic for a break, but I didn't see much of one.

"Now!" I yelled as I jumped off the barrier and ran between a black BMW and a big moving van, and stopped on the first white line. An Atlas Van Lines eighteen-wheeler roared behind us and tight line of cars swept past in front of us, horns blaring, buffeting us with their back drafts. Four cars later, I saw another break coming and squeezed her hand again. "Now!" We sprinted in front of a red Dodge mini-van with a wide-eyed soccer mom behind the wheel, through a gap in the third lane, and jumped up on the relative safety of the next concrete divider that separated the local lanes from the express lanes.

"What a hoot!" Sandy screamed as she clutched her leather shoulder bag to her chest with one hand and me with the other. "God, they ought to put this on *The X-Games*, Talbott," she said as we wobbled precariously on the divider.

"You wouldn't listen, would you?"

"What fun would that be?" She grinned from ear to ear.

Up ahead, a four-car El train pulled out of the station on the southbound tracks, taking most of the waiting passengers with it. Behind us, Tinkerton and the goon had gotten out of the LTD and were standing on the other side of the first divider, three lanes away, pointing at us, screaming. Two Chicago cops ran up

next to him, pistols out, with expressions of total confusion. No doubt, they had never been in a high-speed chase quite like this one. Without a whole lot of thought, I smiled at Tinkerton and flipped him the bird, holding my finger high over my head. That completely unhinged him. His face turned red and he looked ready to have a stroke right then and there. He ripped a large automatic pistol from his shoulder holster and took aim at me. He would have shot me too, if one of the Chicago cops hadn't pulled his arm down.

"That's real smart," Sandy shouted. "Why don't you get him good and pissed?"

"He didn't shoot did he?"

"Not because he didn't want to."

I could almost read the cop's lips as he yelled at Tinkerton and pointed at the cars whizzing by on the freeway. I doubt it was compassion or concern for us that motivated the cop. More likely, it was the mountains of paperwork and the lawsuits he'd find himself buried in if Tinkerton missed and hit the wrong people. Frustrated and even angrier, Tinkerton surprised me by climbing over the divider and following us out into the fast-moving local lanes. He still had the gun in his hand, but at least it wasn't pointed at us. His goon followed, most unhappy about it, and the two Chicago cops took up the rear.

"I don't know about you." Sandy's hand tightened on mine. "But I don't want to share this divider with anybody that big and angry, especially not one with a gun. Let's go."

Together, we jumped down into the express lanes and I saw this was the big leagues. There were four lanes rather than three and the stream of cars was thicker and faster than in the locals. We could see panic on the face of almost every driver who flashed by us, and I'm sure they could see it on ours.

"Now!" I screamed and we cut behind a delivery van and kept moving through a gap between a Honda and Cadillac. We stopped, halfway there, toeing the white line as we waited for a break in the third lane. Behind us, I heard loud honking of horns and a sudden squeal of brakes followed by a sickening *Thump!* I looked back in time to see a blue-clad Chicago cop bounce high off the hood of a Toyota in the local lanes. He cart-wheeled through the air, arms and legs extended, followed by a loud series of sharp crashes as a half-dozen cars rear-ended each other trying to avoid the cop and the careening Toyota. The, all Hell broke loose, with more crashing metal, more squeals, and more loud horns.

"Well, that ought to slow them down a tad," she yelled, wide-eyed.

Maybe, but we had enough problems of our own at that moment. Cars were speeding past, front and back. I glanced left and saw a Greyhound bus changing lanes, heading right for us, straddling the bright white line we were standing on.

"Oh, shit!" Sandy said as she pulled me forward. We darted in front of the bus and kept running, across the last lane of traffic, and onto the relative safety of the El station median. Hand-in-hand, we jumped onto the low concrete retaining wall as a big Mercedes sped past behind us, horn blaring, narrowly missing us. The wall was perhaps twelve inches wide and four feet high, separating the busy express lanes from the steel tracks. Twelve inches wasn't very much. Sandy tottered back and forth next to me as we fought to keep our balance. Maybe I was too concerned about her making it up to the top with me, and maybe I was a bigger klutz than she was to begin with, but I couldn't stop. I let go of her hand,

but my momentum carried me over the top and I fell face-first on the grimy, sharp-edged gravel of the railroad bed.

"Eee-Yeeagh!" My hands and knees rebelled in pain.

"Uh, Talbott," Sandy shouted a warning. "See that blue-black rail in the middle? The one next to your left hand?"

"Yeah," I answered as I looked down. My shins rested on the brightly polished track where the train's wheels ran and my right hand was a few inches away. Next to my left hand, where I had narrowly missed landing, was an evil-looking, blue-black rail.

"That's the third rail. There's about a gazillion volts of electricity in that thing. You touch it; it'll ruin your whole day."

"Hey, I'm from LA," I replied. "What do I know from rails?" Carefully, very carefully, I rose to my feet and brushed the dirt and gravel off my hands, giving the third rail a wide berth. Sandy jumped down next to me and we looked up at the subway platform. The concrete slab was even higher than the divider, at my eye level, and there was no ladder or stairs to climb. To make matters worse, I saw the front headlight of a fast moving train coming up the northbound tracks, heading straight for us.

"Here," I said as I put my hands together and bent my knees. "Give me your foot. Quick. I'll boost you up."

"No sweat, it'll slow down as it comes in," she announced confidently, slowly raising her left foot and placing it in my hands. As she did, I glanced past her again. The train was close enough for me to see the panicked expression on the engineer's face as he saw us standing on his tracks.

Fortunately, Sandy did not weigh very much. "One, two... three," I yelled and flipped her upward. She soared onto the air in a tight, acrobatic flip and landed on the platform on both feet, light as a feather.

I looked left again and I could see she was dead wrong about the train. It had not slowed a bit. I was tall and in pretty good shape. Desperation and a speeding train can make great motivators, so I put my hands flat on the platform and launched myself upward, rolling over the edge just as the lead El car roared past.

"Oops. Guess that was an express," I heard her say as I lay on the platform looking up at the concrete roof of the station, thankful I was able to look up at anything at all.

That was when I heard a loud, sarcastic, and very black male voice say, "My, my, what *do* we have here?"

"They be the Fucking Wallendas, Jamal. You know, them dudes in the circus," a second voice added.

"Yeah, das who they be," came a third voice, "the Fucking Wallendas."

"Check out the mess they made back on LaSalle. Dey fucked that up good."

"Check it out, Rashid. All them po-lice cars? Cops gonna be really pissed."

I looked around as six young, black men closed around us in a tight circle, complete with dark sunglasses, oversized, cockeyed baseball caps—mostly White Sox and Bears—blue jeans slung below their hips, and unlaced, hi-top work boots. Harlem, Watts, or the South Side of Chicago, it was definitely your urban gang-banger-out-on-the-town outfit, complete with matching blue plaid flannel shirts hanging out at the waist and "do-rags" on their heads under the hats.

"You be right, Toothpick. You be right," the one in the center said as he looked back toward the chaos on the expressway with a smile. "But why the Fucking Wallendas drop in on my El platform this fine morning? Das what ah wants to know."

Toothpick was the biggest of the lot, maybe 6' 6", well over 300 lbs, and fat as a house. He grinned as he reached out and ran a finger slowly down Sandy's arm. "Lookey here, Jamal," he said. "The Wallendas done brung us lunch."

His finger didn't make it as far as her elbow. In one smooth motion, Sandy jumped four feet in the air. With a blood-curdling scream, her Reeboks lashed out in a series of lightening-quick karate kicks. She caught Toothpick at the base of his throat, in the face, and a coup-de-grace in the groin, dropping him to his knees, bug-eyed, holding his throat and his crotch and coughing, all at once. The others took a step toward her, but she had dropped back on the platform and into a defensive Karate crouch, fingers out, eyes darting back and forth. "The next one who gets smart goes to intensive care."

Jamal defused the situation. "Nice hang time, girl," he laughed.

I got to my feet and stood behind her, figuring my best efforts would be spent covering her back, but Jamal was more effective.

"Thas enough, Toothpick, we don't want you to hurt her no more, now do we?" he said as he raised his hand and the others immediately stopped. "Very impressive, very im-pressive indeed," he said as he slowly clapped his hands. Clearly, he was their leader. He looked over at the growing line of police cars back on LaSalle Street, his eyes dancing with amusement. "But ya'll seem to have gotten seriously lost. This here ain't Oak-brook or Win-net-ka. This here be the south side—*my* south side—and we call it *The People's Republic of 35th Street*. So, ya'll need to show some respect."

"Look," she said. "All we want is to get on the next train out of here, that's all."

"Thas all?" Jamal pointed at the police cars and grinned like a malevolent shark. "What you think them pigs up on LaSalle want? You the fuckin' Tupperware Lady? They come down here to give you a po-lice escort through the projects? No, ah think they be chasin' yo' asses, thas what ah think."

We stood our ground and the six gang members did the same. That was something, but I could tell Jamal wasn't finished with us. He was cagey and street-smart. Behind those Oakley sunglasses, his dark-brown eyes were studying all the angles. Down here, a man couldn't reach his eighteenth birthday alive and out of jail if he was stupid.

"Speakin' of chasin'," Jamal looked across the expressway, "Ah don't know what ya'll done, but them two *suits* down there running between the cars want yo little white ass some kinda bad, girl."

"We didn't do anything," I told him.

"They sho think you did."

"They're wrong."

"Imagine that! The Chi-ca-go Po-lice chasin' somebody on 35th Street—a white man and a white woman at that—and they got it wrong?"

In the distance, I saw another train coming toward us. This one was on the southbound tracks heading out of the city, and I intended for us to be on it. The cops had given up and turned back toward LaSalle, but Tinkerton and his goon

managed to get across the express lanes and had reached the retaining wall on the other side of the tracks, barely ten feet away. Time was running out.

"What do you want?" I asked Jamal.

"You askin' what *we* want?" A homie in a blue-plaid shirt shot back. "Shit, we *takes* what we want."

"Reparations, man. We want reparations." Another homie postured.

"Yeah, some serious reparations."

"Ya'll trespassin' on our turf without permission, without no passports or visas."

"And look at what she done to Toothpick, man."

"Yeah, that was flat out rude, man."

Sandy cocked her head and took a long look at the gang leader. "Hey, I know you. That's Jamal Sanders hiding behind those "Oaks", isn't it?"

"Jamal don't hide, bitch!" Toothpick threatened again, but Sandy's foot twitched and Toothpick took a step back.

She came out of her crouch and pulled her camera out of her shoulder bag for Jamal to see. "Yeah, Jamal Sanders of the Black P-stone Disciples? Right?"

"We now the Disciple 35th Nation. We be franchisin'," Jamal corrected her. "And ah *do* remember. You that crazy bitch with the camera walked thru the 'hood and took all those pictures wif me. The brothers over on Cottage Grove called you *Lil' Sister*. When was that? Two years ago? Yeah, ah remember you, all right."

"Crazy? You never saw better shots—of you, the homies, or life in the projects—have you? That was a great spread."

"Yeah. Got you some kinda award, didn't it?" he asked. "What it get us?"

"Got your face all over the front page of the Trib. That was serious pub, my man, better than you ever seen before, and you didn't have to go to jail to get it, did you?"

"There is that."

"Was I fair?"

"Oh, yeah. You was fair. Ah'll give you that much, Lil' Sister."

To our left, the outbound train roared into the station and ground to a halt. In the lead car, the motorman looked at us with round, terrified eyes as he saw what was going on, but it was too late for him to do anything about it. The train stopped, the doors automatically opened with a loud hiss, and a dozen black passengers stepped out onto the open platform. They took one look at the gang, at us, and at the cop cars with their sirens and flashing lights, and thought better of it. In unison, they stepped back inside the cars and prayed the doors would quickly close.

As they did, I heard a voice shout up at us from the track bed to our right. "You, up on the platform, stay the fuck where you are." I looked down and saw Tinkerton's dark-suited goon standing on the tracks below us.

"I'd do what he says, Pete," Ralph Tinkerton's sarcastic, hardscrabble twang joined in. His usually cold, gray eyes were red-hot and angry as he tasted his impending victory. "You too, Miz Kasmarek."

I looked longingly at the El cars behind us, but we had blown our chance. The doors closed with a loud "Hiss" and the train immediately started up. It gathered speed and pulled away as quickly as the anxious motorman could make it move, to the obvious relief of his frightened passengers. That was when Tinkerton's goon

raised his Glock and pointed it up at us. That was a big mistake. All around us, I heard shuffling feet and loud clicks as a dozen other handguns suddenly materialized in the gang member's hands, one and often two per man. There were matte-black Glockes, a wicked .357 Magnum, a long barreled .38, a .45 Colt, and a huge, chrome .44 Magnum "Dirty Harry" cannon among others, and they were all pointed down at Tinkerton and his goon.

Jamal folded his arms across his chest. "This really be some morning," he crowed. "Everybody be forgettin' themselves today, forgettin' where they be."

"Ralph," I smiled down at him. "This isn't the Columbus Rotary Club up here. I'd be real careful if I were you."

Tinkerton burned with anger, but that didn't make him stupid. "Pete," he managed a smile. "You and I need to talk."

"I don't think so. The last time we tried that, I got cut and you got that bruise on your cheek and that big, ugly bandage on your hand. Is that from the fire?" Tinkerton glared and said nothing. "Too bad it didn't fry your sorry ass."

Jamal and the rest of the gang broke up laughing, pointing down at Tinkerton, and chattering. "He diss'ed you, Chuck." "The White Boy diss'ed you good." "Swish!" "Two points. Two points for White Boy."

Tinkerton could barely contain his rage. "Look, Talbott... Pete." He tried another tack. "You can't win this thing. You can't run fast enough or far enough. I can reach out and grab you by the throat anywhere you try to hide."

"So far, your grab ain't been too good, Ralph," I said.

"Two more points for White Boy."

"He be killin' you, Chuck."

"You been poster-ized, my man."

"No mas, no mas!" another homie ridiculed him.

Tinkerton's eyes flashed up at them. "If you continue with this folly, you're only going to earn yourself a lot of pain. You should remember that before you go dragging other people into it with you."

"Nobody dragged me into anything," Sandy snapped.

"No, no!" Someone in the crowd called out. "The bitch don't count. Dis be one-on-one." And, "Yeah, dat be a technical. She be on da bench."

"You be right, Doughboy," The others joined in. "Jus' White Boy and Chuck. Da bitch don't count."

"Yeah, 'cause she could kick both their sorry asses, she want to."

They all broke up laughing, all except Toothpick who was still holding his crotch. "Yeah, ya'll got that right," he added warily.

"The score still White Boy four, Chuck zip."

"Look, Pete, you're an intelligent fellow," Tinkerton said, pointedly glancing around at the homies. "I won't scam you or try to scare you anymore. The world's full of two kinds of people—those who understand the moment and seize it, and those who let it run roughshod over them. As I told you in Columbus, we're the good guys. We're cleaning up this country, putting the low lifes and the riff-raff in jail where they belong."

"Low lifes? Riff-raff?" I heard from the crowd. "Who he talkin' 'bout Jamal?"

Tinkerton ignored them and kept his eyes focused on me. "We'll be running this country soon enough and we can use someone with your determination and your

resourcefulness on our side,” he said with a big Texas smile. “Unfortunately, you haven't had a chance to see the big picture yet.”

I looked down at him with an equally big smile and said, “Ralph, if you're the big picture, it's time somebody tore it down off the wall and hung up a new one.”

The gang went crazy. “A trey, a trey!”

“Shit, a trey from half-court, man.”

“He be da white Kooo-beee Bryant.”

“Das it, game over. White Boy win.”

“I want them.” Tinkerton turned and shouted at Jamal, pointing at us.

“Like, I'm supposed to give a shit?” Jamal laughed.

“How much do you want for them?” Tinkerton looked at me then back at Jamal with a thin, sinister smile. “I'll buy them.”

“Reparations? Now thas a different story.”

“How much?” Tinkerton seethed with anger.

Jamal thumbed his chin for a moment and pointed. “That gold Rolex on yo' arm.”

“He's with the government. He wants to kill us,” Sandy said.

“That right, Chuck?” Jamal asked. “You gov'ment?”

“Why do you care?” Tinkerton answered as he pulled the big, solid-gold watch off his wrist and tossed it up to Jamal.

“The man do have a point, Lil' Sister,” Jamal said as he slipped the watch over his wrist, admiring the way the solid-gold band gleamed in the bright morning light. He turned and looked at Sandy, then shrugged. “Why *do* ah care?”

Tinkerton smiled, supremely confident now, figuring we were cheap at twice the price as he motioned for the goon to climb up on the platform.

“Not so fast, Chuck,” Jamal raised his hand. “All the green in yo' pockets, too. Toss it on up here.”

Off to our right, we all heard the unmistakable sound of another El train coming in. Heads turned. This time the train was on the northbound track where Tinkerton and the goon were standing. They saw it, and so did we. Tinkerton was on the verge of losing it, but he did what Jamal said. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a money clip with a thick wad of bills and tossed it at the feet of the young black man.

“Done!” Tinkerton answered through clenched teeth. “Now toss them down.”

“His too,” Jamal said, pointing at the goon.

The goon frowned. “Give it to him!” Tinkerton shouted at him as the train came closer and closer. The goon did what he was told. He pulled out his wallet and tossed his loose cash onto the platform.

“Shee-it, Jamal,” one of the gang laughed as he picked the money up and started counting. “Gov'ment sho don't pay like it used to. You think Richie Daley or Jesse Jackson make chump change like this? Ah don't think so.”

“The guns, too,” Toothpick added.

“The guns?” Tinkerton glowered up at him. “No deal.”

“Your choice, Chuck,” Jamal smiled. “Put the guns up here or go fuck yo'self, 'cause we don't want nobody pullin' none of that shot-in-the-back-while-escapin crap.”

Reluctantly, Tinkerton and the goon laid their automatics on the edge of the concrete platform. Black hands quickly scooped them up and they disappeared in pockets. Tinkerton looked down the track at the onrushing train and began to fidget noticeably. "All right, you bastard! Now throw them down here."

"Uh, oh!" A gang member moaned. "Chuck jus' diss'ed Jamal's mama."

"He gonna be *real* sorry 'bout dat," another chuckled.

Jamal looked down at Tinkerton and shook his head. "Chuck, time you learned, some things ain't fo' sale down here. You want 'em, ya'll can come on up here and get 'em yourselves. Dey be all yours."

Tinkerton's eyes flared as he knew he'd been had. He grabbed the edge of the platform and tried to pull himself up, but his bandaged hand wouldn't support his weight and he fell back onto the tracks. Behind him, the goon had not even gotten that far. Given the choice of climbing up alone and facing the gang or staying in the path of an onrushing El train, the goon decided the top of the concrete barrier was the safer bet. Tinkerton looked at the train and gave up too, climbing up onto the barrier next to him. The ring of black faces laughed at them even harder now. In less than three minutes, they had picked Tinkerton and his goon clean and completely outmaneuvered him.

Tinkerton knew it too. He looked up at me in angry frustration and said, "I'm warning you, Talbott. It doesn't end here."

"You got that right, Ralph."

"You don't understand. They were scum. All of them. Scum!" he screamed, but his words were drowned out by the El as it roared into the station and stopped. The train doors opened. I grabbed Sandy's hand and headed for the open door, but she turned back.

"Thanks, Jamal," she told him.

He smiled, "Most fun we've had all week, Lil' Sister. A tidy profit, too. But you best watch out for that big dude. He be pissed at you and he *really* pissed at White Boy. He goin' cap his ass, he get the chance." With that, Jamal and his homies ran down the platform and climbed the stairs to the street.

We got on the train and looked out the window. Standing on the barrier next to us, I saw Tinkerton's face only inches from the glass. This had become personal. It had nothing to do with Columbus or the bodies, or the mob. He wasn't accustomed to losing or be humiliated like this, as I escaped from his grasp once again.

"Good thing the homies got his gun." Sandy chuckled. "Your lawyer friend's mad enough to melt the window glass." She pulled out her camera and began snapping shots at Tinkerton and the chaos on the Dan Ryan and back on LaSalle.

Behind Tinkerton, a growing crowd of dark-suited goons and Chicago cops yelled at each other and pointed up at the El car, but they were too late. The motorman was not about to wait around in the middle of all this chaos with all those guns out. The doors of the car closed and the train began to roll, picking up speed as we left the station.

"You know, Talbott, I gotta hand it to you," Sandy said, grinning from ear to ear. "Yesterday, I thought you were just another tight-ass nerd. What a hoot!" As Tinkerton and his goon watched, she reached up and threw her arms around my

neck. "Shows how little I know," she said as she gave me a big, wet kiss on the lips.

Chapter 21

With a \$5.00 rose and a \$50 Cubs hat...

For a small woman, it took it took a lot to pry her loose and set her back on the floor. It was a hard, wet, noisy kiss, and our faces were only inches apart as I raised my hand toward my mouth. "Don't you dare wipe that off." She grinned up at me. "It's bad luck."

"I wasn't wiping, I was checking to see if my lips are still here."

"Good idea. I've been known to damage some things when I get excited."

"I'll have to remember that."

"Yeah, you'll have to remember." She looped one arm around one of the El car's stainless steel poles and the other around mine, pulling me close. Her cheek was pressed against my arm and I could smell her hair. Considering we were screaming at each other only a half hour ago, I was surprised and suddenly very much afraid.

"Giving me a big wet one in front of Tinkerton wasn't real smart, you know."

"That depends on your perspective."

"It's going to be hard to argue I dragged you here against your will, but you knew that, didn't you?"

"My will, huh." She looked up and gave me a helpless shrug. "I guess I was so pumped after all that stuff back there, I couldn't control myself. But don't push me away, Talbott. Please. Let me have some fun before I come back down, okay?"

The El train quickly gained speed, rocking and clattering its way north, back into the city. Sandy seemed content with the vise grip on my arm and I was content to watch her reflection in the dirty window glass. Some people have a sixth sense when people are watching them. She must be one of them, because it didn't take long for her eyes to pan up and lock on mine as I watched her.

"What?" she asked with those dark, curious eyes.

"Thank you," I said.

"For what?"

"If it wasn't for you, they'd have had me for lunch."

"Who? Jamal and his Homies? Nah, they were just messing around. If you want to see some bad, I'll take you on a real tour of the south side."

"No thanks. I've had my adrenalin for the day. Look, I know I acted like a jerk this morning. Part of me wanted you to go away, but most of me was glad you stayed. So I apologize. I couldn't have done any of this without you."

"Jeez, a man who knows how to apologize. Does this mean we're a "we" again?"

"That's up to you, and Tinkerton."

"And you aren't going to run off and dump me the first chance you get, are you?"

"No," I said.

"Is that a promise? Because a gentleman like you would never break a solemn promise he made to a vulnerable young maiden like me. Would he?" She stared up at me with a straight face. "Okay," she added. "Maybe I'm not so vulnerable."

"Only if you promise me that if this all goes wrong and we get caught or they're closing in on us, you'll get away from me and run off and hide. Will you promise me that?"

"How sweet. He almost cares."

"I mean it, Sandy. I'm worried about you. Promise."

"All right, I promise. Cross my heart, I'll run away from you. But if you run away from me, I'll hunt you down like a mad dog."

That was a cheery thought. I looked around the El car. Spartan, you might call it. It had a tile floor, molded plastic seats, and aluminum poles with straps for the rush hour crowd to grab. Plastic: the surface of choice for a cattle car. Nothing to break, steal, or stain. And Sandy and I were the only white faces on the train. It had been noisy when we jumped in, then all conversation instantly ceased. The other passengers had their noses jammed into their newspapers or their eyes closed, hoping it would all go away.

I looked back through the window. The northbound lanes of the Dan Ryan were strewn with cars and trucks involved in the chain of accidents. Their drivers stood arguing with a growing army of cops and with each other. On the grassy bank, cops swarmed all over Gino Parini's white Mafia-wagon and I could barely make out Tinkerton and his goons working their way back up hill to LaSalle.

"That guy Tinkerton doesn't like you very much," she said.

"You believe me now?"

"Jamal was right. He's got you in his cross-hairs." She still had her arm wrapped around mine and she tightened her grip even more. It didn't look to me as if she had any intention of letting go. I knew it, she knew it, and we both knew the other one knew it, but neither of us wanted her to take it away. There was a newly found warmth and energy there and God, I had to admit it felt good. It had been a long time.

Behind us, some of the police cars had already turned around. Lights flashing, they raced north on LaSalle, trying to catch up. On the busy city streets at that time of day, they stood no chance. Sometimes though, if they couldn't do anything else, cops just liked to make noise. Eventually, Tinkerton would send a small army after us. The man had no shortage of anger or motivation, but he had no idea where we were going or where we might get off. For the moment anyway, we were free.

"How long do you want to stay on this thing?" she asked.

"You're the local expert, you got any suggestions?"

"The El drops underground in another mile and turns into a subway. It runs north under State Street into the Loop. We could get off at Randolph and run like hell."

"Running would not be a good thing. We want to be quick, but melt into the crowd."

"I'm much better at melting," she hugged my arm tighter.

I looked down at her, exasperated. "Are you going to keep making suggestive comments like that, because..."

"Hey, I'm just fooling around, Talbott," she said, not backing off an inch. "So lighten up. You sound like an old man."

"I am an old man. How old are you? God, you are sixteen, aren't you?" She smacked me on the arm. "That was to show you I do have a sense of humor."

"Humor? Well, they might lock you up for a lot of things, but you are way too late for statutory rape," she said with a twinkle in her eye. "I'm twenty-four."

"And I'm thirty-four and the longer I hang around with you, I'm not sure I'll ever see thirty-five."

"Then I've got a lot of work to do to 'young' you up, don't I?" She squeezed my arm tighter again. "'Cause I'm not ready to act thirty."

The train rolled on north through another station. "Okay," I said. "We'll get off at Randolph."

"We could go back to my aunt's. And I have a couple of girlfriends out in the suburbs I could call. Or we could hop on another subway and head north to Evanston."

"Bringing your friends would be a bad idea, but what's in Evanston?"

"My Toyota. I have it parked up there in a rental garage. It isn't much, but it's a car and it can get us to Milwaukee, or Peoria, or St. Louis, or somewhere."

"No, Tinkerton would have already checked on vehicle registrations and they'd have an APB out on your car and the license plates."

"Well, we can take the El out to O'Hare or Midway and catch a plane."

"You and me make it through airport security? That won't work."

"Let me think," she said. "There are some commuter railroads that come into the Loop. The Northwestern Station is about a half mile away. Or we could run over to Michigan Avenue and catch the Illinois Central or the South Shore."

"The South Shore? Where does that go?"

"South, dummy! Well, actually it swings east around the south shore of the lake into Indiana, as far as South Bend, I think. Eddie took me there once, to a Notre Dame game."

"Eddie? Did he go to Notre Dame?"

"Get real. His golden dome was above his ears. No, Eddie was a gambler and he liked to watch his money work. He bet like Pete Rose and he lied even worse. He would tell me he quit and then put down serious money on a half-dozen football games the next weekend. The bastard borrowed money from everybody, always looking for that big score. He hocked my camera once. I chipped his front tooth over that one."

"A real sweetheart."

"Yeah, he was a walk in the park. We had our moments though," she smiled wistfully. "They lasted about a week and a half after the honeymoon, when the love muffin disappeared and I woke up next to the real Eddie."

Through the window, I watched the train drop lower and lower until we disappeared inside a tunnel and everything went black. The lights came on inside the car and the rumbling clickety-clack of steel wheels reverberating off the concrete drowned out her voice. Outside, the first sign for the Randolph Street station flashed past.

"Is this where we get off?" I asked.

"Yeah."

I turned her around so she faced me and looked into her eyes. "Look, you can stay on the train and ride it to the end of the line, you know."

"Then what?" she asked. "Go home and feed the cat? Clean the kitchen? Bury the stiff in the rear yard? I don't think so."

"If you come with me, we're getting out of Chicago. I don't know where we're going, probably to Boston, and I don't how long it will be before you ever get back here."

"Promise? Because I'm bone tired of Chicago, Talbott. It's flat worn me out and there's nothing here I want to go back to. Frankly, Boston sounds pretty good to me. Anywhere sounds pretty good, so stop trying to talk me out of it." She still had her arm through mine and she pulled me out the door onto the platform. "I'm coming, are you?"

I pulled my arm free and ran down the platform toward the staircase, but she blew by me at a dead run. I ran after her, but I never stood a chance. In seconds, we were up on the street, walking away, and blending into the fast-moving crowd. The truth was I was glad she was with me. I also knew it was stupid and very dangerous, but I couldn't stop myself anymore. She was so alive, and I was so tired of being alone.

"Let's take the train to Indiana," I decided and told her. "The South Shore. It'll get us out of here, and it's in the right direction."

"Okay. The South Shore station is under the Prudential Building."

"I was there yesterday. I had to fight off the hookers for a pay phone."

"It's so nice to be wanted," she laughed as she latched onto my arm again. "We're disguised as a couple. But to make it work, you've got to pretend you're enjoying it."

We walked up Randolph past a long line of stores. Every half block I pulled her into a doorway. She would put both arms around me inside my jacket and rest her head on my chest while I looked up and down the street. "We could move a bit faster if you didn't keep doing that," I told her.

"I'm pretending, remember. So stop complaining."

What could I say? I looked up at the sky, expecting a lightning bolt to zap me any minute, but the tall buildings and deep doorways probably ruined Terri's aim.

At the next corner I saw the entrance to the underground commuter rail station. We passed two gypsy girls on the stairs hawking cellophane-wrapped roses to the tourists. Sandy started down the stairs, but I pulled her back and reached into my pants pocket. I pulled out a badly wrinkled five-dollar bill and handed it to one of the girls, who smiled and gave me one of the big red ones.

"Here," I said sheepishly as I turned and gave it to Sandy.

Her face lit up like a small child. "A rose? A red rose? You?" I seemed to have caught her completely by surprise. "Uh... I really don't know what to say, Talbott."

"You said to pretend we're a couple," I answered.

Before I could stop her, she reached up and kissed me softly on the cheek. "This is very sweet of you," she said. "I know you're just pretending, Talbott, and that's okay. You're safe out here on the street, but don't do something like this when we're alone."

Hand-in-hand, we ran down the stairs to the underground railroad station under the Prudential Building. There was a large, framed railroad route map standing next to the ticket booths. I found downtown and let my finger trace the line that ran south and east around Lake Michigan. Each colored dot represented a local or express train station.

"Here's my plan," I told her. "We'll take the next South Shore train, like you said, whatever comes first, and head into Indiana. If we move quickly, while Tinkerton and the cops are still streaming north, maybe we can slip through before they can close the net."

"Makes sense."

"Then stay close and keep quiet." We walked up to the ticket window at the far end. "When's the next train to Kankakee?" I asked the bald-headed ticket agent.

"That would be the Illinois Central. One's leaving on Track Six in..." He squinted through his bifocals as his finger ran down the schedule. "I make it twelve minutes."

"Two tickets, please," I smiled and handed him two twenty dollar bills. Next to the window was a rack with Amtrak brochures. I pulled out the one for the trains headed east from Chicago and stuck that in my pocket. With the tickets in hand, I smiled at him again and pulled Sandy away.

"Kankakee?" she whispered, confused. "That's straight south. I thought you said you wanted to go east, to Indiana?"

"Later," I answered as we walked to the far side of the cavernous waiting room. Sitting on a hard wooden bench, I saw a pre-teen girl with blue jeans, a book bag, and a Cubs baseball hat on her head. Her eyes were closed. She had earphones in her ears and an iPod hanging around her neck. Her feet dancing to the music. I walked up to her with Sandy in tow and tapped her on the knee.

"Wow, a Cubs hat!" I said with a friendly grin as her eyes opened. "You know, I promised my girl friend here that I'd buy her one while we were in Chicago, but the store in the hotel was out and we've got to leave."

"So?" the girl eyed me suspiciously.

"Twenty bucks. I'll buy it from you."

Slowly, the girl took the hat off, examined it carefully, and looked back up at me as she considered the offer. "Fifty," she countered.

"Fifty!" Sandy said. "For a lousy fifteen buck hat?"

The girl shrugged and put the hat back on her head. "I'm not the one with the promises, am I?" She answered with a knowing smile and eyes much older than her years.

I had no choice but to laugh as I dug in my pocket and handed the girl two twenties and a ten. I took the girl's hat and pulled Sandy back into an alcove.

"I don't believe you. Fifty bucks? You're nuts."

"Hush," I told her. "Put your aunt's wig on." She did and I put the Cubs hat on over it, pulling it down low, so it rode on top of her ears. "Now go to the ticket window at the other end and buy two South Shore tickets on the first train for Indiana." I took her shoulder bag from her and the rose. "It won't take Tinkerton's people long to check all the stations and talk to the ticket agents. When they lay our photographs in front of baldy back there, he'll remember us and he'll

remember the two tickets I bought for Kankakee. With the Cubs hat and the blond hair, the other guy won't. Now go."

"Talbot." She looked up at me with a new hint of respect. "Underneath that slightly dim-witted dweeb exterior, you can be one sneaky son-of-bitch. I have hopes for you."

She walked away toward the ticket booth as I took a seat on the bench. I had her big shoulder bag. It was like a cookie jar on the kitchen counter. I could grab the papers and be out the door before she knew I was gone. It was a thought, a good one, and probably even the right one, but I couldn't do that to her.

She came running back, took my hand, and pulled me along. "Let's go, we gotta hurry. Our train's leaving on Track Four in three minutes."

"South Bend?"

"No. I bought tickets on a local. There's an express leaving in thirty minutes that goes as far as Michigan City, but we don't want to sit here that long. The local connects with it at 59th Street. We can get off, wait there, and buy tickets on the express."

"Very smart. And very sneaky, too."

"See, Talbot?" She grinned happily. "What ever would you do without me?"

"Don't let it go to your head."

"Then move your ass, because the three minutes we had is now two."

She grabbed her shoulder bag and the rose and we ran down the tunnel. "By the way," she asked. "How come you didn't grab the papers and take off without me?"

I looked shocked. "You know, that never even occurred to me."

"Bullshit! You thought about it all right, but I've got eyes like a hawk and you aren't half fast enough to get away with it."

"You know, that must have been it," I answered as we jumped on board the nearly empty commuter train and plopped side-by-side in one of the rear seats on the far side of the car. The South Shore Line had gaudy orange cars with diamond-shaped accordion contraptions on top that connected to overhead electrical wires. Not that I cared. The train could burn cow chips as long as it got us the hell out of Chicago.

She put the rose to her nose and took a big sniff. "Presents are nice," she said as she gave me a hug. "So we're off to Boston?"

"I have friends there. Maybe we can get some help."

"That works for me. I locked the store. I've got my camera and a tooth brush," she said as she patted her bag. "I've even got a rose and a new baseball hat, and I've got you. What more could a girl possibly want?"

"Sandy..."

"Relax, Talbot. I'm just joking with you again. Really. I don't go where I'm not wanted, so you're safe."

Wasn't this going to be fun, I thought. This trip with her is going to be a ball of laughs, if it doesn't get us both killed first. Fun? Laughs? She was pressed up against me, holding tightly onto my arm. Despite her promises, I could tell she wasn't joking at all.

Chapter 22

Praise the Lord for Catholic girls schools ...

The South Shore tracks were in a deep cut well below street level and the train finally found sunshine a couple of blocks south of the station. A staccato of black shadows flashed across the windows as we passed under a succession of trestles, overhead wiring, and bridges. As we went under one of the wider ones, a line of Chicago police cars raced by above us, sirens wailing and their blue strobe lights flashing, headed for Michigan Avenue.

"Right direction." Sandy pointed a finger at them like a pistol and pulled the trigger. "But a tad too late."

The train began to slow as we approached the first station. The car's doors opened, but the platform outside was nearly empty — no cops, no dark suits, no sunglasses, and no Disciple 35th Nation homies waiting on this platform. I saw nothing more sinister than a handful of housewives with shopping bags. Still, I could not completely relax until the doors closed and the train headed south again. As it picked up speed, I leaned my head back on the seat and realized how bone tired I was. The physical pounding and emotional stress of the past three days had all taken their toll.

Twenty-five minutes and eight stations later, we finally reached 59th Street and got off. We found ourselves on a high, wind swept platform a half-mile west of the lakefront. The tracks and the station were up at the second story level, giving us a three-hundred-and-sixty degree panorama of a run-down southeast side neighborhood. We slipped around the corner of a billboard and tried to blend into the graffiti. I looked at my watch. We had ten minutes before the express train to Indiana caught up with us. Sandy looked at the panorama and pulled out her camera.

"Get me in the foreground and you can get top dollar from *The Enquirer*," I said.

"That is so unfunny. *The Enquirer*? I'm an *artiste*, you dolt." Clearly, I had hit "ze hot button." I made the mistake of grinning and she saw me. Her eyes narrowed. "You were pulling my chain, weren't you? Teasing me, about my work? About my camera? Do you have a death wish, Talbott?" She walked slowly toward me with her lethal fingers out. "You like pain?"

"No, no, I love photography. Black and white. Never color."

"Why do you think I work at that art gallery? You think I like that old fart Fantozzi chasing me around the storeroom. The kids pictures? The Polish weddings?" I've been taking classes at the Art Institute, working on my own show," she said, still coming at me. "Le Magnifique and all that other crap pays my tuition."

"I was only teasing," I said, backing up until she had me trapped against the billboard.

She broke up giggling. "That was way too easy," she said as she pressed in against me. "Gino was right, you really are a wuss."

"There's a reason why men hate women, you know."

"It isn't fair, is it?" she said with a mischievous twinkle in her eye. "And now I've got you right where I want you." She put her arms around me, her small, hard breasts pressing into my stomach. One could argue that it was just "one of those things"—two bodies at the same place at the same time. Most guys wouldn't complain or even comment, but this wasn't "one of those things." She knew exactly what she was doing and I didn't dare say a word. That would only make things worse. I could have turned or pulled away, but she had me backed up to the billboard, so I couldn't do that either. I didn't want to. And I couldn't kid myself that I didn't like it, because I did.

Her head only came up to my chest. I looked down and saw those jet black eyes locked on mine. Neither of us said anything, but almost imperceptibly she shifted her body and her breasts moved ever so lightly across me. I closed my eyes. That was one of the most incredibly erotic feelings I had ever experienced.

"Please don't." I leaned forward and whispered into the top of her head. I could tell she was about to say something, so I laid a gentle finger across her lips. "Please don't," I repeated, thinking how wonderful her hair smelled. "And don't say anything. Please."

She could tell from my expression that I wasn't playing anymore, so she backed away. She started to say something, but she stopped and looked confused and deeply embarrassed. I could see she was about to cry. "It's your wife again, Terri, isn't it?" she whispered as she pressed her face into my chest and began to blubber. "Peter, I didn't mean anything. No, that's a big lie. I did mean something. I meant a lot! But I was only being playful, flirting, trying to make you feel good. Now I feel so horrible, because the last thing in the world I want is to hurt you." She buried her face in my chest and started to sob. "I can do that Peter, make you feel good and help you, if you'll let me."

I tipped her head up and pressed my finger against her lips again. "It's okay. We can talk about it later, I just can't talk about it now, okay?" I knew this was going to happen some day. It had to, and I knew I would be no more prepared for it then than I was the day Terri died. Maybe I would never be. Looking down at Sandy, I knew the choice was going to be made for me, and I had better figure out how to deal with it.

Mercifully, I saw the headlights of two silver, electric railroad cars bouncing down the tracks toward us. "Let's get out of here," I whispered. She pulled away as the train stopped next to us and we quickly got aboard. The car was about half full, but we were able to find an empty seat near the back. Sandy sat down a few inches away from me, stiff and wooden. Seconds later, the train pulled out and quickly picked up speed. I looked out the window. There wasn't a single cloud in the high, blue sky, but I knew Terri was up there somewhere watching all of this. I was still hopelessly in love with her, but I knew I was quickly falling in love with Sandy at the same time. But she had me tied in knots so bad, I couldn't even talk to her about it.

Out of totally lame desperation, I put my arm around her shoulders and pulled her closer. "You didn't do anything wrong, Sandy. I'm just damaged goods and you're going to have to give me some time and space to work it out, okay?"

"Damaged goods? *You?*" she looked up at me in disbelief "I had a husband go gay on me. He gets shot to death by his boyfriend. I'm a not-so-recovering

alcoholic who goes to AA meetings three or four times a week, and I haven't had a guy even want to leave my toilet seat up for two years. And you think *you're* damaged goods?"

"Sandy, look..."

"No, no, I swear I'll behave, just don't be mad at me, Peter. I don't think I could take that." She leaned her head against my chest and we sat like that without talking for a long time, longer than I could imagine her staying quiet. "You know," she finally said. "In Michigan City, I remember there's a big commuter parking lot near the station, one of those self-park things."

"And?"

"And we can get off there, well short of South Bend, boost a car, and head east. In a commuter lot like that, it could be a long time before a car would ever be missed."

"Is 'boosting' cars something else from your wayward youth?"

"Seventh Grade at Infant Jesus of Prague," she said, then looked up at me. "It's a Catholic girls school on the North side... Really."

"Really?" I looked at her, convinced she had to be making this up as she went along.

"I'm serious. Bobby McNally taught me a lot of things and boosting cars was one of them. By junior year of high school, he was running a car-parts-to-order business from the back of the cafeteria. If you needed a transmission for a '95 Olds. A carburetor for a new BMW. Maybe custom chrome hubcaps, bucket seats, the whole engine. Bobby's little band of elves would have it for you the next morning. Half the body shops on the south side were calling him."

"And you were one of his elves, I suppose?"

"Let me put it this way. You keep doing all the deep thinking and I'll handle the little details like getting us there."

I leaned back in the seat and the rocking of the car and the rhythmic rattle of the steel wheels on the rails proved too much. With her head on my chest and a drowsy afternoon sun washing in through the window, sweet girl smells slowly wrapped themselves around me and I fell asleep. The next thing I felt was Sandy's soft fingers on my cheek. "Wake up. We're getting near Michigan City and I don't want you to be a zombie when we get there." I sat up and looked out the window, as we passed the first sign for Michigan City and the train began to slow. As the train pulled into the station, I saw the large, fenced commuter lot she mentioned, sitting across the street from the train station.

"It's got a guard," I pointed down at the booth and the gate across the exit.

"A parking lot attendant?" she scoffed. "Piece of cake."

We walked down the long flight of concrete stairs, across the street, and past the guard as if we belonged there. She was right. He was at least sixty, fat and gray, studying the centerfold in *Hunter's Digest* with a stub of a cigar clenched between his teeth.

"A retired postal worker," Sandy walked me to the rear of the lot and held out her arms like a used car salesman surveying her empire. "What's your preference today, Mister Talbott? Feel a little racy?" She wiggled her eyebrows. "No? That Volvo's got your name on it. Or, maybe that lovely Toyota Corolla." She pulled me

farther away from the gate. "I've got it. That dusty, dark-green Chevrolet two rows back that looks like it hasn't moved for a couple of days That's the one for us."

As we walked over, I saw she was right about the dust.

"It's less obvious than the imports," she went on. "And I won't need a computer to get into the ignition. Besides, the button on the passenger door is up, which means it isn't even locked. Here, hold out your hand." She opened her bag, dug to the bottom, pulled out a quarter, and dropped it in my palm. "Pretend it's a screw driver. While I play with the ignition, you switch the rear plate with the one on that Firebird in the next row. It'll give us a little edge."

"More Bobby McNally?"

"Him, or an Elmore Leonard novel, or maybe it was an old MacGyver, I can't remember which. Anyway, get moving."

"Yes, ma'am, but what about the front plate?"

"I'll do it after I get the engine started."

"You think I can't do them both by myself?"

She looked at me again as if I was a third-grader. Sure enough, before I had the rear plate even halfway off the Chevrolet, she had the engine running, the front plate changed, and was standing over me with another dose of humiliation. Looking down at my limited progress, she pulled a large key ring from her purse. "Men," I heard her mutter. The key ring had enough gadgets dangling from it to overhaul a tank and she quickly had the rear license plate off the Firebird. She came over, knelt next to me, and used her tool on the last screw on the Chevrolet.

"Well, it was rusty," I argued. "And I didn't have one of those Swiss Army tool kits like you've got." I pointed toward her key ring.

"No whining, Talbott," she said as she screwed the Firebird's license plate into place. "I'll give you a cookie later, now get in. I'll drive," she said. When I looked at her and frowned, she quickly added, "After what you did to that poor Lincoln, don't you dare look at me like that. Besides, I can get us past that Bozo and out of here, and all you'll accomplish is to get us thrown in jail."

Before she put the car in gear, she reached behind her back, unfastened her bra, did some contortions inside her lime-green top, and pulled the bra out the neck opening. She pulled on the collar and stretched even more. "Relax. This show isn't for you," she said as she put the car in gear and drove down the long aisle to the exit. When she stopped next to the ticket booth, she leaned forward and looked up at the attendant so he could see right down the neck opening at her breasts.

"Hey," she smiled helplessly up at him. "I've looked everywhere, but I can't find that damned ticket,"

"Sorry, Miss," he said, looking down, gawking. "Uh, it's a two-day minimum." He tapped the sign under the window. "That's thirty bucks."

"Thirty bucks! That's a rip, man," she said as she fumbled in her purse and reluctantly handed over the money.

"Sure is, but better you get ripped than me. If I give a ticket out, I gotta turn one in or they take the thirty bucks out of my pay. But you have a nice day now, you hear."

We drove out on the street and turned right. "It ain't what you got, Talbott, it's knowing how to use it."

"I suppose you learned that at 'Infant Jesus of Prague too?"

"No, tenth grade at Pius the 12th, Sister Mary Boniface, English Lit."

I turned and looked at her. "All you did was flash the guy."

"Some people just don't understand art." She shook her head with a wistful smile. "The guard would remember you, but when I stopped, he never looked at my face, the car, you, or anything else. You may not appreciate them, but he sure did."

I smiled and looked at my watch. It was almost 2:00. "Let's find the signs for I-80," I told her as I opened the glove compartment. I pawed through the trash inside. At the bottom, I found a couple of battered road maps and pulled them out.

We had reached an empty stretch of road and she pulled over to the curb. "Turn around," she told me. I started to turn toward her only to get a slap on the shoulder. "The other way, you moron! I want to put my bra back on." I turned away as she pulled the lime green top up over her head. "And don't you dare watch me in the window glass, or I'll slap you silly." She stopped to untangle the bra before she put it back on and I smiled as I watched her in the window glass, then turned my eyes to the Michigan road map. She slapped me on the back. "You turkey! You were watching. I saw that!"

"I was controlling myself just fine until you told me not to look."

"Talbot, you have more self control in your little finger than all the other guys I've ever met put together," she said as she pulled the top back over her head. "So suffer!"

The Michigan road map showed the northern tier of Ohio, too. On the back, I found a table with mileage between US cities. "It's nine hundred miles to Boston."

"There's always Washington DC. We need to call Timmy Hardin tomorrow. We could go there."

"Maybe, but Boston first."

Up ahead we saw the first sign for I-80. Sandy pointed. "Isn't the toll road the first place they'll look if they think we're heading east?"

I looked fondly at the sign, but she was right.

"It's going to take us all night to get that far anyway," she said. "And that's too many hours in a stolen car."

"Yeah, I know." I reached in my pocket and pulled out the Amtrak brochures. "There's a train from Chicago to Boston." I looked at the schedule. "We can catch it in Toledo. No one would be looking for us there."

"Toledo? You got that right. And the train? Sneaky."

"It doesn't leave there until 1:30 in the morning and it doesn't get to Boston until 6:30 tomorrow evening."

"Not exactly like flying, is it?"

"No, but slow and meandering might keep us under Tinkerton's radar."

"It won't take us six hours to get to Toledo, so we have a lot of time to kill."

"We'll take the back roads," I said as I looked down at the map. "You drive for a while and I'll navigate."

"Sounds like a plan," she said as she reached for the radio. "Just one little problem, I can't go six hours without a big dose of Merle Haggard."

I wanted to gag, but I didn't want another bruise so I let it go.

Route 12 ran up along the Lake Michigan shore for twenty miles and then cut across the rolling farmland of southern Michigan through the small towns of Niles,

Sturgis, Summerset, and Coldwater, until we dropped south to Toledo. For the first hour, we drove in silence, enjoying the calm and the quiet. The road was flat, boring, and empty.

"Look, Peter, I know you think I'm some kind of air head, a silly ditz, like Parini called me, and most of the time I am."

"No, I don't." I sat up and turned toward her.

"Yes you do. But you're going to pretend you don't, and I'm going to pretend I believe you, because it's been a long time since I've had a nice guy around, and I like to pretend too. You pretend and I'll pretend, and sooner or later we're going to pretend ourselves right into the sack. That'll be a lot of fun and something we could both can use, But when the clock strikes midnight, I'm going to be like Cinderella at the end of the ball, alone, with nothing but a couple of mice, a big pumpkin, and some lovely memories to keep me company."

"That's not going to happen, Sandy."

"Yes it is. But I'm a big girl, so don't go getting the guilts about me. I'm going to pretend right along with you until that clock strikes twelve, and I'm going to enjoy the hell out of it while it lasts."

Chapter 23

Toledo, where make-overs start, but never end...

Sandy was driving and humming in time with the radio as it played a song about a guy who painted his name and Bobbie Jean's on the water tower in John Deere green. I'll have to remember that the next time I want a date in Iowa, I thought.

"What do you think of Parini?" she looked over and asked.

"Parini?" I shrugged. "That's like asking me what I think of an avalanche."

"Be serious."

"I am serious. He's big, he's powerful, and you don't want to get in his way."

"Then, you think he's a bad guy?"

"Good? Bad? He does what he's told to do. That could be planting flowers, picking them, or stomping the Bejeezuz out of them, but he does what he's told."

"Well, I like him. I see something in his eyes."

"Is that the photographer talking? All I see is the chrome-plated .45 in his hand."

"Maybe. I just don't think he's all bad."

"Speaking of bad..." I looked over at the gas gauge and at the clock. "Let's get off at the next exit and get some gas. I need to make a phone call."

"Your friend in Boston?"

"Yeah."

"But if he doesn't know anything, why would Tinkerton bother him?"

"Because Tinkerton doesn't think that way. He'll keep his goons stomping around in the dark until they step on something. Then look down and see what it is."

We found a Shell station in a small town east of Niles. Sandy started filling the tank while I headed for the pay phone. As I dropped in some change and dialed Doug's office number, I watched her check out the car. She looked at the oil and the air pressure in the tires. She even took off the cover the air cleaner and held the filter up to the light, shaking her head disapprovingly. If my car ever was stolen, I hoped it was by a thief with a mechanic fetish like this one. Then I remembered. My car *was* stolen. By a County Sheriff back in Ohio, about a hundred years ago.

On the third ring, I heard a friendly receptionist's voice say, "Symbiotic Software, how may I help you?"

"Doug's office, please. If he's not in, put me through to Sharon. Tell them it's Pete Talbott and I need to talk to one of them."

I heard a couple of minutes of what I guessed was a Mozart piano concerto. I didn't call in very often, and it was nice to see Doug had risen from his Grateful Dead phase to a higher intellectual plain. Finally, someone came on the line, but it wasn't Sharon.

"Pete? Hi, this is Jeanie Simpson in HR." She sounded hesitant, almost unsure. "Doug isn't here. He didn't come in this morning and we're getting worried."

"What about Sharon? Isn't she there?"

"She didn't come in either," Jeanie paused, still not sure. "Look, I know you two are old friends or I wouldn't say this, but when Doug and Sharon's desks were both empty this morning... well, the common assumption was they had gone off somewhere together."

"Doug and Sharon? That didn't happen."

"I didn't think so either, but it wasn't my place to question. However, he missed two appointments this morning and a conference call with the bankers."

"Doug missed a call with his bankers? Have you called the police?"

"I called Ted McDermott, our attorney. He said the police won't touch it for forty-eight hours, so we had to sit tight."

"Ted's right, Doug will probably come wandering in tomorrow morning with some lame excuse, so sit tight," I told her, not believing a word I was saying, but I didn't want to get the office staff involved. "Jeanie, when you came on the line just now, you sounded surprised to hear from me."

"You had several phone calls this morning. A man was asking if we knew where you were. He was polite enough, but my radar went up. First he tried the receptionist, then Programming, and then he tried working me."

"What did he say?"

"He said he was calling from California, from your old office, and that he had to talk to you about some project the two of you had been working on. He was very, very persistent and he wanted to know if I knew how to reach you. But it just wasn't right."

"What wasn't?"

"Excuse me for being blunt, but I'm HR. I knew you had been out of work for quite some time in Los Angeles, so what could you possibly have been working on with this man? And he said he was calling from California."

"California?"

"Yes, but we have Caller ID on all the incoming lines and the display showed the call was from a local Boston number. That's why it didn't seem right. And then the Boston Police started calling this afternoon, asking if we knew where you were."

"You did the right thing," I reassured her. "Tell the office staff, if they get any more calls from that guy, they should play dumb. You haven't heard from me, you haven't talked to me, and you don't have a clue where I am. But if you can, get them on tape."

"Are you coming back? Can you help?"

"I'm going to try. I'm in Amarillo, Texas. If I can, I'll call you again tomorrow."

After I hung up, I stayed in the phone booth for a long minute, playing the "what-ifs" back to myself. As usual, I came up with more questions, but not very many answers. What I did know was that we had to get to Boston and we had to be careful.

The rest of the drive across southern Michigan was uneventful. I took the wheel for the second half of the trip. We took it slow and stopped for coffee and a late lunch before we hit Toledo at 6:30 PM. There wasn't much traffic by that time. What there was, was all leaving town, not going in. That made it easy to find the train station. It was a big, neo-classic building named Union Station, like most other downtown train stations in the Midwest. It was south of the tall buildings, down on the river. We circled it twice, staying a full block away. All we saw was a cop car parked near a donut shop, no SWAT Teams or ugly sedans with black-walled tires were lurking nearby.

"Drop me at the front door," Sandy said. "I'll look around the waiting room." She could tell I didn't look very happy at that thought. "You're something else, Talbott." She pulled the blond wig from her shoulder bag. In seconds the transformation was complete. "We need to know, and it's better to find out now than later. If I come running back out, you'll know it was a really bad idea."

It did not take more than three minutes before she came strolling back out and hopped in the car, holding a newspaper in her hand. "Unless they're disguised as bored ticket agents, a very old black porter, or a couple of really gross homeless guys laying a bench in the back corner, nobody's home. Let's go."

As I drove away, she opened the newspaper. It was the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. She flipped through the pages in the first section. "Oops!" she said. "We made the AP wire."

I pulled over to the side of the street and read the story over her shoulder. It was inside, on Page 4, but they had the photo from my California driver's license next to the story. Nothing makes you look more like a perp than one of those. *I made a mental note to cross Arnold Schwarzenegger off my Christmas card list.*

TWO WANTED IN MIDWEST CRIME SPREE

Chicago. Chicago Police joined a three-state manhunt for a modern-day, Bonnie and Clyde. Following a high-speed chase through the south side this

morning, two police officers were seriously injured when the pair shot their way through a roadblock at 35th Street creating havoc on the Dan Ryan Expressway. They escaped north on an El train and disappeared in the Chicago Loop. A large manhunt is continuing downtown and police sources consider both suspects armed and dangerous.

The pair are believed to have escaped with the help of the Disciples, a notorious south side street gang. CPD Gang Intelligence says the two white fugitives may be major players in an interstate drug trafficking syndicate from the west coast believed to be muscling its way into the Chicago rackets with the help of a Columbian cocaine cartel.

The man is identified by Chicago Police as Peter E. Talbott, a drifter from Los Angeles who faked his own death in Mexico last year. He is wanted for questioning regarding the death of a private security guard on the north side earlier this morning, and in Ohio for the murders of a county sheriff and two ambulance attendants.

His unnamed female accomplice has not yet been identified. She is described as a short, punk rocker with black hair and heavy make-up...

That got a rise out of my unnamed female accomplice. "A punk rocker with heavy make-up!" she exploded.

"And short."

Her eyes became thin dark slits. "Don't let your mouth get your butt in trouble, Talbott, but what's this stuff about us shooting our way through a roadblock?"

"And the *death of a private security guard... major players in an interstate drug trafficking ring... a drifter who faked his own death in Mexico last year?* Tinkerton is losing it. Odd, though, there's no mention of the Feds. No *FBI* sources, only the Chicago cops."

"Well, he's got you labeled as a cop-killer now. He wants you dead."

Not just me, I thought but didn't say, *and that is what I'm afraid of*. "We have almost six hours before the train leaves," I told her.

"A girl can always shop. Let's go back to the Interstate and find a mall. I need some things and you could use a new look, too. Besides." She gave me that look again. "The balcony of a dark movie theater is a good place to hide and kill some time."

"They don't have balconies anymore."

"Darn!"

We found a mall at an interchange in the suburbs and wandered through a large department store. I picked out a pair of dress jeans, a plum-patterned Polo shirt, and a dark blue casual blazer. Sandy bought a light blue top, a dark-blue skirt-shorts combination, and a jacket. We had the clerk cut off the tags, and we went to the fitting rooms to change. When she came back out, she took me by the arm and pulled me down the concourse. "There's something else I still need to do with you."

"You've been trying hard enough," I mumbled.

"Not that!" She smacked my arm and pulled me into a makeup shop. "Your face. Your hair. It would be great if you grew a beard, but there's no time. Besides, they get scratchy in all the wrong places while they're growing in." I looked at her, but it

did no good. "What if you go blond? The hair and the eyebrows?" She started rummaging through the tubes and bottles on the shelf. "Nothing phony or bleachy, just a nice soft natural look."

"I suppose you know how to use that stuff?"

"Six months in beautician's school, that's like graduate school for us bimbos and ditzes." She looked at me with a twinkle in her eyes. "I have the blonde wig, but I think I'm going to get a light brown color and maybe something coppery-red. I've done them all."

"I'll miss the black, is that your natural color?" I asked, not thinking.

"That's for you to find that out, Talbott." She stuck out her tongue and turned away.

Out in the mall we found a 12-plex theater. There was no balcony, but she was right. It was a great place to hide. The movie was a singles dating comedy starring a bunch of twenty-somethings I had never heard of, but it was her pick and I didn't care. The theater had those big recliner stadium seats and it was mostly empty.

"Can I pretend we're a couple again?" she asked as she snuggled close. It didn't matter, because five minutes later I fell sound asleep.

It was probably an hour later when I woke up with my head buried in her shoulder. "God, I'm sorry, Sandy, that must have killed your arm."

"Don't be," she whispered. "I haven't had a guy fall asleep on me for a long, long time, not one I cared about anyway." I looked at her, but she shook her head. "Don't! It was only a nap, nothing you need to feel guilty about."

"I don't feel guilty."

"Oh, yes you do." She leaned closer and kissed me gently on the cheek. "You feel guilty about a lot of things you have no reason to feel guilty about. That's one of the many subjects you and I need to talk about. Now shut up and watch the end of the movie."

After the movie, I had her drive back to the train station. That gave me a chance to look over the Amtrak schedule and routes. "Some of the trains have private compartments," I said. "It would be great if we could get one all the way to Boston."

"Like Jack Lemmon and Marilyn Monroe in *Some Like It Hot*? But that's in black-and-white, so I doubt you ever saw it."

"I did so. But the Amtrak compartments are a lot bigger now, like a small room. Maybe we could get one of those."

"Yeah? You and me, alone in a small room. I can't wait."

"Would you stop that! This is hard enough for me as it is."

"Yeah, I'll bet it is."

I looked over at her and glared.

"All right, I'll behave. I promise."

"Seems to me, you said that before," I reminded her. "But if we get stuck sitting in an open coach, we'll have to bail out in the morning, maybe a couple of times, and try something else. So we really want a compartment." I looked at the schedule and ran my finger down the chart. "Wow. It'll run us almost \$1,200." I dug in my pockets and counted out what was left of the Sheriff's Coffee Fund and Louie Panozzo's envelope. "We have enough, but it will take us down to maybe \$500 in cash. That's okay, if I can get some help in Boston."

"I've got another idea." Sandy said as she dug into a pocket in the shoulder bag and pulled out an American Express Gold Card with the name "La Magnifique" embossed on the front. "I forgot all about this. Old Man Fantozzi gave it to me so I could handle CODs and drop offs at Fed Ex, stuff like that. It's in the store's name, not mine, and it has a \$5,000 line of credit. Nobody knows about it except Fantozzi."

"You're sure?"

"He won't even see a bill until the end of the month. I know the charge card confirmation number and codes by heart, so I can call the credit card company and find out if anybody put a hold on the number before I use it. I can even get the charge pre-approved."

"You sure about that?"

"No, but if I hear anything funky, I'll hang up and we can use the cash. So what's to lose?" There was a pay phone in the foyer of the restaurant. While I paid, she called American Express. It only took a couple of minutes, but when she came back, she was smiling and waving her Gold Card. "Like I thought, nobody knows about this card."

We left and drove back downtown. I found a city parking garage four blocks away near two big department stores. I picked the middle level and backed it into a dark spot next to a big SUV. It was perfect. No one would even know the Chevy was there. It was after 11:00 PM by the time we walked back to Union Station. I hung around a rack of Amtrak maps, while Sandy went to the ticket counters. She returned five minutes later holding two ticket folders in her hand.

"Any problems?"

"Nope. The train is only half full. I got one of the bedroom compartments, like it showed in your brochure, all the way to Boston. But I still can't believe it costs eleven-hundred and eighty-six dollars."

"Le Magnifique can dock your pay."

"My pay? That's a joke. They'll have to fight with my landlord, the IRS, and Dombrowski's Funeral Home on Montrose if they want what's left."

"Dombrowski's Funeral Home?"

"Eddie even stiffed me for the funeral. I told them they could dig the little shit back up and flush him down the toilet for all I cared. Instead, they sent in the lawyers."

The train didn't leave for two hours, but there was no sense trying to leave the station. The waiting room was exposed, but everything downtown was closed by then and we'd be even more visible out on the street. I looked around and picked a heavy wooden bench in the rear corner. I sat with my eyes on the door and she lay on the bench with her head in my lap, staring up at me, saying nothing. That in itself was remarkable, but I knew I couldn't take it for very long.

After about fifteen minutes of awkward silence, I finally got up enough nerve to say what I had wanted to say for two days. "I need to tell you something."

"I've heard that one before, Talbott. If you tell me you're gay, I swear, I'll kill you right here and now." I laid one of my fingers across her lips. That was the only way I ever found so far to shut her up, then or now. Then I put my hand over her eyes so she couldn't look at me.

"What are you doing?" she mumbled.

"Please be quiet. I can't talk to you while you're looking at me like that, or when you keep interrupting me. In fact, I can't talk to you at all, and that's part of my problem."

"That is ridiculous." She ran her tongue up my finger and kissed it.

"Stop that!"

"Oops, I forgot." She giggled. "Sor-ry."

"And be quiet. It's not ridiculous. *I'm* always afraid of saying the wrong thing to you, and all *you* ever do is crack jokes and say or do something suggestive. I'm having a *real* problem with that, Sandy."

She didn't say anything at first. "And you don't have a clue, do you?"

"A clue? Don't say it's because I'm in love with you. We barely know each other. And don't say it's because I'm an awkward computer geek who can't handle a *real* woman like you... God knows that's probably true, but I've known plenty of women. You're hardly the first. I talk to women. I was *married* to a woman. But you, I can't talk to."

Her answer came very matter-of-factly. "It's because you're terrified of me,"

"More jokes, see what I mean?"

"It's not a joke, Peter. You may *know* plenty of women, and you may *talk* to plenty of women, and I know you were married to a truly wonderful woman who I know you loved very, very deeply. But how many women have you been with since Terri died?"

I looked at her for a moment, realizing this conversation was spinning dangerously out of control. "*Been* with?" I asked. "You mean slept with?"

"Not really. How many have you let touch you? How many have you let inside those walls you've put up, and let help you?"

"None," I finally answered, my voice barely above a whisper. "Not since Terri. No, the truth is, for a long time before Terri."

"Because you feel guilty. Because I make you feel guilty, and that's a big, big wall that none of us mere mortals can ever hope to climb over."

"What I'm feeling, it has nothing to do with you. Well, it does, but..."

"Women can read you like a book, Peter. If you look at one of us, or think about one of us, or think about physical contact or any kind of intimacy, or, *god-forbid*, think of having sex with one of us, you have a panic attack. You think you're being disloyal."

I couldn't say anything, because somehow, in two days, this *elf* had me nailed.

I bet I've gotten closer to you than anyone, but you've made Terri an impossible act for me or any woman to follow." Even with my hand over her eyes, I could feel tears in the palm of my hand.

"Oh, don't do that," I groaned, feeling even worse as I wiped away the big crocodile tears running down her cheeks. "That's not fair."

"I'm not going to apologize this time. I can't help it," she sputtered. "I told you I was a sap for stuff like this. Well, the fact is, Peter Talbott, you can't talk to me because you are afraid of what it might mean if you let me get close. And you are right. All I do is crack jokes, try to get you in the sack, and cry, because I'm just as *terrified* of you."

"Why would you be terrified of me?"

“Are you kidding? That kind of love? That kind of loyalty? I know you think I’m a silly little girl who doesn’t come close to measuring up to what you need or what you had. And I know we don’t know each other very well, but I know everything I will ever need to know about you. I knew it that back in Chicago at my aunt’s, maybe before that. So at least give me a chance. Guys like you come along maybe once in a million years and I’m petrified that I’m going to blow this thing with you.”

Chapter 24

Where Glenn Frey meets the lower bunk...

The Amtrak train came twenty minutes late. Our car was the near the rear and we walked quickly to the gate and got on board. An elderly black porter met us in the passageway; his nametag read “Phillip.” He opened the door of our compartment with a big smile as he handed me two keys, telling me the restaurant car opened at 6:00 AM.

“Thank you, Phillip.” I steered him aside. “My wife and I are on our honeymoon and we are absolutely exhausted,” I whispered quietly to him. “In the morning, maybe you can bring us some food from the dining car.”

“It would be my great pleasure, sir,” he smiled. “There’s a menu on the table inside. If you check off what you want and slide it out under the door, I’ll take care of everything.”

“Thanks. But, I have another problem, too. My wife’s brother’s with the FBI and he’s a real joker. He and a couple of our other friends love to pull pranks.” I handed him a folded one-hundred dollar bill. “That’s so you won’t tell anyone that you saw us, or saw anybody that looks like us. Now, he’s clever. He’ll probably flash a badge and growl and bluster, and tell you we’re wanted for something, but you never saw us, okay? Because I have another hundred in my pocket if we make it to Boston undisturbed.”

“Yes, sir!” Phillip said as he reached up and switched the placard on the door from Occupied to Vacant. “And don’t you worry, Mister... Smith. I shall see to it personally that no one bothers you or your wife. Now, ya’ll have a good night.”

I stepped inside and locked the door behind me.

“That was really sneaky, Talbott,” Sandy said. She was no more than two feet away from me, which was about as far apart as we were likely to get for quite a while.

I looked around. “My bedroom closet in California was bigger than this.” The entire compartment was only 6’ 6” by 7’ 6”, with a couch along one wall and a pull-down bunk above it. Both had been made up for the night. There was also a small armchair and a fold-down table with a big window above it. There was a smaller window by the upper bunk and a tiny restroom by the door that contained a toilet, a sink, and a shower.

“All the comforts of home,” Sandy said as she pulled down the shades.

No, I thought, all the comforts of a closet. And I'm about to spend the entire night in here with you, just the two of us, when I was uncomfortable being alone with you in your aunt's much larger apartment last night. Thank God for bunk beds.

We sat side-by-side on the lower bunk for the next ten, very awkward minutes, waiting for the train to leave. "I don't know about you," I said, "but I'm exhausted."

"I'll flip you for the lower," she said, patting the bunk.

"No way." I sprawled out on my back. "I'm too damned tired to climb."

Finally, the train shuddered and began to move. It slowly gathered speed and pulled out of the station and we began to relax.

"Okay. I'm going to take a shower and wash my hair," Sandy announced as she stood up in front of me. "But you and I need to get a couple of things straight." She pulled her new blue top over her head and stood in front of me in her bra, which wasn't much more than a very thin strip of form-fitting, silk. "I usually sleep in the nude, but I promised you I'd behave. I'm not going to sleep in my new clothes either, so that only leaves the bra and panties, okay?" She looked down at me, waiting for me to say something, but I couldn't. "Besides, by the time you and I reach Boston tomorrow night, there won't be much we haven't seen or bumped into, no matter what we wear or don't wear."

"I guess you're right," I said.

"Good, because I don't want to upset you again."

"You aren't upsetting me."

"No? Well that's good to hear." She was watching my eyes as she let the skirt-shorts drop to the floor and she stood there in her panties. There wasn't very much to them either, and a thin smile crossed her lips as she knew I was lying.

"I assume you'll keep your shorts on," she added. "I don't think I could stand the excitement." With that, she turned, went into the shower, and closed the door. I stripped down to my shorts and turned out the light. I reached down to the end of the bed and raised the window shade half-way up so I could see outside. There was a thin, quarter-moon in the sky, and thin clouds racing by. I slipped under the sheet and soon heard the water running.

Twenty minutes later, the shower door opened and Sandy walked past me. There were three foot holds on the end wall. She scampered into the upper bunk without saying a word. I didn't either, but neither could I fall asleep. I lay on my back with my eyes closed. Every few minutes, she would flip noisily from one side to the other, fluff the pillow, pull the blanket up, then push it down, and then flip back over again. This went on for another twenty minutes.

"Pe-ter," I finally heard a little-girl voice call down to me. I opened my eyes and saw her face looking over the side of the bunk at me. "Can I come down there? Just to sleep. Please? I really, really promise I'll behave, but I hate it up here and I don't want to be alone tonight. Just let me be next to you, like in the movie theater, please?"

The bunk was only three feet wide. I never said yes, but as I shifted back against the wall, she was out of her bunk, down in mine, and under the sheet before I could say no.

She pressed her bare back up against me and pulled my arm over her. "Thank you," she said. "Good night." She yawned and the next thing I heard were soft, sleep sounds.

I raised my head and looked at her. I couldn't believe it, but she really was asleep. Lying there in the faint moonlight, I thought she was one of the most beautiful things I had ever seen – childlike, yet all woman. Me? I was afraid to move. Lying next to each other like that, we had a lot of skin touching and I could feel the firm contours of her body pressed against me. I could feel her soft breathing. I could smell her hair right under my nose, and a hint of perfume. This was the closest I had come to girl smells in a long, long time and I realized how much I missed them. Behaving? God, I really wished she wasn't.

In the hospital, toward the end, Terri and I had talked about this. *"I love you, Peter, but when I'm gone, you've got to move on," Terri said. "Promise me you'll find someone."*

"I promise," I humored her, but I had no idea then what that would mean.

"I know you Peter Talbott. You weren't meant to be alone. You have too much to give and you must find someone to give it to. Now promise me. If you don't, I'm going to haunt you." That was our joke then. Now, I wasn't so sure.

My mind flashed back to a happier night, when Terri slept next to me on the beach. We had made love and there was nothing covering us but the moonlight. It all came flooding back – the two of us running barefoot through the sand, the tall palms, the patio of the little house, the smell of the red and green bougainvillea bushes, and soft sound of the surf rolling onto the sand. In the distance, I heard a radio playing the Eagles' *Hotel California*. *You can check out any time you like, but you never can leave.* Glenn Fry was more right than he would ever know.

I touched Sandy's hair, ever so lightly, and I touched her cheek with the back of my hand. She didn't wake, but her head moved ever so slightly and I thought I saw a faint smile on her lips. I looked out through the window and I knew Terri was up there, watching us.

"She's lovely, Peter," Terri told me. "She's smart and she's funny."

"Like you," I whispered. "Lovely, smart, and funny, but you were taller."

"Yes, Peter, I was taller. But she needs you now, and I do not need you any longer, my love. She does, every bit as much as you need her. My time is over now, and she's so full of life. You need to open yourself up and love her, as you loved me."

I knew she was right, but could I let her go that easily? Could I? I pulled my hand away and closed my eyes.

When I woke, the first pink light of dawn was streaming in under the shade. I was squeezed back against the wall and Sandy was lying on her side facing me, her head propped up on an elbow, her eyes only inches away from mine, wide open, staring at me. I had seen enough of her moods by now to know something was wrong.

"What time is it?" I asked

"About 6:00."

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing," she answered woodenly. I gave her a look and she knew that was not going to be enough. Laying next me like this, I could feel the tension in her and see it in her eyes. She was like a rubber band stretched to its limit and about to

snap. "All right," she finally said, you were talking in your sleep. You said Terri's name a couple of times... No, you said it more than a couple of times."

"Me? I never talk in my sleep."

"Well, last night you did." I could tell she was choosing her words very carefully now. "I know I shouldn't ask you this. I know I should be a big girl and let it run its course, but I can't. I need to know about Terri. I need for you to tell me about her."

"Tell you about Terri?" I smiled.

"I may never get this chance again, Peter. I need to know what I'm up against." She laid a hand on my chest. "I need to know if there's enough room in there for me too."

She rolled over, pressed her back up against me, and pulled my arm over hers again. "Okay, I'm not looking at you," she said. "My eyes are closed, I'll shut up. Now, tell me all her, and about you. Then I'll tell you about me. Yesterday you said we didn't know much about each other. Well, by the time we get off this train we will, and maybe we can figure out what we're going to do with each other, okay?"

This moment had terrified for the past two days; no, for the past year. Now that it had come, the anxiety, the tension, and all the guilt were gone. Suddenly, I didn't mind her asking and I didn't feel awkward telling her about Terri, either. In fact, there were many things I wanted to tell Sandy now.

"That isn't necessary. I already know what I'm going to do with you." I reached over and stroked her hair again. "It's okay."

She twisted around and looked up at me, wide-eyed. "It's okay? It's really okay?"

"Yes, and you're okay, too." I picked up her hand and pressed it against my chest. "There's as much room in there as you want." I bent forward and kissed her.

She threw her arms around my neck and put me in a lip lock, as tears rolled down her cheeks. Finally, she came up for air and asked, "You said everything's okay?"

"Yes, everything's okay." I pulled her to me and we kissed a long, deep kiss as she melted in my arms. "And *you're* okay too."

She pushed me on my back and rolled on top of me. "Then this is the most ridiculous thing I have ever had to ask a man in my life, but would you make love to me? Now? Is that okay too?" I smiled and nodded. "Good," she said as she put her hand on my chest again. 'Because if you'd said no, I'd have smacked you so hard your eyes would cross."

It seemed as if it was over in a matter of minutes. We made love quickly and with far more energy and passion than skill and after all the build-up, I felt embarrassed. I lay next to her, sweating, desperate to think of something intelligent to say.

Sandy beat me to it. "It's been a long time; I hope I didn't hurt you."

"No, but I thought we might break the bunk or knock the train off the tracks."

"You did knock my train off the tracks," she kissed me on the chest, softly and gently. "And I don't want to create an ego problem, but it's never been like that."

"You are amazing," I told her.

"Yeah, I am, aren't I? And I'll bet if we give it another try, I can even be more amazing."

She was and we were.

Later, we lay there in the bunk wrapped tightly around each other, as if we couldn't get enough. The window shade was up and the bright, early morning sunlight fell across us. The sky was a clear, high blue, with white clouds blowing past. I couldn't see Terri's face, but I knew she was there, watching, happy for me, happy for us, happy for all of us.

"She's your biggest fan," I told Sandy as I looked out the window.

Sandy raised her head, looked at me, then followed my eyes out the window and thought it over. "Terri?" she asked in a small voice. I nodded. Slowly, Sandy looked back out the window again and pulled the sheet up over her. "You kept saying her name in your sleep last night."

"It's not like that."

"It's not huh?" She turned back and looked at me, our faces only inches apart. "Because you really creeped me out there for a second."

"All I know, is that all the guilts are gone now. In the hospital in L.A., when she was dying, she told me I had to find someone else after she was gone. She knew I'm a one-girl-kind-a-guy and how hard this would be hard for me. That's why I know she's happy now."

"Good," she said as she kissed me again. "But next time we do this, would you mind if I pull the shade down? I can get as kinky as the next girl, but this bunk is only so big and even I have my limits."

We both laughed, but I swore I heard Terri laughing along with us. "*Like I said, Peter,*" I heard her say to me. "*She's smart and she's funny, and you need her. Now, goodbye Peter, goodbye. You don't need me anymore.*"

At 7:15, we slipped the menu under the door and took a break.

"This love stuff burns a lot of calories and I'm starved," Sandy said as we ordered most of the items on the menu. When Phillip came back at 7:45, I opened the door far enough to take the big tray from him.

"You can relax, sir," he said. "Ain't nobody been askin' 'bout nobody or nothin'."

"Great, Phillip." I handed him cash for the breakfasts and a big tip. "We have a long stop in Albany, don't we?"

"Yes, sir, just before noon, usually forty-five minutes. Ya'll can get off and stretch a bit if you like, while they switch the other cars to the New York train."

I locked the door and turned around with the tray. Sandy had grabbed two towels from the shower. She had tied one around her waist and the other hung around her neck so the ends covered her chest. "Sorry," she shrugged as she pulled out the small fold-down table and sat on the end of the lower bunk. "I'm too hungry to get dressed."

We sat opposite each other eating, but as the minutes passed, she grew strangely quiet. "What's wrong?" I asked her.

"There are some things I need to tell you." Her eyes never left her plate.

"No you don't."

"Yes, I do. At my aunt's, back in Chicago, I really wanted to make love to you."

"I know that, but it would have been sex, not love."

"I know that too. This isn't easy for me to say, so please let me get it all out. The last couple of years have been bad. Nothing was working for me. I was lonely. I was desperate for a little warmth, a little affection. I had started drinking again,

drinking a lot, and I knew I couldn't get much lower. So, if a one-night stand with a nice guy like you was the best I could get, I wasn't going to turn it down." She raised her head and looked at me, tears running down her cheeks. "But I have *never* done anything like that before, Peter, I swear it," she said, trembling. "Never."

"Sandy, don't blame yourself. God knows, I wanted to, but if I had..."

"I know. But when you rejected me, I was crushed. I was angry, lonely, and very depressed." Tears were running down her cheeks, and she looked like a small, very scared little girl. I reached over with my napkin and wiped the tears away. "On the El, when I told you there was nothing for me to go back to in Chicago, I really meant it. I hate to use the "S" word, but if you had dumped me downtown yesterday or over on State, I probably would have killed myself." She kissed my hand and gave me a pained smile. "I'm over all that now. I am, really. So, if I'm still here, driving you crazy today, you have no one to blame but yourself."

"We really are a pair, aren't we?" I said. "I talk to ghosts and you're suicidal."

"Not anymore." She touched my hand. "So you can keep all your memories of Terri, and you can talk to her any time you want... as long as I can pull the shade down every now and then."

I set the tray outside in the corridor and we lay in the lower bunk wrapped around each other for the rest of the morning. It had been a long, painful time since I felt this close to anyone, to someone who I knew needed me as much as I need her.

"You don't suppose this whole thing is just a big adrenalin rush after the Dan Ryan, do you," I asked as I drew lazy circles on her back with my finger.

"I don't care what it is. I'm not moving... well, except maybe to do that."

"It's almost 11:00. That stop in Albany is coming up and we need to call Hardin."

"You'd rather do that than lay here with me like this, stark naked?"

"No, but we can come back and you can have me for the whole afternoon."

"That's what all the boys say."

The train rolled on through the beautiful, wooded and hilly upper New York countryside as we got dressed. Sandy gave her head a violent shake and scratched her head wildly with both hands for a few seconds, sending her hair scattering in every direction. She gave it two or three pats to push down the worst parts. "There!" she said. "I'm ready."

The Albany station was in the lower part of downtown. We looked through the windows but didn't see any cops, strange sedans, or guys in suits and sunglasses, so we got off train and found two pay phones inside the station. I dropped in a couple of quarter and called Senator Hardin's office. As they connected us, I handed Sandy the phone. "You're good at this, get him on the line," I said.

"Hi," she said in a bubbly voice into the phone. "Is the Senator in? ... I'm sure he is. Tell him Sandy Kasmarek, the cute little butt in the blue silk dress who worked for him in Chicago, is on the phone, and she's pregnant." She looked up at me and winked. "You still won't interrupt him? Okay, okay, then tell him Peter Talbott is standing next to me... Ah! That name he *does* know. Yeah, honey, I'll wait... and I was just kidding about the pregnant part... Yeah, I know you knew."

She covered the mouthpiece and whispered to me, "When ya gets 'em down, ya pounds lumps on 'em,"

"Who told you that? Bobby McNally?"

"No, Father Tony." She turned back to the phone. "Hi, Tim, you too... Well, we've been kinda busy. There aren't too many phones out here in the woods." She rolled her eyes back and forth, mocking him. "The stories in the newspapers? I didn't know we were such celebrities... And you got the overnight package? Good... Yeah, he's standing right here... No, no problem, here he is," she said as she handed me the phone.

"Senator, good to talk to you," I said. "Did you look those papers over?"

"I sure did, Pete—may I call you Pete?—and I interviewed that fat creep Panozzo long enough to know that stuff you sent me is real."

"Good, because I've got two more drives full of that stuff. One must have a hundred other syndicate-front businesses on it. The other has all the payoffs to cops and politicians, the overseas investments, foreign bank accounts, all of that stuff."

Hardin went silent for a moment. "Two more drives of that stuff, huh? And all the payoffs. Well, that's dynamite, Pete, absolute dynamite. But those notes of yours about Ralph Tinkerton and those people in Ohio..."

"I can prove it, Senator. Every word."

"You can, huh? Where are you? We need to get you off the street."

"Tennessee at the moment, but we're headed your way."

"Look, Pete, you're in real danger. I can have some people..."

"You have enough to do with what I already sent you. Check out those names, the death certificates, and the graves in Columbus. I'll call you in a day or two, when we get to Washington. Ciao." I hung up on him. Hardin? The left half of my brain trusted him, because he was a U. S. Senator and because we didn't have very many other options. But, the right half told me I'd be a fool to bet my life on any Washington politician.

I saw Philip again as we got back on the train and had him bring us some lunch, then we locked ourselves in the compartment. Like Sandy said earlier, all that lovin' stuff burns a lot of calories. That it did. After we ate, I folded the upper bunk up into the wall and lay down on the lower with my clothes on.

Sandy stripped down to her underwear again and looked down at me. "You don't want a bunch of ugly wrinkles in those new clothes now, do you?" she scrunched up her nose and slowly slipped out of the underwear too. I shook my head and started to get undressed, but she pushed my hands away. "No," she said. "It's my turn." She slipped out of her bra and panties and with tantalizing slowness, undressed me. Then she pushed me down on the bunk and we made love again. Afterward, she rolled over, put her head on my chest, and we both fell into a deep sleep.

It was 3:00 when Sandy yawned and stretched, supple and sensuous like a big cat unwinding from a long nap. "How long until we get to Boston?" she asked.

"Two, maybe three hours."

"You're kidding. I must have dozed off."

"Dozed? Yeah, that was what it was. I'll take the first shower," I said as I started to roll over her and get up.

"Wait a minute." She pushed me back down and put a finger on my lips. "Don't say a word. This should not come as a big surprise to you, but I am utterly in love with you, Peter Talbott. I know you can't use the "L" word yet, and I'm okay with that. But every now and then, give me a little squeeze or a kiss or something so I know you still like me, okay? But not a word. Please. Or you'll break the spell. I'm going to slip into the shower now, and then we'll do your hair."

Actually, we discovered that even a tiny Amtrak shower could hold two people and a lot of fun. Afterward, she came back in with the bottle of blonde hair dye and wrapped a towel around my shoulders. "We could go for the sun-drenched, poofy-blonde surfer look," she said. "Or the tousled, freaked-out, white-haired, Rod Stewart look. Or, I could really screw it up, turn your hair green, and watch it fall out in big clumps."

"How about the former beautician with the black eye look?"

It took her about a half hour, but after I toweled it dry and combed it, I looked at myself in the mirror. The hair and eyebrows were now a nice, natural blonde and the face looking back at me didn't look anything like mine.

"Not bad for a bimbo beauty school graduate, is it?" she asked.

"Well, you never told me you graduated. You going to do yours, too?"

"The black is so... me. But, yeah, I thought I'd try a light brown."

"Good choice. While you do that, I'll order us an early dinner. The train gets into South Station in Boston at 6:30, but I thought we'd off at Framingham at 5:50 and catch a local into the city. That'll get us closer to Doug's house and we can avoid any unfriendly eyes waiting for us downtown."

Framingham was in the far western suburbs. We stepped down on the platform and I said goodbye to Phillip, expecting the SWAT team to jump out of the bushes any minute with bullhorns and riot guns, but nothing happened. The streets around the small station were filled with dozens and dozens of luxury cars and SUVs waiting for the commuter trains from the city. We walked into the waiting room. It had four ticket windows, only one of which was open, and a newsstand that sold a little bit of everything from cigarettes to newspapers, candy, and maps. I went over and picked up a Rand McNally map of Boston that showed the railroad and subway routes on one side and a street map on the other.

"You live here," Sandy said. "What do you need a map for?"

"I only moved here two months ago. Other than driving to the office in Waltham from my *suck-ass* little apartment in Lexington, as Gino called it, and maybe the Red Sox game Doug dragged me to, you probably know Boston better than I do."

I looked at the map while she went to the window and bought two commuter train tickets. When she came back, we walked outside to the tracks and went around to the other side of a billboard that screened us from the station and the street.

"Another billboard, another train station. Wanna neck?" She pressed against me and moved gently back and forth. "Hmmm. Something tells me you don't mind anymore."

I leaned my chin on the top of her head. "How much time do we have?"

"About ten minutes. Not enough, is it? So you owe me one."

"Are you keeping count?"

"You better believe it. An opportunity lost is an opportunity lost... Sister Eugenia."

The commuter train was on time, but it was a local milk run that stopped at every little station, which was exactly what I wanted. It dropped underground and we finally reached the Back Bay station at 7:00. We walked through the station and took the long flight of stairs up to the street, but nothing looked out of place.

"We're getting pretty good at this sneaky stuff, aren't we?" Sandy asked as we hurried off up Exeter Street. The shadows were getting long and it would be dark soon. A line of storms had swept through while we were on the train, leaving the streets wet and the early evening air warm and damp. I looked up. The sky was clearing. The stars were coming out and it would be a good night for walking.

"Have you ever been here before?" I asked.

"Boston was our spring trip my senior year of high school. Half the class lost their virginity that weekend."

"What happened to the other half?"

"They became nuns."

"So, that's the part you remember most? The churches?"

She grinned like a Cheshire cat. "Actually, about all I do remember is a bunch of kids running through the subway cars singing about getting poor Charlie and the MTA." She pointed back to the round sign with the blue "T" over the subway entrance. "But they called it the "T" by then and that ruined the whole thing. Don't worry, though. I know Boston like the back of my hand; I've read all the Spenser books."

She wrapped herself around my arm. "Are you still okay with this?"

"Are you going to keep asking?"

"About every five minutes, so you better get used to it."

Being a man of few words, I lifted her off the ground and gave her a big kiss.

Back Bay had been the old Charles River marshes that land speculators had filled in the nineteenth century, so it was the only part of the old city with a sensible grid pattern. It had five boulevards—Beacon, Marlborough, Commonwealth, Newberry, and Boylston Streets — plus some short side streets. Commonwealth ran down the middle, with a wide, park-like strip of trees, grass, formal gardens, and flowerbeds called the Mall in its median. Back Bay was nice, with big trees overhanging the sidewalks and streets. From there it was an easy walk to Harvard, Fenway Park, the Band Shell, Filene's, the Markets downtown, and the financial district. That made a Back Bay townhouse one of the most fashionable and expensive addresses in Boston. Obviously, Doug's lifestyle had improved since his nine-hundred square foot apartment in Glendale.

The sun was setting. I had my arm around Sandy's shoulder and she had her arm around my waist as we walked, looking to all the world like lovers out for a stroll. As darkness set in, we made circled Doug's block, turning west one street short of Marlborough and walked up Commonwealth a few streets, turning north again and crossing Marlborough, then walking east on Beacon back to Exeter. The streetlights came on, the pavement glistened beneath our feet as we walked, and it was surprisingly quiet. Perhaps the lush canopy of dripping oaks screened out the big city noise. Whatever, my docksiders sounded like Clydesdale hoofs on the

cobblestones. I checked the parked cars even more closely. Still, I saw nothing. Were they that good? Was I that stupid? Or, had no one been there to begin with?

Chapter 25

Boston: the Flying Wallendas meet Stephen King...

At night, nothing looks more sinister than an old 19th century brownstone, with the lights out and the shades drawn. They'd make great locations for a Stephen King movie, and Doug's townhouse on Marlborough Street was no exception. We walked by on the other side of the street where we had a full view of his place and all the cars on the street, continuing down to the corner. His was a narrow, three-story townhouse, the fifth one from the far corner. It couldn't have been more than forty feet wide. As with most of the other homes on the street, the first floor and front door were a half- storey above ground level. Ten wide, but badly worn granite steps led to a raised stoop and a massive, hand-carved Victorian front door. There were carved, limestone balustrades on each side and cut glass sidelights and a stained-glass transom around the door. All in all, very distinguished.

"You gonna try the door?" Sandy whispered.

"That thing? Not without the key or dynamite," I told her as I continued checking each parked car, doorway, and rooftop we passed. "Let's look around back."

We crossed the street at the corner and continued south to the alley.

"There's no way they know we're here."

"No? All I did was mention Eddie's name to Tinkerton, and they were all over you before I even got to Chicago. The other names in the obituaries were from Phoenix, Portland, and Atlanta, and I'll bet Tinkerton sent a bunch of his men to those cities too."

"But the odds..."

"There are no odds. That term doesn't apply to Tinkerton."

We entered the alley and walked quietly along the rear side of the houses. It was like being in a dark, narrow canyon, with an unbroken line of tall, board fences, garage doors, and trashcans on each side, lit by an occasional security light mounted high on a telephone pole. The small circles of light they cast shimmered off the puddles in the alley's ruts and potholes, leaving a hundred dark places for someone to hide.

From the rear, Doug's house looked much like his neighbors, except none of his lights were on. He had a stout brick garage with an overhead door, and a tall board fence that spanned the gap to the garage next door. The fence had a thick wooden gate. Along the fence ran a line of dented metal garbage cans, but there was nothing that offered a hand or even a toehold to scale the fence. Even if you did manage to climb it, Doug had added a looping double spool of razor wire along the top.

Sandy stood in the alley and looked up at the tall barrier. "Jeez, and I thought you were paranoid," she said glumly.

"Good fences make good neighbors."

"Who said that? Carl Sandburg or O. J. Simpson?" she asked, pushing on the fence and the gate, sizing them up. "Your surfer boy built himself a good one." She stepped over to one of the garbage cans. Rummaging inside, she pulled out several sections of newspaper. "I think it's time the 'Fuckin' Wallendas' made an encore," she said.

"You can't get over that thing," I tried to tell her.

"We lived in a second floor apartment and my old man never let us out on school nights. I learned the fine art of escape and evasion from my older sister Louise. Piece of cake, Talbott, let's go."

She draped her camera and the big shoulder bag around my neck and pushed me back against the wooden fence with my hands knit together. As light as she was, I barely felt her weight as she stepped from my hands to my shoulder and draped the newspaper across the razor wire. "Good thing I changed into the shorts," she said as she looked down at me. "I wouldn't want some pervert looking up my skirt." She dropped back down, "Okay, one, two..." She rocked backward, and "three!" I tossed her upward and she soared effortlessly over the razor wire, clearing it by at least a foot. She dropped out of sight on the other side, but I heard no screams or snapping of bones, only a soft *Thump*.

Moments later, the bolt on the gate rattled and she pulled it open, dusting off her hands with a flourish as she welcomed me inside the dark rear yard. "Warning: performed by professional acrobat. Do not try this at home," she said with a big grin on her face.

"Show off," I mumbled.

"Show off? I remind you that you would be standing out in the alley picking your nose right now if you hadn't brought me along."

"You're lucky you didn't break your butt!" I whispered.

"And you'll be lucky if you don't get another bruise later."

"Hush." I put my finger to her lips and we stood listening, waiting for our eyes to adjust to the darkness. She started kissing my finger, running her tongue up it, and putting it in her mouth until I pulled it away and glared at her. "Will you stop that!" I whispered.

"You didn't complain when we were on the train. Then again... maybe that wasn't your finger, was it?" she whispered with a gleam in her eye.

Doug's back yard was as dark as a cave and the damp air slowly came alive with the sounds and smells of a warm summer night. Rich and earthy, still wet after the rain, I smelled roses, lily of the valley, and honeysuckle. I heard mosquitoes buzzing and the flapping wings of a large moth. Too much. Too little. And very quiet. Slowly, the outline of the yard emerged from the shadows, blacks on darker blacks and grays on darker grays.

The garage took up almost half the area between the fences, but there was a tool shed off to the right and a cracked, uneven sidewalk leading to the back door of the house. I took Sandy's hand and we walked slowly to the wooden rear stairs. They creaked as we stepped lightly up the half-dozen risers to the covered back porch. There was a window on each side of the rear door. I tried to look into the

dark rooms, but I couldn't see a thing. I opened the screen door and squinted through the small glass panes in the kitchen door. That was just as fruitless, so I turned my attention to the locks. One was set in the doorknob and he had two dead bolts in the door. No hope there. I looked closely at the door and window frames. There were no electric contacts or wires from a burglar alarm system, but I knew he had one. I pulled out my handkerchief, placed it against one of the small panes of glass in the door, and smacked it with my elbow. In the still, damp air of the back yard, it sounded like a car crash, but it probably wasn't loud enough for anyone to hear next door or out in the street. Not in these old buildings. The front and rear walls could stop a cannon ball. I slipped my hand through the broken window frame, intending to open the door as Sandy reached out and turned the doorknob. To my surprise, the door swung open. The damned thing hadn't even been locked.

"Men!" she whispered in my ear. "You always gotta break something, don't you?"

"Slow down!" I whispered, trying to hold her back, but she ignored me as usual and stepped through the open doorway into the kitchen. The best I could do was grab her by the seat of her shorts and stop her from going any farther.

"Have we been formally introduced?" she asked as I let go of her rear end. "Yeah, come to think of it, I guess we have, haven't we."

The room was very dark. There was barely enough dim light coming through the draped rear windows to tell me we were in the kitchen, but not much more. Her hand ran along the wall, searching for a light switch, but I seized her wrist. "No, wait," I said as I heard the panicked skittering of sharp nails on the tile kitchen floor. Three terrified balls of fur dashed past us and tore out the back door, screaming like banshees.

"What the hell was that?" Sandy asked.

"Doug's cats, I hope." Without seeing them, I knew one was a big, black Persian, fat as a turkey, and the other two were Burmese, one white and one gray.

"Something sure spooked them."

She was right about that, and there was a damp, foul smell in the place. I wasn't sure what it was and I wasn't sure I wanted to know, either. We stood there in silence, listening to our own hearts pound, but nothing else came out of the dark at us. The townhouse was as silent as a tomb. Still, something had terrified the cats.

"Stay there," I told her as I inched forward, reaching out, navigating through the dark room with my fingertips. Fortunately, these old houses were not large. I bumped into the kitchen table and then my hand found the counter top and the stove on the far side. To my right, the darker, rectangular shape of a doorway emerged from the gloom. I figured it led to the front rooms. I took two steps toward the door when my foot bumped into something large and soft lying in the middle of the floor. I lost my balance and fell forward on my hands and knees.

"Are you all right?" Sandy quickly asked.

"Yeah. Have you got a match?"

She rummaged around inside her big shoulder bag. "Here. You want them?"

"No. I don't want to move. Light one, but cup your hand around it."

She struck the match across the emery paper once, twice, then a third time before it lit, but by then I had already guessed what was lying next to me.

"Oh my God!" she said as she dropped the match on the tile floor. Its dim yellow glow quickly went out, but not soon enough. In that split second I saw a dead, battered, and half-naked body lying on its back, tied to a kitchen chair. The face was bloody and swollen beyond recognition, its eyes staring up at the ceiling, but I knew it was Doug.

Sandy had seen it too. She quickly turned away and I heard the sound of gagging and coughing as she threw up in the corner.

There was nothing to say. I took the matches from her hand and lit another, forcing myself to take a closer look as a towering rage grew inside me. They had used coat hangers to tie his legs and arms to the chair and the wires had cut deep into his skin as he struggled. There was a kitchen towel jammed in his mouth and enough bruises and burn marks to show that Doug had died slow and hard. Worse still, there was a second body in the room, sprawled on the floor near the sink. It was a woman. She was naked and as badly beaten as Doug was. Her face was turned away from me, but I knew it was Sharon. It took a real sadist to beat and torture two people like that and a real twisted mind to order it. Not that Tinkerton would have come here and gotten his own fingers bloody. He preferred rubber gloves, a clean, white surgical gown, and classical music when he worked, so the kitchen of an old brownstone would be far too crude for his tastes. That was the moment I knew I could never rest until I killed the man, with my bare hands if I had to.

I was trembling, my legs shaking, but I forced myself to my feet. "Come on," I said hoarsely as I took Sandy by the hand and dragged her out the door.

She seemed to be in a daze as she looked back to the bodies. "You... you aren't going to leave them in there like that, are you?"

"There's nothing we can do for them now and if we don't get out of here we'll be next." I pulled out my shirttail and wiped off the doorknob and the wall where she touched it. We turned and ran down the rear stairs hand-in-hand, trying to put the horror of the kitchen behind us. When we reached the rear gate, I heard Sandy's pained voice call to me as she tugged on my arm. "Slow down, damn it. If I fall, I really will break my butt!"

She was right. I slowed down and we stopped at the gate to take some deep breaths and clear our heads. "We'll head back downtown," I told her. "I need some time to think."

Her hand was still gripped in mine as we turned east up the alley and jogged slowly away. Side-by-side, our footsteps were finally in synch as they splashed and echoed off the old, worn asphalt. We had gone no more than a hundred feet when I heard the unmistakable "Pop! Pop! Pop!" of a silenced pistol firing at us from the shadows further up the alley. I heard one shot, then another and a third, as the slugs smacked into the heavy wooden garage door behind us like a bass drum. I didn't stop to think. I wrapped my arms around Sandy, picked her up, and dived blindly over a row of trashcans that stood against the brick wall to our left. The three shots had not come all that close, but I knew there were more bullets where those came from.

I twisted in the air as I went over the cans and landed on my back with Sandy on top. I got a sharp elbow in the ribs for my trouble, but I kept rolling until I had her jammed up against the wall and she couldn't get up, which was good. I turned

my head and looked out through a gap in the cans. Across the alley, the dim outline of a man stepped from the shadows two houses ahead of us. I couldn't make out his features, but he had a pistol in his hand with a fat, ugly silencer screwed onto the barrel. A silencer? That ruled out the cops and the Neighborhood Watch Committee.

He came toward us in a low crouch, taking one small, hesitant step at a time as if he was trying to figure out his next move. Not that there was much we could do to stop him. We were safe for the moment, hidden in the deep shadows behind the cans, but we were trapped. I thought of making a run for it to draw the goon's attention away from Sandy but I knew that wouldn't accomplish much either. After he killed me, he would come back and do her. I looked through the crack again and saw the goon still hadn't come much more than halfway across the alley. That was something. He missed with his first three shots and that was something else. I couldn't see his face, but maybe he was scared of us, too. Maybe he was new at this. Maybe he wasn't sure if we were armed. Maybe there was a river of cold sweat running down his back just like mine. Maybe, but he kept edging closer, swinging the pistol back and forth.

"Ay! Give it up, guy," he growled in a nervous, bass voice. "Youse two can come on out, I won't shoot ya, honest. I just wanna talk."

"That's no Fed," I heard Sandy mumble.

"Shut up!" I whispered, pushing her against the wall.

The goon was getting frustrated. He raised the pistol and shot twice more. One bullet slammed into the battered metal trashcans next to me with a loud, *Pa-loonk!* and the other exploded on the soft brick of the garage wall behind us, showering us with red dust and chips of cracked clay. Two more shots and two more misses. That made five in all, but he wasn't likely to miss with very many more.

Sandy jabbed her elbow into my ribs again and tried to get up, but I shoved her back down on the muddy ground and leaned on her. "You son of a bitch!" she mumbled into the wall, furious at me, but I kept her there.

Fortunately, the gunman wasn't very bright. He could have ended it quickly if he had circled around the cans and come in behind us, but he didn't do that. And by not doing it with speed and determination, he gave us a chance. Quickly and quietly, I drew my legs beneath me and pushed myself up into a low crouch. He had a gun, which was his edge, but I was wound tighter than a Swiss watch. All I had to do was picture the bloody carnage back in the kitchen to flash back into a searing rage, but I needed something more. Something. Anything! My hands skimmed across the rough pavement of the alley searching for a weapon, or something sharp or heavy that might make a dent in the goon's skull. Other than a rotten head of lettuce and a bent soup ladle, the pickings behind the trashcans were slim.

When we didn't come out after the last two shots, the goon got really pissed. "I'm warnin' youse!" he threatened, but was cut short by the crash and clatter of an empty can tipping over across the alley and another screeching stampede of cats. When they dashed out Doug's kitchen door, they must have run through the back yard into the alley and the goon's gunshots spooked them all over again. They hissed and howled, tipping the can over. It went one way and the lid rattled

the other and that spooked the goon. He turned and began popping shots at anything that moved. Just when I thought I would have to take him on with nothing more than a soup ladle, an angry, fifteen-pound ball of fur, teeth, and sharp claws skittered around the corner and bowled into me.

It was Doug's big, black Persian. I dug my fingers deep into the fur on its back and picked it up. The terrified Persian screeched, its sharp teeth bared and claws flailing the night air as I sprang over the top of the packing crate like a jack-in-the-box. The goon was not more than five feet away as I heaved the cat at him like a medicine ball and with that first quick look, I knew I had him. His eyes went round as saucers as he saw those teeth and claws flying at him. If he had the presence of mind to turn the gun on me, ignore the cat, and pull the trigger, I would be dead, but he did not do that. He couldn't. All he saw was a ball of razor blades coming at him and that sealed his fate. He froze. I may have gotten low marks for form, but a perfect ten for accuracy. The big Persian hit the guy flush in the chest. In that instant I had no doubt the cat understood what had happened to Doug and who was responsible. With claws flashing like four chain saws, it dug in and ran up the goon's chest, face, and over the top of his head, sending blood, strips of cloth, and flesh flying. The goon screamed and stumbled backward, using both hands to fend off the cat. His pistol clattered on the rough concrete and I knew he had forgotten all about me.

But I had not forgotten about him. He stood whimpering, his hands covering his face as blood ran down the front of his shirt. I hit him with a roundhouse right, putting my shoulder into it and following through. That should have been enough to put anyone down for the count, but this guy didn't want to cooperate. He staggered backward, shook his head, and roared with pain, then lumbered toward me again, wiping the blood out of his eyes, trying to focus them on me. With the image of that kitchen floor seared on my brain, I wasn't running. He wasn't running either, and that was just fine with me. I wanted something to hit.

"Come on," I said as I squared around and motioned to him. "You want some more?" That only got him angrier. I put up my fists and circled him to the right as he came at me in a bull-rush. His right fist caught me flush on the shoulder and the left side of my body went numb. That was when a dark blur flashed past me. Spinning and grunting like a 100-pound dervish, Sandy gave the goon a lightning fast karate kick to the forehead. She had small feet packed inside those Reeboks. The kick snapped his head back like a hard, straight jab from a middleweight and stood him upright. I remembered what those feet had done to Toothpick on the El platform in Chicago and this clown didn't stand a chance. It was all over in a few seconds and I hadn't even moved.

The goon tried to clear his head, but Sandy gave him a second kick to the face and a third, followed by a sweeping smash to the kneecap that buckled his leg, a straight fist to the throat, and a hard kick to the groin. That one dropped him to his knees, groaning. With his head finally down at her level, she finished him off with a spinning heel to the temple. His eyes rolled back in his head and he toppled sideways on the ground like a felled oak, out cold. She stood over him breathing hard, bobbing up and down. "Come on you turkey!" she screamed, daring him to get back up, but he never did. Lucky for him. She was a lethal little package riding a huge adrenaline high and I had no doubt she would have killed him.

"Hey." I got to my feet and laid my hand on her shoulder. "You won."

Eyes wild, she spun around and would have kicked me too if I hadn't backed up. For that instant, I wasn't certain she recognized me and I wanted no part of those size-six feet or those delicate little fists. I raised my hands in mock surrender and smiled. "Sandy, remember me? I'm on your side."

Finally, she blinked and looked down at the unconscious goon. "Jeez!" she giggled with an embarrassed smile. "Did I do that?"

"It must have been something he said." I bent over and felt around the dark alley, trying to find his pistol. My fingertips skimmed across the rough concrete, knowing it had to be there somewhere. Finally, I felt the barrel in one of the deep ruts. Picking it up, I brushed the dirt off and slipped it into the waistband of my pants, as she stepped behind the line of cans and rattled around back there in the dark. She let loose with an angry moan as she came out cradling her broken camera in her hands.

"Look what you did!" She glared at me accusingly.

"Me? What did I do?"

"You threw me back there."

"The guy had a gun. He was shooting at us, remember? I'll buy you a new one."

She didn't seem to make the connection or care about it. "I don't want a new one," she mumbled and began to cry.

"Sandy, come on. It's only a camera," I said, immediately realizing that was a *big* mistake. "I'll buy you another one, I promise! We gotta get out of here."

She looked at the broken camera and then placed it gently, almost reverently, in her shoulder bag. "You owe me!"

I bent down and rifled through the goon's pockets. I found his wallet and a spare magazine of bullets for his pistol. I opened the wallet and pulled out a thick stack of fresh one-hundred dollar bills, several thousand dollars worth, which I jammed in my pocket. Any contribution to our cause was appreciated. I also found a Massachusetts Driver's License bearing the name Anthony Grigiatto and his photo, but what I did not find was a badge or government ID. Well, at least he wasn't a fed or a local cop.

Sandy came up behind me, trying to brush the dirt off her new clothes. "Who is he?" she asked as she looked down at the muscular goon. He was wearing an open collar silk shirt, gold chains around his neck, and Italian loafers. She looked at the driver's license. "Grigiatto? Look at him—he's a miniature Gino Parini. Gotta be Mafia. Bet they call him "Griggs", or "fat Tony" or something. I told you Gino would come after us."

"We don't know that. The guy could be local help working for Tinkerton."

"What if Parini knows about the spreadsheets and the flash drives?"

"How could he?" I asked, just as confused as she was. "We need to call Hardin. He's right, we need to go in." I walked over to the dark spot between two garages where the goon had been hiding in the shadows. I found a small, two-way radio propped against the window ledge. "It doesn't look like he's alone, either."

I picked up the radio and pushed the microphone button. "Ey," I mumbled, sounding like the goon. "You dere?"

"Yah. What's wit dose two? You see where dey went?"

"Nah. Nuttin'."

"Well fuckin' stay awake next time."

I grabbed her by one hand and the radio in the other, and took off running.

Chapter 26

Don't crush a' da grapes...

The faster we got away from Doug's townhouse and lost ourselves in a big crowd, the safer I'd feel. When we reached the first cross street, we geared down to a quick, huddled walk and turned south toward Commonwealth Avenue and the Mall. No sense attracting any more attention. We crossed the westbound lanes and entered the park, then turned east toward downtown. The curving walkways, bushes, and tall canopy of trees might be lovely on a bright sunny day, but on a dark, wet night with the town full of bad guys, every shadow was a threat I didn't want to deal with.

"Tell me something," I asked Sandy as we hurried away. "All that flashing-feet karate stuff? Between beautician school, photography classes, and your graduate degree in auto theft, how did you have time to get a black belt?"

"After I threw Eddie out, I developed an intense desire to kick guys. I switched over to The North Avenue Tae-Kwan-Do and Karate School, because they let me do that without going to jail. You'd be amazed how fast you can work your way up to black belt when all you want to do is smash somebody."

"I'll bet you won Miss Congeniality, too?" I said as I sprinted away.

"No, the Class Clown," she answered, narrowly missing the back of my head.

I kept the goon's radio turned on as we headed east. It was a standard Motorola model with no special markings, none of the usual "Property of U. S. Government" warnings, and no Boston Police Department bar codes or inventory numbers. So far, their channel was dead quiet. Not a squawk. Not a peep. No one came on for a communication or time check. In fact, Sandy and I were almost back to Arlington, the busy north-south street and a half-mile away, before we heard anything. Then, all hell broke loose.

They must have found the goon or he must have finally gotten up and found them, because we heard a quick staccato of half-coherent messages over the radio. It was hard to tell how many people or cars were involved, but I had been in the Army. From the language they used, these were not police calls or calls from any other government agency I had ever heard of. There was no standard radio procedure, no call signs, and no unit designations, only angry grunts, swearing, threats, and a lot of chatter. They were not the Boston Police Department. They were not the FBI, the DEA, the CIA, or any of the other flavors in the Federal law enforcement alphabet soup either. But whoever they were, they were too late.

We crossed Arlington, where the Commonwealth Mall ended, and hurried on into the Public Garden, the western third of the Boston Common. A quarter mile in, along a curving walkway around the lake, we came to a park bench and a trashcan sitting under the dim light of a decorative Victorian street lamp. The can

had one of those black plastic liner bags inside. I dug all the way to the bottom, but all I found was newspapers and old beer bottles.

Sandy stood there watching me "What are you looking for?" she finally asked.

"Some string or something," I said in frustration. "If I can tie down the transmit button on the radio, we can block the frequency and completely screw up their communication for a while." I looked up at her and said, "See? I got some good ideas, and I didn't even go to Catholic Schools or know Bobby McNally."

She gave me a pitying look, reached into the trashcan, and pulled out the whole bag. In ten seconds flat, she had dumped the trash back into the can, ripped the thick top strip off the bag, and tied it around the radio. She found a large pebble on the ground and slipped it under the plastic, forcing the transmit button down and open the frequency.

"Engineers. What would you do without me?" She raised the radio to her lips and spoke into the open mike in a sexy, throaty voice. "You boys out there in radio land, ya'll have a nice night now, you hear." She then set the radio in the bottom of the can. But as she straightened up, she got a good look at her clothes and at mine. "Yuck. Rolling around in that alley wasn't such a good idea, was it? Look at us." Her new mall clothes from Toledo were covered with mud and food stains and mine weren't much better. Neither were our hands and her arms and legs. "We're not going to get very far looking like this."

"You're right," I answered glumly. I looked at my watch. It was almost 9:00 PM and the stores would be closing. I pulled out my street map and opened it up in the small cone of light beneath the ornate Victorian street lamp. They might be cute on a bright summer day when the Public Garden was probably full of tourists, but they weren't worth squat when you needed some light. I didn't like being in a big city park after dark like this, but the walkways through the Common were the shortest route back downtown. Besides, the goon's pals couldn't follow us in here in their cars.

As I tucked the map away, I remembered the goon's automatic. I pulled it out of my belt, carefully wiped my fingerprints off, and dropped it in the nearest storm sewer grate.

"That might have come in handy, you know."

"No. All it would have done is give them an excuse to shoot. I can't take that risk."

"You mean with me along now, don't you?"

I made no reply. "Let's keep moving," was all I said. I took her hand and we crossed Charles Street and entered the Common.

"Why don't we find a place to hide here in Boston? It's a big city. You said you have some friends. It shouldn't be too hard to disappear for a while."

I thought about it for a moment. "No, not after Tinkerton brought in locals. They know the ground a whole lot better than we do and it will only put more people in danger."

"Where then?"

"Washington. Hardin. He's the only one who might listen to us, and who has the clout to bring Tinkerton down. But I have a plan B. We pass through New York on the way to Washington. Santorini's lawyer is there, that guy Billingham, remember?"

"B for Billingham? Gee, that's original."

"This whole thing is about the Witness Protection Program, right? That means the Mafia is still holding the missing pieces. They have all the whys."

"What makes you think Billingham will talk to you?"

"I don't," I smiled. "But something tells me they'd like to poke a stick in Tinkerton's eye as much as we would."

The dark walkways that wound through the Common eventually brought us to Tremont and Park Streets at the far southeast corner of the park, where we saw another of those round, white signs with the big blue "T" on it. We hung back and circled the station, but I saw no one loitering around the front entrance. No two-way radios. No jackets with too many bulges. So we pushed on through the double doors and took the steep flight of stairs down. This was Park Street, one of the T's main line crossings. We slipped into the restrooms and washed off the worst of the mud, then met near the ticket booths in front of a colorful route map of the city.

I studied the big map and ran my finger across the subway routes. "We could take the Red Line to the South Railroad Station and maybe catch the Amtrak to New York."

"The train? You're becoming a one-trick pony."

"One trick? I thought you complemented me for my inventiveness."

"Good one! And, bite my tongue, yes I did, more like a stallion than pony, as I recall," she smiled. "But your ego aside, we've got to do something about these clothes. I brushed some of the loose mud off, but we can't go anywhere looking like this."

We continued east through the Common until we reached Tremont, then took the smaller side streets southeast past the Old South Meeting house until we saw the big gray façade of South Station in the distance. It was another of those huge, old granite caverns dating to the 1920's, built for the era of long-distance train travel. From two blocks away, I saw Boston cop cars parked all around the station at odd angles, doors open, with cops standing around smoking and laughing. Other police cars were racing by on Atlantic Avenue with their flashers on.

"Looks like they caught on to our train thing," Sandy said. "How sad."

"Yeah, I was looking forward to getting you into the upper bunk this time."

"The upper? That has a *much* higher Degree of Difficulty."

"Yeah, but anybody can get laid in a lower. Been there, done that."

She looked me up and down and smiled. "I'm liking this. You've been with me three days now, and you're actually developing a budding sense of humor. Not much of one yet, but keep on trying. I have hope for you yet."

We turned around and found one of the darker side streets, heading north and east and away from the South Station. "Okay, what's the new plan," she asked.

"I'm putting the final touches on it as we speak."

"You don't have a clue, do you?"

"Nope, but I will."

We walked on past the Old State House, trying to blend into the evening crowd around the restaurants, bars, and shops near the Quincy and North Markets and Faneuil Hall. We continued under the elevated I-93 into the North End and on into Little Italy. This was old Boston and residential. We walked up Salem, with her

arm around my waist and my arm around her shoulders, wandering the back streets until I saw what I was looking for—a brightly lit self-service laundromat.

“You think we can stand around in our underwear waiting for the clothes to dry?” Sandy poked me. “I’m game if you are, but we might be noticed.”

“Well, I might be.”

“Talbott, you must love bruises, don’t you?”

“No offence meant, ma’am.”

“Don’t you know, petite women don’t like being teased about sizes and physical inadequacies? Especially by someone who took so much delight from them just a few short hours ago,” she said, as her right claw dug a painful inch into my side.

The laundromat was painted stark, institutional white and it was lit as bright as day. The only customer was a dumpy, older woman in a housedress who sat in a chair in front of the washers, knitting. She had three large, empty laundry baskets on the floor, and a half-dozen tall stacks of clothes on the table in front of her. Behind her there was another load thumping around in a drier.

We walked up to the woman arm in arm and I gave her my friendliest, most pathetic smile. “Pardon me; I wonder if you could help us out?”

She looked at us and our clothes and the dried mud smeared on Sandy’s legs and probably thought we were homeless. “I ain’t got no money, Mister,” she said.

“Money isn’t our problem,” Sandy said as she looked down at our muddy clothes. “We were walking in the Common and got chased by some kids, some muggers. We got away, but we took a tumble down a big hill. Look at us,” she laughed. “I am humiliated.”

“Yeah, humiliated. I can see that,” the woman looked at her, still wondering.

“If I take her home like this,” I added. “Her old man will kill me.”

“Yeah, I got girls. I’d kill you too,” the woman said, starting to laugh. “So, what do you want? You want to use a washer?”

I looked at the piles of clothes on the table. “I’ve got a better idea. That’s your kids stuff, right? How old are they?”

The woman frowned. “I got five — three girls and two boys, sixteen to twenty-four, and my husband Theo. You can add him to that list too. But why do you care?”

“Are any of them about our sizes?” Sandy asked.

The woman looked us both over, up and down. “Yeah. Maybe. Why?”

I pulled out the money I had taken from the goon’s wallet and peeled off three crisp, new one-hundred dollar bills. “How about you sell us some of your kid’s stuff—we’ll pay double what you paid for them—and you can have our dirty clothes. It’s all new. Deal?”

The woman plucked the three hundred from my fingers, and tucked it into her bra. “Lena’s Clothes Emporium is now open for business, Mister. Show me what you want.”

It took less than a minute to pick out some jeans and a maroon pullover shirt for me and some faded blue jeans and a dark-blue MIT sweatshirt for Sandy. None of it was exactly our size, but it was close and that would be good enough to get us out of town. I even got her to trade her kid’s nylon windbreaker for my gray herringbone sports coat plus ten dollars to have it dry cleaned.

We slipped into the restrooms to wash up and change. When I came out, Lena was standing by the washing machine pushing our stuff in, adding the soap. I waited by the restroom door for Sandy. When she came out, I noticed there was a pay phone on the back wall. "I'm going to call Billingham."

"At this hour? You don't think he's still there, do you?"

"No, but I can leave him a message and that might start him thinking." I dialed Area 212 Information and asked for the phone number of Steiner, Ernst, and Billingham. Before they shunted me off to the computer, I even got the NYNEX operator to give me the firm's address, not a small task when you are dealing with trained, phone company, customer service representative. Through years of illegal lab experiments, secret in-breeding, drugs, chemicals, and electro-shock therapy, call centers had elevated rude and dumb to near-Darwinian perfection.

When they connected me to the law firm's phone number, I found myself trapped in one of those multi-layered answering machines that let me dial the first four letters of the last name of whomever it was I was foolish enough to be calling. I punched B-I-L-L and after the Beep, I said, "Charlie? This is Peter Talbott. A mutual friend, Gino Parini, told me you had Jimmy's ear. To be perfectly frank, I need some help. I'm in the City and I'll call you tomorrow. Maybe we can get together and talk things over. Ciao. Who loves ya, Baby?"

"You had to say that, didn't you?" I smiled, embarrassed. "But what did calling him accomplish?" Sandy asked.

"Well, now we know he's real and that he hangs his hat there. And now he knows I'm real too."

We turned and walked out the front door. "Thanks, Lena," I waved.

"Hey, Mister, she's a cute little thing. Next time you get her dirty, you come back here and see old Lena." She waved.

We walked back to Hanover along the dark, twisting neighborhood streets of the North End. Many of the city's long-time produce distributors were located here, and the smells of fresh fish, bakery goods, flowers, and vegetables from their warehouses filled the damp, night air. In the evening, after the city's normally brutal traffic faded away, the streets and parking areas around the warehouses were packed with delivery trucks loading for their late-night runs into a three-state area around Boston.

I looked over at Sandy in her new clothes. "MIT? That's a new look for you."

"I'm studying to be a rocket scientist."

"We already have one in the family, we don't need another one."

"Whoa!" She stopped walking and turned me around where she could see my face. "What was with that *family* thing? Don't tease me about something like that, Talbott."

"I wasn't teasing, but you're right. This isn't a real good time to be making long-range plans."

"Don't worry, I'm not going to trap you into something you aren't ready for." She threw her arms around my neck. "But you're damned lucky you didn't say anything like that to me back in the laundromat. I'd have dragged your butt into the restroom and given Lena a real story to take home to the kids."

We crossed over to Hanover Street and ducked into a dark doorway near a flower distributor. She snuggled underneath my new windbreaker. "Is there some reason we're hiding here watching trucks?" she whispered.

"Maybe we can scarf a ride. If we can get to Providence or New Haven or somewhere, we can sneak on a morning train to New York."

Two buildings over was the warehouse of a large vegetable distributor. The overhead door was up and the bright light inside cascaded out into the street. Three men with handcarts carried out stacks of small wooden crates filled with vegetables and loaded them into a large, white panel truck with "DeFanucci Brothers, Green Grocers, Providence" stenciled on the side. The truck appeared to be loaded. The driver was a middle-aged man in a long grocer's apron, with a thick head of curly black hair. He checked the paper on his clipboard and then rolled down the rear door and walked back into the warehouse.

"Come on," I said as I pulled Sandy to the side of the truck.

A few minutes later, the driver came out and walked around the front of the cab, where he saw us standing next to his door. He stopped short. "Can I help you?" he asked suspiciously, eyeing us both up and down.

"Are you with DeFanucci's in Providence, by any chance?" I asked.

The driver nodded, still not sure. "Yeah, I'm Dominick. Why?"

"I'm Steve Bowen. This is my friend Wendy. She goes to Brown, in Providence..."

"In an MIT sweatshirt?"

"Oh, that's mine," I said sheepishly. "Anyway, we were up here at a concert and my car got stolen. I've *got* to get her back to campus, and I saw your truck. Well, I wondered if we could talk you into a ride. I mean, I'll pay you some money if you'll take us, but we're like, *really* in a bind."

He looked us both over again, but we must not have looked too threatening. "How much?" he asked.

"I don't know," I tried to look as helpless as I could. "Fifty?"

"Make it a hundred," Dominick answered.

"Seventy-five!" Sandy shot back. "And we get to ride in the back."

"Deal," he snorted as he looked at her. "But no squashing the veggies. I know these Brown girls. She gets too excited back there, you pay for anything you crush."

"Deal," she said with a big grin.

He rolled up the back door and let us climb inside. "There's a couple of tarps and a stack of mover's blankets over there on the side so you can get comfortable. You sure you're up for this, Steve? It's going to be an hour and a half before I let you out of there, you know. That can be a lifetime with a Brown girl." he winked at her. "But I'll honk when we get near Providence."

He waited for us to throw the moving pads on the floor, then rolled the door down and latched it from the outside. It was pitch black inside as I joined her on the floor. She put her hands under my shirt and put her head on my chest, then lay there quietly.

This was a mood I had not seen, I thought, as I stroked her hair.

"Here I have you alone in the dark again, and all I want to do is crawl under your shirt and hide. I'm sorry," she whispered. "But I'm terrified that something's going to happen to you. Can you understand that?"

We lay there quietly like that all the way to Providence, her head lying on my chest while I stroked her hair. After what we found in Doug's kitchen and all the rest of what they had been throwing at us the past few days, we needed some quiet time to reaffirm life and get comfortable with what was going on between us, but that was good.

As we crossed into Rhode Island, she pulled my shirt up and slowly ran a line of kisses across my chest. "When we get to Providence, let's get a room. There's no sense getting to New York in the middle of the night and I'm really, really tired."

It was almost 11:00 when we heard the horn beep. Five minutes later, we felt the truck slow and stop moving. The driver's side door opened and slammed shut, and we heard footsteps coming around to the rear. When Dominick rolled the truck's rear door up, we were sitting innocently on the moving pad.

"How did my veggies do back here?" he asked.

"We didn't crush a single grape," Sandy said. "But the avocados blushed."

"Ain't love wonderful? Then I'll cut you some slack on the veggie abuse, but I don't have to send those moving pads to the cleaners, do I?" he chortled.

"Heavens no," Sandy answered demurely. "I'm a Brown girl."

"Yeah, my ass!" Dominick laughed as we dropped to the ground and he rolled the rear door down. "Well, Brown girl, there's the front gate, as promised." He pointed to two brick columns a short distance up the street.

"You're a life saver, Dominick," I told him as I handed him a hundred dollar bill.

"The deal was only for seventy-five," he said.

"Yeah, but the lady's embarrassed and we were hoping the extra twenty-five might help you forget all about us being in the back of your truck tonight."

"I already did," he said as he pocketed the money and helped us down. He got in the truck and drove off, while we walked down to a taxi stand that was outside the campus gate. We hopped in the first cab in line.

"What's the nicest hotel downtown?" Sandy leaned forward and asked the driver.

"That would be the Marriott. It ain't far." "Is the train station near there?"

"Yep, just down the street."

"Great!" She sat back and pulled my arm around her. "When it's late at night and you need a room in a strange town, with no reservation and no luggage, money talks. And the more you pay and the bigger the tip you leave, the less the desk clerks will remember... Sister Josephine, and don't ask."

The room cost us another \$380 of the goon's money, but Sandy was right, discretion comes at a price. The room was on an upper floor. I was exhausted and collapsed in the middle of the King-sized bed on my back while she headed for the Jacuzzi in the equally large bathroom, leaving a trail of clothes in her wake. By the time she reached the bathroom door, she had nothing on and looked back at me over her shoulder, "All I want is a long, hot bath to get the mud from that alley and the smell of vegetables off me, followed by a good night's sleep."

"Sounds great," I answered as she closed the door. I got up long enough to get undressed and pull the bedspread and blankets down. I heard the water running in the bathroom and I guess I heard the Jacuzzi motor start, and then I was out like a light. The next thing I remember was warm, moist skin settling down gently

on top of me. She put her arms around my neck and I could smell her and feel her engulfing me.

“Remember the part about me only wanting a hot bath and a good night's sleep?” she whispered in my ear. “Well, I lied.”

Chapter 27

New York: a rolling stones is harder to hit...

I didn't sleep long, but I did sleep well. This was the first time we had slept together in something that wasn't narrow, moving, or bouncing down the road smelling of lettuce and avocados. You would think that moving from a narrow bunk no more than four feet wide to a huge king-sized bed might gain a tiny bit of separation. No. Even when Sandy was sound asleep, if I moved, she moved with me, up, down, across, and right up to the edge of the bed, never losing contact. The girl was like Crazy Glue. Obviously, she would take some getting used to.

The sun was up when I woke the first time. I was lying at the left edge of the bed and she was laying half on top of me, sound asleep. Our room was on an upper floor and we hadn't bothered to close the drapes on the bay window at the foot of the bed. They were wide open and the morning sun streamed in across the bed and across us. Lying there, I was able to look up and out the window to the high blue sky. Instinctively I looked for Terri, and that was the instant I knew she was gone, and she would not be coming back. Surprisingly, that sudden realization did not terrify me, fill me with grief, or rip my heart out, because I understood this was what Terri had always wanted.

At 9:30, I woke again to find Sandy standing next to the bed. She still wore the high-speed, karate-kicking Reeboks, but her light-brown hair had been combed-out and styled soft and full. She wore soft, pastel makeup, and she was wearing a brand new outfit—an attractive, light gray pants suit with a dark blue blouse and pearls. The effect was stunning. The sharp-edged sales clerk I followed up North Michigan Avenue was completely gone now. She had an older, more professional look, like an ad out of Vogue.

“I couldn't sleep, so I took some of the cash from the gumba in Boston and hit a couple of stores down the street.” She tuned slowly around for me to see. “You like?” She asked proudly.

I looked her over, head to toe. “What I see, is the glowing, relaxed look of someone who has been getting laid way too often.”

“I'll be the judge of that.” She grinned from ear to ear. She opened a bag and put my new clothes on the bed for inspection. There was a pair of pleated, light gray, men's dress slacks, a white silk shirt with French cuffs, and a dark-gray striped sports coat. With the blonde hair and clear sunglasses, the new look should work for me, too.

“You want me to try them on?” I asked.

"Actually," she said as she began unbuttoning her blouse, "I thought I'd take mine off. See, the train doesn't leave for two hours..."

"And we wouldn't want to get them wrinkled... being new and all."

"It's amazing how fast you catch on now."

And it was amazing what that girl could do in an hour when she wanted to.

Packing and checking out were very quick, and we walked outside into a delightful New England summer morning. The sun was shining and the sky was clear. The train station was less than a half mile away, so we walked, passing a Starbucks where I stopped for a cup of real coffee and a pay phone.

"You're calling Billingham again?" Sandy asked.

I nodded as I dialed his office number and began dropping in coins. This time I got a real person and asked for his secretary. When I told her my name, she immediately replied, "Oh, yes. Mr. Billingham is expecting your call."

It was less than a minute before I heard a thick, friendly, baritone voice at the other end of the line. "Mister Talbott, you have been a busy fellow these past few days."

"A rolling stone gathers no bullets, Mister Billingham."

"An excellent point. What can I do for you?"

"It's important that we talk, important to both of us."

"Important, eh? Well, I have this line swept three times a day, so go on."

"No, face-to-face. I have some information that might interest you."

"Interest me? I doubt that."

"I guarantee you won't regret it." There was a long pause at the other end of the phone. "How about later this afternoon?" I asked. "Not in your office, some place outside, with wide open spaces."

"Here in Manhattan? My, my, you do roll," he chuckled. "Assuming you are familiar with the city, perhaps Washington Square, under the arch at say, 5:00 PM?"

"I'll find it, but I thought your office was on Sixth Avenue, in Midtown?"

"Excellent. I appreciate a man who does his homework. My office is indeed up in Midtown, but I have a 3:30 class down at NYU."

"Really? What are you taking?"

"No, no, Mr. Talbott," he laughed. "I'm teaching, not taking—Advanced Criminal Procedure, and it usually draws a pretty good crowd, if I do say so myself."

"I saw you on TV a couple of days ago."

"What a monstrous waste of time. Well, if you watched, you'll know I am fat and jolly, completely bald, and I'm never without a big smile or a couple of large bodyguards. So don't get any peculiar ideas, Mr. Talbott, or try to do anything but talk."

"Me? I'm a pussy cat, Mister Billingham."

"That's not what the *Boston Globe* said about you this morning, or the *Chicago Tribune* the day before. And I guess the Columbus papers the day before that, but who's counting, eh?"

"None of that stuff is true."

"Of course not. I'm a defense attorney, remember? That's what *all* my clients tell me," he chuckled. "But if you really are part of the innocent, tiny minority, that's all the more reason for you to be careful. 5:00 PM is a long time from now and like

most pussy cats, you've already used up most of your nine lives... and *ciao*, Mr. Talbott."

Two doors down from the Starbucks was a bookstore. We ducked inside and I bought a copy of the *Boston Globe*, curious about the story Billingham mentioned. I opened it and groaned. This time we had made page one. They had my photo again, with the headline, "Torture Slaying in Back Bay, Midwest Cop Killers Believed in Boston," and they had enough of the details and the twisted background to convince me it was more of Ralph Tinkerton's handiwork. This time, they had Sandy's photograph too. Mine was the same old California driver's license mug shot they used in Chicago, but Sandy's was even worse. Her black hair looked dirty and uncombed, not stylishly "messy," her skin was pale and fleshy, and she wore black lip-gloss and eyeliner. With a pair of dull, dead eyes and dark bags underneath, she must have been in her Goth phase. I turned the paper and showed her.

"Which was it?" I asked. "A horrible hangover or Halloween?"

She stared at the picture without saying a word and I could see the tears start to form.

"Hey, I'm sorry," I said. "I was only kidding."

"You should keep that," she pointed at it and managed a whisper. "You can pull it out any time I get moody or piss you off, or you don't think I appreciate you enough. That was me, about a year ago, after I hit bottom. Like I said, you need to keep it."

"Well, one good thing," I said, as I gave her a hug. "That sure isn't you anymore."

The ride down to New York's Pennsylvania Station at 34th Street and Seventh Avenue in Midtown took about three hours. When we crossed into Connecticut, I began to relax. With all the local crime in New York, the newspapers in the Big Apple would have more than enough of their own news without needing Boston or Chicago stories for filler. By the time we reached central Connecticut, the sky had turned gray as fresh showers came up the Atlantic coast to meet us.

The station is underground, and Sandy and I joined the flow of bodies heading for the narrow escalators. The old, granite, neo-classical train station had been torn down and replaced by the Madison Square Garden sports arena. The railroad waiting room and ticket windows were in the basement, complete with the usual array of homeless, Hari Krishnas, panhandlers, bag ladies, and three-card Monte dealers. In the middle, we found a large, confusing map that showed the complex array of bus, train, and subway routes that overlaid the five boroughs.

"Looks like the wiring diagram for the space shuttle," I mumbled, trying to orient myself to the big map.

She stared at the map for a second, as if she was taking it all in, then her finger shot out and touched a spot on the map. "There's Washington Square at the lower end of Fifth Avenue. Isn't that where we're going?"

I stared at her, wondering how she did that.

"And those little dots? Aren't those the subway stops around it? If we took this line here." Her finger traced a thin green line across the map. "But we aren't really going to take the subway again, are we?" She wrinkled up her nose. "Yuk."

"We can walk if you'd like," I glanced at my watch and saw it was only 2:45. "Our meeting with Billingham isn't until 5:00," I said.

"Good. My butt is tired of sitting."

"It's probably raining out there, you know."

"Talbot, when you're in love, you can walk right between the drops." She wrapped herself around my arm and pulled me away. "Let's get out of here before I figure out a better use of that extra two hours."

We took the escalator up to the street. Standing under the canopy at 34th and 7th Avenue, we looked out on a sea of umbrellas bobbing past in the misty summer rain. On the corner, I spotted one of the ubiquitous New York street vendors selling cheap umbrellas for \$10.00. Yesterday they were probably \$5.00 and he was mostly selling knock-off Oakley sunglasses, but yesterday the sun was shining.

"Love's great," I told her as a raindrop dripped off my nose. "But even Gene Kelly used an umbrella."

"Just buy one. If you buy two, you'll make me cry."

As we walked down 7th Avenue, Washington Square lay ahead of us in the gray mist about three miles away, but it was an easy walk huddled under the umbrella. The rain was only a light drizzle and the extra time would give us a chance to check out the meeting site. Sandy was wrapped around my arm as we walked south and I realized how comfortable that felt now. I stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, turned, and pulled her to me. Our lips met and we stood, arms entwined, kissing, mouths open, tongues probing, for a good two minutes. In any other city, we would get comments, odd looks, or even a few loud grumbles, but not in New York. You can get away with anything for five minutes on a New York sidewalk.

"Not too shabby," she said as I finally put her down. "Was there some particular reason for that?" she asked, smacking her lips to get the circulation back.

"None at all, I just felt like doing it."

"Just like that, huh?"

"Just like that."

"Then that's the best reason of all." She beamed. "But if you do that again, I'm going to drag you into another hotel for a long, tawdry afternoon of debauchery."

Arm in arm again, we turned south and resumed our stroll. We passed a corner newspaper stand. The latest editions of the *New York Post* covered its entire sidewalk. Not that New York newspapers were known for understatement, but the headlines screamed at us in huge black letters "GOV SAYS NO". The story had something to do with the state budget, but I guess it was an off news day in the Big Apple, because below the fold, I saw, "NEW ENGLAND MANHUNT CONTINUES FOR COP KILLERS." They had our photographs again, both of them, but I didn't bother to read the story.

"Let's get out of here," I whispered as I pulled her away.

"Peter," she laughed. "This is New York City. King Kong could walk down Fifth Avenue and no one would notice. Even if they did, they wouldn't care so long as he didn't step on one of them."

At 11th Street, we turned east to Fifth Avenue and walked south to Washington Square, where Fifth dead-ended at the big arch. Cuddled up under the umbrella,

we walked south through the park, out the other side, and down to Bleeker Street, slowly checking it all out. Billingham knew we were coming around 5:00, but he didn't know where we'd be coming from. Walking down Fifth from the north would have been the obvious approach, but I intended to circle the park and come in from the south or east where we might blend in with the younger NYU crowd.

It was only 3:45, so we found a small, nearly empty Italian restaurant on Bleeker Street. Located four steps below the street, the restaurant was dark, with bushy plants and old Chianti bottles hanging in the windows. We ordered some pasta and the waiter gave me a look of utter scorn when I told him I would like a bottle of Joseph Phelps Cabernet from Napa, but what do Italians know about good wine?

"Thanks, but I think I'll pass," Sandy said.

"I'm sorry, I forgot you've stopped," I apologized and waved the waiter away.

"A glass of wine sounds good," she said. "But I don't want to start, not now, not after all I've been through. I'll bet that Joseph Phelps stuff even comes with a cork, huh? When Eddie ordered, it always had a screw top."

"When you date a guy from California, you get cork."

"Date?" she giggled. "With all that sweating and moaning, is that what you call it?" She put her hand on mine. "You're going to take a lot of work, you know."

After we ate, I drew a crude map on the paper tablecloth. "Here's the plan. Billingham will be coming in from the law school buildings on Sullivan on the south side of the square. I'm going over two streets, then north to the park. You go back to MacDougal and up to the park the way we came. Wait for me near the corner, while I talk to Billingham. When we're done, I'll meet you there and we'll take off to one of the subway stations to the west, okay?"

"No, I want to go with you."

"Look, you're the only one who knows the truth. If they catch both of us, I'm finished, we're finished. That's why you're going to stay over on MacDougal and run like hell if it all blows up." I put my hand on hers, caressing it lightly. "So you're going to go over to MacDougal, because you know I'm depending on you."

She stared back across at me for a very long time. "You really are a sneaky, manipulating bastard, Peter Talbott, aren't you?"

She did what I asked, but she didn't like it. Since I looked more like my photo in the newspaper than she looked like hers, she insisted I take the umbrella. The three-block walk to Washington Square was one of the longest walks I'd ever taken. The street was narrow. The afternoon was dark and gloomy with rain dripping off the sycamores. I swore I saw government hit men hiding in every doorway and eyes following me from every parked car. In the 19th century, Washington Square was a green oasis and the best neighborhood in the city. A Sunday afternoon stroll there would have been all the rage, but times had changed. Now, on a rainy afternoon, I saw a totally empty playground in one corner and an equally large, fenced dog run in the other, where the X-ers took their golden retrievers and Russian wolfhounds to growl at each other. Most of the park benches had become homeless "shacks", with cardboard and blankets draped over them.

It was all pretty depressing stuff. Across MacDougal, at the corner with West Washington, I saw Sandy hiding in a doorway. Her eyes never left me as I took a

slow lap around the perimeter of the park. I used the wide diagonal sidewalks to criss-cross it several times, but I saw nothing. Other than Sandy's dark eyes following my every move, the only serious interest I got was from the hookers near the arch and a small army of crack dealers hanging around the fountain at the center of the park.

New York! Ya gotta love it! Where else does a city divide-up its recreational turf on such a non-judgmental basis?

Chapter 28

Just a quiet walk in the park...

It was 4:50. I took a seat on a wet park bench facing south toward the NYU Law School buildings, where I had a good view of the entire park. If Tinkerton's men came at me out of the late afternoon gloom, they had better come in numbers and be wearing track shoes, because they would have a tough time cornering me in all that open ground. In the distance, I heard the chime of cathedral bells and knew it must be 5:00. Shaggy college kids with long hair, book bags, and that all-important second-hand grunge look poured out of the NYU class buildings to the east like a jailbreak. After the flood of the great unwashed had ebbed, I saw another group of older and more prosperous students emerge from a building down on Sullivan and scatter. Three men dressed in top coats and business suits followed them out the doors. They crossed 4th Street and marched straight north into the park.

Barrister Billingham was the man in the center, dressed in a stylish, mohair topcoat over a navy-blue pinstriped suit, and a red silk tie. His deep Florida tan completed the outfit, and he was right. Even if I hadn't seen him on television, there was no mistaking him for anyone else in the park. Towering above his bald head were two very large, mono-brow hulks dressed in dark, loose fitting, unbuttoned raincoats. The muscle on the left held a large, dark-green golf umbrella over Billingham's head, his arm straight out, chest high, like the Russian wrestlers carrying their flag at the Olympics. The muscle on the right had his hands in his coat pockets. What else was in there I wasn't sure, but his eyes swept back and forth like two nervous radar dishes until he picked me out of the gloom from a half-block away. He must have said something to Billingham because the lawyer looked my way and gave a brief nod as he continued on to the arch.

I looked around the park one more time and then looked over at Sandy. Satisfied that the three men had come alone, I stood up and headed for the arch where they waited for me at the wrought iron fence at the monument's base. Flanked by the two hulks, Billingham greeted me with a pleasant smile, but there were no hugs or handshakes.

I looked up at the inscription carved on the pediment high above us. "Let us raise a standard to which the wise and the honest can repair," I read aloud. "George Washington, 1798. Which one are you, Charley?"

A thin smile crossed his lips. "Gino said you were an irreverent smart-ass, Mister Talbott, and I have always found Gino an excellent judge of people."

"Yeah, a real prince."

"Before we begin, Harvey here has something he needs to do." Billingham motioned to one of the beefy bodyguards. "Don't be alarmed, he won't hurt you, unless I tell him to."

With that, the bigger of the two hulks stepped behind me and quickly frisked me: back, sides, legs, groin, chest, neck, the works. His hands moved quickly, efficiently, and very professionally. Satisfied, Harvey nodded to Billingham. The other goon handed Billingham the green golf umbrella and the two bodyguards walked away, taking up positions far enough away, but not too far, their eyes constantly moving, scanning the surrounding area.

"Now that I know you aren't armed or wearing a wire, we can have that little talk you wanted," Billingham said pleasantly as we walked off down the sidewalk, side-by-side, each of us under his own umbrella.

"I'm the one they're trying to kill," I reminded him.

"And for very good reasons." He pulled what looked like a small transistor radio from his jacket pocket and turned it on. "This little gadget doesn't play any of your favorite rock music, Mister Talbott. It emits a bubble of 'white noise' that drives the neighborhood dogs crazy and renders a directional microphone useless. These days one never knows what they might have set up in a parked car, on a roof, or in some window."

"It's a little warm for a topcoat, isn't it, Charley?"

He smiled. "I don't mind the extra protection, Mr. Talbott. You never can tell what the weather will bring here in the city." He looked across the street to the west. "I assume that is Mrs. Kasmarek hiding in that doorway over on MacDougal—the attractive, young woman with the large, shoulder bag?" I made no reply. "Gino was quite smitten by her, so she must really be something. Personally, I am surprised you still have her with you. The comfort factor aside, it is very dangerous for a man in your situation to keep a companion. Inevitably, it affects one's judgment, for the worse I am afraid."

"Gino said that too."

"Gino is a very smart man. By the way, you'll be happy to know he is recovering nicely in a clinic up in Montreal."

"Canada? You don't take any chances do you?"

"Not when it comes to prying little minds with unlimited budgets. By the way, I understand you and Mrs. Kasmarek saved his life. I am personally very appreciative, and I assure you it gained you some good will in other quarters as well. Gino is a lot like Harvey and Tomas over there, it will take a lot more than one bullet to kill them. Be that as it may, I assure you Mrs. Kasmarek is in no danger from us. Neither are you, Mister Talbott." He paused and looked me in the eyes, "But I wonder how much danger are we in from you?"

"Me? You're worried about me?" I laughed.

He gave me another thin, cold, smile. "Please understand. Between the Justice Department and the Patillo Family over in Newark, I am not without enemies. At last count, I had two undercover police officers in my class, a boyish-looking FBI agent passing as a student intern in the department office, a new janitor, and I am

not too sure about my new neighbors in Connecticut. As for the Patillos? Attorneys are supposed to be off limits, but if Rico thought for one instant that I stood any chance of getting Jimmy Santorini out of jail, he'd have a contract out on me before nightfall."

"An occupational hazard. You should be more careful about the clients you take."

"True enough," he sighed as we continued walking around the park. "So tell me what you want. And tell me what you have that I am supposed to find so interesting."

"What I want is some information on Louie Panozzo. What was it that he had on Jimmy Santorini?"

Billingham looked at me for a moment. "Suffice it to say that this meeting never took place, Mister Talbott. I spoke to my client. Frankly, I advised him that we should not talk to you, but a man can get very disconsolate when he is locked up inside a Federal Penitentiary, surrounded by all that barbed wire and knowing he will be very, very old when he finally does get out." Billingham stopped walking, his eyes drilling into me. "But be advised, if you are playing games with him, you will learn that Jimmy has no sense of humor what-so-ever."

"Neither does Ralph Tinkerton," I answered. "And if I don't stop him, it won't matter who Jimmy is pissed at."

We resumed our walk. Every time we crossed a new sidewalk, he led us off in a new direction, like a freighter in an old war movie zigzagging to avoid submarines. Until a few days ago, I would have thought Charley Billingham a paranoid nut, but that was when I still trusted funeral directors, doctors, and county sheriffs. I never did trust lawyers. Who does?

"All right. You asked me about Louie Panozzo," Billingham began his story. "He worked for Jimmy in Newark. He was not *family* or a *made man* or anything nefarious. He was merely an ordinary, nine-to-five bookkeeper, but he had access to all the financial records and all the accounting. No, that is not quite correct. They were his financial records, his *books* if you will, and he knew where every dime came from and went. That means all the drugs, women, numbers, the unions, loan sharking, money laundering, the scams, guns, booze, the bookies, the legitimate businesses Jimmy ran and the crooked ones. Panozzo had the details of everything that went into the till. More importantly, he kept *the pad*: the record of the payoffs Jimmy made to the police and half the elected and appointed government officials throughout eastern New Jersey and New York. Unfortunately, the FBI seized Panozzo on a trumped-up wire fraud charge. Instead of trusting me to get him off, he accepted a plea bargain from the U.S. Attorney and rolled over, first to that bastard Hardin, if you'll pardon my language, and then in court."

"I know that."

"Of course you do," Billingham smiled, making me feel like a complete idiot. "And as I think you are aware by now, when Louie left Newark, he took an electronic copy of all of Jimmy's master accounting records for the past five years with him."

"That's what this is all about? The bean counter's books?" I asked.

Billingham looked at me as if I was a first year law student who had just farted in the middle of one of his lectures. "No, Mister Talbott, this is not about the

books, it is about power. Those records not only include the various items about Jimmy's operations I enumerated, they also include dozens of transactions with the other *families* in the Tri-state area—joint ventures, as you might call them—so those computer files can put many, many people in jail. No one knows that. Jimmy does, of course, I know it, Gino does, and now you do.”

“Tinkerton knows too. He tried to carve them out of me with a scalpel.”

“Not exactly. He knows the files exist and that they contain information on Jimmy's operations in New Jersey, perhaps the payoffs as well, but that is all he knows.”

“So who has them, Charley?”

“We had been hoping you do, Mister Talbott,” he smiled. “The Feds don't have them. If they did, they would have used them by now, and half the politicians and crooks on the Atlantic seaboard would already be in jail. And Rico Patillo doesn't have them. If he did, he would already be squeezing and muscling people.” He stopped and looked at me. “I know you are still skeptical about the value of those records, but did you ever see the *Untouchables* movie? The one with Kevin Costner as Elliot Ness and all that?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Well, in real life, when Al Capone was convicted and sent to prison, it was for income tax evasion, not the murders or numerous violent crimes he committed. It was the accountants who got him, the *bean counters* as you call them. With Louie Panozzo's accounting records, you could control a five-state area, perhaps even the government in Washington itself. That's what makes them the most explosive bits of computer code since the Manhattan Project, and whoever has them has his finger on the trigger.”

“So it wasn't simply a matter of Panozzo holding a news conference and saying he made the whole thing up?”

“That was pure propaganda. Do you think Jimmy Santorini would let that little weasel off the hook just because he stood up and said he didn't mean it? No, no, it was the books. It was always the books. Panozzo couldn't trade them to the Feds or to Rico Patillo, and he couldn't give them back to Jimmy, either. That was their little secret you see—Louie's and Jimmy's—and the only thing keeping him alive. As long as Louie had them, no one could touch him.”

My mind flashed back to that night on the embalming table. “Tinkerton did.”

“When Tinkerton learned that Panozzo was coming back to us, he grabbed Louie before he could get away. Perhaps he said something wrong, perhaps he tried to run bluff; but Tinkerton decided to torture the truth out of him. If he knew what was really on them, he would have been more careful, but Panozzo was overweight and out of shape. We assume he had a heart attack. Whatever, we know Tinkerton failed to get them.”

“Tinkerton told me it was an accident, he went too far.”

“That is quite likely the truth. And then you showed up,” Billingham turned and studied me. “Permit me to be blunt, Mister Talbott, but do you have them? Everyone believes you do. We can make you fabulously wealthy, and I will personally guarantee your safety and Mrs. Kasmarek's. All we want to do is destroy them. We'll even permit you to destroy them, if I can be there to watch. However, your clock is ticking. If Rico Patillo catches you first... well, you saw

what he is capable of doing in Boston. He would kill you, kill her, and kill your mother, your dog, and your mother's dog, and that would be on a good day."

"How does Patillo figure into this?"

"The first thing they teach a young prosecutor is to ask who benefits. So far, it is Rico Patillo who keeps coming up the big winner. Him, Senator Hardin, and your friend Ralph Tinkerton, and I would dearly love to find the link that ties them all of them together. As for the losers? Jimmy is in Marion and I'm walking around with two bodyguards."

"That's why you are going to help me, Charley."

"Me? And why would I want to do that?"

"Because I'm your last hope. Yours and Jimmy's. I need you to pull together everything you have and everything you can find on Panozzo and his wife, Clement Aleppo, Richie Benvenuto, Johnny Dantonio, Paulie Mantucci, and their wives. I need medical records, dental records, blood types, all that stuff. I also need you to pull together everything you can find on the Greene Funeral Home, the Varner Clinic, and Oak Hill Cemetery in Columbus. Who owns them, their tax records, everything."

"Is that all?" He chuckled.

"No, I need you to do a little research for me," I said as I handed him a slip of paper.

He opened it and read the names, "Skeppington, Brownstein, Pryor, and Kasmarek, Atlanta, Phoenix, Portland, and Chicago? ... Kasmarek?" he looked over at the doorway.

"I'm not keeping her around for personal comfort, Charley. They buried *the Mole* under her ex-husband's name in Oak Hill Cemetery in Columbus, and she's got proof. Louie Panozzo and his wife are buried under my name and my wife's. He won't match my Army records, and his wife won't match my wife's hospital records in California, either. They buried your other New Jersey friends under those other names. Tinkerton murdered them, and you'll find his signatures all over the records. And I think those guys barely scratch the surface. There are more graves up there."

Billingham stared at me, perhaps with a newfound appreciation. "You never cease to surprise, Mr. Talbott." We had come around full circle to the arch, and I stopped. Billingham pulled a long, Cuban cigar out of his coat pocket, bit off the tip, and lit it slowly with a wooden match. As I watched his face, I could see the wheels turning.

"You are a sharp lawyer with plenty of resources," I told him. "Dig out the two sets of death certificates, get photos of the two sets of headstones and find a sympathetic judge. That ought to be enough to get a warrant to dig up the Talbott graves in Columbus. That should bring Tinkerton's house of cards crashing down, and give you the wedge you need to file some prosecutorial misconduct charges to get your boss out of jail."

"Prosecutorial misconduct?" Billingham looked down at the slip of paper, thinking. "Possibly, but it's a stretch."

"Really?" I reached in my pocket and handed him the Massachusetts driver's license. "Who's this guy?"

Billingham frowned. "Tony Grigiatto, "Tony G," a button man for Rico."

"He was waiting for us in the alley last night in Boston with a gun and a silencer. They had a whole crew up there and that means Rico Patillo is working for Tinkerton."

"No, Mister Talbott," Billingham shook his head sadly. "You have that backwards, it means that Tinkerton is working for Rico Patillo. As I said, this is all about power and if you do have those computer files, you should tread very, very softly." He started to turn away and then he looked back and paused. "But, if you don't mind my asking a personal question, why are you doing all this?"

"Because I want off the merry-go-round. I want us both off," I pointed across the street. "They won't leave us alone, so I'm going to bring them down."

"You? You are going to 'bring them down?'" Billingham smiled, amused by the naiveté of my answer. He took a deep drag on the cigar and tipped his head up, exhaling a thick cloud of cigar smoke. It hung around his head under the umbrella in the damp air. "Then I wish you good luck, Mister Talbott," he said. "We'll both need it."

Billingham had just tipped his umbrella to the east and turned away again, when I heard a loud, painful grunt come out of him. His eyes bulged and he lurched forward as if he had been punched in the back. He staggered forward with a puzzled expression as the blow drove him to his knees. He dropped his umbrella and toppled into me. As thick and bulky as he was, the best I could do was to catch him and slow his fall, lowering him to the sidewalk in front of me. I knew immediately that he had been shot in the back. He was lying on his side looking up at me, wide-eyed, trying to breathe.

I ran my hand across his back. I felt a jagged tear in the back of his coat, between the shoulder blade and his spine, but I felt nothing wet. I pulled my hand away. No blood? I put my hand back and felt around in the tear until I found something small and hard. I pulled it out and found myself looking at a spent bullet. That was when I realized he was wearing a bulletproof vest under the top coat. The bullet hadn't penetrated, but might have broken a few ribs as it slammed into him, flattened, and knocked the wind out of him.

"A goddamned Kevlar vest, Charley?" I said. "You gotta be kidding."

"Like I said." He wheezed painfully. "In this city, one can never be too careful."

I turned and tried to determine where the shot came from, but I couldn't tell. Suddenly another bullet zipped past my head and grazed the concrete sidewalk behind me, kicking up chips and sparks. From the way it ricocheted, it must have come from the north, and high above. I looked around the nearly-empty park, but there was no one within several hundred feet of us who could possibly have gotten off a shot like that, much less two. They must be using a rifle with a silencer, shooting from one of the rooftops.

Billingham's eyes were wide open. He clutched my arm and tried to pull himself up, but I pushed him back down. I propped our two umbrellas out in front of him, screening both of us from view to the north and east where the shots must have come from.

"Stay down!" I told him as I crouched behind the umbrella too. The thin nylon would never stop a bullet, but what the gunman couldn't see, he wasn't likely to hit.

Billingham's two guards had been facing away from us, and it wasn't until the second bullet skipped off the pavement that they also realized something was wrong. They dropped into defensive stances with their guns out scanning the side streets.

"No, up north," I screamed at them, wanting to make sure they knew it wasn't me who shot their boss. "It must be a rifle, up on one of the roofs." They both nodded.

"Thank you," Billingham pulled me to him and whispered. "Thank you."

"Track down that stuff, Charley," I told him as I scanned the park again. I was already on the "10 Most Wanted List" in the Post Office, so sticking around the park would not do me any good. Neither would getting shot in some noble gesture to protect Charley Billingham, so I took off running west, zigzagging through the trees.

Harvey ran over and plucked Billingham off the sidewalk, threw him over his shoulder as if he were a rag doll, and then sprinted south into the trees. The other guard trailed behind, watching the roofs, waiting to return fire, but there wasn't any.

Billingham had it all wrong; he was so intent on foiling unwanted listeners that he set himself up for a bullet. While we strolled around the small park shielded from view by the heavy overhead cover, the rifleman had found himself a good firing position. He watched and waited and when we looped back through the park and came back into the open, he had a clear shot.

I had spent enough time on the rifle range at Fort Riley, Kansas to know that a rifle shot from almost any distance was difficult in the drizzly fog and half-light of the late afternoon. Add in the thick tree canopy and the fact the closest rooftops had to be at least 500 yards away, and this guy was good. If Charley hadn't been wearing the vest, he'd be dead.

Chapter 29

In the backseat of Goutams' magic carpet...

I ran west through the trees doing my best UCLA tailback impersonation, cutting left, cutting right, blazing my way through the USC defense. Overhead, the leaves, the big branches, and the misty rain did the rest. Up ahead I saw Sandy. We made eye contact and I continued running through the grass and trees in case they had other shooters stationed around the park. But before I was halfway to MacDougal Street, I knew I was out of range and out of danger. The farther away I got from the arch though, the clearer it became that the gunman was aiming for Billingham, not for me.

This was Rico Patillo's handiwork again. It was unlikely anyone knew I was here. After Boston, if they thought I was anywhere around here, they wouldn't have used a long gun, they would have surrounded the park with an army, because Charley was right. They wanted those flash drives and they needed me

alive to get them. It wasn't the same for Charley. Maybe his TV time in front of the Hardin Commission spooked Rico and he wanted to make sure the lawyer never did talk. Maybe Rico wasn't taking any chances. When Jimmy finally did get out of Marion, it would be in a hearse. And the simplest solution to all those problems was to take Charley out, now.

Sandy's path and mine converged at the corner on MacDougal Street. I grabbed her hand and we ran up Fourth without breaking stride until we were two blocks west of the park. That was where I stopped and pulled her into a doorway to catch my breath.

"What happened back there?" she panted along with me.

"Somebody took a shot at Billingham."

She wrapped her arms around me. "I was so afraid. You scared the hell out of me."

"Not as much as it scared the hell out of Charley!"

"Is he okay?"

"Yeah. He was hit in the back by a sniper with a rifle, somebody up on one of the roofs. But the fat bastard was wearing a bulletproof vest, if you can believe it."

"Has he got two more?" she asked.

"No, but he's got our umbrella." I looked down at her, but she didn't find that very funny. "The bullet knocked him down and he probably peed in his pants, but he'll be okay. He thinks I saved his life and that's even better. He owes me now."

"So they weren't shooting at you?"

"I don't think so. I think they were after him. So, let's get out of here." I took her arm and we walked quickly toward Sixth Avenue, looking to all the world like two shadowy city stick figures heading home from work.

"What did he say?"

"This whole thing is about Panozzo's books, those damned flash drives. Tinkerton, Rico Patillo, Gino, Billingham, and even your pal Hardin have all been looking for them, because Billingham says there's a lot more on them than we think. They tie in all the other east coast families and they're dynamite, add in the payoff lists and they are raw power."

"And he had no idea they were in your pocket, only a few feet away?"

"Maybe, but it seems I'm the rock everybody wants to turn over now."

"So what are we going to do now?"

"See Hardin. He's our last chance."

We reached Sixth Avenue and saw a sign for the subway. Unfortunately, there were two battered, New York City Transit Authority Police cars parked on the sidewalk in front of the entrance with their doors hanging open and light bars flashing. I put my arm around Sandy and we gave them a wide berth. Three exasperated white Transit cops in torn and disheveled blue uniforms were wrestling a huge and very angry black woman up the stairs. She must have weighed three hundred pounds, and she was wearing a short-short, orange, patent-leather mini-skirt, a tube-top that looked like she had been shoplifting basketballs from a sporting goods store, and a pair of chrome handcuffs. Kicking, cussing, and spitting, she was a load, as the two Transit cops pushed her up the last few stairs, dragged her over to one of the cars, and jammed her into the back seat.

One look told me the transit cops were far too occupied to notice two lovers hurrying to the subway. We made a hard right and hurried down the wet, concrete stairs to the station below. I slid a five-dollar bill under the ticket window, dropped two tokens into the coin box, and we scampered through the turnstile, taking the stairs two at a time to the northbound tracks. It was 5:40. The rush hour crowd filled the dimly lit cavern. I found a spot where I could put my back against the wall, pull Sandy up against me, and try to blend in. Fortunately, it wasn't long before a single, white headlight appeared down the track and we heard the distant rumble of an in-coming train. The sound grew louder and louder until the train burst from the tunnel and braked to a halt in front of us. We joined the surge forward and with a shove here and a wiggle there, we pushed our way inside the car. The only people who squeezed in after us were three college students and a couple of gray-haired housewives toting shopping bags. No suits. No sunglasses. No lawyers with Gucci shoes and Florida tans. As quick as it stopped, the car started up with a jolt. I grabbed a silver pole and Sandy grabbed me, wrapping her arms around my waist.

"That had better be *your* hands on my buns back there," I whispered into the top of her head.

"I certainly hope so," she looked up and gave me a forced smile.

At Penn Station, half the crowd got off and we let the tide carry us out onto the platform. I peeled off into an eddy as the doors closed and train rolled away down the tunnel. I looked around the narrow platform, but we were the only ones left who had gotten off. The others had disappeared up the escalator. I pulled Sandy close and held her very tight. Billingham was right. She was in a lot of danger and I had put her there.

"Hey. That's me you're crushing."

"I know." I held her like that for a good five minutes.

"When I get crazy mood swings, I can always blame it on PMS," she muttered into my chest. "What's your excuse?"

Fortunately, a northbound local finally arrived and I didn't have to answer. We rode it up to Forty-Second Street and got off for keeps this time. If Manhattan was a zoo, then Times Square between 5:00 PM and 8:00 PM, when the nearby theaters had their curtain calls, was the monkey cage. That's where Broadway, Forty-fifth Street, and Seventh Avenue cross, opening up a wide, exciting space full of speeding cabs, ten-story neon billboards, buses, theater marquees, flashing lights, movie houses, discount electronic stores, hustlers, street preachers, pimps, hookers, the early theater crowd, vendors, bums, and every nut case the city has to offer. And a lovely, big crowd to get lost in.

We walked north on Broadway. When we passed the first brightly lit electronics store, Sandy pulled me over to the window. It offered everything from radios and camcorders to boom boxes, watches, pens, X-rated videos, and cameras. "You owe me something, remember?" She tapped her finger on the glass by the display of electronic thirty-five millimeter cameras. "Something you broke when you tossed me behind those garbage cans in Boston?"

"A new camera, huh?"

"Not just *a* new camera, Sandy wants one of those!" She pointed again. "A Pentax with a Vivitar 20 x 200 zoom lens. And it's going to run you about five hundred bucks before I'm done."

"If it makes you happy, five hundred is no problem."

"It'll take a lot more than that, but I'll start with the camera." She looked in through the store windows and checked out the smug, hard-eyed, male Arab clerks standing behind the counters. "When we get inside, Talbott, you just stand there, look pretty, and keep your mouth shut. Got that?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said, thinking any price would be worth it if it got this crazy woman off my back over the camera.

"Cause Sandy's gonna give those turkeys a serious butt-whippin'."

Twenty minutes later we came walking back out with the Pentax, the telephoto lens, a camera bag, three filters, and three high-capacity memory chips, all of which she had gotten for three hundred and ninety-five dollars, including tax, leaving the shattered wreckage of a half-dozen formerly cocky sales clerks in her wake.

"The Big Apple?" Sandy crowed. "Those clowns wouldn't last five minutes on Maxwell Street in Chicago, the old one or the new one."

"Okay, you have your new camera, and a masterful performance it was," I congratulated her. "Should I find you a Polish wedding?"

We walked to the corner and started looking for a cab. It was already 6:15. The streets were choked with traffic, but I finally got one to pull over to the curb next to us. The driver was a small man with dark skin and straight black hair who looked back at us with a toothy, white grin.

"How long to drive to the Newark Airport from here?" I asked.

"Oh, forty-five minutes, I should think," he answered in a thick accent.

"Then Newark it is," I told him as I eased up on my grip.

"The airport?" Sandy whispered, confused. "I thought you said we couldn't fly."

"I did."

The cabbie had his CB radio turned on and we heard the incessant chatter of a dozen or more voices speaking in a language I was certain I never heard before. Every now and then, the talk would be punctuated by shrill laughter and our driver would pick up his microphone and chatter along with them.

"What language is that?" I finally leaned forward and asked.

"Oh, that is Bengali. A dialect from the north of India, near Calcutta. All the Bengali taxi drivers, we talk to each other on it. You know, we talk about the traffic, the weather, what's happening on the bridges, the best routes to take..."

"And tell a lot of dirty jokes?" Sandy asked, as she kicked off her shoes and curled up on my lap.

"Oh, no, no. No dirty jokes," he laughed. He picked up the microphone and chattered some more, looking at her in the mirror and laughing as we heard voices laughing on the radio even louder. "They say, maybe some dirty jokes," he giggled.

The driver turned west on Forty-Sixth and the cab slowed to a snail's pace in the narrow two-lane street. The rain came down harder now, banging on the cab's roof like a tin drum. Jockeying inch-by-inch with the other cabs, we eventually made it over to Eighth Avenue where everything completely ground to a halt.

"With the rain, the traffic is more bad tonight," the driver shook his head.

I looked around the interior of the cab. It was clean, not a speck of dirt or dust on the leather seats or floor. Even the windows had been recently washed, inside and out. Up on his visor and saw a city license with his photograph and the name Goutam Ray.

"Maybe he cleans apartments," I said as I put my finger on Sandy's lips and leaned forward again. "Goutam, how long would it take for you to drive us to Philadelphia?"

"Philly? Oh, my. Maybe two hours, maybe a little more, once we get out of this."

"What would the fare be?"

"That is a tariff fare, not metered, plus tolls, and I have to come back..." he looked at me in the rear view mirror. "And all that gasoline, Ayii! And..."

"How much!" Sandy cut him off.

"For you, lovely lady, three-hundred dollars."

I looked down at Sandy and shrugged. "Even with your Swiss Army key chain-toolbox, changing license plates and hot-wiring a car in this rain will ruin those new clothes of yours," I said as I ran my fingers through her hair. "And the lovely new do."

"All because of me, eh, Talbott?"

I looked at my watch. "It's 6:30. When we get to Philly, we can catch a train to DC, or we can wait until morning."

"No," she shook her head. "As much as I'd love to shack up with you for another night of unbridled passion, let's get this thing done, tonight. That business in Washington Square scared the Hell out of me. I'm not brave anymore; I want this thing over."

I leaned forward, "Okay, Goutam. We're going to miss our flight out of Newark anyway, so you can drive the lovely lady and me to Philly. But take your time. If you get us there by 9:00 with no problems and without the cops stopping you for any tickets, it's four hundred cash, okay?" I saw his face light up in a grin in the rear view mirror.

Goutam turned the cab west toward the Lincoln tunnel. "Let's call Hardin," Sandy said. "I don't want to make it to Washington only to find an empty office at midnight."

"Goutam, find a deli or coffee shop for a quick pit stop. I want to grab a couple of sandwiches and we need to make a phone call."

Ten minutes later, the cab pulled over to the curb along 42nd street at the door to a deli that had a big carryout sign. "This is my cousin's establishment," Goutam said. "He has a pay phone and an excellent tongue if I may be bold enough to suggest, sir."

"Tongue?" I looked down at her. "That would almost be cannibalism, wouldn't it."

"How's the corned beef? Or, don't Hindus eat cow?" Sandy asked.

"Oh, pretty lady, to not eat kosher corned beef in New York City? With a fresh dill pickle and some potato latkes and a knish? *That* would truly be a sin."

She went for the sandwiches while I went to the phones and dialed Hardin's office. He was not in, but his aide knew to immediately patch me through to his cell phone at the posh Georgetown hotel where he said Hardin was speaking at the

annual dinner of the U. S, Association of Chiefs of Police. *Totally appropriate*, I thought.

"Senator, this is Pete Talbott," I began. "Good swill at the Willard tonight?"

"One of the very few places in the District that still serves a decent foie gras," he said softly. "You must excuse me for not using your name, but I'm sure you understand. Where have you been?" he pressed. "I thought you were going to get back in touch yesterday and I was getting very nervous. This business in Boston..."

"Boys will be boys, Senator, but you're right. It's time for us to come in. We'll be in your office tonight, I hope before midnight."

"And, you're bringing everything with you? The data files and all?"

"Relax Senator, I have them."

"They're important, you know, *very* important."

"By the way, you almost lost another witness today." There was silence at the other end. "Two hours ago I was standing in a park in lower Manhattan..."

"Manhattan! I thought you said you were in Tennessee?"

"I lied. I do a lot of that. It helps me stay alive. Anyway, I was swapping stories with your baldheaded friend, Charles Billingham, when someone tried to take him out with a sniper rifle." I let that sink in for a second. "Don't worry, he's still very much alive, but he's going to have quite a bruise. The shooter was probably one of Rico Patillo's soldiers."

"Rico Patillo!" Hardin almost came through the phone.

"Yeah. That was his people who tried to kill us in Boston yesterday. Charley thinks Tinkerton is working for him, so it all fits. You watch your back, Senator, you could be on their list too."

"Me? I'm a United States Senator, have you lost your mind..."

"Nope, I'm just beginning to find it. I'll see you at Midnight, in your office in the Russell Building."

"It's right next to the Capitol, you can't miss it."

"Great, and Sandy says she'll have that fetching blue dress on."

"What? Just bring those files, damn it!"

"Ciao, Senator." I hung up and stared at the phone for a minute.

"Tim? The blue dress?" Sandy laughed. "You're getting as bad as me, you know."

"It must be catching."

"Like I told you, Hardin's cute, but if he stands around too long in the hot sun, he's gonna leave a grease stain big enough to cook McDonalds French fries."

We ran back out to the cab. Goutam had been looking at maps and immediately drove away, heading for the tunnel and New Jersey. I reflected back to the phone call with Hardin and remembered what Billingham had told me. There were way too many people way too eager to get their hands on Louie Panozzo's files.

There was a roll-down shade between the front seat and the back. I winked at Goutam in the rear view mirror. "See you in Philly, Goutam," I said as I pulled it down.

Chapter 30

Washington, DC: the shining city on the hill...

I rolled up the shade as the cab pulled over to the 30th Street Station in Philadelphia at 8:50, giving Goutam a leisurely ten minutes to spare. It was another of those big, neoclassical edifices from the 1930s that Sandy and I were becoming so expert at negotiating.

"Thanks, Goutam" I said as I handed him four of the crisp new one-hundred dollar bills I had taken off *Tony Grigs*, the hit man in Boston. Goutam smiled, and I handed him another one. "That's a little extra so that your memory won't be too clear about the people you had in the back seat and what they were doing on the way down here from New York. You see, her husband can get very jealous." I winked at him.

"Oh, yes, sir!" he grinned. "And I can see he has ample reason to be."

"Where's an INS agent when you really need one," Sandy muttered as she got out of the cab. "Like, he knew what we were doing back there."

"Like, you care if he did?"

"But this time, we didn't even do anything!" she complained as she jiggled and twisted her skirt and top, trying to get everything back into place. "But how did my clothes get all turned around like this, Talbott?" she asked innocently enough.

As the cab drove away, she took my arm and we strolled into the terminal. The evening commuter crowd had largely dissipated by then, but there were express trains to both New York and DC every forty-five minutes to an hour, so the station was never empty. One of the trains to DC was leaving in ten minutes and would arrive at Union Station in Washington at 11:00. We bought two seats in the upper deck of the observation car. At night and in the rain, we assumed it would be empty and give us some privacy.

The ticker agent found that mildly amusing. "Just so you know, we turn the lights out about two minutes after the train clears the station," he warned without looking up at us.

"And...? Sandy asked, puzzled.

"And you'll want to be in your seats by then, lady," he looked up, straight-faced. "The late run back to DC is popular for all those tired, Washington staffers returning home from a hard day *bureaucrating* in the Philly field office. So if I were you, I'd find an empty seat, I wouldn't go gawking or stumbling around up there in the dark."

We looked at each other, puzzled by his comments. By the time we got on board and climbed the stairs to the upper deck, there were already a dozen couples huddled together on both sides of the aisle, especially toward the back of the car. From the looks and the blankets, it was obvious they were waiting for the lights to go out too.

"Why did I bother to straighten my skirt?" Sandy whispered as we took two seats in the second row. She snuggled up against me and kissed me lightly on the cheek. "But what a great place to hide."

"Think of all the money we wasted on a sleeping compartment?" I said. Her head shot up and I got those narrow, threatening eyes. "Uh, that isn't what I meant. No, no, it was a lovely sleeping compartment with you lying there next to me."

"And under you... over you... and yeah, I guess next to you too." She kissed me on the cheek. "But tonight you're safe, I just want to cuddle."

The train started up and I looked down at her, concerned. "Are you okay?"

"What? Just because I'm not pulling your pants off like everybody else in here? You think I'm sick or something? Men. Maybe I'm all loved-out for the day. Did you ever think of that?"

"You? My bullshit meter just went off the chart. "What's wrong?"

She put her chin on my chest and looked up at me. "It's almost midnight, Talbott. In three hours, I'll be back in my shack with the pumpkin and the singing mice and you'll be long gone, remember?"

"Sandy, you're crazy." I couldn't see her very well, but I ran a finger across her cheek and felt the tears. "I'm not leaving you."

"You won't have a choice; they won't give you one. This has been a wonderful ride, Peter, but it's almost over and we both know it."

"Trust me, that's not going to happen."

She put her head back down and stopped arguing, but I knew she was a long, long way from being convinced.

The rain that buffeted New England the previous two days had blown on through DC and sucked the humidity out to sea with them. By the time our train rolled into Union Station at 11:10 we were greeted by a clear, cool early summer evening. DC was a 9-5 "company town," and the streets were nearly deserted after dark. And Hardin was right. His building wasn't hard to find. Two large office buildings stood between the train station and the big, floodlit Capitol dome stood down the street, less than a half-mile away. The sign on the first one read "Dirksen and Hart." The sign on the other read "Russell."

Inside the small front lobby, two bored rent-a-cops sat on stools next to a large, airport-sized metal detector, reading newspapers and watching a game show on a tiny TV. One of the guards went through the motions of pawing through Sandy's shoulder bag. The other one never moved.

"Can you tell us where Senator Hardin's office is?" I asked as the guard opened her camera case and looked through the lens as if he had never seen one before.

"Hardin? Oh, he's up in the *high rent district*, one of the guards snickered. "Ya'll go up to the second floor and take the hall to the right. His office is all the way back on the Capitol side. You can't miss it."

"High rent?" I asked.

"Yeah. He's got *the view*, the second one cackled.

"And the back door," the first one added and they both had a good laugh. "Best not forget he's near the back door."

"Is that so they can sneak stuff in or sneak stuff out?" Sandy asked.

"All depends on what she look like." The second one laughed even harder.

"Over the years, lots of "stuff" went in and out *that* back door."

We walked away shaking our heads, our footsteps echoing down the high, plastered ceilings and broad marble floors of the long corridor. A broad staircase led us up to the dimly-lit second floor. The lights were out in most of the offices.

The only light in the corridor came from the art deco ceiling fixtures that ran down the center of the hall. This late at night, with only a handful of bulbs lit, the old building appeared even spookier. The only office that appeared in use was Hardin's. Up ahead, we could see his door standing wide open so the dim light fell out and illuminated a small circle around the doorway, like an island in a black sea. There was a US flag in a polished brass stand on one side, a State of Illinois flag on the other, and a round State Seal with big, gold letters on the open door that said TIMOTHY A. HARDIN, ILLINOIS.

Sandy and I peered around the doorframe. Most of the lights were out in his outer office, but we could see it was jammed with too many desks, mismatched, metal and wooden file cabinets, old computers, dirty coffee cups, pizza boxes, overflowing waste baskets, cubicle walls, tall stacks of paper, and government reports. But, there was no one there: no receptionist, no busy clerks or Senate aides, and no anxious petitioners, nothing but a loud voice and laugh coming from the rear office on the left.

"I think that's him," Sandy whispered.

"If you aren't sure, I can have him stick his tongue in your ear."

"Are all the bruises healed yet, Talbott? Because you'll regret that one." She took me by the arm and wheeled me through the door into Hardin's inner office.

The Senator was sitting behind a huge mahogany desk in a tall, tilt-back leather chair. It was Hardin all right; I recognized him from TV. He was talking on the telephone, but he was one of those men who always looked 6:00 News sound-bite ready, smiling and posing, even when he was alone and on the telephone. Practice makes perfect, and his image was obviously something the Senator took great pains to cultivate, thanks to capped teeth, a tanning bed, and the occasional Botox shot.

He had his back to the window and we could see what the guards meant by 'the view.' His office looked out on the floodlit U. S. Capitol. That scenic backdrop made a nice touch when the Chamber of Commerce boys from back home came calling. He could bask in its reflected power and glory while acting as if none of that stuff really mattered to a "regular" guy like him. It only took one look for me to know I hated him and the white horse he rode in on, but I had to be fair. Hardin was exactly what this place attracted and he was probably no better or worse than the rest of them. I glanced over at Sandy. She looked like she was eating it up, which made me detest this Bozo even more. In fact, I would bet the farm he got most of his votes from women. If this Senate "thing" didn't work out for him, he could always try the soaps or host one of those late-afternoon TV talk shows where the biker moms have a meaningful dialogue with their lesbian daughters and the audience gets to pick sides and guess who the real father was of the six possibilities.

But Hardin was beautiful. Without missing a beat, he motioned for us to take the two chairs opposite him, as if we were more important than the person on the phone, and he would be with us the second he got rid of the jerk on the other end. We sat down as he droned on, "I know, John, I know," he reassured the guy. "Of course it's important to Dade County, just like that new court house is important to Peoria... Chicago? Oh, fuck Chicago." He winked at us. "They're just a bunch of Democrats anyway... That's right, you want a little, you gotta to give a little... Hey,

some constituents came in and I gotta go. I'll call you in the morning, after you've had a chance to think it over again... Oh, I'm certain you will."

Finally, Hardin hung up and sat forward as he looked across the desk at us. "Sandy! My God, it's good to see you again, girl," he said, still trying to place her. "You worked in the Chicago office last year, right? Hey, we really missed you after the election. And this must be Pete, right—may I call you Pete? Great!" He rose to his feet and extended a firm, meaty hand in my direction, but he never took his eyes off her.

"So, Sandy..." He seemed to be undressing her from head to foot until I thought he might drool on his desk. "What is it? You look... different?" he asked, cocking his head to the right. "The hair? Is that it? The makeup? Help me out here, girl. It's a little more... How do I say this? Quiet?"

That was one way of putting it, I thought, but Sandy was more diplomatic. "Yeah, well, we've had to make a few adjustments the past few days, Tim."

"I'll bet you have." His head nodded up and down like a bobble head on a dashboard. "My aides got me the stories and I finally caught up." He patted a small stack of newspaper clippings in the center of his desk. "My God, I know you Sandy, it all sounds so incredible."

"You haven't heard the half of it," I interrupted.

Finally, he remembered I was there and took his eyes off her. "Pete, Pete, so you were there when they shot at Billingham, huh? Incredible! And you *did* bring those computer files with you? I am absolutely dying to hear the whole story, but where are they? We need to lock them up or something."

It was obvious that Hardin wanted the flash drives, not our story, but Sandy leaned forward and kept talking anyway, telling him all about it for the next twenty minutes. The Senator sat there nodding, looking like he was listening intently, but you could never tell with a guy like that. He would frown and sometimes look curious or troubled, sometimes bored or shocked, throwing in a random question now and then, but for the most part, he let her talk, probably hoping she'd talk herself out. She told him about Chicago, Tinkerton, the witness Protection Program, Columbus, the obituaries, Boston, and the people who kept disappearing and managed to get most of the important stuff in.

"That is absolutely incredible." Hardin leaned back, wide-eyed, staring at me. "And you say there's a conspiracy inside Justice and this fellow Tinkerton is running some kind of a rogue operation killing off our own government witnesses? With doctors, a funeral home, and even a county sheriff? Unbelievable!"

"You do believe us?" Sandy asked.

"Of course I believe you, Sandy," Hardin leaned forward, empathizing with us all the way. "But you gotta know, in this town, with the kind of people you're dealing with, it isn't a matter of believing, it's a matter of proving."

Sandy dug to the bottom of her purse. "We have the newspaper clippings, the obituaries, all of it," she said as her hand came back out with a thick sheaf of papers, talking nervously, non-stop as she laid it all in front of him. "Here's the stuff on my ex, Eddie. And in Columbus, they buried a man named Louis Panozzo and his wife using Peter's name and his wife's."

"Panozzo testified in front of my committee, for Chris sake! He was their accountant," Hardin said, looking at me. "And you have those data disks with you, Pete?"

"That's what started the whole thing." Sandy kept on, digging deeper into her purse. "I have photographs, lots of them on a memory chip. I've got shots in Chicago of Tinkerton chasing us around, and some from Boston, before he broke my camera."

"That's okay, Sandy," Hardin held up his hands in mock surrender. "I believe you, I really do. What a mess. The mob. Hired killers. And now, this rogue agent Tinkerton. It's a miracle you two are still alive." He shook his head in disbelief. "You did the right thing coming here. The absolute right thing. We need to get all that stuff locked up—especially those disks—and we need to find you two a place where you'll be safe."

"And where would that be, Senator?" I asked. "In the Federal Witness Protection Program?"

"No, God, no! Of course not, Pete, but that's a real good question, isn't it? I guess *safe* doesn't mean what *safe* used to, does it? No, there is a top-secret staff section of the FBI that works directly with my Committee. They're top notch and they have nothing to do with the WP or with this guy Tinkerton."

"The FBI?" I asked, still not sure.

"They're part of the Organized Crime Strike Force and I have them on standby. They have a safe house out near Winchester, Virginia, and I can have you on the way out there in minutes. Okay?"

I frowned as I thought it over for a few moments. The FBI? Sooner or later, I knew it was going to come down to something like this. FBI? City cops? State cops? Maybe the damned CIA? I didn't like it, but eventually we had to trust somebody, even if it was this greasy U. S. Senator with his lacquered hair.

"All right," I nodded to him. "Call them. But it's both of us, Senator. Both or none. We've been on the run long enough, and I don't want to see Sandy get hurt."

"I wouldn't have it any other way, Pete. It's a smart move, real smart," Hardin winked at me as he picked up his desk phone and began dialing.

I got out of the chair and walked slowly over to the window. With the flood lights on, the Capitol looked clean and white set against the black, night sky. It reminded me that the government of the United States really did have lot more integrity than Ralph Tinkerton and his ilk. That was when I realized how tired I was, more tired than I had been in years. Hopefully, we were on the home stretch now, and I was damned glad all of this would soon be over. Each of the past six days and nights had taken their toll like a long series of body punches. The first ones didn't seem that bad, but like a long heavyweight fight, each successive blow took its toll. Punch after punch left me slumped in the corner, bruised and battered. All I wanted to do now was to curl up somewhere with Sandy and tune it all out.

"You know," Hardin wagged a finger in the air. "I always wondered about that guy Tinkerton. His operation always seemed a little too pat, a little too perfect, but he was careful. There was nothing I could ever get my arms around. Well, this will bust it wide open, wide open... Hi, Warren?" I heard him say into the telephone. "Tim Hardin here..."

As I gazed absently out the window at the Capitol, I realized the dark window glass also captured the reflection of Hardin's outer office. I could see his receptionist's desk. I could see the rear side of the office's telephone console. And I could see that none of the little red lights were on. I looked back at Hardin again and saw he was talking into the telephone anyway. I looked at the console again, then back at Hardin, and it did not compute. None of the lights on the telephone console were lit. Then I saw another reflection. In the back corner of Hardin's office, I saw a gaudy, red and gold U. S. Marine Corps flag and an icy shiver ran up my back. Next to the flag hung a large, framed photograph of men in jungle fatigues. Younger men smiling and laughing. Some framed ribbons and citations. And I saw a framed motto that read, "Zero Defects." Hardin's shrine was not nearly as extensive or imposing as the one Ralph Tinkerton had in his office in Columbus, but I knew we had been had.

Hardin hung up the phone and smiled at Sandy. "They'll be here in a couple of minutes, so why don't you give me all that stuff you brought, especially those flash drives, Pete, and I'll lock it all up in my safe," he said as he held out his hand toward me.

"Sure," Sandy said as she picked up her stack of papers.

I took the three flash drives out of my jacket pocket, but kept a tight grip on them, wondering how I was going to get Sandy's attention so we could get the hell out of there. "Uh, you know, maybe we should keep them with us, Senator."

"Pete, Pete, they'd be safest right here in my office." He held out his hand and gave me that confident, toothy smile.

"Yeah, but what if the FBI wants to go over all that stuff with us tomorrow," I began edging away. I motioned toward his "shrine" and said, "By the way, Senator, I didn't know you were in the Marines."

"Me? I did a few tours, sure... Semper Fi," he smiled lamely, not having a clue what I was getting at.

That was when I heard that all-too-familiar Texas twang behind me. "Good boy, Pete, bravo! You are finally catching on, aren't you?"

I spun around and found Ralph Tinkerton's large frame filling the doorway to the outer office. He was dressed in a stylish, beige, summer-weight business suit and burgundy tie, looking every inch the successful lawyer, except for the black Glock automatic with a long silencer he was holding in his hand.

"Now, put those flash drives on the corner of Timmy's desk and back away," he said as he pointed the gun at Sandy.

Chapter 31

Zero Defects, a zip drive, and a bag of cash...

"What are you doing here?" Hardin shrank back, surprised and worried.

"That is an excellent question. What *am* I doing here?" Tinkerton chuckled as he motioned with the automatic for me to step back, then picked up the three flash

drives and slipped them in his jacket pocket. "I would say I am checking up on my old partner, *Major* Timothy Hardin."

"You damned fool!" Hardin exploded. "Don't call me that!"

"Don't call you which? Major? Or partner?" He motioned me back even further. "Now, sit down, Pete." He pointed the Glock toward the chair next to Sandy's. "And see to it you keep your little feet flat on the floor, Miz Kasmarek. I would threaten to shoot one of you if you get out of line, but better than that, I'll shoot the other. You two got that?"

Tinkerton turned back to Hardin. "You know, Timmy, it is positively amazing what a fellow can accomplish these days with one of those sleek little jets you were nice enough to have Justice to buy for us. My, my, but it saves time. An enterprising fellow can go damned near anywhere—Columbus, Chicago, Boston, New York, even Washington—in no time flat. But it's even more amazing what you can learn with a couple of well-placed telephone taps, once you understand whose telephones you ought to be tapping."

"You tapped my phone? My phone!" Hardin turned red.

"Yours, Charley Billingham's, Rico Patillo's..."

"How dare you!"

"How dare I?" He feigned surprise. "Well, Tim, how else would I know you had these special guests coming in all the way from... now, where was it? Tennessee? You know how we Texans do hate to miss a party." The look of amusement on the big lawyer's face quickly changed to anger and cruelty as he turned the Glock on Hardin. "These days, I *dare* to do a whole lot of things *major*. Especially when it's *my* neck that's in the noose and I learn a traitor has sold me out."

"Stop calling me that!"

"Tim, Tim, fuzzy language is the first sign of fuzzy thinking. Stop calling you what? Traitor? Or, do you mean partner? Or, is it major again? This is all getting very confusing for me, so you must put it in itty-bitty little words that even a dumb west Texas hick like me can understand." Tinkerton looked down at him with utter contempt. "Isn't it funny how you didn't object to what we did when it was Sergeant Dannmeyer and Lieutenant Tinkerton taking the orders and doing all your dirty work for you."

"Shut up!" Hardin hissed as he glanced nervously at Sandy and me.

"Surely you jest," Tinkerton laughed cynically. "You are afraid of these two? Why, Major Hardin, I would bet the farm that my old friend Pete Talbott saw through your bull shit act a long time ago, even before I came walking in. Didn't you, Pete?"

I looked at Tinkerton and at Hardin, but I said nothing.

"You see, Pete here is a *very* smart boy," Tinkerton went on. "He may not look like a whole lot, but it doesn't pay to underestimate him, I assure you of that." He looked at his bandaged hand and flexed it. "I underestimated him several times and I learned that lesson the hard way." He turned toward Sandy and me with those cold, gray, November eyes and a particularly nasty smile. "By the way, Pete, you and your little hump here owe me a new Rolex watch, remember? You owe me for a couple of other things too, and before this night's over I intend to take them out in trade."

I saw Sandy's hands flex on the armrest, so I put my hand on hers. This wasn't a good time for her to rise to the bait.

"Let me venture a guess, Pete. I bet the good major told you he was calling the FBI and they would swoop in here and whisk the two of you off to a safe house somewhere in the lovely Virginia countryside. Is that what he told you?" Tinkerton's eyes twinkled with amusement. "He was calling in the cavalry to the rescue, the bad guys would go to jail, and the two of you would live happily ever after? Is that the fairy tale you told them, Major? Oh, shame on you."

Hardin glared at Tinkerton, but the Senator did not answer.

"The cavalry?" Tinkerton walked to the window and looked down into dark side city street beneath the window. "I don't see any horses, but there is a large, midnight-blue Mercedes with New Jersey license plates parked down there by the side door. Did you know that, Tim? Is that what the FBI is driving these days? Mercedes Benz sedans with Jersey license plates. Or, could that be a couple of Rico Patillo's gunmen sitting inside?"

He backed away and motioned me to the window with the Glock. "Come over here, Pete. Take a look for yourself... Carefully, very carefully."

I stepped to the window and sure enough, there was a large, dark Mercedes parked in the side street near the building's rear entrance.

Tinkerton motioned me back to the chair. "You phoned the good Senator here and told him you and your little slut were coming down to Washington, right here to his office where you'd be safe, so you could personally hand him Louie Panozzo's files on those flash drives, didn't you?" Tinkerton shook his head. "You are such a fool, Pete. Do you have any idea what you had in your pocket? Do you? You were handing Timmy the world on a silver platter, on Rico Patillo's platter, and that Mercedes is what you were going to get in return, you and Miz Kasmarek."

He motioned toward the Marine Corps flag standing in the far corner of the room, surrounded by all his photographs and decorations. "A Silver Star," he shook his head sadly. "The voters ate that up, didn't they, Major? You should read the citation, it would make the hair stand up on the back of your neck. *Heroism above and beyond... at the risk of his own life... against a skilled and resourceful enemy...* and all the rest of that crap. It was great stuff, really. It took Sergeant Dannmeyer and me half the night and a bottle of Chivas in a Saudi bar to put that crap down on paper without vomiting."

Tinkerton turned and glared angrily at him. "Semper Fidelis, Major? Did I hear you say *Semper Fi!* Always faithful. Duty. Honor. Country. Too bad you never understood any of it, Timmy."

Slowly he walked around the chair until he stood behind Hardin and began tapping the Glock's silencer lightly against the side of the Senator's head. "It may sounds trite, Pete, but there really is no honor among thieves. None whatsoever." He leaned over, almost whispering in Hardin's ear. "I might be a fanatic when it comes to things I truly believe in, but Timmy here doesn't believe in anything, not a goddamned thing except himself, his ego, and his career. He is an unrepentant crook, plain and simple, and all he wants is power. He was selling you two out and he was about to sell me out right along with you. Can't say Timmy didn't aim high

though, that he didn't set some ambitious goals for himself. What he was buying, was nothing less than the White House."

"You need to watch the caffeine, Ralph; it's making you a bit paranoid." Hardin tried to laugh, desperate to regain some of his old composure. "The White House? You've gone way over the top this time."

Tinkerton's smile faded as he swung the automatic in a short, vicious blow, raking the barrel across the Senator's cheek. "Semper Fi! How's that for *over the top* and *paranoid*, old buddy?"

The blow snapped Hardin's head sideways. Stunned, his hand went to his cheek and came away streaked with blood. Tinkerton was skilled at knowing a man's vanities and weaknesses, and he knew Hardin by heart. The Senator cowered in his chair as Tinkerton stepped closer and pointed the Glock at Hardin's head. "You ungrateful bastard, I have you on tape working the whole thing out with Rico Patillo!" Tinkerton pressed the silencer against the bridge of Hardin's nose. "What was it you called me? *A liability*? You told him it was, *time to cut our losses*? Isn't that what you told Rico... Major?"

Tinkerton was red hot now and I was surprised he didn't blow the Senator's brains all over the office carpet, right then. He looked at me and said, "Pete, we deserved better than this—you and I. If you had only listened to me back there in Columbus, boy, you and me, we had it all."

He motioned toward the dark window. "As you may already have surmised, the gentlemen in the Mercedes are not with the FBI. The good Senator here arranged with Rico Patillo to have the two of you added to the concrete mix of a new Interstate Highway overpass near Paramus. Knowing Rico's people, I am certain those animals would have disposed of you fairly quickly and then amused themselves with Miz Kasmarek for the rest of the night. Unfortunately, sooner or later they would be coming back for me as well. That was the kind of scum I was cleaning out, Pete, eliminating it if you will, until my old pal Timmy sold us out."

"Ralph," Hardin tried to reassert himself. "Don't be a fool. You and I can still work this thing out."

"Work this 'thing' out? I think not, Tim. The only thing you and I have to work out is who kills who first, and unfortunately for you, I'm the one holding the gun now."

Hardin blinked nervously as he looked at the window, at the office door, and then at Tinkerton's automatic.

"Too late, Major," Tinkerton smiled, taunting him. "If you look real close at that Mercedes, you'll see there is no one inside. Well, there is, but the two grease balls who were in the front seat are now lying in the trunk, and they are very, very dead. Besides, I'm not worried about Rico anymore, because I have the flash disks now, and all of Louie Panozzo's wonderful accounting files. He may have been a fat slob, but he was a surprisingly clever accountant. He's got it all—the drug buys, the women, the meth labs, the crooked businesses and the squeaky clean ones, the bank accounts, the payoffs, the union boys on the pad, the whole enchilada, even all the money he paid you and every other bent politician on the East Coast. So I'll be the one running Rico now, and I can buy myself another Senator on any street corner in town."

Tinkerton turned and looked at me. "Pete, I count you among my very infrequent failures. God, what a pair we would have made! And Timmy here? If he had not gotten so damned impatient, he might have made the White House the old-fashioned way and I might have ended up as Director of the FBI, or Attorney General, who knows?"

The big lawyer's eyes seemed to turn wistfully toward the brightly lit government buildings outside. "Poor Louie," he said. "He wasn't much of a poker player—too reckless, especially with his own life. I had hoped that the sharp edge of a scalpel might help him understand the precariousness of his position, but he would not tell me where those damned flash drives were. No, Louie wanted to be my partner. Imagine that? Another partner. Just what I needed, when I already had a loyal partner right here in Washington, didn't I, major?"

"Louie Panozzo, what a piece of work!" Tinkerton looked up at the ceiling and laughed. "So tell me, Pete, where on earth did you find them? Please?" He patted the pocket he had put them in. "It has been driving me nuts all week."

"He hid them inside a car you didn't know about, an old wreck of a Buick. That's how I got out of Columbus. I found them taped inside one of the door panels."

Tinkerton shook his head, chagrined. "The door panels in an old wreck of a Buick. That figures."

"You're a maniac, Tinkerton," Hardin told him. "Even in Nicaragua and Iraq, the rest of the men thought you were nuts, you and that sicko Dannmeyer. Why do you think I recommended Justice put you in charge of security for the Witness Protection program to begin with? It was because no one could think of anyone as ruthless as the two of you."

Tinkerton's eyes narrowed. He slowly raised the automatic and pointed it at Hardin's head again. But Hardin wasn't finished. "I'm not impressed by your threats, Tinkerton. You need me. The bodies? Those high-speed chases? Chicago, Boston, and now New York? Like a fool, you've left too many bodies lying around and a lot of people are asking questions now—the newspapers, the local cops, my committee, the FBI—big questions. Without my protection, you're finished."

"Finished? Perhaps you are right, Major. That's why I want the kitty."

Hardin looked as if he had taken another unexpected hit. "The kitty? I don't know what you're talking about," he answered, but his denial came too fast.

Tinkerton raised the Glock again and this time he pulled the trigger. There was a soft "Phutt!" and a Nine-Millimeter bullet tore off the bottom half of Hardin's right ear, before the heavy slug buried itself in the headrest of his big leather desk chair.

"Ah! Ah!" Hardin screamed as he grabbed the side of his face and spun sideways in his chair. When he pulled his hand away, there was blood all over his fingers, running down his neck and onto his shirt. Then Tinkerton pulled the Glock back, as if he was about to give Hardin a backhand blow across the mouth, but the Senator covered his face and shrank away in stark terror. "No, not the face," he mumbled. "Not the face."

Sandy turned her eyes away, but I continued to watch this horrific show, not knowing what Tinkerton would do next.

Tinkerton lowered the Glock and laughed as he looked down at Hardin's lap. "Why Senator, I do believe you have pissed you pants. Now get that kitty! Get it now, or by God, your precious 6:00 News face will be the last of your worries. I'll turn your brains into a fresco on that wall."

"No, please," Hardin cowered, completely broken as he raised his shaking hands to fend off any more gunshots. "Please."

"Get it!" Tinkerton pointed the Glock at Hardin's other ear.

Trembling, Hardin reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a set of keys. He bent over and opened a side drawer in his desk. There was a steel strong box built inside. His hands were shaking, covered with blood, as he tried to fit a small key into the lock, but he dropped the keys on the carpet.

Tinkerton walked around to the other side of the desk and pressed the silencer against the side of Hardin's head. "No more games, open it."

Hardin whimpered and shook like a leaf. He picked up the keys and tried again, and then he tried a third time, before he could get the key into the lock and open the door. Tinkerton shoved him aside and reached in, pulling out a large brown alligator skin briefcase. He laid it on the desk and snapped the locks open. He slowly raised the top. I saw the briefcase was packed with stacks of hundred-dollar bills and several fist-sized blue-velvet bags.

Tinkerton picked up one of the stacks of green and fanned it near Hardin's ear with his thumb. "You know, Major, nothing ruins the image of a great man worse than a very ordinary vice." He dropped the stack of bills in the briefcase and picked up one of the blue-velvet bags. It was heavy and sounded like a bagful of small stones as he tossed it up and caught it lightly in the palm of his hand. "What do we have here, Major? Diamonds?" he asked as he cocked his head, his eyes twinkling. "How much?"

Hardin didn't answer. His eyes were riveted on the brown briefcase as if it were his own life lying open on the desk in front of him.

"How much!" Tinkerton screamed at him. "Three million? Five? Maybe ten?" Tinkerton smiled. "I knew you had something squirreled away, you little weasel. I knew you had a stash hidden away in here, because I can read you like a book. Even in the Marines, you always had a way out, a private little escape hatch, didn't you?"

"I'm a United States Senator," Hardin whispered, his shirtfront now covered with blood. "You'll never get away with this."

"I would offer you a little sporting wager on that, but I'm afraid you won't be around for me to collect." Tinkerton grinned. "Now get up! We are going for a little walk, all of us—you, me, the rocket scientist, Miz Kasmarek, the briefcase—all of us," he said as he turned toward me. "And no stunts, Pete. Nothing brave or noble. I'll shoot the girl if you so much as blink wrong. And be advised, this is not the Thirty-Fifth Street El station in Chicago. I saw those cute little feet of hers in action and if one of them as much as twitches, I will put a hole in her you can run your fist through. I swear I will. Now get up and get moving, all of you."

Tinkerton grabbed Hardin by the arm and pushed him toward the door. We went through the dark outer office and into the hall, with Sandy and me in the lead and Tinkerton and Hardin close behind. The Senator turned toward the front

of the building, but Tinkerton blocked his way. “No, no, the side door, Major. With Rico's boys gone, there is nothing out there to stop me now.”

“What about the guards?” I asked. “They'll remember us.”

“You really are a tourist, Pete,” Tinkerton laughed as he pointed the Glock at me. “Those rent-a-cops wouldn't recognize Donald Duck if he stepped on their feet. So, ya'll put your arms around each other like two little lovebirds and stay well ahead of me. Walk straight out the door and across the street into the park. And remember, I do know how to use this thing. Now move.”

Chapter 32

Another ‘senseless act of urban violence’...

It was nearly midnight when Tinkerton forced us out the side door, across Delaware Avenue, and into the dark city park beyond. The walkway meandered deeper and deeper into the trees and featured the same antique, wrought-iron streetlights as in the Common in Boston. They might be quaint, but they did not shed much light. Neither did a sky full of stars or a thin, quarter moon, leaving the dark, sinister expanses between the trees and tall bushes looming like black holes.

“Too bad you refused my offer back in Columbus, Pete. We really were the good guys.” Tinkerton was apparently still trying to win me over to “the dark side”.

“You never struck me as one of those wild-eyed California liberals, and I assure you *The Sopranos* and *The Godfather* are a bunch of crap. When you get up close and personal with Santorini's people, or Rico Patillo's, or any of the rest of them, they are ignorant, unschooled scum—petty thieves, pimps, bookies, drug dealers, and killers—some of the worst, most amoral people this country has ever produced. That is why we had to smash them. It was for the good of the country, Pete. Making some of them talk gave us the proof we needed to roll-up their operations and put the rest of them in jail.”

“Zero Defects, Ralph?” I asked.

“That's right, Zero Defects. They should be pinning a medal on me, not crying over a bunch of low-lifes like Louie Panozzo, Richie Benvenuto, Clement Aleppo, Johnny Dantonio, and all the rest. You never met them, Pete. The collective IQ of all six couldn't have been much over one hundred. They refused to follow the simple rules they themselves agreed to, so they became breakage, that's all.”

“Breakage?” Sandy asked. I squeezed her shoulder, hoping to shut her up, but that was hopeless as usual. “For a lawyer, you've got some real weird ideas about people.”

“Do I? Santorini already had contracts out on each one of them, and dead is dead. This way, their numerous transgressions enabled the program's integrity to remain intact and their deaths served a higher purpose, which was much more than that ilk deserved.”

“What about Panozzo's wife and the other women?” Sandy asked. “What were they? More breakage? Is that what they deserved too?”

"In life, we each make our own choices, Miz Kasmarek. We chose the beds we lie in, don't we? They picked theirs, much as you picked yours."

I looked over my shoulder and glared at him, but Tinkerton was not that stupid. He knew where the danger lay and he continued to point the pistol at me, knowing that would control Sandy. "Say what you like, it was our little unit that provided backbone to the entire Witness Protection Program. Not one of them left. Not one of them caved in. Not one of them recanted. Yes, that was zero defects. So which was the greater evil?"

"You are a fool, Ralph," Hardin mocked him. "We got rid of Santorini and all the crooked politicians and cops who protected him. Sure, we let Rico take over all his territories, but that was a temporary expedient. We control Rico."

"Unfortunately, Rico doesn't look at it that way, does he?" Tinkerton shot back. "You are such a waste, Timmy. *Time Magazine* called you *The Crusading Marine*, *The Mob's Senator from hell*. After all, *you* came up with the title *Zero Defects*. If we had stayed with it for another year we could have broken up the rest of the east coast families and put them all in jail, Patillo included. We could have done it the honest way, but that was too slow for you. The Senate wasn't big enough. No, you wanted the White House, and you thought you could use Rico and all of his pals and connections to get you there."

"The White House? I don't know what you're smoking these days, Ralph. You need professional help." Hardin sneered at him. "The VA has some good mental health people, maybe I can make a few calls for you. But, these theatrics with the handgun? A nobody like you? You wouldn't dare kill me, and we both know it."

Hardin's last insults had pushed Tinkerton over the edge. "You lying bastard," Tinkerton growled. "You haven't got a shred of honor left in you, none at all."

Sandy and I had stopped walking. We turned and looked at them as Tinkerton swung the automatic around and backhanded the Senator across the mouth with the long barrel of the Glock. Hardin stumbled sideways and crumpled to his knees in the grass a few feet away. "No, no. God, not the face again. No," he mumbled as a tooth fell out in his bloody hands. Tinkerton wasn't finished. He stepped closer and raised the pistol again, but Hardin never gave him an opening. He fell to the ground and kept crawling further away, covering his head with both arms, sobbing, "No, no."

Tinkerton followed, taunting him. "What ever is the matter, Timmy? Don't you think the voters will like a pretty boy with a fresh scar and a few gaps where those pretty, white-capped teeth used to be? Take it from me, a few bruises helps focus the mind, don't they, Pete? Maybe I can throw in a couple of burns, too?" He stared down at the cowering Senator. "Everything I did was for the program, to protect it, and to protect you, you rotten, two-faced crook! Everything. And you hung me out to dry."

Tinkerton was absorbed with Hardin and I knew this might be the first and only chance we would get. Should I go for him? Or, should we make a run for the bushes? I gauged the distance. Tinkerton was at least ten feet away from me. Could I get to him before he turned the gun back on us? "Now!" I whispered to Sandy, "run!" and shoved her away. She stumbled and looked back at me. "Go!" I said again and this time she did, scrambling away into the darkness.

Before I could follow her, Tinkerton had spun around and had the gun pointed at me again. "Stop right there, Pete. I'll drop you if you so much as twitch. I swear I will."

Slowly I turned and looked back at him.

"*Miz* Kas-mar-ek," he called out in a sing-song voice. "Come out, come out, wherever you are. This is a nine millimeter I have in my hand. I'll begin shooting random pieces off young Peter here if you don't, pieces you will surely miss."

I looked over my shoulder and groaned as Sandy walked back out of the bushes. She stepped next to me and put her arm around my waist with an embarrassed shrug.

"Good girl," Tinkerton grinned. "Now sit, both of you, right there on the grass."

We did what he said and I looked around, desperately hoping that a cop would come by, or maybe a jogger, or even a park bum, but we had no such luck. The park was quiet as a tomb. I managed to place myself between Sandy and Tinkerton's gun, but in the end that wouldn't do a whole lot of good for her or for me. His big nine-millimeter slugs would rip through both of us without even slowing down.

Tinkerton turned back to Hardin and jabbed him with the gun barrel. "The briefcase is from Rico Patillo isn't it? He used you and the hearings to break up the Santorini mob for him and to pump you up at the same time. You pompous fool. Even the whores over at Eighth and I Streets know what they are worth. He was paying you chump change, pocket money for him, because you were giving him all the mob territories from the Bronx to Philly. Hell, he'd have the whole country! He'd be the head Capo, wouldn't he?"

"You're wrong." Hardin looked up at him, blood running down his chin and staining his white shirt. "I had it all under control; I had him under control. I would have been President and I could have controlled all of it."

Tinkerton almost looked sad as he stared down at Hardin. "You thought *you* could control *him*? You get the White House, what does Rico get? Does he get to pick the Attorney General? Perhaps the Director of the FBI or some section chiefs over at Justice?" Tinkerton laughed. "Of course, they wouldn't need anyone as overt as say, a Charley Billingham. Oh no, just someone completely inept, like one of those ding-a-ling college professors from the Kennedy School at Harvard. What do you figure the Capo might give you? Fifty million? Perhaps a hundred million pumped into your campaign? Rico knows you'd be a bargain at ten times the price, because he'll be the one who has the White House, not you."

Hardin pushed himself up to his knees. His eyes were full of pure hatred now.

"Ah, but there was a fly in the ointment, wasn't there, Timmy?" Tinkerton sneered. "No, three flies, actually. There was me, because I can tie a bunch of big, noisy tin cans to your tail, and then there was these two, because they can tie some cans to mine. And we can't let that happen; we can't leave any loose ends lying around, can we?"

Tinkerton moved even closer, crowding him. "So what was your brilliant master plan, major? After Rico's boys got rid of Talbott and his girl friend, what then? What did you have planned for me? A rifle bullet? No, something more subtle. Perhaps a car accident? Been there, done that, though. A prowler in my apartment? Or a creative mugging in a dark city park? Yes, I can see it now,

Government Official Beaten and Shot to Death in Park Robbery? Well, guess what, Timmy? That mugging will indeed happen, but it will happen to you, not to me.”

The big lawyer towered over Hardin, raising the automatic and taking careful aim at the side of the Senator's head. Even in the dim light, I saw Hardin's eyes grow wide with fear as he realized Tinkerton really did intend to pull the trigger this time. The big lawyer seemed to glow triumphantly now. All the talking and the arguing had been mere preface, so had the beating and the blood. Tinkerton needed those to humiliate the Senator. It would not do to simply kill him. If that was all Tinkerton wanted, he could have shot all of us back in the office or as soon as we entered the park. No, first he had to drag Hardin down to his own level. Then he could kill him, make it look like a street crime, and calmly walk away with at least a shred of self-respect. That was the depths to which Tinkerton had now fallen. He intended to pull the trigger and then turn the gun on us.

Tinkerton was a good fifteen feet away from me now. If I could get to him, at least as far as his legs, I might have a chance before he turned the gun on us. If I could grab a leg and maybe knock him off balance, I could pull him down to the ground with me. It was a desperate thing to try, but I didn't see any choice. Sandy must have had the same idea. From her knees, she swung around and tossed her heavy shoulder bag at him as if she was doing the hammer throw. I shoved her aside and went for Tinkerton, scrambling across the grass on all fours as fast as I could move. He saw the big leather bag flying at him, but he raised his arm and managed to block it. The heavy bag did knock him off balance, but that wasn't enough. Before I got halfway to him, he had his gun arm pointed at Sandy and me again. And from his angry expression, I knew he was going to shoot.

As the Glock lined up on my head, I heard a *Phutt! Phutt! Phutt!* as the soft, coughing sound of a silenced pistol cut through the night air of the park.

My heart stopped. First, I figured I was dead, but I was still kneeling on the grass, no worse for wear. My eyes then went to Hardin, expecting to see him crumpled on the ground with his brains all over the grass, but he was still kneeling, terrified, but apparently he was okay, too. Then I thought of Sandy. I turned my head, terrified that Tinkerton had carried out his threat and shot her first. No, she was still sitting on the grass, also unharmed. Finally, I looked up at Tinkerton. The big lawyer's jaw mouth hung open and his expression of total victory melted into shock and confusion. His hand went to his chest and he looked down at three neat red holes that formed a nearly perfect triangle in the center. Blood ran thick and dark over his fingers. The Glock slipped from his fingers and fell on the grass at his feet. He wobbled back and forth. His knees buckled. His eyes rolled up in his head, and he toppled forward on the grass like a big felled oak, landing on his face only inches from where Hardin was kneeling.

Hardin, Sandy, and I found ourselves staring at each other, then down at Tinkerton's body without the slightest clue as to what had happened to him. The big lawyer had been shot, but by whom? That was when we saw a dark, hulking figure slowly emerge from the bushes and walk toward us, backlit by the distant glow of the city. Whoever he was, his left hand leaned heavily on a cane and his right hand held a long-barreled chrome pistol that also had a silencer screwed to the end of its barrel.

"You know, Ace," the man finally said. "You can get yourself in some of the damndest fixes."

"Oh, my God! It's Gino!" Sandy jumped up and ran to him, throwing her arms around his waist and hugging him.

"Hey!" he growled affectionately at her. "Easy with the freakin' leg, you ditz!"

"Who are you?" Hardin demanded to know.

"You okay, Sweat Pea?" Parini completely ignored the Senator as he held Sandy out at arm's length and looked her up and down. "You ain't hurt or nuthin'?" He went on, ignoring Hardin and ignoring me too, but I expected that. Finally, Parini looked down at Hardin. "The name's Parini, Senator. Gino Parini."

"Parini?" Hardin puffed, taking some newly found confidence from the fact he was still alive. "You're Jimmy Santorini's hit man."

Parini glanced down at Tinkerton's body, then over at Hardin. "Given the general situation here, I'd be careful with the name-calling, if I was you."

Hardin must have figured that the statement did not bode well for his future. Slowly, his hand reached out for Tinkerton's Glock, which was lying on the grass next to the dead lawyer.

"I wouldn't do that, if I were you, Senator," Parini warned as he waved his .45 in Hardin's general direction, then motioned for him to move back. "Looks to me like you're the one keepin' the questionable company here."

"Uh, look, Parini... Gino—may I call you Gino? Great!" Hardin turned on his famous, if now somewhat battered, TV smile.

Parini chuckled. "That smooth-guy shit don't work so well when you're missing a couple of teeth, Senator. And all that blood? You're gonna need some serious fixin' up."

"Never mind that, Parini," Hardin tried to focus. "You see that briefcase over there?" He pointed at the alligator leather case lying in the grass next to Tinkerton. "There's seven-and-a-half million dollars inside. Take it. It's all yours."

"Seven and a half? All mine?" Parini feigned surprise. "Gee, thanks, for what?"

"For cleaning up this little mess for me."

"Cleaning up? This... mess?" Gino looked confused.

"Yeah, get rid of him." He pointed at Tinkerton's body. "And get rid of these two, too. Do that for me and the briefcase is yours, okay?"

Parini limped painfully over to where Tinkerton lay, picked up the briefcase, and set it next to his foot. "Get rid of 'em? Didn't I hear you and this crud Tinkerton talking about that very same thing just a few minutes ago?" Parini bent down, reached into Tinkerton's jacket pocket, and pulled out the three flash drives. "All because of these things huh?"

Hardin looked at the disks and began to panic. "Look!" He bristled. "Do you want the damned money or don't you?"

"Me? You know, I think I'll pass. You see, I'm FBI, Senator, undercover. Remember those guys you never called? The FBI really does indeed have an Organized Crime Strike Force, and I'm on it. That means you're busted."

"The FBI? You?" Hardin blinked. "What about all those men you killed?"

Parini laughed as his wise-guy Jersey accent began to fade. "Reputations can be funny things. Sometimes they're deserved, and sometimes they're not."

Hardin looked up at Parini and the realization slowly sank in. "You can't touch me." He smiled all too knowingly and shook his head. "You can't prove I did a damned thing."

"Want to bet?" Parini smiled. "I have Panozzo's accounting records, the ones that show all the payoffs, including yours. I have a briefcase full of cash and diamonds with your fingerprints all over it. And as the *fait accompli*, I have this whole conversation on tape," he said, patting his jacket pocket. "But none of that matters. When Rico finds out how badly you screwed this thing up, you'll be the one begging for Witness Protection, if you don't want to end up in that cement mix over in Paramus."

Parini bounced the flash drives up and down in his hand, taunting Hardin.

"Personally, Senator, I'm glad this operation is finally over. It's taken four years, and if I never see Italian food again, it'll be too soon. However, we did put Jimmy "the stump" in Marion, we shut down Tinkerton's security operation. And with Panozzo's accounting files, they'll need a whole new wing at Marion. I can just see you in a cell right in the middle of all the boys. You ever played "drop the soap", Senator? Well, you're gonna be taking some real interesting showers for the next ten-to-twenty."

Hardin saw his world crashing down around him and he panicked. His eyes darted back and forth between Parini, the flash drives, and the briefcase looking for some way out, but there was none. Suddenly he lunged for Tinkerton's pistol. A Hardin's fingers found the grip of the Glock, Parini shot him twice in the face. The bullets snapped Hardin's head back and his lifeless body crumpled on the grass next to Tinkerton.

I stood and looked at Hardin, then at Parini. "You wanted him to go for the Glock, didn't you, Gino? That's why you left it lying there and why you kept taunting him."

"It was his play and that was fine with me. If Hardin had been a more competent lawyer than he was a crook, he'd know that a briefcase full of cash doesn't mean squat. Truth is, we'd have had a hell of a time proving anything against him. Now we don't have to."

Parini slipped the pistol back inside his jacket and looked down at the two bodies. "Will you look at this!" he made a dramatic gesture toward the two bodies. "A U. S. Senator and a former *High Ranking Justice Department Official*, cut down in the prime of their lives. Another *senseless act of urban violence*, a tragedy, that's what I'd call it, a real tragedy."

"Like the tragedy in the basement of the funeral home in Columbus?" I asked him. "You waited back there in the bushes to see how things would shake out before you made your move?"

"They shook out fine," he answered with cold, dead eyes.

"Well it's a damn good thing you didn't wait any longer," Sandy barked at him.

"Don't worry, Sweat Pea, I wouldn't have let them touch a hair on your pretty little head, he said, reverting to the old Newark accent. "Hell, if I wasn't married with four kids, I'd run off with you myself and start makin' a bunch 'a little Italian babies. But him?" he looked over at me with disdain. "Him, I'd have let them have."

"We're a *we* now," she told him as she scampered over and threw her arms around my waist.

"So I see." Parini scowled. "But if this dumb mope ever causes you any grief, you let me know and I'll break his freekin' legs. You hear me Ace!" His face broke into a big smile as he slipped the flash drives into his jacket pocket and handed me Hardin's briefcase.

"I don't want this," I told him.

"Oh, yes you do," Parini quickly answered. "He said there's seven-and-a-half million in there that belong to no one. It can get the two of you out of here and buy you a fresh start some place else. In a couple of years, maybe three or four, this whole business should finally be over. Jimmy Santorini will realize he isn't getting out of Marion, Rico Patillo should be sitting in the cell next to him, and no one will remember the *two* of you," he said as his eyes locked on mine. "Do you understand me?"

From the expression on his face, I understood exactly what he was trying to tell me and I knew he was right. So I took the briefcase.

"I'll get the manhunt for you called off in a couple of hours, but remember, Hardin and Tinkerton aren't the only rotten apples in this town, not by a long shot. There are a lot more that need thrown out before it's safe for you two to come back. So you disappear."

"But where?"

"I don't know and I don't want to know," came his quick reply. "Like I told you in Chicago, for a couple of bumbling amateurs, you haven't done too bad figuring it out by yourselves. We would never have gotten Tinkerton without you and we would never have gotten Hardin, either." Parini pointed north at Union Station, sitting flood-lit at the far end of the park. "Take the first train headed out of town and keep going. Hell, you even have some luggage now. And if I know the two of you, you'll do just fine. Now go!"

I took Sandy's hand and we began to walk away as Parini said, "When the time's right, when it really *is* safe back here, I'll run a classified ad in the *New York Times* on the first Sunday of the month, in the Personals. It'll say, *Ace: You and Sweet Pea can come on home now, signed Gino*. You got that?"

We looked at each other and nodded, and then we took off running away down the sidewalk. That was the last we ever saw of Gino Parini.

Epilogue

Under the scorching Baja sun...

The scorching yellow sun had finally risen above the row of palm trees on the other side of the courtyard wall. There wasn't a cloud in the high, blue sky, and to the east, the sun sparkled off the iridescent, blue-green water in the bay. The cool morning breeze we had enjoyed was now wilting and the air inside the courtyard would soon become hot and languid. In another hour or two, it would chase us

inside the thick, cool, adobe-walled house but not yet. For the moment, the courtyard was still very pleasant.

The mornings down here were my favorite time of the day. I could lie back in my old canvas beach chair, sip a cup of strong, black coffee, and read. The patio was alive with the sweet smell of Bougainvillea, the rich cooking smells from the kitchen, and the sharp, salty tang of the sea. Of the entire week, it was Wednesday mornings I liked best. The Tuesday afternoon mail plane usually delivered some new books for me, some photography magazines and country music CDs for Sandy, and the Sunday edition of the *New York Times*. It was as thick as an oak log and I could spend all day Wednesday reading it from front to back at my leisure. Sometimes that would take me well into Thursday or even Friday, since time was a commodity we had in abundance now.

A dark shadow passed over me and I put the paper down. "Peter," Sandy said as she stood blocking out the sun. "Watch the baby for a minute, will you? I've got to help Rosaria with the salad."

"Right," I replied as I glanced over at the baby playing happily on a blanket in the shade. Sandy smiled and let her hand pass lightly up my chest. She knew the effect that had on me and we both knew why she did it.

I looked up at her and smiled back. Her raven hair was long and wild now, hanging halfway down her back in a long, single braid. I liked it that way. She had been working-out like a fanatic to get her figure back and I liked that too. If I stayed out in the sun too long, I burned, but she and the baby had tanned to a rich, golden brown. It must be the Italian skin, I thought. But barefoot, in that thin, white cotton top and colorful Indian skirt, it was hard to tell her from the natives.

"Anything in there?" she asked, pointing at the *Times*.

"No, of course not," I answered as I reached out and pulled her close, running my hand across her bare stomach. "Do you want there to be?"

"Get real," she laughed as my hand moved higher under the white cotton top and lightly caressed her breast.

She closed her eyes and let my hand linger there. She didn't push it away. "Hold that thought," she finally leaned over and whispered.

"Hold that thought?"

"Yeah. After lunch."

"After lunch?"

"Yeah," she said as she pulled my hand out and gave my fingers a light kiss. "I have to help Rosaria with the salad. After we put the baby down, maybe you'll get lucky." She turned and bounced happily away into the house, humming some new country song she'd been playing.

After she had gone, I picked up the paper again. It was the Classified Section of the *Sunday New York Times*, which I had folded open to page four. At the bottom, I re-read the same small, inconspicuous boxed ad that I had been staring at off and on for most of the past hour. "Ace and Sweet Pea, come on home," and it was signed "Gino".

I refolded the section, stuck it in the middle of the tall stack, and walked over to the bin where we kept the kindling we used to start the fire. I dropped the *Times* inside, where it joined what was left of the last three issues before it.

I walked back to the baby, picked him up, and carried him into the middle of the courtyard where we could both look up at the sky. For the most part, it was a clear blue, except for a handful of soft, white, puffy clouds passing to the east. I stared at them and squinted. The pattern slowly changed and I swore I saw Terri's face up there, but only for an instant. This was the first time in many, many months that I had seen her. She was so far away, but yeah, it was her. It was nice to know she was up there, that she was smiling, and I didn't need to be a "rocket scientist" to figure out why.

